

"Stay positive, it's not going to be as bad as you think. It never is." Shelby said to herself.

She was close to her apartment building. A half block away now. Two blocks ago that gnawing doubt had started, had wormed its way into her head and taken root. It had grown too. The closer she got, the more she saw of what was happening ahead. The clues added up quickly as her steps drew her closer.

All the better to see things clearly my dear. She heard the thought in her head but in Tony's voice. He was fond of parroting the big bad wolf when feeling playful.

And see she had. The debris covered sidewalks. The look on people's faces as she passed, or they passed, shock and numbness dominated. Cars sat in the middle of the streets unmoving, oh so similar to so many end of the world movies and shows. But there was a difference. There had been progress made, several streets she'd passed had one lane cleared, and in many of those cases traffic flowed. Aid cars, ambulance and even wreckers clearing more of the overabundant stalled cars. She should have invested in tow truck companies.

On her way back Shelby had seen the difference a day makes. There had been so many signs of break ins. Very few commercial buildings or stores had been left untouched. In twenty four hours a nomadic army of barbarians had come through and plundered everything. She wondered idly if the sacking of Rome had gone something like the looting of Seattle. She could certainly empathize with those long ago overnight refugees.

Shelby tripped over a hard chunk of debris hidden within a plastic shopping bag. Looking to examine what had almost tripped her she identified several more. Makeshift slings, simple plastic shopping bags with rocks in them littered the ground. She continued on to her corner mindful of the new threat.

Traffic cones closed the intersection and the streets around her apartment building. Few paid any attention to the tall orange cones. There was no one there to enforce them anyway. Here, the smell of burning was thicker and more potent, giving the impression that instead of rising with the heat the smoke sank like a cold draft of regret. She stood at the corner and looked up.

"Aw, what the hell." She muttered.

Her apartment building had burned. Yes indeed it had burned very well thank you very much. All the better to leave you my dear.

It was still burning but it was well on the way of burning itself out, left to take its own natural course. No flames shot out of broken windows. Smoke trickled out slowly burning away the last stubborn bits of fuel left over. There was still smoke lazily sliding up along the sides of the building, as if halfhearted and spent.

From the scorch marks it had either burned down to ground level or started in the lobby. With so many windows broken out from the heat it was a shell of itself, a dead useless husk. People were avoiding the sidewalks under it, there was several feet of burnt debris piled up in heaps around the perimeter of the building. Looking at the building that had been, if not her home at least a place to stay, Shelby realized it was now official, she had nothing to her name.

Except she still had a future.

She was fairly certain that Tony had been inside when it started. There was a good chance, and she knew she should be thinking it as unfortunate but, eh, it was almost certain he had burned inside the apartment building. The only thing she had left was what she was carrying. There was the car Tony

would have left at his place of work. A few minutes of checking through her bag she found her keys, and yes she had a spare key for the Honda.

Shelby had noticed cars were on the move again. The streets were being cleared. She turned and started making her way to his workplace. On her way she considered her next move. The shock of actually having nothing, and losing Tony she reminded herself, made her thoughts slow. She had to backtrack a block due to the public library being in the same condition as her apartment building.

She hadn't realized it until she started walking past the building but City Hall had power, the lights were on and the entire street in front was clear of cars. There were a lot of people milling around, creating a crowd of refugees she had little doubt had little better to do. They milled around the city building aimlessly. It struck her that they were a mob just waiting for direction.

Shelby knew she was at a crossroads. Her career was probably over. The company she worked at was not likely to survive being shut down for even a couple days. She'd spent so much time climbing the ladder, competing among others for that promotion, that step up, that office with a window that she'd shoved everything else away. And now she was adrift, as aimless as the rest in the crowd. Except she was different. She knew magic. She had power. She had a vision of the future.

There was an opportunity here, Shelby realized. Instead of seeking power as she had before she already possessed it. Standing at the edge of a crowd surrounding City Hall she wanted to get through, wanted to be part of the corrective process. With her new abilities she could be big. Shelby Rostcourt could be a big name in a new arena of competition. Shelby Rostcourt had the edge now. She just wondered how to best go about making her play.

She was standing at the edge of the crowd undecided and still uncertain when she saw a dragon glide in and land on the raised courtyard in front of City Hall.

She stood amazed, staring openmouthed as many of those around her started moving away with a sudden urgency. When it had flown over Shelby had seen shockwaves in the magical essence caused by its passing. More importantly the beast itself looked like it glowed in her magical sight. It seemed brighter than anything around it. It landed and moved toward another creature that displayed the same magical glow.

Shelby almost smiled. This had been the first step in her future, finding this dragon. Looking around she decided to wait until the crowd thinned a bit more. It would give her time to come up with a way to approach and set herself apart. As she waited she saw a number of people come out onto the elevated courtyard and join the dragon. She blinked when she noticed the tall cat with tentacles coming out of his back. A few seconds later, and after looking much closer she spotted a tiny gryphon.

Her heart beat faster. Three of them were already here. This was her vision coming true. She had to make the connection. She had to make contact with them or things would be so much harder afterward.

Stepping closer yet staying out of the swarm of refugees she made her way toward the wide steps up to the courtyard level. There was a line of police almost shoulder to shoulder and the crowd of people they held back were four and five deep. She stopped in the clear area in the street and looked for better options. There were police tending every entrance. Getting through would be impossible without creating a show.

She discarded several ideas to get through the police cordon. She'd need to do something to gain the attention of someone that could give the order to let her through. Or even better, escort her to where they were talking with the dragon. Considering a number of tactics she settled on one that while had a good chance of working it was also somewhat amusing.

Taking her walking stick in both hands she focused and generated a spell on it. Aiming the brass end at the ground Shelby smiled at the circle of light that moved wherever she pointed. She brought it up and tucked it into her armpit. She'd rather not look like she was aiming a weapon to the casual glance. She wanted to catch their attention but not get tackled or shot as a result. The circle was bright enough to see as it wandered over the side of the building in the process of Shelby learning to aim properly.

A minute of getting the hang of aiming she had her circle of light on the large umbrella next to the dragon. He looked at it, and followed its progress as Shelby moved it side to side. All conversation stopped as everyone followed his gaze. She started spelling out her name. With their attention on her bead of light she spelled out 'We need to talk.'

As several of the people started looking around she held her arm up and waved.