

WATER DRAGON PUBLISHING

FANTASY  
SAMPLER

2022 EDITION

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Published by Water Dragon Publishing  
*[waterdragonpublishing.com](http://waterdragonpublishing.com)*

An imprint of Paper Angel Press  
*[paperangelpress.com](http://paperangelpress.com)*

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# CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Angels in the Mist.....	3
Best Intentions.....	13
Broken Bridge.....	23
Beguiling Voices.....	31
Goddess Chosen.....	39
Goddess Daughter.....	49
Goddess Rising.....	57
Grimaulkin.....	75
Grimaulkin Tempted.....	87
Grimaulkin Redeemed.....	91
Homecoming.....	101
War Mage.....	115
Just a Bit of Magic.....	125
Mermaid Steel.....	131
Rules of the Campfire.....	139
Songs in a Box.....	157
Balls in Play.....	165
Seeker.....	171
Sky Chase.....	181
Publishing With Water Dragon Publishing.....	124



# INTRODUCTION

**S**TORYTELLING IS AN ACT OF COURAGE AND OF FAITH. Every author will tell you how difficult the writing process can be. Stringing the words into sentences, the sentences into paragraphs, and the paragraphs into chapters is, most writers might tell you is the easiest part of the process. It's what happens afterward that is the most challenging.

Submitting a story for publication feels like setting a child free. Stories (in a not-at-all-inaccurate analogy) are a writer's progeny. Release those stories out into the universe is anxiety-inducing and angst-provoking: How will the story be perceived? Will readers like it? What will a reader think after reading my story? What does it reveal about me, the writer?

No matter whether its characters are fictional or real, its settings pure invention or rooted in reality, a story can lay bare a writer's heart. As a reader, you may be able to peek into a writer's soul and psyche, gaining glimpses into their dreams and disappointments.

## *Introduction*

This volume contains bits of tales from authors who were brave enough to trust us with their literary offspring to bring their stories to appreciative audiences. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did in bringing them to you.



# ANGELS IN THE MIST

BOOK ONE OF "THE Z-TECH CHRONICLES"

RYAN SOUTHWICK

*An ancient, powerful evil is loose in San Francisco. The heart of Silicon Valley must fight back the only way they know how — with compassion, unwavering determination, and, of course, super-technology.*

Anne Perrin is resigned to a life driven by an adolescent trauma: a strict routine, no socializing (outside of the safety of her waitressing job), and no romantic relationships. When her cautious lifestyle lets the perfect partner slip through her fingers, Anne vows she won't let it happen again and ventures into San Francisco to find happiness.

Her first night out in a decade becomes a nightmare when her date turns on her with sadistic intent. But his nefarious plans for Anne are unexpectedly interrupted by a mysterious savior. Valiant, smart, compassionate ... Charlie is exactly the partner Anne has been looking for. And best of all, he likes her too.

Things go well between her and Charlie until an assailant with unexpected strength plunges Anne into a world she didn't know existed — nor could have imagined — where super-science and an eclectic group of extraordinary individuals may be the solution to Anne's lifelong loneliness ... and humanity's only hope against an ancient threat.

*Visit our website for more information about  
“[The Z-Tech Chronicles](#)” series.*

# THE OPERA

**A**NNE AND CHARLIE EXITED THE THEATER, both gushing over their first opera experience.

High school prom was the most formal event Anne had attended before tonight. Dressed in a skirt and blouse, with her boyfriend at the time in a proper suit, they had afterward eaten hamburgers at the local diner, celebrated by splurging on milkshakes, and they both wondered if it got any better than that.

Tonight, she discovered it most certainly could.

Anne wore an elegant, flowered dress she bought just for the occasion, cinched at the waist, which Doris said would show off her hourglass figure, and she was happy to see it had attracted Charlie's attention more than once. Charlie had swapped his signature brown leather jacket for a crisp black tuxedo that made her heart swoon every time she looked at him. He had treated her to a fancy French restaurant. Charlie had barely touched his food, which Anne found odd, but she made up for it by leaving not a scrap on either of their plates.

## *Angels in the Mist*

Then, of course, came the opera. Anne had never felt so excited and out of place at the same time. There the upper echelon mingled in the lobby with fine champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries that even Anne's full stomach couldn't refuse. Charlie had seemed remarkably comfortable among the city's finest and made conversation easily, though she noticed that he avoided giving his name during introductions, which Anne chalked up to nerves. The performance itself had been breath-taking; the powerful music filled her with such emotion that she thought her heart would burst. She was the first from her seat for the standing ovation and wiped tears from her eyes the entire way out.

In short, the evening had been a chapter from a fairy tale adventure, and Anne couldn't imagine being happier.

She smiled at Charlie, who returned it. He had been pleasant, but maintained his usual physical distance and, while it was fun at first because it felt properly upper class, now that they were alone, the small space between them felt like miles.

Anne wanted to be closer, to feel his touch, and she was tired of waiting. She felt guilty over her selfish need; she knew Charlie was skittish about physical contact, for some reason. Although this evening had drawn them closer together, it wasn't enough.

Anne sidled closer, slipped her arm through his, and held her breath.

Several tense seconds passed. Charlie hadn't bolted, and she felt no signs of a flashback.

*So far so good.*

She relaxed enough to look up at Charlie. His jaw was clenched, eyes fixed straight ahead, as if fighting some internal battle. Not wishing to cause him discomfort, Anne swallowed her disappointment and released him, but he caught her at the last moment and patted her hand. When she looked up again, he was smiling. Anne sighed in relief.

Feeling bold, she rested her head against his arm. Again he didn't flinch, and her demons stayed put. Her smile grew.

A block passed with only the sounds of the city and their breathing. She closed her eyes to enjoy the feel of his muscular

arm, his pleasant warmth on this cold, misty night. When she opened her eyes, however, his smile was gone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Charlie said, “I was thinking of something a friend told me earlier today.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm.”

She drummed her fingers on his jacket. “Are you going to make me guess?”

“It was just some advice.”

“Ah. Something profound, like ‘don’t eat yellow snow’?” She nudged him playfully.

He chuckled and surprised her by slipping an arm around her shoulders. The demons stayed quiet. Anne wanted to sing.

“More like relax and enjoy yourself.”

*Good advice.*

She snuggled into his chest; his silky jacket was a pillow from heaven.

They walked in blissful silence. Parking in the City, even on a weeknight, was an Olympic event. Tonight they had lost, finally landing seven blocks away, but, nestled against him as she was now, a long walk back to the car sounded just fine.

“So, who is this sage friend of yours?” Anne said. It was the first time Charlie had mentioned someone else in his life.

“Oh ...” Charlie cleared his throat and looked away. “H-her name is Cappa.”

*Her?*

An unexpected flare of jealousy turned her mouth dry. “Is she pretty?” Anne snapped her mouth shut, but it was too late; the words had already escaped.

“Who, Cappa? No, she’s just —”

Charlie stumbled on something, though Anne couldn’t see what. “I mean yes! Yes, she’s pretty, but she’s a friend.”

“So she’s a ... pretty friend?” Her heart sank.

Charlie stopped and ran a hand through his thick brown hair. “Yes, she’s pretty, but she’s just a friend. Cappa’s helped me

*Angels in the Mist*

through some hard times. She's been there for me ever since I ... I got started in the business."

Anne took a calming breath.

*Down, girl. He's allowed to have female friends.*

It didn't help. Irrational as the feeling was, Anne needed validation that she was still in the running.

"Charlie ... this is our third date. Yes, third," she repeated when he grinned. "I still count your dashing rescue in the furniture store as a date. Do you like me?"

He gulped. "I do."

"Then show me."

Heart thundering, Anne tilted her chin up in bold invitation.

Charlie looked at her, confused, like a teenager alone with a girl for the first time. "I'm sorry," he said in a shaky voice, "I can't —"

He stumbled forward — drawing a surprised squeal from Anne — and their lips met.

There they stood, wide-eyed statues in the night. A car sped by, leaving swirls of mist in its wake, the roar of its engine lost in the sound of her pounding heart.

Anne checked for flashback warnings. Nothing.

*Okay, here goes.*

She parted her lips and kissed him in earnest. He tasted like the chocolate truffles they shared during the intermission, and there was something else — an earthy, sensual flavor that quickened her pulse and left her wanting for more. Anne wrapped her arms around him. Her fingers slipped under his jacket and kneaded his firm back, then pulled him tight against her. Charlie was slower to the game, but eventually folded her in his strong arms, which had carried her to safety after William's knife —

Anne's scream pierced the night, shrill even to her own ears. Charlie jumped back, looking even more terrified than she felt.

A few seconds later, when the flashback of William cutting her throat receded, Anne was left with a different horror.

*Oh no. No, no, no!*

"Charlie," she said in a hoarse whisper.

He stepped back.

Anne reached imploringly but didn't advance, afraid that if she did, he might run away for good. "Charlie, please, I—I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Please don't ..."

He took another step away. Anne was devastated.

"Please don't go," she said. "Don't leave me. I didn't mean to scream. I won't —"

"Of course you did!"

His harsh tone hit her like a slap. Anne covered her mouth, but an anguished sob burst through her fingers.

Charlie didn't seem to notice. He was instead staring at his hands. "Why wouldn't you scream," he said softly. "That's what you do when someone hurts you."

"What? N—no, Charlie, you didn't hurt me."

He shook his head, brows furrowed. "You don't have to lie. I should have known better than to ..." He balled his fists and turned away. "I'll call you a cab, and ... if you want to press charges, I understand."

"Charlie, what the hell are you talking about? You didn't hurt me! It was a flashback, that's all."

His skeptical frown remained.

"Look, I'll prove it!" Anne shed her jacket and pulled her shoulder strap down, intent on baring herself to the world to show her unblemished skin, but Charlie held up a hand.

"All right! Just ... are you sure?"

She tugged her dress back into place and nodded. "Having post-traumatic stress disorder doesn't mean I'm made of glass. You did everything right, Charlie. I couldn't have asked for better."

He stuffed his hands into his pockets, but she caught his arm.

"No! Please, I ... I want a do-over."

"Anne, I know what a flashback is, and it's not pleasant. I don't want to put you through that again."

"And I don't want to scare you again, so ..." She tugged his hands out and took them in her own. "Let's try just the kissing part and see how it goes." Her spirits fell when he hesitated. "Please? I—I can't promise I won't scream again, but if you give me another chance, I —"

His kiss caught her by surprise. Tender, caring, passionate — it was everything she could have wished for. Anne drank him in,

## *Angels in the Mist*

pressed her body to his, eager once more for his touch, but their hands remained joined; only their tongues danced the lovers' tango.

Minutes, hours, or years passed. She didn't know, and she didn't care. When they finally parted, her lips mourned his absence, and she could only stare into his eyes with unabashed yearning.

He brushed her auburn hair back with gentle fingers. "Anne Perrin, this last month with you has been my happiest in a long, long time. You're one of the kindest, funniest people I've ever met, and it's an honor to be your date."

Charlie might have said more, but Anne covered his mouth with hers, and for the next several minutes, she showed him the true meaning of passion.



Anne was in heaven. A few shivers were all it had taken for Charlie to enfold her in the warmth of his jacket under his comforting arm; even her demons knew better than to disturb her bubble of happiness. Head resting against his chest, she closed her eyes and absorbed his scent — a musty mix of cologne and an earthy smell that made Anne want to wrap herself around him and purr.

*Wouldn't it be terrible if we got lost? We'd have to stay like this for hours.*

She snuggled closer and smiled.

*Oh darn.*

A loud pop sounded from overhead. Anne looked up just in time to see the streetlight nearest to them go out. A second later, the same happened to the light ahead of them, then the one behind. Thick fog blotted out star and moonlight, leaving them in almost total darkness.

"That's odd," Anne said. She reluctantly withdrew from his warmth and fished around in her purse. "I've seen streetlights go out before and they're usually quiet. Maybe a transformer blew or something. Aha!"

She pulled out a small flashlight and clicked it on. Its broad beam lit the sidewalk but didn't penetrate very far into the mist.

"Oh well, at least we won't trip. Still think you can find the car, Charlie?"

Anne stepped forward, but a touch from Charlie made her pause.



“Stay close,” he whispered.

“What’s wrong?” His cautious tone put her on edge.

“The lights didn’t go out by themselves. They were broken.” He picked up a small object from the ground. Her flashlight glinted from a shard of clear glass between his fingers.

“Charlie, what’s going on?” A sudden chill raised the hair on the back of her neck.

“I don’t know,” he said, eyes searching the darkness. He ran a hand through his hair. “Come on, the car’s just up ahead.”

Anne latched onto his arm and they set off at a brisk pace. Shadows danced in the mist, but disappeared when she tried to track them. Her demons stirred in response to her fear; phantom fingers groped at her wrists and ankles, making her want to scream.

“How much further?” she said, voice trembling.

The figures in the fog were becoming real, taunting her like specters. She clutched Charlie’s arm, swinging her flashlight this way and that.

Charlie pointed ahead. “It’s right up —”

Anne shrieked.

One of the shadow figures had taken form.

A wiry man jumped from the roof of a parked car. A blonde streak near his temple divided his dark hair. His pasty-white face split into a frightening grin.

Charlie darted between them. The wiry man grinned wider. He advanced, as if to walk right through her guardian. Charlie put a restraining hand on the wiry man’s chest.

In a blur of motion, he caught Charlie’s arm and hurled him into a parked car.

Like a scene from Anne’s worst nightmare, Charlie struck the car with the force of a wrecking ball. It crumpled around him in an explosion of glass and screeching metal.

Anne rubbed her eyes, hoping it was just a hallucination, but the gruesome scene remained. Charlie’s limbs protruded at sickening angles from the wreckage. She turned her shaking flashlight back to the wiry man, making his unusually large eyes glow.

He mouthed a single word.

“Run.”



# BEST INTENTIONS

BOOK ONE OF THE *GLASS BOTTLES* SERIES

J DARK

*When your past is left undone, it will come find you.*

Fern Fatelli is a private investigator, specializing in more shady activities than finding children. The situation that launches her deeper into the uncertain realm of Magick is Fern being hired to expose Hervald Thensome, a prominent businessman in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as an adulterer. From this point on, Fern's situation spirals deeper into the realm of magic and danger.

Attacks by a mysterious man, and her own contracted adventure with kidnapping a general's family keep Fern walking a tightrope between her own concerns, and those around her, and her past. Her sister Fawn, a police lieutenant becomes involved as attacks on Fern become tinged with Magick and their shared past. The past comes back in full force with a revealing of the true reason why Fern and Fawn's parents cast the spell that destroyed the family so many years ago.

*Visit our website for more information about  
"The Glass Bottles" series.*

**Z**HIRK AND I PULLED UP AT UNCLE TODD'S PLACE in Cole Harbor. It was a small bungalow nestled among near- identical bungalows that had been base housing at one time. Uncle Todd's was a quiet tan in color, and the porch dipped slightly at the front due to settling. The place was tidy, and the small garden in the front of the house gave it a cheery look, one that I remembered well from living here up until about ten years ago, when I turned eighteen and left.

Fawn stayed another two years, and moved out after Aunt Ruthie had died. Uncle Todd had lived here alone since then. I walked up the familiar steps and he was at the door before I even had a chance to knock.

"Fernie! Com'ere and give your Uncle Toddie a hug," he said as he swept me into his arms. Uncle Todd was a rail. He was near one-point-eight meters tall, but ridiculously only around sixty-five kilograms. His lean face reminded me of the anteaters at the zoo. He had a thick shock of black hair, and a thick, greying mustache.

## *Best Intentions*

He had on old, comfortable khaki pants and a denim shirt of faded brown. Bright red suspenders clipped on the baggy khakis, a bright splash of color over the soft earth tones.

As always, Todd was happy to see me. He was one of those people with open arms for anyone who came by. A genuine 'treat everyone as you want to be treated' person, who actually lived the words. True to form, he stepped off the front porch and greeted Zhirk like a long-lost friend who just happened to show up. We entered the house and sat down, me on the old recliner and Zhirk on the floor as there was no furniture big or sturdy enough for him.

Todd looked at our faces and picked up on the mood. He went into the small kitchen, and a moment later, brought us some lemonade. As he settled on the sofa next me, he said "This isn't just a social call, is it? Your friend there," he nodded at Zhirk, "has got a shotgun. What's got you spooked?"

"I need to know more about Mom and Dad, Uncle Todd. I have someone after me and there's weird stuff that's happening. I got a bottle that seem to drain a person. I got weird magickal stuff going on. I got a guy that's a drooling vegetable, that's like a puppet on someone's string. And there's a guy that's seriously powerful, and can leap a three-story building. That's what's going on." I leaned against Uncle Todd, inhaling the soft pine scent of his aftershave.

"You're the only one that knows what Mom and Dad were doing when they died, and I need to know, Uncle Todd. It's weird, but I believe that it's all tied together by Mom and Dad. Please, can you tell me more about them?"

I watched him sit back up and swallow. After a long sigh, he replied, "All right, you're old enough. But do you mind me calling Fawn here to join us? I want to tell you, and I really don't want to tell the story twice. Once is going to be hard enough," he finished, with a wistful, desolate look. He got up from the sofa, then walked back to the kitchen, and the only phone in the house.

About fifteen minutes later, Fawn strode grimly into the house. Uncle Todd smiled sadly and gave her a big hug. She closed her eyes and returned the hug, her chin resting on top of his shoulder. Uncle Todd stepped back, and collapsed onto the sofa, uncomfortably

rigid as he waited for Fawn to sit down. She flashed me a flat smile as she sat on the arm of the sofa next to me, then looked over at Uncle Todd. I looked at him with her. Uncle Todd really looked like he wanted to forget the whole thing. His body was piano-wire taut, and you could feel the reluctance vibrating in the air. He took a deep breath, then began.

“First off, you got to understand that this was still when the changing was new to everyone. You had all sorts of people trying to practice magick the way they thought it should be done. A lot of those people were lonely, desperate, or just plain nuts. Most of the world didn’t think about magick. Magick that worked was pretty hit and miss. The effects were uncontrolled and intense. Mike and Cathy were two of the few who enjoyed a stable belief in magick. They saw it as a natural part of the world, and enjoyed the quiet communing with nature that the Wiccan religion provided.”

Todd sighed and looked away as if he were seeing the story. “They’d been married eight years before the changing and wanted children. Whatever the reason, despite all their efforts and all those of modern science, Cathy never was able to get pregnant. When magick came back into the world, they, like a lot of the others, were caught unawares. Fortunately, their first accidental spell didn’t kill them. They worked together carefully after that, and quickly learned methods and rules that helped them survive learning magick. They eventually garnered enough magickal control to attempt to have children. Fawn, you and Fern are the result of that. Twin girls. They were ecstatic to have the two of you and were very happy for five years. But that sixth year, we had a plague sweep through Halifax, and you two got very sick.”

Fawn and I shifted in our seat. Zhirk remained a quiet lump on the floor. He’d closed his eyes, his whole being absorbed with listening. Uncle Todd closed his own eyes for a minute, then opened them, and continued. His voice started to get hoarse. Whatever he was going to say, he really didn’t like.

“Your parents were desperate. The plague was one of those that had developed immunity to modern antibiotics. The two of you were going to die. Your dad called me and asked to stand in on a ritual to try and save the two of you. Our casting was a dismal

## *Best Intentions*

failure. The spells were not strong enough to fight the disease. Your mom got the idea to cast a different kind of spell. This one was an invocation to the other side of the life force, death. Cathy came up with the thought to barter a life for the two of yours. She convinced your dad it was the only way to save you two. So they worked a calling and attracted an entity of pure malevolence.”

I looked at Fawn who was wide-eyed. I think I was as well. Mom had called to Death to save us. Uncle Todd had tears rolling down his face. His features stilled as he exerted his will.

“They called it Semjaza. I think it was some kind of demon or avatar. They bargained for its assistance, and it agreed. Semjaza gave them the method to create and cast the spell to save your lives. Your dad had reservations, but like any parent, was willing to go to the extreme to save his children. They researched the spell for three days, and then fasted for two more, making sure that they were in harmony with the world around them before casting the spell.”

Uncle Todd stopped and looked at us. His eyes were haunted as he thought about how to say it. “The first part of the spell went without difficulty. It was the second part where things got tricky. Your parents were so deeply into the natural part of the world, and to call something so unnatural upset a lot of things in and about them. They were committing a rape of life energy, drawing it off from the plants and animals around them, feeding it to Semjaza in exchange for your two lives.”

His voice cracked as he returned to the story. “I messed the spell up. You girls started screaming and collapsed as the magick began to flow into you. I saw pieces of you flaking and floating away to that thing your parents called up. Your dad saw what was happening and tried to abort the spell. The power had control by then. He and your mother were locked into the casting. When Mike stopped chanting his part of the spell, it began to collapse.” Uncle Todd looked bleak. It was like the color had gone out of him, and his clothing. It all felt like, I don’t know. Words can’t describe the sense of loss, of desolation, that I got from looking at him.

“I wasn’t as direct a part of the spell as you four were, and when Mike and Cathy started screaming, I froze. Your dad started



chanting again, and yelled at me to save you two by completing the spell. Instead, I pulled you both from the circle and ran to the cars. You two were screaming like damned souls, that thing was howling in rage about something, I don't remember what."

We all paused to take breaths. Todd went on with the story. "I looked back and saw a swarm of black blobs emerge from the its mouth and float over to your parents. Wherever they touched, a gouge of flesh disappeared and blood spurted, and the blob returned to that demon. I didn't watch any more, you two were screaming. The flaking had stopped, but something flowed back into the two of you when I pulled you off the pentagram. It was like a greasy smoke that emanated from your folks and the demon. It cut off when you were in the car." His haunted look made him seem even thinner, gaunt like a starving man.

"I ran to the driver's door and yanked it open. Your folks started screaming for me and I looked back. They had large pieces missing and Semjaza was screaming at them still." Tears were streaming down Todd's face as he forced himself to finish the narrative.

"Your mom looked right at me and I could see her pleading for me to come rescue her. Your dad was screaming in utter terror as those blobs took pieces of him. The ground was wet with blood." Todd's rate of speech quickened. "I panicked and drove like all hell was chasing me. When I got you two home, you were both unconscious. All I could think of was to put you in bed and talk with Ruth."

"The next morning, when we checked on you, you were both like puppets. Eyes open and just lying in bed. No reaction to anything. Later that day, I noticed little wisps of something floating around the house. It seemed thickest near your door. I looked in and saw faint black smoke flowing into you. The black stuff was from the spell I guessed, so whatever happened was still going on."

"Ruthie and I set up a quick circle. We weren't as near as practiced, nor as powerful as your folks. The spell took all day and most of the night, but we managed to cast a spell that cut the link to whatever it was. You girls woke up the next morning like

## *Best Intentions*

nothing ever happened, and we just carried on. You didn't seem to remember what happened that night. You never really asked about your folks, and we just went along with that. Ruthie figured you'd ask eventually." Uncle Todd drew a shaking breath.

"The hard part was listening to you scream on the anniversary of the casting. It'd happen right at the time the spell started, and stop at the time we blocked the spell from you. I don't know why. I don't know how. It just happened."

"Other than that, you were normal, healthy kids. In fact, you never did get sick again from anything again after that night. For that matter, now that I've thought about it, neither have I." He took a deep breath, and looked at me and Fawn. "That's the story. You now know as much as I remember. I hope it helps." He stood up, looking at Fawn and I. "Now you know, and lord knows, I want to forget it all." Uncle Todd shuffled tiredly into his bedroom and locked the door.

No one moved at all. I could hear Uncle Todd crying behind the door. I'm sure Fawn and Zhirk heard it too. We got up as silently as we could, and quietly left the house, which seemed changed after the story. Everything had a kind of loss to it, as if nothing was whole or would be again. Fawn surprised me, giving me a quick hug. She ran to her car, got in, and drove off without glancing back.

Zhirk and I got into his truck, and rode all the way back to the office in silence. I don't know that the story helped at all. It was confusing to me. We were going to die and they used 'black' magick to heal me and Fawn. Then my parents were eaten by something because they didn't finish the spell. Uncle Todd and Aunt Ruthie blocked the spell somehow, so it didn't keep putting something into us? That's what it sounded like to me.

I wanted to talk to Fawn in the worst way, but she had turned off her cell phone. I called her desk and Detective Marin answered and let me know that she had called in sick. Fawn would need a lot of alone time for this apparently. We knew something had gone wrong, but this was really opening old wounds we didn't know we had in each of us. Still, with Baldy being out there and stuff swirling around magick-wise, she'd be smarter to be with someone so they could cover her back.

*J Dark*

I didn't know where to look so I borrowed a line from Uncle Todd talking about what his granddad told him about some place called Viet Nam - 'If you're stuck and can't do anything about a situation, get some sleep. It may have changed when you wake up'.



# BROKEN BRIDGE

BOOK TWO OF THE *GLASS BOTTLES* SERIES

J DARK

*Sometimes a broken bridge has to be crossed.*

Talk about Byzantine influences.

Fern Fatelli is approached by a desperate father to find his daughter before something bad happens to her, only to find that the job is really a diversion made to have her owe a service to a fae lord.

Cobb, the fae lord, then contracts Fern, not as a finder, but as a wizard, and forces her to re-open the Anolyn way.

As this is going on, Cobb is deliberately obstructing her research, and, more sinisterly, sending creatures to attack her, all the while expecting results.

What does a girl do to get a break?

*Visit our website for more information about  
“[The Glass Bottles](#)” series.*

# 1

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN I WAS BEING PLAYED.

“Let me repeat what you’ve said, to make certain I heard you accurately. You’re hiring me to find a white rabbit.”

It took nearly all my willpower to not ask if it was two meters tall, or wore a Victorian coat and carried a large pocket watch. I also snidely thought that it was too long after Spring for him to be wanting me to hunt down the Easter Bunny because he hadn’t gotten his favorite chocolate eggs.

“Mr. Cobb,” I repeated, with what I hoped was sympathetic patience, “I’m not really able to handle this kind of job very easily. Now if you’d take this problem to Larry Potter, he may well be able to find your rabbit without the huge charge you’d get from me.”

“You’re the one I need, not some wannabe finder. I gotta find my rabbit, and I gotta have you find her.” The petulant note in his voice was really getting irritating.

## *Broken Bridge*

I am not the most patient person in the world, and he'd hit my limit. I gritted my teeth, and tried very hard to be polite. Like you'd expect, I didn't quite try all that hard.

"Mr. Cobb, I don't find lost animals. I don't like using magick. You need magick to find a lost rabbit as fast as you're wanting to. There's no way I'd even know where to look and, to be honest, I'm not interested in looking. This kind of job is for a real private detective, or a magicker, not a finder. So tell you what: you get your lazy butt up out of my guest chair, go out the door, and go hire someone else. She or he can whip up a spell to find your little white bunny pretty quickly. Problem solved. Good day."

Mr. Norman Cobb got up very slowly from the chair, and tried to go for intimidating. He stepped over to the edge of the desk, placed both hands on it and leaned forward, trying to get into my face and force me to back up. This action, and the invasion of my personal space, really started to piss me off.

"Ms. Fatelli," Mr. Cobb said in a tense, frustrated voice. "I told you already. I don't want no fuckin' magicker. I want *you* to find my rabbit! Now either you start trying to locate my rabbit, or ..."

I respond even less well to threats, and grabbed the paperweight. He saw the motion and came around the side of the desk to stop me from throwing it, and probably to try and intimidate me further. I spun my chair to face him and, as he cleared the edge of the table, I planted my stiletto heel in between his legs, making contact with those soft and extremely tender testicles. He gasped and screamed at the same time, sounding more like a duck than a man. He fell to his knees, then toppled onto his side, moaning. He curled about his injured area like a fetus.

