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The Magician

1

“Mr... Curn... co... vick... did I say that right?”

“Crnkovic.”

“Krinkovich?”

“Yes, senator.” I sat down and unbuttoned my suit jacket. A rental, ill-fitting, and hot. I was miserable.

“Good. We are here to discuss the nature of exactly what went on over the past week or so, your experience with Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Calix Oakley, and what you witnessed having infiltrated NSA headquarters. Before we begin, let us remind the audience that this is not a trial, Mr. Crnkovic has, at this point, been granted immunity from all charges of impersonating a federal officer, and that you are here as our guests and should conduct yourselves as such.”

I glanced back at the sea of reporters and government aides, cramming the benches that stretched out behind me. My hands were shaking a little.

“Then let’s begin.” The chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee was Senator Sam Gordon, an independent from Wisconsin and the first of his political persuasion to hold the chairmanship. To his right was Senator Alice Frey, a democrat from California and the chairman of the subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Homeland Security. To Gordon’s left was Senator Will Kettleman, a republican from North Carolina who was also a member of the Armed Services Committee. Sixteen other prominent senators lined the massive marble semicircle

which faced my tiny wooden table, complete with two silver microphones and a complimentary water pitcher.

Gordon was in his early seventies with calm white hair and an easy demeanor. He had been a democrat most of his life and then switched to independent in his old age, sick of partisan fighting in the senate. He folded his hands and looked at me expectantly.

“Please tell us, in as much detail as you can, exactly what happened.”

The wiry stenographer seated to my right turned to me and glared.

2

State Route 20 is one of only three highways in Washington state that closes annually in the winter. The tiny town of Mazama, buried by eight feet of snowfall the last time I was there, was hardly a wide spot in the road and the photograph my mother took of my brother and me standing atop a snowdrift with a stop sign at our feet is still on my bookshelf.

It took me a full ten years to make it back to the unspoiled wilderness of the North Cascades, fully grown and by myself this time, negotiating the winding road past Diablo Lake and down into Mazama’s old rows of log cabins. Early August is usually the hottest time of the year in Washington and that day was no exception with beads of condensation dripping down the Frappuccino wedged in my cup holder.

My summer had been productive. A new job as an IT administrator for a law firm in had nearly doubled my salary and cut my hours in half. Only the occasional call from an attorney struggling to format a Word document or trying to send an attachment interrupted my schedule on any given day. And every month, I would setup a new laptop or two, hand it off to a fresh-faced paralegal, and tell them to head down to AT&T and buy a Blackberry.

My new job had afforded me a cozy apartment on the fourth floor of a 1960s building wedged between a grand old Victorian house and a German auto repair shop. I had a view of downtown Seattle, the Space Needle, and, on those rarest of clear days, the Olympics looming high above the sound.

When I paid off my first credit card, I bought a flat panel TV. When my student loans dipped below the halfway mark, I flew to LA for a weekend of debauchery with a buddy in WeHo. And when my birthday came around in late July, I went on a weeklong vacation, cranked up *The Best of Journey* in the Kia, and took off in a tank top and shorts to scout the property my parents had given me as a college graduation gift.

Situated along the Methow River just south of Twisp were twenty beautiful acres of alders, blackberries, a cluster of seedy Douglas firs, and one small crabapple tree. There was a riverbank comprised of small pebbles and driftwood, a dirt driveway, and perched atop a small pad of concrete was a tiny cabin built by my father, my brother, and myself when I was thirteen. My mom had grown increasingly tired of sleeping in tents and had begged to have “just four walls and a roof.” We gave her barely that.

Parking the car and wading through the knee-high weeds that covered the property, I lifted my sunglasses in half-disbelief that the little hut was still standing. It was a pathetic structure, a quick cabin bought at one of those DIY home shows for a few hundred bucks, a truckload of lumber, and an instruction manual printed in China which read nothing like American English. It took us nearly four days to get it done and less than a year to get so caught up in junior high, high school, college, and (for my parents at least) middle age that we never returned. But I retained fond memories of it and always thought about setting aside time to go back and visit.

And though it clearly took ten years, I had no regrets. My older brother floated and partied through college, fucking around and spending five years for a communication degree he never put to good use (he’s on Broadway now in “Cats” so I guess that kind of counts as communication). My parents paid for it all without saying a word, new cars, new textbooks, new laptops...

I, on the other hand, moved out on my 18th birthday, afraid to come out and date guys while living under my dad’s roof. I paid for school by myself and when my parents bought a motor-home to travel the country, the Twisp property was put in my name. Congratulations on your degree! Now you can afford to pay property taxes.

Thanks mom.

I opened the door to the faded wooden walls and listened as the rusty hinges groaned in disapproval. It smelled like musty old house and a fine sheen of dust covered the wood stove, the floor, and the futon. I reached through layers of spider web to open the lone window and sighed, my nose twitching at the dust.

“Well shit...” I said under my breath. The midday was well over 90 and I was already sweating. I made a quick trip back to town for some food, an ice chest, a hose, and some matches, then promptly hooked up the water connection and began hosing down the cabin, inside and out.

