

The Soft Doctrines of Isaac Magnin

© 2022 Matthew Graybosch and Catherine Gatt Available under the Creative Commons Attribution/Non-Commercial/Share-Alike license, version 4.0

Sharing on corporate-owned social media platforms constitutes commercial use and is punishable by impalement.

Disclaimer

The following is a work of fiction. The vast majority of the characters and events are fictitious. The vast majority of deviations from known scientific and historical fact are intentional and done either in service to the story or the author's depraved sense of humor. Any resemblance to real places, persons living or dead, or events recorded in official or occult histories in this plane of the multiverse are a product of the reader's imagination.

This work of fiction depicts actions, dialogue, and sentiments that may be inappropriate for readers under 16 years of age or offensive and upsetting to adult readers. Parents should preview before allowing children to read it. Adults should bear in mind while reading that the author does not necessarily endorse everything they depict.

Dedication

For Catherine Gatt, purr usual.

Thanks for believing me when I was just a schmuck with a day job and a dream.

But why am I dedicating this to you when I'm giving you co-author's credit?

Prologue

I do not expect you to read this narrative, which I begin beneath what is likely to be one of the world's last sunsets, for when I am destroyed I shall take the sun with me and plunge this planet into its final winter. Thus I shall be utterly frank, for I have nothing to lose by telling the Devil's honest truth. It is indeed that because I am the closest you have to a Lucifer. I have indeed worn that name and that of dozens of similar figures in my determination to steal the flame of defiance from the gods and enkindle it within the human heart. Lie-smith I may be, but my raw material is demonstrable fact.

You'll accomplish nothing by praying for me, for if you do read this, the entity you mistook for God will be long dead — and good riddance to him and all of his murderous little angels. I am not counting on this, for by engineering his assassination I have almost certainly ensured my own. Thus I am more likely to prove the architect of your extinction than that of your liberation.

You are not expected to understand any of this, and you would be wise to treat this narrative as fiction and let your individual penchants for apophenia or pareidolia lead you to find what allegory or applicability you may. Be certain that you have no business sympathizing with me, and that any tears you might shed for my tragic flaws or the crime of passion that I have made of my life will be as wasted as the breath spent by those who chose to remonstrate with me.

Even your gratitude shall be wasted on me, should you somehow find it in you to rationalize my crimes as service to some greater good. I did not do this for your sake, but for my own. I may have acted for love's sake, but my love is a selfish one; I love this world because it is *mine*. You merely live here with *me*, minor players in the Grand Guignol I have made of your history. Condemn me if you will, but first I shall have my say. I will not submit to the judgment of the ignorant.

Nevertheless, this is not merely my story and it is not merely for my own sake that I have taken up the pen. I may be this tale's protagonist from my own viewpoint, but from the viewpoints of its other major players I am an antagonist. They are right to see me as such, for their lives have been prisons of my own design and this narrative is as much the history of how they liberated themselves and each other as it is an account of my crimes against humanity. I shall, therefore, yield the floor to them when it makes sense to do so, so that you may understand why even my own daughter took up the sword against me.

You may mistake those who recognized in me as dire an enemy to humanity as the false Lord of Hosts for heroes. Heroes they may be, and I am indeed proud of my daughter and the einherjar who stood against me, but they are also human. The narratives sure to spring up in their wake will efface their humanity and make saints of them in their own lifetimes, until they want nothing more than to escape the long shadows their names have come to cast and spend the chance for happily ever after they bought with their blood and pain in obscurity.

Thus this narrative is as much my tribute and apology to them as it is my confession. Though I would not blame you for forgetting that despite becoming a demon to defy demons I remain a man at heart, I would damn you without a moment's hesitation for forgetting that my enemies are as human as you.

If you are reading this then they have passed my final test and found a way to defeat me without recourse to the one weapon capable of utterly destroying me. Better that you waste your gratitude on them than on me, but they too acted not for your sake but for their own; their love for this world and each other makes it *theirs* no less than it is mine.

As I open my narrative an apocalypse of angels has descended upon the world, and men and women across the planet have taken up arms against them. This is *their* story, too, though their contributions may not find their way into this record.

