

Magic Road Warrior
By C. M. Lance

About 9,500 words

Karl pulled into a space in the Overland Park Police station visitor parking lot. He stood and stretched outside his car and looked around before he put on his sport coat. It was a crisp, clear early spring day. The cloudless blue sky, the light green spring tree leaves and the yellow of freshly bloomed daffodils heralded new beginnings.

This was his first sales call on the police department in Overland Park, the second largest city in Kansas. His research said there was a new police chief. He'd be meeting with the chief and key members of his staff in a few minutes at 3 p.m. Since the art of sales on an ongoing basis involves developing a mutually beneficial relationship with your customers, Karl had also arranged to buy dinner for the Police Chief and his two captains after the presentation this afternoon.

Karl's sales strategy was based on taking care of his customers. But until he could demonstrate that he would take care of them and provide good products at a good price, he needed to show them he was interested in them and helping them succeed. Today's presentation, demonstrating product capabilities, and this evening's relationship dinner were two important first steps.

He heaved his sample case out of the rental car's trunk with a strained grunt. Karl wasn't a big guy, about 5'11" and slim. The case was the size of a large suitcase and it was full, with enough samples to leave some with customers as he travelled. He often wondered why they didn't enchant the case to make it easier to haul around. Typical, they spend all of the magic on the products he carried and none on making life easier for the sales team. He extended the case handle and tilted it to roll toward the police department entrance. The city obviously put a lot of pride into the architecture of this impressive white stone and steel building with its large expanses of glass.

Once inside, he was guided to the conference room where he'd be presenting his wares by a pert young administrative assistant who looked like she'd just gotten out of high school. He'd arrived about 15 minutes early to be able to set up before the audience arrived. He hoped it would include the chief, his two captains and three to six others. A good crowd would indicate incipient interest in what he had to show them.

It was a high tech conference room. The window shades and lights were all controlled from a wireless device on the conference table as were the speakers, telephone system, projectors and TVs. The room could be blacked out for projector use or the shades raised to allow sunlight to flood in. Karl raised the shades to give a view of the woods behind the building.

Using the enchanted pen he carried, he opened the sample case. Karl had installed

a small sword pin on the pen in place of the clip which gave it a decorative appearance.

He understood the pen was a new development.

After he accepted the job, he learned that three sample cases had disappeared over the last four months. It wasn't until last week, however, that he learned two of the sales people disappeared with their cases. The third didn't disappear; her charred and battered body was found in a dumpster. The pen-sample case enchantment would only allow the case to be opened with a pen operated by the sales person to whom it was assigned. Corporate security maintained it would discourage any more thefts. Karl didn't care about preventing thefts. He was more concerned with the safety of the sales person – specifically himself.

Karl would have taken the job even if he knew about the disappearances and thefts before he accepted it; he really needed the job.

He laid out some of the products he was planning on demonstrating. First out was the combination bullet and magic proof vest. The vest was Kevlar over a goat skin lining. The Kevlar took care of the bullets; the skin from a sacrificed goat took care of magic, up to a limit. A master sorcerer could still wreak havoc, but there weren't that many around and most served the side of truth and justice – wherever that could be found. To Karl it was more mythical than dragons. He'd at least seen a dragon egg.

The original vest had chicken skin lining. Most MSI products were made in Haiti, utilizing vodou magic. Vodou used a lot of poultry sacrifices and they worked fine, but cops were loath to wear anything made of chicken skin. Being clucked at by the good citizens while on patrol was not something cops were willing to bear.

Goat sacrifices were more expensive, but you could only sell what people would buy. Karl was glad the change was made before he started with the company a month ago. He didn't think he would have been able to sell chicken skin vests. He wasn't one of those glib sales people who could sell sand to Arabs; he had to believe in a product to sell it.

Next out was the ankle bracelet kit. The kit consisted of an ankle bracelet made of woven strips of Manatee hide, four boundary stones and a cat skin sack everything was carried in. It was a lot more effective than the ankle monitoring bracelets used on Paris Hilton. Those only reported the prisoner's location. Karl's bracelet kit didn't report – it detained within a prescribed area. After the bracelet was affixed to the prisoner's leg, the four boundary stones were buried at corners of the property. Increasing levels of pain were generated as the detainee approached the boundary delineated by the stones. Crossing the boundary caused disabling pain which could result in death if the detainee was moved a significant distance past the boundary. Unearthing a stone resulted in disabling pain for the wearer of the ankle bracelet within two minutes after it was unearthed, unless the stone was placed into the cat skin bag.

The enchantment could only be released by digging up the boundary stones and placing them back in their bag. The ankle bracelet was released by bumping the bag containing the stones three times against the bracelet. When the detention spell was in use, the bag was to be kept in a safe at the police station. Anyone who wanted to free the prisoner had to break into a safe in the police station, take the bag, dig up the boundary stones and put them in the bag. Doable, of course, but not exactly a pleasure cruise on the river Styx.

His audience began straggling in just as he was laying out stasis charms. These

competed against Tasers and Stun Guns, but they were much more humane and more reliable. They immobilized the subject in stasis without injury or pain.

Karl greeted each person individually as they arrived and handed out business cards. There were four middle aged sergeants, two younger lieutenants, two captains and the chief. One of the captains was a stately, fit looking woman with intense eyes; bordering on fierce. She was at least six inches taller than Karl's 5'9" and demonstrated a very firm but not aggressive hand shake. Karl speculated that she perhaps was an Amazon; they were effective in police work.