The futon was a total loss, spots of mildew covering its once blue upholstery. But it was from Ikea’s as-is section and not having the heart to throw it away, I drug it out into the sun to dry. The pot-bellied wood stove was vintage, bought at a swap meet by my dad for all of \$50. It had aged well and once the dust was washed out onto the concrete pad, the inside of the cabin took on a humid tone and my breathing eased.

I grabbed a towel and headed for the river, peeling off my tank top and using it to clean the dust from my Ray-Bans. Afternoon was settling in and the crickets were starting to buzz in the hot grasses that covered the property.

I stopped short at the river’s edge, stunned by the new development across the water from me. A massive, sprawling log home sat squarely in the middle of what was once a grassy flood plain, a broad arc of trees wavering behind it as a windbreak. The hill beyond had an orchard of some kind and a new SUV was parked under a carport with a green metal roof.

“There goes the neighborhood,” I muttered. I wandered down the riverbank, glancing back at the Robert Redford palace occasionally to reassure myself it was still there. The Methow was a hive for yuppies from the city who wanted an REI experience just three hours from the comfort and safety of Seattle. Yuppies who would wear their Gortex and their hiking boots and use lighter fluid and shop at Whole Foods, then tell their coworkers about how they “roughed it” for a weekend. Yuppies like me.

Except I swam naked. Yuppies put in hot tubs and ushered their kids away from the river as though they would catch beaver fever just by looking at the water. I stripped down in a secluded bend and sprinted into the shallows before diving into a deep spot where the eddies

slowed down. It was cold. Bracingly so, to the point where it took my breath away and my heart raced slightly. Glacier water. But the air above was still hot as hell and I enjoyed watching the sun play with the leaves on the trees as I turned and swam into the fast current for a solid half hour.

Fatigued and achy, I pulled on the boy shorts I wore under the cargos, spread out my towel, and tried to catch the last of the sun, listening to the birds chirp high above and the water wash past with cool gushing sounds.

I was almost asleep when I heard him. Slow, measured footsteps... the kind you take when you have nowhere to go and all day to get there. A slight rustle in the bushes as he shouldered past. Then the silence as he paused and I felt him staring at my back. My cargos were near my right hand and I slowly walked my fingers over the stones to them, feeling for the Baby Eagle I almost always kept on me.

I got up nonchalantly, resting first on my forearms, then rolling over to sit cross legged on the towel and face the bank where I knew he was. It was a man. His steps were too heavy to be a woman.

“Hello?” I said, my right hand still resting on my shorts.

I caught a glimpse of him, light skin, dark hair, a beard, and far too much clothing for the kind of heat we were in. He was behind a bush, barely visible and then suddenly gone, as if he'd fallen backwards or disappeared.

I pulled the gun from its pocket, cocked it, and got to my feet, my hair dripping into my face. I walked towards the bush, stepping into my flip flops along the way, and toying with the safety on the pistol. Nothing. Gone. I packed up my stuff and headed back to the cabin.

I tell my friends when we go camping that I take a gun in case we get attacked by a bear or mountain lion. In truth, I take it for the two-legged variety of predator. The kind that thinks and plans and meditates. The kind that takes without earning.

I get a lot of flak from my friends for being the only gay boy they know who owns a gun. I've never shot anyone or at anyone or even aimed at anyone (except when I was a child living in Sarajevo, but that's another story). I vote republican only sometimes and I don't think violence is glamorous. But you can never be too careful and I take comfort in the fact that Britain's violent crime rate is higher than America's because owning a gun in England is illegal, thus criminals know they are preying on unarmed citizens.

Spare me the lectures about safety and what not. I go shooting twice monthly at the range and have a concealed weapons permit. I have a safe I keep the damned thing in when I'm at home and when I'm not, it's either tucked in the back of my jeans or in the glove box. I even took self defense classes before buying it to make sure I could take down anyone who got ahold of it. My Baby Eagle.

I put up a target on a fat tree, backed up a ways, and shot at it until it started getting dark that night, listening to the pop-pop bounce off the hills and the birds squawk. The air cooled down, little bugs started nipping at my legs, and a giant mosquito landed on my arm. I flexed and it popped like a flying zit, guts and traces of blood landing on my wrist. I laughed a little and swatted at the spider I could feel crawling on my calf.

I went to the car to dig out a change of clothes and my sleeping bag and when I turned around, I caught my breath. He was there, peering into the window of the cabin. Fluffy, untamed hair, faded camouflage pants and jacket, and a pair of worn out boots. My finger tickled the safety on the gun and I squished the sleeping bag under my arm, watching the sun go down behind the mountains.

"Can I help you?" I asked loudly.

He turned abruptly, saw me, and then bolted.

"Stop!" I dropped my clothes and sleeping bag to chase after him. "Stop, dammit!" My feet hurt as I ran in my flip flops, but I caught up to him and tackled him to the grassy ground.

"Who the fuck are you and why are you here?"

"Let me go." His voice belied his appearance... it was deep and resonant, commanding.

"There's no trespassing, dude... get out of here." I got up and looked down at him, motioning to the driveway with my gun.

