QUICK SILVER

A novel by

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Chapter 1.

“The rush of excitement”

Taking something that doesn’t belong to you is a time-honored tradition. Every living thing does it in some way or another. But if the owner objects to having the item taken, it’s called stealing.

I steal things. I don’t do it because I need the money. I don’t do it to correct any social injustice. I do it because I like to steal.

It’s not about the treasure, it’s about the process. Nothing else in life is more exciting and nothing makes me feel more alive than gambling with my freedom and escaping undetected. That’s the real reward for pulling off the perfect theft. The item itself is mainly just a reminder, a trophy to hold in my hand after the victory.

Although I have to admit...I like rare and expensive trophies.

My name is Sylvester Larcini, and I am a kleptomaniac.

I discovered my taste for stealing at the ripe young age of seven. I walked to a local bookstore with my allowance, intending to buy a comic book, but somewhere along the way the money must have fallen out of my pocket. I could have just returned home and asked my mother for more--she would have understood--but I was too mad at myself for losing my allowance.

I decided to take the comic without paying for it. With my seven-year-old logic I figured it would be okay, since I would be out the money either way. When the store manager turned away, I grabbed a comic book and slipped it under my shirt and down the front of my pants.

The rush of excitement I felt was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It was like Christmas and Halloween and my birthday all rolled into one. I thought the manager would hear my heart pounding in my chest. But he noticed nothing. Nobody saw anything. I got away scot-free.

Over time, I perfected the technique. I found I could suck in my stomach and tuck several books into my waistband without them showing through my shirt. I never wanted for reading material, although I had to keep my stash hidden among some old books in the attic where my parents never looked.

One day I spotted a manual on lock-picking techniques in a used bookstore. I took it. Before I even finished reading the manual, my interest in comics was gone. Lock-

picking was secret, forbidden knowledge not meant for a young boy like me...and I found it irresistible. I studied that manual until it fell apart. I even created my own lock-pick set by filing down pieces of scrap metal. I practiced on bike locks, padlocks, my home's door locks and any other locks I could get my hands on, until I could open them all within seconds.

Then one night I watched the musical *Oliver!* on TV and became fascinated by the pickpocketing scenes. I started teaching myself how to pick pockets by surreptitiously planting items on friends and family members and then removing them. At first they often caught me, despite the deftness with sleight of hand I had developed from my shoplifting experience. But I always played it off as a harmless little game and nobody took it seriously. Everyone thought I soon grew out of that phase...but in reality I just became good enough that they never caught me anymore.

In my mid-teens, I chafed at not being able to drive legally, so I figured out how to steal cars and motorcycles for joyrides. Since I didn't have to pay for the vehicles or their repairs, I used them to practice tricky maneuvers like bootleg reverses and ramp jumps in abandoned parking lots. Not many of the vehicles made it back to their owners in one piece.

While I took the cars just for the thrill of it, I knew I would need to make a living soon. So I started

taking untraceable valuables I found in the cars and selling them at pawnshops. But when I found a place that would buy almost anything of value, no questions asked, I began regularly jacking the stereo systems from cars to sell after my joyrides.

It still wasn't enough to live on. However, the pawnshop owner knew a guy who ran a chop shop, and he paid well for premium vehicles. It didn't take long before the cars I took ended up never being returned to their owners at all. I even began breaking into secure homes and storage facilities to get at some of the more valuable vehicles.

I found particular satisfaction in breaking into buildings secured with alarms or guards. A successful burglary often requires a wide variety of different skills: lock picking, safecracking, stealth, security devices, repelling and fast driving, to name a few. The best missions were like solving an exhilarating, dangerous and intriguing puzzle that involved a quick mind and an agile body. I even spent a summer interning with a special effects company in order to learn how to disguise myself effectively, for those instances when looking the right part made it easier to gain access, or when there was a risk of being recognized. The sheer variety of options kept things interesting and challenging.

I ended up making a pretty good living for myself stealing cars and burglarizing upscale homes. Unfortunately, it didn't last.

The first time the police caught me, I was still just a teenager. Being new to burglary, I hadn't thought to check for dogs when I broke into a wealthy stockbroker's home. I didn't notice the Doberman until too late. It chased me into a closet and wouldn't let me out until the owner returned home. I didn't carry a weapon so there was nothing I could do.

Fortunately, since this was my first offense, the judge gave me the option to avoid jail time by enlisting in the military. I took it and joined the marines. The training was interesting, and I especially enjoyed learning to use a variety of weapons and earning my parachutist insignia. But the military and I rarely got along. As they say, there is no "i" in team, and I never was much of a team player. So I ended up spending a lot of time pulling extra duty assignments for questioning orders and generally doing things my way instead of the military way.

After my enlistment ended, I went back to my previous occupation. Only now I carried a handgun. At the time I regarded it as a handy catch-all alternative to carefully planning for unexpected contingencies. But the gun turned out to be a crutch; it made me lazy and overconfident and I took too many chances. When an angry security guard cornered me during a botched art heist, I learned what I

now call my twenty-fifth axiom of theft: Never pull a gun on someone you're not prepared to shoot. He called my bluff and opened fire. I took a bullet to the chest. Not only did I almost die, but the fact that I was carrying a firearm guaranteed I'd end up spending the next six years in prison.

That was my lowest point in life. Being stuck in a cell caused me to suffer daily panic attacks that made it hard to even breathe. I'd quietly cry myself to sleep each night and wake up drenched in sweat. Those six years felt like an eternity, and when I got out I knew I could never survive another prison sentence. That meant giving up the risk of capture...which meant no more stealing. I would have to get a real job. What a depressing thought.

Then my parole officer took an interest in me. Strangely enough, she and I hit it off from the moment we met. Eventually I came to trust her enough to tell her about my past exploits, and I shared with her my need to steal and my despair of giving it up for a legitimate job. I'd thought she might recommend something sad and tedious, like therapy or rehab, but instead she surprised me by suggesting I become a security systems specialist.

What a brilliant solution! It turned my background from a liability into an asset. The work gave me the opportunity to test new security systems as soon as they reached the market, and--more importantly--it included

staging mock robberies and live exercises for clients. They paid me to steal from them!

And I excelled at my job, too. Just a year ago, I made my most spectacular break-in ever. To avoid cameras and armed guards on the ground, I made a night parachute jump from a rental Cessna onto the rooftop of the targeted building. I then picked two locks to gain entry, held up a bed sheet to walk undetected past an ultrasonic motion sensor, and used a hidden digital voice recorder to distract a guard from his post. I made my escape with four pieces of antique jewelry worth almost a hundred thousand dollars *each*. Of course, I had to give them back, which left me with no trophy and sucked half the fun out of my victory. But I still treasure the memory.

Failure on these exercises was considered a good thing, with disappointment being my worst penalty for being caught. That didn’t help the exhilaration factor...but with a little imagination, sometimes the missions could still feel almost real. And I always imagined the job was training me to become a better thief. I just never actually put it to the test.

Until now.

Chapter 2.

"A trail of breadcrumbs"

I crouched down in the thick forest brush at the base of the stone wall surrounding the secluded estate. Despite the bright half moon and starry night sky, my black turtleneck sweater, black jeans, black boots, and thin black leather gloves helped me disappear in the shadows. A black ski mask rolled up like a watch cap hid my distinctively silver hair. When my hair color started changing back in my early thirties, my wife Dana teased me by shortening my first name to "Silver." The nickname stuck.

I unzipped my black backpack and removed a thick, juicy steak wrapped in plastic. I unwrapped the meat and tossed it over the wall. Then I blew several silent blasts on a dog whistle.

A moment later, I heard something crash through the brush on the other side of the wall, followed by a low growl. Then came sloppy chewing noises and toothy clicks.

I tugged the ski mask down to cover my face. My heart immediately beat quicker as that delicious flood of excitement washed through me.

The wall was fifteen feet tall--too high for me to scale by jumping, and too smooth for freestyle climbing. So I drew a collapsible grappling hook from my backpack. The device resembled a flashlight until I pushed a button on its side, and three rubber-padded hooks snapped open at one end. From the other end I drew out a thin nylon rope. The device was one of my own designs, something I developed for just these sorts of occasions. I gave the grappling hook a single swing and tossed it over the wall, then pulled it back until the hooks caught at the top. I scrambled up the rope.

I hauled myself up to perch on the top of the stone wall, squatting on the flat stone surface like a shadowy gargoyle. One of my knees creaked, which I ignored--I wasn’t about to have my evening spoiled by a reminder that I wasn’t quite as young as I used to be. Instead, I studied the grassy clearing and surrounding overgrown garden of leafy trees and bushes below me.

This was the first time I had actually seen the estate’s guard dog up close...and I realized right away it was no dog. It was a huge gray wolf. Someone had made a

bad security decision. Wolves rarely bark and they usually run away from strangers, which makes them lousy guard dogs. At best they just look intimidating.

Ever since my incident with the Doberman so long ago, I always took special care to check for and neutralize any guard animals before entering a premises. Dog or wolf, the xylazine-based sedative acted quickly, and the magnificent animal was already staggering drunkenly in the clearing. That it had eaten the steak didn't surprise me--just two nights ago I'd tossed untreated meat over the wall to make sure the animal hadn't been trained to accept food only from its handler. It had devoured the treat without hesitation.

While I waited for the sedative to take effect, I studied the grounds. Over a hundred yards straight ahead, in the center of the walled estate, stood the only building in sight: a huge, two-story Victorian mansion of weathered stone and wood. The unkempt garden grew right up to the building, and veins of ivy crawled up the mansion walls as if trying to reclaim it for the garden.

I used a pair of compact binoculars to peer through each window. Only darkness stared back. To the right of the building, near the front entrance, I spotted the wavering beam of a flashlight probing through the dense foliage. I'd watched the place enough times to know there should be four guards outside. I had no idea if there were any inside. There hadn't been any way to find out.

My job as a security systems specialist allowed me to develop contacts who had access to information about security measures installed almost anywhere in the Northeastern US and beyond. But not this place. The only reason I had even noticed it was because a couple months ago I took a wrong turn onto a little-used country road and drove by it. The estate appeared overgrown and neglected, yet two men wearing black suits and carrying MP5 submachine guns guarded the front gate. That sort of stuff piques my interest.

All I could find out about the place was that it belonged to a reclusive Mr. Sherman Lord, and supposedly he'd had an expensive biometric security system installed in his bedroom over a decade ago. I had no further details because the installation records had mysteriously disappeared. I suspected that was no accident.

What was Mister Lord hiding that required expensive security? My third axiom of theft is to always keep an eye out for new opportunities. So I installed a spycam in a tree just down the street to keep tabs on the front gate. Occasionally various vehicles passed through, usually at night. Most of them were black vans and SUVs--sometimes with government plates--but three of them were hearses. Yeah, that was too intriguing for me to ignore.

The wolf finally toppled over and hit the ground with an audible thud. Time to move.

An oak tree grew in the garden conveniently close to the wall. I collapsed the grappling hook and returned it to my backpack. Then I climbed down the tree into the wild garden below.

Thick, gnarled oaks, white birches, elms and maples grew randomly throughout the estate grounds. Untrimmed grasses, bushes and ferns spread unchecked under the trees. Moonlight filtering through the foliage cast dappled patterns on the ground. Despite the neglected landscaping, the garden appeared strangely beautiful and the air smelled wonderfully fresh, although it was as cold and silent as a morgue. It felt as if the whole place were holding its breath.

I realized I was breathing too quickly, my heart was pounding and my muscles were too tense. *Unprofessional*, I thought, deliberately slowing my breathing and forcing my body to relax. It had been twenty years since I'd done this for real. I'd forgotten how alive it made me feel.

Which was ironic. Because I was dying.

A month ago, doctors diagnosed me with stage four adenocarcinoma--cancer of glandular tissue. I'd ignored the slight discomfort in my chest for too long, and the cancer had metastasized. According to my oncologist, I probably had a few weeks left before the pain would become incapacitating...but for the time being, at least, I still felt fine. Apart from that minor ache in my chest.

And that's why I was here. I wanted to take advantage of the little time I had left. I wanted to feel that undiluted, primal rush for real again. I wanted to poke life in the eye one more time before my disease knocked me down for good. I smiled under the ski mask at my own morbid thoughts.

The wolf lay on its side, breathing deeply and drooling on the crushed grass beneath its head. The animal had enough sedative in its system to keep it snoozing for at least a couple of hours.

I reached down and scratched the furry beast between the ears. "Sweet dreams, Fido," I murmured. Up close the animal looked even more massive, bigger than any wolf I'd ever seen in a zoo or on TV.

The nearest path meandered through the foliage toward the mansion, and that's where I headed. The trees closed in overhead as I walked. Moving stealthily was easy; my night camouflage blended me into the shadows and the loamy soil felt as soft as cotton under my feet, absorbing all sound.

But I still felt unusually jittery, as if I'd had too much coffee. Had I really forgotten what it was like to put my freedom at risk? Or was I just nervous that I wouldn't measure up to the real-world expert I used to be?

My sense of unease increased as I approached a cracked and disused marble fountain partially covered with dead ivy

and a thick layer of dust. The figure under the withered vines looked like a deformed man tearing himself to shreds.

What kind of a person would own such a thing? I briefly wondered if perhaps I should have chosen a more conventional target...but I had to admit that the creepy statue only added to my curiosity about the enigmatic Sherman Lord.

Distractions can lead to mistakes, so I forced myself to focus on the job. I rounded the fountain and continued down the trail.

Most thieves don’t put much thought into planning their escape contingencies. I do. Thirty yards from the mansion, I crouched down and slipped off my backpack. I extracted a short length of black nylon cord and tied it tightly across the path between two trees at about shin level. The shadows made it effectively invisible. I looked around and took a mental picture of this section of the path. It wouldn’t do to forget it.

I then followed the path right up to the edge of the manor house. Here the vegetation thinned out somewhat. I moved into the shadow of the building and sidled up to the nearest window. Dusty white shutters stood fully open but the window itself was closed. Through the glass I could see it was also latched.

The foil strip of an old-fashioned sensitive-tape alarm system ran around the inside perimeter of each pane of glass. I inspected the window more closely, looking for

the magnetic contacts often associated with these security systems--when the window was opened, the magnets would separate and set off the alarm--but I didn't find any. I couldn't say I was impressed with whoever set up the security in this place. Steel bars would have been a more effective deterrent against anyone who made it past the wolf and armed guards.

I reached into my pack for my ATN PS15-4 night vision goggles. They resembled a pair of black binoculars with head and chin straps to allow hands-free operation, and they were a must-have for most of my missions. I fitted the device into place and lowered the lenses over my eyes. With the flick of a switch and a faint electronic whine, my view of the world turned a bright, ghostly green. Spotting deterrents would now be a whole lot easier.

I peered over the windowsill. No light shone in the room beyond, but the goggles clearly revealed a strange collection of furniture from different countries and ages. Fringed velvet curtains framing the window looked like something from Versailles. Five stained-glass lamps hung from chains attached to the high ceiling. An old Victorian love seat sat in one corner. Unfamiliar impressionist and abstract paintings hung on the walls, along with a 60-inch plasma television. A porcelain Chinese vase and a Greek urn sat on an ancient Egyptian table against one wall. An intricately patterned Afghan rug lay in the middle of the hardwood parquet floor. And on the rug stood a carved teak

desk that might have come from India, with a colonial leather chair behind it. The odd combination of furniture didn't fit together at all, but at least it suggested affluence.

I drew a glass cutter from my pack and pressed its rubber suction cup against the center of one window pane. I rotated the diamond tip around the cup with a few careful movements that sounded like light scratches on a chalkboard. A gentle tap with my gloved knuckle snapped the circle free. No cracks formed to break the electrical current flowing through the foil strip, so no alarm sounded. I reached through the hole, unlatched the window and lifted it open without a sound.

I couldn't help smiling to myself; less than half a minute and I was in. No, an old sensitive-tape security system wasn't much of a challenge, but this was the real thing, not just another exercise.

Keeping an eye out for tripwires, motion sensors, cameras and other deterrents, I slipped over the windowsill. The room inside felt warm and stuffy, and it was silent except for a faint ticking. I looked to my left and spotted an antique grandfather clock in the corner. It displayed the correct time, almost midnight. I closed the window behind me to leave it looking as undisturbed as possible.

The parquet floor didn't creak as I walked. I circled the Afghan rug, lifting the corners and checking underneath

for security systems. Finding nothing, I stepped up to the teak desk. I cautiously opened each drawer but found nothing more interesting than basic office supplies.

In the back of the room, a magnificent flight of stairs led up to the second floor. The steps and banisters were carved from beautifully veined, dark marble, and yet thick carpeting almost completely covered all the steps. The point of using such fancy marble was for show...so why hide half of it?

I used a pocketknife to pry up one corner of the carpet. Sure enough, there lay the pressure plate of a switch mat alarm system. So there *would* be interior security, besides just the biometric system. Finding interior security tends to deter most thieves, but it only encouraged me. More security usually means more reward. Of course, Sherman Lord could be just plain paranoid. To find out, all I had to do was follow the security measures like a trail of breadcrumbs. That’s axiom fourteen, by the way.

I didn’t bother trying to deactivate the switch mat. Instead, I straddled one of the wide banisters and used the thick supports to pull myself up the staircase.

The top of the stairs ended in a hallway running left and right, with a marble banister along the side overlooking the office below. I stepped down to the wood floor gingerly to make sure it wouldn’t creak.

To the right stood two open doors along one wall. I took a peek inside each and discovered two unoccupied bedrooms furnished with old-fashioned elegance, including antique four-poster beds. Since the biometric security system was supposedly installed in Mr. Lord's bedroom, and these looked like guest bedrooms, I ignored them and headed down the hallway to the left instead.

The corridor contained no furniture or artwork, just an old-fashioned steam heating radiator against the right wall across from the far end of the hallway banister. Ten feet beyond that, the hallway turned left and continued another twenty feet before ending at a single wood door. A thick carpet covered the last dozen feet of hallway leading up to the door.

Another inappropriate use of carpeting. I used my knife to pry up one corner. Sure enough, there lay another pressure plate. If you're trying to stop a thief who has made it past one of your security systems, does it make sense to have another of the same type further down the line? Mr. Lord could certainly have used my services.

I sat back on my heels and pondered how to reach the door at the other end of the four yards of carpet. Disabling the switch mat system would take time and there was always the risk of accidentally setting it off. Jumping over the switch mat would be too noisy, and I couldn't be sure the pressure plates didn't extend the entire length of the carpet.

The hallway walls stood only about three and a half feet apart, which gave me an idea. I removed my backpack and put it on backwards so that it hung down my front. Then I pressed my upper back against one wall and lifted my feet one at a time to press against the opposite wall, raising myself clear of the floor. By pushing hard against the walls with my upper back, arms and feet, I managed to slowly shuffle sideways over the carpet toward the door. The rough stucco wall dug into my back but it also added helpful traction.

Suddenly the house reverberated with a low bonging sound. I jerked involuntarily and slipped down the wall a few inches. The bonging sounded again. And again.

Quashing a rise of panic, I looked around for the electric eye or motion sensor I must have tripped, but saw nothing. I hung over the carpet, unsure whether to work my way back along the walls or just drop to the floor and run for it.

A thought suddenly occurred to me and I glanced at my watch. Midnight, of course! I would have kicked myself if I could. The grandfather clock downstairs was just striking twelve. Feeling foolish and shaking with unneeded adrenaline, I glanced at the door at the end of the carpet. If someone were to come through it now...

No sense in waiting for it. Sweat stung between my shoulder blades where the slide down the stucco wall had abraded my spine, and my legs trembled from the strain of

maintaining such an awkward position. Taking advantage of the continuing noisy chimes, I quickly shuffled along the walls to the door, willing it to remain closed.

The last echo of the chimes died away and silence filled the house in its wake. I cinched down the wall enough to bring the doorknob within easy reach, then grasped it and slowly turned it.

Locked. But at least no alarm rang.

Bracing myself between the walls with only my feet and upper back, I fished through the pack on my stomach for my lock picks. I then chose a slow feeler pick to avoid the noise of raking the lock. It took only a few seconds of nudging the tumblers into position as I twisted the torsion wrench before the lock clicked open.

With careful deliberation, I turned the doorknob and pushed lightly. The door opened a crack, and I gave a mental sigh of relief. Fortunately, Mr. Lord hadn’t seen fit to install a deadbolt.

I slowly pushed the door open a few inches. The air flowing out smelled humid and stale. I opened the door wider and peered inside. The room was smaller than I expected for a mansion master bedroom. A large antique canopy bed against the back wall dominated the room, with a shadowed bulge lying in its center.

Sherman Lord, I presumed.

A large Persian rug covered most of the floor, although not the area just inside the door. That allowed

me to step down into the room safely. Not that I had much choice; I couldn't have maintained that position much longer. With my back burning and quadriceps trembling, I sank gratefully to the floor. While it's true you can maintain full strength and endurance well beyond your thirties, recovery tends to suffer with age. I knew I'd be feeling this mission for the next few days.

I silently closed the door behind me. Almost silently. The latch gave a small click as it closed. The sleeping form gave a muffled snort, then sighed and stirred like an uncoiling snake.

I slipped off the backpack and scuttled like a cockroach to the foot of the bed. The bed creaked as Sherman Lord sat up, and I used the noise he made to cover my own sounds as I slipped under the dust ruffle. To my relief, there was plenty of room under the bed. I quietly dragged my backpack underneath behind me.

Then I lay still, listening intently as my heart pounded. Lord grumbled something unintelligible, and the bed creaked again as he lay back down. I slowly breathed out a sigh of relief.

I waited ten long minutes before quietly creeping out from under the bed. I stood and looked at Sherman Lord, who lay on his back under the covers. The amplified light through my night vision goggles gave him the appearance of a glowing, radioactive corpse. He was a large man with a thick neck, slab-like cheeks and dark hair receding up his

forehead. Although age lined his face, his features held the strength of weathered marble. An oddly carved stone pendant--like a distorted, upside-down letter A--hung on a thin cord around his neck.

I turned my attention to the rest of the room, but there wasn't much to see. There were two doorways in one wall, one of which stood open and I could see it led to a bathroom. Apart from the bed, the only other piece of furniture was an intricately carved rosewood table next to the bed. On it sat an old-fashioned rotary dial telephone from the '70s. I hadn't seen one of those in decades.

The center of the dial had a label insert with the phone number written on it, which I committed to memory as a matter of course. That's axiom nine: Always memorize any potentially useful information.

The table had a single drawer, which I quietly pulled open. Inside lay a booklet, some papers, pencils, paper clips and other junk. I might have ignored the booklet if not for the recognizable Wilson Security logo on the cover. Curious, I activated the night vision goggles' infrared illuminator, which provided a beam of light that was invisible to the naked eye yet allowed me to read clearly through the goggles. I flipped through the pages.

It was the operations manual for a Voiceguard RK-7, a high-priced but not particularly sophisticated voice-operated lock that had been discontinued years ago. So it

appeared Lord did indeed have a biometric security system. Excellent. But where was it?

On the last page of the booklet someone had written "PW = Open Sesame." Isn't that always the case? Give someone a fancy security system and they'll conveniently write the password down somewhere nearby. Still, it wouldn't do me any good unless I could match the voice pattern stored in the computer's memory. I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

But I had to wince at the choice of passwords. Open Sesame? Really, Sherm?

The RK-7 was nowhere in sight, so I returned the booklet to the drawer and crept over to the door near the bathroom. With infinite care, I turned the knob and pushed the door open just enough for me to slip through. I quietly shut it behind me.

This room was dark enough to require the infrared illuminator again. I switched it on and found myself standing in a large walk-in closet with plush carpeting. Along the wall on my right hung a large mirror over an antique dressing counter with nothing on it. Across from me stood a cabinet of drawers. And on my left the closet opened up into a room with racks of clothing covering all three walls. A low shelf held a couple dozen pairs of shoes.

Not exactly a bank vault but I figured it was worth a search. I checked the drawers first. Most just held socks

and underwear, but the top drawer was locked. Two rakes with a lock pick and it clicked open.

Inside the drawer I found only a single, unsealed envelope with no name or address on the front. Ignoring a twinge of disappointment, I shook out the letter and unfolded it. It read:

To Director Lord:

Phase 143 completed.

FBI director successfully replaced.

I blinked and read it again. Surely the "FBI" part stood for something other than the Federal Bureau of Investigation, right? But the "successfully replaced" part still sounded a little ominous. And what exactly was it that Sherman Lord directed?

Well, I wasn't here to decipher someone's mail, so I replaced the note and locked the drawer. Despite the content of the letter, I was beginning to suspect that maybe Mr. Lord was indeed just a paranoid recluse who installed security measures to defend himself against imaginary threats, rather than to protect any real valuables. But I'd yet to come across the RK-7.

I turned to search through the clothes rack, and discovered this was no ordinary wardrobe. The clothing consisted of an odd assortment of styles, ranging from a modern Italian business suit to a frilled lace shirt that

looked like something Mozart might have worn. I even discovered a long jacket of metal-studded leather and a pair of fur leggings! The shoes varied from new alligator skin dress shoes to well-worn, knee-high leather boots with brass buckles. Had Sherman Lord once been an actor? Or did he have some sort of fetish?

As I searched through the rack, the infrared beam shone past the clothes and reflected off something metallic against the back wall. I pushed the clothing aside, revealing a metal door just large enough for someone to step through. The solid steel door had no visible hinges or handle. Instead, built into the thick metal frame to the right of the door were a wire microphone grid, a button, and a small metal plate with “Voiceguard RK-7” engraved on it.

Ah, so here it was at last.

I thought for a moment, weighing my options, and settled on axiom fifteen: If you can’t get in alone, use someone else.

I moved the clothing back to conceal the metal door, putting everything back the way it was. I took a digital voice recorder from my pack, switched it to voice-activated record mode, and placed it out of view on an overhead shelf directly above the metal door. Then I parted the clothes on the opposite side of the closet, climbed through into the tight space behind them, and shifted the clothing back into place.

Axiom eighteen: Always carry a pre-paid, disposable cell phone. I produced one from a backpack pocket and dialed the number I'd seen on Sherman Lord's telephone. After two rings, he picked up.

"Mmph. What is it?" Despite having just woken up, he spoke with a smoothly precise voice. I couldn't place his accent--something Latin American or Spanish, perhaps?

I spoke with the exacting, overly annunciated voice of a professional recording: "Hello. This is an automated emergency alert for all registered owners of a Wilson Security Voiceguard R.K. series biometric authentication system."

"What?" Lord growled. "Who authorized you to call--"

"A programming issue could cause the password on your Voiceguard R.K. series system to automatically reset if not accessed by six a.m. Eastern Standard Time today. Please test your system as soon as possible to ensure this problem does not occur."

"Oh, bloody hell..."

"If you receive this message after six a.m., please contact our support department as soon as pos--"

He hung up. I returned the cell phone to my pack, and waited.

The closet door banged open and a light switched on. I listened as Lord stomped into the room and shoved the clothing away from the metal door. There was a faint click as he pressed the button on the RK-7.

"Open Sesame," he growled.

I heard a metallic click and the quiet hum of the door opening. Lord punched the button again, and the hum repeated as the door closed and the lock clunked back into place. He snarled and mumbled something I couldn't quite make out, then stomped out, switching off the light and slamming the closet door shut behind him.

After waiting a few minutes for Lord to settle down again, I crept out of my hiding place and recovered the digital voice recorder. I uncovered the metal door and played back the recording.

Although I wasn't concerned Lord would hear anything--the surrounding clothing and closed door provided sufficient soundproofing--I couldn't guarantee the fidelity of the recording would be adequate, even for this old voice-recognition system. So when the playback approached the part where Lord said "Open Sesame," I held my breath as I pushed the RK-7's button.

My concerns proved unfounded; the panel clicked and slid to the side with a soft hum. Light flooded in from the room beyond, so I slid the night vision goggles up onto my forehead and cautiously peered through the opening.

Numerous brass oil lamps suspended from chains hung from the ceiling. Their flickering flames filled the room with a warm yellow light. Brick walls supported arched wood beams in the high ceiling.

The room was divided into two sections that didn't belong together at all. The right half looked like an overused university chemistry lab, with heavy wood tables cluttered with beakers, test tubes, burners, crucibles, stills, flasks, etc. Strange liquids and powders filled the containers, some smoking, some bubbling, some just sitting there and looking about as appetizing as a fish milkshake. I noticed some medical equipment too, including a wide array of forceps, clamps and scalpels.

The left side of the room looked like an office at a wealthy law firm. Ceiling-high bookshelves lined all three walls, each filled with leather-bound books, piles of papers and stacks of rolled documents. An Afghan rug with simple patterning covered most of the stone floor, and upon it sat a tastefully arranged, old-fashioned office space with a heavy antique oak desk, plush leather chairs and even a potted ficus. In the wall behind the desk stood an ornately carved wooden door.

That looked promising, so I rounded the desk and inspected it. The door had dragons, griffins and sea serpents carved into the wood, and a wrought iron latch shaped like a snake. I tested the latch and found it unlocked, so I cautiously pulled the door open. A light automatically switched on in the room beyond and...

My jaw dropped as I stared at the impossible vision before me. Although the room was no bigger than Lord's

walk-in closet, the shelves lining the walls spilled over with treasures beyond anything I'd ever imagined.

On the shelf directly in front of me sat a polished walnut box filled to overflowing with precious stones, beautifully cut and glowing with liquid richness.

On the shelf directly below it, in velvet cases, lay rows of finely carved rings of precious metals, expertly embellished with multi-faceted gemstones.

On a rack of pegs to one side hung necklaces of superbly worked gold, platinum and silver, inset with glittering jewels.

Along an upper shelf, exquisitely detailed statuettes of jade, ivory, gold.

Draped on a pile of ancient gold doubloons, silk scarves woven with gold thread in gorgeous patterns and beaded with precious gems.

Hanging from hooks in the ceiling, strings of both creamy white and lustrous black pearls.

Pendants and clasps with iridescent, shimmering opals and polished silver--

Sparkling yellow diamonds--

Blood-red rubies--

Smoky blue sapphires--

Beautiful amber topazes--

Rich, gleaming emeralds...

My mind swam as if I'd just taken a blow to the head, and I stared at the obscene excess of wealth like the

proverbial kid in a candy store. This was a treasure straight out of the Arabian Nights, or the hoard of a *dragon*, or the riches of...of...

I shook my head, convinced this couldn't be real. Paste gemstones, maybe. Hell, even a hologram would be more believable.

I stepped into the room, tore off my gloves, and dug my fingers into the walnut box. Smooth gemstones caressed my hands with cool kisses. I snatched up a gold coin and bit it--the metal gave almost like sweet butter. My hands shaking, I dug a jeweler's lens out of my pack and carefully inspected several jewels at random. No blemishes and no visible inclusions...they were flawless. It was all real. *Real*! I couldn't decide whether to laugh, cry or run amok through the wealth....

Then a sudden realization hit me like a splash of ice water in the face: Someone who could afford to amass a collection like this would have little trouble mustering the resources to hunt me down. And I'd just put my fingerprints on handfuls of these treasures. What the hell was I thinking? I'd let a pile of shiny objects blow a fuse in my brain and then tossed my professionalism out the window. Never before in my life had I seen anywhere close to this much wealth, but that was no excuse. I was better than this.

Cursing myself, I pulled my gloves back on. Then I carefully collected up and added to the backpack all the

items I had so foolishly touched with my bare hands. Fortunately, there was still plenty of room left for more, so I turned my attention to the rest of the treasures. I'd originally envisioned taking just a trophy, some small reminder of my mission...but how could I pass up all *this*?

There was no way I could haul away more than a small fraction of this magnificence, so I told myself to take only the very best. Still, my pack filled up far too quickly. I even stuffed my pockets with loose gems and jewelry, padding them with wads of hundred-dollar bills I found in a silver cash box. I had almost all I could safely carry, yet I hadn't even made dent in this treasure hoard. Truly, not a dent.

And the top shelves still needed checking, so I climbed up and peered around. Among a dozen or so figurines, I found an intricate gold statuette of what looked like Bastet, the Egyptian cat goddess, which I thought looked especially nice. As I hefted it to decide whether it would be too heavy to take, I noticed in the back of the shelf a six-inch tall crystal statuette of a beautiful woman in a long, chemise-like dress. Even covered with dust as it was, the figure appeared surprisingly life-like.

I picked up the crystal statuette and blew some of the dust away. The attention to detail took my breath away--I could even see the woman's fingernails. I again produced my jeweler's lens and studied the artistry more carefully.

The detail didn’t just include the fingernails, but their moons and ridges as well, along with all the fine lines on the woman’s hands. I could even make out her individual eyelashes! Truly a masterpiece.

Curiously, the interior looked hazy, as if it contained a hollow space filled with a blue-gray smoke that appeared to flow and swirl as I turned the statuette.

I hesitated. The crystal looked too delicate to haul around in a backpack, and damaging it would be a worse crime than stealing it. But it belonged in a museum, not hidden away in the back of some dusty shelf. I wrestled with the decision as I gently wiped most of the remaining dust away. This was hands down the most beautiful piece here.

Nope, I couldn’t resist. I carefully wrapped the statuette in a silk scarf and placed it inside a zip top plastic bag from my backpack. I stuffed crumpled bills inside the bag to serve as additional padding, and when I zipped it shut I blew air in to inflate it for even more protection. Then I carefully tucked the bag into the top of the backpack where it would best survive any bouncing around. I had to leave out a jewel-encrusted silver gauntlet to fit it in, but so be it.

I returned to searching the upper shelf and noticed the statuette had been resting on a tan sheet of parchment. I picked it up and blew off the dust. The parchment was approximately twelve inches wide by eight inches tall.

Thousands of tiny little dots set in perfectly straight rows covered its smooth surface. The only unmarked area was a one-inch blank strip of white space running down the left and right sides.

I examined the rows with my jeweler's lens, and discovered that each of the minuscule dots was actually an incredibly detailed illustration resembling several Nordic runes drawn one on top of the other in multiple colors.

Where had Sherman Lord managed to find such amazing artwork? And why did he treat these treasures so carelessly? At the very least he could have slipped the parchment into a protective plastic sleeve.

Then I noticed a slight raggedness along the top and bottom edges of the parchment, as if the upper and lower thirds had been meticulously torn away. The damage to such an incredible piece of art made me wince...but what remained was still too unique and impressive not to take anyway. At least it didn't weigh anything or take up much space. And although the parchment appeared ancient and brittle, it rolled up easily. I tucked it safely into the backpack.

I hefted the now rather heavy load onto one shoulder and took one last look around. It broke my heart to leave so much of the treasure behind, but what could I do? At least I had packed away enough of it to fund a truly lavish retirement...well, if I were going to live long enough to retire. At least Dana would want for nothing.

I reluctantly bid the magnificent treasure hoard farewell and returned to the closet. I closed the metal door and hid it once again behind the clothing. Then I fit my night vision goggles back over my eyes and cautiously opened the door to the bedroom. Sherman Lord lay in his bed, his back to me. I crossed silently over to the door to the hallway and eased it open, climbed back up onto the wall, and closed and locked the door behind me. I crab-walked my way back over the carpet and stepped down to the wood floor on the other side. Then I headed around the corner toward the stairs.

Voices carried from downstairs. I froze in place and listened closely.

"Sorry to awaken you, Mister Godson." The man's voice was breathless and more than a little nervous. "But look...the window."

A gruff, professional voice--presumably Godson--replied, "Summon the guards. Secure the premises."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir. You want I should update Mister Lord?"

"I'll do it. Deactivate the alarm."

"Yes, sir."

I heard a brief series of electronic beeps, followed by the slap of bare feet on the parquet floor headed toward the stairs.

Axiom seven: For every plan to get in, have three to get out. Unfortunately, I had limited options right now--I

couldn’t go back and I couldn’t go forward. But I looked at the steam heating radiator on the left side of the hallway and the banister supports along the right...and I realized I could go *over*.

I yanked a length of black cord from my backpack and quickly tied it across the hallway at shin height between a banister support and the radiator. As long as no one turned on the lights, it would remain invisible in the shadows.

I slipped back around the corner and muffled my mouth with my hands to sound as if I were on the other side of the bedroom door. “Godson!” I called out, using a passable imitation of Lord’s voice. “Help me!”

The footsteps immediately pounded up the remaining steps and raced down the hallway. As soon as I heard the grunt of surprise and the heavy thud of a body hitting the ground, I sprinted around the corner.

I caught a glimpse of Godson sprawled across the floor at my feet. He looked a little taller than me, but more solidly muscled, and with dark hair trimmed in a crew cut. He wore only boxer shorts. He’d lost his grip on a large pistol, which slid across the floor past me.

I leaped over his prone form, landed just beyond his feet, hopped over my tripwire and raced for the stairs. I bounded down the steps in just a few strides and bolted for the window.

A tall, slim man in a black suit stood at the window, his back to me and a walkie-talkie at his ear. "Roger that," he said. "Continue the sweep." He heard my footsteps and turned--

Remember my axiom about using someone else to get you in? It also applies to getting you out. I slammed into the guard with my shoulder, and my momentum carried us both through the window in an explosion of shattered glass.

The collision tore the night vision goggles completely off my head, but at least the guard's body shielded me from the flying shards of glass. And when we crashed into the ground outside, his body absorbed the impact for me and, more importantly, my backpack.

I scrambled to my feet over the dazed guard, who lay gasping for air with the wind knocked out of him. The night vision goggles were nowhere in sight and I didn't have time to look for them. Fortunately, I'd never touched them with my bare hands, so at least I wouldn't leave any fingerprints behind. I sprinted off down the garden trail.

Two booming pistol reports echoed from inside the mansion. A bullet zipped by my ear and clipped a nearby tree branch. *Holy crap*, these guys weren't kidding around! Stifling an urge to panic, I glanced back in time to see the barely clothed Godson leap through the broken window. He fired another roaring shot in midair, then hit the ground and sprinted after me like a track star.

Acutely aware of the weight of my greed bouncing against my back and slowing me down, I summoned all my strength and forced my legs to move as fast as they could. As I headed around the first bend, I still had enough wits about me to remember this was where I'd tied the cord across the path, and I leaped over it. I continued running, and for a few seconds the only sounds were the thudding of my feet and my own labored breathing.

Then I heard a grunt and the crash of someone tumbling into the bushes behind me, followed by muffled swearing. Despite feeling as if my heart was going to explode, I couldn't help grinning. Axiom forty-six: Be prepared for anyone who's faster than you.

But then a moment later I heard the crunch of Godson's footsteps accelerating through the brush once again. I had hoped tripping twice would convince him to slow down and keep an eye out for further tripwires. Unfortunately, some people are just slow learners.

I dashed up to the creepy marble fountain. After all that had happened to me so far tonight, I didn't think anything could surprise me...but I was wrong. A woman sat on the edge of the fountain, her elbows on her knees and her head slumped. She had long, curly blonde hair and a well-toned body. She was also stark naked.

She slowly raised her head to look up at me as I ran by. She had a small round birthmark on her cheek, and she

gazed at me with heavy-lidded eyes. She stared right at me but showed no reaction at all.

Then I was past her and running toward the clearing, wondering what the hell I had just witnessed. No time to think about it. The wall loomed up before me and I angled toward the oak tree.

I scrambled up the tree to the top of the wall. From a pocket I drew a string of firecrackers, used a disposable lighter to light their fuse, and tossed them into a bush at the edge of the clearing.

As I did so, I noticed the wolf was gone. The animal's quick recovery meant it would likely suffer no serious aftereffects from the sedative, but it also meant I'd failed to calculate the right dosage. I'd have to look into that. Later.

Godson burst from the path into the clearing just as I jumped down the other side of the wall. I protected the stuffed backpack as I landed and rolled, but the jarring impact caused a spark of pain to shoot through my chest. It was my cancer letting me know it hadn't forgotten about me, but I had a more immediate threat to my life to deal with right now. I grimaced through the pain and struggled to sit up.

The firecrackers went off with furious popping noises. The explosions sounded remarkably like automatic gunfire--which was exactly how they'd been designed to sound.

Godson cursed and opened fire with his pistol, shooting up the garden. I glanced up at the bright flashes reflecting off the canopy of the tree I'd just climbed. Shot-up twigs and leaves fluttered down around me.

I'd bought myself some more time and I wasn't going to waste it. I hauled myself to my feet and dashed along the length of the wall, recovering more with each step. When I reached the empty, forest-lined road that passed in front of Sherman Lord's property, I turned and followed it away from the mansion.

The fireworks petered out, and a moment later I heard Godson call out an order to the guards from the top of the wall. I glanced back and saw the flicker of flashlight beams probing the shadows. But I'd opened up a wide enough lead on them and my car was just up ahead, hidden in the thick brush along the road.

My oncologist said I was unlucky, but he was wrong. My cancer was just happenstance. Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity...and that made me a lucky bastard indeed.

Chapter 3.

"Someone with a real taste for blood"

Godson stepped through the closet doorway leading to Sherman Lord's hidden office and laboratory. He still wore only his boxers, and he carried his big Desert Eagle .50 caliber pistol in one hand and a black plastic trash bag in the other. Dirt smudged his ruggedly handsome face. Several minor scratches marked his sharply defined arms and legs, and blood oozed from two shallow gouges on each shin. But the pain didn't bother him. It never did.

Lord stood on the office side of the room in the doorway to his treasure room, his back to Godson. He wore an expensive purple silk bathrobe and slippers. He stirred slightly as Godson approached his desk.

"He took the artifacts," Lord said softly. "Both of them." His voice would have sounded calm and collected to most people, but Godson could hear the constrained fury behind the words.

Lord turned his sharp gaze on Godson. “Where was your wolf?”

Godson shifted uncomfortably. “He disabled it.”

“How?”

“A sedative.”

“A sedative. Not poison, not a silenced bullet to the brain?”

“No, sir. He came prepared. This wasn’t some ordinary street thug.”

Lord glared at Godson. “He broke into this room and stole the two artifacts. Of course he was no ordinary street thug.” His frown deepened the age lines in his slab-like cheeks. “That telephone call from Wilson Security on my direct line. I should have known something was amiss.”

“Sir?”

Lord focused back on his muscular assistant. “You insisted the security was sufficient, Godson. You told me there was no need to waste energy on castings.”

Godson swallowed, but he knew better than to react defensively. “Yes, sir. But he left these behind.”

He dumped the contents of the plastic bag onto the desk: a pair of night vision goggles and the two black nylon cords that had tripped him. One of the cords still had a piece of skin from his shin stuck to it.

Lord's scowl transformed into a calculating smile. He stepped up to the desk and picked up the night vision goggles.

"Yes..." he murmured, lightly sliding a finger along one of the black metal tubes. "I can track where these have been."

"Send me to him. I'll tear his arms off for what he did." Godson clenched his fists, rippling the sinewy muscles in his forearms and causing his joints to pop.

Lord put down the goggles and shifted his gaze to Godson. "The priority is to retrieve the artifacts undamaged. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir, you do."

"Good. Once we have them secured, his arms and any other body parts are yours to do with as you see fit."

A grim smile touched Godson's lips. He pivoted on one heel and headed for the exit.

"Oh, and Godson..."

The muscular bodyguard hesitated. "Yes, sir?"

"You get one more try. Fail again and I shall send in someone with a real taste for blood."

Godson frowned. "Who?"

"My lawyer."

Chapter 4.

"No way I could ever tell her"

As my rally car approached my home, I touched the button on the remote to activate the garage door opener. I then sat and waited as the old garage door slowly clattered its way up, whining and groaning the whole way.

Dana and I bought our house eleven years ago. Despite Dana coming from old money, the house looked no different from the rest of the middle-class homes in the neighborhood. She refused to spend money she didn't earn herself, and long ago I developed a preference for maintaining a low profile--a basic survival strategy in my line of work. So we didn't live as ostentatiously as we could.

But I had to admit I was tired of waiting for that garage door opener to do its thing. And with the backpack beside me bulging with treasures probably worth hundreds of

millions, it seemed silly to continue putting up with the wheezing old device.

The garage door finally opened sufficiently for me to drive in and park. My rally car had an ugly flat black paint job, which looked incongruous sitting between Dana's shiny new white Ford SUV and my gleaming black-and-silver Suzuki Hayabusa motorcycle. But the ugly paint job made it easier to hide the car in the dark, a significant advantage in my line of work. And while I could have chosen a faster vehicle than the Subaru WRX STI, I found the rally car's agility and ability to handle rough surfaces at speed more useful for my purposes.

I picked up my overstuffed backpack from the seat beside me and climbed out. Not wanting to awaken Dana at this late hour, I waited for the noisy garage door to finish clattering back down before I entered the house.

I quietly slipped in through the door to the kitchen, which we'd recently furnished with new stainless steel appliances. Dana liked to cook, so I'd upgraded the kitchen for her birthday. A straight path ran from the garage door, through the kitchen, and down a long hallway where I could see the bedroom door standing open at the far end. Although I wanted nothing more than to dig into my backpack and examine my ill-gotten gains, Dana was a light sleeper. Now just wasn't the time. So I stashed my backpack in the back of the broom closet where Dana was unlikely to look, since I did most of the cleaning. I had

the day off tomorrow, so I would have plenty of time to inspect my newly acquired treasures at leisure.

I headed to the bedroom, my body still thrumming with excess energy. I still couldn't believe what had happened tonight. Talk about going out with a bang! I just hoped I could keep the grin off my face so my wife wouldn't get suspicious.

Dana lay asleep on her side of the bed. Yellow light from a lamp on the deck outside filtered through the gauzy curtains and lit the side of her face. Although she'd just turned thirty-eight, she had that kind of cute look that easily passed for ten years younger. Her pixie bob hairstyle only enhanced her youthful appearance.

As I gazed at her face, my sense of elation faded. There was no way I could ever tell her what I had done. When I asked her to marry me thirteen years ago, I made her a solemn promise that I would never steal...for real...ever again. I had to. Why? Well, remember that parole officer I connected with after my prison sentence? That was Dana.

I knew within two weeks of meeting her that I wanted to marry her, but I didn't think she would even consider getting involved with an ex-con. Still, I had to try, and I eventually mustered the nerve to ask her out. She said yes without hesitation.

A month later she took me to meet her parents at their family summer retreat, a lakeside cottage in upper New York. They never felt fully comfortable around me--

something Dana found perversely appealing--and I don't think I helped matters when I demonstrated for them all the ways a thief might break into their cottage. At least they did appreciate my list of suggestions for security improvements. That's what gave Dana the idea for me to become a security systems specialist. That same day she and I took a walk along the lake, and I asked her to marry me.

I sat on the edge of the bed to remove my boots, and Dana stirred. She blinked at me, her eyes muzzy with sleep.

"Hey Dana," I said softly. I leaned in and gave her a kiss.

"Hey Silver," she murmured back. She squinted at the clock. "Four-thirty?"

"Sorry. Troubleshooting a new system installation," I lied. "Picky client."