After everyone was settled with sodas and cookies Karl had provided, he started his presentation. "Good afternoon gentlemen and lady. Thank you for taking the time to meet and allow me to present what I feel are efficient and cost effective solutions to some of your ongoing operational issues. My name is Karl Gunnulf. The products I represent are from Magic Security Inc. or MSI."

Karl started out with the bullet and magic proof vest and ran into the first objection which was loudly raised by the oldest Sergeant in the room. "I understand that those vests have chicken skin on the inside. Ain't anyone on this force gonna to be caught wearing chicken skin." Chuckles and snickers came at Karl from all around the room.

Karl gave them a wry smile. "Early models did indeed have chicken leather and I agree with you; it was a bad choice." He picked up the vest and took it over to the Sergeant and held it open. "This new model is lined with full grain kid leather. You'll find it to be buttery soft and supple, making it very comfortable to wear, much more comfortable than a Kevlar only vest. The kid goat skin provides the magic shield. We've tested it against class 4 Wizard fire spells and it stands up quite well. It shields a 6'5" officer from head to toe. Anyone over that height will have some singeing of their shoes. But, shoe polish applied with a dollop of elbow grease will make them as good as new."

He handed the vest to the Sergeant. "Look it over and pass it around. Be sure you feel the leather lining. I think you'll be impressed with its quality." Karl smiled and said "We considered using a sheep sacrifice, but we thought you gentlemen would rather be known for wearing Ram leather than Lamb leather." He was encouraged by the laughter that received. "And, the kid skin spell has been enhanced to keep you warm in the winter and cool in summer, to deal with the biggest drawback to wearing protective vests."

Turning back to the sample table he asked "Any other questions before we look at the tracking dolls?" The Amazon captain asked "Are the vests effective only against vodou magic or do they work against traditional magic?"

"They have been extensively tested against European, Oriental, Vodou, Vodun, and Native American magics. That is why I can quote you parameters regarding Wizard fire spells. I can provide you an extensive list of magic spells and enchantments they protect against as verified in our product test bed which, is located in Gallup, New Mexico."

"Any other questions?" No one responded so he lifted a tracking doll from the special compartment in the sample case. He was pleased when he turned back to see another sergeant rub the goat leather and nod with a pleased look on his face as he handed it to the sergeant next to him.

"These little dolls are unique in the security industry. They are adapted from vodou dolls of which I'm sure you have all heard. There are two primary adaptations which have been incorporated.

“First, they are used to track their subject. When properly activated, the eyes will point in the direction of the subject.” He held the doll up and pointed to the white eyes with loose black center disks covered in clear plastic. He shook the doll to show how the black disks were free to move as they rattled around in the eyes. “That significantly reduces the time an escaped convict remains on the outside, endangering the public at large.

“Second, they are reusable. A traditional vodou doll is custom made per subject. With these, you activate them with hair or nail clippings from the subject placed in here.” He opened the small door over the cavity in the doll’s chest. “When the escapee has been dealt with, remove the subject’s trace elements and the doll becomes inert again, ready for the next subject.”

One of the other sergeants burst out “How the hell do you figure we’re going to get the nail or hair clippings of an *escaped* convict?”

Karl smiled and looked around the audience. “Does anyone have any thoughts about that?”

The middle aged male captain, Captain Arthur, looked over at the police chief. “How about making it standard procedure to take hair and nail clipping samples from everyone who is incarcerated and keep the samples until they’re released? If they escape, we’ve got what we need in storage. We’ve talked before about taking DNA samples from everyone. A procedure change like that would serve both purposes.”

The police chief nodded at this and turned to Karl “What are the precedents for that? What do other departments do?”

“That procedure is what we recommend and those who use the tracking dolls have all implemented it. You’ll need safe storage for the tracker dolls so you might as well use that same storage for the... shall we call them DNA samples? Safe storage is needed because the tracker dolls are made by adding tracking capabilities to vodou dolls. They are still vodou dolls and in the wrong hands can serve the original purpose.”

There were surprised glances exchanged by the members of the audience. A lieutenant asked “You can still use them to remotely torture a subject?”

“Yes. That’s why they need to be secured at all times. In the wrong hands they can be seriously abused.”

“But that means we could potentially use them to incapacitate an escapee. We could even use them to interrogate a terrorist, if we got our hands on one.” Heads nodded around the room and there were a few grim smiles.

“Both are true. Of course, you have to be concerned with lawsuits in either case. Although there are mixed feelings about torturing terrorists – and I don’t want to get into those ethics – torture can still draw lawsuits.” Karl had raised his hands palm forward as if to stave off any discussion regarding torture.

“Admittedly, an incapacitated escapee is easier to capture – but – if they were to be incapacitated at the wrong time, say... just as they are trying to step out of the way of an oncoming bus and were injured or killed; you will find yourself with a potential lawsuit.”

He could tell the police chief understood the issue so he continued; “Because of its lethal potential, each doll has a marker, like a gun serial number; and any magic perpetrated is infused with the magical marker which can be identified by a competent warlock, witch or wizard. We are the first to produce magic with a traceable marker and

the patent is pending.”

The police chief raised one of the questions that Karl had been expecting. “I understand that Magic Security Inc. manufactures everything offshore. We prefer to buy American made.”