“Don’t shoot me.” He was standing up now, facing me, mangy and filthy. He reeked of one too many nights near a campfire and never washing his clothes.

“Get off my property and I won’t have to.”

“You even know how to use that thing?”

I glanced to the right and spotted the crabapple tree, its branches heavy with early fruit. I aimed and fired, neatly taking out an apple. The pieces thudded to the ground quietly as the gunshot ricocheted off the hills.

“Don’t do that again,” he said, his voice pleading.

“Out!”

“You’re not safe here.”

I aimed the gun at him. “Neither are you. Leave.” I was finally getting a good look at him. There were leaves in his hair, his face was smudged with dirt, and his clothes were greasy. I felt it on my hands from touching him.

“Put it down, please... I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Clearly. Now get the fuck out of here! Don’t make me ask you again...”

“There’s no time for this... you shouldn’t be here. It’s getting dark an-” He stopped mid sentence, turned his head to the left as if he were listening to something, then snapped to wide-eyed attention. “Get down!”

He sprang up, lunging for me and I fired as we both went sprawling backwards onto the ground. I looked over his filthy hair just in time to see a flash of light stream overhead and sink into my car behind me. The Kia exploded, a massive fireball lighting up the dusky ground, and I felt a piece of glass strike my head.

“Holy shit!” I pushed him off me and scrambled to my feet to look back at my car, a mass of flames and smoke. “Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Follow me,” he growled, staggering to his feet and clawing at my tank top. “We have to run.”

And we did. All the way to the river and then across the freezing shallows towards the McMansion on the other side. Halfway across, he stopped me, held up a blood soaked hand, and listened again.

“Slowly... like this...” He crouched down to his hands and knees in the water. I did the same in time to avoid another fireball that flew over my head and into a stand of trees with a crackle. Luckily, it had rained not two days prior, otherwise the entire valley might have burned down.

“What the fuck is this?!” I was beginning to think my parents had sold the property to the military for war games without telling me.

“Later.” He scrambled up onto the bank and nearly disappeared into the bushes, reaching out to drag me up behind him. I slipped the pistol into the back of my shorts and crouched with him in the brambles.

“Shit... I think I shot you...” I looked at his arm soaked in blood.

“You think?” He shook his head, exasperated, and then looked around the sides of the bush. I followed his eyes, but only saw shadows and the shining, rushing water. “When I say so, we run for the house.”

“Yeah... yeah OK.” I noticed my adrenaline pumping, faster and harder now, my hands shaking. The sky was darkening rapidly and the air was cooling off.

We waited for several more moments before he grabbed my arm, squeezed it, and stood. “Now!”

I sprinted behind him across the plain towards the house. The SUV was gone and the lights were out, the green metal roof glinting the faint sun. Our shadows were long and we disturbed a nest of pheasant as we ran past, sending them fluttering and chattering up into the sky.

Another fireball sailed past us, landing in the carport and burning out on the concrete. The man began weaving back and forth and I followed his pattern, crisscrossing like a helix to make ourselves more difficult targets. At least he was smart.

He nearly dove on me as we crossed once more in front of the house, a fireball flying over us and crashing into the house. I felt the heat flush over my body, dangerously close, and my skin felt dry. Glass broke inside the house and flames started to crackle with more intensity.

“This way,” he said breathlessly.

I gasped for air as I followed him around the side of the house. He held out his arm to stop me suddenly and I looked in horror at the flaming pentagram drawn into the grass. In the middle stood a man in black, terrible streaks of black paint smeared across his face and arms, his hands outstretched towards us. He murmured some kind of low incantation which sent shivers down my spine.

My companion suddenly shoved me to the ground, covered me with his body, and spoke in a voice wrought with alarm.

“Erin a menna sha sha tuoii, erin a menna sha sha tuoii, erin...”

With gale force, flames shot from the man in black and poured over us, mashing us into the grass. I gritted my teeth and groaned, clutching the reeking fabric of my companion’s shirt as he continued chanting over me. I closed my eyes and dirt whipped up around us, chunks of weeds flying about and smacking my forehead. The whirlwind held off the flames and I heard thumps as the clusters of roots flew into the house and struck the other man within the pentagram.

The flames stopped and I opened my eyes onto the now scorched ground, my companion standing and turning around to face the man in black. They both began speaking furiously at one another until the trees in the windbreak started to groan and waver, the unburned grass fluttered, and the flames of the pentagram grew higher and higher.

“Ranutha obaann e, jusi sha tuoii, kelld ngac o me!” They fought suddenly, brilliant flashes of light coursing between them as the man in black hurled his fists through the air and swung heavily at the other man.

I scrambled backwards, into the charred, warm dirt, watching as they fought, the flames from the burning McMansion dancing wildly behind them. Only when the mountain man caught a fist on the side of the head with a bright puff of light did I snap back to my senses.

I drew my gun. “Stop!”

The man in black sneered at me from under the face paint and started muttering something I couldn’t understand.

I fired. Three rounds in all, none of which were aimed particularly at him. He crumpled to the earth, the flames of his pentagram burning out behind him as he did so. And then there

was silence, the faint echos of the gun receding into the distance and just the crackle crackle of the house as it burned.

