

Farsighted

A Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Detective Cart scowled at the body on the ground. She didn't like this case already. The body lay strewn about the small concrete room, freely intermingling with the destroyed books and dented computers. The only things left standing were some heavy metal shelves, emptied of contents. At least there was no blood.

If there was anything good about this kind of death, it was the lack of blood. It was small consolation for political bullshit she knew was coming over this case landing on her plate. Maybe she would get lucky and the B.S. would be enough to ship the case to some other detective.

The room was brightly lit by temporary police lights and there was a subdued din of conversation as the CSI techs and photographers moved about the room, working solemnly. It had probably been the victim's workshop before something had exploded, destroying the room and its occupant. What remained of the room was housed inside an abandoned warehouse, a few blocks from the docks. The explosion might have gone unnoticed if there hadn't been a couple necking down the street when it happened.

Cart winced at the thought. "Necking" wasn't just a euphemism in this case. The two reporting the explosion were wannabe vampires who got off on drinking each others' blood. Her partner was outside questioning them now. Detective Cart thanked her lucky stars that she had won the that bet.

She stood with her hands in her jacket pockets, trying to get a feel for how it happened. She rebuilt the room in her mind, putting desks, chairs, computers, and books back where they might have been before the explosion. It had been a small workspace with all the furniture centered around a workbench. The workbench was now lying in multiple pieces along with its former owner. She tried to place the victim in her imaginary room, but could only vaguely place him near the center of the explosion. She shook her head.

This might not be a homicide at all, just the victim's spellwork gone horribly wrong. If that was true, there would be no shit-storm and no work for her to do. The sooner this case was closed, the better. But not likely, she thought irritably. It felt too obvious, too conspicuously like an accident.

A tall man with sandy blond hair and a spotless suit entered the ring of police lights. He carried a small notebook and carefully threaded his way to where Detective Cart was standing. He quickly surveyed the mess then turned to Cart.

"They didn't see or hear much beyond the explosion," he said.

Cart grunted.

“Find anything interesting in here?”

Cart shook her head. The tall man looked around more carefully, and frowned slowly. “It almost doesn’t look like a homicide, does it?”

“No,” sighed Cart, “it doesn’t.”

“But?” prompted the tall man.

“It’s meant to look like an accident.” She removed a small object from her pocket that looked like a polished stone. She held it up and pushed some of her will into it. The air around her and Detective Demars shimmered a pale blue-green. After a moment, she dropped her hand to her side and the shimmer faded.

“No wards other than ours,” said Demars.

Cart nodded and pocketed the small stone.

“Were they removed, or destroyed in the attack?”

Cart started to answer, then was distracted by the sounds of arguing in the hallway outside the small workroom. A low authoritative voice then the higher-pitched voice of a reporter, full of self-righteous indignation at being kept away from a story. Demars and Cart looked towards the door to see several uniformed police officers pushing the press out of the room and back down the hall. They shouted questions and threats as the sound withdrew. Demars shook his head. Had they no respect for the law? They should just let the police get on with their jobs.

“It’s hard to say,” said Cart, “whether the wards were destroyed or removed. We’ll have to wait for the techs to finish their analysis.” She groaned inwardly. Analysis meant time and time meant more chance someone would notice that a Cart was working a magic case.

Demars nodded.

Cart turned away from the door and pointed to a small window in the far wall of the workroom. Demars studied it for a moment. The glass had been blown out, probably in the explosion, and the edges of the metal window frame were melted slightly.

“Our victim likely had a ward on that window,” she said.

“It’s melted,” said Demars. “From the explosion?”

“Could be,” said Cart. “From the explosion, or from when the ward was destroyed.”

Demars looked at the window then at the epicenter of the room. “Could the ward going have caused a greater explosion in the room?” He traced the path from the window the center of the room in the air with his finger. It was almost impossible to make out in the chaos of debris that littered the floor, but there did seem to be a vague path, like something had traveled between the center of the room and the window at nearly the same time as the explosion.

They moved closer to the window, careful not to disturb anything in the room as they did so. Out the window they could see the narrow street, shiny with rain, red and blue light bobbing like drunken clowns in the confined space. The building across the street had no windows facing this one, but the roof was visible.

With unspoken agreement, they left the crime scene and crossed the street. The press clamored for them as they left the building, but the uniforms kept them safely contained. Around the corner of the opposite building, they found a fire ladder and climbed the rusty metal rungs to the roof. They walked cautiously along the roof, looking for the spot they had seen from the crime scene’s window.

The sky was dark and heavy with clouds. There was a chill in the autumn air that was somehow colder for being humid. They could just barely hear buoys in the harbor, bells clanging on the rolling waves. Beyond the activity of the crime scene, there was silence and

stillness as if the buildings themselves were steadfastly ignoring the human presence.

Demars was starting to second guess coming up here without first talking with the CSI techs. If this area really was connected to the crime, they could be destroying evidence, just by coming here. He turned to say something, but Cart held up a hand and said, “do you smell that?”

He sniffed the air several times. It smelled of wet bricks, rusting metal, and faintly of seawater. Beyond that, there was a sharp smell, out of place with the other, more earthy odors.

“Ozone,” he said. Cart nodded.

He turned to look towards the crime scene. “I can see into the workroom from here.”

Cart said nothing. Her shoulder-length copper hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The breeze from the harbor tugged at it while she stood motionless, smelling the air.

Demars didn’t like it when she got like this. He couldn’t tell if she was using magic or not and he definitely didn’t want that on his watch. He chastised himself mildly for assuming Bernie was so easily swayed from the straight-and-narrow. They were partners because he requested her. One of the many rumors about her was that she was painfully by-the-book. Usually that just meant every form was filled out, with all required copies sent to all required people and departments. Or that warrants were always obtained and that suspects never had “accidents” in her custody. But out here, it was harder to forget who her family was and where she came from. He just prayed she stayed focused on the law.

Cart blocked out all her other senses and focused solely on the smell. The wind made it difficult to tell if the smell originated here or came from somewhere else, carried on the breeze. She turned away from the flashing lights and walked slowly towards the back of the building, closer to the harbor. She let her path weave as she followed the smell. When she reached the back of the building, she turned to face Demars again and frowned.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The smell is constant,” she said.

“What?” That didn’t make sense. It should be concentrated where the assailant had used magic to attack the ward. Or, if the smell was drifting in from somewhere else, it should be fluctuating as the breeze moved it.

Cart nodded.

“I’ll call the techs over here,” said Demars. He walked towards the fire ladder, hesitated, then climbed down. Bernie turned back to the building’s edge and examined the area. All her instincts said that magic had been in use here, too. But why? She looked down from the edge. Another empty street and dark buildings all around. Over the rooftops she could see the lights of the harbor and the dark water beyond.

She pulled out the stone from her pocket and pressed it gently with her will as she scanned the area. Nothing. None of the buildings were warded. An unwanted thought pushed itself up to her consciousness. It would only take a few words and she could see so much more than what the ward stone could show her. She sighed and put the stone away, pushing the thought away with it. Maybe the techs would have better luck.

The next morning, Cart and Demars sat in their adjoining desks, reading the lab reports. Conversation and phone calls murmured in the background. Cart tried not to notice the sidelong glances from other detectives. Thunderheads on the horizon, she told herself, and she had a job to do. It was always better to do solid police work on a case and let that speak for her than any

promises of good and unbiased behavior.

Demars sat back from the report and looked across his desk at Cart. "A straight line," he said, a slight question in his voice. Cart nodded. "Why a line?" he asked.

She sat back in her chair and fiddled with a pen as she talked. "If it's from a ward, lines are easier to construct than curves. We could just be seeing one edge of a much larger ward."

"A ward protecting—" Demars checked the report. "-Ulrick MacGregor's workshop?"

"Possibly," Cart said. "Awfully strange angle on the line if it was part of his ward."

The techs had confirmed Bernie's sniff test and found traces of magic in a straight line on the neighboring building's rooftop. The line seemed to point to, or away from, the epicenter of the explosion.

"Too bad they didn't find anything connecting the two," Demars said.

Bernie grunted.

"Not surprising, though, with all the people milling around outside the crime scene." He wondered how much that missing link would matter if the case ever went to trial. Briefly he considered getting a subpoena for all the shoes of the press that had been there to test them. Surely they'd be able to make a stronger link than that, so he dismissed the idea.

"If it was an attack, rather than a ward," Cart said slowly, "where did the assailant stand?" She pushed a diagram of the area from one of the reports across the desk and pointed at the far side of the building rooftop.

Demars leaned closer and looked at the diagram. Several of the surrounding buildings had partial outlines. "Did they check the other buildings for magic?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Even if they had, the explosion was near to ground level, but the traces we found were on the rooftop."

"So?"

"So magic requires line of sight in most cases. If the assailant was standing on the far side of the roof, he wouldn't have line of sight to the workshop window. The building itself would have been in the way."

Demars frowned. "Let's take a step back," he said. "Do we know the magic traces we found on the rooftop were related to the explosion? They could have been made days before."

Bernie had to fight down her impatience. She reminded herself that not everyone understood magic like she did, and that they were better off for their ignorance. She blinked slowly and wished again that they had caught a nice normal murder with a gun or knife instead of this.

She shook her head. "Too much rain. Six, eight hours at the most."

He looked down at the report, trying to find where she'd read that estimate.

"Uh, at a guess," she said quickly, straightening in her chair. "The lab report should tell us that and whether the explosion had any of the same traces."

"Okay," said Demars slowly. "If we assume they were connected, then the assailant would have had to stand far enough above the rooftop to have line of sight." He tapped his pen on the desk. "Does it have to be strictly line of sight?"

Cart leaned back in her chair again. She didn't like talking this much about magic. Every time she showed her hand about how much she knew, it had bitten her in the ass. Gods but she hated this case more with each passing minute. At the same time, she wanted to catch the murderer. Until some buericrat ordered her off the case, she would use every tool in her arsenal to do so. Even if that meant explaining the limits of magic to her partner.

She suppressed a sigh. "Line of sight is easiest, but it can be reflected a short distance." She

sat up and pointed at the magic trace diagram, indicating the far side of the rooftop trace. “If he stood here and used a mirror suspended above him, he could redirect his will to MacGregor’s workshop.”

Demars nodded.

“Single redirects are easy,” said Cart in a low voice, pitching it so only her partner could hear. “More than one is extremely tricky. More than two are unheard of.” Demars wouldn’t hold her knowledge against her. At least not yet. Maybe when he got his law degree and started working for the DA’s office that would change, but for now, he was alright.

He frowned. “A suspended mirror? That seems a little elaborate.”

Cart shrugged. It wouldn’t have been the strangest thing she had ever seen for redirecting magic to confuse or cover the traces. The weirdest one involved a fish tank and a prism. That was back before she was a cop. “What do we know about MacGregor?” she asked.

Demars felt like he was on solid ground again. “The building was owned by a real estate holding company. They claim the building has been empty for two years.”

“Any surveillance on the building?”

“Nothing. None of the surrounding buildings have cameras, either. The closest cameras are more than two blocks away from the crime scene. There’s one two blocks away on the docks and an ATM camera three blocks further inland.”

Cart scowled at the world in general and leaned back in her chair. “Someone knew he was there. What about his financials?”

“The techs promised them this afternoon, along with his phone records, if any.”

She sighed. “There was no next of kin listed,” she said, pointing at the report on her desk. “No friends, no records of employment.”

“I have some friends in the tax office,” said Demars. “Maybe they can find something. Even crooks pay taxes now, lest they pull an Al Capone.”

Cart’s lip curled in a small smile and she nodded. “Do we have a home address for him?”

“Uniforms are there now,” said Demars. He pointed to the address in her report.

“I want to see it,” she said.

“I’ll join you,” Demars said. “I can call my tax buddies from the car.”

Cart smiled. It was illegal to drive and talk on a cell phone at the same time. At least she wouldn’t have to argue about who drove.

CHAPTER TWO

Eric assumed all corporate offices looked like his. He had no empirical evidence for that, but it seemed like a safe bet. Beige walls, industrial gray carpet, and florescent lights caged him in on all sides. It was worse than a casino, doing its best to hide the time and the real world outside. Doing its best to trap you in its womb of uniformity. It was a lot like prison in that way.

He shuddered at the thought and sat up a little straighter in his office chair. He tried to make sympathetic noises into the phone headset he wore. The woman on the other end had been going on for a while about all the problems she was having with her computer. Eric's script suggested that she run a virus scan and reboot the computer. He was planning to let her finish her tirade first. No sense in doing too much work when she was paying for the call.

All around him, techs were murmuring into their phones, soothing the callers and reassuring them that everything would be alright, trying to sound interested in the worst cases of "user error".

When he had applied for the job, he was hoping for something a little more techie, something that would use some of his relatively new computer knowledge to solve problems. On some level he knew that wouldn't be the case, but he took the job anyway because it was closer to what he wanted to do than dishwashing. And they were one of the few places that would consider someone with a felony on their record. One of the guys he knew had pointed him in the direction of Herbert and Sons Computer Support Services after Eric had complained about his lack of luck finding a job.

Finally, the woman on the phone reached the sobbing conclusion of her tale of woe. Eric turned on the voice of his headset again and said, "I'm sorry to heard that, ma'am. Do you have anti-virus software installed on your computer?"

"I don't know," she said tearfully. "How can I tell?"

Eric rolled his eyes. Thankfully, they didn't have video chat with the callers. He walked her through the process of looking for the program. She did have anti-virus software installed, but it wasn't scanning anything. She babbled something about her nephew adjusting some settings because it was too slow.

He clicked through some scripts on his computer, leading the woman through the process of turning the software back on, scanning for viruses, cleaning them, and getting her back to mostly running again. Eric was pretty sure that she had some nasty ones on there that wouldn't be cleaned by the software, but that wasn't his job to fix. Some people were just beyond helping and it would just cost him sanity points to try.

After thirty minutes, she was happy and Eric tried to force some levity into his voice as he asked the boilerplate satisfaction questions at the end of the call. He failed, but she didn't seem to notice. In some ways, magic had been so much less trouble than technology. At least idiots who tried to dabble with magic had the good fortune to blow themselves up before they could ask stupid questions or waste other people's time.

As he hung up the call, his computer informed him that it was his federally mandated fifteen minute smoke/bathroom break now and started an timer counting down the time in bright red numbers. Eric leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms over his head. He ditched his headset and hit the bathroom.

Some of his coworkers complained about the regimented control over your life here. Scheduled bathroom breaks, no cell phones, no talking to others while on shift, that sort of thing. Eric didn't complain. After three years of going where he was told, when he was told, it was a pretty easy routine to fall into. Besides, if you got out of line here, you got a verbal reprimand or maybe fired, but nobody was waiting to beat the crap out of you or shoot you. That was freedom all its own.

After relieving himself, he caught the elevator up two floors to the smoker's balcony. He had thought it was odd to have a balcony dedicated to smokers. He expected some dank little cage behind the building. But at thirty floors up, he realized there was no time to take the elevator down, smoke, and get back up to his desk in the federally allotted fifteen minutes. The building owners weren't being nice, they were just being practical.

The elevator doors opened to a short hallway to the balcony. The natural light was nearly as welcome as the time away from his desk, even if that light had competition. Fluffy gray clouds floated ominously across the sky, threatening more rain. Eric nodded to some of his coworkers and went to the edge of the balcony to look out over the city. Car horns sounded distantly below them. A slight breeze ruffled his dark brown hair, pushing it over his eyes as he bent to light his cigarette. No matter how many idiots called him, this was still better than prison Eric told himself, still better than washing dishes.

He tossed his hair back and stared out toward the horizon. He cleared his mind of work, of school, of regret, of everything and let himself just be with the balcony and the sky. Someone had called it "meditation" once and Eric laughed at them. When he thought of meditation, he pictured monks in those orange robes or new-age types in expensive clothes specially designed for it. Eric didn't meditate, he just cleared his mind and focused on the moment. It was a state of mind you needed to work with magic and even without working magic, he found it relaxing.

After a few minutes, he was ready to face the inanity of work once again. He finished his cigarette quickly and hurried back to his desk, settling down into his chair just as the countdown finished and his phone rang.

"Herbert and Sons Computer Support Services," said Eric into his headset. "How may I help you today?" Just a few more hours and he could go home.

A few hours later, Eric climbed the grimy stairs to his tiny apartment. He heard his neighbors arguing through the thin walls and the sounds of television playing loudly. If he had been willing to room with someone, he could have had a nicer place. But he was tired of having a cellmate and wanted to be alone for a while.

He inserted his key into the lock and lifted the door slightly. He jiggled the key as he pushed

the door open. Before he learned that trick he had been stranded in the hallway, cursing, because the door opened yesterday and what had he done differently this time? One of his neighbors volunteered to bust it down for him, but Eric declined. He was pretty sure he couldn't afford the cost of a new door.

Once inside, he hip checked the door as he closed it and locked the deadbolt. He slid the other locks closed before dropping his bag on the floor.

The tiny efficiency apartment was cold and barren. Eric turned on the small space heater and pulled his laptop from his bag. He plugged it into the power strip that was connected to an extension cord for the single lamp in the apartment. That in turn, was connected to the outlet in the kitchen with an unsafe three-prong to two-prong converter. The only thing Eric really cared about was the laptop and it had a two-prong plug, so he figured it was safe.

While the computer booted, he went to the bathroom and checked the fridge in vain for something edible. He decided to skip the possible food poisoning from his leftovers and had a glass of water instead. The computer chirped that it was ready and Eric sat down on the bare mattress, pulling the laptop towards him. He checked his email and picked up his programming class where he had left off.

Eric worked through the lessons, his mind easily assimilating the concepts of programming, mapping them to the concepts of magic that he already knew. He was constantly surprised by how similar the disciplines were. For once, he felt like he had made a good decision in life. Programming was a better outlet for his problem solving skills than magic had been.

For one thing, programming was not tightly controlled by the government. Anyone could get a compiler and start writing software. Getting a focus for doing magic required lots of paperwork and a background check. Then once you had finished writing a program, anyone could run it without needing a permit. That meant there were more legitimate and less frightening businesses that hired programmers.

Once he started reading about programming, Eric was stunned that it wasn't more tightly controlled. You could do almost as much damage with a computer program as you could with magic and they had a much wider reach. A program could start in one country and attack computers thousands of miles away. Magic could do more physical damage than a program, but you had to be pretty close to your target to do it. On balance, Eric thought they were equally dangerous when you wanted them to be.

But doing damage wasn't really what got Eric excited about magic or programming. It was making something, forming his will into something useful. It was the sense that he had made something that not many people knew how to make and he knew how to use it.

He attacked his lessons with vigor, solving puzzles and learning to program. It was fun on its own, but it was also Eric's ticket out of the tiny apartment and his mind-numbing job. That was doubly motivating.

CHAPTER THREE

Cart and Demars pulled up in front of Ulrick MacGregor's house. It was a small brownstone on a tree lined and tidy street. Several patrol cars were already parked outside with their lights off. Demars had called his tax buddies on the ride over. They made no promises, but said they would look into it. Demars made sure to stress that if anything looked suspicious or they had doubts to call him and let him get a warrant. They already had one for his financials, but the IRS was picky about getting all the right forms.

As they approached the house, a uniformed officer nodded to them and said, "they're already inside. So far, nothing."

Demars thanked him and they climbed the few steps to the front door. It was a heavy wooden thing with a shiny brass handle that looked decades old. The windows were not barred.

"No bars," he remarked softly.

Cart nodded. She glanced back the way they had come and made sure the officer wasn't looking. She activated the stone in her pocket briefly. There were no wards on the windows or the basement door. She let the light fade as quickly as possible. The stone was perfectly legal, but it was technically a magical device and she didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to it.

"No wards," she said.

"And no property damage," said Demars. "Safe to assume they were disabled rather than attacked?"

Cart nodded. "That's not easy to do. It takes time." She looked up and down the street. It was quiet and she saw no faces peeking out of windows nearby. The closest cross street was four houses down. She called to the officer at the bottom of the steps.

"Officer, has anyone canvassed the neighbors to see if they saw anything unusual in the last few days?"

"Uh, not that I'm aware of, ma'am," he said, "but I only came on shift half an hour ago. I was told Vinetti was handling that."

"Thanks," she said, frowning.

"Problem?" Demars asked as she climbed the steps and opened the door.

"Not yet."

The hallway was cool and dark. It was all gleaming wood and neatly patterned wallpaper almost a hundred years out of date. There did not seem to be a speck of dust anywhere. The living room could have been pulled from a 1920s catalog, all of it immaculately cleaned and polished. Cart remembered her mental reconstruction of the workshop and it fit. MacGregor had been tidy alright.

Uniformed officers and CSI techs were combing the house. They seemed to be taking special care to put things back where they came from after examining them. Whether it was to avoid Cart and Demars from writing them up or a reaction to the obsessively neat state of things, Cart couldn't say.

They turned into the living room and that's when Vinetti appeared. He slithered into the room from some dark corner of the house, stepping in from of them. He stood too close to them and looked intensely from one to the other. He was thin, but flabby, as if time was finally catching up to him.

"Well," he said, grinning, "if it isn't my two favorite detectives." Cart refused to back away or play his staring games. Instead, she looked past him into the room as if something amazingly interesting had caught her eye and Vinetti wasn't it.

Demars met his gaze and leaned forward slightly, closing the uncomfortable distance even further. "We heard you were in charge of canvassing the neighbors," he said. "Hard to do that from in here. How's it going?"

"Be fair," said Cart, "he's not used to investigating actual criminals."

"That's true," said Demars. "Did IA call to let you into the club yet, Vinetti? You know we're all pulling for you."

His gaze didn't waver but Bernie thought she saw his hand twitch in a fist then immediately relax. She started to say something when a tech came in from the back room.

"Sirs, there's something you need to see."

They disengaged from their private standoff to follow the tech downstairs to the basement. The air was even cooler here and far more damp. Despite the moisture, there was no hint of mold or mildew in the air. The walls were painted white and the floor was carpeted with simple industrial carpet, far newer than the rest of the house's contents.

Along one wall was a workbench similar to the one from the crime scene, only this one was still in one piece. Next to the workbench were heavy shelves, laden with book. Unlike the books upstairs, these were obviously well-used. They were neatly arranged and conspicuously cared for, but this was a working library, not one arranged for show.

They looked around the room, taking in the details, then turned to the tech. Vinetti said, "well?"

The tech closed her eyes and activated a much larger version of the magic detector that Bernie carried. The walls lit up with traces, deep blues and purples, criss-crossing the white paint walls and traveling out from the room in all directions. There were pale yellow lines and a few pure white ones, radiant in the dark of the basement.

Cart swallowed hard. This was not the work of a careless magic user, the kind who would accidentally blow himself up with a misplaced word or misdirected will. Accidents did happen, but not to this guy. She stepped closer to the wall to examine one of the purple lines.

Vinetti glanced around the room and then glared expectantly at the tech. "And this is significant because..." he prompted, fists balled on his hips.

The tech began to explain the different colors and patterns. Demars thought she did a reasonable job of keeping the explanation simple because he was able to follow most of it. Demars watched Cart carefully. The awe he had seen in her face had been banished and she studied the lines with much more reserve.

"So, you're saying this guy was some kind of magical genius?" asked Vinetti impatiently.

The tech nodded, cowed by his anger.

Vinetti turned to face Cart and Demars again. "Magical genius blows himself up in an experiment gone wrong. Case closed. Have a nice day."

Demars sighed.

Cart turned to him. "How careful are you with your service weapon, Vinetti?" she asked, her tone neutral.

He dropped his arms and looked at her suspiciously. "Why?"

"You follow all the rules, all the security precautions to keep from accidentally shooting yourself, right?"

Vinetti scoffed. "Of course. What's that got to do with anything?"

"This guy," said Cart, indicating the basement around them, "was even more careful with magic than you are with your weapon. There is no way he accidentally blew himself up. Ulrick MacGregor was murdered."

She cursed inwardly. She had still been holding out hope that it was a simple accident, that the whole thing could be ascribed to bad luck and the case could be closed.

Demars saw the tech nod slightly in agreement. He watched the anger in Vinetti rise and look for a way out of his skinny frame. His face turned red and he looked back and forth between Demars and Cart.

"You got all that from a bunch of colored lines on the walls?" he demanded.

"Oh, and the fastidious rooms upstairs," offered Demars helpfully. "He seemed like a very careful man."

Cart nodded. "Obsessively so," she agreed.

Vinetti's face turned nearly purple as he glared at them. Sweat started to break out on his forehead. Demars wondered if he'd ever try a case against a lawyer with this kind of reaction to being proved wrong. He always pictured lawyers as cold and calculating, distancing themselves from the cases they worked. But, he'd also had that impression of police detectives, and that clearly wasn't always true.

"They're right," volunteered the tech, trying to be helpful. Vinetti's back was to her, so she couldn't see his face. "He was-"

Vinetti whirled on her with a stare so piercing that her words caught in her throat and her eyes widened in terror.

"I'm going back upstairs," Demars announced quickly, trying to defuse the situation. "I want to have a closer look at the windows, doors, and any storage closets he has." He stepped towards the stairs and turned to Vinetti. "Coming? You've been over the house already, so you can let me know what you've discovered so far."

Vinetti swallowed and glared at Demars. Then he pushed past him and stomped up the stairs and out of the basement. Demars gave a nod to the tech and followed him.

"It's okay," said Cart. "He has that effect on everybody." The tech nodded tearfully. "Tell me more about the ward traces you found, if any, here and around the house."

They left the house two hours later with no more information about who might have killed MacGregor. The man had been a completely paranoid neat freak. His underwear was not only folded but also labeled by the day of the week. He just didn't seem like to type to be involved in something so dangerous. But whatever he had been into, it had probably gotten him killed, but he didn't keep any information about it at his house.

“Where to now?” asked Demars as they got into the car.

“Let’s check with his suppliers,” said Cart. “Maybe we can figure out what he was working on by looking at the stuff he was buying.”

“What if he buys online?”

Cart shook her head. “The level he was at, it would be difficult to find the right components online without drawing attention from the ATFM.”

“You think he was working on something that big?”

“More like ‘something that intricate’,” Cart said. “You can buy ten cases of bullets and you’re just stocking up. But, you buy remote control detonators specially designed for urban areas and you’re going to get someone’s attention.” She started the car and pulled out into traffic at the end of the block. “Besides, most of the good stuff can’t be found online anyway.”

They made their way slowly across town and into Queens. Most of the buildings were boarded up and covered with playbills and graffiti. A few people stood here and there, waiting for buses, or talking in small groups. They eyed the “unmarked” car suspiciously as it passed. Bernie wondered they would ever make a police car that wasn’t completely obvious, something like a nice convertible or a classy old Buick of some kind. Until then, she’d do it the old fashioned way.

Cart pulled the car into a spot on the street several blocks from where they were going. Demars looked around and saw only abandoned buildings and a convenience store with more stickers and neon on the window than actual window.

“We’re there?” he asked dubiously.

“Not exactly,” said Cart. She stared straight ahead as she spoke. “I’ve never broken the law while on a case, and I’m not going to start now.”

“Okay,” said Demars, not quite sure where this was going.

“The contact I have-” she faltered, took a deep breath and continued. “The contact I have knows me, knows I’m a cop, and he works for my father.”

“Ah,” said Demars. He wondered when this would come up. They had spent two years as partners, catching only murder cases with non-magical causes of death. He figured it was because murder by guns, knives, strangulation, drowning, or other means was just more common. Now he wasn’t so sure.

