Summary

Jess Lennon is a many things. A martial artist, an orphan and a drifter.

Oh. And she is a (card carrying) Wizard of the White Council. A Kung Fu Wizard, so to speak.

Which is why she gotten volunteered by the White Council to respond to a plea from help from the Supernatural Community of New Orleans. With their own Wizard being away to deal with a greater threat to the land, a new drug has entered the city and endangers not only those of mundane background but also may pose a great threat to those of magical gifts and vocations.

...Whats the worst that could happen?

(Don't answer that)

Notes

Disclaimer:

I don’t own The Dresden Files. The Dresden Files is the property of Jim Butcher, and are not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

I further apologize to the City of New Orleans which I am about to misrepresent literary a lot.
Warning:
This is not a fic about Canon Characters. Its set in the same Universe but tells its own story. If you want your Harry/Marcone smut you are not going to be happy here ;)

Still. Enjoy?

Timeline Note:
This story happens between Skin Game and Peace Talks of The Dresden Files Books
I had spent only thirty minutes in New Orleans and already had punched the first person.

I’d love to claim that was a new record for me, but I was taught that lying is bad. And to be fair to me here, he had started the fight. I had only stepped off the train, got a snack in the train station concourse and then tried to decipher the map I had bought of the tourist kiosk to find myself to the French Quarter.

Which was when a guy build like a hunger-striking quarterback had jumped me, punched my poor map and then attempted to do the same to me. Only by letting myself drop, loosing the backpack and then rolling out of the way had I escaped the nigh-berserkian fury of my assailant. By the time he realized I had dodged his first attack I was already back on my feet and introduced myself with an open palm strike to his solar plexus.

Which he shrugged off. Of course he did. The elbow hit down on my shoulder that came in return was not as shrug-off-able, though.

Ow.

I made a few steps back and looked around. An audience was already forming. Which was to be expected. Street fights were pretty interesting if you hadn’t to take part. Especially if one of them was a six-foot-one tall woman. There are not that many of them around, let me tell you. My life would so be easier if it was, after all.

Still, drawing this fight out was generally a bad idea. The guy had a look in his eyes like he was really out of it, some strange mixture of primal fear and primal rage. Which also explained his fighting style. All fury, aggression and the reflexive echoes of probably having had some fight experience in his life. With how strung-out he looked his weight advantage was probably a lot less than he was used to, but fought so recklessly, someone would get hurt seriously in time.

For now he concentrated on me, but if he went after the gawkers I saw a dozen scrawny people he’d snap in a heartbeat like that. Not to mention the evergreens of police, battery charges and spending the night in a cell that loomed over any extended fight in the streets. Missing my appointment because of that was really not a thing I wanted to do.

Okay. Time for the ‘Don’t do this at home, kids’ kind of stuff, I decided. The next time he went in for a punch, I ducked under it and came up inside his range. I grabbed the wrist of his dominant arm, twisted and then punched him straight into the humerus bone with a little special trick of the fist I don’t feel the need to write down.

(Liability, for once. If you do it wrong, you break about three finger bones at once.)

Suffice to say, I felt the bone fracture cleanly under the strike. He howled and jerked back, holding his broken arm, giving me the opening for a follow up hand heel punch onto his rips, an elbow strike
on his pelvis and finally another solar plexus strike. With both hands striking together this time, the impact was more than audible and my assailant finally went to his knees in a tumble and crashed into unconsciousness.

Breathing a bit faster and standing over another person, I already heard the siren call of a police car. Grabbing my bag I headed into the audience. I had places to be after all.

Well. Welcome to New Orleans I guess?
The Benoit Boarding House was in the old(er) part of the French Quarter. Once a very elegant home for a well off family, the somewhat reduced family of these days offered its use to a very specific subculture of the city. The place was in fact the meeting place-slash-community center of the Paranet Cell of New Orleans and the supernatural community in general. Oh, some parts had their own thing going on. From what I read up on the city, the Witches and Voodoo Practitioners seemed to keep to themselves a lot. Which still leaves a lot practitioners, magically gifted and magically cursed people without a strong group identity to fall back on if things got rough.

Oh, yes. I should probably mention that. I’m a Wizard. Just like the dude you maybe have read about from Chicago. Well, not exactly like that. You see, he is what is generally called an ‘western-style Wizard’. Which means he follows an european-originated style of Wizardry.

I on the other hand follow a more eastern style. Which is not that different, at least for the lay-person. My approach basically fuses Chinese martial arts and the use of magic into one seamless style of Wizardry. So I’m not just a Wizard, I’m a ‘Kung Fu Wizard’. Or ‘Wushu Wizard’ if you are into alliteration.

So, back to topic, if things got rough New Orleans could rely on having a resident Wizard on its own. Or so I had thought until a few days ago, when a message had reached me through another Paranet Cell up in Minnesota.

(Some moron tried to boost his Football team by calling on the power of the thing it’s named for. Guess how that went.)

It had calling me to ‘arrive in New Orleans at my earliest convenience to deal with a matter of importance

See when a Wizard nigh two hundred years your senior ‘asks’ for you to come to her home town, you generally do just that. Even if it’s only for cookies and coffee. Given that Wizards generally do get more powerful the older they get, ageism is a very creative way to make your own live more difficult. So much more difficult.

I stopped before the restaurant across the street from the boarding house gave myself a once over. Okay, first things first. I’m really tall. Not freakishly tall like certain other North American Wizards, but as a woman my six foot and one inch still made me stand out in a lot of crowds. Add to that the fact that almost twenty years of hard style chinese martial arts (for sake of simplicity from here on mostly incorrectly called ‘kung fu’) and a generous genetic predisposition toward a well developed body figure give me a physique usually only ascribed to comic superheroines.
Also. And I know this may blow your mind, because if you read the ‘Kung Fu Wizard’ before and how I follow a eastern/chinese magic tradition you may have been under the impression that I’m Asian.

Hah.

No. I’m so black, my skin could be a commercial for that really expensive Swiss dark chocolate. Which is really strange, because I also have green eyes and some other Caucasian features. So yes, I’m African-American(?) with some Caucasian ancestry. I think.

(Long story. Let’s just say for now I’m adopted.)

Looking at me in the restaurant window, I wore my usual get-up. Sneakers, black jeans and a ‘I know Kung Fu!’ t-shirt over which I had put on my enchanted green leather jacket. Long and straight black hair fell over my shoulders and my hands were covered in black-cloth wraps adorned with stitched sigils and Hanzi characters all the way up to my elbows. Maybe it was considered impolite to walk into someone’s place with your foci already ready, the supernatural equivalent of walking around with a rifle, but experience had taught me to better be sorry about being impolite than being sorry about not being ready for an attack.

Satisfied with being presentable, I re-shouldered my backpack and went over the street to knock.
Chapter 3

The door opened pretty quick and I was almost pulled inside with a snapped ‘Oh come in!’ just fast enough to allow the surprisingly thick Threshold to part before me. The old lady with the steely grip slammed the door closed behind me and then gave me a once over.

“Dear god. Just what does the Council feed you kids these days? Or are you a Ghoulblooded?” She asked, which I denied. I had met a few Ghoulblooded, people with Ghouls in their relative recent ancestry and while they had not been quite as awful as their carnivorous ancestors (in fact I liked a few of those), I didn’t want to be mistake for one.

(Look, I got enough prejudice to deal with in my live, I don’t need to court more. Especially with Ghouls being in general nasty pieces of work having a bit of a bad reputation in the supernatural work as thugs for hire.)

“I’m Elizabeth Benoit, but you can call me Liz.” She told me as she waved me down the hallway to a well lit sitting room in a resolute tone before taking the chair opposite to me.

“I’m...well. I’m basically the cranky old lady who organizes the meetings so the rest can just shout and argue.” She told me with a crooked grin. “I take it you are the Wizard Marie promised she’d call in?”

“Wizard Jessica Lennon, yes. And I was under the impression that Wizard Laveau would be here too?” I inquired back at her, which only led to her laughing quietly.

“Now, if Marie was here, we’d not need you, do we?” She pointed out with a disarming smile. “No, Marie is busy with some Wizard diplomacy she doesn’t want people to worry about who can’t do anything about it. The problem is that in her absence, a situation developed that requires a bit more supernatural weight than we can provide on our own. Which is where you come in.” She explained and in an attempt to get myself some thinking time, I complimented her on being so okay with Wizard affairs. Normally people from the Paranet were a bit more...awed by us. Or scared. Or suspicious in general. Few are actually so...genial.

“Heh.” she grinned at me.” I used to be a Venatori Witch for nigh fifty years, kid. I met a lot of Wizards. Retired home to New Orleans after the Red Court imploded. Well, so much for retirement so far!” She laughed at me. “Now of course, my old Coven sees me as hopelessly tainted by ‘non-traditional’ influence, but it makes me a great go-between for all the magical factions in the city.” She added a bit more soberly. Before we could continue our talk, someone knocked on the door and Liz scampered off without so much as a word.

A minute later she returned with a man in his fifties, wearing - of all things - a police undress uniform. I stood up to shake the hand he offered more on autopilot while I was still a bit surprised at his presence me while Liz did the introductions with a curt “Captain Bob Ketterer, NOPD Major Crimes Unit. Wizard Jessica Lennon, White Council. As Marie promised.”

I will admit, I was confused. Usually I try to avoid the police. More because them having to try and explain Wizardry in their reports can drive them really mad. Ketterer meanwhile just gave me a level
look, like he was comparing me to a mental list of crimes he was about to try and prove I committed. Wow. Felt like the school principal all over again.

“Wizard Lennon, thank you for coming.” He finally said. “I did not think Madame Laveau really could have reacted to my request so fast, but I am glad she did. You see we have a little problem.” He grimaced. “Usually when magic impinges on the police work, I am the one to straighten it out. Keep it all ‘orderly’ for the files while trying to enforce the peace even towards the supernatural community. With the help of the Paranet, Miss Benoit and Madame Laveau we have kept New Orleans a relatively quiet city for the last few years.”

A deep sigh escaped him and I got the feeling of a bone-deep exhaustion in him with regards to the magic world. Not resentment, just exhaustion. “Now with Madame Laveau out of the City we lack our, so to speak, big gun. And naturally every supernatural crook or opportunist is scraping at the walls we build. Which leads us to our current crisis.”

From his bag he pulled a small vial of a strange, glowing liquid. Handing it to me, I felt the magic energy coursing in it immediately. It was some sort of...Potion? Elixir?

“Wizard Lennon, did you ever hear the name ‘ThreeEye’?” Ketterer asked me quietly.

Saying just ‘Yes’ would have been an understatement. The ThreeEye incident had been making waves among the Council about fifteen years back, putting Warlock-in-potentia Harry Dresden off the Councils shit list and generally raising the awareness on how magic and modern crime could interact. Not quite something with a major political impact among the council, but it had dominated the rumor mill so thoroughly even a twelve year old apprentice me had heard about it. A black-magic crazy Sorcerer had created a magic drug that opened the users Third Eye, their Sight. The ability to perceive the world beyond the solid facade we all see day to day. Spirits, Magic and what else. The world shown in truth.

It was a challenge for a Wizard to open his Sight and we come by that ability naturally as a part of our craft. A normal human’s mind could not safely handle the experience in many cases.

“I am familiar with it.” I softly said, eyeing the vial with suspicion. Ketterer seemed to note my tone, for he simply continued without questioning it.

“This seems to be a...variation of it. The street name is ‘Nu3’. It’s been flooding the streets for the last three months, and while the average user is surprisingly docile, every tenth or so goes on a violent bender. Like, worse than even a bad trip on any mundane drug I ever seen. We had to shoot one dead who didn’t even flinch when the beanbag round hit her in the stomach.” His voice quivered with the last sentence.

Sheesh. That stuff was nasty, if that was true. Very nasty.

“So, you want me to deal with it? Off the books?” I asked him. Well, I could deal with that. Find the Sorcerer who was responsible and punch him pretty hard. Not a elegant approach but workable? Maybe flex my biceps a bit at him or her. Most criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot after all.

My thought process to that regard broke when Ketterer waved me off with a wry smile.

“Not exactly.” he said and put something on the coffee table beside us. As he pulled back his hand, he revealed a star and crescent shaped golden badge.

“I want you to help us find the person and arrest them." he said with a deceptive simplicity. "And to that end, Wizard Lennon, I want to hire you as Detective.”
Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The “You can’t be serious.” escaped my mouth just before the shot of laughter that followed it. But Ketterer only gave me that level stare again. Oh god. He is serious! I realized. This man must be crazy! But the way he looked at me told me that this was not a quick decision. That was something he had thought well and long over.

“You just shutting this down underhand is no promise that it won’t start again, Wizard.” He continued, a smooth baritone of his voice. "And for the people injured, or killed, by this drug I want justice. Which means that whoever is responsible for this in a court of law, judged by twelve of his fellow citizens and sentenced as the laws of this state say.” he said, with as much conviction as I heard priests recite the Bible. Well. Time for a change of tactics, I figured.

“But isn’t there some sort of requirement? I mean I can’t just jump to detective like that. Or at least I’d hope the police does have some higher hiring standards in general than picking up people you met less than 60 minutes before?” And being a beat cop wouldn’t help me solve the case. Hah. Check. Mate. I hoped.

Ketterer simply pulled out another file and laid it open before me on the table. Crap. I thought as I recognized the clean and economic handwriting of Sheriff Jonah Mason. Ketterer had apparently done his homework. Very well, in fact if he'd managed to find that dinky little town in Alabama in which Mason represented a one-man law enforcement.

“According to Sheriff Mason, who sends his best wishes and regards by the way Miss Lennon, you have been a sterling deputy in his employ. In fact he gives you glowing recommendations. Which means its good enough for me to cite it as previous police service experience to jump you directly to the lowest grade of Detective.” Ketterer said with a note of triumph in his voice. Well. Seems I had just lost queen in this chess gambit? Crap.

I mentally sighed. Yes. I’ve been a Sheriff’s deputy. In Alabama, for about two months last year. And only to help the Sheriff there fend of a local corporate-owned gang who had been possessed by a bunch of angry Native-American related animal spirits.

(Don't build stuff on holy sites people. Its rude and liable to incur a spiritual shitstorm down the line.)

But somehow, I don’t think raising that issue with Ketterer would have any effect. In fact, it would only support his statement of the advantages of a Wizard in uniform if I guessed right. Keeping a straight face, I frantically considered my next counterargument until Ketterer waved me off with a patient grin.

“Look, I did my research. I heard of all the crap Chicago PD went through with their Wizard Consultant. I even had their Sergeant on the phone to get some in-depth details about it. And I don’t want this to hobble our legs. So the best way I see it is to simply hire you, bill you as a 'new transfer to raise diversity quotas' and then hide what you actually do under as much paperwork as I can. Just as I have done all these years since I was a young detective investigating Werewolf attacks in the Tremé.” Which was probably not hyperbole I decided of his tone. The Captain's smile turned wistful as he continued.
"Heck, you are a women, you are black, the PR Department will love it. As will the bean counters because they get to mar two fields for one paycheck" He joked. I pondered to shoot back that I was also a practicing Taoist, but figured that there was not a hiring quota for that. Or maybe that was because of the thing in the constitution about religion and state not mixing? Sigh.

I shot Liz a pleading look, but from her smug grin she had been in on this little ambush from the start. I had been betrayed. I could either say firmly ‘no, thank you’ and take my leave - leaving me to default on the promise of help of another Wizard, a big no-no in our circles -, say no and work the case on my own - without any police support I’d wager which would make it double as much effort - or…

With a reluctant grunt, I picked up the badge. Well, I told myself, you did want to be a cop once upon a time.

Granted I had been six years old.

“When do I start? And please tell me there is dental?”

Major Crimes was headquartered in an old townhouse in the French Quarter, diagonally across from the Eight Precinct HQ. Originally, Ketterer told me as he gave me the tour with my new badge on my belt and all, they had shared that place, but the MCU had outgrown it years ago. As a response the offices and file rooms of the MCU had moved to the other house, while most of the gear and equipment (and holding cells) were still located in the Precinct. Peaceful coexistence between both places was soon to be achieved, he told me with the grin of a person who knew he was just saying a polite platitude.

As we settled into his office for the paperwork, me politely ignoring the fact that his computer suceded moments after me sitting beside him while he cursed the machine out.

“Well. I know this might sound invasive, but...I had some idea of what Madame Laveau could to, magically wise. Would you mind telling me what your ‘elements’ are?” He asked, obviously awkward about it.

For quick and dirty magic, or more terminologically correct Evocations, every full-blown Wizard had an affinity toward a certain subset of Elements based on their respective tradition, usually about three. Didn’t mean you couldn’t use the others, just that those were harder work to master.

I gave him a slight shrug, grabbed myself a marker and went to the Whiteboard on his wall. Despite her ties to the local Voodoo culture, in general Wizard Marie Laveau was a western culture wizard as far as I knew and thus I drew the usual five pointed star representing the four classical elements and the additional element of Spirit on top. The circle that I drew around the star was to represent the human will to encompass magic. A pentacle, in the western world one of the most well known signs of magic.

Beside it I began to draw my system, the Elements I had been taught from rote as representing magic to the tradition I was educated in. Again I made five points, but instead of connecting them as a star, I drew a circular set of lines between them, creating a sense of balance between them, maintained equilibrium. There was no ‘on top’ or ‘down’ in it and no outer circle. You moved with the flow of magic, you didn’t try to contain it. I labelled the five points at random as Fire, Water, Metal, Wood and Earth, the five classic elements of the region my magic tradition originated in on mainland China.
And in the perfect center of the circle of elements I drew the Taijitu representation of the balance of Spirit as well as the Yin and Yang of the universe, the cornerstone upon which all magic was based.

“Okay. You see I use somewhat different Elements than the one you know from Wizard Laveau.” I turned around to see Ketterer pay focused attention to me behind his desk. “My strongest Element is Spirit.” I tapped at the Yin and Yang in the Center. “Following that, I’m about good experienced with Metal and Earth.” Another set of taps. “I’m working on Wood, and I am worst with Water.”

Ketterer raised a hand like a school boy. “No Air in there?” he asked, obviously amused at my teacherly tone of voice. I pointed again at the symbol for Wood. “Wind magic is a subset of Wood. Wood represents flexibility, giving and taking. Wavering the effects of outward forces including wind. And sometimes funneling it.”

At his understanding nod, I continued. “Elements that work in one way for one system, can have very different meanings in another. The US is pretty westernized, magically, so most people you meet use the western system. I’m something of an odd duck out. You know, among the horde of over six feet tall, female black Wizards you know.” I finished with a wave and crooked grin while capping the marker.

Which was good timing because just then someone opened the door and stepped in. He was in his early thirties, slim of build and pale enough to make me consider the possibility of him being a Vampire for a moment or so.

“Captain, we just had another Nu3 incident. Some guy went berserk in the Quarter and started a street fight with someone who was actually his size for a change.” He started without so much as a preamble as he approached the Captain, not noticing me still standing in the corner beside the whiteboard. “According to eye-witnesses he fought a, quote, giant black female bodybuilder, unquote. And no I am not joking about this, Sir.”

(Hey I take offense to that last one. I don’t sculpt my muscles, I train them to use. I’m toned, not bulging.)

“She broke the perps arm and then knocked him out cold, leaving the scene before the uniforms could show up to take her statement.” He finished. “Damn, first we have the drug crazies and now people come into town for a chance to fight them it seems?” He paused with a groan. "I really need the new partner sir. Especially with lunatics like those run around, if I am to keep up with shit like this.”

Ketterer, to his credit, did not crack up - Especially once I started glaring at back of the cop’s head when he called me a lunatic -, instead he just took a very dry tone as he addressed his subordinate.

“Well, as a matter of fact I did just find you a new capable partner.” he began, pointing in the corner where I still stood. "Detective Sergeant Carter Bennett, meet Detective Jessica Lennon. I am sure she can help you find your ‘lunatic’.” he finished with a grin.

Benett turned around. I waved. After a moment his eyes narrowed on the two magic symbols I had drawn on the whiteboard. Well, he was pretty quick on the uptake it seemed. “Detective?” He asked with a suspicious tone before turning to Ketterer.

“I thought this whole ‘get a magic user on the force’ was just hypothetical, sir? A thought experiment.” He sighed with resignation but Ketterer just shrugged. “Wizard Lennon fit the requirements and was available. And with Anson Lucas having a sorceress on his payroll, I figure some magic escalation on our part is only smart. Anyway, my Unit, my choice. She’s your new partner, Carter. Have fun.”
At the word ‘Wizard’, Bennett gave me another cursory look, slightly more appreciating. For a moment I wondered if he would continue to argue with the obviously indomitable Ketterer but then he made a surrendering wave at his boss. Ketterer just continued his explanation as if the pause hadn't existed.

“Jess, Carter here is the lead detective of the ‘Atypical Cases’ squad of Major Crimes, which is our code for ‘Magic Crime’. I say ‘lead detective’ but what I should say is ‘lone detective’, until today, because his previous partner retired after last full moon.” He sighed and cocked his head. “Some out of town Lycanthropes made trouble then. Long story.” He just added vaguely. “Carter, I trust you will be able to show her the ropes of the job and use her to our advantage? Good, then get to work.”

Bennett just nodded firmly, giving me another considering look before waving me to follow him. “Okay.” He started without any further preamble. Well, can’t argue with the attitude? “First let’s get over to the Eighth and you give your witness statement regarding this newest Nu3 rampage.” Oh. Right. Good idea, I suppose. “Then I’ll bring you up to speed on what we have.” He added and waved me to follow as he walked toward the door.

Well, first day on the new job had officially begun.
Chapter 5

“I suppose this is your desk” Carter - who had insisted on using given names, despite the fact that he was technically of higher rank - waved at the unclaimed desk across from the one he took a seat on, stowed his gun in one drawer and checked out the coffee mug still sitting there lonely. Stopping at the door, I took a long look around.

The office was big enough to house three double-desks, but only one the one set was inside. The space next to it was filled by an assortment of old file cabinets, all with padlocks. Behind it, a pair of old leather couches made for a comfortable looking seating arrangement, together with a cork blackboard and a coffee table. On both desks stood, I kid you not, old mechanical typewriters. The most modern piece of equipment was in fact the coffee maker beside the couches.

“Nice.” I commented, walking to my ‘my’ desk. “It has a certain ‘Life on Mars' chic.”

Carter just shot me a look that said he had heard those jokes all long ago. “Look, if people like you can fry servers with a mean look I’d rather go old style than have my investigation get BSODed.” He explained with the patient air of someone not explaining this for the first time. “I’ve got a computer terminal in another room, but that’s solely to print stuff from the servers. Otherwise we do all we can in hardcopy triplicate.” He waited for a moment before showing a faint smile and adding “Copy that?” in the tone of a man attempting to break the ice.

Well, I could understand that reasoning. As Carter stood up from his desk again and went to the coffee maker, producing another mug with the NOPD Logo on it for me in the process, I followed him and took a look at the blackboard. On it were a number of portrait pictures, notes and the usual things you saw in many cop shows. At the top was a very handsome and yummy looking African-American man in his late thirties, labelled as ‘Anson Lucas’. Right beside him was a caramel-skinned, blue-eyed, blonde-locked portrait of a woman looking only a few years older than me. And she looked hot. Hot enough to confirm that yes, I was still bisexual.

“Emmanuelle LeHaine? That sounds totally not ominous a name.” I commented and Carter snorted while handing me the second mug. “Yeah, And as far as we could find out she has never been arrested under that name or even been to the attention of any police force at all. Squeaky clean file. Which given her demonstrated criminal energy as Lucas right hand I just refuse to believe a little bit.” He pointed at the red string connecting the two pictures. “Together they are the Power Couple of New Orleans criminal world. Like evil-er Clintons.” He sighed and rapped his knuckles on Lucas photo.

“Anson Lucas, Age thirty-eight. Former street gang kid, recruited for the Army when he was eighteen. Came back fifteen years later and spent the next two years taking over all the crime in the city he could. ‘Be all you can be!’ gone horribly right, it seems.” He explained with disgust. “The Army promised to declassify his file and sent it over. Three years ago. So until they actually do, we only know he was a sniper of some sort and that the last big single-rule crime boss of the city was taken out with a high-powered marksman rifle about six month after he came back.”

“Purely a coincidence I guess?” I tried to make light of it, but something about him just made a chill
run down my spine. Maybe it was just the general awareness that long-range snipers were any Wizards nightmare these days. Or maybe I just had a real bad feeling about the look of ambition Lucas demonstrated in his picture.

Carter barked a laugh and continued. “Obviously. Since then he has worked his way to the first among equals of the standing criminal empires of the City. We know he’s the one pushing the Nu3, but we can’t prove it yet. He has his hands in a lot of pots by now, but the drug trade was his entry level operation. We think he’s pushing his new crap as a way to get the old stuff out of the way. Clean house of the untidy old stuff for his shiny new. Make all the dealers in the city dependent on something only he can supply. We don’t know when he started with LeHaine, we just know they are an item and for all we hear about it a very happy one. She’s his magic ace in the sleeve, some kind of Sorceress as far as we could find out.” Well, that explained how Lucas had gotten his hands on a magic drug. I gave the picture another look, but so far photographs did not catch an image of one’s magic talent yet.

“We don’t have as much on her as we like soooo…?” He trailed off giving me a suggestive look.

“I’ll get on the phone with some Wardens I know and see if they find out more?” I offered with a laugh, earning an appreciative nod while I looked at the next few pictures. “And of course you have Vampires in the city too.” I noted, which brought Carter’s head to snap around with a shocked “Vampires? Where?”

I gestured at a picture showing two very pale brunette siblings, both looking early twenties and beautiful in a slightly inhuman abstract way. “I’m pretty sure these two are White Court.” which led Carter to just stare at me in questioning silence until I continued to elaborate “White Court of Vampires. Feed on lifeforce, usually through sex though there are other, even less savory options. Usually bad news.” I explained, thinking of one of the few exceptions and wondered what my depressive little redhead friend was up to these days.

“Vampires.” Carter groaned. “Those two are Lysander and Alissa Vallon. They showed up the week after the previous head pimp of the city got his heart torn out by the Night of Nightmares and took over the sex worker industry in town by essentially unionizing them under their benevolent management. Heck, I’ve heard city leaders praise them for their work of ‘sanitizing’ the sex trade in this city, bring down violence and drug abuse in the business.” He told me, running his fingers through his hair as he did. “I mean, I knew the guy before them was a Vampire. We found enough blood bags in his fridge to confirm that when we collected the body. But those two? Hell, Alissa once asked me for a date!” he said in abject horror at the revisited memory. “I mean, it was during the execution of a search warrant, but still…”

“Good you didn’t say yes?” I tried to say as cheerfully as possible. “If it helps, a lot of people find the White Court pretty hot? All that Twilight-craze and so.” It apparently did not, judging by the glare he shot me. “Why are they set apart like this, though?” I wondered, pointing out that the sibling vampires had only a single string connection to Lucas themselves.

“Because they are not part of Lucas empire proper. They are more an...associated power. They rule all forms of sex trade in the city from their giant ‘Circus Plaisir’ palace. City politicians are among the least prolific of their patrons, and we know at least one Senator is a regular. Lucas can’t attempt to outright take over that part of the cities crime without starting a full blown war over it. But for now the Vallons seem more inclined to profitable coexistence anyway. In effect they are essentially the Austria-Hungary to Lucas German Empire.”

Yeah. And if I remember History class well enough that did end so well. Which was probably why Carter had chosen that metaphor.
“So Lucas rules the criminals, LeHaine supplies the magic muscle and the Vallon’s take care of the connections?” I summarized as far as I understood. Carter nodded in agreement. “Basically.”

Putting his now empty cup back on the table he shook his head again. “Vampires. Because I don’t have enough…” he sighed again and took up his jacket again. “Come along, I think I need to shoot something now and you need to get your gun issued.”
Chapter 6

“Okay.” Carter said, looking at the pristine paper target at the end of the my range, with not even the edges frayed by stray shots. “You are not getting a gun.”

“I told you I suck with them?” I retorted a bit tartly, gently putting the empty Glock on the counter before me and ignored the quietly laughing officer-of-the-range behind me. “You are a self proclaimed Kung Fu Master and still can’t handle a simple firearm?” He just continued hiding his own smile as he continued to stare at the tauntingly undamaged black silhouette.

“Oh obviously? I am simply a more elegant fighter from a more civilized era.” I short back with as much haughtiness I could put into. The officer-of-the-range took ‘my’ gun back from me and vanished into the armory while Carter still grinned at me in this shit-eating way that just...irked me. A lot. The fact that his own target had a just perfect little grouping on its chest didn’t help me with that. Time to make a point, I decided.

Taking up one of the bullets still lying on the shelf from me loading the gun they had given me, I rolled it between my fingers and then flipped it vaguely into the direction of the still unharmed target sheet with a hissed “Kentse!”

Metal element magic has a variety of uses. The most direct one is metallimancy, the ability to move and re-shape metal. Like telekinesis just specific for metals. Or if you want to be pop culture about it; metalbending.

(I love those shows. Always worth the effort of circling myself up to watch them.)

The slug accelerated the moment the metal spell took it in a firm grip, its flight path straightening along my will and finally hitting the target silhouette on its paper sheet. Right in a very male part of its semi-anatomy. Which I am happy to admit here, was not planned. I’m good, but not that good.

Still, Carter’s smile fell flat very suddenly. For a moment he just looked at me, the 'wounded' target and just seemed to be taken aback by the casual, and seemingly easy, use of magic. “Point taken.” He then said with a conciliatory gesture of his hands and a slightly queasy face as he considered where my ‘shot’ had landed. “You don’t need a gun to be dangerous.” The cop admitted, crossing his arms over his chest with a thinking face for a moment. “The problem is that the perps don’t know that. Flexing your abs won’t convince them to surrender, and don’t think using magic all the time is that much of an option. For one, in terms of stressing the willing belief of juries too much.” Nodding to him I had to admit that he was right when he made those points. Magic was great and powerful, it was the force of raw creation. But you don’t bring a sledgehammer to every fight without some consequences. Looking at the issue from that side, it was a problem, I realized. But Carter just lit up a grin and patted my shoulder with an air of someone having an brainstorm. “Don’t worry. I do think I have a idea what to do about your sidearm.”
The weight at my hip felt...strange as we walked back into the Major Crimes building. At least I had managed to convince Carter that issuing me a cell phone was not really an option. I mean, after the third 'eye-phone' had died a messy violent death just by me picking it up while powered on he had accepted disgusted defeat. Though the quartermaster cop’s death glare at me made me consider sending some conciliatory donuts later. Annoying the guys in management was a bad idea, the Council bureaucracy had taught me.

My demonstrated skill with a firearm had also convinced them that maybe the time for me to get an actual driver’s license would be at a later time.

Possibly after the city had been evacuated. Or on a military base.

( Look. My school got this ridiculously computerized car as a donation for driving lessons when I was sixteen. I was already pretty strong with my magic. It’s not my fault I never passed that class?! Who even computerizes brakes?)