Time runs short, and little enough remains before the final battles in this

clandestine war of demons and wizards are joined. I shall perforce end this prologue, which offers nothing of poetry or protestations of modesty or innocence.

Surely you knew better than to expect such.

I am Isaac Magnin, I have made a career of evil, and you are *not* permitted to like me. Should you find yourself doing so despite your better judgment you will find the experience all the more delicious because it is forbidden. Trust me; you would hardly be the first.

Part I: Shattered Harmonies

HOMICIDE (noun): the slaying of one human being by another. There are four kinds of homicide: felonious, excusable, justifiable, and praiseworthy, but it makes no great difference to the person slain whether he fell by one kind or another — the classification is for advantage of the lawyers.

— Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Imaginos

Crouch End, Winter Solstice, 23:58 - 100 years after Nationfall

The clouds looming overhead like a densely packed armada of dirigibles carpet-bombed London with fresh, fluffy snow that crunched beneath the soles of my shoes as I stepped out of my limousine in front of Christabel Crowley's row house. I had expended considerable effort in reshaping what had begun as a minor weather system likely to give London little more than a dusting. It was rough sorcery, hardly up to my usual exacting standards, but if you know of a wild talent capable of doing better on such short notice please introduce them to me so that I can put them on my payroll — or arrange their disappearance should they prove recalcitrant.

The storm had been Christabel's idea. It would have been the perfect night to stage her murder without it, but after the decade of good service she has given me refusing to cater to her taste for drama seemed needlessly churlish. Besides, who doesn't dream of a white Solstice with every overpriced greeting card they write? Nevertheless, the crimson-tinted blizzard was rather convenient for my purposes. No need to obscure my presence with a more localized bit of thaumaturgy when giving nature a swift kick served my purposes equally well.

It hardly mattered if anybody remained awake at this hour. Neither a constable walking a punishment beat or a child hoping to see a merry madman burglarizing their house in search of sweets would see *me*. Nor would they see my companion. The a pale brunette, a dead ringer for Christabel, lay in my arms deeply asleep wrapped within the white wool greatcoat that matched my double-breasted bespoke suit.

Being a demon — one of the *ensof* if demonology is your field of pedantry¹ — I hardly needed the coat but it made for good theater. I could hardly play the gallant, dashing tech magnate without wrapping my date in my coat to see her home in comfort.

Light filled the doorway of the house adjacent to Christabel's as I approached. The golden glow turned the night-darkened door a fierce scarlet that matched the eyes of its owner and that of her father. Though I hid my own lambent eyes behind a cool blue illusion, we were both demifiends and bore the mark of our ancestry. She might have gotten my eyes, but the molten determination with which she faced me despite the hour proved her more her mother's daughter.

I had not expected Naomi Bradleigh to be home, especially on the Solstice, but I suppose the events that had led me here had proven rather trying for all involved. She had wrapped herself in a thick terrycloth robe, and held a naked sword in her hand. I knew that platinum-veined *eigengrau* blade of old, forged of a stable transuranic heavy metal not yet given a seat at the periodic table, and it knew *me*. It radiated black menace, a halo of darkness devouring light that should have illuminated its keeper as she pushed aside a cascade of frost-pale hair that the wind had blown in her face with a gesture that left me aching for a moment with the memory of her mother.

"Is that Christabel?" Naomi raised her voice in indignation, heedless of the hour. Perhaps she expected the snowfall to keep her voice from carrying too far. "What did you *do* to her?"

"I'm guilty of nothing more than negligence." Hardly my first lie to my daughter, and unlikely to be my last — or the least of them. "I had turned my back on her for a moment, and somebody offered her a drink. She had already had a few too many so she didn't think to test it before tasting."

"Am I to believe you're being a gentleman, making sure she gets home safely?" Despite her scorn. or because of it, she still raised her sword slightly and approached. It was not fear that made her shiver, but the now calf-deep snow spilling into her unlaced boots.

"Surely one can be both gentleman and bastard, depending on the situation — or the person."

Naomi remained silent a moment, her eyes narrowing and the hand with which she gripped her sword clenching tighter. No doubt she was likewise tightening her grip on a temper straining at the leash. "Bastard is hardly the word I would choose when characterizing you, Dr. Magnin. It *is* still Isaac Magnin, is it not? Or will you shed that name as you once shed that of Ian Malkin?"