He knew her family’s reputation, every cop did. They were hard-asses, trafficking in drugs, guns, and magic. They didn’t like loose ends and they didn’t like squealers. And they had more than enough guys doing time to enforce their rules inside and outside of prison. Bernie never spoke of it, so he didn’t pry.

“How do you want to handle it?” Demars asked quietly.

“His shop is two blocks up, across the street. It’s a pawn shop and second hand store.” Demars strained his eyes and thought he could make out a sign that looked like the one. “He may spook if I come in the front door and the back door will certainly be locked, probably warded as well.”

“You want me to distract him while you get in the store and get between him and the back door?”

Cart nodded and looked at him, relief in her eyes. He smiled slightly. “No laws broken,” he said, “all above board. Just two cops asking questions.”

She smiled back. “Thank you, Lawson.”

They got out of the car and walked towards the shop, Demars leading her by about half a

block. The shop's doors and windows were barred and it looked dark inside, but a gaudy flashing "open" sign proclaimed the dingy shop as ready for business. Demars pulled the door open and both a physical bell and one of those electronic bells sounded.

He walked into the still, dusty air and looked around. There were shelves lined with musical instruments, old computers, and vintage dishes. There were a few clothing racks with furs and leather jackets near the back wall. A glass case filled with the shop's more expensive items occupied one wall. Behind it sat a mousy looking man with almost no chin. He looked bored, but his eyes followed Demars as he stepped further into the shop.

Demars scanned the shelves critically as if looking for something specific. After a moment, he turned to the shopkeeper and said, "do you carry vintage computers?"

The man shrugged. "A few." He gestured towards the back wall of the shop. There were some beige boxes stacked in a dusty corner. One had a faded sticker proclaiming the machine to be "Windows 95 Ready!"

Demars positioned himself between the shop's door and the man, blocking his view of the door. He wasn't sure that was good enough, but it would have to do. He leaned on the counter and looked at the shopkeeper conspiritorially. "Actually," he said, "I'm looking for an Apple Lisa. Ever heard of them?"

The shopkeeper shook his head. The door chime sounded. "Well," said Demars, "they are pretty old and pretty rare. Listen, if you ever get one, give me a call, will you? I'm willing to pay top dollar for one that still runs."

The man behind the counter shrugged noncommittally. "Whatever," he said. He pointed to a battered notebook for people to leave their name, phone number, and what they were looking for.

Demars leaned as if to fill it out when Cart came up behind the shopkeeper, trapping him in behind the glass case. The shopkeeper turned, annoyed, and nearly fell off his stool.

"Hiya, Simon," said Bernie, "long time no see."

"Jesus, Cart," said the shopkeeper recovering himself and backing away a step. "You scared me."

Cart's copper colored eyes flamed, but her hands were relaxed. She was trying to be intimidating without doing or saying anything intimidating. Demars thought it would be a neat trick if she could pull it off.

"How's business?" she asked, peering into the glass case. Whether she was really looking for something, Demars couldn't tell, so he kept his eyes on Simon.

Simon looked at Demars. "You a cop, too?" he asked.

Demars nodded and produced his badge for inspection. Simon glanced at it, then looked back to Cart. Demars felt a pang of shame that knowing they were both cops, he didn't relax at all. Were cops in his town so notorious that they were a legitimate threat? Then he remembered that this shopkeeper probably didn't sell vintage computers for Cart's dad.

"What do you want, Cart?" Simon asked, trying to sound defiant, but it came out whiny instead.

"Do you know a man named Ulrick MacGregor, medium height, brown curly hair?" She handed him a picture they had found of Ulrick playing bridge with some friends.

Simon took the photo gingerly and looked down at it. "No," he said, not looking up. "It doesn't ring a bell." Demars and Cart exchanged glances.

"He would have been buying something from the back room," Cart said, taking the picture

back. "A load ballencer, an amplifier, something like that."

Simon licked his lips and looked to Demars then back to Cart. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, only a slight quaver to his voice.

"Okay," said Cart. She took out a business card and laid it deliberately on the glass case. "If you think of anything related to MacGregor, give us a call."

Puzzled, Demars started to withdraw towards the front door. Cart came around the case, then turned back to Simon.

"I'll be sure to let my dad know that you said 'hi'."

Simon's eyes widened in fear and the dam broke inside him, all his resolve melting away. "Oh, come on, Bernie," he pleaded. "If I talk to you, your dad will kill me. If I don't talk to you, you might kill me." Demars fought to keep his expression neutral. "They say you're legit and don't do that kind of thing, but I've worked for your dad for a long time. Some things just run in the family, you know?" He smiled desperately. "You understand, right? I can't talk to you, or I'm done for. I can't screw up again."

"Again?" said Bernie, sharply. "What did MacGregor buy?"

Simon grabbed his hair in both his hands. "Gah! Shit! Nothing! I mean, I don't know any MacGregor."

"Was it something for a ward?"

"I didn't- I can't-" Simon looked about wildly, as if expecting Cart's father to come busting through the place any second.

"A name, Simon," prompted Cart. "What part did he buy?"

"I didn't have it," cried Simon, terrified.

"So he went to Alex? Is that how you screwed up?"

"God damn it, Bernie! I can't tell you."

Cart sighed. She turned to her partner and whispered, "if we take him in, it will be bad for him. He didn't admit to anything other than lying about not knowing MacGregor."

"And that's easily explained away by a bad photograph or honest mistake," Demars said.

"I say we go talk to Alex and come back if we have to."

"And if this gets back to your father?"

"It won't. Simon's sense of self-preservation is highly evolved."

Cart turned back to Simon. He was hugging himself as if he was cold. His eyes watched them intently. She pointed to the card she had left on his counter. "Call me if you change your mind."

They drove back to the precinct in silence. On the walk back to the car Cart said she would need to make some calls to find out where Alex Petrovin was dealing these days. Bernie wasn't sure she still had enough connections to find him, but she didn't share that doubt with Demars. The less he knew about her connections to magic, the better it was for both of them.

Demars stared out the window of the car and tried to picture Bernie in a crime family. She was tough, sure, and had a temper, but she followed the law like a religious zealot. He had never thought her capable of intimidation or violence except in support of the law. The experience with Simon colored his mental image of her slightly differently.

She had said nothing intimidating, made no threats, and yet Simon feared her. He wondered how much was her and how much was fear of her father. Demars was pretty sure that her "threat" to talk to her father would not stand up in court as intimidation, but it was the closest

thing to breaking the law he had ever see her do. That concerned him.

He liked to think that people were their own people, made by their choices and their will, not by the choices of others, no matter how influential those others might be. He had friends from law school that had been born into incredible poverty or who had overcome physical handicaps or social barriers to become excellent students. They reaffirmed his stance that choices mattered.

So he believed that Bernadine Cart was her own woman and she was no more destined to become a criminal than he was destined to be a corporate tax accountant or project manager like his parents. But now, that belief was weakened by the ease with which she had struck fear into Simon's heart. Worse than that, on some level, he suspected that she enjoyed it. Some cops get off on the sense of power over others, but more than that, she seemed to enjoy the power without having to display it.

Cart drove the car through streets spotted with sun and darkness as the heavy clouds drifted overhead. Simon, for all his whimpering show, had not been very useful as a source of information. He hadn't sold anything and it wasn't clear what MacGregor had been hoping to buy from him in the first place. She cursed herself for being too easy on him. Maybe they should have brought him in for lying to them about knowing MacGregor. Then the could have leaned on him while waiting for his lawyer to arrive.

She chastised herself then for letting her emotions run away with her brain. The law was the law. He didn't have to talk to them and it would have put him at risk to his life if they had brought him in. Not from them, but from Cart's father's people. It was better this way. Merciful. The opposite of what her father would have done, which made it good by definition.

Still, they hadn't made a lot of progress on finding out who killed MacGregor or what he was building and why that might have gotten him killed. Simon dealt mostly in components for offensive magic, things with a direct impact on the world, or for heavy-duty wards. The wards seemed most likely, given what they had seen of MacGregor's home and workshop already, he considered safety and security to be very important.

Somebody had to know this guy. It seemed extremely unlikely that his death was random or accidental, so who knew him and why did they want him dead? His address book had been empty and his neighbors said he kept to himself and they never saw him with anyone else. There were no employment records, no bank accounts, only his driver's license and the sale of his house in the public record. Maybe Demars' tax buddies would come through and they'd find a lead in there.

There was a wealth of information to be gleaned about MacGregor from his magic, but Cart didn't want to go there. If they could look at his magical focuses, they might be able to tell where he had gotten his parts. She could identify some, but they'd need a tech to get all the details.

She clenched her jaw at the thought of having to file that request. Three years as a detective and she had managed to avoid all of this pussy-footing around when it came to magic. All she wanted to do was her damn job and catch the murderer. Was that so hard for everyone to believe?

They pulled into the parking garage under the precinct building, parked, and took the elevator up to the eighth floor as usual. Even as they approached the floor, they could hear shouting. The doors slid open and Cart and Demars headed for their desks, dutifully ignoring the shouting, just like everyone else in the office was doing.

The blinds on the captain's office were closed and there were two voices in addition to Captain Nisbet's. One of them sounded like Vinetti. They sat down at their desks and started writing up their notes from the house and their visit to Simon. The sense of dread was palpable between them.

A few minutes after they had sat down, the yelling stopped momentarily then the office door swung open. Nisbet's well-built frame filled the doorway. "Cart, Demars," he said in a firm voice, "would you please join us?"

Walking into Nisbet's office was like walking into a wall of static electricity. Vinetti and one of the commissioner's aides were seething and it filled the small office like a physical force. Nisbet closed the door and sat down in his office chair slowly, reminding Vinetti and the aide whose office it was.

"The commissioner would like me to remove Detective Cart from this case," he said calmly. The aide nodded vigorously. Nisbet gestured to Vinetti. "There is also vocal agreement with that course of action from Detective Vinetti."

Vinetti started to say something, but the captain held up his hand and Vinetti fell silent again.

"Further, Detective Vinetti believes an investigation should be opened into how a case involving magic was ever assigned to Detective Cart in the first place." It was Vinetti's turn to nod vigorously.

The captain leaned forward onto his desk. He looked at Demars and Cart in turn. "Do you have anything to add to the discussion?"

Demars said quickly, "yes, sir, I do. Detective Cart has been nothing but professional on this case. I have the utmost confidence that will continue. Removing us from the case at this time would cause further delays in finding the killer and do the city an injustice."

The aide smirked and Vinetti let out a short laugh. Captain Nisbet shot them both icy glares and they returned to listening in silence. "Well spoken, counselor-in-training," said the captain. "Detective Cart?"

"I believe we are making progress on this case. If you want me off the case," she said, emphasizing the "you" slightly, "I will understand, but I don't think it's necessary."

Nisbet clasped his hands on the desk. "Very well," he said. He fixed his gaze on the commissioner's aide. "For now, Detectives Cart and Demars will continue to work this case. If the situation changes, I may reconsider."

"But captain this is—" the aide started to shout.

"That's enough," Nisbet said, his voice cutting through the shout without being raised. "You have my answer. Take it back to the commissioner."

He turned to face Vinetti. "As for the investigation into how cases get assigned, I'm afraid I don't have enough people to handle the actual crimes that get committed, and I certainly don't have enough to spare for something like that." Vinetti's face got red. "If you have the time, Vinetti, or know someone who does, you're more than welcome to take up the investigation yourself."

Vinetti nodded, grudgingly, and remained silent.

"Now," said the captain, "if that's all, I have work to do."

They started for the door and the captain said, "Demars, a word please." The others filed out of the office and Demars shut the door behind them. He turned back to see a look of concern cross the captain's face.

"Yes, captain?"

Nisbet studied the detective for a moment then said, "I have no doubt Cart is keeping to the straight-and-narrow on this case. But I know her history and I know the bond partners have with each other."

"Captain, I-"

"I'm not accusing you, or her, of anything, but you need to be squeaky clean on this one. If you have any doubts or see anything that makes you think she can't do the job objectively and legally, you come to me." He watched Demars for another moment. "Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Demars, with only the slightest hesitation.

"Good," he said, going back to the paperwork on his desk. "Now go catch the killer before the press does any more fear-mongering stories about how magic will kill us all."

CHAPTER FOUR

It was still early at the nightclub. Only a few tables were taken and the dance floor was still empty. The music still thumped loudly, covering the conversations of the patrons. The decor was new and the club was still on the rise of popularity any new club got a few months after opening. Lights flashed on the dance floor in time with the music, leaving the tables in more intimate darkness.

Curtis Krish leaned on the bar, sipping a vodka and tonic. While he appreciated the cliche of the club owner lounging at the best table, surrounded by beautiful women and loyal knee-breakers, he preferred to do business by the bar or in his office upstairs. It was still quiet, so he stayed at the bar, enjoying his little enterprise while he waited for his minion to report back.

He liked to think of himself having minions, it made him feel important. Knee-breaking thugs anyone could get, but minions were smart enough to choose their alliances and Curtis thought that made them superior to simple muscle. Besides, if things got really good, he could make them wear gold lame jumpsuits like in those old spy movies.

Curtis smiled at his own joke. Some girls at the bar thought he was smiling at them and they giggled, whispering something that made them giggle even more. He picked up his drink to go join them when his minion returned. Fun forgotten, Curtis motioned for his office and left the bar quickly. He heard the girls groan and pout behind him. Later, he thought, maybe later.

In his office, with the door closed, the music was barely audible. Soundproofing, along with a variety of other physical and magical security measures, had been major concerns when he had it built. The office furniture was stylish and new like everything that Curtis had. He didn't have time for anything less.

Qinnell, Curtis' minion, was already seated in one of the deep, square leather couches. He looked at ease which made Curtis relax a bit. Dealing with MacGregor had been messier than expected and Curtis didn't like surprises.

Curtis sat down across from Qinnell. "What do they know?" he asked.

"Hardly anything," said Qinnell. "They're still looking for where MacGregor worked or any friends he had."

"It's early yet," said Curtis, "and that Cart woman is still on the case."

"You think she might be able to figure out what he was working on?"

"Perhaps," said Curtis, "but I don't want to take any chances."

He paused, seeming to consider the best way to derail her investigation. He had already made up his mind, but he thought it seemed more spontaneous this way. He snapped his fingers as if a thought had just occurred to him.

“There’s a small tech support company downtown that happens to employ a number of ex-cons who did time for trafficking in magic.”

“So?” asked Quinnell. “Why would she assume they were involved if she was given this tip?”

Curtis’ lip curled. “That’s the joy of knowing the other side’s playbook. They almost have to investigate if the tip comes from a reliable source and seems credible. We just have to make sure of that and they’ll be off chasing shadows for days, long enough for us to finish up and start selling.” He leaned back in his chair, true joy filling his face. “And once we start selling, there’s no going back. We will own this town.”

Quinnell smiled. He had heard that one before. Everyone assumed he wasn’t smart enough to lead and that’s why he was always second. He liked to think he was smarter than they were because the lead guy always took all the heat, they were inevitably who got arrested or killed. It took some doing to stay out of the limelight and to get out before things got bad without getting killed by one’s own people, but he had done it before and he would do it again.

This time was no different. Curtis Krish had come parading into town, the next new crime lord, or so he thought. Quinnell had to admit that he had style and was smarter than most would-be gangsters. And, this thing they were building really did have the capacity to change the world of magic forever. It wasn’t often you saw that kind of thing. So Quinnell had approached Curtis and got the job.

“How do you want the tip to go? Police hotline? CI?”

“Alex Petrovin and Enrique Hidalgo.”

Quinnell was glad he wasn’t drinking anything or he would have choked on it. “What? Why would they help you?”

“Simple,” said Curtis, “it’s in their best interest to redirect suspicion away from themselves and onto someone else.”

“Won’t they just tell the police where to find you instead?”

“No, no, we don’t tell them directly. Some of Alex’s men come to my club for drinks. They don’t know it’s my club and Alex doesn’t consider me a threat yet. We slip to them that the Hidalgo family has some kind of magic lab in those offices that might be related to the MacGregor killing.”

“And Enrique Hidalgo?”

“I know some girls he might like that owe me a favor.”

“Hmm,” said Quinnell. “How long will that grapevine take to get the information to Cart? And how do we know they’ll even take it to the police?”

“We don’t,” said Curtis, “that’s why we’re splitting the bet. As for the time, we should know by tomorrow if it worked. If it doesn’t, we can use the police hotline and tip them ourselves.”

If there was one thing Curtis liked better than developing and dealing in high-powered magic, it was playing people off each other. Even if neither Alex nor Enrique rose to the bait and tipped off the police, he would have raised some hackles on both sides. That was worth something.

If she had any brains, Bernie would be at home in bed, resting up before another long day of trying to figure out who killed MacGregor. Instead she was waiting outside an exclusive French restaurant for Alex Petrovin to finish his very late dinner.

Finding him hadn't been hard and she'd been waiting for over an hour now. That gave her plenty of time to consider how ill-advised this was. It was still legal, so she soothed her conscious with that. Just talking to someone didn't require a warrant. Still, she knew how it might look, meeting with a known magic trafficker in the middle of the night, without her partner.

Lawson was going to be pissed, she knew, but she also didn't want to spook Alex into silence. Scare tactics might have worked on Simon, but Alex was too smart to fall for that. She wanted to take the soft approach and hope he gave her something to go on, for old time's sake.

They had met in the hospital, both visiting friends of their family that had been injured in a recent altercation. He was young and handsome and Bernie thought he was cute. She had also been young and they hit it off. After twenty minutes of conversation and realizing they had so much in common, Bernie thought they would become friends, or more than friends.

After that day, she wasn't allowed to be on her own in the hospital. She never saw Alex again and, not knowing his last name, she didn't know how to find him. Of course, if she had known his last name, they might not have talked at all. It wasn't until years later that she saw his mugshot and realized who that nice young man had been.

The heavy clouds from earlier in the day were starting to congeal and covered the night sky, obscuring any stars that might have been visible beyond the city lights. It wouldn't be the first time since the hospital that their paths had crossed. The city was too small for that and their occupations too diametrically opposed. She had tried to paint him with the same brush as she did the other criminals she pursued. For the most part, she succeeded in ignoring any humanity he might have and focus solely on the death and tragedy he brought to the world. She would deny to the grave that any part of her still felt affection for him, that she gave any thought to what might have been.

She heaved a tired sigh of a well-worn mental path that led nowhere. She pushed the thoughts aside and focused on what she needed to know from Alex and how best to get it from him. He didn't need anything she could legally give him and he didn't feel any debt to her. Dammit, she felt so powerless.

The restaurant door opened and Alex drifted out, a beautiful blond on his arm. He talked softly to her and she laughed a sweet, crystal laugh with a hint of lust. He was was taller than she remembered, but the dark brown hair and green eyes were just as she remembered. He blazed a radiant smile at his companion, then his eyes flicked up and saw Bernie waiting just outside the circle of light by the restaurant door.

Heavily muscled men appeared around Alex, staring at Bernie, but they made no threatening move. Alex paused. His car rolled up to the curb. The blond looked puzzled at Alex and he murmured something to her before patting her hand and giving it to one of his guards. He looked at Bernie and motioned to the car with his eyes.

She climbed in behind him and settled into the plush leather seat across from him. The door closed behind her and they were wrapped in a cocoon of silence. Discreet lights around the interior bathed them in an intimate yellow-white light.

Alex studied her for a moment then said, "hello, Bernadine. It's been a while."

"Alex," she said, trying to remain professional and keep her mind focused on what she came here to do. A flicker of disappointment might have crossed his face, but Bernie couldn't be sure.

"What brings the city's finest, and I mean that, to seek me out so late in the evening?" He crossed his legs and smoothed his pant leg, clasping his hands in his lap.

Bernie took a deep breath. "I'm hoping you can shed some light on a case I'm working on." Alex blinked in mock surprise. "Do I need my lawyer present for this?"

She shook her head. "This is just a friendly conversation," she said. "If things don't go well, I will make it official." She looked at him, her eyes hard. "I'm hoping it won't come to that."

Bernie could almost see the wall come up behind his eyes, betraying nothing. He gazed levelly at her and said, "what's the question?"

"Ulrick MacGregor was murdered last night," she said. "He was working on something magical, something dangerous. Did he come to you for parts in the last few weeks?"

Alex looked down at his hands and smiled. "Dearest Bernadine, you should learn to phrase your questions better." He looked up and met her eyes. "I cannot answer your question without admitting to trafficking in magic. Which, of course, you know to be false. I do nothing of the kind."

"Of course," said Bernie, kicking herself for going all in. She pursed her lips in thought and then said, "do you know anyone who might have supplied MacGregor with magical components in the past few weeks and what those components might have been?"

Alex gave a short, soft laugh. "Better," he said. "I might know someone who allegedly supplies magical components. This person might or might not have supplied MacGregor."

"Do you know," said Bernie, trying to sound nonchalant, "where I might find this person or what they might have supplied?"

"Allegedly, they supplied components for amplifying magic and for masking magical traces."

Bernie nodded. She considered asking for the specifics of those components, but decided it was less important than who had done the supplying and she didn't want to run out her goodwill on specifics.

"And do you know where I might find the supplier?" she asked.

Alex withdrew a gold business card case from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He pulled out a card and wrote an address on the back. He held the card out to Bernie. She leaned forward to take it and he held onto it.

"Normally," he said, "I would ask what I get in return for this information." She looked at him and did not release her grip on the card. "What are you offering in return?"

Bernie looked him in the eye. There was still a wall behind his green eyes, guarding his true emotion from view. She felt her anger flare, but held it in check. She expected better of him than to try and weasel a favor out of her. But, she reminded herself, he was a criminal and information is stock in trade, as valuable as cash, guns, drugs, or magic.

"I can't offer you anything," said Bernie, "but the thanks of the New York City police department." She added as an afterthought, "and those thanks don't come with a 'get out of jail free' card, if that's what you're wondering."

He laughed softly again. After a moment, he released the card and returned his hands to his lap. Bernie looked at the address on the card, somewhere in downtown or midtown Manhattan by the looks of it. She slipped it into her jacket pocket and moved to leave the car.

"Bernadine," said Alex. She sat back and looked at him. His eyes were lowered, studying his hands.

"Yes?"

"I hope you catch him," he said. "The killer, I mean. It's always unsettling when the

delicate balance of life is upset."

She studied him for a moment and he lifted his eyes to her. There was a fire in them, of anger, but not directed at her. She watched him a second longer then he tapped on the glass of the door. It opened and a burly man extended his hand to help Bernie out of the car.

Bernie nodded at Alex and accepted the man's hand. Once out of the car she saw the blond being escorted towards the car. She glided into the backseat and the door closed. The car moved away, nearly silent in the night, and Bernie watched it go. When her heart stopped pounding, she was again grateful that she had not included Demars in this interview.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eric sometimes felt like half of his day was spent stroking the egos of people who just didn't understand computers but were too proud to admit that they didn't know something. That was almost worse than the callers who were clueless and freely admitted it. At least they didn't try to second guess Eric's help. They just did what they were told and dutifully read the complete error messages to him.

Unfortunately, his last call had been the sort that was just savvy enough to really shoot themselves in the foot and then get indignant when Eric told them there was nothing he could do. When you delete all the photos on your computer and all the backups, what did they expect would happen? That the pictures were somewhere in the ether, just waiting to be pulled into existence on the hard drive?

Actually that thought had provided Eric with a good ten minutes of mental diversion on whether you could use magic to do exactly that. In the end, he gave up on the idea because, one, it was illegal for him to do magic any more, and two, because it was implausible. Doing that kind of manipulation of the magnetic fields on a hard drive was theoretically possible, but it was a waste of effort. Using a USB cable and technology was much simpler.

After he extricated himself from the phone call, the computer informed him it was time for break. He hit the bathroom then headed for the elevator to go have a smoke. He pushed the button, but it didn't light up. Undaunted, he pushed it again. Nothing.

Shrugging, he headed for the stairs. The sounds of overlapping chatter on phone calls blended into a now-familiar din, as lifeless as the cubicle walls. As he approached the stairwell door, he thought he heard a different voice, tight and focused, not like the flat emotionless voices of his coworkers. He furrowed his brows and listened more closely, his steps slowing as he concentrated.

He heard the voice again, just before the stairwell door burst open in front of him, police in bulletproof vests and glowing magical wards spilling out into the corridor. Eric froze without having to be told to do so. They told him anyway.

“Freeze!” they shouted. “Don’t make any sudden moves!”

The cops were filtering through the office now and Eric could see heads popping over the cube walls, still on their headsets, trying to see what was going on.

Strong efficient hands pushed Eric up against the wall and searched him. All he could think about was that he was missing his smoke break.

After the initial hubbub had died down, they had corralled everyone into one corner of the office and were taking them, one by one, into the manager's office to be questioned. The magic techs were there, searching for something. Despite not having anything to hide, Eric's stomach turned itself into knots watching them. He knew more than a few innocent guys in prison, all done in by circumstance and bad lawyers. He really didn't want to fall into that kind of judicial crack.

His coworkers were mostly silent as the cops stood watch over them. They hadn't said to be quiet, but nobody wanted to be overheard talking about the situation. Some woman cop with wavy brown hair and a well-dressed partner had explained that they had it on good authority that this office was trafficking in magical components that were involved in an active homicide investigation.

Eric was pretty sure the office manager was going to have a heart attack before the day was out. He was red-faced and pacing like a caged animal. The male detective had patiently explained to him that they had a warrant and that the search was completely legal and the manager could take up any claims of damages with the city. He even gave him the number to call to make such claims and apologized for the inconvenience. It was the only time he'd ever seen a cop being helpful.

Occasionally the office manager would do some minor chest thumping at a cop and demand to see the detectives in charge. The cops would assure him that the detectives would see him when they could spare a few moments.

The cops cycled through the employees in alphabetical order. Being near the tail end of the S-list, Eric had to wait for several hours while his coworkers with more fortunate last names were interviewed and released. Even his boss had been released before him, but he refused to leave, fuming in his sweaty rage, until questions were answered to his satisfaction.

The magic techs were finished and the male detective told them they could go. Eric could see frustration on his face as he went back into the manager's office. That wasn't good, he thought. Good they didn't find anything, but angry cops were worse than normal cops. They were more inclined to find something to harass you over when in a bad mood. Eric had never seen a cop in a good mood.

The male detective came over to the group to fetch the next one. "Strickland, Eric," he said. Eric raised his hand and followed the detective into the office.

The woman detective was sitting behind the desk, a notebook in front of her, nearly full. "Please have a seat," she said absently, waiving at the chair opposite the desk.

Eric sat down and the male cop sat in a chair by the door, mostly behind Eric. So it was that kind of interview, he thought. He steeled himself for the accusations.

The woman cop looked at a piece of paper with the employee names on it. She saw some annotation and frowned. She pulled another sheet of paper from a different stack and looked it over. Eric waited in silence. He was familiar with this power-play and he wasn't going to bite.

After a minute or so, she looked up at Eric. "We have reason to believe this office or someone within this office has been trafficking in highly regulated magical components," she said plainly. "Additionally, the same person or persons may be wanted for questioning in connection with the murder of Ulrick MacGregor two days ago." She paused as if waiting for the weight of that to sink in.

Eric suspected that his coworkers started babbling their innocence at this point, pleading that they didn't do anything wrong, and please just let them go. This part of the power game he

would play. As much as he didn't want to fall victim to circumstantial evidence, he refused to plead when they had nothing on him. Eric sat in silence, his eyes meeting hers.

