

# The Consultant Trilogy

*By Zapper*

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*Magic has always existed and is now openly acknowledged. 10% of the population is magically sensitive and 5% can actually be taught to cast spells. Only about 1% has the ability to earn a Magic-User 3rd Class license. In a country of 300 million there are potentially 3 million professional practitioners. However, it takes hard work and training to develop that raw talent. There are currently in the United States about 1 million licensed practitioners. Of that 100,000 are rated 2nd Class, with about 10,000 1st Class Magic-Users, and there are only 300 Master-Class Magic-Users in the entire country.*

*The power of magic is rising how humanity reacts will chart the course of civilization of the next thousand years. An Age has come to an end, and a new Age has arrived, and as yet no one has noticed.*

# THE SECURITY CONSULTANT

*Book 1*

# CHAPTER 1

## *An Unexpected Visitor*

I pulled my 69 Dodge Charger into the parking lot behind the converted warehouse on N. 1st St and opened the door feeling the chilly spring air of St. Louis wash across my face. Getting out of the car I popped the trunk and picked up the bags from my recent shopping trip. It was Monday, and it also happened to be the first really nice spring day. It seemed like the whole world was in a good mood. The building's main entrance was a short walk from my parking spot, so I took my time walking up to my office enjoying the crisp air and sunshine.

The warehouse had been converted a few years back during one of the city's urban renewal phases, now it housed two floors of offices and shops. I liked having my office in with all of the mundane shops, even if I did get some of the random foot traffic. It was the price I paid for being in this type of a building. All in all, it was a good set up. As a small business owner, (I am my only employee) I had to open and close the office, this didn't bother me since I've always been okay with being by myself. I reached the front door and as expected the lights were out. The sign in front read:

*Alastar L. Donegal,*

*MAA, MU-2C, Security Consultant of the Arcane*

I had to smile slightly at the pretentiousness of the sign, but if you're gonna advertise you have to give the public a reason to come inside. I set my bags on the tiles, held my hand up twisting my fingers in a quick gesture and with a slight trickle of magic I spoke the Key. I felt a surge of magic and the wards around my place of

business dropped. I then reached into my pocket and pulled out the mundane key to the office and unlocked the door.

Once inside I went to the small side room of my two room office. This room served as a place to store magical components and was just large enough for a small summoning circle. I put away the magical supplies from my shopping trip and returned to the main office. I went over to one of the windows along the west wall and opened it to allow my familiar access to my office, coincidentally, allowing in some of the fresh spring air. Next I fired up my computer. The office held a pair of slightly worn secondhand couches facing each other with a coffee table between. My desk sat off to the side so I could see customers as they entered the office. Beside the desk was a small refrigerator with a coffee pot on top. I got it going since coffee is one of my addictions.

I glanced at the door and spotted my reflection, I'm a normal looking American male, thirty years old, of Irish descent. Standing 6'1" and just under 190 lbs I'm in pretty good shape, I run and lift a couple of times a week, and on Saturday's I attend a judo class. I've got sandy blonde hair, blue eyes, and I've never had trouble finding female companionship, although, I'm currently between girlfriends. I spotted the sign again not really needing to read it and snorted. MAA, most people nowadays knew that stood for a Master's of Arcane Arts, of which I'm reasonably proud, the Magic-User 2nd Class license aggravated me.

I come from a long line of Magic-Users, not hedge wizards or hex witches, my ancestors were real wielders of Arcane Power. Magic has always been around, but during the Renaissance those who practiced it went underground. Humanity was pretty hostile to anything different and potentially dangerous and we, as a community, are both. We'd been successful in hiding from the mundane world until the cold war and J. Edgar Hoover and the damn FBI. Once Hoover had found out about us, he'd tried to black mail the American Magical Community into assisting in the containment of communism as our patriotic duty. Now the American Guild of the Arcane, (AGA) is as patriotic a group as you can find, but black mail did not sit well with the Elders. So in 1955 they had announced our existence to the world. There were a couple of tough years, however, humanity had grown over the centuries and now we're able to practice openly. Funny how things work out, I thought sitting down at my computer.

I had a 2nd Class license, but this was mostly based on my Master's Degree and the skill I'd demonstrated during the practical examinations. The sad fact is that I'm a runt magical speaking. This made me the black sheep of the family. Even though both of my parents were classified as Magic-User Master-Class, the only classification above

a 1st Class License, I'm only a mid-grade Magic-User 3rd Class in terms of magical muscle. There are only about a thousand Masters worldwide. I've an older brother studying in the United Kingdom, he's already a licensed Magic-User 1st Class, and has completed his studies for a Ph.D. in the Arcane. Within a year he should be taking the tests for Master Class level. My Father passed away during a magical experiment gone wrong when I was a small boy so I don't remember him much. My Mother is a proud, cold, analytical woman and no matter how hard I studied or how many hours I spent at one magical exercise after another, I failed to live up to her expectations. So even though my mother lives in one of the better suburbs of St. Louis I don't see her all that much.

The smell of coffee distracted me from my depressing thoughts so I poured a cup and sat down behind the computer to do some research. I had two clients today. The first would take me into west St. Louis to look at some guy's house. He wanted an estimate on some practical wards for home defense. The second was set up for 1 pm and would take several hours. I would be installing the wards I'd been crafting for almost a week now. These would go into a business building downtown. As a Security Consultant for the Arcane this is what I did. I specialized in the crafting of wards and protective glyphs for people. It didn't take a lot of power. It took years of study and you had to understand ley-lines if you wanted to succeed. In fact you almost had to be an artist when it came to the actual crafting and setting of the ward net. I had over the last five years gained a reputation as one of the best in the mid-west.

I was ready for my afternoon client although I need to do some research for the one scheduled for 10 am. I glanced at my watch. I had 45 minutes before I had to leave, enough time to do some preliminary research, I decided. I logged onto the Guild website and started hitting the star charts and plotting ley-line positions. I silently thanked the guild, they compiled all this data, made sure it was current and accurate, and made it available, (for a fee of course) to those professionally practicing the Art.

Before I got too caught up in my research I figured I should check on Edgar, my familiar. Edgar is a crow, (I know don't even get me going about the name, he picked it for God's sake!) who, having been cooped up all winter, had wanted to stretch his wings. I live in a small house in College Hill which is about 4 miles as the crow flies from my office. I'd built a large roost from an oak tree inside the office next to the window and when Edgar got tired he knew how to get into the office.

I closed my eyes and I recited a quick cantrip sending out a wisp of power that allowed me to see what Edgar was seeing. I could tell he was soaring effortlessly about

half way between my house and the office. Satisfied that he'd be fine I released the spell and returned again to the research that I suddenly realized I was trying to avoid.

"Come on, Alastar, this is how you pay your bills" I said to myself in a weak attempt at motivation.

At that moment I felt a slight jarring at the outer wards to my office. Not an alarm, a notification that another practitioner of the Art was about to enter. I don't get that many Magic-Users visiting my office. I've got a few friends, most of whom are much more powerful than me, who I see socially so this was unusual. The door opened and in walked a very attractive woman. She was dressed in a grey business blazer and white blouse with a matching grey skirt, nylons, and sensible low heeled shoes. The outfit said serious professional. Her hair was black as midnight and her skin was extremely pale, but her eyes took my breath when they flashed a startling shade of blue. I prefer women with a bit of cleavage and this was the only area where she fell slightly short in my estimation. Overall, I wouldn't kick her out of bed!

"How can I help you Ma'am?" I asked standing up and walking around my desk.

"Are you Mister Alastar Donegal?" She practically purred walking toward me one hip at a time.

"Yes, Ma'am, what can I do for you?"

I involuntarily took a step back and actually bumped into my desk. I felt my face flush as my backward momentum caused me to sit on the edge of my desk. What the hell is going on? I'm no Casanova, but I'm not some virgin either. I can usually at least talk to a beautiful woman. She stopped a couple of feet from me and looked me up and down, slowly, like she was sizing me up for something.

"I heard that you're the best, . . . . at runes, wards, and magical security." Her voice had a slight accent, French I guessed, and was almost hypnotic. I nodded not trusting myself to speak.

"I need your, . . ah . . . services and am prepared to compensate you handsomely."

"Can I get your name, Ma'am? And . . . uhm . . . would you like a cup of coffee?" I felt stupid, all of a sudden, for offering her coffee. God what was I thinking? With a smile she turned and flicked her hair over a shoulder and then glanced back at me.

"Yes, please, cream and sugar."

I was torn between watching her backside as she moved over to the couch and getting the coffee. Manners won out and I poured two cups, picked up packets of cream and sugar, and brought them over to the couches. I sat down across from her and placed the coffee on the table between us.



“Now, Ma’am, what’s your name and how can I help you?” I managed to stammer feeling like I’d just accomplished something.

“Well, you see one of your clients is my ex-husband, and he has some property of mine. I intend to get it back and was hoping that you’d be willing to work an accommodation.” As she said this she leaned forward picking up a packet of cream and added it, along with two packets of sugar, to the coffee. It took a full second before what she said penetrated my brain.

“Ma’am what type of property and why can’t you go to the police? I mean if he has something of yours, well, that’s what the police and the courts are for.” I stumbled through my speech barely able to pull my gaze up to meet her eyes.

“I know that your wards alerted you, I’m a Magic-User, like you. This is not something for the police. It’s about the Art. I want you to give me the Keys to the wards. That’s all I need and I’m prepared to pay you very handsomely.” She was now staring at me intently the coffee she’d been playing with untouched.

At this I felt ill, I’m not the best person around, but I’ve got my standards. If I sold out one of my clients, no matter if it was justified, I’d be out of business.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, I can’t help you.” I said, actually regretting it.

“Are you sure we can’t find an accommodation?” She asked raising one exquisite eyebrow.

“I won’t sell out one of my clients. If your ex-husband stole something from you then you need to go to the police. If it’s an artifact maybe the Guild can help you recover it. I can’t do what you’re asking.” At this I stood up and walked toward my desk. I was about half way there when I heard her say.

“I’m sorry too, . . .oh, would you have a look at this?”

I turned around in time to see that she had followed and was only a couple feet behind me. She lifted one hand and drew a glyph in the air that glowed for a second between us. I’m not the most powerful Magic-User, in fact I’m pretty wimpy, but I’m well trained and very knowledgeable. As soon as she started drawing her glyph I spoke a word of activation, I was wearing a shield ring that would deflect most magic. I’d also woven into my belt several crystals, where every morning and evening I stored power. I tapped one of the crystals by touching it with my off hand and poured its energy into the ring I held up between me and my attacker. Abruptly the air between us was distorted by the shield I’d activated.

I was barely in time, whatever spell she’d used slammed into my shield with the force of a Mack-truck. I felt it shudder and hold. I activated the second ring on my right hand while touching another crystal with my left. This ring designed to use

telekinetic force to bind an opponent. I wasn't strong enough to work this without augmentation and the power from the second of the six crystals woven into my belt flowed through me. The power lashed out and she blocked it with a negligent wave of one hand. I felt the ring burst and fall off my finger. Holy shit, who am I fighting? Before I could try another spell, she spoke a Word of Power and my shield was shredded, and I was seized in a telekinetic grip.

"Look into my eyes."

I felt a force grip my head and turn it to face her. Her blue eyes seemed to blaze with power and I felt myself being pulled forward. There was a strange tearing sensation and suddenly I felt like I'd been snapped free and was sucked down into a pair of blue whirl pools. Then I blacked out.

\* \* \*

My awareness started to return slowly. I could tell I was stretched out on something soft with my hands bound together in front of me. My ankles were also bound together and I was gaged and blindfolded. I had a headache to beat all headaches. For a moment I felt anger well up inside me. This woman had walked into my office and subdued me without working up a sweat. I was always weaker than everyone else in my family and my mother had been against me working as a security consultant for this reason. She thought I was too weak to work professionally in the Art and had wanted me to stay on the estate pursuing a more academic career. Laying here bound and gagged it felt like she was right, and that pissed me off.

Think Alastar, think! I admonished myself. Okay, I can't speak a cantrip to release my bonds. I can't make any gestures that leaves purely thought magic. As skilled as I am, I suck at mind magic. I started controlling my breathing and focused on my hearing. Was the woman still in my office?

For several minutes I lay still and listened. She must be gone. However, I heard a slight rustling from behind my head. Slowly I started to piece together a picture. If I was on the couch by the wall then Edgar's perch would be behind me. I took as deep a breath as I could with the gag and drew on my magical power. For a second I nearly lost the connection between me and the magic because of how startled I was. I'd tried a light drawing of power and in answer I'd received, for me, storm of energy. I calmed down and reduced the flow of power. Now came the hard part, I wasn't able to speak the cantrip out loud, so I'd have to recite it in my mind while using my magic to strengthen the bond between me and Edger.

Slowly the room came into focus. I was perched by the window and felt very happy with myself since I'd had a great flight. Now if only there was something to eat. I managed to push back a bit and separate my thoughts from Edgar's. I focused on getting him to look at me. At first Edgar was confused looking around the room, but at last he settled on the human shape on the couch.

I now knew that there was no one else in the room so cautiously I reached up toward my face. Even though my hands were bound I was able to push the blind fold up away from my eyes. The light was bright and blurry and I had to blink several times before my vision cleared up. Weird, I thought, colors seemed much clearer and brighter like there were dozens of shades where I'd only perceived one or two before. I didn't want to waste any time so I started working on my gag. That bitch had stuffed a piece of soft plastic in my mouth before she tapped it shut. I ripped the tape off and spit out the rubber mouth piece.

Once I could speak I pulled in more magical energy. I was less surprised this time at the overwhelming response and focused on the words. The spell rang out in a clear woman's voice and suddenly my hands and feet were free. I didn't know where that voice came from and figured it must be my mystery lady back for round two! I jumped up and drew in as much power as I could and looked around. I saw nothing but an empty office just Edgar and me.

"What the hell?"

Again that voice! Sort of like my mystery lady's only slightly different. I glanced down and received the greatest shock of my life. Pushing out from my chest were two distinct mounds.

"I have breasts?"

I reached up with both hands and squeezed the flesh on my chest. I felt a breast in each hand and the unique sensation of a pair of breasts being squeezed. For a moment I was too stunned to react then I slowly continued my exploration. I moved my hands to my throat and my questing fingers found soft skin, a long neck, and then a smooth chin with no stubble. This can't be happening I thought to myself. I stumbled over to the mirror hanging above the refrigerator and saw staring back the face of the brunette who'd attacked me. I reached up with one hand and felt her face and saw the woman in the mirror copy my movements perfectly. I felt the hand touching my lips and knew this was real. I stumbled to the chair behind my desk and sat down. When I did I noticed the bounce of extra flesh on my chest and for the first time an absence of my old friend between my legs. I started to hyperventilate, I felt dizzy, and my vision swam. What the hell had just happened to me? Why would this woman change me

into a copy of her? For that matter why would she put me into her clothes? I took several deep breaths, get a grip Alastar, what would your mother think if she saw you? I suddenly felt ashamed. This was just a transformation spell I needed to focus and prioritize.

At the St Louis Academy of the Arcane, we'd been forced to learn several spells designed to shape-shift. I, of course, didn't have the strength to use those spells and had to figure out a way to augment my power. I learned to store magic in things like crystals and then tap them in class to cast the necessary spells. I'd passed, but everyone knew that I was the weakest Magic-User ever to earn an MAA. However, when it came time to change into a copy of yourself, if you'd been born in the opposite gender, I'd claimed I didn't have the power. I showed the instructors I could cast the spell perfectly and knew the theory. But, I'd claimed, I didn't have the strength to cast it. As a result I'd gotten partial credit which was fine with me since the idea of being female was one that I was totally uncomfortable with. Now sitting at my desk in this strange woman's body I wished I'd not chickened out because those lessons would have come in handy.

I took a deep breath. Okay, she made me into a copy of her, and put me in her clothes, why? She wanted to get into either one of my clients houses or places of business so maybe she'd changed into a copy of me. If she did then she probably needed my clothes. Although why change me into a copy of her? Duh, I thought, because she wanted only one Alastar running around. If she knew that I didn't have the power to shift on my own, then I certainly wouldn't have the power to break her spell transforming me into a copy of her. She'd also taken my belt with the crystals where I stored additional magical energy. I was effectively stuck until her transformation spell wore off. Why didn't she take her clothes? Leaving me naked with no way to change back would be a pretty good tactic. I shuddered at the thought of being stuck, naked, in a female body, in my office.

Okay, priority one, I need to alert my clients that someone wearing my face would be trying to gain access to their building. Unfortunately she never said which client. I logged onto my computer, noticing how different it was to type with long finger nails. I did a quick search of my former clients with magical abilities who were divorced and wealthy enough to rate this kind of attention. I came up with three names.

I almost made the mistake of picking up the phone and calling each client. Instead I went into my storage room and pulled down one of the spell-books from its shelf. As I did I realized that I could barely reach the book. Obviously I was several inches shorter right now. I needed a simple spell to change my voice. It took about ten minutes to find

it and then I went back to my desk. I once again opened myself to the magic around me and felt a torrent of energy. This could be very addictive, I thought, and then cast the spell. I felt the tingle that told me it had worked and then said.

“The rain falls mainly on the plain in Spain.”

At the sound of my normal male voice I jumped and spun around, “yes!”

Of course this maneuver in my unfamiliar shape caused me to lose my balance and I hit the floor hard on my newly-padded rear end.

“Damn it!”

I climbed to my feet rubbing my soft, sore, butt and tried not to think about what it was I was feeling and sat down behind my desk. I picked up my desk phone and started making calls. I figured they thought I was crazy when I introduced myself and explained that there might be a person using magic to look like me attempting to gain entry.

“Don’t worry,” I explained for the third time, “this person only looks like me. He doesn’t have the Keys to your Wards. If you leave the wards up and he’s stopped then he’s an imposter and you should then call the Guild.”

After my last call I checked the clock and saw that it was already late afternoon. Between the attack, the time I’d spent unconscious, and then calling my clients I’d completely missed both of my appointments. Oh well, it’s probably for the best.

“I can’t exactly go looking like this” I muttered.

For a second I considered calling my mother. She’d be able to break the spell with ease. But the thought of her seeing me in this body and the satisfied smile, she had too much class to say “I told you so,” stopped me. No, whatever happened I’d figure this mystery out on my own. Besides transformation spells required a continuous feed of power or they wore off. In theory I just had to wait several hours and I’d shift back to my natural form. I figured the next step was to go to my house and use one of my grimoires to break the shape shifting spell or if all else failed, wait it out. After that I’d alert the guild authorities so they could start looking for my imposter.

My clothes were gone and my mystery woman hadn’t left me her purse. I opened the drawer to my desk and sighed with relief when I saw my car keys were sitting where I always left them. I shushed Edgar out the window and walked to the door and stopped when I saw my reflection in the glass. Oh, God, I was going to have to go out in public like this. I felt totally humiliated! I’d been ambushed and transformed in my place of business like some barely competent hedge witch. At least no one who knows me has seen me like this, I thought, and with that stepped out into the mall.

I retraced my steps to my parking spot feeling greatly relieved when I saw my car sitting there waiting for me. I'd figured the car would be there when I found my keys still in my desk drawer, but seeing it was still a relief. I opened the door and tried to climb in and noticed that the skirt I was wearing made getting into a car the way I usually did impossible. I turned around so I could settle my butt into the driver's seat and then swung my legs in and under the steering wheel. Now I realized I was too far back and had to slide the seat forward so I could reach the pedals. Finally ready I started the car taking comfort in the familiar growl of the engine. The drive took about ten minutes with heavy traffic this time of day. I was pleased to see my small two bedroom house come into sight. I pulled into my driveway and pushed the button that opened the garage door and felt the wards around my house activate. The car suddenly stalled.

"What the fuck" I said out loud confused.

This is my house I created those wards myself they're designed to recognize my body's physical essence. No matter what form I'm in that essence, like a magical genetic signature, doesn't change. Confused I spoke the Key and sent a trickle of energy at the ward net and felt the field drop. Once inside the house I let Edgar in and then I kicked my shoes off and headed down to my basement where I'd built, at great expense, my sanctum.

My basement might as well be out of some novel. It's long, the entire length of the ranch style house. I've got a summoning circle built into the cement floor. Along one wall running the length of the basement is a floor to ceiling set of built-in book shelves containing most of my magical archive. Along the far wall is a large desk with a computer and a flat screen TV. I suddenly felt like a weight had been lifted, ever since the attack I'd been jumpy. Now, in my place of power I felt safe. Okay the first order of business is to identify the spell that was used to turn me into a woman. Then figure out the best way to break it. I pulled down a magical reference book and flipped to the section on transformations.

After twenty minutes of study I started casting. My house is built on a ley-line, (not one of the large powerful confluences, just a small line) which helps tremendously if you're a magical weakling. For the first time since I moved in I didn't need to touch the ley-line I had more power at my fingertips than I'd ever imagined. My initial spell told me that my body was free of any curses, hexes, charms, or spells. I cast the next, and the next, and the next, each spell was designed to identify any active magic on my body. After nearly an hour of straight casting I felt exhilarated instead of exhausted, like I usually would have been, but disappointed and confused.

Okay, Alastar think, there is no active magic on this body. So she couldn't have used a transformation spell. I woke up in her clothes, why? The amount of power I can now draw is easily ten times what I normally can.

"Holy Shit, she did a soul swap!"

The realization hit me like a bucket of cold water. Spells like this are considered sorcery and are the darkest of black magic. They rip the soul of the subject out of its natural body and move the soul into a new form or an object. Every time this sort of spell is cast the person casting it loses a piece of their own humanity. Unlike a transformation spell, my mystery woman had used a spell to rip my soul out and put it in this body. I was now for all practical, physical, and magical purposes, the mystery woman.

Well, at least that explained the clothes. She hadn't changed them she'd just left me in the clothes she'd been wearing. At this I started to giggle uncontrollably. Here I was worried about why she'd put me in her clothes when there were bigger questions. After a minute I stopped laughing and tried to focus on the problem. Why would she want to be me? Obviously not to steal my magically power, . . . .... wait the wards. She'd wanted access to one of my clients and since I wouldn't give her the Keys so she took my body. I was a living breathing Key for every ward I'd ever created.

I shivered at the thought of black magic. Generally speaking magic was a tool and the intent of the person using it determined if it was beneficial or harmful. There were a couple of exceptions. Blood Magic, which fed on the life force of the sacrifice; necromancy, which dealt with the bodies and souls of the dead; and sorcery, which used the souls of living sentient beings as a source of power and a tool; each of these types were considered illegal by the Guild and they damaged the soul of the practitioner. The idea that she'd used this type of a spell on me made my skin crawl.

My stomach growled, and I glanced at the clock on the computer and saw that it was almost 8 pm. This body needed food and I need to think. How do I stop this bitch? I went to the kitchen and got some left over pizza and a bud from the refrigerator and plopped down on my couch. I was once again startled by the way my chest bounced and the empty feeling between my legs. Trying to ignore my body I bit into the pizza and grimaced at the greasy taste. What the heck, I love cold pizza! I took a drink of beer and felt my stomach churn. Okay this body was not going to tolerate greasy pizza and beer.

"Lord why have you forsaken me" I asked the empty room. "Pizza and beer are two of your most blessed culinary combinations?"

Edgar looked at me from where he'd been sleeping perched on a roost by the kitchen. I regretfully returned the pizza to the box and found some cold cuts and bread. With my stomach settled enough to finish dinner and I thought about my problem. I desperately needed information. Just then a strange new sensation caused me to pause. After a second I realized I was feeling pressure in my bladder. I grimaced, it looks like it's time to learn how to pee sitting down. This was a practical problem I'd have to master if I was stuck in this body for any length of time and it shouldn't have surprised me. I went into my bathroom and couldn't help staring at myself in the mirror. I was now about 5'7" much shorter than I was used to and there was no doubt about it, I was stunningly pretty. I hung my jacket on the hook behind the door and then hiked up my skirt and pulled down my panties and hose. Next I settled on the toilet letting out a little yelp due to the cold seat. It took me several tries experimenting with clenching up and relaxing muscles until I figured out how to make this body tinkle. The warm flow of urine and the feeling of relief that came with it were very similar I thought. I remembered to wipe and then flushed the toilet and put my clothes mostly back in there proper position.



# CHAPTER 2

## *The Chase*

**T**here are several ways to get information and Magic-Users have extra options. However, there is always a price for information. I decided to start with the internet since the price there was the lowest. I went to a Guild news site and started flipping through articles for the last few days to see if anything would pop. After about 30 minutes of what felt like fruitless searching I froze. In the social section there was an article about the famed researcher Magic-User Master-Class Bernard Livingstone from Boston who was visiting St. Louis to display his latest crafting. The article showed a picture of his wife Molly and daughter Morgana the resemblance between the two made it easy to see that Morgana took after her mother. What caught my eye was the fact that Morgana's face was the same face I'd been staring at in the mirror 40 minutes ago.

I scanned the rest of the article and was somewhat surprised to learn that Morgana was just 18 and had recently graduated from a private all girls' high school that specialized in teaching magic. I would have put her in her mid-twenties, I guess make-up and/or a minor glamor could have made her look a few years older. Armed with this information it didn't take me long to find where they were staying. Now I had a lead on whose body I had, but I still didn't know why Morgana would want to trade bodies with me. The story that she needed to get into an ex-husbands office or house was obviously a lie.

I also realized that just because I had a hotel it didn't mean she'd be there. In fact the odds were good that she wouldn't be at the hotel. So, time to start with the mojo. For

the first time in my life I felt like I had an edge in the magic department. I spread out a map of St. Louis on the floor in my summoning circle. I then went to my bathroom looking for my hair brush. Most of the magical community is pretty careful about things like hair, nail clippings, and bodily fluid since these things have a resonance that can be used for several types of castings. I, much to my Mothers annoyance, had never been all that good about destroying these things. Today that worked to my advantage since I found several hairs.

I returned to the summoning circle and tied a paper clip to a string and then wove two of the six hairs through the paper clip. Chanting a quick locator spell I pushed energy into the casting. God, I felt strong!

“Crap!”

The paper clip had turned a bright red from the power of the spell and burned off not only the hairs, but the thread. It fell onto the map and burned a hole straight through.

“Damn it!”

I snatched the map up before it could catch fire. On my second try I pushed the thinnest trickle of energy into the paper clip and was rewarded by it spinning around a couple of times and then jerking down to touch the map. The location was along I-70 forty five minutes outside of St. Louis the exit looked like it would have a hotel.

“I’ve got you now, you body thieving bitch.”

I stood up headed back up to the main floor of the house. For a moment I considered calling my mother. She would probably know the Livingstone’s, (there aren’t that many Magic-User Master-Class practitioners running around) so it would be simple to meet them with her and get to the bottom of this situation. Almost as soon as I thought about calling mom I rejected the idea. She would just use this as another example of why I shouldn’t be professionally practicing magic and try to convince me to move back onto the estate. No, I needed to solve this myself. I needed to prove that I was as competent as the rest of my family.

Before I left I took the time to adjust my wards, if Morgana was walking around in my skin there was no way I was letting her into my house. I reset the wards to only drop upon the activation of the Key. Edgar flew over to my shoulder and we headed to the garage. I figured my first stop should be the hotel where Morgana’s parents were staying. I needed to try to understand what was going on with their daughter hopefully they’d be able to help. The Chase Park Hotel was about a twenty minute drive and not really in the direction I needed to go to confront Morgana. It would be almost 9:30 pm before I got to the hotel but I decided I didn’t care.

Driving the Charger in a woman's body felt very different. The skirt and women's shoes made it harder to use the manual transmission. Since this body is shorter not only did I have to adjust all the mirrors and the seat, but I had to get used to sitting much lower than I was used too which affected my field of vision. At least Edgar settled into his usual spot in the passenger's seat. When I arrived at the Chase I was annoyed at the cost of parking, I mean come on, a buck for an hour on the meter at 9:30 at night? Then the walk into the lobby made my feet start to ach. Why in God's name do women buy uncomfortable shoes? And my shoes didn't have 'real' heels just low two inch ones.

"Ugh."

When I walked into the lobby, despite my preoccupation, I could sense something was wrong. I paused for a second and looked around. There was far too much security and the police car out front wasn't normal. I walked toward the front desk and spoke a charm under my breath designed to make anyone I talked to want to help me. It wasn't strong enough to qualify as a compulsion just a simple spell designed to influence. The clerk looked like he was in college and working nights at the hotel. I tried for a sexy sophisticated walk, caught a heel, and stumbled stupidly. At least I didn't fall over, "damn it!" I muttered under my breath.

"Hi" I said feeling like the source of sophistication. Not. "I, . . . um . . . locked myself out of my room. My name's Morgana Livingstone."

I tried to pull my shoulders back and push my chest out. Hey, if you got'em you might as well use'em. I could almost see the spell take effect. The clerk seemed to fixate on my chest for a second. Then instead of asking for my room number or identification said, "sure thing Ms. Livingstone." Okay maybe he was under a different kind of influence.

"Ah, call me Morgana," I said fluttering my eye's at him.

"Here you are. You're on the 19th floor, room 1922. Let me just make you a new key card. Oh, I'm so sorry about your parents."

For a second it didn't register my parents? I decided to just keep my mouth shut.

"Here you go, will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you, you've been very helpful."

I turned and walked away toward the elevator my heels click clacking away. I felt totally self-conscious. I wondered what the heck was he talking about as I rode the elevator up to the 19th floor. I approached room 1922 cautiously and then spotted yellow police tape across room 1924 the next room down from mine. Shit, if the Livingstone's were all traveling together, Morgana being eighteen, probably had her

own room. And from the look of things her parent's room was the scene of a crime, damn, damn, damn!

I swiped my key and walked into a plush room and spotted a connecting door to one side. Yes, they'd gotten adjoining rooms! I moved further into the suite and saw a king sized bed, living room, walk-in closet, and huge bathroom. It was easy to see why this was a five star hotel. I started checking the dresser when a loud yowl interrupted my search. A huge calico cat darted from the closet and leaped at my face screeching as it attacked. I reacted instinctively and caught it just below the throat. The damn thing scratched my forearm and surprised by how much this hurt I dropped the cat.

As soon as it landed it launched itself at me again, I was more prepared this time and spoke a Power Word for sleep. The magic slammed into the cat, but the crazed beast fought it off. Holy crap, it crouched hissing and spitting all of its fur standing on end. After a second it attacked again and this time I brought my shield spell up. The cat bounced back from the shield giving me the time I needed to cast a stun spell. I'd just learned my lesson so I poured about twice as much power into the spell. Energy flashed across the room and the cat landed on its side out for the count.

"What the hell!"

I felt my knees turn wobbly for a second as the adrenaline hit my system. I took a couple of deep breaths to re-center myself and then went over to check on the cat. It was breathing then as I watched it, it shuddered once and died. I felt my legs collapse and I settled on the floor next to the dead cat. I didn't understand. My first spell should have put the cat to sleep when that didn't work the second spell shouldn't have been enough to kill it. Suddenly it dawned on me this was Morgana's familiar.

Not all Magic-Users have a familiar. In fact it's kind of rare these days. Usually if you're from an old school family, sometimes teenage girls, or if you're like me and a weakling, well you need every advantage you can get. At the moment I wished I hadn't left Edgar in my car. Trying to ignore the cat I started searching again this time starting with the luggage. There were several days' worth of outfits, casual, formal, and exercise clothes. I felt a surge of excitement when I discovered Morgana's purse. Now I had a driver's license as well as her cell phone. I glanced briefly at missed and recent calls, but nothing rang any bells. I spotted a computer case and decided to look at it later. I took a quick look in the bathroom found a magical travel kit, with some basic spell components, and some things which were specific to female Magic-Users. If I was stuck in this body for any length of time this would come in handy.

Now I focused on the door that connected the two rooms. I knew that the Guild would be sending over its own Investigator if there was a crime here which, from the

police tape on the door, I thought was likely. I decided to try mundane methods of entry first. I opened the door only to see another door with no handle. Obviously this door could only be opened from the other side. I used my key card and tried to slide it down between the door and the door-frame and was surprised when I was able to jimmy the door open. I went into the room and I instantly sensed death. I opened my third-eye and examined the room, looking for any magical clues, or active spells.

The third-eye refers to an ability that all Magic-Users have and use to look at the world of magic. The mundane world appears as a shadowy black and white to the third-eye, but anything with magical power shows up in color. Another aspect of the third-eye is that it cuts through illusion and shows true shapes. It can also show hidden glyphs and spells and is useful for certain types of research.

I quickly figured out that there were no active spells in the room and that two powerful practitioners of the Art had died on the bed. I was careful not to touch anything as I looked around. After about 10 minutes, when I hadn't turned up any clues, I returned to Morgana's room and shut both doors behind me. If they'd been murdered it wasn't by magic. I sat down on Morgana's bed and tried to think. First she'd used an illegal spell to swap souls with me. Next she had killed her parents. Check that probably killed them. I realized that I had no proof of murder, but it was way too coincidental for some kind of natural death. What if I had it backwards? What if she'd killed her parents and then swapped with me? It would be a great way to keep me occupied. I might even get arrested and charged. I would eventually be able to prove my identity. Although it would take a Magic-User Master-Class and some very advanced magic to do it. Still I'd be cleared, eventually. In the meantime I'd be out of circulation for a couple of days, maybe longer. The whole time Morgana would free to do whatever it was she was trying to do. Could she be so cold hearted as to kill her parents just to delay me? Why not just kill me? I looked down at the dead cat and had an epiphany. Familiars, they bond mystically with their masters. It was a powerful connection which only death could break. Typically familiars either went into a catatonic state until they died of starvation or they went feral attacking everything and everyone until they were put down. Edgar was in the office right about the time of the swap. What if she decided not to kill me because of the trouble my familiar would make? My office was in a relatively public place all it would take was for building security to come investigate the noise and she'd be the prime suspect in her own death.

Of course there was also the possibility that she wanted her body back. All of this left me with more questions than answers. For example Morgana wasn't dead, she was

in my body so why had her familiar gone feral? This, of course, brought me full circle to the original question, what was her motive? She'd obviously lied about the ex-husband so why did she want my body? All of this speculation left me frustrated and with more questions. Nothing so far seemed to fit. From what I'd been able to read the Livingstone's were a happy, adjusted, and powerful magical family. I doubted she'd kill her parents just to distract and delay me.

I stood up shaking my head feeling my hair swish back and forth. I needed to head out to the place where Morgana was holed up. But first I decided to take as much of her stuff as I could. I had no idea if or when I'd be able to swap back so I spent the next couple of minutes packing up her toiletry kit, make-up, clothes, and computer. I had it all packed into a suitcase, computer case, and hanging bag. I then pricked the index finger of my right hand and using my blood drew a rune on each piece of luggage. Next I tried a spell I've used before with lots of augmentation. This time I had plenty of magical muscle and the spell activated shrinking the objects I'd marked. When the spell ran its course each piece of luggage was small enough to fit inside my new purse.

I slipped out of the room and walked toward the elevators. Before I left my place I'd grabbed a ring that I'd spent several months crafting. The ring held only one spell and would work with the barest trickle of power. It was another way to husband power if you're a skilled weakling. The spell was better than invisibility in my opinion. It was a spell of un-notice. It was designed to trick the senses into not reporting to the mind that the person wearing the ring existed. I'm not very good at mind magic, but I'm a great craftsman and this spell was directed at anyone sensing me via any of the five senses. The ring had a weakness, if I was actively casting a spell anyone with magical sensitivity would feel my presence and the spell of un-notice would break. It was also completely ineffective against security cameras. So I needed to be careful not to cast any more spells until I was out of the building. I activated the ring with ease.

Walking through the lobby I noticed a black Buick pull up behind the police car in front of the hotel. The Guild Special Agents that got out sent a shiver down my spine. They could be here to look at the crime scene or they could be here because they'd gotten a tip that I was here. Shit! I sat down on one of the couches in the lobby and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. After a second I remembered to put my knees together. Stupid skirt. The special agents along with the uniformed mundane police entered the hotel and headed over to the front desk. After a brief conversation all four disappeared into an elevator. As soon as the elevator doors closed I was up and walking out of the hotel. I got to my car without incident and started the engine. For a couple of seconds I just sat there. What had I gotten myself into? Maybe it was time to go into

the Guild and tell them what happened. After all I hadn't done anything wrong. In fact I'm the victim. Then I thought about my reputation as a security consultant. No, my clients wanted secure wards and they wanted privacy. They would not be happy if I brought a bunch of unneeded law enforcement to their doors. I again thought about my mother and the fact that I was always a disappointment. I decided that I'd handle this myself. I'd head up to the hotel I'd scryed earlier and try to find Morgana and bring her in myself.

The drive out gave me time to think. I've always been good at runes, wards, and protective spells. I've worked hard at combat magic because the exercises are supposed to increase a Magic-User's strength sort of like lifting weights. Only I never really got any stronger. Now I had plenty of magical muscle, I thought with a sarcastic grin. This brought up a new question, why would Morgana give up her strength? What if she didn't know I was a weakling? I mean a normal Magic-User 2nd Class isn't wimpy. If it was to gain access to a location that only I could access then that made sense. She'd now be stuck in my body, unless she had a plan to compensate for the loss of power. Then it dawned on me, Bernard Livingstone, the article had talked about his latest creation. He'd figured out a way to enchant the power of a ley-line into a crystal. If you held the crystal it would be like standing on a ley-line wherever you were. It wouldn't run out of stored power the way my crystals did and it could triple or quadruple a Magic-User's strength. If she'd stolen her father's research then she'd remain strong while in my body. The idea fit, but I knew there was something else I was missing.

\* \* \*

It was almost 11 pm when I pulled into the parking lot of the Motel 6 just off the highway. I opened the door and released Edgar to do a reconnaissance. Next I used the last two hairs from my hair brush wrapping them around my index finger and tied a knot. I used the barest whisper of power and cast the spell, "like to like" and spoke a Word of release. I felt a slight pull on my finger, not toward the motel, but around the back. I did a sending to Edgar directing him to head out that way and started walking. Focused as I was on tracking down Morgana I tried to ignore the differences in my physical body. All of a sudden I couldn't seem to ignore them. Breasts swinging one way and hips the other, I felt physically small and weak. If it weren't for the magical power that sang in my veins I'd be worried about some guy jumping me. Behind the motel, my spell told me to start walking into the woods.

"Why is it never easy?" I muttered.

If you haven't tried walking through soft loamy dirt in heels, even two inch heels, I'd recommend against it. After a couple of minutes I pulled my shoes off and held them in one hand grimacing every time I stepped on a stone or a stick. After about five minutes of walking I couldn't see because the trees now blocked all light from the motel and the road. I used a cantrip and caused a ball of glowing light to hover above my head. That's weird I thought usually when I use witch-light it's a light purple color now it was a light blue. As I walked I thought about the difference between the ways a physical body must filter magic. It had changed one of the color manifestations of my power. If I was still in school it would make a great research topic.

Abruptly I realized that I'd reached my destination. Directly in front of me loomed a large tree and the spell pointed right at it. I sent my witch-light over to it with a mental nudge. Once the light got close enough to the tree I noticed a dark stain on the bark. With a deep breath I opened my third-eye. What I saw was a glowing purple glyph on the tree. I didn't recognize the glyph but I knew my signature color when I saw it. I stepped forward, eager to look at it more closely, when my familiar screeched a warning. Not being the most powerful Magic-User has ingrained in me some defensive instincts. Instead of turning and trying to bring up a shield I dove forward into a headlong roll just like I practiced in the Dojo. It saved my life, because with a crack of thunder a bolt of lightning shot from my left slashing through the space where I'd been a second ago and struck a tree set it ablaze.

I jumped to my feet feeling my chest move around in a distracting way, I ignored the sensation, and I focused my senses in the direction of the attack. I drew in as much power as I could hold and it was a vast amount of power. I could feel my eyes blazing and the air around me began to crackle with static electricity as my hair started to stand up. I Looked back in the direction of the attack and saw another tree with a glyph in purple now fading. I recognized rune as a simple lightning strike. Once a Magic-User got in range it would activate and blast once. It was the kind of mindless rune magic I hated, because it could hurt anyone that came by similar in the mundane world to a landmine.

Then the ground beneath my feet irrupted, and a cold claw like hand grabbed my ankle and jerked my foot out from under me. I went down backwards and tried to control my fall by slapping the ground to dissipate the energy. In front of me climbing from its fresh grave was a male corpse. I rolled to my feet twisting my ankle free as I moved while trying to get some separation between me and the monster. I need to be able to see what it was I faced. The creature blazed with dark energy. There was no doubt in my mind I was looking at a zombie and one newly made. I brought up my



body shields with a word and then held out my hands feeling my power cover them. My whole body was encased in a shield I'd personally designed. The shield consisted of three layers, each layer separated by less than a centimeter, and each layer angled slightly from the one above it. The design was to allow me to deflect spells or physical attacks while using the least amount of power possible. Now, however, I burned with power.

The zombie stepped forward and swung its right arm in a wild raking move. I ducked the swing and stepped to the right. As I did this I reached up cupping its chin with my left hand. I stepped behind it with my left foot and grabbed the back of its head with my right hand. Then with all the force I could muster drove it over my hip smashing the back of its head into the ground in a move known as Irimi-nage. The skull shattered like an egg. I wasn't sure if this was because of the force of my throw or the magically powered muscles and body shield I'd used but the end result was the same. A Zombie without a brain to tell its limbs what to do is just a corpse.

Edgar perched in a tree to my right let out a caw of approval, and started to preen himself. Glad you approve I thought sourly. The stench from the corpse was pretty overwhelming. Holding my nose to stop a gag reflex I'd never had before I looked closely at the rune on the tree. I'd never seen anything like it and with a sinking feeling I realized that it had been written in my body's blood. Which explained why my tracking spell had brought me here I thought angrily. I quickly memorized the rune and then returned to the corpse. I went through its pockets, barely able to keep my dinner down and was surprised to find a wallet and a passport. I hesitated for a second and then opened my third-eye, again, examining the corpse for magic. What I saw startled me. On the zombie's forehead previously invisible was the same glyph that had been on the tree.

I called Edgar to me and walked off a good hundred paces and then turned back to the trap. For a second I didn't want to think about it what I needed to do. This was something I didn't want the Police or the Guild's special agents to find. My blood or rather blood from my body had been used in the creation of black magic and necromancy. I had a spell I used to light fires in my fire place. It was great because I'd modified it to be as efficient as possible. Fire is a powerful, cleansing element, when you burn something to ash if the fire is hot enough you can destroy almost all physical and magical traces.

Drawing as much power as I could and I cast my spell. I'd expected a fire, what I got was a fire storm. A spark of light darted from my open hand to the tree with the glyph. When it hit it exploded into a column of flame that nearly 40 feet into the sky. And like

a tidal wave the fire rolled out running rapidly toward me. I barely had time to raise my shield before the flame swept past. Almost as quickly as the fire started it collapsed and died. The thing about magical fire is that it needs magic to sustain it, lacking more power as a source of fuel it had died. The area where the trap had been was nothing more than a 40 foot circle of ash. With a small burst of power I put out the secondary fires my spell had started and then turned back to the motel. As I stepped out of the woods I activated my ring of 'un-notice' and promptly stepped on a sharp stone in the parking lot.

"Damn it!" I swore hopping up and down.

Limping back to my car I realized that I'd dropped my shoes during the fight, and now they were nothing more than ashes.

"I'm not with it tonight."

I drove toward St. Louis and my little house for almost twenty minutes before I stopped at a Burger King and order a chicken value meal to go. After I'd collected my food from the window I pulled around behind the restaurant and parked my car just as a wave of nausea hit me. I barely managed to get my car door open before I vomited. I sat there shaking and trying not to think. The smell of the food I'd purchased didn't help my stomach at the moment.

Good God, what the hell was going on? What had I gotten myself into? So far today I'd either seen or been the victim of body theft, sorcery, murder, black magic, and now necromancy. I sat still gripping the steering wheel with two hands and focused on breathing. After the nausea subsided I started sipping my diet cola and concentrated on what had just happened. This had obviously been a trap, either set for me or for anyone investigating what was going on. Again, I thought about going to my mom or to the guild, but rejected the idea for the moment. Mother would just use this as another example of my short comings, and the guild would systematically contact each of my clients. No I had to get to the bottom of this myself. I needed to prove that I was just as capable as the rest of my family.

"Who was the dead guy?" I wondered out loud.

I grabbed the passport and opened it. I read the name, Ambrose L. Grosvenor for some reason the name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. Now that my stomach had settled a bit I decided to try to eat. As I ate I let my mind wander and abruptly remembered in a flash of insight. Ambrose Grosvenor, was a criminal, he'd been convicted of practicing illegal magic including sorcery, blood magic and necromancy. It had been a case study in my ethical use of magic class when I'd been at the University. He'd been paroled about a year ago after having served his sentence in an

English prison. I guess he'd never practice illegal magic again since his body was now nothing more than ashes.

I started up the Charger and headed home, as I drove I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something obvious. Why would Morgana kill Ambrose? Then her parents and swap with me? Why the elaborate trap? I mean as an artist the lightning was inspired since both glyphs must have activated at the same time, lightning is a quick and simple spell obviously the power to reanimate a corpse must take a few seconds. By distracting me with the lightning Morgana had set me up for the zombie to take me down. Then I had my second epiphany of the night.

What if Morgana was a victim? Ambrose had been out of prison for a while. What if I was his target all along? What if he'd uncovered an ancient black sorcerer's spell for swapping souls? This would give him a powerful and unique ability. He knew that I was an impotent Magic-User. Bernard Livingstone two weeks ago had announced his breakthrough and Ambrose needed it. He needed it because in my body he wouldn't have enough power to cast his soul swap spell. So Ambrose tricks Morgana and takes her body and kills her in his body. Now in Morgana's body he kills Morgana's unsuspecting parents and locks up her familiar which would have gone feral with Morgana's death. He then takes the crystal he needed to augment his power in my body. Ambrose then arrives at my office pretending to need my help. It's a public office, in an office building with lots of people. He swapped bodies with me and in flies Edgar. Now he's got another familiar who will go crazy if I'm killed and he can't afford a public scene so ties me up and leaves.

So Ambrose now in my body has a crystal that augments his power by a factor of four and doesn't run out of stored energy like my crystals do. Knowing that sooner or later I'll come looking for him he set this trap, designed to either kill me or take me out of town for a couple of hours. Not to mention the fact that now that I'm in Morgana's body and I might get charged with the death of her parents. The final piece that made me certain it must be Ambrose all along was the fact that he'd spoofed my tracking spell. It should have at least shown me two possible locations for him, instead it had pointed only to the Motel 6. That took real skill, skill that an 18 year old girl recently graduated from high school, no matter how strong, wouldn't possess.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

It all fit as farfetched as it was it somehow struck me as right. Suddenly my vision blurred poor Morgana just 18 years old and she had been tricked and murdered. I took a deep breath and focused on the road God how do women deal with these emotional swings? This brought me back to my original question. What the hell did he need my

body for? What home or building did he need to get into so badly that he would go to this length? If I could figure out what he was after I could catch him in the act. I knew I'd get no answers out here on I-70 so I hit the gas and accelerated toward my house and all of my files.

# CHAPTER 3

## *Revenge*

**I**t was well after midnight when I pulled into my driveway, I almost forgot to speak the Key, but got it out before my wards stalled out the car again. Once in the house I reset the wards and then headed to the cabinet where I kept my whiskey. I needed a drink.

My head hurt, this had to have been one of the longest days of my life. After downing the two fingers of Jameson in a single gulp I spent the next thirty seconds sputtering. Obviously Morgana was not used to whiskey. I could tell that I was exhausted, physically, emotionally, and magically. I made another sandwich and then went to my bedroom. I set my purse on the dresser and pulled out the three items I'd en-spelled earlier. It was simple to break the spells. I watched the drops of blood vaporize and the luggage and computer case returned to their normal size. The idea of sleep was almost irresistible. For some reason I knew I couldn't afford to rest. I felt like I was in a race against Ambrose and so far I was losing. I took Morgana's toiletry kit to the bathroom and brushed my teeth, washed my face, and pulled my hair back into a pony tail and turned on the shower.

As I waited for the shower to heat up, I removed the clothes I'd been wearing all day. I soon realized that Morgana's sense of smell was far better than my own. God, I stink I thought to myself. I tossed her clothes to one side and looked in the mirror. I was captivated. Her flawless face had high cheekbones with a slightly up turned nose and chin that came to a delicate point. But it was her beautiful blue eyes that stole my

breath. Her skin was very pale and her nipples bright pink. Looking down at the crotch I saw a small well-trimmed triangle of hair.

“I think I’m in love” I said out loud and wondered if that made me a narcissist.

With the water hot enough I climbed into the shower. The first thing I noticed about Morgana’s skin was that it’s far more sensitive than my own, the second thing I noticed was that I was crazy if I thought her breasts were too small. The third thing, well, you get the picture. I could have stayed in the shower the rest of the night contemplating the feeling of soapy slick female flesh. It took longer than I thought it would to dry off. I’m used to vigorously rubbing the water from my skin. But after feeling the abrasiveness of my towel, I understood why women blot the water off. I’d managed to keep my hair mostly dry by putting it up so I headed back to the bedroom and opened Morgana’s luggage. I found a pair of pink sweat pants and black t-shirt with small letters across the chest that said, “If you can read this you better buy me a drink.” Setting these to the side I found a bra and panties. The panties slide up my legs and settled snugly around my crotch and hips. God, that feels weird I thought. I’d always been a boxer guy and having material fit so snugly was weird. Next I picked up the bra, just as I’d seen my last girlfriend do I turned it around backwards clasped the hooks. I then spun it back around and slipped my arms through the straps. It still took me a few seconds to adjust my new and still foreign appendages into the cups. After this the sweat pants and t-shirt felt almost normal.

Feeling refreshed and more awake, I headed to the kitchen to get some coffee going. The best thing about my Keurig was that I had a hot cup of coffee in my hand in a few seconds. I now headed to the basement to do some research. I figured I’d start by looking at the data base with all my files.

“Let’s see, sort by magical rating.” I thought to myself.

The name at the top of the list caused me to stop. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Evaline Mor Donegal, Ph. D. AA, Magic-User, Master-Class. About three years ago I’d rebuilt and redesigned the wards on my mother’s estate. My family was easily the most powerful, magically speaking, in St. Louis and we had a vault full of ancient artifacts, whose purpose only mother knew. But anyone going after my mother was suicidal. She was superbly skilled and magically speaking she was one of the top 20 Magic-Users in the United States. Very powerful and skilled Magic-Users also had the ability to slow down the effects of time, they are not immortal, just very long lived. My mother was at the height of her power and she looked like she was in her early thirties and would be very difficult to take down. Ambrose would be a fool to mess with her. I decided to try a different approach. I started up a search engine looking for all the

information I could find on Ambrose L. Grosvenor. I let the computer do its thing and went up to the kitchen to get another cup of coffee and returned to the basement. By this time I'd found several articles and even a Guild sponsored Wiki page with info on Ambrose. Born in Breast, France in 1942 he was the son of magical parents. He had been a gifted student of 1st class power. According to the articles he had a dark side and was caught practicing or trying to learn illegal magic. In 1970 his parents had gone missing, authorities had been unable to figure out what had happened. In 1972 he'd been caught in London, England trying to steal an artifact related to blood magic. The object was an ancient stone (obsidian) Athame whose properties had never been thoroughly documented. During the investigation it was discovered that he'd been practicing illegal magic for years. I was stunned to see a picture of my mother in the audience at his sentencing back in 1972.

When I read this I realized I'd been doubly a fool. I'd seen that Athame, it was in the family vault. My mother, because of her expertise on ancient artifacts, was often asked to do research or act as a consultant by the Guild in fact she was now a Guild Elder and sat on the St. Louis Guild Hall Council. She could have been the Guild Hall Grand Master if she'd wanted the title. Unless I was totally mistaken that dagger was at my family's estate.

"OH MY GOD, that son of a bitch has been planning all along to use my body to steal the Athame of Tartarus, from our vault."

Saying it out loud suddenly made me realize that it was not only logical, it was possibly the only explanation for what had been going on. I rushed to my home phone (Ambrose had taken my cell when he stole my body) and called my mother's private number. After several rings voice mail picked up, this was not unusual since my mother never seemed to be able to remember to carry her cell phone with her while at home. I glanced at the clock and saw that it was after two a.m. She usually stayed up late but there was a good chance she'd gone to bed by now. Whatever was going on I needed to get over to the estate as quickly as possible. I rushed back to my bedroom and grabbed a set of Morgana's cross trainers and her purse and headed to the car. I only stopped long enough to allow Edgar to land on my shoulder before I ran out. At this time of night there was very little traffic and I stomped on the accelerator. I also poured energy into my ring of un-notice and focused on extending the field out around the Charger. I didn't have time to deal with cops tonight and for once I had the magical strength to really use this ring. It still it took me almost 30 minutes to get to my mother's estate.

As I approached the grounds I felt the wards humming with power, I spoke the Key with a push of energy and felt the Charger slip between the wards. I pulled my car to a stop in front of the main entrance and darted toward the steps taking them two at a time. The front doors were closed and locked for the night. It only took me a second to speak the Key that unlocked them and focused as I was on reaching my mother I almost didn't notice Edgar when he landed on my shoulder. I dashed into the house feeling at home. If there was one place I knew it was this house. I hit the steps to the lower level running. When I came out onto the hallway I raced to the far end. This was where the stairs were that lead to the vault, if something had happened it would be here.

As I rushed down the hallway toward the stairs I saw a body crumpled in the hallway. When I got closer I realized it was my body. I knelt next to it feeling for a pulse. Slow and steady I felt the heartbeat. Okay, but who was in my body? I decided not to take chances and cast a spell to bind it. Now I headed deeper into the vault going slower trying to be ready anything. The outer glyphs were down, not a good sign. I descend the stairs slowly and cautiously. Once at the vault level there should have been a set of wards to stop me, but these had also been deactivated. I raced along the hallway not knowing which chamber to check, yet feeling with a sense of intuition that I needed to head to the back of the vault. I opened the last door and inside I saw my mother in her favorite black and purple bathrobe, her dark red hair loose, holding a stone Athame. All the protective spells in the chamber had been deactivated.

"Ambrose, put that down you murderer!" I shouted, charging forward. Unfortunately, Ambrose in my mother's body lifted a hand and a wall of force came into being between us.

"Ah, Alastar, how have you been? Are you enjoying your new body? It is much better than your old one, no?"

His slight French accent seemed so out of place coming from my mother's mouth. I didn't respond to his taunt, instead spoke a Word designed to slice through a shield spell. It was another spell I'd re-designed to be as efficient as possible to compensate for my lack of power. At the moment I had plenty of power and I used every bit of it. I felt Ambrose protective shield come apart under my assault. Before I could do anything else she lifted the dagger and made a vertical cutting gesture and the fabric of reality was torn open in response. With a grin Ambrose stepped into the breach and waived at me with one hand.

"Tat-ta darling, I'll see you soon."



Before I could cross the room the hole had sealed itself leaving me and Edgar alone in the vault.

\* \* \*

The sun was peaking over the horizon, when I finally closed my eyes. After Ambrose escaped I returned to where my body was lying passed out. I removed the binding and with a word levitated the person I assumed to be my mother and using one hand pushed her to her room and dropped her, fully clothed, onto her bed. Then I went around the estate and reset all of the wards to answer only to the command Key not to a body signature. By the time I was done the sun had crested the horizon and I was exhausted. My mother's room is huge and besides the bed there is a full couch, love seat, recliner, and coffee table. I stretched out on the couch and closed my eyes. I thought it would be difficult to fall asleep but I was out almost as soon as my head hit the cushions.

I woke up with a start, feeling magical bonds wrap around me. Unable to move my arms I opened my eyes and glanced toward the bed where I'd left my mother. Mid-morning sunlight was streaming in from behind a tall figure holding an old world styled wand. The wand was pointed at me, which explained the binding.

"Mom, is that you?" I asked trying to shake the sleep from my brain.

"I am not your mother, Morgana. What are you doing in my house? And what did you do to my magic?" Demanded the figure in a cold voice!

"Mom," I said feeling irritated, "I'm not Morgana Livingstone! I'm your son Alastar. Ambrose Grosvenor stole Morgana's body, then mine, and now yours. Release me, please" I added feeling annoyed. After everything I'd been through I was in no mood to put up with my mother's dominance games.

"I, ... I'm in Alastar's body?"

For the first time, in my memory, my mother, Evaline Mor Donegal, Magic-User, Master-Class sounded unsure of herself. Ignoring me for the moment she walked over to the large mirror hanging on the wall and stared at herself. With her free hand she touched her face, then her chest, and finally a quick check of her groin. Turning back to me I could see that she was red faced and flustered. This was another first. I've never seen my mother anything but calm and in control, even when she was angry her control never slipped.

"Mom, let me up I can explain what's happened." I said as gently as I could.

With a gesture of the wand she released me and I sat up. I felt like crap. I wasn't sure how much sleep I'd gotten but it hadn't been enough. I'd been slinging magic around yesterday like I've never done in my life. That much magic would have taken me a year to build up and store. Mom sat down on the couch opposite me crossing her legs feminine fashion, grunted, and quickly readjusted to a position that accommodated my male parts.

"You said you'd explain?"

With that I launched into an account of what had happened to me yesterday. She sat quietly listening as I went through the events and my deductions. She only interrupted once to ask about the zombie and made me show her the rune I'd memorized. After I finished talking she sat quietly, not moving, I recognized this as something she did when she really wanted to consider an issue.

"I need to report this to the Council of Elders."

"Mom, do we really want to make this situation public knowledge?"

"I said the Guild Council of Elders, not the public. Ambrose is a criminal and ever since he was paroled we've had him under surveillance. A week ago the agent assigned to watching Ambrose disappeared and Ambrose dropped out of sight. It alarmed the council enough to put out a quite notice for all Master-Class Magic-Users to be on the lookout for him. None of us thought he was this powerful, daring, and lucky. If what you're telling me is accurate," when I started to protest she held up her hand. "If you're right then he's a serious threat. The soul exchange spell alone makes him one of the top criminals in the world. Then there is the theft of the Athame, that knife can be used in several different rites all of which are trouble."

What she didn't add was that in her body he was even more powerful than he'd been in his original body and that power was augmented by the artifacts he'd stolen. Standing up, she offered me her hand, this felt odd since I can't remember the last time my mother offered to help me up. I took it and once standing she said.

"Alastar I'll need your help. I'm not strong enough at the moment to do the sendings required to call a meeting of the Elders. You'll have to activate the orb, although I'll do the talking."

I nodded not trusting myself to speak. Seeing my mother in my body was weird, on so many levels, her having to ask me for magical help made me feel like the world was upside down. On the other hand I felt hugely relieved that she wasn't lecturing me about not coming to her for aid as soon as I'd been attacked.

Mother's sanctum was only a short walk from her bedroom. As we approached the doors she spoke the Keys to lower the wards and nothing happened. With an irritated

look, she took a deep breath, and I felt her focus and pull in a tiny amount of power and then release it repeating the Key. The wards dropped and we entered her sanctum. I couldn't help smiling, since I was behind her and she couldn't see me, at her having to deal with my handicap. This experience might actually bring my mother's ego down a peg or two and should help me once we got back into our proper bodies.

Mother's sanctum was a circular room with large skylights. Around the room there were several enormous book shelves, and in the center the most complex pentagram/summoning circle I'd ever seen. My mother had spent years building up the power in this place and it contained cases with staffs, wands, and enchanted jewelry. With all of this even in my body, my mother was far from helpless. Did she really need me to work her communication spell? Probably not, but why waste a crystal, or ring when I could help? It was far smarter to save the power stored here for when it was really needed.

Evaline walked over to a small side table covered in black velvet cloth and pulled off the cover. Once the table was revealed I could see that embedded in the center was a large crystal. Mom looked at me and then gestured toward the crystal.

"Alastar all you have to do is direct enough energy to activate the crystal, once activated I'll cast the spell and do the talking."

I shrugged my shoulders feeling the unfamiliar shifting of my chest, "sure." I focused on the crystal and briefly opened my third-eye. I instantly saw what she wanted me to do and sent a tendril of power toward the crystal. In response the crystal began to show a swirling cascade of color inside. At this Mother started chanting and gesturing when she finished I felt her pathetic surge of energy. It was enough and the crystal flared with white light.

"I am Evaline Donegal, Magic-User, Master-Class, and Senior-Elder-in-Good-Standing of the St. Louis Guild of the Arcane. I summon the American Guild of the Arcane, Council of Elders to an emergency meeting. I will host at my estate in St. Louis the emergency is about Ambrose Grosvenor. He has just stolen the Athame of Tartarus. The session will begin at 7 pm US CST."

With that she broke the connection. I'd never seen this particular sending orb but from its basic design I guessed that each member of the Guild's Council of Elders had a similar orb. The message mother had sent would flow to each linked crystal and the message would be locked within until the owner came and listened to it. Kind of like an answering machine only much more secure and one that required a level of magical skill and power to operate.

With this task done, my mother suggested we find some breakfast. I was starving and quickly agreed. We carried our food out onto the back deck overlooking the lawn. Breakfast was filled with awkward silences and attempts to make conversation.

“Do you think we should tell the St. Louis Guild Hall what happened?” I asked having finished eating and feeling the need to fill the silence.

“Not until after we talk to the National Council.” She replied, “in fact I’d like you to stay on the estate today. The local police and the Guild may have a warrant out to bring you, ... Morgana Livingstone, that is, in for questioning. I’d really rather that not happen at all, but if it happened before tonight’s meeting getting you out of jail could be challenging.”

“So we’re just going to sit here while Ambrose run’s loose doing God knows what? Mom he’s got your body! He could be anywhere in the world right now pretending to be you. We have to do something!”

Mother nodded, “your right, once we’re done here I’ll make some phone calls and send out a couple of additional magical messages.” She said sipping her cup of coffee as though she didn’t have a care in the world.

“How can you be so calm?”

“This isn’t very different from a transformation spell.” My mother replied looking at me with an amused half grin. “Come now Alastar you honestly don’t think that this is the first time I’ve worn a male form?”

I sat there sputtering as she took another sip of coffee. After a minute I said, “you know there’s another thing I don’t get. Why did he take your body? I mean he had mine, so he had access to the house and the vault. Why attack you?” For a moment I didn’t think she’d answer, and then finally after an internal debate she replied.

“I think there are two reasons. Revenge and power.”

I remained silent, knowing my mother would continue if I didn’t interrupt.

“I didn’t think much of it when he showed up on the grounds. I thought he was you, and even though you don’t visit much you’re always welcome. We had a quiet dinner and since you didn’t seem to be talkative I chose to respect your privacy.”

Now mother was staring off into space as she talked, like she was watching the past events instead of recounting them.

“I returned to my sanctum after dinner, I’ve been working on a broad area weather spell and I wanted to look at the results of some of my recent research. Around midnight I went to bed. I was almost fully asleep when the warding from the room within the vault where the Athame was stored went off.” She paused to look at me,

“you see that knife is very dangerous, once I stored it in the vault I placed a special set of wards on the room. They are keyed to me only, well, to my body’s physical essence.”

“You never told me you had set up additional wards.” I interrupted feeling hurt that she hadn’t trusted me.

“I’ve set up layers of security on this property that you’ve had no reason to know about.” She replied looking at me and not seeming the slightest bit concerned.

“Shall I continue?”

I nodded my head and bit my lip to stop from saying anything.

“I put on a robe and headed to the vault. I saw Ambrose, who I thought was you, coming up out of the vault looking like he’d been up to something. I stopped him and accused him of trying to break into the Athame room. At this he laughed and said that this was probably a better revenge. We looked each other in the eye and he cast his spell. It’s a very quick spell since I didn’t get a chance to bring up a shield. I also never expected an attack from my son.” Again she was staring off into space.

“You said there were two reasons?” I asked. “I understand the power of the artifact, but revenge?”

“Yes, he must have deduced that he’d need to be in my physical body to get into the chamber. By stealing my body and leaving me in yours, he is revenged on me for the role I played in his arrest in London.”

I felt my cheeks burn, because I knew what my mother meant by her comment. What she didn’t have to say, was that Ambrose by leaving her in my body had effectively stolen her personal power in addition to the artifact.

“Mom, how are you connected to this guy?” I asked.

She looked away staring off into space. “Before you were born, before I’d even met your father, I was studying abroad. It was a fashionable thing to do, for young, powerful, Magic-Users in the 1970s. I was in London studying at the Royal Academy of the Arcane when I met Ambrose. You’ve got to understand that in those days he was very charismatic. We had some similar interests and started meeting to talk about research. We even dated for a while.” With this she paused to look away before she continued. “After a few months I realized that he was headed in a direction I thought was unethical. We started arguing and I finally broke off the relationship. The night he tried to steal the Athame I was in the Academy’s archive and thought I saw him. I went after him curious and wanting to talk to him. I saw him break into the section reserved for powerful magical artifacts.” She now looked down into her cup of coffee remembering. “I called the authorities and then waited for them to arrive. Ambrose was on his way out and so I stopped him pretending that I wanted to talk to him. It

worked and while we were talking security arrived. The problem was that when they tried to arrest him, he overpowered them. So I took him down. That was the first time I'd ever been in a serious magical duel." She paused to look over at me. "The rest of the story is a matter of record. Ambrose was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced for the use of black magic, breaking and entering, attempted theft, and some other charges I can't remember. I never saw or heard from him again until last night. Although, I thought he was you at the time." After her speech we sat in silence for a while both of us thinking as we looked out on the back lawn.

"Why have I never heard about this before?"

"Alastar, you're a good son, but there are many things I've done that I've not told you about. And there are many other things I will never tell you." She stood up, "I need to get cleaned up. I believe you kept a few sets of clothes in your bedroom?" When I nodded, she paused before heading to my old room to say. "You said that you left Morgana's luggage at your place? Ask Steven (the butler) to have Morgana's luggage brought here. You'll be staying at least overnight."

Yup, that was my mother, even in my body she was giving orders and assuming I'd obey. I had to let out a sigh, since even though I wanted to rebel, what she'd suggested made sense. I stood up and went looking for Steven.

# CHAPTER 4

*It's All About Power*

The day passed pretty quickly, after getting Morgana's luggage I'd showered for the second time in this body. This time I'd indulged my curiosity to a point just short of masturbation. Once out of the shower I dressed in a set of casual clothes from Morgana's luggage brushed out my hair and used one of the magical beauty aids that was considered a minor illusion and had the same effect as make up. Not that Morgana needed much. Then I went in search of my mother and found her in her sanctum on the phone. Once I came in she asked me to help out with a few magical sending's. This kept me occupied until lunch. I left my mother, who was now focused on researching something or other, and went to the kitchen. I had bowl of soup and a sandwich for lunch on the back deck and tried to enjoy the spring day. Edgar was out with me swooping and flying around obviously relishing the weather.

Bored, I figured I should test out the magic ability of my current body. So I went to one of our training rooms. The great thing about these rooms was that you could really cut loose magically. There were spells on the room designed to keep castings inside and yet allow me to see what I could do. What I learned that afternoon shocked me. I'd always had an affinity for elemental magic, earth, air, fire, water, metal and wood. I could still work elemental magic, but it was no longer an affinity. Instead, I discovered I was more in tune with celestial bodies and ley-line magic. The movement of the planets, stars, sun and moon were something Morgana's body was very sensitive too. There must be a genetic tie, I thought. Because I could sense the lines of magical power that ran through the earth in a way I'd only read about. I suspect that Morgana's

Dad had also been sensitive to ley-line magic considering his research. I was also much more gifted at mind magic than I'd been before. The second thing I learned was that I was powerful!

This body easily had the strength to be a Magic-User Master-Class all Morgana had needed was the knowledge and skill. I had plenty of both which made me wonder if I could take the tests and did I want to give up this power? I was still very uncomfortable with this body but having this kind of power was new and addictive. To my chagrin, I discovered that even the best training room with all kinds of protective spells can be over loaded if the person getting the workout is strong enough. After accidentally putting a crack in the floor I decided I'd trained enough for the moment. While I'd been testing my abilities I'd failed to notice that I'd become drenched with sweat. I felt damp along my back and sweat running down between my breasts. Talk about weird sensations, I thought, as I headed back to my room.

Once clean I still had some time before dinner. I noticed that Steven had brought Morgana's computer as well as her other things when he delivered them from my house. Curious I powered up the machine and learned that like so many other powerful Magic-Users she'd utterly failed at cyber security. She didn't even have a password on her PC and her e-mail account took only a few minutes to hack (the password was Gandalf. . . . really?).

I started poking through her e-mail and didn't notice anything odd until I saw a series of notes between her and a person called ALG. I saw that she'd gotten in touch with this guy via a mutual friend and was looking for some rare spell components for a difficult spell she was attempting to master. ALG had arranged a meeting three days ago shortly after she'd arrived in St. Louis. This had to have been the setup Ambrose had used to steal her body. What caught my interest was the address. It was for a house in a well to-do area of St. Louis. Did Ambrose have a residence here? Or did he have friends or accomplices working with him? What if he'd never left the city?

To stay here after the crimes he'd committed would take confidence and arrogance. I figured that Ambrose, from everything I'd read or heard, had plenty of both. I knew I had to check this out, and that my mom would forbid it. She'd tell me to wait until after the council meeting. It was only 5 pm and I had no interest in sitting around listening to a bunch of old men and women talk. I expected that I'd have to repeat my story over and over, and that I'd be poked and prodded (magically speaking). I headed to the vault. Mom kept some really powerful artifacts and magical tools in the vault in addition to other less powerful items. These other tools might come in handy if I found and was forced to confront Ambrose. I stayed away from the older, strike that,



the 'ancient' stuff and instead focused on the things I knew how to use. A pair of wands, a couple of rings, and a set of earrings (I now had pierced ears so I might as well use them). I then returned to my room and changed into jeans, cross trainers, (with pink trim, ugh!) a long sleeved black blouse, and a black jacket.

Sneaking off the property was much easier now than when I'd been a teenager. Thanks in part to my un-notice spell and my much greater strength in using it. Of course the fact that my mother had given the staff the day off, after Steven returned with my things, didn't hurt. She didn't want to have to do a lot of explaining about why she was in her son's body. With Edgar riding shotgun I headed back into St. Louis.

"Ambrose, you sorry SOB, if you're still in St. Louis you're about to regret it."

I arrived in the area to find that the address was in a gated community. I pulled up to the gate and the security guard stepped up to my window.

"How can I help you Miss?" For a second I didn't know who he was talking to and then realized I was now the 'Miss.'

"I'm here to visit some friends" I said and made a quick gesture and subvocalized the Power Word for beguilement.

"Okay Ma'am, go on in" he responded returning to the booth and hitting the button that opened the gate. Once inside I drove around until I found the address and then drove past it, stopping two blocks away. I knew that I needed to approach this cautiously. I sent Edgar into the sky to watch from above and activated my ring of un-notice. I walked back toward the house and realized that I could see my breath on the cold evening air. I scanned each of the houses looking for a place where I could duck around behind them. I figured it would be better for me to work my way around behind the place where I thought Ambrose was hiding in my mother's body. From the street, when I'd driven by, the house had been dark. I spotted a sidewalk winding around behind one of the houses and used it to cut through one of the neighbor's backyards heading to the rear of Ambrose's house. There was a tall privacy fence separating Ambrose house from its neighbors. Edgar informed me there was no one in the backyard so I risked detection and levitated over the fence.

Once inside I found a well-manicured English garden. Most of the plants hadn't started to blossom yet, but spring was on its way. I made it undetected to the back side of the house and started looking for a door. After a couple of minutes I found it and looked around. With no one in sight I cast a spell to unlock the door and slipped into the house. I didn't want to risk a witch-light, but knew I couldn't afford to stumble around either. So I cast a spell designed to allow me to see better in the dark. It wasn't

as good as a witch-light would have been, in the interest of stealth, I'd have to make due.

I was starting to get worried all of this spell casting pretty much defeated the effectiveness of my ring. After satisfying myself that everything was okay I headed deeper into the house. I made it to the kitchen when I heard a noise behind me. I started to turn and felt my head explode. Standing behind me was a guy holding a police baton, it descended again, and everything went dark.

\* \* \*

I woke up groggily my head aching unable to move. The first thing I noticed was that I was naked. The second thing I notice was that it was damn cold. I'm not normally very shy about my body, but being naked in a female body seemed like a much greater violation than it would have in my natural form. I was bound with magic unable to move or speak floating about a foot or two off the ground. The only thing I could move was my head. I was able to tell that I was outside in some sort of clearing and the moon had just risen.

"Ah, you're awake, excellent."

The sound of my mother's voice came from my left and for a second I felt comforted when I heard it. Then Ambrose stepped into view. My mother has long dark red hair and a great figure. She can easily pass for a woman in her thirties. Ambrose had dressed her body in a loose ceremonial robe tied at the waist with a rope. Her hair hung free to her waist and she was bare foot. In her hand she held the Athame and once she was sure that I could see her, she gave me a wicked grin I'd never seen on my mother's face.

"It took you long enough to get here I thought I might have to go kidnap you if you didn't read the e-mails I left."

When I didn't say anything Ambrose made a gesture and loosened the magic holding my mouth shut. "You bastard, my mother will be here soon and you'll regret what you've done." I said trying to sound brave.

Ambrose's laugh, sounded unlike anything I'd ever heard my mother make, it was a cackle filled with insanity, and it made the hair on my arms stand up.

"Evaline has almost no power. I could swat her like a bug, my dear. Instead of thinking about your mother you should be wondering what I want with you."

Feeling like I needed to keep her talking I said. "Alright I'll bite, what do you want with me?"

Ambrose lifted the Athame, "I intend to perform the Rite of Iapetus and for that I need the blood of a virgin, freshly shed upon the Athame of Tartarus. You Morgana Livingstone are a virgin and therefore crucial to my plan."

I felt the blood drain from my face, and I closed my eyes to block out the sight of my mother laughing manically. I don't know how long I hung there with my eyes closed, but when I opened them I saw that Ambrose had moved away. I could hear her talking with someone although I couldn't make out what they were saying. I took a deep breath and opened myself to the magic around me, and found pain. I'm not sure how long I screamed but my throat was raw when I stopped, Ambrose was once again standing in front of me grinning.

"Ah, I see you've discovered what happens if you try to draw magic while wearing a Collar of Binding."

Even though I couldn't move I felt for the first time a metal collar around my neck. I'd read about this device, it was used by the Guild to contain criminals with magical abilities. No doubt Ambrose was familiar with it from his days in prison.

"Whatever you're planning won't succeed, mother has called the Council and once they arrive they'll track you down and you'll be back in prison where you belong." I blustered weakly.

"That is where your wrong, my dear," Ambrose said sweetly. "I want you to be able to appreciate what I'm about to do," and with a wave of her hand I was spun around and found myself, still bound, facing a dirt clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a large concrete slab with a pentagram carved into the stone surface. Kneeling to one side were a man and woman, it was hard to figure their ages since they both had their faces pressed into the ground. Ambrose walked around to the woman and whispered into her ear, the woman then stood up and held out her hands palms up. In two quick slashes Ambrose cut her wrists open with the Athame. As soon as the blood started to flow the woman walked to the circle encasing the pentagram and began to fill the trench with the blood leaking from her wrists.

Next Ambrose turned to the man, "watch her" he said gesturing at me. "If she tries anything subdue her." Ambrose then went into the center of the pentagram and settled into a lotus position and closed her eyes.

Well Alastar you're in trouble now, I thought, no magical power, stuck naked, in a female body, about to be sacrifice in some dark ritual. For a second I felt like laughing at the ridiculousness of my situation then I felt a wave of despair well up inside of me. My whole life I'd been weak, almost powerless, no one had ever thought I'd amount to

much. My pathetic Magic-User 2nd Class license was an embarrassment to the family. I felt tears leak out from under my eyelids. Was this how I was going to die?

At that moment I felt something snap inside of me. It was true I'd always been weak and no one had ever given me a chance, yet I'd built a life and a solid reputation based on skill and intelligence. So what if this stupid collar blocked me from using power, that was almost normal for me. The more I thought about it the more I wondered. Magical devices like this required a high degree of specialization and skill. Unless Ambrose had stolen one, which was unlikely, then he'd have probably crafted it himself. Perhaps it was flawed? Very carefully, I focused on drawing the smallest trickle of power. I felt the magic and no pain. Blocking out the sounds of the woman as she whimpered and crawled around the circle, I pictured my version of an open lock spell. This was a spell I could perform un-augmented, but only because I'd changed it so much that it took very little power to cast. After what seemed like hours, I felt like I had enough power and whispered a single word and sent my spell at the lock on the collar I wore. There was a flash of pain for a second as the spell activated and then the collar fell away. I didn't waste any time, I drank from the torrent of magical energy available to me, and cast a spell that shattered my magical bonds.

I fell to the ground and barely had time to roll over before the unnamed male was on me. He tried to straddle my prone body but I got my legs up and around his waist in full guard. This didn't faze him and he reached down with both hands started choking me. Because I've always been a magical weakling I've compensated with training. I've studied several Martial Arts over the years. I grabbed his right wrist with both of my hands I put my right foot into his hip and pushed up. He twisted slightly to my left trying to keep his balance while choking me. This allowed me to lift my left leg up and hook my calf under his chin, and using the power of my abs and legs, I flipped him onto his back with his right wrist still trapped by both of my hands. This caused his elbow to be stretched across my right thigh, in a classic arm bar. I pushed up with my hips and cranked down on his wrist with both hands, the resounding pop of his elbow breaking told me I'd been successful. I immediately rolled away and got to my feet. The guy let out a bellow of pain and clutched his broken arm. Unfortunately the noise had gotten Ambrose's attention and her eyes blazed with power as she looked at me.

"Be still" she said.

I felt mental shackles wrap around my mind and almost panicked. I've never had any talent for mind magic and this type of attack would normally have been very effective against me. Morgana, however had a natural affinity for this type of magic, so

I used every bit of focus and natural ability I now possessed and fought. Abruptly the mental pressure from the spell dissipated.

“Now, bitch! I’ve had enough of you.”

I cast a magic missile spell, a simple construct of pure magic, with every bit of power I could now put behind it. Ambrose caught it on an up raised hand. My next attack was fire, I’m very skilled with fire, and even though this body wasn’t particularly strong in elemental magic I was blazing with magic. The result was an inferno. Ambrose in my mother’s body floated up and out of the blaze, holding the Athame in one hand and a glowing red stone in the other.

“Curse you! I’ll eat your heart for this!” Ambrose raged.

Only then did I comprehend that the spell I’d just cast had not only destroyed the pentagram Ambrose had been planning to use, but I’d accidentally killed the woman she’d been controlling. For an instant I thought I’d be sick, I’d just taken a human life. Ambrose lashed out with lighting and I raised my shield in response. As soon as the lighting hit my shield I realized that the stone Ambrose was holding must be the artifact that Bernard Livingstone had created, because she was much stronger than me.

“Well this is nothing new,” I thought to myself as my shield deflected the attack. I started casting in earnest.

In a magical duel, there are several things that come into play. Each Magic-User’s individual power is a factor, along with skill, knowledge, creativity, the number of spells that the Magic-User can control at one time, and lastly luck. Within seconds I was operating six spells simultaneously. I’ve got a rare gift for this, most 1st Class Magic-Users can hold two or three active spells at once and a master must be able to operate at least five. I’d never had the power to really see what I could do, but now in Morgana’s body fighting for my life, I completely cut loose.

Ambrose matched me, spell for spell.

She had me beat in power, but my spells were designed with the assumption that I was weaker than my opponent and compensated for it. I’m not sure how long the contest lasted as I lost all track of time during the fight. Abruptly Ambrose broke through one of my defenses and hit me hard enough to cause me to lose focus. With that I lost control of one spell after another and the next thing I knew I was bound once again unable to move. Panting Ambrose looked at me with a vicious glare.

“When I sacrifice you, I’ll hold your still beating heart in front of your fading sight and take a bite out of it before you die.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!”

The strong male voice rang across the clearing as a group of no less than seven Magic-Users flew into view. In the lead was my mother in my body. Around his waist a belt of crystals blazed feeding him power, and in each hand he held a wand tipped with a glowing crystal. Ambrose threw up a shield which the Elders blasted through. I felt the magical bonds around me dissolve as Ambrose was forced to concentrate on defending herself. I managed to land and roll to the side without hurting myself.

The assault lasted for only a few seconds before Ambrose used the Athame and made a quick slash behind her tearing a hole in the air. As she went through my mother hit her with a spell and Ambrose dropped something. Then she was gone and the hole sealed itself behind her. Silence fell across the clearing. I felt my knees give out and hit the ground hard, for a second the world seemed to spin and then everything went dark.

\* \* \*

I woke up with sunlight hitting me in the face. I groaned and rolled away realizing that I was in my own bed, or at least the bed I'd used growing up, and that I was still in a woman's body so the nightmare from the last 48 hours was real. At first I tried to just stay there, but the demands of my bladder made me get up.

Once I was up there was no point in going back to bed so I brushed my teeth and took a quick shower. After drying off I put on panties, a t-shirt, (I decided I didn't have the patients for a bra this morning, er ....afternoon?) and a soft fuzzy bathrobe I found draped over a chair in my room. I then went down to the kitchen looking for coffee. Once I got there I found Chelsea, mother's cook, working on dinner. Chelsea took one look at me and said, "your, ... mother wants to see you in her study Alastar."

"Can I at least get a cup of coffee before I go?" I whined.

Chelsea has always had a soft spot for me, she smiled, "sure honey."

Armed with coffee I went to find my mother. When I entered her study I could see the light from the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows. Evaline was sitting behind his desk reading from a very large book. As soon as I entered he put the book aside and stood up.

"How are you doing Alastar?" The concern in his voice was touching.

"I'm fine, what happened after I passed out?"

"Before I tell you that can you tell me how you ended up in that clearing? Particularly, after I told you to remain on the estate."

As he said this he gestured to a pair of leather chairs sitting in front of the fireplace at the far end of the room. I flushed with embarrassment and decided that I wasn't going to apologize. If I hadn't interrupted Ambrose he might have finished his ritual. Once we'd both settled into the chairs I launched into my story. There were several points where my mother nodded as though what I was saying fit in with facts he already knew. When I finished I looked down at my now empty cup of coffee and sat in quietly on the floor.

"I suppose you'd like to know what happened here."

When I nodded he continued, "I didn't know you'd left the estate, the Elders started arriving and once we had a quorum I called the meeting to order. I told them what was going on and the first thing they wanted to do was verify my identity. After a bit of spell casting they were convinced I was who I said I was, so they wanted to talk to you. We went to your room and found it empty."

At this he frowned at me, but instead of lecturing me he continued. "We returned to the main study to discuss what to do next. About that time Edgar began beating against the window. I let him in and he flew around the room raising a tremendous ruckus. We are all knowledgeable enough about familiars to know that you were in trouble. I asked for volunteers to help rescue you and once I had a team I armed myself with as many tools of power as I could wield at one time and we all flew after Edgar, he led us to you. You owe your life to your familiar son."

For a moment my mother paused to look fondly at Edgar who had flown into the study through an open window during this conversation and landed on the back of my chair.

"We arrived in time to see a spell battle of epic proportions. I've never seen nor heard of anyone wielding the amount of power Ambrose was throwing around during that duel. I thought you'd be dead before we could get there, yet somehow you stood in the center of that storm toe-to-toe with her."

He shook his head, and for the first time my mother looked at me with respect, and maybe even a little pride, in his eyes. I had to look away because I felt a lump in my throat and I could feel my eyes watering. Stupid girl feelings, I grumbled to myself. I was also feeling guilty I realized. I'd had nothing to do with mother losing his body and power, yet I felt guilty. If I'd gone to him sooner maybe we'd have been able to prevent this from happening.

"Just as we got there Ambrose broke through your defense and bound you. She may have been supercharged but she couldn't take all of us at once. So she fled like the coward she is."

“But this doesn’t really settle anything. She still has the Athame and the stone, she’ll just set up the rite in a new location and we won’t be able to stop her.” I said feeling frustrated.

“Yes, and no” my mother said. “You see the ritual she’s trying to do, can only be done a couple of times per year. Also she dropped this,” and with a flourish he held up a stone the size of a golf ball that was ruby red. As soon as I saw it I knew it was the stone that Ambrose had taken from Bernard Livingston to augment her power.

“Without this stone there are only a dozen places in the world that offer the confluence of ley-lines she’ll need to power the spell. We will of course watch each of those locations and have strike teams waiting during the time she can perform the ritual. In the meantime the Guild will be hunting her with every agent and resource available.” As he said this he grinned. “Odds are she’ll be captured before she has another opportunity to perform the rite.”

I sat quietly thinking for several minutes and then asked, “so what about us? Are we stuck in these bodies?”

For the first time my mother looked uncomfortable. “Soul swapping spells are illegal for good reasons. Even if we had Ambrose in custody and petitioned the Elders to change us all back it might get denied. Every time this type of magic is used a part of the humanity of the person casting the spell is destroyed. If it’s done often enough there is nothing left but a psychopathic monster. But the fact is Ambrose is at large and we can’t, at least for the moment, swap back. My advice to you, DAUGHTER, is to get used to that body. It’s probably going to be yours for the rest of your life.”

“But what about you” I asked, “how will you preform your duties without your power?”

My mother lifted up her hand holding the stone, “with this I’m not as powerful as I used to be, but I’ve the strength of a Magic-User 1st Class. With my skill and knowledge the council has already agreed to recognize my status as a Magic-User Master-Class. Although, I can no longer function as an Elder,” he said with a strange tone before he looked away. Then he shrugged. “With dedication, study, and training I suspect that I’ll get by. Perhaps I’ll even be able to figure out a way to make your magical talent stronger. Oh, the masters that witnessed your duel with Ambrose have all agreed to vote you honorary Master-Class status pending your completion of the tests.”

\* \* \*



I spent the next couple of days at the estate, but it felt too weird for me to stay for very long. Everything seemed bigger and I kept bumping into things, miss-judging my reach or physical strength. One high point was when I walked in on my mom in a training room working on the same spells I'd slaved on for years. The ones that she'd insisted would increase my magical strength. From what I could see she was just as weak as I'd been. This particular exercise involved using telekinesis to lift weights. Mom had always claimed I lacked focus. So watching her struggle to lift less than I had the last time I was home in my natural body gave me a feeling of satisfaction. It was a form of poetic justice, yet it was also at least partly my fault he was in this situation. Feeling conflicted and a little guilty I quietly backed quietly out of the room.

Since I was living, temporarily, on the estate I took advantage of the training room and spent most of my time checking out my new abilities. I also made good use of the library to brush up on celestial and ley-line magic. Being so much stronger than I'd been before gave me a new feeling of pride. Then I'd remember what it had cost my mother and I'd feel guilty. After all the years of listening to her lecture me to try harder and feeling like a failure it was satisfying to see her struggle with my handicap. But at the same time I loved my mom and didn't like seeing her weak. All in all it was a dichotomous week. By the end of the week I found myself in my Charger headed back to my house. I'm still not sure how I feel about being female, and a virgin, but I know I love having the power of a Master Magic-User.

*Morgana has reluctantly taken a position as a consultant for the St. Louis Guild of Magic-Users. The theft of a powerful Elven artifact leads to something much more sinister. Now Morgana finds herself in the middle of a much larger plot and is in a race against time if she is to recover the Mask and save the ones she loves!*

# THE CONSULTANT AND THE MASK

*Book 2*

# PROLOGUE

## *The Thief*

The moon was full and shining down on the van parked a couple of blocks south of the Mansion House Apartments in downtown St. Louis. It was a hot and humid summer night, nothing new really for St. Louis. The thief left the van running with the a/c on low as he moved to the back and settled into a comfortable position on the floor. Not officially licensed he had to be careful not to come to the attention of the Guild when he practiced magic.

Max, (to the few people he called friends) closed his eyes and concentrated. The first spell he cast was designed to cause anyone looking at the van to see it, but to file it away as unimportant. This was not a very powerful spell, it called for subtly and talent in mind magic. These were areas that Max excelled. Max had trained with some of the most skilled practitioners in a very exclusive, if illegal, school and he now made a comfortable living with these abilities.

Tonight he'd been commissioned to remove an artifact from an apartment in Mansion House and he felt confident he would succeed. It was almost 1 am when Max was ready to cast his next spell. He was slightly nervous, although he'd cast this spell dozens of times he'd never cast it at this particular type of target. Max paused to consider how uncomfortable he was going to be, but brushed this thought aside the money was just too good.

He took a deep breath and glanced down for one last look at the photograph of his target. Max then focused on building a mental picture of the target in his mind and released the spell. It took affect at once. He felt his spirit pull free from his body and fly up toward the Mansion House disappearing into the brick wall of one of the upper level apartments.

\* \* \*

Max slowly started to become aware of his surroundings. First, from a distance came sound. The breathing was heavy, a man grunting rhythmically to a soft feminine counterpart, whose moans of pleasure, punctuated the air. Next the taste of peppermint filled his mouth along with a salty flavor he couldn't identify. Suddenly he could see but the room was extremely dark with a small amount of light coming from his left. Then the smell of two people engaged in sex filled his nose and with that the sense of touch returned.

Max now felt for the first time in his life the sensation of a large penis pushing into his slick welcoming vagina. At the same time the man on top of him was actively sucking the nipple of his right breast while stroking his left breast. He realized that he had his legs wrapped around his lover's waist and was pushing up to meet each thrust as the nearly overwhelming sensation of an orgasm approached.

"Harder, harder, ... oh God." Max heard a woman's voice say.

With this the man reached down and started to stroke his clitoris as he increased the pace of his thrusting. The orgasm took Max's breath away and caused him to grip his lover's ass tightly with both hands. Max pulled him as hard as he could into his pussy. At this point he couldn't hold in the scream of pleasure as his world shrank down to, cock, vagina, and the sensations of a female orgasm. Suddenly Max felt his husband's penis flood his vagina with a warmth that amazingly caused a series of aftershocks of pleasure, not a full orgasm but pleasant enough to keep his vagina pulsing. After a minute Max's husband rolled off, his penis sliding out with a slick popping sensation. Max lay there stunned.

"That was great Karen." Will said.

He then got up and walked to the bathroom turning on the light. There was the sound of a faucet running as Will moved around. Max lifted his left hand and looked at the slim delicate female fingers, with the wedding ring on the third finger. He then touched his sensitive breast and knew that he possessed the body of Karen Smyth. His spell had been perfect his timing awful. Now that he was fully in control of the body Max knew that Karen's consciousness was in a sleep state. To her everything that happened would feel like a dream after he left.

The warm sticky feeling between Max's legs caused him to get up and head to the bathroom. Will had just finished wiping off his manhood with a washcloth and smiled at his wife. He kissed Karen on the top of her head and then returned to the bedroom.

Max closed the bathroom door and stared at himself in the mirror knowing what he would see. Karen Smyth stared back. About 5'2" she was in her late forties, and was about twenty to twenty five pounds overweight. Max figured that she had probably been pretty when she'd been younger but a sedentary life style with too much food had left her looking chunky. Her C sized breasts sagged a bit, her stringy brown hair hung down past her shoulders and her skin was somewhat blotchy. The feminine sensation of cum running out of a well-used vagina to drip against the side of her leg startled Max from his inspection. Suddenly feeling nauseous he rushed to the toilet and emptied Karen's dinner into the bowl.

"Get a grip, Max." He said to himself.

Max used some tissue to wipe his mouth and then flushed the toilet. After waiting a couple of seconds for his stomach to settle he turned and sat on the toilet and used more tissue to wipe the remnants of his recent love-making from his vagina. He was startled by how sensitive it remained even several minutes after sex. Feeling dirty Max went to one of the drawers next to the 'his and her' sinks and pulled out a wash cloth. Wetting it down with warm soapy water he then cleaned his crotch and legs. Next Max found a tooth brush and got rid of the after taste of vomit, peppermint, and cock from his mouth.

One of the benefits of the possession spell was that Max had access to his victim's memories, mannerisms, and skills while he possessed a body. The problem was that he had to focus to bring these forward. However Max had used this spell often and was skilled in pulling up a victim's memories. He now used Karen's memories to find panties, a night gown, to turn off the lights, and finally to climb into bed. He settled onto his back and listened to the slow rhythmic breathing of Karen's husband.

"There's no way he can already be asleep" Max thought to himself.

Max glanced at the clock and saw that it was now twenty minutes past one, twenty of the longest minutes of my life he thought. Max settled in to wait knowing that he had to make sure that Will was asleep before he made his move. By 2 am Max could hardly stay awake and figured that it was time to get going. The possession spell didn't have a time limit and unlike a transformation spell, once it had been cast no energy was required to maintain it. But he didn't want to be in this body any longer than he had too. His masters had lectured him about what might happen if his body died while he possessed another body. Not something Max wanted to think about.

Particularly since Will was a Class 1 Magic-User and would exact a vengeance on Max if he caught Max possessing his wife. In fact this was the reason Max had targeted Karen. Magic-Users had a natural defense against this type of magic, and the stronger

the Practitioner the more powerful the natural defense to hostile magic. In order for Max to possess Will he would have needed some type of symbolic consent.

Max climbed out of bed and walked out of the bedroom not feeling the thick shag carpet beneath his bare feet as he focused on the task at hand. The hall had hard wood floors which were cold enough to cause his nipples to harden breaking Max's concentration. Doing his best to ignore this reaction, and the sway of breasts and hips as he walked, Max continued to the study. Once in the room he turned on the light and looked around. There was a pentagram inscribed on the floor in silver. Books dominated one wall and windows the other. The third wall held several display cases. One of these cases held a Mask made of a strange white stone. Max quickly focused on the Mask since this was the object he'd been commissioned to pilfer.

Karen had no magical power but she was magically sensitive. One of the characteristics of possession spell was that Max was limited to the magical abilities of the person he possessed. He walked over to the display case and using Karen's limited sensitivity opened his third-eye and examined the wards protecting the case. The intricate weaving of energy was well beyond anything that Max could hope to overcome in Karen's body. However his ace in the hole was Karen. Most Magic-Users included their spouse's bio-metric information when building household wards. This way a spouse who was not magically gifted would still be able to access buildings and valuables.

By possessing Karen, Max controlled her body which should allow him to breach the wards. Watching the wards carefully Max stepped forward and reached up to the latch keeping the display case closed. The wards flared for a second in Max's sight and parted. He opened the case and picked up the stone Mask. Max was startled by how light the Mask felt, but there was no doubt that it was made of some kind of stone. Max also noticed that the Mask felt oddly cold. He closed the case and went to the kitchen where he put the Mask into a plastic bag. Next Max went to the hall closet and found a pair of Karen's tennis shoes and a long khaki trench coat that belonged to Karen. Max wrapped the trench coat around her night gown slipped on the shoes and grabbed a key. He exited the house and felt the wards part and then snap back in place when he passed.

He rode the elevator to the lobby and waved at Gus the doorman as he left the building. Walking two blocks to where he'd parked the van seemed to take forever. Max spotted the van only with difficulty since the spell Masking the van was still in effect. Max reached up under the front right tire and found the key fob for the van and unlocked it with a click. He opened the passenger door and looked back to spot his

body apparently asleep on the floor in the back of the van. This filled Max with a sense of relief. At least his body was still safe. He dropped the bag behind the passenger's seat locked the van leaving the key fob on the driver's seat.

For a second Max thought about returning to his body now, this would leave Karen waking up in the middle of the street with only a vague dream about what had happened. But as soon as Max had that thought he discarded it. Part of his reputation was built on no one really understanding how he accomplished his thefts. Max retraced his steps to the apartment. Once in the apartment he hung up his coat and returned to his place beside Will. Settling into the bed, Max relaxed and with a word activated the part of the spell that returned his spirit to his body.

