

The Obsidian Badge

“Discussion groups?” Marcus asked, raising his eyebrow incredulously. “You want to try and do this with a petition?”

“What do you suggest?” Angela asked.

“Not like this!” Marcus scoffed. “These guys make all their money by avoiding laws. Legal efforts are their stepping stones! They don’t care about protests!”

“We need to try!”

“Angela,” Marcus sighed, “I know you want this to be a simple thing, but you don’t know these guys like I do.”

“They’re monsters, I’m not arguing that,” Angela said, “but why does that mean we have to become monsters to fight them?”

“We’re not monsters.”

“Who are we to decide that?” Angela spat back.

“Look,” Marcus sighed and shook his head. “Either help or don’t. I don’t care anymore, but don’t assume that you can change my mind by appealing to my humanity. I know the people I’m dealing with.”

“Fine,” Angela frowned and folded her arms on the oak bar top. It was only about six in the evening, so they were nearly alone in the dreary bar. The TVs were playing the latest news cycle about Martin King donating most of his fortune and company profits back into the community. His first project was going to be renovating the homeless shelter and setting up free job training for people staying there. “It just feels wrong.”

“You want to do this your way? Fine. I’ll do it mine and we know which one of us is going to get results. I got another job tonight.”

“Alright,” Angela sighed. “I’ll see you at home.”

“Hey,” Marcus frowned. “I don’t mean to make you feel stupid. The protest thing is good, but it’s not how we fix people like Martin King.”

“Do we even give them a choice?”

“You stick to your protests, but maybe leave Alexander Brown to me? If you organize a protest at the Brown Technology Campus, you’re leaving in handcuffs or worse. I’d drive you home from the police, but I don’t want to worry about what else I’d have to do.”

“OK, OK,” Angela sighed. “I’ll meet you back at the apartment.”

Marcus nodded and hopped off his barstool, grabbing his coat off the back of his seat, and headed out to the street. He rushed through traffic, sidestepping speeding bikes and cabs. Walking up onto the curb, Marcus blended into the crowd of Brown Tech employees leaving for the night. Most were too tired to notice him walking against them, but Marcus knew that he wouldn’t get so lucky with the guards. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the black, metal badge from his pocket, a five-pointed star in a circle.

Taking a deep breath, Marcus walked up to the door and held up the badge to the security guard. “I’m here to see, Mr. Brown.”

The guard almost retorted, but his face went slack and he nodded. “Sure thing. Top floor.”

“Appreciate it,” Marcus smiled walking through the door. He held the black badge up to the elevator door, bypassing the electronic security system with the badge’s magic before the doors open and Marcus stepped inside. Marcus held the metal disk in his hand and flipped it in his palm, running his thumb along the edge of the badge.

The elevator opened on the top floor and Marcus walked down the hall to the office. He

passed artificial waterfalls, artificial plants, and fluorescent lights and hated the lack of life. The lock at the door opened when Marcus showed his badge at the door. Stepping in he looked around the massive office. The windows took up most of the walls, big sheets of glass that offered uninterrupted views of the city. Alexander Brown was sitting at his desk, reviewing something on his computer.

“A nice office,” Marcus looked around. “A bit too...modern for my taste.”

“Who are you?” Mr. Brown stood, keeping his desk between him and Marcus. “Who let you in here?”

“I’m with the Obsidian Badges...” Marcus said. He turned away from the businessman and looked at an oil painting on the wall that made him shake his head. It was a landscape with a big moose in the foreground. It might have been Maine or Alaska, but it was some kind of fanciful, idealized vision of nature.

“I’ve never heard of you...some kind of watchdog group?”

“Think of us as Super Cops, only without all the red tape.”

“Well, if you’re with the cops, I’m sure have a warrant?”

“Like I said,” Marcus said, glancing over to the desk. “Less red tape.”

“What do you want?”

“Fifty-six million,” Marcus said. “That’s about how much you owe.”

