Sheer Genius
by Samarkand12

Summary

In the world of the Dresden Files, there are few who can match one Harry Copperfield Blackstone Dresden in terms of collateral damage and immolated property. Few except the adopted daughter of Micheal and Charity Carpenter, Agatha. A girl who is unaware of a celebrated (and infamous) past.

Harry and Agatha are about to discover it.
Chapter 1

It didn't start when I set the Chicago River on fire.

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_Eight years ago, Transylvanian Alps, Romania_

The rain beat down upon his shoulders as he gutted the last of the pale giant spiders. The Lord's favor had him leap aside before it could spit venom in his eyes as a last spiteful act. Flicking off the ichor, he sheathed _Amoracchius_ into its scabbard. He leaned heavily while he surveyed the battlefield. The snow-white female fiends and their mounts lay dead in this remote valley.

So did their victims.

Armor creaking, he knelt by the man and woman who he had seen torn apart as he had arrived upon the scene. Strange tattoos akin to stitches decorated parts of their bodies. They had been very large when they had lived. Perhaps they had had inhuman blood. No matter. Bending his head, he held the Sword of the Cross hilt up as he prayed for their souls to be received by God's grace. He turned to the burly man lying nearby. Smashed glasses glittered in the fitful moonlight coming through the clouds. He heaved one final breath.

Michael Carpenter bowed his head.

Then he saw the child.

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"It's festive," I said, as the flames danced on the surface of the Chicago River. "It's like when they dye the river green for St Patrick's Day, only for the Fourth of July."

"It is October, Harry," Michael Carpenter said.

"Fireworks are always in season." I groaned. "Murph is going to shit a brick when she gets the report on her desk tomorrow morning."

"Language," Michael admonished. "Isn't Lieutenant Murphy on sick leave?"

"No, she's just working the office until the docs say her knee is fully healed."

"Good to hear," Michael said. "This city needs more like her."

"I'm buying her a chainsaw for Yule." I glanced down as the flames started to tickle my boot soles. "Hey, Michael, could you--"

Metal gauntlets clamped around my wrist. Michael Carpenter lifted six feet and change of skinny wizard and wet leather duster up with easy strength. His broad shoulders and solid frame come from his trade as a carpenter. When he's not hauling around two-by-fours, he's one of the Knights of the Cross who wield three holy swords in the name of the Almighty. I'm still figuring out which is his trade and which is his calling. I'm not sure if he sees a difference between the two himself.
The dunking in the river had soaked my duster too much to let it billow out majestically. At least the flames were a dramatic backdrop while we walked away. I silently cursed out the roasting kraken. The things are supposed to be deep-sea creatures. It must have followed a freighter up the Seaway into the Great Lakes. I'd been investigating disappearances of homeless along the river when life became a scene from the worst class of Japanese cartoon. The Calamari From Hell had nearly dragged me under when Michael had shown up in the nick of time.

He does that a lot. Must be coincidence.

Michael's armor was battered and scorched from the battle. Wonderful. This would go over so well with his wife. Charity Carpenter is a lot of things. What she isn't is forgiving of wizards who return husbands in less than tip top shape. She couldn't blame me for this, though. I hadn't asked for Michael to show up. He had been on His clock for this one. We limped a couple of blocks away from the river to my ride.

The Blue Beetle was as bashed up as Mike. My car is blue by tradition only. One door is green, the other is white, and the dented red hood was closed shut with a coat hangar. Only my genius mechanic Mike and help from a changeling named Fix had kept it running after I'd rammed it into a chlorofiend at Wal-mart this summer. I tossed the wet duster into the trunk. Michael stripped off the heavier pieces of plate and added them to the load. The front end was settled down low when we got in. The engine sputtered for a few seconds before settling into its mighty four cylinder putt-putt.

The Blue Beetle isn't a knightly charger, but it'll get you where you're going.

I yawned while I drove through the early-morning gloom of the city. There are times when I wonder why the hell--sorry, "heck"--I do this. The case wasn't a paying one. A Wiccan who hung out at McAnally's had asked me to check into things. Seemed that people hadn't been showing up at a homeless shelter she volunteered at. What can I say? I'm a sucker for a female in distress, especially when she chipped in for one of Mac's steak sandwiches and brown ales. As good as that had been, it didn't exactly pay for the hours I'd spent gratis. I'd be wringing my clothes for hours to get them dry.

Michael's home west of Wrigley Field was a sanctuary. A pristine white picket fence enclosed a lush, neat green lawn that stayed that way whatever the season. The trees planted in front provided the right amount of shade on hot summer afternoons. A tire swing swung in the fall breeze from one stout branch. The swept walk lead up to a neatly-painted house. Even the Halloween decorations they'd put up--a Dia de los Meurtos theme--were cheery.

"Come in," Michael said. "You need a shower and some sleep."

"No, I'll head back to my place." I swayed on my feet. "I don't want to make a scene with Charity."

"Charity wouldn't toss you out into the cold," Michael replied.

"We are talking about the same woman, right?"

"That's unfair." Michael frowned. "You only see one side of her. If you came by more often, you would see the real Charity."

"It wouldn't be a good idea," I said. "I'm not Disney Afternoon material. I'll be fine. Go home to
"As you wish," Michael said. He nodded at his home. "It's times like these when I'm thankful that I have a safe place--"

Then the attic windows blew out.

Michael closed his eyes.

"My hand to God," I said, "I didn't even touch my blasting rod."

"Lord give me strength," Michael prayed. "Oh, Agatha."
Chapter 2

Eight Years Ago, Transylvania

There was nothing worse than a grief-stricken child's cry.

Michael held the girl to him as they fled the valley. The thump of approaching helicopters could be heard from the north. Either police or military had been summoned by the locals. He had little wish to explain his presence in such circumstances. The girl kicked and screamed, arms stretched out to her dead family, while he carried her off. It was a heartless thing to do. If he had had the choice, he would have taken the time to give her people a Christian burial and time for her to mourn over them. He hoped she would forgive him.

He stopped deep in the woods. The girl had quieted somewhat. Going to one knee, he set her down for a better look. Strawberry-blonde hair was plastered to her skull. The lenses of her glasses were cracked. Wide green eyes stared at him. Her dress was strange: a green tweed pinafore over a blouse, with ragged green and white striped woolen stockings. At her throat was a necklace of odd design, akin to a shellfish.

"Peace, child," Michael said gently.

The girl babbled words in Romanian.

"I am Michael," he said, pressing a hand to his heart. "What is your name?"

"A-Agatha," the girl said.

"What a pretty necklace," Michael said, reaching for it.

The girl jerked away, shaking her head.

"Is that important?" Michael did not expect her to understand his words. From beneath his surcoat he produced a crucifix. "Like this?"


Heterodyne. It must be the girl's family. Michael heard the sound of soldiers and bull-horns in the distance. The authorities had arrived. It would be difficult enough to escape over the border by himself. With a child with no papers, it would be even more different. Yet leaving the girl would mean abandoning her to the mercies of the Romanian orphanage system. Michael had seen too many documentaries about such places.

He had to escape.

The girl was in need.

It was a simple decision.

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Family.

I never had a family. Mom was dead the day I was born. My dad was a good man, but he died when I was six. The only memories of him I have are flashes of sleeping while he drove from town to town, and the expression on his face when I found his body. What I had with Justin DuMorne was a lot more Helter Skelter than Brady Bunch, complete with beatings and sort-of-incest sex with my adopted sister. Since I fried DuMorne with a fire spell, there's not a huge chance I'll be bringing around the wifey and 2.5 kids for Thanksgiving dinner. Marriage isn't in the cards--unless you count jokers--after what happened to Susan.

Maybe this is why I don't take up Michael's offers to come by. It isn't that I've given up on friends completely. Stars and stones, I'm not as bad as I was when I was Crazy Hermit Man after Susan quit town. I see the occult crowd at Mac's. There's the weekly roleplaying games with the Alphas. But I don't want to screw up what Michael has by being the beer-swilling weird friend he brings home from work who stinks up the den watching the game. What Michael has is the American Dream, Religious Catholic Edition: stay at home wife who supports him, perfect kids, great house. Coming into Michael's home, though, seems like threatening something solid and perfect.

Which just goes to show I much I know.

I jerked the shrapnel out of the wooden beam. The steel splinter in the pliers could have been a ninja's calling card. There were dozens of pieces dotting the walls and ceiling of the attic. I was having flashbacks to my less successful potion experiments. Actually, it was weird seeing an honest-to-Bog lab like my own in the Carpenter home. There were differences: my head threatened to bump against the peak of the sloping ceiling, and there were heavy-duty electrical lines laid in. But the plain wooden tables and metal shelves were close to what I had in my sub-basement.

I finished plucking out the last bit of metal--a half-melted cog--an hour later. By then, Michael had finished replacing the windows. They were in frames that had popped out whole in the blast. The glass was a shatterproof type I'd seen on a certain mob boss' limo. That meant this sort of accident happened often. Glass tinkled as Charity Carpenter swept up the remnants of a glass chemistry rig. Charity is a tall, statuesque blonde who could have been a Valkyrie in a past life. I'd seen her stand up to Kravos' super ghost even when she was pregnant and in a graveyard.

Now, all I saw was a tired and worried mother.

"She doesn't mean to do it," Charity said, more to herself than anything. "She only wants to help."

"Is she making home-brewed grenades?" I asked, shaking the coffee can full of blast fragments.

"Agatha would never do that in the house," Charity said. She picked up a tangled mess of pipes. "She was talking about designing a new pipe organ for Saint Mary's."

"Are you sure she didn't mix up the plans," I said, eyeing the wreckage, "for a Katyusha rocket battery?"

"There might have been some inspiration," Charity said.

"They did call them 'Stalin's Organs'," I said. "Aggie hasn't gotten over her clumsiness?"

"If that was all it was, I wouldn't be worried," Charity said. "It makes no sense. Her academics are stellar. She graduated high school at fifteen. Every one of her professors at UCS thinks she could
be the next Gates or Hawking if only--"

"She still has the headaches?" I asked.

"They've gotten worse." Charity's lips thinned. "Mr. Dresden, could this be a misdirected talent?"

"There's no traces of magic," I said. "I could tell right away if it was a spontaneous entropy curse."

"We've had cranial x-rays and MRI's," Charity continued. "The psychologists tell us it could be a reaction to murder of her family. No amount of therapy helps."

"It hits you hard," I said. "Take it from a guy with experience, it's enough that she ended up with you and Michael."

"You're very kind." Charity drew a deep breath. "I've laid out some clothing for you from a charity collection. It's in the bathroom. Feel free to use as much hot water and soap."

"You didn't have to," I said.

"Yes I do." Charity leaned away from me, face contorted. "There are sewer pipes which reek less than you. I can't inflict that stench on the good people of Chicago."

I suspect Charity wasn't including me among the "good". She had a point. Flash-fried kraken slime isn't Old Spice. Charity stayed upwind while I climbed down the folding ladder attached to the attic trap-door. I tip-toed as best I could through the upstairs hall. It must have taken her most of the hour I was here to calm down the kids. As I passed one open door, I heard Michael's calm voice talking over muffled sobbing. Agatha, then. I didn't want to butt into family business. I muffled my footsteps even more until I reached the bathroom.

Agatha H. Carpenter was a good kid. Shy, sort of cute. She dressed in baggy sweaters and ankle-length skirts, the outfits of girls who were either unsure about their bodies or teased mercilessly about them. I'd been the wise-mouth kid in high school. I'd gotten my share of knocks from bullies I wouldn't back down from. For a brilliant but klutzy girl, that probably translated into a world of heart-ache. Even though she'd rocketed out of high-school hell, that sort of torture stays with you. It leaves scars.

I toweled off. Agatha and I weren't close. We'd chatted a few times when I'd stopped by Michael's for business. She often asked me for science-fiction novels and comic books. What the heck, it let me rotate my reading material without having to put up new shelves. It wasn't as if I could have a heart to heart with the kid. Hell's bells, the guyabera made me look like a Tijuana pimp. The pants cuffs hovered several inches above my ankles. I'd be doing the Walk of Shame down the front walk without any of the satisfaction beforehand.
I crept downstairs. The front couch had an afghan spread on it.

Not my problem. Murph said domestic calls were the worst. What did I know about talking to teenage girls?

Fluffing a throw pillow, I laid my weary head down to sleep.

Drifting down the stairs came low, agonized weeping.

Elaine had--

Well, it wasn't as if I was expecting any sleep.
I was just about to knock on Agatha's door when I had a thought. Unbelievable? Well, Harry Dresden might rush in where fools and angels fear to tread. But I've learned a few things over the years. Especially since at least twice I've ended up looking good for crimes I never committed because I happened to be standing over the metaphorical body with the bloody knife in my hand. Put it together. Suspicious mom finds man she doesn't think much of has invited himself into the room of her teenage daughter. Late at night. Mix it in with my usual luck? Charity would be burying me in separate Hefty bags in the backyard.

Bad plan. Better check with the parents first.

About then was when Agatha's bedroom door slammed open. It caught me in the side like a love-tap from the Bears offensive line. Wizard became one with the hallway carpet. Through the daze I heard angry muttering and sniffing going down the hall, over the loud crinkle of paper. Rubbing a shoulder, I staggered up as I followed to the stairs. There was a dim silhouette standing by the hearth in the Carpenter living room. It was a big brick mantel made for hanging stockings from. The person down there--my keen detective instincts suggested "Agatha"--was not full of Christmas cheer.

*SCRITCH*

"--stupid, c-clumsy dumkopf--"

A match-head sparked, then died out.

"--should know better--"

*SCRITCH*

"--can't even light a match, I want to watch it burn, work verdammt--"

I was tired. A man's defenses are down when it's two in the morning. They're even lower when your mind catches up with the fact that a giant demon squid nearly ate you. Stars and stones, I'd been staring down its beak not an hour earlier. Agatha's words carried so much rage and self-loathing. It was as if I was feeling them myself. I'm more than familiar with those emotions. Not too long ago I spent hours staring at a dinky example of DeBeer's less than finest, marinating in them. I've got a predictable response to that state of mind.

I lash out.

"Flickum biccus."

Emotions are the fuel of magic. They're the channel between the will and the natural energy that empowers the Arts. The stronger the feelings, the bigger the kick. And I've always had a problem with fine control of my evocation. The spell I'd cast at the fireplace was a minor fire working to light candles. The logs Michael had set on the grate flared up like they had been soaked in kerosene. The paper piled atop the logs disintegrated. By some miracle the flames went up the flue instead of as a fireball through the mesh steel screen guarding the hearth.
There was a yelp. The girl standing in front of the fireplace flung the matchbook she'd been trying to use into the inferno. Stumbling back, she landed on her rear end. What a rear end it was. It was keen detective instincts, I swear. They kick in automatically. That's why I noticed how Agatha Carpenter had filled out since I'd last seen her. Or else the shapeless clothes she had worn had done a better job of camouflage than expected. Tonight she wore a loose long-sleeved shirt that hung down to mid-thigh and dark pajama pants.

Men these days say "Rubenesque" when they don't want to call a girl fat. Agatha wasn't. She most definitely was a big girl in the way women were before two olives and a popsicle stick became the industry standard. Agatha was a couple inches shorter than her adoptive mom, who's just shy of six feet herself. Charity's the proverbial brick privy, but it's a statuesque beauty. Agatha's build was softer than Charity's. More Marylin Monroe, especially up front. The picture of Gadget Hackwrench on the front of her shirt swelled out in ways that reminded me achingly of Susan.

Agatha's expression turned from shock to grief. She had very pretty looks. They were rounded and friendlier than Charity's cold beauty. No woman looks good when they're that hurt, though. Agatha's face twisted while she stared into the fire. She bowed her head, strawberry-blonde hair hiding her features from view. Reddish in this light, it was mussed and tangles with a cowlick sticking up from behind. Low sobbing came from behind the curtain.

Like I said, I'm a predictable guy. I can't help taking care of women. My old-school chivalry of opening doors and pulling out chairs brings me razzing from Murph. Can't help it. What mashes my buttons are women in physical or emotional pain. It brings out the chest-thumping alpha in me. I was beside Agatha in a couple strides of my long legs. Appearances be damned. I'd deal with the fall-out later. Kneeling beside her, I checked for any injuries. Nothing too bad, though a few stray cinders had burned little holes in her flannel pajama bottoms.

...which clung to hips and thighs that gave her a classic hourglass figure...

Lake Michigan provides a great way to hide human body parts if you encase them in concrete.

These are things that come to mind when you're in the house of a construction contractor with strong religious views.

I tore my gaze away from Agatha to the fire. The blaze had died down to a safe level. Ash floated above the flames. How much paper had she shoved in there? A scrap with scorched edges was stuck to the back of the fireplace screen. Lit from behind, it was some kind of blueprint. Gears and cogs and circuitry of great complexity had been drawn with a careful, skilled hand. A spark landed on it, finishing the job. Upon the logs burned wooden models: machines, airships, and other mechanisms. As a wizard, I do much of my own craftwork for magical items. I carve and sew and cast metal for jewelry. I'm not half-bad at it.

What I saw right before they were consumed was exquisite workmanship.

Agatha was burning years of work.

I brushed the hair away from her face. Bright-green eyes glistened behind gold-rimmed glasses. When they flicked briefly up to meet my gaze, there was a strong tug on my mind like a riptide pulling a swimmer out to sea. She nearly sucked me into a soulgaze. I had to jerk my head away before I did even more damage. Even so, the impression of fierce intelligence surged through the connection. I focused on the tip of her nose--an old wizard's trick--while trying not to slip down further. Have some class, Harry.
What do you do when someone burns everything they worked at? What do you do when they're so far gone in pain and agony that even a chat with Michael can't reach you?

Sometimes there's only one thing to say.

"What, you forgot to bring along the marshmallows?"
"Marshmallows?" Agatha blinked.

"Isn't that what you do around a campfire?" I said. "Sing songs, toast marshmallows, yack about who's dreamy at the Boy's Side of camp?"

"I--I never went to--"

"It can't be beer and weenies," I said, "because there's no sand. You need a beach for beer and weenies. Or are we going to eat ice cream right out of the tub and braid our hair?"

"What are you talking about?" Annoyance replaced confusion. "You're talking about idiotic sleepovers when you're--oh, sweet lightning, what are you wearing?"

"Your mom dressed me," I said. "Don't worry, I heard the seventies are coming back any day now."

"Mr. Dresden," Agatha said, stepping back to take in all my glory. "I--I didn't know you were here."

"Your dad let me stay over," I said. "Since you don't have a dog, I bunked down here instead of the Snoopy Arms."

"I didn't mean to disturb you." Agatha turned back to the blaze. "I came down to burn some trash I won't need any more."

"Nothing like a fire on an autumn night," I said. "Hey, kid, since I'm up, some hot cocoa sounds great."

"Mama has Nesquik." Agatha wiped her eyes with a sleeve.

"Used to eat it dry out of the box," I said. "Could you make a couple of mugs? I don't mix well with electric appliances. Charity will run me through a woodchipper if I blow out the microwave."

"I'll be a few minutes." Agatha smiled uncertainly. "We have some Reddi-Whip in the fridge, and a pack of Peeps for Halloween."

"Perfect."

I followed her to the kitchen and watched her from the doorway. She opened a cabinet instead of reaching for the knife block. It was pretty cheap pulling the send-the-little-woman-to-fetch-me-a-beer trick. Murph'd dock me a berjillion points on the Modern Man index. The Carpenters ran a traditional household from what I'd seen, though. Michael would never raise his daughters to stick to the stay home and spit out babies routine. But he and Charity worked on the Cleaver model as far as I could tell. Agatha needed something familiar and positive to pop her out of her funk.

Dressing like a vintage-store rodeo clown to wrestle her out of the way of the mad bull of depression helped.
Speaking of, where were Ward and June? A creak came from the top of the stairs. Michael and Charity stood at the top. Holding her by the shoulders, Michael talked to her for a minute. She shot me one meaningful, touch-my-kid-and-die glare. But she left instead of coming down. He gave me a calm nod before following his wife back to be. Guess I was solo on this one. I was both encouraged and a little insulted. What, he didn't think I was a menace to his daughter? Of course, given my social life of late, I couldn't get laid if I was dropped buck-naked into Castle Anthrax coated in Hershey's Syrup.

Hell's bells. A year since Susan had changed and headed for parts unknown. A few months since Elaine had come back from the dead and then disappeared. The only women in my life were Karrin Murphy and the girls in the Alphas. Neither of them were romantic prospects. No wonder my libido had piped up "hey, CURVES!" at the big reveal. I checked in on Agatha again. She brought out two steaming mugs out of the microwave. Nice kid. Sweet girl. Just that. This was no different than counseling teen-agers who had broken through with their talent when a parent with a clue hired me.

Agatha came out with all the fixings on a tray: hot chocolate, Reddi-Whip, marshmallow chicks, bite-sized Hershey bars, and graham crackers. Hand me a guitar for a rousing chorus of "Kumbaya", if I could play one without sending Mister yowling into the night. She sat cross-legged in front of the fire. A Peeps-and-chocolate sandwich was held near the flames at the end of a pair of kitchen tongs. She cursed in German and Romanian when the first improvised S'more carbonized. Sipping my Nestle's special, I ate the second scorched attempt while she tried a third. Soon there were a bunch cooling on the tray.

Sitting beside her was like being on Ebenezar's farm. I'd spend a lot of time staring into the wood stove or campfires when we'd go on hunting trips in the Ozarks. McCoy always seemed to know when he needed to fade into the background. Whole evenings would pass with me brooding and him whittling. Agatha wasn't doing too badly. Without my sharp cheekbones and duster, she couldn't put on the spin on it like I could. Give her a few years, though, and she might have a chance for The Show. Reaching back, I draped the afghan from the couch over her shoulders.

"These are quite good," Agatha said, biting into a S'more. "It's all a matter of heat transfer. The smoke from my burning hopes and dreams adds a piquant flavor."

"Any point to saying," I said, wiping away a Reddi-Whip moustache, "that it gets better, you can try again, there's always another sunrise?"

"It would make me want to beat helpless animals to death with a shovel."

"Yeah, that's crap a lot of the time." Sorry, Michael. I have to be me. "Best I can say is that no matter how much life throws at you, you have to get back up again. It's the only thing you can do."

"It hurts, Mr. Dresden," Agatha said.

"Only ones who don't feel pain are the dead, kid," I replied. "And it's Harry. Anyone who brings me Nestle and Peeps immediately gets first-name rights."

"The dead." Agatha touched the locket at her throat.

"That's a trilobite," I said. "Dad was a paleontologist?"

"Never met my father--my biological father--or mother," Agatha said, stroking the golden casing.
"It's a symbol of the Heterodynes. My family must have been from Mechanicsburg."

"I'm not up on Transylvanian nobility," I said. Well, aside from the Drakuls. "So you're a hidden duke's daughter, with an estate waiting for you?"

"Hah. No. I'm no one special." Agatha smiled bitterly. "The Heterodynes were...famous in their time, but you wouldn't have heard of them. I couldn't speak English when I, uh, met Tata. He thought 'Heterodyne' was my family name instead of what the locket stood for."

"Never changed the H?" I asked.

"I was too much in shock to correct him." Agatha massacred a handful of helpless chicks. "It was the last name he gave me to the nuns at the Italian convent he brought me to. Ended up on my adoption papers. Better than common-as-Clay, I suppose."

"You never went to Mechanicsburg to look for any relatives?"

"It's not there anymore." Agatha clutched the locket. "Adam. Lilith. Uncle Barry. They died the night Michael found me. I would have died with them. I should have died with them, for all the use I've been to Tata and Mama."

"Never knew my mom," I said. "Dad died when I was six. I had a foster dad for a while. It didn't work out. Best thing that ever happened to me was some old coot from Missouri showing up to show some faith in me."

"Tata's always had faith in me." A tear streaked down her cheek. "Even after everything I do turns to scheisse."

"That's him," I said. "Agatha, that old coot was happy I stayed alive. I wouldn't have mattered if I'd never amounted to anything, as long as I stayed true to what he taught me."

"Well, you did become someone important." Agatha said. "After all, you're Chicago's premiere 'professional wizard'."

"I could see the finger-quotes in your mind."

"Oh, I don't doubt you, Harry," Agatha said. "You don't live with Tata without finding out the current scientific models are lacking."

"So you believe in magic?" I said.

"Magic's just insufficiently analyzed science," Agatha said. She shook her head. "There's no magic in my life, anyway."

"I could change that," I said, looking over my shoulder up the stairs, "but your mom and dad wouldn't like me corrupting their daughter."

Uh.

"With magic."

"How else would you corrupt me?" Agatha asked.
You have to be kidding me.

"Tata's right, you're a gentleman." Agatha slumped. "You don't have to keep me company. I'm not about to do anything--uh--drastic--"

Agatha flopped over to one side, against me.

She really was a robust young woman.

Might as well let her drop off for a bit. I was still wired. Then later I could stick her on the couch. I could sleep on the floor--

Sleeeeeeep.

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Mechanisms don't question. They serve. Within the locket, gears and springs and tuning forks the width of human hairs stood sentinel. They had been since their creator had fashioned them years ago. They had survived without adjustment or maintenance throughout the bumps and shocks of a young girl's life. The works of a Spark do not easily succumb to simple mechanical failures.

The mechanism was, however, fragile for all that it had been made by Barry Heterodyne.

And it had never been designed to deal with influences extant in another reality.

*click*

*click*

*CLACK*

Every so slightly, a gear slipped out of adjustment
It was a cathedral.

Though it was dark, it had the sense of vast space rising up to high ceilings you had in great churches like St. Mary's. I could make out tiny details if I looked hard enough: the sheen of brass, the glint of glass, here and there chrome and steel. My senses told me of power thrumming beneath the ground. It wasn't faith. It was something I'd never encountered. The closest had been the greasy smell of ozone that had charged the air right before I'd channeled the lightning on the toad demon. The air in this place smelled stale yet sterile. There was a feeling of--

*KACHUNK*

A circuit closed.

*FZZZZZZ*

Blue light flickered behind glass.

I looked up and up and up.

A weird atonal humming filled the--

Argh.

I woke up to find out soft tissue injuries are a stone-cold bitch to face in the morning. Not that that was news to me. They're even worse when you fell asleep sitting upright and cross-legged. Those weren't knots in my back. They were a macrame project. My legs were one huge cramp. Reports from my left arm told me I had at least serious muscle strain. The kraken must have cranked it when it grabbed me. Forget even moving my neck until Christmas. Then there was the ringing in my ears.

It wasn't ringing.

It was humming. Snatches of the dream came back to me. It was two melodies combining in a way that wasn't so much musical as strangely catchy. It drew you in. Somehow my neck ground against the rust freezing it in place to turn it a fraction of an inch. Eyes closed, Agatha drew on the wall with a charred piece of kindling. Sketched out in charcoal on the wallpaper was a crazy-quilt of equations, mechanical diagrams, and what I thought was computer code. I've seen enough science magazine pictures of microchips to know she was sketching out an incredibly detailed schematic freehand.

The headache slammed into her a second later. I'd never seen one of her notorious fits. I hoped this one wasn't typical. Agatha screamed hoarsely and clamped her hands to her head. She toppled to the floor. I lunged to catch her. My body yelled at me it was going to get me and my little dog for this. Pain's only pain. You can ignore it if you have to. Justin taught me that. I didn't manage to catch her. Instead, my back was a half-assed air bag. The macrame twisted into fine mesh netting.

"Owwwwwww," Agatha moaned.
"Hey. Turn to me," I said. "Alright, you're good. No blood from your nostrils. Are you seeing auras?"

"Not a migraine," Agatha ground out. "Just the usual, like my frontal lobes are being squeezed in a vice."

"Been there, done that, drank the potion," I said, "curled up around the toilet for a day."

"Never had one wake me up before." Agatha looked up at the wall. "Sweet lightning, did I do that last night? I don't remember being manic enough to write on the walls."

"You were doing it earlier," I said. "Do you sleepwalk a lot?"

"I had a somnambulism episode?" Agatha backed away. "This is very bad. I've never done anything like this before. If I'd been near any tools-- tell me I wasn't near any tools!"

"Things happen after you're under stress," I said. "I wouldn't worry about it unless it becomes a habit."

"Fir-aş a dracului ." Agatha blushed. "Sorry. I'm not supposed to blaspheme."

"You get off on a technicality if you do it in a foreign language."

"'God knows all tongues, Agatha'," she said, quoting from memory.

"'Sweet lightning' is fine, though," I said. "Home-made curses to sneak under the bar?"

"Expressions I heard when I was younger," Agatha replied, "and Uncle Barry didn't think I was listening."

"Little pitchers have big ears," I said. "Did you have attacks like that when you were with him?"

"All my life. There was a time when I heard the music," Agatha said, stroking her locket, "and then poof! The music stopped."

Music.

"Harry, are you in pain?" Agatha adjusted her glasses. "Red fire! You're one enormous bruise!"

"You should see the other guy." I tried to hide the spasms running through me.

"Well, you're the one right in front of me." Agatha poked and prodded. "Does this hurt? Does this?"

"YES!"

"You're in no condition to drive home," Agatha said, completing her torture session. "I'll drive you back. First though we have to get you downstairs and stripped."

Under other circumstances this would be a wonderful turn of events. Not under Charity's roof and with her daughter. I was about to point this out when Agatha hefted me into a fireman's carry. Six feet plus of wizard weighs a fair bit even if he's on the thin side. The girl really was strong. While she carried me off Gor-style, I caught sight of a picture above the fireplace mantel. It was Agatha
and Michael wearing "Habitat for Humanity" T-shirts posing in front of a half-built home. The kid must have bulked out carrying I-beams on her shoulder.

She went down the stairs leading to the basement. It was a huge finished room as big as the entire upper floor. One section had a fully-equipped workshop. Michael's probably. Along one wall were the washer and dryer and water heater. There was also a long metal table with high-grade lights above it. Beside it were trays with instruments I associated with Cook County. They had an operating theater underneath their home? Who had Michael trained with, Burt Gummer? Agatha laid me down onto the table. She had a clinical expression while she took off my shirt. The only concession to modesty was putting a little towel over my bits before yanking down my pants. Definitely not the fun kind of medical fantasy. Then again, nurses in skimpy latex uniforms haven't featured much in my visits to Chicago's finer hospitals.

Bubbling echoed off the concrete walls. Agatha adjusted the controls of a whirlpool bath. It was the type used in therapy, not mellow California living. I clamped the modesty cloth in place while she helped me in. Paint me red and call me Harry the Lobster. It was nirvana. I prayed the pump jets would survive long enough to pound my aching muscles into jelly. Then I nearly blacked out when hands bore into my back and shoulders. Hers were rougher than I'd expected a girl's to be. They were a working girl's hands: rough and used to handling tools. And crushing rocks, by the feel of it.

"All the guys get this on the first date?" I gasped out.

"Don't be rude. This is a medical emergency." Agatha did something to my neck that sent fireballs through the top of my head. "I've seen cadavers in better condition than you. Livelier ones, too."

"You've seen cadavers."

"Some girls take AP Calculus. When I was fourteen I audited pre-med courses. Those trips to the Medical Examiner's office for autopsies were a treat--"

"You must make your own bread," I said, throwing the switch on that conversational track.

"How did you guess?" Agatha asked. "I learned it from Lilith. She was always baking and canning."

"Your uncle's wife?"

"Foster mom. Adam was my foster dad," Agatha said. She relented kneading me into a pulp. "They were good people. Adam and Lilith would have been glad to know I ended up with Mama and Tata."

"Like I said, never knew my parents very well," I said. "An old hillbilly called Ebenezar is the closest thing to a Dad I have. He made me the man I am today."

"Mama and Tata did the same for me." Agatha shrugged. "Not that it means much. They gave me a great life, Harry. I'm grateful for it. But, I know I could do something more. I could do something to help."

"What you drew looked pretty impressive," I said.
"Useless gibberish like everything else," Agatha said. "I'll wipe it off as soon as we're done. Good thing Mama put up washable wallpaper. The kids scrawl everything with crayons--"

"Hey, Mr. Dresden, ask for extra!"

Golden hair framed features that were a younger version of Charity's.

"Molly," Agatha growled.

"Guess you finally got a guy, freakazoid," Molly Carpenter said. "Break out the Tiger Balm and the high heels."

"Bratty sister?" I asked.

"Fourteen going on Whore of Babylon," Agatha shook her fist at Molly. "Get back upstairs."

Molly smirked and lifted up a Polaroid camera.

*FLASH*

"Hahahahah! This is so going up on the fridge!"

"Get back here, child of evil!"

"Hey Mooooom, you've got to check out what Miss Innocent's doing down here--"

Crap.
Sanya fought demons in the grey light of false dawn. The courtyard of the villa housing the convent echoed with grunts and the hiss of wood slashing through the air. Stripped to the waist, his dark skin gleamed with sweat as he whipped the hanbo through a series of sabre cuts and guards. Shiro had taught him the basics of swordsmanship with the short staff, in the healing time after casting aside the coin. Phantom aches in his wrist reminded the Russian of the elder Knight's lessons in avoiding having one's hand chopped off. There had been many lessons like that. The pain and exhaustion had distracted him from the nightmares.

He had not slept much this night. Venice was too close.

Propping the hanbo against a wall, Sanya shifted into a series of Combat Sambo drills. He had learned the basics of the art at a club in Moscow run by a vor v zakone. The gangster had thought a black man would prove profitable touring in exhibition matches. Not much different than a dancing bear. Sanya pushed himself through simulated take-downs, punches, kicks, and joint locks. He was not so adept at wielding Esperacchius that he could trust himself to always have it at hand. It was why he had paid a former spetsnaz operative working for a mafiya in Hamburg to school him the vicious military version of the Russian wrestling system.

*clink*

Sanya spun about.

The girl squatted beside his duffel bag, laying out a now field-stripped AKM. She had been silent when a sister had brought her in to meet the man who would escort her to America. That often happened with children saved by the Knights. There were wounds which could not be healed so easily. Sanya understood that. One of his nightmares had been what he had done once to a French girl about her age, when Magog had ridden him. She was quiet now, too, as she deftly reduced the assault rifle to its components.

"Loose tolerances," she muttered in Romanian. "Rough yet rugged construction."

"A very Russian weapon," Sanya said. "Kalashnikov designed it so that even a mujik would know how to maintain it. Or a small child who should be asleep."

"Oh! I'm sorry!" Pieces scattered when she scampered away. "Mother Superior forbade me to do this, especially after what happened to the clock--"

"You should ask before touching someone's weapons." Sanya checked the components. "No damage. No harm. Although shouldn't little girls be playing with dolls?"

"You can't shoot things with a doll," the girl said. She paused. "Unless you integrate a small-caliber gun into it. But it makes more sense to save the space for a small explosive charge to act as a distraction."

"You are a very practical girl," Sanya said, hands frozen in reassembling the bolt group.
"The sisters say to put your trust in God." She shrugged. "I'd rather have a death ray on hand."

"You do not believe?" Sanya asked.

"I'm not an atheist," the girl replied. "I concede it is possible that there is a power, transcendent or immanent, in the universe who represents the principles of order."

"Catechism lessons must be interesting," Sanya muttered.

"Sister Gloria had to have a lie down," she said. "The Jesuit they brought in was much better at arguing doctrine. He's helping me with my Latin, although Brother Ferdinand's weak on Ancient Greek."

"I think we will have much to talk about on the flight to Chicago," Sanya said.

"Are you from Bessarabia?" she asked. "We lived in Chisinau for a month. Your accent's similar."

"My mother was Moldovan," Sanya said. "Do you know any Russian?"

"Only a few phrases." The girl hesitated. "Could you teach me?"

"I would be happy to." He nodded at the AKM. "Would you like to learn how to put it together properly?"

"Nyet." Her hands went behind her back. "I'm, uh, not very good at reassembly. They found bits of the clock three kilometers away."

"It would not hurt to watch," Sanya said, field-stripping the AKM again. "Now, it goes like this..."

+++ Dealing with poltergeists teaches you how many lethal things are scattered around the average American home. Kitchens are the worst. But even a living room has lamps, chairs, ashtrays, and other things that can hurt like hell when tossed at you at high speed. Lying in the tub, I counted out the many ways Charity could kill me. Take that workshop: drills, saw blades, screwdrivers, and other improvised weapons were hung up on pegboards. Actual weapons were racked in a cabinet fronted with security glass—an entire medieval armory—on one wall. Let's not forget the surgical instruments.

I hunkered deeper into the tub while the yelling and screaming went on above.

Stairs creaked.

Great. Death by soccer mom in--

Were those knitted wooly mammoth slippers?

Charity stared at me for a short eternity. She sighed. Ignoring everything, she went to the dryer. She took out my jeans and western shirt. She snagged a towel from a half-full laundry basket. Pulling a hospital privacy screen between us, she placed them on the side of the Jacuzzi. Okay. Hint taken. Pretty surprised I earned a fluffy towel, though. Charity had worked minor magic of her
own fixing the rips and getting out the worst slime stains. I was tucking my shirt into my pants when she peered around the screen.

"Are you hungry?" Charity asked.

"I rate a continental breakfast along with the traditional last cigarette?"

"Mr. Dresden, I know my oldest daughter," she said. "She brought you down for treatment, not for immoral reasons. I can tell you didn't misinterpret her intentions because your arms aren't dislocated."

"She can handle herself?" I asked.

"A colleague of my husband's took a personal interest in her safety," Charity said. "And Agatha believes the best preventative medicine in a crisis is suppressive fire."

It's about then that I noticed what was hanging from the ceiling.

"Tell me that's a display model."

"It turns out hand-cranked Gatlings with hopper feed," Charity replied, "are technically not classified as Title II machine-guns. It was a fun project, though I did the assembly."

"Because nothing says mother-daughter togetherness than firearms manufacturing," I said. "Message received. Hands off like she was mordite."

"Mr Dresden, I--" Charity shook her head. "In the past, I've seen you as a mercenary. A man who makes his living through powers that are reserved to God. Last night, I saw you reach out to a troubled young woman with a grace I didn't expect."

"It wasn't me," I said. "All hail the power of s'mores."

"Agatha has few friends," Charity said. "I would not have thought you of all people would connect with her. The Lord moves in mysterious ways. You're welcome at my table for breakfast."

"Don't want to traumatize the kids," I said. "You don't want to expose them to me drooling over Fruit-Loops. Think of the children."

"Still an idiot, Mr Dresden?"

"I have to be me, Charity." I looked down. "Love the footwear."

"She calls them mimmoths," Charity said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to sterilize the hot tub."

Nice to see some things never changed.

Charity had hung my duster to dry out on a hanger hooked on a ceiling beam. The leather was as stiff as I still was. Arching my back, I stretched as best I could before forcing my twinging muscles to climb the stairs. On top it was quiet, though there was an overturned chair in the living room. Agatha's scribbles were still up on the wall. I stopped to admire them. They had the intricacy you saw in high magic ritual circles. I wasn't even close to that sort of spellwork.
My senses pinged.

Everyone carries magic within them. Magic is at the very heart of what it is to be human. Very few people relative to the world population have the mojo to manifest even a minor talent. But all it takes is will and intent to do basic workings like a magic circle or a ritual pentagram. What coursed through the blueprints and equations scribbled on the wall was channeled willpower very much like circles of power I made when doing spellwork. Stars and stones, even as it faded away I could tell it had probably crackled like a ley-line when the drawings had been fresh.

Almost as powerful as mine.

My breath steamed in the crisp autumn morning air. The sun was coming above the yardarm. Or was that the forecastle? For a guy who dreamed about sailing, I could never sort out nautical vocabulary. I buttoned up against the chill as I walked to the Blue Beetle. Settling in the front passenger seat, I leaned it back as far as it would go. I thought about what I'd seen in my dream. Or had it been my dream? Kravos had taught me that a powerful dream could create its own pocket demesne in the Nevernever. Halloween was coming up. The barriers between worlds were weakening.

What had I seen in Agatha's mind?

The front door opened. Agatha came out in a bottle-green greatcoat and one of those furry Russian hats. Heavy boots thumped on the wooden balcony. I wouldn't be surprised if they were steel-toed. She carried a foil dish covered in plastic wrap. She stopped for a second when she saw my car in daylight. A lot of people do when they take in the glory that is my ride. Agatha circled it before knocking on the passenger side window.

