**Microtargeting**

The driverless bus pulled up to the station, and the automated doors swung open with a quiet, but satisfying, ‘woosh’. Almost on instinct, Kassandra lifted the handle from her rolling luggage and turned around on the station to quickly wrap her arms around her friends. She pressed her face against Liam’s thick beard, and placed a hand on Finlay’s head, sliding it neatly between his satyr’s horns. Ibrahim was a bit harder to reach, but she managed to reach her hand out, grasp his left side, and pull him into the group hug.

“Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone,” she said, in the ‘motherliest’ voice she could muster. “I’ll be back in two weeks, tops. I want to have a town to come back to,” she joked, and turned around to the dark-haired man standing behind her. He wasn’t too tall, maybe only an inch or so taller than she was, and his face was genial, if a bit vacant. He had a smaller suitcase, blue, and whenever he dragged it along the ground, one of the wheels spun around wildly. “Ready to go, Marcel?” She asked. He smiled and gave a slow nod as he moved aside to allow her on first.

It was strange that, after all the vaunted ‘improvements’ to the bussing system, nobody had quite figured out a way to let people on easier. The steps were still as steep as they had always been, and as was almost tradition, she nearly tripped getting on. They had managed to do away with bus drivers, and control of the bus’s radio went to the highest bidder, but *stairs* were apparently the one thing that perplexed the mightiest minds of the venture-capital world.

The door began to close behind her, and Kassandra swore, her hand bolting from her side to keep it open. The door continued to shut, and she pulled her hand back, worried that it was going to be crushed, only to release a silent breath of relief as Marcel’s hand grabbed the door and forced it open. She heard a few mechanical bits ‘*clank*’ as he did so, and tried not to laugh as she heard him utter a frustrated *“Va te faire foutre,”* at the door. “I hate these things. They always close on me,” he said with a tone that was somewhere between ‘frustrated’ and ‘disappointed’. “I’ll fix it,” he said, looking back at Kassandra with a smile. “Go ahead and find a seat.” The bus was ringing its complaints (A feminine voice broadcasting a ‘please step away from the entry door’ throughout the bus) from the center console, where the driver ought to have been.

She looked back at the rows of seats. She was a bit surprised at just how empty the bus was. The Dover-to-Newcastle Bus was a bit new, and she knew that the Dover-to-Coventry stretch of the trip was barely patronized at all, but still. She took her seat in the front row, on the right side of the aisle, and turned back around towards the front, just in time to see a bright, white light envelop the bus door as Marcel laid his hands on it. A few metallic ‘clinks’ later, the mechanisms of the door slotted back into place, and the bus came back to life with a quiet *‘whirrr’*. Marcel turned back around to look at Kassandra with a goofy, self-satisfied look on his face, and she had to covertly cover her mouth to hide an amused smile.

It was truly, honestly hard for her to believe that Marcel could be anything other than a typical young man. Maybe it was how easy-going he seemed, but a part of Kassandra’s mind was unable to wed the vision of Marcel Youcef, her amiable, somewhat-thick-headed new acquaintance, with that of Marcel Lepesant, *The Dragon of Paris*, the creature that had eaten up nearly 3 months’ worth of news almost a year ago, when he suddenly appeared in the center of the *Champs de Mars.*

The bus lurched forwards, and Marcel’s face smacked right into a bus seat as he tripped. He gave a meek laugh, said *“Sorry,”* in an embarrassed tone of voice, and tried to regain some semblance of dignity as he composed himself and sat back into the seat. The more she got to know Marcel, the harder the latter vision of him was to accept.

Settling into her seat, Kassandra watched as Marcel gave a quick wave to the group of friends assembled at the bus station, before letting her head settle into the headrest. She had to admit, for all her misgivings about the whole “Self-Driving Bus” scheme, it was undeniable that the seats were far more comfortable than they had been before. At least now it was possible to get some real, genuine sleep without waking up 6 hours later, sore in places you didn’t know *could* get sore.

The entire scheme had been implemented by Victoria Silva, CEO of Automatya, who had become a household name after being given carte blanche to ‘revolutionize’ the Lisbon public transit system. The daughter of *Retornados*, she was nearly as famous as she was contentious; Half the world saw her as a visionary who would deliver the world from looming disaster, and the other half saw her as nothing more than a con artist with a particularly strong layer of technology-covered paint over her scams.

Kassandra didn’t really have a strong opinion about the issue; she didn’t really believe that a few changes to busses and cars was going to save the world or anything, but she *did* have to admit that the new buses were a step up from how they used to be.

Marcel, on the other hand, had made *his* feelings on the business magnate *quite* clear. His diatribe against Silvia’s entire business model the other night (interspersed with the occasional curse in French or Arabic) had left no room for doubt. Kassandra had to admit that the situation was quite funny; while she wasn’t sure if his antipathy was borne of his personal politics, his training as an engineer, or the fact that he had worked for the Paris Metro until only 2 months ago, she *did* know that there was a kind of humorous incongruity in seeing a creature straight out of old story-book legends get so worked up about something as mundane as public transportation.

“Want me to wake you up when we get to Manchester?”

Kassandra’s snap back to reality gave her whiplash. In response to the sudden question, all that she could produce was a confused “*Huh?*”

“Sorry,” said Marcel, with an awkward look on his face. “You looked tired, I just wanted to know if you needed a wake-up call when we got to your stop.”

“Sure,” she nodded, flashing him a smile. “What about you? Aren’t you tired too?”  
 Marcel gave an awkward shrug and a flat “No”. In return, she gave him a curious glance. “Not for another few months or so,” he elaborated. “I’m awake until probably September, and then I’ll wake back up sometime in early December.” He tried to present the information casually, but Kassandra could tell from his halting speech and uncomfortable movements that wasn’t used to speaking so cavalierly about his *condition* like that.

. “Sure,” she said, trying to act like the information she was receiving was pedestrian, everyday knowledge. “Wake me up when we get to Manchester?” She had to admit that she was *exhausted,* and sleeping seemed like a more productive way to kill time than playing with her phone for a few hours. She saw Marcel give a nod of his head, and she gave a quiet sigh as her consciousness faded.

Kassandra didn’t usually know when she was dreaming.

She had tried, before. She had even taken a class on ‘The Phenomenology of Dreaming’ in university, a blow-off class that was only there to fill out your schedule and satisfy a Philosophy credit. She had tried lucid dreaming before, and had even made some progress once or twice, but something about the concept just never seemed to ‘click’. It didn’t help that she never seemed to remember her dreams to begin with.

