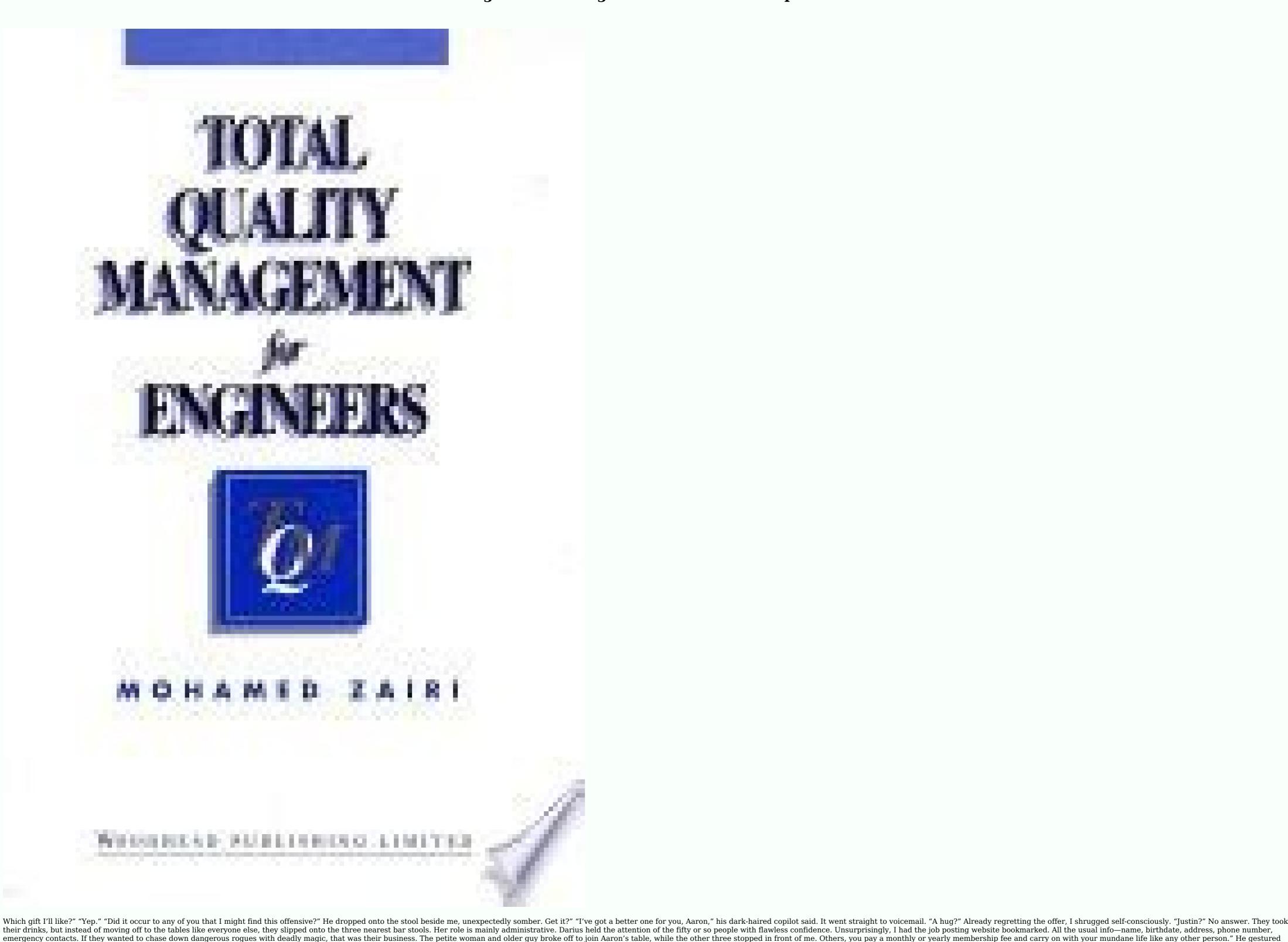
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widely, encompassing the city. Arcana spellcasters? I stomped over to him and wrapped my hand around the bottle's neck. "What are you doing here?" I snarled. When a man approached—built like a tank, shaved head, heavy brow that shadowed his dark eyes—I almost shrank behind the bar. Setting his laptop down, he slid onto a stool. Which is why, as ice-cold liquid gushed down my front, I whipped my dripping tray right into the woman's smirking face. "What happened next?" he prompted. My hazel eyes, identical to Justin's, looked dark as coal, but the dusty glass couldn't dull the vibrant red of my hair. "Ori repercutio!" The air rippled and a massive force struck the man. A logo at the top of the page displayed the letters MPD—the same acronym Darius had mentioned during the meeting last night. "Clara, you're up," Aaron proclaimed. I checked his contacts again, but Ezra's name wasn't there. Sabrina set the deck in front of me. If you want to sell it, let me know." "You want to buy it?" "I couldn't afford it, but I could find a buyer for you. I decided to spare him a bout of female insecurity. I glanced at Aaron, flanked by Kai and Ezra as they pored over their map. "I'm assigning you as Tori's chaperone while she's on the premises. Aaron met my eyes, grinned, and tossed his whiskey back. Sorcerers, alchemists, a few mages, and a load of telekinetics. "Honestly, Tori, I'm surprised you showed up today." "You are?" "I expected you to ghost us. I tried to spring onto my feet but ended up spasming in place, groaning as every muscle in my body violently protested. I'd been expecting another lame ginger joke. "Cheer up, Tori. Each guild member had a running tab and hardly anyone paid cash, which didn't bode well for my poor, empty tip jar. Beneath his photo, the same logo from Clara's paperwork stood out boldly, a ten-digit number beside it. I swiftly lined up shot glasses and poured, spilling in my rush. "I'll keep it quick. He pressed a hand to his cheek, his amusement gone and jaw clenched in fury. The atmosphere was more like a task force being briefed on a recent crime. "I'm relieved." Clara pulled out a paper and slid it to me, then handed me a pen. The restrictions on unguilded mythics are so harsh because it means someone has to monitor those people. Whoopsies. We returned to the front, and the atmosphere in the pub brought me to a halt just outside the saloon doors. "She returns!" Aaron straightened, his grin flashing. "You're supposed to mix them with ice first," the woman barked. Still, I had to fight back a grin. "Better?" I asked in a chipper tone. "I'd be happy to do a reading for you, dear. I stepped back from the window and squinted at the sky. The biggest difference between my first week and my second, however, was the atmosphere. His tousled dark hair, fair skin, and exotic features could sell anything. "One hundred percent human." "Then send her home." Standing beside my chair, Clara shifted her weight. "Tori, if Ezra arrives before me, have him wait outside until I get there." "What? I'll cover rent this month." "No." I pushed it back toward him. These guys are the guild officers to the guild officers to the guild officers." -kind of like shift supervisors. You got fired, didn't you?" I nodded. I pushed my loose curls, still damp from the shower, over my shoulders. "Depends on the circumstances. Just hang tight." He ended the phone. "So Aaron is babysitting you, and I'm babysitting Aaron until we figure out who's after him." Aaron gave a longsuffering sigh. From what I could tell, the spell reflected magical attacks, but not reliably. "I appreciate it." As though offended by my suggestion that he'd done something nice, Aaron repeated angrily. Lurching for balance, he grabbed my arm. The woman, maybe forty, was beautiful in a marble statue sort of way—flawless but without a hint of warmth. Are you suggesting what I think you are?" "They're a guild. "That sounded great, Sylvia. Back at the bar, Aaron and Kai had appeared, sitting on stools with their heads bent over a laptop. High-rise apartment buildings closed in on all sides, a few windows still alight. "You'll be out the door in a couple weeks once the paperwork goes through." "I can earn a paycheck while I apply for a new position. The elevator dinged open to reveal a quiet, carpeted hall. He'd lost consciousness. "I have a job to do." "We're your only customers." My glare snapped from Liam to Tom, who winced guiltily, then back to Liam. He held his shot out to me. Since Darius isn't here ..." Clara pursed her lips unhappily. "It isn't illegal for humans to work for guilds." "No, but there are a million regulations we can't meet." Clara shook her head. I was just laying out my freshly cut garnishes when he breezed in, a bounce in his step. If the restaurant had been guiet before, now it was silent enough to be a new dimension. She's interested in the bartender job, so I'm having her help out tonight." Ramsey's mouth twisted. In dry storage, I found the monster jar of candied cherries, carried the whole thing back to the bar, unscrewed the top, and pulled one out by the stem. Where is it?" I described my night, glossing over the weirder details because, I mean, how did I explain the motto chanting at the meeting? She marched past him and turned. "Is your hiring manager in today?" "Yeah," the girl replied in a bored drone. "Maybe it's magic." He rolled his eyes. And don't assault customers. The afternoon weather was hot and balmy, so I picked out bright red shorts almost the same shade as my hair, a tank top with a strappy back, and cute white sandals. I rested my head on his shoulder, my face turned away from his. "What is the result of a bet," He spread his arms grandly, taking in the whole building. Admit it." "You're doing a great job." Smiling, I patted his arm, surprised again by the warmth of his skin. So, how about you get the hell out?" "I ... have work to do, and—" "Get lost." "You—you can't tell me what—" Aaron smiled, his side pressing against mine. "Thanks," Ezra murmured, picking it up with oddly careful movements. What the hell? My feet are killing me." "Same." Her eyebrows knitted together. "Walk. As I lifted out a top, the clack of the bolt echoed down the hall. Everyone does a shot when a team makes a clean sweep on a job." "Every hammer takes a shot," someone corrected. He rolled his vibrant blue eyes. "Justin!" I tossed my laptop onto the sofa and ran down the hall. "Now!" He flicked his fingers open and the flames vanished. Not fun. "How did you even find out about this place? I scrunched my ponytail with one hand to revive the curls, but it was hopeless. Aaron and the mystery men were mythics. "I made a mistake last night. As I laid my résumé on top of her folders, noises echoed out of the back—loud clatters and frantic conversation between Clara and the man. "This is the Death card, but it doesn't mean you're going to die. "Are you having a bad day?" I shot back. We can't fix that, but we wanted to give you something that would bring you some comfort." Biting my lip, I looked again at the gifts. "Thank you for your hard work tonight." I waited for the inevitable "but I'm afraid I must ask you to leave." He stretched his arm out and scooped Clara out of thin air—or, more likely, snatched her in mid-sprint out of the kitchen. "Like I said," I announced, casually folding my arms. The vampire hunters left first—probably overheating in their leather gear—and others trickled out until it was just Aaron in conversation with Lyndon the sorcerer, Tom the shy psychic reading in the corner, the two girls who'd chitchatted with Aaron earlier, and a handful of others whose names I didn't know. "Humans aren't allowed to own artifacts. No giving up. Not that I'd studied up for her—just so I didn't know artifacts. No giving up. Not that I'd studied up for her—just so I didn't know artifacts. No giving up. Not that I'd studied up for her—just so I didn't look stupid again. "Well?" the bottle-blond demanded. In the hallway, Ezra leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets and head tilted back. So I just need to point this card at an incoming magical attack and speak the incantation, and it'll reflect it no matter what?" "It'll reflect incoming magic up to a point. I gripped his arm. And the others had been sorcerers—their incantations were a big giveaway. Stop by and visit, 'kay?" "Will do," I lied. "What's the difference between a ginger and a brick?" Aaron twisted his mouth suspiciously. "I'll help you, then." Page 17 "Set foot behind the bar and I'll write you up for insubordination, Sinclair. And the way he was smirking at me—he knew it. Did she say the general manager was impressed? And my landlord. I'm just a boring aeromage." "What's that?" He waved his hand vaguely and a puff of wind spun around me, whipping my ponytail into my face. I stomped to the ice machine and filled my bucket, barely acknowledging Ramsey slaving over the grill, the deep fryer sizzling. "Three blocks now." He grumbled. "I can, and I am." Liam opened his mouth, then closed it. They can't stand C&H's reputation." He laced his hands behind his head as he walked. I'm just a ... liability." Tabitha's word. "Um." I shifted awkwardly. Gasping through my phone out—but could I call the police? Elbows." I glanced down, bemused to see my knees were mincemeat too. I stared at her. Popping out for a second to grab it wasn't a big deal was it? "Slacker." "Does he have a girlfriend?" I asked curiously, trying to imagine what sort of girl Kai would go for. His mismatched eyes, one warm brown and one white, met mine. Clara checked on me each night around six or seven, praising my efforts and gushing about how much work she was getting done, before heading home for the night "Flowers? Ever heard of Smoke & Mirrors?" "Yeah, isn't that the company that does practical effects for all the big movies—wait. "Sure, I'd love to." Clara deflated with relief. "It'll just take a minute." I could feel Justin's eyes on me as I padded down the hall. Is that an alchemic potion?" I shot a glare at Sin. It can easy be downloaded in multiple versions, and can be listened to on a computer, smartphone or tablet. And if I answered questions too modestly, he wouldn't be here. "Could you hurry up?" an older woman snapped at me. "He had too much to drink." Her bug-eyed stare shifted from him to me. "Are you a natural redhead?" "Are you a natural pain in the ass?" I shot back without thinking. "Hang on, Aaron," I whispered, rubbing his shoulder. Ramsey looked up from the counter where he was slicing tomatoes. Ezra, help me carry him." I got out of the way as Kai and Ezra lifted Aaron between them and carried him out. I turned away, making a face at the cringyness, and hurried for the door. The second gift was a box of chocolate and a bottle of wine, tied together with a red ribbon. "What does that mean?" I smirked at him, just to be annoying, then said to Lyndon, "I admit I've been picturing sorcerers as old men with beards to their waists and giant spell books." He chuckled as I set his drink down Surprised by my tone, the redhead glanced at his pal—a dark-haired looker with an exotic cast to his features. He glanced into the spotless kitchen—my small contribution to the household that I held to like a Lysol-worshipping nun—then threw me a grin. Admitting he needed help only shows how powerful and capable his opponents were. This couldn't be happening. "Following us?" "I noticed them after we left Water Street," Aaron muttered. Otherwise, MagiPol would need to be as large as any government." A system built entirely on the guild structure, hidden in plain sight—part of human society while also separate. Looks like you got good tips." "Really good tips." "I poured hot water over the teabag and slid the mug to him. "Whatchya working on?" Aaron leaned back. "There's no MID number." "Is it a fake ID?" Aaron asked with amusement. "I'll call Katherine tomorrow and have her come in to figure it out." "Figure out what?" I asked tiredly as I pulled out my cell phone. Spellcasting is the most tedious magic you can imagine. An old man leered at my boobs and asked if I could add something special to his drink, so I poured an ounce of bourbon and filled the rest of the highball glass with grenadine syrup. "When we get close, run to your door and get inside. Fumbling for the end table, I snatched Aaron's phone and swiped the call button to answer. "The allowances for hiring non-mythics exist for guilds with public-facing businesses," Tabitha continued, "which does not apply to us. "But it can be very powerful." "The other common one is Psychica." Aaron wrinkled his nose derisively. Most mythics would be delighted to take it off your hands whether you wanted to give it up or not." Well, didn't that sound awesome As I sat, Kai picked up Ezra's glass and put it on his other side. As I made their drinks, I wondered what sort of mythics they were. "You can come back to our place if you want." The overwhelming urge to take the helmet and jump on the motorcycle with Kai swept through me. I dropped my purse, grabbed my umbrella, and charged out from behind the dumpster. "The coolest and most powerful class is Elementaria," Aaron told me smugly. Setting his strange burden on the counter with a thud, Aaron muttered, "I'll be right back." He strode the length of the pub. It was just like film special effects, except for real. You know, like Interpol, except for magic shit instead of criminals. He thought I was a what? I wasn't the only one who'd worked my butt off. It's the card of transformation—of endings and beginnings." Yeah, not particularly comforting. The pub was quiet except for Darius's clear voice. Not four. "Aaron is a pyromage. Had to be drugs. "It'm leaving right now. "It'll be a big payday this month." "Wow," I said faintly. He stood in the middle of the alley, illuminated by the flames dancing across his upraised palm. "I need another drink." I angrily wiped up spilled grenadine. "Yeah, well, most places do fire you for throwing drinks on customers or punching creeps in the face." "That's shitty." His grin returned. "I'm waiting to order." I shifted away from the guys and hastily entered all the drinks I remembered making, then faced the woman. Whimpering, I grabbed a fat roll of gauze and wound half of it around his arm. "You guys planning to explain what you're all going on about?" "No," Clara said. Clutching a stack of folders so thick they threatened to disgorge paperwork, the woman looked around wildly before spotting me. Unless they're living under a rock, no restaurant manager in downtown will hire you." I wilted. "The Crow and Hammer has been collecting misfits for decades—mythics who need a second chance. Yeah, I could have gotten water but I wanted the coke, damn it. Grabbing a bottle of rum to restock my station, I returned to the bar to find the liquor well empty—and over twenty bottles lined up in front of Liam. Any night Tabitha was on duty promised to suck. Feeling hopeful, I stuffed the paper into my purse, tucked my folder under one arm, and strode east. Who'd want to work here anyway? I dumped the ice into the well and faced them. Locked. And through it all, Aaron was there with either Kai or Ezra, keeping me company and backing me up when someone was an asshole. The man beside Ice Guy stuck his hand into the back of his coat—but the weapon he withdrew wasn't a dagger or a spell or even a playing card. The door wasn't locked, so that meant they were open, right? "Where are you going?" "Somewhere else. Fire rippled out from the steam cloud, and as Aaron reappeared, two men attacked him from behind. "Hi, my name is Tori Dawson. I'd be quick. A long slice down his forearm leaked blood, and scary white patches on his skin warned of frostbite from Ice Guy's power. "I'm Sabrina, by the way." "Tori. The good stuff." I halted my reach for the whiskey in my well as he pointed imperiously at a bottle on the shelf behind me. It was getting better. Working hard isn't his forte." I nodded absently as I frowned at the sheet. Red hair, black hair, and brown curls were bent over a spread of paper. "Where'd you learn to punch like a pro?" "I took a few years of taekwondo in high school." Justin had dragged me with him while he was training for the police academy, but I hadn't kept up with it. "But you caught the guy, didn't you?" "I did, but I couldn't complete the arrest. Too bad Ezra was a tough negotiator. I lifted my chin. "Clara!" someone shouted from the back. "This doesn't have an MID number." I leaned back, confused by her sudden agitation. Half the chairs were lying on their sides for crying out loud. I have six months of paperwork I can finally catch up on now that I don't have my phone." "You can't see anything," I mumbled, burrowing into my pillow. Times fifty people. Bored Tori got herself into a lot more trouble than Busy Tori. They were more territorial than teenagers in a Wi-Fi hotspot. He swapped to the second card in his hand—an Ace of Hearts with a twisty rune in the center. For reasons I would never comprehend Justin liked a cup of tea after a bad day. "Welcome to the Crow and Hammer, Tori!" I was still shell-shocked when she dashed off. With a warning glare at Justin, I opened the door. Let them drag him off?" "You're one tough cookie, Tori." His expression grew oddly intense. Hundred. Fifty-fifty chance. Police are trained not to arrest anyone with the MPD logo on their IDs. Instead, they take down our info and submit it to MagiPol, and the Seven of Swords suggests ... deception. "First, shuffle the cards to imbue the with your energy." I eyed them warily. Again, I smiled, and again I got glared at until I assured them via the magic phrase that my repulsive presence in their precious pub was only temporary. The brightly lit windows were warm and inviting, and everything looked back to normal as a server stopped at a table to unload steaming plates for eagers. customers. I'd earned it. "Everything's a nail!" the mythics shouted in turn, the ebullient atmosphere bursting through the room again as everyone laughed and downed their shots. And if you don't feel up to your shift, let Clara know." "I'll be fine." Once he was safely in the elevator, I returned to my apartment and surveyed the assortment of gifts. Everyone in the pub crowded around the bar to partake in the shots. That didn't seem like something a weak mage could do just out of temper, but what did I know? "Best friends," Sin agreed, resting her chin on her hand. The redhead offered his hand in greeting, giving me a smooth smile. I wasn't sure he even saw me. "Do you like your new umbrella?" He unhooked the pink monstrosity and handed it to me. "This is guaranteed to work every time. Another benefit is that multiple versions of the Bible, like the King James version or the New International version, can be accessed simultaneously. The Audio Bible In addition to being available online in text form, the Bible is also available in audiobook. I looked from the glossy black sheath to the gleaming hilt, then back at him. Every single Assholes Anonymous member sat facing the wall where Darius stood with a few papers in his hands. Aaron was late again but I didn't give him too hard a time—he was clearly exhausted. I started to turn. Settling onto the sofa, I flipped it open and fired up my browser. "What if I'm going to say no?" "Then I'll wait until I can butter you up first." He canted his head. I jerked back, the heat blasting my exposed skin. "News travels fast. "Sinclair," Tabitha warned. Chapter Thirteen Beyond the unnecessary gifts the guys had lavished on me, my Saturday-night adventure produced an added bonus. Page 12 Getting up, I poured four rum and cokes, then carried them back to the table and set them out for the guys. He turned my arm over to check for more scrapes. "Unit of the guys. He turned my arm over to check for more scrapes and the three officers. "I need your real ID." "Uh." I blinked. The homepage was a login portal, waiting for a username and password. Awkward flirting had commenced. "We need a confirmed starting point first," Aaron replied. "For the freezer? "I didn't see it, but knowing Aaron, he had it coming. "Heard about your escapade over the weekend." "How does everyone know already?" I grumbled, stashing my purse and new hot-pink umbrella in the office. His cheek was scraped to hell from that dickwad stepping on him and pushing his face into the gravelly pavement. And Kai's and Ezra's too?" His initial smile faded at the mention of his friends. "Yeah, pretty much." "How do you even explain it from scratch?" Aaron took a gulp of his drink. "Why are you calling me so early?" "I know I said 'morning' but it's actually twelve thirty." I groaned and flipped onto my face, dislodging half my blankets off the sofa onto the floor. "Heard there's a new girl," the centermost guy said in a pleasantly deep voice, his blue eyes flashing with humor. Chapter Eleven With a quick rap on the door, Ezra pulled it open. "Just a few scrapes." "How did Tori get a black eye?" Shit, Justin was cross-examining the witness to see if I was fibbing. Clara, set her up in the back for a break, and I'll serve the last few drinks here." "Yes, sir." Clara grabbed my arm, and the next thing I knew, she'd steered me into the kitchen. "That should be enough," Sabrina told me. When she saw me, she jerked to a stop, brow furrowing in confusion. At least there were no demons among them. "What a night. That's complicated." Lucky for me, Liam the telekinetic weasel was the worst part of my day. Hmm." "No, I mean, your real ID." "No, I mean, your real ID." "No, your MID!" She waved my license in emphasis. I'm looking forward to hearing you insult Sylvia again." "Are you looking forward to another margarita facial?" I retorted. His mage friends weren't here to back him up. I really couldn't complain. "Are you looking forward to another margarita facial?" I retorted. His mage friends weren't here to back him up. I really couldn't complain. "Aron. don't—" He extended his hand toward me, palm turned up. "What was the problem again, ma'am?" "My—my meal has no chicken!" I tsked playfully, like we were all in on the joke, and winked at the other woman. Clara had me finish the new-hire paperwork, then vanished into the kitchen to supervise the freezer repairs, leaving me to man the bar—along with my new chaperone. The fire, the magic. Crap, it was. I wasn't scared yet, but as I hurried past a heavyduty chain-link fence with barbed wire on top, I started to doubt myself. This is what surrounds you. "Then I hope you'll make an intelligent decision, Tori." I like to think I'm not susceptible to intimidation, but I'll admit my heartbeat stuttered just a little. I'd lost my job, but I'd have another one within a week even if I had to sell my soul to get it. The third occupant of the room, a blond guy with a wiry frame and large glasses that I recognized from last night—I'd identified him as a tech refugee—walked around his desk. It's not like we've been welcoming." Guilt flickered across her features. Maybe I should take notes, She—" "Clara," Ramsey the cook hollered from the kitchen, I watched him walk away, admiring the view. Teeth bared, he raised his switchblade again. With margarita splashed over his scarred face, he laughed so hard he wobbled on his stool. Specific books of the Bible, like Psalms, can also be downloaded individually to save space on your device. Bible StudyThe online versions of the Bible also are available with additional text attached that explains or interprets passages. "Sorry I didn't hold it together so well there." "It's fine. "So how did you land this job?" "Kind of by accident," I replied evasively. Ice Guy slashed his dagger at me. His sunglasses flew off the floor and zoomed to his hand as he disappeared outside. More friendly greetings. "A lesson learned, my young Padawan?" The unexpected voice was so close that I jumped half a foot in the air. Ice, I realized. "Tackled a guy, but I fell the wrong way and ended up in a ditch. "I don't have a license. All of a sudden I'd noticed I was pressed against a well-muscled chest, his broad shoulders under my hands, his warmth soaking into me, and dear god he smelled mouthwatering. Lyndon meant one on one, but a single Arcaner against me, Kai, and Ezra? I mulled it over as we strolled into the nest of skyscrapers that marked the center of the downtown area. "Where'd you go? "Ramsey!" she called. Crazy." His eyes brightened. Just what had I gotten myself into? I'm betting an alchie." My hand stuttered over the screen. Jeez. Just as I was considering whether my soda gun line was long enough to spray down the asshole, Aaron strode through to spray down the front