I stood up out of the chair, all one-point-six meters of me. "Mr. Cobb," I said to him. "I don't find lost animals, I don't like threats, and I don't like your attitude. When you can walk, get out. Oh, and if you want to file an assault charge, I have a camera that records all my talks in here, just in case someone tries to pull stunts like yours." I sat back down in my chair and waited until "Mr. Norman Cobb" got back up off the ground.

He groaned again, staggered towards the door, then stopped. I saw his shoulders tighten. I stood up quickly; when someone



does that they're usually getting a good mad up just before they try to take your head off. Then his whole body started shuddering, and I heard him whine like a wounded animal. *What the hell?*

He turned around slowly, tears leaking down his cheeks. He stood there, halfway to the door, gazing at me with the most intense anguish radiating from him.

"Please, Ms. Fatelli, I'm ... sorry. I need you, not Mr. Potter. The rabbit, that's my daughter. She's been changed. Somehow, something changed her. She was playing in the yard, and I heard her scream, and I got to the door and saw her shrink into a rabbit and run off. Now she's missing. Halloween is tomorrow. I'm afraid someone's going to catch her, and keep her, or kill her. I know a magicker could do it easier, and cheaper, but I can't go that way, Ms. Fatelli, I ... just can't."

I sat back down and looked, really looked, Norman Cobb over. He gave every semblance of a man broken by a need so desperate that he'd do anything to fill it. Hardcore crack addicts look less strung out. This made no sense. It bothers me when things make no sense. Why would a person come to me to find a magically-changed girl, and then refuse to go to the people who could help him most? I decided to take a chance and look at him with my mage sight.

Everyone has mage sight — theoretically, at least. It's that, even in a world where magick has been shown to exist, most people will run from it in a heartbeat. And, of the other ten percent who don't, maybe one in ten of those will actually sit down to study it, and, of those, only about one in fifty actually have the perseverance to become really good. What this means is that magickers — people who *really* know magick — are few and far between.

When I looked at him, I just about went blind as the bright essence of him assaulted my eyes. Looking at a fae can do that to you, especially if the fae in question is strong. All fae are strong in magick, much more so than humans, generally. So they tend to glow when viewed with the sight. "Mr. Cobb" glowed like a blast furnace. The recoil stabbed through my eyes like a knife. I jammed my hands against my eyes to lessen the pain.

## *Broken Bridge*

Mr. Cobb straightened and threw off the glamour that shrouded him. His whole image changed. Instead of a rumpled grey business suit, he wore a deep violet shirt that looked like silk, tights of deep green, and a deep rich brown leather vest. A short, nasty-looking sword, about as long as my forearm, hung off of his left hip. He gained in height as well, standing just a shade under two and a half meters tall, and rail thin.

"Ms. Fatelli, now do you understand why it is so important to find my daughter?" He rasped out.

"Well, for starters," I said, deadpan. "Because she's your daughter?" That's me, life of the party.

I swear he growled slightly at that, and then took a deep breath. "My daughter has been turned into a rabbit. I need to find her before something irrevocable happens. There are other things involved ... other magick. I am also certain that you have experience with this other kind of magick. That is why I have come to you."

"Mr. Cobb, or whoever you are," I replied. "I have no idea what you're talking about. What kind of magick do you mean, exactly?"

The Elf lord straightened and extended one arm. Just out from the tip of the arm, an object coalesced into view, hanging suspended in the air. When I saw what it was, my stomach flipped over, and I almost started whimpering. He was showing me a glass bottle. The same glass bottle that I had seen destroyed sixteen months ago during the biggest living nightmare of my life. I wanted to curl up and hide in a corner, but that really wasn't an option right now. Zhirk would have told me to get after it; he'd have my back. Only he wasn't here anymore. He'd died when the Fallen Angel, Ahiah, had killed him in the front office.

I stared at the bottle like a bird hypnotized by a snake. Cobb stared at me like a starving wolf watches a crippled sheep.

"Ms. Fatelli, you have seen this before, haven't you? The human who changed my daughter was attempting to use this on her."

"How the hell did the guy get that thing, and why are you sure he's human? If he was, why didn't your daughter just change back after she got away?" My voice was high-pitched, as I was nearly

screaming at him. I was angry and scared at the same time. I think that's a standard reaction when you have the absolute life scared out of you like I just had.

He didn't bat an eye, nor show any reaction to my outburst. He just waited, absolutely, completely, nerve-wrackingly still. He watched me a moment more, then replied with a maddeningly neutral voice.

"I believe that he had made a mistake in the spell, that the rabbit was not what he wanted. My daughter may have shifted before he could complete the spell, and he bound her to that form since his spell was tailored for a human, not a rabbit." He shuddered slightly and, if he had not been so still prior to that, I would not have noticed.

Cobb continued in that strange, neutral voice. "He used cold iron in the spell."

Cold iron. Anathema to the fae. I'm not sure why, but cold iron is about the worst thing that a fae would face, and most of them would bolt away if given a chance. It's their poison. A single nail made of cold iron is enough to seriously weaken the most powerful of fae spells, and any typical one is blown away like dust. I wasn't sure what that did in this case, but it probably had something to do with why this child was still a rabbit. Maybe it locked spells like shape-shifting. Who knows? I sure didn't. But the bottle — the fucking bottle — terrified me. I'd never thought to see it again after the huge implosion at the cabin. But god, or, in this case, magick, has got a real warped sense of humor.

I had to admit one thing: I did have more experience with that damned bottle than the rest of the world. I wish I didn't. That bottle sucks your whole self, soul and all, out of you. It converts your soul, and anything that you were or might have been, into magickal energy. You're gone; nothing's left. No soul to reincarnate, or go to heaven, or hell, or wherever you believe souls go. It's a complete destruction of you. The holder can get one huge boost of power, but to keep at high levels, the user has to keep putting more people in the bottle.

I looked back again at Mr. Cobb. I wanted to turn and run. I couldn't though. It wasn't a rabbit anymore; it was a little girl.

*Broken Bridge*

“All right, I’ll help you find your daughter, but I’m going to get full discretion on who or what’s used to do the job, or we can part ways right now.”

Cobb smiled and said, “Done.”

Like I said earlier: I should have known I was being played.

# BEGUILING VOICES

BOOK THREE OF THE *GLASS BOTTLES*  
SERIES

J DARK

*Never trust magic ... or the people that hire you.*

Fern Fatelli dives back into her job as a 'trapper', and is hired to kidnap a girl away from an abusive household — only to find that she's delivered the child into a far greater danger than she could have ever imagined.

*Visit our [website](#) for more information about  
“[The Glass Bottles](#)” series.*

**W**E GOT TO THE CHURCH RIGHT AT SIX. And I should have seen things coming a mile off. I think I did, actually, but I didn't want to believe it. Kent and Kevin were gone; we'd buried them a month ago. The wounds hadn't had but the barest time to scab over. I found myself drifting on occasion, wishing the past could be changed.

It can't. The past is set in stone, and the future is all smoke and mirrors. The present, the now, is where that smoke and mirror image become solid with the tick of a clock. Time has a magic all its own. But it takes time to ease sharp pains and make them dull. It takes time to grieve.

I'd thrown myself back into work as a way of not sinking into despair. I kept myself busy, without time to think about all the losses, all the death. Yeah, I was trying to escape the grief, and pushing so hard to escape it, that my reactions spilled over into this job. Sometimes that drowned out my little inner voice, which was trying to tell me to pay attention.

A single vehicle sat near one burned-out overhead lamp. It looked a lot like a variant of the old Hummer that the armed forces

## *Beguiling Voices*

still use. Its light color revealed itself to have a pearlized finish in our headlights. JC stayed in the back seat while Ginny and I got out. Ginny was still in my sweats and band shirt, having decided that she didn't want to wear that school uniform one more moment.

The Hummer look-alike disgorged four people, which immediately set my hackles up. I didn't like the idea of being outnumbered, but no one had set numbers for either side, so it may have just been a precaution on Cameron's part — or so I told myself. After all, with all the crazy that had gone on in the news, precautions weren't a bad idea. That's why JC was in the car and, hopefully, out of sight.

The four approached me and finally got close enough get into the light. Cameron was there, along with three Hamref that looked like they belonged at an outlaw biker rally. All three wore black leather pants, a sweatshirt with the arms cut off, and a thick leather sleeveless jacket. I could see knives hung at their hips, and one looked like he had a boot knife as well. My hand slid into my purse, finding the snubnose. I gripped it and hoped I wouldn't have to use it.

The Hamref started to fan out into a semi-circle. Cameron stepped forward and greeted me with a smooth smile.

"Ms. Fatelli, I really appreciate all that you've done for Ginny and myself. I was in the depths of despair to hear of my niece's terrible suffering in that loathsome household. My brother-in-law never had his heart in raising her properly, or giving her a home full of warmth and love."

I wondered when he'd get to the point. I only half-listened, keeping my eyes on the three Hamref, who noticed my attention and froze, just like predators waiting for the prey's attention to slip. Not this time.

"So why the bodyguards? This doesn't look like a friendly family gathering."

David Cameron smiled. "It's not, actually." His hand was in his pocket.

Ginny spoke up. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing? What is this?"

Cameron — if that was his real name — paused. The Hamref didn't. They swarmed me, tackling me to the ground. I scratched



and bit anything I could, terrified I was going to die. Ginny screamed, then I heard a thud.

One of the Hamrefs disappeared, leaving the other two to finish me off. I think my small size worked against them. Their knives sliced my thick jacket to pieces, but fortunately missed me.

I heard the sounds of a car door opening. JC had gotten out of the car. Then came a maniacal chittering that froze my blood. The Hamref and I both froze as the chittering rose in volume. I could just see past one of the Hamref. JC had the case open and held a spindly thing that my eyes didn't — or maybe more accurately, couldn't — focus on.

He dropped it on the asphalt and said, "Sic 'em."

The spindly thing chittered and shrieked as it scampered across the parking lot like a demented four-legged spider. I couldn't scream; I couldn't move. The hideous noises the creature made paralyzed me with fear.

It had the same effect on the Hamref. JC wasn't affected. I noticed white wads of something in his ears. He'd plugged them with cotton! Suddenly, the Hummer look-alike roared to life. Its four wheels churned on the pavement as the driver hauled the car around and roared past me, JC, and the paralyzed Hamrefs, disappearing down the long drive and into the night.

The creature shrieked again and shambled on stick-like legs towards me. My mind nearly went white with terror as it pounced on the first Hamref. A delicate beak unfolded from under its head and locked forward. The end looked razor-sharp. A drop of fluid fell from the end. The pavement hissed as the liquid splashed on the asphalt. It leaned over, using the beak to probe at the Hamref's face and shoulders. It shifted lower, then plunged downward into the Hamref's neck, piercing it.

The Hamref shrieked, then shuddered. A few moments later, its feeble thrashing stilled, then its body began to shrivel. The chittering thing held onto the withering Hamref with its two spindly front legs. Its body expanded slowly as it sucked the Hamref's fluids, like drinking a thick shake through a straw.

The second Hamref tried to throw off the effects of the paralyzing sounds, slowly rolling to its side. The thing pulled its

## *Beguiling Voices*

beak free of the empty husk of the first Hamref and shrieked. My overloaded brain couldn't take the renewed terror. I passed out.

JC was kneeling next to me when I finally woke back up.

"How are you feeling, boss lady?"

I looked up at JC, then screamed and backed up as I spotted the guitar case next to him. The bone-chilling chittering started up, then quit when JC gave the guitar case a tap with his foot. I think my eyes were too big for my face as I stared at that guitar case.

"What was that?! What the hell was that?!"

The only reason I didn't pull my snubnose pistol was that I was so frightened that I'd forgotten about it.

JC smiled patiently, and waited until I calmed down.

"How about we start over?" He offered me a huge yellow-green hand to help me up off the ground.

I warily took it, not taking my eyes off the guitar case. "It's not going to get out?"

JC chuckled in that rich deep voice of his. "In a word: no. Its home is in that case. So it's not going to leave there unless I ask it to." He smiled disarmingly, which is a real trick. Orcs, as a general rule, always look like you owe them money ... and you're overdue.

"What is that thing, JC? Oh crap! Ginny! Where's Ginny?"

I knew the answer even as I formed the words. My memory was clearing, and the scream as Ginny was grabbed reminded me that, scared or not, Ginny had been forcibly taken. That the new kidnapper was my client was salt in my wounded pride.

"Where did the truck go?"

JC pointed north. "That way, though I don't know if they stayed going that direction." He shrugged. "That's just the way they left the lot."

"Thanks for the save, JC. They'd have gutted me if you hadn't sent that ... thing after them."

"You're truly welcome, Ms. Fatelli. After all, neither of us has been paid. And since you're my boss, I think you need to talk to that Mr. Cameron. I'm afraid that I'm not very good at interpersonal things."

JC straightened his suit jacket, then picked up the guitar case. "Shall we go back to the barn and decide what our next move is going to be?"

That was a good idea. If we wanted to come at this without getting killed, a plan would be needed.

"I'd rather go right in and take her back, but that's kind of a bad idea."

I thought for another moment. Cameron knew we weren't dead, so he would expect that we would try to get Ginny back. Not because she'd been kidnapped, but because as the person hired to get her out of trouble, I'd taken a responsibility for her safety. Cameron blew all of that away when he tried to kill me. There was Ginny — and my pride as a professional — on the line here.

I get a person I'm contracted to get out of danger killed; that puts a huge blemish on my record. My fault or not, I saw it as survival. If I wanted to get more jobs, I had to correct this one. That brought up another question.

"JC, what, exactly, is that thing in your guitar case?"

"You're not going to let that go, are you?" He sounded not exasperated, just ... resigned.

"How can I? I saw it up close and personal. I saw what it did to that Hamref." A lump formed in my stomach. "It's ... an Outsider, isn't it?"

"Honestly, I'm not certain. I don't think it is. The man who owned this guitar case before me got it from someone else, who didn't know what it was. I just call it 'Mack'. Its home is in the guitar case. Though why someone put it there is way beyond my understanding. What I do know, is that it is smart. It instinctively knows who's a friend, or an enemy. I've never had to tell it anything; it just knew." He shrugged his thick shoulders, then had to straighten his coat again.

"So that thing does know who the enemy is?" I looked at the guitar case, which chose that moment to chitter and rock.

JC tapped it with his boot and it quieted once more.

"Yes, indeed. It's never attacked anyone I didn't tell it to, nor has it hurt anyone around me that I didn't want hurt."

As much as I wanted to believe that, I didn't want to test it.

"Let's get back to the office."

I rubbed the nub of my missing finger, and wondered what Zhirk would have said about a thing like that.



# GODDESS CHOSEN

BOOK ONE OF "GODDESS RISING" TRILOGY

JAY HARTLOVE

*The man who would beat the devil isn't a hero, but a ruthless madman.*

Running from his dark past, former Duvalier hit man Charles Redmond is forced to take sides in a battle that has been raging since Exodus: between a power-mad magician named Silas Alverado and Sammael, the Demon Prince of Liars.

When Charles' beloved Voodoo is threatened with extinction, he must wager his life between pure evil and the man who could destroy the world.

Charles' psychiatrist, Sanantha Mauwad, steps into this maelstrom of nightmares, violence and insanity to help Charles find his strength. She tries to save Charles' mind, but can she save his soul?

*Visit our website for more information about  
the "[Goddess Rising](#)" series.*

## 12

**S**TEPPING THROUGH THE SIDE GATE, Charles could hardly recognize the rectangular dirt courtyard behind the priest's house. In just the few hours since he had been there, the quiet retreat had become a gaily-decorated festival site. The palm-frond thatch walls around the yard had been decorated with brightly colored banners. Flags with intricate designs covered entirely in spangles were leaned up in the corners of the yard. The ground outside the *oumphor* temple had been covered in elaborate curlicue patterns made of white flour, the *veve* symbols of the Loa gods. There were twenty men and women along the side walls with drums and rattles and percussive sticks, all working together to build an impossibly complex rhythm. There were another fifty people dancing around in the middle of the courtyard. Everyone accented their clothing with some brightly colored sash or turban or scarf. Many of the men had their shirts off as they swayed their bodies to the music. Everyone was singing.

## *Goddess Chosen*

He stood there for a moment and took in the spectacle. The sheer joy of the place rekindled the flame in his heart that had been set in the fields. He spotted Sanantha up at the front of the congregation, talking with some men and women who were dressed entirely in white. He made his way around the dancers to Sanantha.

"Charles! Welcome!" she greeted him with her big open smile. She blinked and stared at him upon his approach. "You look like you don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"I am rather overwhelmed. It's been a helluva day."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

Charles chuckled and looked away. He shook his head and turned back to her. "Sure. They say confession is good for the soul." He walked her over to the fence away from the dancers. He took a deep breath to steady himself. "Well, I just confessed to Father Gorvil, publicly. Some of the village men overheard me telling you about my past here. Thankfully they went to him and didn't just kill me in the jungle."

"What did he say?"

He blinked, trying to come to grips with it himself. "He absolved me."

Sanantha's frown of concern smoothed and stretched into a triumphant grin. "That's wonderful!"

Charles took another deep breath. "It's a big step, all at once."

She put her hand on his arm. "I understand it's going to take you a while to forgive yourself. But this should show you that you are worth forgiving." She nodded at the ground. "Father Gorvil is really coming through for us."

"I'll say."

"No, you don't know the half of it. Joseph came into the village this afternoon looking for us. Father Gorvil sent him packing, but it seems the conversation was very strange."

Charles' grin vanished in his shock. "How so?"

"When Father Gorvil told him that we were under his protection, Joseph backed down and said he wasn't prepared to fight a houn gan. He told Father Gorvil to tell us that he had chased us from Washington, but that we were safe here. I can't believe he



would just back down like that. I mean, he blew up an airplane to try to kill us."

Charles compared this sudden change in tactics to the other sudden changes he had seen in Joseph. "Actually, that kind of mercurial twist is not that unusual for him. Maybe he just wanted me out of Washington so he can continue with his plans there. Maybe he came here to make sure we weren't going anywhere." Then he gave it another thought and concluded, "Maybe I'm grasping at straws here."

"Maybe he wants us to feel safe so we don't ask too many questions at this mass. I don't trust him for a second."

"Neither do I, believe me."

"Look, we are just about ready to start here. You and I will be seated inside the shelter, right over here on Father Gorvil's right," she said pointing at a couple of chairs. "Go ahead and sit down. I've got a few more things to do, and then I'll join you." She clutched his shoulder. "That's so great that Father Gorvil has forgiven you. All this can move ahead with a clean slate."

Charles took his chair and Sanantha disappeared around the partition into the sanctum. He was so nervous he could barely stay seated. He was torn between his growing sense of community with these people and his growing anxiety about participating in a summoning. The dancing and music was something he wanted to be a part of, yet he couldn't help but think of all this excitement as playing with fire. Now that Joseph had found them, what if they did something that really angered Joseph? What if the gods were on Joseph's side in exacting revenge for Charles' past deeds? Did these people that he was coming to care about, who were throwing themselves so enthusiastically into this effort, realize the dangers at hand?

The first thing he noticed when he sat down was the large veve design of Madame Erzulie on the ground next to him. It was three feet across and built around the shape of a heart. Like the other veves, the interior cross bars and curling branches that projected from the heart looked like an elaborate wrought iron window, only drawn with carefully-poured flour on the dark hard soil. He took comfort that it was pointed at him.

## *Goddess Chosen*

The most conspicuous feature of the temple was how the roof was held up by a central sturdy, square wooden pillar set in a stepped stone seat. The ground around the stone seat was decorated with more *veve* drawings and the steps were piled with offerings of corn, bowls of food, and open bottles of liquor. The pillar itself was painted with two intertwining serpent spirals that ran from the ground all the way up to the rafters that it supported.

He smiled at seeing the familiar pillar, just like the one in his personal altar at home. He had been surprised earlier at how differently the temple was laid out compared to temples he had seen in New Orleans. Now that everything was fully decorated, the differences and the similarities to his own practice became clearer.

He had no idea why there was a whip hanging on a hook halfway up the pillar. On the other hand, the wooden model of a ship hung near the top made him think of Erzulie's ship in his dream. The courtyard was really an extension of the temple floor, since there was no wall on that side of the temple. He then realized that the stone pillar seat was the altar for the villagers, since one couldn't even see the stone altar in the sanctum behind the partition screen.

As he watched the villagers dancing and singing and drumming, he noticed there were very few children present. He assumed they were left alone at home, since this crowd could easily be the entire adult population of the village and surrounds.

The men were dancing in circles with other men, and the women danced among themselves. Some of the villagers worked themselves into a frenzy, dancing in double-time to the drumbeats and singing. The music was also comfortingly familiar. He focused on the stomping bare feet of a nearby group of women. He glanced up and saw that a young woman in a blue flowered dress smiled coyly at him while she danced. It was the girl who had caught him in the jungle that morning. He blushed and looked away.

He was glad that Sanantha came out of the temple and sat down next to him.

"We'll start when Father Gorvil comes out," she informed him.

"Is there anything I need to know ahead of time? I mean, will I be performing any function in the ceremonies? We're sitting right up front here."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I don't think you'll have to do anything. Father Gorvil will run everything personally. He wants you up here since he'll be seeking answers to your questions."

Charles leaned in close and took a sober tone. "Before the ceremony starts, I want to go on the record that I'm really quite worried that these people don't appreciate how much danger they're taking on, and for a stranger's problems at that. I mean, what do my problems have to do with them?"

"Oh, they want to be here anytime the gods speak. It's an important part of their community. The gods could choose to speak through any one of them."

Just as the sun winked out over the horizon, Father Gorvil emerged from the ghuevo sanctum. The drummers and singers went silent, and everyone sat down where they were. Only the drone of insects persisted. A couple of the men and women in white made their way along the walls of the peristyle, lighting torches as they went. Father Gorvil was dressed in a long white robe that struck Charles as curiously plain for someone of the priest's position. He was attended by two men and a woman, again all in white, who held various long implements for him.

Father Gorvil carried a bucket in one hand and a leafy branch in the other. He began chanting prayers as he stepped up to the central post of the temple, dipped the branch in the bucket and shook a spray of water from the branch all up the length of the pillar. Then he walked out into the crowd and continued to shake water out over the congregation. Each time he called out a prayer, the assembly would call back a response.

When Father Gorvil came back into the temple he handed the bucket and branch to one of his attendants, and took instead a black iron bar with a large disk at one end and a hook at the other. Charles understood this bar gathered spirits and made communication with them easier. He also took an elaborately beaded, long handled rattle in his other hand. Charles immediately recognized the primary tool in dealing with spirits, the Asson rattle wand of command. Each time Father Gorvil handed something to or took something from one of his assistants, the helper would kiss the object.

## *Goddess Chosen*

He held the iron bar up to the crowd and the drummers started a simple, consistent rhythm. Father Gorvil began a different chant that listed the names of gods, including many Catholic saints. When he was done, the crowd sang a few choruses of a joyous song that Charles did not understand.

Father Gorvil then traded the iron bar for a long, notched, wooden pole with a mirror attached to one end, which Charles remembered was the Joukoujou, the tree of life and the balance beam of the gods. Father Gorvil kept the long-handled rattle in his left hand. When he held the pole up, the drummers changed to a different rhythm. Again, Father Gorvil ran through a litany of gods' names, again including saints. Again the crowd sang a song when he was done.

When Father Gorvil traded the mirror pole for a sword, Charles surmised that the priest was done preparing and was now moving toward an actual summoning. Father Gorvil held the sword up and began another round of names. The drummers began yet another set of rhythms, when suddenly a man stood up and cried out from back in the crowd. The men on either side of him stepped up to steady him, and the seated crowd parted to give him room to come to the front.

The man's face was contorted in pain and he was stooped over holding his back. Charles noticed that many of the congregation paid him only passing attention, as if what was happening was nothing unexpected. He seemed weak, almost unable to hold himself up as he staggered toward the temple. He let out another cry of pain and fell to his knees, as if he had been struck in the back, but there was no one there. He reached around behind himself frantically, as if to fight off whatever was striking him. The men at his sides did nothing to assist him. Again he cried out and again he staggered under an unseen blow, this one knocking him to the ground.

Charles was horrified and thrilled at the same time. He had never witnessed a possession first-hand. He glanced at Sanantha who nodded that this is what was supposed to happen. That these people had come for the chance to be chosen for such a punishing ordeal made Charles wonder how badly they needed this spiritual contact.

As the man lie on the ground and moaned, Father Gorvil, still holding the sword and the Asson, stepped up and began reciting prayers over him. He stopped moaning and slowly sat up. He looked around with a contorted frown on his face. Gorvil brandished the rattle and the man looked up at him and blinked, as if seeing the tall, thin priest for the first time. The man abruptly stood up and saluted the priest in a military fashion. Gorvil planted the sword in the ground between them and saluted him back. He then called an order to his attendants who brought forth a chair which they sat down in front of the central pillar. The man grabbed up the sword, marched over and sat down in the chair, crossing one leg broadly over the other in an imperious pose. One of the attendants stepped up and draped a large red cape over his shoulders.

Father Gorvil continued to recite prayers at the man while he sat surveying the crowd. Maybe it was his expression or maybe his body language, but Charles couldn't help but feel that this wasn't just a villager putting on an act. Could this really be a personal visitation of a god? Charles was astonished. He leaned over to Sanantha and asked, "Is this Ogou?"

She raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Probably Ogou Fer, the god of wartime strategy."

"Will the man be all right after this?"

"Oh, yeah. His soul is just set aside, subjugated, is ridden by the god. That's why the Loas are called the Divine Horsemen. The people are the horses."

Suddenly the possessed man stood up and began speaking. The drummers kept up their rhythm but did so quietly as everyone strained to hear the god's words. Even Father Gorvil stepped back to give him room as he started pacing back and forth across the width of the peristyle. He held the sword rigidly up against his shoulder as he strutted, the red cape flowing behind him. "So enemies pursue you, and you don't know why. So you come to me to figure it out!"

On his return trip he turned on Charles. He strutted over to the seated man and berated him. "You're too stupid to see why enemies chase you, so you come to me to figure it out?"

## *Goddess Chosen*

Charles was terrified. He pressed back into his chair and kept an eye on the sword.

Thankfully Father Gorvil interceded. "The enemy is a l'alouby of some cunning. We need to know who sent this demon." Gorvil stepped over to the stone base of the central pillar and grabbed up a pot from among the offerings. Much to Charles' surprise, Gorvil reached in and pulled out a handful of corn mash paste, which he smeared onto Charles' head. "This man is vexed, not stupid," the priest declared.

This seemed to satisfy the possessed man, and he planted the sword in the ground in front of him and stood up straight with one fist on his hip. He then thrust out his other hand holding up his index finger and smiled hugely.

Father Gorvil held the Asson rattle a little higher and demanded, "Who sent the demon?"

The man stepped up to Charles, leaned forward, grinned and hissed a single word right into his face. "Sssiillaasss."

Charles recoiled and frowned at Gorvil for an explanation.

The houngan frowned intensely and pursed his lips at the possessed man. He demanded, "Nothing more?"

The man stood up, folded his arms over his chest and looked away without answering.

Father Gorvil looked at Charles and said, "The name of your enemy."

# GODDESS DAUGHTER

BOOK TWO OF "GODDESS RISING" TRILOGY

JAY HARTLOVE

*How far can you genetically alter someone before she becomes someone else ... before she loses her soul?*

A breakthrough in human cloning leads to unspeakable evil.