“MSI prefers to manufacture in the US, and does manufacture whatever it can here. We don’t export jobs. I hope you understand that the majority of our products are manufactured with vodou and quite honestly, Haiti holds the majority of the expertise in that area. In theory, that foundation results from the impressive density of ley lines converging on the island. We certainly can’t move the ley lines to the US. Additionally the Haitian government has put a lot of effort into improving the quality and reliability of vodou since they envision it becoming their major export.

“We even tried to get visas for some of our vodou practitioners to come to the US to begin manufacturing here and were resoundingly rejected. We’d love to manufacture in the US, but right now the scrutiny on vodou is the heaviest it’s ever been. The unfortunate terrorist incidents in Mexico and Canada have created unease and suspicion of vodou. So, until we can get the rules changed, you can benefit from the lower prices of offshore labor, coupled with the intensive quality control we apply to the products when they arrive in the US.”

Captain Arthur said “I understand that vodou is less effective than the traditional European magic because it relies so much on animal sacrifice.”

“That is a rumor promulgated by our competition. The eye of newt, toe of frog, tongue of dog, adder’s fork, lizard’s leg and other animal parts used in traditional European magic aren’t willingly given up by the various animals. Freeze drying animal parts to be used later, instead of using fresh, doesn’t make it any less of a sacrifice. As far as effectiveness, look at what was accomplished in the suicide zombie terrorist attacks in the countries to our North and South.”

Raising the issue of vodou terrorist attacks was a dicey situation. On the one hand it associated vodou with terrorism; on the other he could identify the efficacy of vodou in two recent incidents that had already drawn a great deal of scrutiny within the law enforcement community. Karl liked to face things head on. His wartime experience taught him the best defense is a good offense.

“Does MSI have anything to prevent that from happening in the future? I’d think a company specializing in vodou would be in the lead on a zombie security product.”

“Zombie suicide bombers are very hard to deal with, particularly if they are freshly dead when resurrected; before they have time to decompose. In that form, they’re almost impossible to tell from the living. My understanding is that the people were murdered the day before the attacks, specifically to resurrect them for the attack the next day.” The Amazon captain, Aisling, nodded “What I’ve heard as well.”

Karl continued. “We have our R&D departments in the US and in Haiti working on developing detection products. We’re approaching it from two directions; the detection of zombie magic in the Haitian shop and the detection of the absence of life signs – breathing, heart beat, blood flow and so on in the US R&D lab located in Miami. We’ve posted a bonus to the team that comes up with the solution most quickly. Unfortunately, they are still working on it. There is encouraging progress in both camps, but nothing yet that works according to the parameters we’ve specified. A tough requirements is to detect the zombie in a large crowd.”

Karl went on to present and demonstrate a number of other products, some of which he would also be trying to sell to the magic defense shop tomorrow. Captain Aisling volunteered to have the stasis charm demonstrated on her. It worked effectively, which was heartening to Karl. He was about 90% sure she was an Amazon, from close experience with Amazons during the war.

It was a good sign when it was effective against someone as physically powerful as an Amazon, not to mention the fact that Amazon magic, while not particularly strong and very personal, served to reduce the effectiveness of many other types of magic.

When she was released from stasis, it was discovered that it hadn't affected her hearing, a fact that made Karl increase his Amazon probability estimate from 90% to 99.9%; and caused chagrin with some of the sergeants when they discovered she clearly heard their ribald comments while she was immobilized.

Karl was encouraged by the meeting, particularly when the police department team scheduled to meet internally and then get together with Karl again later in the week. A prime objective for any salesperson was to generate enough interest to get a next meeting. During the general conversation as the meeting was drawing to a close, Karl offered to buy the first two rounds of drinks at their local watering hole and everyone agreed to meet there in a half hour. Dinner reservations with the chief and his two captains wasn't for two hours, so he had time to get to know the people who really ran the department, the lieutenants and principally the sergeants. They didn't make the actual purchase decisions, but they could certainly cause problems if they weren't happy.

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Karl got to the bar first, and ordered a beer and some appetizers for the group and started a tab. The bar was called Eddie's and featured prominent photos and memorabilia of Eddie, the dog on the *Frazier* TV show as well as of Martin Crane, the retired cop who was Eddie's owner and Frazier's dad.

The group straggled in as singles and in pairs over the next 20 minutes. As Karl expected, the sergeants were there first. They didn't get entertained as often as the ranking officers and free beers were appreciated.

Sergeants Hastings and Rodriguez were the first arrivals. After they got their beers, Hastings turned to Karl "Good presentation today. You have some interesting items I think we will be able to use." Rodriguez held up his beer bottle and nodded "I agree."

Karl clinked beer bottle necks with them. "Thanks. I hope we can do mutually successful business together. I look forward to our meeting later this week and if you have any questions in the meantime, please don't hesitate to call me." With that Karl dropped any discussion of business and got down to getting to know them as people.

He found out that they both had grandkids. Hastings said his 12 year old grandson had shown magic potential in achievement placement tests and he expressed concern about it. He wasn't aware of any hereditary magic in either his or his wife's family. He feared the reaction of some of his religious fundamentalist neighbors. With the growth in magic practitioners over the last 25 years, fundamentalists started picketing magic schools. That occasionally initiated violence, resulting in a few cases of severe injuries or death.

While Karl was commiserating with Hastings, the Amazon Captain overheard the conversation when she walked up with a beer in hand and an appetizer on a napkin in the

other. “What do you expect in a state where they voted evolution out?” she said with a crooked smile. “Those religious fundamentalists want the rest of the world to evolve while our state regresses. Leave us alone while we live in our caves.”

