

In just over half an hour, I'd either have pulled off an impossible heist during an illicit underground magic fight, or I'd be dead. Oh, and to make things interesting, I had to accomplish this feat on a private tropical island filled with shady Ohrist guests swanning around sipping champagne while openly flexing their magic in front of each other.

Then there was my employer, Tatiana Cassin, who moved through the crowd like an eighty-year-old shark in a sea of guppies acting like they had teeth.

My boss chatted briefly with everyone, who paid their respects *Godfather*-style. The few who snubbed her received a serene smile with a hint of menace, which made most of them scurry over to correct their misstep. She didn't give a damn what anyone believed of her, actively encouraging all the rumors about her presence today.

I had much to learn from Obi-Wan Corleone.

An Indian woman in an orange saree, who was literally as insubstantial as the smoke from her cigarillo, waited impatiently for her turn with Tatiana next to a man in a kilt with skin as hard and bizarrely defined as an alien exoskeleton.

Tatiana's bloodred silk couture gown weighed more than she did, but her blue eyes were as sharp as the bone spikes magically fanning out from the neck of a Black woman in a fitted tuxedo, who bent to kiss Tatiana's wrinkled hand.

They both looked majestic, whereas I was shvitzing worse than an old Jewish man in a sauna due to my overly starched formal housekeeper's uniform worn by all the servers employed by Santiago Torres. I swear, the combination of sweat and polyester had terraformed a microbiome in my armpits.

Note to self: next time I secretly crashed an event, wear breathable fabrics.

My golem partner nudged my hip, both of us hidden under my magic cloaking. "How much longer?" he whined in a whisper.

Sighing quietly, I showed Emmett the old windup watch on my wrist—exactly like I had the other dozen times in the last half hour. Five minutes to showtime.

He rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes but was distracted by a woman sashaying by in a flowy caftan made of living bees. With his hands, he measured his hips in comparison to hers.

"I could rock that," he mused, looking sadly at his sweatpants and runners.

I tapped my index finger against my lips, directing him to keep quiet. While no one could scent us or detect my heartbeat under the black invisibility mesh created by my shadow magic, they could hear us speaking.

Everyone was taking their seats for the outdoor fight, except for Emmett, me, and the security team, who made no attempt to be subtle. They patrolled through gardens where short bulbous cacti nestled in beds of red rocks, between rows of gently swaying palm trees, along the beach with the aquamarine Sea of Cortez beyond, and around the perimeter of the ring.

Taking calming breaths of warm, salt-tanged air, I pulled out the domino that I'd won in the Kefitzat Haderech and ran my thumb over the single black line carved into the tile face. Neither Tatiana, nor our client, Vancouver's head vampire Zev BatKian, had been able to learn much about what we faced en route to our target: the Torquemada Gloves. The vault containing them was in the basement of Torres's opulent mansion and had a heartbeat-monitored door.

That was it. A whopping two facts: basement and special door. I was literally operating on nothing.

And if my manipulative employer and the most paranoid vampire in Canada couldn't sniff out any more details than that, no one else could.

Did working for Zev leave an oily feeling deep in my soul? Why, yes. Did I have a choice? Also, yes. Though with my family's safety and my continued breathing at stake, it wasn't a difficult one to make.

I wouldn't betray Zev, yet he'd still taken a few dozen opportunities to press upon me the importance of loyalty. Not being a total moron, I'd understood his feelings on that subject at our first encounter. At this point, he was just beating a dead horse about how scary he was. It had taken all my willpower not to affect a terrible Dracula accent during our last meeting and say, "I vant to suck your blood. Blah. Blah. Blah."

Another reason I wasn't all that worried about the vampire if I failed? He'd be late to the party. Torres's people would have already killed me, being trained to suss out threats using both magic and high-tech means. However, if I didn't present the Torquemada Gloves to Zev, I could kiss the ward to keep out demons and other dangerous supernatural baddies goodbye. I'd blown my first shot at the vampire's assistance and this gig was the rare gift of a second chance.

Thankfully, he couldn't accompany us to the island. Even if he'd dissolved into smoke and snuck through the lowered wards alongside Tatiana, as Emmett and I had under my cloaking, the

fights were held in broad daylight, precisely so no unwanted bloodsuckers showed up. Zev might be able to go outside under an umbrella on a sunny day in Vancouver, but the tropical sun here would incinerate him.

