

CHOICES

by Alex Woolfson

It took five days to find the lonely, white farmhouse, and that was at least four days too long. Locating things with magic was always difficult, and Spooky Jones had become only marginally better despite months of practice. The photo in his hand provided a fragile, untrustworthy thread of connection to where they'd been keeping her. It showed a straw-thin, 8-year-old girl with purple-ribboned pigtails and a wide grin. She proudly revealed a missing front tooth, her eyes bright with mischief.

He had promised Isabelle Jackson's mother that he would find her little girl. With every hour that passed, it became more likely he'd find her dead. Spooky needed to try harder, push himself harder. Twenty children had gone missing in the last six months, snatched "out of thin air." It stank of magic and more would certainly follow. They needed a champion they could count on. Spooky hadn't slept in two days.

Parked under a maple tree were a shiny, black, 2010 Ford F-150 and a grey 1996 Honda Accord with several angry dents in its side. The engines were cool but the windshields were clear: no dust, no leaves. Light flickered softly through one of the closed Venetian blinds on the first floor. Whoever did this was still here.

The gravel driveway crunched under his sneakers as he walked up to the front porch. He didn't care if he surprised them or not. Either way, he'd get answers.

The door was unlocked, and Spooky entered the front hall. Steam from fried chicken, Salisbury steak, and buttered corn filled his nose. On the left, narrow wooden stairs with cracked boards led to the upper floor. Straight-ahead was the kitchen; seven knives clung to a magnetic bar next to the microwave, with a gap for one more. On the right, two large men with two TV dinners each sat in plush, fabric chairs and watched the Animation Network in the dark. Thin shorts and sleeveless tops just barely contained their pharmaceutically-swollen chests and thighs. They were tanks.

Spooky slammed the door behind himself.

The tank with buzzed black hair, leapt to his feet. "What the fuck?!" A

kernel of corn shot from his mouth, bounced off his chest, and landed on the floor.

Spooky stepped forward, lifted the photo in his left hand, and dropped his voice to its lowest register. "I'm looking for a little girl. 8 years old. Four foot two. African-American. Her name is Isabelle Jackson. And you're going to take me to her right now."

"You're looking to get your teeth smashed in, kid, walking into someone's home like that!" The red-faced man had ten inches and a hundred pounds on him. His blonde pal had at least eight inches and was even heavier. Spooky was just fifteen and hadn't even started shaving. But as they barreled towards him, he didn't flinch.

He just raised his right hand slightly and let them see the bright, green glow in his palm. "I don't think so."

It was a simple illumination spell, but sometimes that was enough. Maybe they'd recognize it was magic, maybe they'd just assume he had regular powers. But either way, they'd know size and muscle weren't going to decide this. If they were smart, they'd back down, and Spooky would be able to get what he needed without anyone getting hurt. That was always better. Even if these men served monsters, Spooky didn't have to be one.

They weren't smart. The black haired tank saw the glow, stopped in his tracks, and twisted his head towards his buddy. "Shit! Get the freak!" The blonde turned and rushed towards the stairs while the black-haired thug resumed his charge towards Spooky, fist raised. Apparently, the "freak" ate its dinner upstairs.

Spooky ignored the oncoming fist and instead thrust out his glowing palm at the blonde. A long, green ectoplasmic chain erupted from it to wrap around the guy's ankles. Spooky snapped the chain with a jerk of his arm, pulling the guy's legs out from under him. The blonde's jaw smashed hard into a wooden stair before Spooky whipped the man's body back into the stomach of the charging thug. They both crashed into the TV room, crushing a chair, flattening a side table, and leaving a large dent in the wall that shook the house. The fight was over in less than two seconds. They were out cold.

Damn. He wouldn't get any answers from them now *and* he had to make sure he didn't need to heal them to keep them alive. Every fight,

he was getting stronger, and even when he pulled his punches, it always seemed like too much. It was like he was going through a growth spurt, but instead of tripping over his own feet, he was conjuring sledgehammers. Maybe he should take Amanda up on her offer for them to train together again. She said she could help him learn his limits, control things better. She'd helped him before. But in their last session, he'd lost control and sprained her wrist. She said it was fine, that accidents happen, but she wouldn't let him heal her. And it could have been so much worse...

