

“Dr. Carter?”

I set down my fountain pen, sit back in my creaky swivel chair and slide the sheaf of forms away. As an affiliate of the Magical Vendor’s Guild, I’m legally obliged to make this filing to the Board of Governors of the International Magical Coalition. They grant my license as the owner of the Sorcerous Supplies Shop of Ann Arbor.

I’ve been open for business three years now. I like to think I’m building a reputation for the quality and variety of my potions (all made on the premises by yours truly), though Zeus knows even simple love philters are highly regulated nowadays. But I can’t rely on the potion market to sustain me. So I also trade in everything from scrolls and grimoires to magical/musical instruments, and all sorts of spell-making supplies: eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and even tongue of dog, though I’ve always felt guilty about that one. I love dogs. Have a cute Demon Yorkie myself. Carnation is a ferocious little bundle of love with two little eyes, two little ears, two little horns and two little tails. Beautiful creature. She really lights up my life. It’s a shame to have to sell dog’s tongues in my shop, but I have to earn a living. It’s not easy, being a self-employed magician.

“Yes, Jackson?” I respond to my faithful automaton.

“Dr. Carter, you have a call.” His superbly crafted metal fingers hold out my portable magic mirror. *Drat*. I disabled my primary mirror on the wall over my desk before I started the paperwork, but I forgot all about my portable. I almost never use it; it’s old and spotted, and you can’t get a clear image on it. My friends keep telling me to upgrade to an iPad, but I can’t afford it.

“Thank you, Jackson,” I say, taking the mirror. “Hello?”

“Hi, Dr. Carter!” the mirror says brightly, and I can make out the gorgeous dimpled face of Samantha Dove. The girl’s a street herbalist, works with bugbane and feverfew. But she also deals in lotus fruit. Narcotics. Illegal. So she’s a smalltime drug dealer. So what?

“Hi, Blackbird,” I reply, mustering a warm smile of my own. She got the tag because her last name’s Dove and her complexion’s chocolate. As for me, everybody calls me Dr. Carter, though I never actually got a degree. In fact, my name is Isaac.

“Hi. I know you’re real busy, but I met a guy who’s interested in seeing your place and I know you don’t let in strangers without a reference.” This is true. Maybe I could make a better income if I let in just anybody, but once a crazy warlock trashed the showroom—and besides, I have secrets in this place. Some might lead the Board of Governors, or whatever department’s division’s sector’s office’s subcommittee processes these filings, to deny me my license to stay open next fiscal year. Good thing they don’t send out inspectors anymore.

“Really?” I say with a touch less weariness in my voice. “That’s great!” A new prospective

customer! And business has been slow lately. “Why don’t you bring him over? What’s his name?”

“Tom Weiss,” says Samantha. “A client of mine, you know. I met him in California a few years back when I was down there for the rock-hemp crop. I think he’s rich.” Better and better.

“So, when can you bring him over?” I say. “Right now, maybe?”

“You sure, Dr. Carter? I know you’re busy. . . .”

“No problem. This nightmare of paperwork isn’t due to be faxed in for three days, and I’m only expecting a call from my suppliers later this evening. If you can reach this Mr. Weiss, the store’s open. How soon can you bring him here?”

“Maybe a half hour.”

“Fabulous!” That just gives me time to get the place cleaned up. The showroom's a bit disorganized. Magic wands and potion bottles all over the place. Working with Jackson, though, it won't take long to get everything put away on shelves or stowed in the back.

“Can’t thank you enough, Blackbird. I’ll see you in thirty minutes.”

“Likewise, Dr. Carter. Signing off.” The mirror blanks out, then returns to its normal spotty reflection. I hand it back to Jackson, who has stood by patiently waiting through the conversation.

“Will you be wanting any assistance neatening the shop, sir?”

“Yes, of course, Jackson. And you can check the fountain’s levels, too. I want everything to look good today. We have a new customer coming to the store.”

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I’m located underground in the heart of downtown Ann Arbor, below 5th and Liberty. One of those places where a staircase leads down from the street level to basement storefronts, you turn right instead of left and go through the blank wall into my foyer. You need to have one of my pass tokens to get through, of course. Blackbird does.

I lead Mr. Weiss deeper into the shop. Blackbird wanders off on her own, heading for the area off to the left where there’s a collection of drug-related paraphernalia.