I stood up suddenly, my stomach tight and my mouth dry. I stumbled towards them both, inspecting my kill and trembling violently. I stopped to steady myself and when the man in black reared up again to charge at me, I fell backwards into the dirt, the pistol landing with the thud a few feet away. He was chanting again, his hands raised, the hair atop his head sticking into the dark blue sky, his eyes glowing.

And then he was steaming, wilting. As if somehow he was evaporating, his massive, hulking form began to wither and shrink until he was actually a very short man, weak and stunned.

The man with the beard was on the ground behind him, looking up, fingers outstretched, his mouth moving quickly. The man in black fell once more and this time did not get up.

I retrieved my gun, and moved away, out past the side of the house to look back at the river. I could make it to the cabin, grab my iPhone and digital camera, and then get out to the road and hitch a ride back to town. Or I could walk if there were no cars. Either way. I headed out towards the plain, my feet bare because I had lost my flip flops somewhere during the run.

That's when I heard him breathing. The slow, labored breaths. I turned around to look at his matted hair, faded fatigues, and greasy face laying face up in the grass, smoldering dirt still surrounding him. I heard glass breaking.

“Shit...”

I turned to go once more, then thought better of it and walked back to retrieve the bearded man. The man in black was clearly dead, his body already stiff as I stumbled over it. The bearded man smelled of burnt hair and blood as I got him to his feet, draped his arm over my shoulders, and helped him back across the plain, massive flames climbing high into the night sky.

It was ridiculous, really. I was too smart, too successful, too low key, too gay to get caught up in something so stupid. But by the time we made it back to the tiny cabin, I was

beyond furious. I dropped the man off on the stoop of the cabin and looked at the black streak on the dim ground where my car had been.

“Fuck! The insurance company is NEVER going to believe this...”

“Obviously... you don't have Allstate...,” he mumbled from behind me.

“Fuck you! Son of a bitch... if you hadn't been here in the first place, none of this would have happened.” I marched past him into the cabin to pull the first aid kit and a Coleman lantern down from the rafters. I pumped the gas valve a few times, twisted it on, and stuck a lit match inside. The light was blinding.

I propped him up against the side of the building and examined his arm. It had bled badly and his sleeve was soaked. I thought twice about touching it.

“You have any diseases?”

“Huh?” He was faded and delirious.

“Am I going to get sick from touching your blood?”

“No, no...”

“I don't believe you,” I sighed. I pulled on the latex gloves in the kit, grabbed the scissors, and snipped the fabric off. To my relief, it was a slash wound in a surprisingly muscular arm. It would leave a scar, but I figured it served him right for trespassing.

I flicked some antiseptic on it and he barely flinched. Gauze, some tape, and I was onto his head. His hair was disgusting and bloody, a massive gash and lump forming where the other man had hit him.

“Jesus... OK, you know what? Stand up. Can you stand?” I dragged him to his feet.

“Take off your clothes.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because you're a fucking filthy homeless pig and I'm not going to touch you unless you do it.” He struggled with the buttons and I finally had to come help him, snipping here, tearing there. “Fucking socialist society... oh let's just *give* away our money to feed the poor and homeless... let's *enable* people to be lazy and still survive... God fucking forbid you actually get a fucking job and work for a living... no, instead you live out here on someone else's land and

play with rockets... fucking disgrace to humanity and this country. You should be tried for treason and shot.”

He was down to his skivvies before I grabbed the hose, turned it on, and started to wash him down with angry, harsh sprays of the frigid water. He cringed and huddled against the wall like a dog afraid of being punished, gripping the siding and shivering. In the light, I caught his eyes, bright green and sad, peering up at me from dark eyebrows. And they cut to the bone. I turned down the water pressure.

He pitched forward and I rushed up to catch him, easing him down as I brought up the hose to gently wash us both in the bright light of the lantern. I left him for a moment to rummage through the cleaning supplies I had bought that day and retrieved some dish soap.

I stripped off my gloves and my clothes, soaped him up, and started scrubbing with a rag. His body was surprisingly strong and I wondered exactly how old he was; it was hard to tell with the fluffy beard. But he was clearly in shape and well fed to my surprise. His hair was the worst and I had to wash it twice to get it looking halfway normal, a mass of thick jet black waves.

When the grease was gone and he smelled like apple scented Palmolive, I turned the hose on myself and rinsed off. After a quick round to gather some sticks, I built a fire in the stove, hauled his ass inside, and sat across from him, moving the lantern closer to redo the bandage on his arm and properly pull the skin together on his temple and then tape it shut.

He was silent the whole time, dazed slightly and I know more than a little ashamed. When I was done, I went out and found my clothes and sleeping bag, just feet away from the wreckage of my little car. I unzipped the sleeping bag and put it on the floor. He got up to leave and promptly slumped against the wall.

“You think you can make it to town?”

“Yeah.”

“OK.” I let him leave and felt slight relief until I heard a grassy thump as he fell into the weeds. “Shit...”