I curled my nails into my palms to keep from scratching my itchy armpits. Had the makers of these uniforms never heard of natural fibers?

Two minutes left.

*Positive thoughts, Feldman.* I wasn't coming into this totally unprepared. In fact, my entire life had trained me for dealing with the unknown. Forty-two years of experience, my honor roll chops, ex-librarian meticulousness, resilience from navigating a divorce, and some pretty sweet magic talent made me a force to be reckoned with. I bounced on my toes, as alert as an Olympic sprinter braced for the starting gun.

With a smile as suave as his bespoke linen suit, Santiago escorted Tatiana to her ringside seat, which was in my direct line of sight. He'd been hosting these championship fights for over forty years, and Tatiana had attended every one with Samuel, her aficionado husband.

Though this was the first time since his death seven years ago that she'd made an appearance.

Santiago's wife, Sherisse, a frosted blonde with a distracted air and leathery skin, joined them. Tatiana leaned over Santiago to speak to the woman, who shook her head with quick nervous movements. When Tatiana sat back in her seat with her chin propped on her fist, Santiago turned a hard look on his wife, but was all smiles again when he resumed chatting with my employer.

There was no way to contact Tatiana to learn if there was an unanticipated and unwelcome wrinkle in our mission, because I couldn't carry a phone for fear of it being tracked. Once the fight was over, Emmett and I were to meet back at the private plane she'd chartered, but until then, we were on our own.

A bell rang out and a loud cheer went up.

Emmett grabbed my sleeve and I nodded, putting away the domino talisman and setting the alarm on my watch. We'd estimated a half hour to accomplish our mission, based on the average length of these fights in previous years.

Still cloaked, we jogged toward the pale yellow manor with its array of arched windows, rounded balconies, and colonnades.

Lionheart, a barefoot Asian woman in a faun-colored sports bra and fitted shorts, exited a set of ground-floor glass doors and strode across the lawn. The tawny hair cascading to her shoulders was straight out of a shampoo commercial, but as she passed us, I glimpsed the flat, dispassionate gaze of an apex predator. The fighter ignored everyone in the crowd attempting to give her high-fives, her balletic grace in no way lessened by the myriad of ragged white scars traversing her body.

The ring was elevated to shoulder height so it could be seen by all the spectators. Stairs on one side provided access, but the fighter ignored them. In one smooth motion, Lionheart grasped the lower ropes and swung her body up and over into the ring. She walked to the corner and sat down on the mat cross-legged, her eyes closed.

If the cheers greeting Lionheart had been enthusiastic, the ones for her opponent, Destructo, were downright deafening. Dude was a wall of a man with two beady eyes and a nose that listed sideways as if bolting for greener pastures. With skin that could transform into a rock-solid surface, he stomped to the ring, roaring and grunting, his blue satin boxing shorts stretched to the breaking point.

Were I to judge a book by its cover—and I were—the chances of him speaking in erudite sentences were small, though I'd bet he referred to himself in the third person.

For months, Ohrist fighters had competed in a series of to-the-death battles, all in hopes of winning the lucrative prize at today's championship event. Tatiana hadn't given me specifics but apparently it was enough to set the victor up for life.

Lionheart had to be as bloodthirsty and deadly as Destructo to have triumphed over all the other contenders, but I had no doubt that she'd employ strategy. All Destructo had to do was stand there and let his opponents tire themselves out running into him until they fell to the mat like toddlers at nap time and he squashed them like bugs.

"Betting is closed!" cried a sweaty bald man.

Fun as it would have been to watch the two fighters duke it out to the end, work took precedence.

Emmett and I flattened ourselves against the house, careful to stay in line with an enormous bougainvillea tree. It must have been hooked to the same irrigation system that allowed the lush lawn to grow in this desert climate. What a waste of water for grass that was just getting torn up under people's shoes.

After careful calculations back home, based on aerial shots of the property, we'd determined that the tree fell into a tiny slice of land undetected by either the motion sensor over the door or the one over the bank of windows to our right, both connected to monitors in a security hub.

A female guard on patrol set off the motion sensor light. She checked in with her team leader on a headset while I tracked the rotating camera mounted above the door. The second she stepped inside the house, Emmett and I fell into line behind her. The trick was to follow the guard closely enough that the door shut without hitting one of us, while not breathing down the woman's neck, thereby giving away our concealed presence.