Psychiatrist Sanantha Mauwad is back, helping a world leading geneticist recover a four-month memory gap in which his wife was killed and his daughter was left in a coma. But, as she unravels the mystery, she finds nothing and no one are as they appear.

Cutting-edge science and ancient cults collide in this tale of too much power driven by too much passion.

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the "[Goddess Rising](#)" series.*



# 14

**I**SHI SHIMATO HAD ARRIVED HALF AN HOUR EARLY to give himself time to go over the numbers his accountants had emailed him that morning. Sitting alone in the drab gray and tan hotel business center conference room, he had lost track of time. The sound of rain outside and the smell of damp added to the timelessness of the room. He had expected his partner Hideo Yamaguchi also to arrive before their scheduled appointment. In fact, he was counting on Hideo's arrival as his cue to look up from the spreadsheets on his laptop.

Ishi was quite surprised to have his concentration interrupted by the cheery voice of Young Nae Yoon. "Mr. Shimato! Thank you for coming all the way to my turf here in K-L." Young Nae walked into the room and reached over the table to shake his hand.

Ishi got up to meet his gesture, and then felt compelled to follow the shake with a small bow. "Mr. Young. It was the least we could do, especially after our last meeting ended so poorly. I apologize again for leaving prematurely. I still don't know what came over me."

## *Goddess Daughter*

He glanced down at his open laptop screen and took note that it was 2:05. "I also apologize for Hideo being late today."

Young Nae took one of the eight seats around the table, the one at the head, and leaned back into it. "Well," he started with a chuckle, "if you are done apologizing, we can talk business. When we met in Singapore, I did not know that Hideo had not completely briefed you on our discussion of a merger. I assume you two have talked it over since then?"

"Yes, we have. I have all the numbers here."

"I'm sure you do. What matters now is whether you want to do this. Hideo has made it clear that he does."

"Are you interested, in principle, with moving ahead?"

"In principle. If you are going to stay on as President for me, I need to know your heart is in it."

Ishi glanced again at the clock on his open laptop. Where was Hideo? He wasn't prepared to discuss this on his own. He certainly wasn't ready to talk about how he personally felt about it. "Well, Hideo and I built Clearwater Distribution up from seed capital, so I very much want to do what will make the company prosper."

Young Nae sat up and leaned forward, putting an elbow on the light brown wood table. "I know that your wife's uncle gave you half the money to start this business. You've paid Lo Cheung back a dozen fold over the years. This company is yours, with Hideo. This way you get to still run it, and you get a windfall of cash for your half of the ownership, which you can invest as you please. What's the downside? Hideo sees the logic."

"Hideo has his own reasons for wanting the liquidity. My situation is different. He isn't trying to preserve a legacy."

"A legacy? Don't you think your family will be better off liquid?"

"Forgive me for being so blunt, but you have forced the issue. I feel I must make my position very clear. I am part of a larger family. At the risk of jeopardizing our business together going forward, and you are one of our biggest customers, I have to say, I don't think I can sell one of my family's businesses under these circumstances."

Young Nae got up and started pacing around the room. "Do you think I want this company because it was started with Lo

Cheung's seed money? That was ten years ago -- ancient history. You and I are talking access to wealth today."

"I just don't think of it as mine to sell."

Young Nae continued pacing as he walked. "Let's think about this from the numbers. I always feel tough decisions can be made easier with more data. Yours has been a slow growth business. You are diversified enough that fluctuations in the commodity markets have never dragged your business down too far, nor let you spike very high." By now, he was walking all the way around the room. "It is safe to say it is very unlikely you will ever see this company overpriced enough to give you an exit window. Your salary is all you're ever going to see. Your ownership equity is just going to sit, bottled up in the balance sheet."

Ishi turned his swivel chair around unconsciously to track Young Nae's pacing. "That's not the issue."

At this point, Young Nae was right next to Ishi's chair. He leaned over and put his hand on Ishi's shoulder for emphasis. "It should be. This family legacy stuff is blocking you from seeing any benefit from all your hard work."

As Young Nae let his hand fall from his shoulder, he happened to touch Ishi a couple of times on his right arm, once above the elbow, and once above the wrist, before he continued his pacing.

"Sometimes it can be worth self-sacrifice to build something bigger than oneself," Ishi insisted.

"This is a matter of principle? We are getting philosophical?"

Ishi felt a wave of anger that surprised him. "I will not be mocked." He put his hand on his chest, fighting a growing feeling of excitement. "You have quite upset me. I never lose my temper." His breathing became deeper and labored. "I am having a hard time controlling myself. I think we need to end this meeting. We have come to an impasse."

Young Nae took a seat across from Ishi. "You think so?" he asked calmly.

Ishi realized he had mistaken the tightness in his chest for anger. He really was having a hard time breathing. "I am not feeling well. Is there any water in here?"

Young Nae leaned back, relaxed. "I didn't order any."

## *Goddess Daughter*

The pressure in his chest was now undeniable. "I think I am in trouble here. Can you help me?"

Young Nae didn't answer.

Ishi eyes went wide as he suddenly realized this was no coincidence. He remembered getting sick at their last meeting when Young Nae had scolded him. "What have you..." He clutched his chest with both hands as he felt a spasm. "What have you done to me?"

Young Nae calmly looked him square in the eye. "I have secured your family's financial future. Clearwater is registered as a Japanese partnership. Under Japanese partnership law, if one partner is deemed incompetent by two independent doctors, the remaining partners can buy him out as long as they do so for a fair price. Since you and Hideo are equal partners, and I will be paying him just over 4 million dollars for your company, your family will get a two-million-dollar windfall."

Ishi managed to gasp out the words, "*Kyusho jitsu*."

"If that's the name you want to use for it," Young Nae toyed with him.

Hideo knocked on the door and stuck his head in as if unsure of himself before entering. "I'm so sorry I am late. I got lost here in the hotel. I had the devil of a time finding someone to help me." He saw Ishi gasping and holding his chest, and Young Nae taking out his cell phone. "What the hell? Ishi, are you all right?"

"Hello. This is Young Nae Yoon in Conference Room 11a. We need an ambulance and a medical team up here right away. Someone is having a heart attack."

Hideo ran to Ishi's side. Ishi was clawing his shirt collar open, trying to catch his breath. Hideo helped him and turned to Young Nae, nearly yelling in his panic. "How long will they be?"

"They said it could be 10 to 15 minutes."

Even as the pain threatened to choke off his thinking, Ishi still noticed how calm Young Nae was. He tried to say something to Hideo, but it only came out as a gasp. Frustration piled on top of fear and he panicked.

"Do you know CPR?" Hideo asked Young Nae.

"No, I don't."

“Shit, neither do I! Hang in there, Ishi.”

Ishi grabbed him by the arms and shook him, trying frantically to speak, his eyes bulging out wildly.

“You’re freaking out, man. Try to relax. Try to breathe. Shit, I don’t know what I’m doing! Do we lay him down, do we keep him upright?”

“I think you’re supposed to elevate his feet,” Young Nae commented without emotion and without getting up.

Hideo pushed Ishi’s chair back from the table, picked up his legs, and swung his feet up onto the table. “Is that any better?” he asked the distressed man.

Ishi was barely holding onto consciousness. His body convulsed as shockwaves of pain ripped through his torso. The last clear image he saw, the last thought he could grasp, before slipping into an unconsciousness from which he would never recover, was the horrifyingly calm expression on Young Nae Yoon’s face.



# GODDESS RISING

BOOK THREE OF "GODDESS RISING"  
TRILOGY

JAY HARTLOVE

*Saved by a goddess ... but only as a tool for revenge?*

The nascent goddess Desiree meets the Egyptian archangel Joseph while ghost-busting the myth of Saint Patrick.

Aided by her psychiatrist, Sanantha Mauwad, Desiree discovers she is a pawn in a revenge quest that Isis has been planning for thousands of years.

Once again, gods and demons war on Earth with our heroes fighting not just for survival — but justice.

*Visit our website for more information about  
the “[Goddess Rising](#)” series.*



THE WALK HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL WAS SURREAL. Desiree couldn't bring herself to make eye contact with people she passed on the street for fear of her god-self reaching out and seizing their souls. Could life really be moved into and out of a body so easily? She wondered if soldiers ever got used to the feeling of taking a life, or if they had to make excuses to themselves for the rest of their lives. All these questions, and every time she got more answers, it all became just that much more intense.

She opened the door and moved directly to collapsing on the couch. It was more of a loveseat, so she was left with one leg sticking up in the air. She glanced over at the giant hole in the back wall of the living room and thought about how Joseph always referred to his god Ptah as the Opener of the Ways. *More like 'Opener of the Kitchen'.*

Sanantha came out from her room. "Welcome home. You all right?"

## *Goddess Rising*

"No," she groaned without getting up. "I used to think more information leads to more understanding which leads to better coping. Knowing more is not helping."

"Helping with what?"

Desiree sat up. "My powers are out of control. They take off on their own and I just get dragged behind. They're frightening too, like life and death at a whim. Knowing what's going on doesn't help. All the history and mechanisms and relationships don't give me any handle. I can't tell if my conscious actions are helping Isis or not. It's like I've found this fabulous alien spacecraft crashed in my backyard. I know it can go to the stars, but with no instruction manual and all the controls in an alien language, I can't make it do anything. If it flies, I can't tell if I'm doing it or it's doing it on its own."

"Is Isis pushing you aside? Are there periods when you can't remember what you've been doing?"

"No, I'm always aware, which makes it worse. Oh, I see. You're thinking about when I would shift into being my mother and lose my Desiree identity. No, I don't feel like I'm being overwritten, just forced to be a passenger in my own body."

"That is consistent with the *loa* mounting experience. You said all your answers so far don't help. What would you like to know?"

"How to be the god I'm supposed to be. Both of our angels say I am. Osiris in my dream said I am."

"Who knows how to be a god?" Sanantha asked.

"Other gods? Alec contacted Boann. I felt for her when I went out to the woods by the river."

"Maybe. I can try to summon a *loa*. I don't know how successful I would be. I was only ever a flag mistress in my village, and it usually takes a mambo to summon a god from scratch. The only time I have ever been mounted was when Erzulie revived you."

"Joseph knows the Egyptian gods, he served one of them."

"Yes, but he was also imprisoned by them for thousands of years."

"Do we know why?"

“No, and I don’t think that would be a polite question.”

Desiree squirmed around on the loveseat and pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “I still think he’ll have our best access. “Hello, Joseph? It’s Desiree. May I ask you a favor? Right, of course. Thank you. Can you come over to the cottage this afternoon when you’ve got a minute? I need your advice. Okay, sure. Thanks.”

She hung up and gestured broadly toward the door. “Wait for it ...”

The knock came.

Desiree grinned overbroadly. Sanantha got the door. “Come in.”

“Joseph, I need your help. You have been wonderful answering all my questions. Sanantha, you have been a rock of support in my corner. Now I need an expert, a peer. I need to talk to a god and see how I’m supposed to do this. Boann did not talk to me when I went to her. Sanantha’s not sure the *loas* would listen to her. What can you do to put me in touch with a fellow Egyptian god?”

He frowned. Was that thought or caution? “I am an angel of Ptah, the Opener of the Ways.”

Desiree snickered to herself.

“What?” he asked with no humor.

“Nothing. Sorry, please go on.”

“As we saw with Kailash and Semeru, holy places are holy because they exist in both this plane and the next. I could open a gap at Karnak where my gods are resting.”

Sanantha helped him out. “I understand your reluctance to visit the gods.”

“I want to help and I will. I will have to avoid direct contact with the gods, though.”

Desiree couldn’t help herself. “When Silas freed you, it was against the gods’ wishes? Why were they holding you?”

“Yes, my master freed me before the gods were satisfied. I had exceeded my authority, acted on my own wishes and against theirs.”

“Isn’t helping me more of the same?”

## *Goddess Rising*

“No, I am assisting a goddess. Helping the Neters is why I exist.”

“Actually, Isis is known for acting on her own,” Sanantha added. “Plenty of stories have her going against the wishes of the other gods. So helping a rebel may not excuse you. Please be careful.”

Joseph smiled what almost came across as boyishly. “I didn’t know you cared, Doctor.”

Sanantha smiled back. “Don’t flatter yourself. I need you here to protect her. Promise me you will keep her safe.”

“I promise.” He turned to Desiree. “When would you like to leave? I know the place well, so we can get there in one step.”

“What time is it there now?”

“There is a two-hour time difference. It’s three o’clock here now, so it’s five there. We’d have a little over an hour of light.”

“Am I overdressed. I mean, it’s the desert and I’m in a sweater.”

“You should be fine. You might be warm, but it gets very windy.”

“All right then. No time like the present.”

Sanantha spoke up. “Please don’t do it in here. Go out back, maybe. You create a cloud of black sulfurous smoke when you leave.”

Desiree snickered. “Bye, Sanantha.” She started to follow Joseph but stopped to retrieve her wallet.

“You won’t need that,” Joseph said. “We’re going and coming right back.”

“I dunno, traveling to another country. I’ll take my passport and credit card just in case.”

She and Joseph walked to the patio. She took his hands facing him and closed her eyes.

“Are you still frightened of this travel?” Joseph asked. “We have done this several times now.”

“Not afraid of the trip, but the blackness is always a shock. I’ll just keep my eyes closed, thank you.”

With the rushing sound of air, she knew they were no longer in Ireland. She felt a gentle warm breeze on her face, opened her eyes, and involuntarily took a breath at the view. The grandiose pylon

gate of the Temple of Isis at Agilika loomed behind Joseph like a fortress wall. It was huge and beautiful but there was something more, something touched her deeply. "Joseph, I feel like I'm home."

"People came from all over Egypt to worship you here. This place keeps you alive in people's minds even today when they visit and learn. Did Alec tell you about the impression prayer leaves on a place?"

"Yes, like Patrick's gravestone." She was happy to notice no tourists present. She looked around and saw they were on an island.

"This place is steeped in thousands of years of belief in you."

"Well, not me personally, but my soul, which is where I feel the connection. Is this one of those holy thin spots?"

"Oh yes, this temple very much exists in both planes."

She looked around again and felt something didn't fit. "Why does this place feel like it's in the wrong place?"

"Oh, of course. Isis remembers it in its original setting. This temple complex used to be on a nearby island called Philae. When the Egyptians built the Aswan High Dam, the Nile backed up and expanded Lake Nassar, and it flooded Philae. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization declared this a World Heritage Site and spent nine years dismantling the entire complex, numbering all the blocks, and reassembling it here on Agilika."

"They moved all these temple buildings? Wow. Wait a minute. That's UNESCO. My mom worked for UNESCO." She walked across the entrance plaza, looking up at the two pylon towers that formed the front gate. "Those giant carved images all across these faces include other gods in addition to Isis. Will they be on the other side for me to talk to?"

"That's my hope. Now you're going to need to know how to part a gap to go there and to return. I can't come with you."

"Right. Do I use my god *chi*?" she asked, grasping.

"Yes and no. You will need to summon it, but not to project it the way you do when you heal. You let it flow into one hand, and then you use that hand like a knife to split the firmament."

"Split the firmament."

"The split will be narrow, so you need to line up your body flat behind your hand so you can slip through."

"Right, I saw you stand sideways on Kailash."

## *Goddess Rising*

“Since you’re new at this, don’t expect the gap to be as wide as the one I made for you and Brother Renpo. Any gap will do, just squeeze through. Let me set up a shadow phase for you to practice on.”

“Part of me thinks this is perfectly normal, and part of me is scared shitless.”

“You know which part is which. Isis used to do this all the time when she visited this temple.” Joseph took off his sunglasses and swept his gaze back and forth between them. At first, she didn’t see any effect, but then she saw a distortion, as if she were looking through water at him.

“I won’t even ask how you built that. I take it this is made from the same stuff as the barrier between worlds?”

“Yes. Stand like this.” He stood sideways to the wall with his legs and free arm bent back to hide behind him.

“Oh my god, Joseph. Walk like an Egyptian?”

He appeared taken aback. “Of course.”

“No, no. I mean you are in the same position you see everyone in tomb paintings.” She pointed up at the pylons. “Like those figures. They didn’t understand how to portray perspective in their art, so they drew everything flat.”

He stood up straight to face her. “That’s not true. They drew figures like that out of vanity.”

“What? I was an Art History major.”

Joseph rolled his yellow eyes. With his sunglasses off she could see him do this. She wondered how often he did this that she couldn’t see.

“Once people saw this was the position gods and angels used to travel to heaven, everyone wanted to be portrayed as divinely important. So they had artists place their images in this posture whenever possible. They couldn’t actually make the trip, but they wanted to be remembered as having a touch of the divine.”

She stared at him flabbergasted. Standing there indignant in her sweater, cords, and boots in the Egyptian desert, she couldn’t even find words.

“Surely you learned how important status was in art.”

“Yes, yes. The more clothes you wore in your portraits, and the bigger you were pictured in relation to the others, the more

important you were. I get the vanity thing. I'm just having a hard time believing the divinity thing was so lost to time, that we in modern times guessed so wrongly."

"Thousands of years of unspoken tradition followed by hundreds of years of silence under the sand. I think you will find a lot of things have been reconstructed incorrectly. Shall we try this?" he said resuming the position.

"Of course." She reached inward, took a deep breath and summoned the god *chi* in her heart. Then, as Renpo had taught her, she whirled her arms around and let the heat flow down into her right hand, ending with her body mimicking his.

"Now picture the barrier as a viscous gelatin, spring forward with your back leg, and bring your hand down to cleave the barrier like a hatchet."

She did this and was shocked at the sensation. "I felt my hand part something, like I was tearing through fabric."

"Good, now do it again, and this time as you feel the splitting, walk into the gap and push it open."

Again she followed his instructions, and again she was amazed at the result. She passed through and ended up next to Joseph. "I felt that. Why am I still here?"

"This is a practice wall. It has this world on both sides. The real wall has the spirit plane on the other side. Practice one more time, going back through to your side. I want you to know this sensation well. It will be your way home."

Summon, displace, pose, spring, cleave, and step through.

"Well done." He performed a bit of *tai chi* himself, ending with a sweeping away with both hands. The practice barrier vanished. "Now you're on your own."

"Do I cut anywhere in particular?"

"Anywhere here is good. This whole area is as you said, a thin spot. Oh, and don't worry about any locked gates. They won't be there on the spiritual plane."

She felt like she was about to jump off a cliff even though she was standing on flat ground. She wet her lips and took a deep breath. "A guy I knew in college said he had visited the astral plane by making espresso with Red Bull instead of water." She smiled

weakly at Joseph. He smiled reassuringly back. "I don't think this is what he meant. Here goes nothin'." Summon, displace, pose, spring, cleave, and step through. The walls of her cut stuck to her as she pushed through, making her drag her following arm the last few inches. Obviously she needed more work on technique.

She found herself at the Temple, but the air was filled with mist. The sun was obscured, making it seem later. The carvings up on the walls appeared the same. Semeru had appeared different than Kailash. She walked between the pylons, looking for any sign of life. Behind the gate was a courtyard lined with flower-topped stone columns. Behind them were rooms that probably were for priests back in the day. The other end of the courtyard was another, smaller pylon gate. She turned around and she could no longer see Joseph who waited outside. Alone in a heaven only her soul recognized.

Through the second gate was an interior court of columns. Beyond that was a chamber of high flat walls covered in hieroglyphics. She sensed this was the actual sanctum of Isis. She felt calm here, at home. She was tempted to just sit down on the floor and revel in the peacefulness.

She remembered why she came, and decided bold was better than timid. She was a god, after all. "Hello! I'm home! Anyone here?"

"Isis, is that really you?" a woman's deep voice called out from the shadows through a passage out into another courtyard.

Desiree looked closer and saw an outline emerge. It was a woman in a flowing gown, but she had the head of a hippopotamus. Even though she had imagined this moment of first contact, meeting one of the gods face to face was a lot more daunting than she imagined. "Hathor! It is lovely to see you again!"

Hathor stepped right up and enveloped her in a hug. Her huge head felt very strange. "Sister! It has been centuries. I thought I would never see you again. So many have never returned. Let me look at you." She held Desiree at arm's length and looked her up and down. Then she let go, frowned, and stepped back. "Oh no, you didn't."



Desiree wondered what the god saw. She reached up and felt a headdress of bull horns holding a sun disk. She hadn't felt it there before. She wasn't sure what to say, but words came up anyway. "Yes, Isis moved into my body, that we now share, so she can walk the Earth. She did not have the strength to manifest and travel to the material plane. I need advice on how to best serve the goddess. How does a goddess gain believers that bring strength? How can I tell which motives are mine and which are hers? I want to do the right thing."

Hathor gently swung her massive head side to side. "We do not approve of this. We are not supposed to walk the Earth unless our believers wish it. We only possess humans to give them messages, not occupy them like puppets."

"It's still me, Desiree. I'm still here. Isis gave me life and I'm letting her use my body."

"You always were a rebel. I love you for that. There are limits though, and you have crossed them. You already know we do not agree with your revenge quest."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean by that."

Another figure appeared out of the misty shadows. This one was a tall muscular man. It wasn't until he came into the light that she could see he had a falcon head.

Desiree's heart jumped and she felt compelled to greet him. "Son!"

He paused and frowned deeply over his enormous beak.

Hathor said, "Yes, it's really Isis. She's sharing a human body."

Horus did not look entirely convinced. Moreover, he did not look happy to see his mother.

Isis in her heart was crushed by sadness.

Horus put his hand on Hathor's shoulder and motioned with this beak toward the front of the temple complex, toward where she had left Joseph.

Hathor and Desiree followed his gaze. "Oh no. You are not going to gain favor by bringing Ptah's exiled bastard." She held up three human fingers. "That's three bad throws in a row: possession, revenge, and the exile. Remember the pillars, dear: strength, tenacity,

intelligence, and," she paused for emphasis, "discretion. You'd best be going back now."

"Please don't reject me. This place feels so much like home, and you feel so much like family. You said yourself it has been far too long. I really need to understand how I can do right by your sister goddess. To do right by you."

"I am sorry," Hathor said, "but talking to you any more will only come to a bad end. It was lovely to see you again. Perhaps we will meet again, in happier times." She and Horus turned and walked back into the mist and vanished.

The goddess inside her felt crushed. Desiree felt crushed. She hung her head and tried not to cry.

As she turned to go, something on the stone floor caught her eye. Up against a wall in dust, it looked like a bug. She pulled out her cell phone and used it as a flashlight. "No service. Big surprise." The light revealed it to be a key. She picked it up and examined it. Gold, with a hieroglyphic stamp on the thumb grip. She looked around and no one came back out to say anything. She slipped it into her pocket.

She walked dejectedly out through the courtyards and the pylons, and could see Joseph waiting. He was making eye contact, so she guessed he could see her. She raised her arms and shrugged in resignation.

He shook his head and slumped his shoulders.

She started to summon her god *chi* to open a cleft back through, when a feeling pulled at her to turn to the right. She recognized this yearning as Isis trying to tell her something. At first she only saw the river and the horizon beyond. Then she looked closer and saw ... pyramids? Yes, a grouping of three. Giza was at the other end of Egypt, how could she see them? The effect was tantalizing. The harder she looked, the closer they appeared. Her feet felt light on the ground and when she looked down, she saw the ground flying by beneath her. It felt like a dream and somehow it didn't frighten her. Apparently physics doesn't apply in the spirit plane. What was Isis showing her?

She flew up to a walled city built around the Great Pyramids. Everything was new and clean and people were working in and around the buildings, priests and bald acolytes. She landed in the

middle of the complex, near the sphinx, which was intact and painted. No, she didn't land, she descended right into the ground, finally emerging in a large cubical underground chamber. A colossal painted statue of Isis dominated the room and faced a gray stone altar. The room was made of black granite and was lit by twelve torches in sconces around the statue's feet. A gold throne sat next to the altar, and in it sat a priestess. Behind the altar stood a short, pale priest.

A panel swung opened and another taller priest entered. The man behind the altar and the new man wordlessly exchanged gestures. Laid out on the altar was an assortment of utensils. The new priest reached into his robes and pulled out a case, and from the case he pulled a wand and a dagger which he added to the altar collection. The short priest assisted the taller one with his attire and preparations. This routine looked very much like what she had seen Alec do.

Almost. This gear included an elaborate metal crown and a purple sash belt. There were also more utensils here, including little copper mirrors. If Alec was working from the same rituals, why didn't he have all this stuff too?

For the first time since he entered the chamber, the tall priest looked up at the statue of Isis, dropped onto both knees and then lowered his gaze reverently to her painted stone feet, holding the rod and sword in either hand down at his sides. He began in a language Desiree did not recognize, yet did understand. "Great Isis, Goddess of Life, Protector of Humanity, hear my summons." He swung the rod up in a broad arc to hold it aloft and spoke more forcefully. "I stand at the center. I am the Master. You must hear my summons." He then stood up and drew a symbol in the air with the end of the rod and stated, "I have the power. I now walk freely on your plane. You must come forward at my command."

The priestess frowned at his bold gesture, but this was only his opening volley. He leaned back and looked the huge statue straight in the eye, pointed his sword at Isis and demanded, "I am Chosen. You must obey me. Tell me what I seek."

Desiree felt Isis wanting to possess the priestess, so she decided to play along. She swooped into the priestess and took over

her body. She was alarmed at how easy it was to do. She stood up abruptly and raised her head proudly. One by one, twelve rays of light erupted from her forehead to form a wheel-like crown. She raised her hands and five more rays of light shot from each upturned palm. Desiree loved the effect. They felt like they stood for something. Were these keys of some kind?

The tall priest did not look satisfied. He commanded further, "Do not dare to withhold your powers from me! I demand that you employ all your abilities to my task. I know of the last seven rays of enlightenment. I need them to strip away all deceit to find my enemy, our enemy! Reveal the last seven Arcana to me!"

Desiree felt a profound emptiness. She did not know why, but she felt like he wanted something that had been stolen, something she should have kept safe. She felt a tear roll down her cheek. Isis was really upset.

The priest saw the tear and looked terrified.

The short priest's head transformed into the head of an ibis bird. Oh, Thoth possessed the priest.

"Faen-ka." Thoth said quietly, but clearly.

The tall priest seemed incensed by that name, and whirled on his fellow, only to see the god standing there instead. He dropped to his knees.

"Son of Earth," the God of Wisdom addressed him paternally, "the twenty-two images at your disposal, those twenty-two rays of knowledge Isis is offering you now, are the only keys I have ever possessed for your use. The additional seven you seek, the Tablets of Aeth, reveal the powers of creation itself. In all my wisdom, I do not know how to convey such secrets to the minds of men."

"Great Teacher of Mankind," he humbly addressed the god, "if these keys are not yours, then from whence did they come? And to whence did they go? Does Isis not command all the material, mental and spiritual realms?"

*Really? I do? I mean, she does?*

"These images were designed by the betrayer you now seek. My daughter Isis thought Faen-ka discovered them in a foreign land and brought them as a gift to the gods. Now he has taken them out of the temple."

The priest was clearly surprised and took a moment to think about it. "I have only watched my predecessor use these images. He used them just last month in our conflict with Moses. I was never given the opportunity to memorize them. I am certain neither of my fellow high adepts have ever even seen them. I may be the only person who has ever seen them, but I know they do exist. Is there no way for you to view them?"

"They are not of Our sphere."

The priest was again shaken. "Can you help me find the traitor?"

"You will not find him in this lifetime."

Desiree raced to keep up. *This Faen-ka guy brought new magic to the Egyptians, then right after Exodus, he stole it and ran away.*

"The clairvoyance your keys have given me has never failed. If I will not succeed in my mission, is it because I will die, or is it because my adversary has the Tablets of Aeth and I do not?"