(Which is also totally unfair. I can ride a motorcycle, actually. I just never learned cars. Or bothered to get a license)

After fitting me out, Carter had decided we both needed some ‘real’ coffee and not the swill in our office, which apparently was only used to keep caffeine levels up. And so we arrived at a local coffee shop simply called ‘Café Louise’. The sign at the door that said ‘no active electronics after this point’ already made me like the place, because after the dead cell phone’s earlier I just about had filled my daily quota of techbane crap. Having to hear a lot of people all around me complain that their precious little electronic leash is starting to fizz can really dampen the mood after a while.

The inside was a pretty cozy little shop, a lot of comfortable couches and chairs. The espresso machine was positively ancient, though very well maintained from the looks of it. As we walked through the door, a slim honey skinned girl in her early twenties perked her head up, gave Carter a wave and then pointed to the group of seats beside the shop window before going to work on the machine.

I raised my eyebrow, given that we hadn’t ordered yet. On the other hand, my tolerance for strange coffee shops was pretty big. I once had patronized one that had been run by a honest-to-god dragon.

(Lower-case d only, though.)

After a few minutes, the barista came over with a cup in each hand. Carter got some starbuckian eldritch monstrosity made out of foam and syrups that might give lesser people instant diabetes. The cup she put before me on the other hand was a gloryful vessel full of pitch-black caffeine unsoiled by dairy products of any kind, strong enough to kill small children and house pets and with enough flavor to make me almost write a blog entry about it, if I wouldn’t kill any computer just by glancing wrongly at it.

As we were the only customers right now, the girl sat across from us and sipped from her own cup before grinning at Carter. “So that's your new Partner, I guess?” The girl asked him before turning to me. "Hi, I’m Louise.” She introduced herself holding out her hand. ‘I’m his sister.”

As I bent over the small table to shake her hand, I got a little jolt of magic from her. Not much, but it pretty much told me that she had at least some supernatural gift of her own. And otherwise...Now that I saw it, both had the same lean and slim body build, the same way their eyebrows swung over their eyes. They even had the same hair color, if you ignored the obviously different accompanying skin tones of her honey to his twilight cosplay.
Carter, apparently not the first time he’d dealing with people processing this kind of mental comparison, just sipped on his monstrosity and then shrugged. “Yes Lou, she’s my new Partner. In fact, she’s brought in from out of town for the current...case.” He paused and then added the “She’s a Wizard” as a minor conversational bombshell.

Louise head swung around at me with an almost forceful interest. “A Wizard? Really?” She gave me a longer once-over now. She’d probably felt my magic when we shook heads but the W-Word always gets you a reaction. "Huh, I’d expected someone more...Gandalf-y. Or maybe more like Madame Laveau. Or Warden Meyers.” Well, she knew her way around the Wizards of the area it seemed. Even if Bill Meyers, the Wizard-Cop in charge of the Region, was all the way over in Texas. I just smiled at her as disarmingly as I could.

“Let me guess, you are a Paranetter? I’m afraid the white beard does bite with my svelte skin tone, my magic fashion adviser told me.” I smiled back, waving my mug as a way of salute, which made Louise give up a short and very bright laugh. A nice smile, I decided. Carter's little sister was just...instantly likable.

“Yup. I got the ‘magic’ in me.” Lou said with a dramatic tone of voice after a moment. “Not that it’s that impressive, compared to the stuff some others in our group can do.” She trailed off with a sigh, giving her brother a questioning look. Maybe checking if I was okay before she got into details? After a ‘go ahead’ gesture she continued.

“Basically, I have two magic talents. One, I sometimes got prophetic dreams. Which is pretty much useless because I can never tell if it’s a vision or just a really screwy dream.” She explained, with gratuitous gestures to accompany her words. Maybe this was the wrong moment for me to remember that I had a...thing for hyperactive girls. Well. And hyperactive boys. All that energy they could bring a given task if focused…

“My second, and marginally more useful talent, is that in places I am familiar with I develop a sort of psychometric sense. I can feel what people want, or how they want it, among other things” She continued, waving at my near perfect cup of coffee. Oh. Well. That was certainly useful.

“Oh? What’s the definition of familiar for that purpose?” I inquired, my curiosity picking. Magic shop talk was always interesting to me. Louise just shrugged, another echo of her brother in her gestures. “Places I’m at a lot and in which I feel fully comfortable. My shop, my place, our Mom’s place. My ex-boy and girlfriends places after a while, if it goes well.” Hmmmm. That sounded to me like some sort of localized minor form of Intellectus. *Quite* interesting. But then I turned to Carter and gave him a raised eyebrow.

“Let me guess, you have some magic sense to track down fugitives?” I asked him laconically, leading Louise to almost snort in her mug in response. “No I have no magic at all.” Carter smiled at me, having probably seen the question coming from his tone as he continued “I should have been more precise. Louise is my half-sister.” His amused tone sobered up now. “Its complicated. When I was ten, my dad just took his stuff left and my mother...had a dalliance with alcoholism out of despair. Lots of booze, lots of men. Bad time for her, bad enough that I stayed with my grandparents during it.” *Ouch.* Not a nice childhood memory I gathered, but Carter just explained on "She’d been pretty much at rock bottom when she realized she was pregnant again, with no idea who the father was.” He pointed at his sister though I had already deduced that. “After the shock wore off, Louise being on the way made her realize she needed to pick herself up. Kind of a wake-up call. Got herself sober, got herself a job and just fix her live. Took her a few years but with my grandparents help, she did it.” He put a hand on his sister’s knee and from the affection he held in his eyes, there was also a lot of more complex emotions in there. Probably the specter of how his life had looked without his little sister coming along. I couldn't help but smile. Usually when I heard those kind of stories they
ended badly, so it was nice to hear them with a happy end for once.

“Still, we figure one of Mom’s alcohol fueled one night stands had some magic in him, which Lou inherited.” He finished explaining and I just managed to swallow a curious ‘huh’ because in general magic inheritance does not quite work that way. In general magic gets inherited matrilinearly, through the mother. For the father to pass it on, he generally needed to have a lot more than the minor gift Louise demonstrated. At least when it came to mortal parents.

For a moment I considered voicing that thought, but as I saw how close the siblings were before my eyes I decided against. Instead I filed the issue on the list of things I was to discuss with Wizard Laveau if the opportunity would arise and went with the far more neutrally worded “So no idea at all who your father is?”

Louise just gave me another shrug. “Not really. And I never really wanted to? I don’t know, he just never was important to me. I got Carter, I got my Mom. It’s not like he was more than a seed donor as far as I’m concerned. I’m not sure people understand, but family is more than just blood.” She said seriously, while I kicked myself. A stupid question, because I knew the answer already.

“Trust me, I know.” I answered after a moment of consideration. But hey, they had taken me into confidence on their family history and I decided fair game was due. “I know exactly because I’m in a similar spot.” That got the full attention of both Bennett siblings and I simply went on. “I’m an orphan. As in ‘given up anonymously after birth’. Until I was ten I spent all my life in a catholic nun-run orphanage, until my Wizard Master came along and adopted me out of there.” Without realizing it, I had pulled the small iron cross on its chain out from under my shirt. Shifu had given it to me the day he had picked me up from the Blessed Mary Orphanage. And while he had later admitted to me that he’d only done it to butter up to the Mother Superior of the place, it still reminded me of that day. The fear of leaving the only place I ever really knew, the anxiety of going to a strange new place. And the pure and utter elation at someone actually wanting me. Even if it had been a somewhat scary and old looking Hispanic man who turned out to be an even older Kung Fu Master-Slash-Wizard later on. And my life had turned even more awesome than I had ever imagined it could be while crying myself to sleep the years before.

Family is what you make, not what you are given, sometimes.

“I never knew my biological parents. My father was the man who came to invite me into his life. And just like you, I never saw the point of adding people on the sole fact of genetics to that.” I smiled slightly at Louise, a smile between people who could actually relate on something not many other people really get. With an understanding nod, we raised our coffee cups at each other.

Carter, obviously having decided that the topic had run its course leaned back and asked “What language was that, by the way? The one you used when you did magic?” with a curious tone. Leaning back as well, I considered my answer. “Its called Tocharian B.” I finally said, skimming over the part where using a different language for your magic had the purpose of creating a strong mental barrier between the magic energies and oneself. As well as to train a mental muscle onto a very specific trigger. Using magic in a language you actually used was a good way to accidentally misfire a spell. Imagine if your word for a fireball was ‘fire’ and you ask something to light your smoke. And using no word at all was just a very good way to fry your brain. So all Wizards used languages for their magic they knew well enough to understand what the words meant but didn’t actually use that much. Or they simply bastardized another language, like Latin. Whatever worked for you. My Master had actually used Zhang-Zhung, an extinct sino-tibetian language he’d learned from his Master.

“It was one of the Tocharian languages, long extinct and spoken by the Tocharian Indo-European
city states living in what is now modern China a long time ago. Given that I am also someone not of the various Chinese ethnicities but involved with their culture a lot, the language seemed a natural fit for me.” I continued to explain, and the Bennett siblings nodded at me. And then we got into a discussion what magic language Lou would use and I had to explain why a fictional language like Klingon and Sindarin was probably a stupid idea to use for that purpose.

After some more widely varied small talk Carter paid the coffee - under protest - and we walked back to his car, a old Ford LTD Crown Victoria. Louise and me were actually giving each other a parting wave through the window, but as Carter and I reached the doors of his car, he rapped on the roof and gave me a level stare.

“Okay, I’m not singling you out here, just so we are clear. I’m telling you the same general policy I’ve told all my partners since Police Academy. If you hit on my sister I will shoot you.” He told me with a voice of calm determination, big brother instinct on full throttle. After a moment of considering retorts I just shrugged. “Fair enough.” and got into the car beside him.

Maybe tomorrow I was going to tell him I could spell myself bulletproof.
In the evening, we attended a Paranet meeting. Liz Benoit had not been joking when she had said it be composed of a lot of shouting and yelling at each other. Not joking at all. Carter and I sat on the wall, trying to stay as neutral as possible for now. Louise had shown up too, but was too busy helping Liz keep everyone fed to stop by for more small talk.

It turned out, the supernatural community of the city was essentially composed of three big factions. First were the oldest, the voodoo practitioners, who generally kept to their own these days. They had sent a few observers and envoys, though. Next came a sizable werewolf pack. And I mean one of the ones where being a werewolf was a part of your lifestyle, your culture, your heritage and not a curse. It was a thing your grandparents had done, your parents and probably your children would do too. And finally, a loose confederacy of local witch covens. Witches were minor talents, but what they lacked in power they could usually make up in teamwork skills and their skill at building connections with spirits and ghosts. A witch can’t throw a fireball at you like a Wizard. Doesn’t mean they can’t make your life difficult if you piss them off. Though they had some overlap with the Voodoo community here, which I gathered was a long-term issue of contention among them.

The first topic of the evening was that at the last new moon a few witches of the local coven had decided on performing a ritual. Which had, no joke, included at least some nude dancing. And now, it turned out, they were accusing a duo of teenage werewolves of lupine voyeuristic nighttime activity. At a high point of the argument, in which the Pack Leader and the Head Witch were locked in a screaming match of epic proportions, Carter actually whispered to me that he was pretty sure the adolescent wolves had been probably invited to watch by two of the attending novice witches. Because in his words “I caught them making out in Lou’s café the week before”.

Dear Immortals, I know I’m supposed to go with the flow and all, but please no witch and wolf Romeo and Juliet while I do this job, ok?

Finally, the Pack Leader promised to give his charges some ‘counseling’ and Carter almost burst into laughter at my quiet comment that someone ask the Head Witch to better make sure her charges got some advise on contraceptive measures, both herbal and modern medicine. Because if their leaders were like this about staring during some lunar nudism, I just wonder how much of a meltdown a little witch-wolf lovechild would be for both groups.

But still. As hilarious as this little romantic dramedy was to everyone not involved, everyone was on edge. I could feel it in the room. The various sub communities of the supernatural culture of this city were keeping their walls up, even toward each other. Apparently Anson Lucas had also started to headhunt a lot off the unaffiliated magic talents for his services, I had noted from some hushed comments before the start. Nothing even near the power he already had at his side with his Sorceress, but he was branching out. Broadening his base. Joy.

And, again as amusing as it was, all that arguing between the ‘big’ factions was not helping. Yes,
their leaders defended their members to the hilt, but by doing that they only emphasized to the people who were not part of a coven or pack that they didn’t have someone like them in their corner. And then Lucas came and offered just that. Tempting to you, if you were usually alone and on the bottom rung of the ladder.

Crap. The supernatural community here was fraying badly. And with their Wizard they could have hidden behind gone, they felt abandoned at well. For now, Ketterer and Liz had argued to not introduce myself as Wizard. Maybe that way I could be a surprise for them to spring at Lucas, but now I wasn’t sure I agreed. I was not exactly the most subtle of people and maybe knowing they had a Wizard again might help them feel more safe. But as I saw the attendants arguing further and further, I was beginning to fear it might not either. Because they didn’t know me, they only knew their Wizard. And with that me being an outsider from a entirely different culture, I might even make them retreat to their own even faster.

Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Fuck me...

Next came the inevitable complains about the fact that Nu3 was still on the street. Carter got in front and gave a quick rundown on the publicly available information of the case, promising to give the work his all.

The former opponents of the previous argument now teamed up on him, implying he wasn’t doing all he could because magic people were “second class” or something like that. And yet, as I watched Carter handle them, I found myself even more impressed than I had been until now. So far Carter had been given just as much new stuff to deal with today, including me as a new Partner. Which in all honestly I am not always an easy person to be around with, given that I’m really bad at bending myself to make others comfortable. And yet he had never lost his temper, never let his frustrations guide his actions. And now he was calmly and reasonably dealing with two people obviously unwilling to consider reason.

Carter Bennett rose even more in my appreciation just now. When we started today I had feared that he’d just be in charge of the ‘Atypical Cases’ as a career in decline, as was often the case where police dealt with magic in my experience. Now I realized that it was actually the opposite, that Carter was a natural born troubleshooter, put on the job because his skills. Or to put it in Pen and Paper terms...he was the Social Character needed in this circumstances.

I allowed myself a small smile. When he trotted me up front to introduce me as his new partner - and ignoring all the stares at my noticeable physique - he had almost calmed the people down and agreeable to each other. Which in my opinion was a pretty impressive achievement.

Which lasted until the next topic of the agenda came up, the price of Baby’s Breath herbs in the local magic supply shop. Which apparently some Voodoo practitioners out of the Bayou controlled and had ramped up the price somewhat, just to spite the witches.

Thank God I didn’t actually have a real gun. I might actually have shot myself to spare me dying of boredom.

As we took a break from the meeting, I headed outside of the front door for a quick smoke. Lighting the cigarette with a little fire trick a Pyromancer friend had shown me years ago, I was almost immediately intercepted by a group of people who looked like they had been attacked by a rabid goth-supply store.
“Hey, invite us inside?” Their leader told me, grinning at the girl at his side as he obviously thought he exercises some kind of natural authority. I just gave him a level stare over my smoke and a whimsical “Yeeaaah, I think not?” I mean, if they hadn’t been invited in before, and needed one, I’m not going to open the door to a room full of already scared Paranetters.

Big Guy stepped before me, actually a head taller than me and stared down at me. At least he was smart enough not to go for eye-contact, I had to admit.

“Listen. In case you haven’t heard of us, we’re the Hex Heads. We heard you have some...magic problems and are willing to offer our services.” I attempted to return the glare for a moment, only to see that his gaze had already switched to my breasts. Well. Preferable to a Soulgaze with this bozo either way, I figured. “For a price, I guess? Do you guys get you cheaper if we buy the whole baker’s dozen?” I added in the same whimsical tone I used before, even if I didn’t feel it. Practitioners for Hire? Probably just some thugs with some magic talents, wereforms and maybe, maybe a few focused practitioners among them. Great. Magic Rent-A-Thug’s. Exactly what this city needed, I was certain. I took another draw on my smoke and blew it out again.

“Thanks for your offer, but your services will not be required.” I told him firmly. Top thug just snorted into my face and made a step back, as if he considered my words.

Dear thugs. If you want to fake out a hit, please don’t telegraph it from a mile away. It really robs you of any intimidating factor if you meet someone who actually knows how to fight.

I turned out of the way of the gut punch before it had even fully happened, landing my open palm on his forearm bone in just the right way to numb everything down from that position for the next half hour.

I continued to stare at him, drawing on the smoke again as if nothing had happened. Maybe Top thug was willing to let it be at this warning shot. But instead of doing the smart thing and just backing down, he tried to grab my arm with a roar of anger. Not even a real attack but how he’d grab a women he'd attempt to use his bigger physique against.

Well. Patience with guys like that? Fresh out.

My palms met each other and I almost whispered the “Kauta!” of the old Tocharian language that I used to work my spells in, pressing my arms out at his chest. Raw force lashed out and he flew away from me until he smacked audibly into a mailbox a few meters down the walkway.

The scene went quiet as this happened.

His buddies all took a careful step back as they realized they faced another practitioner. While I doubted they had me pegged as Wizard

(More because of stereotyping than demonstrated magic, I’d wager! You’d be surprised how many assholes have difficulties accepting a back girl on top of the mortal magic food chain)

none of them seemed willing to go for a tiff right now. After a moment, and another draw on my smoke, they just grabbed their boss and the so called ‘Hex Heads’ slowly withdrew, not without a lot of dirty looks at me though.

Flicking away the now finished cigarette I opened the front door and slipped back inside hoping I had missed enough stupid argument with this little diversion, until I heard a sound out from one of the empty rooms to the side of the door. Deciding to just check and make sure if this wasn’t already a too stupid Hex Head breaking in in retaliation, I flipped on the light switch.
Nope, I wasn’t *that* lucky. The light revealed in fact not a B&E in progress but a beast with two backs made up out of a certain teenage werewolf and novice witch.

“Oh, come on!”

After two more hours of shouting and meeting, Liz finally showed me the room she had prepared for me to stay in. For breakfast I was to simply go over the street to the restaurant there, which was apparently owned and operated by her son and his husband.

With effort, I managed to get myself into the shower before bed and let the hot water work on the tension in my back. Within a day I had arrived in a new city, found out about a magical drug problem and being recruited as a freaking cop.

If I had a working smartphone I might have sent pictures to my friends of my new badge. But then my old Pyromancer friend Colby would probably burn down a house in shocked surprise at seeing me as a cop before going into hiding for the next, oh, century?

(He may or not may work as professional arsonist and insurance scammer. Hey, I don’t judge? Or maybe now I gotta start doing that now?)

When I had set out I had expected it was some minor errand to run for another Wizard, some make work stuff from the old ones to the new ones. Not this. Not all the responsibility, not all the pressure to suddenly perform.

Just standing there and letting the water run down my skin in hundreds of hot rivers realizing I had actually to go to work tomorrow. I mean, I had worked before. But usually just some quick side-jobs on the road when I was out of cash and the local bank refused to take a travelers cheque.

(Hey, I’m a Wizard. No credit card for me...)

Because of that my previous work experience usually went less to being structured and more to do what was available and paid. I had worked as bouncer, Mandarin translator, bike courier, stripper, woodworker, martial arts instructor and masseuse among many others.

(Not that kind of masseuse. Pressure massages and stuff. Pervs.)

But none of these jobs had actually, you know, been with very high standards regarding my personal appearances.

(Well. The stripper one did. But probably radically different than cop standards.)

As long as I showed up on time and did the job, my employers hadn’t usually cared how I looked. Which was pretty good, because if you spent years drifting all over the world, your wardrobe does start to suffer. And just try to find some clothes that actually fit me in some more remote places of the world.

Still. I suspected I probably should aspire to a more...stringent personal care as long as I wore that badge. So instead of just going to sleep as I had originally planned, I stepped outside the shower and grabbed the washing kit from my backpack. Back into the shower - and positively luxuriating in the fact that its century old piping meant the hot water kept coming - I began from the top, opening the bottles of shampoo and conditioner and went to work on my shoulder-blade long black hair.
As usual for me, once I settled into the routine of cleaning myself my mind began to wander. Talking with Lou about my Master earlier had been...nice. Too many people just assume that if you are adopted you automatically had the driving need to find your birth parents. I’m not saying a lot of orphans don’t. Or that I had not had the same desire when I was younger. But after I had come to live with my Shifu that had...changed. Maybe because I never had wanted my birth parents come and get me because I wanted to see them, but because I only wanted them to take me away.

Okay. The orphanage had not been bad. Don’t misunderstand me here. It had just been...strict. And boring. The nun’s had cared for us, but their goal had been to raise us as as good and faithful people and not to provide a home. Think like growing up in a christian summer camp. I had always chafed at the restrictions they put me on. Girls didn’t climb tree’s. Girl’s didn’t pick fights. Girl’s weren’t sarcastic or overly ironic.

(Yes, I was a little sarcastic shit as a little kid. Which has totally changed. Seriously!)

The fact that I also grew like a weed didn’t endear me to the Nuns at all. Always standing out, always a head taller than the other girls. I had been so glad to be finally out there of the place. No more Nun’s telling me how to life my life!

Which had turned into a sense of infantile betrayal when Shifu had sent me to a catholic Nun run private school right after. Okay, the reasons had been solid for that, I now knew. The school had a firm ‘no electronics on the grounds’ rule, which had been a blessing once my magic had started to bloom in full. The fact that it also offered a very good education has also been a role. And at least I had been able to go home after class. Still, ten year old me had been decidedly unhappy about suddenly having to wear a school uniform and say prayer before class again.

Other than that, my life had turned so much better after I started living with Shifu. At first we were both a bit awkward around each other. I was skeptical about why he had taken me in, and he simply hadn’t much experience caring for a kid. Especially a girl. Which turned into a mutual learning experience for the next year. But by the time we celebrated my first birthday in his house we had been more than just Master and Apprentice-to-be. We had been...a family. And after that, the few times I had thought about my birth parents coming to get me had not been the dreams they were in the orphanage. They had been nightmares.

Rinsing out my hair, I got out the tightly secured bottle containing my depilatory potion. Beginning to carefully apply it to the places where I wanted to get rid of body hair, I remembered how Shifu had used it to begin teaching me how to craft my own potions.

(He was also pretty sick of me stealing his razors all the time for my body hygiene.)

Washing the potion off my now silky-smooth legs (among other places) I continued with the bodywash, remembering with a snort how Shifu had actually been told by a teacher that he couldn’t just give his 11 year old daughter a bottle of his men’s wash to use for showering after P.E. Class. Honestly, I think if he had known how much...details he was to learn about female hygiene and body care he’d possibly thought twice about taking me in. It wasn’t like he had been prude or so. (He had been a practicing nudist in some respects to his life and I had picked up on that later on, so we had been very comfortable with each others bodies). He had just grown up in a time where things like getting your twelve year old daughter her first bra or dealing with her first...plumbing incident had been firmly relegated to the female half of the species and been known as Things Men Were Not Meant To Know.

Which given that he had been over two hundred years when I first met him...

God. Next year he would be dead ten years. I should probably be home for that and...don’t know.
Do a ceremony? Something like that.

Either way, he had faced the challenges ahead and braced them. Be they learning about female hygiene products or actually reading my teenage fashion magazines to make sure he could give me proper critique when I asked him if my outfit looked good.

“A good challenge reminds you what it means to be alive. Being stuck in what you know can sometimes just be another form of death.” He had said to me while we both tortured our fingertips tailoring my costume for a school play I participated in when I was thirteen. “Embrace them. Grow on them.” That were his words. Followed by a very colorful curse as he picked his finger again.

Screw my blood relations. That man had been my father in everything that counts. And done a pretty good attempt to be a mother too, when he had to.

I stepped out of the shower and began to dry myself off and then simply threw myself onto the bed, naked as I was born, a smile on my lips. Thinking of Shifu, of the things he had taught me, had encouraged me to seek out new ways to grow as a person, as a Wizard and a Martial Artist. To keep my mind open to the new things waiting out in this great wide world.

I realized, I was actually looking forward to tomorrow. Yes, today had run me ragged already, but I had enjoyed it. And tomorrow would be just as exhausting, I suspected. Just as taxing. Just as forcing me to expand my horizon to meet new and unexpected circumstances.

God. I admitted just to myself. Shifu was right. A good challenge is what makes you feel alive sometimes.
The next morning, I decided to give the contracted police gym a try for my daily workout, but the guy at the counter just waved me off when I showed my badge to enter. He instead handed me a package and a note from Captain Ketterer reading ‘Not sure if the official gym is your speed.’ together with an address further down from the place.

In fact, a look through the glass behind the desk clerk showed a neat, modern and - more importantly - computerized gym. I had the distinct impression that me just sneezing in there would short out every piece of exercise equipment for the rest of the day. Which while possibly amusing, would not be very social of me.

Moving down the street, the address led me to something more to my speed. An older building looking like it had been built in the fifties. More of the ‘boxing ring surrounded by other equipment’ type of gym, it reeked of decade old sweat, some blood and just generally steeped in the smell of people working out. And not a shred of electronics anywhere in sight.

I fell in love with the place at first sight.

I also possibly brought down the age average of its patrons about ten years just by entering it seemed. Not to mention that I just became a very radical statistical outlier in terms of gender distribution of its client list as well. At least I didn’t go for the triple threat by also radically upping the average skin-melanin level, like I had at the private school my Master had enrolled me as a child.

(To be fair to him, the selling point had been the ‘electronics free school environment’, but it was still been a very White Anglo-Saxon Catholic place.)

The package the clerk in the other gym had given me turned out to contain a new dark blue training pants and tank top, both stenciled with a the letters ‘NOPD’. After a moment of considering going back to the boarding house to grab a sports bra that wasn’t brightly pink.

(Don’t judge me, the others needed serious washing after a month on the road.)

I quickly went to the small-ish woman’s locker room and changed from street clothes into the new stuff, leaving only my black foci-armwraps on. The only thing I left in the package were the training shoes, wrapping my feet in spare non-focus wraps as usual.

The moment I stepped out all eyes were on me. Inside the ring a few older cops were sparring, one of them being Ketterer. Like I said, I’ve been to a very expensive catholic private school and while I had been never to jail so far, but I have seen enough movies to recognize the atmosphere as ‘everyone size up the new kid’.

(That or they were distracted by the sudden appearance of boobs in their male dominated area.)
As far as I could see everyone took a very good look at me, all six-foot-one of dark chocolate skinned amazonian stature. The firm hard muscle on my arms and and six-pack - nicely revealed by the tight tank top - drew almost more looks than what sat over the six-pack. In fact, some of those looks were definitely more seizing me up like a perp than anything else. I was generous and chalked that up to actual reflex based on experience and not racial profiling. For now.

One of the men in the ring made a comment to Ketterer I couldn’t understand, but the mocking body language showed me enough to get the gist. Well. Time to make a first impression, I guess?

So I stepped up to an unoccupied sandbag and considered my options. After a moment I decided on the reasoned approach of Screw it, go big or go home. I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath, Invoking as I did.

Now, if you have some knowledge about other Wizards, you know what Evocation is, the quick and dirty way of magic people use to throw fireballs and the like. In Magic For Dummies terms it means drawing in magic and evoking it at something. Every Wizard, Sorcerer and a lot of focused practitioners can do it. It is one of the basic tools of your average advanced magic user.

Invocation on the other hand is more of a special technique used by my school of Wizardry. Aside from me, the only other people I knew who could do it were my Master and - in a less complete form - one of his ex-disciples

(‘ex’ as in ‘ex-Marine’, if you get my drift.)

I had clashed a while ago. In Magic For Dummies terms it means drawing in magic and invoking it into yourself. Actually a lot harder to pull of than I make it sound. Like, I took me ten years to master this technique and I’m still working on improving myself with it.

By doing that I can charge myself with magic in three basic ways. I can toughen up my body, making me a lot harder to hurt. I can strengthen my muscles, making me faster and stronger. And finally I can speed up my reflexes and movement, making me able to use the greater speed of my muscles. How much magic I can draw in is an...evolving state, but I can distribute what I have pretty freely between those three areas. If I go for balance, I can go toe-to-toe with a Lycanthrope at Full Moon or a well fed average Member of the White Court of Vampires without problems. If I put all in toughening myself up it takes a high-powered military rifle to hurt me. If I put it all in speed I can catch moving cars.

As I threw the punch at the bag, I put almost all in strength, just keeping enough in toughening myself to prevent myself from getting hurt by the energy in my punch. The effect was...accordingly.

The bag didn’t fly off the chain. It snapped in the middle opposite my impacting fist, spraying a meter of sand toward the wall on the other side of it. The sound of my fist hitting the fabric echoed through the gym, followed by ringing silence and the noise of trickling sand. And then after a moment the third guy in the ring simply let out a snap of laughter and slapped Ketterer on the shoulder as if he was congratulating him. A few more laughs, and even one or two claps rose out of the room and then everyone went back to the business of exercise.

I let go of the invoked magic as I walked over to the ring. The big drawback of Invocation is that it’s both hard to change how you distribute the magic energy once you did it and that keeping the invocation up is a lot like keeping your kegel muscles contracted for a long time. Far easier to simply draw in as needed and letting go when done. Not to mention that you were a signal light of magic to everyone who knew to look.
Either way I had passed the muster, I hoped.

“Must have been a faulty bag, Sir.” I joked as I moved over the ring and saluted-ish to Ketterer. “Hope they have an replacement.” I added with a cocky grin. Ketterer just grinned at his two companions in a fraternity-smug way.

“I think Lieutenant Mayer did say he’d pay for it if you actually broke it.” He answered, winking at a African-American man beside him, the same one who had made the mocking comment earlier. The self same man grinned back and made a disarming wave.

“I did, and I’m good to my word Bob.” He admitted with a mix out of a snicker and a sigh. “Though in recompense, I may consider that permission to poach.” He added and then turned to me. “Ever considered doing SWAT, Detective? I think with that punch we could retire our battering rams wholesale!” Mayer inquired with a joking tone, waving me up into the ring. The other man just groaned in reply as I climbed up. “Cal, I’ve had enough crap going on selling Bob’s little brainstorm to City Hall as a green detective. Can we keep her in one division for, say, a week before I have to revisit the topic with the Mayor’s aides?” he grunted. "No offense, Detective. Captain Hallerson, Public Relations Division, to my bane.” He introduced himself and shook my hand. “Basically, I spin the needs of the department to people who think in vote percentages.”

I also shook Mayer’s hand, getting a whole ‘classmates’ vibe off the three from the ribbing and jokes. I also began to wonder if Ketterer had informed them of the real reason of why he had given me a badge, that he wanted a Wizard to throw at the new magic drug problem of the city. Ketterer had made some noises about cloaking my new ‘job’ in some buzzwords like ‘diversifying the unit’ and ‘bringing in fresh eyes to look at old problems’, which had apparently not resulted in jubilation in some parts of the city administration if I went by Hallersons words.

Or maybe he just had Wizard’s Disease about enjoying not sharing information and getting a rise out of friends like that.

After some more polite conversation, I returned to the floor of the gym and went through my usual training exercise. After helping set up the replacement sand bag and promising not to break that one too.

As I practiced my strike forms on it, it first dawned on me that maybe the line of reasoning that me having a badge would make it easier to do this didn’t necessarily easy in general.

After half an hour, Carter showed up too. Holding a set of boxing gloves, he too added his name to the list of ‘impressed appreciation’ of me. On my grinning question if he wanted to spar he just raised in a hand in a gesture of surrender.