This time, however, she managed to figure out that she was dreaming almost instantly. Maybe it was the way that everything seemed to warp around the edges of her vision, or how the oppressive sense of unreality hung around her like a miasmic cloud, but there was no question in her mind that she was fast asleep.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel that there was *still* something odd about the world around her. Her surroundings were completely unfamiliar, as opposed to the usual hodge-podge of remembered places that usually made up a dream’s scenery. The waves of the ocean to her North stretched like sand dunes, multiple and uneven, far into the distance. At the edge of the horizon, she could just make out the tall, chalky walls that her waking mind had seen up close a few times; England sat across the waters, the Cliffs of Dover broad and high, nearly too far away to really see.

Kassandra had never been to Calais; She’d never even been to France before. She hadn’t left Thessaloniki until she had graduated university, and she had spent most of her time afterwards jumping back and forth between America and England. But somehow, she knew where she was, and an oppressive sense of unfamiliar familiarity made her dizzy. She took a deep breath of the salty air and felt the grass tickle the palms of her fingers as she sat, looking down at all the nearby hills, and taking a long, pensive gaze across the channel.

Her lucid brain had no idea who the man sitting next to her was. He was tall, young-ish, maybe in his late 20s or early 30s, with a short fringe of bone-white hair and a placid look on his face. Kassandra was sure *she’d* never seen the man before; But he had that same sense of unfamiliar familiarity that seemed to be this dream’s running theme, and a small bit of conscious thought signaled that the face was somehow memorable to her, though her waking mind didn’t seem to be otherwise cooperating.

Her unconscious mind immediately pegged the man as her father.

He wasn’t, of course; Kassandra’s father was a 54-year-old civil servant in Greece; But something in her limbic system was quite insistent that the man sitting on the grass next to her was her father. The disconnect between her sleeping and waking minds was a disorienting experience, to say the least. It was like trying to believe two contradictory things at once; a difficult juggling act, which threatened to bring her fragile thoughts crashing down. At the very least, it gave her a hell of a headache.

*“Can you see the Cliffs, son?”* Her ‘father’ asked her, pointing out across the waters. Kassandra nodded, more instinct than response. It took her a second to realize that he had asked her in French, a language she didn’t speak and could not feasibly be dreaming in. Before could collect her thoughts, her dream-father gave her a gentle smile. She folded her knees to her chest and continued to stare out into the ocean. She knew the next bit by heart.

*“They’re an immense, pallid bulwark that have protected the humans there for centuries,”* she said, the French rolling effortlessly off her tongue, the taste of sarcasm unmistakable coming out of her own mouth. Her father’s smile faded at her cynical tone.

*“Sometimes from themselves,”* he added. Kassandra felt her nose twinge upward in frustration. Her sleeping mind could remember that these conversations always went this way. They’d be lucky if it didn’t devolve into another shouting match. Her waking mind had lost the plot completely and began searching the text for clues.

*“They’re Cliffs, Dad,”* she said, with all the firmness of a teenager first pushing up against a parent’s boundaries. *“They don’t have a mind to think with. And even if they did,”* she continued, her voice getting louder as her face got hotter. *“I don’t see why the Cliff has any business telling anybody what they can and can’t do.”* She’d been waiting to use that line for a while. Well, *she* hadn’t, but the part of her mind that *wasn’t* fully awake had the feeling that she *had* been sitting on it and had been waiting- *Aw, screw it*. Her waking mind was never going to make any sense of this; might as well just sit back and watch the show.

Her father gave a disappointed? exhausted? sigh. *“Never mind,”* he said, resignation in his voice. Kassandra just pulled her legs to her chest and continued to stare pointedly at nowhere in particular. After a long while, her father finally spoke up again, clearly uncomfortable with the silence. *“I’m not going to be around forever, you know,”* he said, softly. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Kassandra felt her own words spew out first.

*“Yes, you will,”* she said, the corner of her mouth turning upwards and her voice acidic. It felt like more than just a childish outburst. *“In a hundred years, Mom and Jeantournette will be dead and gone, and you and I will be exactly the same.”*

*Ah,* thought Kassandra’s waking mind, realizing her situation at last. This wasn’t a dream; somehow, she had wandered it Marcel’s memories. Normally that would be an absurd conclusion, but this was clearly some hoodoo-magic-nonsense, and that was way-outside her ballpark. She’d ask Marcel about it when she woke up. For now, she decided to just watch the show.

Her father (who, she realized, could only be the long-deceased Oliver Lepesant), gave her a deeply sad look, and Kassandra felt a sudden pang of guilt. Her father had never been the vulnerable type, and seeing the hurt look on his face was the first thing to break through her emotional armor she’d been so careful to build. Her father, meanwhile, just turned to look back at the sea.

*“That’s not as true as you might think,”* he said, quietly. *“We might be safe from disease and old age, but there are plenty of other things that can kill us,”* he said. *“I’m not ‘The Last Dragon’ for no reason. I was just the most careful. The minute you start thinking you’re invincible is when it gets you.”* ‘It’ being death, of course. Her father, despite (or perhaps because of) his naturally long life, seemed to be more scared of the great beyond than most.

*And why shouldn’t he be?* Her unconscious mind thought. *He’s got so much more to lose than ‘they’ do.* ‘They’ being humans. It was always ‘they’ with him. Not ‘us’. Not ‘we’. ‘Them’. Even when referring to his own wife and daughter, her father always seemed to hold humanity at arm’s length. Even if ‘they’ were a species to be protected and beloved, she knew her father still saw them as ‘lesser’ than himself.

*Than the two of us*, she reminded herself, as much as she might hate it. She sighed. She had no response to her father than to just sit silently. He was right, of course; for all her youthful angst, Kassandra knew he had a point, even if it didn’t sit totally right with her.

Her father, thankfully, had a knack for knowing when not to push the issue. He gave her a gentle hug with his left arm, and when he pulled away, said *“Could you go and get your sister for me?”* She nodded. No surprise there; Jeantournette took after dad in every way except the one that mattered. He might’ve neglected her for a decade, but what did that matter now? Once her father had realized how similar the two were in temperament, they’d become fast friends.

Standing up, Kassandra walked unhurriedly towards the house and opened the door to the kitchen. The creak could be heard down the road, but Kassandra knew Jeantournette would be just inside, pretending like she hadn’t just been watching from the window.