Spooky's eyes glowed white. There were some broken bones, and a concussion, but the tanks weren't in any immediate danger. He could leave them.

It was time to meet the freak.

He put the picture back into his left pocket and climbed the stairs. He could hear movement in the hallway above. He extended a thin, round layer of ectoplasm from his right palm to hover in front of his torso, something that could be formed into a shield quickly. Whatever was going to happen next, it wouldn't be subtle.

It hit him the moment he rounded the top stair into the second floor hallway. Bats, hundreds of them. And they were angry. He couldn't see the magic user behind the attack, but if a crazy was going to control animal minds, they had to be close.

Spooky surrounded himself with an electric field of ectoplasm which kept the biting, screeching creatures well away from his skin. He then extended it out in a rush, pushing the bats back down the stairs behind him and into the passage in front of him. He hoped to catch the crazy with the exploding wave, but no dice. The hallway was empty.

He held off the frothing bats with his glowing ecto, thirty feet in front of him and thirty feet behind him. The ones in front were crunched against a boarded-up window, but the hall was clear, glimmering in the green light of his magic. Three doors on the left. Three doors on the right. All closed except one at the end. Spooky thought he saw movement just inside the open doorway.

Spooky could command a lot of power with his ectoplasmic manipulation--he'd even pushed an aircraft carrier a couple feet, when he'd been showing off for ExSec--but there was a dangerous limitation:

he could only do one thing at a time with it. If he needed to shield his body, he'd have to let go of the bats. But then he'd have zero visibility. And the crazy controlling these things wouldn't have that disadvantage. The crazy would know what the bats knew. Spooky kept his shield extended; he would just have to act fast if someone charged him.

He walked cautiously down the hall, eyes on the open door, bracing himself for any sudden moves. Using magic changed people. Everyone but Spooky, anyway. It twisted their minds. Made them dangerous. He'd fought over a dozen magic users before, and you could never predict what they were going to do. Sometimes they'd run. Sometimes they'd hide. But when they came at you, they usually did it fast. Spooky heard a small thud up ahead. Was the crazy moving in that room? Getting ready to rush him? Spooky continued forward slowly and strained his ears, but he couldn't hear anything over the crackling of his own magic.

That's why he missed the door opening behind him. Why he missed the man in the soiled grey robe who gripped a long carving knife as he slid in close. Why it wasn't until the thin, sharp edge of steel touched the side of his throat, that Spooky realized the mistake he made.

And then instinct immediately took over. Right fist snapped into left palm. Right elbow then slammed back into the man's ribs. Spooky's whole body, all his weight, into the move, just like Amanda showed him again and again and again, until he didn't have to think to do it.

"Gahh!" His attacker cried out in pain. It worked. The crazy was off him, wind knocked out and staggering back away from Spooky. The knife clattered on the wooden floor.

But Spooky was cut. His carotid artery, sliced. Couldn't tell how bad because now the hallway was a storm of screeching, biting bats again. His magic had collapsed.

Spooky knew he had to heal himself, but he was being assaulted on all sides. There were a thousand sharp pains and hits, claws from everywhere, and so much noise.

A rushing now filled his ears. His stomach felt sick. Knees weak. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* He should have kept the shield close to his body. He should have opened the doors as he went down the hall. These missing kids needed him. *Isabelle* needed him. She deserved better than this!

And damn it, she was going to get it. Spooky gritted his teeth and focused. Ignore the bats. Ignore the crazy. He needed to do just one thing right now, and that was stop the bleeding before he was out. His hand was already at his own throat, he had physical contact, all he had to do was summon the bright, warm light from within his chest to start knitting the artery back together.

But he didn't get that chance. The man leapt on top of Spooky from behind, knocking him to the ground. Spooky rolled with the momentum, onto his back, he wouldn't let himself be pinned. But the man was now on top of him. Spooky could just see his face through the hammering bats. Black, wild eyes. White, bird's nest beard. Spittle flying from his mouth.

"Yes, my brothers! Eat him! Eat him! Let's eat him!" The crazy lurched in to bite his face, trying to get at his wounded neck. Spooky slapped at him, trying to hold him off.

