

I slammed back into my mortal body with a startled gasp and bolted upright, staring around myself in confusion. The church was still quiet and dark around me — the rows of empty pews reaching back into the gloom. It felt like I was waking up in a crypt or something—

“What in God’s name?”

I jerked, turning towards the sound of the voice that had spoken. Oh shit, it was the Hunter, halfway down the central aisle of the church, clearly still on his way to leaving.

My thoughts leapt into frantic action. I needed to complete my mission, at the very least. Where the hell was that orb? With urgent jerks of my head, I located it lying next to me on the stairs of the altar, glowing and humming away like I wasn’t just about to get shot all over again.

Grabbing at it, I lifted it above my head, gauntleted fingers clenched around its glassy surface. A quick glance showed me that yeah, my blood was *everywhere*. Apparently that part was important, blood of a Spiritborn or something. Guess it was now or never.

“What are you doing?” the Hunter bellowed, and in my peripheral vision I watched him rush to take aim at me once more.

I brought the orb down with all my might, shattering it on the steps like it was made of paper-thin glass. The world tilted. Magic spun out in all directions and was sucked downwards at frightening speed, right into the leyline below us. There was a moment, as it happened — a great stillness, when the very Earth itself paused mid-breath.

The leyline detonated.

Magic spewed everywhere, the force of the explosion rivaling videos I'd seen of atomic bombs going off.

I was thrown bodily down the aisle, right into the Hunter, before continuing on past him for several yards. Meanwhile, he was on the ground, screaming as blood gushed from his face.

Managing to slow my landing with a twist of magic, I turned to look at my enemy with a frown. Why was he bleeding? Wait... did I? Holy shit, my gauntlet must have hit him in the face!

"Lol!" I exclaimed, then winced as I realised I'd just said 'lol' out loud. "Fuck you buddy, I'm out! Have fun realigning your nose!"

I didn't hear his reply, because I bolted out the front door like he was my dad about to ask me to mow the lawn. Being shot again just really wasn't on my agenda, as nice as it had been to take a little vacation from this defective hunk of meat that everyone insisted I call a body.

The moment I set my feet on the pavement outside the church, I was knocked on my ass again as secondary explosions rocked the ground below me. Fuck me, *this* was Apollo's definition of a single brick? What was going on? I wish I had enough magic to get into the air, because this was getting dangerous— Hold on...

My internal reserves were full to the brim! How— the magic from the explosions were refueling me! I'd be nice if it did it without making me nauseated. That wasn't pleasant, and it certainly wasn't a good sign. Before I could even begin to address everything that was going on, though, I needed to be safe.

So, with my reserves of magic filled to the brim, I yanked on the fabric of reality and sent myself flying into the air. Just in time too, because more explosions began to ripple through the city, spreading out along six

seemingly linear paths. There was so much magic ricocheting all over the place that it was manifesting itself briefly within this layer of reality.

A shockwave of magical wind buffeted me as I simultaneously tried to keep myself aloft, *and* figure out what was happening. I was beginning to suspect something worrying, something that made my blood run cold.

The six directions the explosions were taking, they just so happened to correspond to the links between the leyline below me and its closest neighbours. This wasn't one brick — Artemis and Apollo were knocking the whole wall down, and if any bricks landed on innocent mortals? Well, that was just the cost of doing business. I *knew* those gods had been up to something...

I needed to get moving, I needed to get home— Wait, but what about Eva? Shit, did I go to try and find her? Help her home? But no, the cops would spot me for sure, and when that happened, the Hunter would be right behind them. Shit. I'm sorry, Eva. You're on your own.

Guilt warred with the ice in the pit of my stomach as I began to make my way towards home, all while watching the ripple effect of the god's deception and my gullibility.

From my position up in the air, I clearly saw the next leylines in the chain go up in geysers of violent arcane energy, but this time, I saw something else. They were distant, but I could just make out what was happening. The leylines weren't just exploding, they were tearing off their chains. The gods might have lied about the scale of their plans, but not the intent...

Magic was free. The enclaves' monopoly on the arcane was sundered with the shattering of one small marble.

What had I *done*?

Setting down on a random rooftop, I collapsed and gasped for breath, trying to understand the scale of what was going on. Even more distant magical explosions were going off further out, so far away now that I could only sense them as a mere suggestion of the actual event taking place.

At least no one knew it was me who'd done it. Well, not *me*, me. At most, they knew some witch had done it. Thank fuck I hadn't gone as myself.

Shit! Mum and dad would be looking for me! I needed to get home and out of my ruined, bloodstained clothing before they got too worried.

