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The Magician (cont'd)

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The next day dawned overcast and cool on the western side of the mountains and as we boarded a Greyhound after hitchhiking our way over to the I-5 corridor, I sighed in relief to be back among people and civilization and machines. Cal was less than enthusiastic, still with that fluffy beard and my now dirty tank top. He was a mountain man out of place in proper society and I told him so as we headed south.

“I used to live in the city once upon a time. It’s just been ages. You go to war in a foreign country for a few years, then come back only to be sent out into the wilderness... I haven’t seen this many people in years.”

“Where are you from?” I asked, leaning against the window of the bus as rain pelted it from outside.

“Originally? San Diego.”

“Do you have family?”

He snorted and looked at me as if I were crazy. “No. They disowned me when I came out to them,” he said quietly, glancing around to make sure no one else was listening.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s why I went into the Marines and that’s why I never told anyone.”

“I thought my parents would flip out... I moved out early because of it, thinking they would never speak to me again. But they said they’d known all along, so go figure.”

He smiled a little. “Lucky.”

“Not quite. I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

“Ah, but you’re young yet.”

“24... How old are you?”

“28.”

That surprised me. It was so hard to tell because of the beard and the hair and the dirt that seemed ingrained in his skin. I had pegged him as much older because of his bearing, the way he carried himself.

“So how does one cast a spell?”

“You really want to know?”

“Absolutely.”

“It starts with energy manipulation. Or at least that’s the scientific term for what happens. You get a feel for the energy around you... coming from plants, trees, streams, the earth. And then you have to use your body as a kind of... hmmm... resonator.”

“Resonator? You mean like a muffler on a rice rocket?”

“No no no... like a tuning fork. You resonate your own energy at the same frequency of the things around you. Then you tell that energy what to do. Most people make up a language or use one that’s extinct because it’s hard to speak English and get the right results.”

I stared blankly at the seat in front of me. “I don’t get it.”

“There’s a lot of stuff you go through... I didn’t believe it at first either until they told me about the spell I cast on the chopper. Pretty fucked up when you’re sitting in a hospital bed and you’ve got an analyst from NSA telling you that you’re supernatural.”

“So it’s just your kind?”

“No, anyone can learn it. I’m not sure how I learned my first skills... some say it’s instinct.”

“So then you train...”

“Yes, then you train and you read a lot of spell books and some other such shit. All those old lady books that spell magic with a ck at the end and tack E’s on where they don’t belong... like olde or booke. But eventually parts of it make sense and you gravitate towards where you’re

most comfortable. I was best with the outdoors... I've always enjoyed it and I took very naturally to druidism."

"Have you been to Stonehenge?"

"Once or twice. The people in the white robes that burn incense and chant are a bunch of crackpots. When you're there with a purpose, you can feel the power and the Earth shifts under your feet. I like the replica they have down on the Columbia better than the real thing, though. Less people have been to it and the desert really amplifies the Earth's energy field."

"Was everyone at the lake a Druid?"

"Look at you... full of questions now!"

"Well? I'm curious..."

He smiled a little and tilted his seat back. "You've got sorcerers. At least that's what I call them. They use Satanic magic... basically devil worship as you might call it. It's dark magic... umm... OK all the energy in the universe is divided into positive and negative forms, light and dark, but not necessarily good and evil. Good and evil depend on the intent of the user, not the kind of energy. Anyway, dark energy is what sorcerers use and they'll use devil worship as a means of tapping into it."

I looked at him blankly.

"The religion is just the means to an end. For a lot of people, devil worship is the easiest way to get into the dark magic. But witches and warlocks, they'll use witchcraft... actual potions and spells and chants to get there."

"And what about the light energy?"

"Oh my gosh... there's tons of light energy usage. Christian Scientists use it. Called the power of the Christ, but it's the same as what, say, a mage might use. Or an enchanter. Scientifically, it's all energy manipulation. And a few complete atheists have come to use it."

"And what do you use?" I felt myself smiling at him, part of me dismissing his story as utter bullshit and part of me longing to hear more.

"I'm trained in light magic. Most Druids use light magic, but some traditions teach the dark arts."

"You'll have to show me sometime."

“Perhaps.”

It was late afternoon when we reached the gritty, hobo infested Greyhound station in downtown Seattle. The 1930s pink building needed a pressure washing badly and the shining new federal courthouse nearby cast a very big shadow on it in terms of urban renovation. The city was such a strange mix of new money and old habits that I found it dizzying to look at homeless people sitting next to “help wanted” signs and the various halfway houses that dotted the neighborhoods.

The rain was steamy, mixed with shafts of sunlight that shot down into the heart of downtown, and I felt myself sweating as I got off the air conditioned bus, checking for my wallet, keys, and cellphone. I would have to go buy a new car in the next few days, a daunting task I was not looking forward to. My CDs were gone, but in a strange twist of fate, I had forgotten my iPod and I knew it would be waiting for me on my desk at home.