Bernie watched him fail to react. He wasn't the first one today to sit quietly under her gaze. She was almost glad. The pleading got really tiresome after a while and got in the way of getting information out of people. She and Demars had speculated that some of the biggest drama kings and queens really might have something to hide and were using their overreaction as cover. They had quietly put tails on some of them after they were sent home.

"You have quite a record, Mr. Strickland," she said.

To Eric's complete surprise, that statement was not followed up with threats.

"I suspect," said Cart, "that you would notice if magical components were being moved through this office."

"It's illegal for me to use magic," said Eric, "even for detection or wards."

She shook her head. "I don't mean that you would detect them magically, I mean that you would notice."

He studied her. She didn't look like someone who crafted magic, but he had been wrong before. He had heard it was easier to get permits if you were in law enforcement. There was a feeling you got around magic that was hard to describe, like you could sense the focusing of will or ordering of matter without using any magical means to detect it. Eric had discovered that feeling sometime in adolescence, but there were so many other competing feelings at that time he didn't know what it was.

Some people who didn't practice magic called it the third eye or of the sixth sense, but Eric thought it had more to do with observation than anything else. Spend enough time around magic and you learned what to look for, the slight static electrical charge of a focus or the faintest smell of ozone that clung to large magical workings.

"Maybe," he said.

"Have you noticed anything lately? Say, in the last few weeks?"

"No," said Eric.

"You've been in to the office everyday?"

"Every weekday," said Eric, "eight to five."

She nodded, clearly disappointed. She offered her card to him from a stack on the desk. "If you think of anything, please give us a call," she said. He made no move to take it and she set it back on the stack. "You can call the main police tip line," she said. "The number is in the phonebook and I'm sure it's on the web somewhere."

The man behind Eric stood up and he took that as his cue to leave. The detective escorted him to the elevators and left him there with a uniformed cop who pushed the call button for him. Eric resisted the urge to check his watch. He was pretty sure he was still getting a few hours of free vacation out of this deal. Part of him was screaming to be paranoid and watch for any tail back to his place. The bigger part of him was looking forward to doing some programming to take his mind off the can of worms life had just opened up for him.

CHAPTER SIX

Captain Nisbet never raised his voice. At least, Cart had never heard him raise it. His anger was no less palpable for the quiet voice. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he listened to Demars finish the recap of the interviews and the non-results they'd had from following some of the employees home.

"We're still running some of their backgrounds, looking for anything that might tie them to trafficking in magic," Demars said.

Nisbet laid his hands flat on the desk and looked at them when he spoke. "So you cost this city thousands of dollars and brought a potential lawsuit down on this department, and you came away with nothing to show for it?"

Demars shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Cart said, "yes, sir."

The captain took a steady breath and looked Cart in the eye. "You said the information was reliable. That your source was good in this area."

Cart swallowed hard. Demars had to fight the urge to glare at her. He had been more than a little upset that she'd gone behind his back to talk to Alex Petrovin. He felt like she didn't trust him to be there and they needed to trust each other. Especially now that the source had turned out to be wrong, he wished she would have trusted him to be there. Maybe he could have asked a question or seen where the information was faulty and they wouldn't be here, getting not-yelled at by the captain.

Cart nodded. "I know, sir. I'm sorry."

"It's not just me that's taking the heat for this screw-up," said Nisbet. "This looks bad for you, Cart. IA may come sniffing around again, and if not them, you can bet Vinetti and that weasel from the commissioner's office will be down here before lunch demanding that you be removed from the case." He paused and folded his hands on the desk. The muscle in his jaw worked overtime. "Give me a good reason I shouldn't take you off this case."

Cart started to say something but the captain held up his hand.

"By noon," he said. "Or I will give it to Vinetti and you can work the dead jogger case he's currently on. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Cart. Demars nodded.

Bernie had spent the previous night racking her brain, trying to figure out if Alex had lied to her and why. If he hadn't lied, then he had bad information and that wasn't like him.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” said Demars, sitting back down at his desk. He pulled out the original crime scene photos and started looking through them.

Cart said down opposite him and stared at the closed report on her desk. Maybe this was her time to fall, to somehow fail to live up to the ideal she had set for herself. She always figured it would be someone else dragging her down because of her family or some major screw up. This didn’t seem to rate more than a three or four on her mental ten point scale of screw ups.

She angrily pushed down the self-doubt and put all of her fear and frustration into working the case. That was something she was good at, transforming the pain into crystal clear focus on the work. She had survived worse and she would survive this. It was only a three or four, after all, hardly worth a second glance. She opened up the case file on her desk and flipped through the pages, looking for something they had missed.

Demars watched her fight with some internal demon before opening the report. He was relieved when she refocused on the case, more than he thought he would be. They were going to have to work together to find something good by noon. He wanted her to stay on the case, mostly because they were partners and he really did want to catch the killer. A tiny part of him that he was ashamed to recognize wanted her to stay on the case so he didn’t have to work with Vinetti.

“Why did MacGregor do his work at this warehouse?” he asked.

“Too dangerous,” said Cart, not looking up from her papers. “When magic goes wrong, it can go catastrophically wrong.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Demars. “I meant, why *this* warehouse? How did he find it? Was it for rent, did he see an ad in the paper, did he like the lack of traffic on the street?”

Cart sat back in her chair. “It wasn’t convenient to his home at all,” she said. “I figured that was intentional.”

“It probably was, but he would have had to rent it from someone.”

“All the buildings were owned by the same holding company, right?” asked Cart. “All empty?”

Demars flipped through his notes. “All empty going on two years.”

“Do we know who heads the holding company? What other shell companies own it?”

“The techs were only able to follow it back two other companies before they hit a dead end at an offshore holding company,” said Demars.

“What were the other companies?” asked Cart.

He told her and her brow furrowed.

“Why does one of those sound familiar?” she asked.

“Maybe because they own a lot of properties around the city?”

Cart shook her head.

Demars paused in his reading. “Wait, here it is,” he said. “One of the shell companies that owned the warehouse also owns the office we raided yesterday.”

Bernie’s eyebrows went up. “They wouldn’t be that careless, would they?”

“It’s circumstantial at best,” said Demars. “It wouldn’t be much help in court. Those companies own hundreds of buildings around town.”

“Still,” said Cart, not giving up, “let’s assume whoever killed MacGregor wasn’t smart enough to cover his tracks in the real estate department.”

“It won’t help,” said Demars. “The building purchases are all public record, but the actual owners have their law firm buy the buildings. Then the whole arrangement is protected by

attorney-client privilege.”

Cart swore under her breath. Demars started to say something then his phone rang. He listened for a while, making short grunting noises and writing on his notepad. He thanked the caller and hung up.

“That was my buddy in the tax office,” he said. “MacGregor claimed a modest income from ‘consulting’.”

“That’s almost as good as owning a night club as a cover job,” said Cart.

“That’s not the interesting part,” Demars said. “My tax friend wasn’t the first person to ask for the information.”

“Who was the first?”

“The MAS.”

Cart stared at him in silence for a moment, then said quietly, “and they couldn’t remove that query from the record?”

“They did,” he said, “but the clerk was perturbed at having his records modified and vented to my friend about what jerks they were.”

The Mental Acuity Service, MAS, was sort of the research arm of the government in the area of magic. They worked on powerful, dangerous magic so that the government would have it before any other countries or before anyone else at all.

MAS had been a curse word in Bernie’s house growing up. They were scarier but less real than the ATFM, the bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Magic. Bernie had seen ATFM agents as a kid, but she had never seen the MAS. They were the boogeyman and the devil rolled into one.

When she was at the academy, they learned about the roles and responsibilities of all the agencies involved in policing magic. The MAS had come up because they didn’t so much police magic as hide in the corner with all the really dangerous magic that they had either made themselves, found, or otherwise acquired. Cart had always thought of them as slightly mad hoarders, grinning and cackling while the lightning crashed menacingly in the background.

“What did the MAS want with MacGregor?” asked Cart.

“That’s a good question,” said Demars.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dread filled Eric as he rode the elevator up to the office. Having most of yesterday off had been great. Too great, in fact, and he didn't want to come back to work. Sinking into his own world of programming, he felt surrounded by interesting things and smart people with open minds who wanted to learn something new. There, no idea was too crazy, too grandiose, or too involved to be dismissed out of hand. Sure, some people would, but there was always someone who like the idea, someone who had something valuable to contribute.

Back in the office, lurking behind those hateful phones, were the opposite of the people Eric wanted to spend time with. And he wasn't just talking about the callers. Some of them were even entertaining, but the gerbils he worked with, their heads down, their tiny minds limited to the script on the screen and the work at hand, they were so boring. More than boring, they drained the life out of Eric. They ran around the wheel in their cage and refused to see anyone outside their tiny world.

He couldn't be too critical. After all, he was on the wheel right there with them, chugging along through the days, making a living and thinking too hard about what the soul-sucking job was costing him. But, at least he had a job and it wasn't some dangerous manual labor job. The pay wasn't great. It was above minimum wage, but just barely. He tried to suck it up and put on a less irritated face as he arrived at his floor.

There was some kind of commotion over by the boss' office. Eric figured it was somebody's birthday and that's where the cake was. He threaded his way through the bland cubicles to his desk. He looked into the cube next to his and Jerry was not there. Eric's eyebrows raised slightly. Of the gerbils in this cage, Jerry had always been the contrarian one who tried to suck the life out of the job just as it squashed his own. He must be getting cake, Eric thought.

Eric hung up his coat and sat down at the computer. When he logged onto the system, a message came up to go see the boss immediately. That was not a good sign. He stood and, after the briefest hesitation, he grabbed his jacket. He was probably not coming back to this cube any time soon. Without a backwards glance, he headed to the office and the rising commotion surrounding it.

A short line had formed outside the door and they were arguing in slightly raised voices about the injustice of it all and how they were going to sue the company. Eric doubted they guy could afford a lawyer, but idle threats were part and parcel of many people's chest thumping.

Waiting in line to be fired is a special kind of torture. It was a new one for Eric, but it solidified tech support as one of the lowest rings of hell firmly in his mind. While he waited, he had some time to think about what he was going to do next. He wondered if he had enough

experience to start applying for programming jobs. He certainly didn't feel confident about it today.

In some ways, he was glad to be fired. The job had really sucked, but being without money was going to suck more, so he had to come up with something to do next. The only other skill he had was off limits to him. It still called to him and, despite how much prison had sucked, he considered it for longer than was really healthy. After a few minutes, sanity won out and he dismissed the idea of going back to magic.

One of the chest thumpers in front of Eric in line was saying, "it's discrimination. The only ones of us getting the can have records." Eric wasn't sure how this guy had come by the information. He certainly didn't make it habit of telling everyone he met.

"They were looking for magic yesterday," said one of the others, "maybe the boss just wants magic as far from here as possible."

"Fuckin' pussies," replied the first guy. "A little heat comes down and they bow down?"

"Maybe it was you actually running magic through here," challenged the first, "screwing us all and now you're trying to lay the blame somewhere else."

"Way to go, numbnuts," said a third guy.

"Fuck you both," the first guy said. "I did nothing wrong and this is some bullshit."

The office door opened and a somber ex-employee walked out the door, a few pieces of paper in his hand. The boss motioned for the next person in line to enter the office. The door closed behind him.

Three hours later, Eric was nursing a beer in the cheapest bar he could find. After getting fired, he had found a copy of the newspaper on a cafe table and searched the want ads. He circled a few jobs and called the numbers from one of the few remaining public telephones in the city. Finding one of those should come with an honorary private investigator badge.

All of the jobs had been filled by the time he called. After that, he couldn't face going to the unemployment office. The dread of going to his last job had nothing on the dread of going to the unemployment office. Being jobless was almost better than going to that place. Where the office job was aggressively bland and sucked the life out of you, at least there were evenings outside the office to look forward to. The unemployment office seemed to thrive on the destruction of hope. People with so little left to lose came there with their last shreds of hope and the office seemed to bleed it out of them, grinding it under the boot of impersonalism and paperwork.

Eric shuddered involuntarily at the bar. He was glad he had avoided that. He would need a far stronger constitution to face that kind of pain. Instead, he had gone walking, semi-randomly down streets that looked interesting, hoping that something would spark a brilliant plan in his mind. Failing that, he hoped to see a "now hiring" sign in one of the windows.

After walking for a couple of hours without a brilliant plan, Eric decided to take the edge off his mounting despair with a beer. That was twenty minutes ago and he still hadn't finished his first.

"Can I get you a nipple for that?" joked the bartender.

Eric just glowered at him and went back to staring off into the colored depths of the liquor bottles along the wall of the bar. The TV chattered quietly to itself. Besides the bartender and Eric, the place was empty.

The front door opened and a slim, slightly Asian-looking man in a hoodie sat at the bar a few

stools down from Eric. The bartender approached him cautiously and said, “what can I get for you?”

“Two Jacks and a Canadian,” said the new guy. The voice sounded slightly familiar to Eric, but he couldn’t place it, so he ignored it. No sense in nosing around without good reason.

The bartender’s eyes flitted to Eric and back to the newcomer. “You sure, buddy? That’s a lot of whiskey.”

“I’m sure,” said the guy. He produced three brown paper bags and one of those reusable tote bags, all of which he set on the bar.

The bartender took the bags and turned his back to Eric while he started putting bottles into bags. The Asian guy looked up at the TV and said, “the Jets are going all the way this year, man. Their offensive line is amazing and that QB throws the ball like a laser.” He half-turned to Eric. “You follow football, buddy?”

Eric took a sip of his warm beer and said, “not really.” He sensed the guy staring at him, so he turned to see what his problem was. Instead, his eyebrows went up and he smiled as he recognized the voice finally.

“Hey, Eric,” said the Asian guy, “long time no see! When did you get out?”

“Hey, Tong, how’ve you been?”

The bartender seemed to relax slightly as he bagged up the third bottle.

“Not bad, man,” said Tong. “Things are going, you know. What are you up to these days?”

“Just got fired,” said Eric, raising his glass.

“That sucks,” said Tong. “Where from?”

“Shitty office job,” said Eric, “but it doesn’t matter now.”

Tong looked around the empty bar and said quietly, “you still in the game?”

“Nah,” said Eric with more conviction than he felt. “I’m looking to do something different for a while.”

“Ah,” said Tong, “too bad. You were the best, man, the best.”

Couldn’t have been that good, thought Eric, seeing as how I got caught. To Tong he said, “thanks.”

The bartender put the bag on the bar with the muffled clink of glass from within.

Tong looked at him and said, “hey, put it on my tab, will ya?” The bartender nodded. “And, give my buddy here a round on me.”

“Thanks,” said Eric. “You got time to have one with me?”

Tong looked towards the door. “Not right now,” he said. “Gotta get this whiskey where it’s going.”

“Right,” said Eric with a nod.

“Another time, though, man,” said Tong. He stood and he and Eric bumped fists. “See ya.”

Eric downed the warm beer in a few mighty swigs and eagerly awaited the cold one the bartender was pulling for him. That was too damn close, thought Eric. There was no way in hell those were merely whiskey bottles. It was probably real whiskey inside them, but the bottles were almost certainly magical focuses, and powerful ones from the looks of it.

The physical form of a magical focus was under the control of the one creating it, within some limitations. The mechanics of the limitations were well known, but the reasons behind them were not. For example, the size of the focus was correlated to the complexity or power of the focus. Most focuses for doing minor magic were the size of a marble or a deck of cards.

Much bigger than that and you were dealing with something more serious.

The composition of the focus was also limited. You couldn't make one into a radio, a gun, a clock, or anything with complex or moving parts. So, a clock case could be a focus, but you'd have to glue a real clock onto it. In this case, the bottles were the focus and the liquor and caps were added to make the illusion convincing to the naked or untrained eye.

If Tong was trafficking in magic that powerful, he had certainly moved up in the world since they had last seen each other. He had always liked Tong, but if he was into anything that big, Eric would have to steer clear of him in the future. The last thing he needed was to get caught with a focus that powerful anywhere in his vicinity.

The bartender set the cold beer in front of Eric. He tried to enjoy it, but his mind was elsewhere and the bartender left him to chase his thoughts in silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bernie admired the tasteful interior of the apartment. The carpet was strong, yet subdued, the furniture modern, but functional. It looked like an interior design magazine brought to life. She looked down at the body and sighed. One murder with magic she could chalk up to bad luck, but now an MAS agent?

Of course, the captain hadn't known who the victim was when he ordered her and Demars to take the case. Once he found out, he was sure to pull her and put Vinetti or someone else on it. Until then, she was going to work it as if it was her case.

The apartment looked like it had been pristine, but that someone had started living there not long ago. There were two used towels in the bathroom, but none in the hamper. There were plates in the sink, but none in the dishwasher. The clincher had been the fridge. Two days worth of take out leftovers and no other food anywhere in the apartment. Either they were dealing with a very strangely obsessive victim, or the apartment was a short-term rental place and the victim was from out of town.

The photographers from CSI were there, snapping away, while a magic tech did a sweep. There was some heavy-duty magic from the victim's person, her files, and her computer. One of the wards had been so intense that it fried the first focus the tech used, making it spark and causing the tech to yelp in astonishment. After that, they had briefly examined the victim manually and discovered her MAS badge. The tech had carefully steered clear of the body after that.

Cart was trying to put the scene back together in her mind when Demars returned from interviewing the neighbors.

"The neighbor who called 911 said she heard yelling, a struggle, and then a single gunshot," said Demars. "She didn't see the other party, but she said he sounded male."

"Are there security cameras in the lobby of the building? A doorman, maybe?"

"No doorman," said Demars, "and I'm having the super pull up the video footage now. The stairwell is not monitored and it has access from the lobby, so all he would have had to do was hide from the cameras long enough to gain access to the stairwell."

"That seems like a gaping security hole," said Cart.

"The super seemed a little miffed when I pointed that out to him and said he would look into it."

"From the looks of things," said Cart, broadly indicating the chaos among the fashionable furniture, "there was one hell of a struggle."

"No sign of forced entry?" asked Demars.

Cart shook her head. "None. So they most likely knew each other."

"Hmm," said Demars, "business or pleasure?"

"Hard to say," said Cart. "The apartment is pretty posh, but maybe that's just how MAS agents spend your tax dollars. I'm betting she was in town on business by the case files, but that doesn't rule out having personal visitors. What time was the call?"

"Around seven P.M.," said Demars, consulting his notes. "Probably not business, then."

Cart grunted.

"If it was business," said Demars, "wouldn't they have met at the MAS building?"

"Possibly," said Cart. She didn't say that more than a few of her father's business meetings were done after hours in places other than an office. Normal people, she reasoned, met in offices during normal business hours.

"Well," said Demars, "we'll get what we can from the MAS on the victim and see where that leads us."

"As soon as we make that call," said Cart, "MAS will be down here faster than you can say 'jurisdiction'."

Demars looked up from his notebook and over his shoulder. "Or faster," he said. Cart turned around to look at the figures coming through the apartment door. They wore the unofficial uniform of federal agents everywhere of dark suits, white shirts, and bland ties. One was pudgier than the other, but both were fairly well built. One thing Cart had unabashedly kept from her childhood was estimating the outcome of a brawl with them. It had served her well on the school grounds, growing up with her brothers, and even in the police academy. She had some martial arts training beyond what they taught at the academy, but she was far from an expert. She guessed she could take the pudgy one, but it would be a hard fight, and stalemate with the other.

The pudgy one produced an MAS badge from his suit and held it up for their inspection. "I'm agent Walker," he said, "and this is agent Kantorowitz. We're here to take over this investigation."

Demars looked them over. Cart guessed he was making a similar evaluation of their power, but probably their legal or political power, rather than something so crude as brawling. "We have to clear it with our chain of command," he said. "You understand. We do things by the book around here."

"Of course," said Walker with only a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

"Until we get that sorted out," said Kantorowitz, his eyes roving all over the apartment, "please tell your techs to stop what they're doing."

Cart bristled involuntarily. "Why? We would, of course, turn over all materials collected if this becomes your jurisdiction." She slightly emphasized the "if" just to irritate them.

His eyes settled on Cart for a long moment. "Detective Cart, isn't it?"

Demars started to say something, but Walker interrupted him. "Would you please call your superior? The sooner we get this case transitioned, the better."

Demars nodded and stepped away to call the captain while Cart and Kantorowitz had their staring contest. After another long moment, Cart said, "it is."

His lip curled nearly into a sneer. "I'm sure you don't want the evidence to be mishandled or the crime scene tainted. So, I repeat, tell the techs to stop." Cart had heard more subtle threats from hardened criminals. Anger boiled up inside her, but she calmed herself by remembering that she already had a murder to solve and it wasn't this one.

“Fine,” she said shortly. She turned to the techs and said, “okay people, stop what you’re doing until we get it sorted out who’s crime scene this is.” Most of them had stopped doing anything as soon as the MAS agents arrived and had been busily examining their shoes.

They squared off, Cart still between the agents and the body. “You got here quick,” she said. “You from the local office?”

They ignored her and looked past her into the apartment, watching the techs and examining the scene.

“Quite a struggle,” said Cart. “Agent Bryne must have been quite a fighter.” Kantorowitz looked at her sharply and Walker warned him off with a glance.

Demars returned from his phone call. He stood next to Cart, facing her. “It’s legit,” he said. “The captain confirms we’re to hand over the scene to Walker and help in whatever way they direct.”

Walker smiled slightly. “As I said, our case.”

Demars glared at him.

“What can we do to help,” asked Cart as sincerely as possible. She wanted nothing more than to drop this case and head out, but she knew it would irritate the MAS agents to have to dismiss her and Demars after they had offered to help.

“You can get the hell out,” said Kantorowitz. “You and all your people.”

Demars turned to the room and said to the techs, “okay, wrap it up. Make it a priority to get all the evidence to the MAS office ASAP. Got it?” There was a murmur of assent and the tech started filing out of the apartment.

Demars said, “anything else?”

“We’ll call if anything comes up,” said Walker. “You can go.”

Cart and Demars headed for the apartment door. Cart paused and turned. “Settle a bet between me and Demars? Do you guys ever have business meetings outside the office?”

“Good-bye, Detectives,” said Walker. He herded them to the door and shut it behind them.

CHAPTER NINE

The crime families of New York didn't like each other, but they tolerated each others' presence out of practicality. Get more than one in a room together and there was bound to be a fight about something.

The room was thick with tension as minor bosses from five of the families sat around a table, a bodyguard behind each one. The Sloan family had offered to host the meeting since they were the only ones on relatively good terms with all the parties involved. The room was large and well-lit with utilitarian furniture. It was on the top floor of a warehouse that the Sloan family owned, far from the site of either murder.

Alex Petrovin stood as guard for his uncle Yuri and kept his eyes on the others. He and his uncle had powerful wards, as did the others, and no other magic had been permitted into the building. Alex trusted the Sloans to screen for weapons, magical or otherwise, but one could kill even when unarmed, so he did not let down his guard. He expected nothing less from the others.

He knew most of the other men around the table by face and reputation, even if they had never met in person. At least all of the families were taking this seriously and had sent people capable of speaking on behalf of the families in general terms. While he was grateful this meeting wouldn't be a waste of his time, he was also a little concerned that everyone was so worried.

After Bernadine's raid on the office had provided no clues as to the murderer, he worried that word of the leak would lead back to him and he'd have to explain why he was giving tips to the cops. A small part of him also worried that the families would take it out on Bernadine somehow. They still might, he reminded himself.

Frank Sloan, the organizer of the meeting motioned to his bodyguard to close the door and looked at the faces around the table. He knew he was on top of a powder keg, but he was very careful not to be the spark. It was that calm, steady, non-partisan dealings that had made the Sloan family the biggest importer/exporter of illicit goods on the eastern seaboard.

He took a deep breath and said, "gentlemen, I know you have a lot to discuss. Despite our differences, we are here to solve a problem. Let's keep that in mind."

He ceded the floor with a wave of his hand and there was a brief clamor for speaking rights. After a chaotic second, a voice cut through the noise and asked, "does anyone want to claim this as an internal problem?" It was Jose Hidalgo, a stout man with close-cropped hair and a scar on his right cheek.

There was uncomfortable silence around the table, but no one spoke.

"Good," said Hidalgo, "then we must find this *pendejo* and make sure he cannot cause any

more trouble.”

“Agreed,” said Yuri Petrovin, his bass voice rumbling.

Ravi Naidu leaned forward and looked around the table. “And just how do you propose we do that?” Another uncomfortable silence rose from the gathering. “If we knew how to find him, we would have dealt with this already.”

“He can’t be that hard to find,” said Renard Cart. Alex watched him and tried to see the Cart family resemblance. He had light brown hair, like Bernadine did, but that’s where the similarities ended. “He’s one man,” said Cart, “we have people on the ground all over the city. We just have to make it worth their while to find him.”

“What do we tell them to look for?” asked Hidalgo, angrily. “Someone not in the families who has been developing some heavy-duty magical focuses?” A few of the men started to interrupt but Hidalgo powered over them. “We don’t even know what he looks like.”

“This is bullshit,” said Naidu, “let the police find him. They are looking for him already.”

“No!” said Petrovin, pounding his fist on the table. “This man has had the audacity to come into our city and start making trouble.” There was a murmur of agreement. “Big trouble, the kind of attention we cannot afford to have if we are to run our businesses. We must find him and anyone he works with and teach them a lesson so this does not happen again.” Yuri looked around the table, daring any of them to disagree with him. No one did and the silence settled over the table for a long moment.

Sloan cleared his throat. “Then we’re agreed? We put the word out to look for this man.” Nods went around the table. “Will there be compensation for finding him? Beyond, of course, the goodwill of the family the report it to?”

“Fifty thousand,” proposed Cart, “ten from each family here, with the Sloan family to act as escrow.” There was some discussion between the bosses and their bodyguards. Alex leaned down and Yuri whispered, “a bargain. He has cost us that much already.” Alex nodded and straightened up.

After the discussion had died down, Sloan said, “agreed?” A round of nods and murmured affirmations went around the table. “Very well,” said Sloan. “Once he is captured, and turned over to one of the families here, the money will be paid. In the event the finder does not specify which family is to take the man, the Sloan family will hold him for twenty-four hours while a family is elected to come and collect him. If you do not collect him in that time, we will dispose of him in a manner of our choosing. Agreed?”

There was grumbling agreement around the table. No one liked giving up money without also getting the troublemaker, but it had to be done.

“How do we know the man turned over is really the culprit,” asked Cart.

Yuri glared at him. “You doubt our word?” A few of the others agreed sharply.

“Not your word, just that of the street rats,” he said. “Some of them would sell out their own mother for that kind of money. How can we be sure we’ve got the right man?”

“Perhaps we should lower the reward,” said Naidu, “to make lying less appealing.” No one seemed to take this very seriously. When dealing with dangerous targets, it had to be worth the risk.

“An addendum, then,” said Sloan. “The money will be paid after the man is turned over and after the family has been given time to verify his identity.” The table nodded in agreement. “In that case, you have twenty-four hours to deliver the reward money to escrow, by the usual channels.” Sloan nodded. “Good day, gentlemen.”

The men left by pairs, through different doors. If the feds were watching the building, they wanted to make it harder for them to place them all at the same place at the same time. Alex and his uncle Yuri left by a back door, slipping into the back of a long black car.

Yuri looked out the window and scowled. Alex wasn't sure now was the right time, but the longer he held his tongue, the worse it would be for him.