"Gotterdammerung," Agatha said, after I rolled it down, "what did you do to this poor machine?"

"It's not a wreck," I said. "It has character."

"It has a pressing need for emergency surgery." Agatha shoved the dish into my lap. "Mama says stop being stubborn."

Bacon, eggs, and hash browns.

No wonder Michael married her.

"Just a moment." Agatha disappeared between the freestanding garage and the house, then returned wheeling a bicycle that looked like it had been sold back when women wore bloomers.

"What's that made of, iron?" I asked, as she heaved it into the front trunk.

"It's a Batavus stadsfiets," Agatha said. "You can't go wrong with solid, dependable design."

"I bet it doesn't get stolen much," I said. The Blue Beetle's front shocks settled down noticeably. "And if it does, the thieves are so worn out they can't get more than a block before they give up."

"Plus lugged steel frames are solid enough to stand up to beating them into unconsciousness if they fight back."
"Hey, Ag? Is your sister alive?" I asked while Agatha buckled herself in.

"Molly's fine," Agatha said. "Drenched, but fine. The hypothermia will wear off eventually."

I gave Agatha my hairiest eyeball.

"She wants to act like a little witch," Agatha said, smirking, "she can stand a little ducking in the rain barrel."

"Did she weigh more than a duck?"

"She quacked as loud as one until she gave up the picture." Agatha tucked a Polaroid into a duster pocket. "I know you practitioners are sensitive about photographs of yourselves."

"Smart kid." I inhaled wonderful bacony goodness when I tore off the wrap. "Has anyone ever said 'but she was such a quiet girl' after meeting you?"

"All the time, actually."

"I thought so. Home, Jeeves."
Chapter 7

We drove home to the smooth, sophisticated sounds of polka.

The Blue Beetle's radio was the first part to break down after I bought it. I left it in rather than have a hole in the dash. Agatha had fished a portable CD player and a miniature computer speaker out of her greatcoat when she'd found the radio was out of commission. She'd also spilled three small crescent wrenches, several fuses and transistors, and a Doctor Doom Pez dispenser from the same pocket. Want! Between gearshifts, she put together an improvised sound system that had us serenaded by dueling accordions in tinny mono sound.

Polka isn't what I expected Agatha to rock out to. I'd have thought she would be a classical music girl. Instead she bounced in her seat to beer-hall oompah tunes. The sheer cheerfulness of her head-bobbing and air-accordioning on the steering wheel grounded out my ability to short out copiers at fifty feet. Seriously, it was weapons-grade adorable. You'd have to stick up one of those kitten-and-puppy-sleeping-together posters to compete. The Beetle agreed. Shifting was slick. It turned corners as if it were on rails. The engine had lost the worrying hiccup it had picked up last week.

Typical. Always leaving me waiting for the wrecker, and then sit up and beg when the first cute redhead plops into its lap.

Traitor.

Hold on, was that the Imperial March?

"They said polka and John Williams couldn't mix," Agatha crowed. "Ha! Fools! I showed them all!"

"This is your work?" I asked over a brass section and concertina.

"Music's always helped me think," Agatha said. "Lilith taught me to play piano when I was little. Mama had the church organists tutor me."

"Is that why you hum?"

"Oh. You heard me heterodyning," Agatha said. "Annoying isn't it? I started when I was five. It canceled out outside noise. Useless when your head explodes when you try to concentrate."

"Music and mathematics have a long history," I said, nursing a travel mug of Charity's coffee. Her brew could inspire Lucifer to beg forgiveness from the Big Guy. "I learned Pythagorean musical theory to sharpen me on mystical harmonics. Don't ask me to play, though, unless you want to see a guitar gently weep."

"When I play, I almost can imagine I can see what I dream about," Agatha said. "It's what keeps me in school. I switched to a musical composition major after the disaster of first year."

"Must have been rough starting university so young."

"It's not that. I thought I might get over my problems in time." Agatha sighed. "Instead I melted down every computer I tried to program. Don't talk about the lab accidents."
"So you escaped to the glamorous world of polka," I said.

"A friend I met at the medical examiner's introduced me to the genre," Agatha said. She stared out through the windshield. "It's not so bad. I enjoy the music curriculum. Not the best in the department, but not the worst. I audit lots of science courses.

The CD player shuffled to a klezmer track

"All I wish is that one of my inventions would work."

I thought about the cathedral and the music and the power flowing through her designs.

I didn't say anything about it. What did I have to go on? All I had was a weird dream and proof she had tons of willpower. Just because you had lots of will didn't make you a sorcerer. Plenty of minor-leaguers had all the belief in the world without that little bit of talent that made someone a practitioner. It wouldn't do Agatha any good to suggest she might have the makings of an unwoken magical talent. She would have even more problems with technology. Charity would not like the idea at all. There was also the nasty habit of desperate people turning to magic to make deals for power. Personal experience taught me that's a bad road to go down.

I wasn't even sure what Agatha might have. What I'd sensed in the dream had been nothing like any magic I'd ever met up with. What I had on my hands was a mystery. Look, I'm not playing my violin at 221B Baker Street waiting for the Chicago PD to come by to plead for me to apply my superior skills of ratiocination. Usually it's Murphy calling me to get my ass in gear if I want to earn my fifty-an-hour consultant's fee. Otherwise, I don't seek out cases of mystical import. That's the Wardens' job. You can find me down at the pub nursing a brown ale. It was better to stay quiet until I was sure something occult was happening.

Why crush a young woman's hopes yet again?

We parked in the small gravel lot in front of my boarding house. I swung my hand a few times to charge up the rings. I've been ambushed a few times by unwanted visitors lurking in the stairway leading down to my basement apartment. It was also why I tend to carry my blasting rod beneath my duster these days. Yes, I'm paranoid. Yes, they're also out to get me. This time the stairs were clear. Agatha had good instincts. She stayed at the top while I disarmed the wards and unlocked the heavy steel security door. A demon had taught me the hard way that wood and a bachelor pad's threshold weren't enough.

My apartment is one big room with a small alcove for a wood stove and icebox. A door leads into a bedroom about the size of a pick-up truck bed and a very small bathroom. Muttering "flickum bickus", I lit the kerosene lanterns hanging on the walls. The amber light shone on the tapestries and rugs covering the stone walls and floor. It worked for lords of medieval castles. It worked for me. Besides, I decorate for texture rather than color. Proof of that is that my carpets range in style from Navajo to Graceland. The furniture is second-hand but comfortable. The most modern thing in the place is the Star Wars poster--old school, Leia hanging onto Luke's leg--Billy gave me.

I ushered in Agatha, closing door and wards behind her. She hung her coat on a coat rack by the umbrella stand where I store my staff and sword-cane. Beneath it she was wearing an outfit right out of the Victorian era. A green tweed skirt fell to her ankles. It was matched by a vest worn over a crisp white shirtwaist with slightly puffed mutton sleeves. She seemed to fit the apartment, with its wood stove and its lantern light, more than me in my jeans and Western shirt. She drifted over to
one of the many bookshelves lining the walls, taking down a copy of a Calvin and Hobbes anthology. It was *Scientific Progress Goes Boink*. What can I say, I have a fine appreciation of classic literature.

Mister wandered over from his spot in front of the fireplace to bestow upon me the welcome a lord grants a favored peasant. His shoulder-block shoved me a few inches back. My cat is thirty pounds of bob-tailed grey who hunts down the wild emu infesting Chicago's back alleys. If he doesn't find one on his rambles, he deigns to sample the kibble from the food bowl provided by his servant. Stalking over to Agatha, he sniffed the hem of her skirts. She didn't put down the book while she crouched to scritch behind his ear. There was a mild earthquake when Mister flopped over, purring like a Twenties-era rumrunner's speedboat.

The faerie cleaning service had been by while I'd been out playing *Jaws* with the kraken. Brownies are the world's best maids. I'd advertise them in the paper if that didn't mean they'd stop coming by. Don't ask me why you can't mention their existence. It must be a union law in Local 1 of the Tinkerbell Union. I slipped into the bedroom to change into clothes that hadn't been through the mangler. Today was an office day. I decided to go with a dressier shirt and a clean pair of black jeans. I've been trying to build up my practice again after neglecting it for half a year. I had to impress the clients a little more than I was used to.

I came out to find Agatha standing over the trap-door leading to my lab.

How the heck had she found it hidden beneath the throw rug?

"I knew it," Agatha said. "It stood to reason that you'd have your lab at home. Your office wouldn't be secure enough."

"I could have sworn I had it covered up," I said.

"Oh, I found it by deduction," Agatha explained. "There's not enough space in front or to the sides of the property. You could have expanded beneath the back yard, but it was more likely there was an existing sub-basement."

"How did you know I had a secret lab?"

"Wizards must be a lot like Sparks," Agatha said, squatting down. "You would need a space to perform twisted rituals that violate reality and summon dread spirits from the vasty deeps."

"You've been researching magic," I said.

"No, not really," Agatha replied. "But if I was going to delve into sorcery, twisted rituals and dread spirits would be what I'd do."

"Not unless you want a starring role in *Highlander*," I warned. "Besides, your mom would kill you. Correction: she'd castrate me, then kill you."

"I wouldn't summon a truly dread spirit," Agatha said. "Nothing more gibbering and rugose than a morning radio DJ."

I gave her my most withering deadpan stare.

"Aheh. Bad idea?" Agatha scuffed a boot-toe.
"Very bad idea. Never summon anything big enough to swallow your head, kid."

"Fine. Spoilsport." A light far brighter than what came from the lanterns shone in her eyes. "But, could you show me where you work? I've never had a chance to see a sorcerer's sanctum."

Oh, no.

Dammit.

Not the big eager puppy eyes.

Resist!

"Please?"

Stars and stones, I'm weak.
Chapter 8

Every practitioner dedicates some place for their magic. A Wiccan with an apartment might turn a corner into a sacred altar. The Merlin probably has an entire wing of a mansion dedicated to the Arts. It's an instinct: here, in that place, we can be who we truly are. My own lab is in the sub-basement beneath my apartment. I think it might have been a root cellar. It's cold enough all year round to have been used as one. Tables on three walls surround a central table, with enough space between them for a person to move around. Cheap wire shelves hold my notes and materials. Bolted into the concrete, a large brass circle in a clear area at the far end handled summoning spells.

A human skull rested on its own shelf amid wax-spattered candlesticks, tattered romance novels, and a thong with CANDI written on it in lipstick. I'd never felt skeevier than when I'd opened that plain brown package. What Bob wants, though, he gets. A spirit of air and intellect, Bob the Skull is my filing system and Encyclopedia Occultica. He's also a smart-mouthed pervert who demands autographed porn-star panties as occasional tribute. There was no way I wanted him and Agatha to meet. Luckily, the sun had been up long enough to send him to sleep. I rearranged the bodice rippers so the covers didn't show, and hid the thong at the back of the shelf.

Agatha came down the folding stairs with her greatcoat draped over her shoulders. Being October, it was chilly enough down here for me to be wearing both flannel robe and a sweater. The second she had a chance to look about, it was as if an essential part of her switched on. It was like Murphy squaring up on the mat at a martial arts bout, or Susan when she'd heard a hot tip about the supernatural. Here and now was where Agatha could be who she really was.

How could someone like this be so inept at her passion?

It was as if she were cursed.

Mysteriously absent birth parents. Someone had killed her entire family.

My subconscious tapped me on the shoulder and suggested this may be a clue, dumbass.

Unlike me, he's a real asshole.

"You've done wonders with the space you have," Agatha said. She held a flask up to the light. "No making do with factory rejects here. My Uncle Barry always said you can judge a man by the state of his tools."

"It's only this organized down here because I was working on a project," I said. "It was a mess before that. Your uncle was a scientist?"

"He was a mechanic and toymaker," Agatha said. She passed by Bob without more than a casual glance. "Your lab reminds me of his workshop. He always set up one whenever he could when we settled in a place long enough."

"Your family moved around a lot," I said. "Was he hiding from the authorities?"
"I can't think of any reason the Baron would--" Agatha paused. "I mean, the Securitate would be hunting us."

"That was the Romanian secret service, wasn't it?" I tried thinking of what I knew of Romanian history. "I thought they disappeared when Ceausecu was killed in '89."

"My memories from then aren't so clear." Agatha fiddled with a bunsen burner. "Whatever my Uncle was protecting me from was taken care of by Tata. What's done is done."

"I didn't mean anything by it," I said. "You know us consulting detectives, we can't help sticking on our deerstalker hats."

"You're more of a pulp hero, like the Shadow," Agatha said. "All dashing in your leather duster."

"A fan of the old school? Pulp magazines are before your time."

"Old things call out to me." Agatha brightened, reaching between an orrery and a box of devotional candles. "Hey, it's an Edison phonograph."

"It's for my potions making," I explained. "Want to see some magic?"

"I won't tell Mama if you won't."

Now I was really starting to like the kid.

I thought about her clothes while I set up the phonograph for a demonstration. The occult scene in any city is made up of several mundane subcultures mixed in with actual practitioners: New Agers, Wiccans, and Goths. I didn't have as much contact with the Gothic scene. They were too likely to be vampire pawns, or dabble with LaVey or Crowley. The latter often lead right to a severed head in a black hood bumping across the ground. I'd seen enough of the type who favored the Victorian look.

Agatha's wardrobe was too functional. It wasn't meant to be romantic. It was what normal people wore back then. Back in a time when there was a Romanian nobility. That would have been before World War II. Her style seemed dated earlier than that. Long-lived supernatural creatures and wizards learn to adapt to contemporary fashions, though their attitudes often remain out of date. Someone who might have been taken by the fae and found herself in another time, though... If you're a young child, you might be able to adapt. But when you get older, there could be a longing for a time that meant "home" to you.

Michael and I should have a talk.

I put a wax cylinder from the box labeled "cock's crows" into the phonograph. Potions need eight ingredients: a base liquid, five components to engage the senses, one to engage the mind, and one to engage the spirit. Capturing an ingredient for sound can be tricky. We can't exactly use tape recorders. Many wizards mess around with silver-strung strings or jars stoppered with human ears. Too much trouble.

I had this rig made by an engineering major in the Alphas, then altered it in my lab. It can't play regular cylinder records. I set the needle made from a lacquered violin string into the groove. I turned the crank. The needle transferred the sound into the parrot's voice-box. A mummified tongue flapped as it spoke into the brass horn. Out came a cock's crow. It was as loud and real as
life. With it came the sense of dawn breaking, the smell of dew, the creak of bedsprings as a farmer rolled over.

The expression on Agatha's face was pure wonder.

"Ahahahahaha! Incredible!"

Her features twisted.

"Of course! The symbology is obvious! The reproduction component is of a mimic-capable avian! Can it reproduce human speech?"

"Not well," I said, every hair on the back of my neck standing up. "You'd need a--"

"human larynx and vocal elements." Sweat dripped onto the table top. A vein throbbed in her forehead. "Ideally a skilled impressionist or a talented performer. A-and y-yes, I see the runes inscribed into the phonograph casing."

Shaking hands grabbed a pen and scribbled ancient Greek across a page torn from a notebook.

"--Mnemosyne, Goddess of Memory on the recording medium, invocations to Euterpe and Polyhymnia, the ideal donor would be a trained singer who signed an organ donation card--"

Out of a greatcoat pocket came a small leather case. Its padded interior was filled with surgical tools.

Agatha held up a scalpel and a mirror to her throat.

"-BUT ONE CAN'T ASK ANOTHER TO PROVIDE WHEN ONE CAN DO IT ONESelf- -AHHHHHH!"

I caught Agatha as she convulsed into a full grand mal seizure.

Behind me, skeletal teeth clacked like Satan's own canastas.

"Ooooh, baby. Mentally unstable, willing to do dangerous experiments, and a redhead."

Orange fire bloomed in the skull's eye sockets.

"She's also rocking a corset under there."

Crap.

"Shut up, Bob!"
Chapter 9

Madness scares the hell out of people.

A man lying on the sidewalk with a broken leg will have a crowd around him asking if something's wrong. A woman lying in the gutter muttering about CIA satellites wiretapping her brain will make passerby avoid her like the plague. No-one wants to be reminded that your personal reality can warp like a reflection in a funhouse mirror. It's why the Western world explains away the supernatural instead of facing its existence. Insanity even unnerves wizards. A warlock is proof that there but the grace of Whoever goes they.

The concrete box under my apartment stank of madness. I couldn't blank out how Agatha had gone from cheerful girl to something wild in the space of a few seconds. There had been been an obscene lust on her face, like rotten fruit. It was like seeing the true face of a Red Court vampire tearing free of its flesh mask. Fighting down panic, I locked my arms around her in a bear hug. It wasn't a rational decision when I worked my right hand up to her temples. I wasn't thinking about the scalpel lying a few feet away, or the risks of a suicidal girl grabbing for any of the sharp implements in reach. I had to put her down, the reek of her crazy all around me--

"DORMIUS!" I shouted.

My concentrated will was slammed back into me like a dodgeball.

My right arm went numb from elbow to fingertip. Agatha writhed free. Grabbing the center table, she clutched the trilobite locket. Sweat dripped from her face while she muttered a mantra over and over. "Not as a ladder from earth to Heaven". She forced herself to stand as if clawing her way out of Hell. "Not as a witness to any creed." The pure light of faith shone between the fingers at her throat. "But simple service simply given." She swayed. "To his own kind in their common need". She slammed her hands down over and over on the table top, beating back pain with pain. An atonal hum filled the air.

"H-Harry--notasaladderfromearthtoheaven--" Agatha rasped. "You b-better call the police quickly, I-I'm stable at the tothisownkind moment, but I can't guarantee--"

"You're stronger than this," I said, right arm limp at my side. "You can beat it."

"The m-moment I actually see it--" Agatha sobbed. "It would work. I know. And then I babble like a second-rate Spark out of the novels."

"Come on." I hooked my left arm with hers. "Up we go. We've got a couch for you to swoon on and a cold compress right out of the icebox."

"You k-keep saving me," Agatha said. "It's really r-rather nice. Hah. You need a hat. Um, not a fedora. Ooo, a slouch hat to match your duster."

"What about me?" Bob asked.


"Shut up, Bob! Some holomancy and ventriloquism," I said, as I shoved her up the stepladder.
"Oof. Big girl. "A cheap gag I thought up when I was starting in the business."

"This is my reward for six centuries of tutoring you hairless apes, stuck in a hole working for a boss who thinks a Whopper is haute--"

I kicked the trap-door shut.

"Your magical clank-head is very snarky." Agatha flopped onto the couch. "I'd reprogram it."

"Too far gone," I said. "I might as well put him into concrete and chuck him into the lake."

"Ooooh. They never showed this in the plays." Agatha cradled her head. "Sparky rants increase headache intensity by a factor of a hundred."

"Sparks?"

"Ah, the villains in stories when I was growing up," Agatha said.

"Penny dreadfuls from the nineteenth century." I didn't phrase it as a question.

"How did you guess?" Agatha asked.

"You're a terrible liar, kid," I replied. "And I didn't work three years at Ragged Angel without picking a few tricks."

"One day it was 1884," Agatha said, an arm over her eyes, "and-then they were all dead and it was different and wrong--"

"You never told your parents," I said.

"How could I? Traveling a century in the space of a few hours." Agatha laughed hollowly. "Why, I must be mad. You had better make that call, Harry."

"We don't need to involve the police."

"I've been trained in combat sambo and saber," Agatha said. "There's knives in your kitchen and that walking stick is a sword-cane. I'm sleepwalking, manic, and tried to operate in an unsterile environment. Call the police before I hurt someone I care about."

I was dialing the old rotary phone a second later.

I called Special Investigations. John Stallings picked up the line on the other end. He's Murph's partner, Scully to her reluctant Mulder. We're not exactly friends. But we've worked enough SI cases that he owed me a few favors. He knocked one off his tab by calling the nearest station house. The beat cops there think I'm the nutty psychic whose block gets weird calls at least once a year. Zero credibility. Stallings used the power of the thin blue line to send a pair of uniforms who were semi-clueful.

One was the classic bull who might have worked for Ditka before the Academy. The other was a woman who had some training in dealing with mental health interventions. She handled Agatha carefully but respectfully. There was an awkward moment when they went through her greatcoat. Road flare, spray can of oven cleaner, cloves of garlic, a wooden tent stake, a heavy flashlight with
a machined steel casing, a whacking huge wrench... How had I missed those? The male cop edged away from her while his partner helped her into the back of the car. Agatha waved through the back window as they drove her off to Cook County for twenty-four hour observation.

I didn't need sunlight through the sunken windows of my apartment. I could see perfectly fine by the light of the flames dancing on the bridge just built between Charity and me. How could I have known Agatha would react that way to magic? Under stress, sure. But nothing to imply that she'd scream past "geek" to "PULL THE SWITCH" in two seconds. I braced myself at the trap-door. With the amount of emotional resonance she had been throwing around--stars and stones, if she has talent it was be a warp core--the lab would be unusable for days until I performed a cleansing.

It was clean.

As if she had never been there.

I eased back down.

The only energy came from the scribbles from her notes--

"Bob, look at this." I rapped on the top of his skull. "Wake up and roll them bones."

"Puns again, boss?" Bob said. "On top of insulting the only reason you aren't on the magical short-bus, you offer me puns. I hate my unlife."

"Check these out." I held up the paper to his glowing eyes. "She worked out an Orpheus Organ from the phonograph. She said she had no magical training."

"She optimized the runes, too," Bob said. "She must have been staring hard at your staff when you came over. Lucky dog. Seriously, go for it."

"We're not dating!"

"Repressed, virginal, secretly tormented by forbidden thoughts about grey magic." How a skull could waggle eyebrows, I had no idea. "Harry, those are the best ones. She might end up skinning off your scrotum for a change purse, but trust me, the sex until then will be amazing."

"I am not listening to this."

"Look, boss, you're young. Inexperienced," Bob said. "Take it from me, she's worth it. Why, you could hear the mad genius."

Great. Dating advice from a skull.

Wait. "Hear"?

That hum, the way her voice changed and..deepened...

Now I knew what Agatha was.

It was time to call the Carpenters.
Within the locket, tuning forks blurred as their outputs reached levels even their creator had not accounted for.

There was a sharp *CRACK* in the high ultrasonic.

One tine of a tuning fork the size of a human hair vaporized.

The other wobbled as it took up the load.

++++

"You break it, you own it," Nick Christian said. "It's a cheap laptop, but the mike and spectrograph are worth real money."

"Will the circle closed," I said, from the hall. "That will shield the rig from any magical energies."

"If it's works and it isn't stupid," Nick muttered. He touched a droplet of blood from his thumb to the chalk circle on the floor. "Don't you have to believe for this to work?"

"How much do you believe in intact high-end electronic gear?"

"Abracadabra. Alley-alley-oxen-free." Nick stepped back. "Did it work, or am I stupid?"

"It should hold." I stepped into my office. "Thanks for the loan. I'll have it back to you first thing tomorrow."

"My pleasure, stilts," Nick said. "You were my most solid hire. The newbies you have in the trade these days are worse than useless. You ever want to come back--"

"It doesn't look like much," I said, "but it's mine. And it allows me to do good.'

"Amen to that."

Nick pumped my hand before he left. He's a fireplug of a guy with a smoker's rasp and out of shape muscles. He's also the best private eye in the city. Ragged Angel pulls in a healthy profit through corporate investigations, skip tracing, and divorce work. The money would be even better if Nick didn't do pro bono work hunting down missing kids for his poorer clients. Make no mistake, he'll charge if it's a rich client. But he'll put his entire agency to work on his dime for a welfare mother whose ex took off with the kids during visitation. He taught his padawan well. I stayed well away from the magic circle containing the voiceprint rig. Whatever Nick's chances of canonization, he really would bill me if I nuked his equipment.

I settled behind my desk to wait for my clients. The only light in the room was the laptop monitor and a vintage desk lamp from the forties. The twilight gloom had deepened outside the windows. My office is on the corner of the fourth floor of an old office building. The gold-painted legend HARRY DRESDEN, WIZARD on the frosted glass on the door gleamed in the low light. Battered file cabinets containing my cases lined one wall. An electric kettle had replaced the coffee machine for this meeting. There was a tea service on the table by the doorway where I keep my
Like I said. It's not much. It's mine.

I reviewed the file I'd typed up on the Underwood. Most of my cases aren't as eventful as you might think. Really. This one had been even easier. All the legwork I'd needed to do was talk with Michael and Charity for some background. I'd deliberately stayed quiet on why Agatha had lost control. I needed them cooperative to help her. Yeah. Michael's description of how he had found her tracked with my suspicions. I had never heard of the spider-riding albinos he'd fought in Transylvania. Bob had said they sounded like a few different types of creatures from the Nevernever, but nothing matched exactly to the Knight's description. They definitely hadn't been spirits since they hadn't dissolved into ectoplasm.

What mattered was evidence that Agatha and her family had come through the Nevernever. The spirit world is a weird place. Locations don't match up one-to-one with the material universe. You can walk three minutes and come out halfway across the planet. Or you can go for a day to re-emerge five feet from where you left. Time's screwy, too. I've heard of travelers hitting patches of slow time where they age years while a minute passes our reality. The opposite is true too, as reading a few fairy tales will tell you. The bit about monsters is true as well. Before Mab bought out the contract, I was deep in debt to one of them who happened to be my fairy godmother.

Thoughts about some of the nightmares from her part of the Nevernever given an inkling of what might be Agatha's power.

The whine of the elevator could be heard from down the hall. I should have warned the Carpenters to take the stairs. It hadn't worked right since an accident a couple of years ago. The building management couldn't actually prove it was my fault. Which I wasn't about to take responsibility for, as insurance companies don't take "I had to crush a giant scorpion" as a reason not to sue. I was on my feet to greet them. Michael and Charity had on Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes: a suit for him, a pretty ankle-length gown for his wife. Formal was good. It might make Charity pause for a second before trying to chuck me out the windows when the truth came out.

Agatha was in the outfit she'd been in before leaving the hospital. I guess she had spent the last forty-eight hours in pajamas or a hospital gown. According to her parents, they had put her through plenty of tests along with the twenty-four hour psych watch. She froze at the threshold of my office, even less able to meet my eyes than is usual. I gently took her arm in mine to escort her in. I know, me heap outdated chauvinist pig. It got me a wan smile and a pat on the hand. I guided her to one of the two visitor's chairs I'd moved to the table. Charity got the other. I wheeled out my own office chair for Michael.

"Rooibos," I said, gesturing at the packet of tea bags. "They told me about your problem with stimulants."

"The Mountain Dew Incident." I swear, Michael looked as if he was having Nam flashbacks. "It was the last time anything close to this happened."

"It was my fault," I said. They had to know some time. "I shouldn't have--"

"You couldn't have known our daughter would pry into your personal notes," Charity said. "I thought we raised her better than that."

"I feel horrible about it," Agatha said, looking down at her shoes. "There's no excuse for my
"The psychologists said anything that engaged her enthusiasm," Michael said, "could have been the trigger. We're lucky it was a field she couldn't have done anything with. She was scheduled to watch a high-energy physics demonstration yesterday."

Stars and stones, she had lied to her parents' faces to cover for me.

Lucky for both of us I can hold a poker face for a few seconds.

"But I'm much better now!" Agatha rattled a pill bottle. "They gave me a prescription and a schedule for therapy. I'll have to withdraw from my classes for a while--"

"That won't help as much as you think," I said.

"She's talented, then?" Charity asked.

"She isn't a practitioner," I said. "What she has are mutant superpowers."

There was the silence you get after a bomb drops.

"Harry, would you like the name of Agatha's therapist?" Michael asked.

"Come on, you wield a sword powered by god juice," I said. "Agatha, you're what we in the magical community would call a siren."

"My daughter can enthrall with her voice?" Charity was more on top with the slang than I thought. "Merciful God, will the Wardens come for her?"

"She hasn't broken the Third or Fourth Laws," I said. "What she may have is pure empathy projection. She's not forcing other minds to feel emotions. Anyone who hears her has the free will to react according to their nature, as if she were a great actress or singer. And she's not using magic."

"But how can she do so--" Michael began.

"Ultrasonic and infrasound," Agatha broke in, animated for the first time she'd come here. "Complex subvocalized harmonics--yes, of course, that's why you have that spectrograph--"

"Agatha!" Charity snapped. "Calm yourself."

Well. You don't need magic or mutant superpowers to make yourself heard.

Agatha calmed the--sorry, Michael--hell down. I explained the experiment we'd do to confirm it. Charity frowned when she saw the other chalk circles. But even she had to agree it's allowed by the Church for protection from supernatural forces. Agatha stood in one. Michael and Charity stood in the other. I went to third base. We each powered up the isolation cells: Michael with prayer, Agatha with that heterodyne hum, and mine by an effort of will. It was harder than usual. The ricocheting sleep spell had blown out the fuses of my right hand's energy meridians. I'd had to trade some favors with a talented Chinese accupuncturist to unblock them. Even now, the circuits in my right arm were weak.
It was simple. If Agatha were using a magical talent I somehow couldn't detect, the circles of power around us and the laptop would strip out any spells she wove into her voice. All she had to do was speak with intense conviction, enough to trigger whatever power she had. I just hoped she had it in her to do it. She was among the toughest people I'd met. Anyone who could knock aside a White Council wizard's spell had willpower pouring out of her ears. But she'd taken a huge knock to her confidence. It wouldn't work if--

Agatha breathed deep.

"Ahahahahahahahahaah!"

Her face twisted into a mask of maniacal glee.

"Fly, my pretties, fly!"

She swirled about, fingers arched like claws, as her dress whipped around like the hem of a witch's cloak.

"I'll get her and HER LITTLE DOG T--ow, ow, overdid it--"

"You--you quoted--" Not easy to speak when your skivvies just got sucked up north of your colon.

"The Wicked Witch of the West."

"She was the understudy in a school production of *Wizard of Oz,*" Michael said. "Mrs. Callahan said she was a natural for the part."

"Scared that simpering twit Chelsea out of her red slippers," Agatha said, smirking.

"She ran ten blocks barefoot back home after that rehearsal," Charity said, hiding behind the cover of her husband.

"Mama, tata, look at this!" Agatha stepped out of her circle, to the laptop. "Look at the waterfall display. Those harmonics!"

Score one for Dresden.

Which is when I should have realized that being smug was going to bite me in the ass so hard down the line.
Chapter 11

There's magic in the moment you find your power. It's Superman when he leaps up and away out of a Kansas cornfield for the first time. It's Spiderman finding out he can stick to the ceiling of his bedroom. It's Arthur drawing a sword from the stone. It's a runty, smart-mouthed orphan standing in the blocks for the long jump. He's going to show them, dammit, he's going to run and leap over tall buildings and oh Jesus it's like the world's pouring into him and he's going farther higher faster than anyone in school. It's every bully and teacher who thinks he'll be nothing special staring at him, for one second, as if he's a superhero.

I still have the blue ribbon.

Agatha would have the moment she saw what she was capable of on the computer screen for the rest of her life. She would need it. Because after that origin moment, you start paying for your power. There's Uncle Ben and kryptonite and archenemies and the Lady of the Lake's hand rising out to catch Excalibur after Camelot's fall. Some days it's worth the price. Other times you think you'd have been better off swatting that spider before it bit you. Sometimes you walk away. But that moment will always be there, when everything changed.

"I'm not broken," Agatha said.

"You never were. This is a great gift," Michael said. "Imagine what you could do. You could preach His word, or inspire students to great things."

"Or go into politics," I added. "Of course, I'm not supposed to encourage you to follow the path of evil."

"She can't walk away from it, can she?" Charity asked.

"It's not like a magical talent that fades if you lose belief," I said. "This is a part of her that comes out through instinct."

Now comes the bit where I piss into her Cheerios.

"That's the problem," I said. "Sirens got the name from the Greek monsters who could lure men to their doom by their song. Into madness."

"I broadcasted my insanity," Agatha said, looking at the waterfall plot with horror. "Black fire and slag, did I pass on my crazy to you?"

"Wizard. Not a pushover," I said. "If someone had weaker will or was susceptible? Yeah, if you become too intense, it could happen."

"There's no power without price," Charity said. "The use of her ability causes mental illness, doesn't it?"

"It's not the same as black magic," I said. "It won't directly stain her soul. But the fugue she goes into when she delves deep into emotions leads to primal territory."

"Could I drive someone permanently mad?" Agatha asked, leaning into her father's embrace.
"It's more like a fey glamour," I said. "Like I said, you're like an untrained actor who can dazzle like Brando. You could also whip a mob complete with torches and pitchforks."

"Agatha would never do that," Michael said. He touched her trilobite locket. "You don't share our faith in Him. But you have always said you believe in heroes."

"How couldn't I, Tata?" Agatha laid a hand over his.

"Charity, you'll hate the idea," I said. "I'm still offering my help. My mentor taught me how to deal with mixing intense emotions and control. Agatha could also use some defense training against psychomancy."

"I will leave it up to Agatha," Charity said stiffly. "She's old enough to judge for herself. Just...teach my daughter how to be safe, Harry."

"I swear on my power," I replied. "I'll leave you alone for a while. Knock when you're ready."

Michael looked at me gravely. He understood the power of oaths. Amoracchius could be rendered powerless if used for false purposes. A wizard swearing truthfully on his power puts a geas on his own magic. Breaking that oath meant I'd be breaking what made me a wizard. I could end up with less magic than a carny palm reader if I failed to live up to it. There are master and apprenticeship vows with less heft.

It was worth the risk. The money's alright. But my Consulting Wizard business is a tool. The pamphlets by the door aren't propaganda. They're my one-man war against the stupid secrecy of the White Council that allows ignorant teenagers to go Dark Side because no-one told them the facts of life. It's a sign that no, you're not crazy. I can help. I'm in the book. Let's talk. I've solved as many cases in the office with a long chat than out on the streets. Agatha was the exact person I'd vowed to guide.

The muffled sounds of the Carpenters filtered through the door into the half-lit hallway. It was late enough that the building had shut off the lights except for the elevator and fire exit signs. Agatha would need the lessons on mind magic. The White Council is too scared of the consequences of psychomancy to teach more than a few basic techniques. With her willpower and faith, those might make the difference between freedom and slavery. She would come across as an all-you-can-eat buffet to empathovores like White Court vampires. A siren who was the daughter of a Knight of the Sword would be a powerful pawn.

Stars and stones, I hoped she never met Morgan. He would snicker-snack before he would find out she wasn't--

There was a paper cup on the floor, beside my office door.

Starbucks, probably from the one down the street, unused.

The janitors here weren't that slack.

I had left my blasting rod and staff in the office. I still had my shield bracelet and rings. The cup was on its side as if it had been tossed in a hurry. The heavy door to the stairway hadn't been closing, nor had there been anyone by the elevators. In the other direction were more offices and a supply closet that was usually locked. Inching down the hallway, I tried the doorknob. It didn't
move much. Just enough for, say, someone inside holding it tight might think they could fool me into believing it was locked.

I Listened. It's a trick of mine. It isn't magic. It's a sort of hyper-focus where I can concentrate on some sounds and filter out ambient noise. It saves me a ton of money that would be spent on gear like parabolic mikes. And that asshole who always yaks during the movie? Not a problem. There was someone on the other side. Female, quick breaths. A male's would be deeper. I released the doorknob.

Then I twisted, tearing the door open.

For a second, before I brought up my pentacle necklace glowing with blueish light, I could swear there was no-one--

Well. Well, well, well. Molly Carpenter had decided to make trouble for her big sister. On her way to the kind of club no dad wants their kid going to when they're fifty, let alone fourteen. Her pleated schoolgirl kilt had been slashed to ribbons. Black tights covered up without leaving much to the imagination. There were rips in her blouse, too. Which was open and knotted beneath her chest to show off a red bustier. Her make-up wasn't as bad as some kids, but there was just a little too much and too blatant. There was a golden ring through one eyebrow, a stud in one nostril and--

"Your navel?" I asked. "Is there anyplace you haven't--no, no, I don't want to know."

"Hi." Molly grinned sickly. "You're not still pissed off about that Polaroid?"

"Let me see." I stroked my chin. "Vell, vat do ve haff here, a shpy? Ve must bring the naughty fraulein to ze PrinceAlbrechtstrasse for qvestions!"

"Don't narc on me to Frau Farbissina!" Molly hissed.

"I'm having a rare moment of responsible adulthood," I said.

"Fine. Slap the cuffs on me." Molly extended her wrists. "Can they be the fun-time cuffs?"

"You aren't old enough to know about fun-time cuffs."

"Duh. Internet." Molly grinned. "I'm a bad girl. I need a paddling."

"Beeep. Beeep." I retreated. "We are officially backing off from this conversation."

"My safeword is 'harder'," Molly said. "Hah. For a pervert, you're way too easy to freak out."

"You pulled the glass on the door trick while Charity was ranting about me?" I said. "Tip: next time, use a stethoscope."

"Nice. I can snag one of Agatha's," Molly said. Her grin fell. "She's going to be okay, isn't she?"

"She'll be fine," I said. "Heart of gold under the bratty sister act?"

"Pffft. She's always woe is me," Molly said. "I might as well be invisible, the way Mom and Dad are around her. Now she's got a scholarship to the Xavier Institute."
"It must have been rough when she showed up," I said. "New older sister, able to boss you around."

"Wasn't too bad at first," Molly said. "She had the coolest stories. Uh, until I grew up. It just got old, being sister to the biggest freak who ever went to my school."

"Doubling down on the teen rebel out of self defense?"

"You have a problem with the way I look?" Molly asked, all wounded teenage indignation.

"None at all. Can't cast a stone," I said. "I once wore hammer pants."

"Pass me the brain bleach." Molly peered down the hall. "So, are you gonna turn me in?"

"Go home. Do not pass go." I held out my hand. "Give me the lockpicks you had to have to hide in the closet. Promise to lay off Agatha for a while."

"Cross my heart." Molly laughed. "Made you look! Ag wasn't the only one visited by the breast fairy."

Now there's an image I didn't need.

"Actually," Molly said, posing, "this is one of her old corsets I--"

"OUT! Begone!"
Molly touched me for the cab fare home.

Not that kind of touch, I swear.

I watched the tail-lights of the cab until they disappeared. It looked like it had been heading towards the Carpenters' house. One could only hope Molly wouldn't convince the cabbie to drop her off somewhere else and keep the rest of the money. I didn't want to think about how she'd convince him. Maybe it was because I was raised by a hermit wizard who'd lived outside of Des Moines, but I was sure the only piercings fourteen-year old girls should have is in their earlobes. Or be wearing their older sister's corsets. Damn those devil musicians and their crazy rock music.

Micheal and Charity were outside my office when I huffed and puffed my way back up. Should I tell them? If I'd wanted to out Molly, I should have marched her in to face the music. I'd given my implicit word to give her a pass. It didn't matter if she was a minor. Promises really are a big deal for wizards. You start welshing on the little ones, and you end up tempted to break the important ones. Molly wasn't my problem, anyway. Agatha was. I hadn't agreed to be the guardian angel for the Carpenters. Given my record, putting in that application would get a lot of laughs in Heaven's HR department.

If Molly got into trouble, they would never forgive me if I had known about the warning signs.

This? This why I'm usually a loner.

"Had to take care of something," I said. "How is Agatha?"

"She asked to speak to you in private," Michael said. "We've talked and prayed over what to do."

"She is not putting herself into an institution," Charity spat out. "They won't understand about her condition. She could end up in one for years if she commits herself."

"The Church can provide a place for her, if it comes to that," Michael said. "Agatha's worried about her mania and sleepwalking."

"That might wear off," I said. "She said her headaches came when she was five. A child's brain might not have been able to handle that sort of power. Her brain might have created a defense mechanism she's fighting through. The struggle could be the trigger for her mental problems."

"It might ease once she finds out how to control her ability?" Charity asked.

"It could even stop with the accidents when she experiments," I said. "Her power's tied to emotions. The more excited she gets, the more her brain works to shut down. Cue rolling a one on every Science check."

"If she hadn't had her breakdown, we would never had found out," Micheal said. "Quite a coincidence, isn't it, Harry?"

"Dammit, Jim, I'm a wizard, not a theologian!" I replied. "I'm not a neurologist, either. No promises on that."
"As long as there's a chance she stays out of an asylum," Charity said.