Even stranger was the sensation that though I had been gone only two days, it felt like weeks had passed and the city seemed fresh and new to me. The noise of cars and people filled the air and absent was the crackling, sharp energy of the forest. Seattle’s skyline had been unrecognizable for the better part of three years, thanks largely in part to the mayor’s lifting the height restriction for new buildings. The tradeoff (and there is *always* a tradeoff in this city) was that new buildings had to be a certain distance apart so as to allow plenty of light down onto the streets below and avoid the dreary permashade in which New York is constantly drenched. As a result, the cityscape had taken on a needle-like appearance, filled with colored glass, brushed aluminum, concrete, and the frequent bright yellow crane. Two days had made a huge difference and the new high rise only a block from the bus station had suddenly been clad in silvery glass and some kind of artisan tiles.

I turned to Cal as I got off the bus, waiting for him to shoulder the massive overstuffed bag. “You have a place to stay tonight?”

He nodded.

“You don’t do you...”

He shook his head.

“Alright, you can stay with me.”

“No... You’ve already been too kind to me,” he said motioning to the bandages on his arm and head. He had healed remarkably fast.

“Hey... you saved my life and you got me out of there. It’s the least I can do.” I watched as he hesitated. “Come on, don’t be such a weenie.”

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We were soaked when we reached my apartment. I was fumbling for the key to the front door when it opened from the inside.

“Hello young man!”

“Hey Mrs. Winston...”

Dora May Winston lived on the ground floor next to the entry and, at 87, was more of an apartment manager than our actual apartment manager. Don’t get me wrong, Tyler was cool as hell and had a rockin’ body, but he was a pothead and had ended up supplying about half the residents with their weekly stash. It was Dora who vacuumed the hallways, picked up the foyer when junk mail was thrown on the floor, baked fatty brownies every time a new resident moved in, and, on days like today, sat in one of the low, modern easy chairs reading lust in the dust romance novels and opening the door for residents so they could come in out of the rain.

She turned and walked past the easy chair to the gas fireplace and stoked the DuraFlame log with her cane, her bright pink windbreaker suit rustling as she moved. She turned around and shoved her massive glasses back up her face with a gnarled, arthritic hand.

“And who is this?”

“This is Cal. Cal, this is Mrs. Winston.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am.” Instantly, I could hear the military accent in Cal’s voice.

“Ma’am?! My husband died thirty years ago... when will you kids ever learn to call me ‘miss’?”

“Back on the dating scene again, huh Mrs. Winston? I should take you out to a bar,” I said, opening my mailbox and fishing out the ads.

“Oh you’re sweet,” she said. “Cal, are you Adrian’s new boyfriend?”

“Oh... no... I’m just passing through town and... um... he offered to let me stay.”

“Well don’t let him pass you by... He’s got the best ass I’ve seen since the war.” She was already sitting again, reading her novel as if we weren’t even there.

I glared at her, then at the shirtless man holding the buxom woman splashed across the cover of her paperback.

“Your face is red,” said Cal quietly.

I looked away from him, closing my mailbox and heading towards the elevator and feeling his eyes rove over my butt.

It was a relief to enter my apartment at last, cream nylon berber carpeting, sage green walls, and a host of mid-century modern furniture that I had pieced together from Ikea and, on an occasional payday, Design Within Reach. The whole place was clean and warm and bright, even with the rain and I immediately threw the daypack into a corner and rummaged through the kitchen for a PowerBar.

“The bathroom is on your left if you want to shower. I have some clean clothes you can borrow, too... we’re about the same size I think.” I threw Cal a PowerBar and he tore it open greedily.

“Thanks. You go first, though. If you don’t mind, I’m going to hang these uniforms out so we don’t wrinkle them too much.”

“Sure.” I pulled the gun from my shorts and dug Cal’s shotgun out of the daypack to lock them both in the safe I kept in the hall closet. “Combo to the gun safe is 4116,” I called back over my shoulder.

As I showered, I realized how alarmingly calm I was about this entire situation. Either the fireball things were illusions and Cal was crazy as hell, or he was telling the truth. I hoped it was the former, even though I knew it wasn’t.

What made things even worse was how readily I was sharing my apartment, my food, my gun safe with him. I mean, after all, gay is good, right? I’ve been hurt emotionally by men, but no gay guy has ever harmed me physically and since our conversation about Lieutenant Fischer the night before, I had felt increasingly comfortable and at ease around Cal, my doubts soothed

over by the knowledge that at heart, he probably loved dick as much as I did. And at the end of the day, I could appeal to that sense of sexual similarity to avoid harm.

At least I hoped so. More than once in this city, the gays had gone crazy and killed one another. I remember a specific incident in recent memory where a Macy's employee met a guy on the internet, got into the guy's car after work one day to go on a date, and was hacked to death with an ice pick. Not the way I wanted to go.

I put out a fresh towel as I dried off and went into my room to change. "Bathroom's yours. There's a spare toothbrush and razors under the sink."

"Thanks man."

I pulled on some sweats and a fresh tank top and sat down on my sofa, tugging my laptop closer and checking my email. Eventually, I turned on the TV to watch the news and zoned out on a series of commercials for local car dealers and mattress centers. The rain fell softly outside and the light of afternoon left me slightly restless to get up and do something. Before I knew it, nearly an hour had passed and I was dozing in front of the Samsung.

"I hope you don't mind I used your clippers to cut my hair."

"Not at all. Here..." I got up and turned towards him to lead him to my room. He was wrapped in the fluffy white towel I'd left out for him and was drying his hair with a hand towel. "I'll show you where th-

I stopped in mid sentence as he finished toweling off his hair and brought the cloth away from his face. He had cut his hair down to a thick pelt of shiny black atop his head and completely shaved off his beard. The dirt from his skin was gone, his nails were trimmed and clean, and I felt the air rush out of my lungs briefly as my heart raced.