"Uncle," he said, "I may have an idea of how to find this man."

Yuri looked at him sharply. "What is this? What do you know, boy?"

Alex swallowed. "One of my men likes to go to different clubs around town."

"And?" prompted Yuri.

"He overheard someone talking about the new guy in town who had some amazing focuses." It was bit of stretch. Alex's guy had heard about someone dealing in magic, but the way things had gone for the police, there was nothing to that rumor. Things had gone so badly for the police, or so rumor had it, that Alex had begun to suspect that his guy had been used as a patsy. Following the source of that rumor would no doubt prove much more fruitful.

Yuri swore in Russian. He leaned closer to Alex, his eyes flashing. "Alex, you find your guy and you find this new guy. Understand?"

Alex nodded. He was pretty sure his uncle wasn't going to kill him right now, but there was murder in his eyes and Alex didn't like being on the wrong side of that anger. He would put out word, as the families had agreed, to the street-level contacts, but he was going to find this bastard if it was the last thing he did.

CHAPTER TEN

Curtis sat behind his sleek glass and chrome desk and drank very expensive scotch. One of his eyes was starting to blacken where that bitch agent had hit him. Part of him hated that he'd had to kill her so quickly. Quick was okay, if it was also clean, but this had been nothing short of a disaster.

He took another swallow of scotch. She had wanted to pull the plug on the whole thing. After all he'd done for her, setting up the manufacturing facilities and getting buyers lined up. She couldn't just pull the plug on something like that. Besides, this was his ticket to the top and no dirt MAS agent was going to stop him from making it.

There was a soft knock at the door. Curtis motioned to the guard by the door and he opened it. Quinnell came in with a sharp-faced man in tow. They approached Curtis' desk and he waived for them to sit down.

Quinnell said, "this is Evan." The man nodded in greeting. "He's proficient in magic and has agreed to help out, for the usual fee."

Curtis looked him over. He fit some of the magical stereotypes, skinny, near-sighted, fixated on details, but something about the sharpness of his chin and cheek bones made him look slightly off, like someone had put his face together based on a description.

"Of course," said Curtis. "Are you familiar with using reflectors?"

Evan nodded again.

"Good," said Curtis, "then this will be easy." Curtis knew about magic, of course, and he had crafted it years ago. But, when he came to town, he got away from crafting magic himself and focused on the higher level problems of transportation and sales. He opened a drawer in the desk and withdrew a small drawstring bag. He tossed the bag to Evan, which he caught one handed.

Evan opened the bag and pulled out one of the objects inside. It was shaped like a suction cup and about one inch in diameter. As he turned the thing over in his hand, he thought he could hear the club noise from below more loudly and smell the ladies' perfume at the bar.

"Those are 'repeaters'," said Curtis, a smile curling his lip. "And they are the future."

"What do they do?" asked Evan. His voice was high and pinched.

"You know about the distance problem in magic?"

Evan looked like the question insulted him. "Magic requires line of sight, so the distance over which you can perform magic is limited."

Curtis leaned forward in his chair and jabbed a finger at the objects in Evan's hand.

"Repeaters solve the distance problem," he said. He waited for the statement to sink in, then

said, “you chain them together, all within line of sight of each other. Then you focus your will on the near end. The repeaters transmit your will to the far end and it’s as if you’re standing at the last repeater when your spell takes effect.”

At least, that was how MacGregor had explained it to him. Curtis hadn’t tried it himself. He was above that now, the boss, not some lowly magic grunt. He considered this the first field trial of the devices.

“Nifty,” said Evan. Qinnell thought it might have been one of the biggest understatements he had ever heard. The distance problem had been a long-standing problem for the application of magic. It had lagged significantly behind all other technologies of a similar era, like the steam engine, partly because of this daunting problem.

Making your will influence the world around you had undergone significant improvements over the decades, most notably by patterns of manifestation that let a physical object represent a spell. Users of the focus didn’t need to know anything about how the focus was constructed, they just needed to be told how to use it.

Even with the creation of focuses, it just wasn’t possible to focus your will into changing the physical world if you weren’t near the physical world you wanted to change. It was still unclear why this was the case, even to academics and those who studied magic as a principle. Qinnell had been reading up on the distance problem after Curtis had told him what he was building. The current theory was that focusing your will to do magic used more senses than we knew about and those senses were also part of the input to doing magic.

Qinnell wasn’t sure if he believed that, but he had first-hand experience with trying to magic from a great distance and it having no effect. It was one of the reasons magic hadn’t simply supplanted other technologies for warfare. A gun or bomb was a far more effective distance-killing device that magic would ever be.

“Your target is going to be at his club later tonight. Qinnell has the address,” said Curtis. “Setup the repeaters wherever you’d like, but I suggest being across the street at a minimum, several blocks away would be even better. Once you take care of things, you can collect the repeaters by focusing on the next to last one and pulling the first one to you. Do that all the way back to where you’re standing.” He looked at Evan closely to see if he was following all this.
“Got all that?”

Evan nodded.

Curtis smiled. “Good. Qinnell, make sure he has the target, address, and see that he gets safely on his way.”

Qinnell nodded and he and Evan stood up. “If this goes well,” said Curtis, “there will be lots more work in the near future.” Evan grinned greedily.

Oh yes, thought Curtis, a lot of work.

The shorter autumn days meant that it was nearly dark by the time Evan arrived at the address Qinnell had given him, even though it was still too early for the club to be busy. That suited Evan just fine. He watched the club door and entry way for a while from across the street. He pretended to be waiting for a bus, occasionally checking his watch and looking hopefully in the direction of oncoming traffic, before turning back to stare at the building in front of him.

The entrance proper was well-lit under a curved red awning and it reflected off the white concrete spectacularly in the dying sunlight. A regular bass beat could be felt more than heard,

even where Evan stood, coming from the club. There was valet parking, but the cars Evan had seen pulling up to the place were mid-priced sedans, not luxury cars.

There was too much attention at the end of the awning, where the cars pulled up, people got out, valet drivers got in, and bouncers checked IDs and for dress code. But, this is where Krish had said to do it, and what Curtis Krish paid for, Curtis Krish got. Evan settled on the edge of the club wall for the first repeater. There were fake windows set into the otherwise smooth wall of the club. Slowly changing abstract art was displayed there on heavy-duty outdoor computer monitors. They added to the glow of the entrance and gave it a hip, yet classy, feel.

Evan really did check his watch now. He still had twenty minutes until the time window in which his target would be there. He wanted to lay out the repeaters in his mind, choose the route back the alley, before he placed any of them. He left the bus stop and found a nearby window ledge with good line of sight to his mental placement of the first repeater.

He didn't know how close together the repeaters needed to be to make this work. He decided to base it on half of the distance he could manage unaided. That left plenty of room for error if the repeaters themselves consumed some of his will or adversely affected the distance of the spell.

He decided to zig-zag the repeaters down the street, then down an alley to the next street over. Doing that had mentally used all the repeaters Krish had given him. He scoffed mentally at Curtis' instructions to use at least two. He barely had enough to get a block away. He thought maybe Krish wasn't allowing for some will or distance to be consumed by the repeater itself.

That was just like him, all arrogance and self-importance while missing the important details. Evan sighed. Well, at least it was a one-time job. He could work for someone else once this was done. And he wasn't going to complain about the money. It was very good, even considering he'd have to skip town for a while until the Petrovin family had stopped looking for Alex's killer.

Once Evan had decided where to place the repeaters, he retraced his steps to the club, this time actually placing the small disks. He had bought some industrial-strength sticky-tack to hold the repeaters to the walls of the buildings. Normally, Evan would just bind the outer layers of molecules together using a simple spell. But this was new tech and Evan wasn't sure if or how operating on the repeater itself would change its operation.

He hoped Krish would sell him some of the repeaters for his personal use at a discount. These things were just full of potential and Evan hadn't had a chance to play with them before this evening's engagement.

After placing the next to last repeater across the street from the club entrance, Evan pulled out his cell phone and pretended to have a discussion. When he got to the place on the club wall where he wanted to plant the last repeater, his pretend phone call took a nasty turn.

"You what?" he asked incredulously, stopping in his tracks. He feigned being overwhelmed and stepped over to the wall to steady himself. The bouncers looked at him.

"No, it's cool," he said in a hurt tone. "I just-, well, I just made plans for the weekend for the both of us." The bouncers looked away, apparently satisfied that he was just some guy on a phone, pausing to focus on the call.

Evan pulled out the tiny repeater and worked it into the crevice of the inset faux-window. "I just wish you'd give me a chance to make it up to you," he said into the phone. He had to get the position right, so he didn't want to hurry.

He nodded and made grunting noises into the phone for a bit. When he was satisfied with

the position of the repeater, he prepared for his big finale. He wanted to make sure they were watching him as he walked away and not the place he had been.

He started walking again, towards the carpeted area. "Oh yeah? If that's how you feel about it," he said, his voice raising. The bouncers watch him warily. "Fine! You leave, then! If you're leaving, take that goddamn poodle with you! I am sick of that thing pissing on my carpets." The bouncers watched him as he walked out of the glow of the club entrance and off into the night, still yelling at his lifeless phone.

Two blocks later, Evan put his phone away and circled back around to the start of the repeater chain. He got in position and prepared his spells. Evan was a professional and he spent a lot of time honing the spells until they were a natural extension of his mind. The difference was not always visible to people who didn't craft magic, but there was an elegance to Evan's spells and focuses. He took great care with his tools, far more than he paid to his appearance, but that was true of so many spell crafters.

Lovingly, almost reverently, Evan removed his most deadly focus from its small leather pouch. He had manifested the focus as a small slab of metal with sharp edges and a perfectly matte black finish. He wanted it to be uncomfortable to hold, constantly reminding the caster that this focus was deadly in purpose. Evan laid it gently on his palm and put the leather pouch back in his pocket.

He cleared his mind and started down his personal checklist of magic. Physically, he was standing at the end of an alley, a block and a half away from the club. He had chosen a spot behind a dumpster and under a rusted fire escape so he was mostly shielded from view. He pulled a string of beads from his pocket that looked like a rosary. Each one of the beads was the manifestation of a small spell. Starting near the pendant, Evan fingered one of the beads and pushed his will into it.

A stronger ward than he usually kept activated sprang into existence around him. There was a brief sharp smell of ozone. Evan fingered the next bead and the smell faded. Next bead, and Evan appeared to take on the color of the objects around him. It wasn't the best camouflage, but true invisibility was fiendishly difficult and not worth the effort in most cases. Certainly not when he was so far from his victim.

Once activated, the spells would stay active until Evan consciously stopped them or until the focus was broken. Every spell that was active was taking a small toll on Evan's energy and ability to focus. Having dozens of small spells active was like wearing a very scratchy sweater next to your skin. It didn't really hurt, but it was distracting, and eventually it was so distracting that you grew exhausted from trying to ignore it and just took the sweater off.

Evan skipped the next two stones on the fake rosary. They were spells for masking his smell and sound, which he didn't need for this job. Finally, he activated a spell for alerting him when someone was physically nearby. It was an addition to the wards he already had in place and was one he rarely used.

Satisfied with his preparations, Evan put the rosary back into his pocket and cupped his free hand under the one that was holding the black slab. He focused his eyes and his will on the repeater nearest him. He gasped as his perspective changed.

His vision blurred and seemed to rush past him with a speed that made his eyes hurt. There was light and shadow and there were shapes that seemed to move in disturbing ways for just a painful instant.

At the same time, there was a whooshing, clashing sound like the chaos of hundred

televisions all with the volume turned up too loud on annoying ads. The sound crashed into his eardrums so painfully that they rang.

As he was recovering from the changes to sight and sound, he became aware of the smell of ozone. Evan realized it must be what the smell was like outside of his ward bubble on the far side of the alley. He could smell the wet brick of the wall and the mildew of a cardboard box that he hadn't smelled from his side of the alley.

Evan took a few deep breaths, steadying his nerves from the intensity of the experience. It was incredible! For once, Krish was not exaggerating the impact the repeaters would have on the world. Evan couldn't wait to get this job finished so he could see about getting a set for himself.

He slowed his breathing and focused on the job at hand. He looked around from his new vantage point and located the next repeater. He focused his will on it and his senses were again barraged with sight, sound, and smell, but this time he was ready for it. It was still painful, but it was not as disorienting as the first one.

Slowly, pausing at each connection, Evan pushed his will further down the chain of repeaters. At the end of the alley, he stopped to examine the club from halfway down the block. It was too far to do magic from here, but Evan needed to mentally regroup. This chain of will was becoming more and more difficult to maintain.

He was still sensing things from earlier locations in the chain. He could still smell the ozone of his magic even though he was hundreds of feet away. He could feel the pressure from the other repeater locations pushing in on him, sights, sounds, and smells that felt like they would come crashing in on him if his concentration was interrupted. Maybe using so many repeaters had been a bad idea after all, but it was too late for that now.

Evan pushed back on all the senses trying to invade his mind and just focused on his current location. With that firmly in mind, he pushed his will to the next repeater. Again the pain of vision and sound hit him. It seemed to last longer this time and he felt slightly dizzy, even though he knew his body was standing safely on firm ground a block away.

By the time Evan had pushed through to the final repeater, he was panting with the effort. He felt a bead of sweat trickle down his face. The sensation seemed to come from miles away and could barely be felt through the haze of other input. He looked out from the last repeater and had a good view of the club's entryway, just as he'd hoped.

Evan just hoped that Alex would be arriving soon. He wasn't sure how long he could hold his attention like this. He tricked his mind into focusing on the final location by counting the rungs in the canopy's arching structure and by tallying the number of guests that were carrying guns and those that were not.

After a ten minute eternity, Alex's car pulled up to the entrance. A bouncer opened the door and blocked Evan's view of the person getting out of the car. Evan's mental trigger finger was so itchy from all the input lapping at his consciousness that he considered killing the bouncer too, just to get him out of the way. He ground his teeth and waited for the bouncer to move.

Alex stepped out of the car and Evan prepared to fire. Then, he leaned back into the car and helped a voluptuous woman in a brilliant blue dress out and onto the carpeted walkway. Evan took another breath, lined up the shot, and pushed his will through the focus in his hand two blocks away.

The spell ripped its way down the chain of repeaters. The force of the spell seemed to scream like metal scraping on metal, echoing and careening off Evan's senses. It impacted each

repeater like a hammer, sending a shockwave of pain, image, and sound back to Evan. He gritted his teeth and mentally held on against the rising flood of sensations pounding relentlessly against his mind.

A low, wordless cry started involuntarily from his throat, slowly rising in pitch as Evan started to panic. The sound of his own scream only added to the sensory overload as it was heard from half a dozen repeaters down the alley.

At the far end of the repeater chain, Alex started walking up the carpet, nodding to the bouncers as he passed. One of his wards suddenly lit up and he crouched, pushing the woman back towards the bouncers. Their guns were already out as they searched the area. One of them caught the startled woman and pushed her back into the car while the other had come to stand over Alex while he scanned the area for the threat.

Then a chunk of the white concrete in front of Alex exploded. It sent shards of concrete flying into Alex and the guard and sent a puff of fine concrete dust into the air. The guard stood in front of Alex even as he stared incredulously at the blank wall where the shot had come from.

By the time the kill shot had reached the final repeater, Evan was collapsing in an alley two blocks away. He dropped like a sack of potatoes, crumpling down and flopping back onto the ground, dead. Blood trickled out of his nose and ears. His eyes stared, unseeing, up at the sky. The irises were lost in the pools of red that surrounded them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eric wasn't sure why he went back to the bar where he had met Tong the day before. He reasoned that it was because the beer was cheap and cold, but he passed a dozen places that fit that description on his way to the place. He even wondered if, somewhere inside him, he wanted to see Tong again, a guy he called a friend, after the shitty day he'd had. Of course, the day had been so shitty that he was probably not good company anyway.

The unemployment office had been just as detrimental to his hope as he feared. At least when he was in prison, he had hope that he'd survive long enough to finish his sentence and get back into the world. With unemployment, the best he could hope for was another shitty job. At least there was beer and porn out in the world.

Eric sat at the bar, drinking his beer a little more quickly this time. He still couldn't really afford to be spending his money on beer, but he was still trying to shake the cold dread the unemployment office had place on his heart. The TV was on talking to itself about sports while a few other patrons drank their beers in silence. The bartender let his customers drink in peace. Years behind that bar had taught him that, when customers wanted to talk, they would. Until then, he would leave them be.

Over the last two days, Eric had a lot of time to think. Mostly he was busy thinking of reasons not to go back to crafting magic. He tried to relive the constant fear of getting caught, the dread of going to prison, and the pain of actually being there. He tried telling himself that life without magic was simpler and safer. He was better off making a living doing something legitimate, something with a longer life expectancy, something respectable.

Eric had never been very good at convincing anyone to do anything. In middle school, he'd had to give a persuasive speech in one of his classes. They left believing the opposite of what he wanted them to believe. When he had crafted magic, he let other people do the negotiating and the persuading while he focused on implementation. In prison, he had never been able to convince the guys from cell block D that he was broke. They always insisted on beating on him for a while, then checking his pockets to be sure.

He took a long swig of beer and shuddered inwardly at the thought. Definitely didn't want to go back to that, he thought. Nagging thoughts about how much fun it was or how much money could be made kept trying to surface. Eric pushed them down ruthlessly. He was legit now, and that was final. Better learn to live in that world.

The door to the bar opened and the patron sat next to Eric at the bar. It was Tong. He had a wild look in his eyes that was a mix of avarice and fear. He nodded to Eric then looked at the

bartender.

“Double of whiskey,” he said, then added quietly, “the real stuff.”

The bartender poured the drink and Tong tossed it back like a man dying of thirst would drink water. He set the glass back on the bar and said, a little hoarsely, “another.”

Eric blinked and took a drink of his beer. Something had Tong really rattled. When a courier for the Sloan crime family was nervous, Eric was nervous out of self-preservation. The other bar patrons noticed Tong, but went back to their drinks after a moment.

The bartender poured the second drink and waited, bottle in hand. Eric wondered if this happened a lot in the bartender’s experience. Tong downed half the glass in a gulp and set the glass on the bar. The bartender put the bottle away as an excuse to give Eric and Tong some privacy.

Eric pitched his voice low, conspiratorially. “Jesus, Tong,” he said, “what’s going on?”

He leaned closer, cupping his hand around the whiskey and taking another sip. “There’s a bounty out for this new guy in town who’s been edging in on the magic trade,” he said, his voice hoarse and quavering slightly.

Eric mentally put this on the list of reasons why going legit was the right move. He didn’t have to worry about who was pissed at who this week. A few snide comments and half-hearted jokes crossed his mind as a response, but he settled on, “and?”

“And?” demanded Tong, through clenched teeth. “I carried the supplies to this guy for another family.” His eyes darted around the bar as if someone might have heard. If they did, they gave no notice.

Eric took a drink from his beer again. Yep, definitely better to stay out of this. A thrill of excitement at the danger Tong was in threatened to spiral up from his gut, but Eric pushed it down. Eric was in no danger and Tong probably wasn’t either. And anyway it wasn’t his problem to deal with.

“You’re worried this guy will rat you out when he’s caught?”

Tong looked at him like Eric was the dumbest human he’d ever laid eyes on. “What do you think?” he asked in a whisper. “That he’ll just laugh maniacally and go down all by himself?” He slammed back the rest of the whiskey. “Not fucking likely.”

Eric finished his beer and ordered two more, one for him, one for Tong. Tong put his elbows on the bar and cradled his head in his hands, cursing softly. Eric felt sorry for him. Suddenly, having spent all day in the unemployment office didn’t seem so bad. At least no one was going to try and kill him if he gave the forms to the wrong clerk.

Tong took a long swig of beer. “Shit,” he said plainly, setting the glass on the bar.

Eric studied the bubbles in his beer as his mind raced. Despite his best efforts to keep the situation at arms length, the problem solving part of his brain was off and running with the new challenge. He cursed himself for thinking. He sipped his beer and waffled on whether or not to share the solution his brain had come up with. After a minute or two, Eric’s inner problem solver demanded to have his idea heard.

“What if you were to find the guy first?” he asked quietly.

Tong blinked and looked at him. “What?”

“You find the guy before any of the families do,” Eric said. “If you were a courier for him, you probably have a good idea where he is. You find him and shut him up.” Eric said the last part quickly and in barely more than a mumble. He was not a killer and he hoped like hell that Tong wasn’t either.

Tong stared at Eric and considered this for a minute. "I can find him, but I can't shut him up," said Tong. Eric felt relieved Tong hadn't changed that much in the years Eric had been in prison. Tong had a faraway look in his eyes, like he was trying to think and failing.

"What about the other family guy who was in on this?" asked Eric. Tong looked at him, somewhat blankly. Eric cursed mentally. He feared that now he'd put the idea in Tong's head, he might decide he was capable of murder after all. Sometimes that seed of doubt was all it took.

"Won't this other guy be looking for the interloper, too?" Tong nodded slowly. Eric continued, "because he has just as much to lose as you do if this new guy starts running his mouth."

"More," said Tong. He took a swig of beer and seemed much calmer than he had been a few minutes ago. Eric hoped it was just the power that came from having a plan and not the recklessness that came with losing all hope.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was a thick report on Detective Cart's desk when she got in the next day. After being summarily dismissed by the MAS the previous morning and making no progress on locating MacGregor's killer, she was grateful for any new information. She looked at the report's origination as she draped her coat over her chair and sat down. She sighed. At least she could make a good start before Demars got back from his meeting with the MAS.

It had made her a little nervous that they wanted to speak with him at all. She had become quite paranoid after leaving her family to join the police and she knew it. At times like this she wanted something to focus on that wasn't all the maybes and possibilities and worries that would otherwise consume her mind.

The report was the detailed analysis of the magical traces from the crime scene and the rooftop across the street. The traces were like breadcrumbs left by magic as it happened. Sometimes, traces were left on purpose, but most of the time it was accidental. Some traces were avoidable, but many were not.

Like the smell of ozone when magic was being used, there was something about the way will was manifest that affected surrounding matter. The way Bernie's father and brother had explained it, as the will passed from energy into changes on the world, the world became more ordered where the energy had passed. They said it kind of like how iron filings line up in a magnetic field. As your will passed into the world, the molecules and electrical charges in the area lined up in response. It wasn't usually enough to change the molecules along the path, but it was possible.

More than that, the intent or purpose of the will used in the magic lined up or modified the molecules in specific ways. That was a general rule, not a certainty. If it was, murder by magic cases would be a lot more airtight. If you could look at the traces and know what the magic had been intended to do, fewer killers would get off by claiming they were trying to knock somebody's hat off when they accidentally scrambled all the molecules in the guy's frontal lobe.

Besides, magical focuses were more than just one component. So, if you got traces from one component, you could see what the intent was for that component, but not for the spell as a whole. If you had enough traces, you could make some educated guesses about what was going on, but they would be speculation and generally not admissible in court. Still, such analysis could be helpful.

Detecting traces from a crime scene was a mundane job, requiring precision of execution, but detection was all automated. Once the traces were collected, specialized hardware had to be used to categorize the mass of raw data into something that could be analyzed. The department

only had one such machine, which is why it had taken so long for the report to come back.

Once the traces had been categorized and mapped out, they had to be analyzed. Analyzing magical traces to determine intent was a fairly specialized skill. The department had access to a separate set of techs who did such work. The delay to get their time was even longer. Bernie hadn't felt like waiting that long, so she'd had the report sent to her first. She would send it to the magic geeks later.

Bernie opened the report and read the summary page.

- Intent: hide/conceal, amount: high, complexity: high
- Intent: protect/ward, amount: high, complexity: very high
- Intent: communicate, amount: low, complexity: low
- Intent: amplify, amount: low, complexity: very high
- Major identified components:
 - MgShadow3.2.2
 - TraceBlock_8.1
 - EyesOn-1.0a
 - WalledEntry-01129-227-56
 - SensiSend-ver3
 - StepItUp1.1.8
- Unidentified components: 312
- NOTE: portions were too obscured or disturbed to be analyzed. See pages 8-12 for location maps.

Bernie raised her eyebrows at the number of unidentified components. MacGregor must have been working on the thing for a very long time to have accumulated that many specialized components. Based on what she had seen at his home, MacGregor had probably made most of the components himself.

That wasn't a certainty of course. It was always possible that the list of components the lab had was out of date and that's why so many of the components present at the murder scene couldn't be identified. As new, reusable magical components appeared on the market, the trace databases were updated, but there was inevitably a delay.

Besides, MacGregor had had style, antiquated thought it might have been. He was unlikely to be satisfied with off-the-shelf components for the complicated parts of his project, whatever that was.

The components that could be identified hinted that protection and warding was extremely important. It was present in both quantity and the traces that were there were complex. Wards got their complexity from either being very specific or being general, but complete. It was hard to prevent a very specific thing from happening because time, spaces, and sensory perception were all involved in directing or preventing magic. Putting all of that information into a ward was difficult to do and still have the ward be effective.

Likewise very general wards were easy to construct, but they invariably missed something. For example, the ward Bernie wore on her belt protected her from incoming magic directed at her body. It would not protect her if someone aimed the magic at her gun and caused it to fire while still on her hip. It also would not protect her from a rock, thrown by magic, towards her head. A general ward that caught more threats increased the complexity of the ward substantially.

It wasn't yet clear to Bernie whether the wards were part of the focus MacGregor had been

building, or whether they were protecting him while he worked on the focus. Communication and conceal/hide were often found in combination, she knew. If you're building a magical focus to communicate, you want to be sure it's secure and not just anyone can eavesdrop on what you're communicating.

The amplify component was the most puzzling to Bernie so far. Amplification was common in things like bombs, beacons, or anything involving wind, but rare with hiding. It was probably a misnomer to call it amplification since it didn't actually increase the amount of power by itself, it was much more like a capacitor. Her brothers had described it as how you get yourself going on a swing. With each swing, you're putting the same amount of power into the motion, but because you do it at the right time, you increase how high you swing. An amplifier helped with the timing so that your steady stream of will could build up and affect the world more than if you did it unaided.

The report said that there was a low amount of amplification, but that it was very complex. From all that Bernie knew about amplification, there wasn't much complicated about it at all. It was a well-known component that rarely failed catastrophically. When it was involved in a spell gone wrong, it was usually the application of the output of the amplifier that was the problem, not the amplifier itself.

The components that had been identified were not advanced enough to warrant the "very high" on the complexity scale. Bernie assumed it was the unidentified components which contributed the complexity. So far, her best guess was some kind of long-distance communication focus. She eagerly turned pages in the report, her interest piqued.

Several hours later, Demars returned from his meeting with the MAS, looking unhappy. His lips were tight and his shoulders tense. He nodded a greeting to Cart and sat down in his desk chair. A copy of the detailed magic analysis had also been sent to him and it rested on his desk, a roadblock to his day improving. Lawson had had to struggle through reports with more dense jargon both on the job and in law school, but after the hellish meeting with MAS, he was not in the mood to decipher anything.

He stared at the report and tried to keep his face neutral as he unwillingly recalled the meeting with MAS. Pushing the thoughts away violently, he made a face and looked up his partner. Bernie was watching him, papers spread out in front of her on the desk, temporarily forgotten.

Her brow furrowed. "Everything alright?" she asked.

Lawson forced himself to smile slightly and said, "fine." He jutted his chin towards her desk and said, "it looks like you've gotten something out of the report. What is it?"