Spooky's arms, legs, and nose felt like they were full of wet cotton, his defensive slaps felt numb and useless. Glowing splotches crowded his vision. It wasn't magic, he was losing consciousness. He could feel himself going. Mind wandering. Wanting to sleep. Just seconds away. Then he could rest. Finally, finally rest.

"NO!" Spooky shouted as loudly as he could and it was like his whole body tightened with an electric shock. He slammed his hands into the crazy's chest. And then he felt his magic rush in from his feet and his legs and stomach and blast out from his palms. It was uncontrolled and savage.

But it was enough. The crazy bounced hard against the ceiling above and collapsed back down on the ground ten feet away. The bats around Spooky followed, falling to the floor, stunned by the shockwave of the blast.

Spooky crunched into a ball and grabbed his own throat. He could hear wet, wheezing noises. It took a moment to realize he was the one making them.

Didn't matter. He summoned the healing energy. Centered that warm, sweet glow on the slash in his neck. Binding the skin together, knitting the wound. Then he led the energy through the artery to the blood vessels throughout his body. Replacing what was lost. Restoring

his own strength.

With every breath, the fuzzy, numb cotton stuffing his body receded further. Within ten seconds, he was no longer in danger of circulatory shock. After a minute, he felt almost completely back to normal. He opened his eyes.

The crazy wasn't moving. The bats, no longer goaded by their master, had retreated. Spooky took just a few more seconds to heal the bites on his cheek that the man had made and then stood up. Spooky could be completely healed with a few more minutes of work, but the smaller bites and scratches from the bats he could take care of later.

Spooky's eyes glowed white. The crazy wasn't dead, but he'd need a hospital--or healing if that couldn't happen soon. He tried to extend his mind down to the lower floor, but he couldn't sense the musclemen below. He'd always needed direct line of sight to use this diagnostic power, but recently, he'd been hoping that it could do more. That it could be a way of locating people, both friends and enemies. But not today. Didn't matter. They'd still be out anyway.

Spooky's neck and chest felt damp and sticky. The front of his trench coat was soaked with a slick of dark blood. He'd get an earful about this from Cassidy. And God knows what Amanda would say.

No, he knew full well what Amanda would say. And it was her training that saved him here. Maybe that was a sign. Maybe it meant he *should* take her up on her offer of more training sessions.

But Spooky didn't believe in signs. He believed in choices. This crazy chose to sacrifice the life of a child for a small measure of additional power. Spooky chose to keep people safe, even if it cost him. And he'd do anything to keep Amanda safe.

Spooky heard another thud and his eyes shot up. This time, he could tell where it was from: the ceiling above. There was someone else in the house.

He raised his ectoplasmic shield around his head and body, nice and tight. It significantly affected his vision and he could barely hear through the crackling. But fool him once... It was unlikely that two crazies would be willing to work together, but he'd encountered that one time before.

The other rooms in the hall turned out to be empty, there wasn't even furniture. But in the room with the open door, there were some chairs

and a half-eaten TV dinner on a floor covered with guano. There was an open window with a billowing curtain that could just been seen from the hallway, edges that could be mistaken for movement. And there was a rectangular trap door in the ceiling with a ragged, cotton strap hanging from the handle. Spooky had to slide over one of the chairs to be able to reach it.

Shield still tight around him, Spooky stood on the ladder he'd pulled down and poked his head up into the attic. It was dark and he couldn't see or hear anything through his own magic. He climbed into the large, hot space. Nothing tried to jump him, so he cautiously lowered the shield from around his head. Just so he could see. Dusky haze from a skylight and the green glow surrounding his body offered just enough illumination to see.

There were a dozen small beds. An exposed toilet in the corner. Lots of dark nooks to hide in.

Then he heard a noise and spun to face it. He had to force himself not to form fists. He'd need his palms open to launch an attack.

Twelve frightened children huddled in the far corner behind the trap door. Boys and girls. Young. Ages 7 through 13? They were all wearing identical white cotton long-shirts and pants. No shoes. Their faces, hands and feet were tattooed with black marks. And they looked like they hadn't eaten for some time. They recoiled as one mass once they saw the ferocity in Spooky's eyes.