*“Dad wants you,”* she said, pointing her thumb back up towards the hill, and brushed past her without a second look back. Fragments of her vision slowly started to fade away as she walked up the staircase to her bedroom for some quiet, the steps becoming more muted as she reached for the doorknob at the top of the staircase…

Kassandra woke back up on the bus to the sound of thunder, her eyes violently shooting open, and she inhaled in a series of short and fast breaths, like a diver who’d spent too long underwater finally returning to the surface for air; The dull aches across her body and sudden sense of nausea certainly *felt* like what she’d imagined the bends to feel like.

The bus was still shockingly empty, and little had changed since she’d fallen asleep, save for the sudden torrent of rain that now covered the windows. She held back a comment about English weather in favor of the far-more productive act of coughing her lungs out for a few seconds, until the bothersome itch in the back of her throat was gone.

Marcel was still sitting in the seat next to her, a sheepish look on his face as he avoided making eye contact. After she had finished coughing, he just flashed her an apologetic look, and said, in a voice so quiet she almost couldn’t hear, “Sorry about that.”

“It’s no problem,” she said, almost reflexively. “What happened?”

“I can’t really control it,” he admitted hastily, trying to save face. “It just happens sometimes. My neighbors at my old apartment used to complain about it. It’s usually pretty rare, I don’t know what prompted it this time.” Kassandra listened intently. She didn’t understand much about magic, and, truth be told, she wasn’t all that interested in the topic, but she *was* aware that people who *could* use magic sometimes had it go off without warning. Finlay had been proof enough of that. Though, in his case, it was more of the ‘mildew growing in the hotel bathroom’ genre of magic than the, ‘import you memories into someone else’s dreams’ that Marcel apparently had going on.

“It’s all right,” she said, her brain finally starting to wake up. “If anything, I should be apologizing to you. I feel like I saw a very private memory of yours.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” he said, somehow even more ashamed than before, “mind-reading stuff like that goes both ways.” It didn’t’ make her feel better at all, really, but she’d already committed to not making a fuss about the issue and it seemed in bad form to change her mind now. There was a moment of silence before he said, in a quiet voice, “I’m sorry. About your sister, I mean. She seemed like a nice person.”

Kassandra just sighed. “She was,” and changed the subject. “Where are we, anyways?” Marcel just gave a shrug and looked out towards the rain-covered windows.

“I have no idea. The bus hasn’t stopped once since we got on, though.”

“Really?” asked Kassandra, surprised. “There’s no way that nobody from Dover to Manchester didn’t want a ride. Hold on, I’ll check the map,” she said, whipping out her phone and navigating to the Automatya app. “Manchester’s right here, and we’re in… Liverpool?” She asked suddenly, a confused look on her face. “That’s not right. Did we get re-routed or something?”

Marcel leaned across the bus aisle to look at her phone and gave her a similarly bewildered expression. “That’s odd. Is there a road closure up to Manchester or something?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, zooming in on the map just to double-check. “If there was, they would’ve just dropped us off in the outskirts or something and given us partial compensation for the ticket. This is…” she trailed off, before shooting a her companion a smug look. “I think you’re just bad luck, Marcel.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said, almost without thinking. “Does the map tell you where we’re going?”

“No clue. It’s acting weird,” she said, trying to access the App’s settings. It seemed to be fighting her the entire time. “It says we’re still on the North-East side of the river. Hale Road, if that means anything to you.” Marcel just shrugged. The road to their left was mostly empty woodland, and to their right was a few rows of houses behind a fence that stretched further than Kassandra could see.

Almost as if on cue, the bus slowly pulled over to the shoulder and parked itself in front of a small, featureless bus stop. Even through the thick torrent outside, Kassandra could see two figures at the stop, one holding an umbrella to shelter both from the rain. Once the bus had come to a complete stop, the doors swung open with a metallic ‘clunk’.

Marcel shot Kassandra an inquisitive, if apologetic, look. “I think this might be partially my fault, again,” he said, standing up. “I seem to attract a lot of…” he fumbled about for the English word. “*Bizarre* people lately. I’m sure if I get off, the bus will take you to Manchester.”

Kassandra didn’t even hesitate. “Like *Hell*.” Without thinking, she’d already snatched the umbrella and bag, and was practically pushing Marcel towards the door. “Nobody should be facing potentially-violent strangers alone. I’ll come with you.” She could practically hear her father (her *real* father) chastising her ‘obstinate personality’ in the back of her mind.

Marcel gave her a gentle, if lopsided, smile. “I’m sure you mean well, but I can handle myself. I’d hate for you to get in harms way for my sake.”

“Absolutely not,” she said, folding her arms. “At the least, you’ll need moral support, and at worst, you’ll need a favorable witness.”

Marcel waited for a bet before shrugging and getting out of her way. “If you insist,” he said, warily. “But please try to be careful.” For all the worry on his face, Kassandra surmised that he was secretly grateful that she’d decided to come with. He’d given barely any pushback, after all, and it was clear that he was as unsure about what was going to happen as she was.

Pushing past Marcel, she unfolded her umbrella as she stepped off of the bus and was met with the face of none other than Victoria Silva herself.

As much as her eyes wanted to pop out of her head, Kassandra couldn’t help but feel silly that Ms. Silva *hadn’t* been her first assumption, if not some toady for the Automatya company. Who else would have the power to re-direct a bus like that? Given who her travelling companion was, it was hardly a huge leap to assume that the CEO of Automatya would be interested in talking to him. Still, it was a bit jarring to suddenly be face-to-face with a household name.

Judging by the look on his face, Kassandra guessed that he was just as surprised as she was. She felt a little bit of comfort, knowing that she wasn’t the only one being thrown for a loop. He descended the rest of the staircase out of the bus, and started a bit as the door closed behind him, and the bus began to speed away as if it had somewhere very important to be.

There was barely any time for the two of them to process what was going on before Victoria Silva flashed the two of them a genial smile, and extended her arm out towards Marcel, though her arm didn’t extend out past the cover provided by the umbrella held by the woman to her right. The other woman was taller than Ms. Silva, and younger. Whereas Ms. Silva was tanned and dark-haired, the other woman was almost ethereally pale, and her hair was a gradient from platinum blond to a mix of pink and blue that looked more like cotton candy at the tips. She wore a leather jacket, a spiked choker around her neck, and an easy-going smile that made her seem amicable, despite the rest of her ensemble. Ms. Silva, in contrast, wore a smart suit with padded shoulders, some loose-fitting slacks, and an HR smile that would’ve impressed a Stepford wife.