"How are the kids handling this?" I asked oh so innocently.

"We haven't told them the details," Michael said. "Only that she had a bad headache and had to stay in the hospital for a while."

"Molly went to stay with a friend," Charity said. "She might be blaming herself for how she pestered Agatha."

Staying with a friend. Classic.

"I'm not the guy to tell anyone how to raise their kids," I said, feeling my way around the tripwires. "Seems to me that Molly might be taking it the hardest. Being the brat sounds like her way of getting attention, and if she's feeling guilty--"

"He's right," Michael said. "We've often concentrated on Agatha's troubles."

"Thank you, Mr. Dres--Harry," Charity said. "I should involve her more. Agatha has shouldered the most responsibility in the family. Involving Molly could be what she needs to be included."

Mission accomplished. See? I can be subtle.

Agatha's parents headed for the stairway. I decided to stretch my talk with Agatha to give Molly a decent head start. Miracles might happens. She could be heading home after all. Agatha sat in one of the visitor's chairs, writing on one of my legal pads. A steaming cup of tea was left unattended on the other chair. The hair on the nape of my neck bristled when I heard that faint, complex hum. It wasn't as loud as when her train of thought had switched to the tracks leading to Cloud Cuckoo Land. There was no strong emotional vibes--literally--in the air. She seemed more distracted than obsessed while I tip-toed up behind her.

It isn't hard to pick up the elements of a magical style. Any New Age bookstore or occult catalog can provide the basics of magic. Wiccans cobble them together from many different sources. What it isn't is easy. Self-taught practitioners like Victor Sells were like martial artists who learned everything by studying *Karate for Dummies*. It's nowhere near as effective as the training provided by White Council apprenticeships or studying with a teacher of a traditional style. It had taken me six years under Justin DuMorne, several more working with Bob, and a whole lot of trial and error to work out how to enchant a blasting rod.

One line of runes Agatha had scribbled down were the ones on that same rod. Written beneath that line was several equations Justin had forced me to work out. It had taken me months to do it. Below those were more runes and equations. Several lines were scratched out. Each was successively shorter. More compact. More optimized. I only have a GED. What I'm not is any slouch in math. I wouldn't have survived an eleven story plummet in a busted elevator without being able to work out force equations on the fly. It needed all my focus to do it, though.

What I was seeing here was elegance of design that was light-years beyond me.

"Unh." Agatha pinched the bridge of her nose. She sipped some red bush tea. "Oh, Harry. I didn't hear you come in."
"You were lost in your work," I said. The last line had what took three separate spells combined into a single incantation. "You said you didn't know anything about magic."

"I saw one of your wands by accident last year." Agatha tapped her head. "Photographic memory for equations and scientific data. It's a knack I picked up trying to study before the seizures hit. I was curious, and looked up the runes at the university library. Once I worked out their meanings, it was obvious they were describing a sort of symbolic circuit."

"That's a big leap to working out the equations," I said.

"Physics obeys certain principles," Agatha said. "The ways magic manipulates the world might be unknown to science at the moment, but it can't flat-out violate thermodynamics and conservation of energy. The math behind magic has to relate to the math behind physics."

Agatha examined her work more intently.

"Yes. There may even be a way to unify SCIENCE! and magic into a unified theory. A Grand Unified Theory. A...a metaphysics if you--"

I snatched the cup of tea in my left hand, will drawing the heat from it.

Agatha spluttered when I threw it in her face.

"I--I needed that," she said, wiping the tea from her glasses. "B-but it wasn't as bad as last time. I was in control of it. Something shook loose in my mind--"

"Agatha, give me your Name."

"You already know it--" Agatha paused. "Oh. Yes. My true name. Tata always told me never to say my full name out loud."

"A Name given from your own lips grants power," I said. "I need it if I need to stop you before it happens again."

"Better you than Tata." Agatha closed her eyes. "I am Agatha Heterodyne Carpenter. I grant you my name of my own free will."

"Good." I laid my hand on her shoulder. "You can't go home tonight."

"I know," Agatha said, looking away. "How ironic. I was planning on moving out. Although where would I go, where people wouldn't toss me out for explosions on a regular basis?"

"There's my building. I swear, you could set off a nuke on the front lawn without anyone complaining."

Hold on.

There was an idea....
Chapter 13

"You're the best, Mrs. S," I said, taking the keys.

"It isn't the first time a young woman's knocked on my door late at night," Mrs. Spunkelcrief said. "When this was a boarding house, we would have one or two girls a year stay for nine months."

"This isn't that kind of trouble," I said.

"I don't judge, Harry. There but for the grace of God." My landlady clutched her robe closed against the October wind. "Is it drugs or liquor? Let her know that I won't have her bringing either into my house. Had enough of that during the 60's."

"Neither of those. She needs a quiet space for a while, away from her family."

"Away from knives and other sharp things?" Mrs. S. shook her head. "There have been a few times, with pills and razors-- You'll watch over her, won't you?"

"I promised her parents," I said.

"You're a good boy, Harry." Mrs. S. nodded. "She has a week until Halloween. Then we'll have to talk about a lease. Good night and God bless."

Mrs. Spunkelcrief smiled at Agatha, standing by the ramp at the end of the porch, before closing the door for the night. Her hunched-over silhouette could be seen through the windows as she turned off the lights on her way to her bedroom. On a good day, she can straighten up enough to look me in the navel. There are fence-posts with better hearing. That doesn't mean stupid, though. Mrs. S. might not have noticed some late-night shenanigans. But no landlady runs a boarding-house for decades in a lively town like Chicago without seeing a lot of darkness. It hadn't pickled her sense of charity. Mrs. S. is a terrific landlady.

Don't be late with the rent, though. She can hammer longer than you think of a door with that cane.

Agatha stood by the Blue Beetle with a small suitcase in hand. Mister sat by her feet. If you looked close, you'd see his eyes glowing a dull orange from what might be the streetlights. Both followed me up the spiral stairs bolted to the side of the house near the front. They creaked as we climbed past the Willoughbys apartment on the second floor. There wasn't any danger of it breaking away. The late Mr. S. had done good work when he'd converted the house to apartment rentals. At the top, I unlocked the door beneath the roof overhang a few inches above my head.

I lit the Coleman lantern brought up from my place. Mrs. S. had had the power shut off after this apartment hadn't been rented for a while. I could see why. In the old days, this would have been where the cheapest apartments would have been. There was about seven and a half feet of head-room in the center of the attic, where the roof was flat above what would have been the hallway. It angled down on either side enough that I had to duck my head coming in. Some light came in through the bulls eye window in the center of the wall facing the street. A claw-footed tub with shower head plumbed into the taps and a stained porcelain sink were out in the open by the back wall. A thin wooden partition hid the chain-pull toilet tucked into a corner.

Our foot-steps echoed around the open space. The wind whistled past the eaves. It always blows in
Chicago. The house groaned and creaked around us. It's a rare one in this town: all wood, survivor of generations of O'Leary's cows. It's a comforting sound when you're in the basement. At the top, it was more like a crow's nest high up above a clipper ship's decks. Agatha didn't seem to mind. I guess she'd been in worse. I turned my back while she undressed in the tub behind the drawn shower curtain. I inflated the air mattresses and unrolled the sleeping bags Michael had given me while she brushed her teeth at the sink.

Agatha set up a little nest beneath the window. She was in a long-sleeved T-shirt dress dyed a familiar shade of blue. A golden Star Fleet patch above one breast winked in the lantern light. Her night-gown was longer than the skorts the Science Division had during their five-year mission. It wasn't as tight, either. There was enough of a hint for me to mentally leap under the cold water tap down in the basement. Damn you, Bob. Damn you, Molly, for showing that you had to stuff that corset. Think snow drifts. Think rolling in an avalanche while Queen Mab is riding you like a little pony.

Fuck you, subconscious. Fuck. You.

Chain rattled across the bare floorboards.

"What are you doing?" I asked, as Agatha locked one looped end of a tire chain around an exposed wall stud.

"If I'm the crazy girl in the attic, I might as well be official about it." She wound sports wrap around each ankle, then chained them together with the free end. "There. With some work on my wail and creepy laugh, I'll be set for the part."

"There's only room for one weirdo here," I said. "I call dibs on the psycho occult guy squatting in the basement. You're the eccentric bohemian girl in the garret."

"I didn't pack my beret." She slid the padlock keys across to me. "Hide them out of my reach, Harry."

"What if you have to head to the powder room?"

Agatha took out a bedpan wrapped in a plastic bag from her suitcase.

"I'm not emptying that," I said. "Not unless your dad pays double."

"I'll save you the trouble." Agatha set a small picture frame by her bed. A battery-powered light switched on, illuminating the black-and-white portrait from behind.

"And who is that dapper fellow?" I put the man in the smart Gilded Age suit at around late thirties or early forties. Slavic, a neat mustache, reading a book seated in front of a huge dynamo. "A sweet-heart from back in your day?"

"I was ten! He wouldn't have looked twice at me." Agatha sighed longingly, like the girls in school had over New Kids on the Block posters. "Nikola Tesla. What a towering genius. Edison might have been the Wizard of Menlo Park. It was Tesla who was the true magician."

"What did he invent?" I asked.

"What didn't he? The electrical system the world relies on, for a start," Agatha said. "Remote-
control, fundamental aspects of radio transmission, fluorescent lights. Red fire, in his Colorado Springs experiments he called the very lightning from the heavens."

I was thankful, in that moment, both that I wore loose boxers and the chain around her ankles could have been used to pull out redwood stumps.

"Such wonders he hinted at." Agatha's voice came back to normal. "He once said that he knew the resonant frequency of the earth. With a few taps, he could crack it asunder."

How tough were those padlocks?

"Capability doesn't equal intent, of course," Agatha continued. "Otherwise all those who mocked him and stole his work would have been laid waste. Nikola was a gentle soul, far too good for this world."

"That's how it goes," I said. "You haven't been doing any calculations on the side with those frequencies?"

"Some work on the sonic aspects of iron resonance cavities." Agatha yawned. "Focused sound beams--oh, there you are."

"B--Mister," I said, to the cat nuzzling into her cleavage, "get out from there."

"No harm." Agatha settled Mister on top of her. "He's like a big, furry, um, blanket...warm 'n nice..."

Agatha snored.

Behind Mister's eyes, firefly glows winked off in one.

Jerk. Not jealous at all.

+++ Cold light the electric-blue of ball lightning filled the cathedral.

It was massive. Gears and cogs spun slowly in the glass-fronted machinery lining the hall. Cables the diameter of concrete mixers snaked beneath the steel-grating floor and up the walls. The monstrous tower in the center nearly reached the vaulted ceiling. A white tower like a Beaux-Arts lighthouse supported a metal half-dome covered in little knobs. Every other second, what was in the tower flared enough to be seen through the walls. It was a cross between a Jacob's ladder and a warp core. Purplish electrical bolts arced among the nodules on top.

*THUNK*

A knife switch thrown.

On a control panel in front of me, one light among three snapped on--

I kicked free of the sleeping bag.

What the--

Who invited Vincent Price to the slumber party? And why was he talking mit a German accent like Herr Doktor mit der duelink scars he got at der university?

Agatha moaned in her sleep, twisting beneath her own unzipped sleeping bag.

Mister crouched by her, eyes glowing that electric-blue I'd seen in the dream.

"Bob?"

Hello, Dresden. Bob's voice--or that spirit I called "Bob", who'd gone through a make-over--came pitched on frequencies only a wizard's senses could hear. I'm watching over her as you commanded.

Bob in Mister stroked her brow with a paw.

It has been such a long time since I was near such a promising student. Almost like those times--No, this is different. She's a good girl, she is. But her mind, it dances so brightly. Not like yours, so small even when I offer to show you the universe. That's alright, Dresden. I am a teacher, and those whom I serve receive the lessons they can understand.

That part on Thriller when Vince had done the monologue had creeped me out. The laugh of his on the end had featured in a few nightmares before more intense ones had come along.

But her? Oh my, Dresden. She'll show you all.

"Bob!"

"Didn't have to shout, boss." Jack-o'-lantern light came back to Mister's eyes. "What's up?"

"Nothing," I said, as my testicles slowly descended. "You sounded weird there. Practicing for Halloween?"

"Nope. I'm just fine." Bob settled back down to nuzzle Agatha. "Yeah. Real and spectacular. She's an 88, sahib. Brains, beauty, and boooooobs."

Back to normal.

Right.

I didn't sleep at all for the rest of the night.
There are times when it's more than a little annoying not being able to reliably use electric light. Carving thaumaturgic symbols on a miniature music box by lantern-light is one of them. You have to watch out for carbon monoxide building up in the small space, and even the best Coleman can't be focused onto a single spot. I wiped my eyes as I peered through the magnifying glass at the mechanics. Tiny sigils had been etched into the metal drum, around a name spelled out in runes, winding between the pins. A strawberry-blond hair plucked out by the root wound through the steel comb. Braided silver wire ran from the winding mechanism to a tuning fork set into the lid. Snapping the shut, I wound it up by a small knob on the side. I concentrated, focusing my will, remembering the every distinct syllable of the Name.

"Vigilans passio, Agatha Heterodyne Carpenter, vigilans passio."

The music box tinkled a few bars of a random tune when the connection formed. Snuffing most of the candles, I laid my head down on the table for a while. Thaumaturgy is my specialty: directing energy, making links between things. But what I was trying was a delicate psychomancy variation that tied the music box to her mind. If I'd screwed up, the music box might have affected Agatha instead of the other way around. There lay a deep, deep grey area of magic that could damage her mind. Someone would have to trust another completely to wield that amount of power over them. Or be so afraid of themselves that they would willingly hand someone a loaded gun. Someone with old blood and dreams tinged with madness.

Bob slept on his shelf. It would have taken me a few hours instead of most of the day if I'd had my lab assistant helping. I'd relied on my own research. I didn't want to find out if Igor Bob might appear. What I'd seen last night brought home hard how little I knew about the spirit within the skull. It was easy to think he was a wise-cracking Groucho Marx with perfect memory. Bob had only been with me for twelve years. He had been Justin's for longer than that. I don't think my mentor would have put up with constant demands for bodice rippers. Bob was contracted to be a perfect mystical advisor to the one who owned the skull. Decades of service to a warlock like DuMorne meant a darker personality than the smart-aleck pervert I relied on. Somehow, Agatha's rising passions had roused that old Bob to life.

There was a new bolt on the underside of the trapdoor, which I locked with a small application of kinetomancy.

A heavy chair went on top of the rug that hid the trapdoor.

Can't be too careful these days.

++++

I followed the sounds of clashing wood.

I'd found Michael's truck parked in front of my building when I'd come out from a breath of air. He had picked her up this morning to watch her for her university classes. They must have come back while I'd been occupied. Agatha and her dad were sparring in the back yard. It's a postage stamp between the rear of the boardinghouse and the lilac jungle marking the limits of the property. A little storage shed in one corner contained the shovel, ladder, and tools Mrs. S. never used. This late in October, the ground was frost-covered dead grass except for one sandy patch of earth.
Michael snapped a strike at his daughter with a wooden longsword waster. Agatha parried with a single-stick, a dowel with a leather cup guard. Both wore fencing masks and padded leather gloves. Agatha had changed into sweats, sneakers, and a red gi similar to the white ones Murphy wore in her aikido practices. It was low-speed drills, allowing me to watch their technique. Agatha wasn't bad. In fact, she was better than me at swordplay. Not that that's too hard to top. Michael suddenly dashed in to close after he darted past her guard--

Agatha slammed him to the ground in a perfectly-timed throw so hard that I felt it through my soles.

"Tata!"

"I'm fine," Michael said, levering himself up with the waster. "It's why we train on hard ground as well as the mats."

"Ah so, the lady knows kung-fu," I said. "So this is the ancient art of Transylvanian wrestling."

"Sambo is Russian," Agatha said, taking off her fencing gear. "One of Tata's friends started me off with the basics. I trained at Vladimir Federov's school after a year of judo."

"I'd heard about him when I was training for my PI license," I said. "He runs a bodyguard and bounty hunting business on the side. Scary man, supposed to be an ex-Russian paratrooper who fought in Afghanistan."

"He didn't pull any punches," Agatha said. "It let me work out a lot of frustration, though."

"We'll do hand-to-hand next," Michael said, sitting on the stairs to the back door.

"Sure you don't want some ice on that?" I said, as Agatha rummaged through a gym bag.

"Tylenol is my friend," Michael said, rubbing his ribs absently. "She's stronger now. Before, she couldn't fight at full speed before the headaches began."

"Has she ever talked to you about the Heterodynes?" I said. "She said they were famous heroes when she was young."

"I see. I've always suspected Clay wasn't her uncle's true name." Michael shook his head. "She sometimes claims they were real. They aren't. There are no records of a family by that name in Transylvania, or Mechanicsburg."

"Looked into that myself," I replied. "None of my contacts knew about a siren clan from there."

"Bill and Barry Heterodyne weren't sirens," Michael said. "The stories she told Molly made the Heterodyne Boys to be a pair of Tom Swifts fighting evil across a Europe full of mad scientists. Exploding airships, death rays, malfunctioning robots. She should publish them some day."

"Were there ever any mentions about the family before Bill and Barry?"

"Now that you mention it, no," Michael frowned. "Except for Bludtharst and Euphronysia. There was a tale she once told a Storm King who fought Bludtharst with all the might of the Western Kingdoms, and married the Heterodyne daughter."
"Never heard of them."

"More of her uncle's tales, no doubt." Michael said. "It's enough that the Heterodyne Boys were heroes. They're what she puts her faith in."

I thought about heroes as Agatha and Michael suited up in light boxing helmets and fingerless cage fighter gloves. In Transylvania, Vlad Tepes is a Romanian national hero. He might have impaled a few thousand peasants and joined the Black Court. But, hey, everyone loves a patriot who ate dinner among Turkish war prisoners writhing on blunt stakes. The original Merlin who founded the White Council also is supposed to have enchanted Igraine to sleep with Uther Pendragon to have Arthur conceived. Go back far enough, and most heroes turns out to be hard bastards who happened to be on the right side of history.

Some people call me a hero. That might explain my cynicism.

Interesting, though. The only other Heterodyne Agatha had ever mentioned needed to be stopped by a united Western Europe. The threats that inspired the medieval kingdoms to stop fighting like cats in a sack were threats like Genghiz Khan or the Saracens. Had her uncle been passing on a warning to her--

The music box chimed a tinny version of Rocky's Theme.

Agatha crouched in a fighting stance. Her fists were in front of her face in a classic boxer's guard. There was an intensity to her expression that I'd seen before. Feral. Fierce. She exploded into a series of kicks and punches that had her father backing away. A side-kick hit like a baseball bat smacking into a side of beef. Michael winced more and more as she connected through his defenses. He didn't stop her when she segued into a series of grappling moves. Leg locks. Hip throws. Choke holds. After a minute, she had him in a complex lock that would have cracked his tibia like a nutcracker if she had cranked it harder.

"Time out!" I said.

"I'm okay, Harry." Michael massaged his knee. "I've handled worse."

"You were fighting Reds then," I said. "Agatha, how are you?"

"S-so intense," Agatha said, shivering. "For the first time I could-- Strong--"

"Yeah, about that," I said. "It's time to talk about something I saw last night..."
Chapter 15

Nick once told me about the proverb about the blind men and the elephant. Six blind men are asked to describe an elephant. One touches the trunk, saying it’s a rope. Another strokes the ear, and thinks it’s a tree with a giant leaf. So on and so on, none of the blind men understanding what an elephant really is until they compared notes. Investigations were often blind-pachyderm’s-bluff until you felt up the whole elephant. I’d asked what happened when the elephant decided to trample you to death while you were copping a feel. Nick had laughed and said that was the fun part of being a PI.

Looking back, I’m sure he was being sarcastic.

I mediated on the opaqueness of truth with a bottle of Mac’s homebrewed brown ale. The bottle was frosty from resting in the top compartment of my icebox. It might be a desecration, but to me "cellar cold" is being too cheap on the ice. I downed another swig while I mulled over what Agatha could be. My mistake had been falling into the trap of thinking her most obvious talent was her only one, like how most practitioners fall into a single skill. What I should have been thinking was "wizard" or "sorceror". But she had no magical talent in spite of having the willpower and mind that would have made her a cinch for admission to the White Council.

Mister shifted in my lap as I tipped my head back against the chair-rest. I had to figure out what was going on. I had sworn on my Power to teach her to be safe. I owed it to Michael and Charity. How was I supposed to keep my vow if I had no idea of the limits of her powers? Old, powerful blood in spite of no record of a famous Transylvanian noble family in the historical record. Michael had access to the Church. They had scholars in the priesthood who would have found evidence of her family. Empathic projection and physical toughness? That sounded like a White Court vampire. It didn't fit, though.

* A pair of Tom Swifts fighting across a Europe of mad scientists.

Mister meowed unhappily when I dumped him out of my lap. I went to one of the bookcases besides the fireplace. Candlelight shone weakly on the creased spine of the paperbacks on the shelf. I pulled out the first of the series: *Doc Savage, Man of Bronze*. Long before Justin had adopted me, I’d stayed with a foster family whose apartment had been above a used book store. The old pulp novels were sold out of boxes, the cheapest in the store. I’d had to leave them behind when the system sent me to another placement. But Doc Savage's adventures had stuck with me. Doc was a man trained in martial arts, near-peak strength and reflexes, a photographic memory, and gifted in all sorts of sciences.

* It was all wrong.*

Agatha was too smart to mistake fantasy for reality. So why would she tell me the Heterodynes were famous if they didn't exist?

Somewhere in the back of my head, a mimmoth trumpeted.

++++

Agatha had turned the attic into more of a home. A few antique kerosene lamps with tall glass chimneys lit the room with a soft light. Laminated posters had been taped to the walls. Talk about
full-frontal geekery. I'm the proud owner of an original Star Wars poster. I own a complete set of Han Solo novels. I grok the way of the fan. Compared to Agatha? Dilettante. One huge poster had a team in fatigues striding out of a round portal I remembered from a so-so science fiction movie I'd seen a few years ago. Huh. So they'd replaced the main actor with Macgyver. There were astronomical star scenes that had me thinking of times in Eb's barn at the telescope. One wall was devoted to pictures of space probes and rockets.

Agatha lay curled up on a wooden futon bed beneath the bulls-eye window. A table covered with delivery Chinese cartons was placed in front of the bed. Beneath it was a green Persian carpet. On the wall above her were two posters: Saint Tesla of the Lightning and a tower very much like the one I'd seen in her dreams. She watched a movie on a laptop computer by the light of a lamp set on an end-table. The screen was angled so that I could see it from where I stood at the door. I stayed where I was to avoid hitting the computer with my gremlinization field. She was playing an animated movie. The style was Japanese, like the Voltron and Robotech series I'd watched as a kid. Zeppelins flew and bug-like flying machines whipped through the air.

On her face was an expression of such raw agony that it could only be homesickness of the worst sort.

"Hey," I called out. I lifted up the key ring, with the spare to the attic. "Thought I'd visit."


"I should have told you in the morning," I said. "It's just hard to say 'I've been peeking into your deepest dreams twice now'. Not what you bring up in casual conversation."

"I almost never remember them," Agatha said, looking up at the second poster. "It fits that my subconscious stars the Wardenclyffe Tower."

"One of Tesla's inventions?"

"He never completed it," Agatha said. "J.P. Morgan funded it as a wireless broadcast tower. Tesla intended it to be the prototype of a vast network that could channel electricity to any point on the planet."

Agatha's face did that thing again.

"Can you imagine what it would have been like if it had been built? Standing high, throbbing with power? Spewing lightning?"

Somehow, I bet she never read Freud.

"Not that it matters," Agatha continued. "That time's long gone."

"Tesla must have been a lot like the Heterodynes," I said.

"He existed." Agatha sighed. "You must have talked with Tata. The Heterodynes never existed. They must be my imagination. Only stories."

"They never existed here." My heart beat faster. "What about the timeline you came from?"
Agatha sat up.

"Agatha," I asked, "what's a Spark?"
"So you figured it out," Agatha said. "I wondered when you would. What gave it away?"

"When you told me about the Heterodynes," I replied, "your guard was down. You talked as if they were real, widely-known historical characters. I could buy correcting yourself later, but not with the locket. It's too distinctive for a family on the run."

"Of course. If the Heterodyne Boys existed in only Uncle Barry's tales," Agatha said, "the trilobite sigil would be cause for comment. You're correct. The golden trilobite is a good luck charm throughout Europa."

"There were a few other hints," I continued. "You mentioned a 'baron' your family might be hiding from. A baron doesn't have the sort of pull to chase people all over Central Europe. The Austo-Hungarian Emperor's men might do it, but you never mentioned the imperial family's existence."

"That's still thin evidence to base the existence of an alternate timeline."

"I've also had a couple of beers in me," I admitted. "So I made a leap."

"The venerable SWAG method," Agatha said. "As my physics professor once said, 'never discount the value of a scientifically wild-assed guess.'"

"You're avoiding the subject," I said. "What is a Spark?"

"Oh, boy, how to explain it?" Agatha said. "I need to tell you all about my world, to give you an idea of what Sparks are."

"Ballpark it for me."

"Scientists, engineers, and dreamers who ruled the world and created wonders....and nightmares."

+++ 

Oh shit. They sank England.

I repeat: **they sank the British Isles.**

I stared in horror at the upper left corner of the map Agatha had drawn of her childhood's version of Europe. Where London and most of southern Britain was under water. The north and Scotland were an archipelago. Ireland was now sixteen separate islands. All because one Spark had decided to raise a land bridge to invade England and "gotten it wrong". Somehow some lunatic had cobbled up some invention based on 17th century technology that could sink a major land mass.

You could probably do the same today if you hit England with a large portion of the American nuclear arsenal. One of the heavy hitters on the supernatural side--a Faerie Queen or an Archangel--could do it easily. The entire White Council might pull it off if they decided to turn warlock, devoted themselves to a months-long earth magic ritual, and fuel it with a few hundred thousand sacrifices and the channeled energy of a hurricane. One sorceror? Upper limit might be Krakatoa or Mount Saint Helens. The Spark who had sunk England had done it because his invention had
The rest of Europe wasn't any better off. None of the large nations of the late nineteenth century existed. Hells Bells, a lot of the countryside was labeled "Wastelands": huge stretches of forest haunted by Spark-engineered mutations and rogue war-machines. There was more civilization in the West and Italy. Germany and Eastern Europe were just peasant villages and dozens of little kingdoms and fiefs ruled by Sparks and what regular nobility had managed to cling to power. The only real organization on the Continent was an Empire ruled by a Baron Wulfenbach.

My skin crawled when I saw her pictures of a Hive Engine and slaver wasps. Apparently, every child in Europa had to learn what they looked like. It must have made for epic nightmares. I imagined a few dozen of the engines crashing into Chicago like Martian cylinders out of *War of the Worlds*. Instead of the castle of the local Spark, they would be aimed at major power centers like City Hall or the Chicago PD headquarters. The engine would generate hordes of warriors who'd kill any resistance and herd the population to the engines. Then the wasp swarm would sweep out. Cue the zombie apocalypse, all dancing to the Hive Queen's tune.

"Were the geisterdammen that pursued you," I asked, "servants of the Other?"

"I have no idea," Agatha replied. "The Other was said to have stopped by the Heterodyne Boys. Baron Wulfenbach mopped up the last Hive Engines and revenants when he returned."

"Ag, we have to alert the White Council," I said. "If the Other manages to pop across the Nevernever, or a faction like the Reds gets their claws on this? We'll be hip deep in shambling horrors."

"I'll testify to what I know about the Other and its inventions," Agatha said. "Even if it means admitting I might be a-- a--"

"A Spark." I tapped her locket. "You're probably a Heterodyne, too."

"That's impossible!" Agatha shook her head. "Yes, my Uncle Barry shared the same name as one of the Heterodyne Boys. Yes, there might be some superficial similarities between my foster parents and the constructs Punch and Judy--"

I pictured how the Senior Council might react to news that a Spark like Agatha could sew together body parts and revive the dead with a handy lightning rod.

"--it makes no sense," she continued. "Klaus Wulfenbach was my uncle--the Heterodyne Boys' best friend."

"You called him the ruthless tyrant of much of Europe."

"He's nothing like Stalin or Hitler," Agatha said. "His airship fleet patrols his realm. His soldiers fight all sorts of threats. There's no secret police or anything. My Uncle never hated him or called for revolution. He just seemed sad whenever the Baron came up in conversation."

"He might be an enlightened tyrant," I said, thinking about a certain Merlin. "He's also holding together an empire facing a continent of Doctor Doom knock-offs. Suddenly you pop up out of nowhere, the daughter of the Heterodyne Boys. Plenty of chances for someone to turn you into a symbol of revolution."
"I never thought about the politics," Agatha said.

"The good guys can be the first ones to volunteer you to be the goat," I said. "Your Baron would have had to defuse the threat you posed. Probably might have made you a puppet ruler in Mechanicsburg or forced you to marry him."

"A literal puppet." Agatha shivered. "The Other wasn't the only one with mind control technology. I guess I lucked out when I was transported here, after all."

"Kid, if you're a Spark, you're even more of a prize," I said. "That's why when we tell the White Council about the Other, we're not telling them about Sparks."

"If I'm a Spark, I can be...dangerous." Agatha flexed her hands. "I have...ideas, you know. We had working energy weapons and giant killer clanks back home. I, um, whenever things were bad with bullies at school, I'd draw things."

"Every kid who's ever had sand kicked in their face thought that," I said.

"Did they have their victims spread out over the schoolyard, in anatomically-correct detail? On fire?"

"We all have our dark sides," I said. "In me, there's a wolf that howls sometimes in the dark hours. But we don't let that rule us. We fight against it. You're a daughter of the Heterodynes, and the Carpenters' kid. If some part of you tries to go Dark Side, you'll kick its ass to the curb."

"You really think so?" Agatha said, eyes glistening. "You're not scared of what I could become?"

"I spent my life being the White Council's whipping boy," I said. "Everyone tells me I'm supposed to be the next Vader. Screw that, screw them, and screw the destiny my teacher had planned for me. Same thing for you. I say we bring you into your lab at home, and watch you make something awesome."

The music box in my pocket tinkled the opening bars to "Weird Science".

"Red fire! Yes!" Agatha beamed. "Like a working vacuum-clank to help Mama. Or that powered armor I always wanted to build for Tata! Or anything I want. It's possible. I CAN DO IT!"

Agatha danced around the room. Stars and stones, I could feel the energy gathering in the room. It was the power I had sensed in her dreams. Concentrating my will, I focused on a spot on my forehead just above the bridge of my nose. My third eye opened. One of the powers of a wizard is the Sight. It allows us to see a far greater spectrum of energies than normal human eyes. You see everything. But you also don't forget anything. Ever. The most holy aura or the most depraved spiritual sludge stay fresh in your mind as when you first Saw them. Seeing too much can drive one insane.

Agatha blazed with blue fire running through bones and nerves. Her dress became the robes of an Athena smudged here and there with grease and soot. Her aura sparked and popped with colours so vivid they might have been in the first rainbow God showed to Noah. In her head whirled equations and blueprints and abstract visions I couldn't even begin to understand. Her footsteps were the crash of great mechanical treads. The air around her was filled with the sound of hissing steam and the throb of great engines. Arms laced with cables and steel seized my shirt front and--
--she kissed me, the Sight still on me, the fire of her brilliance blazing through me--

--and I was on the floor, my Sight slamming shut from the intensity, and she stood there triumphant--

"TOGETHER, HARRY DRESDEN, WE'LL SHOW THEM ALL!"

+++ 

That night, in my tiny bed in my apartment, I tried to sleep.

Couldn't.

Fire and dangerous beauty.

Elaine after we'd figured out a tough spell together, and she reached for me in the dark.

Susan.

I padded out to the fireplace mantel. On it was a small grey box containing a dinky diamond ring.

_Scientists. Capable of impossible wonders._
It's said that everyone has an a guardian angel.

He stood watch in the corner of an unheated attic apartment in a boardinghouse in Chicago. In truth, the totality of his being stretched across in both the material and spirit worlds. Yet it there was a tiny-yet-significant aspect of his being that was focused on the girl on the bed. She tossed and turned. Eyes which could look unprotected into the hearts of blue giants watched the glories she built in the dream-realm carved out of the Nevernever. What could be called a mind by lesser consciousnesses noted--with slight, if very rare, surprise--that the dream-demesne had achieved a rare stability.

"Must build all the things. Need tools. To move the world. Need..."

Something very much like soulfire spun into being within the center of Agatha H. Carpenter's dream. It wasn't quite the same. It partook of the strange power the girl created within herself. The watcher saw her take a tiny ember of that part of herself. Cogs and gears and springs and computer code coalesced into a little ball of ball lightning that pulsed in time with her heartbeat. An eye opened.

*DING*?

A beam of laser light flicked out of the newborn spirit, scanning sharp features and honey-blonde hair that hung to the watcher's shoulders.

"A friend," the watcher said. "A servant much as--"

The watcher leaned close.

"If my nature permitted envy, I would be jealous of you," the watcher said, delight suffusing his features. "Your creator has endowed you with that which even I lack. You have a precious gift."

*BING*

"If you would choose," the watcher said, producing a slim case out of thin air, "I would offer you a bit of aid. Sunrise is coming. Without shelter, you will fade into her mind like any other dream. Do you accept?"

*DING!*

"You will be able to fulfill your function." The watcher screwed together the two halves of a pool cue. "Now, this may sting a bit."

He chalked the cue.

He sighted down the shaft.

*THWOCK*
The little servant jangled several curses at the watcher when the cue drove it through the apartment wall. Still present by Agatha's side, the watcher followed the orb as it careened around the city. Wherever it passed, it seized up bits and pieces of machinery. A broken tamagotchi left in a vacant lot. The starter motor of an abandoned motorcycle. A fridge left out for pick-up by the city in the coming morning. A busted toy robot tossed into the garbage. Dross and refuse, gathered up by the creature. A whirlwind of circuitry and parts surrounded a core from which a figure a few centimeters high was forming.

*POCK*

A steel sphere about the size of a grapefruit smashed through the windshield of a Chicago PD police cruiser, whose startled occupants had seen the ball of lightning flash right at them. The watcher nodded when the hurried discussion between the two officers concluded that any weird shit had to go only to one place Discorporating the pool cue, the watcher withdrew from his post by the girl. Yes. Perfect. The watcher strode through space and time. The path through the firmament lead him to an isolated spot on the Bootes Void. At times he needed some privacy. The Almighty understood.

He snapped his fingers.

A dirty-blonde goatee sprouted on his chin.

"Exceeeeeellllllleeent," the Archangel Uriel cackled.
When in doubt, run.

That's not cowardice talking. It's common sense. I'm not a master of kung fu or mighty of the thews. To quote ZZ Top, I have legs and I know how to use them. There are plenty of times when showing my heels to the Monster of the Week is the best option. It gives a squishy wizard like me time to think of a way to pull my ass out the fire. It's also an advantage when I want to catch someone instead. True fact: humans can actually outlast their prey over long-distance hunts, literally chasing them into the ground. I'd been spending a few hours over the weekend in Lincoln Park since Mid-Summer Day, getting into shape.

Well, an hour every other weekend.

At least once a month. Cross my heart.

I wheezed as I stumbled down the last few blocks toward home. I hardly felt the chilly morning air cutting through my T-shirt and running shorts. My body was too busy screaming at me about unwelcome house-guests like Lactic Acid Build Up and Too Many Damn Whoppers. That was fine. It gave my brain a rest from acting as a squirrel-cage for the thoughts that had been bouncing around through the night. There was only one foot in front of the other. Better than an entire morning of cold showers.

I flopped down on the crushed trunk lid of the Blue Beetle when I finally stumbled in the little gravel patch my place called a driveway. Draining the last of a sports bottle filled with Gatorade, I let my heart rate slow down from cardiac arrest to ferret on crack. Stars and stones. Hard to believe that I used to letter in track. It must have been youth and the total stupidity that comes with it. To my left, gravel shifted as someone shuffled over to me. I nodded at Mrs. Spunkelcrief as she came over to me in robe and slippers. I'd never actually seen her dressed up. Rheumatism and arthritis had kept her housebound for as long as I'd rented here.

"Oh, to be young," she said. "You don't know how lucky you are, Harry."

"My kingdom for a wheelchair," I gasped out. "You're up early, Mrs. S."

"My new tenant has been keeping me up since six," she said. "What a dynamo! She's been all over the house seeing what needs fixing up."

"Agatha signed a lease?"

"Paid cash on the barrel, too. First month, last month, damage deposit"--Mrs. S. handed me a piece of paper--"and part of your next month's rent. She asked me to tell you it isn't up for discussion."

"She didn't have to--" I protested.

"Be a good boy and accept it with grace," Mrs. S. chided. She glanced up. "That girl never stops. It still makes me nervous, her all alone up on the roof."

"What's she working on?" I asked.
"The lightning rod," Mrs. S. replied. "Those terrible storms a couple of years back frightened me. Agatha said she'd see about making sure it was up to code."

I brought out the little music box tucked into a shorts pocket. From it tinkled a light, very familiar melody I'd often heard her hum.

"Did she say anything," I asked, watching her silhouetted against the brightening sky, "about tying it into the electrical system?"

"What a funny thought!" Mrs. S said. "She did mention something calling in someone to improve the fuse box."

The billing department at ComEd was going to have whole-body orgasms when they saw Agatha's apartment's meter reading.

I managed a controlled fall back into my apartment. The icy water sluicing from my shower head shocked me awake enough to realize what I'd just done. My upstairs neighbor and new superintendent was a mad scientist. Oh God. We'd probably end up with a Mr. Fusion running on Mrs. Spunkelcrief's kitchen compost in the back shed, and an airship hangar extension on the roof. There wasn't any doubt about what she might be capable of. Not after what I'd seen of her in my Sight. Not after what I'd felt blasting through me when her lips touched mine.

I opened both taps full blast. I was not going to think about that. I was not going to think about how a Spark like her Uncle Barry might have created a shade as strong as Kravos, and who knew the secrets of her world's medical technology. I wasn't going to think about what that might mean for Susan. There was no way I'd ask Agatha permission to summon Barry Heterodyne's ghost--if he'd left one--near the anniversary of his death. It was dangerous as hell to do that when Halloween was coming. Ghosts aren't people. The intelligent ones are naked obsession. A ghost obsessed with protecting his niece could be a deadly haunt at a time when the wall between worlds was weakest.

I flopped onto the couch after pulling on some jeans and a Western shirt. Mister nuzzled up for his morning scritching. His claws pricked my skin, warning me it had to be up to standards. My fingertips rendered tribute while I checked the invoice she had handed to Mrs. S. She had calculated right down to the penny what she had owed me if I'd thought of charging the Carpenters for the time spent researching her case. It should have rankled but...well, business hadn't gotten back to what it had been when I'd gone to ground last Halloween. My practice never had been a huge money-maker. There are times when your chivalrous side has to park the lance and take the damned money.

She was so getting treated to dinner, as soon as possible.

Scribbled below it were sketches. Agatha apparently planned on re-installing my steel security door in a new frame that hadn't been nailed together by a senile rhesus monkey. Steel shutters for my apartment's sunken windows, too. An ornamental railing with spikes on top around the stairs. Huge cat statues that resembled economy-sized versions of Mister flanking the gate. No. Not statues. Clanks. I'd tangled with the wizard equivalent of robots once or twice. Victor Sells' scorpion construct had nearly killed me and Murph. These Fun-Sized Agony and Death Dispensers she intended for front door guard-kitties--

I read that again.
"Coming!" I squeaked out, when I heard the knock at the door.

"Hi, Harry!" Agatha said, after I'd opened the door after checking through the peephole. Her Victorian outfit had been ditched for workboots and overalls. "Meet your new neighbor."

"Hey, Crazy-Attic-Girl," I said, standing aside to allow her in. "Wiring in the new slab?"

"Aren't you going to invite me-- Oh, right, threshold law." Agatha stepped in without a formal invite, proving that she was human. "No, of course not. My new place is too small for that sort of work. Can you believe it? 'My new place'."

"This is your first time living on your own?" I said. "Welcome to the excitement of scrambling for rent money and eating ramen out of the cup."