Again there was that sense of dislocation and suddenly Max was back in his natural form. Max reached between his legs to verify that his equipment was in place and he felt his chest finding only firm pectoral muscles. With a sigh of relieve Max slide up into the driver's seat.

\* \* \*

Max sat down at the laptop in his motel room. He quickly logged on and sent an e-mail to his contact.

"I have the merchandise. Where do I deliver it?"

As soon as the note was sent Max logged off the computer and got ready for bed, trying not to look at the bag with the Mask sitting on the table to one side. Max turned off the lights and got into bed. He felt fatigued from the day but his mind kept returning to the events of the evening. Max couldn't shake the memory of laying underneath Will as he thrust into Karen's eager vagina. The memory was so disturbingly erotic that Max found himself becoming hard. Max tossed and turned for over an hour before he managed to fall into a fitful slumber.

\* \* \*

The next morning Max discovered that he was to meet his buyer at a rest stop outside of St. Louis on I-70 toward Lake St. Louis. They would meet at midnight. Max was cautious by nature so he packed up his bags and headed up to the closest exit to Lake St. Louis and found another hotel. He settled in to wait for midnight and his meeting.



Max pulled his van into the parking lot of the rest stop and didn't see any other vehicles. Not really alarmed he got out of the van picked up the gym bag with the Mask and headed back to the picnic tables where he'd meet his buyer. Since he was the first to arrive Max sat down and lit a cigarette. He hated waiting but understood the necessity at times.

"Are you Maximilian Alexander Dionissis?" Asked a high sweet female voice.

Max spun around in time to see a beautiful blonde woman in old fashioned long robes standing behind him.

"Yes," he hissed. "Are you Siofra?"

Getting his first good look at the woman Max noticed that the tips of her ears were sticking out from her long blonde hair. Her narrow eyebrows and pointed chin finished establishing her race.

"You're an Elf." Max stated redundantly.

Ignoring Max's statement Siofra asked, "do you have the artifact?"

Max now lifted the plastic bag which contained the Mask he'd taken from the Smyth's apartment yesterday.

"May I see it," Siofra said.

"As soon as I see the money."

Suddenly Siofra snarled. "Insolent human" and made a gesture with her left hand.

Max was already moving before she completed her spell. He dodged to the left, diving into a roll that came up to Siofra's side. At the same time Max spoke a Word of power that increased his, speed, strength, and resistance to hostile magic. There was a blaze of light as a bolt of magical energy blasted through the space that Max had occupied moments before.

Max didn't have many offensive spells, but he knew how to fight, and augmented his abilities with mundane weapons and he was furious at this betrayal! He pulled out a Glock, Semi-automatic, 9mm, and started firing. Siofra was faster and had a shield in place before Max got the first round off. With a gesture telekinetic force gripped Max lifting him a few inches off the ground and pinning his arms to his side. Siofra smiled an evil leer and walked over to pick up the gym bag that Max had dropped.

"You've got the Mask now let me go." Max said, hoping that he might yet come out of this alive.

Siofra walked gracefully around Max in a full circle taking the gun from his numb hand before stopping in front of him. When she smiled this time Max noticed that her

teeth were a brilliant white and that a small trace of saliva had run down from the corner of her mouth.

“Maximilian you have done me a service. My mistress will be very pleased. Yet I cannot risk you telling anyone about what happened. Go with my thanks into the afterlife.”

Before she could start casting Max interrupted. “If I’ve done you a service then you owe me a debt, if you’ll not grant me my life then I ask a kiss. You are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. I’ll count myself lucky to die with the taste of your kiss upon my lips.”

Max said, hoping to play on Siofra’s Elven pride and culture simultaneously. Elves were known for their pride and for repaying debts. What Elven woman could resist being called beautiful? Siofra cocked her head to one side a slow wide smile dominating her face.

“Your silver tongue has granted you, your last request.”

Siofra moved forward confident in her power and gripped Max’s head with both of her hands. She then leaned forward and brought her lips to his. While Siofra had been talking and moving toward Max, he’d started casting the only spell he could think of that might save him focusing intently on Siofra the whole time.

Suddenly Siofra pulled back, eyes wide, “what have you done?”

With a snarl Siofra made a gesture with one hand and spoke a word, of power. A bolt of magical energy blasted from her open mouth hitting Max in the chest blowing a hole through it the size of a softball. The power of a kiss, Max knew, was an ancient symbol of unity so powerful it would potentially overcome even a truly powerful beings natural resistance to Max’s most unique spell.

Siofra froze.

She blinked several times as though she were becoming aware. Then she opened her mouth and licked her lips. Next she raised her hand to touch her face. This seemed to break her free from whatever force had held her motionless.

Max looked down at his body with the huge hole blown clean through his chest. His knees gave out and he collapsed to the ground. Long blonde hair cascaded around his bowed head as he tried to catch his breath. Staring into his own dead face was not a situation he’d ever thought he’d have to deal with.

# CHAPTER 1

*Phone calls before 6 a.m. are never good*

**T**he obnoxious buzzing of my cell phone pulled me from a deep sleep. I rolled over to grab it and managed to tangle my hand in my long dark hair. I reached again and only knocked the phone from my night stand.

“Damn it” I growled.

I threw back the covers and started patting around on the floor until I located the offending device.

“Yes!” I said grumpily into the phone.

“Morgana Livingstone?” Asked a deep male voice.

“Yes, who is this?”

I replied feeling annoyed, I'd just glanced at the clock and saw that it was 6 am. Who in their right mind calls someone at six in the morning?

“This is Inspector Lee from the St. Louis Guild Hall. I understand you're an expert on magical wards and runes.”

The doubt that filled Inspector Lee's voice made me want to bristle.

“The Guild could use your help on a theft we're investigating.”

It took a moment for my sleep addled mind to recall that I was now on retainer as a consultant to the Guild. My mother's idea and as usual I couldn't say no.

“Okay, where do I meet you?”

“Can you be at our downtown office by eight?”

Inspector Lee said in a tone that indicated it was more of an order than a question. There was also the implication that it might take me more than two hours. I hadn't met this guy yet and already it felt like he was a sexist jerk.

“I'll be there” I replied and hit the end button.

“Ugh, I hate mornings!”

I said to the empty room and rolled over onto my back feeling my breasts shift around under my large men's t-shirt. It was late May and it felt like summer had arrived in St Louis and the a/c in my house was already running. For a second I stared up at the ceiling fan and thought back about all the changes in my life.

\* \* \*

For three months now I've been living as Morgana Livingstone. After Ambrose Grosvenor managed to escape in my mother's body leaving her in mine and me in Morgana's the Guild Council of Elders had held a closed door meeting to discuss the situation. My mother had been invited, I had not.

The Council decided to state publicly that Ambrose was on the loose and wanted. He'd stolen my Mother's body and left her in my body. That way she could retain some status as an advisor, but since she lacked the power she couldn't be a full National level Guild Council Member. This also allowed them to put Ambrose in Evaline Mor Donegal's body on the Guild's most wanted list. They were desperate to catch Ambrose. The Council chose to keep my involvement a secret. Alastar in Ambrose's body was, (nothing more than ashes now) officially missing. According to the Council the Livingstone's were a powerful and well-connected East-Coast Magic-User family. The idea that Ambrose could murder all three and take down my mother (the matriarch of the Donegal family) would, (they felt) be too much of a blow to the prestige and reputation of the Magic-User Guild and the Council of Elders. On top of which it was an election year and the Guild was once again under attack by politicians who wanted to score points with the mundane community and by limiting the power of the Guild and enforcing strict control over the magical community.

When Mother broke the news to me I'd felt like I'd been violated yet again. My body had been stolen and now my identity? I admit I'd become a bit irrational as evidenced by the broken furniture. My mother had watched it all with her normal annoying calm and when I'd run out of energy asked if I was done with my tantrum. I tried to move back into my old house but mother had vetoed that idea. She'd let me return briefly to pick up a few personal items and then had a moving service there to clean out the rest of my belongings. Most of the clothes she confiscated. With the assertion that they fit her far better than they fit me, which while true, still felt like theft. Next she insisted on helping me finding a small house to rent near the St. Louis Academy of Magic-Users. I drew the line when she offered to go shopping with me. So instead she'd asked

Chelsea, our long time cook, to take me shopping. That had easily been one of the most embarrassing events of my life.

Chelsea had started the experience by taking me to my mother's tailor. Once in the exclusive shop I'd been measured and fussed over. Chelsea had grabbed Ann, the shop owner, and drew her off to one side talking to her in a whisper. When Ann returned to the room where I stood in my panties and bra feeling very exposed she looked me over carefully.

"So I'm told that you need several dresses, business suits, and a couple of gowns." Ann said looking down at a piece of paper.

"What! I don't need all that and besides I can't afford it."

"Oh don't worry Morgana, Mrs. Evaline Donegal has ordered it for you and has already paid for it." Ann said bustling out.

At least now I know my measurements, I thought, I'm 5'7" and 36C, 23, 36. Chelsea now forced me into several department stores where she threw outfit after outfit at me. I'd never tried on so many sets of clothes in one day. I learned several things that afternoon: Chelsea is a tireless shopper, heels take practice, I can't snap a bra behind my back to save my life, and I'm still very uncomfortable being a girl. However, the practical part of me knew that I was now Morgana, probably for the rest of my life, and I needed a wardrobe.

All of this, unbeknownst to me, was in preparation for a trip back east, once again arranged by my mother. It was necessary anyway under the fiction that I was Morgana. She was an only child and had relatives and an estate that needed to be settled, as well as her parents funeral to attend. The Guild and its lawyers had smoothed the way legally, so now I had a sizable inheritance. I did my best to avoid talking to Morgana's friends and relatives pretending to be mourning my parents. This worked on everyone except the head of the Livingstone family! Bernard's, (my body's father) older brother and now my uncle insisted on seeing me. Arthur Livingstone was a member of the National Council of Elders and was well aware of the situation. That didn't stop me from being nervous when I entered the large house on the Livingstone estate. My shoes made the distinctive click-clack noise as I walked over the marble floor following the Livingstone butler. He was about four and a half feet tall and clearly dwarven. I was wearing a conservative skirt, blouse, and business jacket but still felt awkward and out of place. As I approached the study I noticed the large oak doors were nearly twelve feet tall.

"Good God that's pretentious," I thought to myself. The irreverence helped with my nerves as the doors swung open at our approach. Unlike most Magic-Users studies I

didn't see a summoning circle, although there were plenty of book shelves. Looking out a pair of tall windows behind a large desk stood a man with long white hair, his hands clasped behind his back.

Without turning around he said in a gentle masculine voice, "please sit down."

I gulped involuntarily, and saw a set of chairs off to one side with a pot of tea and cups already set out. I walked over as gracefully as I could and sat, barely remembering to put my knees together at the last second. When I looked up I saw that Arthur had turned around and was watching me. He had a long face full of angles, a large drooping mustache, and brilliant blue eyes. I instantly saw from which part of the family Morgana got her eyes. As he looked at me I got a vague sense of disapproval.

"Please pour the tea, my dear."

Suddenly I felt like this were some kind of test and felt annoyed. I picked up the tea pot paying no attention to the quality of the service and quickly filled both cups. I then glared up at Arthur.

"Satisfied?"

Without saying anything he crossed the space and sat down in the vacant chair. He looked at me with those piercing blue eyes.

"No, I'm most definitely not satisfied. My brother and sister-in-law are dead, my niece's soul has been sent to the afterlife and you wear her body."

The bluntness of his speech stunned me. I didn't think that he'd be happy about the situation but I hadn't expected this.

"If it's any consolation I'm not happy about this either."

At that he grunted and picked up his cup and took a sip.

"I had thought that perhaps the best way to keep your identity secret would be to bring you here and surround you with family. I see now that your mother was right."

"What are you talking about?" I asked still unsure what was going on.

"During the council meeting after it had been decided to keep what happened to Morgana secret I argued that you should be turned over to me. Your mother argued that the best thing to do would be to keep you in St Louis. No one there knows Morgana, so it would be less likely that you'd make a mistake that would give away your identity. I didn't see it at the time but she was right."

At this I tried to interrupt but he held up a hand and continued.

"You may have my niece's body but you move nothing like her. She was graceful and refined, you are neither. I could see that you're a fake just from the way you poured the tea." He said sounding sad.

I suddenly felt guilty. Like I was some sort of pervert wearing this stunning female body, and doing it badly. But I never asked for the sex change and I was just as much a victim as anyone.

“Sir, I’m sorry that I’m not what you were hoping for, but this is hard for me too.”

Arthur now met my eyes and nodded.

“Morgana was the sole heir to Bernard’s estate. Since you are eighteen the estate will be held in a trust and I’m the executor. I will make a stipend available to you but you will not get the full inheritance until you’re 21. You are registered to start classes in the fall at the St Louis Academy of Magic. The cost of your schooling will come out of the estate.” Before I could say anything he continued. “I saw the reports of your battle with Ambrose and if they are true.” Again I tried to say something and once more he forestalled me and continued, “I have no reason to doubt the truth. Morgana was always very gifted, I’m sure with your knowledge you are more than worthy of the Master status. However, this might cause a few to wonder. So even though you’ve been awarded the honorary rank, your mother and I agree, you need to go back to school. It should be much easier to earn a degree the second time around.”

He paused to sip his tea and then looked at me with hard critical eyes.

“Now that I’ve met you in person I think that I need to have a word with your mother about getting you some additional help learning how to be a lady. I’ll not have the Livingstone name become embarrassed or Morgana’s memory tarnished with such unrefined behavior.”

\* \* \*

I shook my head to help clear it of memories. The trip back east had been uncomfortable and embarrassing. With two distinct results, the first was that I was due to start classes at the St. Louis Academy of Magic in the fall. The one bright spot (if you could call it that) was that I was now Alastar Donegal’s junior partner in the consulting business. So I got to keep my office and using my honorary Magic-User Master Class status to purchase a magical consulting license from the Guild.

The second was far more embarrassing. Apparently my uncouth behavior or at least lack of refinement had bothered Arthur Livingstone enough to talk to my mother. Shortly after my visit back east mother had forced me onto an airplane bound for New Orleans to spend three weeks with Mrs. Broussard and her school for young ladies. Manners, edict, diction, makeup, and clothes had all been crammed down my throat. I’m not exactly sure what story Arthur Livingstone and my mother concocted but I

kept getting comments like “you poor thing” and “isn’t she sweet” the flight back to St Louis had felt like an escape from prison.

I threw the covers back and stalked into the bathroom suddenly angry at the events. Even after this much time my body felt awkward to me. I turned on the lights and saw Morgana’s sleep tussled long dark hair framing her beautiful face and stuck my tongue out. The woman in the mirror copied my movement.

“God I hate mornings” I muttered and started getting ready.

After getting cleaned up I went to work on my face. Makeup was something that had taken me a lot of work to learn but, thanks to the training I’d received from Mrs. Broussard, it was now almost easier than using a glamor and it certainly helped me look more like other young women. Besides when I’d explained to mother that I would rather use a glamor he’d stated in no uncertain terms that there was no way he was going to allow his ‘daughter’ to waste magical power on an everyday task simply because I was too embarrassed to learn what every woman knows. It felt like mother had decided that it was his duty to cram a life time’s worth of lessons on womanhood into a few weeks. I’m sure Arthur’s phone call hadn’t helped things either. I started to suspect that it was a way for mother to avoid dealing with her new male body by focusing on me and my ‘adjustment’ issues. The lessons had paid off since I was now able to, in short order, do a passable job of putting on my ‘face paint’ as I still thought of it.

I walked into my closet amazed at the amount of clothes. There were the things that Chelsea and I had bought, and several bags from my mother’s tailor that I hadn’t even dared to open. In addition I had returned from Massachusetts with all of Morgana’s clothes. I thought about putting on one of the business suits, but then in a rebellious mood pulled out a comfy pair of jeans, a short sleeved black blouse, and comfortable black leather shoes with no heel. I knew this look was way too casual for a Guild Inspector, or even a Guild Special Agent. Which is why I chose it, I didn’t want anyone to think that I was part of the Guild. My only concession to a professional appearance was that I pulled my hair up into a business look.

Glancing at the clock I saw that it had taken me an hour to get ready. I hurried into my kitchen pouring a bowl of Cheerios muttering “it was so much easier to get ready as a guy.” Still I had twenty minutes before I had to leave. Edgar my familiar flew from his perch over to the counter and started begging. If you’ve never seen a crow beg before it’s worth a laugh. I giggled softly as I ran a finger over his head and then dropped a handful of Cheerios onto the counter.



Less time required to get ready in the morning was only one among the many physical changes I was struggling with. I had toyed with the idea of using my power to transform into Alastar. In fact I'd done it the day after I'd recovered from my battle with Ambrose. Even though I was much more comfortable in my original form, I knew I had to release the spell. Transformation spells require a continuous flow of power to maintain the altered shape. This meant that anyone who was sensitive to magic would know as soon as they met me that I had a powerful spell running. Most people with the ability would reflexively check to see what type of spell was being used. In the magical community wearing a transformation spell around in public was the same as a mundane person walking around wearing a Mask. While not illegal it was a bit rude and caused plenty of uncomfortable questions and looks. The last and perhaps most compelling reason was the steady drain of energy. I guessed that I was now strong enough to last about a week before my strength failed and I'd have to drop the spell and rest. During that time I'd get progressively weaker and more vulnerable. Transforming back into Alastar simply wasn't a solution. Besides as my mother lectured me, when she saw me in my Alastar shape, I was using my power to avoid having to accept the fact that I was now a woman.

My new house was on a minor ley-line in University City it would take me a solid twenty minutes to get to the Guild Hall in downtown St Louis. Edgar my familiar flew up to my shoulder as I picked up my purse from the counter. I opened the purse, (a new habit for me) and checked cell phone, wallet, keys, a few small magical tools, some feminine products (that I didn't want to think about) and a new addition a Walther P22, a very small .22 pistol. A girl, even one with magical gifts like mine, can't be too careful.

\* \* \*

The drive downtown was uneventful and the traffic was light. I reached into the glove box and removed a pass that allowed me to pull into the underground parking garage at the Guild Hall. I held up the pass for the attendant to see and spoke the word of activation and felt the Guild's outer wards part. I guided the Charger toward the security booth and rolled down my window.

Leaning out the Guildsman said, "Ma'am what brings you to the Guild Hall today."

"I'm here to see Investigator Lee."

"Very good Ma'am, please park in spot 24 and take the elevator to the sixth floor."

When I nodded he hit the button that caused a yellow mechanical arm blocking my progress rise. Driving into the shadowy interior I saw that each of the spots were numbered and found spot 24. From my location I could see the elevator off to the left. The ride to the sixth floor was uneventful and I walked into a lobby with a buxom blonde receptionist. Something bothered me about the woman and I took a look at her with my third eye. A Magic-Users third eye allows them to view the world of magic. Everything mundane appears in black and white but everything magical is in vivid color. The blonde practically glowed with color. There were at least half a dozen active spells including a transformation spell. Somehow I got the impression that it would be a very bad idea to mess with her.

‘Well here goes nothing’ I thought to myself and walked cautiously forward, Edgar balancing on my shoulder. “Excuse me I’m here to see Inspector Lee.” I said feeling out of my depth.

The blonde smiled up at me, “certainly. If you’d take a seat I’ll let the Inspector know that you’re here.”

I settled into a chair remembering to cross my legs at the knee the way Mrs. Broussard had been coaching me and looked around. Obviously the Guild had money. The lobby had new carpet and the furniture was of good quality. I’d only sat there for a minute before the door behind and to the left of the receptionist opened and a large dark haired man in a crumpled cheap grey suit walked out. He scanned the lobby for a second almost as if he was looking for someone else before he settled on me and walked over.

“I’m Inspector Lee, are you Morgana Livingston?”

I stood up feeling Edgar flap his wings for balance and extended my hand. “I’m Morgana, you asked me to come in.” I said feeling unsure about this situation due to his reaction.

“Excuse me,” he said, “I was expecting someone older based on your reputation.”

His grip was strong and his hands had a rough edge of calluses that reminded me of how small soft my hand now was. I felt my face flush in response to his comment.

“I can assure you Inspector I’m more than qualified to assist you on a crime involving wards.”

He looked me up and down his eyes lingering on my chest for a moment before he said “let’s get going then. I’ll drive we are headed out to the Mansion House Apartments.

“So do you have a first name or should I just call you inspector all day.”

I asked feeling irritated. We were driving an older Buick, which stank of coffee and old cigarettes, toward the crime scene and the Inspector hadn't said much yet. Glancing at me out of the corner of his eye he grunted.

“I'm Allen, you can call me Al.”

Then with a sigh he said “look it's nothing personal but I don't agree with the Guild's policy of bringing in outside experts. So when the Lieutenant told me that the St. Louis Guild Grand Master had directed us to get in touch with you to help on this case, .... Well it feels political and like a waste of money. But my opinion doesn't count so let me bring you up to speed.”

Another minute went by in silence before Al started talking, “We are headed to William Smyth's apartment. He's a licensed Magic-User 1st Class and two nights ago after he and his wife went to bed they were burglarized. We're stumped. The wards were never disturbed. The only thing out of the ordinary was that Gus the doorman saw Mrs. Smyth leaving the building in the middle of the night and return a few minutes later. Mrs. Smyth claims to have no memory of leaving the building. So the Guild is hoping you can look over the security and see if there was a hole in the protections anything that might give us a lead.”

I nodded to indicate I understood and then glanced out the window. Odds of me spotting something they'd missed were slim.

\* \* \*

The thief Max stood in the bathroom of the safe house he'd driven to after his failed attempt to sell the Mask. He'd only stopped long enough to ditch the van and switch into his current car. He was staring into the mirror at the blonde Elven beauty. At the moment Max was 5'10" and in a body he'd dearly have loved to fuck if he'd been in his natural form. Instead his body was dead, and he was stuck in this one. He reached for the memories that came along with the body when he possessed it and felt Siofra fight him. This had been a strange situation from the start.

Max had been desperate and tricked Siofra into kissing him before she killed him. The powerful symbolic nature of a kiss had been all Max needed to breach her natural defenses and possess her. However, she'd felt his spiritual invasion and before Max had time to take full control she'd cast a spell killing Max's body. This meant if he said the release words designed to end this possession, his spirit would try to return to his dead

body and instead he'd be flung into the afterlife. Max wasn't ready to die so he had no intention of saying those words. But this also meant he'd never be able to use the possession spell again. For all practical purposes he was stuck in this body.

The spell had been designed for one human to possess another human. It had never, as far as Max knew, been tested on one of the other races. One of the things Max had discovered was that Siofra's spirit was not nearly as silent or dormant like a human's would have been. Every time he tried to access her memories she fought him. In some ways this reminded Max of his days as an apprentice at the Hidden Hand Society. When he'd been instructed on this spell he'd been paired with another apprentice. One of them would cast the spell and the other would try to fight off the spiritual violation. As Max got better he learned the mental tricks necessary to fully subdue the mind and spirit of the person he possessed. It had been years since he needed to resort to these principles but Max decided it was time. He needed to gain access to Siofra's memories and skills. More importantly he needed to understand why she'd tried to kill him instead of just paying him.

Max moved into the bedroom and settled cross legged on the bed. With a few breaths Max had centered himself and began the mental and spiritual assault on Siofra. He desperately needed to put her into the normal catatonic state.

\* \* \*

The Mansion House Apartments were in downtown St Louis and had a variety of tenets all of whom made a good income and wanted to live downtown. It was easy to see that this place had money. From the security guards to the wards that had been set to protect the residents it didn't appear like it would have been easy to get in and out of this place. We took an elevator up to the Smyth's apartment. Apparently they were expecting us because the door opened after the first knock. The man who greeted us was only a couple of inches taller than me. He was your average looking middle age guy. Grey had started to settle into his hair and his waist reflected a sedentary life style.

After Inspector Lee introduced himself and flashed his credentials Mr. Smyth let us into the apartment. The décor struck me as nice but not over the top. Very classy I thought. Inspector Lee explained that I was here to look at his wards to see if I could figure out how they'd been breached. Mr. Smyth looked over at me obviously doubting my ability, however this look was replaced by lust as he checked me out. I just wanted

to scream, "hello, my eyes are up here" when he focused in on my chest. Instead I looked around the apartment and decided to ask a few questions.

"You've a very nice apartment. Are these Elven artifacts?" I asked pointing to a display case in his study next the empty case.

For the first time Mr. Smyth's eyes left my chest and looking at the torque in the display case, lit up.

"Yes, you see I've a passion for collecting Elven relics."

"Are these all mundane or magical" I said sweetly trying for innocent since I could already feel the power of these artifacts.

"Oh, no my dear they are all magical. Otherwise what would be the point?"

His face had flushed with the tones of a true fanatic.

"It was a Mask that was stolen correct? What exactly did it do?"

"Ah, yes, like I told the other inspector I don't know what it did. I had just acquired it and had only begun to examine it."

Looking at him now I could tell he was hiding something, but what?

"Come on Morgana, let's look at the wards," Al said with an impatient edge in his voice.

\* \* \*

Driving back to the Guild Hall I felt frustrated. I was missing something and I couldn't put my finger on it. The wards had been tight. I might have been able to break through them but my intrusion would have left signs. There was nothing to indicate how they'd been penetrated. Allen looked smug like he was happy I'd had no success. This irritated me even more. I may have gotten this job because the Grand Master was friends with my mother but I wanted to prove to these guys that I was worth the money!

"Did the Guild interview all of the building employees working the night of the robbery?"

Not even glancing at me Allen replied, "of course, it's standard procedure. The only thing we found that was unusual was that Mrs. Smyth left the building at about 2 am. She has no memory of leaving the building. Obviously this is our only lead but we're at a loss to figure out what happened to her."

"Can I read through the transcripts?" I asked frustrated that I could piece this together.

“Sure but it won’t do you any good.”

\* \* \*

Returning to the Guild hall Allen set me up in a cubical with paper copies of the statements from the building employees. Edgar hopped to the top of the divider and started preening while I read. When I got to the statement by Gus the doorman, I paused, my mental alarm went off. Mrs. Smyth shortly after 2 am had left the building and been gone for 15 minutes. Why would she leave and come back at that time of night? How is it possible that she didn’t remember?

Allen mentioned this as the only real lead. They had asked to examine her magically to see if she’d been compelled, but Mr. Smyth had refused to allow his wife to be tested. If they wanted the Mask back why would then refuse to cooperate? I packed all the papers into a folder and stood up summing Edgar to my shoulder. There was more here to read but I needed my study and summoning circle. Suddenly I heard a commotion at the other end of the office. A tall thin incredibly good looking man had entered and was confronting Allen.

“Are you Inspector Lee?”

Allen in his rumpled suit, looked up at the man and said, “yeah, that’s me who wants to know?”

“I’m Sir, Galohond Larothta of the Sylvari and I am here about a crime you’re investigating.”

Allen eyed the elf for a moment and then invited him back into his office. As they walked by I caught the elf’s eye and felt a shiver run through me. One part of me wished that I’d been invited to go with them just so I could be near this masculine creature. Another part started choking the part that wanted to get closer to him. Blushing I finished collecting my papers I summed Edgar to my shoulder and headed down to the garage.

\* \* \*

As I drove home my mind kept wonder back to the blonde elf and his incredibly broad shoulders. Desperate to think about something else I focused on the case. An elven artifact of unknown power had been stolen, why? What was the purpose of the artifact? The wards on the Smyth place were first class. In fact they were much better than I’d have thought necessary for a personal residence. My gut told me that William

Smyth was not being completely honest and it was obvious that he wasn't fully cooperating. Now suddenly an elf lord appears in the Guild Hall. There was something much larger than the theft of a simple mask going on here!

Of course the fastest way to solve this would be to find the thief. I shook my head at that, what am I thinking; I'm not a Guild Inspector. They had brought me in to look at the wards and runes on the Smyth place I did and couldn't help the Guild. So my obligation was complete. I thought about calling my mother and asking what he thought about all of this and then rejected the idea. I'd been getting way too much 'help' from mother lately. Besides if the Guild wanted mother's help they could ask him for it.

Gunning the Charger I headed home and thought about getting a workout in before dinner. This body was stunning but it hadn't been in very good physical condition when I'd gotten it. I'd been working hard at improving my conditioning. I could now run five miles and not feel winded. Besides I needed something to distract me from thoughts of the tall elf and his broad shoulders.

\* \* \*

Max opened her eyes. The sun was setting which startled her. Most of the day had been spent sitting in lotus position focused on subduing Siofra. Max stretched feeling her spine pop and climbed off the bed. For the first time in this body Max felt comfortable. Her effort to gain control of Siofra's memories, skills, and abilities had been mostly successful. Max no longer felt Siofra actively fighting him, instead he felt her in the 'normal' catatonic state. Max reached for a memory and found himself in Summer as the Elves called their homeland. She was standing in a dueling circle with her brother in another circle opposite her. The duel began and Max was surprised by the strength and skill displayed. Elves in the human lands never used so much power. The answer came to him from Siofra's memories. This time it was a lecture, by her mentor.

"Magic in the human realm is different in its very essence from magic in Summer." The master said. "While you can feel the magic, you cannot touch it in the human realm. Therefore the only power you'll have, while there, is what you bring with you. Never use so much magic that you lack the strength to part the veil and return home."

Max shook his head. "Shit! I'm trapped in the body of a female and I'll run out of magic very quickly. I'm totally screwed."

Max focused for a second on the internal power stored by Siofra. He was surprised to discover out that she had used very little power before he'd taken control of her body. Max was also startled by her strength. At this moment Max was holding more power than he'd ever been able to in his human body. However unless Max returned to the eleven homeland he'd never be able to replenish the power.

Looking over at the Mask Max felt a sudden surge of excitement when he searched Siofra memories. The Mask! It acted like some sort of magical adaptor. When used by an elf in human lands it would pull magic from here alter the magic so that an elf could use it. There were only a few of these Masks known to exist and they had been made by a master craftsman who had passed away. The technique for crafting them was lost as well. If Max put the Mask on he'd be able to fill up Siofra's magical reservoir. There was something else about the Mask tickling at the back of Siofra's memories. They were gender specific. So a male elf couldn't use a female Mask and vise-versa. Fortunately this Mask with its delicate feminine features was one that Max could now use.

As Max picked up the Mask she realized with another surge of memory why this was so important to Siofra. There was a woman who,....as soon as these memories floated up Siofra's spirit rose up against the mental shackles Max had bound her with and fought him. To the observer it appeared that Siofra had simply frozen. Inside Max was doing everything he could to put her back down. Suddenly Siofra seized control of Max's mouth and spoke a quick incantation.

Desperate now Max did the only thing he could think of, he pulled on Siofra's magical power and turned it against her in a spell known to his brothers and sisters as the 'spirit knife'. It was a direct attack on a person's spirit. Normally this type of attack would be easy to defend. Because Max was sharing Siofra's body he was able to attack her spirit directly by passing any normal magical defense. In fact the Secrete Hand Society had designed the spell for this purpose. If he possessed someone and was losing the struggle for control, and could not, for whatever reason, escape to his own body this was the last emergency option. He felt Siofra's mental shriek as the spell blasted her burning all the ties that bound her spirit to her physical body. For a moment a ghostly image of Siofra hovered in front of Max's eyes and then it dissipated. Max collapsed to the floor shuddering. He'd felt every bit of agony Siofra had felt when the spell tore into her. It was as though a piece of him had died as well when he'd killed her. There was another consequence Max realized despite the throbbing headache. He would no longer be able to access Siofra's memories or skills.



He had what he'd managed to take before she'd rebelled and that was it. Whatever spell Siofra had cast, Max knew he was in trouble.

# CHAPTER 2

## *The Hunt*

**I**t was well past midnight and Mark was on his way home from work. He'd gotten out of the Army a few months ago and was planning to start college this fall using the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Even though he had a bit saved up from his last overseas deployment Mark had found a job working as a security guard. The pay wasn't great but he needed the work at least until school started. Besides, in Marks opinion, walking around an empty warehouse at night was much easier than other types of work and far less dangerous than his time in the Army.

Suddenly Mark felt a magical stirring on the road behind him. He glanced in the review mirror and saw a set of lights in the distance. Mark was on a back road about 25 minutes outside of East St. Louis and was used to this being a fairly quite drive home. Again Mark felt a spike of magic behind him and this time saw a flare of light in the mirror. Someone was throwing magic around back there and it didn't seem like it could be anything good.

Mark had no magical power. None, he was what was currently being called 'magically sensitive.' After he'd entered the Army they'd put him through a battery of tests, Battle-Mages (BMs) were in very high demand. However, once the Army was convinced he couldn't be developed into a BM they put him into another course. The course was designed to develop Mark's magical sensitivity, after BMs Magic Sensors (MSs) were the next highest demand. When a squad was out on patrol it was handy to have someone who could sense a ward, or magical trap before it killed the whole squad.

Mark could now feel the magical battle raging behind him. He sped up and at the same time started to look for side roads. He needed to get off this road and let the battle sweep past. Unfortunately when he looked into his review mirror the car that

had seemed at least a half mile back was now only a couple hundred meters behind him and gaining fast.

Within seconds it flashed by and swerved in front of him using his truck to block the view of whoever was chasing the car. As soon as it was in front of Mark an object was flung out the passenger side window. Mark reacted instinctively slamming on the brakes and turning the wheel to avoid the object. Before Mark had time to come to a full stop he heard the thunder of hooves and looked out to see nearly half a dozen glowing horsemen galloping down the road at an impossible speed. As they neared Mark's truck the lead horse leapt into the air sailing over the vehicle. The others followed and Mark turned his head to watch as they continued to gain on the fast moving car.

Mark sat there for several seconds watching the incredible chase and felt the spells slashing back and forth between the car and horsemen. Soon they were beyond his ability to see or sense them. After a moment Mark realized that he could feel another source of magic. Getting out of the truck he walked to the side of the road where the object had been flung, Mark knew he was being stupid and yet he couldn't help himself. There were so many ways this could go bad. If this were some sort of MIED (Magical Improvised Explosive Device) then he was probably already a dead man. Of course how could he leave it along the side of the road? It might hurt the next car that came by. And odd were could that car would have a family in it.

Mark spotted a plain looking gym bag. Mark knew that instead of approaching it he should call 911 and get the police out here. There was something about the bag drew him toward it. Mark approached carefully every sense full open. Whatever was in there was powerful, and unless he was completely mistaken non-hostile. In fact he could almost feel it's welcome. With care Mark squatted next to the bag and gently eased the zipper open. He then peered into the bag and saw what appeared to be some kind of Mask. Mark decided that it would not harm him so he picked the gym bag up. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding when nothing happened. As he walked back to his truck Mark told himself that he'd call the Guild in the morning and turn this thing in. It was way too powerful to leave on the roadside where anyone might stumble over it. He'd never be able to live with himself if some innocent mundane person was hurt because of this artifact.

Mark climbed into his truck and headed to his apartment. Safely home Mark tossed the gym bag onto his coffee table and went into the kitchen for some left over Chinese food and a beer. While waiting for the microwave to heat his food Mark downed his bud in two long steady pulls. Once his food was warm he grabbed a second beer and

sat down on the couch and turned on the TV. Mark was into his third beer before his attention returned to the bag. Suddenly he realized that it was tugging at him. He opened the bag and pulled out the Mask setting it on the coffee table so he could examine it better.

It appeared to be made of a white stone, the features were fine and the Mask was obviously designed as a female face. Mark extended his senses and got his first solid impression. He dropped the Mask and jumped back. The clatter of stone on wood barely registered as Mark realized that the Mask was aware of him, and that it wanted him to put it on.

“The damn thing is sentient.” Mark said out loud.

He’d never heard of an artifact that had an awareness or perhaps a sense of identity? But somehow this one does. If Mark’s sensing ability was working then the Mask was curious, it was curious about Mark and its surroundings. Mark snorted slammed his third beer and headed to the bathroom for a shower and bed. Mark at the last second and diverted into the kitchen for a fourth beer after what he’d witnessed tonight he needed something to take the edge off. He usually didn’t drink this much but the magical battle he’d witnessed during his trip home had left him shaken. He felt like he was back in Afghanistan and had just returned from a patrol and needed to decompress. Of course they’d not been allowed to drink while in the sandbox.

Standing under the shower Mark finished off his beer. Once ready for bed Mark walked back into the living room to turn off the lights and walked around making sure everything was locked up. Again the Mask caught his eye, and this time the siren song snared him. Almost in a daze he walked over and picked it up. It didn’t feel like stone. It felt soft, somehow, and this puzzled Mark. When he’d first held it the Mask had felt hard and cold like it was made out of marble. Now it was springy and warm to the touch almost like it was a living thing. When his fingers made contact he felt a shudder run through his body. Mark returned to the bedroom turning off the lights along the way without conscious thought. Mark looked into the mirror in the bedroom. Staring back was a slender young man, 5’ 10” with brown hair and eyes. Mark turned out the lights and settled onto his back holding the Mask in both hands. Mark felt a shiver of surprised, he could have sworn he’d put the mask back on the coffee table before he’d left the living room. Unable to fight the urge Mark lifted the mask up and then settled it onto his face. For a second it made his whole face tingle and then everything went dark.

Moonlight washed over me as I stood in my secluded backyard. Morgana's body, my body, is strongly aligned with heavenly objects as well as ley-lines. Even after taking this into account I was still unable to explain why the moon felt especially personal and powerful. Even my cycle (I shuddered slightly remembering my first experience) was tied to the moon.

My recent experience at the Guild Hall and the Mansion House apartments had left me determined to prove my ability. Even if this was a simple theft I fully intended to show the Guild and that smug Inspector Lee what I was capable of! So as soon as I'd returned home I'd changed and gone for a run. This may seem contradictory but when I run I sort of zone out to the world around me, it's where I do some of my best thinking. I returned home after five miles with no flashes of insight. I got cleaned up and made light dinner and then started searching through the records I'd brought home from the Guild. After finishing these I switched to my research books and on-line search engines. After several hours I'd come up with a couple of options. Mrs. Smyth must have been the means the thief had used to take the Mask. She'd left in the middle of the night and returned later. Assuming she was innocent of the theft that left three possible options.

A soul swap, which while possible, (I glanced down at my breasts for an ironic confirmation) but was extremely unlikely. It was very rare magic, and it would have been impossible for the thief to get out of her body since she had no magical power. That left compulsion and possession as possible means. Of the two, compulsion was the most likely possibility. In the United States it was illegal to compel people against their will but the magic didn't take all that much power and the principles were obvious to anyone with an undergraduate level of magical training. It would be relatively easy to find out if she'd been compelled a magical examination would answer the question.

I wrote a note to myself to ask Allen about having the Guild get a court order and force the exam. Now I considered possession. This was much trickier possibility. She could have been possessed by a being from beyond the veil. Or she could have been possessed by another human a Magic-User for example. For a creature from beyond the veil to possess her they would have needed a vehicle. Perhaps a means was a better way to think of it. An artifact, a messed up summoning, or a ritual with the intent of summoning a being from beyond the veil into a host body would be the most likely possibilities. If her husband had screwed up a summoning or if she'd been in contact with an artifact, well, those were the two most likely possibilities.

The last possibility was a human Magic-User had used a spell to do this, I had no idea how that would be done I only knew that it was theoretically possible. I was determined to show Inspector Lee, the Guild, and (even though I wouldn't admit it) the handsome elf, that I was a very capable Magic-User worthy of my honorary the Master Class ranking! Thus I found myself standing in a light cotton robe next to a summoning circle in my backyard under the silvery light of the moon. Luckily for me this spot was secluded because I was very uncomfortable with my next step. I had drawn three circles for tonight's work. The first was the Great Circle with symbols at each of the four cardinal points. Within the Great Circle I'd drawn two smaller circles. One of the smaller circles was where I'd be standing and the second was where I intended to summon a being from beyond the veil.

I took a deep breath and tossed my robe to one side. I was now completely naked, female, and a virgin. These were all powerful symbolic aspects useful for the ritual magic I was about to perform and were extremely important to the being whose help I intended to beseech. I stepped into the Great Circle and glanced over at Edgar. He was perched outside and would be of no real help for this.

"At least it's warm," I muttered under my breath.

I now focused briefly on the Great Circle pouring enough power into it to activate it. Next I stepped into my circle and faced the circle I intended to use to contain the Spirit. Once I'd activated the inner two circles I focused on pulling as much power as possible. Morgana's body gave me access to tremendous amounts power, I added to that by drawing from the ley-line beneath my feet and then with a deep breath focused on the silvery light of the moon. I felt my body hair stand up pulling away from me defying the laws of gravity as I drew even more power. One part of my mind noticed that my skin now emitted a soft silvery light, but I stayed focused on the task at hand. The great thing about this type of circle was that they helped to focus and contain power. When I felt the moment was right I spoke the incantation, finishing with a plea in plain English.

"Luna as a sign of your favor I ask that you send me one of your servants."

I felt the power flow out of me causing me to collapse to my knees and catch my breath. For a second I felt utterly empty. The stillness in the clearing was like a moment of perfect frozen crystal clarity.

"What would you have of me mortal?"

I looked up and the woman in the summoning circle opposite me was as stunning as she was inhuman. She was completely naked with a perfectly formed body made of what looked like liquid silver.

I climbed shakily to my feet.

“What is your name?”

The creature stared at me for a moment and then let out a high pitched laugh like the sound of church bells ringing.

“Surely you don’t expect me to answer that question.”

“By my power and the will of your mistress you are here, by the circle you are bound, and thus I ask again. What is your name?”

This time the slivery lady appeared enraged and darted forward to rake at the invisible wall of her circle. When her claw like fingers hit the edge of the circle a spider web of light flashed around. Yet she remained contained within the circle.

“You try my patience mortal, say the reason for summoning before I breach your defense and devour your soul.”

I took a deep breath and focused my will upon the being from beyond the veil.

“Again, I ask, who are you?”

“Aarghh!” the being’s screech made my ears ring as it threw itself at me ruthlessly striking the magical barrier, only to be stopped once again by the circle.

“Thrice I’ve asked and now thou art compelled, speak THY NAME!”

At my words the creature went ridged. Then suddenly she threw back her head and laughed.

“My queen has once again shown her wisdom. She sent me to you this night because three cycles ago you did battle with another mortal and during that battle my queen observed you and became interested. I am Procellarum Oceanus, the Mistress of Storms, second only to the great goddess herself.”

I stood there for a moment stunned. The spell I’d used was designed to summon a servant of the moon and to bind it for a short time. Once I had its name it had to answer my questions honestly, however the answers given were not necessarily understood correctly. It could also refuse to answer. I could try to compel it but that was a tricky business better to barter if the creature became difficult. I could also use its name in future summoning’s with greater ease. This was the first time I’d tried this type of a spell since very strong Magic-Users are capable of working a summoning like this and for this particular summoning the Magic-User had to be female. The fact that Procellarum stood before me left me momentarily speechless. Procellarum didn’t seem to mind and simply stood there staring at me as I collected my wits.

“Three nights ago,” I began at last, “in the human city of St. Louis an artifact was stolen,” I made a gesture and released a spell I’d prepared in advance. An image of the Elven Mask appeared in the air above my head.

“Where is the thief?”

When I finished Procellarum nodded and motioned for me to continue.

“What is the purpose and nature of the Mask?”

Again she gestured for me to go on.

“Why are the Sylvari Elves interested in this crime?”

After I asked my third question Procellarum smiled.

“Ah, child excellent questions all and yet better ones could have been asked.”

Before I could respond she said; “Prima, in the morgue two blocks south of the Guild Hall. Secundo, the nature of magic is different in every realm. When Elves come to the human realm they must bring their magic with them or they are powerless. The Mask transforms human magic so that an Elf might have unlimited supply of magic while here. Mighty Elven artifacts are aware and have a will of their own. These Masks were crafted at the height of Elven power to provide way for Elven warlords to conquer the human realm. Tertia, Isilidhrindal the Sylvari Queen wishes a peaceful relationship with humanity. Trade has been prosperous for both elves and humans although the elven nation is divided on this issue. The Queen is not as powerful as she once was and there are those that wish to over throw her and see an opportunity in the human realm to gain a power base. The Mask are crucial to these rebels and the Queen will do much to keep them out of rebel hands.”

For a moment I stood there feeling stunned.

“Thrice you have asked and thrice have I answered, the cycle is complete, this summoning is done. Call again Maiden-of-the-Moon and I will answer but next time be prepared to pay a price for a service.”

With that Procellarum disappeared in a blaze of silvery light. After I realized the spell was indeed over I stumbled out of the circle and hardly aware of the fact that I was still nude and in a daze pulled on my robe and walked to the house. Abruptly I felt Edgar when he settled onto my shoulder and the normality of it brought me back to the here and now. What the hell is going on? Perhaps it’s time to go see mother, I thought.

\* \* \*



Max woke up and struggled to sit up. She'd been lying on her side naked, with her hands cuffed behind her, feet shackled, and rubber ball gage in her mouth. Max struggled to look around but the cloth sack that had been pulled over her head limited her vision. Max felt inside and found that she had about a quarter of the power she would have if she were at full strength. It should be simple to get out of these bonds Max thought. Drawing on that power Max felt agony arc through her body. Gasping for breath Max realized that there was some type of collar around her neck and as she moved about Max realized that there was a chain running through the collar. Obviously her captors didn't want Max to use her magic. Whoever it was that had captured her, they knew what they were doing.

Max lay back and thought about yesterday. After she'd killed Siofra she knew she had to run. Max had collected up her gear taking only enough time to finish forging a new Georgia drivers licenses. What Max had failed to appreciate was that the spell Siofra had cast had been a sending, calling for help. Before Max had finished up the door had burst open and two tall male Elves had come in hands blazing with power. Max had thought quickly and pretended to be Siofra. Things had calmed down but one of the Elves had pulled out a phone and called in the situation, including Siofra's recovery of the Mask. Both men had picked up the Mask and apparently tried to draw magic through it. They of course failed. After a few minutes they asked Siofra to try. Max had been startled to realize that just holding the Mask in her hand was enough to allow her to draw power. At the same time Max felt something come awake inside the Mask. Like there was some kind of entity in it and when Max used it, it had awoken. It felt hungry and evil to Max so she quickly put the Mask down. Max had to fight the urge to wipe her hand on her robes the Mask left her very skin feeling contaminated. She also realized that the one slight tug of power had been enough to fill her with energy. It didn't take long for the two goons to realize something was wrong and start to become suspicious. When one went outside to get a better cell phone signal, Max acted. She hit the remaining elf with a stun spell grabbed the Mask tossed it back into the gym bag and ran.

The chase had resulted in her current situation, Max thought with a grimace, but at least these assholes don't have the Mask. In a last ditch effort at defiance before Max had been captured she'd tossed the bag with the evil thing into a ditch.

\* \* \*

I woke early the next day. My head hurt like I'd been on a drinking binge even though I hadn't touched any alcohol. I got a pot of coffee going and then looked up the number for the medical examiner's office. After going through a couple of automated answering trees I got a real person who put me through to one of the assistant medical examiners. After explaining who I was and that I was working a case for the Guild and suspected there might be someone in the morgue from two days ago who had been killed via magic and that it might be related to what I was working on. The examiner told me that I couldn't get that kind of information over the phone but if I came down they would let me do a magical examination of the body. They'd also need confirmation from the Guild that I was on official business. This meant that I'd have to call Inspector Lee.

My conversation with Al had been brief and after a little persuasion he agreed to authorize my visit. The trip downtown was pretty quick with light mid-morning traffic. This was my first visit to the morgue and I was surprised to figure out that it was on Clark Avenue just a couple of blocks from Busch stadium. There was plenty of parking and the building itself was very modern looking. I found my way to Dr. Paula Caldwell's office and after knocking on the door was greeted by a short plump woman in her early fifties with thick glasses and brown hair.

"Are you Dr. Caldwell?"

She looked up at me with eyes made extra-large by her glasses and said "that's me, and you must be Ms. Livingstone from the Guild?"

"Come with me" she said and led the way down the hall toward an elevator. "So there was only one body brought in the night that you mentioned. A male, mid-thirties, and it was obvious that he'd been killed by magic. The Guild sent an inspector down to examine the body and then she left."

We took the elevators down to a lower level in the building and when we stepped out the smell of chemicals hit my nose and made me sneeze. Dr. Caldwell marched off down the hallway, seemingly oblivious to the odor, to a door where she swiped a badge and then typed in a code. There was an audible click and we entered a secure area. Once inside she indicated a large book on a table next to the door.

"You'll need to sign in."

Once I'd signed in we went down a short hall and into a larger room with several rows of square doors. There was a computer in this room and Dr. Caldwell went to it and sat down. I noticed at once that it was much colder in here than other parts of the building.

“Ah, here it is.” She said looking up at me. “Maximilian Alexander Dionissis, age 34, U.S. citizen, died of massive heart failure due to magically induced trauma.”

She said reading from the computer screen. She then got up and walked to one of the square doors and opened it. Inside I could see a shelf and something wrapped in a medical bag. She pulled the shelf out and unzipped the bag. I was surprised by the lack of smell. Evidently the chemicals they’d used were enough to stop the body from decaying. Or they had such an effect on my nose that I couldn’t smell anything.

Looking down at the corpse I felt my heart start racing and suddenly I felt nauseous. With an effort of will I pushed aside my reaction to seeing this unknown corpse and focused on the wound. The cause of death was obvious. The size of the hole burned through his chest left no doubt. What I noticed right away was that the edges of the wound had blackened. Whatever had done the burning had been so hot that it had cauterized the flesh as it burned through. I took a shallow breath (another deep breath would have made me sneeze again) and opened my third eye. The area around the hole sparkled with faint traces of green and gold energy. I pulled out a small clear crystal and held it over the damaged area and spoke a soft incantation.

The energy from the wound arced up to briefly touch the crystal. I now held up the crystal checking to make sure that I had an exact match for the residual energy from the wound. If I found the person who did this I’d be able to use the crystal to identify their magical signature.

Dr. Caldwell was looking at me curiously, “what did you just do?”

“This” I said holding up the crystal for her to see “is like taking the magical equivalent of a finger print. It should help us identify who did this.”

I said feeling proud of myself. I’d worked out how to do this spell this morning and prepared it for this visit. One of the differences separating Magic-Users 1st Class and above from 2nd Class practitioners and below is that ability to take theory and turn it into a new spell when the need arises. At 2nd Class and below it’s mostly just memorization.

“The Inspector who came down yesterday just looked at the body for a few minutes and then left.”

She said with the sound of disapproval in her voice. I could tell by the way she was looking at me that I’d earned some respect with just this one spell.

“Thank you for the help Doctor I think it’s time I head over to my office.” I said not bothering to tell her that my office wasn’t in the Guild Hall.

Mark woke feeling absolutely fantastic. It was almost noon and he lay there for a moment puzzled about the feeling of euphoria, then he shrugged it off and rolled out of bed. As he walked to the bathroom he wondered at the strange dreams he'd had all night long. They were filled with color, but had been fragmented he remembered seeing broken glass, looking into a glowing purple crystal, holding a pair of wands; it went on and on random and disconnected.

Mark headed to the kitchen to get a pot of coffee going. Once the coffee pot had started brewing he headed to the bathroom to go through his morning ritual. Passing through the living room Mark spotted a couple of objects on the coffee table he didn't recognize. Looking closer out of curiosity he noticed what appeared to be a half a dozen crystals, a couple of wands, and a set of rings. Mark felt a chill run down his spine.

"What the hell?"

Mark opened his magical senses and looked closely at the objects. At first he felt relieved since he couldn't detect any magical power. Mark picked up one of the crystals and it felt empty sort of hollow. This reminded him of that time in Afghanistan when they'd gotten ambushed by an Afghan Shaman who had started hitting them with Magic. They'd called it in and returned fire but lost several guys before help arrived in the form of one of the Division's Battle Mages. The duel had been impressive, particularly for Mark since he'd watched it through his enhanced senses. Once the battle was over he'd been ordered to help sweep the area and to look for any magical traps or objects. Mark had found the Afghan Shaman's body and he'd noticed several crystals around the Shaman. Mark had picked up one and felt the same feeling then as he did now. The BM had explained that it was the way a magically wrought crystal normally felt after it had been drained of its power.

"How did all of this stuff get here' Mark asked himself. He set the stone down and checked to make sure the doors were locked. To his surprise the apartment was unlocked.

"I could swear I locked up before I went to bed" Mark muttered feeling even more confused and quickly locked the door.

Mark stepped into the bathroom and turned on the light. When he looked into the mirror he was a bit startled by his appearance. He looked paler, his normally brown hair was slightly longer and lighter, and for the first time in years he had no whiskers in the morning. Mark had been shaving since he was a freshman in high school and now his face felt soft and smooth to his searching fingers. Abruptly Mark remembered

the Mask. He'd put it on right before he fell asleep. What in God's name had he been thinking. Mark rushed into the bedroom looking around intently for the Mask but couldn't find it. After looking under the bed and into every corner of the bedroom Mark gave up and returned to the bathroom.

He spent several minutes looking at his face. It had changed. The changes were subtle but there none the less. His skin looked paler and felt very soft and smooth. His nose was thinner and smaller and his lips looked puffy. Turning his face from side to side Mark decided that the depth of his eyes had changed and his chin was more pointed and delicate.

"What the fuck is going on?" Mark asked out loud.

Suddenly he had an idea and opened up his magical senses to the fullest. As soon as he did this and looked into the mirror he saw the Mask sitting on his face. To normal mundane sight it was invisible but it stood out to the third eye. Mark reached up and tried to touch the Mask but his fingers felt only smooth soft skin. He slid his fingers around trying to hook them under the Mask but couldn't find the seam. Mark could see the faint line where the Mask stopped and his skin started. When he ran his fingers over the area he couldn't feel the edge. For a second Mark couldn't breathe.

"Oh, God! What have I gotten myself into?" He whispered.

\* \* \*

I made it to my office in no time and let Edgar out through the window, he'd been feeling cooped up today since I'd not let him out for a flight yet. I didn't have any appointments today but I liked to make sure I spent some time in the office every day. I don't get a lot of walk in business, but I feel like it's important to keep up the appearance of normal hours. Looking down at my casual attire I regretted the choice since I usually went out of my way to look professional while in the office. It was summer and the heat was in the upper 90s. I'd chosen a pair of khaki slacks and a sleeveless light green blouse and sandals with a low heel. When I'd been at the morgue I'd wore a light matching khaki blazer which I'd left in the car. The neckline on the blouse showed off a hint of cleavage, my mother would have approved of the outfit, but the only thing I liked about it was that it was somewhat cool and didn't expose too much skin. When I glanced around I smiled, the only real change to the office was that instead of just one desk now there were two along with a second name on the door.

I figured that I probably should call my mother and let her know that there were some strange events going on in town. But besides giving me unwanted advice, there

really wasn't that much she could do. She just didn't have the magical strength to do a whole lot. I would need to talk to Inspector Lee and fill him in on everything I'd learned. In fact I'd already promised him I would. It was the price I'd had to pay to get him to agree to let me examine the body in the morgue. I called my mother but got her voice mail. That is just too weird, I thought, at hearing my old voice answer.

"E. Mor Donegal, I can't take your call at the moment, please leave a message."

I grinned a little when I noticed that mom was now using her middle name instead of her first and name. Maybe I wasn't the only one having to work through my gender issues. I put down my cell phone and pulled out the crystal and set it in front of me on my new desk. I examined it for a minute or two with my magical senses before turning to the computer. The Guild had a number of useful applications on line if you had authorization to access them. Because of my retainer status I could and I made use of one now. It was sort of like a program used by the FBI to run a finger print. It was more difficult because you can't just scan a magical signature with a machine. Instead I used it like an index. First sort by color, this was tough because shade mattered and even though the signature's base shade was green it had been laced with gold. Next the pattern, I frowned with concentration since this was the most complex part of this task. The first aspect of this pattern told me the person who'd cast the spell was female. After another ten minutes I was sure that the caster was an Elf.

I pushed my chair back and rubbed my eyes. Max had been killed by an eleven woman. I knew that the Guild data base didn't have much information on elven criminals. The elven kingdoms liked to extradite any Elves who had committed crimes in the human realm back to 'Summer' to try and if necessary punish them. Perhaps I should attack this from another direction, I thought. I dug into the Guild's criminal data base, search by name: Maximilian Alexander Dionissis. The search came back with a match almost at once.

It turned out that Maximilian went by Max and had been arrested on two occasions, once for theft and once for the unlicensed use of magic. On both occasions there hadn't been enough evidence to go to court. In the first instance the charges had been dropped and in the second Max had paid a fine. My eyes lit up as I read the notes attached to his file. An inspector, from Atlanta, had speculated that Max was much more powerful (magically) than they were able to prove. They'd tested him and he'd graded out below Magic-User 3rd Class, but the Inspector thought he'd somehow spoofed the tests. It was further speculated based on a tattoo on his forearm (of a hand inside a circle) that he was a member of the Hidden Hand Society. I had no clue what

society that was, but I figured it must be one of the illegal magical organizations that the Guild was constantly trying to stamp out.

Just then my cell started to buzz and at the same moment there was a tingle at the outer wards to my office. I ignored the phone and got up to see who was coming into my office. The man who walked in was about 5'8" with brown hair, and while he looked rather ordinary I knew he was a Magic-User 3rd Class. He was also one of the better magical craftsmen in St. Louis. He'd commissioned me or Alastar rather, to put the wards on his shop. His shop was in East St. Louis and therefore needed an extra bit of magical protection.

"Can I help you Mr. Carter?" I asked trying to sound politely interested.

"Where's Alastar?" He asked angrily.

"Unavailable at the moment, I'm afraid. I'm his partner and am familiar with his work. I believe he installed a triple ring set of wards on your shop last fall." I said trying to sound competent and knowledgeable in spite of my apparent youth.

"You can give me my money back!" He said glaring at me.

I met his gaze for a moment and then he looked away. "Please, why don't we sit down?" I said indicating the couches off to one side. We moved over to the couches and Carter seemed to have come to the conclusion that I was a woman because his eyes became glued to my chest.

When he looked up from my chest I said, "So can you tell me what happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened I was robbed!"

"Did you call the Guild?" I asked knowing that no matter how good the wards there is always a way to get through them.

"Of course, and the insurance adjuster, in fact they just left my shop. That's why I'm here."

"Okay, could you just tell me what happened from the beginning?" I said starting to become annoyed.

"I arrived at my shop this morning and found the wards down. Like they'd been turned off, except that when I tried to bring them up all the magical linkages and bindings were broken. They're now completely useless. I saw that the main door had been forced and the mundane alarm had been hexed. The only thing the thief touched was the display case where I display some of my enchanted magical items."

I interrupted, "the thief didn't try to take the cash from the safe?"

"No just the items on display," he replied sullenly.

“What about the more questionable items you kept shielded in the lower vault” I asked staring intently at him.

Mr. Carter jumped to his feet, “how do you know about that?”

“Oh, sit down. I’m Alastar’s partner. I’m fully briefed up on his work. So the thief got through the outer wards, but the ones hiding the vault kept everything there safe?”

Slowly Mr. Carter sank back onto the couch blushing as he did so. “I, uhm, yes, that is the lower vault was untouched.”

“Luke, may I call you Luke?” I didn’t wait for his nod, “I don’t care that you keep some semi-legal magical items in the vault. If a stripper comes to you for a glamor to make her sexier who am I to judge? Or if some guy wants to fulfill a fantasy about being a woman for a day why should I care? I’ll need to see your shop so I can see how the wards were breached and I need you to be completely honest with me. If you try hiding things from me it will just prevent me from being able to help you.”

With that I stood up. “I’ll meet you at your shop at 1 pm?”

When I extended my hand he shook it and said, “I’ll be there.”

\* \* \*

It was now nearly three pm and I was worried. I’d never seen a set of wards taken down the way the ones on Luke Carter’s shop had been. It was like all of the magic they channeled had been drained to the point that there wasn’t enough magic in them to maintain the linkages that bound them together and allowed them to draw on power from the ley-line under the shop. Once they’d been drained to that point they’d simply collapsed under their own magical weight and even the small amount of energy this would have caused had been drained. What remained was worse than useless. I’d put up a temporary set of wards for Carter and told him I’d craft another full set as soon as possible.

But the whole thing puzzled me. If the thief had been strong or skilled enough to use some new spell to get through the outer wards why stop at a bunch of relatively cheap items? The lower vault had several items of far greater value, and the safe had several thousand dollars. Why break in and not take the money? If the thief was after magic why not take the more powerful stuff?

The call on my cell phone had been Inspector Lee when I’d called him back he asked me to come into the office. Since I’d promised to tell him what I’d learned from my summoning I figured I’d best head in. Besides it would give me a chance to talk to the Special Agent who’d responded to Carter’s call and find out if he knew anything more



about this. Using Guild ties to help my personal business might not be completely ethical but I needed to figure out what happened.

\* \* \*

Mark woke with a start. Late afternoon sunlight streamed through his bedroom window and at first he couldn't figure out where he was or the time of day. Shaking the cobwebs from his head he glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost five pm.

"God I must have been tired."

He mused out loud and was startled to hear his voice. It sounded slightly different. Am I coming down with a cold? He wondered, although he felt great so it must be something else. Mark lay there for a couple of seconds collecting his thoughts. After discovering the Mask was attached to his face he'd decided to call the Guild and get help. He'd actually dialed a couple of times, but for some reason he'd hung up each time before the line connected. What would he tell the Guild? That he saw a magical battle and had taken a magic artifact? That instead of delivering it to the Guild he'd used it and oh-by-the-way how did all of those powerless magical items make their way to his living room? If a Guild Special Agent walked into his apartment it would look like he was a thief!

Mark had decided to go out for a walk to clear his head. If he couldn't go to the Guild there were other Magic-User's in the city. They were more discreet than the Guild, and were willing to overlook a few of the finer points to Guild law. Perhaps they could help. When Mark got back from his walk he poured a bowl of cereal since all of a sudden he was starving. After he ate, he felt incredibly tired and looking at his watch realized he had a couple of hours before he had to go back on duty tonight. A short nap would feel pretty good.

The nap had probably been a bad idea Mark decided since he now had less than an hour to get to the ware house where he'd spend the next eight hours walking around. Mark hurried into the bathroom and stopped when he spotted his reflection in the mirror. His hair was almost completely blonde now and it had grown several inches. His eyes had turned a startling shade of green and his skin was much paler. His face had continued to change, the features were much more delicate and the lips were fuller. Mark could still see a little of the old Mark in this new face, but it was rapidly changing. Hardly able to believe what he was seeing Mark ran his fingers over his new features just to make sure they were real. Then Mark opened his third eye and was shocked again. The Mask glowed with power, and green energy in vine like tendrils

had wrapped around him ducking into his skin here and there and popping out in other places. With a shudder Mark released the sight.

“Ok, get dressed and then head down to the Guild Hall. It doesn’t matter if they think you stole all that stuff, they’re the only ones who can help you.” Mark said to himself.

Figuring a quick shower would help calm his nerves Mark turned on the water and stripped off his clothes. When he caught a glance of his reflection he stopped and turned to face the mirror. His body was thinner and taller than before he was sure of it. But what had stopped him were the bright pink nipples on his chest and the missing definition. Mark had spent many hours in the weight room and the thin twig like arms and legs showed a staggering loss of muscle. His now hairless chest could have been that of a ten year old boy. Except that his nipples looked a little puffy.

“Fuck the shower!”

Mark raced to pull on a pair of jean shorts and a t-shirt that were both suddenly too big at the waist and shoulders yet tight around his butt. He slipped his feet into a pair of flip flops and grabbed his keys, wallet and headed out the door. Once in his truck Mark drove west toward down town St. Louis. As he was driving he suddenly felt the urge to pull into a shopping plaza. It was now 6:30 pm and most of the shops were closed. Mark parked the truck unable to resist the urge to get out. He walked along the side walk until he was standing in front of a small magic shop. It sold used and cut rate magical items. Probably half the stuff in there wasn’t even magical.

Suddenly Mark opened his senses and could feel and see the wards. He was almost touching the outer ward. Helpless Mark watched as his right arm came up and his palm touched the ward. Unexpectedly Mark felt a rush of energy from the ward as it pushed into his palm. The energy poured into him causing the Mask on his face to tingle before settling into his center. It had only taken a second but Mark could tell that the ward net was completely down. He moved toward the door and watched as his hand came up in a gesture and with a word he’d never heard before he cast a spell. Suddenly telekinetic power gripped the door and the latch clicked open. Before Mark stepped into the shop he uttered another word and there were several electrical sparks. Mark knew instinctively that all the electrical items in the shop had been shorted out including the alarm.

Mark headed toward the first display case. There were several items showing the signs of minor enchantments. In short order Mark had them out and was stuffing them into his pockets. Then moving behind the counter he found the plastic bags the

shop keeper used for customers. Picking up one he continued to clean out all of the magical items. Once done Mark headed back to his truck.

Before he knew it he was back in his apartment sitting on his couch. Mark watched helpless as he picked up each Magical item and drained it of power. Each time he drained an item he felt the Mask tingle and then the energy settle deeper into him. For the first time in his life Mark felt what his instructors had described as a Magic-Users center. This was the place a Magic-User stored magical energy before casting a spell. Once done Mark headed back to the bedroom to stretch out on the bed.

Suddenly he felt like he had control of his body again. Mark jumped out of the bed.

“Holy shit, what the fuck was that.” He looked at his hands and realized he was shaking.

“The Mask! It’s possessing me!”

Suddenly more determined than ever Mark headed toward the door to his apartment intending to drive into the Guild Hall. A wave of exhaustion hit him and he stumbled. Mark caught himself on the edge of the door and tripped forward into the hallway. He made it another step before he collapsed to the floor in a dream filled sleep.

\* \* \*

I rode the elevator up to the sixth floor looking forward to meeting Inspector “call me Al” Lee. At least I’d be able to contribute some information to the investigation even if I didn’t have any real answers. I made it to the lobby and was once again startled by the freaky receptionist. This time I didn’t bother looking at her with the third eye. A few minutes after I arrived Inspector Lee was escorting me to his office. It was a small office with no windows and barely enough room for his desk and a couple of chairs.

“So what do you know about the thief, Maximilian Alexander Dionissis?” I asked.

Allen shrugged, “not much to be honest. I’d heard that he’d been killed but since it was done with Elvin magic it was turned over to the Foreign Affairs Division (FAD). Which brings me to the main reason I wanted to talk to you,” he said. “This case has also been pulled into the FAD. I’ve been officially taken off the case and your involvement is terminated as well. You can talk to Diana the receptionist on your way out and bill the Department for your hours.” As he said this I could tell he was pissed.

“What about the information that I learned from my summoning spell?” I asked feeling annoyed.

Al pulled out a small digital recorder and sat it on his desk. "I'll take any information you've discovered and pass it on to the FAD."

With that I relayed what I'd learned, however I left out the details of who I'd summoned since it was none of the Guild's business. Once done Inspector Lee stood up and offered me his hand, "it's been a pleasure working with you Ms. Livingstone. I hope we can offer you some business in the future."

I knew I'd been dismissed so I headed back out to the lobby to find Diana and bill her for my time. As I was talking to Diana I heard the elevator doors open behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and my heart started racing. Sir Galohond Larohtta in an immaculate grey suit walked into the lobby. I've never been attracted to men before, but there was something about this elf that made my body react in ways that were foreign and uncomfortable for me.

"Ah, Morgana Livingstone if I'm not mistaken."

He said extending a hand. I reached out to shake it and was startled when he deftly took my fingers and turned my hand over so he could bring my fingers to his mouth brushing them with his lips. My body's earlier reaction had been nothing compared to the electrical jolt I felt when his lips brushed my fingers. I felt my nipples harden like pair of tiny erections, my face flushed, and there was an unexpected ach in my loins that made me want to squirm and rub my thighs together.

"Yes, . . . ah, . . .that is, please call me Morgana." Why the heck did I say that, I thought? "And you are Sir Galohond Larohtta I overheard your introduction to Inspector Lee the other day." Why am I babbling I thought, good grief Alastar get a grip.

"I am pleased that you remember me. I am of course familiar with the Livingstone family. Please accept my deepest condolences on the loss of your parents."

As he said this, his gaze caught mine and I noticed that he had deep grey eyes. The sincerity in his voice made me feel ashamed about the ruse I was forced to play, while making my body hum in response.

"Thank you. You're very kind." I stammered and I suddenly realized he'd not released my hand. With a bit of reluctance I pulled my hand away. "Excuse me, I really should be going." I said attempting to step around him but he moved back blocking my avenue to the elevator.

"Your pardon, Morgana, but I'd like to speak with you. I understand that you've been looking into the theft of the Mask of Esarthae Haelond." Before I could respond he continued, "I'm the Chief Investigator for the Sylvari here in St. Louis. I understand you're a private consultant. May I come by your office at say 10 am tomorrow? I'd like

to discuss an opportunity for us to work together.” At this he pulled out a business card and handed it to me.

I wasn’t sure how to respond so nodded my head, plucked the card from his hand, and ducked around him heading for the sanctuary of the elevator. Once safely in my Charger I let out a breath. Well now I’m officially off the case according to the Guild. But I may be back on it as an agent working for the Sylvari, and Sir Galohond.

“God I need a drink.”

\* \* \*

Max had spent most of the day sitting on the floor or lying on her side. This had been the least uncomfortable position she could find with her hands behind her. Max had also discovered that the chain that connected her to the wall was barely long enough for her to lie down. Eventually she’d been forced to relieve herself, stretching the chain as far as it would go Max squatted so that the urine would be directed as far away as possible. This was met with only limited success and she’d been forced to sit on the floor next to a puddle of urine.

The loud noise of a door banging open caused Max to jump. A pair of rough hands gripped each of her shoulders lifting Max to her feet. There was the sound of a key turning in a lock and Max felt the chain in her collar come free of the wall as one of the guards tugged her forward by it. Max instantly tripped and unable to catch herself with her arms bound and fell head first to the floor causing a muffled yelp when her breast was smashed against the cold stone.

“Take off her shackles.”

Max felt one of the two move to her feet and once the restraints were removed she was again pulled upright. With a tug on her leash Max was dragged forward. She was led down a hall and then up a set of stairs. Max soon lost count of the twists and turns and only knew that they’d arrived at their destination when she heard a door open and was led into another room. Now for the first time Max’s arms were freed from their restraints only to be secured to the arms of the chair Max was forced to sit in. Max felt a tug on her collar as the chain was attached to the chair and then felt a new set of shackles secure her feet to the legs of the chair. Then Max heard one of the guards leave.

After a few minutes the door opened again and suddenly the hood covering Max’s face was jerked off. Max’s eyes watered at the bright light and she tried blinking several

times. After a few minutes Max made out the form of a male elf sitting in a chair opposite her. When it was apparent to the elf watching her that she could see he spoke.

“Do you know who I am?”

Max just started at him and then made a muffled sound around the gage.

“Please remove the gage.”

The guard to Max’s right quickly complied and Max felt her jaw ach after having been forced open for so long. With another gesture a small cup of water was placed under Max’s lips and she drank greedily. Once Max had finished drinking the elf lord looked over at the guard who’d remained in the room.

“Leave us.”

The guard nodded and left shutting the door behind him leaving Max alone with this elf.

“Now, let’s start again, do you know who I am?”

Max shook her head, “no should I?”

“As a matter of fact Siofra would know me very well. How is it you wear her body?” The blonde elf lord sounded curious.

“A misunderstanding.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, the bitch seemed to think that she could double cross me and kill me after I’d done a job for her. She failed to full understand the consequences of her rash decision.”

At this the male elf threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“Ah, that sounds just like Siofra. Unfortunately, you still haven’t told me much.”

At this point Max decided it was time to come clean. He explained how he’d stolen the artifact and how Siofra had tried to kill him. When Max was finished the elf shook his head.

“Siofra was always too arrogant for her own good. Too sure of her power and quick to assume that humans are weak. Now for her pride she’s gone.” Then he looked sharply at Max, “What am I to do with you?”

“You could just let me go? I promise I won’t make any trouble for you. I’ll disappear and you’ll never see me again.” Max said desperately.

At this the elf lord laughed, it was a rich golden laugh the kind that made others want to join in.

“No Max I don’t think so.” He held up his hand before Max could interrupt “I believe you. I’m sure you’d do everything you could to disappear. But you see you’re wearing

the body of my cousin, the body of a Sylvari noble woman. It's very valuable just for the blood line to say nothing of the power you might wield if allowed to run free."

At this the elf stood up and picked up the wooden chair he had been sitting in and moved it to the far wall. When he returned he looked down at Max.

"I'm sure you don't recognize the chair you're sitting in. It was Siofra who found it while exploring an ancient ruin in Summer and it was Siofra who discovered its purpose and capabilities. It has the unique property of appearing as a normal chair, unless one knows the command words. Its magic only works here in human realm. Which is probably why it had been hidden in Summer in the first place."

Max felt his heart start to race and a cold sweat broke out on his skin. "Look there is no need for this I'll do whatever you say."

The elf ignored Max and continued. "It's very effective in getting information from a captive. It can give pleasure, or pain, because it's designed to be used on the mind of the person in the chair so it leaves no physical damage. You see my cousin was very gifted at mind magic, compulsion, and illusion so learning the secrets of the chair was an obsession of hers. Then she shared that information with me." For a moment he shuddered. "You see that is how I knew that you were telling me the truth. Siofra's death released me from the magic of chair."

At this he grinned widely. "The irony is poetic since you're wearing her body and I intend to use the chair to en-spell your mind just as she en-spelled mine." At this the elf let out a soft chuckle. "You see while you're bound to the chair all of your natural and magical mental defenses are gone. Let me give you a demonstration," with this he spoke several words that Max couldn't quite make out. But suddenly she felt a wave of energy sweep over her body making her shudder.

"Your name is now Little Slave." The elf said. "Please tell me your name?"

"I'm Little Slave" Max said and was startled. "No my name is really Little Slave, damn it I'm Little Slave." No matter how hard Max tried to say 'Max' it kept coming out Little Slave. "Please I beg you this is unnecessary." Max pleaded tears starting to leak out of his eyes.

The elf lord's grinning was filled with glee. "I'm sure you'd do whatever I asked right up to the point where you thought you could escape. Oh, no Little Slave, I have need of you but I must be sure you'll obey. Now be silent."

Max tried to say something and found that his voice wouldn't work.

"Let us begin, when you and I are alone you will answer to the name Little Slave. When we are around others you will answer to the name Siofra. You will think of yourself as either Siofra when others are around or Little Slave when it's just you and I,

but you will always remember who you once were. You will do nothing to harm me or yourself and you will always obey my every command.”

Little Slave could feel magical shackles burning their way into her brain. She tried to fight them and was helpless against the power of the chair.

“You are in my cousin’s body; one of the things I need from you is children to continue the line. The other thing since you’ve used the Mask is that you now have a connection to it. I intend to use that connection to find recover it.”

The Elf lord walked around the chair like a wolf circling his prey.

“This is just too perfect, my vain, domineering, and arrogant cousin killed by a human thief. Now her body is my play toy.” When he laughed this time there was no gold in it, instead it sounded too Little Slave like pure evil.

“Elvin woman have learned to control their cycle so that they can become pregnant when they choose.” With an evil leer he said, “you’re now attracted to men and only men. Your main purpose in life is to have babies and give pleasure to men. You will act very feminine and never tell anyone that you were once male.”

Little Slave shuddered again and felt the mental bindings burn into her and then she felt a shifting deep within her psych. When she glanced up at this elf she noticed his broad shoulders and how strong and virile he looked. Little Slave felt her nipples poke out and for the first time since she’d been trapped in this body she felt an ach between her legs.

The elf lord’s face was now flushed with glee as he leaned forward, “you will have sex with any male I order you too. On my command you will become pregnant as often as you can. You may speak, now what is your name?”

“Little Slave” She said shuddering as the third set of commands burned into her.

“What is your purpose, Little Slave?” Asked the elf.

“To have babies and pleasure men.” Little Slave responded with growing horror.

“You will not cast a spell unless you ask me first is that clear?”

“Yes” She replied screaming on the inside.

“When we are alone you will call me Master. But when we are around other Elves you will do your best to act as my cousin would, only as a more subdued, humble, and respectful version of Siofra.”

“Yes Master.” Little Slave responded, feeling more mental chains burn into her psych.

With that the elf lord began freeing Little Slave from the chair. Once she was free Little Slave sat there quietly thinking about her options. The collar had also been



removed but she doubted that she'd be able to cast a spell. The elf lord held out his hand.

"Come now, Little Slave it's time to get you cleaned up and then you will come to my bed chamber. I intend to be the first to show you the joy of womanhood."

Little Slave followed the lord into the hallway where the two guards waited.

"Take my cousin to her old chamber and once she is ready escort her to my bedroom."

As the new Siofra was walking away following the guards the elf lord said, "Oh, Siofra, clean yourself quickly, put on something sexy, and hurry back to me."

Siofra felt the order sink in as though she were still in the chair. Feeling like she was trapped in a nightmare she hurried after the guards.

# CHAPTER 3

## *The Mask*

I'd just arrived home, still thinking about Sir Galohond and the possibility of working for him, when found a message on my machine from my mother. Evidently she'd been away on a business trip back east and was now home and wanted to have dinner sometime this week. I decided not to call her back right away. It was early evening and since I was feeling frustrated I decided the best thing for me would be a workout. So I grabbed my duffel bag and headed over to the 24 Hour Fitness not far from my house. As I drove I felt annoyed, it wasn't as much fun to come here now since most of the guys I used to lift with now regarded me as a piece of ass to be ogled. How do women put up with this? Still I'd paid for the membership and needed to blow off some steam. When I got home Edgar cawed at me in aggravation over the way I'd rushed out to go to the gym and he hadn't eaten yet. I refilled his feeder and spent a few minutes placating him. Why are males so needy, I wondered?

\* \* \*

Mark woke up and for a moment wondered where he was, why was he sleeping in the hallway. Then his memories returned, his body kept changing and when he'd tried to go to the Guild for help the Mask had possessed him. Mark reached for the Mask but felt only the smooth skin he was now starting to associate with his face. Mark pushed himself to his feet and felt flesh move around on his chest in an unfamiliar way. He reached up and cupped a pair of breasts.

For a second the world spun and Mark had to throw out a hand to catch the wall in order to prevent himself from falling over. He stumbled to the bathroom and found that the lights were still on. When he looked into the mirror what he saw stunned him. The woman staring back had large green eyes, blonde hair now past her shoulders, and

a pair of small high breasts pushing out against Mark's now oversized shirt. The face had changed even more, it was very fine boned with a thin nose and high cheek bones there was no trace that Mark could see of his former face. Unable to resist the urge Mark stripped. He noticed that his shoulders were now thinner and much smaller than his had been. His arms, although thin, had a bit of muscle tone. His new breasts were small and perfectly formed cones, if he'd had to guess he'd have said an A or perhaps a B cup. His waist had gotten much thinner probably in the low twenty inch range and then the hips flared out creating that hour glass figure he enjoyed observing in woman. To Marks relief his cock and balls still hung between his legs. However, when he reached down feel his penis he realized there was no sensation. He could feel his cock in his hand but there was no feeling of his hand gripping his cock. Mark quickly felt his scrotum and realized it had no sensation as well. He also discovered that the sack was empty, he was missing both gonads.

Unexpectedly tears burst from Marks eyes and he slipped to the floor hugging his knees to his chest. He felt completely trapped and helpless against the power that was changing him. He was also worried about what would happen once the change was complete.

\* \* \*

I arrived at my office early the next day, I told myself that I needed to get caught up on some work but the truth was I was anxious about my meeting with Galohond Larothta. I'd originally planned on a conservative business suit. But after several different changes I'd settled on a black skirt and matching blouse that showed some cleavage. I also added a set of three inch heels, black stockings, and took the time to style my hair and carefully apply my makeup. Now sitting in front of my computer at work I felt like a school girl waiting for her first date instead of a professional Magic-User expecting a potential client.

With nothing better to do I thought back to last night. After I'd eaten a light dinner I'd called my mother. He'd answered on the second ring. After a few minutes of polite chit-chat I told him about the case. Mother wasn't surprised that FAD had stepped in and taken over the case. He also adamantly denied having asked the Guild Grand Master to throw some business my way. This made me a little confused, why would the Guild Grand Master want me involved with this specific case. With a mental shrug I moved on and explained to mother what I'd learned from the summoning and the morgue at this point he'd gotten very quiet.

“Alastar, you need to be very careful. Elves are not to be taken lightly and the fact that some faction is running around St. Louis with a powerful artifact is very serious. I want you to promise me that before you do anything stupid you’ll come see me.”

“I’m not a child mother, I can handle this.”

I replied feeling annoyed. That had led to an argument which hadn’t helped my mood any. Now as I sat here waiting for Galohond to arrive I wondered if I’d been stupid to snap at my mother. Almost as if thinking his name had summoned him I felt a jingle at my office wards alerting me to the arrival of a Magic-User.

I stood up smoothed my skirt, and walked around the desk to greet my visitor. When Galohond Larothta walked into the office he took my breath away. At 6’2” his athletic body hummed with masculinity. He was wearing work boots, blue jeans, and a collared shirt obviously going for a casual look. It made me feel like I’d over dressed for our meeting.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again Morgana.”

He said walking forward to take my hand and kiss my fingers again.

I shivered with pleasure and said, “the pleasure is mine Sir Larothta.”

“Please call me Galohond.”

“Would you care to sit? Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea?”

“Tea please.”

He said sweeping over to one of the couches and sitting down. I’d managed to anticipate his request for tea and already had hot water waiting. I got two cups of Earl Grey going and placed them on a service that I brought over to the coffee table. After taking a sip I decided to get down to business.

“Yesterday you said there was something that you thought I could help you with?”

As soon as I said this I regretted my choice of words. When he raised one eye brow I felt my face heat up.

“I’m sure there are several things you could help me with.”

He said flirting with me while his eyes lingering on my cleavage before looking me in the eye. I noticed that he had beautiful grey eyes.

“I’m investigating the theft of the Mask of Esarthae Haelond and I understand that you’ve done some work on this matter for the Guild.”

“I have, but I turned everything I learned over to Inspector Lee yesterday. You should be able to get a copy of my report from him.” I said feeling puzzled.

“I’ve reviewed your report and I’m impressed. Could I see the crystal with the magical signature you took? I understand that you think the thief was killed by a female elf?”

At this I nodded and got up feeling his eyes on me as I moved to my desk. I pulled the crystal out of the desk and walked back over to where we were sitting. I spoke a word and channeled a trickle of power into the crystal so that it started glowing with the color and pattern I’d copied into it. I then sat it down on the table between us.

“My I have a closer look?” Galohond asked.

When I nodded he reached forward and picked up the crystal with two fingers. He turned it over several times and with a sigh sat it back on the table.

“I can’t say that I’m surprised, but this is disturbing none the less.”

“Oh?”

“The former Lady Duchess Siofra Aldalithe is a hunted fugitive with a bounty on her head. I’m not surprised to find her here, nor am I surprised that she is responsible for killing your thief. She is wanted for greater crimes than murder back in Summer. What worries me is why she’s here? I doubt very much it’s just to get her hands on the Mask. There will be a purpose behind her desire to acquire it.”

“And you’re sure it was her?”

“Yes, I’ve fought her before and I’d recognized her magical signature anywhere. May I have your crystal? I will return it when the investigation is over but I have a meeting later today with the Guild Foreign Affairs Department and I’d like to let them see this.”

When I nodded he put the crystal into his pocket.

“I’m sorry to cut this meeting short, I’m afraid I must head over to the Guild. Perhaps we could meet later today?”

“I’d like that,” I responded without thinking.

“How does dinner sound?”

“I, . . . uhm . . . what did you have in mind?”

I could tell that I was blushing fiercely now.

“Why don’t we meet at the Franco at 7 pm? I’m particularly fond of French food. If you’ve not been there before then I think you’ll be surprised.”

When I nodded my agreement he once again scooped up my fingers for a kiss goodbye and he walked out the door. As he walked out I found my gaze lingering on his hard round athletic butt. I wondered what it would feel like to hold it with both hands as he thrust into me. Suddenly I snapped out of my day dream.

“Get a grip Morgana!” I said and walked back over to my desk.

\* \* \*

After Galohond left I sat at my desk not really doing any work, instead I replayed the events over again in my mind. Max had stolen the Mask, a Mask which allowed female Elves to draw power while in the human realm. Siofra who was a wanted criminal and a fugitive from her home realm had killed Max and taken the Mask. She might still be in the area or she could be a thousand miles from here. Based on what I'd learned I figured she planned to use the Mask to build a power base here and to use our realm as a sanctuary to overthrow the Sylvari Queen. This was obviously something that was best left to the Guild to handle it. I let out a sigh, I really needed to focus on crafting a new set of wards for Mr. Carter and I still didn't know how his wards had been so thoroughly breached. Abruptly my thoughts were interrupted by my cellphone.

"Hello."

"Morgana Livingstone?" asked the voice of Luck Carter.

"Yes, what can I do for you Mr. Carter?"

"You said to call you if I noticed anything unusual. Well I'm looking out of my store across the street at Dave Martin's shop and he is being robbed!"

"Okay, take a deep breath and calm down. Did you say you're witnessing a robbery right now? You need to call the Guild."

"I already called the Guild but I thought of you when I saw the way the thief took down his wards."

"What do you mean?"

"She just held out her hand and the ward net went down and then walked into the shop. Shit! Dave is out in the parking lot right now trying to stop her. This is going to get ugly." With that the cellphone suddenly disconnected.

For a second I didn't know what to do, these shops were in East St. Louis and I'd have to use the I-64 bridge and then it would take me 20-30 minutes to get to his shop. I looked over at Edgar sitting on his perch and suddenly knew a way. There was a spell I'd never tried before since I'd not had the power. I could use my bond with Edgar and shape shift into a crow. Just because I was in crow form I'd not be able to fly, flying was a skill that took practice. But since I was bonded to Edgar and he was a flyer I could draw on his skill.

I knew I didn't have much time so I quickly changed from heels to boots, grabbed a pair of wands and opened the window allowing Edgar, and my soon to be transformed self, access to the sky. Edgar remained on his perch looking at me with his head cocked

to one side. I started by strengthening the bond between us. Next I closed my eyes concentrating, and pulled power into my center. I drew the mental construct of a crow and spoke the words of the spell and felt my flesh and clothes transform.

Everything was huge! I looked up at Edgar in time to see him hop down from his perch with a flutter of wings. Suddenly I realized that my spell had been perfect in that it had made me a crow like Edgar, but I had accidentally made myself a female crow! Edgar was checking me out! Without thinking about it I snapped my wings down and darted into the air. I was out the window before I knew it with Edgar following in hot pursuit. For a brief moment I realized that the male pursuing the female was part of the crow mating ritual. Damn it, Edgar! I also realized that flying was as natural to me right now as it was to any crow because of the bond I'd established with Edgar. I turned east and head toward Luke Carter's shop.

Once I was up high enough I cast a second spell this one affected the wind. It wasn't that powerful a spell so the affect was localized but it brought up a 20 mph tail wind which helped us considerably. The next thing that helped was that I was on a direct line for the shop instead of having to follow the roads and cross the river at one of the bridges.

Even so it took several minutes before we arrived over the shopping plaza. When I spotted the parking lot next to where Luke had his shop I knew that I was too late. There were a couple of cars tipped over and a fire was going to one side. But most disturbing was the body of an elderly man lying sprawled on the sidewalk with a broken staff lying next to him. I dove for the ground and started shifting back into my human form before my talons hit the pavement.

As soon as I was fully human again I knelt next to the man and checked to see if he was breathing. He was so I checked for a pulse, which was slow but strong. Okay so he's just out. I stood up and looked around.

I saw Luke running up from his shop with one arm extended while he used the other arm to try and keep it stable. On the hand of the extended arm he had a large ring with a ruby that was glowing red.

"It took you long enough." He said.

"You could have helped him."

"I'm not a Guild Special Agent or a Magic-User Master Class."

Before I could say anything else a woman came up.

"She went that way" and pointed east out of the parking lot. "After she took down Mr. Martin she jumped into a Ford F-150 and tore off."

I knew that this robber needed to be stopped before she hurt anyone else and that I was in the best position to pursue her. So I recast the spell that turned me into Edgars dream girl and took to the air.

\* \* \*

Mark finally decided to get up and take a shower it had been two days since he'd first found the Mask and he'd hardly been awake long enough to eat much less get cleaned up. There was something soothing about the feeling of water cascading down his body. It would have been completely relaxing except for the differences which were impossible to ignore. The first being the feeling of water massaging his chest, God that feels good he thought. Soon he was rubbing and fondling his new chest, exploring this narrow waist and the feeling of hips that flared out. When he realized what he was doing he hurriedly turned off the water and got out of the stall leaving a puddle on the linoleum in the bathroom.

Mark wrapped a towel around his waist and rubbed the steam off the mirror. The female face that stared back was the most bizarre thing he'd ever seen. When he ran his eyes down his body he realized that it looked wrong to have the towel wrapped around his waist leaving his chest exposed. Still he stubbornly refused to shift the towel to the proper female position. As Mark stared at his reflection he felt an emotion coming from the Mask. Opening his third eye Mark was not surprised to see the Mask and the green ropes of energy flowing from the Mask around and into his body. What did startle him was that for the first time he felt a reservoir of magical energy inside of him. Like the Mask was draining magic from the world around and using it to change Mark and at the same time storing the excess inside of him. Mark concentrated on the Mask and realized that it was hungry.

Mark thought that perhaps he could satisfy the craving with food so he went into his bedroom and threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He noticed that although the jeans were too big around the waist he had trouble getting them over his hips. The material of his skives bunched uncomfortably as well.

“Arghhhh”

He then went to the kitchen. When he got there he was startled to see that it was almost 11 am. He'd spent most of yesterday sleeping. Mark glanced at the message machine and saw that there were several messages. “Shit, I missed my shift!” Feeling like he'd probably lost his job Mark knew there was no way he could go to work looking like he currently did. Mark decided to forget about the message machine for the



moment and focus on breakfast. He made a 4 egg omelet with toast and wolfed it down with coffee and milk. He felt full, but knew as soon as he'd finished eating all that food hadn't satisfied the Mask.

Mark soon found himself in his truck headed toward an outdoor shopping plaza where he knew there were several magical shops. He had a little under a hundred dollars in his wallet and figured that maybe he could get a couple of magical items. It was a long shot but Mark hoped that it would be enough to satisfy the Mask for now. Mark parked his truck and walked toward one of the cheaper looking magic shops. As he approached he felt the outer wards of the shop tingle against his skin. Mark knew that these were like a door bell they'd tell the owner that someone with magical talent was about to enter the shop. Suddenly Mark felt like a passenger in his own body. His hand came up and he felt the ward dissolve. He strode quickly into the shop and looked around there weren't any other customers at the moment. The owner was stocking some books on a shelf in the back of the shop and looked up as Mark entered. The look on his face reflected confusion.

"Can I help you?"

"I think not," Mark's voice sounded high, feminine, and cold.

Suddenly Mark thrust out a hand and spoke a word. A bolt of glowing green energy hit the owner before he could get a shield up and sent him sprawling into a heap. Now Mark focused on the case with magical items. Just like the last time he found a bag and filled it with all of the items he could find in the shop. As Mark was leaving he could hear a groan from the owner. This made Mark feel a little bit better since it told him that he'd not hurt the guy.

Mark darted out of the shop heading toward his truck. He'd barely gotten to the sidewalk when some sense told him to duck. A bolt of angry red energy flew over his head. Mark spun around and brought up a shield. Looking back through the light green energy field Mark saw the owner of the shop was holding a staff in one hand and extending the other which was glowing with red energy. A second later that energy slashed out at Mark. This time Mark held out a hand and caught the energy on his palm. The power from the spell was instantly absorbed by Mark. Now confident he started to walk toward the shop owner.

Again and again the guy blasted at Mark who sometimes deflected the blast and other times absorbed it. Mark stopped walking a few feet from the owner.

"Mortal do you know who I am?"

"A thief!"

"I am Esarthae Haelond and I am your death!"

With this Mark brought both arms up and pushed them out like he was shoving someone. The energy that lashed out was a sickly looking green bolt of force that made the air crackle as it rushed toward the shop owner.

He brought up his staff like he was going to use it to block the energy just before he was struck. Crack! The instant Mark's magic missile hit the energy shield and staff, excess magical energy exploded in all directions. The force of the explosion blew the shop owner off his feet and snapped the staff in two. As the back blast surged toward Mark he felt once again the sense of absorption and the wave flowed on by.

Mark walked over to the now semi-conscious owner and knelt next to him and placed a hand over his Solar Plexus. This area was known as a Magic-Users center, or in some cultures referred to as the Manipura Chakra, it is where magical power is stored. Mark felt the Mask reach and pull power directly from the shop owner. The sensation was like a wave of pure pleasure. For a second Mark could see lines of energy connecting him to the man and then it was over. When Mark looked down at the guy he got the same feeling that he'd gotten from the objects that had been drained.

Mark felt like he was about to be sick. Still unable to control his movements he stood up picked up the bag of items he'd dropped and walked to his truck. As Mark drove back to his apartment he couldn't help feeling the emotions coming from the Mask. Pleasure at being full and satisfaction at defeating an opponent the Mask was for the first time, since Mark had been able to sense it, happy.

Mark pulled into a parking spot by his apartment and walked into it without bothering to look around. Once inside the apartment he sat the bag of magical items on the floor and collapsed onto the couch. Suddenly Mark felt the Mask go quiet. He lifted his hand and realized that he was back in control of his body for the moment. Mark tried to stand up and felt a wave of dizziness wash over him. At the same time his skin felt itchy and tingly all over. There was a sudden sharp pain in his groin that doubled him over. This was followed by a series of cramps. And then he heard the sound of his hips breaking. Agony washed over him as his very bones moved around sliding into a new configuration. When it was over Mark lay on the couch basking in the lack of sensation. Slowly he reached between his legs and felt only the smooth contour of a female groin. His penis was completely gone.

Mark stood up on wobbly legs and walked around the couch planning on heading to the bathroom when the door to his apartment burst open. Standing in the door was a beautiful brunette radiating power who's eyes blazed blue with magic.

"Please help me."

Mark pleaded dropping to her knees and holding out her arms. The strange woman gestured and spoke a word. At that moment Mark felt the Mask stirring but it was too late. The stun spell slashed into Mark knocking her into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

I stood over the body of the woman I'd tracked from the shopping plaza to this tiny apartment and felt confused. From what I'd seen she had to be at least a Magic-User 2nd Class. Yet she'd offered no resistance, instead it felt like she'd wanted me to knock her out. I walked into the apartment and looked around. Lying on the floor next to the couch was a bag that held, what I assumed were, the stolen magical items. Then I noticed the pile of items on the coffee table and the floor around it. Could these all be pilfered magical items?

I opened my third eye and looked around the apartment. The items in the bag glowed with energy while the items on the coffee table and floor looked drained. But not drained like an item that had been used and needed to be recharged. These were drained to the point that they were useless. The spell matrix that had been bound into each item enchanting it had collapsed. They could never be recharged. Now I turned and looked back at the woman and felt like I was about to be sick.

The Mask on her face glowed with a sick green power. From the Mask numerous tentacles of power sprouted. These tentacles had wrapped themselves around the woman's body burrowing in at one spot only to pop out at another. I had to take several deep breaths to prevent myself from becoming ill. Then it clicked, this woman was wearing the Mask of Esarthae Haelond it was the only artifact that I'd heard of that might have this level of power. But it was designed for an elf, the woman in front of me looked human.