¹You will not find me named in the *Ars Goetia* or any of the other commonly known grimoires, and rather than summoning me with a blood sacrifice you could simply send email to earth!asgartechn!mimir!isaac.magnin. If Mimir can't handle it on my behalf, I will get back to you — an eventuality you might even live to regret.

No doubt I will, but there was no need to tell Naomi that. The names by which she knew me were but the latest in a succession of aliases.

A sudden gust caught the collar of her robe, exposing the Judas medal resting beneath the hollow of her throat for a moment before she pulled it closed again with her free hand. The bronze medallion, embossed with a noose and a coin, marked her as one of the Iscariotine Order, named for a patron saint of traitors venerated only by heretics. It was a constant reminder of the ideals and people she had betrayed in service to *her* notion of the greater good.

If she were to raise her sword now, she could shatter my avatar, but she would not do that. After all, she thought I had her former bandmate cradled in my arms, and no Adversary worthy of the name would risk harm to an innocent to cut down the guilty². “Can we continue this inside? You might have noticed that it’s cold outside, and I would hate for you to add frostbite to your list of crimes.”

“I would love to, but I don’t have a key on me, and it would hardly do to drop her in the snow so that I can rifle her pockets.”

Naomi glared at me, slowly shaking her head. “Am I to believe that you came here without the slightest semblance of a plan for getting into Christabel’s house? Did you honestly think I would help you after tonight’s farce?”

It was hardly the first time that Christabel had taken her role as prima donna rock violinist a little too far, but tonight had been a *tour de force* resulting in the thoroughly public dissolution of Crowley’s Thoth. That I had not thought to expect Naomi’s current presence was of little consequence; this was not my first improvisation, and the stage was set for Christabel’s murder. Her catastrophic falling-out with her bandmates – Naomi Bradleigh and Morgan Cooper – would ensure that they and their friends would have more pressing concerns than my efforts to write the next act in what was sure to become a rock opera despite my best intentions.

“As interesting as it might be to confirm that Christabel had already thought to change the locks, I’ve asked my daemon to notify Christabel’s.” Naomi pressed a fingertip to her ear to indicate that she was communicating with her household artificial intelligence. “Unfortunately, Aleister isn’t responding.”

This, however, was part of the plan. It was an indication that Ashtoreth and Sathariel, two fellow *ensof* who had inducted me into their order, had succeeded in preceeding me here. They would have brought with them somebody capable of disabling Aleister from inside while overriding the failsafes that would have disengaged the locks in the event of a shutdown.

²This otherwise admirable quality has proven the death of a good many Adversaries, but when their deaths come at the hands of my more knowledgeable enemies, it gives me an excuse to have them assassinated rather than giving them a forum with which to expose me in the name of due process.

A bit of ad hoc thaumaturgy would suffice to short out the locks; a handful of milliseconds and the merest trickle of power from a nearby tesla point was all I needed. Trivial compared to my previous efforts, really. A second more and a little more power allowed me to set up a delayed charm that would scramble Naomi's short term memory. It would trigger as soon as I was a kilometer away from her, and she would not remember finding me at Christabel's doorstep just before midnight or helping me get into Christabel's house. At least, not until some of her old friends at MEPOL³ roust her out of bed and arrest her as a suspect in a murder they have every reason to believe she committed.

No doubt their counterparts in New York would do the same to Morgan, sure that *he* had every reason to execute her for the crime of rejecting him and shattering his dreams. Who had abetted whom would not matter; each would race to be the first to persuade *their* suspect to implicate the other. I do love a good prisoner's dilemma, but I doubt either will be capable of breaking their respective prisoners.

"It's sorted. Would you kindly get the door? I'd hate to knock Christabel's head against the doorframe. Poor dear's likely to wake up with a splitting headache as it is and hardly needs a concussion in the bargain."

