

As Marc pulled into Camp Arcanum, Mr. Fixit's headlights caught something sparkling in the dark. He vaguely remembered that Eleazar and Michael had erected an artificial Christmas tree beside the picnic table. Orange extension cords coiled around it as garland. Chrome-plated box-end wrenches dangled from the branches as ornaments and reflected light like mirrors. A mechanic's trouble light took the place of a star on the top.

He growled under his breath at the waste of time and tools. At the last moment, he decided to park beside it instead of on top of it.

Marc slumped out of his car and into his trailer. He didn't bother with the lights inside. Stripping his clothes off as he went, he fell into bed. He knocked over the pictures of women he didn't know and burrowed under the covers, hoping he didn't dream about Brenwyn, Jeremiah, or any of the other denizens of Arcanum.

#

Eleazar made the circuitous run of the last few hundred yards into camp driving with only his left hand on the wheel. His other hand spent most of its happy time between the thighs of Esmeralda, an exotic beauty he had met that evening in Arcanum. That he was able to negotiate the

turns, the clutch, the gear shift, and a curvaceous Brazilian was a tribute to his superb physical coordination.

He pulled his gypsy wagon into its habitual space and his paramour for the evening was upon him before the engine had even died. He found her enthusiasm to be encouraging. He did everything he could to encourage her in turn.

The two of them made it out of the truck without injury and commenced across the gravel drive, the stairs and trailer door while linked lip-to-lip. Once inside, Esmeralda's outer clothes came off as if buttered. Eleazar was doing his best to catch up when he was distracted by the sound of bedsprings. His blood froze as he saw the naked form of his boss, the surly giant that beat monsters to death with a shovel, rising out of shadows.

“What the Hell are you doing in my trailer?” Marc rumbled.

The lights came on and, shortly after that, Esmeralda started shrieking. Marc clapped his hands over his ears and bellowed. Eleazar did his best to not get caught between the two.

Esmeralda burst out of the trailer with an endless torrent of invective in English and Portuguese. Eleazar followed her, collecting up the pieces

of her clothing that had already fallen off. He attempted an explanation, but there was little that could be heard over her keening.

She took off a shoe and pitched it at his face. Eleazar caught it easily and held it out for her, trying to look as helpful and harmless as possible. She shouted something that sounded very nasty in some new language, returned for her shoe and pummeled him with the heel.

Esmeralda stormed off, still swearing in multiple tongues and calling for a cab on her cell phone.

“Esmeralda!” Eleazar called after her, but she tramped on into the night. This was a great loss: a Brazilian reiki therapist with multiple piercings would have filled in several squares of his Women of the World Bingo Card.

Eleazar slinked back into the trailer, now needing the bed for nothing more than sleep. Rough hands gripped him by the throat and threw him back outside. As he collected himself at the bottom of the stairs, a pillow and a blanket flew out to cover him. The door slammed shut and locked from the inside.

“But this is my trailer,” Eleazar protested, but quietly.

“Leave me alone!” Marc shouted through the door.

“But, milord—”

“GO AWAY!”

“But my keys . . . inside . . .” Eleazar’s voice trailed off, not entirely sure he wanted Marc to hear him at this juncture.

The icy drizzle returned and it motivated Eleazar to scurry over to Michael’s trailer, pillow and blanket in hand. He tapped on the door, to no effect. Eleazar started pounding.

“Oh, come on, nobody could sleep through this,” Eleazar muttered. “Michael? It’s more frigid than my soon-to-be-ex-wife out here.”

The trailer remained dark and silent with no sign of life.

Realizing he had been bested, Eleazar dashed across the camp to Theodora’s shed. Placing the pillow and blankets in her cabin, he wrapped himself in his makeshift nest and settled in to sleep.

#

Musetta sat behind the counter, unmoving as Brenwyn stormed into Arcanum Arcana.

“Musetta, what the Hell is going on?”

“Good morning, Bren.” Musetta looked up with a mild smile. “Nice to see you.”