I knew I should call the Guild after all they were responsible for handling magical crime in the city. But I had an uneasy feeling. Inspector Lee hadn't appeared real happy about being pulled off the case. In fact the impression I got was that FAD existed more for political reasons than to solve actual crimes. I suppose I could get in touch with Sir Galohond Larothta the Mask fell into his lane after all. However this was a human woman who was wearing the Mask. Lastly she'd asked for help and hadn't done anything to try and stop me from stunning her.

I made up my mind and cast a sleep spell on top of the stun spell to make sure she remained unconscious. I then pulled out my cell phone and placed a call.

“Mother? It’s Morgana. .... I need your help. Can you send Steven to pick me up? . . . . I’ll explain everything when I get there.”

\* \* \*

It was early evening and I was sitting on the back patio at my mother’s house. I was sipping a chilled white wine while mother took a long pull from her second stout.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?”

“I’m not really an expert on Elven magic,” mother replied. “But no. That Mask is changing and probably controlling that poor girl. We need to separate them.”

“How do we do that without killing her?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’ll need to do some research, and I think I’ll call my old friend, your former tutor, Susan McDonald. She’s an expert on Elven magic.”

At this mother paused to see if I agreed. When I nodded he continued.

“I think the first priority is to contain the influence of the Mask.”

I was a bit surprised. “Contain it how?”

At this mother laughed, “come now Alastar or should I call you Morgana since you seem to have forgotten how to ward.”

With a burst of insight I understood what my mom was hinting. If we couldn’t separate the mystery woman from the Mask we could or rather I could do some wards that should prevent it from controlling or changing her any further. I took another sip of my wine, savoring its light sweet flavor. When I finished my glass I glanced over at my mom.

“I suppose I should get started.”

At this he nodded, “while you’re doing that I’ll see what I can find out. When you’re done meet me in my study.”

With that he got up and headed back into the house. I noticed that he took long confident strides and that his posture was much more masculine. Perhaps mom is adopting, I thought for a second, and then reached for my purse. I found Galohond’s business card and punched his number into my cell phone.

“Hello?” His deep masculine voice made me shiver.

“Galohond this is Morgana. Something’s come up and I can’t make it tonight. I’m sorry can I get a rain check?”

“Morgana I’ve been looking forward to having you, ... for dinner all day are you sure we can’t meet later?”

I felt my face burn with the innuendo and stammered.

"I'm very sorry, but no. How does tomorrow night sound?"

"It sounds great but only if you wear something sexy as payment for making me wait a whole day to see you again."

"Fine tomorrow it is" and with that I pressed the end button.

For a second I sat there feeling appalled. Did I just agree to another date and that I'd wear something sexy?

"Crap!"

With that I got up and headed up to my room to prepare for tonight's task.

\* \* \*

I entered the bedroom where the woman was stretched out. She was wearing men's jeans and a t-shirt which seemed ill fitting and mismatch on such a pretty young woman. Well if the Mask had possessed her there was no telling why it was making her dress this way. I'd stopped to pick up some paints and a couple of artists brushes and set all of these items to one side. I then took the next several minutes to remove all of her clothing, including men's underwear, and pulled her long blonde hair back so it would be out of the way. As I looked at her I could barely see a faint line where the pale skin covered by the Mask stopped and her more natural coloration started. I knew this would take some time and that I had to be very careful as I started painting wards onto her body. I took my time and switched back and forth between magical sight and mundane vision. Containing the power of the Mask was challenging and took all of my skill as an artist and a professional warder but when, after nearly three hours, I was done I looked down on her pleased with the work. I channeled enough energy into the ward matrix to activate it and watched the results with my third eye.

Starting at her feet the wards sparkled and became active. As they did the green tentacles piercing her feet dissolved. This continued as each ward activated the next moving up her body in a chain reaction. In a matter of seconds only the Mask remained. It still glowed a sick green but I could tell its influence was contained. I shut down my magical sight and drew two more wards on the wall next to the bed. The first was a healing ward. It would pour benevolent energy into the woman's body while she slept under it until its energy faded. I had no idea what kind of trauma she'd been put through but this could hurt. The second ward was a sleep ward. As long as it remained active the person on the bed would remain asleep. I put enough energy into both wards to keep them active for the next 10 hours. I had no idea what this woman's story

was but I didn't want her walking around the house un-chaperoned. Time to go find mom and see if she'd come up with a way to remove the Mask. Feeling pleased with myself I headed up to the study.

\* \* \*

When I arrived in the study mother was sitting behind his desk reading from a tome I didn't recognize. He looked up when I entered the room.

"So how did it go?"

I couldn't help smiling "very well I think. The Mask is contained, but I still don't see a way to remove it. The wards I made are only a short term solution. They'll wear off, so we really need to get that thing off her."

"Agreed. I spoke with Susan and she'll be by tomorrow. She had a couple of ideas on the phone but won't really know for sure if they will work until she sees the patient." Mother stood up and walked around the desk.

"So what do you say to a late dinner?"

Suddenly ravenous I nodded.

"I think I could eat a horse."

"I don't think we've got any horse, but pizza and beer are in the kitchen. I never realized how good those two flavors are before."

I groaned to myself quietly. I'd found that after I'd gotten Morgana's body I just didn't really like greasy food. If I knew Chelsea (mother's cook) there would be a few other options. So I accompanied mom as we headed toward the kitchen.

Dinner was awkward as usual. I'd never really felt comfortable around my mother after Ambrose left him in my body. Evenings like tonight just reminded me of this fact. He tried to make light conversation with questions about clothes and if I was seeing anyone. After dinner I summoned Edgar to my shoulder and headed to my room.

One of the things I'd always liked about staying in my old room in mother's house was that it was large and it brought back lots good memories. Tonight it felt strange. Like the memories of the boy who grew up here didn't fit. The bed was too hard, the closet small and it only had a couple of outfits. I dug out a fresh set of panties and an oversized men's t-shirt to sleep in and then walked into the bathroom attached to my bedroom. I looked at the shower for a moment and then decided to take a bath instead. My bathroom had a separate stall for the shower and the tub. I'd never been a big fan of baths growing up now I found myself really enjoying them. I got the water going and added some bubble bath my mother had thoughtfully provided. Returning to the sink

I brushed my teeth and stripped. The reflection of the raven haired woman no longer startled me even if I still thought she was hot. I checked the temperature of the water and then climbed in. I had to go slowly since it was very hot but once immersed it felt heavenly.

The tension in my shoulders eased away as I felt my body relaxing in the hot sudsy water. I let my mind drift trying not to think about the case or the implications for the magical community of a rogue terrorist cell running around St. Louis or the reaction of the Guild when they found out I'd recovered the Mask and hadn't handed over the person wearing it. Instead I just drifted. Strangely I found myself thinking about Galohond. There was something about him that I couldn't identify that made me keep thinking of him. The breadth of his shoulders, his round athletes butt, the dreamy grey eyes, I felt my nipples getting hard and that achy empty feeling returned to my groin. I started to slowly rub my breasts focusing on my nipples. God that feels good I thought. As I played with my titts the ach in my groin got worse, I slipped my right hand down and started to stroke my clitoris. I felt the hot soppy water inside my vagina as I slipped a finger in. I continued to stroke my clitoris while sliding a second finger inside. As I rubbed my pussy I felt a spot inside that sent electricity shooting through my whole body. I started to moan uncontrollable. I'd never felt anything so fantastic, my moans turned into low cries of pleasure as I felt my first orgasm in this body.

I'm not sure how long I stayed in the bath but the water was cold and my fingers and toes were shriveled up by the time I got out. Why I'd waited so long to do that was a mystery to me, it had felt unbelievable. It made me wonder what real sex would feel like. Again my mind drifted to Galohond. For a second I fantasized about him on top of me thrusting into me. I had to shake my head if I kept this up I'd be masturbating all night long. I stepped into a pair panties enjoying unique female sensation of sliding my panties up until they fitting snugly against my flat crotch. Next I dug out a large men's t-shirt put it on planning to use it as a night gown. Then I returned to my bedroom. Edgar was already asleep on his roost. So I turned out the lights and climbed into bed.

\* \* \*

I was drawn from a deep sleep by the buzzing of my damn alarm. God I hate mornings, I thought, as I reluctantly climbed out of bed. It was early but I wanted to check on our house guest. The spell I'd used to make sure she stayed asleep would be

wearing off soon and I wanted to be there when she woke up. I was assuming that she was an innocent victim based on her reaction to me yesterday although it could have all been a ruse. I decided to go for a tough look this morning. I put on a pair of tight black jeans, black shirt, and cowboy boots. I pulled my hair back and did a quick glamor on my face instead of taking the time to do make-up.

Next I swung through the kitchen, Chelsea was already there so I grabbed a cup of steaming hot coffee and a bagel and headed to our guest's room. I opened the door and was pleased to see that the wards were just starting to run out of power. Well this should be interesting I thought and settled down in a chair in the corner. From my position I'd be able to watch her wake up and it would probably be a few minutes before she noticed me.

\* \* \*

Max reclined back into the plush love seat as morning sun light streamed into the room. She was happy that for the moment she could think of herself as 'Max' since the Master's command had said she must remember who she was but only had to think of herself as Little Slave while alone with him and Siofra while in the company of everyone else. While she was alone she could think of herself as Max. She tried not to think back to last night but her mind kept drifting back.

After she'd gotten cleaned up she'd put on a sexy black cocktail dress she'd found in Siofra's closet, fixed her hair, and grabbed a set of three inch heels. She'd skipped stockings and underwear since she'd been told to dress sexy and Max had always found woman without underwear sexy. After she arrived at the Master's it hadn't taken him long to get her out of the outfit anyway. The rest of the night had a dream like feel to it in Max's memory. They had sex of course. In fact they'd had sex for what felt like hours. The Master had used a spell to return the stiffness to his cock after each orgasm. Max lost count of the number of orgasms she'd had but by the time the night was done Max realized that something inside her had changed. Just the thought of the Master's large pole was making her wet as she sat there. Maybe it was the magic, but Max realized that even sitting here now just basking in the sun light she craved that feeling of fullness that came from a rock hard cock thrusting into her. She shuddered.

With a sigh Max got up and walked over to a small table, God I'm sore she thought finding it difficult to walk. As she passed a mirror she saw the beautiful sexy blonde elf, wearing a peach colored teddy, even with her hair tussled from last night Max knew she looked great. On the table was a pot of tea, several pieces of fruit, and



pastry's. The Master had ordered the food before leaving. His orders to her had been stay in the house and be ready to travel by noon. Max was starved and thinking back she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten. So she poured a cup of tea and filled up a small plate with as much food as it would hold and before returning to the love seat. Max tucked her feet up under her and balancing the plate on the armrest she started eating.

How much freedom do I have within the Master's commands Max thought. She glanced at the phone next to the bed and setting the food aside and went over and picked it up. As soon as she got a dial tone she called the number to her old cell phone. It went directly to voice mail but this was enough to tell Max that she did have some free will and that the master hadn't thought of everything. Max returned to her seat and started eating again trying to think through the situation. She'd eventually have an opportunity, at some point, and when it came she needed to be ready to take it.

\* \* \*

The low moan was the first indication that the woman on the bed was coming around. During the night she'd become buried in a cocoon of blankets and only now started to stir. Mark's mind still heavy with sleep couldn't figure out where she was. Slowly memories returned, the last several days, trapped inside her body by the Mask. Abruptly Mark realized that she couldn't feel the Mask. The last two times when she woke up there had been a sense of hunger coming from the Mask and more recently other emotions. At the moment there was nothing. Mark sat up cautiously feeling irritated by the long blonde hair that hung across her face. With an unconscious feminine gesture she swept the hair aside. The next thing Mark noticed was that she was completely naked and that her breasts were exposed. Mark unaware that she was being observed pulled the sheet up over her chest. It wasn't a dream I've got breasts Mark thought. Mark now looked around the room slowly as she remembered the events of the past few days.

Mark remembered the Mask taking control of her body, forcing her to feed on stolen magical items, and then the fight at the shopping plaza. Finally Mark remembered gaining control of her body just as someone forced her door open. The Magic-User had looked very powerful and Mark had done the only thing she could think of at the time. Surrender. She vaguely remembered the Magic-User casting a spell and then nothing. No looking around the room Mark figured that even though she didn't know where she was it couldn't be a Guild cell since it was way too nice for a government cell.

“How are you feeling?”

The woman's voice startled Mark and she glanced into the far corner to see a woman wearing all black watching her. Mark realized this was the same woman who'd knocked her out so she must be responsible for bringing her here. She was sitting in a leather chair with a small table next to it. Mark noticed the coffee cup sitting on the table and figured that he must have been out for quite some time.

“Where am I?”

Mark asked startled at the high sweet feminine voice.

“You are safe for the moment, I am Morgana Livingstone, and you are in the home of my mo,...er....God Mother. I'd like to ask you a few questions particularly about the Mask you're wearing.”

Mark let out a sigh, “you're a Magic-User aren't you? Can you help me? I can't get this damn thing off and it's been making me do things and it's been changing me.”

The words came out in a rush. Mark had wanted to talk to someone about the Mask for days and now suddenly she felt like he was free from the Mask's compulsions.

“Why don't you start by telling me your name and how you came to be in possession of the Mask?”

Mark tucked her legs under her and turned so he could fully face Morgana. When she did this she accidentally allowed the blanket to become tangled and exposed her titts. Mark quickly adjusted the sheets feeling her face turn red even though she was sure this wasn't the first pair of breasts the woman had seen.

There was something about the awkwardness that alerted Morgana. Like this woman wasn't comfortable with her body. For a woman this old keeping a sheet tucked around her torsos should have been as natural as breathing.

“My name is Mark Miller and I found the Mask while driving home from work Tuesday night.”

Mark launched into the story and was surprised at how good this woman was at listening. If she'd heard the same story she wouldn't have believed it but somehow she got the impression that the woman not only believed her but wanted to help. When Mark concluded the story she sat there quietly looking down into her lap.

“I hope that old guy is okay. I never meant to hurt anyone.”

“I'll have to make a couple of calls to find out how he's doing” Morgana said. “You've given me a lot to think about. For now I'd like you to stay here. Mr. Donegal owns this house and has agreed to be your host for the next couple of days. There is an expert on Elven artifacts, Mrs. Susan McDonald, who also happens to be a friend of Mr. Donegal's

and she is on her way here. I hope she'll know how to separate you from the Mask. Please have a look at your hands."

Mark had noticed while Morgana had been talking that her hands and arms had been painted with a series of symbols that she recognized from her days in the army as wards. Now she held them up and inspected them closely.

"I've warded your body against the enchantment of the Mask but the wards will only work as long as they are clear. If you wash them off or smudge them they'll stop working and the Mask will be able to start working its magic on you again."

Morgana stood up and walked over to the closet. She returned with a light blue fuzzy bathrobe which she dropped on the bed.

"There are slippers in there as well. For now if you could do without them I'd prefer you stick to loose fitting clothes. Avoid anything tight that might rub or smear the wards. I'll need to check them later today. Now if you get dressed we can head down to the kitchen and find you something to eat."

"Uhm, that sounds good but, ah, well I need to use the restroom." Mark stammered.

Morgana nodded in understanding.

"Turn left and you'll find it two doors down. If you go to the end of the hallway and take the stairs down you'll find yourself on the back side of the house. Just walk straight through the first set of doors and you'll be in the kitchen. I'll wait for you there."

With that Morgana turned to leave but paused and looked back over her shoulder.

"Mark I'll do everything I can to help you. You're safe now honey."

Then Morgana stepped out of the room and for the first time since finding the Mask Mark felt hope.

# CHAPTER 4

## *An Unexpected Visit*

**A**fter Morgana left Mark just sat still attempting to sense the Mask's influence. When he completely failed to feel anything he almost became giddy with relief. He tossed the blankets to one side and jumped out of bed. The strange sensation of breasts bouncing brought him back to his current situation. Mark looked down and saw the female anatomy he'd seen the last couple of times he'd been awake. This time when Mark looked between his legs and there no sign of his old friend he felt his heart sink. His eyes suddenly felt wet and he realized that he was about to cry, (another strange emotion for Mark). In order to distract himself Mark picked up the robe that Morgana had left and slipped it around his shoulders. He then found a pair of slippers and went in search of the bathroom.

\* \* \*

I arrived in the Kitchen in time to spot my mom drinking orange juice directly from the container.

"What are you doing young man!"

I did my best to sound like my mother when she'd caught me doing exactly the same thing when I'd been growing up. Startled mother choked for a second and then glared over at me.

"Alastar, don't you take that tone with me."

I tried not to giggle but the effort of holding it in was too much. Still grinning I refilled my coffee cup.

"So when will Susan be here?"

Susan McDonald had been a longtime friend of the family. I'd spent one summer under her tutelage back when mother had hopes of developing my meager strength into something more in line with our heritage. Susan had been a friend and a mentor to me when I had desperately needed one. I was looking forward to seeing her again.

"She'll be here later today," Evaline replied. "Alastar, . . . er . . . Morgana Susan doesn't know about your situation. You'll have to play the part of Morgana Livingstone while she's here. I'm sorry, but the more people who know the secret the less likely it will remain one."

I nodded my understanding. I wasn't happy about it but I understood. "I'd better send Edgar away while she's here. She helped me bond him and her owl is going to recognize him the minute they meet."

"Agreed. Now is our guest awake?"

"Yes, but there is more to her story than I realized at first, she's a victim of the mask's magic."

I then explained to my mother what I'd learned from Mark. When I'd completed my tale I noticed that my coffee cup was empty. I refilled it while mother stood silently looking out a window from the kitchen that overlooked the back yard.

"I don't really know that much about Elven artifacts. But from the description this Mask must be ancient and powerful. I'd guess it was designed for a female elf to use. The Mask must have become active and then it sensed Mark. With no mental or magical defenses he'd be an easy target for it. If what you say is true, then I suspect that the Mask is not just turning Mark into a female but also an Elf. Have you seen any signs of a racial change?"

When I shook my head no, mother continued "So perhaps we're in time. You see if the changes had been completed the Mask would be in total control of Mark and there would be no way to separate them. As it is there may be no way to separate them right now. Susan will know better than I." Mother looked around the room and spotted the morning paper where Chelsea usually left it. He picked it up and headed toward his office pausing to look over his shoulder at me. "After our guest, . . ."

"Mark" I interrupted.

Looking annoyed mother continued "after Mark has eaten please bring him by my office I'd like to have a look at him. I need to report to the Guild Hall that we have the Mask they've been looking for." With that mother strode out of the kitchen.

Feeling like I needed something to do I went to my purse and fished out my phone. I then called Luke Carter. For a second I'd thought about calling Inspector Lee but I knew the case was over as far as he was concerned and I didn't want him connecting

the dots between the robberies and the Mask. He'd just pass the information on to FAD and that might complicate things. I figured that mother would call the local Guild Hall Council Grand Master and the two of them could work out what to do with the Mask after it was separated from Mark. Hopefully Luke will be able to answer some other questions.

\* \* \*

I hung up the phone just in time to hear the door to the kitchen open. Mark walked in and, despite the sleep tussled hair and the wards covering most of her skin, she looked quite pretty.

"Did you have any trouble finding the bathroom?"

"No, although I'm not used to dealing with this" she said gesturing down at herself. I nodded in understanding and regretted the fact that I couldn't tell her how I knew what she was going through.

"Let's get you something to eat. What are you in the mood for? An omelet? Eggs and toast? Chelsea my mother Mr. Donegal's cook is shopping right now but I'm not too bad when it comes to cooking eggs." I said almost revealing my relationship to my mother.

"Uhm I don't think my stomach could handle anything that heavy right now. Could I just have some cereal and maybe some fruit?"

"Have a seat over here dear and let me get you a few things."

With that I went into the pantry and picked out a couple of different kinds of cereal and placed the boxes along with milk and a bowl in front of Mark. I then started slicing fruit. After a few minutes I looked over and saw Mark scraping the bottom of her first bowl of cereal. I then brought over a plate with apple, pear, and melon slices, and fresh grapes in a few minutes I returned with some cheese and croissant. Looking at the spread I laughed, "a regular continental breakfast."

Mark who had been focusing on shoving apple slices into her mouth looked around at all the food. "I'm making a pig of myself aren't I?"

"Not at all, from what you told me I don't think you've eaten properly for the last couple of days."

I took a sip from my third cup of coffee. Mark seemed relieved and returned to her pursuit of calories. The only real difference was that she slowed down a bit.

"So how do you feel now?" I asked when I noticed that Mark was now playing with her food more than eating it.

“I’m not sure. I mean physically I feel great. No aches or pains, and this body is very light and limber. But I feel like a stranger or like I’m wearing someone else’s face. Only that doesn’t really cover it. I mean for example I’m sitting here and I should feel my balls against the chair, instead it’s like there is nothing in front of me to touch it. I’m probably doing awful explaining how weird this is.”

“Mark, no one can really understand what you’ve been through. But we’d like to help.”

“Why? Why would you want to help me?” Mark asked softly.

“For starters when magic is abused or it’s used to hurt people the Guild does its best to make things right. Next I’m a Magic-User Master Class and I have a duty to use my power to help people. Mr. Donegal, our host, is a member of the Guild and would like to help you.”

As I made my speech I made sure to make eye contact with Mark. I’d learned a long time ago that if you wanted to convince someone of something eye contact is a good place to start. Mark looked down into her lap for a moment. When she looked up I could see tears glistening in her eyes.

“Thank you.”

Maintaining eye contact I nodded. “Mr. Donegal asked me to bring you to his study after you finished eating. Are you ready to meet the head of House Donegal?”

At this Mark seemed a bit awed but I could see her pulling herself together.

“I’m ready”

“Ata girl” I said standing up while pretending not to notice Mark flinch at my comment, “follow me.”

\* \* \*

When I was small I used to think of this house as some kind of magical castle and had imaginary adventures in each of the rooms. As I got older I thought of it as cold, draft, and just too big. Now as I led Mark through each of the rooms on our way to the study I could see the impression it was making on her. The impression was of wealth, power, and magical might perhaps there was some calculation that had gone into the construction of this house I thought.

I knocked on the double doors to mother’s study and waited for a second before I pushed one of the two open and led Mark inside. Mother’s study is different from her sanctum. This is the room where he comes to relax read and think. The floor is made of hard wood with no sign of a summoning circle. There are several thick Persian and

Turkish rugs on the floor. The far end of the long rectangular room is floor to ceiling glass windows with large curtains that can be drawn to block out the sun. Along the left wall bookshelves dominate with a few portraits of our more illustrious ancestors. The right wall has a huge fire place made of unmatched stone. There are several leather chairs and couches around the room and positioned in front of the windows is a huge mahogany desk where my mother was currently sitting reading something on a computer monitor. As we entered he looked up and grinned.

I led Mark toward my mother noticing for the first time that when he smiled the room seemed to light up. He was tall with broad shoulders and a muscular build I'd spent several years at the gym working on. He came around the desk and offered a hand to Mark.

"Morgana told me what happened to you. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, a bit confused, but much better now thanks to Morgana. Thank you for asking sir."

"Please call me Mor, why don't we all have a seat?"

With that he led us to the couch and chairs arranged around the fire place. "Even though Morgana has told me your story I'd like to hear it from you if you don't mind."

"Yes sir, ah I mean Mor."

With that Mark went into his story about finding the Mask and everything that had happened since then. As he talked I watched my mother closely. Once Mark got into his tale I noticed mother discreetly open his third eye. I knew he was doing a couple of things; inspecting the Mask and the wards I'd done to contain it. I was also sure he was trying to evaluate what exactly the Mask had done to Mark. When Mark completed his tale mother sat there for several seconds thinking.

"Mark I'm not sure if we'll be able to remove the Mask or not. My friend and colleague Dr. Susan McDonald will be here in a couple of hours. She is an expert on Elven magic and I hope that she'll have some ideas. In the meantime feel free to explore the house and grounds Morgana is, I'm sure, an able tour guide."

Feeling like we'd been dismissed I got up as Mark stood he extended his hand.

"Thank you, I can't tell you how much your help means to me. If you can get this Mask off me and return me to normal, I'll be forever in your debt."

Mother grinned wickedly "be careful when you choose words around Magic-User's we have a tendency to hold people to them."

Then with a chuckle he walked back to his desk. Just before I stepped out of the room he called out, "Morgana a moment of your time, in private please."



"I'll just be a sec why don't you want to wait for me in the hallway or I can meet you back at your room."

"Are you kidding, I'll never find my way back to my room without a guide. I'll wait."

Once the doors were closed I turned back to mother.

"Morgana, ... Alastar ... this is going to be very difficult. I'm not sure about everything that artifact has done to that young man, the current changes are extreme. Unless I'm miss-reading things he now has a magical chakra and from his earlier story he didn't have any magical ability. I have no idea how that Mask was able to take a person who while magically sensitive was completely mundane and transform her into a Magic-User, but it did. It also looks to me like the physical changes may be permanent. Susan will have to examine him to know for sure."

"How can the physical changes be permanent? Transformation spells require a continuous feed of energy to maintain."

"That's just it he doesn't register as a transformed person. The body signature I got from him was that he is in his natural body. But that was confusing too. If I didn't know better I'd say he's a half-elf. Inter-breeding of the races is extremely rare and usually results in birth defects so they are highly discouraged. Be careful around him and watch him. If the Mask gains the upper hand for control we could all be in trouble."

"I'll be careful" I said turning around and heading out of the room. Just as my hand touched the door knob my mother said, "oh, by the way, you did a really nice job with those wards. I doubt there are more than a dozen people in the world who could have done that."

"Thank you." I then left the room. Mark was standing in the hallway looking at a painting of a forest scene.

"So would you like to go back to your room or would you prefer a tour of the grounds?"

"After being a prisoner in my own apartment these last few days I'd like to walk around. But is there anything else I can wear?" Mark indicated the bathrobe and slippers.

I had to giggle at that, "I suppose you do look a bit odd. How would you feel about a nice dress?" At the look of horror on Mark's face I did laugh out loud.

"Come on I think I've got a pair of sweat pants and a loose t-shirt that should fit you. We have to be careful, we can't afford for the wards to get smeared. As a matter of fact I should probably examine them while you change."

Susan McDonald arrived in a black Mercedes-Benz E350 at 12 pm exactly. Mark was now back in her room so I had decided to find a spot where I could watch for Susan. I arrived at the entry to find that my mother was already there. We walked out the front door and then down the steps together to greet Susan.

Susan McDonald is a short woman, with light brown hair and a full figure. She is also just over a hundred and could pass for thirty. Although she is classified as a Magic-User 1st Class although she has more knowledge and skill than most members of the Guild Council of Elders in my opinion. This coupled with her irreverent nature and love of life, have always drawn me to her and seeing her smile up at my mother made me want to scream.

“Alastar how are you?” She said wrapping my mother in a hug.

“Susan, I’m not Alastar. You did get the news?”

“Evaline? My god! My dear, I’m so sorry. I just didn’t believe it when I heard the news and then seeing you standing there next to your girlfriend well I just assumed that things were back to normal.”

This was the second thing I always loved about Susan, that despite all the years she assumed the best about people and that the right thing would happen in the end. She was also a bit scatter brained.

“Ah,” mother turned to me and gestured me to step forward. “Susan McDonald, this is Morgana Livingstone, Morgana Susan.”

“Thank you, Mor,” I said looking at Susan. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Ma’am I’ve heard so much about you.”

“So you’re one of the Livingstone clan, hmm good family. Evaline I definitely approve.”

Now it was my turn to feel my face flush. Before I could say anything mother stepped in, “Susan it’s not like that, Morgana is more like a pupil and friend there is nothing going on between us.”

“Really” Susan’s sharp eyes darted between the two of us.

“Perhaps we could go inside and have a glass of ice tea and talk about the Mask and its victim?” I suggested.

Abruptly smiling Susan wove her arm through mothers and headed up the steps. “That sounds lovely, come along now dear.”

We soon found ourselves in the atrium relaxing and looking out at the flower garden that extended off this section of the property. Mother and Susan had been getting caught up for the last twenty minutes while I sat quietly listening. I was enjoying the conversation even though I wasn't contributing. For me it was a nostalgic feeling to be in Susan's company. Finally she turned to me, "so tell me about this young woman you rescued."

"For starters she was a man before the Mask began its work on her."

I was pleased at the startled look on Susan's face. It took quite a bit to startle Susan. I then launched into a retelling of Mark's story only this time I added observations from my inspection of the Smyth apartment and what I'd deduced about the thief and my examination of his body. I then added what Sir Galohond had told me about the former Lady Duchess Siofra Aldalithe and my theory that it was all connected and that there was an Elven terrorist cell active here in St. Louis. When I finished both my mother and Susan were staring at me with stunned expressions on their faces.

"Al, ah, Morgana if what you say is true we have a very serious problem." Mother said looking both impressed and irritated that I'd not told her everything before now.

"All of that may be true, and if it is then it's a matter for the Guild to attend too. For the moment we should focus on this Mark person." Susan said.

"Shall I fetch him for you?"

"Yes, dear bring him to Evaline's sanctum. There are a few tests I'd like to try."

\* \* \*

Mark had been nervous as he waited for Morgana to come get him and had almost jumped at the knock on the door. The door opened and Morgana poked her head in.

"Mark are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Mark felt a lot better as he followed Morgana along a hallway into a part of the house he'd not seen during the tour. If I can be changed back to normal I wonder if Morgana would be interested in a date, he thought to himself, as he watched the movement of Morgana's shapely backside.

"So where are we going?"

"We are going to Mor's sanctum. It's where he casts his most powerful spells. Susan has worked there before and is familiar with it. She needs to examine you magically before she'll know what can be done to help you."

For some reason being around Morgana settled Mark's nerves, even though she was a virtual stranger she'd been the first good thing to enter Mark's life in a while. If Mark had thought the double doors made of oak that led to Mor's study had been impressive the wrought Iron, oak, and Silver doors leading into his sanctum left Mark feeling awed. These people live in a different world from the rest of humanity, he thought.

The doors opened at a word and gesture from Morgana which was a bit odd since most Magic-User's jealously guarded the secrets of the sanctums. Or at least that's what Mark had been led to believe. Mark stepped into a circular room with a series of sky lights letting in enough illumination to make any other light unnecessary. The next thing Mark noticed was the room contained more books than he'd seen in one location outside of a library in his entire life. The floor was made of a type of dark stone Mark had never seen before and in the center of the room was a magic circle with all sorts of symbols. The whole thing looked like it was made of silver and set into the stone. At the clearing of a throat Mark came back to himself and glanced to his right. He spotted Mor and a woman he assumed was this Susan person standing in front of a group of chairs.

"Mark, this is Susan McDonald. Susan this is Mark Miller the young man we've been telling you about." Mor said.

Mark extended his hand and realized that the woman shaking his hand had a firmer grip than he did. "Please sit down," Susan said indicating the four chairs facing each other in a circle.

"I've heard your story, from Ms. Livingstone, but I'd like to hear it in your own words."

With that Mark launched into his story again. Morgana noticed that it was starting to take on a cadence built up from the telling and retelling. As Morgana watched she noticed that Susan did the same thing that her mother had done. About half way through the tale while Mark was distracted she opened her third eye and studied the young man. Once Mark completed his story Susan sat quietly for a moment and then glanced briefly at Mor before looking back at Mark.

"I must be honest with you Mark this is going to be a challenge. That Mask is an artifact I've read about and from what I've learned it's a vile thing. An Elven War Lord wished to use her power to dominate the human realm and then bring hordes of human barbarians back to Summer to help subdue her rivals. The problem is that Elves are limited in what they can do magically while in the human realm. She thought she had solved the problem when she allied herself with an Elven Master Craftsman who also happened to be an Elven Witch. The Witch in a blood rite killed

herself and passed her life force into the Mask. Once in the Mask the Witch gained the ability to possess anyone who uses it. She used this power to betray the War Lord and steal her body. However, she was defeated while in the human realm by an allied force of humans and Elves. The Elves have learned to counter the power of the Mask by the simple expedient of never putting it on. They can touch it and become attuned to it and draw power from it while it's here in the human realm. After they're attuned to it they only need to be within close proximity to draw power. The Witch being female prefers female victims and refuses to give any power to men." Susan paused to see if Mark understood what she was telling him.

"But if the witch prefers woman why did she do this to me?"

"I can only guess. It's been hundreds of years since anyone has used the Mask. Over time spirits trapped in objects like this have a tendency to fall into a sleep like state. At some point Siofra must have wakened the spirit of the witch within the artifact. Once that was done the witch would have been desperate to have a body to possess. Because you were magically sensitive but lacked any real power you were an ideal target for her. She probably didn't even know your race or gender until after you put the Mask on that first night." At this Susan paused to see if Mark understood. At his nod she continued.

"Once she had begun to take control of your body she needed two things, the first was power. The way the Mask works is that the person wearing it draws power through the Mask into their center. You didn't have the ability to do this. So the Mask had to improvise. Obviously it can drain power from objects."

"And people," Morgana interrupted.

At this Susan stopped and looked at Morgana with a question in her eyes.

"When the Mask was making Mark rob a magic store yesterday, the owner objected violently and with magic. During the battle the Mask drained the shopkeeper of all his power. But not just his power but also his ability to do magic, I spoke with the hospital this morning and he is completely mundane." When Morgana looked over at Mark she could see the look of shock and horror on her face. "I'm sorry Mark, it's not your fault you didn't do it the Mask did."

"Yes" said mother "but that might explain Mark's magical chakra."

At this Susan nodded "yes it might and if that's the case then our task is a bit easier." Turning to look at Mark Susan continued "Mark time is of the essence. The wards that Morgana placed on you are first class but they are only a temporary measure. Already I can see the Mask working to get around them and take control of you again. We need to get that Mask off you as soon as possible."

“Ma’am, I’m more than ready to have it off!” Mark exclaimed.

“I’m sure you are. However, there are some things you should know. First this spell will take all three of us to cast and it might fail. If it fails the Mask will gain control of you forever. If that happens we will be forced to kill you. The witch who lives in that artifact is too powerful to let loose on this world again.”

At this Mark swallowed, “I understand Ma’am. I’ll take my chances just get this thing off me!”

Susan smiled and leaned forward to pat Mark’s hand. “There are other possible outcomes. We might have complete success in which case you’ll be separated from the Mask and will change back into your natural form. I doubt that will happen since I can’t sense any active transformation magic. In fact I think the most likely outcome will be that we separate you from the Mask and you will be female for the rest of your life. But until the Mask is off I can’t tell for certain.”

“Ma’am, I wish I’d never seen this damn thing. If we do nothing the Mask will take over, if we try and fail it will take over. But if we try and succeed I’ll be free although there is a chance I’ll be stuck with this body. Those are odds I’m willing to take. Especially since I can’t go back and changed the things I’ve already done. It seems like there’s only one choice. So when do we start?”

“Now if Morgana and Evaline are ready.”

“I’m ready,” Morgana said.

“So am I, but I don’t know how much help I’ll be. I don’t have much strength.”

Susan looked over at Evaline disappointment on her face.

“Evaline, when your son wore that body you always underestimated it and him. There is a powerful ley-line under this estate. You have spent years attuning yourself to it this is what I need you to do today. Allow me to pull on the strength of the earth through your connection to the ley-line and this place.”

Mark watched the exchange between Susan and Mor wide eyed obviously confused by Susan calling Mr. Donegal by a female name.

Turning to me Susan asked, “Morgana have you ever participated in a linked working?”

“Yes Ma’am.” Morgana replied wishing to add that Susan had taught her how to link more than a decade ago.

“Well then let’s begin.” Susan stood up and turned to Mark. “Please remove all of your clothes and step into the center of the circle.” She then looked at Evaline “do you have any potions that will induce a light trance?”

“Certainly”

“Please fetch one.”

Morgana had to hide a smile as she watched Susan order her mother around here in the heart of her own power. Obviously Evaline’s confidence in his magical ability was shaken by living in Alastar’s body for the last three months. By the time Mark had stripped out of her clothes and took her place in the center of the circle. Evaline had returned with a potion contained in a small bottle. He brought it to Mark careful not to step on any of the silver lines.

“Go ahead and drink this Mark it won’t hurt you.”

Mark tilted his head back and downed it in one shot. Amused Evaline took the bottle and retreated out of the circle. Susan looked around and saw that both Evaline and Morgana had taken positions outside of the Great Circle just where she would have directed them.

Glancing at Morgana Susan asked “those wards on Mark’s body, did you leave a key or central ward that will allow us to take them all down at once?”

Morgana smiled this was just like the days back at Susan’s cottage when they’d worked magic together.

“Yes Ma’am, there are both a central ward and a verbal trigger.”

Susan nodded, “quite good in fact some of your warding reminds me of Alastar. Mark, dear, how are you feeling?” When Mark just turned her head to look at Susan showing glassy eyes Susan knew that it was time.

“Okay ladies, this is how we’ll begin. On my command Morgana will release the wards on Mark. As soon as she speaks the trigger Evaline bring up the power of the circle. That should contain the Mask. As soon as that’s done both of you will link with me. Evaline concentrate on drawing power through the ley-line and push it to me. Morgana feed me a steady stream of energy and watch what I do. If I falter you’ll have to pick up the spell. Questions?”

When both Morgana and her mom shook their heads Susan took a deep breath.

“Let’s begin, Morgana drop the ward.”

Morgana lifted a hand (even though it was unnecessary) and spoke the Key. At once Mark’s posture changed suddenly she seemed confident and angry. Before Mark could utter a word there was a blaze of silvery light that shot along the silver pattern set into the floor. In less than a second the entire Great Circle was a glow with power.

“Mortals I will destroy you and feast on your power before this day is done!”

The arrogance, power, and malice in the voice shocked Morgana. This creature was evil! Susan didn’t respond instead she spoke a word and made a gesture. Morgana

knew exactly what to do and spoke the word that would link her to Susan. On the other side of the circle Morgana could feel Evaline doing the same thing. Morgana felt the link solidify between each of them. Faint and tenuous at first within seconds it grew into a fully formed link. It was the kind of magical connection that only people who really knew each other and had performed magic together could establish.

Abruptly an inhuman shriek sounded from within the circle as Mark blasted a sickly green energy at Susan. The energy struck the side of the circle and splashed into an arc left and right following the contour of the circle all the way around searching for, yet finding no, flaws. Susan began chanting while making an intricate series of gestures, each movement was fluid and well-practiced and it took several seconds before Morgana started to understand what she was doing. This first series of spells was designed to draw the magical energy trapped within the circle out and dissipate it. The Mask need power in order to remain active, if that power could be siphoned off it would be helpless or at least much easier to deal with.

"Foolish human is that the best you can do?" With that the creature inside the circle spoke a word and stamped her foot against the stone. The room shuddered but the stone and the circle held.

"This circle has been warded against that type of attack," Evaline said sounded smug.

Now Susan started a new series of spells. Morgana could tell these were designed to draw the creature out of Mark's living body and contain it within the Mask.

"Noooo" the sound of the spirits agony caused one of the sky lights to crack. At the same time a sickly green mist poured out of Mark's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. The mist was heavier than air and pooled on the ground around Mark's feet.

At this point Morgana was channeling more and more magical power into Susan. Morgana had never experienced a link this fully formed. She was watching the Mask from three different angles all at once almost as if for the moment the three of them were one being. Morgana felt Susan's demand for more energy and responded by directing more power toward Susan. It now felt like Morgana was trying to sprint uphill with a hundred pound pack on her back through the mud, her lungs were on fire and her pulse pounded loud in her own ears. Morgana caught a glimpse of her mother and saw that his face was red from the strain of pulling ley-line magic and directing it to Susan and at the same time felt him pulling every bit of power from the earth he could.

The mist was pushing itself up taking on the form of an Elven woman. For a moment her features were stunningly beautiful but this lasted only for a second. Now



they changed her teeth became fangs and fingers sprouted claws and within seconds a hag like monstrosity stood within the circle towering over Mark's frozen form. The feeling of pure malevolence, a hatred for all living creatures was so powerful that Morgana felt her concentration waiver for a second. What kind of creature was this thing? It certainly wasn't human!

Again the creature shrieked and the volume and violence of it caused Morgana to stagger back a step. For some reason Morgana felt the need to look up and saw that one of the skylights directly over the circle had cracks running the entire length. She reflexively paused to catch her breath. Almost in slow motion Morgana watched as the window broke sending several large shards of glass toward the circle. Without thinking Morgana directed telekinetic force toward the falling glass, barely catching the glass just a foot or two above the circle. With a gesture she tossed the shards to one side and then directed energy at the remaining glass in all four skylights blowing the glass up and away from the house and more importantly the circle.

However while this was going on the creature surged against the boundary of the circle looking for a flaw. Energy played along the perimeter but the creature was contained. Then Susan collapsed to her knees.

"Alastar take it," She gasped out.

Without thinking Morgana reached out and took control of the link smoothly picking up the threads of the spell and allowing Susan to catch her breath. If Morgana had thought she was working hard before now she really knew what it felt like to strain under a heavy magical load. With a calming breath she reached into the recess of her mind and somehow found more power and directed it at the creature.

"Esarthae Haelond I bid thee return to your vessel." Morgana said.

This time the creature's answering shriek was softer and contained words that Morgana didn't understand. Morgana felt power coming to her from her mother in far greater quantities than she'd thought possible. Now more energy, faint at first but growing in strength, flowed to Morgana from Susan who had pushed herself back to her feet.

"By thy name and the power of this circle I bid thee Esarthae Haelond return to your vessel!"

There was a huge surge of energy as the power of the binding pushed into the creature within the circle.

"Mortal there will come a day when I am free and on that day I will find you and have vengeance!"

The malice dripping from the creature's voice made the hair on Morgana's arms stand up. She took a deep breath and steeled her will.

"ESARTHAE HAELOND thrice thou art named! By my Word thou art bid and by my Will thou art bound. RETURN TO THY VESSEL!"

Morgana ended her command with a shout and a release of power that caused the sound of thunder to crack through the room shattering mirrors, lights, and shorting out every piece of electrical equipment in the room. The sound of thunder drowned out the Spirit's roar as it returned to mist and was sucked in a swirling vortex into the Mask. The Mask became visible to mundane sight for the first time since Mark had put it on and fell to the floor with a clatter of stone on stone and a sudden silence.

Morgana felt her legs turn wobble and dropped to one knee rather than allow herself to collapse fully. She looked over at her two partners and saw that Susan was sitting on both knees steadying herself by leaning forward and using both arms to hold herself up. Across the circle Morgana's mom had also dropped to a sitting position but appeared to be fine.

With the spell done Morgana broke the link and then dropped the circle with the simple expedient of sliding one foot across the silver line. The magic released with the sensation of a bubble popping. First Morgana checked on Mark, after the Mask had fallen off she'd collapsed in a heap. Finding a steady pulse Morgana turned to the Mask. Reaching out telekinetically she picked up not wanting to touch it and walked over to her mother.

"Mom, do you have something we can put this thing in that will prevent its influence from affecting anyone else?"

"Evaline you mean" he hissed glancing over at Susan. The louder "yes I've got a special safe here in the sanctum designed to hold powerful magical artifacts and prevent any leakage of magic or influence."

"Oh be still Evaline, I figured out that Alastor was Morgana the second I saw the wards on Mark's body. But if I needed any further evidence the link proved it."

Susan pushed herself to her feet and turned to look at Alastor.

"My dear, I'm so proud of you. What you did today was amazing."

With that Susan walked over and gave Alastor-Morgana a hug.

"Now let's get rid of that dreadful thing and put Mark to bed. After that I could use a drink!"

It was still early in the day despite everything that we'd done. The spell to remove the Mask had started at 1 pm and by 1:30 Susan and I were sitting in mother's study drinking a chilled Chardonnay. Mother was sipping on a light beer and looking relaxed.

"How's Mark?"

"I took her back to the guest room, and put another sleep ward over her. She should be out until tomorrow morning. Physically she's exhausted and needs sleep. Mentally, well who knows after everything she's been through?"

"So will the two of you tell me what really happened three months ago?" Susan asked.

Mother looked irritated "Susan the only reason that I didn't tell you everything was that the council ordered us to keep it a secret."

"Well I'm not a member of the Guild or the Guild Council." I said and turned to Susan.

With that I launched into the story about Ambrose and what he'd done. Once I'd finished Susan only nodded.

"Now things make more sense. Dear it may be tough to give up your life and identity but based on what I've seen you will be able to do a lot of good with the power you now have."

I smiled with pleasure at Susan's words, she had always been very encouraging and easy with compliments sort of the opposite of my mother. Suddenly I realized the time.

"Crap, I need to start getting ready."

"Ready for what dear?" Mother asked.

"Uhm, . . well I, . . ah, . . . sort of have a date."

"A DATE? With a man?" the surprise in mother's voice made me feel rebellious.

"Yes if you must know, so as much as I'd like to stay and get caught up. I really need to get moving." With that I left my startled mother and amused mentor and headed up to my room to grab my keys.

\* \* \*

Instead of trying to get ready at mother's place I jumped into my Charger, (Steven had gone out earlier and picked it up for me) and headed to my house. Once home I petted Edgar and gave him some food. Then I headed to the shower. After getting cleaned up I wrapped a towel around my chest tucking it between my breasts to hold it

up while I wound a second towel around my hair to help dry it and keep it out of my way.

I went into the closet and after a moment of hesitation started opening the bag's containing the garments my mother's seamstress had made for me. The first bag held a deep red formal gown. Definitely overkill for tonight I thought. The next bag held a purple full length dress with a large slit up the side and a plunging neckline. I don't think so! After checking and rejecting several more dresses I opened one and paused. It was a brilliant blue silk dress that stopped just above my knees. It was off the shoulder with a sweetheart neckline, but still covered more of my chest than some of the other dresses would have. After looking at it for several minutes I decided that would be the right mix of daring but not too daring. I took the bag into the bedroom and laid it on the bed. Now underwear, as I considered this I noticed the bag the dress came in also had a pocket on the outside. Unzipping the pocket I discovered a set of lingerie that perfectly matched the color of the dress. It seemed that either my mother or Chelsea had thought of everything, a multi-way strapless bra, thong panties along with a garter and stockings. Somehow I knew that if I started looking through the shoe boxes I'd find the perfect shoes to go with this outfit.

For a moment I thought about calling Galohond and canceling. Was I really ready to try and be a girl on a date? The very thought made my knees go weak. Okay get a grip, it's not like you're going to have sex. This is just one date talk to him. Find out if he's interesting or an ass. With that I dropped the towel and stepped into the panties.

\* \* \*

I never liked driving in heels tonight was no different. The Franco at 7 pm was prime time for dinning. I wasn't sure how Galohond had been able to get reservations but when I pulled up to the valet he was already waiting. Galohond was wearing a black double breasted suit with a green shirt and matching tie. The suit did a great job of setting off his broad shoulders and thin waist.

"Ah Morgana it was indeed worth the wait, you are a vision."

With that he scooped up my fingers and kissed them lightly.

"Thank you Sir, if you weren't a knight I'd accuse you of trying to be gallant."

"It's the prerogative of the gentry to be gallant my lady" he said with a deprecating grin.

I tucked my arm through his elbow as I'd felt my previous dates do and said, "well lead on good sir I understand a feast awaits us."

At this he laughed and we stepped into the cool dark recess of the restaurant.

\* \* \*

Evaline and Susan were sitting once again in the atrium. They were enjoying an after dinner coffee when the wards vibrated. Evaline sat up straight and sent out a questing. At first he didn't feel anything and started to relax.

"Is everything alright?" Susan didn't appear too concerned.

"I'm not sure yet. The wards started to signal and then stopped. Alastar designed the wards on this place, and while he might not have been very powerful, he is an absolute genius when it comes to warding."

"Yes I know Evaline, I did train him remember?"

Evaline flashed a smile at his longtime friend. "It's Mor now. Evaline doesn't really fit."

Susan giggled and put her hand on Mor's. "So do you remember that summer back in the seventies when you were feeling very experimental?"

Mor flushed remembering, he and Susan had a quiet fling each of them transforming into the men they were particularly attracted to and then seducing the other.

"I remember, but try to imagine how strange this is for me. I'm in my son's body and don't even have the power to work a transformation spell without either tapping a ley-line or pulling power from one of my repositories."

Suddenly there was another jarring at the wards and then the full alarm went off. The outer wards were breached and the inner activated in full defense mode. A loud siren started and a signal was automatically sent to the Guild Hall. The Donegal estate was under Magical assault.

\* \* \*

Rushing forward dozens of figures approached the house from all four directions. All were dressed in dark colors and wore archaic looking armor. In addition to the primary assault force the road leading up to the property was blocked in both directions by two squads of ten Elves in black armor. Lastly a reserve force of a dozen headed up by a blonde female Elf wearing form fitting black and green armor with golden accents waited along the drive way leading to the house. Siofra looked around anxiously waiting for a signal from her Lord for her to move up onto the objective.

Whoever tripped those alarms is most likely a dead man or dead elf she thought to herself.

\* \* \*

Back in the estate Evaline and Susan had hurried to the hall leading up to the main entry. Evaline had dismissed the servants early and there were no security guards in the house with Alastar's wards they'd always seemed unnecessary.

The pounding of magical blasts against the wards sounded like the crack of artillery. They'd been at it for nearly sixty seconds and already it seemed like an eternity.

"Should we go collect young Mark?" Asked Susan.

"No, we have her under an enchanted sleep she's probably safe where she is. Especially since no one knows she's here and Guild Special Agents will be responding to the alarm. Whoever is attacking my house doesn't have much time, certainly not enough to do a thorough search. Assuming they break through the inner wards."

"Evaline, I think we need to assume they'll break through. You're on your home ground but you don't have much strength. I'll try to hold them at the entry, go to your sanctum and arm yourself with your most powerful weapons." Susan looked at her friend fear showing in her face.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

With that Evaline started running for the sanctum. One benefit of this body, he thought, is that it's in great shape. Suddenly the pitch of the alarm changed. Louder and shriller, "shit" the inner wards were breached. For a second Evaline considered going back but figured he'd be useless in a straight up magical fight.

He approached the sanctum and since he hadn't seen any sign of intruders took down the wards and headed in.

"Ah, thank you that was much easier than bashing the wards down."

The voice was a cultured masculine one and Evaline whirled around. Three Elves stood in the hallway each wearing armor and carrying swords in one hand wands in the other. Except the leader, he was a tall blonde elf with broad shoulders and stood there calmly holding a staff his sword sheathed at his side.

Pulling as much power as possible Evaline lashed out with magical energy, even using as much strength as he could from the ley-line beneath his feet it was a far cry from what he could have hurled at the intruders three months ago. The power splashed across a shield the lead elf had pulled up in response to the attack momentarily blinding everyone in the hallway. Evaline used that moment to throw

himself backward into the sanctum and spoke the words that caused the doors to slam closed and simultaneously bring up the wards on this room, sealing it with magical power.

For a moment the Elf Lord cursed in his native tongue. This assault had not gone according to plan. The wards had been much more powerful and subtle than he'd anticipated his team had set them off prematurely giving the occupants time to prepare. Now Evaline Donegal had locked herself in her sanctum. The mistress had explained who this man really was and that he was much less powerful in his current body but not to underestimate him. He was smart and on his home turf. The Elf Lord lifted a gauntleted hand to his face. On the wrist of the gauntlet was a large gem. Activating it with a trickle of power he spoke.

"All squads this is lead, report status."

Around the estate each of the squad leaders had a similar gem on their gauntlets and from the gem their master's voice sounded and they moved to respond.

"Bravo Echo ONE in position negative contact." Came the reply from the northern blocking force.

"Bravo Echo TWO in position negative contact." The southern element reported.

Alpha Echo ONE, through the wards on the objective, negative contact."

"Alpha Echo TWO, through main wards. CONTACT, repeat we are in contact with a defensive force."

"Roger Alpha Echo TWO secure the main entry. Break, Romeo Echo move forward and support Alpha Echo TWO report main entry clear." The tall Elf Lord said.

"Roger lead, Romeo Echo moving." Siofra said turning to her reserve element and directing them to follow her as she moved forward.

"Alpha Echo THREE, working on the wards, we'll be through and on the objective in 2 mikes, negative contact." Came the report from the last assault element.

\* \* \*

Back in the entry hall the doors burst open from the force of the repeated pounding. Before the first Elven warrior could jump through Susan blasted white hot energy into the breach. For a second the lead Elven warrior glowed as his shield absorbed the energy then it failed and the white hot fire struck him in the chest. His entire body glowed for a second and then with a scream he fell to the ground nothing more than ashes within the melted armor.

Warbling their battle cries the Elves surged forward. The next elf made it into the doorway before he fell to Susan's furious blast. Suddenly the windows to the side shattered and a huge Elven warrior stood there. Susan pivoted and blasted him with both hands but he caught the energy on large metal shield strapped to his left arm. It obviously held a powerful enchantment since it absorbed the blast. Then Susan sensed movement in the doorway and turned in time to catch a green energy bolt and deflect it before it could strike her.

Now more Elves pushed through the door and Susan had everything she could do just to defend herself. As she did this she noticed the large warrior was moving forward. Even though he'd cast no spells his sword glowed with green and red power that she knew would cut through her defense. Glancing back Susan knew there must be 8 or 9 opponents in front of her and no chance to beat them.

She hesitated for a second then whispered, "I'm sorry Evaline."

With a scream of defiance Susan uttered her death curse blasting out with all the power she could hold and weaving in her life energy which created a title wave of amber and white power that surged toward the attackers. The magical fire ripped down the hallway and caught five of the Elves before they could get out of the way. Their individual body shields held for a heartbeat and then they were consumed. Silence fell in the hall. Of the twelve Elves that had assaulted the main doors seven were dead. One of the Elves noticed that even though the fire had been white hot the walls and furnishings had not caught fire.

Into this mess Siofra strode looking every inch the Lady Elven War Lord. Pointing with her sword she said "the Mask is that way." Siofra also noticed that she was now close enough to draw power from the Mask. She instantly started doing so and felt energy pour into her in greater and greater quantities as she got closer to the sanctum.

\* \* \*

The music was light and the ambience perfect I thought. Galohond had taken the liberty of ordering and since I knew nothing about French food this was fine with me. He proved an excellent conversationalist and I approved his taste in wine.

"So how is it you're here as an agent of your Queen?"

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about work?"

"I'm not asking you about the case. I'm just curious how you came to be in St. Louis."



“That is a bit of a story. You see although I come from a noble family some of my relatives have joined the separatist movement. I volunteered to hunt them down here in the human realm to prove my loyalty to Queen Isilidhrindal.”

I was surprised that he'd be this open about Elven politics and his family. I'd always heard that Elves were very private people. Then I had an inspiration.

“You're related to Siofra.”

“Yes, curse her. She has brought a great deal of shame to my family.”

“But that's not all is it?”

“No, she's my cousin, she somehow persuaded my younger brother to join her cause. If I can capture her, I might have an opportunity to talk him into surrendering. If he does then I can use my influence at court and beg the Queen for mercy.”

“Since you've been so open I feel like I owe you some information as well.”

I said feeling guilty. I hadn't lied to him and I was under no obligation to pass information to him. But I was starting to really like his openness and I didn't want this case to come between us.

“Oh?” He asked looking interested.

“I, along with Mr. Mor Donegal, have recovered the Mask.”

“WHAT!” At the sound of his shout heads turned around us.

“Quiet” I hissed “we only just recovered it last night. We spent most of today separating it from the poor human woman who was wearing it. I'm sure that Mor has informed the Guild so you should be able to talk to the Foreign Affairs Division tomorrow and arrange for it to be returned. It's an Elven artifact after all.”

Now he looked worried, “you don't understand. That Mask was stolen from the vaults of a citadel guarded by Elves loyal to the Queen. The separatists somehow were able to turn guards who had been loyal and use them to gain access to the vault. I and my war-band were able to track them and we ambushed them before they left Summer. They fought with suicidal ferocity. A few managed to escape into the human realm and when we tracked them down they had all committed suicide to avoid capture. The Mask was already gone. I came to St. Louis because Mr. Smyth had contacted Elves who deal in black market items looking to sell the Mask. They in turn contacted the Queen's Guard and I was dispatched. I thought I was going to arrive here and buy the Mask and return it to Summer. But by the time I got here it had already been stolen. I believe that the separatists are still here in St. Louis and they are powerful and well trained. Morgana these are very dangerous people.”

At this he paused and then continued in a rush, “I've reason to believe that there are

members of the Guild perhaps even on the St. Louis Guild Council who've been compromised."

"Compromised how, what do you mean?"

Before he could answer I felt a shriek in my head. I put both hands to my ears in response although it did nothing to reduce the noise. When I could see again Galohond was looking at me with an alarmed expression. Before I knew what I was doing I was on my feet.

"My mother is in danger, our estate is under assault. I've got to get there as fast as possible."

I turned and practically ran out of the restaurant heading for my car thinking. When I got to the entry I realized there was no way I could get to the estate in my car in time. I sent out a call to Edgar and ordered him into the air directing him to the estate. He was much closer than I was so if he got there before me, I could use our bond to see what was going on. By this time Galohond was standing next to me.

"I don't understand, I thought your mother was dead."

"Did I say my mother? I should have said my Godmother. Evaline Mor Donegal is my Godmother and her estate is under assault."

I didn't bother to look at him to see if he'd believed my lie. "I plan to get there fast, you can come if you can keep up."

Before I could cast my spell he interrupted me.

"What do you plan to do?"

"I'm going to transform into a bird and fly to the estate."

"That will take some time yes?"

"Normally but I'll summon an Air Elemental and use its strength to get me there very quickly."

"I'm not an expert on human magic but in Summer Air Elementals are the most tricky and difficult of all the Elementals to summon and control."

"They are here as well, but I don't have many other options if I want to get there fast."

"I have a powerful transformation spell. If you have the strength to copy the design you can use the spell, it's much faster than some bird."

I caught his meaning instantly. Transformation spells required the caster to have the pattern of the creature or person they intended to change into. For example I have the power to change into a Polar Bear but without the pattern I can't change into one. The second aspect is that the more powerful the creature the more magic is required.

There is also a mass component. It requires more magic to add mass, and interestingly enough, an equal amount of magic to reduce mass if you're going for a smaller creature. I nodded to Galohond and he stepped out from under the valet awning and walked into an open section of parking lot. Then cast his spell. I watched the transformation using the third eye to make sure I understood the pattern. The words of power and gestures he used were different but suddenly the pattern took shape superimposed over his physical image.

"No way," I said stunned.

Standing in the parking lot was a huge Green Dragon with a golden belly. He looked at me and then leapt into the sky with a great snap of his wings. Cars in the parking lot shifted around from the down blast of his wings and several car alarms started going off. I had the pattern for a dragon seared into my mind. A DRAGON, holy shit there hasn't been a dragon sighted in the human realm in a thousand years. I walked to the parking lot where Galohond had stood and felt nervous. This would take a lot of power could I do it?

Abruptly I felt the light of the full moon bathing my skin in its soft radiance. I felt super charged with energy. I concentrated on the pattern of a dragon and pulled all the power I could and then poured it into the pattern and spoke the words and cast the spell. My skin rippled with energy, I felt myself growing and I fell forward onto my forelegs. I shook my head and felt scales ripple along my back. With an unconscious motion I snapped my new wings down and then up stretching. I realized that the change was complete and looked at my scales. My dominate color was blue with a silver belly and the undersides of my wings were silver as well. I tipped my head back and roared feeling incredibly powerful.

I noticed another dragon high in the air and all at once I could hear him in my mind.

\* Morgana if you want to help your God Mother you need to get control of your Dragon nature and take to the sky. \*

Abruptly I remembered why I'd changed into a dragon and knew that I had to hurry. My mother was in danger. Rage swept through me, dragon anger, a feeling almost overwhelming in its elemental power. Without thinking about the people around me I jumped into the sky and snapped my wings down and in seconds I'd climbed several thousand feet leveling off even with Galohond.

\* You make a beautiful dragon. \*

I realized that I was larger than he was by a considerable margin and in dragon terms more powerful.

\* You're not so bad yourself pipsqueak. \*

I then turned toward my mother's house and started snapping my wings beating the air furiously. At the same time I realized that dragons must also use magic to propel themselves through the sky. So I pushed out with my power. In seconds I'd left Galohond far behind me. As I did this a part of me realized that I was using power at an alarming rate if I wasn't careful I'd arrive exhausted. But in this moment I didn't care.

\* \* \*

Edgar came to the estate first and spotted the two groups of Elves blocking the road. One group was engaged in a furious spell battle with the QRF (Quick Reaction Force) from the Guild Hall. The other group was maneuvering to provide covering fire and then as Edgar watched both blocking groups fell back toward the house disengaging the QRF as they did so. The wards were down and the house was completely open. I directed Edgar to the skylights that led to the sanctum. If I knew my mother he'd make his last stand there. Edgar perched on the sill of one of the windows and gave me a view of the interior. The doors had been forced and a group of more than a dozen Elves in black armor were inside. My mother was being held in the air and a female elf with blonde hair was trying to open the safe that contained the Mask.

I roared and redoubled my efforts to get to my mother's estate. There are several ways to fuel magical power. There is the amount of ambient magic in the world around us. There are artifacts which are able to contain power such as wands, staffs, and crystals. There are the elements, the sun, then moon, and ley-lines, but there is also emotion.

Magic is the life force of the universe. In its natural state it's pure chaos. As the will is applied it can take shape, the more powerful the will, the greater the determination, the more magic that a Magic-User can use and shape. Emotion and Will are closely linked. At the sight of my mother held prisoner I allowed my dragon rage to sweep through my body. My home had been invaded, my mother held prisoner, and now these assholes were going to free the Mask. I had never been so furious in my life. With my Will I shaped my anger using it as a conduit from which I drew as much power as I could hold. I then focused on flying.

Within a few minutes the estate swept into view. I could see that the blocking force had disengaged from the Guild Force and was almost within the protection of the house. I decided I would not allow this to happen. I opened my jaws and to my surprise lighting blasted out. I was nearly a mile up and two miles away but my dragon vision turned the night to day for me and then telescoped in allowing me to see my targets

clearly. The lighting forked and then forked again as it traveled the distance. Bodies, grass, and gravel went flying. In a few seconds I was over the estate and I circled it looking for the survivors of my first pass. To my surprise most appeared to be getting back to their feet obviously elven armor and personal body shields had done a good job protecting them. Again I blasted them with lightning and watched with amazement as the lightning seemed to twist and follow my enemies striking them in a relentless chain of lightning. This time only about half were able to climb to their feet. I decided that I'd leave the survivors for the Guild and wheeled about diving for the skylights above mother's sanctum. I tucked my wings close as I dove transforming as I descended. There was no glass to break and I caught myself with telekinesis as I passed through the skylight next to Edgar. I barely noticed when Edgar followed me through.

Several green and golden missiles blasted up at me, I ignored them as my body shield flared. I could still feel the silver glow of the moon on my skin and drew strength from it. When my heels touched the floor of the sanctum the power of the ley-line flowed smoothly into me increasing my power yet again. This was a ley-line I'd been tapping since I was a child nothing could be more familiar.

I looked to one side and saw a hole in the air, the blonde woman holding the Mask of Esarthae Haelond stepped through the hole and for some reason she didn't look happy. In front of the hole six Elven warriors stood swords at the ready. Behind them a large blonde warrior who looked very familiar stood holding a staff watching me. I could tell he was the one holding my mother telekinetically.

"If you release him, I'll let you live."

The sound of my voice startled me. It was full of a slivery power that made strange echo within the confines of the sanctum.

"Woman who are you?"

I let my spell speak for me; I attacked with fire, lightning, cold, and magic missiles all at once and with precise control. Four of the six warriors in front of me reeled backward one dead the other three wounded before they realized they were under attack. I leapt forward summoning light to my fist in the shape of a Katana and sliced at the nearest standing warrior. He tried to catch my blade on his and even though his sword glowed with a green energy and my blade bounced off. I used the momentum to spin in a circle and took his legs out from under him before he had time for a second block. Then I was by him facing the elf with the staff.

He leveled his staff at me and blasted with a gold and green power. I brought my shield up and energy flared across it blinding me for a second. When the light cleared the elf, my mother, and the hole in the air were gone. I looked to my left and saw one

warrior still on his feet. He looked at me with a grim determination and charged forward. As angry as I was I still had control, I lashed out with telekinesis. I pulled the sword from his hand and lifted him into the air. Then I hit him with a sleep spell and watched him pass out. I looked at the three wounded warriors who were starting to move and cast the same sleep spell on them.

A noise behind me caused me to turn, but Edgar had already warned me so I didn't lash out. Instead I watched as Galohond had just landed in Elven form and looked around. The look of shock and anger on his face told me that I had at least one ally in the building. I suddenly felt like throwing myself into his arms and crying but I refused to give in. I would rescue my mother and then someone was going to pay for this.

# CHAPTER 5

## *The Hunt is On*

**T**he commander of the QRF strode into the entry-hall looking around as though he expected an attack to appear from any corner. He was flanked on either side by Magic-Users who looked like they knew what they were doing. I moved forward leaving Galohond where he was at the far end of the hall, Edgar squawked and flapped his wings once to maintain his balance at my movement. I'm sure I must have been a sight in my tight blue dress with a large crow perched on my shoulder. I could feel the QRF commander holding magical power obviously ready to lash out, so I made sure to hold my hands out palms up indicating my peaceful intentions.

"Ma'am please identify yourself." It was more of a demand than question.

"I'm Morgana Livingstone, Evaline Donegal is my Godmother (I decided to stick to the story I'd told Galohond) when the wards on this estate were breeched I came to assist."

"My team took fire from an organized group, apparently Elvin terrorists, as we approached the estate. We are now securing the property and rounding up prisoners. I must ask you and your friend to remain here."

When I nodded he spoke into a mic attached to his shoulder of his tactical battle harness. "Main entrance secure. I'm leaving Stevenson with two possible suspects in the main hall."

With that he and one of the two QRF members moved off leaving a tall special agent with us. I knew it would be a few minutes before they had secured the grounds and thought it best to let them do their work without interference. I kicked off my heels and walked over to a wall where I sank to the floor and leaned back closing my eyes. God I was tired. I've been working this body hard for the last three months but I didn't

think I'd ever used this much power in a twenty four hour period. Including the night I'd been captured by Ambrose. I heard Galohond walk over and take a seat next to me.

"What you did tonight was very impressive." He remarked softly.

"I failed. My Godmother was captured, Susan is dead, and the mask is gone." I had only discovered Susan's body a few minutes before the QRF had shown up and I was still in shock.

"You took out several Elven warriors by yourself. I don't know any other human who could have performed a similar feat."

"How many Master Class human Magic-Users do you know? And of those how many have you ever seen really cut loose?" I responded listlessly my eyes still closed.

"Only a few and no I've never seen any of them really go full out."

"So where did they go? I assume Summer, can we follow them and can you track them?" I asked. Now I opened my eyes and looked at Galohond making sure I could see his face when he responded.

"I can part the veil to Summer, but I don't know where they landed in the realm. It's not like I can open a way here and arrive in the same spot on the other side. I have to have a place in Summer in mind and that's where my way will open."

"So why didn't we just open a way to Summer from the restaurant and then open another way to here?" I asked feeling frustrated.

"Two reasons" Galohond replied, "the first is that I'd never been here. I can only open a way to a place in the human realm where I've been. The second is that time doesn't flow evenly between the realms. The difference is not huge but it's enough and it's erratic."

"What do you mean 'erratic'" I asked having never learned the art of parting the veil.

"We could have parted the veil and arrived in Summer and then instantly parted it again returning here. To us the event might have taken five minutes subjectively. Yet we could have arrived here only to find an hour had passed. Or two or three hours it's hard to know. Conversely we could spend several hours in Summer and return here to find only five minutes have passed. The time stream is not so different that days will go by in one realm while hours pass in the other, and they seem to oscillate and correct. For example when one realm might get ten to fifteen hours ahead of the other, suddenly it slows down and the other catches up. We have wizards who spend most of their lives studying this and can sort of predict the oscillations. I'm not that good and didn't think it worth the risk."

I decided to accept this but also became determined that I would start studying this branch of magic. I had never had the power to part the veil and in the last three



months had not had a reason to learn. Now I had a reason there were some Elven terrorists that I planned to hunt down.

“Why did their leader look like you?”

When Galohond didn't respond immediately, instead he stood up and looked up at the ceiling his face becoming a mask of sorrow.

“You must have seen my brother, Arangalad Larothta. Was he leading the raid or was there a female with long blonde hair?”

“There was a woman, she was the one who retrieved the Mask, but it didn't look like she was in charge. In fact there was something odd about her.”

“If he was leading this raid then he's truly lost. I doubt I will be able to bring him back to my Queen.”

By this time the QRF commander returned to the entry hall and walked toward us. I stood up and faced him.

“Morgana, correct?”

“Yes”

“There's a Guild Inspector on his way. The St. Louis Guild Hall Grand Master has been informed and he directed me to ask you to come to the Guild Hall to make a statement.”

“Of course, however before I leave I'll need to bring the wards back up. I have no intention of leaving my Godmother's estate wide open while I'm gone.”

“I'm sure the Inspector will be willing to leave a couple of Special Agents here to watch the place.”

“I appreciate that” I said.

The commander turned to Galohond, “I'm told that you have diplomatic immunity and I can't direct you to come to the Guild Hall to make a statement. However your cooperation would be greatly appreciated.”

“Commander, I'm happy to assist.” Galohond said.

\* \* \*

The sun was coming up as the Guild Hall cruiser pulled into the driveway to my mother's estate. It had been a very long night. After building a set of temporary wards I'd gone to the Guild Hall. For the next several hours I'd told my story over and over. I'd answered questions until I was ready to blast those interrogating me through the wall. I was proud of the fact that I'd not lost my temper.

The St. Louis Guild Hall Grand Master finally showed up. He knew my full story yet he seemed willing to allow me to be interrogated for hours before directing his folks to drive me home. He had to know that I would have nothing to do with an assault on my own family's estate. His lack of support left me feeling confused and suspicious. Now approaching the estate I could see the signs of the battle that had raged here last night.

Trees had been knocked down, furrows dug into the turf. The concrete road was tore up where the QRF had been ambushed and it was easy to see where the Elves had retreated by the path of destruction. We drove up the long winding driveway to the estate and when the house came into view I saw more evidence of destruction. The lawn was ripped up where my lightning bolts had torn into Elven rear element. The house was scorched where the Elves had breached the wards and several windows had been shattered. The doors at the top of the steps leading from the circle drive to the main entrance had been blown in and signs of Susan's death curse were still lingering in the air. I felt tears leak down my face as the car stopped and didn't care.

I told the driver I'd be fine and spoke the key that allowed me to slip through the simple ward and enter the house. I glanced at my watch and saw that I had about an hour before the spell that kept Mark asleep expired. I was glad the QRF had only secured the property and not actually tried to search it. For one thing the house was huge with several levels and guest rooms it would have taken them a great deal of time to fully search the house. For another the vault under the house had another set of wards, ones that hadn't been breached and I had no interest in taking those wards down or allowing a bunch of Guild Special Agents into the family vault.

I returned to my room and stripped off my dress and climbed into the shower. The hot water sluicing down my soft body rejuvenated me. I hadn't let my mind think through my next steps but now through the fatigue I considered the problem. The Elven separatists had the Mask, my mother, and other resources that Galohond had alluded to but not described. These were very bad people. And they had my mother! Who knows what they're doing to him I thought. I felt my anger burning but refused to let it cloud my thinking. If they remained in Summer the Elven Queen and her forces would hunt them, find them, and eliminate them. Elves as a race didn't think much of Human Magic-Users, they usually underestimated us which would hopefully be an advantage and made me think it likely that they would return to the Human Realm. They seemed to think that the human realm offered them a sanctuary. That was about to change I vowed softly to myself. If they returned to this realm I had the key to finding them right here in this house.

Mark was attuned to the Mask. If the separatists brought it back here I knew that I could use her connection to find it. From there it would be a matter of planning and rescuing my mother. Assuming all of this was true there were things I didn't know and there was only one person who could give me the answers I'd need. Galohond.

I finished up in the bathroom and returned to my bedroom pulling out a matching black bra and panty set. Then I dug out a set of comfy sweat pants with the letters PINK on the butt and a black t-shirt that showed off my flat stomach and headed to the kitchen. It was too early for Chelsea to arrive but I needed coffee. Once I got the pot going I figured I might as well eat something and popped a couple of slices of bread into the toaster. Once the machine was done, I poured a cup of coffee for myself and Mark, put four slices of toast on a plate and headed up to Mark's room. When I entered Mark's room I noticed that sunlight was streaming through the window and that the ward was down. Mark stirred when she heard the door close.

"Good morning, how are you feeling?"

"Great actually" Mark said sitting up and stretching.

Her sleep tousled blonde hair fell across her face as she sat up. Reaching up with an unconscious grace Mark brushed it out of her eyes. I sat one of the two cups of coffee down on the night stand next to the bed along with the plate. I then moved over to the chair in her room and sat down and took a sip of my coffee. Mark pushed herself back until her back was against the headboard and pulled her legs up to sit cross legged in the bed and then picked up the coffee. After taking a sip Mark reached up and touched her face with one hand.

"I still can't believe it's gone." She said. "I need to look at myself in the mirror."

I nodded and when Mark stood up the large t-shirt, we'd put her in the yesterday, came down almost to her knees. I could easily see her nipples poking out from the thin material. Mark knew the way so I followed her to the bathroom. I watched as she stood in front of the mirror touching her face. I opened my third eye and examined Mark. There was no sign of the green energy that had twined its way around her body in fact there was no sign of the Mask at all. The changes that the Mask had made in Mark were impossible to spot. She looked like a normal woman, a normal half-human woman if such a thing could be considered normal. When I looked more closely I was also sure she was now a Magic-User or at least could become one with training. It's very difficult to simply look at another Magic-User and gage that person's strength. I would need Mark to draw in power in order to tell how strong she was. But there was no doubt in my mind that she was now a Magic-User of at least 3rd class strength.

Mark touched her face turning it to the right and the left as though she couldn't believe that the Mask was missing. I could tell she was using the third eye to look for the Mask. Suddenly she turned around and threw her arms around me in a warm hug.

"Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome, but Mark I've got to tell you. Saving you has come at a price." Let's go back to your bedroom so we can talk." Once we were settled back into her room I launched into an explanation of what happened while she'd been unconscious. As I talked I could see the shock on her face.

"Why would some group of Elves want that Mask?"

"Because it's powerful and it allows them to draw on their magical power while here in the human realm."

Mark shook her head. "What can I do to help?"

I smiled at that since it was exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for. "I think that you have a connection to the Mask. There are a couple of different types of spells I could cast using your connection to figure out where their hiding. But for now why don't you get cleaned up and meet me in the kitchen in about an hour and a half? I need to see how badly the estate was damaged and talked to the staff."

When Mark nodded I left her to herself and went in search of Chelsea.

\* \* \*

The great thing about mother's staff is that they have been with the family for a long time. It had been years since there had been any kind of magical assault on the estate, and this was the first time that any of them could remember where the intruders actually broke through the wards. Steven the butler and Chelsea the cook are the only two full time members of her staff. Mother had set up a service to take care of the grounds and another company that came in and cleaned the house a couple of times a week. Once Steven and Chelsea arrived I explained what had happened and then the three of us spent the next hour surveying the damage.

It was better and worse than I had thought. The physical structure of the building had not been damaged to badly. Several windows were shattered, and three doors had been forced. Not to mention the damage to my mother's sanctum. It had sustained damage from our spell casting and from the Elves when they had forced their way in. Apparently it hadn't taken all that much for them to overpower my mother. Most of the items she kept in the sanctum remained untouched. Obviously after they'd gained entry they'd subdued her and knew right where to find the Mask. The most extensive

damage was in the entry-hall where Susan had made her last stand. Even though the damage to the house would be fixed within a day or two Susan's death hit me like a dagger through my gut. I felt for a moment physically ill and once again tears slid down my face. Chelsea found me in the entry and hurried over to wrap her arms around me.

"Don't worry, honey, the Guild will find your mother." She said trying to comfort me. I pushed away and wiped the tears off.

"If you think I'm going to wait for the Guild to handle this then, . . . well, . . . you're wrong."

I then explained to Chelsea about Mark and asked her to be on the lookout for him. "See if she needs anything to eat and then send her to mother's study. I need to make some phone calls. But I'd like to talk to Mark as soon as she's ready."

With that I headed to the study. Fortunately mother's study had been undisturbed. I went to the desk and found her address book. There was a page in the book labeled ICE (In Case of Emergency) my mother had explained to both Anthony and me what to do if something happened to her. I checked the time; it was now 8 am in St. Louis, which meant that it was 2 pm in London. I called my brother Anthony.

The conversation was awkward. Mother hadn't told Anthony that I was in Morgana's body. This meant I had to keep up the charade. The conversation ended with Anthony saying that he would return to St. Louis as soon as he could get a plane ticket. My older brother and I had never really been close. My magical handicap was part of it but the other part was the age difference he was ten years older than me. I decided to think about Anthony later.

Next I used the phone number in mother's address book to contact the Guild Council Elders. I knew that the St. Louis Guild Hall would have already notified the National Council of Elders but I wanted to make sure that mother's closest friends and colleagues knew what had happened. What surprised me the most as I made these calls was that apparently no information about the attack had been passed from the Guild to the Elders. Something was very wrong.

After making the necessary calls I sat thinking. Several things just didn't add up. First how had the terrorists known to raid our house? My family had no association with the Mask. Second once they assaulted our house they knew exactly where we'd hidden the Mask. It should have taken them time to search the estate, including the vaults. Because of the protections on the vaults they should have still been searching when I arrived. For that matter why had Siofra tossed the Mask? Mark's story about finding it made me think there had been some kind of argument or falling out among

the terrorists. The rift had evidently been patched because Siofra was here during the raid, but she had clearly not been in charge. There was also Galohond's statement about the Guild being 'compromised'.

Suddenly things started to make more sense. What if someone highly placed in the St. Louis Guild Hall was in league with the separatists? This person could have gotten the message when my mother called and passed on that we had Mark and the Mask. If the information had been passed on to the Elves then they would have had almost a full day to prepare for the raid. I didn't have any proof but this felt right. Once Siofra was close to the Mask she would have been able to feel it if she'd used it before and had presumably established a connection. That would explain the reason why they hadn't had to search the property. I still didn't understand why Siofra would have ditched the Mask in the first place, but at the moment that wasn't as important as finding her. I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Galohond's number.

"Morgana, how are you?" His masculine voice sent a thrill through me.

"Tired, I haven't had a chance to sleep yet." I replied. "Can you come over to the Donegal estate? I need to talk to you."

"Yes, but I'll need a couple of hours. How does noon sound?"

"Fine, we can have lunch here while we talk."

After I disconnected the phone I realized I needed to think this through a bit. I was confident I could use Mark's connection with the Mask to locate it if it was in the human realm. Once I knew where it was, I would need to take a look. If there were a couple dozen Elves there I wouldn't be able to take them down by myself. I may be very powerful but part of my success yesterday was surprise. That and I'd had lots of advantages here on my home turf. The moon, ley-lines that I knew intimately, and my rage had all helped. To hit this group in their place of power, especially if they'd prepared, meant that I'd need allies and every advantage I could find.

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the study door. Chelsea poked her head in, "Morgana, I've got Mark here. You said you wanted to see her."

"Thank you, Chelsea, yes I do want to talk to Mark."

As I said this I stood up and came around the desk to greet Mark. Chelsea had found some clothes for Mark who was now wearing a pair of jean shorts, and a light blue t-shirt with a bra underneath. The clothes appeared to be a bit loose but they looked much better than what I'd been putting Mark in since she arrived.

"Mark you said that you'd be willing to help me rescue my Godmother." I said after we'd sat down.

“I don’t know what I can do, but yes I’d like to help. I spent four years in the Army so I’m pretty good with small arms. I used my magical sensitivity while on active duty so I’ve some training there as well.”

“I didn’t know you were in the Army. You might be able to help more than I thought at first. For now though I’d like to see if you can draw in some magic.”

“Morgana, the Army tested me very extensively I’ve got no ability to draw in power.” Mark said looking embarrassed.

I leaned forward making sure to make eye contact with her.

“Mark, I think the Mask changed more than just your physical body. I think you have the ability to use magic. So please try. Start by opening your third eye and just try to feel the magic around us. Once you feel the magic focus on it and then pull it in. The sensation should be almost like taking a deep breath. It should feel normal and natural.”

I watched with my third eye as Mark focused on the magic around us, then suddenly I felt her pull on it drawing power into her center. As I watched Mark abruptly realized what she was doing and let go of the power.

“Holy shit!” She jumped to her feet shock evident on her face. “I can feel the power inside me.” Mark held her hands over her stomach like she could touch the power with them.

“I told you that you were registering as a Magic-User to me. If you feel up to it, I’d like you to pull in as much power as you can and fill your center. I’m trying to see how strong you are.”

Mark nodded and closed her eyes focusing on her sensitivity to the magic. When she started drawing the power in this time it felt more natural.

“Are you holding as much as you can?”

“Yes, does it always feel so good? It’s like I’m holding liquid life inside of me.”

The wonder in Mark’s voice brought back some of my childhood memories as my mother instructed me in the use of magic.

“It does, but over time the wonder goes away. I suppose as we get more used to working with it we lose the sense of awe your feeling right now.” I said pausing to evaluate her as best I could. “I’m no expert at this but as best I can tell you look like a middle-to-strong Magic-User 2nd Class. You might with training and time reach 1st class status, it’s hard for me to know for certain.”

Smiling widely Mark released the power. “So how do we find your Godmother?”

“I would like to use your connection to the Mask to find it. I think the terrorists will keep the Mask in the same location as my Godmother. I’ll handle the spell casting for that. For now I’d like to teach you the spell for a body shield. It’s fairly easy and if you’re going to come with me on this rescue I’d like you to be able to protect yourself as much as possible.”

For the next hour I worked with Mark on the shield. She was a quick study and cast the spell correctly on her second attempt. After that it was a matter of teaching her how to continue to feed it energy to keep it up. This required some concentration. With practice holding a spell active while doing other things would become second nature to her. Once I was satisfied that she could cast it and hold it I sent her to one of the training rooms to practice. There was a pitching machine down there and I had some fond childhood memories of learning to deflect baseballs with a body shield.

I returned to mother’s study and pulled several grimoires from her shelves and began studying. There are dozens types of tracking spells. There are also ways to block them. So I needed to be prepared to deal with interference.

\* \* \*

Before I knew it Steven knocked on the door to let me know that Galohond was here. I asked him to have Chelsea send up lunch for two to the study. Galohond walked into the study wearing traditional Elven garb. Long robes with a belt and sword at the waist, I was still attracted to him but pushed those feelings aside since we had business to discuss. I soon discovered that Galohond is an attentive listener, I explained my plan and showed him the spell that I’d devised to locate the Mask.

“I agree with you Morgana. We cannot trust the St. Louis Guild right now. I’m not sure your spell will work but I think it’s worth trying. If we do locate them then I’ve got a suggestion. I have my own personal retainers on the other side of the veil. Your Godmother’s caught up in this, but with that lone exception, this is Elven business. Let’s combine forces and see if we can’t rescue Evaline, take the Mask, and neutralize this threat.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” I said looking into his grey eyes.

\* \* \*

Locating the Mask had proved harder than I’d thought it would be. The first spell we’d tried had failed which wasn’t all that surprising. The Elves were blocking



tracking spells so I went with a different approach. Using a few drops of Mark's blood I cast a spell designed to allow her to draw power over a distance from an artifact she had a connection too. This was a spell that most Magic-Users are taught at the college level and was very useful for augmenting power if you didn't want to carry objects around with you. It was something I'd learned at the academy but had never really been able to exploit.

Susan had noticed Mark wasn't just an ordinary human she was half-Elven. The spell I used allowed Mark's Elven side to draw Elven magic through the Mask like any female Elf attuned to it. By itself this spell did nothing to help us track down the location of the Mask. As Mark drew in the power I sent a questing down along the magical bond. This spell wasn't designed as a tracking spell either. Instead it was used to map out magical linkages and bonds. I used it almost daily as I developed wards for a building or location. Once I had the linkage between Mark and the Mask mapped in my mind I focused on the large map of St. Louis and its surrounding area that I'd placed on the table. I pulled a small bag of silver powder and tossed the dust into the air speaking a simple cantrap I'd designed that would visually display a linkage I'd requested. Once the dust settled it showed Mark's location on the map with a small circle and drew a strait silver line to the location of the Mask which it marked with a second circle of silver on the map.

The elves were hiding in the Hazlet State Park on the Carlyle Reservoir in Illinois looking at the map I guessed it was a little over an hour by car from the estate.

"Morgana that was amazing! You used three different spells to create a new affect, I don't think I could have got through their blocking spells and I certainly couldn't have done it without alerting them." As Galohond said this he swept me into a hug. I flushed with embarrassment and smiled up at him. Suddenly Galohond pressed his lips down on mine. For a second I stiffened then before I knew it my body was responding melting up against his strong frame. I felt my nipples harden and there was an ach in my groin that made me want squirm and rub my legs together.

"Do you two want me to leave?" Mark asked with a smirk.

I pushed away from Galohond feeling my face turn a bright red. "No, uh, that's okay." I looked up at Galohond, "What was that for?" I asked.

"I'd like to say it was because you're beautiful, brilliant, and the most powerful human mage I've ever seen and I wouldn't be lying. But the real reason is that I've wanted to kiss you since the day we met in the Guild Hall."

Looking at Galohond as he made this speech did nothing to help me get control over my raging girl hormones so I turned away from him and walked to the other side of the room.

“We know where the Mask is, but we don’t know if Mor is there. We also know nothing about their defenses. I’d normally go to the Guild Hall for this but if the St. Louis Guild Hall Grand Master is working with the separatists then we’d be tipping our hand.”

“Morgana” Galohond said stopping my pacing, “I am running low on magical strength. So I must return to Summer, while I’m there I’ll summon my personal retainers. We will meet you here.”

With this he pointed to a spot along the north side of the reservoir. It appeared to be a bit swampy with lots of trees which would make a good rally point before we moved south to the location where these Elves were basing their operations.

“That sounds good, when will you be there?” I asked.

“I’ll leave now but as I said before time runs differently between the realms. You can plan on my war-band and I arriving no later than sunset.”

I looked at my watch it was now 2 pm. It would take me about an hour to an hour and a half so I could easily make it there. In fact if I were smart I might even be able to do a quick reconnaissance.

“Alright sunset but if you’re not there by then I’m going to do this without you.”

The idea of what these criminals might be doing to my mother was driving me crazy. Galohond seized my shoulders with both hand and then with his right hand he tipped my chin up so that I had to look into his eyes.

“Morgana, we will rescue your Godmother, do not try this by yourself. These people are dangerous. You are powerful but not powerful enough to take them all on alone.”

Galohond looked worried and concerned as he stared into my face.

“I’ll wait for you unless something happens, if I think he’s in danger I’ll do whatever I have too.” I said this feeling very determined.

\* \* \*

Evaline came to slowly his head throbbed like someone had been beating on it with a hammer. When he opened his eyes he realized that there was some light streaming into the darkness under a door off to his left. He figured based on the fact that he was lying on something soft and above the floor that it must be a bed. When he tried to

move Evaline discovered that his arms and feet were chained to the bed posts. With the slightest effort of will he attempted to draw in some magical power and felt the collar around his neck block the attempt and send pain shooting into his mind. Evaline instantly released the magic. 'Well that's to be expected' he thought.

Evaline didn't know how long he lay in the darkness before he heard footsteps approaching the door. It opened and the lights came on causing Evaline to blink trying to adjust his eyes to the light. There were two Elves facing him, a tall blonde Elf with broad shoulders and grey eyes. The second Elf was a female with long blonde hair and bright green eyes. Evaline was sure this must be Siofra based on the limited information he'd received.

"I'm glad to see your awake" the male Elf said. "Let me make the introductions, I'm Sir Arangalad Larothta, and this is my cousin Lady Duchess Siofra Aldalithe. I understand you are the former Master Magic-User Evaline Mor Donegal. You're going to have to tell me about the spell that put you in that body."

"I'm not telling you anything cur. If you run now you might be able to escape! In fact if you release me now I might put in a kind word for you when the Guild strike team arrives."

Ignoring her outburst Arangalad continued "Your power may be reduced but from what your colleague's in the Guild have told me you are very smart with a deep understanding of magic, or at least human magic. In fact they speak highly of you, you will make an excellent addition to our cause. Particularly since I plan to use the area as my base of operations, you will soon use all of your power and influence to make sure that I'm undisturbed."

"There is no way I'm going to help you! How is it you're on friendly terms with the Guild? You're an outlaw here as well as in Summer." Evaline responded.

"Ah, that is an excellent question. In fact I think the answer to that question would be better served as a demonstration. Cousin if you would be so kind?"

With that Arangalad gestured toward Evaline. Siofra stepped forward and made a gesture and the chains holding Evaline fell away. Before he could move bands of telekinetic energy wrapped around Evaline lifting him off the bed. Arangalad turned and opened the door leading them out into a hallway.

Evaline was prevented from getting a good look at the building because his head was restrained as he floated along on his back between the two Elves staring at the ceiling. Soon Arangalad opened a door and they entered another room. This one had a pair of windows that were heavily curtained so Evaline still had no idea what time of day it might be. Now he was rotated upright and then he spotted a large ornate

wooden chair sitting in the middle of the room. Using telekinesis he was deposited in the chair. A set of leather restraints floated over buckling his arms to the arm rests while two more sets secured his feet to the front legs of the chair.

Arangalad picked up a smaller chair and sat it in front of Evaline smiling evilly.

“I’m sure you don’t know anything about the chair you’re sitting in. I don’t know when it was created or who crafted it, but whoever made it was a genius at mind magic. My cousin is also gifted in psionic magic found it in Summer. Its magic only works here in the human realm which made unlocking its secrets very challenging. Siofra is quite good and she somehow managed to unlock the chair’s secrets and then shared them with me.”

At this Arangalad glanced evilly at Siofra, “I recently had the chance to return the favor didn’t I Siofra?”

At this the blonde female said; “Yes Arangalad.”

Evaline looked at the female Elf with a growing apprehension. For a second a look of hatred crossed Siofra’s face before the look of neutrality returned.

“You see when my cousin used the chair on me she made it so that I couldn’t act against her wishes or her best interest. Once Max killed Siofra and took her body the conditioning was broken, now Max, who wears my cousin’s lush little body, is my slave. Isn’t that true Little Slave?”

“Yes, Master.”

Arangalad leered evilly at Evaline.

“It is the most powerful artifact of compulsion that I’ve ever heard about. One of its strengths is its subtlety unless you know what you’re looking for it’s impossible to tell that someone is under its influence. Several members of the St. Louis Guild have enjoyed treatments from that chair, including your Grand Master.”

At the look of shock on Evaline’s face Arangalad let out a laugh. “Oh this is going to be so much fun.”

\* \* \*

I found a truck stop near the Reservoir off of old US-50. I topped off the gas tank and then parked the car behind the station. I used a spell of un-notice and sent Edgar into the sky.

“Mark, this is as close as you can come for now. Once we are in place I’ll text you,” I said holding out a cell phone. Mark who had driven up with me walked around from the passenger’s side to the driver’s side and took the phone and keys from me.

“Drive to the park it shouldn’t take you more than ten minutes. We will have taken the rebels by surprise. I might need you to help us locate the Mask.”

“Why can’t I come with you now?”

“Because you can’t caste this spell.”

With that I transformed into the crow shape that Edgar seemed to like and took to the air. As I flew toward the reservoir I started looking for the state park. Almost at once I felt the subtle wards. A section of the park well away from the main office was laced with wards. They were mostly the type which sent an alarm if tripped. But woven into them were wards to cause people to lose interest and go around. There was also a layer which caused the illusion of an empty section of woods. I was not close enough to pierce the illusion and the way it was set up I’d probably trip one of the outer wards. Whatever was under that illusion I wouldn’t be able to see it unless I tried to sneak in. As tempting as that was I turned north heading to the rally point.

Once I landed I looked at my watch. I’d taken my time leaving the estate since I’d wanted to be as prepared as possible. I’d started with a careful choice of clothes. Black jeans, and work boots were followed by a tight black t-shirt. I tucked the t-shirt into the jeans and threaded a wide black leather belt with several silver metal disks worked into it through the loops of my jeans. Over the T-shirt I selected a black leather jacket. It was too hot for this outfit but that’s where the jacket’s special properties came into play. The jacket was one I’d worked on after switching into Morgana’s body. The leather held several defensive spells and would keep me warm or cool or dry depending on the temperature and weather conditions. I tied my hair back and looked in the mirror. The gorgeous brunette in black leather stared back like she was fresh off some Hollywood set.

Next was a trip to the vault. Once there I’d helped myself to several items that had been in my family for generations. The first was a staff. It was six feet of black oak. Glyph’s and wards decorated its length making the staff more of a tool than a weapon. It had been in the Donegal family for generations. Then I found a powerful ring that my mother had once let me experiment with. It generated body shields of far greater power than I’d be able to do on my own. The last item I’d taken from the vault was a tiara which would gift me with very potent realistic illusions and some skills in psionic magic.

Edgar landed on my shoulder and I found a tree to sit next to since it could be several hours before Galohond arrived. Because I had nothing else to do and I was feeling paranoid I made use of the tiara and caused the illusion that I was a bush growing next to the tree. I could feel Edgar's confusion as the magic took hold. He wasn't happy with me and flew irritably into the tree where he found a place to wait.

Abruptly the tiara sent a tingle through me warning me that someone was near and they were using an illusion. The tiara sensed this and with no effort I was able to pierce the spell. Two male Elves had entered the clearing and were looking around. The tiara gave me a strange double vision. I saw a pair of squirrels images superimposed on a pair of Elven warriors. Elves as a race are very gifted with illusions and these two were no slouches. If not for the tiara I'd never have realized they were here. One of the squirrels chattered to the other.

"The trace ends here." The bigger of the two Elves said.

"Tasathdien are you sure someone was snooping around the wards?" Said the smaller of the two.

"No, I'm not sure, but I felt a presence. When I tried to back track it I felt the presence move up here. Now I don't feel anything."

"I don't feel anything however you're almost never wrong. Let's set a trap and see what we catch."

With that the two started casting. I'm not all that familiar with Elven magic but I could see right away they were building a ward and laying it over the clearing. I assumed that its purpose would be to alert them to anyone entering the clearing. With this ward in place Galohond would be compromised from the moment he and his team arrived. I was pretty sure I could take these two out but would that alert the main group? Perhaps I could disrupt the ward once they were done.

The casting took about twenty minutes and I was impressed with the spell. To my dismay the two elves didn't leave instead they settled down by a tree across from me. I realized this was going to be very tricky. They would notice if I changed the spell since they were right here. However if I left it up the chance that Galohond would arrive and tip off the terrorists was one I couldn't risk.

This was going to have to be a subtle working. I sent Edgar into the air feeling confident that he wouldn't be detected. Or rather the Elves would see him and think he was just a bird not knowing he was my familiar. Edgar after flying around for several minutes landed in the tree above the Elves hiding under their squirrel illusion. Now I strengthen the bond between Edgar and me so that I could observe the Elves through Edgar's eyes. Once this was done I slipped a sleep spell through Edgar and ever so

gently allowed it to drift down on my squirrel/Elves. The spell took almost ten minutes to work and only when I was able to see through Edgar's eyes that they were both sleeping I let out a sigh of relief. Next I started to modify the Ward. About a minute into my working there was a tearing sensation as a hole was ripped in the fabric of reality.

"Crap!"

The time for subtle was over I snapped the ward breaking it and the surged to my feet strengthen the spell on the two Elves. Both stirred as the ward went down and I could only hope that no alarm had been sent back to the rebel camp.