On the edge of the group, looking straight at him, more angry than afraid, was Isabelle. She held a candlestick in her hand like a weapon.

He'd found her. Alive and in one piece, he had found her.

He cleared his throat and his face relaxed into a gentle smile. "Hi, there. You're Isabelle, aren't you?" Spooky didn't close the distance between them. Instead, he knelt near the trap door's rectangular hole in the floor and said the words he'd rehearsed in his head during the most hopeless moments of this search.

"My name is Spooky Jones. Your mother Janice sent me to find you. And I'm here to take you home."

She continued to glare at him, not moving. Not saying anything. Not even responding to her own mother's name. He recognized several other children from files he got access to when he took Isabelle's case.

The smallest boy hid his face against the body of an older kid and whimpered. "*Please* don't hurt us... We'll be good. We'll be good." From his police report, Spooky knew his name was Alec and he was from Michigan. He'd been gone a month longer than Isabelle.

Magic. Spooky's magic still crackled around his body! And after what these kids had been through... He immediately dropped the shield that surrounded him. He still had the scratches on his face and dried blood on his neck, but he hoped he didn't look *too* scary.

"Right. Sorry. I'm not like him. I'm not like that man. I'm not like any of them. I'm a friend. Those bad men won't be able to hurt you anymore, I promise. And I'm going to get you all back to your families. Right now."

Spooky removed the mobile from his inside coat pocket and called ExSec using the private number they had given him. They told him they would have a team to the farmhouse in less than 45 minutes.

Spooky then closed the trap door; he didn't want anyone accidentally falling through. And he used the wet wipes he kept in an interior coat pocket to clean up his neck, so they could see he wasn't hurt. He needed to get a clear look at the marks covering their bodies, but he didn't approach the children. He knew what it was like to feel out of control, to feel helpless and small. And he refused to make any of these kids feel like that, even if it was for "their own good."

So, instead, he sat down calmly against the far wall and used his magic to make balloons. One after the other to float around the room. He told the kids that the people downstairs couldn't hurt them anymore. That those bad men were taken care of. That superheroes were on the way. He told them he could also heal any of them if they needed it. If that's what they wanted, but if they didn't, that was fine too. All the while filling the attic with colorful, floating balloons with glowing green strings that dragged along the floor.

At first, the kids had been baffled by this and hugged their backs against the pink insulation poking out of the attic wall. Spooky figured Isabelle might need something to punch so he floated one balloon over to her. Sure enough, she hit it with a powerful swat of her candlestick, sending it back at him. Once it reached him, he poked it back at her. An older boy with dark skin (Peruvian?) stepped forward and swatted it

again towards Spooky with his hand, and then, all at once, Spooky was engaging in a volley of balloons with the children. Baffled or not, they knew what a balloon fight was. They hadn't had any fun at all in a very long time and it was like a dam burst. He stayed where he was, but he couldn't help getting into the game, grinning.

"How *old* are you?" Isabelle said eventually, eyes narrow, lower lip pushed up.

"Fifteen and a half."

"No, you're not." She took a big step towards him, swatting two balloons at once at him. "You're just a kid too, aren't you?"

Spooky didn't argue. He felt he had more in common with her than with most adults.

"Is the crazy man really dead? Was that you fighting him downstairs?" An older girl joined her. Marcie, age 10, from Caribou, Maine. Missing for only two weeks.

"We heard 'splosions. *Big* ones." Alec stayed where he was against the wall, and his voice sounded like he had a head cold. But he seemed a lot less scared of Spooky now.

"He's not dead, but yeah, that was me. I beat him and his friends in a big fight, and they won't be able to hurt you or anyone else ever again. They're done. It's over."

That was when Isabelle and then the others first smiled. Another balloon brushed her shoulder, and she batted it back at Spooky annoyed. Spooky accelerated it to bounce off his own nose, deliberately over-acting the recoil of his head, and then there were giggles, laughter. Maybe for the first time in weeks. Some were still scared of the magic--maybe some of them would always be scared of magic--and over half didn't even speak English, but being able to swat Spooky in the face with his own creations somehow helped. It wasn't long before the braver ones moved closer to him, to get in better shots with their balloons.