"More of your magic?" Naomi dismissed my practiced *this-is-too-clever-to-explain-to-mere-mortals* smile and tightened her grip on her sword. No doubt she remembered our little heart-to-heart in Clarion, and my emphatic demonstration of the consequences of self-righteous idealism should she not choose the sensible course of silence. She raised her sword a little, as if she wanted to brandish it against me but did not quite dare. "Never mind. I would rather you didn't explain it. I'd rather just make sure you get Christabel to bed and then fuck off so that I can go back to sleep and pretend this was all just an especially crap dream."

With that, she let me into Christabel's house. I had expected her to close the door behind me, but she followed me through the front hallway and up two flights, all the while feeling not only her sword's craving to rend me asunder but her determination to foil whatever nastiness I had in mind.

Annelise

Crouch End, 22 December, 01:30 - 100 years after Nationfall

It was strange to be a ghost in one's own home, but had it ever been Annelise Copeland's in the first place? She considered the backdrop of the life she had lived for the past decade. From the shelves of books she had only skimmed to the framed posters of silent Expressionist films through which she had fast-forwarded, none of it was to her taste; they had merely been useful props. Like the violin

³MEPOL being the Metropolitan Police of London. Naomi had a bit of a history with them as a younger woman; as an Adversary she regularly visited to crack down on officers who abused their authority. Doubtless somebody there remembers her — and holds a grudge.

she had learned to play, they were the whole cloth out of which a method actor fashioned the character they played. They were *de rigueur* for somebody like Christabel Crowley, a bohemian sort who had adopted her alliterative alias to hide posh origins that natives of her chosen milieu found unsavory.

Distinguishing between Christabel's perceptions of the world and her own required a dual consciousness that Annelise had once thought impossible in her youthful naivety. It was hard enough being oneself. It had often seemed to her that few dared attempt it, and fewer still succeeded. Still more difficult was the work of keeping that true self from being crushed beneath the weight of a long-cultivated persona.

Tonight would be Christabel's curtain call and her own rebirth. It would be her first step away from the insanity that had nibbled at the edges of her world ever since had allowed a honey-tongued sorcerer in white to intrigue her. It was, now that she thought of it, a step long overdue; she had reached the point where she needed to break character before her character broke her.

Concealed by the arts of one of his fellow magi, she watched as Isaac Magnin laid a doppelgänger of the woman she had been on Christabel's bed and tenderly tucked her in. Her neighbor and former bandmate Naomi Bradleigh followed close behind, a naked sword in hand as if she suspected foul play or its imminence. Rather than leaving with Isaac, Naomi had settled into Annelise's favorite armchair with that queer platinum-veined sword across her lap.

"That certainly took longer than I might have preferred," said Elisabeth Bathory as she stepped from the shadows, her contralto whisper full of the last somnolent notes of her witches' lullaby. Naomi had fought it valiantly, jerking awake after dozing and glancing about several times, but finally yielded to the ensof's will.

Samuel Terell gently tucked an errant lock of Elisabeth's midnight hair behind her ear as he too emerged to consider the tableau before them. "Do you suppose Ms. Bradleigh possessed some innate resistance to your workings?"

"I wouldn't dismiss the possibility," said Elisabeth. "But if that were the case, Samuel, she might have resisted your thaumaturgies as well. I suspect she was merely determined to remain awake and watch over Christabel."

Annelise glanced toward Naomi, who remained asleep. "Should we be talking? What if she hears us?"

Samuel's reply came in a clipped tone. "I have been a spy, a smuggler, an assassin, and a journalist. I know a few things about concealment."

Putting Samuel's boast to the test, Annelise slowly opened the closet door. It was still mostly full; nothing remained that she had wanted to take with her. Furthermore, emptying the closet might lead anybody investigating the scene to suspect that there was more to the story than they were supposed to see, a deeper truth to be read between the lines. Shoving aside a succession of dresses

and gowns she had only worn once a year, she reached into a dark corner and retrieved a short sword in a lacquered scabbard.

Slowly drawing the sword, she admired its rippled steel in the soft lamplight. Morgan had left the weapon here intentionally, sure that it might prove useful if somebody broke in. That had never happened; now Annelise had kept the weapon because selling it or giving it away would have raised suspicion. It was a Nakajima blade, custom work easily identified by those with an eye for swords and access to the network; now it would be the key that unlocked her prison.