Wait, no — *stop*, Itias. Stop and think. Having a meltdown over the stress is tempting, but you're stronger than that. What next? Get home, hide clothes, jump in the shower? I can pretend I don't care about all the exploding... or something. Yeah, that wasn't going to be very convincing.

Well, first things first, I actually needed to make it home, so I got to working on that. I tried to keep low as I flew across the city, which was rapidly beginning to resemble a kicked anthill. Emergency services were all over the place, their various flavors of siren causing a cacophony of noise to rebound through the night. Protestors could be seen fleeing through the streets too, trying to get home in the chaos.

What a fucking mess... dang, I was so stupid. A gullible idiot.

As I ducked and wove across the night sky, I began to notice something odd about my magic. It was refilling faster than normal. A *lot* faster, in fact. I wasn't totally sure, but my full recovery time might've just gone from a month or two, to a day or two. Also, magic was just... working better. Each pull on reality threw me much further than before. Which was lucky, since I needed to make sure I didn't make a beeline for home, in case anyone spotted me.

When I did eventually close in on my boring middle-class suburban house, I found all the lights were on. Great, my parents were probably looking for me.

Rather than use my own family's hose, I dropped into the neighbours' backyard and used theirs, spraying myself down and throwing my cloak and tank tops into the back of their garden. They were ruined, no point incriminating myself by keeping them close at hand. If I went on more magical adventures, I'd get a proper, cooler outfit.

Next, I threw myself over to my bedroom window on the second floor, and took a careful peek inside. The lights were on, the door was open, but I couldn't see my parents anywhere. I guess I'd be finding out if it was safe or not.

With the careful application of a minor spell, I was able to flip the latch and silently open the window. Inside, I could hear the murmur of my parents speaking loudly downstairs, and I breathed a sigh of relief. At least I had time to get the gauntlets off.

As I slid my hands out from inside their warm embrace I was left feeling uncomfortably vulnerable — they had been my lifeline through this crazy night, and without them... God, I'd been pretty gung-ho about getting shot, but now that I'd experienced it? A cold wave of terror washed through my entire body. I think I'd pass on any encores.

Shuddering, I took my pants off and threw them in my cupboard, down on the floor where they could collect dust for another few years. A sigh escaped me as I stared down at them. I wish I could wear cool clothes more often, it sucked that girls got all the variety, and guys just had... boring stuff. With morose sigh, I left the pants in my closet.

I dressed myself in the 'boring stuff' and took a deep breath, mentally preparing for the lecture I was about to get. When mum and dad were all

worked up like this, they didn't really give much of a shit about anything other than telling me off.

Mentally bracing myself, I made my way down the stairs with bated breath, hoping against hope that it wasn't going to be as bad as I expected.

"Where have you *been*?" Mum all but screamed at me the moment I came into view in the living room.

"I-I um... I went out onto the roof to see what all the noise was," I mumbled as humbly and apologetically as I could manage. Talking shit to a god was one thing, but geez, Mum was scary.

Sputtering, she turned to Dad for backup while she tried to formulate a response, but he didn't get a chance to chime in before she let loose again. "What possessed you to do that, young man? There's some sort of... of *terrorist attack* going on out there and you climb out the window to *watch*?!"

She knew the problem was magical, it was hard not to feel all the arcane energy that was bouncing around like wireless signals at a convention. Unfortunately, for obvious reasons, Dad had never been let in on the little family secret, so she couldn't say it out loud. Still... I guess that just made her *extra* pissed at me.

"Um... yeah," I cringed. Nevermind, where was that Hunter? I was suddenly keen to have another encounter with a bullet.

An explosion cut through the conversation like a knife, sending all three of us staggering and reaching for support. The nausea I'd been feeling since the first explosion redoubled and spread throughout my body in a wave, and it was all I could do not to throw up there and then. Mum wasn't as in control of her stomach as I was, because she sprayed vomit out onto the carpet with a horrible gagging sound.

“Jane, are you okay?” Dad asked urgently, holding her hair out of her face as she sat down on the arm of a sofa, ashen faced and shaking.

I opted for flopping down onto the carpet, a clean patch, of course. Fuck, I felt about as good as Mum looked right now.

“I feel it too, Mum,” I choked out, gasping for air.

Our eyes met at that, a knowing look passing between us. Dad wasn’t a witch— no, a *Spiritborn*, so he wasn’t feeling this... but we were. Whatever was happening to us, it wasn’t mundane.

Then the pain was back, smashing into me like a baseball bat, and my vision began to close in once again. Before I blacked out completely, I was just able to make out Mum toppling backwards into the cushions of the sofa. Fuck me, what *else* did this shitty night have in store for us?