“Sorry Jess. I am getting better, but something tells me you’d kill me up there. Possibly literally.” He grinned at me. And to be fair, he seemed fit but more of a runner, if my guess was correct. I tagged him in at the sandbag and moved beside it, beginning to do some t’ai-chi forms.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” Carter asked me between his pounding the bag. “Might be a bit personal, though?” I looked up at him while changing forms and beckoned him to go ahead with a shake of the head. After a moment Carter simply asked “Are you gay?”, looking around to see if someone else was in hearing range.
After a moment of just staring I began to laugh until I had to break form for a moment while I composed myself. Not because of the question, but how awkward Carter was about not, I guessed, embarrass me. Which was pretty hilarious to me, because I had never been what you'd call circumspect about my sexuality and libido.

(Which is what a lot of my friends would call a "charming understatement.")

As I finally had myself back under control and went back into my forms, I answered. “It’s not that simple. Given that I'm not exactly someone fitting labels either, I'm not exactly willing to attribute them to myself.” I told him. “Let’s just keep it easy and say I’m bisexual? Interested in both girls and boys. In fact I’m only homosexual in the respect that I only date homo sapiens.” Which in my profession did disqualify a lot of people I met. Raising my eyebrows in an inquisitive glance in just asked “I assume that's not a problem?”

Carter, still awkward about it, waved me off. “No, I just...Okay. Long story short, my first partner was gay. And because then it wasn’t that acceptable as its now, he didn’t tell me. So I, deciding he needs some more social life, tried to set him up with a former classmate of mine. It finally ended in a very awkward double date.” He explained with a hilarious blush. “Since then...well. I just want to know? To keep such...misfires at bay.” He finished. Well. That was at least considering.

I gave him a level look and a crooked smile in return. “So I told you mine, you tell me yours?” I coaxed and after a moment he conceded the point with a smile of his own. “I’m...blondesexual. Don’t laugh, it’s true. And generally just girls, with some situational flexibility. And for me to tell you the situations in question, I need a drink first.” He explained with a shrug. Well, I had a friend who was seriously redhead-sexual, so I wasn’t about to judge him for liking blonde girls. Still, I gave him a relaxed smirk.

“I’ll keep that in mind. And try to avoid dying my hair blonde while I’m in town.” I quipped back. “Hey, can I ask you something in turn? Why don’t you want your sister to date your partner?” Carter actually gave me a dirty look for a second and then turned to stare at the roof. “Because we have a damn dangerous job. Especially we who deal with magic crimes. Chances are that if one of us dies on the job the other is probably dead too. And...I kinda don’t want that for her. If I die on the job it will hurt her enough. Losing her lover, or worse, the same day from the same shit…”

Well. That was a lot more real than what I had imagine. And worse, I could actually see his point. Still, part of me disagreed on the whole ‘making decisions for her’ aspect of it.

“Hey, who let the chick in?” A voice cut over us. Both of us turned around to see a...well...hunk of a cop move in. “Crap, I thought Layson was still on vacation?” Carter muttered before he gestured at him and introduced us as the new guy came closer. “Officer Layson meet Detective Lennon.” He introduced us as the blonde giant stepped up to us. Six foot three, I’d guess and he had the toned built of a fellow martial artist. He also gave me a returning once over, the kind I had learned to interpret as ‘dismissed on account of boobs’ as well as a semi-sneered “Detective.” before he turned on to Carter again. “Hey Sarge, finally have the guts to throw your hat in the ring this year?” he asked with an arrogant undertone. Carter, ignoring the tone pretty passive-aggressively, only gave a firm “Maybe” back.

On another questioning look from me Carter reluctantly began to explain “Layson means the annual Department MMA tournament. He’s reigning champion, as of the last two years.”

Was he? I turned to Layson but he just gave me a patronizing smile as if he read my mind. “Sorry, Detective. Males only. Safety issues, you see.”

Only because I was on the force for less than twenty-four hours by now did I not respond with the
“Oh, don’t worry. I won’t hurt you too much.” that my social reflexes suggested.

(See. I’m a mature person. Mostly.)

After some more not-so-subtle putdowns to Carter, who had apparently entered the tournament on a dare last year and eliminated pretty quick, Layson continued into the now empty center ring while giving some more ‘quality commentary’ to other people on the way there. I felt invigorated by the level of welcome on the force by him.

Turning to Carter the “Want me to beat him up for you?” slipped out before I could really stop myself. Don’t get me wrong, the guy had the weight and reach advantage on me in a fight, so unless I cheated with magic I wouldn’t have an easy fight with him. But I was pretty sure I could take him even without magic advantages. Especially if the moron gave me a good first hit by underestimating me.

For a moment Carter just looked at me and I could see it in his face that he was tempted. Very tempted. But then the look in his eyes turned a bit more...considering. “No.” he finally said. “But could you teach me to do it myself? Within the next 4 months?”

Heh. Okay. I was really starting to like this guy.
A police life has some hazards no one tells you about. Like, running into half a dozen beat cops coming out of their Sexual-Harassment-Prevention class. Which is generally a good idea to have them attend, don’t get me wrong. But if you literally trigger a look into your very own soul by eye-to-eye contact then half a dozen strangers who just got three hours of ‘her eyes are up here’ is seriously inconveniencing.

Or having to quietly slip out of the squad room because you may have accidentally hexxed the TV they were following the game on during overtime? (I swear I’m sorry!)

Also, all that Donut jokes about cops? Huge Understatement. I met (and fought) death cults less dedicated to their idols.

(Note to me: Find a quick route from here up to New York. If I get myself some Cronuts I could rule this precinct like a dark queen on her throne.)

Another thing is, crime can happen pretty quick and unexpected. Which was why Carter and I found ourselves driving down a street at high speed to what the woman on the radio - ‘This bitch’, Carter had called her I think? Rude - had called a ‘robbery in progress’. Our car being the closest set of badges to the location meant we were the first at the scene, ‘parking’ simply across the street and jumping out of the car.

“Gun!” Carter hissed at me as we did this, his own already out and in his hand. Reasonable and mature Wizard that I am, I did not make a joke about still having my ‘guns’ safely tucked into my bra just to be obstinate and followed suit, putting the unfamiliar weight in my hands as we reached the door of the shop.

We entered the bodega, a surprisingly big one at that, and I muttered a quiet curse. The freaking place was a labyrinth of shelves and narrow passageways. Carter was giving me military-ish sign to take one side, vanishing down the other. It was probably unwise to remind him at that point out loud that he had not yet explained those signs to me, so I simply began to slowly walk down the aisle on my own. For a moment I considered doing a little life-sign spell in a circle of maple syrup as I turned around a corner and my world became pain in the thunder of a firearm.

Now, I may have mentioned before, but I had enchanted my green leather jacket to be pretty much bulletproof to run of the mill ammo? That does not mean I don’t feel the bullet hit. And what hit me right in this second straight between my shoulder blades was - as I would later see - a sawed off double-barrel shotgun from a very short distance.

It was like my back had been attacked by a tightly grouped swarm of hyper-sonic bee’s.

Ow. So very much ow.

And if that wasn’t enough that, the transfer energy from the punch all but keeled me over. Slamming
me forward with just enough of force to make me end up breaking my fall on my two personal issue D-cup airbags.

Double ow.

As I was flat on the ground - muttering saintly and patient words of love in Mandarin about whatever asshat that had just shot me - two sneakers stepped up into my field of vision and dropping the empty shotgun on the ground. Bending down the bastard just picked up my own gun, which I had let go as I landed, and pointed it straight at my face.

“Hell, what did they feed you to make you, Bacon Girl. And why are you still alive?” The robber said with a heavy helping of street crime slang in his voice, obviously checking me out as I rolled onto my back, breathing in pain for a moment. The gun still hovered with the business end toward my face as the gangster seemed to consider his options. “Nice and slowly, Bacon Girl. If your partner isn’t stupid you may actually get here out unharmed. Ish. If not, I’ll just have to shoot you. Again.” He added with an unkind smile and gesticulating with my gun to make his point.

Putting on a unperturbed face, and hopefully hiding all the pain, I just ignored him and simply got to my feet, slapping some dust of my clothes. As I stretched my shoulders, making some slight pain noises and checked if I hadn’t actually injured myself apart from what I felt were probably a few hundred bruises all over my back. The perp just stared at me while I did that and finally exclaimed a unbelieving “ARE YOU CRAZY, BITCH?! Think I’ll not shoot a cop in the face instead of the back!?” His voice rose as his face turned red. As reaction to his flaring temper, I merely turned toward him and smiled with all the mocking I could muster and just taunted a “Go ahead?"

And that was apparently the drop that was enough to break his restraint. His jaw clenched and with a swift motion of the finger he pulled the trigger, aiming the gun straight between my eyes.

Which was the moment when a little flame plopped out of the muzzle of the Glock. You know. Like a lighter. The criminal just stopped for a moment, then pulled the trigger again to the same effect. Looking into the muzzle and tried again.

(Which would have been a hilariously bad moment to produce a different outcome, if you ask me).

Finally convinced that despite the very realistic weight, this was not a real gun he turned back to me. And probably realized for the first time I actually was taller than him by a few inches as well as noticeable better in shape. An effect only underscored by me the audibly cracking my knuckles.

“Well, fuck me...”

“You didn’t have to make him walk up to me and say ‘Please sir, may I have another?’ for me to arrest him, you know?” Carter gave me a look of admonishment as we stood before the bodega. The fact that his eyes laughed their imaginary-asses off kinda robbed it of it's disciplinary effect though. Carter, as he had told me, had ducked the moment he had heard the shotgun go off and slowly moved toward my position, using the shelves as cover. By the time the moron had realized my gun was fake he’d already been ready to line up a shot if necessary but had then opted to arrest rather than morgue the guy after it was clear he was overpowered by me.

“The guy shot me. Least he could do is help me through the healing power of laughter.” I asserted the righteousness of my decision. "Also, I wasn’t sure I’d get through his rights without flubbing off. I kinda lost the card you gave me when he shot me.” I added more reasonably, moving my shoulder blades to relieve some of the pain there. “At least the other cops believed the story about the kevlar-
leather in my jacket?”

“Yeah, and now half of them google it on their phone because they want some too,” Carter grinned at me. “Too bad you can’t mass produce them? We’d make a nice penny.”

“The problem is not production but charge. I need to re-power the enchants every few months. Maybe a bit sooner after today.” I wiggled the jacket on my hand to emphasize. “At least your little gun trick worked?”

Carter gave a only slightly smug smile for that admission. An old partner from his beat cop days, it had turned out, bought the decommissioned guns of the department and turned them into novelty lighters to better his pension. They had the same weight as a real gun, looked like a real gun and were totally harmless. “Some of the old people just want to have the feel of it back on their hips after they retire” he had explained to me. For me it was the reverse, get used to a gun on my belt while Carter worked on my shooting skills. As well as intimidate perps in a standoff, because they didn’t know it was fake.

“Well enough. Just promise me you won’t make ‘let them disarm me and then kick their ass’ a go-to tactic okay? Might be a bit hard to explain to the other cops if it becomes a repeat performance?” He pointed out with smirk. I only crossed my arms over my chest and looked down on him haughtily.

“I’ll take it under consideration.” I assured him. Mainly because that had been exactly my plan. Well, he didn’t get to be a detective by collecting bottle caps, I guessed. Unlike people like me who found it in the cereal box.

The same evening I spent in the Benoit Boarding House basement, sitting in a circle before a few lit candles. The room was lined with magic-diffracting wood carvings, so Liz had ensured me I could do almost all forms of heavy magic inside without disrupting the building above.

No heavy duty magic, for now. I merely sat in the skin, taking up a lotus position and worked some magic on myself. Namely, I fixed the epic assortment of bruises on my back (after Liz had made a polaroid image of the impressive image) using some biomancy. I had some talent as a healer, even if I wasn’t nearly in the same league as Wizard Listens to Wind. I’m good at what you’d call ‘chi healing’.

Chi is essentially another word to call the general magic background field of a living body. If you know how, and spend a lot of time learning to do so, you can actually feel how an injury disrupts that natural field of magic, or is disrupted by it (Look I’m dumbing this down, ok? No offense.) If you could see the disruption, you can fix it, leading to a heavily accelerated healing process. Works great for most injuries and some illnesses, but the more complicated stuff I generally don’t touch yet. Wizard LTW (Don’t tell him I acronym him like that!) threatens to send me off to med-school at some point to fix that often enough, and maybe once I had time I’d actually do it?

For now it was more than enough to fix myself back up. I also used to it to do ‘maintenance’ to my own body. Keep tissues fit and firm, prevent certain monthly occurrences (and have I not gotten death threats from some of my girlfriends over that little trick) and all other sorts of things to keep my body in perfect condition. Someone had once compared it to performing plastic surgery on myself, but you know what? I’m expected to live three hundred years with this body, and given my lifestyle choices not quiet ones at that, so I’ll just take care of it every way I can. If that also means keeping
my T&A firm and perky that’s just a bonus. Beats Botox as far as I thought.

I was absorbed in regenerating some shoulder ligaments courtesy of my welcome committee yesterday when my concentration was finally broken by a knock on the door.

“Dear? You have a...package?” Mrs Benoit’s voice came through the wooden door in a slightly warning sense. “Are you decent?” she asked then, in a tone that made me wonder just what the other local practitioners did in that room. Those white blotches on the ground did look suspicious on second thought.

Aaaanyway, I stood up and broke the circle around me with the foot. The usual slight feeling of air pressure equalizing accompanied it. I pondered for a moment just putting a shirt back on, but then decided that Mrs Benoit had probably seen worse in here. All the magic energy coursing through my body had also covered me in a pretty thorough layer of sweat (Look. Energy movement equals heat equals body reacting by regulating equals sweat, got it?) which would make any shirt probably nothing but a token effort anyway.

“I’m not, but I don’t mind.” I called out in answer and grabbed a towel I had, in a moment of preparatory genius, taken down with me. Mrs Benoit opened the door and stepped inside, giving me a slight look that can be best described as ‘seriously?’ as she noticed me still being butt (heh) naked. And maybe five percent of subtle appreciation-slash-impressed-by-fitness. Give or take a percent of envy. I tend have that effect on people, sometimes, especially the ones that know I’m cheating with magic on the whole sagging thing. The fact that she was literally just reaching the upper end of my bosom with the top of her head did probably not help in that regard.

(Just remember what Pratchett wrote about people whose teeth are on height with sensitive body parts, people….)

“A...gentleman left this for you.” She informed me, handing me the second brown nondescript package-and-note set I got today. And from the feel of it, again containing clothes? I ignored the card for a moment, curiosity picked, and opened the package.

Out came...well...you could call it a dress. Miele, my gymnophobic Vampire friend from Europe, would have had some more choice words for it, beginning at the fact that she’d seen swimwear which covered more skin. It was made of a beautiful silk(?) cloth which I’d guess would cling to my body shape in just the perfect way. Its green tone fit perfectly both to my eyes and skin tone, showing a lot of the latter both front and back. The set of strap heels that came with it looked as if they were perfectly paired to it. Whoever had sent me this hadn’t just bought shelf, even my not-that-developed sense of high fashion told me. This had been ordered to fit for me. Hell of a way to make a first impression. And expensive.

Realizing that, my suspicion wrangled my body-image-ego and inner-’i got a gift!’-kid into submission and made me pick up the card that had come with it.

Dear Wizard Lennon,

I am sorry I have taken this long to welcome you formally to this city. As a community leader to the magically gifted people in New Orleans I would be remiss to ignore you any further. Please accept this invitation for Dinner tonight in order to make up for my inexcusable lag in reaction.
I have taken the liberty of sending you a dress, as I am informed you have been backpacking the last couple of years and thus may not own a suitable piece in your wardrobe for the evening. Consider it a Welcome Gift.

At your service

Anson Lucas

P.S: To ensure a polite conversation I consider your attendance as a promise on your power to not offer violence first.

Cheeky son of a... I thought as I read the card again, checking it and the dress for magic residue while doing it. For a moment I just considered doing the paranoid thing and burning both. Unlike the guy in Chicago, Lucas had no standing in the supernatural political scene, I could ignore it at my leisure.

On the other hand, getting some face time with the guy actually responsible for the crap that brought me here might be helpful. And that little post-script note just told me the guy was pretty savvy to how the supernaturals do business. Which meant I may just walk into some sort of entrapment.

What do you do when you have no good choices?

Crap.
Of course the dinner was at a whorehouse. Well. Whorehouse would have been a bit...unfair. As in it being a gross understatement. The ‘Circus Plaisir’ was not just a house, for starters. It was a ‘small’ high rise of easily fifteen floors.

As I walked through the front door, I realized the first and second floor were a small but well equipped casino. The fifteenth floor was billed as a restaurant on the chart at the entrance, so that was probably where I was going.

Which left only scant thirteen floors for the buggering. Well, let’s be fair, maybe a little bit of a service infrastructure too. At the very least some laundry, I hoped. Still, I could feel the sex thick in the atmosphere the moment I stepped inside the place. The whole place was steeped in it, reeking of it, its aura caressing my Wizard senses in a scintillating fashion. Emotion and magic were intimately intertwined, so if you had a dozens of people in this place experiencing the sort of feelings that came with a good fuck...

Suddenly I was very aware of the fact that I hadn’t gotten properly laid in months. At least not by someone that wasn’t me.

A awareness of state which was not helped by the very appetizing male specimen walking up to me with a welcoming smile and looks that were just too good to be true.

Down girl. Vampires are friends or foes, not fuck buddies, I told the more id-related parts of my body and demonstratively crossed my arms over my chest in my best ‘don’t fuck with me’ pose. Which in this circumstances may just have been a bit of a Freudian turn of phrase...

No, I wasn’t wearing the dress. I had considered wearing it for about a millisecond and then put it aside in favor of anything else. Don’t get me wrong, it was a gorgeous piece and would make me look like pure sex on legs if I put it on, but it was decidedly not what I would wear to a possibly hostile dinner date with a local drug lord.

(Yes, I still kept it. Sue me. It makes my legs look awesome...)

Discounting the dress, I had opted for my standard gear. Black jeans, my enchanted green leather jacket, sneakers and just to be obnoxious a Breaking Bad shirt. I had left my new badge and ‘gun’ back at the Benoit boarding house. He had invited me as a Wizard and if something did happen to me while I attended this meeting in that persona, the White Council would be far more terrifying in its response than the New Orleans Police Department ever could. Comes with the territory of our ruling body being the seven most powerful mortals on the planet.

“Wizard Lennon, I assume?” The Vampire asked with a smile so charming it might have killed lesser women as he stopped before me. “I am Lysander, one of the proprietors of this place. Mr Lucas has asked me to welcome you in his name and ferry you up to the restaurant for your dinner. Just to make sure you do not get...lost on the way.” He purred genially at me, just as a triplet of
Italian-looking bombshells clad only in stockings walked past us, shooting me inviting smiles.

DOWN GIRL! I commanded mentally at my rebelling nether regions. But still. Damn. Did I mention that they were identical triplets from what I could see?

(And that was...everything! Fantasy does not need to report to duty. Damn you, bisexuality...)

After rolling a, so I assume, mental natural twenty on my will save, Lysander guided me to a very nice and luxurious elevator which he assured me would take me directly to the restaurant. A glare from me made him not ride up with me, which I was silently thankful for. Worst case, all the sexual tension I just had brought under control might hex the thing and then I’d be stuck with a someone who looked like he had commissioned his abs in marble from Michelangelo himself.

Which would have been so very bad in all the good ways. Or good in all the bad ways. All the deeply enjoyable, exhausting, sensual and **thoroughly** erotic ways.

Fucking Vampires.

(Not literally. Literally is bad.)

I reached the top floor without a hitch, which was nice given the modern elevator, but I wouldn’t count my graces on that until I was safely down again. Getting stuck up here was not much better than getting stuck in general. Especially given the prospective company.

The restaurant was...nice if a bit generic. Your usual high-end elegance dining place. The kind of place where you bring your mistress to, but not your wife. Which in context makes a lot of sense, if you think about it. Though the last time I was in a place like this, I had ended up wrecking it in a fight with a bunch of rogue Einherjar.

(Long story. If you want it, ask the guys in Oslo.)

It was also empty, save for what I assume was the best table available. It was already set and occupied by two people I instantly recognized from their pictures.

Anson Lucas, in nature, looked like he had been a school quarterback once. Broad shoulders and a body shape which he obviously still kept fit. A handsome square face with just a little bit of chin beard, close cropped kinky hair, skin a few shades lighter than mine and beautiful dark eyes, he could have found work as a state-level male model if he wanted I’d guessed. He wore an obviously hand-tailored suit that accentuated his looks perfectly. I went out on a guess and decided it was the same talented hands who had made the dress he’d sent me. From what I saw, he probably was not armed, but there was nothing that said he hadn’t had goons waiting in the kitchen.

The woman sitting on his lap was, unsurprisingly, his pet sorceress. Who looked even more like a model than he did. Caramel skin and as far as I could tell natural blonde hair that spoke of a biracial heritage and a centerfold-material type of figure that I would have considered fake if the techbane issues she would have just like me wouldn’t make surgery...inadvisable. The dress she wore was just as revealing as the one they had sent me, and probably again the same mysterious tailor at work.

Damn why is everyone so insistent here on turning me on with the eye candy tonight? I complained quietly while once again fighting my id into submission. But it was true. Alone, both of them would have been incredibly good looking. Literally remarkable. Together they probably turned heads if they passed by. God help whatever gender their future kids would feel attracted too.
But then, I’m not exactly a wallflower myself and you don’t survive as Wizard too long if beauty alone throws you off balance. So I just bucketed up and went on my way.

As I walked closer LeHaine got up from his lap and intercepted me a few meters short of the table. “I’m so glad you could make it Jessica...I may call you Jessica?” She purred with an accent I couldn’t quite identify just from hearing. Filing it away for later, I met the calculating stare in her brilliant blue eye just quick enough not to trigger a Soulgaze before she was close enough to pull me into a lot-more-than-polite hug.

Okay. If she’d gone for a handshake as greeting I’d politely declined it. Which was probably why she hadn’t done that and instead just went for the full body approach. But the physical contact between two practitioners means more than just touching skin. In truth, our magical auras meeting up close now gave each of us a very good feel of the respective magical strengths of our talent. In her case I was respectfully impressed. She had some serious power, for a Sorceress. I’d call her a Welterweight champion, in terms of the raw magical oomph I felt off her, with the ‘Wizard’ levels of talent generally starting with ‘Middleweight’ power. Not a pushover at all, and I wondered if the whole ‘seductive sorceress’ shtick she had going on (which in our community was really done to death and considered a bit...cheap) was not a way to make people underestimate her. Like someone talking like a overeager sports fan to hide the fact that they can in fact compete semi-professionally.

On the flip-side, I felt her suppressing a slight shiver as she felt my magical weight class. Which, without any self-flattering, could only be called Super Heavyweight. It wasn’t arrogance, but in terms of raw magic potential I am comfortable in the top ten percent of the ‘fifty under fifty’ of the White Council. As a matter of fact, the only Wizard in my general age range I knew was equal to me in raw potential, I had thought dead until Halloween a few year’s ago.

(Seriously, Dresden, what the fuck are you doing with your life?)

Welterweight Champ or not, if you step into the ring and suddenly realize in the other corner waits a Super Heavyweight contender you will get a bit nervous. After a moment LeHaine broke our embrace and I gave her my best fake-BFF smile.

“Of course, if I can call you Emanuelle?” “Manu, please, all my friends call me Manu.” So she wants to be friends, did she? Honestly, if you heard one ‘let us rather be friends than enemies’ pitch from some bad guy you heard them all. But no point in being hostile from the start, though. Diplomacy is always a good try before you burn down the house around your enemies.

(Again, Dresden, what the fuck are you doing with your life?)

“Oh, you didn’t like the dress we sent you?” She then asked, giving me a slightly emphasized once over as if she noticed my clothes for the first time. I just gave her my brightest smile. “Oh, I loved it, I just wasn’t sure how I could keep my breasts from popping out if I ended up sneezing. You just have to show me the spell you use to prevent the same with yours.” I shot back in the same high school ‘popular girl friends’ voice. Her smile never faltered, but the hit had obviously struck well beyond the smiling facade from the slight quiver of her nostrils. Behind her back, I saw Lucas successfully swallow a laugh. Well, even drug lords can have a sense of humor I guess?

Manu’s smile became less fake and a bit more threatening. Which I actually preferred to the mean girls act. Honesty, even with aggression was far more to my liking as faked civility. “Oh, I would be glad to show you some of my spells.” She purred with an edge of anticipation in her voice.

“It’s a date. You show me yours, I show you mine!” I retorted cheery and seemingly unperturbed.
Mainly because I mentally reminded myself we were not locking eyes for our stare-off but staring at each others nose-bridges. Which would really look ridiculous from the outside. It’s important to remember that sometimes, or you end up drunk on our own ego. And that way lies too much make-up, robes and evil laughter.

After another moment, our contest came to an end. Declaring myself the winner by points of the exchange, I let Manu guide me to the table, taking a seat across from Lucas. The servers showed up immediately, setting the table with a very tastily looking assemblage of meats and side dishes. I waved off the wine and got a sparkling water instead. As we started to eat, we made polite non-conversation with each other as the dinner went my. Lucas, it seemed, was a ‘business for dessert’ kind of guy and - after some subtle magic check of the food - I was never one to go hungry if there was an alternative.

Lucas actually shared some stories from his time in the Army, I told some (edited) tales of the whole Istanbul business (Which given how high-profile that was in the end of the affair, was pretty much magic public record at this point) and Manu added some annoyingly vague tidbits of her time before New Orleans, including the fact that she had been tested for Council Membership at some point. Which meant I had to make another call to Edinburgh tomorrow.

As we moved from dinner to coffee, Lucas finally veered onto a serious topic of discussion. “Now, Wizard Lennon, we all know we aren’t here purely to socialize.” He began in this rich baritone voice. “I just considered it...wise to establish a cordial relationship with you, no matter how long your stay in this city.”

“Not your city?” I shot back before I could stop myself. “That’s usual the phrase, I think?”

Lucas just smiled. “Only for fools and people who do not understand long term strategic developments. I am aware that I have not nearly the power to make this city ‘mine’ in anything but hyperbole. At worst, I’d start open warfare with the established authorities and other still entrenched faction and that would only be bad for everyone involved. No, Wizard Lennon, I consider myself a part of this city. I just aim to make myself an irreplaceable part of it. To make it less profitable to remove me than to leave me in place.” He explained as if it was the most sensible thing in the world.

Damn. The guy had not read Machiavelli. He had read Pratchett!

Keeping my poker face as good as I could, I raised an eyebrow. “By selling drugs and crime? Not exactly the most socially accepted trades” I continued the direct approach with an raised eyebrow. Manu just laughed a bit and Lucas folded his hands, the image of someone who had this discussion often enough to wear it like a comfortable sweater.

“I do not force people to buy my produce. And crime will happen either way. I just see myself in a position to organize it. After all, it works for Chicago?” He pointed out and for all I tried, I didn’t come up with a good counter. Baron John Marcone of Chicago did set a sterling example of a Gentleman Crime King. And by the sound of it Lucas saw him not only as a role model but was smart enough to pull it off in his example. Joy.

Leaning back and crossing my arms, I went for the cheap shot instead. “Tell that to the guys going berserk in your ‘Nu3’, or the people who get hurt by them.” Which apparently had some effect as Lucas exchanged a view with his girlfriend/mistress/whatever. The analytical part of me noted that it was long enough to trigger a Soulgaze but obviously did not do it, which could only mean they already had shared that experience. That probably meant a lot of things, once I got some context for it. But first it only cemented that theirs was really more than a business relationship.
“This is actually one of the reasons we...invited you, Wizard.” Lucas continued the conversation, giving me a sober look. “We are well aware of the...unexpected reactions some of our clients experience due to our product. And as I am committed to a stable criminal subculture in this city, it is a very undesirable side effect. My associate...” he nodded to Manu “...has been trying to fix the flaws in the formula, but sadly her education seems not sufficiently comprehensive in this area. You, on the other hand, are a full Wizard of the White Council. You have access to scholarly resources and background that Manu sadly has not.” He paused and a slight smile crept on the edges of his mouth. "With your help we could make our product finally into what I envisioned. A low-addictive, non-health detrimental but powerful mental stimulant. Within a year I could use it to drive any other, mundane, drug out of the city. Just think on how much cleaner it all would be, how much safer…” He trailed off.

I just stared in response. Okay, that was serious ambition. Now matter how I turned his plan, it wasn’t even against the Laws of Magic. And the impact it would have was...visionary. It would also effectively give him an very effective hold on the drug trade in every big city he could get his hands in. It was a drug lords, or pharma companies, wet dream.

I began to laugh. Honestly, it was either that or I’d have shouted ‘You are insane!’ into his face and there’s really no going back from that in a polite conversation. “You can’t be serious. Even if I were not a cop right now - and let me tell you this is as strange for you as it is for me - I’m not going to hand you the formula turn yourself into the greatest drug monopoly since Marlboro applied for a trademark.”

Lucas, for all his visions of criminal ascendency, waited politely until I had finished laughing before he continued, taking a sip of his espresso as he did so. “What, Wizard Lennon, is the greatest source of criminal violence. Is it robberies? Hold-ups? Drug trade? No, I will tell you what is. Territory fight. One gang against each other. And all of them against the police.” he sighed. “You cannot rule such a disparate group of people. The more force you apply to control them the more they will chafe and the more force you will apply. And it only needs one challenge to succeed to break your hold in any meaningful way. But imagine if they came to you, because you had something they want. With that they give you the power over them. And with that power comes ultimately peace, by negotiation or demand. Tell me Wizard, does that really seem such a bad option as compared to the chaos of independent crime?” He asked me, looking almost...earnestly?

And while I pondered for a suitable scathing remark our eyes met.

Soulgazes are different for every Wizard. Most have some some ‘window in your soul’ thing, but mine are a bit...different.

Lucas jumped on the table, same as I. His first kick was blocked by my arm, followed by a nasty hook which I barely dodged. We continued to trade blows as I felt his style in our exchange. He was driven, ambitious and uncompromising in his strikes, more than willing to take minor hits for great gain in the longer term. And yet I felt a deep level of restraint in how he fought. He never let himself of his leash, never just reacted by reflex. Every move, every strike was deliberate. Every time he opened himself to possibly gain something it was a decision he made. He was meticulous in his fighting style and something in the way he drove himself in the match just impressed onto me that he was not doing this for his own glory, his own sense of self importance. He just thought it was something that needed to be done as decisively as possible.

Even if it broke him in the process.
Our eye contact broke. We never had actually moved to fight, but we both breathed heavily as if he had traded true blows. He gently checked the wrist I had ‘broken’ while I felt the rip he had ‘cracked’ in return with every breath just to convince myself it was still whole.

Ever heard the words ‘you can only truly know someone by fighting him’? My Soul gazes work like that. If my eyes lock with another person I have a quick and hard fight in our heads with them, the way they fight representing their soul.

And as much as I’d hate to admit it...Anson Lucas was not someone I could hate. Disagree with, yes. Arrest, double yes. Oppose in his plans, triple yes. But without wanting it, I felt a tinder of respect towards him. What was the term my Master had used sometimes? A ‘honored enemy’, that was it. And from the way he looked at me, I had the strong guess the feeling was mutual.