Galohond rode through the hole on a large black stallion, he wore deep blue armor and had a huge sword strapped to his back. Once he was in the clearing he made room for his followers. By the time the rift closed there must have been a hundred Elven warrior mages in the clearing. Each one fresh from Summer and bursting with power.

"Galohond, your timing was almost disastrous!" I snapped walking forward.

Galohond looked at me through the open visor of his helmet and grinned. "Now this is something you don't see every day. A talking bush and a pair of sleeping Elven guards."

I felt annoyed and dropped the illusion and summoned Edgar to me. "Better?"

"Aye Lady Livingstone, much better" Galohond said. He then turned to one of his men "Randgos bind those two rebels." Then he jumped down from his saddle and tossed the reins to another Elf.

"Where is Mark? I thought she'd be with you."

"About ten minutes up the main road from here. I'll call her once we've got the rebels defeated. She doesn't know enough magic to defend herself."

I quickly cast a spell causing an illusionary three dimensional map of the park to materialize. Having flown over it I was able to display this view with a good amount of detail. I marked our position and then the location of the rebel camp. Then I caused the wards I'd observed to appear so that the Elves would have an idea what they were riding into.

"I suggest we surround the site and then attack from all sides at once. I don't know how many Elves are here but they were hurt when they assaulted my Godmother's estate." I then caused an image of Evaline to appear.

"This is what he looks like."

I took a deep breath getting ready to explain why my 'Godmother' wore the body of a young man but Galohond must have figured out what I planned to say.

“I’ve already explained what happened to Evaline Donegal.” He whispered and then continued in a louder voice; “We will split into five squads for the assault.”

“Randgos, take the 1st squad around to the south signal via speaking stone when you’re in position.”

“Aye, Sir” Randgos replied with a salute. He then leapt into his saddle and road off followed by twenty warriors.

“Castien, take the 2nd squad around to the east. Be careful the terrain is not favorable and I don’t want you to make contact early.” Galohond directed.

An Elf in green and black armor with a scar running from his nose horizontally across his cheek saluted from the saddle. “Aye sir.”

Orthandon, take the 3rd squad around to the west.”

“Aye, Sir” The Elf in silver and green armor replied with a crisp salute.

Morgothor, you have command of the 4th squad. I will accompany you with the command squad we will assault the main entrance to the camp together from the north.”

“As my lord commands” a tall pale Elf with black hair replied.

Galohond turned to me. “My lady may I offer you a ride?”

I nodded my agreement feeling my heart speed up with the idea of battle to come. Galohond jumped back into the saddle and then extended an arm. I grabbed his hand and he pulled me into the saddle behind him. Together we rode for the ward followed by forty Elves.

\* \* \*

Max moved quietly through the building. In the time she’d spent here she learned that this compound had been brought into the human realm from Summer directly. She didn’t know the spells involved but the building was impressive. It amounted to a small citadel with 50 foot walls, a great hall, several towers, and a barracks.

The day had been a tough one. The assault from last night had cost the rebellion to many warriors. They had escaped into Summer and all the Elves had pulled in as much magic as possible before returning to this sanctuary. Most were now sleeping off the fatigue from the night before. Max had been used to draw power from the Mask and then send it to Arangalad via a link. Proving Arangalad’s theory, the Mask could provide power to all of the rebels while in the human realm. Next Max had been forced to assist in the compelling of Evaline. Max shuddered as she remembered it. Then



Arangalad had sent Evaline to his room and taken Max back with him to his bedroom. Arangalad had been rough as he took Max from behind. Even so Max had come, unable to escape the compulsion to climax with Arangalad. Now however Arangalad was sleeping.

Arangalad had made a mistake. Today for the first time he'd not order Max to stay in the room. Without that order Max was free to move around within the citadel although she was forbidden from trying to escape or harm herself. Within those constraints Max quite a bit of freedom and her first opportunity.

Max entered Evaline's room. He was curled up on his side in the fetal position. Max put a gentle hand on his shoulder and noticed that Evaline was sucking his thumb.

"Wake up little one."

Evaline blinked, "momma?"

"Yes, dear, I need you to come with me." Max said trying to be as sweet as she could while at the same time feeling disgusted at what Arangalad had done to Evaline. This was his way of humiliating and embarrassing Evaline. Max knew that there were several layers to this compulsion and on a command from Arangalad, the compulsion to be a 5 year old boy, would be lifted. But the memory of it would stay with Evaline and he would know that Arangalad could do it any time. Unfortunately only Arangalad could lift the spell.

"Up" Evaline said holding up his arms.

"Baby's too big for Momma to carry. I'll hold your hand." Max replied wishing that she could cast spells a levitation spell but she was forbidden from casting any spells without direct permission. Evaline's large callused hand enveloped Max's tiny soft hand and they headed out the door. There were no internal patrols, at the moment, which was good since there was almost no chance for them to avoid anyone. When the room with the chair came into view Max breathed a sigh of relief. She scanned the door with her third eye and saw the wards. She reached into the bodice of her dress and pulled out a small potion. When she'd opened the safe with the Mask in it she had seen several other items. Max was a skilled thief it had taken almost no effort for her to palm a couple of the potions.

Once she'd had the opportunity to examine them she had been thrilled. The first two were combat potions. They made the person drinking them stronger and faster and boosted the user's body shield. The third and last potion was designed to neutralize magic. It could be used in a variety of ways but Max thought this the most effective for the current plan. She opened the vial and scattered the contents over the

wards. They went down at once. Max knew that the wards would only remain down for a couple of minutes.

“Momma I got ta go potty” Evaline said.

Max glanced over at him and saw he was standing with his legs crossed holding his privates. “In a minute sweet heart, Momma needs to open this door.”

Working as quickly as she could Max pulled the set of lock picks Arangalad had given her before the mission to recover the Mask. The lock on the door was simple for a thief of Max’s skill. Once open she dragged Evaline inside and shut the door. Almost as soon as the door was shut she felt the wards outside the room come back to life.

“That was close.”

“I really have to go pee-pee.”

“I know sweetie. I promise I’ll take you to the potty but first we need to play a little game.”

“I like games.”

“It’s called repeat after me. Now I’ll sit in that fancy chair over there and you have to say whatever I say. Okay? Then it will be your turn to sit in the chair.”

“That sounds like a boring game!”

“Well honey if you want to go potty you have to play the game.”

Feeling excited and nervous Max sat in the chair. “Okay honey now you need to say these words nice and clear for Momma.”

With that Max said the words of activation that he’d heard Arangalad use earlier that day. When Evaline spoke them Max felt the chair’s magic grip her mind.

“Now say I release you from all prior commands imposed by this chair and Arangalad.”

“I re, . . .re. . . lea. .se . . .you from all commands.” Evaline stammered.

Max felt chains she was no longer consciously aware of drop away. Even though Evaline hadn’t pronounced the words exactly right it had been good enough.

“Okay baby, now say stand up.”

Max knew from Evaline’s session that once the magic started the only way out of the chair was if you were released. Suddenly there was the sound of a horn blasting out an alarm. The outer wards had been tripped. The castle was under attack.

“Momma I’m scared.” Evaline said.

“Baby, momma needs you to say stand up.” Max said feeling desperate.

“Stand up!”

Evaline shouted stamping his foot and Max practically leapt out of the chair. She hurried over to Evaline and hugged her.

“Evaline, I think some people have come to rescue you.”

With a deep breath Max reached into the source of power inside of her and cast a simple sleep spell on Evaline. Max was thrilled when Evaline sank to the floor. She’d been able to use magic without Arangalad’s permission! She was no longer under the compulsions imposed by the chair. Using telekinesis Max moved Evaline to one side in the room and dropped a simple illusion over him to hide him.

“Time to get the hell out of here.” Max mumbled to herself feeling a little guilty about abandoning Evaline.

# CHAPTER 6

## *Assault*

**T**he Elves had reflexively cast illusion spells over themselves to prevent anyone from noticing as they thundered toward the rebel camp. For me the ride around the island was a blur. Sitting behind Sir Galohond might sound romantic but I'm not a skilled rider. I had one hand wrapped around his waist and I clutched my staff with my other hand. My breasts were crushed into the metal armor protecting Galohond's back and as we bounced along I was glad, for the first time that I could recall, that I didn't have a set of balls. Because they would have been black and blue from the beating my bottom was taking as I struggled to stay on. My entire world view narrowed to just hanging on. As we got closer Galohond slowed the troop to a walk and then finally stopped several hundred yards short of the outer wards.

"We'll wait here until the other squads report in" he said glancing back at me over his shoulder.

"Fine" I said and slipped off the horse.

I couldn't help rubbing my bottom as I looked around. It took me a few minutes to figure out where we'd stopped. Once oriented I opened my sensing ability to the fullest, the wards in front of us were just as I'd observed earlier only now I was closer so I focused on the building or buildings beneath the illusion. The vague shape of a wall swam into view. It was huge and not too far away but that was as much as I could determine.

The quite was shattered by the sound of a horn wailing from within the heart of the warded area.

"Command, this is Randgos the 1st has been compromised. Standing by for orders."

The sound of Randgos calm voice coming from the crystal on the back of Galohond's right gauntlet was unnaturally loud. Galohond swore once then touched the crystal.

“All squads attack now. Push onto the objective and remain in contact. Acknowledge.”

“1st Squad, roger attacking.”

“2nd Squad is in position and attacking.”

“3rd Squad 2 minutes from position, attacking.”

“This is Command and the 4th squad attacking.”

Galohond said and turned to me, “Morgana” he reached down from the saddle and extending his hand.

“So we’re done with stealth right?”

After Sir Galohond nodded I turned to face the place where these criminals were holding my mother.

“Then I think I’ll handle my own transportation from this point, thank you.”

As I said this I summoned every bit of rage, and fear I could muster and then used my emotions to help me draw in the magic. Next I focused on the ring on my hand, with a trickle of power I activated it and felt a powerful body shield distort the air slightly around me. Galohond had been watching me for the second this had taken and I looked up at him making eye contact.

“You’re Queen is Turethiel Isilidhrindal can you show her to me?”

In answer Galohond held out his hand palm up and an illusion of a red haired Elven woman in a green and silver gown appeared hovering over his palm. Instead of concentrating on the image I used the power of the tiara and drew on Galohond’s memories as he focused on the Queen. I poured as much power into the tiara as I dared and let its magic take hold. This was a type of magic I’d never been very good at, but mind magic and illusions were the reason this artifact existed. My ancestor who’d crafted the tiara had been one of the most skilled Illusionists of her time. It was said she’d learned her craft at the feet of an Elven King and lover hundreds of years ago.

I heard the Elves around me gasp and seeing the look of shock on Galohond’s face I felt satisfied that the power I was sending into this illusion was having the desired effect. In my hand instead of a staff I now carried a spear. I glanced up at Edgar and saw that he’d been caught up in the glamour as well. Instead of a crow a small dragonet roughly twice Edgar’s normal size flew in a lazy circle around my head.

“Morgana I’m not sure what spell your using but if I hadn’t seen you do it I’d swear that my Queen was standing here garbed for battle with her mighty spear Tathanir in her hand and her familiar Gwethdadaaiel flying above her.”

I looked down at myself and saw a form fitting breast plate making up the center piece of traditional Elven armor covering me. The colors were the Queen's silver and green and the outfit itself consisted of steel, silver, leather and silk revealing and protecting at the same time.

"Then it's time to do what we came to do."

I noticed that even my voice had changed as I turned back to the ward and considered it for a second. Wards are my specialty. These were Elven wards and I wasn't all that familiar with the design. Yet there are things that hold constant for every ward, ways to exploit strengths and make them weaknesses, and ways to simply untie the ward so that it collapses under its own weight. I focused all of my attention on this Elven ward and lifted my staff (even though it looked like a spear I could tell that its nature was unchanged) and sent my power and will through it using the staff to shape the spell. Light burst from what appeared to be the spear's tip flew across the sky and hit the ward. The ward shimmered into view for the first time visible to the naked eye, a spider web lattice of intricately wrought magic. My power flowed down each line, mapping it and displaying it. After a few seconds I had what I was after I cut through a key linkage here and caused a power imbalance there and suddenly like a row of dominoes it started to collapse. Within seconds the entire ward had dissolved collapsing with a faint popping sound.

"Ride Sir Galohond the enemies of your Queen are before you."

I said in my most commanding voice. Then without waiting to see if they would follow I active my telekinetic power and rose smoothly into the air and flew toward the now visible castle. Below and behind me I could hear the cries of the Elven warriors and the thunder of their mounts hooves, but I focused on the gate directly in front of me. I reached again drawing power into me and focusing it through my staff, I pointed at the gate.

"Frigidam!"

The spell lashed out and even at this distance I could feel the back blast of cold air. The gate of iron and oak turned white with frost and a lattice of ice spread out from the gate to the wall and ground around it.

Now I gripped my staff with both hands holding one end and spun it around my head and then snapped it down to point at the gate.

"Ruptis!"

An invisible fist of telekinetic force surged toward the frozen gate. The impact sounded like a freight train hitting a wall and the gate rang with a resounding boom.

Yet it held. Again I drew on my power focusing on filling my chakra with as much energy as possible.

“Frigidam!”

My power lashed out and the slightly damaged gate was once again coated with frost. As quickly as I could I drew in power and shouted while pointing my staff at the gate.

“Ruptis!”

Again the gate rang and this time numerous cracks showed while pieces of stone and masonry fell from the wall above it. Edgar’s dragonet roar alerted me just before my body shield flared absorbing the strike of a magic missile. We were losing the element of surprise and my mother was in there! Suddenly I was terrified for his safety and then I was angry, angrier than I’d ever been in my life. I channeled every bit of rage that I could this time as I drew in my power. More and more power, I filled my chakra and then I forced more power in, finally feeling like I was about to burst with I shouted as loud as I could.

“Frigidam!” Then I spun my staff and howled, “RUPTIS!”

This time the gate shattered with a thunderous boom blowing thousands of fragments of gate and part of the wall around it into the courtyard behind the gate. While I’d been focused on the gate several Elven warriors had assembled in response to the alarm, their shields flared as they were bombarded with shrapnel and most were thrown back by the force of the blast.

I sailed toward and above the wall having no intention of landing. A guard tower over the gate had four Elven Warriors each with the traditional great bows. The arrows glowed with green, gold, purple, and red power as they shot them up at me. I responded with a wall of air sweeping them to one side and off the tower. All four had body shields which had flared but hadn’t stopped me from pushing them off the tower. I couldn’t tell if they’d been injured in the fall but I was satisfied with having cleared the top of the tower.

“The Queen, the Queen is here.”

I looked around trying to spot the person shouting and then I spotted another guard tower with a single guard. His hand was on a large crystal mounted and it glowed with a soft white light as he shouted into it.

“The Queen is here fly, QUEEN TURETHIEL ISILIDHRINDAL IS UPON US WE ARE UNDONE!”

I couldn’t have asked for a better panicked response. The guard tried to jump into the courtyard but I hit him with a magic missile. One of the simplest of spells however

I used my staff to focus and magnify my spell. His shield flared and then the missile smashed through his body causing him to tumble to the courtyard below.

I hovered over the ruined gate and cast a spell which blazed a beacon of light into the sky and caused me to become so intensely bright for a few moments that no one could look at me. I knew this would buy only a second or two but I needed to send a message. I pulled out my phone and pushed send on the text message I'd already typed up for Mark.

"It's begun."

I didn't wait for his response instead I focused on the wall to the great hall in front of me. Again pushing energy through the staff I blew a hole through the wall and augmented my voice with power so that it echoed with concussive force around the castle.

"Arangalad Larothta and Siofra Aldalithe submit to me now or face my wraith!"

I had deliberately made a target of myself hoping to draw the Elves attention. I got my wish as spells lashed out at me from all directions. I used my shield to absorb the power and felt my ring start to grow warm indicating that it was beginning to reach its limit. As this happened I floated closer to the hole I'd blown in the great hall. I couldn't take much more of this and hopped that Galohond would be through the gate soon.

While I'd been absorbing the attacks I used the staff to quest back along the line of each spell so that now even though I couldn't see most of my targets, in fact several were firing on me from behind stone battlements, it didn't matter. These Elves were in the human realm and I was one of the most powerful Magic-Users of this realm. They were about to learn that human magic was both strong and subtle. My spell reached through the ether seeking and finding each Elf slipping through their shields since a questing didn't match the criteria required by a shield to defend. With this gossamer connection established I held each target in my mind I whispered;

"Illuminare."

Twenty tendrils of power wafted out sliding down the bond slipping through body shields and all around the curtain wall twenty individual began glow. Then cries of pain rang out as the glow became heat and they started to burn. Unfortunately the spell wasn't fast enough to kill them as the elves worked to counter the magic but it did distract them. And more importantly they were now unable to hide behind illusions or in the rubble they should be easy targets for Galohond.

Just then Sir Galohond and his troop clattered into the courtyard, with all of the defenses focused on me they'd had no problem getting into the fortress. As I



disappeared into the Great Hall I saw Galohond look up at me. Even at this distance I could see the surprise on his face.

\* \* \*

When the alarm went off Arangalad had been pulled from a deep sleep. Climbing to his feet he was confused at first but quickly focused on the alarm as he pull on his clothes. He looked around and realized that Siofra was missing.

“Damn that woman, she won’t be able to sit down for a week when I’m through with her.”

Just as he finished buckling on his sword he felt the wards go down. All of them and all at the same moment, “what in the nine hells is attacking us, he thought.”

The pounding on the door wasn’t unexpected and he made a gesture causing it to swing open and the Elven guard almost fell into the room.

“My Lord we are under attack. The ward was tripped along the south west section but now the whole thing is down.”

“Yes, fool, I’m linked to the ward. I know it’s down. Who is the Captain of the Guard tonight?” Arangalad snarled.

“Captain Caltidiriel Isilidirseer.”

Arangalad lifted his gauntlet clad hand to his mouth and touched the crystal. “Captain Isilidirseer, this is Arangalad, status report.”

“My lord status of enemy force unknown, the wards are down. I’m proceeding to the central tower to assess the ...”

A loud explosion rocked the building and caused several cracks to appear in the wall behind Arangalad.

“By Hothyan’s balls what was that?” Arangalad said.

“My lord I just reached the tower, it looks like the main gate is down. I repeat the main gate is down and an assault force is riding hard for the gate. No, no it can’t be....”

“The Queen is here fly, QUEEN TURETHIEL ISILIDHRINDAL IS UPON US WE ARE UNDONE!”

Arangalad stood silent for a moment his mind frozen in shock. Then he lifted the gem to his mouth again.

“Captain Isilidirseer, can you confirm that report.”

“My Lord I’m looking at Queen Isilidhrindal, I say again Queen Isilidhrindal is here!”

Arangalad's mind seemed to whirl in a frenzy. How could she be here? The last report he'd seen placed her in her Palace in Summer. Even though his little group was officially in rebellion against her reign his spies in the palace had indicated that she wasn't taking his threat all that seriously. Then there were the serious legal and diplomatic implications for the ruler of an Elven nation invading and taking military action on United States soil.

Arangalad also realized this was an ideal time to attack. He had just under 200 warriors here, he'd led half of them on the raid last night on the Donegal estate. The raid hadn't gone well and he'd lost more than a quarter of his force, either captured or killed. Another ten had been injured and although they had been healed with magic they were all exhausted. He had ordered minimum manning in order to give his warriors time to rest. Arangalad felt like his mind was moving in slow motion. A second explosion shook the room this time louder and with more violence. Arangalad lost his footing and fell in an uncharacteristic way to the floor.

"Arangalad Larothta and Siofra Aldalithe submit to me now or face my wraith!"

The sound of the Queen's voice echoed through the room sending a shiver of fear along Arangalad's spine. With the spike of adrenaline that accompanied the fear Arangalad's mind started functioning again. He decided that he couldn't risk a confrontation with the Queen and her forces. Much as he hated to admit it this was a fight he was going to lose.

"My lord I'm not sure how but the Queen breached the gate and his killed or injured most of the soldiers on the curtain wall. Her forces are entering the castle resisted. What are your orders?"

Arangalad lifted the gem again and directed a trickle of power into it changing its color slightly. "This is Arangalad to all-hands, full retreat. I say again full retreat, rally at pre-designated rally points."

Angrily Arangalad strode into the hallway. A small PSD (personal security detail) consisting of four guards formed up around him in a diamond formation as they headed down the hall. There were two artifacts that Arangalad intended to secure before he parted the veil and fled into Summer. A soft cold and scary feminine voice whispered in the back of his mind, if he failed in this task whatever remained of his life would be spent in agony.

\* \* \*

Mark had been sitting impatiently waiting for some kind of signal that the operation was underway. After a couple of hours of trying to listen to music or read from his Kindle he felt a stirring in the ether. Knowing this might be the first sign of the assault he opened his sensing ability. Yes, there was the Mask to the north right where he'd felt it all day. Mark climbed out of Morgana's car stood up and stretched. He could feel the ward and even almost catch a glimpse of it with his third eye but it was at the far end of his ability. Abruptly it just vanished.

"What the hell?"

Mark had never heard of a ward of that magnitude just going down.

"Morgana and Galohond must have started."

He said out loud to himself. Mark got into the Charger and turned on the motor he wanted to be ready as soon as Morgana called him in. Mark wasn't surprised when all at once his magical senses registered a huge explosion of magical force followed by the casting of dozens of spells to the north. Suddenly his cell phone buzzed. The message was simple; "It's begun."

It felt like a major magical battle had started as Mark felt magic flicker back and forth as spells were cast. He put the car in gear and pulled out of the truck-stop and headed north. As Mark drove closer to the battle the intensity escalated to the point where he had to start shutting down his magical senses and focus on the road.

"Crap what am I doing? Even in Afghanistan I never saw anything like that."

The lights from the magical fight lit up the horizon as twilight settled in. Mark drove on.

\* \* \*

Galohond led his troop through a maze of rooms on the lower level of the citadel. The assault was going better than he'd hoped. Especially once he'd seen the size of the rebel stronghold. So far most of the enemy warriors he'd faced were in a state of shock and only had time to grab a weapon before his War Band engaged them. In fact most of the fighters were only interested in fleeing. Not that he blamed them, with the show of power and skill that Morgana had put on most of the rebel Elves were convinced that Queen Isilidhrindal was here in person. If Galohond hadn't seen Morgana change into the Queen he'd have been certain it was her as well. Then there was the way she'd breached the fortress, Galohond figured that even if Isilidhrindal were here she couldn't have put on a better show. As Galohond rounded a corner he caught a glimpse

of a familiar female figure down a long corridor and then she was gone. His heart started to race unless he was mistaken that was Siofra!

\* \* \*

I moved through the upper galleries of the Great Hall looking for my mother. Normally I'd be able to use a spell linked to the blood relationship between a parent and child. However Morgana's body wasn't actually a blood relation to my former body. Before I'd left the Donegal estate I'd taken a dozen or so of mother's hairs from the hairbrush in his bathroom. Using these I cast a spell that gave me the general direction of where he was being held. Along the way I encountered several more Elves, two surrendered as soon as they saw me. I figured I couldn't trust them so I stunned and bound them, the others I killed. They'd kidnapped my mother and I wasn't going to try to be chivalrous. I just wanted to get to him as fast as I could and they were in the way. When I came to my third dead end I began to feel like I was stuck in a maze. In frustration I blasted a hole in the wall and stepped through it into a storage room.

"I'm done walking in circles" I muttered. So I faced the direction I needed to go and blew a hole in the next wall.

\* \* \*

Max was frustrated the entire castle was in confusion. It had been easy for Max after leaving Evaline to veil herself with magic and move through the passageways undetected. However she'd been forced to detour twice to avoid pockets of fighting that blocked the passageway and only now was able to approach her room. Arangalad had made her store the Mask in her room and had told her not to touch it or use its power without his permission. Max decided that she would take the Mask and escape. She had two reasons for this. First Arangalad wanted it so she didn't want him to have it. Second and more important the only way that Max could practice magic in the human realm was by drawing power through the Mask. So as much as she loathed the thing unless she wanted to live in Summer where she was a wanted criminal she needed the Mask. Max slipped into her room and went to the chest where the Mask was stored. When she heard a key in the lock she froze for a second. Max quickly veiled herself and cast a levitation spell once she was flat against the ceiling she used another spell she'd learned as an apprentice to hide all traces of the spells she'd just cast making it almost impossible to detect her spells.

Arangalad entered the room and his four guards spread out looking ready for anything. The rage Max felt upon seeing Arangalad was almost enough for her to drop the veil and attack him right there. Max saw red! This was the man who'd enslaved her, both body and mind and had figuratively and physically fucked her. Suddenly all she could think about was settling the score with him. But Max had never been strong at offensive magic. She'd been trained as a thief not a fighter or Magic-User. After his attempt to subdue Siofra he'd gained a small portion of her memories and skills. This foundation had been built upon by Arangalad with his command for Max to do his best to impersonate Siofra. Under Arangalad's ungentle hand Max had learned over the past few days a great deal about Elven magic and several powerful offensive spells. She still wasn't a fighter but she was a far cry from helpless. Additionally Max had at her command several of Siofra's favorite spells. As Max thought about this and tried to summon the courage to attack Arangalad pulled the Mask from the chest and dropped it into a pouch which he tied to his belt. He then spun about and headed out the door.

Once the five Elves were gone Max drifted to the floor. Suddenly she was shaking uncontrollable. Max had never felt so helpless she wrapped her arms around herself as she sank to her knees. For several long minutes Max tried to tame a rollercoaster of emotions, fear, rage, pain, humiliation and even lust as she'd been forced to learn a woman's passion and crave her master's touch. Slowly Max gained control of herself and the emotions settled into a cold anger. Max decided then and there that nothing else mattered she would have revenge on Arangalad for what he had done to her. Using her connection to the Mask she followed Arangalad hanging back and trying to remain undetected, but waiting for an opportunity to attack. As Max walked she focused on the Siofra memories of dueling and her favorite spells.

\* \* \*

Mark pulled the Charger to a stop in front of the shattered gates of the castle.

"No way, a fucking castle" Mark said out loud in awe.

She got out of the car and went around to the trunk. Mark had convinced Morgana to stop by her apartment before driving out. Mark may have been out of the Army but she still enjoyed shooting and had several guns at her place. In fact through some of her Army buddies she had a couple of items that were not necessarily 100% legal. Now she started arming up. She pulled a Beretta semi-automatic 9mm from its case pushed a 15 round mag into the stock and racked it flipping the safety off putting the weapon in condition 'red'. Mark already had a tactical Blackhawk belt holster clipped on so she

slotted the weapon into it and pulled out her primary weapon system. The M4, she adjusted the shoulder harness and slung the weapon in front of her and pushed in a 30 round mag. Next she put into the cargo pockets of her pants several magazines. The right pocket held four mags of 5.56mm ammo and the left pocket held four mags of 9mm ammo. Feeling better prepared to handle anything that might come this way Mark settled to one side of the Charger and waited for Morgana's phone call.

Mark had only been in position for a few minutes when he noticed four Elves racing out of the ruined gate. They were in various states of dress and had the look of rats fleeing a sinking ship. Mark stood up and sighted them down the barrel of the M4.

"Halt!" He shouted opening his senses up at the same time.

The nearest Elf made a gesture and a bolt of magical energy sizzled toward Mark. Mark's body shield flared up just as he'd practiced with Morgana taking the blast. Mark didn't hesitate firing a three round burst into the lead Elf. The Elf's shield flared absorbing the rounds so Mark went full auto and hosed down all four Elves. Each of their shields absorbed several rounds and then flickered out. The first two went down under Mark's barrage of fire and then ran out of ammo.

Mark dropped the M4 letting its sling catch it, drew his Beretta, and smoothly continued firing. With their shields down the Elves tried to dive for cover but this was a game Mark had played many times while in the Army. In a matter of seconds all four Elves were down. Mark ejected the mag and racked a new one. He then holstered his 9mm and repeated the process with the M4 and returned to his position by the car. As far as he was concerned he would maintain this position until called forward.

\* \* \*

Arangalad was in a rage, he had left his room knowing he had to collect both artifacts and try to salvage something from this disaster. To top it off Siofra had somehow managed to escape him. She should have been by his side fighting with him and serving as his loyal slave. Arangalad had hoped that she had slipped out of his bedroom and simply returned to her bedroom but when he'd retrieved the Mask there had been no sign of her. Arangalad headed toward the room with the chair. He knew that he needed to collect it and then escape into Summer. For a moment Arangalad considered a detour to fetch Evaline but with all of the chaos and fighting he decided it would be too much of a risk. Along the way he had run into some of the attacking forces and had killed two Elves and retreated from the others. Now at last he was approaching the room with the chair.

Suddenly the wall across from the room exploded and Queen Isilidhrindal stepped through the hole. Arangalad was surprised, then his reflexes kicked in, and he raised both hands sending twin blasts of green and gold energy into her. The Queen's shield flared with a brilliant emerald energy deflecting his blast. She turned to look at Arangalad and her eyes blazed with silver light. She raised a hand and a wall of force slammed forward knocking Arangalad and his guards off their feet and sending them tumbling down the hall. From the floor Arangalad saw her raise a hand and blast down the door to the room with the chair.

Arangalad was confused if the Queen was here to take him and Siofra for their crimes why was she ignoring him. Something was not right and Arangalad's suspicious mind wondered if this was really the Queen. Could it all have been a trick? If it was then he was too late to stop the evacuation and coordinate the defense of the citadel. It wasn't too late to take this imposter prisoner and escape with her and the Chair into Summer. A female voice sounded in Arangalad's mind causing him to shiver.

"Bring her to me, my servant and I will reward you."

Feeling determined Arangalad stalked down the hall and into the room with the Chair.

\* \* \*

I blasted through one wall after another. Sometimes walking down a hallway others stepping through rooms, I didn't care about the carnage I left behind I was focused on one thing only finding my mother. By the time I'd knocked down my fifth wall I stepped into a corridor with a door directly opposite me. My shield flared as I was hit from my left by a blast of energy stronger than most. I glanced to my left and saw five Elves so I hit them with a wall of telekinetic energy sending them tumbling down the hall and then focused on the door. It was child's play to knock it down and I stepped into a room with no furnishings except a fancy oak chair sitting in the center of the room. My spell told me that my mother was to my left. So I opened my third eye and examined the room. I instantly saw the veil hid him. I cast a counter spell which nullified the veil and gave me my first clear view of my mother curled up on one side sleeping. I felt a sense of relief wash over me just as pain seared into my back and I was thrown forward. I hit the opposite wall several feet above the floor and felt my shield flare cushioning the blow before I landed on my ass.

I looked back and saw the five Elves I'd knocked down now standing in the door way looking pissed off and ready for a fight. I'd lost my grip on my staff but as I slowly climbed to my feet I caused it to fly into my hand. These guys looked calm, confident and ready for a fight! They were obviously different from the Elves I'd encountered earlier.

"Surrender now and I may be merciful," I said playing on my glamour.

"I don't know who you are but Turethiel Isilidhrindal you are not!"

The blonde Elf who seemed to be in charge said. Suddenly it clicked and I knew who he was. "Arangalad Larothta you miscreant I am your Queen submit to my will!"

At this he laughed dispelling the scene I'd tried to create. Obviously he didn't believe my illusion. But at this point it didn't really matter because I was here and there was nothing he could do to stop me from rescuing my mother.

"You are not the Queen, dispel your glamour that I may know the face of my enemy."

I'd had enough of hiding anyway so I dropped the glamour and gave my enemies their first look at me.

"I'm Morgana Aoife Livingstone, Goddaughter to Evaline Mor Donegal, Magic-User Master Class and if you've done anything to my Godmother I'll make you beg before I kill you."

The look of surprise on Arangalad's face was replaced with recognition which pleased me for a moment and then I attacked. Because the space was relatively confined I sent five magic missiles burning toward them as a distraction. At the same instant I used my tiara to create five identical images of me for them to deal with while veiling. Next I sent light shaped into several daggers spinning at them along with a blast of lightning.

I was surprised when all five elves survived my initial offensive. They countered by sending walls of force, a gale of icy wind, shuriken made of mystical energy, while two of them pulled out their swords which glowed with green energy and rushed forward.

I sent my illusionary doppelgangers forward to deal with the first two. Since they believed they were fighting me they actually engaged in a physical battle. I knew that I had to get more creative so I focused on the two guards that remained by Arangalad's side and using a power of the staff transformed the air in one of the guard's lungs to water.

He went down coughing and clutching his throat concentration broken. Arangalad hit one of my doppelgangers with beam of pure darkness and swept it sideways through two more. The anti-magic cut through the illusions with a feedback that caused my tiara to heat up and breaking the illusion entirely.



I lifted my hand to cast my next spell when noticed the other guard with Arangalad was down and then the air distorted directly behind Arangalad. A hand reached out of thin air to wrap around his neck. A second hand with its fingers transformed so that they ended in a set of wicked looking claws reached with a familiar precision into Arangalad's groin sliding under his armored cod piece. With a quick raking movement the claws ripped up and out holding a piece of bloody meat. Arangalad's shriek of raw agony echoed around the room. He collapsed forward curling into a ball around his pain. The woman behind Arangalad tossed her bloody prize to one side and drove her transformed hand into the side of his neck and shoulder as she glared down at him.

"You always seemed so eager to give me your cock when I was your slave. I thought I'd take permanently now that I'm free of you. Die in agony!"

The two Elves who'd been fighting my illusions leapt toward her swords extended but she opened her mouth and spat a glowing green fire. The fire hit the Elf to her left and blasted through his shield and chest knocking him back several feet searing a hole through the spot where his heart had been.

Before the Elf to her right reached her I hit him with a series of magic missiles knocking him into the far wall and then punching through his shield and riddling his body. In less than a second his body slid to the floor leaving a wet streak behind. The Elf I'd cast my spell turning the air in his lungs to water stopped moving since the spell continuously changed any air he managed to suck in into water while he tried to coughed up as much water as they could. Evidently he had neither the training nor self-discipline to dispel the magic while distracted and choking.

I looked across the room at the blonde female Elf, "Siofra I presume?"

"No, I'm not Siofra. My name is Max and I'll be going now."

"I'm afraid not Max. I appreciate your help but I'd like to ask you a few questions like. Is your real name Maximilian Alexander Dionissis?"

The look of shock on the woman's face was all that I needed to confirm my suspicion.

"Look I'm not a murder and I was not helping these guys. They had me under a compulsion just like they've got Evaline under one now."

"Why don't you start at the beginning and explain to me what's going on?" I said glancing at my sleeping mother and not hearing anything from the hallway I figured that I had time to understand this mystery before I acted.

However my mother opened her eyes and turned her head spotting Siofra. "Momma?"

I glanced at Siofra and then back at my mother confused. Now he sat up and looked around apparently frightened. But when he saw me his posture suddenly changed. He lunged to his feet.

“Die!”

Evaline screamed extending both hands and blasting me with my former signature purple fire. I raised my hand blocking the flames and directing them to one side. I was startled that blast had been considerably more powerful than I’d been capable of.

“Mother stop, it’s Morgana!” I said trying to figure out what was going on.

He snarled with an inarticulate rage dove forward into a roll and came up a few feet from me his fists pumping with a quick one two motion. In response to mother’s attack, two bursts of telekinetic energy slammed into my shield, blowing me completely through the wall and into the air outside the room.

I activated my own telekinesis and caught myself in the air at least thirty feet above the ground. When I looked back my mother was standing in the hole in the wall eyes blazing with madness. Then he leapt into the air and flew up toward me! I had never been strong enough to have cast any of those spells. What the hell was going on? How had he got so strong and why was he attacking me?

“Mother its Alastar! Stop!”

He made a slashing motion and a crescent shaped blade of pure magical energy blazed toward me. I poured energy into my ring and then used my tiara to veil myself and dropped several feet while causing a doppelganger to appear in the space I’d just been occupying. Mother clapped both of his hands together and a sword of purple energy came into being. He then flew strait at my illusion.

\* \* \*

Back in the room with the chair Max watched the battle between mother and daughter for a few heart beats and then turned away. She moved over to where Arangalad was unconscious and bleeding to death and pulled the bag with the Mask from his belt and turned to look outside again. As Max watched Evaline drove a sword through Morgana and Morgana’s body dissolved. Grinning at Morgana’s clever use of illusion Max turned to leave and then spotted the chair.

Suddenly she felt a surge of hate for that chair! How many people were under its influence? If Evaline were free from the compulsion there was no way he’d be fighting his daughter, .... Max drew all the power she could through the Mask and then hit the chair with the most powerful fire spell she could summon.

“BURN!”

The intensity of the heat surprised Max and she backed away from the chair into the hallway. It was blazing with red, gold, purple, green, and blue flames and for a moment Max thought she could hear voices screaming in the flames. Max figured she'd done all she could and turned to head down the hallway when she felt a binding spell slip around her.

“Cousin, I have you!”

Galohond said striding forward holding a bloody sword in one hand. Max started to cast a spell that would dissolve the magical bonds but before she could Galohond's second spell took hold and Max passed out.

\* \* \*

I watched my mother slice through my illusion dispelling it and cast a binding spell. I felt my spell settle around mother's shield and I was surprised when the shield held. Mother spun around searching for me, so I focused on the binding powering energy into it. Suddenly his shield collapsed and the binding took hold. For a moment he was helpless but I knew better than to relax.

Then I spotted a dark foul smoke pour from the hole where my mother had smashed me through the wall and I felt a wave of energy pass by me. When I glanced back at mother he was no longer struggling, instead he was looking around confused. I decided to take a chance and dropped my veil and flew up in front of him.

“Mother?” I asked.

“Alastar?”

“It's Morgana mother, do you remember?”

Suddenly tears were pouring down his cheeks.

“Alastar ... I'm ... sorry, I was ... trying to ... stop but ... couldn't. The chair ... it made m...me.”

The words came out between sobs. I felt my heart break and flew up to wrap him in a hug. We floated there for several minutes before looking around. I knew that I needed to find Siofra and Galohond and figure out what was going on. I looked around trying to take stock of the situation. The fighting appeared to be over so I carried us back to the hole, the room appeared to be filled with smoke so I caused a wind to come up and pulled out the remaining smoke. Once we landed inside the room I released my mother and took a look around.

Where the chair had been only a pile of ash remained. The bodies of the five Elves lay on the floor but what surprised me was that Arangalad moved his head weakly to look over at us.

“I’m free” he whispered in wonder.

I looked at my mother but he was staring at the pile of ashes that had been a chair. So I moved over to Arangalad and knelt next to him. As I did this Galohond walked into the room he saw Arangalad and with a choking noise hurried over and knelt on Arangalad’s other side.

“Brother” Galohond whispered.

Arangalad looked over at Galohond and his eyes seemed to focus. A faint smile crossed his face.

“Be happy brother I’m free.”

“Free of what?”

“The woman the one who chained our minds and made us her slaves, Siofra and I, we never had a choice.” Arangalad’s eyes fell on the ashes and he smiled.

“I go to my death happy brother, I am no longer a slave and that cursed chair is gone. Forgive me and tell mother and father I’m sorry. I will wait for you in the afterlife and we can hunt together like we did when we were boys.”

With that the life seemed to fade from his eyes and when I touched his neck I couldn’t feel a pulse. I looked up to see tears streaming down Galohond’s face as he began to mourn his brother.

# CHAPTER 7

## *Epilogue*

I wanted nothing more than to take my mother and get into the Charger, along with Mark, and leave this mess behind. By default I found myself in charge. Sir Galohond was rocking back and forth softly singing a song I couldn't quite hear holding the body of his dead brother. My mother was staring off into space and I didn't want to interrupt. So I walked into the hallway in search of one of Galohond's squad leaders. I found two guards wearing Galohond's colors guarding an unconscious Siofra. For a second I thought about saying something since she had helped me in my fight with Arangalad and had in all likelihood been the one who'd destroyed the chair.

Instead I said "Sir Galohond's brother is dead. Who is his second in command?"

The taller of the two guards replied, "Lieutenant Randgos, my lady."

"Do you have a way to contact Lieutenant Randgos?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then ask him to meet myself and Sir Galohond here and provide a status report."

"Aye, Aye my lady," the guard said snapping a crisp salute.

"I'll be taking this one for questioning." I said pointing to Siofra and used a levitation spell to lift her before the guard could protest.

Instead of going back into the room that had held the chair I walked through the hole I'd blasted in the wall. On the other side was a room that had been a bunk room for several guards. The room had two large holes and a door along with several bunk beds. I dropped Siofra onto the floor in the middle of the room. The bag tied to her belt obviously looked like it didn't belong so I pulled it open and when I saw the Mask knew I was right. I grabbed a stool and sat down placing the Mask on the floor and then cast a spell to wake Siofra.

As Siofra started to come around I took a close look at her. Her face looked gaunt like she hadn't eaten well in quite some time. She had dark circles under her eyes and her clothes were spattered with blood. When her eyes came open she looked at me and then they darted around like a wild animal that had been caged.

"What is your true name?" I asked looking down at her trying not to seem too threatening.

"You already know." She replied looking defeated.

"I still need to hear it from you."

"Maximilian Dionissis" he said. "You're Morgana Livingstone, although you were once Alastar Donegal."

"How do you know that?" I asked feeling chilled.

"Arangalad interrogated your mother with the chair, he told Arangalad everything." Max said. I felt my cheeks flush with a fresh rage and took a deep breath to calm myself.

"How did you know my name?" Max asked.

"I've been investigating the theft of the Mask. I examined your body and reviewed your record, but something about the case didn't add up. After successfully taking the Mask from Max why would Siofra run from her own people. Then when I saw you in my mother's house you didn't look happy to be there. In fact it looked like you would have run away if you'd been able. Then you attacked Arangalad and claimed that your name was Max. There was only one person, involved in this affair whose name was 'Max' so I guessed that it was you." I watched Max as I talked and when I saw her nod I continued.

"So why don't we start at the beginning and you tell me what happened?"

Max seemed to consider for a second and then launched into her tale. I listened at times surprised and others horrified at what Max had been through. It made her actions in killing Arangalad much more understandable. I stopped her when she tried to gloss over what had been done to my mother and made her tell me in detail. Besides messing with his mind, Arangalad had implanted several layers of compulsion. The plan had been to either allow Evaline to be rescued or to release him. Once he was home he would become an agent for the separatists in the Guild. There had been a secondary mission to capture me and turn me over to Arangalad. The third layer had been to kill me if the situation became compromised. When Evaline saw me in the room with the chair and Arangalad on the floor dying he must have decided the situation fit the condition which required him to kill me.

Max finished her story by explaining that destroying the chair was the only way that she could think of to end its power. I agreed that most of the time this was the quickest way to end the power of an artifact. However, it was also risky, there were some artifacts whose spells survived their destruction. I pointed this out to Max and she admitted that it had been a guess. About this time the guard I'd talked to earlier walked into the room followed by Lieutenant Randgos.

"Lieutenant, do you have a status report?" I asked.

"Ma'am, I do, but where is Sir Galohond?"

"He's mourning his brother let's not disturb him for the moment."

"Very good Ma'am. The castle is secure. We have taken 32 prisoners. We have 84 E-KIA, (Enemy Killed In Action), 11 E-WIA (Enemy Wounded In Action) we suffered 8 KIA, and 17 WIA and have already administered Battle Field Healing to the wounded. I recommend that we begin preparations to part the veil and return to Summer."

I nodded at his report. "I agree please begin making your preparations." I turned to Siofra, "you can come with me under your own power or I can bind you and bring you."

"I'll walk," she said.

With that I returned to the room with the chair. By this time mother had moved to the hole in the wall and was looking out over the courtyard. Galohond was still sitting next to his dead brother chanting softly. I walked over to my mother and cleared my throat. He turned to face me and I could tell that he'd been crying.

"Are you okay?" I asked feeling like it was a stupid question. This was my mother Evaline Donegal, always strong, always in control. I didn't know how to handle this situation.

His eyes had a haunted look but he met mine. "I'm a long way from okay, but I'll survive."

"We need to report this to the Guild, but the St. Louis Guild Hall Grand Master was subordinated with the chair. In theory he is no longer under the influence, but is it wise to call him?"

Mother shook his head, "no and we're across state lines anyway, right? This is a Chicago Guild Hall problem. Call Grand Master Samantha Christenson she is an old friend and will be able to contain the site and take care of the media. It would probably be best of all if the Elves weren't here when she arrives."

I felt better, mother was starting to function he was thinking about political implications and making sound recommendations. I now turned to look at Galohond after a moment I walked over and knelt beside him placing one hand over his.

“Galohond, I know you’re grieving but we have to talk.”

“Have you ever lost a sibling Lady Morgana?”

“No but my father passed away several years ago. I know this is hard but you’ve got a job to do.”

Slowly Galohond climbed to his feet. “Where is Randgos? I need to get a report.”

“I’ve already got it. The castle is secure and Lt Randgos is preparing your War Band to return to Summer. Before you go we need to agree on a couple of things.”

When Galohond nodded I continued “first this is not your cousin Siofra” I said gesturing to Max. “She can tell you the full story but the real Siofra is dead. What should we do with her? Also I have the Mask” at this point I held up the bag containing the Mask.

“We will take the woman and the Mask and return to Queen Isilidhrindal she shall judge their fate.”

I looked at Galohond and then at Max. On the one hand Max had been a victim. Of both Siofra and Arangalad on the other she had been a thief and had been the cause of her own downfall. Still she had helped me and I felt like I owed her a debt.

“At her trial I would like an opportunity to speak on her behalf. If not for her today would have been bloodier.” I said.

“Agreed.”

“Arangalad indicated that there was another person, a woman who had enslaved him. Do you have any idea who that might be?”

Now Galohond frowned thinking, “no, but I will make sure the Queen knows. It appears we have a plot within a plot. The real threat has yet to step onto the battle field.”

“I need to call in the Guild, it would be best if your people were gone before they arrive.” I said.

Galohond nodded and headed out of the room shouting for his guards.

\* \* \*

I stood before the ruined gates to the castle leaning against the Charger. My mother was in the back seat of the car trying to rest. Mark, who I’d completely forgotten about once the battle had been fully joined, hopped up on the trunk and sat waiting, with me, for the Guild Special Agents to arrive. Edgar was perched possessively on my



shoulder apparently his ego had been hurt when I'd blasted my way into the castle without him.

Behind us the castle was now empty, even the bodies of the dead Elves had been removed. The Guild Special Agents would secure the site until a team from Chicago could come down to inspect it more fully. Mother had provided me the direct line to Grand Master Christenson and once I'd explained who I was and what had happened she had been only too happy to send a team down. She had explained to me how it would be in the best interest of the Guild, and the Magical Community as a whole, to keep this quiet since those involved had been mostly Elves.

Tomorrow the Guild Council of Elders would travel once again to St. Louis and meet with mother and me to go over the events of today. At that meeting they would decide what to do. She had also wanted to know if I needed a guard. I'd declined her offer and was only too happy to see the first of the Guild Special Agents arrive on scene.

The drive to St. Louis was extremely quiet. Mother had spent most of the trip stretched out in the back sleeping. I asked Mark to drive since I was exhausted both physically and magically and spent the first few minutes staring out the window lost in thought. I trying not to think about what sort of hell my mother had just gone through. I may have dosed off for a few minutes but I never really got any restful sleep. It was very late when we arrived at the Donegal estate. I asked Mark to spend the night and we all settled into our rooms just before the sun crested the horizon.

\* \* \*

The Council of Elders started arriving just before lunch. I figured this was a good sign since it meant that we would be feeding them and no one has ever said anything bad after a lunch made by Chelsea. Mother greeted each guest and I played the gracious 'Goddaughter' for them. We introduced Mark and then moved into the formal dining hall for lunch. All told there were 13 Elders who'd made the trip. After lunch we moved the meeting to the atrium where the Chairman of the Council of Elders called the meeting to order. The Chairman of the Council of Elders was a small female Master Magic-User Corine Lyons with white hair and wrinkled skin that made her look grandmotherly. Her bright blue eyes and sharp wit quickly removed any doubt about her ability to lead.

"Magic-User, Master, Morgana Livingstone, will you tell us what has transpired?"

Her questions seemed simple enough but with all the Elders sitting in chairs in a semi-circle and me, mother, and Mark in three chairs in the middle it felt like we were on trial. I got to my feet and started my tale.

“Ma’am it all started when I got a call to come down to the Guild Hall and help Inspector Lee look into the theft of an Elven artifact.”

For the most part they let me talk without interruption. Then the questions started. It seemed to go on and on. Then it was Mark’s turn. I sat listening and wondered what it was that these powerful individuals were trying to discover. Lastly they asked mother to tell her story. There was a noticeable difference when he talked. Far fewer questions and all phrased more respectfully. When the three of us were done the Elders asked Mark and I to leave so that they could continue talking with mother alone.

Out in the hall Mark leaned against one side. “Is it always like that?”

“Like what?” I asked smiling since I could guess what he was thinking.

“Like we are being interrogated, like I’m a child and they just caught me trying to steal a cookie.”

I did laugh at that, “yeah that’s about how it always feels. Come one let’s go to the kitchen. We can get a cup of coffee and a real cookie and wait. They’ll probably be talking for a while.”

I was surprised when after only 30 minutes we were called back into the atrium. Mother was standing to one side looking thoughtful. Magic-User Grand Master Lyons looked at Mark and me as we stood nervously next to each other.

“Morgana I have received a message from Queen Isilidhrindal and she tells me that you have done the throne a service.” Chairwoman Lyons said. She paused to let this information sink in before she continued “from what I can tell you’ve done the Guild a service as well. Based on what you uncovered we will be testing several Guild members here in St. Louis and a few of the other Midwest Guild Halls. There is no telling how many members fell under the influence of this group. Well done!”

With that she stood up and started clapping. For a second it was just her but then all 13 Elders joined in. I felt my face flush but decided it would be best to say nothing.

Grand Master Christenson, a tall thin woman of African descent now focused on Mark clearing her throat in order to speak. “Mark, we understand you’re a victim here and we will do everything in our power to change you back but if this is impossible I’d like to offer you a place at the Chicago Academy of Magic. You have a talent that must be trained and paying for your education is the least the Guild can do after all that you’ve suffered.”

Mark looked stunned and unable to speak she simply nodded her head.

“Morgana we would like you to take up a full time position as an Inspector within the St. Louis Guild Hall. In addition as a Master Magic-User and a full Guild member you’d sit on the St. Louis Council and receive a full salary from the Guild.” Grand Master Lyons said.

“Grand Master Lyons, thank you. I don’t mean to be rude but I’d like to think about it.” I said.

Chairwoman of the Council of Elders looked disappointed but nodded.

“Don’t think to long my dear the Guild needs young powerful women like you.”

As if by silent agreement this ended the meeting and the Elders got up and began to filter out.

\* \* \*

Later that evening it was just me and my mother sitting on the back patio eating a light dinner. The stars were out and a light breeze took the edge off the humidity of a summer night in St. Louis. I took a sip of my Chardonnay and felt my body start to unwind. I looked over at my mother who was also drinking a glass of wine.

“Alastar your brother arrives in the morning.” Mother said looking up at the stars.

“I know I texted him that I could pick him up but he said he’d prefer to have Steven do it.”

“I talked to the Elder’s and they agree we can let Anthony know about your secret. Officially you are my ‘Goddaughter’ but Anthony will know the truth.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. On the one hand it would be nice not to have to lie to Anthony but it would be incredibly embarrassing for me to meet him.

Mother broke into my thoughts, “Alastar I need you to do something for me.”

I looked over at my mother noticing how serious he looked. “Anything.”

“I must retire.” I tried to interrupt but he held up a hand. “Please, this whole situation has made it clear I’m not suited to lead House Donegal. Anthony is my heir but he isn’t ready to move back to St. Louis. Even though he’s ten years older than you he’s not ready. He only finished his course work last year and his thesis this spring. He’s scheduled to defend it in a little over a month. If all goes well he’ll have his Ph.D. by this fall. But he’s procrastinated on taking the trials and becoming certified as a Magic-User Master Class. He’s enjoyed the ten years he’s spent in the UK and now I intend to light a fire under him to get him to finish up and come home. However, until

he's certified a Magic-User Master Class, I'll need you to handle the family's affairs here in St. Louis."

For a second I was speechless. "Mother I can't run the estate. I don't know enough magic."

"Morgana, no, Alastar you're ready. Let's be honest Morgana Livingstone was a young woman from a rich family with more power and natural talent than ambition. She never really studied hard, she never pushed herself. Since you've taken her body you've already surpassed Master Class Magic-User's far more experienced. Because of your handicap you've always been disciplined and driven. Your knowledge, skill, and drive when combined with Morgana's body's raw talent have made you in a very short time one of the top Masters in the United States."

I had to look away from my mother since my vision started to waver. "So what is it you want me to do?"

"First move into the estate. There are objects in the vault that are powerful and have been in the family for generations. You used three of them today very effectively. There are other objects we are charged to keep out of the hands of those who would misuse them. Second take my seat on the St. Louis Guild Hall Council. I'm no longer qualified to hold it." At this I tried to protest but he raised his hand.

"Thank you for your loyalty but it's the truth. I don't have the power to hold the position."

"Mother, what will you do?"

"Your father and I have property in Washington, in the Puget Sound I plan to retire there. It's a nice house with everything I need." At this mother sat his glass down and reached over to catch my hand and look into my eyes. "Alastar I need you to do this for me. That chair and the fact that I couldn't defend Susan or myself has taught me a great deal, I need time. I need to work on building up my power and time to heal please try to understand."

I felt my eyes tearing up. Instead of trying to explain I reached over and gave him a hug. "Mother I'm always ready to do whatever I can to help." Surprisingly I meant it.

# THE CONSULTANT AND THE HOUNDS OF HEAVEN

*Book 3*

# PROLOGUE

**I**t was nearly midnight when the hole was torn in the fabric of reality and a striking woman with dark red hair stepped through. She wore loose fitting dark robes and carried a staff in one hand in the other she held an obsidian Athame. She paused to look around and spotted two individuals kneeling with their faces pressed into the cold stone floor.

"Rise." The word was spoken softly but it hissed out, with an inhuman quality, on the suddenly cold night air.

When the pair stood up they couldn't have been more different. The first was a large man, a hard man, with grizzled features and short blonde hair starting to go grey. The woman who stood next to him was have a foot shorter and was very thin with just enough curves to mark her as a woman. Her hair was black as the night and features reflected a slightly oriental heritage. She appeared to be in her late twenties and she was also a vampire.

The woman with the staff and Athame glared at the two for a moment and then said, "One of you had better explain."

The man opened his mouth but the woman cut him off with a gesture and said, "Great One, things have been going well here we've had no indications that the Guild was interested in our operation until yesterday. This buffoon discovered that his lover is actually a guild spy!"

The man started to protest, "Great One, she's been one of my dancers for several months. There was never any indication that she was anything other than a stripper!"

The room seemed to get darker as the light appeared to be absorbed into the very body of the woman with the staff. "I don't want excuses. How did you discover this guild agent?"

After a short pause the man said, "I've been using wards to protect my records. At your direction I change them every month. This time when I changed them I added a special surveillance spell. One that would copy the aura of anyone who'd been into the records and save it for me to review later, I inverted it and veiled it with a technique that Monique showed me." With this he gestured to the vampire. "The spy didn't spot the new ward and it captured her aura. When I confronted her she tried to run. Fortunately Monique and several members of her coven were present to help me catch her."

"I see" the words were like a cold slap to the man's face. "How badly are we compromised?"

"N, n-neg, negligible damage" the man stuttered. He took a deep breath and then continued, "I have only been sleeping with her for a couple of weeks. She moved in with me last week."

"Have either of you started an interrogation?" The words were soft and cold and both the vampire and the human flinched back.

"No, Great One," the vampire said.

The woman now focused on the vampire. "You have done well so far Monique. You are, as of today, in charge of operations here in San Francisco and on the west coast."

The man managed not to wince at the demotion. Until now San Francisco had been evenly split between them. Not only had he been demoted but Monique had just received a promotion.

"Donald, you will begin interrogating this spy. I want you to use your skills as a psionic to dig into her mind. Learn everything you can about her, her real name, her rank, Guild status, what she learned and passed to the Guild. I want you to know everything." At this the Great One stepped forward and placed the tip of the Athame under the man's eye. "Do you understand me Donald? Learn where she was born, the names of her family and friends, her favorite color, what she likes to wear, where she shops. Delve her mind and take her memories directly you have two days. When I return you will know her better than she knows herself."

Donald swallowed. "I understand Great One. When I do this it may break her mind."

"I don't care about her sanity, but do not damage her physically."

"As you command Great One," Donald replied.

The woman now turned to the vampire. "I will meet the both of you in two days at the camp. I assume our recruits will be ready for graduation?"

"Yes, Great One, they are a fine class. They are ready and eager, even, to start the war!" Monique said.

"We aren't ready for that yet. It's enough that they are trained and will take the vow and follow my orders." Looking at Donald she said, "bring the spy to the camp and be ready to make your report."

"Yes, Great One."

With that the woman turned and made a slashing gesture with the Athame cutting a new hole in reality. She quickly stepped through the hole and when she was gone the room seemed to get brighter.

\* \* \*

Donald approached the cell where Gail, or at least the woman who'd called herself Gail, was held. There were several ways to question a prisoner. Donald was quite skilled at the art of interrogation and had performed this service for his mistress in the past. This time was different. Donald was an unregistered Magic-User, if he'd been trained by the Guild he guessed he'd be around a Magic-User 2nd Class in strength. But he'd attended a special school that focused almost extensively on psionic magic, mind magic. The Guild schools taught a very minimal curriculum on this type of magic because of its propensity for miss-use. Based on the fight to capture Gail Donald guessed she was also about a 2nd class Magic-User in strength, but she was a fully trained battle mage. The only reason they'd been able to bring her down was that they'd taken her by surprise. Donald had drugged her wine and when she'd noticed the drug she'd immediately tried to run. Most vampires are not very gifted at spell casting (Monique was an exception) however they have other abilities. They're very strong, fast, durable, and have a natural resistance to hostile magic. Monique's coven had rushed in and subdued Gail before she could get away. Now Gail sat in a concrete cell in the California high desert. This place was known as the 'camp' and was where new members of the movement underwent initial training. The goal of the movement was to start a revolution that would lead to a new state run by those with magical abilities.

Donald took a deep breath and felt a moment of regret. He'd really liked Gail and thought they might have something. She was a natural red head with a lean athletic body and had quickly become one of the most popular strippers in his club. Now Donald was about to use an ability he'd been taught but never tried. The spell was



essentially mind rape. He'd use his power to force his way into her mind and then start copying her memories. As a psionic he had the ability to wall off a portion of his own awareness so that her memories would remain separate from his and still be accessible. The spell was designed for speed and brutal efficiency it made no attempt to protect the victim. By the time he was done with her, unless her will was very strong, her mind would be shattered. A gifted psionic healer might be able to restore her sanity but there were very few psionic healers in the Guild.

Donald opened the thick wooden door and stepped into the room. Overhead a single light bulb provided a dim illumination. Gail sat tied to a solid looking metal chair. Her clothes were ripped and her face was bruised. She glanced up at Donald when he entered and glared at him defiantly.

"The Guild knows where I am and they will have figured out by now that I've been captured. If you don't want to spend the rest of your life in a cell you'll help me escape," she said. For a second Donald felt a lump in his throat, one of the things he'd loved about Gail was her indomitable spirit.

"The Guild may know where you were and that you've been taken. I doubt very much that they know where you are. It's too late for escape, or regret, my the Great One has commanded that I take your memories. I'm sorry."

At this Gail stiffened and her face turned pale under the bruises. "Donald, please don't."

Ignoring her comment Donald walked around the chair checking her bonds. Then he checked the collar of binding to make sure that she wouldn't try to use her powers. She continued to beg trying her best to talk him out of what he had to do but Donald wasn't listening. In a low voice he started chanting the words to the spell. The language had died out with the people who spoke it a millennium ago. Donald didn't understand the language he only knew the spells he'd been taught in it. He moved to stand behind Gail and she grew quiet as his magic started to insinuate itself into her mind. As he chanted Donald pulled out a small knife and made a slight cut on each of his index fingers and thumbs. His chanting reached a crescendo and on the last word of the spell Donald placed one bloody finger over each of Gail's eyes and a bleeding thumb into each of her ears. The eyes and ears are windows to the mind and Donald's blood became the vehicle that transported his power past Gail's pathetic mental defenses. Donald's blood mixed with Gail's tears and worked its way unnaturally into her eyes causing the whites to turn red at the same time it filled her ears and pushed past her eardrums causing them to pop from the pressure.

Donald was surprised when he encountered Gail's psionic shields. They were much more advanced and sophisticated than he'd expected of a Guild Special Agent. Interesting. With a little additional effort and a psionic technique not taught outside of the hidden hall of mentalists, Donald pushed past Gail's shields. The shock of psionic contact caused Donald to stiffen, his mouth open in a moan of pleasure, as memories flowed.

A name, Elizabeth Ann Gunning,.....jumping rope at recess.... a new Sunday dress,.... a first kiss,.. more and more, faster and faster memories surged into Donald.

To Donald Elizabeth's memories had a flavor and a texture, they were light and sweet, like cinnamon and hot chocolate and they felt like silk sliding over naked skin. They were at once erotic and addictive, he felt himself becoming aroused. He'd made sure to section off a place for them in his mind. What Donald hadn't been ready for was the emotional impact.

Donald remembered the day she entered Guild Academy and began her training. The thrill she'd felt when she'd been approached and recruited into the Special Operations Section more known as the Hounds of Heaven.

"Holy shit" Donald thought, almost disrupting the spell, she's a Hound!

In addition to the memories Donald realized he was also feeling what she felt, the emotions were at times intense.

Elizabeth's first lover, her first case, the first time she'd been in combat, the first time she'd had to kill, and now at last the current case.

Donald knew on a conscious level that the spell did more than just copy memories, feelings, and emotions. It also copied skills, habits, and mannerisms. All of this everything that made up the person who'd been Elizabeth Ann Gunning was taken apart copied and put back together in the receptacle Donald had built within his consciousness to contain and exploit it.

As the spell worked its sinister way through Elizabeth's mind it left ruin and wreckage in its wake. The spell wasn't gentle and made no allowances for what it did to Elizabeth. It jumbled her memories leaving them in fragments with broken emotional ties. The feelings that belonged to a given memory were no longer associated. Feelings of love that belonged to parents and family floated freely unattached to the proper memory. Skills gained through hard work were mixed-up with mannerisms and habits, Elizabeth's identity, her very sense of self, was lost in the cacophony of her dissonant mind.

It was done.

Thump, thump, thump Donald focused on the steady beat of his heart. Donald concentrated on breathing in and breathing out, relax, center, relax. Slowly he regained his sense of self and made sure that his own identity had remained separate from Elizabeth's. The spell had been harder, more seductive, and more primal than he'd imagined and he'd come very close to losing himself inside Elizabeth.

26 years' worth of memories, emotions, skills, and training were all now locked away within Donald ready to be pulled out examined and used. Some psionics got so addicted to absorbing the memories of others that they drove themselves insane, devouring mind after mind until they had to be put down. For the first time in his life Donald understood the temptation. With time he would be able to examine Elizabeth's memories and skills working the talents that he found useful into his own abilities. Within a month he would be as proficient a battle mage as Elizabeth had been. He ended the spell with a mental discipline that closed off his mind from Gail's or more correctly Elizabeth. She hadn't been lying, Donald realized, the Guild would be hunting for her and the forces doing the hunting would be the Hounds of Heaven.

This was bad.

Donald pulled his hands away from Elizabeth and heard a wet sucking popping sound as the physical connection between Donald and Elizabeth was severed. Elizabeth slumped forward a small trickle of drool running from the corner of her mouth down her chin. Donald's back popped as he stretched and he glanced at his watch. Twelve hours had gone by while he'd been mind raping Elizabeth. Donald rubbed his fingers together and noticed that the cuts had healed and the blood flaked off. He didn't look back as he left the room. Elizabeth's body was still in the chair but she was also inside him and would be with him for as long as he lived.

\* \* \*

Donald was sitting in his office at the camp drinking a beer with a slight grimace of distaste. Elizabeth didn't like beer and once in a while bits and pieces of her personality bleed over into him. It wasn't like their personalities were integrating more like he was aware of what she liked and didn't and was caught off guard by this once in a while. The door slammed open causing him to jump to his feet an angry shout dying unvoiced. Standing in the doorway was Monique and the Great One. Donald instantly stepped to one side of his desk and knelt before his mistress pressing his forehead into the floor.

"Have you done as I commanded?" Again the voice caused a strange echo in the room and it got darker and colder when she stepped inside.

"Yes, Great One." Donald replied. At the same time he wondered why she was here early. He'd expected to be with Monique to greet the Great One when she arrived just before midnight. The sun had only just set and it was several hours before the appointed time.

"Monique, go find the prisoner and take her to the sanctum. Prepare for the ritual." The vampire bowed and then flowed silently out of the room closing the door softly behind her.

"You may look at me." When Donald glanced up she said, "tell me what you've learned."

Donald immediately outlined the situation. The woman's real name was Elizabeth Ann Gunning, she was a Hound of Heaven, the location of the Camp had been compromised and the organizations, business interests, and drug distribution locations had all been passed on. Instead of becoming visibly angry as Donald had expected the Great One watched him and then turned away musing quietly to herself.

"I'd expected the Guild to be busy dealing with the situation in Seattle, instead that fool Lott got himself killed. Things have quieted down when I'd expected open war in the streets by now. Well it can't be helped at this point." She turned back to Donald who'd remained kneeling.

"Perhaps something can be salvaged." She walked over to stand in front of Donald. "You've proven that you can't run my organization here."

Donald started to protest but she silenced him by merely lifting an eyebrow. "You've been thinking with the wrong head and using your powers to jump into bed with as many of our female agents as you can. This makes you a liability despite your skill. I'm willing to give you another chance, but instead of being in charge of a territory I'm sending you on an undercover mission. Do you think you can handle it?"

When the Great One had told him he was a liability Donald had thought his life was over. She was not known for her mercy, she was also not known for wasting resources. One of the aspects of being a psionic was that it made him an excellent undercover agent. Donald grabbed the offer like a drowning man grabbing a life-vest.

"I live to serve you, Great One."

"Then come with me." She said.

The walk to the sanctum where ritual magic was cast took only a few minutes. When they arrived Donald saw that Elizabeth had been brought in. Someone had

taken the time to clean her up and fix her hair in a braid. She was wearing a simple dress and stood motionless to one side. After Donald had mind raped her she'd had been lucid for short periods, at other times she'd been like a child, and at other times like a living doll. At times like this if you gave her simple instructions she would carry them out without question. This must be one of those times, because she stood silent, unmoving, with a blank expression on her face. Monique was standing next to Elizabeth with one hand on Elizabeth's arm.

"Go stand next to your former lover."

The command startled Donald as the Great One's voice hissed out echoing weirdly around the room. Donald hurried to do as he'd been commanded knowing the slightest appearance of discontent or hesitation from him could result in his death. The Great One moved to a table normally used to hold ritual objects. At the moment it only held a set of smooth round crystals. The Great One drew the obsidian Athame, that was never far, and Donald noticed for the first time that the hilt ended in a clawed hand consisting of four fingers closed to form a fist. The Great One spoke a word that Donald couldn't make out, a word that felt unnatural, a word not designed for a human throat, and yet she spoke it with ease. Donald felt the temperature in the room drop several degrees and watched in amazement as the fist on the hilt of the Athame opened. The Great One reached out selected a crystal and placed it in the now open hand. As soon as she did the obsidian hand closed clutching the crystal. Now the Great One turned around to face them.

"This Athame is ancient. It has powers only speculated about within the halls of the Guild. Tonight I plan to use one of its lesser known powers for the first time in the human realm."

With that she walked across the room to where Monique, Elizabeth and Donald stood. She paused and stared for several seconds at Elizabeth. Donald noticed the Great One's eyes, which normally were green, now had flecks of black rolling across them. He forced himself not to look away. Without warning the Great One spoke three Words of Power and drove the Athame into Elizabeth's chakra, the point right above her bellybutton, Elizabeth never moved. There was no blood and to Donald it looked like the knife had somehow passed through Elizabeth's clothes without cutting them. Slowly the crystal started to glow. A soft white radiance filled the crystal. When it stopped getting brighter the Great One spoke a single Word and pulled the Athame from Elizabeth who immediately collapsed bonelessly to the ground. Only the unnatural speed of Monique prevented her from hitting her head on the hard stone floor. As Monique eased Elizabeth's body the rest of the way down the Great One

returned to the table and removed and replaced the crystal. She turned to look again at Donald and Monique who now stood side by side next to the recumbent form of Elizabeth.

"Do either of you know what I just did?" When they both remained silent she continued "I used the Athame to separate that woman's soul from her body. Normally the soul would enter the Athame and then be used to power a ritual but it can also be preserved and saved. In ancient times, in other realms of existence, five souls would be saved into five separate crystals and then released at once during a Great Rite to add power the ritual. But there are other ways to use this tool." As she said this she'd been walking toward Donald. Now she with a gesture she wrapped Donald felt invisible bonds preventing him from moving.

"Great One, there is no need to bind me I am your servant." Donald said.

"Yes, you are my servant, but I don't want you to flinch." With that she spoke again the Words of Power she'd used earlier and drove the Athame into Donald's chakra; pain unlike anything Donald had ever felt exploded across his mind. Not physical pain but spiritual pain, and as the pain got more intense Donald sensed the world slipping away. He felt like he was being sucked forward movement without motion and then darkness. Once again Monique caught the body before it could hit the floor. She lowered Donald's inert form with a lot less care to the cold stones. As curious as she was to learn the Great One's plan Monique knew better than to ask.

The Great One held up the Athame with the softly glowing crystal and said, "now for something new. Let us see if I can put back what was taken." She stepped over to Elizabeth's body and spoke the Words of Power only this time it sounded to Monique like she said them backwards and then drove the knife into Elizabeth's chakra for the second time. It only took a few seconds for the glow died from the crystal and color flooded Elizabeth's cheeks. Even though she was unconscious an intangible spark of life that had been missing returned. The Great One gestured at Elizabeth's sleeping form. "take Donald back to her cell. I'll talk to her later." Glancing at the recumbent male body. "I need to prepare this one for tonight's ritual."

Monique easily lifted Donald's female body into her arms and headed to the door. As she did she noticed that the Great One had already placed the glowing crystal from the table into the Athame's hilt. There would be a sacrifice tonight. Donald was about to be made an example, for all to see, of the price of failure. Monique grinned to herself only two of them knew where the real Donald was. Monique couldn't wait to see Donald's face when she woke up and realized that she'd never again use her power to seduce a woman into giving her a blowjob and that she would never drive a rock hard cock into

some young woman's eager pussy. As Monique ran through the darkness her laughter floated into the night.

\* \* \*

The solider trotted up to Colonel Black stopping a few feet away and coming to attention. They were in the field and in full battle rattle it was about 30 minutes until midnight and the Hounds were still maneuvering into position. The sergeant reported crisply.

"Sir, the scouts are in place and have spotted our primary target. We have a PID (positive identification) from two different scout teams, headquarters has been notified."

"What is her condition?" The Colonel interrupted.

"She was spotted being moved a few minutes ago by the vampire known as Monique. The scout's assessment is that she is alive, unconscious, with unknown injuries." The sergeant replied.

At this COL Black nodded and turned away to look at the camp they'd be assaulting within the hour.

"Sir, there is another report, we can't be certain but it looks like the Queen of Spades is also present."

Although the Colonel didn't offer any reaction, his stillness was enough to alert those that knew him that this was surprising and important news.

"Sergeant, are you sure? She is the Guild's most wanted person. Standing orders are to bring her in dead or alive." Colonel Black said quietly and unnecessarily. Everyone in the Guild knew who she was, but the Hounds had given her their own special code name. The Queen of Spades signified both her importance and how dangerous she was to every sane person.

"Sir, we can't be sure. She was spotted for a few moments only, but the scout got a good look and in his opinion it's her."

The Colonel traded looks with his deputy before turning to the Master Gunnery Sergeant standing on his other side.

"Pass the word to all units; expedite movement, report when in position."

The soldiers of the Guild's Special Operations Section better known as the Hounds of Heaven moved with a precision and silence unheard of in other units. They were all running spells that enabled them to see clearly in the darkness. Each unit also moved under the cover a veil. There were ten, ten person, teams all moving simultaneously to

step off points. The Colonel had another two teams in reserve. Each Hound was a Magic-User and they carried the best weapons that either technology and or magic could provide. The Colonel himself was a Magic-User Master Class. This group of would be revolutionaries had to be put down hard and the Guild wasn't taking any chances. Besides breaking dozens of laws and plotting the violent overthrowing of the United States government they had managed to capture a Hound. Colonel Black had planned tonight's raid himself and decided to lead it himself because he wanted to make sure this threat was stopped here. Now, with the news that the Guild's most wanted person was in the camp, well the stakes had just gone way up.

It took a little over an hour but all the units made it to their objectives and reported in, none had been spotted. Suddenly the Colonel felt a ripple of power; some ritual had just come to its conclusion and power exploded out, along with the agony of a death, in a wave of power that anyone with any sensitivity would have felt. COL Black made a decision they had to move now, they couldn't wait any longer. Speaking directly into the mic attached to his battle harness the Colonel said.

"All units, move onto the objective, weapons red and free, you are cleared to engage."

Just like that the night exploded into noise, light, and chaos.

Colonel Black, and the two reserve teams, took to the air and shot forward staying above the battlefield for the moment. The Hounds moved with the precision and speed of the well drilled and disciplined battle mages that they were. The initial spells hit the ward protecting the camp. The wards lasted for maybe ten seconds before they fell. This was not good they had not expected the outer wards to last for more than a second or two. Alarms rang out around the camp. The next set of spells breached the HESCO barriers and concertina wire that protected the camp's perimeter in ten different locations. Less than 90 seconds from the start of the assault and the Hounds had moved through the breaches and onto the objective. But it had been enough time for an initial defense to begin. The 50 Cal machineguns in the guard towers had been hit during the initial barrage, taken out with RPGs spelled to travel further and to not miss the designated target.

There must have been nearly two hundred individuals in the camp a mix of vampire, werewolf, elf, dwarf, and humans with magical abilities. They never stood a chance. At one point as one of the teams attempted to enter the ritual chamber it had been repulsed by powerful magic. The team had set up a perimeter and poured a hail of gunfire and spellfire into it while they waited for reinforcements. On the second attempt they met no resistance whoever had been in the chamber had fled. Once the fighting started to die down Colonel Black and his personal command team descended



into the camp. Fires were still flickering around but most of the fighting was over. COL Black was listening to the first casualty reports when a young Lieutenant came up.

"Sir, we've located and secured Captain Gunning. She is unconscious, but our preliminary examination shows no serious physical harm."

For the first time that night Colonel Black felt a slight relief. "Any sign of the Queen of Spades?"

"None yet sir, but the scouts placed her in the ritual chamber at the start of our assault. She may have created an escape route for herself and whoever was in the chamber with her through the veil." The Lieutenant replied.

While they'd been talking the Captain who'd led the assault on the chamber came up. "Sir, I think you should come see this."

At this the Colonel nodded and followed the Captain. Once they arrived in the chamber the smell of fresh blood was almost overpowering. The body of a man had been nailed spread eagle to the floor with iron stakes driven through the hands and feet. He had been sacrificed horribly in a blood ritual and had obviously died in extreme pain. It was easily one of the most horrific sights Colonel Black had seen and he'd seen a lot over the years.

"Close and seal this room Captain. We'll need to get a forensic team and a magic research team down here to see if we can figure out what kind of spell this rite is powering." The Colonel took one last look around the room and left. It would be a long night, yet there was some satisfaction, they'd been able to rescue one of their own. Still Colonel Black dreaded having to report that they'd had Ambrose Grosvenor trapped and she'd slipped away.

# CHAPTER 1

**M**urder. When my phone rang at a little after 3 am Thursday morning, I thought long and hard about not answering it. Ever since landing in this body I've discovered that I'm much grumpier in the morning than I'd been before. But at 3 am, I felt, I had a right to be annoyed. On the other end was Inspector Lee, his attitude toward me had changed over the last few months. Partially since I was now an official member of the Guild and partly because of the rumors about what I'd done to save my "God-Mother/Father" had made the rounds throughout the St. Louis Guild Hall.

"Ms. Livingstone, there's been a murder we need your help."

Inspector Lee, not known for being loquacious, was downright talkative this morning as he made it clear he needed me to meet him at the Kennedy Forest just west of the St Louis Zoo off of I-64. To call it a forest is an exaggeration, in my opinion, it's a few acres of wooded land full of trails for hiking and biking. The details of the situation were still a bit sketchy, to my sleep addled brain, as I parked my Charger behind several emergency vehicles and Guild cruisers. I got out of my car and Edger my familiar (yes, he's a crow and don't blame me for the name he picked it) flapped up onto my shoulder. As I walked forward along the line of cars I could see my breath in the cold morning air. Predawn in late October in St Louis can be downright cold. I was glad that I'd opted for black jeans, black leather boots, a simple khaki top, and my black leather jacket.

I spotted Inspector Allen Lee he was waiting for me in the shadows by a guild cruiser. The sun had just started to come up giving the area a cold grey light and creating some long shadows. Al is a big man I'd guess he's about 6'2" or 6'3" with broad shoulders and thick bones so any shadow he hid in needed to be long. He looked like he could bend metal with his bare hands. It always surprised me that, no matter what

time of day, his suit looked rumpled. In addition to being physically intimidating he was also a Magic-User 2nd Class and as I'd learned much smarter than he let on.

"Ms. Livingstone thanks for coming down."

I'd told him to call me Morgana, but after my status as a Magic-User Master Class got out (even if it was 'honorary' until I finished my degree) well there was no hope of informality. He could be so stuff sometimes it made me want to giggle.

His hand engulfed mine in a firm grip. Fortunately for me he didn't apply much pressure. I guess those macho games, where one guy tries to out squeeze the other guy, were a thing of the past. A good thing too, since even in my original male body I'd never have been able to withstand his grip.

"No problem Al, so what's going on?" I asked knowing it would irritate him that I'd called him Al. He guided me off the road and onto a little used path.

"It might be best if you see for yourself ma'am," Allen replied.

As we walked along a trail I cursed silently. The ground was soft and my shiny leather boots were getting splattered with mud. The heels were only two inches and the boots were cute so it annoyed me that I was getting them dirty. I'd discovered over the past few months that much of woman's fashion was a pain but I really liked shoes. There was something thrilling about finding the perfect foot wear for an outfit that made shopping trips with Chelsea fun.

It took only a few minutes before I could see yellow police tape stretching from tree to tree cordoning off a large area. As we reached the tape I noticed that the mundane police, guild special agents, and medical personal were all on this side of the tape. I thought it a bit strange so quested out with my magical senses. I instantly felt the ward. Woven from tree to tree it was designed to protect whoever had been camping in the grove. Almost as soon as I felt the ward I felt the echoes of death magic. Someone had died, and it hadn't been pretty.

"Why haven't you taken down the ward and gone in?" I asked.

"We tried" answered Inspector Lee "but these are elven wards and they're tied to the trees along the grove. None of us know how to bring them down without destroying the trees at the same time."

Well that explained why they called me. I'm one of the foremost experts on wards in the Midwest and I've recently had reason to brush up on the Elven wards. I calmed my mind and gave Edgar a silent order to fly around and above the grove. As Edgar started his aerial reconnaissance I began drawing power.

Magic is the life force of the universe. The very power of creation and it filled me with a sweet liquid fire that made my whole body buzz. In some ways holding magic

like this could be addictive, every color is brighter, sounds are crisper, smells sweeter and yet I could only hold it for so long before the power would slip away and I'd drop with exhaustion. I know this because it was one of the first lessons my mother had taught me before I'd left for the Academy. My thoughts were interrupted when Edgar demanded my attention. I used my link to him to view the area from above. At the same time I cast a spell I'd developed in my work with wards. The spell is a type of questing. It was designed to flow along the ward and map it out. In the early morning light the faint silvery lines of the elven ward came into view and along with the lines came the linkages and bonding points. I could see that it was skillfully done and that it had been tied to the trees and through them to the earth. It had also been set to expire with the dawning of a new day. The person who created this ward was only interested in protecting the camp site for the night. As I watched the first rays of dawn hit the ward it shimmered. As it did the linkages started to fray gradually coming apart.

"Al, it looks like you'll be able to get in there in a few seconds," I said.

"I'll say this for you ma'am, you work fast," Inspector Lee replied.

For a second I was confused then I realized that he didn't know that I had nothing to do with the ward coming down. I thought about explaining it and then decided not too, might as well build up my reputation. When the ward fell apart I ducked under the police tape and moved into the clearing. The first thing I noticed was the smell of shit and blood. Morgana's sense of smell was much more acute than Alastar's had been, which at time is pleasant since I've learned to appreciate some of the finer scents. Today it worked against me. I was unprepared for the scene in front of me. To one side was a tent with the cold remains of a campfire in front of it. In the middle of the grove the grass had been burned back to create a circle of bare earth. Gouged into the dirt was a trench forming a lesser and greater circle. The lesser circle enclosed a pentagram and between the lesser and greater circle were a series of complex runes. Blood had been used to fill the entire trench turning the ground black. In the middle of the pentagram a naked elven woman had been staked to the ground spread eagle with iron stakes driven through her hands and feet. She had been cut open from her pelvic bone to her collar bone and her organs removed. They had been placed carefully around the inside of the lesser circle in precise relation to the runes in the greater circle. As I stepped forward the smell got even more intense and so did the feeling of black magic. I felt as though I was moving in slow motion as if the air was made of molasses and I was forced to push my way through. A part of my mind had detached itself from my emotions and was cataloging the horrific scene.

A ritual had been performed one that used sacrifice, blood, and death magic. An elven woman had been gruesomely slain in such a way that she had probably been alive for most of the ritual. Due to the sever mutilation it would be a challenge to identify her. Another part of my mind reacted violently to the scene, the smell and sensation of blood magic got to me and I doubled over with dry heaves. Luckily I hadn't eaten breakfast so there was nothing to come up. I could hear the police and special agents of the Guild moving forward. They were taking pictures and making observations into voice recorders. I was distantly impressed by their professionalism. It took me several minutes before I was able to push the feelings of black magic away and straighten up. Al handed me a tissue and then a stick of gum.

"Thanks, I guess you guys are used to seeing this kind of thing?" I said.

Al shook his head. "Never get used to it. This one is bad."

That made me feel a little better and I realized that I needed to put my feelings aside and see if there was something productive I could do. I walked around the clearing trying to piece together the big picture. It looked like this woman had been camping by herself, which I thought was kind of strange but then she was an elf. There were Guild Inspectors already looking through the tent and her belongings so I figured I'd stay out of their way and just get a report later from Inspector Lee. I took a shallow breath trying to ignore the smell and focused on the body of the victim and the ritual.

The pentagram was fairly normal but the rest wasn't anything I was familiar with. I could see a police photographer taking pictures and made a mental note to get a copy. I opened my third eye and looked at the scene. A Magic-Users third eye is the mystical vision a Magic-User uses to see magic. The mundane world fades to a world of black, white, and shades of grey while magic can be seen in vibrant color. To me magic viewed this way is astonishingly beautiful.

The scene before me was ugly.

Fragments of dark purple magic remained mostly around the body of the woman and the runes. They were fading quickly as sunlight streamed into the clearing dissolving the remnants of the dark rite. Woven through the purple was a dark violent angry shade of red. I looked closer at the body and felt that there was something strange. It looked like there were several types or colors of magic twined around the body and into the wound. I picked out shades of purple, red, orange, and green in a sick twisting pattern running deeply into the body. Obviously more than one spell had been used. Whoever was responsible had been very skilled. I pulled out a crystal one similar to the one I'd used last spring when I'd been investigating the theft of an elven mask. I looked over toward Inspector Lee but he was busy talking to a mundane police

officer. With a slight shrug I moved over to the body being as careful as I could not to step into the trenches dug into the earth or any blood or body parts.

Once I got to the victim, I knelt next to her, trying to be careful not to touch anything. This was harder than I expected. When I looked down at the body I had to tell myself it wasn't a person just a thing and I needed to study. I quickly cast the spell I used to take an imprint of magical signatures. They were fading rapidly so I knew this needed to be done right way. I watched as the crystal took the imprint and figured that I'd try to analyze it later. When I stood up I realized that I was standing on a ley-line. Not one of the main ones that move through the St Louis area but a lesser line. I reached into it intending to map it back to one of the larger lines and felt a jolt of dark power. I staggered back from the body and almost tripped. A wave of nausea hit me and it felt like my skin was momentarily covered in a slick viscous substance. I severed my connection to the ley-line and felt a pair of strong hands on my shoulders.

"Ms. Livingstone are you alright?" asked Al.

"Give me a second," I replied breathing deeply, despite the smell, I focused on not tossing my non-existent breakfast for a second time.

"Maybe you should go back to your car. Your part here is done."

I could hear the condescension in his voice and it irritated me. What he wasn't saying was that if I was so weak that I kept getting sick at the sight of blood I was no use to him.

"Okay, but do you sense the ley-line here?" When Lee nodded I said, "Try to reach out and touch it." I felt him open himself up to the line and then his face turned pale, the next thing I knew he was on all fours vomiting coffee and whatever he'd had for breakfast onto the grass. Feeling vindicated I walked out of the clearing and back toward my car. I figured I'd call later today and apologize for setting him up like that and pass along whatever I found out about the magical signatures on the crystal.

It was early and I had plenty of time to get to my first class of the day. I was enrolled at the St Louis Academy of Magic. This was my mother and Arthur Livingstone's idea. It gave me, Morgana Livingstone, a good reason to be here in St Louis. Morgana had just turned nineteen and didn't have a degree. Even though the Guild had granted me honorary Magic-User Master status there was an expectation that I'd earn a degree and make the title official. It was frustrating on the one hand because I'd already had been through college and had a Masters of Arcane Arts (MAA) but on the other it forced me to go out and mix with other young Magic-Users. In fact I figured that my mother's main reason for forcing me to do this was just to get me to mingle with other people my body's age and to learn to act more like a woman. I suspect she was right. If left to

my own preferences I would probably have settled into the comfort of the Donegal estate and pursued my own magical interests and ignored the outside world and my body as much as possible. Having to choose what to wear each day, put on makeup, attend class, talk to other students, and even get hit on by the occasional guy was forcing me to adapt to my situation.

As I drove toward the University I realized that there was another reason for pursuing a degree. When I'd gone through the first time I'd focused on wards and elemental magic. Those were things I was good at or had a natural affinity for. Now I was taking classes focused more on ley-lines and celestial magic. These were areas where I was only passingly familiar and needed to understand better if I planned to take advantage of my body's full potential. I glanced at the clock on the dashboard and realized that I would be way early. For a second I thought about stopping for breakfast but my stomach rebelled at the thought. The scene I'd just come from was still too fresh in my mind for anything like breakfast to work. There was a coffee shop just off campus I decided to make a quick stop hopefully a cup of coffee might actually help settle my stomach. It was still early when I walked into the shop enjoying the smell of freshly brewed coffee. I'd taken a couple of seconds to clean the mud and, much to my displeasure, blood from my boots before entering the store. I got my usual bold dark coffee with no cream or sugar and found a seat toward the back of the shop.

I'd brought Edgar and my book bag in with me. Luckily the owners of the shop were accustomed to the craziness that surrounds the Academy of Magic, enough to not mind me bringing my familiar into the shop with me. In fact they gave me a couple of biscuits that I could break up and feed to Edgar. I pulled out my book on potions and tried to block out this morning's events and focus on my class. This was a subject I'd found very boring when I'd taken it my first time through the academy now it was doubly boring to me. However, it was one of the basic requirements for a BAA (Bachelorette of Arcane Arts) so I had to take it. I pulled out my notes and text book, took a sip of coffee, and tried to block out the image in my mind of the woman who'd been sacrifice to fuel some blood magic. After about ten minutes of this I gave up and pulled out the crystal I'd used to make a copy of the magical signatures at the crime scene.

I put it on the table in front of me and with a slight wisp of power activated it. As the crystal lit up with the colors and the pattern of the magic I'd copied from the victim I was reminded that magic like this would have once been beyond my ability. It would have taken either a skilled Magic-User 1st Class or Master Class to work something like

this and before I'd found myself in Morgana's body I'd only had the power of a strong Magic-User 3rd Class or a weak 2nd Class.

I focused my attention on the magic displayed by the crystal and saw at once that my first impression in the clearing was correct. There had been more than one spell active during that sacrifice. It was quite complex so I separated out the two major elements one a shade of purple that was strangely familiar, yet I couldn't place it. The second was an angry crimson. It was the crimson magic that set my heart racing. Whoever or whatever it was that had wrought that magic, well, it was the closest thing to pure evil I'd ever felt. There was almost sentient hatred in that magic for all things living, even though this was just an echo of the real spell.

I pulled out my notebook and started taking notes on what I was seeing, sensing, and feeling as I worked my way through the patter and the colors impressed into the crystal. One of the nice things about being back in school was that it had forced me to return to some of the basic principles of magical construction and de-construction. After graduating it's easy to get lazy when it comes to some of the basics. I noticed that I'd been skipping steps or taking short cuts in the use of some aspects of my magic, like taking detailed notes while studying a magical problem, perhaps this forced return to academia was better for me than I'd first thought.

Edgar's caw disrupted my focus and I glanced up at him as he perched on the back of the chair next to me. At first I wondered why he'd interrupted my work and then I realized that I'd been at this for quite some time and would be late to class if I didn't get moving.

\* \* \*

I was done with my classes by mid-afternoon and tossed my books into my car grateful to get out of the cold breeze. The October wind today had a cutting edge that hit my chest and made my nipples turn hard in an abrupt reminder of all that had changed about me. I'd been in my new body for eight months and most of the time I no longer thought about everything that had changed. At other times something would happen, like that gust of wind, to bring the change back into sharp focus. I had some homework to do, but I knew that I could get it done pretty quickly so I wasn't too worried about it. Normally I'd head over to the academy's athletic facility and get a run in and then drive home. Today I decided to skip my run and head over to the Guild Hall and find Inspector Lee. I was excited at the prospect of talking to him and seeing what he'd learned about the woman who'd been killed. I needed to pass on what I'd learned



(not much really) and, since the victim was an Elf, find out if they'd notified the local liaison to Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal an elf who went by the name of Sir Galohond Larothta.

At the thought of Galohond my heart sped up. I hadn't seen him for over a week, he'd had business in Summer (the name the Elves use for the Elven Realm), and only returned to St Louis yesterday. I'd been sort of dating Sir Galohond ever since spring when he'd helped me rescue my mother from some Eleven terrorists. I was still confused about him. My body reacted to his in ways that I found easy to understand, on an intellectual level, but difficult to accept. Once again I was struck by my own mixed emotions many of which lately were centered on Galohond. I'd been happy with my male identity even if I'd resented my lack of magical power. In one afternoon Ambrose had changed everything turning my life upside down. I now had the magical power I'd always craved at the cost of my body along with my sense of self. I couldn't deny the truth that Morgana Livingstone's body was extremely beautiful, very much female, and solidly heterosexual. Her hormones had waged an eight month campaign against my male ego and at times like this I knew that the hormones were winning. I'd tried staying away from Galohond but it didn't help. I found myself thinking about him, imagining his strong hands around my waist, his soft lips pressed into mine. I could feel a now familiar ach in my groin, that I now associated with arousal, and distracted myself by starting my car and backing out of the student lot.

I thought about calling the Guild Hall and asking for Inspector Lee, I was only a few minutes away so I figured it would be easier to go over in person. Besides Sir Galohond might be there, this thought did nothing to lessen my discomfort. Parking in the garage next to the guild hall was an old routine by now. I was a member of the Guild even if I'd chosen not to take my 'God-Mothers' seat on the St. Louis Guild Council. My mother had wanted me too, but I felt it was too much. If I was really Morgana Livingstone a nineteen year old student and an 'honorary' Magic-User Master Class, I would never be offered a seat on the St Louis Guild Council. Magic-Users work for years to earn that distinction and to have it handed to me on a platter would be suspicious and would probably make me some enemies within the Guild.

My boots made click clacking sounds as I walked toward the elevator and suddenly I was self-conscious. It'd been a while since I'd seen Sir Galohond, he'd been back in Summer surrounded by all of those beautiful elven women, and here I was about to possibly meet him wearing boots, jeans, and a simple khaki top. I had just a minimal amount of make up on and my hair had been pulled back in a practical way I liked

while in class. For a second I almost turned around and left. "get a grip Alastar he's just a guy."

I stepped out of the elevator and spotted the voluptuous blonde receptionist "Diana" guarding the entrance to the offices where most of the Guild Inspectors worked. I knew from past experience that she was part receptionist, part security, part traffic cop, and no one to mess with. I'd used the third eye to look at her when I'd first visited this office and discovered that she had so many spells up that it was impossible to tell who she really was but she was ready for trouble. I'd found out later on that she wasn't a real person instead she was an institution. That is "Diana" was a watch that each of the inspectors had to take turns standing. At the start of a shift they transformed into the voluptuous blonde in order to make visitors underestimate the defenses here and then they were augmented with several objects of power. I also got the impression that the transformation was a spell tied to the bracelet "Diana" always wore and that it did a number of things besides physically transform the person wearing it. The idea of Inspector Lee taking his shift as the blonde receptionist had left me in giggles when I'd first realized what this meant.

"I'm here to see Inspector Lee," I said.

"He's meeting with a representative of the Elven government; you can wait for him in his office," the receptionist said in a high feminine voice.

I looked at her closely trying to pierce the complex structure of spells to determine who was on duty.

"David is that you?" I asked trying to guess the receptionist's identity.

She let out a sign. "Ms. Livingstone, my name is Diana, if I had another name I'm not allowed to say it while on duty."

I laughed lightly being pretty sure I was right. David was one of the inspectors who worked cases from time to time with Lee. He was a little below average height but made up for it in width and raw strength. He was also one of the more macho inspectors and had on more than one occasion hit on me.

"Thanks. Oh, and David, if you don't want people to know who you are then don't bring your coffee cup with you when you start your watch."

I said referring to the cup sitting next to the computer that David had won during the annual Guild's shooting competition last summer. The blonde turned red from chin to hair line and now I couldn't hold the laughter in as I walked away slipping around her desk and heading through the door to her left.

When I entered the large room I was struck again by the fact that this was a cube farm. You'd think an organization as large and powerful as the Guild would have fancy

offices for its employees. But no, it was a government agency and it looked like it. Along one side of the large rectangular room were a set of offices on the opposite a series of interrogation rooms. In the middle a number of cubes where most of the inspectors worked, when I'd first met Inspector Lee he'd been in one of the cubes. Since then he'd been promoted to section chief and now had one of the offices to himself. I headed to it to wait for him.

His office was small with barely enough room for his desk and a pair of chairs facing it. To one side he had a two drawer filing cabinet with a coffee pot on it. Since he was kind enough to have coffee and cups I helped myself while I waited. I may have acquired a new taste for shopping, particularly for foot gear, but some of my old preferences had stuck with me. I was still addicted to a strong cup of coffee.

Edgar flapped from my shoulder to the coat rack by the door and started preening while we waited. With nothing better to do I pulled out the crystal and my notes and started to review what I'd learned that morning. Not much really, there were two distinct types of magic, both black and both were blood magic. The level of complexity and the power required had me leaning toward a Magic-User Master Class criminal which, if true, was bad news. What I was curious to know was what the guild experts had learned about the rune and the physical evidence from the site of the ritual. The ritual had obviously generated a massive amount magical energy, presumably to work a powerful spell, I'd be damned if I could identify the spell. In addition to the purpose of the ritual there other mysteries; how had the killer gotten through the wards without disturbing them? How had the ley-line become tainted? Before today I'd have bet my car that such a thing just wasn't possible. Was the tainting of the ley-line the purpose of the ritual? At the moment nothing made much sense because I didn't have enough information to understand what was going on.