"You will not die an early or unnatural death."

Desiree was still trying to grasp what had happened when Isis spoke up on her own. "If these Arcana are so powerful, then why didn't Faen-ka succeed in using them to defeat the Hebrews' magic?"

"Always the trusting one," Thoth commented lovingly at her, shaking his long beak back and forth slowly. "Why does the snake not fly through the air? It is against its nature. This man was never a son of Egypt. His intent was not to defeat Moses, but to lead Ramses into defeat."

Desiree put it together, but was horrified at the result. *Faen-ka was Ramses's trusted advisor, maybe even his High Priest. He planted new magic so Ramses would not take Moses's miracles seriously. That led to Ramses's legendary overreaction and defeat.* She was astonished at the scale of the deception and amazed at how no one saw it coming. She felt terrible for the Egyptians. All those people suffering and dying, just to embarrass the king. This revelation outraged Isis. She was not going to let this slide.

Desiree knew she was watching something that happened a long time ago. The reactions she was feeling from Isis were what the goddess felt back then.

## *Goddess Rising*

The priest was still trying to figure out a game plan. "If there are now powers on Earth that we cannot master, how will Egypt fare against those who have such power? We can blame the loss of the Hebrews to the treachery of one man, but if the traitor trains others and they attack us, we may not be able to defend ourselves."

Desiree thought this priest was really smart.

"Faen-ka will not attack Egypt, and he will never have any followers. Yet your thinking is correct. Although Moses was originally trained in this very temple, the secrets of power now at his command are not ours." The god raised his hands above his head and looked upward. "Seeker of Truth, know that the world is changing, and the truths I have given you, though immutable, will not always apply to the world of men. O Egypt, a time shall come when, instead of a pure religion and an intelligent cult, you shall have nothing left but ridiculous fables that posterity will find incredible. There shall be nothing left to you but words graven upon stone, dumb and almost indecipherable monuments to your ancient piety."

Desiree felt Isis decide to hold her tongue in spite of her anger, but she definitely sized up the tall priest. She decided if he wasn't going to catch his old master in this lifetime, Isis would make sure he did in another lifetime.

*Another lifetime?* All at once, Desiree realized she was looking at the first version of Silas Alverado and that Faen-ka was Sammael in disguise. It was all she could manage not to let her mouth drop open. She also now knew what she had to do.

With that thought, she fell back out of the priestess and tumbled through the dream space back to Agilika. She was still in the spirit plane where she had started. She looked around and wondered if she had actually moved at all. She guessed it didn't matter.

She was about to summon her god *chi* to slice her way back into the physical world when she spotted Joseph. Only he wasn't alone. A tall god with a head that looked sort of like a donkey, was talking with Joseph, right there in the real world. Joseph was very reverent, bowing his head.

Desiree pulled up the *chi* as fast as she could, whirled it down into her hand and sliced. She knew Joseph had seconds. She jumped through the split just as another split opened up behind Set, who reached to put his hand on Joseph's shoulder.

"No you don't! He's my servant now!" She ran up, ready to fight the god, but it was too late. He and Joseph slipped from view. She dove for where they vanished, but the hole was gone and so were they. She kicked the sandy flagstones and yelled, "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

She grabbed her auburn hair with both hands. No more headdress. She finally figured out her goddess hitchhiker was hell bent on going to war with Satan over a three-thousand-year-old deception, and not ten minutes later she lost her supernatural protector.

Oh yeah, all the while standing in the middle of the Egyptian desert in a sweater and boots. She thanked her good luck that she remembered to bring her passport and credit card. She pulled out her cell phone. At least it had a signal here.





# GRIMAUULKIN

L. A. JACOB

*Treading the straight and narrow is not natural to one who summons demons.*

Michael LeBonte is set free after five years in magic prison. All he has to do is stay on the straight and narrow path for the rest of his life. However, because he summoned demons to “take care of things,” it’s easier said than done.

Now his plan is to make a new life for himself. His sister has welcomed him back, he’s met a cute guy, and he’s found a nice job assisting the local private investigator.

But his expertise does not go unnoticed and he gets pulled back to do what got him sent to prison in the first place.

*Visit our website for more information about the “[Grimaulkin](#)” series.*

# ONE

## *FREEDOM 2000*

**T**HE AIR WAS CLEAN OUT HERE, making me think of renewal and rebirth. I stood outside, taking in a deep lungful, closing my eyes to better feel the microscopic bits of pure summer heat hanging in the air, ready to burst forth in a month or two.

“C’mon, man, I ain’t got all day!”

I snapped open my eyes to focus on the cabbie standing next to his yellow car. He was the first man I set my eye on here outside. Glaring at me was a tall, dark man with a Yankees baseball cap.

“Just a minute,” I said, and did what I said I wasn’t going to do: I looked back.

The door clanged shut behind me, its iron bars sliding into the side wall. I heard echoes of more cold iron being bolted into place, to keep the men and women inside. I don’t know what I thought I was going to see in looking backward. Someone waving goodbye from one of the high windows of the cells?

“Come ON.”

The driver got in the car when I moved toward the cab. I suppose the cab and the \$50 in my pocket was the least the prison could do for me after I'd been their guest these last five years. Now, due to my reaching the adult age of 18, I was free.

I got into the back of the car. It smelled of cigarettes and abused leather. I hadn't even shut the door before the driver took off from the front door of the William F. Blackstone Prison. I looked up at its brick facade. Maybe it was a little lighter than I remembered it. There were no bars on the outer windows, beyond which were the offices and visitors' rooms (hardly used). The guards could retreat there if a riot ever broke out. Not that one ever happened while I was there.

The circular drive let me take a good long look at the building before the cab shot out like a bullet, heading to the wrought iron gates. I glanced at the guard who waved us through. I didn't know him. What did I expect? A "Hey, good luck, Mike"?

The very second I crossed the threshold of the outer gate, I felt the magic.

It was power, pure and simple, that surrounded the prison. Inside Blackstone Prison, there were obvious — and hidden — runes and markings to stop magic from being used by the prison's occupants. That didn't stop people from talking about magic. Or practicing some theories.

To see if the magic was active out here, I spread out my hand on my lap so that the driver couldn't see, and concentrated on the center of my palm. I felt it grow hot, then a small flame appeared.

I quickly quenched the flame and looked up at the driver, who was looking at me through the rear-view mirror, as I expected.

"You're goin' to the bus station, right?"

"Right," I said.

That's what they told me when they gave me these clothes that didn't fit. I knew they were from other — possibly dead — prisoners. I wore a long-sleeved button-down blue shirt with the Polo logo in faded blue above the right breast, threadbare at the elbows. The pants were two sizes too big and, if I didn't have the belt, they would have been down around my knees. The shoes were also too big, but at least I didn't feel like I was wearing clown shoes.

There was no way I would have fit into the clothes I came in with. There's not much to do in prison other than read and work out. Since reading material wasn't exactly prolific — I read *Stranger in a Strange Land* eight times and hated it each time — I'd pushed myself to the limits and beyond in the gym.

"What were you in for?" the cabbie asked.

I looked out the window.

"You don' wanna talk about it?"

"No. I don't."

"How long were you there?"

"Five years."

"Oh, that's nothing."

"Yeah. Easy for you to say." I glared at him through the rear-view mirror. "I'm not exactly in the best mood for conversation."

"Jeez," he muttered, looking away.



As the cabbie shut up and drove, I looked out at the quiet world. I put the window down; it only went about half way before stopping. It was enough, I suppose.

I could smell the fields of upstate New York — animal smells of cow and horse dung. Even this close to the prison there were still some domestic animals, small local farms that I would later find out could be considered "organic". I could feel the magic in the air, tingling, giving me goose bumps. I could use the magic myself if I wanted to. I could probably fly to the bus station almost as quickly as this guy was driving. However, I was let loose from prison with a simple caveat: that I could no longer summon any entities. As that was what had gotten me into trouble this time, I had agreed.

"Summoning" is a broad term in magical circles, especially with the so-called Magical Cops, the Rosicrucians. What I just did in the back seat could be considered a summoning, if I had used something outside of my body to create the fire. However, I used my own will, and my own heat, to manifest a flame. If I used my own will and energy to fly, I could probably get about twenty feet down the road before falling out of the sky. I would need an entity,

something outside of my body, to keep me aloft if I wanted to fly to the bus station.

Being in prison gave me plenty of time to work on my semantics so I could argue my point if necessary — if I got caught. If I used energy and power outside of myself to augment my own abilities, was that a summoning? I could argue that it wasn't. If I had wings, then yes, I could use magic to fly. But I have legs, so I can use the energy around me to run faster (that is, if my body could handle running faster, which, in its present, well-toned condition, I supposed it could).

Of course, if it was ever found out that I was using magic in daily life, the Rosicrucians would swoop down on me like a flock of pigeons on bread. So, if I used magic, I had to keep it tightly under wraps.

We drove out of the more rural area of upstate New York into the city of Troy. The cabbie sped through the streets like he had melting ice in the backseat and had to get it to the freezer because his life depended on it. I supposed I should have talked to him, but I really wasn't in the mood to bare my soul to a cabbie. I needed to bare my soul to someone else.

This part of town was full of boarded-up properties. People of different races other than my own thronged the neighborhoods. It didn't look like a pleasant area for a white boy like me. But, if I had to, I could take care of myself. I'd learned a few things in that gym: boxing, wrestling mixed and cobbled together martial arts, and magic.

As the cabbie drove, avoiding people and cars, running yellow lights, and rolling through stop signs, I slunk a little lower in the seat. I didn't want to end up back in prison because someone looked at me like I was fresh meat and I had to defend myself.

The bus station was a square building that had been top-of-the-line ... in the '50's. Now, it had a few boarded-up sections of its own. Graffiti covered the side we approached. The cabbie pulled up to the curb just behind a bus that was dropping off passengers at the front door.

"Your stop," said the cabbie.

"Thanks." I put my hand on the door. I heard a hum and saw that the window was being closed, probably from his end.

"Yeah."

As soon as I shut the door, the cabbie peeled around the bus and took off.

I thrust a hand into my pocket. The two twenties and a ten were still there.

I turned to see a set of cloudy glass doors that looked like they had been there since the Cold War. I pushed through them to the interior of the bus station.



I looked around for a paper schedule. Instead, I found the schedules displayed on large TV's attached to the wall. I had two options: go home to New Haven, and see what awaited me there; or find out if my older sister Evelyn — who we all called Evie — had stayed in Providence, after graduating Brown University.

I surrendered to the Fates — and my budget. I approached the counter. The young dark-skinned girl with straight bright red hair stood behind the counter, smiled and said, “Good afternoon. How can I help you?” I thought she looked weird with the red hair; I said nothing about that.

“How much is a one-way trip to Providence?”

“Twenty-five dollars.”

“And New Haven, Connecticut?”

She consulted a screen. “Thirty-two, seventy.”

“I’ll take the trip to Providence.”

One thing about being a wizard: a lot of times fate — the Universe, the Great Creator, God, what have you — likes to intervene for reasons that come to fruition in time. This was probably one of those times, so I let it happen.

I boarded the bus, handed over my ticket to the driver, and found a seat. These seats were far more comfortable than any in prison, that was for sure.

We left Troy and headed to the Massachusetts Turnpike. I ended up dozing most of the way to Providence, since there’s only so much trees, rest areas, and cars a person can handle watching.

I woke up to see the Providence skyline in the twilight. The sun set behind me, illuminating the skyline from behind some

buildings. We went past the city, two exits beyond a bit of a traffic jam, and arrived at a large bus station.

I disembarked and looked around. Magic was here, too. Lots of it. I knew the history and antiquity of the buildings powered this magic. This was the town of H. P. Lovecraft, after all.

I saw a pay phone and picked up the handle. Its line was dead. There was an entire wall of pay phones, and I tried them all. Nothing.

I noticed most people seemed to be talking to little large bullet-shaped objects they held near their ears. When they finished talking, they would sometimes close these devices like a *Star Trek* communicator, or just slip them into a pocket or purse. I'd read about these things in one of the old *Time* magazines that we had in the prison library: cellular telephones. How amazing. But it didn't help me.

Again, Fate intervened.

"You need any help?" asked a girl. She was cute, about sixteen, wearing a mini-skirt, a pink shirt with a short jacket, and thigh-high platform boots. Her makeup was thick and runny, like she'd run, or had been through a short, but intense, crying jag. I looked down at her — I didn't realize that I had gotten this tall in five years.

"I need a phone," I said. "And a phone book."

She laughed. "They don't have phone books anymore." She pulled out one of those cellular phones from a humongous tote bag she carried. "Here, use mine. Call 411."

"411," I repeated, easily memorizing the short number. I took the phone and dialed. Nothing happened.

"Press the green button."

"Oh." I did, and held the phone awkwardly to my ear. A computerized voice said, "Cingular 411. City and state, please."

"Providence, Rhode Island."

"Please state the name or business you wish to call."

"Evelyn LeBonte."

"One moment, please." There were a series of beeps. "The number is ... 401-548-9664. The number again ..."

"Okay—"



“Dialing.”

“Oh.” But I had memorized the number.

The girl looked at me, amused. Okay, so I was a tourist in this world of technology, but she would be a tourist in my world of magic. I could understand her slight grin. It seemed I had a bit of catching up to do.

The phone rang three times before picking up. “Hello, you have reached Evie and Dominic.”

Goose pimples formed on my arms, hearing her voice again, I wanted to reach through the phone and somehow teleport there. I could probably do it, but not without an entity. Her voice continued, “Neither of us are home right now, so if you could leave a message after the beep, we’ll get back to you.”

It beeped.

“Evie. Evie, It’s Mike.”

I paused. What was I going to say? I heard a loud click and a whine of feedback. I held the phone away from my ear.

“Mike?”

She sounded breathless, like she had bounded across the room to get to me. I could envision her doing just that.

“Yeah.” I took in a shuddering breath, holding back emotion from my voice. “Yeah, it’s Mike.”

“How do I know it’s really you?”

“Ask me something only I would know about you.”

I could hear her breathing, catching her breath. She said, in an accusatory tone, “What’s my favorite color?”

I thought for a moment. “It used to be fire-engine red.”

“No, no, no, that’s too easy.”

“Phil used to say that color made you look cheap when you painted it on your nails.”

“Mi — Mikey?” I heard her swallow a sob.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my God, Mikey ...”

“Yeah.”

I looked at the girl. She was watching me, curious. I wondered if she could hear Evie’s strangled voice.

Evie asked me, “Where are you?”

"I'm at the bus terminal in Providence."

"You wait there. I'll pick you up. I'm in a green Camry."

"I don't know what a Camry looks like. Is it a car?"

"Look for the green car. God, Mikey ... Don't go anywhere!"

"I won't."

She hung up. I looked at the phone trying to figure out how to hang up.

"A Camry is a car," said the girl, as she held her hand out for the phone. I gave it to her. She pressed the red button and tossed it back into the tote. "Have you been under a rock these past few years?"

"You could say that," I said. "I appreciate you letting me use the phone."

"No worries, mate." She smiled. "I can wait with you while your friend picks you up."

"She's not my friend. She's my sister." I turned around. I noticed a hot dog cart, and my stomach growled. I hoped the girl didn't hear it. "I guess I'll wait outside."

The girl followed me out the front door, where another bus deposited a new set of passengers. We stood off to the side in the late twilight.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"Mike."

"I'm Ashleigh."

I held out my hand; she took it. I shook her hand, being careful not to squeeze too tightly. In prison, a handshake was often a small contest to see who was the strongest.

"So have you been under a rock?"

"I've been abroad."

"Where?"

"Greece."

"They don't have cell phones in Greece?"

"Not where I was. No, um ..."

"Reception?"

"Yeah." I noticed her backpack. "You in school?"

"Yeah. I just came from my friend's house."

"Aren't your parents going to be worried?"

She shrugged. "Foster parents. They don't care."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She stood very close to me. I could feel her nipples poking my arm.

I turned to her and gave her my most winning smile. "Ashleigh, I don't swing that way."

She pouted. "Figures."

I laughed. "I appreciate the offer, though."

"Yeah, you would." She looked me up and down. "Well, you'll have a line of guys just trying to get in your pants."

I laughed, and I think I blushed. "I'm not here for that. I'm here to see my sister."

We made small talk after that. She told me who the president was, and a little about the current state of the world. I got her to talk about her friend and her life, so I could avoid talking about mine.

I saw a green car pass by very slowly.

"There's your ride," Ashleigh said.



GRIMAUULKIN  
TEMPTED

L. A. JACOB

*Stress affects people differently. Then, there's magic.*

Mike LeBonte is house-sitting while his sister and her new husband go on their honeymoon. What could happen in two weeks?

First, his cousin Becky calls him saying she's being followed. It could be the Mafia. Or it could be the church she's trying to separate from.

Then his boyfriend tells Mike his ex is coming to visit. Then Mike meets his parole officer — a Knight of the Rosicrucians, the very people who put him in prison.

With all this stress, it's no wonder that Mike resorts to magic to cope. But like any drug, it could very well alter his own perception of reality.

*Visit our website for more information about  
the "[Grimaulkin](#)" series.*

# ONE

THE DJ BEGAN PLAYING SOME SLOW MUSIC and started announcing the wedding party. They all entered and took places before the head table. Then we all rose when Evelyn and Domenic came in. They had their first dance, then the wedding party had their dance, and then they all settled in.

“Hm,” said Scott. “They didn’t greet the guests.”

“Just as well,” I said, glad I didn’t have to shake my father’s hand.

They immediately started serving lunch. The soup was salty, the salad bland and wilting, and the steak tarragon was nothing more than a chunk of meat with some salt and pepper. But the stuffed potatoes were to die for.

Danny said, “Evie’s motioning for you, Mike.”

I had my back to her, so I turned around. She was waving at me to come over. I got up and stood across from her, then squatted down so I was at her level.

“How’s everything?”

“I hope you didn’t pay an arm and a leg for the food.”

## *Grimaulkin Tempted*

“Too late now, right?” she laughed. “Listen, after the father-daughter and mother-son dance, will you mind if you danced with me?”

“I don’t know how.” My dancing consisted of boxing footwork.

“I’ll lead,” she said with a smile. “It’s not complicated.”

“All right.”

After lunch came the required dances. Then the DJ announced, “Evelyn Marcello would like a dance with her brother, Michael LeBonte.”

I got up. I expected the whole room to turn and stare at me. They didn’t. Evelyn waited out in the middle of the dance floor as I crossed it. I had watched the other dancers intently, and saw that it was mostly standing around, shifting from foot to foot, without moving much. I stared at her awkwardly.

She smiled, and took my hands. Placing them on her waist, they started to play “Faithfully” by Journey.

“You know this song used to make me cry,” I said.

“It made me cry after you left.”

I looked down at the sequins on her dress. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks. I wish I could see you in a tux. You would have been more handsome than Dom.”

I chuckled. “We can’t get married. Isn’t that still illegal?”

“It sure is.”

“I see Becky filled out nicely.”

I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Hey.”

It was Dom. “Oh, you want to dance, too?” I put my hands on his waist, and guided him away from Evie.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” he said, while I heard laughter.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since I saw you.”

“Oh, really?”

I laughed to try and diffuse the situation. I let him go, brushed the front of his tux, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You take care of my sister.”

“Or else?”

He knew the truth about me and hadn’t mentioned it to Evie. His eyes were shining, from drink or from happiness, I couldn’t tell.

“You know it,” I said, guiding him back to my sister.



GRIMAUULKIN  
REDEEMED

L. A. JACOB

*Protect your present or suffer from your past.*

It's Scott's birthday, and Mike LeBonte has big plans for his boyfriend.

First, he has to deal with losing his magic. However, he's well-known to the police as a consultant, and someone has summoned a demon in the North Burial Ground in Providence. Not just any demon, but Lucifer himself.

As Mike fights to try and regain his magic to help the police, a man from his past comes into town and tries to make inroads on his boyfriend.

That, Mike cannot abide.

*Visit our website for more information about  
the "[Grimaulkin](#)" series.*

# ONE

## *ALL SOULS'*

**I**N A WEEK, MY BOYFRIEND SCOTT WOULD BE “AN ADULT.” Two years after dropping out of the military academy, blowing off his family, and younger than me by six months, he would be perfectly legal to sleep with.

Also by the end of the week, Tyler would be out of our lives forever. Tyler, older than me by about five years, had celebrated his 23rd birthday with his head in the toilet bowl after way too much tequila.

However, on this night — which was All Hallow’s Eve, or Samhain, or Halloween — Scott and I stayed at our sanctuary space: Scott’s store. He wanted to be open late for the procrastinating Wiccans, and some of the stores in downtown had candy for kids in costume walking by. It was an attempt to try and drum up support for downtown.

We hadn’t seen one kid yet, and it was an hour after sunset. I sat at the end of the glass counter while Scott sat behind the

## *Grimaulkin Redeemed*

counter. We got caught kissing once and offended a customer, so now we kept our distance in the store when it was open.

"So the first thing you're going to do when Tyler leaves is walk around your apartment naked?" I asked him.

He chuckled. "I don't do that anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because you would've probably remote-viewed me."

I laughed. I took in his red hair and blue tank top that accented his abs.

He plucked a lollipop out of the bowl for the kids. It was the kind with chocolate in the middle.

"I think I'll be having these around for years."

"Give them to the customers when they buy something."

The door opened.

"Hey, Frank," said Scott.

"Hey," he said, and gave me a glare. "You do some weird shit recently?"

I touched my chest. "*Moi?*"

"My phone's been ringing off the hook."

I looked at Scott. Scott looked at the floor.

"No," I said to Frank. "I haven't done anything."

He frowned. "Must be the season." He took one of the lollipops.

"You have to say 'Trick or Treat'," said Scott.

Frank flipped him off. Scott chuckled.

"You have a lot of work?" I asked.

He unwrapped the lollipop and tossed the wrapper in the trashcan before answering. "I got one cheating wife, one missing person, and one dog-napping."

"Dog-napping?"

"Somebody obviously thinks I'm Ace Ventura."

"Did you take it?"

"Sure. You can help with that."

"I don't know —"

"They're bringing by something tomorrow with the dog hair on it."

I swallowed. "Frank, I don't know if I can do it."

“Why?”

I sighed. Scott gave me a little smile to reassure me.

“I’m on meds.”

“What do you mean ‘on meds’?”

I couldn’t look at him. “I have a mental problem. They call it ‘psychosis’.”

“What’s it really called?”

“Schizophrenia,” I muttered.

Scott came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Why the hell are you taking meds for it?” Frank demanded.

“Because the things I saw were getting in the way of my life.”

“What do the meds have to do with you not able to find a dog like you find people?”

“I can’t do magic anymore.” I looked up at him. “I tried. I really tried. I can’t do anything anymore.”

Scott said, “He had one foot in the other world, and one foot in this one. They gave him medicine so he could be fully in this one.”

“Who gave you meds?”

“The Rosicrucians,” I said. “The people who sent me to prison.”

Frank stuck the lollipop in his mouth and sucked on it for a minute, thinking. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he said around the lollipop.

“Because I thought you’d freak out.”

Frank waved a hand. “I’ve dealt with schizophrenics off their meds before. Usually in the back of a police car.”

“Ha, ha.”

“I’m being honest. You don’t seem typical.”

“He’s a textbook case,” said Scott, squeezing my shoulder.

“When did you start the meds?”

“A few months ago,” I said.

Frank took the lollipop out. “Well, this kind of puts a damper on things.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll do what I can. I need the money.”

“Scott not paying you enough?”

“He’s not paying me at all,” I said. “I didn’t think he needed to.”

*Grimaulkin Redeemed*

“What do you need the money for?”

“Things are getting cramped in the apartment. I’ve been there for six months. They want me out.”

“That’s why he’s at the store so much,” said Scott. “To give them some privacy.”

Frank looked at me. “I’ll see what I can do. I’ll probably take you with me to the animal shelters or something.”

“Thanks, Frank.”

He saluted me with the lollipop. “Don’t mention it. I gotta go clean the office. I’ll see you tomorrow about noon.”

“Okay.”

He left the store. I let out a long breath.

“See?” said Scott, stepping away from me. “See, it wasn’t that bad.”

“He didn’t ask me a ton of questions like you did.”

“Because I didn’t know anything about it. He’s been a cop, so he probably had that kind of training.”

“Schizophrenia with psychosis. I have to keep saying it to get it straight.”

He went back to the counter and got a bottle of water. “What was worse: coming out or telling your sister?”

“She knew I was gay before I admitted it. This,” I pointed to my head. “She never knew. I think that’s why Dom wants me out. He doesn’t trust me.”

“He should do some research like I did. You’re not a violent type.”

“But I’m a textbook case?”

“Everything but the antisocial behavior. The article I read said that not everything is apparent.”

I looked at him. “Have you noticed a difference?”

“You don’t keep asking me to sleep with you.”

I winked. “Biding my time.”

“Until when?”

“Tyler goes home.”

“Ohhhh, I see your ulterior motive.”

We both laughed. I still did want to sleep with him, but I wanted to wait for just the right time. And in a week, if all my plans went the way I wanted, it would be exactly the right time.



No kids showed up, and neither did any late Wiccans. By eight, I begged Scott to close up, and he finally agreed. Scott brought me back to my apartment. I sat in the truck for a few minutes, looking up at the light in the window.

“At least there’s no games on TV tonight.” Dom was a big football fan, and it pissed him off a couple of days ago when he had to move from the big TV to the little one in their bedroom.

“That’s good.” Scott leaned over and gave me a kiss.

He hadn’t offered — and I hadn’t asked — to move into his place after Tyler left. I kept hoping every night he would ask me. But he probably wanted his privacy after Tyler left.

I bent my head and ducked out of the truck. Scott drove off down the street. I contemplated walking around the block a few times to give Dom and Evie some more private time. But it was getting chilly and I had no jacket.

*Well*, I thought. *I have to face it*. At least that’s what the Confessor told me. I took the side door and stomped up the stairs, making noise that would make them aware I was coming back, just in case they were in the middle of anything.

I opened the door. Rufus stood there to greet me with a wide grin and a wagging tail. I peered inside. “Want me to take the dog out?”

“It’s okay,” said Dom from the couch. He was watching some sports show, and my heart sank. After I took my pills, in a half-hour I would pass out. He’d have to move to the bedroom, dislodging Evie from watching whatever she had on TV, and another quiet fight would ensue.

“I got some work,” I said, hanging up my jacket.

Dom turned around. “You did?”

“Frank has a couple of cases.”

Dom turned back to the TV, but not before I saw his look of disgust.

“What?” I said.

“Can’t you get a steady job? Like, I don’t know ... McDonald’s or something?”

## *Grimaulkin Redeemed*

“Are they going to hire someone out of prison with no work experience?”

“Don’t put that down on the application.”

“They’ll need references. And I have all these appointments with —”

Dom switched off the TV, turned to face me fully. “Do you have any idea how much extra you’re costing us?”

“I know. We already discussed this,” I said, trying to keep my temper down. One thing the pills did was help with that. “Are we short again?”

“That’s not the point. The point is that you’re using schizophrenia as an excuse to not be able to work.”

“What? What the hell makes you think that?”

Evie appeared in the bedroom doorway. “Dom, honey —”

“Don’t ‘Dom, honey’ me. You know it’s true. There’s a lot of people who have what he has and can work.”

“How long have they had it?” I asked. “I just started with the pills.”

“Newest excuse,” said Dom, getting up from the couch. “‘Wait until the pills work.’ ‘Wait until I get a job.’ Our lives are on hold because of you.”

“I never stopped you from anything.”

