

## **The Secret to Building Momentum (Is To Take One Day at a Time)**

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# **The Secret to Building Momentum (Is To Take One Day at a Time)**

by [Jedi Buttercup \(jedibuttercup\)](#)

## Summary

For years, I'd lived under a death sentence for defending my own life. Who was I to throw stones at someone else who'd seen the trap he was mired in and chose to rip it down and start over?

## Notes

Because I've always wondered how things might've unfolded if their first meeting had gone differently.

The first time I encountered Gentleman John Marcone, he hadn't yet been dubbed the Gentleman. I'd never so much as heard his name, not even from my friends in CPD's Special Investigations. And I doubt ever he'd been in a position to hear the name Harry Dresden, either.

I certainly had no idea our paths were destined to cross and recross in increasingly involved ways over the course of the next decade. How could I? That initial ships-in-the-night passage never even brought us face to face.

What it did instead, was set the tone for every meeting that came after. To the end of my days, I will never forget the hammering sound of gunshots echoing off the waters of Lake Michigan, the sight of innocent blood staining a young mother's hands, and the look on the face of a green-eyed young man as he realized just what his presence in that park had cost.

I was still new to the wizarding detective gig at the time. I'd barely finished my apprenticeship at Ragged Angel Investigations; the ink on my business cards still had that ozony fresh from the printer scent, and I had just scraped together enough savings to hang out my own shingle. But I'd already made enough of a name for myself in finding lost things that a skeptic with money to burn had sent me to a well-trafficked stretch of greenery on a needle in the haystack quest for a missing coin. And not just any coin: the irreplaceable souvenir of a lost brother's military service that had somehow fallen out of her pocket.

I'd been tempted to turn the woman down; I'd already accepted a retainer on another, more involved case, and the idea of tromping around Chicago for hours following the tug of a seeking spell on what was likely a wild goose chase hadn't exactly blown my metaphorical skirt up. Maybe some of what followed would have happened differently if I had. But I don't spend much energy worrying about it; I doubt I'll ever know, bar someone breaking the Sixth Law of Magic.

Though seeing a child injured like that, in such a senseless way ... if there *was* a way to turn the clock back, I might even do it myself, regardless of what the Council would have to say. I may have seen worse injuries since, more blood, more pointless death and destruction ... but that was the first time I'd faced it unprepared, without the adrenaline jolt of righteous fury to hold the chill of horror at a distance. The first time I'd felt the shadow of the Grim Reaper since Justin DuMorne tried to enslave me.

To be unwilling witness to an innocent's destruction ... it leaves a scar on the soul that never entirely heals. And mine was pretty scarred to begin with. I already had good reason to reject the idea of a world where the strong rule and the weak cower; that day in the park only solidified that conviction.

That little girl was the same age I'd been when Justin took me in. As Elaine had been, when he'd brought her into his house. As Faith Astor had been, when she'd nearly fallen victim to a troll. I looked at her and saw a yowling hellion in pigtails whose parents had reported her kidnapped rather than deal with the reasons she'd run away ... and a pair of orphaned wizards so happy to belong that they'd suffered any 'training' just to earn a word of praise.

Marcone had looked back, just once, as he and his companion headed for another car to flee the scene. He'd been too far away to trigger a soul gaze; just as I'd been too far to cast a shield to intervene. But I caught enough of his expression to see a revulsion there, a rage of denial, to equal my own.

I took special interest in the news articles in the local papers after that. I was surprised to see the violence I'd witnessed written off as Jamaican gang warfare; much less so to see a death notice pop up for little Amanda Beckitt after three weeks on life support, and a wrongful death suit brought against the one goon who hadn't actually fired a shot in her direction. And not at all displeased to read about the increasing rumors of trouble in Chicago's underworld that followed, a new player systematically and ruthlessly stripping control away from the Vargassis. Coming down especially hard on any aspect of mob business that harmed children. *Civilizing* organized crime, as far as that was possible. It didn't take an investigator's mind to connect the dots.

Every time I read one of those articles, saw the picture of an all-too-familiar player in the paper ... I thought of summer green eyes gone flat with helpless anger, and all those older memories, as well. Of how near I'd come to getting ground under the black magic wheel and perpetuating the cycle myself. Of abuses of power, and the arbitrary way people in authority seemed to enforce their rules.