Karl didn't particularly want to be drawn into a religious discussion, there were never any winners, unless everyone agreed and then there wasn't much of a discussion, more of a pep rally.

Captain Arthur walked up carrying a scotch on the rocks and overheard “Are you up on your soap box again Aisling?” he asked. “Nobody necessarily disagrees with you, but we try not to pull fundamentalist tails. They are our neighbors and some of the ones we are sworn to serve and protect.”

“I figured there wouldn't be any fundamentalist tails to pull in a bar.” She looked around the bar and laughed as she said it.

“Oh, they could still be here. They'll just repent with a hangover tomorrow, but you're right; if they're going to do anything to repent, they'll probably be at Hooters. They can get a double dose – liquor and lust.” Everyone chuckled politely at this. Apparently it wasn't an entirely new topic to the group.

The conversation ranged over a number of topics and Karl continued buying rounds. It eventually came around to military service. All of the sergeants, one lieutenant and one captain had served their country in the armed services. Karl admitted that he had spent some time serving and was still in the reserves. It turned out that there wasn't any overlap between Karl's service and any of the others. Karl had served in the second Afghan-Pakistan incursion against terrorism which all of those present had missed. His tour had finished just as the war was ending and due to budget issues, he wasn't involved in the wrap up activities. His talent wasn't suited to wrap up duties.

“Wow, you served in that one? That was the first war were magic was used by both sides. How was that?”

Karl replied quietly “War is hell, no matter the weapons used.”

The chief had arrived and raised his highball glass “Hear, hear, war is hell, let's hope we don't see any new ones in our lifetimes.”

Karl raised his beer in toast while thinking that the wish unfortunately was highly unlikely, with the cultural collisions of growing magic power coming in conflict with physical technology growth and growing worldwide intolerance of differences.

Karl bought a last round of drinks and appetizers then left to head to the restaurant where he would have dinner with the police department brass. The reservations were at a new Brazilian steakhouse specializing in all the meat you can eat. He'd found that cops tended to be carnivores. Amazons were even more so.

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Karl had reserved a private dining room and ordered wine and another round of appetizers, Empanadas, for the table. He requested that wine be decanted to allow it to breath prior to dinner. He ordered a Cakebread Chardonnay and a Peachy Canyon Snow Vineyard Zinfandel from Paso Robles, a robust but elegant wine that stood up well to a dinner dedicated to the carnivore in man, and woman. Interestingly, no magic ever improved wine, in fact often making it worse. It was almost as if grapes were immune to magic. Karl had always meant to study up on it but the events of the last several years affecting him personally hadn't left him much time.

The chief of police and his two captains showed up within minutes of each other

and were escorted to the private room where Karl awaited.

First they all headed to the salad buffet and everyone made a token effort to gather salad. Karl noticed that they gravitated to the shrimp and oysters on the buffet and less to the greens. Captain Arthur summed it up fairly well for the group when he said “Salad isn’t food. Salad is what food eats. Let’s get this greenery out of the way and then focus on food.”

Back in the dining room the salad was quickly disposed of and the waiters began bringing an endless procession of meats of all sorts; beef, pork, lamb, chicken and sausage of all sorts and styles cooked over an open flame.

Karl knew that he would get his best understanding of operational issues from the Sergeants. This audience would provide his best source for understand budget issues that he would have to help them overcome. Once he understood their situation, he could put together a package to help them succeed.

He also wanted them to be comfortable with him. They would need to trust him to provide solutions honestly and be interested in their success.

The first challenge to that came early in the dinner. The police chief asked “How long have you been with MSI?”

“I joined them a little over a month ago.”

“You seem pretty knowledgeable in the area of magic. Where were you before?”

“I was with Nuclear Magic. I was the lead product manager and one of the founders.” The tableau in the dining room came to a stop with everyone looking at him.

Captain Arthur spoke first “They went out of business and left a lot of people hanging. My development went with their centralized power source. It cost us a lot to reconnect to the power company, after we paid a lot of money for your power source that quit working.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Karl knew it would be a waste of breath to tell them that five years of his life and all of his life savings were down the tube as well.

Captain Aisling looked at him levelly. “It was a remarkable failure; all over the news then suddenly out of business. It disappeared from the news, but no one was ever prosecuted to my knowledge. What was the story behind the headlines?”

Karl set his silverware down and picked up his glass of deep red Zinfandel and took a sip. Setting it down, he looked around the table. “How much do you know about the technology behind Nuclear Magic?”

Everyone shrugged or shook their heads.

“The concept was to use magic to harness nuclear power on a small basis to serve small communities of interest; like your development.” This last with a nod to Chief Arthur.

“It was combination of physical science and metaphysics to harness the power of the sun in a box to provide cheap power. It provided power to a small community and could also feed excess power back into the electric grid. The power fed into the grid created an income stream to the home owners.”

Captain Aisling said “A noble objective if it worked. A spectacular failure when it didn’t.”

“I have only heartfelt sympathy for those people we failed; but the fact is – it did work and worked very, very well.”

“It worked very well for nine months, then died, leaving us without power.”

Attempts were made to restart it that continually failed, and then General Edison charged us an arm and a leg to reconnect us to the electric company.” Captain Arthur stated heatedly.

Karl took a deep breath “General Edison... the largest electric power manufacturing company in the world and the company most likely to be affected by Nuclear Magic’s success.”