"Lucky you." She gave me a sympathetic smile, followed by a yawn. "I gotta be in early to prep. The new D.A. is a real snake."

I smiled back. "The crooks don't stand a chance against you, sweetie."

That was another reason I couldn't tell Dana what I'd done. She went through law school shortly after we were married, and since then she had developed a reputation as a relentless prosecutor. She'd made enemies who would just love to know what her husband had been up to tonight.

"Oh, your doctor called earlier," she murmured. "He wants you to call back. Something wrong?"

I pasted on a smile. "Uh, no, I just had a question about some vitamin supplements. Go to sleep."

"Night, Silver." She closed her eyes and rolled over.

No, I hadn't told her about my adenocarcinoma, either. I wasn't ready to tell anyone yet, not until I could no longer ignore its effects. Somehow not talking about it made it seem less real to me. But more than anything, I didn't want people giving me that look of pity. Especially not from Dana. So for now my illness would remain a secret too.

I shook my head to clear it. Enough morose introspection. Tonight was a night to celebrate...even if I could only do so in my mind. I finished undressing and crawled under the covers. I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling, replaying the night's events over and over in my head. I couldn't stop grinning.

Chapter 5.

"A hundred shards"

I ran down the garden trail almost in slow motion. My heart pounded in my chest and I gasped for air, but my legs would not move any faster.

Now. Godson is supposed to trip now! But I didn't hear him cry out and crash into the bushes behind me. In fact, I couldn't hear anything at all. I turned my head to look.

A figure in a hooded black cloak loomed up behind me. A bleached skull grinned at me from under the hood. Boney hands clenched a wicked-looking scythe with a notched blade stained with blood. The skeletal arms raised the ugly weapon, ready to strike...

#

I jerked and my eyes snapped open. I lay twisted up in the sheet, my skin sticky from sweat. Battered and bruised, my body ached in a dozen places, my muscles having

become stiff and sore from my adrenalin-fueled escape from Sherman Lord's mansion. The easier injuries and slower recovery times that come with aging suck, but right now that didn't bother me in the slightest. The soreness only served to remind me of the thrill of last night.

I rolled over and saw that Dana was already gone. Morning sunlight streamed through the sliding glass door that led to the porch.

Wait...only afternoon sun came from that direction. I rubbed my eyes to clear away the lingering traces of sleep, and glanced at the bedside clock. It read 4:05 p.m.

What the hell? I scrambled out of bed. Last night I'd laid awake savoring my memories for over two hours before exhaustion finally overcame me. But still, sleeping this long was ridiculous. I pulled on a pair of gym shorts and hurried to the kitchen.

Dana would be at work all day, but there wasn't a lot of day left, so I retrieved my backpack from the kitchen closet and headed into the living room. Native American, African and Australian artwork decorated the walls of the living room, and most of the furniture consisted of unique antiques that Dana enjoyed collecting. Included among them was an ornately carved bookshelf that extended the length of one wall in the living room. From it I selected several books on ancient artifacts, and brought them to the dining room table along with my backpack.

I took a seat at the table, eagerly looking forward to seeing that incredible statuette again. I unzipped the pack and carefully withdrew the plastic bag.

The bag remained sealed and full of air...but purple smoke swirled among the scarf and crumpled money I'd used for padding.

"Oh no..." I whispered. "No, no, no..."

I pulled open the bag and scooped out the scarf and money. The purple smoke floated out and dissipated, leaving a lavender scent in the air...and revealing a hundred shards of crystal lining the bottom of the bag.

For a moment I thought I would be violently ill. I stared in dismay at the bag of shattered crystal sitting on the table. *What have I done?* Had the statuette broken when I shoved that guard through the window? Or when I jumped down from the wall? Or had it not even survived the bouncing as I ran from Godson?

It didn't matter. I had destroyed the statuette and nothing could change that. Ashamed and disgusted with myself, I suddenly couldn't stand to be near the shattered remains. And with my joy ruined, I didn't even feel like looking at the other treasures. Not now. I stood up and walked out of the room.

#

I'd converted the basement of our house into an extensive home gym, complete with free weights, weight

machine, treadmill and exercise bike. I'd also hung up a heavy bag, which was the current focus of my attention.

I viciously struck the bag with my taped fists again and again, mixing it up with full-powered elbow strikes, knee strikes, shin kicks and other Thai boxing techniques I'd studied after I got out of the military. While I always preferred to run like hell when things went south, I studied various martial arts to serve as a last-ditch option in case I was ever cornered. I never gave it up because I enjoyed the workout.

Right now it seemed the best option for venting my frustration and anger with myself. How could I have been so stupid? I'd known the statuette was fragile, yet I'd taken it anyway, and my stupid greed had robbed the world of one of the most amazing pieces of art I'd ever seen. If I'd had any sense, I would have left it on the shelf where I'd found it. Better for it to remain intact in the hands of some creepy recluse than to have it in my hands as a pile of worthless crystal shards.

Panting from exhaustion, I gave the heavy bag a final switch-kick with my shin, then turned and headed upstairs. I'd get cleaned up, find something to eat, and then check out the rest of my loot. Maybe inspecting the other treasures would help me forget about the damage I'd done. As long as nothing else was broken....

I hadn't bathed since before the robbery, so I took a long, relaxing shower that did wonders to work the kinks

out of my muscles. Afterwards, as I sat on the edge of the bed pulling on jeans and socks, I looked out the sliding glass door and noted the sun hanging low in the sky. Dana would return home in probably another hour or so, which didn't give me much time to inventory my stolen goods.

A soft voice behind me said something like, "*Sultrién. Raláünch mas treviétha?*" The words were full of complex, whispery inflections I'd never heard before.

I jumped to my feet and turned to see a woman standing in the entrance to the hallway. She appeared to be about thirty, tall, with a willowy yet nicely curved physique. She wore a simple shift of some thin violet fabric that reached almost to her bare feet. Dark red hair hung down over her shoulders and halfway down her front, contrasting starkly with the porcelain paleness of her skin.

"Uh, hello?" I asked, wondering how she'd gotten in here and alarmed that I hadn't heard her approach.

The woman frowned. "*Meywrehéi niéste*," she said, stepping closer and peering at me with the most intense, pale blue eyes I'd ever seen. They reminded me of glacier ice. She frowned and cocked her head, as if possibly recognizing me from somewhere. I found her angular features intriguing, even attractive in a coldly regal sort of way. Something about her seemed vaguely familiar to me too. But if she was one of Dana's friends, I couldn't place her.

"Are you here to see Dana?" I asked. When she didn't respond right away, I added, "By the way, was the front door unlocked?"

"*Ashgárat softs mekásiká vin-tagránts Mähdríedd?*" she asked. She spoke with such complex inflections and intricately articulated words that I figured I'd probably sprain my tongue if I tried to pronounce them.

"I'm sorry, do you speak English?"

"Auvérns may 'ínglesh'?"

"Terrific." I spoke Spanish passably well and even a little German, so I tried, "*¿Habla usted español?*" and "*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*" No response. So I tried some languages I couldn't speak but at least knew enough to recognize: "*Parlez-vous français? Fala português? Italiano? Ruski?*" Nothing.

I dug a T-shirt out of a drawer and pulled it on as I pondered how to communicate with this woman. I figured she had to be one of Dana's clients, but why would Dana have her come here instead of going to her office? And how had she gotten inside? It wasn't like Dana to leave the front door unlocked, nor to give a key to anyone else.

The woman murmured something unintelligible and gestured, weaving her hands together in what appeared to be some form of sign language. I could sign the alphabet but I recognized none of her gestures.

I shook my head and said, "Sorry, I don't understand."

She took a deep breath and then unexpectedly said, "Can talk now."

"Oh. Why didn't you say so before?"

"English I not before speaked. Some time will it take to it better speak I." Her accent sounded like something vaguely Eastern European or French, maybe.

"Um, right. Well I'm afraid Dana's not here, and she won't be back for at least an hour. But if you leave me your name and number, I can let her--"

"Why here am I?" she interrupted. For a moment her wide eyes made her look like a lost child.

I gave her a wry smile. "Actually, I was going to ask you the same thing."

She stared around the room and then back at me with those intense ice blue eyes. "I image you break? This is where? Not *Ile-bráytyn*?"

"Uh...what?"

"Know you why *däemán* killed *Mähdríedd*?"

I shrugged. "I'm sorry but I don't know what you're talking about." I wasn't in the mood to play twenty questions with someone this difficult to understand, so I added, "I actually have a lot of work to do. Let me show you to the door, okay?"

I walked out into the hallway, and to my relief she followed. I led her through the living room to the front door, and said, "When Dana gets back I'll let her know you dropped by, Miss..."

She pointed to her chest in an oddly formal gesture and said, "I *Morrigainausálafé*."

"Wow. Okay, Miss...Ausalfay. I'm Dana's husband, Sylvester. You can call me Silver."

As I reached for the doorknob, I heard the screech of tires outside. I glanced through the small, diamond-shaped window in the door and saw two police cars on the street at the end of my driveway. Four police officers with shotguns climbed out and took positions behind their vehicles.

I stared with growing alarm. "What the hell...?"

A black SUV and a large black van drove in and parked at an angle in front of the two cop cars. Two men in gray suits stepped out of the SUV, and a team of men in full SWAT gear surged out of the van. They too moved into position behind the vehicles. Several members of the SWAT team jogged around to the sides of my house.

"Oh, crap..." I whispered. I stepped to the left of the window to avoid being seen, which gave me an angled view down my street to the right. There I saw two more police cars blocking the road, with two cops keeping back a small crowd of onlookers.

I turned my attention back to the law enforcement personnel directly in front of my house, just in time to see another man step out of the SUV. He wore black military fatigues and boots and carried a large pistol in a holster on his hip. He was tall, broad chested, with black hair trimmed in a distinctive crew cut. I'd only briefly

seen that hard-featured face before--and through night vision goggles, at that--but I recognized him instantly.

It was Godson.

My blood ran cold. I pulled the redheaded woman away from the front door and ran to the kitchen. She followed, glancing back at the door.

"Outside what there is?" she asked.

I ignored her as I yanked open a drawer and pulled out a Beretta 92 pistol. I cycled a 9mm round into the chamber.

Then I stared at the pistol in dismay. What the hell was I thinking? I was a reasonably good shot, but was I seriously thinking of taking on over a dozen heavily armed law enforcement personnel with *this*?

The redhead showed no reaction to the gun, but she looked into my face with concern. "Silver, what wrong there is--"

The wall phone rang and she jumped. She stepped back and stared at it with wary suspicion.

I hesitated for a moment, but I knew waiting would only postpone the inevitable. So I picked up the receiver and listened, though I said nothing.

"Good afternoon, Mister Larcini," said a familiarly smooth, precise voice. "Do you recognize with whom you are speaking?"

For a moment I couldn't breathe. My throat felt dry. "Sherman Lord," I finally managed to say.

"Very good. Now this is what you are going to do. You have precisely ten minutes to gather everything you stole from me and take it to the authorities waiting outside your home."

"I see...."

"For your sake, I hope so. Because if you are one second late, or if anything is missing or damaged, your home will be burned to the ground and you will be shot to death. Do I make myself clear?"

My breath caught and I felt my heart pound. "You can't just..."

Lord chuckled without humor. "Oh, just watch me, Mister Larcini. Ten minutes."

"How did you find--"

The line went dead.

I hung up the phone and slumped against the wall. There was no way I could comply with Sherman Lord's demands even if I wanted to.

I gave the redhead a sickly smile and asked, "Do you know any way to put shattered crystal back together within ten minutes?"

"What?"

Evidently surrender would be suicide, so I focused on my other options. They apparently had my house surrounded, so sneaking out the back wasn't a realistic option. There was nowhere to hide in here either. I could try driving through the line of vehicles at the end of my driveway, but

even if they hadn't already anticipated that, they'd know what I was up to as soon as my tediously slow garage door started opening. A cold pit grew in my stomach as I began to realize there was a good chance I wouldn't make it out of here alive.

Maybe I was doomed, but I could still do something to help protect Dana. I grabbed up the phone and speed-dialed.

As I waited for her to pick up, my gaze drifted to the door that led to the garage. I looked at the straight path from the door through the kitchen, down the hallway and to the bedroom. An idea occurred to me.

Voicemail picked up. "This is Dana Larcini. I'm not here right now, but if you'll leave your name and number..." I snarled with frustration as I waited. Finally, the beep.

"Dana! Don't come home. Don't talk to anyone. As soon as you get this message, just drive to..." I hesitated, knowing the line was probably bugged, "...to the place where I proposed to you, okay? Make sure you're not followed. I'll get there as soon as I can. If I'm not there within twenty-four hours...avoid the police and go into hiding. Stay away from anyone named Sherman Lord or Godson. That's all I can say right now."

I hung up. Dana wasn't equipped for this, but I couldn't give her any more details without revealing too

much to anyone listening in. I just had to get out of here and find my way to her before anyone else did.

The redhead pointed at the phone. “That device what it does?”

I tucked the Beretta into the back of my jeans. “I’m sorry, miss, but I have to get out of here. Now.”

“Answers I need understanding,” she said firmly. “With you go I.”

“It’s too dangerous....” Belatedly, I realized her life was in danger too. And I got the feeling that staying here could be worse than coming with me.

“With you go I,” she repeated.

I looked over her slender frame and sighed. “All right. I think Dana has some gear that’ll fit you. But we’ll have to hurry.”

Chapter 6.

"Going with option B"

"Sir, you may want to take cover," said one of the FBI agents from where he crouched behind a patrol vehicle.

Godson gave him his best shut-the-fuck-up glare, then resumed observing the house from where he stood in the open between the cop car and the SUV.

Larcini wasn't a killer. He was nothing more than an overambitious thief who had gotten lucky. And Godson was here to make sure that never happened again. He would have preferred to simply smash through the front door and take the goods back by force, or beat the little bastard until he begged to give them back. But Lord was fussy about his artifacts. He was so concerned about their being lost or damaged that he preferred this public spectacle over a relatively quiet smash-and-grab operation. Godson didn't like it at all. But one way or another, Larcini's luck was about to run out.

He checked his watch. Nine seconds left. So Larcini was going with option B? Really? Godson gave a predatory smile and drew the heavy Desert Eagle from its holster. Option B would work just fine.

A clattering whine kicked in and the garage door to Larcini's house started rising up.

Godson stifled his disappointment. He touched his ear mic and said, "All units, converge on the garage. Hold your fire until we have the artifacts. Repeat, hold your fire until we have the artifacts."

The law enforcement personnel shifted position to cover the garage entrance, and several uniformed cops and SWAT team members came running from around the side of the house. Godson slipped the safety off his pistol.

A compact car with an ugly black paint job backed out of the shadowy darkness of the garage. It rolled slowly down the slight incline of the driveway toward the street.

Chapter 7.

"Tempting fate"

"Hang on," I said to the redheaded woman sitting on the seat behind me. I twisted the throttle and the Hayabusa's engine roared. The rear tire screeched as it launched us through the kitchen and into the hallway. I heard the woman scream over the howl of the motorcycle's engine, and she clung to me like a panicked cat.

We both wore full-faced helmets, jeans, and leather motorcycle jackets, boots and gloves. I'd tucked her long hair inside her jacket to spare her a wind-whipped, tangled mess. She also wore my backpack filled with my tools and Sherman Lord's treasures.

The Hayabusa accelerated down the hallway and through the bedroom. I knew I was tempting fate by going through a glass window twice in less than twenty-four hours, but at least this time I wore better protection. The motorcycle hit the closed sliding glass door and burst through it with

a crashing spray of broken glass. It shot across the wood deck and off the far side. We were airborne for a second, then hit the lawn. The rear wheel fishtailed for a moment on the slick grass as I fought to steer the bike through a gap in the line of cypress trees separating my property from my next-door neighbor's.

I leaned left as far as I dared and angled the motorcycle across my neighbor's lawn to the street. There the street tires finally found decent grip, and I leaned hard to the right and accelerated toward the police barricade ahead.

The cops drew their handguns. I heard the pop of a pistol shot but felt no impact. The redhead still clung to me, which was a good sign she hadn't been hit either.

And then we were upon them. I shot through the gap between the two patrol cars and weaved through the crowd, onlookers scattering before me.

I found an opening and whacked open the throttle. The Hayabusa surged down the street, briefly lifting its front wheel as if to wave good-bye to my would-be captors.

Chapter 8.

"Out of control"

As soon as Godson heard the crash of the sliding glass door and the roar of the motorcycle at the other end of the house, he knew the ugly black car was just a distraction.

He yelled into his ear mic, "Left side of the house, now!"

Larcini's empty car rolled to the end of the driveway and crunched into the side of one of the patrol cars. Godson ignored it. He stepped out from between the patrol car and SUV just in time to see the motorcycle reach the street and veer toward the police barricade down the road.

He raised his heavy pistol and took aim down the sights. His finger touched the trigger and he started to squeeze...but the motorcycle weaved, and beyond it stood onlookers. If he missed Larcini and hit one of the bystanders instead, the whole situation could spin out of

control. Cell phone cameras were everywhere, and they made it nearly impossible to contain overtly public incidents.

Actually, hitting Larcini could be even worse. If he had the artifacts on him, the bullet or the resulting crash could damage them. And if he'd hidden the artifacts instead and the shot killed him, there was always the possibility that even Mr. Lord wouldn't be able to track them down.

With a snarl of frustration, Godson jerked his aim away from the target and lowered the pistol to his side.

He shouted into the ear mic, "SWAT team move in on the house now. Everyone else get after Larcini, goddamn it! I want him alive!"

Police and FBI agents piled into their vehicles and drove off in pursuit of the motorcycle, sirens screaming.

Chapter 9.

"The police pursued"

I could still hear the sirens, but I'd pulled far enough ahead and made enough turns through the suburban back roads that I was sure I'd lost them for now. I turned onto a four-lane road and came to a stop at a red light.

The redheaded woman still clung tightly to me. I opened my visor and turned my head to ask, "Are you okay back there?"

"*Vashánts*!" she said with stunned breathlessness. "What travel this is?"

I smiled. "I take it you've never been on a motorcycle before?"

"Never so fast before I have moved! Alive it is?"

I half laughed, unsure whether she was serious. "It's...a machine."

"A machine? Propelled it is by *éssänts*? But none I can anywhere detect!"

Who *was* this woman? "Where are you from that you've never heard of motorcycles before?"

"*Ile-bráytyn*," she said, as if that were in any way helpful.

I glanced in the mirror and saw a patrol car pulling up behind me. The driver had his radio handset to his mouth. He blipped his siren.

The light changed. I slapped down my visor and shifted into first. "Hang on..." I yelled, and accelerated hard through the intersection.

The patrol car's siren wailed, and red and white lights flashed in my mirrors. I weaved past a few cars, but there was too much traffic ahead with too few gaps for me to take advantage of the motorcycle's high power and small size. Worse, another police car coming over a bridge just ahead of us angled to block my lane of traffic.

I leaned left and veered across the opposing lane. I went off the road and fought to keep the motorcycle upright as it rolled down a grassy embankment to the road that passed under the bridge. A gap opened up in the light traffic and I shot across the path of oncoming vehicles, which blared their horns in protest. I merged into the right lane and continued weaving through traffic.

Unfortunately, my little maneuver didn't help much. The first patrol car actually followed me down the embankment, and it too managed to cut across the opposing lane. Worse, I discovered I had moved up right behind two

more patrol cars. A second later their lights started flashing.

Enough of this. I whacked open the throttle and shot up between the two police cars. As I flew by, I caught a glimpse of a startled cop's face through his side window. Fortunately for me, even cops tend to underestimate the power-to-weight ratio of modern sport bikes.

An expressway access road loomed up on my right. I veered off toward it and raced up the on-ramp onto the expressway. The police pursued, sirens screaming.

Only a few cars were traveling down the road where I merged onto the expressway, but far ahead I could see rush hour traffic clogging all lanes to a slow crawl. I took advantage of the open straightaway in between to rapidly accelerate to a hundred and forty before I had to lean heavily on the brakes.

As I moved up behind the creeping vehicles, the pursuing patrol cars closed the distance between us. But the wider lanes of the expressway left enough of a gap between the vehicles for me to easily lane split between the lines of cars and continue my way down the road at a healthy clip. The police had no choice but to stop, and I soon lost sight of them.

At the next exit I turned off the expressway, and for a while I rode down several side streets, putting as much distance as possible between myself and my pursuers without attracting attention. Then I headed into an industrial

park full of modern glass buildings, parking lots and carefully managed landscaping. Enough people had left the area by this time that there was little traffic to contend with.

I steered the Hayabusa off the road below an overpass and pulled in between a pair of dumpsters. That would at least make the motorcycle difficult to spot from the road. I killed the engine and stepped off the bike, and helped the redheaded woman down from her perch on the pillion. I removed our helmets and hung them from the Hayabusa's clip-on handlebars.

"Axiom twenty," I said as I transferred my backpack from her back to my shoulder. "Nothing beats a motorcycle for escaping through heavy traffic."

The woman swayed slightly on unsteady feet as she stared at the bike. Her hands shook.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She stared up at me through a veil of mussed red hair, then blinked and took a deep breath to compose herself. "A caster you are?" she asked, pushing the hair out of her face. "A machinecaster?"

"I doubt it." Why was it that nothing this woman said made any sense?

She persisted. "And who pursued us those were machinecasters too?"

I shrugged. "Those were cops. Police."

"You they hunt. Why?"

I hesitated. Normally I would lie or evade the question, of course. But what did it matter now? The police were already after me and telling her the truth couldn't make things any worse.

"I stole some valuables and the owner wants them back," I said.

"Then a thief you are?" She asked that without any evident judgment, which I appreciated.

"Yeah. I just wish to hell I knew how he found me." I shook my head. "Anyway, I'm sorry you got caught up in this mess. Nobody could have recognized you under that helmet, so it should be safe enough for you to go now."

I pulled out my wallet and handed her a hundred dollar bill. "For a cab," I said. "Good luck."

I turned and started walking away...but I heard the crunch of her boots on the roadside gravel as she followed me.

I turned back. "Look, I don't mean to be rude, but as you can see I'm in a bit of a situation here. It's not safe for you to be near me. Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

"*Ile-bráytyn*. But there is this not. Lost I am. Here where is?"

I sighed. "We're in New York. You know that much at least, right?"

She shook her head.

"Really? Terrific...." I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. I really didn't have time for this woman and she would only slow me down. But I couldn't just abandon her, not if she was this lost.

"Listen, I need a new vehicle," I said. "Come with me and I'll figure out what to do with you later, okay?"

Her eyes narrowed with a flash of irritation, but then she dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "With you go I," she said. "Answers for my questions would I have."

We walked to a nearby office complex and hopped over the low concrete railing of a covered parking lot. The redhead studied the vehicles as we walked along the line of parked cars that remained.

"Everywhere such machines are," she murmured. "Yet *éssänts* in none of them I feel."

I too scanned the vehicles. This was an upscale business district, so unfortunately most of the cars were newer models with modern anti-theft systems. I didn't have time to deal with those right now.

"You used that word before," I said. "What is ess...essence?"

"The energy for castings. Not even a trace I do feel here. The 'mowter-saikel' you control, but of *éssänts* you know nothing?"

"There you go again. Half of what you say just makes no sense to me."

There, a late-nineties Toyota Camry with a weather-damaged silver paint job. Old enough, nondescript, generic...perfect.

I kneeled down behind the Camry and dug into my backpack for a small tool kit. "Keep a lookout and let me know if anyone approaches," I said, selecting a crescent wrench and unfolding a screwdriver from a Swiss Army knife. I went to work removing the car's license plates.

Fortunately there wasn't anyone else in the parking lot, because the redhead ignored my request and instead just stared off into space. "Failed did we," she murmured. "Gone the *éssänts* is. To replenish the store within me not enough exists...."

"Nope, still not making sense," I said. I shifted over to a Lexus parked next to the Camry. "Where did you learn English, by the way?" But the woman remained lost in thought and just ignored me.

I unbolted the Lexus' license plates and replaced them with the Camry's, then I affixed the Lexus' plates onto the Camry. That would make it a lot tougher for the police to find the Camry when its owner reported it as stolen.

After checking that we remained alone in the parking lot, I selected a slim jim from my backpack and jimmied open the Camry's door. Once inside, I used a small cordless drill to bore two strategically placed holes into the lock cylinder to destroy the lock pins within.

The whine of the drill drew the woman's attention. "What it is you are doing?" she asked.

"Reliving my youth," I said. If she was going to speak cryptically, then so was I.

With the lock pins destroyed, I jammed the screwdriver into the lock cylinder like a key and switched on the ignition. The engine growled to life.

That moment in stealing a car usually sent a tingle of excitement up my spine...but not this time. I wasn't doing this for fun. This was a theft of necessity.

I reached over and opened the passenger door. "Let's go...Morrigan, is it?"

"*Morrigainausálafé*," she said. She came over and peered in through the open doorway.

"That's...not happening. Mind if I call you Morrigaine?" I indicated for her to take a seat.

She used an odd, palm-raising gesture that implied a shrug. "Inelegant it is," she said, peering around the interior of the car. "But adequate."

She climbed in a little awkwardly, as if unsure whether to put her feet or head in first, and then sat down on the front edge of the seat. She looked at how I was sitting, and shifted back to copy my position.

She gave me a surprised smile. "Comfortable this is," she said.

"Let me guess...first time in a car too, right?"

"Aye, it is."

I sighed.

Chapter 10.

"Message received"

Godson sat alone in the black SUV, taking five seconds to watch the sunset through the tinted window.

He opened his cell phone and selected Mr. Lord's number. He didn't look forward to making this call, but he knew better than to delay any longer.

Lord immediately picked up. "Yes, Godson."

"Mister Larcini eluded the pursuit, sir. The cops found his motorcycle but he was gone. I searched his house for the artifacts. No trace of them, sir." Godson closed his eyes and waited for the dressing down.

But for several seconds Lord said nothing. When he finally spoke, he said softly, "Draw your pistol, Godson."

Godson pulled the big Desert Eagle from its holster on his thigh. He blinked with surprise as he stared at the weapon. He had not made the conscious decision to draw the pistol; it was as if he had done so without thinking.

"Point the weapon at your head," Lord said.

To Godson's horror, his arm rotated the gun up and pressed the muzzle against his own temple. He desperately struggled to move the pistol away, but his arm refused to obey him. The cold muzzle rested against his temple without even the slightest quiver. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his heart raced. He had never felt so helpless before in his life.

"Message received, Godson?" Lord asked in a mild tone.

Godson swallowed. He forced himself to speak evenly. "Loud and clear, sir."

"Good."

Control of Godson's arm returned, and he yanked the gun away from his head. He dropped the weapon on the seat as if it were red hot and rotated the phone away from his mouth so Lord wouldn't hear his gasp of relief.

"Fortunately, I have a contingency plan in place," Lord continued. "Call my lawyer. He has some instructions for you."

"Sir, how did you make me do--"

The line went dead.

Godson took a deep breath and stared warily at his shooting hand. He opened and closed his fist a few times. Yes, his fingers obeyed him just as they were supposed to.

He picked up the Desert Eagle and holstered it. Then he searched through the numbers on his cell phone.

Chapter 11.

"That crazy story"

Evening descended as we drove north. I just wanted to sit quietly, but Morrigaine asked questions almost non-stop. She wanted to know how I controlled the car, where cars came from, how many varieties there were, and how many people owned them. The answer to that last question led to her asking how many people there were, and she laughed when I told her the US had over three hundred million and that the world population was over seven billion. There wouldn't be room for that many people to all lie down at once, she insisted. What do you say to someone who believes that? I just shrugged.

All the while she stared at everything we passed like a cat watching birds through a window. She gaped when we passed an office building that was over ten stories tall, and she asked what it was for, how tall buildings could be, what people did in them, and so on. Half my answers just

caused her to shake her head or give me a blank look. It was as if she had almost total amnesia or grew up in a cave somewhere. At least her English continued to improve--either that or I was getting used to her messed up sentence structure.

When the urban landscape gave way to lush green forest, she quieted down and mostly just stared out the window. At first I welcomed the reprieve...but that just gave me time to think about my situation. And the more I thought about it, the worse it looked. Sherman Lord had taken fewer than eighteen hours to track me down. I hadn't dropped my wallet or any other identification, since I never carried such information with me on any mission. And surely I'd collected up all the treasures with my fingerprints on them. Even if I had managed to leave a stray hair or something, a DNA analysis wouldn't have produced results so quickly.

Ultimately, I suppose it didn't matter. Lord had found me and he'd reported the robbery to the police--that was the reality I faced.

Actually, it was worse than that. Lord had done more than simply report me. His man Godson had been with the police, acting as if he was the one in charge. And Lord himself had placed the call to me, not some police negotiator. That had to mean law enforcement was working for him.

I remembered the letter I'd found in Lord's closet, the one that said the FBI director had been successfully replaced. Suddenly the idea that the FBI part actually referred to the Federal Bureau of Investigation didn't seem so farfetched to me, and I wondered if those men in suits who'd shown up at my house were actually FBI agents. Maybe the SWAT team was too.

I hit the steering wheel with my palm. "I am *so* screwed..." I muttered to myself.

Morrigaine jumped. She looked at me and raised a copper-red eyebrow questioningly.

"Sorry," I said. "It means I'm in trouble."

She pondered that for a moment, then said, "Help you perhaps I can."

I snorted. "No offense, Morrigaine, but I don't think someone who's lost her memory can do much to help me."

She gave me a flat look. "Undamaged is my mind."

"Yeah? Then why is everything completely new to you? Why is it you don't know where you are or why you're even here?"

She shook her head and looked away for a moment. Then she turned back to me and asked, "Who broke my image?"

"Dare I ask what you're talking about?"

"The small clear rock statue. Break it did you?"

I stared at her. "How do you know about the statuette?"

She pointed at her own face. "Of me it was."

"Huh? There's no way you're the same..." But even as I said that, I realized how closely she resembled the statuette--the same regal features, the same long hair, even the same dress she was wearing when I first saw her. No wonder I thought she looked familiar!

"Of me it was," she repeated with certainty.

My mind reeled as I tried to imagine how this was even possible. "Explain," I demanded.

She took a deep breath and said, "For hundreds of years did *éssänts* slowly weaken. Gradually more difficult castings became, so fewer druids there came to be. Eventually disappeared did most enchanted creatures: *faéryas*, *dracónnas*--"

I growled with exasperation. "Come on, quit screwing with me!"

She gave me a startled look. I sighed and said, "It's an expression. It means tell me the truth."

Her gaze darkened. "The truth I am telling you. If it is an explanation you wish, then listen!"

I opened my mouth to suggest she had a creative definition of the word truth, then thought the better of it and just shook my head.

She continued, saying, "For centuries my father--the Great Druid manacaster and lifecaster *Mähdríedd*--worked to create a great mana casting to reverse the weakening of *éssänts*."

I gave her a sideways look. "You're saying your father lived for centuries?"

"Aye. Indefinitely can life castings extend life, given sufficient *éssänts*. But on the night *Mähdríedd* was to complete his work, into my chambers entered a *däemán*."

"A day-what?"

"*Däemán*. A malevolent creature of *éssänts*. Huge this one was, with its face like a horse skull, burning eyes, skin like stone, claws like knives of steel."

"Charming."

"Its mind I attempted to influence with a casting, but to no effect. My shoulder the *däemán* touched, and all strength drained from my body. Outside to the keep courtyard it carried me. There in the center is my father's tower where he worked, and in the window above I could see his silhouette. Cry out to warn him I could not, for my voice was as weak as my limbs."

She stared grimly into the distance. "If he was to complete his work, interrupted he could not be. But into the window the *däemán* launched a casting of fire...and with a great burst of flame it exploded. His screams..." Her voice cracked and she fell quiet for a moment.

I shifted uncomfortably. Her grief seemed real, but did she really expect me to believe that crazy story?

Morrigaine took a deep breath and continued. "When the fire burned out, to my skin the *däemán* touched a crystal statuette in the form of my image. Into smoke my

body dissolved, and I floated into the crystal. Nothing more do I remember until I awakened in your home."

I shook my head. "Yeah...I don't think your problem is amnesia. Are you familiar with the term 'fruitcake'?"

"A food of celebration, aye." She studied my face. "But believe me you do not, do you?"

"Well what do you expect when you talk about monsters and magic? Do you really believe in that stuff?"

"Of course. A caster I am."

"You can cast spells."

"Aye. A mindcaster I am. And a shockcaster. One day I shall become a Great Druid."

I chuckled. "Really. Show me. Cast a spell."

She shook her head. "No *éssänts* remains to replenish my reserves. What I have is all there is. I shall not waste it on foolish displays."

"Surprise, surprise...."

"But how can a self-moving carriage such as this exist? Is gone my ability to sense *éssänts*? Or is there some...new form of *éssänts* you use? Tell me what powers this carriage."

"It's called a car and its engine runs on fuel."

"Fuel? Like wood?"

"Gasoline." When she gave me a blank look, I added, "It's a highly flammable liquid distilled from oil. It contains more energy than wood."

She shook her head. "No, *éssänts* is more like...like unseen beasts that a skilled handler with voice and gestures can control."

She frowned in thought and absently tugged on the zipper tab on the front of her motorcycle jacket. She made a surprised sound when the tab pulled down and unzipped the front of the jacket. She slowly pulled the tab up and down several times, a delighted smile on her lips.

I looked out the window and sighed. "I think I need to make a new axiom about not helping strangers...."

Chapter 12.

“A pudgy, balding man”

Stars filled the cold sky. I turned off the highway onto a dirt road, which led through dense forest to a broad, placid lake nestled among the hills. The road followed the shore and eventually led to a spacious, modern log cabin on a hillside overlooking the lake. This was the cottage where I met Dana’s parents and where I proposed to her.

As we approached, the Camry’s headlights illuminated Dana’s white SUV parked at the base of the stairs leading up to the cottage.

“Good, she made it,” I said with a sigh of relief. The deep bed of gravel in the parking area crunched under the tires as I pulled up next to her vehicle.

“This dwelling is what?” Morrigaine asked.

"It belongs to Dana's parents." I switched off the engine and reached for the backpack. "It's empty most of the year. It should be safe."

"And this 'Dana' is...?"

"My wife. Look, she may not understand my showing up here with you, so I'll go in first and explain the situation to her. Then I'll come get you, okay?"

She nodded.

I picked up the backpack and climbed out of the Camry. I tucked my Beretta into the back of my jeans under my motorcycle jacket. Then I walked up the long flight of stone steps that curved along the front of the hillside and led to the entrance on the far side of the cottage. The front door was unlocked and the security switched off, so I headed on in.

"Dana, it's me!" I called out, lowering the backpack to the flagstone floor of the foyer. I walked into the living room, which was decorated with an expensive colonial décor. Wide windows gave a magnificent view of the moonlit lake. A cheery fire blazed in the huge brick fireplace.

"Yes, he just arrived," said a man's voice in a soft, southern drawl.

I looked to my left into the adjoining dining room. On the opposite side of the broad, antique oak table sat a man wearing an old-fashioned pinstripe business suit. He was a pudgy, balding man who looked to be in his sixties, and he had a cell phone to his ear.

"Of course," he drawled. "I shall advise him." He closed the phone and placed it on the table, then looked up at me through round, outdated spectacles.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Good evening, Mister Larcini," he said, a placid smile on his thin lips. "My name is Ernest Beel."

"What are you doing here?" I demanded with growing alarm. "Where's my wife?"

"I represent Mister Sherman Lord."

My eyes widened and I placed a hand on the pistol in the back of my jeans.

"I see you are familiar with my client's name."

"Where is Dana?"

"Apparently you are in possession of some of my client's property. Most particularly, two artifacts."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Beel continued to smile. "Come now, Mister Larcini, there is no need to be coy. I refer to a crystal statuette of a woman and a piece of parchment covered with tiny symbols."

"Where is my wife?"

He removed his spectacles and produced a white handkerchief from his breast pocket. "I suspected you might attempt to communicate with Missus Larcini," he said as he polished his lenses with the handkerchief. "So I followed her here."

I gritted my teeth. "God damn it, where is she!"

"On her way to a secure location far from here." He fitted the glasses back onto his bland face and tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket. "But you needn't be concerned for her safety. Simply return my client's possessions and she will be returned to you. No harm done."

"And if I don't?"

Beel's placid smile didn't change. "Then you will watch as she is gutted like a fish, and you will be forced to eat her internal organs as she slowly expires."

"What the fuck!" I drew the pistol and pointed it at Beel's face.

He didn't even flinch. "If you want my advice, Mister Larcini, I would recommend returning the artifacts posthaste. And in pristine condition."

I swallowed, desperately trying to think of a way to buy more time so I could figure out how to get out of this mess. "I don't have them with me," I said.

"No problem. I shall accompany you to their location."

"No, I mean...I mailed them to myself. They won't arrive for a few days."

"I see. Then in the interim I shall remain with you to ensure you--"

The front door clunked shut. I turned my head and saw Morrigaine walking toward me.

"Enough time I have waited," she said. "In here I--"

"Morrigaine, stay outside," I warned.

Too late. She stepped into Beel's line of view, and his thin smile immediately evaporated. He fixed me with a chilling glare.

"The deal is off, Mister Larcini," he said. He picked up his cell phone.

"Put it down!" I yelled at him.

He ignored me and unfolded his phone.

BLAM! The Beretta went off and the bullet drove a hole right through Beel's forehead. His head snapped back and the cell phone dropped from his fingers.

"Oh shit..." I said. I'd never killed a man before. I honestly wasn't sure whether I'd meant to pull the trigger or whether I'd done so by accident. But it was done.

Only it wasn't. Beel's gaze refocused on me and he smiled. No blood poured from the bullet hole over his left eyebrow. With speed and strength that belied his soft appearance, he scrambled over the table and lunged toward me.

"*Mümríe*!" Morrigaine cried.

I fired another shot into Beel's chest, but it didn't even slow him down. He slammed into me and we crashed into a wood coffee table. The pistol flew from my grasp.

Thankfully the table collapsed, absorbing some of the impact. The force still almost knocked the wind out of me, and a brief stab of pain flared up in my chest.

Beel straddled me and clutched my throat with both hands. I grabbed at his fingers and tried to peel them from my neck, but he was surprisingly strong and he wouldn't let go. So instead I threw a quick right hook at his jaw.

My fist connected...and to my amazement his jaw broke loose with a dry snap. It swung away, dangling on threads of connective tissue. Beel's placid face distorted and flickered out for a second, revealing the dry, rotted husk of a corpse underneath, its leathery skin stretched tight against the skull. Then the pudgy face reappeared, but the corpse jaw dangled freely, swinging under his chin as if the smiling face was some sort of hologram.

The horrific sight caused a surge of adrenalin to pump through my veins, and I thrashed at Beel like a madman. Somehow I tore his grip loose and knocked him off to the side. I scrambled for the dropped pistol.

As my hand closed on the grip, I glanced up at Morrigaine. For some bizarre reason she was gesturing with that odd sign language of hers and muttering something I couldn't hear. A lot of help she was.

I leaped up and whirled around to level the pistol at Beel, who had clambered to his feet and now lurched toward me.

For an instant my mind swam with an odd sense of vertigo, and my gaze lost focus. My hand opened and the Beretta dropped from my fingers.

I recovered just in time to duck under Beel's grasping arms. I slammed a fist into his stomach and thrust my knee hard into his ribs, which caved in with a muffled crunch. Beel didn't react in pain, but the impact knocked him off balance and caused him to stagger to the side. I raised my foot and thrust a push kick into his chest.

The shove caused Beel to stumble backward. He tripped on the hearth and crashed into the fireplace, where he immediately caught fire. The flames rapidly engulfed him as if he had been splashed with gasoline. His pudgy face distorted and flickered away, leaving a dry corpse thrashing helplessly among the firebrands. A keening wail emitted from the jawless mouth. The intense heat of the blaze forced me to step back. Within seconds the flames completely consumed the corpse.

I stared at the ashes as they fell through the fire grate. My mind reeled but I managed to croak out, "What the *hell* was that?"

Morrigaine stepped up beside me and gazed at the smoking remains. "A *mümríe*."

"A moom-what?"

"A *mümríe*. The dead who know not that they are dead."

I stared at her. "You actually know what that was?"

She nodded. "Fortunate you are that I was here to destroy it."

"*You* destroyed it?"

"Aye. A mind casting I used to make it fall into the fire. Flames can destroy any unliving creature."

"So you're saying that I didn't kick it into the fire, and instead you *convinced* it to jump right in?" I choked out a laugh. "Yeah, right. Susceptible to flame I knew it was, so my noisemaking device I dropped and instead into the fire I pushed the *mümríe*."

I blinked in surprise. "What the hell did I just say?"

She smiled. "The *mümríe* I did not convince, for its brain is dead. It was *you* I convinced."

"You made me push the moom...moomr...Mister Beel into the fire?"

"Aye, the thought I put into your mind. What you just said was that thought."

She put her hands on her curvy hips and gave me a smug smile. "A casting you requested? One you have now experienced."

I stared at her with my mouth open, then shook my head and headed for the liquor cabinet. I grabbed a bottle of bourbon and dropped down on the couch. My hands trembled as I fell off my adrenalin high. I took a swig from the bottle and coughed--I didn't even like bourbon.

"How do you know about this stuff?" I asked with a hoarse croak.

Morrigaine came over and took a seat beside me. "My father was a manacaster, and thus much lore did he possess

about all forms of castings. Some of this knowledge he taught me in my youth. A deathcaster created the *mümríe*, and upon it an imagecaster placed an illusion of a living man."

"Sherman Lord is some sort of a...a sorcerer?"

She raised a copper-red eyebrow. "The one you stole from is this Lord Sherman?"

I nodded.

She smiled and said, "Unless created was the *mümríe* before the loss of *éssänts*, then sufficient *éssänts* must still exist somewhere. Thus a caster Lord Sherman could be." She chewed her lower lip as she thought. "Could it even be he is the *däemán* that imprisoned me and killed *Mähdríedd*? Some *däemáni* have been known to possess casting abilities. From Lord Sherman what did you take?"

My mind felt numb but I stood up and went to the foyer to retrieve the backpack. Morrigaine followed me as I headed to the dining room, and she watched as I dumped out Sherman Lord's treasures. She made a surprised sound as she gazed in delight at the glittering display.

I held up the plastic bag filled with shards of broken crystal. "This was the statuette...before I broke it."

"You released me. For that I thank you."

"Uh-huh," I said, still not sure what to think of that claim. Part of me couldn't help suspecting I was either going insane or the victim of some elaborate hoax. I

picked up the piece of parchment and unrolled it. "And this I found with it."

Morrigaine gasped and snatched it from my hand.

"Hey, careful with that! It's valuable." I did not want another ruined treasure on my conscience.

Her pale, ice-blue eyes glittered. "Indeed it is. This is the great mana casting of *Mähdríedd*!" She ran a finger across the torn top edge. "Or...part of it. The middle piece. The top and bottom pieces, where are they?"

"This is all there was. What is it?"

"A scroll." She grinned like an eager child. "Designed it is to return *éssänts*!"

I sighed. "Again with the essence...."

"If this piece survived, then perhaps so too did the others! A tracking casting I could use on this piece to locate them. My reserve I would need to replenish before I could do that, but perhaps..."

"Morrigaine..."

"Almost complete was the scroll of *Mähdríedd* when the *däemán* killed him. Perhaps finish it I can!"

"Morr--"

"To full strength I could return *éssänts*." Her eyes glistened. "No longer would this world be so barren!"

"Morrigaine, I don't have time for this! I just found out Sherman Lord kidnapped my wife! I have to find some way to get her back."

She looked at me. "Your wife he took?"

"He's going to kill her if I don't return this loot in perfect condition." I snatched up the plastic bag filled with crystal shards and shook it at her. "But I broke the goddamn statuette!"

She looked at the broken crystal and thought for a moment. Then she gave me a calculating look and said, "Repair it I could."

"You...really?" I didn't want to get my hopes up based on anything this strange woman said...but she had apparently been right about Mr. Beel. And if there was *any* chance she could help...

"Aye. But sufficient *éssänts* to do that I no longer have stored within me. My reserve I must replenish."

I sighed. "Okay, let's say this essence stuff actually exists. How can you get more?"

"From the *éssänts* enclave."

"The what?"

She caressed the edge of the parchment. "In his quest to restore *éssänts*, a small region *Mähdríedd* found where the drain was less severe than anywhere else. His keep he built in that enclave so sufficient *éssänts* he would have access to for his project to reverse the drain. If Lord Sherman created the *mümríe*, then the enclave may still exist."

"The essence enclave. Fine. Where is it located?"

"In *Ile-bráytyn*."

"And where is that?"

She made that raised-palm, shrug-like gesture. "Where is here?"

"We're still in New York State."

She gave me a blank stare.

"New York. Where New York City is located. Seriously, you've never heard of it?"

She shook her head.

"It's in the United States. You know where that is, at least, right?"

She shook her head.

I sighed and shook my own head in disbelief. "Hold on..." I headed into the living room and came back with a globe of the world. I set it before Morrigaine and pointed to New York. "We're here."

She looked at me in surprise. "You know the world to be a sphere? The druids of *Etyilientiénn* discovered--"

I wasn't going to let her lead me down another rabbit hole. "Show me where you're from," I said firmly.

"In the Unknown Land we are? Truly? So far away it is...." She turned the globe and pointed a sharp fingernail at Scotland.

"You're from the U.K.?" I raised an eyebrow. "You sure don't sound like it."

She frowned. "Many there speak as I do."

I smiled. "My mistake. That Romanian-French accent and Yoda-like grammar you've got going on is perfect Queen's English."

She ignored that and gazed wistfully at the globe. “Months would it take for us to travel there.”

“To Scotland? We could be there in a day or two.”

She laughed. “Now you are a gatecaster?”

“Whatever that is, no. We use airplanes.”

“Err-plenns?”

I grimaced. “Vehicles used to travel long distances fast.”

Her gaze turned serious. “Then use err-plenns! If enough *éssänts* remains, much I could do....”

This was getting me nowhere. “Sorry, I don’t have the time.” I started repacking the treasures into the backpack. “I need to find Dana.”

Morrigaine rolled her eyes. “If a deathcaster is what Lord Sherman is, then without my help you will not defeat him. And *éssänts* I need. Take me to *Ile-bráytyn*.” Her demanding tone turned skeptical. “If you can.”

The ominous booming tones of the *Terminator* movie theme filled the air. Morrigaine jumped and I looked around in alarm before I realized the music was just a ring tone coming from Beel’s cell phone, which lay on the rug where he’d dropped it.

I picked up the phone but let it ring for a moment while I thought about what to say. Then I took a crisp hundred-dollar bill from the backpack and crumpled it near my mouth as I answered with a passable imitation of Beel’s southern drawl. “Beel speaking.”