He was handsome. Devastatingly so. Like, please-be-a-sperm-donor-and-make-sure-the-human-race-has-strong-genetics-passed-down-to-future-generations handsome. Handsome to the point where I couldn't stop looking at him. His skin was much whiter than I had thought and it set off his green eyes. A square jaw had been hiding under the beard and his face bore the symmetry of a model, though he was too muscular for a runway.

"Um... in here is the uh... well you can take anyth- I mean, help yourself... um... wear anything you want." I choked getting the words out and I felt my face flush hot.

He flashed me a grin which nearly dropped me to my knees and pulled out my oldest pair of jeans and the rattiest t-shirt I owned. He dropped the towel and I almost swooned at the sight of his butt... he had the dimples at the base of his back. The bitch had ass dimples! And as he pulled on my jeans, I felt my dick stir slightly. He turned to face me and I noticed the David lines dipping below the front waistband, the nice little abs, beefy pecs... basically the works with a little fat on his sides and abs. Nothing unattractive by any means, but enough of a flaw to let you know his body was, in fact, real and enough of a pad to be comfortable in a cuddling situation.

“Are you OK?” He looked at me as he slipped his wrists through the t-shirt and prepared to pull it on.

“Yeah... I uh... just wasn't... I didn't... I didn't think you'd look like that.”

“Like what?”

“That.” I motioned to his face and torso.

He smiled at me and redness poured into his face. “I think you might be even better looking than when I saw you naked in the river.”

I huffed a brief laugh and looked at the floor.

“Where's your family from?” he asked softly as we stood a few feet apart, straining not to simply reach out and start touching despite the instinctive magnetism.

“Umm... I don't like to say...”

“Why not?”

I hesitated, biting my lip as memories skidded across the top of my thoughts. “Croatian.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“Nothing... I...” I pursed my lips for a moment. “We lived in Bosnia until '96.”

“What?!” he grinned. “You don't have an accent.”

“I don't want one.”

He studied me for a moment, his eyes lingering in my gaze, then trickling downward over my body. I shrank back a little, looking at the floor as my hands twitched. I felt skinny, awkward, my usual confidence stripped away by the mere fact that I was attracted to him.

“We should uh... figure out what we're going to do next. I need to buy a new car.”

“Well I need to get down to McChord.”

“I can help you... I have a couple weeks off from work for vacation.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want you wasting your vacation on this. Hardly worth it. You should fly to Hawaii or something.”

“I could help out with the computer end of things. An extra mind to bounce ideas off of...”

He was silent for a moment. “You really want to?”

Why? God in heaven, why on Earth did I want to help him?! I felt compelled to, even though the bastard had been responsible for demolishing the Kia (which had *The Best of Journey* in the CD player... grrrr!) and had dragged me over hill and dale just to avoid encountering another spell caster thing-type-person. It was more than the attraction. There was an innate trustworthiness, a comfortable light feeling I got when I was this close to him.

“Yes, I want to help,” I said firmly. “I don’t know anything about this energy manipulation magic stuff, but I can learn. And other than accidentally shooting you... what the hell happened to your scar?!” I pointed to his arm where the wound was almost entirely gone, having left nothing but a slash of white. His head was healed in a similar fashion.

“It’s Mederma,” he said sourly. I smiled. “I heal faster because I can send a bunch of mitochondria to the area... speeds up the cell regeneration.”

Mitochondria, hmm? He was smart. Or at least he’d taken biology. “Well, I was going to say I don’t think I’ve slowed you down.”

“No,” he said. “Not at all. In fact, your insight’s pretty good... I never would have thought to track down Reynolds or change Fischer’s password.” He paused. “You wouldn’t happen to have a tarot deck, would you?”

“No.”

“Know where I could find one?”

We went for a walk in the rain to a small Pagan bookstore down the street from me. I had been past it many times, twisting my nose at the smell of incense and glaring side eyes at the strange Creole woman who talked like Miss Cleo and did rune stone readings for unsuspecting customers. Walking in for the first time was like entering a foreign country and I was painfully

aware that I did not fit in. My clothes were too trendy, my hair too modern, and my demeanor too grounded. My deodorant stuck out against the frankincense smoldering away in the back corner.

Cal took to it immediately, pouring over the tarot decks that were displayed in a glass case.

“Elloo,” said the Creole. “Yoo need sahm elp?”

“Yes, ma’am. I need a tarot deck.”

“Yoo want eh light or dahk one?”

“Light. Something with good energy, suitable for a beginner.”

“We ave dees tree.” She pulled a few decks from the case and Cal mused over them, touching them, shuffling them, looking at specific cards in each deck. “An what about yoo? Yoo are noht magical.”

“No,” I said.

“Cahm closer.” Pirates of the Caribbean. But she was too fat to be Calypso and I had nothing on Johnny Depp. I stepped towards her and she quickly dabbed her finger in oil and drew it across my forehead, her dreadlocks swaying with momentum.

I felt something course through me, maybe excitement, maybe something else. Then she lit a bundle of sage which reeked something awful and shook the smoke around me.

“Os saina sha nok nok mitu pre.”