“*Monsieur Lepesant?”* Asked Victoria Silva as she held out her hand towards him. Out of the corner of her eye, Kassandra saw Marcel’s eyes narrow and the corner of his mouth turn upwards. “I’m Victoria Silva, the CEO of Automatya.”

*He hates being called ‘Lepesant’*. Kassandra thought. *Strike one.*

Still cordial, Marcel extended his hand to meet hers. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Silva,” he said, his speech even-tempered. “I assume you’re the reason we’re here in Liverpool and not Manchester?” He said, almost accusingly.

Ms. Silva, to her credit, just nodded. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience. I needed to talk to you and I had to make sure no one knew about it. I promise you that you’ll forgive me when you hear what I have to say,” she explained. Before Marcel could protest, Silva turned towards the younger woman holding the umbrella and made an introductory gesture. “And this is Layla. My… temporary associate,” she said, studiously avoiding the obvious word ‘bodyguard’. Layla just gave a polite nod.

Marcel perked up at the mention of her name. “Malcom’s daughter?” He asked, suddenly directing his attention to the younger woman. Layla, for her part, was unflappable.

“The one and only,” she said, in a breezy Chicago accent, flashing him an easy smile.

Marcel’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you the-”

“Not anymore,” she cut him off, a sudden, panicked, and pleading frown on her face. “I used to be. It’s a long story.”

“Ah,” said Marcel, shooting her a sympathetic glance. *“Les chiens ne font pas des chats.”* Then, in English, “Like teacher, like student. I think you’ve inherited your mentor’s bad luck.”

Silva shot Layla a confused look before saying a few sharp things to her in Portuguese, and Kassandra took the opportunity to ask Marcel, “Have you met her before?”

Marcel just shook his head. “Never, but I’ve heard of her. She’s a wizard, probably one of the best in America,” he said, casually. “She’s a natural talent, and her mentor was one of the best wizards of the century, infamous as he might be.”

“What about her father? You said his name was Malcom?”

Marcel gave her a strained look and nodded, “I met him once. He was an… *acquaintance* of Oliver’s,” he said.

Before she could ask any more questions, Silva turned away from Layla and back towards her and Marcel, her HR smile returned as quickly as it had vanished. “Please, M. Lepesant, would you like to come with me?” She asked, genially, turning her body so that it was parallel with a side road that the bus had stopped behind. “I can explain everything on the way, but in the meantime, I’m sure you’d like to get out of the rain?”

Kassandra could see the hesitant look that crossed Marcel’s face. Part of her wanted to offer some words of encouragement or advice, but another, stronger part of her recognized that she was way out of her depth. The rain trickled off Layla’s umbrella as Marcel’s expression turned from diffident, to pensive, to almost deferent, before finally landing somewhere halfway between choleric and surly. “I have an E-Mail address and a phone number. Why not contact me that way instead of kidnapping me?”

“No need to sensationalize. We both know you could easily leave this conversation if you really wanted. Just like we both know that your phone and laptop have been tapped by every alphabet agency from Washington to Beijing.” The surprise that crossed Marcel’s face indicated that he was not, in fact, aware of this fact. Silva responded with a shocked look of her own. “No? Well, all the same. I thought it would be best to discuss this in private, away from prying eyes and ears.” She angled her body sideways again, her eyes pleading for Marcel to follow her down the side road.

Marcel sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment, clearly trying to weigh his options. After a pregnant pause, he finally gave an acquiescent “Fine.” Silva’s face remained place as-ever, but Kassandra swore she could see a twinkle in her eyes. “*However*,” continued Marcel, his tone suddenly stern. “I won’t put up with something like this again. And Kassandra’s coming with,” he declared, his eyes darting swiftly to his travelling companion. “If you want to come, that is.”

“Are you kidding?” Asked Kassandra, a smile in her voice. “I wouldn’t want to miss this for the world.”

Kassandra couldn’t hear the thunder after the bright flash of lightning that had filled the sky; the whirring of the helicopter blades drowned out all other noise, save for the occasional voices that came in through her headset.

Kassandra hadn’t known what to expect when they had followed Ms. Silva off the beaten track, but on her list of guesses, ‘Helicopter Ride into the Irish Sea’ had been somewhere south of ‘The Mansion from Resident Evil’ and north of ‘Reanimated Dinosaur’. Given the helicopters violent lurches and shakes, Kassandra probably would’ve preferred the dinosaur.

“Holding up ok back there?” Rang a voice through Kassandra’s headphones. Layla shot them a friendly, if apologetic, look from the pilot’s seat.

“Doing fine, Wizard,” said Marcel in a cool tone. “How much longer until we land?”

“Only about 10 minutes. Try to hang on until we get there, Big Guy.”

Kassandra breathed a small sigh of relief now that she knew they were only a few minutes out. “Thank God.”

“Nope,” interjected Layla through their headsets. “Don’t thank God. Thank King School’s Online Helicopter Piloting Course,” she said, and Kassandra could see a toothy grin in the front window’s reflection. Silva shot her a warning glace from the passenger seat, but said nothing.

“You really can learn everything on Youtube these days, eh Wizard?” He asked rhetorically, and the cabin fell into another silence.

Kassandra glanced at Marcel, her lips beginning to form a question, before her eyes quickly darted back to the front of the cabin, and she idly fiddled with a piece of plastic on her headset. Marcel apparently noticed and gave her a lopsided smile.

*You look like you’re going to explode if you don’t speak. What did you want to ask?*

Apparently, the crash-course that Marcel had accidentally given her on the bus was enough to teach her when a foreign presence was in her mind. Though, she had to admit, this felt a lot less invasive; less like a negotiation with a house-burglar, and more like a friendly conversation on her front doorstep.

*Do I just think the question?* She thought, trying the whole ‘telepathy’ thing out for herself. Marcel just nodded. Kassandra just felt a grin spread across her face. She’d never been party to magic quite to this degree. It was an odd, incredible feeling. Something entirely novel that she had no adequate vocabulary to describe. Before she could get too caught up in her reverie, though, she felt a frown spread across her lips.