The more I thought about the events of the morning the more worried and confused I became. As I looked at the pattern of the spell captured by my crystal I noticed something odd about the color of the purple magic, I couldn't put my finger on it, but I could have sworn that I'd seen it before.

"Ms. Livingstone, I'm glad you stopped by." Inspector Lee's gravelly voice pulled me up from my thoughts.

"I wanted to talk to you about the magical signatures I found on the body this morning," I said reflexively looking around to see if Sir Galohond had followed Al into his office. I was disappointed to see that he hadn't. Al moved into the office and worked his way around his desk and sat down facing me.

"I'd offer you a cup of coffee but I see you have one," he said with a grin as he reached over to fill up the mug that had been sitting on his desk. "What have you discovered?"

I held up the crystal. "I took an impression of the magic still active on the body this morning." I channeled a bit of power into the crystal so that Al could see the impression. A three dimensional black and white image of the woman appeared in the air above the crystal however the magic that had been used on her showed up in bright color as though we were viewing the victim with the third eye.

"There were at least two active spells on that woman and possibly three if you look here and here. The first one was cast by the person whose magical signature is this deep purple." I pointed to the part of the spell I was describing. "At first I thought this was a simple, yet strong, magical binding but you can see it's been modified." I pointed to the next part of the spell. "Just like a normal binding this one paralysis the target, however there is a twist here, I think it actually prevents the subject off using their magic. As you can see the spell is similar in design to the one used by Guild Special Agents on the handcuffs or collars of binding."

"That's not possible" Al interrupted me. "The nature of that spell requires it to be grounded in metal. There was nothing on the victim that could have grounded the spell." He gestured to the black and white image of the naked elven woman hovering in the air between us.

"That's the trick, isn't it?" I said, "Why is that spell grounded in metal?" Before he could answer I continued "it's because unless it's grounded there's a magical feedback which over time is very unhealthy for the person the spell has been cast on." When Al nodded I continued "the guild uses those cuffs or the collar to keep prisoners from using magic for the duration of a prison sentence which could be anywhere from hours to years. It would be in-humane not to ground the spell. But what if you only wanted to stop someone from using magic for an hour? What if you didn't care about the harm the feedback might cause the victim because you planned to kill her anyway?"

I looked at Al and could tell from the slightly sick look around his eyes he understood what I was saying. I took a breath and pointed to the next part of the spell.

"This looks like the second spell that was cast. Notice the color is crimson and also the dark shadowy purple, it's either a different person or the murderer is using a powerful artifact or somehow both to cast this spell." Here I paused looking over to see if Al was tracking.

"I've never seen a spell like that, what is it?" Al Asked.

I shook my head. "I was hoping you could tell me. There are elements I recognize but at this point I've got nothing."

"I'll have our researchers start looking into that spell. You said there might be a third spell?" he asked.

I pointed to the crimson and purple threads again. "This is pretty complex stuff but if you separate it here and here then it would be two spells working together. If I'm right it means that this part is actually the ritual and here it's interacting with the crimson mixing them together and then getting a boost from the green and gold energy traces here and here. I'd say that the green and gold energy was the life force of the victim. The pattern is diffused like we're missing the points where it was tied off, since there are five of them, I think it's a safe assume that they were tied to the pentagram in the rune. If you look at it that way then I'd guess that the crimson was generated by a ritual item, like a knife, a bell, or a chalice, and that it added too and helped shape the power raised by the ritual." I paused to think for a second.

"The part that bothers me is the shadowy purple weave, it doesn't fit either theory. If I had to guess I'd say that the person casting the spell was really two people but that doesn't make sense. Even linked to another person the spell casters magic isn't affected like this," I said pointing to the spell.

I sighed in frustration. "I have no idea what spell the ritual powered, I can only tell you that this ritual caused a massive surge of magical energy."

At this Al grunted "Ms. Livingstone," he said. "I appreciate your work on this but right now it's all conjecture until we figure out what the perp was trying to do." I nodded in complete agreement with him.

"The lab is still working on the physical evidence, and our magical researchers are going over the rune. We should have something in a few hours. However, you need to understand that this is an official Guild investigation and while we appreciate your help, you are not an Inspector. To be honest I've been instructed to thank you for your time and ask you to stay away from this matter."

"What? I don't understand," I said.

"Ms. Livingstone, I like you, and in my opinion you've done some great work for the Guild. I'm just a lowly Inspector, however there are those in the St Louis Guild Hall who resent your making the Guild look foolish during that whole affair with the Mask. I've been told to thank you for your time and ask you to stay away from this case."

Feeling stunned I stood up and barley noticed when Edgar flapped over to my shoulder. "I can't say that I understand, or agree. Thanks for seeing me and talking to

me face-to-face. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help if the 'powers' within the Guild Hall change their mind."

I turned to leave but Al stopped me. "Ms. Livingstone, I'm sorry but I'll need that crystal. It's evidence now and part of a murder investigation."

I handed him my crystal and felt unreasonably irritated. Here I was trying to help and instead of sharing information and treating me as an equal all Al did was listen and take what little evidence I'd developed and tell me to stay away from the case. I turned and started to walk away pausing at the door.

"Al, one other thing, whoever did this was very skilled and powerful. If I had to guess I'd say that you're looking for a Magic-User Master Class perpetrator." I didn't wait to see what Al thought of my last statement instead I walked quickly toward the door that led to the elevators.

Once in the cool semi-dark confines of the parking garage I headed toward my Charger not really paying attention to my surroundings. Instead I was fuming as I thought about my meeting with Al. I hadn't taken the seat on the St Louis Guild Hall Council because I was worried about Guild politics and because I was still angry about the way the Guild tended to ignore those Magic-Users who had less power. In fact everything about the Guild's policies on those with lesser magical ability, I felt, was wrong. Now that I was one of the most powerful members of the St Louis Guild I found that I had a whole new set of problems. Some nameless 'official' was taking out a petty revenge by keeping me away from this case, at a time when all the resources of the Guild should be focused on finding the person responsible.

Abruptly Edgar let out a "caw" pulling me to the here and now. He launched himself into the air and I immediately brought up a shield. Whatever had caused Edgar to jump into the air couldn't be good. Then from around the other side of a parked van a tall figure with broad shoulders stepped into view. I felt an almost physical shock as I recognized Sir Galohond.

The tall blonde Elf Lord moved toward me with a feline grace that I'd unknowingly missed. When he got close he reached out and scooped up my hand, politely ignoring the last glimmer of my shield as I dropped it, and gallantly brushing my fingers with his lips.

"Morgana, I thought I caught the scent of your perfume when I left the Inspector's office. I'm glad I was able to catch you," he said.

I could feel a sudden heat between our bodies at his implication. That he had been the hunter and I'd been the prey and that he'd been successfully tracked and caught

me. I stood there looking up at him and it took me a moment to realize he'd stopped talking.

"Now that you've caught me what do you intend to do with me?" The words were out before I could really think about what I'd said.

"I know what I'd like to do but it's not fit for polite company to say," Galohond responded with a gravelly heat entering his voice, he stepped closer so that his chest almost touched mine, and looked down into my eyes.

"I'm sorry about the loss of your country woman," I said desperate to change the subject and get some breathing room. Galohond must have sensed this because he stepped back and nodded.

"Inspector Lee let slip that he'd called you in to help with the investigation. Do you have any ideas what is going on?" he asked.

For a second I considered telling him what I'd reported to Al, but I decided that I didn't want to have that conversation here in the Guild Hall parking garage. Plus I needed to think about the implications of Al's warning.

"Perhaps this is conversation we should have somewhere else?" I sighed looking up into his clear green eyes.

"Ah, I wouldn't want to put you into an 'uncomfortable position'.... ... with the Guild," he said with a wicked grin.

The blatant innuendo made me blush. "You're such a gentleman," I said pretending to misunderstand his flirting.

"In that case perhaps I could entice you into having dinner with me tonight? There is a new Italian place that I've heard has been given very good reviews." His grin was infectious.

"What time will you pick me up?" I asked.

"How does seven sound?" he replied.

"I'll see you then," I said and walked around him toward my car. As I did I could feel his eyes on me so I exaggerated the movement of my hips just to give him a little show.

Once safely in the car I headed toward the Donegal estate and began to have doubts. What had I been thinking walking like that? What did he think that meant? Did Galohond think he was going to get lucky tonight? Did I want him to get lucky tonight? Why did I have to act like a sixteen year old girl flirting with her first boyfriend when I was around him? I ground my teeth in frustration even a sixteen year old girl had more experience with boys than I did. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was already after four pm. Argh, I needed to get home and start getting ready if

he was going to pick me up at seven. Crap what should I wear? I stomped on the accelerator and for a second considered bringing up my spell of un-notice.

The drive to the Donegal estate gave me time to pick out and disregard half a dozen out fits before I'd even arrived home. As a guy it hadn't really been much of a problem, choosing what to wear for a date. Now I had several things to consider. First how formal? Dress or no dress? The venue should help me figure this out, an Italian restaurant implied romance. I could either encourage this or discourage this by what I picked. Then there was the weather. It had been a cold October already with temperatures dipping into the 40's after the sun went down. I'd learned in the last eight months something I'd never even considered before acquiring my new body. When men dress up they tend to put more clothes on, when women get dressed up they tend to show more skin. Showing skin in October could result in a chilly evening.

When I got to the estate I rushed to my room and started going through my closet. "God I've got nothing to wear!" I muttered. Just after the words left my mouth I froze. How often had I heard girlfriends say exactly the same thing over the years? "This is just too weird" I muttered and returning to my searching.

I finally decided on a black skirt and blue blouse combo that went with my long black cashmere and wool blended coat. The blouse was a bright blue, silk, V-neck with short sleeves that showed a hint of cleavage and the skirt was mid-thigh but combined with black hose and my long coat I'd still be warm. Finally I picked a set of black leather pumps with a four inch heel. In the months becoming Morgana I've gotten much more comfortable in heels and these went perfectly with the outfit. In a weird way it was exciting to get dressed up like this for a date.

I felt a sending from Edgar and opened myself to it. He was perched by the glass windows in the main entrance with a good view of the driveway. The image of a white corvette pulling into the drive way with Sir Galohond behind the wheel made my pulse race. When he parked the car and climbed out he was wearing a black pants a dark green shirt and a long khaki trench coat. I felt a sense of relief that the outfit that I'd not gotten too dressed up and that my outfit would complement his. I was ready to go when Steven, (my mother's butler/driver/grounds keeper and Chelsea's husband) knocked on the door to let me know that my date had arrived. I thanks Steven, and made no move to go down to meet Galohond, I figured that I'd make him wait a few minutes on principle before I headed down. After all I didn't want to seem too eager.

Steven had taken Galohond to the library to wait for me. It was a good place to keep him cooling his heels since there were plenty of books, pictures, and symbols of the Donegal family's accomplishments to keep him entertained. Steven opened the door



for me and I swept into the room accompanied by the click clack of my heels on the stone floor. Galohond turned at the sound and I watched with satisfaction as his eyes widened slightly in appreciation.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," I lied with a small smile.

"Waiting for perfection is time well spent," he replied equally smoothly scooping up my hand for the now familiar kiss. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished, it's been a long day," I replied.

"Then let us away," he said tucking my hand in the crook of his arm and escorting me toward the main entrance. Luckily Steven met me there with my coat or it might have been a cold evening. Of course I knew a cantrap that would have kept me warm but it felt like a waste of magic to use it when a coat would work.

Once in the car I couldn't help asking, "How was your trip back to Queen Isilidhrindal's court?"

"In one respect it was routine. Every few months I'm required to present myself to the Queen and report on the events here in the human realm. But while I was there I found that the court was abuzz over the rebels."

I was startled at this. "I thought that after last summer the Queen had the rebels pretty much beaten."

"It had appeared that way until about a month ago, they raided and burned the crops being stored in the royal granaries. Then a week ago they attacked and stole a shipment of money intended as the payroll for the guard out-posts along the western frontier."

When I looked puzzled Sir Galohond chuckled. "I sometimes forget that you don't know the topography of Summer. The western front is our border with the wild lands. All sorts of creatures dwell there. The Orc tribes are Queen Isilidhrindal's biggest concern along with the chaos wastes."

At this point the conversation was interrupted as he pulled the car out onto the highway. "Has the Queen decided what she's going to do with Max?" I asked in an attempt to steer the conversation away from the elven politic situation and onto familiar territory.

"She has, in fact that was one of the reasons I was recalled," Sir Galohond answered. "Your testimony on Max's behalf carried much weight with the Queen. She ruled that Max would be allowed to live and that she should be allowed to learn Elven magic since that is what her body is attuned too. However, the Queen has stipulated that Max swear oaths of loyalty and service to the throne. Max agreed and has now entered the

Queen's service as a handmaiden and a student. If she serves faithfully for the next century the Queen will release her," Galohond said looking thoughtful.

"Why do I get the feeling that this decision is unpopular?" I asked.

"It's not that it's unpopular, it's complicated. Max occupies the body of Siofra Aldalithe she was cousin to the Queen and is heir to the Ducal House Aldalithe. Her blood line is coveted and there is concern about who should assume leadership of House Aldalithe since Siofra was the last direct descendant." For a second Galohond appeared lost in thought. "Queen Isilidhrindal has appointed a regent for the Aldalithe fiefdom until Max's time of service is complete. This, of course, has generated a controversy. There is debate about Max's future once her term of service is fulfilled. Should she be forced to marry one of the nobles from another ducal house who could then assume the Aldalithe mantel? No one believes she should be allowed to assume the ducal seat. The Great Houses don't want the Queen to take direct control of the Aldalithe estate either as that would be a huge increase in the Crown's power. It might provoke a backlash within the Nobel houses." Sir Galohond paused at that lost in thought. Obviously Elven politics were complicated and I was only really listening with half an ear. I was more concerned with what was going on here in St. Louis and as he talked about elven politics I stopped paying attention and focused on the mystery I'd encountered this morning.

Dinner was less romantic than I'd thought it would be with both of us lost in thought over separate issues. The restaurant was dimly lit and had plenty of wood and leather and probably would have been romantic if we'd been in the right mood. I caught myself several times not paying attention to what Galohond was saying and had to bring myself back to the present. Finally after a long pause in the conversation Galohond said.

"A fine pair we make tonight. I'm worried about politics back in Summer and you're obviously focused on the murder this morning. Is there anything about the case that you can tell me? After all it was Caltidiriel Isilidirseer, who was slain."

He said this looking at me like I should recognize the name. "Was she someone I should know?" I asked.

"She was with the rebels last summer when we took back the mask and saved your God-mother or is it father?" he replied.

"God-Father is probably more accurate at this point," I said with a smile think about what my mother would have said about that remark.

"God-Father it is then," he said with an answering smile. "Caltidiriel Isilidirseer was the Captain of Arangalad's guard when we assaulted his castle. She is the second

daughter of a minor noble. The crown has been hunting her ever since the assault." Sir Galohond paused to take a sip of wine.

"Our sources tell us she broke with the rebels after the assault and was on the run from both the rebels and the crown. The crown thinks that she might have been under the influence of the chair and forced into joining the rebels. After the chair was destroyed and she was free of its compulsion, we believe she fled. Apparently the rebels caught her first," he said.

For a moment I just stared at him. "Why do you think the rebels are behind the ritual killing?"

"The description of the murder is similar to the one that happened recently in Summer. We've been able to link the killing to the rebels and their mysterious female leader."

For a moment I sat just staring at Sir Galohond thinking. On the one hand it made sense. After all whoever had bypassed those Eleven wards had known what they were doing. Most humans with enough power would have just blasted through them, instead they'd been parted and the murder had slipped in leaving the wards intact. The problem was that the binding spell had felt distinctly human. In fact it felt like a spell that could have been cast by someone with Guild training.

I decided that since Sir Galohond had been sharing I might as well fill him in on what I'd learned. I quickly outlined the scene of the murder and then what I'd deduced when I'd examined the spells used in the ritual. As I did one of the pieces that had been bothering me fell into place.

"Holy shit!"

I couldn't prove it but I was certain who was behind the killing. The key was the color purple.

"What?" Sir Galohond looked around in alarm. "Morgana what is it?"

I waved at him for a second as my mind raced putting together the details. "I need to talk to Inspector Lee, but I think I know who killed Caltidiriel Isilidirseer and who was behind the rebels this summer."

Sir Galohond reached across the table and took both of my hands.

"Morgana, slow down, tell me what you figured out." My mind was spinning, yet Sir Galohond's touch caused me to pause and look at him.

"Do you remember that my 'God-Father' was assaulted by a criminal named Ambrose Grosvenor and that he used a spell to steal her body and put her soul into her son's body?" I asked.

When Galohond nodded I continued "human magic has certain characteristics unique to each person using the magic. Or perhaps it's more correct to say that when we draw upon the magic, around us, our bodies act as a filter and imprint a distinctive color and pattern upon the magic we wield. We refer to that as the Magic-User's magical signature. The color most strongly associated with the Donegal family is purple. Evaline Donegal's color was a deep dark purple while her son Alastar's was a lighter brighter purple. When Ambrose stole Evaline's body and left her in Alastar's body, Evaline's signature changed to match her son's color and pattern. Today for the first time in months I felt Evaline Donegal's signature. It just took me a while to remember it. It was at the crime scene, that was what felt so familiar about that spell. It was my moth,.. .... er God-mother's magical signature I felt on the body! Ambrose must have been there and cast that spell!" I finished in a rush.

"So if this Ambrose is behind the ritual murders, both here and in summer, then she is also the mystery woman behind the rebels." Galohond said looking at me for confirmation.

I stared off into space for a second. "We have to be careful not to jump to conclusions. The only thing we know is that Ambrose was at the scene of the murder here in St Louis and cast one of the spells found on the victim. If these murders are being committed by the same person or persons as the ones in Summer then there is a good chance that Ambrose is involved in both. If the people committing the murders are linked to the rebels then so is Ambrose. But right now most of that is just guess work," I said.

Galohond waived my objection away and said, "Caltidiriel Isilidirseer was slain while she was on the run from the rebels and if she was killed by this Ambrose person then that just strengthens the tie between Ambrose and the rebels."

I nodded in agreement. "I'm sure there are parts we are still missing but so far this fits and the pattern feels right. Call it woman's intuition" I added ironically. "but I'd be willing to bet that Ambrose is behind this. Why else kill that specific woman?" I mused. "In fact that makes the kidnapping of Evaline last summer make more sense. It also explains why the rebels were so interested in subverting the Guild here in St. Louis. Ambrose was getting even with those who've thwarted him." I said.

After this we both settled back to think and the more I considered it the more it seemed to fit the pattern.

"When Ambrose fled last spring we used every resource available to the Guild to find her and failed. If Ambrose was hiding in Summer that would explain why we couldn't locate her" I speculated.

"But it's impossible," Galohond said, "How could a human gain such power in Summer?" Galohond said, "Human magic doesn't work in Summer, or at least you have the same problem there that we do here. The only magic you have is what you bring with you and you are significantly weaker."

"I'm not sure," I mused. "Maybe she has an artifact or a tool that allows her to use magic in Summer like the mask. Maybe the Athame she stole has something to do with it," I said thinking out loud.

I stood up "I'm sorry to cut our dinner short, but think it's time to leave. I should get in touch with the Guild and you might want to report in as well," I said not at all bothered by the lingering doubt in Sir Galohond's eyes.

# CHAPTER 2

I slammed the phone down in frustration. I'd been trying to get in touch with Inspector Lee but all I'd got was his voice mail. When I called the Guild operator she'd told me that he was unavailable, however I could leave a message. I knew that I could go up the chain of command and get in touch with one of the St Louis Council members, only I didn't really know them that well. On top of which if what Al had said earlier was true there was some kind of political power play going on within the Guild that I didn't really understand or want to become part of. I'd been excited and in a good mood as Sir Galohond drove me home as I continued to think about the situation here in St Louis. When Galohond had parked the car and leaned in to kiss me goodnight I'd been caught by surprise and found myself responding before I knew what I was doing. When he drove away I felt like I was floating up the steps and into the house on a cloud of happiness. My inability to get in touch with Inspector Lee brought those good feelings crashing down. I decided to curb my impatience and try to reach Al in the morning.

Getting ready for bed was a routine event now after being in Morgana's body for this long. It was always a relief to take off my bra after a long day and slip into a silk pajama top. I skipped the pajama pants opting for just the top and panties as I went through my nightly routine. Once I turned off the light and slid in between the sheets I tried to relax. But my mind kept racing.

If Ambrose is back in town and if she was behind the elf's murder then things were probably going to get bad. Because I knew, at least in my mind, who was behind the murders but not why they were being committed I felt a sense of undefined danger. What was Ambrose after? The last time it had been the Athame and that had only been a means to an end. She'd been attempting a ritual that would have vastly increased her power. Was she still after power? That would make sense only there was

something odd about the ritual she'd performed. It hadn't culminated properly, directing the energy into the caster. I ground my teeth for a second in frustration over not being able to report what I'd deduced. Punching my pillow a couple of times I rolled onto my side and slide a pillow between my legs. I'd go in to the Guild Hall in the morning in person and if Al wasn't around I'd get on the Grand Master Davis's schedule and talk to him. He still owed me since the assault I'd led on the rebel elves was responsible for him being freed from the chair's control.

Once I'd resolved to go into the Guild in the morning I slowly drift into a fitful sleep.

\* \* \*

Arghhhhh.... ..

The mental shriek followed by a massive ripple of magical energy caused me to jerk up right out of a deep sleep into full wakefulness.

"What the fuck!?"

I quickly quested out with my senses. The wards around the estate were intact. But I could still feel the magical after shock, from the powerful spell, rippling in the night air. I reached mentally for Edgar, on his perch, and as I climbed out of bed he fluttered to my shoulder. Relieved that the house wasn't under attack I got up and noticed that it was just after midnight, Friday had arrived in dramatic fashion. I rushed to my mother's former sanctum. I flipped on the lights, ignoring the subtle signs of the repair work that had taken place after the events of last spring, and walked over to the large crystal sitting on a special pedestal made of silver and covered in runes, within a locked and warded oak cabinet. I got the crystal and pedestal out careful to speak the keys that unlocked the protective wards before I touch either item. I carefully carried them over to my Mother's desk and sat down. I placed the crystal on its silver pedestal in front of me and focused on the crystal.

Scrying is not one of my magical strengths but I knew enough to operate a scrying crystal. My mother who did have a gift for scrying had crafted this crystal and it was much better than anything I could have made. Because the emanations of the spell that had pulled me from my sleep were still pulsing through the ether I felt pretty confident I'd be able to use this device to figure out what was going on. Someone had just cast a very powerful spell in St. Louis a spell filled with pain if that scream meant anything. I felt a surge of anger. St. Louis was my town and whoever did this, if they hurt anyone, would regret it!

I channeled enough power into the crystal to activate it. Then I attuned it to the magical emanation I was feeling and slowly a faint blue white light formed within the depths of the crystal. In seconds the light resolved into a three dimensional picture, giving me an overhead view of a large house. The house was lit from within by several electric lights but based on the glowing crystals around the house I could tell that a very serious set of wards had been activated. Because my mother's scrying crystal wasn't giving me a view inside the house I realized the wards were blocking scrying.

I used my limited ability with the device and pulled back giving me a larger view of the area. It was easy to see that this was one of the better suburbs of St Louis and it took me nearly a minute to recognize the neighborhood. Suddenly I knew whose house I was looking at I'd visited it a couple of times, while growing up, with my Mother. This was the St Louis Guild Hall Grand Masters house! I focused on the flavor of the magic I'd felt but by this time it was too faint and I just couldn't place it. All I could tell was that it had been something powerful and dark. As I watched the house I saw a Guild cruiser pull up and two Special Agents get out. They approached the house only to stop as the silvery light from the house ward flared. One of the agents reached up to the mic clipped to his shoulder and spoke into it for a few minutes. I assumed he was calling the disturbance in. I snorted at this; anyone with any magical sensitivity within fifty miles of the Grand Master's house would have felt that spell.

For a second I considered going back to bed. But I knew there weren't very few people capable of getting past the Grand Master's house wards. If he was in trouble and needed help then I was one of the few people in the city who could help him. I left the sanctum and returned to my room. I got dressed as quickly as I could, selecting a pair of blue jeans and a black t-shirt as well as my black leather coat. I hurried back to the sanctum and grabbed my ring of unnoticed, the shield ring I'd kept handy since last spring, and the staff I'd become fond of as well.

The next problem was how to get there quickly. I could take my car since I was only about fifteen miles away. But the roads weren't direct and even veiling the car, so I could break every traffic law, it would still take nearly twenty minutes. I looked over at Edgar and decided that the fastest way would be to fly. I went to the desk and opened a locked and warded drawer that contained a few things I'd added since moving back into the house. The first was my Walther P22, mundane weapons were always a prudent backup, the second item was a ring I'd spent several weeks enchanting.

After the events of the spring I'd realized that the quickest way to get around the city would be by air. Using the dragon shape, taught to me by Galohond, while both powerful and fast used up huge amounts of magical energy, if I wanted to arrive and



not be exhausted, I needed a better option. I'd spent considerable effort crafting the ring and I hoped it would prove worth the effort as I slipped it onto my hand. This was a ring of Aether and it allowed me to exercise greater control over the element of air. Because I no longer had a strong affinity for air and because using it for flight is tricky I needed a tool to stabilize some of the variables and make it easier for me. I often use telekinesis for flight, but telekinesis has limitations. It only works well if you're going to stay close to the ground and don't want to travel very fast. To fly far and fast I needed to use Air and to do that safely I needed better control, which is where the ring came in.

With Edgar on my shoulder I walked out onto the driveway and felt him take to the sky. I had thought about shifting into crow shape and following Edgar but even as a crow I would only be able to fly so fast. I lifted my hand with my newly crafted ring and channeled power into it. I felt a sense of excitement as the air hardened around me and then even more as I rose smoothly into the night sky. I quickly gained height and speed as I caught up to Edgar. His caw of annoyance made me laugh and I accelerated past him heading to the Grand Master's residence. As the wind became fiercer I formed a shield of hardened air in front of me to protect me the blast. I knew that if I climbed high enough I would be able to use my ring to condense the air within a protective bubble in order to keep up the pressure density so that I wouldn't become hypoxic. What I hadn't considered was how cold it would be and I was only a little more than a thousand feet up. This was easily solved with a simple cantrap designed to protect MagicUser' s from the cold.

In a matter of minutes the house came into view. By the time I saw it there were already three Guild cruisers parked in front but the ward was still up and no one had managed to get inside the house. I dropped to the ground in a rush of air causing some loose leaves and dirt to spin away on miniature dust devils. The two guild special agents I'd landed next to had been forced to look away due to the wind blast I'd generated and now they looked over at me. I didn't recognize either one but read the name tag on the uniform of the older looking of the two.

"Agent Thompson, who is the senior agent on the scene?" I asked.

"That would be agent Lawson," he said pointing to a special agent over by one of the cruisers talking into a radio.

I nodded my thanks and walked over to him just as he put down the mic.

"Special Agent Lawson?" I asked extending my hand. "I'm Magic-User, Master Class, Livingstone can I be of assistance?"

Hearing my name and rank caused the Agent to straighten up and give me his full attention. I could see him evaluating me and knew that my body's age made him skeptical about my claim to Master Class status. He was too smart to say anything out loud. If I wasn't really a Master Class Magic-User, well there was a penalty for claim rank you weren't granted. If I was a Master Class Magic-User then he'd be a fool to offend me.

"Ma'am we're still trying to figure out what's going on. What we really need is to get through those wards," he said indicating the wards that were still keeping everyone back. "Unless you can do something about them I'd ask that you just stay out of our way. The on-duty Inspector should be here soon."

I nodded and said "Let me see what I can do about the wards." I didn't wait to see the look of skepticism on his face.

Instead I stepped away from him and opened my third eye examining the ward around the Grand Master Davis's house. I wasn't surprised to see that it was both powerful and complex. I could feel Edgar still winging his way here and regretted that I hadn't kept him with me. It would have been useful to be able to examine this thing from a couple of angles. I cast my personal questing spell. The one I'd designed while I'd still been in my original body to map out wards. I watched as it flowed out, in a silver blue wave, mapping the intricacies of the ward Grand Master Davis had created around his residence. I saw that he'd tied the ward to a set of crystals but the overall shape eluded me. I used my ring to harden the air under me and rose into the air so that I could get a better view of the whole ward. I now saw that it had been tied to five crystals forming a pentagram around the house and then at the highest point a capstone crystal had been placed. Based on that and the way the ward descended into the ground I suspected that an equal distance below the house was a foundation crystal making a total of seven stones tying and powering the ward. I also noticed that Master Davis had used the powerful ley-line below the house to fuel the crystals so there was no chance this thing was going to fail when the crystals ran out of power because they wouldn't run out of power.

I floated around the house doing a complete circle before I descended directly across from the crystal above the Grand Master's porch. I briefly considered hammering at the ward in the hope that I could create enough feedback to expose a flaw in one of the crystals and then attempting an assault aimed at shattering the crystal. Once one crystal was gone the ward would become unbalanced and I should be able to start to pry it open. The problem was that it looked like Master Davis had thought of this and any attacking energy would be reflected back at the attacker. There was no simple

solution here. I took a cleansing breath and focused, I'd have to do this the hard way. I'd start by loosening several of the magical bonds at the junction points, then slip enough power between to hopefully corrupt one of the base spells and unbalance the ward slightly. After that I should be able to send enough power through to sever the connection to one of the crystals. Once done with that,.. ..... it looked like I had a couple of hours' worth of work ahead of me.

I centered myself and drew in power, then using my staff I started gently working at one of the magical bonds on the ward. A few minutes later I felt Edgar arrive and sent a command to him to circle above the ward that way I could watch from two perspectives the results of my casting. By the time I'd gotten a second bond loosened I felt Edgar send me a warning me that someone was trying to get my attention. I paused and looked around.

Standing next to me was a plump older woman with grey hair holding a pair of wands and wearing a flannel sleeping robe.

"Morgana Livingstone?" she asked.

"Yes Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I don't recognize you," I replied and feeling sweat running down my back even though it was a cold night.

"There's no reason you should since we've never met. I'm Gwendolyn Grant, I was a friend of your 'God-mother's'. I think we can get through Guild Master Davis's ward faster if we work together," she said.

Before I could answer she turned to the ward and pointed with one of her wands. "I see that you've loosened the bonding here and here enough so that if you push that thread of the spell up I should be able to slip through and deactivate the crystal above Jason's porch."

I saw what she was suggesting and figured it might work but would take all of my strength to lift that part of the spell. (Another part of my mind found it interesting that she was on a first name basis with the St Louis Guild Hall Grand Master.) I figured that in another thirty minutes I'd have the ward down on my own. But if Grand Master Davis's life depended on us getting into his house, the quicker we got in the better, so I nodded. I reached down through my staff to tap the leyline in preparation for throwing everything I had at this ward, when the power from the line flowed up I doubled over with nausea. The muscles in my stomach clenched tightly, making it difficult to breath, as I fought not to get sick. Gwendolyn looked at me curiously.

"What's the matter dear?" she asked in a grandmotherly sort of way.

As tempting as it was trick her into touch the ley-line, like I'd done with Al, I remembered my manners and refrained.

"I think we may be too late to help Grand Master Davis," I said.

"What do you mean too late?" she asked in an academic sort of way.

"An elven woman was murdered today, well I guess yesterday morning now. The ritual that was used had an apparent back lash; it corrupted the ley-line at the scene of her murder. The one here has been corrupted, as well, it feels just like the one at the other murder scene," I replied.

Before I could stop her I felt Gwendolyn reach out and touch the line. I had to hand it to her, the only way that I could tell that she felt what I'd felt was a slight flinch.

"Well, that's interesting. You shouldn't need the power of a line to lift that thread, now girl, let's get to work!"

My opinion of Gwendolyn went up as I turned back to the ward. Without touching the line I drew in magic tapping my bond to Edgar to strengthen and stabilize my power before I channeled it through my staff. I reached out and whispered, "Portio!" I felt the magic push out and I strained against the spell. When I'd barely created an opening I felt Gwendolyn slide the tiniest sliver of power through it and delicately begin to manipulate the crystal across from us.

Abruptly the crystal flared and then went out. As soon as it did the opening I'd been working so hard to hold got much easier. Enough so that I was able to look over at Gwendolyn in time to catch her satisfied grin.

"One down, I think all we'll need to do is two more and the ward will collapse," she said.

I nodded in agreement and returned my focus on the ward. Surprisingly we had to deactivate three more crystals before the ward fell. As soon as the ward was down the Special Agents who'd been waiting rushed into the house. I started forward irritated that they'd rushed in ahead of me when I felt a hand on my arm.

"Why don't we let the Agents do their job for a minute or two before we go in dear?" Gwendolyn said.

"What if they run into something too powerful for them to handle and need help?" I asked.

"Then we'll be right behind them and will help as best we can. But they're trained to work together in teams, to clear the rooms of magical traps while preserving evidence. Unless you've been a special agent you'd just get in the way," she said calmly.

I sighed and nodded. I also realized that I was pretty tired. I summoned Edgar back to me and after he landed on my shoulder I looked around. Instead of three guild cruisers there were now at least half a dozen or more. I could also tell that the on-duty

Inspector had arrived because I'd seen a plainclothes agent enter right behind the first wave of special agents. I turned to Gwendolyn and said, "Shall we go in?"

When we stepped into the entry I noticed that nearly every light in the house must be on which was odd for the middle of the night. We were met by Agent Thompson. "Ma'am," he said looking at Gwendolyn, "I was just coming out to find you. Inspector Bills would like to show you something."

"Lead on Agent Thompson," she said.

I followed quietly in Gwendolyn's wake feeling annoyed, I'd done most of the work bring down the ward and Gwendolyn was getting most of the respect from the Agents. Agent Thompson led us down a hall and through a set of French doors into what must have been Guild Master Davis's sanctum.

It looked like a pitch battle had been fought in here. Furniture had been smash and there was blood all over the room. Near the door was the body of a werewolf killed while in the hybrid form they preferred for fighting. A hole had been burned through his torso the size of a basketball with a magic fire so fierce that the werewolf's regeneration factor hadn't been able to overcome the wound. To the left of the door was what I assumed must have been a vampire, it was pinned to the wall half way to the ceiling. There must have been nearly a two dozen wooden stakes as thick as my thumb driven through the vampire's body. They'd been driven with enough velocity to not only penetrate the body of the vampire but to become embedded in the stone wall behind her. Across the room from us was another set of doors that lead out onto some type of inner garden or courtyard. The doors had been shattered and across the threshold the lay the body of a human and judging by the wand next to his hand he'd probably been a Magic-User. His head was several feet behind his body.

Gwendolyn made grunt of disapproval and lifted her robe to step over the blood and debris trailing behind Agent Thompson through the destroyed sanctum. I followed and noticed that the smell of blood got stronger as we got to the shattered doors and moved into the courtyard. This area was obviously one that the Guild Master used for several purposes. It was a rose garden with well cared for plants growing all around sides. In the center of the area was a summoning circle inlaid with silver. The sweet perfume of the roses mingled with the smell of blood, vomit, and shit to create an odor that left me gaging. I didn't need to look into the circle to know what I'd find. I forced myself to look never the less.

The St Louis Guild Hall Grand Master had been an older man, bald from a receding hairline that he'd been too proud to turn into a comb over. His bearded face did nothing to hide the fact that he'd died in agony. Inspector Bills was a tall woman of

African heritage, thin with almost no curves, and a serious expression. She extended her hand to Gwendolyn. "Ma'am, thank you for coming."

"Of course," Gwendolyn replied, "although it's Morgana here who you should thank. She would have had the ward down soon even if I'd never showed up."

At this inspector Bills turned to me. "Ms. Livingstone, thank you for responding. When I arrived on the scene, you were already focused on the ward so I thought it best not to interrupt."

"You're welcome inspector," I said loud enough to be over heard by the agents around us and then gestured to the Guild Master. "It appears that Ambrose Grosvenor has struck again."

For a second there was stunned silence as my two companions stared at me. "What are you talking about?" Inspector Bills asked.

"The Elven woman who was murdered yesterday was, I believe, killed by Ambrose Grosvenor." I gestured to the scene in front of us. "This murder looks just like the ritual that was used during the murder yesterday in the Kennedy Forest. I'll need to check the spells here, to be sure, but the magical signature on the body of the Elven woman yesterday was Ambrose's."

By the time I'd finished talking every eye in the courtyard was on me. Edgar broke the stunned silence with a caw and I stepped forward opening my third eye to examine the body, as grisly as it was, closely. I ignored everyone else as I did this choosing instead to focus on the scene in front of me. I spotted the three spells I'd seen on the body of the elven woman. The color signature was that of my mother's former body. Along with the crimson color and the faint shadowy purple, I'd yet to identify. I walked around the body examining the spells from every angle and committed them to memory. Then I pulled out a crystal and repeated the process I'd used earlier to take an impression. Even though I'd committed this scene to memory it would be useful to have an impression for further study.

After a few minutes I felt a hand again on my arm. I looked over into the eyes of Gwendolyn.

"Could I have a word, dear?" she asked.

I followed her through a different door out of the courtyard and found myself in a hallway. She turned to peer up at me.

"I think it's time for both of us to go home for the night." Before I could object she continued. "I'd like to talk to you later today about your belief that Ambrose is back in St Louis and that she is behind these murders."

When I nodded, Gwendolyn continued. "You're staying at your godmother's place?" Not waiting for confirmation she said, "I'll be over at one, we can have lunch and talk. Please do me a favor between now and lunch."

"What would that be?" I asked.

"Don't tell anyone else that you suspect that Ambrose Grosvenor is back in St Louis."

\* \* \*

The sunlight streamed into my bedroom as I rolled over and wondered how much of the day I could get away with spending in bed. After I'd left the crime scene last night I'd called my mother. Even though it was after 3 am in St Louis my mother was awake on the west coast. Hearing his strong masculine voice made me feel better. At first I'd been reluctant to explain what was going on but before long I told him everything. Including my belief that Ambrose was back in St Louis.

"You can trust Gwendolyn she is one of my oldest friends," my mother said, "But I want you to promise me Alastar, that you'll be careful. I know that you're much more powerful than you used to be but don't get over confident."

When my mother referred to me with my original name I knew that he was serious. So I promised him that I'd be careful and hung up. With my mother's advice in mind I'd gone to bed. I'd forgotten to turn off my alarm so when it woke me at 7 am I was ready to kill something. I lay there for nearly twenty minutes before I realized that no matter how tired I was I just wasn't going to be able to fall back to sleep. Since I had a few hours until my lunch date with Gwendolyn decided that I might as well use the time to get a workout in. I changed into gym clothes and slipped on my running shoes and headed out. There is a trail that runs around the inside of the Donegal estate and gives a pretty good workout. After two laps and about 30 minutes of running I returned to the house to get cleaned up.

Shortly before one o'clock I felt a tingling at the edge of the wards on the estate which told me that a Magic-User of some power was approaching. After last night I'd sent out messages to the staff to take the day off and had left the wards up not wanting to take any chances with Ambrose in the area. The 2008 silver Jaguar XF glided to a smooth stop at the gate. The driver's side window rolled down I caught a glimpse, through the camera mounted above the speaker, of Gwendolyn before she pushed the call button. I didn't wait to talk to her through the PA system instead I clicked on the icon that opened the gate and flipped my laptop closed. One of the changes I'd made to the security on the estate after I'd moved in was to modernize it. I could access any

camera, lock the house down, or open and close any gate from my laptop. My mother had relied on either the staff or wards to take care of security and, in my opinion, failed to take advantage of some of the advantages of modern technology.

I took a look at myself in the mirror before heading down to the main entrance to meet Gwendolyn. I was wearing comfortable jeans, a nice dark sweater, and a pair of soft khaki mid-calf boots. I'd brushed my hair out and let it hang down in a loose mid-night curtain. I turned away pleased with the casual yet feminine look head down to meet Gwendolyn.

I reached the main doors before Gwendolyn had the chance to knock and opened them in time to see her puff to the top of the steps leading up from the driveway to the porch.

"Good afternoon Morgana, may I come in?" she asked.

"Please," I said holding the door open, "it's too cold to stand around outside."

Gwendolyn stepped over the threshold into the house and I again felt the faint tingle at the wards telling me a powerful Magic-User had crossed them. Once inside Gwendolyn turned to look at me.

"I must say you look quite fetching."

I blushed and said, "May I take your coat?"

"If you'll indulge an old lady I'd like to keep it. I get chilled easily," she said running her hands along the fur collar of her winter coat.

"I've got lunch ready, if you'll come with me?" I asked headed toward the kitchen.

"I gave the staff the day off after last night so you'll have to endure my cooking," I said.

I'm not the best cook around so I'd kept lunch simple. I'd heated up some vegetable soup (that Chelsea had made two days ago) and left it at a low simmer on the stove. There is a breakfast nook off the kitchen and I'd set up two places with a pitcher of lemonade and a pitcher of water already on the table. In the center of the table sat a large salad bowl with wooden spoons, and a covered dish with freshly heated bread, (it was really bread that Chelsea had made and I'd just heated it in the oven). Sunlight streamed through the windows making it a pleasant place to have lunch.

"I hope you're okay with soup and salad for lunch," I said feeling slightly nervous.

"Oh, this is fine dear," Gwendolyn said and took her coat off and folded it and then laid it on the chair to one side and sat down. "It's so nice and warm I think I'll chance taking my coat off after all."



I noticed she was wearing a full length purple wool dress with an interesting belt of woven silver links at the waist. The color of her dress reminded me of my former magical signature color. I dipped up two bowls of soup placed them on a tray and brought them to the table. I sat a bowl in front of each of us.

"Please help yourself," I said indicating the salad and bread.

We ate in silence for a few minutes.

"I think it's been over a year since I visited here." Gwendolyn said trying to make light conversation.

"Oh, are you a friend of my God-Mother, well I should say God-Father now," I asked? I'd decided earlier to pretend that I hadn't already talked to my mother about Gwendolyn.

"I've known Evaline for years. I've been away working in South America and only returned to St Louis a couple of days ago. To be honest I had no idea that Evaline had a God-Daughter. I knew Anthony pretty well but because I've spent so much time in Brazil, I never got to know Alastar," she said sounding sad.

"Oh," I said mostly just to fill in the pause. "What have you been doing in Brazil?"

"I went down there at first to do research but then got a position at the Academy of Magic-User's in Rio. In fact I'm only back in St Louis on sabbatical. I'm teaching here this semester and presenting my research. Then I'll probably return to Rio."

"What is your field? Can you tell me what you were getting ready to present?" I asked feeling curious.

"My field is ritual magic I've been in Brazil studying the rituals of the native people. However, the paper that I'd intended to submit has nothing to do with ritual magic. I discovered some interesting ancient spells and I've compiled them into a book I wanted to present it first to the Academy of Magic-Users here in St. Louis since they sponsored my initial research. After that I'd planned to tour several other campuses and Guild Halls talking about it," she said pausing every now and then to eat.

"But enough about me, why do you believe that Ambrose is back in St. Louis?" she asked.

I collected my thoughts for a moment and then laid out my observations from the first and second murders. Gwendolyn was a good listener since she didn't interrupt me once as I outlined my theory.

"I agree with your assessment of the binding spell," Gwendolyn said. "The other spell is tricky; it's obviously part of the ritual, I'd be inclined to call it one spell with three separate components all working together to achieve a single purpose. The tainting of the leyline is an interesting side effect since it doesn't really serve a useful

purpose and makes no sense as the objective of the rite." Gwendolyn mused in a distracted sort of way. "This is one ritual I'm not familiar with but I plan to spend some time this afternoon doing research on it."

"It seems to me that these killings are all linked. Human sacrifice is the blackest kind of magic; its use goes back to the dawn of time when ancient priests and shaman used them to raise huge amounts of power. If the killings are connected perhaps Ambrose is trying to chain each ritual," she said.

At my confused look she continued. "There is a way to use the power of one ritual to build upon and increase the power the next allow each ritual to build until a crescendo of power has been reached and the actual spell is cast. It's a common practice in ritual magic and doesn't require blood or human sacrifice. Ambrose would need some sort of focus item to store the power from each ritual every time he casts it until he releases it in the final spell." At this Gwendolyn sighed.

"We still don't know the ultimate spell Ambrose is trying to fuel. And of course all of this is conjecture since we don't have any hard evidence. I'll head over to the university archive and do some research and see what I can find out."

"Thank you for believing me," I said with a sense of relief.

Gwendolyn reached out and patted my hand. "I don't understand current Guild politics dear, but don't let them bother you. Now here's my card. The cell phone number listed is current if you think of anything else please call. Oh, and I'll make a couple of phone calls. I think that the Council of Elders would be interested in knowing that Ambrose is back in St. Louis."

I took her card and then walked her to the front of the house where she left with the sound of tires crunching on the concrete of the driveway. I made sure to tighten the wards behind her and then returned to my mother's sanctum. Mom had been doing research on the Athame just prior to the events of last spring. Maybe I could get a clue by reviewing some of her notes.

"Damn," I swore quietly. I'd spent the last hour looking through my mother's notes on the Athame of Tartarus and now if I didn't hurry I'd be late for class. I only had one class today and it was from 4 pm to 5:30 pm twice per week. I briefly considered skipping but decided against it. I could use the research section of the Academy's library track down a couple of ideas on the ritual.

I got my books, collected Edgar and got into my car as quickly as I could. Today's class was one that I found interesting since it was on celestial magic. I'd not paid much attention to this subject when I'd gotten my degree the first time through school but now that I was strongly gifted in this area I found it fascinating. The traffic at this time

of day was mostly headed out of St. Louis so I didn't have any trouble making it down to the Academy of Magic.

The professor for this class was a dweebie little fellow with the classic professor look. Most of the time I paid attention in this class However today I just couldn't focus, not with everything else going on. He gave us a break after 45 minutes and it took all of my self-control to return for the second half of the lecture. Once class was over I headed to the library to see what I could discover about the ritual when my cell phone went off. The ring tone told me that it was Galohond.

"Hi," I said feeling awkward and stupid all at once.

"Morgana?" Sir Galohond asked and then continued without waiting. "I've been recalled to Summer. I don't have any details yet but there has been an attempt on the Queen's life and the port city of Norovaul has rioted against the throne."

I felt stunned at the news. "Um, okay will you be able to send me a message when you're back in Summer?"

"I'll do what I can but communications across the realms are tricky. I just wanted to say good-bye."

"Galohond, be safe. I've got a bad feeling about all of this," I said.

"I will. Be careful as well! If your right and Ambrose is back you may be in more danger than I." After a short pause he said "I've got to go. Bye."

The phone clicked off and I just stood in the hallway feeling stunned. Events were starting to happen too quickly. There was more going on here and right now I felt like I was blind.

With a renewed determination I headed to the library. The library at the St Louis Academy of Magic is one of the more extensive libraries on magic and magical theory in the United States. The entrance is similar to many libraries these days with doors that open automatically and a scanner to walk through to make sure you're not taking something from the library without checking it out. The floor is covered in industrial carpet and the ceilings are high with lots of glass and lights. The library is very modern without a card catalog in sight, everything in the library can be found by using one of the computers near the entrance. I sat down at a work station and started searching through the collections. I knew the elements of the ritual. I'd broken those down earlier so I figured I'd study the parts and see if I couldn't puzzle out what Ambrose was trying to do.

After several hours of reading I had a headache and what I thought was an educated guess based on the elements I'd observed at the site of the ritual. From reading my mother's notes on the Athame of Tartarus it could be used in several types of rituals

and was rumored to have a couple of specific powers. One of these powers was the ability to slice open the veil between worlds. I'd seen Ambrose use the Athame to escape on two occasions so I knew this to be a valid observation. If she could part the veil with it and travel to other realms I wondered if she could use it to by base wards within this realm as well. That was a disturbing thought. Another power of the knife was its ability to cut a soul free from the host body without killing the body. If my mother's hypothesis was right this meant that a soul could be freed and stored for later use. Any kind of magic that used a soul to power the spell was by definition illegal and even research into the theory could get a Magic-User in hot water with the Guild. So I didn't have any real ideas about how Ambrose would use a stolen soul but I didn't put it past her to do it. I tapped my finger against my lips as I pondered the situation.

Thinking back to my conversation with Gwendolyn, I wondered if Ambrose was harvesting the souls of the victims of her ritual and then planning to use them in the final spell as a power source. Whatever she was up to it involved a lot of power, I wondered if she would try to use a ley-line like the last time? There were other ways to get a boost of power. She could target a specific day like the summer or winter equinox. Or a holiday, for example Halloween was only five days away. I shuddered, suddenly sure, Ambrose would perform her greater rite on Halloween. There would be at least one more murder and I still had no idea what she hoped to achieve.

Power in and of itself was meaningless, right? If I could figure out what Ambrose was after I might be able to put together the pieces and be there the next time she killed someone. My thoughts were interrupted when the library announced it would be closing in fifteen minutes. I got up and dropped the books I'd been looking at in the return bin and headed for the exit. Edgar cawed hungrily reminding me that neither of us had eaten since lunch and it was now almost eleven pm.

I hit a fast food joint on the way home opting for a burger and fries. Nothing like a bag of greasy goodness for dinner! I thought biting into my burger as I drove toward the Donegal estate.

\* \* \*

I stood in my mother's sanctum and looked at the summoning circle inscribed on the floor. The circle was made of silver and was actually three circles. A greater circle with runes inscribed at each of the cardinal points. Inside the greater circle were two smaller circles one designed for the summoner and the other designed to hold that which was summoned. In addition to the circle the house had been constructed on a

ley-line, which I intended to tap into for additional power tonight. I needed answers and I needed them fast. The last time I'd summoned Procellarum Oceanus looking for answers I hadn't had her true name. So I'd beseeched Luna the moon goddess for aid. Working a summoning without the name of the spirit being summoned carried a degree of risk. Now however, I had Procellarum Oceanus true name so I could summon her with less risk, although she would demand a price for her services.

I made sure the curtains were open and that there was plenty of moon light streaming into the sanctum from the windows and the skylights. I pulled out a soft cloth and started cleaning the silver of the circles along with the runes. Satisfied that it was clean and ready I stepped into the circle I planned to use to hold Procellarum and placed a single crystal glowing with power in the center and then carefully stepped out. Satisfied with my work so far I walked around the room turning off the lights. Edgar was perched behind the desk at the far end of the sanctum and I strengthened my bond to him knowing that he would anchor me during the spell.

Even with the lights off there was enough silvery moon light to allow me to navigate the room. Next I walked over to the desk where I'd left a potion. I unstoppered the draft and drank it quickly feeling slightly sick at the overly sweet taste. The potion had been brewed by my mother and would heighten my magical perceptions and expand my awareness. When I turned back to the greater circle I dropped the dress I'd been wearing to the floor. Naked I walked carefully back to the circle mindful not to step on any of the freshly cleaned silver lines. Once in the lesser circle I planned to use to keep me safe during the casting I channeled power. First into the greater circle where I felt a slight snap as the circle activated and a boost in energy as it focused the magical power into me. Then I activated each of the lesser circles.

Now I began to draw in power starting with what I could feel in the world around me and then reaching down into the ley-line beneath the house. The power of magic filled me causing my skin to tingle and my hair to rise as though full of static electricity. I'd never felt more alive!

"Procellarum Oceanus servant of Luna I summon thee," I said pouring my will and my power into the words. The room was silent with a stillness so perfect that it was unsettling.

"Procellarum Oceanus, silver light, handmaiden of Luna, I summon then." I repeated pouring more power into my summons. Now the feeling in the room changed and a tingle of expectation filled me as the light of the moon turned into a bright silver spotlight casting the room into stark relief.

"Procellarum Oceanus, mistress of hidden knowledge and greatest of Luna's daughters, thrice thou art named, thrice and done, I SUMMON THEE!" I finished my summons and sent a burst of energy into the ether.

There was no clap of thunder or burst of light, one second the circle across from me was empty the next a naked woman whose skin and hair was pure silver stood facing me. For a second my breath caught in my throat I had forgotten how perfectly beautiful she was. But her beauty was alien in its perfection, a cold beauty that somehow reminded me of the vast emptiness of space. We regarded each other for several heart beats in silence.

"Why have you summoned me, maiden?" Procellarum asked.

I gulped somehow Procellarum knew that this body was still a virgin and yet I felt like I'd passed some type of test. She'd referenced it during our first meeting, but it still unsettled me, that she knew I was a virgin.

"I need answers, Ambrose Grosvenor has returned to St Louis and there have been a couple of murders. I need to understand what is going on so I can stop her," I replied.

"Knowledge is power child and knowledge of hidden things is particularly dear to me. What do you offer in return?" The question came out in a series of rich, clean, chiming tones that sounded so pure they made my ears hurt.

"At your feet is a crystal filled with magic, human magic. I offer that to you in exchange for answers." I held my breath and waited for her reply. Within the crystal was power not a tremendous amount of power but there was more to this gift than just the magical energy. Creatures like Procellarum were beings of spirit and energy; their ability to directly interact with the human realm was very limited. In Procellarum's case she could only appear physically when summoned under the light of the moon. Human magic would give her the power to manifest within the human realm and appear to us and interact with us. At least until the power I was offering gave out which would happen pretty quickly depending on how long she remained in human form.

"I accept your gift, child. Ask your questions." With that she reached down and picked up the crystal cupping it in her hand.

"There have been two murders committed here in St. Louis, the victim's lives where used to power the ritual. What is the purpose of this rite?" With that I held up the crystal I'd used to take an impression of the magic on Grand Master Davis's body and with a trickle of energy caused the image to appear. I felt Procellarum focus on the image for a second then look back at me.

"That rite has not been performed for many years child and it is very dangerous. It is a rite of ascension and must be performed six times. The person casting the spell must devour the souls of the six victims during the final casting." Procellarum said, "Each of the lesser rites may be performed anywhere but the greater rite must be done in a place of power and during a time when the veil between the realms has thinned."

My mind raced a rite of ascension, what did that mean? Was Ambrose so ambitious that she was trying to make herself into a super being, a god? I hadn't even thought that such a thing was possible. It made her previous attempts to increase her power seem pitiful and weak.

"Like All Hallows Eve" I interrupted my mind racing. "The moon will be full during Halloween this year," I whispered.

"Yes, daughter" Procellarum said her alien voice emotionless.

"But six souls, as horrible as it is, can't be enough power to become a god!" I thought out loud.

"No, it's a catalyst like the tiniest of pebbles dropped onto a hillside can cause an avalanche of rocks."

"It's thaumaturgy! She plans to use the principle of like to like, when she devours those souls, she will devour the souls and spirits of all around," I said my mind now working in over drive. "Halloween is the perfect time with the veil between the realm of the living and dead is at its thinnest all she'll need is a place of power close to a cemetery or a large battle field and there will be plenty of spirits to consume."

"Child, if this spell is cast the hunger won't be limited to the dead," Procellarum said.

"You mean she will be able to consume the souls of the living as well?" I whispered.

"Yes, for as far as her power can reach. Probably a mile possible two, as you mortals measure distances, depending on how much power she is able to raise with her rite," Procellarum stated.

I nodded feeling horrified by what Ambrose was attempting.

"Our deal is complete," Procellarum said. I glanced at her and watched as the soft blue light faded from the crystal. Procellarum then dropped it to the floor where it shattered against the stone. Then she vanished.

# CHAPTER 3

Once again the ringing of my cell phone pulled me from sleep. I glanced at the clock beside the bed and saw that it was just after 7 am Saturday morning. Ugh, I'd only got 3 and a half hours of sleep. After I finished my summoning I'd called my mother. Even though we'd already talked I felt like I needed advice on what I'd just learned. There was a part of me that just couldn't accept that it was possible to turn one's self into a god. My mother had been appalled but hadn't discounted what Procellarum had said. In fact he was a little worried that I'd chosen to go to Procellarum for help since the cost that beings like Procellarum charged were never really what one that at first.

After I got off the phone I dug into the spell books my family kept in the estate library. There wasn't much on these kinds of rituals just the basic principles, which made sense because an actual spell book explaining how to do this would have been illegal to own. I picked up the phone on the fourth ring.

"What!" I snarled into the phone.

"Morgana Livingstone? My name is Amber Meyer, I work for the St. Louis Guild Council as the office manager. The Council is holding a closed session today at 1 pm and your attendance is requested."

"Ugh, Okay," I said still confused and sleepy.

"Can I let Master Beck know that you'll be attending?" she asked.

"Do I have a choice? Never mind, yes, I'll be there. I assume the meeting is at the Guild Hall?" I asked.

"The meeting will be in the River Room on the seventh floor of the Guild Hall. I'll let the acting Grand Master know." And with that the phone disconnected. I lay back and just relaxed into the feeling of soft memory foam. Who calls at seven in the morning,



well I suppose the Guild does, if there is an emergency, and if they want to make sure certain people attend. Tired as I was I knew that I'd not be able to fall asleep so I decided to get up. I tossed back the covers and groaned as I climbed out of bed. I was wearing one of my old t-shirts and a pair of dark blue panties the hard wood floor felt cold under my bare feet as I headed into the bathroom. I paused for a second to glance out my bedroom window. There was frost on the ground and it was thick for this time of year which made me wonder if it would be a cold winter.

When I'd been living in my own place I'd used a local gym to get a workout in almost every day. The family estate had excellent places to run as well as a gym down by the training rooms. I headed down to the ground floor after slipping on a pair of grey sweat pants with the letters PINK across the butt, a sports bra, and a light blue t-shirt. Since finding myself in Morgana's body I'd had to adjust my workout routine. I wasn't as strong or as fast as I used to be but I was much more flexible. I warmed up by doing sets of jumping jacks, followed by crunches, and push-ups. I went through the rotation three times before I started to feel sweat beading up on my forehead. I slowed down now and started stretching, I'd discovered that the splits were pretty easy for me now and I could bend over backwards so far that I could place my palms on the floor while standing and look forward between my own legs.

After twenty minutes of stretching I turned to the heavy bag and putting on a set of pink Evergel gloves started working it over. Combinations of punches and kicks slammed into the bag making it bounce. I had spent quite a bit of time building up my new body's muscle memory trying to train it for an emergency. Besides this type of cardio was very good exercise. I tried to make it to the dojo twice a week but with current events in St Louis I thought that it might be tough to get there this week. After an hour of punching, kicking, and continuous calisthenics I headed back up to my room to get cleaned up.

I took a long hot shower making sure wash my hair thoroughly after my workout. There were several products in the shower that I hadn't even known existed when I'd been male. Body wash, exfoliating cleanser, shower gel, body lotion, shampoo, conditioner, a loofah and a sponge. This had been part of the training I'd received in New Orleans at the direction of Arthur Livingstone. At Mrs. Broussard's school for young ladies, proper hygiene had been a point of emphasis. Looking back on it now I knew that it had probably been a good thing, at the time it had felt like one embarrassment after another. I'd felt more like a boy playing dress up in my older sisters clothes than a woman. Now I was able to go through the routine without much thought like I'd been doing this sort of thing my whole life.

I went into my walk in closet with a towel wrapped around my torso, the top edge tucked between my breasts, and a second towel wrapping my hair. "What should I wear?" I asked myself. After several minutes of thought I decided to go with a casual professional. After all this body was only 19 and I wouldn't be expected to dress too professionally. I picked comfortable pair of khaki slacks, a black blouse that buttoned in front and showed a bit of cleavage, and knee high leather boots. After getting dressed I took several minutes to blow drying my hair and then tying it back in a bun. Once done I called Edgar to me and headed down to find a late breakfast at least I didn't have to worry about classes today, it being Saturday.

Chelsea was busy in the kitchen which made me wonder if she was bored with her job since most of the time she was cooking just for me. I hadn't even thought about entertaining so she hadn't had to cook for a dinner party since my mother left. She generally made lunch and then left dinner in the refrigerator for me and at lunch she always cooked enough for three. This was because Steven usually ate lunch here with us, it was a bit early, but I didn't see him today. Still it was nice to have her around since she'd been here as far back as I could remember. Some of my fondest memories growing up were sneaking into the kitchen to snatch chocolate chip cookies, while she pretended not to notice.

It was only 11 am but Chelsea knew me well enough to know that I wanted to eat. She quickly cooked an omelet with a side of hash browns and brunch was served. Once Edgar and I had eaten we headed out into the city. I figured I'd head into my office and check on things there before going over to the Guild. I'd kept the same office that I'd had before switching into Morgana's body. Most of my clients were confused about the young Magic-User Master Class working, at least in name, with Alastar building wards. But in the almost eight months since the switch I'd proven my ability with warding was as good as Alastar's had been. Business had been good lately there were plenty of people looking to add extra security. I parked in my normal spot and walked toward the warehouse on N. 1st St that had been converted into offices and shops. My office was on the second floor and even though it wasn't the nicest office around it was the result of my hard work and I felt proud of it. I climbed out of my Charger and Edgar flapped up to my shoulder. The click-clack of my heels sounded loud to me in the half full parking lot as I maneuvered toward the main entrance.

Suddenly the noise of tires squealing on pavement caught my attention. A large white van pulled into the parking lot and accelerated toward me turning sideways at the last minute and skidding to a stop. A sliding door flashed open and three large guys piled out of the back. Abruptly Edgar cawed a warning and I reacted without thinking.

I ducked just in time as a wooden club about three feet long flashed through the space where my head had just been. With my movement Edgar took to the air and I continued forward turning my duck into a front roll to get as much distance between me and whoever it was attacking from behind. I got to my feet and focused on bringing up a body shield using my shield ring. It was a good thing since one of the guys from the van had pulled out a Taser and fired it. The two darts hit my body shield and bounced off. I glanced back at the guy with the club and was surprised to see that it was a woman with pointed ears and then she vanished.

"Crap!"

She'd used a veil and a good one if she could pull it off while I was watching that meant she had some serious skill.

I sent a wave of kinetic force at the three men in front of me hoping to knock them down and turned to look for the woman, I opened my thirdeye as I moved. I spotted her easily enough now that I was using my magic sight and sent a stun spell at her. I was surprised when she raised both hands and crossed them at the wrists palms facing me and blocked my spell. A pair of bracers on her wrists flashed with light as they unraveled my magic and absorbed the energy. At Edgars mental warning I turned back to face my original attackers. The three guys were climbing back to their feet but what was really shocking was the driver. He'd jumped out of the van after I'd knocked down his buddies and, since I was using the third-eye, he suddenly started to glow with an amber light. As I watched his clothes ripped and he grew nearly a foot while sprouting fur all over. In less than two seconds a werewolf in full hybrid battle form standing nearly seven feet tall faced me. Then he lunged forward with dazzling speed. At the same time the woman who'd countered my stun spell attacked. I trusted my shield to protect me from behind and thrust the palm of my right hand at the werewolf hitting him in the chest with a telekinetic strike. The force of the blow caused the werewolf to scream in pain and rage. I could hear bones snapping as he was lifted into the air and then he was flying backward over the van. At that moment I felt my shield come apart and then the energy powering the shield just bleed away.

I spun again to face the Elven woman and saw that she had pressed her bracers into my shield. The enchantment had obviously been designed to work against a Magic-User because they'd taken my body shield down in next to no time. She stepped in close and threw a straight right cross at my jaw. I barely had time to get a hand up and only managed to partially block her punch redirecting most of the force of the blow to the side. I reacted without thinking and snapped a front thrust kick into her belly hard enough to hear her breath whoosh out. A shriek from Edgar brought me around again

in time to see him physically attacking my first three opponents. The smallest of the three pulled out a lighter and with a flick brought up a flame he then cupped his hand over the flame spoke a word. Then his hand caught fire with no apparent harm. He pointed his burning hand at Edgar and a gout of fire sprayed into the sky. Edgar darted to the side but I could feel his pain as the air around him heated. Edgar darted under a parked car flying low and disappeared from sight. The guy with the fire apparently didn't care as his torch caught the car and in less than a second it exploded.

By this time I'd ducked to the side but I wasn't fast enough and the concussion generated from the car exploding tossed me to the ground. After a second I managed to focus on my shield ring and with some difficulty brought up a new body shield. It was much weaker than my original shield but it provided some protection. Before I could get to my feet the elf was standing over me her club held in both hands. "don't you ever quit?" I said as she brought the club down.

My shield flared holding up for the moment and I lashed out with a kick to her knee. I added as much telekinetic energy to the blow as I could and felt the satisfying crunch of bones breaking. She screamed and toppled to one side dropping the club and grabbing her knee. This gave me enough time to get to my feet. Of my original three opponents two were on the ground but moving. The guy with the fire was still standing and now his whole body was wreathed in flame but the fire seemed to energize him rather than hurt him. Obviously he was a MagicUser who'd specialized in elemental magic. Fire must be his element. He faced me and started laughing.

"If you surrender now bitch, I'll take you unburned to the Great One."

"Hey, flame boy, eat lightning!"

I said and cast a spell I'd only use at great extremis. I pointed my hand at him and spoke the power Word that released the spell. Out of a clear sky lightning struck with a clap of thunder that left my ears ringing. For a second every muscle in his body stood out, locked up with the intensity of the electricity running through his body, and then he collapsed his fire guttering and then going out. The roar to my right pulled my attention from the magic I'd just cast as the werewolf dropped onto me causing my shield to flare and throwing me backwards into the side of a parked car. The force of my impact left me feeling stunned as the car crumpled around me.

Before I could move the werewolf reached down grabbed me and lifted me into the air with his hands around my throat. Again my shield flared and he pressed his claws into it. I felt my shield ring heat up and knew that the anti-magic element of the werewolf's curse was disrupting my energies and his immense physical strength was taxing the power of the shield. If my shield failed again things would get ugly. My

shield ring was on the index finger of my left hand on my right index finger was another ring one I'd spent several weeks working on and even though I'd not fully tested it I had no choice but to use it. I pointed my Ring of Gelidus at the werewolf and spoke the Word to shape and release the energy. A spear of cold so intense you could see it struck the werewolf in the chest. In an instant he was flash frozen. I shattered his hands which were still wrapped around my shielded neck with a burst of telekinetic force and rolled to the side. By the time I got to my feet in time to see a sedan slam to a stop next to the van and a man and a woman jump out. The man was tall with dark hair and an athletic build. The woman was a couple of inches shorter than me and had red hair and a killer figure. The man pulled out a pair of wands and sent a bolt of energy at the tallest of my original three attackers who'd just got back to his feet. His skin had turned a metallic color and I noticed for the first time he was holding a short sword. His partner looked at the two new comers and grabbed the guy with the sword and shouted something I couldn't quite hear. They vanished with a pop and reappeared next to the elf.

The woman who'd also jumped out of the car saw the three of them and made a fist with hand and then appeared to throw a punch at the three from nearly twenty feet away. The elf woman now standing, with no apparent discomfort on both feet, crossed her wrists repeating her spell blocking technique successfully. Again there was that popping sound and the three vanished only to reappear in the van. The engine roared and they took off. I thought about taking a parting shot but suddenly felt cold and exhausted. I glanced down and saw a piece of metal sticking out of my left thigh. I thought in a detached sort of way, that it must be part of the car that blew up. I guess I'd not gotten my shield back up quickly enough. Suddenly I felt light headed and dizzy. I slid to the ground vaguely aware of Edgar landing next to me with a caw of concern. After that things got confusing. I remember feeling cold, and then the faces of the EMT guys lifting me onto a stretcher and into an ambulance.

\* \* \*

At some point I must have passed out because the next thing I knew I was in a hospital bed looking at the slightly off white walls and listening to the monotonous sound of a ceiling fan. It wasn't long before a handsome doctor walked in greeting me by name.

"Ms. Livingstone how are you feeling?" he asked.

"Like I just went five rounds with Anderson Silva," I replied.

"That's to be expected from what I've heard of your attack. You're a very lucky young woman," he said in a slightly condescending way.

"The piece of metal that hit your leg didn't do any serious damage. It missed all of the major arteries and nerves. We took an x-ray while you were out and your femur is fine. The bad news is that it took nearly a dozen stitches to close the wound and there will be some tenderness and a scar. The good news is that you'll recover fully in a few weeks," he said.

"How long have I been out?" I asked.

"Only a couple of hours, when you were brought in you were pretty out of it from blood loss," he said in a gentle sort of way patting my hand.

I closed my eyes and felt for Edgar. There was a caw from the corner of the room and I looked over at my familiar feeling relieved. I knew on one level that he was okay because if flame boy had killed him I'd have felt it. Abruptly the realization that I'd just killed two people hit home and I started shaking. I felt the doctor squeeze my hand.

"Are you alright? I can get you something to help calm you down," he said.

I shook my head. "I'll be alright in a minute. I'd rather not take any drugs if I don't have too."

"Okay, when you're ready, there are a couple of people waiting to talk to you," he said.

I really didn't want to talk to any Guild agents but I knew that I had too. I probably also needed to get in touch with that Amber person and explain why I'd missed the Guild Council meeting.

The doctor had only been gone for a few minutes before the door opened and by the click-clack of high heeled shoes I could tell that a woman had entered my room. Two men followed closely behind her. It took me a second to recognize them but the first two people who'd walked into my room were the man and woman who'd helped me. Behind them came Inspector Lee.

Both the man and woman wore non-descript business clothes. This did nothing to hide the fact that the woman was a knockout. She was a natural red head with a figure that most women would kill for and, by the way she dressed, she knew it. The man was just over six feet tall with brown hair and unremarkable features. I'd be willing to bet that beneath his loose fitting clothes he had a very fit body because he moved with the grace of a fighter. They gathered around my bed and there was a second of silence before Inspector Lee spoke up.

"Morgana, how are you doing?"

"Considering the fact that I was ambushed on my way into my office by a team of Magic-Users, a werewolf, and an Elf, I'm okay." I said trying to make a joke.

"Who are your friends?" I asked weakly.

"This is Major Kevin Puller and his partner Captain Elizabeth Gunning they are with the Guild Special Operations Section," he replied.

For a second I couldn't breathe, Special Operations Section that meant that these two were Hounds of Heaven the Guild's bloody dogs of war. Their reputation within the magical community was ruthless. I couldn't speak for several seconds as my mind raced. They'd shown up while I was being attacked and saved me. That was just way to coincidental.

MAJ Puller extended his hand which I reluctantly shook noticing how firm and callused it was.

"Please call me Kevin, and my partner goes by Ann." He said

"You were following me!" I said feeling confused.

The woman, Ann, nodded "yes, we were. After the Elven woman was killed a few nights ago a squad from our team, the 4th SOS, was deployed to St Louis. When Grand Master Davis was killed our team leader, Colonel Black, pulled in the rest of the 4th and decided to put the most powerful members of the St Louis Guild under covert protection," she said.

"A Lucky thing for you" her partner commented dryly.

"If you're feeling up to it, we'd like to move you for your own safety from here to the Guild," Inspector Lee said.

"Why am I still in danger?" I asked.

"We think that you're being targeted by the Queen of Spades and we'd like to make sure that she doesn't get her hands on you," MAJ Puller said in a very straight forward and strikingly military way.

"The Queen of Spades, who is that?" I asked.

"Excuse my partner," the redhead said, "That's the code name we use for Ambrose Grosvenor."

I felt my mouth drop open at the obvious confirmation that I'd guessed correctly. At my distressed look she continued.

"Don't worry dear, the Hounds are in St. Louis, we'll make sure that nothing happens to you."

For some reason I didn't feel any better.

The process for checking out of the hospital surprised me with the amount of paperwork required. I felt like I was buying a house before I'd finished signing forms in triplicate. I got a second shock when I went into the restroom to get dressed and discovered several bruises including one on my cheek from the punch I'd only partially blocked. I took a couple of minutes and called Chelsea and asked her to put together a bag for me which Steven delivered before I'd finished the checkout process. Even though I was now wearing fresh clothes I felt stupid as the nurse pushed my wheelchair down to the curb where Inspector Lee had parked a Guild sedan. Getting out of the wheelchair I realized that I was sore all over and my leg ached like crazy. However, I refused to show it as I climbed into the back seat.

Inspector Lee and CPT Gunning sat up front with MAJ Puller sitting in back with me. I noticed right away that Steven was following us in my Charger so I didn't have to worry about getting my car. We arrived at the Guild Hall without any problem, however as we pulled into the parking garage I saw several people in front of the Guild Hall holding signs.

"What's all that about?" I asked pointing to the protesters as we entered the cool darkness of the garage.

"You haven't heard?" Al asked in surprise.

"It started yesterday. There have been a series of demonstrations in front of the Guild Halls in L.A., New York, and D.C.. This morning the protest in L.A. got a little violent."

"What are they protesting?" I asked feeling curious.

"Apparently the lesser magical talents feel that the Guild doesn't represent them. They're saying that the Guild is too harsh, arbitrary, and relegates them to second class status. They have a list of reforms their demanding, including representation on each of the local Guild Hall Councils," Al said as he maneuvered the car into a spot close to the elevator. By his tone of voice I could tell that he thought the demands ridiculous.

I got out of the car and limped toward the elevator. I couldn't help thinking that the 'lesser talents' had a pretty good point. Just then Steven caught up with me and passed me the keys to my car and told me that the Guild had promised him a ride back where he'd left his car. As we took the elevator up I looked over at Al.

"So what are we doing?"

"We'll need to ask you some questions and take your official statement. We're required to provide a copy to the mundane authorities. After that there are a couple of



members of the St. Louis Council who'd like to talk to you and then I think the Hounds will want to take you to a safe house for the night." Al said looking to MAJ Puller for confirmation.

After Puller nodded I said, "What if I don't want to go to a safe house?"

"Morgana, your life is at risk. Obviously Ambrose has targeted you for some reason we need to keep you safe and away from her until we've got her in custody," Al said looking worried.

The elevator stopped at a level of the Guild Hall I'd never visited. It opened on plush carpet with floor to ceiling windows to one side and a security/receptionist desk a few paces from the elevator. Sitting behind the desk was a Guild Special Agent in uniform along with a male receptionist. I could tell without opening the third-eye that both of them had several active spells running and were carrying magical items.

Al nodded to them and the Magic-User/receptionist and said, "Inspector Lee, room 3 is available."

We walked around the desk and down a well-lit hall and stopped by a room with the number three in brass on the door. Al opened it and I saw a decent sized room with a nice oak table and eight chairs around it. The far wall was floor to ceiling glass and to one side sat a small coffee bar with a Keurig, a tray with nice set of mugs, and a large variety of K-cups.

"Would you like something to drink?" Al asked.

"I'd marry you for a cup of coffee," I joked sitting down and stretching my leg out with a sense of relief.

Once everyone had a beverage the questioning began. Inspector Lee pulled out a digital recorder and placed it on the table.

"Alright, Magic-User Master Class Morgana Livingstone, can you please tell us what happened today outside your office building?" he said.

I'd been expecting questions so I took a moment to sip my rich dark coffee and collect my thoughts. I told them everything I could remember. Inspector Lee made me tell it from start to stop twice. Then he started asking questions. What did each of the attackers look like, what spells had they used, what objects of power, the questioning lasted for over an hour. A knock on the door interrupted Al as he tried to pull more details out of me about the Elven woman. A plain looking middle aged woman, slightly overweight, with her hair up in a bun, and thick glasses stuck her head in.

"Inspector Lee, I'm afraid I must interrupt your deposition. Ms. Livingstone, MAJ Puller, and CPT Gunning are invited to come up to acting Grand Master Beck's office," she said.

I recognized the voice as the woman who'd called me this morning. Amber Meyer if I remembered correctly. Both of the hounds pushed back from the table and stood up. I grimaced as I stood up, the pain meds were starting to wear off and my leg was hurting. I followed along behind them doing my best not to limp. Luckily the trip to the acting Grand Master's office was a short one. We went to an executive elevator and rode it up another floor. This time there wasn't any obvious security or a receptionist at the elevator instead it opened on a large space with an artificial fountain in the middle and several skylights providing an abundance of light. Around the sides were a series of doors which obviously led to offices. Amber led us to an office with an oak door and knocked before opening it. The office was huge with a set of comfortable leather couches to one side but the office was dominated by a large oak desk. The room was filled with sunlight from the late afternoon sun streaming in from a set of floor to ceiling windows along the far wall. The man sitting behind the desk stood up when we entered and came around to greet us.

He wore a spotless grey suit with a bright yellow tie and white shirt. He must have been just over six feet tall with dark hair liberally sprinkled with silver. He extended a hand to shake each of ours and when his large hand engulfed mine I got a sense of power and vitality from him.

"I'm glad to meet you Morgana, I knew your father Bernard very well and I consider your God-Father a friend. I've been worried about you ever since I heard about your attack," he said. Then looking at MAJ Puller. "Thank you Major, Captain, according to the report, if you hadn't arrived when you did, well, I'd hate to think about what might have happened."

"Just doing our job, sir," MAJ Puller replied. "Please call me Kevin and my partner goes by Ann."

We sat down and Master Beck said, "Please call me Phil." Turning to me he got right to the point. "Morgana, why would Ambrose want to kidnap you?"

I'd been thinking about that ever since I woke up in the hospital. "I think that Ambrose is setting up a rite of ascension and that she's using each ritual for two purposes. The first is to sever the soul of the victim and store the energy generated during the ritual for the sixth rite which will be the last and finale rite. The second reason is to pay back those that betrayed her, bested her, or got in her way," I said.

I then explained what I'd learned from my research (leaving out my summoning of Procellarum) and my discussion with both Gwendolyn and my 'God-Father'.

"Sir Galohond said that a murder in an identical ritual happened in summer which means that Ambrose has committed three murders and has three to go," I said.

"Make that four completed rituals," said MAJ Puller.

The room was silent for a moment except for CPT Gunning who shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"What do you mean four?" I asked.

MAJ Puller glanced at CPT Gunning who was looking off into the distance before he looked back at me. I wondered what was going on since this struck me as unusual behavior for the Captain.

"Out in California almost six weeks ago the Special Operations Section raided a training camp for a group we'd been monitoring. They were suspected of having radical, illegal ideologies and were actively working to overthrow the mundane government here in the United States. It turns out that Ambrose was running the camp using it to recruit followers we don't know what her ultimate aim is, because the individuals we captured seemed to think they were going to create a new ruling class where those with magical power rule those without."

"What race was the victim?" I asked feeling like there was something important I was missing.

"He was a human," the major replied.

"That makes two elves, and two humans," I said thinking out loud. "I wonder when the first elf was killed."

The Hounds gave me a quizzical look but Master Beck started to nod.

"Ritual magic is based on patterns. The more powerful the ritual, the more complex and subtle the pattern, for example I'd be willing to bet that the first victim was the elf sacrificed in Summer. Then a human followed by an elf and then Grand Master Davis. The pattern is elf, human, elf, human so the next victim would logically be an elf," I said in a rush.

"Which doesn't explain why you were targeted," said Liz.

"No but you can bet there was a reason. Ambrose does nothing without a purpose," Kevin said.

Suddenly a black berry on Kevin's hip started buzzing. He reached down and after glancing at it said "excuse me. I need to call into our HQ. Is there a secure phone I can use in private?"

"Certainly, Amber can take care of you," said Master Beck and he walked to the door and opened it. MAJ Puller followed him out leaving CPT Gunning and me sitting in the office. After a few minutes of silence I said "I didn't know there were female Hounds."

She made a grunting noise and her face turned slightly red. Very softly she muttered, "Neither did I."

I wasn't sure I heard her so I said, "Excuse me?"

"It's pretty unusual, I normally do undercover work, but there are a few of us." When she looked at me I could tell that whatever it was, that had been bothering her, was now under control so I figured it would be best not to pry.

Master Beck returned after a couple of minutes and sat down.

"Morgana, I think that under the circumstances you should move into one of the Guild safe houses. I know that you want to help and as a member of the Guild and a Master Class Magic-User you are very capable. But National Guild Council of Elders has decided to turn this investigation over to the Special Operations Section," he said.

I felt my face flush and I started to get angry. "Master Beck, I'm a citizen of the United States and a member in good standing of the Guild. I'll decide where I go and where I won't and I've got no intention of hiding in some safe house."

"I thought you might feel that way. So I took the liberty of calling your 'God-Father' he is expecting you to call." He looked somewhat smug as he said this.

"Fine, but it won't make any difference."

"What won't make a difference," Kevin said walking back into the room.

"Me, calling my God-Father," I said.

MAJ Puller nodded in a distracted way and turned to CPT Gunning.

"Ann, we've got to go. The Colonel thinks he's found the Queen of Spades and we're pulling everyone in for an immediate assault," he said.

CPT Gunning instantly jumped to her feet. "Let's go!"

Kevin turned to Master Beck. "I know that you wanted us to stay with Morgana but this takes priority. Perhaps you could give her a guild special agent for protection." Without waiting for an answer both of the hounds rushed out.

\* \* \*

I followed Inspector Lee as we headed into a restricted area in the basement of the Guild Hall. The room had a cold stone floor and a series of light fixtures along the left and right walls provided enough light to see. I had my overnight bag hanging from one shoulder and Edgar sitting on the other. I'd borrowed a staff from the Guild armory (mostly to use for taking weight off my injured leg) and it made a thumping sound as I limped along. Ahead of us the hallway opened into a large circular room

with two other entrances. In the middle of the room was an arch standing alone on a pedestal.

After I'd talked to my mother, he'd guilted me into agreeing to accept protection for one night. His argument was that if the hound's raid was successful the threat would be past but there was no point in taking unnecessary risks. This decision led me to where I now stood contemplating the gate. Traveling by magic is tricky business. It takes power and skill to part the veil between worlds and step into another realm of existence. It's a different thing to move your physical body from one place to another within the same reality, skipping the intervening distance, by magic. If the Magic-User is strong enough and has studied this type of magic there is a spell called blinking. One of the Magic-Users I'd been fighting earlier today had used that spell to 'blink' or teleported around grabbing his accomplices and then jump into the van to escape. In order to use that kind of magic the destination must be in sight and the range is very limited. It's also very tiring.

Traveling by magic over long distances is a very different thing altogether. It takes power and a very solid grasp of the location (both the destination and the current location). About a hundred years ago the problems presented by traveling had been solved by the crafting of a 'gate.' A physical artifact tied into a ley-line for power and then linked to another gate. The only effort required by a Magic-User wishing to use the gate was to speak the correct key and send enough energy to activate the proper glyph above the arch. As these artifacts had become more advanced as the artisans crafting them had learned how to link more than one gate. For example the gate I was currently looking at had the glyphs for Chicago, New York, Seattle, and San Diego's Guild Hall gates.

I could travel to any of those Guild Houses from here and after talking to Master Beck I'd decided on San Diego. There was a safe house not far from the Guild Hall, close to the beach, and I'd never been to San Diego so there was very little chance of me being recognized. In addition to traveling to the safe house by gate Master Beck had insisted that Inspector Lee accompany me as additional protection. I still felt like this was over kill but I channeled power into the glyph and spoke the key. The air in the arch changed from a transparent view of the other side of the room here in St. Louis to a shimmering silvery field of subdued light.

I looked over at Al and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Yes, but let me go first," Al responded stepping forward and before I could protest he stepped through the gate. I gave him a slow three count and then followed.

As I walked through the gate I felt a strange tingle move across my skin followed by second of dizziness that almost made me lose my balance. The feeling quickly passed and I looked around. The gate in the San Diego Guild Hall was also in what I presumed was the basement. At least there were walls all around without any windows and the room was circular which made me wonder if this was something done because of the magic involved or out of a sense of artistry. I spotted Al waiting for me along with a middle aged woman with grey streaks in her hair.

"Hi, I'm Special Agent Walker," the woman said. "I've been asked to help Inspector Lee and see to it that you make it to a safe house for tonight."

I walked over to her and shook her hand. "Thanks for the short notice hospitality. I know this must be a pain for you."

"Don't worry about it dear. If it weren't for the protesters this wouldn't even be a concern."

"Protesters? Al said something about protesters earlier and I saw some at the St Louis Guild Hall. I didn't know they were demonstrating here as well," I said.

"There have been peaceful protests for most of the day at all of the larger Guild Halls around the country. The protest in L.A. and New York got a little out of hand and Special Agents had to disperse the demonstrators. We've been pretty lucky here with only about a hundred folks carrying signs and they got a permit so it's legal."

I felt confused; I'd heard something about protests today but hadn't really understood the magnitude of the event. We headed up a set of stairs and then used a freight elevator to get into the attached parking garage. A heavily armored SUV waited for us and Agent Walker jumped in behind the wheel with Inspector Lee taking shotgun. I tossed my back into the back and settled in behind Inspector Lee with a groan. My leg was now hurting something fierce and I'd only had a couple of Motrin for the pain. The doctor had given me stronger medication but I hadn't taken it since there was a concern for my safety. If someone made another attempt to grab me the last thing I wanted was to be out on pain killers.

As we approached the entrance to the garage a guild cruiser got in front and behind us and turned on their lights. The crowd outside was more than a hundred and they wasted no time shouting at us. The agents were well trained and we pushed through the crowd slowly and steadily. Once we were a couple of blocks away we got onto the highway and the cruisers turned off their lights. After a mile they dropped away and we proceeded alone.

It had been early evening in St Louis but it was only dusk here so I looked around curious since this was the first time I'd visited San Diego. In about twenty minutes

we'd gotten off the highway and headed into Coronado. The house we stopped in front of didn't have a driveway and was packed tightly with its neighbors. It was a small three bedroom bungalow and looked well maintained. When I saw Agent Walker pull out an overnight bag I realized I'd have two babysitters and feeling irritated headed into the house.

\* \* \*

Colonel Black looked around at the hounds waiting with him in the main assault element. The Command Post for this op was a couple of blocks away and would be run by MAJ Puller because the Colonel had decided to take the field for this mission himself. If the Queen of Spades was really here then he'd be needed, as the only Master Class Magic-User with the 4th SOS, he was the only Hound in St. Louis with the power to deal with her. There were three ten person teams maneuvering onto the objective at that moment. Each team was on foot and veiled, they would report in once they were in position. Additionally there was a scout sniper team with the building under observation and a UAV overhead, so far all the activity appeared to be normal.

The objective itself was a warehouse on the corner of E Carrie Ave and Hall St. Hall St runs along the western side of the Mississippi and this area consisted of several miles of warehouses, gravel and shipping companies, and other industrial businesses. During the day the warehouse looked fairly normal, which was to be expected, it was a cover for the true purpose the facility. It was a staging area for the organization the Queen of Spades had been building. As far as Colonel Black had been able to determine it was also used to move weapons and people around the country without the local authorities knowing.

"Dog Lead, this is the Dog Pound. All dogs are in position switch to tactical," MAJ Puller said over the radio.

"This is Dog Lead, roger, switching," Colonel Black replied.

His assault force consisted of four up-armored SUVs with sixteen hounds. Each vehicle had lights and radios and Colonel Black reached down and switched from the command net to the tactical frequency.

"All dogs this is dog lead, report."

"Dog One, is green," came the response from the first dismounted team announcing they were in position and ready.

"Dog Two, is green," the team two led said in a calm professional voice.

"Dog Three, green."

"Blood hound, is green," said the spotter for the two man sniper team in over watch for the mission "we are in our primary position."

Colonel Black knew that this meant that the sniper team was on the tower just north and west of the objective.

"Dog Lead, this is the dog pound. We are green, mission is a go. Command has authorized weapons red and free."

"Dog pound, this is dog led, roger pushing." With that the first vehicle started moving east along E Carrie Ave toward the warehouse. The three other vehicles moved up in a tight formation behind the lead vehicle. Very quickly Colonel Black in the second SUV caught sight of the main entrance to the warehouse just as the door opened and a pair of men in coveralls carrying large duffel bags, stepped out.

"Dog lead, this is blood hound, contact, two tangos. Engaging."

"Hit it!" Colonel Black barked into the tactical net and the lead SUV accelerated into the parking lot and raced toward the entrance.

The first of the two guys spotted the SUVs and reacted by reaching into his duffel bag and pulling out a gun. He only got it halfway out before his body arched in pain and then dropped limply to the ground. The second guy tried to duck back into the building but two rounds from the sniper team dropped him before the door was open.

The Hounds of the 4th SOS, moved with the smooth efficiency developed during long hours of training. The four SUVs spread into a line abreast and screeched to a halt in front of the main entrance. The doors flew open before they'd stopped moving and all of the hounds piling out. Colonel Black was the fourth person through the warehouse door as the hounds moved in. Around the back of the building the loading dock flew open as a spell from the ten-man team assaulting the back hit the doors. Another team moved from the ground by the north wall flying up to the roof using telekinesis. Once on the roof they cut a hole, right over the middle of the main storage floor, with a specialized spell and dropped through the opening into the warehouse. The last team breeched the south wall, with a similar spell to the one used by the team on the roof, coming through from the side.

The radio chatter was minimal as the teams moved into the building. MAJ Puller started to get nervous. There should have been several fire fights, or at least reports of contact, by this time it was way too quiet. He looked over at CPT Gunning as she watched the video feed from the UAV over the objective.

"Dog lead, this is dog two. I've got an IED! I say again IED!"

"ALL DODS THIS IS DOG LEAD GET OUT!" Colonel Black shouted into his mic but it was already too late.



The sound of the explosion shook the command post nearly a mile away. The UAV overhead showed it all. Each of the corners of the building blew out and then a second and third set of explosions ripped the building. The whole structure just sort of collapsed in a cloud of dust and debris. In less than a minute the building had been reduced to rubble. As the dust and smoke started to thin MAJ Puller could see that a couple of small fires had sprung up over parts of the wreckage.

"Oh God," Kevin said in horror looking at the screen. In an instant the biggest disaster to hit the Hounds of Heaven in all of Guild history had happened. In one operation 46 seven hounds had just died. With an effort of will he pulled himself back from that thought, there was a chance some of the hounds had survived. Emergency rescue was needed now. He reached for the phone to call the Guild and begin the rescue operation that had been a contingency that was always planned for but as far as he knew this was the first time it had been necessary. As MAJ Puller turned away from the UAV provided picture to focus on the emergency procedure checklist he failed to see CPT Gunning's satisfied grin.

\* \* \*

I'd taken a long shower (being as careful as possible not to get my bandages wet) after unpacking my few belongings. One of the items that Chelsea had sent at my request was a special crystal. It was one of the ones designed for communicating over long distances that my mother had enchanted before her body had been stolen. It was linked to a crystal that I'd given to Sir Galohond several weeks ago so that he could send me messages from Summer. It wasn't perfect for communicating since you had to hold the crystal cast the spell that powered it and then speak your message. The magic of the crystal transmitted the message to the crystal it was linked too where the message was held until the second crystal was activated by its owner. I'd been waiting for a message since Galohond left the day before and hadn't gotten anything. Now sitting on my bed I focused on the message crystal which instantly glowed in response indicating it held a message! I activated it with a trickle of power.

"Morgana I hope things are well with you." I heard Sir Galohond's voice as though he were standing in front of me. "Summer is in chaos. Things are far worse here than I thought. The Crown has had to put several cities under martial law and two of the frontier provinces have rebelled. The Queens forces have spotted creatures out of chaos wastes helping the rebels. So in addition to rebellion we're dealing with the minions of chaos within Summer."

"The rebels have been doing everything they can to capture the nobility, focusing on those responsible for the frontier fiefs, and have used a despicable spell on them when they refuse to join the rebellion." He paused for a second and then continued.

"Morgana, they have discovered a way to remove the soul of a captured noble and swap it into the body of a peasant loyal to the rebellion. Peasants have very little magical power and aren't much of a threat individually. The rebels are keeping these 'new' peasants as object lessons for freshly captured nobles. It's a very effective tactic and when combined with powerful magical oaths, taken freely, a way to rapidly increase the power of the rebellion. Many of the minor nobles have gone over rather than risk losing their body and power. We know all of this because we managed to capture two of the rebelling lesser nobles and, upon putting them to the question, discovered the truth. No one has been able to describe the spell being used since it's a closely guarded secret. Apparently the rebellion is supported by a female known only as the 'Great One.' She is the person with the power to move souls from body to body and has become the most wanted woman in the kingdom. However none of this could have happened so quickly or be this wide spread without the support of someone of importance with the kingdom. The crown is convinced there is a traitor; unfortunately we've not been able to learn the identity of this person."

"Worse yet the Queens children Prince Glandor Isilidhrindal and Princess Aradiliel Isilidhrindal have just gone missing and presumed taken. The Queen is frantic to find them. I've called up my war-band and plan to help in the search. The Queen won't focus on anything except finding the twins so this has become the highest priority. I'm glad you're in the human realm where things are calm and safe. I think of you often, be well."

I sat in stunned silence my mind spinning. What the hell? All at once there were riots here, open rebellion in Summer. Ambrose was actively working a Great Rite of Ascension and the world in chaos. The Guild would be fully focused on the protests here and wouldn't want to devote additional resources to tracking down Ambrose, assuming that the Hounds of Heaven didn't catch her during their raid. Was it possible this was all connected? Was Ambrose powerful enough to pull all of this off? What if Ambrose hadn't set this up and there was a third party? I wondered if all of the turmoil in Summer was just a ruse aimed to keep the authorities busy while the real enemy focused on a completely different goal. Get the monarchy distracted with riots, rebellion, and a desperate search for the Prince and Princess so that they missed whatever it was Ambrose or Ambrose's master really planned. I was probably being paranoid and there was no evidence of another actor. It just seemed to me a bit

implausible that Ambrose in less than a year had been able to set all of these events in motion. I decided that I needed to get another opinion and went looking for Inspector Lee and Agent Walker.

I pulled my bathrobe around me and headed into the living room. The TV was on and both Agent Walker and Inspector Lee were sitting on the couch watching a news report. CNN was on and a picture of St Louis along the river not far from the Arch was on the screen. I stepped up behind the couch in time to hear. "we don't know how many of the Guild's security force were killed when the warehouse exploded but as you can see local fire fighters and rescue teams are working the site."

"What happened?" I asked.

Al looked up at me his face pale. "I think that's the warehouse where the Hounds thought they'd cornered Ambrose. It looks like it was a trap. I don't know if Ambrose died but the building blew up with the entire assault force inside."

"We don't know that!" Agent Walker said.

I sat down on the couch between the two with a sinking feeling in my stomach. Events were spinning out of control and I still didn't know how to stop.

# CHAPTER 4

**M**oonlight in a silvery shimmer illuminated the mountain clearing and the great circle that had been prepared for the upcoming rite. The clearing itself overlooked a valley that led to Aearoneithel the Capital of Summer. The city itself sat on an island in the middle of a large lake that dominated the valley. The island was closest to the northern shore and a mighty bridge connected it to the mainland. From here on the mountain side to the south and west of the lake, one could barely make out the lights of the capital as they shimmered in reflection of the silvery waters.

Along one side of the clearing a pavilion had been erected and Princess Aradiliel Isilidhrindal entered it one step behind the Great One. Her brother Prince Glandor Isilidhrindal had been dragged in a few minutes earlier and now lay upon the floor bound and gagged. The werewolf guarded the entrance to the pavilion grinned at the memory of the hunt.

The Princess had talked her brother into a brief escape from the stress of the capital and all of the turmoil in the kingdom. They had left with a small group of Elven nobles to go for an afternoon's ride in the country. The Great One knew where to have the pack waiting and when the Elven nobles came by the ambush had worked perfectly, particularly since the elves hadn't been expecting firearms, and then when the Princess had turned on her brother and knocked him out with a wellplaced stun spell the fight had been over. The pack augmented with elves loyal to the Great One had slaughtered or captured every member of the royal party. After the fighting they'd moved fast traveling to this clearing where they'd met the Great One and more members of the movement. Those here with the Great One had already prepared the ritual circle and with the moon up the rite could be performed.