He looked at Captain Arthur. “Are you aware that General Edison didn’t have to do anything to reconnect you to their power grid? That was built into our system. In addition to providing excess electricity to the grid, our system could also draw energy from the grid – sufficient for all your needs.”

Captain Arthur looked surprised. “We were told that it was very expensive to reconnect.”

Karl continued “What General Edison did was charge your electric company to ‘Certify’ that their equipment could pass the load through to supply your needs. Our system was designed to pass more energy than your neighborhood needed back to the electric company at the same time it was meeting your needs. The system was set up from the outset to handle that amount of power in either direction. Are you also aware that the Nuclear Magic system only failed when it was connected to General Edison equipment? There are still dozens of communities drawing power from our Nuclear Magic systems that don’t connect through General Edison. Some have been in operation for longer than three years.”

“How can that be? Did they have a different version?”

“As you, said Nuclear Magic became very high profile; both when we started up and more so when the problems began to surface. Because of that the government was all over us. We spent a lot of our resources trying to resolve the problem, then we spent the rest of the business’ resources responding to and settling lawsuits until there was nothing left. The company partners were indicted for fraud and we were facing lengthy jail sentences. But, someone noticed the anomaly I just mentioned regarding General Edison equipment.

“Luckily we still retained some very bright people. They went to work and found the cause of the failures. We had developed a complex combination of advanced technology and magic. Does anyone here know much about Gremlins?”

The police chief shrugged “People blame them when things don’t work. I saw a movie with Gremlins once. A mythical being.”

“Everyone has been learning that many of what used to be considered mythical beings have a basis in fact. I can assure you that Gremlins are real. Our government now has a rather extensive file on them, accumulated while investigating Nuclear Magic. We found that Gremlins were the source of the failures; they caused the physical side of the system to fail; which in a way was fortunate. If the Gremlins had affected the magic side, the destruction would have been devastating. The physical side created a small sun in the box. The magic contained it. If the magic side failed, that sun would have been released catastrophically; destroying more than just your neighborhood.”

Captain Arthur looked stunned. “I never knew that.”

“We did. That’s why the safe guards we put in place were designed to vaporize that small sun before the magic ever released it. We discovered the gremlins and the NSA verified their existence and the damage they caused. We managed to track them to a

Wizard a way to control and direct wild Gremlins. I accompanied the authorities to his estate. I went as a consultant partially based on my wartime experience and partially based on my expertise with the technology and the investigation. But, when we got there he disappeared.”

“You mean he wasn’t there when you got there?”

“No, he was there in full Wizard regalia – robes, pointy hat – the whole outfit. I would have thought I’d walked into a costume party if it weren’t so serious. No, I mean he disappeared right before our eyes; in front of over ten reliable witnesses. We never found him to find out why he sicced the Gremlins on Nuclear Magic. Shortly after he disappeared, all the Gremlins died. They didn’t disappear, they died. I understand that their death afforded some government agencies interesting cadavers for dissection.”

“Do you have any speculation?”

“NSA found some very tenuous connections between the Wizard and General Edison, but nothing that would stand up as evidence. Shortly after the Wizard disappeared General Edison served cease and desist papers to what little was left of Nuclear Magic to prevent any mention of General Edison in relation to the failure of Nuclear Magic. I also learned from some of the government contacts I made during the investigation that General Edison lobbyists were all over congress to keep it quiet.”

“Wow. That puts it in a different light.”

“There are still a lot of people who lost out on the failed systems and Nuclear Magic is no more, so there is nothing available from it to the victims such as your community. I wish there were deep pockets that could be tapped to pay back those who lost on this, but without the Wizard, there really is no link – especially with a pack of dead Gremlins. Of course, since it was discovered Gremlins were responsible for the failures, the indictments against the Nuclear Magic principles were dropped. It took me two years to find a job after that debacle. To be honest, part of those two years was used trying to prove our innocence. Whatever the reasons – I really appreciated finding this job.”

“Can any of this be verified?” asked the chief.

“If you have any NSA contacts, you could put in queries. Howard Wagner is someone I worked closely with and trust a great deal. I don’t know how much he can reveal though.”

There was quiet at the table. Karl said “I hope I’ve answered your questions, but let’s put that behind us for a while. I’d like to find out how I can help you improve your operations cost effectively.”

Everyone seemed relieved to be off the topic and the conversation continued through Bananas Foster flambéed at the table, accompanied by glasses of a 20 year old ruby port.

Captain Aisling held back after the others were leaving. She stood next to Karl and looked down into his eyes. “When I look at you, I have the impression that you’re much larger. The name Gunnulf is unusual.”

“Oh, you know the Vikings. It’s some kind of Scandinavian name. Gunnulf means something along the lines of battle wolf.” He decided to plunge forward. “I have the feeling there is more to you than appears as well. Are you good with a bow?”

She looked at him levelly then began to smile. “I am much better than average. Perhaps sometime when you are in town we try a little competition at the archery range.”

He returned the smile. "If you are anywhere as good as some ladies I knew during the war, I wouldn't stand a chance in competition with you."

"Perhaps just for pleasure then. You never mentioned your rank in the war. Were you enlisted? I have the impression that you were in the front lines."

"It was the same rank I hold now in the reserves; colonel, the one with the bird. I was never one to operate from the rear. I prefer to lead by example. For that, you have to be close to the front."

She nodded. "Colonel; impressive for one your age. I look forward to the meeting later this week." She extended her hand to shake his and took her leave.