She watched him a moment longer. Whatever the MAS had said to him, it hadn't gone over well. But, they had more important things to focus on right now, so she looked down at her notes and rearranged a few papers before she spoke.

"I've been going over the detailed magic report from the scene of MacGregor's murder," she said.

Lawson got up to come stand behind her and look over her shoulder at the papers. "Shouldn't the techs be doing that?"

She waved a hand. "Of course, and they will," she said, "I just wanted the results ASAP, so I thought I'd take a stab at it before I forward it on to the techs."

Lawson's fist clenched and his stomach tightened. This was exactly the kind of behavior the

MAS had asked him to watch for. He didn't like it at all. He didn't like how his normally careful partner had become so careless around the magic on this case. He didn't like having his arm twisted to spy on her and go behind her back.

If this case didn't go well, it would reflect very badly on Bernie and also on him. As much as he liked Bernie as a partner, she was showing some disturbing changes in behavior on this case. If he wanted to keep his record clean on the way to the DA's office someday, he'd have to partner with someone less controversial. That was a change he didn't like being forced to make.

He was glad he was standing behind Bernie. He forced his fist to unclench and said, "okay, what do you have?"

Bernie went over the drawings she had made as she had been trying to reconstruct the purpose of the magic at MacGregor's. She explained the components that were identified, what their purpose was and how they fit together. She also explained a little of her analysis of the unidentified components.

"This is much harder," she said. "There are fewer landmarks for intent or how they fit into the whole."

It all sounded really hard to Lawson. "But what does it do?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," said Bernie, "but, frankly, we may never know." She pointed to one of the pages in the thick report. "See this part," she said, "there's so much confusion in the data collected at this point, it's impossible to tell what was going on. This could be part of the focus MacGregor was building, it could have been part of his wards protecting his workshop, it could be part of some spell that the killer used."

Lawson sighed and went back to his chair. He sat down heavily and eyed his copy of the report resentfully. After a second, he scrawled a sticky note, smacked it on the report cover, and moved the thick folder to his outbox. He wasn't going to get anything out of the report that Cart hadn't already gotten.

He looked up to find Bernie watching him again. Something the MAS had said to him clearly had him rattled. Her paranoia started working overtime and she came up with a dozen plausible ways the MAS could be screwing her over. She shrugged mentally. Fuck it, she thought. She was using all her skills to try and solve this case and appearances be damned. But, Lawson couldn't be so cavalier. He had a career to consider and Bernie was dragging him down.

"Why did you request me as your partner?" she asked, quietly.

Lawson blinked in surprise. Had she read all of that from his frustration? "What?"

"You could have asked for anyone in the department," she said, "but you asked for me. Why? You had to know the impact it would have."

"Guilt by association, you mean?" asked Lawson, meeting her eyes for the first time that day.

"Something like that," said Bernie, watching him intently.

Lawson smiled a sad little smile and said, "I wanted to prove that I could work with difficult people." After it was out, he wondered why he always spoke so plainly with Bernie. Other people, he could phrase things more diplomatically, more lawyerly. Something in her gaze and demeanor demanded the unvarnished truth. Cynically, he wondered if she got it from her father and if that was part of what had made him so feared. More practically, it probably made her a better cop.

It was Bernie's turn to smile sadly. "Well, that's kind of an understatement," she said. After

a pregnant moment, she said, "I won't be offended if you request another partner."

Lawson started to protest, but she held up her hand. "I would miss you, of course, but I won't be offended. I understand needing to distance yourself, sometimes."

A wave of sadness passed through Bernie and she pushed it away. Everything changes and they'd had a good run together. If anything, he had been good for her standing in the department. Lawson had big plans and the will and talent to follow through on them. If he could be her partner for over two years, maybe she wasn't the pariah everyone thought she was.

Lawson looked at her and, for the first time, he wondered if his headlong charge towards being DA was the right move. He nodded slightly and said, "thank you."

She nodded and looked back down at her drawings. She pulled one out from the others and looked at it. It seemed to kindle a fire in her eyes. "Oh, right!" she said. "I forgot to tell you."

"What is it?"

"This component," she said, passing the paper to Lawson, "is a typical component for covering your tracks, obscuring the magic traces left behind."

"If that's what it's for," asked Lawson dubiously, "then how does it get detected?"

Bernie shook her head. "It's a fairly low-powered version and it's so common that even how it covers its tracks is well known."

"They why would anyone use it?"

"Sometimes, you only need to fool a casual magical glance," said Bernie. She shrugged. "Sometimes it's all you can afford, sometimes the thing you're obscuring is not so critical that you need to spend a lot of time on it."

"And in this case?"

"MacGregor clearly had money," said Cart, "so that wasn't it. He was so careful elsewhere that it can't be because he expected only casual glances. I think he used this component because the thing he was obscuring was so complex that we'd have no hope of deciphering it but he couldn't bring himself to leave it complete unprotected."

Lawson started to say something, but Bernie continued.

"But, that's not the important part. This component is only sold by one family in town." Lawson prayed that it wasn't the Cart family. He didn't want to deal with that disaster and explaining it to the MAS.

"Who sold it?" asked Lawson, dread climbing up his throat.

"Alex Petrovin," said Cart, her voice suddenly hard.

The dread climbing up Lawson's throat slid back down as his stomach dropped away from him. Shit. That was almost worse than Cart's family being involved. The MAS had specifically asked him about the relationship between Cart and Alex Petrovin. Lawson didn't know if they were even acquainted and his ignorance had not gone over well.

She looked at him expectantly. He managed, "well, then, we'd better go have a talk with him."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Simon waited for the half-dozen clocks to stop chiming before he eased down off the stool behind the counter. If anyone came by for his real business, they'd know to knock at the back door. The front door had a sign listing the hours as 10-6, daily. It was best to keep up appearances, anyway.

He walked unevenly over to the door. His left leg had never been quite right after that mishap with the Cart family back in '97. For a few years afterwards, he'd complain to anyone who would listen about how the punishment didn't fit the crime. It wasn't like he was skimming or talking to the cops or anything. How was he supposed to know the goods had been tagged by the DEA? He didn't deal in drugs at all.

Still, it had cost one of the Cart boys ten years at Sing-sing. While Simon had a permanent limp from the mishap, at least he'd stayed out of prison. After the Cart boy had been sent up for a dime, Simon stopped complaining about his leg.

Simon flipped the sign from OPEN to CLOSED, locked the army of security devices on the door, and finally shut the barred door over that and locked it in place. He pulled down the blinds and walked slowly towards the door to the back room.

Before he reached the end of the counter, he saw the dark figure emerge from the back and he froze. His mind raced over the people he'd sold to, the people he owed money to, the people who just didn't like him. It was a distressingly long list of people who might want to do him harm.

He started to inch a finger towards one of the gold chains he wore on his wrist. It was a focus for another ward. As he started to move, the figure spoke.

“Don’t,” he warned and Simon froze again.

Curtis knew he should make this quick, but the power and the fear were too delicious to let go of after such a brief time. Simon had been a necessary supplier in this operation, but it was untidy to leave loose ends like him around. Especially after that bitch agent Bryne had given him so much trouble, Curtis wanted to clean up the mess as soon as possible.

“Who are you?” asked Simon, his voice quavering slightly. Simon was not as afraid as he let on. Oh, he was a coward alright, and he freely admitted it, but this was not the first time he'd been threatened. He didn't need to touch his focus to activate it since it was already touching his wrist, it just took a little more concentration. He pushed his will and felt the ward raise around him, adding another layer of protection. The dark figure didn't seem to notice.

Curtis had to bite back the angry response, his ego demanding to be recognized wherever he went. He reminded himself that, right now, anonymity was an asset. He gripped the gun tighter

and savored the moment of power. Any second now, Simon would try something, a plea, a sudden move, something, and Curtis would be ready for it, ready to control the situation.

“You can take anything you want. The cash register is open and there’s a box under the counter with all the large bills,” said Simon. The longer he stood there, the more worried he got that his wards wouldn’t be enough.

A few years back, Simon had started wearing a bullet proof vest. One of the neighborhood punks had tried to shoot him in his own store and a few days later, someone had tried to knife him in the gut. He wore that thing religiously for years. Last year, he had been in an altercation where the vest had been used against him, magically, and he hadn’t worn it since. His attacker had convinced the metal plates of the vest to pull towards each other, nearly crushing Simon before he could raise a ward to stop it. Now, just looking at the vest made him short of breath.

Simon knew he’d only get one shot at it, so he waited until the figure had clearly dismissed his offer to the cash. Then he said, as miserably as he could, “p-please, don’t kill me!” As he finished speaking, he lunged at the figure, aiming to tackle and disarm him.

Curtis felt vaguely insulted that Simon hadn’t figure out who he was yet. Anonymity was one thing, but he wanted Simon, at least, to know who had been his killer. And to offer him the cash? That was just insult to injury. His eyes stayed fixed on Simon, waiting for the move he knew must be coming. Then, there it was, the plea and the tensing of his shoulders.

Simon lunged and Curtis tilted his pistol upwards, firing at the rushing body as the crashed together. The gun’s roar was muffled by Simon’s clothing as it fired into his exposed gut. They fell to the ground with a heavy thump, Curtis pushing Simon away from him, even as they fell.

The gunshot felt like a red-hot hammer, slamming into Simon’s gut and shattering his resolve to fight. In all his years, he’d been in hundreds of fights, had his leg and fingers broken, but he’d never been shot. He always kept that fact as an awkward badge of cowardice and self-preservation. He knew lots of guys who had been shot and bragged about it like it made them a badass for being on the wrong end of a weapon. Simon always felt slightly smarter than those thugs.

Now, the strange pride was fading away with everything else as Simon’s brain scrambled to figure out what to do next. After a few seconds of scrambling, all thoughts just fled and left Simon to stare, disbelieving, into the world as the pain started to register.

Curtis rolled away from Simon, expecting some kind of follow-up attack, and pointed his gun at Simon while lying on the floor a few feet away. Simon stared unseeingly ahead while his hand went instinctively to cover the wound. Curtis got quickly to his feet and went to stand over Simon.

The movement dragged Simon’s consciousness back to the present, however clouded that might be. He looked up at the figure and recognized the face in the light of the fire exit sign over the back door. His brows slowly furrowed as his brain, preoccupied with the gunshot, spared enough focus to recognize the face.

“You,” croaked Simon.

Curtis stood over the dying man and smiled. Finally, he had been recognized. A thrill of excitement ran through him. Now, he could end it. His lip curled in a sneer.

“Me,” said Curtis, and he pulled the trigger again. The shot pierced Simon’s heart and he convulsed once before going limp. Curtis shot him a third time in the head. This was no time for mistakes.

He watched the body for a few seconds after it had stopped moving. When he was satisfied,

he went out the way he had come in. He had places to be and alibis to strengthen by his smiling presence at the bar of his club.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tong had loaned him a jacket for the evening. Honestly, Eric didn't know what was stranger, that Tong owned more than one sport jacket or that he had agreed to go with Tong. No, "strange" was more befitting Tong's clothing choices. "Insane" or "ludicrous" would better describe Eric's course of action.

After convincing himself that Tong's problems were his own and that he wouldn't get involved, here he was, getting involved. Tong had assured him that Eric's role was just to stand at the bar and make a scene if any of Petrovin's thugs started to close in on Tong. It seemed pretty involved to Eric, to be a lookout. Still, he did owe Tong some favors from before he went to prison, so Eric had relented. This was about as legit a method of repayment as Eric was likely to find.

The jacket fit fairly well over Eric's skinny frame. He was lucky Tong was nearly as slight, but the jacket clashed horribly with Eric's faded and grubby jeans. Tong had said it was fine. The bouncers only looked for a jacket, not what was underneath. Eric hoped he was right, because this would only work if they could get into the club.

They walked along the darkened street towards the club, Tong pulling ahead of Eric. "Tong, dude," said Eric, "slow down. You said you wanted to blend in when we got there." His pace slowed a little and let Eric catch up. "Yeah, I guess I did say that."

Tong had made them get off the subway several blocks from the club so they could watch the door for a few minutes and choose their moment. Eric wanted to roll his eyes. He marveled that someone could be so careless about who they ran illegal materials for as to get into this situation, but so cautious about their approach to a night club. He chalked it up to overcompensating for prior mistakes and played along. God knows he had some prior mistakes that could use some overcompensating.

"Now," said Tong, his voice tight, "do you remember what I told you? About the club's layout?"

Eric fought to keep the petulant-child tone out of his voice. "Yes," he said. "I should try to get a spot on the corner of the bar, so I can see the side door as well as the VIP tables in the back."

Tong nodded. "And you remember what Alex looks like?"

"Badass Russian gangster, tall, thin, dark brown hair," said Eric. Then, because he couldn't resist, he added, "kind of looks like Lenin's nephew."

Tong looked at him sharply and Eric smiled.

"Goddammit, Eric," breathed Tong. "Don't fuck me on this one."

“Never, Tong,” said Eric. “I know what’s at stake. Try to relax. We want to blend in, remember?”

Eric’s heart was sinking. He was starting to have a bad feeling about this. Tong was way too wired to be thinking clearly. He wondered if his friend had hit some coke or something while Eric had been trying on the jacket.

One thing Eric had learned repeatedly on the street and in prison was that drugs and violence didn’t mix. Unless you wanted to lose, of course. He had walked away from his share of fights with drunk or high tough guys by talking his way out. He’d convince them he was so weak that they would damage their reputation by even starting a fight. That didn’t work most of the time, but it had worked often enough that Eric continued to try it.

If things got hairy in the club, he really wanted Tong to be able to take care of himself with minimal interference from Eric. If Tong had taken uppers of any kind, he was likely to start a fight and draw the thugs to him. Eric cursed himself again for getting into this situation. What the hell was he doing?

They stopped when they could see the glow of the club’s entryway half-way down the block. There were five or six heavily muscled guys in black t-shirts and sport coats hovering around the entrance. They were helping skinny women in negligible dresses out of the backs of limos. Their eyes never stopped moving over the entrance, the cars, the people.

Eric took in the scene. It was hip and classy, except for that ugly pockmark on the side of the building. It had been covered over by cheap-looking plaster. There was a larger patch in the otherwise immaculate white concrete of the entryway.

Tong scanned the flow of people, waiting for the right dynamic. After a minute or two, he saw a group of young men and women walking towards the entrance. He touched Eric’s arm and they attached themselves to the group, talking to each other about nothing. The bouncers looked over the group, briefly checked the ID of some of the girls and let them in.

The air inside the club was warm and moist after the chill of the autumn night. Eric and Tong slid among the crowd towards the bend in the bar that afforded a good view of the side entrance. The VIP tables were on the wall opposite the bar. Those wanting to see and be seen lined the long leg of the bar and shunned the far end.

Eric ordered two beers for them. They were just two guys on the prowl for hotties, he said to himself. They weren’t a magic trafficker and an ex-con here to find and argue with one of the minor bosses of the Petrovin family. Nope, just totally normal guys out on the town. He tipped the bartender very well, hoping it would come in handy later if the shit hit the fan.

Tong and Eric drank their beers and tried to chat like they were evaluating prospects, pointing out good looking men and women as they passed. Eric was mostly concentrating on looking normal and watching for Alex Petrovin, but part of his brain really was appreciative of the beautiful humanity all around him. One of the things prison was sorely lacking in was beauty and he had missed it.

After twenty minutes, Eric ordered them another round. Tong was starting to get anxious, scanning the crowd, checking the exits. He made a move that Eric just caught out of the corner of his eye. Tong’s hand moved from his pants pocket to his belt. He made a small circular gesture around the buckle, then his hand moved towards the bar to take the fresh beer.

Eric pushed down the fear and anger that welled up inside him. He paid the bartender and turned to Tong. He looked up at Eric and flinched from the fire in his eyes.

“Goddammit, Tong,” hissed Eric. “You said ‘no guns, no magic, just talk’. That’s why I

agreed to come with you.”

Tong scowled at Eric. “You owed me from—”

“I know I owed you,” said Eric, “but I would have found some other way to return the favor if I’d known you’d bring that shit.”

“I needed protection,” said Tong, defensively.

“I can get sent back to prison,” retorted Eric, “if I’m within ten yards of magic.” That wasn’t completely accurate. He had to be within ten yards of magic and believed to be using it. The details about helping others to use magic were a jumbled mess of legalese in his mind. In any case, he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be good for him if they had any run-ins with police.

Tong stared at him as if waiting for Eric to produce a good enough argument that Tong’s safety was less important than Eric staying out of jail.

Eric sighed, cursing himself for ever going to that bar. “Fine,” he said. “Just don’t go firing off any magical flare guns, okay?”

Cart drove the big blue sedan down the street, the streetlights and stoplights strung out before them like gaudy jewelry. The moon was obscured by clouds and stars were hardly ever visible in the city. Demars studied her as she drove, looking for any tension or rehearsed reaction on her part.

The MAS was convinced she was dirty and they just needed Lawson to help confirm it for them. He had asked why Internal Affairs wasn’t involved, if they were so convinced? And why had these allegations surfaced just as an MAS agent was murdered and the case had gone to Cart? The agents hadn’t even weasel-worded around the questions before changing the subject.

Demars stared at her and said, “how do you know Alex Petrovin?”

“What do you mean?” asked Cart. She glanced at him and Lawson thought he saw her shoulders tense. “He’s a low-level boss with the Petrovin crime family,” she said. “I’ve seen his rap sheet, but I don’t remember it off the top of my head.”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Lawson, turning to look out the front window of the car. “I mean, how well do you know Alex Petrovin?”

Bernie narrowed her eyes and refused to look at Lawson. So, they had finally gotten to him. She knew Lawson was a good guy, but it was only a matter of time before anyone with a grudge against Cart or her family tried to get her kicked off the force. She always figured it would be that asshole Vinetti, not her partner. It made her angry that she had offered to partner with someone else, to give him a graceful way out and here he was, trying to find dirt that wasn’t there.

“Was it IA or MAS who put you up to this?” she asked, softly. She would save her anger for later.

Lawson winced internally. He couldn’t imagine living and working with that kind of threat constantly circling overhead. He could forgive some of her paranoia since part of his reason for asking was that MAS wanted to know. The other part was more personal.

“You went to talk to him, alone, without your partner, a day after MacGregor was murdered,” he said. Despite his efforts, some indignation at being left behind had crept into his voice.

Bernie sighed. “Are you still mad at me over that?”

“Yes,” he said, defiantly.

She looked at him briefly then turned back to the road in front of her. “We met once

socially, many years before I became a cop," said Bernie. "We've met a few times since then, under official circumstances, and that's it." She looked at Lawson as they stopped for a red light.

He tried to read her and he was certain there was more to it than that, but Bernie's stubborn streak could put an end to any more information if he pushed too hard. He grunted as she turned her attention back to driving.

It took another forty-five minutes before Alex showed up at the club. Eric and Tong needn't have worried about missing him. A low murmur of excitement and a sea of turning heads announced his arrival. He was just as attractive as the rumors made him out to be, tall and thin with clear green eyes. The woman on his arm was nearly as tall with striking blond hair and pale blue eyes. Eric could see why their entrance had caused a stir.

They were escorted to the rear-most VIP table by one of the staff and Alex's guards hovered protectively around the couple. When they sat, Eric and Tong had a good view of them from their spot at the bar. Eric wasn't sure Tong could be any more keyed up.

"Now what?" asked Eric.

"He won't do business at the table," said Tong. "We have to get him to his office behind the bar."

"And how do we do that?"

"Just wait here," said Tong. "Watch for cops or more thugs. I'll get him to move."

Eric grabbed Tong's arm as he started to walk away from the bar. "Wait, what should I do if I see cops or thugs."

"Send up a flair," said Tong, breaking free of Eric's grasp and sliding quickly through the crowd toward Alex's table. Eric cursed himself again for getting involved. He did not want to draw attention to himself by starting a loud argument by the bar, so he prayed that no one interesting showed up that required a flare.

Eric watched the guards stop Tong short of the table. Alex seemed annoyed, then waived him closer. They argued for a tense minute, Tong gesturing to the bar and Alex shaking his head. Eric cursed and took a swig of his beer. As he lowered it from his lips, he glanced towards front door of the club. His heart skipped a beat.

That woman detective and her partner from his ex-workplace were standing just inside the door beside a grumpy looking bouncer. He looked away quickly before they saw him. He glanced back to where Tong was still arguing with Alex. The rational, self-preserving part of his brain was screaming at him to run, to get out of there and get as far away as possible.

But if he ran, Tong would get busted. If that happened before he and Alex had worked something out, Tong would probably get killed by one of Sloan's guys. Major parts of Eric just didn't care about that, but the tiny, tarnished streak of honor in Eric didn't want that to happen. Combine that with the fact that, if Tong got out alive, he'd not only not forgive Eric, but he'd likely try to kill him, and Eric felt compelled to warn him. He cursed again.

Eric set his beer on the counter and motioned for the bartender. "Hey, can you send a round of vodka shots to Alex Petrovin's table?" The bartender grinned and turned away to get the shot glasses. Eric left an IOU wrapped in a ten dollar bill on the bar for the shots then slid into the crowd.

Alex held up a hand to stay Osman's ranting demands. "Look," he said reasonably, "I

understand it's important, but I'm not going to discuss it with you right now." He did want to talk to Osman about this whole debacle, but no way was he going to let a mere courier make demands on his time. He debated having one of his guys take him back to the club's office and letting him stew for an hour or two, but he dismissed it as being too close to acquiescing to Osman's demands.

"Dammit, Alex," sputtered Osman, "we don't have time for this." He threw his arms back as if encompassing the whole world. "All of this could come crashing down at any second."

"That's an exaggeration," said Alex calmly. He flicked a speck of dust off of his dark silk shirt. He was pleased that his new girl was keeping herself busy with her smartphone and giving Alex the space he needed to deal with the intrusion. His last girlfriend had been far too clingy.

"Are you sure?" demanded Osman. "What about what happened last night out front?" He couldn't believe Alex's stubbornness. They were both in trouble here for dealing with that new guy Krish. Tong knew it could be his ass if the Sloan family found out he'd been carrying on the side, but Alex had so much more to lose. And Alex had a reputation for being smart! How could he not see the danger they were in that demanded discussion now?

Alex bristled. He had indulged Osman long enough. He hadn't wanted anyone to know about the shot someone took at him, least of all someone like Osman who talked too much.

"That's enough," said Alex with finality. "You and I will talk after the club closes, understand?"

It hadn't been the first time someone had tried to kill Alex, but it had been the most baffling. Alex didn't like mysteries. The best explanation they'd come up with was remote detonation of detcord or some tiny amount of C4 or something. It hadn't even injured anyone, but there was no doubt in Alex's mind that he had been the target. He had one of the friendly cops in the department sniffing around to see if anything strange was reported in the area that night. After it happened, Alex sent out some of his guys in all directions, but they saw no one. That, like Osman, were problems for later.

Cart and Demars surveyed the room, ignoring the grumpy looking bouncer who had let them in. They located the exits and the other bouncers for reference. After a moment, they spotted Alex. He was in the far VIP table, leaning forward and arguing with an Asian looking guy who gestured wildly, clearly frustrated.

They bumped and jostled their way through the crowd until they were almost within earshot of Alex's table. Then, two large guards materialized to block their path.

Cart looked up at the guard nearest her. He was taller than her by at least a foot and built like a linebacker. His suit was well made and black. She produced her badge and said, "police. We need to talk to Alex."

"No one talks to Alex tonight," said the guard, only a faint Russian accent in his voice. He didn't look down to talk to her or to examine the badge.

Cart glanced at Demars and then gestured at the Asian guy. "That's a very solid looking mirage, then," she said.

The guard didn't react. He stood his ground and said, "you go now. Alex is busy."

Cart felt the heat of anger rising within her when a scantily clad cocktail waitress brushed past her with a tray of shot glasses. The guards let her pass, her long blond ponytail swinging behind her.

Osman was about to argue when a waitress with shots of vodka appeared. It diffused the

argument momentarily while she unloaded the shots. Alex turned his head slightly to get a better look at her and noticed two of his guards talking to someone. He moved to look past the guard and saw her.

Bernadine's light brown waves looked strange in the club's multi-colored lights, but no less beautiful. She scowled and looked like she was about to start a fight with the guard blocking her path, even though he outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. Something like pride tickled Alex's stomach for just a moment before he squashed it. Charming though she may be, he reminded himself, she is trouble.

Alex turned back to the table. The shots were unloaded and the waitress had started back to the bar. Behind Osman was a scruffy, skinny guy with straight black hair, his eyes fixed on Osman.

"Cops," said Alex plainly.

Eric reached out for Tong's arm, to pull him away from the cops before he did something stupid, but he was too late.

Tong's head whipped to the side. Fueled on cocaine and adrenaline, he twitched like a rabbit on meth. Eric grabbed Tong's arm and tried to pull him towards an escape out the back. Tong spat a word, pushing his will through one of his large gold rings, even as Eric tugged.

The spell slammed into Cart's wards with a flash of yellow light and a shower of pale blue sparks. The force of it knocked Bernie back several feet and she fell to the ground.

A guard put himself between Tong and Alex while the second whirled around as if to take Tong down. His beefy arm was fast, but not as fast as Tong. He spat the word again and the guard's ward flashed in defense, as the impact spun him to the ground.

Eric let go of Tong's arm and brought his arms up to shield himself in case Tong turned on him next. Not that it would do any good. He had no wards and that spell was a simple one with only one purpose.

Demars had his gun out now, trained on Tong. He shouted, "down! Now!"

The flashes of magical light had mostly been lost in the club's changing lights, but Demars' shout cut through the din of music and conversation. Somebody screamed and a hundred people tried to be the first to the door.

Eric put his hands in the air while still trying to hide behind them. He tried to look non-threatening while making himself as small a target as possible. Alex and the guard between him and Tong remained still, wary of drawing Tong's attention.

His eyes were wide and bloodshot and his lips were curled back in a desperate grimace. His eyes fixed on the gun. A wave of maniacal defiance crashed through him. A gun? He could curse it with a word into a useless hunk of metal. He could- something. A flicker of doubt sent the wave of defiance receding into panic.

"Down, now!" repeated Demars. His gun didn't waver. Eric laid on the ground and prayed that Tong was still holding on, that the hopelessness he'd seen in his eyes hadn't taken over. From where he lay, he could see the woman detective lying still on the ground. For Tong's sake, he hoped she was alright.

Tong started to say something and Demars didn't wait to see if it was that damn spell again. He shot Tong in the shoulder, spinning him down to the ground. The screaming in the crowd redoubled and people ran out all the doors, including a few of the fire doors.

Before Tong could recover, Demars was flipping him over and cuffing his hands. He groaned in pain and shock as the blood started running out of his jacket. With one hand, Demars

pulled out his phone and called for backup. With the other, he kept pressure on the wound.

A minute later, the screaming and stampeding had stopped as the club finally emptied. Cart stirred on the ground, a groggy, pained movement. The tension drained out of Eric at the sight. Tong was in deep shit, but at least it wasn't cop-killing deep shit.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eric sat on the uncomfortable metal chair in the interrogation room and hoped his laptop was safe. He figured the cops were tossing his place and he didn't want it confiscated as misguided "evidence". He had made a secret stash for it under the floorboards and dragged his mattress over it. He vowed for the hundredth time that night to spend every waking moment looking for a programming job so he could get away from all this for good.

The door opened and the woman detective came in carrying a thick folder. Eric knew without looking that it was his. She closed the door, lay the folder on the table and sat down across from him. She had pretty copper-colored eyes, even if one of them was bloodshot and starting to blacken from Tong's magical assault.