When they were a few feet away, Spooky could see the runes on their skin clearly, lit by the glow of the balloons' ectoplasm. These were ancient symbols that moved, twisting on themselves. *Archdemon branding*. Spooky had seen this magic only one time before--when he had been in Hell. Spooky continued to play with the kids while they

waited for ExSec, but he felt ice in his heart. No crazy should even know what these marks are, let alone have the power to use them. This was something else. Something he'd never encountered before. Something bigger.

The leader of the North Coast Defenders turned out to be a scowling fireplug of a man who went by the name PowerFist, but he introduced himself to Spooky as Oliver Corbero. He had skillfully opened the skylight above and slid down smoothly on a stiff rope. One of the older kids, seeing him, gave an excited cheer and ran over. He accepted the adulation graciously, patting the girl on her head--they all knew what a superhero was even if they didn't know him by name. His arrival meant they were truly rescued, just like on TV.

Corbero seemed embarrassed that the rest of his team refused to be in the same room as Spooky, but Spooky was used to it. Before Spooky began helping the Department of Extraordinary Security, every military encounter with a magic user had ended in significant losses. They'd had no defense against magic, and even super-powers were easily outmatched. Stay clear and wait for the crazy to self-destruct--that had been the rule for over forty years. Most heroes felt it was just a matter of time before Spooky became their biggest threat.

Still, with Amanda's help, he'd developed a good, if cautious relationship with ExSec. He'd helped Colonel Charleyboy take down a few crazies, and so far, her Department had grudgingly allowed him his independence. But it was on cases like this that he could see the advantages of not working alone. Spooky was just one teenage boy with newly rented office space and a receptionist. ExSec had over 200,000 employees and a 40 billion dollar budget--they would have these kids in the arms of their parents within a few days. Amanda had cautioned Spooky that ExSec had political interests that often favored those with money and power, but the teams Spooky met in the field just seemed to want to help people, especially kids.

Following Spooky's instructions, Corbero's team had a silent hovership just above the skylight. Spooky didn't want the children to see the crazy or his accomplices downstairs, and so Corbero helped him get the kids into a rescue basket and onto the well-equipped, flying

mini-hospital that ExSec provided its regional teams.

Then, while the stronger Defenders secured the thugs on the first floor, Spooky made sure the magic user couldn't cause any more trouble. The binding spell required several minutes and continuous physical contact, but he wanted to give ExSec an alternative to "shoot on sight." They finally seemed to trust him when he said these guys couldn't use magic anymore, but they still didn't bother calling him if they could take the shot. He healed the injured magic user just enough to put him out of danger, but left him unconscious.

When he looked up, the team's government man was in the hallway with him. Dark silk suit, polished black shoes, thin black sunglasses. These agents didn't have powers, but they were ultimately the ones in charge. And they weren't afraid of Spooky. Instead, they listened closely when he spoke and always called him Mr. Jones. Spooky liked that.

"Mr. Jones, my name is Agent Tom Hastings. I'm here to offer you whatever support you need to resolve this situation."

It was a line Spooky had now heard a dozen times before; the suits had come up with a script for interacting with him some months ago. Maybe they figured that a consistent routine would keep their tame wizard from losing his marbles. Or maybe Spooky's obvious distaste for authority preceded him so they stuck with what worked. He told him the crazy was safe for his men to lock up. Hastings touched the temple of his glasses and gave the order, and the Defenders came immediately. They still kept their distance from Spooky, but it was clear they were a lot more afraid of the G-Man than him or the crazy.

"Can I offer you a lift home, Mr. Jones?"

This was also standard. His reward for services rendered. Spooky had taken the bus out here--a nine hour ride that had dropped him six miles from the farmhouse. He was too young to drive himself and you never knew how these cases would shake out--he didn't want to risk some cab driver getting mixed up in it, even if he could afford the fare. He'd once asked ExSec if they'd be willing to get him to a distant crime scene, but they had made it clear that they weren't going to be his personal chauffeurs. Not if he was independent. But when he solved a case, when he saved lives, they could be magnanimous. Yes, he'd gladly take Hastings up on his offer. They climbed the ladder into the

attic.