For years, I'd lived under a death sentence for defending my own life. Who was I to throw stones at someone who'd recognized the trap he was mired in and chose to rip it down and start over? Hell's Bells; I'd pretty much done the same thing, on a smaller scale, with less thought for the consequences.

As first impressions go, that was definitely a memorable one. For me. I recognized Johnny Marcone instantly when a pair of his bodyguards chased me down on a hot, busy day three years later and ushered me into a dark blue Cadillac. He was older, better dressed; eyes faded and hair silvered as though his battles had leached some of the color out of him, but definitely the same punk from the park. The same mobster from the papers. The one who'd burned the Vargassis to the ground and wrestled the city's Families into order. But from the affable, relaxed smile Marcone turned my way, he didn't recognize *me* from Adam.

I admit to running off my mouth at first, in surprise; my default response to condescension. Until he offered me money *not* to do my job. As ridiculous as it was, that felt like a betrayal of the furtive kinship I'd felt reading the articles; my temper lit like my favorite fire spell.

Did Marcone think he was the *only* person in the city that gave a damn about cleaning it up? Who had the right to vengeance?

"It isn't the money, John," I fumed. "It's the principle of the thing. Jessica Stanton and Tommy Tomm might not have been innocent ten year old girls, but they were killed with a weapon from *my* side of the fence. And if you went to the trouble to track me down, you know what that means. That makes it my business, whether you like it or not."

Marcone went still at that answer; his polite, earnest expression faded away, leaving something almost predatory in its place. "They do say you're the real thing, Mister Dresden,"

he said, in a measuring voice. "A real magus. I would as soon not make an enemy of you over this matter."

"And that's the only choice?" I seethed. "I kiss your ring and pretend like I'm grateful for the opportunity, or we go to daggers drawn? I hate to break it to you, Marcone, but most of us don't sort neatly into minions and enemies. Two people died today because someone perverted the forces of life and creation on my turf. I'd have thought you might understand why I have a problem with that."

I don't take very kindly any more to being told what *not* to do ... if I ever did.

"It interests me how much you seem to think you know about my motives," Marcone's tone chilled further, drawing frowning glances from his red-headed driver. The way his hands were steepled made him look like one of those old-fashioned gentleman villains from the movies; probably where his nickname came from. But not a trace of what he was feeling showed in his expression.

He met my gaze, then, casually staring back when I looked a little too long into that abyss.

I should have glanced away. But I wanted it, too; I'd just had it shoved in my face that I'd basically been writing fan fiction in my head about the guy for three years, and getting the characterization all wrong. Ascribing positive motives where there probably weren't any.

Stars and Stones; I'd known what he was, all along. I didn't know why I'd still expected to like him.

The soulgaze began almost instantly.

I have this theory about what we take into soulgazes. When two people look inside one another, past all pretenses and defenses, under the crystal clear, merciless spotlight of the Sight. Both my masters – the cruel one, and the brutally honest one – taught that it allows us to see each other exactly as we are. But human beings are ever changing; sometimes from second to second, under the influence of emotion. John Marcone was a soldier and a warrior under the surface; a disciplined man, as cool and dry and bare as a server room. But in that moment, like a computer thrown out of whack by a wizard's presence, an off-pitch whine disturbed that orderly space, drawing the eye to a dim corner in the back where something he normally kept tamped down was spilling out of its box.

*Mommy, mommy, mommy*, I heard, faintly, from that corner. *Owie, owie, owie*.

A pool of blood seeped out of that corner; and when I looked down, I saw blotchy red footprints marching backward to a pair of athletic shoes, too small to be mine.

Then I blinked, and found myself back in the car, staring into the ruffled expression of a man who looked just as startled and wrong-footed as I felt. Perhaps I hadn't been judging him wrongly, after all. We just had different methods of dealing. I tended to react to things like a wounded dog: snarling and snapping, sinking my teeth into the immediate threat and shaking it until it stopped fighting back. I *could* plan; I was pretty good at working things out, when I had the time and emotional distance. But not like Marcone; he had a tiger's soul, strong and

merciless. He'd stalk his prey until just the right moment; for years if he had to, spurred on by the goad of that memory.

I probably should have reacted to that with a little healthy fear. But 'healthy' isn't the first term most people would use about my reactions to danger.

"Huh," I said, blinking at him.

He stared for a long moment, then cleared his throat and glanced to his driver. "Mr. Hendricks?"