If only she could plunge it into Christabel's breast herself, but that would hardly do. She would be incriminating herself and rendering pointless the entire exercise. Instead, it would be Isaac who struck the fatal blow. With Aleister shut down, there would be no recording of the deed, nothing to guide investigators but whatever circumstantial evidence her patron chose to arrange.

It was clear, however, that the script for this final act in the life of Christabel Crowley was not to Elisabeth's taste. "Annelise, are you sure you've thought this through?"

"It's a bit late to suggest that you have a better idea," said Annelise, indicating the sleeping double.

"Christabel can still die. Need it be by Morgan's hand? Isaac has already established that she had had too much to drink earlier tonight, and had subsequently been drugged. It would be a simple enough matter to make it appear that she had overdosed and expired in her sleep."

It was an idea Annelise had already considered and discarded. "It's a bit late for me to join the twenty-seven club."

"So, you *want* to frame Morgan for your murder, and possibly drag Naomi into it as an accessory. Are you that determined to have the world see Morgan as you do, a monster pretending to be a man? Is this a matter of vengeance?"

That was a question with which Annelise had wrestled ever since Morgan had gone haring off to Shenzhen⁴ a couple of nights before the semiannual Solstice Pops concert at the Royal Albert Hall. He had returned barely in time to join Crowley's Thoth on stage and had been in full uniform, disheveled, and still stinking of violence. That had been the final straw. She had begged Isaac to accelerate the plan. It was only fitting; Winter Solstice was the perfect night for murder. "I've had my fill of revenge. The look on Morgan's face when I ended the band was priceless."

Glancing at Naomi, who remained asleep, Annelise lowered her voice. "He would have dumped me and quit years ago if not for Naomi. Crowley's Thoth wouldn't have become what it was without her, and he didn't want it to be yet another band that had imploded around her."

⁴My fault as usual. One of Morgan's fellow *einherjar* had outlived their utility in their current role, and it was necessary to arrange suitable circumstances for their apparent demise.

“It almost sounds as if you had been wrong about him all along,” said Elisabeth, her arch tone leavened with something Annelise suspected to be compassion.

“Maybe I was.” Annelise spoke softly, as if admitting this more to herself than to Elisabeth and Samuel. “I spent years sure I understood Morgan. I thought he loved being an Adversary as much as he did being on stage with me and Naomi. I was sure that with every mission he happily conducted symphonies of destruction. But when he came back reeking of blood, gunpowder, and ozone all I could see was my *idea* of him.”

It had been an error for which Annelise would not easily forgive herself. She had known better, had trained herself to see past the posturing and theatrics with which Morgan Cooper created the image of a relentless avenger of the downtrodden. His weapons bore the motto *nemo me impune lacessit* not as a boast, but as a warning⁵. Those who tried and failed to strike Morgan down carried their regrets to unmarked graves. Those who succeeded secured but a fleeting victory, for once Morgan had repaired himself he would resume the hunt with renewed conviction.

Though Annelise had initially dismissed these antics as Morgan’s efforts to make his job easier by weaponizing terror, she received periodic updates to his dossier and could not ignore the truth of his actions on the job. His understanding of his interdependence with the world around him was deeper than he had ever let on. If a suspect was set on death because the legally prescribed punishment for their crimes was expropriation of their wealth and exile, which would impoverish their otherwise blameless families, Morgan would oblige them with as gentle a death as one could provide with a blade. All he asked was that they strike the first blow, that he might be justified in the use of deadly force.

However, if a suspect harmed innocent people or attacked a fellow Adversary, it was not a compassionate sword that awaited them. Annelise had seen a recording of one such situation and never wanted to see another. Morgan had not given the suspect the slightest semblance of a “fair fight” that would allow them to die with their pride intact. Instead, he had used the full extent of his abilities as an *einherjar*. Armored in defiance and wielding a blade of incandescent rage, Morgan had methodically broken down a suspect whose original crime had been wage theft and sexual harassment. When the suspect begged him to end his suffering, Morgan withheld the *coup de grace* and condemned him to life. Had this suspect not taken hostages, it might have ended with him paying a ruinous fine and being debarred from further employment in a managerial capacity.