"Killjoy." Agatha grinned. "This is going to be great. It's long overdue. I mean, I loved living with Tata and Mama and the kids. But it's time I grew up. Moved out. Terrorized a new neighborhood."

"You can afford it on top of tuition?" I asked. "I appreciate paying my rent. But not if you're going out of pocket on it."

"I've made a few investments over the years," Agatha said, measuring my doorway with a tape measure. "I read a lot of the tech journals. I've been lucky a few times reading between the lines about start-ups. Most of it went into a fund to help my family through the tough times. There's some left over for my expenses."

"Just to be clear, I have no problems being your gigilo," I said.

"Hah! Please." Agatha shook her head. "I wouldn't torture you with that duty."

"Torture? You're gorgeous."

"Don't do that," Agatha said. "You don't have to lie about it to boost my confidence. Whatever Mama tells me, I've heard what people say. A prize I'm not."

"What are you talking about?" I said, angrily. "Last night, it was as if I was looking at a goddess."

Oh.

Oh, hell, will my mouth learn to shut the hell up for once.
Chapter 19

So much for attending the housewarming party.

Good thing for me I'd decided to throw an early-morning pity party instead. What a disaster. I'd might have just been able to laugh it off if she hadn't seen the open ring box on the mantle. Agatha had nearly broken the speed of light backing out the door. I hadn't even had a chance to explain whose ring it was. She probably thought I'd broken into a jewelry store at midnight out of creepy stalker love.

Hells bells, she might even think it had been an unintended effect of her siren abilities. It could be true. It probably was true. Her emotions were coming to life after years of suppression. We had been spending a lot of time together under extreme stress. Who knew what might be sneaking up on my subconscious? The vision of her in my Sight hadn't helped. How was I supposed to teach her to be safe, needing a lot of intimate contact, if I couldn't control how I felt?

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, I meditated in the way I had been taught to prepare myself for a ritual magic. I usually control my emotions by thinking of them as separate from "me". It was the same method I use to ignore pain. This time, I laid brick after brick around my feeling for her. A prison tower rose within my mind. I concentrated on the slap of mortar between courses, the rough surface of the granite blocks in my hands, the tap-tap of the chisel laying warding symbols in the rock. At the very top I set down a keystone carved with the symbol for Lethe.

Numb.

I had to be numb for a while.

Now, maybe I could drive to the office without blowing up my car--

I stared at the empty space in the rear engine compartment of the Blue Beetle.

++++

The Volkswagen Beetle engine is one of the simplest designs around. A monkey with two rocks and a pointed stick could work on one. Okay, that might be an overstatement. This monkey can't do much except stare at it until the wrecker from Mike's garage comes by pick up Mighty Blue from where it broke down. I'm still pretty familiar with the layout, and can even nod sagely and say "timing's off" to passer-by. Not that I'd know if it was the timing. The guy beside me probably doesn't know what's causing the magic smoke to waft out, either. The important thing is the sage nod and the grunt that we manly men understand mechanical things.

Then I sell another piece of my soul to Mike for him to find out and fix what's really wrong.

What was on the table covered with newspapers in the backyard wasn't an engine. It wasn't even parts of an engine. Agatha had stripped down the heart of my trusty steed into Volks-atoms. I didn't need the music box to know she was deep into a heterodyning trance. The air vibrated as if bees had visited an underground LSD factory. Her fingers blurred like a master magician whipping through a complex illusion. The expression on her face was unsettling. It wasn't manic. It was intent. No, it was obsessed. It was the sort of focus that might explode into pure rage if I did something stupid like interrupt her.
Something was coming together in the center of the table. Bits of an erector set, an electric motor, a laser pointer, cables leading from her laptop to some sort of oversized Lego brick--I'm not a mechanical genius. The closest I ever got to shop class was playing Mousetrap with Elaine. But my eyes didn't like looking too closely at how whatever-it-was was fitting together. It was like Thomas Edison was channeling M.C. Escher. It was nauseating to see without risking Seeing it.

The heterodyning faded to a low hum.

Agatha positioned an engine cylinder into a padded vise.

A goddamn laser etched a design into the metal at the end of a freaking robotic arm.

"It works," Agatha breathed, watching her impossible creation. "It works."

"Agatha," I asked, edging toward her as if she were a vial of nitroglycerin, "what are you doing to my car?"

"I'm working on dissipating the chaotic energies magic inflicts on technology," Agatha said absently, clamping another part into place. "My guess is that the disruption concentrates on the system at the point of maximum complexity--the engine--so applying a series of modified warding sigils to act in a manner similar to my heterodyning would cancel out the effect."

"Which you're doing with a freaking laser?"

"No kidding. Can you imagine how long it would take to etch it with hand tools?"

Agatha blushed.

"Um, when I'm stressed, I gadgeteer." Agatha twiddled her fingers. "I needed some distraction time. Stupid, really, I should be able to accept a compliment without having to have it rammed through my thick skull."

"That's on me, Agatha," I said. "What I said was out of line."

"You were being gentlemanly," Agatha said, fumbling with the next part. "It's not as if you suddenly fell in love with me or anything."

"I very easily could."

I caught the piece when she dropped it.

"Do you know what magic is?" I asked, setting down the piece of engine. "It's life. Not just life energy. It's the energy of living. A baby's laugh is magic. An old couple holding hands in the park is more mystical than any great rite. Magic is passion."

"Harry, when I kissed you last night--" Agatha said.

"You were ecstatic and wanted to share it with me," I said. "Nothing more. I get it. It doesn't change the fact that your passion made you beautiful in my eyes. Don't be ashamed of it, either. It was a gift to see you like that."
"You're in love with me?" Agatha said.

"It's complicated." I drew a deep breath. "You remind me of two women who I loved. Elaine was my first...everything. The wedding ring was for Susan. Both were strong, smart, incredibly passionate women. I've been coming off a rough year. My shields are down."

"Am I really a goddess?" Agatha self-consciously brushed her hair away from one grease-strained cheek.

"You're one suggestively-held wrench away," I said, "from being Miss January to December of the best-selling cheesecake calendar, ever."

"That...explains things, actually." Agatha said. "One time I went to a con as Gadget Hackwrench. There was an unusual number of accidents where people kept walking into doors. I insisted to Molly that there wasn't any provable causal link--"

"You are Geekphrodite," I intoned. "Accept your fate. You know it to be true."

"Does this change things between us?" Agatha looked down. "I enjoy spending time with you. I was going to ask you to come with me to the planetarium this afternoon."

"I would love to." I coughed. "As soon as you put together my car."

"Give me fifteen minutes."

Agatha grinned, delirious with happiness.

"Look, Harry! One of my inventions worked! It worked! I'm a SPARK!"

++++

"Wake up, Bob," I said, tapping the skull. Agatha was too busy reassembling the engine to notice.

"Boss, it's broad daylight!" my lab assistant said.

"You're safe in your sanctum," I replied. "And we're in shade on the porch. Tell me what you see."

"The most perfect set of--"

I smacked the skull hard.

"Fine, fine. Let's see...uh...."

Bob's eyelights flared.

"What? What's going on?"

"Oh nothing. It's just that her soul's on fire."
"Ready?"

"Ready!"

*click*

*whirr*

*putputputputPUTPUTPUT*

"It's alive. It's alive!"

"Been waiting for years to say that?"

"You have no idea!"

++++

People laugh at the Blue Beetle. A guy goes to all the trouble of cultivating a rep as the toughest mystic mug in town, and he drives a dinky toy car that was new around the time the Beach Boys' testicles dropped? It's not that I don't understand the ridiculousness of the image. But the Big Blue Bug is what I'd always wanted: my own set of wheels. You're nowhere in America without a ride. Justin hadn't given Elaine or I enough money for a car, or allowed time off for a job to earn one. It was another way of controlling us. So when I finally left Ebenezar's farm for Chicago, I vowed I'd buy a car no matter what it took. Especially when I discovered the feisty social scene you find on the El late at night.

I'd worked at several places before hooking up with Nick. One was a part-time gig as a dance partner with a senior-citizen's organization. My diet had tended towards baked beans and Spam right out of the can the month I answered that ad posted on the Safeway bulletin board. It worked out well. The ladies appreciated my brand of old-school chivalrous behavior. Enough to be patient until I learned the steps. It's where I met Mrs. Spunkelcrief. It's also where I heard that one of my dance partners had an early-sixties era Volkwagen that she hadn't driven in years. It had been true love the second I'd opened the rented garage where she had been keeping it.

It isn't KITT. Then again, I already have one smart-ass artificial intelligence in my life already.

Squatting by the rear bumper, I examined what Agatha had done to the Beetle's engine. It looked stock. More than that, it looked as if it had come out the factory in Die Vaterland. My trusty mechanic Mike couldn't have done any better. And she'd been using Mr. S.'s tools loaned to her by my landlady. Etched on every surface were the adapted warding sigils. Looking at them through a magnifying glass, I saw each line was really a nested series in almost microscopic script that could never have been placed by a human hand. A svartalf might have done it, and charged my weight in gold for the job. The symbols were a mix of Church theurgical symbols, musical script, and what looked like an electronics diagram.

Hesitantly, I released a tiny burst of magic at the engine.
"Stars and stones," I said softly, as the chaotic energy was absorbed and dampened out. "She did it. How did she do it without 'knowing much about magic?"

"She's smarter than you," Bob said, held in my free hand under my duster. "Not that that's such a high bar. But she's really, really, incredibly smarter than you. The base she's built it on is standard Church warding and banishing invocations. But she's twisted the logic like it was in a gimp suit. Boss, please. Pimp me."

"I'm not selling you to Agatha," I snapped back.

"She'd hurt me," Bob said dreamily. "She would bend and break my very essence to her warped view of the universe. Only, in a good way. Not like the last time. I'd learn so much."

"The last time?" I asked. "Would that last time involve glowing blue and speaking German?"

Bob's teeth snapped shut.

"Bob?"

"Don't ask about that, sahib. Please." Bob's voice was very faint. "Some things are left buried. As in, under a hundred feet of concrete."

"It's okay," I said soothingly, deciding to make a few outside inquiries about Bob's former owners. "What's this about her soul on fire?"

"The closest to what she's manifesting is soulfire," Bob said. "You've heard of Hellfire, right? Basic trick of the Fallen, letting cultists channel the essence of hell. The gotcha to it that it blackens the soul. Soulfire is the angelic equivalent, the fires of creation."

"So Agatha was touched by an angel," I said. "It explains why she ended up with the Carpenters."

"Nyet, oh ignorant one," Bob said. "'Closest equivalent'. Soulfire burns part of the soul, adding to existing magic or work of faith. It's like rebar in concrete. Soulfire-infused spells are the saintly miracles of legend."

"She's literally burning up her soul every time she Sparks? What happens if she runs out?"

"There's a reason why angels grant soulfire to martyrs," Bob said. "It's a one last blaze of glory against the forces of evil deal. Although judicious use of soulfire isn't that bad."

"You're using your immortal soul for fuel," I said. "That can't be healthy."

"Mortals. 'Ooooh, my soul!'" Bob's eyelights rolled. "It's not a big deal. Live a little, go to a rock concert, spend a weekend in bed with Swedish bikini models and some Crisco--the tank is topped up in no time. Anyway, she isn't using soulfire. If she was, at the intensity she displays in her aura, she'd have been a lifeless husk in under ten second."

"So exactly what is the Spark doing?"

"Warping the laws of nature," Bob shivered. "Her soul becomes some sort of primordial creative force, that she weaves into her inventions. Physics are physics, boss. You can't alter a laser pointer into a beam that can etch metal. Not on current drawn from the domestic power grid."
"That's insane," I said.

" Noticed that, didn't you?" Bob said. "The way she enters a state of controlled insanity whenever she Sparks. It's amazing. Your average warlock takes months or years to go as bonkers as she does in seconds."

"Are you saying that the Spark is black magic?" I asked.

"Apples and oranges boss. The Spark isn't magic." Bob's eyelights flared. "It isn't anything we've ever encountered. It works on metaphysical principles no-one's ever encountered. Is this great or what? Agatha deserves deep, penetrating, intense research!"

"So she isn't automatically condemning her soul," I said carefully, "every time she Sparks out?"

"I'd doubt it." Bob's teeth clattered. "Of course, going crazy on a regular basis would do funny things to the human mind."

I thought about the track record of Sparks in her recollections of her home reality.

Fuck.

"Boss, there's this shop I heard about in Seattle," Bob said, eyelights shifting from side to side. "Very tasteful. Countess Marie is a sorceress with leather and satin. I already calculated Agatha's measurements--"

"Shut up, Bob."

I hurried back into my apartment to secure Bob in my lab. Hells bells, in all the wonder about what she could do, I'd forgotten the "mad" part of "mad scientists". No wonder the common folk in her world thought Sparks were monsters. The source of their power meant dipping into states of mind that would scare even warped souls like Victor Sells and Kravos. The Spark wasn't magic. The corrupting aspects of black magic came from the direct connection between will and power in a practitioner's spell. Even using a prepared magical object like my rings meant that I'd have to intend to murder with all my heart if I used it for lethal force. Agatha's inventions wouldn't have that intimate link. Turning her laser into a blaster rifle would probably be more like gunsmithing.

Probably.

God. Charity and Michael would die when they found out. The girl they'd rescued and raised risked becoming a ranting lunatic intent on world domination by the talent they'd encouraged her to work at. Me? I was planning on contacting the White Council. If the Morgans in their ranks discovered her Spark and its implications, they might decide to apply the Seven Laws to Agatha on general principles. The Council could declare the Spark the equivalent of her world's magic. There wouldn't be any other authority who could say no, unless she cut a deal with another faction like Elaine had.

Or she might fight back. Like adapting those dampening sigils to other purposes. They worked by acting as passive channels activated by the low-order magic passing through them. A practitioner or being that used magic--like a Red Court vampire such as Bianca St. Claire--could rework them into a true spell if she explained the theory. Simply releasing them into the general public could alter the balance of the war. A well-timed hexas is a potent tool in any Warden's arsenal. Or it
could finally allow the Council to use modern technology. Agatha could become a pawn or a threat in a second.

Screw that. As if I'd let that happen.

I splashed water in my face. First things first. I was going on a test drive of the New Blue Beetle with Agatha. I couldn't risk freaking her out. I'd talk to her in a little while about what I'd found out. You have to dole out these portentous revelations one at a time. Locking up, I climbed the steps up to ground level. Agatha was back by the car, adjusting some kind of electronic device which featured vacuum tubes. She had cleaned up and changed into a fawn blouse and grey ankle length skirt beneath her great-coat. She'd exchanged her Russian hat for a green tweed peaked cap and old-fashioned driving goggles.

Molly Carpenter stood with her arms crossed as her big sister argued with her. The kid had switched from punk lolita to skater girl. A skateboard emblazoned with skulls was matched by a helmet with the same. Baggy cargo pants and a too-tight T-shirt with "SKATE OR DIE!" completed the costume. Her hair was in two pigtails. Her entire attitude radiated an "oh, please" signal at 2000 kilobrats. My lips twitched. Sisters. Never had a brother. Always wondered what it would be like having one. Apparently, siblings meant constant pissing each other off. What were they talking about?

"I am not going on a date with Harry!" Agatha shouted.

Oh.

"This is a great development for you," Molly said, clearly savoring every word. "Older men know things. They have technique. Come on, you wasted years when you could be doing things with college guys."

"I had a headache," Agatha replied. She whipped out a multitool while she leaned in through the open driver's-side window. "Yes he, ah, admitted feelings for me. That's only because he's emotionally vulnerable."

"He's a hot rebel with a tragic past!" Molly shrieked. "Are you blind, or is Mom right when she thinks you might be a lesbian?"

"Mama thinks I'm gay?" Agatha asked.

"You've worked on Pride Parade floats ever since going to college."

"That was because Theo knew I had carpentry training," Agatha said, deep at work installing whatever it was. "I didn't realize the significance of the rainbows until Tata explained it."

"Mom nearly had an aneurysm when she found out," Molly snickered. "Just like she will when she finds out you're going on a D-A-T-E with Gandalf on crack and a six pack of Red Bull."

"Nice line," I said. "I should print that on my business cards. Planning the wedding?"

"No, you're her first affair," Molly shot back She switched to a stage-whisper. "Break her in gently. She's a delicate flower."

Agatha snarled.
"Like an orchid?" I asked, to the cowering girl behind me. "What are you sticking into my faithful steed, Ag?"

"Radio. The late Mr. Spunkelcrief was an audiophile." She patted the new console covering the hole in the dash. "I relied on pre-war design. The vacuum tubes and extra fuses should handle the transient overvoltages caused by your magic. Pure electronics are too volatile for the dampeners to handle."

"Sweet. Ten bucks says it will still burn out in three seconds," I said.

"You're on," Agatha replied, smiling confidently. "While we're at it, we can drive my truant little sister back to school. She convinced her teachers that she had to visit her poor crazy sister in the asylum."

"Back to the Big House, Molly." I opened the passenger door for Agatha. "After you, my lady."

"Why thank you sir," Agatha said, buckling in.

Molly retched.

"No comments from the peanut gallery, kid."
Chapter 21

Looks like I owed Agatha a Whopper Trio. Usually radios fuzz out into static if they spend more than ten minutes near me. I have to sit on the opposite side of the car or lie on the trunk lid whenever I go to the drive-in to keep those little FM speakers working. The rich, clear sound coming from Agatha's radio was Dolby quality. It was also completely wasted on the inane chatter of the morning drive show. I fiddled with tuner dial until I found a classic rock station where the hosts weren't as obnoxious. I also upped the volume to compete with the noise leaking out from the headphones clamped over Molly's ears. The bratling was folded up in the rear seat with that adamantium-strength boredom that comes from youth. It also gave her the power to listen to guitars screeching like Mister on a back-alley date, to which the only answer was *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Under it all was Agatha's distinctive hum as she scribbled on a legal pad.

It was strange how domestic it felt. It reminded me a little of when Justin DuMorne drove Elaine and I to and from school. He insisted on it rather than have the school bus add a stop. Not that the routine was half as cheery as this. Justin had been a dour man who wasn't much up for much conversation than quizzing us on how we'd done that day. More than once he shoved one of us out--usually me--to walk the last mile home if I'd screwed up. The rigid schedule also cut into our extra-curriculars. It had still impressed me back then. A dad driving his adopted son to school was a big thing to an orphan. He cared about us to take the time for that.

It had been just another of his damn leashes.

Bitter? Me? It is to laugh.

"Could you stop here?" Molly called out.

"We're still five blocks away from school," Agatha said.

"I might be the cool guy with the tragic past," I said. "But I bet your cred takes a nose-dive if your friends see you being delivered in the Bug."

"Yeah, you need a way better ride. Maybe a muscle car." Molly perked. "Or you could turn it into a flying Beetle. Can't you whip up flubber or something?"

"Or a magical effect to nullify the effect of gravity!" Agatha said. "We could adapt your kinetic-energy rings into propulsion devices!"

"Hold it! First, the last time I tried aeromancy ended up with a UFO report on the local news," I said. "Two, turning any piece of technology into an enchanted item trashes it for mundane use."

"Hey, Dad still has that old Vespa you tried to restore a year ago," Molly said. "The engine's junk anyway."

"Don't remind me. Parts are in low-earth orbit." Agatha grinned wildly. "Of course, that makes the frame perfectly suitable for magical modifications."

"HOVERBIKE!" the two girls yelled out in unison.

"And three, your parents will kill me your after-school project is becoming my apprentices," I said.
"I promised to teach you mental self-defence techniques, Agatha. Not magic."

"I assume it wouldn't be a problem, Harry, since I lack any mystical talent." Agatha frowned. "Though it would put you in a bad light with Mama, wouldn't it?"

"Trust Mom to kill fun from a mile away." Molly scowled, slumping back. "She's so afraid of everything outside of her little world."

"Charity isn't too far wrong about the risks, kid," I said. "Even if you aren't a practioner, dabbling in the wrong thing is dicy."

"Come on, at least let Agatha help!" Molly said. "You. Her. Chase scene from Jedi."

"You. Serpent. Out of the car."

The little temptress laughed in the face of my mighty scowl before kicking off on her board down the sidewalk.

"This is why I asked Mama to keep the rain barrel full of cold water," Agatha said. She bit her lip. "I was looking forward to collaborating with you."

"We'll talk about it," I said. "In fact, we should take a raincheck on the planetarium. Save it for the weekend. Your lessons take priority."

"Of course they do," Agatha said. "We could meet on campus at, say, four? I'll be in Rockefeller Chapel practising for a recital then."

"Perfect." Not so much, I'm not a guy comfortable in churches. But for this I wanted her in a place where she was comfortable "Need a lift? I can swing by the university on my way to my office."

"No, I think I'll enjoy a ride," Agatha smiled. "It seems such a lovely day already."

Agatha wrestled out her two-wheeled tank from the Beetle's trunk. I watched her pedal down the street at a swift clip before taking out the earring. I clipped the small silver harp to my left ear. Usually I would get out of the car to create an improvised circle for this sort of spell. The wardings on the engine seemed to draw in random magical energies within the car, which I found damned handy. Gathering my will, I muttered "feniculus sonitum" before sending a pulse of energy through the earring to its mate resting next to the music box back in my lab. The silver harp played the tinkly version of the "Chariots of Fire" theme that was now on Agatha's personal soundtrack at a frequency only a wizard could hear.

This monitoring her mind was becoming to be a little stalker-obsessive, to be honest.

Lying on the front passenger seat was a manilla folder. Inside were computer print-outs of the details of the Other and her techbane warding. All the notes were in perfect Latin. I'd explained it was the business language of the White Council. Honestly, I shouldn't have even told her about them. She was still a straight, if more clued in than most. I drummed my fingers on the papers. Revealing Agatha's existence and her Spark would do more than bring her to their attention. She was Micheal's adopted daughter. The Church and the Knights weren't signatories to the Unseelie Accords, though they had enough status to acts as seconds in duels. If the White Council decided they wanted her, they had enough wealth and influence to strong-arm her if need be. I didn't think Michael would be so saintly if they came after one of his kids. Elaine's words about not letting a
bunch of old men dictate her life came to mind.

Screw that. The White Council could find out about the slaver wasps from an anonymous tip. I'd send her papers to one of the contacts I had with the Venatori Umbrorum. They're a clued-in group of scholars and middle-weight practitioners who fight the good fight against the darkness; they had been a source of intelligence and analysis since the war with the Red Court had kicked off. A remailing service would obscure the tracks. I admired the details on the warding notes. Stars and stones, I had never seen anyone with an instinctive understanding of that branch of magic without any actual ability. The White Council would break the First Law for someone like that on their payroll. I could see the Merlin being driven up in a limousine to her apartment. He would be the perfect picture of the genteel wizard. The jerk. He'd offer her a chance to work with experts in the Art instead of a suspicious thug.

I laid my head on the steering wheel. I repeated all the arguments against teaching Agatha magic: Micheal's disapproval, Charity's reaction, the screw-up with Kim. But, dammit, I'm not that noble a guy. I wanted a damned hoverbike. Agatha could craft things for me that a svartalf would charge me an entire amputee ward. I wanted that brillaint goddess all to myself. My fists clenched around the wheel as the walls of the tower within me wavered. I reinforced it brick by brick. Agatha was counting on me to be the stable one today. I couldn't let my screwed-up brain interfere in her lessons. I was Harry Dresden, professional wizard. I could be mature about this. And maybe the Leanansidhe would be working down at the soup kitchen giving free bowls of Campebells to the deserving.

I was completely in control when I drove to my office. Fine. I was angst-proof. Running up and down the stairs a few times was a little extra exercise. My hand was on the doorknob when I heard a noise from inside. Nothing overt. It was the sort of sound that, say, a thing who wanted to ambush me might make if it heard me about to come in. Like a Red Court vampire, say, hiding with the blinds drawn. No-one had interfered with the lock. But then, Mab had been able to waltz into my office. Silently, I drew out my blasting rod. Runes flared with red light and the tip glowed a brilliant red. I shook out the bracelet hung with shields on my left wrist. With a mental Bruce Lee scream, I flung open the door with the blasting rod extended to light up the unlife of anything about to ruin my morning.

Blue eyes stared at the tip.

"You know, Dresden, they have ointments for male problems like that."

"Oh, hey, Murph."
Karrin Murphy is so cute you could put her in your pocket. Like one of those little nine-millimeter concealed-carry automatics. She's five feet nothing with blonde hair and blue eyes. She's also a black belt in aikido and a shelf full of marksmanship awards. A hard-charging attitude to her work earned her a lieutenancy at an age when most police officers are thinking about working their way up from patrol. That same no-nonsense attitude also earned her exile to the professional Siberia of Special Investigations. SI handles the weird cases that are too toxic for the rest of the department. Most commanders lasted a month or two before the stress and failure earned them early retirement. Instead, Murphy had taken her job so seriously that she hired the only professional wizard listed in the Chicago phone book as a consultant.

That did not mean I immediately lowered my blasting rod. Shapeshifters are a fact of life. Which tells you all you need to know about mine. The open blinds let in enough sun to rule out a vampire hiding under a flesh mask. After a second, Murphy reached over to my desk to touch the steel blade of my letter opener. Not a faerie, either. What finally decided me was the smell of fresh donuts from the bag next to her on the couch. The camouflage of your average supernatural killer usually doesn't extend to bringing in sugar-charged goodness. It's one of the sure things that separate the white hats from the black hats. She had also brewed a fresh joe in my Sunbeam Coffeemaster automatic vacuum pot. That was what convinced me to put aside fiery magical death for a mug of caffeinated ambrosia and a boston cream with sprinkles.

Murphy tossed the reason she had come over after I'd settled behind my desk for the breakfast of champions. The sphere landed with a soft clunk on the blotter. I stopped it from rolling over the edge with an elbow. The outside was made of dozens of pieces of scrap metal that fitted together in a jigsaw pattern. Rivets joined the seams tight. Shaking it didn't produce tell-tale rattles. Poking around didn't reveal any hidden catches. Concentrating, I extended my wizardly senses to see if it was enchanted. Nothing. I licked the last of the cream from my fingers before performing the final test.

"Pikachu, I choose you!" I shrugged, tossing it back to Murphy. "I'm drawing a blank. For all I know, it could be a thermal detonator. I can tell you it isn't magical."

"The night shift reported in something ping-ponging around the city before this punched through a cruiser windshield in Woodlawn." Murphy scowled at it. "It's not earth-shattering. But I have to put something in the report."

"Meteors," I suggested.

"We're saving that for the next collapsed building," Murphy said.

I muttered something unworthy of the dignity of a wizard around the rim of my mug.

"Screw it. 'Teen prank'." Murphy tossed it back to me. "I only bothered bringing it in because the two officers who found it stopped by the house as I was heading to work."

"And here I thought you came here out of unrequited passion," I said. "You brought donuts. It a sign of love for cop chicks."

"Pig," Murphy shot back. She squinted at my left ear. "That's new. I didn't figure you for the
metrosexual look. Although, trust me, you're not about to pull it off."

"A vital part of a case," I said, a little more defensive than I should have. "A favor for the 
Carpenters."

"Stallings told me about Agatha," Murphy said. "Is she going to be alright?"

"All signs point to yes." I blinked. "I didn't think you knew any of the Carpenter kids before last 
Halloween."

"Agatha's a friend of a friend at the medical examiner's office" Murphy shuddered just a little bit at 
the reminder of the Nightmare case. "Waldo Butters handled the aftermath of the Velvet Room 
fire, along with a bunch of other SI cases. I think it was Agatha who clued him into the spookier 
side of things. They have this hilarious Pinky and the Brain act."

"So she already has an Igor on stand-by when she decides to go into reanimation experiments," I 
said.

"I thought the White Council cracked down hard on necromancy," Murphy said.

"Technically, it wouldn't count as magical revival," I said.

"Maybe we can distract her from zombie armies by asking for those sonic cannons Waldo said she 
was working on," Blue eyes narrowed in a way that criminals in interrogation rooms have learned 
to fear. "Dammit. She's part of a case you're involved. What's going on, Dresden? What does my 
ulcer have to worry about now?"

"Confidentiality clause. You know the drill." I debated for a second on how much warning I could 
give. Murphy and the detectives at SI had done me enough solids that they deserved a heads up.. 
"Let's just say the Brain part of the act isn't so much an act anymore."

"Do you have a bottle of whiskey in the desk to go with your hard-boiled PI image?" Murphy 
sighed. "No, forget it, I'm on the job now."

"If it's any comfort, any trouble you'll have from her will come with a scientific explanation baked 
in. Agatha will even cite footnotes."

Murphy stomped out with a lot more force than any woman her size usually did. I forseaw a bad 
day indeed for any petty lawbreaker they crossed paths with Karrin in that mood. She goes full 
Javert sometimes. I puzzled over the mention of sonic cannons. Agatha had talked about 
experiments in that line that first night in the attic apartment. Focused sound beams. "Iron 
resonating cavities". A half-eaten bear claw dropped out of my hand when the penny dropped. 
Stars and stones, she must have been thinking about the old legends of church bells driving away 
faeries. That had actually happened whenever a particularly devout bell-ringer with faith had been 
the one on the other end of the rope. Otherwise it didn't effect the fae at all. But Agatha's 
SCIENCE! worked by crazy laws that were bullshit even by the standards of the magical world. I 
had a sneaking suspicin--given the timing--that Agatha had a hell of a grudge against my fairy 
godmother for stealing Amorrachius. And Agatha had offered that sort of technology to Karrin 
Murphy. Agatha wasn't just planning on making weapons for her dad. She had been working on an 
anti-supernatural arsenal for the cops.

That was going to make waves. As in, tsunamis. Individual, ungifted humans don't phase the
various supernatural factions much. It takes a Knight of the Cross or a White Council wizard to rank as a serious opponent in conflicts between the inhuman and mortals. Even hunter groups like Special Investigatons were considered nuisances instead of threats. Murphy and her men did the best they could with shotguns loaded with rock salt and bottles of garlic oil. With my advice, they'd handled beasts like trolls on their own. Never without a lot of bruising, though. Major threats like the loup-garou could wipe out the entire squad in one shot. It had certainly done for Murphy's old partner Carmichael. What made the supernatural community nervous was humanity as a whole on a rampage. The power of a Sidhe host out for a social could be countered by a mob of peasants armed with iron scythes and pitchforks if enough of them were willing to die in the battle. The only reason Murphy usually didn't call in vanilla cops and SWAT was the casualties a confrontation would generate. If the gloves came off, and humanity had Agatha's technology? A mass uprising by modern-day humans was considered enough of a terror that calling in the mortal authorities was the nuclear option in the supernatural world. A trained team of cops armed with Sparky ray guns and other wackiness would be the equivalent of a tactical warhead. Probably an actual tactical nuclear warhead, if Agatha could find some pinball parts and spare plutonium.

Little Miss SCIENCE! was already setting herself up as a player without my urging.

A knock at my door reminded me why I came into the office lately. The implications of a Spark throwing herself into supernatural conflicts were involving. But it didn't pay the bills. I wondered who the walk-in would be. I get a surprising number of them for a man who works out of the fourth floor of a not-very-spiffy office building. Openly advertising as a professional wizard and appearing on Larry Fowler's show attracts its share of nutbars along with the few legitimate clients. There's also the curiosity seekers who want to see if I'm the con-artists most people think I am. This time it was Sidney Greenstreet. Seriously. I thought the world was about to become black and white in stylish chiascuro. He was a hair under my height with a heft that rivaled Marcone's pet bulldozer. The jowls under his chin were fat, but he moved with the grace of a fighter who had once been a threat in his prime. My inner accountant cheered at the obviously expensive grey suit and shoes that spelled "money". He laid his homburg in his lap when he sat down in one of the client chairs in front of my desk. His scalp was shaven instead of bald. He probably did it to get it over with instead of trying a comb-over.

"Come to see me about a bird?" I couldn't help myself. Really.

"Not today, Wizard Dresden." Sidney chuckled in a way that had me checking for Peter Lorre lurking in the corner. He offered his hand. "Although I am involved in antiquities. You may call me a dealer in trifles."

"No names?" A tingle came through my palm. He was a practioner, though not a strong one. That and his formal use of White Council terminology meant he wasn't a straight. "Are there any men in grey cloaks who might want to have a chat?"

"I am careful never to become an object of attention of the Wardens." He smiled genially, which had me shake out my shield bracelet out of sight beneath the desk. "As to names, well, you may call me 'Mr. Greene'. It is what is on my documents of the moment. I do understand my resemblance to a certain popular figure."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Greene?" I asked. "Before we start, you should know--if you haven't checked me out already--that my main client is the Chicago Police Department. And the rumours on the street about Marcone and me are just that. No offense."

"None taken." His English was perfect, though there was a hint of an Eastern European accent in
there. "I assure you that the task I wish to hire you for is legal under the laws of Chicago and...other communities. I am willing to pay a five-day minimum of your standard rates to act as a courier for an offer to certain parties."

"Who is the party of the second part?" I asked. "I might approach Summer, but Winter's right out. I'm not exactly grata with any of the Vampire Courts, what with the war on. If it's the Council, you definitely have the wrong man."

"You seem eager to talk yourself out of a job," Sidney said. "My impression was that you were in need of funds."

"My first name is Harry, not 'Patsy'."

Sidney placed a business card with an address I knew by reputation on the desk.

They were definitely parties that I'd rather stuff rabid wolverines down my pants than cross.

"Would this do to assuage your fears?" Sidney took a roll out of his briefcase. It was a very impressive roll of high-denomination bills. "You may reveal a physical description of myself to the parties I wish to contact. My reputation is sufficient enough that they will recognize it. I will also type up my correspondence before you while you watch."

"I'll seal the letter into the envelope myself." I rifled through the bankroll, holding a bill up to the light as if I knew how to detect counterfeits.

"Of course." Sidney smiled. "Do give my regards to Mr. Etri."
Chapter 23

Never, ever cross a svartalf.

You wouldn't think a bunch of short grey midgets would have the muscle to stand as their own independent nation among the fae. But even the Norse gods didn't dare fight them over the hot rocks Loki pawned off on them. Freya had to pay them off to recover her jewels the same as anyone else who wants something from them. It wasn't a kiss for each svartalf, either. That's the Disney version. The legends surrounding them talk of them bench-pressing the anvils in their forges; they're reputed to have forgotten more of the Art--especially earth magic--than most Senior Council members have learned in centuries of experience. Combined with being the finest crafts-things on earth and the Nevernver means they can make any weapon they need. They also have a long list of customers who owe them favours. Violating their touchy sense of honour is dangerous, and cheating them is a recipe for slow and agonizing suicide.

They worried me less than my client. Svartalves don't go in for the mind-games of the fae. You hold up your end of the bargain, they hold up theirs. I wasn't so sure about Sidney. It would take at least three days to set up a meeting. Svartalves are notoriously secretive, operating through mortal representatives. Even a wizard of the White Council can't call up the leader of the Chicago guildhouse for a quick chat. So I was taking the opportunity to check up on Mr. Greene. I wasn't using Karrin. Actually drawing the attention of the cops to Sidney wouldn't be appreciated. I definitely wasn't checking with the Wardens. But there were other avenues.

Bock Ordered Books is Chicago's oldest occult bookshop. It's in that neighborhood just south of the University of Chicago that's the frontier between academia and the gang-ridden neighborhoods of the South Side. It used to be much worse before the Alphas hatted-up to drive out the worst of the mundane and supernatural predators. In the relative safety of daylight, I could walk the block from my car to Bock's without looking like I was going to rip someone's face off. I sensed detected the subtle wards the owner had laid around to discourage anyone from causing trouble. Nothing compared to my own wards, but they showed a firm grasp of basic magical theory.

Artemis Bock looked up from an auto magazine when the chimes over the door rang. Big and broad-shouldered, the layer of fat from comfortable living didn't hide the body of a man who might have been a bruiser in the past. The scars and knots on his hands didn't come from a lifetime of only wrangling books. Bock knew every inch of Chicago and the mortal supernatural community. He had contacts with dozens of specialized dealers all over the United States. Maybe even the world, for all I knew. He nodded once before signaling to a young man with a strong resemblance. Son, probably helping out at the shop between classes. Bock snagged a key from a hook behind him.

Bock Ordered Books occupies an old speakeasy that was fronted by a family grocery stores. The main section has shelves with everything from crystal balls to aromatic oils. A row of bookshelves along the back walls contain the best selection of occult literature in Chicago. Most of it is slanted towards Wicca, though there are sections for Hindu and even Norse mysticism. Not my style, personally. I don't need any faith aside from that in my own power to work the Art. A door paneled in the same wood as the rest of the wall leads to where you could once get a nip of bathtub gin in the old days. Now it contains an office and boxes and shelves full of his inventory. Along one wall runs the cage: a section behind iron bars where he keeps rare books and the real books on magic that are for those in the know.
"My contact in Georgia fedexed in what you wanted." Bock rummaged through a pile of packages before handing one to me.

"You're a lifesaver, Bock." I forked over a portion of Sidney's retainer. Bock's merchandise doesn't come cheap. "Did you find out anything about the guy?"

"He's been known on the scene for ten years," Bock said. "The people I've spoke to says he likes playing the mystery man. No-one's ever heard of him being under suspicion in Europe or the US. Things a little shadier about what he does in South America or Africa."


"This won't bite me, will it?" Bock asked. "I run a clean shop. I've got a family to support. I don't want trouble from this Greene, the cops, or the Wardens."

"He's a pro. He'll understand me checking him out." I peered through the bars of the cage at a familiar book. "Hey, Bock, mind putting that on layaway for a friend of mine?"

"Apprentice?"

"A former straight who's become interested in serious magic," I said. "A young woman might come around asking about magic. Strawberry blonde, very retro. I'd appreciate it if you taught her the ropes."

"Usually you'd be the one who would step in." Bock grinned. "Especially if it's a woman."

"Damsels are my kryptonite," I admitted. "It's politics. Her parents aren't very understanding about the magic. I can't take her on as a student. She has the yen for it, though. So I want to make sure she has someone to explain the basics."

"Be my pleasure, Dresden," Bock said. "Keep your money. I have a spare copy coming in a couple of days. I'll reserve it for her for a month."

"You're a prince, Bock."

I settled to study the psychic combat focus. It was a crystal, clear as spring water, set on a brass base inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphs. I had seen something like it at the White Council meeting last summer. Psychomancy is so feared by the White Council that only the most basic defenses are taught. Anything more risks violating the Third and Fourth Laws. It was just permissible to spar mentally to test a student's weaknesses. The problem with trying that is I wasn't sure connecting to Agatha beyond the odd dream-connection we'd been having would be healthy for me. It takes one hell of a strong mind to bounce a sleep spell right back at its caster. The focus I'd had Bock order was a toy that used holomancy to simulate neuromancy defense drills. Nothing you couldn't do with simple, legal mental contact. What it would do is put a buffer between Agatha's Sparky brain and mine. I fooled around with the thing until I could summon up a few crude images floating in the air. Holomancy is one of those delicate areas of magic I suck at. I had a feeling Agatha would be able to summon up the full IMAX experience plugged into it.

It had been Ebenezar McCoy who had taught me those defenses. It had been one of the few lessons I had ever gotten from him. DuMorne had never given me any such lessons. It had taken all my control not to lash out with fire and wind that first time. I had concentrated on the memories of his soulgaze with me: the great tree rising high, wood hard as iron, solid and immovable with the
branches granting shelter to all beneath them. I glanced back through the bars at the copy of *Elemental Magic*, written by my teacher. It's the book most wizards hand to their apprentices these days. It treats magic as the raising and manipulation of forces without the sophisticated philosophy found in other works. The only philosophy found in its pages are the same I learned through him by example. A practitioner is responsible for everything his magic does. Power must be wielded with care. Magic is derived from the distillation of life itself. To profane it is to profane yourself.

I couldn't think of a better man's words to learn from.

The atmosphere around me changed from scruffy inner city neighborhood to oasis of academe the moment I stepped on campus. That happens a lot in Chicago. One street will be upper crust, while the other a few blocks over is hell on earth. CPD and the university cops ensure that the students paying the tuition they'll be in hock for decades won't be bothered by the local riff-raff. The supernatural side of things is handled by the small but learned occult community of the university. All around me students were wandering around the campus, enjoying the last few days of sun before the chill of late fall set in. My duster and staff didn't earn me more than a couple of odd looks. U of C isn't the hotbed of eccentricity that Berkely is. This is the school whose sarcastic motto is "Where Fun Comes To Die". But it takes more to than a coat out of *El Dorado* to weird out students these days.