I retrieved him and dragged his nearly naked body back inside. He lay in a fetal position, watching me as I rearranged everything in the cabin. I finished and sat up against the far wall, gun in hand, watching him watch me.

“What’s your name?” he asked me, looking at the stove.

“Adrian.”

“I’m Cal.”

“Cal?”

“Short for Calix.”

“You’re Greek?”

“Welsh. But Calix is Greek.”

I let a pause grow between us, uncomfortable with how easy it was to talk with him. The stove was warm and my nerves were calming down slightly.

“Were those things missiles?” I asked suddenly.

He made eye contact with me for the first time in a while. “No.” His voice was softer now, the edge gone and I could see the aristocratic outline of his nose. “Fireballs.”

“Like ball lightning?”

“More or less.”

“Did the guy in black have a flame thrower?”

“No.”

“Then how did he...?”

He paused and swallowed, his eyes glittering as the lantern began to die down. “You want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“Magic.”

“Bullshit.”

I should say for the record that I don’t believe in magic. Or at least I didn’t up until that night. We were Catholic in Sarajevo, but the atrocities experienced between 1991 and 1995 not only prompted our emigration, but also our loss of faith in any higher power watching over us. I was a computer science major in college with a minor in history, so my experience with religion

during those crucial, young adulthood years was minimal. Besides, most religions would have rather seen me burn than join their ranks as a gay boy.

So I was, in a word, faithless. But magic had always held this kind of lower connotation, as if it were a base and crude belief, a superstition having to do very little with fact and more focused on the games people play with one another's minds. Monotheism at least had this glamour and popularity to it that went unquestioned. But if you ever said you were Wiccan, you immediately had to explain the hows and whys, justifying your beliefs to the masses of people who actually care about your eternal soul (usually for their own benefit, but sometimes out of genuine concern).

I half expected Cal to be gone when I woke up the next morning, shivering in the chill that would wear off in less than an hour. Light was already streaming in through the dingy window and the dampness from my hosing down the cabin was evident in the air.

But when I looked, he was there, curled up defensively on the sleeping bag near the wood stove, his black hair less fluffy and looking slightly more tamed. He had the look of European aristocracy with high cheekbones and a high bridge in his otherwise Roman nose. It was difficult to guess his age... 30s? 40s? He was exercised and healthy, but the dirt on his body was not completely gone and his unkept appearance was all at once both terrifying and aging.

I shivered again, retrieving my change of clothes from nearby and slipping into them, turning my back in case he awoke while I was changing my underwear. I left the clothes I'd worn the day before next to him on the floor, retrieved my pistol, and went out to piss against a rock in the crisp morning air. I shook my head at the sight of my car and reminded myself to find my cell phone and call the insurance company.

Dragonflies were already buzzing around when I returned to the cabin and found Cal sitting up against the wall, dressed in my shorts and tank top, pulling on his old combat boots. I snatched my iPhone from atop the ice chest and checked my voicemail.

"Hi Adrian, it's Marie from Loundsebury, Camden, & Wade. I know you're on vacation, but um... I'm calling because I just bought this Blackberry and... <sigh> I'm having the hardest time setting it up. Do I just enter in my email address? I can't seem to get it figured out... I know you said something about syncing it to my computer... is that what that CD is for?"

Anyway, give me a call back whenever you get the chance... it's just been such an inconvenience switching to this system. Thanks"

Stupid bitch. I resent people who can't figure out simple problems. They should be classified as special needs and be treated like the retards they are. When in doubt, run a fucking Google search. Don't waste other people's time with your own inability to learn and discover new things on your own.

"You have someone you can call?" I asked him as he got to his feet, leaning against the wall.

"Um... yeah. You can't stay here, though."

"Look, we've been through this. I don't know who or what you think you are... but let's be honest... you're crazy. Like, you have issues going on up here." I tapped the side of my head. "Now I cleaned you up and gave you a place to stay for the night. But my car is fucked, the people over there... their house is gone. Please please please just leave... this was supposed to be my vacation."

"If you stay here, you're gonna die."

"OK... why? Why here? Why MY place? Specifically, why this spot?"

"Because they're trying to kill me and now they will kill you." He clasped his head, now remarkably well healed and barely showing anything but a cut. "I don't expect you to get it, but the man we encountered last night was not alone. There are more like him and they will be back."

"Why?"

"Because I was once one of them. They would have killed you last night, but now that you've helped me... When they find bullets in his chest, they will be looking for you."

"Who?"

He moved towards me, then turned and headed out the door, setting a brisk pace considering his injuries. "I'll be happy to tell you everything, but we need to get moving."

"No, you do. I'm staying put." It suddenly occurred to me that I had no way of getting back across the mountains short of hiring a taxi or hitchhiking it.

"You need to come with me."

“What are you going to do? Cast a spell on me?”

He stopped and turned around. “I saved your life last night and you don’t trust me?”

I pursed my lips. “You’ve got a point there... But I don’t trust anyone. Especially you.”

“Noted.”

I felt up in the rafters for a dusty old daypack, packed it with food from the ice chest, filled two water bottles, lowered my sunglasses and headed out after him.