"What do you suppose the Great One wants with those two?" the werewolf asked the vampire standing guard with him. For a moment he didn't think the vampire would answer but then the creature turned to look at him.

"There will be a rite tonight, I believe, that only one of the twins will survive," the vampire said in a cold amused voice.

Prince Glandor sat up and looked around the pavilion blinking. At first he seemed confused but then he grabbed at his chest and squeezed the hard pectoral muscles beneath the silken shirt. Then quickly he reached between his legs and felt for the first time his manhood. After confirming that it was actually there he looked around the pavilion. There were only two other people conscious. The red haired human woman and the female vampire watched him closely.

"How do you feel?" The voice of the woman carried an odd echo quality that made the Prince wince and the tent seemed to get darker when she spoke. Then with a grin he leapt to his feet.

"Like a new man!" With a laugh he held up his hand and spoke a word. A globe of light appeared hovering above his hand in a vibrant shade of green with gold and silver lines of light weaving through the globe.

"I would have never thought it possible! I have my brothers' body and his power!" the new prince said and threw his head back in a laugh.

"Are you satisfied with our deal?" As the woman spoke the light given off by the new prince's sphere dimmed but he hardly seemed to notice.

"Of course! What will you do with her?" the new man asked.

"Don't worry; presently she won't be able to reveal your secret. You are now the elder, the heir, and the more powerful twin in body and magic. Soon the throne of your mother will be yours!"

At this the beautiful elven woman on the floor moaned. The new prince reacted quickly walking over to the side of the pavilion where their gear had been piled and drew out a set of manacles. He swiftly locked them onto the princess's wrists.

"There's no point in fighting. I'm stronger than you now, and even if that weren't true, it would still do you no good since you're wearing the Irons of Balchamarth," the new prince said gleefully.

Suddenly the princess's eyes came into focus and she stared up into her brother's face. "Who are you and why do you look like me?" At that she reached up to touch her throat. "What's wrong with my voice? Why are my wrists bound? What's going on?"

The new prince again burst into glee-filled laughter. "Why my brother, don't you recognize your twin?" At the confused look on the face of the new princess, the new Glandor took a couple of steps back so that the prisoner could see him better.

"I used to be called Aradiliel but the name hardly suits my body. I'm more of a Glandor don't you think?" This time his laugh rang had an almost hysterical edge.

"Aradiliel, I don't understand. What have you done?" the former prince said.

"The Great One has fixed the wrong of our birth! Let me see if I can help you understand." With that Aradiliel reached down and grabbed Prince Glandor by her long blonde hair and pulled her painfully into a sitting position. Then he spoke another word of power and a shimmering oval shaped surface appeared and in its reflection Glandor got her first look at her new form.

"You see brother, well I suppose sister now fits, the Great One used the power of her Athame to move my soul into your body and your soul into my former body. I am now the heir and the twin with the greater power while you are now the frail princes."

"This can't be happening." With that Glandor turned her head to look at the Great One. "Who are you? Did you do this to me? Why?"

"Simple princess, your sister entered my service with only two requests; she wanted the throne and she wanted your body. I have fulfilled the second request and soon I will fulfill the first. I'll leave you two to say good bye to each other it is almost time for the rite."

With that both the vampire Monique and the Great One left the tent. When they did it seemed to get brighter and the air was somehow easier to breath. It was nearly half an hour before the new prince strode out of the pavilion and his delighted smile conveyed the pleasure he'd taken from the conversation.

"When do we begin the rite?" he asked Ambrose.

"You and some of the guards will depart for the human realm. We must keep up the illusion that you're our prisoner. Once I'm finished here I will join you in the human realm," she said.

Suddenly Ambrose spun around red hair flying out. "My Athame!" She rushed into the pavilion closely followed by the prince and Monique. The new princess was on her feet, her hands were still manacled but she clutched the Athame in her hands and in front of her a four foot gash in the fabric of reality glowed. Even as the princess ducked into the hole Ambrose reached out her hand and said, "Redire!" The Athame jerked free of princess Glandor/Aradiliel's feminine grip and flew into Ambrose's outstretched hand with a solid thump. Princess Glandor/Aradiliel pitched herself head first into the tear which sealed itself a second later.

"We lost him!" Aradiliel said with her brother's masculine tones.

"Not for long!" Ambrose snarled. "Monique gather a squad I'm sending you after her!"

The vampire bowed and raced out of the pavilion shouting orders.

"I still need a sacrifice," Ambrose said softly. The atmosphere in the tent got considerably colder and darker as a pair of shadows darted around Ambrose in an unnatural display.

"Great One, there is a hunting lodge only a few leagues from here. It is a place frequented by nobles, I'm sure we can find a suitable replacement there."

Lead the hunting party yourself Aradiliel, oh, and from this moment on you are Prince Glandor Isilidhrindal do not answer to any other name. If you are to take his place you must keep up the deception from now on, do you understand?"

"Yes Great One!" the new man said. Then he rushed from the pavilion to begin organizing the raid on the lodge.

\* \* \*

The ripple of power from the ritual caused Sir Galohond turn and focus on the direction where the power originated. Another rite had been performed. Suddenly he was very afraid for the lives of the Prince and Princess. Sir Galohond and his war-band had been attempting to track the rebel force that had kidnaped the royal twins under the open stars. It was slow going since the rebels had used every trick to disguise their trail and the poor light made it a difficult task. The ripple of energy from the ritual gave Galohond a direction and a rough distance. Galohond figured he must only be a few leagues away. Sir Galohond didn't have to say anything as he turned his horse and started riding toward the source of the energy wave. His warriors closed in around him and within minutes they were moving along a dark mountain side headed toward the source of the spell.

Suddenly the gem on his bracer glowed and the voice of Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal filled the air.

"Sir Galohond, did you feel the disturbance?"

"Yes, my Queen. I'm headed to the source now," he replied.

"Good, you are the closest. Once you get the site call me and I'll come through with my guard. We will encircle and assault this place together!"

"As my Queen commands" Sir Galohond replied.

It took about thirty minutes for the clearing to come into view. Galohond knew at once that it was already deserted. Mindful that it could be a trap he ordered Randgos take a squad and scout the clearing. Next he activated the crystal on his bracer. "My Queen?"

"Are you at the site of the spell?" came the impatient query.

"Yes, my Queen."

"Make way!" With that Sir Galohond felt a twisting of reality and a sphere light hung in the air spinning with every color of the rainbow. This was one of the powers that the ruler of Summer possessed she could travel in an instant to any place within her realm if she knew where she wished to be. Out of the light a huge white stallion leapt with Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal on its back, behind her rode a hundred of Summers finest knights in full battle gear. The Queen was outfitted for war, wearing form fitting battle armor in silver and green. She was tall, as she sat on the back of her white stallion, her long blonde hair and mighty war spear Tathanir made an impressive sight. Above her Gwethdadaaiel, a dragonet and her familiar circled looking for threats.

Sir Galohond and his entire band dropped to their knees before the queen. With an impatient gesture she ordered them to their feet.

"Is that the camp ahead?" the queen asked.

"Yes, your majesty," Sir Galohond answered.

They could see the site of the ritual between the trees including the young woman who'd been sacrifice. With a cry the Queen roared like thunder into the clearing. When there were no magical traps Sir Galohond breathed a sigh of relief. Jumping back into his saddle he led his tired war-band into the clearing.

Besides the circle dug into the earth and the dead elf there was little to see. The sun was just cresting the horizon and with the fresh light Randgos called Sir Galohond over.

"Sir, look here." He indicated an area where the grass was depressed in a rectangular fashion. "I think they had some kind of tent or perhaps platform set up."

"Your Majesty!" The shout came from an older elf, one not wearing armor. Instead he wore loose fitting robes of green and gold and was carrying a staff of dark twisted wood. The Queen walked over to him.

"Yes, Duke Elentaure what have you found?" The Queen asked.

Sir Galohond recognized the name Duke Aranion Elentaure was one of Summers foremost wizards.



"The veil is weak here. An enormous amount of magic was used to tear open the veil, enough for a large force to move from Summer into the realm beyond."

"Do you know which realm?" the Queen asked.

"It has the feel of the human realm," the Duke replied.

The Queen turned to the Elves watching here. "We are close! I can feel both Glandor and Aradiliel's essence. They were here, alive, and neither was killed in this place."

"My Queen!" Came a shout from one side and pushing his way through the assembled warriors a young knight in green and black armor knelt before the Queen.

"Report Sir, Manmion Galavir," the Queen said.

Again Sir Galohond recognized the name. This Knight was a famous hunter there were few indeed who could trick him or get away from him once the hunt had begun. There were plenty of stories about Sir Galavir the hunter and the creatures he'd tracked and killed, including trips into the realms of Chaos.

"My Queen there are tracks made by a large party departing to the west and then returning. I also detect a hint of smoke in the air. The hunting lodge of Annuaegas lies to the west it belongs to House Aldalithe. It is likely that the rebels raided the lodge and found someone there to use for the sacrifice."

The Queen nodded. "Sir Galavir, I agree with your assessment. But I cannot spare anyone to go investigate. The trail is fresh and I will catch this villain if I have to track her into the wastes of chaos."

Behind Sir Galohond and to his right there was a slight gasp. He turned to look over his shoulder and was startled to see the former Lady Duchess Siofra Aldalithe who was now called Lellwen Dionissis. The former human thief known as Max was now the ward and a handmaiden of the Queen. Sir Galohond was surprised to learn that she was here with the Queen. But Siofra had always been very powerful if Lellwen had learned to master some of that power she would be quite useful.

"My Queen surely we should help. There might be injured Elves that are in need assistance," said Duke Elentaure. This caused Sir Galohond to refocus on the conversation in front of him.

"I will not divide my force, nor will I turn aside when we are this close," she said.

At the Duke's reproachful look the Queen softened a little. "Alright Aranion, this much I will do." With that she drew in her power and opened another travel sphere.

"Go my Duke, this portal will take you to the palace. Bring back guards and physicians. I'll hold the portal open for the ten minutes. If you are not back I'll close it and we will proceed to the human realm."

"As my Queen commands," the old Duke said and despite his age leapt into the saddle and raced into the sphere. He returned with two minutes to spare. A squad of ten guards and a pair of healers, based on the speed of the return they must have been part of a reserve force the Queen had standing by. Once they'd departed the clearing the Queen started casting. In seconds the veil had parted and the Queen's one hundred Knights plus the one hundred dragoons and cavaliers of Sir Galohond's war-band had crossed into the human realm.

As Sir Galohond road through the veil he noticed that the sun was several hours higher in the sky. The air was crisp and to Sir Galohond's left there was a mighty river. It looked like it must be at least a mile wide. With no idea where they'd come out in the human realm Sir Galohond reached into his saddle bag and pulled out the iPhone that Morgana had given to him a couple of months back. It took a few minutes to power up the phone and open up the GPS App, Sir Galohond was startled to learn that they were standing on the bank of the Mississippi in the Columbia Bottom Conservation Area north of St Louis. When Sir Galohond looked up he realized that the Queen had deployed scouts and they were trying to find the trail Ambrose and his supports might have left.

The trail ended along the bank of the river where they'd obviously had a vessel waiting. Even the most talented scout can't track a ship over the water. Sir Galohond moved up to the Queen in time to hear her frustrated conversation with Sir Galavir and Duke Elentaure.

"My Queen," Sir Galohond said interrupting.

When all three turned to look at him he felt embarrassed for his lack of manners. "My Queen we are on the out skirts of the human city known as St Louis. I suggest we camp our forces here and veil them. In the mean time we should send representatives to the Guild and the powerful families in the area."

After a moment to think the Queen nodded. Agreed, let us make camp. Sir Galohond, contact the authorities and powers in the area. Request help from one nation to another, let the humans know I consider this an emergency and call upon our treaties with them for assistance." She then turned her back to the three nobles and walked away clearly angry that her children were still missing.

\* \* \*

I woke up early Sunday morning unable to sleep. The bed was too soft, my leg hurt like crazy, and I'd been too worried about Galohond and the situation back in St Louis.

I'd spent most of the night tossing and turning and even though my body was exhausted I'd just not been able to sleep. When I glanced at the time on my iPhone I realized that it was only three days to Halloween. Three days to figure out what Ambrose was up too.

"Ahg," I groaned as I sat up. The wound in my leg hadn't seemed that bad yesterday. I limped into the bathroom and found the bottle of meds I'd gotten at the hospital. I figured the Codeine would make me loopy so opted for the 800 mg horse pill of Motrin instead. I skipped a shower and changed into a fresh set of casual clothes. I'd not told Chelsea that I would be coming to a warm location (I hadn't known myself at the time) so I had capris, a blue blouse, and comfortable shoes. I limped into the kitchen and got some coffee going and then turned on the TV to get the news.

It was already worse than yesterday. There had been violent riots during the night in several cities, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, St Louis, New Orleans, Dallas, Denver, L.A., and San Francisco. Other cities hadn't seen any violence but there had been large demonstrations in almost every city in the country. The local news showed that the protestors here in San Diego had gone home late last night and there were already a few standing outside the Guild Hall. I figured I had no time to waste and woke up both Inspector Lee and Agent Walker.

"I'm going back to St Louis now. You can either come with me to the Guild Hall or you can stay here but I'm leaving in 15 minutes," I told an only half awake Inspector Lee.

The drive to the San Diego Guild Hall at 6 a.m. on a Sunday was quiet and quick. I had to admit that San Diego was a pretty town as we crossed the bridge from North Island's Coronado community back into San Diego. To my right I could see a series of piers where the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet had several ships tied up. It made me wonder about the lives of Magic-User's in the military. This was a relatively new trend both the Army and the Navy had, about ten years ago, started recruiting Magic-Users. The Army employed them quite extensively, or at least they seemed too according to my conversations with Mark. But I had no idea how the Navy used its Magic-Users. My train of thought was interrupted when we left the Coronado Bridge behind us and entered San Diego.

Getting to the Guild wasn't a problem and with the small number of protestors today it was easier getting in than it had been leaving last night. I was surprised by the number of cars in the garage and the number of Magic-User's at work. It was Sunday and most of the Guild Halls across America would normally be at minimal manning. With the events of Friday and Saturday the Guild was obviously taking things

seriously. As we headed to the lower levels of the Guild Hall one of Agent Walkers friends, a man very thin and perhaps an inch taller than me stopped her. I was in a hurry to get to the gate so I didn't catch his name but did over hear that the National Guild of Magic-Users had called an emergency session of the United States Guild Hall Council of Elders. This usually happened about once a year and they normally met for about two weeks to talk about the health of the American Guild of Magic-Users and to pass any new policy decisions. An emergency session was pretty rare. The last time this had happened had been just after 9/11. I guess they were taking all the rioting and demonstrations very seriously. As a result all Master Class Magic-Users were being recalled to their Guild Halls to assist until the 'crisis' was over. This made it particularly easy for me to use the Gate in the basement of the San Diego Guild Hall to get back to St Louis. Even with the time difference I found myself back in St Louis by 8:30 am.

"Morgana" said Gwendolyn Grant causing me to turn to my right just after stepping through the gate.

"Gwendolyn, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"I got a call from San Diego a few minutes ago that you were returning so I came down to meet you. The Guild has set up an office for each Master Class Magic-User recalled. It's actually very convenient. If you have a minute, perhaps we could have a cup of coffee and talk before acting Grand Master Beck calls the emergency session," Gwendolyn said.

"Uhm, sure. Just a second though," I replied. I turned to face Inspector Lee who had already started to head for the exit.

"Al, I just wanted to say thank you. I don't like to think I need a babysitter, but I appreciate you watching out for me," I said feeling a dull ach in my leg.

Al turned to face me and nodded. "Not a problem Ma'am."

I offered him my hand and he shook it firmly in his large callused hand.

"If you need anything just give me a call," Al said.

I followed Gwendolyn up to the offices set aside for Master Class Magic-Users. With only around 300 Master Class Magic-Users in the country, unless you were a member of one of the Guild Halls in a major city like L.A. or New York, your Guild Hall would only have a few Master Class Magic-Users. We'd been lucky in St Louis to have seven before Grand Master Davis had been killed. So it wasn't really tough for the Guild to find a place for each of us to work during the crisis. The St Louis Guild Council of Elders would be meeting with Acting Grand Master Beck and all Master Class Magic-Users were invited to that meeting. One of the rules for being appointed to the Council

of Elders was that a Magic-User had to be either a 1st Class or Master Class Magic-User. This was one of the issues that had bothered my mother after she wound up in my former body. I'd only been rated as a 2nd Class Magic-User and truthfully I'd really only had the strength of a 3rd Class. I'd been given the 2nd Class license due to my skill and education level more than my strength.

My mother had been working hard to increase her new body's strength although I doubted she'd had much success. She did have my biological father's last crafting, an artifact known as the Ley-Line Stone. This allowed her to channel energy through the stone as though she were standing on a ley-line. It gave her a significant boost in magical strength. With the stone she was a middle level 1st Class Magic-User. Still she'd elected to leave St Louis rather than continue living here and serving on the Council. I respected her choice.

"Do you take anything in your coffee?" Gwendolyn's question pulled me back from my musing.

"Black is fine," I replied.

After offering me a mug of steaming coffee Gwendolyn settled into a chair opposite me.

"I was very worried about you after I heard about the ambush and your injury," she said.

"Thank you, but I'm fine. I think we have bigger things to worry about," I said.

"You mean the riots?" she asked. When I nodded she continued. "The Guild is working with the mundane authorities nationally. There is a special session of the American Council of Elders and the National Security Council. Also Phil will be holding a planning session in a couple of hours to put together a strategy for keeping the peace here in St Louis," she said. At my confused look Gwendolyn smiled. "Phil is Grand Master Beck's first name. I sometimes forget that you and the other younger Magic-Users only know him as Master Beck. He and I attended the Academy together so I sometimes forget to use his title," she said with a light laugh.

Just then my cell phone went off indicating a text. "Excuse me," I said picking up my purse and rooted around until I found the phone.

"Morgana." The sound of her voice brought my attention back to Gwendolyn.

"The disaster at the warehouse has left the Guild weakened. There aren't very many Hounds of Heaven and very few are able to operate here in the United States. 30 were killed in the trap. Of the sixteen that survived only five are fit for duty. The Commandant of the Special Operations Section has ordered the rest of the 4th SOS and all of the 6th SOS into St Louis to track down Ambrose. That's almost a hundred and

fifty Hounds of Heaven. They know that someone tipped off Ambrose about the raid. There weren't very many people in the know; they'll want to interview you since you were with Phil when he found out about the raid," she said placing a hand on mine.

"Am I under suspicion?" I asked feeling angry.

"Honey, stop and think for a second. You were involved the last time Ambrose came to St Louis. Your parents were killed and you're the sole heir to their estate. Then all at once your abilities made a giant leap forward. Even though you're enrolled at the Academy everyone in the Guild knows your power and skill far exceed someone of your age and experience. When the rebel elves tried to set up a base here you foiled them and used magic with more ability, skill, and power than any eighteen year old girl just out of high school ever could. And that's taking into account that you went to a private high school that specializes in magic training," she said.

I tried to interrupt but she held up a hand. "I'm sure there's an explanation but everything around you has been secretive. It makes those for whom paranoia is a professional requirement uneasy. Honestly dear, you're a mystery. I'd like to help you but I'm as in the dark as everyone else." The look she gave me indicated that she wanted to help if only I'd let her. For a second I was tempted and then my phone buzzed again. I pulled my hand away and held up my phone. The text was from my mother: "Call ASAP, use the crystal not a phone, emergency."

I sat there for a second feeling like I'd just had cold water poured down my back.

"What is it dear?" Gwendolyn asked sounding concerned.

"I need to get back to my house, my ah,... ... 'God-Father' needs to talk to me. When will the planning session happen?"

"It scheduled for 1 pm," she said. "But honey, Colonel Black will want to interview you, and when the new hounds arrive their H2-CI will want to talk to you as well."

I felt confused. "Why would this Colonel Black want to talk to me and what's a H2-CI?"

"Colonel Black is the commander of the 4th SOS and was leading the attack that got ambushed. He wants to interview everyone that new about it. I just told you the Hounds of Heaven are sending reinforcements here, a full team and a half of Hounds will be here by the end of the day. The H2 is the Hound Intelligence division, CI means counter intelligence. They also want to talk to everyone who might have known about the raid," she said.

I felt a chill go through me but I nodded. The Hounds of Heave were the Guild's elite troops. They'd been after Ambrose ever since he'd stolen the Athame from our estate. The idea that the Guild was sending so many of them here made me wonder what else

was going on. The idea that I was a possible suspect actually pissed me off, but I decided to keep that to myself for now.

I glanced at my watch it was 9:30 am that gave me plenty of time to get home and back. The trip would take a half hour each way. I'd need to hurry but if this was an emergency and my mother didn't want me to use a cell phone then there was a good reason. I needed to get moving.

"Uhm, thank you for the coffee, I really have to go. Maybe we can talk again after the meeting?" I said standing up and wincing. Edgar hopped from the back of the chair I'd been sitting in and landed on my shoulder.

Gwendolyn got up as well. "Are you sure it's wise to leave? You could call your God-Father from here."

"Don't worry I'll be back for the meeting," I said limping toward the door.

"Morgana," when I looked at Gwendolyn over my shoulder she continued "you'll consider talking to me? I'd really like to help."

"After I talk to my god-father, I'll buy you to a cup of coffee and tell you everything," I said and left.

Once outside the office I fished around in my purse, juggling my overnight bag and the staff that had been loaned to me until I found the ring I'd been looking for. This was my ring of unnoticed. My power and skill was such that I didn't really need the ring but using a tool made the effort much easier and with my injury and lack of sleep I figured I might as well use the ring.

After I slipped it on my finger I looked around to make sure no one was paying any attention to me and then activated it. I could feel a slight tingle as the spell went into effect and then started to make my way as quickly as I to the garage. I'd just left the elevator that provided access to the upper levels of the Guild Hall and was walking toward the elevator leading to the parking garage when I saw a group of half a dozen Elven nobles. When I spotted Sir Galohond my breath caught. I thought he was still in Summer, what was he doing here in St Louis. I deactivated my ring with barely a thought and tried to shout Galohond's name by my voice caught.

Fortunately for me Edgar had no problems with nerves. He flapped his wings and let out a loud "CAW!"

Sir Galohond's head whipped around and when he spotted me a brilliant white smile lit up his face.

"Morgana!" he shouted.

He closed the distance between us in a blink and I felt his arms wrap around me in a hug that nearly crushed the breath out of me. After a second I pushed back so I could

look up at him, I could tell that he was a heartbeat away from kissing me which was the last thing I wanted here in public. Although another part of me was secretly pleased by Galohond's reaction and really wanted that kiss. I stubbornly placed the palm of my free hand on his armored chest and pushed. Galohond let go and stepped back still grinning down at me.

"I've missed you. I would have called but I needed to attend to business here in the Guild Hall first," he said.

My mind was spinning, Sir Galohond was here and he was armed and armored for battle. There were five Elven soldiers by the look of them also armed for battle with him and a sixth in robes.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Galohond looked around and said, "I can't explain it right here. If we go someplace private I'll fill you in."

"I don't have time, I have to get home and get in touch with my GodFather he said it was an emergency," I replied. "But I'll be back here for the Grand Master's meeting."

"I'll go with you to your estate, if that's okay? I can fill you in as we drive, as long as you plan to return here in the next couple of hours," he said.

I nodded not trusting myself to speak. Sir Galohond went over to his companions and a heated conversation ensued, interestingly, it was warded. So even though I could see that they were talking, I couldn't hear a sound. I discovered that I was mistaken Sir Galohond wasn't the leader of the group; their leader as it turned out was an older looking Elf. The older Elf must have given Sir Galohond his permission to accompany me because when the ward went down Galohond strode over to me and extended his arm.

"Shall we go?" he said. We headed toward my parked car with me doing my best to conceal my limp.

"Morgana, what happened to your leg?" Sir Galohond asked.

I grunted in a most unladylike manner. "I was ambushed Saturday morning when I went to my office."

Galohond stepped in front of me forcing me to stop walking. "You were attacked?" I could see the anger in his eyes as he put both hands on my shoulders. "Who is responsible?"

I felt torn, on the one hand a part of me felt thrilled that he wanted to protect me while another part was annoyed that he thought I needed protecting.



"I'm not sure who was behind the attack but I handled it. Now you can get out of my way and come with me, or you can get out of my way and stay here. But either way I'm leaving." My words were harder than I'd intended but had the desired effect. He moved to one side and then followed me as I limped into the elevator.

Once we got into my car Galohond asked me to tell him what happened. He sat quietly listening while I went over the events of the past couple of days. He had no idea about the riots and unrest here and when he'd come in that morning he'd been surprised at the protesters. I asked him to explain what was going on as I got onto the highway and headed toward my 'God-Father's' estate. I knew that the Queen's heir was missing but not that she had come to the human realm following the trail. I was shocked to learn that another ritual murder had happened yesterday. That made two killings in Summer and three here.

Suddenly an idea hit me. "Galohond, that first killing in Summer was it a male or female elf?"

"A male, Sir Rilaiien Nelthalta, one of the minor nobles who'd been working with Siofra and Arangalad last summer," Galohond said. "After the battle he fled to his family's estate in Summer. Somehow he was taken even though no one at the manor knows how," Galohond said sounding frustrated.

"So the first killing was a elven male in summer, next a human male here, then an elven female also here, then the Grand Master and lastly an elven woman in Summer. Three rites have been performed here and two in Summer. To complete the pattern Ambrose must perform the final rite in Summer making it three here and three there." I mused exiting the highway while my mind raced.

"Also there were two elven women killed and one male, that means there must be two human men and one human woman sacrifice to complete the symmetry. The Grand Master and the man out in California make's it two human men, so she needs a human woman and Ambrose must take her to Summer to complete the rite," I said in a rush sure that I was right.

"Look out!" Sir Galohond shouted.

I looked up in time to see a sedan that had pulled out across the two lane road that led past my family's estate. The sedan blocked both lanes so I hit my brakes hard and turned the wheel over. The sounds of tires locking up filled the air and I controlled my skid taking the car onto the shoulder of the road and brought it to a stop with the front two tires in the field next to the road. I sat there for a second stunned luckily there wasn't much of a ditch here. Then before I could collect my thoughts there was a screeching sound of metal tearing and my door was ripped open by telekinetic force.

As this fact registered in my still dazed mind, the huge arm of a werewolf in hybrid form reached into the car and grabbed me around the throat and pulled. The only thing that prevented me from being dragged bodily out of the car was my seatbelt.

Suddenly there was a burst of light and the werewolf screamed and let go of me as a bolt of golden energy hit his arm at the elbow. Sir Galohond wand in hand said, "Morgana are you alright?"

Gasping for air I nodded and unfastened my seatbelt just as the roof of my car was ripped away by the same telekinetic force that had pulled the door off. Edgar gave a "caw" and launched himself into the sky. Sir Galohond dove out of the car into the field while I threw myself out of the shattered door and into a roll coming to my feet with my body shield up. I was barely quick enough as my shield absorbed a stun spell cast at me by a woman standing about twenty feet away in front of the sedan holding a glowing staff. The woman was tall and thin with dark blonde hair cut short. She wore a long khaki coat against the cool October wind and the staff in her hand blazed with power. I now noticed she had a pair of friends next to her one a guy holding a sword with grey metallic looking skin and another guy who I recognized from the ambush yesterday as the Magic-User who'd used the blink spell he also had a body shield glowing around him.

"Back for round two I see, where's the Elf?" I snarled.

"Here" said a voice right behind me and I felt my shield fall apart as it came into contact with her bracer. I dove forward but wasn't quite fast enough and my head exploded in pain as the baton she used hit me with a glancing blow. Luckily I'd been diving forward as she swung or I'd have been out of the fight then and there. I hit the ground hard and rolled over onto my back as the Elven woman stepped over me with her baton raised, and Sir Galohond struck.

His sword was an Elven two-handed long sword and in one smooth motion he took her arms off at the elbows. The Elven woman screamed and stumbled back. Before Galohond could follow up the werewolf leapt at him. He blocked the first swipe with his sword cutting the monster but he had to step back.

"Shit, the she didn't say anything about an Elven noble being with her," the grey skinned guy snarled.

"It doesn't matter," the woman with the staff replied. "Take them both!"

I'd managed to sit up and now I focused on the quickest combat spell I knew and poured power into it and then sent a magic missile screaming at the woman with the staff. "You bitch, you killed my car!"

She managed to get a shield up and while it absorbed most of the impact she was still flung back several feet through the air hitting the sedan she'd been standing in front of with a crashing sound.

I was now on my feet and furious. "Do you have any idea how many hours I spent working on that car with my dad?!" I reached out with telekinesis and grabbed the other Magic-User only to feel him disappear. An intuition told me to spin around and I spotted him five feet from me pointing a wand at me.

"Paralysi!" he shouted, the wand sent a jet of orange light at me and I dodged to my right with a quick side step and luckily the spell missed. In reply punched my fist at him and shouted. "Ventus!" and released a blast of wind from my Ring of Aether. The wind howled into a gale as it crossed the distance separating us and picked up the Magic-User blasting him up and back. As I watched he blinked out and then behind me I heard a crash. I turned around again but this time it was to see the results of my spell. The Magic-User I'd just thrown lay in the wreckage of the sedan.

"I guess you failed physics. Just because you can blink doesn't mean you've stopped your own momentum," I said.

Suddenly my attention was diverted to my left. Sir Galohond was engaged in a duel with the grey skinned guy with a sword. Even though Galohond's blade was longer and he was taller and had greater reach the grey skinned guy was pressing Galohond back. He was obviously faster and stronger than a normal human and must be augmenting his body's natural ability with magic. I started to cast a spell to help Galohond when I felt agony rip through me, for a second I couldn't breathe as my world turned white with pain and I collapsed to one knee with both hands on the ground in front of me to help catch my balance. I barely managed to look up through my curtain of dark hair in time to see that the woman with the staff had recovered from hitting the side of her car and had fired off another stun spell. Now she stalked toward me with a furious look on her face and the staff extended.

"Submit Morgana and I might allow your friend to live," she snarled.

I didn't answer she had me covered if I tried anything she'd just hit me with another stun spell before I could raise my body shield. That's when Edgar dove in striking her face with a shrieking, "CAW!" The woman screamed and dropped her staff to try to fend off Edgar but he darted away too quickly his beak streaked with blood. The woman continued to scream in agony and collapsed to the ground. I took advantage of the respite to get back to my feet and glance around.

The werewolf lay a few feet away minus his head. The Eleven woman was also missing both arms and was moving about weakly nearly overcome with blood loss.

The Magic-User who'd attacked me was not moving and the woman with the staff was rolling around on the ground both hands drenched in blood covering her empty eye socket. That left the guy with grey skin. I concentrated and cast a spell of telekinesis striking out at knee level. He must have somehow felt my spell because at the last second he turned and blocked it by driving his sword down into the ground between us. I felt my spell come apart as it hit his blade but this was all the distraction Sir Galohond needed and he sliced into his opponent's neck with a sweeping two handed blow. With the power of the strike and the magic in Sir Galohond's blade I'd expected it to take the guy's head off. Instead there was the sound of metal striking metal as Sir Galohond's blade bit into the guy's neck about half an inch.

"Agh!" The physical adept stumbled back and dropped his blade to clutch at his neck with both hands. As he did I noticed that his skin returned to its normal color and bright red blood started squirting rhythmically from his neck. He stumbled back and then slowly sank to his knees and then his back. For a few more seconds the blood continued to squirt but it soon changed to a steady leak that created a rather large pool around the guy.

Sir Galohond and I looked at each other feeling stunned and exhausted. The popping sound of a blink spell startled me and I looked around. The guy I'd thought I'd downed popped into the air next to the woman with the staff. Then they both vanished. I spotted them about fifty feet beyond the sedan and then there was a tearing motion and I saw the veil part. I tried to run forward summoning my power and got ready to cast a spell that would hold the rift open. As I focused on my spell my wounded leg chose that moment to give out and I stumbled. I lost the threads of the magic and when I looked up again they were both gone. Sir Galohond walked over to me flicking blood from his blade.

"Morgana are you wounded?" The concern in his voice was touching.

I felt the back of my head and knew that I'd have a lump there but it was nothing compared to the werewolf, elf woman, and the grey skinned guy.

"I'll survive," I said.

"We need to get you to safety," Galohond said.

"My house is only another mile from here. Once we're behind the wards we'll be fine."

Sir Galohond nodded. "Let's away then."

"Just a second," I said and walked over to the Elven woman, as sick as it made me I took a moment to remove the bracers from her severed arms. I held them up to Sir

Galohond. "I've never seen anything like these. Twice now she was able to use them to bring down my body shield," I said.

"I recognize them, they are used by the Queen's Sharif's in Summer to help arrest criminals. They are controlled items, I wonder how these criminals came by them," Galohond said. I reluctantly handed the bracers to Galohond knowing that if they were property of the crown, then the crown would want them back.

Once Galohond had tucked the bracers away I reached out and took Galohond's hand and then used the Ring of Aether, to lift us into the air. The flight to the estate took about a minute even though I kept us to a relatively slow speed. Edgar had no trouble keeping up. As we approached the wards and I spoke the key and channeled enough energy to part them, once through the wards I felt them snap back into place behind us. I brought us down in a smooth descent to land on the patio behind the house. Almost as soon as we were down Edgar landed on my shoulder with a "caw." I stumbled for a second the adrenaline was gone and I felt tired and sick to my stomach. We'd just killed three people add that to the two from yesterday and I was leaving a trail of bodies. I turned to the side and vomited into the flowers planted along the patio. I wasn't sure if my reaction was due to the violence or a possible concussion from the blow to my head. Either way I felt nauseous.

"Morgana, are you okay?" Galohond asked.

I took a deep breath and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and looked up at him. There was some furniture on the patio and Sir Galohond helped me to sit down in a white wicker chair. Once he saw that I was somewhat composed and that I didn't appear to be wounded he knelt next to me so that we were looking into each other's eyes from a few feet away.

"Who were those people?" Galohond asked.

"I don't know for sure, but I think they're with Ambrose. I think they are trying to capture me for Ambrose to use in the next ritual," I said.

As I said it my instincts told me this must be the reason behind two attempts in two days to capture me. In fact the more I thought about it the more convinced I was. If they had wanted to kill me I'd probably be dead. After all striking with all of their power from ambush with the intent to kill me probably would have been successful. Instead they'd been constrained; they couldn't kill me and that made it more difficult for them. I on the other hand had been able to defend myself with all of my power. I also had some unexpected help, on each occasion. My mind, which still felt like it was working in slow motion, latched onto the comment about Sir Galohond not having supposed to have been with me. What did that mean?

"Should we alert the authorities?" Galohond asked.

"Yes, I'll call the Guild, but first I need to see what my moth,... ah 'god-father needed." I stumbled. "She, I mean, he said it was an emergency. He's not one to panic or exaggerate." I could tell I was flustered and barely speaking coherently.

Galohond followed me into the house as I made my way to my mother's study. Once there I rested the Guild staff against the wall next to the desk. I then behind my mother's desk where I'd left the crystal we used for sending messages to each other. I saw that it was glowing indicating that I had a message. I sat down at my mother's desk and picked up the crystal. I pushed my aura out so that it covered the crystal and watched as the color changed from the normal yellow to green indicating that the proper owner of the crystal had unlocked it. I pushed a trickle of power into it activating the crystal.

"Morgana," my mother's masculine voice filled the air, "I need you to come to Seattle at once. Strange events have been happening. I don't know if you remember from the reception we threw back in August. But at that reception there was a couple that were kidnapped by the local werewolf pack while under our protection. Steve Henderson and Samantha Lott, they were infected with the werewolf virus and turned. Instead of joining the pack they formed one of their own. Yesterday they called me because while they were out hunting they found an Elven girl lost, traumatized, and confused in the woods. I went to them and we were attacked by a mixed group of elves, humans, werewolves, and vampires. We barely escaped to Blake Island. I've got all of the wards up and they've attack once already. I tried to call the Seattle Guild for help but the city is in lock down they need every available Special Agent there in the city to keep the peace. The elven girl says that her name is Aradiliel Isilidhrindal if she's telling the truth it makes her Queen Isilidhrindal's daughter. Morgana she was wearing the Irons of Balchamarth, they are used by the Queen to hold only the most dangerous Elven criminals. I'm not sure what's going on, but if you can't get here soon the island will be overrun and they will take the girl." With that the crystal went dead.

I looked at Galohond and saw that he was both shocked and angry. "Morgana we must ride to their aid at once!"

"Of course, only let's take a second to think. I've got a feeling that this is important, I don't understand it yet, but this is the first event in the last few days that hasn't felt orchestrated. So far we've been dancing to Ambrose's tune, reacting to events, piecing together clues, trying to figure out what she's up too. This feels like a mistake, our first real break in this whole series of events," I said.

Galohond nodded. Tired as we both were it was obvious that this was way to coincidental for it not to be connected to Ambrose, and it wasn't even noon.

# CHAPTER 5

I sent a message via the crystal to my mother it was just two words. "I'm coming." Next I took a few minutes to call the emergency number that I'd gotten from the Guild several months back, after the events around the Mask had been cleared up. I explained to the Agent who answered the phone who I was and what had happened. She assured me that they would have a team on the scene as soon as possible to deal with the wrecked car and the bodies we'd left in the street. She also said that when I returned to the Guild Hall she would expect statements from both Sir Galohond and I.

Chelsea was here and I asked her to prepare lunch for us, nothing fancy, both of us needed the calories. Leaving Sir Galohond in the garden behind the house so he could work a sending to Queen Isilidhrindal I headed to the lower levels of the estate. The vault contained several items of power and I already knew what I planned to take. I was tired of getting caught unprepared and feeling like I was fighting with one hand tied behind my back. I found the staff I'd used last spring during the assault on the rebel elves fortress. It was six feet in length of smooth black oak carved with glyphs and symbols making it more of a tool than a weapon. It offered me two advantages, I needed something to take the weight off my injured leg, and it allowed me to apply my power in a number of innovative ways. Next I selected the Tiara of Perspicientia that I'd also used last spring. It was a single piece of white gold and diamonds crafted into a Celtic pattern, beautiful and powerful. I moved next to a cabinet containing a variety of lesser items. I selected four rings of power to my growing collection of magic items. The rings contained magical energy. I could use them to boost the power of a spell, more importantly, if for some reason I found myself in Summer they would provide me with desperately needed energy. They along with the Ring of Shielding, Ring of Unnotice, Ring of Gelidus and my Ring of Aether I now had a ring on every finger except



my thumbs. I left the room I was in and moved to a vault that contained a variety of fighting wands and selected two. They were housed in a single sheath designed to be hung from my belt. Lastly I went to a sword case and pulled out a blade known as an OWakizashi it was nearly two feet long. This blade had been a project of mine while I'd been studying Iaido and Kendo before I'd had my body stolen. I'd wanted a weapon that reflected some of the skill I'd been working to acquire. After being switched into Morgana's body I continued to practice on my own. I'd been too embarrassed to go back to the dojo, however I'd decided to finish crafting the weapon. It wasn't a mighty artifact like some of the other items in the family vault but since I'd made it I was partial to it and it was attuned to me.

I returned to my room to change clothes and get ready for the upcoming raid. I selected a pair of loose fitting black jeans, a black cotton blouse with long sleeves, leather belt, and black boots with a low heel. I attached the sword and wand case to my belt and put on all of the rings. Next I picked up my black leather jacket. I'd spent a considerable amount of time working charms into the jacket and the enspelled leather would stop most physical and magical attacks at least for a while. Now I pulled my hair back and spent a few minutes working it into a tight braid to keep it out of my way. I picked up my staff and looked at myself in the mirror. Dressed in all black with sword, wands, and staff I cut quite the image of a femme fatale which for some reason made me feel inordinately pleased.

Armed and ready to face whatever challenges Ambrose might throw at me I went out and found Galohond. I stepped onto the back patio and had to pause. The mid-day sun was shining down and Galohond had taken off his helm and had obviously been using the crystal in his gauntlet to communicate with the other elves. This done he'd taken out his sword and started going through a weapons kata stretching muscles that had tightened up after the morning's action. I was pretty sure he didn't know I was there. His movements were smooth and fluid, his blonde hair shone, and his broad shoulders within the armor made him the picture of male perfection. He moved with the grace of a hunting cat and I felt my heart speed up as I watched his virile martial dance. My breath quickened and suddenly my nipples felt like twin erections pushing against my bra. Sir Galohond drove the blade down slicing his imaginary opponent from crown to sternum and froze the kata complete.

He looked up spotting me and smiled his brilliant white smile. I don't remember closing the distance between us; I do remember reaching out with one hand and touched his bicep. His arms seemed so large and powerful and when I looked up into his eyes I was once again surprised by how green they were. The ache in my groin

made me want to squirm and rub my thighs together, I felt my face flush. Slowly almost as though he was afraid to hurt me Galohond reached under my chin, with one hand, and tilted it up slightly and then very slowly leaned down and brushed his lips to mine.

Time stood still.

His soft warm lips moved away from mine and I wanted to plaster myself to him but something held me back.

"Uhm, we should move. It's been hours since my God-mother sent that message. If we're going to get help to them we need to go," I said breathlessly, hating myself.

"Agreed. I've passed word to my Queen and she's ordered me to return with all haste," he said.

I shook my head. "What am I thinking. We should eat before we go, Chelsea has made us some sandwiches and I don't know when we'll eat again."

Reluctantly Galohond agreed and we eat quickly hardly tasting the food which earned me a disapproving look from Chelsea. Once finished we returned to the back patio, I picked up a small backpack with a few additional items I'd figured might come in handy and strapped it to my back. I held my staff in one hand and made sure that all of my gear was in place and secure. I then looked over at Galohond and extended my hand.

"Ready?" I asked.

He had just finished putting on his helmet and gauntlets and reached out to grasp my hand in return.

"Let's fly!" he said with a grin.

I poured magical energy into the ring of Aether and lifted both of us into the air. This time I remembered to included Edgar in the spell as we rose into the early afternoon sky so that when I accelerated Edgar was able to keep up. I followed Galohond's directions flying over the Mississippi river and then turning north. It took less time than I'd have thought it would before Galohond directed me to start slowing down and start descending.

Part of my mind was following Galohond's directions while another part was concerned about the sirens I'd heard and the smoke I'd seen rising from St Louis.

"It looks like today is going to be another fun filled day," I muttered to myself.

\* \* \*

Flying north along the Mississippi river it had been easy to spot the Columbia Bottom Conservation. Spotting the Elven force within the wooded area was another matter. We descended into a clearing that looked empty until I felt us cross wards invisible even to my senses and then I saw the force below us. Galohond had told me that in addition to his war-band, of one hundred, the Queen had brought one hundred of her best knights. The force below us was a formidable one.

They had set up an open sided tent for the Queen to rest while they searched the area and while Sir Galohond and (as I'd found out later) Duke Aranion Elentaure lead a small group to the Guild Hall to seek aid. Galohond explained to me that the mission had been partially successful. The Guild had its hands full keeping the streets undercontrol, but Colonel Black the Commander of the Hounds of Heaven here in St. Louis, had agreed to help because of the treaties between the Guild and Summer and because there might be a connection between the Queen of Spades and this group that had kidnapped the prince.

Now however Queen Isilidhrindal was more interested in sending a force to rescue her daughter. When we landed we were escorted immediately to the Queen. As I limped along beside Sir Galohond I spotted a couple of faces I recognized as members of his war-band. We entered the shade provided by the tent and I saw that a group of chairs had been set up with small tables next to them for refreshments. In the middle of the tent a table had been set up with a map of St Louis on it and Elves occupying the tent were clustered around the map. There were two tall Elves in armor, one in robes, and the Queen.

The presence of Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal was such that the other three faded into the scenery. She was tall and blonde, with skin the color of cream. She was wearing the exact battle armor that I'd worn while under the glamor several months ago. Her green eyes found my blue ones and I dropped with a wince to one knee, I felt Sir Galohond take a knee beside me.

"Morgana Aoife Livingstone rise." She said and I returned to my feet.

"Sir Galohond tells me that you've found my daughter?" she said and the intensity of her gaze made me look away.

"Not I, your majesty. Mor Donegal has found her. The princess is on Blake Island however they are under attack. Mor has called for a rescue," I said.

"Then he shall have it," the Queen said.

"Sir Galohond, you have been to this Blake Island?" she asked.

"Yes, your highness."

"Then you will be able to lead our forces back through Summer to the Island," she said looking at Sir Galohond.

"Your highness that might not be the fastest way," I said before Galohond could reply.

The Queen turned her head to look at me and I heard a rustle from the side of the tent and noticed the small dragonet move for the first time.

"You have a swifter way?" asked Queen Isilidhrindal.

"As you know time is not consistent between the realms. We could leave now and arrive at Blake Island only to discover that the trip took a full day. If we go to the Guild Hall we can use a gate there to arrive in the Seattle Guild Hall with only a single step," I said.

"Your Majesty, there is a problem with that plan." Said Duke Elentaure. "The streets of St Louis are crowded with demonstrators. There have been clashes between Guild Special Agents trying to keep the peace and the protestors. The Governor of Missouri has called out the National Guard to augment the forces of the Guild."

I felt stunned. We'd just flown over the city and I'd seen the signs of trouble, I'd never imagined it had gotten this bad. Before I could say anything Sir Galohond spoke.

"There is another way to the Guild Hall. The Hall sits on the west bank of the Mississippi River south of Eiler St just off S. Broadway. It has a pier on the river and a river entrance. If Her Majesty is willing to bring through the veil one of her barges we can sail from here down the river to the Guild Hall and avoid the streets altogether." Sir Galohond said.

The Queen tilted her head obviously thinking, before she could speak one of the armored knights at the table spoke up.

"Your Majesty, the plan is sound however I'd like to point out that we've found the trail of the rebels here. Your daughter may need a rescue but she is, for the moment, in friendly hands. Your son and heir is, in all likelihood, here in St Louis. I think it would be wise to keep a force here and to stay on the trail."

As he spoke Sir Galohond leaned over and whispered, "That is Sir Manmion Galavir 'the Hunter' he has never lost the trail once found and he has never failed to find that which he hunts."

The Queen took her time to respond. She walked around the group and looked down at the map for a few minutes and then appeared to make up her mind.

"Sir Galohond, I will summon a barge through the veil as you suggest. Divide your war-band in half and have your second-in-command report to Sir Ruion Galadhrinmyr."

At this the other armored Elf looked up "my Queen?"

"Sir Galadhrinmyr, you will accompany the Lady, Magic-User Master Class Morgana Aoife Livingstone. You will embark upon the barge and sail down to the St Louis Guild Hall and from there travel by gate to Seattle and rescue my daughter. That is," she said turning to look at me. "If you're willing to take on this charge?"

"Of course your Majesty," I said feeling slightly confused by her orders but more than willing to take advantage of any help pulling my mother's feet out of the fire.

Next she turned to Sir Galohond "Sir Galohond Larothta you will take the rest of your war-band through the veil and travel to Blake Island via Summer. For while it's true time runs strangely between the realms that doesn't mean that it won't favor us. Should you arrive before Lady Livingstone act as you deem best to save my daughter." The Queen said.

Sir Galohond snapped a salute. "Yes my Queen!"

"Aranion, you said that this Colonel Black of the Guild's Special Operations Section is willing to assist us?" asked the Queen.

"Yes your Highness," the Duke replied.

Then you will take a squad of knights and accompany Lady Livingstone to the St Louis Guild. Convey my compliments and let this Colonel know that Sir Galavir has found the trail and that we expect to have the criminal cornered soon. We'd like to work with his forces and coordinate the rescue my son," she said.

The old Duke nodded. "As my Queen commands."

Once the orders had been given the audience appeared to be over because Sir Galohond took my hand and guided me out of the pavilion. He appeared less than pleased at his orders but was far too disciplined to say anything and moved swiftly to carry them out. We found Lieutenant Randgos and Sir Galohond started giving out orders. I wandered a short distance away to look around the bustling Elven camp.

I spotted a blonde woman who looked familiar walk past Galohond's forces and I couldn't help following after her.

"Max?" I said as I my tired mind finally connected the dots.

The woman turned around and a look of pleased surprise crossed her beautiful features.

"Morgana?" she said.

I hadn't seen Max since her trial several months ago. Queen Isilidhrindal had agreed to let me testify on Max's behalf, however I'd not been allowed to talk to her after my testimony and I'd left Summer shortly after. Max was wearing Elven armor with a

short thin blade at her side and several wands hung from her belt along with an interesting looking case.

An awkward silence hung for a second and then we both asked at the same time.

"How have you been?" "How are you?"

With a laugh I said, "I'm doing fine. How are you? You're living in Summer now and you're a virtual prisoner," I said feeling worried about Max.

"I'm okay," she said and at my dubious look added. "I really am Morgana."

"I've been studying Elven magic, as well as etiquette, art, culture, basically everything a young Elven noble woman needs to know. The Queen has been very kind to me, oh, and she has given me a new name. I'm officially Lady Lellwen Dionissis and a Lady-in-waiting to the Queen."

I felt my mouth drop at all of this, I was happy for Max, after all without her I doubt that I'd have been able to save my mother from the rebels. At the same time I wondered if this would have been a life she would have chosen for herself. Then again how many of us really had the ability to choose the circumstances of our own lives?

"Morgana the Queen is about to work a spell to part the veil and bring a barge through I need to be there in case she needs something." Lellwen said.

"Can I tag along?" I asked interested in watching the Queen show some of her power.

As it turned out most of the camp was too busy preparing to depart to come down to the river. I quickly spotted a knot of armored nobles surrounding the Queen. I figured it would be best to keep a lower profile so stopped well short of the group. Lellwen continued on until she was just behind the Queen. When Queen Isilidhrindal spotted Lellwen she nodded to her and motioned for her to stand behind. Now the Queen faced the river and lifted her hands. I noticed that the dragonet had taken to the air and that he flew a lazy circle around Isilidhrindal. I felt Edgar leave my shoulder and take to the air but he stayed close to me and well out of the way of the casting.

Abruptly I could feel power rippling through the air, like a heat wave the magic moved out from the Queen distorting the air as it traveled out over the river. The distortion resolved into a large arch and suddenly the prow of a boat pushed through. Wow I thought that had to have been the smoothest parting of the veil I'd ever seen and the size of the gate was huge. The barge that sailed through was startlingly white. The prow was shaped like a swan with its wings sweeping back. The barge had one main mast a large main sail and a smaller jib and it moved easily to the bank. The crew brought the sails down with quick efficiency slowing the craft and then another sailor tossed a line to one of the Elves on the bank who quickly tied it to a tree. The crew wasted no time in dropping an anchor from the bow and stern and then a long piece of

wood was extended over the side spanning the distance between the barge and the shore. The Captain (or at least I assumed he was the Captain) was a thin short Elf who had no trouble walking down the plank. He walked up to Queen Isilidhrindal stopping several feet from her and dropped to both knees.

I couldn't hear the conversation but he must have pleased the queen because he stood up with a smile and then hurried back aboard his boat shouting orders as soon as his feet hit the deck. If I had to guess I'd have said that there were somewhere between fifteen and twenty sailors aboard the vessel. It was wider with a much more shallow draft than the pictures I'd seen of most Elven boats so I figured it had been designed for either the smooth waters of a lake or river and not the open sea.

I figured that I should get back to Galohond and say good bye and then be ready to leave so I headed back to where I'd left Galohond. By the time I'd returned the temporary camp had been struck and Sir Ruion Galadhrinmyr was standing next to Sir Galohond. As I walked up I noticed that Galohond was taller than Ruion and perhaps younger although age is hard to judge with Elves. Ruion had dark red hair and grey eyes and carried an Elven great bow as well as an Elfish rapier and dagger. They both looked up when I arrived.

"Morgana, where have you been?" Sir Galohond asked wrapping me in a hug.

"I ran into Lellwen and then went with her to watch the Queen bring a boat through the veil. I think we will be ready to leave in a few minutes," I said in a sort of breathless voice.

"That's why I've been looking for you. We are ready to depart but I wasn't going to leave without saying good bye," he said looking down at me.

Then before I had time to think he pressed his lips into mine. This time the kiss was much less delicate and more impassioned I felt a flutter in my stomach and my free arm curled around his head while I lifted the weight off my injured leg by lifting my foot up. When the kiss broke I could hardly breathe and felt my cheeks flush. There were several whistles from the men standing around and some good natured clapping which made me turn even redder.

"I would never dream of leaving without saying goodbye," Sir Galohond said gravely although his eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Get going you big lug," I said stepping away and feeling Edgar land on my shoulder.

Galohond leapt into his saddle and brought his big bay gelding around, I felt him release a pulse of power and there was a ball of light that shot from his fist. When it got twenty feet in front of him it grew vertically until it was a solid bar of light ten feet high then it expanded creating a door wide enough for the troop to ride through single

file. Galohond glanced at me and then spurred his horse through the door to Summer. When the last of his men were through the door collapsed upon itself. Leaving me standing with Sir Ruion on one side and Lieutenant Randgos on the other.

Getting aboard the barge might have been challenging if I'd have had to climb up the narrow plank. Instead I cast a spell and used telekinesis to fly over the water and land easily on the deck. If Sir Galohond's men were unhappy about leaving their horses they were too disciplined to show it. Each warrior trotted up the narrow plank in full armor making it look easy which made me wonder what I'd been afraid of. The last one to come aboard was the Duke.

The trip down the Mississippi river was surreal. There wasn't much traffic on the river today even for a Sunday. This was somewhat strange since the Mississippi is one of the busiest waterways in the world. I'd heard somewhere that over 400 million tons of cargo traveled along this river per year. After we passed under the I-270 bridge I could start to see smoke rising from the city. As we got closer I saw several columns of smoke rising and by the time we passed under the McKinley St. bridge I could make out the sound of sirens. When we passed the Poplar St bridge I watched several National Guard Humvee's moving through East St Louis. This made sense since because it was where many of the lesser talents, those without Guild licenses, practiced their craft lived and worked. The destruction appeared to be the worst in this area and I wondered if the Humvees were from the Illinois National Guard.

As we got closer to the Guild Hall I saw that barriers had been built and were manned by Guild Special Agents, mundane police, or National Guardsmen. I was a bit surprised that the area right around the Guild was now somewhat calm. As we approached the pier there were several Special Agents there and two speed boats launched from the pier. The Agents in the speed boats used a spell that allowed them to speak with a booming voice and order us away from the pier. The spell is a common one and I was ready. I replied booming out my name and rank and requesting permission to pull in pier side. After a brief conversation on his phone the Special Agent-in-Charge directed us to follow her to the Guild pier.

\* \* \*

It was just before 1 pm when we got to the Guild Hall, I had no intention of attending the special meeting of Elders and Masters that the acting Grand Master had called. I had more important things to do. I said good bye to Duke Elentaure and led Sir Ruion, Lieutenant Randgos, and Galohond's warriors down into the lower levels of the



Guild. The poor Special Agent standing watch at the St Louis Guild Hall Gate was quite flustered when he saw so many people and tried to stop us. I, for once, pulled rank showing him the badge that proclaimed my name and rank and told him to step aside.

I looked at the arch and picked out the glyph for Seattle and channeled the power required to activate the glyph and spoke the key that would open the gate. When I stepped through the gate I felt that same tingling sensation, a seconds worth of disorientation, and then I was standing in a well-lit circular room with pictures of the previous Grand Masters of the Seattle Guild Hall on the wall. In seconds the entire force of elves was through the gate. I noticed that the room that housed the gate here was similar to the room back in St Louis in shape and size and there was a Special Agent on watch here as well. She was walking toward me with a confused look on her face.

"I wasn't expecting anyone to come through. Can you state your name and business, please?" she asked adding the please as an afterthought.

"I'm Morgana Livingstone, Magic-User Master Class, and these are my guests, I received word that Mor Donegal Magic-User 1st Class has a group of terrorists attacking the wards on his estate. I'm here to see what I can do to capture and arrest those criminals," I replied.

As I talked I saw her eyes get bigger and bigger. I suddenly realized that she couldn't be more than eighteen or nineteen and was out of her depth.

"Where is the Seattle Guild Hall Grand Master?" I asked.

"I believe he is monitoring the protest," she said looking more confident. "I can't leave my post to take you to him but if you go up the stairs to the ground floor and then head to the main entrance you should see him."

I nodded my thanks and walked briskly over to the door that would lead up to the main floor. Although it had been 1 pm in St Louis it was only 11 am here in Seattle. I'd tried to call my mother several times by cell phone, only to find that the phone went right to voice mail. So either the phone was turned off or there was a different problem, like someone had knocked down the cell phone tower on Blake Island. I tried the house phone but that also failed. So I was pretty anxious to get down to the water front. The Guild Hall in Seattle had bought up much of the block north of NE Pacific St and east of Eastlake Ave NE and south of the Burke-Gilman Trail to the west of the University of Washington campus. One of the nice things about this location was how close it was to Lake Union which was connected to Puget Sound. It was about ten miles by boat from here to Blake Island and I was pretty sure based on my last trip to Seattle that I'd be able to get a boat to take our force out to the Island. In fact I knew that the

Guild Hall kept a couple of small ferries, because I'd hosted a reception to meet the local magical community back in August. At the time I'd worked out a deal to use the Guild's ferries to get guests out to the island and back again. We were about a block north of the lake so it would only take a few minutes to get to the Guild pier by foot but when I reached the main floor and looked out through the glass windows onto the street I could see that the Guild Hall wards were up and the building itself was in lock down. Through the faint heat haze created by the wards I could see the protesters. They'd crowded as close to the Guild Hall's main entrance as they could with the wards up. There must have been several thousand people between us and the pier.

I looked around the main entrance and spotted the Grand Master of the Seattle Guild Hall talking to a tall thin woman who, I assumed, was another Master or Elder. Grand Master Larsen was a tall heavy set man gone prematurely bald.

I turned to Sir Ruion. "If you would come with me we need to talk to Grand Master Larsen. Lieutenant Randgos, please try to keep your soldiers back here by the stairs and out of sight as much as possible. We don't want to alarm anyone," I said.

At the pair of nods I walked toward the Grand Master faintly amused at the sound of my boots click-clacking on the marble floor of the Seattle Guild Hall main entrance. The main entry to the Seattle Guild Hall is impressive. Marble floors and columns with a high ceiling and glass along the whole south wall created an impressive effect. Now however metal gates had been lowered outside of the glass and the buildings defensive warding was active. There were a dozen Special Agents in full riot gear standing by the main entrance behind them a couple of dozen feet the Grand Master surveyed the scene.

It was obvious that the Guild was on high alert and the Grand master was taking a personal interest in the situation. His head turned as we approached and I could tell when he smiled that he remembered me from last my last visit before I'd started school.

"Grand Master Larsen, it looks like you've got a few guests outside your door?" I said trying to make light of the situation.

The woman next to the Grand Master snorted causing the Grand Master to glance at her.

"Morgana, I don't believe you've met Magic-User Master Class, Patricia Moore she is one of our elders," he said indicating the tall, thin, woman with dark brown hair next to him.

"Pleased to meet you," I said extending a hand.

She looked at my hand and then at me for a second before taking my fingers as if to say 'where did this tart come from.' Instead she said, "A pleasure," rather sourly.

I had the immediate impression that she didn't smile much and dismissed her from my mind before I turned back to the Grand Master.

"This is Sir Ruion, he is a knight in service to Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal, we just arrived by gate and need to get to the Guild pier and out to Blake Island," I said.

"Ah, yes. I received a call late last night from Mor about the situation on the island. I'd like to help but I've got every MagicUser, Special Agent, and Inspector working to keep things quite here in the city." He gestured at the crowd outside the Guild Hall. "At the moment they are just chanting and carrying signs. But from what I've heard from other Grand Masters things could get ugly if we aren't careful."

I looked outside again feeling frustrated. The Grand Master was probably right but it wasn't his mother whose house was under siege.

"In fact if it weren't for your God-Father's friendship with Samantha Lott and Steve Henderson we'd probably have the same violence here that L.A. and St Louis have seen," he mused.

When I looked at him skeptically he continued. "Samantha and Steve were kidnapped and turned last August. What the Pack didn't take into account is how strong willed they are. They broke the Alpha bond and formed their own pack. Since then they've made peace with the Pacific Northwest Pack and managed to convince the Pack to work with the Guild to help us keep the city under control. Werewolves may not be very strong magically but there strong physically and there are a lot of them," he said actually sounding grateful.

"I understand all of the Guild's resources are committed here in the city. However, I didn't come out here with just Sir Ruion. We brought fifty eleven warriors with us, I just need a way to the Guild pier and then I need to borrow one of the Guild ferries to get us out to the Island," I said.

The Grand Master glanced at Master Moore. "we might be able to help with that. There is a tunnel from the lower level of the Guild Hall directly to the Guild Pier. All of the normal Guild ferry runs have been canceled today due to the protests so finding a boat shouldn't be a problem," he said.

I felt elated at the news. "Perfect!"

"Master Moore, would you find an Agent to take Morgana and her party through the tunnel?" the Grand Master said looking at the tall woman at his side.

"Are you sure Steve?" she said reaching out and taking hold of his sleeve. "An additional fifty soldiers could make quite a bit of difference here. I'm sure that Magic-User Donegal is exaggerating the situation on Black Island."

For a second the Grand Master seemed to be considering her idea then he shook his head.

"No I've known Mor for years, before he became one of Grosvenor's victims, and he has never been one to exaggerate. If he's called for his God-Daughter's help then he must be in need."

With that he strode over to the Special Agent who appeared to be in charge of the forces at the door and started talking to her in low tones. I turned to look at Master Moore.

"How do I find these tunnels?"

\* \* \*

Getting down to the tunnel proved to be very easy once we'd found an Agent to escort us. The tunnel itself was well lit with bare concrete floor and walls, it was wide enough for four to walk abreast and the ceiling was high enough to make it feel more like a hallway than a tunnel. I could also tell that it was used pretty regularly. The clump of my staff and the sound of boots from our fifty warriors filled the tunnel with enough noise to distract me from the dull ach in my leg. At each end of the tunnel were metal doors and the agent with us had to swipe his security badge and then type in his PIN (personal identification number) to get them to unlock.

At the water front the Guild has a large three story building attached to the back of the building is the Guild pier including a sheltered area and a dry dock for its' boats. We came up from the tunnel and were met by a Magic-User 3rd class whose name was Douglas, he was responsible for running the pier. The Grand Master had already called and he was gathering a crew to man the ferry that would take us out to the Island.

While we waited Magic-User Douglas directed us to the passenger lounge where passengers typically waited before boarding a ferry. The waiting area was empty today since all of the normal runs had been cancelled. I once again felt a sense of urgency to get out to the Island. I knew that it would do no good for me to give in to my emotions and start yelling at Douglas to get the boat ready faster.

In about 30 minutes we were told that we could board the boat and by noon we were moving out onto Lake Union. I knew from past experience it would take about an hour to get to the Blake Island so I pulled out the crystal my mother had used to send me her

message. I activated it and sent her another message. "I will be on the Island by 1 pm." I sat back now stroking Edgar and feeding him small pieces of bread. I figured that once we got closer to the Island I'd send Edgar up to check out what was going on. As we passed the West Point Lighthouse I knew it was now about an eight mile run nearly directly south to get to Blake Island. As badly as I wanted to launch into the air and go help my mother I knew it would be better to wait and bring all of our forces onto the Island at once.

I decided to go talk to Sir Ruion and LT Randgos and try to put together a plan. I'd briefly described the island to them while we'd been waiting to board the ferry but hadn't formed a solid plan. I found them toward the back of the ferry talking with the squad leaders. As soon as they saw me they stood up.

"Lady Livingstone?" Sir Ruion said.

"I thought we should spend a few minutes talking about what we'll do once we get to the Island," I said.

"Why, tis simple my lady," Ruion replied. "We will disembark and move up to the estate, putting down any ruffians' we encounter along the way."

I glanced over at LT Randgos to see that his eyes were dancing with humor. "You must admit Morgana it has the advantage of simplicity and is very similar to the plan you used to rescue Mor last summer," he said obviously teasing me.

I gave him a look that said, "You're not helping."

"I intend to send Edgar to look over the situation in a few minutes. If we can spot the assault force we can figure out the best way to deal with them. I'd like to capture and question a few of these criminals. We don't really know what's going on and I think that the event's in Summer and here are linked. So any information we can collect could be extremely useful," I said.

"As you wish," Sir Ruion replied in a mild condescending tone.

When I felt that we were close enough I sent Edgar into the air and found a quiet place to sit. Once settled I strengthened my bond to Edgar and soon had an aerial view of the island. At first there wasn't much to see, the island is mostly covered with trees. I started to make out faint tracings of spell work. I'd laid several types of wards over the island during my last visit. Mostly they were designed to alert my mother to the presence of visitors. The wards around the estate on the northwest side of the island however, were strong enough to keep unwanted visitors out. Those wards were visible in light blue. I felt relieved because if they were up that meant that the forces attempting to gain access hadn't yet been successful.

As Edgar circled the estate and I noticed something strange, an ugly violet lattice of spell work had been laid over the whole estate. As I focused on it I realized that I'd never seen a working quite like this one. It was Elven but with some human influences. I knew that I'd need to describe it in detail for my partners so I spent several minutes studying it. Now I directed Edgar to start looking for the hostile force on the island. This proved more challenging than I would have thought. Partly because there are so many trees on the island and partly because they had a very good veil up, at last Edgar spotted a flash of light and flying closer he saw a creature who didn't look either human or Elven standing along the east side of the estate. The creature appeared to be tall with red skin and a crown of horns poking out of his skull. In some ways he reminded me of Darth Maul from the star wars movies. He held out his hand and a spear of flame as wide as my wrist flashed out to hit the ward. The ward shimmered and held. The creature kept the flame up for perhaps five seconds before releasing the spell.

I directed Edgar to return to the ship and stood up. I had a feeling that this might be more difficult than I'd thought at first. We were only a half a mile away from the island; we'd have to turn slightly east soon if we wanted to tie up at the pier. I didn't think this a particularly a good idea. Another option was to turn west and come up on the estate from the water. There wasn't a good place to land but most of the elves in our party should have the strength to work a short fly or levitation spell. One of the things I'd learned about Elven magic was that generally speaking the stronger one was magically the higher rank one had in society. So an elven farmer would be able to work simple spells but nothing truly powerful. While a knight would be capable of powerful feats, a lord, or a member of the royal house would be more powerful by orders of magnitude. The warriors with us under LT Randgos command we're up at a knight's level so even if they were handicapped by trying to use magic in the human realm they should be strong enough to get to shore. The real advantage they brought to this fight was numbers, training, and the enchanted weapons they'd brought with them.

I explained the situation to Sir Ruion and LT Randgos, there was an enemy force of unknown size between the docks and the estate. Most of the force was veiled but I'd seen humanoid creatures of unknown power testing the wards. The wards were still up however they could come down at any time. Rather than fighting our way through I suggested we come in from the sea and I'd use my key and open the ward and our force would fly the last hundred yards to the shore.

"How is it that the wards are still up? If these are the same rebels that are active in Summer then I wouldn't have given your wards more than an hour or two," Sir Ruion said.

"I designed the wards myself and not to sound boastful, but I have a gift for wards," I said.

"One of the things that I learned from the failure of the wards at the Donegal estate last spring was a better way to design them. The problem with most wards is that they're static. Most Magic-Users think of them as a wall or a barrier. The wards I built here are active and adaptable if there is a Magic-User linked to the central warding stone and if the Magic-User understands how to defend the ward net. This way he or she can take advantage of the ley-lines powering the ward to adjust the net and adapt it for almost any attack," I said watching the stunned look on Sir Ruion and LT Randgos's faces.

"That's not possible," Randgos whispered.

I could tell what he really wanted to say was that if such an act of sophisticated and subtle magic were possible the Sylvari Elves would have thought of it.

I decided to let his unspoken comment pass. "I designed these wards specifically for Mor and I made sure to train him on how to use the net. Then last summer Sir Galohond spent six hours trying to break through the net and we failed. Besides how else can you explain that the ward is still active?" I said looking back and forth between them.

"Look, it's not full proof, if enough power is brought to bear, one of the warding stones can be overwhelmed. If that happens then it would only be a matter of time before the whole net collapsed," I said.

"I'd be willing to bet that Mor has spent every moment since the first assault on the ward net using the ward stone to hold it together hoping for a rescue. Which, gentlemen, is why we're here," I reminded them.

Sir Ruion looked thoughtful and nodded. LT Randgos spoke up. "what I don't understand is why they haven't just parted the veil and escaped into Summer."

I'd wondered about that myself when my mother had said that they were under-siege and had two theories. "If there are elves in the attacking force they'd be able to follow into Summer where they'd become much more formidable while the humans would become weaker. Why give up a well-fortified defensive position for a place where you're likely to be at a huge disadvantage." When both elves nodded I continued. "The second reason is that I think the spell that is surrounding the ward is another type of ward. One designed to prevent anyone inside the field from parting

the veil. I understand that the Guild has developed this type of ward for use by its Special Agents when they are making an arrest on a skilled Magic-User. Although I've never seen it so I can't be sure," I said.

"So gentlemen, are your warriors able to cross a hundred feet of water and over a twelve foot stone by air?" I asked.

Sir Ruion looked at LT Randgos since he wasn't as familiar with the capabilities of Galohond's men.

"If this were Summer then I'd say, yes. Not a problem. But here our magic is weaker, I think that most of them, can manage that much telekinesis. There are five though who won't be able to do it here in the human realm. The best they'll be able to do is levitate; so they will have to be towed," he said.

"Good enough, I'll go first and part the wards and fly into the estate. I have the Keys and I'm sure that Mor will know that we are here as soon as he feels me opening the Ward. I'll hold it open for the rest of you," I said getting up and heading to the bridge to talk to the ferry's captain.

As the island came into view I stood on the prow of the boat and took a deep breath drawing in as much power as I could and then focusing on my ring of unnoticed. I cast the spell pouring as much energy into it as I could. I could feel the spell slip out and cover the boat as it moved aft I realized I had just enough strength to hide the boat and that as soon as I focused on casting another spell this one would fail. Well at least I could cover our approach from any lookouts the invaders might have.

The next ten minutes stretched out and felt like hours to me as the boat got closer and closer to my mother's estate. Soon I could make out buildings and the faint shimmer of an active ward. I sent Edgar back into the sky but I couldn't spare the attention to focus on our bond, if there was a problem I knew he'd let me know. Heard the faint tread of elven war boots on the deck behind me and asked without turning my head. "Are your warriors ready?"

"Aye, my lady we are all ready. The captain plans to bring us another twenty feet in and then he's as close as he's willing to go. So far there is no sign that we've been spotted by either attackers or defenders," LT Randgos said. Was that a trace of respect for the spell I'd used to hide the approach of the boat?

"Well then it's time to go," I said and felt a moment of relief when I released the spell. I took a quick look and saw that all of the Elven Warriors were on the deck looking ready. Rather than waste time I cast my fly spell through my ring of Aether and in a gust of wind soared into the sky. I knew without looking that the elves were following my lead and taking to the air. As I approached the ward I considered the malevolent



violet ward. Everything I'd studied about wards told me that it was meant to contain those within not keep us out. I was still a bit nervous as I crossed the boundary of the ward and felt a slight tingle. With a sigh of relief I spoke the key and willed energy into the Words.

The purple and blue ward in front of me parted allowing me to pass inside the estate. I felt Edgar enter the ward just behind me and I spun in mid-air to watch the arrival of my rescue forces. LT Randgos was in the lead with Sir Ruion keeping pace with the slowest of the warriors.

The first twenty were moving at a good pace obviously comfortable with the use of telekinesis and entered the estate just behind me. The next group was moving much slower obviously under their own power but trying to conserve energy as they flew toward the ward net.

"CAW! CAW!"

Edgar's alarm caused me to whip my head around, a group of shadows had detached from the shore just east of the estate and were flying rapidly toward us. I whispered a spell that improved my eyesight and telescoped in on the enemy. The shapes resolved into three humans and one creature with blue skin and bat like wings flying on its own power.

I used the spell that increased my voice and shouted, "Sir Ruion, hurry the enemy is almost upon us!"

At my words Sir Ruion looked over at the approaching force and smoothly started to climb staying with the slower group but gaining altitude. At the same time he lifted his Great Bow and nocked an arrow. He sent his first shaft at the invaders from an impossible distance. As the arrow left the bow it transformed into a dart of pure golden energy and flashed toward the lead Magic-User. The Magic-User lifted his hand and the bolt struck an unseen shield. But it hit it with enough force to knock the Magic-User back a few feet. This got the attention of the attacking force and they split up. The creature with the bat like wings climbed rapidly along with one of the Magic-Users while the other two raced straight toward the slowly moving elves.

I felt frustrated I needed to remain where I was holding the ward open and from this angle I wouldn't be able to engage the attackers. The middle group of twenty elves had now made it through the ward and landed. All of the elves inside the estate who had distance weapons moved quickly to engage the invaders. Sir Ruion was taking carefully aimed shots while keeping pace with the last ten elves. There were the five who were levitating and one elf towing each of them. I was impressed to see that there was no panic, only an intense focus, as they moved forward.

The attackers were now within range and each Magic-User launched a spell. Two of the three spells were the simplest form of combat magic but still very effective. The spell was commonly referred to as a magic missile. It was pure magic shaped into a bolt of energy and fired at a target. Each missile reflected the color of the Magic-Users magic who'd cast it. One was yellow streaked with red and the other was bright orange missile. Both were targeting the elves towing their comrades to safety. The yellow and red bolt splashed against an elven shield and while the elf was pushed slightly off course he appeared unharmed. The second bolt however was a different story. It sliced into through body shield of the elven warrior and while the shield dissipated much of the energy a knifing ribbon made it through hitting the warrior's armor. It must have been enchanted armor because the elf never made a sound. He just continued to tow his friend toward safety.

The two attackers who'd climbed to engage Sir Ruion now launched spells of their own. The Magic-User sent a ball of glowing energy at Sir Ruion that crackled with electrical power. While the bat-like creature sent a bolt of purest black at him.

Sir Ruion waited until the last second before the ball of electricity would hit and then dismissed his fly spell and dropped like a rock and causing the glowing ball to pass harmlessly over him. The darkness however twisted and followed. Sir Ruion reactivated his spell ten feet above the water and turned the momentum of the fall into forward energy. He rolled over onto his back and fired an arrow almost straight up as he passed below the Magic-User who'd targeted him. This time the bolt hit the Magic-User's shield and blasted through it and embedded itself into the human's shoulder. He immediately screamed in pain lost control of the spell keeping him airborne and dropped into the ocean.

Sir Ruion turned to face the bolt of dark energy and held his bow up as though to block with it. Even at this distance I could see the faint green glow surround him as the darkness hit. The darkness instantly expanded creating a cloud of black that enveloped Sir Ruion. At this the bat creature let out a shriek and dove into the expanding darkness.

There was suddenly a twang from below me as the elves let loose with nearly twenty arrows directed at the remaining two visible attackers. Seeing the volley of glowing shafts they broke off their attack and moved away over the water. The remaining ten warriors made it into the ward but I still couldn't see Sir Ruion.

Then all at once he fell out from the cloud of darkness plunging into the cold water of the Sound. I wasted no time since the last of the elven warriors were now within the ward and darted out accelerating rapidly. I summoned as much power as I could and

pointed my staff at the diminishing cloud of darkness. The spell I cast was a combination of light and force and it shredded the darkness leaving the bat like creature floating in the air without its protection. Before I could cast another spell half a dozen magically powered arrows struck the creature. The first three fell away harmlessly but the next three penetrated the creature's protective shield. Of the three magic darts to penetrate the creatures shield two bounced off its armor only the last bolt struck home. The Bat-like creature threw its head back and let loose an inhuman sound howl of pain. I now launched my own magic missile spell and the sapphire colored spear of energy blasted forward. The creature reacted quickly folding its wings and diving away so that managed to avoid my spell. It very rapidly gained speed and separation from me and the attacking elven archers.

With the routing of the sentinels I focused on finding Sir Ruion. He'd fallen into the ocean here and I wasn't able to see him. I floated above the place where he'd entered the water looking for a sign when I thought I saw movement below and to one side. I reached down with telekinesis and dragged Sir Ruion to the surface. He appeared to be half drowned, I didn't have time to check him out, the invaders could return with reinforcements any second so I raced for the wards opening them just long enough for us to slip inside. I dropped Sir Ruion at LT Randgos feet and landed next to him.

"Is he breathing?" I asked.

Lt Randgos looked up at me. "Yes, barely."

Just then the sound of an engine approaching caused me to look up. A Jeep Wrangler with the top off and what looked like a M240B mounted on the roll bar raced toward us. There were three people in the jeep. A blonde woman was driving while a large youth with sandy brown hair sat next to her. Behind the machine gun in the back sat an older man with dark Latino features, in a kind of elevated stool that allowed him to use the weapon while strapped in.

The sounds of coughing made me look down as Sir Ruion brought up a half a lung full of water and opened his eyes. A feeling of relief washed over me. We had arrived and with the forces at hand we should be able to hold out until Sir Galohond and his troops arrived.

\* \* \*

It didn't take much time for introductions. I vaguely remembered Samantha and Steve from the reception last August and I'd never met Mr. Paul Frost Samantha's chief of security however they were very happy to meet us. Moving the team up to the main

house only took a few minutes, since the grounds weren't really all that big, and Steve filled me in during the trip. As my mother's message had said they'd been out hunting and come across Aradiliel in the forest on the Olympic peninsula. She was terrified and running wildly hands bound by a set of manacles. There was no way that they felt they could just leave her. They'd called my mother and she'd come quickly taking charge of the situation. Just like my mother I thought. They'd all come back here and last night at around mid-night the estate had come under attack. Fortunately the wards I'd set up to alert my mother to new arrivals on the island had worked and had given them enough time to bring the defensive wards on the estate to full strength enabling them to keep the invaders out.

Up until now there had been very few people to actually defend the property. Mom had a cook but no one else on staff out here. Samantha had brought her three bonded physical adepts and two younger werewolves' recent recruits to their small pack. So the six of them plus my mother had been defending the property for almost fourteen hours, they should have all been exhausted. Luckily physical adepts can go for days if they have to on little to no sleep and the same was true for werewolves. Samantha and Steve claimed the benefit of both and looked more than ready to continue fighting if necessary. Before we were even to the main house LT Randgos had started issuing orders to the squad leaders sending out teams of elves to protect the property.

"Just remember to stay inside the ward. You can leave but it will stop you from returning unless you know the key," I warned them before the squads started dispersing.

I, of course, wanted to go straight to my mother but resisted the urge knowing that it would be better to make sure the warriors were properly deployed and then go in along with Sir Ruion and LT Randgos. Ruion was quickly recovering from trying to drink several gallons of the Pacific Ocean. As soon as he was ready the three of us along with Samantha Lott and Steve Henderson headed into the house to the sanctum. The island estate is much smaller than the Donegal estate in St Louis. This seemed to suit my mother just fine. She never really wanted a staff out here; instead she wanted privacy so that she could come to terms with her new body and life. The house itself had half a dozen bedrooms on the second floor. On the main floor it had a kitchen, a ballroom, formal dining room, a study, and most importantly to my thinking the sanctum. It was from the sanctum that my mother practiced his magic. It was also where I'd installed the 'ward' stone.

I found my mother in the sanctum, sitting before the granite ward stone, looking exhausted holding a glowing cane in one hand. The cane had been fitted with a large

red crystal (it was the crystal that glowed with power) and I recognized it after a second as the ley-line stone. As I stepped into the room I felt a link between me and the stone suddenly spark to life. I'd used the stone in the past and established a link to it. However, I'd not expected it would respond to my presence in this way.

Mor's left hand rested on the ward stone and I could feel from where I stood, just inside the doorway, that he was linked to the greater ward around the house and was actively using it to fend off the invaders. The ward stone was about the size of a volley ball and polished to a smooth finish. I'd placed it into a hole I'd cut into a small mahogany table so that two thirds of it were visible above the table. The table itself was a work of art with glyphs and wards cut into it and filled with silver. I hadn't crafted the table, I'd designed it and specified the runes but an elven artisan had crafted it. At the sound of my staff on the hardwood floor I felt him pull back from the ward and focus on us.

I was slightly shocked when my mother looked up and grinned at me. The face was the face that I'd seen in the mirror every day for thirty years. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and a rugged chin made me realize for the first time what a good looking man I'd been. In fact there were several similarities to my old body and Sir Galohond which, now that I realized it, sort of creeped me out. Was I a closet narcissist?

I also realized that my mother was relying heavily on the ley-line stone he'd fixed to the end of the cane. My old body had at best been a weak Magic-User 2nd class, this fact had always been a point of friction between me and my mother. She believed that I was weaker than the rest of the family because I'd never really dedicated myself to strengthening my power. In the time he'd had my body I was perversely pleased to see that he'd had no more success building up his magical muscle than I'd had. However, my mother had acquired Bernard Livingstone's ley-line stone which increased his strength to a strong Magic-User 1st Class. This was still a handicap as far as my mother was concerned because in his former body he'd been a very strong Master Class Magic-User.

"Morgana, thank God you made it." My mother said with a relieved expression. "I'd give you a hug but the wards are being tested and I'm afraid I need to focus."

As he looked up at me I could tell that something wasn't right, I just couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't hesitate for a second. "let me help." Not waiting for an answer, I stepped forward and placed my hand on the ward stone and channeled the power necessary to link to the stone. I instantly felt my mother through the link and had a birds-eye view of the estate. There wasn't an attack going on instead I heard my mother's voice in my head.

"Alastar, I wanted to talk to you without being overheard for a moment," he said.

"What's going on?" I asked silently.

"I'm not sure. The Elven lady, there's something strange about her. We still haven't been able to remove those damn manacles and she is traumatized, which is to be expected. But there is something more going on; she starts at everything, flinches at shadows, and is always cold. She's been through something worse than just a kidnapping." Evaline said.

"Okay, why the secrecy? I'm pretty sure the Elves I'm with had nothing to do with this," I said.

"That's just it, all of this, the murders, the kidnapping of the royal twins, the attempt on your life, the riots, and demonstrations around the country, as well as a rebellion in Summer. It's all just too coincidental and too big for it to be just Ambrose. Alastar we need to be very careful," he said.

"I agree. I've shared my theory with Gwendolyn as well as Sir Galohond. I believe that Ambrose is attempting a Greater Rite of Assentation and I think she has allied herself with another faction or being of power. I just don't know who," I said. "You still haven't explained why we're talking in secret," I said.

"Because I'm not sure who we can trust. With Ambrose's ability to swap souls she could have replaced people of influence in both Summer and here in the human realm. Think about it for a moment, what was she doing last May? She was using the Elves and the chair to gain control over high ranking Guild members. I think your destruction of the chair only set back her plans. She was always one to have a plan within a plan. This feels like the fall back plan."

"I think that LT Randgos, and Sir Ruion are trustworthy. At least enough to help break us out of here, so what are we facing?" I asked.

Out loud my mother said, "I think their done for a few minutes we can probably talk now."

I opened my eyes and severed my bond with the ward stone by removing my hand.

Without getting up Mor said, "As far as I can tell there are anywhere from 75 to 100 invaders. Not all of them are capable of casting spells. There are werewolves, vampires, and several creatures from some chaos realm with this group, as well as elves and humans. They are at a slight disadvantaged at the moment with the sun up since the vampires are weakened by it. Come sunset I think we will have a very tough go of things."

"Why don't we just escape into Summer?" Sir Ruion asked.

"I've not been able to part the veil since their ward went up. You're welcome to try," Mor replied.

Sir Ruion nodded. "Perhaps later. Assuming we can't escape what do you propose?"

"I don't think it's wise to wait for nightfall. If we take the offensive we don't have to drive them from the island. Instead I think we need to focus on destroying the ward that's preventing us from escaping. Then we fall back behind our own wards and flee the island. With this many elves in Summer I think we will be safe enough. Once we've got Aradiliel back to the palace I think the immediate threat will have passed."

As my mother finished his thought a loud explosion caused us all to turn and look out the windows facing south. Black smoke was rising from the gate that had been blocking the main driveway onto the property. It didn't take me long to realize that whatever had caused the explosion had also probably breached the wards at the gate.

"Morgana, defend the gate! I'll see what I can do to keep the rest of the wards up." Mor said placing his hand on the ward stone and causing the gem at the end of his cane to flare with power as he drew on its strength to augment his own. "Oh, take one of the crystals from my work bench before you leave," he said.

I looked at my mother and was impressed with the speed and authority he organized the defense of the estate. Then I was moving. Edgar fluttered his wings trying to keep balance as I limped as quickly as I could through the house heading for the main entrance. As quickly as I tried to move I couldn't keep up with my four companions. Steve, Samantha, Sir Ruion, and LT Randgos had raced ahead leaving me to limp along behind as quickly as I could. When I got to the front door it was standing open and I instantly saw what was going on.

The invaders had somehow gotten hold of a truck, (probably from down by the main pier) and had loaded it with explosives and rammed the gate. The explosion from about a thousand pounds of explosives combined with the weight and momentum of several thousand pounds of truck blew through the metal gate leaving only wreckage behind. I had no need to bring up my third-eye to know that the ward had been shattered in this sector as well. If I knew my mother he'd be working feverishly to rebuild the ward using the ward stone. Unfortunately there was only so much he could do without a crystal to tie section. The ward would remain unbalanced and would fail if we didn't act quickly. I need to get down there and replace the crystal. My mother had realized this before I'd even left the sanctum, which explained why he'd had me pick up a crystal.

After the suicide bomber had detonated the truck his companions had rushed into the breach. It was hard for me to tell but it looked like at least 25 to 30 invaders had

rushed forward. To one side of the gate a squad of ten elves had set up in a line blocking the driveway about twenty feet beyond the blast area and they were already pouring arrows into the charging attackers. The enchanted arrows were slowing down the attackers but it was a losing situation for us. Several of the invaders had raised magic shields and were working to protect the main force.

I saw that Sir Ruion had already taken position with the squad, LT Randgos was nowhere to be seen. Both Samantha and Steve had disappeared as well. I drew in as much power as I could and activated my ring of Aether and soared into the air. The invaders were clumped together moving forward as a group behind the magical shields being held by at least three human looking Magic-Users. I activated my ring of 'un-notice' as I flew toward them. Once I was directly over the enemy I pulled out one of the battle wands I'd brought with from my families vault. It was designed enable the Magic-User to channel and control lighting and I took full advantage now. The first bolt tore into the enemy ranks and sent several bodies flying. Before I could cast a second bolt a shield had been raised over the group. My second bolt hit it causing it to flare with red light. A creature with red skin and a crown of horns looked up at me and made a gesture and a bar of fire as thick as my wrist blasted up at me.

Rather than try to block it I moved to one side and hardened the air in front of the fire at an angle to direct the blast further away from me. I was surprised by how hot the blast made the air around me. There was no way I wanted to get hit by one of those strikes.

CAW! CAW!

Edgar's warning caused me to whip my head around in time to see the bat-creature diving at me. Both of its claw like hands were stretched out in front of it and they were covered in a strange shadowy substance. I was pretty sure that I didn't want that thing touching me with those claws. The darkness from the creature's hands shot toward me in twin midnight jets. I remembered the spell this creature had used on Sir Ruion and countered by channeling light and force through my staff so that it glowed brighter and brighter. The beams of darkness hit my shield of light and exploded out leaving me in a bubble of night that lasted for a second before the light from my staff eroded the darkness shredding it in several places.

Then the bat creature hit my shield with both extended claws. The force of the blow was enough to drive me back and my shield wavered. I responded by flicking my wand at the creature and blasting it with lighting at close quarters. The creature had no time to avoid the blast so it raised a shield of darkness which my lightning flashed into and disappeared with no obvious effect. As it defended the creature hadn't been able to



stay aloft next to me. It had struck and then passed away and to my left trading altitude for air speed as it circled around to attack again.

I took the moment of respite to look down and saw that the attackers had moved forward a little but were starting to spread out. I could also see that the elves were slowly running out of magical energy. Fully half of the arrows being shot now didn't glow with magical energy. By taking the power they brought with them into the human realm and channeling it through their weapons and magical items they'd been able to husband their strength now, after several minutes of steady fighting, they were running low on power. Despite this the arrows had taken a toll as there were perhaps a nine or ten bodies scattered on the ground with arrows sticking out of them. My own attack earlier had either killed or wounded a few as well, because it looked like only about fifteen of the original fighting force was still pressing forward.

I caught a flash of movement by the gate and saw that another group of twenty some invaders were charging through. I realized that if they engaged the squad defending the gate we'd be overrun. I knew I had to do something quickly and that's when the bat-creature soared up holding what looked like a beach ball of purple light and shadow. It threw the ball at me like a kid doing a two handed basketball pass. I knew that I didn't want whatever that thing was to hit me and brought up a wall of hardened air. Behind the hardened air I activated my shield ring and brought up a body shield going for a layered defense. When it hit there was a burning sensation on my finger where I had my ring of Aether and then the ring crumbled to dust. As soon as it did I dropped like a rock. I'd only been about twenty feet up and as the ground rushed up to me I pushed down with telekinesis hoping to catch myself before I hit. The result was that I landed hard and my wounded leg collapsed, sending a knife of pain through my leg that made me hiss in pain as I crumpled to the ground.

This saved my life because as soon as I was down Paul Frost opened up with the machine gun mounted on the jeep. The heavy rounds slammed into shields which in some cases held up for a few seconds and then collapsed leaving the attackers in the open. Other shields lasted long enough for the owner to get out of the line of fire by retreating back through the gate. This turned the area between the gate and the house into a killing field and Frost shot with the skill that physical adepts were known for; he shredded the invaders bodies with bullets mercilessly. I let go of my staff and wand and covered my head with my arms and focused on channeling power through my shield ring and keeping it as tight to my body as possible. Over the noise of gun fire I heard the shrill cry the bat-creature had made earlier during our encounter.

I looked up and saw that it had struck at Paul from above. Paul had somehow sensed the attack and tried to get the gun pointed up but it was too late. The bat-creature struck but instead of going for Paul it smashed the machine gun. Paul reacted with blazing speed drawing his side arm and at point blank fired round after round into the creature. It let out another shrill cry and flung itself into the air, zig-zaging back and forth to make it a difficult target before ducking out through the breach in the estates ward.

Then it was over, I looked up and saw that the attackers were either all on the ground or they had fled back through the breach in our defenses. The bat-creature was nowhere to be seen. I stood up with difficulty sheathing the wand I'd used and picked up my staff using it to take my weight. I could see a spot of blood through my pants over my wounded leg. With difficulty I limped down to the ruined gate and started the process of working the crystal that I'd brought with me from my mother's sanctum into the ward net, sealing the breach. Behind me I could hear the jeep pull up and stop. I figured they were covering me with M-4's now that the 240 had been destroyed.

It took several minutes to repair the damage and work the crystal into the net. At some point a red haired woman, who I assumed was the third physical adept, showed up with a silver tripod designed to hold the crystal I was working with. Knowing my mother he'd arranged this which was a good thing. Because once I was done, I'd either have to stand here holding the crystal or put it in something. Leaving it on the ground wasn't an option.

With a sigh I stepped back and reviewed my work. The ward was back up unfortunately I could tell that it had taken some serious damage. The threads of the ward weren't balanced properly and the invaders were constantly working to knock it out of balance so they could overload a crystal and pull it down.

"Morgana, are you alright?" I just noticed that LT Randgos was standing next to me. I'd been so focused on my work I hadn't heard him approach.

"I'll be fine, I'm just tired and hungry," I said feeling like my blood sugar was running low.

"Here" he said offering me a bottle of Gatorade. I accepted it gratefully and took several swallows.

"You need someone to look at your leg," he said.

I glanced down and saw that the wound that had reopened during the fight was bleeding and had soaked through my pants.

"Your probable right, can you give me a hand getting back to the house?" I asked feeling light headed.

\* \* \*

I was sitting in the kitchen with my left leg propped up as Paul Frost worked on it. He'd cut the jeans open and cut off the old bandage. The stitches I'd gotten at the hospital had pulled apart and it was bleeding freely. Paul cleaned the wound and put a fresh dressing on it with the competence of a person who'd done this many times. Just as he was finishing up my mother came into the kitchen. He looked tired with dark circles under his eyes.

"How are you feeling dear?" He asked.

"I'll be okay. I just took some medicine and Paul here is helping," I said waving a hand at Paul. What I didn't tell him was that I'd dry swallowed a couple of Motrin instead of something stronger because I wanted to be able to focus if there was another attack.

"You need something stronger than Motrin." My mother replied, he obviously knew me too well.

"I can't afford to be out of it if another attack comes," I said pushing myself up. "I think I left some clothes the last time I visited. I'll go get changed."

As I moved to go around him my mother reached out and slowly almost tentatively gave me a hug. With his head next to my ear he whispered quietly. "Alastar, I'm so glad you're here."

I gave him a quick squeeze suddenly conscious of my breasts being crushed into his chest and pushed away.

"I'll be gone for a few minutes to change, Sir Ruion and LT Randgos went with your werewolves to take a look at the defenses. I expect that they'll be back soon. When they get back I'm sure they'll want to see Aradiliel and then plan our next move."

"Of course, I'll be in the sanctum when you're ready," he said turning to open the refrigerator.

I picked up my staff and using it to help support my weight I limped out of the kitchen with Edgar flapping over to my shoulder as I left. As I did I could hear Mr. Frost talking to my mother in low tones. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he was saying. The elves could be powerful allies but without access to Summer to recharge their power they were going to become increasingly less helpful. I made the trip to the room I'd stayed in the last time I was here trying to remember what I'd left.

As it turned out not much, I'd left a sundress with a nice floral print and a change of skivvies.

"Great, the next time I go toe to toe with these clowns I'll be in a sundress!" I growled as I stripped off the cut and bloody jeans. Well, fashion be damned! I'm still going to wear my leather jacket! I muttered thinking that I'd spent too much time and energy working spells into the leather to not wear it out of some girly fashion issue! Since it seemed like I had a few minutes I hobbled to the bathroom and filled the sink with hot soapy water. I found a washcloth and stripped out of my clothes. I was surprised at the number of small bruises that dotted my pale skin. I spent the next few minutes using the washcloth and a towel to clean up as best I could. Then I changed into a fresh bra and panties and climbed into the stupid sundress. I put my rings back on keenly missing the Ring of Aether. I took the belt that I'd used to hold my sword and wands and buckled it around my waist knowing it looked silly with the dress but not caring. Next I spent a couple of minutes to brush out my long black hair and then braid it into a single pony tail to keep it out of my way. Feeling somewhat rejuvenated I limped down to mother's sanctum.

\* \* \*

The strategy session never really got started. Both Sir Ruion and LT Randgos insisted and seeing and talking to Aradiliel, with Samantha leading the way, the four of us returned to the second floor of the house. Aradiliel's room turned out to be the room across from my mother's which surprised me a bit since it's not the biggest or nicest. Samantha knocked gently and then when there wasn't a response cracked the door open. She paused for a second and then stepped in, with the elves on her heels.

Aradiliel sat looking out the window. From this angle I had a good view of her profile and my breath caught. I spotted at once the family resemblance between her and her mother. Both women were blonde, but while the Queen was a woman at the height of her power and beauty the princess was filled with the beauty of youth. She looked over her shoulder when we entered and if her voice caught for a second it was to be expected.

"Sir Ruion Galadhrinmyr, well met Sir!" She said standing up and turning to face us fully.

"My Lady" Ruion said dropping to a knee with LT Randgos only half a second behind.

"Please rise and introduce me to your companions," she said in a soft musical voice that fluttered a bit as though she were trying to contain her emotions.