“Do not use your Jedi shopkeeper’s tricks on me,” Brenwyn said. “I know all of them.”

“What on Earth are you talking about, dear?”

“I am not just another difficult customer. Now tell me. Who is Marc Sindri?”

“Who would that be, dear?”

“Michael came by this morning to pick up Marc’s things. As Michael tells it, Marc has been staying with me the last few weeks.”

“How nice for you, Bren,” Musetta said. “It has been such a long time.” Her grandmotherly demeanor was infuriating.

“I tend to remember the men I take into my bed,” Brenwyn said between clenched teeth, “especially since they have become an endangered species.”

“Perhaps,” Musetta with that annoying twinkle in her eye. “Now, who is Michael, dear?”

“Michael?” Brenwyn knew the question was aimed to break the back of her anger, but it still worked as it nudged her mind to a place beyond righteous indignation. “Michael Caravaggio, the artist who is designing the new renaissance faire.”

“Oh yes, I forgot,” Musetta said absently. She took up her feather duster behind the counter and went over the display. “You’ve been very friendly with them. Who else is living up at their camp?”

“Well, there is Eleazar, that lech, and . . .” For some reason, the third person was a total blank in Brenwyn’s mind. That distressed her no little. “I cannot remember. I know that there are three troublemakers. For some reason, they have started a feud with Jeremiah.”

Musetta grinned:

“Does anyone need a reason?”

Brenwyn placed the talisman she had found in her shop on the counter.

“Does this have anything to do with that?”

Musetta pulled the talisman towards her with the wooden handle of the feather duster and examined it with a magnifying glass.

“All the trappings of the Golden Dawn. Angelic sigils. Sacred names. Definitely Jeremiah’s.” Musetta looked up at her directly. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“Are you sure?”

Brenwyn reached for the talisman, but Musetta swept it off the counter and wrapped it in a silk handkerchief.

“Absolutely,” Musetta said. “I’m the one that put that blind spot in your memory.”

“What?!” Brenwyn felt the bottom fall out of her stomach.

“I believe I was clear,” Musetta said.

“Why would you do that to me?”

“You two broke up badly.” Musetta turned away and secured the talisman in a wooden casket behind the counter. “I thought it best if I gave you some time to heal.”

“I would never have let you do that, even after Emrys was killed. I faced that pain.”

“A very good lesson to learn,” Musetta replied calmly.

“I am getting tired of your lessons,” Brenwyn said. “I am a grown woman, now.”

“And head of your coven, the most admired and respected woman in Arcanum.”

“What of it?”

“You can have anything you want, within reason,” Musetta stated. “I may not have the right, but I have the responsibility to teach you still.”

“That some things I cannot have, no matter how badly I want them?”

Musetta beamed at Brenwyn as if she were a slow child who had tied her own shoes.

“Yes.”

“And Marc Sindri is one of them?”

“Perhaps.” Musetta handed Brenwyn a snapshot. “You tell me if you should have him.”

Brenwyn looked at the picture of the scruffy man in black. From the jolt of electricity that passed between them with their first handshake to the quiver in her belly when she first saw Marc naked, she felt months’ worth of sensations in fractions of a second.

“Do you remember him now?” Musetta asked.

Brenwyn remembered the pleasure, no, smug satisfaction, she felt when she first realized Marc could be the one to outlast and outwit Jeremiah. She also remembered the absolute desolation as she sat beside his bed in the ICU.

“Oh my God,” Brenwyn said after several long moments. “I would be lucky if he ever spoke to me again.”

Musetta nodded.

“You have got to stop this,” Brenwyn plead. “Shut it down. Otherwise, I will have no chance to make things right with him.”

“No.”

“No?”

“As in ‘You can’t have it.’ You’d better get used to the sound of that,” Musetta said.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“So that you will learn, my dear. By Beltane, your world will be completely turned upside down. You’ll need to make adjustments before that.”

“What will happen then?”

Musetta put on a face Brenwyn had seen a thousand times before.

“You know that I don’t foretell the future,” she said.

