

I avoided the worse is my breakdown by partying for three days straight.

I reach the border at Detroit— Sorry Port Huron, you're the more direct route, but you're not exactly a party city— in just over two hours, while staying on secondary highways. I left a lot of local sheriffs perplexed a motorbike could drive this fast in winter.

The crossing was uneventful; I swiped my phone, the gate opened, and I was back in the US. Quebec is the only place where crossing is mostly handled by people.

Then it was a check-in at the Shinola, I got the penthouse because that was all that was available, there was some sort of convention in town, and I was out to the first club I could find. I didn't care about the name, or if it was a gay club, I just wanted loud music, a lot of bodies and dancing.

It was three days spent with people, dancing, eating, drinking and drugs, the last two mainly them, I have a strong version of Arnold's gifts so alcohol and drugs do little for me. It's why I'm not on medication for my depression. He could take it away, but the other benefits are too useful. I heal faster, I'm tougher and stronger.

Somewhere in there, I did lose it. I remember a corker spaniel holding me as I bawled my eyes out. Soothing words. He might have topped me, or it could have been someone else. Those three days were a blur.

Then I was functional.

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Flint has had it rough.

I may have mentioned history isn't my strong suit, but everyone knows about Flint, and within the magical circles, we even know who is responsible for making it the jewel of a city it is now. We don't know because it was advertised, but because we know how factions operate.

My time frames might be wrong, as I said I am not a history guy. Blame my history teacher during my last two years. Great speaker, amazing smile, wits so sharp you could slice butter with it. I was in his office a few times a week, and we made a mess of it each time.

Somewhere at the end of the twentieth century and early twenty-first, Flint, Michigan was abandoned by the people in charge of maintaining it. Corruption, failed infrastructure, failed businesses. Ignored by the state or the country. Big things I remember, the tainted water thing, the crash of General Motors— that had a wide impact, but when Ford bought them, Flint didn't get any of the new plants— the city mayor going to prison for misappropriation of funds.

Until the thirties, Flint was not a place anyone wanted to live in, but those trapped there couldn't afford to go anywhere else. Then, as if by magic, things began improving. Corrupt politicians stopped running for office, those already there retired for 'family reason'. People, who five minutes before the election were at the bottom of the polls, won. There were so many of those there was an investigation of the voting machine, but no experts found anything wrong with them.

People who know about us now know that anytime something happens 'as if by magic', it usually means magic was involved. Now it's easy to find out who did it. You ask the people who benefited and they'll tell you; if they don't know, it's probably the Ten Knives.

Back when this started, the Gray Church was still in power— Secret Christian group who stamped out any one of who they felt was becoming too powerful while wielding blood magic in secret.

I am proud to say my family played a part in taking them down. Not as much as my dads wished we had, but one of my dads is directly responsible for keeping a god from wiping us out. So there you go.

So back then, knowing who did what was tougher because just about everyone hid what they did. My family was one of the rare who rubbed our power in the Church's face by semi openly ruling the San Francisco Metropolis— it was San Francisco Bay back then.

We know it's the Ten Knives because no one else has taken credit for it. The Ten Knives follow Nandokuka, the god of subtlety and obfuscation. Unless you're in a direct confrontation with them, you will never know they are there. They blend in, vanish in the crowd, the background.

I suspect they are behind the hacker group Inconsequential because that would be just like them to name one of the larger social change movement ‘inconsequential’.

Anyway, since the thirties, things have been improving, good men and women have found themselves in positions of power, used the money provided by the government and private donations to fix-up Flint, rebuild the city. Now, the crime rate is back to the country’s average, unemployment is a point or two lower, median income half a point higher. The streets are clean, well maintained, the storefronts inviting, and the people there so friendly it’s borderline scary.

The one problem, for my situation, is that I had no idea how to make contact with the Ten Knives. As I said, subtlety is their thing. You could sit in their enclave and never know it. There are a few places you can go and increase your odds, but even then, it’s not certain.

Magic shops are one such place.

Many stage magicians are followers of Nandokuka, sleight of hand is right up his alley. If not the magician himself, one of his or her technician, but usually it’ll be the magician, there is something about flaunting who they are while hiding it sounding very much like a thing the Knives do.

So I did a search for magic shop making a thing of having big-name stage magicians as their customers and I find two. Alacazam, and Hog’s Wart. That second one took me a bit to work out until I saw the wand and lightning bolt as part of their logo. It had to date back from when those books were still big.

I go to Wart because they had a picture of the owner and Copperfield on their website.

The Copperfields are known Ten Knives. I swear. They’ve never said anything about it, but you don’t get generation after generation of successful stage magicians without real magic. Stories go they trace back their family to Harry Houdini. I went to one of Francis Copperfield’s show in Vegas a few years ago, and it’s got to be real magic because I didn’t find any trap doors or projectors or anything out of the ordinary on that stage after the show was over.

Wart’s a cozy little store with the kind of magic tricks on display you’d give a kid to get him interested or get him out of your fur. The owner is a gibbon with fur so white she has to be in her hundreds.