*Does that mean you’re reading my thoughts?*

Marcel gave a shrug. *Yes. No. Just the surface level. As long as you focus on talking to me, I won’t see anything you don’t want me to see.* She felt his thoughts reverberate in her mind, nearly eclipsing her own. *It’s vice versa, too. Mental Magic is like that. Technically, all I’ve done is open a brain-to-brain radio channel. I’ve just had more practice not letting intrusive thoughts bubble up.* Almost as soon as she said it, Kassandra felt the more embarrassing memories of her life begin to manifest at the forefront of her brain, and her face began to flush a hot pink, before she tried to shift her brain back to ‘speaking’ with Marcel.

*Why do you keep calling Layla ‘Wizard’?*

*Oh, that,* thought Marcel, wryly. *Wizards get really squirrely when I say any part of their true names. Or even just something in the ballpark.*

*Why?* Asked Kassandra, her curiosity piqued.

Marcel smiled. *A Wizard’s power is tied up in their sense of self. It’s why no two mortal mages, of any kind, are exactly the same. They take their magic, and imbue it with themselves, and in turn, imbue themselves with their own magic.*

*So what does that have to do with Layla’s name?*

*A Name is probably the single-best encapsulation of your identity. To many people, their names* ***are*** *who they are, completely and totally. At the same time, magic is a very verbal art.* Marcel elaborated. *Invocations, rituals, magic words, et cetera. The more magic is tied into your sense of self, the more power a creature that knows your name has over you. Same reason I try to avoid saying Finlay’s name.*

*Silva doesn’t seem to mind calling her ‘Layla’, though,* retorted Kassandra. *And I’ve said her name once or twice. It has be more than just knowing someone’s name.*

Marcel gave an approving smile. *Exactly right. The name is only one half of the equation. The Power Differential between the namer and the namee matters just as much. Wizards are still 90% mortal, so knowing their name doesn’t do much if you’re on the same level. You’d need to be high up on the totem pole to influence a wizard’s actions with just their name. Gods, Djinn, Demons, Angels-*

*Dragons,* interrupted Kassandra. Marcel shot her a sheepish look, but nodded.

*And Dragons, yes. If I were to say Layla’s name right now, she’d probably slip into a trance and plunge us right into the Irish sea. Hence, why I call her Wizard, instead. Does that answer your question?*

*It did,* thought Kassandra. Before she could think a proper ‘thank you’, sound crackled again in her headset.

“Not to interrupt the staring contest back there,” started Layla, her voice playful. “But we’re about to land. Please make sure your seat-backs and tray-tables are in their full, upright position, your seatbelts are securely fastened, and any carry-on items are securely stored in the overhead compartment. We hope you’ve enjoyed your flight with Air Neoliberalism, and enjoy your time here, in the middle of the ocean.”

Kassandra could hear Marcel stifle a laugh, and she felt an involuntary smile cross her own lips. Leaning into the helicopter’s triangular side-window, the storm blocked most of her view into the distance, leaving her with only the sight of the churning darkness far below. Occasionally, when lightning struck, the water would be as bright as it would’ve been on a calm and windless day. There would be a gradient-in-time of white, to sea-green, to dark blue, and back to the pitch-blackness of the water surrounding it. The lightning was powerful, and brilliant, and loud, and far too short-lived compared to the dark and endless sea. Kassandra made a mental note to check the price of a helicopter ride over the ocean in the future. She never even would’ve considered doing something like this before, but the beautiful light-show created where the brilliant ephemeral met the unknowable eternal was the sort of thing composers wrote symphonies about.

The whirring of the helicopter blades began to slow considerably as the hovercraft began to descend onto what Kassandra could now see was a large, metal platform below. Though it was only a glimpse, Kassandra had seen the whole of the structure as they had begun to descend. It was a Floating Platform, something like a research station, but the corners of the platform had been rounded off, and the gunmetal coloring Kassandra would’ve expected was also absent; the entire platform was painted in a variety of neutral colors, from beige to ecru. There was even a triangular roof on top of the 3-story structure in the center of the platform. The whole thing looked like an HR department got it’s hands on an oil rig; still completely soulless, but at least it would probably have carpeting.

The helicopter touched down onto the helipad somewhat lopsidedly, causing Kassandra to shift slightly in her seat. As the whirring motor began to die down, she swallowed as her hands turned white around her restraints, all-too-eager to move her legs again.

The door on Marcel’s side of the Helicopter opened first, sliding back and locking in place with a ‘thunk!’ As soon as he was on the tarmac, he turned back around to look at Kassandra, his dark-brown eyes gentle and polite as he offered his hand to her to help her down. “Not the first time I’ve flown,” he said, to nobody in particular, “but it’s my first helicopter ride. Next time, I suggest we wait for the weather to clear. There were a few times I was worried we’d become flotsam.”

Layla flashed a sardonic smile his direction. “You’re in one piece, aren’t you?”

“Mostly. I think I left my stomach somewhere near the Isle of Mann.”

“Sir, if you please,” said Silva, interrupting their banter with a leading gesture. “We can get out of the rain right over here.”

Their attention now on Silva, the group was herded towards the multi-story building that made up the center of the floating platform. The hard, steel exterior door that sat on the outside of the building was a fascinating contrast to the interior; Layla held the door open for the rest of the group, and Kassandra could see that the floor inside was, in fact, covered with a thin layer of blue carpeting.

Huddling inside with the rest of the group, Kassandra watched as the door closed behind them, and took stock of the interior; It looked like any other conference room, if a bit bare bones; the carpet was thin, and the dim fluorescent lights were the room’s only source of illumination. The table in the center of the room had a few swivel chairs around it. On the opposite wall was a pull-down screen, and a projector on the room’s ceiling pointed towards it. Happy to be out of the rain, Kassandra followed Silva’ instructions and sat in the nearest chair, wringing out the tails of her coat onto the floor.

Marcel slid into the chair next to her as Silva moved in front of the screen, her smile straining at the edges as her eyes caught Marcel’s increasingly uninterested expression. Layla, meanwhile, folded her arms as she leaned against the door.

“Apologies for all the secrecy, Mr. Lepesant,” said Silva, her voice firm enough to command the groups attention without sounding petulant. “I can assure you that all the inconvenience we’ve put you through is worth it. If you’ll kindly watch this presentation, I’m sure we’ll be able to explain everything.” She shot a nod at Layla, the lights went out, and the room went silent as the hum from the fluorescent bulbs died, replaced a second later with a hum from the projector above.

Kassandra’s eyes went wide with amusement at the images that flashed across the screen. She hadn’t known precisely what to expect, but somehow, a bog-standard advertisement hadn’t been it. Images of semi-civilized wilderness (like the kind you’d expect to see around a golf course) were summoned and dismissed with Adobe Movie Maker wipe transitions as cheery piano chords played in the background. Kassandra had to swallow her laughter as a muted cymbal roll signaled the transition to images modern, high tech cities, sharp-looking computers and progressively orb-shaped cars.