"We're there, boss," Hendricks replied, still frowning as he parked in front of my building.

"Good," Marcone said. "Call another car for me; you'll be driving Mr. Dresden today."

"He – what?" I blurted, surprised.

Marcone gave me a smile, sharper and less effusive than before, but somehow more sincere. "I can see that I won't be dissuading you, Mr. Dresden. Mr. Hendricks will not interfere with your investigation, or your appointments. But there is more at work here than the death of a ... friend, however that death was caused. If you will insist on pulling at this particular thread, I would prefer to be forewarned of any ... developments."

"And meanwhile, it looks to the cops like I've fallen into your pocket," I pointed out. Ten minutes before, I would have been furious at the high-handedness; I was still irritated, but also confused. What the hell had he seen that made him think I needed – or would accept – a babysitter? "Thanks, but no thanks."

"I can see how that might be a problem," he replied; though his tone added, *to someone other than me*. "But is not the gaze of the police that concerns me."

I thought that through. Gentleman Johnny or not, his grip on the city was still relatively new, and whoever'd killed his bodyguard had fired a clear shot at him. So if he couldn't control the investigation, he wanted to be *seen* as controlling it? Maintaining his position might hinge on the outcome. Especially if a rogue sorcerer was involved; vanilla mortals were ill equipped for that sort of challenge.

Still. "Yeah, well, it concerns *me*. This is the source of my rent money we're talking about."

"There is a very simple answer to that problem." Marcone spread his hands invitingly.

"Not one I'll ever take," I shook my head, unwilling to budge on *that* point. "If you ignore everything else I say, believe that: I won't accept any kind of collar, no matter how comfortable. Ever."

His gaze turned speculative; but after a moment, he shunted it aside and pressed onward. "Then let us compromise, Mr. Dresden. Think of it this way: if we are to share this city as anything other than implacable foes, then I must gain further measure of your methods, as you must of mine."

I'd heard my share of reasonable words concealing malicious intent in the past, and it had left me mistrustful of any attempts to butter me up. In a world where I hadn't spent the last three years guiltily cheering the man's criminal career along, I don't doubt that I would have rejected that with a quippy insult too, and fled back to my office with my hackles all aruff. But he wasn't exactly wrong. And ... there was always the option of ditching Hendricks *later*, once I was safely on my own turf.

I felt a touch of vertigo then, as though I'd stumbled down a hole that morning and only just noticed I was still falling. My first murder scene since I'd started working with the CPD; my first offer of anything like respect from someone in a position of power. What in the name of the White Rabbit was I getting myself into?

"All right, fine. But he stays in the car," I insisted.

Marcone smirked, as self-satisfied as a cat licking cream off its toes. "I'm glad we understand each other, Mr. Dresden."

"Yeah, well," I shook my head as I opened the door. "We'll see about that."

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I don't like to be too trendy with my quotes, but the one about the paths and the yellow wood is pretty apropos, here, I think.

Or maybe the one about small seeds, and how they grow.

\*

Striking a cooperative truce with Gentleman Johnny Marcone didn't instantly make my life easy. It may have had a surprisingly salutary effect in countering maliciously lurking Wardens, traitorous goons bucking Marcone's leadership, and other assorted human-scale bumps in the road; but the overall quota of rocks falling in my life was still on a decidedly upward trend.

That wasn't really a surprise, though. I'm a wizard; danger more or less goes with the territory. Most of the things that go bump in the night think human practitioners taste good with catsup; the fact that we can actually fight back just adds extra seasoning.

It didn't paint me with the scumbag brush, either, even if a few of CPD's finest did look at me a little askance when they starting hearing the rumors. I owed at least two of my arrests at Murphy's hands to that, I'm pretty sure; but she more than paid that debt back, with interest, over the next few years. The cops still paid a large part of my living expenses, calling me in when there was no one else to turn to; I never did sign a contract with Marcone.

Chicago's crime lord just ... occasionally lost things, and called me up to retrieve them. A key, a tie-tack, a money clip, an athletic shoe; never the same item twice, and never anything that seemed to warrant the investment. But every time I saw him, he'd insist on a polite conversation first. And every time, it would end the same way. Even after he hired another, not-quite-human magic user for everyday wear.

"If you ever change your mind...."

"Asked and answered, John. Asked and answered."