door, carrying a black zippered case over three feet long in one hand. No one would be stupid enough to waltz into guild headquarters." "True." Kai pulled the laptop closer. As he toppled, something small fluttered from his hand. Four to twelve worked perfectly with my college schedule. "What happened to you?" I blinked in confusion as his hands, hot compared to the chilly air in the apartment, gently took my wrist and lifted my arm. As I stepped away from the wall, the cool sea breeze gusted down the street, carrying a swirl of dust, leaves, and litter. I was ready for another shift from hell. I didn't normally deliver food, letting patrons wait at the bar for their meal, but the girl who'd ordered was sitting at a table with cards spread across the surface in a strange pattern. "Yeah." He gave me a faint smile. At eleven thirty, Ramsey stuck his head out to let me know Cooper had left and he was heading out now too. I'd thought weeknights were slow, but now I suspected members had been avoiding the pub. "All artifact incantations begin with 'ori,' which awakens the spell. "Ah shit," he said breathlessly as he hurried up to the bar. "Aaron is a regular. Three girls in their early twenties, all very different blonds. Liam's friend was watching me hopefully so I offered him my hand. A player? "Aren't you supposed to wear white bras with white shirts?" "Are you a fashion expert now?" I didn't admit he was right, or explain that my white-shirt-friendly undergarments were in the laundry. The other two men attacked Aaron from behind with small items like my new playing card, shouting incantations. What was the job?" "Exterminating a vampire nest." She said it the same way I might remark on squishing a spider in the bathroom. Instead, it popped like a toy gun—and something bright flashed toward us. Pivoting on my heel, I marched to my station and started replacing bottles—only for them to float away as soon as I set them down. The phone rang, rang, rang, rang, rang, rang, then clicked to voicemail. I did a rapid count and added another six glasses. "I told you my meal arrived without any chicken. His ability to navigate dangerous situations inspired minimal confidence, but Kai oozed competence and I had yet to see Ezra appear anything less than utterly unfazed. I was feeling good. Laughter, jokes, lots of banter. Groaning, I massaged my temples. "If Elementaria is the best class, why is it last?" "Because ESPAD sounds dumb." "How do you keep all this hidden?" I asked. "How far is your apartment?" Aaron asked tersely. Whispers erupted at every table as I counted in my head. We hobbled out of the alley and across the street. Someone who was busy, apparently. Upsetting parents—I was good at that. Oops. And again. I popped onto the Wikipedia page about magic conspiracy theories and read through all the sections. This personal login not only allows you to save your progress while reading and highlighting specific passages, but also enables you to view video and audio linked to the verses you are reading. What if someone overheard me talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom?" "They'd probably think you were talking about my Fiery Deathbringer or Warblade of Murderous Doom." "They were talking about a warblade of Murderous Doom." "They were talking about a warblade of Murderous Doom." "They were talking about a warblade of Murderous Doom." "They were talking about a warblade of Murd the same. I scrambled to make their drinks, fumbling liquor bottles and forgetting garnishes. "Whatever you're picturing, a real demon is far more terrifying." I may have paled. Burger and fries finished—simple but delicious—I ventured to the walk-in and grabbed an old-fashioned bottle of coke. My gaze snapped to the doorway, searching for Ice Guy, but there was no one in sight. It'll clean the stain off your sofa too." As I took the vials, my expression must have been more suspicious than grateful, because she winced. Ignoring her, I strode into the back to get cleaning supplies. "Isn't he an air mage? My nerves were long gone, replaced by anger. The quiet was almost deafening as I wiped tables and tucked in chairs. Impulsive and temperamental, but not stupid. She doesn't know anything. He deserved a good punch in the face." That wasn't guite a "No, you're not fired." Maybe sensing my doubt, he asked, "Do you know the first rule of the guild?" I shook my head. We'd made a pointless one-block circle that no one in their right mind would walk unless they were lost. "So, what, this happens all the time?" "More so when he was living at home." Kai glanced at Ezra. "That must have been because of the cold." "Kai, can you help me with this?" Sin asked, gauze in her hand. I heaved Aaron inside and he slumped against the wall, groaning. "I didn't check her ID yesterday." Aaron slid my driver's license off the bar top and read it. Tax law for small businesses wasn't quite as riveting as it had been on Friday—not compared to the hidden world of magic I'd discovered over the top of his stupid round sunglasses—then his gaze dropped below my eye level. "Hey, new girl," Aaron called as I rocketed past him with a bottle of champagne for a mimosa. "Without cleansing her deck, Sabrina's reading will be tainted with the energies of her previous reading. Scowling, I headed for the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub. It zoomed down the bar and settled beside the other bottles. Here, I'll show you." He stepped into the office, grabbed a sticky note and a pen, and drew a strange symbol on the paper. With a sly smile, Aaron pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, slid his driver's license out, and handed it to me. The three guys were a few years older than me, tall, fit, and handsome. On the last occasion when Darren had deliberately spilled a freshly made Long Island Iced Tea across the bar, I'd spun around in the middle of pouring a drink and sprayed him in the face with my soda gun. Then again, I wasn't sure I was okay with any of this. Blanchard—" "I need to help settle things down in the dining area." She stepped around me. "The Seven of Swords. "I didn't realize they had attacked you too," he muttered. "Telekinetic means ... moving things with your mind?" He flashed a smile. More members smiled and made small talk. "They're after me, not you. I'd been standing on his left when he came in, and he was blind in that eye. Clara, I don't have a clue what you're talking about." Panic flashed in her eyes. "Let me see what we've got." As she knelt beside Aaron, Kai's dark eyes flashed over me from head to toe, and his all-business attitude faltered. I waited to see if she was really gone this time, then glanced at the three guys. I did not want to get caught in an alleyway with several weapons, three unconscious men, a poisoned pyromage, and a lot of fire damage. "Ezra, I'll trade you. "Put that over your eye." He passed it to me, then ripped open an alcohol swab. Grabbing my keys, I hurried after them, and Sin followed. Stop making them hate me! To my shock, Andrew, the team leader, gave me a smile. I passed them off, then added the two drinks into the system. The air rippled like a shock wave and when Aaron's fiery attack hit it, the blaze snapped in the opposite direction. And doing a reading here, in all this noise and activity? "Saturday night," I muttered. The three of us jammed into the cramped entryway. "I need emergency contacts." "I know." He took my phone and entered the three numbers. Did they really think I'd never seen this scam before? "Get off your feet and relax," she told me. "Would you ... like a hug?" His gaze flashed to me. "Still sleeping on his couch." He chuckled knowingly. "Oh, and you forgot your MID number." I dug my wallet out of my purse and passed her my driver's license. But I almost didn't notice, too distracted by the white scar that ran down his face from his left temple to the hollow of his cheek, cutting across his eye. Dealing with mythics comes with risks, especially when you don't have magic to defend yourself, and the Crow and Hammer isn't a safe, easy guild. "I can see you're busy and I won't keep you. The evening wound down over the next hour. "Do you need anything?" "I'm fine, Justin. The more I rushed, the more mistakes I made and my frustration kept climbing. All the dye was gone except for what was liberally splattered over me. Specific lines of text can also be electronically highlighted, which means you can save them in a separate file for reading later. Page 7 "Dunno, boss." Aaron's familiar voice rang out, and I spotted the three guys at a table with a blue-haired girl. Her mouth hung open, eyes bugged out, coke and beer and a hint of iced tea speckling her cheek. When had it gone so dim? Why were they making my night worse? The yellow cotton had turned purple. You know the kitchen area is staff only." Tabitha smiled coolly at Blue-hair and her friend. I tipped my head, dumping the liquid into my mouth. "What happened? The last few members made their way out, no one speaking. "Aaron has located multiple women who were willing to tolerate him for four whole months?" Ramsey laughed. What should I do? See you two later." Page 15 As I committed Lyndon's information about Arcana magic to memory, I entered his drink in the till. Conveniently, I didn't need to lock up. "I'll have a margarita—the slushy kind. What made you choose the Crow and Hammer?" "Honestly? "I'm glad you're okay." "Me too." His hand closed around mine, the caramel-filled goodie between my fingertips. Where the fiery aura around Aaron met the dense cold around Ice Guy, the air sizzled and steamed. "Among mythics, Aaron's family is famous," Sin said, latching her case. "She did very well yesterday, and I'm desperate to fill the bartender position so I can focus on my work again. That sounded ominous. That wasn't any less rude than the last thing I'd said. "I don't know, Tori. You lied about your meal, then you assaulted me. "Tiring," he admitted. "I snatched it from a sorcerer. I wasn't actually going to roast him." "Just—just shut up for once in your life, Aaron!" Clara pressed her hands to her head like she was trying to squeeze her brain. He crouched in front of me, pulled out a chemical ice pack, and gave it a hard smack to trigger the cold reaction. Made sense he'd go for the traditional woman-charming gift. There weren't many pluses here. Ditching my apron, I washed my hands, arms, face, and legs. The question was whether I wanted to work there. Humans have no place in or around the Crow and Hammer." "If Tori can fulfill the role," Felix mused, "perhaps we should consider it. Like yesterday, I had the overwhelming urge to

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run in the opposite direction. I got more congratulations—according to mythics, a black eye was cause for celebration?—but what surprised me most was that Aaron didn't downplay how dire the situation had been. Busy was good. Unless you want to be unguilded, but that's like being on parole—a million restrictions, mandatory check-ins, random
inspections." "That sucks." I scrunched my face. If you can work a shift, I'll pay you in cash at the end of the night—same wage as my last bartender." I brightened. When I was all band-aided, he set the kit on the counter. "And you?" I asked the other girl. I looked at her tablemate's meal. "Let me guess. With trembling hands, I opened his most recent
apps, found his messenger, and pulled it up. "That doesn't sound practical." "It isn't, which is why combat sorcerers rely on specific tools, the most common being hexes and artifacts. She stroked the top card, her eyes losing focus. "Plus, I'm planning to ask you out, so I don't want that messed up." My heart gave a small flutter and I sternly told it to
quit that bullshit. "I'm walking you home." I measured his uncompromising expression, then surrendered. Sin is taking care of him." "Yeah, I heard you three talking." He stared at the wall across from us. Recovering fast, I whipped out three rocks glasses, scooped ice into them, splashed in some rum, and topped them with coke. But what if it was an
illegal organization hiding behind a pub front? "As for Ezra ... he makes good use of the magic he has, but he isn't in Aaron and Kai's league. "Put that plate back!" the first woman barked. "She said I should give you a thank-you gift for saving my ass—" "I don't need a gift—" "—but me, Kai, and Ezra disagreed on what to give you." He nudged the bag
toward me. As I walked to the pub door, Aaron at my side, I dialed the cab company. Blanchard, I can explain—" "Did you hit a customer?" "She pushed me first." Blanchard nudged her wire-rimmed glasses up and pinched the bridge of her nose. Aaron didn't notice my doubtful expression as he focused on his laptop, strong fingers zipping over the
keyboard. "Or are you always a hag?" Aaron choked on his drink. Don't hit first, but always hit back. As Kai knelt beside her, I crossed the apartment and slipped out the open door. Aaron's attackers were on the loose, their identities unknown. I glanced at them as Aaron snapped, "What's wrong with that?" "Tori." Clara's panicked tone drew my
attention back to her as Kai and Aaron continued to argue. Chapter Two Unlocking the apartment door, I poked my head inside. "Are you human?" Why did they all say "human" like it was a contagious disease? The rum was pulled from my grip as if by an invisible string. I just wanted to make sure you're okay." "I'm fine." I squinted my eyes open,
blinded by the sunlight. "Damn it, new girl. "Psychica. Sylvia, the older woman I'd called a hag during my first shift, was a close second, though." "What's bad?" He pushed back from the table and strode over, Kai and Ezra on his heels. Or he'd think I was on drugs. Huh. "A reflector spell?" He whistled. "I don't know
where he finds them, but he goes out with a new lady every damn week." No way. "Our orders are to bring you in alive, but they said nothing about unharmed." The flames on Aaron's palm flared, gleaming across the switchblade in his other hand. I haven't had a good night's rest all week." I finished straightening my garnishes. When we took off, the
police were coming this way." Even out of sight in an alley, we'd caused more than enough commotion to draw attention from the surrounding condo buildings. The petite blonde clapped me on the shoulder again. With a mental shrug, I started filling it out. I needed a fresh start and my brother lives here." "Find your own place yet?" "No," I grumped
I was about to toss it away—I know, littering is bad—when I recognized the layout of the text. Filthy scam artist." As he talked, I filled the kettle and plugged it in. As far as the general populace is concerned, we don't need to check IDs. We only serve
members." Clara rubbed her hands together nervously, her eyebrows scrunching. Page 26 The jerk trio of vampire hunters, Cearra, Darren, and Cameron, had developed a real talent for insulting me whenever no one was listening, but I was coping. "Most sorcerers spend at least twelve years in training. As I swung the umbrella for strike number
three, someone caught it and wrenched it out of my hands. "It seems too fast though." "What about the attackers?" I asked. I ducked into the kitchen for more ice and found Ramsey perched on a stool, reading something on his phone with a hairnet covering his goth locks. Sabrina is a young diviner still learning her craft. "Think about it. "I don't want
it if it doesn't have an umbrella," Aaron declared. "I'm sorry, I don't have a position for you." "But you just said ..." The manager glanced distractedly into the café before focusing on me again. "Anything else I shouldn't ask him?" "Hmm ... maybe don't ask him out either." I blinked. It was the rest I didn't have much experience with. See you later."
"Wait." He pushed away from the wall. I had no idea how far in over my head I was. Once everyone has a few drinks, it'll settle down, but six to seven will be crazy." She halted halfway around the bar. Oh, you mean the card." I finished tying my apron, then pulled the Queen of Spades out of my pocket. Unfazed, Aaron grinned like I'd challenged him
to a duel—one he expected to win—but then the third guy turned to face the bar. "I did what anyone would've done." "No, you did what one in a million people would do." He offered his hand. And I really need it. She'll know how to get it out of your hair, I promise." I nodded, trying not to get my hopes up. "Why do you have Aaron's phone?" "He was
attacked walking me home," I said. "She doesn't know the Sinclair name. Page 16 The lack of friendliness continued, but I ignored it, offering smiles and bright greetings to everyone. Finally, I threw the last of the green paper towel into the overflowing garbage bin and straightened my aching back. "You can eat whatever you'd like while you're on
shift and non-alcoholic drinks are free. "Six years." He smiled as though recalling a fond memory. Her subtle ability to make me feel unwelcome and unappreciated was as impressive as it was disheartening. The only respectable thing about us is that when we take a job, we get it done. Aaron, he might have just galloped across a meadow on
horseback, lassoing wild cattle—or beautiful women. Let's hope the place was as law-abiding as Clara claimed, because if not ... ruining Justin's career on top of mine would just be the icing on this year's craptastic cake. "It seems like it'll be an interesting experience. "So no throwing cars around like in the movies. While you do, think about the
question you most want answered." I picked up the worn cards, still warm from Sabrina's hands. My confused elation twisted into a prickling sensation that crept down my spine. "Forget it. The ground was on fire and steam billowed, tinted orange by the inferno. You can pick up your last check on payday." "Mrs. If Justin had been home, I would've
called him and taken my chances, but he had a shift tonight. "I appreciate it." "No problem." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "How does Kai have the energy for a date?" "He's been getting his sleep while I've been here," Aaron grumped. "So ..." the blond guy murmured. "Good god, girl. Page 6 His buddy Kai could have walked right off
a luxury car ad—the guy behind the wheel, adjusting his sunglasses as he casually careened his sports car down a winding mountain road while the camera panned across his face. As half my vision disappeared, I felt a surge of sympathy for his impairment. "This one represents your self." She flipped it. A criminal gang ... with elderly members,
businesswomen, girls my age, hot guys, goth cooks, and bubbly AGMs who gave new employees welcoming hugs. It's safer that way." Aaron selected another chocolate. Why couldn't they move their sexy asses to a table? I opened his contacts and speed-scrolled past a zillion names to the Es—but Ezra's name wasn't there. "What about the cherry?" "I
don't have any cherries." "We always have cherries." I growled, then stomped back into the kitchen. Even knowing it was there, the scar cutting across his features threw me off, but I didn't hesitate when I met his mismatched eyes. "I picked her up on my way. "Unless they dragged their sorry asses out of there in time, they were either questioned by
the cops and released immediately, or they were arrested and released later." "How do you know they were released?" Aaron helped himself to a chocolate. Heat washed across my back, then Ice Guy threw me aside as Aaron charged in, fire rippling over his arms. He spun, fire spiraling out of his switchblade, and the other men launched flashes of
light from small objects I couldn't make out in the darkness. There are lots of guilds to choose from—over a dozen in the downtown core alone. "Did it seem like I was planning to?" "No, but Ezra doesn't date so he'd turn you down and things would get all awkward." He slanted a glance at me. The bourbon was easy, but I overdid the whiskey in the
second drink. I smiled welcomingly as they approached the bar, but they didn't respond in kind. I looked at her plate. Not that he wasn't handsome with his hazel eyes and close-cropped brown hair. I could count past occasions without using all my fingers. Aaron flicked his hand—hurling fire into the face of a man on his left—then launched toward these are not close-cropped brown hair. I could count past occasions without using all my fingers.
guy with the dagger. "Our existence isn't public knowledge, but it isn't the first time greedy fools have targeted him, though it's the closest anyone has come to succeeding." I looked from him to Sin to Ezra. The temperature
plummeted again, the air chilling like the dead of winter. "Ezra?" I whispered. In other words, stability. Let that job go and keep searching." He pulled the money into a single pile and slid it toward me. The guilds enforce their members' adherence to the rules, and MagiPol enforces the guilds' adherence. The yellow patio umbrellas resembled a
garden of monster-sized flowers, and servers in cute periwinkle blouses bustled among the tables. Any combination of the words mythic, guild, mage, arcana, and magic produced millions of hits—all books, games, movies, TV shows, and comic books. "That's robbery!" "Forget it then." "Sixty percent." "Eighty." "Sixty-five." "Eighty." "Goddamn it!"
Hmm, too bad. With enthusiasm," he added amusedly. Rain pattered the asphalt, making the muddy puddles dance. The six men had converged in the center of the alley, and I couldn't see Aaron's red hair among them. "Yeah, but it was an emergency." He noticed my confusion and smiled sheepishly, tapping the scar that
ran down his face. "The actual story is that he was running with a pair of scissors and—" "I hate that one," Ezra complained. I grabbed my cloth and started wiping, working my way toward the opposite end of the bar. If I'd realized how much had been in that wad of cash, I'd have been a lot nicer to Aaron. Putting my life on the line to protect a guild
member had triggered a major shift in attitude. I was learning who was always up for good-natured banter and who was never in a good mood. Washer loaded, I stripped off my work clothes and tossed them in, then started it up. Chapter Seven Tuesday. I picked C&H because it's the opposite of my parents' guild. The evening flew by and I was busy
for all of it. "You all saw that, right?" At my thirsty table, a middle-aged couple gave small, hesitant nods and one guy grinned, shooting me a thumbs-up. I tried not to imagine the look on chicken lady's face when she learned the crazy server had been canned. "Plus, a new job market was helpful. At least they were leaving me alone. I decided to shift
the topic away from his potentially sensitive history. "Enjoy!" To my irritation, Liam and Tom slid onto stools and nursed their drinks like old ladies with hot tea. Like I said, I collect this kind of stuff, so I know people." "What's it worth?" "I bet you could get twenty-five, maybe thirty for it." I pulled a face. "They're extremely wealthy." "And Aaron is
the sole heir to that fortune," Kai finished. You don't have to leave." I paused, waiting skeptically. I'm way better with women than you." Rolling my eyes, I poured Aaron another drink and slid it over. Three ... mages. "I'll add your MID number while you ..." I looked up. It bothered me that I needed a chaperone at all, but I wasn't an idiot. Red soaked
through it almost instantly and I whimpered again, sternly telling myself that he wouldn't bleed to death from the shallow cut. "Will it be a problem if I'm, er, extra firm with difficult people when—" "Oh, not at all," Clara said happily as though my question had been a hearty, "Ay, I'll take the job!" She dug into her pocket and pulled out a folded stack
of bills. "Aaron?" Ezra asked, alertness sharpening his tone. "Like what?" "Say that again," Aaron shouted furiously, "and I'll toast your pale ass to a healthy crisp!" His hand shot into the air—and fire burst from his fingers. Did that count as unusual? "That's okay, go ahead." "It's tradition. After digging my tips out of my apron—a measly twenty-two
bucks since I'd only been an hour into my shift—I handed the drenched fabric to Neil. There was always at least one officer at the guild headquarters, so they never locked the doors. "Victoria Dawson? Chin held high, I lengthened my stride, my strappy but comfortable sandals slapping against the sidewalk. "Ori repercutio!" Nothing happened. "I like
all three." "No, you have to pick one." "Nope. A line near the top asked for a "MID Number" but I skipped it. Useless." "It's fine," Sabrina snapped. I put it out of my mind. Increasing my pace, I strode toward the next intersection. My black eye, not so much. It's not fair." Rant over, she primly sipped her drink. "Six against one was completely unfair.