“You know,” Brenwyn muttered, “but you will not tell.”

“Events are moving faster than before,” Musetta shrugged diffidently.

“You can’t leap into the future with your eyes closed.”

“You know that I am careful.”

Musetta snapped the picture out of Brenwyn’s hand.

“No!” She felt all of her memories of Marc fading the moment his image left her sight. It was like being abandoned by the side of the road.

“Why not?” Musetta asked. “Close your eyes and it all goes away. No more sorrow or fear. You’re allowed to tend the garden of your soul without weeds.”

“I want him back.” Brenwyn did her best to hold tight to her memories of Marc.

“And you’re willing to endure everything for him?”

“Ten times what he has gotten from me.”

Musetta handed the picture back.

“Remember, this is more than just taking on another lover,” Musetta said. “Here in Arcanum, he is a more valued commodity.”

“I understand.”

“I hope so.”

Musetta put a silk-wrapped package into Brenwyn’s hand.

“What is this?” Brenwyn asked.

“It’s another amulet. It still closes Marc’s mind to you, but you remember who he is.” Musetta eyed her carefully, reading what her body and mind revealed. “It’s your decision to offer this as a trade.”

Musetta smiled and placed a bundle of Polaroid pictures on the counter near Brenwyn’s hand.

“Here, you might need these until then.”

#

Marc came out of his trailer and readjusted the pine garland Michael had hung over the door. In the early light, Marc could see that the artist had been busy. The tool guy Christmas tree was decked with even more sparkly hand tools. The trailers and the barn were all decorated with Christmas garland and lights.

With travel mug of coffee in hand, Marc slogged across the camp while his men gathered and boarded the trucks. He climbed into the bed of Theodora as Michael and Eleazar stood nearby. Picking up a hard hat, goggles, gloves, and hearing protectors, he held them high for everyone to see.

“Okay guys, listen up,” he shouted. “I know you hate wearing this crap, but today it is *very* important that you wear *all* of it! That OSHA inspector will be crawling up my ass with a microscope. If I get bit down there, I will be even more unpleasant to deal with.”

“He could get worse?” Michael whispered sideways to Eleazar.

Eleazar shrugged.

“So everybody be careful,” Marc continued. “Wear your equipment. And, for God’s sake, don’t drop a tree on anyone. Not even the inspector. They’ll just send another one.”

His denim and flannel army chuckled at the quickest resolution to their problems.

“Round ’em up!” Marc made a sweeping circular gesture over his head. “We’re on the clock!”

“We’re men with power tools,” Randy called out.

“And we’re not scared!” the others responded

The last of the stragglers climbed aboard the trucks which then drove away down the forest path. Marc hopped into the passenger seat of Theodora, bracing himself as Eleazar gunned the throttle and sent Theodora careening after the main force of the flannel and denim army.

#

Marc was going through the papers in the new office trailer, confirming he had all of the dozens of documents the inspector would want. Apropos of nothing, Marc stopped, distracted by thoughts of Brenwyn. Absently, he wondered if she might be thinking of him, then he knew with absolute certainty that she wasn't. Musetta's amulet guaranteed that.

He had frequently thought about taking off the amulet in the last few days, if nothing else, when he needed to shower. Having Brenwyn finally able to touch his mind when he was naked and in the shower seemed to be a bad idea. He had been doing the equivalent of sponge baths, which were never as much fun as when Brenwyn did it.

He dropped his reveries and looked out the window when he heard engine sounds outside. A dark, clean sedan pulled through the gate and parked beside the trailer. Marc didn't need to see the license plates to know it was "government."

A severe-looking woman with close-cropped silver-gray hair stepped out of the car. She was wrapped in a white wool coat and carried a clipboard and a Polaroid camera. Praying to whatever gods protected working men from bureaucrats and wolfing down two antacids from the roll in his pocket, Marc pulled on his black shearling coat and knit cap and stepped out of trailer.

“Are you the one in charge?” the woman asked in short, clipped syllables. “I’m Ms. Snowden with OSHA.”

