

As I said, Flint has had a rough time, but those are behind the city. These days, Flint is a clean city, with thriving businesses, clubs I will have to go to once they open, really good food, with a local cider producer that I think could convert Arnold to drinking the stuff.

Like any city, Flint has its share of museums, Sloan, Whaley House, the Crossroad Village, and a couple of art galleries. I walked through Sloan because it's a science museum, and it's always interesting to see how they try to fit magic into their understanding of the world; when they even acknowledge it exists. Sloan didn't.

I can't blame them. Magic isn't something they can easily test. Most practitioners don't advertise, and those who do, like the Thinkers, well, how do you test for magic when it's basically all in their mind? Or would they let me have sex to charge up? Let me influence them so they can try to quantify what exactly I do? Not that I'd let them. Another problem is that for me, and a lot of magic-users, it's not just a tool we use, it's part of a belief system. My god gives me these abilities, and there's something sacrilegious about trying to understand how they work.

It's literally part of what caused my fathers to rebel against theirs.

I stay away from the art installations.

I know and understand art. It's Albert's gift, but I'm not an artistic person. My art is sex and I live it. The rest, colors on canvas, moving pictures on the screen, even the written word, those aren't for me. And because art is subjective, even knowing what is 'good' art, doesn't make me like it. And the jarring between my dislike and my knowledge it's good gets exhausting, not to mention listening to 'experts' going on and on and on about what they believe is good art when they have no idea what they're talking about.

Only once did an argument I got into with one of them, over their belief that Rembrandt was nothing but a hack, lead to a hot night in bed. I don't have Arnold's predilection for fights, or sex afterward.

So I stay away from them, art places I mean.

I spent a couple of hours at the Buick Automotive Gallery, learning about the company. I did not know it was the precursor to General Motors, and one of their brands until the merger with Ford in twenty-eight and the brand was dissolved. I don't know much about cars. I'm a bike guy and mostly a driver of them. I can do basic repairs, and fix the magic on mine, but anything major I take it to Adam so he can fix it.

By the time I made it to the Stepping Stones, it was late afternoon, the sky was clear, a little cool, but it just made wearing my jacket comfortable. And while everything did look man-made, the sounds brought me back to Golden Gate Park, back home. The waterfalls, the kids running around, the families. The happiness.

With a few exceptions, Golden Gate Park only held good memories for me.

Even the demonstrators, with their signs protesting I don't know what, didn't interfere. They were just part of the scenery, easy to ignore and forget.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a woman said.

I startled, pulled from my thoughts and memories.

The sheep lounged on a wool blanket spread on the ground, with a wicker basket on her left, the neck of a wine bottle poking out of the partially open top; an open paper book on her right, upside-down. The sun reflecting off the cover kept me from making out the title. She was in her late fifties, maybe early sixties. Her fur still had black, but was mostly gray. Her eyes were closed as she looked up at the sky, or tried to catch the last of the sun.

I'd utterly missed that she was there as I approached.

Her question made me look at the Stepping Stones again, the light reflecting off the placard of the protesters, and she was right; they were beautiful. More than that, they were art, and good art. The varying heights causing the waterfalls to sound different, to almost harmonize.

"I love coming here to watch the sunset," she said. "Then they turn on the lights and that's beautiful in its own right." She was silent. "Are you in town to see them?" She asked.

I looked at her and she smiled.

“Not many locals wear bike leather at this time of the year.” She indicated my attire. “I’m guessing you’re from somewhere to the south, Tennessee?”

“California, but I travel a lot,” I answered, looking at the waterfall again. The sunlight was glittering over and though it, mesmerizing. “And I’m just passing the time until a meeting can be arranged.”

“Ah, someone important.”

I chuckled. “Hardly. I’m just a contact point between others and my family, but this isn’t business. I just need to return something.” I’d been aware of six attempts to liberate the deck of cards at this point, I figured there had been more since those six didn’t register as they happened, but afterward. I realized I’d felt motion on the inside breast pocket where I had the deck. None of them stayed to ask what I was doing with it, which would have let me arrange a meeting with whoever was in charge.

“Something lost?” she asked.

I pulled my gaze from the waterfall. “Excuse me?”

“You said you were returning something. Is it something someone lost?”

“Not exactly.”