The presentation swam through a few more seconds of home-made stock footage before flashing to a title card. The words “From the Minds behind Automatya and Vertex Industries,” faded in before dissipating into an image of a professional-looking older woman sitting in a chair in front of a group of bookcases. A subtitle with “Mara Agostinho, CFO, Automatya” appeared beneath her as she began to speak.

“Public-Private partnerships are a thing of a past,” she said to an invisible interviewer. “And it’s clear that innovations in cryptocurrency and professional automation have hit a peak.” Smash cut to more stock footage clearly meant to represent some kind of economic slump; sad men in suits and lots of graphs with red lines pointing downwards. Ms. Agostinho returned quickly to the screen. “But there’s still one frontier of innovation.” Kassandra buried her head in her hands, realizing what was coming before it was even said.

“Magic.” Even though she wasn’t looking, Kassandra could hear the Tinker-Bell sound effects and tried to push out of her mind the cringe-inducing images likely flashing across the screen. Even with her face in her hands, she could sense Marcel tensing up, and the contemptuous look crossing his face.

Kassandra, for her part, tried to block the rest of the presentation out of her mind. Jokes about how it was only a matter of time before Capital tried to subsume the ‘arcane mysteries’ of the supernatural were common in her friend group, but she hadn’t really expected it so soon; it hadn’t even been a decade since the existence of magic first became common knowledge.

The rest of the presentation was mercifully short, and the room’s lights came on with a flicker and a hum. Marcel was already out of his seat and getting his jacket on, ready to storm out into the rain. Apparently sensing that she’d lost her audience, Silva slid up to try and do some damage control. “I hope the presentation was interesting to you, M. LePesant? We have some figures to show you that we hope will demonstrate any potential RoI available to early investors and *company partners*,” she said, emphasizing the latter option.

Kassandra sucked in air through her teeth. *Appealing to financial motive. Strike two.* Marcel’s mildly contemptuous look evolved into an outright scowl as he turned towards the door.

“*Pass*,” said Marcel, intensely. “I don’t know what I expected, coming here,” he said, seemingly more disappointed with himself than anything. “Let’s go, Kass,” he said, offering her an apologetic look as he reached for the door handle. Standing up from her chair, Kass made her way towards Marcel, part of her wondering if he even knew how to fly a helicopter.

“Wait, Marcel.” The sound of his first name coming from Layla stopped him in his tracks. “I know this doesn’t look great. You’d think they could do a bit more market research considering they’ve got a target audience of one,” with that, she shot a scowl of her own at Silva. “But I’ve meet some of their engineers. They’ve got some of the best talent and brightest minds in a generation. One of the benefits of Automatya being the most overvalued companies on the market. *Don’t* give me that look, you know it’s true,” she said, returning Silva’s own nasty glance back at her, before softening as she turned her gaze back to Marcel. “They could really do some good work. If the money doesn’t convince you, at least consider what good magic could do if it was publicly available, instead of being horded by the few people born with the right talents. And imagine what they could do with just a little bit of juice from the largest magical battery known to man,” her expression turned from pleading to playful at that last remark, clearly referring to Marcel himself.

Marcel visibly loosened as he let out a sigh. Kassandra had to agree that her argument was persuasive. “Fine,” he said, after a beat, before adding, “but if I smell anything that smells even remotely fishy, or unethical, I’m leaving.”

The HR smile returned to Silva’s face nearly instantly. “Great. If you’ll please follow me, I’ll show you what our engineers have been up to.” With that, she opened the other door in the room. Following her down the dimly-lit staircase, the group entered into a much-larger production floor. White, steel columns held up the roof while the walls looked they had been pulled from shipping containers. Doing a bit of spatial calculus in her head, Kassandra realized that she hadn’t seen this room from the outside; it was well hidden by the buildings and helicopter pad above. Impressive for a room that reached at least as long as a football pitch and a third as tall. Various bits and scraps littered the corners of the room, while devices whose functions she could only guess at sat placed strategically throughout.

A dark-haired man wearing a protective vest and goggles looked up as the door to the room opened up, a professional, unpracticed, smile spreading across his face. Though he was trying to contain it, his eyes were locked on Marcel, the keen glint in them betraying his excitement and awe as the group approached.

“This is Lindsey Cheng, our chief engineer,” said Silva, “he’ll oversee this platform as soon as we can fly in the rest of the engineering team. Until then, he’s working on the models and prototypes we hope to develop in the future.”

Lindsey gave a friendly nod and shook Marcel’s and Kassandra’s hands. Marcel returned the smile, a look of amused understanding in his own eyes. The kind of look of solidarity that people of the same trade gave when being introduced. “So, you’re the one who does all the actual work, huh?”

Lindsey gave a laugh that had only a small tinge of nervousness. “I wouldn’t say *that*,” but he couldn’t keep himself from nodding all the same.

Apparently wanting to keep the conversation moving, Silva interrupted. “Mr. Cheng’s been hard at work here. We hope to show just some of what magic can do when mixed with good old-fashioned innovation.” The pride in her voice was almost tangible. Lindsey, for his part, put up a hand and dipped further back into the room for just a second. He returned carrying a device about the size and shape of a coffee maker, with a spout at one end and an empty tank on the top.

“We wanted to start out with a simple proof of concept, to prove we’re doing something worthwhile,” explained Lindsey as he placed the device on the table in front of the group. “And I thought, what’s more worthy than providing clean water for people around the world?” He smiled. “If you don’t mind volunteering, Mr. LePesant?” He said, pulling out a small, metal cube and a pair of elastic gloves. “It’s Cadmium. We found that it’s a more efficient magical conductor than Quartz.”

“Isn’t Cadmium poisonous?” Asked Marcel, genuine curiosity in his voice as he peered at the metal cube.

“Yes. Hence the gloves,” said Lindsey, before shrugging. “I’m sure you’ll be fine, but safety rules are safety rules. If you could imbue this with just a little bit of magic, we’ll show you what it can do.”

Marcel slipped the gloves on before taking the cube, cradling it in his hands as he closed his eyes. Kassandra could feel the air pressure drop and the room around her darken, leaving only Marcel a single point of light for a brief second, before the feeling vanished.