“Yes. I’m Marc Sindri.”

He walked over and extended his hand, but Ms. Snowden ignored the gesture.

“Let’s get started right away,” she said, looking down at her clipboard. “There’s a lot I want to see and I don’t like standing in the cold.”

“Uh. Okay,” Marc said. He wondered, for just a moment, whether it *would* be less trouble to let Randy drop a tree on this woman. “Where do we start?”

“Let’s start with your tool shop and art foundry.”

Marc relaxed. Michael’s obsessive record-keeping should be well above Ms. Snowden’s standards.

“No problem.”

Marc waved to Eleazar and he brought Theodora around to pick them up.

“Good morrow, milady,” the rennie said as he doffed his paisley cap, “I am Eleazar, the—”

Marc made a cutting gesture across his throat and Eleazar stopped in mid-greeting.

“Eleazar the—what?” Ms. Snowden examined him as if he might be carrying salmonella.

“The—man who drives the Bobcat?” He sounded uncertain of having the right answer.

“And is Eleazar your first name or your last name?”

“Yes?”

“It’s his stage name,” Marc volunteered. “Eleazar is a performer that helps with all my ren faire projects.”

“And his license is under that name?”

“License?” Eleazar was looking cornered.

“Everyone operating heavy machinery must have the appropriate license and certificate renewed on a regular basis.” She held her pen

poised over her clipboard like a headsman's axe over the block. "He doesn't have a license, does he?"

"We're kind of informal here," Marc said, "since this is more of a farm labor situation."

"Informality breeds accidents, Mr. Sindri."

She checked off one box on one of the many forms on her clipboard. Marc looked over her shoulder to see the offense and its required fine.

"Five hundred dollars?" he squeaked.

"For a start."

She pointed her pen at Eleazar's boots. They were knee-length black suede, custom-made and costing at least two hundred dollars a pop.

"Are those site-approved, steel-toed boots?"

"These are hand-made by Aethelred the Cobbler." Eleazar stood tall in defense of his choice in footwear.

"Steel toes or not?"

"Alas, they are not." Eleazar deflated as Snowden checked off another box. Marc's eyes widened. Marc had a distressing vision of a column of fines and charges taller than the stalwart Ms. Snowden and her clipboard.

"Well, let's get on with it," Ms. Snowden said.

Snowden and Eleazar got into the front seats as Marc climbed into Theodora's bed and held onto the roll bar.

"Mr. Sindri!" Ms. Snowden called. "Do you always ride up there?"

"Not always, but if we have more than two people—"

"Uh-huh."

Snowden checked off five boxes on three separate pages. Marc hung his head in defeat. His brand-new ulcer was probably already the size of a nickel.

"You can go ahead," Ms. Snowden told Eleazar, "if you keep the vehicle at a safe speed."

Eleazar, with a look of anguish on his face, set Theodora to crawl away from the trailer into the woods at an entirely reasonable pace as Marc discretely popped another two antacids.

Marc leaned against Theodora and watched Ms. Snowden watch his men. A tree fell into the clearing in front of them and three of his best men took to cutting away the branches like little worker ants in Dickies and jeans. They moved slowly and with deliberation, partially to impress Snowden and also because their safety equipment kept slipping out of place. Snowden, like a pillar of salt with her snow-white hair and white wool coat, observed quietly and took down notes on her clipboard. When

finished, she returned to where Marc, Eleazar, and Michael stood beside Theodora and Michael's green Mule side-by-side.

"Well, everything seems to be in order except for a few infractions."

Snowden checked off a few more boxes. She glanced over at the workers and an expression of amusement flickered briefly across her face.

"Too bad you didn't have them practice with their safety equipment before today."

Ouch, found out.

Marc and Eleazar grimaced while Michael maintained a polite smile.

"If the inspection is over," Michael said, "I would guess you have an initial figure for us?"

"I have been keeping a running total."

Snowden punched several numbers into the calculator built into her clipboard.

"Your fines accumulate to roughly one hundred and fifty-six thousand dollars," Snowden stated.