“Welcome to the Hog’s Wart,” she says, her voice shaking. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

“You wouldn’t happen to be part of the Ten Knives would you?” I can be subtle, I swear.

“Is that some online magician’s group? I’m afraid I predate all that technology.” She seems truthful, which means shit in this case. If there’s one group who can fool my empathy it’s got to be the Knives.

I sighed. “You wouldn’t tell me if you were, would you?”

“Young man, if I knew, I would happily tell you.” She had the most disarming smile.

I smiled back and took the deck of card out of my pocket.

“Now, that I can help you with.” She hobbled out from behind the counter. “What level of magician are you?”

“I’m Society,” I say, and get no reaction.

“You young people and your new rating systems. What kind of deck are you looking for?” She motions to a display filled with decks of cards. “I have all of them, the Stripper, Svengali, Invisible, Trump, I even have a few varieties of the Marked decks. If you’re looking to cheat at poker, that’s the one you want.”

I picked one whose box matched the one I had and paid.

Outside, I had to make a decision. Had it all be an act on her part and now I just had to wait until one of them made contact, or did I cover all my bases and visit the other store?

Alacazam was more upscale. Large, well lit. With shelves displaying tricks and clerks explaining how to perform them to small groups of customers.

Something felt wrong about displaying magic, even fake magic, so openly. We might not be under the heel of the Church, and no longer officially secret, but most of us were raised by men who had to be careful about showing what they could do, and while my fathers never were, I’ve been around enough other men who are wary of doing magic openly I picked some of it up.

“Welcome to Alacazam, the treasure vault of magic,” a young-looking mole greeted me, offering his hand. “I’m Steve, how can I dazzle you?”

I shook his hand and let him lead me deeper into the store. He pressed against me, as we squeezed around a group of customers, I felt him reach inside my jacket for the pocket where I kept my phone. I had his hand in mine, gently pulling it away. Unlike a lot of people, I am keenly aware of my phone, not only because it’s my lifeline to my family, but because it contains a lot of apps and information that would get in me trouble if it fell in the wrong hands.

“Don’t,” I say, not putting any threat in my voice.

“Sorry man, it’s just part of the experience. Dazzle you with sleight of hand. You have quick hands yourself. I take it you do magic too?”

“You can say that,” I let him go.

“Then you’re probably interested in our more advanced products.”

“Do you have anything used by Nandokuka?”

He frowned. “I don’t know that one. Do they have branded products? If they do, I can check the catalog.” He pulled out his phone.

“It’s okay. What do you have involving knives? Ten of them?” I told you I could be subtle.

“Tricks with ten knives? We have trick knives. Is that what you mean? I don’t know that we have bundles. Gideon,” he called to a palomino horse carrying boxes, “Do we have bundles of trick knives? He wants ten of them.”

“Knives are on the back wall, next to the crystal balls,” the horse answered without slowing.

“I know where they are, I need to know...” the mole shook his head in annoyance. “Sorry, I don’t think we have bundles. I can make you one if you want, but it’s going to have to be with different knives. I don’t think we have ten of any one of them. There isn’t a lot of demand for trick knives.”

“It’s okay, thanks for the assistance.”

I walk out and try to figure out what my next step should be.

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One detail that occurred to me after the fact was that I was taking a huge risk. The kid in the store tried to pick my pocket; he was clumsy at it, and I’m attentive enough that I don’t usually worry about anyone getting close and managing it, but this is Ten Knives territory, the masters of subtlety.

I don’t pay attention to the stories of them being all crooks and thieves. Growing up under the shadow of my family’s history makes me cautious about listening to other stories. Even if they were like that at one time, that doesn’t mean it’s who they are now.

I retreated to my hotel room to do some work. I added a *phrase* to the back of my phone using one of my pens, this was a temporary measure, for something permanent I’d have to work with a different kind of ink, and not do it outside the phone, since even adding another phrase to make it harder for the ink to rub off, it would in time.

I’d have to get a case for it, write it on the inside of the case. Or better yet contact Aiden and find out why this wasn’t done when we were given our phones. He could finally make an Arnold-proof phone that way. I’d have to do something anyway, my phone was my lifeline to my family, my friends, my bike. Without it, I was well and thoroughly fucked.

The phrase was something simple, to make it tougher to grab my phone unless they were me. For practical intent, it was as if it had a coating of frictionless powder. Unless they used strong magic, their fingers would simply slide over it.

I did the same for the deck of card, but not on the box itself. Stories about the box a Knife carried his kanji in were as numerous as those about all the horrible things my family did over the centuries, and that they be true or not, I was not desecrating something of value like this. Even if for all I could tell this one was a plain cardboard box.

I used the box I bought and slipped the Knife’s box in it. I had to tape the edges to keep the box from falling apart, since they were the same sized and not meant to fit one into the other. It didn’t have to be pretty, just hold the writing so no Knife could steal it. I wanted a face to face meeting.

Then I went about passing the time until I either came up with a way to make contact with them, or they made contact with me.