“Well, I do think this concludes this issue. I am crestfallen that we could not come to an accord on this, but I now see that there was never the chance for that.” He stood up and extended its hand. “Still, I did enjoy the meal beforehand. Welcome to New Orleans, Wizard... Detective Lennon.” I took his hand and shook it firmly. “Thank you, Mister Lucas. I am confident we will see each other a lot in the future.”

Well. The gauntlets had been thrown. From here one only was the field of honor.
“So you thought it was a good idea to meet the guy we are trying to arrest?” Carter glared down at me. “And you didn’t even tell anyone?” He added, throwing up his arms in frustration at me.

“Okay, I get that for a cop this was a bad move.” I conceded calmly to his exasperated “Bad move?” exclamation. “But, and let me be clear here, he invited me in my capacity as a Wizard. And while I said I will take the badge and all that comes with it seriously, the White Council has nearly a decade of lead time on my loyalty and person.” Keeping my voice as reasonable and firm as I could, I had to be sure he understood me here. “I’m sorry if that interferes with this whole cop-shtick, but there will be moments the Wizard takes precedence over the Cop. And just like I follow your lead when it’s about the Cop-ing, I kinda hope you trust me enough to follow mine with the Wizard-ing.”

We stared at each other for a moment. I got that things like this put him in a bad spot in a set of ways. He had sworn to uphold the laws and regulations of the police department. I had done that too...but only secondary to the Laws of Magic and the Rules and Customs of the supernatural community. Heck, the only reason I was here, was wearing that badge and being his partner was to deal with the things he could not. To bring in the perspective of someone other than a pure police officer into this.

After a seemingly infinite moment he just sighed. “Point conceded. If not agreed upon.” he added with a slight edge and landed himself on the couch opposite to me. “Still, next time at least tell me. So if we find your body we know where you went before it was dropped off somewhere?” He added with a bit of forced humor.

“Hey, I think if there was anywhere they might have dragged my body it might be to their bedroom.” I admitted with a scratch to my temple, because unless I had been mistaken there had been a few moments where that vibe had been there. And I was honest enough to admit that if I’d taken them up on it, it would probably have been a...memorable night. And quite exhaustive. Well, the long shower after I had returned to the Boarding House after the dinner had..alleviated some of my tension issues. For now.

“Also,” Carter changed the topic, now that it had run its course. “I got this via fax, of all things, from Austin.” he pointed to a small file on the coffee table between our couches. In our argument I had missed it so far, but now I picked it up. Seems like Warden Meyers had come through on the message I left on his answering service. What he had sent over was all the little intelligence he had on the Sorceress named Emanuelle LeHaine, based on the fact that he was the Warden in charge of the greater area.

Perusing it, I whistled quietly. “Huh. No wonder she’s such a bombshell. She’s a quarter vampire. Ish.” Carter gave me a stare at that comment and I elaborated. “Her grandfather was a teenage White Court Vampire virgin who fell in love with his fathers hedge-sorcerer’s apprentice. True love is kinda the kryptonite for them, so when they had their first time together while being in love, he turned human instead of fully vampire. Since his father seemed to frown on that, they ran away
together and had a daughter later on. Said daughter landed in a small magic commune where she later had a daughter of her own, Emanuelle herself. She was apparently taught there until she was eighteen, at which point she decided she wanted a bigger world that just the recluse she grew up in. She applied to the council, but while she had a pretty good theoretical foundation, she tanked a bit under the minimum power requirements.” All of which she had volunteered in her original application to the Council it seemed.

In response to Carter’s questioning look I shrugged. “Think a football player who has great skill at the game’s performance, but doesn’t have the endurance to play an entire half time.” Sports metaphors. When do they ever not work? “Makes sense.” Carter agreed after a moment with a nod. See my point?

Still, that didn’t entirely fit with the strength I had felt on her. Yes, she was not wholly in the Council’s preferred power scale. But with some work she could be. I had the strong feeling she had rather flunked the examinations because the Council had rather sat on its more conservative tendencies and no one had decided it was worth the effort to get off their butt and spend the work-time to sponsor her. Like a scout seeing talent but then the team manager decides it would be too expensive to develop it.

Sigh. Sometimes the grumpy-old-people tendencies of the Council were just really aggravating, you know?

“After that she apprenticed some more with a few other non-Council sorcerers. More like a artisan education than going to college.” I explained before Carter could ask on the differences of education standards. Continuing, I read out aloud. "After that she took some gigs as Sorceress-for-hire, up and including to doing some work for a PMC in Iraq…” I looked up from the file and Carter already picked up my line of thought. “Same time Lucas was there. Explains where they met probably.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, finishing out the little more details the file could reveal. "No Law violations on record. She was a mercenary, but she was on the level regarding the Laws of Magic. Well, would have been too easy to simply call the Warden Cavalry to cut off her head.” I finished the file and handed it over to Carter who just gave me a very skeptical look “How is this Nu3 not a violation? I thought the original ThreeEye was one, from what you told me about it?”

Shaking my head, I leaned back on the couch and crossed my legs. “Nah, the ThreeEye guy violated the Laws with something else, and in a lot more nasty ways. The drug itself is...a borderline case. Mainly because taking it is your own free will. If you’d forced it down someone’s throat it would be a borderline break of the Second, I think, but even the Council may decide that it’s not yet gray enough to act on it.” I concluded with another shrug. Which meant the ball was entirely in the court of mortal laws for now.

“I did come upon a small tidbit yesterday, though.” I then added to the discussion. “Lucas told me the whole berserking out was not part of his intent with the stuff. He called it a ‘flaw’ in the formula.” I recounted the entire part of the conversation about it, just leaving out the parts about the Soulgaze we shared.

(Hey, that’s not just something you tell freely around if you know it. It’s just...not done.)

“So, something is wrong with his drug. Huh.” Carter pondered. Apparently his view of the great and unflawed evil drug overlord had just taken a hit. As he still digested that, I made a decision of my own and got up while putting my ‘gun’ back into its holster.

“Come, I want to take a look at something.” I told him.
The place was the same where my original welcoming committee had started its fight with me. Now, a day later, it was a lot more quiet, an empty corner save for some passing people who didn’t pay attention to us. Beckoning Carter to be silent, I calmed my mind. What I had in mind would require focus, but might give us important clues.

Then I opened my Sight.

The Sight is an essential tool of Wizardry. It is the ability to perceive things beyond what it is considered the ‘real’ world and show all the stuff under the ‘real’ surface. The magic, the spirits, all the things hidden to someone who could not truly see. And beyond that, it is an experience of pure existential truth. You not only saw things hidden under the surface, but also the true state of everything. Seeing something, or someone, with the Sight will tell you something about the state of their person, their mind, their spirit and beyond. You see it as it is.

Look it’s just...hard to describe how the world looks with the Sight open. It looks a little bit like an LSD trip, a little bit like a spiritual vision and a lot of expressionistic paintings. All at the same time. I once discussed the issue with a more scientifically minded wizard and he theorized that magic energies, spirits, auras and all things like that operate on different dimensional planes than we usually can perceive, but still exist in the same space in the real world like us. The reason the Sight was so disturbing, especially for newcomers to it, was like if someone who had always just perceived and existed on a two-dimensional world suddenly opened his third (pun intended) eyes and realized there was a third dimension. It was not so much that the human mind was not built to handle it. It was just that a lifetime of three dimensional perception just turned the Sight into an literal Outside Context Experience. And because of that the human brain tries to interpret it back into context. Like how you see colors instead of electromagnetic wavelengths hitting your eyeballs. Which once again, only adds to the general trippyness of opening the Sight.

Oh and there is an extra kicker. You can never forget what you see with the Sight. Which means that if you happen to see something truly terrifying you can never forget it. And again, the Sight is a realm of pure truth. So there is no pulling punches or the like.

Which is just an invitation for long-term headaches in general, if you ask me. For that reasons, Wizards are generally very careful about opening their Sight outside of a calm and quiet work environment. Because even with all the drawbacks, once you get past a certain threshold of complexity in your spellwork you can only advance by ‘seeing’ what you are doing. For that reason, the ability to open your Third Eye is generally one of the hallmarks of a ‘true’ magic talent. Though not being able to doesn’t mean you are automatically incompetent. There have been deaf composers too, is all I’m saying. They are just rarer than those who can actually hear the music.

Anyway, with my Sight opened I slowly began to turn around, avoiding to look at Carter sitting on the hood of his car. I liked him, but I didn’t want know how he looked with all the little white lies of reality stripped away, burned into my memory forever. Too Much Information, if you ask me. Especially after only knowing him for a few days yet. Like walking into your new coworker under the shower. Just try not to think of how he looks nude for the next few days after that. There are reasons for personal barriers to exist after all.

So instead I tried to glean whatever might have set my attacker off. I let my eyes wander, taking in the surreal scene of the street and trying to notice anything that was...well... off.

(Which is a serious challenge when looking at things with the Sight. One of them is not like the
And then, like a fog horn suddenly going off beside me, something screamed at me like a mad banshee. I didn’t realize what it was at first, only that it had come out of nowhere and it was angry. And it was not alone. Within moments I was surrounded by about a dozen of minor spirits, all screaming their rage at me. It was an cacophony of anger I could not make out the details off. It was not unlike being accosted by a mob of angry people all spewing out why they are furious with you. It is simply not possible to really understand what the individuals are saying, you just get the loud and hard wave of anger battering at you and making you take a step back. They even tried to claw at me, even if they only moved through me like air, immaterial they were still. Which meant they were not insane (for spirits), just mad with rage. But my head swelled with ever increasing pain as the screaming became louder and louder and more and more spirits came and converged on me, attracting even more in a nasty cycle of ever increasing anger...With an effort of will, I closed my Third Eye and sighed deeply as I slumped back, ending up on the hood of Carter’s car beside him.

Well, that had been nasty. It was like an entire neighborhood of angry spirits suddenly realizing they had someone to complain too and all trying to do it at the same time. And that had just been the natural spirits bound to this place, a place of familiarity that protected them from the ever renewing power of Sunlight. Which meant that all the free spirits, as well as ghosts and all other sorts of ephemeral presences in our world were still waiting for nightfall to come out and play.

Fuck. No wonder the guy had been raging mad. I was a Wizard. I had been trained to deal with perceptions like that. Or if they became too overwhelming to be able to simply shut my Sight and stop. ‘Normal’ people simply did not have the experience and capabilities. And worst of all, with their Sight opened by an outside influence they did not even have the option of shutting it down again until the drug stopped working. Which left them open to the same congregation of angry spiritual residents I had just experienced.

No wonder some had snapped. Probably only those who were noticed by the spirits or were otherwise vulnerable to them. The luck of bad timing. They had not been berserking in anger. They had been so damn scared by the spirits that their flight instinct had been broken down and they’d been permanently stuck on suicidal ‘fight’. If you cannot flee, go down fighting. Human intransigence at its best. All of which led me to one very unappealing conclusion.

“Crap. It’s not a flaw in the formula.” I finally said to the waiting Carter, as the pain in my head began to abate slowly. And it was not. The drug did exactly what it was supposed to do. It opened your Third Eye. The problem was what happened next.

“It’s a flaw in the city ...”
“So who are we meeting here, again?” Carter asked me with a dubious look at the old and run down movie theater. Faded out posters decorated the walls, a wild spattering of genres and eras of film.

“Someone I know. I think I need a second opinion on this. Someone is wrong here, and not just what we think.” I explained as we walked up to the theater entrance.

Today a double feature was billed at the program chart; “The Thousand Furious Fist of the Shaolin” and “Thunder of the Silent Fist”, both somewhat older - and as the chart promised, only subtitled - Wuxia movies, I had seen...damn had it already been over fifteen years ago?

Shifu had simply loved the imported movies and watching them together at a similar theater back home had been one of the first regular bonding exercises between us after I had come to live with him. The popcorn had been bad, but since I hadn’t tasted any popcorn before it had the redeeming bonus of novelty as well as the plus of something that the orphanage nuns would have given me the we-do-not-approve look. The movies had been far varied. Some had been pure awesome, others just so over the top ridiculous. But they had always been fun. Especially when my Master had provided running commentary on the bad ones.

...I hadn’t been to the movies since he died, I realized. Maybe it was past time I did go again. If only just to remember those days.

Carter, after a prompting from me, paid the tickets mumbling something about expense accounts and we both moved inside. The first movie was already in its first fight scene, a unassuming Shaolin monk basically just beating up... everyone. The theater itself was almost empty, save for one person sitting in the sweet spot right in the middle, flipping popcorn over his head, catching it with his mouth and obviously having a very good time.

I gestured toward him and Carter just sighed and followed through the rows until we took the two seats next to him, despite the popcorn landmines on them.

“Hello Stone Monkey.” I greeted him with a very small nod of my head. With this one it was always good policy to go for a mix out of friendly familiarity and respect. Like meeting a respected rich uncle. Or a mafia godfather you are on first name basis with. The fact that he had been close enough to respond so quickly to my messaging spell so we could meet here told me a few things, though. Mainly that my growing suspicion that this entire situation was a lot bigger than I had thought was not that off base as I had hoped. Or else he’d been keeping a less close eye on me.

Beside me Carter gave him a once-over, stuck in what I now associated very much with his ‘cop-mode’. A handsome young Asian man in his thirties, obviously very fit and a broad smile on his lips, he returned the inspection and then casually flipped another popcorn in his mouth before offering us some.

“Hello Little Girl. What brings you to see the wisdom of your teacher this day?” Stone Monkey
smile widened as he spoke, causing me to roll my eyes at him. Why couldn’t he never just cut to the chase from the start? But then, I had to admit, it was simply not in his nature. In more ways than one.

“You know why. Something is going on in this city beyond the obvious. Beyond this Nu3 drug on the streets and whatever its peddler Anson Lucas is planning.” I told him in a terse voice, more convinced of it with every word I spoke. I felt it deep inside myself that the Nu3 was not the important problem here, just a problem. And sometimes being direct with Stone Monkey was the only way to nail his tail to the ground, otherwise he would dance circles around something for hours just to amuse himself. And while I enjoyed that occasionally - usually when I wasn’t the one asking him things - today was not one of those days. But he only quivered an eyebrow at me in return.

“Maybe I do, but maybe I don’t. How about you tell me first what you think.” He retorted in a playful imitation of a teacher’s voice. Mentally cursing whoever had the brilliant idea to teach him the Socratic method, I began to compile my answer in my head...which was the moment when Carter brought himself back to attention. Damn. So focused on Stone Monkey, I had actually forgotten that he was here too for a moment. Carter on the other hand just glared at Stone Monkey.

“How about you tell us now what you know here or I’ll bring you back with us and we can continue this in an cozy interrogation room.” He growled in his best 'bad cop' voice. I had no idea if he was just posturing to back me up as the ‘good cop’ or would have really done that, but Stone Monkey just stared in surprise at the audacity and then laid back his head and let out a roaring loud laugh before he looked back at me. “I like him, he’s funny. You can keep him!” He laughed some more while wiping a tear out of his eyes.

Carter, now obviously trying to reinforce his authority (or just pissed at being underestimated in general), pulled back the front of his jacket and revealed his badge and handcuffs on the belt. “I’m not joking, pal.” He said tersely and in a clear threatening voice before I could stop him.

What happened next...I cannot describe. It happened too fast, even even if I had invoked full speed beforehand. One moment Carter was trying to stare Stone Monkey down, the next he was wedged head down between his seat and the back of the next seat in the row before him. Stone Monkey sat in a lotus seat atop Carter's ass and whirling his handcuffs lazily off his index finger while flipping another popcorn in his mouth with the other hand. And grinning so every damn smug at me while a long monkey tail started to lazily fling behind his back like a satisfied cat. I’m sorry Carter, but I just couldn’t help me but to quietly put the palm of my hand on my face in response to the scene.

“Little Girl. Introduce me.” Stone Monkey then said with a tone that was half amused relaxedness and half threatening badassitude. And he had, in fact, not asked he had commanded by invoking the teacher-disciple relationship between us. Sigh . Maybe I really should have told Carter more about whom we were meeting in here, but I did not want to reveal just how...strange my life sometimes gets as a Wizard. Well. That was out of the window now.

With another sigh I bent down to look at Carter’s face and began the usual litany. “You are in the presence of the Great Sage Equal to the Heavens, the Victorious Fighting Buddha, the Handsome Monkey King, Sun Wukong himself.”

(Yes. He insists on all three titles. Always use them all when referring to him formally. He is like the eastern answer to the trolling of Loki mixed with the badassness of Thor and has enough power that few beings weaker than the Queens That Are of Faerie can rival. He was also most likely the top contender for the title ‘God of Martial Artists’. Not to mention that he has the Buddha on speed dial. The Buddha. Seriously. Don’t fuck with Sun Wukong .)
Carter, from the look in his eyes, didn’t recognize the name. No appreciation for the eastern classics, I guessed. But he was thankfully quick enough to catch on that pissing him off any further was not a smart move in any way. So after a mumbled apology from my partner, Stone Monkey climbed back into his seat, while my Partner up righted himself again, rubbing old popcorn out of his hair.

“Uhm, how do I refer to you, sir?” Carter finally asked, after another glare from me to show some manners or else, in an exceedingly polite tone. “Mr Wukong?”

“Hah. No, Mr Wukong is my...well. There is no Mr Wukong. Stone Monkey will do. You are the friend of my disciple after all. Or Shi Hou if you want it to be more ‘asianesque’.” He said, making the air quotes with his hands before looking back at me and making a ‘go on’ wave.

“Oh, Anson Lucas is using his sorceress - not a Witch or other local practitioner but a full sorceress from what I saw - to make a new form of the same drug that poisoned Chicago fifteen years ago. Powerful stuff, it opens your Sight even if you are not a sufficiently strong magic user.” I began, counting down what we knew so far. “So far, Nu3 has a far higher chance of people going insane than ThreeEye. Or rather, the users are being driven insane by angry spirits who seem to deliberately seek them out to express their fury at them when they get the chance. And the spirits are restless. Angry. So when they see a lot of people who can’t defend themselves they just go up to them and vent. All of which means there is something going on beyond the drug trade, because there has to be a reason for them being so angry.” I finished somberly. Carter beside me still didn’t believe it fully, his body language told me, but I knew what I’d seen. I had tried to explain, but he still only saw the drug problem, saw the drug as the problem and not just a problem.

Stone Monkey just nodded somberly after I finished and put the tip of his fingers together. “You are right. The spirits are angry. For a lot of reasons, ever since the big storm the Fomor kicked off hit this city. Angry at the Fomor for attacking them, yes, but that’s just politics after a fashion. What they are truly angry with, ever since then, is the lack of proper reaction by the humans.”


Carter’s silence was almost drowning out the movie still going on at the big screen. “Katrina. Was created. By someone.” He repeated, obviously not believing what he heard.

“Oh, yes. The Fomor did it, ostensibly. One of their various regular ‘let’s push over some trash cans and see if someone gets his shotgun in response’ attempts to see if they can muscle in somewhere. Before the fall of the Red Empire they did it often enough, looking for a good foothold to start their own little niche of power.” Stone Monkey explained in the same almost casual tone. “The problem here in this city is that a lot of spirits, from shades of the departed all the way up to the Loa, feel betrayed by ‘their’ humans about what happened after the last one. The slow response of your government, the fact that there is a huge disparity in which places got funds to repair, marginalizing the places of their followers. They feel that the entire response is a huge and subtle attack on them to drive them out in favor of more...mainstream culture. Spiritual gentrification, so to speak. They feel...rejected. Themselves and their followers. ” He finished with another popcorn flip.

“Thats where Wizard Laveau is…” I realized. “Liz said she was doing diplomacy…”

“Oh, yes.” Monkey gave me an approving smile. ”She is currently somewhere in the Bajou, doing a spiritual communion ritual to directly talk to the Loa and arguing in favor of the humans, I am told. While of course at the same time the Fomor are trying to talk the Loa into abandoning them. Which would, among other things, open another route of invasion for them, not to mention rob hundreds of magic talents of the protection they enjoy from the Fomor hunters. It is quite the fragile situation.”
Another popcorn flipped into his mouth.

I swallowed. “And Lucas is the drop that threatens to flood the barrel. Just another human who uses magic as a tool, a weapon for his own power and ignores all the greater wonder and meaning of it. No wonder the spirits are pissed.” I said quietly, fully realizing the scale of all of it for the first time. If the Loa decided to abandon their humans, retreated into their home domain in the Nevernever, it wasn’t going to affect most Wizards overall. But there were many more practitioners in this city who relied on them, who lived with them in an intimately connected way. It would cripple one of the richest magic subcultures in North America. Possibly for good.

“What can I do?” I asked after a moment, looking Stone Monkey in the eyes. He just sighed and shrugged. “You are already doing what you can do. You are a Wizard, even if you are not a Mambo. You represent Magic as it should be, a force of creation to be used in reverence and wisdom by humans. You are the ‘old way’ to the little crime lords ‘new way’.” He explained with a serious edge in his voice and a somber light in his eyes. “Your actions are watched, your decisions judged. This ‘case’ may very well be the little weight that tips the scales in the greater picture.” A kind smile then came upon his lips. “Your Master did teach you that being a Wizard came with great responsibilities, after all. Right?”

Carter, seemingly having digested all the bombshells that had just been dropped on his formerly orderly worldview this, gave Stone Monkey a calculating look. “Why can’t you help us out? You seem like a pretty powerful being?” He asked with even more strained respectfulness in his tone. Stone Monkey just shrugged, at the suggestion, though.

“I am a powerful being. But I am also a foreign being. The local spirit's core fear is about being supplanted by something else. Having me come in and kick ass would only affirm their fears, in a way. Not to mention that the Loa would be required to act against me out of sheer principle if I did it without their permission. I am a guest on their territory, after all.” He laughed. “And you have no idea how many paperwork I’d have to file at home to do it. The Jade Emperor would flip his shit. Again” He laughed but then took up a more somber tone again.

“No. This is a situation that can only be resolved by mortal deeds, not the actions of immortals.” He gave Carter an encouraging smile. “And for what it’s worth...I usually bet on the mortals in situations like this. Call it gambler's experience” He added with a wink.

After another silent moment we stood up and made our formal goodbye’s, leaving Stone Monkey to enjoy his movie. But as we left the row of seats he beckoned us to wait, getting up and walking us out of the theater.

“One thing.” he said warily as if he feared people listening. “Don’t assume you know all the players in this little game yet. Some may wait for the half-time to get off the bench.” He added cryptically with a serious look.

As Carter and I walked outside and back to his car, he gave me a look. “So that's your...Master? I thought you told me he was dead?” He asked, trying to make it sound casual. I had indeed told him that my Master had died almost ten years ago, but he apparently still considered it a sore point for me. I shrugged and gave him a reassuring smile.

“No. He’s not my Master. He’s my...teacher, if that is the right word. Master and Apprentice imply a relationship where one will succeed the other eventually. Stone Monkey is a teacher, which
only means he considers me having potential and taking me as disciple to cultivate it.” I sighed. “He
did the same to my Master when he was younger, which is why he now does it for me. He’s just a
great believer in sink-or-swim practices of handing down education.”

“Is he liable to make the swimming harder?” Carter groaned, obviously imagining a crazy Chinese
deity making even more paperwork for the case we worked on. I only shook my head grinning. “No,
I think not. Which is actually worse, because if he’s considering the situation serious enough to be
purely helpful and not as a training opportunity…” I trailed off.

I considered that even more solemnly just as Carter suddenly sucked in air and stared in front of
us. “Jess. Why is my car covered in popcorn?” He asked as we stood before a veritable mountain of
the stuff. Sticky, buttery popcorn. Covering the entire car from wheel to the roof. As Carter
courageously began to burrow himself to the door of his car I began to hear a loud impish laughter In
the back of my head.

Well. At least he hadn’t pissed on it?
Chapter 13

Our little chat with Stone Monkey, and the following popcorn excavation of his car, had left us both hungry. As we got some hot dogs I caught Carter up on the Fomor.

They were a ragged bunch of misfit gods, demons and giants from a lot of Pantheons and Regions all over the world. They had lost various power struggles, wars or simply petty feuds and been driven into the sea a long time ago. Since then they had banded together and allied, throwing their disparate strengths together into a common drive to conquer the lands they had been kicked out. Ever since the Fall of the Red Court of Vampires they had used every chink and crack in the supernatural world they could find to seep in. And there were a lot of those these days. It was worst at the coast of the big oceans, but every big enough body of water was a possible source for their magically augmented servitors to move land-in and begin to kidnap people of magic talent for whatever plans they had with them.

(No one really knows. It makes a lot us practitioners very nervous.)

If you are reminded of Lovecraftian literature, this is not a coincidence. Ol’ H.P. knew a lot more than people assume today. Hope you didn’t want to sleep tonight.

Carter looked a lot more green around the nose after I finished my little exposition. Not unsurprising, given the topic.

“So these guys want to make landfall in New Orleans?” He finally asked with a grave tone and I just nodded. “Yeah, and New Orleans has a disproportionately big magic community compared to most other cities in North America. Normally they couldn’t try something fishy,” Carter just gave me a raised eyebrow of disapproval on the pun, "without starting a shooting war with the Loa and all the lesser spirits in the area too. And all their allies and relations. Which so far has kept the city safe...”

“And just that protection is on the edge of falling apart.” Carter sighed. “I am so not equipped to handle this kind of shit.” He told me with a look of someone who just realized he was standing at the edge of a long and steep cliff. I just put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. “Hey, that’s what I’m here for. Right?” I tried to encourage him with a smile. “We’ll handle this, don't worry.”

I just hoped I sounded more believable as I felt.

We spent the next few hours scouring more Nu3 Berserker incidents, hoping for some more clues. Sadly, the only thing we did collect was a pounding headache for me from using my Sight at every location. The spirits had not attacked me again, possibly realizing that a Wizard has ways to retaliate with a little preparation against their little flashmob. Like opening the Sight only after drawing a circle around me and empowering it, leaving them to angrily stand on the other side and glare in utter
impotently.

(And let’s not even go down into what forms of ectomancy, purification spells and eastern exorcism I knew. Scare me once, shame on you spirits. Scare me twice, etc etc)

We returned to the Major Crimes headquarters in the evening, both exhausted and maybe a bit tired of each other too. If you spent the entire day driving around with someone who kills your radio and other forms of electronic diversion by sheer proximity, you’d be tired of them too? I didn't judge Carter for that and I myself had a healthy desire for some time alone to properly digest the day. Maybe some meditation, check out the big guest-bath-with-tub Liz had told me about at breakfast and a good night's sleep.

Hitting the locker rooms, we were just about to say our goodbyes for the day, do a quick shower before heading home and just not see each others faces until tomorrow morning when a uniformed cop poked his head in. “Sergeant Bennett? Dispatch just called.” He announced with some slight out-of-breathness. “We have another rampage in progress.” he told us, handing a sheet of paper to Carter. Well, so much for calling it a day, I guessed with a sigh. I was back up in good shape after my healing meditation yesterday, but with the headache I was really not in the mood for another brawl. But well, I told myself, someone had to? Better me than some beat cop who'd be forced to use his gun in self defense.

I was about to tell Carter that line of thought when I noticed that his face had gone even paler than he usually was. Handing me the report without words he just snapped his gun back to his belt, a dangerous look in his eye, followed by him picking up a honest-to-god pump action shotgun from his locker.

Looking down on the paper, a shiver run down my spine as well.

It was happening at Lou’s Café.

I had pegged Carter for a responsible, even a bit sedate driver. Which given that my top ten of crazy driving were headed by a crazy werewolf from Las Vegas who was apparently possessed by the spirit of Elwood Blues and an differently crazy half-vampire on a motorcycle, meant I was probably a bit more forgiving than other people when it came to questionable driving behavior.

On the way to the Café, Carter made a very convincing audition for the #3 spot on my list. Which is to say, I did invoke full toughness on myself in the slight hope of surviving the possible fatal frontal collision he courted at least three times. Not that either slowed him down in any way.

Still. His sister was in danger. If it had helped us getting there faster I’d gotten out and shoved . The uniforms whose squad car we almost t-boned when we arrived at the scene would have probably politely disagreed, giving the looks of terror on their faces toward the suddenly arriving detectives.

“Two perps inside.” The uniformed sergeant informed us as we got outside of the car, bringing us up to speed. Two more squad cars had arrived as well, turning this into a right and proper standoff from what I had seen of those before.

(Not always from the other side. Shut up. Only once or twice.)

The sergeant continued his summary of the situation at hand in a terse tone. “Unarmed, but heavily violent. When the first responders came in, thinking it was just an argument inside, they beat him bloody with a chair before he even got a word out. His partner barely dragged him outside afterward
Looking over the hood of the cars, the light inside the Café was off, and the sun had already vanished for the day as the evening crept further along. Attempts to use the car lights to shine inside just mirrored the front windows, so we couldn’t really see what was going on inside. Still, this was a hideous escalation if I ever seen one. So far, the berserkers had been alone. And they had never sought such a well defensible position. But as the sergeant elaborated more, both of them were apparently US Marines on leave, identified by the shoulder cam of the cop they had beaten senseless. That might explained the level of organization they displayed even in their state. Even driven mad with fear, the instincts hammered by their military training were still there. Which also meant they were an entirely new class of dangerous, compared to the previous Nu3 abusers which had been at best somewhat fit normal people.

Shit.

The one good news in this pile of bad was that the shoulder cam had been ripped off the cop's uniform during the fight and was still transmitting for now. So as far as we could see, the patrons who had been inside when it had gone down were all huddled in the back while our two berserkers continued to lay out a defensible perimeter out of whatever they could find. Again, instincts at work I guessed.

Which left us two major options. One, wait them out. Problem with that was that we all had no idea how long it took for a Nu3 rampage to actually ebb off. All previous incidents had been ended with a fight, a taser or a gunshot. Option two was waiting for the local SWAT and fight it out in a breach. And I did not like option two. At all.

I had seen the interior of the shop, and knowing the layout option two would end with someone injured and most likely dead. And from the look in Carter’s eyes, he knew that as well as I did. The look he gave me changed to outright pleading as we both realized that no approach by the police would be in any way good enough to resolve this situation here without shit hitting the fan in a major way. After a moment I just quietly nodded at him in understanding and decision.

It was time to bring the magic.
Chapter 14

The back door to Lou’s cafe was a very tough looking metal door probably meant to dissuade people from breaking in. Okay. I could probably break it with magic if I really tried. But that would not have been very subtle and probably alerted the two very angry berserkers inside. Avoiding that was kind of the point of the exercise, after all.

So I had to get a little bit more... creative for my next trick.

Slowly, I leaned my head against the metal of the door and began to draw a Taijitu onto it. The Diagram of Ultimate Power of Taoism, representing the eternal balance and interconnection of opposing forces. The play of the untouchable spirit and the unavoidable force. What you commonly call an Yin-Yang in modern parlance..

With an effort of my will, a circle snapped into existence around it and I began to channel magical energy into it with a breathing exercise.

Closing my eyes, the spell began to take shape in my mind. I existed in the realm of force, everything I related myself to was solid, firm and unavoidable. And yet I had to move beyond something I could not avoid. The only way to do so was to become something else, to move myself beyond and into the realm of spirit alone.