She studied him for a minute then said, "we meet again."

This was not going to end well for him and he knew it. There was no point in making it worse, so he swallowed any sarcastic replies and said nothing.

"If you want your attorney," she said, "you have to ask for him."

Eric's eyebrows went up in surprise. He knew his rights, but every cop he'd ever dealt with did their level best to pretend they didn't exist. He briefly entertained the idea that she was new to this, but dismissed it. There was too much pain and weariness in her eyes.

"Since you don't seem like the talkative type, I'll start," she said. "We're investigating a murder with specialized magical components, the kind that are not legal without extensive permits. We went to Alex Petrovin's club to talk with him about those components." She paused and looked at him, her eyes hard. Eric kept his expression neutral. "For the second time in a week," she said, "there you are, smack in the middle of my investigation."

Eric said nothing. He reigned in his frustration and wanted to defend himself, to scream that he was innocent. But held his tongue and waited for the threat. Then he would see how best to plead his case.

She flipped open the thick folder and looked at one of the pages. "We ran your record with that of Alex Petrovin and Tong Osman." She looked up at him. "You and Osman go back quite a ways. Trafficking, dealing, and using magic along with some B&E, drunk and disorderly, trespassing, that kind of thing. There's nothing in the records between you and Alex Petrovin." She closed the folder and stood up. She wandered away from the table, turning her back on him.

"From all the evidence we have of your movements and this case, it looks like you were running magical components for somebody, probably Alex Petrovin."

She paused, but didn't turn around. Here comes the threat, thought Eric, give us what we want or else. If he didn't give them something, he'd be back in prison before the day was out.

“Your office was searched in connection with magical trafficking. You were with Alex Petrovin and Tong Osman tonight, both of whom are suspected of trafficking. You just finished three years in prison for trafficking. With your record and recent behavior, it certainly looks like you’re running again.”

Eric waited. He still didn’t know what she wanted. He wasn’t going to admit to something he didn’t do and he wasn’t going to give up Tong unless he had no other choice.

She stayed facing away from Eric, her hands clasped behind her back. “I don’t believe it,” she said.

Eric made a choking sound. “What?”

She turned to face him. “I said I don’t believe it. It’s too convenient.” She sat down again, folding her hands on the table. “I do believe there are many things you’re not telling me.” She looked him in the eye to make her offer clear. “Most of those things are not my concern.”

Eric nodded slightly. He didn’t trust her to keep that unspoken promise, but it let him see her next play.

“I’m interested in anything you know about these components-” she slid a piece of paper across the table “-and who might have sold them to Ulrick MacGregor.” He looked at the piece of paper. The names of the components were familiar to Eric. He’d used most of them at one time or another. Some of them were new or looked like newer versions of ones he’d used. These were definitely components that Alex dealt in and Tong would have carried for him.

Eric studied the paper and Cart studied him. He knew something, that much was clear, and he was protecting himself, Osman, Alex, or all of them. Guys who ratted out their partners didn’t last long, especially in prison. Since he was still alive, Cart assumed he wouldn’t flip on them, even if it meant going back inside. With guys like that, threats did nothing but piss them off. But the soft approach wasn’t working either.

“Ulrick MacGregor ended up dead, killed, probably by one of his suppliers who wanted the focus for himself,” she said. Eric looked up at her, his face expressionless. “And, in case you thought you were safe,” she said, “you should know that ‘Silent’ Simon Beck turned up dead a few hours ago.”

Eric swallowed. He didn’t know Simon personally, but he had been around forever. He’d heard stories that Simon was the pickpocket king, back in the day, before he’d started running magic for the Cart family. Whatever Tong had carried and whoever he and Alex had supplied was bad news. “Sorry to hear that,” said Eric.

Cart studied him and nodded. “I thought you might be.” After another moment she said, “while you were within ten yards of magic, the limit of your sentence, you were not attempting to use magic.” Eric felt a little relieved, but wary that this might be leading up to a threat. “We have nothing else to hold you on,” said Cart, “so you’re free to go.”

She stood up and went to the door, carrying the folder with her. She opened the door and gestured towards it. “Just don’t leave town in the next few days,” she said.

Eric stood and made his way slowly to the door, waiting for it to slam in front of him as some cruel joke. It didn’t and he forced himself to walk down and out of the police station rather than running out.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Demars. They watched Eric Strickland cross the street and head out into the city night. “He damn well knows more than he’s saying.”

“Of course,” said Cart, “and of course I’m sure. He’s protecting someone. Whether that’s

himself, Tong Osman, Alex Petrovin, or someone else, that's what we need to know."

"And you're sure he'll lead us to them?"

"Yes," said Cart with a confidence she didn't really feel. He damn well better, she thought.

Curtis nervously paced his stylish office. As soon as he'd gotten wind of the bounty on his head from the families, he'd barricaded himself in his office and sent Quinnell off to be his eyes and ears. That was over twelve hours ago and Quinnell still had not returned.

Worse still, Evan had missed his meeting with Quinnell to return the repeaters. Curtis had kept several in reserve, but the guys in production kept running into problems creating more of them. If something had happened to the repeaters or if Evan had been discovered, well, it was all bad for Curtis. He swore.

It was late morning and the club downstairs was not yet open. There were guards outside Curtis' door and he was both warded and armed, magically and non-magically. This was not how it was supposed to go, him hiding out in his own club, blinded and incarcerated because the families got a bug up their ass about him moving in. They were the ones who refused to innovate! Curtis was just filling a need.

More than anything, he was pissed at his production guys. These devices were going to change the world and Curtis was going to be at the forefront. He'd seen them in action! MacGregor had demonstrated them when they were setting up the production. He'd even been considerate enough to explain how to defeat the repeaters with spectacularly bad side-effects.

Curtis' lip curled in amusement. MacGregor wasn't too bright for an ex-MAS agent, tipping his hand about the repeaters' weakness like that. He stopped smiling and considered whether Evan had been killed by the same means as MacGregor. That would mean someone else knew the secret and that Evan's death could be tied to MacGregor's. That would bring all of it closer to Curtis. He couldn't have that. But no, if Evan had been killed the same was as MacGregor, the explosion would have been on the news.

He had started a new line of thought on what he'd do to the production guys if they didn't get it working soon when Quinnell returned. He didn't look happy.

"Well?" demanded Curtis.

"Evan is dead," said Quinnell, "Alex is not. That courier Osman is in the hospital. He and Alex are the best leads to you right now."

Curtis was stunned. It was all falling apart. He had planned so well and thought of everything and it was all falling apart. Rage welled up inside him. This kind of thing simply didn't happen to him. It was all Quinnell's fault for bringing in that slap-dash assassin to kill Alex. He should have done it himself, like with Simon. At least then he'd know it was done right.

"Goddammit!" screamed Curtis. Quinnell didn't flinch. "How? How was Evan killed? He should have been blocks away from Alex."

"The police aren't connecting Evan's death with anything. Alex never reported the attack."

Curtis resumed pacing. "Well, that's something anyway," he said, grudgingly. "Were you able to recover the repeaters?"

Quinnell hesitated. That wasn't like him. Curtis stopped pacing to look at him.

Quinnell swallowed and said, "they weren't there."

"What? Somebody else took them?"

"As far as I can tell," said Quinnell carefully, "they were destroyed." Curtis didn't

immediately bite his head off so Quinnell continued quickly, “there were pock-marks or small burned spots in a line of sight pattern between Alex’s club and where Evan’s body was found.”

Curtis was overwhelmed with rage. It danced around inside him like a fiery imp, igniting him, but it was too random to direct at any one thing. That was not a failure mode MacGregor had warned him about. For the first time, Curtis considered that MacGregor may have been more devious than he had let on. But, he could deal with that after Alex was taken care of.

“Where is Alex now?”

“Unknown,” said Quinnell. “We followed him from the police station, but he slipped the tail.”

“And Osman?” asked Curtis. “Is his condition life threatening?”

“No,” said Quinnell, “just-”

“Well, see that it is made life threatening,” said Curtis coldly. “Find Alex and kill him.”

“Yes, sir,” said Quinnell. He didn’t mind killing or arranging killings for the boss, but Curtis was flailing. He was not handling this change in plans well at all. Soon, it would be time to find another rising star to latch onto.

Curtis waved a dismissive hand and went back to sulking.

“One more thing,” said Quinnell carefully. “There was another man taken for questioning by the police along with Alex and Osman.”

“Who?”

“Eric Strickland.”

“Never heard of him,” said Curtis. “Find and kill him as well.”

“Yes, sir,” said Quinnell. He left Curtis to sulk in silence.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The morning had come too quickly for Detective Cart. She had been up most of the night interrogating Alex and the other two about the murder, then dealing with the paperwork for charging Osman was assaulting a police officer. The day was hazy and it added to grayness of the city beyond the precinct windows. She walked out of the elevator and towards her desk. She was a little late coming in that morning and she was surprised to see that Demars was not at his desk. He was always on time. She shrugged inwardly. He had been up late with her and maybe he had overslept a little too.

A movement in the captain's office caught her eye. He was not alone in his office, which was not unusual, but from the shadows on the blinds, he had four other people in there with him. That was unusual and she didn't like it. Still, she had paperwork to file to keep the tail on Alex.

She felt sure that Alex didn't kill MacGregor. She had no doubt that he was capable of murder, but if he was supplying components to the guy, why would he kill a paying customer. It crossed her mind that maybe MacGregor wasn't paying, but there again, you don't kill the guy who owes you money because then you'll never get it. You have to find some other way to make him want to pay you. Memories of her father's violence flashed across her mind. He could be very creative with that kind of motivation.

They were no further in finding MacGregor's business partners, if any. Whatever cleansing had been done of his records had been done by someone with fairly high level clearance. She thought of the murdered MAS agent. She was pretty sure that someone in MAS could do it. But why would they? Maybe MacGregor was an MAS agent. They usually left the undercover work to the ATFM, so maybe he was just on a black-ops project. But if that was the case, why not just take the case away from the local police so they could hush it up?

Cart's mind wandered through possible connections between the MAS and MacGregor as she filled out the surveillance forms for Alex and Eric. Bernie thought about Eric's role in all of this. If he was running magic for Alex, what were they discussing at the club last night? It could have been something as simple as the delivery schedule for the night, but Cart didn't think so. There was some emotion in their exchange. She lightly probed her eyebrow with a finger, testing how swollen the area was. Their argument felt related somehow.

The door to Captain Nisbet's office opened and he walked over to her desk. Cart looked up and saw that Vinetti and another guy she didn't recognize sitting in the office.

The captain looked down at Cart, clearly strained by the conversation of the last hour. His brow was deeply furrowed and Bernie could tell he was resisting the urge to ball his fists by the way they twitched slightly. "Detective Cart," he said, his voice soft but strained, "would you

please join us in my office.”

“Yes, captain,” said Cart. Her paranoia kicked into high gear, but she had a sinking feeling that it was too late for that.

The captain went to sit behind his desk and Vinetti closed the door behind Cart. The MAS agent Walker and Demars were standing next to Nisbet’s desk.

“This is Detective Manford,” said Nisbet and added with slight distaste, “Internal Affairs.”

Manford appraised Cart but made no movement to shake her hand or otherwise acknowledge her presence.

“I believe you’ve already met Agent Walker with the MAS,” the captain continued.

“Yes, sir,” said Cart.

Captain Nisbet clasped his hands on his desk and looked her in the eye. Cart had never seen him this worked up before, his jaw was clenching and releasing, over and over. His hands were squeezed so tightly that they were losing their color in places.

“You’re off the MacGregor case,” said Nisbet. His eyes didn’t waver and she thought she saw slight regret in them. Whether it was regret at giving her a chance in his department or regret over taking her off the case, she couldn’t tell.

“Sir, if it’s about last night, I’m fine,” she started.

“It’s out of my hands, Detective,” Nisbet said. His eyes went to the IA detective Manford and Agent Walker.

Cart swallowed. “Can I ask on what grounds I’m being removed from the case?”

“There’s more,” said Nisbet. “I’m also placing you on administrative leave pending the results of Detective Manford’s investigation.”

Cart saw Demars scowl and look at the ground in his corner of the small office. Manford’s narrow face looked impassively at her. Vinetti, on the other hand, could scarcely contain his glee.

“Sir?”

He gestured at Manford who cleared his throat and said, “there were some irregularities with how this case was assigned to you.”

Cart bit her tongue from arguing. She had no control over how cases got assigned. How could they hold that against her?

Manford continued, “as you know, the department has, uh, *concerns* about you investigating magic related cases. This case was routed to you by persons unknown within the department. That’s why I’m here to determine if anything untoward was taking place.”

“I have done nothing wrong,” said Cart, “and that hardly seems like grounds for putting me on leave.” She wanted to scream and break something, but she kept the rage down churning around her stomach while she focused on keeping her head cool.

“There’s more,” said Nisbet.

Agent Walker handed Cart some photos. “We have reason to believe you’re working with Alex Petrovin on keeping this case from being solved.”

The photos were of Cart meeting Alex outside his club, of her getting into his limo. Shit! She knew that was going to look bad and she had banked on nobody looking. Not paranoid enough, it would seem. She kept her face expressionless as she looked over the photos. After a moment, she handed the photos back to Walker.

“Yes, I met with Alex Petrovin to ask him some questions about MacGregor, but that was all.”

"You've talked to him twice now," sneered Vinetti, "and have squat to show for it. I think it's a cover for passing information."

"Nobody asked for your opinion, Vinetti," said the captain. Vinetti looked sharply at the captain, but said nothing.

"Maybe you did only ask him questions," said Walker, sounding unconvinced, "but your partner tells us that you knew Alex Petrovin socially several years ago."

Demars glowered at the floor miserably. He didn't like being party to this, but it was his duty to report the facts, however unpleasant or inconvenient. He just wished it could be otherwise.

Cart glared at Walker. "When I took this job, I took an oath to protect and uphold the law, a duty I take seriously," said Cart. "I have done my best to find MacGregor's killer."

"Maybe," said Walker again.

Cart started to protest, but Captain Nisbet said, "that's enough. There will be time for debate after Manford finishes his investigation." He stood up from behind his desk and walked over to Cart. "I need your gun and badge."

Her rage and frustration churned up and out of her stomach, but she bit it back. "Yes, sir," she said through clenched teeth.

He looked her in the eye as he took them. There was sympathy there wrapped in a threat that seemed to say, I will back you up, so long as you're not lying to me. He nodded once and retreated to his desk again.

"Detective Demars will continue on the case with Detective Vinetti," he said. "Make sure they have all your notes before you go home, Cart."

"Yes, sir," said Cart. Her mind was reeling with all the futures before her. She pushed them away and tried to focus on just the next few hours.

The captain dismissed them. Cart opened the door more vigorously than was strictly necessary. She stacked all her reports and notes into a pile in the middle of her desk.

Demars came out of the office after her and stood by his desk and faced her. "Bernie, I'm sorry. I had to tell them," he said.

"Here are my notes," said Cart, gesturing tightly at the stack.

"Bernie, please," said Demars. He didn't want to lose all the trust they had built up over the years over one incident. As incidents went, this was kind of a big one Lawson admitted to himself.

"You have my phone number if you need anything," she said, unwilling to meet his eyes. She didn't want to think about the guilt he was feeling and she didn't trust her own emotions to stay in check. She knew he was just doing his job, but it hurt like hell. She nodded once and stalked to the elevator.

Agent Walker watched the officers from Internal Affairs search Cart's apartment. They were being considerate, as these things went, putting cushions back on the couch, not intentionally breaking anything. Her apartment was almost entirely utilitarian but it had the usual clutter of a lived in space. There were no pictures or memorabilia of any kind, no art or anything else to personalize the space.

The only thing hanging on the wall was Cart's graduation certificate from the police academy. It was framed and hung on the wall next to her dresser. The dust settled on it was far less than the dust settled on the rest of the furniture.

The officers worked in silence, checking all the drawers for secret compartments and searching every box in the closet. Walker was sure they wouldn't find anything. Getting Cart off the case had never been about her involvement with Alex Petrovin. He did think it was nice of her to hand them such an easy excuse to get her out of the way. Local cops could be so short-sighted at times.

Walker strolled back into the living room. Kantorowitz was finishing up a phone call.

"That was the local office," he said. "They want to know how things are going."

Walker scowled. He made sure none of the IA officers were within earshot. "Who's idea was it again to put Cart on the MacGregor case? We wanted her to find the killer, not figure out what the devices do or where they came from."

"We pulled her as soon as we could," said Kantorowitz. "It's likely she won't make the connection between MacGregor and Bryne."

"Won't she?" asked Walker. "She got more out the trace report on MacGregor's murder than I thought she would."

"We can intercept it before it goes to the real techs," said Kantorowitz. He thought Walker was overreacting a little bit. They wanted her to find MacGregor's killer, something they could do on their own, but not without raising some flags. Now that Bryne was dead, they had no choice but to come in and try to stop the investigations from going anywhere.

"That's not the point," hissed Walker. "This is getting out of hand. If she or anybody else makes the devices work, the cat's out of the bag and somebody will go down for it."

"That someone is Jennifer Bryne," said Kantorowitz. "After all, she's the one who sold out the MAS with her buddy MacGregor."

Walker sighed. "And who do you think will get the blame for not stopping her? We had *two years* to see what she was doing and stop it."

"Let's hope it won't come to that," said Kantorowitz.

"In my experience," said Walker, "'hope' is just a way to lie to yourself."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eric had spent the morning polishing his resume and sending it out to various companies in the area. Screw this getting interrogated by the police again bullshit. He wanted far away from all that more than ever. His place had been searched by the police, but the laptop was safe in its hiding place.

He scratched again at a spot on his forearm and scowled. He was pretty sure the cops had put a magical tracker on him, but there was nothing he could do about it. You had to use magic to dispel magic, so unless he was willing to do that, he was stuck with it until they disabled it. He had to admit it was a clever way to see if he was using again.

Eric had just finished stowing his laptop again when his phone rang. It was a cheap prepaid phone and he'd only given the number to Tong. He answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mr. Strickland?”

“Who is this?”

“Mr. Strickland, I’m with County General Hospital. I’m afraid I have some bad news about your friend, Tong Osman.”

Eric swallowed. “What is it?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Osman died about an hour ago.” Eric sat down on his mattress. He was never that close to Tong, but he was an okay guy when he wasn’t high. This just didn’t seem right. If Tong had been on the kind of shitlists he thought he was, then it probably wasn’t natural causes that he died of.

“But, it was only a shoulder wound,” he said lamely.

“I don’t know about that,” said the voice on the phone. “All I know is that you are listed as his emergency contact. We need you to come down and collect his things.”

“Okay,” said Eric. He felt numb as he hung up the phone. He put on his jacket and left his apartment, heading for the hospital.

There was a haze sitting over the city giving the light a surreal quality. The plain brick buildings stretched up and down the street, broken by alleys and the occasional traffic light. Eric walked away from his building, heading for the subway. He wondered if he should try to contact Alex Petrovin and let him know that Tong was dead.

Eric was lost in thought about Tong’s next of kin when a car stopped suddenly to his left. He looked up in time to see three guys coming towards him. They were well-muscled and wore ski-masks. They had come out of a white van and advanced on Eric with lightning speed. Eric backed away a few steps, trying to get his feet under him to run, but he wasn’t fast enough. Two

of the men grabbed his arms while the third reached up to put a black bag over Eric's head.

Eric kicked toward the guy in front of him, getting in a glancing blow near the guy's groin. The guy grunted but managed to get the bag over Eric's head. Belatedly, Eric started to yell for help. He resisted with all his meager strength, but it wasn't enough. They pulled him into the van and pushed him to the floor as the van started to move. His hands were bound behind him. Eric took a precious moment to consider the consequences of what he did next.

Making magic without any focuses is very difficult, time consuming, and error prone. But using magic, even when it's not your own, is usually straight-forward. Eric's mind had started to race as soon as it was clear he wasn't going to outrun the men. His best bet was to hope someone would find him, preferably before someone killed Eric. And his two best bets for being found were a 911 call on his phone and the magical tracker from the cops.

If he could get to the phone, that was the better choice. It was more likely to get a response and it ran no risk of him going back to prison. If he found the magical tracker, he could push more will into it and the trace it would leave would be easier to find. If anyone was following him, this approach would make it more likely that they find him. The downside was that, if the cops noticed the clearer trace, they would know he was using magic.

And if no one found him at all, he was likely to have a very short life. He would risk punishment for trying to save his own life.

Very carefully, he formed his will into a spell to find the tracker the cops had placed on him. He felt a slight warm tingle as the spell scanned him and concentrated around the spot on his forearm he'd been scratching at all day. He waited a few seconds to see if any of his captors had a particularly keen nose. Eric had been careful, but some change to the atmosphere was almost unavoidable around magic.

No one reacted so Eric pushed more will into the tracker. It wasn't enough to drain him by far. He argued to himself that, if he got out of this, he could explain that it was the fear that had made the tracker intensify. At least the part about the fear would be true. For the first time in his life, Eric hoped the cops were following him.

Bernie didn't go home. The last place she wanted to be was at home, watching MAS and IA going through her stuff. She had nothing to hide, but she was pretty sure that wouldn't stop them from finding something. After leaving the precinct, Bernie had taken the first subway she came to and rode it while she thought.

What Manford from IA had said about there being some irregularities about her getting the case had tickled something in her memory. It was just outside of conscious thought, so she stared at the passing tunnel lights and thought, letting her mind wander.

Why would someone want her on this case? What did she bring to the case that another homicide detective would not? Her experience with magic was one. Or they might have assumed she still had connections to her family she could use. But that didn't fit since it was the Petrovin family doing much of the supplying to MacGregor.

Knowing magic meant she would, presumably, be able to make connections via MacGregor's work, which she had. Maybe that's what whoever had arranged for her to have the case wanted all along, just that connection to Petrovin. Maybe she wasn't the key at all, but it was some ploy to get at Alex.

Frustrated and feeling no closer to finding an answer, Bernie got off the subway at the next stop. She was far uptown, a long way from anything familiar. She started walking back

downtown and her cell phone rang.

“Cart,” she said.

“Uh, hi, this is Officer Parkey,” said a nervous sounding voice. “I’m the one tailing Eric Strickland.”

Bernie almost redirected him to Demars, since it was his case now, but she just grunted instead. If what he had to say was important, then she’d tell him to talk to Demars.

“He was just walking down the street when some guys in a white van grabbed him,” said Parkey. He added quickly, “there was nothing I could do. They were gone so fast. I got a partial plate.”

Bernie’s heart raced. They needed Eric and Alex to find MacGregor’s killer. She hailed a cab as she talked into the phone. “Where? Where were you when he was taken?”

He gave her the address and the direction the van headed when it left. Bernie gave the address to the cabbie and turned her attention back to the phone.

“Call Detective Demars,” she said, “tell him what you told me. Get him to contact Alex Petrovin and tell him he’s in danger. Got that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Parkey.

“Oh, and don’t tell Demars you called me.”

“Ma’am?”

“Just an inside joke between me and Demars,” lied Cart. She wasn’t going to let anything happen to her best leads, if she could help it. But there was no point in muddying the waters for Lawson.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Parkey and he hung up.

Cart just hoped that Eric was going straight like he said he was. She’d place a magical tracker on him last night while he was in interrogation. If he was using magic again, he would detect it and disable it. If not, then she might be able to follow the deliberate magical traces it left behind.

Several minutes later, the cab pulled up beside the address Parkey had given her. She paid the driver and got out. She was grateful she had brought the tracking focus with her from her apartment. She slid it out of her pocket and activated it. Like the ward detection, it would highlight traces as a faint glow. This one was tuned to tracker she had placed on Eric.

Placing magic on someone else is tricky. It’s illegal under most circumstances because you’re using someone else’s energy to do magic. If you do that with a powerful enough spell, you can incapacitate or injure someone. The tracker spell is minor enough that the target doesn’t notice that it’s there. The police need a warrant to use trackers, which Bernie had gotten for Eric. Most basic wards protect against incoming magic in a general way, so it’s much more difficult to place a tracker on someone who’s warded. How much more difficult depends on the wards.

Bernie looked around the area and didn’t see anything. It was a typical city street with brick buildings stretching off in both directions and alleyways between some of the buildings. She took the focus up and down the sidewalk on both sides of the street, waving it slowly back and forth, intently looking for the glow of discovery. After spending several minutes at it, she was glad the street was mostly deserted. She didn’t want to explain what she was doing or have someone notice her magic and call the police.

Finally, she found it. The sidewalk glowed faintly with orange light. It was fading even as Bernie followed it up the sidewalk and saw it lead sideways, out into the street. As it did that,

the glow became significantly less bright as the tracing spell modified the floor of the van instead of the ground beneath Eric's feet. She trotted up the street, following the glow.

After a few hundred yards, the glow intensified. It was still fading overall, but the glow was stronger here than it was a few feet back. Cart wondered what had changed, but she wasn't going to argue with it. She also wasn't going to be able to follow this trail on foot for much longer. It was fading too rapidly.

She cursed and pulled out her phone again and started running after the orange trail. She dialed a number from memory, cursing that this day had come.

"It's BC," she said into the phone. "Yeah, long time. I need a favor. Now." She gave the address of an intersection further down the street where she expected to be in a few minutes. "Thanks, Kip."

As Bernie arrived at the intersection, breathing heavily from the running, two large men on motorcycles pulled up beside her. The older one handed her a helmet. She traded it for the detector focus she was using to view the trace Eric had left. It left her hand and her view of the trace vanished. She hated to let it go, but this was her best chance at finding Eric and MacGregor's killer.

As she buckled on the helmet and mounted the rear of the bike, the driver affixed the focus to a leather bracelet then turned the bracelet over to provide skin contact. He spoke a word, eyed the path in front of them, and started the bike moving down the street, his companion close beside them.

"So, you're Bernie Cart," said the driver, keeping his eyes on the street in front of them. "Kip told us about you."

"Only good things, I hope," said Cart.

The driver chuckled, "not exactly. I'm George."

They rounded a series of bends and wended through narrow alleyways. All the while, the biker was careful to keep to the speed limit and obey all the traffic laws. Bernie was sure that was not his normal behavior, but she was grateful for it. The last thing she really wanted was attention from law enforcement. At least, not until she'd found MacGregor's killer, then they could call in the marines.

"It's fading pretty fast now," said George. "That last intersection took a lot out of it."

"Knocked out," said Bernie.

"Yeah," George agreed.

Bernie looked around. Traffic had thinned as the approached a more industrial section of the city. She had no idea how to find someone in these columns of low, similar buildings without painful hours of searching. Those were hours she didn't have. If she didn't find Eric and MacGregor's killer, MAS and IA would hang her out to dry.

Hell, they might do that even if she found the killer. With that frustratingly hopeless thought, some last vestige of responsibility tore loose and fluttered off into the wind behind them.

"I can't protect you, but I haven't seen any speed limit signs in a while," she said, clutching tighter to George's midsection.

He grinned over his shoulder and nodded to his companion. They let the engines roar and the bikes took off down the mostly empty street. Buildings whipped past and Bernie hoped a million things at once, not daring to actually believe in any of them.

They took a few harrowing turns, then the bikes started to slow. Bernie checked behind

them for cops, but there was no one on the street. It was deserted, but didn't look abandoned. Some trash collected under stairs and in little grottoes around the loading docks, but the doors had fresh paint and the oil stains on the ground were relatively fresh.