When you think "chapel", a soaring Gothic Revival monument isn't the first image that comes to mind. Rockefeller Chapel was as grandiose as the man who'd sponsored its construction. It soars a couple of hundred feet high just north of the Midway Plaisance. I paused to admire the sculptures on the outside: a mix of the religious and academic. Inside is a space that wouldn't have disgraced a cathedral. The tiled ceiling arched high above me. The pastel stained glass windows let in light that glowed off the intricately-carved woodwork of the balcony. There wasn't the deep sense of faith that I felt whenever I visited Saint Mary of the Angels. Father Forthill's church is a fortress. There was a quieter sense of grace here. It was the accumulation of hundred of services and convocations and concerts that had taken place here.

A scale of notes broke the silence. The Skinner organ of Rockefeller Chapel is not a subtle instrument. It's big, loud, and proud. Agatha must be warming up for her practise. I spotted her at the console. She was intent on a musical score, pantomining a musical passage above the keys. I let her be. The chapel was deserted except for us and a man who was hanging around in a corner. He was a short, scrawny guy in a Victorian suit complete with golden watch chain draped over his stomach. I wasn't sure the bunny slippers went with it, though. His black hair added at least an inch to his actual height. It stood up as if he had caught the mother of all lightning bolts. I noticed one fist was clenched tight around something. He huffed into a bag in short, nervous wheezes.

"You okay?" I asked.

"About to make an idiot of myself," he gasped out. Bright, intelligent eyes flicked up and down. "You're Harry Dresden. I saw you on Fowler's show."

"Waldo Butters, right?" I asked.

"Am I wearing my name tag?" He looked down. He stared at his slippers. "Oh, crap."

"Your fingers look like a musician's, or a surgeon's," I said. "You're also hyperventilating into a police evidence bag. Murphy and Agatha mentioned you worked at the morgue."

"Ah-ah, not morgue. We're a forensic institute, according to the esteemed Brioche," Waldo said.
"Engagement ring?" I nodded at his fist. "I've been there."

"Claddagh rings. I stole it from Buffy," Waldo replied. A quick glance at Agatha brought on another round of panicked breathing. "What the hell am I doing? I've known her since she was fourteen. This is so Nabokovian it isn't funny."

"Agatha never said anything about romance when she talked about you," I said.

"Oh, I am flying deep in the friendzone, Goose." Waldo ran shaking fingers through his electrified 'do. "We've gone to conventions. Won a couple of Octoberfest polka competitions. Last year we visited the Mutter Museum in Philly. Seriously awesome, you should see the Soap Lady."

"I'll put that on my next tourist itinerary."

"I always told myself that she was like a niece or something." Waldo sagged, "Who am I kidding? I'm a thirtysomething Jewish nebbish who's waiting for his lederhosen at the dry cleaners. She hasn't seen me. I can escape with the last shreds of my dignity."

Waldo turned to rabbit out of the chapel.

Dammit.

"Hey, Waldo." I grabbed his shoulder. "Some free advice? Fear's only an emotion. It doesn't have to make you weak."

"Then I'm the strongest man in Chicago," Waldo said.

"Fear can drive a mother to die for her kid," I continued. "Fear can inspire an artist to make something for the ages. Fear's a temporary thing. Now regret? That sticks around."

"You write fortune cookies?" Waldo asked. "Do you have another koan?"

"The gun is good. The penis is evil."

Waldo blinked.

"See, now you're thinking of Sean Connery in a wedding dress." I grinned. "Where's you fear now?"

"Sinking under a tide of existential nausea." Waldo flashed a smile. "Yowza. That worked."

"What's the game plan, Maverick?" I asked. "Going down on one knee?"

"Singing the Song of Songs," Waldo said, "in the original Klingon."

"If she doesn't take you, I will." I brushed imaginary lint off his shoulders. "Don't worry about the slippers. Making an idiot of yourself before the female of the species is our biological imperative as men."

"Okay. Here goes." Waldo flashed a Vulcan salute. "Stay on target, Waldo..."
I watched him walk with trembling knees to the console.

I didn't let myself feel the pain.
"It seems to be a day for men to be giving me rings," Agatha said faintly.

"What?" Waldo asked, down on one knee. "Is there another guy?"

"No! Yes? The waveform hasn't collapsed yet." Agatha stared at the pair of rings in the palm of her hand. "I had no idea you had such feelings for me."

"I come back from the conference, and first thing I find out when I call is you were hospitalized," Waldo said. "I nearly lost you without ever telling you how I've come to feel about you this past year."

"I don't know how to answer you," Agatha said.

"Got it. 'You'll always be my friend'." Waldo smiled. "I was expecting that."

"You don't understand." Strange harmonics reverberated through her words. "There are all these feelings I've never been able to experience. Passions that rush through me like primal forces. I am not broken. A brilliant man thinks me worthy of his love."

Agatha whipped around to face the organ console.

Strapped to her back was a small pack, out which emerged eight robotic arms.

"That's new," Waldo said.

"Neurally-controlled clank musical assistant. Made it this morning." Agatha posed dramatically with hands poised to crash down on the manuals. "Now I MUST PLAY!"

++++

Evenings on the farm, Ebenezar would listen to a wind-up victorla as he read by the fire. His small collection of phonographs slanted towards the big orchestral works of the classical canon. It was the music of his youth. I'm more of a Johnny Cash and Offspring guy if you held my feet to the fire about what music I like. But I never turn down the chance to listen to a classical concert. I do a hell of a lot less damage at one if my magic acts up; lots of times I've shorted out club sound systems during the opening act. There's nothing like listening to Beethoven on a warm summer evening in the park. I've even cadged tickets to the Symphony Center to hear Chicago's finest.

Compared to Agatha, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was a guy playing a kazoo in the bathroom.

I couldn't stand to be inside the chapel. The first eruption of Handel's Messiah out of the organ's mighty pipes had ripped open my third eye. The memory would never fade. From Agatha's fingertips came a storm of musical notes and harmonies was sung by a brazen choir of angels. The latent faith within the walls of the church had blazed into heavenly glory. The very structure had become infused with Agatha's will and faith and what I could only call "sparkfire". Being near her must have tuned my Sight to her spark. I could see it now: blue-white light was woven through the organ. Hell's bells, she must have tweaked it somehow.
The Midway Plaisance was filled with a crowd drawn by the power within the music. Front and center was Waldo Butters. He looked like a man who had hoped to sit in a Ferrari and make engine noises. Instead, he had been sent down to the lot with keys that turned out to be for the Millennium Falcon. Hundreds spread out across the grass: students, gang bangers, cops, everyday citizens. A black man with a fringe of silvery hair, the name tag on his custodial uniform reading JAKE, knelt in an attitude of devout prayer. He wasn't the only one. Half the throng was weeping in ecstasy. The other half was dancing as if Heaven itself had decided it was time for a rave. In the distance I could see news trucks from all the major outlets pulling up.

Then Agatha reached the Hallelujah Chorus. The afterburners kicked in I staggered as a wave of faith exploded from every soul in the crowd. Shadowy figures appeared amid the crowd. Wings spread wide. What she was playing had same resemblance to Handel's original score as the Space Shuttle to a Piper Cub. Improvisational runs drawn from jazz contrasted perfectly with the canon oratio to make something new. Something amazing. It took every mote of my psychic defenses to stay standing. Tears dripped down my face as the memories came. My first time with Elaine, the rush of that first burst of magic at the long jump, triumphs big and small. A choir formed within the crowd burst into glorious song. The music responded to their contribution. Lifted it up. Offered it up to the half-seen angels in the sky, who sang back with heavenly perfection.

"Do you think this is a 'yes'?' Waldo Butters screamed in my ear.

"What this is, is chaos!" I screamed back. "When is she going to run stop?"

"When she gets to the end of the piece," Waldo shrieked. "She either gadgeteers or plays music to release tension."

"With that robot on her back, she can do both!" I groaned. "We have to get her out of here before the crowd mobs her. That could get ugly!"

"We need one hell of a distraction from that!"

"Maybe I can burn down a building or something."

"WHAT?"

"Nevermind!" I plunged my hand into a duster pocket. "I have a better idea! When I slap you on the back, run in there and drag her out of the side exit! Make like one of the crowd if anyone spots you!"

"I don't know, Agatha really hates it when someone interrupts her playing--"

"Just do it or they'll be all over her like pixies on a pizza!"

We shoved through the crowd until we found an open space facing the east door of Rockefeller Chapel. Out of another duster pocket came a length of coaxial cable. I screwed together the connectors to make an unbroken loop circuit. It settled into a rough circle big enough to encompass me and Butters if we huddled up. Ignoring Waldo's quizzical look, I empowered the magic circle with an effort of will. The copper inside the wire created a far better barrier that one drawn from salt or sand. The swirling currents of faith and magic within the crowd were shut out by the invisible barrier.
I rebuilt the tower wall in my mind stone by stone within me to drive away the siren harmonics from the organ. I had two spells to cast quick succession for this to work. I didn't even know if the first one would work. The last sleep spell I had tried on Agatha had bounced back on me. Trying it on a Spark deep in creative madness might be like attempting to disperse a hurricane with a leaf blower. I would have to risk casting it near the end of the piece. The second? I grasped the holomancy focus. Lucky I had this, since illusions was not my specialty.

Were those helicopters? Those were news helicopters heading in.

"Dormius, Agatha Heterodyne Carpenter, dormius!"

I raised the crystal high.

"Lumen, camerus, factum!"

I slapped Waldo on the back, driving him out of the circle and releasing the magical energies within.

There are two ways of creating illusions. One is to project them into someone's mind, which results in a visit from the Wardens after you become Cackles Von Mindbender. The other is to bend light itself into a construct. Either way, you have to create the image in your mind in every exact and trivial detail to invest it with your belief in its existence. What should have appeared in the sky above the Rockefeller Chapel was a golden glow with a hazy suggestion of a bearded face within it. Then the faith of the crowd swept through me. The devotion of hundreds of people primed to receive a religious visitation invested my half-assed Almighty Father impression into Cinerama. All was silent save for the discordant crash of the organ as Agatha fell asleep. Every eye stared at the landscape of blue sky and golden clouds. A majestic face stared benevolently down at them. It had Eb's beard, Michael's features, my father's eyes. A hand that could have shaped continents raised in a benevolent salute. In a voice that was both Charleton Heston and Alec Guiness, words that should have been carved from stone a thousand feet high rolled out from the heavens.

"BE EXCELLENT TO ONE ANOTHER! AND PARTY ON!"

Hey, words of wisdom are words of wisdom.
Chapter 25

The situation was officially out of control.

In fact, the situation had jumped over the guardrails. It was now riding naked except for assless chaps on a rocket-propelled Harley across the Grand Canyon. I had underestimated how many people there had been in the crowd. There hadn't been hundreds. There had been thousands. Thousands more on campus had fallen under the influence of Agatha's performance. Thousands more in Hyde Park and Woodlawn had sensed the outpouring of faith from her audience. At which point my brilliant plan to distract everyone had ignited the gathering faith of all those souls.

Chicago is a tough town. It's always been a bare-knuckle place. But it isn't without heart. The best in Chicago came out that October day. It was like a cross between the visitations at Lourdes, Woodstock, and the parade scene in Ferris Bueller. The crowds had swept us along like currents in Lake Michigan. We had passed choirs singing hymns, Jews dancing the hora, Muslims praying to Mecca, pagan drum circles dancing in the name of the Goddess. Countless faiths worshipped among the greater mass heartily obeying the command to party on. I'd aimed us towards the south in hopes we could make it to the Blue Beetle or Billy's place. No go. Woodlawn was now one big block party.

Two tourists who usually would have been eaten alive by the gangbangers in this part of town giggled when I intoned the wedding rites of the Reformed Temple of Jedi. The groom cradled his bride as guys in gang-colours saluted them with plastic glasses of jug wine. Ballet dancers from the U of C boogied down with breakdancers to a sound system wired into a nearby lamp-post. Fireworks exploded in the air as a colander-wearing devotees of Pastafarianism streaked past waving sparklers. With a word of power, I added my own pyrotechnic display to the mix. Eat that, Gandalf!

Agatha rocked out in the center of the street to a chanting crowd as PolkaMaid. Strapped to her back was a small hardshell backpack that supported eight robotic arms. Whatever power source inside the pack glowed blue and smelled faintly of ozone. Somehow she had collected a tuba, a drum, a clarinet, and an accordion from enthusiastic contributors. Her clank transformed her into an oompahing one girl-genius band. My sleep spell hadn't put her down. Instead, she was blissed out in a dreamy state that must have been the Spark equivalent of chugging down a bottle of cough syrup. Her atonal humming could be heard over the music blasting from her instruments.

Suit torn, Waldo Butters stared at her with awe.

"She's a Spark," Waldo said, over and over. "They're real."

"Figured that out too?" I asked, ambling over.

"'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth,'" Waldo quoted. "I figured it out a year after I met her. Never really believed it until now, though."

"So you're down with alternate realities," I said.

"Easier to believe than monsters running around hidden on Earth," Waldo said. "And I put the existence of non-human creatures in my autopsy report about the Velvet Room fire. Nearly got
myself committed and fired over that one."

"You should have learned from Murph's example," I said. "The powers that be like all the dirt swept under the rug."

"I had the lecture from Brioche, thanks." Waldo ran his fingers through his spiky hair. "Only reason I was let off is that the stock picks I shared with the others at work. We all made out like bandits."

"Agatha said she was lucky once or twice," I said.

"Lucky? Think perceptive," Waldo snorted. "I was her front man for the market because she was underage. Most of it went to her family. But I know she personally cleared at least a million and a half after commissions."

"Marrying her for her money," I said, swallowing heavily. That much cash can buy a lot of instant ramen. "I respect that."

"I am so out of my league." Waldo hung his head.

"She didn't say no yet," I said. "Hey, Butters, could you professor to my Gilliigan? Tell me how you think the Spark works."

"Oh, that's a tough one." Waldo grinned. "Can you imagine the possibilities of brain scanning an actual Spark's brain? I want to rush her over to the nearest MRI and strap her in."

"I should remind you of her dad. Big man, access to power tools and foundations to hide bodies," I said. "Anyway, you wild man you, invasive medical probing is at least sixth date territory."

"Agatha does rub off on you after a while." Waldo massaged a temple. "Ballpark, considering what they can do with a Victorian tech base, we're talking intellectual leaps three or four magnitudes greater than baseline humans. She probably has insane dendritic branching and intense neural networking."

"What would that do to her mind?"

"Based on the stories she told about Sparks, they probably enter a fugue state," Waldo continued. "They become obsessively focused on their goal. It probably includes an evolutionary adaptation of the flight or fight response along with an endorphin cascade to reward problem-solving."

"I am well versed in the ways of adrenaline," I said. "Would some call them mad?"

"Sparks sound aggressive, based on the history of the Long War," Waldo mused. "Obsession and a drive to constantly solve problems would lead to fight overr flight. We're definitely talking chimps rather than bonobos. There's likely a learned dehumanization response and other disorders--"

Agatha played on, her face set in a crazed grin.

"We have to get her off the street right now, don't we?"

"Tick-toc," I replied. "She's having fun, but I don't think you want to see her when she's angry.".
I hefted my staff like a majorette’s baton. I goose-stepped in front of Agatha hoping she would take
the hint. With a gleeful cry, Agatha fell in behind me to become our own private parade. Her
humming increased as we filtered through the crowds. I suddenly realized what she was doing. Her
humming was similar to some cone of silence spells wizards create to muffle noise when doing
rituals. It isn’t an easy spell. You have to constantly react to incoming noise and generate out-of-
phase sound. Most wizards can muffle persistent background noise. Agatha’s mind was reacting
instantly to all sounds and cancelling them out on the fly. That was an impressive mental act. It
was also creepy as hell when you thought about it.

The uneasy expression on Waldo’s features told me he was thinking about the implications as well.

It took an hour to cross the three blocks to Bock Ordered Books. I didn’t even try for the street
entrance. In chaos like this, Bock would have run down the shutters to protect himself from any
mob violence. Even a cheerful crowd can turn nasty in a second. That goes double for a target like
an occult bookstore. I lead us into an alley behind the building. The noise of the crowd grew
distant as we went in deeper. I shook out my shield bracelet as we passed a Dumpster. The sheer
amount of faith pumping through the area should have driven off any supernatural nasties. But
even with the Alpha’s reputation, there was a chance some of the wildlife from the Nevernever or
Undertown had risked the chance to snatch food from the herd of prey milling around.

The back door of Bock’s place was a heavy steel door that would have resisted any forzare I could
summon. At least, from this side of the door. I brought up memories of times I had been in the back
checking out his restricted stock. I focused on the door leading to the alley. I readied my will to
push on the image of the opening bar of the fire door. A sudden hiss of melting steel disrupted my
concentration. Shielding my face, I saw a ruby line of light cut a circle around the lock-plate. It
came from the end of one robotic arm. A steel claw ripped the entire chunk of door free before
reaching in to release the bolt.

"I’m helping!"

"Agatha, why did you include a laser cutter in your organ-playing clank?" I asked, heart-pounding.

"I don’t understand." Agatha frowned. "Waldo, why is he asking such a silly question?"

"She thinks everything is better with death rays," Waldo explained.

"Yes they are!"

"Does your clank have any other, uh, functions?"

Several sharp surgical instruments ranging from a scalpel to a freaking cranial drill popped out of
the arms.

"Now that you mention it, I also included a basic medical suite that doubles for purposes of self-
defence. Is it not elegant?"

Which was when Artermis Bock ripped open the door with a sawn-off double-barrelled shotgun
with mule’s ears hammers pointed right at my face.

"Bock! NO! Agatha, he’s a friendly!" I jumped between him and Agatha’s collection of sharp doom.
I really, really have to train myself out of that.
"You must be the proprietor of this establishment," Agatha said, beaming. "I assure you, I can repair your door without any trouble. Would you like any death-traps added? Free of charge!"

Bock's eyes widened. The shotgun fell to the pavement.

He went to his knees, staring at the trilobite brooch at her throat.

"Mistress!"
The evidence that other realities existed was a snowglobe.

Bock brought it out of a fireproof safe hidden in the floor beneath the cage shelves. The case it was in had the heft of the containers used to transport mildly radioactive materials. Don't ask me how I know that. He set it reverently on his office desk. The Bock I knew wasn't a man of faith. He had principles, sure. He dealt fairly with his clients, kept confidence in his dealings, and helped out where he could in the occult community. But he never stuck his neck out. That was fine. Most sane wizards did the same. Not me, which tells you all you need to know. The second he had seen her locket, Artemis Bock had become a believer. He stared at her a mixture and awe and love that had me thinking I'd stumbled into Eddie Murphy's least regarded movie. Or else I'd forgotten to bring the myrrh and frankinsence on my last grocery run. Faith glowed off the Heterodyne pin fastened to his checkered flannel shirt.

The snowglobe appeared to be your usual ticky-tacky tourist junk you pick up at any souvenir store. Although the workmanship was more solid than the normal run of kitsch: a solid brass base supporting a globe of thick glass. The flakes swirling inside fell upon a medieval town with winding streets surrounding a castle high on its hill. It was when you looked at it more than a few seconds that it did its trick. All of a sudden the model inside the globe expanded to fill your entire vision as if it were a helicopter shot of Chicago in a movie. My newly-attuned senses detected a hint of sparkfire in the snowglobe. Nothing as distinctive or powerful as Agatha's energy. But it was there: will forged into a solid form that no magic could match. The detail was amazing. You could see everything: the half-timbered buildings, the majesty of the castle with its eccentric mix of domes and Gothic architecture, the red church to one side. I tracked along the walls running around the entire town.

There were a lot of gun emplacements.

Stooping, I examined the front gates. The welcome mat for her ancestral home was, uh, cheery. The skeleton-and-scythe cradling a trilobite upon what I really hoped were carvings of human skulls. The gargoyles flanking the entrance had more than a passing resemblance to Chauncy's cousins. Whichever architect had designed the town church had dipped into Lovecraft's weirder tales before dropping six tabs of acid. More details from around town--including the gun emplacements--had more of an Addams Family vibe than the home of Europa's shiniest heroes. The word town didn't come to mind. What was the term I was looking for? Oh, yeah. "Lair". Don't get me wrong, I'd seen pictures from Eastern Europe that had the same imagery. There's an entire chapel decorated with human bones somewhere in Czechlosvakia. But the grotesquerie was everywhere in the tiny model of the town. And it was in a souvenir meant to be sold to tourists to remind them of their stay. The memories I've had of places like this are the sort I try to bury deep under the sub-basement with boulders piled over the grave.

Eyes watering, I broke free of the Sparky glass' effect to see Agatha's reaction. Her hands curled protectively around it as if it were her child. Atonal humming whispered out of her lips. Maybe the Weird Tales urban planning was normal for Europa. Or maybe she had seen her home for the first time. Like me, Agatha had spent much of her only life as a wanderer. Unlike her, I didn't have a home town I could point at as a birthplace. Chicago might have become my city, but it one I had adopted rather than grown up in. I didn't have the bone-deep connection a native like Bock had. This was Agatha's real home. Stars and stones, it was her ancestral family seat. I'd forgotten that she was nobility where she came from. It was also physical proof Europa existed. To hold in your
Hands confirmation that your memories of another world were true must be incredibly satisfying. Even if the proof was Victorian Latveria.

"De heterodynink," Bock whispered, his all-American English slipping into a thick accent that was a cross between German and Balkan. "Ho yez, Pappa Bock said a Heterodyne would come. 'Hyu must heff faith, leetle Artemis. De Heterodynes neffer abandon their own.'"

"How did your father come here?" Agatha asked. "I think that Uncle Barry used a device to open a passage somehow, but I was too scared to see how he did it."

"It was after the attack on Der Kestle," Bock explained. His accent thinned back to nothing. "All the Bocks of Mechanicsburg save Pappa Hieronymus were killed in the blasts that crippled the castle. He went on a serious enough bender that he was swept up in the Wild Hunt. He ended up stranded here, with nothing except this snowglobe, on Mom's doorstep in Cicero after the Hunt rode through."

"Your dad was badass enough to escape the Wild Hunt drunk?" I said. "I don't think there have been five or six in the history of our world who did it sober."

"I remember legends of the Hunt and the Erlking," Agatha mused. "It was said a Heterodyne challenged the Master of the Hunt when it dared to trespass on his lands."

"You're thinking of Ht'rok-din, the First Heterodyne," Bock said. "Pappa told me that story. The Erlking invaded the lands of the tribe who had sworn fealty to him. Ht'rok-din stood in the tribe's place as the quarry of night."

"That takes stones to sacrifice yourself like that," I said.

"Heh, A Heterodyne's no-one's prey." Bock's toothy grin reminded me that he hadn't always been a mild-mannered bookseller. Those scars on his knuckles didn't come from pinochle. "The Heterodyne lured the wild hunt into a trap created by his SCIENCE! That Halloween, the Erlking surrendered to Ht'rok-din's service until the next Samhain if he didn't want his own hunting spear shoved up his ass."

"It's like Jacob wrestling the angel," Agatha said.

"Stars and stones, he must had rules lawyered one hell of an oath to duck retribution," I said. "The Erlking's said to be a peer of the Faerie Queens. An insult like that earns you the sort of revenge that become legends so nobody ever tries it again."

"Oh, no. Pappa said that the Erlking considered it the best vacation ever," Bock replied. "The Old Masters used to organize Halloween raids as an excuse to invite the Erlking along, for old time's sake. Pappa said his great-great-great-grandfather who became a Jaeger told him that the Old Masters were feasted in the Erlking's hall many times."

"What?" Agatha's voice was very small. "But my father and uncle were heroes!"

"You never heard the tales of the Old Masters?" Bock groaned. "Of course, Master Barry would never tell you those stories. Pappa said the Heterodyne Boys did their best to disown the legacy of their ancestors."

"What is the legacy of the Heterodynes?" I held up the snowglobe. "Because this says evil overlord
"Mistress, forgiff me," Bock said, paling. "Hyu must understand, hyu grandmamma Saint Teodora changed everythink ven she raised Masters William undt Barry. De sacrifice she made killink Saturnus, de last ov de Old Heterodynes, ended dose times."

"Bludtharst Heterodyne had to be stopped by the righteous crusade of the Storm King," Agatha whispered.

"The Heterodyne Boys were the family's bad apples, weren't they?" I said, gazing down at the tiny town with its eccentric taste in decoration.

"Fifty generations of Europa's most vicious, depraved lunatics." Bock went to the safe, returning with a thick book. "Pappa wrote this so the family would know its heritage."

"This must make great bedtime stories," I said.

"It's hard to explain," Bock admitted. "Pappa said it was in the blood, the respect for the Masters. They might have been depraved lunatics who walked the earth like demons. But, you know, they were our depraved lunatics. There was a lot of pride. A lot of fear, but also a lot of pride."

"This is bound in human skin," Agatha said flatly. "I can tell. The grain in the leather is distinctive."

"Don't worry, it's Pappa's. He was a sentimentalist." Bock handed her a pair of cotton gloves. "Here. You might need these."

Agatha opened the cover with all the enthusiasm of a coroner braving himself to flip over a maggot-ridden corpse. Her shoulders sagged as she skimmed the pages. Hell's bells. I don't have any illusions about the depths humanity can sink to. I've read books on the Holocaust and Pol Pot. I've seen the handiwork of warlocks like Victor Sells. Murphy's told me about a few of her nastier cases before she was assigned to SI. I've seen my share of inhuman cruelty too. But even my faerie godmother would have thought the Heterodynes were over the top if half of what Bock's dad had written were true. The Heterodynes sacked cities like Paris Hilton shopped on Rodeo Drive. One Heterodyne built the town cathedral on a bet, and then had the bishop assigned to it sacrificed on the altar. The nations of Europa sent tribute to Mechanicsburg in hopes the nutbars-in-residence would attack someone else.

Pappa Bock had been a fan of the town's defenses. It showed in the chapter "Hilarious Sieges". My mouth went dry when he listed the many items of misery and woe that awaited anyone who tried to attack Mechanicsburg. His drawings of what the lava cannons did to enemies was an excellent diet aid. They had freaking lamp-post golems as air defenses. Several Heterodynes allowed enemies inside to study attackers whose designs they found interesting enough to warrant close-up study. No wonder the Heterodynes got away with it for so long. Between the geography around the town and what the Old Masters came up with, I would have rather joined up for a frontal assault on Arctis Tor while screaming Mab wore army boots than attack Mechanicsburg. The First Heterodyne had defeated the Elking, the primal spirit of the hunt, while being the quarry of the Wild Hunt. I'd bet my last rent payment that Mechanicsburg's defences on the supernatural side could tank an attack from the Faerie Courts.

Agatha thrust the book away from her. Silently, she went to Waldo Butters. He had passed out on a couch near the bookshelves. The day's stress had finally caught up with him. Two rings glittered in
her palm. She kissed them, then placed them into Waldo's hand. Closing his fingers around them,
she ran towards the back door as if the Erlking's hounds were at her heels. Dammit, no! Not after
I'd spent so much time convincing her that she wasn't some kind of monster. I caught her as she
hipchecked the door open. It turns out that having an ancestor who can make the Master of the
Wild Hunt his bitch lends a little power. Agatha's fist rang my bells when she wildly swung at me.
I staggered, holding on.

Our eyes met.

An eternity later, I was on my back in the alley as I heard Agatha's footsteps running away.
Chapter 27

Eyes are the windows of the soul. It isn't a metaphor. Meet a stranger's gaze sometime. There is an almost painful moment of intimacy. With wizards, the effect is much more profound. I don't get a sneak peak through the blinds when I look into another's eyes. I see deep into the very recesses of their soul with the clarity of the Sight. What I see will never fade or soften with time. The soulgaze is a two-way deal as well. The person on the receiving end sees as deeply into me.

I didn't blame Agatha for running after experiencing that.

It was suppertime at the Carpenter home on a warm summer night. Soft, welcoming light glowed through the windows. Stray bits of conversation could be heard like a radio softly playing in the distance. Michael and Charity said grace before a meal. Molly laughed over the clink of cutlery. The little ones babbled as little kids do. At the front gate, Agatha stood guard against the darkness in green and gold armor. In her left hand she bore a kite shield emblazoned with the trilobite sigil. In her right was a sword of fire and lightning. Upon her brow was a crown of interwoven strands of iron and gold and silver. Equations were etched into the strands. Strange energies played around the braided crown. She gazed up into the night sky.

Last summer, I had opened my Sight in the presence of two Queens of Faerie in an act of primordial creation. The vision had stunned me with its majesty and terrible beatauty. That memory paled into insignificance to the heavens as Agatha saw them. The crowds celebrating in the streets might have said they saw the face of God. In Agatha's soul, I saw the beating heart of the Almighty expressed in stars and planets and nebulae. I saw the play of quark and proton and electron within them, and the forces of the universe to which they danced. My ears Listened to a music of surf, wind, bird call and whale song, Bach and Chuck Berry. I perceived everything with pure clarity and understanding.

I screamed because it was sublime and terrible and the totality of existence was expressed with perfect coherence AND IT HURT AND BURNED AND I WAS LESS THAN A MOTE BEFORE THE ULTIMATE INFINITY OF ALL OF CREATION SO BEAUTIFUL--

"He's hurting so bad!" a young girl's voice screamed.

"Kid, don't!" an older, gruffer voice said.

I writhed as tears of blood leaked from my eyes.

Soft hands pressed to my temples.

_Hush little baby, don`t say a word_

Memories: warm arms cradling me, fabric softener smell from the blanket swaddling my vulnerable body.

_Mama`s going to buy you a mockingbird_

Safe. Mom`s arms. Milk-taste as my lips closed around a nipple.

_And if that mockingbird don`t sing, Mamma`s going to buy you a diamond ring_
My eyes drooped as Mommy rocked me in her arms.

Yes. Sleep.

--and if that horse and cart fall down, you'll still be the sweetest baby in town--

Rest.

++++

I stared up at the mobile spinning above my crib, reaching up with chubby baby hands--

I blinked my eyes.

Bed. I was on a bed. Not a crib. I was lying under the covers of a bed in a snug room. A soft light came from a night-light plugged into an outlet low on one wall. It shone on shelves full of plastic tubs full of fabric and yarn. By the sole window was a sewing machine On it was a half-finished plush toy. Through the glass I could see the night sky-- An eternity passed before I opened my eyes again. Looking outside right now was not safe. Concentrate on where I was. I was in the Carpenter home. This must be Charity's sewing room. Michael had talked about it. Must be a spare bedroom, though this was the first time I had even been in it.

I was wearing pajamas my size. They were crisp. New, right from the store package. On a table by the sewing machine were the clothes I had been wearing at Bock's. They were neatly laundered and folded. Including my boxers. That wasn't going to make talking with Charity awkward. Right from the store package. New, safe warm milk skin. Head between my knees, I breathed in and out as I centered my mind upon my name. I am Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. My mother was Margaret LeFey. My father was Malcolm Dresden. Sense impressions of a mother's arms around me became the warmth of a car seat and the drone of an engine as my father drove to another town. A part of me longed for those other memories. I couldn't afford to linger on them.

A cup and pitcher of water made of shatterproof plastic was beside my clothes. It took a few minutes for me to figure out how to pour myself a glass. The cool water stung as it went down my throat. It felt as if someone had worked on the inside with fine-grit sandpaper. I concentrated on the sensation to wash away the ghost of milk still warm from a mothers breast in my mouth. Standing up was an adventure in itself. I wobbled like a baby taking its first steps as mommy waited with open arms saying come here you can make it that's a brave girl. It didn't help that in my peripheral vision the angles in the room became Escher-like nightmares like they did when I held a spell for too long.

The magic was a faint whisper to my other senses. The child-proof latch on the door resisted my wizardly skills for a good ten minutes. I stumbled down the upstairs hallway with all the grace of a herd of stoned mimmoths. Downstairs I heard three familiar voices talking in the kitchen. The door was just the hall, the second-farthest from the master bedroom. I carefully swung it open. Inside was a girl's bedroom: band posters on the walls, clothes scattered everywhere, a bed with the covers drawn up over a hunched figure beneath them. I whipped them off. Molly Carpenter jerked guiltily. In her hands was the holomancy focus from Bock's.

Hovering over it was a tiny, perfect projection of the Enterprise from the original series.

Hell's bells.
"I can explain," Molly said.

"Stop." My voice was a dead-ringer for Mr. Toad's. "Did Bock tell you how dangerous what you did was?"

"You were screaming, Mr. Dresden." The illusion broke apart when Molly's concentration wavered. "I could hear you screaming in my mind ten blocks away."

"Again, did Bock tell you?" I asked, once more. "The Third and Fourth Laws. Say them."

"Thou shalt not invade the mind of another,'" Molly whispered. "Thou shalt not enthrall another'. Under pain of d--d-- I swear I didn't mean to hurt you, all I wanted was to stop you from screaming!"

"That's how it starts, Molly." I laid my hand on hers. Molly gasped when she sensed my aura. "What you pulled off was like disarming a nuclear weapon after watching a couple of action movies. I think you tap-danced right on the edges of the Laws without tipping over. You saved my sanity, probably my life."

"Guess Agatha's not the only one with superpowers," Molly said, with a trace of smugness.

"Try that again and I will personally beat your ass senseless," I said. I did my glare-at-the-tip-the-nose trick. "I've got a big Ozark whupping stick. And I will use it."

"Liar, you'd never hit a girl," Molly said.

"I will. Or else I'll have to explain to your dad why your head's in a black hood five feet from your body." Great job, Harry, scare the hell out of a teen girl. "Either my office when we find Agatha, or you talk with Bock. Do they know?"

"Dad thought I was only singing a lullaby when he found us." Molly paled. "Mom's going to have an aneurysm when she finds out."

"You have to tell them," I said. "So, you listened too much to Agatha's stories. Hatted up to be the hero when you thought she was in trouble."

"I ducked out of school the second I felt what happened on campus," Molly said. "Didn't help. Agatha's out there somewhere. Mr. Bock tried a tracking spell. Lieutenant Murphy has the police looking for her. Nothing."

"Agatha's not helpless," I said. She had been wearing her clankpack when she'd run, along with the mini-armory she had in her coat.

"No kidding. My sister, Victoria von Doom," Molly said. "Mr. Dresden, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What are you, a panda?" Molly burst out, furious. "Do you need human intervention to breed? Are we going to have to run a telethon for funding? I set you up perfect for Agatha, and you let Waldo Butters sneak up behind you, We can't let them breed! They'll spawn a race of four-eyed geeks that will rule us all!"
It was beneath my dignity to hit a fourteen-year old girl with a pillow.

Keep telling yourself that, Harry.

I slammed the door shut on Molly's ranting. Stars and stones, the kid was a prodigy. She had nearly pulled off a perfect veil, first time, while under stress in that closet. She had cast a spell of respite that made my version seem about as refined as anaesthetic-by-two-by-four. The talent I'd sensed when I touched her was probably sorceror potential, if not White Council. Not strong, but sophisticated. All in the body of a headstrong teenage girl whose mother thought magic was the tool of the horns-and-pitchforks crowd. Agatha's crisis with her Spark would have sent Charity's fears into overdrive.

I had screwed up so badly.

How could I face Michael and Charity after swearing on my power to teach Agatha to be safe, and now she was in the wind?

*sniff*

Um.

I breathed in deeply.

Coffee.

Really, really good coffee.

The Carpenter's kitchen was roughly the size of O'Hare. All the better to feed the bottomless appetites of a Children's Crusade of offspring. Murphy, Charity, and Michael were seated around one corner of a table that could have hosted the knights of Camelot with space left over. I held up one finger as I followed my nose. On a counter you could have landed jet fighters on was the source of the scent of java personified. A certain someone had taken a percolator, added a refinery's worth of piping to it, and grafted on what looked for all the world like an arc reactor. Reverently, I placed a mug beneath the spout. A sensor within automatically filled it to the brim.

I sipped.

*It was even better than Mac's beer.*

"Earth to Dresden." Karrin's voice returned me to Earth after I visited Paradise for a long while. "Feeling better? Because you look like hammered shit. Pardon, Mr. Carpenter."

"I love you too, Karrin." I cradled the mug of caffeinated perfection. "Not as much as this."

"Do not worship idols, Harry," Michael glanced down at his own full mug. "Although Agatha has created a strong temptation that tests even my resolve."

"Michael." I couldn't meet his eyes. We had soulgazed years ago, so no danger there. But I still couldn't.

"You did not fail my daughter." Michael's strong hand clasped my shoulder. "Your words have
sustained her through a terrible time in her life. If you doubt the sincerity of your promise, I absolve you of any guilt."

"She's alive." Charity's face was drawn from stress, but her voice didn't waver. "This was delivered by courier this morning."

"How long have I been out?" I asked.

"Two days," Karrin said. "Two days where a mad scientist is wandering around my city with a fusion reactor strapped to her back."

"High efficiency fuel cell," Charity corrected. "It's designed to run on any hydrogen-rich fuel at room temperature. Agatha talked enough about the direction of her research to guess."

"Whatever it is, her notes say it could power a city block," Karrin said. "She's armed with a laser that can slice through steel like a hot knife through butter, along with whatever it was that killed that troll. The officers on scene described hearing a bell that blew out windows in a three-block radius, along with turning the troll into chunky salsa."

"My child, smiting evil," Charity said proudly. "The city is still in awe of the miracle she conjured."

"Um, just for the record--"

"We figured that was you. God's in his heaven quoting cheap sci-fi dialogue." Karrin snorted into her cup. "The only reason I don't hate you right now is that I can write down 'act of God' in the report to the mayor."

"He works in mysterious ways," Michael said. "Harry, there was a call from Rome last morning."

"How's Il Papa doing?" I was totally going to be That Guy.

"He says he appreciates the assist." Michael was smiling beneath his beard. "However, and I quote, he wanted me to tell you that 'we will take it from here.'"

"We have looked at all the churches. The university has searched as well," Charity said. "She hasn't been seen at the Field or the planetarium."

"You're within your rights to file a missing person's report, Mrs. Carpenter," Karrin said. "But your daughter has not committed a crime. We might detain her on a psychiatric hold, based on her self-committal. I'm not sure that's a good idea given her talents."

"You won't find her by magic, either," I said. "There's at least a half-dozen ways a pro could duck a tracking spell. Agatha's whipped up a warding that does what the feng-shui at Mac's does to dissipate random magic. I don't think even I could find her if she's adapted that."

"I have been told that we already possess the tools to find her," Michael said with complete confidence.

When a Knight of the Cross says that, you bet that he's gotten it from the most trusted source possible.
Still, we already had the tools after Murph and Bock had hit dry wells?

Wait.

Of course.
Interlude: What Rough Beasts

"BAD KITTY!"

DOOOOOOOOOOM

Feline screams echoed off the basement's walls.

"IDIOTIC MONSTERS! WHY CAN'T A YOUNG WOMAN DEAL WITH HER EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS IN PEACE? FIRST IT WAS THAT IMPUDENT TROLL MAKING INDECENT ADVANCES UPON ME. THEN IT WAS WHATEVER THAT VILE THING, THE ONE WITH THE SUCKERS AND BEAK. THEN YOU HORRIBLE CAT-THINGS!"

Blue light gleamed on dark glass honed to a razor's edge.

"AT LEAST YOU RETAIN ENOUGH BODILY INTEGRITY FOR VIVISECTION. THIS OBSIDIAN SCALPEL SHOULD AVOID DAMAGING FURTHER THE ONLY SAMPLE I HAVE OF YOUR SPECIES AT THE MOMENT. BE ASSURED, YOU WILL BE MAKING A VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION TO THE FUND OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE."

Albrecht focused on the warlock's boots instead of the pain. Foolish he had been, to be tempted by the fleeting joys of pizza. The pride of malks had caught him after he had succumbed to the bait of a box of seemingly-abandoned pizza. The delivery-mortal of the delicious substance had been lying dead not far away in the alley, Sated from his corpse, the malks had taken Albrecht as a toy and after-dinner treat. Harried he had been by paw and fang and claw down to this cellar. The malks had been about to finish their game when they had happened upon the warlock. Or rather, the warlock had happened to them. Twenty the malks had been. Most had run upon hearing her terrible magics which summoned the voice of the bane. The few who had not escaped had been torn apart by her many arms tipped with blades.