Now, this kind of magic was not... unheard of. But most Wizards only did it in the form of potions, very specialized and limited forms of stored magic. Safer too. Most used them as forms of escape potions, in my experience. Doing something like that on the fly, now... that was not easy. But it was possible. Hard. Dangerous in the get-solid-in-the-middle-of-the-door kind of way. Which would be a very bad and embarrassing way to die, I admit. And a little bit hard to explain to the medical examiner, I guessed too. But then, if it came to that, it would be Carter’s job to explain it and not mine.

And with that conviction in my heart, that need to have this work, I broke the circle with a gesture and cast the spell. The magic ran over my skin, seeping into my flesh and warming my bones and then I simply... seeped through the door.

I can’t really explain the sensation. Imagine slowly falling through jello. But one moment I was outside the door, the next I was inside the dark storage room in the back of the Cafe, breathing hard from the exhaustion of the spell and feeling oddly heavier than before.

Phase one had been a success, I decided. Now on to the hard part.

The customers that had been inside the store when the situation began were all huddled together. That was something, I decided as I continued my cursory glance around the corner to the main room. The problem, as far as I saw, was that the two Marines stood right in front of them, arguing in hushed tones and their stance shivering with restless energy. I had the suspicion that they had been hopped on a broken adrenaline button for so long, about an hour, that it was slowly wearing through
their self-control.

Crap.

And even with that little time-crunch, I wasn’t sure I could simply jump into the room and start to fight them. They were tall, they were fit and probably well enough trained that they’d be a challenge to overcome individually, no mention of them together. And with the four - no, five - other people in the room, I wasn’t really liking those odds.

And on the other hand...now that I knew why these guys went crazy, I was equally unwilling to go in guns blazing with full force, possibly killing them. They were just as much victims and deserved better.

Well, that's why I had a plan....

Which is why I stepped out of the storage room door a minute later, my hands held up and smiling as friendly as I could while saying a gentle “Hi!”

(I never claimed that I came up with a smart plan, did I?)

Marine #1, as designated by the fact that he was closer to me, immediately reacted. It was kind of impressive how he moved, like a flung rubber band out of USMC issued muscle and aggression. Oo-rah, I guess?

The punch he threw to my mid-section was positively savage. With all the adrenaline in his system it seemed like all the physical governors on his bodily strength had gone of the window. You may have heard that people can lift cars and stuff, in theory, but the body won’t let them because using that strength breaks yourself apart? Well, adrenaline allows you to do that in an emergency. Like being in what they considered life-or-death fear situation. As in, right now.

That being said, you can probably imagine the kind of punch that was hitting me straight in the gut. I’d guess the result would be major internal bleeding and injuries to that effect at the very least. Which is why I had invoked everything into toughening myself up before I had stepped outside of the storage room.

(See? Plan!)

Which meant the hit was ’just' painful as fuck as it reverberated through my entire body from the abs up. Another bruise for Liz’s collection, probably. But other than that, I was pretty much fine. Much to the soldier’s surprise, I gathered from the look on his face. Before he could react however, I switched my own approach to this encounter. With everything I could invoke in toughness I could hardly try to out-strength him, given that he had the weight and height advantage on me. So I went for an advantage in style. The room was too cramped for the motion and agility of Baguazhang so I instead switched to what I knew of Southern Praying Mantis. The true martial artist knows more than one style, my Master had taught me. Your true style was the foundation you built your house upon, but every house is build out of more than one type of stone, he had told me. And because of that he had me study different styles and schools beyond our own, a practice I had kept up after his death.

In the short range and small space of our fight, Southern Praying Mantis was devastating. I threw a series of short kicks into his side and then, as he groaned in pain, we began a furious exchange of blows. Holding my arms close to my chest, I managed to block and parry any further hammer-punches away from my center of mass, using the openings he gave me to land strikes of my own on
his chest and driving him back a step every time. Every hit I landed wheedled him down more until finally he extended himself just too far enough for me to end it. I grabbed his dominant arm as he missed my head with a long punch and with a merciless twisting motion simply popped it out of its socket as if I unscrewed a bottle.

( Look, I said I didn’t want to kill them, that didn’t mean I would not hurt them if it was necessary.)

With a scream of pain, Marine #1 went down at my feet. Don't matter how hardcore you are, a dislocated shoulder hurts like fuck. And only in the movies do they relocate it themselves.

(Okay. I do that too, but what in here so far makes you think I'm not a crazy person?)

Marine #2 meanwhile, screamed as well - though in this case I figured it was more rage than shared pain with his buddy - because he also strode up to me with angry steps...just as I had planned.

Just as he reached the right position, uncovering the hostages too, I crouched down and moved my arms in a fluid circular motion around myself. Bringing my palms together over each other, I moved them behind and beside me, channeling magic between them. Breathing in and half-closing my eyes, I snapped out a “Tauta!” and pushed my hands outwards again, straight at the oncoming Marine in just the right moment in his motion, releasing the pulse of kinetic force I had charged between them.

(Yes it looks like a Kame Hame Ha or Hadoken spell. Shut up.)

Now, the important part here was that I didn’t just hit him with that spell. Because that would have accelerated him straight into the shop window, creating all sorts of messy glass shards to cut him into messy burger meat.

(The First Law of Magic kinda looks down on that kind of behavior. Strenuously.)

Which is exactly why I had spread out the force wave to also hit the window itself, shattering it cleanly into harmless fragments. I just hoped all the cops outside had taken cover like I told them to, just in case. Marine #2 was lifted off his feet meanwhile and through the now empty window frame, landing hard onto the pavement outside of the shop. The landing was painful, obviously, but not enough to actually put him out of it. Which is why he was promptly tasered by three cops waiting for the opportunity to do just exactly that. A little bit of twitching, a little bit of ozone smell and he was down too.

Breathing out in relief, I turned to the hostages and released my invocation. Making calming motions at them, I tried to convince them that yes it was over. While I helped guiding the hostages outside, I caught Carter’s sister staring at me, seeing in her eyes that she saw not just the girl who had joked and bonded with her only a few days ago, but a Wizard who had taken the guys holding her captive for hours down in less time than it took her to make an espresso...

Wizards. We’re a fucking scary bunch sometimes, even to our friends. I gave her my most encouraging smile and before I could stop myself, a quip escaped my lips despite the tension still in the room.

“Hey Lou. Maybe make it a bit less strong next time?”
With Carter helping to calm down his unsurprisingly shocked little sister and her patrons, I took it upon me to help the uniformed cops secure our two Nu3-serkers and put them safely in the back of a squad car to be processed at the precinct and then given over to the tender care of the legal system. Or to be more specific, the military police already waiting for them in all probability. Whatever happened to them, their life just had taken a nose-dive downward I suspected. Crap.

But they weren’t the only ones in that boat, if I was honest about it. Louise, so it looked, had been pretty shaken by all of it. Which, the more I thought about it, was not a big surprise given her natural talents. She had not just seen the insanity in their eyes but had probably felt it from the moment they stepped inside, her own safe space turning upon herself by their temporary insanity. Having had my own share of surprisingly traumatic Sight images, I could relate to that to an extend. In fact, I made a quiet mental note to offer Louise to introduce her to a medicine man who had helped me work through seeing a nasty form of demon with my third eye open a few years back. Good help in stopping the image from taking permanent hold on my conscious.

Lou was my partner’s sister, so I figured putting my network of contacts in the supernatural world to work for her was the right thing to do. It was actually quite likely that she just had her first real experiences of the dangers of the supernatural world and I wanted to make sure that this specific bruise healed and didn’t scar over. Well, I decided, problems for tomorrow.

Lighting a smoke as I watched the squad cars and EMTs drive away, my mind began to wander a bit. I still kind of felt bad for the two Marines, no matter of violent they had been. Yes, they had taken hostages, caused injuries and lots of property damage. But by the time they had done that, the angry spirits of the streets had driven them so up into a frenzy they had literally believed the entire world was out to attack them. And unable to just flee from all the people in the city, they had opted to fight as the only available choice to them. One of the most primal option switches in our makeup as a species. Fight or flight. All the reasoning go out and the id takes over, I shuddered between two puffs. Losing yourself like that was scary, or rather, being so drawn into instinct that you hurt people without thinking. I have had enough strength and skill to kill a person with my bare hands since I was fourteen years old, and I had always been trained on a strong belief of using that power with reason and a sound mind. But no, that was not what really scared me here.

I am a Taoist. I believe in going with the flow of things. To move as it feels right and now force myself against the current inside me. To be true to myself in my actions and decisions. What scared me to my bones here was that if something like this here would happen to me - if I was stripped down to the bare id - I would no longer be able to feel the flow. It was like being struck spiritually blind while walking in a room full of karmic porcelain. The sheer potential for catastrophe was...terrifying.

I couldn’t be angry at the people driven mad by the Nu3 anymore. I had been when they threatened someone I liked, but now I just felt sorrow for them. Sorrow for the damage to their souls. And there was nothing I could do for them...

And yet, I was wondering... why. I mean, I got that the casual use of a magic drug pissed off the
local spirit world a lot. Imagine spending centuries making your zen garden and then some morons come around to have a drunken party in it.

But something told me there was more to it than what was apparent. The people driven mad were a side-effect, I was certain. Not the goal, or else there would be a lot more of them. This entire situation had a feeling of...spadework to me. Preparation for something big. To quote the Lord of the Rings, I felt it in the water. I felt it in the earth. I smelt it in the air.

(Yes, I know. Movie quote, not book quote. Sue me. Do I give you crap for knowing Forbidden Kingdom and never having read Journey to the West?)

I had always a talent for instinct when it came to magic. Understanding by feeling. Maybe it was a natural thing for me, or maybe it had developed along with my magic philosophy. But I had long learned to trust myself when something felt strongly enough. And here I felt, I knew, that however subtle the plans were prepared and set in motion...they would end in nothing resembling subtlety.

We need to figure out what is really going on here, I realized. The Nu3 was important but it was not crucial. And as long as we held onto it as the crux of this affair, I was sure we’d never be able to step back and look at the problem from another angle.

Stop thinking like a cop. I told myself. I had told myself the last two days to do just that. I had gotten a badge and done my best to fit in with others who had one. I had read the case files, I had listened to Carter’s lectures on proper police investigation. Even my meeting with Lucas I had gone to by defining myself as attending as something different from a cop. I understood that now. I had let myself be subsumed by the sudden change in my life. I had tried so hard to fit all I was into being a cop that I hadn’t realized I ought to fit the cop into all I already was. I had resolved this situation right now not like by being a cop, but by using magic and knowledge no other police officer had.

Stop thinking like a cop. Think like a Wizard!

Now, you may have noticed, I was pretty deeply in thought. So it might be forgivable that I didn’t really pay attention to my surroundings. I mean, it was not like I would be randomly attacked on the streets, right? Oh, wait...

The piece of pavement hit me straight between the shoulder blades, its size meaning the enchantments on my jacket doing far less to protect me than they would had on a bullet. It kicked the breath right out of me, staggering me. Which was when a booted foot kicked me in the back of my knee, making me go down. A followup kick in the rips turned me on my back. Great. More pain to add to the bruise from earlier on my chest.

Oh, not these morons again, was the first thought that went to my head next, as I noticed half a dozen Hex Heads stand around me. A slim little slip of a girl among them, I noticed, stowed what looked like a carved rod of wood into the holster on her hot pants. The guy I had blasted in a mailbox two days ago was not among them as far as I could see. Still, I figured, the slim girl probably had some Earth magic based upon the new pothole in the street and my new bruises. For now I was alone out here, with Carter was still inside and taking statements from his sister and her patrons. Which meant he had probably not yet noticed my little problem. Oh bother.

“’Sup?” I finally snarked and looked up at them, trying to not let them see how much I hurt right now. After another moment I was beginning to catch my breath again and managed to invoke on myself, feeling the pain in my back and ribs subside for now. They’d hurt like hell later on, especially if I had to go and fight with them. And I’d probably have to spend half the night fixing
either of them in Liz’ basement. Again. “Guys you have no idea how much trouble you’re in.” I
continued toward the surrounding thugs as I considered my options.

The circle of Hex Heads was too close for me to simply try to jump to my feet again without them
trying to stop me. And from the way a few of them twitched, I’d guess they had some hyperawareness
potions in their system. Useful stuff, even if it gives you a temporary form of ADHD without the
proper mental focus to truly use the potential. Once I was up, I could pretty much take them down I
wagered. The problem was for me to get the moment to turn my vertical into a horizontal position
without offering them more chances for potshots to keep me down.

“Freeze!” a voice suddenly snapped and all of their heads flung around to see Carter, bless his
blue little soul, stand on the boardwalk. His gun was out and up, though he had not yet a finger on
the trigger. As he still added an “Police!” Earth Girl was already going for her rod. Now we couldn’t
have that, can we? I doubted Carter could take pavement as well like me, after all.

Okay. Flash fact. Kicks in the crotch? Hurt girls just like boys. Lots of nerve ends down there,
after all. Earth Girl’s eyes went white as my sneaker-clad foot kicked out and hit her straight under
the fake-schoolgirl plaid-skirt. She literally just keeled over in a groan of pain that made me wince in
sympathy. But helping my friend avoid getting potholed to death overrode any female-allegiance I
felt in this situation.

Next I slammed my fists down beside me, weaving some Earth Magic of my own. Gravity
suddenly...went away as I drew it inward and then inverted its direction. Zero \( \text{g} \) won’t make you
levitate no matter what the movies tell you, but one negative \( \text{g} \)? Different story. With my little trick I
essentially fell upward for a moment, just long enough to propel me towards one of the hyperaware
thugs. The one big flaw of hyperawareness? You don’t usually have the physical ability to fully use
the higher reaction times you had. Unlike, say, a Kung Fu Wizard invoking mainly for speed.

The exchange lasted less than a second, three quick body hits to his torso and an elbow to his temple
and then the Hex Heads still in the fight were down to four. I turned toward the next doped-up thug,
but just as I was trying to engage him I another one of them jump me from the side. I evaded the
attack, but even so I felt claws rip through my shirt and scrape at my stomach as he came close.
Some sort of Scion? A half-breed between some kind of Monster and Human.

As I turned to look at the new threat, I was identified it as a slender but tall woman of a graceful
posture who looked barely eighteen. Okay, I give the Hex Heads that, they are supporting equal
gender thuggery. But the way she hissed at me and flexed her fingers like claws, was more than
enough clue for me to pick her as an Ailuranthrope.

Okay. Quick theory sidebar. Lycanthropes you probably know of. People being inhabited by
angry wolf-spirits, usually pretty nice unless full moon came along. Probably the historic inspiration
for Norse Berserkers too. Though, mean and strong. Ailuranthropes are pretty much the same just
with angry cat spirits. Which meant they were just as fast as me when invoked and I had seen
another one’s fingernails cut through a leather jacket like it was wet paper and draw blood with ease.

Also. They are cats . Which means they are sadistic little bastards by nature.

Invocation or not, if she got the chance she’d gut me like a cat catching a squirrel. Fun times. For
her, if not me. On the other hand, she had hung herself with enough piercings to trigger a metal
detector at a airport. Which was a bad idea when you went into a magic fight for a reason I was
about to demonstrate.

I made a pulling motion with a snapped “Kentse !” and the angry hiss turned into a painful wail and
what turned out to be my second groin attack of the day. Oops?
(It was okay, though. Therianthropes heal like crazy. Still. Ow. )

With both their magic user and their big guy (or girl) taken out of the fight, the rest of the Hex Heads just gave me a nasty look, probably deciding that survival beat bravery and broke into run away, probably to annoy me at a later time. Carter was right beside me the next moment and helped me handcuff the allies they had left behind, as well as coaxing me through reading them their rights.

“Next time.” He then commented with a strained voice. “Get out of the way so I can shoot them? Also, you’re bleeding.” He added, handing me a handkerchief. Taking it I began to assess the state of my body. Okay, the pavement hit had undone a lot of my repair work from last night. Like someone hitting a just healed up bone at the exact same point. I could already feel the throbbing pain there, even through the increased toughness. Probably not a serious injury, but I had the distinct feel my entire back was back to turning into a hell of a bruise. One rip felt like it had cracked a bit and as I looked down I saw three shallow but long claw cuts going the width of my stomach, leaking blood. Ow.

We waited for another squad car to arrive to take our little Hex Heads into custody and then went to hunt down a first aid kit and then Carter announced I was going to do my first interrogation.
Earth Girl glared at me from her chair. Well, I couldn’t blame her. Getting kicked in the crotch like that isn’t fun, I knew from experience. But then I felt the mess that was my back and my sympathy ebbed quickly.

“Mary-Beth Collins. Corpus Christi PD seems to be a big fan of you.” I told her as I sat down with the file Carter had printed out for me in my hands. “Drug possession, vandalism, drinking in public. And now we can add attacking an officer of the law.” And then, almost lazily, I pulled her Rock Rod from behind my back and dropped it right between us. Think like a Wizard, I told myself again as I added a quiet “As well as trying the patience of a Wizard.”

See, if you drop the W-Word to any of the less strong talents you get a different general reaction based on whom you are talking with. Sorcerers, who can range from ‘Wizard Talents without the education’ to ‘didn’t walk the distance during tests’, usually have a defiant attitude. ‘You are not better than me’, in essence. At least to any Wizard under one-hundred. Minor talents usually have a slightly impressed air, mainly because most of them rarely see that level of power walk in the door. Focused Practitioners, the middle class so to speak, they do simply panic. I could see it in her face. The ‘Have I strayed too close to the Laws of Magic’ look in her eyes as she went through her recent actions. The Seven Laws of Magic, the unilaterally imposed big seven deadly sins of Black Magic. If you are very very lucky, you only get the probation from hell if you happen to break them by accident. All other options end with your head taking a divorce from the rest of your body. Permanently.

Sounds harsh, I know. Maybe even draconic. But the problem with Black Magic is that it’s like Cancer for your soul. Once you have it in you, it is almost impossible to get rid of it. With luck you can get it into remission, but the more you use it - and here the metaphor breaks down a bit because now it’s more comparable to an alcoholic insisting they ‘don’t have a problem’ - the more it metastasizes the more twisted you get. More Black Magic follows, more twisting and suddenly you start World Wars for fun, profit and dead bodies to reanimate.

(Yes. That happened. Google ‘Heinrich Kemmler’, Paranetters.)

I may not like the ‘one sentence fits all’ policy of the Council, but I’d have to lie if I said I didn’t see where it’s coming from. But if I was totally honest here, Earth Girl had done nothing that came close to the Laws. They forbade, in order;

Killing a person with or for magic (So be careful with gratuitous fireballing.)

Turning them into something else (No baleful polymorph for you!)

Invading someone’s minds (without invitation that is, with it you can mindfuck around as you like...)

Enthralling another person (Sidhe and demons are fair game if you feel suicidal.)

Raising the (human) dead. (Dinosaurs are apparently allowed to be raised?)
Travel back in time. (We all travel forward anyway, according to that Hawking guy.)

Opening the Outer Gates. (Don’t invite Cthulhu in for coffee. No-brainer, right?)

Person, for the sake of the discussion, counts as everyone who both trigger a Soulgaze and would eventually die of natural causes. So basically, have a Soul and be Mortal. Otherwise we Wizards are free to react with extreme prejudice if you tick us off. So don’t meddle in our affairs, kids!

Still, even stretching her attack on me as far as I could, it fell well short of the only applicable Law, the First. But a lot of Focused Practitioners get a bit paranoid (not without cause) about accidentally screwing up in situations like this. So I just sat there, the Rock Rod before and stared at Earth Girl’s bridge of the nose, just as Carter had told me to.

“You are the law, you have all the power in there. Let it work for you, because she knows that too.” had been his advice. “The fact that you are pretty intimidating looking helps too.” He had added, making me leave my jacket outside and sitting there only in the ripped shirt, displaying toned biceps and abs while I studied Earth Girl. She really was a little slip. Nineteen years old and five feet something tall, but I was afraid she would be able to push herself between the bars of her cell if someone didn’t watch her in there. Her hair was done in a poisonous green and, I kid you not, she was wearing neon pink color contacts. Some semi-occult tattoo’s on her wrists were visible as she fidgeted around. Internally, I sighed. Probably not a bad kid, or had not started as one. But then she had gotten magic and suddenly she hadn’t fit into her original social circles anymore. Perpetually broken cell phones were probably the least of the problems, but would still cut her off a lot these days. And then, how do you explain magic to high school kids? If you even realized it was magic. I met a few kids who thought they were mutants thanks to their gifts until some Paranetters had taken them aside and explained the magic bee’s.

I was pretty sure I knew Earth Girls, Mary-Beth’s, story by guesstimate already. She had felt ostracised by her talents, suddenly being a social loner. Which can be hard if you are not used to being alone, I guess. And then you meet someone who not only understands that feeling, but also what causes them. Someone you can talk to.

Too bad those someone’s were apparently a magically gifted biker gang. “Look.” She finally spoke. “I didn’t know you were a...Wizard?” She asked, from the tone hoping I was ‘only’ a Wizard and not a Warden, the Councils police/military force.

“No, I’m not a Warden. So this doesn’t have to involve them.” I coaxed, again following Carter’s script of ‘Offer them a way out after boxing them in’. Mary-Beth grimaced and then began to spill. Apparently the Hex Head I had beaten up the day before had not ordered the attack, I was surprised to learn. Instead someone had approached them and offered both a substantial donation and help in establishing the New Orleans chapter of the Hex Heads as soon as the ‘dominant magic powers’ were ‘pruned’.

I was not sure I felt better about a bounty on my head than about feuding with them.

“Chick was, I don’t know. She sounded like she was from New Jersey. Like Jersey Shore, you know?” Mary-Beth described her to me. Five-seven tall stunner, she said, looking Italian. And apparently another Focused Practitioner, so she said. And stronger than herself.

I really hoped my poker face firm held as the mental sign ‘Fomor Agent?’ blazed up inside my head in bright neon pink. If Mary-Beth had been any less clear on how she looked as she continued to describe the woman to me, I would have been seriously tempted to suspect Manu Lehaine having something to do with this little problem. Maybe just to keep me occupied, or because putting me in the hospital was ‘just business’ enough for her to consider it worthwhile trying. Or maybe just a way
to gauge my reactions and skills.

Paranoia. It’s just pathological if you don’t have dangerously competent enemies.

But Manu was a few inches taller than the person being described to me, and a pretty striking biracial blonde. Her being mistaking her for someone of an Italian-American phenotype was...unlikely. And I figured Mary-Beth was magically-savvy enough to see at least realize she was talking to a veiled or glamoured person. Which left the mysterious Fomor Agents Stone Monkey had warned me about as the most likely suspect. Trying a cheap shot to see if they can get me off the board before I realize they were there. Gutsy move, but I doubt the Hex Heads had taken that much prodding to go after me. Fire and forget goons, lovely.

I was about to ask a few more follow up questions when the door to the interrogation room opened. Inside stepped a very well dressed man, giving me a disapproving stare as he closed the door behind himself and took a firm stance behind Mary-Beth on her chair before he opened his mouth with a deliberately cool tone of “I am afraid this interview is over, Detective Lennon. My client has nothing further to say to you at this point.”

Oh. Great. The Ninth Biblical Plague. Lawyers. I gave as good as a stare back as I could while avoiding a Soulglance - provided the lawyer had one to gaze -, but he seemed wholly unimpressed at my green-eyed glare.

“I still have questions for your client.” I said, trying to break his verbal momentum but he just shook it off and waltzed forward, beckoning Mary-Beth to stand up and then continued to address me in the same almost detached voice.

“I am afraid we will not be available for further questioning.” He raised an eyebrow in a studied manner at me. “In fact I have already contacted the District Attorney’s office and have manage to arrange a plea bargain for her. In fact, my client would like to apologize for her unwise and adolescent impetus to attack the legal and recognized law enforcement of this fine city.” The look he gave her implies she would no matter what she thought. Not that Mary-Beth wasn’t already suitably scared of having pissed off a Wizard and was obviously overwhelmed by her counsels forceful manner. I probably could expect that apology in calligraphed writing from the look in her eyes.

“And since no weapons were involved...” The lawyer continued onward, not bothering with his client more than making sure she moved with him towards the door. And he was right. The Hex Heads had attacked me with magic only. Not-admissible and not-provable. Damn. “...The DA has agreed to let mercy take the lead in this case. My client will thus be making up her debt to society through community service, provided she does plea within the next three hours and does not hold up the work process.” So that’s how he had gotten that deal. He’d promised them less paperwork. Take her off the DA’s hands and a ‘case closed’.

“You seem pretty efficient for a public defender, I have to say?” I said as he opened the door for Mary-Beth, crossing my arms under my breasts and leaning back in my chair. He just shot me a slight smile, which actually had some honesty in it and breaking his cool detachment. “You are mistaken, Detective. I am indeed not a public defender, Detective. I work for a local non-profit organization seeking to help young person of talent in trouble. And possibly help them realize their talent in due course.” he informed me with an slightly amused tone. Like he was telling me a private joke.

I mentally groaned. ‘Non-profit organization’ my firm dark chocolate ass. As the lawyer finally shoved the somewhat perplexed Mary-Beth out of the room and pulled it closed, I
slammed the palm of my hand on the table. I would be betting my Council Robes that said organization was one of the ‘talent-scouting’ measures taken by Anson Lucas to recruit more magic to his employ I had heard about at the Paranet meeting. Massaging the bridge of my nose, I shoved my irritation with Anson down for now. And my reflexive instinct to just follow up on that operational column of his plans.

You have bigger problems for now. I told myself firmly. Yes, I had come here to help the cops with Ansons growing magic influence. It was why Captain Ketterer had given me a badge. But the situation here was not what Ketterer thought as he had done so. Anson Lucas was not the devil in this play. He was just the demon they knew. Even when he pulled things like this, getting a magic criminal a obvious get-out-of-jail card and a job interview in one, he was not the problem we faced right now.

Carter had come inside the room while I still pondered and sat himself on the edge of the interrogation table. “Nice work, even if its cut short.” He commented, rubbing his chin. “Don’t feel bad, it’s not the first time Walter Larberg did that in the last few months. Got me a few times too. Smarmy little legal pest just knows who to talk to for ‘little favors’.”

Ignoring his attempt to cheer me up, I just looked up to him and took a deep breath. I had to clear something up for my peace of mind, but I wasn’t looking forward to it. “Carter, why am I here?”

“What do you mean?” He asked me after a moment, obviously confused by my question and in response I pulled the badge off my belt. “Am I just here to help you bring down Anson Lucas?” I said while looking at it, staring at the golden star and crescent. I had it for scant three days and yet...Some things weighed more than the metal they were made of I realized. In a lot ways this badge had just as much weight as my black Council robes.

My partner just scratched his chin again. “Honestly? I think yes, that’s why we wanted you here. Lucas was having his sorceress and we wanted to get even.” He said quietly. “I want him down. I want to bring him in, book him and then see twelve of his peers convict him so we can kick him out of the city and into a prison where he won’t bother us ever again. Because I feel that if we don’t stop him he will run this city five years from now. And I think that if we don’t stop him now, we may not be able to do it later.” Carter spoke with firm words, conviction and sincerity. And then he showed a sardonic smile on his lips.

“But I have this little voice in my head that says it that may just be tunnel vision on my part. That I have been trying to do just that for months and maybe I’m losing perspective.” He sighed. “Look, I was here too when your strange monkey buddy told us that there was more going on in this city than just our little trench war with Lucas.” The pale and slim detective shrugged at me with a hint of weariness. “Winning the battle against him only to lose the war for New Orleans just sounds like a bad deal for me.” He paused before he continued. “So screw why we wanted you here, Jess. I told Ketterer half an hour ago that we are putting the Lucas case on hold pending a bigger issue, anyway.”

I perked up. I mean, I had seen the amount of work Carter had done for this. The pounds of files, typed and handwritten due to the way he had deliberately low-teched himself in his work without one of Anson Lucas practitioners just hexing it all away. And I had been afraid he’d be so stuck in tunnel vision about that he’d not be willing to give up going after Lucas. Lucas was a cop problem, after all. He was a criminal breaking laws. The Fomor were a much more abstract threat. Until they rode into the city in force. By which it might be too late for the police to do something about them. Relief was too small a word for how I felt at his words.

Carter noticed it too and put a hand on my shoulder. “Jess. Protect and Serve. That’s what that what
you have in your hand means.” He finished and got off the table. Taking the badge from my hands, pulled me to my feet and pointedly clipped it back onto my belt. “So let’s ignore the fact that Lucas just stole another magician for his little collection and look for the one who hired her, Partner.”
Chapter 17

Carter parked the car at the side of a street in the business parts of Pigeon Town. By now the evening had passed into the early night so the street was pretty deserted and the businesses lining it were closed for the night, aside from the odd twenty-four-hour diner. After a moment of squinting into the darkness, Carter pointed to a nondescript door wedged between a hardware store and a karate dojo.

Mary-Beth had, in the presence of her lawyer, confirmed to have met the person who had hired the Hex Heads in this location. Though she had been somewhat...awkward about describing it. Said she had felt strange inside. Which was enough for Carter to check his gun and me invoking my magic as we climbed outside the car and walked up to the door.

As it turned out, the door was not closed and led down to a basement complex that seemed to stretch down under the adjacent couple of shops. I was about to ask Carter if that was normal in this city when I began to feel what had disturbed Mary-Beth.

The place was steaming in magic energy. Not just the general presence of it that was everywhere. It felt like I had stepped in the pressure-tent equivalent of magic atmosphere. For a moment it was almost hard to breathe so unused was the feeling. And with every step down the stairs the pressure got stronger. Whatever this place was, it was full to the brim of magic. I felt like I could draw it in easier than breathing in here.

“Oh. It’s one of those places.” Carter said casually as he reached the end of the stairs and turned toward the first door. Waving me over, I looked over his shoulders and frowned. Inside the basement room, lit by sodium lamps and full of old sofa’s, chairs and cots. And people. Dozens of people, all sitting around and staring at the empty center of the room fully lost in reverie. Okay. This was capital-c creepy. Only as I reached out with my wizard senses I felt the workings of a small spell in the place where they all stared. Nothing fancy, nothing complicated but obviously meant to last for a while. It felt a lot like the spells my Master had me do to train my evocation skills, in fact.

The next room down was even stranger. It looked a lot like the other but instead of just staring into a spell, the center was occupied by a pair, male and female. Dancing closely together, as if in a trance, magic gently evaporated from them. Carter identified them both as belonging to one of the smaller witch covens, on the fringes of their society. Apparently the dancing and emotion it incited helped them call forth magic and finally it clicked to me what this place was.

It was an Opium Den. Or rather, the Nu3 version of one. All those people were full of the stuff, their Third Eye wide open and engrossed in the magic they saw glow before their eyes. Some of them had enhanced their experience with some other drugs too, as I smelled the faint odor of weed and saw pill bottles in the hand of some of the users.

“Why didn’t you tell me of places like this?” I asked Carter quietly after we had tried to talk to some of the people here, only to receive blank stares. My partner just shrugged. “We were focusing on the ones that went crazy.” He said. “In these dens they never do. They just sit and..stare.”