She turned back to George. "Did we lose the trail?"

"No, it's solid up to that building on the left." He rolled to a stop and removed the focus from his wrist. He handed it back to Bernie and let her see for herself. The trail was very faint, but still visible. It intensified beside a door to a darkened warehouse. There was still time, she told herself. The van was no where in sight, but they couldn't have been here long.

She got off the bike and removed the helmet. She handed it back to George and said, "thanks. Tell Kip I owe him one."

He took the helmet and reattached it to the back. "You need anything else?" he asked eying the entrance to the warehouse.

She shook her head. "There is one thing," she said.

"Name it."

"Get word to Alex Petrovin. Tell him to meet me at this address."

George looked at her like she had just declared Kip loved tofu, incredulous with a heaping of distaste. She looked at him defiantly. He shrugged and said, "okay, will do."

The bikes turned around and rumbled slowly back the way they had come, making as little noise as possible. Bernie reached to the small of her back for her gun and had a moment of panic when she realized it wasn't there. Memory filled in a second later and she cursed. She reached down and retrieved the tiny pistol from her ankle. She had no spare clips, but it was better than nothing.

She approached the building from the side. The haze had congealed into lumpy gray clouds, muting the afternoon sunlight. The door where the trace had led was flanked by two large cargo doors. None of them had windows. There was a small alley between the building and one next door. She glanced down the alley, but there were no windows in that side either.

At the far end of the building was a fire escape ladder leading to the roof, but there was also a security camera aimed at the loading area. There was a second one aimed down that side of the building. Bernie crossed back to the far side of the street and approached in what she hoped was the blind spot of the cameras.

She considered hexing the cameras into inoperability, but she still hoped to stay out of their sight the whole way up to the roof. She holstered the tiny gun and climbed the rusty metal ladder. If she kept climbing, she'd pass right in front of the camera aimed at the loading dock. As she neared it, she paused and pulled a black handkerchief from her pocket.

It had been a gift from her father when she graduated from the police academy. Of course, he didn't deliver it himself, but it was waiting for her, inside her locker. It was silk and had been embroidered in red with the words "Ma fille n'est plus". She had kept it with her every day since then. It gave her resolve to keep going, to be a better person than her father.

She reached up and draped the handkerchief over the lens of the camera. Quickly, she climbed past the camera and pulled the black fabric off. She hoped it had been quick enough to go unnoticed by whatever guards were watching the feeds.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They pulled their target into the van and, after a moment, he suddenly stopped resisting. The guys looked at each other while the driver took a circuitous route back to the warehouse. They had been on plenty of snatch and grabs, but this one had been the easiest by far.

“So far, so good,” said one of them. He had a nasal voice like his nose was plugged up from a cold.

“Damn easy is what it was,” said another, a bass voice this time.

A third grunted his agreement.

Eric was sorely tempted to do some more on-the-fly magic to loosen his bonds or to poke holes in the hood so he could see out. It was difficult and dangerous to do magic without line of sight, so much so that people likened it Russian Roulette. Eric thought that was an unfair comparison since crafting magic was not random at all. He thought a better analogy would be trying to draw something without looking at the paper. Only if you screwed up with magic without looking, you were likely to blow a hole in the paper and probably the thing you were drawing.

Still, the feeling of desperation had started to set in. Whoever these guys were, they didn’t seem likely to let him go. But they were just hired hands, Eric argued with himself. They had no stake in his eventual fate, only in doing the job. That was almost worse than someone on a power trip, like the guys he’d seen in prison. They just wanted to prove themselves or to get something from Eric. He could appease them by finding a way for them to look good without actually hurting him. Sometimes, anyway.

But guys who were impersonal, he didn’t know how to deal with. He couldn’t offer to pay them more without lying and risking insulting them. He couldn’t appeal to their better nature, because, in Eric’s experience, people who chose this line of work didn’t have a better nature. He was in no position to threaten them, but maybe he could turn them against each other.

Professionals they may be, but everyone has some suspicions that others are getting a better deal somehow.

“How much are they paying you?” asked Eric, trying to mask the shaking in his voice.

A foot shoved his shoulder roughly.

“None of your damn business,” said the nasal one.

“Yeah,” agreed the bass.

“Okay,” said Eric, “just checking.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Eric hoped they were turning it over in their heads, trying to get their slow mental gears working.

Finally, the third guy said, "why?"

"Shut up," snapped the nasal one.

Eric gave a half-shrug. "No reason," he said, his heart racing. The problem with baiting a bear trap is sometimes you caught a bear, but sometimes you just attracted a smart bear and pissed it off.

"How much did you get?" asked the bass.

The third guy started to reply when the nasal voice cut them off. "He's just messing with you. He doesn't know anything and we all get paid the same, okay?"

"How do you know?" asked the bass.

"That's it," said the nasal guy. Eric jumped as he was grabbed by the shoulder. A second later his head exploded with pain and his vision went white before fading to black.

He woke with his head pounding. He tried to lift his hand to his head and it stopped short. He tried moving his legs and found they had been bound to a chair. Opening his eyes, the world was still black. They had stopped moving. It smelled like concrete, wooden pallets, and machine oil so Eric guess they were in a warehouse. He listened for any sounds and thought he heard murmurs from a long ways off.

Eric tried to think of something he could do to escape. All of his plans involved getting free from the chair, so he rocked it to see if it was bolted down. It was not, but in his movements, he accidentally slid the chair on the concrete and it made a high-pitched squeak. He stopped moving and listened for the voices, but they had stopped, too. A few seconds later, he heard footsteps coming towards him.

"You're awake," said a voice, "good." This was not one of the men from the van, but a more cultured sounding tenor. "Take off his hood," he said, "I like to see who I'm talking with."

Eric blinked at the light and looked around a second before his eyes came to rest on his captor. He was medium height and build. He had a wide, friendly-looking face. Eric thought that must come in handy when convincing kidnappers to do your dirty work.

"There," he said. "Much better." He got another chair and sat across from Eric. "Tell me what you told the police."

"What?"

Quinnell's eyes flickered up to the man who had removed the hood. The man turned to Eric and slapped him hard across the face. Eric's head blossomed in new pain.

"Again," said Quinnell.

"I didn't tell them anything," said Eric, quickly. Quinnell raised a hand, staying the next blow. He looked Eric in the eye and waited. "I don't know anything," said Eric.

"I'm afraid I don't believe you," said Quinnell. He nodded and Eric's head reeled with another slap. He felt his lip split open and tasted blood. He tried desperately to think, but his head pounded. What could he tell them? What bit of truth would get him out of this mess alive? Something in the back of his brain nagged at him, like a half-remembered dream.

Eric brought his eyes back to focus on Quinnell. It seemed to take longer than he remembered. Quinnell leaned towards Eric and said, "tell me, or I'll have to start breaking your fingers."

This brought fresh terror to Eric. He was going to need his fingers if got out of this alive, plus he was general averse to pain. "Okay, okay," said Eric, squirming slightly in his seat. "I know some things, but I didn't tell the cops any of it."

“Go on.”

The thing nagging at the back of Eric’s brain started to creep forward through the fog of pain and fear. He was protecting Tong from the police, but Tong was dead. This guy with the broad face was either the new magic supplier everyone was looking for, or he was involved somehow. And Tong was the only one who knew who the new guy was. Eric glanced at the two men in front of him. Well, the only guy not also on the new guy’s payroll.

Eric swallowed and tried to sound convincing. “Before Tong died,” he said, “he hid photographs and other information so he could claim the bounty by proxy.”

Quinnell paused for a beat. That didn’t make sense. The bounty was for Curtis Krish in person, not information about him. The families already knew who Curtis was, just not where. Any information hidden on photographs would only tell someone where Curtis had been. Still, it could have addresses of Curtis’ other properties or connections. He chided himself mildly for being too efficient in killing Tong Osman. He should have waited a bit longer. Osman would have told him if such information existed, eventually. Still, it was the news of Osman’s death that had drawn Eric into the open, as planned.

Quinnell leaned back in his chair and Eric started to panic. That was the wrong thing to say, but he was out of ideas. Eric started to say something, some plea for his life, but a well-muscled man bounded up to Quinnell and the plea died in his throat. From the size of him, Eric guessed he was one of the guys from the van. He leaned down and whispered something in Quinnell’s ear.

Quinnell frowned and stood up quickly. “Keep an eye on him,” he said, pointing to Eric. “Don’t shoot him unless you have to.”

Eric almost let a whimper of mixed relief and dread escape his lips. He would live a while longer, but to what end? He hoped for a quick, painless end when it came.

Once on to the roof, Bernie moved quickly towards the rear of the building. There was a small cluster of air conditioners and electrical connections. Bernie hoped there would also be a way into the building for anyone climbing up to service it.

She should wait for backup. She should at least *call* for backup. But, what did have to go on? A person of interest had been kidnapped? That could be anything. Eric was an ex-con with problems of his own, it wasn’t necessarily related to MacGregor’s killing. Still, he was in danger. Bernie promised herself that if he was inside, she would call for backup.

She looked around for a hatch. There were no breaks in the old tar paper large enough to be a human sized opening. She went to the edge of the building and looked over, looking for a metal ladder like the one of the front of the building. Nothing.

Then she heard the creak of hinges and the sound of boots on metal rungs. She immediately crouched and removed her gun from the holster. She turned back towards the roof and scrambled over to the nearest air conditioner, cursing. Her trick with the camera must have been noticed.

The boots finished climbing and thumped onto the roof. The boots walked over to the air conditioners quickly, but not in a bid to reach cover. Good, thought Bernie, take it nice and slow. She fingered off the safety and listened for where he was. There were only four units plus the oddly shaped box for the electrical connections. It was only a matter of time before he made his way to her.

She turned, as quietly as she could, to face the direction of the hatch while still crouching.

She waited, listening. The boots paused and she risked a glance up and over the top of the unit she was crouched behind. A strong-looking man in black and a shoulder holster was leaning over a unit near her.

Bernie stood and leveled her gun. "Don't move," she said.

He froze and his eyes flicked up to her. He scowled.

"Back away slowly then lie down with your hands behind your head."

He straightened up slowly. Then in a sudden move, he lunged forward. His arms came up to knock Bernie's gun aside. As he reached her, she fired. The shot went wide as his arm collided with hers, grazing his arm. She stepped with the momentum of the blow and out of reach of his other arm. He grabbed at the air where she had been. It threw him off balance, but he recovered quickly.

He grabbed her left wrist, forcing her hands down. Bernie released her gun hand and pointed it at the man's midsection. She fired and the shot tore into the man's stomach causing him to grunt in pain. His right arm followed through with a roundhouse punch and connected with Bernie's head on her already blackened eye.

Pain seared through her head and her vision jumbled. She staggered with the force of the blow. Bernie wrenched her wrist away from the man's grasp and stepped backwards, trying to put some distance between them. The man fell to one knee and clutched at his stomach.

She brought her gun to bear on the man and reached for her cell phone. As she pulled the phone from her pocket, a hand cracked down on her left forearm, hard, knocking the phone away. She turned the gun on her assailant and backed away, but she wasn't fast enough. The second man smacked her gun hand, knocking it away. The small gun skittered over the rooftop and came to rest not far from the wounded man.

Bernie spun with the blow and cracked her fist backhand into the second man's face. Blood spurted from his nose and he cursed loudly. Bernie brought her elbow down to block the body blow she knew was coming, but it was a bit too late. The fist slammed into her side like a mallet. It drove the air from her lungs and sent a wave of pain down her side. Her knee wavered and threatened to give out.

A second later, a force hit her knees from behind and she toppled backwards. Her vision swam but came into focus on the large gun the man produced and trained on her. Bernie cursed herself for not calling for backup before checking out the roof.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Eric was surprised to see the lady detective again so soon. His heart sank when he saw that she was bound in her own handcuffs. His wish had been granted and he had been followed by the police, just not enough of them.

Quinnell was yelling at someone in the back office. He ranted for a few more seconds then a man in black scurried out of the office and up the metal ladder to the roof. Quinnell stalked out of the office and over to them. They bound Bernie's legs to a chair and re-cuffed her hands behind her.

"You are causing me a great deal of trouble," growled Quinnell to Bernie. He stopped beside the guard with the bloody nose and held out his hand. The man handed Bernie's small gun and her wallet to Quinnell. He looked at them and then at Bernie, leaping to the correct conclusion.

"Why, Detective Cart," he sneered, "did you get on someone's bad side?"

She said nothing. Eric looked at her in astonishment. The only Carts he knew were in a different business entirely. He had heard that one of them had broken ranks and joined the police, but he thought it was just a rumor. Suddenly her familiarity with magic made more sense. But, if she was not here with the police, there was no cavalry coming to save them. Eric suppressed a whimper.

Quinnell pocketed her gun and wallet and asked the guard, "did you check her for focuses?"

The guard faltered. "No, but she's a cop," he muttered.

"Idiot! She's also a Cart," he said. "Go get the detector. Now!" He trotted off to the office and Quinnell shook his head. He wondered how people that stupid made it in life.

"What am I going to do with you, Cart," said Quinnell. "You were not part of my assignment and I really hate to go off-task when I'm working."

"What was your assignment?" asked Cart.

Quinnell chuckled.

The guard came back with a flat wand like a handheld metal detector. He activated it and waved it near Cart. It emitted a beep when it passed near her belt. The guard flinched at the beep, but Quinnell looked unsurprised.

"Take it off her," he said.

Eric's heart sped up. If they checked him, they were going to find the tracker the cops had placed on him. He didn't like his chances of surviving the next few minutes if that happened.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. Now that he knew where it was, disabling the tracking spell was fairly easy. He worked as quickly as he dared, finding the spell and shutting it down

permanently.

The guard pulled Cart's belt free and handed it to Quinnell to examine. He concentrated and passed a hand over the belt. It glowed faintly blue. The form a focus or ward could take varied widely. Its size was in some way linked to its complexity, but not always. The reaction to detection was less variable. It could still be modified, but only by degrees. You could make a ward glow more green or yellow, but it was always going to be primarily blue to detection.

"Wards," said Quinnell, handing the belt back to the guard. "Now him." He pointed to Eric.

Eric opened his eyes, but continued to work. It was trickier than he expected to disable the tracker and he didn't want to permanently damage himself in the process. Just before the wand reached him, he pushed his will to disable the tracker. It heated in the hasty destruction and burned his skin. Eric forced himself not to twinge at the pain. Cart glanced at him and he nodded very slightly.

The wand passed over Eric without making a sound. The guard straightened up and Quinnell nodded. "Fine," he said. "Get the hoods and bring the other van around."

Quinnell checked his watch. The team he'd sent after Alex should have checked in already. He would deal with this first and then see what the hold-up was with Alex. Once that was done, he could leave Curtis to his incoherent ramblings.

"So you killed MacGregor," said Cart.

"You disappoint me, Cart," said Quinnell with a sigh. "What makes you think I would admit to something like that? I'm not as stupid as a Bond villain."

"You're right," said Cart. "Since you're going to kill us, there's no harm in telling us how you did it, right?"

Quinnell shook his head in annoyance. "Don't make me gag you as well," he said. "It's so undignified."

Emboldened by Cart's presence, Eric tried to help with whatever play she was making.

"How did he die?" he asked.

Cart looked at him. "Explosion," she said, "magic gone wrong is what it looks like." She looked back at Quinnell. "But that's what it was supposed to look like, isn't it?"

Quinnell knew she was trying to draw him into a confession, into bragging about how he'd managed to get to kill someone as careful as MacGregor. It wasn't going to work.

"What was he building for you?" asked Cart. "Was it so awesome that you had to kill him when he was done? A high-magic mugging?"

Quinnell looked at the guard standing behind Eric and Cart. He said, "go get some tape and rags to shut her up."

"What about all the suppliers?" Cart asked. "You had to know that would bring down the heat. Why kill them, too?"

There was a muffled thump and the sound of scuffling boots from the direction the guard had gone. Eric and Cart looked in that direction, but Quinnell refused to rise to the bait. He waited for the guard to return and stared stonily at them.

Cart had never been happier to see Alex Petrovin in all her life. He walked out of the back office, two guards a step behind him. Quinnell's man lay on the floor of the office and didn't move. They walked towards Quinnell, guns drawn.

Quinnell sensed his prisoners relax slightly. That made him nervous but he wasn't going to play their mind games and turn to look. When he heard three sets of steps instead of one, he did turn and look.

“Answer the lady,” said Alex, his voice hard. “Why kill your suppliers?”

Quinnell held up his hands and took a step backwards. Eric dared to hope that he might make it out of this alive. As he watched Alex and his men advancing, he thought he caught a whiff of ozone. It was too faint to be Quinnell, or if it was, it was an extremely minor spell.

“Alex,” said Quinnell, “it was just orders. You understand.”

“I understand,” said Alex. There was a fire in his eyes. Eric was glad he was not the target of Alex’s rage. “But I don’t forgive.”

Alex and his men stopped six feet away from Quinnell. When Quinnell realized they weren’t going to shoot him just yet, he stopped backing up. He licked his lips and smiled his friendliest smile.

“Just orders,” he repeated, “nothing personal.”

“Where is he?” demanded Alex.

“Listen,” said Quinnell, “I want to make a deal with you.”

Alex narrowed his eyes. His finger itched to pull the trigger. His tolerance for ass-kissing fools was extraordinarily low, especially after they tried to kill him.

“Now you want to make a deal,” Alex said, his voice cold. “Two of my men were killed less than an hour ago.”

Quinnell swallowed. “Sorry to hear that,” he said. On a very personal level, he was sorry. They were supposed to kill Alex, too, and things were not going at all as planned with him still alive.

Alex swore in Russian and spit on the ground.

“You son of a bitch!” Alex relaxed his gun hand slightly, forcing himself to stay focused and not shoot Quinnell out of pure anger. His father had taught him better than that.

Cart looked at Alex and Quinnell. She was pretty sure Alex wasn’t going to kill her or Eric, but that also meant he wasn’t going to shoot Quinnell in front of them. He knew that Bernie would be required to report everything she saw and to try her hardest to put him away for a murder she witnessed. If he didn’t plan on killing her, he wouldn’t kill Quinnell, at least not in front of her.

But she didn’t want Quinnell walking out of there until she got a confession from him or enough suspicion to arrest him for MacGregor’s murder.

“I can offer you a deal,” said Bernie.

“Stay out of this, Cart,” said Alex, his eyes still on Quinnell.

“We can protect you from the Petrovin family and anyone else you’ve pissed off if you agree to help us with the MacGregor murder,” she continued.

Quinnell laughed. Eric thought he heard a note of desperation in it.

“Protect me?” he laughed. “Like you did with Tong Osman?”

Cart smiled. Well, it wasn’t the MacGregor murder, but he had all but admitted to knowing about the hit on Osman. “Yes, just like Osman.”

“Tong Osman is dead,” screeched Quinnell. “Why would I agree to that kind of protection?”

Cart forced a chuckle. “We had Osman moved after the attempt on his life,” said Cart. Alex and Eric turned to look at her. “We asked the hospital continue as if he had been killed until he could be safely released from the hospital into our custody.”

Eric felt relieved and annoyed at the same time. He was in this warehouse, bleeding and tied to a chair, all because he was going to pickup Tong’s things after his “death”. This more than

made up for the debt Eric owed him.

Quinnell pressed his lips together and refused to look at Cart.

“As far as I know,” said Cart, “the hospital only called one person to notify them that Osman was dead.” She leaned as far forward as her bound arms would permit. “And that person wasn’t you.”

Quinnell barked a little hysterical laugh. He really didn’t want to deal with the cops but all of his plans for gracefully exiting Curtis’ employ were falling apart by the minute. He promised himself that, if he got out of this, he was going to stop hiring thugs and dirty cops to do his work and just do it himself.

If he dealt with the cops, he could never go back to work for any of the families in New York. He could try his luck with Alex, but that might not turn out any better.

“I know where he is,” said Quinnell to Alex. “You can turn him in and get the reward.”

“You useless little weasel,” said Alex. “You would turn on him that quickly?”

“I just want all the deals on the table,” said Quinnell defensively. “If I go to the cops, you get nothing.”

Alex pushed down his rage. “It would be worth it to rid the world of your back-stabbing,” he growled. This was taking too long. He needed to get Quinnell out of here and kill him without Bernadine seeing.

Alex barked a command in Russian and the two guards grabbed Quinnell’s arms. They started dragging him to the back door of the building.

Bernie started to panic. He was either MacGregor’s killer or who knew who was. She couldn’t let him get killed until she had what she needed from him. She tugged at her bonds to no avail.

“Wait!” she shouted. “I need him.”

Alex looked at Bernie and Eric with a hard expression on his face. “Sorry, I can’t let you see this. It’s better that way.”

Quinnell was babbling and screaming in protest, fighting the Russians for every inch they moved forward with him.

“No! Wait!” He turned his head to shout over his shoulder. “Cart, I’ll take your deal! I’ll tell you who killed MacGregor. I’ll tell you where to find him!”

The smell of ozone in the air increased. The guards stopped pulling Quinnell forward and looked back at Alex. He sniffed the air but motioned the guards forward. They were the only ones in the building and the only windows in the place had been boarded over. There was nowhere for an assailant to hide.

A voice boomed out from overhead. “Quinnell, you treacherous bastard!”

Alex trained his gun up and around the empty warehouse, searching for the source of the voice, ready to shoot anything that moved. Cart’s heart leapt. If this was MacGregor’s killer, then he was close by, directing his voice via a simple redirection.

She turned to Eric and said, “try to find the source of the voice.”

“What? I can’t,” said Eric.

She shook her head. “I’ve seen your record, I know you can. I give you immunity from prosecution in your search.”

Eric was speechless. After all the work he had done to distance himself from magic and a cop was asking him to work for her. It caught him entirely off-guard. Before his mind could

start evaluating the consequences, she interrupted his thoughts.

“And, get me out of these cuffs,” she said quietly.

The flood of thoughts were pushed aside as Eric grabbed hold of this easy request. He looked down at her cuffs. In his mind, he built a model of the latch mechanism that allowed them to ratchet closed, but not open. He pictured it perfectly, overlaying that image with the reality his eyes were seeing. Then he made the image in his mind pull back the latch to release the cuffs. As he did so, he pushed his will into the image overlaid on reality. His will followed his mental direction and pulled back the latch with a click.

The cuffs slid off Bernie’s wrists and she moved to free her legs.

“What do I do if I find him?” said Eric in a whisper.

“Hold him or disable him, but don’t kill him,” she said. She unbound Eric’s hands. “He’s using some kind of indirection.”

Quinnell was looking around wildly and professing his innocence. The guards had recovered from the surprise of a disembodied voice and were back to dragging Quinnell to the back door.

“You gave me no choice,” said Quinnell. “They were going to find you and your new magical trinkets didn’t work.”

The voice laughed cruelly. “Didn’t work? I beg to differ!”

Alex shouted another command in Russian and the guards pulled harder at Quinnell, trying to hurry him along. That’s when the floor of the warehouse erupted with bits of flying concrete. A line of fist-sized pockmarks appeared in the concrete floor, throwing shards of concrete at Quinnell, Alex, and the guards. They stopped moving and threw up their hands to protect their faces.

A laugh echoed through the large space.

“I’d say they work just fine!” the voice boomed, triumphantly.

The dust started to settle and the guards looked at each other, uncertain about what to do. Quinnell gaped at the ruined floor before them.

“But, but-” he stammered. “Evan. What about Evan?”

The voice laughed again. “The fool did not take enough precautions,” said Curtis. “His wards were insufficient to block out the side effects of transmission.”

Quinnell felt fear an excitement at once. Curtis had managed to get the repeaters working after all this time. Now, he really could change the world.

“Excellent, sir,” said Quinnell. “Let me just take care of these loose ends and we’ll be back in business.”

Bernie picked up the magical detector from where Quinnell’s guard had dropped it. She directed Eric over to the wall, sheltered behind a large beam. They crouched and she pointed to a spot over the office. The trapdoor to the roof was open.

“He’s probably redirecting through that,” she said.

“Got it,” said Eric.

“Good luck,” she said. Staying in the shadows, along the building’s edges, she moved toward the front door of the building, still holding the magic detector.

Eric sat cross-legged on the floor and focused his attention on the area around the trapdoor to the roof. He looked at it and let his senses encompass all of the area. The lighting was a weird

mix of natural light and florescent. It smelled of pigeon poop, warm tar paper, and machine oil from the hinge of the trapdoor. There was ozone there, too, stronger than where he sat on the floor of the warehouse.

As he focused on the area, he constructed a spell to search for magic. It was a crude detector, but if the area currently had magic being reflected through it, crude detection was good enough. He swept the detection back and forth until he found the source of magic. He focused on that point to the exclusion of all else.

Suddenly, he felt his senses elongated and pulled, somewhat painfully, to somewhere else. He took stock of his senses and his new surroundings. He was on a nearby rooftop and seemed to be attached to an air conditioner, stairway cover, or cell tower antenna. He was above the ground more than usual, but not much more. The air was fresher here, but smelled like brick and aluminium.

Alex shouted at the air, “we will find you! Osman told me where you are hiding.”

“Fifty thousand,” scoffed the voice, “is what you will pay me not to kill you where you stand.”

Alex had his strongest wards active and had since the attempt on his life an hour ago. He felt confident they could repel most of what a street mage could throw at him, but he didn’t feel like testing it.

“The families were not pleased at the attention you were drawing from the MAS,” said Alex.

Quinnell spoke up in defense of his nominal employer. “More like not pleased with the competition,” he said.

“Shut up, Quinnell,” said the voice irritably. “I’m done with you anyway.”

There was an electric pull in the air. Then, with a sound of grinding metal, a piece of an overhead beam came loose and fell with preternatural precision. It struck Quinnell square on the head. He flopped forward against the restraining arms of the guards and didn’t move. The guards dropped his weight to the floor.

Alex and the guards raised their guns, searching in vain for something to shoot at. Some wards can protect against physical objects, but it’s usually not worth the effort. If you want to stop a bullet, wear a bullet-proof vest. If you want to shield yourself from flying debris, wear a helmet and a face-shield.

“Damn it!” spat Alex. “Find the son of a bitch!” He squatted down to take Quinnell’s pulse and yellow light flashed against his wards, tossing his arm back painfully.

“Now, now,” said Curtis, “is that any way to speak about the newest crime lord in New York? You can’t stand in the way of my progress.”

Eric marveled at the change in perspective. Whatever the focus was, when he’d concentrated on it, it was transmitting his will far from his body without direct line of sight. It was like a reflector on steroids and it was unbelievably cool. Eric felt giddy.

This is how it was supposed to be. Him using magic to get stuff done, to solve problems and make things happen. That was what he loved about magic and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to let go of it ever again.

He started to search around for the source of the magic or for the next focus. Eric had started to suspect that this redirection was good enough to carry will long distances. He heard a noise and shouting. His body frowned and Eric realized he could still smell the warehouse, still

hear Alex and his guards talking with the mage. He could still smell the tar paper roof.

If the redirection was all you needed, he shouldn't be able to sense anything along the way. It would be overwhelming, he realized. By the time you repeated your will through three bounces, you'd be luck to still be sane. No, the only way this would work is if you could block out input from the all the focuses but the last one.

If he'd had more time, Eric felt sure he could have constructed a general ward for all the focuses. But for now, he'd do it the hard way. He started at his personal source.