She picked up the book, turning it as she closed it, I noticed writing, then it was closed and back in the basket. “Why don’t you sit, you’re going to give me neck cramps looking up like that.”

I sat, the waterfall mist turned into diamonds at this angle.

“I hope you won’t be offended,” she said, pouring herself a glass of white wine, “but I didn’t plan for company. I only have one glass, so I can’t share.”

“It’s okay, I’m not really a wine drinker, although Flint has some amazing cider.”

“That we do.” She took a sip and placed it on a coaster between us. Wood I thought, larger than it had to be, but I figured it was for stability, the design painted on it was black and white, abstract, it had an amateurish quality to it that made it more appealing, the kind of things a grandchild gave.

“Excuse me?” I looked up from it. She’d asked a question, but I’d missed it.

She chuckled. “I asked what is it you’re returning? It must be important if you rode all the way here and are waiting for someone else to set up the meeting.”

I took the deck of cards out of my pocket. “It’s important to someone,” I said.

“It doesn’t look like much.”

“That’s protective coloring, I guess you could say. I don’t want it to be stolen.” I put it back in the pocket.

“How did you come to have it? You said it wasn’t lost.”

“The man who had it attacked me.”

“Ahh, so it’s a trophy?”

I shook my head. “I don’t need any reminders of the fight. It’s going to stick with me long enough.”

“Then why take it?”

I turned the deck in my hand, looking at it. “To give a message, the man associated with people who ordered him to fight me. I don’t think he knew who I was, but he shouldn’t just pick a fight because he’s told to. Because of this, he represents a group of people. If he’d picked on anyone else in my family, he could have started a feud over something that doesn’t concern him or the people he represents.”

“Are you sure it doesn’t concern those people?” She asked.

“Oh balls,” I said, realizing I hadn’t considered that. What if the Knives had purposely taken part in that? “I hope not. We don’t need that kind of aggravation. I just want this to be a misunderstanding so we can both go a separate way afterward. The world has enough problems as it is. It doesn’t need this kind of conflict added to it.”

“What would be the message?”

I shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought about it yet. But it would be something like maybe they need to educate their members as to who the others like them are out there. This isn’t like the old

days anymore, where we all stuck to our corners and cities and rarely met. Now, it's becoming one big melting pot, and if they aren't careful, they're going to get pulled into fights they don't want to deal with. Other people's conflicts that's going to force them to reveal themselves. I don't think it's something they want. They have a history of not stepping into the limelight."

"No threats?" she sounded surprised. "No, how dare you attack me or my family, know your place, or we'll put you in it."

I chuckled. "That would have been my grandfather's way and the generations before them. If you catch my fathers on a bad day, they might explode like that, but I don't want to start another fight. That's why I'm the one talking to the others and not them. I never go looking for a fight, but I'm able to stand my ground if someone's determined to start one."

"It's nice to meet one of the younger folks who think like that," She said. "Gives you hope the future might not be all fighting and wars. Gods know there is enough of that already going on without us adding to it."

"Yeah."

"You think things were better when everyone had to stay in the shadows?" She asked.

"That's before my time, but seems to me we can do more good in the light, and the checks to keep us from making things so much worse are more fair, more like that keeping everyone else in check."

"I suppose that true. You said the people you are meeting with keep to the shadows. You think they should step into the light?"

"That's not for me to say. It's their faith, not mine. I figure they'll do what they feel is best. I mean, look at this city. It was all accomplished from the shadows, so it's not like only bad guys hide there."

"True, sometimes those people use the light to blind everyone to what they are doing."

We were silent as the sun disappeared over the horizon and colored lights came on around the stones. She was right, it was beautiful.

"Well, I wish you luck with your meeting," she said, standing. "It's getting time for me to head home." She patted my shoulder. "You're a good man, Wyatt Orr." And then I was alone.

I looked at the lights reflecting on the water for a while longer, then the cold seeped in and I decided I needed to get to my hotel room, change and go enjoy the clubs. My hand landed on the empty card box as I pushed myself to my feet.

It was crushed, on the grass.

I stared at it, trying to get my mind to reconcile everything that didn't add up. I'd been sitting on a blanket, there had been a deck of cards within this taped box. I'd been talking to...

Hadn't I?

The string of curses I let out devolved into laughter. The Ten Knives were definitely the masters of subtlety.