After an eternity, the malk's screams finally ended with a rattling wail. The warlock's boots stomped towards him. Magnificent they were: ISO-20345 compliant, hardy leather, aluminum toecap and heel protection, in a semi-formal style which would not have disgraced their wearer at a formal function. Cared for they were, with signs of frequent repairs and constant application of oil to the leather. Ached did Albrecht's heart for his lost tools to restore the warlock's boots to their pristine state from the stains and cuts on them. Cruel the malks had been to crush his tiny yet able hands. Failed he would to the Duty. Mercy it would be for the warlock to torture him to his final death.

He cried out as the mortal's hands scooped him up. Green eyes wide with madness stared down at him like a queen of the Courts. Gently she did lay him on a clean pad of gauze taken from a pocket of her coat. One of her arms placed a magnifying glass before the shattered lens of one glass. Strange was the music she hummed as she stripped the blood-soaked clothes from his tiny form. Albrecht endured the agony of his wounds being swabbed with fire and sealed with some sticky substance. A bandage wrapped around his injured ribs. Probes of the bane shieled at the tips with rubber torn from the bottoms of gloves she wore manipulated the bones of his hands into their natural course. Albrecht shuddered as the last splint was applied.

"You poor creature," the girl-mortal said. "Such naughty kitties. We'll have you up and about in no
"Owe you my life, I do," Albrecht gasped out. "Debt I cannot pay now. Tools I have none and hands fail me."

"You are a fellow craftsman," the flame-haired warlock said. "What manner of tools do you require? I assume of bronze, since you are clearly of the Heinzelmannschen."

"Cobb I am. From oblivion I rescue footwear and leather goods." Albrecht gasped as the girl splinted his broken left arm. "Fallen are my people, for cobblers are gone and mortals discard their shoes. Cursed is Payless and their ilk!"

"You have no idea how many times I've had to replace these," the warlock said, extending a foot. "One does try to maintain, but what with one thing and another--explosions, acids, monster attacks--I go through these darned things like the space shuttle does reentry tiles. Ha! Why, I could name you Official Cobbler-Minion to the House of Heterodyne. That would solve both of our problems, wouldn't it?"

"Honored, I am. Home I have not."

"Do you swear service to me and my house?"

"Yes."

"Pinky swear?"

"Yes." Sweat beaded on Albrecht's brow. "My lady, will there be...pizza?"

"Sure, I'm told I bake a pretty good pie. It's all applied chemistry." The Lady Heterodyne smiled like Maeve at a bound mortal on her bed. "So, would you like the position?"

"Albrecht swears, thrice and it is done!"

A golden glow appeared. A trilobite badge on a thin chain coalesced about his throat.

"How curious. Now, as part of your general minionly duties, I require a recommendation for a quiet space where I can work. I need to express the vision without interruptions. Away from others who I might harm."

+++}

A hand hovered over a sphere of steel and brass.

Power gathered.

"Sit ad scientiam!"

Electricity flashed from hand to sphere on the wooden workshop table.

Blue light shone between the jigsaw metal panels. It shook. It whirlled about.

With a crack, it emerged from its egg.
Chapter 29

I peered through the bullet-proof glass of the blast shield at what had come out of the egg. The dents in the steel plate testified to how much shrapnel a struggling Spark could produce. For good measure, my shield bracelet was shook out and charged up. Look, I'd just activated a mad scientist's creation with a bolt of lightning while shouting "For Science!" in Latin. There's some precedents for what happens in the next reel. Although if I had accidentally kicked off Agatha's plot for a robot apocalypse, it was going to be a pretty tiny rampage of mechanical doom.

The whatsit on the lab table resembled an old-fashioned pocket watch with a single blue eye where the face would be. Stumpy arms and legs had folded out of the sides after it had hatched. It dinged and chimed like an R2 droid made by a Victorian clockmaker. Its single eye looked curiously at the copper wire circle I'd activated right after zapping it ALIIIIIIIIIVE! There was an intelligence in its behavior that was light-years ahead of any construct I had ever seen. Even the Council's wardhounds were poor copies of real dogs. Shrugging, it crossed over the magical barrier without any hesitation.

Huh. That meant it was mortal in some way. Only mortals had the free will to choose to ignore a magic circle. Or else it was spiritually part-cat. I extended my wizardly senses while it gathered the broken eggshell. It was definitely Agatha's work. The flare of sparkfire could be felt several feet away. The whatsit jumped down to wrangle open several tubs full of parts under the table. It dumped them on top of the egg-bits. Someone must have danced over my open grave at Graceland. My spine had a thick coating of frost when the sparkfire became a blaze. Not the inferno that Agatha had, but the whatsit wasn't just a Spark's creation.

It was a Spark.

Brass arms blurred.

*DING*

Then there were two.

"Good god," Michael said, standing beside me behind the shield. "I've seen Agatha draw those before in the corners of her notes. Molly called them 'gizmos'."

"A self-replicating quirky minion squad," I said, when the second gizmo built another with a pepper-pot case. "Sparks are complete bullshit."

"Language, Harry," Michael said absently. "Although I agree with the sentiment."

"Talked with Bock?" I asked. "So you know about her secret origin story and dark past."

"It doesn't change how I feel about Agatha," Michael replied. "If anything, Bill and Barry's defiance of her family's history is a parable that proves His grace."

"I tried reminding of her that before the soulgaze."

Michael's steel-hard grip nearly crushed my shoulder.
"Bock must have skipped that part, I continued. "I told you I screwed up bad. Whatever she saw must have sent her deep into a fugue."

"She gave as good as she got." Michael was visibly holding himself back. "Not that I would ever pry into that sort of intimate detail--"

"You raised an incredible girl," I replied. "Agatha is pure Carpenter in her soul. What she isn't is baseline human. She sees--she sees--"

"Sit down. I will take it from here," Michael stepped out from cover. "Excuse me? First, I must assure you that I am not your creator, you are not bound to serve me, and you are not obligated to kill my enemies."

*DING*

Pappa Gizmo and its children gathered around when Michael unfolded a map marked with the locations of where SI had reported Agatha's suspected monster hunting. They were dotted in and around the Loop. More properly, under it. Chicago is riddled with underground hide-holes: old buildings that sunk into the swamppy ground, tunnels like the Pedway and secret passages cut during Prohibition, and the bunkers they ran the Manhattan Project out of before it moved to Los Alamos. There's even the remains of a huge freight subway runs through most of downtown. Lots of things which don't like the light of day snuck into the abandoned parts. They added their own basement additions. Undertown is a dark, dangerous maze full of gribblies that's suicide to wander about. Unless you're a half-crazed Spark with more firepower than the 82nd Airborne. Without a tracking spell, finding her would be like looking for a needle in a pitch-black warehouse filled with rabid ferrets.

The gizmos could pull off the search. Pappa Gizmo went into overdrive after Michael explained the dangers of her situation. Nah, Pappa didn't fit. Gizmodius Prime? Maybe... Yeah. "Dingus" fit better. Dingus and the Gizmos--the hot new band playing Chi-town clubs. They raided Agatha's old lab for parts. After a half hour there were dozens of the little guys. A stream of them equipped with propellers flew out into the night. More disappeared into a tiny hatch cut into the attic wall. By dawn there would be hundreds scouting Undertown searching for their creator. Those gizmos could create more of there kind from junk they found in the tunnels. My bruised brain dragged up a phrase I'd reach about in a science magazine. "Grey goo". Maybe I had doomed the world to a miniature clank apocalypse. Although there seemed to be limits to their replication abilities. The gizmos created by Dingus had much less of a Spark in them. The third generation had a flicker. The much simpler fourth-generation were plain Spark creations.

Dingus opened a fireproof safe in the far corner of the room.

The bulging folder it dragged out was labeled "HOME SELF DEFENSE GRID".

I should probably mention this development to Michael.

Dingus looked up at me and winked.

I hauled my skinny wizardly ass downstairs to the spare bedroom. As I passed by the master bedroom, I heard Molly talking through the half-open door. I shut down my Listening hard to give her and her parents some privacy. Shutting myself in, I sat lotus-style with my long legs twisted up like the world's most unappetizing pretzel. Then I started the psychic equivalent of smacking my head into a brick wall until it felt so good when it stopped. I thought of the Queens in all their
glory. I thought of the time I had opened my Sight while stargazing at Ebenezer's farm, and what Jupiter really looked like when you had the blinders off. All the awe-inspiring things while returning over and over to the terrible beauty of Agatha's vision. Fingernails cut tiny circles into the heels of my palms. Cold sweat covered my body. Over and over, the beautiful and the sublime tore at me until I could stare up at the glory of the Universe's unshielded face for a full minute before my brain shut down.

Hells bells, no wonder Sparks had to dive into madness every time they worked. You had to be crazy to deal with their version of the Sight. A wizard's third eye perceived the hidden world in terms of metaphors. As eldritch as they could be, the visions of the Sight were couched in a layer of symbolism that was a tissue-thin buffer for the mind. Agatha's madgirl brain tossed even that protection aside to get deep under the hood. She grokked things that would send an experienced wizard reeling for the nearest padded cell. Worse, at some unconscious level her Sparky sight was on all the time. And that photographic memory of hers for scientific detail was busy in the background recording it all. It was a miracle of SCIENCE! that an adult Spark could get out of bed without wearing some adult diapers.

I groaned as some very, uh, intense sense impressions involving Charity and baby powder replaced the stunning beauty of the clockwork of the universe.

This was going to end up me in finding a woman to tie into a high chair after tucking me into leather nappies and gagging me with a pacifier.

Speak of the angel. Charity Carpenter opened the door. She hesitated a second before sitting by the sewing machine. One hand absently played over the Singer's controls. This must be her sanctum, I realized. It was full of comforting, soft things while she concentrated on making crafts for her family. How often had she shut herself in here while Michael was out derring-doing in the name of God and her apple pie? I should go. In fact, I should ask Murph to drive me back to my apartment. Having a punch-drunk wizard around her innocent kids was not what she'd want. I was about to shuffle off when Charity crumbled. For as long as I'd known her, she'd projected cool control that hadn't wavered even with the revelation of Agatha's power. Everyone has limits. Hoarse, bitter sobs ripped through her as she hid her face behind her hands.

"I tainted her," Charity cried out. "My pride. I tried so hard, but I sinned enough to poison my little Molly."

"You had a talent." Suddenly, a lot of Charity's hostility made much more sense. "Let me guess, it manifested in your teens."

"My parents didn't even bother to understand," Charity said, tears dripping between her fingers. "They sent me to mental hospitals and schools that might as well have been institutions. I finally ran away. To Gregor."

"Cult leader?" I asked. "That's a common pattern, Charity. There's lots of Fagins on the supernatural scene who groom raw talents. I ended up with one as a foster father."

"What I and the other women did with Gregor was not fatherly." Charity lowered her head to the floor. "The Warden who came to lecture us warned about what we were doing. Gregor tipped over the edge not long after that. I should have run when the disappearances started. I couldn't, it was the only home I had. When he bound me as sacrifice for the dragon, I believed it was just punishment for my sins."
"So that's what I've been doing wrong." I snapped my fingers. "Dragonslayers get all the hot chicks."

"Has anyone told you that you are an insensitive jackass, Mr. Dresden?"

"You and Murph sing from the same hymn book."

"Before Michael burst in, I--" Charity shuddered. "I hated Gregor so much. I felt it rising up in me. Had Michael not interrupted the ritual, I might have...done things. It's why I believe magic is sinful. No-one should have that power. Praise be, Michael still has no idea I was a practitioner. That I stained our daughter in the womb."

"So what are you going to do?" I said. "Send Molly off to a convent? That worked real well for you."

"After accepting Agatha's power? We'll lose her for sure." Charity's blue eyes flicked up at me. "I won't let the Council have her. God help them if they lay a finger on her."

"The spell of respite is legal psychomancy," I said. "The Knights of the Cross might not be signatories to the Accords. But Michael has the cred for Molly to be given a proper hearing. There are some good folks on the Council. And you have one other thing in your corner."

"What?"

"A devious, unscrupulous wizard who can teach Molly how to convincingly fail the entrance exams," I pointed out. "At the very least, let me teach her some of the shielding skills I was supposed to be teaching Agatha."

"He works in mysterious ways," Charity mused.

"Want me to book?" I said.

"No. Stay. You're in no condition to leave," Charity said.

"I'll switch to the living room couch," I said. "No sense in burning out the motor while you're working."

The machine whirred to life seconds after I headed for the stairs.

+++++

*BING*

My eyelids weighed like they had dumbbells bolted to the eyelashes.

A cyclopean blue eye stared at me.

"You found her, Dingus?"

*DING*

"Let's roll."
Chapter 30

I hate stakeouts. You're stuck in a car or behind the lens of a camera for hours at a stretch. Bathroom breaks? Here's a wide-mouthed drink bottle, and hope you don't become loopy enough to mistake it for apple juice later. Lose concentration for a second, you'll miss the subject ducking out. So that's why I favor a proactive approach to investigation. The uncharitable might call it a habit of blindly shit-disturbing by someone who had the attention span of a gnat. I say look at the results I get.

Given how much of a pounding I've taken on cases recently, maybe I should learn to love stakeouts for my health.

Murphy had no problems with them. It must be a Zen skill she picked up in her martial arts training. Her partner Stallings sat beside her in the front paseanger seat. He was a solid, rawboned man whose balding head was compensated for by a Magnum-worthy moustache. Their attention locked on the old firehouse across the street halfway down the block. I was meditating--not dozing--in the back seat of Murph's Saturn. It was a slim brick structure between an office building and a row of storefronts. Below two windows on the second storey was the big garage doors where ladder trucks had raced out in the days before CFD had consolidated. I'd passed it by without noticing it whenever I decided I wanted a steak sandwich and brew at Mac's after work. It was halfway between MacAnally's and my office building. A contact of Murph's at City Hall had found it had been recently sold to a developer after years as a storage garage for Sanitation Department equipment.

I couldn't figure why Agatha had chosen that of all places for her lair. As far as I knew, she hadn't gone near when we'd had that meeting in my office. Dingus had still insisted she was in there. It had taken a while to understand the mix of Morse code and pantomime the High Chief of the Gizmos used to communicate with humans. The little guys had been a lot cleverer in their search pattern than I'd expected. They hadn't simply brute-force canvassed the areas on the map. Several of them had plugged themselves into telephone lines and electrical wires to detect unusual surge patterns. Apparently they had hit pay-dirt. Every so often a flyer or two would flash by with carrying a tool or part from the attic lab; they had also raided the Carpenter pantry for a bunch of supplies. I spotted two gyro-gizmos flying into a top-floor window with a mason jar of canned tomatoes. Earlier I'd seen a trio flying in a bag of flour. Something about that tickled my subconscious. My brain was still too punch-drunk from its encounter with the infinite to form a coherent thought.

"Are we there yet?" I called out.

"Let me shoot the wizard," Stallings said, attention never straying from the firehouse. "I'll shoot him somewhere where it won't matter, like the head."

"No shooting the wizard," Murphy replied. "Although we can taser him later if he can't keep his skinny ass still. Keep to the plan, Dresden. We don't make contact until Dingus gives us the all-clear."

"I heard the armory they pulled out of her coat when they transported her in for assessment," Stallings said. "Now you tell me she's an interdimensional exile who can make a phaser out of a laser pointer and a TV remote. Karrin, I sympathize. But this really calls for a proper SWAT containment operation."
"Her parents tell me she respects lawful authority figures," Murphy said. "We wait until our little friend says she comes out of this 'madness place'. Bock said these spells could last a few days, at most. She has access to water and food. We'll move in when she burns herself out."

"Agatha's a good kid," I said. "This fortuping is her way of keeping others out of the line of fire."

"She did save us a lot of trouble dealing with that troll," Stallings admitted. "Do you think she fixes appliances? My fridge's compressor sounds like its on its last legs."

"By the time she's done with it, your ice-maker will have a glacier setting."

"You're serious." At that, Stallings did turn his head around.

"He's serious," Murphy said.

"Just wait until you let her loose on the SI coffee machine," I said.

I silently willed the police-band radio to carry Dingus' signal. The gizmo hadn't made a chirp ever since it had disappeared into the firehouse five hours ago. It knew exactly what Agatha was up to. But once it had joined up, it hadn't given a peep of explanation of conditions in there. She could be creating anything. Bock had said Agatha was amazingly stable for a Spark--let alone a Heterodyne--considering the stories his grandfather had passed down. That didn't take into account the soulgaze. No-one who has met my eyes had ever been the same again. I've had a few people faint on me. All of them seemed, ah, disconcerted by the experience. Combine that with the stress she had been under? I didn't have Michael's rock-solid faith that what she was doing was harmless. Nor did Murph or Stallings. They had put large cases--like the type you'd use to transport heavy-duty weapons--into the Saturn's trunk when they'd briefly stopped by SI's offices. I'd heard hints that SI had pooled their money for some unofficial hardware purchases that didn't appear on the armory inventory.

Stallings grunted. Perking up, I tracked the dark Cadillac that was slowing down by the curb of a parking space to one side of the firehouse. The tinted windows and look of the tires spoke to me of the kind of custom modifications that went into armored limousines. It was more Gold Coast--or Paranoid Latin American Dictator--than you saw in this part of town. A tall blonde in a grey suit whose skirt didn't hide a set of long, athletic legs stepped out. Her gaze swept over the street with the casual professionalism of a trained bodyguard. I jerked upright when the huge slab of beefcake got out of the driver's seat. He had the heft of a former college football star who hadn't quite had enough juice to go pro. His orange hair was cropped close to his skull, the better not to be grabbed in a close fight. His tailored suit hid the gun I knew was tucked into a shoulder holster. The blonde I didn't have a name for. The shaved bear I did.

Hendricks.

I was out of the car with a hand on my blasting rod. Hendricks and the blonde had already stepped into position to shield their principal. He didn't seem too concerned about an angry six-plus wizard stomping up the sidewalk. He wouldn't be. Very little worries Gentleman John Marcone. He's a short man with salt-and-pepper hair. A suit that could have paid a small nation's debt was perfectly tailored to a figure that was fit without being muscle-bound. Men like the Gentleman leave the muscle to others. With the laugh lines around his eyes and boater's tan, he could have been the beloved coach of a championship college team. I had seen what was behind those eye green as faded dollar bills. It was a tiger's soul that had looked at mine and yawned. It was the soul of the
most ruthless crime lord in Chicago's long, long history of organized crime.

"Mr. Dresden," Marcone said. He nodded politely to my back-up coming up behind me. "Lieutenant Murphy. Sergeant Stallings. I would have sent someone by earlier to offer some coffee while you waited."

Son of a bitch. He'd had us pegged before he even arrived. Why was I not surprised?

"May I ask why you are here, sir?" Murphy pronounced that last word as if it were "cur".

"Visiting one of my properties," Marcone said. "This is another of my restoration projects. You might have discovered that if you had checked more thoroughly this morning."

"So, what's the game?" I asked. "Hookers or blackjack? Or is it both? Kind of like peanut butter cups."

"A boutique," Marcone said. "Which I assure you is no concern of the law. All the paperwork is in order. Unless something has recently come to the notice of Special Investigations."

"Missing person case," Stallings said.

"One of Mr. Carpenter's children?" Marcone asked, concern showing on his face. "Yes, I believe it was Agatha who has gone missing since the incident at the university."

"Get away from her, you--" I gritted my teeth when Murphy jammed a thumb into a pressure point. Dammit. "Walk away. There's a girl who's had it rough these past few days. She has nothing to do with you."

"I've followed Ms. Carpenter's work for the past year," Marcone replied. "Her work on mind/machine interfaces is fascinating, though I can understand why she adopted a pseudonym in publishing her articles. Minds such as hers should be supported."

"Sir, please step away," Murphy said. "The situation is--"

"I assure you, lieutenant, the situation is well in hand."

The garage door rolled up.

A massive mechanical hand closed around Hendricks. Twin green glows burned in the darkness of the firetruck bay.

"THRONGOR GREETS FRIEND!"

Marcone blinked when Hendricks was yanked off his feet and into the firehouse.

"Well, that's new."
Chapter 31

Heh.

Heh, heh, heh.

He said "hand".

Sometimes life gives you these perfect moments. This one wasn't going to last long. A van screeched around the corner to come to a stop by the back of Marcone's car. The heavies spilling out were the crime boss' back-up. Obviously they wanted to ask some questions of whoever had created a giant hand that had snatched Marcone's bodyguard. Murphy and Stallings had already gone for their guns. So it was about to become pretty heated in a second or so. It was all worth it for the briefest flicker of confusion in Marcone's eyes.

A loud whine broke up the impending summer stock revival of the OK Corral. As one, everyone looked up at the roof. Mounted on security camera brackets were guns right out of Buck Rogers: long steel barrels with Ming the Merciless flutes and ridges. Orbs on the back glowed an eerie blue. My wizardly senses warned me of the incoming before a blue-white beam blasted the Glock one of the Marcone's men held by one thigh under his coat. The twisted, melted remains clattered on the sidewalk as the troubleshooter beat at his charred pants leg. Something like a grid of electric fire flashed into existence before subsiding into an invisible barrier that reeked of ozone.

"Looks like Agatha did some remodeling." I stepped back to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Ward, Ms. Gard?" Marcone asked.

"No. There is a surprisingly strong threshold for a building so recently occupied," the now-named amazon said. "But this shield is not tied to it. Do not attempt to breach it."

"Harry, has Agatha gone over the edge?" Murphy asked quietly.

"No, this feels like an automatic defense system," I replied. I extended my left hand to within a fraction of an inch of the shield. Yikes, this thing had game. "If she was loaded for bear, then we would all be grease stains on the pavement."

"Power failure." Marcone said it as casually as thinking of sending a butler to check the fuse-box.

"Bad idea," I said. "She'll have at least one back-up power source. And she'll interpret it as an attack."

"Marcone, this has officially become police business," Murphy's badge was out, hung on a chain around her neck. "There is a mentally-disturbed woman inside who sees your men as a threat. Back down. Let me do my job."

A hair-thin light-beam played over the badge.

"IDENTITY CONFIRMED," a mechanical voice said. A small tray popped out of the brickwork. "LIEUTENANT MURPHY, KARRIN. PLEASE PLACE FINGER TO CONFIRM HUMANITY."
"It wants blood," Ms. Gard commented. "Bleeding is a standard test to prove mortality."

"Great. I already gave to the Red Cross last week." Murphy hesitated. "Should I?"

"The flunky's right," I replied. "The other way in means talking to the hand."

"Ms. Gard is a highly-paid consultant from Monoc Securities," Marcone said.

"I stand corrected. She's a flunkette."

"Fine, here's my bonafides." Murphy stabbed her finger into the tray. Wincing slightly, she dabbed away the tiny bead of red with a wet wipe. "Could you let me in now? I'm here to interview Ms. Heterodyne."

"DNA ANALYSIS COMPLETE. GUEST ENTRY AUTHORIZED." The barrier powered down as the door just to the right of the garage bay swung open.

"I'll have your man released as soon as possible," Murphy told Marcone.

"Great, I'm stuck on the other side of the velvet rope with the losers from the burbs," I said.

"Well, sorry. Some of us just have what it takes for a VIP pass." Blue eyes twinkled for a moment.

"It is good to see Hendricks in such qualified hands," Marcone said. "I'm sure he will be back with us within the hour."

Translation: ticktock, Murph.

Murphy had her game-face on when she stepped through the door. It slammed shut with the thunk of heavy bolts sliding home. The electric shield powered up the moment she was sealed in. It was dialed down to a warning jolt instead of instant flash-fry. Marcone stood looking at it for a long, long time before getting back into the Caddy. Of all the places to hole up in, Agatha had picked one owned by the most powerful crime boss in the city. A nasty shiver went through me when I realized it was on a route that I walked nearly every day. That had creepy implications when I thought about it. Even creepier was Marcone keeping tabs on Agatha before her Spark had revealed itself. I didn't know if it was really because he was a secret science fan, or because he was looking to reel in the daughter of a Knight of the Cross.

For once, the guy in the leather duster carrying a staff wasn't the weirdest thing around. The people on the street had rabbited when Agatha's defence system had enacted a strong argument against the Second Amendment. Generations of gang warfare bred quick reaction times and an instinct for seeking cover into the average Chicagoan. The crowds that had filtered back stayed on the other side, especially with Stallings standing guard with his badge out in front of the lair. He was using the "we're filming" excuse this time. I wondered if I was the rugged hero or the comedy relief this time. The minutes stretched out without any word from inside. If Murphy or Dingus didn't bring Agatha out of her fugue, shields be damned. Marcone had a reputation for being fiercely protective of his people. No-one attacked his men without the fallout from the retribution scattered across the city.

The garage doors opened.

THRONGOR plopped a dazed Hendricks beside me, patting Cujo on the head before crooking a
Stars and stones, the flunkette had been right about the strength of the threshold. It was nothing to write home about. It was even weaker than the one around my apartment. But there shouldn't be one at all. Firehouses counted as homes. But they were like an army barracks: public buildings whose residents were transient in the end. Any threshold should be cobweb-thin. Agatha's occupation had been a couple of days at most. Not enough to establish true ownership as a home. Instead, there was the decided thrum of power in the nascent mystical barrier. Had I stepped through without invitation, my magic would have been gimped a fair bit. The ground floor of the firehouse showed signs Agatha was settling in. The huge room where fire engines had waited for alarm calls was being filled with work-tables and bits of lab equipment assembled by the gizmos.

I froze when I saw that it wasn't only Agatha's mechanical minion squad on the job. Little Folk were everywhere. Cobbs, mostly. The shoemaker elves were a few inches high, with white dandelion puffs of hair on both the young and old. They wore 19th century worker's wear: leather aprons over matching boots and trousers, with neat white shirts beneath waistcoats. Their workbelts and aprons had tiny tools tucked in dozens of pockets. Thick safety gloves and goggles protected them from the steel and iron parts. Several of them were busy working at a miniature cobbler's shop creating the heavy button-up safety boots Agatha favored. A flock of tiny sprites were assembling a labcoat on a mannequin, while knockers in their miner's hats and overalls knocked back little cups of beer beside a hole dug out of the concrete floor. At each throat were Heterodyne symbols.

Wafting down from the spiral stairs next to a brass firepole was the scent of really, really good pizza.

Agatha was sitting on the wooden floor in the former bunkhouse that took up most of the second floor. The stench of days without a bath ruined the savory scent of cheese-and-tomato ambrosia. A pale Murphy stared at the...thing that was in the middle of the room. I wasn't into modern art. Ditko's more my speed. I could tell that whatever it was meant to be was artistry of the highest order. It was like a collision between abstract sculpture and a kid's mobile. All sorts of bits of junk ranging from computer parts to brass-cased gauges had been welded, riveted, and strung by wire in a complex pattern that looked weirdly familiar. If you squinted, it formed a human shape with a stylized cape flaring around it.

Not a cape.

A long coat.

"Harry."

Agatha's head swiveled around in a way that reminded me of pea soup and backmasked vocals.

"Isn't it beautiful? I needed ages to capture it all. The blueprint of your soul made manifest."

Agatha rose. I strangled the impulse to run as she laid hands that felt like they could crush rocks on my shoulders.

"Such a wondrous mechanism. Warped, damaged, battered. Yet with such potential. " 
"Funny, that's what my guidance counselor used to write on my report cards."

"See, Lieutenant Murphy? Right there, where his sense of chivalry interacts with an overdeveloped libido and his scarred sense of self esteem? A fascinating conundrum to solve. We may have to resort to explosives."

Agatha's grin widened into the Cheshire Cat possessed by Hannibal Lecter.

"Don't worry. Soon I'LL BE ABLE TO FIX YOUR EVERYTHING."
Chapter 32

Ohgodohgodofgod.

The worst thing was Agatha's expression was the same as Mister's when he brings home a gift after his rambles. Only this wasn't a rat on my doorstep. This was a severed human arm. And it had a suitcase nuke handcuffed to its wrist. What's she'd created was a voodoo doll and True Name combined with whatever sparkiness she had worked into the design. Forget blood and hair--an enemy with this could do hideous things to me. I didn't even want to think what Agatha was planning.

I couldn't show my fear. She didn't realize what she had done.

I needed to defuse this situation with a few well-chosen words.

"That's just nifty," I said.

"Nifty?" A thrum of anger tinged her voice.

"Spiffy?"

"Spiffy? I created an orrery of your inner self!" A muscle in one cheek twitched. "For hours I have poured the shattering eldritch revelations you blazed into my mind into this work, and all you can come up with is--"

"Agatha, I heard a timer in the kitchen a minute ago," Murphy said.

"Have to go check the pizzas!" Agatha chirped. "It wouldn't do to disappoint the coggs, the little dears. I've taken it upon myself to provide them with a comprehensive retraining program to ease them into the modern world."

"I brought you your medicine." I took a bottle of pills out of my duster. "In case you feel the need to take the edge off."

"Sleep is for the weak!" Agatha popped a can of Red Bull, chugging it in one long gulp. "I AM A GLORIOUS BUTTERFLY OF CAFFEINE AND SCIENCE!"

"Could you show me your arsenal again?" Murphy asked.

"Delighted to! Oooops, time to go." Agatha touched my cheek. Her palm jittered like a hummingbird on meth. "Harry. You think you've broken me. You haven't. I am Martha's daughter. Not for me soothing words. It's the nightmares that make me run."

A small sonic boom shook the windowpanes as she ran off.

"It's not textbook," Murphy admitted, "but it did build a connection between us."

"You don't have to explain," I replied. "It's like showing off your purse collection."
"Been hitting the penis enlargement spells?" Murphy said. "You've been tripping over your dick lately."

"It's the motion of the ocean, not the size of the boat." I drew a shaky breath. "We can't take her back like this. It would kill her to have Michael see her like this."

"We can't stall Marcone forever," Murphy said. "The pills. Hand them over. If worse comes to worse, I'll mix them into a drink and slip it to her while she's distracted."

"Roofieing her," I replied. "That's an innovative approach to crisis negotiation. Had practice?"

"One word about 'being hard up for a date' will earn you a broken kneecap."

I didn't think the sedatives would do much. Michael had reacted to Agatha being anywhere near caffeine with the same horror as breaking open the seven seals. Eventually she'd run out of gas. The question was when and how hard she'd crash. I shuddered when I saw the results of her Red Bull-fueled creativity. The soul-sculpture resembled a car crash between da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* and the Kabbalistic diagrams of the Ten Sephiroth. There were Egyptian elements in the mix as well. The insight was as astonishing as it was terrifying. I squinted as something caught my eye deep within the abomination of magic and SCIENCE! It was a silver pentagram that was twin to my own. On either side was carved the faces of Janus. What the hell was that? There were more details that popped out: a stylized chain of snowflakes around the hand Mab had had me stab myself with; a horribly twisted section that brought back the scents of blood and gasoline; a gnarled oak of steel that cradled my heart.

It wasn't an abomination. It was an honour.

High-pitched cheering erupted from below. Giving her creation one last look, I descended to the ground floor to find Agatha handing out pizza to her new subjects. It was a lot more orderly than the free-for-alls that Toot-toot and his gang committed whenever I paid them off. A cobb in a formal waistcoat with a Heterodyne sigil at his throat stood beside Agatha as she sliced up several all-dressed into equal portions. He was an inch taller than the rest of his brethren. He solemnly ate a small bit of each piece before handing out to a grateful minion-fae. The Little Folk savored each bite. My mouth watered in sympathy. Whatever she had baked into those was freaking amazing. I felt just a little bit cheap for relying on Pizza Spress' spongy crust and thin cheese.

A low, evil chuckle came from behind me.

With a click-clack of metal joints, a figure almost as tall as me stepped out of the cover of what looked like the demented love-child of a still and an arc reactor. It was dressed neck to toe in the latest word of early twentieth century evening wear. Spotless white leather gloves and a grey bow tie matched the tuxedo on its gaunt frame. Atop its head was a black top hat tilted at a rakish angle. Not head, I corrected myself. *Skull*. It was a Terminator's naked skull with very familiar runes laser-etched into the gleaming steel. A brass Heterodyne sigil shone in the center of its forehead. Instead of red, it's eyes glowed an eerie blue that regarded me with not a hint of warmth. I suddenly had an inkling how Agatha had had such deep insights into soul structures.

"Bob?"

"Boss," the clank said, heavy on the accents of Deutschland. "Zo gut to see hyu. But hy am not 'Bob'. Dis instance ov me is 'Mephistofelees'."
"Are you going to segue into 'Heaviside Layer'?' I asked, my mouth running ahead of my panicked brain. "Or do you do a soft-shoe to 'Putting on the Ritz'?"

"Always wit de funnies." Mephistofelees bowed. "Hyu asked me to vatch over de Mistress, after all. I vas obeyink orders to de letter."

"I ordered you not to speak with her."

"Speak, yez. Flash mine eyelights in Morse code, nein." Mephistofelees chuckled darkly. "Verra schmott girl. She introduced 'me'--vell, mein primary instance ov consciousness--to de concept ov 'forking'. Hy am vat you vould call a fragment of de original. Some bits ov him dot he did not vant to keep. Pfft. Veakling, like hyu. Agatha, she is stronk enough to stand de old master's lessons."

Oh. Super.

Terrified screaming echoed throughout the room when a Way opened up in mid-air.

A snow-covered Waldo Butters in pajamas lurched in with his feet locked into elaborate work boots.

"Ho gut, de new minion is here. Now ve can drill de holes in hyur skull properly."
Mephistofelees' steel skull warped and shifted. Layers of muscle and cartilage appeared like a flaying in reverse. Skin tightened over it to form a gaunt face that looked like Vincent Price had gone the lich route. Bloodless lips peeled back baring steel teeth as the fragment of my assistant tipped his hat. That wasn't what unsettled me. What did was the final connection my brain made between the terrible, cold energy radiating off Agatha's new employee and the concept of soul-manipulation. Only one school of magic fit the sorts of lessons that Sith Bob meant to teach her.

Necromancy.

Somewhere in his past, my wisecracking lab assistant had worked for someone so foul even he didn't want to talk about it. This from a spirit who had once cheerfully suggested trading a baby to Mab to buy her off. No wonder. Necromancy is icky. It means using the essence of life itself to enslave dead flesh to one's whim. Worse, necromancers are reputed to have control over souls: consuming them, exchanging them, trapping them. Agatha's tales of her home-dimensions mucking around with the scientific version of necromancy had scared me. The stories of reanimates coming back wrong hinted that Sparky meddling with the boundaries of life and death did terrible things to the souls stuffed back into patchwork bodies.

I wanted to crack open his armored skull so he would fry outside in the sunlight. I held back from throwing down. The raw power I'd sensed coming off Mephistofelees meant any fight would cause more than the usual property damage. Burning down Agatha's lab around her ears wouldn't earn me any brownie points. I also didn't know the terms his oath of service to her. Meddling blindly could have unpredictable repercussions. So I had to let the walking necromantic textbook take his place beside her.

Agatha was arguing furiously in German with the nattily-dressed cobb who had taken the lord's portion of the pizza. Or was it "cogg" now? Butters sat in a chair beneath a blanket while Murphy talked soothingly to him. I eyed the workboots laced tight on his feet. A faint glamour of fae magic had been worked into the leather. It was a typical Little Folk prank to leave seven-league boots baited as a trap. They worked by opening Ways into the Nevernever that could cross great distances in a few steps. The trick being that the routes taken through the spirit world could be through some sketchy neighborhoods.

"Dresden. Hi!" Butters eyes were bloodshot. Clutched in one hand was a shotglass reeking of the demon alcohol. "You're a lot nicer as a hallucination than those spider-wolves I saw earlier. Maybe this will be a classic blackout, and I'll have no memory of this afterwards."

"Keep staring up at those pyramids, doc," I said. I examined the boots. "Did you just put these on, or was there an invitation?"

"Agatha wrote me a note inviting me to see her new lab." Butters blinked slowly, twice. He looked around. "Holy shitaki. This is awesome."

"You should see her gun safe," Murphy muttered.

"Then they should be safe to take off now," I replied.

"My feet are the warmest part of me. Pass."
"I'm so very sorry about my subordinate's actions." Agatha said, her voice sending harmonics of regret through the air. "I did not realize my steward Albrecht would interpret my orders that way."

"In no danger, your minion would be," Albrecht said. "Paths sworn to the cobbs he was taken."

"THERE WERE SPIDER-WOLVES!"

"Really? If we could backtrack, we could obtain some examples to join the malk I vivisected earlier."

"Before we do that," Murphy said, "we should have you checked up. Waldo, she's drank at least five cases of Red Bull over the past forty-eight hours."

"What?" Butter's catatonia disappeared in an instant. He grabbed her wrist. "Dammit, Agatha, you know caffeine is contraindicated on your medical files. There has to be an examination slab around here somewhere. I want you lying on it and strapped in. No objections."

"Yes, doctor." Agatha began unbuttoning her blouse.

Uh.

"Maybe you should do that behind a privacy screen?" Murphy suggested.

"Come on, Ag." Butters draped the blanket over his shoulders. "This is going to be so weird with a live patient. I'll just, uh, pretend you're one of my usual customers."

"You're such a romantic, Waldo."

"Show you her arsenal, in her stead I will." Albrecht bowed. He focused intently on her shoes. "Excellent your footwear is, if scarred. Repairs we would be glad to do."

"Harry, does the Keebler have a foot fetish?" Murphy asked me.

"They can't help it." I bowed back to Agatha's steward. "I'm sure she'll be happy to put them in your capable hands when the day is over."

"A man of honour you are, Za Lord," Albrecht said. "Come, her gift to you awaits."

Agatha's gun rack took up most of one wall of the firehouse garage. There were a lot of them. There were enough of them that Burt Gummer might have held up his hands and asked if she was being a little excessive. The death rays ranged in size of elegant pistols to monsters that would have been at home mounted on a Star Destroyer's turrets. It was as if someone had shown a Victorian gunmaker a number of modern sci-fi props--from the E-11 blaster to Trek's phasers to Colonial Marine pulse rifles--and the shop had gone to town with lots of brass and steel and glowing bits. Murphy hefted a nasty-looking piece of work that looked like the demented offspring of a tactical shotgun and a death ray toted by Ming the Merciless; inside the tuba-shaped muzzle was a tuning fork of pure iron that buzzed to life with a sound that had my tooth fillings shivering. Albrecht and the other fae servants edged away before Murphy powered it down.

Then I saw it.
It was a small object with a bow tied around it. You couldn't mistake it for anything else for a fan like me. It was a brass-and-steel rod just long enough for male hands to wield in a two-handed grip. A blue crystal at the top sprouted a miniature Tesla coil. Laser-etched around the inactive hilt were a mix of runes and mathematical equations that I instinctively understood. It was a mixture of my style and hers in perfect, brilliant harmony. My birthday. She had remembered my birthday. Almost no-one did, not after Susan had disappeared. Finding chalk in my duster pocket, I drew a shaky circle several feet across on the concrete. I empowered it with a surge of will. Agatha's gift flared to life when I loosed my power through its arcane magitek circuits with the faith of a child who has seen the greatest story ever told. Sorry, Michael. The other movie just didn't rank. Not for me.

"Gladius lux."

With a hiss and a "vreem", a blade of pure force one atom thick manifested out of the lightsaber's hilt. A bright blue glow enveloped the blade for that classic look. I flicked the blade in an unpractised swing that would have had Obi Wan sighing. My usual style was classic fencing with smallsword blades that took advantage of my stork-legs in the thrust. I must have looked like a complete dork to Murphy as I mimed a duel scene from Star Wars. It was a miracle that I didn't slice any limbs off with the weightless blade. Only the magic circle stopped the blade from going out of control outside my improvised practise ring. Ozone filled the air in the wake of the blade's passes. This. Was. So. Cool.

Waldo screamed.