At the end of the driveway, we crossed the road and ended up on a small trail that led west up into the mountains. I hesitated.

“You coming or what?”

“Shouldn’t we be heading into town?”

“I’m going to Diablo.”

“What the hell is in Diablo?”

“The dam. Keep walking with me, please.” He motioned to me and I hurried across the weeds and into the brush that scattered the hillside below the trees. “Do you believe in magic?”

“No. Well, until last night, no.”

“You should start. It’s very real.”

“And you’re some kind of sorcerer?” I asked, pushing twigs and blackberry bushes out of the way to keep up with his breakneck pace.

“Yes. I’m a druid.”

That caused me to stop and laugh aloud for a moment into the air. “Like in World of Warcraft?”

He turned to glare at me. “Hardly. I manipulate the natural energy coming from plants and the earth. I don’t make potions, invoke unholy powers, or other such nonsense. That’s dirty magic.”

“Right. Yeah, OK. Clean versus dirty magic. Energy manipulation. And I’m following your ass into the woods... you’re gonna kill me.”

“If I had wanted you dead, I could have taken the chance last night. You think I’m crazy?”

“The thought had occurred to me.”

He stopped abruptly and turned around. "I spent eight years in the Marines... Force Recon in Afghanistan. I did two tours of duty in that hellhole until my helicopter was shot down. I said some kind of prayer on the way down that saved all but one of the crew by casting a spell around the chopper. Rather than send me to Iraq, the Marines handed me over to the government to participate in a preliminary test group for energy manipulation."

"You're shitting me." Suddenly, his fatigues made sense. "So you work for the CIA or something?"

"NSA actually. That's why we're going to Diablo Dam. NSA has a small detachment there. Supposed to keep track of me, but I haven't checked in for over a year now."

I paused again, stopping to rest on a large rock. "This is incredible..."

He braced his arm against a tree to rest and I noticed for the first time the eagle, globe, & anchor emblem of the Marine Corps tattooed on his right shoulder, complete with the words "Semper Fidelis" underneath it.

"So you've just been living out here in the wild? Why aren't you at a base or something?"

"Well, originally we were training at Diablo Lake. No better place for nature magic, I think you'll agree."

"OK. And?" I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I'm technically AWOL."

Bingo.

"I had a falling out with the instructor assigned to train us, ended up out here by myself and never went back. NSA looked for me for a few months, but I haven't seen or heard anything from them in nearly a year. About six months ago, I encountered the first of these rogue agents living out by your place. Nearly killed me. I've been working on my abilities since then, picking them off one by one."

"Why do they want to kill you?"

"Let's keep moving, please." We picked up the pace again. "I don't know why they're after me."

"And it hasn't occurred to you to maybe ask NSA what's going on?"

“Like I said,” he said shrugging. “I’m AWOL. There will be hell to pay when we get there, but since you’re involved in this now, I don’t know what else to do.”

“I’m not involved.”

“You’re a witness. You’re involved.”

I frowned at his back as he trekked up the hillside at breakneck speed. “Any reason we’re not taking the road? Maybe hitchhiking?”

“I’m not going to risk getting into a car with a stranger. We could both end up dead.”

“Right. How logical,” I said bitterly. I called my insurance company when I saw the bars on my phone drop to three, figuring I’d get one last call in before we were out of service range. My agent, as I suspected, did not believe that my car had been torched and I ended up canceling my policy.

6

Diablo Lake was beautifully lit by the time we reached it. I had begged and pleaded Cal until he relented and we cut down to the road in order to find a ride. I had no intention of staying out overnight in the North Cascades with no map and only a half crazy military cleric of some kind showing me the way. As it turned out, a surly female truck driver let us ride all the way to Diablo and the air was noticeably cooler at the higher elevation as we thanked her and climbed down from her truck.

Diablo Dam was, at one time, the world’s highest dam at 389 ft. It spans a gorge in the Skagit River’s path through the Cascades, touching outcroppings of rock on either side and plunging to the valley down below in a mass of concrete, steel, and generators. It’s an old dam (built in 1930) and it bears the look of worn concrete, aged and full of seasons with long black streaks following its curves from top to bottom and generators that produce half as much electricity as their newer brothers.

It was state of the art for its day and as we neared it, I couldn’t help but notice the small Art Deco details in the concrete work: a geometric pattern stamped here, an extra line there, aged but still reasonably intact.

“Don’t blink... I think that was town back there and I didn’t see any signs for an army base.” I was following Cal down to the shore near the eastern edge of the dam.

“We’re going out there,” he said, pointing to the largest of the tiny islands formed when the dam was built. “Here, help me.”

We shoved a small rowboat stored inconspicuously in an old shed near the water along the shore and into the cold brilliant blue waves. The glacial flour that continually poured into the lake from runoff gave it the shining blue quality and, had the day been warmer, the trees slightly different, I might have thought the water was tropical.

Cal rowed us out to the island quickly as the sun was disappearing. Recalling the previous night, I began to scan the edges of the water for anything suspicious, keenly aware of how quickly fireballs travelled.

“They probably won’t come after us tonight.” The boat touched the shore of the island and we soon hauled it up into the pines.