Of course. Carter and the cops couldn’t see the magic that caught their attention, the colors no one else could see and the otherworldly shapes it took. Like someone seeing a sunrise after a lifetime of
night. I remembered the first time I had seen magic, my own Sight open. That wonder I had felt. But by now that time was the better part of twenty years past and I had, I don’t know, grown used to it. Inundated. For them...I was not sure I could truly relate. Even if the Nu3 did not have an addictive element to it, I suspected a lot of them would still be here.

But I also began to understand why this place felt like I was sitting at the bottom of a magic well. Was it Heisenberg who said that the pure process of observing something changed it? That also went for magic, after a fashion. If you watch magic, you influence it to a degree. You made it more...’real’ if that makes sense. Heavy magic instead of your usual ‘normal’ magic, to say it simple. Or rather, more persistent magic.

If one person did it while she worked some magic, the effect was negligible. If eighty people did nothing but look at magic for days, or weeks, the effect was...staggering.

After trying a few more rooms, all more variations of the earlier ones, Carter navigated me back to the surface. Only when I stepped back out onto the street did I realize how much the atmosphere down there had weighed on me. Releasing my invocation, I held onto a street lamp and began to take deep breaths. I hadn’t even noticed the feeling of claustrophobia that had come over me in the basement, all the magic around me. If I had to go down there I would have to mentally prepare myself better, ‘acclimatize’ myself like someone climbing a mountain had to.

Finally getting my composure back, I walked to Carter sitting on the hood of his car. Taking a sip of the water bottle he offered me I finally asked him “How many of those places are in the city?” already certain I didn’t want to know the answer.

“About a dozen smaller ones. Of this size? With that one I think it’s seven we know of. When they started a few weeks ago we tried to find a connection to Lucas, but he doesn’t run them it seems. He only provides the ‘product’ to be used in them.” Carter sighed. “Those places are not illegal and on its own Nu3 is not either, so we can hardly just close them up.”

Yeah, no. I was willing to to bet dollars to donuts that ‘about a dozen’ came down to exactly thirteen. And seven was an equally important magic number. And every one of those was possibly as chock full of magic like them. In fact I suspected the same pressure of magic I had felt kept most of the spirits out. For them it must be like walking through feet-thick gelatine getting in there. Exhausting for a ephemeral being, and once again fueling their anger at the few people they caught in the open, exacerbating the Nu3 attacks.

But still. At this point I was no longer willing to consider coincidence likely where those dens were involved. Someone had organized them, I was sure. And that someone was essentially building himself a set of very very deep magical reservoirs.

A quote from the officer of the range the day before yesterday came to mind. “Never pull your gun without being prepared to use it.” he had said. And the same principle came to magic. Never build a spell you are not prepared to cast. Which meant someone had built himself a hell of a gun.

And the icy feeling down my spine made me feel certain they were more than ready to use it.
With the Nu3-den covered and our mystery practitioner not found, Carter and I considered our next step. One option was to simply check the other known dens and try to find her there, but somehow I doubted that was going to work. But as I looked at the door leading back down there, I began to have an idea. If Anson Lucas had not created those dens, it only was logical that the few magic talents he had had also not created the spells still running down there. I explained this to Carter as we went down the stairs again, somewhat slower this time. In fact, even as protected from sunlight as the place was, those spells could not run longer than a few days before they had to be recharged. Probably closer to every day, in fact. Which meant there was, possibly, a connection between the site of the spell and whoever had cast it. And while normally that connection weakened pretty fast, I pointed out to Carter, sometimes a brute force effort was workable to make weak links still work in a tracking spell.

Gee. Now where to find a place chock full of ready-to-use magic for me to throw at a wall to see what sticks? Heh. I love this kinds of little ironies. They spice up life.

Before we went down again, I had grabbed Carter’s roadside marking spray from his car's accident kit. Now as I stepped inside the empty center of the first room, I sprayed a Taijitu circle around me and empowered it, trapping the spell and myself inside it and causing the ‘audience’ to groan in annoyance. The circle didn’t exactly cloak what they saw, but it probably was a bit like shower steam getting in the way of the details of a movie sex scene.

Well. They were about to get a show in compensation. Bringing the palms of my hands together and closing my eyes, I began to move myself into a slow circular t’ai chi form, beginning to draw in in the magic from the room. For a moment I was almost overwhelmed, like opening the kitchen sink and getting a high pressure fire hose. But training, focus and discipline took over immediately and as I changed to another fluid form I had a firm and solid grip on the magic I drew into the circle with me. Weaving it around the smaller spell, nothing more than a little trick to move air around in a moebius shape it turned out, I began to dig deep into it.

I said before that every Wizard has a certain affinity to some elements in his evocation. Wizards also have affinities, individual talents in other ways of magic. Some of them have a talent for moving around huge amounts of energy with ease. Others have the ability to get incredibly sensitive readings off things. Another one’s had a knack for being able to handle highly complex magical constructs in their heads without tools.

Me? I’m good with going by feeling. To just let go of conscious decision and just feel my way forward. Shut off the doubt and self-criticism of the superego. To go with the flow, stop trying and simply do magic even if I do not fully know how . To be able to feel my way through the holes in my knowledge as long as I know where I want to go.

Which is what I did right now. I knew and had used tracking spells, knew how to read another practitioner’s aura from their spells. I knew how to combine both techniques. What I didn’t know was how to boost the resulting spell to work with the oh so very faint traces still left in the spell and work on a scale that would actually let me find someone inside a city as big as New Orleans. And so
I moved from one form to the other, weaving magic in balance of feeling and knowing. I was vaguely aware of the engrossed sounds of the audience, seeing the vast amounts of magic drawn in and applied to my problem. They had only watched minor magic so far, so to them it was probably an entirely new experience. Forget seeing the sunrise for the first time. Look at this supernova!

And finally...my spell worked. With a feeling of an internal snap and a slight sense of imbalance to myself I knew where the person who had cast the spell was. Or rather I felt myself drawn to them, as if I stood atop a slope with them at the ground level. Moving onto a calming ready-position, I finally broke the circle and let the magic I had used evaporate again back into the atmosphere. Which still had only used a drop of the ocean at the bottom of this place, I realized. A part of me wanted to go and run before the tracking spell lost potency, but I made myself check first if I could do anything to pull the plug of this magical tank, ignoring the grumbled questions to show the people inside more magic.

But a cursory glance around showed me there was not much I could do at this point. The best way to get rid of magic was by letting running water ground it out, but someone had considered that. All the drains and other holes inside the place were closed up tightly, so even if I could flood it, it would only create standing water. Whoever had done it had been very thoroughly, using concrete or other solid plugs, which meant I would have to do some heavy work to open it up again. And I did not have the time.

With a frustrated groan I led Carter back up to the street level again. It was time to to meet the real bad guys of this little drama, I decided.

With my directions, Carter drove us to another part of the city, this one a bit more run down but closer to the center. Finally we came to a halt before what looked like an old and boarded up diner. Which would have looked not that out of place in the neighbourhood all in one, I had to admit. The three turtlenecked guys not-so-subtly standing guard over the street on the other hand...

“Awesome. Servitors.” I complained, pointing them out to Carter. “Basically, the goons of choice for the Fomor and their higher agents. Originally normal humans, I think, but for their service they have been implanted with a few bits of extra organs. Starting with gills and going up depending on how much they have impressed the Fomor Lord they serve.” I explained to him, skimming over the Fomors admittedly impressive bioaugmentation magics. I also didn’t mention some of the more wild rumors I had heard about them from the Paranet, mainly because I still suspected they had been exaggerated in the retelling.

“Gills explain the Steve Jobs-wannabe fashion?” Carter asked thoughtfully, keeping an eye on the three guards. “Are these guys usually packing guns?”

“If we stretch the definition of gun to include strange gun-shaped seafood mollusks shooting pointed and serrated darts? Yes, they are usually packing.” I told him as cheerfully as I could, causing him to just gently tap his head against the steering wheel. “On the flipside, since they sold their Souls to their bosses in return for their shiny new toys, they forfeit the protection of the First Law of Magic.” I added with a slightly dangerous tone of the voice. The actual metaphysics were a bit more complicated, but that was it under the bottom line. Carter just gave me considering look. “Meaning no holding back?” He said quietly and I nodded. “If they push me, yes. If they run or surrender...”

Look, they are ruthless bastards who’d sell out everyone to their bosses if they could. Which is pretty
irrelevant to my use of lethal force, because in the end that was still my decision. If someone choses to be a bastard who kills just because someone is in the way that’s between them and what passes for their conscience. For myself, I consider it an too easy choice to do something like that with the magic I command. And that way usually lies Black Magic in the end.

“So how are we going to do this?” Carter ask warily. The three guards were spaced too far out from each other to take out at once and if we took them one at a time, the other two could pin us until whoever still was inside got out and into the fray.

“I have an idea.” I said slowly. “But you are not going to like it. At all.”

The car alarm of Carter’s department issued vehicle was surprisingly loud. The lights began to flash, the horn went off and in general just made an incredible racket. And just as we expected, two of the servitors left their position to check it out while the third stayed behind and seemingly made a report inside. After checking the car, making sure no one was inside and no one seemed to have triggered it they stood around and scanned the area.

Hidden behind a simply veil in a side alley I reached out and once again sent just the faintest of hexes into the car, causing the alarm to be triggered again. Doing this was not as easy as it sounded. Hexing something, the deliberate triggering of magic’s tendency to have technology go haywire was in general more akin to taking the biggest and nastiest sledgehammer you could find and badger something to pieces. So what I did was trying to just hammer away a tiny little piece of it with the very same hammer. Tricky, tricky work. But effective. After the fourth time I triggered the car alarm, the servitors had the obvious body language of someone no longer watchful of it being a trick but annoyed at someone’s crappy car. And in all fairness, by now the car probably was a tad trigger happy with the car alert. Even with the softest touch, I was probably wreaking havoc on the electronics of the it. Well, car maintenance can send their complaint letter to my desk.

(Oh god. I have a desk now. That’s still strange to me.)

Giving me another of those silent special forces signs, which he had finally explained to me, Carter beckoned me forward. Taking point, I let the veil slip and used the cover of the night to move forward as triggered the car alarm a final time. The two servitors still standing beside it flinched as the sharp siren went off again and in that moment of distraction I was close enough, invoked magic with one breath to quieten the still throbbing pain from the fight earlier and launched a spinning kick at the first servitors chest. My sneakers made a chunky sound as they connected and the goon was slammed against the shotgun-door. Continuing my spinning motion I exchanged which leg held me safe on the ground and my other foot’s front grinded itself right into the servitors gills. Experience with his kind had taught me that those things pretty squishy and sensitive, and the gurgling sound of pain from him confirmed the effect. A final follow-up with the palm of my hand onto his temple took the servitor out of the fight. All in all, the combination had taken less than two seconds to execute.

Before the first servitor was on the ground I had already leaped on the roof of Carter’s car and let myself fall down, executing a scything kick on the servitor on the driving side, hitting his forehead with the back of my foot and throwing him to the ground. Once again using the momentum I had build, I continued the scything motion into a full spin and then into a roll off the roof of the car and landed on the fallen servitor with my right knee once again going for the gills. A nasty one-inch punch to his head took that one out too. Less than five seconds gone but the third Servitor was too far to reach for me before he started to shoot at me, his weapon already at his shoulder and taking the extra second to make sure he didn’t just spray and pray but had a good aim at me. Accelerated by my invocation, I saw how his index finger moved from a safe position to the trigger and knew I was not
nearly fast enough to fully dodge the shots he was about to fire.

I was still readying my shield spell when the loud thunder of a gunshot echoed through the empty street. But instead of me being pelted with ammunition from under the sea, the servitor was slammed against the boarded up diner-window. Well. Servitor sans a large chunk of his head. Carter, his hands still on his gun, stepped out from behind the corner of the side alley he moved forward. Eyes still on the servitor he had shot he stopped only as he had reached his car and the cover it offered.

Okay. I didn’t like guns, but I knew enough of them to understand that the single shot Carter had fired had been a masterwork. He had hit the servitor right between the eyes, in the dark and at least thirty feet distance. But I didn’t have time to reflect on just how good a shot my partner was. Carter already signalled me that he had me covered and to get a move on. So I got to my feet again and dashed toward the diner window. Wood magic was not my strength, not something that came to me by instinct. But in kung fu you don’t just train what comes easy to you. And yes, my hurt back complained, my rips considered calling for a vote of no confidence, but right this moment it didn’t matter. I was in motion, I was in action and I simply flew along the way I felt was right as the Tao had taught me. And sometimes feeling is all that matters in magic.

And so, as I look a leap at the boards securing the window I reached out and into the wood before me and ripped it out of my way inside the place, landing in a three point stance in a hail of splinters and sawdust. And since I never would let it stand that a Wizard couldn’t make a good entrance, I lit up my brightest smile and aimed it straight at the servitors and their practitioner inside.

“Okay, who do you have to beat up in here to get some seafood?”
Chapter 19

Chapter 19

I had their attention now. Well done, me!

I didn’t wait for them to go to their weapons. A few years back I had studied under a grumpy zen lady who had specialized in Baguazhang, or as it is better known to the Western Audience: Airbending. And while I generally preferred my own hard-style, the soft styles had their own advantages. Said grumpy zen lady, for example? Had been able to dance around in a crowd of opponents like a leaf in the wind. And while I couldn’t replicate her skill at that to the same level, I had incorporated elements of it into my own style. Combined with the fact that I had invoked purely for speed and toughness at the moment, relying on only my considerable natural strength, this turned me diving straight into four more servitors at knife-range from crazy to just audacious.

Still. I was not about to waste time trying to beat them down individually. Especially since I suspected they were more senior to the four that had been standing guard and thus potentially tougher. Not while I could already feel their own magic user preparing some spell of her own. And given the way the hair on my neck began to stand up, I had a good idea what it was. And how I could use it.

And just a moment later my suspicion was confirmed as the Italian practitioner pointed her hands at me, clawed and obviously angry, and hissed something slightly Gaelic sounding. The lightning that sprang from her hands, obviously focused by the sickly green glowing bracelets on her arms, was almost too fast for my reaction. Almost. If I hadn’t notice the slight static charge that had preceded her spell she might have hit me straight in the chest. Followed by a very intense and fatal cardiac arrest, not to mention the other fun side-effects of being hit by lightning.

Instead I had my own spell ready. A lot of western Wizards tend to dismiss Elements that are not part of their system. Most of those who do just consider Metal a jumped-up part of what is ‘properly’ Earth. And while there was a certain amount of overlap, as is between all elements, there were some more metaphysical things that only really worked with Metal. What I did now fell under that category.

First, lightning cannot be simply ‘thrown’. Lightning is just electric current following a predetermined path. This is not different for magic lightning, just that in that case its path is created by the magic of the caster. Second, a current no matter of what kind will always stay on its path. Which is not as easy as it sounds because lightning is fast.

And third, metals are an excellent electric conductor. By channeling a metal evocation at the incoming lightning strike, I did not deflect it, I did not parry it. I conducted it along a path of lesser resistance. Do not hit the badass kung fu Wizard, I offered it, it is way easier to hit all the goons around her.

Heh. Ka- blitz.
As the four thoroughly grilled goons fell to the ground all around me, my true opponent and me came truly face to face for the first time. And to my surprise I recognized her. I had seen her only the day before yesterday. She had walked past me on my way to the dinner with Anson Lucas, smiled at me as she had passed me wearing nothing but stockings and a smile. She and her two identical sisters.

Lowering her hands and looking at her goons with a overdone sigh, she smiled at me in a distinctly shark-like way. “So, we meet again Wizard.” She said in a husky Philadelphia English accented voice. “I’ll admit, I didn’t expect you to find me or my sisters yet. Coming in guns blazing once we are really going to work, yes.” Another overdone sigh. “Luck is a skill too, I guess.” She added after a moment, inspecting the fingers that had just tried to fry me.

At the same time, I gave her a more careful once over then I had before. Twenty-ish, about five feet eight, slim but shapely under her dark green mini dress that matched her eye color perfectly, Italian-olive skin tone and curly black hair, all in all she looked like she could confidently audition for the next Bond Girl. Even the cruelly arrogant look on her face, the smile that said ‘I am powerful and I deserve it’, seemed to only accentuate her beauty and the faint odor of black magic coming off her after she had just killed with magic acted more to underscore it with an air of danger. She was one of those people who could make being a warlock look hot and have people fawn over how she was actually not truly ‘evil’.

You know. Like Tom Hiddleston as Loki. Just with boobs and a different type of accent.

“Or maybe you are not as smart as you like to think.” I finally retorted to her, trying to edge close enough for me to lang a direct blow to her. I wasn’t about to try and get into a ranged fight with someone specializing in lightning. But just as I was ready to go for it, her eyes narrowed and she spat in gaelic again.

The lightning came too quick to dodge or to raise a proper shield spell. Instead I just had the time for something quick and dirty. If you are familiar with the Warden of Los Angeles, you may know how he uses Water magic to create entropy in order to break down solid mass. I can do something similar...just directly opposite. By using Earth Magic I could create enthalpy, the principle opposing entropy. If entropy was a system’s desire to break down into its most disordered state, enthalpy was a system’s desire to remain in its most energy-low state. My spell essentially raised enthalpy on my own body, causing it to deny accepting any sudden energy influx into it. As in being struck by lightning.

Now, I wasn’t just turning immune to lightning. With the energy of the strike not going in me, it did what energy always did when it found its way blocked. It went somewhere else. So the electric energy dispersed in the air in front of me, turning into heat and kinetic energy. Which ‘just’ meant a bomb went off in front of me, so to speak, as me being shocked dead.

My enthalpy spell and the invoked toughness took care of the majority of said bomb, but the rest was enough to lift me off my feet and slam me through the until-now undamaged boarded-window. For the second time today I slammed onto the asphalt on the street. The spell had ceased the moment my concentration lapsed, around the moment I had slammed into the wood, and I felt my pants rip and knees scrape over the street. My enchanted leather jacket kept the same from happening to my torso and years of martial arts made me land in a position that kept any important parts, like my head, secure during the crash. I had actually landed well enough to immediately get back up onto my feet. Still, my knees hurt, and the impact had done nothing to help my already abused back. In fact as I moved an arm I felt a sharp pain that told me something had been torn or otherwise injured. I took a deep breath and broke invocation just long enough to put more effort into toughening myself up, numbing the pain.
But in the time this took, a certain angry lightning-wielder had strode out of the diner. The ‘bomb’ had ruined her hair and ripped her dress, but she seemed otherwise fine. Fine enough to run at me in heels and curse me in colorful sounding Italian. How come bad guys can do that anyway? Is that a Evil-specific class skill? Or did Fomor bio-augmented ankles come with the job?

Focus, I told myself, raising a more traditional shield of force just quick enough to catch the next bolt of lightning. Hissing another curse she, and I just realized that I still did not know her name, she began to try to shoot her lightning to the side of my shield, forking it in the hopes of hitting me. That or she used her blasts more to try and blend me, hoping to sneak down an attack in the moments my eyes still recovered from the flash of a previous strike. All in all, she fought smart. She knew that if I could bring my broader magical talents to bear, I could outmaneuver her. So she kept it coming, hitting me hard to keep me defensive and trying to find just enough of a chink in my armor.

Which came with her real masterstroke came. You see, Lightning is a subset of Air Magic. And with her bludgeoning my shield with flash after flash, I had let myself to forget this. So one moment I was still expecting the next lightning to hit me shield, preparing to do another Metal redirection when she instead just brought her palms together with a nasty smile and then ripped them apart in a swift motion and another spell, pulling the very air away from me strong enough to rip a good chunk out of my lungs.

If you had never that happen to you, don’t. It fucking hurts. Like throwing up and spluttering at the same time in reverse. A rational part of my mind insisted she had not ripped it out of my lungs directly. Rather, she had created a vacuum in front of me and the air in my lungs had went out of my open mouth to fill it. Still, even with my toughness up the pain drove me to my bloody knees.

And she...hesitated. She still kept the spell going, keeping me in a small localized vacuum, but as pain and sudden lack of breath kept me from focusing on another magic spell she really should have just finished it. My inner discipline had kept me from just blacking out from the shock or panicking as my lungs demanded new air. But that took all my effort, so I was wide open. But she...gloated. I could see it. She enjoyed the fact that a Wizard was on her knees before her. I was at her power. And there was nothing I could do.

Now. Carter on the other hand. The gunshot was strangely muted without the air to transmit it, but the italian twirled around and wove another spell, pushing the bullets out of its path before they could make her head explode. And with a furious sound, she raised her hand and sent a blast of lightning straight at Carter. My partner had already been jumping back into cover after giving off his shot, but even so the bolt still winged him. Without being able to do something I saw him slamming against the side of a building and come to a rest, unconscious but still twitching.

Anger rose inside me. Carter was my partner, my friend, and he had just been injured while coming to my defense. Emotions power magic. In a lot of ways they act as a catalyst to a chemical reaction, allowing a Wizard to draw in more energy and do stronger magic. And my anger now powered me as I pushed my palms toward the ground, casting a force spell that propelled me out of the vacuum zone, but I didn’t waste time breathing in. Hearing my steps come closer, the fomor agent turned around again. I saw lightning appear in her hands, but by the time she was ready to cast it at me I was finally close enough for me to do something about it.

Invocation is only one of the special magic techniques of my style. It is the first step, so to speak. To take magic and fill yourself with it. And now I was to demonstrate one of the more advanced things you could do with it. My right arm came up, hand on an open strike position and aimed it straight at my opponent. Calling magic energy into me, I shaped it around my arm and then let it fly outward. The magic from me collided with the magic energies she had called forth and clashed into it like a breakwater hitting the oncoming wave. Her spell just...collapsed as its structure broke down, the
magic energy harmlessly evaporating back into the atmosphere. A technique that had been handed down into my school for millennia, the ability to break spells with a strike of your hand. Her eyes went wide as her spell turned to nothing and I still continued the strike, pulling back my fingers and impacting my palm straight onto her chest.

Now the air went out of her chest, and still I was pissed. Now this fight had turned from magic into close combat, my advantage was absolute. I grabbed the back of her head and with one ruthless motion I brought it down on my bloody knee before she could react. An audible crack-sound later, she was at my foot and out cold just as I finally allowed me to take a deep breath into my abused lungs.

“Who needs luck instead of skill now?” Was all I could wheeze as I went to look after my partner.
Carter, it turned out to my relief, was still alive. He was hurt, but from what my quick magic examination told me he was not in any direct danger. His heart still beat strong and the lightning had strafed ‘only’ his leg, causing some burns all the way up to the side of his torso. I took a moment to work his chi close to the more important organs there, just to be sure. After that I searched his jacket for his cell, only to find that the lightning and magic together had delivered it from its electronic misery. A problem which turned mood when a veritable horde of patrol cars came howling into the street, doubtlessly called by people being terrified of the impromptu lightning show.

And hey, it only took about a minute for me to convince them to put away the guns and believe me that I was on the same side as them. Which honestly was just swell for me because even if you can make yourself temporarily bulletproof, getting shot still hurts like a bitch. With my back hurting like it had been used as a punching bag, my lungs still cramping and the lower part of my legs being drenched in the blood from my knee, I kind of considered not adding bullet-bruises to that something in the win column.

So I just sat myself on the hood of Carter’s car, figuring it was already magic-ed up enough to not mind the wizard crashing on it, and simply closed my eyes and let my exhaustion overcome me. I don’t know how long I had sat there and just let the adrenaline wear off, doing breathing and meditation exercises to try and mobilize what little strength I still had, but I was vaguely aware that someone stepped up beside me.

Opening my eyes, I looked up at Captain Ketterer. Following his look, I saw Carter being carted off into an ambulance which immediately drove off. The two surviving servitors and their lightning throwing mistress were being loaded into a police van at the same time, guarded by an army of uniformed cops. Following the van as it left the street, Ketterer pinched the bridge of his nose wearily.

“You know, Detective. A couple years ago I met this sergeant from Chicago during a conference. We ended up exchanging stories about how magic could affect police work over a bottle of scotch. In the end, he told me that a Wizard could be an incredible asset to any police force who has access to one. If you could live with the pandemonium of paperwork for the infrastructure damage the wizard will cause, that is.” He told me, taking in the scenery. Or the war zone.

The lightning my opponent had thrown around like it came free had set three parked cars on fire, made the asphalt of the street rip when it had been deflected by my shield and scorched the facade of half a dozen houses. The diner where the fight had begun had looked, quite appropriately as if a bomb had gone off inside.

“Until tonight I really had thought he had only told me a joke.”
About two hours later, after an exhaustive verbal report to Ketterer, I let myself crash into the couch in Carter’s - and since Ketterer had not fired me yet, mine too - office. Ketterer had actually not been that angry. Yes, he had been annoyed at Carter and me going into the situation without backup or calling it in. Very annoyed at that. It turned out Carter had a bit of a habit of leading in where SWAT fears to tread. I had actually not even stopped to consider doing that and apparently Ketterer had expected, or at least hoped, that having me around would force Carter to play it safer and rein in his own instincts to jump right in. Heh. Because that had totally worked out. Glancing at his empty desk I couldn’t stop myself from muttering an appreciative “Though little bastard.”

“Who here is ‘little’?” His voice suddenly came from the door as he pushed it open with a crutch. He looked...well. Not well. While he normally looked already pretty pale, exhaustion now turned his skin decidedly sickly. His right leg was wrapped up in some sort of bandage and I could see that every step pained him. Letting himself fall onto the couch opposite of me, he waved at the door. “Can you close that for me? I think some very annoyed nurses might call our uniformed friends to look for me soon.”

Like I said. Though little bastard. Just as I was about to do as he asked, a crime scene tech came up to me. In his hands he held a big cardboard box containing all the secured evidence from the diner, swept for prints and any obvious traces. Ketterer had apparently stood behind them and pushed to finish it as quickly as possible and then turn it over to me for further investigation. Well, wasn’t that just nice.

Taking the package to the couches, I began to unpack it onto the table between them. Carter bend forward, a look that told me to ignore the grunt of pain, and with his help we had quickly sorted everything. First and foremost was a big map of New Orleans which included all the locations of the Nu3 dens Carter had told me about. My first hope that they would form a circle, and thus conveniently lead me to the center and the rest of the Fomor agents, was quashed. It seemed more like they had been arranged for maximum coverage of the city, to make sure every part of it had its own well of ready magic. Next came a set of fast food order menu’s, all of them vegan. (Now we knew these people were truly evil!)

Also present were surveillance pictures. Not just of me, but also Manu LeHaines, local witches, voodoo practitioners, werewolves and a lot of the unaffiliated talents. That much didn’t surprise me as much, as I explained to Carter. The Fomor were notorious for kidnapping magic talent of all persuasions whenever they could. It would only be normal for them to look up what they might decide to shop for.

The first real mystery was a series of weather charts, showing New Orleans and Atlantic Ocean before it. After both failing to understand it, Carter called in a uniformed police officer who had apparently worked on his family’s fishing boat before joining the force. Perusing the charts, he only scratched his head and told us they were projections for tomorrow night. Or tonight as we had finally passed the midnight line during our work. Holding it up, Officer Veit pointed at a certain point on the chart. “See here.” he told us. “That’s the storm heading up to the city. Nothing too bad, just a blast of heavy weather hitting is during the night. Weather channel has been telling us about it for a few days, because apparently the weather science guys had predicted clear weather for the week until it had suddenly started to form.” He explained. “Heavy rain, some lightning and thunder probably. And lucky me gets to be on duty.” he sighed and went on his way.

Quietly, I continued to stare at the chart. On its own the storm was not suspicious, but it having suddenly appeared? While the Fomor made a list of people they would like to kidnap the most? Coincidence, this was not.
“Maybe the storm is used to cover the actions?” Carter offered, scratching his chin thoughtfully. But I just shook my head. The storm would be a handful, Veit had told us, but not enough to keep an entire city distracted.

Unless. Unless.

“Fuck.” I whispered almost reverently. It all fell into place before me. The way the Nu3 dens were spaced to make sure every part of the city was covered equally. The reasons the spirits were getting angrier and angrier, resulting in more frequent attacks. It was like one of those trick pictures you can only see the other half once you make that final leap of understanding to reveal it. And then you could not unsee it. I saw what they were planning. I understood how they could do it. And with that, I feared what the consequences of it would be, both for the city and the people in it.

“I know what they are doing.” I said quietly. “And I have no idea how to stop them.”
After my revelation, and my admission of not knowing what to do, Carter had just stared at me for a minute and then put his, metaphoric, foot down. “Get some sleep, patch yourself up and then look at the situation again.” he had told me. And he had been right. After a few hours of sleep and a metric ton of breakfast I had taken another look of the situation and a plan had offered itself to me. It was not a plan I liked, or even liked to consider. But what was the saying? It was the worst plan, aside from all the other plans we had. The fact that Carter had called me shortly afterwards and told me our Fomor Practitioner had vanished from holding only convinced me that it was the only option I had left.

And so I had spent almost the entire rest of the day meditating and taking care of all the injuries - the pavement attack at my back that had undone all the repair work I had done on the shotgun hit there, as well as the cracked rib and claw marks from the Hex Heads. The scraped knees, the partially fractured shoulder and even more damage to my back from the fight with the Fomor - I had accumulated over the last few days. Feeling almost whole again, I showered for almost an hour, ritually cleaning every inch of my body, depilating myself of every hair I did not want on me and rubbing skincare potion in until my flesh almost shone. It was more than just about hygiene, it was about readying myself. I felt, I knew, that the coming night would be exhausting, demanding and taxing in a myriad ways. I wanted to feel the best I could be for what was to come.

On nights like that you have to prepare yourself in every way possible.

Stepping out of the bath, I began the dressing process almost as ritually as I had cleaned myself. First came the little Cross of iron on its chain, nestled between my bosoms, followed by my sturdiest training bra. There is nothing more distracting in a fight than a sudden weight shift on your chest, let me tell you that. A matching black pantie came next, followed by freshly washed - Bless you Liz - black jeans pants. I clipped off the badge from its belt as I closed it firmly enough to not skid during fighting that was to come. This night was Wizards business, not Cop business. Carter had understood that, when I had explained my plan, as much as it had aggravated him. Even if his injuries wouldn’t have slowed him down, I’d not brought him along.

Next came the last clean shirt I still had, which explained the alleged origin of the word ‘Boob’. As in B if you look at them from above, oo from up front and b from the side.

(Birthday present. I have some really weird friends let me tel you that...)

My sneakers followed, as well as me wrapping up the lower end of my pants around my ankle for support there. That finished I turned toward the long black cloth wraps still lying on the bed. Now I’ve mentioned before that these wraps are my equivalent to a wizard’s staff. The focus for my magic skills. I still remember making them, the latest version of the same design. The black fabric was not store bought but had been crafted by a, I kid you not, Svartalven tailor and was incredibly tough and hard to damage in any way. Especially with the additional spells woven into it. The dark red sigils and hanzi I had stitched into them where were the equivalent of carved runes. I knew other Wizards used more specialized foci to support their one ‘general’ focus, but all my attempts to do that
just had usually ended up in me abandoning them shortly again. Maybe it was my Master’s attitude that a focus was no replacement to training, and that in fact focus-less spellcasting should be trained just as hard.