I even, eventually, got a first name out of Hendricks. Marcone's right hand man refused to be bribed, even with six-packs of Mac's best dark ale, but Nathan *would* drink if offered freely. And after Sigrun Gard was hired, I brought extra along for her, too. I probably learned more about runic magic in one day watching a literal Valkyrie at work than in all the years of my apprenticeships. Words like "amazeballs" might even have left my lips once or twice, to my eternal regret.

I never allowed myself to forget, though, the foundation on which those friendships were built. Through hexenwolves and loup garou, Nightmares, Red Court vampires, and faerie wars that shook our city, we still pursued our lives with strict demarcation lines; we might have decided not to be foes, but I wouldn't have called us friends. The thunder of gunshots, the sounds of a little girl crying in pain; I hadn't forgotten them, and I knew he couldn't.

So it surprised me less than it probably should've when a Catholic priest came to me for help and one of the things he needed help *against* turned out to be a clutch of Outfit hitters. Hendricks' expression had been apologetic over the barrel of his semiautomatic as he'd fired at the Beetle, and he'd made sure neither he nor the others aimed at *me*; but they hadn't stopped their assault when they'd recognized me, either. It was the Shroud of Turin at stake, after all.

It was the first time Marcone had allowed the bare ugliness of his position anywhere near me since that initial conversation; and it was that that made me realize just how deeply the man had slid under my skin over beers at McAnally's and coffee in cheap diners and the sweat of battles against true monsters over the last four years. I couldn't call John Marcone my friend without acknowledging what he did, and how many lives were still ruined by his organization, whatever pretty language he used to dress it up, and I hadn't been ready for that yet. But before that day, when I crouched down in the front seats of the Beetle with the man I knew then as Father Vincent, he'd never drawn that line in blood and asked me to step over it, one way or another.

I'd like to say that the Denarians made that choice easier for me; that fighting literal Fallen Angels for control of Christ's burial shroud put more petty moral matters in perspective. But as my friend Michael, the Knight of the Cross, would remind me, all sins are equal in God's eyes; and equally importantly, that He reads the intent of our hearts as much as the proof of our actions. The truth is, I met another little girl in the midst of the struggle over the Shroud, sent as neutral emissary in another matter altogether. And her bodyguard. The Archive, the sum of all written human knowledge; and the Hellhound, a centuries old assassin who never missed his aim, or broke a contract.

A little girl who hadn't had a name until I told her I couldn't call her by her title. Who wrote legal documents in crayon, cooed over my cat, and set off my wards with the power of a lesser Queen of Faerie. And the man who drove her around because her feet couldn't reach the pedals ... and made sure she kept her bedtime, gave her cookies, and in general made sure to acknowledge the fact that she *was* a little girl as well as the supernatural entity he'd been hired to protect.



I liked Ivy from the first moment I laid eyes on her; and I pitied her for the life she'd never been given a choice in living. But it was the moment that shots broke out in the midst of the duel she'd come to the city to meditate that truly etched her on my heart, a fitting bookend for that other day in the park seven years earlier. She was never truly in danger; Don Ortega, the Red Court vampire I was there to fight, and I were the two who loomed largest in the crosshairs that day. Between Kincaid's supernatural aim and her own not insignificant abilities she was well able to defend herself. But I couldn't stop hearing the echo of gunshots over Lake Michigan when she came to me to say goodbye, and invited her to drop by for a social visit before she left town.

And later, after Marcone saved my and Michael's life in the midst of the struggle over the Shroud, and incidentally helped save most of the rest of Chicago as well....

I tracked him to Amanda Beckitt's bedside, stared down at the frail, now-teenaged body that had been asleep longer than Ivy had been alive, and understood. I told him to return the Shroud to the church, three days thence, after he'd had time to see if all the deaths – the thieves, the priests, Michael's mentor in the Knights of the Cross, and everyone else who fell victim to the Denarians when they were drawn to the city after it – had been worth its cost. And made my decision – though not without a struggle.

"You were never an intentional target, Harry," he said, after he'd processed the fact that I wasn't going to try to take the Shroud from him right that moment. "I can't apologize ... but I did regret your involvement."

"Not enough to fill me in," I told him, jaw clenched in an effort to keep calm. "Stars and Stones, John. Did you think I wouldn't understand? Me, of all people." I gestured to the bed.

We'd never spoken of it, not since that initial soulgaze, but we both knew what Amanda's injury had meant to each of us, the talisman she represented for us both, in different ways.