“So, you’re extorting me?”

“No, I don’t want your money,” Marcus scoffed. “I wouldn’t know what to do with fifty-six million. That’s what you owe in taxes...”

“So, what? You’re with the IRS?”

“Not in the slightest,” Marcus chuckled. “I’m here to warn you that you need to pay it

now. And pay as much as you can afford to give.”

“What do you mean?” Mr. Brown laughed. “Are you threatening me?”

“You know what this is?” Marcus said, holding up the badge that was getting warm in his palm. “It’s something of a family heirloom. See, my great-great-grandfather was a sheriff and he gave this to his son. I got it from my father.”

“So, what? You got an old cowboy legend passed down to you and you wanna be a hero?”

“No, my ancestors weren’t heroes,” Marcus said. “And they realized that. If someone was innocent, it didn’t matter because people were always above them. They decided to quit law enforcement because they needed to go after people who considered themselves above the law. People who would twist and abuse the law until they found what they wanted from it. You know the type, I’m sure...”

“And?”

“And others agreed with him. They all got together and headed to Vermont together. They found a woman accused of being a witch and asked for her help.”

“They asked a crazy old coot for help?”

“I said she was accused,” Marcus smiled. “Not falsely accused. They found her and asked her to give them the power to do real justice. She took their badges, melted them down, and infused them with magic. The eleven men became the Obsidian Badges.”

“So you wanna be a vigilante?”

“No, I inherited it. The Obsidian Badges said they wanted to eliminate injustice, rather than specific people. So, the badges passed from family member to family member. I got this when my dad passed away three years ago.”

“My sympathies, but if you’re here to just tell me this touching story—”

“The Obsidian Badges are coming for you.”

“What?”

“The Obsidian Badge has found you guilty of injustice. Sitting on your hoard in your high tower while your employees and the people in your city are suffering and starving...”

“I should be responsible for the entire city?”

“Your wealth is built on their labor, you’ve probably worked harder to avoid taxes than your actual business plan, and your tax return last year was less than your minimum wage employees...three hundred and fifty dollars, I believe?”

“How did you—?”

“Obsidian Badges have their benefits,” Marcus said, raising the badge to eye level. “Used to just be a basic lock pick and give you any security clearance you want, but it works on computers these days. Cheaper than a hacker, but it takes a little longer...”

“So you’re blackmailing me?”

“The Obsidian Badges are coming for you tonight. And they’ll keep coming until you change your mind.”

“Are you threatening me? If you or any of these Obsidian Badge people come for me, I’ll bury you so far under the ground you’ll wake up in magma!”

“I’m not threatening you, Mr. Brown,” Marcus said, dropping a folded letter on Mr. Brown’s desk. It was antique and faded, but Mr. Brown’s name was written next to the Obsidian Badge seal. “I’m warning you.”

“Get out!” Mr. Brown stood and pointed at Marcus. “Get the hell out of my office! If I ever see you again, I’ll call the police!”

Marcus took a deep breath and shook his head. “The warrant will disappear once you’ve

committed to following our demands. Fifty-six million shouldn't be too hard for you to find, but I'd suggest making sure you don't get a second one."

Mr. Brown reached for his phone and Marcus clutched the badge in his hand. He faded through space until he was outside the building looking up at the office on the top floor. Marcus had always found his favorite trick the Obsidian Badge offered was an expeditious retreat to the last place he'd last taken it out. Appearing again at the front door, Marcus let out a breath, slipped the badge back into his pocket, and went over to the park bench across the street to watch.

"He didn't take that very well..."

Marcus turned to his right. Great-Great-Grandpa William was sitting next to him, wearing a broad, ten-gallon hat with an old hide vest. His mustache made Marcus think of an old push broom, though the bristly, grey facial hair wasn't enough to hide his creased face. His eyes looked a little hollow and the rest of his clothes were patchy and ragged.

"Yeah, they never do," Marcus said, running his thumb around the circumference of the badge. "You fellas should probably get to work."