“So, Mr. Weiss,” I say. “What brings you to my shop? Are you looking for anything in particular?” I gesture grandly at my extensive inventory. Mr. Weiss has been staring around at everything as if he can’t believe his eyes. I don’t blame him, either.

My place looks marvelous.

All the lights are turned out, and the showroom is illuminated solely by a small fountain in the center. It flows with a very thick white liquid that shines bright enough, in fact, to illuminate the showroom. It’s called a moon fountain, and it’s an example of something that cost me a lot of money. And I hardly ever use it. But every time I do, I know it was a good purchase.

In the dim captured moonlight, the store looks mysterious and lovely. The fountain is not far from the counter, which has glass display cases on either side housing my most unique pieces. On top of the counter are an array of flame-bottles. As the name suggests, these are tiny glass bottles which when uncorked produce a small flame. They were invented way before modern cigarette lighters, but are no longer supposed to be produced because they can be weaponized too easily.

Behind the counter is the door to the back room, with my extremely potent customized locking spell on it. That particular bit of sorcery would stop the most powerful of magicians if they didn't know the password—which is, of course, an intricately designed charm in an obscure language, to insure that no one but I and one or two trusted associates can get in and out of there.

Over on the left side, I have my potions. Hundreds upon hundreds of vials of different blends, lining the walls in close-set shelves stacked to the ceiling. Most are well enough labeled: There are a range of red-pink shaded vials with little hearts printed on; black ones with white skulls and crossbones; green ones with pictures of clouds of gas, pearly liquids in clear bottles with no label at all—the rows go on and on, every bottle holding a unique blend or different potency.

And in the right branch, there are magic wands, staffs, swords and knives; books, scrolls, and a selection of grimoires; magical animal parts—dragon scales and the like (this is the most illegal section of the showroom, what with dragons and so many other species being protected); harps, flutes, and other instruments with a permanent aura lingering around them. . . .

In one corner I have a selection of potted plants with such intricate patterns in the roots and branches that you could stare at them for hours.

I might mention that, myself, I'm wearing black pants, shirt, vest and tie. A black-handled, black-sheathed knife hangs from my black leather belt. Above, my dyed black hair; below, my polished black shoes. I'm big on black.

And in the light of my moon fountain, everything looks fabulous.

"What? Oh. . . . Just looking around," says Mr. Weiss in response to my query. "I was in the area and Samantha—Blackbird—decided to take me on a tour of the sights."

"Lovely," I say amiably, considering. Is he not familiar with her street name? Something is out of the ordinary. I make a decision on the spur of the moment, and act upon it.

"In that case, I'll give you the grand tour of the Sorcerous Supplies Shop." I put on a disarming smile and put a hand on his shoulder, steering him around the shop. I bring him first to the left branch and gesture towards the potions.

"Interested in a woman?" I ask. "Very good. Interested in someone who's otherwise involved, married? That's no problem either." I smile as I indicate the deeper red colored vials. "Got a

‘friend’ you’re getting tired of?” (I raise two fingers as air-quotes around “friend.”) “Well, you’ve come to the right place—” pointing to the black potions.

I watch his face. He doesn’t appear shocked. He keeps his expression stiff and emotionless as he picks up a small black-glass bottle with a skull and bones on it and turns it over in his hands, looking for any more detail on the bottle.

He finds it—tiny dull white letters low down on the back of the bottle.

ESSENCE OF ANNIHILATOR (GU). IMPORTED FROM CHINA.

He weighs the tiny bottle in his hand. “Isn’t this illegal?” he asks abruptly.

I grin broadly, projecting overwhelming confidence. I’m on my home ground, after all. “Yes, indeed,” I say. “Isn’t it funny? People can still get a hold of death apples or cyanide, yet they choose to ban this magical poison. It’s nothing to me, of course. I think people should be able to get a deadly agent of some quality when they want it.” I wait for his response, an offensive spell on the tip of my tongue.

He frowns slightly. “What else do you have here like that?”

I drag him across the shop, past a wary Samantha Dove (now looking at the weapons) to the animal parts section. “Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog,” I patter, moving past them. “And here we have salamander skin flakes! Not that kind of salamander, the *other* kind of salamander! And here’s dragon scales—and here are dragon’s teeth! Grow your own military! A bargain at two hundred thousand dollars a package. And check out these—” He breaks through my verbal whirlwind.

“What about unicorn parts?”

At his question, I stop dead.