"You've made an effort to stay on ... a certain side of the fence," Marcone replied. "And I've made an effort to respect that. I have not intruded on your friendship with Michael Carpenter and his family, but it seemed indicative of what your stance would be on this matter."

Ah. "And you've been planning this since before that day on the sidewalk," I realized. Why tell me any of it, then; why put a foot on the slippery slope that would lead to telling all of it?

I'd been on the other end of the decision to hold information back for someone's own good before. Deaths and injuries that could have been prevented if I *had* shared, had taught me different. I'd also been on this end, too, with Murphy. That had stung plenty, too.

He swallowed, then. "I anticipated that there would be ... consequences. I ask only that you do not reveal her survival. Neither to the police, nor ... anyone else. It would put her in grave danger."

I sighed, and ran a hand through my hair. "Let me tell you something an old man told me, just a few days ago: *Your path is often a dark one. We live in black and white, while you must face a world of grays. But trust your heart. You are a decent man. God lives in such hearts.*"

His brow furrowed, and I continued, determined to get it all out. We were guys; we didn't talk about this kind of crap. But the events of the last couple of weeks had made it crystal clear it had to be said. "Even God's Swords know I don't stand on either side of the fence, John, and don't condemn me for it. Look, I know you have your secrets, and you always will. There are things I can't share, either. But we understand each other, and that's ... there aren't many other people like that, for me. Maybe just Michael. Hells Bells; maybe you're even the counterbalance to Michael." I gave him a mirthless smile.

Marcone's expression shifted as I spoke, from something walled off and resolute to something that looked a lot like a spark of hope, quickly shuttered behind his usual calm, engaged façade. "I doubt greatly that Mr. Carpenter would appreciate the comparison," he said, dryly.

"You never know; the man has a huge heart," I shrugged. "But we'll never find out if you ever do this again. I can't – *won't* – be your lackey; you've known that from the start. You're never going to be able to guarantee my word or my loyalty that way. But in matters that touch on both our turf like this, it's like you said a long time ago; if we're not going to end up sharing this city as 'implacable foes', I *need to know*. You're just going to have to trust me not to work at cross-purposes, or if I say there's got to be a better way. Because in this case?" I clenched my jaw, thinking of Shiro again, Michael's mentor, who'd laid down his life for me facing the Denarians. "There had to fucking be a better way, John."

He stared at me a long moment, then nodded, a slight incline of the head. "I suppose there will be much groveling involved?" he said lightly, as if he wasn't a mob boss speaking to a lowly private detective.

A tension I hadn't known I was carrying eased out of my shoulders; I still hadn't forgiven him, but the fact remained, I also still wasn't ready to let go of whatever it was we were building between us. I glanced at Amanda again, thought of my invitation to Ivy, and nodded my head. "Oh, I fully intend to make you pay. Starting at my house, three days from now. Bring the Shroud."

I hadn't often entertained him in my apartment, even before; he looked curious and a little wary, but inclined his head. "I look forward to it."

"See you around, then. And...." I sighed, reaching out to brush a thin, lank lock of hair off Amanda's forehead. "I hope it was worth it."

"So do I," he murmured.

Unable to say another word without choking up or losing my temper again, I turned and left.

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Everyone quotes from the first few lines of Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." He wasn't wrong; more and more the last few years, events spiral out of all control, "turning and turning in the widening gyre."

But the sixth through eighth lines of that poem hold a lot more resonance for me lately:  
"everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while  
the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

The White Council is losing its fight with the Red Court of Vampires, and the man who best matches me in protecting my city and its innocents is a mob boss with ledgers dripping with blood. If it darkens my hat further to take some of his bad in stride in order to take some of that passionate intensity as well...

As the man said, *I anticipated there would be ... consequences.*

\*

I opened my door to Nathan's knock, waving his boss inside, then took great pleasure in slamming it in his face. Hendricks, I'd have my reckoning with later, over a pint at McAnally's; there was still the small matter of a quantity of bullet holes in my car to be hashed out.

From the lack of immediate attempts to break the door down after it closed, I gathered he understood, and was probably assigning himself to stand guard outside; I wished him joy of it. Then I thrust one of those little tubs with the cows on the label, the fancy-cutesy names, and half a day's worth of calories in heavenly deliciousness into Marcone's hand.