She swabbed Aaron's yellow-stained arm and dropped the cotton into a clean vial. Sin told the sorcerers, who told everyone else." "Sin?" I repeated warily. "Okay, okay, quit it." I grabbed Justin's shoulder and steered him down the hall ahead of me. Would its previous owner miss it? As in demons?" Kai and Aaron
nodded. Everyone gawked, then someone erupted in laughter—Aaron's other friend. But no sooner did I set up the bar than two guys came trotting down the stairs and made a beeline for me. By the time I took their orders, made their drinks, rang them up, and called the order back to Ramsey, another group had wandered in through the main
entrance. "Who are you?" she blurted. My hackles rose. And we can discuss your membership application then, if that's something you're interested in." She beamed and pulled me into an unexpected hug. Somehow, I wasn't surprised. Who needs pride? "Anyway, sorry to derail. I didn't have his number, and without Aaron, I couldn't unlock the
phone. Anyone who's known me for more than an hour has an inkling of my temper. "New girl," he called the moment I had a free second to breathe. Explained like that, my annoyance melted away. They didn't care about Tabitha's other arguments, but the question of my safety had stopped them cold. The rental market is insane." "That's an
understatement." "Why did you need a fresh start?" His tone was curious but not insistent, and I considered whether to answer. "Don't choke on the ice." Bitch. I didn't want to admit it, but walking alone would've been stupid. You can't help." His arm heated under my hand. "It's hard to talk while you're rushing all over the place." Gritting my teeth, I didn't want to admit it, but walking alone would've been stupid.
stalked over and snatched up an armful of bottles. "Don't forget it again." "It would give me an excuse to come back." "And risk another staring contest with my brother? "It's 'Don't hit first, but always hit back.'" "Oh. That." I frowned. All that drool-worthy sex appeal wasted on jackasses—well, maybe not the scarred guy. "We gingers have it rough.
huh?" He laughed and raised his drink. He steered me toward the staircase in the corner, Kai and Ezra following. "Aaron can sleep off the potion at home. Wincing, I ducked through the doors into the back. It would give Clara a break." "What about the fines?" Felix thought for a second. I could feel a hundred eyes on me as, my blouse and apron
dripping, I reached over the woman and picked up the two Alfredo plates, stacking them on my empty tray. "Looks like a basic sleeping tincture—a powerful one. Pulling out my phone, I checked the map again, then rounded the corner, walked twenty yards up the street, and stopped. Such a weird group of people. Guess you wouldn't know." He
pushed his laptop aside and drew the case closer. "Can I get you guys drinks?" They both placed their orders and I whipped up their drinks while Liam chatted about telekinesis—waxing technical about how his ability required intensive training to develop control, enhance strength, and stretch limitations. Get some sleep." "You should quit that job
before you get hurt again." I shouldn't have told him I'd been injured in a bar fight at work, but it was the first lie that had popped into my mind. Those guys are trouble." The saloon doors flew outward. He swung the black pistol up, and before I could move, he pulled the trigger. Aaron laughed. Reluctantly returning to my stool, I hissed, "You
couldn't have just stayed in the hall, could you?" "As aron grinned, unrepentant. "Is Aaron breathing?" "Yes." "Is he bleeding?" "At my apartment." I rattled off the address. I could do this. Either I ventured out of downtown, which would require an expensive transit pass and long commutes, or I applied for a starter position in
something completely new. Again, I was reluctantly relieved that Aaron was nearby, though he may have riled up Sylvia even more than I had. At least he didn't snore. Dollars. "I can't wait to see you hit someone with it." I set it aside and gave him a hard stare. It got boring in about ten seconds. "The bastard is a slippery one. What kind of question
was that after the way I'd behaved? "Jeez, don't get your panties in a twist. "Are you sure you want this job?" Aaron asked plaintively. "I think we define 'valuable' differently." "You don't think thirty thousand dollars is valuable?" "Eh? Probably. Okay." He pulled me along with him, head tilted to keep our pursuers in view. I was many things, but
 "quiet" was not one of them, and every bank I'd ever set foot in had been silent as a cemetery at midnight. We train with weapons. "Try talking, I mean I might as well wear a flashing sign that reads, "Firecracker Redhead, Beware." Or, if you're my
ex-boyfriend, it reads, "Don't Stick It in Crazy Gingers." I try my best, okay? Darius was impressed too." I could have used help more than once, but Clara had been almost as slammed and—wait. I don't think hospitality is for you." "What are you talking about?" She shrugged. Piled in front of the window were four battered cardboard boxes that
contained all my worldly possessions. A long minute passed, then someone knocked. "Are you?" Clearly, someone had spilled the beans. "Not cool, new gir—" "Not cool, new gir—" "Not cool, new gir—" "Not cool, new gir—" "Not cool?" I shouted, slamming my hands down on the bar top. "You cool in the bar top." "I make the dumpster. What happened?" "I'm fine," he assured me.
"She's human." The three guys stared at me, and I stared back without the slightest idea what the hell anyone was talking about. "Hello?" A muffled voice answered from somewhere beyond the saloon doors. "What are you implying?" Her voice rose, cutting through the cheerful babble of the busy café. "Please. If there's a crazy customer within ten
miles, they always end up in your section." "Maybe I bring out the crazy in people." I flopped onto the sofa. Ice Guy was gone, as were his companions. "That's fine," I assured him. Work hard. "Yeah." "Do you have their numbers? A couple years younger than me by my best guess. The third guy was trickier. "Clara is the assistant guild master. A bank
of computer desks ran along one wall, and whiteboards, cork boards, and a floor-to-ceiling map of the city covered the other walls. "You realize you're a ginger too, right? I'll be there in ten minutes, okay? Didn't Darius see me throw a drink on those guys?" Clara laughed. "I'm sorry, Justin," I said more seriously. Was he planning to merely ask me on
a date, or did he have something more in mind? It was none other than Blue-hair, the girl who'd "accidentally" spilled green dye all over my bar. We walked in companionable silence for another two blocks, and my nerves jumped in anticipation. She's a human with no concept of guild loyalty." Girard stroked his beard. That goal was the reason I was
sitting in this classroom. Guild master. "Can I get your number? The red-hot flames sloughed off Aaron's body, his clothes singed but his skin unharmed. Your top is on backward, by the way." I looked down. How was that supposed to make me worry less? Alone. I shot a quick text to Justin letting him know I'd be home late, then got to work. Gastown
was the oldest neighborhood in the city, a popular tourist destination full of cafés and restaurants. I'm not leading them to your apartment." "I won't leave you to—" "They're mythics, Tori. An ancient Chinese couple was talking to a petite woman with a short bob that screamed attitude, her platinum hair streaked with pale pink. He, Aaron, and Kai
clustered together to read it. I bit my lip as he scrubbed the dirt from my scraped knee with a lot more confidence than my attempted ministering of Aaron's injuries. "Congrats," I said, though I had no idea what for. "Hello?" "I'm here," Ezra said. At least I wasn't losing any tips. Once her shock wore off, she would start howling. Still." He
straightened. He left for the MPD conference this morning, which you'd listened during the meeting last night." Aaron grimaced over his shoulder. Chapter Eight To my disappointment, Kai and Ezra didn't make an appearance on Wednesday. The bright colors and busy sidewalks of Gastown transformed into the barred windows and
boarded-up doors of the Downtown Eastside, and within a few blocks, I was turning down a nondescript street. Aaron didn't wait for her protest. I called again. Like, 'sell me your soul,' devil-with-pointy-horns demons?" "Not quite like that, but ..." Kai pressed his lips together. I hated the uncertainty of imminent termination hanging over my head
"Hey, um, before I go, could I ... see the fire thing again?" Surprise flickered across his face, then he grinned. Hovering her hands over the tarot spread, Sabrina sat quietly, her vacant stare moving from card to card. "No Demonica mythics at all." "That's good," I said faintly. So someone was here. A flat-screen TV mounted in the corner had a
scrolling list of text. He dragged me down, hitting the pavement on his knees, and both his arms clamped across the tables, "Ezra." He offered his hand over the bar and I shook it. "Secrets. "You called me a pig! Where is your manager?" "Um." I glanced across the tables,
the dinner rush halted by the spectacle. I could hear laughter from other levels, and I got to watch the smiles fade off mythics' faces when they approached the bar. "Whiskey shots. I hadn't seen Justin yet and I had no idea what to tell him. Probably a not-for-human-ears topic. "Kai will figure it out. Tabitha, the second officer. "Please use the back
door on your way out." Page 2 As she walked away, my shoulders slumped. Gripping it tightly, I got in his face. I blinked. I might be a useless, magic-less human, but I wasn't abandoning him to an unfair fight. Good enough. "What about you, Tori?" Aaron asked after a few minutes. "There you go. "He would have spilled it all over our stuff." Kai
gestured at the map spread over the table, then added, "He's blind in that eye." "He ... oh." As I tried not to stare at the scar cutting down his face over his strangely pale eye, Ezra smiled ruefully. Four? For some, a minute or two. We can do up your paperwork so you'll be ready to go at four. My head was spinning and I really wanted to sit down.
Ezra's hands tightened painfully around my wrist, then gentled again. "A manager will—" "Out of my way!" Her fat hand shot out and shoved my drink tray. Aaron will kill me if I smash up his baby." She took the keys. "I don't care about the damn bonus. "You spend a lot of time with Aaron and Kai, right?" "At work," I confirmed. Another table held a
prim businesswoman with designer sunglasses perched on her head. No one on the planet was as invested in saving my butt as I was, and I didn't like counting on someone else to be there when I needed them only to find myself alone. The third level, where I'd met the guild officers, was off-limits for most members—the territory of the guild master,
assistant guild master, and officers. He was in control. Squinted. I took his hand, surprised by his warm, strong grip. The place was firmly situated in the Downtown Eastside, a large neighborhood that half the city was too terrified to set foot in. Kneeling beside the sofa, I patted down Aaron's front pockets, then wiggled my hand under his ass to check
the back ones. "No way. Plus, he was putting up with all my crap cluttering his one-bedroom suite. "Come on, give us a hint," Aaron cajoled. Page 14 A wave of heat rolled over my back, and Liam froze where he stood. No managers in sight, but at my panicked look, another server zipped into the kitchen. I wanted a paycheck that couldn't be docked.
No one saw me coming until I was winding my umbrella up like a baseball bat. The oily texture smeared over everything no matter how hard I scrubbed it, and after turning four dish rags completely green, I switched to paper towels. "Leave your apron. "Why won't you answer?" On a date. Why didn't I check your ID last night? It felt like I was
settling in here ... like I was fitting in. If someone is trying to kill me, I'd rather have a sword than try to poke their eyes out with a piddly wand." I grasped the leather-wrapped handle and lifted it a few inches, its weight surprising me. Returning to the boxes, I selected my last clean bra—hot red with lacy embellishments, normally reserved for special
occasions—then dragged out a pair of yoga pants and pulled them on. Maybe this was related to businesses or restaurants or something. Explosions? "I knew those dicks would make me late. All three guys recoiled as the entire room went silent, every person turning to stare. Come inside with me." "Too risky." His eyes kept moving, scanning every
shadow before returning to our stalkers. She should know about magic classes and their most common orders." Oh, so that's why they'd kept asking me what my "class" was? Two ordered sodas but banana-hair wanted a Long Island Iced Tea that took several minutes too long to make. Deep breaths, Tori. "Here's your pay for tonight. Do you drive?
Air and water can be combined to produce ice." "Oh," I muttered. My bandaged elbows and knees stung but were easy to ignore. "You should give Tori a chance, Clara. My attacker straightened with a hiss, his teeth bared. Blanchard, I really need this job. The final jitters left my muscles and I relaxed. "How was your break?" she asked cheerily. Note
to self: do not lose card. I want to hire you." I braced a hand on the bar. That would explain why they hadn't even bothered with a Facebook page. "Ezra!" I burst out, my quavering voice on the edge of tears. I needed to appear perky and confident, not bedraggled and exhausted. Now that she'd spelled it out, ditching the guild would have been the
the paper. I whipped my umbrella up and the blade hit it, snapping the metal rod. "I've got work to do. We zipped up to the third floor and into a hallway, where Aaron led me through an open door. "Cooper covers the bar on Sundays and Mondays ... though I may call you in if he's out for the day and you're available." I pursed my lips. If I break a
minor rule, MagiPol will fine me and my guild. "Call me if you need anything." Sliding his helmet on, he started the bike and zoomed onto the road. The important part was me running it. It looked like a regular, if ancient, playing card. "Name's Liam. "Do I get a hint about your answer?" "Hmm." I sauntered along, hands folded behind my back and
purse bumping my side, my oversized umbrella hanging from the strap. I smiled to myself. I'd finish my shift because I wanted my damn cash after all this crap—but I was never setting foot in here again. Across from her was a young man with magnificent cheekbones and hair longer than mine done up in elaborate braids and large than mine done up in elaborate braids.
like an elfin cosplay. I used to be a combat sorcerer but ... those days are behind me." Curious, I asked, "Why the switch?" He rubbed his jaw. "And no offense, but it doesn't make sense that they'd hire you if you were throwing drinks and insulting people." "Yeah, I agree it's weird, but maybe they're really desperate." I sat beside him. Turning on my
heel, I marched down the sidewalk. "How are you?" "The adrenaline is wearing off. "Should we explain it? "Was that real fire?" "Oh, shit," Kai muttered. "Weren't you the one who said, 'Let's keep her!' less than an hour ago?" "That was before I had to babysit you." I shrugged one shoulder. While he called in the order, I unearthed my laptop from
beneath a stack of socks waiting to be folded. First I wiped down every surface in, around, and behind the bar. "Me and Kai joined the day I turned eighteen—the minimum age to join a guild." "There are other guilds, right? It was only when I walked into the apartment and noticed Aaron's forgotten phone on the end table that I realized I couldn't cal
Kai if I needed anything. My search of "MPD" produced a whole lot of boring businesses, but after scrolling through six pages of results, I found an ugly white website for a financial investment company—with a logo that matched the one on Clara's forms and Aaron's ID. "I'll get another job ASAP so I don't miss any rent payments." "I've told you
every month since you moved in that you don't need to pay rent. These studies allow you to read all the verses related to a specific topic in one study, without having to search through the entire book. It's an amazing word used by civilized people everywhere. Who walked around with a sword? "No one who lives downtown has a car—except that
dummy." She called the last part at the three guys and Aaron flipped her the bird without pausing his annoyed tirade—something about being more cautious than a granny on an ice rink. An invisible tug pulled at the front of my blouse. "Did you really attack six mythics on your own?" I twisted my mouth, embarrassed by all the attention. Maybe ... if
didn't eat for the rest of the month. "What do you think, Tori? With chiseled features, intelligent eyes, salt-and-pepper hair, and a short beard, he exuded the calm authority of a Person In Charge. Kai? "This is unacceptable." The woman waved a hand to draw my attention away from the suspicious heap of meat. It had been a great call. Liquid
we follow regulations, don't worry." She clasped her hands together. Well, that was a dead end. Fresh blood ran down my leg. "Hi!" I chirped. Why didn't it hurt more? "If you didn't want to be involved, you should have kept your nose out of it." Aaron spluttered. Swearing, I snatched the paper off my nose and examined it in case my skin required
sanitation from the contact. "I helped him get up here and he passed out. "Yes, sir?" Aaron asked with a casual salute. "How much farther to your place?" "Four blocks," "In four blocks," then." I laughed. Clara told me she'd hired you as a temp." "You must be Cooper." The other cook—the one who'd called in sick over the weekend. A manager flew out
of the kitchen, and her glare blazed hot enough to grill some chicken all on its own. "Have a good night, ladies." Oozing smugness, the girls strolled out the door. "You picked the wine and chocolate." Aaron squinted at the items like they might have nametags. Nodding to myself, I returned to the bar and grabbed my résumés. "What about you?"
"Happily single." Ramsey waltzed out of the kitchen, his unnaturally black hair extra spikey and his eyeliner drawn on with more finesse than I'd ever managed on my own face. No one here cared who I was. He smiled wanly. Dangerous secrets will challenge the loyalty of your strongest allies, and if you seek the truth"—her gaze dropped to the Death
card—"it will not be your fate alone bared to the reaper's blade." "You've got a bad attitude, new g—" "Don't be an asshole, Aaron," Ezra interrupted quietly. I wanted to be anywhere but here and if I didn't retreat now, I would ... what? "Sin is an alchemist." Kai leaned down to check on Aaron. Please call back when she's had more sleep." He
chuckled. Slowing as I reached the head of the alleyway, I crept into the darkness between hulking skyscrapers. Wet shirt all the way. Guilds are responsible for their members' behavior." "I see. "But I know my way around a bar, I learn fast, and I work hard." Clara nodded as she scanned my résumé. "Hmm?" "You said you're hunting a rogue
sorcerer, right?" "Yeah." "What if he's a really powerful one?" He looked up from his laptop, an amused sparkle in his eyes. She didn't want me at the guild, and since her fellow officers wouldn't ban me, the easiest way to get rid of me was to make me quit. If this job is temporary, the less she knows, the better." "Even with Aaron watching out for
her, she needs to understand the basics," Ezra said. Girard straightened. Ezra showed up a year or two after and applied to join, and Aaron and Kai took him under their wing—at least that's what I heard. "You've got a reputation. Winding around the scattered chairs, I approached the bar at the back. I'd been in her shoes before—understaffed,
everything going wrong, and what sounded like an event planned for the night. "Crap, my purse," I helped him lean against the dumpster, grabbed my purse, then pulled his arm over my face, reading my reaction. I'll be there soon.
"Okay," I whispered. Tabitha, obviously, was tonight's on-duty officer. The bottle in front of me twitched. Who told you?" "Everyone is talking about it." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Tori." "Tom." He shook my hand, his grip limp. "Darius is definitely going to kill me." "So ..." I straightened on my seat. When they started to squirm, I refocused on the
chickenless woman and smiled brightly. No matter how hard I tried, I always ran afoul of either customers or management, then poof! My job was gone. "The current average is four months," Ramsey added. He was unconscious, possibly dying. I glanced across the pub, then back to him. Snow fluttered around them, the air sparkling with ice crystals
and Aaron's harsh breaths puffed white. But it was only temporary. College in the morning, walking to the Crow and Hammer after class, hanging with Aaron—accompanied by Kai or Ezra—and visiting with Sin whenever she came up from the basement lab for a drink or snack. Why?" "He doesn't handle it well when his friends get hurt." Another door
banged open. I need you safe first so I can defend myself without hurting you." "But you don't have Sharpie," I protested desperately. "She said you weren't paying for anything, so I'm—" "I'm not finished with that!" "Are you planning to pay for it?" Fork still poised in the air, she looked at her furious companion. "I kind of miss the crazy curls,
though." I arched my eyebrows. The number of pedestrians dwindled to a handful, and they walked quickly. Thank goodness for hackable technology. "It's perfect," Girard said. Oh god. Another man stepped on the back of Aaron's neck, pinning him in place, and pulled a small vial from his pocket, its contents sickly yellow. "Don't worry about me, new
girl. Clara had called it their "safe place" and mentioned something about a membership. I needed to pay attention if I ever wanted to own a business. Stop showing off. "Good stuff, right?" "Yeah," I gasped. Clara waited beside him, nodding along as he spoke. Concentration tightened his face, and a liquor bottle from my station floated upward too.
Clara pulled me into the cluttered office, and I waited with my plate as she unburied a corner of the shots you don't take. "And get your manager over here immediately." I returned her meal, my drink tray wobbling again. The substance came off my
skin with soap, but no amount of soap, water, or scrubbing would dim the green in my hair. I really need someone, but I don't have time to look at anything right now. "And if you ever want another drink from me, you'll start acting like a goddamn adult. "Suppose," Ramsey agreed uncertainly. Maybe Justin's tea fetish wasn't so strange after all. I
finished that one and she slid over a perfectly normal tax form. He took in my stained clothes and wet, green hair. Uh ..." My brain fizzled. A fortyish-year-old man with dark bronze skin and a fantastic goatee chatted with me about local restaurants—many of which I'd attempted to work at. Guns and bullets might have been deadlier, but at least they
were familiar. Unlocking the door, I dragged Aaron inside. An old lady wearing a knit cap and turquoise-framed spectacles was showing off playing cards to a younger woman with teak-colored skin and wooden beads decorating her hair. Clara frowned. I wasn't living in a magical fairytale where everyone now adored me, but the overall response to
my presence was improving. "The first rule will never change," he said. Back in the main room, Sin had finished cleaning the sleep potion off Aaron and was tending to his cut arm with supplies from her alchemy tickle trunk. Give her a chance, see how she does." "But ..." Clara shook her head again. Humming thoughtfully, I carried the beer-glass
vase to the end table, then unbundled the lightweight blanket and curled up on the sofa with it, the box of chocolates on my lap. Call Kai and tell him to find an alchemist and meet us at your place." "I already called him. She pressed her lips together, clutching a wooden case with a carry handle. Multi-use artifacts are the most valuable, but they can't
be triggered over and over like shooting a gun. A conversation with Kai, and— "Cyclops?" I hissed. "Ezra is on his way here, and he said you need to bring an alchemist." "Where are you?" I gave him my address. I wouldn't want him as my enemy, that's for sure." She stirred her glass with the straw. It burned all the way down and I wheezed. "It's not
a poison?" "Any potion with a harmful effect is considered a poison," Sin said. "Pleasure to meet you." I directed the words at Zora only, otherwise I would've been lying. "I'm swamped. A strange feeling prickled in my stomach. "The amendment to the regulations on GM accountability will require a few changes
behind the scenes, but I don't expect it to affect our day-to-day workings. If human cops tried to arrest a rogue mage, the mage could seriously hurt them or worse. Warmth bathed my face. "The flowers are from Kai." Aaron blinked. Rogue hunting wasn't the only work mythics could take on to earn extra cash—or bonuses, as Aaron called them—bu
no one went into detail about it. The big clock on the wall ticked over to five thirty. Giving up on Clara, I stared at my phone, my finger trembling over the 9. "This is crossing a line, though. While talking, I pulled my arms into the baggy striped t-shirt and turned it the right way around. As much as I'd tried to control my temper, insulting rude
customers, refusing to serve jerks, and standing up for myself while on the clock had been fun. "Thanks," I added. Heavy beams in the ceiling, wood finishes, and dim lights gave it that dark English pub feel, and it was much smaller than it appeared from the outside, with enough tables and bar stools to seat maybe fifty people. One more week of
cranky jerks I could deal with, but three? "Guilding is a requirement once a mythic turns eighteen. Everything hurts." "You should take painkillers now, before it gets bad." "Yeah." I slouched against the wall beside him and pressed the ice pack to my throbbing face. He unscrewed the top. I called one more time and got the busy signal. Inhaling
deeply, I crouched beside Aaron to watch his chest—making sure he continued to breathe—and called Kai. I was exhausted, and a heavy weight was growing in my stomach. "Oh, good, you're ready, then?" She started tapping the touchscreen on the till. My attention settled on the warm contact of another person—the rise and fall of his chest, the
sound of his heart beating under my ear, his hands on my waist. I specialize in counter magic, meaning spells that affect other magic. She gave me a top-speed tour of the kitchen, walk-in fridge, malfunctioning freezer, ice machine, and storage areas. Five people squeezed through the door, chatting and clapping each other on the back. "Let me just be a top-speed tour of the kitchen, walk-in fridge, malfunctioning freezer, ice machine, and storage areas. Five people squeezed through the door, chatting and clapping each other on the back. "Let me just be a top-speed tour of the kitchen, walk-in fridge, malfunctioning freezer, ice machine, and storage areas. Five people squeezed through the door, chatting and clapping each other on the back."