William nodded slowly and brought his hands to his lips. A shrill whistle echoed through the air, like a harsh breeze that shrieked through the city. When he'd first witnessed the ride of the Obsidian Badges, Marcus had run off to the nearest shelter, but he remained still and calm as the phantom horsemen rode through the park. The ghosts whooped and hollered, running up the side of the building and yelling as they charged.

"They're excitable..." Marcus leaned back his head to watch the Obsidian Badge riders on their pursuit.

"They've been doing a lot of work, recently," William said. "You keep finding them..."

“They keep gettin’ caught,” Marcus frowned. “I’m starting to feel bad for ‘em.”

“Don’t feel too bad,” William said. “Those who never learn just...never learn. I’ve been doing this for over a hundred years and I gotta say, it never gets any easier. But it’s better than letting it continue.”

“Worth it?” Marcus asked.

The old sheriff adjusted his obsidian star and stood up from the bench with a grunt. “Best be getting up there. Don’t want those boys to have all the fun.”

“I’ll keep an eye on things,” Marcus said, standing.

His ancestor whistled, a little less frighteningly, and a ghostly black horse emerged from the mist with a shrill whiney. William hopped up into the saddle and took the reins, looking down at Marcus from the saddle. “I’ll decide if it’s worth it when I get put to rest. I’ll say hi to your pops for ya.”

The horse reared up and rushed toward the building, bounding upward to join the other ghosts terrorizing the office. Marcus watched the ghosts circling the office, passing in and out through the windows. Marcus thought that the Obsidian Badge worked a little more efficiently than the three ghosts of a Christmas Carol. It was almost six times as many ghosts, but it took less than a third of the time, so Marcus figured it was an even trade-off.

Marcus went back to his apartment and watched TV. He had an internet alert for anything relating to Brown Tech or Alexander Brown, but the alert didn’t go off until nearly midnight. Marcus had fallen asleep with the TV on and his phone woke him up with a harsh ring. Checking his phone, Marcus opened the news alert.

Alexander Brown: Divesting back to the community! The headline was blunt, but Marcus didn’t need to know anything else to know that the job was done. The next warrant would

appear tomorrow morning, so Marcus decided he'd go to bed now.

Closing the door to his bedroom, Marcus examined the Obsidian Badge in the dark. He examined the badge under his bedside lamp, so dark that it absorbed the light rather than reflecting it. His duty had felt like an honor when his dad had passed it on to him, but Marcus was starting to understand the weight of the responsibility. A knock at his door made him perk up. Angela entered the room when he grunted and sat on the side of his bed.

"Guess I don't need that petition," Angela said. "Have fun?"

"You know I didn't..." Marcus sighed and folded his arms behind his head. "I don't like doing this, ya know."

"I know, I just want to be more useful."

Marcus frowned and shook his head. "I do this so you don't have to."

"I know the badge isn't mine," Angela said, "but I want to help."

"It was given to me by Dad, you should haven't to deal with it."

"Justice isn't one person's job," Angela said. "It's on all of us. That's why I protest and why I'm trying to study law. Just...haunting people after they've been terrible people doesn't change anything. We gotta make it so they learn in the first place, ya know?"

Marcus cracked a slight smile and chuckled. "Maybe you're right," he said. "How about you help me out next time?"

"Really?"

"Sure," Marcus said. "I'd still prefer to use the badge myself, but I bet we can find things for you to do. There's a lot of moving parts to it."

"So, am I an Obsidian Badge now?" Angela asked, eager.

"More like a deputy," Marcus conceded. "I'll handle the ugly parts."

“Can I make a badge out of tin foil?”

“Go to sleep, Angela,” Marcus grumbled, giving her a shove. “We’ll get you on your first job tomorrow.”

Angela rushed out of the room, excitedly heading to her room. Marcus closed the door and turned the Obsidian Badge in his fingers. It felt a little bit lighter in his grip.