“You can’t afford this place on your own if we move out.”

“You want to move out?”

“We’re looking for a two-bedroom,” said Evie. She got a glare from Dom. Evie looked down.

“No, we’re not,” snapped Dom. “We are absolutely not.”

“I’m trying,” I said. “I can’t do what I used to do.”

“Yeah, no magic.” He wiggled his fingers in my face.

I instantly reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it.

“Stop being a jerk,” I said.

My voice carried an angry edge that I had perfected in prison but didn’t find myself using very often in the outside world. Behind that voice was the obvious threat of pure violence.

Dom glared at me. This had been building up for a long time. I could see by his eyes that he was ready for a fight.

“Mikey! Dom! Mikey, let him go!”



I threw his hand down, letting it go. Evie's panicked voice caused me to blink first. Otherwise I would have punched Dom right in the face. Instead, I pushed by him to the bathroom, slamming shut the door.

I sighed, sat down on the toilet, gathering myself together. Maybe I should try getting a busboy job at the China Inn or a dishwasher or something else. I couldn't depend on Frank all the time. However, when he came through, the money was good.

At least I didn't have to worry about the pills. The Rosicrucians paid for those. I got up and opened the medicine cabinet. There sat my bottle of pills, on the top shelf. One every evening.

It killed me to take them.

I took down the bottle. Not for the first time did I think about flushing them down the toilet. I hadn't thought about taking them all — that wasn't my way.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Mikey?"

Evie.

I opened the bottle and looked at the pills remaining. I was doing this for Evie, for Scott, so that I could deal with them and with reality.

Damn, reality sucked.

"Are you okay in there?"

"Yeah," I said, and shook out one pill into my palm.

I popped it in my mouth, thinking yet again that my magic was gone because of modern medicine. I poured water in the glass and took a swig, swallowing the pill before I thought any more about it.

I opened the door.

Dom was gone. Evie stood in the doorway.

"You okay?" she asked me.

"Yeah." I smiled at her. "I have a case tomorrow with Frank."

"That's good," she said.

"I'll give you whatever I make. To help."

"It's okay. Dom's just upset because they let more people go at the paper. He said he'd make more money being the paper boy."

"Why doesn't he try for the *Journal*? Or writing for TV?"

## *Grimaulkin Redeemed*

“He’s been trying to get in the *Journal* since he graduated. He’s overqualified.”

“Overqualified? Really?”

“He’s got an Ivy League degree. Why pay for that when you can pay somebody from URI, or even RIC, a lot less?”

University of Rhode Island or Rhode Island College degrees were a dime a dozen in the state. Brown University, however, seemed to be more prestigious. I didn’t even have a high school equivalent degree. Hell, I still didn’t have a driver’s license.

She gave me a hug. “I’ll talk to him.”

“No, you’ll end up in one of those fights that you don’t talk to each other for days.” I stepped back from her. “I’ll see what I can do. I’ll talk to the Confessor. Maybe he can suggest something.”

She caressed my face. “I know you’re trying, Mikey. It’s been hard for you. He doesn’t understand.”

I kissed her hand. “Love you, Evie.”

She gave me a haunted smile, then went into the bedroom.

I lay on the couch, picked up my most recent book, and read it for the half hour until I felt it slip out of my hand.

# HOMECOMING

*A WAR MAGE NOVEL*

JAKE LOGAN

*Even wizards in the U.S. armed forces have to go home some time.*

First Magus Brent Rogers of the US Army stationed in Afghanistan is ordered to return home on furlough. Considered a war mage, he is trained to find enemies at a distance, to blow up their bombs, and to alert his men of danger.

None of this is needed in the city of Worcester, his hometown.

Brent has to learn to relax, to not see threats in every corner, and to let his family welcome him home.

But if he relaxes his vigilance for even a second, who knows what could happen ...

*Visit our website for more information about  
the “[War Mage](#)” series.*

# TWO

## ★ *WORCESTER, MONDAY* ★

**L**OGAN AIRPORT WAS BUSY AT 5 A.M. ON A MONDAY. Somehow Brent had lost a day in travel, but he slept most of it on the three planes that got him here.

He rented a car, took the insurance, and picked out a 2004 Chevy Impala. He caught Route 90, the Massachusetts Turnpike, while listening to a familiar Boston station playing Dire Straits. Worcester didn't have its own rock and roll radio station, so the airways had to pick up stations from the big cities of Boston and Providence, Rhode Island.

Familiar landmarks on Route 90 made him smile. Even the signs on the turnpike did: Allston/Brighton, Weston, Route 128, Framingham ... I-495. Route 146, one of the Worcester exits.

He took that exit. From there, he continued to Route 122A, going to Worcester Center. Traffic was heavy around Worcester,

## *Homecoming*

due to signal lights and people trying to get to work early on Monday morning. He checked the clock in the car — it was near 8 a.m. Chances were his mother might still be home, getting ready for work, his father probably already at the police station for his job.

He drove to Edward Street, past the house. Still white siding, small for five, but too big for the remaining two. No cars were parked in the driveway, and the deck in the back had a mosquito net covering it. His heart gave a little leap — it was as he had left it. He continued down the street to the end, where it met MA-9. He took a sharp right, then another right into the parking lot of a large building which housed different doctors' offices for the University of Massachusetts Hospital across the street.

UMass Hospital, a sanctuary for vampires.

When he was 16, Brent had gone to work in the transport department in UMass, and met Dr. Bates, who openly stated he was a vampire. Vampires were legal in Massachusetts and most of the liberal New England states, but in other states, such as the Deep South, they were chased out at least, destroyed at worst. When Brent left for the Army, they were talking about making vampirism federally legal.

Brent walked into the medical building instead of the hospital, to the second floor, down the well-worn carpeted hallway, to the door that said, "Dr. Timothy M. Banant, Endocrinologist." Brent took a deep breath and opened the door. His hazel eyes lit immediately to the frosted sliding glass doors on the other side of the room. He went to the window and it took a moment before the glass slid open.

The woman with reddish-auburn hair and round glasses was looking at something on her desk as she asked, "Can I hel—" She looked up. Her jaw dropped.

"I was wondering if —"

"Brent!"

He grinned as she jumped up from her seat, ran around the desk and threw open the door that separated the office from the waiting room. Brent caught her in his arms when she ran into them. She was a petite woman, so catching her wasn't difficult.

"Hi, Mom," he said, hugging her. No one else was in yet. She stepped back a moment, looking up at him, her hazel eyes welling up with tears.

“Oh, my God, Brent — how — are —” She threw her arms around him again. “How long are you here?” she said, muffled in his uniform.

“About a month.” Three weeks, four days to be exact.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She pulled back, putting her small hands on his biceps.

“I’ve been on planes since they gave me leave. I figured getting here was more important.”

His mother looked him up and down. “They haven’t been feeding you,” she said. He knew he was fit and trim, hardly any fat on him at all. The Army did that to a person.

“Mom ...”

“Did you call your father?”

“I thought I would go see him after I get a shower.”

“You need the keys?”

“Um, yeah.”

She walked back to the office. “Is Keithy still out of work?” he called.

“He was out last week.”

Brent set his jaw, refraining from saying anything. His mother knew how he felt about Keithy and his “injury”. Now was not the time or place to discuss it.

“I’ll get these back to you at lunch.”

“With a Ruben from Jake’s.”

He laughed. “Yes, Mom.” His mother kissed him and sat down. An old man came in and held the door open for him. Brent murmured his thanks. He glanced at the old man, who smiled at him.

He walked to the car, and drove back to his parent’s house. He unlocked the door to hear barking. The big German Shepherd came bounding out and leapt up, placing his huge front paws on Brent’s shoulders.

“Pickles!” Brent rubbed the dog’s head, scratching his ears, as the dog licked his face. Brent had hoped that Pickles would remember him. The two had been near inseparable since high school, when he got the German Shepherd. The K9 unit tried to train Pickles for basic work but he was the rebel of the litter. They finally put him up for auction and Brent’s father won the bid.

## *Homecoming*

“That’s a good boy,” he said, and the dog jumped down. He took off his backpack and set it down on the floor in the foyer.

He walked through the impeccably clean house to his room, as it was since he left but dusted frequently. The clothes he pulled out of his drawer smelled freshly laundered. He pulled out what he needed and got undressed.

Pickles was sniffing at his backpack. “Don’t piss on it,” Brent said, padding naked across the room to the door. He picked up the backpack, bringing it with him to the bedroom. After locking the front door, he walked over to the bathroom and took a long, much-desired hot shower. Finally, he wasn’t encased in a layer of dust or dirt.

Pickles waited on his bed as he usually did. He and Brent played tug of war for a short time with the wet towel. Brent flipped the towel at Pickles who dove out of the way before it hit him. Brent pulled on his underwear. Those fit, however his denim shorts were a little too big. He chuckled as he threaded a belt through the hoops.

He pulled on an AC/DC t-shirt — it was a little tight across the chest, but still fit. He got on socks and sneakers.

He put Pickles out to the dog run. He stood at the credenza by the back door that held the fancy china, the set of dishes that were taken out for holidays. Along the top of the credenza were pictures of the family. In the center was his official Army picture in formal dress greens. He looked so young there, less than two years ago.

Keithy’s picture showed a big broad man, his arm around Brent’s shoulders. It was the last picture before the accident. Before Keithy stopped driving.

Another picture was of his sister, Lori. Her three kids were gathered around her, dressed in swimsuits, as she sat in a lounge chair by a nondescript pool somewhere. There were no pictures of her and her ex-husband, Alan, anywhere on the credenza.

When Pickles came back in, Brent made him pirouette before tossing a treat to him. “I’ll be back, okay, big boy?” He found his old phone, plugged in the wall at his nightstand. He thought he was due for an upgrade by now. He unplugged it, flipped it open, and dialed the home landline. Hearing the home phone ring, he nodded, confirming that it worked.



Brent glanced at the clock on the phone. Nine. Plenty of time to see Dad. He flipped it shut and headed out to the car.

Brent parked in the tiny parking lot for visitors. He walked to the front of the building, built as a state of the art in the '70's but now rough around the edges like the men. As he got to the door, someone shut the door in his face. With an angry sigh, he tore the door open.

He walked into a foyer area lined with wooden benches on either side. The person who had slammed the door in his face sat at one bench, looking angry and nervous at the same time.

Brent walked up to the glass window and leaned on the counter. Beyond the window he could see officers both uniformed and plain-clothes, working. The desks and chairs beyond were metal and beaten, old and well-used, like a lot of the plain-clothes guys. The female officer talked to him through the small speaker set in the window. "Yes?"

"I'd like to see Detective Jim Rogers."

"In regards to?"

"I'm his son. From Afghanistan."

"I'll check if he's in. Please take a seat."

Brent sat down on the well-worn wooden benches across from the guy. The man glared at Brent, as if the reason he was here was his fault. Brent glared back at him, daring the guy to start something.

"What," the guy snapped at him.

"Nothing," said Brent, turning to look through the glass beyond the receptionist. This wasn't the first time he'd come to visit his father. A few of the uniforms glanced out at him, and one or two waved to him. He smiled and waved back.

He looked up to see his father moving on the left-hand side of the room. He threaded his way between desks and came to the side door leading to the waiting area. Brent stood up to meet him. He was a large man, tall and broad like Brent, but with a paunch Brent didn't have. Because he was losing his hair, to make things easier, he went bald. He had Brent's angular face that was filling out, however; not as chiseled as his own.

"Brent!" He pulled Brent into a bear hug. "How are you? Are you here to stay?"

## Homecoming

"Just a month," he said.

"At least for Fourth of July, that's good. Come on back."

People called him by name as he followed his father to a desk behind a partition and diagonally under the stairs. "I got a new partner. Luke gets in around 10." His father hooked a chair over for Brent. "Coffee?"

"As long as it's not the same that the Army has."

His father laughed. "Cream, no sugar?"

"Yep."

His father walked to the coffee station which was within view of the desk. Brent looked around — his father had moved from the middle of the room to the edge, closer to the glass-enclosed office of the captain of detectives. His father returned with the coffee, the stirrer sticking out of it. "How is it over there?"

"Do you want the line we're fed or the truth?"

"*Que est veritas,*" said his father. "What's in your gut?"

Leave it to his father to get right to the emotional heart of the matter. "It's a worthless fight. The people don't trust us, don't understand the idea of freedom and liberty. We're helping them so that the Taliban can come sweeping back to a clean country."

"Damn. You're there for how much longer?"

"Two years. Then college."

"Good thing you have plans. Better than your worthless brother."

"What's up with that?"

His father shrugged. "He's screwed the system, that's all. Got the right doctors to write the right things."

"Should I do some —"

His father said, "No. Leave him alone."

"I can cast something —"

"It's not worth it, Brent." He smiled and pointed to a small stack of files in a file holder on his desk. "At least my unsolveds are less than my solveds." He drank his own coffee. "Did you talk to your mother?"

"She wants lunch."

He chuckled.

"Hey, Brent." A man came over and clapped a pair of hairy hands on Brent's shoulders. "Back home?"

Brent craned his neck to look at the bear of a man standing over him. He was large in every sense, broad, strong, and hairy. "For a little while. Hi, Tony."

"Looking good, kid. The Army put some meat on those bones." He slapped Brent's shoulders, hard. Brent winced. "Captain wants us," he said to his father.

"Luke isn't in yet."

"Us." He motioned between Brent's father and himself. "As in you and me. We're the only ones here this early."

His father got up. "Must be a hot one. Be right back," he said to Brent.

Brent watched them go, his father walking over, swinging his arms, and Tony, loping along like the werewolf he was.

Rubbing shoulders with the vampires in UMass had introduced him to a whole host of Children of the Moon, as they liked to call themselves. Werewolves, vampires, fae, ghosts, and witches; creatures that most people didn't believe existed. Worcester was a stop for some of them on the way to Boston, where supposedly the RevWar ghosts and Old World vampires held sway.

Many of the Children of the Moon worked together. They believed that they were all of the shadowy underground, fringes of the multitudes of the Children of the Sun, as they called humans. As with the human races, countries, and cultures attempting to join with each other, there were some growing pains.

The fae's hate of the vampires had eased into dislike; the werewolves and vampires joined together and buried the hatchet centuries ago. Ghosts worked with anyone who could notice them, which were mostly witches and some vampires. Vampires liked to consider themselves the "aristocrats" of the Children of the Moon, but werewolves and fae often would put a kibosh on any vampire that got too big for their britches. That was when the old animosities would come into play, and a hunt would be called out on the vampire, who would have no recourse than to pipe themselves down or get out of Dodge before the wolves and fairies destroyed them.

Before he had even gone to UMass Hospital to work, sometimes Brent would help his father with cold cases. He glanced

## *Homecoming*

over at the file folders that his father had called “unsolved.” He lifted himself slightly off the chair and picked out the first folder from the pile.

Some of these cold cases were vampires that had lost control, or uncaring vampires that were passing through to Boston or other points beyond in the hinterlands of New York or even further west. Sometimes they were fights between werewolves, or a fae gone rogue. Or sometimes, they were just people.

He glanced around the room again, opened the folder. Taped to the inside flap were photographs, mostly of the scene of the crime. He wasn't looking for those. “Marilyn Monroe” was in the alias line, called that because she — he, actually — played that character in some clubs. He was found dead on Worthington Avenue, a hot spot for gays, drugs, and sex workers. His real name was unknown —

— *John Kemp* —

— Brent grabbed a sticky note pad and ball point, scribbled the name and pasted the note next to the blank spot that said “real name”. He glanced around again, then continued to read the narrative.

“Marilyn” had been found dead from strangulation according to the coroner. He turned the page. Three suspects were named. He looked closely at each name, but none stood out. However, one of the suspects mentioned “Tool”, and that name highlighted in red in his mind's eye.

All Brent had to do was think the spell, and “Tool” came up in his mind, everything from how he looked to his last known address, the make and model of his car —

Brent scribbled one note after another. He was still scribbling when his father snatched the folder out of his hands.

Brent's eyes were white when he noticed the folder was gone. To quench the spell, he closed his eyes and exhaled.

“I told you not to do that anymore,” said his father sternly. “Psychometry isn't grounds for a warrant.”

“Sorry, Dad.” Brent opened his eyes. “I was only trying to help.”

“I know you were. You've always been right. But this kind of thing is too freaky to admit in court. They don't care if the Armed Forces believes in it.”

“Will you at least notify his next of kin?”

His father opened the folder and looked at the front page. “We’ll try.” He closed the folder and tossed it on his desk. “Besides, if the department knew what you could do, you’d be working for Larry first, and you know what kind of an idiot he is.”

Brent glanced at an empty desk, a few rows away from his father’s. Larry Salucci was an excellent patrolman, a mediocre sergeant, and a horrible detective. He never asked the right questions, even with a cheat sheet. He followed his gut, and was often wrong.

“Want to go with me on a call?”

Brent glanced at the clock. “Yeah, sure, I have a couple of hours.”

“We’ll bring you back in time for lunch.” His father picked up his jacket.

Tony walked over to them, shrugging into his jacket. “Is Boy Wonder coming?” he asked.

“Yes. We have to bring him back for lunch or my wife will be pissed.”

Tony chuckled. “C’mon then.”



Brent climbed into the back seat. He searched for the buckles. “No seat belts?”

Tony turned to Brent’s father. “What year is this car? 1967 Chevy?”

Brent found the seatbelt tucked into the back seat. “Never mind, I found them.” His father drove the three of them to the hospital.

“Domestic violence,” said Tony. “White female, aged 28, found beaten outside her home at four-thirty a.m. this morning. The newspaper delivery person called it in.”

“You’re going to be the reporter,” said Brent’s father to Brent. “Pick a paper.”

“The *Gazette*?”

## *Homecoming*

“Sold.”

They drove to Saint Vincent’s. They walked through the crowded emergency room, flashing their badges. Brent followed close so he wouldn’t be left behind. The two men stopped at the nurse’s station, and Tony asked where the woman was who had been found beaten. “Fifteen,” said the nurse.

The three men went to the temporary room, separated from others by a thin wall of glass and curtains around it. The smell of the hospital reminded Brent of the operating theater back in Kandahar. All he needed to do was utter the healing spells he knew and most of these people would be out of here. But that would also mean he would be exhausted by the time he finished.

Brent’s father knocked on the window, which was covered by a curtain. “Detectives Jim Rogers and Anthony Carlucci. Can we come in?”

“Yeah,” said a tired voice, and the two men stepped inside. Brent came in right behind and took a spot in the corner.

The two detectives showed their ID. “I’m Detective Rogers,” said his father. “What’s your name?”

“Linda.”

“Linda, can you tell us what happened?”

“Dunno,” she said. Brent looked at the woman. Her eyes were swollen, one eye swollen shut, the other shiny and red. She was probably white, but her face was going to be covered in black and blue bruises. “Went outside with my dog. Got beat up. Don’t know where my dog is.”

Tony flipped open his reporter’s notebook. “Do you live at 78 Lincoln Avenue?”

“It’s my sister’s house.”

“Do you live there?”

“I was visiting.”

“Where was your sister?”

“She’s not home.”

“What kind of dog do you have?”

“One of those mop top dogs.”

“Havanese?”

“I guess.”

Brent bit back a chuckle. Leave it to Tony to know his dog breeds

“What’s your dog’s name?”

“Harry.”

His father asked, “Did your dog have a leash?”

“Yeah.” She focused her open eye on Brent. “Who’s that?”

“I’m a reporter from the *Gazette*,” Brent said.

“I don’t want no reporter here,” said the woman. She glared at his father and Tony. “I don’t know who beat me up and stole my dog.”

“I thought you said you lost your dog.”

“They musta stole my dog,” she said.

They would eventually get her to tell them what was going on, but Brent wanted to help. Brent thought the truth spell and when the woman caught his eye, he let it go with a push of his will. The woman stared at him, blinking. The two detectives turned to look at Brent, who gave them a short nod.

“So,” began Tony, “what —”

The woman suddenly burst into tears. “If I tell you, he’ll kill him!”

“Who’ll kill who?”

“Tyler. He’ll kill my baby.”

Her “baby” was Harry, the dog. She had gone outside to take the dog out while her sister wasn’t home. Tyler had broken up a few days ago with her sister — who she refused to name. While Linda was outside, Tyler approached. Tyler, a linebacker training for the Patriots, easily overpowered her and started to beat her, first with a leftover snow shovel from outside, then with his fists. She tried to run to the door but he caught her in between the doorway and outside and he started beating her there too. She tried screaming, but the area was apathetic and no one came to her.

“He said he was gonna take my baby and he said he was going to kill him if my sister didn’t talk to him.”

Brent stepped outside, having “gotten the story.” His father asked more questions as Tony stepped out to take a look at the records. Brent hung around the room, until his father came out. “Need to see if the dog’s still there,” he said.

## *Homecoming*

Tony returned. "No note of a dog following the ambulance."

"Of course not. That would be too easy."

Tony chuckled. "I shouldn't have a hard time finding a dog."

"The hard time will be if the dog goes to you, Tony."

"Just because I'm an alpha doesn't mean I can get all dogs to do what I want."



# WAR MAGE

L. A. JACOB AND JAKE LOGAN

*In war, here be dragons.*

First Magus Brent Rogers has just been transferred from Fort Leavenworth to Afghanistan. His mission: to find out how and why a seemingly indestructible dragon died on an alleged suicide mission.

Brent finds out that even dragons have secrets — and those secrets, if known, can kill them. Will Brent be like all the other wizards, and work for the Army, or will he keep the secrets of the dragons?

His success — and maybe even his life — could depend on his decision.

*Visit our website for more information about  
the “[War Mage](#)” series.*

# ONE

## *BLESSING*

**F**IRST MAGUS BRENT ROGERS GRABBED THE WILLOW STAFF and his duffel bag the moment the helo touched ground. He jumped out of the bird and into a hail of mortar fire. Ducking and running, he dashed for the only cover he saw through the dust and smoke: a section of boxes about thirty yards away.

Yet he wasn't the only one with the bright idea to hide behind the boxes. Someone jumped in beside him. They were close enough that their shoulders touched. Brent looked to the man, who was grinning.

"This is what I come here for!" he said.

Brent thought he was crazy.

The birds, loaded back up with new troops, headed off into the air. The mortars still exploded around them, but none of them hit the helicopters. Then, the mortars stopped, and the man next to Brent stood up, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Welcome to Blessing!"

## *War Mage*

"Thanks," Brent said, but the man walked away before he could say anything else.

Brent headed deeper into Forward Operating Base Blessing, a series of tents and beehive huts scattered around at the middle of a valley, which explained the mortars. He asked a few people where the commanding officer's place was, and got directed to one of the beehive huts.

The air conditioner was working its damndest to keep the air cool, but it wasn't working as well as he hoped, as he walked into the office.

The female Marine nodded to him. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Colonel Parlance."

"May I ask—"

"First Magus Brent Rogers. I'm expected."

"Yes, sir."

Brent looked at the soldier's stripes. She obviously didn't know that Brent was a lesser rank than she was, and didn't deserve the "sir". But he was damn lucky he still kept his rank ... considering.

She got up from the desk and went over to the thin plywood door on the side. Knocking on it, she opened it when a voice called, "Yes."

"Sir, First Magus Brent Rogers to see you."

"Send him in."

She stepped aside for him to squeeze by her to enter the tiny office. It was taken up by a desk, a chair the colonel sat in, and a chair across from the desk. The wood was still exposed in the office; there were no personal effects that Brent could see.

After exchanging salutes, the colonel offered Brent the seat. Brent sat, and dug out his orders from an inside pocket of his tunic.

Parlance frowned at taking them. "We already have a wizard here."

"I understand that."

He perused the orders. "So in between normal patrols, you're supposed to report on the dragons?"

"Yes, sir. I understand you had four dragons?"

"Had. Baldar died two months ago."

"I'm here to investigate that, sir."

"Our wizard already sent a report."

What was the diplomatic way of saying, "*But Archmage Dieter doesn't believe the report?*"

"We just want to be sure the dragons are being well-taken care of, sir."

"You want to make sure they're not pissed off."

"Yes, sir."

Parlance leaned back, his hands in a steeple. "You have no idea what a pain in the ass they are."

"With all due respect, sir, they're at least working for us, and not the Taliban."

"Which is a positive, and I suppose why you're here to make them happy."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure you don't want Blessing to be a smoking ruin."

"Not particularly." He handed the orders back to Brent. "They're in Firebase Jackson. Our wizard goes there every few weeks to make sure they're satisfied."

"May I speak with him?"

"Good luck with that. He's probably at the TOC. Claims that he can't be disturbed when the dragons are in flight."

"We'll see. What's his name?"

"Lieutenant Alex Waters."

A full magus, a higher rank than Brent. *Son of a bitch*. He knew he was going to run into this problem. First sergeants were a dime a dozen in the Army. He could have been a lieutenant — if he hadn't been tortured.

He would also be a permanent resident in Leavenworth if they didn't need wizards so badly.

"I'll talk to him," Brent said, rising. He saluted the colonel, saying, "Thank you, sir."

"Let me know what you find."

"Of course, sir."



## War Mage

Brent needed somewhere to put his stuff. He couldn't carry his staff and duffel everywhere, especially into the TOC — the Tactical Operations Command office. He knew that the TOC was usually cramped on the best of days.

He stopped at the secretary's desk. "Any place I can put my stuff?"

"Wherever you can find someplace," she said.

*Great help*, Brent thought as he left the building.

Most of the people around him were Marines, with hardly any Army. They were still helpful, though, as he asked where the barracks were. He didn't know how long he was going to be in Blessing until he got to the Firebase, so he needed somewhere to put his stuff and a cot to sleep on until he could catch a helo or a supply and ammo run to Firebase Jackson.

He walked into a barracks to find a fracas of men playing on a Playstation, shooting people and having a grand old time. Brent threaded his way through the barracks and stopped at an empty cot. He knew that no one owned that cot because there were no pictures or decorations above the cot.

"This spot taken?" he asked the big, hairy guy next to him.

"Not anymore," said the guy. "It's all yours."

Brent shoved his duffel under the cot and leaned the staff against the wall.

"You're a wizard," said the guy.

"Yep." He held out his hand to him. "First Magus Brent Rogers."

"Fuck the title," said the guy, engulfing Brent's hand in a huge one. "*Sergeant* Kurt Bennington."

"Nice to meet you, Kurt," Brent said with a smile.

Kurt only nodded. "Where you coming from?"

"Kabul."

"How's it going over there?"

"I don't know. I didn't stay there long."

"So what puts you out here?"

"The dragons."

"Ah," said Kurt. "You're one of *those* wizards."

Brent tilted his head. "*Those* wizards?"

“You put the squeeze on the paranormals to make sure they do what they’re told.”

“No, no, I don’t do that. At least, those aren’t my orders, anyway. And besides, I wouldn’t want to do anything like that.”

“What are your orders?”

“To find out what killed one of the dragons.”

“I thought you couldn’t kill them.”

“Seems that you can.”

Kurt turned away, and that’s when Brent made his guess. “Werewolf?”

“DADT,” he snapped. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” applied to paranormals as well as homosexuals. If they weren’t asked, they didn’t have to say whether they were paranormals or homosexuals. Because Brent asked, Kurt would have to admit it. By invoking DADT, he already had.

“Sorry,” Brent said. Brent took his staff. “You know where the TOC is?”

“I’ll bring you there,” said Kurt, getting up. “Not that I’m doing anything special right now.”

Brent followed Kurt out of the barracks and into the warm spring air.

“You just get out of the Academy?” Kurt asked him.

“No. I just got out of Leavenworth.”

“What the hell did you do for that?”

“If you tell me what you are, I’ll tell you how I got here.”