Karl hoped he had found an ally in the department.

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The next morning he rose early and worked out in the hotel gym before his appointment. He was scheduled to meet with the proprietor of Magic Defense, a small store that sold magical charms. When he talked with the proprietor about the appointment, he expressed an interest in a number of the MSI products available for the general populace such as the stasis charm which was considered equivalent to the taser and fell under similar legal requirements and restrictions.

Karl was a few minutes early and easily found a parking spot on the street. The store was located in downtown Overland Park sandwiched between an electronics store and a sports bar. Karl wondered what effect the magic store might have on the electronics next door. Magic and electronics frequently caused interference, usually to the detriment of the electronics.

Karl heaved the massive sample case out of the trunk of the car and wheeled it the half block to the store front.

Pausing in front, he reviewed the items in the display window. He recognized some competitive items. There was a truth charm; an oblong prism encased in a woven ring to which were affixed feathers. It functioned by turning different colors when someone either lied or told the truth in the users presence. He didn't see a price tag, but knew they were usually more expensive than the MSI version and much more complex than his was. They tended to lose effectiveness when the feathers came off.

There was an ornate necklace, almost as large as a breast plate, which shielded the wearer from magic. Usually only women would wear something like that. Guys who wore something like that would have more fear of being beat up than of being magicked. He was confident his vest, without the Kevlar, would be a more stylish and acceptable product here in Kansas.

He looked up at the sun and judged that it was time for his appointment. A bell jangled as he opened the door.

There was a teenager behind the counter "How can I help you?"

"I'm hoping I can help you. Is Oliver Tenant available?"

The boy hollered toward the back of the store "Ollie, someone here to see ya."

In a few moments a small, hunched man hurried out. He looked at Karl "Are you Karl Gunnulf?"

"Yes I am, Mr. Tenant."

Tenant turned to the boy. "Why don't you go get some breakfast, while we have our meeting, Tony." The boy nodded, grabbed a windbreaker and headed out the front door.

Tenant cleared a spot on the counter. “Why don’t you set your sample case up here? Can I help you lift that?”

“No thanks. I’m getting used to hauling it around. I have to work out every morning to stay in shape to lift it.”

“Is it full?”

“Pretty much. I need to carry enough samples so if you’re interested I can sell a few to tide you over until your first shipment arrives. I’m usually out for a week at a time so it’s pretty full.”

Karl heaved it up on the counter and pulled the pen out of his jacket pocket and used it to open the case.

Tenant glanced in. “Do you also carry the vodou tracker dolls that MSI manufactures?”

“Yes, I do. They’re in this locked compartment.” He patted a compartment that took up half of one side of the case. “But I can only sell those to law enforcement organizations.”

“Oh, of course. By the way, our owner is in town and will be joining us in a few minutes.”

“That sounds good. Shall I wait a few minutes then?”

“Yes please.”

“So you have out of town ownership?”

“Yes, he owns 13 stores in various cities throughout the US.”

Karl eyes wandered around the store. It appeared to be the standard mix of magical charms and pseudo magic such as prisms and pyramids. He pointed up on the wall, where there were a number of whips hanging. “What purpose do those whips serve?”

“They’re enchanted to wrap around an assailant’s weapon as a defense. Once wrapped, the user can jerk the weapon away. It makes one an expert with a non lethal defensive weapon.”

Karl heard a door open and a very tall man, dressed in an elegant gray suit with a maroon tie and matching pocket kerchief came through a door from the back of the shop. The man had an ascetic face with a mustache and pointed goatee. His longish, graying hair was swept back from his forehead.

“May I introduce our owner, Artemis Jacopo. Artemis this is Karl Gunnulf with MSI.”

Karl stared at Artemis. He looked familiar. Then he pictured Artemis with a tall pointy hat and knew where he’d seen him. Karl’s eyes hardened and he turned and shut his sample case. He was reaching for the pen in his pocket when Artemis motioned toward the wall and then swept his hand toward Karl. Before Karl could finish reaching into his pocket, the whips he’d been looking at earlier writhed and flew at him, wrapping round and round, like constrictors, binding him tightly where he stood.

Tenant looked unsurprised. Artemis walked toward Karl. “Something in your eyes... you seemed to recognize me. Why else would you close your sample case? But I don’t recognize you, although... there is something familiar, something in the back of my mind. Hmmm...” His hand was raised and he continued to look at Karl, then shook his head.

He motioned at Tenant. “Ollie, open the case let’s see what we have.”

Tenant tried to open the case and it wouldn't budge. He pounded on the case and tried again. Still nothing. "Artemis I think it has relocked itself."

He looked askance at Karl. "Is this some new development? Well, I guess losing three cases and sales reps might incite some security changes. Where is the key?"

Karl remained silent.

Artemis turned to Tenant "Pry it open."

Tenant went through the door to the back of the office and returned after a few minutes with a small pry bar, about a foot long, and a hammer. He approached the sample case confidently. He positioned the pry bar at the seam between the two halves of the case. He prepared to strike it with the hammer. Karl cleared his throat then said "If I weren't in the same room with you I'd let you go ahead and do that, but since I'm here; I don't want to die with the two of you. If you value your life, you shouldn't do that."

Artemis turned to him impatiently. "Well, then, where is the key?"

Karl remained silent while he stared at Artemis. Artemis waved his hand and wriggled his fingers. The whips constricted further, forcing a grunt out of Karl.