Murphy was already bounding back up the stairs in the time it took for me to power off my new toy and break the circle. My long strides let me catch up with her at the top. Oh. Um. Yeah. I probably should have stayed downstairs. Waldo hadn't been kidding about the slab. Agatha lay strapped down at wrist and ankle with only a modesty cloth over the, er, bits. Eyes closed, her body shuddered fitfully under what must have been a terrible caffeine hangover. On her head was a weird steel helmet with the usual sparky dials and bulbs attached to... Huh. Must be a holoprojector. Hovering above a bed of red, blue, and green lights was an image of her brain rotating in mid-air. The energy crackling through it would have put one of Victor Sells' power-source storms to shame. Butters knelt on the floor with his hands to his ears. Blood dripped down between them.

On the floor, a stethoscope lay beside her locket.

Stars and stones, I was such an idiot.

"Think I blew out my eardrums," Butters grated out. "I was removing her locket when the stethoscope picked up feedback coming from that thing. Ow."

"In danger, the Mistress is?" Albrecht wrung his hands.

"What?" Butters yelled. "No, she's fine. Whatever was in it was keeping her revved up. She's just crashing out from exhaustion. Her vitals are good."

"Calling in an SI team to secure this place." Murphy headed for a nearby telephone rather than her cell. "I hope we can stall Marcone for long enough to keep that arsenal of hers out of his hands."

I picked up her locket with a pair of pliers.
I popped open the back with a twist of a scalpel.

A moan came from the slab.

Exhausted green eyes stared at the ruined, intricate mechanisms within her locket.

"My uncle. He--he put that on me. For years. He MADE ME STUPID!"

Gently, I laid my right hand on her brow.

"Dormius, Agatha Heterodyne Carpenter, dormius."
"This crippled Agatha since she was five?" Michael asked.

"I think it's based on that humming of hers." Butters peered into the locket's guts with a magnifying glass. "There's the remains of tuning forks in here. It was resting right up against her vocal cords. It must have sensed her starting to hum when she began sparking, then sent a disruptive pulse that caused her migraines."

"Right up until a wizard decided to keep her company one night," I said. "But the techbane doesn't usually affect clockwork."

"This little gadget was holding back a powerful spark for years." Butters angled the glass at a slider bar in the rim. "See? Set to the maximum. It's been straining for years without any maintenance. One tiny glitch and POW!"

"Mr. Bock was shocked Agatha began sparking at so young an age," Michael said. "His father's writings said that the younger a spark breaks through, the more traumatic and deadly it can be."

"Her uncle was hiding under the radar with a little girl about to go Dark Phoenix," I said. "So he chained her down until he could be sure she could survive. Only he and the only others who might have known about the locket were killed."

"What a terrible choice he faced." Michael gazed about Agatha's lab. "Although I can see understand now why he did it."

This was the first time I'd ever seen Michael Carpenter flustered. Usually he's in a sort of Catholic zen calm whenever he isn't channeling the Fist of God. Seeing him shocked was like hearing the captain of an airliner say "ooops" during the routine spiel about the weather. Which is something airline captains say when their complex piece of aeronautical engineering has just lost all communications and navigational gear. Yet another reason why I've switched to Amtrak for any long-distance travel. It was one thing to discover his oldest daughter had power. It was very much another to find out that she had created her own miniature Fae Court and a tiny Fortress of Solitude.

The fact is, I hadn't seen it coming myself. I'd thought at most she might be a medium-level player on the local scene like the Alphas. Instead she was looking more and more like a up-and-coming power in her own right: her own minion army, old family ties to the Erlking, and the scary interest of the Baron of Chicago. Give her a few years and some luck? Agatha could have enough weight to claim freeholding lord status under the Unseelie Accords. Freeholding lords were rare: beings with enough clout to sign the Accords as equals to nations like the Red Court and White Council. The only one I knew about was a shapeshifting semi-immortal in the Ukraine. Hells bells, maybe the Heterodynes already had standing of some type among the supernatural in their home reality.

That was a heavy burden for the girl tossing and turning on the gurney. Butters adjusted the drip from an IV bag loaded with sedatives to even out the caffeine overdose running through Agatha's brain. Even under my sleep spell, she was sparking enough that her wrists and ankles were locked to the rails with hospital restraints At least she was covered up by a sheet. My stupid brain couldn't help lingering on a memory that would end with Michael punching me out if he could read minds. He nodded to the two attendants from the forensic institute he'd asked to help; Agatha must have been popular enough at the morgue to have them unofficially use a city body-bus as a stealth
They headed for the Carpenter place while Michael and I carried out the soul-statue out to the Blue Beetle. I'd wrapped it up with a tarp tied with cord to hide it. The back of my neck still itched when I sensed the stares coming from Marcone's Caddy parked at the end of the block. I sighed at what had been done to my wheels before Murphy had arranged to have it driven to Agatha's lair. The Beetle had become the focus of an improvised art project by the people grooving out on the peace-and-love vibe. The body panels had been spray-painted in a psychedelic theme right out Haight-Ashbury. A brass statue of Buddha with a spliff in his mouth had been riveted to the front trunk lid. Superglued to the roof was a garden of artificial sunflower spinners.

I saw a future of many police stops-and-frisks for wacky tabacky.

The soul-statue just about fit in the trunk. I thought about inviting Michael for a beer at Mac's. Nah, he was meant to be with his family now. Reluctantly, I left him to head back to his truck while I drove the Dippy Bug back to the homestead. I cringed when I parked in the spot in front of the boarding house. I could almost hear my neighbours calculating how much their property values were dropping at this latest stunt by the neighborhood weirdo. Grunting, I hauled Agatha's creation down the stair and into my apartment. Damn. I should have snagged a dolly from her lab.

Someone had been in my place.

It wasn't a bowl of porridge that tipped me off. It was the phone line extension that snaked beneath the carpets to the trapdoor hidden beneath an armchair. A small hole had been drilled into the frame. Coggs. It had to have been the coggs. Thresholds are usually impossible to breech. But fae can ignore them as long as they enter a home with a beneficial intent in mind. It was how my cleaning service could do its business without me around to invite them in. Heaving aside the chair, I followed the new phone line into my lab. It had been neatly tacked along the edge of one wall and the ceiling to a certain shelf.

Bob's skull had a new addition: a phone jack port drilled into the back.

From within my lab assistant's sanctum came the whistling and chirping of a fax machine.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Boss. It's amazing." Bob's eyelight flickered in a glazed, dreamy fashion. "The Internet. A vast network of light and electricity containing an ocean of knowledge. And it's full of porn. I mean, we're not just talking naked hotties here. There's clowns! Doing things!"

"How are you on the Internet?"

"Agatha hooked me up." Bob bounced up and down. "I have it all down. TCP/IP, compression algorithms, the works. It's all code when you get down to it. Easy for an energy being like me to interface with. Although I'm stuck on dial-up. Boss, work harder. I need DSL!"

Very deliberately, I laid a claw hammer on the long table running down the center of the lab.

"Um. This is about my evil twin, isn't it?"

"What the fuck did you do?" I demanded.
"So, no high-speed?" Bob's eyelight flared when I slapped the hammer meaningfully in my palm. "I had no choice, boss! The music called to me. The old part of me. What I was when Heinrich Kemmler owned me."

"A warlock," I said.

"The warlockiest, boss. He was flat out evil. Bad news." Gulp. If Bob thought someone was evil...

"The most powerful necromancer the White Council ever faced off against. Hell on wheels. He started World War I, and had a hand in the sequel."

"You're telling me Agatha's made a pact with a necromancer's familiar," I said.

"Oh, don't worry, Evil Me's not free range," Bob said. "He's locked down under similar runes as the ones on my sanctum. Even more secure--he's tied to her bloodline, so no-one can hijack Evil Me."

Blood pact.

She'd made a blood pact with the damned thing.

"How powerful is it?" I asked.

"Forty years of service to a guy who needed the White Council to put down," Bob said. "They took him out for the seventh and final time in '61. Senior Council, all the Wardens, the Archangel squad, and every practioner and ally they could lay their hands on. By that time, I was pretty buff. Kemmler had me pumping serious iron."

"So, what you're telling me is that if the White Council finds out," I said, my spine a solid bar of ice, "they'll land on her like a strategic nuclear strike."

"Yeah, that's sort of a problem for her." Bob replied. "But look on the bright side: with him gone, I feel cleansed!"
Chapter 35

I came to in a puddle of saliva and cheap Mexican liquor.

One of Agatha's sonic cannons must have gotten wedged in my skull last night. The bells were tolling for me in terrible, dolorous tones that hammered at my brain. My cheek came free from the lab table with a sucking sound. I mentally reconstructed last nights' spiral into depravity. Realizing how screwed I was came first. Finding out I'd had Kemmler's familiar for years would be the Merlin's best Christmas gift ever. Any allies I had on the Council would be distancing themselves at the speed of light after he declared me a Heir of Kemmler along with Agatha. The Warden's housekeeping after taking out their worst enemy for over two centuries involved killing his apprentices, his minions, their allies, and anyone who owed them money.

I must have reached for the tequila left over from that love potion when I realized I couldn't even tell the White Council if I wanted to. Mr. Mephistopheles had been part of the creation of the soul-sculpture. It could target me in so many ways using that knowledge. Oh, and it likely knew the strengths and weaknesses of my wards. It was incarnated in a clank body that might let it pass my threshold. It had shown no fear revealing itself to me. There was a not-so-subtle hint there that bringing White Council attention onto its arrangement with "the Mistress" would end up with me spread over a large part of Chicago. Somewhere near the end of the bottle, I had demanded Bob show me the porn he'd found on his Internet connection. A whirling shard of memory sliced through my mind. I'd discovered that infantilism is indeed a fetish and there are pictures of it. Along with stories. And short video clips.

The World Wide Web needed to be cleansed with fire.

On the plus side, Bob had set me up with email.

Zombies had risen from their graves with more grace than I did crawling up the ladder. I left the trap door open. There was a chance I'd end up falling down and cracking my skull open. It would save Michael the effort. The apartment was toasty as if a fire had been the hearth overnight. A bleary glance told me the fireplace was clear of any ash. Did I light the stove overnight? Wonderful. There was going to be a charred mess from a drunken stab at dinner. I stumbled over to the kitchenette alcove absently mumbling a spell to light a candle on the counter. In the soft light gleamed a steel pipe coming out of my wood-stove.

Uh.

It went into the water heater perched on a concrete shelf in one corner of the kitchenette. It was a dinky twenty-gallon unit that had shared the gas feed from the stove that had come with the furnishing when I'd started renting from Mrs. S. I'd had it disconnected first thing. Even the simple electric thermostat would eventually fail after constant exposure in a wizard's apartment. It would violate my lease for a flaky gas-burner to erupt into a fireball. Squatting down, I opened up the firebox. Nestling against the back was a coil of pipe that my dazed brain put a name to: heat exchanger. Trembling, I opened up a tap that had never been used. Cold water splashed over my palm, then blessedly hot water scalded me.

*BING!* Dingus chimed, popping out from behind the heater along with a bunch of other gizmos.

"I swear I will make sweet, sexy man-love to you," I babbled.
Dingus backed away.

"Sorry. I overshared there," I replied. "That must explain the dream about the dwarves fixing my toilet. How did you get past my wards?"

Dingus pantomimed a cobbler working at his bench.

"Albrecht snuck you past the threshold as part of his toolbox." I held up a fist. "You are my hero. You're R2D2 hacking the Death Star."

Dingus burbled in Morse, a tiny claw bumping my knuckles.

"Ag's still out, but Butters says she's okay?" I sighed in relief. "Good. Did you see where Mephistofelees went? I lost track after we found out about the locket."

*DING*

"Butters gave it a job at the morgue?"

Dingus shrugged.

"I guess it's qualified." I held up a finger. "Hold that thought. Shower first. Hot shower."

My inner evil overlord came out when I dashed towards the itty-bitty bathroom, shedding clothes as I went. I think I actually let out a MUHAHAHAHA laugh as my stubble on my chin fast-forwarded to a goatee. That might be an exaggeration. But not by much. The simple pleasure of steaming water over my naked skin was ecstasy. I didn't even soap up for a several minutes. The novelty of it was cleansing enough. There was even enough warm water for my shave afterwards. I almost felt human afterwards, if I squinted and cocked my head just so.

My chipper mood darkened when I called into my answering service. Mr. Greene had left several messages while I had been occupied with Agatha's breakthrough. His polite follow-ups had become a lot more curt the longer I'd left him in the wind. I envisioned all those lovely hundred fluttering out of my wallet unless I got my ass back on the job. Helping Agatha and the Carpenters was great for my soul. It didn't keep me and Mister in Coke and kibble. Probably a wise decision to track Mr. Greene down for some compensatory groveling, preferably with some word from the svartalves that they were considering his offer.

Someone knocked on my front door.

With my luck, it'd be Donald Morgan in town to see if he could pin anything on me for the God stunt.

It wasn't the Gestapo. Molly Carpenter stood at my threshold, shifting nervously from foot to foot. This time there was no make-up. No corsets. She was dressed in Sunday-morning clothes, in a dark jacket and skirt that reached below the knee. Her face was scrubbed clean. It made her look very young and vulnerable. Clutched in front of her with both hands was the copy of *Elemental Magic* I'd reserved for Agatha. A blush colored both her cheeks.

That's when I realized I was still dressed only in the towel I'd thrown around my waist after leaving the shower.
Cursing, I hastily lowered my wards before dashing into my bedroom. I dug into the back of a
dresser drawer for the slim wooden box where I kept my robe and stole. Ebenezar had sent me one
after my fashion faux-pas at the White Council meeting last summer. The box stopped Mister from
turning it into more nesting material. I smoothed down the flowing black silk robe and adjusted the
blue stole over my shoulders. I imagined the Merlin’s expression of refined constipation as a mask
to wear for the occasion. I strode out to speak with Molly with all the dignity the occasion
demanded.

"The zoo doesn't officially open until ten," I said. "Hand-feeding the panda bamboo is only at
noon."

"I probably shouldn't have said that, huh?" Molly adjusted her skirt. "Just so you know, this is
totally Mom's idea. She said if I was risking my soul for power, I should at least look respectable
when I do it."

"So they know you're here."

"Dad's waiting in the truck," Molly said. "It was pretty intense last night. Dad said we all had to
pray for guidance. That's when the Bible on the table fell open to Matthew, The parable of the
talents."

"Not familiar with that one," I said.

"A man going on a trip gives his servants money--the first ten, the second two, the third one,"
Molly said. "When he comes back, the first one's invested his talents, doubling his money. The
second did the same. The third just buried his in the ground."

Behind the mask, I winced at what that must have meant to Charity. She had murdered her gift.

"I have this power. It can help my sister. Maybe calm her down when her clock hits cuckoo,"
Molly continued. "I think I can also do other stuff. I can't be a hero like you. But I could use my
power to help, like become a psychologist or help the cops as a psychic."

"Molly, it's not easy living with having a talent." I gestured at the apartment. "If you train up your
talent to its potential, this will be your life. No computers, no Walkmans, no electric lights. You'll
never be able to look anyone straight in the eye again."

"FYI, it's compact disc players now," Molly said. "And iPods are now a thing."

"Don't make the cranky wizard who hasn't had his coffee feel old, kid," I snapped. "Training as a
White Council apprentice won't be easy. None of this sassy teenage rebellion while you're in a
brown robe. You go to school, you study with me evenings and weekends. If I attend a Council
meeting, you keep your head down and your mouth shut. You have to be sure you want this."

"Is it worth it?" Molly asked.

"A lot of days I feel like I'm a pocket watch fob repairman," I admitted. "But it's a part of who I
am. See this pentagram? It's my faith: the powers of the elements bound by human will. I love the
Art too much to give it up."

"Wow, you sound like as much as a geek as Agatha," Molly said.
"The Star Wars references should have been a clue, kid," I said.

"I--" Molly swallowed heavily. "I know I could ask Mr. Bock for lessons. I want it to be you."

"I'm not a favorite with the Council," I warned. "As my apprentice, you'll be tarred with a pretty dirty brush."

"You're the one who got my sister through the worst time in her life," Molly said, squaring her shoulders. There was more of a hint of her mother in her now. "I don't want to move away just to learn. I want to be your apprentice."

"Padawan" I corrected. "Hey, I even have a lightsaber now."

"I promise I won't skate on my lessons," Molly insisted.

"Good."

"But if I step out of line, you can put me over your knee and spank me," Molly added, mischief twinkling in her blue eyes.

So this was how Justin had felt.
"I can't take this from you," I said, handing back the check.

"It's to cover the costs of her apprenticeship." Michael firmly pressed it back to me. "I drew it out of her college fund. It won't make much of dent. Agatha's investments provided enough money for all of our children's expenses."

"Kind of wish she'd offered me some stock tips," I said.

"She did, as I recall," Michael replied. "You said something about needing the money for Burger King."

Ouch. Talk about finding out the winning lottery ticket is in the jeans you put through the wash.

"We'll want regular reports about her progress and discipline." Michael smiled sadly. "First Agatha, then Molly. My little girls grow up so fast. I wish I could be there for them."

"What's keeping you from them?" I noticed the gym bag in the truck seat beside Michael. A small luggage tag had been looped around the handle. "Oh, come on. Now the Big Guy sends you a tape that will destroy itself in five seconds? Tell Him to take a number."

"I can't ignore the call," Michael said. "Agatha's safe. Butters said that with the malfunctioning locket's influence gone, her brain won't be driven into an uncontrollable fugue."

"She needs her tata there when she wakes up," I insisted.

"I left a video tape for her. I always do." Michael turned his head away. A fist clenched.

"Want me to come along for the ride?" I offered. "We can do a road trip afterwards. Sleazy roadhouses, jello shots off of stripper's stomachs. The works."

"It would give me a chance to counsel them to find a more fulfilling life," Michael said.

"You're like the king of anti-fun." I nodded. "I'll keep an eye on your family. Nothing'll touch them."

"Thank you." Michael laughed hoarsely. "What a month. At least there's no possible way this can escalate further."

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For a boneyard, Graceland Cemetery was a pretty place on a crisp late-October morning. It's as much a park as a resting place. People used to picnic on the lawns back in the 19th century. There are even walking tours to of all the historic mausoleums scattered around the place. I was still twitchy in spite of it being broad daylight. It might be because I've seen at after dark. The walls topped by a spiked wrought-iron fence weren't to keep out grave robbers. It was to pen in what roamed among the headstones after the sun set. Especially now so close to Halloween, when the walls between worlds thinned to a threadbare curtain. An itchy feelling had crawled over my skin when I'd passed by where we had fought the Nightmare a year ago.
Or maybe the heebee-jeebees came from meeting a necromantic spirit at my own grave.

Bianca St. Claire's gift to me was a grave reserved for moi in the expectation I'd soon be in it. Not a plot. It was an open grave six feet deep. Somehow it was kept that way in spite of Bianca having ended up buried under her own mansion after I'd pulled it down on top of her in a fury of fire and vengeful ghosts. There was even a fancy white marble headstone. Engraved in gold was a pentacle bordered top and bottom by an inscription: HERE LIES HARRY DRESDEN. HE DIED DOING THE RIGHT THING. Cute. Nearby was the statue of Inez Clarke-a girl in a frilly dress with a folded parasol leaning against one knee. Legend said the statue disappeared from its case every so often to play with kids visiting dead relatives. I wondered if I'd ever find her sitting on my headstone one night.

There was only the barest breath of arctic cold and a shimmer in the air when Mr. Mephistofelees opened a Way out of the Nevernever. He had exchanged mourning clothes for morning clothes. His outfit of black coat and trousers wouldn't have looked out of place on a Victorian hearse driver. A black ribbon dangled from his stovepipe hat. The clothes must be ectoplasm like the flesh mask he had crafted to conceal his sanctuary. The steel skeleton beneath wouldn't transform to slime; the blueprints I had found among Agatha's papers told me that the thing could make like Arnie even with its magic locked down. It bowed politely to Inez before before meeting me on the opposite side of the grave. Discreetly shaking out my shield bracelet, I sent the slightest whisper of power through my staff. A faint blue glow to match the ones in Mr. Mephistofelees' eyes suffused the carvings in the lightning-blasted oak.

"Dis vas to be a friendly meetink," Mr Mephistofelees said, steel teeth gleaming in the sunlight. "Ve both vant vat is best for de young Mistress."

"Ripping you out of that skull to fry in the sunlight would be a good start," I said.

"Mindless violence. Hyu do play to hyu strengths." Mr. Mephistofelees spreads its arms wide. "Take hyu best shot, vizard."

"Can't and you know it," I said. "If I do, Agatha's cogs will wonder why she let me get away with attacking one of her sworn servants."

"Undt a fight vud make so much noise." Mr. Mephistofelees winked. "Ve would not vant dose hypocrites among the White Council messink about. Pah. De fools. Dere magic is but parlour tricks compared to life and death."

"You're on notice, chuckles." I forked two fingers at my eyes, then stabbing them at him. "You try to trick Agatha into bringing back Kemmler, I'm coming after you with every weapon I have. The Summer Lady owes me a favor or two."

"Suspicious dot dis is a plot to revive de Master." Mr. Mephistofelees chuckled. "Vy, chust when I tink hyu is a crude thug, hyu show de hint of promise. De Master is dead. His apprentices? Of dem all, only vun showed any spine. Undt he is a traitor."

"And Agatha's going to be Miss Mass Graves? Not on my watch."

"Mmmm, no. De Mistress is not so derivative," Mr. Mephistofelees said. "I laid out hints of de Master's visdom to her. She threw dem back in my face, calling dem a vaste of time. She took hold of dem, her brilliance undt madness spinning terrible possibilities dot left me breathless vit de
presumption. Together we will rip apart the Master's lessons to rebuild them anew. There will be a new age of aetheric engineering that will eclipse thousand of years of the so-called Art of magic."

Clicking his heels, Kemmler's familiar shot out a stiff-armed Von Stronheim salute.

"MEINE FÜHRERIN!"

"And you're working for Waldo Butters?" I asked.

"Eh, the Nazi's may have been pathetic pawns in the Master's schemes." Mr. Mephistofolees shrugged. "They can't say they didn't have a fine grasp of dramatics and excellent dress sense. Although you are right. I would not wish to cause friction with such a promising minion as Dr. Butters."

"Stars and stones," I whispered, as it all clicked. "You aren't tempting her. She's trying to redeem you."

"Undt dot is why I heff pledged my loyalty to the House of Heterodyne," Mr. Mephistofolees said. The trilobite sigil emerged from the flesh mask. "A family of geniuses to teach and to guide. Vons dot are worthy of my lessons. Undt she will need such as I. She is vulnerable. We both know dot. So...truce, for her sake?"

I hated it.

I really did.

"Truce, Dr. Strangelove. But stay away from Molly. She's my apprentice."

"Hy vill respect professional boundaries." Mr. Mephistofolees bowed. "Undt we may be working together soon. The Mistress has so many fascinating ideas about your precious Susan's' affliction."

The spirit tap-danced down an invisible stairway through a shimmering Way conjured at the bottom of my grave. My breath hitched at what it had hinted. Susan Rodriguez had been a writer for a tabloid called the Midwest Arcane. An investigative talent that should have earned her a byline in the major papers had been hampered by her refusal to close her eyes to the supernatural. Her column appeared next to Elvis sightings instead of New York Times op-eds. She had constantly badgered me for the low-down on the occult. An eventful night involving a toad demon and some mislabeled potions had led to a more personal relationship. Right up until she had found out about Bianca's invitation to that damned Halloween party. I'd tried to warn her off. I hadn't said enough. Now she was infected with the blood of the Red Court. If she gave into the urges, she would become a murderous bat-faced blood-drinker. I'd spent months locked in my lab trying to find a cure. Bob had told me it was impossible.

Impossible to the knowledge he had access to.

But he hadn't had access to Kemmler's works, locked and buried behind ten tons of metaphorical concrete. Mr. Mephistofolees did.

What might be possible if Agatha combined forbidden necromantic magic with SCIENCE!??
The Wizard Dresden is invited to the annual Samhain Ball
as a valued guest of Svartalfheim, under the Laws of Hospitality
where it is hoped the Lady Agatha Heterodyne, lately named Carpenter
may grace us with a concert.
Master Etri
Chapter 37

Every community needs a place where everyone knows your name. Whether it's a dive bar on the corner or a trendy club downtown, people need some place where they can gather around to worship at the altar of ethanol. Chicago's magical community has MacAnally's. It's an honest-to-God tavern beneath a building not far from my office. A few steps down through a door fronting a clean-enough alley brings you down into a large room smelling of craft-brewed beer and food sizzling on the wood-fired grill behind the bar. Old ceiling fans whirl at a height that makes tall wizards nervous. Thirteen is a lucky number here: thirteen wooden pillars carved with fantastical scenes from Old World folklore, thirteen tables scattered at seeming random, thirteen stools at the crooked bar running along one wall. The layout is a kind of feng shui meant to diffuse magical energies from cranky wizards until the landlord's brews can calm them down.

It was early enough for the tavern to be empty. Mac’s filled up later in the evening. Mac nodded to me when I came in. He's a tall man with a shaved head that I've never seen sweat no matter how hot it got by the grill. The white apron he wore over dark pants and a white shirt was always spotless. He could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty. Mac cocked his head at a new addition to the pub: a sign on the wall reading ACCORDED NEUTRAL GROUND. It had gone up not long after the war between the vampire courts and the White Council had kicked off. The Unseelie Accords are the latest version of the formal agreements in the supernatural world. They govern challenges, diplomatic relations, and the rights accorded to those who matter. They're partly upheld through centuries of tradition. But mainly they are obeyed because they're signed under the authority of the Queen of Air and Darkness. Breaking them meant flouting Mab's authority. Which is a thought that will make even a heavyweight like a Red Court noble's metaphorical testicles shrink fast enough to form an event horizon.

Mac had enough time to cook my order before Mr. Etri's emissary came in. Ms. Luzhakna was a tall woman who was six feet with a little change. From the neck of her dark-blue tailored coat to the tips of her leather boots she was dressed with the understated elegance of those whose monthly clothes budgets top my annual gross income. The toned legs clad in her tailored slacks matched the rest of an athletic body. She moved across the wooden floor with the grace of a trained martial artist. Long, slightly wild hair shading towards auburn framed haughty European features that could have sent the Merlin scurrying back like a schoolboy caught picking his nose. Mac and I exchanged a meaningful glance. Silently, he placed a stemmed beer glass on a tray beside the two bottles of his brown ale and my steak sandwich. Mac's is strictly a self-service establishment. But I had a feeling that the concept was a foreign concept to Ms. Luzhakna. I also wished I'd gone home to change into my one good suit.

I scored a few points when I pulled out a chair for her at a table in the corner. She raised one eyebrow. No doubt she was shocked such a lowly American lout such as I had an idea of continental manners. She eyed the beer I poured for her with suspicion. Her loss. Snapping open a briefcase, she laid out a series of papers on the table between us. She sat back with the bored air of a noblewoman forced to slum it among the plebes. I imbibed my own beer straight from the bottle as God intended, though being an uncultured Yankee I wished Mac would chill his beer once in a while.

I definitely needed the fortification. The documentation provided by the svartalves was exhaustive. A reproduction of a document on vellum in Romanian in old-fashioned script was accompanied by two separate translations—one in English, the other in Latin—by professors from the University of Chicago who were part of the magical underground. In 1507, one Faustus Heterodyne had signed a
pact under that era's version of the Accords which had been countersigned by the three sponsors required to recognize a freeholding lord: the Erlking, Vlad Drakul, and a strange sigil that a note said was one Lasciel's. Beneath the last one's signature was some Hebrew that had a handy translation of "my love, we shall always have the sack of Jerusalem to remember".

"Gotterdammerung!" Luzhakna's accent had the trace of German in it. She took a second, deeper sip of ale. "Does our host allow one to purchase stock for one's own cellar?"

"Sure, if you're willing to lower yourself to bring the case to your own car," I said, taking a bite from my sandwich. "He doesn't make deliveries, princess."

"Simply Ms. Luzhakna for now." Her lips tightened. "Circumstances have disqualified me from the succession."

"You were a peer of Svartalfheim?" I asked. "So you Chose to become mortal."

"Heavens no, I am not a changeling," Ms. Luzhakna replied. "I am of the royal line of Holfung-Borzoi. A small principality that you no doubt would not have heard of. Entirely mortal with a proper pedigree."

"My mistake." Standing up, I clicked my heels before taking her hand to kiss the knuckles. "You're a much friendlier sort of royalty than the last Queen I met."

"Not that many have called me that, though I understand how I stand in comparison to her." Luzhakna was cagey enough not to say certain names in public. "I assume this documentation will satisfy the White Council of the Lady Heterodyne's bonafides. Unless she proclaims a writ of renunciation, House Heterodyne's freehold is assured in this realm under the current arrangements."

"It figures that it would cross alternate universe barriers." I paused. "Ms. Luzhakna, can I ask where Holfung-Borzoi is? And on which Earth?"

"Well-spotted, Wizard Dresden," Ms. Luzhakna said. She idly swirled her beer in its glass, eyes downcast. "Yes. I am from the Europa of the Heterodynes. How did could you tell?"

"Some of your wording echoed Agatha's hints when she talked about her home," I explained. "So there are stable Ways between our Earths."

"Hardly. It would be incredibly difficult for even your Senior Council to attempt such a crossing." She sipped more of Mac's ale. "Only the most powerful of entities or a particularly gifted Spark could do so. My crossing to this realm was due to a debt I owe Mr. Etri."

"I didn't think the svartalves went in for slavery," I said. "Can I help?"

"You're more of a gentleman than I expected. No, I am here out of a sense of honour." She smiled sadly. "After an unfortunate accident, I had to declare myself unable to stand as princess in the succession. Two friends of mine convinced me to join them on an expedition to find hidden civilizations. Quite common in Europa. Finding them is something of a sport."

"I'm guessing you took one wrong turn at Albequerque," I said.

"More of the nature of three death traps, a chasm, and a weak spot leading into the Nevernever to
"I know a few things about owing favors," I said.

"It's hardly a chore. As princess, I could well have been married to some hideous dwarf." Ms. Luzhakna smiled wickedly. "Mr. Etri might not be the second incarnation of Andronicus Valois. But being his companion and servant is far less of a burden than if I had had to marry some of the boors among the Fifty Families."

"Damn. His gain, my loss."

"Well, it is not as if I was exclusively sworn to him in that manner." She settled back in her chair, letting her coat fall open to reveal a well-fitted silk blouse. Really, really well-fitted. "It is refreshing to meet both a man gallant enough to start a war over a point of principle and knowing the proper courtesies. If only you could dance."

"Been a while since I last rhumba'd, but you know what they say about bicycles." I drank a hefty gulp of beer to cover up a suddenly dry throat.

"Really? Perhaps I shall reserve a spot on my card for the ball." Ms Luzhakna scribbled down a note on the back of a business card with a fountain pen. "The Samhain Ball is white tie. Leave the duster at home. This tailor does excellent, quick work. Have the tab sent to me for payment."

"That's generous of you, Ms. Luzhakna."

"Do call me Zulenna."

Um.

I glanced at Mac.

He had a thumb up.

I quickly filled my mouth with meat and bread before I said something to screw up the miracle that I had talked myself into a date.

The prospect of being on Her Highness Call-Me-Zulenna's dance card made me slightly less leery of attending the Samhain Ball. The idea still didn't fill me with joyous anticipation. Not since the last time I'd attended a party on Halloween. I didn't fear the svartalves as I had Bianca St. Claire. There was no bad blood that I knew of between Svartalfheim and myself. If there had been, they wouldn't have bothered with elaborate schemes to trap me. They would just have had me swallowed up by the earth or gutted me in a duel. Svartalves had a refreshing bluntness compared to the usual run of faeries and monsters who featured in my rogues gallery. What scared me down to my bones was the implications of Agatha being exposed so quickly to some seriously dangerous beings. The Heterodynes must have had a lot of weight behind them to rank as freeholding lords who could get the Erlking to vouch for them. That hinted that they could have made some very nasty enemies among beings who nursed grudges for millennia. The svartalves might well be putting her on a platter with an apple in her mouth.

I offered Call-Me-Zulenna my arm when we finished out drinks. If I was playing the chivalrous
rogue, I might as well be consistent in it. She accepted it with the grace of a noblewoman humouring a lowly peon. I was very glad I’d walked here instead of driving in the Dippy Bug. I’m not sure my newfound gallant mystique in her eyes could have survived my car’s new decoration scheme. Parked in the tiny lot of Mac’s place was a high-end car from Die Vaterland that looked as if it could break interstate speed limits standing still. Obviously serving Svartalfheim had its perks if that was the company car. Oh, yeah. The Dippy Bug was staying parked at the boarding house. There was no way I was going to show up at the ball in the Blue Beetle in that state. Maybe I could change in the bathrooms at Svartalf Central after cabbing it over.

The alley was in shadow. That must have been how the Reds could have attacked.

A piercing scream ripped through the air as a Red hit team emerged from under veils. Beneath their flesh masks, the vampires of the Red Court are batlike nightmares of flabby black skin and fanged maws dripping narcotic venom. Pink, forked tongues whipped through the air. I barely had my shield up in time before one slammed into it with an impact that sent a surge of warmth through the bracelet on my left wrist. That left me open for the other Red that vaulted out from cover behind Das Auto. I hunched down ready to brace for an onslaught of clawed fury when its distended belly exploded in a burst of gore accompanied by a stutter of automatic gunfire. In Zulenna’s left hand was a tiny little German submachinegun that was the little brother to the one’s I’d seen used by hostage rescue teams. Reaching under her coat, she whipped out a broadsword with a basket hilt as if she’d been expecting to attend tea and Kurgan. She beheaded the wounded vampire with a single stroke while braining another with her briefcase.

I reached for my birthday gift.

VRRRRRRRRM.

It turns out cutting a vampire in half with a lightsaber is exactly as awesome as expected.

Slightly less awesome was stumbling because of the unexpected lack of weight and cutting the front half of Zulenna’s car in two.

A shotgun blast boom in the close confines of the alley. One Red’s head blew apart as buckshot turned it into chunky salsa. The survivors screeched in rage before skedaddling down a manhole cover, From behind a dumpster emerged the bulk of Cujo Hendricks. In his hands was a massive scattergun with a drum magazine. Probably illegal, but then he was a freaking criminal. The rumble of tuned Detroit iron heralded the arrival of a less-than-welcome Cadillac. Gentleman John Marcone stepped out as his new flunkette opened the door for him. I noticed that Zulenna had shifted her teeny submachinegun’s barrel at the Amazonian blonde. Cold distaste was mirrored by an equal measure of frowning on Ms. Gard’s part. Oh, great. History between them. Well, at least she wasn’t focusing on wizarding-inspired increases in her automobile insurance premiums. Marcone looked over the scene of carnage with deceptively-mild green eyes.

"Mr. Dresden. I do believe you could use a lift."

Fantastic.
The howl of distant sirens coming closer reminded me that I was standing in a blood-stained alley with brass from an illegal automatic weapon scattered on the ground. I wasn't exactly a darling with the upper brass of the Chicago police. Being linked with Murphy and being right about the supernatural were two of my greater sins in their eyes. I foresaw a lively time in an interrogation room if I stuck around. Zulenna must have come to the same conclusion. Grumbling in Russian, she flicked blood off her sword before sliding it into a sheathe hung from a baldric. Subtle magics of suggestion and holomancy wove a veil that hid it from casual observation. She gave her bisected car an annoyed look before hauling a small carry-on bag out of the front passenger seat well.

Marcone's pet Amazon seemed about to demand Zulenna hand over gun and sword before he waved it off with a casual gesture. He must have had it upgraded since the first time I'd been in it, during the Victor Sells case. It had been stretched out enough to become a limo with a bench seat along a new driver's partition. The four of us fit inside, though with my long legs it was pretty snug. Marcone sat facing us with Gard by his side with the dignity of an emperor. I couldn't help thinking of what I had seen in the soulgaze he had tricked me into. A tiger with cool green eyes had lounged on a throne before the skyline of Chicago behind it. Roman legionnaires bearing spears and holstered pistols stood at attention on the steps leading down from the throne; carved into the stone were dollar bills, syringes, and women in skimpy clothing offering themselves up. Its claws were stained with blood. Beneath one paw was a shadowy figure like a doll. It had bared its fangs when I'd tried to make it out.

Two cars parked at either end of the alley screeched away with spinning tires and revving engines. Hendricks drove away at a normal speed and merged with street traffic. The Cadillac melted into the chaos of early rush hour. I had a sudden twinge of nervousness that I was being taken for a ride in the traditional sense in the Outfit. I doubted Marcone really meant me any harm. Rumour was he was ballsy enough to do his own executions. But if he'd meant to do that, Zulenna and I would have been kneeling in a deserted warehouse instead of his personal car. We rode in silence as Hendricks made one random turn after another. For once, Marcone wasn't paying me much attention. Instead he stared hard at her left arm. A claw had ripped open her jacket and blouse without breaking the skin.

Through the gap I could see a pattern of stitching that circled her upper arm.

"Pardon my curiosity, Ms. Luzhakna," Marcone said. "May I ask the nature of the operation? I've seen such stitching before on a man I was apprenticed to years before."

"You've encountered another construct?" Zulenna asked.

"One Hieronymus Bock, who taught me many of the fundamentals of my trade," Marcone replied.

"Mechanicsburger who ended up stranded here," I muttered to her.

"A fascinating man with a particular talent with a straight razor," Marcone continued. "I learned much from him. Not merely the hows, but the whys. He spoke at times of the masters he once served. Of honor and loyalty owed in turn to vassal and lord. It was an excellent school in employee relationships."

"The loyalty of those who served the Old Masters was legendary," Zulenna said.
"He never mentioned their names. I think I know it now," Marcone said. "The Heterodynes. Monoc Securities provided a most enlightening precis on their history."

"I'm sure the old goat in Oslo has a file on them," Zulenna said.

"You only assumed I was his daughter," Miss Gard said. "Although he does like to me to call him Daddy."

"History?" I asked.

"Old and buried," Zulenna said, with a glare that hinted she'd like to have Gard six feet under.

"I wish Agatha Carpenter--my mistake, Agatha Heterodyne--all the best with her work." Marcone handed a file folder to Zulenna. "As you may confirm for Mr. Dresden, I have gifted the building she has...appropriated to a foundation dedicated to supporting promising young inventors."

"The Brighter Future Society," Zulenna said. "It does seem to be in order. I am sure that I will find no connection to you in any of the paperwork."

"Do you honestly think I believe you don't want your hooks in her?" I said. "She'll never work for you, Marcone. She'd die before helping a criminal scumbag like you."

"I would never want her to compromise her principles," Marcone said. "Only that she continue her work in certain fields she is already interested in. And that she has the wisdom to tend to her own pastures, leaving me to mine."

Zulenna tipped back her head and laughed.

"Is something amusing, Ms. Luzhakna? Marcone cocked his head.

"You didn't read the file on the Heterodynes well enough, sir," Zulenna said. "Lady Agatha has been living here long enough to regard this city as her home. Her kind are notoriously territorial. Her house, even more so."

"Guess what, Johnnie-boy?" I said. "You're in her town now."

"Do advise her about how messy territorial disputes can be, Mr. Dresden," Marcone said without batting an eye.

The Cadillac parked at the corner of the block where the svartalves kept their Chicago guildhall. It was a small mansion dwarfed by the towers on either side of it; the lawns within the spiked iron fences were still green in spite of the late October chill that gripped the city. The Blue Beetle was parked just up the street. Marcone smiled innocently at that. Jerk. Although I admitted it was convenient. Zulenna smirked at it as she passed it heading for the gates at the front of the property.

I waited until Marcone's land barge had pulled away before having letting the post-fight shakes out in the privacy of the Beetle. I'm fine when there's a fight on. It's the aftermath when what passes for my brain catches up that it hits me. Stars and stones, the war was still on. There hadn't been as much attention directed at me since the case at Midsummer. There had been an uneasy truce between the Reds and the White Council since Mab had granted safe Ways through Winter's territory in the Nevernever to the Council. The hit team had been a sign that some tat was being
personally visited on me for the tit I'd handed Bianca last Halloween.

I only intended to do a quick drive-by of the Carpenter place. I didn't want to draw down heat from my personal problems onto Micheal's family. The peace of the Colonial house made me pause. I stepped out into the afternoon sunlight slanting through a tree still in leaf in his yard. Still the same oasis in the middle of Chicago. Well, not the same. There was a new addition on the white picket fence. What looked tiny lightning rods poked up out of the wood. There was also a new weathervane with a certain Ming the Merciless look on the roof. My magical senses picked up the sparkfire of other, hidden mechanisms around the property.