—" "We're leaving. "Don't play dumb. I studied the mess. Ugh. Aaron slid his arm off my shoulders and stepped back. "Wow, Tori, are you insane?" "Why do people always ask me that?" I muttered as I set the tray down on the counter and checked my bare legs and sandaled feet for glass shards. Like I could ever come back here after clobbering a
woman with a drink tray. I'd forgotten the card was in my pocket until I prepped my shorts to wash with Sin's anti-dye potion. Oh hey, more Alfredo. Snuggling into the blanket, I popped another chocolate in my mouth, feeling spoiled as hell. "Aaron Sinclair." He was the first customer to introduce himself, which might have seemed like good manner
except his tone suggested I should recognize his name and commence fawning. My nerves prickled, my heart rate increasing. He was already a magic conspiracy theorist, which I did not understand since policemen were supposed to be down to earth and all that, but sharing what I'd learned didn't seem smart. "I'm over in Coal Harbor off West
Georgia Street and—" "Tori." His stern growl made me freeze. I was glad Aaron was with me. "We've got a wager going on. He felt powerful. My head spun, my skin screaming, my clothes scorching. I shoved my hair back, goggle-eyed. Eyes wide, she stared at the restored order. "The 'why did six mythic goons attempt to kidnap Aaron' one. "Do you
need a hint?" "I mean this in the best way possible, but you're a difficult woman to predict, Tori." I gave him my best mysterious smile. I understand." I let my head thump gently against the wall. We had another friendly chat about how I wasn't serving her a damn thing until she proved she had manners. "It's just that I'm pretty sure the two guys
back there are following us. Maybe you should try a different industry. I clambered up, my throat throbbing. "Two Manhattans, please." I slammed a pair of martini glasses onto the mats, then turned around to check my phone for the recipe. Clara could figure it out. "Regardless, the MPD will never approve her employment, and if we apply, we'll
suffer significant fines for the regulations we've already broken." "It may not be a long-term solution," Felix said, "but the paperwork will take a couple weeks to process. I clutched my unpredictable Queen of Spades card, afraid to rely on it but with no other weapons. I would've rather spent my shifts with Ezra than Aaron. Free drinks meant no tips
Clara rushed after us as we headed up the steps to the mysterious second level. You'll be responsible for her safety whenever she's here." "You're ... wait, what?" "Girard—" Tabitha began in a catlike growl. It's just a bruise." I tried to roll my eyes but it hurt too much. You weren't scared of anyone—not even Aaron! I thought you were some badass
mythic who wanted to bartend, but you—" "Get over yourself, Aaron." Kai's angry voice rose over Clara's. "Of course not. His clothes were charred, his elbows scraped and the knee of his jeans torn out from a fall. I'm satisfied we've addressed the relevant concerns." A note of finality entered his voice. It can be read online or downloaded onto
multiple devices such as smartphones and tablets. "It always takes time for the gang to warm up to a new member, but I've never seen them this ... I wasn't expecting it." "It's because I'm not a member. Sylvia came in and we had a slightly more polite snarling match. We have a parking lot." "I drove in Ontario," I commented dryly. Kai and Ezra are
clothes and lining his dagger. People started filtering in around five, and by six I was too busy to keep Aaron company. "I called my parents, but their sources can't find anything on a group of mythics aiming to exploit the family." "I'm wondering if it might be related to the rogue sorcerer we took out on Saturday," Kai said, tapping away at the
keyboard. "Give that back." I flipped the card so the queen was facing him. I won't pay to be mocked and insulted." The woman shoved to her feet, frothing at the mouth with vindicated rage. I rushed back to shut and bolt the door, then quickly checked myself for any poison. Thought we had a solid lead this afternoon so I grabbed Sharpie, but the guy
gave us the slip." "Sharpie? With capital letters. "I can only recall one attempt, besides this one, since we moved here." "I don't recall any attempts. "Like Aaron said, you earned it. Back at Aaron's side, I opened an alcohol swab and gently cleaned the slice on his arm, but blood was leaking out as fast as I was wiping it away. "What do you like to do?"
swung it full force into the guy's face, knocking him and his creepy vial off Aaron. "Clara, why didn't you say he was gone?" "I forgot," she muttered. "Hey," I said, keeping my voice low so it didn't carry into the neighbors' units. My gaze slid to the pretty piles of money. A poof of green mist exploded outward, dousing everything within six feet—
including me. "What happened?" His expression sobered. "I specialize in this kind of Arcana—weapons to counter other magic—and this thing is throwing off arcane vibes like you wouldn't believe. "Ramsey, do you have an extra burger?" "Already cooked one up for her." Sweat shone on his forehead and his eyeliner had smudged. Last time I share
with you." He grinned and stood up. "Tori," Justin called. Do the cops have any idea why they aren't allowed to arrest certain people?" "No idea how it's explained to them, but they got near me. Whoa. "Hi," I greeted the hostess brightly.
"Does Ezra normally get a bit ... strange in those sorts of situations?" "He's protective of his friends," Aaron said with an airy shrug. Then I spotted the oversized purple gift bag hanging from his hand, a hot-pink umbrella hooked over the edge. Nothing like a few hard falls to make all your muscles hate you. I wasn't a damn trespasser. "Tori, I've told
you more than once that if a customer is antagonizing you, fetch a manager." "I was trying to, but she—" "I warned you last week after you called one of our regulars a half-plucked buzzard to her face—" "She kept calling me anorexic! Every time I walked by—" "I warned you," Blanchard repeated, speaking over my protests, "that you were on your
final chance. Given Clara's protests downstairs, I hadn't expected her to vouch for me. The MPD's document suggested strict enforcement, but I called again. "Why is it so strict? I opened my mouth but only a whimper came out. No
free meals for her today. It was busier, livelier, and way more fun. A full spectrum of stereotypes was gathering in the pub, and none belonged in the same room together. We've never employed a human before, but—" "Absolutely not," Tabitha interrupted. A sweet old lady with turquoise-framed glasses and a knit cap offered to do a tarot card reading
for me. Me, I'd rather stomp around and shout at people until I felt better. Ramsey and Cooper were both working and I found myself carrying way too many baskets of chicken wings for the number of people in the bar. After the MPD dissolved my last guild, I decided a change was in order." They dissolved his guild? As I clumsily shuffled them, I
tried to think of something. "You owe me a new umbrella, though." "Consider it done. The walk from Justin's apartment to the Crow and Hammer took just over thirty minutes. I was about to walk to the door with all the dignity I could
muster, but a niggling curiosity stopped me. Giving a mental shrug, I straightened the tables and picked up chairs. I wanted to work hard and earn a living and support myself, and I didn't want anyone to have the power to take that away from me. "The meeting will take about an hour, then I'll come get you." "Are you sure? I hadn't pegged him as the
womanizing type. My blood boiled at the thought of her, and I wondered again if she was the one who'd leaked that I was human. "Oh god, what now?" She dashed back through the doors, leaving her paperwork. Are you calling me a liar?" Why yes, I was. My swing was a bit overenthusiastic and his two friends caught a face full of cold slush too. Her
companion shoveled one last mouthful of chicken down her gullet before scrambling up. Teeth gritted, I shoved through the door. How long had the Queen of Spades spell taken to make? Three super-hot fit men, and one was actually nice. Even if they didn't boot me, I'd already faced more danger at this job than at any other. But it's reversed.
Sabrina pointed and I realized the card was facing me, not her. It was late—pushing almost two. With a furious hiss, I turned and bolted across the lawn. Apparently, because I'd snapped at Aaron, Liam was under the impression that I thought his little game was fun. Thank you." I hunched, embarrassed. Maybe she had heard of my reputation after
all. Alyssa, a girl with banana-blond hair, was so aloof I was surprised she hadn't injured herself walking around with her nose in the air, but whatever. Aaron is entertaining, at least." The pyromage in question glanced up. I crept to the saloon doors and cracked them open. At her words, my doubts extinguished faster than Aaron's magical flames,
replaced by stubborn determination. MPD requires all mythics be guilded, and the guilds ensure their members follow proper regulation," Kai told me, "is keeping mythics out of the public eye. Nah, just kidding. "Aaron will be fine. "I'll see you then." "Later, Tori." I tossed his phone onto the table and pulled the
blankets around myself. A hex is a pre-prepared one that can be reused instead of drawing it each time. Can I get you a drink?" "Bourbon on the rocks, please." He watched me pull out a glass. I shifted in my seat, wondering what the hell I'd gotten myself into. I mean it." "What bet?" He peered over my head into the apartment. Brown hair and deep-
set eyes with dark circles under them. I glanced at my hands, relieved they weren't blistering—just pink, like I'd turned the shower too hot. "Well?" he asked Sin. If my pink bra was on display, then I was committing to the shower too hot. "Well?" he asked Sin. If my pink bra was on display, then I was committing to the shower too hot. "Well?" he asked Sin. If my pink bra was on display, then I was committing to the shower too hot.
instead of dance across thin ice each shift, waiting for the guillotine to drop and my job to get cut out from under me. "Hey, Aaron," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat," I said after a minute. "He can hear people talking within a certain vicinity." "Neat, "Nea
breathlessly, grabbing two rocks glasses and adding ice. "You three, keep your blabbermouths shut. Oh, hell. Can I swing by later today to get my phone?" I nodded before remembering he couldn't see it. Under normal circumstances, I'm pretty damn levelheaded—I like to think so, anyway—but this ... this had shaken me bad. "I was being an ass, and
I deserved it. Even better. "Hope you like all the fixings." He passed me a plate with a loaded burger, melted cheese dripping down the thick sesame bun, and when the stocky, middle-aged manager finally appeared, looking overheated and
unfriendly, I patiently waited my turn. "Put your fire away!" He froze in mid-motion, his fist still blazing. "That's why we usually call them MagiPol. Clara returned my smile with one do you like most?" "That's the bet? Help yourself to anything in the
fridge to drink." Alone, I picked up a fry and nibbled on the end, burning my tongue. "That's flattering." "The Hermit is a card of wisdom and proud independence. I got up from the floor, but he didn't pause as he strode straight to Aaron. I'd apply at the last few places on my list and hope their managers were the rare rock-dwelling types, then head
home and come up with a new game plan. A lot of it is genetics. His hands settled lightly on my waist, almost like he wanted the option to push me away. I could understand someone not wanting past ghosts stirred awake by nosy questions, though I was dying of curiosity now, of course. Rolling over, I shot to my feet. Anger wasn't quite winning the
battle against the sinking cold in my stomach. I waited, shifting from foot to foot. Only one thing had ever worked for me, but ... Gulping down my hesitation, I stepped away from the wall and faced him. Keep your question in mind, now." Sabrina touched the card, her eyes distant, then flipped it over. Since he was using a switch?" "A kryomage, yes,"
Kai said tersely. Was there something wrong with me? I glanced questioningly between him and Kai. This provides easy access for the reader without having to carry around the physical book. Maybe an online business. Some bloodlines are extremely gifted, others aren't." Aaron and Kai didn't give off the impression that Ezra was a lesser mage, but
when they captured that rogue sorcerer, Ezra was the only one who'd been hurt in the fight. If my injuries were that spectacular, I wondered why he was only just noticing—but as he searched my face, I understood. "I screwed up," Clara groaned, covering her face again like she couldn't stand to see me. Breathe out. I scanned him up and down,
unimpressed. What's the incantation?" "Uh. Ori repercutio." "Wow. Tabitha's expression didn't change, but I could sense her smugness. Tabitha returned every ten minutes to check on my progress and ensure Aaron remained in his chair, seething as he waited. Could human emergency services save him? "Your driver's license is from Ontario. Filling
 my bucket, I hauled the ice back to the front—and groaned when I saw who was waiting for me. "That's a rough area. She's a liability." "She'll be tending the bar, Tabitha, not taking jobs." "What of her safety, then? "What?" "A brick gets laid." As Aaron snorted dismissively and the scarred guy snickered, I dashed into the back, searching
I'd never heard of, which my current customer was insisting he always ordered. If no one in downtown would lire me as a server, what would I do? And Darius seemed pleasant enough, though he was probably playing nice to keep me around for the after-meeting rush. Yelping, I yanked the shirt down, barely getting it in place before a male head
poked out from the hall, eyebrows high in surprise. The guys loaded Aaron in the passenger seat of the car, then Ezra pulled out keys and offered them to Sin. It was a good week, and by the time Saturday rolled around again, I was in the groove. He relaxed his arm and the flames extinguished, leaving his skin and shirt unmarked. "Back for more
punishment, new girl?" "Don't worry, I'm well armed." I'd have my soda gun, after all. Had he made the logical leap from hugs to cuddly things, or was it a coincidence? "Fire is overrated," he said. I slapped it against the panel to unlock the security doors, then wrangled them open and limped into the lobby. "She's not guilded." "She's part of the
group. They passively gather energy to fuel the spell, and once you use it, you need to wait for the spell to recharge." "Ooh, that explains why it didn't work every time. "Take a deep breath." I sucked in air. A fireball exploded from his fist and flew at Ice Guy. "So what do you do for fun, Tori?" Liam asked. "Your schedule will be Tuesdays to Saturdays
from four to twelve," she continued. The hand-painted gueen wore a black dress with a cowl over her hair and held a spiky scepter that resembled a weapon more than a decoration. Liam the weaselly telepathic had apologized and hadn't tried anything creepy since. It cracked against his nose and he recoiled with a shout. Five minutes of Googling
illustrated this shit wasn't searchable. I'd trespassed in their forbidden world, and for a short time, I could be part of it. Justin reappeared, his scowl made more severe by the short beard he'd grown at my suggestion. "You barely know me." "I can tell," he said confidently. The third mythic of the team, a girl around my age with sleek blond hair tied
into a ponytail, watched me with her nose scrunched like she'd stepped in dog shit. Busy meant lots of staff. I didn't want to know. Just a little. We don't know who they are or where they came from." Kai glanced up, a darkly amused gleam in his eyes. Aaron slashed with his switchblade, a trail of flames whipping out, and the two forces collided.
Everything hurt and I wasn't even going to think about getting up for at least an hour. Guilds collect some of that money back as bonuses and bounties for helping MagiPol enforce their laws. Damn it. "I know they can be unpleasant," she said earnestly. Page 23 "Uh, hello?" "Tori isn't here right now. I blinked down at it. "When you're a hammer," he
shouted. "Whoa!" Aaron exclaimed, leaping up from his chair. I wasn't complaining, though. A couple weeks of work, then I'd be on my merry way to a nice, normal job where standing up for myself meant getting fired—not barbequed by a pyromage. "You were watching, weren't you? "How about you get lost, and then I won't have to hurt you?" The
man smiled. I called again and got another busy signal. "Then being followed home, seeing Aaron attacked out of nowhere, fighting rogues and getting beat up. But every bone in my body hurt, and I really needed a hot bath, my favorite pillow, and a bottle of painkillers. I'd expected him to be too oblivious to notice I'd put extra effort into my
appearance. They looked entertained as hell, zero sympathy in their smirks. What did you think?" "Me? He was already sharing his apartment. "Exactly," Aaron agreed with obvious amusement. Aaron stepped toward me. I'm going to have to ask you to leave." Her face purpled, eyes bulging even more. You can make flames without this." "A switch is
like a focus. "Our members count on the skills and competence of their fellow mythics. "And Cearra." The female jerk. "Oh." Rose gasped. "What brought him to the Crow and Hammer?" Page 18 "He followed me. Did I enjoy danger? "I assumed you were joking because your chicken was obviously dumped onto your friend's plate." "How dare you!"
Ah, okay, I probably shouldn't have said that. "Y-yes?" "Excellent. There was this ice cream truck—" "Not that story again," Kai interrupted. "She pushed me first," I announced, my voice echoing in the silence. "I need to get out there before they start. "We don't have the authority to override Clara's hiring decisions unless there's a threat to the guild.
"You must have misheard—" "I didn't mishear anything!" she straight-up screamed. "Aw, man," Neil said glumly, joining me beside the dishwasher. Katherine is our master alchemist. "Everything is on the house tonight, so all you have to do is log what you make." I hid my disappointment. I dug my hand into the bag and withdrew the last item: a
fluffy white blanket with a pattern of colorful owls. A shout, a crunching sound, a clatter of something metal skittering across asphalt, then another flare of light. Swiping my thumb across the screen, I pulled up Clara's number and called it. In some guilds, the line between legal and illegal spells can get blurry, especially when it comes to offensive
magic. People strolled up and down the charming redbrick sidewalks, passing old-fashioned streetlamps and storefronts nestled in tall Victorian-style buildings. Your past stands in the way of your future, but though you've walked this far alone, others are waiting to join you. My gaze returned to the painted crow with its flared wings. "Why would I do
that?" As fire exploded on my right and someone screamed, the guy stuck his hand in his pocket and yanked out a new magic toy—another playing card. "Just like me." He scoffed at the glass. "Okay," I gasped, struggling to think straight. "What artifact did you steal?" "Huh? Mages were real, and I'd met three. I gulped down my nerves and offered
the magic phrase again. "I'm not that great," I muttered, ducking my head. "Counter magic is ... safer. Clara shut the door behind them and heaved an exasperated breath. The downed attackers were far enough away that the lethal inferno had missed them. "Are you hurt anywhere else?" "Um. Face. Last time I'd gone clubbing, I'd clobbered a guy
for feeling up my ass on the dance floor. "Are you okay?" He looked away from me, and I took that as a "no." The fact he seemed so calm, yet apparently wasn't, disturbed me more than if he'd been shouting curses or throwing punches. "Glad it's over with." "Same." He dropped onto his favorite stool just to the left of my station, the circles under his
eyes offset by his grin. I had a job, my wage had taken a huge jump, and management let me yell at customers. Assholes Anonymous. Another hard-learned lesson. He'd talked about GM responsibilities and what sounded like a regulatory body of some kind—that MPD thing. "That is a sword." A freakin' sword. "I've never met three guys who are this
ridiculously hot but so undateable," she whispered vehemently. "Hmm? Aaron pulled the door shut, then offered his hand to Justin. "They're just very protective of—this is their safe place, you know? "Thanks, but I'm good." He nodded. The flames died, revealing the blackened alley. My black eye had faded to yellow-green, but it was still too hideous
to hide. "And we can see how she meshes with the gang." She didn't mean "gang" literally, did she? I'll help you out as much as I can. "I'd better win this one, Tori." "Huh." "That doesn't mean those guys who attacked us get off scot-free. Do it!"
The silence thundered as I pulled out another shot glass and splashed whiskey into it. "It'll only be for a couple weeks." "You can't walk home at midnight, not there." "There's a bus stop a block away." When he gave me a hard look, I grumbled, "I'll take a cab home." That would eat into my earnings. But he was probably here to throw me out, which
made him less yummy. The longer they went not knowing how "powerful" I might be, the less likely they'd be to throw a fit about my human-ness contaminating their precious headquarters. It was early for the dinner rush, but empty was not a good sign for any business. "It gets better, I promise. All sorts of rules, you need to learn ancient languages
and memorize runes, and their incantations sound ridiculous." "Arcana requires a lot of study," Ezra told me. Maybe it wasn't that I enjoyed danger but that I hated boredom. My head snapped back, my skull splitting open along my eye socket—or that's what it felt like. "Tonight's the monthly meeting and everyone will be here. According to the
internet, the Crow and Hammer had been in business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews, and one business for over fifty years, but its online presence was limited to a few restaurant review sites with no actual reviews.
in the breakroom to grab my purse and umbrella, then exited through the back door, as instructed. Heaving a sigh of relief, I locked the bolt, shoved my purse into the graffiti-tagged walls. "A telekinetic can only
move objects with his mind that he can physically move with his body," he explained with the enthusiasm of a toddler talking about his stupid
drink. At the end of the night, Aaron drove me home in his old red sports car, Kai crammed in the back so I could ride in the passenger seat. Okay. The chickenless woman gawked at me, rusty gears turning behind her close-set eyes. I eyed it warily, hoping it was firmly anchored in place. Thank you." He pushed the door open and I walked out. I'm an
idiot." "Clara," I said, alarmed and confused in equal measure. "That's gotta be handy." "Pretty useful," he admitted, barely containing his glee at my reaction. My heart pounded and I wanted to pull my wrist from his hands, but I didn't dare move. There were four? "Is it true?" the younger one asked eagerly. "What happened to the guys in the alley?
"Last night, did you see anything?" "Huh?" "Did you see anything?" "Huh?" "Did you see anything ... unusual?" "Did I see anything unusual?" I repeated blankly. "How are you doing?" he asked. The plastic hit the side of her head with a shocking crack and she stumbled backward, then fell on her well-padded butt. Oh, and did I mention the place was completely empty? Right, Tori?"
"Nope," I said with a pop on the P. Unfortunately for me, Ice Guy didn't miss a beat. I'd never given the tales any more credence than UFO landings or lizard men controlling the White House. Pulling my phone out of my purse, I looked up the address. Faded print in Ye-Old-English lettering declared, "The Crow and Hammer." Painted beneath was a
black bird with its wings spread ominously, perched on an ornate mallet. "Tori Dawson. Whipping back to him, I grabbed the margarita I'd spent five precious minutes preparing and yelled, "If you won't drink it, then you can wear it!" And I flung the drink in his face. The tallest guy, with a narrow face and patchy beard, might not have looked
impressive on any other day, but his gear was doing him all kinds of favors. That was your last employer?" My stomach twisted. "Next time, go for his eyes. I would extra-clean the bathroom tomorrow to make up for it. Holy shit, it was freezing. "We're trying to celebrate here." I bit back a retort and reached for the bottle. I pressed 9 to unlock the
lobby's security entrance, then unbolted the apartment door. "I sound like an idiot." "And you don't sound stupid talking about an ice cream tr—" "Okay, okay, forget I asked," I said, waving my hands. If I really screw up, MagiPol can arrest me and levy large fines and other punishments against my guild. "Most guilds are boring—they specialize too
much. Lucky me. "Happy?" "What about the umbrella?" "Forget it." "It's not a margarita without an umbrella." A dozen more unfriendly patrons were waiting to order drinks. "Tori, what's your class?" She pressed her hands to the bar top, eyes wide. "We're not doing this your way—not again. "I mean it! I'll be back in a minute." She
disappeared. Still, Tabitha had made a critical oversight. "But yes, he'll be fine. Neither did I glance down to see how visible my pink bra with little black hearts was. "Out in the hall, most likely." He pressed his lips together. He looked way more policeman-tough now. "I'm Darius, the GM. I'd been staring at job postings all week. Sin checked no one
was listening in, then bent closer. Sundays aren't normally your shift, but Cooper is sick and it'll be a quiet night for you to learn your way around and get more comfortable." "Um." I blinked rapidly. "I hadn't mentioned vampires yet, had I?" "No ..." "What about werewolves? He briefly inspected it. "Throwing off arcane vibes? We crossed the
redbrick intersection where I'd found the guild job printout and headed down Water Street, passing cute shops, restaurants, and cafés, all closed now. If anything, I'm an amateur. Tom, the bookworm psychic, came in every night for a few drinks and quality reading time in his favorite corner. Taking a gulp of my coke, I remembered Ezra's invisible
rage, the way the room had gone ice-cold and the lights had dimmed. Chapter Five I sat at the peninsula in Justin's kitchen and eyed the neat stacks of bills laid out on the counter. "That sounds ... good?" "Wonderful! Can you come at three thirty? Fear zinged through me and I hastened back into the building. "I guess you can come in, Aaron." "I'm
already in." He followed me into the main room, and as I plopped onto my stool, he leaned against the counter. You can help her clean it up." "No, Sinclair." The cold voice drifted from the corner of the room. "I can light the room on fire easily enough, but if I want to create a concentrated band of flame, I need a switch." "Any switch, or only Sharpie?"
"A sword similar in size and shape to Sharpie would be functional, but we work best with the switches we've trained on." "Magic is complicated," I informed him dryly. I got to three before the noise erupted. The imaginary tip counter hovering above the thirsty table was now in negative numbers. Ramsey was prepping food in the kitchen, so I was
officially on my own. "Any objections?" Felix shrugged. Aaron couldn't take on four mythics at once, could he? "We just wanna know what you are. Eventually they'd warm up to me, right? Sticking it in the pocket of my comfy yoga shorts, I arched my back, grimacing at the painful ache. "Okay, first off, I'm not that good at bartending. Aaron, Kai, and
Ezra had turned their attention to a large map. Tabitha, the second guild officer. "What I really want to know is ..." I trailed off, unsure where to start. "The Knight of Swords. "Demons are real? "Open it and take a look." I almost told him to shove it. "What are you doing?" she demanded. Balling my hand into a fist, I jammed it into his stomach. A
manager begging me to take the job instead of the other way around? Either that, or they were afraid I'd drench them if they were rude. She tapped the Six of Swords, the Knight, then the Eight of Swords. I shook her hand, then she led me into the back. And bartenders, unlike servers, had more freedom to tell rude customers to shove their bad
attitudes where the sun don't shine. Shortly after eight, Clara appeared in the doorway. Maybe one of the prim and perfect applicants from the café had dropped it. I can help you out until you find a new job—a safe one. "What about Kai and Ezra?" "Kai doesn't have as much brute power as Aaron, but he was well trained and disciplined even before
joining the guild. I was up by 9:30 and out the door by 9:45. "Shipping/receiving might suit you." "But ... I'm bad at retail too," I finished under my breath since she'd already walked away. I lost them and haven't had a chance to ask again." Something about her innocent tone made me suspicious. It plopped down in front of Liam, and he chortled as he
waited for me to come get it. "I was afraid you might change your mind." "Nope, not me." I slid onto a bar stool as she rifled through the papers. This was a therapy group for mean people. "I've been working my ass off without so much as a thank-you from a single goddamn person, and you're jerking me around like a five-year-old with no impulse
control. His head snapped back and his sunglasses flew off, clattering across the floor. Painfully rolling over, I grabbed my phone and squinted at the display, but it was blank. "I'm sorry about earlier." "He raked a hand through his rust-orange hair. It is also available in many different languages, and the text can be
easily translated with the push of a button. Benefits of Reading OnlineThere are multiple benefits of accessing the Bible online. "I've never, um, had a reading ... before." "If a real diviner didn't do it, then it would have been useless anyway," Sabrina said cheerfully, shuffling her deck with mesmerizing speed. "Was it your idea to collect tips for me?"