Kurt chuckled. “Even exchange, I guess. Yes, werewolf. Bitten.”

There were two types of werewolf: born and bitten. The born ones were trained from birth to change into their wolf form at will, while the bitten ones were at the mercy of the full moon and were usually untrainable.

Born werewolves sometimes joined the K9 units. Bitten ones were locked up for three days — the day before the full moon, the full moon, and the day after. Their changes occurred at different times during those times of the month. It was a disease they carried. There was no cure.

“Oh, sorry,” said Brent, knowing that meant Kurt had no control over it.

## *War Mage*

Kurt shrugged. "The benefits are sometimes worth it. Your turn."

"I got caught and tortured by the Black Lions. You know them?"

"All too well. They told me about them when I got here. My CO said to watch out for them."

"How many of you are there?"

"I'm the only one in my unit. The company has one born, one other bitten." He stopped in front of a building near the front entrance of the FOB. "Supposedly the SEALs have a vampire. But that's just a rumor."

"Interesting," Brent said. It wouldn't be surprising. Brent turned to the door of the TOC. "Wait here?"

Kurt took out a pack of cigarettes. "Sure." He held out a cigarette. "Got a light?"

Brent snapped his fingers and a small burst of flame appeared on his index finger. Kurt laughed and lit the cigarette from it. Brent rubbed his hands on his pants to douse the flame.

Brent didn't bother knocking, but just walked in. The captain in charge turned to stare at him, then noticed the wand patch on his arm. The captain pointed to the far end of the place.

"Behind that sheet."

A sheet blocked off an area of the TOC, which made it even more cramped than it should be. Brent walked around the map table. Men sat at blurry monitors, cameras on drones recording sections of the terrain that the soldiers couldn't see. The fog of war had disappeared with the advent of both wizards and drones.

Brent ducked behind the curtain. For all he knew, the man could be jerking off.

Lieutenant Waters sat with his eyes closed, his hands in his pockets. Beside him on his desk sat a laptop. It was hot, but roomy back here.

Waters had an angular face and wide eyes, a small mouth and large nose. He was tall and thin, not well-built like Brent was, and certainly not able to perform fieldwork like Brent's orders had instructed him to do.

"Lieutenant," Brent called, breaking the man out of his trance.



Waters' eyes snapped open. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Nice to meet you too, Lieutenant. I'm First Magus Brent Rogers."

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

Brent made a point to look around. "Nope."

He slowly took his hands out of his pocket. "What do you want?"

"You made the report of the dead dragon."

"Yessss ..."

"Where did you get the information?"

"The other dragons."

"They were in the area?"

"Of course."

"I thought all of them have different sectors."

"Not that day."

"Then why —"

"Look, Sergeant, I don't have time for this right now."

"When will you have time?"

Waters chewed the inside of his cheek. "I'm busy."

"Then I'll ask the dragons myself."

"Go ahead. You know they're at Firebase Jackson, miles away."

"I'm aware of that."

"Good. Will you please excuse me?"

"I'll leave you to whatever you were doing. Sir."

Brent stepped out from behind the screen. A couple of the men chuckled quietly.

Brent left the TOC. Kurt stood, leaning back against the hot beehive hut. The heat didn't seem to bother him.

"So that was a waste of time," Brent muttered.

"He's an asshole," Kurt pointed out, standing straight up. "I could have told you that."

"Thanks for letting me know."

Kurt stomped on the butt of his cigarette, then picked it up and put it in his pocket.

"I need to get to the Firebase."

"I know who you need to talk to."

## *War Mage*

Kurt started walking north, back to the helo pad. "Gonzo!"

A brown-skinned man turned at the sound. "Ben, how the hell are you?"

"Good, man. Listen, this wizard needs a ride to Jackson."

"You're in luck. We'll be sending some supplies out that way tomorrow."

"Can I hitch a ride?" Brent asked.

"As long as you can ride on top of the helo."

"Sure, just tie me down tight."

"Sounds kinky," Gonzo said with a wink. "We'll count you in."

"Thanks, man."

"Anytime. You owe me a Skype call, Ben."

"Will do."

Gonzo nodded. "Be here 0400."

"You got it."

Kurt smiled. "That was easy."

Brent grinned. Magic worked that way.

# JUST A BIT OF MAGIC

BARB BISSONETTE

*Every morning, Jenny Smith stares into her magic mirror, searching for glimpses of two girls. Today, she is joyful with anticipation, knowing that this is the day they will materialize in her village.*

Molly has come to the village for a fresh start. Her parents are dead, her boyfriend has cheated on her with her best friend, and she is feeling very alone. Miranda has arrived at the boarding house and work place, but she has her own secrets. Nothing is as it seems in the village. Not the yoga studio. Not the bits of magic that seem to hover everywhere. Not even the assortment of women who gather there.

The two girls find themselves drawn into the circle, discovering that all of this is leading to the biggest story, the biggest mystery: the reason why they ended up in this strange, unconventional place to meet a hedgewytch named Jenny Smith.

*Visit our website for more information about  
"Just a Bit of Magic".*

## 2

*“A purple door means a witch lives here.”*

Old wives' tale

**B**eyond the path lay a cottage looking as if it had been plucked from the pages of a fairy tale and placed very gently in its own special spot, so exquisite it appeared. The roof seemed to be thatched; the old stone walls had green ivy tumbling along them, catching in the stonework and encircling the windows. A gold etching of a new moon with three scattered stars adorned the deep purple door. I'd never seen a door like it, rounded at the top with an ancient brass door knocker in the shape of an owl just above the door knob.

An old wooden porch hugged the entire front of the funny little cottage, scattered with wooden chairs and pots of various herbs and flowers. A large ancient hawthorn tree guarded the entrance, with dozens of herbs growing every which way. Masses of purple and white lilacs lined the cobblestone path, spilling onto the lawn and around the sides of the porch. Splashes of colour decorated the ground in the guise of early spring flowers — tulips

## *Just a Bit of Magic*

and daffodils, and even some trilliums — interspersed with different coloured pansies, including some of the little ones my mom used to call “Johnny Jump Ups”. The whole lawn murmured in the May breezes, a vision of colour and spring splendour.

Hens pecked in the grass beside the flowers while a goat grazed off to the side. I heard the “cock a doodle doo” of a rooster.

“Wow! I love it,” I exclaimed.

Miranda nodded, seemingly mesmerized.

“I’m so glad. It is rather pretty, if I do say so myself.”

The light airy voice floated to us on the spring breeze. It seemed to have been conjured out of nowhere. We both looked around, startled and beheld ... no one. No one at all.

Already unnerved by our previous encounter, I felt disconcerted at attending the abode of a witch. This bodiless voice did nothing to help this feeling.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the voice continued. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I’m up here. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Jenny Smith.”

As of one accord, Miranda and I tilted our heads in the direction of the voice. At first, I didn’t see the owner until Miranda pointed her finger towards an apple tree on the right, a mass of fragrant pink and white blossoms. One of its branches had grown out from the trunk in the shape of a letter ‘L’, creating the semblance of a swing. We beheld a woman perched there, several feet in the air.

*This must be the witch, I thought. The other witch. Were there really two?*

*So, this had to be the hedgewytch.* I shook my head, trying to straighten it all out in my mind.

She could have been any age, any age at all, this Jenny Smith. Her face bespoke of a number of years, but her body seemed limber, her face wreathed in smiles. She looked spry enough as she surveyed us from the top of the tree, swinging her legs which were encased in khakis and running shoes. She wore a bright yellow blouse and a yellow hoodie. She resembled a little lemon drop roosting there. Her hair, a mass of grey curls, tumbled on top of her head, fastened with a bit of yellow ribbon. She could have risen straight out of the pages of a fairy tale book herself.

She surveyed us with a friendly little laugh.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” she lilted. “I’m all mixed up in May.”

“What are you doing? Did you fly up there?”

I spoke the words without even thinking, marveling at the sight of her.

“Oh no. I haven’t learned to levitate yet, much as I’d like to. I’m working on crossword solutions. Sometimes I can snatch the words out of the air.”

She chuckled. I wasn’t sure if she was joking or not. She stuck her hand into the air just then, but it appeared to be only to shoo away a pesky mosquito.

“Oh yes,” I said, regaining some composure. “Nora wants to know the answer to twenty-two down.”

Jenny Smith’s laughter rang out among the apple blossoms.

“Nora King has no patience,” she declared. “She thinks the crossword puzzles will improve her brain. She’s right, of course, but she has to think on them awhile for those benefits.”

“I think she’s been working on it awhile, actually. She was studying it yesterday at the café.”

Jenny peeked down through the apple branches. Two big blue eyes inspected us.

“Oh, yes, I see. You’re the girls from the corner store.”

We both nodded, returning her smile. And that is when I saw her eyes twinkle. They literally twinkled. I don’t know how else to describe them. The flashes of light lasted only a second. I thought maybe I had imagined them until the night of her huge mysterious revelation. Then I knew for sure that they could absolutely twinkle and flash. Such a big mystery for such a little woman — witch or no.

But wait, I’m getting ahead of myself. This big mystery took a long time to unfold. We had barely taken a step on the path to discovering it.

I felt fascination, but I felt something else too. I discerned a stirring of unease in the pit of my stomach — a stirring first manifested at the café when I heard her name. An unfamiliar feeling ... distrust, anxiety? I observed her, knowing deep in my soul that something amiss existed between her and I — something off-key. I had no earthly idea how to describe it even to myself. But warning signals surged through my bloodstream.

*Just a Bit of Magic*

Miranda seemed to have no such misgivings, appearing completely at ease.

“We heard you were a witch,” she called up the apple tree.

I didn’t know if this was a proper thing to say to a witch. Truth be told, I had no previous frame of reference for etiquette in this matter.

Jenny seemed not to mind in the least.

“Well, that’s what they say,” she agreed.



# MERMAID STEEL

JAY HARTLOVE

*The power of love over hate.*

A human blacksmith and a mermaid weaver fall in love and must overcome the fear and hatred that divides their neighboring villages. Only by reconciling deep cultural differences can the forbidden lovers bring their peoples back from the brink of war.

A grand adventure, a hero with a dark past, a powerful goddess, and a message of hope for us all.

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“[Mermaid Steel](#)”.*

## 6

CHIELLE'S HEART WAS POUNDING with a confusing rush of worry and anticipation as she floated up under Sten's landing. She gripped the edge of the platform and looked up the ramp. The gentle slap of waves under the wooden floats measured her tense breathing. She glanced back at the setting sun, and then up at the shack. Surely Jacio would have gone home by now. Sten would be alone. Her heart pounded even harder.

*Courage. This has to be done. Courage.*

She hopped up on the deck and made the long climb up the ramp. Maybe this will turn out well. Why did this ramp have to be so steep? Oh, right, low tide.

The half dozen steps from the wharf edge to the door never looked so far. Now or never, she thought as she walked. All or nothing. She knocked.

Sten opened the door and a rush of warm smoke-scented air spilled over her. He was silhouetted in the orange glow from the roaring hearth. She suddenly felt cold and outside.

"Chielle. What a happy surprise. Please come in. Isn't it kind of late for you to be out?"

## *Mermaid Steel*

She stepped in and smiled at how much she liked being here. Her smile faded as she turned to face him. "There is something I need to talk to you about."

"Sounds serious. Shall we sit over here on the bench?" He invited her with a wave of his hand. "Can I get you something? Maybe some cocoa?"

"No, thank you. I will sit. Please stop being so nice. I've got a confession to make, and I just need you to hear me out."

He joined her on the wooden bench. "All right, I'm all ears."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "That first day that I rescued you from the net? I was not just casually swimming by. I had been watching you for a while."

"Good thing. I will never regret you being there."

"For days. I knew you were a blacksmith. I acted surprised to learn your trade. I had been waiting for a chance to talk with you — because you're a blacksmith."

"I understand."

"When you offered to teach me how to work metal, I thanked Rorra for my amazing luck." She looked away. "Then I abused your trust a second time."

"You taught your men how to make those spear points."

"Yes," she sighed. "I didn't know they were going to make weapons. I thought, I thought, I don't know what I thought. Of course they were going to make weapons."

She looked up and met his gaze. "I am so sorry. I lied to you, and I betrayed your trust."

He shrugged his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "The good news is, you're not a very good liar. I suspected all this pretty much from the beginning. My only regret is that you felt you needed to lie in the first place. It certainly makes sense. You probably grew up hearing it all the time. 'Never trust a human.'"

"That's true. I'm still ashamed, especially now that I've gotten to know you and found what a kind and thoughtful person you are." She caught herself before she started gushing.

"That says a lot for you. You feel guilty for acting the way you were taught."

Her heart pounded again, this time with a glimmer of hope. She lowered her head and looked up at him. "Can you forgive me?"

He turned to face her fully. "Yes, Chielle, I forgive you."

She sighed so big her shoulders dropped. "Thank you."

"Were you worried I'd say no and throw you out?"

"I didn't know what to think. The thought of losing you was tearing me apart." She caught her breath when she heard the words that had spilled out.

Sten smiled the most charming, bemused grin she had ever seen. "Losing me?"

Her heart just about jumped out of her chest. Now or never. All of nothing. Even with all of her courage gripped tightly, all she could manage was a quiet but sincere, "Yes."

She didn't see when he moved so close, but suddenly his face was right up to hers. He was breathing just as hard as she was. She was pretty sure the pounding vibration she was sensing was his heart matching hers. He leaned in and puckered up, so she did the same.

At first contact she found the mix of soft lips and muscular pressure fascinating, but this was swept away by a sudden flood of giddy joy that completely surprised her. She held his face in her hands and he wrapped his strong arms around her body, pulling her up against his chest. She let his love wash over her and she dove in.

When at last he broke the kiss, she rubbed her cheek against his in a stroking motion. She was very happy he had shaved again today.

He seemed confused.

"That's how we kiss." She pointed down the side of her face. "Remember the pressure nerves."

"Oh, right. You're really sensitive there."

"Very."

"Which is why you don't like beards."

She stroked his bare cheek with her webbed fingers. "Yep." She wrapped her arms up under his and around his back, pulled him tight, and buried her face in his neck. "You make me so happy."

She thought she felt him stiffen under her hug. Was she moving too fast? Then he squeezed her back.

She reveled in the connection, warmed by feeling his heart beating next to hers. She nuzzled his neck and was pleased his sweat tasted like sea water.

## *Mermaid Steel*

He stroked the back of her head with his hand, caressing the fringe edges of her gill flaps. Even though his hands were rough, it was the gentlest thing she could remember.

She loosened her hug and looked up into his eyes again. His breathing quickened right with hers and they fell into a mouth kissing, cheek rubbing, head clutching frenzy. He once pushed his lips too hard and opened her mouth, only to encounter her full row of pointed, razor sharp teeth. He pulled back in surprise.

She shrugged, puckered up her full lips, and gave him a reassuring smooch.

He launched back into kissing her and her excitement overwhelmed her. The smell of his body, the texture of his loose shirt, the taste of his breath, the hair on his head, his strong hands grasping her body, fumbling with her dorsal fin, it was all intoxicating.

She was so lost in the moment she did not notice her body was gyrating, her tail was lashing, and she started to rub her breasts against him. He looked down and she saw what she was doing.

"You're getting pretty excited," he commented with a chuckle.

"How embarrassing. I'm sorry. My instincts took over." She wrapped her arms around her chest. "I'm just mortified."

"Your instincts?"

"Courtship dance, underwater. Everything is always in motion in water. We don't just embrace, we swim around each other, brushing our bodies together. You must think I have no self-control."

"Hey, abandon to the moment isn't a bad thing. I'm kind of flattered that you trust me with such an intimate ritual."

"I really did not mean to do that."

"Would you stop apologizing? You are who you are. I'm still learning all this. Believe me, I've got habits and instincts that I'll be apologizing for as well." He caressed her cheek and held it in his hand. "Besides, when I look into those astonishing eyes of yours, I'll forgive you anything."

"I promise not to take advantage of that. Your trust is so important to me."

"You've got it." He leaned in and touched his forehead to hers. "Hey, it's way past sundown. How are you going to find your way home?"

"I'll use the moon and echoes." She was sad he had moved so quickly to her departure. He really did think she was moving too fast. She joked to cover her doubts. "You're not trying to get rid of me, are you?"

"No, of course not. I've got a lot to do tomorrow, so I need to get to sleep soon. I also didn't know if you could navigate in the dark, or if your family would worry about you. Or does your family know where you are?"

"They will worry if I'm out too late. No, I have not told them about you. I told my brother about you and the metal working, but frankly, I didn't know what else to say."

"Have I really been that vague? Chielle, you stir feelings in me that I have not felt in a long, long time. I don't know how safe it would be to go tell your family that you're seeing me romantically, but please do not doubt that I am very fond of you."

Fond. Now there's a word to ponder. "May I come see you again tomorrow?"

"Um, not tomorrow. I'm going to be tied up all day. The day after next would be great. Can you make it day after tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course."

He stood up and stepped to the hearth. "Can I get you anything before you go?"

"No, thank you." She got up and straightened her erda. "You're right, it's late, and I should be going."

He intercepted her at the door. He wrapped his big arms around her and drew her up close. "I'm really happy you came tonight."

The way he smiled at her nearly dissolved her apprehensions. The warm kiss he gave her finally removed her doubt.

She grinned up at him. "Day after tomorrow."

"Good night, Chielle."

"Good night, Sten."

She turned at the wharf edge and smiled back at him in his glowing doorway. She waved and thanked Rorra he was such a patient man. She nearly ruined it. As she leapt off into the black sea, she thought she must slow down, take it easy, let things flow naturally. Rorra would want it that way. Sten was worth the wait.





# RULES OF THE CAMPFIRE

BOOK ONE FROM "STORIES IN GLASS"

PAUL S. MOORE

*If you woke up one day and realized you had memories from more than seventy lives, fluid in every language you'd ever spoken, and recalled all the texts you'd ever read, would you wonder why?*

It took Asitr forty years to discover the why. Soon after, he appears as a guest on a radio talk show to bait traps with the telling of stories. He tells tales about his life as one of the world's most popular and quickly forgotten celebrities — of gardening for the Prophet Enoch, eavesdropping on Satan and Baal Zebub, and living between lives in a lost world. They sounded like the tall tales of a crazy man.

Twenty years later, a John Doe is found, naked and shivering, on the grounds of the Harbinger Psychiatric Institute, clutching a six-inch orb of blue glass and anxious to tell his own story. Is it a tale of organized insanity inspired by Asitr's radio appearance?

Dr. Henry Milton has what looks like an easy assignment: he has twenty-four hours to evaluate the John Doe and refer him for processing. But John Doe has a timetable of his own. He has less than forty-eight hours to convince Dr. Milton to suspend his disbelief in a supernatural world where activities swirl around us unseen and mingle within our own natural realm.

*Visit our website for more information about the "Stories in Glass" series.*

# GARDENER OF THE GODS

**I**T SOUNDS CRUEL TO LET LOOSE A BOY OF TWELVE YEARS at the gates of a strange, dangerous world. I was expecting to walk through the arched entry and be handed greatness. Isn't that how it works for ... a chosen one? I strutted through the gates with confidence, but I staggered through the next two years in despair.

Think of my age. This is an age that still believes that goodness is what is expected in the world. It is the best age to recruit a true believer. It's an age too young for the burden of choosing a true belief.

Goodbye to the age of the delighted boy, preparing to become a man. I was stepping into that next age and there were problems. Lack of experience, chemical and hormonal changes, the craziness of finding out that goodness is both unexpected, and situationally relative. Endangered by that mix is the untested strength of belief in things taught.

Despite my mother's words, I felt over-matched. I cowered when no one stepped forward to show me my way. I prayed for an

## *Rules of the Campfire*

angel, for God himself, even for my parents to come and get me. All the prayers went unanswered.

After stealing food to stay alive, failing to sell seed, and being beaten for having nothing more valuable than seeds, I began to feel I didn't have the approval of Heaven.

It wasn't clear what exactly I was failing at, but I was failing. Tested, retested, and failing every day, until faith was gone.

Nothing replaced the lost belief in my mission. I tried to believe in people, but they wouldn't give me a reason to believe in them. People were either cruel to me or indifferent to my presence.

I saw people steal things for survival. I saw them steal things they didn't need. I watched big boys bully little boys. Big men bully little men. Powerful beings bully everyone. I saw murder for pleasure. murder for gain, and killing for survival and revenge. I saw the rape of children and the surrender of suicide. I watched as one of the bastard Anakim ate the blood of a man who offended him with an offer to share a goblet of beer. All before I turned fourteen.

Most of these things were viewed from my perch atop a grape arbor in the back yard of a fenced in butcher shop. Finding the butcher's shop saved me from a life in the alleys.

The shop shared an alley with an all-night beer hall and a gambling house. Whores who couldn't get jobs with the temple of Baal would frequent the alley because they were assured of the presence of drunken men with money. Thugs were attracted for the same reason.

It was under the light of the moon that I learned about the human capacity for depravity. I began to wonder why the God of creation who designed beginnings, endings, and limitations on all things didn't mandate brakes for such a horrible engine. Why was it so apparent that goodness had so many barriers and depravity such full license to run?

It was under the light of the sun that I tried to shake off my memories of those nights. I filled my head with the adventures of exploring. I was living in a city of such size, even after two years, I hadn't penetrated beyond its outer circle.

The owner of the butcher shop first brought to my attention the importance of this city being a series of circles. His observations became building blocks fitting squarely onto the foundation I received from my parents in our years of wandering. I was failing and falling when he saved me.

I was hiding from him for so long, it surprised me when he reached out to me. He made it obvious he was aware of the freeloader in the back of the shop.

First, I noticed that my ladder had been taken down. I spotted it leaning on a table under the arbor. I might have thought nothing of it if I didn't also notice that my sack of seeds was sitting on the table.

I kept my eyes on the bushes and the door to his shop while I inched my way toward the arbor. My heart sank with the fear of realizing I may have lost my safe bed. It dropped further after shuddering with memories of nights without comfort in the alleys.

Closer to the table I saw something that made me gasp. Next to my bag was a plate. It was stacked with beef and piled with grapes. A bowl lay next to it — a barley soup with floating islands of carrots, celery, and onion.

All my senses were on alert. The owner, I thought, was surely in hiding, waiting to catch me in his trap like a mouse. I finally acquiesced to the inevitable and approached the table. This looked like a fine last meal.

I attacked the plate like a ravenous animal, making guttural noises while violently waving my free hand to warn potential interlopers away. I was determined to force down as much as I could before my trapper seized me and punished me for squatting on his land.

Nobody materialized, but I soon learned what happens when a mouth full of stringy beef forms a mass of sinew in the throat of a glutton.

I remembered Auth dislodging a sprig of mint from Puth's throat. He had slapped her hard on the back while she hacked and coughed. The noise she made sounded like a dog with laryngitis. I was making that noise now. It seemed to echo off the gate. Barf! Arf! Barf! Arf!

## *Rules of the Campfire*

The spasms grew more painful. The sound seemed to grow quieter. I couldn't reach my back with enough force to dislodge the meat, so I threw myself backward against the central pillar of the arbor. The pillar gave away and I fell down. I rolled to my feet and threw myself backward into the wall of the butcher shop. My head started to tingle at the scalp and the feeling spread down my face and began to center itself at the back of my neck. Still, the sinew held its ground.

My spasms stopped. I was no longer emitting sounds. My body had resigned itself to death by hysterical eating. I had just enough awareness to notice that something wasn't adding up.

I felt it odd that the sound of my choking should still be echoing off the gate. I found it even stranger that the gate was moving. It was moving like someone was throwing a weight against it. I made it across the yard, slipped the latch, and swung it inward.

Through tearing eyes and a clouding mind I saw something that terrified me more than the thought of choking. A beast, very dark, not shapeless, but nearly indistinguishable from the night.

The beast rose up in front of me and I discovered it had claws. I could feel them tearing at my solar plexus. The weight of the thing pushed me off my feet and air exploded from my lungs before I hit the ground. Meat erupted from my mouth. Once again, I felt claws dig into my body, then a wet tongue on my face

After removing the trailing scraps of meat from my face the beast sniffed the ground and found the larger pieces he had just forced from my esophagus.

I spent the rest of the night propping up the arbor, petting my new dog, and slowly enjoying the soup and grapes. A note on the table made the evening perfect. The butcher was offering me a job.

After two horrible years in the city, I finally had one good night. A night that began with the usual permeance of gloom turned into a hopeful evening filled with thoughts of a new companion, a surprise benefactor, and a job. I was feeling like the chosen one again. I fell asleep while scratching my new companion behind the ear, and wondering what kind of job a butcher would offer a chosen one.

When the butcher opened the back door. I jerked awake. The sun was rising. I could see the features of a dog resting his head on

my lap. It was a forty-pound black dog with visible ribs, a white walrus mustache, and a brown mask. We were both looking at a round, red-faced man standing in the doorway. He stood still and silent. All three of us looked puzzled.

I jumped to my feet when the butcher turned to close the door. My new dog walked over to the butcher suspiciously and smelled a circle around his feet. Whatever the dog discerned from this made him bold enough to look up and sniff the air while he stared into the butcher's face. After sniffing the butcher's butt, his tail began to wag, and he ran back to my side. He had given the butcher his approval.

I didn't know what to think of the look on the butcher's face. It certainly wasn't the look of approval. I had cleaned up as much as I could. I fixed the arbor. Nothing was broken. Why did he look so concerned? So stern?

"Oh, sir! The food!" I said. "I just thought that ... I mean I thought ... the note said I could ... You didn't?" I was stammering and feeling foolish. The round red face in front of me opened its mouth and guffawed.

"The food was for you," he laughed. "I'm sorry about the soup. Good herbs are hard to find. I meant the meal to be a business dinner." He looked down at the dog. "Business that has no place for dogs. Have you been hiding this dog since you adopted my arbor last year?"

"Well, no sir. This isn't my dog. I mean ... not really ... yet." I was surprised he knew I was his tenant for the whole year. I wasn't sure I still had a dog.

The butcher stated the obvious. "He acts like he thinks he's your dog."

I was hoping I could gain the job and keep the dog, so I began negotiating for both. "Well, we just met, sir," I said. "He's a good dog."

"Even good dogs have no place in a clean butcher shop. Even if they don't steal."

"I wasn't thinking, sir." It was true. I couldn't think of a reason for a dog in a butcher shop.

"They don't belong in my new restaurant either." Logic was the enemy again.

## *Rules of the Campfire*

"I can see that, sir." I looked down and could tell from the ribs showing through the dog's coat that no food would be safe around him. "If only I could feed him well enough." My own attempt at logic sounded weak, but I was hoping the butcher could be generous to boy and dog.

"Why would you feed someone else's dog?" The relentless questions wore me down. I tried a question of my own.

"Well ... why would you feed me?" I didn't think it so funny a question, but the ample deposits of fat on my benefactor began to undulate rhythmically as he sat down, laughing.

"It's clear to me you have a dog," he said. "I'm going to go into business with a boy and a dog. What are we going to call him?"

"I was thinking I would call him Barfarf, sir."

"Barfarf? Barfarf?" The rolling laughter came again. "Have you thought this through?"

"Well, there's a sort of story behind it, sir."

"I'll tell you what." The butcher said it suddenly as he rose to his feet, "I'm going to make us a pot of tea. You tell me the story behind that name, then we'll put our heads together to find a proper name."

"What's wrong with Barfarf?"

"Okay, let me put it to you like this ... Picture yourself in the street. The alley. The park. You are calling your dog. You put your hands to your mouth and scream out ... Barfarf! Barfarf! Barfarf! They have rules about people acting mad in public. Barking like a dog in public is usually construed as madness. There's also the problem of calling unwanted dogs to you."