Powdered unicorn horn is one of the most highly coveted substances on the planet. (Celestial steel may be a contender, but it comes from the stars.)

Unicorn poaching is an international issue. They’re a critically endangered species. If the unmagical really knew about them, they’d try to protect them, too, but the international magic community has been trying pretty hard anyway. Magical governing bodies in Europe have established top-secret reservations to protect the unicorn population, but unscrupulous necromancers poach them anyway, because they’re so strongly magical and there’s such a powerful demand for them. What’s the old law of economics? *If there’s demand for a restricted commodity, the natural result is a thriving black market.* It’s always held true.

But I don’t deal in that stuff. It’s true. Regardless of what I think of efforts to regulate markets, I don’t hold with murdering unicorns, and I will not engage in the trade of smuggled unicorn

parts. Sure, I could make a few million dollars—but some principles are beyond money. Also, nobody has ever asked before.

I no longer trust Tom Weiss in the slightest. Either he's an inhuman monster, or he's an undercover agent of the MPA. That's Southeast Michigan's Magic Police Authority. He doesn't look like a cop, but then they're all plainclothesmen anyway. (Except for their people in the unmagical AAPD. They wear normal police uniforms. Every magical law enforcement agency needs a few people working with the city government to make everything run smoothly. The MPA has tried the vigilante route, but there was too often a risk of unmagical police interference.) Mr. Weiss could be trying to get at the smugglers and the poachers behind the unicorn trade through me.

The only thing keeping me from blasting him on the spot is that Blackbird vouched for him. Even though I'm thinking she might have been mistaken, I'm willing to hold back a bit until I find out more. Ask questions before I shoot, you might say.

"You want unicorn parts?" I say calmly. "Come with me."

I lead him to the sealed door behind the counter.

I activate the senses-numbing spell while I speak the password to unlock the door, so he can't hear me or read my lips. The door swings open, and Mr. Weiss staggers as his senses return.

"Come in." I beckon him forward.

My little demon dog, Carnation, snarls at Mr. Weiss as we enter. Jackson stands still and tries to look like an inanimate object. I stride straight through my cluttered back room and pull out what I want from under the table. A wooden box about three inches wide and three feet long. I open the end of the box and slide out a long, straight and spiraling, sharply pointed horn.

"Look at this," I tell him, laying the horn carefully on the table.

He stares at it for one moment. Then he turns to face me, his arm outstretched, one finger pointing at my chest. The tip of the finger is glowing hot red with an unexploded spell. He seems to have grown several inches taller, and his face is like a dangerous stone cliff. Suddenly I'm nervous.

Carnation barks hysterically, then turns and runs. *Thanks, dog!* Jackson moves, then stops when I glare at him. *I've got this.*

"Tom Weiss, MPA," he says (I was right!). "Is that a real unicorn horn?"

Trying not to move, I nod carefully toward the end of the table the horn is lying on. "There's a magnifying glass and examination kit on the table there. I assume you know how to use it."

He turns, keeping his glowing finger pointed at me while he locates the kit. He glares at me. "Don't try anything. I have backup." Then he lowers his hand to open the case of instruments.

Before he has time to identify the thing as a genuine narwhal horn, I spring into action. I pluck the obsidian dagger from my belt and thrust it into his body up to the hilt. He doesn't even have time to scream. There's a sound like you get when you spill water on the hot stovetop—*pfhssssss*—and Tom Weiss disintegrates in a puff of sulfurous steam. The handle of the knife clatters to the floor. I pick it up regretfully. The blade is gone for good, along with Tom Weiss.

Behind me, there's a soft squeak. I turn swiftly. Blackbird is in the open doorway, her hand over her mouth, clutching an engraved sword from the shop.

"What did you do to him?" A reasonable question.

"I dispatched him to the demon dimension, my dear Samantha," I say matter-of-factly. "He's not dead. He gets to be tortured for eternity instead." I frown at the bladeless handle of my weapon, then shrug and toss it into the trash can. One use only. Too bad. "It's for the best. You were wrong about him. I don't blame you, but—"

Blackbird glares, her fists clenched, then whirls and decapitates Jackson with the sword, smashing a bottle of universal solvent on his body. I stare, astonished, as she turns to face me. "I was *not* \*\*\*\*ing wrong about him!" she yells. "I was working *with* him. This case could have made my career—and instead, my partner gets killed—or doomed to eternal torture—whatever—*damn* you, Dr. Carter!" And she snatches a flame-bottle from the counter behind her and hurls it, through the doorway, at me.