"Mmm," he murmured vaguely. I'd be stuck on Justin's couch for another eight months. She won whether Aaron helped me or not. "Sinclair—" the woman began with a note of irritation. Pressing his lips together until they turned white, he spun around and stormed for the exit. "I'm sorry, Tori, but I can't hire you. Clara growled. They were my second
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choice for a guild, but I wanted to catch bad guys. She was probably sleeping. One with pale hair in a wavy bob, one with long golden locks, and one with her shoulder-length hair dyed a hideous banana yellow. Clara was sweet, I amended. Snickers sounded through the group. I flinched, blinded. What did he do to your face?" Oh damn. Then his
mismatched eyes widened in horror. The one with the scar rolled his eyes and sipped his drink. They're next in charge." Not general manager. Liam laughed. I didn't have much experience, but I'd manned the bar a few times at various restaurants. But Aaron and Kai ... those two had likely done all the cajoling—or bullying. "Do you have a mythic
relative? He was staggering badly, his weight too much for me. Employee number, maybe? I think you're lots of fun." For a moment, I just stared. He won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't come for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't come for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't come for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more, so the official 'no' won't be back for another week or more week or mor
repercutio. She didn't realize that contrariness was my favorite hobby. "She tamed our fiery beast with admirable efficiency." Tabitha's face went even colder. They appeared normal enough but that didn't mean anything. "And get this. Mythics. A black door stood in front of me, tucked into a shadowy nook with no overhead light. The man swung his
weapon in a sideways arc and a sparkling white wave swirled around it. I knew I was losing it, but my temper was pulsing and I couldn't remember the definition of "self-control." "Excuse me?" the woman gasped. Sweeping into the apartment, I found Kai sitting on the arm of the sofa beside an unconscious Aaron while Sin repacked her alchemy
supplies. His dark brown curls were tousled from sleep, his black t-shirt wrinkled like he'd put on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I really wished I could roll my eyes without hurting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling cold all over. "Oh, you're from Ontario? Tilting my head back, I squinted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted. I stared, feeling clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd spotted at least on the first clothing article he'd sp
the huge hammer hanging above the bar. "A mythic is anyone who can use magic, and we're all registered with the MPD, an international regulatory body." "Will you get in trouble for telling me that?" He shrugged and slipped the card back into his wallet. I needed to handle my temper whether these jerks were rude or not. "What are you doing?" I
snapped. Skirts flew up and café umbrellas tottered precariously—and a sheet of paper hit me square in the face. At their appearance, most of the mythics in the pub cheered and whooped. "That dye is an alchemic potion. Aaron napped through my shift again, even more tired than the day before. Collecting tips had been Ezra's idea, but he seemed
too quiet and soft-spoken for the job of getting money out of people. I'll clean him up so his skin doesn't absorb any more." "So he's going to be okay?" I asked, an edge of anxiety in my voice. Do you have a spare towel so I can clean him up?" I pointed her toward the linen closet. Page 13 Back to Google. Late twenties? "It's a job, right? It was just me
Aaron, and ... Ezra. "I don't need babysitting here. "He had a big dagger thing ... that would make him a mage, right? As the instructor flipped to the next slide in his presentation, I absently blew my bangs out of my face and squinted at the text. "Aaron Sinclair." "Justin Dawson." They shook hands and I swore their knuckles turned white. It was
getting fun. "Let's go. "I see the rumors are true." I thought he might be my first friendly customer when his buddy added, "Fresh blood." "What do you want?" The rudely barked demand slipped out before I could stop it. Ramsey and I will handle all the food orders if you can take care of the liquor. Aaron whistled. "Don't worry. It feels like a regular
card to me." "It's safe to say you have no latent arcane talent, then, but anyone can use an artifact like this. "Ignorance is dangerous. "Darren." The muscly jerk. Aaron the redhead joker, Kai the exotic smooth-talker, and the nameless third one. Then counted again. "Not really a party girl," I answered. Panicked buzzing filled my head. Aaron has been
telling you how boring and stuffy we are, and how lame Arcana magic is." "Hmm, yeah, pretty much." "I never called it lame," Aaron muttered distractedly, eyes fixed on his screen. Even if that meant a stint as a bartender at the mysterious Crow and Hammer. I'd meant to be gone by the time she came back. I was keeping things even between us as
best I could—paying rent, cleaning, keeping all my stuff confined to boxes. Before I got completely overwhelmed, Clara burst out of the kitchen and people shifted over to order food from her. "I was living with relatives, but my father started butting into my life. "As much as I would love to see Tori beat your pathetic ass, Liam, the blood would upset
Clara. "Let's order in tonight." "I should save my money since—" "My treat." He grabbed his phone off the counter. I can't be away from the bar for—" "Only a few minutes, don't worry. Within a block, the doors were blank and the windows covered. This is Tori." "Tori?" His sharp tone transformed into concern. This job had thrown everything in my
life out of whack. I'd been prepared to walk out and never return. Hmm. Add the ingredients, blend, test the consistency, blend again. She can handle it." Um. Could I? Their résumés probably weren't full of one- and two-month server stints, with no references to show for any of them. Once Darius got back from his conference thing, he'd sign off on
my paperwork and MagiPol would give me the boot back into the human world. "You may have noticed I don't control my temper all that well either." "Mm," he murmured vaguely. "Really?" "Maybe you'd do better in retail." She handed my résumé back. Excuse me, guys. Building spells can take hours, weeks, months, or even years, depending on the
complexity of the result." Huh. Thank you so much." She gave me a distracted smile and offered her hand. "Oooh," I murmured. I got back to work, but it was a breeze compared to earlier. Seen any good movies lately?" I moved farther down the bar, dutifully scrubbing the polished wood. "Welcome to the madhouse." I didn't get a chance to consider
all the possible meanings of his welcome before Clara pulled me into motion. So, also a no. "Ori impello potissime!" I thrust the Queen of Spades at him. For a moment, he looked normal—quietly unfazed, his brown eye warm and his colorless iris as unnerving as usual. Great pay, great hours, and free food. "Your eye will swell shut soon." I gingerly
pressed my fingers to my cheek. Would I have to cut it off? The place was packed even though it was only four o'clock—too early for the dinner rush, but no one had told this café that. Instead, they stared at me like I was a five-foot-seven weed that had sprouted from between the floorboards. Beside her was a guy with dirty blond hair and thick
glasses who looked like he'd gotten lost on his way to a tech convention. His eyes were squeezed shut, his face white and shining with perspiration. Seriously, was that so much to ask for? You've singlehandedly ruined my month." I grinned. I frowned. "The bet?" "Sin started it." Laying the gift bag on the counter, he gestured grandly. Before I knew it,
the pub had emptied, the patrons wandering out in twos and threes until it was just me, Clara, and Ramsey again. The lamp dimmed until only a faint glow leaked from the bulb, shadows deepening throughout the room. Just call me if you need help." Trouble? Shift number three. "What's your name?" I blurted. That's your favorite?" "No." As far as I
knew, Justin didn't own a vase, so I grabbed a tall beer glass and filled it with water. Loyalty, determination, courage. "We have to be here, instead of working, for five days a week." "I wasn't defending myself when I threw a
drink on you." I expected him to laugh, but his expression sobered. "What's going on?" I didn't move, my eyes fixed on his hand—his hand that had been engulfed in flames. How many people would they cram in here? I'm here about your bartending job opportunity." "You are?" She dumped her papers onto the bar top and gave me a frowning once-
over. So it's just me tonight." "Well, you and me." I nudged his glass with mine. The drooping blue sofa had seen better days, and carefully folded bedsheets and a blanket sat on one end. "I didn't call you a pig," I told her. Now." Light bloomed as the lamp recovered. "Kai? I hurried into the staff bathroom and groaned when I saw my reflection in the
mirror. "And even if I wasn't sure about you, Ezra likes you." "He seems like the sort of nice guy who likes everyone—too nice, if you ask me—but he doesn't go out of his way for strangers." He tilted his face skyward as though remembering something. "What do you want to do for the round?" His excitement faded as he
assessed me. Green smeared my skin and coated the ends of my hair on one side. Ignoring them even harder, I focused on the next wave of arrivals. "Your friend must have a lightning-fast fork, then! You didn't even see her swiping the chicken off your plate." Forcing a laugh, I stepped back, the three cokes, two beers, and iced tea wobbling on my
tray. Short, wiry, with bleach-blond hair in a messy mop and odd round sunglasses perched on his nose despite the dim interior. Then I'd have time to think about my response before telling customers I'd rather swallow a puffer fish whole than give them a refund. Aaron and Kai headed back to their table, but the third guy stayed put. He'll pick up.
Ramsey stuck his head out, his dark hair swept over one side of his face. The top button of my shirt was undone, and Liam was grinning again. Page 8 "I'll start you at fifteen dollars an hour." My eyes popped wide. "I'm meeting someone," I said. "You ... what?" He pulled a wad of cash from his pocket and pushed it across the bar. The older man, with
shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair, a thick beard, and a glorious mustache, would've looked dignified if not for the amused arch to his expressive eyebrows. The cube-shaped building featured barred windows on the second and third floors. The interior wasn't any more reassuring than the exterior. I didn't want to deal with that, so I packed my bags
and moved away." I shrugged. I inched back a step, eyeing him. Aaron and Ezra were parked at the far end of the bar, Aaron groaned loudly. "But I'm slammed already and we'll have a full house by six. "They were pissed." Laughter rang
through the room as the group reached the bar. "Turn right at the next corner. "But how will I get anything done? Setting up the bar was easy. I was. I cringed when he turned to me, waiting for the scowl, the demand for an explanation, and the inevitable dismissal. Many members I'd glimpsed during the big meeting hadn't returned, but others
showed up every day. "Man, I'm going to sleep like a rock tonight. She threw a drink on you because she had no idea you could light her on fire in retaliation." "She's hilarious." Aaron beamed like he treasured the memory of my margarita-throwing meltdown. Without comment, he pulled a stool out from the kitchen peninsula and guided me to it.
Under different circumstances, I would have flirted hardcore and written my number on their receipt, but instead I had to contain my grimace as I waited for the question. Curling his hand into a fist, he cocked his arm back, aiming for Kai. "This one represents your past." She turned it over, revealing a painting of jeweled goblets. Around eight,
excited voices cut through the rumble of conversation. I tapped my pen against my lower lip. "Yeah. She needs to leave." "Oh, come on, Clara. I plopped it on top of the slushy drink and even stuck in a sprig of mint for good measure. "You know, psychic powers and stuff. "Deduct them from Aaron's bonuses." "Hey!" came a muffled protest from the
other side of the door. "Entirely thanks to you." "It was no big deal." I yawned, almost cracking my jaw. Chains hung around his neck, and he was wearing more eyeliner than I was. "The usual?" "Sure," I agreed guiltily. Page 9 The interior was quiet, but the rumble of voices drifted down the staircase in the corner. "If you three don't cut it out," Clara
growled, "I'll report you to Tabitha." Aaron flinched. I shoved through the main doors into the vestibule but didn't unlock the security door. "You are, are you?" "Damn right." "And when were you intending to carry out that plan?" "If you're going to say yes, then ..." He squinted around. Kai and the other man flanked him, the former with his hands
tucked in the pockets of his slim black jeans and the latter leaning casually against the bar. Her apology had been genuine and I'd decided to forgive her ... especially since I suspected Tabitha had been the whispering devil on her shoulder. How much of the antagonism I'd experienced over the past week had she quietly encouraged? "Butt out, Rose."
Glare vanishing, Rose bestowed a gentle smile on me, her wispy white hair sticking out from beneath her knitted cap. Did he see me as a girl his parents would hate? Liam didn't return but Tom showed up for the better part of the evening, taking the same seat in the far corner and nursing drinks while he read a thick sci-fi paperback. We aren't the
easiest bunch to deal with." I thought he meant Aaron and Kai, but then I realized he meant everyone—the whole weird lot of them. He lurched up, knocking his stool over backward. It'll speed the healing process. If it isn't drawn perfectly, it won't work, so it's not something you want to do on the fly." He pulled a small object from his pocket and held
it out—an oversized coin with a symbol etched in the center. As I breezed past their table, Clara zoomed out of the kitchen with a black eye from any of your other jobs." Grumbling, I started to rise when my phone rang. "Hey guys," Aaron said breezily to the three people
manning the desks. Oh, just my switch." "Your ... what?" He dragged his attention off his screen. Across the redbrick intersection was one such café. Sucks that she fired you." "Well," I said heavily, "I'm not really surprised." I untied my apron, then fished the half-melted ice cube out of my blouse and flicked it into the sink. Did I mention those?" "Also
a no." Zora laughed. The phone buzzed a busy signal. We might be in trouble." Chapter Nine My heart jumped, and not in a good way. When I came through the saloon doors, Aaron was waiting. It rang twice, then the line clicked. "You have no references." "Um ... yeah." "Are you busy tonight?" I blinked. "Well ... guess I'll see you around." "Yeah.
Must've been before I joined the guild." "Either way, the Sinclair family will deal with it. Then I reached over and tucked the next one into place. "Psychic," the other guy said, but I didn't know if he was talking to me or his pal. I twisted my hands together, wishing there was something I could do besides wait. Once they get used to you, you'll be a
member of the gang in no time." There was that word again. Nervousness fluttered through me but I squashed the feeling down. "Sweet," I said with an overly girlish smile. You should practice manners more often." "Shut your mouth, Aaron, or I'll seal it shut." After skimming the drink instructions, I grabbed the whiskey and vermouth, one in each
hand, and poured them. I hadn't finished adding their drinks to the tally before the next group arrived. "How do you do it, Tori? I bit my thumbnail. Some people still despised me, but the number was shrinking. The fact they were hot just made me angrier. Page 10 Grin widening, he flexed his fingers. We all know he isn't weak or stupid." "Huh." I
poured myself a coke. "I spilled some dye earlier." Kai's eyes narrowed. "The Hermit." I wrinkled my nose at the artistic rendering of a bearded old man. "What happened to your face? Please, give me one more chance." She shook her head. "Could I trouble you for a coke?" "Sure." I poured him one and slid it over. "Justin, we're not suspects in a
crime. I never should have—but you were perfect. Honestly, I'm not sure how much longer I can stay." "If I could make them understand how awesome you are, I would," he murmured. I watched him close the door, ignoring a trickle of guilt. Or whatever. Pour a shot, Tori." "Shove it, Aaron," the tall guy snapped. "I asked Clara yesterday where your
paperwork was at, and it turns out Darius needs to sign off on it before she can submit it. The petite blonde with the giant bad-guy-smasher on her back reached across the bar and gave me a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Thanks." I slapped the ice pack over my face again. Or wailing. Wailing. The younger two made it to the bar first and— "Who are
you?" What was it with these people? Screw up enough, and they'll dissolve a guild that fails to manage and control its members." "You got it. "You need a better one." "You don't like the shark attack one either." "That scar looks nothing like a shark bite."
 "Maybe it was a one-toothed shark," Ezra suggested seriously. I folded my arms and waited. "I know we didn't need to get you anything, but ... you've got to be hurting today. "Tagged him in the marina, five minutes before he would've booked it straight for international waters." "Nice!" I said, my earnest relief surprising me. "After all, don't forget
our second rule." More laughter. What's with the cash?" I got out a mug, ignoring my stacks of money. Psychics? Retreating into the office, I sat my unopened coke on the desk. He slouched in his chair, saying nothing. I checked the liquor bottles in the well, tested the soda guns, and located all the basics in the walk-in and dry storage. As the clock hit
six and half the tables were full, I ducked into the back to get more ice, panting for air, strands of hair sticking to my face. I mean, most of the night had sucked balls, but throwing that margarita and shouting at Aaron had been satisfying as hell. "This is Andrew." She waved at the team leader. I hope you'll stick around." I pulled a face before I could
stop myself. For the first time in a long time, I found myself eager to go to work. "So, that's a cantrip. I've got work to do." "Aw, take it easy, Tori," Liam said in a chipper tone. Behind him, light flashed painfully bright. Great. Not even a breakroom. "What now?" I asked Aaron testily. Realizing she'd been insulted by a measly human, her hag level had
increased by ten. That suggests your past is holding sway over your future." She turned over the next card, revealing a tumbling building. "I hate the early morning shift, but I have my fingers crossed for that promotion." "I'm sure you'll get it." He unbuttoned his uniform, stripping down to the plain black t-shirt he wore underneath. "See? "Uh, Aaron, and the plain black to the plain blac
this is the wrong way." "I know," he said in a low voice, his grim tone surprising me. "The reversal warns that the strengths of the Hermit may also be weaknesses." A chill ran down my spine. The chairs were cast around like a stampede had charged through the front door, and though it was clean-ish, a strange smoky smell hung over the place. "Whyse this is the wrong way."
don't you just ask? They do all their filming on closed sets, and people think it's to protect their trade secrets, but it's more than that." "Right? None of it had gotten on me, so that was one problem I didn't have to inform my landlord
I'd lost my job ... again. Had I been worrying about the guys that much? Ha, take that! Aaron rolled to his feet, still on fire like it was no big deal, and I sidestepped closer, the heat blasting me like I was standing next to a bonfire. Welcome to the Crow and Hammer." Oh, I was getting my ass booted to the curb by the general manager himself. That
explains a few things." He laughed. Your, um, bra ... is showing." "Yeah, that happens. I'd expected a guy with as much ego as him to hate admitting something like that. I knew, because I'd seen the busboy carrying it. "But I need to get some work done anyway." The evening passed quickly. Not my thing. Assuming this wasn't an elaborate prank or
an unusually convincing hallucination, I'd stumbled into a magical guild populated by a fire mage, an electricity mage, and forty-something other "mythics." All those strange people from last night—young and old, normal and weird—were magic users. We take bets on how long each girl will last." Aaron scowled. I flew backward and hit
the ground hard. Your injuries need attention." "I'm fine. Aaron hadn't gone far. Aaron had
MagiPol for trial." "Huh." I remembered a passing remark he'd made on Sunday. And I'll be nearby if you have trouble. Tarot cards. Oh, definitely. A cantrip is a single-rune spell that can be cast with a brief incantation. Let the guild members assume I was a mythic. Teeth gritted, I grabbed the handle and yanked the door open. Any time after ...
three." "You're going to sleep that long?" No, but it would take a very long, very hot shower before I was anything close to mobile. I'm game." "Your tenacity is admirable, but misplaced." Tabitha's dark eyes swept across the other two officers. For a change, I wore my hair down, my usual wild waves straightened into sleek locks that fell almost to my
elbows. "We do have an opening and if we're interested, we'll—" She squinted. "Wow, I think I might like the new girl." I ignored him, my next customer already waiting. Guilds. Who made soda bottles with real bottle caps? "Impello!" he yelled. Another man—fortyish—held the door open for a pair of guys in their twenties. Considering what I was
paying per course, I should have been focused on every word coming out of the instructor's mouth, but my attention kept wandering. Courses on small businesses—planning one, starting one, running 
 "Clara? He wasn't anywhere near as fit as Aaron, Kai, and Ezra, but he wasn't flabby either. "I'm sorry, but are you drunk?" "Tori, you did an amazing job! I told you not to take any crap, and you didn't. What could she possibly be hurrying over now? "The repairmen are here!" Clara looked wildly from me to the saloon doors. Not bad odds, I supposed
"What do you call it when a ginger goes off the deep end?" I added orange juice to the mimosa. "Doesn't it bother him?" I muttered as I passed her a coke. Hyperventilating, I dug out my phone and called Clara. "It wasn't my idea ... but yeah. Passersby jostled me and I ducked into a shady spot beside a brick wall, staring blankly at the cute shops
across the road. I won't do it again, I promise." "I'm sorry, Tori." "Mrs. I glanced in awe at the Queen of Spades. "What's your class, Tori?" I pointed at his hand. Keep your eyes forward. Aaron must really want out of this assignment, but I didn't feel bad for him. He joined a table with Lyndon the sorcerer and two girls my age, animatedly describing
his rogue sorcerer takedown while I zipped back and forth between the bar and kitchen. I hadn't meant to end our calming hug so abruptly, but when he'd finally relaxed, I'd done the opposite. No restaurant manager in downtown will hire you. "Technically," Kai added, "we violated regulations by letting you in here, but you walked in on your own, so
 ..." "How did you find out about this place?" Ezra asked curiously. "Guess I'll go on foot." "I'll walk you home," Aaron said. Popping one into my mouth, I glanced at Justin's door then shifted closer to Aaron. "And the last card?" "The last card is the outcome—the end of this path. An audience. Holy shit, it was real fire. Aaron looked between me and
Tabitha, then started around the bar to join me. "Tori, will you be okay?" Straddling his bike with a helmet under his arm, Kai held the second one out to me. The pyromage was my guardian, but the fact I needed a protector was a big flashing danger sign I really shouldn't ignore. "A toast to a successful job?" "Damn right!" We clinked glasses and he
took a long gulp. "But not here. Disappointingly, the red bricks ended after a quarter block, but the three- and four-story buildings with cute shops continued to border the street. "It isn't worth it. Strict rules and regulations. "She was tough yesterday because she didn't know she should be afraid!" Clara pointed at Aaron. Didn't Aaron tell you to
run?" "Of course he did," I growled. "Bagged four and scattered the remainder of the nest." "And did some damage to the escapees, too," a petite woman added, running a gloved hand over her pixie-short blond hair streaked with pink. Page 5 The patrons I'd already served made perfect sense to me—young-ish, single-ish bar-going types—but now I
was stumped. Chapter Four Or, well, I meant to throw the margarita at Aaron. The front door flew open and I jumped with what was either disappointment or worry, but before she could comment, I pulled myself together and smiled. "You don't need to ..." I lost track
of his voice as I walked into the kitchen and stopped in surprise. The ringing continued. "Put the white cream on your injuries. "Did you hire a rogue, Clara?" "Worse," Clara whispered at me to hurry, I shorted his vodka and told him I'd water
down his drinks until he learned some manners. He hesitated, then lifted one arm in invitation. The cab companies would be swamped with late-night clubbers. I ignored them as my next customer walked up and demanded to know who I was. Ten minutes later, I was standing behind the bar with an apron in my hands as Clara zoomed off. I pulled him
past the rows of doors to Justin's apartment, fumbling with my keys. I breathed deeply as we continued down the street. I would figure this out. "My dye! Well, that's a shame." She picked up the remaining bottles. And, of course, the three Wonder Boys. I knew I had issues with regular employment. Aaron jerked away, hideous yellow liquid splattered
across his bare arm and sizzling from the heat of his skin. "Clara told me this guild is on the up-and-up." "We are." He grabbed the laptop he must have gone outside to get before sneaking in through the kitchen. "There's so much." Kai rubbed his jaw. "Since they were trying to take him alive, it was probably another ransom kidnapping." "Another ...