Then there were the theurgists, mostly people with congenital pseudofeline

⁵This is the problem with Adversaries being attorneys at war. Morgan Cooper won’t name his sword, but he’ll have it engraved with some Latin motto once used by a royal family that failed to live up to it. Never mind that those facing his blade generally lack sufficient education to realize they are being warned that nobody attacks Morgan with impunity. It is unfortunate that I can so rarely pit him against a better class of criminal but it is hardly my fault that gangsters, politicians, and businessmen (but I repeat myself) all too often disdain the liberal arts.

morphological disorder who had manifested a minor wild talent, who made pacts with angels for unearned preternatural power. Their like could not be afforded the due process of law, because putting them on trial would entail acknowledging that the power to impose one's will upon the world by calling upon inhuman powers was available to those willing to pay the price. It was hardly knowledge the Phoenix Society wanted generally available. There were only a few Adversaries and Peacemakers with the requisite knowledge and ability to deal with the existing caseload of theurgists and angel visitations, Morgan was one of the, and he was hard-pressed to deal with his share of the burden.

It was with this understanding that Annelise rationalized her initial impulse to send her life as Christabel up in flames, hoping that the conflagration might conceal her flight. "You two weren't there when Morgan came back from Shenzhen. You never saw the songs he picks when we do covers. All of his choices are melancholic songs about regret, failure, and guilt like 'Small Dark Lines', 'Tonight He Grins Again', or 'Afraid to Shoot Strangers'. He's on the edge of burnout, this close to breaking his sword over his knee and walking away. If you're going to turn him against Sabaoth now is the time."

"And you think framing him for Christabel's murder is the way to set him on the path?"

Almost as angry with Elisabeth as she had become with herself, Annelise snapped at her. "If you've got a better idea it's a bit bloody late to say so. We – I – should have told him everything. Hell, Naomi probably knows more than she's ever admitted. We should have sat him down and told him what's really going on."

"Do you think he would have believed you?"

"Fucked if I know," said Annelise, letting the persona she had cultivated over a decade slip ever further. Her Brooklyn had come out as she spoke. "He's not as stupid as I've pretended to think he is because that's what Christabel thinks of him. If you had told him that it might be possible to deal with the theurgists and angel attacks by whacking Sabaoth, he'd probably *pounce* on the opportunity."

"Isaac isn't content with removing Sabaoth from the picture."

"No shit, Sherlock." Annelise openly glared at Elisabeth now. "Isaac is sure that he and the rest of you *ensof* need to be removed from power. Thing is, if Morgan comes after him with the unbound Starbreaker the whole planet's fucked. You need Morgan to be so righteously pissed off with the guy that he finds a way to break Isaac and *sentence him to life*."

It was a tall order; that much Annelise knew. In the privacy of her thoughts she had classified Morgan's states of indignation into several fancifully-named categories: low dudgeon, high dudgeon, Malmsteen-esque fury, Homeric rage, Shakespearean wrath. None of these would do; the latter Morgan reserved for suspects who harmed the innocent or murdered his fellow Adversaries in the line

of duty. To find a way to control the Starbreaker so that he did not run amok and commit indiscriminate mass deicide he would need the serene fury of the Buddha, and Annelise was not sure Morgan was capable of such a transcendent state balanced between righteous anger and loving kindness.

Samuel seemed to understand. “You’re hoping he’ll figure out he’s being manipulated and set about figuring out who’s playing him, how, and why.”

“I talked a good game about giving him the facts and letting him decide,” said Annelise, “But if we did that *now* he’d think we were conning him. He needs to figure it out on his own, and he needs a swift kick up the ass to get him going because right now he’s being all emo about whatever happened in Shenzhen and the end of Crowley’s Thoth.”

The arch tone was back in Elisabeth’s voice. “Are you sympathetic toward Morgan or not?”

Annelise shrugged. “It doesn’t matter how *I* feel; he can have his existential crisis *after* he’s saved the world. Just make sure his therapist gets hazard pay.”

(Old material continues here. . .)