"We've got a bad connection," said the person on the other end. I recognized the voice immediately. It was Godson. "You get the artifacts?"

"Not yet," I replied.

He growled. "Son of a bitch...."

"I'll have them soon enough." I decided to take a risk by asking, "Where is Mister Larcini's wife now?"

"Where do you think? On her way to the *éssänts* enclave. Make sure Larcini stays put. We're almost there." He hung up.

I stared at Morrigaine and said, "This is insane. They believe in essence too? They're taking Dana to the essence enclave!"

"Then to the keep we shall go?"

I looked helplessly at the crystal shards, then at the fireplace, and sighed heavily. "I still don't believe magic is real...but apparently there actually is some place called an essence enclave, and that's where Dana will be." I finished packing up the last of the treasures. "So yes, we're going to the keep. And we have to go now." I shouldered the pack.

I switched on the security system and locked the door, and Morrigaine and I hurried down the stone steps to the parking area. As we approached the vehicles, the growl of an engine reached my ears and headlight beams swept around a bend in the road leading back to the highway.

There was nowhere for us to run, so I said, “Under the car!”

We dropped down at the front end of the Camry and crawled underneath. I shoved the backpack ahead of us to push up an embankment of gravel to help conceal us from the approaching headlights.

Two vehicles drove up and parked, one on each side of the Camry. The doors opened and at least ten men stepped out of the vehicles. All I could see was their black pant legs and black leather shoes--except for one wearing black fatigue pants tucked into black military jungle boots. I held my breath, but nobody bent down to look under the car. Instead, they all crunched their way across the gravel parking area and up the stone steps to the cottage.

As soon as they’d disappeared around the side of the cabin, Morrigaine and I climbed out from under the Camry. The two vehicles parked on either side of us were a black SUV and a black van.

I opened the Camry door and slid the backpack onto the back seat. “Get in,” I whispered to Morrigaine. “Keep quiet.”

She took her seat and I pushed the door shut as quietly as I could. Then I pulled out my Swiss Army knife and hurried around each of the other vehicles--including Dana’s SUV--and stabbed the blade into the side of each tire. The hiss of escaping air sounded like a pit full of snakes as all three vehicles settled slowly on their rims.

The cabin’s alarm system went off with a piercing shriek. I ran to the Camry and dropped into the driver’s seat. I fired up the engine and accelerated hard in reverse until the car pulled clear of the gravel parking area, then I whipped the steering wheel around to make a smooth J-turn and stepped hard on the accelerator.

Despite the alarm helping cover up the sounds of our escape, I heard a shout from the direction of the cottage. I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw staccato bursts of light flashing from the top of the stairs, followed by the popping of automatic gunfire.

I floored the accelerator, wishing I had something with at least double the horsepower. Two bullets hit the Camry with audible thunks, and I saw one round punch a hole through the rear window and star the glass.

Then we rounded the first bend and moved safely out of the line of fire.

Chapter 13.

"Fake yourself"

Only a few vehicles remained in the mall parking lot at this hour. I parked near the entrance and we climbed out of the car.

"We need to hurry," I said. "The place closes in less than an hour."

Morrigaine gazed around the parking lot. "For what are we here?"

"We need some supplies. My workplace is probably being watched, so I need to improvise." I gestured up at the sprawling building complex before us. "Fortunately, the American mall is a Mecca for MacGyver wannabes."

She shook her head. "Again there you go. No sense does half of what you say make to me."

We both needed warm clothing for our trip, so I took Morrigaine into Macy's and told her to pick out whatever she wanted. She looked out over the sea of clothing racks

before her...and froze up. The sheer volume of apparel available left her a victim of overchoice, unable to choose anything. The irony of going on a shopping spree in a mall with a woman who had no shopping instincts didn't escape me. So I grabbed up a selection of suitable slacks, blouses, even bras and panties, and sent her into the dressing room with instructions to choose three sets that fit.

She asked why I had given her only trousers to try on, since she was accustomed to wearing only long dresses. I explained that it's better to wear practical clothing that offers some protection and greater mobility when you don't know what you'll be facing. Fortunately, she'd actually grown to like the jeans I'd had her put on for the motorcycle ride--although they made her feel "brazen," she said, since they accentuated the curve of her hips. No women she'd ever known would dare wear such clothing in public. But she saw women here wearing them without shame, so she was willing to do the same. Still, she spent the first half hour self-consciously pulling her sweater down over her hips.

I also picked out warm wool sweaters, socks, light hiking boots, toiletries and a carry-on bag for each of us. With the police, FBI and possibly everyone else looking for me, I couldn't very well use my credit cards, so I paid for everything with the hundred dollar bills I'd taken from Sherman Lord. I had to admit to deriving a certain amount

of pleasure from the idea that Lord was financing our escape. Fortunately, I had relieved him of almost ten thousand dollars in cash, so he would be footing the bills for quite some time.

I also bought a variety of makeup supplies--for me to use, not Morrigaine--and a wig of long white hair. And with Halloween coming up next month, it was easy to find a shop selling latex mask kits and other costume supplies.

We made it out just as the stores were closing.

#

The next stop was just south of Syracuse. I parked in the shadow of a willow tree on the street near an upper-class suburban home. The house had a perfectly maintained lawn bordered by perfectly manicured hedges.

"Stay here," I said to Morrigaine, as I reached for the backpack on the rear seat. "I mean it. I'll be back in a moment."

"Where is here?" she asked.

"Bob and Elaine Crenshaw's house. My in-laws." I opened the car door. "I need to borrow a few things."

I climbed out and looked around. It was now after midnight and nobody was out this late. Most of the houses had already gone dark, Bob and Elaine's house included. I headed up the walk to the front door, and felt along an overhead ledge for the spare key. Axiom thirty-four: Learn the habits of everyone around you. I unlocked the door and slipped inside.

The foyer was dark, but I knew where to find the wall-mounted alarm keypad. I'd installed it, after all. I tapped in the code and switched it off.

I then checked a nearby antique table for a purse--Elaine usually dropped hers there whenever she arrived home. Sure enough, one of her Gucci handbags sat between a flower arrangement and a silver tray for car keys. I rifled through the handbag and found her wallet. She had five credit cards. I took one.

Then I headed down the hall to Bob's home office. The room looked like an old-fashioned banker's office, with two cherry wood desks, leather chairs, and several portraits decorating the walls.

I made a beeline for the back wall and moved a framed reproduction of George Washington out of the way, revealing a sturdy AMSEC wall safe. Since I'd installed and set the combination for that, too, it took me only a few seconds to dial it in and open the door. After a little rummaging through the jewelry and paperwork, I came up with Bob and Elaine's passports. Those I pocketed.

Then I transferred all of Sherman Lord's treasures--except for the cash and the two artifacts--from the backpack to the wall safe. Bob rarely accessed the safe...but just in case, I changed the combination.

I awakened a computer on one of the desks and used an airline ticketing website to search for the next available flights to the UK. To my dismay, I discovered all the

morning flights out of JFK were booked. All of them! Was some convention going on?

So I ended up reserving two seats on a British Airways evening flight. However, I didn't relish the idea of wasting the whole day doing nothing while Dana was going through who knows what, so I planned on waiting at the airport on standby in case seats opened up on an earlier flight. I also arranged for a rental car in Glasgow, and I paid for everything using Elaine's credit card.

I reset the security system and locked the door on my way back out to the car. Fortunately, this time Morrigaine had stayed put. I tossed the passports into her lap as I dropped into the driver's seat.

"Ever wanted to be someone else?" I asked as I started the engine.

She flipped through one of the passports. "No."

I shrugged. "Then you're not going to enjoy this as much as I will."

#

I applied a few last lines to Morrigaine's face with an eyebrow pencil, and compared the results to Elaine Crenshaw's passport photo. It would do. I turned her to look in the cracked bathroom mirror of the gas station restroom.

She stared in surprise at her appearance. I'd hidden her dark red hair under the white wig, used bronzing powder to darken her skin, and applied the eyebrow pencil and

other makeup to subtly age and alter her features to resemble the sixty-year-old Elaine.

I looked even more transformed, with an age-spotted balding head wig, fake teeth, latex-enhanced craggy face and a grizzled adhesive mustache to look like the seventy-year-old Bob. I slouched, pushed out my stomach and hunched my shoulders to complete the effect.

Morrigaine shook her head in appreciation. "An imagecaster could do no better," she said.

I gave her my best Bob smile and spoke with his hoarse smoker's voice. "Axiom twenty: If you don't have the equipment to fake documents, fake yourself instead."

She gave me a puzzled frown. "Axiom twenty you said is nothing beats a mowter-saikel for escaping through heavy traffic."

I smiled. "Axiom one: I make up the axiom numbers as I go along. Come on, let's go."

#

The drive to JFK International Airport took over five hours. I envied Morrigaine not knowing how to drive and thus being free to nap along the way, but at least I'd gotten plenty of sleep the previous day. Unfortunately, my mind kept conjuring up all sorts of horrible scenarios of what Dana might be going through. She was the only person who had ever understood me, the only one I could really talk to, and that meant the world to me. The thought that I might lose her just made me crazy, so I switched on the

radio in the hopes of distracting myself with some upbeat music I could sing along to. But the radio was apparently broken and all I got was static. I ended up just mindlessly counting mile markers.

We arrived shortly after sunrise, and I immediately put us on standby for the first available flight to the UK. Both of us were famished--I hadn't eaten much of anything in over twenty-four hours--so I hunted through the terminal until I found a restaurant with private booths. Few items on the menu appeared familiar to Morrigaine, but she loved the smell of a nearby customer's avocado burger and fries, so I ordered that for her.

We both still wore our disguises, although I did remove my fake teeth in order to eat my sandwich. Morrigaine devoured her hamburger like a barbarian, biting off huge mouthfuls.

"Suave," I muttered.

She swallowed and exclaimed, "Delicious! And available such exceptional food is to anyone?"

"Exceptional? Hardly. But yes, it's available to anyone."

"Even peasants?"

I chose to ignore that. I glanced at my backpack sitting next to the two carry-on suitcases on the seat beside me. "Guess I'd better find a storage locker for you," I said with a wistful shake of my head.

Morrigaine paused. "For me a what?"

"Not you. My gun and tools. They'd never make it past security."

"Security?" She took another oversized bite of her burger.

I sighed and gave her a brief description of how the TSA checkpoint worked, and what was legal and illegal to take through.

"...which is why I have to leave my equipment behind," I finished.

She frowned. "Wise is it for a thief to abandon his tools?"

"It's wiser than being caught."

She chewed on a French fry as she thought for a moment, then said, "Enough *éssänts* I still have to get your equipment past 'security.'"

I chuckled. "Yeah...that's not going to happen. I'll find out where some lockers are located." I finished off my sandwich and stood up. "Hold on, I'll be right back." I headed to the counter to pay the bill.

Situational awareness means everything in my line of work, and so I should have known better than to take my eye off Morrigaine and our luggage. Yet for some reason I didn't think to look back until after I'd paid the bill.

Both Morrigaine and the backpack were gone.

Chapter 14.

"Better not to alert him"

Sherman Lord's downstairs office had seen a number of changes since the break-in two nights ago: an infrared security camera in one corner of the ceiling now watched over the room, and a lattice of thick steel bars covered the window through which Larcini had entered. In fact, cameras now covered every room in the mansion, and steel bars protected every window. Godson knew Lord would not tolerate another security breach, so better to overcompensate than risk another break-in. No one like Larcini would ever get into this place again, period.

Godson, his black military fatigues freshly pressed and his boots polished to a liquid sheen, looked out the window as he spoke quietly on his cell phone with the head of his investigation team. Outside, the morning sunlight sparkled on the dew-dropped foliage of the garden...and it clearly revealed the divot where his lead security guard

had face-planted into the ground after Larcini shoved him through the window. The fall had wrenched the man's shoulder and he still couldn't hold a gun properly. Godson's lip curled and he turned away.

Sherman Lord sat behind the teak desk. He wore a brown suit with a skinny tie that had been out of style since the 1960s, but which suited Lord's aged, stone-like features. Manila folders containing detailed dossiers on FBI personnel lay scattered across the desk, and he pored through one of them. He finally nodded and used a red pen to scribble "Replace" across the cover of the folder.

Godson hung up his phone and approached Lord's desk.

Lord opened another folder. "Any sign of my lawyer?" he asked as he skimmed over the first page.

"No, sir. But a cop reported finding a vehicle with a bullet hole in the window. The description matches the one Larcini was driving. And it has stolen plates."

Lord's gaze snapped toward Godson. "Where?"

"J.F.K. The engine was still warm."

"He is fleeing the country."

"Yes, sir. Want me to lock down the airport?"

Lord's old-fashioned leather chair creaked as he sat back. "No. He is slippery. Better not to alert him. Have agents watch the gates of all today's flights with any tickets purchased within the last twelve hours."

Godson flipped open his cell phone. "Yes, sir."

Chapter 15.

"Go through security"

I frantically scanned the crowds as I hurried through the terminal with the two carry-on suitcases. I knew walking this fast was not consistent with my old Bob Crenshaw disguise, but finding Morrigaine before she did something crazy was more important.

There--the tall elderly woman with white hair. She wore my backpack over one shoulder as she stood in line at the security checkpoint to our gate. Somehow she had already made it to the front of the line. There was only one person ahead of her.

I tried to push my way to Morrigaine, but it was too late. A TSA officer beckoned her over. She handed him her paperwork just as I'd explained we'd have to do in my description of the security procedures. The officer then directed her to the x-ray machine, and I watched helplessly as she placed the backpack on the conveyer belt.

Then Morrigaine stepped over to the bored-looking female TSA officer viewing the display unit and spoke a few words to her. She also gestured with that odd sign language of hers. The woman stared disinterestedly at Morrigaine for a moment, then went back to viewing her monitor. Morrigaine shrugged and walked up to the body scanner.

I held my breath, my heart pounding and my palms sticky, as I watched the TSA officer's face and waited for her eyes to bug out the instant she saw the contents of the backpack.

Suddenly the woman yawned. It was a huge yawn--just watching her made me yawn too. Her eyes squinted shut and she rolled her head to stretch her neck. She muttered something to another TSA agent nearby, and they both shared a chuckle.

The backpack slid out the other end of the x-ray machine. Nobody paid it any attention. As the line moved forward, I watched Morrigaine pick up the pack and sling it over her shoulder. She caught my eye and gave me a big, smug smile, then strolled off with a sway of her hips.

When my turn came to go through security, I didn't have to fake my trembling hands to make my old man disguise appear perfectly convincing.

#

Morrigaine and I took seats at the gate for a 9:55 a.m. British Airways flight to London. The seats faced a large

window overlooking the tarmac, which made it awkward for me to keep an eye on the throngs of people behind us. But all the other seats in the crowded gate area were taken...which didn't bode well for any seats opening up on this flight. I had a sinking feeling we would indeed be spending all day at the airport, and I dreaded the idea of wasting so many hours going nowhere while Dana remained captive.

To take my mind off the waiting, I started up a conversation with Morrigaine. "Okay, what did you say to that T.S.A. agent to make her ignore the pack?" I asked, tugging a strap on the backpack that sat on the floor between my feet.

She smiled. "The words conveyed no meaning. The flow of *éssänts* they only helped to channel as I misdirected the guard's mind."

"Ahhh..." I said as a light went on in my head. "Hypnosis! That's it, isn't it? Some form of hypnosis, right?"

"Hipno-sis?"

"It's the use of voice and motion to lull a person into a state where he's susceptible to verbal suggestions."

"Persuasion without *éssänts*?"

"Exactly. No magic necessary."

She waved a hand dismissively. "'Hipno-sis' is not what I do. My voice and hands I merely use to help focus and direct *éssänts*. My mind is what I use to gather the

éssänts to flow into the mind of another person and alter his thoughts."

I shrugged. "Hypnosis can be pretty impressive. It's been known to allow people to ignore pain, lose their inhibitions...or perhaps ignore a monitor they're supposed to be watching."

She gave me a disgusted look. "Your mind I should misdirect to believe your face is on fire."

I chuckled...but I had to admit I wondered if she could actually do that.

She suddenly sat up and stared out the window, and I followed her gaze. A British Airways 747 had detached itself from the boarding ramp and was swinging slowly away.

"That is *what*?" she asked. "A building I thought it was. How can so huge a thing possibly move?"

I grinned at her wide-eyed reaction. "It's an airplane." I pointed to another 747 as it made its final turn and taxied down the runway. "Watch."

She stared. "How *fast* it moves," she breathed. "Faster than a mowter-saikel!"

"Uh, keep it down, Morrigaine. People are starting to stare."

She ignored me. "Ahead of it the road ends, yet it does not slow down." She frowned as the 747 bore down on the end of the runway. "Beyond it lies the open sea. Will such a large thing not sink?"

The frown evaporated as realization lit her face. She turned to me with a self-satisfied smile. "Ah, it is a car that can float, am I right?"

I choked down a laugh and said nothing. I just watched her smug smile turn to open-mouthed stupefaction as the jet lifted its nose and climbed lazily into the air. She stared until it passed out of sight.

"Uh...or fly..." she said weakly.

She turned to me with a dark glare. "Through the air that huge car did not fly simply from machines!"

I laughed. "Believe what you wish. But it's true. Sorry."

"But as impossible that is as--"

"--using magic to influence someone's mind?"

"No, as impossible as *you*." She took a deep breath, visibly calming herself. "Why I tolerate this behavior from you I do not know. Laugh at me again and I will--"

"Turn me into a frog?" I suggested.

She smiled without humor. "A wonderful idea that is. Unfortunately, one of my casting specialties it is not. But have you seen what the strike of lightning can do to a person?"

She sat back and looked out the window. "For what are we waiting here anyway?"

"We're on standby for this flight. But if we can't get seats, we'll have to go over there--" I gestured at

the next gate over, "--and wait for our evening flight, which we have..."

I noticed two men by the boarding gate for the evening flight to the UK. They looked too similar, with their gray suits and dark glasses. They leaned against a wall and casually watched the travelers around the waiting area. One of the men stopped two passing security officers and spoke with them briefly. He opened his suit jacket just long enough to flash a badge attached to his belt.

I came fully alert and continued looking around the gate. I quickly spotted two more similarly attired men sitting in the otherwise mostly empty waiting area.

My heart pounded in my chest. Sherman Lord had tracked me down again.

I casually turned around in my seat and scanned the crowd at the gate where Morrigaine and I were seated. As far as I could tell, there weren't any law enforcement personnel watching *this* gate. Which meant that somehow they must have found out I was booked on the evening flight. And now they were waiting for me like spiders in a web.

"Which we have what?" Morrigaine asked with a mildly irritated tone.

A pleasant British female voice announced over the P.A. system that the flight to London Heathrow was now ready for pre-boarding for people escorting small children or requiring assistance, thank you.

In a few minutes the crowded gate would empty and our concealment would disappear. I had to act now, either by sneaking out unnoticed or--

A heavyset woman in a green polyester pantsuit and an equally hefty man in baggy shorts hurried up to the gate and stood in line at the counter. Sticking up out of a side pocket in the woman's Louis Vuitton purse were passports and tickets bundled together with a rubber band.

"Stay here," I murmured to Morrigaine. "I'll be right back."

I stood up and used my old man shuffle to make my way toward the ticket counter. As I passed the overweight couple, I casually bumped the woman's purse. With practiced familiarity, I plucked the bundle of documents from the purse and transferred it into the slot of a nearby trash receptacle in a single, smooth motion. Again, this theft of necessity did little for me.

I returned to where Morrigaine was sitting. "Let's go," I said mildly, picking up the backpack and carry-on suitcases. "I think we're about to get a lucky break." She gave me a curious look but said nothing.

As we approached the counter, I heard the heavyset couple arguing with the check-in agent. "...but we had them when we went through security!" the man insisted.

"I'm sorry, sir," the agent explained in a British accent, a sympathetic expression on her face, "but without

your tickets and passports we cannot allow you to board the plane."

The man raised his voice and said something about suing the airline. A security officer approached and asked the couple to please step aside. Angrily the pair stormed off.

I stepped up to the counter, my own tickets in hand. In my hoarse Bob's voice I said, "My wife and I are on standby. Any seats open up?"

Chapter 16.

"Fifteen hundred years"

Not only did we have no further trouble getting on the flight, but the seats were in "World Traveler Plus" class, which meant at least a little more legroom and other comforts for the long trip. And with the addition of a limp to my gait, Morrigaine and I were ushered to the front of the line. We found our seats and I gave Morrigaine the window. She remarked how the place was overly crowded with seats, and she wondered what we were doing here. "Another waiting room?" she asked with a yawn.

I didn't answer. I was carefully observing the passengers as they filed in, trying to spot any likely law enforcement personnel.

Morrigaine looked out the window. "Those large platforms that stick out from the outer wall of this building, what are they?" she asked, pointing.

"The same things sticking out from the sides of the airplane we saw take off," I said, still watching the incoming passengers. "They're called wings."

She stared at me with wide, child-like eyes. "This is...we are going to *fly*? This entire room?"

I chuckled. "Of course. How else did you think we were going to get to Scotland?"

"Of course," she breathed, gazing ahead.

"I'd have thought someone who believes in magic wouldn't be surprised at the idea of flying."

"Flying a huge room filled with hundreds of people all at once? And so far?" She shook her head in amazement. "What can I do to help?"

"Let's let the pilot handle this one, okay?" I glanced down the aisle at the passengers still finding their seats, and added, "But I wouldn't mind if you cast a 'hurry-up' spell."

She shook her head. "For 'cuss-tims' I must save my remaining *éssänts*, Silver." She frowned uncomfortably. "Not much do I have left."

After what seemed like an eternity to me, the flight attendants closed the doors and the 747 disconnected from the boarding ramp. Fortunately, I hadn't seen anyone suspicious board the plane. The flight attendants went through the usual seat belt and emergency spiel, which Morrigaine observed closely. Finally the jet began to taxi down the runway.

Morrigaine stared out the window. She gasped as the engines roared and the jet accelerated, pressing our backs into the seats. When we lifted off the ground, her expression flickered between fear and excitement. Then she watched, mesmerized, as the city rushed by below, shrinking as we gained altitude.

"Such power," she murmured to herself. "Such power...."

The higher we climbed the more I relaxed, until exhaustion finally overwhelmed me and I allowed my eyes to slide shut. I listened to the drone of the engines, felt the soft but persistent acceleration holding me firmly to my seat.

Morrigaine leaned close and said, "So, you said a 'pilot' is flying this room, aye? And tell me I suppose you will that he uses only machines to make this room fly?"

I pretended to be asleep.

Fortunately, she soon dozed off herself. Sleep eluded me, however, as twisted dreams kept jerking me awake. And the mild discomfort caused by my cancer felt more persistent now, more like a continuous ache deep in my chest. I hoped it was just my imagination. Despite the dreams and the discomfort, exhaustion eventually won out and I drifted off for a while.

When I awoke, I found Morrigaine listening to music over headphones. She swayed to the tune with her eyes closed. I nudged her arm, and she opened her eyes and

smiled at me. Even through her aging Elaine disguise she had an attractive smile.

"*Sultrién*," she said, removing the headphones. "This music device a serving wench gave me. What a remarkable gift!" She paused and her smile faded. "But no *éssänts* do I detect within it. Understand this I do not...."

The nap had refreshed my mood and my sense of curiosity, so I asked, "So what made this essence stuff disappear, anyway?"

She sighed and shook her head. "No one knows. His whole life the Great Druid *Aumérllynex* sought the source of the *éssänts* drain, but to no avail."

"Uh-huh. Who is Aum...Aumair...who is that guy?"

"*Aumérllynex*. Lifecaster and movecaster. Possibly the greatest of the Great Druids."

"I see. So what happened to him?"

"I do not know. If the *däemán* attacked the Great Druids, easily they should have been able to defend themselves. But weakened they all were from battle, so..."

"Battle?"

She nodded. "As *éssänts* weakened, so too did *Ile-bráytyn's* defensive castings that for ages had made the land so difficult to find by causing winds and currents to carry ships away. Emboldened by the weakening, *Sáüks'ain* raiders launched from the mainland waves of ships to our lands. Although all his time *Mähdríedd* had to spend on his task to restore *éssänts*, valiantly the other six Great

Druids directly fought back against the invaders. Powerful storms from the skies and leviathans from the deep they summoned to swamp *Sáüks'ain* ships and smash them to pieces."

She sighed. "But in the reduced *éssänts* many *Sáüks'ain* vessels still reached our shores. There too the six Great Druids attacked them, by greatly enhancing the fighting prowess of Lord *Ærturrínn's* warriors, by laying wards and casting traps, by corroding the invaders' weapons and confusing the minds of their leaders, and more. With castings of lightning I contributed, burning the enemy in their armor."

"I'll bet that came as quite a shock."

She ignored my lame joke and continued. "But...far too many there were," she said with anguish in her voice. "To a man were all Lord *Ærturrínn's* greatest warriors slain. And their stronghold of *Khámmæ-yette* fell. The *Sáüks'ain* raiders put to the sword everyone within its walls."

She fell silent for a moment, with an expression so somber I decided against making any further attempts at humor. Then she sighed and added, "Two nights after that the *däemán* came for *Mähdríedd* and me."

She looked down and said nothing more, so I said, "I see. So...what would have happened if that demon-thing hadn't come for you?"

"Upon activation of *Mähdríedd's* scroll, *éssänts* would have returned in full. In *full*, Silver--far stronger than I have ever experienced! And with his lifecasting thus infused with much greater power, *Mähdríedd* would have resurrected all Lord *Ærturrínn's* warriors. Any wounds they suffered would have instantly healed, so easily they could have driven out the *Sáüks'ain* raiders! If only prepared I had been for the *däemán*, I could have..."

A scruffy-faced passenger across the aisle from me leaned over and said, "I think I saw that one. Val Kilmer was in it, right?"

Morrigaine glowered at him. His smile faltered and he returned to reading his book...which I happened to notice was titled "The Dark Age."

Something clicked in my head. "Wait a sec...." I sat up and turned to Morrigaine. "Exactly when were you supposedly put into the statuette?"

She thought for a moment. "The fifth day of summer."

"No, I mean of what year?" I watched closely for a reaction in her pale blue eyes. For what reaction I wasn't sure.

"Why, this year, I think. Although no memory do I have of my time inside the crystal. Why do you ask this?"

"And what year would this be?" I persisted.

"Twenty-one sixty-two."

"Uh...oh." That wasn't the answer I'd expected. "Are you sure?"

"Twenty-one sixty-two..." she repeated, "...years After *Wolzgaánt*. Unless a different calendar you use?"

Ah. "Do you know the calendar based on someone named 'Jesus Christ'?"

"*Jesú hei Kraísttüè*? Of course! One of the seven Great Druids he is...was."

I blinked. "You knew him when he was alive?"

She nodded matter-of-factly. "Indeed. A lifecaster he discovered himself to be when the *Rómiani* nailed him to a tree five centuries ago, and--"

"Hold on...you're saying he was crucified five hundred years *before* you were put into the statuette?"

She nodded.

"Yet he was still alive in your time?"

She nodded again. "For many centuries can a lifecaster extend his life."

Oh boy. I sat back. 500 A.D. was roughly the time frame I'd figured. She claimed to be from Scotland, which she called *Ile-bráytyn*. That sounded something vaguely like 'Isle-Britain', didn't it? As in the British Isles? If so, then maybe the druid she referred to as *Aumérllynex* was...*Merlin*. And Lord *Ærturrínn* was...Arthur. *King* Arthur.

The Arthurian legend.

I turned to her and asked, "Did your Lord--I'll call him 'Arthur', okay?--did Lord Arthur have a bunch of knights and a round table, by any chance?"

She nodded. "Famous were his warriors. Large and round was the oak table in their strategy room, but--"

"Uh-huh, and by any chance did they live in a castle called something like 'Camelot'?"

"*Khámmæ-yette*, you mean?"

I stared at her, not sure what to think. Then another realization hit me. "Wait...how do you pronounce your name again?"

"Morrigainausálafé."

"Of course. Morgan le Fay. I do not believe this."

"No, pronounced it is *Morrigainaus*--"

"No, I mean...Morrigaine, I have heard of you."

She looked at me suspiciously. "When first I saw you I thought you appeared familiar, but where did--"

"No, I mean I've read about Morgan le Fay. She was an evil sorceress in the time of King Arthur, during the Dark Ages when--"

She gave me a flat look. "What do you mean, 'evil'?"

I blinked. "I don't know. She supposedly betrayed the sorcerer Merlin. She had a son called Mordred, who killed King Arthur, and--"

"What?" She glared at me. "Heard you these absurdities where? *Aumérllynex* was a Great Druid--never would I betray him! And *Mähdríedd* was my *father*, not my son! Who has slandered our names?"

I chuckled. "Sorry, I guess the Arthurian Legend has changed a little...over the last fifteen hundred years."

"What do you mean fifteen hundred years?"

"That's how long ago the legend says you lived."

Her angry expression slowly faded. She looked around the cabin as if seeing everything for the first time. "So long?..." she asked softly, almost whispering.

Then she turned to me with pain in her eyes. "No wonder the world has forgotten the existence of *éssänts*. Am I all that remains?"

I could only shrug.

A spark of hope returned to her gaze. "The *däemán* killed *Mähdríedd*, but the fate of the other six Great Druids I do not know. If imprisoned they were in crystal as I was, then alive they may still be too! Any other crystal statuettes did you see where you found mine?"

"Sorry. There was just yours."

She sighed, but then set her jaw with determination. "If alive they remain, then find them I shall."

"Okay, then." I didn't know what else to say. She seemed so sincere. And I couldn't deny my recent experiences. But I still couldn't help thinking insanity or an elaborate hoax made a much more reasonable explanation for all of this than, well...Morgan le Fay sitting next to me on an airplane.

I was about to change the topic of conversation, when a flight attendant came by and offered us lunch. Morrigaine's mood lifted as she dug into the meal of roast

lamb and goat cheese tart. She ignored the utensils and used her fingers.

"At least a wide variety of delicious food you have in this time," she declared, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"You really love this stuff?" I asked. "I'll have to take you to a decent restaurant sometime."

She paused in her eating and looked at me pensively. "About this world I have much to learn...."

"Well, we can start with your sentence structure, if you'd like."

"Why?" She raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Incorrect is my translation?"

"Sometimes it's a little backwards."

"Easy that is to fix."

She spent a moment going through a few of her hand gestures, then said, "Perfectly I speak now, do I not?"

I smiled. "Well, B plus for effort, maybe."

"Be what?"

"Never mind. Your native language has to be the most difficult to pronounce that I've ever heard. Would you write something in it for me?" I handed her a pen and a paper napkin, curious to see if her language was similar to anything I might recognize.

She shook her head. "A written tongue it is not. More crude languages must suffice for that."

"No written version? Why not? Any language can be represented by text."

"Not *Dái-stels*. A most efficient tongue it is, using *éssänts* to carry context and deepen meaning. A written form of it would no more convey full intent than a painting of a man reveals details of his thoughts."

Wistfully, she added, "That *Dái-stels* has not survived the loss of *éssänts* I am not surprised. As my store of *éssänts* wanes, more difficult I find it to speak the language...."

To distract her from descending into melancholy again, I switched on the television and showed her how to select what she wanted to watch.

She stared in delight at the images, then shook her head and said, "A mere machine this cannot be. Some form of *éssänts* must exist that I cannot detect."

"It's just an electronic device," I insisted.

"How is such a thing possible?"

I tried to explain to her how television worked, but everything I described just inspired her to ask more questions about related technologies: LCD screens, data transmission, computers...I finally ended up having to explain the basics of electrical power generation.

"So," she said when I'd finished, "what you are telling me is that a lightning casting makes these image castings appear?"

I gave up and suggested she go back to listening to music on her headphones. Instead, she looked through the onscreen list of available movies and zeroed in on one called *The Death of King Arthur*. Something told me this wasn't a good idea, but she insisted on watching it.

The movie turned out to be a sappy, romantic version of the Arthurian legend with a heavy dose of magic special effects. It portrayed Morgan le Fay as vying with Merlin to manipulate the relationships between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot. I kept glancing at Morrigaine, wondering what must be going through her head, but she just sat quietly through the whole show, watching intently.

At the end she frowned in dismay. "So petty and depraved is how people in this age remember me?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I'm guessing the movie isn't exactly an accurate portrayal?"

She snorted. "'Queen' *Guénevieren*? *Queen*? *Guénevieren* was the name of Lord *Ærturrínn's horse*!"

"Oh?" I grinned. "Then I hope Lancelot figured that out in time."

"But one thing it does reveal," she said, her expression changing to a smile of triumph. "In *Ile-bráytyn éssänts does* still exist!"

I winced. "Morrigaine...it's just a movie. It's not real."

She gave me a scornful look. "With my own eyes I saw it."

"With your own eyes you saw special effects. Think of it as...as an 'illusion casting', as you call it, to make magic seem real in the story."

"So you admit illusion castings still do exist," she said with smug satisfaction.

"Oh screw this," I said, reaching for a magazine. It just doesn't pay to argue with some people.

#

We arrived at London Heathrow that evening with no further problems. As the plane touched down with a squeak of tires and a roaring shudder, Morrigaine grabbed my hand and held her breath. She glanced around at the other passengers and, noticing their lack of alarm, let go of my hand and calmly gazed out the window. Still, I detected a nervous glitter in her eyes until the plane slowed to a more car-like pace.

"The journey is complete?" she asked. "We are in *Ile-bráytyn*?"

"It's called the United Kingdom now. But yes, we're here. We still have another plane trip to make, though."

Before we deplaned, I explained the customs procedure to Morrigaine. I knew I couldn't leave the backpack on the plane because someone would surely find it before we made it out of the airport. That meant relying on Morrigaine's hypnosis-like trick once again, something I definitely did not want to do. But what other choice was there?

When I told her that customs officials occasionally let luggage through without being inspected at all, she gestured dismissively and said that would make her task simple. Her careless confidence only made my stomach feel even more queasy, and I tried to impress upon her how much trouble we would be in if we got caught. She just smiled at me, which didn't help one bit.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried. When the customs official he asked us about our luggage, Morrigaine whispered a few words to him...and the man simply waved us through. I had to admit she was turning out to be a very handy person to have around, although that smug grin of hers was beginning to get on my nerves.

As we waited at a ticket counter to get on a connecting flight to Glasgow, Morrigaine pointed to a group of Japanese tourists. "Not well does this bode for us if the barbaric *Hünnés* have reached the shores of *Ile-bráytyn*," she said with concern.

"I think you'll find they're a pretty well-behaved bunch now," I said dryly.

She studied them warily. "*Aumérllynex* once battled one of their druids."

"A Japanese druid? I'm guessing 'druid' is a rather generic term to you."

She stared at me in sudden realization. "Since *Mähdríedd* failed to return *éssänts*, surely *Ile-bráytyn* is overrun with *Sáüks'ain* raiders!"

I chuckled. "A lot has happened in the last fifteen hundred years, Morrigaine. After the Saxons, came the Vikings and then the Normans, I think. And since then there's been enough international travel to mix up every original ethnic group. The Saxon tribes don't exist anymore."

She gave me a cold smile. "The *Sáüks'ain* truly are gone?"

"Ye-ah. For all practical purposes." I decided she didn't really need to know I was of Anglo-Saxon descent myself.

#

The short flight to Glasgow arrived well before midnight. Our rental Mercedes and a map of Scotland were waiting for us. Although neither Morrigaine nor I had managed to get enough sleep on the flight from JFK, we both felt anxious to get going. She pointed out the general location of her father's keep on the map: a sparsely inhabited region northwest of Dumfries.

The drive took over an hour, taking us off the main motorways and through several quaint towns. We stopped only briefly at a service station and used their restroom to remove our disguises. We switched into jeans, hiking boots and thick wool sweaters.

We drove through sparsely populated farmland, then into wet, rocky hills and boggy valleys with occasional stands of conifers. Morrigaine became oddly subdued as she

gazed through the window at the moonlit countryside. She commented sadly that the magnificent forests were gone.

I tried to cheer her up by asking what life was like in her time. No, I still didn't really believe she could be a fifteen-hundred-year-old legendary sorceress, but I preferred her distractions to being left with my own thoughts.

She launched into a long explanation of her world. The way she described it, the Dark Ages weren't quite as dark as history portrayed them--at least not initially.

"Truly commonplace druids never were..." she said, "...at least not since long before I was born. But few nobles there were who did not employ at least a handful of us, which greatly improved the lives of their subjects."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well, from clouds weathercasters coaxed rain to aid crops, and for ship's sails they summoned steady winds. Lifecasters eased the birth of people and of livestock, and they aided those with injuries and disease. Movecasters repaired damaged tools and armor, floated wagons across impassable ground, and lifted heavy stones to help construct walls and keeps. Flamecasters heated water, sealed wounds, fueled forges and ignited enemies. Beastcasters commanded and tamed wild animals. And so on. For even the least powerful druid it was easy to find work performing some common tasks that freemen or peasants could not do better."

Her gaze turned wistful. "But as *éssänts* began to wane, so too did its benefits. First to lose their powers were most of the lesser druids. And with their loss, life became more difficult for many. More frequent and bloodier the wars became. Many a tribe and nation did stagnate and regress."

"You'd think some of those details would have made it into the history books," I pointed out.

She shrugged with that raised-palm gesture. "Little good came from the loss of *éssänts*, but one fortunate occurrence was the weakening of the mainland's legion of Grand Imperial Druids. For centuries had they expanded the *Rómiani* empire, helping their powerful armies to capture and rule most of the mainland and beyond. To take *Ile-bráytyn* was one of their main goals, and several times they did invade and occupy portions of our land. But with the gradual loss of *éssänts*, the powers of the Grand Imperial Druids faded. And without their strength to support the huge *Rómiani* empire, slowly it collapsed."

Now that I had a historical context for what Morrigaine was describing, I could figure out what she was talking about. "I don't know if it helps," I offered, "but the Roman Empire never regained its former glory." I gave her a brief description of what had happened to Rome and what it was like now.

She nodded soberly and said, "Good it is to hear that. Still, I suggest that you not turn your back on the *Rómiani*. A ruthless and expansionistic people they are."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said dryly. "By the way, has anyone ever accused you of being a little bit racist?"

She snorted. "My land they invaded and my countrymen they killed. What would you have me do? Embrace them?"

"Well, I don't think you need to be quite so worried about the Romans these days." I didn't think it necessary to mention that my father was Italian.

Morrigaine gave a wan smile and said, "As a child I was less suspicious. But early on I learned common people shun the more powerful druids and their families. They fear such excess of power, even though in my youth I knew no castings. And suspicion breeds suspicion."

"So how did you learn to cast spells?"

"The same way as most do, with patrons and mentors. In childbirth my mother died, and for much of my education my father sent me to *Khámmæ-yette*. As the daughter of *Mähdríedd* I was expected to have an affinity for the casting arts, and so I worked with the few druids who could still use the weakened *éssänts*. My mindcasting ability they soon identified, and they helped develop my aptitude with misdirection. This much was no surprise. But one day as I attempted to dissuade an angry dog from biting Sir *Gáwayinn's* manservant, from my hands I released a crackling spark instead." She smiled. "So fast I had never before

seen a dog run away! And with it my potential to become a Great Druid was revealed."

"Because only Great Druids can cast lightning spells?"

She shook her head. "A single type of casting is all most druids can ever achieve. But manifesting two very different types of castings...that only a very few can manage. Potential Great Druids they are, for beyond all other druids can they excel within their specialties, and they can even learn additional lesser castings. So rare are Great Druids that not even the child of a Great Druid is expected to become one. That I showed such abilities came as a great surprise."

She paused so I said, "Congratulations?"

She nodded graciously and continued. "Thus I came to the attention of *Aumérllynex*. My powers he investigated and tested, and then my education began in earnest. To help me develop my talents, *Aumérllynex* saw to it that I had the best tutors. Quickly I learned." She gave a nostalgic smile.

"And as my skills developed, *Aumérllynex* enlisted me to help him in his quest to discover the source of the loss of *éssänts*. Eventually, all my time I spent either studying or assisting *Aumérllynex*...until the end, when severe became the loss of *éssänts* and *Ile-bráytyn* was invaded."

"Sounds like you didn't have much time for yourself," I said.

She smiled and did the raised-palm shrug. “My life had purpose,” she said.

I glanced at the map. “Well, I guess we’ll soon see if it still does. We’re almost there.”

As we approached our destination, Morrigaine had me stop occasionally and drive down side roads so she could get her bearings.

“So different it has all become,” she said in dismay. “But familiar are some of the land shapes. And something in the air I can feel...”

Finally, she pointed off in a direction perpendicular to the road. I drove up and down looking for a side street heading that way, but there just wasn’t any.

“Walk we must,” she finally said.

Chapter 17.

"A curse has been cast"

I parked the Mercedes on the side of the road and we climbed out. I grimaced as I looked across the bleak, rocky terrain. This didn't look promising. I just hoped Morrigaine wasn't leading me on a wild goose chase.

I shouldered the backpack and reached inside for a flashlight. As I fished it out, I noticed Morrigaine peering intently at me.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

She frowned. "Somehow...so familiar you look to me right now."

"Huh. And you don't think our being together almost constantly for the past day and a half might have something to do with it?"

She waved a hand dismissively. "No, it is your attire I refer to." She gestured at my black sweater and jeans. "Did we see someone who wore clothes of the same type?"

"I don't think so. Come on, we need to find Dana."

Morrigaine watched as I flicked the flashlight on briefly to test it, and she opened her mouth to say something. "No!" I said, before she could ask. "It's just batteries!"

She gave me a dubious look, then turned and walked toward the empty hills. I took a deep breath and followed. Despite the desolate landscape, I found myself in the mood for a walk after all the hours of sitting in planes and cars. The nearly full moon provided enough light for our hike, although dark, scudding clouds gradually crept in as we walked. I eyed them with suspicion and wished I'd thought to bring an umbrella.

We walked in silence for a long while. I followed Morrigaine steadfastly, watching her lithe form wend its way through the rocky hills, her long copper hair occasionally tossed about by gusts of wind. Periodically she paused to weave patterns with her hands and mutter under her breath, then she would change her heading slightly and set off again. She paused once to mention how bracingly fresh the air felt, and how the smell of heather in the air made her miss her home terribly.

Bracingly fresh, hell. It was damn *cold*.

When I saw a wisp of fog floating over a nearby hill, I joked, "Watch out for the ghost, Morrigaine."

She froze and stared where I indicated, then waved a hand dismissively and continued walking. "No ghost is that," she said. "Merely fog."

I shook my head and smiled. "So you believe in ghosts. Why am I not surprised?"

She nodded. "Of course. They are but detached spirits that remain after the deaths of their bodies."

"Yeah? And how can that possibly happen?"

"If there is enough *éssänts*, then through strength of will alone can someone who died a bad death remain. Others return when summoned by a deathcaster, who controls them."

"Like that moom...like Mister Beel."

"Aye. Most spirits are harmless and unseen, though for brief periods some can will themselves visible. To interact with the world they may possess bodies--living or dead. Of course, easier it is for spirits to possess the dead, since no spirit already resides in the body. Once I witnessed a ghost repossess its own remains."

"Is that so?"

"Aye. The spirit of a *Sáüks'ain* raider animated its own rotted corpse. It hacked to pieces two warriors of *Khámmæ-yette* before my lightning casting destroyed that mindless creature for good."

I smiled and said, "Morrigaine, zombie slayer." I thought for a moment and added, "Moom...moomree...that sounds kind of like 'mummy,' doesn't it? I wonder if..."

My smile faded as my insides lurched. I put a hand to my stomach. It roiled queasily.

I took a deep breath and continued on, but a few steps later my stomach lurched again. Nausea welled up in my throat and I broke out in a cold sweat.

"Hold on, Morrigaine..." I said, "I don't feel so great." I felt lightheaded and my vision swam, so I dropped the backpack and took a seat on a lichen-covered rock.

Suddenly my stomach cramped painfully and I doubled over. "What the hell did I eat?" I gasped between clenched teeth. Another wave of nausea hit me and it was all I could do to keep from vomiting.

Morrigaine lowered herself onto another rock. She grimaced and held her stomach as well. "I too feel..." She blanched and put a hand to her mouth. Her complexion lost what little color it had.

Despite our brisk pace, the cold air had leaked through my thick wool sweater and I started to shiver. My toes and fingers felt numb and my calves ached as if I'd been marching all day. Another spasm of nausea again threatened to empty my stomach.

"*Nërltréngh*!" Morrigaine moaned. She leaned forward, hugging her middle.

"Food poisoning," I gasped. "I've had it before and it can get really nasty. We need to head back."

"Aye, we should go. I..." She raised her head and looked up at me through strands of hair that had fallen over her face. "Wait. No. Something is wrong."

"I'll say. Airline food's never made me this sick before."

"No, I mean...ill we both became at the same time. Why?"

"Who cares? Let's just go before it gets any worse."

I hauled myself to my feet. My joints ached, my skin felt uncomfortably sensitive, and I could feel a vicious headache coming on. "Why did I ever let you drag me on this fool's errand?" I mumbled.

"Fool's errand?" she snapped. "This from one who knows nothing of *éssänts*!"

"Again with the goddamn essence." I looked back the way we'd come, dreading the long walk back. My stomach lurched again. "I've let a madwoman drag me halfway around the world...."

She jumped to her feet, her eyes blazing. "Mad you accuse *me* of being? Several times you have witnessed the use of *éssänts*, yet *still* you do not acknowledge it exists? Even when it is so obviously...so obviously..."

She hesitated, the anger fading from her eyes.

I wanted to tell her to just get the hell out of my life, but another stomach cramp hit me and all I could do was hunch over and groan.

Morrigaine's fingers twisted a pattern in the air. She closed her eyes and shuddered once, and the tension visibly drained from her face.

She looked at me. "My apologies, Silver," she said softly. "Upon this land a curse has been cast. Little wonder it is so empty--the discomfort of such a sickness casting no one could bear for long."

"A curse? I thought you said there wasn't enough essence left for spells."

She smiled with relief. "Here there is. Can you not feel it? There is *éssänts* here! Weak it may be but I can feel myself slowly replenishing!"

She came closer and looked into my eyes. "The last of my *éssänts* store I used to free myself of the effects of the curse. At this rate, much time I will need for my reserve to be sufficiently replenished, but the effects I shall remove from you as soon as I can, that I swear."

"Fine," I mumbled. The headache had turned into a stabbing pain behind my eyeballs. "Let's just get the hell out of here."

"No." She looked around at the dismal landscape and smiled. "For a reason are curses are made. Something worth hiding is somewhere nearby. We must continue on."

"Morrigaine, we can't stay here!" I complained. "I'm seriously ill!"

"Serious ill you are not."

"How the hell do you know?" The plaintive tone in my voice made me cringe. I'd never been fun to be around when I was sick, even when it was just a minor head cold, but this was truly embarrassing.