Cal glanced watchfully over his shoulder as he heard the incantation. I felt myself relax and sink into the old crushed red velvet sofa mashed against an old bookcase, framed with wood scripting. The Creole lady sat next to me, the bells on her linen skirt tinkling as she pulled a handful of stones out of a small velvet bag and threw them on the glass table.

Whether from coincidence or as an indication of something bigger, thunder rumbled distantly in time with the stones clattering across the glass.

“Yoo are afrayed. An confuzed. Yoo try to relax, but yoo find only daenger. Yoo are virgin to magic an yoo don believe.” She looked closely at the stones. “Yoo will bai something big very soon. Do naht bai dee one from dee man. Bai from dee woman.”

Cal approached with a deck. “One of these please.”

She grabbed my hand suddenly and turned to Cal. “Yoo will look afta heem. He is worth more den he seems.” She rose suddenly and walked behind the counter, retrieved a fresh tarot deck wrapped in plastic, and handed it to Cal. “For a Druid, dees deck is free.”

“Thank you, mother,” he said, taking the deck gingerly from her. He turned to me. “You want to stop by the bank? Get another car loan?”

I nodded, shook off the relaxing feeling that had permeated me, and got up to follow him out the door, thanking the Creole as we left.

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So Cal had never been reported missing by Lt. Fischer. And as it turned out, in order to keep up the appearance that the operation was still going ahead as planned, Commander Reynolds and/or Colonel McNamee had apparently never told payroll to stop paying the soldiers involved with Diablo Lake. So it came as little surprise when Cal stopped by his bank and found his checking account full of over a year’s pay, plus bonuses, plus interest. Living off the land had left his money completely untouched and NSA’s salary was far better than that of the USMC.

My bank account was another story. I was still fiddling with debt here and there and I resolved not to buy an expensive car, just in case something happened. Besides, I was happy with the Kia and other than perhaps more horsepower, I had no complaints. So although I qualified for a \$30,000 car loan, I promised myself I’d spend no more than \$15,000 which left me with an interesting array of choices, both used and new.

Now to be frank, I’m a car geek. I love them and love living in the American car culture of road trips, motels, and campgrounds. Don’t get me wrong... I have utmost respect for public transportation, but I don’t want to sit between Jack Daniels and the Marlborough Man every time I go to work. Plus, Seattle is curiously disadvantaged when it comes to transit. It’s a mess that the city is working on, but it’s nowhere near as good as, say, Portland or San Francisco. It’s easier to drive than to wait for the unreliable Metro busses, take one of several limited neighborhood streetcars, ride the light rail to and from the airport, or take the Sounder to Tacoma. Parking sucks and some bullshit politician had pushed through a \$30 car tab initiative,

robbing the state of money used to fix roads and gifting Seattle with more potholes than any other city in the country. That sent the gas tax soaring, but I still could not bring myself to ride the bus with all the freaks who were denied licenses by the state.

If it's any consolation, I like small cars that get good gas mileage. I have no tolerance for SUVs driven by Botoxed 40 year old mothers zoned out on Valium and nonfat lattes. I mean, does that bitch really NEED all that space? She didn't HAVE to have four kids. Let's face it: most SUVs don't fit in parking spaces, get shit for gas mileage, total almost anything else in an accident, and can't *really* go off road. The only time 300 horsepower really matters is when the bitch goes on a shopping spree and has to haul around her Sephora face-Bondo, prissy Coach purses, and other designer trinkets. All, of course, financed by her asshole engineer husband who bought the fucking SUV for her in the first place because she's the only reliable pussy he's ever going to get until he hits the gym and works off his beer & football fupa.

But I digress.

Cal was overly enthusiastic when we got off the bus in Renton the next day to walk the dealerships and find my next ride. I was, too, but only because we were no longer sitting next to the cracked out meth-head who was cutting himself with a razor blade, licking up the blood, and pissing himself every time we took a sharp turn. Luckily, most of his veins were probably collapsed anyway, so I'm sure he didn't lose much blood.

Pity.

"You sure you don't want to buy a Beemer or something? There were some nice cars in the city..." he said. Renton, as a suburb, was less than desirable when it came to the bourgeois attitude of most Seattleites.

"I told you, I won't buy a car made by white people. They're too expensive to fix and they're unreliable. So that leaves American and Asian cars." I scanned for the Mazda dealership.

"American cars are made by white people."

"No, they're made in Detroit and everyone knows there are no white people in Detroit."

I had fully expected to buy a Honda Fit or a Corolla or a Prius. Seriously. Something practical and fuel efficient. I was not concerned about image. Which is why I ventured into the

Saturn dealership, looking at used IONs and thinking about the practicality of plastic door panels in parallel parking. A rotund man in a suit came out to greet us and immediately steered me towards a steel blue sedan when I said I was looking for a used car.

Other than a few dings on the outside, the car was in great shape and a sorority blonde in Abercrombie sweatpants and filthy Uggs was eyeing it at the behest of another salesman.

“Don’t get it,” whispered Cal. “Remember what she said about not buying from the man?”

“You don’t believe her, do you?”

“She’s a prophetess.” Cal was dead serious and I almost laughed at him.

The salesman cleared his throat. “You guys want to take her for a test drive?”