To my absolute shock and amazement, there was a small hill with a concrete entry in one side of it, smack dab in the center of the island and completely invisible from shore. A metal sliding door was fastened securely shut and only a small intercom with a single button appeared on the wall next to it.

“Gunnery Sergeant Calix Oakley, authentication Alpha 612.” He released the button and looked at me. “Let’s see if I’m still in the computer system.”

We waited and when I thought he had surely been erased, the door slid aside with a groaning hiss.

“Surprised?” he asked.

“I’m beyond the point of asking questions anymore.”

I followed him inside down a short flight of stairs, the door sliding closed behind us. The place was newer with concrete walls and floors and exposed pipes and lights in the ceiling. No one was at the front desk when we opened the secondary door. Dusty paperwork, a computer station still on and flashing the Windows logo, a burn mark on the wall behind the chair.

I reached into the back of my shorts and drew my gun.

“Can I borrow that?” he asked.

“Hell no.”

He frowned and entered a supply room nearby, rummaged through a metal locker, and emerged with a sawed off pump action shotgun, slinging a shoulder pouch of ammo over his frame.

“What caliber are you?”

“Don’t worry about me; I have extra magazines in the pack,” I said patting the mesh compartment on the side of the daypack. I always kept three extra magazines around.

“Well, I’m not too sure how much these will help us.”

We continued down the main hall, looking into offices, the mess hall, quarters, a small gym. Charred streaks on some of the walls, an overturned table, bullet holes even in one wall of the cafeteria. But no sign of people. Drops and pools of dried blood, but no footprints, no bodies, no nothing. Just dust and buzzing fluorescent lights.

Cal ran his fingers through some of the dust and sniffed it. His eyes darkened terribly and I backed away from him.

“They’re dead. Incinerated. This is all ash,” he said, motioning with his gun.

I felt my skin crawl as I looked around at the fine sheen of white-gray powder that coated everything.

“How?”

“I’m not sure. Obviously energy. Maybe the same kind of sorcerer we ran into last night. It would have taken a lot of them though. Or someone with a lot of skill. They got in somehow.”

“Snuck in?”

“No, they were let in. That door upstairs is the only way in or out and you can’t open it, not even with magic.”

“You sure?”

He looked at me. “Absolutely. I helped build the electro magnetic lock right after I came here. It distorts any field of magic within 10 yards of it. Even I couldn’t cast a spell or summon any energy in front of that door.”

I nodded and stayed quiet for a moment. “How many were there?” I ventured.

He sighed and his mouth twisted as if he were about to cry, then sank back to normal.

“23 including the instructor, Lieutenant Fischer.”

“All military?”

“All except the cook.” He dusted off a bench in the mess hall and sat down.

“So now what do we do? I’d kind of like to get back to Seattle soon if you don’t mind. Not that I’m complaining... I mean, thank you... for saving my life. Um... but I’ve had enough of the woods.” I was sunburned, cranky, and wrought with fatigue. I sat next to him, shoving my gun in the back of my shorts. “I swear I won’t tell anyone about this... It’ll be our secret.”

Cal eyed me sharply. “I’m not letting you go that easily. You’re involved and we need to get in touch with NSA and let them know this happened.”

“Shouldn’t they already know? I mean, this was an outpost... someone’s had to have found out by now.”

He sighed heavily. “Look, there are a lot of ins and outs you don’t know.”

“No... I’m sorry... it’s simple. Who did you report to?”

“Two officers... Commander Reynolds, in charge of logistics, and Colonel McNamee, in charge of operations.”

“So they’ve got to know this happened. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. Only question is why nothing was done about it.”

“Let’s check the computer.”

We walked across the hall to the lieutenant’s office and woke up his computer. It was password protected.

“Shit.”

“Hang on...” I typed “admin” in the username field and entered the Windows default password. The welcome chimes startled us as the desktop appeared.

“How did you...?”

“Whenever there’s a TON of computers setup, always try the default password. Because you know some IT guy didn’t want to take the time to change the administrator login on these machines.”

“Fair enough.” He blew off the chair and sat down. “Let’s take a look at some of Dan’s emails. This is strange...”

“What is?”

“If they knew he was dead, his inbox would be empty, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, they’d definitely shut down his username. At least I would.”

“You work in IT?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

Cal paused for a moment. “Interesting. Look at this... some of these have been replied to.”

“So he’s alive?”

Cal opened some of the sent messages and scanned them. “No... This isn’t how he writes. Dan couldn’t spell to save his life. These are all perfect... Written to the Colonel... Sir- As per our discussion... blah blah blah... proceed to Project Delta... that must be something new; we were on Beta when I left... It says he’s based at Quantico which is strange; he trained there for embassy duty, but hadn’t been back in years. There’s a couple in here to the deputy national security advisor. She recruited him for the job.”

“Victoria Brinks?”

“Yep. She’s spearheaded this whole project... magic in the military, as she liked to call it. Great lady... met her a few times. Let’s see... here’s another one to the colonel.” He opened it.

“Yeah, he didn’t write this.”

“You’re sure?”