She rolled her eyes and spoke to me as if talking to a child. "I know, trust me. Just a little while longer, Silver."

I desperately wanted to crawl into a warm bed and pass out for a day or two, but out of sheer mortification I forced myself to mutter, "All right. Just a little while longer."

She nodded. Then she cocked her head as if trying to hear a faint cry. "The signature of *éssänts* is slightly stronger in..." She pointed toward a long rise covered with tangled briars, "...that direction."

Just the thought of heading up that rise caused me to break out in a cold sweat again. "Any direction but th-that," I said, clenching my teeth to keep them from chattering.

"The direction you least want to go is that way?" She raised an eyebrow. "Then the correct direction it must indeed be."

"Oh come on!" I groaned. "You're just saying that to be mean!" That plaintive, childish tone just blurted out again. I wanted to slap myself.

"Trust me, Silver."

I glanced up at the tangle of brush, feeling the vomit rising in my throat. But Morrigaine was already working her way through the mass of prickly briars.

It took all my will to follow her. My stomach gurgled and roiled with every step I took, and I gasped for air between waves of nausea. My skin felt clammy and I alternated between sweating and shivering. But I said nothing, determined not to utter a word as we walked to the top of the incline.

On the other side of the rise, the ground sloped down into a broad basin. The moon provided enough light to illuminate the opposite rim half a mile away. Low-lying fog curled in tendrils over the lip of the basin and flowed down the slope to collect at the bottom. But it didn't conceal the fact that most of the depression was an impassable, marshy bog.

"Great," I grumbled, squinting through my pounding headache. "At least we can walk around the ridge and keep out of that mess."

Morrigaine shook her head sadly. "No. Our destination we have reached. This area I recognize. No forest remains, but this is...was...the location of my father's keep." She pointed to where a stagnant-looking pond lay in the center of the depression. "There is where it once stood. And there is the strongest source of *éssänts*."

I groaned. “Don’t tell me you want to go plodding around in that rotting swamp! You can see from here there’s nothing there!”

“There is where *éssänts* is the strongest.”

“Can’t you get enough of it just standing here? Isn’t this close enough?” My body ached all over and I couldn’t stand the thought of hiking into the basin and then back out again. “I’m sick and I’m cold and I just want to go home!”

Morrigaine’s brief look of disgust cut me to the bone. “Stay here, then,” she said. “The stronger the *éssänts*, the sooner will my reserve be replenished and the sooner I can free you of the curse.” She turned and headed down the slope.

I stared after her, dismayed that I had just whined like a spoiled child. What was the matter with me?

I stumbled after her. “I...I’m sorry, Morrigaine.” I shook my head to clear it but was rewarded with only a shooting pain. My stomach lurched again and I tasted vomit in the back of my throat. “I just don’t feel...”

Her shoulders relaxed and she turned back to face me. “An illness casting like this you have never encountered before, so you do not know how to fight it. The worst sickness you have ever experienced you are currently reliving.” She gazed levelly at me. “When you were but a child I imagine it was. But the illness is not real.”

"It...it's not?" I shivered again. "I'm n-not really sick?"

She shook her head. "Only in your mind does it exist. As soon as I can I shall free you of the curse, that I promise." She turned and continued down into the basin.

She was right about the child thing. The sickest I'd ever been was from a bout of bad food poisoning when I was ten years old. But if the sickness wasn't real and I didn't actually need medical attention, then I just needed to tough it out, right? Surely I could do that.

I took a deep breath and resolved to just keep my mouth shut and follow Morrigaine without any further complaints, no matter what. I forced myself to ignore the cramps, the nausea, the sweats and everything else, and to instead focus on standing tall and walking with purpose. No stumbling, no swaying, nothing but a strong, steady pace as if I felt perfectly healthy.

Then something gave inside my head, almost like my ears popping...and suddenly I felt fine. A little tired, perhaps, but fine. Every symptom I'd had just...vanished. My calves no longer ached, either, and I didn't even feel cold anymore. Was that all I needed? A little attitude adjustment?

The clouds finally began to creep across the moon, periodically robbing the land of its cold light. I switched on the flashlight and illuminated the way for Morrigaine.

As we descended into the depression, the ground became spongy and sloppy, dotted with stagnant puddles. The only life was a dreary assortment of dark mosses, scraggly grasses and bushes, and a few twisted trees. The air smelled like mildew and rot. We walked into a chilling fog that diffused the flashlight beam into a murky glow. The fog eerily reflected our breathing and the squishing sounds of our footsteps.

Morrigaine paused at the edge of the broad, scum-covered pond and kneeled down to inspect it. I started to suggest we walk around it, but then I remembered my resolution and stayed silent. Besides, she seemed to know what she was doing.

She stood up and stared out across the pond. Then she took a long stride right out into the slimy water.

And she abruptly disappeared.

"Morrigaine!" I cried. I dropped the pack on the mossy bank and jumped in after her--

--and crash-landed clumsily onto a small bush. I lost my balance, slipped and fell on my butt. I stared around in surprise. The pond was gone. It had completely vanished! Morrigaine stood in front of me, staring down at me with wide eyes. She burst out laughing.

"Into the water you thought I fell, did you not?" she said.

"Very funny," I growled, my dignity bruised worse than my tailbone. "All right, I'll bite. Where did the water go?"

She offered me a helping hand, which I reluctantly accepted. "Still here it still is, viewed from there." She pointed at the spot where she had stopped to inspect the pond. "It is an illusion, an image casting to keep out the curious should the curse fail. A very good casting it is, too. No flaws could I see until I actually touched it. Much time someone spent perfecting it."

I frowned and brushed off my jeans. I stepped back onto the "shore" to pick up the backpack, and when I turned around...there was the pond again, all stagnant and vile-looking. I planted a foot firmly in the slimy water--and *poof*, it vanished. I stepped back and tried it again. And again. Then I squatted down at the edge of the pond and slowly poked a finger into the water until the pond disappeared yet again.

"Un-freakin'-believable...." I looked up at Morrigaine. "It's not a hologram, is it? And I haven't been hypnotized either, have I?"

She rolled her eyes. "It is an image casting. Now all night do you wish to play with it? Or do you wish to see what it was concealing?"

I stood up, my head spinning. For the first time I had to admit I no longer doubted that magic--or something that might as well be magic--actually existed. I'd really

thought I was onto something with the whole hypnosis thing, and I might have even been willing to believe the incident with Mr. Beel was some sort of hallucination...but no longer. And if magic was real, then that meant...well, I didn't know what it meant. But the world was now a far different place than I'd ever imagined. I needed time to process this....

"Behold," Morrigaine said, sweeping her arm in a wide arc to encompass a huge dark shape that loomed out of the marsh before us.

The base of the shape mostly lay hidden by the fog, but when I looked up I could see the form materialize into a high wall. Dark vines formed a ragged net over blocks of weathered, water-stained stone. Beyond the wall I could see a square tower projecting above the fog.

I gaped. "How in the world did we not see this before?"

"Image casting, Silver." She gazed up at the wall, her eyes shining through strands of fog-dampened hair. "I too thought the keep no longer stood."

Well, if magic was real, that meant Morrigaine probably wasn't crazy after all. I had grown strangely comfortable indulging her strange fantasies without truly believing them. It looked like that was going to have to change.

I clapped her on the back and said, "I really am partnered with Morgan le Fay, aren't I?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Come on, druid, let's take a look at your home."

The fog thinned as we approached the ancient walls, and I could see how large the keep really was. In my mind's eye I had pictured only a relatively small tower, but this one had an impressively formidable outer wall. The place looked more like a small castle.

"Of the finest of keeps it is," she said proudly, as if she had read my mind. "--was," she corrected. "And the first of its kind constructed of stone instead of wood. The inspiration it was for the construction of *Khámmæ-yette*."

As I looked up at the wall, I didn't pay attention to where I was putting my feet. My foot caught on something and I stumbled. I shined the flashlight on the object that had tripped me--and took a hasty step backward.

It was a human ribcage. The decayed remains of the skeleton lay half embedded in the moist earth. The remnants of a rusty chainmail tunic partly covered its discolored ribs. Its skull wore a rusted, conical helmet. A corroded broadsword lay partially sunk into the mossy ground nearby.

I shined the flashlight around the area. The beam illuminated another skeleton a short distance beyond the first. Then another beyond that. And then another...I spotted at least half a dozen of them. All wore decayed

leather or chainmail armor. Rusty swords, spears and other ancient weapons lay with the remains.

"Recognize these guys?" I asked Morrigaine.

She stared warily at the skeletons. "No. But that is armor typical of *Sáüks'ain* raiders."

"Hm. Anything left out in this climate for fifteen hundred years would have completely rotted away by now."

"Not necessarily, Silver. The *éssänts* is stronger here, and enough there possibly is to support a preservation casting on the area. Not much has the keep aged."

I gave her a sideways look. "You mean you lived in this place as it is now?" I didn't mind a rustic atmosphere, but this place was about as cheerful as a dungeon.

She gave a one-palm shrug. "Almost. Magnificent, is it not? Let us enter within."

I gave a last glance at the skeleton at my feet, then did a double take. "Wait a second."

I kneeled down and peered at the rusted helm. There was a small round hole just above where the left eyebrow would be. I touched the inward-curving edges of the hole.

"Something wrong?" Morrigaine asked.

"Something interesting," I murmured.

I pulled the Beretta from my backpack and ejected the magazine. I removed a cartridge and inserted the bullet into the hole. It was a perfect fit.

"If this guy died from a nine-millimeter bullet to the head, then he had to have lived within the last hundred years. But then what was he doing wearing ancient armor?"

I checked some of the other remains. One had two 9mm holes in its helmet. "Looks like someone shot up the local Renaissance faire," I said.

"The what?"

The clouds finally made good on their promise, and a light drizzle began to fall. "Let's find some shelter," I suggested.

We hurried up to the castle wall, spotting several more skeletons along the way. "At least this place doesn't have a moat," I said, touching the rough stone of the eighteen-foot tall wall. It was too high and too smooth to climb. "Is there a front door around here someplace?"

Morrigaine headed off to the right. I followed her along the length of the wall and around the corner. An archway built into the wall had once stood here, but the ground was wetter and part of the wall had sunk into it. The massive wood doors had long ago toppled outward and now lay slowly moldering on the ground. Most of the arch had also collapsed, and scattered blocks of mossy stone lay embedded in the soft earth around the doors.

We crossed over the doors, which felt crumbly and spongy under my hiking boots, and entered the castle walls. Inside was an open courtyard, roughly square in shape and forty yards across. The square tower I had seen earlier

projected up from the center. Built against the inside of the surrounding wall were several small stone buildings with wooden doors and shuttered windows. They were separated by a few open shelters with wood roofs over what might have been animal feed troughs lining the wall. A small stone well stood between the wall and the tower. The rest of the courtyard was mostly bare, except for occasional clumps of grasses and low bushes that had invaded the grounds. Actually, I thought the ruin looked surprisingly picturesque, despite its desperate need for repair.

"There was where the *däemán* held me," Morrigaine said quietly, indicating an open spot in the middle of the courtyard. She then pointed at the top of the square tower, jutting like a skeletal finger above the fog. "And there was where my father..." She let her hand drop.

The moon finally disappeared behind the clouds for good. Distant thunder rumbled and the rain started coming down hard. I grabbed Morrigaine's hand and we ran to the nearest open shelter, just to the right of the entrance. The rotting roof leaked but it managed to keep out most of the rain. That the shelter still stood at all after fifteen hundred years didn't seem likely--unless of course its decay had somehow been magically arrested, as Morrigaine had suggested. Or maybe someone had rebuilt it relatively recently, or it was receiving periodic maintenance.

But this place didn’t look inhabited. My hopes of finding Dana here began to fade.

We stood for a moment, listening to the rain drum against the wood roof and watching puddles form in the courtyard. Morrigaine hugged her arms, looking as damp and uncomfortable as I felt. I put an arm around her shoulder to try to help her keep warm. She had a lavender scent, I noticed...just like the fragrance that had lifted from the broken shards of her statuette.

“Where to now?” I asked. I was anxious to get moving again so I could warm up.

“The tower,” she answered, gazing up at the square pillar of stone rising into the sky. “There we may find...” Something on the other side of the courtyard caught her attention.

I followed her gaze. Through the rain I saw a faint blue glow on a door to a stone building.

She stared at it in surprise. “A ward? One still exists?”

She ran out across the courtyard and I followed. Fortunately, the door stood under part of a wood shelter so we were able to duck out of the rain again. Bands of rusted iron reinforced the wood door, and a thick iron latch held it shut.

Painted on the door at chest height was a symbol that looked a lot like one of those detailed characters on the

parchment piece, only this one was the size of my fist and it glowed with a faint, almost iridescent blue sheen.

I reached out a hand toward the symbol, but Morrigaine grabbed my arm and pulled me away.

"No! A lightning ward that is," she hissed. "Touch the door without speaking the proper word of passage and it will kill you."

"I see," I said, swallowing. "Well, axiom sixteen is the greater the security, the greater the reward. Any idea why this is here?"

"No."

"Then how do I, um, deactivate it?"

"You do not. I do. Lightning castings I know well. Just stay back and do not touch me."

I gave her plenty of space, although I held up the flashlight so she could see clearly. She took a deep breath and stepped up to the door. She reached out with one hand and, with intense focus, used one finger to slowly and painstakingly trace over the glowing whorls of blue paint without actually touching the symbol. I caught myself holding my breath. As her finger moved, the blue glow gradually diminished. After a couple of minutes, it had completely disappeared.

Morrigaine eased away from the door, but she didn't relax. She turned slowly, her pale face strained, her hand trembling with tension. She kneeled down and placed her palm flat on the ground.

I heard a crackle of electricity and saw a brief burst of light flash from under her hand. My feet tingled.

"Wow," I said, stepping back.

She breathed out and slumped. "It is done," she said wearily.

I helped her to her feet. My stomach felt queasy at the thought of what might have happened if I'd touched the door. Breaking and entering I knew well, but magic was new territory for me. It didn't bode well that I'd almost committed what was probably a rookie mistake.

Morrigaine reached for the door handle, and this time I stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Wherever there is one security measure, there is often another," I said.

She gave me a wry smile. "No axiom for that?"

"How does eight sound? Hang on a sec...."

I gingerly touched the iron latch. Nothing happened, so I lifted it and slowly pushed the door open just a crack. I carefully shined the flashlight around the edges of the opening. A reflection near the top of the door revealed a thin metal wire.

I reached up and slowly ran my fingers along the wire, following it to where it looped over a small hook on the wall. I unhooked it and cautiously pushed the door open further, testing for any resistance. There was none, and I was soon able to open the door all the way.

The wire dangled down from the pin of an M67 fragmentation grenade hanging on a hook embedded in the ceiling.

“Charming,” I murmured.

“That is what?” Morrigaine asked.

“A dramatic vindication of axiom eight. Don’t touch it.”

A steep flight of stone steps led down. I cautiously descended, playing the flashlight beam over the stairs, walls and ceiling to keep an eye out for additional traps. Morrigaine followed. At the bottom we found ourselves in a small, empty square room with a wood door in the opposite wall. I spotted nothing suspicious, so I carefully pulled the door open.

A hallway constructed completely--walls, ceiling and floor--of small stone blocks continued ahead thirty feet and ended in a wall with a small alcove set into the middle. The alcove was just over a cubic foot in size, and within it lay a rectangular object that glittered in the flashlight beam.

Something about the hallway raised my suspicions, although I didn’t detect anything amiss. I lowered the backpack to the floor and motioned for Morrigaine to stay put. Then I cautiously stepped forward and played the flashlight all around me. I spotted nothing, so I slowly made my way toward the alcove.

As I drew closer, I could see the glittering object was a clear glass box with a silver frame. Initially the box appeared empty, but as I neared and raised the flashlight, I noticed a piece of beige paper lining the bottom of the box. Another step closer and I realized it wasn't paper...

It was another piece of parchment.

"Pay dirt, Morrigaine!" I said triumphantly. I stepped within arm's length of the box, and my foot landed on a stone that gave slightly with a faint click.

Instinctively I snatched up the glass box and bolted for the door. The ground trembled, and with a grinding roar the ceiling began to crumble and collapse. I sprinted down the hallway as blocks of stone dropped all around me.

At the end, a thick panel of steel slid down from the top section of the doorframe. I dove for the opening, tossing the glass box and flashlight through ahead of me. I willed the steel panel to stay open even though I could see it would slam down and block off my escape before I even reached it.

Then, to my amazement, the panel caught for a moment with an agonizing screech of metal. I hit the ground and scrambled for the narrow gap beneath the panel. Two falling rocks bounced off my back and calf but I barely felt them. I managed to worm halfway through the opening before the panel dropped again. Just as the thick sheet of metal touched my lower back and I was sure it would slice

me in half, it momentarily caught again. But I had lost my forward momentum. My fingers scrabbled on the smooth stone floor, unable to find any purchase.

Morrigaine grabbed my wrists and hauled back with all her strength. It was just enough--I managed to pull my legs through the opening just as the panel dropped again, crashing to the ground with a boom. A thunderous roar followed an instant later, and with a deep groan the steel door buckled outward under the pressure of several tons of earth and rock. A puff of dust curled up from under the panel.

Morrigaine helped me to my feet. “Are you harmed?” she asked, her eyes wide with alarm.

“I-I’m okay,” I said, shaken. I looked myself over, not quite believing I had managed to stay in one piece. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

She slumped with relief, then managed a smile. “Once again I must come to your rescue,” she said.

I returned the smile as I brushed myself off. “Remind me again who freed you from your crystal statuette prison?”

She ignored that and glanced down at the shattered remains of the glass box. “What did you--?”

The slip of parchment lay amid the shards of broken glass. With a cry of delight, she snatched up the ancient artifact. “Another piece of my father’s scroll!” She held it out for me to see.

The rows of tiny characters covered the parchment piece, just like the one I'd stolen from Sherman Lord. Except this one had a thin strip of whitespace along the top and both sides, and it was torn across the bottom.

I rummaged through my backpack for the first piece of parchment and then held the two pieces together. They fit perfectly.

"The top piece, right?" I asked. "Or are we holding it upside-down?"

"Right you have it, Silver," she said with a broad smile. Her ice blue eyes glittered as she stared at the parchment pieces. "And if two pieces survived, then perhaps so too did the third!"

I nodded. "Maybe so. But the reason I'm here is to find Dana. We need to keep looking."

She nodded and tucked the parchment pieces back into the backpack. "The tower we should check."

We headed back up the stairs and I pulled open the door to the outside.

A dark figure stood just outside, dripping wet from the pouring rain. It wore a tattered hauberk of crumbling chainmail, rotted leather boots, and a rusted conical helmet...with a small hole over the left eyebrow. Fleshless fingers gripped a rusty broadsword.

I stared open-mouthed at the dripping skeleton. The empty eye sockets of its skull stared back at me. Its mud-

streaked, bony arm raised the sword with a scraping sound of rusted metal.

Morrigaine slammed the door shut and leaned against it. Immediately afterward came a dull thunk, and the door shuddered.

I just stood there and gawked. “Jesus H. Christ! Did you see--”

“Possessed corpses guard the keep!” she hissed. “Now do you believe in ghosts? Or must they kill us first?” The door shook and she struggled to close the rusty latch. “Help me!”

I snapped out of it and leaned my back against the door, which shuddered with the impacts of multiple weapons relentlessly pounding against it.

My mind reeled. Curses, illusions, wards and now walking skeletons? How was I supposed to deal with dangers I didn’t even understand? What could I do! I’d never felt so damn useless....

More blows hammered the door, and a section near the top splintered as a heavy axe blade smashed through it. A large chunk of rotting wood broke free from the top, narrowly missing my head as it fell.

I glanced up and my gaze focused on the M67 grenade still dangling from the hook in the ceiling. I may not have known anything about magic, but as someone once said, there are very few problems that cannot be solved through a suitable application of high explosives.

I reached up, grabbed the grenade and yanked it free of its pin. The spoon flung off with a reassuring clink. I tossed the grenade out the gap in the top of the door. A corroded spear thrust back through the hole, barely missing my hand.

"Get down!" I cried, grabbing Morrigaine and pulling her down against the stairs.

The grenade exploded with a jarring *krump* that I felt through the stone steps. The door flung open, and pieces of bone and wood flew in over our heads. Debris ricocheted off the walls and ceiling and bounced down the stairs.

It was Morrigaine's turn to gape in disbelief. Then she turned to me with a suspicious glare and asked, "Just batteries?"

I pulled the Beretta from the backpack and cycled a round into the chamber. "Follow me," I said, scrambling to my feet. Pistol in one hand, flashlight in the other, I ran out the door.

The flashlight beam revealed muddy ground littered with pieces of metal, cloth, leather and bone. A shallow crater in front of the door was rapidly filling with water.

Movement just ahead--I raised the flashlight beam and illuminated a skeletal form emerging from the rain and darkness. It walked toward us with a jerky gait and raised a rusty battle-axe.

"Out the front gate!" I yelled over the lingering ringing in my ears and the hiss of the rain. We turned and ran for the exit.

Another skeleton loomed up ahead. It brandished a sword as it plodded toward us.

Morrigaine veered off to the side and kept running. I paused to take aim with the Beretta, and fired off two quick shots at the skeleton. One round snapped off a rib and the other blasted out some teeth and caused the skull to jerk to the side. But the creature kept coming, undeterred. I turned to follow Morrigaine, but she was nowhere in sight.

Lightning flashed above, illuminating the courtyard for just a second, revealing nearly a dozen skeletons shuffling through the mud toward me from all sides. The lightning flickered out, leaving seared images of the walking dead on my retinas as darkness descended again. Deafening thunder boomed through the courtyard, echoing between the walls.

Something clamped onto my ankle. I shined the flashlight down and saw a skeleton missing everything below its waist hanging onto my ankle with a bony hand encased in a rotting leather gauntlet. Its skull wore a heavily corroded helmet and it grinned at me through broken teeth.

I raised my foot and kicked at the skull, which snapped free from its spine and rolled away into a puddle. But the hand didn't let go.

Another skeleton reached out and grabbed my wrist. I instinctively twisted my hand around to break its grip, but the fleshless hand hung on tenaciously. For having no muscles, this corpse was strong! But now I had a grip on its wrist, too. I quickly twisted the bony arm straight and smashed my open palm against its elbow. The joint snapped completely in two...but the hand remained clamped to my arm.

How the hell was I supposed to fight these things? I threw an elbow strike at the skeleton’s face. The impact ripped the lower jaw completely free, but the skeleton didn’t even seem to notice. It reached out for me with its other clawed hand. I ducked underneath it and tried to back away, but the skeleton hanging onto my leg latched onto my other ankle too.

More bony hands grabbed my shoulders and arms. I tried to twist free, but I’d lost my leverage and my ability to maneuver. My feet slipped out from under me and I crashed down onto my back in the mud. For a moment a paralyzing shock of pain shot through my chest, and I watched helplessly as bleached, grinning faces descended over me, reaching with fleshless hands.

Then something struck my head once hard, then again, harder. The nightmare exploded and swirled away into darkness.

Chapter 18.

"Eyes on the corpse"

Godson stepped through the closet panel into Sherman Lord's hidden office and laboratory. He saw Lord standing before one of his workbenches in the laboratory half of the room, and he hesitated.

Lord wore a full-length white hospital apron over green scrubs. Old brown bloodstains spattered and smeared the front of the apron, but a fresh red stain stood out on his chest. And a line of blood from a random spatter trickled down the bridge of Lord's nose.

On the table before him lay a man in a blue business suit. He had gray hair, a receding hairline and looked to be in his mid-fifties. His pallid, bloated complexion and the milky glaze over his eyes indicated he had been dead for a couple of days at least.

Lord's latex-gloved hands hovered a few inches above the corpse, his fingers moving with grace and precision

reminiscent of a concert pianist playing a complicated concerto. He glanced up at Godson and gestured him over.

Keeping his eyes on the corpse, Godson approached. He could feel the hairs on his arms stand on end, but he managed to keep his face neutral as he breathed through his mouth to avoid the stench of decay.

He hated watching Lord work on his bodies. Of course his boss knew this and often made a point of summoning him to his laboratory when he was working on a new project. Fears were obstacles that had to be faced, conquering fears made one's mind stronger, and a stronger mind meant greater control of one's castings. Lord had repeated this lesson time and time again.

The corpse blinked slowly and turned its milky eyes toward Godson, who managed to suppress a shudder but couldn't stop his upper lip from curling with disgust.

Lord noticed and chuckled. "You can relax, Godson. The corpse is chemically preserved and does not smell."

"Yes, sir. It still looks creepy."

"Not for long...." Lord weaved his hands in a precise pattern over the dead body's face and murmured under his breath.

A new face shimmered into existence over the old one. It was still recognizably the same face, but now the man had a healthy pink complexion and clear brown eyes. He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the table.

Godson's cell phone rang. He concealed his relief as he pulled the phone from a pocket of his black fatigues. He stepped away from Lord's table as if it were an automatic gesture of courtesy rather than an excuse to get away from the corpse. He answered the phone and listened to the report.

Lord inspected the gray-haired man's face with a critical eye from various angles. "Do you know who you are?" he asked.

"Ronald Sheffield," the man answered in a pleasant baritone. "Director of Homeland Security."

"Very good." Lord nodded with satisfaction. "You may go. Await my contact."

"Yes, sir."

Director Sheffield stepped down from the table. He smoothed back his gray hair, adjusted his tie, and headed for the exit.

Godson closed his phone and turned to Lord with a frown. "M.I.5. reported in. Someone tried to break into the keep."

Lord stared at Godson. "Larcini? How could he possibly know about the keep?"

"He's with a woman." Godson steeled himself and added, "A woman with long red hair."

Lord's eyes widened. "What!" He clenched his fists hard enough for the joints to pop. "God damn it! No wonder he has managed to evade me. This is becoming--"

"Sir, they were captured," Godson quickly interjected. "They're being held in the dungeon."

Lord's scowl gave way to a grim smile. "They have been fully secured?"

"Properly incapacitated and under guard. They won't slip away this time."

"Have the jet ready to fly within the hour. Oh, and send Mister Larcini's wife to me immediately. I have a job for her."

Godson flipped open his phone. "Yes, sir."

Chapter 19.

"What to wish for"

Cool water drips from a fountain into a crystal pool. The heady scent of fresh roses flavors the warm air. A woman caresses my cheek with her delicate finger. I float in a sea of pillows of down and silk...

N-No...the bed was hard. Hard as rock, actually. And the air smelled...musty. My skin felt cold, too. I slowly opened my eyes and focused on the finger. Odd, it was kind of fat for a finger. And furry.

A rat.

I lunged to my feet, fully awake, and I winced at the sharp pain that shot through my skull. The rat skittered away into a narrow drainage hole. That sound of water came from a leak in the ceiling dripping into a black puddle next to me. Where was I? My head pounded.

Squinting through the headache, I peered around. I found myself in a dimly lit room about thirty feet across,

with three of the four walls constructed of large stone blocks. The fourth wall was a row of thick iron bars with a padlocked door in the middle. The bars were relatively rust-free and looked strong enough to hold an angry rhino.

Embedded along the bottom of the walls at five-foot intervals were thick iron rings with heavy chains attached. One of those chains led to a shackle locked around my right ankle.

Decades had passed since my time in prison for that failed art heist, but the memories of the panic attacks I'd suffered flooded back in. My heart raced and I broke out in a cold sweat. I had to get out of here.

Outside the bars, a hallway ran left and right, and across the hall from me I could see another cell just like mine, only empty. A dim, smoldering torch in a wrought iron holder down the left side of the hallway provided the only source of light.

On the opposite side of my cell I could see I had more company than just the rat. Six skeletons lay sprawled on the floor, each also shackled to the wall by the ankle. Trace remnants of cloth clung to the dry bones.

I tensed, recalling my recent experience with similar remains, and I looked around for anything to use to defend myself. My backpack was gone, and a quick check of my pockets came up empty. The only things within reach were the chain attached to my leg and a rusted metal bowl that I

figured was either a chamber pot or a food bowl. Maybe I could double up the chain and use it as a flail?

Fortunately, these skeletons seemed content to stay put. Then again, so had the other ones, at first....

"Morrigaine!" I called out. "Can you hear me?" I listened but heard no response. "Dana, are you there? Is anyone here?" Nothing.

I checked myself over. Spattered mud caked my clothing, and one sleeve of my wool sweater had been torn wide open. But at least I wasn't soaked through anymore, just uncomfortably damp. I ached from a dozen cuts and bruises, and a steady pulse thumped in my head. Otherwise I felt okay. At least physically. I still felt jittery, there was a tightness in my chest, and I couldn't shake the feeling that the walls were closing in. But I knew from experience that at least those symptoms would go away if I could just find a way out of this cell.

I checked my watch and discovered the LCD had cracked and leaked black, leaving the display unreadable. The partial dryness of my clothing suggested I'd been unconscious for a long time, although my mild headache seemed a suspiciously light price to pay for being knocked out for so long. Perhaps I'd been drugged?

The scrape of a boot on stone caught my attention, and I looked up. A bald soldier in green camouflaged British military fatigues stepped up to the bars from the right side of the hallway. He carried a pistol slung under his

arm in a nylon shoulder holster, and a ring of keys dangled from his belt.

"At least someone's here," I said with a sigh of relief. "You want to let me out of here, bud?"

The soldier laughed. "You stirred up a bloody hornet's nest," he said with a strong Manchester accent. His smile was not friendly. "In another hour this place is going to be crawling with troops. You pissed off the wrong bloke."

"Where is here? And where is Morri--the redheaded woman? Is she okay?"

"I'd worry more about yourself if I was you, mate." He turned and walked back down the hall.

"Hey!" I called after him. "Is my wife here?"

The only response was the creak of a heavy wood door before it clunked shut somewhere down the hall.

In a fit of frustration, I picked up the rusted bowl and hurled it at the bars. It hit with a loud clang, bounced off the floor, and rolled into one of the skeletons before falling over and clattering to a stop.

A soft, whispery voice echoed through the air. *"Ashgárat efaán...rai-stels?"*

I looked around. The words were so faint I couldn't tell from which direction they'd come. It sounded like Morrigaine's language, but that wasn't her voice.

"Hello?" I said. "I'm sorry but I don't speak that language."

The skeleton the bowl had bumped against stirred into motion. Dry bones scraped against the stone floor, shedding dust and rotting bits of faded cloth. The skeleton slowly sat up and drew itself to its feet, and the fleshless skull tilted up to face me. The empty eye sockets burned with a malevolent orange glow.

"Oh, shit!" I scrambled back against the wall. "Guard!" I yelled. I grabbed my chain and doubled it up to form a two-foot weapon. Awkward, but better than nothing.

The whispery voice came again, this time louder and in oddly accented English. "Our deaths...will not go unpunished!"

With a clicking of bone against stone, the skeleton lurched toward me. It raised its claw-like hands and reached for me--

--and abruptly jerked to a halt, its clutching fingers still ten feet away from me. Slowly it looked down at its foot. The chain shackling its ankle to the wall had extended its full length, preventing the skeleton from moving any further.

I slumped against the wall and gave a sick half-laugh of relief. It sounded more like choking.

The skeleton glared at me with its burning eye sockets. The voice whispered hollowly, "A mere chain...will not stop me...from exacting revenge...."

It backed up several steps, then reached down and grasped its own fettered leg with both hands. It snapped

the dusty bones in two like dry twigs. The shackle slid off and clattered to the floor. The skeleton then fitted the broken bones together...and they visibly fused back into place as if they had never been broken.

The skeleton again turned its malevolent gaze on me. It lurched forward, extending its clawed hands toward my neck.

"Stay back, I'm warning you!" I raised my chain, ready to swing it at the skull. "Why are you coming after me? What the hell did I ever do to you?" Anger vied with fear in my mind, and I welcomed it over fear alone.

The skeleton hesitated. It slowly lowered its head, as if the glowing eye sockets were looking me over from head to foot. Its gaze shifted to the shackle on my ankle and followed the chain to where it connected to the wall.

"You too...are a prisoner?" the whispery voice asked with a note of uncertainty.

"Yes!"

"The *däemán* that captured us...it is not here?"

"Apparently there's just me and a guard."

The skeleton lowered its arms to its sides. "Then...too early has my trap been sprung...."

"Who--what--are you?"

"I am known...was known...as *Aumérllynex*."

My jaw dropped. "Merlin? *The* Merlin? Seriously?"

"That is the name...I am known by now?"

I glanced at the other five skeletons and a light went on inside my head. "Are those...are they the other Great Druids?"

"Aye. Who...are you?"

My panic had evaporated and I lowered the chain. "My name is Silver Larcini, and I'm working with Morrigaine. That's what I call her, anyway--she's the redheaded woman you were training to become a Great Druid. Her father is the Great Druid Mordred who tried to return essence to the world."

The burning glow in the skeleton's eye sockets flared more brightly. "*Morrigainausálafé*...still lives? She and *Mähdríedd*...survived?"

I was beginning to wonder if I was the only person who couldn't pronounce her name. "I'm sorry, the demon killed Mordred. But it put Morrigaine into some kind of stasis inside a crystal statuette. I found and released her."

"It is good to hear...at least she survived...."

I looked over at the other skeletons. "Why are you and the other Great Druids in this cell? What happened to you?"

The voice sighed like a breeze passing through a leafless tree--an incongruous sound coming from a skeleton with no lungs. Then it said, "When the last of the *éssänts*...abruptly disappeared...each of us traveled here...to *Mähdríedd's* keep...to replenish our reserves. The only known place it was...where some *éssänts* might

remain. But already the *däemán* had...taken the keep. With our *éssänts* reserves so depleted...the *däemán* used living dead guardians...to easily capture and imprison us. Within this cell...there is no *éssänts*. Thus we died...not by blade or castings...but by hunger and thirst!" The hollow voice managed to sound both incredulous and indignant.

I frowned. "If there's no essence in here, shouldn't you be dead? I mean...dead-dead, not alive-dead, or undead--whatever you call it."

"Lifecasting and movecasting are...my specialties. I had insufficient *éssänts*...to preserve my life indefinitely without nourishment...or to bend open the bars of this prison. But just enough I still possessed...to infuse myself with two lesser castings. The first...preserved a brief presence of my mind in stasis...and the second...allowed me to animate my remains. When my body was disturbed...the trap would be triggered."

"A trap. For what?"

"The *däemán*. Surely it would come for our remains...I thought. And when it did...my trap would animate...and I would avenge our deaths and the destruction of *éssänts*. Instead...after so many centuries...it was you who disturbed my remains...."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Um. Sorry about that. Is there any way you can...reset it, or something?"

"No. The last of my *éssänts*...I used in its construction. When this reserve is exhausted...I shall be no more." The skeleton lowered its head.

I thought quickly. "If you want vengeance, then what better revenge would there be than to complete Mordred's spell and return essence to the world?"

The skeleton slowly looked up. "Not enough...*éssänts* do I have to--"

"Not you. Morrigaine. She's trying to finish her father's work. She can't do it alone because she doesn't know anything about today's world. But if you can help me get the keys from the guard, I can get out of here, find Morrigaine, and help her complete her father's project."

The voice took on a dubious tone. "How can I know...that you will do this?"

I dropped my chain. "You can't. But if you don't trust me, then you have no chance of getting revenge against the demon. What have you got to lose?"

The skeleton stood quietly for a moment. Then the whispery voice said, "Where is...the guard?"

I jerked my thumb toward the hallway. "Down the hall to the right."

For a moment the burning glow in the skull's eye sockets faded to almost nothing...then it flared into an intense bright orange. The skeleton turned with a creak like old leather and lurched over to the cell door. It turned sideways and pulled itself between the bars,

crushing its sternum and ribs with dry cracking sounds in the process. As it shambled down the hallway, the dangling bones in its chest fused back into place.

The skeleton moved out of my sight, but I could hear the bony feet scraping on the stone floor. Then came the creak of the door opening, followed immediately by the scrape of a chair. Two shots rang out, echoing loudly in the confined hallway. I heard several thumps followed by the start of a cry that suddenly cut short. Then a faint jingle of metal. Again came the scrape of bones against stone approaching down the hallway. I waited, holding my breath.

The skeleton stepped mechanically into view and shuffled slowly up to the bars. Again it forced its way through with the snapping of dry bones. This time, however, the ribs did not repair themselves; they dangled from the fractured rib cage like the broken spars of an ancient shipwreck. The skeleton staggered toward me. Two bullet holes marked its fleshless forehead. The eye sockets glowed only faintly.

The skeleton stopped. It raised its bony hand and held out the soldier's ring of keys. Fresh blood glistened on the white finger bones. Hesitantly, I reached out and accepted the keys.

"Thank you, Merlin," I said.

"Return the *éssänts*...Sil--"

The burning glow within the eyes sockets winked out, and the skeleton collapsed into a heap of dusty bones at my feet.

I stared at the moldering, lifeless bones, thinking what an inglorious an end this was for such a legend. “Rest in peace, Merlin,” I said.

I dropped to one knee and searched through the keys until I found one that fit my shackle. The heavy chunk of iron dropped to the floor. I hurried to the door and found a key that fit that lock as well. As the door creaked open and I stepped out of my cell, it felt as if a great weight had been released from my shoulders. I could breathe freely again.

A second glance at the cell across from mine confirmed it was empty. Further down the hallway to my left, just past the smoldering torch, I could see two more cells, also on opposite sides of the hallway. From this angle they looked empty, but I called out anyway. “Morrigaine! Dana!” Nothing.

So I jogged down to the other end of the hallway, where the soldier had headed. I stepped through an open doorway into a square, stone-walled room with two more hallways in the back leading left and right. Another torch sputtered in its holder in the middle of the far wall, but a glowing gas lamp hanging from a hook in the ceiling provided considerably more light. A wood table and a toppled chair stood in the center of the room.

The soldier lay on the floor, his neck bent at an unhealthy angle and blood staining his collar. A ghastly grimace twisted his mottled, open-eyed face. A pistol lay on the ground next to him.

On the table sat a portable TV/DVD player with a stack of DVDs, two paperbacks, a cardboard box filled with military rations and...my muddy but intact backpack!

I made a beeline for the pack and searched through the contents. Almost all my equipment was still there. The only missing items were the Beretta...and the two scroll pieces. I groaned in dismay.

Hoping to find the missing parchment pieces on the soldier's body, I knelt down and searched through his pockets. Nope, no scroll pieces. And no ID, either, although he did have a cell phone. I switched it on and searched its contents. No contact list and no recent calls listed, but I did find a single text message that read:

> Keep prisoners under max security. Total disablement for the woman. Send recovered artifacts to Colorado enclave immediately. The Director and full security detail are inbound.

So there was a woman being held prisoner here...but was it Morrigaine or Dana? I didn't like the sound of "total disablement" one bit, but it implied to me they regarded her as dangerous. And since Dana couldn't hurt a

fly--outside of a courtroom, at least--that likely meant the other prisoner was Morrigaine. So where were they keeping her?

And if Dana wasn't here, then where was she? Godson had said she'd been taken to the essence enclave, but he hadn't been specific. And apparently there was a second enclave...in Colorado. Had we come all this way for nothing?

I figured the Director had to be Sherman Lord. And if the soldier was to be believed, I had less than an hour to find Morrigaine and get out of here before that "full security detail" arrived.

I picked up the guard's pistol and checked it for damage. It was a Glock 17C 9mm. I'd have preferred my Beretta, but this would do just fine. I unbuckled the soldier's shoulder holster, which held two extra 17-round magazines in Velcroed pouches, and strapped it on over my damp sweater.

I slung the backpack over my shoulder and headed up to the two hallways that ran left and right. The light from the sputtering torch and gas lamp didn't reach far down either hallway, so I fished the flashlight from my backpack and shined it down both passageways. The one on the right ended in a pile of rubble a dozen yards in, where the ceiling had evidently collapsed. So I headed left.

The hallway had an arched ceiling and rough stone walls. I followed it for about fifty feet, where it turned right and headed down a long flight of stone steps.

On the walls to the left and right of the top step, I noticed two faintly glowing, iridescent symbols. The symbol on the left glowed red and the symbol on the right glowed blue. Another identical pair of symbols adorned the walls halfway down the stairs, and I saw a third pair at the bottom.

I shined the flashlight on the nearest blue symbol. It looked exactly like that "lightning ward" Morrigaine and I had encountered earlier. So I kept well away from it and shined the light on the red ward. It was drawn with a different pattern, but I doubted it would be any less dangerous.

This passage was apparently the only route out of here, but I wasn't about to just walk down the steps and hope for the best. I'd watched Morrigaine disarm the lightning ward, but unfortunately I hadn't the faintest idea how she'd done it. I wished I'd thought to ask her to teach me a thing or two about how to deal with essence-based threats.

All right then, what if I tried relating the wards to something I'd actually faced before, like perhaps a new automated weapon security system? The first thing I'd want to know is how it was activated. Did it use pressure plates on the steps? What about a laser tripwire? Or

motion sensors? Or infrared sensors? Any of those options would make sense here.

So what would I do to get by all of those activation systems? My preferred technique would be to simply bypass the weapon entirely, but the confines of the hallway made that unlikely. And I didn't have the proper "word of passage" nor the necessary knowledge of essence to deactivate it. So...a decoy would be the next best option.

Okay, that I could handle. I jogged back to the dead soldier lying on the guard station floor. I grasped him by the ankles, dragged him back down the hallway to the stairs, and lined him up with the top step. With a shove of my boot, I sent him rolling down the stairs.

The corpse had been dead only a few minutes, so its body temperature was still human normal. It also still weighed the same as a live person, of course, and it hit each step as it tumbled down the stairs. Thus, I figured it would likely trigger each of the activation options I'd considered.

Sure enough, the instant the body passed between the first pair of symbols, night erupted into blinding day as a crackling arc of electricity jumped from the blue ward and a roaring jet of flame shot from the red. They both viciously attacked the body like striking snakes, and the discharge of energy released an explosive thunderclap that blasted up the stairs hard enough to knock me backward.

Flaming and contorting horribly, the body continued its deadly tumble down the stairs, passing between the second and third pairs of wards. Each time the effect was the same, and two more shocking blasts buffeted me. I covered my ears, wishing this weapon system came with a silencer and hoping there were no unfriendlies within hearing distance.

Burnt to a blackened crisp, the body hit the floor at the base of the steps. It made a wet sound like a rotten watermelon dropped from a rooftop, and the charred skin cracked open and bled. A thick, acrid smoke billowed from the corpse, filling the corridor with a stench like burnt almonds and roast pork. It was all I could do to keep from throwing up.

I blinked until the bright arcs that had been burned onto my retinas faded enough for me to see clearly again. That was without a doubt the nastiest home defense system I had ever encountered. But now all that remained of the wards were black scorch marks on the walls.

Despite the ringing in my ears, I couldn’t help but grin. I’d done pretty well for a magically impaired techie. Maybe I’d do okay in a world with essence. It certainly wouldn’t be boring....

I worked my way cautiously down the steps, holding my breath as I passed between the scorch marks...but nothing happened. I stepped around the almost unrecognizable

cinder at the base of the stairs and continued down the hallway.

A short distance ahead, the hallway ended in a long, vertical shaft leading up, with a thick iron ladder affixed to one wall. So I climbed.

At the top, the ladder ended under a square wood trapdoor set into the ceiling. I couldn’t see any security measures, so I cautiously pushed up against the door. Although heavy, it wasn’t locked and I was able to lift it just enough to peer into the room above. Nothing to see but a dusty stone floor littered with bits of broken rock. No sounds, either. I slowly pushed the trapdoor all the way open, using my flashlight to check for wires or any other suspicious objects in the process.

I climbed out and found myself in a large, square room, with the ceiling maybe forty feet overhead. A weathered wood door stood in one wall, with slivers of weak sunlight streaming through the edges. At least I knew I was above ground now. And that it was daytime.

I closed the trapdoor. As it dropped into place, I noticed the top of the door had thin sheets of stone adhered to it to match the floor of the room. With the hinges hidden underneath and the handle disguised as a gap between the stones, the trapdoor blended into the floor perfectly. What a remarkable piece of workmanship.

I headed for the door to the outside, only to stop short when I spotted another fist-sized symbol painted in the center of the door. This one was black. Terrific.

I briefly considered hauling the charred body of the soldier up the ladder and pushing it against the door to see what would happen, but the thought of handling a burnt corpse didn't exactly appeal to me.

And I had an alternative option: across from the door, stone steps stuck out from the wall. They wound upward in a wide, square spiral along the walls, leading up to the ceiling. Some of the steps had visible cracks running through them, and a few had broken off completely and now littered the floor in scattered pieces. Still, I figured the stairs were less dangerous than the ward, so I cautiously climbed upward. Because the stairs lacked a railing and were only three feet wide, I hugged the wall and avoided looking down the well in the middle.

At the top, the steps ended in another wood trapdoor set into a wood ceiling mostly covered with dusty cobwebs. Another check for security turned up nothing, so I slowly lifted the trapdoor. It creaked but I heard no sounds above. I climbed the rest of the way up.

The square room above was about twenty feet to a side, with a pointed ceiling supported by heavy timbers. A single broad window that extended down to knee level let in watery daylight and revealed a cloudy sky outside. Below I could see the keep's courtyard and wall, and beyond it the

long sloping rise that led to the rim of the marshy basin. I was in the top of the keep's tower. Mordred's laboratory.

If I'd harbored any doubts that Sherman Lord was using the keep, they evaporated upon seeing this room. The place looked a lot like that weird laboratory half of the room behind Lord's closet, with heavy wood tables, glass and ceramic containers filled with strange liquids and powders, copper tubing running from one odd glass contraption to another, medical instruments, unfamiliar tools, etc. And the laboratory did not look ancient, burned up or abandoned. It appeared the sadistic bastard really could use essence, and he'd rebuilt Mordred's lab so he could use the enclave himself.

I wandered around the room, inspecting everything without touching, and I wondered if Morrigaine might find some of this stuff useful in her quest to finish her father's scroll.

The only decoration in the room was a large, framed, hand-painted map of Great Britain hanging on the wall by the window. Although yellow with age and splotched with mildew, it nevertheless remained a beautiful work of art.

And it looked out of place in this otherwise austere laboratory. Incongruity often means deception. Axiom...whatever.

I approached the map and gently pulled one corner away from the wall. Behind it I discovered a small safe door.

I smiled to myself, pleased to see that even in a world of magic, human nature never changes. I carefully lifted the map off the wall and set it to one side.

The safe appeared to be a variant of an old Mosler TL-30 Money Chest with a dial combination lock, similar to models I'd dealt with for years. No special equipment required. I delicately turned the dial, barely touching it, feeling for the faint tremors of obsolete tumblers. It didn't take long before I felt the final click.