“You can let her go first,” said Cal, motioning to the Uggs girl and the other sales rep. Our guy leered at the other one and turned turned to leave us alone, frowning at the lost sale.

I glared at Cal.

“You didn’t want that car anyway,” he said patting me on the shoulder.

“He’s right,” said a woman walking up behind us. She had the remnants of a burger in one hand and a Jamba Juice in the other. She wore a pale blue blouse, black pants and heels, and her her hair pulled up in a loose ponytail. “I’m Chrissy,” she said, setting the Jamba Juice cup down on the hood of a car and extending her hand.

“Adrian,” I said shaking her hand. She had an aggressively firm handshake and I smiled.

“I’m just back from lunch, so excuse the food. I’m sorry Sean couldn’t help you guys out. Was there something specific you were looking for?”

“A car under fifteen,” I said. “Something reliable, low miles.”

“Something sporty,” said Cal.

I swatted at him. Chrissy smiled and finished her drink, chucking the cup into a trash can.

“Walk with me. You’re from here?”

“Seattle, yes.”

“Right on.” She ate the last of her burger and threw the paper away in another trash can.

“I’m guessing you already looked at the ION coupes.”

“Yeah... I kind of like them.”

“OK. Well how about this.” She turned to face us. “Twenty instead of fifteen.”

“Nope. I’m on a budget.”

She smiled over her shoulder at me. “You’re wearing Sevens. That means you can afford it.”

Smart girl. “Honey, we’re in a recession... I gotta make the most of my dollar.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said Cal. “What’s the car?”

“It’s a lease return. 13,000 miles on it. Other than that, brand new. It is last year’s model, hence the price drop.” She started walking again. “All the usuals... air conditioning, ABS, airbags, et cetera. Warranty’s transferable, too, since it was a lease.”

She stopped in front of a frumpy-looking Vue.

“I don’t want an SUV.”

“Not that one, the one next to it.”

I had to walk around the Vue to see the tiny roadster parked next to it. A bright red Saturn Sky, trimmed in chrome and with the top still up, was hiding in the shadow of the larger car.

“You’re kidding me. Twenty?”

She nodded. “I’ll give you guys the cute discount.”

“Sold!” cried Cal excitedly, running his hand over the hood and drawing the water droplets together with his fingers.

“Now wait wait wait... I wanted something practical. This is a ticket getter. Rear wheel drive is gonna be murder in the snow. And how much will my insurance go up?” I looked at the painfully sexy little car as Chrissy unlocked the door and turned it on. It had a healthy growl to it and she put the top down, flicking the wipers up to clear the beads of water from last night’s rain. I sighed. This was NOT what I had intended...

Maybe it was the sight of Cal bending over the door to look at the gauges or maybe it was actually the car itself, but it took all of twenty minutes to write the check over, get the title, register with my insurance company, and put the key on my keychain. Chrissy was dizzyingly

efficient and I realized why she had four Salesman of the Year awards on the glass shelf above the desk in her office.

Miss Cleo had been kind of right in a way and I was just about to tell Cal so as we were pulling out of the driveway when I heard the squeal of brakes and tires and then a metallic crunch. Back down the road, the sorority girl was returning from her test drive and had slammed into the back of an Escalade which had stopped suddenly to make a right hand turn, the driver clearly on his cell phone.

I stared in awe for a moment, then looked at Cal as he played with the radio.

“I won’t say it,” he said.

“It’s OK if you do.”

“I told you so.”

“Yes, you did. Back to the city?”

“Quickly. I want to get the uniforms ironed and your badge fixed up so we can get down to McChord.”

McChord Air Force Base is closed to the public, a massive base situated smack dab in the middle of Washington’s largest ghetto, Lakewood. To be fair, Lakewood had tried to clean up its image in the last five years. “Cops” was no longer allowed to film there, the streets were swept regularly, and the dirty little Vietnamese restaurants that served cat were slowly going out of business as the fire department conveniently let them (and their adjacent meth labs) burn down. But Lakewood was still trashy at heart. Gangs roved the streets at night, obese women with six kids waddled in front of old strip malls, and even in broad daylight, I dared not pull over into a parking lot of anything less than a Starbucks or a Safeway. Loiterers seemed to ooze from the walls in this neck of the woods, threatening to pull me down from my pedestal of perceived privilege into their self-induced chronic poverty.

I should be upfront: I have no tolerance for poor people. Having come to this country a dirt poor Croatian immigrant who spoke shit for English, I made a concerted effort to move

myself up in the world. I knew early on that school had to be my number one priority. Not sports. Not bullshitting with friends. Not skateboarding and smoking weed. Not \$200 Nikes. Not fucking. School. Maybe that kind of thinking is “privilege”, but I don’t think so. I call it common sense and I have little sympathy for people who didn’t consciously learn at age 14 or 15 to get their act together or forever live in need. And no, I don’t buy that whole “they’re just kids... they don’t know what they’re doing” line. You get to a certain age and you *know*. You know and then you choose.

But as we drove through the shantytown of leaning houses, rat-filled garages, and chain link fenced lawns with pit bulls panting at their gates, I think what frustrated me most was the sense of hopelessness. There is an overpowering sense of victimhood in Lakewood. Poverty and misfortune were someone else’s fault, not your own. The big rich white man held you down and kept you poor in Lakewood; it was never a matter of self reliance or ambition. To that end, I hated the city and tagged it in my mind as a hive of welfare checks, drug abuse, and fucked up priorities.