"The children are currently receiving medical attention. We've noticed that they have marks on their skin that appear magically animated. Are there any precautions we need to take?"

"Those marks aren't dangerous, Agent. Not to you or your men, anyway."

Hastings smiled. "I had assumed you'd have let us know if they had been."

They stepped into a waiting platform in the attic and were lifted into the hovership. Inside, there were plush chairs with tech in the arm and head rests, recliners that could easily be converted to hospital beds. Four EMTs were working their way through their twelve small, new patients, setting up IV lines. Once they got some fluids in them, Spooky's magic could help with the effects of dehydration and malnutrition. If the kids were up for that.

Isabelle saw him and immediately pushed away from the med tech who'd been shining a light down her throat. Before a second tech could get an IV in her, she leapt from the chair and ran to Spooky, taking his hand and glaring at the EMTs who'd been poking and prodding. The medical workers just smiled and moved on to the next kid. The children didn't seem to be in immediate danger and the first responders knew it was more important that they felt safe. Still, they kept their distance from Spooky, just like the heroes. He always had a lot of privacy during the debriefs with the suit on the way home.

Hastings glanced down at Isabelle, who pressed the side of her small body against Spooky's back, peeking out. His eyes softened for a moment. "So, do you think the marks are dangerous for the children?"

"Not on their own. But they're used for tracking."

"Well, that bastard won't be able to track any kids now, will he?"

Hastings removed and pocketed his sunglasses. Everyone was safely aboard the hovership and the heroes were busy entertaining the kids, so he could drop his cool Man in Black pose. Now he just seemed like a regular career military guy in charge of a small, regional team, which is what he was. And it was clear he rather liked their new, highly effective defense against the Dark Arts.

"The marks weren't for him, Agent. He wouldn't have had the power

to cast that kind of magic. And these kids were snatched from all around the world. He wouldn't have the power for that, either."

Hastings stiffened. "You think something else is behind these abductions?"

"Or someone else. Yeah."

"Any guesses who?" His tone was deliberately flat.

"No. As far as I know, nothing should have this kind of power. Not here on Earth."

Hastings frowned and they stood there in silence. Many conversations he had with ExSec ended this way. Hey, by the way, there's a huge threat to the world. Sorry, there's nothing you can do about it. Spooky wished he could give a different answer, but there was still a lot he didn't understand about magic. Like why it drove people crazy. Like why the Walls between Hell and Earth were weakening. Or how to fix that.

Then Isabelle's thin hand tugged at Spooky's palm. He knelt down next to her. She screwed up her courage and cupped his ear. Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper. "There was... there was a *witch*..."

Spooky knelt in front of her, but kept holding her hand. She was very brave. "You saw who did this to you? You saw who took you?"

Hastings leaned in, laser focused on what she had to say. Isabelle glanced up at the big man in the suit, who was practically looming. "It's OK," Spooky said, his eyes rolling up at the G-man. "He just really wants to help protect kids too." Hastings got the message and straightened back a bit.

She nodded and met Spooky's eyes. Then the words tumbled out in gulping breaths. "It was a lady. Grey hair. Mean eyes. But she was pretty, like a movie star. She was in my bedroom. I fell asleep when she touched me. I never saw her again. But the crazy man *loved* her. He said she was a goddess. He said she was..." Her voice became a whisper. "...*the White Witch*."

Spooky exchanged a look with Hastings. You could never get anything useful from the crazies. They'd babble, and it'd be nonsense. Even Amanda's telepathic interrogation had proved useless. But sometimes, they'd say something that almost made sense. And it'd be about a woman. A witch with incredible powers who they wanted to

impress.

"The Platinum Priestess..." Hastings' words seemed to come out involuntarily, under his breath, like an expletive.

"You know who this is?" Spooky felt his pulse quicken. When he'd asked about this "witch" before, ExSec had denied all knowledge. He stood to face Hastings.