I turned the handle and pulled open the heavy steel door, revealing an interior a little larger than a square foot in size. It contained a small stack of old, leather-bound books. I picked up the top book and flipped through it. Crudely handwritten characters similar in shape to the ones on the parchment piece and the wards filled each of the pages. That they were stored in a safe implied they had some value, so I decided to take them. Perhaps Morrigaine would have a use for them.

As I removed the books, I happened to notice a metallic glint in the back of the safe. A closer look revealed a jeweled ring, which I picked up and held in the light. The ring consisted of a simple silver band with a dark red ruby set into it. Not particularly valuable looking. Dust coated the stone, so I lightly blew on it and buffed it on my sweater.

When I looked at the ring again, the ruby was gone. I looked down at the floor, assuming the stone had fallen out

of its setting. I lifted each foot, then turned around and--

"You are here," said a slightly nasal voice. "Finally!"

I snatched the Glock from its shoulder holster as I looked up. A tall, extremely skinny man sat cross-legged on a nearby table. He wore flowing robes of some red cloth that hung so loosely on his frame it made him look even thinner. Although bald-headed, he had a goatee of thick black hair protruding from his chin.

I pointed the pistol at his face, but he just smirked and said, "Your toy cannot harm me."

"Who the hell are you?" I said with a menacing growl, giving him my most intimidating glare to hide the fact that I was alarmed at how easily the man had sneaked up on me.

"Do you wish me to tell you?"

"Of course I wish you to tell me. Why else would I ask?"

He gave me a smug smile. "I am *Däggdédggin-Al-Arháádsz*," he said in a formal tone, touching his palm to his chest. "Now, 'master', what is your third wish?"

"Wish?" I snorted. "What do you think you are, a genie?"

Again the smirk. "Who else would offer you three wishes? Now try to conceive of a more intelligent wish than that last one. My name is of no benefit to the likes of you."

"You're a genie?" I slowly lowered the pistol. "For real?" Two days ago I would have laughed in his face, but now...

He smiled thinly. "You are not required to believe me. Just tell me you forfeit your third wish and I shall happily leave you alone."

I raised an eyebrow. If the guy couldn't count, maybe he was insane after all. "What do you mean 'third' wish? I only made one wish."

He sighed. "That was your second wish. I have already granted you two wishes. Now if you would be so kind as to present or forfeit your third wish, I will be free to leave this accursed place. I have waited enough centuries inside that miserable ring."

"You were in the ring?" I looked at the empty silver band. "I thought genies were supposed to come from lamps."

"That shows what you know about *dgényíea*."

I resisted the temptation to slap the smirk off his face. "So what was my first wish?"

"Do you wish to know what it was?" His thin mouth curled up in a sly smile.

I gave him a flat look. "Forget it."

"So what *is* your third wish?"

"How about if I just wish for more wishes?"

The genie rolled his eyes. "What part of 'three wishes' is unclear to you? You are entitled to three wishes, and three wishes *only*."

I didn't have time to play his game. "Screw this. I'm leaving." I reached for the leather-bound books.

He fluttered his hands. "Wait! No, you must complete your wishes! I have waited too long!"

"Not interested." I unzipped my backpack.

He sighed. "All right, I apologize for tricking you. To make amends, I shall re-grant your second wish *if* you agree to make your wishes now...and if you will offer me a wish in return."

I put down the books and chuckled without humor. "You want me to offer you a wish? Now you think *I'm* a genie?"

"I can grant myself a wish if the one whose wishes I grant offers me a wish in return."

"Who made up these stupid rules?"

He shrugged. "This is the way they have always been."

"Fine, I accept. So how about if I wish for the return of essence?"

The genie barked out a startlingly loud laugh. "So now you try flattery? What do you think I am, omnipotent?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know your limitations? I've never done this before!"

"I am not required to educate you! But I hope you have enough sense to think smaller."

I opened my mouth to tell him to go to hell, when it suddenly occurred to me what to wish for. "Wait, could you bring my wife to me? As in...teleport her here?"

The genie stared off into space for a moment, then frowned and looked back at me. "You want me to teleport a corpse to you?"

I stared. "W-What?"

"Oh. You didn't know she's dead?" He gave me a little "whoops" smile.

"What the *fuck*!" His words had hit like a punch to the stomach. "How do you know?"

"I can see anything relevant to a client's wishes."

"If you're bullshitting me..."

"I most assuredly am not. As a *dgényíe* I am incapable of lying. I'm sorry for your loss, but your wife is dead."

I found it hard to breathe but I managed to croak out, "Can you bring her back to life?"

He shrugged. "I can. If you make the wish."

"I wish for my wife to not be dead!"

He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at me and said, "Done."

I stared at him. "Done? What do you mean done? Where is she?"

"She is where her body was, in a distant land."

"*Where*, exactly?"

"That answer would require a wish."

My lip curled. "This is bullshit. I'm leaving." I felt like a fool for letting this jerk screw with my mind.

The genie wrung his hands. "But you agreed to make your wishes now! You have one left!"

"I don't have time for this."

"You could! You could wish for more time, if you want!"

"Is that so? Could you roll back time so I can relive the past few days knowing what I know now?"

He frowned. "With *éssänts* this feeble? I could reverse time no more than one day."

"Gee, more limitations, what a surprise." I snorted. "But even that would still give Morrigaine and me time to figure out how to avoid those damn skeletons. So I'll call your bluff, Barbara Eden. Do it."

"I cannot just 'do it.' You must wish for it."

"Jesus H. Christ," I muttered. "Fine. I wish to be moved back in time to just before Morrigaine and I arrived at the keep. There, will that work?"

The genie closed his eyes and gave a broad smile of profound relief. "Finally I am free..." He again focused on me and his smile faded. "...though your wish will lead to my imprisonment within that ring for fifteen hundred years. Now would you like to know what I wish for?"

"Not really."

His smile turned nasty. "I wish for you to kill your wife."

"Not funny, asshole." That was the last straw; it was time I taught this anorexic weasel a lesson. I reached out to grab him by the throat.

The genie waved his hand. A sudden, overwhelming sense of vertigo swept through my mind. My vision blurred and the room spun around. Had he drugged me? I tried to aim the Glock but I couldn’t feel my hands anymore. I tried to run for the trapdoor but could no longer muster the strength.

I cursed the skinny bastard as the floor dropped out from under me, and for the second time that day I slipped into the empty darkness of unconsciousness.

Chapter 20.

"Am I one of them?"

The Boeing Business Jet 3 cruised over the Atlantic under the mid-afternoon sun. Godson entered the spacious cabin from the cockpit and walked through the luxuriously appointed lounge to Sherman Lord's art deco-styled office.

Lord sat in a leather chair, speaking into an old-fashioned brass telephone handset as he looked out the window at the thin layer of white clouds far below. A glass of scotch sat on the polished whorled walnut table before him, along with a bowl of fruit, a stack of papers and a laptop computer. Godson wondered why Lord bothered ordering scotch, since he never got around to actually drinking it.

He took a seat across from Lord. As he waited for the conversation to finish, he took a notepad from a breast pocket of his black fatigue jacket. He flipped it open to a page with a fist-sized symbol of complex lines and

patterns neatly drawn in green ink. He produced a green pen and carefully added a few more intricately curved lines to the symbol. He frowned at the results, then added several more lines.

Abruptly the symbol glowed a soft, dark green. Godson gave a thin smile of satisfaction. He tore the paper from the pad and placed it on the walnut table, face up.

"Just see that it is done, Mister President," Lord said. He returned the handset to its cradle and looked up at Godson.

"M.I.5. reported in," Godson said. "The last message from the guards at the keep confirmed the prisoners have been properly secured. A company of soldiers from Dreghorn Barracks is on its way to reinforce security, and the two scroll pieces are en route to the Colorado enclave via separate military transport planes."

Lord nodded. "Good. We shall devise better security arrangements once this unpleasant business is concluded."

"Sir, wouldn't it be safer for the scroll pieces to remain at the keep? It's in the strongest of the four enclaves so our castings work more efficiently, and--"

"It is also too far for us to access quickly when circumstances go awry, as recent events have proved is possible. Plus, I prefer having easy access to two *éssänts* enclaves rather than one."

"But the U.K. has two enclaves, doesn't it? If we relocated there..."

Lord shook his head. “I appreciate your initiative, but the U.K. is no longer the center of global influence. Besides, its second enclave is the weakest of the four...and it is located underwater. How long can you hold your breath, Godson?” He chuckled.

Godson persisted. “But surely the greater level of *éssänts* at the keep would more than make up for--”

Lord’s smile faded. “No. You need to understand that more *éssänts* is not necessarily more useful, Godson.”

The muscular bodyguard frowned but he said nothing. He knew better than to push when Lord’s patience thinned.

Lord picked up his drink and swirled the ice in the glass. “It is not just we who can detect *éssänts*. Ordinary people can also sense its effects, if there is enough of it. And if they possess a latent aptitude for using it, eventually that aptitude will manifest itself. The level of *éssänts* at our New York enclave is low enough to avoid these problems, yet still high enough to replenish our reserves, given time. Thus, we can have guards, servants and visitors on the premises without concern. That would not be the case if we resided at either the keep or the Colorado enclaves.”

“I understand, sir,” Godson replied. He had heard this argument before, although he wasn’t convinced the tradeoff was worth it. But clearly Lord wasn’t about to change his mind.

"That reminds me," Lord continued. "I want the soldiers cleared out of the keep enclave immediately after we are done with the prisoners."

"Not a problem, sir."

Lord settled back into his chair and smiled. "I am particularly pleased that my skeletal guardians were able to defeat a caster as skilled as *Morrigainausálafé*. If I knew who killed the warriors I used to make them, I would offer them my thanks."

He glanced at the paper Godson had placed on the table. "A new ward?"

Godson nodded. He leaned forward and plucked an apple from the fruit bowl, then placed it on top of the symbol he'd drawn.

Instantly the apple began to shrivel and turn black, and a mottled white mold crept over its surface. Moments later, all that remained was a lumpy, rotted blob.

Lord raised his eyebrows and nodded. "A decay ward? Impressive."

"Actually, sir, it's an age ward. Two days per second."

"Better still. I told you integrating your illcasting and wardcasting abilities would yield faster results."

"Yes, sir. But aging something a few days isn't very useful. I just think I would progress faster if I had access to more *éssänts*."

"Ah." Lord chuckled. "Thus your interest in moving to the keep. But there is no need to rush, Godson. Time to mature one's connection with *éssänts* is as important as practice."

Godson had his doubts but he nodded assent anyway.

The co-pilot knocked and entered through the lounge door. She was a stunningly beautiful Latin woman, with full lips, large dark eyes, mocha skin, lush black hair, and eye-drawing curves further accentuated by her sensual walk. Godson had heard she won a Columbian beauty pageant a couple of years ago. Now she wore a smart pilot's uniform with a tight skirt that showed off long, toned legs.

The co-pilot smiled warmly at Lord and said, "We'll be landing in an hour, sir."

Her face flickered briefly, revealing the dry husk of a corpse underneath.

"Hold a moment." Lord beckoned her over.

Godson resisted the urge to lean away as the co-pilot sauntered closer, her face periodically flickering between life and death. Lord weaved his hands in a complex pattern in the air, and the flickering ceased.

The beautiful face smiled warmly once again. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

Lord dismissed her with a wave of his hand, but he frowned as she walked away. "I may be maintaining too many

servants again. I suppose I do not need my co-pilot to be undead."

Godson flinched as the woman flashed him a sultry smile on her way out of the office. Lord looked up and noticed his troubled look.

"What is it, Godson?"

"Nothing, sir."

His gaze narrowed. "Enough. Your attitude toward my creations is inappropriate and has become tiresome. You will speak your mind and we shall deal with this issue now, understood?"

Godson took a deep breath and asked, "Sir...am I one of them?"

Lord's eyes widened. "*That* is your concern?" He laughed heartily and shook his head. "No, you are not one of them. I mean, I did kill you, of course, because I cannot control the spirit of a body that has not yet died. But I immediately re-summoned your spirit to your body and restarted your heart. The wonders of modern medical technology."

The bodyguard shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "So...my spirit is possessing my own body...which is still alive?"

"Exactly. More initial effort but less maintenance in the long run."

Godson gave a small sigh of relief, then he added, "And you need control over my spirit because...?"

Lord's smile thinned. "I have not survived this long by taking chances with loyalty."

"I would never betray you."

"Of course you wouldn't. It would never even occur to you to do so." Lord smiled and looked back out the window.

Chapter 21.

"Utterly, totally lost"

I woke myself up with a loud sneeze. I found myself lying on my back in the middle of a dusty, badly rutted dirt road surrounded by thick forest. My head swam dizzily as I struggled to my feet. To my surprise, I discovered the Glock and my backpack on the ground next to me.

I picked them up and stumbled over to the side of the road, where I found a mossy log on which to sit. I looked around with bleary eyes. The road wound through hilly terrain, and I couldn't see down it very far in either direction. Sunlight streamed through the trees, low on the horizon.

Terrific. Was it dawn? No, it felt too warm for that. Dusk, then.

Where was I? And what had that damned so-called genie done to me? I checked myself over. No new cuts or bruises. My clothing was still damp and muddy, which meant

I probably hadn't been unconscious for long. It also meant the genie had failed to roll back time to before my encounter with the skeletons. So how had I gotten here?

Voices carried through the still warm air. I looked up and saw half a dozen men round a bend in the road. They all wore dusty, ratty tunics of rough cloth, and some wore leather sandals while the others went barefoot. Each carried a large bundle wrapped in cloth on his back. One led a tired-looking donkey hitched to a rickety wooden cart filled with wooden crates.

The men fell silent when they noticed me. They eyed me suspiciously but continued trudging along the road.

I stood up and shifted my backpack to conceal the pistol under my arm. "Uh, hi there," I said. "Looks like I'm lost. Can you tell me where we are?"

The dusty men just stared at me sullenly and continued walking. One of them muttered something to the man next to him in a strange, vowel-filled language that didn't sound remotely familiar to me.

"Do you speak English?" I asked. They looked at me without even a flicker of comprehension.

I tried again with, "*Sprechen sie Deutsch?...¿Habla español?...Parlez-vous français?*" But the group just walked by without showing any sign of understanding.

A clatter of hooves came from the direction the men were headed. I turned and saw a black horse canter around the bend. The rider was a woman in a long red dress of

some velvet-like material with bloused sleeves. Her long, copper-red hair tossed about behind her like a cape as she rode.

The woman was Morrigaine.

I stared in open-mouthed surprise. The group of men immediately pulled over to the side of the road and watched her warily as she approached.

"Morrigaine!" I cried out in relief. "Where in the world have you--"

She glanced down at me as she rode up, but her face showed no reaction at all. She looked back in her direction of travel and rode right by me.

I stared after her. "Morrigaine?"

She didn't look back. The horse cantered around the bend and disappeared behind the trees.

Bewildered, I looked over at the group of men. They were already continuing down the road, ignoring me completely.

"What the hell is going on?" I muttered to myself. Where had Morrigaine gotten that dress? And the horse? I strapped my backpack onto my back and jogged after her.

I followed the dirt road as it wound through the forested hills. Before long I reached a narrow, less-worn path that branched off from the main road. I knelt down and inspected the dusty ground. Fresh hoof prints veered down the narrower path. I stood up and set off in that direction at a brisk walk.

The sun settled down behind the trees. Despite the gathering darkness, I couldn't help noticing the gradually increasing beauty of the forest. Huge, gnarled oaks lined the path, with glistening green vines curling up their rough-textured boles. Small bunches of brilliant purple flowers grew among the exposed roots of the great trees, and glittering silver strands of spider webs hung between leafy bushes. Beyond the canopy of verdant leaves drifted feathery clouds of pastel rose and orange fading to a smoky dark purple. Even the dirt road gradually turned from packed, pale dust to a springy dark loam. A cooling breeze carried the rich, earthy scent of the forest.

As the woods darkened further, stars slowly emerged, growing into a million brilliant sparks of light winking in the clear sky. A crescent moon bathed the forest with a silvery light.

I followed the path up a long rise, and at the top I realized I was standing on the rim of a wide, shallow basin...a familiar basin. Only now a thick forest grew where before there had been a marshy bog.

The keep stood in the center of the depression. I stared in bewilderment at the stone walls and jutting tower that rose from the surrounding forest. Where had the forest come from? Was it another illusion spell? Or some other bit of magical weirdness?

Well, there was one way to find out. I jogged down the path toward the keep, fighting a growing sense of dread

at all the changes I was seeing. Finding Morrigaine had to be my first priority. Hopefully she would know what had happened.

As I neared the outer wall, I remembered the skeletons and slowed my pace. The thickness of the forest made it difficult to see far ahead, and the dark shadows under the trees didn't help either. I cursed losing my night vision goggles and thought about digging out my flashlight, but I didn't want to announce my approach in case Lord's security detail had arrived. I glanced up at the moon, wishing it were full rather than just a crescent.

Then I did a double-take. Wait a sec...wasn't the moon supposed to be almost full? I thought back to the previous night and distinctly recalled looking up at the clouds encroaching on a gibbous moon. Yes, of course it was! Then how the hell...? I stared at the thin sliver of moon, a sick welling of panic growing in the pit of my stomach.

A sudden sense of urgency overcame me, and I ran down the path. I rounded a bend--and almost ran into two men standing in the middle of the path. They heard the thump of my footsteps and turned.

One man stood taller than me, and he held a huge knife that reflected a cold gleam of moonlight. He wore a long sleeveless jacket of badly cured leather, rough leather sandals, and furred leggings strapped to his shins with leather thongs. A shaggy mane of dirty blond hair reached

his shoulders, and his immense beard was stained dark under the mouth.

The second man, shorter and stockier, gripped a heavy axe in both hands. He wore a ratty chainmail shirt over coarse cloth, a fur skirt, and leather sandals. Unkempt and greasy hair stuck out from under a metal cap. Tattoos of curved black lines covered his cheeks.

The man with the knife growled something at me in a harsh, guttural tongue that sounded vaguely German, but I didn't recognize any of the words.

I backed up a few steps and said, "*Sprechen sie Deutsch?* Any chance you guys speak English?"

The rough-looking men shared a look, then the short one with the axe gave me a broken-toothed grin. Both men brandished their weapons.

I yanked the Glock from its holster and leveled it at them. "I don't want any trouble." We may not have had a language in common, but a pointed gun cuts across a lot of language barriers.

It didn't work. The stocky man advanced, raising his axe.

"Don't do it..." I warned, slipping the pistol off safe.

He drew back his weapon to swing it at my head, leaving me no choice. I pulled the trigger and fired a single shot at his face. His head snapped back and he dropped to the ground without a sound.

The other man flinched at the sharp report and the sudden flash that briefly lit up the night. Then his face twisted into an enraged grimace and he lunged forward, slashing diagonally with his knife. I shifted my aim and fired two quick shots to center mass. He stumbled and dropped to his knees, clutching his stomach and bellowing something unintelligible. Then he toppled over and lay still.

I stared in disbelief. In the space of three seconds I'd just killed two men. Despite my time in the military, I'd never even shot at a person before in my life. Well, apart from Mr. Beel, but I'm not sure he counted as a person. With any luck I'd never have to shoot someone ever again.

A shout to my left. A man with a spear came crashing out of the brush. He ran toward me, wild-eyed and grinning. Instinctively, I turned and fired two shots. Both bullets hit him squarely in the chest, and he stumbled and crashed to the ground, his spear embedding in the earth at my feet. So much for luck.

The dark woods around me stirred with motion: the clink of metal, the slap of leather, thudding feet, snapping twigs, shouts of warning.

A feathered arrow hissed by my ear. I turned and fired twice again, and the archer dropped from his vantage point behind a small tree.

I could hear the clatter of armor and weapons approaching rapidly somewhere on the path behind me, and a man with a sword emerged from the brush on my right. They were everywhere!

I fired a shot at the swordsman and missed, but the report and the muzzle flash caused him to stumble backward, trip and fall. I turned and ran down the path toward the keep.

The forest had been cleared back from the wall, leaving a grassy corridor ten feet wide all around the keep. With no trees or shadows to block my view, I could see clearly all the way to the corners of the wall on both the left and right sides.

Two men had just come around the corner down the left side. On the right, thirty feet away, four men stood at the base of the wall. The largest of them hefted an iron grappling hook tied to a thick rope.

The man spotted me and called out something. He drew a sword while the others grabbed up spears and axes. All four charged me.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" I shouted at them, doubting it would do any good. "I mean it!"

Sure enough, they ignored me and kept coming. I dropped to one knee and took aim. Gritting my teeth, I fired methodically. Three of the men dropped immediately, but the biggest took three shots before he finally went down. Tough bastard.

The two men at the opposite end of the wall behind me were now running my way, and three more emerged from the woods near the four I'd just shot. An arrow whizzed by overhead.

I fired at the nearest man and missed, and the Glock's slide locked open. I ducked back into the forest for cover and frantically worked to switch out the empty magazine for a full one from the holster.

Footsteps crashed through the forest toward me. I had just slapped in a fresh magazine and chambered the first round when a hairy barbarian of a man loomed up before me, spear held high and ready to thrust at me. Two shots in his chest dropped him before he could ventilate my stomach.

Then the group of three I had just evaded crashed into the forest behind me. I turned and blasted away furiously. This was a mass slaughter! Were these crazy bastards all on drugs? Didn't they know that axes and spears are no match for a semi-automatic weapon? They weren't even *trying* to get out of the line of fire!

But I quickly learned I'd made a mistake by entering the confines of the forest. Although I had the advantage of maneuverability with my short weapon, my opponents could get closer before I spotted them. The last man in that group of three almost took my head off with a sword before my bullet caught him in the neck. The flat of his blade slapped against my arm as he went down.

I dashed back to the open corridor along the wall and spotted four men to the left, two to the right. One of the four was an archer, who fired an arrow that went wide and skittered along the wall with a flash of sparks. I took aim and cleared the path again, taking out the archer first and then methodically firing at each of the remaining men in both directions. The sour reek of burnt gunpowder filled my nostrils.

Someone bellowed right behind me, and I turned just as a burly warrior barreled into me. The impact jarred the Glock from my fingers, and I crashed to the ground with the wind knocked out of me. As I gasped for air, the heavy man straddled me and reached for one of two daggers tucked into his belt. He grinned at me through a thick beard of tangled black hair.

The Glock lay within arm's reach, and I frantically scrabbled for it. I snatched up the pistol and fired at the man's face. But I shot too quickly, and the bullet just missed. Worse, the slide locked open on an empty magazine again.

The warrior stared in slack-jawed shock from the shot fired so close to his face. I didn't give him time to recover--I rammed the hot barrel of the Glock into his open mouth and heard the crunch of breaking teeth. He roared with pain and dropped his knife as he clutched at his mouth. I grabbed the hilt of the second dagger in his belt, yanked it free, and plunged the blade into his neck.

The man made a gurgling sound and toppled over. As I struggled out from under his dead weight, I saw another spearman come running up. The man put all his weight behind his spear and thrust it down at my chest. I rolled to the side just in time, and the leaf-shaped blade sunk deep into the earth.

As the spearman struggled to free his weapon from the ground, I gave a desperate upward thrust with the dagger. The blade was sharp, and it pierced right through the man's cloth vest and up into his solar plexus. He crumpled over the blade and dropped to the ground.

I pulled myself free and scrambled to my feet. I yanked the remaining magazine from the holster and reloaded the Glock. Dazed and reeling with exhaustion, I looked wildly around, searching for my next opponent.

But there was none. The forest had fallen silent. I stood alone in the middle of the carnage.

The giddy fall from my adrenaline high hit, and tremors took hold of my legs. I staggered over to the wall and sank down, leaning back against the cold stone with my backpack. No more of the sword-swinging and spear-thrusting barbarians came out of the forest. Only a vestigial ringing of clashing metal and the popping blasts of the Glock remained in my ears, along with a thick stench of sweat, blood and burnt gunpowder in my nostrils.

I turned and retched into the grass, then collapsed back against the wall, breathing heavily. A couple minutes

passed before I recovered enough strength to move. Then I holstered the Glock and dragged myself to my feet.

I gazed around at the battlefield...and found myself struck with an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. I'd witnessed this scene before, or at least something similar to it, of that I was certain. For a moment I stared at the bodies, trying to match them to the elusive memory. There were too many trees here and that path wasn't there, but...

Then it clicked: the bodies were lying in exactly the same positions as the skeletons Morrigaine and I had stumbled across when we first approached the keep. The only difference was that the skeletons here still had flesh on their bones.

Reluctantly, I approached the body of a man in a chainmail hauberk and a conical steel helm. I slowly reached out with the toe of my boot and pushed the bearded face to one side. There was a nine-millimeter hole neatly punched into the metal just over the man's left eyebrow.

I stared at the body, stunned. These were the corpses that would later guard the keep...and I was the one who had killed them! That meant...that meant the genie was *real*. He *had* rolled back the clock--back to when these warriors were still alive!

Wait. No, that couldn't be. I looked down at the long tear in the sleeve of my sweater and the spattered mud on my clothes. Those had happened in the fight with the skeletons. If the genie had rolled back the clock to a

point before Morrigaine and I entered the keep, then my clothing would have been undamaged and clean.

A chill ran up my spine. This wasn't just a few hours ago. Those skeletons had taken a lot longer than that to rot--months at least, probably years. I remembered Morrigaine saying that a preservation spell could have kept the skeletons from completely rotting away for who knows how long.

And then I remembered Morrigaine wearing that red dress and riding by me on that horse--she'd looked at me without any recognition at all....

Realization hit me like a punch to the gut, and my knees almost buckled. The genie hadn't *reversed* time by one day. He'd *sent* me into the past...*fifteen hundred years* into the past! This was Morrigaine's time, before she had even been put into the statuette....

But how could that be? That wasn't my wish! I had wished for...what had been my exact words? "...to be moved back in time to just before Morrigaine and I arrived at the keep."

A sick knot tightened in my stomach as I realized I hadn't actually *said* I wanted the clock to be rolled back a few hours. I'd only implied it. The pain-in-the-ass genie had interpreted "moved" to mean *sent* rather than *reversed*.

The full wording of my wish had been fulfilled. I had indeed been sent back in time to just before Morrigaine and I arrived at the keep. It just wasn't the moment I'd

expected, but a different moment fifteen hundred years earlier...one that the genie himself had caused to happen....

Son of a bitch.

I realized I was now utterly, totally lost. I slowly sank down to my knees. What the hell was I supposed to do now? The world I knew was gone. I might as well be on a completely different planet. No one I knew even existed yet....

Actually, that wasn't entirely true. Morrigaine was here, even if it was an earlier version of her who hadn't met me yet. And if she was still here, then her father had to be still alive, right?

I straightened as I realized something. What if I were to warn Morrigaine and Mordred about the demon's plans? Wouldn't they then be able to prepare for it and defeat it? Then Mordred could complete his scroll and bring essence back. And then maybe he could come up with a way to send me back to my proper time. There had to be a way--Morrigaine had done it, after all.

But as I continued to think, I realized that if Sherman Lord really was the demon, as Morrigaine had speculated, then killing him *here* would also completely erase his impact on the future, wouldn't it? Even if Mordred couldn't send me back home, eliminating Lord from the future would mean I would never have run into him in

the first place. Therefore the events that had caused me to wind up here in the past wouldn't occur at all.

I drew the Glock from its holster and looked over the brutally effective weapon, wondering how some futuristic firepower would do against a demon. An unexpected smile managed to creep over my face. Maybe this trip through time would actually turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

Morrigaine had said the demon would attack shortly after Camelot fell and the night before Mordred was supposed to complete his scroll, so it would be easy to figure out when to be ready for the attack.

My smile faded as I suddenly wondered if it was actually possible for me to change time at all. So far the one significant action I had taken here in the past--killing a couple dozen berserk medieval warriors--had already shown its effects on the future: the dead barbarians would become the skeletons guarding the keep. Were there any other future events that I might have caused here in the past? Nothing that fit immediately came to mind. Did that mean I would fail to stop Sherman Lord--assuming he was the demon? I did see the paradox in trying to eliminate him: since it was because of him that I ended up in the past, then if I eliminated him from the future, how would I end up in the past to eliminate him from the future?

Did that mean I was destined to fail? Or did it mean that Sherman Lord wasn't the demon? Or was history

rewriting itself as I acted, so that each change I made here that would affect the future was automatically becoming part of my memory as if I had experienced it, because in effect I had--er--would...experience it?

Bleah. All I was doing was confusing myself. Maybe Mordred and Morrigaine would know what to do. But before I could explain things to them, I would first have to find a way to communicate with them. This time *I* would be the lost stranger from another time speaking an unintelligible language. I almost laughed.

I gathered up my gear. I'd lost one of the spent magazines during the fight, but no matter--I wasn't likely to find any rounds to reload it in this century anyway. I headed down the length of the wall, rounding the corner and continuing on to the main gate. The massive wood doors in the arched entranceway had not yet collapsed. And, of course, they were sealed shut.

I knocked and stood for a moment but there was no response. I knocked again, this time using a handy rock to make a louder noise. Again no response. Well, considering no one had apparently heard all the shouting and shooting of the recent battle, I wasn't surprised.

"Helloooo!" I called out. Still nothing. It appeared that a wall of massively thick stone and wood made for an overly effective sound baffle.

Well, getting into hard-to-enter places was what I did. I dug my collapsible grappling hook from the

backpack, popped open the padded hooks and drew out the climbing line. The device was a much more elegant and portable tool than the clunky hook those medieval barbarians had been preparing to toss over the wall.

I figured the barbarians had to be the invading Saxons, since Morrigaine had said the skeletons were wearing Saxon armor. But if they were killed before the demon put her into the statuette, then why did she say she had never seen them before? How could she have missed seeing their bodies lying just outside the keep wall?

I shook my head. Maybe history was indeed rewriting itself, and for some reason it hadn't sorted out my memories yet. I did not like having no clue how time travel worked. For all I knew, I could be seriously screwing up history.

I gave my grappling hook two long, easy swings and tossed it over the wall. I hauled in the slack until it caught at the top, and climbed my way up the rough stone blocks.

At the top I surveyed the courtyard inside. The keep looked pretty much the same as I remembered, only now it was in much better condition, of course. Everything appeared old but nothing had fallen apart yet. The stone buildings and wood shelters looked solid and well maintained, and the packed dirt of the courtyard was free of weeds and debris.

I glanced over at the building where fifteen centuries from now the medieval warriors I had just defeated would get their revenge against me. I shuddered at the memory.

Four horses stood quietly under one of the shelters. One of them looked like the black horse Morrigaine had been riding.

The only other sign of life was a yellow light glowing in the single large window at the top of the tower. I hadn't had much time to explore the keep earlier, and I didn't want Morrigaine or Mordred to catch me poking around the place looking for them, so I figured it would be safer to wait where I knew one of them would show up sooner or later. And considering the spell casting abilities they both possessed, it would probably be better if I saw them before they saw me.

I reversed the grapple and lowered myself into the keep. Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, I made my way to the tower. The door at its base was heavy and iron-shod with a wrought iron handle. I reached for the handle...but then remembered the black ward I'd seen on the other side of the door. That had been fifteen hundred years in the future, true...but did I really want to risk it? The image of those wards lashing out at the soldier's body was something I would not soon forget.

Instead, I ran my fingers over the rough stone of the tower wall, and noticed half-inch gaps between the stone blocks. Forget the doors; this would work just fine.

Using the conveniently provided gaps for my fingers and toes, I quickly worked my way up the side of the tower. At the top I peered over the lip of the broad window.

The soft yellow light came from a dozen candles glowing inside the room. A warm draft flowed out of the window, carrying with it the scent of tallow and tangy spices. Nobody was here, so I quietly climbed inside.

The laboratory didn't look all that different than Sherman Lord's version of it fifteen hundred years from now. The same sort of strange alchemist's equipment cluttered the tables that by now I had become accustomed to finding. Everything just looked more homemade than off-the-shelf.

I slowly walked past the tables, inspecting everything on them but touching nothing. The lab certainly looked in use, with open jars of shiny powders, uncorked bottles of ink in various colors, quill pens, shards of painted bone, freshly crushed herbs, liquids steaming over candle flames...

But the scroll wasn't in sight. Well, I wasn't surprised. With so much riding on the success of the project, it would be foolish to leave the thing lying around in plain sight. Maybe Mordred kept it on his body at all times.

My gaze drifted to a large framed map of Great Britain hanging on the wall. It was the same hand-painted map I'd seen fifteen hundred years in the future. Only this one

was pristine, not stained with age and mildew. I stepped over to the gorgeous piece of art and touched it gently, wondering how it would survive the fire that would eventually consume the lab. Magical fireproofing?

I lifted the map from the wall and moved it to the side. Sure enough, behind it lay the small wall safe, only of course this one didn't have the more modern Mosler combination lock. Instead it had a crude key lock.

It took me longer to dig my lock picks out of the backpack than it did to open the lock. I smiled as I pulled on the handle, thinking it would be easy to go soft in this low-tech world.

The hinges were a little tight and I had to use both hands to pull the door open. That forced me to lean to the side...which probably saved my life. Something shot out of the safe with a twang, narrowly missing my shoulder and embedding in a table leg across the room. It was a crossbow bolt.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, mentally berating myself for getting cocky. Primitive certainly didn't mean low danger. Still, at least there hadn't been some sort of ward instead.

The safe contained a small metal crossbow in a wooden brace, its lever-like trigger pulled by a leather cord routed behind the brace and tied to the safe door. The crowded space also held a handful of quill pens and several

corked ceramic bottles. Tucked between the crossbow and the side of the safe was a piece of paper.

I fished out the paper and held it in the light. It wasn't paper, I realized, but parchment. It was Mordred's scroll!

But this beautifully worked piece of art wasn't the completed work. It was the same size as the other two pieces I'd seen, only it sported a neat tear along the top, with the writing indented along the sides and across the bottom. It was the bottom third piece.

I pursed my lips. So the scroll had *already* been torn up and distributed. That's why the other two pieces hadn't been--wouldn't be--destroyed in the fire that would kill Mordred. He must have kept this bottom piece in his lab so he could finish working on it.

Well, the other two pieces might be safe from the demon's fireball, but this one wasn't. I tucked it into my backpack. Then I held a candle close to the safe so I could see if I'd missed anything. Yes indeed, in the back lay a small silver...

My breath caught. It was a silver ring with a dark red ruby. It was the genie's ring!

It took several seconds for the implications to sink in. Feeling oddly light-headed, I slowly picked up the ring and stared into the bloody depths of the ruby. Then I ran my finger back and forth across the smooth, cool stone.

The ruby evaporated into smoke, which dispersed out of the setting and disappeared.

"*Sultrién*, mortal," said a slightly nasal voice. I turned around. The bald, goateed genie sat cross-legged on the nearest table, his flowing red robes draped over all the alchemist equipment.

"What is your first wish?" he asked solemnly.

I burst out laughing. "You again!" I tossed the empty ring back inside the safe and gave the genie a cold smile. "At least this time I know the rules."

The genie blinked with surprise. "Do I know you?"

I laughed without humor. "Oh, you will, asshole."

"I see. Is such hostility necessary?"

"Believe me, it's well deserved. Now shut up and let me think."

He sniffed but said nothing.

The possibilities rushed through my mind. The genie had sent me backward in time, so surely he could send me forward. But couldn't I do better than that? If I could stop the demon now, then in the future I would never rob Sherman Lord and I would not end up sent back in time. The past couple of days would never happen.

"I just want to be clear this isn't a wish," I said cautiously, "but could I prevent the demon from killing Mordred and imprisoning Morrigaine by just wishing it dead? Let me explain. Mordred is the Great Druid who--"

The genie raised a hand to stop me. “In matters regarding wishes, I can understand any reference you make. And no, the demon cannot be killed.”

“Why not? Do you mean it’s immune to damage, or is stopping it impossible because that would create a time paradox?”

His eyes narrowed. “If you want to know why the demon cannot be killed, it will cost you a wish.”

I sighed. “Forget it.” If the demon couldn’t be killed, then was there any point in my even trying to help Morrigaine and her father?

I now had the third piece of the scroll. If the other two pieces were already completed, perhaps Morrigaine wouldn’t need them at all. If so, then with this final piece and access to an essence enclave, surely she could finish the job and return essence to full strength. Then she could use her boosted powers to help me get my wife back from Sherman Lord. Right? All I needed to do was get home safely.

The genie cleared his throat. “Well then, are you ready to make your first wish?”

“I’m working on it.” I took my time, carefully thinking through the wording. Nothing too fancy, just something that hopefully couldn’t be wildly misinterpreted like the last wish.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, I wish to be immediately and safely teleported to the location of the woman I call

'Morrigaine' at the same moment in time your future self sent me into the past."

I mentally crossed my fingers, hoping the wish made sense to the genie and that he wouldn't consider the time and the location two separate wishes.

He stared off into space, focused on something I couldn't see. Then his thin face fell. "You *dog*!" he snarled. "Do you realize what you have done? You have destined me to lie imprisoned within that ring for *centuries* before you make your second and third wishes!"

"Life's a bitch, ain't it? Now grant me my wish."

Just then I heard a faint cry from outside. I stepped over to the window and looked down. In the shadowed courtyard below I saw a hulking figure emerge from a doorway. It had massively muscled arms, a vaguely horse-like head, and eyes that glowed like coals. A smaller form struggled weakly in its grasp.

"Morrigaine...." I whispered. I yanked the Glock from its holster. Oh hell, it was happening tonight! Forgetting the genie's claim that the demon couldn't be killed, I took careful aim down the gun sights. But I hesitated--at this range I could miss, and a stray bullet might hit Morrigaine.

Behind me I heard the creak of the trapdoor opening. I immediately ducked and turned, shifting my aim. A man in a gray robe was climbing up the steps into the lab.

Mordred.

He had his back to me for the moment, but when he reached the top of the stairs he would turn and see me and the genie. No matter, the demon was the more immediate threat. I turned back to the window.

The demon had reached upward with a three-clawed hand. In its palm glowed a brilliant ball of yellow flame. I raised the pistol, but the fireball abruptly shot up toward me, trailing a wake of fire. There was no time to aim. With a dismayed cry I ducked below the window, realizing at the same moment that there was no escape. I should have taken the shot.

I glanced up at the genie and saw him staring at me. “Begone, mortal,” he said with a wave of his hand.

And then the room erupted in a white blast of flame. I screwed my eyes shut and waited to feel the intense heat sear my flesh...but I felt nothing, not even a hot breeze--although I heard Mordred scream in agony. The sound sent a shiver up my spine.

And then once again the ground dropped away from me in a swirl of darkness.

Chapter 22.

“Get out of here”

I opened my eyes and at first saw only dark blurs. My head swam. I blinked until my vision cleared, then sat up.

My heart sank as I realized I was once again lying on the cold floor of the dungeon cell. The torch that still smoldered out in the hallway dimly illuminated the slimy stone walls, stagnant puddles and iron bars.

Wait...the skeletons were gone. And the torch was now on the right side of the hallway instead of the left--this wasn’t the same cell.

I heard a muffled moan behind me. I scrambled to my feet and turned around.

A woman hung on the wall, spread-eagle. Buckled leather straps held her waist, neck, wrists and ankles securely to metal rings embedded in the wall. Leather covers wrapped her hands snugly so she couldn’t open her fists. And thick strips of cloth blindfolded and gagged

her as well. Mud spattered her wool sweater and jeans, and her hair was a tangled mass of red.

"Morrigaine!" I cried. I reached out and pulled away the blindfold and gag.

She stared at me with her wide blue eyes. "Silver!" she breathed with relief. "Alive you are!"

I grinned. "Good to know." I reached out to unbuckle the straps around her neck. "Are you all right?"

"Aye, now I am. Because of these restraints, no casting could I make to escape." She gazed around the room. "Where are we?"

"In a dungeon under the keep." I freed her neck and then moved on to her left arm and hand restraints.

"Under the keep? I am aware of no donjon existing here."

"Apparently undead guardians have been locking up their captives here at least as far back as when the Great Druids disappeared."

"Oh? How is it you know this?"

"I'll explain later. Right now we need to get out of this place." I shifted over to work on unbuckling her right arm and hand.

She focused on me. "I witnessed your capture by those undead guardians, Silver."

I grimaced. "Yeah, not my finest moment. I'd hoped at least you'd managed to escape."

"For a time I did. Faster than the possessed corpses I was able to run, and I circled around hoping to find you before the undead returned. But you were already gone from the courtyard. And as I searched, the walking dead closed in on me. The second time I did not escape." She shook her head in dismay.

I kneeled down to free her legs. "Why didn't you just control their minds or blast them with lightning?" Then I remembered the fight with Mr. Beel. "Oh, right...no controlling dead brains."

"And insufficiently restored is my *éssänts* reserve for an effective lightning casting."

She rubbed the circulation back into her wrists. "Several times I heard your voice calling out, but respond I could not. Then for a while there was only silence. I feared you would not find me."

I freed her legs and then worked on unbuckling the strap around her waist. "I, uh, took the scenic route getting here."

When the last strap fell away, Morrigaine immediately embraced me in a tight hug. "Thank the sun that you are safe," she murmured. "Where were you?"

I smiled and said, "Shopping. Let me go and I'll show you."

She obliged. I removed the third piece of the scroll from my backpack and handed it to her.

Her eyes widened. “The final piece it is!” she breathed. “You found it where?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I paused for a second and added, “On second thought, *you* probably would. But there isn’t time for me to explain right now. Do you think you’ll need the other two pieces to complete the spell?”

“Uh, no, I think not--just this bottom piece needs completion.” She frowned. “Why? The other pieces are where?”

“I’ll explain later.” I took back the parchment and returned it to the backpack. “Right now we need to get out of here. Sherman Lord and his goons could show up at any time.”

Morrigaine frowned with concern. “I am not prepared to face him. Only partially recharged is my store of *éssänts*.”

“No essence in these cells. Yeah, I heard.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You heard? From whom?”

“Later. Let’s go.” I dug the soldier’s keys from my pocket and headed to the cell door.

“But...your wife.”

“She’s not here. A genie told me she’s in a distant land.” I unlocked the door and held it open for her.

She gave me a curious look. “A genie?”

“Yeah, I’ve been...busy. I found out there’s another essence enclave in the U.S. and that the other scroll

pieces are on their way there. And I'm betting it's that enclave Godson was referring to when he told me where they'd sent Dana."

She smiled at me as she walked through the doorway. "No longer do you doubt the existence of *éssänts*."

"Yeah, well, I finally got my evidence. Now if we can just get you to believe that machines can fly...."

Across from Morrigaine's cell stood another empty cell. We headed to the right, past the torch and between two more cells. The one on the right held the dusty remains of six skeletons--it was the cell where I had been locked up.

Only a thick wall of stone separated Morrigaine's cell from mine, and she had been strapped to the other side of that wall the whole time. If I had only spared just a few extra seconds to take a closer look at the cells before heading to the guard station... Instead, a distance of forty feet and five seconds had turned into a journey of miles and centuries. I could have kicked myself.

We headed through the doorway into the guard station. "Once again I sense *éssänts*," Morrigaine said with relief. "My reserve is restoring."

"Unfortunately we don't have time for you to top off your battery." I rounded the cluttered table and toppled chair, and headed for the passageway that led to the exit.

She paused to gaze around the room. "Could this be where all along the *däemán* was hiding?" she asked. "Under our very feet the whole time?"

I shrugged. "He was a big sucker, but I think he could still fit in these hallways."

She raised an eyebrow. "How do you know how large--"

"Later." I took her hand and pulled her toward the passageway. "I found a door to the outside, but it's guarded by a black ward."

"A black ward? That I wish to see."

I switched on my flashlight and we headed down the passageway. When we turned the corner, Morrigaine stopped and sniffed the air. "That smell...what is it?"

"Fried guard. I had to push his body down these stairs to get past some wards." I played my flashlight over the scorch-marked walls and the blackened corpse still lying at the base of the steps.

She gave me an appraising look. "For someone who knows nothing of *éssänts*, resourceful you are."

I gave her a wry smile. "Axiom five."

We scaled the metal ladder and climbed through the trapdoor set into the ceiling. I showed Morrigaine how the door blended perfectly with the floor when closed.

She shook her head. "Masterfully concealed--and without the use of *éssänts*. No wonder it is that my father and I never detected it."

She frowned pensively and added, "If the *däemán* hid underground in a place devoid of *éssänts*, then not surprised am I that *Aumérllynex* could never track it down in his quest to seek the source of the *éssänts* drain."

"Actually, Merlin did eventually see this hiding place...unfortunately."

She gave me curious raise of an eyebrow, but said, "Another topic for later, I presume?"

I nodded, then turned and gestured at the door with the black symbol painted on it. "What kind of ward is that?"

She looked at the symbol and burst out laughing. "One that reads 'Exit', Silver." She lifted the latch and pulled the door open.

Clear afternoon sunlight warmed the decaying courtyard. The cloud cover was breaking up. We stood for a moment, blinking until our eyes adjusted to the light. It surprised me how much smaller the courtyard appeared in the daylight. Small and harmless.

Morrigaine and I hurried to the main gate. We crossed over the fallen doors and headed back along the wall, retracing the steps we had walked the night before.

We reached the place where we'd first spotted the ancient skeletons. And there they were, all lying in the same positions where I had left them fifteen centuries ago. They lay half-buried in the muck and grass as if their remains had never moved.

But as we approached, I heard a soft sucking sound and a clink of metal. One of the skeletons lifted a bony arm. It slowly reached for a rusted broadsword. Another skeleton feebly lifted its mildew-stained skull from a muddy puddle. A third closed its fleshless fingers on the haft of a rusty axe.

All the Saxon warrior remains were stirring now, slowly pulling themselves from the mud.

Bullets hadn't done much good against these walking dead, so I didn't bother drawing my handgun. I marveled that I didn't feel as terrified as I thought I should--perhaps I'd become habituated to seeing skeletons move, or maybe the daylight had robbed them of their inherent scariness.

"By day ghosts are slower to become active, but soon they will gain strength," Morrigaine warned, taking my hand and pulling me away.

I didn't need encouragement. I followed her around the skeletons and up the side of the draw at a run. At the top of the basin we looked back. All we saw was a slimy, impassable swamp with nothing at all moving within it.

We turned and hurried away from the keep.

Chapter 23.

"How thoughtful of you"

Sherman Lord's business jet touched down with a screech of tires at Carlisle Airport in northern England. The jet taxied to the gate and came to a stop. The engines powered down with a descending whine.

Godson waited as three of his black-suited security detail opened the outer door, and cool humid air flowed into the cabin. On the platform outside stood a husky, pink-faced man in a gray suit, breathing hard as if he had just run to the gate. He stood with his arms out and legs apart as the security detail patted him down and ran a metal detector wand over his clothing.

The lead security guard checked the ID card the man held up for him. "M.I.5.," he informed Godson. "Agent Rowe."

Godson looked down at the shorter man as if he were a bug. "State your business, Agent Rowe."