"This is Lieutenant Randgos, of the Larohtta clan, and a sworn arms-man to Sir Galohond Larohtta. At this Randgos bowed again.

Gesturing to me he said, "this is the lady, Magic-User Master Class, Morgana Aoife Livingstone, the god-daughter of Mor Donegal your host."

At this I remembered the lessons I'd received at Mrs. Broussard's school and curtsayed.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Princess. I only wish that the circumstances were better," I said.

"Thank you, I wish the circumstances were different as well," she said with a strange note in her voice. When I raised an eyebrow in question she seemed confused for a second and then lifted her hands.

My breath caught. The manacles were made of a black iron and the chains not only encircled her wrists but had wrapped themselves up her arms almost to the elbows. There were several places where the chains had shot between each of her arms and unless my eyes were tricking me it looked like some of the links were biting into her pale skin.

The hiss of breath from my elven companions told me that they knew what those horrid looking chains were.

"Who dared to put the Irons of Balchamarth on you!" Sir Ruion nearly shouted in anger.

"A human woman, I do not know her name but her followers call her the Great One, and my,... my... brother." The princess said in a voice barely above a whisper. Slowly silently a tear slide out of one of her eyes and she turned away to look out the window again.

"What?! This can't be possible, why would your brother do this to you?" Ruion gasped.

"I don't know all of the reasons it seems like madness to me. Perhaps he is under a compulsion," she said her voice barely audible.

"Princess, I know very little of the Iron's but why haven't they been removed?" Sir Ruion asked.

Not looking back at us she replied. "They can only be removed in Summer, and only by a person with the strength of a noble. I'm afraid, Sir Ruion as strong as you are, you do not have the strength required."

"Princess, we will have this siege lifted soon, when it is we will return to Summer and the palace. Once there it shouldn't be too hard to find one with the strength remove those foul things."

"Thank you, gentle knight, now if you'd excuse me I'm feeling light headed. I think I'd like to rest," she said her voice still barely above a whisper.

"As my lady commands" Ruion said.

As headed back down to the sanctum I could tell that Sir Ruion was troubled. The news that the Prince had betrayed his sister and might be working with Ambrose was a shock. This might explain why the princess had been acting strangely. Being betrayed by your twin brother and bound in those horrible chains would be very traumatic.

\* \* \*

Night had fallen and I was standing on the veranda looking at the wards to the southeast of the estate. I had a bad feeling that something was moving in the forest and that we'd know what it was very soon. After the meeting with the princess we'd returned to the sanctum and tried to come up with a plan. Ruion had tried to get in touch with the Queen however the ward over the estate that prevented us from traveling to Summer must have also been set to stop magical communication because his sending failed. It had been late afternoon by this time and we were facing several problems. The biggest was that the magical energy of our elven warriors was running low. The warriors who'd used up their energy had been rotated to positions where we didn't expect an attack. Mor and I were the two most powerful Magic-Users, although Steve Henderson surprised me. He was a physical adept but unless I was wrong he had the strength of a Magic-User 2nd class. He'd never been through the Guild's formal training but Samantha Lott who had been trained was tutoring him and he was surprisingly skilled.

Sir Ruion wanted to act on the earlier plan and assault the ward locking us in the human realm. The fact that the enemy knew we were here meant that we wouldn't have the advantage of surprise. This plus the fact that our elven warriors were at low on magical power caused LT Randgos to argue against the idea. He pointed out that it would be more foolish to abandon a defensive position at this time. If we waited to link up with Sir Galohond we would possibly have equal numbers, surprise, and warriors' fresh from Summer. After listening to both sides of the argument I had to agree with LT Randgos. The Guild knew we were here and once they had a chance they'd send a force to the island to check on us.

Now with night falling I started to second guess myself. With the arrival of darkness there would be creatures who'd remained away during the day and were now active.

Vampires didn't like the sun. The newer and less powerful the vamp more susceptible to its light but even the newest wouldn't just burst into flames. They'd feel the light and it would weaken them. If left in it for more than a few minutes would start to show burns and would eventually die of exposure to the sun. The older vampires, those who lead the covens, would be uncomfortable under the sun but that was about all. Then there were the vampire lords who it was said could walk the day and feel no ill effects. The fact that we'd not seen any vamp's during the day was a good thing. It suggested that any vampire help would hopefully be foot soldiers and not anything really powerful.

I wished I had my ring of Aether as I called up telekinesis pushed up away from the ground. I felt like I needed to check on each of the squads deployed around the estate and check the wards. I knew that my mother was already using the ward stone to make sure that we were secure but I needed something to do. I flew only a few feet above the ground, I didn't want to make a target of myself by going up too high, and with my leg there was no way I was going to walk.

I started by checking the ten warriors assigned gate duty. They were led by an older looking veteran and had already dug in to either side of the drive way piling up dirt in a berm to protect them as they shot at anything coming through the gate. The hastily constructed Entry Control Point (ECP) was cleverly designed to provide maximum protection and catch any enemy coming through the gate in a cross fire. I also noticed the jeep was now parked, between the berms sideways so that it blocked the driveway. Even though the machine gun had been destroyed it could still be used as an obstacle.

The elves had either brought with or acquired several camp stools and they were talking quietly as they watched the gate. I felt their eyes on me as I floated to the ground and in the dim light blushed slightly.

"Quiet night so far" I said.

The sergeant nodded. "let's hope that it stays that way," he replied.

"Is there anything your warriors need?" I asked.

"We've got food and water, we are rested and ready. So unless you can provide us access to Summer I think we're as good as we can be." He chuckled.

"Alright, if anything happens send up a signal arrow," I said getting ready to leave.

"Ma'am," he said with a note in his voice that made me turn around.

"Yes?" I asked.

"You did good today. Getting us out here and then through the ward. I saw you fighting to hold the gate, you did good," he said and turned back to look down at the ruined gate.

I nodded at his back and rose into the air feeling a sense of pride that I'd earned the respect of this grizzled veteran. By the time I was check the third squad full darkness had fallen. I'd cast a spell that allowed me to see in the dark and was getting ready to move on to the next squad when an arrow screeched into the night and then exploded. The arrow had come from the ECP.

I lifted into the air and headed back to the front of the house flying as fast as I could using telekinesis. In seconds I touched down behind the squad at the ECP. By the time I got there I noticed Samantha and her three bodyguards were also there.

"Sergeant, what do you have?" I asked.

"My lady, there" he said pointing at an indistinct shape just outside the ward. As he did it suddenly stepped forward stopping only a foot or two from the ward. A light flared up and I realized that there were two individuals.

A female with black hair and slightly oriental features in tight black leather carrying a foil on one hip and holding a slender staff in her left hand stood facing us. Next to her was a strange looking creature. His skin was black and his features were rugged, he appeared to be heavily muscled and wore a set of black armor. When his cloak twitched I realized that what I'd thought was a cloak was really a set of batlike wings folded and hooked together. This had to be the bat-creature I'd faced twice already.

"Hello the house," the woman in black leather shouted.

I stepped out between the two improvised bunkers into the driveway and faced them.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Ah, if it isn't the one calling herself, Morgana Livingstone, the Great One is interested in you, young one," the woman said sending a chill down my spine. I suddenly wished I'd had more on than just a sundress and a leather jacket. Kevlar would be comforting right about now.

"I can't even begin to tell you how much I don't care what Ambrose is interested in," I said trying if I could confirm our theory that they were the same person.

The woman hissed for a second. "You pompous, presumptuous, fool, you don't deserve to speak the Great Ones name out loud. I should remove your tongue for your arrogance."

"Come and get it, Vamp!" I said putting two and two together and realizing that the woman I faced was a Vampire.

"Peace Monique, this will not accomplish the Great Ones will," the batcreature said his voice low and gravelly sounding like he had a hard time making the sounds into



words that were understandable to a human ear. Monique's eyes glowed red for a second and then they faded away.

"Don't lecture me Dekorzud, when last I checked this was my command," Monique hissed.

Looking at me she said, "You are outnumbered; we have brought in reinforcements along with human weapons. This ward will go down tonight and we will drink the blood of all who are within the wall if you don't give us the girl."

"Girl, girl, which girl are you referring to? There are several on the property," I said trying for a confused sound, although my acting isn't the best.

This time Monique's eyes didn't turn red but I could tell she was annoyed. "Don't play games. You know who we are after, Princess Aradiliel Isilidhrindal, surrender her to us and we'll leave."

I could feel the elves around me stiffen all of their attention focused on the vampire.

"Why should I believe you? You come here and invade Mor Donegal's property, you assault his house, and you tried to kill us earlier. But even if you could convince me of your sincerity I'd still tell you to go to hell. I've seen what Ambrose does to those he captures. I'll not turn anyone over to you," I said.

"You will regret this choice bitch, we are coming." With that the darkness rose up covering both Monique and Dekorzud when the light returned they were gone.

I turned to the sergeant. "Please pass the word, expect an attack any second."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than the ward flared up in a purple and blue dome as dozens of spells hit the south side of the estate almost simultaneously.

I pushed myself into the air using telekinesis, to get a better view of what was going on, and pulled in as much power as I could while drawing out my battle wand. In few seconds I could see the attack spells as they zapped out of the forest striking the ward causing the shield to shimmer and ripple. I accelerated toward the side of the estate under attack hoping that I could get there before it was breeched. Suddenly the popping sound of several rocket propelled grenades being fired filled the air followed by a series of explosions that rocked the night.

The ward held.

I was still a way off but I flicked my wrist holding the wand and a bolt of lightning shot out heading for the same area where I'd seen the muzzle flashes. The roar of machine gun fire erupted only this time it happened from the attacking side with heavy bullets slamming into the shield causing multiple shimmering rings of concentric energy to appear wherever they struck. In seconds the ward over the southern side of the estate was nothing but shimmering light. I knew that the ward

wouldn't be able to take much more of this and was thankful that they'd not had heavy weapons for the attack earlier today. I guessed that Monique hadn't been lying when she said that they now had reinforcements and human weapons.

I pushed myself higher so that I'd have a better view of the attackers and soon saw the twinkle of gun fire and the steady line of tracers as the machine gun pounded the ward. I knew that I had to act quickly and cast my most powerful lightning spell using my staff as the tool through which to channel and shape the spell. Out of the clear night sky lightning forked and then struck the ground where the machinegun fire had originated, again, and again, and again in less than three seconds. On the third strike a series of secondary explosions erupted on the ground.

I moved forward and pushed through the ward to get a better angle to attack the invaders using small arms. I lashed out with the power of my wand several times before I sensed the rush of an attack. I brought up my shield and dropped several feet. My shield flared as the batcreature, I'd fought earlier, passed over me nearly invisible in the night air. I turned and darted for the ward sub-vocalizing the key and creating an opening just in front of me. I slide through the ward and held it open for an extra second. I felt a presence follow me in.

I grinned with pleasure it had worked. I opened my third-eye and spotted the bat-creature as it circled trying to get above and behind me. I spun my staff in a circle faster and faster as I channeled magic through it. The air just above the staff started to spin many times faster than the staff until I held a miniature tornado.

"Come and get some, bat-boy!" I shouted into the night just as he dove at me. I spun around and flung the miniature tornado at the bat creature's chest. The wind caught him with a cruel force and even though he got some kind of shadow shield up it wasn't enough to prevent him from tumbling from the sky. He hit the ground hard and for a minute I considered moving back to attack the rebels pounding the shield. Instead I started down, I knew that I should make sure that thing was out before I turned my attention elsewhere.

I dropped to the ground a few feet from where the bat-thing had hit, annoyed at the way my dress flared up as I landed. If anyone had been watching they'd have gotten a great view of my panties. I could see the impression he'd left in the dirt and thought he must be dead or at least out. The snarl was the only warning I had as he suddenly attacked swinging a large clawed hand at my leg. Fortunately I had my shield up unfortunately the kinetic power of the blow took my feet out from under me. I rolled with it, coming back to my feet and facing this thing. At some point during my roll I'd lost both my staff and my wand. I drew my O-Wakizashi causing it to light up with a

pale blue light. I faced the bat-thing from about ten feet away and saw that it hadn't survived the fall unscathed. One wing was obviously broken and there was blood on its face. Its arm on the side with the broken wing looked like it was dislocated as well and hung uselessly. Despite all of that I felt disadvantaged. I'm 5'7" and about 110 lbs this thing was nearly seven feet tall and must have weighed in at close to 300 lbs. One solid blow from that clawed hand and I'd be done without my shield.

"So Dekorzud, how's the wing," I said moving with a limp toward its injured side.

"Been better, human, when I drink your blood it will heal swiftly," he replied in gravelly English.

"What kind of a name is Dekorzud? It doesn't sound elven and, by looking at you, I don't think you come from Summer," I said.

The creature growled for a second and then said, "I do come from the realm your people call Summer. Not the soft lands where the Sylvari live. I come from the wild regions, where those with strength roam free and hunt the weak." Without missing a beat it lashed out with its good hand sending three jets of inky darkness arching toward me.

I'd seen this attack before and was ready, I held up my sword as though to block it and channeled light into the blade. I had to close my eyes and look away for a second as the light became too bright to look at. When I glanced up at Dekorzud he had stretched his good wing over his eyes to block out the light. I decided to take advantage of the moment and lunged forward trying to drive my sword into the creature's belly. It reacted faster than I'd thought it could, spinning around in a circle to avoid my attack, it got a partial blow in as I went by. Again my shield flared and I stumbled forward but I recovered my balance and turned to face the thing. Suddenly the sound of thunder roaring in several concussive blasts centered on the gate filled the air.

"Ah Monique begins the real assault. Soon the house will be in flames and all of you will either dead, food, or held captive for the Great One," Dekorzud bragged.

I realized I had to end this quickly. I was half tempted to simply take to the air and leave the bat-creature, but there was no telling what this thing could do with the freedom to move inside our defense. It moved well on the ground, but I guessed that this wasn't its natural fighting environment. I punched with my left hand sending a fist of telekinetic force at the creatures head. Dekorzud's shadow shield flared up blocking the strike and I used the distraction to drive my right hand, still holding the O-Wakizashi, at the ground a foot from bat-boy's feet and spoke the word to release the magic of the Ring of Gelidus. A spear of super cold energy lanced out striking the ground just in front of Dekorzud flash freezing the ground in a five foot circle around

him including his feet. As I'd guessed he hadn't thought to protect his feet from a strike that missed them. If he'd have been flying the blow would have gone harmlessly past, the ground conducted the cold nicely freezing his feet in place.

The creature threw back its head and released an inhuman scream. I didn't wait for it to quit screaming, I hammered its feet and ankles with a telekinetic blow that shattered them causing it to fall onto its good side. I knew that the thing was still dangerous, so I approached it cautiously. I stepped up and with two hands drove my sword down into the bat-creature's skull. It started thrashing about and wisps of dark shadowy energy bled out of it. After a few seconds it went still.

"Shit the gate!" I said out loud realizing that I could hear sounds of fighting and what sounded like a call for assistance. I picked up my staff, sheathed my wand, and pulled my sword from bat-boy's head. Using telekinesis I lifted into the air and headed toward the sound of battle.

As I climbed I was able to observe the fight. The ward had once again been breached at the gate. I could just see the crystal tripod shattered and laying in pieces as elves, vampires, werewolves, and creatures out of nightmare rushed through the hole. LT Randgos had redeployed his forces so that two squads of ten covered two sides of the estate choosing to leave only a look out watching the approach from the ocean to the north. This meant he had two squads in reserve and one squad guarding the gate. It also allowed him to cycle squads off post to rest if the siege lasted for very long.

LT Randgos, obviously more experienced at this than I, hadn't been fooled by the attack on the south side of the estate. He'd allowed the squad stationed there to handle the attack and waited holding back his reserves waiting to see what happened. I felt stupid as I realized that the whole attack to the south of the estate had been a rouse to draw as much of our forces over to that area. Meanwhile the real attack came once again on the main entrance on the east side of the estate.

By the time I was flying toward the battle it looked like the squad on the gate was engaged in close quarters battle and both reserve squads had been committed to the fight. As I got closer I could see that in addition to the elves the physical adepts, Steve, Paul, and Katie were fighting next to Samantha and a pair of werewolves in hybrid form. Then I saw Monique, she was back from the front line issuing commands obviously leading the attack. Suddenly she leapt forward jumping nearly thirty feet through the air to land next to the sergeant I'd talked to earlier. I watched she drove her sword into the sergeant's neck. When she tore it free a fountain of blood followed. I felt horrified at first and then angry, I just wanted to start blasting but the enemy was

mingled in with our forces and anything I did at this range would have as much chance of hitting a good guy as a bad guy.

Instead I landed behind Monique at the rear of the enemy force. As my feet touched down I tried a spell I'd never had the strength to use before my swap into Morgana's body. I slammed the end of my staff into the ground and caused gravity in a cone from me to the point where Monique's force mingled with ours to increase to ten times normal. I watched as a 300 lbs. troll standing seven feet tall with green skin suddenly weighted 3,000 lbs and crash to the ground shattering several bones in the process. My spell had caught nearly a dozen invaders and while I doubted any of them would be killed they weren't going to be attacking anyone for a few seconds. I turned to face Monique just in time to bring my shield up and block a jet of flames she sent at me from her slender staff. I was startled by her spell since very few vampires are also Magic-Users. I managed to block the flame deflecting it up into the empty sky and started a spell duel in earnest with her. It was time to show this vamp what a real Magic-User could do!

There are several factors that come into play during a duel of MagicUsers, strength, knowledge, and skill are all critical. But there is something to be said for experience and just plain old speed. Monique must have been a Magic-User before she was turned. She was also far older than me and far more experienced but she wasn't as strong. Very quickly she was holding six spells attacking and defending with three each all at once. This was normally one of the tests for Magic-User Master Class, can you attack on the physical, mental, and spiritual plains all at once while defending each. As a Vampire she was also faster than me. This meant that she could see what I was doing and counter it before I saw what she was planning. My only advantage was that I was stronger than she was, my shield ring allowed me to pull off a sophisticated shield with far less power than normal, and I could attack and defend eight spells simultaneously.

As we fought the elves and the invaders on both sides fell back trying not to get caught in the cross-fire. After the first few seconds I realized that even though I was stronger and could handle more spells Monique's vampire speed and skill gave her a huge advantage. She was disrupting my spells before they were fully developed and still attacking me. I started to think it was only a matter of time before she got through my defenses with something and began to focus less on attacking and more on defending.

The loud call of a horn rent the air as a flare of nearly white magical light shot into the night sky. The creatures of chaos and darkness around us cowered from the light

and the thunder of hooves that filled the driveway as fifty elven warriors came out from under a veil just a few feet behind the enemy at a full charge. They ripped into the invaders and even though I was exhausted I took the time to glance toward the new comers. In the lead was Sir Galohond riding his bay gelding at a full charge with a long spear lowered and pointed at Monique.

I dove to one side feeling my leg protest at this violent movement. Somehow Monique managed to avoid being impaled and to blast Sir Galohond in the back with strange dark energy. I was exhausted and in pain from my leg and my last fight but I couldn't let this bitch kill Galohond. My heart raced at the thought of Galohond dying and my vision turned red. Vampires are known for their keen hearing so I dropped my staff and using as much magical energy as I dared I slapped my hands together augmenting the sound with power. The noise blasted out like a physical blow, loud enough to cause most of those around us to drop their weapons and cover their ears. For Monique she stumbled backwards dazed and in pain. I pointed my Ring of Gelidus and released its third and final charge. A jet of super cold energy blasted toward her, yet somehow she sensed the attack and dropped to her knees just before it struck. The energy passed above her so closely that it froze some of her hair before it was gone.

With a cry Monique brought up the darkness she'd used last time to escape and was gone. With the disappearance of their leader the invading forces concentrated mostly on escaping and in a few minutes the battle was over.

I looked down and saw that I was once again bleeding from my wounded leg. I felt exhausted and light headed. My Ring of Gelidus was empty and would take some time and effort on my part to recharge. As fatigue hit me like a brick I realized that my physical and magical reserves had been spent and I wanted nothing more than to settle to the ground. Despite all of that I was elated. The siege was broken. Sir Galohond trotted up and swung down out of his saddle. Before I knew it he was crushing me against his armor and kissing me.

"What was that for?" I asked out of breath when he finally let me go.

"When I saw you there fighting that vampire sorceress I thought you'd be dead before I could get close enough to help. I'm just glad that you're in one piece," he said and then added. "I love you."

# CHAPTER 6

**T**he sun was coming up as I looked out over the sound. With the siege broken Samantha Lott, guarded by her loyal physical adapt Steve, and I had led a team of elves out to find the grounding points of the ward preventing us from parting the veil to Summer and then dismantled it. Next I went to work fixing the ward on my mother's estate. There was no point taking any chances on the enemy returning for a sneak attack.

When I'd returned to the main house I got a full account of the fight. Of the fifty warriors LT Randgos and Sir Ruion had led four were dead and twelve were injured. Sir Galohond had led fifty warriors through Summer and three of them had been injured and one killed during the fighting. The enemy had suffered far higher casualties. By the time I'd finished talking to LT Randgos, who was giving me the run down on what had happened the sun was fully above the horizon. LT Randgos was one of the wounded, his left arm was in a sling and he had a long cut on his right cheek.

My mother, Sir Ruion, Samantha, Steve, and Sir Galohond were all in my mother's sanctum in various chairs and couches talking. When LT Randgos and I arrived they stopped talking and looked up. Sir Galohond stood up and gave me a quick hug before we returned together to the couch he'd been sitting on.

"How are you doing Randgos?" Galohond asked.

"I'm fine sir, this scratch is barely worth noticing," he said indicating the cut on his cheek. "and my arm was only dislocated I should be back to full strength in a day or two."

My mother interrupted from where he sat sipping a glass of wine looking exhausted. "Morgana, Lieutenant, please have a seat and a glass of wine. We've been discussing what to do next," he said.

"I think we should take Princess Aradiliel and leave at once for Summer. The sooner she's behind the palace walls the safer she'll be." Sir Ruion said.

I crossed the room and picked up the bottle of Merlot and poured two glasses putting one into Randgos hand before settling into the couch next to Sir Galohond.

"I agree," Sir Galohond said and reached out seemingly without thought to twine the fingers of his free hand with mine.

"However, I cannot move my injured warriors at the moment. I'll send fifty uninjured men with you and then follow along with the rest of my force later."

"Agreed, but I'd like LT Randgos to come with me, as the leader of your men. We work well together and he should have the honor of leading the soldiers who bring the Princess back to the palace," Sir Ruion said.

With that decided things got quiet as we all sipped our drinks. The strong bite of the alcohol in the wine helped me to start to relax. Finishing his wine Sir Ruion stood up and faced Mor.

"Sir, I must take my leave." When my mother nodded he turned to me and Galohond.

"Sir Galohond, if you would be so good as to inform your men while I go talk to the princess I'd appreciated it," he said.

"I'll come with you," Samantha said standing up and looking at Ruion. Sir Ruion looked like he was about to object but then changed his mind.

"Have you informed the Queen that the siege is broken and that her daughter's safe and returning to Summer?" I asked.

For a second there were surprised and then guilty looks. "I'll pass the word, to her majesty, at once," Galohond said.

With that Steve, Randgos and Sir Galohond all left so that it was just my mother and I.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"For a chick with a hole in her leg, yeah I'm fine," I replied. "How are you? You must be exhausted from being linked to the wards for nearly two days."

"I'll be okay. It was harder than I thought fortunately I've got this" he said reaching down to stroke the cane with the ley line stone worked into the handle. After a moment's pause he continued "when the wards were breached it felt like a spike being driven into my head." He grimaced at the memory of the pain.

Mor looked down into his glass for a moment. "So you think Ambrose is back and is behind all of this and that she's allied with some other power?"



When he looked up I could see the determination in his eyes. I met his eyes and nodded.

"I think it's time I return to St Louis. I may not be as strong as I used to be, but I know Ambrose better than anyone in St Louis. It's time to stop hiding," he said.

"Are you sure? You seemed to be enjoying your time here. It's like you're more at home in your skin," I said stumbling for the right words.

He stood up and finished his wine in a large swallow. "I'm sure, and I do know what you mean. In fact I could say the same for you. I'm proud of you,... god-daughter." I felt my vision blur and I had to look away. After I'd had a minute to compose myself he continued. "come find me once you're rested and we'll make plans for the trip back east."

I watched him leave suddenly realizing how masculine he was and in a flash what a cute muscular butt. That thought sent me into a fit of giggles that left me gasping for breath. Once I'd calmed down I sat there, for the longest time I didn't want to move, but after a few minutes I got up and limped my way to my bedroom. As I walked by a set of windows I could see that Monday had fully arrived and for a moment I paused to watch the activity as the elves got ready to depart. When I made it my room I went straight into the attached bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I was a mess. Sweat and blood stained my dress. I had bruises forming where I'd been hit during the fight. For a second I thought about my duel with the vampire Monique and realized that if not for the arrival of Sir Galohond I'd have probably lost that fight. She'd just been so damn fast. I had to put both of my hands on the counter and took several deep breaths as I shook with reaction.

I stayed there until I'd regained control of my emotions and then looked longingly at the tub before I realized it would be really hard to keep my wound dry and settled for another shower. I had to maneuver so that I was mostly out of the water with only my right side in the stream and used a washcloth to clean up. After drying off I pulled out some fresh bandages and carefully cleaned my wound and wrapped it in a fresh bandage. As I did this I realized with a start that this was much easier in my new body because I was more flexible. In my old form I'd never have been able to bend over like this to get a good view of what I was doing. Once finished, I put on a soft blue silk bathrobe and returned to my bedroom to get some sleep.

There was a light knock at my door just as I was about to pull the covers back. With a sigh I walked over and opened the door. Standing there in a borrowed t-shirt and khaki shorts was Galohond. His broad shoulders filled the doorway and I caught a hint of his

masculine scent. The sight and scent stirred something inside of me and I wanted to reach out and run my hand over his well-developed chest and abs.

Sir Galohond looked down at me and said, "I probably shouldn't be here, it's just that I can't get you out of my mind. I would have returned to Summer with Ruion, only I couldn't bear the thought of being away from you."

I stepped closer to him stopping just short of touch and put my hands behind my back so that my breasts strained the silk of my robe and looked up at him. My heart was racing and I was confused but glad that he was here. Something inside me seemed to melt when I remembered what he'd confessed that he loved me.

"So why are you here?" I asked.

He reached out with one hand and using his thumb and fore finger tilted my head back. Then very slowly he leaned down and brushed my lips with a gentle kiss. The soft touching of skin sent a thrill of pleasure through me and I reached up to get both arms behind his head so I could pull him down for a more thorough kiss. This time our mouths opened and our tongues fluttered and danced in each other's mouth, he tasted like peppermint. When the kiss broke I had to step feeling light headed yet I somehow managed to draw him, with me, into my room. He closed the door and turned off the lights reflexively and then we were kissing again. This kiss was full of passion and hunger and he crushed his mouth into mine. It seemed to go on for hours and by the time we broke my nipples were as hard as ice chips and there was a dull ach in my loins. My inhibitions fled, I couldn't get enough of him, as I kissed him again running my hands over his rock hard body. When we did come up for air this time I stepped back and with a slow deliberate movement I untied my robe and let it slide gracefully to the floor.

The look on his face was all I could have asked for, the awe and wonder of seeing me naked for the first time gave way to lust and desire. It was more than enough to stroke my ego and overcome any lingering doubt. His arms were around me and his mouth and tongue worshiped every curve as he guided me to the bed. When he started sucking on my right nipple I couldn't help the moan that escaped as jolts of sensation shot from my breast to my loins. Then he reached down and started stroking my clitoris. The waves of pleasure that filled me were hundreds of times better than when I'd explored my new body myself. I felt like every inch of me was on fire and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to get him inside of me, to fill the empty achy feeling between my legs. At this point I was literally squirming with need.

"Please," I whispered.

I response he grinned and stood up. In a few swift movements his shirt and shorts joined my robe on the floor and then he returned to the bed. But instead of kissing me he gently spread my thighs and began kissing the soft skin inside my left knee careful of the bandages. Slowly and deliberately he worked his way up to the small triangle of hair by my vagina and then blew gently on my outer lips. The sensations were so erotic I couldn't stand it and then, when I thought I was about to orgasm, he started over on the other leg. He repeated the process, with my right inner thigh, this time when he reached my clitoris he went to work stroking and licking using his tongue and fingers to push me over the edge into an orgasm that made my toes curl.

I wanted to return the favor but he was in control. He now moved up my body covering me with kisses until he got to my breasts. I nearly had a second orgasm from the kissing and stroking of my breasts. The sensations were enough to drive me right up to the edge.

"Please, take me, please," I whispered begging him.

I felt him reach down in response and once again he started stroking my vagina only this time focusing on spreading my pussy lips and positioning his cock at the entrance. Very slowly and gently he worked the tip of his penis into me. From my male memories I knew that he had about an average sized tool but at the moment it felt gigantic. I suddenly realized that I was scared and thrilled by what was happening to me. For the last several months I'd become more and more used to the idea of being Morgana and at this moment as he penetrated me, I fully accepted who and what I'd become. There was a moment of pain as he took my virginity and I knew that blood was mixing with our juices as he started pumping in and out. It hurt, but it was a pain that I knew would lead to pleasure.

Galohond was a very patient lover and he played my body like a master touching every erogenous zone so that when my next orgasm hit it nearly shattered my world. This time he lost control and the feeling of his hot seed pumping into me added to the pleasure, I heard a woman cry out and it took me a moment to realize that it was me. I clenched him tightly with my inner muscles and dug my fingers into the hard skin of his back and butt.

Slowly the sensations faded leaving me with a wonderful feeling of happiness and contentment. Galohond slowly pulled out with a sliding popping sound.

"Care to take a shower with me?" he asked.

"I'll scrub your back if you do mine," I replied.

When I stood up I learned two things most women know. What goes up must come down, and I could barely walk because I was so sore. Galohond had already

disappeared into the bathroom so I took my time following him. I dug out some fresh towels and tied up my hair so it wouldn't get wet before joining him. As I ran my hands over his soap covered muscular back and found myself humming a little tune out of sheer contentment. After getting cleaned up we returned to the bedroom.

I gestured at the rumpled bed. "I should probably change the sheets, but you can stay with me if you'd like."

Galohond hugged me to him and looked down into my eyes. "I'd like nothing better, but I need check on my warriors. After that I'll try to get a few minutes of rest. I've told the men to be ready to leave by noon."

I glanced at the clock by the bed and saw that it was just after 8 am. "Well I'm going to get some sleep."

He kissed me again and then got dressed. Before he opened the door I said, "Promise me you won't leave without saying good-bye."

Galohond looked at me for a second and then walked back to the bed and softly kissed me.

"I'd prefer to never leave your side again. But duty calls. Even so I'll never leave you without saying good bye," he assured. With that he stood up and quietly left.

I tried not to give in to the feeling of being alone after having had sex for the first time as a woman. I just couldn't help feeling a little lonely now as I slid into the fresh bedding. My body ached from the rough treatment of the last few days in addition to the new ach from between my legs. I rolled onto my side putting a pillow between my legs and hugging a second pillow to my front and drifted into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

The sound of my alarm buzzing pulled me from a deep formless sleep. There was a feeling of wellbeing and happiness that surrounded me like a soft dark cocoon. I rolled over and a groan escaped as all of the aches and pains from yesterday manifested including my sore nether region.

Have I mentioned how much I hate mornings?

I tried to rub the sleep from my eyes and sit up, I actually managed to do so, on my second attempt. When I was able to focus on the clock I realized it was a quarter after eleven and Galohond planned to leave at noon. Suddenly I realized I needed to be there to say good-bye. I tried to stand up and even though my leg protested, it felt like it was actually doing better than yesterday. I looked over at my dirty dress and knew that there was no way I was about to put that back on. The sum total of my wardrobe

consisted of the clothes I'd worn out here, that sundress, and one more change of underwear. Maybe Samantha or her physical adept with the red hair would have something I could borrow. What was her name? Oh, yes Katie something. Well, I didn't have to worry about taking a shower this morning since I'd taken one with Galohond last night. For a moment the memory of that shower made me feel flushed and slightly aroused.

By the time I'd brushed my teeth, fixed my hair and found some extra clothes (it turned out that Samantha and I were close to the same size) I barely made it down to the driveway where Galohond and his men were assembling. When Ruion had left he'd taken the horses so Galohond and his men would be walking. However Samantha had offered to have Paul Frost drive my mother's SUV with Katie Johnson riding shotgun. There wouldn't be anyplace to get gas in Summer but it should be just fine until the veil was parted and they returned. The bodies of the dead had been wrapped in blankets and they were strapped to the top of the vehicle. The wounded who couldn't walk were riding inside the SUV.

I saw that my mother was watching the bustle of activity and with the help of my staff I limped up to him. For a moment I stood next to him enjoying the silence.

"How are you feeling dear?" he asked.

"Sore, tired, and ready to go home," I replied.

I caught sight of Galohond and felt my heart race I took a small step forward thinking about calling out to him and then I decided against it since he appeared to be busy organizing his men. I dropped my hand and felt a small sigh escape. I noticed my mother watching me.

"What?"

"I know that look," he said with a grin.

"What look?" I said feeling absurdly irritated by his smug grin.

"The look of a young woman in love," he replied.

"I'm not,... well,...love," I sputtered.

At this my mother laughed. "Oh, Morgana, I was young once. I remember what it felt like to lose yourself in a man. Have you been intimate with him yet?" he asked.

I felt my face flush and my jaw drop. "I, ah, that is, ah, it's none of your business."

"You at least used protection?" he asked.

"Well, not exactly," I said.

At this my mother looked out at Galohond as he finished organizing the movement. "He's very handsome. They say that elves make great lovers, that they are sensitive to

the needs of their partner, and very attentive. There is a down side to a relationship with an elf."

"I know the down sides," I said resenting the fact that he was treating me like I was a child.

"Have you talked about these things? You have responsibilities here while he is a noble in Summer, any children you have will be sterile and they will either be able to use magic here or in Summer there is no way to predict which." He continued as though I hadn't said anything.

"God-Father, I know all of this you're embarrassing me," I said breaking in on his lecture.

At this he nodded. "We'll talk more later. If you're ready I suggest we return to St. Louis via Summer. I can have a car ready in an hour and we can follow your boyfriend."

"That sounds good I'll let Galohond know that we will be behind him and that we're traveling through summer," I said using this as an excuse to limp away from my mother and the very embarrassing conversation.

My parting with Galohond was somewhat anticlimactic. He was focused on getting his men ready. He stopped what he was doing long enough to take me into his arms for a very thorough good-bye kiss. I told him we'd be following him and use Summer as a short cut to St Louis. With the unpredictable way that time flows between the realms it could be a very fast trip to St Louis or it could take all day. The relative time from our perspective would be short.

I watched as Sir Galohond and his warriors stepped through the veil followed by Paul and Katie driving the SUV. Once they'd all departed I went to the kitchen figuring that I should get something to eat while my mother finished making the preparations for our departure.

I really didn't have much here besides the magical items I'd brought with me so I had almost nothing to pack. I found some cold cuts and bread and made a quick sandwich. I washed it down with a diet coke and then made my way to my bedroom and nearly bumped into Steve Henderson.

"Morgana, I was just looking for you. Your god-father said to tell you that everything is ready," he said.

"Thanks, I'll be right down," I replied.

I went, as quickly as my battered body allowed, up to my bedroom and collected the magical tools I'd brought with. I dropped my dirty laundry into a gym bag and called Edgar to me. Once he'd settled onto my shoulder I made my way down to the driveway.

My mother had a black Lincoln Navigator in the driveway and had saved the front passenger seat for me. Instead of climbing into the passenger seat I walked around to the front of the SUV.

The wards on my mother's house were powerful and complex. One of the things they'd been designed to do was prevent anyone from parting the veil or opening a gate to another realm of existence within the estate unless they knew the key to the ward. I, of course, knew the keys. It takes a good deal of power and skill to open a gate to Summer, normally a Magic-User 1st class can handle it. My mother had the skill and with the power he was able to pull through the ley-line stone, could manage it. However, it would take a lot of effort for him to do it.

With this in mind I focused on drawing in magic and opening the ward so that I could part the veil. When I was as full to bursting with magic I pointed my staff, and absently noticed that the runes along the black wood were burning with a sapphire light, and said, "porta!"

I felt the magic flow out of me and suddenly a small spot of intense blue light about twenty feet in front of me flared. The blue light grew until it was nearly ten feet high and ten across changing shape as it grew becoming an arch. Through the blue light the vague shapes of buildings could be seen. The next step was tricky because once in Summer I wouldn't be able to draw in any magic I needed to hold as much inside of me as I could while still maintaining the spell. Because the source of my power was here in the human realm I needed to be the last to go through the gate. I waved to my mother and he drove the Lincoln through the gate. I followed a few seconds later. I felt a sharp tingle as I stepped through and then I let the gate collapse.

One of the limitations with opening gates between worlds is that you can either open them to places you've been or you can open a gate to a random location. If I'd never been to Summer and tried this spell I'd have had no idea where in Summer we'd find ourselves. However, after the events earlier this year involving the Mask of Esarthae Haelond, Galohond had taken me to Summer so I could testify on Max's behalf. That meant I had a reference point. Much like the human realm, most buildings and certainly all of the important locations in Summer are warded to prevent beings from other realms stepping directly into them. The elven capital is warded to prevent gating in, with the exception of the area known as the port.

It is a large coble-stoned square courtyard surround by a wall with gates in three directions for entry into the city. Elven officials approached us as soon as we set foot within the courtyard. Three officials' or rather two guards and one admin type walked toward us. All three were tall; the guards wore elven ring mail and carried swords and

staves. The armor was green and gold and I could tell it was enchanted. The official wore what looked like silk and cotton robes of green and white and carried what looked like an elven version of a clip board. I could tell that they were interested in us but not overly so, which led me to believe humans visited from time to time and motor vehicles were not totally alien.

The elven realm is a nexus of sorts with travelers from adjacent realms visiting to trade with the elves. I knew that Sir Galohond maintained a residence in the capital as well as his own estate on the Larohtta lands and wondered how I would find him. The elven equivalent of a TSA agent stopped a few feet from me flanked by his guards and said, "State your name and business."

"My name is Morgana Livingstone, Magic-User Master Class from the human realm, I'm looking for Sir Galohond Larohtta," I replied.

"You understand this is the port for Aearoneithel, and if you plan to visit the city there is a charge, if you plan to simply pass through there is a smaller fee. If you need to find a resident of Aearoneithel I can direct you to a porter service where you can hire a guide," he said.

While he'd been talking my mother had gotten out of the Lincoln Navigator and walked up to us.

"I believe this will suffice," he said, handing a document that had been rolled up and tied with a red ribbon. The elf opened the document and read it, taking his time.

"Ah, why didn't you say you're official representatives of the Human Guild of Magic-Users. The fees for your use of the port are covered by the agreement between the crown and the Guild. Will you be staying in the city or leaving?" he asked.

"As much as we'd like to stay, we have pressing business back in our realm," my mother answered. "In fact the group we were looking to meet has arrived."

I glanced in the direction Mor was looking and saw the SUV driven by Paul and Katie through the gate to our left. In front of the SUV rode Sir Galohond once again mounted on his bay gelding, he was still armed but was now in a different set of armor and he looked like was ready to return to our realm. I felt my heart race as soon as I saw him.

"Sir Galohond it's an honor to see you again," the elven TSA guy said.

"Borombar, I'm off again on the crown's business." Galohond replied.

"Will you be coming with us?" I asked Galohond.

I asked before I realized that his destination might be something he didn't want widely advertised. He glanced at me and his smile was all I needed to see to know that it was okay.



"By your leave Lady Morgana, I will open a gate to the Donegal estate in St Louis," he said.

"It is a kind offer Sir Knight but we will be traveling to my realm, perhaps you should husband your strength," I replied.

At his nod I walked a few feet away and focused on the spell, parting the veil from the Summer side was not much different from the spell I'd used to bring us here. Except that I had to rely on the magical reserves I carried with me. Fortunately I'm strong (magically speaking) and can hold a large amount of magic. I was surprised at how quickly this spell depleted my reserves. By the time I stepped back into the cool autumn air in St Louis I'd used about fifteen percent of my reserve. If I had to spend any time in Summer I'd have to be very cautious in my use of power. This reminded me of the constraints that the elves lived with when they were in our realm.

I'd brought us through the veil onto the driveway just outside the wards on the Donegal estate. I was slightly surprised to see that it was already evening. St Louis is two hours ahead of Seattle so when we'd left at one p.m. it had been three p.m. in St Louis. In late October the sun set around five p.m. here, so it had taken at least two hours to get home even though it felt like we'd been in Summer for no more than twenty minutes. The inconsistent flow of time between the realms was one of the hazards of this type of travel. I went to climb into my mother's SUV when Sir Galohond offered me his hand.

"If my lady would consent I'd be pleased to give her a ride," he said offering his hand.

I glanced up at him and when he grinned, his slightly crooked smile, I knew he meant more than just a lift behind his horse up the driveway. My breath caught and I felt my face turn red at his innuendo. I took his hand and felt him lift me easily up. Mor spoke the key and parted the wards to the estate and headed up the driveway closely followed by Paul and Katie, we brought up the rear.

"I'll need to call the Queen and let her know that her daughter is safely back in the palace. Once I'm done perhaps we could get some dinner?" he asked.

"Only if dinner is in the form of room service," I said feeling bold.

"Ha! It's a deal," he replied and I could hear the laughter in his voice.

"You do realize that we don't have a stable here don't you?" I asked.

"Don't worry this is an elven stead I'll brush him down and feed him. He'll stay on the grounds," Galohond replied.

By this time we'd arrived at the main entrance. "If take your horse around back past the garden there's nearly two acres of lawn your horse should be good there for the night."

"I'll see you soon my lady," he said touching his finger tips to his lips and then riding around the side of the house. I pulled out my cell phone, which I'd turned off once on Black Island since there hadn't been a signal. Now that I was back in St Louis I was curious to see the time. I was surprised to see that it was almost seven. The trip back had taken longer than I'd thought it would. I followed the sounds of voices and found my mother with Chelsea in the kitchen. Mor had just finished talking about dinner arrangements with Chelsea when I walked in.

"Morgana, will you and Galohond be eating here with us or have you made other plans?" he asked.

"We may be going out. Sir Galohond needs to check in now that we're back in the human realm," I said.

"Do you mind if I turn on the news?" Paul Frost asked looking at a flat screen TV mounted on the wall where Chelsea could see it while she cooked.

"You can turn it on," Chelsea said, "but there's nothing on except coverage of the riots and demonstrations. The governor had to call up the militia and the Guild has special agents all over St Louis. The riots and fires are under control and things have settled down now. The Governor and the Grand Master of the St Louis Guild are planning to meet with some of the leaders of the protestors tomorrow to talk about their complaints."

I shook my head and felt a surge of anger. I understood the position of those without much magic or at least those without much magical power. I'd spent most of my life in that category. It was every American citizen's right to show their political views by peaceful demonstrations, I just couldn't condone the violence. Particularly if innocent people had been hurt or private property damaged. I also couldn't shake the feeling that their legitimate complaint was being hijacked by Ambrose.

Suddenly Sir Galohond strode into the room he spotted me at once and hurried over his boots sounding loud on the hard wood floor.

"I'm sorry Morgana, I was able to report in and the Queen demands my report in person as soon as possible." He held up his cell phone. "I just spoke with Sir Manmion and he said that the Queen would like to speak with you in the morning if you're willing."

"Of course I'm willing to see her, do you want me to come with you?" I asked.

"Not tonight, I'll call you in the morning," he said and then grinned at how cliché it sounded.

Chelsea is an absolute genius in the kitchen in no time we were all eating left over roasted garlic chicken and potatoes, with a light salad. It was Monday night but it felt

like I'd been gone for weeks instead of days and I was exhausted from the nearly continuous use of magic as well as the roller coaster of emotions. The food combined with a glass of white wine left me feeling so tired I couldn't really even follow the conversation so after I finished I excused myself and went to my room. I barely remembered to put some food out for Edgar and open my bedroom window before I collapsed into a deep sleep.

# CHAPTER 7

**T**he sun streaming through my open window directly into my eyes pulled me from the warm, dark, cocoon of exhausted sleep. I rolled over to get away from the light and after a few minutes realized that I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. I pushed the covers back and climbed to my feet only to learn that I'd not really prepared for bed. I'd kicked off my shoes and my borrowed clothes but hadn't taken off the shirt or bra. Now I realized why women don't sleep with a bra on, it's damn uncomfortable. I stripped and made my way to the bathroom my mouth tasted awful and I need a shower.

After getting cleaned up and putting on my own clothes I felt ready to face breakfast. As I walked down to the kitchen, to look for breakfast, I felt my phone vibrated in my back pocket. I pulled it out and saw that it was my mother's friend Gwendolyn, for a second I considered ignoring it. "Hello," I said.

"Morgana? I'm glad I was able to reach you. Did you go out to the west coast Sunday? You were supposed to be here for the Grand Master's meeting with the St. Louis Guild Council of Elders," she said sounding annoyed with me. "The Grand Master was angry that you left, and Col Black was furious that you weren't around for questioning. You really need to come down to the Guild Hall today!"

She said all of this so fast I felt like I couldn't even break in to tell her what happened. When she finally paused I said "Gwen, give me a second to explain. Mor Donegal was in trouble and called me asking for help. His estate was under attack and the Guild Hall in Seattle was unable to send anyone. The good news is that we sent the attackers running and rescued Princess Aradiliel and returned her to the palace in Summer. My God-Father is here with me in St. Louis and we are both planning to drive into the Guild Hall today."

The phone was silent for a second. "Why didn't you return any of my calls? If I'd have known what was going on I could have passed this on yesterday?" she said.

"The cell tower was out on the island, I'm a little surprised that the Grand Master Larsen, of the Seattle Guild, didn't send Master Beck a message though."

"If you can be here by noon I think we can explain to everyone what happened," she said.

I felt aggravated, my leg hurt and I was still tired even after getting a full night of sleep. Slinging around as much magic, as I had, over an extended period creates a kind of cumulative exhaustion and I was feeling it. I found Chelsea in the kitchen making pancakes for breakfast. There is a reason why I love Chelsea. Not only is she an amazing cook, she's been with the family for longer than I can remember, and she knows exactly what I like to eat after all of the tension and the events of the last few days.

I bit into a cake filled with blueberry sweetness and covered with maple syrup and felt like I was in heaven. I looked up to see Chelsea watching me with a smile.

"Marry me," I said, it was a line I've been using on her for about ten years now and it never failed to bring a smile.

"I would, Alastar, but I'm not into women and from what your mother said neither are you," she replied.

I nearly choked and that would have been a shame considering how good the food tasted.

"He told you!" I accused. "I'm going to kill him."

Her grin turned into a wide smile. "You should know by now that Mor always asks my advice on you kids. He's concerned about you dating and sleeping with an elf lord."

"I know he's worried, but don't you start in, I'm an adult and I know what I'm doing," I said a little crossly.

"Your mind is that of a 30 year old. Your body, on the other hand, is a young woman's and it's so full of hormones that I'm not sure, when it comes to matters of romance, that you're thinking clearly," she said in a motherly sort of way that deflated my righteous indignation.

"So what do you think I should do?" I asked taking another bite.

"Honey, I just want you to be happy. So go slowly, use precautions, and be ready for some tough times. Elves and humans are from different worlds, literally, and that is going to cause problems. You might be able to work them out but you should talk about them if the two of you are serious," she said.

I nodded and looked down focusing on my breakfast and thinking. Chelsea knew me too well because after her comments she left me alone to think. She knew that if she pushed me hard I'd just do the opposite out of plain old contrariness. If she let me think about her comments and gave me space to digest them I'd make up my own mind.

Once I finished eating I stood up and headed up to my mother's study. The study is different from the sanctum in that it's not used for casting spells. It's more of a place to relax read and think about magic. It had always been a place where I could find my mother when he wasn't actively working a spell.

The tall double wooden doors opened without a sound as I slipped inside. My shoes made a distinctive click-clack on the wooden floor as I walked over to the fire place. Even though it was mid-morning a fire was going and my mother was seated in a deep red leather chair with a large book on his lap. He didn't look up as I approached instead he appeared to be focused intently on what he was reading. Leaning against the armrest of the chair was the cane that held the ley-line stone. Apparently it never left his side. Before I could say anything he spoke.

"Did you know that there are ley-lines in both the human and elven realms?"

"I hadn't thought about it, I supposed that I've always assumed that there would be," I answered.

He looked up at me and absently reached out to stroke the gem fixed to the handle of the cane.

"When we traveled through Summer yesterday I tried to pull power through the gem in this cane." He paused to look me directly in the eye. "It felt like the gem was super charged. Normally I get a significant boost in power, it brings my strength up from a 2nd to a 1st Class Magic-User, in Summer with this gem, I've got the strength of a master."

I felt my jaw drop.

"Does anyone else know?" I asked.

He shook his head. "just you and me. I've spent most of the morning reading through every book I can find on humans traveling through Summer. There has never been, to the best of my knowledge, an artifact that allows us to draw power in Summer. This gem is truly one of a kind."

"Did Bernard leave any notes? Can his work be replicated?" I asked in a rush.

"I don't know. I've left a message for his brother Arthur to so we'll see," he said, "What did you want to talk about?"

"You remember we talked about an old friend of yours, Gwendolyn Grant?" I asked. Collecting my thoughts, this was a standard tactic of my mothers, start a conversation with an observation or piece of information that put me off balance and then ask what I'd come to see him about.

"Yes of course," he replied.

"It seems I'm a suspected of leaking information to the terrorists and my disappearance yesterday was not taken very well. She thinks that the sooner you and I appear at the Guild Hall, to answer any questions that the Special Operations Section has, the quicker I can clear my name," I said with a little heat.

"Morgana, you're going to have control your emotions. In matters of magic and politics you have to keep a level head," he said.

All I could do was sputter for a minute and he took advantage of my momentary speechlessness to continue.

"Gwen is a very intelligent woman and a dear friend. I think we should take her advice and head in at once," he said putting the book on a small table next to the chair and standing up.

"You'd best get ready, shall we meet at eleven? I'll drive."

I watched him leave caught between amusement and irritation. He'd been condescending on purpose to put me off balance which meant he wanted me to agree to do as he said without arguing. After a moment I headed up to collect my magical items and get ready to head into the guild.

\* \* \*

The drive into the guild was interesting for a couple of reasons. First my mother insisted on driving, I informed him it was just an example of his masculine need to control things. At his glare I just smiled sweetly, I am woman hear me roar! Our bantering took a backseat to the reality of events in St. Louis as we saw the evidence of the police, National Guard, and the Guild's lock down. There were police and guild cruisers and National Guard HUMVEEs out in force. There were also several check points where we were asked to show our Id's and directed to explain our business. The first time it annoyed me by the fifth, I was worried. What had been going on to cause the government to lock the city down like this?

When we got to the Guild the first thing I noticed was the curious and sometimes hostile stares I got. At my mother's advice we went directly up to the floor with the Grand Master of the Guild's office. I was surprised not to see Amber Meyer waiting to

greeting us as she had last time. Instead a desk had been placed several steps away from the executive elevator and a tough looking Guild Special Agent sat there. He was obviously there for security and not as a receptionist. He did ask us our names and business.

"I'm E. Mor Donegal here along with my God-daughter to see the acting Grand Master," my mother stated calmly.

For once I was happy to sit back and watch my mother. I'd been here before, but with the suspicion being directed my way, I was happy not to have to talk to anyone just yet. This also gave me a chance to look around. The Grand Master's office, along with offices for key members of the council of elders, was on the highest floor of the Guild and each office as well as the reception area had a great view of the city, river, and the arch. Just then the door to the office opened and Grand Master Beck walked out. He was wearing an immaculate black suit and a blue tie that matched his eye's I noted idly.

"Phil, how have you been?" My mother asked warmly.

"Good, I understand you're going by Mor now? It fits you." As he said this he motioned us into his office. It looked pretty much the same as last time. The events of the last few days had caused me to become more cautious than normal and even though I was moving over to take a seat. I scanned the room and, very faintly, sensed another presence hidden by a veil behind and to the left of his desk. The Grand Master had directed us to a set of four chairs surrounding a coffee table to one side. I was careful to take a seat that allowed me to watch the area where I suspected we had an additional guest.

"Phil, what's going on? I've been lead to believe that Morgana is" Before he could continue I interrupted my mother.

"Who's hiding behind your desk?"

The Grand Master looked at me sharply. "What did you say?"

I drew in a spike of power very quickly and said, "Revelare!"

The magic leapt across the room and shredded the veil hiding a man in Army Combat Uniform (ACU). He was a little below average height at 5'8" and very thin with an air of vitality about him. His brown hair was cut very short so that it looked like he must use a razor each morning on the sides of his head. His skin had that well-worn leathery look of someone who spent most of his life out in the elements. Even though I'd stripped away the veil he'd been using he never moved. I got the impression of a predator at rest, simply waiting for the right moment to spring upon his prey. From the look in his eye I figured he must view all three of us as prey.



"I told you it wouldn't work," Grand Master Beck said.

The man moved forward coming around the desk and took the remaining empty seat. "What gave me away?"

"Shadow," I said.

At this he frowned. "I'm pretty sure that I took my shadow into account."

"I didn't say your shadow. You were standing to the left of the desk with sunlight coming in from your right. The shadow of the desk should have been continuous but it wobbled around your veil," I replied.

At this he nodded with a slightly chagrined expression. "I'm Colonel Black, Magic-User Master Class, of the United States Guild of MagicUsers, Special Operations Section," he said, "I assume you're Ms. Morgana Aoife Livingstone, honorary Magic-User Master Class, and that would make you, Mr. Evaline Mor Donegal, formerly Magic-User Master Class, and now rated a Magic-User 1st Class because the criminal Ambrose Grosvenor left you stranded in your son's body, after he murdered your son, and stole your body."

The succinct brutality of his summary left me dumbfounded.

He turned back to me. "I would like to know two things Ms. Livingstone, where have you been for the last 36 hours and who are you really? Because there's no way you're a partially trained 19 year old girl."

It took half a second for his comments to register and then I felt my face flush. I opened my mouth to answer and reflexively drew in power while Edgar sitting on the back of my chair let out a caw. I glanced in the direction Edgar indicating through our bond and saw a corner on the far side of the room with nothing but a book shelf hidden in shadow before I turned back to Col Black. I suddenly realized that he was also holding himself full of magical power. What really surprised me was how quickly and smoothly he'd pulled it in and how much power he held. A quick assessment told me that he was in fact far stronger than I. Grand Master Beck looked back and forth between us for a second and blinked.

"Uhm, okay, everyone calm down," Phil said.

"I'm perfectly fine" I said crossing my legs at the knee and picking an imaginary piece of lint off my clothes. As I did this I released the power I'd taken. When I glanced back at the Colonel he'd done the same. While all of this had gone on his expression had never changed and he'd never lost his focus on me. In fact the intensity of his stare was a little disconcerting.

"Which of your questions shall I answer first?" I mused out loud.

"Where have you been for the last 36 hours? I traveled with the help of Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal to the Guild Hall here during the riots on Sunday, then by gate to the Seattle Guild Hall. I'm sure that there is a record of my use of the Gate here and there were plenty of witnesses. Once in Seattle I took a Guild ferry to Black Island where a group of terrorists were attempting to force their way through Mor's wards and into his estate. Their purpose was to take Princess Aradiliel hostage. I along with some Elven allies broke the siege and returned the Princess to her palace in Summer. After that Mor and I returned to St. Louis," I said meeting his gaze and refusing to look away or be intimidated.

"These events can be verified?" Col Black asked.

"Certainly" my mother said, "by me plus dozens of others both human and elven. Plus there are Guild records."

"As to your second question," I said seeing him nod at my mother. "the Guild has ordered me not to discuss it," I added as sweetly as I could. "I'm afraid you'll have to take it up with the national Council of Elders."

For the first time I saw what I thought was a startled expression on the Colonel's face. This look was followed by comprehension.

"You're just as much a victim of Ambrose as anyone. But the Guild didn't want the full story to get out. Two of the more well-known and powerful Magic-User Houses both defeated by one renegade Magic-User 1st Class," he mused. He then looked over at Grand Master Beck. "I plan to send a request for Morgana's true identity through my chain-ofcommand. Until then, I have your word that she's trust worthy?"

Master Beck glanced at me and my Mother for a second before nodding. "Yes certainly."

There was a pause after this while everyone looked at each other. Then the Colonel broke the silence. "So what do you know about the raid on Sunday on the warehouse here in St Louis?"

"Only what I overheard while here, that the Hounds thought they'd found Ambrose and they were going to try to raid the location. After that I found out by TV that the raid didn't go to well," I said.

He grunted at that he took a second to stare off into space.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

The Colonel looked at me and then nodded. "Is the person standing in the corner over there taking notes for you or is that your body guard?"

At this both the Guild Grand Master and my mother glanced quickly to where I'd pointed. The veil was perfect, the only reason I felt sure I was right was the sending I'd received from Edgar.

"How did you know?" the Colonel asked sounding mildly surprised.

"I've been told that Hounds never enter dangerous situations alone. So he's probably your back up. It's a better place to cover me, the line of fire is clear. It's out of the sun so he doesn't have to deal with gradations of light and lastly I felt him draw in power when you and I were talking." That last part wasn't completely true; Edgar had sensed the guy and had let me know through our bond. But it was better to keep the Colonel guessing. Most Magic-Users, especially the very powerful, discounted the value a Magic-User gained by bonding a familiar it was considered old fashioned.

At this the woman in the corner dropped her veil and stepped forward. I was surprised that it was Captain Gunning the female Hound I'd met earlier.

"Sir, we should take her into custody and question her," Captain Gunning said.

Colonel Black shook his head. "Stand down Captain." He then looked back at me. "So who are you really? No, don't answer that. If you've been directed to keep it a secret then I won't try to force you to tell me. It'll probably be easier and faster for me to just get the answer through official channels."

Before I could respond the door opened and in swept Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal followed by Duke Elentaure, Sir Manmion, and Sir Galohond. The Queen spotted Grand Master Beck and took a step toward him. "have you heard that the rebel camp has been located? My scouts and hunters tell me that my son is alive."

We had all risen when Turethiel entered the room and her presence seemed to make everything around her pale. The power of her beauty and personality was such that I wanted to do whatever she suggested without even knowing what it was she needed.

Before the Phil could say anything Col Black spoke up. "Yes your majesty, we've been working with your scouts and I agree. We have located a rebel camp. We have them under observation and are developing an assault plan. If you would give us 24 hours I'm sure we can give you back your son."

The Queen turned to look at Colonel Black and then back at the Grand Master.

"I don't know this person. 24 hours is not soon enough. I formally request the assistance of the United States Guild of Magic-Users in helping to free my son. I'd also like my forces to be involved with the planning and the raid as advisors since we've been fighting these criminals for several months."

I could tell that both Captain Gunning and Colonel Black both wanted to say something, instead they deferred to the Grand Master. I could see the sweat build up

on Phil's face and for a second I felt sorry for him. He was obviously not the kind of leader who thrived under stress.

"Your majesty, on behalf of the Guild, I agree to your proposal. I'll leave the timing of the raid up to you, Col Black, and Col Gortney.

Queen Turethiel nodded. "I'd also like Magic-User Master Class Morgana Livingstone and her 'God-Father' Mor Donegal to assist my staff as advisors on this event. They have proven themselves very capable during the rescue of my daughter."

When the Grand Master agreed the meeting seemed to break up, the Queen stayed to talk privately with Grand Master Beck and the rest of us trooped out.

\* \* \*

Although I've been in and out of the St. Louis Guild Hall many times over the years I never really appreciated the size of the building. After we left the Grand Master's office Colonel Black led Queen Turethiel's advisors my mother and me to a part of the Hall I'd never seen. The sign over the door read, St. Louis Guild Operations Center (SLGOC), when I stepped through the door I felt like I was entering a scene from a movie. The room was large and several degrees cooler than the rest of the building. The lights had been dimmed and nearly half of them were red which created a strange illumination in the room. At the far end of the room was a video wall. Oriented on the video wall were several rows of desks filled with computers, phones, papers, and other type's equipment. Each row had about half a dozen work stations. In the middle of the room was an elevated circular area with two crescent shaped desks. Each desk held four large computer screens and in the middle of this area one agent sat in a chair obviously designed to roll and swivel between the two desks.

For a moment the video wall at the far end of the room caught my attention, it was huge, going from about waist height to the ceiling. It had been divided into three rows with three displays per row. On the far left was an international news feed, below it was a national cable news feed, and below that a local news station. All three channels were on mute with words scrolling on the bottom. In the middle top row was a digital map of St. Louis with blue icons showing the location of each Guild cruiser, check points, and command posts (CP) the guild was using to lock down the city. As I watched I saw a guild vehicle leave one of the CPs and head toward another check point. Below this display was a screen with another map, one that appeared to be scaled out so it showed the city plus some of the surrounding area. It took me a second to figure out that this map showed where the National Guard had deployed its forces

along with police checkpoints. This display appeared to require a manual update because as I watched someone moved a cursor over one of the check points and clicked on it. This opened a sub-menu listing the numbers of police officers at the check point. Whoever was driving the mouse updated the number and then closed it. Below this map was a live video image taken from the air in black and white it showed the start of a crowd gathering at the Gateway Arch park. The top block of the third and final row of video screens was what appeared to be a chat room. Each of the CP's apparently posted reports which were then acknowledge by the SLGOC watch team. Below this was a computer screen that reminded me of an excel spread sheet with columns listing the forces stationed around the city, numbers of agents at each location, current status, and several other columns with acronym's I didn't understand. In the bottom right block was a screen titled battle rhythm, immediately below the title today's date and a timeline set up on a 24-hr clock. Below that a series of blocks filled with labels for things I didn't understand tracked across the page.

My attention was diverted from the video wall when my mother called my name. I walked over to where everyone else had gathered around the woman who occupied the seat in the elevated circular area. Col Black was talking to her and I couldn't hear the conversation. After a moment he gestured for us to follow him. There was a set of doors to one side of the room and we all followed him through. The doors lead to a set of stairs that took us up one level and into a large room with a long table running most of its length. The first thing I noticed about this room was that one wall was all glass and it looked down on the SLGOC. From here I could easily see the video wall and the activity below as agents moved from desk to desk and talked to each other in quite conversations.

I turned away from the wall and looked at the table on which a map of Missouri and Illinois had been stretched. To one side of the long table were a couple of desks with computers on them. There were several people already in the room when we arrived. A tall athletic looking man with black hair that had gone grey at the temples was shaking Colonel Black's hand.

"The H2 will be here in a few minutes to brief us on the enemy order of battle," the man I assumed to be Colonel Gortney said.

"Then we are just in time," COL Black responded.

"In time for what?" COL Gortney asked.

"The Grand Master has decided that Queen Turethiel's people will participate in the planning of the raid and act as advisors during the raid," he replied.

COL Gortney just looked at COL Black for a second before turning to the elves. "If you plan to help perhaps introductions would be appropriate."

\* \* \*

The H2 as it turned out was a young looking woman, by the twin bars on her collar she was a Captain, and she quickly outlined the situation.

"We've located the terrorists in the Hazlet State Park on the Carlyle Reservoir in Illinois," she said pointing to a location on the map.

I stiffened when I heard this since it was the exact same park where the rebels had held my mother last summer. I looked over and caught Mor's eye and knew that he was remembering that event as well. The Captain continued her briefing and it took a couple of minutes for me to focus on what she was saying. As best as intel could determine there were between twenty five and thirty rebels there now. They would probably bring more in from Summer at the start of the rite. The Queen of Spades (as she called Ambrose) was already there. Once the situation had been outlined she turned the briefing over to Major Puller.

He described the forces available for the assault and based on terrain the most logical force deployment. The Hounds were taking no chances there were about a hundred and fifty of them in the St. Louis area, and MAJ Puller was recommending they use all of them for the assault. They would all be in position by nightfall. At this Duke Aranion Elentaure spoke up at this point. He explained that he had a hundred Elven knights all of whom were ready to assist. After some conversation it was decided to keep thirty of the knights in reserve with the command element. The Duke had wanted to mix Elven forces in with the Hounds but both of the Colonel's disagreed. The Hounds were trained to operate together and with no training mixing in the elves at this point might introduce too much risk to the operation. Instead they were divided into two assault elements and two blocking elements. This settled Major Puller returned to outlining the plan. When he went into Course of Action analysis I started to get bored.

I found myself standing off to one side with my mother watching the humans and the Elves work through the planning process for the assault. They had all obviously had military training and any comments from me or my mother would've just been a distraction. I came to the realization that this was how professionals planned a mission and it made me slightly embarrassed at how I'd handled the situation last spring or even bringing help to my mother on Blake Island. I remembered all too well

buying off on the rouse and leaving the main gate to my mother's estate. If I'd have stayed how many Elves might be alive today?

I was very well educated in magic and my new body very strong, magically speaking, was I falling into the same trap that other powerful Magic-Users fell into? Was I starting to become arrogant and too reliant on my power? Ultimately magic is just a tool that people use to accomplish things. Magic is a powerful and versatile tool, true, but a tool that was not perfect for every task. Watching professional soldiers plan this raid brought home the point that I didn't have the kind of training that real soldiers had and I had been very naïve earlier.

I felt my mother put his hand on my shoulder. "Morgana let's go find something to eat. We're no help here. I'd also like to make a few phone calls; the Guild usually keeps a couple of offices for visitors."

I nodded and followed my mother out of the planning room.

\* \* \*

Hazlet State Park is almost an island; it sits in Carlyle Reservoir and is connected to the western edge of the lake by a narrow strip of land. The southeastern part of the park has several docks and cottages for rent. Most of the park is heavily wooded and the northeastern corner was where Ambrose had set up a camp and was getting ready of the rite.

Night had fallen and with it the temperature. I could hear the sound of the wind moving through the trees and I couldn't control a shiver and a strong sense of Déjà vu. The last time I'd been here was in May. However my memories of that day were still clear. I had rescued my mom from a group of elves who'd capture him and had for the first time really cut loose with my power. I'd killed and the memory of that still gave me bad dreams.

The plan called for the assault elements to get into position and then maneuver onto the "objective" from the air, land, and lake in all directions. Just prior to the assault the Battle Mages of the Guild's Special Operations Section would activate a ward that would prevent the rebels from opening a gate into another realm. When the ward went up that would signal the start of the assault. I was standing in the command post watching as the Hounds bustled around taking care of a million details necessary for the operation to be successful. I'd hoped that Paul Frost and Katie Johnson would have helped with tonight's raid but they'd insisted that they needed to get back to Seattle since that was where Samantha was and she was their concern, not Ambrose. My

mother had thanked them for their help and then arranged for Samantha and Steve to use the Gate in Seattle to travel to St. Louis once Samantha was here Paul and Katie had no choice but to stay and help. I had to smile at this; it's never easy to say no to my mother when he puts his mind to something.

My mother was with the group of Magic-Users who were going to cast the spell that would raise a ward over the island and lock it down for traveling to other realms. Paul and Katie were with her and Samantha and Steve where here with me in the command post. The three physical adepts were bonded to Samantha and this made them extremely protective of her. So I was surprised that they'd been willing to split up for this operation. I glanced at the 5'6" busty blonde beauty standing a few feet away wearing only a pair of jeans, halter top with a short leather jacket. Incongruously over one shoulder she'd slung a sheathed gladius. Next to her Steve loomed at six foot he was five inches taller than me and he was built like a wrestler. His posture screamed with masculine power and he was also dressed lightly for the weather. He wore a black t-shirt that did nothing to hide his muscular chest and arms, and a pair of jeans and work boots. I knew from my mother that they were both werewolves, in addition to being a physical adept in Steve's case and a Magic-User 3rd class in Samantha's case. I hadn't realized that this also protected them from the cold.

I looked away and shivered again. I was wearing boots, jeans, a black t-shirt with a sweatshirt pulled over and my black leather jacket with its' protective spells and I was cold. It was the night before Halloween and the weather had taken a dip with a cold front moving through. I could see my breath as we waited for the start of the operation.

The hounds had set up their command post on the southern tip of the island so that they would be close enough to the fight to execute effective tactical command and control but far enough away so that the fight shouldn't spill over into the CP. The CP itself wasn't anything overly fancy it consisted of a tent with a generator to one side along with a couple of satellite dishes. Tables had been set up inside the tent including one with a projector directly opposite a movie screen. The projector took a feed from a computer and showed a live video from an overhead asset (probably a UAV like a predator). The video was infrared and the UAV was focused on the area of the island where the rebels had set up their ritual. In addition to the UAV the Hounds had inserted teammates trained as scouts and snipers. They'd maneuvered into a closer position and were now able to provide "eyes on the ground" info on the rebel camp.



A sudden buzz of excitement caused me to focus my attention on the area of the CP where COL Gortney was standing looking over the shoulder of a technician who was seated in front of a computer screen.

"Are you sure?" I heard him ask the sergeant seated at the computer.

"Yes sir, a gate has just opened and the Queen of Spades along with an additional twenty rebels have just come through," the sergeant replied.

The Colonel paused for a second "call Colonel Black tell him everyone is in position. We have a P-ID (positive identification) that the Queen of Spades is on the ground. We are officially weapons red and free, he is cleared to begin the assault when the ward goes up."

I knew that this meant that Ambrose had been identified and that Colonel Black who was with one of the lead elements would begin the attack as soon as he felt the ward.

Before the sergeant had delivered his message Colonel Gortney started talking into the radio mic that had been clipped to his web-gear.

"Dog catcher, this is the dog pound, drop the net."

"Dog pound, this is dog catcher, roger."

The quick exchange told me that the battle mages tasked with bringing up the ward that would trap Ambrose on the island were now cleared to begin. Timing was a key piece of this because as soon as the ward went up everyone with any sensitivity on the island would feel it. That would tip the rebels off that something was wrong. A minute later I felt the tingling sensation that told me that a ward had just been raised, and that we were within its boundary.

As soon as I felt the first sign of the ward the forces on the screen started their assault. I found myself riveted to the images depicted on the projector screen. Blue icon's over the infrared provided by the UAV were moving in on the ritual site. The system was known as Blue Force Tracker (BFT) and it identified a person as a friendly, if you didn't have that tag you were by definition hostile and could be engaged.

The rebels reacted with a speed that surprised me. They met the attack with gunfire and magic slowing down the initial assault. Three boats bringing in twenty one hounds ashore were met suddenly with a huge wave of water that capsized all three dumping the hounds into the water. The power of the Magic-User who'd cast that spell could only have been a Master Class. My mother's strongest affinity before the body swap had been with water.

"That's Ambrose," I said pointing to the heat signature of the MagicUser who'd caste that spell.

Colonel Gortney didn't wait for further confirmation before speaking into his tactical radio. "All dogs, the queen of spades is at the eastern edge of the camp, by the lake, don't let her escape!"

I watched the screen as units reacted to the message turning and orienting toward the eastern edge of the camp. The closest unit was a squad of mounted elven knights who'd ridden up along the beach under the cover of a powerful veil. They kicked their mounts to a full gallop and charged toward Ambrose. I had a feeling that this was the squad led by Sir Galohond in an instant of intuition I was certain of it. I was also suddenly equally certain that his life was endangered. I hesitated for a second and then hurried out of the tent.

"Morgana what are you doing?" Steve shouted at me as I used telekinesis to climb into the night air.

I looked down at him and Samantha; they'd both followed me out of the tent.

"Sorry guys, but I've got to go," I said and using telekinesis I accelerated toward the battle. I could hear them both shouting at me to stop and come back, I ignored them. If Sir Galohond and Ambrose got into a fight I knew that there was only one possible outcome and the very thought made me sick. The knot in my stomach only got worse as I flew so I poured all of the power I could draw in and channel into speed wishing that I had my ring of Aether! Edgar flapped along beside me having no trouble keeping up.

As I got closer I could see the flash of battle magic flying and I could hear the chatter of small arms. From this position it looked like the Hounds and elves were pushing hard advancing in on all directions except from the lake. As I got closer I cast a spell that allowed me to see better in the dark and suddenly the pitch black turned into a murky twilight. Visibility wasn't as good as day time but it was good enough.

As I flew over the camp I saw the circle and pentagram, similar to the one used in the previous rites. Staked out, naked in the center of the circle was a male but at this height and speed the details were a hard to see. The only thing I knew for sure was that he was alive and then I was past him moving toward the lake.

The knights that had charged Ambrose's position were mostly down. Their bodies scattered like some giant had swatted a hand down in the middle of them. However one knight was still on his feet his sword glowing in one hand and a wand in the other. He was being pushed back, I was sure that this was Sir Galohond.

I strained to move faster and bring up a shield using my ring at the same time. Suddenly a four man squad of Hounds landed just behind the figure who I assumed was Ambrose. Along with Ambrose were a pair of werewolves in hybrid form and

unless I was mistaken the vampire Monique along with another elf lord. The hounds attacked with smooth precision. Somehow the werewolves sensed the attack and spun around ready to defend. Each werewolf took a full blast from the Hounds and the force of the magic blew them back. Monique flashed forward a blur in the darkness and blood fountained from the neck of one of the hounds.

At the same time the leader of the squad of hounds focused on Ambrose sent a rapid fire of spells at her causing her to pause in her attack on Sir Galohond. A flash of light to my left and the feeling of bullets impacting my shield caused me to glance away from the fight. Rising into the air was one of the creatures I'd spotted on Blake Island, he had red skin and a crown of horns bursting from his skull in a way that reminded me of Darth Maul from star wars. His eyes blazed with power and in one hand he held an M-4 carbine while the other was covered in a gauntlet that burned with a bright red fire. Before I could respond he pointed a finger of the gauntlet covered hand at me and a spear of fire lanced toward me. I deflected the fire and desperate to get to the fight below launched three simultaneous attacks. I cast a cone of super chilled air to attack him physically from my Ring of Gelidus, a stun spell to attack his mental defenses, and a spell known as a spirit whip to assault his spirit. He brought up a flaming shield that stopped my cone of cold and had sufficient mental defenses to deflect my stun spell but the spirit whip struck home. I saw him shudder as his ego was directly assaulted and then his defenses faltered.

One of the keys to effective magic is confidence that your spells are going to work and that they'll be effective. With a sudden and profound loss of self-confidence he was now open to other types of magical attacks. I didn't waste any time and cast one of the fastest attacks I know. Magic missile is not the most sophisticated spell, what it lacks in sophistication, it makes up for in speed and raw power. This is particularly true if you can pour a lot of power into it and I had power in spades. The six foot spear of glowing blue energy snapped through the Darth Maul look-a-like's shield and sliced into his torso. He let out a cry of agony and plunged into the dark forest below us.

I turned back to the fight with Ambrose and started to descend. It looked like the battle had dissolved into two separate mêlées. The werewolves, Monique, and the elf lord were fighting two remaining hounds of the heaven while the squad leader and Sir Galohond fought Ambrose.

As I watched the hounds hit first one and then the other werewolf with a deadly series of spells that either killed them or did enough damage to knock them out of the fight for a while. It was an impressive use of team work as one hound shielded and the other hound attacked and then they reversed roles, over lapping spells and causing

confusion in the attacking forces. Monique's speed and spell casting had kept her free from harm so far, just as the elf lord's armor, weapons, and magical skill had kept him uninjured. When the second werewolf fell Monique managed to cut through one of the hounds' defenses and drove a clawed hand toward his throat.

I hesitated for a moment, I could see things clearly now and both groups were fighting so closely that any spell I tried from this range would endanger friend and foe. Sir Galohond was smashing his blade into Ambrose's shield while MAJ Puller launched spell after spell at her with one hand and fired rounds from his M9 with the other. Ambrose in my mother's body was a sight; she blazed with a brilliant purple power. Fighting an Elven Lord and a Hound of Heaven and holding her own. I felt a strange conflict inside, a sense of pride in watching the body of the person I'd always thought of as my mother and fear for Sir Galohond.

I glanced back at the other battle and saw that the last hound on his feet was doing everything he could to keep both Monique and the elf off of him. If I didn't help now he'd be dead in the next couple of seconds. The Monique and the Elf would be free to help Ambrose. With a growl of frustration I dropped to the ground behind the elf lord and Monique and sent a bolt of lightning from my wand blasting toward them. Monique saw the spell coming and dove to one side using her superhuman speed the elf wasn't so quick or lucky. His body shield flared and then collapsed his armor must have been enchanted since it absorbed much of the strike, still he stumbled forward slightly stunned.

The Hound lifted his Beretta 9mm semiautomatic pistol and fired several shots point blank into the off guard elf. The rounds tore into the exposed face and throat of the elf creating a fountain of blood. I spun around questing out with all of my sense looking for Monique and I failed to spot her. Damn vampires, they were at their most powerful at night and Monique was obviously a powerful vampire.

A sudden cry caused me to turn my head. Ambrose had pulled out an epee and lunged forward not at Sir Galohond but at MAJ Puller who'd been leading the squad. Somehow the magic of the sword penetrated his defenses and punched through his chest right where his heart should be. I started to scramble forward knowing I was too far away to do much right this second. Ambrose's lunge had left her momentarily exposed and even though she recovered quickly, it wasn't quick enough. Sir Galohond drove his blade into her torso at the shoulder cutting down at an angle. I felt my heart lurch into my throat "nooo" my cry was too soft to be heard.

Ambrose dropped her sword and grabbed Galohond's arm with both hands as she fell onto her back. Galohond stood over her frozen for a second and then with a cruel

twist pulled the blade free. He then changed his grip so that he had both hands on the hilt with the blade pointed down and drove the blade into Ambrose's skull and sinking it all the way through and several inches into the ground. My mother's body twitched once and then went still.

I felt my knees give out and I sank to the ground as well. My emotions were all over the place. I was relieved and happy that Galohond had survived the fight. I was hurt and upset that my mother's body was dead. I'd somehow always entertained the hope that we would capture Ambrose and force him to trade back with my mother. I no longer wanted my old body or life back but my mother's loss of power and self-esteem was something that I'd wished desperately to fix. Now that hope was gone and a feeling of sorrow and despair caused tears to run down my cheeks. I could barely watch as Galohond checked on MAJ Puller and then came over to us.

"Morgana you fought well, why are you crying?" he said sounding detached and curious.

"It's complicated," I replied and lifted my hand so that he could help me up.

Galohond started at it for a second and then grinned and pulled me to my feet. We both looked around as Edgar landed on my shoulder. There were still pockets of fighting here and there but it looked like the rebels had been soundly defeated.

"Come with me, I think that Prince Glandor is over there," he said pointing back toward the circle I'd seen earlier.

By the time we arrived the sounds of fighting had faded to almost nothing. Prince Glandor had been freed from his bonds and someone had draped a blanket around his shoulders. Abruptly from the night sky Queen Turethiel and Colonel Gortney descended along with nearly a dozen elven knights and Hounds. The queen rushed over and embraced her son and several of the elves standing around cheered. Galohond looked on somewhat impassively and then glanced down at me.

"A good night's work wouldn't you say?" he remarked.

I looked around at the death and destruction, most of the bodies belonged to the rebels, a testament to the fighting skill of the hounds. This was how a professional force engaged the enemy, from the planning to the execution every aspect had been disciplined, even more impressive was the skill and control with both mundane firearms and battle spells the hounds had demonstrated. Most of the hounds were Magic-User's in the 2nd and 3rd class range and they'd cut through the rebels with relative ease. Even though the rebels had rallied the contest had never really been in doubt.

I thought about my mother and the fact that her body now lay in a pool of blood several hundred yards behind me. I knew I'd have to break the news to him.

\* \* \*

In the aftermath of the battle I went looking for my mother. I had no real appreciation for what went on after a fight like this or the job required to clean up and sanitize the site. There were Guild Inspectors collecting evidence, a videography team had been flown in to video everything as well as take still photos. A group of Magic-Users that specialized in forensic magic was on the site using a variety of magical tools to take measurements and collect evidence. A tent had been set up nearby where the Hounds H2 section started the official debriefs that would become part of the Guild record of these events. In addition to all of that activity there were groups of psychologists, councilors, and chaplains walked around talking to both the hounds, elves, and the captured rebels. I guess even in the most élite units of the Guild, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) was something to worry about.

I'd been intercepted by a Hound Intel Officer soon after the hostilities had ended and told in no uncertain terms that I needed to be debriefed. Sir Galohond looked at me and the Hound and muttered something about needing to find the Duke and excused himself. Once I was done making my statement I looked around for Galohond and couldn't spot him. After a few minutes of wandering around I saw my mother talking to some official wearing a Guild uniform and veered away. I didn't feel like explaining once again why I'd left the CP and without authorization entered the fight. Since I had a few minutes to myself I decided to look for the damn Athame of Tartarus it was, after all, the artifact that had started this whole thing. Ambrose had attacked me and my mother because it was in the family vault at the request of the Guild. She'd been studying the thing for the Guild. To my surprise the obsidian blade was nowhere to be found. I grabbed one of the Inspectors who'd been bagging evidence and asked about it. The Inspector told me that she couldn't be sure but she didn't think it had been recovered. I'd looked Ambrose's body over after Sir Galohond and had killed her and it had been unexpectedly hard. This was my mother or at least it was the body I thought of as my mother there was an emotional connection that I couldn't shake. The épée had been a new addition and it appeared to be of elven make. It had runes similar to the bracers that had been so effective in disrupting my body shield. I'd wandered back to the circle where I was standing absently staring at the place where the rebels

had planned to perform the rite. I heard the crunch of boots and turned to see Colonel Gortney walking toward me.

"Who the hell do you think you are!" he demanded rhetorically. "I allowed you to participate in this as an observer against my better judgment. You completely disregarded procedures, endangered your, life as well as all of those around you by acting as you did!"

"Excuse me!" I said feeling my emotions get the better of me. "If it weren't for me Ambrose would have killed all four of your Hounds and Sir Galohond and escaped."

"No, Ms. Livingstone she wouldn't have. We had a hellfire missile locked on her from the predator overhead. We were trying to get everyone to disengage so that we could take the shot. MAJ Puller was there to get Galohond out not take Ambrose down."

I felt my mouth drop open. "I don't think he was having much success. Ambrose's personal guards were giving them all they could handle."

"Be that as it may, you entered the fight without proper training, equipment, or permission. Without a BFT you could have been mis-Id'd as part of the enemy force," he said. "You are a very skilled MagicUser but you have no military training. If you ever interfere with an operation again, without approval, I'll see to it that you are arrested. Are we clear?" he asked.

I nodded feeling guilty and defiant at the same time.

"Having said that, your spell casting was impressive, you have a gift for combat magic. If you've an interest in a career in this field give me a call." With that he handed me a card. I felt a little bewildered first he chewed me out and then tried to recruit me? As recruitment tactics went his sucked. Yet I felt my face flush with the implied compliment.

By this time the sky was starting to grow brighter in the east with pre-dawn light. I was barely able to keep my eyes open and felt like I was wandering around uselessly. I decided it was time to go find Sir Galohond he must be done with whatever official duties he'd had after the battle. Maybe I could talk him into helping me find a nice quiet hotel and get some sleep. Perhaps he'd be willing to scrub my back in the shower before going to bed. The thought of Galohond made me ach in a way I'd never dreamed possible a year ago. I hurried toward where I'd been told the elves were gathering to return to Summer. The location wasn't very far from the site where Ambrose had intended to sacrifice Prince Glandor. I arrived in time to see Duke Aranion Elentaure part the veil to Summer. I scanned the elves as they passed through the gate searching for Galohond. When I saw him stride through the gate just behind the Prince I felt like someone had kicked me in the gut.

"Morgana are you alright?" The sound of my mother's voice behind me made me look away from the gate.

"Hey, you're crying. Why are you upset?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry mom, it all happened so fast. Your body's gone," I said wiping at my tears.

"I know honey, don't worry, it's okay. I've gotten used to this body, I'm younger, and even if I'm not as strong in magic as I used to be I still have all of my knowledge and skill, I'm fine. I don't think that's the reason why your crying is it?" he said.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because you were watching Galohond leave and you're crying. You weren't even aware that I was here," he said.

I felt a fresh flood of tears well up and Mor stepped forward and wrapped a pair of strong arms around me. "It's okay honey, you can tell me what's going on."

"He, he, left without saying goodbye," I stammered. "He told me that he'd never leave me without saying goodbye. I know it's irrational we haven't even made any plans for our next meeting. It just hurts," I finished lamely.

"Come on dear, the Guild has a helicopter that we can use to get back to St. Louis. Some sleep will do you a world of good," he said stroking my hair.

I dried my face and gently pushed away. "Thanks' mom, I mean Mor, I'm better now."

\* \* \*

The trip back to the Donegal estate was uneventful. As we flew toward the St. Louis Guild Hall I could see the sunrise and the red light of the sun's first rays painted the clouds as though an artist had splashed them with a vivid assortment of red, orange, yellow, and white colors and shapes. Even my tired mind appreciated the artistry although I could barely keep my eyes open. We landed at the Guild heliport, on the roof of the Guild Hall, Steven (my mother's long time butler, grounds keeper, and sometimes driver) met us in the garage with the large up-armored Lincoln Navigator that my mother preferred. Samantha Lott and her three guards piled in followed by my mother in front with me in the second row. I fell asleep on the way to the estate which was just as well because Samantha was angry with me for having taken off like I did in the middle of the fight. I didn't feel like justifying myself again since all I really had to go on was a gut feeling that something bad was about to happen to Galohond. The reality had been that he'd done just fine without me.



I woke up when we arrived at the estate. The sun had fully cleared the horizon although it was still early. Morning is not one of my favorite times and the fact that it looked like it was going to be a beautiful day made me grumpy. I limped my way to my room and got cleaned up and into bed as quickly as my exhausted body would allow. I paused only to dry swallow a couple of aspirin. I lay there in the darkness with the curtains drawn for several minutes trying to find a comfortable position. As I did my mind kept trying to make sense of the events of yesterday and today. Things just didn't add up. I came back to the fact that Ambrose was dead, the crisis was over, maybe I just needed time to adjust to the idea and relax. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't fall asleep. Giving up I pulled on a pair of silk pajamas (courtesy of my one of my shopping trips with Chelsea), a soft fuzzy blue bathrobe, and a pair of soft thick socks and padded down to the kitchen. As I passed the atrium I spotted my mother sitting there looking out a set of large windows. He was drinking coffee and had a platter of sliced fruit and bread, sitting on a small table to one side of him, mostly untouched. I walked into the room and sat down in the empty chair on the other side of the small table and without out asking picked up the coffee pot and pour myself a cup.

"You couldn't sleep either?" he asked without really looking at me.

"No, I'm tired but my mind just won't shut off. It's like I'm so tired I can't fall asleep," I said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

I sighed and stared out the window at the garden behind the house. "Things just aren't adding up," I said picking up a croissant and after adding some butter bit into it.

"Oh, like what?" he asked.

"For starters that was just way too easy. I mean sure the Hounds of Heaven handled the assault and they're the Guild's best forces, but how did they find Ambrose? I know that they had Elven help I just think it was too easy. Ambrose has been doing this for over a year and no one has gotten close until now." My mother took a sip from his coffee cup and nodded for me to continue.

"I've studied as much as I could the rite that Ambrose has been using and yesterday didn't fit the pattern. She already killed three men the last victim should have been a woman, not Prince Glandor. The first victim was an Elf, and three elves have been killed so to keep the symmetry of the rite the next victim should have been a female human." I paused to take a drink of coffee and think.

My mother knew as much or more about these types of magical rites as I did so he'd understand without having to go into a long explanation about how the

circumstances just didn't add up. A Greater Rite had to be done very carefully with attention paid not just to the symbols, runes, and instruments of the ritual. It also had to strike the right kind of balance so that as the energy built it would be controllable. The slightest miss-step could cause the whole thing to simply spin out of control and result in unforeseeable consequences. It was hard to predict what might happen if the rite got away from the caster, it could be anything from the dramatic to the inconsequential.

"Morgana, I don't disagree with you, but it's all moot. Even if yesterday had been intended as some kind of rouse or subterfuge by Ambrose, at the end of the day, she's dead," he said gently.

I continued on like I hadn't heard him. "The rite should have taken place in a graveyard, or a battlefield, or at a minimum a ley-line junction. After all the purpose of the rite is to prime the pump the souls of the dead or the power of a line would be necessary to channel the power she needed." I shook my head and looked my mother in the eye.

"There is something deeper going on and we just don't have the whole picture. The rite needed to happen today, today is Halloween, the veil between the spirit world and ours is at its thinnest. Performing the ritual yesterday doesn't make sense."

"Honey, sometimes the mind of a Magic-User is affected when they try to accomplish things that are beyond them. Ambrose wouldn't be the first Magic-User in history to have gone insane in a quest for power. We're just lucky we were able to stop her before she killed even more innocent people," my mother said.

"All of the other evidence aside, answer me this, if she intended to sacrifice Glandor where was the Athame of Tartarus?"

For several seconds my mother sat there looking at me. "The Athame wasn't at the site?" he asked for the first time doubt showing on his face.

"No, I get the feeling that the whole thing was a set up. I just don't understand why," I said feeling tired and worried all at once.

"Well we won't solve anything right now. Why don't you try to get some sleep and I'll make some phone calls and do some research. Perhaps we can figure this out," he said.

# CHAPTER 8

**T**he conversation with my mother had somehow calmed my mind enough to allow me to settle into bed and for me to fall asleep.  
I dreamed.

In my original body I had a strong affinity for the six elements, in this body I was more in-tune with the earth and celestial bodies, a side effect of being closely aligned with the stars and moon was the sight. From everything I've read about the sight, it's a fickle thing. It can manifest in flashes of intuition, it can be encouraged through the use of instruments like Tarot Cards, crystal balls, and scrying bowels, it can also happen to one who is sensitive while dreaming.

I found myself in a graveyard. It was dark, not the inky blackness that prevents you from seeing more than a few feet at a time, it was closer to twilight a time with long shadows and some light. I looked up and saw what I at first assumed were a flight of crows. After watching them for a second I realized that these birds were far too big to be crows. They were ravens and they were circling something up ahead of me. I moved forward feeling drawn to whatever it was they were watching.

As I got closer my heart started to race, I knew that I didn't want to know what was there, and yet I couldn't stop myself from moving closer. I spotted a group of about a dozen people standing around a grave in black suits and dresses as though they were at a funeral. I couldn't see the casket or the head stone but I felt like I needed to know who was being buried. As I moved forward my foot caught on a root and I stumbled forward unable to catch my balance and I sprawled to the ground.

"Morgana, let me help you," a familiar voice said.

I looked up and Sir Galohond stood next to me offering me a hand. Even in my dream I felt my body react to his as though we were physically connected. I reached up

and took his hand and he pulled me to my feet. I looked into his deep green eyes and felt comforted even though the dream was profoundly disturbing. As I looked into his eyes I noticed a bit of black, like a small mote in each of his eyes and wondered why I'd never noticed that before.

"Who's being buried?" I asked.

"Let's go find out," he said wrapping a strong arm around my waist.

The crowd had dispersed while I'd been talking to Sir Galohond and somehow the casket had been lowered and the grave filled in with fresh earth. My attention was drawn to the grave next to the fresh one. I saw that it had an interesting looking head stone. It was shaped like a tree only in miniature rising to my waist in height. There was a flat surface to the tree and some writing on it. I felt drawn to the tree and looked at the writing.

In loving memory of Sir Galohond Larothta

Friend, Lover, Hero, and Father.

When I read this my heart started racing and my breath caught. It was impossible Elves don't bury their dead and besides Galohond was alive his arm was around me. I pushed away from Galohond and rushed over to the headstone marking the fresh grave.

Here lies Morgana Aoife Livingstone who was once Alastar Liam Donegal

Rest in Peace

I couldn't breathe; fear gripped me so hard that I thought I'd lose control of my bladder. I glanced at Galohond for support but he was gone. In his place a large dark form rose up, covered in shadows it climbed higher and higher until it was nearly twice the normal human height. The creature's features were androgynous and a feeling of evil swept over me. I felt its power surge out in an overwhelming wave of force. Fear, despair, contempt for the living and a desire to devour, I threw my arm up over my eyes and screamed.

I found myself sitting up in bed breathing hard sweat had soaked through my silk pajama top and I was shaking uncontrollable from the effect of the dream. It had been so vivid so real. I got up and went to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face. My stomach was in knots and suddenly a wave of nausea hit me. I barely made it to the toilet before throwing up. I stayed there until the shaking stopped and my stomach settled and then got up and brushed my teeth. This wasn't enough, I still felt dirty, and I didn't want to think about the dream so I got into the shower and started the ritual movements I'd learned for cleaning this body. By the time I'd finished blow drying my hair and picking out an outfit for today I felt calm. It was around noon

and I'd decided on a professional look today, since I had to go into the Guild Hall. Even though they'd taken statements yesterday the Guild Special Operations Section Intelligence Officer (known as the H2) wanted to go over the details of yesterday's assault, again. They'd also insisted that I talk to a counselor to make sure I was not suffering from PTSD. I dressed in a black pants suit with a blue blouse that matched my eyes and headed down stairs looking for Chelsea and a bite to eat.

Chelsea was humming happily as she worked on something extravagant for dinner. Apparently since the threat Ambrose posed was over it was time to celebrate (or at least that was Chelsea's reasoning) plus we had guests. While she worked and I ate a toasted cheese sandwich and a bowl of chicken soup the news was on the flat screen to one side. The demonstrations by those with magical talent who were not seen by the Guild as strong enough for formal training were still going on. However they'd taken a more peaceful turn over the last 24 hours. Leaders from the Guild Halls in cities across America had met with the demonstrators and the United States of America Guild of Magic-User's Council of Elders had called an emergency session for today. They planned to meet with the leaders of the "movement" as it was being called, to see what Guild policies needed to be changed to address the lesser talents complaints. I noticed that the scrolling message at the bottom of the screen mentioned that the international terrorist Ambrose Grosvenor had been killed during a raid on a terrorist cell in Illinois early this morning.

I had to turn away from the TV, it wasn't really the news reporters fault if the information received from the Government was misleading, the more I thought about it the more sure I became that last night's events just served some larger purpose. Did that mean that there had been a person controlling Ambrose? Had Ambrose been a victim just like so many others? Well there was no way that I'd find answers just sitting here at home.

When I stood up to leave Chelsea stopped me. "Mor asked me to give you this note."

I took the folded piece of paper from her and read it.

Morgana,

You were still sleeping and after the last few days I decided it would be best to let you rest. I spent the last few hours reading about Rites of Assentation and I agree last night's rite had to be a ploy. I don't yet understand what that means I've arranged a meeting with Grand Master Beck and COL Black to discuss the situation. If memory serves, you said, you have another de-briefing session and then a meeting with a mental health counselor. I'll meet you in your temporary Guild office after those meetings.

Mor

I looked up after reading the note to see that Chelsea had gone back to working on dinner. Sometimes my mother could be so irritating. He had, once again, chosen to treat me like a child while he ran off to take care of adult business. Well no help for it now I needed to get moving.

I collected Edgar, my staff, rings, and wands from my room and after a couple of minute thought I decided not to take my Wakizashi. I felt like I needed to be ready in case I was attacked but the sword was a little too overt. I left my bedroom and went to the sanctum. Over the last few months I'd started to think of this as my sanctum, now that my mother had returned, I'd need to move my things to one of the other rooms set aside for spell casting. I went in and sat down at the desk pulling out the crystal that Galohond and I used to send messages to each other while he was away in Summer. I composed my thoughts and then activated the crystal with a touch and a brush of power.

"Galohond, in the confusion after the battle we didn't have a chance to say goodbye. Things are starting to get better here. The death of Ambrose is all over the news and our leaders are talking to the demonstrators both are good things, however I'm worried. There is something about yesterday's events that doesn't feel right. Please contact me as soon as your able too, I miss you."