As I began wrapping my arms in them, I remember the first time my Master had brought me to a waterfall, told me to step under it and throw a spell. The running water had grounded me out, I had no focus and unsurprisingly, I had not been able to call forth any magic that day. Or the next. But after almost a year of exercising, I had finally managed to blast enough force up into the air to make the waterfall part over me and create a rainbow in the air out of the drops.

Just because something is hard to do is no reason not to try and get better at it.

Striving for excellence, aiming for perfection despite knowing you can never reach it is the heart and soul of kung fu. Tonight would be hard, tough and demanding. But that was the life I had chosen. As I wrapped the cloth around my forearms, every pull of it confirmed that again for me. And finally I put on my enchanted green leather jacket, remembering the days I had first donned it. Friends I hadn’t expected to meet and adventure on the edge between Europe and Asia. I missed them, and not just for the backup. A storm was coming and a part of me wanted just to weather it together with my friends and family.

Well. It was time to make a deal with an enemy.

Anson Lucas home was not really surprising to me a penthouse inside a well off residential high rise. The doorman, it turned out, actually had me on his list and let me inside without a fuzz, handing me a magnet card to use with the elevator he shoved me into.

Even taking the card gingerly between two fingers. It took three attempts for the blasted machine to read it. I tensed slightly as the elevator reached the top floor, expecting to have to fight my way through whatever Threshold the place had. But while I did feel a minor one - the strength what I usually associated with a loosely cohabiting couple and only a pale shade of a real ‘family home’ threshold - it parted before me without issue. Apparently being on the Doorman’s list counted as being invited inside.

The doors opened and I stepped inside the home of the rising star crime lord of New Orleans. It looked pretty much as I had expected it, interior design by money. Not uncomfortable, but the clear feel of someone else having decorated your house. On the outside terrace a pool had been laid right into the edge, essentially turning an entire side of the basin transparent. Gentle steam rose up from the heated water and inside both Anson Lucas and Emanuelle LeHaine took a swim.

Well.

I couldn’t stop myself from thinking. No reason for them to bother with swimsuits in their own home? Or stop myself from looking.

I walked through the door out onto their terrace and stopped at the edge of the pool, giving both nude criminals a raised eyebrow. If either of them was bothered by me seeing them skin-clad, neither showed it. Lucas actually smiled at me and offered a polite “Wizard” as he climbed out, holding out his hand as greeting.

After a moment I took it, not wanting to start this little conversation with offending him. Still. Nice equipment he has down there. A small part of my brain insisted on having me notice. LeHaine continued to lazily pull her laps, content to let her lover deal with me.
“I noticed that I apparently was...expected? Invited?” I asked with a raised eyebrow, to which he only gave me a knowing smile. “Jessica, if you came to my home with a search warrant or to arrest me within the bounds of the law no door of mine would stop you. If you came here as a Wizard to bring me to the justice of your Council then I am equally confident no door could stop you. So I rather decided to simply extend an open door policy, as opposed to a broken door policy toward you.” his eyes met mine. “I know you won’t abuse it. In fact, I invite you to use it to prevent...miscommunications between us.”

Soulgazes. Sometimes they can be far too revealing, because he was right. If he gave me that open door invitation my sense of honor would prevent me from abusing it, smart bastard that he was. Smart honest bastard.

“I take it you are not here for a swim yourself, then? I assure you the water is quite pleasant though.” He waved over to the pool where Manu lazily swam on her back. “And honesty compels me to add, we would enjoy the additional company.” He smiled at me, these infuriating little honest smiles. And he had a very nice smile, I had to admit, when he didn’t use it to hid behind. *Mind on the business!* I admonished myself as I caught myself getting off track.

I pointed toward the oncoming storm. It was still only a mass of grey clouds, promising to be nothing too bad. Rain, winds, a bit of lightning and thunder. No one in the city knew what it truly hid behind its clouds. “No. Not today.” Oops? Was that a freudian slip? “We have a bigger problem, I am afraid” And then I began to explain to him what was truly going on in the city, the Fomor’s invasion plans, how Lucas Nu3 business had allowed them to create reservoirs of magic for them to tap all over the city. How they would use all that magic to fuel their ritual and turn the oncoming storm into a supercell, hitting an unsuspecting city and opened the gates for whatever lurked in the sea beyond.

Lucas listened intently, his face hardening with every word. As I finished my recapitulation he let out an angry growl and clenched his fists. “Wizard Lennon, I give you my word that I had nothing to do with this.” he almost bit out, eyes smoldering with suppressed rage. Manu had stepped out of the pool midway through my explanation and almost radiated anger of her own from her wet skin as she walked up beside us. But before she could add her own assurances to his I waved both of them off.

“I know.” I just told them. Just like he knew I would never abuse the invitation he extended, I knew he would never do something that hurt the city like the Fomor planned to do. Damn soulgazes, I mentally sighed. “And that’s why I am here.” I said, looking at both of them. “I want you to help me stop their plan.”

Finally, something seemed to break through Ansons composure. After a moment a quiet “What?” was the only thing Anson seemed to get out of his mouth. Despite the gravity of the situation, I couldn’t stop myself from grinning at them as I crossed my arms over my chest and nodded at Manu.

“I suspect that the Fomor forces active in this city consist of a high number of Servitors and at least three Focused Practitioners of some skill. I am confident I could take either of them, maybe even a group of them, on my own. But if I have to face them all alone they could simply pounce on me all at once and overwhelm me.” I explained calmly, keeping eye contact with Anson. “Which means I need someone as backup. Someone who is strong enough to keep up with me once the magic flies.”

I turned and smiled at Emanuelle LeHaine, New Orleans’ welterweight magical champion, arguably the second strongest native practitioner in the city.

“Mister Lucas. May I borrow your Sorceress?” I asked while I finally looked her squarely in the blue eyes.
The Soulgaze started almost immediately. One moment we were standing at the pool, the next she launched herself at me. Anson Lucas had been a kickboxer, after a fashion. He had been aggressive, focused, but confident in the power he had. He had pushed, punched and always moved forward undaunting like a juggernaut.

Emanuelle LeHaine, Manu, fought more like I expected from someone who practiced the internal Chinese Martial Arts, Aikido or Judo. She pushed just as hard as her lover, showing the same confidence in herself, but it was all about driving me out to defend myself, attempting to open myself and then use my own strength against me. She was very much aware that she was not nearly the strongest fighter on the block, but from the way she fought me she had come to grips with that a long time ago. I switched my own style - more on autopilot than anything - accordingly, blending some more Baguazhang and other soft style into how I fought her. Our hands, arms and elbows started to blend in a whirlwind of probes, blocks, parries and attacks, trying each other and none of us giving ground.

At some point we crashed both into the pool, so to speak, still trying to out-maneuver each other as we fought in the shallow end of the water. As we continued our contest we moved on from simply trading blows and tried to get more clearly on top of the other, grabbing, choking, and twisting each other’s limbs in countless attempts to pin the other down. She would not surrender, I realized. She would never surrender. And yet...she never crossed the line. She never went for my eyes or any other moves that would have been considered unacceptable by any martial artist in a spar. She did try to knee me between the legs, but it had more the feeling of simply not holding back than trying to cheat herself to win.

Emanuelle LeHaine was a hard woman if she needed be. She was confident in her own strength and had come to grips with how much she had of it in comparison to others. She was maybe not the most ethical person, but I could sense in her a solid core of morals. And while we exchanged some more traditional blows, I also felt something in her style that resonated with my own. She was at balance with herself. She knew herself and liked the person she was. The last strikes we exchanged were nothing more than mirroring each other like some sort of martial arts ballet, as we recognized the similarities in each other and the respect that formed out of that.

We both shook and the Soulgaze broke. Both of us breathed hard and...was she flushed-red? Huh, that was a bit strange. But for now...unimportant. I hoped.

Manu shook herself again and then quietly shot me a smile, then turned around and gave Anson a kiss on his chin. “I will get dressed. Make the deal, but don’t make it cheap.” she told him and then sauntered off inside, leaving me standing out alone with the crime lord. Who just gave me another one of these too-damn-sexy honest-smiles as he saw his lover leave us behind..

“Well, and here I thought I had to worry about you going high noon on each other one day. It seems you did impress her after all, Jessica.” The silent As I knew you would made me consider for a moment to throw him into the pool. Just because.

Then his smile grew a lot more shark like as he invited me to sit in the poolside couch group.

“Now to my terms.”
By the time Anson and I had negotiated our little deal - And wouldn’t I pay for that later - he had donned a bathrobe and we had both moved into the living room.

“As far as I know the primary Agents of the Fomor inside the city are a set of - and I kid you not - identical triplet practitioners. Focused level, at least that’s what I gathered from my little tangle with one of them.” I put the picture from the traffic cam Carter had pulled for me on the table. The stubborn cop had refused to go home even when he had been tracked down by the medical personnel and had set up shop in his office, continuing to put together intel and information. In fact, when I had visited him a few hours earlier he had been in a static-laden telephone dialogue with the Paranet cells on the upper east coast. On the picture he had given me was the slightly fuzzy form of our escaped practitioner at the corner of a street and in the process of throwing lightning at me. Carter’s telephone campaign had borne fruit, as another set of tele faxes had shown, even if the picture they painted for us was everything but encouraging.

“According to the Warden of New York City, the three practitioners in the service of the Fomor in this city are named Valerie, Fabiana and Isabella de Luca.” Valerie had been in fact the lightning-thrower from last night. Not that I could have told them apart from looks alone. “They used to be pretty much run of the mill focused practitioners out of New Jersey. I mean, if you ignore the whole magical triplet thing and not wonder too much whatever their parents smoked when they conceived them.” I began to explain loud enough that Manu could hear us through the open door to her walk-in closet/armory.

“At least that was what most people in the area thought. Until Sandy hit, that is, and some of the local practitioners stuck inside the hurricane noticed that something was manipulating the storm to hit various places harder than others.” I continued my summary of what Carter had collected with nothing more than my Council and Paranet telephone lists. I figured Warden Luccio would not be amused at me having given the number of the Warden of New York to a mortal cop. But I was pretty sure the situation warranted it. “An investigation was conducted by the Warden shortly after the hurricane was over and the sisters were to be questioned by the Warden as simple matter of them being seen near it. Instead of doing that, though, they skipped town pretty suddenly. Unsurprisingly suspicious, the Wardens managed to confirm that they actually had affected the storm with some sort of ritual magic. Apparently, turns out, they had done so in the employ of the Fomor, as an attempt to cover up a slew of kidnappings and assassinations within the magic community of the area. The Fomor are also suspected in having them be able to skip a appointment with a Warden sword for breaking the First Law grand scale.” I finished my summary, biting the nail of my thump. Like I said. Not a pretty picture.

“And now they are attempting the same here in New Orleans.” Anson sighed. He didn’t like the art any more than I did. “And you are sure you saw them before?” He asked me and I just nodded. “At the Circus Plaisir, right before our Dinner. They were apparently guests there beyond just checking me out?” Closing my eyes, I could still see them walk by me, smiling friendly and all in the nude. If I’d only knew who they were back then and what they had planned I could have...Nevermind. I couldn’t change the past, after all.
Okay, I could if I put my mind to it with and spent few decades on research. But I should not. Watch Back To The Future for why not!

“So by all appearances the Vallons are involved.” I agreed but Anson quietly shook his head, scratching his chin. “Got to be Lysander alone. I’d wager. Alissa is too smart to do something like that. Too much blow back if the wheels come up. But Lysander…he’s the younger sibling. He has a bit of a chip on his shoulder about that. Trying to score some points with a big power like the Fomor is just the thing he’d pull to show his sister that he is pulling his weight in their scheme’s beyond sleeping with the mayor’s wife and looking good in a meeting.” He said with a calm, considering tone.

“So we go and…ask him about it? Nicely?” Manu said, stepping up to us. She was still buttoning up a white shirt, leaving a nice look at the sports bra underneath open for another moment. Combat boots, black leather pants and gloves inscribed with sigils completed the outfit. She made the outfit work, even if she did look a bit Evil Bond Girl. Over her shoulder she had hung a weapon belt which held a set of very sharp looking sword bayonets, the back of the blades equally inscribed with a fluid set of runes similar to her gloves. As she took a look at the picture, she calmly put on the belt around her waist, checking the ease of which she could draw both weapons with an air of routine. As if the wear on both hilts was not already a good indication that those swords were not for show. Good, I wasn’t bringing her along as eye candy after all.

“Lysander has a little apartment away from the Circus. He likes to use it to ignore the ‘no hookers AND blow’ rule his sister usually enforces on the sex trade every now and then. Another one of his little rebellions” Anson had stepped away for a moment to make a phone call away from the two technocidal women in his living room. “And I just happen to have his supplier on the payroll.” He informed us loudly. “Apparently he has bought a good portion of cocaine only a few hours earlier.” He added with a whimsical smile at both of us.

“Okay. So step one, we visit Lysander and ask him where he has shacked up the three Warlock sisters. And then step two…” Manu looked at me. “Step two is to hopefully surprise them while they are busy setting up their ritual, lock them down and gift wrap them for Warden Meyers.” Who was on his way, but would not arrive well past midnight.

We looked at each other. Yes, none of us believed this night would end this easy.

“I arranged for a Van to take you to his place.” Anson continued. “I figured with the magic in the city already possibly surging, you want to use an sturdier vehicle. I, meanwhile, will stay back here and try to convince City Hall to use the storm to hold an ‘unscheduled emergency exercise’.” He sighed slightly and seemed to run some numbers in his head, scratching his chin again. “Well, that’s what I have an emergency budget for, I suppose.”

After some good-luck wishing, and an annoyingly long goodbye kiss between Anson and Manu, we walked back into the Elevator while he turned toward his office, cell phone already at his ear.

“One question, just between us girls?” Manu asked me as she leaned herself against the wall across from me in the elevator. Obviously keeping the techbane concentrated was a bad idea, so we both kept as much space between us as we could in the small space while we rode downward to the garage. On her question I just tilted my head and beckoned her to ask away. I could always refuse to answer, I supposed.

“How do you experience a Soulgaze. I’m just curious. Wizard Laveau once told me she hears it like an aria in the opera.” She asked with real curiosity in her voice. Comparing that was...Well. Not something you did in public conversation. It was a bit like when juvenile boys compared the size of their dicks in the locker room.
When I told her how I perceived soulgazes as a fight, she just gave me a stare and then let out a brilliant laugh. “Oh, god. No wonder Anson thought we’d actually get along after a while.” She grinned at me after she finished laughing. On my questioning eyebrow she just gave me a surprisingly cute little smile as the elevator reached the garage floor.

“My soulgazes work a lot alike.” She explained with a teasing twinkle in her blue eyes. “Just instead of fighting the other person in a quick spar I do another form of quick body interaction.” After a moment she winked at me and then stepped through the opening doors into the cavernous garage. “Second Base only, though.”

I just stared at her for a second until I realized what she meant. Oh. Oh. Now that explained the flushed face she did have after we soulgazed.

“...Now that’s just wildly unfair.” I muttered as I followed her laugh out and towards the waiting van.
Chapter 23

We took a place on the corner while we waited for Lysander to arrive. I offered Manu a cigarette and we quietly smoked for a moment while my mind wandered.

I had pegged Anson by now. He wanted the City to be at peace, even if it was a forced peace. And rather than try what others had done so often and do it in the confines of the law, he had opted to join the enemy and take it over from the inside. As far as he saw it, probably, all these people who had tried the same from the side of the law had failed so far. So a new approach was needed. A criminal internal reformer so to speak. I was not sure I could agree to that plan but...I could understand the motivation. Even respect it. It was even moral, in a way, even if it was unethical as hell.

I laughed in my head as I imagined trying to explain to Carter that big bad Anson Lucas actually a good guy, in a very strange way.

What I simply couldn’t fit into that view was Manu’s agenda. Her desire. She was Anson’s second, his partner, that I could see but...why?

“So, what is your Interest in all of this?” I finally asked, giving Manu a questioning look. “I just don’t really get why you are in this? Do you want to be Queen of New Orleans or what?” I made sure to put humor in the last sentence to make sure it was not an accusation, but I was just really curious.

The sorceress gave me a considering look and then shrugged. “Love. Basically.” She finally said. “I know it sounds trite but...I love Anson. I love his Vision, the way he is willing to go all the way for that he believes is right. He is a conqueror at heart and throws everything he has into what he does. He is...remarkable.” She said with admiration in her voice. “Even if we weren’t together, I’d still follow him because he is something I had not believed to exist. He is righteous. Even if he is willing to break the laws to do what he considers to be right. The fact that he is a very good lay is a very happy circumstance, though.”

I digested that. And yet...it did fit with what I knew of him. Manu smiled almost shyly at me. “I’ve led a...different life before I met him. Would you believe me if I told you I left my parents commune to become a Warden? I never fit back there, I always itched to fight, for action. And the idea of doing that while protecting people from Warlocks and Monsters? Other kids dream of being Cops, I wanted to wear a Grey Cloak.” She sighed. “When I didn’t make the Wizard cut I was cut loose. I drifted, and ultimately took a job with PMC who used me to hunt down minor talents who supported insurgents. A Rent-A-Warden so to speak.”

Okay. I had not expected that. I mean, I knew she had not broken the Laws, but I had chalked that up to her being simply smart enough to actually break Laws while being a magic criminal. But now that she told me that...again, it jived with what I knew of her from the Soulgaze. Again, a moral being if not necessarily an ethical one.

She took another breath from her smoke. “Anson offers me something I had not believed possible anymore. A cause worth fighting for. And a man worth following to lead it.” She looked me in the
eyes. “All my life I wanted nothing more than that. Does that make sense?”

Inside me, the little girl who had stared in amazement of being told that the man who had taken her out of the Orphanage could use magic and offered her the chance to do so too too, making her a possible promise of a life of both danger and excitement...that little girl thought it made perfect sense.

Before we could continue to talk a car pulled into the street and into the house’s garage. Without another word, we flicked our smokes into the ground and moved toward the front door.

Time to talk to the vampire.

There is something deeply cathartic about kicking down a door hard enough to turn it into a harmless cloud of toothpicks. Especially when you do it to ‘shave and a haircut’. Okay, the magic does help a lot with that trick I will admit.

The living room before us was a porn movie in the making. The nude, and apparently barely legal, girls making out with each other stared at us as we stepped through the annihilated door. Lysander, only clad in pants by now stared up from the coffee table, his face covered in the dusted remains of his coke line. Well, looks like his charm from the other night had just left the building. With an high pitched scream he bolted into the next room, causing Manu and me to exchange a look that amounted to ‘really?’.”

Before we moved onward I bowed to the girls. “Okay, here’s the deal. My current day job is being a cop. You are out of here and on your best behavior for the next, oh, six months or I will ‘spontaneously’ remember your faces while talking with my colleagues from Vices. Deal?” The wild nodding, and jiggling, that followed it would have been hilarious in any other circumstances, a part of me commented snarkily.

Ignoring the rapidly leaving Girls Gone Wild remake for now, I repeated my little ‘explode the door’ Wood magic trick. Manu was first through the door again and snapped something in a middle-eastern sounding language. Following inside, I saw Lysander glued to the wall in a blob of vaguely flesh-colored Nevernever putty. Nice. I could only pull that trick enough to create emergency pressure bandage, but Manu had covered almost his entire torso up to his nose in the stuff. Apparently at the expense of longevity, though, as it already started to evaporate.

Noticing a set of golf clubs in the room, apparently Lysanders backup office, I invoked strength on myself and grabbed a few. Breaking off the heads and twirling them for effect I muttered a “Kentse” and just bent them around him while jabbing them in the wall. It effectively turned the clubs into giant staples that fixed him on the wall before the last of the goob has vanished, leaving him free to scream in rage.

“Heeeey.” I smiled at him as broadly as I could. “Not the bondage you’re usually into, I guess?” The answer was just a very angry glare, almost deliberately at my breasts. Well, I wasn’t about to argue with that. One Soulgaze a day is enough for me, thank you. Next came what I had already expected. The wave of pure sex that hit me. I felt my nipples harden and...other parts of my physique moisturizing as the vampire reached out with his powers and switched all the physical buttons my body had to prepare itself for a good hard fuck. Vampires of the White Court. Also known as Succubi and Incubi. They can turn a C-Span rerun into porn movie with their sheer presence. And a part of me wanted it. Just get rid of all the sexual frustration of not having gotten it in a while, all the sexual frustration Anson and Manu had thrown at me. Just rip of Manu’s clothes, free the vampire
and then see which of us he’d mount first while we made out without each other.

My fist slammed into the wall beside his face hard enough to splatter drywall over the side of his face. I was horny, yes. Wet too. But more than that? I was pissed. At the general situation. At the Fomor for their plan. And at that little shit of a Vampire who thought he could just throw his metaphysical dick at me and I’d throw myself at him.

Being pissed beats being horny for me. And I am not someone you want to try angry sex with, given the fact that I could benchpress lesser men even without magic to beef me up. A point which I had apparently communicated well enough as the waves of sex coming off the immobilized vampire abruptly stopped. Performance Issues, I’d take a good guess. One in five Vampires have them when confronted with angry Wizards.

“So, let’s not play around too much? We look for a certain triplet of hot italian-american practitioners working for Sushi, Seafood and Incorporated. You don’t happen to know something about them?” I asked, faking more politeness in my tone as I felt. Part of me just wanted to continue to punch the wall until he wet himself, but we didn’t have the time. And if he realized I wasn’t the type to really torture someone...

“Hey, I only knew that they came into town for some fun and paid me a lot for some properly invigorated callboys.” Lysander finally regained his charm, it seemed, or at least tried to turn it on to me. “They left the next morning. Now if you want to buy the panties they left behind…I have a discount for our valiant public servants” He offered.

“We don’t have time for this.” Manu sighed and stepped up toward the fixated Vampire. She had obviously also been hit by his sex-attack, but seemed to calm down just like I did by now. “Tell us where they are or I will make your sister an only child.”

Lysander just sighed with a dramatic weariness. “Oh please, Wizard. I’m getting five hundred dollar an hour to play sub to a sadistically inclined defense lawyer from the Tremé to go out on me like they never could on a human. I heal pretty well, provided good company is there. What’s the worst you could do?” He taunted me. Damn. I had been afraid of that. Because he was right. I wouldn’t torture him, and even if I could, he was a member of the White Court. Killing him in fair combat was one thing, the Council would just throw some weregild at the Court and make me sign a nice apology letter. But torturing him, with him being able to recount it afterwards? Diplomatic Incident was the proper word for that. The Council was strangely unappreciative at that.

But apparently Manu had...other ideas. With a disgusted glare at the vampire, she used her teeth and pulled one of her gloves off her right hand. And then almost gently laid her fingers on his bare chest, trailing a lazy s-shape. For a second I wondered what she was doing and then Lysander screamed in pain as her fingers trailed burn marks on his pale-white skin. First degrees only, but still painful. I was about to ask how she did that without me noticing a spell when it clicked in my head. Oh.

It seems Manu and her Crime Lord were more than just very devoted ‘lovers’. They were in love. True Love. Also known as the kryptonite to the Vampires on the White Court who fed on Lust. True Love against Lust, True Courage against Fear, True Hope against Despair. You are what you eat, that held true even for Vampires. And The moment I realized what Manu could to do him with that effect on him, Lysander did the same if the panic in his eyes were any indication. Suddenly sweat started to appear on his forehead. Maybe he was not believing me capable of torture. Manu on the other hand.

“Jess, dear. Would you do me a favor and pull down his pants?” Manu quietly purred at me next,
flexing her bare hand with a smile that would have terrified cats. “I do think I need to make our friend...relax. Just a little bit.” She told me and gave Lysander’s groin a pointed look. “I’ll give him a hand with that.”

Okay. That was just mean. And apparently effective. Lysander turned very green from the mere implication of what Manu implicated and actually seemed to try and pull back his hip into the wall to keep it safe from the obviously crazy sorceress.

“I really really have no idea! I hooked them up with some supplies and helped them launder some money through the casino!” He spat out at an almost amusingly fast speed. The sad thing was, I believed him. Which left us at a loss on which to find them before whatever they planned went off.

Considering my options, or lack of thereof, I took a look around the small office, hoping to find anything that might help us...and noticed a small stack of ziplock-ed woman’s panties lying on the office couch.

“Wait. Wait. Let’s back up a bit.” I told both of them, my mental wheels turning. “Did you just offer me their panties?” I finally asked the Vampire with a level glare at the bridge of his nose. He only shot me a smile so innocent it was almost believable. “A lot of female clients...forget them? Honestly! And maybe I do have a little exchange program with selected employees? New ones for dirty ones? Just business?”

Which was probably how he paid for the drugs and this place without his sister finding out, a part of me that sounded a bit like Carter pointed out. “Do you really have theirs or were you just quipping?” I followed up, intensifying my glare. Manu just looked at me with a ‘you’ve got to be kidding me’ expression, possibly anticipating my thought process. Lysander just sighed after a moment. “The pink one at the top. The cleaning staff atmosphere-packs them for me after they collect them so they are still fresh. If that’s your thing.” he offered with a smile that was probably meant to be disarming.

I grabbed the ziplock from the stack and I walked over to the map on the wall. Opening it, it was pretty fresh. Eww. Warlock body fluids...

Okay. Honestly? I was just throwing magic at the wall and hoped something would stick in any way. What I tried now was a simple tracking spell, hoping the body fluids in the panty were still connected to the person enough to pick something up.

Maybe it was. Or maybe the heightened magic levels from the Nu3 wells in the city just propped up the weak connection just enough, but as I closed my eyes and wove the spell, my fingers followed an unseen tug. Gliding over the map in one fluid motion they finally stopped at a warehouse near the harbor. Of course. It’s always a warehouse at the harbor. Or a old manor in the country. Or a swamp. This was Louisiana after all.

Letting go the arguably least pleasant tracking spell tether I ever used, I wrote down the address on a post-it off Lysander’s desk and then waved Manu to leave. The sorceress just gave me a ‘I can’t believe that worked’ smirk and then bend over the still immobilized Vampire, smiling and kissing him long and intensely on the side of the neck. As she pulled back her head, a sizzling imprint of her lips remained on it, deep enough to probably turn into a very recognizable scar on the pale skin.

“Think of me the next time you try something like that ever again.” She then purred at the Vampire and with a wave we left the office side by side. Only as we reached the elevator in the hallway did Manu turn, look at me and ask with a girly smile. “Do you think he’ll get down on his own?”
I just grinned. He’d probably not. So on the way down we decided, as the kind women we were, to call his sister to ‘help’ him down. After all, that’s what family is for.
Chapter 24

Somewhere on the other side of the continent there was probably an Hollywood executive send out some of his cinematic minions to find a harborside warehouse for his newest movie project. He would want it to be dark, foreboding and utterly clear to the audience that this was not only a place where bad things happened but also where bad guys were by a single look at the place.

I really ought to tell him about this place. It was spot on. The fact that there was a magic working inside strong enough to make both my and Manu’s neck-hairs stand up would probably not translate to a movie though. Provided the camera equipment didn’t just die from merely glancing at the place. My erstwhile sidekick had insisted on calling in some muscle just in case, so we were greeted by about half a dozen of dangerous looking men and women as we pulled up into a side-alley before the warehouse. From the way they were carrying their weapons I suspected at least some of them were former military, which made sense given Anson’s own military background.

As we climbed out of the van, their leader stepped up and gave us a quick rundown. Apparently he and his people had taken a look around and noticed a set of guards all over the area, probably more Fomor servitors I strongly suspected. And after last night, I highly doubted another attempt to draw them off their posts would work. And as much as Anson’s people looked like they could handle themselves in a fight, a frontal assault was not something that looked really attractive to me. For one, that was always something they would expect. As I voiced my doubts, the head goon just shook his head.

“With all respects, Wizard, my guys and me know that. We also know how to do it properly. Our job is to get you both...” He waved at me and Manu. “...inside and then do the things we cannot do. We won’t tell you how to do that, so let us worry about how we do what we do.” He told me in a tone of slight friendly condescension. Like he was talking to a well-read hobbyist talking business with a professional. Narrowing my eyes, a part of me wanted to tell him where to stick that attitude, probably backed up by some of the more dangerous incidents I’d been in. But the more reasonable and mature part of me pointed out that they probably did know how to properly assault a fortified position. Without getting shot dead on the way in. All my tactics for similar situations require a crazy pyromancer, the head-mook of a god of chaos and a surprisingly prude half-vampiric ninja.

(One day I will tell you this story, folks. It’s a doozy.)

The thing that finally made me just shut up and accept his lead in getting inside the warehouse was that as were were still on the way to this place, the storm’s edge had finally reached the city. Thick rain already fell in a steady stream, accompanied by rain and the occasional thundrercrack. Looking up, I could almost see it taking up steam as it crept closer over New Orleans. Time was running out.

And as I said earlier, running water grounds out out magic. Which would make a magic fight in the rain outside of the warehouse a lot more demanding. Especially if I had to conserve my strength to go up against the storm sisters inside. Not to mention that my Invocation was also affected by the running water. Added speed and strength less so, but in this weather I’d be just as vulnerable as
every other normal human to taking hits. A fact that had been driven home in another rainy night
some time ago. My fingertips wandered and felt the places where bullet-scars would have been on
my stomach, if my healing magics had not regenerated the skin in full. Bleeding out like by gunshots
I’d been too self-sure in my magic to take seriously had made a pretty good point to not be stupid just
for pride or because people were annoying me. So yes. Let the guy who knew what he was doing
actually call the shots, I told myself.

“Okay.” I told him after a moment. “What’s your plan?”

It began pretty much like they did it on the television. René, as I found out the leader of the squad
was called, and his second in command unplugged a set of flashbang grenades and ‘cooked’ them to
my intense nervosity for a few seconds in their hands before throwing them in front of the
warehouse, with us all waiting behind the corner under cover. The goons had their guns gield ready
and the moment the sound of the grenade went off, they turned around the corner and onto the street
leading up to the place and began to fire. Not so much aimed fire, as far as I could see and more just
ripping at the half-dozen servitors. Pouring out the fire while stepping forward, the massed amount of
bullets forced even the usually pretty stoic servitors trying to find for cover. Apparently the blatant
frontal assault had caught them off balance, to my honest surprise. Audacity seemed to win out. As
the team continued their march forward, Rene and his second started to lag a step behind, stopping as
they took careful aim to shoot the servitors trying to escape the covering fire of their teammates in a
cool and efficient manner. I don’t like guns, but I had to admit the way they handled the situation
was impressive. Within a few moments the servitors had been gunned down, their guard positions
taken over by Anson’s people and Rene waved Manu and me over.

“Remember, the place has only one exist, the others have been sealed.” he repeated, having told us
that during the planning of the move. “We will keep the door open and prevent more of those...things
from falling into your back.” That too was part of the plan. And the smart choice, because as much
as Manu and I would love some backup inside, I had the distinct suspicion that the stronger the storm
became the more likely was reinforcement from the ocean. Especially with the warehouse already
being pretty close to the water. Someone keeping our back clear was more important for now. And a
little part of me was also relieved at not having to consider keeping their lines of fire free. Manu had
seemed to think similar, from the way she had shrugged at me.

Taking a deep breath in, invoking myself as strongly as I could, shaking off the rain of my leather
jacket and let out a rough. “Let’s go.”