Remember what I said about flame-bottles' capacity for being weaponized? This is because of the magical flame that powers them. Another controlled substance. But only at this moment do I fully realize the hazards.

Logically, I should throw up wards to protect myself from this projectile. Instead, I let my reflexes take over and throw myself flat.

The flame-bottle flies over me and bursts on the desk, reducing my paperwork to ash in moments. No loss there. I jump up, now wrapped in my wards, as the fire runs all over the desk and down the legs. The magical fire spreads with astounding speed; boxes all over the floor have caught, and despite my wards I've got a heck of a hotfoot.

This is all happening in the space of a second, almost a blur. But Blackbird has got me mad. I return fire, literally, sending a blast of magefire from both hands at her. She wisely teleports away, presumably back to the street above. My blast of flame hits the row of flame bottles on the counter.

Seismographs will register some unusual geophysical activity around here.

The resulting explosion destroys pretty much the whole shop. I'm knocked off my feet. I stagger upright, my wards used up, my clothes on fire. Smoke is in my lungs, and in case that doesn't

make breathing hard enough, it triggers a horrible asthma attack. Coughing desperately, I stare wildly around. All I can see is smoke and flame.

“Carnation?” I call, as best as I can through the hacking coughs. “Carnation? *Carnation!*”

My little dog—the sweetest animal you could hope to find—the thing closest to my heart—is gone.

Someday I am going to kill Samantha Dove.

For now, it’s time to run for it. I gather my wits and teleport to the other location I’d been preparing to move to. Roughly 1750 feet north by west, to my second underground hideaway.

I wish to God I could just reopen here, but there’s no chance of that. Blackbird survived—Blackbird! Working for the MPA! Amazing.—and now I’ve definitely got law enforcement after me. I can’t reopen. Everything I’ve built over the last three years is gone. Jackson is decapitated and melted. And I’ve lost Carnation.

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I give myself a breatheasy spell. I’m going to take everything out of here and be gone by the time the MPA catches up. After that, I don’t know. Will I have to live out the rest of my life in fear?

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I’m living under an assumed name in the last place the MPA would expect to find me. I’ve had to swear off magic, because they can trace spells easier than phone calls. It’s a hard life, living as one of the unmagical. I don’t know how they do it.

It’s also hard dealing with a terrible secret.

But I’ve had an idea.

Remember when I was an expert at potion-making? That’s not as easy to trace as actually performing a spell is. I’ve been preparing just a few potions, every now and then, and secretly sending them to be added to the food and drink of just one kid in Ann Arbor. The potions contain memories. My memories.

The idea is that the kid will have these ideas and not know where they came from, but will decide what to do with them. The potions also deliver that suggestion. And so the story—*my* story—will be written down by this kid and submitted to a writing contest. As always, the truth beats anything anybody could invent, so this story is sure to win a prize.

At that point, the prize money will actually rightfully be mine. (It *is* my story.) And because I have a right to the money, the laws of magic say I can summon it to me far easier than if I just stole some money. Performing the summoning will still, of course, alert the MPA to my whereabouts. But I’ll be on the move again, using the money to buy a plane ticket to China. (I can’t teleport that far, of

course.) China has far more lax regulations, even if they have a totalitarian government. I can set up shop again there and rebuild my fortunes. That's assuming I don't kill my asthmatic self trying to breathe the smoggy Chinese air. Besides, I've always wanted to meet a Chinese dragon.

Soon I'll be running the Sorcerous Supplies Shop again, drawing a high-quality clientele interested in the finest magical paraphernalia and the best potions around. I'll be famous, as well-established and respected as all the old magic enterprises—Merlyn, Stanislaus, and the House of Magic chain. I won't worry about any pesky law enforcement knocking on my door. But Jackson won't be helping me, and I'm sure I'll never have another like him. And I'll be without Carnation.

God. Someday I am going to kill Samantha Dove.

#### Postscript

The kid who has written down and submitted my story doesn't know for sure that it wasn't a regular dream-invention or something. Even though this story contains in itself the explanation for how it got into the kid's mind, the kid isn't sure whether to believe it. I wonder whether those who *read* the story will believe it—or not?

Good night, all.

Everything you can imagine is real. —*Pablo Picasso*