Once I'd finished speaking, I caste the part of the spell that would send the message to the crystal that Galohond carried. It was an awkward way to communicate but it was better than nothing. Now with Edgar perched on my shoulder and I used my staff to limp my way to the garage.

Once I got to the garage I realized that my car was gone. I didn't know if had been towed to a body shop or straight to a junkyard. I felt an irrational stab of anger and then tears slipped out of my eyes. God why are my emotions so crazy today? I wasn't due for my 'monthly visitor' for another ten days. But the thought of my wrecked car made me want to start crying. It was more than just transportation to me. My dad had been a muscle car enthusiast and some of my earliest memories of him were watching him work on classic cars. He'd been restoring the 69 charger when he'd died and once I'd gotten old enough, I finished it. I felt like the car had been a link to my Dad and now it was gone. I wiped at the corners of my eyes careful not to mess up my eye-liner and looked through the key box to figure out what was left in the garage.

The family garage had several bays for different vehicles so I took a minute to look over what was available. I wished again that my Ring of Aether hadn't been destroyed earlier since it would have made a quick way to get into the Guild. I settled at last on a

Mercedes CL65 Coupe that my brother had talked my mother into buying the last time he visited from Europe. I climbed in tossing my staff into the passenger seat and watched Edgar settle in his talons scratching the leather gave me a perverse pleasure.

The drive to the Guild Hall was surprisingly quite. It seemed that after the unrest of the last few days most people had decided to stay home. Or maybe it had something to do with the Governor asking everyone not involved with the current situation or emergency services to stay home. I had to go through on National Guard check point and one Guild check point before I made it to the Guild Hall which told me that even though things were quieter no one was taking any chances.

I parked in the parking garage and headed up to the level with temporary offices. I was almost 45 minutes early for my appointment with the H2 who'd run me through another debriefing so I went up to the temporary office I'd been assigned to see if I could do some research on the Guild's computer system on rituals. Maybe I'd missed something during my earlier research that would explain why the last, most important rite, didn't fit the pattern properly. I made it up to the floor with the temporary offices when I spotted Gwendolyn going into an office adjacent to mine with CPT Gunning. My heart picked up for a second Gwendolyn was an expert on ancient rites if anyone could spot something odd about the current pattern it would be her. I tried to pick up my pace and catch her but my throbbing leg made that a bad idea.

As I approached the office I could hear Gwendolyn's voice. "Don't fret dear its part of the greater design."

"I'm not your 'dear' and don't take that condescending tone with me," CPT Gunning growled back in an almost masculine way that startled me. "This assignment has been hard enough without you withholding information from me!" At that the door closed cutting off my ability to eaves drop on the conversation.

I stood there for a second wondering what to do, obviously they were in some kind of a heated conversation. CPT Gunning and MAJ Puller had been the first two on the scene when this all started and she'd just lost her partner. So she had every reason to be upset, I just didn't understand the context. What information had Gwendolyn withheld? What did she mean by the greater design, had she figured out why the sixth and final rite didn't seem to fit the pattern. I lifted my hand to knock on the door and then, after a pause, decided not too. I'd let them talk things out and circle back when Gwendolyn was by herself and get her take on my theory.

I limped to my temporary office and went in closing the door behind me. I only had about a half-hour before I'd have to endure my next round of questioning so there

really wasn't time to search the Guild archives. Instead I hung up my jacket rested my staff in the corner and opened the window behind the desk. Edgar hadn't had a chance to stretch his wings today and now was as good a time as any. I watched him launch himself into the cold afternoon sky for a second before dropping into the chair behind the desk. I was only there for a minute or two before there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I called out not wanting to get up. The door opened and CPT Gunning walked in closing the door behind her. I was a bit startled since I'd thought based on the short conversation I'd overheard that she would be talking to Gwendolyn longer.

"Can I help you, Captain?" I asked.

"Call me Ann, do you have a minute to talk?" she asked.

"Sure, please have a seat," I said indicating one of the empty chairs. She settled into one of the chairs looking ill at ease.

"What do you know of psionic magic?" Ann asked looking directly into my eyes.

I shrugged. "it's a field that the Guild steers us away from, so other than a few basic offensive and defensive spells nothing. Why?"

I noticed for the first time that Ann's eyes were a light grey color, they suddenly seemed very intriguing.

"They say, never lock gazes with a fully trained psionic," she said conversationally as if from a great distance.

I heard myself respond. "Oh, and why is that?"

"Because the eyes are a window to the mind and a psionic knows how to slip through such a window. Please don't move," she said pleasantly.

Now why would I want to move, I thought. After all we're sitting here having a nice conversation, besides if I moved I might not be able to admire her captivating eyes.

Ann started murmuring quietly in what sounded like another language, although I wasn't sure because I couldn't really make out the words. At the same time she moved closer until our faces were only a foot or two apart when she stopped talking I felt something moving around in my head, then she blinked, and I could think again.

I tried to pull away and bring up my shield only my body failed to respond.

"Very good Morgana, in case you're curious, I'm a fully trained psionic and you're under my control fighting will do you no good. But feel free to try, now stand up please," she said.

I did my best to bring up my mental defenses, nothing happened. Mind magic was one of the affinities of this body and I'd successfully fought off a mental attack by



Ambrose, so I focused on breaking her hold on me with everything I had. Again nothing happened.

"We're going to walk down to the main entrance to where a car is waiting for us. If anyone tries to stop us, or talk to us, you will do your best to act naturally and raise no suspicion that anything is wrong. If we're asked where we're going you'll say that we're going out to get a cup of coffee. Oh, and you will not try to escape, in fact you will do everything you can to stay with me and protect me. Do you understand?"

I heard my voice answer, "Yes mistress."

"Very good, now take off all of your magical items and leave them in the desk drawer."

Again my body moved without my control. I felt a sense of horror as each magical item I'd been carrying went into the drawer. Once this was complete she directed me to put on my jacket and we left the office together. I limped along next to her, without my staff, I had trouble keeping up. She glared at me. "You can't feel any pain in your leg. Now walk normally."

Abruptly the pain that had been bothering me since I'd been wounded vanished and I matched her stride for stride. As we walked through the Guild I screamed and fought, inside the prison of my own body, to no avail. Maybe I'd get lucky and my mother or Gwendolyn would spot us and force a conversation, anything to slow us down and give me time to fight this enchantment. We stopped by the elevator waiting for a ride to the ground floor. As we did another Hound, I didn't recognize, came up and started talking to CPT Gunning. They talked for a couple of minutes and then the elevator arrived. It was half full and I was forced to stand on one side of the elevator while Ann stood on the other. I felt a surge of hope; maybe a little physical distance would allow me to break free.

In my mind I heard a masculine laugh and a deep voice spoke directly into my mind. "No little one, you won't escape that easily."

"Who are you calling little?" I thought back angrily.

At that point I panicked and threw every bit of my will into breaking free of this spell. I wanted to throw Ann out of my head, now! During my struggle I lost track of my surroundings finally exhausted I stopped fighting. I noticed I was seated in the back of a sedan and we were on the highway. Ann was in the front seat and next to her was a male elf I'd never seen before.

She looked back at me and when she spoke I heard her feminine voice with my ears and a masculine voice in my mind.

"Ah, I see you've finally quit fighting. It's been very entertaining feeling you struggle uselessly. The problem is that you've got no training in this type of magic and therefore no idea how to break free. But I've enjoyed feeling you try," she purred.

I noticed that her face was flushed with excitement and her nipples were poking through the material of her blouse. The crazy bitch must get off on feeling me struggle against her control, I thought.

"Now close your eyes and rest we'll be at our destination soon," Ann said.

I felt my eyes close and my body relax and there was nothing I could do. I've no idea how long I sat waiting unable to even struggle against the control forced upon me. Abruptly that eerie dual male/female voice ordered me to open my eyes and get out of the car.

We were in some kind of farmer's barn. I could smell the hay from the loft and there were several miscellaneous items of farm equipment parked in the barn. I moved to stand next to CPT Gunning without being told.

"You will accompany the prisoner and wait the Great One's arrival." The woman who spoke was wearing a dark cloak and a hood that covered her face so that no skin showed.

"Monique, if I leave now my cover will be blown. Too many people saw me leave with Morgana. When they decide that she's missing and I'm not there with a good cover story, they'll know that I'm involved, and assume I'm a traitor," Ann said.

"Your time among the Hounds is done, Donald. The Great One is pleased with you and wishes to bring you to Summer for the final event," Monique replied.

At that my captor let out a shout of triumph.

"The Great One promised me a new body, if I was successful, has she picked one out for me?" Ann asked.

"Are you tired so soon of being a woman?" the female whose name I assumed was Monique asked with an edge of barely contained laughter in her voice.

Ann/Donald scrunched her face into a scowl. "I live to serve the Great One, but I'm a man! I'd prefer my original body, but any male body would be an improvement."

"You know that it's not possible to return to your original body. So would you like me to tell the Great One that you desire any male body? Old, crippled, or without any magical talent you don't care as long as it's male," Monique said.

Ann/Donald stepped forward forgetting about me and glared at Monique. "Of course not, I want to be a man again, but not at the cost of health or power," she said.

"You're so cute when you're angry. I suggest that you might want to learn what that body can do before you so willingly cast it aside."

At this point she threw back the hood and I was able to see her face for the first time. It was the same vampire that I'd fought on Blake Island. She'd been leading the forces trying to capture the elven princess. Before Ann/Donald could respond she continued. "I'm coming with you to Summer and, if the Great One didn't have another task for me, I'd teach you the pleasure of that female body you've been gifted," Monique said moving forward with a languid grace that mesmerized the eye. She reached up and with the back of her hand caressed Ann/Donald's cheek. I saw a shudder run through Ann/Donald before she pulled away.

"Stop it Monique, your tricks won't work on me," Ann/Donald said.

"Your body says otherwise, sadly we've don't have time for this, after tonight if you come to me I'll show you how pleasurable life can be from the female side," Monique said.

The two of them now turned to the elf who'd been standing quietly to one side and who had been studiously ignoring the conversation. He was short for an elf with sandy blonde hair and a plain appearance, perfect for moving unnoticed in a crowd. Without wasting a word he lifted his hand and opened a gate.

"Come along" Ann/Donald said to me, moving toward the Gate.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Monique asked.

Both of us turned and I saw Monique holding out a Collar of Binding. Even from this distance I could see the Guild stamp on it. It was a crime to have such a device if you weren't a Guild Special Agent or Inspector.

"Morgana, please take the collar and snap it around your neck," Ann/Donald said with laughter in her voice.

I screamed and fought again with everything I had as I walked over to the woman holding the collar and casually snapped it closed around my neck. The instant it clicked shut I felt pain in my mind and had to stop fighting.

"You'll notice that trying to fight off this spell requires you to use a small amount of magical power in addition to your will. Now even touching that power will hurt you," Ann/Donald said. "Now come along."

And with that we all stepped from the inside of a barn in the human realm to a stone courtyard in Summer. I felt the tingle of magic as I stepped through the gate into a courtyard of elven design. My captors didn't give me any time to admire the trees and flowers growing around the garden or the amazing artistry that had gone into the stone work. Instead the person I'd known as Ann led me into a large building and then

down several flights of stairs into a small room. She directed me to take off my clothes, which she collected into a ball, and then with a flick of her will directed the crystal that had filled the small room with light to go dark. I could see Ann's profile outlined in the light of the doorway.

"Enjoy the next few hours Morgana, they will be your last," she said.

Suddenly I felt the presence that had been in my mind fade and I realized I could move.

"What do you mean?" I asked and edged slightly forward.

"Haven't you figured it out yet? The Great One has always planned for you to be the sixth sacrifice. You may have escaped her in the past, but tonight when the moon is full she will use the Athame to kill you. Your life energy will combine with the five before you and you'll be the catalyst for her ascension." With that she closed the door cutting off all light.

\* \* \*

After a few minutes of standing there feeling stunned, and even though I knew it would be useless, I tried to reach up with the barest hint of magical power to activate the light. Pain stabbed into my mind and I collapsed to the floor holding my head with both hands. After a few minutes I got to my feet and slowly edged my way to the closest wall, then by feel I worked my way around the room. I soon found the door and confirmed that it had been locked. By the time I was three quarters of the way around the room my foot hit what I figured out was a pallet on the floor. It was the only piece of furniture (does a pallet count as furniture?) so I settled onto it, grateful that I didn't have to sit naked on the cold stone floor.

This wasn't the first time I've been held captive against my will. The feeling of helplessness was compounded by the removal of my clothes. There is something very de-humanizing about it, like you're an animal and aren't worthy of clothes. It is also psychological in that it demonstrates that the captor has total power over the prisoner. Finally, it's practical anyone caught running about naked must be an escaped captive. After a few minutes I started shivering, the temperature in the room was just cold enough to make sitting uncomfortable. I tried to feel around but there weren't any blankets so I pulled my legs up to my chest and wrapped my arms around myself trying to save as much heat as I could. Obviously this was another way that my jailors could make me uncomfortable and remind me of my nudity and helplessness.

Sitting alone, naked, in the dark, shivering is a lot tougher than it sounds. I just wanted to curl up in a corner of my mind and make all of this go away. The rational part of me knew it would do no good. So I focused on what had just happened, maybe I could piece together what was going on. Okay, fact one, CPT Gunning was a traitor, or perhaps more accurately she was an agent working for this 'Great One'. Fact two, she wasn't really CPT Gunning but some guy named Donald. A guy who'd been trained in psionic arts and who'd successfully infiltrated the Hounds of Heaven. The only way that the infiltration could have happened would have been for his soul to have been moved into her body. Because the methods the Guild had developed to detect anyone trying to use magical disguises were simply too good. Also this Donald person wasn't happy about being stuck in Ann Gunning's body and from the sound of it returning to his original body wasn't an option.

Fact three, the raid on the ritual site last night was, as I suspected, a set up. The 'Great One' planned to finish the rite tonight. A rite where I'd have an important role to play, a role I'd do anything to avoid. What was it that Ann had said? I'd escaped once already. The only time I'd been held captive was when Ambrose captured me and planned to sacrifice me in an earlier rite last March.

Suddenly my breath caught. Ambrose! Everything clicked together. Ambrose had the ability to move his soul from one body to another. He'd done it when he stole my body, and then again when he'd taken my mother's. This Donald person had been moved into Ann's body and it must have been a spell that would be undetectable, magically speaking, which the soul transference spell was. My mind was now racing as I tried to think this through. The confusion in Summer and the human realm had been a ruse. Ambrose wanted the authorities' busy running around taking care of one crisis or another so that they wouldn't be able to focus on her. Then she'd wanted them to think that the threat she'd posed was past. So she'd swapped into some other body and sent her double out to be killed. That explained why Galohond had been able to succeed so easily. Ambrose had wanted him to kill the person in my mother's body.

This also explained how Ambrose was able to become so powerful so quickly. If he had the ability to move one person's soul into another person's body. I shivered at the thought of how many senior Guild or Mundane officials could have been swapped. Then something else clicked. Galohond had said that the rebels were using some kind of soul swapping spell to move peasants into the bodies of nobles if the noble refused to swear magically binding oaths to the "Great One". The Great One must have been Ambrose!

I pressed my forehead into my knees and ground my teeth in frustration. I had no idea what body Ambrose was wearing, although I was sure I'd find out soon enough. Whoever showed up to gut me, with the Athame of Tartarus, would undoubtedly be Ambrose.

I don't know how long I sat in the dark shivering with cold while tears of fear and frustration leaked down my cheeks. Time dragged, seconds felt like minutes, and minutes felt like hours. I was well and truly trapped. I was in Summer and had no access to any magical power. Even if I did the collar that I wore would have prevented me from using it. I was alone without resources or friends with no hope of fighting my way to freedom. I've been a weakling, magically speaking, for most of my life. So being without power wasn't the worst thing. Ever since I was young enough to cast the spell, I'd had my familiar. Edgar and I had been together for since I was a teenager and no matter how upset I was he'd been a comforting presence in my mind. A familiar offers unconditional love and comfort, as well as providing extra magical stability and at times power, the place in my mind where I could always count on reaching out and touching Edgar was missing. At the time I hadn't realized it but the only thing that could block a Magic-User from touching his or her familiar is the veil. The void between worlds is a barrier that is difficult to breach with most types of magic. For the first time in my adult life I was completely alone. Depression settled over me like a dark tide.

Alone.

In the dark.

Alone.

Abruptly I felt a small smile creep onto my face. That place where I normally felt Edgar wasn't empty. I could feel him, like someone had just flipped a switch. One second it was empty and the next he was there. As soon as I felt him I seized our bond like a drowning man grabbing for a life line. I felt Edgar respond sending me hope and comfort through the bond. Time stretched only now I didn't really care. I could feel Edgar and the only way that could happen was if he was here in Summer. That meant that someone had brought him and that someone would be looking for me.

The sound of gunfire and battle magic followed by a loud explosion was faint. This wasn't really surprising considering the fact that I was in some type of underground cell. I got up wishing again that I could see, but with the collar around my neck I couldn't even turn the light on. Time dragged by and for a while the sounds of fighting got louder and then faded away again. The surge of hope I'd felt was enough to leave me feeling giddy. Abruptly a loud crack at the door of my cell caused my breath to

catch, and then the door was pulled off its hinges and light flooded into the room. It was so bright I couldn't see. I covered myself with my hands as best I could and squinted into the light. Then the sharp scratching feeling of Edgar's talons as he landed on the soft skin of my shoulder was the best feeling in the world.

"Alastar!" I blinked furiously as I was lifted off the ground in a hug by my mother.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I looked past him and saw Lieutenant Randgos and Samantha and her three physical adepts in the doorway.

"I am now," I said.

\* \* \*

Mor pulled off a long leather duster he'd been wearing and draped it around my shoulders. The simple act of giving me a coat made a world of difference. All at once I didn't feel quite as powerless.

"Where are we and how did you find me?" I asked.

"We are in a villa three leagues north of Aearoneithel just off the Queens highway. The property belongs to a merchant family. They fled along with the humans who were with them to the human realm," LT Randgos said.

"It wasn't that hard to find you." Mor said, "When you didn't show up for your meeting with the Hounds Intel officer the Guild tracked me down to complain. I called Chelsea and found out that you'd left the house and should be in the temporary office the Guild had loaned you. The agent who went to check on you found Edgar and some of your personal possessions in the office and she started asking questions. When they checked the surveillance video they saw you come into the Guild and then leave with CPT Gunning. What was odd was that you'd left Edgar and some very valuable magical tools behind. By this time I was working directly with the Guild to help find you. I tried using thaumaturgy and your connection to Edgar and the spell failed. There are only a few reasons why that could happen, the most likely was that you were in another realm. So I took a chance and opened a gate to Summer. I brought Edgar and cast the same spell. This time it worked," Mor explained.

As he talked we left my cell and I was able to see the building where I'd been held. It was a larger than I'd originally guessed. There were signs of fighting all around, from bullet holes along the walls to burn marks left from combat spells.

"How did you rescue me?" I asked.

"Once I knew you were here I figured that you were here against your will so I went to Queen Turethiel and asked for help. Sir Galohond was good enough to lend me some of his men," he said.

"Where is Sir Galohond?" I asked feeling hurt he hadn't come along to lead the rescue in person.

"Things are complicated here," Mor said. By this time we'd made it to the courtyard where I'd arrived.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The capital is in chaos. Princess Aradiliel accused Prince Glandor of being a traitor and working with the Great One. She was right, however Glandor's plans were already in place. Her accusation was the tipping point and he attempted a coup. His first move was to either capture or kill the Queen. The only thing that saved her was Princess Aradiliel. She had brought in additional forces loyal to the crown and they were in place and ready. Glandor sprang his trap and Aradiliel was ready and saved the Queen. Now the forces loyal to the Queen and the Princess are fighting street by street with Prince Glandor's forces. Glandor has more troops than he should including humans and creatures from the chaos realms. In addition to all of that Elven nobles who've been loyal to the Crown for hundreds of years are fighting for Glandor. The court is in chaos with husband fighting wife, father's fighting sons and siblings killing each other. Sir Galohond is fighting for the queen. I promised that once you were safe I'd go to the Guild and see if I couldn't get reinforcements for the Queen," he said.

There were demonstrations and riots in the human realm and the situation was worse here. Open rebellion was bad enough but now royal was fighting royal. I reached out and grabbed my mother's arm.

"We need to talk privately for a minute," I said.

My mother motioned for everyone else to move away and raised an eyebrow in question. As quickly as I could I told him what had happened to me and that Ambrose was still alive and planning to perform the rite tonight. Everything else was just a distraction.

Once I finished talking my mother looked stunned but I could tell he believed me.

"Events are nearly out of control. I'll go to St. Louis and return as soon as I can with as much fire power as I can get Grand Master Beck to give me. In the meantime our best option is to help Queen Turethiel put down her rebellious son. Once she's able to turn her attention to hunting Ambrose there won't be a stone left unturned in all of Summer."



I nodded understanding what my mother was saying. "What do you want me to do?" I asked.

My mother motioned to one of the elves and he brought up a bag and handed it to Mor.

"Here are the items you left in your office." He paused. "Once I figured you'd been kidnapped I asked Samantha and her guards to come up to the guild. I also asked Chelsea to pick out some clothes for you to change into and had Samantha bring them along. I figured you'd want to change into something that you could fight in, if necessary."

Mor looked down at me and then handed me the walking stick with the ley-line stone in its handle.

"The stone is working just like it did the last time we were here. You'll be able to pull magic through it as though you were standing on a ley-line in the human realm, only more strongly," he said.

"Not as long as I'm wearing this collar," I said pulling on the device.

"Oh, I forgot about that." Mor stepped around behind me and placed both hands on the collar and I felt him channel a small amount of power and there was a click. With that the collar popped open.

"Go with Lt Randgos and help the Queen. I'll be back as soon as I can," he said.

Before he could walk away I grabbed his elbow. "one more thing. I'm not sure you can trust Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn was talking with CPT Gunning right before she abducted me. I thought they were talking about the Hounds involvement in chasing down Ambrose, but I might have miss-understood."

"Morgana, Gwendolyn and I went to the Academy together. I've known her for longer than you've been alive," he said.

"I'm not saying that she did anything wrong, just be on your guard," I replied.

Mor let out a sigh but nodded and with that he walked into the courtyard and cast the spell that opened a gate to the human realm. Paul and Katie were the first two through followed by my mother and then Samantha and Steve. After my mother had left one of Randgos men led me to a room that had obviously been used by the mistress of the house. I quickly changed into the clothes Mor had brought. I was a bit surprised most of it consisted of tight fitting black leather. I guess the plan was to have me stun my opponents with sex appeal and then bind them with magic. I settled my rings back onto my fingers and picked up the walking stick. I tried to pull some magic through the ley-line stone and was flabbergasted at the amount of energy that poured me.

Oh, yeah, if the bad guys thought I was going to be helpless now that I was in Summer they had another thing coming.

# CHAPTER 9

**T**he residents of the villa had fled and LT Randgos was impatient to return to the capital. He'd pulled in all of his men and had them mount up so by the time I'd finished changing they were ready to go. He'd saved a mare for me to use which I appreciated. Riding behind someone else as we went into battle was not much fun, trust me I've done that before, so having my own horse was an unexpected surprise. I'm not the best horseman, er, woman around, I can at least stay on. I tied my bag behind the saddle and climbed up. Edgar who'd taken to the air as soon as we got outside now flew over to land on my shoulder.

I walked the horse over to LT Randgos and he gave me a once over.

"Morgana, we'll be riding hard. Just try to stay in the middle of the formation and hang on. If you need us to slow down say something. I plan to get back to the city as quickly as possible. When we left the Queen's forces had secured the north gate, the great bridge, and the palace. They were trying to push the rebels toward the south docks, but this is street by street fighting. So it's slow and bloody and the forces are about evenly matched right now. Assistance from the human's and the Guild could turn the battle," he said looking at me to make sure I knew how grave the situation in the capital really was.

"Once we cross the bridge and get through the gate we'll try to link up with the Queen's forces. We'll do everything we can to avoid a fight until we understand the situation. Please trust me on this. It would be a bad time for you to break away on your own."

I felt my face flush, he was worried that I'd do something like I'd done last night. What he hadn't said was that today was not armature night and if I did something stupid I'd only get myself killed.

"I understand. I promise I'll do what you tell me to until we link up with the Queen," I said. This seemed to satisfy Randgos because he relaxed and ordered out troop to ride.

The landscape blurred by a backdrop of green vegetation and white stone bounded by mountains. The lake that I caught glimpse of in the distance was a sparkling blue with a large island about a quarter of a mile out. The island was covered in trees with white towers rising gracefully like a thousand needles piercing the sky. We rounded a gentle bend in the road and I spotted the great bridge for the first time. From this distance it appeared to be made of silver, steel, and stone. It swept into the air defying gravity by its beauty and size.

The hooves of our mounts creating a low rumble like thunder as we approached the gate that guarded the entrance to the bridge. At the point where the bridge met the road the elves had built a pair of towers with a mighty silver gate between them. I could see the Queens flag flying from the towers and figured that they must still be held by her Majesty's forces. A horn blast rang out and then a pair of glowing arrows zipped from the top of each tower in unison striking the ground about a hundred yards in front of us. Each arrow detonated with a blast that surprised me.

I knew that Elven magic was much more powerful here in Summer, I'd not fully appreciated how much more powerful until now. If those were warning shot's designed to get our attention then color me impressed.

"HALT!" the voice of the female Captain of the Guard rang out and I found our entire troop stopping.

"WHO APPROACHES?"

LT Randgos stood up in his stirrups and replied.

"I am Lieutenant Randgos Norodiir of clan Larohtta and sworn vassal to Sir Galohond Larohtta. I lead this troop and we ride to the defense of Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal," LT Randgos shouted using magic to make his voice boom out.

"Enter," came the reply as the gates slowly swung open. Standing in the middle of the street was a single elf. He was very tall and dressed in silver and green armor with a spear leaning against one shoulder and a white shield on his left arm. The shield had the image of a large dragon drawn on it in silver. The spear must have been at least ten feet long. As we approached he looked up at us and I saw that his eyes were solid disks of silver.

We rode in slowly and Randgos riding next to me said softly, "That is Sir Orsathien Shathaleth 'Silver Hand' hero of the Isilidhrindal clan and cousin to the Queen. He is one of the realms mightiest warriors."

"Why would he be here during a crisis instead of on the front lines fighting the insurrection?" I asked.

Randgos glanced at me with a surprised look, like I'd asked a dumb question.

"My lady if things go badly in the city the bridge and gate are the best lines of retreat for the crown and her forces. It is vital that it be held. By controlling the bridge the Queen can bring in reinforcements and supplies from the countryside at will. The rebels must rely on boats for resupply. I don't doubt that the Queen has sent word out to the villages and towns around the lake ordering them to sail to the city and blockade it until the crisis is over."

By this time we'd gotten close enough to Sir Orsathien to be forced to stop. Galohond's warriors moved aside so that LT Randgos and I could approach.

"Hail, Sir Orsathien Shathaleth," Randgos said speaking formally. "I'm glad to see that you yet hold the northern way."

"Lieutenant Randgos Norodiir, warriors of clan Larohtta, it gladdens my heart to see you returned so soon from your task. I'd thought that you would be gone for too long to be of help to my Queen."

At this Sir Orsathien looked over at me with an evaluating stare.

"This must be the human Morgana Livingstone, whose patron begged the Queen for a rescue," he said.

The way he said it made me angry like I'd personally endangered the Elven Crown. For once I controlled my tongue and keep silent. When I didn't respond Randgos cleared his throat.

"Let me present Lady Morgana Aoife Livingstone, Magic-User Master Class," Randgos said gesturing toward me. "It was Morgana who found the Mask of Esarthae Haelond, who defeated the cabal of Arangalad Larohtta and Siofra Aldalithe, and who most recently, rescued Princess Aradiliel Isilidhrindal," Randgos said.

I felt my face flush at the list of my accomplishments. I felt like most of those things had been either accomplished by working with others or through luck.

"We need to find the Queen so that my Lady Morgana can coordinate the forces of the Human Guild of Magic-Users, with the Queen's forces." Randgos said.

I suddenly felt like he'd made a promise that I'd have a tough time living up to. Still the respect and hope that flared in Sir Orsathien eyes and the change of body posture of the elves around the gate made me realize that Randgos was no fool and that he'd said what he had on purpose. He wanted to provide some ray of optimism to these exhausted warriors.

\* \* \*

We followed Sir Orsathien's directions to the Queens headquarters. One of the things I noticed as soon as we rode through the gate was that the ward over the city was simply gone. I was so startled it took me several seconds to ask about it.

"Randgos, what happened to the ward?" I didn't need to explain what I was talking about because LT Randgos turned to look at me with a knowing expression.

"One of the first things the Prince did was to use his Key to bring down the ward. After that he gated in the army he's been using to try to take control of the capital," he said.

I felt the depth of Prince Glandor's betrayal as we moved into the city. It was as if he'd thrown the gates to the city wide open and invited every enemy they had inside.

"If there is no Ward what would stop the Queen from retreating through the veil if things go badly?" I asked.

"It's an option but to flee the realm would be a huge sign of weakness. It is said that whoever controls Aearoneithel controls Summer. There are fourteen Great Houses that rule fourteen provinces, the two provinces on the western frontier are in rebellion. The Crown has sent an Army to deal with that situation. Now there is rebellion here in the Capital. If the Queen were to flee the realm how many of the Great Houses would remain loyal? If she can end the threat here then there is a good chance the spread of the rebellion can be stopped," he said.

As we rode I looked around examining the city. I realized this city was fundamentally different from human cities. The streets were paved with silver looking bricks and the buildings tended to be made of stone with green slate roofs. Trees, grass, and gardens surrounded us making me feel like I was riding through a park instead of a city. There were other differences as well. The street lights were powered by magically glowing spheres. One house may have white stone one second only to shift to a rose colored stone the next. Many of the buildings had tall thin towers adding a graceful beauty to the city. Other buildings were designed to look like a tree or a rock formation. Stretching between the buildings with no apparent rhyme or reason, were flying bridges made of rope, stone, wood or combinations of the three. The streets weren't on a grid pattern instead they wandered around in a confusing way that left me feeling lost within minutes. However, much of the beauty had been marred because of the fighting. There were fresh signs of combat magic, blackened burned out trees, and buildings that had suffered from combat magical marred the streets. As we

rode forward the signs of combat became more and more obvious buildings had been gutted by fire and magic, columns of smoke rose into the sky, and here and there the bodies of those killed in the fighting could be spotted. Edgar took to the air intent on watching our surroundings. I sent him a mental command to stay close. I was a bit worried that in all of the chaos of a strange city and the fighting that something might happen to him.

After nearly 30 minutes of riding we came across a check point. The hastily erected barrier of stone and wood that blocked the street looked like a pretty good defense against most ground attacks. Standing behind the barrier a squad of Elven soldiers watched us suspiciously. They all had bows pointed at us and arrows nocked.

"Halt!"

Shouted the sergeant, he was obviously determined to stop us despite the fact that our troop had them severely out numbered. LT Randgos moved once again to the front of the formation with me following.

"I'm LT Randgos these warriors and I are sworn to Sir Galohond Larohtta, we are returning to our Lord who is serving the Queen. We request permission to pass," he said.

"I recognize you Lieutenant. You and your troop have the Queen's permission to pass. You will find her up the street occupying the trading hall, of the clothe merchant guild." He sounded almost disappointed to let us through without a fight.

As we rode past I realized that this sergeant must be very young for an Elf. It made me suddenly wonder who'd gotten swept up in this fight besides humans and how much had the elven realm had to pay for Ambrose's ambitions. As we moved through the check point it was clear that most of the elves here had seen fighting. Their armor was damaged and many of them were wounded. They'd obviously been cycled off the front line and given a duty they could perform that allowed them a break from direct combat.

As soon as we were through the check point the first sounds of battle drifted in on the late afternoon breeze. The sun was a large red disk, its rays penetrating the cloud cover, and casting the buildings in an eerie shadow that made it difficult to see. The building that Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal had occupied and turned into her command post was easy to spot based on the number of soldiers surrounding it and the messengers running in and out. Randgos called a halt and dismounted tossing his reigns to one of his men and motioning for me to follow him.

"Are you ready to meet the Queen?" he asked.

I nodded and following his example by handing my reigns to one of the soldiers accompanying us.

Abruptly a brassy sounding horn shattered the air. The roar of hundreds of voices shouting war cries was deafening as an army of Elven warriors appeared at the far end of the street running forward with unnatural speed. The Queen's guards at the command post reacted with the trained discipline of professional soldiers, firing a salvo of arrows into the charging elves. Even though nearly a dozen attacking elves fell the army never even slowed down.

I was frozen in place for a second watching the speed and violence of the attack. Then I noticed that LT Randgos had already mounted and was leading my horse over to me.

"Morgana, mount up. We need to retreat, before this position is overrun."

Before I could put a foot into the stirrup a second roar sounded overhead and I looked up to see a large dragon whose body was covered with golden scales and whose belly was a bright crimson. This was by far the largest creature I'd ever seen and the fact that it was flying was terrifying all by itself. The beast circled the trading hall once and then opened its maw and unleashed a blast of fire that was nearly white hot.

The hall's roof, even though it was made of slate, cracked under the intense heat of the magical fire and the wooden support beams burst into flame as the monster circled away. The elves of the guard now tried to split their attention between the creature above and the soldiers pushing forward. Their arrows arched up into the air and exploded against great beasts scales with no obvious damage. Abruptly the roof to the trading guild blew apart and another dragon pushed its way into the sky. The second dragon was covered in silver and green scales. If the size of the dragon was an indication of its power then the second beast was more than a match for the gold and red dragon.

"Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal, the Queen!"

"The Queen!"

"The Queen has joined the fight!"

"Queen Isilidhrindal!"

The shouts from the elves around me told me the identity of the second dragon. This meant that the first dragon had to be the prince in dragon form. A sudden instinct caused me to shield and I pulled power through the ley line stone and brought up my body shield just in time to block a glowing arrow. I focused on the fight up the street and saw that the Queen's forces were falling back.

"Lieutenant I think those warriors could use some help," I said trying to sound calm.



"Aye, my lady, but I'm under orders to make sure you come to no harm. If we enter the fray you will be at risk," he replied.

"Then you'll need to stay close to me to protect me." I said digging my heels into the sides of my horse. Edgar darted down circling around me once before climbing away. I looked at the advancing elven rebels and lifted my walking stick over my head, its gem glowed with a ruby fire, and I cast a flame strike with as much power as I could manage. The flame fanned out flying over the heads of the defending elves to strike the second row of attackers. Most of the rebel elves managed to raise their body shields, however the few that were too slow or too weak screamed in agony as my fire washed over them. My horse raced forward and I realized I had time for one more long range spell before I got close and summoned a lightning strike.

The lightning tore into the ranks of the rebels and once again it had less of an effect than I'd have thought as most of the Elves raised shields. Suddenly I found myself the prime target of the rebel archers. Their arrows powered by strong magic hit my shield with enough force to toss me from my saddle. I hit the ground rolling to absorb some of the impact with limited success. I did manage to hang onto my mother's walking stick and by the time I climbed back to my feet Randgos and his troop were between me and the archers. The horsemen slashed into the attacking elves and I had enough time, now, to collect my wits.

So far my magic had looked impressive but it hadn't had much effect. I felt like I was channeling more power than I did when in the human realm but each of these elves could also channel magic and they were on their home ground. I was probably stronger than most of them individually, by spreading my attacks across a wide area I was having limited success.

Another tremendous roar from above caused me to look up. The two dragons had locked together slashing and gouging each other in a savage display of draconic battle. For a moment I was mesmerized by the sight. When I looked back down I saw that once again the Queens forces were being pushed back.

LT Randgos charge had cut into the rebels slowing them but the momentum of the charge was spent and the horsemen were forced to turn and retreat. At the same time by some hidden signal a second wave of attackers charged forward from up a side street. The second wave consisted of creatures out of chaos.

There was a monster with the body of a beautiful human woman from the waist up and a giant spider below. There was a naked man with the head of a giant hawk and four arms two that ended in crab like pincers. There were creatures that were a blend of different animals and others with the chitinous bodies of insects crossed with

humans, elves, and dwarves. There weren't as many of these monsters as there were rebel elves but once they tore into the flank of the guards the fight would be over.

I took a deep breath and focused on the spell for shape shifting that Sir Galohond had taught me. I spoke the words and focused on pulling in as much magical power through the ley line stone as possible and then channeling it into the pattern I'd only used once before. I felt my body shift and everything around me seemed to become smaller while scales rippled over my skin and down my back. I'm not sure where my clothes and magical items went. There is a theory that there is a pocket of space in the void between worlds attuned to each Magic-User and that any item that a Magic-User is wearing when they veer into another form are transported to this pocket space. Another theory is that all of our clothes or items are transmuted and become a part of the Magic-User while in shifted form.

I leaned toward the second theory since the change was complete and I could still draw upon my magic which required a connection to the ley line stone while in Summer. Although perhaps in dragon form I could touch the magic of this world and didn't need the stone. It was a mystery that I'd explore one day if I could. I turned my head and barely had enough time to unleash my breath weapon on the wave of monsters before they reached me.

Lightning crackled and then smashed into the lead creatures blowing several of them apart and causing others to jump to the sides. I used the few seconds of time that my attack had created to snap my wings down and lift into the sky. It took only a few moments to put several hundred feet between me and the creatures of chaos. From this vantage point I could see that the Queen's forces were still being driven back by the rebel elves while the Queen was distracted fighting her son.

I dove at the monsters and blasted lightning strike after lightning strike into them. By my second pass I could see that their charge had broken and they were more interested in taking cover than attacking the guards. I turned back in time to see a rebel elven wizard veer into dragon form.

He was a great green and black dragon and was nearly twice my size. He rose into the air with a mighty snap of his wings climbing quickly. He closed on me with surprising speed. I tried to slow him by blasting lightning at him and he somehow anticipated my attack. He snapped his wings shut falling a dozen feet before catching himself. My lightning bolt streaked harmlessly by him. Then he opened his mouth belched a cone of super cold air. I tried to dive low and to his left but he aimed his breath out in front of where he thought I would go so that I flew partially through his

cone of supper chilled air. The cold ripped into me and the only thing that saved me was my magical dragon hide.

I pull out of my dive barely avoiding the ground and turned to look for my opponent only to find him a dozen yards behind me. I circled to my left pitching up and into him in an attempt to avoid another blast of super cold air. After narrowly avoiding two more attacks I realized that I could turn tighter than he could but he was stronger and faster.

For a while the game of aerial tag continued and then my luck ran out and my right wing and the end of my tail were caught by one of his blasts. Now I had trouble turning to the left and climbing because my wing wasn't working quite right. I suddenly realized it was only a matter of time before he caught me.

The sound of a roar behind me caused me to swerve to one side on instinct. I turned my head in time to see a fifth dragon drop onto the back of the black and green monster behind me. This dragon was mostly silver with green and gold highlights. It was larger than me but smaller than the monster it tore into. However it had the element of surprise and had struck from above and behind sinking claws and fangs into the beast. Then the silver dragon pushed off striking with its fiery breath weapon as it climbed away.

Again the green and black monster shrieked in pain, and turned its head in an attempt to catch the smaller dragon with its breath weapon. At the same time it flapped its wings trying to stay aloft while targeting the smaller dragon. I hadn't been idle watching the fight as soon as the silver and gold dragon had attacked I'd turned. I climbed and set up a dive so that I raced by the large black and green dragon as it struggled chase the silver and gold beast. I came in fast from the opposite side and I hit it fully in the wing joint with a lighting strike and then raced away.

The bellow of pain told me that my attack had been effective. I circled around again in time to see the black and green dragon spiraling toward the ground barely in control. The silver and gold dragon struck again blasting the green's other wing with flame. The great black and green beast, now totally out of control and screaming in pain, crashed into a building below. I circled above the site where the beast went in but didn't see any sign of movement. When I glanced back at the rebels I saw that they'd been pushed back a bit due to reinforcements from the command post.

For the first time I saw Sir Galohond in full armor with a shield on his left arm and his great sword in his fist. He was glowing with power as he slashed into the rebels. Along with him were several other knights and warriors who'd been in the command

post. They were still outnumbered although it was obvious that they were more powerful magically and more skilled than the rebels they were facing.

There is a saying that quantity is a quality all of its own. This proved true since even though the queen's forces were individually more powerful and skilled than the rebels, they'd run out of momentum and were now being slowly forced back.

I flew forward and got ready to start strafing the enemy fighters when I heard another draconic roar and glanced up and to the right and saw that the dragon I'd assumed was Prince Glandor had somehow managed to take his mother's back. His jaws were locked onto the back of her neck and they were plummeting toward the ground. In a few seconds he'd drive her into the ground and the fight would be over.

I turned racing forward hoping to get close enough to blast Glandor from his mother's back before they hit the ground, knowing I'd be too late. Suddenly from below and behind the silver and gold dragon swept up raking its claws through Glandor's back and then latching onto one of his wings with her jaws. I realized in a flash this must be Princess Aradiliel. Once she had a hold of Glandor's wing she threw all of her weight to one side forcing the Prince to release his mother.

All three dragons broke apart with the two female dragons circling in opposite directions. Glandor rather than chase one or the other, and giving up his tail to whoever he wasn't chasing chose to climb.

The sound of heavy machine gun fire ripped the air.

I glanced to the ground and saw that a gate had been opened and racing through the gate were Guild forces. In the lead were a pair of M-ATVs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected - All Terrain Vehicle) the vehicle on the left had a M2.50 Caliber Machine gun on the top of it while the second vehicle had a MK19 40 mm grenade launcher. Both vehicles were able to fire over the heads of the elven guards directly into the rebel forces. The impact of heavy machine gun rounds was instantly apparent. Magical shields flared as bullets ripped into the rebel force. They'd hold for a second or two and then collapse and then the elf holding the shield died. The effect of the grenades was even more dramatic. Explosions tore through the opposing force leaving elven knights cowering behind shields that barely absorbed the blast while those around them were blown apart.

Streaming in behind them were nearly a hundred Hounds of Heaven. All of the human forces were relying heavily on mundane weapons which puzzled me for a second. Then I realized that they didn't have access to power like I did and must be conserving most of their magic for body shields and defensive magic. The Guilds bloody Dogs of War proved that their reputation was well earned during the next few

minutes. Squads of Hounds worked together smoothly setting up firing positions and providing overlapping fields of fire as more Hounds poured through the Gate. Squads were armed with the best mundane weapons, M240 machine guns ripped into the rebel forces. Individual Hounds employed both M16 and M4 rifles some of which were augmented with M320 grenade launchers. By the time the gate had closed nearly a dozen combat vehicles had crashed through and the heavy weapons quickly, when combined with defensive magic, turned the tide of the battle.

I circled looking for Prince Glandor but couldn't find him. Then I saw the queen land on the lawn in front of the building that had been serving as her command post. In seconds the princess had landed next to her. I circled one more time watching the battle closely. The combined might of the Guild and the Queen's guards now proved too much for the rebel force. The rebels broke and raced away throwing down their weapons in order to run faster. The route was on and the Guild and the Queen's forces were in full pursuit. When I circled back the Queen and her daughter had shifted once again into Elven form.

I landed next to the Queen and her daughter and veered back to human form. As the world moved and grew around me I felt a momentary sense of dizziness and exhaustion. The dragon form was ideal for use in a fight. However it used so much magic that it left me feeling weak after only a few minutes. When my head stopped spinning I looked up and saw Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal was looking out on the battle with a pale expression. At that moment Edgar swooped in to land on my shoulder possessively.

"You're Majesty, are you all right?" I asked.

Queen Turethiel turned to look at me. "I've visited the human realm several times over the last two hundred years, yet I never appreciated how powerful your weapons have become."

I looked out at the battle trying to understand it from her perspective. A part of me was annoyed that she didn't see the obvious victory that the Guild had helped her achieve. Then I realized what she was seeing. As the ruler of the Sylvari Elves she had a responsibility to her people. She needed to understand the nations around her and evaluate them as allies or potential foes. She'd suddenly had a new reality thrust upon her and was struggling to come to grips with it. Elves are naturally gifted with magic and they tend to look to magic to solve their problems. No matter what type of problem they're facing big or small it must have a solution based in magic. An elf's place in society was determined by magical strength and skill, for example nobles were far more powerful than peasants. Most elves are not capable of understanding

life without magic. When they saw humanity, a race where magical ability is the exception instead of the norm. They tended to think of humans as inferior and racially deficient. Now all of a sudden the Elven realm is in peril and the Human Guild of Magic-Users had come to the Crown's aid. But when they arrive they didn't use magic as the weapon of choice. Instead they'd used mundane weapons and augmented their attack with a prudent and limited use of magic. Of course this was because the Hounds of Heave knew they had to conserve their magical power and used the most effective tactic available. When Elves traveled to the human realm they tended to use magical tools and weapons because they could store power in them and use them more efficiently than simply casting a spell. Elves tended to remain in the human realm for limited amounts of time, returning to Summer before they became too weak. They had never really considered the destructive power of modern military weapons. The result of the hounds attack had decimated rebel force and Queen Turethiel was, for the first time, forced to admit how far humanity had come.

After a few minutes the fight moved beyond our ability to follow so Queen Turethiel walked into a building next to the now ruined Guild Hall of the Clothe Merchants, where we found a hastily erected operations room. This room reminded me of the room that the Hounds of Heaven had used except that here they were using magic instead of technology. Crystals were used instead of computers and a large mirror, hung on the far wall, for scrying to monitor the rebel force instead of a UAV.

Edgar had remained with me since I'd returned to my human form and now took his time preening himself, like he was personally responsible for the defeat of the rebels. We'd only been in the operations room for a few minutes before another figure arrived. At first I didn't recognize my mother, he was wearing ACU (Army Combat Uniform) boots, body armor, and helmet. Over one shoulder he'd slung an M-4 and he had an M-9 in a quick draw tactical holster attached to his gear. In addition he carried a staff with a glowing crystal and had several other items used for storing magical power on him. With him came Samantha and her three guards. I wasn't sure what the nature of their friendship was, I was just glad that they'd decided to stay with my mother until the crisis was over. Even though none of them were particularly strong magically I'd come to appreciate their fighting skills.

"Morgana," he greeted me warmly as I rushed over to give him a hug.

"You and the hounds made quite an entrance," I said happy to know that he was safe.

"Once I found Grand Master Beck, I tried to convince him that it was in the Guild's best interest to support Summer. I didn't have much luck until I explained your theory

about Ambrose. He's not certain that Ambrose is still alive, but the threat that he might be alive was enough for him to give me every Hound of Heaven that could be spared," he said.

By this time the Queen had walked over.

"Mor, your return to Summer was quite timely as is the help of the Guild. Please convey Summer's appreciation to the Human Guild of Magic-Users," Queen Turethiel said.

At this my mother and the Queen started complementing each other and talking about how it was good that the Sylvari Elves of Summer had such a close friendship with the Guild. I moved away from them so that I could watch the magical mirrors. They continued to show the battle and by this time some of the rebel forces had made it down to the southern docks and were trying to escape in the boats there. I could also see Elven commanders here in the command post talking to the Captain of the flotilla of boats blockading the capital. I doubted that very many rebels would be escaping that way. However with the ward down I was pretty sure that any rebels with the power would part the veil and escape to another realm.

"Excuse me Lady Livingstone," a soft female voice said.

I turned around to see Princess Aradiliel standing behind me.

"I never thanked you for your help. Without the assistance of Samantha Lott and your God-Father and then your rescue I'd have been captured by my traitor brother. I don't know what he would have done although I'm pretty certain the best I could have hoped for is death. If there is anything that I can do, you have only to ask."

While she was talking to me she'd been looking at the ground, when she finished she looked up and made eye contact. There was a look of sadness and some sort of discomfort that I didn't really understand. What was clear was her sincerity.

"Princess, I don't know what ordeal your brother put you through. I can only say that I'm glad that you're safe," I said.

After that we continued to watch the route. Night had fallen across the city and magical lights provided plenty of illumination. There were still pockets of fighting but it was clear that the rebels were more interested in surrender or escape. After a couple of hours a commotion caused me to turn toward the entrance.

Duke Aranion Elentaure entered the room flanked by Sir Ruion Galadhrinmyr and Sir Galohond Larothta. At the sight of Galohond my heart started to race and I wanted to fling myself forward and hug him. I'd seen him in the thick of the fight and I'd intentionally avoided the thought that something might happen to him. Now that I

saw him standing here the worry and tension I'd denied drained away leaving me slightly weak in the knees.

"My Queen," Duke Elentaure said dropping to one knee, both Galohond and Ruion followed suit.

"Rise warriors of Summer, what news?" said the Queen sounding regal.

"The rebels are routed. The Prince escaped by opening a gate to another realm. There are a few pockets of resistance remaining. With your permission we are ready to bring the city's ward back up," he said.

"Please do. In the mean time I plan to return to the palace," she said.

"I will make preparations for your departure," Sir Ruion said.

"And I will attend to the ward," the Duke added nodding to Sir Ruion.

At this the Elves moved away to perform their appointed tasks. Sir Galohond looked over to me and I couldn't understand his expression. It seemed somehow remote and unfeeling. I felt myself drawn toward him and when I got close enough I reached up with both hands grabbed each side of his head and pulled him down for a kiss. At first I felt him stiffen and then he returned the kiss with a rough passion that felt odd but made me go weak at the knees.

"You don't know how worried I've been," I said. "Why did you leave without saying good bye and how could you just stand there?"

"My Lady, you must understand with the crisis here, I had a duty to perform. I've not been intentionally avoiding you," he said.

"Well I think the crisis is well in hand now," I replied not wanting to let go of him.

"I agree. It is getting late, would you accompany me on a short journey? I've got quarters within the city," he said.

"Sure, just give me a second," I said and walked over to my mother.

"Mor, I'm going to go with Sir Galohond for the night. Thank you for the loan of your ley-line stone." I reached out and offered him the walking stick with the stone attached to the handle.

"Are you sure you won't need it?" he asked.

"I think most of the fighting has passed and I've got Galohond to defend me. If you need to use magic you'll need this," I said.

With that Mor took the walking stick and gave me a knowing smile. "Have fun, and don't forget to be 'safe'," he said with a wink.

I felt my face flush as I met Galohond by the door. He was flanked by a couple of warriors I didn't recognize. When we left the building I saw an enclosed elven carriage



waiting for us. It was pulled by four all black horses and had half a dozen mounted warriors waiting to escort us. I felt like I'd fallen into a fairy tale as I was helped up into the carriage. Edgar still on my shoulder was forced to flap to keep his balance. Galohond climbed in behind me and the carriage started moving at once.

I moved over to sit as close to him as possible looking up at him with my best bedroom eyes. "So how far is it to your house?"

"Not far," he replied.

"Let's see if we can find something to occupy ourselves until we arrive," I said pulling him down for another kiss. There was something odd about the kiss. It was rougher than what I'd come to expect from Galohond as he pressed his mouth down on mine. I'd been longing to kiss him and my body reacted with a growing passion.

There was a sudden click and I felt something cold around my neck. Startled I pulled back and looked down and felt shocked to the core of my being. Galohond had just snapped a Collar of Binding around my neck.

"What are you doing?" I asked pulling at the collar feeling confused.

"Making sure you don't escape again," he said and as he spoke the air in the carriage got darker.

I froze unable to process what was going on. Edgar recovered faster launching himself at Galohond with a loud. "CAW!"

Galohond was ready, telekinetic power snatched Edgar out of the air.

"You've been troublesome beyond your worth," he said with a cold emotionless voice. The Sir Galohond did something that made me lose my mind. He broke Edgar's neck with a quick application of telekinetic power. I must have launched myself at him physically because when I regained control of my mind was pinned to the other side of the carriage with telekinetic force. Galohond sat there facing me with three scratch marks on his cheek, a silent bloody testimony to my mindless attack.

I reached for my bond to Edgar and found a jagged tear in my spirit where our bond had been. There is a reason why it's become unpopular for Magic-Users to bond familiars. The bond goes both ways, the familiar offers the Magic-User many advantages, extra power, an ally, an anchor when performing complex magic. But there was a huge disadvantage as well. Part of the Magic-Users power and spirit is invested in the familiar. When a familiar dies the pain of its death is severe. Some Magic-Users grieved for years for their lost familiar. A second problem was that I'd just lost a portion of my power. For the next few months I'd be weaker, until I healed from the loss. I'd also lost a part of my spirit or soul. That too would heal but in the mean time I'd be weaker and more susceptible to attacks on my spirit.

"You're not Galohond," I said.

"No Alastar, I'm not, my name is Ambrose Grosvenor. You might recall, we met this last spring. Your mother and I were once friends."

I could still feel the tears streaming down my face and I focused all the magical energy I could find to cast a spell at Ambrose I wanted nothing more than to wipe the look of satisfaction from his face. The intense pain from the collar kicked in shattering my concentration and causing me to scream. I lost track of time consumed in a fiery agony induced by the collar. After it had been used on me back in March I'd spent some time learning about them. The collars didn't really stop a Magic-User from casting a spell. Instead they caused enough magically induced pain to shatter ones concentration. There was no real barrier between me and my ability to use magic. The pain was so intense that I couldn't focus. It was also directly proportional to the amount of magic attempted.

When the pain receded I realized that I was on the floor of the carriage and that I was drenched with sweat. All of my gear had been removed and my hands and feet were bound. The carriage was still moving and Ambrose noticed that I was once again aware of my surroundings.

"That was a very impressive amount of screaming," he said. As he spoke I noticed the interior got darker and for the first time felt really terrified.

"How?" I croaked.

"How, what my dear?" he said sounding amused.

My throat was raw from screaming and my voice was barely discernible but I managed to ask my question. "How did you take Galohond's body?"

"Ah, you were quite right in your theory. Last night's rite was a ruse to lull the Guild into thinking I had been dealt with. You would be surprised at how many people will believe a lie if they want it to be true. All the evidence disputing it will be ignored if it is something they really want to believe. The trick then is to give them the illusion." He trailed off into silence for a few seconds.

"I didn't know who I'd end up swapping with, Galohond got to me first. I don't know if you remember a pause after Galohond ran me through? Which, I must say is one of my life's more painful experiences. It gave me the time I needed to pull off the swap. After that it was merely doing what was expected and keeping my mouth shut."

I felt the tears start to leak out again. The premonition I'd had that Galohond was in trouble had proven accurate and my dream, the one where I'd seen Galohond's grave and my fresh one had proven accurate as well. For a second I almost reached out again for my power only the memory of the pain stopped me.

"You are a very beautiful woman Alastar, once I realized that we were lovers I cannot tell you how tempted I was to delay the rite so that I could enjoy your flesh. Particularly since I've been wearing a woman's body since March, but it will soon be midnight and the rite must be performed today. Soon the temptations of the flesh will be unimportant to me." He gloated.

Again the temperature in the carriage dropped and it became so dark I could barely see even with the magical lamps illuminating the interior. For the first time, I looked Ambrose in the eyes and saw motes of darkness swirling across his eyes. The effect made me realize that he was already a semi-immortal being already.

"It's only been a little more than seven months since you stole the Athame how is it that you've become so powerful?" I asked trying to get him to talk and to give me time to think.

"Ah, you presume that this only goes back to the time I arrived in St. Louis. I learned the soul swap spell before I went to prison. Unfortunately I took me almost a year before I had an opportunity to use it to get free. The man who served my time in jail wasn't me; he was one of my followers and was happy to take my sentence for me. I've been studying and building my power for years, building the organization that would overthrow the Guild. Once my body was released from prison I reclaimed it thinking that I could use it and my soul transference spell to claim the Athame. Everything went pretty much according to plan. I got revenge on Bernard Livingstone by using the body of his daughter to kill him and in the process stole his greatest creation. Then I used the body of Evaline Donegal's son to steal her body, power, and the Athame. Unfortunately you escaped me when I tried to sacrifice you during my original rite. I will fix that mistake tonight and conclude my vengeance on Evaline." As Ambrose talked I realized that he was completely insane.

"Even so you expect me to believe that you've done all of this on your own? You must have some power assisting you," I said hoping to get him to confirm my theory.

He looked at me and smiled.

"Fine I've got another question then. How did you subvert so many people?" I asked.

"Everyone has ambitions and dreams. I simply offer what they desire, for example Aradiliel was jealous of her brother Glandor's physical and magical power but even more jealous of his status as the designated heir. So I offered her Glandor's body in exchange for her service. Once tonight's rite is complete I'll return to Aearoneithel and put the new Glandor on his mother's throne. I'll use the power of the throne of Summer to invade the human realm along with my own forces, allies in the human realm, and my new magical power. The guild will fall and there will be nothing to

protect the mundane humans from the rule of those of us with magic." As he said this he looked out of the window apparently viewing the scene of his imminent rise to power.

My mind, scared though I was, couldn't help racing toward conclusions. If Ambrose had the power to switch other people's souls then there was no telling who was a friend and who was a foe. It confirmed an earlier theory but wasn't very comforting.

"How did you get into the Guild Grand Master's house?" I asked mostly just trying to keep him talking.

"Ah, the Athame of Tartarus has several undocumented powers. One of these powers is the ability to cut through anything, including the physical space between two points. I don't need to cross into another realm if I know where I'm going I can cut reality and step through into any location, by passing wards, locks, doors, and walls. I visited the Grand Master's house earlier that day in the shape of his house keeper while he was at the Guild. It was simplicity itself to cut a rift into his house that evening and bring in enough of my followers to overwhelm him." Ambrose gloated.

The carriage came to a halt with a jolt that made me start.

"It seems we've arrived," he said.

With that Ambrose left the carriage and closed the door behind him. I looked around frantically. Most of my equipment was lying on the seat across from me. Suddenly I spotted an item that made my heart race. It was the crystal that my mother and I used for communication. I reached out with my bound hands and focused. I used the tiniest trickle of power I could and felt the pain stab into my mind. I used a meditation technic I'd learned, to accept the pain and redirect it, so that it passed through me. After several heart beats I realized I could endure the pain and maintain my focus. The pain was still there only now it was something that I noticed in a more abstract intellectual way. I finished my spell and the crystal glowed.

"Mother, it's Alastar, I've been captured by Ambrose. I don't know where I'm being taken. I can only tell you that he plans to sacrifice me before mid-night and complete the great rite. He's wearing Galohond's body. Oh, and he killed Edgar." With that last part fresh tears streamed down my face, yet I was able to focus enough to finish the spell and send it. I thought about picking up one of my magical tools and trying to escape, except that I knew that if I tried any powerful magic, mental discipline or not, the pain of the collar would drop me. I sat back down on the floor just in time.

The door opened and a pair of elves picked me up and dragged me from the carriage. I found myself in the cool air of a windswept open air of a mountain side. The Queens road stretched out below me and off in the distance I could see the lake and the

magical lights of the capital. It took only a second for me to feel the ley-lines beneath me and to comprehend that this was a place of power. The elves dragged me into a circle that had already been prepared and dropped me to the ground. I managed to sit up and look around. Next to me was a large flat stone in an oval shape that stood nearly two feet high. It was made of a smooth white rock that reminded me of marble and was nearly nine feet long and five feet wide at its widest point. It took me a few seconds before I understood that this was an altar. As I continued to look around I noticed several pillars of white, marble like stone, some barely reaching man height while others stood twelve feet high with a lintel connecting them. This reminded me of Stone Henge in the UK. I also realized that the circle formed by the stones was much larger than the circle that had been drawn around me and the altar. The white marble like stones formed a circle several hundred feet across with the altar at the center.

My mind started calculating in a detached sort of way, tonight's rite would draw upon the power of the ley-lines and use the greater circle to focus that power and channel it into the smaller circle. The smaller circle would again channel and refocus the energy and the altar would serve as the trigger. When my life's blood was spilled tonight the whole world would feel the aftershock if this rite was done correctly.

There were probable over a dozen people standing around watching. Off to one side in the gaps between the standing stones I could see a pavilion. I was guessing that Ambrose was inside getting ready, probably going through a ritual cleansing. Most of those watching were elves, I spotted three humans not too far away talking together and watching me. When I saw them I could barely contain my anger. The first person was Ann Gunning standing next to Gwendolyn and the vampire Monique.

"Apparently the Great One didn't have another body for you Ann or should I say Donald," I said trying to get a rise out of the person I'd thought of as Elizabeth Ann Gunning.

The three of them stopped talking for a moment and started at me.

"I live to serve the Great One. If the Great One needs me to be a woman then so be it," Donald said.

The words sounded subservient but I could hear a faint ring of resentment. "I guess that makes sense. I mean now that he's a man again he'll want to keep as much pussy around to play with as possible," I retorted.

Ann flushed and raised a glowing hand only to have Monique grab her wrist. "Do not take the bait she wants you to react so that she can try to escape. Do not fall for her trick."

I felt let down for a second and then looked at Gwendolyn. "So are you really my mother's friend Gwendolyn or are you someone else?" I asked.

At this the woman I'd known as Gwendolyn laughed. "I'm still me dear. It's just that I couldn't refuse the offer that Ambrose made. I've learned more about ritual magic since becoming a disciple of the Great One than you can imagine. After he ascends I will be the next, soon there will be a new pantheon of super beings for humanity to worship," she said with the voice of a fanatic.

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Prince Glandor. "The Great One says it's time to prepare the sacrifice," he said.

With that I was seized by telekinetic fist and my clothes were roughly ripped from me. I was then dropped onto the cold stone altar where my arms and legs were spread apart and stretched out to their fullest. In my mind I knew what was coming next, I was still caught unprepared for the first iron stake as it was driven with tremendous violence through my right hand and into the actual stone of the altar. I'd told myself that I wouldn't scream but it was a promise I wasn't able to keep. By the time all four stakes had been driven through my hands and feet I'd driven my raw and abused voice to the point where I couldn't speak. I could feel and smell the urine that I'd unknowingly released during my ordeal and didn't care. For the next several minutes I focused on breathing and getting the pain under control. As bad as it was I realized that it was only slightly worse than the pain the collar of binding had subjected me too an hour or so earlier. With this realization I started to work on the same meditation technique I'd used before to accept the pain and redirect. I needed that place of calm serenity that I had achieved for a few moments before the guards had pulled me from the carriage. I lay there naked with blood running out of my hands and feet focusing on breathing for what felt like hours. Then I heard the chanting begin. I looked to one side and saw that the witnesses to the rite had donned black robes and were now holding hands chanting. As they chanted I felt the power of the rite begin to rise. It was a power that was linked to the earth through the ley line and it felt primordial.

Suddenly I understood; the slope between this site and the road must have been the scene of an ancient battle long ago. Ambrose needed the power of the souls slain here when combined with the power of the rite to truly cause him to transcend his human nature. My soul and the souls of the five killed before me were the key to the ignition, the rite was the starter, and the souls of the thousands of ancient slain elves would become the motor. The greater and lesser circles would transmit the energy into Ambrose and the purpose of that energy would be a transfiguration, from mortal to immortal.

The chanting changed and the circle parted and Ambrose entered the site holding the Athame aloft in one hand and on his belt were five glowing crystals. I felt the power of the crystals and knew that they must contain the souls of the previous five victims along with the power generated from the five earlier rites. Ambrose would unleash them and my soul in this last greatest rite. I couldn't help the shivers that wracked my body.

I was helpless!

Edgar was dead.

Galohond was dead.

I was truly alone!

Soon I'd be dead. A black tide of despair welled up inside of me. I should just give in and give up. I would soon join my lover and my familiar in the afterlife. The thought of not fighting was like ambrosia.

Ambrose entered the circle and I tried to squirm to find some kind of leverage to pull one of my hands off the spike but it was impossible. The leverage was wrong and my exhausted pain wracked body lacked the strength. Ambrose smiled down at me with the insane grin of a saddest.

"The time has come at last Alastar. You will now fulfill your purpose," he said.

Abruptly blood fountained from Ambrose chest, a quarter second later I heard the crack of a rifle. He dropped to his knees clutching the Athame. A roar sounded to my left along with the thunder of hooves. The overhead a great dragon with silver and green scales dove toward us.

Everything turned to chaos.

The darkness of the night was illuminated by several magical spheres of light that floated over the area. Gunfire thundered and the smell of fresh gunpowder was an acrid sweetness to my senses.

Princess Aradiliel in Prince Glandor's body veered into dragon form and leapt into the air resuming his battle with his mother. The sound of gunfire grew more intense as the attacking force got closer. Then the rumbling thunder of hooves shook the ground.

Evidently my mother had gotten my message.

When I glanced back toward Ambrose, I saw that he'd pulled off his robe and now knelt a few feet away. He was only wearing a ritual loincloth and I could see the gaping wound in his back and assumed the exit wound on his chest must be even bigger. As I watched the wound sealed itself closed and Ambrose released a sigh. I knew that I had

very little time so I reached for my magic again. My body was exhausted and in more pain than I'd ever experienced or thought possible. The promise of agony the collar gave me as a price for my attempt to reach my power was suddenly acceptable. It was simply another foot note to add to the story of hurts that I'd endured, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. I closed my eyes, and focused on the meditation technique I'd used a hundred times. I wrapped my thoughts with the void feeding all of my pain, sorrow, anger, and loss into it. Soon my physical body felt disconnected, all of the sensations associated with having a body had become unimportant. Once I'd established a sort of tranquility I opened my eyes and touched the power I'd stored inside of me, before I'd handed my mom his cane. I felt the magic of the collar and knew that I was being forced to feel even more pain but it didn't affect me. It was outside of me and interesting only in an academic sort of way. Holding my power I cast the spell used to open the lock on the collar of binding.

I heard the metal of the collar strike the stone altar with a clink and then the relief of being freed from the collar almost broke my concentration. An involuntary soft feminine moan slipped out. I glanced over at Ambrose, but he wasn't watching me. Instead he was focused on the battle. He lifted up the Athame and made a slashing gesture and I was somehow able to detect a scream over the din. I was sure he'd used the weapon to inflict an injury on one of my rescuers.

I looked at the spike holding my right hand to the altar and focused on telekinesis pulling the spike up out of the stone and through my hand. A fresh wave of agony raced along the abused nerves of my hand and nearly caused me to lose my hold on my magic. I teetered on the brink of losing control of the spell, after a moment I managed to maintain my connection to the void and the pain faded. With my right hand free I now focused on pulling the spike from my left hand and then from each foot. The pain was fresh and clear as each spike left my body, but once free of the offending metal the pain dissipated.

Emotions battered at me, hate, anger, sorrow, pain and loss I accepted each emotion and once again pulled them apart and feed them to the void. The noise of the battle raged around me and I knew that people were dying yet I felt like I was at the eye of the storm. I felt calm and strong as I lifted myself into the air with telekinesis. Some part of my mind understood that I couldn't stand on my damaged feet. I faced Ambrose whose back was still turned to me and reached out reflexively to Edgar only to feel the emptiness inside where he had been. For an instant I wept silent dry tears of grief, when the moment had passed, and I knew there were no more tears left within me, I



acted. I, almost gently, lifted the four spikes dripping with my fresh blood into the air and sent each one with as much force as I could generate into Ambrose's back.

Ambrose staggered forward, he'd been so focused on the battle in front of him that he'd not done the first most basic thing we're all taught in combat magic training. He'd forgotten to shield. Still he reacted faster than I'd have thought possible and had a shield of dark shadows intercepting the fourth spike before I could strike home.

As I'd worked to get myself free I could feel the battle raging around me and I'd heard the sounds of gunfire. I'd failed to understand the scale or the level of violence.

CPT Gunning and Monique were engaged in a battle with Colonel Black who was leading the company of Hounds in this assault. Although both of them were powerful COL Black was pressing forward. He was carrying a large staff with a glowing crystal and I was sure that he was using the power stored in the crystal to provide the magic for his duel.

My mother and Gwendolyn had faced off, and while Gwendolyn was a MagicUser Master class and therefore stronger, my mother had two things going for her. First she had been one of the most skilled Master Class Magic-Users in the United States, prior to losing her body. Second the fight was occurring in Summer, and Gwendolyn had limited access to magic. She was obviously using stored power to help her fight, however the ley-line stone in my mother's cane not only provided a continuous source of energy, but here in Summer, it felt like it boosted the Magic-User's strength to something beyond what they could normally hold. The end result was that my mother shattered Gwendolyn's defenses and bound her with magic as I watched.

Overhead the Queen fought impostor Prince Glandor both in dragon form. The noise and ferocity of the battle was stunning. I took all of this in, in an instant and had a shield up to block Ambrose counter attack. I knew that it would be strong, just not how strong. Spears of darkness flashed toward me and I put all the stored power I held into my shield. It was enough, barely, and even though the spell hadn't actually hit me the energy of it threw me backward out of the circle so that I hit the ground ten feet away. I clung to my serenity pushing all of the pain away and looked up to see Ambrose fending off a furious attack from Prince Glandor in Princess Aradiliel's body. I needed the respite although a break wouldn't be enough unless I could find a source of power. I reached all around me with my senses, feeling the power of this place and also feeling the strangeness of the magic. I could touch it, I could feel it, but I couldn't understand it or use it.

The ruby light of the Ley-Line stone blazed up as my mother attacked Ambrose from the other side helping Prince Glandor-in-Aradiliel. Ambrose had been pushing the

Princess back. Galohond's body might not be as strong as the Princess in magic, but Ambrose in Galohond's body was strong enough. Galohond's body here in Summer, tapping the elven ley-lines, combined with whatever dark deals and dark power's Ambrose had learned would have been enough. Ambrose still held the Athame and its dark power augmented Ambrose so that the combined power of my mother and the new Princess was not enough to stop him. Slowly Ambrose pressed the two of them back and while I watched this battle I saw first one and then the other two spikes I'd driven into Ambrose back slowly pull themselves out and fall to the ground. There wasn't even a scar to disfigure his strong, broad, muscular back.

I felt a slight tickle at the edge of my senses. If I hadn't been floating in the tranquility of the void I doubt that I'd have felt it. I focused on the tickle and realized it was a bond, one that stretched from me toward my mother. I took the small amount of power left to me and strengthened the bond. As I did this energy started flowing toward me and in that instant I realized that the connection I'd made to the Ley-Line stone was still there. Weaker due to the distance we'd been separated but active. I took a breath and used the energy I'd managed to draw from the stone to double, then triple, and finally quadruple the strength and the size of the connection. Now energy blazed into me as though I were holding the stone in my hand. It almost felt alive, like there was some type of sentient being within the stone, it recognized me, and wanted me to draw upon its power.

When I opened my eyes I felt as though I were looking at the world through a set of ruby colored sunglasses and I knew without seeing that my eyes blazed with ruby fire. It took less than a thought to float into the air. I looked at my hands in detached curious way and saw the blood running up my arm and into the wound in defiance of gravity. At the same time I felt my wounds heal, which left me bemused since I'm terrible at the healing arts.

I drew in more power and was suddenly conscious of the full moon floating overhead. In that instant I felt my connection to the moon flare into full bloom. A new source of power combined with the ruby fire and I felt like I was standing under a waterfall of power with my face lifted into that burning cold, that indescribable pleasure pain that is raw magic in its most elemental form. I drenched every cell of my being in power. For a moment I felt my mind teeter on the knife's edge of sanity. My hair lift away from my body as though I were full of static electricity and when I spoke my voice had gained a depth and timbre alien to my ears.

"AMBROSE!"

At this he spun around and I saw that my mother was still standing and that he was between Ambrose and the Princess, who was stretched out on the ground motionless.

"What have you done? This isn't possible," Ambrose said as darkness swirled about him in a torrent of living shadows.

He attacked.

Ambrose had grown, not just in power but also in skill. He demonstrated that skill now by attacking me on the physical, mental, and spiritual planes at the same time. I burned all three attacks to nothingness with my silver-ruby fire.

"MY TURN" I said, my voice was if anything louder and stranger than before.

I attacked him with the same multi-planar attack he'd used on me, only I split each of the three attacks into three forcing him to defend nine different places at once. The darkness swirled around him and I felt another presence rise inside of Ambrose a powerful ancient presence. As Ambrose started to falter this other presence simply took control.

I fought now with every bit of power, cunning, skill, and ability I'd learned and it wasn't enough. Purple shadows with razor edges and a soul numbing cold slashed at me. Waives of psionic spikes augmented with acidic fire darted around slamming into me with hurricane force, and an oozing relentless sludge of negative spiritual energy pushed up from the earth in the shape of a hundred tentacles wrapping themselves around my defenses and they squeezed.

The ruby and silver torrents of energy faltered and as my defenses frayed I heard a voice speak directly into my mind.

"I'm with you daughter do not despair."

I clung to that fragment of hope and focused on defending myself with every spark of power and all of my will. I threw my defiance at this monster who murdered and hurt nearly everyone I loved. I knew that in the end I was doomed and in that moment I didn't care.

"NOW" Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal, Queen of the Sylvari Elves, voice broke through the thunder that surrounded me.

The roar of power and the buzz of a great ward activating made me falter as it severed me from one of the sources of power that was keeping me alive. I'd have been killed in the next instant except that Ambrose stopped.

I could see him floating several feet off the ground his pale muscular body clothed only in the shadows that swarmed like a school of fish around him. Purple energy flickered across his skin and a set of razor sharp barbs protruded from the backs of his

forearms and calves. He no longer looked human or elven. His gaze was focused above me and to my right so I looked to see what had distracted him.

The Great Circle had been activated each pillar of white marble glowed with a silvery white light creating a circle about a hundred feet across. The circle blazed with a silver power tinged with emerald and at each cardinal point stood an Elven Wizard. Hovering over the circle Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal had returned to her Elven form and at her side floated Princess Glandor-in-Aradiliel and my mother. In Queen Turethiel's right hand she held a complex looking ball of twisted metal and crystal and that glowed brightly with the Queen's signature silveremerald power.

"EALOREN AXORE VOTRI RAZI ACHASBAUGLIR" I bind thee!

Some instinct told me that as badly as I wanted to kill Ambrose my best chance to survive the next few minutes was to move away and remain as unnoticed as possible. I was still mostly full of the magical energy I'd been channeling but without my connection to the Ley-Line stone I wouldn't have any more power. The Queen and her court wizards had very skillfully brought up a circle whose function was to cut those of us within the circle off from any external sources of magic. It also prevented beings without a material body from escaping which I suspected was her primary focus.

In response to the Queen Ambrose started laughing. It was that same strange voice filled with malice and power that echoed around the circle like a living thing.

"EALOREN AXORE VOTRI RAZI ACHASBAUGLIR, BRINGER OF DARKNESS, LORD OF SHADOW, I BIND THEE!

The power of the Queen's magic blazed into the night and I realized that she probably could have dealt with her rebellious son/daughter in minutes. Instead she'd been waiting for this moment to reveal her true power. As mighty as she was her spell was being assisted and augmented by the four Elven wizards who were in turn drawing power up from the ley line.

"PITIFUL ELF, YOU DARE TO PIT YOUR POWER AND WILL AGAINST MINE?"

The creature who possessed Ambrose said in that same alien voice so loudly that I now that I had to cover my ears for fear of losing my hearing.

"I WAS HERE WHEN THIS REALM WAS ONLY A THOUGHT IN THE SEA OF CHAOS! I WAS HERE WHEN YOUR ANCESTORS OPENED THE FIRST GATE AND STUMBLED NAKED INTO THIS REALM DESPERATE FOR A SANCTUARY. YOU ARE NOTHING MORE THAN AN INSECT TO ME!"

Then it threw enough shadowy power at the Queen to make our fight look like a leisurely warm up. At the same time it sent shadows flying around the circle looking for a flaw in the spell. It sought the slightest opening, anything that it could exploit,

and it found nothing. Then I felt it focus its will directly upon the Queen, it sought to overthrow her will, take control of her mind, and force her to open the trap.

The trap that Queen Turethiel had set was a thing of beauty. I'd just realized that my mother and the new Princess were also linked to the Queen contributing their power to the spell. She had arranged for every advantage, the circle, the conjunction of ley lines, and seven magic users or Elven wizards all linked and assisting with the spell, combining magic, spirit, and will into one focused working directed by Queen Turethiel.

As I saw all of this I recognized that she was the capstone, the one point in the trap where monster out of Chaos had a chance. The only way it would be able to escape would be via a contest of wills with the Queen. It had to dominate her mind and force her to release it.

I could feel the power in the air as the two of them focused on each other.

"EALOREN AXORE VOTRI RAZI ACHASBAUGLIR, DUKE OF CHAOS, MASTER OF SOULS," the tension grew with each word and the creature occupying Galohond's body froze its gaze locked on the Queen. Everything else had dwindled to insignificance and time stood still.

"I

BIND

THEE!"

"NOOooo. . . ."

The darkness swirled up and away from Galohond's body. Within the darkness a glowing image floated, a disembodied face glowing with red and purple power. A face I'd seen on a zombie, a face that I'd seen in pictures, the true face of Ambrose Grosvenor floated within the cloud of darkness. The inky vapor flowed up and into a vortex being generated from the metal ball in the Queen's hand. For several seconds the creature fought the pull and finally it was sucked in with a snapping sound and the clap of thunder.

For a moment the silence was loud. Then the Wizards holding great circle spell dropped it and I felt my connection to the ley line stone return.

I looked around the field and was astonished by the number of casualties. In my mind the fight had lasted only a few minutes and yet there were so many dead or injured. I looked at the limp body of Galohond and even at this distance I could tell that it was alive and that it was nothing more than an empty shell. No soul occupied that body. My mother landed next to Galohond and using a hand encased in a rune

covered gauntlet picked up the Athame of Tartarus and dropped it into a specially designed box.

I suddenly felt light headed, the world spun around, and I dropped to the ground for the first time in several minutes. I wobbled on unsteady legs and then allowed myself to fall into the sweet darkness of oblivion.

# CHAPTER 10

For once I woke up without the obnoxious sound of an alarm or a phone going off. Sunlight streamed in through the curtains of my room at the Donegal estate in St. Louis. For several seconds the sheer normality of the situation made me think that everything that I remembered from the last several days was nothing more than an overly detailed nightmare. I reached out for Edgar and found a hole in my spirit where my bond with Edgar used to be. I couldn't stop my eyes from aching yet no tears came. After a few minutes of just lying there watching my ceiling fan I lifted my right hand up and saw the scar on my palm. It was a perfect circle in the center of my hand and when I turned my hand over I saw a matching scar on the back of it. I let my hand fall to the covers and looked out the window. It was all true. Edgar was dead, Galohond, my lover was dead even though his body remained, and for a moment I didn't think I'd have the strength to get out of bed. I'd just discovered that I was in love, only to have that person taken from me.

I don't know how long I lay there but at last couldn't just stay in bed so I got shakily to my feet. I felt like I'd aged twenty years as I stumbled to the bathroom. As I did I realized I was wearing my favorite silk pajamas and wondered how I'd ended up in them. I turned the light on to the bathroom and looked in the mirror and felt a shock run through my system.

The raven haired girl I'd become familiar with was gone. My face was still the same, pale skin, high cheek bones, and a delicate nose, but my hair had turned a deep dark shade of red with a single thick streak of silver white hair descended from my right temple. As I looked closer I noticed that my eyes had changed, from the bluest eyes I'd ever seen, to a pale almost metallic silver color. After a few minutes I decided that I still looked human, and that I was still a beauty. To anyone who knew the signs it would be obvious that I'd been touched by deep magic. Whatever it was that had

happened to me in that circle, I'd been changed and I'd been marked there was no mistaking it.

I made a conscious effort to distract myself by doing the normal familiar task of getting cleaned up. The hot water massaging my shoulders and back felt blissfully good and I stayed in until my skin started to wrinkle. I skipped make up and set about the task of drying my hair with a blow drier, I had no desire to touch any magic at the moment. Next I picked out some comfortable clothes, a t-shirt and sweat pants, and then headed down to the kitchen. I was half-way to the kitchen when a wave of nausea hit me and I hurried into the hall bathroom and spent the next twenty minutes being sick. When I felt well enough to leave the bathroom I rinsed my mouth and continued to the kitchen. Since I've been Morgana I've never gotten sick so I wondered if this was the first sign of the flu. I didn't think I was premenstrual because I wasn't due for another ten days and besides my period didn't make me nauseous. At the moment I didn't think my stomach could handle food so I set about fixing a cup of tea. I was just about ready to take a sip when I heard a noise from the doorway.

"Oh, honey, are you okay?" Chelsea asked.

I turned to look at her and felt a strong sense of affection. Chelsea was like a combination second mother older sister to me and the concern in her face was touching. I barely had time to set my tea down before she wrapped her arms around me in a warm hug.

"No, but I will be," I whispered.

After a few minutes she pushed back and looked at me. She was obviously worried about me and she reached out and brushed a lock of red hair out of my eyes.

"Dear, your mother is taking his breakfast on the back patio. It's unusually warm this morning so he decided to take advantage and enjoy the weather," Chelsea said.

On a hunch I asked. "What day is it?"

Chelsea hesitated for a minute before she answered. "It's Friday, you slept all day yesterday."

"I see," I said softly and then picked up my tea and headed out to find my mother.

It didn't take long to find Mor. He was sitting on the back patio enjoying a cup of coffee and the smell of breakfast caused me to remember that I was hungry, my nausea forgotten. He must have heard me approach because he looked up and then got quickly to his feet.

"Morgana, how are you feeling?" he asked.

"Tired, drained, and a little ache, I think I'll live," I replied.



I sat down without waiting and looked over at the food on the table. Chelsea had made more than enough food for Mor. He had bacon, eggs, hash-browns, ham, pancakes, fruit, and toast sitting on plates scattered about the table. I didn't wait to be invited to eat; I just started piling food on an empty plate. My mother watched me for several minutes obviously content to let me occupy myself with my meal. When I'd finished my cup of tea, he offered me coffee, which I accepted.

Once I'd settled back into a chair with my coffee he looked me in the eye. "I know that you've got questions. Would you wait a few minutes for answers and fill me in on what happened to you after I left you with the guy I thought was Galohond?" he asked.

This sharing of information was a game that I'd played with my mother many times over the years and he usually insisted that I tell him my side of the story first. Today was no different, which in a perverse way was comfortable and reassuring to me. I didn't waste any time explaining to him what had happened. Once I'd finished he sat there thinking quietly. By this time I'd drained my cup of coffee so I helped myself to a refill and waited. Usually when we were getting caught up I was impatient to get his side of the story at the moment I was content to not have to think. I still felt strangely disconnected from the events in Summer and I didn't want to look too closely at my emotions afraid of what I'd find.

"Would you like to know what happened after you left me?" he asked.

At my nod he launched into his story. Apparently he'd gone to the human realm only long enough to deliver the news of the events in Summer to Grand Master Beck and then returned to find COL Black. The guild forces couldn't remain in Summer for long and with the ward going back up they needed to get to one of the places where they could part the veil. My message had stunned my mother. He went at once with COL Black to see Queen Turethiel and had been surprised when she was already mobilizing her house guards to assault Balchamon's hill. This was the place where Ambrose had taken me.

Queen Turethiel Isilidhrindal is no fool and had evidently been playing a deeper game. It had become obvious to her that this was not a normal insurrection when the forces attacking her realm included warriors and agents from the chaos wastes. Then when I explained my theories on Ambrose and his desire to ascend through the use of a great rite she became sure that it was all connected. The last clue that Turethiel had needed was the information about Ambrose moving his soul into my mother's body and the Great Ones ability to move the souls of captured nobles into the bodies of peasants. She was sure that it was all connected and that Ealoren Axore Votri Razi Achasbauglir a Duke of Chaos, Lord of Shadows, and Master of souls was involved. He

was a long time enemy of the Sylvari Elves and every ruler of Summer knew that protecting the realm from him was one of their most important duties. If he was involved then this was the direst threat to the realm since the 2nd Chaos War.

Still she hadn't been certain until Princess Aradiliel-in-Glandor's body had attempted to usurp the throne. During the fighting Queen Turethiel had gotten the full story out of Prince Glandor-in-Aradiliel and she knew then what the realm faced. After the immediate threat from the army of Aradiliel-in-Glandor had passed she went to the royal vault in the palace and removed the prison that her Grandfather had crafted for Achasbauglir, Duke of Chaos. Achasbauglir has been peril to Summer for a millennium and the royal family had taken steps to prepare to fight him.

Once they'd arrived at the scene of the ritual the Queen could feel Achasbauglir's presence only it was very faint. If she wanted to rid the realm of the threat posed by the Chaos Lord she needed to draw him more fully into the realm. The force had assaulted Ambrose men and the battle ensued. The Queen had expected to have to personally fight Ambrose to draw out the being she suspected was possessing and using Ambrose. Her fight with her son had been a ruse to buy time and coax Achasbauglir more fully into Summer.

She'd been surprised at my battle with Ambrose. In all elven lore never had anyone much less a human in Summer stood toe to toe with a Lord of Chaos. The Elves have had success in battling Achasbauglir, it normally took seven nobles working together to defeat him. The time that I'd bought her had enabled her to set the trap.

When my mother finished talking I sat there feeling stunned. I felt betrayed even though I knew better. It seemed like both friends and foe's had agenda's and I'd just been a pawn in a greater game. At this my mother reached out and touched my red hair.

"Something happened to you during your trial," he said.

I nodded. "Yes, I don't understand it."

"After everything you've been through I'd be surprised if you did. Take your time; life will get back to normal," he said.

"Did any of the rebels get away?" I asked.

"At the ritual site?" he asked. When I nodded he continued. "Only Princess Aradiliel-in-Glandor. When the Queen revealed her true strength he fled as fast as his wings could carry him. Don't worry the royal guards are hunting him. It won't be long before his mother has him in custody."

I looked away feeling empty at the news. I'd heard that same line once before only it had been Ambrose who'd been fleeing and the Guild who'd been hunting. Perhaps the Queen and her guards would have better success.

"What about the fake CPT Gunning and your old friend Gwendolyn?" I asked.

"Both were captured. The Hounds have taken custody of both of them, they will be tried in a classified trial, and after that most likely sent to one of the Guild's maximum security prisons," he replied.

"There was a female vampire, named Monique, do you know what happened to her? She was one of Ambrose's senior lieutenants," I said.

At this Mor shook his head. "I don't know for sure. There were several human werewolves and vampires captured or killed. I didn't see anything in the reports or in talking with COL Black about a Monique. But I wasn't looking for someone with that name either. I doubt she escaped," he said.

After that I sat there quietly looking out at the garden and the trees that surrounded the property. Fall was here and the colors of the trees were truly beautiful. It felt wrong, how could the world be full of beauty when I felt so empty. I was missing two of the most important people in my life their absence hurt. It just wasn't fair. Mor interrupted my thoughts.

"Do you know why Ambrose killed Edgar?"

For a second I froze and then I relaxed. "Ambrose killed him, because Edgar was my familiar and Ambrose wanted to take away all of my sources to power," I answered.

"In part, that's true, there's more to it though. Ambrose like most powerful Magic-Users discounted the strength and the assistance a familiar offers their Magic-User. Instead he could only see the weakness. The fact that the bond ties the Magic-User to the familiar just as the familiar is tied to the Magic-User. If a Magic-User dies the familiar usually either becomes catatonic and dies or goes feral and must be put down. The Magic-User also suffers when his or her familiar dies, as a human we are better equipped to deal with the pain and it's not just grief. A part of your spirit was damaged when Edgar was killed and this made you more susceptible to emotions like despair and to spiritual influences. Ambrose wanted you crippled emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically so that you wouldn't be able to resist during the ceremony. He underestimated you," he said.

I looked at my mother meeting his eyes and knew that he was right. Edgar had died because Ambrose saw it as an effective way to attack me.

"What about Galohond?" I whispered.

Now it was Mor's turn to look away for a few seconds. "Morgana, I'm sorry. He's gone. I think Ambrose told you the truth when he said that taking Galohond's body wasn't planned. I think that he came to the fake ritual site with the intention of swapping into a different body. A body that would let him get close to you was just luck and an opportunity he couldn't pass up," he said.

I waited until I was sure my voice would be steady to reply. "I think you're right. He didn't have any idea that we were lovers. If he had known he'd probably have captured me sooner." I paused to make sure I had my emotions in check.

"What,...what are they going to do with Galohond's body?" I asked.

Mor took a sip of coffee before responding. "Queen Turethiel has the three crystals that held the souls of the slain elves. The best we were able to determine was which crystals held Elven souls and which ones held Human souls. She thinks she knows a spell that would allow the soul in the crystal to enter Galohond's body and plans cast the spell tonight. She won't know which elf got the body until he wakes up."

"What about the human souls?" I asked.

"Grand Master Beck has them. At the moment it's a problem without a solution. Their bodies are gone and we don't have a soulless body sitting around so for the moment they will stay where they are," he said.

"There is one thing I still don't understand about the rite, how is it that it corrupted the ley-lines?" I asked.

"That was actually a clue that we missed. Ambrose was drawing on the power of Achasbauglir and it was his power you felt. Oh, the Guild checked each of the sites in the human realm yesterday and the taint is gone," he said.

After that we sat in silence for a while then he excused himself. After Mor had left I continued to sit trying my best not to think. Chelsea came out and cleared away the food and brought me another pot of coffee. Once I'd had my fill of sitting I got up and decided to go for a run. My wounds had somehow been healed during my fight including my leg. Because of my wound I hadn't worked out for several days. I didn't push myself but the exercise was therapeutic.

After a late lunch I spent most of the rest of the day reading. My mother found me in the library and walked over to me pausing briefly before he spoke.

"I just got a message via the message crystal. Queen Turethiel has invited both of us to Summer as her guests next week. Can I tell her that we will both attend?"

I looked up from the grimoire I'd been reading and thought for a second.

"I missed most of my classes this week. I don't want to get too far behind. What day next week is she talking about?" I asked.

"Morgana, you already have a degree and you passed all of your current class's years ago. In fact you could probably teach a couple of the classes you're currently taking. A few more days won't hurt your grades," he said sounding irritated.

"Fine I'll go," I said, "I'd like to be alone."

My mother's face softened and he turned to leave. After taking a step he paused and looked back at me over his shoulder.

"I got an e-mail from your brother. He's finished defending his dissertation. He also finished his trials. He will be awarded his Ph.D. in Magic this December and he's been certified a Magic-User Master Class. He plans to move back home and will be here for Christmas. The Guild here in St. Louis has offered him a position and he will interview for a teaching job at the Academy of Magic as well."

When I didn't say anything Mor left. I didn't really know how I felt about this news. On the one hand it would be weird having him home. It would also be nice since I wouldn't have to fulfill my mother's responsibilities at the Guild. Anthony and I hadn't had much in common before he'd left to study abroad. The weird thing was now that I was Morgana Livingstone I was probably as strong or stronger in magic than he was. I banished my brother from my mind and focused on what I'd been reading.

\* \* \*

Moon light filled the area behind our garden. The circle of smooth stone was exactly the right size for tonight's summoning. I'd been careful as I'd drawn the three circles and prepared the spell I'd used twice before. When I dropped my robe I felt the cold air bit into my naked skin interestingly the cold didn't bother me. I was only slightly startled to feel a fire burning under my skin that more than kept the cold at bay.

I stepped into the circle I'd use for the summoning and faced the other lesser circle.

"Procellarum Oceanus servant of Luna I summon thee," I said pouring my will and power into my words and was startled to see a silver glow cover my skin. The night felt quiet and the light of the moon was as bright as day to me.

I opened my mouth to speak the Procellarum's name a second time when a dot of silver light filled the other lesser circle. In the next second Procellarum stood there facing me. I had to swallow twice before I found my voice. Spirits with the power that Procellarum had never appear the first their true name is used, a Magic-User always had to speak the spirits true name three times.

"You've changed," I said.

Procellarum was still naked with skin of silver and an alien quality about her. But now her hair was as black as midnight and her face was identical to my own.

"Yes daughter, I have," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"My mistress, Luna, has instructed me to answer your questions tonight. I can only answer thrice," she said, "You must be more specific if you don't intend to waste the goddess's gift."

"Why do you look like me?" I said not even thinking about the original reason I'd summoned her tonight.

"I drank deeply of your power and used the bond created thus to find you in your time of need and assist you," she said. "I merged my spirit so deeply with yours that we have both been affected, my physical changed is simply a visible sign of our bond."

It took me several seconds to process what she'd said.

"When I was in Summer and fighting the Duke of Chaos you helped me," I said.

At this she just looked at me with a small smile and I realized that I'd made a statement instead of asking a question.

"Why did you help me?" I asked.

"Ah, that is simple. Luna ordered me too."

Before I could complain that her explanation left something to be desired she continued.

"Luna has long had a score to settle with that particular Chaos Lord and you've served her interests well in the past. It was a choice to support a friend and ally while taking advantage of an opportunity for vengeance. You first came to Luna as a maiden and she helped you. Now as a mother she was once again able to offer you her help. Perhaps one day she will again be free to act in her third and final aspect, the crone," Procellarum said.

I thought about that for several seconds and it made sense. Beings like Luna had to follow obscure rules and were very much constrained when it came to directly interfering in the realms of mortals. I hadn't known that Luna was limited to assisting only three times and that the woman receiving the assistance had to reflect one of her aspects, the maiden, the mother, and the crone. While I struggled with my thoughts Procellarum waited patiently.

"What happened to me, to my body, why have I changed, what does it mean?" I asked trying to make three questions fit into one.

For a long moment Procellarum was quiet. "Daughter, I am afraid I can't answer that question completely. Just as I was marked because I joined my spirit and power to yours, so too were you marked. You will find that you are even more attuned to the phases of the moon and celestial bodies. You will not need to expend as much power to summon me or one of my sisters and we will be more likely to help you in times of need." At this she looked up at the moon, still nearly full, and paused. To me it seemed like she was communicating with someone. At last she looked back over at me.

"There was another spirit within you by the time I joined your battle. I sensed powers of earth, fire, metal, water, wood, and air. But the most dominate of the six elements was fire. I didn't recognize the spirit and I don't know how it came to help you. I can only say that it also left its mark." She seemed troubled by this news and wanted to tell me more but I could recognize the signs. She was being prevented for further speculation by another power.

"Morgana, you have done our mistress proud, rest, grow, and find what peace you may," she said.

With that she vanished. I spent the next few minutes getting dressed and removing all traces of the spell I'd cast. I wasn't sure what the future held but I'd made a few decisions. First I was moving off the property. I needed space and I wanted to focus on my consulting business and independence. Second even though Ambrose had stirred up the lesser talents and then used them to create a cover of chaos for him to hide behind. They had a legitimate complaint. I planned to see what I could do to assist them in getting equal access to education and magical training from the guild. Lastly Procellarum had said something about serving the aspect of the mother. While I was admittedly no longer a virgin I wasn't a mother.

Abruptly I stopped, I felt the color drain from my face and put my right hand over my stomach. I directed a questing into my womb and after a second I felt a spark and the energy bounced back. My knees went weak for a second and I nearly slid to the ground. I'd need to go see a doctor to be sure, only I didn't doubt for a second what my spell had just told me. I'm pregnant.

THE END

## *Reading Order*

### *The Consultant Trilogy*

*"The Security Consultant"*

*"The Consultant and The Mask"*

*"The Consultant and The Hounds of Heaven"*

### *The Bounty Hunter Trilogy*

*"Bounty Hunters"*

*Bounty Hunters II, "Family Reunion"*

*Bounty Hunters III, "Silas Revenge"*

### *Stand Alone Stories:*

*"The Physical Adept"*

*Order and Chaos - The War Eternal: "Small Wars"*

### *The League of Assassins Trilogy*

*Book I: "The Way of Vengeance"*

*Book II: "The Way of Knowledge"*

*Book III: "The Way of Power" (Still in work)*