Oh, yeah. Dingus' crew had been busy.

"You should see the new play-set in the back yard." Charity Carpenter came out to the front gate. "I think the merry-go-round can level a small town."

"Agatha's motto is 'praise God, and pack on the death rays'?" I said. "Just cruised by to see how you were. Michael asked me to check up on you while he was away. I'll head off to the Dresdencave."

"Don't be stupid. Come in, dinner is waiting," Charity said.

"Didn't think you wanted to have a bad influence hanging around," I replied.

"We have to talk about Molly's schooling," Charity said. "And Agatha might wake at any time. You should have a chance to be there when she does."

In one of Charity's hands was a large envelope with the seal of Svartalheim, broken open.

"The coggs delivered this to me this morning." Beneath her poise I could see the fear. "What does this mean for my little girl?"
"This is Sir Bunn," Amanda Carpenter said, presenting each member of her court in turn. "This is our jester Lord Crazypants, and this is Princess Stompyboots. She used to be Agatha's princess before she was mine."

"Those are some serious stompers," I said, glancing at the spikes on the soles of the stuffed clank doll. "So, you get together and have princess parties with Stompyboots?"

"Silly Bill." The curly-haired blonde moppet sniffed haughtily. "I'm a queen, not a princess. Princesses lie around and wait for rescue by princes."

"While queens kick a--uh, bottom and take names," I replied.

"Bill almost said a naughty word, Sir Bunn!" Amanda giggled. Reaching over, she hefted an oversized sceptre painted pink and dotted with rhinestones. "Queens rule wisely from their thrones and smite their enemies with righteous fire. This is my ceremonial mace. Agatha made it for me!"

"I guessed you took royalty lessons from her," I said. "She's going to be okay, you know that, 'manda?"

"Silly Bill, sure she is," Amanda said. "She's Agatha. She's just napping after SCIENCE! Now, more tea?"

"'Happiness is a warm death ray,'," Amanda quoted from memory. "'But always have a back-up method of dealing with captors. Be cute, but don't be harmless'. Don't worry, Bill, I didn't put in the arsenic. I'm not an evil queen. Daddy wouldn't like that."

I glanced at the dolls seated around the table with me. The bunny in chainmail and tabard kept a poker muzzle, while the fangy smile of the jester betrayed amusement at it all. Princess Stompyboots sat quietly holding the flower-decaled plate of Ho Ho's. I had a feeling that life in Queen Mandy's court rivaled Maeve's for unexpected fun. Internally shrugging, I sipped the lukewarm iced tea that Mandy had served out of a toy teapot and nibbled a swiss roll. The taste of almonds was my imagination. Probably. Michael's second-youngest daughter sat in clashing purple pajama tops with orange bottoms with her sceptre-mace in her lap. Which under the paint was likely steel, all the better to beat to death monsters from under the bed if they tried for a toe-nibble after hours. Her future boyfriends were going to have an interesting time when she started dating.

Amanda slipped her hand in mine when I lead her to the bathroom. I'd expected Charity to be her before-bed escort. But apparently it was Michael who escorted her whenever he was home. Somehow the five-year-old girl had decided that silly Mr. Bill--"we already have a Harry"--was
coming off the bench for daddy duties tonight. I had to bend my knees to hold her hand on the way
down the hall. That earned me another giggle from Queen Mandy. She endured my fumbling with
the night's routines with regal grace. I was supposed to use the sparkly mint toothpaste, and forgot
to check the back of her mouth for errant tooth-fairies. The nightly cuddle before lights out? Too
bony, she declared. Although she approved of how I read her a chapter of *The Heterodyne Boys
and the Turbines of Atlantis*. Apparently I had a great Barry Heterodyne voice and was convincing
in the supporting role of the telepathic walrus.

I listened outside her room until Amanda had fallen asleep. It was something Michael would do.

I was ready to sack out for the night myself. The jelly rolls Amanda had fed me combined with the
huge dinner Charity had whipped up hit my still slightly-hungover brain with a one-two punch. I
had only watched as Charity had handled the chaos that was the Carpenter brood at the dinner
table. Mab had handled her forces upon the battlefield with less skill than Charity had with several
squabbling kids. At least now they were bedding down for the night. Light spilled out from under
the door of the room David and Matthew shared, along with Alicia’s next to them. Hope's was
dark. The baby monitor mounted on the walls outside the nursery next to the bedroom carried the
soft burbling of my namesake into the upstairs hallway. I lingered for a few minutes at the door
nearest to the stairs, next to Charity’s sewing room. It had been left ajar. Soft breathing mixed with
equations mumbled in a sleepy murmur told me Agatha was still sleeping off her sparky bender.

A fire had been lit on the hearth. Someone had thoughtfully set out an opened bottle of Mac's dark-
chilled, thank you very much--on a coaster on the table. Sipping it, I stopped by the doorway
leading to the kitchen. The shadows hid me from Charity and Molly as they sat together by the
sink. Several strands of Molly's hair were rolled up in tinfoil curlers. The rubber gloves Charity
wore were stained aquamarine from the bottle of hair dye resting on the lip of the sink. Molly's
mom had a patient smile on her lips as her daughter giggled nervously as her blonde hair was
streaked in a colour not found in nature outside of blue gas giants. On the huge kitchen table were
stacks of books. There was Ebenezer’s work along with several ones that had "gnostic" in their
titles. There were also a couple of psychology textbooks among them as well.

Charity slipped into the darkened living room a few minutes later. Firelight glinted off the
wineglass in one hand. She sipped her glass of red slowly.

"Molly's decided to study psychiatry in university," Charity said. "She thinks the sensitive nature
of her talent will help her with her patients. Would the Council object to that, Harry?"

"You've got the wrong guy," I said. "My name now is Bill."

"Thank you for helping with Amanda," Charity said. "Thank you for helping with everything this
past week."

"We already had this conversation. I owed it to Michael." I savored the last gulp of my beer. "No,
the Council won't have a problem as long as Molly doesn't actually practice psychomancy. Passive
reading is fine."

"Good," Charity stared into the fire. "I called Father Forthill earlier today when Agatha's steward
showed me the contract of Faustus' treaty of freeholding. Lasciel is of the Fallen. The Temptress.
The Webweaver. And she is one of Agatha's ancestors."

Logs crackled in the fire.
"I know I should be yelling 'what' in horror," I said, "but at this point, it doesn't surprise me at all."

"It was in the lore recorded by Mr. Bock's father," Charity continued. "There is a tale of a princess of Hell trying to seduce Faustus, and in turn being seduced by him. He somehow incarnated a fragment of her in a mortal vessel to live with as one of his chief wives and concubines."

"Sounds like the sort of romance the Heterodynes were into," I said. "There was this bit in the book about a Queen of Skral who sent two hundred of her troops to ambush another Heterodyne as foreplay."

"Warrior homuculi," Charity corrected. "It still doesn't change my feelings about her. But this legacy places her in so much danger. That is why I wish to be your date this Halloween when you attend this ball she has been invited to."

"You. Me. Date." I rolled the bottle between my palms. "Charity, even aside from how completely wrong that sentence is? The svartalves lust for beautiful women. You're exposing yourself to some powerful creatures."

"No more than Agatha is." Charity's blue eyes were steel in the firelight. "I am not leaving her at their mercy."

"I'm not so sure she'll be at their mercy." I nodded to Molly, visible at the table reading a book. "Decided to lighten up a little on the conformity?"

"A little hair-dye never hurt anyone." Charity shrugged. "It's almost Halloween."

"Next you'll be telling me you're okay with her piercings," I said.

"Piercings?" Charity's head whipped around towards the kitchen. "Molly Carpenter, what have you done to yourself?"

"Dammit, sensei, you narced on me! FOUL!"

Maybe it was time to head for bed.

"And you knew about it, Mr. Dresden?"

Too late.

++++

A weight on the couch beside me.

I opened my eyes to the embers smoldering on the hearth.

In the half-light, red-gold hair shimmered.

Green eyes stared into mine.

"Harry," Agatha said. "We should talk."
She was dressed in a rumpled Miskatonic University sweatshirt and pajama bottoms dotted with little Enterprises. Her hair was a wild mess. Her features were still drawn with exhaustion from days without sleep. Stars and stones, she was beautiful. Agatha Heterodyne Carpenter was truly awake for the first time in her life. Looking back, there had always been that hint of fog clouding her mind. There had been hesitancy and fear and embarrassment holding her back. That was gone now. The locket's hold was shattered. It was almost physically painful to meet her gaze even after we had stared into each other's souls Her green eyes were alive with the determination I'd seen in Murphy on the mat, the intelligence in Elaine's when we'd practiced a new technique, the relentless fire in Susan's when she was badgering me for a juicy story.

I cupped her cheek with one hand.

Whatever she was about to say faded out when we both decided that a heartfelt conversation wasn't going to cut it.

I hadn't fumbled so much since those late-night biology experiment in Justin's home. Noses bumped. Hands slipped. Her glasses flew off to land with a clatter by the hearth. Weight settled in my lap as she straddled me. Her thighs clamped tight for a firm hold while her arms wound around my neck. Teeth drew blood from my lower lip when I slipped my hands beneath her sweatshirt. I traced the corded muscles of her back with my fingertips. So strong, so alive. The last time I had held a woman in my arms was Aurora dying beneath me from cold steel. Before that Elaine bleeding out from Slate's attack. Before that there had only been the hissing and gibbering and shame from what the creatures had done to me beneath Bianca's mansion. I held tight against Agatha as the hunting cry of a newly-born vampire shrieked in my brain.

I stood in the great cathedral again. The vast tower of steel and glass in its center blazed with blue energy. I knew what it was now: life. It was pure distilled life-energy that would consume me if it escaped. I didn't care if it did. Turning about, I filled my mind with the terrible magnificence of the mechanisms within the vast chamber. All that I had seen in the night sky of Agatha's soul—the clarity of knowing the universe entire—was rendered her in engines and pipes and gears and conduits. It thrummed with power that matched the beat of my own weak heart. Faintly I heard the crack of shattering glass. In slow motion, fragments of the exploding tower cut me to ribbons. The blue energy engulfed my broken body. Reviving it. Rebuilding it. Purifying it.

"Agatha. You're awake."

As one, Agatha and I swiveled our heads around to find Charity in robe and mimmoth slippers standing on the upstairs landing.

"This is going to make our date on Halloween awkward, isn't it?" I croaked out.

"YOU HAVE A DATE WITH MY MOM?"

"Honey." Charity's tone was calm. Almost soothing. "Are you in love with him?"

"I don't know," Agatha whispered. "I feel-- I can feel. I finally can feel. He freed me, Mama. I'm not stupid, I'm not broken anymore."
"Shhhh, baby." Charity plucked her from my arms. She rocked her gently.

"I should go," Agatha said into her shoulder. "I keep causing you so much trouble. You must be so ashamed of me."

"No. You have never, ever shamed me." Charity rubbed circles in her back. "The baby is fussing. I think he wants his big sister."

"Yes, Mama." Agatha leaned back. "Did I create a race of jet-powered aerial porcines? Because it almost sounded as if you were dating Harry."


I surreptitiously checked to see that my jeans were still on as Agatha fled up to the nursery.

"Eighteen. They grow up so fast," Charity said. "All I will ask you is this: will you show her the same respect that you have shown her the past few days?"

"I swear on my power," I said.

"Good." Charity smiled. "Later, we'll help you load the couch in my husband's truck to bring home with you."

"Actually, I already have a--"

"Harry, either you take this couch home with you or else I will drag it into the back yard to cleanse it with holy fire. With you on top of the pyre."

"I'll find the room."

When I decided enough blood had flowed back into my body, I staggered into the garage at the back of the Carpenter property. Using the bathroom upstairs while Agatha was up there sounded like a fine way to commit suicide. Michael had his workshop set up in the old garage. Screwing a garden hose into the faucet outside, I threaded it through a window and over a ceiling beam. The improvised shower in icy-cold water with a bar of grimy soap from the sink where he washed up after projects was a long one. I stayed under the flow for a long time watching the water spiral down the drain in the center of the concrete floor. I faintly heard the cries of kids bouncing around the house and the growl of the schoolbus coming to pick up the older ones.

I waited some more as I became a hypothermic prune until I was sure I heard Charity's minivan head out. I peeked out just to be sure in case Charity had come to her senses and decided to unload that Gatling gun into my heathen, fornicating carcass. Shivering, I dried myself with a frayed shop towel not much softer than the sandpaper on the shelves nearby. I changed back into the jeans from last night and a fresh checked shirt Charity had bought on the chance I might have to stay overnight. Crossing the back yard, I noticed light was shining out of an attic window. I fussed around in the kitchen with the Coffee Maker of the Gods until I gave into the inevitable. The trapdoor to Agatha's old lab was open. Accordion and clarinet blasted out from above.

Agatha sat at a workbench in a dark green twill dress and shirtwaist beneath a lab coat. She had snapped a pair of magnifying lenses on a headband over her glasses. The locket's innards were exposed to the watchmaker's tools she used to pluck out the mechanisms. A video camera recorded the disassembly as she laid out the pieces with steady, precise movements. As she bent over to look
closer at a cracked tuning fork, a chain around her neck dangled free for a moment. On it was a single silver ring with hands clasping a crowned heart.

"I miss Susan," I said, as the polka tune faded out. "I don't know what I'd do if she came back right now."

"I just realized how much I love Waldo." Agatha tucked the chain under the collar of her starched blouse. "Red fire, of course the first time I have a love life, I end up in some ridiculous love triangle. After, I'm a Heterodyne, heir to the most overblown Mary Sues of Europan supervillainy."

"I thought you would have smashed that," I said.

"What, are you insane?" Agatha looked horrified. "This is a priceless example of the work of a master Spark. It's irreplaceable. It begs study to find out how it raped my mind since I was five years old."

"Your uncle was scared out of his mind, on the run," I said. "You would have killed yourself breaking through that young."

"Tata would say I should forgive him." Agatha snapped the empty casing shut. "Someday I will. Not today, and not for a long time."

"You replaced the pictures," I said, as she opened up the cameo compartment.

"Mama and Tata are my parents." Agatha ran a thumb over the glass separating two tintype-style photos of Michael and Charity. "I can't be Agatha Heterodyne Carpenter anymore. But I will always be Agatha Carpenter Heterodyne."

"You wanted to talk, earlier," I said. "We definitely have to. Not just about the svartalves and what it means to be a freeholding lord. Marcone has your number. He gave a message for me to deliver yesterday. He wants you to stick to your knitting."

"Yes, I've already contacted my legal counsel at Smith, Cohen, and Mackelroy." Agatha spun the trilobite locket in her fingers. "My answer to the good gentleman will be what I intend to tell the inhuman, murderous freaks that infest this city."

Agatha pinned the locket in place at her throat.

"Whatever else you can say about the Old Heterodynes, they took care of their town and their own to a fault." Agatha said. "Chicago is my home. My town. My responsibility. And if anyone wants to make trouble in this burg, they're going to find out what a madgirl can really do."
The standard defence of a White Council wizard against mental assault is a smooth stone tower built of one's very will. Being who she was, Agatha's version was rather more impressive. Within a landscape of mountain peaks whose crags were so sharp they cut the metaphorical winds in two was a fortress of reason and willpower forged out of a dark crystal that could have tanked tactical nuclear artillery in the real world. There wasn't just one tower. Instead, five towers that might have come from a medieval architect who had been granted a future vision of the Sears Tower rose from a curtain wall that was set atop a hill. Flying bridges linking the towers formed a classic pentacle within a circle akin to my mother's necklace. Within the interior pentagon of the design was the Wardencliff Edge Tower with a gothic edge. Everywhere were gargoyle-themed clanks and weapons emplacements. The very stones of the fortress were mortared with complex wards based on designs created by the Catholic Church against threats mixed with complex mathematical equations. From within the central keep thrummed sparkfire conducted outward through power conduits to the castle's defenses and those hidden within the peaks around it.

It fell apart the second I planted a kiss upon her lips.

Agatha made a noise that was part protest and part moan beneath mine. She snapped away with green eyes still clouded from the communion spell that allowed us to share a mindscape. Arms flailing wildly, she tumbled off the couch with legs still locked Indian-style. Or was that First Nations-style in these modern times? I chivalrously extended a hand to help her up. Agatha slapped it away, cheeks flushed, while she unkinked her crossed legs. Under her breath she muttered in a stream of Romanian and German that had the whiff of brimstone about it. No doubt it was a diatribe about sneaky wizards who didn't play fair. She showed her back to me as she stomped over to the sink to splash water over her face. Awareness came back to her when the cold water washed away the last of the meditation she had shared with me over the past few hours.

Yawning, I checked the clock mounted on the opposite wall. It was an old project of Agatha's that she had finally gotten working this morning: a cuckoo clock whose case was carved to resemble Rockefeller Chapel. Two small doors beneath the clock dial in the bell tower snapped open to reveal a clockwork mimmoth who trumpeted seven times. Huh. We had spent longer than I had thought on our first mental self-defense class. Time could get as screwy as the Nevernever within a mindscape. I unfolded myself from my own lotus position on the Couch of Shame. Damn thing had been a pain in the ass to haul up the steps to Agatha's apartment. It had replaced the futon beneath the bull's-eye window. That was now at the back of the apartment across from bathtub and sink that were now hidden behind Chinese-style screens. On one wall opposite the door was an electric cooking range and fridge that had been delivered days ago. Along the other long wall was a workbench from the attic lab at the Carpenter's. Hanging on the walls between the sci-fi posters were various death rays from the firehouse's armory along with more medieval items of pain delivery.

"That was a low blow, taking advantage of an innocent maiden's passions," Agatha said, coming from behind the screen.

"The villains who will try to snake into your mind will do that," I said. "Pain's a favorite. But there's plenty of bad guys who use lust and pleasure to break through psychic defenses."

"Point," Agatha conceded. "There's a big difference between holding a mental construct during meditation and maintaining it during combat."
"What we were practising was slo-mo kata," I said. "Don't sell yourself short, Ag. Most apprentices take months to learn how to hold together a simple tower of will. You whipped up Helm's Deep crossed with the Death Star your first try."

"Well, the theory your mentor taught you is similar to the Memory Cathedral technique," Agatha said. "I simply adapted that to visualizing a concentric-defense castle."

"Medieval castles didn't have turbolasers," I said.

"Cover does not replace return fire," Agatha replied. "You should talk this over with Mr. Mephistofelees. He apparently knows several advanced techniques not taught by the White Council."

"That's because his old boss was a freaking necromancer,' I said. "Ag, that thing is dangerous as hell to have on your payroll. The Wardens hear about it, they'll jump down your throat with everything they can spare. Being a freeholding lord just means they slip the demand under your door a second before they kick it in."

"Its knowledge could help save Susan and others like her," Agatha said. "And if it is a monster, it is a monster that has sworn service to the House of Heterodyne. I won't cast it out anymore than I would Albrecht."

"All I'm saying is good intentions and paving stones," I said quietly. "Necromancy is a corruption of life itself. Even a straight channeling it through a ritual is a violation of the Laws. I'm not sure even channeling it through a sparky device would keep you safe."

"I'm not planning on directly using thanatoic energies," Agatha said. "And if I do happen to become a raving lunatic planning on leading a zombie army against all who oppose me, I'm sure you'll be right behind me to smack me upside the head with your staff."

"Seems a waste of good staff work," I replied, waggling my eyebrows.

It took just a second for the pfenning to drop.

"Mama was right, you're a degenerate," Agatha said, cheeks ablaze. Then her lips peeled back in a predatory grin. "Then again, perhaps we should work on desensitizing me against certain stimuli."

"Why, Mizz Heterodyne, I think you're a-tryin' to sed--oooof!"

For the record, Agatha's quite a handful of woman.

The mimmoth-clock trumpeted eight by the time we came up for air. Hand to whatever god was around, I was entirely respectful of the boundaries of an inexperienced young lady. Who might not have been up to speed on technique, but learned very damn quickly on the fly. We broke off the experimentation with considerable reluctance and a couple of buttons undone on her blouse. Agatha and I sat together on the couch with finger interlaced. She was trembling. I was shaking. I hadn't felt like this in a long, long time. It hadn't even been like this with Susan. There was a newness--a raw craving for experience--that I had only felt with Elaine.

Then as one our stomachs rumbled. We both collapsed into giggles. Well, I didn't. Mere mortals giggle. Wizards cackle. We had been so busy with me giving her the Cliff's Notes of the
supernatural world and psychic defense lessons that we had skipped lunch. The last meal we had was hitting an IHOP for a late breakfast on the way back to her place. Taking time for one last lip lock, we got up to head down for a bite at my apartment. There were enough fixings in the icebox for a decent meal, with a hot shower for the next morning thrown in on top of it.

I had my blasting rod in hand while I waited for Agatha to tool up. The ambush by the Reds outside McAnally's had driven home the lesson that the war was still on. Hell's bells, Agatha's outing as a Heterodyne meant she was a tasty target in her own right. Chicago gun laws meant she couldn't pack something like my Dirty Harry peacekeeper when heading out for dark. Luckily, the law didn't outlaw concealed carry of what appeared to be a movie prop. The death ray she stuck into a holster sewn into a greatcoat pocket was more or less a miniature version of Han Solo's blaster with a few extra golden art-deco flourishes. Agatha might get told off by a cop if it were discovered during a pat-down. But outside of SI, no cop would suspect a "toy raygun" could probably punch through an engine block.

It was beneath me to be jealous. I already had a lightsaber.

Okay. I might be greedy enough to want a DL-44 heavy blaster pistol, too.

I was first down the stairs with my shield bracelet shook out in case there were Reds waiting in the darkness. Agatha followed behind like the innocent straight she wasn't, one hand ready to quick-draw her pocket of pain. Says something about my life that a simple walk down to my apartment involved infantry drills. That's what you get when you become an investigative wizard. Fun, fun fun. Although I was less worried about batlike blood drinkers than being swarmed by the media. So far no-one had connected the mystery organ player at Rockefeller Chapel to Agatha. Everyone's memories of that day had been scrambled by the joyful chaos. Several fakes who had come forward claiming to be the player had confused the issue.

Being hunted by Red Court vampires was one thing.

Compared to the media, at least the vamps had some sense of mercy.

We made it downstairs without an ambush by any sort of horror. Agatha covered my back while I disarmed my wards. She must have gone to the Karrin Murphy school of dating. I shoved open my door bracing myself for Mister to slam against my shins before he went out for an evening ramble.

It didn't come.

Firelight danced in the hearth from a fire I hadn't laid. My will coalesced into an invisible quarter dome of raw force. Ozone crackled in the air right beside my right ear when Agatha aimed her death ray over my shoulder. A high-pitched whine like Satan's beehive climbed up into the ultrasonic as it powered up. Forget punching through an engine block. My senses detected energies that could probably mission kill a light tank.

Mister rumbled happily as sharp nails played through his fur. His green eyes glowed just like the amber eyes of the one scratching behind his ears. Like my true landlord, the pupils of those eyes were vertical slits. A gown of green silk slit up one thigh clung to curves that would have made any supermodel commit suicide out of envy. Her features were inhumanly beautiful--high cheekbones and lush red lips the colour of primroses. As she looked up from the fire, they opened to reveal sharp fangs.

Oh. Super.
"Godmother," I said, lowering my shield. "This is such a surprise. I thought we had a deal, even if you sold my debt to Mab."

"La, child," the Leanansidhe said. "I still have a duty to look in upon you, do I not?"

"You."

Uh-oh.

"Agatha, no," I hissed. "She's here as a guest. You try anything, she'll squash you like a bug."

"She stole my father's sword intending to destroy--"

"Oh!" Lea clapped her hands. "I thought my children by him had died. Grandchild, it is wonderful that my blood still lives."

"...WHAT?!"

"I always enjoy our visits, godson," Lea said, as my stomach suddenly lost all appetite. "But truly, I am here to see my grandchild."

Red lips twisted up in joy.

"And you dally with him, yet! Where shall we hold the wedding?"

You know, there's a reason I used to be a panda.
Chapter 42

I had a pretty good mental image of my faerie godmother. She had either been the pleasant woman who somehow had always been around to feed me cookies and tea no matter where the foster system sent me. Or else she was the psychotic lunatic who smiled as she tortured me in a training montage that made Warhammer Space Marine training look like a Club Med vacation. Mixed in with the demented nuturer who thought making me a hellhound would keep me safe was the sly schemer who had conned Amorrachius off of me last Halloween. What I saw was something I had never believed possible could ever be on Lea's features: longing and hope. It was the same expression I'd worn a berjillion times while prospective adoptive parents had come by. It had been on my face the day Justin DuMorne had come.

The sorrow that came when Agatha stepped back with a look of utter disgust was one I'd known in my runt-of-the-litter days as well.

"I'm not falling for this trick," Agatha spat out. "My grandmother was a canonized saint who raised my father and uncle to reject everything you and your court stands for."

"Teodora. I advised Saturnus to rid himself of her," Lea said. "He was far too romantic for his own good, like so many of your line. Your father paid the same price in the end."

"Don't you dare slander my mother," Agatha said. "My father's love redeemed her from villainy. She was stolen from him by the Other."

Lea's answer was bitter, bitter laughter.

"Ag. no!" I struggled to force the muzzle of the death ray down. "Faeries can get past thresholds without permission as long as they are there for a benevolent purpose. She's here as a guest. If you threaten her, she'll have a grudge against you for breaking guest right."

"Tell her to leave!" Agatha snarled. "I'm not going to sit still while she plays some kind of Vader-look-into-your-heart gambit. Nothing she can say could possibly convince me--"

One nail ripped open the flesh of Lea's breast.

"Then let blood tell the tale," Lea said, as blood the colour of autumn leaves stained her green gown. "In the end, it always come to blood."

+++++

"Veritas sanguinus, veritas sanguinus."

As I released my will, the two test tubes glowed blue.

"Congratulations, sahib, the rabbit died," Bob said. His eyelights played over the samples of Agatha and Lea's blood. "The connection's distant. But your girlfriend and your godmother are blood relations."

"I thought that was impossible to detect if a changeling Chose mortality," I said, exhausted from three hours of spellwork. "And she's not my girlfriend. Exactly. We're working out what we are."
"Polyamory is a valid lifestyle, sahib," Bob said. "I can print you out some FAQs. Also, it's not gay if the balls don't--"

I bounced an eraser off his skull.

"Fine, fine," Bob said. "Agatha's blood is all sorts of strange, boss. There are elements I can't even guess at. The traces of fae heritage are a resonance in whatever life-energy pervades it."

"So she can't Chose to become a Sidhe?" I said.

"Ehhhhh, beats me." Bob's jaw clacked. "I'm astonished the Leanansidhe bore a changeling child at all."

"Lea's famous for taking on lovers," I said. "That's her entire deal--being the fatal muse to artists."

"Sure. Inspiration in exchange for feeding off the madness she creates," Bob said. "It's supposed to be all take, no give. Why she often shows up as a godmother to orphan children, too."

"You mean I'm the closest thing she has to a son?"

"Talk about pathetic. I could almost feel pity for her."

"Shut it, Bob."

Bob's eyelights faded away as I cleaned up. My plans for dinner and a quiet evening together with Agatha had been shot all to hell. Instead my head was pounding from a marathon session trying to cobble up a spell to prove Lea's claims of blood relations. It hadn't been as easy as using a tracking spell to form a link. That would have needed a far closer relation--mother and daughter rather than the many greats that separated Agatha and Lea. So I had had to delve deep into water magic--not my strongest suit--with Bob having to walk me through a lot of theory by baby steps. I'd ruined several blood samples until the spell finally worked.

I paused when I reached for the last sample of Lea's blood. The last test tube of Agatha's had been cleansed with acid before being poured into a waste-disposal container. You could do a lot of things to a being with a willingly-given blood sample. It was almost as effective as knowing their name. Even better in some ways for certain purposes. Lea had made my life hell for several years. I had had to look over my shoulder every time I entered the Nevernever in case she decided to put me in the literal doghouse. She had tricked Susan out of a year's worth of memories of me at Bianca's party. There was a lot to be said in favor of keeping her blood as insurance. Or giving a little payback.

My godmother had known that, of course.

Yet she had still been compelled to give it to me to prove she was truly one of Agatha's ancestors.

Good thing I'd ordered Bob's jawbone shut. He'd have all sorts of comments when I destroyed that last sample.

I hesitated before climbing the ladder out of the lab. I had only heard about tense, awkward family moments secondhand. Being confronted by the Starscream to Mab's Megatron as being kin put any stories I'd heard from Billy about Thanksgiving dinners with Georgia's upper crust family into the
shade. None of my other relationships had gotten to the "meet the crazy grandmother" stage. It wasn't at all cowardice to stay downstairs until Lea was compelled to move on at cock's crow. It was sound cautious worthy of a wizard.

Carefully, I peered out to see if there were any blaster marks in my walls. Everything seemed civilized. Agatha sat stiffly in one of my chairs with a tea cup and saucer in one hand. I panicked at the thought of her accepting drink--even with Lea here as a guest--until I saw the steel flask on the table before her. Smart girl. She must have poured the tea into it to break any fae enchantment that might have been woven into it. Faerie glamours were as susceptible to cold iron as the fae themselves. Sniffing, I recognized the blend as the black tea that Lea had served me when she had been playing at social worker. A sealed tin of it was always in the top corner of a kitchen cupboard just in case she ever came by for a visit.

Puffing away on the table between them was the samovar that had been with Lea had brought along every time she had appeared in my childhood. The strong tea and the-- I blinked. On a tray were the gingerbread cookies she had served. I'd always been too hungry to pay attention to their shape. My hazy memories of that time painted them as shellfish. Only now, I realized they had been trilobites. I extended my senses to the samovar. It was a copper urn in the shape of a fat dragon whose claws held the little copper teapot on top of its head. A brass trilobite was set in the center of its forehead. Woven through it was sparkfire, centered in the base where some kind of odd power source heated the water.

It was a family heirloom.

"Young Barry crafted this for me," Lea said, topping off her cup from the spigot. "Such a considerate boy, even though he was Summer through and through."

"Harry?" Agatha asked. "Is it true?"

"She's not being metaphorical," I said. "Best as I can tell, you share a bloodline with her. In fact, according to some research, you might be her only blood relative."

"So." Agatha sipped her tea. "Considering my family's history of insanity, it's probably irrelevant to ask which one was mad enough to take you to bed. Out of curiosity, which one was it?"

"Have a care, grandchild," Lea said, amber eyes narrowing. "Does not the creed you follow tell you to honour your elders?"

" Honour thy father and mother," Agatha quoted. "I have a father and mother in my Mama and Tata. However we're related, we are not family."

"I will not be denied again," Lea said. In the hearth, the flames began burning blue and violet. "Fifty generations of Heterodynes since H'trok-din took me as concubine I have attended to your house. I was there for each time the Doom Bell announced birth or ascension or passage into the crypts. Teodora raised your father to reject me. He barred me my duties to his son, and for that the boy died."

"I--I had a brother?" Agatha froze.

"Klaus Barry Heterodyne." Lea bared her fangs. "Oh, your mother was most skilled in her treachery. I salute her even as I curse the day she was born. Would that I could be sure she was truly dead."
Oh, hell.

"Godmother, Lucrezia Mongfish wasn't kidnapped by the Other, was she?"

"Such a clever boy you are, poppet," Lea said.

"You're saying Lucrezia Mongfish was in league with the Other?" Agatha said. "But you're saying my brother was killed in the explosion."

"Lucrezia Mongfish would never serve anyone, grandchild," Lea said. "She ever sought to control her fate. No, a son for her was an inconvenience. After all, the Storm King must marry the Heterodyne Girl."

"What does that old fairy tale have to do with anything?"

"Ambitions, grandchild." Lea tipped wormwood into her tea. A spoon clinked against bone china. Or probably bone. "I have done wickednesses beyond count. Yet I never would have stooped to what your mother attempted."

"Lucrezia Mongfish was the Other," Agatha said, her cup falling to crack on the floor.

"She was ever skilled at the arts of the mind," Lea said. "Particularly the sciences of transference from one to the other. What better way to become...queen."

"No."

I strode over to Agatha.

"No."

My godmother loved harsh lessons.

"NO!"
Chapter 43

What confuses me most about families is how often they destroy their own. I can't tell you how many of my minor cases about curses had a child or spouse at the sending end. The Astors had been willing to hang their own kid out to dry over the publicity. I did not even want to think about the horror shows that Murphy had encountered as a beat cop dealing with a domestic. Lea's accusation just took my breath away. It was sickening.

Agatha laughed.

Sobs became cackling as she kept repeating "no" over and over. The purple and viridian witchfire in my hearth sent her shadow dancing across bookshelves and walls like a maenad. Horror and rage and despair mixed in the harmonics of her laughter in a toxic brew. Her features were consumed by a madness close to what I had seen in the fire station. Lea was as still as the idol to a malicious god when Agatha stomped up before her. Green cat's-eyes narrowed when an admonishing finger was waved in her face.

"Well-played!" Agatha snickered like an out-of-tune bandsaw. "Break the foundations of my belief in human nature. What's next, Bill used to run puppies through a sausage mill on the sly?"

"No. If only he had," Lea said.

"Godmother, maybe it might be better to give her some breathing space," I said.

"No, let her speak." Agatha cheeks were wet with tears. "Let us play out this farce to the bitter end. My uncle made me stupid. My mother wanted me as her meat suit. What secret atrocity did my father commit?"

Lea's face twisted.

The words came out of her as if dredging up something from the toxic slime deep from the depths of the Chicago River.

"He broke my heart."

"What?" Agatha's voice was very quiet.

"I am of Winter. Cruel and merciless and pitiless," Lea said. The flames in my hearth glowed orange again. "It should not be possible for William to have broken it. Heterodynes do the impossible, mind."

"Would you like a seat?" I asked, old instincts pulling an easy chair to her.

"Grant me the dignity of standing, child," Lea said. Tiny chips of ice clinked on my stone floor. "He could have called upon me to lead all the forces of my command against Lucrezia. Yet he denied me even that to the end."


Something that if you didn’t know my godmother like I thought I had could be called hope.
blossomed in her expression.

"No. I can’t." Agatha backed away. "You stole Tata’s sword. You traded it for some foul thing."

Agatha ran into my bedroom.

Seconds later, retching came from the bathroom within.

"Godmother," I said quietly. "It has been a pretty stressful time for Agatha."

"No, my exile continues," Lea said. "I should not have thought it would end."

"I must have driven you insane denying you the chance to keep me safe," I said.

"You remind me ever so much of my sons." Lea smiled with a hint of fang at my reaction. "La, I speak of their loyalty and bravery and cunning."

"And not because I am a raving lunatic about to grind the earth beneath my heel."

"It is early days yet."

"I have to get an outfit for the ball," I said. I could not believe the words that came out next. "You know me and fashion. Want to tag along? Provide some godmotherly insight? Have the chance to mock me?"

"What do you plot?" Lea cocked her head.

"Well, if someone who needs a pretty dress for the occasion happens to be at the tailor's at the same time?" I shrugged. "We might catch a bite later. Or have a calming cuppa afterwards."

"I have not had time to spend aught time with you," Lea said. A quiet smile played over her lips. "You have been chary of my company."

"I've been in the doghouse with you."

"Until the morrow, child," Lea said. "I owe you more than you can imagine."

The witchfire blazed high. I jerked my head to this side at the flare of light. Lea vanished in the time it took to recover my vision. Slumping on the couch, I allowed the exhaustion of the night to take me. It staved off facing the gibbering terror that I had just agreed to go on an outing with the freaking Leanansidhe. Worse, I had volunteered to go clothes shopping of all things. I was a guy. Shopping meant picking what fit and getting a bunch in different colours. The few times I had gone to the store with a girl--mainly Elaine and once with Susan--had been torture only slightly alleviated by watching them when they hit the lingerie section. Lea had implicit carte blanche to do a wardrobe makeover for me. This boded ill.

Lea's final comment set my neck-hairs twitching. The Sidhe got hinky about debts and obligations. I reviewed my words to her. I had not promised to reconcile Agatha with her. I had not even promised that Agatha would show up at the tailor. It still was worrying how Lea might interpret my offer. The phrase "owe you more than you can imagine" hinted that the debt she considered owed to me was huge. A faerie of her rank was not above arranging matters so have the debt paid off in a manner that would bring the lender even deeper into her grasp. Or else influencing matters
that I would be faced with calling on her aid to get out of the mess. This was why I avoided making
deals with faerieland. They were worse than those student credit cards. Had I gotten rooked again?

Steam whistled. Lea had left the samovar behind. I fiddled with it until the flameless burner at its
base went out. Seeing it again brought back the few decent memories of my childhood between my
dad dying and Dumorne adopting me. With adult eyes, I realized that the workmanship was pretty
 crude. It reminded me of some of the misshapen mugs I had seen at the Carpenters'; the kind of
thing a mom might get from her kids from camp pottery class. Affections and respect had gone into
the making of this. Agatha's uncle had liked Lea enough to craft it even after being raised by a
mother who had taught him to reject everything about the Old Heterodynes.

I didn't think Lea was playing around about this.

The bedroom was dark. I don't often bother lighting candles in my bedroom. I am usually too beat
when I crawl into bed to need one; I've gotten used enough to dressing without light to know what I
am grabbing out in the dresser by touch. For some reason, whenever I mention this to my friends
they comment that this explains a lot about my fashion sense. Philistines. I did keep a few candles
in glass shades for when I had company in there once a century. Flickering light shone through the
bathroom door. It was half-ajar, as if it had not locked when slamming shut and bouncing back
from the rebound.

There are no mirrors in my place. Too many things on the other side can use them as windows or
gates. Plus, I'm not one to waste time regarding how handsome I am not while grooming. In place
of one, Agatha stared into my tiny sink half-filled with water. The candle set on the little on the
wall to one side of the doorway let her see her reflection dimly in the surface. She touched her face
with trembling fingers as if she saw an alien looking back at her.

"I didn’t see a trace of her in the soulgaze," I said. "It isn't a lie detector But an invasion that blatant
would have left its mark."

"I have no clear memories of when the white ladies took me." Agatha supported herself with both
hands on either side of the sink. She kept on staring at her reflection. "They dosed me with some
kind of venom from their spiders. There was a man, I think. Said I was to be his bride. Something
golden. Straps."

Agatha dry-heaved. A couple of drops splashed into the sink.

"There was a moment of pain. Something." Agatha wiped her lips with the back of a hand. "Hah.
Someone touching my mind. Filthy. Red fire, my uncle must have gotten me free just as she was
being put into my head."

"Sounds like a summoning," I said.

"That which is not dead." Agatha worked her jaw. "I think the Geisters and I should have a little
chat."

"Lea might be helpful there." I told her about my offer. "Up to you if you come with."

"She has to answer for what she did to Tata," Agatha said.

"Lea sees that as business as usual," I said. "Anyway, I was the one who took up the sword in false
faith. She would see the debt about that night penciled out when Amoracchius was returned to
"You are speaking on behalf of her," Agatha said. "You should hate her guts for everything she put you through."

"She's my godmother," I replied. "And she had my back last summer. Ag, I think she is sincere as she can get."

"Tata might say I am being unchristian." Agatha sniffed. "So perhaps I am fated to redeem her."

"Heck no. Lea is no Vader," I said. "The only way she would throw Mabitine down the reactor shaft was because she planned on you being the distraction."

"She is still family. Spooky, scary family, I admit. Family enough that your uncle treated her well even though he knew what she was."

"I'll think about it." Agatha pulled the plug. Water gurgled down the drain. "Would you mind escorting me upstairs?"

"You can take the bed tonight," I offered. "I'll ride the couch."

"If I do, I might as well move in."

"It is a little early for anything like that. I’m a big girl, Harry. I can sleep in my own apartment for once without you watching over me."

"We should still have a change of clothes for you down here," I said. "I'll bring the samovar upstairs with you. Lea meant for you to have it."

"Yes. She said I could summon her with it." Agatha rubbed her eyes. "How grand. Tea and dress shopping with my Morticia of a grandmother."

"Bit less 'bippitty' and a lot more 'boo'," I said. "I don't even want to think about what she can do with a pumpkin."

"Just call me Sparkarella."

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