Marc felt as if the new hole in his stomach lining started releasing acid into the rest of his body cavity, but refused to admit the pain. Eleazar

looked horrified. Thank God, he remained silent. Michael exhaled sharply, but appeared to be only mildly shocked.

“But, of course,” he said after only a fraction of a second, “this is open for negotiation.”

“Negotiation?” Snowden examined him coldly. “I hope you’re not suggesting a bribe.”

“No,” Michael said, strangely undaunted. “Rectifying duplicate fines. Mitigation and amelioration. Standard OSHA practices, I’m sure.”

Eleazar looked at Michael as if he were speaking in tongues.

Michael turned to Marc to explain:

“Tommy—one of my former associates—was head of HR for a meat-packing plant. We became very familiar with OSHA safety reviews.”

Marc’s phone rang with its standard jackhammer tone. He opted to ignore it.

“Meat-packing,” Eleazar said to himself. “Now, that sounds like a euphemism.”

Marc moved his foot discreetly and exerted fifty pounds of force on Eleazar’s instep through the sole of his work boot as a promise of what was to come if he didn’t behave. Eleazar let out a stifled squeal of pain.

**Snowden, her attention previously on Michael, turned to the other two.
The jackhammer was still going off in Marc's pocket.**

"That noise," Snowden said.

"That's my cell phone," Marc replied.

"Are you going to answer it?"

"No."

The phone rang again.

"Mr. Sindri?"

"I'll put it on mute."

**Marc checked the phone's caller ID before opting to switch off the
ringer. He stopped dead when he saw it display: "PROSERPINA'S
BOW."**

"Is it something important?" Ms. Snowden asked impatiently.

**In spite of himself, Marc had been hoping for this call over the last
few days. He had been having trouble sleeping and gotten to the point
where he almost looked forward to seeing the little monsters outside his
window at three a.m. Yes, this was important, but he was on the clock,
and right now was the very worst time in the world for her to call. He
had OSHA and an ulcer to contend with.**

Marc made a few changes to his phone's settings before he stowed the phone in his jacket pocket.

"Nothing," Marc grunted. "Just something personal."

"Good," Snowden said with a sharp nod, "because there's a great deal we still need to discuss."

"Personal? Who . . . ?" Eleazar must have finally put two and two together. His eyes grew wide. "And you're not going to answer her?"

"I'm *on the clock*," Marc told Eleazar through gritted teeth. He truly disliked repeating himself to his minions. He foresaw a disciplinary session with a buckshot-filled rubber chicken in the near future.

"And I still need to inspect your maintenance logs and material safety bulletins," Snowden declared.

"And maybe you," Eleazar told Michael, "could take Mizz Snowden back to the office to see those papers while Marc deals with the problem, *witch* has just arisen."

"He doesn't need to do that." The last thing Marc wanted was anyone's help with his personal life.

"Which?" Michael said. He must have guessed there was a secret message Eleazar was broadcasting, but he didn't catch the hint.

"Good witch," Eleazar said in his best imitation of Glinda of Oz.

“Ohh!” Michael said as the low-wattage light bulb flickered on above his head, metaphorically.

“It’s my responsibility to handle this,” Marc said. “We’ll work out this mess.”

“And it’s going to take a long time to straighten this out,” Snowden said. “None of your files are in order.”

“I have system specs, maintenance logs, everything you asked for,” Marc complained.

Ms. Snowden pursed her lips as she looked down on her notes.

“Computer files are unacceptable, and hard-copy material safety data sheets need to be accessible on and off site.”

Michael stepped in to help:

“These are just minor infractions . . .”

“Enough minor flaws can kill a man,” Snowden replied.

“But our safety record is clean.” Though Marc had not stuck to the absolute letter of the law, he had avoided all but the most minor injuries on the job site.

“Then, what do you say about that worker with the broken back?” Snowden accused.

“Who?”

“That late-hours incident in November.” Snowden smiled for the first time, evidently enjoying her verbal ambush. “You can’t just cover up an incident like that.”