The inside of the warehouse was a maze of containers and crates, probably deliberate. At the first
corner, we stopped and Manu got out a small mirror. Muttering a spell, I saw how she used Force to
bend the lightwaves in order to allow us to look around the corner with it. Nice trick, I thought, even
as I saw the two more servitors wait in ambush pressed against the other side of the container
providing the corner we stood at. Well, that would not do at all. Cracking my knuckles, I slammed
my hand at it’s metal side with a hissed “Kentse!” The spell hit the metal, travelled to the other side
and then suddenly it bent with a pained creak. The servitors were hit by the bending metal like being
backhanded by an annoyed god and slammed into the crate at the other side of the semi-hallways with
audible impact. Both were immediately out cold. Okay, now the rest knew we were inside, but I
doubted they had not heard the storm of gunfire before.
Beckoning Manu slowly forward, we managed to take out two more ambushes before we reached the center of the warehouse. The space had been cleared and as we stepped inside, I suspected we’d go blind if we opened our third eyes at the intensity of the magic working going on. Strangely, no more servitors were to be seen. But at least the de Luca sisters were found. One of them had positioned herself right between the center of the space and the exit of the container maze. Still wearing the minidress and scrapes from yesterday it was clearly Valerie, even with the angry glares at us. The next one stood with the back to us, wearing only a thin and flimsy robe and was obviously channeling the magic ritual to power up the storm which by now was audibly howling outside the place. At her feet was an elaborate ritual circle-design etched into the ground of the warehouse. And at the center of it….

Of course. I sighed mentally. A ritual of that proportion couldn’t just be done at the drop of a hat. Even with all preparation and ritual to help you work it, you needed a spark to start it. With the ritual drawing out the magic out of all the Nu3 Wells in the city, they could not just plug into it. They needed to provide an initial energy infusion to set everything up. A Wizard like me might have been able to just do that by themselves, with proper prep and tools. But the de Luca’s were not nearly as strong enough. So they had reverted to...alternate sources. Didn’t I tell you that emotion is a strong component of magic? Anger works good, as does love. And then there is sex. Sex can power a lot of magic, with the downside that you are usually too distracted to actually cast it. But if you had a skilled partner who knew how to draw on the emotions of you and your partner, it was a fount of power.

Which explained why the third de Luca sister was sitting in the center of the magic ritual circle, an ecstatic grin on her face and obviously enjoying herself on top of a young man the same age. From the look on his face he was fully hooked on Nu3 and stared up right into the magic ritual, probably a hell of a light show for him. Given of all the magic energy coursing through both of them, I figured he’d have a hell of a good time.

Damn. Why do only the bad guys get some in this city?

“Okay. First order of business is to break that circle.” I stated the obvious. The ritual circle contained all the magic of the storm spell. The Nu3 wells were just the reservoirs, the spell here was what made them dangerous. If we broke it the spell would collapse. Which would lead us to step two of the plan, prevent them from restarting it. Well. One step at a time, I guessed.

“Ready for round two?” I cocked my head at Valerie, reading my lightning-redirect spell. With a bit of luck I could goad her into another angry spell before thinking. I couldn’t hit her or her sisters with it without breaking the First Law, but I could try to hit the ceiling and see if I could have a bit of it fall into the circle. “Or was one beatdown enough.”

Alas, she didn’t took the bait. Though she did clench her fists at her side, she only showed me a nasty smile and gestured at me with a relished “Get the tall one!”

Wondering who she meant, I heard a primal growl from the side, and turned halfway around just in time to see a purple mass of muscle and tentacles and a stink of rotten fish bear down on me. As it rammed straight in me it took me off my feet and push-threw me into a corner of the freed-up space most away from the ritual circle. Getting myself back on my feet, shaking myself I could only stare at the monstrosity rearing up in front of me.

What the hell? I thought aghast. A….Goroctopus?
Everything but the monster and me vanished from my perception. It was a survival instinct. Focus on the tactical issue at hand and then look at the rest. The thing was...everywhere. If Ursula from the little mermaid and King Kong had a drunken one night stand...well, that child would still be more handsome than this bastard. But you get the picture. Jumping over a tentacle sweep, I considered my options. Getting into close range to hit it sounded like a remarkably stupid thing to do. The image of me getting crushed by the cable-like tentacles of the thing was scarcely more appealing than the look of all those pointy and sharp gorilla fangs in its mouth as it bellowed at me again.

Taking a jump back, dodging another tentacle, I brought my hands together and snapped out a “Kauta!” to fire a kinetic blast as strong as I could make it at the beast’s head. Hitting it squarely between the eyes, the monstrosity was actually pushed backwards. Impressive three feet back, altogether.

Well. I was fucked. Still figuring out my next idea, I attempted to dodge its angry tentacle again only to slip on the yellow mucus it had left behind. The “leg” tentacle that hit me squarely on the chest in that moment of slipping pushed me right into the wall of another container, pressing the wind right out of me.

Damn it, I thought. If I hadn’t invoked myself tougher, I was pretty certain the hit would have caved in my rip cage like a peanut shell. The followup hit on my head I could barely avoid, though the dent in the metal was more than enough to make it clear that that would have probably finished me off.

For fucks sake, the thing was ridiculously strong. And though. So god damn though. I opened the distance as far as I could, but I was still cornered in. The beast was actually so big that I had no chance to even see what was going on behind it, but the sound of thunder roaring out told me that Manu had probably started taking on Valerie de Luca. Deciding on another approach I made an upward striking martial arts form while snapping a quick “Bhumi!” The Earth evocation ran through the ground and then split the warehouse concrete under the beast open in a gorge, fragments flying everything. But once again, the thing just shrugged it off, using its tentacles to keep itself on balance as the ground became unstable under it.

I gnashed my teeth. The damn bastard had taken two of my strongest evocations and been unimpressed by it. Obviously trying to magic it down from the distance was not a plan that would work. I needed a new plan. And I needed it quick.

Continuing to dodge the vengeful tentacle attacks I got winged again, once again slamming my back against the metal containers in my back. My orthopedic would have words with me once this was over, probably.

Wait? I realized. Metal containers? Staring at the Goroctopus, a smile crept on my lips as I had an idea. It was stupid and dangerous, but I was all out of smart. As the next tentacle came after me I closed my eyes for the fraction of a second, reached inside me and changed my invocation. Doing so without releasing it first was….difficult. And painful. Imagine having a cramp in your entire body for a moment. But the effect was immediate. Instead of invoking everything to an equal degree suddenly everything was in speed. The upside was that the tentacles now moved at a decidedly sluggish speed, relative to me. I still wasn’t fast enough to try and sneak by the thing, and even if I was it would only mean to have it in my back. But I was fast enough to dodge its attacks without much effort.

On the downside, one good hit from it would probably kill me instantly. But hey. at least it would be over quick? I bared my teeth at the Octopus-Gorilla thing and growled a taunting “Come and bring it you bad Mary Shelley fanfiction reject!” at it.

I had no idea if it actually understood the insult, but it’s reaction was immediate. It bellowed at me
and redoubled its efforts to quash me into a pulp. Honestly, the bellow alone was enough to give me the rest. What did they feed the thing? Week old sushi?

Still, my plan continued to work. The best struck at me again and again, working itself into a fury as I managed to evade the sledgehammer-strikes of its tentacles. Instead of hitting me, it unloaded its rage onto metal sides of the containers behind me.

Exactly as I intended.

See, even with a Metal evocation, bending the heavy steel of the containers more than the bit I had done earlier to take out the servitors would require a lot of magic. I could do it, but not while Seaworld's answer to King Kong tried to turn me into mousse au chocolat. But every time it pounded the metal behind me it, every time it bent it it not only changed its shape, it also conveyed energy into it. Kinetic, thermal, the works. Those energies were fleeting, but to me they made the metal more...malleable. It required less magic to grab and affect metal already bend recently before. The metal had already changed form and thus was far easier to change again until it had properly settled into its new form once again.

As I continued my little game of tentacle-tag, I focused on the sounds beyond the monster. The thunder came in almost rhythmic intervals. I had the feeling Manu was doing something very similar to what I was doing with Valerie. And my plan relied on that...

Putting my foot forward, I finally let my hands hang back and then pulled them forward in one fluid motion with a hoarse “Kentse!” By now the latter third of both containers forming the corner I was backed in had been bent like aluminium foil. So when I pulled my arms forward they just ripped apart and flew at the Goroctopus. At first I’d been tempted to try and use them as flechettes, but I was worried that the thing could even take that hit. So I decided with a case of very deliberate overkill. The metal shreds were slammed together and formed a metal band around the beast’s torso, catching as many tentacles as I could. Already it was straining against the leash I had put on it, its cable-like muscles working and straining. My little construct wouldn’t hold too long. But it didn’t need to hold much longer. At the right moment of the lightning rhythm I turned the arms I had still outstretched toward the beast around and made another, almost gentle pulling form while muttering a hopeful “Vidyota!”.

The timing was perfect. I felt the lightning come from beyond the beast as it was created by Valerie, pulled off course by my own spell and drawn right into the metal ring around the Goroctopus. The roar it made was deafening and the smell of rotten fish it gave off became even worse as it turned into charred rotten fish. And yet it was still alive.

With a grunt of pure and undiluted annoyance I sped forward and jumped onto the things broad chest. The thing wanted this to end messy? Fine.

Another full-body cramp took me as I put all the energy I had devoted to speed into extra strength. All of it. And, deciding to not take any chances, then on top of that I readied a spell in my fist bringing my arm down with all the power and might I could produce right onto the chest of the sewed together monstrosity, hissing a angry “Kauta!” as the knuckles of my fist connected to its blotchy purple, grey skin. The effect was...satisfying. And so very, very gory. The combined kinetic energy of my spell and strike caved in the beast’s chest, crushing whatever internal organs had. The scream that came out of the Goroctopus mouth started out even more savage than the lightning strike but then ended in a wet gurgle as blood started to come out of its mouth and finally, it began to slowly keel over backward as it died. Me still on his chest ended up on top of it, revealing the rest of the warehouse center before me again.

Manu had indeed been backed into the other corner of the square, but had somehow managed to
create a small body of water between her and Valerie which I suspected had played some role in her managing to deflect the Fomor agents lightning.

Speaking of which. I gifted Valerie with the broadest smile I could manage. The succession of spells had taken a lot out of me, but I still had some gas in my tank. Still, better to end this quickly. So I raised my voice and waved cheerily at the italian-american lightning user.

“So. Trick you once, shame on me. Trick you twice, shame on you?” I quipped and then as Valerie screamed an obscene sounding italian slur at me, I let the little shard of metal I had taken of my rapidly disintegrating Goroctopus belt. Still using all the strength I had invoked, I threw it as hard as I could at the magic circle. Valerie, obviously unwilling to let me do that, immediately reacted by attempting a wind spell to draw it out of the way the same way she had deflected Carter’s bullets.

Which why in her rage at me and the hectic attempt to stop me from disrupting the circle, she had totally forgotten Manu. The wet thunk as the sorceress sunk one of her bayonets into the other woman’s back was audible even at the distance. And then, in a cold and ruthless move, she pulled the other one straight over her throat and cut it in a swift motion. Shock widened Valeries eyes, her air spell collapsed before it could take true hold of the metal shard and unimpaired it’s arc continued until it hit the ritual circle.

A circle is a fragile thing. Once it is set up anything not possessing true free will, animals and even plant seeds, will go around it. Instinctively avoid breaking it. But anything that is moved by something possessing free will is freely capable of crossing the boundaries of a circle and thereby breaking it. What, or how, didn’t so much matter as long as someone wanted to break it.

The ritual circle set up by the de Luca sisters was not different. It plopped like a soap bubble the moment the metal shard crossed its boundary. The two sisters still busy powering it both broke out of their respective focus. The one channeling the spell staring around angrily, obviously trying to pin down the source of the interruption. But with her back to us, the sister who had until now been busy fornicating to trigger the spell was the first to see us...and her dead sister at our feet.

The howl of anger and anguish from her was truly heartfelt. I stepped up beside Manu, who calmly wiped down her swords. The nude sister awkwardly climbed of her partner, who apparently was not willing to just stop and was just about to charge at us when the other sister held her back.

“Let me go ‘Biana!” she howled, trying to shake her sister off. By process of illumination she was thus Isabella and the ritual caster was Fabianna “These bitches murdered Valerie!” She continued, tears in her eyes. “I will kill them!”

Manu and I took positions at each others side. The sisters were quietly talking to each other, but for now I was content to let them do that. Any moment they spent talking they couldn’t try to restart the ritual. Any moment they didn’t do that the Storm continued to simply move as it was and not get powered up more. I could still hear it howling outside, but not more than just a very energetic bit of weather. Nothing like the supercell their plan would bring out. And the more we could buy time, the more the storm wasted its fury as it met the land. No that the ritual was broken, time was on our side.

But then, both of them turned toward us. Fabianna stepped up toward Manu, clearly intending to face her. Isabella had grabbed a small bag from beside her erstwhile sex partner and retrieved a set of bracelets similar to the ones Valerie had used as foci.

“Looks like they won’t come quietly?” Manu asked me with a wary expression, keeping her swords up. I just nodded and released my Invocation, deciding to rather use the mental focus it took to keep it up for more traditional magic. Isabella stared at me with raw hatred in her eyes.
For a moment we four women just faced each other. And then it all happened at once. Fabianna jumped forward and fired a ball of fire at Manu, who only reacted by drawing the puddle of water from behind her into it, extinguishing it before it hit her. Isabella slammed her foot into the ground and in a mirror of my earlier spell, the ground split under me. Already loosing secure footing, I decided to just split the difference and close the distance. While Fabianna and Manu still exchanged fire and water in a steam-laden duel, I managed to dodge three more earth eruptions to the increasing frustration of the angry Isabella. If I could just get in close, I could shut down her magic and knock her out. And then I could help Manu out win her fight. Just one more step.

I was just about to strike at Isabella, when suddenly she showed me a cruel smile and lightning danced between her fingers. Had I been any slower to get my shield up, the lightning would have hit me squarely in the head. Still, moving a few steps back I had to shake my head out from the aftereffects of the near-hit. And how had she done that? Focused Practitioners like her were supposed to be pure one-trick ponies! One element of magic to use. She had used Earth and while Earth could be used to generate lightning as well, the way she had done it had been clearly the same as Valerie had…

Oh. Oh, No.

I stared at her, a terrifying thought entering my mind. They were triplets, each one of them Focused Practitioners. Each one had one element. And together they equalled one Sorcerer-scale talent. Maybe even a full-blown Wizard.

My eyes widened in sudden understanding. I turned around to shout my suspicions over to Manu but froze as I saw the sorceress stepping up behind Fabianna, the bayonet ready in her hand. Apparently the fight between the two had experienced a sudden turn while I had been focused on Isabella. Fabianna’s legs were frozen to the ground, she had a momentarily dazed look on her face and Manu went in for the kill as the opportunity provided itself. It was the smart choice, the secure choice, when dealing with dangerous Warlocks in a fight. A quick kill to prevent the use of a Death Curse, even when they weren’t potentially strong enough. But if I was correct in my guess, it was also the horribly wrong thing to do.

And yet before I could yell at Manu to stop what she was doing, she performed the same ruthless cutting motion over Fabianna de Luca’s throat as she had done to her sister before. Fabianna’s eyes went wide as she began to choke on her blood. Too late for me to do anything about it, I cursed in my head, so I decided to do the only thing I could still do. I could confirm if my fears were true and opened my Third Eye.

The world before my eyes was madness. The magic still around from the aborted ritual made the entire place look as if a manic-depressive rainbow had barfed on the walls. At least the dead Goroctopus was not in my field of vision, because I had no interest to see how that…thing looked in truth.

But before my eyes, the Fabianna de Luca was shown to me in a way that no normal eye could reveal. She looked, well…She looked like the death metal sith version of the little mermaid. Dark, scaled skin covered her instead of her usual skin, her face was haggard and had a sickly sheen to it. She had once been beautiful, even in this form, I realized but the years of working for the Fomor and Black Magic had rotten her to the core. She was what I saw before my eyes. A human shell, hollowed out by the corruptive influences in her life. I swallowed hard at the object lesson of the dangers of making the wrong choices, the wrong deals. The human soul before me was almost fully broken.

And then…it ended. Because before my eyes I saw how the life faded from her form and in the pure
truth of the Sight she calcified into a stone statue as her physical body turned to nothing more than a lifeless corpse. And then it happened. A glow, sickly green, began in the center of the statue’s chest, slowly lifted off it and then after a moment’s hesitation just flashed over to hit Isabella, who looked very much like her sister under the sight, in the chest. Any doubt vanished out of me. Fabianna’s magic had left her in death and moved to her sister, just as Valerie’s had.

Closing my Sight, I just stared at the howling mad form of the last surviving de Luca sister. And as she screamed her fury at us at the death of her sisters, I felt the magic come off her. Isabella de Luca was no longer just a Focused Practitioner, another middle-class magician like so many others. What I felt radiating of her was full and true Wizard-scale talent, and a strong one at that.

And she was angry

I understood what the de Luca sisters had done. I may even today have no idea how they did it, but I know the what. Isabella de Luca had been born with enough magic talent to be a Wizard in her own right. But her sisters had not. That happens. Magic is not a genetic promise. I don’t even know how it works exactly but, it’s not remotely following Mendel’s laws. So, somehow, she had then begun to share her magic with her sisters. Given that they were otherwise identical triplets probably helped with that. Doing it with ‘just’ fraternal siblings would probably not have worked.

If I was honest, today I suspect the question here was less how but rather.. who had done that. Someone they had made a deal with, with the Fomor being the most likely subjects. And through that, every sister had received a third of the original power. A Wizard scale talent had become three Focused Practitioners. And in time, all three sisters had developed the talent they had gotten by practice and use. And upon their death the magic had reverted to the original source. Which meant now Isabella not only had the talent she was born with, but also what her sisters had developed with it. Which meant she just leveled up straight to a full blown sorceress. Stronger than Manu, easily strong enough to be of Council interest.

And we had just killed the sisters she had been ready to give so much of her magic to share with. A bond like that, even among Warlocks, had to be incredibly strong. Which meant the pure rage she now felt would be like pouring pure hydrogen into the blazing inferno of her regained full magic potential.

With angry eyes Isabella de Luca stared at us, tears running down her cheeks as she swallowed a sob. And then with a hoarse voice she looked at the ceiling and uttered only a single word.

“Burn!”
Chapter 25

The world before us became fire and fury. Isabella had just done something incredibly dangerous when she had cast a spell in her native language. Especially inside the center of a giant room still full of nascent magic from an earlier heavy duty ritual.

The Nu3 addict she had used to fuel said ritual with never had a chance. He had almost be at the center of the firestorm she unleashed and died almost immediately. He didn’t even scream as the fire vortex consumed him.

Manu and I only survived more than a moment longer than he did on the simple facts that we both reacted at the same time with our own spells and that what we actually cast did not clash with each other. If we had used different spells, magic that had interfered with each others spells or if one of us had been a bit slower we’d both been burned to the bones. Not a nice way to go, even if it goes fast.

My spell - snapped with a hasty “Kwants!” - created a wall of enthalpy in front of us, fortifying the air around us in a shell that kept us both from being both burned by the fire itself or being cooked alive by the convection a fire of that size radiated. At least for a little while. My enthalpy spells are a good way to create a block to hide behind, but they can only counter a specific amount of energy before they start to break down. By my reckoning, we had about ten seconds before the shell would begin to erode. Which would then be followed by a annoyingly fast increase in heat coming through, followed by heat burns, followed by death. It was a stop-gap spell, something to gain us time, just as I had been trained to do. First rule of magic, get yourself time to think.

Mind you, not that I had any ideas come to mind right then.

Thankfully, Manu was still with me. In a sign of impressive faith in me and my skill, her spell had not been a stop-gap. She had instead spread out her arms and began to chant something in ancient etruscan. With the enthalpy block in place, I didn’t realize what she did at first, but after the first moments passed and I actually paid attention I could only look and feel impressed. Manu lacked the same raw strength I had, true. But she had spent years working with the strength she had. What she lacked in power, she made up in technique. Her spell did not oppose the fire vortex about to consume us. Her spell grabbed the air absorbing the heat of it and grave it just the right spin. Hot air moves upward, creating a empty space which draws in more air. What Manu did was push the air around us closer to the vortex, instead of away. So more air got heated up, moved upwards and pulled in again more air from all around it. It was a chain reaction, with Manu’s spell just providing the right amount of impetus to keep it going.

The result was that the fire vortex Isabella had obviously intended to expand until it burned everything in the warehouse was contained in a strong and self-reinforcing wind funnel. On the plus side, this meant we only had to take the heat coming off it. On the negative side, it turned out the warehouse roof was not built to take the force of the fire and wind slamming into it like a miniature tornado from hell. Manu broke her spell and stared upwards as we both heard the first roof girder creak and then break, her face an expression that could only be described as a extended ‘Oh, crap!’
With a quick look, we both turned around and ran as fast as we could for the exit.

Keeping my enthalpy spell up while we both sprinted back into the labyrinth of containers was hard. But I was sure that if I dropped the shield behind us, I was certain we’d both be grilled instantly from behind. Even so, the metal containers making up the way out had already absorbed heat of their own, radiating it onto us as we reached the treacherous safety of the corridor. And not a moment too late, because with the painful noise of breaking metal, the first segment of roof collapsed and rained down into the place Manu and I had occupied only moments earlier.

Once that first part had fallen, the chain reaction started. I swear a little crazy part of my mind actually started to hum the Raider’s March in my head as Manu and I ran the gauntlet of metal containers, almost stumbling over the servitors we had taken out on the way in. The roof caved in faster and faster now, cutting down on the little lead we had every time we had to take a sideways turn in the corridors. After a time that probably felt a lot longer than it actually was we reached the exit. Rene and his goons still stood at the edge of it, obviously torn between considering going in and getting us out and not wanting to run into the collapsing warehouse.

But in a final crashing sound, the last part of the roof right above us began to tumble down. Looking up, I realized that Manu and I were not going to make it...unless I did something about it. Hoping we had enough space between the roaring inferno behind us, I finally let go of my spell and with a hard breath in between two steps used the last of my strength to invoke everything I had into speed. Throwing Manu over my shoulders, I all but threw everything into a final race against the falling debris.

And then I remember nothing but the feel of asphalt on my face, rain falling on top of me and the encroaching darkness of exhausted unconsciousness.
Chapter 26

The next day, New Orleans still stood. The storm had been a bit worse than expected. A few cellars had been flooded. Tree’s had been ripped out. But other than that...nothing had happened. Apparently unwilling to move into the city without the covering storm reaching full strength, the Fomor advance into the city had never materialized. Anson Lucas men had, according to my cop colleagues on duty, been seen using the storm to strike at his enemies holdfasts. I was pretty sure that those places had actually been the various Nu3 dens set up by the de Luca sisters, cleaned out and broken up. Anson was not the person to not clean up the mess he made, I understood.

Speaking of the de Luca’s, the Warehouse had been covered in uniforms and crime scene investigation the next morning. The fire had charred all the bodies inside the place down to the bones. After a few quiet words with an M.E., Ketterer had managed to talk them into...ignoring the fused bones of the Gorocopus. But to my enormous non-surprise, the rest of the humanoid bones had only accounted for two female skeletons. Which meant that Isabella had probably survived. And I had the pretty strong suspicion she’d be back. May be a stereotype, but she didn’t see the kind of person to just forgot someone killing their sisters. Well. That was a problem for another day, I guessed.

Afterwards, I had spent the next three days divided between paperwork,

(All the paperwork. I got cramps in my hand!)

explaining the situation to the various supernatural factions in the city and the paranet,

(All of which found it necessary to be recriminating with hindsight on my methods.)

and being invited by Anson Lucas to supervise him taking down the Nu3 manufactories he had set up. He had even deliver Manu all their copies of the formula’s and notes on it, with her swearing on her power on not retaining any of them. We had actually had a nice chat while the copies burned in Ansons veranda grill. The Nu3 was off the streets for good, it seemed. Yes, Anson was still here in the city and we had nothing to go on against him. The investigation had basically been set back a year by what I had casually burned in that grill. Still. It had been the right thing I felt.

In return, Anson had received his part of the bargain we made. It was not a big thing, but sometimes even the small things have far-reaching consequences. But still, I had made a deal and I kept to it. And so I had handed him a carefully and cleanly written Letter of Introduction in my persona as a Wizard of the White Council to another Unseelie Accords Signatory. It was not liable to bring him much weight or respect where he was going to use it. But the process of getting it was probably enough to get him through the door far enough to move on on his own merits.

I just hoped the Baron of Chicago would appreciate me buying the expensive paper...
And now, for the first time in days I had a few quiet hours. Standing on a pier at the harbor, looking at the still cordoned off warehouse I lit up a smoke and enjoyed the sunset on the Atlantic. After a few minutes, two figures approached. One of them just gave a cheeky grin, waved his monkey tail at me and then made a theatrical bow to the other person, obviously leaving her the first go at me.

The woman who next approached me was looking like she was in her late-fifties and of creole descent. She wore firm and sturdy clothes, ideal for walking around in the Bayou I wagered.

“Wizard Laveau.” I greeted her with a polite bow of the head. While she had a few centuries of seniority on me, after the last week I didn’t feel the need to be overly subservient anymore. Not because I didn’t respect her, but more because I had shown what I was capable of in her home, so I just figured I had earned myself some more eye-level relations.

“Wizard Lennon.” She returned the bow in exactly the same manner and then added “Spare a smoke?” with a smile. Handing her one and lighting it on my mine, we just stood on the pier for a few minutes and puffed away.

“So. How did the Loa take this little...incident?” I finally asked, giving her a sidelong glance. Laveau just shrugged. “Best as we could hope for, I guess. They have not declared war yet, formally, but they are marshalling their forces for an - what is the term the modern politicians like to use? Ah, yes. ‘Police Action’.” She returned the glance. “You impressed them, Wizard Lennon. Some of them figured you’d just leave once you realized the stakes. And if you had done so, had confirmed their argument that humans don’t deserve their attention anymore.” Laveau sighed, a mix out of relief and exhaustion. “When you did stand firm, and even made peace with an enemy for the good of the city...it impressed them. The faction arguing for standing with the humans under their aegis won out, shaming the ones just wanting to withdraw into pulling along with them.”

Laveau turned around and looked at the city in the fading light.

“This does not make it good thing, don’t misunderstand me. The Loa deciding to once again involve themselves deeply in mortal affairs can have...repercussions we cannot yet fathom. But...” Laveau trailed off.

“But it beats the alternative.” I finished her sentence. Dealing in the best of bad options. I had done the same over the last few days. Sometimes a decision at all was better than none. “So you’re back in town then? Good, I think. The natives were getting restless with me as standin.” I asked, reminding some barbed comments from meeting with some witches before.

Laveau just snorted and shook her head. “Let them get restless once in awhile. It’s good for their hearts. And while I’d like to, but no I’m not here to stay. Not yet. The Loa made it clear that if they were to wage battle on the Fomor, I would be required to join them. I am the Voodoo Queen of this city and a Wizard of the White Council, but I owe them fealty as much as Dresden does to the Queen of Air and Darkness now. And so, to war I go. At least it means I can keep the Fomor away from this city. Which just leaves one question.”

From the tone she took at the end, it was probably the same question Ketterer had asked me this morning. The same question to consider I had come out here in the first place. I took another pull of my smoke to avoid answering and then sighed. “I’ll tell you the answer to that once someone tells me.” I just said and Laveau gave me a long considering look. “I will be in the City for three more days.” She then told me. “I do want love to talk some more, but I do think you need to find that answer first. Just so we know what we will talk about” she then added with an understanding smile. Well, you don’t get over two centuries old without some wisdom, I gathered.

After making some more polite small talk, Laveau flipped her smoke into the ocean and bade her
goodbye. After she had left, the other figure sauntered over.

“‘Sup, Little Girl.” Sun Wukong, the Handsome Monkey King, grinned at me. “You made me a hundred bucks of a very grumpy spirit in the city.” On my annoyed look he just laughed. “Consider it a token of my confidence that I’m betting on you!”

We both sat down on the end of the pier, dangling our feet.

“So. Are you going to stay for a while?” He asked without any preamble. I just leaned my head back and groaned. Sometimes he could dance around a topic for an hours, but on other times he could be incredibly direct. Generally by whatever approach he was more annoying, in my experience. And he was not wrong. Ketterer had asked the same, offered to make my job a permanent gig. Having a Wizard on the force, he had said, had already saved possibly hundred of lives this week. He was willing to see where this lead. And to be fair, I was tempted. I had drifted all over the worlds in the last ten years. Wandering had become first nature to me and maybe that was a bad thing. Maybe I was becoming too dependent on not putting down any roots. Not having a reason to stay. Or ignoring them if they were there. And, without wanting to, I had grown attached to this city. Maybe even a bit possessive-protective. I had bled to protect this place, shed blood too. A part of me insisted that the sheer scale of it suggested that I should stay a while and listen what came out of it. Break the pattern of my live once in awhile.

What kept me from just doing it? Doubt, most likely. Just staying here just as a Wizard would put me in the uncomfortable position of trying to fill a hole in the shape of Marie Laveau in too many people’s mind. And I wasn’t sure I could actually do the cop thing long-term.

“You know, I always figured I would have these kind of discussions with my Master.” I told Stone Monkey, and meant it. Just to have him to bounce off my thoughts and doubts. The kind of support only a Master, or a father, could bring.

Stone Monkey just sighed. “Maybe. But I think I knew what he’d say.” The chinese god said and pulled something out of his clothes, flipping it at me. As I caught it, I recognized an old and faded golden star. The inscription still read “SHERIFF” over it, and it seemed like it had seen its share of combat from the dents in it.

“You know. Your Master had the same decision to make. A young city, in need of someone to protect it. With more than just the strength of his arms and the power of his magic. But also with a symbol. Something to look toward when you were in trouble. He once told me it had been some of the most rewarding years of his life.” A sly smile appeared on his lips. “Until you came along, that is.” He added in a teasing tone. I continued to stare at the star in my hand, drawing my own star-and-crescent badge off my belt and put them beside each other.

“I’m not saying do it because he did it. But don’t not do it because you are afraid you can’t. He taught you better.” Stone Monkey said with a lopsided grin. “Keep the star. If only as a reminder. And I think your presence is required elsewhere anyway.” he then added and waved to the end of the pier, where Carter’s car just pulled up.

He was still limping a bit on his bad leg, but he categorically refused to be slowed down by it as he waved me over. I was about to say something to Stone Monkey, but he had vanished in the moment I had turned around. As usual.

“Hey, we got a case. Apparently a witch tried to racketeer a gambling hall with a ‘Bad Luck curse’. Things escalated from there and now we have a body in the morgue. Think you’ll stay long enough to help me solve it?” He asked, trying to hide the edge of anticipation. “I mean, I just housebroke you for the precinct?”
I took a last look at the sheriff’s star and my own badge. And then I made a decision. And that’s what being a Wizard is all about in the end. Making choices.

“It’s not a ‘Bad Luck curse’ it is an ‘Entropy curse’. I shot back. “If I have to learn all those police terms, you my friend are going to learn all the right magic terms too.” Grinning at him, I clasped his shoulder and we both turned back toward his car.

I’ve made my choice.

My name is Jessica Lennon. I am a Wizard. And I’m a Detective.

And now I had a job to do.

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