And I was understandably nervous as we parked the car and began walking towards the entrance to the base.

“Stand up straight,” Cal chided. He dug a voice recorder out of a Radio Shack bag and tore the packaging away, popping the batteries in and turning it on as he slipped it into his pocket.

Zach’s uniform fit me a little too well and I was struggling to maintain composure, certain I would be found out and charged with impersonating military personnel or something. The NSA badge in my right hand had my picture on it, the result of Cal’s handiwork with my HP DeskJet and an iron-on transfer sheet. It looked surprisingly real, right down to the picture Cal had taken of me in a Marine Corps uniform, but knowing it was a fake kept worry in my mind.

“And remember, say ‘sir’ and ‘mam’, don’t speak to anyone, and keep your face blank and hard at all times.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good good.” Cal smiled and pulled on the olive green hat, then turned and gave me a final straightening. “You look good as a Marine. A little skinny, but good.”

I kept my face stony, looking straight into his eyes with a sharply disapproving glare. My friends called it “the look,” reserved for the sixty-something bear that enjoyed sitting at the gay dive bar and copping a feel as all the young twinkly boys and middle-aged hunks ordered their drinks. More than once, I’d stared him down.

“Jesus... save that for the court martial.” He tore his eyes away from me, glancing back briefly. “Dude, stop... that creeps me out.”

We walked through a security checkpoint with ease, showing our badges and signing into a ledger book that an AFSF officer kept tidily at his booth. He barely glanced at our IDs and waved us through.

“That was too easy,” I murmured to Cal as we walked towards a series of Soviet-era concrete buildings that looked like nuclear blast shelters.

“That’s the air force,” he quipped.

Commander Reynolds’ office was in the base of one of the ugly buildings and I forced my hands to stay still as a C-5 lifted off overhead with a terrifying roar, rumbling the muscles in my throat and rattling some nearby windows. We walked in, Cal stated our purpose, and a woman in a blue uniform called Reynolds to give him the heads up. I hastily remembered to take my hat off and tuck it under my arm, praying that my hair wasn’t too long.

No one noticed.

“Can I help you?” Reynolds, an overweight balding man in his forties came around the corner.

“Sergeant Cal Oakley, this is Corporal Zach Douglass. We’re from NSA.” We both showed our badges and shook his hand.

“Come into my office.” He ushered us down a hallway lit with fluorescent lights and into a crowded office, filled with books, paperwork, and computer terminals. “What does NSA want with me?” he asked, taking his seat.

Cal sat down; I stood behind him.

“I’m here about Diablo Lake.”

“Oh Christ... are they running another audit?” He began typing at his computer. “I gave them all the files I had last time.”

“More of an inquiry.”

“Well, I can pull up the records of all the shipments made, but it will take a while. They’re archived in the system. It’s been almost a year.”

Cal didn’t even act surprised. “Since your last shipment?”

“Yeah. No offense to you, son, but I don’t know why NSA keeps sending boys out here. They need to talk to Colonel McNamee. He cancelled the project, he has all the specifics.”

“When did he notify you that he cancelled it?”

“Ahhh... God... September 4th I think? I have the email in here that he sent me. You want a copy?”

“Two please.”

“Sure, sure.” The laser printer behind him began to hum. “So what’s this inquiry about?”

“That’s classified. Did anyone from NSA ever get in touch with you to confirm the project was cancelled?”

“Nope. McNamee was my sole point of contact for it. Well, that young kid... Fischer. He would call up or email me sometimes to order more supplies, but that’s it.” Reynolds handed Cal the small stack of papers that printed out. “There’s a logistics report, operational detail, and the email confirming Diablo Lake was cancelled. All the numbers add up, so have fun with the audit.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I think it goes without saying that the trip to California was unexpected. The wild goose chase that had kicked off my vacation was an irresistible inconvenience and I found myself curiously unable to deny the natural progression of events as they fell into place with Cal at my side. We made it to Redding that night, taking turns driving at each gas station or rest stop, the top down the entire way as we drove I-5 in silence. Northern California was blistering in August and the humidity in Redding at 8PM was nearly unbearable.

\$46 bought us a tidy, air conditioned Motel 6 room with a stiff bed and a stark white bathroom. “Recently renovated” meant pre-fab Danish mod furniture, white linens, and a Vizio flatscreen TV incorrectly calibrated to stretch a 4:3 image to a 16:9. I fiddled with the remote as I stripped to my underwear, trying to cool down and texting my friend in LA, hoping to hang out with him for at least a drink or two.

“Adrian?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to thank you for this... You don’t know me from Adam and you’ve totally taken a chance. I respect that.” Cal was looking at me and I forced myself not to look back.

“Hell, not like I had anything planned on my vacation anyway.”

“Nothing?”

“Laying in the river.”

“Naked?”

“Always.”

He grinned at me and I felt my stomach turn flip flops. “Want to see something?” he said.

“What?”

“Here.” He climbed onto the bed and sat cross legged across from me, shuffling the tarot cards in his hands. He fanned them out perfectly. “Pick one.”

I drew and looked at it. “Should I show it to you?”

“Yeah.”

“It says ‘The Sun’.” I looked at the card, a massive ball of yellow with a boy and a girl standing below it.