I hadn't noticed anyone enforcing rules about acting out madness in public. The first argument didn't carry much weight with me. I had no trouble seeing the logic of the second argument. "Alright," I said. "We should find a proper name."

"Splendid," he said. "After we get that issue settled, we can discuss a business venture." After announcing those intentions, the butcher headed into his shop and returned a short while later with the worst tea I ever politely choked down.

I drank two cups of that bitter tea before I could finish telling him about the events of the night before. He kept asking questions



about details, pouring more tea when my cup emptied. I didn't know a man could laugh so much. I didn't know that a man could be kindly, yet find such delight in hearing the story of a starving, scared, choking boy. His face, interactive with my story made me feel comfortable. I felt I had been listened to. When my story was completed, his face turned suddenly serious.

"I have an idea for a business," he said abruptly, "I think it's a good idea, worth pursuing. We have an immediate barrier to overcome, and I believe in the principle that immediate barriers be immediately removed. Are you in agreement?"

"I couldn't say, sir. What is the barrier?" I wanted my life to change, but I was cautious.

"We haven't introduced ourselves, and we can't go into business together without a proper introduction. I am Sami, Sami the butcher. With your help I expect, soon, people will know me as Sami the restaurateur — the finest restaurateur in all of Samyaza."

"And I am Asitr," I said. "The confused boy from atop your arbor."

"That is about to change," he promised. "You will soon be known as Asitr, the boy who grows the finest herbs, exclusively for Sami the restaurateur."

"I see. How did you know? How did you find out?"

"I've been watching you. I know about your little garden outside the city. Mighty fine herbs. They can make a top chef of me." Sami widened his eyes and spread his hands in front of his face. He looked like he believed he was talking about magic, or gold, or something equally wondrous.

"They are what they are. I've had little use for them since I came here. I'm sure they could be used to improve your tea-making skills." I was being honest. The seeds didn't open doors for me when I expected them to. Now, they were the reason Sami entered into his negotiations. We didn't need a written contract between us for what followed.

"Then what say we call our little business a 20/80 proposition?" Sami began.

"And the dog?" I was hoping the dog was negotiable.

"I'm afraid we still have an immediate barrier to a business relationship with the dog."

## *Rules of the Campfire*

“He needs a name?” I was hoping that was going to be all there was to overcome.

“Yes, we can’t be properly introduced without a name. Have you thought of something?”

“I think I will call him Sami, after his benefactor.”

“Too confusing. It would be hard to tell us apart.”

It was my turn to laugh. I was using muscles I hadn’t used for two years. My face was getting stiff from smiling. I very much wanted to go into business with this man. “What should we call this dog?” I asked. “A good dog should have the proper name.”

“Well then, I think we should give him a name that will reflect his role in our business.” Sami rubbed his own walrus mustache and rolled his eyes in thought, but he wasn’t offering any names or clues as to the role of the dog in the business.

I finally had to ask, “What role will he have?”

“I need a dog that will dispose of the larger bones in my shop. Does he like bones?”

“I think we should find out. Do you have any bones just lying about?” I relaxed. Negotiations were over.

I can tell you with certainty that the dog adapted to his new job as easily as his proper name became apparent. We anointed him with the name Mr. Bone. The name fit. He was born to the task of demolishing bones. Soon he was an eighty-five-pound partner in a business that grew as quickly as the herbs I planted in the back yard of the shop.

Mr. Bone didn’t seem to mind that we didn’t take him to the restaurant. After the unfortunate flatulence incident at the grand opening, he was barred from the premises. He was tail waggingly happy to be banished to the shop.

Sami was just as happy to spend most of his time at the restaurant. Soon after my first big harvest he learned to make a really good cup of tea. Customers began to give him gifts of teapots from all over the known world. He topped off his collection by purchasing one pot from every merchant in the city. His reputation heightened among the merchants when we hung the pots in the outdoor dining area where light illuminated the collection.

Sami, the jovial entrepreneur, was truly in his element when mingling with the lunch and dinner crowd. His customers came from all circles of the city. I, also, settled into my job with delight.

We hired a serious and talented young butcher named Vanpandikuladezan to run the butcher's side of the business. We called him Vandi. Vandi treated Mr. Bone like an equal in the business. He took care never to give him more bones than were healthy to eat. The excess, he ground up to fertilize my gardens. All was well. As Sami would say, "All is well and getting weller!" It kept getting weller and weller for two more years.

Sami congratulated himself on many a night for placing his restaurant in the second circle from the gate. "Too dirty for the temple bunch and too established for the criminals in the first circle," he would say. It was that same safe, but not staid, atmosphere that lured the artists and musicians into the second circle. Many of them were regulars at Sami's.

One of those musicians got lucky. He received a garden apartment and an expense account when he accepted an offer to play during morning offerings at the Azazel complex.

I began an exciting project of my own. I had just turned sixteen and was starting my own business. It was Sami's idea. He set me up with enough equipment to begin my own landscaping business. The lucky musician was my first customer. With my first job being in the temple district, I was getting good word of mouth in all the right circles.

Word of mouth cost me everything, friends, companions, business, sanity ... everything.

The momentum for that little ball of events began rolling when my client referred me to his patrons in the temple of Azazel. He gave them two locations for places where I could be contacted. He mentioned a butcher named Vanpandikuladezan and a restaurateur named Sami.

Vanpandikuladezan was a name known to an infamous bastard Anakim named Herakles. I never met an Anakim that wasn't dangerous. All of them are bastards born as an unblessed creation and every one dangerous. Nonetheless, you can't help but pity them

## *Rules of the Campfire*

their existence. I pity them all but Herakles. He is a lover of monstrous acts, and lovers of monstrous acts are so damned hard to pity.

The malign focus Herakles leveled at Vandi is difficult to understand. The proportion was so off. In Herakles' mind, a seed of disappointment grew into a living rage, was fed by hate, unconstrained by compassion, and bore the rotten fruit of a plan for casual violence. He set his mind to taking Vandi's soul, and he was going to have fun doing it. We never saw it coming.

They came with the noon crowd. I was at the restaurant with a batch of newly dried lemon verbena. Things were getting busy, so I strapped on an apron and began to take food orders.

Sami was in the back, negotiating with his friend Baddar. Baddar was delivering fresh fish for the evening meals. Those negotiations came to a halt when, to the sound of breaking pottery, the birthday boy entered the restaurant, shouting for service.

Sami knew the source of the shouting and understood the sound of breaking pottery was from his prized teapot collection, but he acted calmly and quickly. His first impulse was to protect his customers and his staff. He chugged toward the dining area.

I bumped into Sami at the kitchen door. He pushed me, hard, into the kitchen, and hissed for me to stay put. He was much quicker than a man his size should be. At the sound of a bellowing voice, he spun and zipped away, dancing and dodging through the aisles between tables.

Louder than the din of the entry, the bellowing voice cut through the restaurant, shouting repeatedly, "owner, owner, owner."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Coming!" Sami knew the urgency of the situation. He knew Herakles was the strongest, meanest, and dumbest of the Anakim. Familiarity with the monster made him anxious and eager to grant every request the brute would make. I, myself, was frozen when I saw his face. I remembered him as the blood eater from the alley.

"I'll have a table away from the street stench." Herakles's first demand was no surprise. He was known to hate the smell of unwashed people.

"If only I had known you were coming." Sami was thinking quickly. "I would have reserved the patio for you. I have the

perfect table, near the smoker. The way the wind is blowing, you will smell only the chicken roasting in sage butter.”

People were already edging toward the exits. Stories went around about Herakles and his penchant to become violent if he perceived people were fleeing him in social situations. Sami didn't know which way the beast was thinking today, but Herakles gave him the opening he was looking for to clear the room.

“It's my birthday,” he said. “I'll need your best.”

“Did you hear that?” Sami said it loud enough to be heard. “We are having a private celebration for a man of renown.” Herakles nodded in approval. “Everyone out,” commanded Sami. “No need to pay for your meal. See you soon. Out, out, out.”

The diners rushed out eagerly. The last to pass Herakles on the way out was Sami's friend Baddar. The fisherman's exit brought some comments from Herakles.

“Hooga Mushka, man. What are you? Some kind of fisherman? Take a bath. Sheesh and Sheeshka Mushka!” Herakles was shouting terms of disrespect. Then he laughed as Baddar scooted off. Taking out his short sword, he smashed another pot in celebration.

I could hear Sami's anger as he entered the kitchen. “Impotent freak.” he whispered. Much more loudly he added, “Asitr will seat you, and I will bring you everything I have for your sampling. Please, be comfortable ... Asitr!”

I knew Sami was worried. I could see his face was grim. He put a finger over his lips, looked into my face, and bellowed, “When you have seated the gentleman you can take your clumsy fool of a self home. I will entertain these luminaries myself.” His attempt to get me out of harm's way didn't have the desired effect.

“He stays,” Herakles shouted from his table. “He will be my wine bearer for the evening. I will train the fool for you, teach him some focus.” I hurried to his side, and he grabbed my tunic, pulling my face close to his. Up close to him, I thought he smelled like a toad.

“Got ears boy?” He asked. “Spill a drop, you lose an ear. Drop a goblet, you lose your head. Fair enough?”

I answered with a steady voice. “I'm equal to the task, sir.” I meant it in a different way than Herakles heard it. Hatred had overcome my fear, and I felt my moment was coming.

## *Rules of the Campfire*

The feeling washed over me casually at first but developed into a certainty. As surely as I'm chosen for greatness, I knew this thing didn't need to live. I was going to find a way to destroy the monster. Reasonably sure I was under the protection of Heaven, I asked. "Allow me to choose you a wine?"

Taking a detour past the wine rack, I ran to the shed. Inside, I had some hemlock, dried dragon berries, and datura seed soaking in a jar of alcohol. They had been soaking for two weeks, and the potion was ready.

I knew I had one bottle of stout wine with a flavor heavy enough to hide the poisonous content of the brew. It was going to need a minute of breathing before the flavors could blend, so I grabbed a weak offering of melon rind wine to buy some time. I was sure he would demand something more powerful.

Time was on my side. I was certain he would remain until the cupboard was bare. Complete immersion in overindulgence was his reputation in the days he was unconstrained.

This is what I have done in every life I have lived. I have gathered good facts and reached bad conclusions. Herakles and his party stayed less than ten minutes. He ignored the weak wine.

Sami served him potatoes and roasted beef within two minutes of his arrival. Herakles finished his plate and once again bellowed for the owner. He was beginning to show his intentions.

"Where did you get this beef?" he demanded. Sami ran to the table. Herakles asked the opinion of his friends. "Do you recognize the source of this beef?" It appeared they did. They all agreed they couldn't be mistaken. They were certain they recognized from where this beef had been attained.

"What is the problem, sirs?" Sami was clearly in the dark. "Is there a problem with the beef? I have lamb and chicken. Let me clear your plates and bring you something suitable."

Herakles gave a surprise answer. "I want to see your butcher. The beef is delicious. Bring me the butcher."

Sami was visibly shaken. He wasn't on the same page as Herakles, but he knew the book. "The butcher's not here." he said. "He only delivers. Please, let me get you some mutton, maybe?"

“From what address? I have to tell the man how much I appreciated his cut.” Everyone at the table weakly suppressed a laugh into their hands. They were sharing some mysterious enjoyment of Herakles's declaration of appreciation.

Sami was suspicious of any polite reason for Herakles to want to see Vandi, so he lied. “I would have to look it up sir. I don't have a head for remembering addresses or names or ...”

Herakles cut him off. “Get the address.” he demanded.

Sami jumped. “Yes, sir, I'll find it right now.” He sped away back to the kitchen, grabbing my arm on the way. Loudly, he shouted, “Come here fool, get the good wine.” Quietly he whispered, “Run to the butcher shop and tell Vandi who it is that wants to see him. Tell him to run to the bridge grove, and we'll try to find out what he wants. Make sure he hangs the closed sign ... go!”

I ran as fast as I could. I used all the shortcuts I knew. It wouldn't have mattered. Herakles had stopped by the butcher shop before he went to the restaurant.

Why the little head game? He didn't stay to watch our pain. He didn't linger to enjoy the public reaction to his crime at the butcher shop.

The public reaction. My fellow human beings. I saw them milling around the shop from two blocks away. I turned the corner, lost my balance, and dropped to the ground when I focused on the object decorating our sign pole. It was the head of our friend Vandi.

I stood up and stumbled through the excited crowd, stopping at the front door. The rest of Vandi's body was in our display window. He was hanging up-side down, wearing a garish note of explanation that explained nothing.

*You took my cow. I killed your pig. Ledger even.*

There was nothing in the note I could understand. The only thing standing in that vacuum where I searched for reason was my own rage.

In shock, my body wracked with a sickly shiver, interrupted by an arm on my shoulder. It was a man I had come to recognize as a regular at the gambling hall.

## *Rules of the Campfire*

“Hey look, it’s the seed kid!” he said. The crowd pressed in on me. “Sorry ’bout your dog, kid. He was a good dog.”

“My dog?”

“Squashed his head flat with one foot,” he grinned. “Go see. Brains all over the alley.”

I didn’t know if I was more shocked at the gleefulness of the delivery or because he didn’t express regret about Vandī. It didn’t matter. I had no time for paralyzing outrage. Sami was alone with a monster.

After one step toward the restaurant, I changed my mind and ran down the alley, letting out a primal scream of rage when I ran past the body of Mr. Bone. I was still screaming when I leaped over the fence, ran through the yard, and into the shop. Vandī’s sharp cleaver was still there, coagulating blood cooling on its surface.

I picked up the bloody blade and ran toward the ogling crowd. It gave me pleasure that they mistook my intentions. Some of them screamed. I couldn’t help but notice how abruptly their attitude changed when they thought it might be their own head about to be taken. My path cleared in front of me as I ran past them and back to the restaurant.

In hindsight, I could have come up with a better plan than running and screaming through the streets with a bloody cleaver. I was rushing headlong into the worst of it. Soon, I would feel like a fool with a butterfly net, trying to catch a mammoth jumping off a cliff.

“Asitr?”

“Yes Bill?”

“We have station identification and national news. We’ll be right back to our madman with a cleaver in just three minutes.”

\* \* \*

## ***THE BILL ELLIOTT SHOW*** **ON AIR TUESDAY**

“Okay. We are back. I don’t know about you guys listening at home, but I am getting a serious case of tingling neck hair. I didn’t



expect so dark a tale in your first life, Asitr. What type of artifact are you going to produce from this story?

“Artifact?”

“Evidence. You know, the promised proof of your tales?”

“From this story? No, but listen to the BBC Asian report tonight. They are going to air a segment mentioning your show. I believe what they talk about will be another proof of my truthfulness. You will be surprised.”

“My show, mentioned on the BBC? Why? Never mind, I’ll check it out. Everybody else keep your dial tuned right here.”

“You needn’t worry Bill. I think the Asian report will air just after your show ends.”

“Okay, Astir. Let’s get back to the story. How does your mission with a bloody meat cleaver become a fool’s errand with a butterfly net?”

“I get arrested for madness in public and murder. Madness and murder.”

“Take a breath Asitr. Tell us the rest.”



# SONGS IN A BOX

BOOK TWO FROM "STORIES IN GLASS"

PAUL S. MOORE

*This time, the enemy is human.*

On a trip to spread his Grampy's ashes in the Amazon, John "Lockjaw" Smith finds love, and a renewed sense of purpose, in the person of Willa Vernon, a lady haunted by her past association with a group of eugenic maniacs.

On the return trip, they add a passenger. She is a delightfully unique "ninety-year-old hyperactive child" with eyes like a jaguar, muscles like a howler monkey, and the mind of the Savant. She names herself Dorothy, after the fictional balloon traveler to a place called Oz.

Dorothy knows the world only from stories, yet she is the only person alive with the ability to save the world from Willa's old employers. She has thirty days to solve a puzzle.

The maniacs have a head start of more than a century. It's not fair. Poor maniacs. Oh, well. A little mass murder could even the playing field again.

*Visit our website for more information about  
the "[Stories in Glass](#)" series.*

## INTO THE WORLD

**J**OHAN 'LOCKJAW' SMITH HAD A HISTORY of being in situations where good outcomes never came easy. When Dorothy produced the helicopter key and began speaking in excellent English, his mind went straight to looking for the big ugly surprise.

It was Willa who jumped into the moment and seized it. The woman, who spent a good part of her career interviewing modernized tribes kept in tribal preserves and dreamed of studying uncivilized people in their natural environment, didn't waste a moment to abandon her dream. "What are we waiting for?" she asked. "Forget all the camping gear. Let's hop on the bird and fly."

Dorothy sprinted ahead of them, excited. In the moment, she reverted to her tribal language, whooping in a tone full of awe, "I see world!"

The helicopter started with a cough and sputter. Lock continued to expect something to go wrong and Willa scanned the rocks for naked, horny, little men, waiting to grab her and welcome her into the tribe. Dorothy climbed on top of the golden bull in the

*Songs in a Box*

back and pressed her face to the window. "Up, up," she said. "Over the rainbow."

Not another word came from Dorothy until, after skimming the sea of green, the helicopter flew past a river village. It was the buildings that got Dorothy excited. They were the largest structures she had ever seen. "Is New York?" she asked.

Reverting to her tribal speech made Dorothy seem child-like. Willa was both charmed by her and scared for her. Her stomach squirmed, and she paused before answering the question. "No, no," she started, "New York is ..." A pang choked Willa in mid-sentence. "New York is bigger."

"Up bigger? To throw paper from high-up on Buffalo Child Long-Lance?"

"Yes, but in every way, much bigger. Too big for us."

"Oh, I see. Too big for me. Many people might not like me. I would try hard. I would smile and show both my teeth. They will see I can be often friendly."

"Everyone will love you, Dorothy." Willa spotted another village and pointed. "Look at this one."

Dorothy pressed her face to the window again, remaining wordless beyond the occasional, sudden 'ooh', as each village they passed grew bigger than the last. When they approached a village with a double rainbow arching over its center, she broke her silence, screaming suddenly like a teenage girl. "Over the rainbow! We fly over the rainbow!"

Lock turned and flew straight at the twin arches, but he let Dorothy know the rainbow was like the Savant. "It will hide when we get close. Watch it start to melt away. Before we can fly over it, we will scare it off."

"Then fly away. Let the rainbow alone, to stay pretty."

Willa leaned into Lock. "Dorothy's a rainbow, John. We can't take her to the airport. They'll separate us."

"We have another option, babe. We're going to Sam's island."

"Pineapple Sam? He has an island?"

"He owns it. His wife's tribe lives on it."

"You've known him awhile? You can trust him?"

“He flew the big helicopter at the Grand Canyon when we captured the Shem.”

Willa relaxed, as miles and miles of green floated by. She was grateful for time to think about how to fit Dorothy into the world, but couldn't ignore time was running out to come up with a plan. The villages were crowding closer together as they flew nearer to civilization.

Lock passed over villages big enough to be called towns. Next, bright lights ahead hinted of the first large mainland city. It was the landmark he was looking for. He veered toward the Panama islands zone, leaving the glow of Panama City at twilight on his left, a sunset behind him, and dark clouds straight ahead.

Dorothy had seen many a wonderful sunset. She saw seasonal storms up close and personal. She had never seen a glow over the land like the lights of civilization. “How big is their campfire?” she asked.

Willa focused on the cloud ahead of them. The sky turned suddenly, deeply, darker.

Behind them, a fierce red sun sprayed orchid and mango splashes onto the blue-sky palette. Normally, the display would have been the star of the show. On this evening, it wasn't even a distraction.

“We're heading into a storm,” Lock called out. “I need to fly under the clouds.” With one eye on the gas gauge, he decided not to circle and wait out the storm. He checked his GPS and relaxed. “Less than four miles,” he called out. “We're going in.”

Willa sat back in her seat, recoiling from a cloud in front of them. “It looks alive,” she said. “Scary.”

Dorothy didn't seem to notice the oncoming storm. She was losing her adrenaline and starting to let worries close in. Why do people need to make such big fires? Why is New York too big for me? Does God want me to stay where he put me? Why did I come? Why am I here? Who will like me and give me a home?

Nervously, she began to rub the etchings on the head of the golden calf, realizing her adventure wasn't going to be all berries and fish. Tracing the odd lines with her finger, she thought she noticed a pattern and looked closer.

## *Songs in a Box*

A sudden flash of light, so white it burned the eyes, turned the sunset to pastel and everything else to black and white. Lightning surrounded the helicopter and crackled, leaving behind the smell of burning hair. The dome light went dark.

Dorothy squeezed her eyes tight, still scratching nervously at the idol's etched head. She opened them briefly when Lock told her it was going to be okay. "I see the island up ahead."

A stubborn, lingering flash of light from a far-off burst illuminated the inside of the cabin, and Dorothy saw the etchings she had been tracing. "Is something," she called out, then she screamed when the startling boom of the distant lightning rattled the helicopter.

"Yep, this is really something," Lock shouted above a loud push of wind and the sudden slapping of rolling rain curtains diving into the windshield.

"The shiny beast, it is something." Dorothy shrieked at another burst of lightning surrounding the helicopter and dove over the seat into Willa's lap, no longer caring about etchings on a golden cow. "God doesn't want me to fly!" she shouted.

"It's only lightning!" Willa screamed the words without realizing it. Her attempt to comfort Dorothy came across as a cry for help.

The helicopter swayed in the wind gusts from nose to tail rotor, making several sudden, short drops and recoveries. Finally, the view through the pilot's windshield showed a narrow sandy spot of beach with jumping waves and bending palms. Through the rhythmic bands of window-slapping sheets of water, the beach looked like it was darting back and forth, closing too fast, then ... *whoomp*.

The helicopter came down hard. The ground was soft but uneven. A sudden tilt brought a blade into contact with a bending palm, and the helicopter whipped a half turn, then suddenly stopped. The inertia pulled Lock and Willa sideways in their seat belts. A flash of gold caromed off the back of Willa's seat and the idol burst heavily through the passenger door of the copter. A screaming Dorothy followed.



Big fists of raindrops, pushed into the cockpit by wind, belted Lock and Willa in their face while they attempted to reorient themselves to the tilted, motionless helicopter. Willa covered her eyes and looked through the slats of her fingers. In a flash of lightning, she caught a snapshot of Dorothy flailing in a low cluster of palmettos.

Lock opened his door and it flew out of his grip, blown by the wind howling through the missing passenger door. When he tried to climb out, he couldn't lift himself off his seat. He thought he must have been paralyzed, until his shock cleared and he realized he was still wearing his seat belt. When he unlatched his belt, he slid toward Willa.

"Hang on to something," he yelled, "I'm going to undo your seat belt."

"Dorothy's stuck in the ... Ow!" Willa screamed when she braced herself with her foot, and a sharp pain stabbed her ankle. Her pain cry echoed extra loudly, because the wind stopped suddenly. The howling was gone. So too, were the big lights on the helicopter. Two blinks and they went dead. Only the red flashers kept working.

The rain continued to fall, but down, not hard and sideways. Chill crept into their bodies, and worry for Dorothy filled the places where fear had been. Before they could even call her name, she ran up to them, hair full of orange sand, body scraped by palmetto leaves, and a trickle of blood running with the rain from her nose and dripping off her chin. She had a message for them.

"Mushka! Thank you, that was new for me." She walked in circles, voice excited, arms flapping. She was rambling in shock. "Would I fly one more time? I will wait first. No! Not wait. I will not fly starting now." She pounded her tiny fist into her palm for emphasis. "I will never fly again. Hooga mushka! God has put me right here in the rain, and right here in the rain I will live. I am home. I choose to see only the world I can see with my feet on the ground." She ended her declaration by clasping her hands under her chin, rolling her shoulders forward, bowing her head, and shivering from her knees to her lips.

Willa, hopping on her good leg, retrieved her laptop from the floor of the helicopter, then pulled her suitcase to the ground and

*Songs in a Box*

sat down, opening it in the rain. "You need to put something on," she said.

Dorothy chose the white cotton skirt Willa wore on the beach the night Lockjaw approached her. She tried wearing the skirt over her head like a cowl, then draped loosely off her neck, and finally, over her shoulder and wrapped around her waist.

After she pronounced herself satisfied, Willa told her she looked like Mahatma Ghandi.

"Is she pretty?" asked Dorothy.

Willa was saved from answering by the approaching glow of flashlights.

# BALLS IN PLAY

BOOK THREE FROM "STORIES IN GLASS"

PAUL S. MOORE

*Is it true that heroes are made, not born?*

Does the right stuff come out of hiding when we recognize the moment the game is on the line? Who will come off the bench to save the world from itself? In these times, it's good enough just to force the game into extra innings.

Otis McKinney, Dr. Henry Milton, an embattled Panamanian tribe, a failed baseball prospect, a dedicated cab driver, and the Asmudi family walk into a club ... It sounds like the first line of a joke. This club is no joke. They're playing for all the marbles.

In a chain, stretching from before the Great Flood and into tomorrow, the weakest link is up to bat and he doesn't know the game rules until he makes them up in the last inning.

*Visit our website for more information about  
the "[Stories in Glass](#)" series.*

## 6

### *I TRY TO BE CLEAR*

OTIS OPENED HIS EYES TO THE SIGHT OF SPINNING CEILING FANS, fuzzy in both thinking and vision. Breathing in the odor of stale beer and cigarettes had the effect of smelling salts. His attention turned to a woman leaning against a long, curved bar. Cigarette in one hand, highball glass in the other.

“So, Dude, why are you here?” The woman sloshed her drink in a circle and watched the ice spin while waiting for an answer.

Otis pulled himself into a sitting position and glanced around the room before he answered. A middle-aged man, possibly a bartender, stared at him from behind the bar, his chin resting on his hands. A man in the doorway stared as well, his weight resting against the handle of the shovel that gave Otis his headache.

Something was off in the décor. The painted piano sat in the right spot. The curved bar and hookahs added legitimacy, and the ceiling fans looked right. The big-screen TV and wall hangings were out of place. The room itself was too small to replicate *Rick's Café Americain*.

## *Balls in Play*

Otis pulled his body onto a chair and moaned, "Why am I here? The question is getting old. Why greet me with a shovel to the face? I came to talk."

"To me? You want to talk to me?" The woman tossed her head back and poured the drink down her throat, catching an ice cube with the last drops. She bit down, and the sound of ice being crushed mingled with her words. "Hit me again with the ginger ale, Mr. Velas. Yes to the *Brain slap*, no to the ice."

Otis responded energetically to the bartender's name. "Velas! From movie night and ... and ..." His voice trailed off into uncomfortable silence. He wiped a dripping line of blood on his lip before continuing. "Dorothy mentioned you. She says you came to the guesthouse when Mr. Wally ... You saw Dorothy on the day ..."

Velas stiffened, his mouth worked into a sneer. "That was not me, *brujo*."

"I understand. Dorothy told me what happened." Otis extended an arm to the woman at the bar. "And you," he said, "Huana. I'm happy to know you survived the war. We need to talk."

On the last bar stool, behind the final curve of the counter top, in the shadow of a decorative pillar where Hollywood movie actors sat in secrecy while they monitored the comings and goings through the front door of the fictional Casablanca gin joint, a light flared. Otis turned his attention to the corner in time to see a silhouette appear in the glow of an inhaled cigarette.

"You have me confused with my sister," a voice from the shadow said. "Caspi's the pretty one."