“It’s not much,” he admitted, sheepishly. “I got too skittish and didn’t want to break the cube. I hope that’s all right.”

Lindsey’s eyes, meanwhile, were wide in amazement. “It’s all right,” he said, in a bit of a daze. “I think it’s still more magic than I’ve ever seen in once place before.” He swallowed and opened a hatch on the top of the water purifier. He dropped the cube in, closed the hatch, and pulled out a cup of cloudy-looking water.

“This is seawater,” said Lindsey, moving into ‘presentation’ mode. “We acquired it through the highly-complex and scientific method of lowering a bucket down to the ocean with a rope, and pulling it back up.” He poured the seawater into the purifier. “But with just a little bit of alchemical know-how, an arcane focus, and a magical battery…” he flipped a switch, and the device whirred to life, drowning out any other sounds for only a few seconds, then stopping as suddenly as it had started. A stream of water trickled out of the device’s spout, clear and pure as a contented smile crossed Lindsey’s face. He opened the hatch in the back of the purifier, pulled out the Cadmium cube, and handed it back to Marcel.

Kassandra was confused for a moment, but the shock on Marcel’s face was obvious. “There’s barely a difference! It hardly used any energy at all.”

Lindsey nodded. “We’re still in the designing and testing phase, and we hope to make it more efficient in the future, but based on our math, a single Cadmium cube imbued with as much magic as possible could purify up to 3 million liters of water. Plus, it’s almost 85% efficient, compared to only about 15-30% for most desalination plants. Just that cube alone could revolutionize life in areas without access to clean water. All at minimal cost for everyone involved.”

“It’s certainly very impressive,” admitted Marcel, eyes still wide with a bit of shock. “What processes did you use? Filtrating the salt and other particles while leaving in the particles that make it potable sounds like it should take more than just a little energy.”

“Evaporation does most of the work, actually,” said Lindsey, clearly glad to be talking shop with someone who knew what he was talking about. “Plus a certain solution. It separates the potable liquid from the salt and other particles.”

Understanding flashed in Marcel’s eyes as he put his head nearly under the device. “*Ahh.* And then you use a bit of juice from the magical battery to effectively send it through the water cycle. I assume that’s what the upper basin is for?”

“*Precisely.* It’s essentially a miniature rain machine.”

Marcel stood back up and folded with approval. “I’ll admit Mr. Cheng, Ms. Silva. I’m impressed.” Silva’s eyes lit up, and she held her head up in satisfaction, while Lindsey started to put away his device, preparing the table to host some new object.

“I assure you, Mr. LePesant, this is the *least* we can do,” said Lindsey, filled to the brim with excitement. “Imagine all the fields that could be revolutionized with even just the barest use of magic! We’ve worked on experiments for everything ranging from agriculture, to chemistry, to geology, to ballistics, to ceramics, to-”

“Ballistics?”

The world froze. Even if it was just a single word, when it came from Marcel’s mouth, it carried an aura of dark anticipation. A question with a wrong answer. Silva audibly swallowed. *Strike Three.*

“I-I misspoke. Ballistics isn’t the right term. More like, Mechanical Physics. Mostly related to space travel, you see. The principles are much the same, after all.” It was a decent enough lie, if it hadn’t come from the mouth of the worst poker face in Europe.

“Ms. Silva,” said Marcel slowly, turning to look at Victoria without moving his body to face her. “Have you, or do you intend, to use magic to power military hardware of any kind?”

“The idea was floated, along with many others,” she said, her answer practiced and perfect. “We float all ideas our engineers present to us, no matter how outlandish. It’s the secret of our success. Occasionally, we make prototypes from these ideas. However, I assure you, Mr. LePesant, we’ve have not developed any kind of military hardware, and you would be under no compulsion to provide your talents to any project with which you have ethical scruples.”

Marcel didn’t move. He simply continued to stare at Silva out of the side of his eyes, his gaze piercing even those he wasn’t looking at. For the first time since they’d met, Kassandra could see Silva begin to sweat a bit under his gaze; She’d never seen Marcel so intense before, but she had to admit that it was fun to watch a world-famous CEO squirm like this. You couldn’t get that on TV.

More silent seconds passed, and Kassandra began to wonder what Marcel’s strategy was. Was he trying to provoke a longer explanation? Marcel didn’t seem the stubborn type, and she doubted he’d win a contest of wills with someone weaned on the cutthroat politics of Silicon Valley and Wall Street. Unless there was something else at play.

*He’s reading her mind.*

The truth hit her at just the last second before Marcel’s sideways visage shifted into a look of almost pure horror. She was seeing a lot of new faces from her new friend lately, and she had to admit, this one might’ve been the worst. Whatever could scare *him* couldn’t possibly be good…

“You’re telling the truth, but…” said Marcel, *“*dear God.” His normally olive skin had gone nearly pale as he looked at Silva with the eyes of someone watching a murder in progress. “You’re a *monster*.”

Nobody quite knew how to react to that. The look of confusion on Layla’s face was so genuine and sudden that Kassandra had to assume that she was just as surprised. Lindsey, on the other hand, had more a look of fear and worried anticipation, without almost no hint of surprise.

“Layla,” said Marcel, and Layla was frozen magically in place. Marcel had explained before how Wizard’s names had power, but it was an odd thing to see in person. Kassandra couldn’t even tell if she was breathing, so absolute was Marcel’s immediate and overwhelming control over her. “I want you to take Kassandra, get in the helicopter, and head back to England.” His words were still slow and methodical, not chosen carefully, but uttered with rage and fear that seemed liable to boil over into tears at any second.

Layla, for her part, didn’t hesitate. She grabbed Kassandra (quite roughly) by he shoulder and practically dragged her out the door and up the stairs, eyes glazed over as she took to her task like an automaton. Before the door closed behind them, Kassandra could see Marcel turn to address the other two, and she could tell he wasn’t happy…

The journey back to the helicopter was blissfully short, and as Layla got further from Marcel, the control seemed to waiver a bit, giving her just the barest hint of her personality back as she carefully helped Kassandra into the Helicopter’s passenger’s seat. The storm continued to rage, the skies black as pitch and the rain that pounded against the metal roof of the vehicle drowning out all other sound. Kassandra couldn’t see or hear the whirring of the motor blades, but she could feel them through the rumbles of her seat and the smell of motor oil in the air. The seatbelt was so tight against her body she could swear her thumbs were turning blue as she held onto them for dear life.

A second later, the helicopter was starting to hurtle into the water below.