He took it with a slightly quizzical expression, then stared at me, as though measuring my seriousness; then Mister, my cat, emerged from the bedroom to take a running block at his shins.

"Kitty!" a young voice sounded from the love seat, and Marcone finally glanced over toward the fireplace, registering my other guests.

Mister left his shins with a final rumbling half-purr, half-growl. Then he headed for Ivy's feet with his feline chin held regally high, acknowledging the obeisance due him.

"I did not mean to intrude...?" Marcone said, studying the pair on the love seat: the adorable blond seven year old in the dark, serious dress with a little butterfly clip in her hair and the poised form of the assassin at her side, both also digging into tubs of ice cream. Ivy was absorbed with the cat; Kincaid stared back at Marcone with cool, assessing interest, but a slight, wry smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"You're not," I insisted, ushering him toward the couch. "John, I'd like you to meet Ivy and her driver, Kincaid." I consciously used the term Kincaid had first claimed the day I'd met them. "Ivy happens to be the current *holder* of a rather ... extraordinary gift. Extraordinary enough that until this week, she didn't have a name; only a title."

Ivy looked up from petting Mister to give me a curious, measuring look, but didn't object. She brushed cat hair from her free hand onto her skirt, then held it up to shake. "Mr. Marcone," she acknowledged. "Harry has written of you."

I coughed, suddenly remembering some of the exact phrases I'd used in my journals over the years; it could get embarrassing fast if he pursued that line of conversation.

Marcone raised an eyebrow at me, but fortunately didn't take it up. Yet. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said, then glanced at Kincaid, though his words were still for Ivy. "I assume, as you were introduced with a name, that Mr. Dresden deemed the situation unacceptable?"

Kincaid gestured idly with his spoon in lieu of a handshake; though I doubt it was lost on Marcone that he gripped it like a knife. "I'm just the hired help. But it does have a nice sound to it."

The label on Kincaid's tub read 'Salted Caramel Blondie'; I saw Marcone take that in as Kincaid dug his spoon back in, then glance to Ivy's – 'Milk and Cookies' – and finally at mine.

I tipped my 'Chocolate Therapy' at him, then gestured to his treat.

He shook his head, then turned the tub in his hands, examining the label. A rare, honest smile broke over the crime lord's face as he took in 'What a Cluster'.

"Only you, Harry."

"I like the sound of that too," I quipped, and gestured him toward the couch.

In a world of grays, did it really matter what hats anyone wore? How far down the road to hell they'd paved with good intentions? *These* moments were the lights I lived for, whatever their origins.

In the long run, it might have been easier to hate Marcone; but I'd never been able to do that. We had too much in common for me not to see the things I disliked in him in myself, and vice versa; and too much in conflict not to be drawn to his fire.

But at that moment, in that apartment, in Ivy's company, we were at peace.

Tomorrow would be what it would be. I seized that moment, and dwelled in it.

\*

Half an hour later, Ivy put down her spoon, glancing at Marcone with a luminous smile. She looked more like a child, innocent and free, than she had at any other time since I'd met her ... except maybe when she was petting Mister, or being faux-parented by Kincaid. As though for once her curse of knowledge had brought *her* peace, rather than more problems.

"Mr. Marcone?" she said. "Harry told you I have a gift."

He took up that open-ended statement with as much alacrity as he'd avoided certain other statements, earlier, manner gentler with her than I'd ever seen it. "Please call me John. And yes; though I thought it rude to inquire if you didn't want me to know."

Her smile widened. "I know things," she explained. "Things that people write down; things that are happening at this very moment."

"You're the Archive," he breathed. He must've heard the term from Gard, because *I* hadn't even known it until I'd met her.

She nodded with pint-sized regality. "So I thought you'd like to know. Jane Doe woke up for half an hour this morning. They just updated her chart."

Shock washed Marcone's face pale. "You're certain?"

"Very certain," she replied, still smiling.

I looked at his expression, and thought about the faith represented by the Shroud of Turin. The quickly squashed hope I'd seen spark to life at the hospital. And the third word from the Biblical trifecta ... the one I avoided using like the plague.

*These three remain*, I thought; three, a number of power in magic and faith alike. I glanced at the paper-wrapped package Marcone had set down by his feet, then closed my eyes, feeling a wave of hot, unnamed emotion wash over me.

If I'd still been waiting for a sign, I couldn't have hoped for a better one.

Onward and upward, then. One day at a time.

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