Cal smiled and looked at the card for a long moment, his eyes fixed and loaded with thought.

“What does it mean?”

“It’s you. The Sun represents life, youth, freshness.”

“Is that what you think of me?”

“Except for the youth part... halfway to 48!”

“Bitch.” I snatched the deck from him, and shuffled it briskly. “Your turn.”

His lip curled up in a smile as he picked a card and turned it over to show me without even looking at it. “The Magician,” he said.

I looked down at it. A man in a robe held a staff high in the air while the infinity symbol whirled above his head. “What does it mean?”

“Power, smooth talker, creation.”

“Smooth talker, huh?”

“Maybe once upon a time.” He toyed with a thread on the bedspread and looked up at me, his eyes glittering, then quickly back down. “Put on some shorts. I want to show you something else.”

I threw on a pair and followed him out the door into the hot dusk. “What are we looking at?” The sun was going down and it was getting dim.

“Look.” He pointed at the row of trees surrounding the parking lot.

“At what?”

“The trees.”

I looked. “What about them?”

He came up behind me and slung his arm over my shoulder, pointing into my field of vision as his chest warmed the skin on my back. “Focus on my hand,” he said into my ear.

“Look at the shape of the tree while you’re still focusing on my hand.”

I saw the blurry green beyond his hand. “Now what?”

“Take a deep breath... feel the scent of the trees in your lungs. You can smell the earth below this asphalt. The bushes to your left. The dumpster down the way. There’s a drainage ditch by the road. You smell them?”

I nodded.

“Feel them. It will feel like pinpricks down your spine. Keep focusing on my hand and it will develop like a Polaroid.”

Out of thin air, a yellow haze appeared around the tree in front of us. I held my gaze, then slowly moved my eyes to focus on it so as not to lose it.

“Is it yellow?” I asked.

I felt him smile. "It sure is."

"What is it?" It was emanating from the tree in shining strands of light.

"It's an aura. They're easiest to see at dusk. You're basically tuning your eyes to see the energy signature of that tree."

I paused to look at it in depth. "So now what?"

"Nothing for now. Just practice looking at the auras."

I tore my eyes away and found a bush. It took a while, but eventually I locked my eyes and my senses into the same position they were in earlier and a bright blue-green glow appeared around the bush.

I turned slightly to Cal. "Why is it green?"

"It's healthy. The yellow means the plant is stressed. Red would be critically injured."

"So the tree needs water or something?"

"Perhaps."

"And the bush has more energy, even though it's smaller?"

"Uh huh. But don't think about that... too early for you. Does the bush say anything to you?"

"Say? Am I supposed to talk to the bush?"

"Not verbally per se, but you can communicate with it."

Right... talk to the bush. First look at the strange lights, now talk to the bush. The bush didn't have anything to say. Just the rustle of dry glossy leaves and small berries of some kind. It was a rustling whispering sound and I sweated a little in the late sun, struggling to hear it.

"Chickaswisha chickaswisha chick chik tic sssswssss." That's what the bush said. Leaves and branches scratching against one another.

Cal was looking over my shoulder again, whispering past me to the bush. "Seck saini, vertin."

My nerves trembled as I watched the green glow swirl up into the air like a tiny tornado, then twist over and plunge straight into Cal's outstretched hand.

I gasped. "Can anybody else see this?" I whispered breathlessly.

“Not unless they can see the aura.” His voice was soft and warm in my ear as I glanced down to see the blue-green haze settle into the palm of his hand.

“What do you do with it?” I managed.

“Well, you can absorb it, you can change it into something else, you can give it back to the plant, or give it to something else.” He pressed his hand to my shoulder gently.

Instantly, I felt a swell inside me, that feeling you get when you eat a healthy meal and then take a long afternoon nap. Fresh, invigorated, passion, and hormones. I looked down to see my chest and stomach flush an embarrassing red. I fought to catch my breath as Cal moved back up the staircase to the hotel room, smug and grinning.

“Don’t try that on your own,” he cautioned. “You lose control of an energy field, even the potential energy from a bush, and you could take out this hotel.”

I watched him for a time, the skin on his back and the dimples above his butt luring my gaze. I shook it off and leapt up the stairs after him, racing for the remote.

12

California has always held this innate fascination to me, especially Los Angeles. It is a land of perpetual sun, massive agriculture and industry. The air is brown, the land is brown, and the people are brown. It’s a giant sepia tone dream and about as far away from the Balkans as one can get.

It is the fifth largest economy in the world after the rest of the U.S., Japan, Germany, and China. The sheer mass of people is enthralling... everywhere you look is sprawling cityscape, suburb, wide roads driven by SUVs and hybrids, trails leading up to dusty state parks, and a million nooks and crannies catering to every lifestyle.

But perhaps the most noticeable thing about California is the optimism. The sheer sense of unbridled, passionate manifest destiny. It arrived with the 49ers during the Gold Rush and never left, the strange notion that tomorrow can be better than today because of *my* effort and *my* dreams. Everyone pursues his or her individual dream and in California, they have the space and

the means to do so. People aren't bound out West by space constraints or deep set tradition and there is neither the history nor the rigid fatalism one might find in New York or Boston.