"I can squeeze the life out of you – slowly – until you tell me. It would be an excruciating way to die, particularly if I prolong it for a very long painful time. I think I might enjoy it and I'm sure Ollie would enjoy it. I know you wouldn't."

Karl panted then gasped out. "What are you doing; stealing our products and reselling them? There can't be that much profit in that."

"Oh, my dear man, that is true for most of the items in your case, but the vodou dolls... now those are quite the item. It was so inventive to make them reusable. On the black market... well I can make millions with just a few of them. The mafia alone can't get enough of them. The Mexican drug cartels are starting to bid them even higher. I really just can't get enough of them. Now, before you force me to inflict more pain; where is the key?"

Karl looked at him silently. Artemis slapped him with the back of his hand. Karl had been struck harder, but lashed as he was, he lost balance and fell to the floor.

Artemis started to wave his arm again and Karl nodded toward his chest. "The pen is in my jacket pocket. The case is keyed to it. Place it in the indent on the side."

Artemis gestured to Tenant who scuttled over and reached carefully into Karl's jacket feeling around until he found the pen. He pulled it out and awaited direction from Artemis. Artemis peered around the case on the front then on the right side where he spotted the indent. He looked at Karl suspiciously, then back at the case. He gestured at Tenant "Bring it over here and open the case, the hole is here on the right side."

Tenant pushed the pen into the indent then tried to open the case. He reversed the pen and again tried to open the case. Nothing moved. "It's not working."

Artemis looked down at Karl and gestured again. The whips tightened further. Karl groaned involuntarily. Artemis said in a testy voice; "Karl, I'm beginning to lose patience. The key didn't work. How – do – we – open – the – case?"

Karl could barely draw a breath. "They said I had to operate it." He gasped then panted for a few moments. "No one else has tried to open it. I thought it might work for you."

Artemis looked thoughtful then nodded in admiration. "Well played. A key tuned to the operator. Ingenious." He motioned to Tenant "Help me lift him back to his feet."

When Karl was back on his feet and propped against the counter, Artemis

gestured and the whips rewrapped themselves, freeing Karl's right arm below the elbow. He held the pen out to him. "Open the case. No tricks." Karl held his hand out and Artemis placed the pen in his hand.

Karl shifted his grip on the pen to grasp it by the sword shaped clip. He smiled slightly and said "Aðalbrandr".

Artemis started to say something then stepped back rapidly – his eyes widening. He was now facing a nine foot apparition and the whips slithered limply to the floor from the giant. As the figure solidified he saw that under the horned battle helm, the features were a larger, fiercer version of Karl's. He wore a silver breastplate. In his right hand was a six foot long broadsword, glowing with blue fire.

Tenant moved faster than Karl expected and pulled a pistol out from behind the counter. He started unloading the clip at Karl. Karl held up the broadsword and batted the bullets aside as he strode toward Tenant. With a flick of the massive broad sword he swept Tenants head from his shoulders.

He whirled toward Artemis more quickly than anything that large should be capable of moving. Artemis also moved rapidly to hurl a huge ball of reddish white flame at Karl. He blocked it with the flat of his sword, slashing it in half. The flame blasted by on either side of him, blowing out the front window, the glass in the front door, catching the wall and window casement on fire and shattering the front display cabinets. The heat as it blasted past Karl, singed all of the hair off his arms and scorched his shoulder length hair hanging below his battle helm.

Nose curling at the scent of scorched hair, Karl leapt forward and caught Artemis around the neck with his left hand and lifted him in a continuous motion and drove his head into the ceiling. He continued to hold Artemis in his outthrust arm; feet dangling limply above the ground while he looked at him for signs of further resistance. He shook him but Artemis flopped loosely in his hand. He flipped the sword over his shoulder and smoothly fit it in the scabbard on his back, grabbed two leather strips from his belt and bound Artemis's hands and feet before laying him inside one of the shattered display cases. He reached for the phone behind the counter. He tried to dial but his fingers were too big for the buttons. After several tries he threw the phone down.

He looked around for the pen to use to dial with then saw Tony standing on the sidewalk with his eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

Karl rumbled "Did you finish breakfast?" Tony nodded dully. "Then get in here and dial 911. My fingers don't fit. If you have a fire extinguisher in here somewhere, you should use it on the wall, before the fire spreads."

Tony turned to run and Karl roared in his best battle command voice. "Stop, Tony. Get your ass in here." Tony skidded to a stop and got his ass in there.

Karl pointed at the phone. "Call 911. Ask that they send Captain Aisling. Tell them Karl Gunnulf asked for her." Tony reached for the phone, then saw Tenants headless body lying behind the counter. He had to wait to call until after he finished vomiting.

Just as Tony hung up two squad cars roared up and cops jumped out leveling pistols and shotguns at Karl who stood as patiently as he could with his hands raised to the ceiling, which was only a few inches above his head. He could tell from that, the ceiling was nine and half feet high.

The cops yelled from outside. "Come out with your hands up."

Karl rumbled back “I’d rather not. I have my hands up, but I’d have to carry this fellow out with me. I can’t be too far from him or his magic will work and he’ll escape. Why don’t we just wait for Captain Aisling.”

The cops looked at each other. Just then an unmarked car, but obviously a police vehicle, pulled around the corner. They looked back into the store at Karl, who smiled back in what he hoped looked like a friendly expression. He wasn’t used to that expression in this form.