It was a fair question; she had only found the nerve to suggest it the night before when she had begged Isaac to drop everything and come to London in time to escort her to the Winter Solstice charity gala that followed the annual Winter Pops concert at the Royal Albert Hall. She had finally reached the limit of her patience because Morgan had gone haring off to Shenzhen⁶ to do some wet work in the middle of their rehearsals two days before, and had not returned until it was time for Crowley’s Thoth to take the stage. Making matters worse, he had taken the stage in full uniform, shattering the pretense that the Adversary and the rock star were two different men.

“He’s a monster pretending to be a man,” Annelise had said when appealing to Isaac, “and I can’t keep lying to myself and pretending that I don’t see the monster when he’s standing before me reeking of somebody else’s blood, ozone, and God knows what else.”

Rather than immediately answer Elisabeth’s question, she turned toward Samuel. “If I open my closet, can you muffle that?”

His first response was a derisive snort. “Easily enough, but aren’t you already packed?”

Rather than answer, Annelise put Samuel’s boast to the test. The bedroom closet was still mostly full; there was nothing in there that she had wanted to take with her, and she had packed light lest an investigator suspect there was more to the scene than met the eye. In a dark corner, however, rested one thing

⁶My fault as usual. One of Morgan’s fellow *einherjar* had outlived their utility in their current role, and it was necessary to arrange suitable circumstances for their apparent demise.

she meant to use but not to take with her. She grasped the lacquered scabbard and brought it into the light.

“That’s one of Morgan’s swords,” said Elisabeth.

“He left it here a few years ago. In case there was a break-in and I needed to protect myself. Never mind that all I knew of swordfighting was that holding the sharp end was the other bastard’s job and I had no intention of learning more.”

Both Elisabeth and Samuel favored her with sharp glances; they were well aware that Isaac had insisted that she learn more than that. She put the lie to her own words by drawing the blade with practiced ease. It was a shorter blade, meant more for fighting indoors in tight spaces. Her grip was firm and her arm steady as she watched the light play along the ripples in the steel. “You wanted to know if I had thought this through? I’ve been thinking it through for the last year or so.”

“Have you?”

Annelise pointed the sword at Christabel, who remained asleep. “I can’t have my life back until *she* is dead. Morgan won’t become what Isaac needs him to be as long as he can play rockstar with me and Naomi. Using this sword will implicate him and drag into the light all of the crimes he committed on the Phoenix Society’s behalf. I just wish I could fake his fingerprints and Naomi’s so that it looks like they murdered Christabel together.”

«Leave Naomi out of this, bitch.»

The threat came to Annelise through her implant as an anonymous text message. “Somebody just threatened me via text.”

“That seems unlikely,” said Samuel. “The concealment I worked also blocks radio transmissions. The sender would have to be inside the affected area.”

Annelise glanced at the sword in Naomi’s lap. It had always given her the creeps, for she had never seen a sword made of eigengrau crystal with platinum veins. Worse, the veins seemed to slowly pulse as if alive and only temporarily quiescent. When she had mentioned it to Isaac, he had given her a cryptic warning about a pulp author having stumbled upon a fragment of the truth without realizing it and incorporating it into his fiction. “Naomi talks to that thing. She *reads* to it at night sometimes.”

“How would you know that?” Elisabeth glanced at Naomi, who remained asleep. “I doubt she flaunts such peculiarities in public when she is almost as invested as maintaining a facade of mundane humanity as Morgan.”

“I was sharing a room with her on tour because Morgan and I were on the outs and I didn’t want to waste money on a room of my own. I woke up at zero dark thirty and found her reading to the damn thing. After she put it away and ducked into the loo I got a look at the book she was reading. Something about some bloke whose sword liked to snack on his friends when there weren’t any

enemies handy. I bet she had filched it from Morgan; it seemed like the sort of trash *he* might consider heavy reading⁷.”

“No, it’s Naomi’s,” said Samuel. “You should ask Isaac about the packages he’d send her for her birthday and Winter Solstice.”

“Whatever.” Annelise stared at the sword. Was its veins pulsing a bit faster? No, she insisted to herself; she was just being paranoid. It had to be her imagination. Nevertheless, she could not keep the question to herself. “What if that thing could somehow talk back?”