“That wasn’t work-related,” Marc said quietly. This was one topic he definitely did not want to take up with a government official.

“So you say. As long as it was on or near the work site, it will be investigated.”

“I think, milady, you—” Eleazar started.

Both Michael and Marc turned on Eleazar and he cut off in mid-prattle.

“That was something like a tornado,” Marc said, “nothing in the government’s jurisdiction. We don’t need your help with this.”

“That is for the worker or his family to decide,” Snowden snapped. “They have to deal with his disability.”

Marc realized there was no way he could side-step this anymore.

“I don’t know where you’ve been getting your information,” Marc said, tapping his chest, “but *I’m* that injured worker.”

Ms. Snowden blinked her ice-blue eyes at him.

“There must be some mistake.”

“I don’t think so. I could show you my medical records,” Marc grunted. “The doctors just last week cleared me to lift that much paper.”

“This can’t be . . .” She sifted through the sheets of paper on her clipboard without apparent enlightenment.

“Just forget about it,” Marc said. “The important thing is that we have gone over forty days without a work-related injury of any kind.”

One of the faire’s pick-up trucks came careening down the logging trail. It swerved to avoid Marc and the others and plowed head-first into a nearby tree. Randy, the driver, and Albert, the passenger, stumbled out, stunned by the crash. A cloud of smoke and powder from the airbags poured out around them. Marc rushed over to the truck, half-concerned for his men’s safety, half wanting to finish them off with his bare hands. Snowden glared at Eleazar as if all her worst suspicions were confirmed.

Eleazar shrugged expansively, trying to put the best face on the situation.

“I guess we simply start counting again.”

Marc grabbed Albert by the shoulders. The burly, young worker held his head where it had struck the support column.

“What the Hell is going on here?” Marc shouted.

“The little monsters are coming out of the bushes,” Albert groaned.

“Little monsters?” Ms. Snowden asked Michael. “Do you have a documented substance-abuse policy in place here?”

“Nothing beyond standard safety policies,” Michael replied.

“But we have a very strict policy on little monsters,” Eleazar added.

“We’re not drunk!” Randy shouted. “The damn things took a chunk out of one of my work boots.”

Randy stumbled around to Marc’s side of the truck to show the damage. He held up one leg of his dirty jeans to show the circular arc of tooth marks surrounding the missing bit of leather. Marc let go of Albert.

“What the Hell did that?” Marc asked.

“I have no friggin’ idea,” Randy replied. “They’re green and slimy and smell like shit. They look like zombie Chihuahuas.”

“No skin on ’em?” This was beginning to sound horribly familiar to Marc.

“Just a layer of this snot.”

He pointed out the smelly goo that smeared the legs of his pants.

“Oh Hell,” Marc muttered.

Albert pointed past Marc and screamed:

“Oh my God!”

An undead skinless squirrel, its bony tail whipping behind it, perched on the side of the truck. It squealed at Albert as it glared at him with empty eye sockets. Snowden, Albert, and Randy reacted with panicked disgust. Marc pointed at the tool rack on Theodora.

“Shovel!”

Eleazar, by now unfazed by any of Arcanum’s wildlife, lobbed the requested tool to Marc.

“Your weapon, sirrah!”

The creature was already in the air as Eleazar threw. The zombie squirrel landed high on Albert’s chest and snapped sharp, yellow incisors at his face. Albert dropped to his knees with a forearm up to fend it off. Snowden couldn’t take her eyes off of the spectacle even as she climbed over Michael and Theodora to reach safety.

“Ma’am, please get off,” Michael responded to her sensible shoe in his groin. “Ow! You have no right to put that—Mmmph!”

Randy retreated into the bush to find a big stick. Marc roughly kicked Albert to the ground, dislodging the undead rodent. He scooped it up with the shovel and hurled it against the trunk of a nearby tree.

By now, Snowden was standing on Theodora and clutching the crash cage.

“What the Hell is that thing?” she screamed.