Any anomaly would send the guards to investigate with magic blazing.

The golem was so close behind me that he elbowed my back a couple of times, but miraculously, we peeled off from the guard at the end of a long corridor without detection.

A hand-painted ceiling mural of a bloody battle complemented the half dozen pieces of knight's armor, their closed face shields giving the hallway a menacing air. Grimacing, I hoped for his wife's sake that Santiago hadn't carried this design aesthetic into their bedroom.

Emmett grabbed my wrist to check the time, then prodded me to go faster.

The two of us crept down the stairs into the basement in tense silence, checking over our shoulders every few seconds. Some of Santiago's guards were shifters and we'd braced ourselves to face a tiger or a python or something, but we hit the bottom step without incident.

That was even more unnerving because either our intel was wrong, and the vault was on one of the upper floors, which teemed with guards, or Torres depended on magic booby traps to protect it.

If Emmett and I died finding the gloves, we'd disappear without a trace, since I'd bet good money on Torres's team having excellent body disposal protocols. My kid and I had our standing TV date tomorrow night, and I wasn't missing that. Plus, in the event of my demise, my best friend, Jude, was supposed to pluck my chin hairs. There was currently one under my jawline that I'd named Houdini for its ability to escape any pair of tweezers, and I refused to be killed before I'd pulled that little bastard out by the root.

We quickly checked behind doors, finding a private state-of-the art movie theater, a games room featuring a stunning billiard table with hand-carved panels, and both a walk-in humidor and large wine fridge in a lounge area, but no vault.

“There’s one more area to check,” Emmett said.

“Give me a sec.” I unwrapped a protein bar and downed half of it, because keeping us cloaked was running down my magical battery. “Okay.” I crammed the rest of the bar in my mouth, and we headed for the open space to the far right of the stairwell, which served as a small art gallery displaying Torres’s collection of modern pieces.

“Is that...” The golem’s upper lip curled back. “A graffitied toilet? Why?”

“Some people like to push the boundaries of what’s considered art.” I frowned at a nine-foot stack of chairs towering precariously in the corner.

“Some people are idiots. We must have missed a secret entrance down here.” Emmett placed a heavy hand on my shoulders and turned me around.

I stopped, waving a hand at this museum. “This doesn’t fit what I’ve seen of Santiago’s personality. He enjoys aggression, the bloodier the better. Fine wines, good cigars, sure. But a bunch of shitty art?”

I tugged the golem along with me, quickly inspecting each piece for a hidden lever or a button or something, but I came up empty-handed.

“Maybe he ran out of cash for the good stuff.” Emmett nodded his chin at a white wall with a large frame mounted there. A small mirror hung at eye level inside it. The rest of the basement had low, tasteful lighting, but this piece had a high-powered bulb trained on it from the opposite wall.

Was the point of this work to show a person’s reflection inside a frame, making them the art? Deep. I shook my head. “Even if I was rich, I wouldn’t waste money on this.”

“Forget about it.” Emmett checked my watch. “We’ve got twenty minutes max until the fight ends.”

“I know,” I murmured, but I couldn’t let go of the sense that I was missing something.

My partner stood on tiptoe to read the small sign above the frame. ““Old sins cast long shadows.”” He made a face at the mirror, which, thanks to my magic, didn’t show our reflections. “Guess I’m sin-free.”

“Yeah, right. Let me lose the magic cloaking and see how true that is.” I gasped. “That’s it! Santiago has light magic. If he faces the mirror and floods the room with light, he won’t cast a shadow. This is the way in.”

Emmett gestured at the wall behind us. “There’s a camera above the light bulb. You have to drop your magic to have a reflection and if you do, we’ll be caught.”

“Ye of little faith.” Facing the mirror, I dropped the cloaking over my face only. From the back—and therefore as far as the security camera was concerned—we were still invisible.

My reflection blinked back at me in the mirror and a doorknob popped into existence inside the frame. I pumped a fist in victory, but on second thought, hesitated to open it. My myth-loving side insisted that nothing would happen to us. We’d solved the puzzle to gain entry and this was our reward. My fairy tale-loving side, however, reminded me that the witch hadn’t padlocked her gingerbread house.

But, at the end of the day, we didn’t really have a choice