"No." He lowered his voice. "I mean, a powered criminal once said that name during an interrogation I conducted. His report might fit Isabelle's description. The Department has never had any credible sightings," Hastings said. "Just the ramblings of mad men and women. And a few scattered accounts from super-villains we've had in custody, all of whom committed suicide before their stories could be confirmed."

"That seems convenient. For her."

Hastings just pursed his lips, silent. His eyes were troubled.

"Right," Spooky continued. "So, some 'witch' is behind this. If ExSec has a file on her, and if you can get that to me-"

The G-Man was horrified. "What? No! There's no way I could do something like that!" He glanced over his shoulder as a Med Tech came to retrieve Isabelle. They'd worked their way through the other children and now they were giving them Protein Cookies. The sight of all the other kids getting to dig into a full plate of cookies with all the heroes was enough to get Isabelle to let go of Spooky's hand and go with the Tech. She was going to be OK. For now.

The interruption seemed to have given Hastings time to compose himself. His hand reflexively touched the pocket with his sunglasses. "What I mean is that, *if* such a file existed, that would not be something I could provide you with, Mr. Jones. I'm sorry. That's out of the question." He'd been able to dull the edge in his voice, but his jaw was tense.

Spooky's eyes narrowed. "All those kids missing over the last six months? I think they're still alive. They have to be. She has them and she needs them for something." He glanced over at Isabelle across the room, now munching a cookie and getting her blood pressure taken. "And this 'witch' is going to come after these children again. She will track them with these marks, so you can't hide them. It won't matter what locks or guards you put up, you won't be able to stop her. I don't

know how to remove the tracking spell, but if I can find who's behind this, I can put an end to it." He locked his eyes with Hastings. "You know I'm the *only* one who can."

Hastings suddenly looked tired. He tried to get back on his pre-written script, but he was clearly rattled. "Mr. Jones... We do appreciate your... good intentions. Some of us even *admire* you. And, as a courtesy, ExSec is happy to provide first responder support when you alert us to civilians in need of immediate aid. But there is no way the most secure department of the U.S. Government would turn over classified, investigative materials to a 15-year-old vigilante. That's a fantasy."

"But-!"

Spooky's voice was now loud enough to have attracted the attention of the other members of the team, both heroes and techs alike. Hastings frowned, gripped Spooky's shoulder and started to lead him off. Spooky didn't like being grabbed, but he sensed something else was going on, so he let Hastings guide him into his private office.

Once they were inside, Hastings moved to stand behind a small desk. He placed his palms on its surface and supported his now heavy shoulders with outstretched arms. Then he glanced up. Even though they were now behind a closed door, Hastings still spoke in a hushed tone. "It's not a matter of convincing me, Mr. Jones. I am talking about federal law with very harsh penalties. You simply do not have the clearance. I wish I could help you. I really mean that. But my hands are tied."

"Right. Then I guess I'll just have to find her on my own, then, huh?"

Hastings looked alarmed. "No! That's not what I'm saying at all. That would be very foolish!"

"Why? Investigating the crazies is what I do. You know that. Why all the drama? What aren't you telling me?"

Hastings pursed his lips again and frowned. Was this guilt? No, something else. *Frustration*. And then it became clear to Spooky.

"That interrogation you were part of," Spooky said. "Where you heard the name. It didn't stop there with you, did it? You tried to follow up. That's why you knew about the other reports, the suicides. But something happened..."

Hastings shoulders sagged just enough for Spooky to notice. He shook his head and looked away. "I must be more crazy than the crazies. You're just a kid..."

"You know *that's* not true. I'm someone who helps people. And I can help you. If you let me." He stepped around the desk and gently placed his palm on Hastings' elbow. "Why is it so dangerous for me to go after her?"

Hastings glanced at Spooky's hand, the one touching him, and a flicker of amusement crossed his face. Maybe he was wondering who the adult was here. Regardless, it seemed to do the trick. "O.K. You're right. I did follow up. The man I interrogated was part of an organization that was based out here, so it was my jurisdiction. I started a full investigation, and I was able to find a series of magic-related crimes that were clearly connected. And then I was told to stop."

"ExSec pulled the plug? On an active criminal investigation that you were making progress on?"

"Yes."

"Because another team wanted to handle it?"

Hastings looked down at Spooky, grimly. "No."