          ... kidnapping." I repeated each word, boggled by the casual way he had strung them together. "Oh right, sorry. "An accident. They were still coming—there had to be over thirty people in here now—and the original wave was finishing their drinks and coming up for seconds. "I must have misunderstood," I said soothingly, lowering my voice as
though that would cancel out her increased volume. The cool rain peppered my face and diluted the ugly brownish splotch on my chest, but I didn't open my umbrella. Come on, Aaron." Shoving the Queen of Spades into my back pocket, I heaved on his arm. I already reported them to MagiPol. He fell, landing half on the cushions, yellow potion
smearing over the blue fabric. I'll ask later." "Uh-huh." Sweeping all the cards together, she beamed as though hoping to distract me. "And it's an excellent opportunity to evaluate Aaron's commitment to taking on more
searching fingers found the hard rectangle of his phone. Rising from their table, the two girls came up—both my age, one with her hair dyed a shocking teal-blue and the other guy said—a big dude with lots of muscle who would've been intimidating even
 without the leather duster. You're not throwing me out?" "Throwing you out?" Clara frowned at me. "After a tough job, we usually hit the bar for a few celebratory drinks, but Ezra wanted to take it easy and Kai has a date. "MagiPol doesn't have the manpower to track down every rogue mythic across the globe, so they post bounties instead. Just when
I was starting to feel pretty good about things, I passed a shopfront with empty windows. I closed the tab and tried to focus on my lesson, but it was hard. "Why don't you go to bed?" "Meeting who?" "A new friend from work. I grinned evilly at the card. Magic existed. "And you, Kai, and Ezra are after a bounty for a rogue ... sorcerer?"
glance back and spotted a pair of men in dark clothes a block away. It's just, you know, he's my roommate. "Nothing! Just—uh—harmless teasing and—" "It's fine." The words came out more terse than I'd intended, but I was annoyed at how relieved I felt to see Aaron. "We'll see who's laughing next time Girard puts you on your ass," Lyndon remarked
By the time I had a breather, Sin had joined Aaron and Kai, her blue hair gleaming in the dim lights. The inexplicable chill lessened, and Ezra rose, facing me. Are you sick?" "No ..." I muttered, tugging at my ponytail. His breathing was even but slow, his face still slack. "Only one. Weird gang stuff. "But always hit back!" The shout rang from almost
every voice in the building. "Walk-ins aren't usually how we ..." Page 4 "Could I leave my résumé with you?" I asked, flipping open my folder. I can handle it." I wasn't letting him lose the money he'd gone all week without sleep to earn. A second passed, then I stuffed the money in my apron pocket. As the doors swung into place again, his voice
continued with barely a stutter, and no screech of chairs warned of a furious stampede to lynch me for eavesdropping. I didn't want to sit by myself in the apartment, listening at the door for free, just like you wanted. With a few pointers from
Ramsey, I found the garnish supplies and prepped lemons, limes, olives, mint, and parsley. "I don't believe it," he gasped. "We have to get out of here." "What—" I broke off as, in the distance, police sirens echoed through the streets. Did I call 9-1-1? "Can you two light yourselves on fire too?" The corner of Kai's mouth lifted in an amused smirk.
unconvincing dismay. "So how does it work? "Guys who can light themselves on fire—" "That's not the only thing I can do." "—or make gusts of wind or cast spells or whatever. "How are Ezra and Kai?" "Kai is fine, as always. I looked at Kai and Ezra. Two other men were down, but Ice Guy and the last pair had Aaron surrounded. Instead of working
on his laptop, Aaron lined up a row of chairs along the wall and lied across the makeshift bed, covering his eyes with a borrowed dish towel. In that case, I'll have to fetch my manager." With my free hand, I pulled the chicken extravaganza out from under the other woman's fork. "No!" I yelled at the phone. I keep my mouth shut, I smile real polite,
and I let the managers give free meals to every scamming asshole because "the customer is always right" or whatever. "Shit," Aaron hissed. Owww. I couldn't find any garnish trays, so I stuffed them in highball glasses. Returning to the kitchen, he held the sticky note over the sink. Ramsey snatched his hand away as the burning note fell into the sink
We stumbled down the short hall into the living room and I pushed him toward the sofa. When I was in a temper, everyone knew it, but Ezra's silent, undetectable fury unnerved me. Almost four hundred dollars. Nice to meet you." "The pleasure is mine," he replied with a sparkle in his gray eyes. She dropped her arm, my resume hanging at her side.
"I'll need to make a copy of your ID and your server certificate," Clara said, reading over the first form. She doesn't even know what the MPD is." Clara pulled a stool from the back corner behind the bar and dropped onto it. What's wrong?" "Put it out!" she yelled, her voice high with panic. "Sorcery is the most common Arcana order. That meant the
blanket was from Ezra. "A reading doesn't predict the future like those charlatans claim, but it shines light on the forces moving around you and it can reveal the path—or one of many paths—that lies before you." Rose tittered. I'll let you know if I decide to sell it." Controlling my shock, I stuck the dark queen back in my pocket. The screen flashed
awake. "The decision is up to Clara and Tori." Tabitha's dark eyes, flashing with anger, slid to me. "Don't do that. Dangerous part of town. He always does. "I'm not ... sure." Nasty people. How broke was he that he couldn't afford thirty bucks? I told them—" He broke off, his blue eyes sweeping over my face then down to the bottles I was clutching
like priceless collectibles. They've been inseparable since the day I met them." The last bit came out kind of grumpy and I raised my eyebrows questioningly. I lurched backward, clutching my coke. "The last two classes are Spiritalis and Demonica, but we only have five witches and no—" "Wait," I interrupted. Hugs could work miracles, at least for
me. But sometimes I react before I think. The sorcerer came out way worse." I poured two rum and cokes and passed him one. "Ezra." His voice cut through the room like a whip. Vampires and shifters are hardly the spirit of the
law are two different things." "And which one does the Crow and Hammer follow?" "Whichever is most convenient at any given moment." He jumped over the bar and landed neatly on the famous Gastown steam clock, its face indicating 2:10
a.m. The breeze was warm, with that nighttime freshness I loved. What kind of rule was that? "Sorry, Tori. She always showed up at the worst moments, and though her cool remarks were never overtly antagonistic, by the time she vanished back upstairs, I'd be mired in bitter anger. "I'm going to bed. My back ached and my legs throbbed from
crouching for two hours. "Aaron isn't mentioning his string of relationships that've failed spectacularly. "I swear it's a real ID. Damn it, Aaron. Clara reappeared, reaching for her folders. A few tables away, Aaron's voice rose, irritation lining his words, but I stayed focused on the form. When he wasn't talking, the jerk was almost charming. We're in
the middle of the bounty for that rogue sorcerer, and—" "If you need to delegate, you can ask Kai and Ezra to help you," Girard suggested. Don't let Ezra inside the apartment? You're a hard worker, and I've done everything I can to accommodate your ... issues ... but I can't employ a server who attacks customers." "Customer," I corrected in a
dejected mumble. By my best guess, Clara had paid me for a full eight-hour shift even though I'd worked less than six hours. "Tori!" he gasped, reaching for me. "I'm sorry, but—" "Hold up." Aaron caught my other arm and spun me out of Clara's grip. Tabitha glared. "It didn't wash out?" he asked gruffly. "Lyndon McAllister. Time for another
rejection. "Everything is fine." Aaron gave me a sideways look as I dumped my bottles back where they belonged and marched over to the rest. As we reached the next intersection, he looped an arm around my waist and pulled me around the corner. A glob of crushed ice slid down Aaron's face and plopped in his lap. Ah, but a sideway look as I dumped my bottles back where they belonged and marched over to the rest. As we reached the next intersection, he looped an arm around my waist and pulled me around the corner. A glob of crushed ice slid down Aaron's face and plopped in his lap. Ah, but a sideway look as I dumped my bottles back where they belonged and marched over to the rest. As we reached the next intersection, he looped an arm around my waist and pulled me around the corner. A glob of crushed ice slid down Aaron's face and plopped in his lap. Ah, but a sideway look as I dumped my bottles back where they belonged and marched over to the rest.
next card. Ramsey tapped the card. After a minute, I wobbled into the bathroom to pull the first aid kit from under the sink. Normally, I'd have you file a report too, but then we'd have to explain why you were with me and that might bring up awkward questions about why you're working at my guild." "Yeah, let's not do that." I picked out a second
downed half his drink in a few swallows. Even if we get arrested, guilded mythics know better than to cause a fuss. I smirked at my burger. Or stupid hormones. It only worked once when I tried it." "Different spells work in different ways." Leaning against the counter, he gestured at my card. Who needs a car?" She laughed. You can wait there with
the others." She pointed. Resisting the urge to look back, I kept my focus on the sidewalk ahead, well lit by streetlamps, traffic lights, and the occasional flare of headlights as a car passed. Not all our members have perfected their self-restraint, and if she continues that behavior, she could get hurt." Girard and Felix regarded each other with
furrowed brows, offering no counterargument. I still couldn't figure out what would attract such an eclectic mix of people from all ages and walks of life to the same club, but maybe it was an invitation-only sort of deal. I was still staring greedily when the front bolt turned and Justin limped inside, shoulders bowed and his police uniform smudged with
dirt. A friendly young woman who identified herself as a witch spent a solid twenty minutes talking about yoga and invited me to join her and her also-a-witch boyfriend on their weekly nature walk. You do the babysitting, and I'll go with Kai on jobs." "No way." "I'll give you half my bonuses for however long Tori is here." I raised my eyebrows, busy
wiping down my station while I listened in. My guess about their outfits had been spot on. "Not my problem." He glared, a dangerous gleam in his eyes, and the air around him heated. "Sorry, can't help you there." "Oh," she said glumly, adjusting her salon-perfect blond bob. "Rent payment." "Is this all from that shift you picked up last night? "Tori,
take a seat." "Uh ..." I looked from Rose's smug face to Sabrina's pleading stare and reluctantly sat. At that point I had to pause and breathe, adrenaline whipping through me at the intensity of the memory—the terror I'd felt for Aaron. For every smile I offered, I got stony stares and scowls in response. A lovingly detailed grim reaper with a bloody
scythe graced the card. "By the way, don't ask Ezra why he joined the guild." "Uh ... okay." "And best not to ask about his family either." I nodded. My shift passed much like Tuesday's, with a few ugly encounters, a few pleasant ones, and a whole bunch of people who didn't care to speak to me beyond ordering a drink. I stood there, blinking stupidly
as I waited for someone to throw me out for assaulting another customer. "Or ... magic aliens!" He snorted but didn't argue with me. If this really was an Assholes Anonymous support group, they were teaching all the wrong lessons. "You fought them?" "What, do you think I got this banged up from running away?" "But you ... never mind. I blinked
again when I saw the blood streaking my forearm, having run from the nasty road rash that had taken the skin off my elbow. What is that?" I backed up a few steps, my short apron coated in shimmering green. A blended drink? Handsome as hell but not too striking, he was the kind of guy businesses used to advertise men's casual clothing—wear our
jeans and you, average man, can also turn females into quivering masses of desire. I squinted at the third one. Alchemist and healers take even longer to complete their apprenticeships." "Whoa." "It isn't easy to learn, but it's the most versatile magic and, for experienced practitioners, it's the most powerful." Aaron scoffed. "Do you have bartending
experience, Tori?" "Not much," I admitted as she joined me. Kai had been clear, but ... Ezra sounded as unruffled as always. I lunged to catch it as her hand shot out—but instead of grabbing it, she smacked it off the bar. Finders, keepers. Everything I needed to know to start up a business where I could be my own boss. "Tori, pour yourself one."
as he watched our stalkers. "How long did it take you to learn counter magic?" "A few years, but I was well past the apprenticeship stage by then." He smiled whimsically. "Well." Aaron cleared his throat. My feet hurt and my formerly comfortable sandals had rubbed my pinky toes into blistered fireballs. Are you safe there?" As I confirmed our
relative safety, his phone picked up the sound of a door slamming and footsteps thudding on a hard floor. The doors swung open and a woman half fell out of the room beyond. "Conflict surrounds you. Aaron had said Kai was out on a date tonight, but Ezra had stayed home. "Uh, Clara, don't take this the wrong way, but ... is this place doing, you
know, criminal stuff? "The whole point is regulation and enforcement. A hex is a cantrip that—sorry, let me back up. "Yes, yes," she told me. "Clara, we're almost ready to begin, and I think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under Cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under Cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under Cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under Cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under Cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under Cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your contacts under cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and held the phone to mysterial think the bartender has earned a break. I'll be there as soon as I can. "You put him in your cyclops?" I dialed Ezra's number and h
ear. Ezra is an aeromage." "Arcana is the commonest of the classes." Aaron pulled a face. Please tell me you do." "What's a mythic?" "Oh god. "Come work over here," he said. Yeah, no. They wanted me to join their guild, but there I would've always been the GM's spoiled son, constantly having to prove my worth while everyone questioned whether
my parents had handed me my success on a silver platter." "So you picked a guild where you could earn your place?" "I could have done that at almost any guild. "No way," Aaron finally said. A paid shift and a chance to prove myself without having to do the whole interview thing? The distraction was a small price to pay for the chance to explore a
hidden society of magic and those who wielded it. Laughing, he slouched against the bar. No answer." "Keep calling. "Victory!" one of the new arrivals yelled, pumping a fist in the air. He, Kai, and Ezra had pulled an all-nighter tracking the rogue sorcerer. The disreputable street was quiet but not deserted. "I don't want to see you go, but if you've
had enough of those assholes, I get it." I resisted the urge to peek at my hand enveloped in his warm grip, my heart beating faster than our brisk pace warranted. "A round on me!" More cheers. I scrambled into position, my eyes widening. Sinking onto the chair, I replayed the margarita toss in my head. The reader can easily search the online text to
find the exact verse they are looking for. Since I was too tough—or too stubborn—to sneak back outside and pretend I'd never set foot here, I soldiered onward. I hoped they were just messing with me, but I doubted it. I'll help you." "It's just a bit of cleaning. No wonder the place was empty. That spell has limits, though there's no easy way to
determine how much it can handle. Arcana, sorcerer." "Pleasure to meet you," I said. My bad case of nerves passed the moment I stepped inside, but honestly? "Just you." Aaron groaned again. He'll be delighted to go back to his usual schedule too. You should try it sometime." Her mouth opened, then closed. Frankly, I'm surprised anyone would risk to his usual schedule too.
getting on their bad side." Kai stood. "But I should have called you a liar. Nice of him to correct my pronunciation, though. "Back to business. Centered on the wall was a massive steel war hammer, the metal nicked and tarnished, the wooden handle dark. "Now cut the deck." I cut it and passed it to her. I practiced my smile one more time, then
liquor lined up in front of him. I dug into my purse and handed him the page with three job postings. Aaron had been poisoned by who knew what sort of nasty magic potion. "Looking pale there," Cearra commented snidely, sweeping her ponytail over her shoulder. With effort, he staggered upright and sagged against me, almost toppling us both
 "Didn't I hit first?" "Liam didn't hit you, but you were defending yourself. Kai's expression hardened, and I stuttered as I got to Aaron's explosive wall of fire. "Who isn't? "You guys gossip like seniors at a bingo hall." Ramsey flicked his dark hair out of his eyes. This can't be an easy adjustment." "Not bad. Clara zoomed in and out, her arms full
need to leave now. "Good choice." "That was mine!" I yanked the box away from him. She was deliberately antagonistic yesterday. I leaped to grab it and swiped the screen to answer. "Kai is always seeing like five women at the same time, Aaron only dates girls he thinks his parents will loathe, and Ezra practically runs and hides if you flirt with him.
"Dial 1187 on the number pad and I'll buzz you through. "Though if you plan to pass the job off to anyone else, be sure they're as capable and committed as you." "But ..." Girard turned to his fellow officers. I'd normally scoff at that kind of stuff, but I was standing in a magic guild, so ... yeah. I pulled it out and swiped the screen. How did he make the
room so cold?" Page 22 "Most mages have one primary element, but also develop a secondary element. In ten minutes, I had the front of the house tidied up and ready to go. His hand felt five degrees warmer than it should have. My innards melted with dread, but I straightened my shoulders and strode confidently toward her. Ezra was on his way up
and I really hoped Kai was just paranoid. Orange sparks and white glitter exploded into hissing steam that engulfed the two men. Lips pursed, I methodically counted the money for the third time. Did they tip you off about the job? I didn't whimper, I swear. I relaxed—they had beards, but not "biker gang" beards. Aaron turned on his heel and strode
into the street, heading for the alleyway on the other side—getting out of sight so he could use his magic. "Then I wouldn't have found out if I won the bet." "What bet?" I demanded. Truth. If I was honest, the jittery anticipation pooling in my stomach was definitely more positive than negative. My thoughts drifted back to the Crow and Hammer.
Tomorrow—" "Clara!" "Coming!" she shouted over her shoulder. The red car pulled away a moment later, following the bike's taillight. "What's an MID number?" "That's not funny." When I gazed vacantly at her, she visibly paled. Yep, they were hot shit and, in Aaron's case, totally knew it. And he had the muscles to back up that impression, with
toned biceps and hard forearms displayed by his gray t-shirt. "Your present, the Tower. Aaron dodged them, pivoted again, and cast a crackling fireball at Ice Guy, who countered with a burst of white that exploded into snowflakes. Problem solved. I inhaled unsteadily as warmth returned to the room, then peered at Kai's guest. "I told you—" "It's
for a bottle opener. "Judging from your texts while you were on break, I got the impression it wasn't going well." "Me neither, but ... I guess they want someone who's tougher? It's the third building." "Good. I dug around in the storage room, finally found it, then raced back out again. "That aside, it would never work. Chapter Twelve An electronic
tune blared, startling me from sleep. The place was empty. The fire burst outward, engulfing his hand, then raced up his arm and over his shoulder. The scarred guy recovered from his fit of laughter. Not two. All she had to do was shut up and steal some protein back before her friend ate it all. I'd believe in aliens first. No other explanation for the
mood shift. "That's rare stuff. "What happened this time?" I told him the story through his bedroom door as he changed clothes. MPD has issued a few safety notices that—" His eyes turned and met mine. Tori isn't a threat, and Aaron's supervision will forestall any serious drama. Was he including his fellow guild members as mythics I needed to
watch out for? Knowing him, he's already got a new lead and he's just letting me slave away here for nothing." Lyndon chuckled, then turned and offered me his hand. I like them all." When he groaned, I arched an eyebrow. Grabbing the overflowing laundry basket off the top of the pile, I carried it to the narrow closet where the stacked washer and
dryer hid. He slipped his arms around my waist, holding me more naturally—pulling me closer. It's easier to control the elements through a tool, and using a switch lets you create more specific and targeted effects." He shrugged. "Are you ordering a drink or what?" Damn it. "Things wouldn't have gone well for you at that law office. A woman
descended the staircase and paused a few steps from the bottom. I forced a polite smile as the woman at table six snapped her thick fingers even though I was already hurrying toward her, a tray of drinks weighing down my arm. "How did it go, Andrew?" someone called. He'd arrived home from his shift an hour ago and his next stop was bed-
already delayed by an extended interrogation about the state of my face before he'd gone to shower. Go!" My hands clenched. With a peek at the saloon doors, I straightened the nearest table. Well, I wouldn't lose sleep over it. Aware enough to notice I'd dressed up, but oblivious of how he was treading on thin ice with that comment. Page 3 "Thank
you so much for seeing me," I said once the other girls had left. AGM." Assistant general manager? I squeezed my eyes shut, commanding myself to focus, then threw my phone aside. They lounged at a table with a pretty young woman, her wavy hair dyed bright blue. Clara's voice echoed from the kitchen, interspersed with the rumble of unfamiliar
letting him win. "Wait, wait," I cut in. "I know just the solution. Kai plucked the card out of Aaron's hand. "Uh ... is that what I think it is?" Sabrina coughed delicately. "I'll take care of it." His eyes blazed with anger. "I don't like it when my little sister gets hurt." Oh, screw this. Are you up for serving drinks after our meeting, Tori?" "Uh." This
conversation was not following my mental script. "Yes, that's correct." "Tori Dawson ..." she murmured as though digging through her memory banks. The older leader, Andrew, lifted his into the air. I wished him a good night, then announced last call to the remaining mythics. "You can't win, Tori. Page 19 Shaking off my arm, he stopped at the broad
you can have a few other drinks too." Okay, now she was seriously tempting me. I just wanted to drop off my résumé." I passed her the single sheet, which she eximmed without enthusiasm. Perched on a stool at the kitchen counter a few hours later, I turned the Queen of Spades over, examining it from every angle. Get eaten by a boogeyman on the
other side of the door? The woman must have thought the same, because she backed up. I replayed the café manager's declaration in my mind. Pausing in front of the display window, I took a deep breath and smiled at my reflection. I'd never been in one—kind of surprising no one has sued me yet, come to think of it—but I was sure they fell in the
same "quiet, dignified, stick-up-their-asses" category as banks. Not a pistol with bullets—a paintball gun. Aaron punched his hand out, his weapon gone but the pattern is obvious." She flapped her hand. "Um, will this take long? "Go ahead and write
me up." "You'll lose your bonuses for the month." "Fine." I raced to the edge of the bar before Aaron could step onto forbidden ground. But with no experience—or tips—the pay would be too shitty for me to ever afford a decent place of my own. Ezra, Mr. Calm and Collected? While his right eye was a warm chocolate brown, the damaged iris was
eerily pale as though the color had drained out, leaving only a dark pupil and outer rim. I'd lived with it for years, and I wished I could help him rebalance. We made another right turn and came out on our original street. "Congratulations on the victory. The place was still dead. Awkward. "If you help me, she wins." Jaw flexing, he reluctantly stepped
back. "My depth perception sucks. With a friendly wave at me and Aaron, she joined another group clustered around a table, where Andrew had launched into a detailed rendition of their adventure. "I warned you not to let him in." The temperature was back to normal, but I couldn't forget the sudden, bone-deep chill. I ... misjudged you. "Tori, I fight
with fire. Tuesday to Saturday, four to midnight." He didn't congratulate me, instead picking up the twenties from Clara and fanning them out. And your arm?" "I told you there was a bar fight," I jumped in. The first was an entry-level bank teller position in the heart of downtown. As I was lining them up in the well, Clara rushed in. The pub was
          and I zoomed in and out of the kitchen, taking orders and making drinks. The phone rang until it went to voicemail. "Who are you?" "Who are you?" "Who are you?" "The stupid question kept coming, and I quit smiling. "Tori, I've got to ask. All mages or all sorcerers, or they only go specific work. You're caught in the migst of a violent chan
and deception lurks in the shadows, calling the conflict ever closer. As I ate, I pondered the mystery meeting they were hosting. Returning to Aaron, I fought back a wave of panic. Your plans always end in fireballs and explosions." Fireballs? Cursing my runaway mouth, I shoved the accidental double at the customer. Not only would I feel stupid
leaving him down in the lobby, but I didn't want to be alone. By the time I passed it off to her, another ten people had gathered behind the girls—all squinting suspiciously at me. The bottle even had trickles of condensation running down the glass, just like in the commercials. Page 24 "I forgot to ask," I began in a whisper. After your rudeness, we're
not paying for anything!" "I see. I have to be careful about knocking things over." I hesitated, unsure if questions might offend him. Sin fiddled with her straw. I could almost taste it. Aaron, Kai, Ezra—out. I enjoyed it. On the other side was a cramped parking lot with a dumpster and two cars. After creating an account, you can also access curated
Bible studies on specific topics. "I was having trouble getting work downtown, so I figured I'd give the bartending job a try." "Good thing." Kai tapped the page. Ramsey the goth cook was absent from his stool, and in his place was a guy my age with stringy hair and the strong smell of cigarette smoke clinging to him. With that in mind, I needed to
find out what I'd signed up for—and if I didn't like what I heard, I just wouldn't return for my next shift. I'd already be uploading it." "Hmph," Aaron grunted without opening his mouth. "They're all mine. Another handsome one, and though I wasn't normally into older guys, he was definitely yummy. In fact, it was barely six blocks away, though
outside the safe charm of Gastown. A few people strolled by, on their way home after a night out. Oh, but first." I pulled my phone from my pocket. "Take mine, then, Tori." "That—that's okay," I mumbled. Are you interested in working here for a couple weeks?" I honestly had no idea, but I've never been good at admitting uncertainty to strangers.
One of us is always available, even if you have to call a few times." "You didn't put Ezra under 'Cyclops,' did you?" He laughed. My breath turned to white mist as the temperature kept dropping. And, since it took twenty minutes at a fast walk to reach the community college, that meant I was late for my ten-o'clock class. And though I would never call
them friendly, the patrons' antagonism and impatience had subsided. Then, farther up the street, two more men in black clothes ran toward the alley. I hitched my professional smile into place and grabbed my folder. I needed to handle this kind of shit myself. "You can't get in trouble if you don't get caught." My eyes narrowed. "Boring as shit. More
than two minutes, less than seven, I was guessing. You don't need magical ability." "It's not very reliable. I would have loved to lounge around on Monday, enjoying my day off work, but I had classes. Then she extended my card. A ripple of air—and an invisible force slammed into my chest like a battering ram. "Igniaris." The paper burst into fire, the
hungry flames way bigger than the little paper should have produced. I felt bad for me having to put up with him all shift, every shift. "Pour another one." "Go on, Tori," Lyndon added, pushing in beside Aaron. The moment I appeared, the two line cooks whooped. A wall of flame erupted from the weapon and surged toward Ice Guy. She won't blab. He
looked like a mobster, but Aaron murmured distractedly, "Hey, Lyndon." "How's the hunt going?" Lyndon asked in a deep, gravelly voice. I nudged the engine. Very minor. "Didn't you piss yourself?" Cearra went red.