The creature peeled itself off the rough bark of the tree and fell to the ground. It made one bounce and then came after Marc again.

“Persistent,” Eleazar said, a calm voice in the midst of the panic.

Marc focused as much as he could on the smelly thing with pointy teeth, trusting his men would keep Snowden safe and out of the way. He flattened the squirrel with an overhand blow of the shovel blade. It slowly pulled itself from the mud to continue its assault. In spite of their fear, the others stood and watched the battle in grim fascination. Marc swatted the creature once more with a wet crunch. Using the shovel like a guillotine blade, he chopped it into little pieces.

The severed head snapped angrily at Marc’s boots; the limbs and the torso thrashed without direction. The tail gyrated wildly in different directions like a pinwheel.

“I think I’m gonna puke,” Albert groaned, one hand over his mouth.

“Get rid of it, Marc,” Michael said. “Wish it into the cornfield.”

Marc dug a shallow grave—two or three shovelfuls of dirt. He scooped the writhing remains into the hole and backfilled it. The tip of

the tail was still exposed and wriggling. Marc piled more dirt on top of that and pounded it down hard.

“You don’t think that was anything like rabies or anthrax, do you?” Albert asked.

Before anyone could come up with a convincing lie, Theodora’s engines fired up with a roar. Snowden, her eyes wide with panic, drove back for the gateway at full throttle. The men left behind were pelted with a double rooster-tail of mud, gravel and ice. Then the inspector and the Bobcat were gone.

“Theodora,” Eleazar said wistfully. “I never thought I’d lose her to another woman.”

Marc surveyed the wreckage: the pick-up steamed where its hood wrapped around the tree trunk; two men down; operations complete screwed up for the day, never mind the inspection.

“So,” he asked with a sigh, “how much of *that* do you think will end up in the final report?” He took his last antacid.

“None of it,” Michael said as he picked up something at his feet. “She left her clipboard.”

#

The Mule approached the gateway site at a safe and measured pace. Marc sat in the one passenger seat as Michael drove. Randy, Albert, and Eleazar were crammed into a cargo bed large enough for two of them. Marc could hear trouble even before they made the final turn.

Theodora's engine was still running where she had been abandoned, her bulldozer blade lodged in the side of the office trailer. The trailer leaned to one side where it been pushed off its cinder block foundation. The loosened electric line connections sparked intermittently.

Eleazar saw Theodora's condition and wailed in anguish.

"My baby!"

He squeezed off of the Mule and fell head first to the ground. The jongleur rolled to his feet and made a mad dash to the Toolcat to carefully back her away from the trailer. The trailer listed further to one side like a ship run aground. Eleazar sat forward, studying the situation. Marc stepped out of the Mule once Michael stopped and assessed his previously well-ordered work site.

"Rat's bleedin' ass," he grumbled. "These are your tax dollars at work."

Marc saw a small knot of his men doing nothing constructive. He shouted at them:

“Where the Hell did she go?”

The workers pointed out the trail of upturned equipment and Port-A-Potties that marked the path of her retreat. A large patch of dark blue paint marked where she had sideswiped the gateway. Marc waved to get Eleazar’s attention.

“Shut her down,” he shouted and made a cutting gesture across his throat. “We’ll worry about this later.”

Eleazar complied and ambled over to Marc. Michael joined them from another direction.

“Well, considering the circumstances,” Eleazar said, “that went as well as one could have hoped, milord.”

“You think?” Marc said.

“He may be right,” Michael said. “We just have to wait and see how OSHA feels about fines assessed by a woman who sees little monsters.”

Marc shook his head. Michael and Eleazar were agreeing, making this a very strange day.

As his workers began to pull their collective act together, snowflakes began to fall from the sky, almost one at a time.

“Yeah. We still lost most of the day here,” Marc said with his eyes on the cloudy sky. “Let’s see if we can salvage any of it.”

The snowfall increased, dropping wet fat flakes which stacked on top of everything. Eleazar tried to catch one on his tongue; his rubber chicken appeared to be doing the same.

“Rat’s ass.”