"I need to speak to the Director," he replied with a cultured British accent. "There's been an...unfortunate development."

"I can deliver any information to Mister Lord."

"I really think I should speak with him directly."

"Do you?" Godson gave him a thin smile. "If you insist." He nodded toward the door at the end of the lounge.

Godson followed Rowe through the lounge and into the office, where Sherman Lord still sat in his leather chair reading a printout. Rowe stepped up to Lord's desk and waited. Godson moved up right behind Rowe's left shoulder, deliberately standing within his personal space to keep him off balance. He could smell the smaller man's sour sweat. Rowe adjusted his tie and shifted uncomfortably as he waited.

Lord finally put down his papers and looked up. "Yes?"

The MI5 agent cleared his throat. "Agent Rowe, sir. I'm sorry to report that the captives managed to escape before our soldiers arrived."

Lord's face remained impassive. "They escaped. Both of them?"

"Both, yes, sir. And I'm afraid we've lost track of them."

"What happened?"

"It's unclear, sir. Our troops arrived an hour ago and reported the captives missing and their guard killed. They are now conducting a thorough sweep--"

Lord's gaze narrowed. "An hour ago. And you did not think to radio ahead with this information?"

Rowe swallowed. "I...thought it best if I delivered my apology in person."

"How thoughtful of you." Lord's lip twitched. "Godson."

The muscular bodyguard put a hand on Rowe's shoulder and gently turned the MI5 agent around to face him. Then he wrapped his fingers around Rowe's neck and slowly squeezed. Rowe gasped with surprise and grabbed at Godson's wrists. He pulled and twisted in an attempt to pull free, but Godson's fingers continued to close like a vise. Rowe's grunts of effort turned into gurgles. In desperation he tried clawing at Godson's face with his fingers, only his arms weren't long enough to reach. He kicked at Godson's legs with his wingtips, but the bodyguard's only reaction was to smile coldly. As Rowe's eyelids started to quiver and his eyes rolled back into his head, Godson gave a last hard twist. There was a wet snap, and the limp MI5 agent crumpled to the floor.

Lord glowered at Godson. "They have at least an hour's head start."

Godson produced his cell phone from a cargo pocket. "I'll set up agents at Heathrow and--"

"Do not bother. I know exactly where they are headed."

"Where?"

"Where do you think? Get your wolf on a plane immediately."

Godson smiled as he dialed. "Yes, sir."

Chapter 24.

"Hard on the lips"

I wished Morrigaine could drive so I could rest during the trip back to Glasgow. I felt exhausted--no surprise, really, since not only had I experienced a particularly stressful past few hours, but I had also actually lived an extra hour or more during the past day, thanks to my side trip into the past. To add to the injustice, Morrigaine slept during the whole trip back.

With nothing to occupy my attention as I drove, I again became aware of the minor but constant ache in my chest. It seemed that every time I paid attention to it, the condition felt slightly worse. Now every time I took a deep breath I felt a sharp twinge of pain near my heart. The discomfort served as a grim reminder that no matter how many bullets I dodged, wards I bypassed, skeletons I escaped or barbarians I defeated...death would be coming for me soon anyway. My morbid thoughts were dragging me

into a pit of depression, so I switched on the radio and found a pop music station to distract me.

During the trip, I frequently checked the rearview mirror for pursuit. I almost expected to see a carload of sword-waving medieval corpses roaring up behind us, a thought that struck me as both extremely funny and sincerely horrifying.

But the only incident of note was that we passed three military trucks traveling toward the area Morrigaine and I had left only five minutes earlier. A dozen men sat in the back of each vehicle, and they all wore camouflaged British military fatigues and carried assault rifles. Good thing we hadn't stuck around any longer.

At the first available Internet café, I used my mother-in-law's credit card to make reservations for a flight back to the U.S. Tomorrow morning was the earliest available flight, so I booked us a luxury suite at a five star hotel in Glasgow for the night, figuring we both deserved a comfortable night's rest.

I wanted nothing more than to collapse onto my bed and pass out for at least nine hours, but Morrigaine said she was famished and I realized I was too. So I dialed room service and let Morrigaine order whatever she wanted. In retrospect that probably wasn't the best idea, since I discovered too late that she hadn't recognized anything on the menu and had thus decided to order randomly. The hotel delivered a feast of steak and kidney pie, cucumber

sandwiches, bean burritos, Caesar salad, smoked salmon, papaya, chips, spinach soufflé, cheesecake, chocolate bars, red wine and tequila. Evidently Morrigaine had already mastered the modern-day equivalent of a sickness curse. Again she passed on the use of utensils and raved about the variety of flavors. Apparently, despite access to magic, the choice of food options during her time period was surprisingly limited.

Between mouthfuls, I gave her a summary of what had happened to me after my capture: the encounter with Merlin, dealing with the wards, and summoning the genie who sent me into the distant past. When I described waking up in the middle of a dusty road fifteen hundred years ago, Morrigaine sat up excitedly.

"The fool on the road near the peasants!" she exclaimed. "It was you! That is why familiar you appeared to me!"

I raised an eyebrow. "Fool?"

She lifted her palms in a shrug. "You dressed strangely, you grinned inanely, and in a strange tongue you spoke to me. Hallmarks of the simple-minded." She looked at my mud-spattered jeans and torn sweater, and added with an innocent smile, "How little has changed in fifteen hundred years."

I matched her smile. "Hypothetically speaking, is there any way to put a person back into a statuette after it's been broken?"

She laughed and took a big bite of soufflé, then gestured for me to continue.

I went on to describe following Morrigaine to the keep, fighting the Saxon warriors, sneaking into Mordred's laboratory, finding the genie again, and then seeing the demon kill Mordred an instant before my wish whisked me back to the present time.

"Then that was *you* I saw silhouetted in the tower window, not *Mähdríedd*," she said, shaking her head. "Fortunate you are to still be alive."

"I'm really sorry your father didn't make it."

She nodded solemnly. We both ate in silence for a moment, and I thought about the wishes I'd made and their time-twisting consequences.

"Why do you think the genie misinterpreted the intent of my wish and sent me so far into the past?" I asked. "It only made things worse for him."

Morrigaine raised a palm. "*Dgényíea* grant wishes, but no control do they have over how the wishes are actually fulfilled. So risky are such wishes that few people are willing to make them."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I hadn't told her about Dana supposedly being dead and my wish for her to be brought back to life, nor about the genie's wish for me to kill my wife. I didn't want to think how that could happen, and I held out hope that the skinny bastard had just been playing with my mind.

But I had to ask, "Can a genie make a wish for himself if you grant him one?"

She gave me a curious look. "I do not know. Why do you ask that?"

"Nothing. Just curious." I put down my fork, having suddenly lost my appetite.

She sighed. "That your wishes were mostly wasted is a shame. *Dgényíea* are extremely rare, and easily one could have helped me complete *Mähdríedd's* scroll. Vast quantities of *éssänts* they store within themselves, although they are limited to using it only to grant the wishes of others. That tends to make them a bitter folk. Extremely tricky and devious they can be if they take a disliking to you. Fortunate you were to escape with your life, and even more to acquire the final piece of the scroll."

"Lucky me." I pushed my chair away from the table and went over to one of the beds.

Morrigaine watched me with a measuring gaze. "You have no experience with *éssänts*, yet on your own you did remarkably well."

"Maybe." I sat on the bed and then lay back on the pillow. "It would have been a lot easier if you had been there to help me out."

She wiped her hands on a napkin, then came over and sat on the bed next to me. "In my time most people feared casters, especially those with great power. Even among

ourselves, we regarded each other with formal respect. But you..."

I chuckled. "You'd prefer me to worship you, is that it, your highness?"

She nodded seriously. "With much fawning and groveling, aye."

She leaned forward and kissed me hard on the lips.

The kiss blindsided me. So too did the sudden animalistic desire that flooded through my body. Before I realized what I was doing, I had her wrapped in my arms and was kissing her back just as hard. Her lavender scent filled my nostrils. The soft pressure of her breasts against my chest made my brain feel on fire, and my hands grasped her incredible curves, pulling her to me with a hungry desperation. She moaned and melted against me.

Then a memory of Dana's face flashed into my mind--her brown eyes staring at me in shocked anger from under perfectly trimmed bangs.

Dismayed, I pushed Morrigaine away and sat up. Her unfocused, glacier blue eyes gazed at me through strands of red hair, contrasting starkly against her pale porcelain skin. She looked so achingly, exotically beautiful. I wanted her in my arms again, to feel those full red lips pressed against mine, but...

"I'm sorry," I barely managed to get out. "I can't."

Her copper-red eyebrows tilted in a confused frown. The dreamy haze of passion in her gaze evaporated, and for an instant I saw the pain of a wounded animal.

Then she stiffened and her face became an unreadable mask. "All right," she said. "I understand." She stood up. "I shall...go bathe now." She turned and walked toward the bathroom.

I shook my head to clear it. "Morrigaine..."

At the door she paused and said in an uneven voice, "A powerful druid I may be, but no harm would my touch bring to you."

"What? I didn't think it would."

She turned to look at me. "Then why--"

"Dana."

She gazed at me blankly. "Your wife." Then her eyes widened with sudden realization. "You married for love!"

I blinked at her. "Of course. Why else would I?"

"For status and to form alliances. Marriage does not signify love."

"Oh. Things have changed."

"I see. Then I do apologize for my actions." A touch of sadness clouded her gaze. Then she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

#

When it was my turn to shower, I stood under the delicious hot spray for a long time, feeling the soap and water washing away much of the exhaustion along with the

grime. Afterward I pulled on one of the bathrobes that came with the suite, and headed to the suitcase for some clean clothes.

Morrigaine lay on her bed, also wearing a bathrobe. Her shining red hair lay fanned out across a towel, drying. She held the bottom scroll piece above her face as she studied the tiny characters. She had twisted the bedside lamp so that its light shone directly onto the parchment.

"Silver, come here," she said, beckoning. She sat up cross-legged on the bed and frowned at the scroll piece.

I sat beside her, and she shifted closer to show me the parchment. To my relief, she had apparently decided to ignore our earlier awkward moment.

"Most of the runes I cannot read," she said. "A unique and complex language *Mähdríedd* used for much of it. But the last row I do understand." She pointed to the bottom line of dots that without magnification looked like little more than an orderly sprinkling of finely ground pepper. "They are not part of the scroll's casting. They appear instead to be a description of what happened to the *éssänts*."

"Oh? So what happened?"

"At the center of the Earth the casting created a powerful force, it appears." She read over the runes again, paraphrasing for me. "Over the space of several centuries, upwards against the sea of *éssänts* the force gradually expanded...thinning and pushing it up through the

Earth to the surface...then further, to above where the air covers the Earth."

"Above the atmosphere? Does that mean there's essence in outer space?"

She shrugged with one palm. "The force was irregular in strength, so affected less powerfully were a few locations."

"The essence enclaves."

She nodded, then frowned at the parchment. "Why a *däemán* would do such a thing, I do not understand. Its own power is derived from *éssänts*, and losing *éssänts* would only serve to severely weaken and eventually kill it."

"Maybe it lives above the atmosphere," I suggested.

"No, nothing can fly that high." She thought for a moment, tapping her teeth with a fingernail. "I wonder if killing off all other *däemáni* was its sole reason for eliminating *éssänts*--the typical petty rivalry between *däemáni* taken to an extreme."

"Cutting off its nose to spite its face?"

She burst out laughing at the expression. "Exactly. And it survived the loss of *éssänts* because within the strongest of the *éssänts* enclaves it made its lair...under the keep. And now with no more *däemáni* rivals to play its political games, perhaps it has taken human form to try its power plays in the human arena."

"Sherman Lord."

"My thinking exactly." She paused, then added, "No wonder *Aumérllynex* could not detect the source of the *éssänts* drain. Since *éssänts* thinned outward from the Earth's center, no source was there to be found on the surface. But with *éssänts* just pushed far above the Earth, not actually destroyed, much easier it must have made *Mähdríedd's* task. All his scroll must do is disrupt the force that keeps it away."

"So how close is the scroll to being finished?"

"Curious..." she said, frowning at the parchment, "but already complete it appears to be."

"It's done?" I raised an eyebrow. "Then where's the magic?"

"Complete is the scroll, but apparently it is not activated. *Mähdríedd* must have been slain just before he could perform this final step. For the effect to occur I think some action must take place."

"What action? You're not going to need all three scroll pieces together, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, sufficient this last piece should be, as long as the other two are not destroyed."

"Then you *can* activate the scroll?" This was getting frustrating.

"This I do not know yet. In order to learn how to activate it, I must first translate the scroll."

"Well, you used a language spell to communicate with me, didn't you? That didn't take much time."

Her smile was almost condescending. "This is a language of pure *éssänts*, Silver. And it is one designed to be most difficult to decipher. Several castings in an environment rich with *éssänts* I will require to translate it, and fully replenished I will need my store of *éssänts* to be."

"Please tell me we don't need to return to the keep."

She shrugged again with a palm. "You said there is another enclave in the Unknown Land."

"Yeah...except that all I know is it's somewhere in Colorado. That's a hell of a lot of land to search."

"Then a hell of a lot of land we must search."

I thought for a moment, then said, "Didn't you once tell me you can use one scroll piece to track down the others?"

She blinked at me in surprise. "Aye! Directly to the *éssänts* enclave it would lead us! And enough *éssänts* I now possess to do this!" Her gaze turned appreciative. "I knew there was a reason for why I tolerate your presence. Stupid you are not."

"Gee, thanks."

She grinned, then said, "The aid of a good map I shall require."

"A good map I can get you."

"And once the translation is complete, I may need some additional *éssänts*-based materials to activate the scroll."

"Materials? You mean like the weird alchemy stuff I saw in the laboratory in the keep's tower?"

She nodded. "Perhaps another laboratory exists in the call-ah-rah-do enclave that I can use."

"Oh no," I said, suddenly realizing something that made my stomach sink. "I think there's at least one more essence enclave in the 'Unknown Land.'"

"Oh?"

"In Sherman Lord's mansion I saw a laboratory that looks a lot like the one at the keep. Is there any reason he would build such a lab in a place where there wasn't any essence?"

"No, there is not." She gave me a bewildered look. "How many enclaves are there?"

I chuckled without humor. "You're asking me?"

"No matter. The more enclaves there are, the more options it gives us."

"But it means Dana may not be at the Colorado enclave. Godson didn't specify *which* enclave they sent her to."

Morrigaine put a hand on my shoulder. "If we do not find her at the call-ah-rah-do enclave, then to the next enclave we shall go until we do find her. And once *éssänts* is at full strength, easier the task should be."

I nodded, suddenly weary again. "We should get some sleep. We head out early tomorrow."

Chapter 25.

"Power with immediate feedback"

Godson finished the last rep of his 415-pound bench press set and set the bar on the rack with a controlled clank. He sat up and stretched the muscles in his arms and chest. He wore only shorts, and he checked his sharply defined physique in the wall-length mirror of the mansion's spacious basement gym. Enough weight machines, free weights and cardio equipment filled the room to service an Olympic team, but Godson was the only one who used them. He picked up two barbells and worked his biceps. He enjoyed watching the striated muscles flexing under the skin with each curl.

His cell phone on a nearby table beeped, and he scowled at it. The alarm meant he had only half an hour to finish his weights, shower and get back to studying.

Admittedly, casting did have its upsides--watching someone stumble into one of his fire wards was always good

for a laugh, and so was watching grown men lose their lunch from his sickness castings. But of all the specialties he could have been born with, he'd ended up with some of the most remote and indirect. He had no quick castings with immediate feedback like the ones *Morrigainausálafé* supposedly had. She could twist a person's will and, better still, summon actual lightning bolts! What could be more immediate, more direct, more *visceral*, than blasting someone with lightning? Instead, Godson's own illcasting and wardcasting experience had so far consisted of slowly and carefully laying traps to be later activated by trespassers, usually when he wasn't even there to witness the results. What fun was that?

It was for this reason that he developed his other genetic gift: physical prowess. Nobody could match the combination of inherent speed, strength and toughness that had been bred into him. And nothing was more gratifying than seeing the look of shock on a bigger man's face as his fists bludgeoned him to death. Now *that* was power with immediate feedback!

Sherman Lord considered bodies merely useful tools, and he preferred to have Godson concentrate his efforts on improving his castings. But Lord also wanted the best bodyguard he could find at his side, so he didn't begrudge the time Godson spent down here in the gym, honing his body into what Godson liked to call a biological weapon of mass destruction.

His cell phone boomed *Room 101* from the film *1984*--his FBI ringtone. He set down his weights and answered it. "Godson."

He listened for a moment, then strode out of the room.

#

Still wearing only his gym shorts, Godson stepped through the doorway into Sherman Lord's hidden office/laboratory. Lord stood by a bookshelf overloaded with ancient tomes, scrolls and stacks of loose paper. He wore an old-fashioned silk smoking jacket, and he casually flipped through a dusty book with wood covers and pages yellowed with age.

He looked up. "Yes, Godson?"

"Sir, the F.B.I. reported in. I had them compare the manifests of all flights from New York to the U.K., then from the U.K. to Colorado during the likely time frames."

"And?"

"They came up with a Robert and Elaine Crenshaw. They're the parents of Sylvester Larcini's wife. But a visit to their home confirmed they haven't left the country. They're not the ones who've been traveling."

Lord smiled. "Is the enclave prepared?"

"Yes, sir. But the plane the 'Crenshaws' are flying on hasn't landed yet--it's inbound to Denver International as we speak. We know exactly where and when they will disembark."

Lord's smile broadened. "Can we arrive there before their aircraft lands?"

"No, sir. But we could redirect their flight."

Lord thought for a moment, then shook his head. "There is no sense in providing those two with advanced warning. Direct local agents to their gate immediately. Ensure the agents maintain a low profile and positively identify Mister Larcini and *Morrigainausálafé* before moving in to apprehend them with Tasers and sedatives."

"Yes, sir." Godson flipped open his phone.

"And have the jet ready to fly immediately. Mister Larcini's wife is..."

"...still aboard, yes, sir." Godson scrolled through the numbers on his phone.

Lord smiled with satisfaction and returned his book to the shelf. "I knew it was just a matter of time before they would seek out the Colorado enclave."

"Yes, sir. But...how do they know where it's located?"

"Only you and I know exactly where it is. Thus, *Morrigainausálafé* must be tracking the parchment pieces...which is only possible if she has the third piece in her possession."

"The third piece. Where could she have found it?"

"I do not know. But I do intend to ask her. It has been missing for a very, very long time...."

Chapter 26.

"Into the mountains"

The American Airlines 737 banked lazily in the late afternoon sky east of the Rocky Mountain foothills, preparing for its final approach to Denver International. Morrigaine stared in fascination at the glowing lights of the city sliding by below, having not yet grown jaded to the sight.

The return trip had so far gone much more smoothly than the trip to the UK. This time Morrigaine carried the backpack with my tools and the handgun right past the security stations. Nobody stopped her. She told me she had enough essence stored to briefly distract everyone in the area, and explained that the security personnel were so easy to fool because they simply weren't used to experiencing the effects of essence--just as it takes less wine to make a first-time drinker drunk than it does an alcoholic. Nobody seemed to notice the backpack hanging

from her shoulder at all. Even I found it difficult to look directly at the pack, even though I did my best to focus my attention on it.

Morrigaine and I again matched the photos on our "borrowed" passports: me as the balding Bob Crenshaw and she as the white-haired, darker-skinned Elaine.

Periodically during the trip, Morrigaine studied a map of the United States I had picked up for her at London Heathrow. She would hold the parchment and stare at the map for long periods, then switch to staring blankly ahead as if searching an invisible horizon. Occasionally she gracefully weaved her hands about one another while whispering unintelligible phrases. I put a set of headphones on her so anyone noticing her motions would just assume she was jamming to music.

By the time we reached US airspace, Morrigaine had narrowed the location of the scroll pieces down to the Rocky Mountains somewhere west of Denver. She looked tired from her long sessions with the map, but she insisted she had not used much of her essence reserve. The spell was simple, she said, it's just that the vast distances involved required intense concentration of being. Whatever that meant.

During a break between tracking sessions, I said, "So besides the whole Jedi mind trick thing, you can track certain things, translate languages, dispel curses, disable wards and sense essence."

She nodded. “Misdirecting minds is my specialty, of course, but the others are basic skills that most casters learn as they develop a specialty.”

“And you said you can do something with lightning, right?”

“Aye. Shockcasting is my second specialty.”

“You can actually control lightning? Like make it strike whenever you want?”

“Aye. But still too imprecise is my control, and a great amount of *éssänts* it still requires. A Great Druid I shall not become until I master this specialty and improve its efficiency.”

“Good thing you’re a rechargeable coppertop.”

She raised an eyebrow, but I decided against explaining the joke.

#

The plane landed without incident. But as we disembarked from the plane and walked up the ramp toward the concourse, I peered ahead and spotted a man in a gray suit and dark sunglasses carefully observing the passengers filing past him.

I grabbed Morrigaine’s arm to slow her down. “Looks like we’re expected,” I murmured.

She smiled. “Then in the correct place we must be.”

The man looked down the ramp and fixed his gaze on me. I slouched behind a tall passenger ahead of me and murmured to Morrigaine, “The man in the gray suit straight ahead.”

She nodded and then did her bit with her hands while whispering softly. The agent looked away with a bored expression.

As we continued up the ramp and I could see more of the concourse, I spotted two more similarly dressed men also watching the crowds. “He’s not the only one,” I added.

Morrigaine took my arm. “Worry not,” she said with a smile. “No one here will notice us for long enough.”

She was right. The agents carefully observed everyone exiting the plane...except us. We walked right in front of them, and past at least half a dozen more agents I spotted as we headed down the concourse. We reached the terminal and walked out of the airport in blissful anonymity.

Since the FBI was waiting for us here, presumably they had discovered our assumed identities. That meant I couldn’t use Elaine’s credit card anymore, and it also meant I wouldn’t pick up the rental car I’d reserved using her card.

Instead, we headed to the long-term parking lot, where I searched through the available vehicles on display. I found an older Jeep sporting a ratty soft top with enough tears in it that I was able reach through to unlock a door without requiring any of my equipment. As an added bonus, the back contained an emergency roadside kit, a full one-gallon plastic gas can, and a toolbox. Considering we

could have used some off-road capability last time, I considered this an ideal choice.

I hotwired the Jeep and paid cash for the parking fee. Until I could pickpocket another credit card, I would pay cash for all purchases. Fortunately, I had almost all of the hundred dollar bills I'd taken from Sherman Lord still on me. And I enjoyed the thought that his money was financing my subversion of his plans.

We stopped at a sporting goods store where I picked up a couple boxes of 9mm ammunition for the Glock. Since Morrigaine had said her scroll translation spell could take several days to cast, I also bought us some extra clothing, sleeping bags, a tent, some MRE field rations and other camping supplies.

Then we drove up into the Rocky Mountains toward Idaho Springs. I found a convenient economy motel tucked away off the highway to use as a staging area, where we removed our disguises, cleaned up and grabbed a quick dinner. In anticipation of rough terrain and a cool night, we both wore jeans, hiking boots, and waterproof jackets over fleece vests. I strapped the Glock’s holster on under my jacket.

After Morrigaine cast yet another spell to head us in the right direction, we drove deeper into the mountains.

#

I turned hard to the left, causing the Jeep’s tires to squeal and the headlight beams to sweep crazily off the

road. The tires crunched as the vehicle turned off a paved road somewhere west of Idaho Springs and onto a rough mountain trail meandering off into nowhere. Morrigaine had suddenly pointed down the dirt road as we were almost upon it, as she had done several times already during the trip.

While I drove, she sat with her eyes closed in concentration, the fingertips of one hand pressed to her temple, the other hand clutching the piece of parchment. This made for a boring passenger, but at least the landscape lit by a full moon made for a beautiful drive.

The dirt road was narrow and eroded into washboards and potholes. The shoulders dropped off into an evergreen forest lining the way. Patches of shimmering aspen occasionally interrupted the sea of dark green firs, their leaves just beginning to turn to brilliant gold with the cooling fall weather. Bare mountain peaks and rough rock outcroppings broke above the sea of green here and there and occasionally lined the road like sharp teeth in a massive jaw. Despite the cool air, I drove with the Jeep's top down. I found the fresh air invigorating, and Morrigaine didn't mind one way or the other. She was used to Scotland's weather, after all.

The Jeep jounced over the dirt road at a respectable clip for fifteen minutes before Morrigaine pointed to a road branching off to the left, again just as we were almost on top of it.

"Whoa!" I said, hitting the brakes and turning the swerving Jeep with a shudder. "Can't you give me any more warning than that?"

Morrigaine had one hand clamped on the roll bar overhead as she braced herself for the turn. Her long red hair swirled out behind her in the gusting wind, and her eyes were wide and bright. I could tell this was like a roller coaster ride for her.

"My apologies," she said with a quick flash of a smile. "I am using a casting to guide us by road, and the change in direction I cannot feel too far ahead. For this kind of reckless speed the casting is not meant. For horse speeds it is fine."

A chain-link fence loomed up ahead like a giant spider web. I stamped on the brakes and the Jeep slid to a halt a few yards away. Churned up dust floated forward, creating an orange haze in front of the headlights. Beyond the fence I could make out little more than a rough, overgrown path and a lot of trees. The part of the fence crossing the road was actually a gate secured with two heavy padlocks and a thick chain. There was a large yellow sign affixed to the fence.

Morrigaine read the sign out loud: "'Do not enter. U.S. Government Property. Trespassers will be subject to lethal force.'"

I killed the engine. "Charming," I said, crossing my wrists over the steering wheel and looking at Morrigaine. "Are we there yet?"

She raised a palm. "No *éssänts* do I sense yet, but not too far ahead lie the scroll pieces. Let us trespass."

Figuring it would be wiser to approach the enclave quietly on foot, I reached for my backpack and we climbed out of the vehicle. I didn't bother unlocking the padlocks; the fence was only nine feet tall with no barbed wire along the top, so we just climbed over.

Morrigaine had some difficulty negotiating the fence, since she was wearing a pair of snug, hip-hugging jeans. Not only had she adapted to wearing "brazen" modern clothing, but she'd even gone so far as to buy a midriff-revealing T-shirt, which she currently wore under her fleece vest and jacket. Neither the tight jeans nor the T-shirt were practical clothing for the field, but she insisted on wearing them.

So I helped her climb over the fence, and we dropped down the other side. Then we headed off down the grassy dirt road into the forest. A thick carpet of spongy soil, dead pine needles and soft grass absorbed our footsteps. An occasional sighing breeze sifted through the trees, creaking old branches, but otherwise the forest was silent. We both carried flashlights but didn't use them; the pale light from the canopy of stars and full moon sufficed to

illuminate the path, even if the surrounding forest remained in deep shadow.

"Can you feel it, Silver?" Morrigaine asked after less than a minute of walking. "The *éssänts*?" She grinned broadly.

The air smelled fresh and energizing, but otherwise I didn't notice anything. Actually, I did--my stomach began feeling a little queasy and I felt the first pulses of a headache growing behind my eyeballs.

"Is that what it is?" I murmured with a grimace. "I don't think it's agreeing with me."

Morrigaine suddenly blanched and came to a halt. "I...I think you are right. My stomach is--" She paused and blinked. "Wait, no. This feeling is..."

Nausea welled up in my throat and I broke out in a cold sweat. I swallowed and said, "It's another curse, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Enough *éssänts* there is to support an illness casting." She managed an uncomfortable smile. "Good news this is, for my store of *éssänts* is replenishing."

"Yay," I said without enthusiasm. "But I think I'm going to throw up." A painful cramp twisted my stomach and I doubled over.

"The curse I can counteract. This time enough *éssänts* I have to help both of us. But myself first...." She

whispered softly to herself and raised her hands to weave patterns in the air.

As I watched her gesture, I thought about how I'd dealt with the sickness spell at the keep. I straightened up and took a deep breath. I forced myself to ignore the nausea, the feverish shivering, the headache and everything else, and focused on acting as if I felt perfectly fine.

Again I felt that ear-popping sensation. And with that, the discomfort...disappeared. All the symptoms simply went away. I inhaled deeply and breathed out comfortably. Apart from a little fatigue and that damned persistent ache in my chest, I felt fine.

Morrigaine finished casting her spell on herself and turned to face me. "Your turn," she said, moving her hands again.

I reached out and took both her hands in mine to stop her. "Save your mana, Samantha. I'm fine now."

She smiled as if to a child. "The discomfort you need not endure like the last time. Enough *éssänts* I have to--"

"No, I mean there's no discomfort to endure. The sickness is gone. Completely." She gave me such an exaggeratedly dubious look that I had to laugh. "Seriously, Morrigaine, I'm fine. I just...well, forced the symptoms to go away."

"You *forced* them to go away?" She raised a copper-red eyebrow. "That is unlikely, Silver. Of castings you know

nothing." She looked me over and added, "But clearly you are not sick."

I shrugged. "Hey, all I know is it worked. I did the same thing at the keep."

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you know more about *éssänts* than you have told me?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know better. Before meeting you I'd never even heard of the stuff."

She studied me for a moment, then said, "To affect *éssänts* without training implies a great strength of will, Silver. Truly uncommon that is. Tell me, any other recent unexpected incidents have there been that you cannot explain?"

"You mean like encountering walking skeletons, a genie, time travel, magical wards and a fifteen-century-old legendary sorceress?" I gave her a smarmy smile.

"No. I refer to incidents where you were certain one thing would occur, but you wanted something different to occur instead...and the different thing did indeed occur? Perhaps you experienced unusual luck?"

I snorted. "Not unless you mean bad luck."

Unfazed she asked, "Do you remember after you grabbed the top piece of the scroll and the ceiling collapsed? By chance did you will the falling metal panel to not block your escape?"

"Well...yeah, I guess I did. Although who wouldn't in that situation? The panel becoming jammed could have just been a coincidence."

"Perhaps. But within an *éssänts* enclave it did occur. Potential you may have. When *éssänts* returns, I shall--"

Somewhere up ahead, a dry twig snapped like a brief burst of static. I touched a finger to my lips to silence Morrigaine, and drew the Glock from my shoulder holster. I peered ahead but couldn't see anything in the dark shadows.

Apparently she couldn't see anything either, and before I could stop her she switched on her flashlight and played the beam over the wall of trees. She'd given away our position, but at least I could take advantage of the illumination to scan the brush ahead of us.

Something glittered back from behind a distant bush, just barely within range of the flashlight beam. I switched on my own flashlight and held it under the barrel of my pistol, pointed toward the glittering. I slowly walked sideways, trying to figure out what it was.

The glittering disappeared for a moment, then reappeared a little closer, and I realized it was a pair of eyes watching us. Animal eyes--they reflected light like a cat's.

Then a large shape detached itself from the shadows and padded toward us. Despite the distance and intervening brush, I could see it had four legs, thick dark fur, and snarling lips pulled back from a grinning mouthful of

teeth. It was a huge wolf. In fact...it looked a lot like that muscular wolf I'd seen in Sherman Lord's garden.

Morrigaine drew a breath with a sharp hiss and stepped back. "Back away," she said tightly. "We must go now. Show no fear."

I glanced at her. "Why? It's just a..."

The wolf leaped forward and galloped directly at me.

Reluctantly, I took careful aim at the animal's huge head and fired one shot. I just hoped the trees would muffle the loud report from the pistol enough to prevent it from reaching unfriendly ears.

The wolf stumbled and collapsed to the ground. I had to admit making the shot in the dark from this range was impressive, but it gave me no pleasure to have killed such a magnificent animal.

"Run!" Morrigaine cried. She turned and sprinted back up the road faster than I'd ever seen her move.

"Morrigaine, it's dead!" I called back, following her at a reluctant jog.

I glanced back over my shoulder and saw the wolf pulling itself back onto its feet. It stumbled after us. I couldn't leave the beast to suffer a lingering death, so I turned and fired three more shots. The wolf dropped again.

And then it clambered back to its feet.

"What the hell?" I knew at least two of the shots had hit squarely. Had the sporting goods store sold me faulty ammunition? I turned and ran.

Morrigaine reached the fence and fell against it, then started pulling herself up. She had the sense to toss her flashlight over the top to free up her hands, but her tight jeans hindered her ability to climb rapidly.

Quick escapes over fences was one of my occupational specialties. I holstered my pistol on the run and launched myself at the fence. I grabbed the top, bounced my feet off the springy middle of the fence, then leaped up and over, twisting around to land on the other side, facing the fence.

The wolf closed the distance with bounding strides. Morrigaine had reached the top of the fence and had started to swing one leg over when the beast leaped. Its slavering jaws snapped at her right foot and caught her pant leg at the ankle. The animal's momentum carried it into the fence with a crash, then it dropped down, jaws still clamped shut on the jeans.

Morrigaine screamed. The wolf's weight pulled her half off the fence, dragging her down toward the ground. It thrashed its head back and forth, worrying her leg like a dog killing a rat, but she clung to the top, her face agonized with the strain.

I drew the Glock and opened fire through the fence at point-blank range. The bullet hit the snarling wall of fur

squarely in the chest. I fired again and again with a furious barrage of bullets that filled the air with strobe-like flashes and the sour tang of burnt gunpowder. But the beast held on stubbornly, its body jerking and twitching with each shot.

In desperation, I finally risked hitting Morrigaine's foot to fire at the wolf's head. The bullet blasted a hole through the top of its skull. The creature dropped like a slab of furry meat and lay still.

Morrigaine was over the fence in an instant, her eyes wide with terror and her face drained of what little color it had. She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the Jeep.

"Hurry!" she cried. "It is not dead!"

"Are you kidding? I just blew its brains out!" I looked back as she pulled me along. "It's not going to..."

The wolf twitched. Its eyes snapped open.

I stared in disbelief. "Oh, *hell* no..." I looked back at Morrigaine and said, "Please don't tell me that's a *werewolf*!"

"You know of the *wyr-wúalv*?" She scrambled into the Jeep. "Then you should know that few weapons can slay them!"

The wolf stood up and shook itself. Its eyes reflected my flashlight beam with a malignant sallow glow.

Then it backed up and leaped for the top of the fence. It scrambled to the top by hooking its paws through the holes in the fence.

"Son of a bitch!" I said, sliding into the driver's seat and fumbling with the key. "Can't you stop it?"

"How?"

"By controlling its mind, or something!"

"Too feral it is! Drive!"

I fired up the engine and accelerated hard in reverse, looking back over my shoulder. "I put a bullet through its *brain*, Morrigaine!" I complained. "How the hell could anything survive a wound like that?"

"I do not understand it either, but rapidly they regenerate most wounds."

I glanced back at the wolf just as it jumped down from the top of the fence and galloped after us. The Jeep couldn't move fast enough in reverse, and the monster was gaining on us.

Morrigaine stared out the windshield at the bounding wolf getting closer with every stride. "Silver..."

"I know! Hold on...." The road finally widened enough for a J-turn, and I yanked the wheel left to slide the Jeep around a shuddering 180 degrees. I stomped on the gas and the tires spun for a second before finally digging in and accelerating us down the rough dirt road.

The wolf leaped and I heard its claws scrape the tailgate, but then the Jeep opened up the distance and left the creature behind. I watched through the rearview mirror as the wolf slowed to a trot.

"A goddamn *werewolf*," I muttered to myself, wishing for the thousandth time that I'd never heard of Sherman Lord.

Chapter 27.

"It will get a second chance"

The Boeing Business Jet 3 lined up for landing as it descended over the lights of Denver.

Godson, back in his usual black fatigues, emerged from the cockpit with his mouth set in a grim line. He knew Lord wasn't going to be happy with the latest update, but he wasn't about to delay reporting it either. He headed through the lounge and into the art deco office.

Lord stood at the bar in a black pinstripe suit, pouring himself a scotch. He spoke without looking up. "I presume they evaded the agents."

Godson blinked. "Uh, yes, sir. How did you..."

"You deliver bad news faster than good news." Lord smiled slightly as he swirled the ice in his drink. "That is a commendable character trait. I suspected *Morrigainausálafé* might elude the agents. She is an accomplished mindcaster, after all."

"My wolf just chased two people out of the Colorado enclave. A man and a woman."

Lord nodded appreciatively. "Good. This time it appears to have succeeded in doing its job properly."

"But it didn't catch them."

A shrug. "It will get a second chance. They will be back when they figure out how to defeat it."

"Defeat it?" Godson frowned. "If they can do that, then..."

Lord smiled. "An enemy's preconceptions can be your greatest weapon. Encourage him to waste his efforts on presumptions before facing reality."

Godson kept his expression neutral to conceal his irritation. He hated it when Lord spoke cryptically. Why couldn't the man just say he planned to trick the two fugitives and then explain exactly how?

"You're going to use Larcini's wife?" Godson asked.

Lord smiled and shrugged. "Only if necessary."

More cryptic talk. Godson knew Lord would reveal nothing more helpful for now, so he just shut his mouth and nodded.

Chapter 28.

"No greatness comes without cost"

I drove fast, heading back through Idaho Springs and toward Denver down Interstate 70.

"What do we need to kill the werewolf?" I asked Morrigaine. "A weapon made of silver?"

"Aye, silver or fire." She looked at me with surprise. "How is it you know that?"

I laughed without humor. "Apparently my teachers got the history mostly wrong, but Hollywood got the monsters mostly right. Go figure."

"Holly-wood? I do not understand."

"Your lightning spell wouldn't work on the werewolf?"

She shook her head. "Only fire or silver can defeat them. All other damage they rapidly heal. I presume silver is still available?"

"At least until the cancer takes me," I said, unable to resist a little gallows humor.

"What?"

"Yes, silver is still available."

"Good, then enough of it we will need to fashion into a blade. Or perhaps an arrowhead. Do bows even exist anymore? I have seen none here."

I smiled. "They do...but I think I have a better idea." I checked the dashboard clock. "That sporting goods store we went to earlier closes at ten. We need to hurry." I took the risk of drawing police attention by accelerating to a little faster than the surrounding traffic.

Morrigaine drew her right foot up to the seat and gingerly touched her ankle. She winced and lifted the torn pant leg to check underneath.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"My leg. It is injured."

I stared at her in alarm. "Don't tell me the werewolf *bit* you!"

"No...just the leg of my trousers. But against the metal of the fence it bashed my ankle with its shaking."

"Do you need medical attention?"

"You have machines to heal such injuries?"

"Well, no, not for bruising. Just ice and bandaging, really."

She snorted. "Then on its own I shall let it heal. Worse injuries I have sustained from a mere stumble."

"Okay. I'm just glad you weren't bitten. It's hard enough to handle the whole legendary sorceress bit, so if you became a werewolf too, well, the leash laws alone..."

She gave me a wounded look.

"Joking!" I said with a grin.

She looked away. "I wish you to tell me the truth, Silver," she said softly. "When you pushed me away, it was only because of your feelings for your wife?"

"Yes. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry."

"Nothing does it have to do with my being a druid?"

"You seem to think that should repel me or something."

"It should not!"

"Well it doesn't. I'm just...getting used to the fact that magic exists, that's all."

She nodded. Then she hugged her arms and lowered her head. A tear rolled down her cheek.

I looked at her helplessly. "Morrigaine, what's wrong?"

She looked away and brushed the tear from her cheek with an irritated swipe of her hand. The tendons in her neck tightened as she struggled to regain control. Then, barely above a whisper, she said, "Everything I ever knew...gone."

I nodded grimly and said, "I'm sorry." I had been out of my own time long enough to know how lost she must feel. "But if we succeed in restoring essence, you'll at least

get that back. And this world is filled with a lot of wonderful new things I'd love to show you."

She wiped her eyes with her fingers and gazed out the windshield. "Promise?" she asked.

I smiled. "Promise."

#

We arrived at the sporting goods store with ten minutes to spare. Morrigaine followed me around as I hurriedly gathered up a butane torch, a canister of gunpowder, a small crucible, heavy leather gloves, a box of empty 9mm shells, a box of primers, a 9mm bullet mold, a sizer and lubricator, and a progressive reloading press. After that I located a nearby 24-hour pawn shop where I bought several American Eagle silver bullion coins. We then headed back to our motel near Idaho Springs.

Morrigaine watched with fascination as I clamped the reloading press and the sizer/lubricator to a table in the room. "What is it you are doing?" she asked.

"Alchemy," I said with a cryptic smile. "Watch."

I dumped the silver coins into the crucible and fired up the butane torch. I played the 2,800-degree flame over the coins until they melted into liquid. Then I put on the gloves and carefully poured the pure molten silver into the 9mm bullet mold. The first few pours would just be to warm the mold and ensure an even pour, so I returned the formed bullet to the crucible and worked it over with the torch again. After repeating the process several times, the

bullets started coming out evenly, and I ended up with six perfect bullets.

The hard part over, I then forced each bullet through the sizer and lubricator, shaving them smooth and lubricating the bullet rings. The device handled the bullets easily enough, despite silver being a harder metal than the usual lead.

I loaded powder into the reloading press's hopper and filled the primer tray. One at a time, I moved the empty 9mm Parabellum shell casings through the die stations, resizing each case and seating the primer, pouring a precise measurement of gunpowder into the shell, and finally seating and crimping the bullet in place.

When I finished, I handed Morrigaine one of the freshly minted cartridges. "Voila, a silver bullet. The perfect tool for clearing out your local werewolf infestation, don't you think?"

She carefully inspected the cartridge, then shook her head appreciatively. "Far longer it would have taken to make even a single arrow with a silver broadhead. Yet clearly these devices are mere machines...."

I smiled and said, "By George, I think she's got it." I picked up all six cartridges and hefted them in my hand. "Do you think this is enough? We'll be in trouble if we run into a whole pack of werewolves."

"Solitary and territorial creatures are the *wyr-wúalv*. Only one shot will you need if you strike its vital organs."

"Works for me."

As I loaded the silver bullets into one of the Glock's magazines, I idly wondered if the Lone Ranger story was actually based on a real Wild West werewolf hunter. That's when it struck me how surreal this moment was. I was standing in a cheap motel with the legendary Morgan Le Fay, loading silver bullets into a pistol to shoot a werewolf so I could rescue my wife and return magic to the world. Was the modern world ready to handle such a jolt to its concept of reality? I wasn't sure *I* was ready to handle such a jolt to my concept of reality.

I paused. "Should we really be doing this?" I asked.

Morrigaine raised an eyebrow. "Preparing to kill the *wyr-wúalv*?"

"Bringing essence back into the world."

"Of course." She gave me a strange look. "Why now do you raise this question?"

"Werewolves. And mummies and animated skeletons and demons and curses and wards. Need I go on?"

She gazed at me evenly. "My whole life I have devoted to the restoration of *éssänts*."

"I know...but bringing back magic will make the world a whole lot more complicated. And dangerous. Don't you think we might be better off without it?"

She thought for a moment, then said, "Life without *éssänts* is like a mind without emotions. Simpler, easier...but incomplete and empty. Would this world stripped of machines be better off?"

I shrugged. "Some people think so. Technology has its downsides."

She waved a hand dismissively. "No greatness comes without cost. But in the balance, is life better with your machines or without?"

"With. They've empowered people to do some pretty great things."

She nodded. "As you demonstrated when you traveled into the past, a single man armed with only a small machine can easily slay a dozen men."

"It wasn't *that* easy...."

"Skilled warriors were the *Sáüks'ain* invaders, yet you defeated them all without a scratch. Truly a devastating weapon is your 'piz-tull' machine. Yet you say that life is better with machines than without. The same is true for *éssänts*, Silver."

If she considered handguns devastating technology, I wondered what she would think about machine guns, tanks and nuclear weapons. But instead I said, "I have to admit it's convenient to be able to easily sneak past security. But it would be a major problem if lots of people had powers like that. And as for the rest of what I've seen..."

"Much of the worst of *éssänts* you have witnessed, for we are facing an evil that controls the little of it that remains. But even more good can come of *éssänts*."

"Such as?"

Her pale blue eyes fixed me with a serious gaze. "Although convenient and comfortable it is to fly in an err-plenn compared to the time and effort needed to construct and maintain an *éssänts* gate, in an *instant* a gate allows one to travel compared to the hours required in an err-plenn. And for healing injuries, all you have is bandages?"

"Well, surgeons can--"

"Can your machines allow you to alter the weather or make dead land fertile? Or to make normally fragile and perishable valuables almost indestructible? Or to extend life indefinitely?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly. Not yet, at least."

She put a hand on my arm. "The world I grew up in was deprived of machines, and a poorer place it was because of it. But deprived of *éssänts* is the world in which we now live, and a poorer place it is because of it too."

I thought about it as I finished loading the silver bullets into the magazine. She made a good point. Plus it occurred to me that if essence was a natural resource--something that was *supposed* to be here--was it right to deprive the world from access to it? After all, nobody would choose to eliminate oceans from the world just

because sometimes people drown in them and they are home to sharks and jellyfish.

Also...Sherman Lord obviously wanted to keep essence hidden from the rest of the world. And I wanted to screw up that vicious bastard's plans however I could. Petty as it may be, that clinched it for me.

"Okay," I said, slapping the magazine into the Glock and chambering a round. "Let's go make the world a richer place."

#

The Jeep rolled to a halt before the chain-link fence. The full moon illuminated the road, but the cold shadows under the trees still stared back as black as pitch.

I checked the Glock for the umpteenth time before I climbed out of the vehicle, and I made sure it sat loosely in its shoulder holster so I could draw it quickly. Keeping my head on a swivel as I looked out for the wolf, I used a pick gun to quickly pop open the two padlocks on the gate. I removed the chain and pulled open the gate, then hurried back to the Jeep. So far, no sign of the wolf.

I decided that it had been a mistake to leave the vehicle the last time. Although I preferred a quieter approach on foot, with monsters like werewolves running around I figured it was more important to have a quick means of escape.

So I climbed back into the Jeep and drove slowly through the gate and down the forest road. I switched the

headlights off and shifted the transmission to a higher gear to keep the engine growl as quiet as possible. Morrigaine turned in her seat to keep an eye out the back of the Jeep while I scanned out front.

Almost immediately I felt the strangest sensation, like a tickling in my stomach. It lasted only a moment, and then faded away. I mentioned this to Morrigaine and she explained it was the curse trying to work its misery again. However, since we had already resisted this specific casting before, it could no longer affect us. That sounded good to me.

With no sign of the wolf as we drove past the location where we'd spotted it the last time, I said to Morrigaine, "Do you think maybe the werewolf is off patrolling someplace else?"

She shook her head. "They are clever beasts. Last time we escaped, and the same mistake it won't make twice. It will cut off our escape route this time."

"Terrific."

Just then the Jeep shuddered as it went over a bump, and I heard the characteristic hiss of tires deflating. I immediately hit the brakes but it was too late. The Jeep settled onto its rims.