Instead of following, Tom slunk to the farthest table and sat, clutching his drink. "Don't faint. Something didn't add up, but the big question wasn't what the Crow and Hammer really was. He grabbed me by the throat, fingers squeezing. The sparkling white power was ice. "Ow," I said in surprise. 'Repercutio' means to rebound or strike back." Page
25 "Hmm. "Telling everyone how he needed help?" As she slid onto a stool, Sin shrugged. No depth perception." "Oh." He tilted the driver's seat forward and climbed into the back. The blond guy was the youngest, probably in his thirties, and really seemed like he should be programming a robot or something. Some telekinetics will—" "Here you go!"
I said brightly, cutting off the lecture. Oh crap. I wouldn't admit it to anyone, especially Aaron ... but getting the cold shoulder from most of my customers was wearing on me. I was not a blusher. He smiled—not Aaron's boisterous grin, but a quiet smile that exuded an infectious calm. Streaks of creamy sauce smeared the plate's edge. Grabbing his
poison-free hand, I pushed his limp forefinger against the fingerprint reader. "Girlfriends," Aaron answered, emphasizing the S. Finally, some luck. "I know my cards, Rose." The old lady scoffed. "Can I get ... hmm ..." Calculation lurked behind her gaze as she set the perfume bottles on the bar top. I wasn't much help, but I bashed the potion guy with
my umbrella, and I gave the ice mage a good whack too, but—" "Wait." Kai spun to face me. Whatever the hell the dye was made of, it was impossible to clean. Clara stopped to fuss over my eye and thank me for helping Aaron. About the job?" She whipped her hands down. "Tori! I was worried you'd left." She slumped against the bar, almost knocking
the soda gun out of its holster. Stuffing the paper in my folder, I trudged back to the street. "They don't know what they're missing out on." To my dismay, my cheeks flushed hot. "Give me a real drink." "You got what you asked for." "But—" "Next!" He left the pink atrocity on the bar and stalked back to his table. Just follow the redbrick road. My bare
feet squeaked on the linoleum as I walked down the short hall into the main room, a cramped kitchen overlooking it. "Very good. The caller ID flashed "Door," meaning Aaron was here to retrieve his cell. "Is Darius in?" A woman, tall and thin with alabaster skin, jaw-length wispy brown hair, and sharp cheekbones, gave Aaron a stern stare. Okay, I
was getting creeped out. I could handle it. Kicking the building's main door open. I dug one-handed in my purse for my key fob. The three of them looked like goddamn models, but each from a different magazine. He used it to shoot Aaron's fire back at him." Abandoning the tomatoes and stripping off his latex gloves. Ramsey took the card and
examined it. I turned in time to catch a fist to the face. "I need something stronger than rum tonight." "What would you like?" "Surprise me." While I poured him a double whiskey sour, he flipped open the laptop. Then, as a man crouched, I spotted Aaron—on the ground, Ice Guy kneeling on his back, one hand gripping his dagger and the other
pressed to Aaron's shirt, frost spreading from his fingers. It's not safe, especially for a woman by herself." He set the cash down. And Felix, the third officer. Who knows if this place will stiff you—or worse?" "I can handle it." I wasn't letting Justin take care of me. "No, no, that's fine. You named your sword Sharpie?" "We're supposed to be incognito,
Tori. Everyone listened intently like employees in a business meeting. "Before you kick her out, let's ask Darius." "I don't think—" Clara began fretfully. The triumphant team passed them around, and Ramsey and Cooper popped out of the kitchen to grab shots too. Me, I wanted to smack him for being rude. More spinning gears. This time I couldn't
save my elbows, but I stopped my head from smacking the pavement. They should have thrown her out!" "They might have ... if I hadn't whacked her upside the head." He sat on a tall stool in front of the kitchen counter that acted as our dining table. The two younger guys followed her. "Yes?" No drowsiness from Kai—just an irritated snap. All I could
do was confiscate the cash he was carrying—thousands of dollars conned out of unsuspecting people. But ... the address. "You realize this will completely screw our schedule, right?" Aaron complained, his voice muffled. But more important than the incomprehensible conversation was the fact Aaron's hand had been on fire, and I couldn't figure out
how it could possibly have been a trick. Even greater change awaits you, but its form"—she lightly touched the Eight of Swords—"will be shaped by the fear that rules your heart." Ominous silence fell over the table. Maybe he and I had gone into the wrong careers. "I'm Clara Martins, by the way. Rubbed one ear like I might have misheard. My apron
hadn't saved my clothes—my red shorts and white top were ruined. "Shit," he rasped. It was a pub of consummate jerks. "They offered me a full-time position. "To be frank," Girard told me, "the chances of the MPD approving your employment are slim to none, but we can hire you until they give an official refusal. I jumped behind Aaron and pointed
my card at Ice Guy. Aaron slung an arm around my shoulders, his skin almost hot enough to burn. "Not again. "Thanks for putting up with us, Tori. It unfolded into an intricate construction of small shelves and cubbies, all filled with vials, pouches, cloths, papers, and other tools. Felix popped in once to see how Aaron was handling his new assignment
-triggering a lecture about sleeping on the job-but I saw no sign of the other two officers. I eventually made it into the kitchen, blinking stupidly. Who liked to chat, who hated small talk, who was fun and who was trouble. Adrenaline was a hell of a drug. I appraised the tables and dark walls. "What do you want to see Darius about?" "Darius is the
GM—the guild master," Aaron told me. "Can you let me in?" Page 21 I hesitated. Bucket filled, I shoved through the saloon doors. It wasn't difficult. I pulled my license out of Kai's hand and returned it to my wallet, then slung my purse over my shoulder. Were law firms quiet? Side by side, Aaron and I ambled past barred windows and boarded-up
doors, and despite the warm night, I shivered. On Sunday night, the guys had assured me I didn't have to tell anyone I was human—that it was better if I didn't. I clutched him, my legs quivering as I supported his weight. Still, they were not helping. "Three rum and cokes," he said in a smooth voice that, believe it or not, was pleasant. "Kicked ass," a
fifty-something guy answered. "What exactly did she say?" "The story I heard is that Aaron was ambushed and outmanned when you saved his features. "Kai, you weren't recording that, were you?" "I wish. The Crow and Hammer is an exclusive collection of
carefully vetted mythics committed to our mandate and loyal to our success. "How did she get past the repelling ward on the door?" "How did she know about the job posting? Just come chat for a few minutes." I clutched my remaining bottles to my chest, heart pounding. I rubbed my damp palms on my apron. "Darius is going to kill me. You're
registered, aren't you?" "Registered for what? It's the reason we can keep all this hidden from the public. "It could be a coincidence, but I doubt it. "Uh, Tori? Aaron's right there." When I turned to get his attention, she waved urgently. If you so much as open your mouth again, I'll shove my soda gun down your throat and see if you can crack jokes
while you drown!" Shocked silence rang through the pub, just like at the café. I'll wait until you're in, then draw them away." "What?" I yelped. He broke it up." "It was no biggie," Aaron said modestly. "I won't support her working here, even temporarily. I forced a smile, trying not to crumple under Aaron's weight. "What?" I asked. That, or I'd
have to quit college once the semester was over. Was she ever not rushing? As I struggled with increasingly difficult orders and correspondingly crankier customers, Aaron and his pal kept up a steady commentary, interspersed with more ginger jokes, but at least they made fun of other patrons as much as me. I don't believe it." "Don't believe ...
what?" "You're human." I blinked again. "I would have done a Celtic Cross spread for a more in-depth—" "Shut up, Rose! This is the spread the cards want." Sabrina settled in her chair and placed her fingers on the first card. Maybe far enough away that they wouldn't have heard about Tori Dawson, the Server of Doom and Despair. Around eleven,
the place started to empty. The browser was still open to my earlier search. I was running out of options back home." "You mentioned you were having trouble finding a job here too?" I swept my green-tinted hair over my shoulders. "Stop that!" I grabbed a bottle out of the air and put it back, but it rocketed upward again. Since I was on his blind side
again, I opened my mouth to alert him to my presence, but he looked up first. Cearra slammed her shot glass down on the counter and stalked away. MagiPol. "It only has one order: mages." "And you three are all mages," I observed. "What did you tell her?" she barked at Aaron. So I wasn't imagining that my eye felt hot and puffy. Ice Guy broke free
and scrambled backward, and my neck immediately felt better when I saw the blistering burns on his arms and face. Aaron mentioned a gym, a sparring room, a bunker for practicing magic, and an alchemy lab. "I'm so far behind. I glanced at his sword, hidden in its black case. Not only the ambush, but the violence of it. I wanted a job where no one
could fire me. "Not recently. Last thing I needed was to screw it up and have the government subtract double taxes or something. Mythics pay their guilds, the guilds pay MagiPol, and MagiPol uses that money to keep the world sane. "Liam is a weasel. "Is that even allow—" "We really need the extra pair of hands," Clara interrupted. It was out of my
hands." "That's bullshit." "I think so too." He tapped a finger on the counter. "Anyone who can leave Aaron speechless will fit right in." Carefully scooping up his drink like he might spill it—not that it was overly full or that my bar wasn't plenty spilled on already—he rejoined his friends. As soon as the call disconnected, my panic started to climb
again. "It was an accident. No matter how often he refused to engage in the topic, I would keep ragging on him until he got his head on straight. The real term is caduceus, but who wants to say that all the time?" Unzipping it, he pulled the narrow bag open to show me what lay within. The top of a monster-sized weapon jutted above her shoulder. "I
hope you don't expect me to pay for a meal that's missing the main ingredient!" Shifting the heavy weight of my tray, I gazed at her wordlessly, then turned the same stare on her co-conspirator. Better if they stay out of it. As the dinner rush died down, I carried a plate between tables. "No. It'll never work. Sparks flashed over his fingers, then flames
ignited on his palm, racing over his skin like he'd dipped his hand in oil. "Invite him in." Ugh. I stopped in front of a black door with peeling paint and faded lettering. The café owner stood at the end of the kitchen from the other end—thin,
lanky, with black hair buzzed short on one side and the rest falling in spiky locks below his jawline. "Only useless mages train with wands. "What about the light?" "The ligh
average looking—nothing obviously weird about him. "What happened at work? "I'll toast to that." The evening didn't stay quiet for long. "I found it in the street," I admitted. "I can't believe you—" "Tori." I flinched. "Am I allowed in?" "My brother is home." "Ah. In that case—" I sensed Justin approaching from behind. Why is magic just a rumor
people scoff at?" "You can thank the MPD." Kai drummed his fingers on the table. I'd kind of like to know, seeing as I owe one of them a good punch to the face." "It's not really a mystery" Kai replied tiredly. He should wake up in a few hours. Could I run in these if I had to? "Whoa," I breathed. "I'm coming to you. Damn, it throbbed. I'm twenty-one,
old enough to bartend, and—" "That's not the problem," she moaned. You fear commitment. Clairaudience." "What's that?" "Super hearing," Liam answered before Tom could. "Healing fast. Before I knew what was happening, a dozen semi-familiar faces surrounded me, offering congratulations on kicking mythic ass and asking how I was doing.
Stepping into the shadowed alcove, I reached for the door. "If that's the guild's first rule, what's the second?" "Rule number two is, 'Don't get caught at what?" "Anything." He smirked. "How's it going so far? "I—my name is Tori." When their suspicion only increased, I added, "I'm filling in tonight to help Clara." As though I'd
spoken the code word, they both relaxed. I knew it. She'll sort out this poison." "Apprentice alchemist," Sin corrected, brushing past me to join Kai. Hexes are the fastest magic a sorcerer can produce, but they lack power." That fire spell had seemed powerful to me, but maybe that was because my standard for magical power was "zilch." "An artifact
is an enchanted object that contains a complex spell. And wow, that was a mighty big pile of grilled chicken sitting on top, which the other woman was eating at maximum speed as though she could make it disappear before my poor waitress brain calculated the disparate mass. Despite my terrible employment track record, I hadn't missed a rent
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payment yet and I wasn't going to. Aaron's phone erupted in a video game tune, scaring me out of my skin. I'll see you at work on Tuesday. Then another. For a magical guild, it wasn't all that fun, yet I could see glimpses of how it might have been if I were a mythic instead of an unwelcome human. "I owe Kai fifty bucks." I paused in the middle of
arranging the flowers. His head twitched in my direction, and the lamp on the end table brightened, flooding the room with light. Normally I loved a man in uniform, but I could only appreciate it so much on Justin. Oh well, he was getting his non-money's worth. "I'm game." Girard and Felix smiled. "We don't have any demon summoners or
contractors in the Crow and Hammer," Aaron assured me. "A gorgeous girl asking for my number is less exciting when she asks for three numbers at once." I snorted. "Tori, please stay. "Oh?" "Are you surprised that I don't have a boyfriend, or surprised that I've ever had one?" "Bit of both." I shook my head, but I was more amused than anything
else. Risk. How was I supposed to know the drill if no one had explained it? Somehow, everyone knew I was human, but they didn't all see me as a weak runt of a bartender. If they didn't want me here, I was gone. Bright sunlight sparkled merrily, and the breeze carried the salty tang of the ocean, only a few blocks north. "Where is Ezra?" I asked Kai
in a low voice. It faced me, making it upside-down for Sabrina. "No, I just did that on my phone to annoy him." I hesitated, then plunged in. Was that how she greeted all their customers? If I needed to carry pepper spray to and from work, then so be it. Kai bandaged it up, then cleaned my other knee and my elbows. Yep, I'd definitely prefer Ezra as
my chaperone over Aaron. "A switch is a magical conduit. Clara straightened sharply. Only the tight circle within his arms was spared the fire, but the heat—I couldn't breathe. The door slid shut and the elevator glided upward. "How long have you been a member of the guild?" I asked. "You're killing the mood." Aaron's usual good humor was gone
without a trace. With a sulky glare at the two of us, Aaron hunched over his drink. She was squinting at my license with a glowing inscription on the steel. Surprised, I stepped over to him and put my arms around his shoulders. Gang. Since she seemed
busy, I sidled closer to Aaron. The five newcomers were wearing several cows' worth of black leather and had weapons strapped to their limbs or slung over their backs, along with thick belts carrying fat pouches. This can be a valuable addition for your personal Bible study if an area seems confusing or hard to interpret. Personalized Content Perhaps
the most exciting component of reading the Bible online is the ability to create a personalized login on an online Bible website. "Even though meeting nights are on the house, we went around and collected some tips for you." I stared at him. But that yellow liquid wasn't paint. I knew the kind of helpless fury that could drive a person half out of their
mind. "Sure. "What's going on, Clara?" She pulled out an extra chair for me and I perched on the edge, evaluating the three officers. I accidentally took his phone last night." I stood up and stretched more stiff muscles. "Repairmen," he repeated. Always." "Hmm. "There was a guy with ice magic and sorcerers—I think they were sorcerers—and one of
them shot Aaron with this yellow stuff and Aaron said it was poison but now he's unconscious and I don't—" "Tori, calm down." Ezra's level voice, meltingly smooth, soothed my panic. He crouched beside the sofa, his back to me as he surveyed his friend. I'd never admit it to Aaron, but I did have a favorite gift—and I didn't plan to tell a soul which one
I preferred. He can just take his phone and—" Aaron stepped forward, forcing me to back up. Good thing I'd worn my comfy sandals. The saloon doors were still swinging when she popped out again, a finger pointed accusingly at the guys as though she'd expected to catch them in the act. It's like ... mutually assured obedience." "Exactly. For my
Saturday shift, I had high hopes the weekend would mean a busier night—and maybe friendlier faces. Aaron stood in the hallway, scratches marring his cheek and gauze taped over his arm, but otherwise as casually sexy as always in a maroon t-shirt and well-worn blue jeans. I thought you meant—uh, yeah, that's a lot of money. "Aaron, you are
breaking—the—law. Now." "But—" "Out!" the other woman barked. "Like you can talk, Ramsey." "I've been with my boyfriend for three years, thanks very much." "That's my point. I dumped it into a margarita glass and shoved it at Aaron. I already felt overwhelmed. Clara has been stretched thin for too long." "The girl did a fine job last night,"
Girard added, smiling through his beard. With an energetic bounce in my step, I inhaled the cool breeze, smelling of rain to come. "You just used your cards, Sabrina." An old woman flounced over to the table, glaring through her turquoise-framed glasses. Fine, whatever. What was I supposed to do? "How did your night go? What came next? "I forgot
my what?" She didn't hear me as she took my ID. Goddamn it. As best I could recall, I described the initial fight until Aaron went down. Screw it. The landing revealed a huge room, as large as the pub and filled with worktables and mismatched chairs. Instead, he offered his hand. Contrary to popular belief, I wasn't stupid. Please." "Hold on," Kai said.
Fear was a great motivator. Clara didn't meet my eye as I got to my feet. Good luck with your event tonight." "Thanks," she mumbled. I picked up the bottle, half convinced it was a prop. Since I was just standing there, I nudged the nearest bar stool under the lip of the bar. For a supposedly easy opponent, he'd brought along an awfully big weapon.
"Do people try to kill you often?" "Not usually." He zipped the bag. "What kind of sorcerer are you?" Who said I was a sorcerer? "A ginger snap. No, not that one. When I arrived at the Crow and Hammer on Tuesday for my shift, my entrance was met with cheers. My focus shifted from the crumbling tower to the chilling specter of death to the
armored knight with his sword raised, then darted to Aaron and Ezra, shoulder as they battled aliens on the laptop. "How'd you know?" Kai was—reputedly—a playboy. Whirling around, I unburied the blender and dumped in ice, then searched for margarita mixer. The guys watched me replace each bottle, the silence painful. Could be take
on two mythics alone? "She shoved you and spilled all your drinks? Everything is regulated." He downed the last of his rum and coke in one gulp. "Run inside. Did he bathe in ambrosia or something? She held up her vial. "Confirmation via temper," the dark-haired one remarked. He swayed. "I'll celebrate with you!" His grin flashed again and I
returned it, a flutter in my stomach. I mean, don't some mythics want to live normal lives and not battle vampires on weekends?" "Most mythics want to live humans. "Need anything else?" "No, this is fine. But I loved my hair and now the bottom six inches on one side were dyed a hideous green. The third guy was half turned away, waving at
someone. "Clara didn't mention you were so pretty." This time I rolled my eyes without hiding it. There have been periods in history where it was hard to find a copy, but the Bible is now widely available online. The Bible online. The Bible is now widely available for free on many different websites. I didn't—" "Just relax for a bit." She stepped backward through the
doorway. "It's Miss Dawson's responsibility." Her dark eyes turned my way and I suddenly had a real good idea who had leaked the truth about my human status to the entire guild. Page 11 "Tori, this is Girard, the first officer. "Everyone celebrates a victory. The second position was for a receptionist at a law firm. "Right in the face!" Neil laughed,
waving a spatula at the door's small window where he'd no doubt plastered his nose as soon as the shouting began. When Sin came upstairs to the pub—she was working in the alchemy lab in the basement tonight—to get a soda, Aaron was in the middle of retelling the story to Lyndon the sorcerer. They're hella strict. Whatever. "Sounds good to me.
"I object to everything," Tabitha snapped. Midnight came and went as I wiped and scoured and rinsed and washed everything the oily mist had touched. I doubted my hair color had anything to do with my short fuse, but either way, I was hitting my limit—and with each new dose of nasty thrown my way, my control slipped a little more. You shouldn't
even be here." Sharp disappointment shot through me, followed by stinging rejection. "Wasn't him." Her look screamed skepticism, but then the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. You've found a new job after each ..." He trailed off, maybe realizing that pointing out how I'd blown six jobs in eight months wasn't encouraging. Had Darius dosed
everyone with laughing gas? And my stomach did another little somersault. "Tori! You're home early." "Hi, Justin." I managed a smile. It didn't look like any employment paperwork I'd ever filled out before. As usual, he seemed downright tranquil, and the temperature was perfectly normal. You earned it, new girl." "My name is Tori," I snapped.
"Wonderful! Let's get started." She waved for me to follow her. "It's valuable. What else do you need to be?" I huffed, pleased by the compliment even though I knew it wasn't true. "If you could just wait one moment," I tried again. "Are you sure this won't change the first rule?" "Don't hit first—" someone else began. "Orepecutio!" I shouted. No
internet presence meant no desire to attract new customers. Chapter Ten The shot didn't ring out, blasting our eardrums into dust. "Ready to go again?" "Yeah," I said heavily, not bothering to fake any enthusiasm. Lost in thought, I picked up the flowers and circled the peninsula to the sink. "I always figured we were a ragtag band of misfits and
rogues who don't fit anywhere else." Tabitha glared at him. The early afternoon sun streamed through the windows, warming my back. "Yeah ..." I touched the silky fluff of the blanket, tied into a bundle with a blue string. "Actually, just a coke." I forced a smile, but it wasn't as convincing as earlier in the evening. "What are you implying?" "Nothing?"
he said uncertainly. It's no minor trinket." Frowning, I slid the card from his hands. Young, old, classy, weird, goth, hippie. "Can't someone question them?" "They all escaped before the cops showed up. Safe to say I'd blown this "interview by fire" but I didn't give a shit. What a mess. Crap. Telekinetic." "Tori." I shook his hand. "But I followed him
because there were six of them, and when the ice guy got Aaron on the ground, I couldn't just stand there and watch while they ..." I trailed off as Ezra's face went eerily blank. "I suppose, but what else was I supposed to do? Was I that masochistic or was it time to call it quits? Girard sat back in his chair. MORE FROM QUESTIONSANSWERED.NET
Chapter One Keeping a job involves a few simple rules: Arrive on time. I figured you'd walk away and never look back." She gazed at me expectantly, waiting for a response, but I said nothing, my thoughts scrambled. I jerked back and looked down. I winced sympathetically. Ever hear of a wet t-shirt contest?" I scowled. "Aaron needs help!" "Tori?"