ExSec never just gave up. They were like pit bulls. Spooky's felt his stomach sink.

"Someone powerful didn't want you to find something... Somebody who stood to gain from what this crazy lady was doing..."

"Maybe. Or... maybe the lady herself was responsible."

"You think she got to them? That she somehow *convinced* your bosses to call you off? But what would get them to listen to a crazy?"

"That's just it. I'm not sure she *is* crazy. My investigation suggested this witch could have been engaged in organized, criminal magical activity for decades."

Decades! The lifespan of most magic users on Earth could be measured in months. She could have been working on dark rituals that took years to complete, amassing huge amounts of power. For all Spooky knew, this woman could be the one responsible for what was happening to the Walls!

Hastings was very sober. "If I'm right, then you can see why you can't go after her. If she has some kind of pull with the highest levels of

ExSec-

"Then that just makes it all the more urgent we stop her now! Sure, I'd love to have your help, but I'm used to working on my own."

"I'm not just saying we wouldn't be able to help you--I don't know how deep her hooks go. I'm trying to find that out, but..." He was seriously worried for Spooky. "For all I know, she could get a powered team sent out to stop you. Maybe more than one. You've become a valuable asset, but no one is untouchable. You could be arrested... or worse. 'Accidents' can happen..."

Hastings now tried to strike an avuncular tone. "I think there is a cancer in the Department, that this woman is likely behind it, and, yes, I very much want to clean our own house. And when the time comes, I'm sure I will need your help and I'll reach out to you. Hopefully with an army of Agents watching our backs. But the truth is, you're all we've got when it comes to fighting magic, this is just one threat out of many, and I don't really know what we're up against. For you to even look into this is too risky. Not until I can find out more. If something happens to me, others can step up in my place. But you're, frankly, too important for us to lose."

"Nothing is more important than saving these kids. And nothing you say is going to stop me from going after her. I'm hearing maybes and somedays, but if she really has control of your Department, you don't know what you'll be able to find. Your investigation could take years. She's taking these kids for a reason, and with what you just told me, I think it's for a ritual more powerful than you've ever seen before, one that might even be removing the barriers between Hell and Earth. The time to stop her is now."

"Just like that, huh? You are an exceptional boy, Mr. Jones." His eyes softened. "*Spooky*. But you are still just a boy. On his own. I'm telling you that I have a whole team of superheroes at my disposal, and I know when I'm outmatched. I'm sorry to say this, but your certainty here speaks more to teenage naivety than good judgment. You're strong, but you're not immortal. Having some doubt, some fear, can be a very good thing sometimes."

"Agent Hastings, I fight monsters and I defeat magic users. I've flipped the bird to archdemons who thought they were gods, and I've

destroyed mountain-sized creatures that could take out your entire navy in a matter of minutes. I fight the things you can't. That's what I do. That's *all* I do. But you're wrong if you don't think I ever have doubts. It won't stop me going after her, but right now, there *is* one thing I'm not sure about."

"And what's that?"

"Whether you're going to help me so I have a shot of finding her before she starts sending you all after me."

Hastings shook his head, but that look of pride was back in his eyes. "You'd take on all of ExSec, wouldn't you? Just to save that one little girl out there?"

"I've taken on the legions of Hell since I was thirteen years old. Those heroes of yours think I'm scary? Wait until they try to stop me from rescuing kids from an evil witch who wants to sacrifice children to monsters. I'll show them what scary really means.

"Tell me where I can find her. Right now."

And so Hastings did. Spooky knew the G-Man might be ending his career by doing so. If this woman really had control of ExSec, he might even be risking his own life. At the very least, he was putting an important asset--someone Hastings considered to be a child himself--at great risk by sharing this forbidden information. But he made his choice. Not because Spooky intimidated him or because he felt guilty. But because he knew that there were children who needed to be protected. That the evil this woman was responsible for needed to stop before it could spread any further. And that the 15-year-old boy standing in front of him was the only one who had any real chance against her.

Spooky now knew what he needed to do to save those kids he'd found locked up and abused, and maybe even hundreds, thousands more.

He would hunt down the Platinum Priestess and take her power away.