"God damn it," I growled as I climbed out of the vehicle. Right behind us, a traffic spike strip lay across the path, painted to blend in with the dirt road and mostly

concealed under a mat of dead pine needles. The sharp steel spikes had ripped open all four tires.

I looked in the back of the Jeep. Emergency roadside kit, gas can and a toolbox...but only one spare tire, of course.

"Silver..." Morrigaine said. The warning tone in her voice caused me to draw my pistol immediately. I followed her gaze out the back of the vehicle.

The huge wolf stood in the middle of the road forty feet behind us, its predatory gaze fixed directly on me.

I raised the pistol and took careful aim, then squeezed off one shot. The silver bullet fired from the handgun apparently as cleanly as any production lead round...but the wolf didn't even flinch. It bared its teeth and trotted toward me.

I took aim again and carefully fired two more shots at its head. The beast only picked up its pace, showing not the slightest sign of injury. Only now did I have the sudden, sick realization that I should have tested the accuracy of the silver bullets before facing the wolf. Despite a rising sense of panic, I held my fire until the wolf approached close enough that I was sure I couldn't miss, then I aimed between the creature's eyes and fired off the remaining three shots.

But the beast kept coming. It was too close for me to run. My only option left was to try bashing its teeth in with my pistol when it tried to sink them into me.

"I'm out of silver bullets!" I yelled to Morrigaine.

The beast leaped...and abruptly disappeared. It just vanished into thin air.

I stumbled backward and looked around frantically. "What the--where did it go?"

Morrigaine looked around in dismay. "That was not the real wolf! An illusion it was!"

"What the hell? Werewolves can cast illusion spells?"

"No. The same imagecaster who made the illusion that hid the keep surely also made this illusion."

"So then where's the real..."

She pointed out the back of the Jeep. I looked where she indicated and saw another wolf emerging from the brush near where the illusion had been standing. It snarled and padded toward me.

"Oh shit," I whispered.

I automatically switched out the empty magazine for the remaining full one...but it contained only jacketed hollow point lead bullets, which were useless against werewolves.

Actually, not entirely useless. Regular lead bullets had saved Morrigaine's life the last time, after all. And silver bullets weren't my only option for killing the creature.

As the wolf approached, I took aim and fired several shots in rapid succession. The beast snapped at its shoulder where one bullet hit, but it didn't slow down

until I put a round through its skull. Then it dropped like a shaggy sack of potatoes. Evidently this wolf was no illusion.

I reached into the back of the Jeep and hauled out the one-gallon plastic gas can. I'd left the butane torch back in the motel room with the rest of the reloading equipment, and although I always carried a small disposable lighter as a multipurpose tool, it was buried in my backpack and would take too long to dig out. So I popped open the roadside emergency kit in the hopes of finding road flares. I found only one, but that should be enough. I snatched it up and shoved it into my back pocket.

As I approached the wolf to within ten feet, it shook its head and clambered to its feet. I aimed one-handed and fired three more shots at its head. At this range, I couldn't miss. Again the monster dropped.

Not willing to let go of the pistol, I set down the gas can and unscrewed the top with my free hand.

The wolf stirred again. "Down, boy," I growled, firing two more shots into its skull. It collapsed again. Blood matted its face and spattered the dead pine needles under its head. The droplets glistened black in the moonlight.

I lifted the gas can over the wolf and sloshed gasoline up and down its length. When the beast twitched again, I dropped the can and stepped back. I wasn't sure whether it was my imagination or not, but the wolf seemed

to be recovering faster each time I shot it. Could a werewolf become habituated to lead bullets?

Again the creature scrambled to regain its feet. “Stay down, damn it!” I yelled, and fired six more shots into its head at point blank range. Hopefully that would scramble its brains long enough for me to finish the job. I holstered the pistol and grabbed the flare from my back pocket.

The wolf began to change. Its thick fur shimmered, becoming less dense, and I realized the hair was actually retreating back into the skin. I stared in morbid fascination as the canine features shrank and warped. The heavy body writhed grotesquely as bones and muscles crawled around under the skin. Within seconds the wolf had morphed into human shape.

A naked woman with a well-toned body lay on the dirt road before me. Blood and gasoline matted her mane of curly blonde hair, and she had a small round birthmark on one cheek.

I’d seen her before. She was the same woman who had been sitting on the edge of the fountain in Sherman Lord’s garden! She’d looked spaced out at the time...and it suddenly occurred to me why. She was the guard wolf I had drugged! I’d sedated a werewolf without realizing it. I shuddered to think what might have happened if she had recovered just a little sooner....

The woman's eyes snapped open. She focused on me and her lip curled in a snarl. Then her face abruptly elongated, her teeth extending and sharpening, her ears stretching back and becoming pointed at the tips. Fur grew rapidly from her skin as the muscle and bone beneath bulked up and twisted her human form back into the massive wolf.

I pulled off the flare's striker cap and scraped it across the igniter. Nothing happened. I struck it again. Nothing. And again...the flare was a dud.

"Morrigaine!" I cried out. "Push in the cigarette lighter! I need to ignite the gas!"

"Push in the what?" she called back.

The wolf hauled itself to its feet. I drew my pistol and fired at its furry head. The monster twitched and stumbled but didn't fall...and the Glock's slide locked open on an empty magazine. I had no more magazines left.

I turned and ran for the Jeep. I knew I wouldn't have enough time to heat up the vehicle's cigarette lighter or dig out the lighter in my backpack, so I desperately hoped there was another flare I'd somehow missed.

I reached the Jeep and tore open the roadside emergency kit. As I searched, I glanced up and saw that Morrigaine had exited the Jeep. She rounded the back of the vehicle and strode toward the wolf, gesturing with her hands as she walked.

The wolf lunged toward me, and Morrigaine extended her hand as it passed by her. I heard a brief crackle and saw

a spark like static electricity arc from her fingertips to the wolf.

The wolf burst into flame with a loud WHUMP. It gave an almost human shriek and crashed into the ground in front of me, rolling and writhing as red and yellow flames engulfed its body. Its limbs thrashed and its jaws snapped in a wild frenzy.

The gasoline burned in a fierce inferno. A wall of intense heat hit my exposed skin, and I backed away, shielding my face with my hands.

The wolf's screams ended as it breathed in a lungful of flame. A few more desperate thrashes and it lay still, while the burning gasoline continued to sear and blister its flesh. The sight sickened me and I turned away.

Morrigaine ran over and grabbed me by the arms. "Are you harmed?" she asked, her pale eyes wide with alarm.

"I'm fine." I glanced back at the sizzling, popping fire. "Is it finally dead?"

"Aye, I should say so!" She stared at the blaze. "*Vashánts*, what an intense heat. That is no ordinary lamp oil."

"It's gasoline."

"The fuel that powers cars?"

"Yeah. How did you know a spark would set it off?"

She shrugged with her palms. "Ignite it, you said, so I tried lightning."

I smiled. “I wouldn’t exactly call that little spark lightning, but at least it did the trick.”

She gave me a dark look. “In another hour or two, sufficient *éssänts* I should have restored for a proper lightning casting, but a spark I surmised was all your ‘gazl-een’ needed to ignite.”

She looked down the road where it stretched off into the darkness. “The closer to the center of the enclave we are, the faster I shall recover. We should continue.”

“Yeah, but we’re in big trouble, Morrigaine.”

“Why? The *wyr-wúalv* is dead.”

I gestured at the Jeep. “So is our transportation. We lost all four tires, so it’s going to be a long, slow, bumpy trip driving out of here on the rims.”

“You think we should leave now?”

“Probably.” I looked down the road. “But we won’t have time to find a new vehicle and make it back here tonight if we do. I don’t know how much time Dana may have left, and who knows when Sherman Lord will show up with more security. I think we should press on.”

“Agreed.”

I took a minute to reload the Glock’s magazines. Then I shouldered the pack and we headed off down the dirt road on foot.

Chapter 29.

"Nobody's luck lasts forever"

The path wound through the forest, following the easiest route along the hilly and rocky terrain. We kept alert and steered clear of any dense vegetation and dark shadows.

After several minutes of walking, Morrigaine smiled and said, "Stronger the *éssänts* grows as we travel. It feels good."

I thought I could sense something too. And it *did* feel good, like a deep breath of fresh, ozone-laced air following a thunderstorm. Despite my focus on our mission, I couldn't help but notice how enchanting the forest appeared under the silver moonlight. The lush firs and golden aspens seemed to take on an extra sheen, with a touch more color and a richer texture.

"This place is beautiful," I murmured to myself.

Morrigaine nodded. "Indeed. *Éssänts* enhances life much as dung fertilizes crops."

"Nice," I said with a grimace. "I think I would have gone with the 'spice enhances food' analogy. Any idea how close the scroll pieces are?"

She waved a hand and stared ahead into the night. "Very close, Silver...."

We rounded a curve, and up ahead stood a weathered wood house set back a short distance from the road. The road continued down a gradual slope to a narrow creek that cut across the path. There was no bridge but the creek was barely three feet wide. Beyond it, the road continued through a broad, treeless meadow filled with wildflowers, and ended at an old church nestled at the base of a rocky cliff face.

This place didn't look nearly as impressive as the keep, and it didn't look like much of a place to imprison anyone. My hopes that we would find Dana here began to sink.

Morrigaine pivoted in place as she peered first at the church and then at the house, her head cocked as if listening to a distant sound. She slowly extended a hand to point at the house.

"In there are the scroll pieces," she said.

The sagging building was falling apart from age and neglect. I frowned. "You're sure?"

"Aye."

The roof of the house was missing most of its wood shingles. Warped steps led up to a porch with an overhanging roof that had collapsed on one side. Only a few shards of glass still clung to the windows frames, resembling teeth in a shark's jaws. The house certainly didn't look like a logical place to hide anything of value...but camouflage was a viable security measure.

I drew my pistol and moved quietly ahead, and Morrigaine followed a short distance behind. I reached the building and inspected the warped wood steps. Nothing looked amiss, so I cautiously climbed up to the porch. The stairs creaked and groaned with each step--a low-tech but effective alarm system, if anyone was inside to hear it. But the ruined building looked as if it had sat unoccupied for many decades.

To one side of the porch lay the rotted remains of a porch swing, its rusted chains still hanging from the ceiling. I checked over the front door and again found nothing suspicious, so I lifted the rusty latch and slowly pushed. The door opened with a faint creak.

Cold moonlight streamed in through two broken windows, revealing a low table of dry, cracked wood in the middle of the room, along with an old couch and an easy chair covered with faded and rotted upholstery. To the left stood a brick fireplace with a rusty fire grate. Two closed doors stood in the left and right walls near the back. A full-

length mirror hung on the back wall between the two doorways.

Morrigaine moved up behind me. “There,” she whispered, pointing straight ahead. “Behind the mirror.”

I switched on a flashlight and stepped into the musty-smelling room. I played the beam over the walls, ceiling, floor and furniture, but found no signs of an alarm system or trap.

I moved up to the mirror. It had a gold-painted wood frame that had long ago dried out, cracked and peeled. A crack also ran down through the center of the mirror’s mottled glass.

I holstered the Glock and slowly passed the flashlight beam over the glass and around the frame. On the back lip of the frame on the right side, I noticed a small metal switch painted the same gold color as the rest of the frame. I moved the switch.

The mirror gave a soft click and slid to the left with a faint hum. Set into the wall behind it stood a vault-like metal door, big enough for a person to walk through. The door sported no combination lock, nor even a voice-operated lock, but instead had an ambiguous black and white panel with two lights that read “Reject” and “Accept.” I recognized it as a Panasonic BM-ET330 iris scanner. Unfortunately, only the right pair of eyes would unlock this safe, and I was willing to bet my pattern wasn’t in the system.

"Terrific," I muttered. "Morrigaine, got any spells that can blast open a safe?"

"No," she said. "Metal deflects lightning."

I heard a creak as the door on my left opened. I turned and saw a woman standing in the doorway. She wore a dusty, rumpled white blouse and a torn business skirt. A disheveled pixie bob hairstyle framed her cute, youthful face...

I stared in shock. "D-Dana?" I whispered.

For a moment Dana just stared back at me, her eyes wide and bright. Then we ran into each other's arms.

"Dana!" I cried. "You're alive!" I clung to her, overwhelmed with joy and relief, unable to believe that after all this she was just suddenly *there*. She was dusty and disheveled, and her skin felt cold from the night mountain air, but she appeared perfectly healthy and whole. I closed my eyes and just held her. For a moment the entire nightmare was over.

Morrigaine softly cleared her throat behind me. I opened my eyes and saw her reflection in the cracked mirror. She wore a sad smile as she watched us.

I shifted my gaze to the reflection of Dana and me. For an instant my dazed mind failed to grasp what was wrong with the image in the mirror...and then I realized I was embracing empty air. Dana had no reflection at all. Then I felt her turn her head and touch her lips to my neck. She opened her mouth and--

"Silver!" Morrigaine cried.

I glanced up at her face in the mirror. She was staring at Dana in utter horror.

My body reacted automatically, and I shoved Dana away from me hard. She bounced off the wall and stumbled to the floor. She snapped her head to face me, and my heart caught in my throat. Her lips had stretched impossibly wide in an inhuman grimace of a smile. Her canine teeth had extended more than an inch long and they looked as sharp as ice picks. She glared at me, her eyes filled with a wild, malevolent greed.

I might have stayed frozen at the horrific sight, but Morrigaine grabbed my arm and hauled me toward the exit. "Run!" she cried, desperation in her voice.

I stumbled after her as she dragged me out the door. My mind reeled. "W-What is--"

"This is a trap!" She slammed the door shut behind us. "Into a *vyámpeerá* a deathcaster has made her!" She pulled me toward the road.

"But I wished...I wished for her to not be dead...."

"Undead is not dead! Run!"

I veered off in the direction of the Jeep, but again Morrigaine grabbed my arm. "No!" she said, pulling me the opposite direction. "That way!" She waved an arm toward the church.

My mind felt numb, my thinking slow and unable to focus on what was happening, so I just did as she said and followed her.

A loud crash of splintering wood carried through the night air. I glanced back and saw Dana standing on the porch in a cloud of dust. The remains of the door and half of its frame lay scattered in front of her.

Her head slowly turned to gaze in our direction. Then she burst into motion, rushing toward us like a spider scurrying after a fly.

I was looking back when Morrigaine and I reached the creek, and the abrupt downward slope along the shore caused me to stumble. Morrigaine grabbed my arm and practically dragged me splashing through the creek. Still unbalanced, I tripped on the upward slope of the opposite side and collapsed, pulling her down with me.

I hit the ground hard, and a sharp jolt of pain shot through my chest. I clutched at the searing pain twisting in my heart, and for an instant I thought my cancer had finally decided to finish me off. But the pain gradually passed to a manageable ache. I rolled onto my back and looked up.

Dana stood on the other side of the creek, her posture as stiff as a corpse. Her mouth remained frozen in that impossibly wide, sharp-fanged grin, and her eyes burned with a voracious, primal hunger. I wanted to scream but no sound came from my throat.

Then she hissed like the breaking of a pressure seal. In the blink of an eye she turned and raced upstream, moving almost like a fast-motion film. She ran so quietly I couldn't hear the sound of her feet striking the ground. I stared where she disappeared into the dark forest.

Morrigaine scrambled to her feet. "Away from here we must go!" she cried, frantically pulling me up. "Now!"

"But she's gone..." I said dully.

"Running water. *Vyámpeerí* cannot cross it."

"Oh. Then...why run?"

She jumped back across the creek and reached out her hand to me, beckoning for me to take it. "The stream is small, Silver, and around the source it will go!"

It took a second for my wounded mind to grasp what she meant. Then I looked back to where Dana had disappeared into the forest, and tried to estimate the length of the stream and how fast she was moving. Could we gain enough of a lead to outrun her?

The urgency of the problem finally began to sink in and my thinking gained traction. I ignored my emotional anguish and focused on a way for us to escape. That was something I could handle.

"We can't outrun her," I said. "We need another plan."

Morrigaine slumped and nodded, her heavy breathing condensing silver in the cold mountain air. "But only

weapons of wood can defeat a *vyámpeerá*. My castings and your weapon are useless!”

I glanced up at the building at the base of the rocky cliff face. “Would we be safe in a church?”

“No protection would it afford us.” She gazed at the church and thought for a moment, then turned back to me. “But if not given permission, *vyámpeerí* cannot enter a building! Time that will give us!”

She jumped back across the creek, grabbed my hand, and we clambered up the sloping bank.

“Do vampires burn up in sunlight?” I asked. “If we can hold out until dawn...”

“...then we can escape!” She raised an eyebrow appreciatively. “You are not completely ignorant in these matters.”

“Score another one for Hollywood.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Let’s go.”

We ran up the road through the wildflower-covered meadow to the church. The old building was constructed mostly of stone blocks, with a peaked wood roof and a huge wood cross above the front entrance. Three stone steps led up to a heavy front door reinforced with iron bands. Rusty old hinges groaned in protest as I pushed on the door, but it opened enough for us to slip through. I shoved the door shut behind us, and Morrigaine found a crossbar to drop in place. Not that it mattered, since the building had

several tall windows in each wall, all broken. I just hoped the whole inviting into buildings requirement would actually work.

The church had definitely seen better days. Faded paint had peeled from the ceiling, coating the floor with a rough, crunchy carpet. Termite-eaten pews lined the aisle. A stone altar stood in the back of the church, and behind it lay broken chairs and desks piled up in a heap of splintered wood. To the left of the altar stood a large stone fireplace with the dusty remains of an old fire. Several stained-glass skylights in the ceiling had shattered long ago, and hundreds of slivers of colored glass lay among the curls of paint. The full moon shone down through the broken skylights, illuminating the church interior with a cold glare.

I followed Morrigaine as she hurried down the aisle toward the pile of broken furniture. The floor crunched and creaked with every step, but somehow I didn't think staying quiet was going to keep the vampire from finding us.

"Why are we hurrying?" I asked. "She can't get in, right?"

"Unless the *vyámpeerá* has already been invited inside this building," Morrigaine said. "Then enter it will, and prepared we must be to defend ourselves." She rummaged through the pile of broken wood.

I spotted a large carved wood cross in the heap of debris. "Is this what you're looking for?" I tugged it from the pile. "Will it scare vampires away?"

She glanced up at it. "Perhaps. As long as blind faith you have that it will work."

"Faith? In which religion?"

"Normally any will do. Like strong will, the faith of a zealot can influence *éssänts*, and *vyámpeerí* are creatures of *éssänts*. But that symbol should work only for followers of the cult of *Jesú hei Kraísttüè*."

I tossed the cross back on the pile. "Too bad I'm not religious."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "Did I not hear you once appeal to 'Jesus H. Christ'?"

I managed half a chuckle. "It's just an expression. But you're a druid. Don't you have some sort of Celtic symbol that would work?"

She shook her head. "Not here. More complex are our symbols and too much time it would take to construct one."

She finally pulled two relatively splinter-free chair legs from the debris. The ends were broken and sharp. "Adequate makeshift spears these will make," she said, handing me one of the chair legs.

"We have to put a stake through its heart?"

"Through any of its vital organs. And inside the *vyámpeerá's* body the wood must remain until it dies, or the wound will heal."

I stared blankly at the broken chair leg in my hand. “It’s Dana. You can’t expect me to--”

“Silver!” She grabbed my shoulder and locked her ice blue eyes on mine. “I cannot do this alone. Please.” She let go and gently touched my cheek. “No longer is that your wife. A monster is all that remains.”

“A monster....”

“Aye. And nothing more.”

I took a deep breath, remembering that ravenous, alien look in her eyes. “Okay,” I said. I gripped my wooden stake like a spear. “But why wood, exactly? What’s so special about it?”

Morrigaine raised her palm in her telltale shrug. “It works...as long as the *vyámpeerá* stands still long enough to be impaled. But so fast this one moves....” She gave me a worried frown. “Very powerful is the deathcaster who made it.”

I hefted my wooden stake. “This is a clunky weapon to use against something so fast. I think I can come up with something better....”

I rummaged through my backpack for my knife and a pair of pliers, and I removed the cartridge from the Glock’s chamber. Then I found a broken wood dowel in the debris pile and took a seat on the floor. Using the bullet for comparison, I used the knife to whittle the dowel into a small conical shape with a flat base as close to nine millimeters in diameter as I could make it.

Then I clamped the pliers onto the lead bullet and twisted it up and down, back and forth, gradually loosening it in the brass shell casing until I could pull it free, taking care not to spill any gunpowder. I tossed the bullet aside and jammed the wood cone into the neck of the cartridge. Then I chambered the round into the Glock with a metallic snap.

"How's this for a high-tech vampire reducer?" I said with a thin smile of satisfaction.

Morrigaine didn't answer. I looked up and saw her staring at one of the broken windows. I followed her gaze...

There stood Dana, pale and smiling. She had her mouth closed, giving her face an almost normal appearance. The window framed her from the waist up like a macabre Mona Lisa.

She spoke softly with a voice as cold as ice. "Hello, Sylvester, my love. I miss your warm embrace." Although she spoke with Dana's voice, those were not her words. She never called me Sylvester.

The thought of an undead monster inhabiting Dana's body was more than I could stand. I jumped to my feet and raised the pistol. "Then come and get it, you *bitch*!" I shouted.

"No!" Morrigaine cried. "Permission to enter you just gave it!"

"What?" I glanced at her, then back at the vampire. "No, that wasn't permission!"

The vampire's lips pulled back into that horrible fanged smile. Then it vanished from the window.

"That wasn't permission!" I insisted.

"Too late," Morrigaine whispered.

"I rescind my permission!"

"Prepare yourself." She turned to face the windows on the left side of the church.

"Oh crap." I turned to face the windows on the right. "I'm sorry."

"We may well be...."

We stood quietly near the altar. I clutched the Glock in one hand and the spear in the other, and shifted my gaze from window to window. My heart pounded in my ears. I knew I would have to react quickly when the vampire came leaping through one of the windows or smashing through the front doors, racing toward us with that impossible speed. I just hoped I wouldn't hesitate because it wore Dana's face. My palms felt damp and a trickle of cold sweat ran down my spine.

A diffused shadow appeared on the ground in front of me. "Above!" I cried, diving to one side.

The vampire dropped from one of the broken skylights and landed on its feet with an amazingly soft thump right behind Morrigaine. I sat up and tried to squeeze off my

one-chance shot, but Morrigaine stood too close to the line of fire.

The painfully familiar figure straightened up in a cloud of disturbed dust. Morrigaine spun around and thrust her wood spear at the vampire's chest. But with inhuman speed, the monster slapped the spear out of her grasp, grabbed her by the front of her jacket, and hurled her into the pile of broken furniture. A small avalanche of debris collapsed over her, billowing dust into the air. She struggled to climb out, coughing and gasping.

The vampire stood at an unnatural position of attention, staring down at Morrigaine with a face as motionless and pale as if it had been chiseled from white marble. I finally had a clear shot.

"I'm sorry, Dana..." I whispered. From my position on the floor, I braced my arms on my knees, took aim and fired.

Maybe the wooden bullet wasn't sufficiently aerodynamic, or maybe I was just shaking too much, but my shot for the vampire's heart just grazed its right breast, sending a fine spray of blood into the dusty air.

Still standing at attention, the undead creature slowly turned its head and looked down at me with a viperous smile. My stomach turned to ice. Suddenly the idea of even trying to use the wood spear seemed ludicrous.

The vampire turned and walked toward me. Horrified, I crab-crawled back up against the fireplace. I slipped

against it, burying my left forearm in a pile of old ashes and kicking up a cloud of dust. For a panicked instant I almost tried to scramble up the narrow chimney to escape. I glanced over at Morrigaine, but she was still struggling to free herself from the pile of debris. She wouldn't be able to help me in time.

I looked around frantically for a weapon. Forget the spear, what else could I use? Wood, sunlight, blind faith... I glanced down at the powdered ashes that coated my left arm...and the insane answer popped into my mind.

As the vampire drew closer, I scrambled to my feet. I raised my pistol and fired. The vampire jerked slightly as the bullet punched a hole right between those so-familiar breasts. But shooting my wife's body hurt my heart more than it did the vampire's, as it continued to advance without so much as blinking.

Teeth clenched, I fired again and again in rapid succession, emptying the magazine into the vampire's chest. Its face flared white from the bright flash of each shot. Dark-colored dots riddled its chest in an area the size of my fist, and a dark bloody stain spread rapidly across the front of its white shirt. Glistening droplets like spilled candy spotted the floor for several yards behind the vampire. The monster never even flinched.

As its arms reached out toward me, the ravenous smile split wider, like the jaws of a snake about to strike. I dropped the smoking Glock and shifted the wood spear to my

right hand. The thing that was not Dana tilted its head, its hungry gazed focused on my neck....

I stabbed the spear at the open mouth, not expecting it to connect. It didn't--the vampire grabbed the spear and yanked it from my grasp as easily as if I had just handed it over.

Which was exactly what I'd done. The instant the cold dead hands clamped onto the spear, I let go and threw all my weight into a straight-fingered punch to the vampire's chest with my left hand, driving my rigid fingers deep into the bloody cluster of bullet holes. My hand plunged completely through the vampire's chest with a sickening squelch. I felt my arm scrape along broken ribs and connective tissue as it slid through.

I cried out involuntarily and closed my eyes as the thick fluids flowed over my arm, revolting me beyond anything I had ever imagined. But I forced myself to keep my arm in the vampire's chest and I desperately hoped I wouldn't pass out. I felt hot tears streaming down my face.

The vampire threw its head back and released an ear-piercing scream. It trembled violently, its jerking spasms threatening to dislodge my arm. Swallowing my horror, I wrapped my free arm around the vampire and grabbed my hand protruding from its back, interlocking my fingers. I clung as tightly as I could, and followed the creature down as it slowly collapsed to the ground.

The vampire shrieked like a locomotive with locked brakes, but its thrashing soon subsided. Its mouth worked spasmodically and the needle-sharp fangs slid back into its skull. Its body relaxed in my grip. And that gaze of burning hunger faded as those once-beautiful brown eyes glazed over. Its head rolled back, limp.

Tears still streaming down my face, I pulled my arm out of Dana's chest and held her tightly to me. "Good-bye, Dana," I whispered. "Good-bye...."

I heard Morrigaine move up next to me. "Ashes...wood ashes you used!" she exclaimed. Then she saw the anguish on my face and fell silent.

After a while, I lowered Dana's body to the cold, littered floor and stood up. There was a damp stain on my jacket and my arm was streaked with gore, but I didn't care.

"I...I wished her to be alive again," I said softly, staring at my wife's remains.

Morrigaine gave me a puzzled frown. "I do not understand."

"The genie told me Dana was dead. I wished her back to life. Then...then he wished for me to kill her."

Her eyes widened as realization set in. She nodded her understanding. "Now the wishes are fulfilled. It is because of cruel deviousness like this that few people take the wishes granted by *dgényíea*." She took my hand and squeezed it. "I am sorry, Silver."

Unable to bear the sight of Dana's mutilated corpse any longer, I pulled off my gore-streaked jacket and covered up her head and torso.

I had to get out of this place. I picked up the Glock and walked quickly toward the exit. Morrigaine followed and helped me pull open the front door. We walked out to the stone stairs, where I took a deep breath of air that didn't reek of blood and gunpowder. I sat down heavily on the top step, and Morrigaine took a seat beside me. And for a moment we just sat quietly, looking up at the night sky flooded with stars.

I suddenly turned to Morrigaine and said, "You...you said that someone who dies a bad death in an essence-rich area can survive as a ghost."

"Aye, if enough strength of will they have, but--"

"And a ghost can possess a body, right?"

She gazed at me steadily for a moment, then said, "Silver, her body is dead. Mindless she would be unless her brain had been properly preserved."

"But you're alive. Her spirit could possess you!"

"It could," she said cautiously, "but a single body cannot hold two spirits for long. Eventually the original spirit would reestablish control, casting out the possessing spirit."

"Couldn't the possessing spirit get rid of the original spirit and stay in control?"

She gazed at me with saddened eyes. "That is what you want?"

I blinked, realizing what I'd just said. "Oh Morrigaine, no...I didn't mean that, I swear. I'm sorry. I just..." I looked down at my blood-smeared hand.

She nodded. She slid closer and put an arm around me, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Are all monsters real?" I asked.

"The worst of *éssänts* you have seen." She sighed. "I wonder if I am mistaken in my quest to return it...."

"*Now* you wonder?"

She gave me a thin smile. "All this time you have sought to rescue your wife above all else. Never have I cared about another so much. Devoted I was only to assisting my father in his goal."

"You had him, at least. And Merlin."

"But not once have I mourned their deaths. Instead, it is their failure to return *éssänts* that I have lamented."

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded.

She looked around at the wildflower-filled meadow. "Never did I consider the wisdom of leaving things be." She looked at me with a serious expression. "Would you prefer to live in a world with or without *éssänts*?"

I sighed and shrugged. "It won't make much of a difference for me either way. I don't have a lot of time left to live."

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I have cancer...an incurable disease.” I didn’t want to see any hint of pity in her eyes, so I gazed out across the meadow instead of looking at her. “I probably have only a few weeks left.”

She stared at me in dismay. “No, Silver....”

“It’s okay. I’ve made my peace with it.” I looked at my bloody hand and murmured, “Besides, I’ve lost everything too....”

“No! A lifecaster I am not, but perhaps with *éssänts* at full strength there is something I could...”

I gave her a wan smile. “It’s a pretty virulent cancer.”

Her gaze hardened. “No. You promised to show me this world, and I intend to hold you to--”

A distant sound caught my attention, and I held up a hand to quiet her. It was a low growl. An engine growl. More than one.

I looked down the road. The engine noises grew louder, and bobbing headlight beams shone through the trees. A vehicle rounded the bend just beyond the house where we’d first encountered the vampire.

Because of the cliff face behind the church, the only way out of here was to head either left or right. To our left, the meadow extended maybe fifty yards and then became a steep, rocky upslope. Only a few scraggly firs grew on the slope, which would provide little cover for anyone

attempting to negotiate the incline. To our right, the meadow extended only twenty yards before scattered trees gradually thickened into dense forest. Near the cliff face, a narrow path that looked like it might be a game trail cut through the trees. Perfect--a narrow path would allow us to move quickly while preventing any four-wheeled vehicles from following us.

I quickly replaced the Glock's magazine and stood up. "This way!" I said, grabbing Morrigaine's hand and pulling her toward the game trail. She ran alongside me, needing no encouragement.

We made it to the trees before the vehicles reached the creek. The game trail began just up ahead. But as we raced between two trees, something hidden in the shadows caught us across the shins and sent us sprawling.

I landed face-down and slid, skinning my hands and arms along the pebbly ground. This time I'd managed to cushion my impact with the ground using my hands, at least, and I felt only a brief twinge of pain in my chest. I rolled over and sat up, spitting out dirt. My shins and elbows stung, and my palms were already oozing blood. I'd also lost my grip on both the pistol and the backpack.

I glanced back at what had tripped us, and to my dismay saw a black rope tied taut between the two trees at shin level. Then I looked at Morrigaine and saw her lying on the ground beside me, her head resting against a flat rock. Her eyes were closed and she wasn't moving.

"Morrigaine!" I cried, reaching for her.

A movement to my left. I looked up to see a man step out from behind a nearby tree. He wore black military fatigues and boots, and carried a large pistol in a nylon holster strapped to his waist. He was muscular, with short black hair, penetrating dark eyes, and a cruelly handsome face.

"Godson..." I whispered.

Lord's bodyguard chuckled without humor. "Tripping hurts, doesn't it?" He grinned coldly. "Once I started thinking of you as a cornered rat, it was easy to predict which way you'd run."

I looked around desperately for the Glock, and spotted it lying under a bush. I scrambled for it.

Godson strode forward and slammed his boot into my side. The impact knocked the wind out of me and sent me tumbling away from the pistol.

"I saw what you did to my wolf," he said as he walked toward me.

Gasping for air, I ignored the pain in my side and clambered to my feet. I stepped forward and threw a right cross at Godson's jaw. In a blur of motion, he grabbed my wrist in a crushing grip, yanked me off balance, and shoved me into a tree. I took the impact with my right shoulder and careened into the ground.

Godson's lip curled in a snarl. "You burnt it so badly I can't even use its saliva to infect someone else.

I have to start over from scratch. Do you have any idea how long it took me to successfully cast that lycanthropy spell?”

My right arm felt numb with shooting pain from the impact with the tree. As I struggled to my feet, I squeezed my shoulder in an attempt to work the feeling back into it. I thought about trying to make a run for it, but I couldn’t leave Morrigaine behind. Besides, I knew Godson could outrun me. I had to take him down, whatever it took.

“Months!” he growled.

Enough feeling returned to my arm to let me use it again. I stepped forward and snapped a quick, distracting jab at Godson’s face, and then immediately rotated my body to drive a low, powerful shin strike at his thigh. He dodged my jab by simply leaning to the side, but the distraction served its purpose. My shin kick slipped in under his field of vision and slammed solidly into his leg.

The impact to the sciatic nerve would have disabled the leg for most men, but Godson barely flinched. Quick as a striking rattlesnake, he fired off a solid jab at my face, smashing me in the nose and sending me sprawling on my back.

“Worse, you made me and my security detail look incompetent,” he continued, as if this were a conversation instead of a battle for survival. “Nobody does that to me. Nobody.”

Stunned, I stared up at the sky, my eyes watering from the pain radiating through my face. I felt blood trickling down the side of my face and I suspected my nose was broken. I turned my head and saw Morrigaine, still lying motionless on the ground. Then I saw the Glock lying just beyond my reach.

I rolled over and lunged for the pistol. My right hand landed on the grip, but before I could wrap my fingers around it, a black boot heel came down hard against the back of my hand and twisted viciously. I gasped as bones crunched and grated, and I fought uselessly to pull my hand free.

I finally twisted my body around and kicked at Godson's ankle, which gave me the leverage to rip free. I held my broken hand to my chest and gritted my teeth from the pain. Godson reached down and grabbed me by the front of my fleece vest. He hauled me up to my feet so he could look me right in the eye.

"You've been lucky," he said. "But nobody's luck lasts forever."

I clinched him around the neck and thrust my knee into his sternum, then swung an elbow at the side of his head and drove my unbroken left fist into his stomach. He didn't even grunt.

Godson hauled me completely off the ground and slammed my back against a tree, knocking the wind out of me again. He drew back his fist and rammed it into my side. Not only

did I feel the ribs crack from the blow, but I actually heard them pop.

As I gasped for air, he smiled and said, “Hear that, Larcini? That’s the sound of your luck changing.”

In desperation, I grabbed at his heavy pistol--a big .50 caliber Desert Eagle--and yanked it from its holster. I slipped off the safety, shoved the muzzle into his side and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

He grinned at me. “Oh, sorry, Larcini...no round in the chamber.”

He balled his fist in front of my face and I heard the joints in his fingers pop. He drew his arm back and just held it there, smiling as I squirmed and winced in anticipation of the punch. I had no strength left, but I took a swing at his head with the big handgun anyway.

Of course, Godson was faster. In a smooth, well-oiled motion, he slammed his fist into my face. I twisted away, hoping to roll with the blow, but the iron-hard knuckles crashed into the side of my face like a sledgehammer. My vision blurred and filled with sparkling lights.

My vest ripped from the impact and I collapsed onto the ground. I lay there in an agonized heap. I didn’t see the next blow coming, but something hit my head and everything went black.

Chapter 30.

“The demon reached for me”

When I finally drifted back to consciousness, the first thing I became aware of was the sharp pains and dull aches that tormented my side, hands, face, arms, shins...my whole body was one massive, unrelenting hurt. I heard phlegm rattling in my throat like a Geiger counter each time I struggled to draw breath. I tasted blood and bile and felt the urge to vomit. I wanted to give up and float off into oblivion.

But...I couldn’t. Morrigaine needed me. So with slow deliberation I forced my aching eyes open.

The clear night sky had lightened and the stars were fading with the approaching dawn. The air had grown colder. I noticed there were no trees over me, so I figured someone had dragged me away from the forest. I turned my head and saw Morrigaine lying not far from me.

She was still unconscious. An ugly welt marred her pale forehead.

Groaning with the effort, I forced myself up to a sitting position. I felt like the victim of a train wreck. All my joints were stiff from injury and cold.

I discovered we were lying on a patch of bare dirt in the meadow. A man stood fifteen feet away. Actually, there were several people. I looked around and saw nearly a dozen men standing in a circle around Morrigaine and me: soldiers, SWAT, police, men in black suits. All of them held guns, which were--not surprisingly--pointed at me. I decided I never should have opened my eyes in the first place.

"Good morning, Mister Larcini," said a smoothly precise voice from behind me. The vaguely Latin American-like accent sounded familiar, but in my groggy state I couldn't quite place it. I slowly turned around and looked up.

The man wore an elegant, three-piece gray suit with a blood red silk tie. He had lined, granite-hard features, and dark hair with a receding hairline. It was Sherman Lord. And beside him stood Godson, his arms folded as he watched me with the focus of a hawk.

"Terrific..." I muttered, shaking my head and instantly regretting it. A pulsing headache now accompanied the rest of my pain. This was not the way I'd envisioned meeting Sherman Lord again.

"That was a most impressive job, evading me for so long. You are a most persistent and resilient man, I will grant you that." Lord smiled. "Tell me, did you enjoy being reunited with your wife?"

"You f-fucking bastard..." I croaked. My split lips and swollen jaw made it difficult to form the words. Heedless of the guns pointed in my direction, I struggled to stand so I could go strangle the son of a bitch with my bare hands.

Godson stepped forward and shoved a hand against my chest. I fell backward and collapsed in a heap. The impact drove lances of pain through half a dozen injuries and sent me into a coughing fit. But I didn't cry out. I didn't want to give these bastards the satisfaction.

"Try that again and I'll break both your legs," Godson growled. He shifted his gaze to my legs as if considering which technique he would use.

I struggled back up to a sitting position and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. It came away bloody.

Lord ignored the brief altercation and added, "I must admit I am disappointed that your wife failed to live up to her potential. She was impressively fast, was she not? But I was delighted to see you were unable to bypass the iris scanner."

He reached into his suit and pulled out three pieces of paper. No, not paper, I realized. Parchment. They

were the three sections of the scroll. I let out a soft groan at seeing all three pieces in the hands of the enemy.

Lord grinned at my reaction and fanned the three pieces for me to see. "Yes, here they all are, together once again." He held up one of the pieces and added, "Tell me...where did you find this third piece of the scroll? It has been missing for, what, fifteen centuries now?"

"Go to h-hell," I growled, wincing as I inhaled cold air over a broken tooth.

His gaze hardened as he tucked the three scroll pieces back into his suit. "Considering your current predicament, Mister Larcini, I would recommend a more cooperative attitude."

A soft noise distracted him. Morrigaine moaned and stirred. She sat up, clutching the side of her face.

"Ohh, my head..." she mumbled, pushing the hair out of her eyes. "Silver, are you..." She looked up, then around, startled to see all the guns pointed at us.

"Hello, *Morrigainausálafé*," Lord said softly. "It has been a long, long time...." Apparently he had no trouble pronouncing her name either.

She gaped at him and said, "F-Father?"

For a moment I forgot all about my pain. I stared back and forth between Sherman Lord and Morrigaine, trying to process what she'd said.

Lord gazed at Morrigaine. Softly, almost gently, he said, "I had nearly forgotten how beautiful you are...."

"Wait a s-second," I cut in, ignoring another spark of pain from cold air across my broken tooth. "*You're* Mordred?"

"An astute deduction," he said with a nod. "I find it most curious how names change with time."

"But you can't be. I s-saw a demon kill Mordred."

"Did you now?" Lord smiled and lifted his gaze up to something behind me. "You mean that demon right there?"

I heard the faint crunch of gravel being compressed by the tread of something heavy, and I struggled to turn my head.

A huge, vaguely humanoid creature stood *right* behind me. It was massively muscled with skin the color of curdled milk. It had a long, horse-like face with sweptback spikes for ears, and it gazed down at me with eyes that glowed like dying coals. Its bulging arms ended in three-fingered hands, with each finger as thick as a radiator hose and tipped with a three-inch claw.

The demon reached for me, its massive clawed hands splaying open. I tried to twist myself around, raising my hands to ward off--

The demon abruptly vanished.

I lost my balance and fell to the side. The shock jarred my broken ribs and I gasped in pain.

Lord chuckled. "The demon, the fireball, even the image of me in my tower--all just illusions to convince

anyone who might be using observation castings that a demon was the source of all the trouble."

"Imposter!" Morrigaine cried, her eyes flashing with anger. "Imagecasting was no specialty of *Mähdríedd's*!"

He grinned. "I actually possess *three* specialties, my dear. I am the only Great Druid to ever achieve such mastery. No one ever knew that I am also an imagecaster."

She gave a disbelieving snort. "Why would you hide such a thing?"

"People fear power greater than their own, and fear brings scrutiny. I did not wish the other Great Druids to pry into my activities."

"Wait," I said. "S-So there n-never was any demon?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Keep up with the conversation, Mister Larcini. There was just me."

"Then...it w-was you who imprisoned Morrigaine in the s-statuette."

He nodded. "I learned that *Aumérllynex* was close to discovering that my mana casting scroll was the source of the *éssänts* drain, so I sent *Morrigainausálafé* to him to continue her education." He gave a crafty smile. "That took time away from his work while allowing me to redouble my own efforts in privacy and complete my scroll sooner."

His smile faded. "Unfortunately, *Aumérllynex* instilled in her his unyielding devotion to the restoration of *éssänts*. She became no longer suitable for my purposes.

Still, in the event I might one day need her abilities, I acquired a stasis statuette from a timecaster for her."

Morrigaine stared in disbelief. "Your scroll caused essence to disappear?"

He laughed. "You had not yet figured that out?" He paused for a second, then added, "No, of course not. Otherwise you would have destroyed the scroll pieces."

"But why would you...?" Her voice sounded like that of a lost child.

"To become more powerful still, of course."

"You weakened *éssänts* to become more powerful?" She shook her head in confused dismay. "What sense does that make? You are a Great Druid! With *éssänts* at its fullest, you would be at your most powerful!"

"So too would the other Great Druids, right?" He smiled thinly. "I designed the casting to allow for the formation of a few enclaves where at least some *éssänts* would remain even after it disappeared from the rest of the world. With access to the enclaves, my castings still functioned well enough to allow me to eliminate the now powerless Great Druids. Enchanted creatures either became ordinary or simply went extinct, with even their bones crumbling to dust. Magic became myth within a few generations."

"People wouldn't f-forget s-something like that s-so easily," I said. I was finding it increasingly difficult to speak.

"Oh, but they did. You see, the mind has trouble even conceptualizing the workings of *éssänts* when it no longer resides within the brain." He tapped his temple with a thick finger. "Imagine if humankind suddenly lost its ability to see color. While the first generation would retain their memories of color, their children would not even be able to grasp the concept. Within a few generations, color would be reduced to mere myth."

Morrigaine made an exasperated sound. "You wanted to be forgotten?"

"Actually, yes. Although my scroll greatly diminished my own power, it made me relatively far more powerful than anyone else. After all, who can resist my castings when no one even knows *éssänts* exists?"

"In the l-land of the blind, the one-eyed m-man is king," I muttered.

Lord laughed. "Succinctly put, Mister Larcini."

"Th-This is all j-just about power? S-Seriously?"

He raised an eyebrow. "What else could I possibly need? A woman's love? Artistic accomplishment? The satisfaction of a hard day's work?" He laughed again.

Morrigaine spoke very softly. "You betrayed us all."

Lord smiled. "Yes, I suppose I did."

She snarled and scrambled to her feet, her eyes blazing with fury. She lunged at Lord with her hands held like claws.

"Godson," he said.

The muscular bodyguard stepped in front of Morrigaine and slammed a fist into her face. Her long hair whipped forward as her head snapped back, and she crashed back into the dirt. She lay still.

"Morrigaine!" I cried.

"She always had a problem with control," Lord said with a regretful shake of his head. "But it is just as well she is not conscious when she dies."

I stared at him. "What? You can't. You s-said you m-may need her abilities!"

"She was the one powerful druid I allowed to survive after *éssänts* disappeared...and look how much trouble she has caused me." He shook his head. "No, she is of no use to me anymore. Besides, for the past century I have been using scientific techniques to selectively breed and engineer a caster assistant, with remarkable success." He gestured at Godson. "In the past I had to scour the land for decades in search of promising infant candidates to abduct and raise as my own. That was how I found *Morrigainausálafé*. But such a waste of time is no longer necessary."

Another coughing fit hit me before I could respond. The iron taste of blood filled my mouth, and a wave of nausea threatened to empty my stomach. Deep inside I could feel a spreading chill, a disturbing numbness that was beginning to displace the pain.

I knew I was dying. But maybe I could still save Morrigaine. "L-Let her g-go," I gasped. "You have m-me."

"In case you had not noticed, I have both of you, Mister Larcini."

He glanced up at the sky, which was turning pink with the approaching dawn. He turned to Godson and said, "Send for two men with shovels."

Godson flipped open his cell phone.

I knew this was my last chance to stop Lord. But my bent knees had grown stiff and numb on the cold ground, and the rest of my body was a crippled mess. I could barely even breathe. What could I possibly do?

I glanced over at Morrigaine. Her long hair had fallen over her face when Godson knocked her to the ground, but I could see her open eyes glittering through the red veil, her gaze fixed on Godson. Her hands weaved around each other with small, subtle motions, hidden from Lord and Godson's view behind her bent leg.

Godson lowered his phone and drew the Desert Eagle from the holster at his hip. He cycled a round into the chamber, slipped off the safety, and raised the gun to point...directly at Sherman Lord's head.

I suddenly realized what Morrigaine was doing, and my heart lifted. I grinned at Lord, which caused my split lip to bleed again. But I didn't care. "Die, you bastard," I whispered.

Lord looked up at the muzzle of Godson's pistol hovering inches in front of his face...and he smiled. "I'm sorry, *Morrigainausálafé*," he said, "but you should know that I control Godson's spirit. And it is incapable of harming me."

For a moment the muscles in Godson's jaw trembled with tension. Then abruptly he relaxed. He whipped around and pointed the weapon at Morrigaine. "You bitch!" he growled.

"Not yet, Godson," Lord said softly.

Godson glared at Morrigaine, but he reluctantly holstered the Desert Eagle. "Yes, sir," he said, gritting his teeth.

Morrigaine sat up and pushed the hair out of her face. Her lip was wet with blood from where Godson had struck her. She fixed Lord with a shrewd glare and said, "Spirit control is no lifecasting ability. That is something only a deathcaster can do."

"You remember your lessons well." Lord nodded appreciatively. "I am a manacaster, an imagecaster...and a deathcaster." He smiled. "I never was a lifecaster."

Her eyes narrowed. "That cannot be. To live as many centuries as you have requires lifecasting. A deathcaster can preserve only corpses."