He warded his body against input from its place on the warehouse floor. It was extremely dangerous to lock your will away from your body, so Eric took a few extra seconds to make sure there was an emergency exit. If something physically disturbed his body beyond a certain threshold, his will and senses would recoil back to his body, abandoning whatever else they were doing.

There were stories of early magic users projecting their will and becoming lost from their bodies, unable to get back. They lay catatonic and unresponsive until they died. Since then, people generally didn't try to project their will unless they were very foolhardy or very cautious. Eric figured he had a good helping of both. He hoped the extra seconds of precaution would be worth it, but he also hoped he wouldn't have to find out.

Next, he warded his senses at the trapdoor to the roof. He blocked out all senses there. The pressure on his mind was greatly reduced after that. Now he could focus on finding the next object in the chain and the owner of the voice in the warehouse.

Bernie sped around the building. If the reflector worked the way she thought, she should be free from detection until she was near it. She pushed her will into the detector and waved it in front of her as she ran. It was silent until she reached the end of the building and it beeped once.

She cursed not having her own detector. The beeping was useful for those untrained in magic, but it was going to give her away when she got close. In hindsight, she could have asked Eric to make this one flash a light rather than beep, but it was too late for that now.

Waving the wand over the area that had beeped, she got it to happen again. Experimentally, she found if she tucked the wand in her jacket sleeve, she could muffle the sound but still wield it. The wand indicated that the magic was above her.

She hoped that Alex was keeping him talking. Following the killer's voice was going to be easier than following his magic with the beeping wand.

She climbed the ladder of the building next door. Seeing no one, she used the wand to find where the magic was in use. The beeping outlined a line from the trapdoor in Quinnell's building to a small brick staircase cover.

Bernie boggled at the revelation. The wand was able to detect active magic or a focus, but couldn't detect traces. If it was detecting a line of magic, then the killer was redirecting his will more than twice. She filed this away for later consideration and followed the beeps as they led off the building's roof and onto the roof of a building across the street.

Alex shooed the guards to start a search. They trotted off, searching the back of the warehouse first.

"You think the families will let you live after all the attention you've brought down on us?"

The disembodied voice laughed bitterly. "I don't think they'll have a choice," he said. "Look at how I've cornered you without even trying."

Alex knew he was buying time for his men to find Krish, so he played along. "Who are you going to get to supply you with components?" he asked. "Or do you intend to hold all the families hostage while you crown yourself dictator?"

"I've made all I need for quite a while," the voice said. "Once I get what I want, I may even sell these to families who work with me instead of against me."

Eric followed the repeaters more quickly now. He had a basic template for what needed to be warded at each exchange. It took him less than a minute at each one to get his bearings, construct the ward, activate it and move on to the next one.

It was such a mechanical process after the first two that he had a few minutes to think about what he was going to do when he reached the end of the devices. So far, the owner of the voice had not detected Eric's presence using the repeaters in reverse. He didn't know if that would hold true when he got to the end, so he wanted to have a spell ready.

Or maybe many spells. Whoever it was, he would certainly have many wards active. Simple attacks like dissolving his veins or arteries would certainly be smacked down by wards. That meant fusing of cells was probably also out. There were attacks on the brain, but they were mostly specializations of destroying veins. The less obvious a part of the body was, the harder it was to target. So brains were out as was anything more complex involving shutting down organs.

Plus, Eric reminded himself, that detective, Cart, had said to hold or disable him, and not to kill him. Disabling was easy. Break a leg or bind shoes to the floor would do it nicely. Shoes could be removed, but feet were easy to target, too.

Quickly, he put together a few spells that would bind shoes to the floor or butt to seat, if he was sitting. That would have to be good enough.

After all the running she had done today, Bernie resolved to spend more time focusing on that particular athletic skill. She was now six blocks from where she had started. The detector wand was still beeping, so the spell was still active. She prayed it would stay that way.

She was still deep in nameless, monotonous warehouses. The magical devices were spaced about one per block, at the very limit of visual perception. The last one had been on the side of a building. The line of sight and the detector wand were tracing a line into a window in a building still half a block away.

After Cart was sure that was the place, she ditched the detector wand so it wouldn't beep at the wrong moment and announce her arrival. She didn't know if the killer would be able to hear from his body, with his will and senses projected so far away, but she wasn't taking any chances.

She ran as quickly and quietly as she could to the window. There was light visible against the dying autumn light outside. She sidled up to the window, calmed her breathing, and peeked quickly inside.

The killer was good-looking with a strong jaw and fashionable clothes. He didn't look like a typical magic trafficker. They usually had more scars and far less fashion sense. Cart had a moment of doubt over whether this guy was really the killer.

He said, "what I want is very simple. I want to be taken seriously. I want a place at the table with the other families. I don't need to be crowned dictator. That title I'm willing to earn."

After a second of panic, Cart had realized he wasn't talking to her, he was still talking to Alex, six blocks away. Cart slipped away from the window and went to find a door into the

building.

Alex swore that he would fire those two idiot guards unless they found Krish soon. He was tired of listening to Curtis' tirades and demands. How hard could it be to find the weasel?

"How magnanimous of you," said Alex. "If I take this message of yours to the families, how can I get word back to you of their decision?"

Curtis' laugh echoed through the empty warehouse. "You can use Quinnell's obituary," he said. Alex looked down at Quinnell's body, still unmoving on the floor. "If it's a positive eulogy, I'll know my terms were accepted. If there's no obituary or if it's only facts of his demise, then I'll know you require more proof."

"Fine," said Alex.

"I warn you, though," said Curtis. "I am not likely to be so considerate in my next warning."

Alex fumed. "Considerate? You tell that to my men who were killed today at your request."

Curtis tutted. "I made no such request," he said.

Alex was about to argue when he realized that Curtis didn't know Bernadine had left the warehouse. He had been careful not to admit to anything more serious than using magic and assaulting Quinnell. He must still think Cart was in the room or he was just careful on principle. Alex didn't think it was the latter. More time, he told himself, just a little more time.

Eric made his way through to the last repeater. He was staring at a lighted window and a man sitting on a chair, staring at him. Not at him, Eric reminded himself, at the repeater. Eric readied his spells, tweaking a few based on the limits of what he could see and therefore easily target.

The man's feet were not visible, but he was sitting in a chair with arms. He tweaked the spell to bind sleeves to the chair. In his body, he took a deep breath. He sent his will through the spell, turning it into changes on the physical world.

Curtis smiled slightly. He enjoyed having Alex at his mercy. He had seen Alex's two goons leave the building, but they were fools and could not trace him here. Curtis took a breath to tell Alex just how wrong he was, but then he sensed a tightening of his sleeves. Faintly, he smelled ozone.

He ground his teeth, but he dared not break eye contact with the repeater. After all, a break in concentration and a resulting feedback loop is what had killed MacGregor. Never mind that it was Curtis that had broken his concentration, it was just a massive accident.

Curtis' sleeves tightened all along his arms as they were pulled tight against chair. He felt the sides of his pants also bind to the seat. It was amateur work, targeting only the visible parts of him. But he should be untouchable here, far from the warehouse, so where was it coming from?

He constructed a small search, starting from his sleeves and moving outward, homing in on the source. But as soon as he had it constructed, the spell stopped. His shirt was bound to the chair and that change no longer required magic to sustain it. He had to goad the attacker into doing something else.

Then it hit him. He couldn't see the attacker and he was looking at all of the line of sight out his window.

"Who else is there with you?" demanded Curtis. "That's not Osman, who is it?"

Alex was surprised by the change in topic, but he didn't let it show on his face. "You're right," he said, "it's not Osman. I never did get his name. I was a little preoccupied after your man here tried to kill me!"

Alex refused to turn and look. He had seen the man at the club with Osman. If Curtis was suddenly interested in him, Alex figured he must be doing something to piss Curtis off. That made him smile.

"You tell him- no, no don't do that! You'll kill us both! Arrgh!"

Cart found the room where the killer sat, unmoving. She carefully moved to open the door when she saw the fabric of his sleeves move. They seemed to melt slightly and join seamlessly with the metal of the chair. He shouted something to the far end of his senses.

She carefully eased open the door and let herself inside, training her tiny gun on the killer. He said, "you tell him-" then Cart interrupted.

"Don't move," she said, realizing he probably couldn't move if he wanted to.

"No, no don't do that!" he said. Curtis' concentration was taxed, dealing with both the near and far ends of his senses. He strained to keep only one set of information in his mind, but felt the concentration slipping away to his panic and frustration at being found. The senses fell away like sheets of water. He grabbed at them, but could not contain them enough to hold on.

Eric saw Curtis' reaction to Cart and was glad he was upset. Then he realized he was more than upset, he was struggling with something mental, something magical.

Quickly, he adapted the ward he had used for each repeater to block sensory input for Curtis. It wouldn't be perfect, but it was better than nothing. The last thing he wanted was for the one cop who knew what Eric's role was in all this to get killed now.

"You'll kill us both!" said Curtis, gritting his teeth.

"I'm not going to kill you," said Cart. "NYPD. Just stay where you are."

"Arrgh!" said Curtis and his last bit of concentration let go. He felt the pressure build at each of the repeaters and was unable to stop it. Then he felt the pressure slow in its build up. He wasn't waiting around to see why. Curtis pulled in his senses dismantling his wards as he retreated back through the repeaters.

Eric finished activating his wards for Curtis then waited. If he pulled his will back, the wards would stop doing anything and Curtis might die. If he waited too long, whatever Curtis was afraid of might happen to him.

Eric waited until he saw Curtis break eye contact. He slumped forward in his chair, panting and sweating with the effort. Eric started to dismantle the wards. As he did so, he felt a pressure building, like echoes confined to a tiny space, repeating in on themselves. They conflicted and amplified each other, resulting in a cacophony of sound and sight and smell.

It was all Eric could do to ignore the burgeoning noise of input and withdraw his senses to the previous repeater. He gritted his teeth and felt his hands clench. His heart raced with exertion and fear of what might happen if he let go too soon.

Eric pulled back from the final repeater with a snap. His senses returned to that of a single location and single perspective. He looked away from the device and down at his shaking hands. A second later, he heard a popping sound as the repeater, no longer able to contain the excess sensory energy, exploded.

Alex trained his gun on the noise, but lowered it when he saw it was no threat. He turned to

Eric and said, “where are they? Did she find him?”

Eric nodded, exhausted. Alex smiled and started walking over to where Eric was sitting. Eric looked past him, his eyes drifting over the chairs, discarded handcuffs, the mangled concrete floor. His brows furrowed.

“Hey,” he said, “where’s Quinnell?”

Alex turned back around, scanning the area, gun at the ready. He was no where to be seen. He swore under his breath. He never had a chance to check his pulse and had just assumed he was dead. He would have been worth the fifty thousand dollars in the place of Krish. Now that Bernadine was going to have her hands on Krish, it was unlikely Alex would be able to get him for the reward.

The doors to the building slammed open and Eric and Alex were bathed in spotlights.

“Freeze! Keep your hands where we can see them!”

Eric squeezed his eyes shut against the light. Just when he thought this day couldn’t get any worse.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Bernie decided she didn't like being on the receiving end of an interrogation. The MAS agents had her going over the events of the previous day yet again, with different questions and angles. The lights in the room were a harsher fluorescent than she remembered.

Agent Walker paced back and forth while agent Kantorowitz took notes. Cart was pretty sure there was something he wanted to ask, but if he asked it bald-faced, he'd give away more than he wanted to. She watched him pace as he considered his question.

She wondered what, if anything they had found at her apartment. If it was her investigation, she would find the timing of Eric getting grabbed highly suspicious. Her apartment, less any planted evidence, was completely innocuous. She didn't do magic, except the police sanctioned wards and detectors. She remembered the pictures of her and Alex and the debt she now owed to Kip, the leader of the motorcycle club she'd called for a lift. She squirmed a little in her chair. That wasn't damning, but it wasn't going to do her any favors, either.

"Why did you take it upon yourself to search for Strickland and Krish, without calling for backup?" Walker finally asked.

"Indirectly, I did call for backup," said Cart. "I instructed officer Parkey to call detective Demars."

"Yet when we traced your cell phone signal, you were not there."

"I followed the suspect to another location," said Cart.

Walker seemed to pause in his pacing for an instant. "How?"

"By using a handheld magical detector, I was able to find the active magic being redirected to the warehouse," said Cart, her tone bored.

"Were you the first to find the suspect, Curtis Krish?"

"No, sir," said Cart.

"Who found him first?"

"Eric Strickland."

"And how did he find Krish?"

Cart sighed. "You'd have to ask him that."

Kantorowitz flicked his eyes to Cart then back down to his notes.

"We will," said Walker. "Now, about your relationship with Alex Petrovin."

Cart bit her tongue. This was a new conversation area, but she was tired and wanted nothing more than to give the MAS agents the finger and go home to bed. She waited, not willing to rise to the bait of confirming a relationship by asking "what about it" or denying a relationship by asking "what relationship".

Walker watched her for a moment then said, "how did Alex Petrovin learn the location of the warehouse?"

Cart hesitated for just an instant. "You'd have to ask him that," she said.

Walker and Kantorowitz exchanged a glance and Kantorowitz scribbled a note into the file. Bernie cursed herself for not thinking that through. She had given Alex the address via Kip's biker buddies. She just hoped that Alex had enough sense to lie about where he got the information. She cringed inwardly thinking she'd owe Alex a debt as well if he did lie for her.

"How sure are you that Curtis Krish is MacGregor's killer?"

"Very sure," said Cart immediately. It was a new area of inquiry, but at least it was one she felt comfortable discussing.

"What hard evidence would you use to prove it?"

"Most likely magical traces from the crime scene of MacGregor's murder and from the site of the arrest last night," said Cart.

A smile flickered at the corner of Walker's mouth and he stopped pacing.

"Very well, detective Cart," he said. "I think we're done for now."

Cart stood to leave. Something didn't seem right. She paused before opening the door of the interrogation room. "How's the Jennifer Bryne murder investigation going?"

Kantorowitz froze mid-note, but Walker didn't miss a beat. He smiled tightly at her and ushered her closer to the door. He paused with his hand on the handle and looked at her. "Fine," he said, opening the door. "Good day, detective."

Eric stared at the bland gray table of the interrogation room, exhausted. Even after the taxing magic he'd performed for detective Cart, he couldn't sleep much in holding. Now he was just counting the hours until they either charged him or released him.

He hadn't spent a lot of time on introspection since the warehouse, but he knew one thing: he missed doing magic. Programming was a pale shadow of the power one could wield with magic. And programming, while creative, didn't use your whole being the way magic did. The anti-magic angel he had put on his shoulder was being drowned out by the magic demons clawing their way back onto his other shoulder.

The door opened and two men in boring black suits entered. Eric tried not to stiffen, but feds made him nervous disproportionate to the damage they could do to his freedom and life. One of them sat down and opened a large file folder and started taking notes. The other stared at him for a moment.

"I'm Agent Walker with the Magical Acuity Service," he said. "We'd like to ask you a few questions about last night."

Eric nodded. Shit! If they were running the show then his immunity from detective Cart might not be worth anything. He cursed himself for going along with it. He had freed himself and he should have just bailed. But, she had given him a reason to use magic again. How was he going to pass that up?

Walker eyed him a moment longer then started to pace. "How did you locate Curtis Krish?"

"Who?"

"The man detective Cart apprehended in a warehouse several blocks from where you were arrested," said Walker, mildly irritated.

"Oh, him," said Eric. "I followed him."

Walker stopped pacing and slammed his hands down onto the table. Eric jumped and Walker

glared at him.

“Let’s get something straight, Strickland,” he said. “You may have Cart fooled, but I know what kind of sleazy dirtbag you really are. She may have given you immunity from the local police for last night, but don’t think for an instant that it applies to me. If you piss me off, I can have you back in prison so fast your head will spin. You understand me?”

Eric narrowed his eyes. There was the threat he was used to from cops. Feds or no, he knew this game.

“I followed him’ is the non-technical version of what I did,” said Eric in a low voice. “How technical do you want?”

Walker glared at him a moment longer then pushed up from the table and resumed pacing. Eric watched him. MAS agents would know a lot about magic in general, but he wasn’t sure how much hands-on experience they had. Walker made a few laps of the room.

“How did you deal with the extra input from each node?”

Eric blinked. Walker didn’t want to know how the repeaters worked. He already knew. He was just finding out how much Eric knew. Eric decided on the truth. They already knew and could prove he’d used magic, so there was no harm in it and maybe it would curry some favor with Walker and he’s ease off the “back to prison” bullshit.

“Wards,” said Eric, “at each node, for the input and targets specific to that node.”

“Created on the fly?” asked Walker dubiously.

“Yeah,” said Eric. “Once I had one, the others were pretty straight-forward.”

Walker considered this and paced a few more times. “The devices were destroyed before we and local authorities arrived on the scene,” said Walker. “What happened to them?”

“They exploded,” said Eric. “It seemed to be some feedback, but I’m not certain that’s what caused them to be destroyed.”

Walker nodded. “What did you do, if anything, to slow the feedback?”

Eric scowled at Walker and shifted in his chair. This guy knew a lot more about the devices than he was letting on. He wondered briefly if he was in league with Krish. That didn’t make much sense to Eric, but he had never understood feds. Krish was too damn unstable to have working with you on something this complex and delicate. If it hadn’t been for Eric’s wards protecting Krish on the way back out of the repeaters, the feedback would have been immense and probably exploded with a lot more force than the tiny pops Eric had seen.

“More wards,” said Eric, “filtering out input and some canceling of the positive reinforcement.”

Kantorowitz hadn’t stopped writing since they’d entered. Eric wasn’t sure he was actually writing anything related to the conversation they were having.

“What is your relationship with Alex Petrovin?”

Eric raised an eyebrow at the change in topic, but said, “I don’t have one. I only met him two days ago.”

“How did you get your job at Herbert and Sons Computer Support Services?”

Eric didn’t see how that was possibly relevant, but he shrugged and said, “a placement service. I don’t remember the name.”

Walker stopped pacing. He looked at Kantorowitz and nodded slightly.

“Thank you, Mr. Strickland,” he said, walking towards the door. “That’s all for now. Don’t leave town for a few days.” He opened the door and gestured for Eric to leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The day after Curtis Krish was arrested, Internal Affairs dropped the inquiry into detective Cart. She noted with annoyance that the Jennifer Bryne murder case had also been closed citing national security and lack of evidence.

The MAS involvement in this whole thing made her uncomfortable. She was certain there was more to the story than Curtis Krish going off and killing MacGregor. She was pretty sure it was connected to the Bryne murder.

She sat at her desk after one and half days of administrative leave. She realized she would probably never know what the connection was, just like she'd never get to ask all the questions she had about the repeaters from Krish's arrest. After talking with Walker, she'd been "asked" to sign some papers saying she hadn't seen anything and didn't know anything.

Cart sighed. Sometimes, you didn't get to find out the full story, and she had to live with that. She sat at her desk, filled out paperwork, and generally straightened the mess Vinetti had made out of her case file.

He had been livid when Bernie brought in the killer. He screamed about how she had violated the intent of her leave by going after him. He screamed about how the crime scene had been mishandled and how cooperating with a suspect to do magic was a travesty and possibly contaminated evidence. The captain tried to calm Vinetti down, but in the end, it was the MAS agents telling him to shut up that had finally worked.

Bernie was working on the file and her computer when Demars returned. He had gone to make sure Tong Osman was settled in the safe house and to see that Eric Strickland would be available to give his testimony at Krish's trial.

"How's Osman?" asked Cart, not looking up from her papers.

"Fine," said Demars. "I think he's having some withdrawal, though. The doctors say he'll come through the detox just fine, he'll just be crankier than usual."

Cart grunted. Demars sat in his chair and looked at his partner. She had been right that it would be easier to maintain his spotless record without her. He had proved he could work with difficult partners. Spending two days working with Vinetti had proved that, he thought. Maybe he would ask for a new partner after things settled down a little. Sometimes, once a trust was lost, it was impossible to repair.

Demars pulled a small cell phone from his desk drawer. He cradled it in his hand and leaned forward to look at Cart. She sensed him looking at her and raised her eyes. They narrowed when she saw the look on his face.

"This was found on the roof of the warehouse where we found Strickland and Petrovin," he

said.

Bernie set her pen down and looked at him. They hadn't parted on great terms and she wasn't sure if or how to mend the fences.

"It's your phone," said Demars.

Bernie nodded. "It's how you found us, isn't it?"

"If I log the phone into evidence," said Demars, "the call records will also become evidence."

She could explain away her call to Kip as contacting a confidential informant or something else. But in her position, having too many things that needed explanation was increasingly suspicious.

"That would be inconvenient," she said quietly, "but not disastrous." She looked at him, trying to gauge the answer he wanted to hear. "You do what you think is best."

He watched her, still not able to read her.

"I need to know you're still the cop I met two years ago," said Demars. "I need to know I can trust you to walk the straight and narrow."

She paused. If she was brutally honest with herself, she was no longer sure she could be the cop she was two years ago. She wanted to be, but that wasn't the same thing. Still, she had too much self-respect to lie to Lawson when he asked for her trust.

"I don't know if I can give you back that trust, Lawson," she said. "All I can say is that I'll try."

He pursed his lips. "I guess that's all I can ever really hope for." He put the phone into an evidence bag and began filling out the paperwork for it.

Nearly being killed had not changed Tong in any meaningful way. He was still as flaky and manic as ever. Eric had always thought that mania was just the cocaine. He went to visit Tong once in the hospital to let him know that the debt was more than paid and if Tong needed any more help, he knew where to stick it.

Tong had pleaded and wheedled for Eric to get him some coke and to find him a big dude to protect him in jail. He wasn't going to get much, maybe a year, for attacking detective Cart. Reduced sentence and all for helping to nail Curtis Krish as MacGregor's killer.

After the hospital, Eric walked down to one of those by-the-day work places. They didn't have anything for him. He had already sent out resumes to a bunch of companies for computer work. The glacial pace at which they moved was aggravating. It gave Eric time to think about the past week and the temptation there was just too great. He shook off those thoughts and started walking back towards his apartment.

It was a cloudy day again, the kind that can't make up its mind if its going to rain or just mist. Eric hunched up his shoulders and walked. The feds had made him sign a paper saying that he swore never to talk about the repeaters. It always struck him as silly to think that words on paper could ever influence your behavior. Still, he did want to stay out of prison and maybe that was motivation enough.

A long black car slid up beside him. Eric looked at it warily, waiting for the nose of a gun to come poking out of a window. Instead, the back window slid down and Alex Petrovin looked out at him.

"Eric," he said, "can we talk?"

Eric stopped and looked at the car, blinking back the heavily misting rain. "What about?" he

asked.

“I promise no harm will come to you,” said Alex. “Please, get in, you’re getting soaked.” As an afterthought he added, “when we’re done talking I will give you a lift wherever you’re going.”

Eric shrugged. Fuck it, free ride. Alex had had plenty of opportunity to kill him a few nights ago at the warehouse, so he probably wasn’t going to kill him now in his own car. Eric got into the back and Alex raised the window. He gave an instruction to the driver in Russian.

“Before you come to any decisions about what I’m going to say, I want you to hear me out,” said Alex.

Eric shrugged. He didn’t have anywhere to be.

“You used to work for the Sloan family, correct?”

“Yeah,” said Eric. “That’s where I met Tong. We used to run components around the city sometimes.”

“Just a runner?”

“Not me,” said Eric. “But all the crafting I did on the side. Sloans don’t really deal, just run.”

“Ah,” said Alex, as if that explained everything. He paused as if finding the right words. “I’m not an expert in these things,” he said, “but I know people who are. I told them about what I saw in the warehouse and they want to meet you.”

Eric shifted in his seat. It crossed his mind that Alex was a fed and this was a ploy to get at him, but it seemed fairly elaborate for that. “Oh yeah,” he said, “what kind of people?”

“Your kind of people,” said Alex, his eyes gleaming with pride and avarice. “We have mages of all kinds working with us. Mostly we deal in more delicate spells, intricate but not flashy. You can set your own hours and the pay is very good.”

Eric sat back in the leather seat and looked at Alex. He wondered if Alex knew how tempting his offer was. A few days ago, when Tong was bitching about maybe getting killed over his magical indiscretions, Eric had sworn off the criminal life for good.

Had Alex come to him then, there was no way he would agree. But since then he’d had a good, long taste of what he’d been missing all these years. The fun of making something from nothing, the thrill of solving problems and seeing the results, and the tiny feeling of being a maniacal overlord and imposing your will on the world, it was intoxicating. Even compared with the stress of being kidnapped and interrogated by the feds, crafting magic was just too good to let go of forever.

Eric didn’t want to enjoy magic so much. There was a lot about it that sucked. It was dangerous, in more ways than just accidental explosions. With his sentence, there was no way he was going to get a legal license for magic, but he could argue with detective Cart and see what she could do for him. He got the impression that she was not in a position to bargain for herself, let alone for others.

And here was Alex Petrovin offering him a chance to do what he loved. There must be a catch beyond the obvious danger and illegality of the job.

“What’s the catch?”

Alex smiled. “You make what we tell you to, no sneaking it out to side buyers. You can take jobs on the side, but not for other families.”

“And if I decide I want out?”

Alex spread his hands magnanimously. “Then you get out, after you finish whatever you’re

working on. We don't want unhappy mages," he said, "too many things can go wrong." He folded his hands in his lap and looked at Eric. "What do you say?"

Eric flicked the little angel off his shoulder and let the magic demons dance and give each other high-fives. He smiled. "I want to meet the other guys I'll be working with and think it over."

Alex smiled. "Of course. I expected nothing less." He pulled a card out of his jacket pocket. "Call this number when you're ready," he said. He leaned to one side and said something to the driver.

A few minutes later they pulled up in front of Eric's shabby apartment building and Eric got out. Alex said, "we'll talk again soon."

Eric nodded once and the car rolled away. Oh yes, he thought, sometime very soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

He watched the feds get into their car and drive away. Their immediate involvement in the case was over so they were going back to whatever sterile MAS lab they had crawled out of. He was glad to see them go. They just ended up sticking their nose where it didn't belong and messing everything up.

Like that bitch Bryne. She had come down to confront Krish and look what it got her. Dead is what. Krish had been to blame for that one, too, losing his head and killing her in her rented apartment. It was a miracle he'd stayed away from the families long enough to get busted by the police after all the heat that brought down.

Of course, that Bryne and MacGregor had chosen Krish to be their supplier spoke volumes about their inability to judge people's character. And they had been so careful up until then, stealing the MAS research and perfecting it. It was only when they wanted to produce lots of the repeaters that things had started to go badly.

He shook his head. That was the problem with greed, it could make you stupid. Not that he had anything against making as much money as possible, but he wasn't going to do anything stupid to get it. Working for Krish for as long as he had was pretty stupid, he admitted, but at least he'd come out of that alive.

He disappeared into the shadows of the alley. The police had raided Krish's club and other properties, seizing everything. Before they could get to the accounts, he had transferred much of the money off-shore. He considered it his due for putting up with Krish for so long. His men had scattered to the other families, which was just as well. He was not a leader, he was the power behind the throne. Now he just needed to find another throne to stand behind.

The subway was dark and the anonymity was comforting. He hid the long wound and its dark stitches under a knit cap, but it made him self-conscious so he preferred the tunnels to taking a cab. He had decided to take a few months off and consider his next employer more carefully than the last.

Even though the repeaters were long gone, the knowledge was still out there. It was only a matter of time before it surfaced again. And then, what an interesting place the world would be.

Quinnell smiled. Interesting indeed.