The research platform lurched as the sound of straining metal filled the air, giving Layla only a few seconds to correct course and get the helicopter stable again, nearly dragging it’s back rotor against the water as it moved upward with great physical effort. Even if her piloting wasn’t 100% mundane, Kassandra figured that Layla had to be miracle worker not to have crashed in these conditions.

The helicopter’s spotlight illuminated the research platform below. Now no longer a proud construction in the middle of the Irish Sea, the landing pad, along with the rest of the platform, was now perpendicular to the water, turned topsy turvy as if by act of sheer will.

As the helicopter rose again, Kassandra could feel her breath stop. Silvery, iridescent scales reflected the helicopter’s light back at it, nearly blinding the two of them as Layla tried to get to a more reasonable altitude. Even still, Kassandra could make out the distinctive shape of a claw, bright as moonlight and with long, seemingly razor-sharp claws at the end, cradling the whole of the research station effortlessly, bending it back and forth as metal groaned and whined, before an earth-shattering ‘*snap!*’ filled the air.

Now detached from the pillar supporting it, the Research Facility sat easily in Marcel’s claw. Kassandra’s stomach nearly inverted on itself as she watched the claw carefully, methodically, wrap it’s talons around the facility and begin to squeeze. The sound of cracking steeling and glass filled the air, and Kassandra silently thanked whatever Gods were listening that it drowned out any screams from down below. She had no idea what Marcel had seen in Silva’s mind, but it must’ve been truly horrifying to provoke this kind of reaction…

As the helicopter ascended, the spotlight crawled up the rest of Marcel’s body, highlighting smaller, less impressive areas from his fore-arm to his chest and up through his neck. The scales, when they weren’t blinding the pair with reflected light, were beautiful to see, little bits of rainbow flashing at the edge of Kassandra’s vision as the water splashed against his front leg. It was difficult to piece together how tall he was now, but Kassandra guessed that it was easily in the 300 meter range, possibly taller. The light landed briefly on the purplish-black horns that protrude from the side of his head, before it climbed up towards the top of his face, illuminating a brilliant, silvery eye that seemed to shine with a light of it’s own. The eye alone was easily bigger than the helicopter itself, and Kassandra felt herself becoming entranced by it; as if she were looking into the gentle light of a generous sun.

Marcel, meanwhile, flinched away from the light suddenly burning his eye, instinctively swatting at the thing that was blinding him.

A massive, scaly claw came from nowhere at the chopper. It was a massive thing, dwarfing the flying vehicle by almost an order of magnitude. Kassandra closed her eyes, convinced for a second that she was about to meet her maker.

For a moment, the damage didn’t even register. Marcel’s claw had cut so cleanly through the back rotary of the helicopter that it didn’t even cause any circular momentum. The back of the helicopter was simply *gone*, as if it had been sawn of with laser-like precision. The brief reprieve lasted only a second though, as the helicopter began to spiral downward towards the inky sea below.

Before Kassandra could even think to scream, she felt gravity begin to slow, and the helicopter stopped it’s death spiral, before slowly lowering down to the ground below.

It took a moment for Kassandra to open here eyes, but once she did, she nearly fainted away anyways. They hadn’t landed in the ocean, thank God. They’d landed on Marcel’s claw.

In the storm, as far away as he was, she had to admit he struck an imposing figure. He could easily have been confused for some ancient Storm God, or leviathan of some kind. The occasional lightning strike did nothing to hurt his imposing form. More importantly, now that she was seeing him up close, she could see why dragons occupied such a grandiose place in human mythology. His arm seemed to stretch upwards for miles, his snout more like the peak of a mountain than the head of a creature. Part of her almost felt obliged to get on her knees and offer tribute. She slid out of the now-silent helicopter and onto the ‘ground’ below. It was firm and hard, but warm, like walking on clay in the summer. She could also see that even just one of his scales was bigger than she was. She felt impossibly, incalculably, small. Like an ant looking up at a skyscraper.

*Are you all right?* The skyscraper asked, telepathically.

Kassandra smiled. “I’m fine. So’s Layla. Just a bit shaken up, I think.”

*Sorry,* thought Marcel at her. *The light got in my eye and I panicked.*

She just shrugged. “It was a little scary. But we’re still alive, at least. We’ll uh, we’ll bare more careful with the spot light next time,” she said, the little bit of levity helping her to feel normal again.

Marcel managed to think a sigh.

*Let’s just get back. Hold on tight.* With that, Kassandra could see the edges of his claw begin to turn inwards, his talons closing around her, Layla, and the Helicopter’s corpse. She felt her stomach drop a bit as she tumbled forward, before finally getting stuck between a wedge in Marcel’s claws where the joints were, smothering most of her body beneath warm, smooth scales as she settled in for the long flight home...

The flight, as it turned out, was only a few minutes long.

Kassandra tumbled out onto the foggy beaches of Liverpool after would could only have been 8 minutes, tops. Marcel was already back in his human form, stretching his arms like someone who’d just used certain muscles for the first time in years. “Sorry for the rough landing,” he said, sheepishly. “I didn’t want anyone to see me after I got out of the storm. Had to fly low and transform early.”

Layla, for her part, finally began to come to, her mind no longer clouded by Marcel’s mental domination, though it was clear that she was still a bit fuzzy.

“What about Silva and Cheng?” Asked Kassandra suddenly. “Did you…” she let the implication hang.

“No!” said Marcel, defensively. “No. They’re out there still,” he said, and pointed out into the ocean. Sure enough, Kassandra could see the crumpled up, miserable remains of the research station wedged into the surf some thousand feet or so out from the shore. “They’re still in the production floor. I’m sure the coast guard will come and rescue them eventually?”

“Aren’t you worried they’ll say it was you who did that?”

Marcel shook his head. “Trust me. I know something they’d rather die than let get out. Mutually assured destruction, except I’m the one with all the nukes.” He smiled and looked down at Layla, helping her to her feet with an outstretched arm. “Sorry about killing your job prospects. Hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Layla just shrugged, slowly returning to her normal, smug self. “I’ll be fine. They didn’t even offer dental.” She smirked. “Nice to meet you, Marcel.”

“And you, Wizard. Safe travels.”

Layla took her leave of the two, and Marcel turned his attention back towards Kassandra. “So. Enough detours. Shall we find our way back to Manchester?”

Kassandra smiled a bit as she put an arm around Marcel’s shoulders. “Sure. But with God as my witness, this time, we’re taking the train.”