"Indeed. And only an imagecaster can make the dead appear alive."

He waved a hand in front of his face with a gesture that almost looked like a gang sign. His face flickered

and disappeared, revealing a dry, rotted skull behind it. Ancient flakes of blackened skin and a few strands of hair adhered to the discolored bones.

"A mummy!" I gasped.

Morrigaine stared at the corpse in revulsion. "No, a *lïych* is what he is. A caster who makes himself undead."

Lord made another gesture, and his aged but living face shimmered back into place. "Quite so. As long as I have access to *éssänts* to replenish my preservation castings, I remain undying."

I noticed Godson had stepped away from Lord, staring at him with his mouth open. Evidently this was news to him too.

Morrigaine glared pure hatred at Lord. Her lip curled as she whispered to herself and weaved patterns in the air with her hands, not even trying to disguise the fact that she was casting a spell.

Lord laughed. "Perhaps you haven't remembered your lessons as well as I thought." Again he tapped his temple with an index finger. "Mind castings are ineffective on a dead brain." He smiled and looked around. "Or do you hope to try controlling one of my other guards? Sorry, but these all happen to be undead as well. Besides, surely you realize by now that shooting me would be pointless. Bullets cannot harm me. They do not burn."

She didn't stop, but instead focused on him with even greater intensity. Her long hair floated upward,

straightening and separating into individual strands. I felt the hairs on my arms stand on end and I thought I heard a humming in the air. Lord's amused smile vanished as he realized what she was about to do.

"Shoot her!" he bellowed.

Morrigaine thrust an open hand forward, and a brilliant flash of blue-white light launched from her palm. The image of Sherman Lord's wide-eyed face burned into my retinas an instant before a thunderous shockwave slammed me to the ground.

As I lay there in agony, the muted popping of gunfire reached through the ringing in my ears. The fresh scent of ozone and the flint-like smell of burnt gunpowder filled my nostrils. I forced myself back up to my knees, feeling the bones grate painfully in my right hand as I steadied myself and looked around.

Curls of thin blue smoke rose from the ring of gun barrels and drifted like fog through the cold morning air. Morrigaine lay on her back, her limbs splayed out awkwardly like a discarded rag doll. Blood seeped through dozens of bullet holes dotting her jacket. Her eyes were open but she lay very, very still.

"No..." I whispered. Despair hit me like a crushing wave and I could scarcely breathe. All the injuries Godson had inflicted upon me paled in comparison. Morrigaine's image blurred as my eyes filled with tears.

But I had to witness what her last act had achieved. I blinked hard to clear my vision and looked over at her target.

The body lying on the ground before me had its back arched, limbs rigidly splayed, fingers curled like claws. Weeping, puffy blisters covered its blackened skin, and steam that reeked of roast pork wafted upward from the remains.

"My word..." a voice whispered unevenly.

I looked up at the person who had spoken, a man standing next to the burnt remains. I almost cried out in anguish when I saw who it was.

It was Sherman Lord. And Godson stood a short distance away from him, his pistol drawn.

For a moment Lord just stared wide-eyed at the charred, steaming body that had once been one of his guards. Then he said softly, "I...I did not realize how far she had come." He nudged the blackened arm of the corpse with the toe of his shoe, and slowly shook his head. "Still, her control...that always needed work."

He took a deep breath and smoothed back his hair with both hands to compose himself. "Enough of this." He turned his attention to me. "Mister Larcini, you have proven a major inconvenience. However, I do appreciate your unusual facility with security systems. So I have a deal to offer you. Tell me where you found that third

scroll piece and I shall allow you to live...as one of my creations, of course."

"G-Go fuck yourself," I whispered.

"Suit yourself." He nodded at Godson.

Godson didn't hesitate. He pointed his heavy pistol at my chest and pulled the trigger.

Chapter 31.

"This colorless, empty universe"

Godson's pistol gave a deafening roar and blinded me with its red-white muzzle flash. I felt the bullet plunge through my chest, tearing through muscle and shattering bones like potato chips. The mushrooming hollow-point hit my heart, exploding it like a water balloon. My back erupted in a cratered cone of shredded flesh, and I collapsed backwards like a broken marionette.

I lay on the cold grass, unable to move, my life leaking out in a growing puddle beneath me. Stars exploded in my skull and the darkness pressed in from all around. I felt so cold but I had lost all other feeling. A rushing sound filled my ears. My eyes slowly drooped closed as my brain began to suffocate. *Tired...so tired...*

I felt a dark presence looming over me. In my mind's eye I saw a tall, emaciated figure in a black cloak that swirled about it as if it were walking underwater. Its

fleshless face shone white under the dark hood. It carried a huge, notched blade at the end of a long staff of wood. I gasped a soft death rattle. The Grim Reaper was coming for me.

"I can't die..." I whispered, though no sound came from my mouth. "N-Not yet...."

The skeletal form stared down at me with empty eye sockets. It raised the scythe blade high into the air, cold steel against a dark gray sky. There was a pause of a heartbeat, an eternity for me.

Then the scythe swung down toward my chest, and I screamed without making a sound. Instinctively I rolled hard to the side. I scrambled to my feet and turned to face my attacker.

But there was no one there.

Confused, I stared around me. The world had become a surreal, blurred haze of silver-gray. The wildflower-filled meadow, the circle of gunmen, the trees beyond...all colorless and translucent. The only sound was that unrelenting rushing sound in my ears, like television static or a massive waterfall a short distance away.

A body lay on the ground at my feet. It was as gray and indistinct as everything else. It lay on its back with its arms thrown loosely out, legs still bent from kneeling, a bullet hole in its chest and a circle of blood pooling under its back.

With a start I realized the body was mine.

The circle of men moved in slow motion. They turned and walked away, gradually disappearing into surrounding gray fog. No one took notice of me at all.

I looked down at myself--not at the sprawled body lying dead in the dirt, but at the person who was standing over my body doing the observing and thinking. I was stark naked in this gray world. I appeared translucent, almost transparent, with my skin giving off a silvery glow. And yet I appeared more distinct than anything else in the meadow.

Physically I felt surprisingly good. The pains in my chest, head, hands, ribs...all of them had disappeared as if I'd never been injured. In fact, this almost see-through body had no marks on it at all--no appendix scar I'd had since childhood, no L-shaped scar on my thigh from a car accident years ago, no slight bend in my little finger from a fracture that had never set quite right...I wasn't even circumcised anymore. Gone too was that constant ache from the cancer eating away at my chest. And I no longer felt any stiffness in my aging joints--a sensation I hadn't realized was there until just now. Physically I felt *years* younger.

It finally dawned on me what this body was, and I stood there in stunned silence. I was...a *ghost*.

I tried to remember what Morrigaine had told me about them. They were "detached spirits," she said, either

summoned by deathcasters or surviving through sheer strength of will after experiencing a bad death.

Had Sherman Lord summoned me? Somehow I doubted it--he'd walked away right after Godson put a bullet in my chest. But I'd watched both Dana and Morrigaine die horrible, violent deaths, and Lord and Godson had beaten me to a helpless pulp and gloated over my total defeat before finally putting a bullet through my heart. That sounded like a pretty lousy death to me.

So apparently I had a strong will. Well, Morrigaine had suggested as much after I overcame the sickness curse all on my own. And I was fortunate enough to have died in an essence enclave. Lucky me.

So...my body was dead but somehow I lived on. Okay, so what did that mean? What was I supposed to do now?

Morrigaine had told me she once saw a ghost possess its own rotted remains. I looked down at the translucent gray form of my own dead body lying on the ground before me. It looked like an abused and discarded mannequin. The eyes were glazed open, their expression in death a mixture of shock, frustration, rage, disbelief.... A thick river of blood had flowed from my slack mouth and down the side of my face. My jaw was crooked and swollen. Blood soaked my fleece vest all around where the bullet had struck.

Oh, my body was dead, all right. If it were possible I would have thrown up. Yet I stared at my corpse in morbid fascination for a long time.

I wondered what would happen if I crawled back into it. The aging husk was dying of cancer and mortally wounded even before the bullet ripped through my heart. Would I climb inside only to die again from that gunshot wound? Or would the injury instantly heal?

Well, if a ghost could possess its own *rotted* remains, then the answer to both questions was probably no. So would I instead become some sort of undead zombie, a living spirit animating a dead body?

And what about brain damage caused by a lack of oxygen? How long had my body gone without breathing? I realized I'd completely lost track of time in this gray world, but surely many minutes had already gone by. Ernest Beel and Sherman Lord were dried-up corpses and yet they'd shown no signs of brain damage. Then again, they had been created by magic spells, not strong will, and Morrigaine had said the possessed corpse she saw was mindless. So would I become brain damaged upon reentering my body? A mindless, undead revenant existing only to seek revenge?

I suddenly had no desire whatsoever to get back inside that mangled shell. But what was the alternative? Stay here and haunt this colorless, empty universe with only the roaring in my ears to keep me company?

I looked over at Morrigaine's body. A part of me desperately hoped I would see her silvery, translucent ghost standing over her body, staring back at me in

surprise. At least then I wouldn't be all alone in this world.

But she wasn't there. Not that I expected to see her. She'd died instantly from a fusillade of bullets, giving her no time to will herself to survive--assuming she even had enough will to do so.

I walked over to her body and kneeled beside it. Gray and transparent, she nevertheless remained beautiful even in death. I reached out to touch her face, but my fingers passed right through her as if she weren't there, and I jerked my hand back. Unable to touch her, I just sat and looked at her.

A nearby movement caught my attention. I looked up and saw three gray, shadowy figures near the edge of the meadow. One was Godson. He stood watching two workmen in overalls and flannel shirts who were digging a hole with shovels. It was a hole just big enough to fit two bodies.

Godson turned and walked over to my corpse. He used the toe of his jungle boot to tilt my head up so he could get a better look at my battered face. Then he let it fall back, and the corner of his mouth briefly curled up in a smirk.

"You son of a bitch!" I snarled, though I could hear nothing but the rushing in my ears. I silently screamed a primal roar of rage and charged at him.

I slammed my shoulder into Godson's stomach, and to my surprise I *hit* something solid. Godson stumbled backward

and fell to the ground, landing on his butt. Stark naked and glowing a pale ghostly silver, the muscular man gaped in shock as the body in front of him--his body, the one in the real world--collapsed and sprawled in the grass.

I didn't know what this meant, but I knew enough not to waste an opportunity to do something. I hopped forward and spun hard on my left foot, raising my right leg and slamming my shin hard into Godson's face. The impact snapped his head back and knocked him flat against the ground.

I dropped my knee hard into his solar plexus, then drove my fist into his stunned face. I punched him again and again and again--no technique, no finesse, I just hit him as hard and as fast as I could, knowing I wouldn't stand a chance if the powerful bastard recovered enough to fight back.

Godson's ghost shimmered like a heat mirage, and it flickered with flashes of white. I grabbed him by the neck with both hands and squeezed with all my might.

And then suddenly his ghost disappeared, dissipating like smoke in a gust of wind. I found myself clutching empty air.

I kneeled on the ground for a moment, just staring at the spot where Godson's ghost had lain, and a grim smile crept over my face. Sherman Lord had finally begun to pay for what he'd done.

I slowly stood up and looked back at Godson's body in the real world. It lay motionless on its back, its eyes closed. The body was dead...but it suddenly occurred to me that if Godson had been a rotted corpse with an illusion disguise like Beel or Lord, then his brain would have been dead and Morrigaine wouldn't have been able to control his mind, right? That meant that until I killed him, he had been *alive*. Not only that, but since I'd killed his spirit without mortally wounding his body, his body was also perfectly undamaged.

It was worth a try. With no further hesitation, I stepped over to the corpse and waded right into Godson's boots. My feet passed through his feet and occupied the same space. I then lowered myself into his body, carefully arranging my limbs and torso to closely duplicate Godson's sprawled posture.

Watching my body disappear into the body of another person felt bizarre and more than a little creepy, but I didn't hesitate. When my arms, legs and torso lay immersed in the body as well as I could place them, I lowered my head into its head.

A gray mist descended over my eyes. I passed out.

Chapter 32.

"The death of the phoenix"

Blackness. And something shoving against my chest again and again and again...insistent...irritating....

The shoving stopped, and I felt cold fingers on my neck. "Yeah, he got a pulse now," someone said.

"Good!" another voice replied, relieved. "Oh man, we'd a paid for it if he ain't got one."

"You okay, sir?"

I groaned groggily and opened my eyes. The early morning sun was trying to pierce through the trees and reach the meadow. One golden ray of light managed to find my eyes, and I turned away, blinking.

The two men in overalls kneeled beside me with concerned expressions on their faces. No, it wasn't concern, really. It was more like fear.

I sat up quickly. The two workmen jumped to their feet and took a step back. "I just slipped," I mumbled,

scowling. My voice sounded oddly gruff to my ears. "Get back to work."

"Yessir!" both men chorused. They picked up their shovels and hurried back to the hole. They resumed their digging with apparent enthusiasm, occasionally shooting furtive glances in my direction.

I stood up unsteadily. My head swam a little but otherwise I felt okay. Actually, I felt remarkably good. But some things looked...different. For one, everything stood out in unusually sharp detail. I didn't remember my vision ever being this sharp before. And the ground appeared to be a little further away than I was used to. It took a moment before I realized it was because I was now an inch or so taller.

I held my hands up in front of my face and examined them. They were large, powerful, and the skin color was a shade darker than I was used to. I bunched the fingers into fists and felt the tremendous strength within flex all the way down my forearms.

I hesitantly took a few trial steps. My body was now more heavily built all around, but it felt solid and supported, well distributed. Yes, there was more than enough strength to maneuver the extra weight without effort. Good balance, too. My joints also felt more flexible, moving with unfamiliar smoothness. I breathed in a huge lungful of air, easily and efficiently, without any discomfort in my chest.

I did feel a slight discomfort in my left thigh, though. It was where my old body's shin kick had struck this body earlier. Hardly any damage at all, though, and I experienced a weird ambivalence between being thankful I hadn't crippled this body and disappointed I hadn't inflicted more damage on Godson.

I probed my torso and arms through the black fatigue shirt to feel my new muscles. They weren't overly bulky but they felt rock solid and sharply defined. I tensed them all and they bunched like living steel. I had never felt so incredible in all my life! I wanted to shout, laugh, run, jump, break a tree in half...

But I didn't do any of those things. I was Godson now, and Godson didn't do things like that. Later he would undergo a personality change, absolutely...but for right now, to all eyes, he would remain Sherman Lord's loyal bodyguard and security expert, werewolf-making sorcerer's apprentice, and brutal son-of-a-bitch bastard.

One of the workmen called out. "We're done, sir. You want we should bury 'em now?"

I immediately turned my gaze of wide-eyed wonderment into a sneer. "No," I said, almost too quickly. "I'll do it myself. You two can go. Have transportation waiting for me at the front gate."

I realized I would have to watch how I spoke. I had Godson's vocal cords but I still tended to speak with my other body's accent.

"Yessir!" they chorused. They jammed their shovels into the pile of freshly unearthed soil and headed off.

I walked back over to my body and stared down at it. It looked so old and fragile in death. I kneeled down and closed the glazed eyes with gentle pressure from my new fingers. Damn this felt strange!

Then I carefully scooped up my cold, stiffening old body in my new arms. It weighed nothing to these muscles. I carried the old Silver Larcini to the shallow grave and lowered him inside. After a moment's thought, I carefully rolled my body onto its right side--I had always felt more comfortable sleeping that way.

I whispered an epitaph to myself: "Silver is dead. Long live Silver."

I stood up and turned away from the grave, feeling not quite real. I wasn't sure whether I felt like laughing or crying. Does one grieve for the body when its spirit has risen again, stronger than before? Does one mourn the death of the phoenix?

Morrigaine still lay where she'd been shot to death. A gentle breeze caused a lock of her copper-red hair to wave slightly, the motion only emphasizing her unnatural stillness. I kneeled down beside her and gently pulled her to my chest. The ferrous tang of blood filled the air, but through it I could smell that lavender scent that had lifted from the remains of her broken statuette, seemingly ages ago. I stroked the luxurious softness of her long red

hair, then touched her cheek. Her skin felt cool to the touch, her face so pale and exotically beautiful...

Then tears blurred my vision. “I’m sorry, Morrigaine,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry....” Then my throat constricted and I could no longer speak.

For a while I just held her close and stared across the meadow, watching the sparkling dew on purple wildflowers turn from red to gold as the sun crept upwards. Then I carried Morrigaine to the grave and gently placed her alongside my body. I reached for the shovel.

I buried them in the clearing and made a rock cairn over their grave.

Chapter 33.

"A little exorcism"

Four security guards in black suits straightened as the limousine approached the front gate. They each carried an M4 carbine--significantly heavier firepower than they'd wielded before. The limousine drove up the gravel path, passing three more guards patrolling the lush garden.

The driver parked before the steps leading up to the front entrance of the mansion. A guard at the base of the steps opened the rear door of the limousine, and I stepped out.

"Good evening, Mister Godson," he said.

I deliberately ignored him and instead adjusted the Desert Eagle's holster at my hip. I considered the big .50 caliber pistol to be overkill for personal protection, but that's what Godson carried, so carry it I would. For now.

The setting sun tinged the sky a pale pink. I inhaled that fresh scent similar to post-thunderstorm air, which I

now recognized as essence. Sherman Lord's estate was indeed built on an enclave, although the essence here didn't feel quite as strong as it did in the other two enclaves.

As I climbed the steps to the front door, I scanned the exterior of the mansion for any new security measures. Thick steel bars now covered all the windows, and infrared security cameras affixed to the walls of the building covered every angle. Someone had learned a lesson. I smiled inside.

The guard beside the door straightened as I approached. He punched a combination into a keypad over an electronic door lock. The lock clicked and the door swung open. Two more security guards inside nodded to me respectfully.

"Where's Director Lord?" I growled. I was getting that growl down just right.

"His bedroom, sir," one of the guards replied.

Good, I knew which direction to head, at least. It wouldn't look good if Lord's security expert managed to get lost in this place. I passed through a doorway straight ahead, walked through a huge library and a hallway, and finally ended up in the same large office I'd broken into ages ago--the one with the odd selection of furniture. The cross-time mix of cultural treasures no longer seemed strange to me; Lord had had all the time in the world to

collect them. I doubtless would have done the same, and then some.

I climbed the stairs confidently, doubting the alarms would be set during the day and not much caring if they were. The trip to the upper floor certainly required less effort than the last time. Along the way I noticed several strategically placed motion sensors and closed-circuit cameras. Oh yes, the security was much improved. I headed down the hallway along the banister where I'd first encountered Godson. The memory of causing him to face-plant as I leaped right over him provoked another internal smile. I turned the bend and walked down the carpeted hallway to Sherman Lord's bedroom.

A new door of solid steel, bolstered with a thick concrete frame, had replaced the old wood bedroom door. Above it perched another security camera and a motion sensor. Built into the wall next to the door was an iris scanner, just like the one that had stopped me in the Colorado enclave.

I looked into the lens. The door clicked and slid open immediately with a snake-like hiss. Just like that. I stepped through.

The bedroom remained the same as I remembered it, except that the lights were on now and Sherman Lord wasn't here. However, the closet door stood open. I headed through it and over to the hidden panel. Sure enough, the

clothing had been pushed aside, although the metal panel itself was closed.

I paused to think for a moment. I figured Lord and Godson must have changed the password since I was here last, but I didn't know what it was.

So I returned to the bedroom and slid open the drawer in the carved rosewood table beside Lord's bed. The operations manual for the Voiceguard RK-7 was still there. I picked it up and flipped to the last page. The words "Open Sesame" had been crossed out, with "Never Again" now written below it. I smiled. Some habits never change.

I returned to the closet and pushed the red button on the RK-7. "Never again," I said.

The panel clicked and slid open with a soft hum. I grinned as I stepped through into the room beyond. Never before had I bypassed so many security systems in so short a time. And no, I didn't consider stealing someone else's body to do it cheating....

Sherman Lord sat behind the heavy antique desk on the office side of the room. He wore an elegant pinstripe suit and pored over a heavy, leather-bound tome opened on his desk.

On a rack near the desk there now stood a bank of video monitors displaying camera views from all around the estate. And on the back wall, the wood door leading to the treasure room had been replaced with a thick vault door, complete with a sophisticated combination lock. The door

currently stood partly open, and I could just see the glitter of the treasures lying within.

Lord looked up. "Ah, Godson. Have a seat."

I sat down in one of the two plush, old-fashioned leather chairs in front of his desk.

"I am satisfied with the security upgrades for this enclave," he said, "but the other three still require attention. No one like that Mister Larcini must ever gain access to them again." He tapped a finger absently on the desk as he thought, adding, "My undead guardians proved the most effective deterrent, but we must incorporate a variety of additional measures."

He closed the heavy tome with a loud thump and stood up to return the book to one of the overstuffed bookshelves covering the three walls of the office. He then walked along the line of bookshelves directly behind his desk, running a finger along the books and stacks of papers as he skimmed the titles.

I caught my lip curling in a snarl as I watched him, and I forced my face into a neutral mask. "Are the scroll pieces properly secure, sir?" I asked.

Lord absently gestured toward the treasure room. "Here will suffice for now. I shall separate the pieces again once we have sufficiently upgraded the security of the other enclaves."

I looked at the vault-like door and allowed myself a thin smile. "Which enclaves will you put them in?"

"One piece in each enclave--except for the underwater one, of course."

So there were four enclaves? I wondered where the fourth was located, but I figured I couldn't ask that without raising suspicions. So I just said, "Sounds like a good plan, sir."

He briefly glanced back at me and said, "You have said nothing since you learned I am a *lïych*. Is this going to be a problem or have you come to terms with the fact?"

I was curious why Lord had kept his undead status from Godson, but I cautiously gave what I hoped would be a safe reply. "It's not a problem, sir."

"Good." He selected another leather-bound book, this one with brass clasps. "I trust there were no problems at the Colorado enclave?"

"No, sir. I had Mister Larcini and Morrigaine buried as you requested."

Lord stood quietly for a moment, then he returned the book to its place on the bookshelf. He had his back to me as he worked on something I couldn't see, so I took the opportunity to quietly draw the Desert Eagle from its holster.

I so very much wanted to tell Sherman Lord to his face who I was before I killed him. But he was the most powerful Great Druid who had ever lived, and who knows what he could do if I gave him any time to react. I slipped off

the safety, pointed the pistol at Lord's back and pulled the trigger.

To my surprise, the trigger didn't move. I pulled harder...and then I realized it was actually my finger that wasn't moving. No matter how hard I tried, it wouldn't budge. I tried to switch hands and found I couldn't do that, either. Neither arm would move. Nor my legs...my entire body had frozen in place! The only thing I could move was my eyes.

Lord picked up the brass-clasped book again and returned to his seat. He ignored the pistol still pointed at where he had been standing, and instead calmly unsnapped the book's clasps and opened its rigid leather cover.

"Tell me, Godson," he said casually, "why did you refer to *Morrigainausálafé* as 'Morrigaine'?"

"Because I can't pronounce her name," I replied immediately. I stared at him in shock. I had never intended to say those words.

"Oh? You never had trouble doing so before. The only person I know who called her 'Morrigaine' is...Mister Larcini." He gave me a measuring gaze for a moment, then asked, "Who are you?"

I struggled to keep my mouth shut, but to my utter dismay the words spilled out without hesitation. "I am the ghost of Silver Larcini."

For a few seconds Lord just stared back at me, his expression unchanged. Then he said, "Your spirit survived the bullet and you possessed Godson's body. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

He leaned back in his chair. "You are certainly no druid, Mister Larcini, so you must have an extraordinarily strong will. But you lacked the wisdom to stay away from the world's only deathcaster?" He chuckled and shook his head. "I should have had Godson shoot you in the head. It is hard to apply one's strong will when one's brains have been blown out the back of one's skull." He shrugged. "No matter, I can rectify that. Point your weapon at your head, Mister Larcini."

My arm pulled back and rotated the big pistol to point at my temple. There was nothing I could do to stop it. The feel of the cold steel muzzle against my skin drove me into a panic. I glanced around wildly, looking for any escape, but my body sat calmly and held the gun to my head without the slightest quiver.

Lord looked at the Desert Eagle and pursed his lips in thought. "Surely you are aware that mere bullets cannot harm me. So why would you try to shoot me?"

I responded immediately. "You said shooting you was pointless because bullets don't burn. So I loaded my handgun with custom white phosphorus incendiary rounds."

His eyebrows raised. "Oh, really? How clever. Let me see...."

The muzzle moved away from my temple as my arm handed the pistol over to Lord. I never would have thought I'd be happy to give up my weapon, but right then I would have sighed with relief, if I could....

Lord accepted the handgun and cycled the bolt, ejecting a cartridge. He studied the fat .50 caliber round, its hollow-point bullet tipped with blue paint.

"Technological advancement is truly turning out to be more trouble than it is worth," he muttered.

He placed the Desert Eagle and the cartridge into one of the desk drawers. "I would prefer you not to carry such ammunition," he said.

He leaned forward, his elbows on the desk and his fingers steepled. "Of course I never actually intended to have you shoot yourself, Mister Larcini. I put a great deal of effort into creating Godson and I will not have my plans ruined by some overly persistent thief who does not know when to quit."

He flexed his fingers and rolled his shoulders as if preparing for an athletic event. "Two spirits occupying a single body is inherently unstable," he said, "but it could take some time for Godson's spirit to re-exert control. So I think I shall use a little exorcism to destroy the second spirit right now and thus ensure it never returns. Good-bye again, Mister Larcini."

He stared into my eyes and weaved his hands together as he whispered softly. And suddenly every muscle in my

body tightened--although I remained sitting in the exact same position. My teeth clenched so hard I thought they might shatter, and I broke out in a cold sweat. The pain was unbearable, like a leg cramp that has spread to every single muscle, and I trembled with the tension. Then a brief spasm ran down my entire body, and the extreme tightness in my muscles eased. I blinked hard and focused on Lord.

He sat back in his seat and smiled. "Welcome back, Godson."

I remained sitting stiffly upright. "Uh, sir?"

"Oh right, the spirit control...." He gestured briefly. "Better?"

I tentatively tried to raise my hands from my lap, and felt immense relief when they actually moved. I rotated my wrists and wiggled my fingers. Such simple gestures had never made me feel such joy.

My smile of relief faded and I lifted my gaze to look at Lord. "Silver Larcini's ghost didn't just possess this body," I said. "He killed its spirit and took its place. There was no second spirit for you to exorcise."

He blinked. "Nonsense. If that were the case, Mister Larcini would be--"

"--still here!" I roared in triumph. I lunged up and grabbed the side of his desk. With a massive display of strength that even surprised myself, I completely flipped

the heavy piece of oak furniture out of the way. It crashed against a bookshelf.

Lord jumped to his feet and began weaving gestures in the air. I stepped forward and grabbed each of his hands in a vice-like grip.

"Oh no you don't," I said with a snarl. "You've cast your last spell, you son of a bitch!"

I tightened my grip on his hands, closing my fingers as if crushing two beer cans. He stared in dismay as his bones snapped and popped, bulging up between my fingers. The undead monster showed no sign that he could feel pain...but that didn't mean I couldn't hurt him.

I clamped one hand on one of his shoulders and the other on his upper arm, and yanked them apart as hard as I could. His entire arm--suit jacket sleeve included--ripped free at the shoulder with surprising ease. The mangled hand dangling out of the sleeve flickered momentarily, then the illusion of live flesh disappeared and revealed a broken claw of ancient dried bones underneath.

"That was for Dana," I said. I hurled the arm across the room.

"Stop!" he cried. "I'll give you whatever you wish!"

"You already are...."

I methodically repeated the grisly procedure with the other arm, twisting it free like snapping off a turkey leg.

"That was for Morrigaine." I tossed the arm away.

"Please! Mister Larcini, I--"

I grabbed the back of his head with one hand and gripped his chin with the other. I jerked hard to the side, ripping his jaw free with a dry snap. His voice cut off immediately. His living face flickered briefly, but the illusion remained in place.

"And that was for me." I threw the jawbone away.

I shoved him hard and he fell back against the floor. I stepped on one thigh, reached down and grabbed his lower leg, and yanked it upward. It snapped at the knee like a dry tree branch. I did the same with his other leg.

Sherman Lord writhed helplessly on the floor, unable to gesture, unable to speak, unable to even crawl away. That was enough for now. I turned and walked over to the heavy vault door and pulled it open. The light switched on inside.

Once again the magnificent dragon hoard gleamed before me. The rich excess of gems, jewelry, precious metals and other treasures filled the shelves to overflowing and glittered with incredible splendor.

I ignored it all. My gaze focused on a glass table in the back of the room that hadn't been there before. On it sat the three pieces of beige parchment, arranged in proper order. I headed over to the table, picked up the scroll pieces, and tucked them into a cargo pocket of my fatigue pants. I turned and walked out without giving the rest of the treasures a second glance.

I discovered Sherman Lord struggling back to his feet. His legs had somehow repaired themselves, and both his arms were crawling across the floor toward him like monstrous insects. Their fleshless fingers were no longer broken, and one of the hands gripped the broken jawbone as its arm jerked its way across the room.

I strode over to the toppled desk just as Lord's arms leaped back to their shoulders. He glared venom at me as he fit his jaw back into place.

"You are *so* dead, Larcini," he said, his voice seething with hatred.

I pulled open the desk drawer. "Yeah, been there, done that."

As Lord started weaving his hands together and murmuring under his breath, I drew the Desert Eagle from the drawer, pointed it at Lord's chest and pulled the trigger. With a deafening roar, the white phosphorus burned a bright streak through the air, leaving a trail of blue smoke. The bullet hit Lord in the chest and blasted chunks of bone and desiccated flesh from his back. He staggered, fumbling his gestures.

"You deceived everyone into thinking you'd died in a fire," I said. "I'm going to make an honest man out of you, Sherm."

A small red flame erupted from the bullet hole in his chest. "No!" he cried, clutching at the hole with one hand. "I must not die!"

"Everybody dies, Sherm. You just didn't do it right the first time."

I fired again and again, sending burning streaks of light into Lord's torso and filling the air with a haze of blue smoke that reeked of garlic. He staggered with each shot and finally collapsed to his knees. Flames burned from each bullet hole, igniting his clothing and traveling up his front and back.

The last shot I put through his forehead. His head snapped back as pieces of skull blasted across the room. Flames gushed from the hole.

Lord's pink-fleshed features flickered and disappeared. As fire licked out of the empty eye sockets of his discolored skull, the flames from the other bullets spread across his entire torso and along his limbs. His body wreathed in flames, he collapsed to the floor, writhing like a decapitated snake.

I turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter 34.

"The ultimate thief"

The headlights of my old rally car illuminated my house as I turned onto the driveway. Although my new body wasn't that much taller than my old one, the Subaru didn't fit me quite as comfortably as before. I figured I'd get a different car soon.

The first thing I'd done after Sherman Lord's death was to have Dana's body cremated; I wanted to obliterate any trace of the corruption Lord had inflicted upon her. And I sprinkled her ashes over the lake near the spot where I had proposed to her.

I left Morrigaine and my old body in the grave where I'd buried them. I thought she would have preferred that, resting in peace together in that mountain meadow, in a place containing the essence she'd spent her life trying to restore.

With those tasks done, I felt I'd achieved a sense of closure. There was nothing more I had to do, nor wanted to do.

But then Godson's cell phone started receiving calls from various government officials, military command personnel, industry leaders and other VIPs from all over the world, each requesting orders or guidance from Sherman Lord. When I told them Lord was dead, they immediately turned to me for direction, apparently unable to take the initiative themselves. I wasn't interested in running a huge, multinational...whatever this was, but I figured I'd better do what I could to keep things from falling apart. So I gave whatever guidance I thought was best. I had to arrange for legal transfer of ownership and inheritance in a few cases, but otherwise I found it surprisingly easy to take over the reins of power.

I soon discovered the dismaying extent of social and political damage Sherman Lord had inflicted in order to enhance his control. His projects had included goading religious extremists into terrorist action around the world--including the 9/11 attacks--so that legislators would increase the surveillance power of the agencies he controlled. And since technology was apparently making it increasingly difficult for him to keep his manipulations secret, he also secretly funded conservative anti-science organizations worldwide in order to foster public suspicion toward scientific and technological progress.

To help undo what I could of those messes, I needed to set new command priorities, which I couldn't safely do until I became much more familiar with the whole system. That was going to take a while. Still, in the meantime I put some of the worst projects on hold--like a massive Internet monitoring system, a bird flu weaponization program and the funding of Iranian nuclear weapons research. There was a lot to learn about this empire. Its command network was *incredibly* extensive.

I spent a full day just browsing through Lord's personal computer files. The man had tapped into a huge number of high-security computer systems throughout the world--private, government and military. He had extensive, well-organized personnel databases that would be invaluable in helping me figure out exactly whom Lord controlled and to what degree. There were also thousands of historical documents describing what had really gone on behind the scenes. They were a conspiracy theorist's wet dream.

One of the more interesting facts I learned was that Sherman Lord's empire controlled every space program throughout the world. This had occupied much of Lord's concerns since the 1960s. Why? Apparently his spell had pushed essence only out as far as low Earth orbit, and beyond that essence was at full strength. He hadn't wanted any astronauts to discover the stuff, so at first he tried discouraging the space programs through numerous design failures and accidents. But his own cold war 'experiment'

had fueled too much public interest in the space programs of both the US and the USSR, and repeated sabotaging of the first attempts at space flight failed to sufficiently dissuade public interest. So he finally had to replace the directors of both space programs, and those of all other space programs that eventually came into being. And on the few occasions when astronauts not under Lord's control managed to slip through his net and make it off the launch pad, he'd made sure they never came back alive. The space shuttle disasters were no accidents....

Even more intriguing was a short note I found describing how Lord had personally detected several faint essence-based disturbances generated from beyond the Earth's atmosphere. He didn't know what the disturbances meant, but he was convinced they were created by some form of intelligence....

Somewhere along the way I realized I had become the ultimate thief. I'd stolen a global empire, a tremendous wealth of knowledge...even a new body. But considering the price I'd paid for it, the realization gave me little satisfaction. And what good is being a thief when you already have everything worth stealing? I was now little more than a glorified administrator.

I decided I needed time to relax and sort things out, so I finally just put everything on hold and drove back to my home.

I now officially owned the place...again. Sherman Lord had used forged documents to assume ownership of my house. I figured he did it to be ironic, but the irony had doubled on itself because Godson had inherited everything from Lord.

It was now nearly midnight. I hadn't been sleeping well lately, and I hoped a familiar bed would help me relax. I'd had the sliding glass door in the bedroom fixed and recovered my motorcycle, so the place looked the same as it always had. Except that Dana wouldn't be coming home anymore....

I parked in my usual space and listened as the garage door clattered noisily back down. Then I climbed out and headed for the door to the kitchen. It was a cool night and I wore only jeans and a T-shirt, so I looked forward to lighting a warm fire. But when I entered the kitchen, I found it surprisingly warm already.

I thought the heat must have been left on, but when I walked into the living room I discovered a fire already burning in the fireplace. That meant someone else was in my house. And I was unarmed--I hadn't seen the point of carrying a gun anymore. Fortunately, I had a collection of African spears displayed on one of the walls in the living room, which was better than nothing. I quietly walked toward them.

A brief sensation of vertigo caused me to stagger, and for a moment I wondered if I was more fatigued than I felt.

Then I heard the metallic click of a pistol being cocked. "What are you doing here?" said an oddly familiar man's voice.

I turned. A man wielding a Beretta pistol stepped from the shadows in the dining room. He wore a T-shirt and jeans just like I did, only he was a little shorter, with a lighter build and silver hair.

The man was me. Silver. Before I became Godson.

I stared at myself in shock. It was like looking into a mirror, only in this case the image looked more like the real me than I did.

He stared in surprise when he saw my face. "Godson?" His lip curled and he raised the pistol to point between my eyes. "Any reason is there why I should not kill you right now?"

"Wh-Who are you?" was the only thing I could think to say.

The other me gave a dark laugh. "So quickly you forget those you have tried to kill?"

"You can't be me. *I'm* me. I'm Silver!"

He looked at me as if I were insane.

"I'm Silver Larcini!" I persisted. "Godson killed me but my ghost survived, and I destroyed his spirit and took over his body. So you can't be me!"

I paused as a sudden thought occurred to me that made me sick to my stomach. "Unless...did Sherman Lord turn my body into a mummy?"

The other me stepped forward hesitantly. “Silver you truly are?” he asked. His eyes locked onto mine with a focus so intense it felt as if they were trying to bore right through my skull.

Then he blinked. “It is you!” he breathed, his voice shifting up a couple of octaves and taking on a familiar Eastern European-ish accent.

He waved a hand, and another brief sensation of vertigo caused me to almost lose my balance. The pistol in his hand disappeared, and I watched as Silver metamorphosed into a long-limbed woman with angular features and long, copper-red hair flowing over her shoulders. She gazed at me with intense blue eyes.

“Another goddamn illusion,” I growled, taking a step back. “Who’s doing this?”

She blinked. “I am no illusion, I am *Morrigainausálafé*!”

“Oh yeah? Morrigaine isn’t an imagecaster.”

“This is my true self! A mind casting I used to make you see me as Silver.”

“Prove to me you’re Morrigaine. Tell me something only she would know.”

She thought for a moment, then said, “Some time after I sustained all those bool-lit injuries, I became aware that you held me. Your warm tears I felt on my skin. You said, ‘I’m sorry, Morrigaine.’” She shook her head with a

wry smile. "For imagining Godson treating me so tenderly, I thought myself insane."

"I would have thought the same thing," I said, returning her smile. "And I have to admit the way you sometimes mix up your sentences sure sounds like Morrigaine."

She blinked in surprise. "Imperfect is my speech? Fix it I can."

I chuckled. "It's perfect. But...how did you survive, Morrigaine? Are you that strong willed too?"

She shook her head. "The *wyr-wúalv*. My trouser leg was not the only thing it bit."

I stared at her. "But you said it hadn't..."

"Aye, I know." She added quickly, "Only a small scratch it was, and with *éssänts* so reduced I did not think I would be infected." She swallowed and shook her head. "I...was wrong."

Realization settled in. "Normal bullets can't kill a werewolf...so when Lord's men shot you..."

She nodded.

I stared at her in horror. "I *buried* you!"

She shuddered and hugged her arms. "I dug myself out. The money I found in your pockets I used to buy passage back to this house. Nowhere else did I know to go."

I winced. "Ouch, Morrigaine, I'm sorry...."

Her eyes filled with tears, and then she rushed into my arms and clung tightly to me. I didn't say anything; my

throat felt too choked up to speak anyway. I just closed my eyes and held her close, feeling her warmth and breathing in her lavender scent. We didn't move for a long, long time.

#

We sat on a Persian rug in front of the fire crackling in the fireplace. I leaned back on cushions propped against an easy chair, while Morrigaine sat cross-legged across from me and watched me closely as I recounted everything that had happened since she was shot.

When I described shooting Sherman Lord full of incendiary rounds, she grinned fiercely. "He was a deceitful monster who betrayed the entire world," she said. "I only wish by my own hand I could have put him to the torch."

I chuckled. "Remind me to never get you that pissed off at me, okay?"

I finished the story, and then we just sat in silence for a moment, listening to the popping of the fire.

Morrigaine studied my face for a while, then finally said, "A strange feeling it is to be talking to my partner and friend...while looking at a man I would have gladly killed less than an hour ago."

I raised an eyebrow. "Just don't confuse the two, okay? I feel like a kind of spiritual hermit crab as it is. I've gotten used to the increased height, weight and

strength, but it's still a shock every time I look in the mirror."

She shook her head. "I do not think I will grow accustomed to your new appearance either." She whispered softly and twisted her fingers in the air.

I sat up. "What are you doing?"

Her eyes glazed over for a moment, and a wave of dizziness passed through me. Then she looked at my face and smiled. She stood up and headed for the bathroom, and returned a moment later with a hand mirror. She sat down beside me and held the mirror up to my face.

I stared at my reflection. It was the original me.

I grinned as I touched my old, familiar features. They felt real. "This is still Godson's body, though, isn't it?" I said. To my surprise, I heard myself speak with my old voice, too.

"Aye. Our minds I have misdirected to see and hear you as you were."

I leaned back against the pillows. "You know, that's a really handy ability you have there."

She smiled. "New axiom: For a thief there is no better partner than a mindcaster."

I smiled back. "And for a mindcaster there is no better partner than a thief."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the three neatly folded scroll pieces. I'd been carrying them around with me ever since taking them back from Lord. I unfolded

and smoothed out each piece of beige parchment and placed them one at a time in front of Morrigaine. She smiled with delight and ran her fingers across them.

Then her smile faded. "If we return *éssänts*, under the full moon I will change into a wolf. Never will I be able to control that."

I couldn't help chuckling. She looked at me in dismay and said, "You laugh that I am a monster?"

I smiled ruefully. "So you're a fifteen hundred-year-old witch werewolf. Well, I'm a ghost thief wearing the body of Frankenstein's monster. If we can find someone who's a vampire warrior mummy from the Black Lagoon, we'll have the perfect team." I paused, then added more seriously, "I'm still me and you're still you. Isn't that what really matters?"

She frowned for a few seconds, thinking, then nodded. She even managed a grudging smile. "A complete fool you are not."

"Gee, thanks."

She turned her attention back to the scroll pieces, and fitted them together in proper order. She traced a finger along the torn edges as she whispered something under her breath. The three pieces merged seamlessly back together. The whole scroll lay on the rug before us, complete and untorn.

She looked up at me and said, "I asked you before if you would prefer to live in a world with or without *éssänts*. Your answer you never gave me."

I looked into her ice blue eyes. "Without essence I never would have met you and I'd still be dying of cancer. I vote we bring it back."

She nodded. "A man with no hands will suffer no blisters on his fingers...but better off he still is having hands, is he not?"

She picked up the scroll and tossed it into the fire. Then she slid up close to me, taking my arm and putting it around her shoulders. I held her close. Together we watched as the fire licked across the scroll's surface, and thick white smoke streamed from its edges. The flames changed color, shifting through the entire spectrum, and the parchment slowly curled up like a black claw. A few seconds longer and the ancient skin crumbled to ash and sifted down through the burning wood.

Then I felt a sudden sensation like a warm breeze rushing down through my body. It sent a shiver up my spine. Morrigaine gasped, an ecstatic smile on her face. Everything in sight shifted slightly, almost subliminally, with the colors and clarity suddenly intensifying. One blink and the world had changed, a subtle yet profound transformation. The air tingled with that thunderstorm-like freshness. It felt as natural and smooth and wonderful as a cool drink to a parched mouth.

Epilogue

"Awakened from a long nightmare"

One eyelid slid open sluggishly.

Something had changed.

The other eyelid opened, and both blinked several times to clear the sticky film covering each eye. The thick, spiny eyelashes swept the mucus through the water, which dissolved it and carried it away in the slight current generated by the slow, sporadic blinking. The vertical red pupils were bowed open wide, irises shimmering a radial pattern of mercurial silver. Despite the near absence of light, the eyes focused on the bare rock wall of the lair she had long ago claimed for herself.

She began to work her muscles to warm them, sending tight ripples through her entire body. She flexed her heavy claws, digging into the smooth, sandy bottom of the lair. The movements sent up swirls of sand and detritus, clouding the crystal-clear water.

Then she dragged herself forward, using her claws and occasional flicks of her long tail to move her considerable bulk through the rock tunnel to the pale eye of light ahead. The thick, armored scales plating her body scraped against the narrow tunnel with a gritty, tearing sound. At the mouth of the cavern she paused for a moment, hanging her claws over the edge like a dog on a step. The red pupils shrank slightly in the faint light filtering from the water's surface far above. They peered around at the sandy bottom just below the mouth of the cave.

Something *had* changed. The last time she had roused from her energy-saving hibernation to feed on the meager diet of fish and water plants was only a week ago. Ordinarily she awakened fitfully with rumbling pangs of hunger after sleeping for several months following her last feeding. Thus it had been for years, hundreds of long, empty years. A dull, lonely existence. But she had persisted. She refused to give up and die as had the others of her kind.

But this time it was not hunger that had interrupted her sleep, but an *excess* of sleep. For the first time in ages she did not feel drowsy and lethargic. She actually felt good, alert, *vital*. Oh yes indeed, something had changed.

She pushed herself off from the cave entrance, drawing a spiral of sand up behind her in a turbulent vortex. With effortless sweeps of her broad tail she glided out into the

lake, gradually ascending to the sparkling surface high above. A large school of fish flashed as one and swam quickly out of her path, but she made no attempt to pursue them. A greater hunger was being satisfied.

Her scaled head rose above the water. Bright sunlight shattered off the disturbed lake surface and the water cascading down her long, snaking neck of dark red scales. Her red pupils closed to mere slits against their mirrored background, unused to such bright light. With a deep huff, her abdominal muscles contracted violently, emptying her waterlogged lungs in a huge geyser of steam. Rivulets of water coursed out between three-inch long teeth. She peered around.

It was dawn. The air was cool, and her condensing breath billowed out with each long exhale. The shore lined the lake to the left and to the right, fringed with green vegetation and a black road. Ahead and behind, the lake stretched on, curving off into the distance.

She rarely came to the surface. There were occasionally humans up here and she did her best to avoid them. Until now she had lacked the energy to deal with them should they turn hostile. Humans usually feared beings like her, and in times past they had often hunted down and killed those of her kind.

Although never very prolific, her kind had become powerful creatures of both terror and wonder to the world for thousands of years...until the *éssänts* began to fade.

Then they began to die out. The wings began to fail and flight became impossible. The breath weapons lost their potency, then ceased to function at all. Her kind could not hunt effectively, especially when their prey of *éssänts* was also dying out. So few remained near the end.

This one had crawled into the lake to die. There she had discovered an area still partially rich in *éssänts* within the chill waters. So while the others died and their remains crumbled to dust, she survived a pale existence in the lake, feeding on what fish she could catch and hibernating to conserve energy and *éssänts*. For more than fifteen centuries she had lived thus, rarely ascending to the surface, never leaving her prison within these cold waters.

Until now. The feeble wings were now bursting with strength, stretching and flexing like giant bat wings, rippling the surface of the lake with white-tipped wavelets. The dormant flame organ within the long neck tingled with revived function, and once again she felt heat in her belly. The tough scales shimmered with a revitalized brilliance.

She knew: the *éssänts* had returned.

The great wings spread above the glassy waters, then pounded down with thunderous, splashing sweeps. Lifted through *éssänts* instinctively controlled by a memory unforgotten, and guided by her dexterous wings, she launched her heavy body into the air. Leaving the cold

waters of Loch Ness, she soared up through the remains of pink-tinged clouds to the bright blue sky above. Swelling with the joy of one awakened from a long nightmare, she gave a shrill cry of greeting to the rising sun.

The End