He sighed heavily again and sat back in the chair. “Remember when I said I had a falling out with the instructor?”

“That was Fischer?”

“Yeah... and it was more than a falling out. Um... he was my...” He pursed his lips for a moment. “Dan was my boyfriend. Since Afghanistan, actually. He wanted to take things public; thought that since we weren’t in a combat zone anymore it wouldn’t matter. I said no, don’t ask don’t tell... He said yes.”

“So you left?” My heart raced slightly.

Cal looked down and for a moment, I thought he might cry. “The military was my life. He would have ruined that... I didn’t have a choice. Anyway, I fucked that guy for three years of my life... I know his writing and this isn’t it.”

“So someone’s logging in under his name and sending emails, reporting that things are BAU.”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Look at the date stamp on these,” I said pointing. “This one was sent yesterday. Jesus... So Reynolds has to know. You said he’s logistics?”

Cal nodded.

“Yeah, then he knows. Otherwise there’d be a supply train lined up at the shore waiting to bring things over. Where is he based?”

“Down at McChord Air Force Base... Tacoma.”

“Well I’d say you need to pay him a visit. In the mean time, we should change this password so no one can send emails from Fischer’s account anymore.”

“Good idea. Actually, you do that and I’m going to check my messages on another machine... see if anyone’s been using me.”

I nodded and began digging through the Exchange settings to change the password. My heart thumped loudly in my chest... a little scandal! Who would have thought? This was totally worth losing my car over, though I don’t know about the family whose cabin we burned down. Part of me felt like I should have left a Post-It with my contact info on their carport or something, but then again I reminded myself that it would have been impossible to pay for the damages to a \$900,000 Lindell cedar custom kit home.

Cal appeared in the doorway again. “My username is still up. Fischer never reported me missing.”

“So Reynolds thinks you’re dead.”

“If it is Reynolds, then yes.” Cal grinned broadly and I noticed for the first time he had perfect teeth. “Small advantage, eh?”

I nodded. “Fischer’s new password is 7stzb8k39o. Remember that?”

“Yeah, sure... We’ll be safe here for the night, but tomorrow I’d like to head into Seattle.”

“Music to my ears.”

“Good. Let’s get some sleep.” He walked down the hall and dialed the combination on his locker. It sprung open and he rummaged through some stuff until he fished out an NSA ID card. “We should find one for you, too.”

“Me?”

“I’m guessing everyone here is still reported as alive; you can take someone else’s ID and we’ll put your picture on it.”

“Wait wait wait... what about their families?”

Cal shrugged. “Hell if I know. Most of these guys were loners. Besides, when you sign up to do shit with NSA, your relatives don’t exactly expect to hear from you.” He popped open a toolbox from a storage cabinet and pried open another locker with a crowbar, throwing me the keycard.

“Corporal Zachary P. Douglass?”

“New guy just before I left. You look kinda like him.” Cal grabbed a handful of coat hangers with Marine uniforms hanging from them. Khaki shirts, blue slacks with the red stripes. “Still pressed after all this time.” Patent leather shoes and the white hat as well. He found a large bag in his locker and began filling it with the uniforms. “Get Douglass’ shit, too.”

I snapped back to my senses and began going through the guy’s massive locker. His uniforms were hung neatly in place... dress blues and a service uniform. I handed them to Cal.

“Should I grab the cammies?”

“Nah, leave ‘em. We won’t need those.”

“Why not?”

Cal didn’t answer and instead focused on stuffing the bag as full as he could get it. “We’ll iron this shit later. Tailor your shirt if we need to.” He held up the keycard. “Let’s test these. You have a camera on you?”

“Ummm... yeah actually. Why?”

“Take pictures,” he said, motioning to the ash and blood spots.

I fished the Nikon out of my daypack, grateful it hadn't been in the car, and started taking pictures.

"Over there, too. And that stain. Turn around for a moment." He dug into my backpack and pulled out a plastic bag. "Want anymore M&Ms?"

I held my hand out and he emptied the candies into my palm, then began heaping ash into the bag.

I followed him down to the other end of the hallway and back to the desk we had passed near the entrance. He swiped both cards and the machine blinked approvingly. "Good. Now, let's sleep."

Even thirty feet above the ground, I could still hear something screaming wildly above us. I figured it was a mountain lion getting torn apart by a bear or something, but Cal caught my hand from the adjacent bunk in the darkness and stared at me, eyes glittering.

"It's a banshee. I've heard her before in these parts. She runs a small convenience store over in Mazama... that's her cover, but she's a pretty powerful witch."

"Why's she screaming?"

"That's what she does after work I guess. Never really encountered her face to face, so I'm not sure if she's with them or if she's neutral. Can you sleep?"

"Yeah, I think so."

We lay in silence for the next few minutes, listening to each other breathe.

"Adrian?"

"Yeah?"

"What I said earlier... can you keep that on the down low?"

"Yeah," I snickered. "Guys don't usually out each other... at least not in my circle of friends."

"So you're...?"

"Honey, please... you think these eyebrows are natural?"

"I figured you were just well groomed."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Your feedback is welcomed: adrian.crnkovic@gmail.com