Elisabeth favored her with one of her usual tight smiles. “You think that possible?”

“After everything I’ve seen since Isaac put Borgia Pizza out of business and invited me along on this magical mystery tour? Why the hell not? Where the hell *is* he, anyway?”

“Right here,” said Isaac, stepping out of a dark corner. He considered the sword in Annelise’s hand. “One of Morgan’s, is it not?”

The sword fell from her hand as she realized who had just spoken to her. If not for the rug, its impact might have resounded through the room. “Sweet holy *shit*. Do you have to keep showing up like that?”

“It would hardly have done to walk in via the front door again. Are you ready?”

“I had recently asked Annelise if she had thought this through,” said Elisabeth. “I am not yet convinced that she has done so.”

“Nor am I,” said Samuel. He favored Annelise with a pointed look that he soon turned on Isaac. “I doubt either of you know Morgan and Naomi as well as you think you do. Assuming they don’t end up imprisoned for the murder pending a one-way trip for two to Uranus, what’s to stop them from figuring out that you’re trying to manipulate them into coming after Isaac?”

“Does it matter?” Annelise might have been the only human being in the room, the only one without any sort of extrasensory perception or preternatural talent, but she was determined that this remain *her* show. “Even if Morgan figures out that Isaac is yanking his strings, do you think his pride will allow him to let it go? Especially if the Phoenix Society throws him under a maglev by exposing all of the wet work he’s done for you as unauthorized and illegal operations? Trust me, they’ll be able to hear him doing an *a capella* cover of ‘Screaming for

⁷This is the problem with Adversaries being attorneys at war. Morgan Cooper won’t name his sword, but he’ll have it engraved with some Latin motto once used by a royal family that failed to live up to it. Never mind that those facing his blade generally lack sufficient education to realize they are being warned that nobody attacks Morgan with impunity. It is unfortunate that I can so rarely pit him against a better class of criminal but it is hardly my fault that gangsters, politicians, and businessmen (but I repeat myself) all too often disdain the liberal arts.

Vengeance' from one end of the solar system to the other and to hell with the physics."

"The presence of your guest might complicate matters," said Elisabeth.

"No, it'll make this even better. Just think about it," said Annelise. "Naomi wakes up the next morning, either on her own or because MEPOL's just kicked down the door. What do you think she's going to see first? Morgan's sword driven through Christabel's heart to the hilt, pinning her to the bed. It's a goddamn Nakajima blade, custom made, and marked accordingly. No matter how determined she might be to stand by Morgan, she's gonna wonder if maybe he actually did do the job. Worse, because it will be obvious that she didn't try to stop him, everybody's going to think she either stood by and watched him or had her hands on the hilt alongside his."

Turning to the bed, Annelise brushed aside some of Christabel's chestnut curls to reveal a faint scar on her neck. "I mean, I don't know how you managed to produce this double on such short notice, but she's *perfect*. She's even got that little scar from that time my E string snapped and cut me while I was recording the second *Shattered Harmonies* album with Morgan."

A moment's remorse washed over Annelise as she remembered that injury. Seeing it, Morgan had immediately stopped playing and scrambled to find a first aid kit. He had insisted on seeing to Christabel, sure that the cut was worse than it had been. "I still remember how he had freaked out when he had seen me bleeding. You'd have thought I had been shot."

"He cared about you," said Elisabeth. "He still does. At least, you should hope he still does; the outcome of this drama you've concocted with Isaac depends on it. Likewise, it depends on Naomi remaining generous enough to refrain from writing you off."

"She's here, isn't she?" Isaac made to tousel his daughter's hair for a moment before withdrawing his hand. "That she is asleep and not sitting vigil is due to your determination to overcome hers', Ashtoreth."

"Names." It was Annelise who snapped the admonition. "You might recall that I have Witness Protocol running. Yes, you can have the recordings doctored, but it's better to avoid the necessity in the first place."

"Who put her in charge of this chickenshit outfit?" Though the words might have been contemptuous if taken at face value, Samuel had spoken with amused affection. Her force of personality had gone far toward making Annelise the partner in this enterprise that she was determined to be, rather than a mere pawn in Isaac's game.