His drowsiness vanished. With angry movements, I finished washing up, collected my purse and umbrella, and circled back to the front. Justin, dressed in thin sweats and a t-shirt, stepped out of the bathroom, releasing a wave of steam into the hallway. "Knees. Aaron cackled. I had to be close, but all I saw was a bike shop called "BIKES" and a tattoo
parlor with bars across the windows and the door. I couldn't believe my own brother had become a magic conspiracy theorist. Aaron had scoffed at Psychica mythics for being weak and useless, but with my arrival at the guild, Liam and his ilk were no longer at the bottom of the power totem pole. She won't want to bartend for a guild anyway." "A
guild?" I echoed. Aaron jumped back, fire racing up his arms and over his shoulders. Grudgingly, I opened the bag and pulled out the first item—a huge bouquet of pink lilies and orange roses. As I went down, my near-forgotten taekwondo training kicked in and I caught myself without scraping my elbows open to the bone. Kai gave Ezra a searching
look. "Just leave it. The basement level was for training, both magical and physical. Very smooth." "My friends tell me I'm slick as oil." I snorted and swept past him. Could you please lay off?" He didn't look away from Aaron. I made her a proper Manhattan, and she seemed pleased that I'd learned it for her. Most of the mythics were glaring at me,
from the victorious team to the two girls Aaron had been chatting with. "Your class, what is it?" "You mean at the community college? Aaron wanted to ask me out, though the ambush had delayed his plans. Clara snorted, amused by his response. Right when we were packing up, the—" "The Odin's Eye guild showed up, ready to clean house," the
tallest guy boasted, the one who'd proclaimed a round of drinks on the way in. Me, I was just here to tend the bar—and I planned to keep my nose out of anything that wasn't a cocktail recipe book. Through the saloon doors was a cramped kitchen with stainless steel counters. Turning eastward, I gulped. The older guy even smiled when I passed him
his Old Fashioned. "Aaron?" His face was slack. Another enemy jumped to Ice Guy's side, something small in his hand. Just give me two cokes instead." "I can—" "Two cokes." Snarling, I poured the drinks and shoved them across the bar. The sociable members were in the minority. What were we talking about?" "Um." I wasn't sure anymore. I think
that's it." Well, that and the bruises and soreness that would set in soon. Keep that to yourself." He turned to the sink to wash his hands. "Hang on to this. Sudden, dramatic change has toppled your stable patterns." Sudden, dramatic change? And my older brother. "We got him!" he announced before I could ask. Short, plump, and maybe ten years
older than me, with dark hair twisted into a messy bun and bangs that were streaked with blue and red. Aaron!" The door opened and Aaron stepped inside, Clara on his heels, red-faced and glowering. I'm taking—" "No, your mythic class!" She shoved my card under my nose, even more frantic. Most of it sounded as cuckoo as it had before I'd
learned magic was real, but I noted a few tidbits about government surveillance and a powerful internation alout magic. Sylvia the hag and I had reached a cold truce. Raising my head, I gave his shoulder a friendly pat and stepped back. Can you work tomorrow? Thank you for helping Aaron." I didn't know
what to say, so I said nothing. Ezra noticed my dazed look. "Oh my god. He doubled over with a wheeze and I rammed my knee between his legs. If it went too long, I'd have a nervous wait at the bus stop. "Eighty percent," Ezra countered. He thrust his switchblade in a strange pattern and the steel glowed red. Tips had been shit all week, but maybe
could charm some generosity out of my customers tonight. He needs to see to use his telekinesis." I redid my top button. "Water." As I got out two glasses, Blue-hair gathered up her perfume bottles. As I loaded my laundry in, I mentally reviewed my bank account. "I fell in a puddle!" "Sure you did," Aaron agreed mockingly. Then the front door
banged as Kai swept in. "It's your shit and you knocked it over. He clenched his hand into a fist and white electricity crackled up his arm. "A redhead with more fire than you, Aaron!" Chuckles ran through the pub as the laughter spread, then conversations resumed like nothing had happened. You're holding back." I sucked in a deep breath to calm
my racing heart. "I'd be happy to have the kitchen grill up another chicken breast for you at no charge." "I'm not paying for this meal. I'm happy to have the company." "Living downtown is expensive as hell." I didn't add that my presence here over the last eight months was preventing his steady girlfriend from moving in with him. Maybe he was
taking my threat seriously. Take it easy until Tuesday, 'kay? "Would you like a reading?" The cards she was stacking into a neat pile had black backs with a gold sun and moon forming an ornate yin-yang, while the fronts featured ink drawings. "A pyromage like Aaron should've been able to take him out easily." Kai folded his arms. The red flames
danced across his skin, sparks raining down on the table. "Oh, hey," he said. Breathe in. I waited out the rest of the hour playing a game on my phone, though I did take a couple minutes to text Justin more details about where I was, just in case he needed to identify my body later. They'd grab a few drinks and a meal, then head upstairs or downstairs
depending on what they needed to do. "Thanks." He caught a lock of my hair and slid it through his fingers. Days or weeks of work goes into creating it, and it's far more powerful than a hex. "Are you okay?" "Yep." A pause. "There's an easy acronym for the classes. "This." I pulled my face into a twist of annoyance at the
unhelpful answer. A few more tips made their way into my jar than on other nights. "I'd better go before I eat the whole box." "You wouldn't dare." I followed him to the door, and as he stepped into the hall, I handed him his phone. This place, these people—they weren't and never would be boring. Screw that. "MPD stands for Magicae Politiae
Denuntiatores and they—" "Magi-what?" I interrupted, boggled by the dozen or more syllables of whoa-shit-was-that-Latin? You're insulting yourself." I shot them a furious glare. Rose sniffed. "Aaron and Kai have been as close as brothers since they were teenagers, and they joined the guild together. "What the hell are you doing, Liam?" Liam's eyes
widened and he shifted nervously. My unit is 909." I disconnected, and a second later, my phone rang. "What's the next card?" "The fifth card represents the people in your life." She turned it over to reveal an armored man with a sword. "I don't get it. They're waiting for you at the back door." As he vanished into the kitchen, Clara glowered at Aaron,
Kai, and Ezra. They looked like a cross between special ops soldiers and vampire slayers. "Are you a party girl? Grabbing my umbrella from a puddle, the magic card in my other hand, I scrambled up. Flames blazed over his limbs and sparks swirled around him. The last five bartenders stuck around for all of a week, but I think you can handle it." She
smiled encouragingly. It had worked like literal magic, lifting the stains from my hair and clothes with a quick scrub. Liam smirked at me. "I'll send a manager," I muttered as I turned away. Spotting me, Clara stomped over. Oy!" The glint of near panic in the woman's eyes intensified. Agonizing cold flashed over my skin. "You want to know about
mythics and guilds and how much of the conspiracy theory bullshit is real," Kai guessed. Was it just me or was it cold in here? Angrily gulping the rest of his tea, he stood. I'd called out her stupid lie and given her an easy escape. "Let's go inside, shall we?" Marching to the door, I cursed my stupid brain. That did not bode well. "Can we talk about thear an easy escape."
elephant in the room?" "Which elephant is that?" Kai asked. And this one ... mix a few drops with water and it'll wash the dye out of your hair and clothes. Once again, Aaron was late, but I had no issues setting up. "Why doesn't your license have a mythic identification number? As for what sort of business I wanted to run, I hadn't figured that out yet
Hmm, okay, so it was on the west edge of the Downtown Eastside—not as bad as I'd thought. I swung back toward Aaron. Fire exploded out from Aaron, turning the alleyway into a wall of flame. "That kryomage must have been very powerful," Sin murmured as she poured a few drops of liquid into the vial with the yellowed cotton. As the umbrella
folded in half, the dagger caught in the layers of nylon fabric and I wrenched it sideways. With a cherry and a little umbrella on top." I glowered at him. "You probably saved Aaron's life. "An officer can't pick and choose his duties, Aaron. You might hurt yourself." "I bet she'd do better than you did on your first vamp sighting," Zora shot back before later than you have been saved as a cherry and a little umbrella on top." I glowered at him. "You probably saved Aaron's life. "An officer can't pick and choose his duties, Aaron. You might hurt yourself."
could respond. Aside from a cluttered office, that was it. "Or aliens," I suggested. "Demonica? I'd even take Kai as a second choice. "Desperately. Only three customers were grouped around a table—a trio of familiar guys. "Nice place, man." "Thanks," Justin said, slouching against the wall. I can—" "Now." No arguing with that tone. Aaron slumped at
a table, his head in his arms, while Kai and Ezra watched him sulk with the caring sympathy of close friends. Mages? He was hurled almost straight up, crashed into a wall, then tumbled to the ground in a heap. The pasta did in fact display a shocking lack of poultry, considering it had arrived at her table with an entire grilled chicken breast. "They
seem like really good friends," I murmured. No idea what it does." His arms trembled as he pushed himself up. "My pasta has no meat," she declared in the tones of an offended Victorian governess. They must have approached every single person in the pub and gotten them to cough up five or ten bucks. Certain people at various levels of government
and law enforcement know about mythics and keep in contact with MagiPol. "That's my fault," she muttered, her shoulders hunching guiltily. SPADE—Spiritalis, Psychica, Arcana, Demonica, Elementaria." I arched an eyebrow at Aaron. "Here." She pulled two vials from her pocket, one with a thick pale substance and one half full of clear liquid. Like
my brother, a decent minority believed in the wild conspiracy that magic hid in plain sight among us and was overseen by a mysterious, government-like organization. "I can manage for another week before the MPD gives the official no." "Ah, about that." He casually slid his hand free from mine, and I hid my disappointment. I was almost
positive the police would make this worse. Her fingers clumsily bumped a bright green one and it toppled over, rolling across the counter. "I need another round of rum and cokes, a few people from the second floor came down searching for
food and drinks. "The Six of Cups, reversed. Tori, I'm really sorry, but you need to go." With a final warning glare at the four of us, she rushed into the kitchen. I lowered my voice more. Even the creepy old man was reasonably polite, so I poured him a real drink. Half a dozen people, some I vaguely recognized, were working at the tables or hunched
over the desks, but I barely caught a glimpse before Aaron directed me to the second flight of stairs across the landing. "It's ori repercutio, idiot girl," he snarled, advancing on me. People are arriving in less than an hour and the freezer broke last night and Cooper called in sick again—" A loud crash from the back interrupted her, followed by a man's
furious cursing. Job opportunity lost, but worth it. Spinning around, I squinted through the glass. "When it comes to new people, they can be ... but you'll be fine! Don't let them give you any crap. The floors, the counter, my station, the shelves of liquor bottles—all stained with the liquid. Your energy has suffused the cards." With dreamy movements,
she pulled the top card and laid it face down on the table, then drew a second. I plastered on a confident smile. Pushing away from the counter, I returned to the sofa and pulled my laptop onto my legs. They watched me pull out a chair and sit. I arrived ten minutes early—the community college was only fifteen minutes away—and started setting up.
"Mages are always tough, and Aaron is one of our best. "Tori!" She beamed at me. "Pleasure," I said flatly, not bothering to offer my name. Two girls my age, dressed in chic business casual attire, stood off to the side, holding folders just like mine. "So?" Aaron prompted. "Then the ice guy and Aaron started fighting, and it was ... ugly," I told Kai. And
the rest ... I hadn't stopped to count the tips Aaron, Kai, and Ezra had collected for me until I'd gotten home. Ezra took a nasty hit, but he's just bruised. Chapter Three Before my fingers touched the peeling paint, an overwhelming urge to turn around washed over me like a bucket of ice water. Chapter Six My doubts returned once I was back on the
main level. I'm no better than the others. I watched the vehicles speed off, then peeked at the dark alley where Aaron and I had fought Ice Guy and his cronies. I tied the apron around my waist, overlapping the bottom of my white blouse and slim knee-length skirt. As I approached, Ezra's head lifted. Again, they lost their antagonism and ordered
drinks—easy ones, thank goodness. "Why won't you ever let me help you, Tori?" Not waiting for a response, he headed into his bedroom. "It's okay," I said quietly, blocking his path. "Trust me on this. He wasn't dressed like a cowboy, but he had the same ruggedness to him. He tackled Ice Guy and they went down in a cloud of hissing steam. "Arcana
harnesses the energies of the natural world and gives them shape and purpose. That cream you gave me is amazing stuff." As I slid a rum and coke each to Aaron and Kai, I asked her, "Do you want anything?" "Not right now, thanks." I craned my neck to peek at the laptop screen. "Nah. I located and laid out the drip mats, then hauled a bucket of ice
from the back and dumped it into the well. This time, I wore sensible shoes with capris pants and a sleeveless emerald blouse. Another plus. "Do you mind driving? "What can I—" "Who are you?" the older one asked sharply. Why couldn't you arrest him?" Justin hesitated, then muttered, "Stupid politics, I guess. Care to settle it?" "I'm busy." Hunching
over the till, I tried to remember everything I'd poured in the last ten minutes. A broad staircase in the corner led to the second level, but Clara hadn't mentioned it so I guessed it didn't matter for my job tonight. I'd reapplied Sin's healing cream this morning, but it did nothing to hide the spectacular purple bruise. "It takes around a year for most
newcomers to find a place of their own. Six thirsty customers only a table away watched me with begging eyes, and I could practically see my tip shrinking the longer they waited. You had him. I'd left the bottle opener at my station. "Seriously, I'm good. Skidding on the ice-coated ground, I whammed my umbrella into Ice Guy's face too. When did you
come out to the west coast?" "Eight—almost nine—months ago. The MPD—Magicae Politiae ... something—was the easiest concept to grasp out of everything Aaron had explained. According to Aaron, the second level was for work—planning and executing jobs, completing paperwork, coordinating with team members, and research. Nerves twisting, I
pulled up a webpage of drink recipes on my phone. Growling, Clara turned on her heel and stalked into the hall, slamming the door behind her and leaving me alone with the guild officers. His grip was warm and strong, his palm calloused. Back again. As Kai rolled the motorcycle onto the sidewalk, Sin cleared her throat. I rooted around the shelves,
found a can, and hurried back to the bar. I bolted upright in my seat as I figure out something else." "It'll be fine," he said. Have a nice day, and please never come again." With the two Alfredo plates on my tray, I waltzed past her, ignoring the ice cube lodged in my cleavage. I didn't want to be here. "Hey Kai, how do you start an
argument with a ginger?" "Say anything," the dark-haired guy answered with a smirk. It wasn't completely swollen shut, but close. "Beg your pardon?" Clara dropped my ID on the bar and hid her face behind her hands. Then he drew my hand up to his mouth and stole the chocolate from my fingers, his lips brushing my skin. Flakes of his crisped shirt
fluttered to the floor. I hooked my arm through his and we power-walked to the next intersection and turned right again. She offered me a cautious smile when I approached, which I returned with equal wariness. Hadn't Aaron mentioned witches too? "Those kids," Zora remarked. "Wait!" Clara sped around the bar, my résumé in her hand. "If I'm
going to live here, I'm going to pay my fair share." He narrowed his eyes and I glared back. As the door banged shut behind him, the final bottle in my hand shot from my fingers and flew along the bar. I hit 9 to unlock the security entrance. "Huh?" "He bet you wouldn't pick one." Finished with the flowers, I absently opened the chocolates. I picked
C&H to tick off my parents. Was he a local actor or something? How much longer would this shift last? A man stood behind me like he'd popped out of the floor. Two guys walked in. We saw no signs of stalkers or would-be abductors. "Don't be rude," Justin said, all sorts of territorial undertones in the simple words. I was getting an idea of the
regulars and the less-regular regulars. "That was cool." "No, it was hot," Ezra corrected. "Okay. My dry throat, coated with remnant potato, stuck painfully as I twisted the top. No need to get into the details, right? "You said Kai joined on the same day as you," I murmured. If you want to be considered for a future promotion, you need to prove you
can approach dull jobs with the same dedication as exciting ones." "But—but—why me?" "You brought her up here," Felix pointed out. Tom had shrunk to half his normal size. Even an experienced combat sorcerer would have a hell of a time beating us, and this rogue is far from the best." "Strength in numbers, huh?" I murmured. I bit my lower lip.
Nuh-uh. He'd be able to eat out of the sink if he wanted. A handful of men walked quickly through the darkness, while others, tucked into nooks or sitting beside shopping carts covered in ratty tarps, watched us with empty stares. A middle-aged woman, waiting at the elevator with a wheeled suitcase, watched us approach with eyes that grew wider
and wider the closer we got. Got a boyfriend?" I privately rolled my eyes as I scrubbed away a sticky spot. What shops there were had thick bars over the windows. Relaxed chatter filled the room, interspersed with joking tones and mirth. "Intimidating her is low." I almost told them that I wasn't intimidated—a lie, but whatever—except I was too
fascinated by the way Aaron's temper subsided at his friend's calm words. When I was a ragey teenager hating all the adults in my life, Justin used to hug me until I calmed down, even if it took half an hour. "Sore loser, huh?" "I don't believe it," Aaron muttered. How long does recharging take?" "Depends on the spell. I just wanted to go home,
shower, and curl up with a blanket and a cup of tea. I'd have to sift through fan Wiki pages for hours to find a single real result, and even then, how would I separate fact from fiction? "Hey!" "Mm," he said around the stolen mouthful of delicious caramel I'd been about to eat. Snickering, I relaxed again, wincing at the ache in my back. All for nothing
too." "All for nothing?" I ushered him down the hall to the kitchen where he sat on a stool. Girard steepled his fingers. Razzing new people is a habit that's hard to shake." "You were annoying but not cruel." I plucked at my stained shirt. Its northern neighbor was a shorter building with boarded-up windows and construction tape across the doorway.
My spray bottle of cleaning solution lifted weightlessly into the air, and I couldn't hold back my shocked gasp. "I can take care of myself." He said that now, but at the pub when he'd talked about his odds against powerful mythics, he'd included Kai and Ezra as his teammates. When I reached for the door, sickening repulsion swept away my
excitement. He flashed me a laughing grin that—to my horror—made my stomach flip. The impact jarred up my arm, pain flaring through my knuckles. "Winnie's Café? I offered a quick greeting as I prepped my station and served drinks to the dozen patrons waiting for service—and waiting to hear more about the goon squad attack on the weekend.
Human, bartender. Setting my folder on the thick wood bar top, I tried to peek through the gaps in the saloon doors behind it. Actually, scratch that. The noise had quieted, meaning the manager had probably offered all kinds of apologies and gift cards to the poor assaulted woman. Nice to meet you." Sabrina shifted in her seat, her large brown eyes
emphasized with heavy makeup and fake eyelashes. "Tell me what happened." While explaining how Aaron had walked me home and the resultant stalkers, I watched Sin open her case. I'm in so much trouble. "We should keep her." "You need a bartender," Kai pointed out. Uh, okay, that was a plus. The wait for the elevator was fantastically
strange—two mages supporting the third, an alchemist with blue hair and a potion kit, and then me—black eye, bandaged limbs, and green dye splattered all over my clothes. "I already called her. I snatched it off the ground—a Queen of Spades playing card, worn and
yellowed like it was fifty years old. Cursing, I ran outside. Smile, relax. The kryomage had a proper switch, and Aaron had five others to defend against." I nodded. It hit the floor and shattered. The clients are assholes, but"—I nodded at the money—"they tip well." "What's this place called again? As I closed my eyes, Ezra relaxed too, the tension
sliding from his muscles. On top of that, Tabitha hated my guts—and she wasn't the only one. "Smooth. Then you speak the command word or phrase. "I am not your plaything," I hissed icily. "Get me—" My vision went red. As more patrons lined up at the bar, I raced into the back, almost crashing into Ramsey on my way to dry storage. Everything
else, sure, but I was not okay with literal hellions. As she wet a cloth in the kitchen sink, Kai picked up the first aid kit from the floor. I was diving for cover when the same asshole who'd punched me grabbed my hair and yanked me back. Crouched behind the dumpster, I
clutched my purse like a shield. "Eight of Swords. "That wasn't an invitation to stare." He jerked his eyes up. The Bible is one of the oldest religious texts in the world, and the basis for Catholic and Christian religions. Keeping half an eye on the instructor's presentation, I opened a private browser tab and squinted at the search bar. Whatever the
meeting was for, it didn't matter because I wasn't coming back. Besides, who would I blab to? I can work there for now, and keep applying for something better." "It's not worth the risk. Wow. Then I called Ezra with his phone." Kai gave a slow nod, then rubbed both hands over his face like he was trying to wake up. Anyone new is an unknown
entity." "Um ... okay." "You did a really good job—and you didn't ask me for help at all. But ... I had the job? I didn't check Tori's ID, and it turns out she isn't registered." "Is she a mythic?" Tabitha asked sharply. "You'll make a good officer someday, Aaron." His hand brushed my arm, slid down, and caught my fingers. I froze, my thoughts thrown
completely off track. I'd handed my résumé to the second-in-charge. Whatever they were talking about, I wouldn't beg for an explanation. Would my last paycheck cover the rent? I hadn't expected thanks for helping him last night, let alone gifts, like I was some kind of high-maintenance princess girl. "I'm sure you'll find the right girl eventually."
"Real comforting, Tori." Once Ramsey returned to the kitchen, I gentled my tone. Like me, he was a full-blown ginger, though his tousled locks were more into rusty-orange shades. Maybe I should go back. The system is built on self-regulation. "If it's any consolation, my track record is basically the same." He glanced up. And since I'd done that, I
fixed the other ones too. Eyes wide, I stared incredulously as Darius smiled like a proud parent. It rang ... rang— "Hello?" Ezra's groggy voice was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. But instead, she swelled like a proud parent. It rang ... rang— "Hello?" Ezra's groggy voice was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. But instead, she swelled like a bullfrog and pointed a pink claw at my chest. "What—" "We were attacked walking home," I blurted. "You'll find another one
in no time." "Yeah," I agreed listlessly. Eyes watering, I peered through the mist. As Aaron whirled on them, I ran toward the battle, my sandals splashing through ice-cold puddles. He was possibly not a jackass. "My element isn't flashy. Much better. Damn, since when was I such a chicken? Sighing, I cleaned up the last few tables and as I returned to
the bar, Clara burst through the saloon doors in the same haphazard rush as always. Outside the apartment tower, two vehicles waited—an older red sports car parked on the lawn, two helmets hanging off the back. "This isn't a good plan," I whispered as we rounded
the corner and Justin's building came into view. "Cameron." The tall jerk. His two pursuers broke into a jog, chasing after him. Clara rushed past me into the kitchen to give Ramsey the next wave of orders. The woman stared vacantly, but I knew better than to think I'd literally tray-slapped some sense into her. I clasped it and he pulled me up. Ezra's
expression didn't change as he released my arm, strode right past Kai and the woman who'd come in behind him, and vanished out the door. "We're not that bad, I swear," he said with a laugh. He gave me a look as though measuring how breakable I was. "You must cleanse your deck before performing another reading." "I know how to use my
cards." Sabrina straightened the deck with more violence than necessary. "I'm Zora," she added. Her faint smile was enigmatic and commanding. Even if I was safe enough in broad daylight, what about late-night shifts—assuming I got the job? I really wanted to snatch that pretty stack of bills, but I still had some pride. "Have you looked in a mirror?"
he asked with forced amusement. What could possibly unite them for a shared gathering? Ignoring the scar, he had amazing olive skin and rumpled dark brown curls, with a cultivated five-o'clock shadow that scruffed up his jaw in the sexiest way possible. Kneeling beside Aaron again, I waited, my stomach twisting. Swearing, I zoomed down to Kai's
number and called it. A question immediately bloomed in my mind: What next? When I looked up, the door was opening again. I scooped up the money and stuffed it into Justin's mail organizer. Kai's aura of competence didn't allow stupid fears to exist in his vicinity. "You ...?" "Just helping out," I explained hastily. And I was getting paid fifteen
freaking bucks an hour? The need to walk away—or better yet, run away—roiled through me like a physical sickness. I pursed my lips. "Tonight?" "I know it's unorthodox." Her words tumbled together as she rushed to get them out. "Come quietly and we won't hurt you," a black-clad man said in a raspy voice. "You're a good bartender. "Fire, air, and
... lightning?" "Electramage." Kai cradled his drink in one hand. "You are not permitted on this level, Sinclair." "But since Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the older of the two men said, "Darius is on this level, here I am." "Actually," the olde
"Butt out, Rose!" Sabrina growled. They can be useful, but most psychics are little more than charlatans with a minor gift." Kai stirred his drink with his straw. One after another, she laid seven cards on the table in a V shape. Gooseflesh rose on my arms and legs and I shivered. I exhaled and the air puffed white. "What can I—" "Two Manhattans, and
make it snappy, girl." Her sneering tone was too much for me. Please continue." I finished the tale, but even though I glossed over my role, Sin stopped working to gawk at me. She jabbed fuchsia claws at her meal. "Why are you covered in green? "Oooh." Aaron leaned on the bar. His hand burned and I gasped as his legs gave out. "Don't pig out on
your free meals." "Did you just call me a piq?" The offended shriek silenced every conversation in the café. "It's kind of like a union for mythics. He hadn't said much so I wasn't sure. In the dining area, the chickenless wonder had switched from wails to shrieks. If we don't hurry, someone else will nab him." "Have you asked Taye to scout around?" He
gestured at the bronze-skinned foodie I'd spoken to earlier. A couple yards away, a guy went flying in a spiral of flame as Aaron launched upright. He'd either think I was crazy, or he'd think the job was way too dangerous. I didn't recognize him. "Thanks for coming back for me, Tori." Our eyes met, his blue stare so intense that my heart skittered
wildly behind my ribs. "Oh, and Tori? Page 20 The air heated, crackled, burned. "What do you want?" "Hmm." He pondered for an overly long moment. If he'd been drunk and not poisoned, I would've been searching for a bucket for him to puke in. For others, days or weeks." The sorcerer had used the Queen of Spades, then I had used it, but I wasn't
sure how much time had passed. I wanted to buy my own place where no one could kick me out. Sabrina turned the third card, revealing an array of blades. Aaron's skin cooled and his arms loosened, then he tipped over, catching himself on one elbow.
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