To that end, I find LA easy. Most of my friends consider LA to be a la la land of shallowness, plastic surgery, paparazzi, and pollution. But I see it differently. It has been described as 100 suburbs in search of the city and I couldn't agree more. It's as if dozens of settlers started their own towns, each one thinking to himself that "this will be the NEW center of Los Angeles". Each city has its own flavor, it's own purpose, it's own dream upon which it was founded.

I speaka no eSpaneesh, don't especially enjoy city driving, and can't stand crowds. But for that twisted mass of suburbs, all is forgiven. A walk down Santa Monica beach, some plain frozen yogurt at Pinkberry, or a night out in Hollywood... all share the same glamour and appeal, not for what they are, but because they're being done in LA.

And the people aren't shallow. My friend Eric lives in West Hollywood, a hive of dense gayness that is so saturated with rainbow fabulosity, it's hard to breathe without getting cruised. I'm told the culture in WeHo is unlike any other place in the world, to be taken on its own terms and not compared to New York's Chelsea or Miami's South Beach (don't get me started on the Castro).

Cal and I entered the hive with the top down on the Sky, Kanye West's "Good Life" blaring out of the stereo, and chocolate shakes from the first In-N-Out we found, thousand island dressing still sticking to my fingers.

Eric greeted us at the base of his apartment building, rubber-clad iPhone in one hand, a smoldering blunt in the other, wearing expensive jeans and a bleached white western-style shirt, unbuttoned all the way. Massive sunglasses were resting on his nose, the silver Dolce & Gabbana logo flashing in the evening sun.

"Hey bitch." He set the blunt down and gave me a lingering kiss, gripping my butt. "Who's the hottie?"

"Eric, Cal, Cal, Eric." They shook hands. Eric took a few puffs, then offered the blunt to me.

"No thanks. What's with the sunglasses?"

“You like them?”

They were huge. Like... enormous. “They’re big.”

“Too big... I can’t smile.”

“Why not?”

“My cheekbones will push them up onto my forehead.”

“Size queen...”

“7/11 bitch.”

Eric was that kind of man who I sometimes longed to be. He was a consummate gay man’s man, considerably fuckable and willing to put out to just about anyone who asked for it as long as they were hot and sexually responsible. He was top, bottom, dom, sub, jock, or prep... whatever he needed to be to fit the situation. Even straight on certain drunken, drug-induced occasions. Hard to peg (pun *very* much intended), Eric was a movie producer, a young hotshot with permascruff and designer hair. His friends were some of the best people I had ever met, each one a 9 out of 10, insanely good looking, outgoing, and always up for something casual but genuine. They were men who would walk all over anyone with a passive personality and then throw them aside when they were finished, disgusted by any lack of backbone. Being what Seattle gays have called an “outspoken bitch”, I got along famously with the chatty clique of Angelenos.

Of course, it wasn’t always healthy.

In fact, I can’t say it was ever healthy. Men like Eric are bad for the soul. He’s everything you or I or the next guy wants in a boyfriend: handsome, athletic, smart, driven, friendly, funny, and a wonderfully adventurous lay. But he was consistently unavailable, never revealing what he wanted in a guy and instead vaguely alluding to some kind of Paradiso attainable only with an over-the-top beauty imported from Australia or Italy. He’s the kind of man who will be single for a very long time as he looks for what he wants... well into his 40s. And he wouldn’t have it any other way.

That said, I felt slightly protective of Cal as Eric groped closer to him on our way up the stairs to his apartment. I wasn’t sure if I was attracted to Cal or not (OK fine... he was fucking

gorgeous), but knowing Eric would probably bed him before I ever did made him that much more desirable.

“What brings you boys to LA?”

“On our way down to Camp Pendleton,” I blurted. Cal frowned at me and sliced his hand through the air to shut me up.

“You doing Marines now, Adrian?”

Cal shifted his demeanor slightly. “Just some business to finish up. I’m ex-military now.”

“I hope you don’t mind us dropping by unannounced like this,” I said.

“Babe, if it was a problem, I’d have told you long ago.” Eric and I had open invites for one another at absolutely any time, one of only two people to whom I had extended such an offer. We walked into the air conditioned cool of his living room, the evening barely peeping through the blinds as a massive plasma Panasonic flickered with some cooking show airing a milieu of money shots involving sauces, oiled vegetables, and browned meat. “Wake up or I’ll unplug your insulin pump.”

Eric’s roommate was sprawled on the sofa, a bottle of Advil and some beer on the coffee table in front of him. He stirred slightly.

“Move your fat ass!” Eric was already pulling his legs down and making him sit up.

“Hey Jason.”

“Adrian?” he said, his voice clouded and groggy.

“What the hell happened to you? You look like you got hit by a bus.”

He rubbed his eyes. “My boss got fired today and the studio asked me to take over.” Jason was an attractive Korean guy with bleached blonde hair who lived on his laptop via VPN access and a constant stream of painkillers, booze, insulin, and older daddy-type tops.

“So this is how he celebrates...” Eric threw his hands up as he traipsed into the kitchen. “Beer? Wine? Pick your poison, stud.”

“What kind of beer?” I asked.

“Not you! Hot mess over there.” He motioned to Cal.

“Hmm? Oh... uh... You have any Mike’s?”

“Bitch beer? Sure.” He dug in the fridge and then chucked a bottle at Cal. “And for the brat?”

“The same.”

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