Captain Aisling climbed slowly from the car eyeing the damage and Karl. She pulled the security loop loose from her pistol but left it in the holster. She walked up to the four cops out front and exchanged a few words with them and then walked toward the front of the shop. There were any number of ways in now, but she walked over to the door with the blown out glass and pulled it open and walked in. She looked up at Karl “Karl Gunnulf?”

He nodded. “Yes, thank you for coming Captain Aisling.”

She looked around. “I wouldn’t have missed it... I don’t think.” She looked back at him then nodded smugly. “I knew you seemed bigger than you appeared. What happened here?”

“The gentleman laying there in the display case is a Wizard. He apparently came up with the very profitable idea of stealing the vodou tracking dolls and selling them on the black market. He recently killed three MSI sales people and stole their sample cases to get the vodou dolls. He tried the same with me. The little fellow on the other side of the counter, without a head, tried to shoot me, a number of times. I removed his head before he emptied the clip.”

“Is the Wizard alive?”

“Yes he is. I have a vested interest in his continued existence. I don’t want him to disappear again. Remember I told you about the Wizard with the Gremlins? This is him. He has a new gig and is dressed differently, but I recognize him. I believe he recognized me in this form as well.”

“You’re a battle wizard, is that correct?”

“The Wizard part is a bit of a misnomer but that’s what they call me. I don’t have many powers. The greatest is simply being somewhat impervious to magic. Magic is also severely dampened in my presence; that is why I need to remain close to Artemis here. He used magic to vanish once before. I’d like to prevent that happening again. Those straps he’s bound with will nullify his magic while I remain close.”

“All this damage and you say you don’t have many powers?”

“This? Oh, Artemis did most of this when he hit me with a blast of hell fire or some such. I admit to causing the missing head over there and the lump on Artemis’s head, but can’t claim credit for the rest.”

“Are there any witnesses to corroborate?”

Karl pointed to two corners. “I’m hoping the security cameras up there and there aren’t just for decoration and weren’t messed up too badly by the magic Artemis threw around.”

“We’ll check them out.” She looked him up and down and side to side. He wasn’t just tall; he was very broad. “I guess as big as you are, you don’t need many powers.”

“I make do with the sword here.” He gestured to his back. “His name is Aðalbrandr. It roughly translates to Prime Sword.”

“I’ve heard about it. I called a couple of lady friends last night who remembered Colonel Gunnulf from the war. They were very complimentary.”

“I’m pleased, both for their kind words and to know they survived. If they are who I believe they are, they were still there when I left.”

“I’d like to relieve you of that sword. I’m sure it will make people down at the station a bit nervous if you still have it.”

“I’d like to be able to do that, but I can’t. The sword has to be very close for me to maintain. If I don’t remain in this form and nearby, I can’t keep him from disappearing.”

He raised a large finger. “One of the first things I’d like to be able to do is to contact Howard Wagner, with the NSA. I mentioned his name last night. Hopefully they have some way of restraining a Wizard. Until they can take over custody, I’ll be happy to be locked in a cell with him but the sword has to be with us.”

“Can I carry it while we take you to the jail?”

Karl shrugged out of the scabbard’s harness and handed it to her with one hand. She grabbed it with two hands and despite having Amazon strength, immediately dropped the tip to the ground. As she picked it up again with effort she said; “Holy Shit how much does this weigh?”

“I’ve never been around a freight scale to weigh it.”

“How much do you weigh?”

He shrugged.

“No freight scale, huh? Can you ride in my squad car?”

He looked out at it. “I don’t think so. Besides the fact that I’m 9 feet tall and my legs wouldn’t fit; I think I might exceed your car’s weight limit. I’m pretty sure I weigh between 700 and 1,000 pounds. I think a large paddy wagon would work; one that can hold half a dozen people or more. Then Artemis and I can ride together, of course you’d have to come along if you’re carrying the sword.”

#

They finally decided that Karl could keep his sword and ride in a locked paddy wagon to the jail with Artemis who had started reviving. Captain Aisling managed to contact Howard Wagner and he was arriving the next morning on a government jet along with restraints sufficient for a Wizard of Artemis’ power.

Karl spent the night in a cell with Artemis. Karl forgot to mention when he spent extended periods in battle wizard form he developed symptoms similar to ‘roid rage that people get who use steroids excessively. It was enough to generate deep seated fear in a Wizard whose powers were nullified.

After Artemis spent an evening in a cell with Karl growing steadily angrier, the threat of leaving him in with Karl loosened his tongue regarding his part in Nuclear Magic’s product failures and General Edison’s relationship in the sabotage he had perpetrated on their behalf.

The tapes from the magic store were functional and showed Artemis’ and Talent’s attacks on Karl before and after he changed. They stopped working about the time Artemis unleashed the fire ball at Karl, but enough was captured to give a good idea of what happened.

Karl got the first of many big orders for MSI products from law enforcement organizations in Kansas and Missouri. They were apparently quite impressed at having a former battle wizard as their sales rep. He ended up winning MSI’s top sales person

award for four years running.

General Edison was eventually broken up and sold piecemeal after the settlement of numerous product liability claims on behalf of Nuclear Magic forced them into bankruptcy.

Captain Aisling convinced Karl to spend an evening with her before he changed back so she could verify some of the compliments that her girl friends had passed on to her about Karl.

Karl also began moonlighting by assisting various law enforcement agencies capture and subdue rogue Wizards, Witches and Magicians.

He eventually moved in with Captain Aisling. They had to find a place with reinforced floors, particularly in the bedroom.

The End