A face moved slowly into the light, a cigarette dangling from the lips and an eye patch over the left eye being the features that first stood out. A young woman in red sweatpants and a yellow T-shirt hopped off the bar stool and walked toward Otis. A large scar at the corner of her mouth and the offset slant of a poorly repaired broken nose made the threat of the large butcher knife in her hand feel very viable. "I'm Huana," she said coldly. "Would you prefer your tombstone to read Dead Bitch, or do you want to give me your name?"

"Otis Beckley. I'm Otis Beckley, I have reservations."

Velas answered, "We don't have a Beckley coming."

"I'm listed as Milton. His secretary was going to call."

Caspi laughed. "That information would be handled on the mainland, at the dock. You're two days early. How did you get here without taking the boat?"

"I'm a friend of Mr. Lockjaw. I came to talk."

"Did you know Willa? Was she your friend?" Huana ran her finger over the blade of the knife. "Where did you beach your boat, Mr. Beckley/Milton?"

"I don't have a boat."

"Yep. He's one of them," Velas drawled. "Want me to set up for video or just dump him in the swamp?"

Huana walked to Velas and set the knife on the bar. "Set up the video equipment," she said. "Splice the acetaminophen discussion from Mr. Wally's flash drive onto the execution video and upload it from Sam's laptop. They'll get the message."

Otis slumped in his chair. "Test me. I can tell you things the X-Club doesn't know. I know you helped bury the shiny beast near the helicopter crash. I can show you which of the wall hangings in the bar were made by Dorothy. I think I'm here to finish her work."

Like a projector freezing on a frame, the silence in the room seemed to wrap around the frozen movement. The people around Otis held tight to their place in the room and gave no indication they even breathed. The stillness lingered until the ash from Huana's cigarette fell to the floor and she asked, "What was my intelligence report on the day we knew we were at war?"

Otis searched his memory. "I don't have the mind of a Savant, so pardon me if I don't get it word for word, but you told Dorothy the news about Lock and Willa. You said you wet your pants, Caspi was going to be raped, Dorothy was going to be dissected like a frog, and everyone was going to die. Close enough?"

Caspi and Velas looked toward Huana. Otis glanced toward the door and noticed the man with the shovel leaning toward her as well. It was clear that only Huana knew if he'd given the right answer. Smiling in relief, he felt confident enough to add a phrase Huana would be familiar with.

"I try to be clear."





# SEEKER

THE UNWOVEN TAPESTRY: BOOK ONE

MORGAN CHALUT

*Does the need for knowledge balance its burden?*

Donovan would prefer to die in his bed, but circumstances might force him to do otherwise.

When Donovan is tasked with Retrieving a young child thought to be a magus — the most powerful magic user in any generation — he is thrown headfirst into a world of intrigue and deception where any move he makes could be the one that shifts his people into a position of bloodshed and failure.

There is a war brewing, centuries old. The Hunters, blood mages and child-snatchers fight the born mages, people of the Order, the school of magic and scholarly pursuit. Donovan must learn who and what to trust and how to endure suffering as he finds more and more about the nature of this endless war and what he can do to stop it.

*Visit our website for more information about  
“[The Unwoven Tapestry](#)” series.*

# 1

**D**ONOVAN WOKE WITH THE DAWN, a moment before Lucas's breathing changed, indicating his rise into wakefulness as well. Habit was hard to break. The younger man groaned, yawned hugely and rolled to his feet. He washed his face with water from the basin provided while Donovan slid out from under the blanket, feeling much better than the night before. It would be hard to feel worse.

He dressed quickly, the sights from his Seeking still vivid in his mind. If he and Lucas hadn't arrived so late last night, they'd have the child already, and be on their way to the Order by now. Still, haste bred mistakes. It had taken them a few days of riding to get here; Hunters could already be close.

Lucas was better with a blade — and any kind of combat — but both sheathed a regulation foot-long knife into their high boots. Lucas wore a short sword as well. Any time the two ran into trouble, Donovan's job was to run with their charges, while Lucas faced down the problem. Together for nearly six years now, they were a good team, Retrieving children with magic and bringing them to the Order

for training. When word had come that there might be a magus in Philipa, they were the obvious choice — or so they'd been told. Donovan didn't want to get his hopes up: magi were beings from legend these days.

"Ready?" Lucas asked, running a hand through his shaggy hair. He'd lamented the need to get it cut, but they hadn't had time. Safe within the walls of the Order after their last Retrieval, they'd had about half a day to prepare before being sent out once more.

"Ready," Donovan confirmed. He opened the door to the hall.

Their room was reserved for Retrievers, but a call and response were required for it to be supplied. It wasn't safe for innkeepers to be so obvious in their support of the Order these days. When Hunters came through, they weren't generally picky about who got in the way.

Still, he and Lucas had been to Philipa before — twice now — and Hanover was nearly a friend. He and his daughters made good money in the horse-town, housing merchant-visitors in their three-story building. They each nodded to him while he took inventory behind the bar, and made their way into the chilly, fresh air.

A woman lay asleep by the porch, a bottle in her hand showing her penchant for celebration. Despite the early hour, the town was not entirely still. The smells were the same as when they'd arrived: the almost-overpowering scent of horse overlaid with iron, smoke, leather, oil, grain, and dung — but it was dampened now with last night's dew laying over everything. It would snow any day now, and the overcast sky was heavy with promise.

Donovan shivered, rubbing his chest and arms with futile effort through his coat. Lucas gave him a sympathetic look. He loved winter like Donovan loved summer, but he didn't have aching joints to worry about yet.

The entrance-gate wasn't far, and they could see the seven-foot stone wall that encircled the town. Not that it was much of a circle anymore. Through the generations, as the town had expanded, it had been knocked down in places to allow for the growth, and rebuilt as needed. A determined person wouldn't struggle to gain entrance, but anyone trying to steal one of the town's famous horses would have a difficult time of it.

They passed soldiers in red uniforms doing their rounds. One stopped by the unconscious woman to nudge her awake and send her home. This town had plenty of guards; merchants were always willing to pay their taxes if it meant more security for their wares.

Shops were coming to life as the owners or apprentices hung brightly colored flags to catch the eye and encourage buyers to visit. The brothel across the street from the inn was asleep, most of its business done by now. The balcony was bare, and the musicians quiet. A few men and women stumbled out, yawning, heading home or to work.

Lucas looked relaxed as they walked, but Donovan knew he was keeping a clear eye on everything. Despite his youth, he'd proven time and again to be far more capable than almost anyone else Donovan had worked with during the last sixteen years Retrieving.

They made their way past the shops toward the guardhouse, twisting and turning down the streets until the squat building revealed itself. Soldiers coming off duty were leaving in small packs — none looked especially friendly — but Donovan put out a hand to catch their attention.

One young man stopped, his friends carrying on without pause. He frowned after them but asked, "Help you, sir?"

"Who is the commanding office on duty, please?"

"Gallagher."

Lucas grunted involuntarily and the soldier smirked. "Aye, that's our love of him as well. Might have better luck with whatever you need if you wait a few hours for Vandò to come on duty."

Donovan smiled. "We'll take our chances. Thank you."

The guard carried on, jogging to catch up with his friends, while Donovan and Lucas continued the opposite way. The guardhouse door stood open, with benches available for waiting. The inside smelled strongly of honey, cedar, and sweaty feet. The main room had several desks: some with tired bodies bent over them, soldiers finishing reports of the night's work. Others were home to a dozen fresh-faced soldiers, starting their day with mugs of steaming beverages and hand-held food. Donovan heard shouts from the back of the building: recruits were being put through their paces.

Lucas grinned wickedly at the sound. He'd briefly joined the military as his mother and siblings had done, but found Retrieving more to his preference. With his magic and skills, he could have climbed the ranks easily, but Lucas had confessed to Donovan early on that he didn't do well under that kind of strict authority. Besides, he loved children and planned to be a father. What better use of his abilities than Retrieving?

They took the familiar path to the office of the on-duty officer and Donovan gave the open door a gentle tap-tap with his knuckle.

"Yes?" came an impatient growl. Commander Gallagher wore his uniform sharply and his beard and mustache were both barely flecked with gray on his weathered face. His desk was crowded, but neat. The wall behind him held a map of the surrounding area, cleanly drawn with notes written here and there. A filing cabinet stood against the wall by the window, covered in small nicks as if regularly used for target practice. Two chairs sat before his desk, but they looked rarely used, the guards left standing, and the civilians taken care of in the front room.

"Who're you?" Gallagher demanded.

Lucas gave a charming smile. "We received notice that a mage was in need of Retrieval." He twisted his heel out slightly to show the knife sheathed there. The blades had plain grips and pommels, but if you knew what you were looking for ...

"You're Retrievers?" Gallagher asked, a touch of fear pushing his tone from irritated to angry.

Donovan nodded. "We'd like to know where our charge is, and we'll be out of your way within the hour."

Gallagher grunted and pushed his chair back from the desk to open a drawer and finger through the crowded files within. Donovan contained his irritation. This man's counterpart usually had the information immediately at hand, ready for their arrival. Bad timing.

"So what are you, then?" Gallagher asked, picking through the pages.

Lucas's eyebrows rose and he looked at Donovan in disbelief.

"I'm a Seeker," Donovan answered calmly.

It wasn't exactly rude to ask, but it was generally accepted that it was the mage's place to offer information about their magic first, if they chose.

"And you?"

Lucas flashed another winning smile. "I'm a Healer. Always happy to assist." His tone was too bright, and Donovan hid his amusement. Lucas had no time for petty people, but was always the consummate professional.

Gallagher held out a file, but neither of them moved for it. "Well?" he demanded, shaking the stiff paper.

"Generally a phrase is offered up, which we reply to appropriately," Donovan said carefully as he took the file. He flipped it open to confirm what little they'd been told.

"Who has the time?" Gallagher rolled his eyes. "All you need should be there. Have a good day." He sat back down behind his desk.

"The reason for the code, Commander, is to make sure that we're the appropriate people to Retrieve the children. Otherwise, you could be handing them over to anyone claiming to be what they're not."

Lucas's tone was patient, but Donovan could hear the anger seething underneath. This was a matter of life and death.

"Anyone like Hunters?" Gallagher asked in the same tone.

"Exactly like."

"People like them only come here because of people like you. Take all the mages you want, but do us the favor of not bringing them back."

"You —" Lucas started.

Donovan put a hand on his arm, "Thank you. We'll dispose of the record ourselves once we've cleared the boy's contract."

"Fine." Gallagher had already dismissed them in his mind and had gone back to what he was doing when they had arrived.

Out front, Lucas let out a great puff of air, steaming in the cold. "That piece of trash is going to get people killed."

"We'll report him when we get back. There's no doubt he isn't following protocol and he'll be dismissed, with someone responsible put in his place. We can't do anything about it now."

“By stone, I can. I can rip his elbows off and make him juggle! UGH.” Lucas kicked at a stone and shook his hands violently. After a moment he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. “You said we needed to clear the boy’s contract. He’s indentured?”

Donovan smiled at how quickly his partner came back to business. “He’s working as a hostler’s apprentice, so that makes things easier.”

“Much,” Lucas agreed.

Instead of taking the child from his family and standing by through the tearful goodbyes, or being offered more than they could fairly take, or having to fight angry relatives who didn’t agree with the decision to send the child away, they only needed to use Order funds to buy the boy’s contract.

They set off at a fast pace both to complete their task, and to keep warm.

“I want to Seek again before we go,” Donovan said.

Lucas looked at him in surprise. “Oh?”

“If the Order knew that the boy was a magus, as the report suggests, then someone else would know, send it off to the Hunters, especially if that Gallagher didn’t keep it to himself. You know how rumors can fly around a place like this. I don’t like that I didn’t See any last night.”

“Better the enemy you know than the one you don’t, right?” Lucas said thoughtfully. “If they have a seat at the shop, you might be able to do it there with little disruption.”

“That’d be the preference.”

“All right, we’ll ask. The boy can pack while you Seek and we’ll collect our horses after.”

“We shouldn’t have left our gear in the room.”

“You’re very nervous all a’sudden.”

“I have the bad feeling we might need to run.”

Lucas put a hand to his sword. “It won’t be the first time.”

They passed a dozen shops as they returned toward the front of town, all of them with invitingly warm glows. The noise increased as they got closer, stamping and whinnying from the probably hundred stalls inside. This was the larger of the two stables, but the



second was across the street, adding its own sounds and smells to the cacophony.

A large sign, made of very thick and colorful glass in red, blue, green, and yellow swung gently out front. A couple of horses peeked out into the fresh air from open stall windows, whickering at passerby.

It was already busy, even at this time of the morning, though Donovan knew from experience in this town that the population of buyers would only grow. He couldn't imagine what it took to run this place as he looked for the owner through the crowds.

"Help you, sirs?" a young boy asked. He might have been twelve — or a scrawny fourteen — with shaggy blond hair and a bright grin.

"We're looking for the owner," Donovan told him above the sound.

"Looking to buy? I can show you the beasts if you like — I know all about them. I'm in my sixth year apprenticed."

Donovan smiled at him. "No, we're not looking to buy. We just need to speak to the owner."

"Sure." He turned around and darted through the crowd.

Donovan and Lucas did their best to follow until they breached the press of humanity, away from the horse stalls, and into a back room of the building. It was much quieter here, but there was a regular stream of boys and girls running messages — offers, no doubt — on bits of paper.

When Lucas and Donovan arrived in the doorway, their little guide gestured to them with aplomb.

"Yes, yes, all right Ruben, go on. Gentlemen, I'm Garth Ward."

"Ruben?" Lucas asked for confirmation.

The boy looked at him.

"Is that Ruben Smith?"

"Why?" the boy asked suspiciously.

"Can you wait outside the door for just a couple of minutes while we speak to Master Ward, please?" Lucas asked him.

The boy looked at the stable owner, who nodded, and stepped out to close the door, eyeing them as he did so.

"Help you, sirs?" Garth asked.

"We understand you hold the contract for Ruben Smith," Donovan told him.

"I do. You're Retrievers?"

Donovan blinked. "Yes." He held up the file. "Gave it away?"

The stable master nodded. "My third apprentice taken in four years. I'd swear it's the shop. The last one swore he'd return, but I don't see that likely. He was an Empath, you know — very good with the customers."

Donovan flipped to a page of the file. "If you don't mind ..."

Garth sighed hugely. "I'll miss him around here — practically one of my own brood, he's been here long enough."

"Six years, he said," Lucas mentioned.

"Mother sold him to me when he was just barely eight. She'd found some beau and decided to pay off her debts and leave town. Still, he's one of my best I can easily say; got a real knack for the beasts." He signed the form and Lucas countersigned, handed it to Donovan, who tucked it into a pocket.

"Just his contract, then, and you'll be settled."

"Ruben!" Garth called. The boy came inside again.

"Aye?" he asked, arms crossed. "Did you sell me?"

"In a sort. These men are the Retrievers and they've come to claim you for the Order learning. You're getting proper schooling."

Ruben eyed them. "I thought you'd be bigger."

"Don't be a loaf, Ben. Go and get your things. They're in a hurry."

The boy ran off.

# SKY CHASE

BOOK ONE OF "THE FLIGHT OF SHIPS"

LAUREN MASSUDA

*Travel to a vast world of airborne ships and floating islands.*

The crew of *The Raging Storm*, led by 16-year-old Captain Cordelia, protects the floating Caelum Islands from strange creatures and criminals.

When Cordelia is poisoned, she must find the cure before time runs out. Her only hope is to join an alliance with a mysterious doctor — one who has carried a grudge against her father for years.

Not only will Cordelia have to race against time, but she will have to face the demons that keep invading her mind.

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“The Flight of Ships” series.*

# 1

## - CORDELIA -

**T**HE HORN'S BELLOW STARTLED ME AWAKE, and I snatched my boots at the foot of the bed. When I heard Flint yelling, "The Black Sting has arrived!" in a booming voice, adrenaline pulsed through me and I was out the door, but not before grabbing my crossbow. I swiftly loaded the arrows and kicked open the door that led to the upper deck. The morning sunlight blocked my vision momentarily, but, when everything cleared, I turned to the rouge-colored sky.

The Black Sting, a giant manta ray, soared about fifty feet above me and my crew, who had all spread out amongst the deck. The creature flew straight into the clouds and disappeared momentarily before engulfing the airborne ship in its shadow. Its fins slapped the wind currents and caused the white sails of *The Raging Storm* to tousle wildly.

The Black Sting's long, slender tail swished from side to side, cutting through a cloud that swiftly dispersed at its touch. I turned

## *Sky Chase*

to my crew members who had all gathered at the lower deck. They carried weapons that ranged from crossbows to swords.

I raised a hand and yelled: "Get into your stations! Fire at my command!"

"Yes, Captain!" the crew cried in unison.

The young men and women carrying crossbows hurried to the upper deck with me, while the others stood below in defensive stances. They raised their bows on accord and pulled back their postures slightly, awaiting my signal.

"Steady, steady!" I exclaimed.

The Black Sting swooped down, its fins expanded, gliding with the quick wind currents. Flint took the helm and veered the ship away, dodging the attack. The Black Sting swirled in a hastier circle, swooping around the rotating ship in a flash of blue and black. It released a screeching wail as it widened its oval-shaped mouth.

The Black Sting swept upward, spiraling like a whirlpool, going faster and faster until I finally yelled, "Attack!"

Arrows ripped through the air in streaks of silver, flickering in the morning light. The arrows pierced the creature's skin and threads of blood spewed out. The creature screeched, swerving to the left as more arrows whizzed like a rain of needles.

The Black Sting ducked under the ship and shoved its body into the keel, causing the ship to jolt and tilt sharply to one side. The crew skidded back, but held tight to the railing before they could topple out.

"Steer her straight!" I exclaimed, clenching a banister.

Flint maintained a tight grip on the wheel before steering the ship back into place. Everyone else, once taking a split second to get composed, rushed back into their positions just as the Black Sting flipped back towards the ship. It spiraled in at an incredible speed as its tail whipped into the deck, ripping out pieces of wood.

"Keep shooting!" I shouted, aiming my own crossbow at the Black Sting and firing.

The creature attempted to dodge, but arrows rained through the air in every direction. The Black Sting screeched and blindly soared forward into the ambush. The weight of its wings struck the men and women, knocking them down, but those who sustained

balance inflicted more damage upon the creature as it dove in one last attack. It thrashed its wing into one crewmember and knocked him over the deck's baluster.

"Mark!"

I rushed forward and grabbed his shirt before yanking him back on the ship. He stumbled to the floor, breathing fast while clutching his chest. Mark threw his head up at me. Relief washed over his freckled face "Th-thank you, Captain," he breathed out.

"Save the compliments for later," I said, and helped him to his feet.

"Y-yes, sorry," Mark rubbed the back of his head.

"Get back to your —" I paused as my attention flew to the sky. My blood ran cold.

The wounded creature fled the ship with its fins flapping frantically away. It soon disappeared behind the clouds, leaving behind wails that echoed throughout the spacious sky.

"It got away ..." Mark huffed. "What now, Captain?"

"We're going after it," I stated firmly and faced Flint at the helm. "Turn the ship around, we're going after the Black Sting!"

"Wait, Captain!" Eamon marched over to me, his olive skin glistening with sweat and his copper hair bouncing in the unceasing breeze. His dark green eyes were sunken with exhaustion.

But I pressed on and demanded, "Are you questioning my order, Eamon?"

My crew surrounded us in a wide semi-circle. They whispered amongst themselves, but I shot them a glare which settled them into silence.

"It's too late to catch up to the Black Sting," Eamon replied. "Besides, it's wounded and probably won't be able to attack for some time. Another ship should be able to kill it soon. We're not the only ones sailing the sky."

I grimaced and said, "We've been tasked to kill the Black Sting. No one else was asked to do so. If another ship gets all the glory, we'll lose credibility."

"Captain," Eamon said with composure, closing his eyes. "I assure you: we won't lose any credibility. But if you really want to

## Sky Chase

catch it ... why don't we take a break now and search later? We've been searching for three weeks and I'm sure you and the rest of the crew would like a rest."

I stared wordlessly at Eamon for several seconds with furrowed eyebrows. I didn't want to stop searching, but everyone was clearly exhausted from the fight, and it didn't help that it was the brink of morning. I, too, was exhausted, but I certainly would not show it to my crew. Plus, we had to fix the ship, and I didn't want to deal with any more damage if it got hit again.

As I huffed out a sigh and rubbed a temple, tension eased off my shoulders and I waved a hand dismissively. "Fine. We'll head back home, but it'll only be a short time until we return to our task."

"Thank you, Captain," Eamon said. "We're sorry we weren't able to kill the Black Sting."

"The next time we find it, we officially end it," I proclaimed, gritting my teeth. "That creature has been terrorizing islands and destroying ships. If we don't kill it next time, more lives will be lost and it'll be our fault." I turned on my heel and headed back toward my cabin. My buckled boots clinked into the floorboard. While I walked, I called to Flint, "Turn the ship west. We're heading home."

"Yes, Captain." Flint nodded and maneuvered the great vessel of *The Raging Storm* in the opposite direction.

Before I settled into my cabin, I turned back to my crew below. I noticed no one had taken any major blows; they were all able to stand on their feet despite having bruises and cuts. But just in case, I asked, "Did anyone get hit by the tail's tip?"

"I got hit by the tail, but not the tip. I'm good though," Bernard said, feebly rubbing his side and flinching at the pain.

"All right," I said, and then noted the broken pieces of wood scattered on some portions of the deck. "Those who aren't injured fix up the ship; those who are, rest up."

"Yes, Captain!" the crew exclaimed in unison.

I nodded and shut the doors of my cabin behind me. Stained glass decorated the slightly arched ceiling, giving the octagon shaped room a bright, vibrant touch. Morning sunlight streamed through the



glass and highlighted the map that filled the back wall. An oil painting of the world, it depicted the plethora of islands called the Caelum Islands, suspended above a field of clouds. There was no land below the clouds. The world was made of islands in the sky, and my home was Domus, the largest island. It rested right in the center of the painted map, with its name displayed in fancy cursive above.

The job of *The Raging Storm*, and dozens of other ships, was to protect these islands from creatures like the Black Sting and from criminals. Every ship had a captain to command, and I was the youngest one. I started my training when I was eight and I learned much quicker than anyone else.

I finally became captain at age thirteen, and this accomplishment made my crew and I fairly renowned across the world. But despite that, my father was never keen about the idea of me becoming a captain. My mother once was, but she was killed when protecting Domus from an invasion years ago.

When I told Father I wanted to become captain, he was wary about my decision, even before Mother was killed. The job of a captain was dangerous, after all, but I constantly assured him I could handle it.

I sat at my desk and collected some letters that I had purposely neglected to read. I didn't regret my decision when I finally got around to reading them. They were all from my father. He meant well, but he worried way too much about me. Before I could read them more in depth, a knock sounded at the door, followed by Eamon's voice.

"Can I come in, Captain Cordelia?"

"Yes," I beckoned, though my attention was on the letters. I heard Eamon entering the office and then the soft click of the door closing.

"What is it, Eamon?" I asked.

"Nothing. I was checking to see how things were going."

"Not too good." I inhaled sharply, slapping the letters onto the desk.

"What's wrong?"

"My father." I leaned back in the chair, rubbing a temple. "He sent me tons of letters asking about my well-being. Plus, he tells

me that Caleb's birthday's coming up and doesn't want me to miss it this time."

"Well, this is your family — of course your father would be worried. After all, you've been gone for almost a month, and you have a little brother, too. How old is he? Four?"

"Five. He'll be six in a week," I said briefly, adding more pressure to the temple.

"Oh, that gives us plenty of time to return home by then."

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. "Yeah, yeah ... might as well head back before Caleb throws another tantrum. Little brat ..." I muttered the last two words under my breath, but Eamon caught them.

"You shouldn't call your brother that, Captain. He's only a kid."

"An annoying one at that," I spat. "You don't have any siblings, so you don't know what it's like to have a brother who's ten years younger than you."

"I do have a few younger cousins though," Eamon noted. "Perhaps going back home will make you feel better. It doesn't hurt to visit family every once in a while. Even if you don't always get along with yours, they're always there for you."

"You're so sappy, Eamon." I rolled my eyes. "Never mind. We'll head back home, stay for a while, and finish our job afterward."

"And how long would a while be?"

"I don't know ... a day?"

"I think everyone would want more than a day — how about a week?"

"A week is too long. Three days tops."

Eamon sighed, defeated. "Fine. Three days."

"Good," I said. "Is there anything else you want?"

"No, nothing, Captain," Eamon said. "I only wanted to check if things were well with you."

"Everything will be well once that creature is dead," I exclaimed.

"It will be done soon, Captain," Eamon said. "Would it help if I make you some tea? It'll calm your nerves."

“Hmmm ... I’d like that, actually,” I considered with a small smile, then I added: “Make it mint.”

“Sure.” Eamon nodded.

While he walked off to make the tea, I leaned into my chair and caused it to tilt back. I closed my eyes, trying not to concentrate on anything while my focus latched onto the darkness within my eyelids. I inhaled and exhaled softly, and my body gradually relaxed. In the close distance, the sound of tea pouring into a cup comforted me, unlike the constant noise of my crew talking from outside. They were so loud, but soon their voices became nothing more but buzzes in my ears.

Soon the fresh scent of mint glided to my nose, and I opened my eyes. Eamon settled the cup of tea in front of me before taking a few steps back. My face lit up, and I picked up the cup. I sniffed it once more before taking a delicate sip.

“It’s good,” I commented.

“I’m glad to hear, Captain.”

Eamon started to leave, but then paused as he took notice of my desk. Letters and papers were strewn all over its cherry wood surface, and crumpled up pieces of paper lay abandoned on the carpet. Books stood piled on one side of the desk while maps lay sprawled on another. The actual surface of the desk was barely identifiable due to all the supplies swarmed across it in a huge collision. I’ve told myself that I needed to clean the desk, but I’ve never gotten around to it since I’m always occupied with more important matters.

“Can you promise me something, Captain?” Eamon asked. His tone had gotten unusually quiet.

“What?”

“Don’t do any more work for a while and sleep,” Eamon instructed calmly. “It’s not good for your health if you keep working nonstop.”

I pursed my lips and took another sip. The warm liquid flowed down my throat, leaving behind a minty-sweet aftertaste. I glanced down at the remaining liquid. I vaguely saw my reflection swaying in the subtle motion of my hand moving the cup.

“Fine.”

## *Sky Chase*

"You should also clean your desk," Eamon also suggested. "I don't think I've ever seen the surface."

I huffed and set the cup down with a soft clink. "Anything else before I kick you out?"

"Nothing," Eamon said. "I just want you to keep your promise."

"I said that I'd keep it, didn't I?"

"Yes, but —"

"You worry too much, Eamon." I got up from the chair and went over to rest a hand on his shoulder. "I'll rest and I'll clean up the desk. You should also get some sleep; there are circles under your eyes."

Eamon smiled. "I'll do that."

I patted Eamon's shoulder before rounding back to my desk. "If no storms come our way, we should be back home within two days. I'll reply back to my father and tell him we're heading home. We'll rest for three days, gather up supplies, and then return to the ship. After we kill the Black Sting, we'll come back home until our next task."

"Alright, I'll go inform the crew," Eamon said.

"Thank you." I smiled subtly and then waved him off. "You're dismissed."

Eamon saluted me before heading out of the cabin. I gazed up at the stained-glass ceiling before my eyes fell to the mess that was unfortunately my desk. I sighed and closed my eyes.

"Falling asleep would be easier than cleaning that desk," I muttered to myself.

My body relaxed into the cushion and tension eased from my muscles once I felt fully adjusted. The noise outside appeared to lessen.

"Finally, peace and —"

A shrill squeak interrupted my moment of bliss and my eyelids flew open. Eamon's pet ferret, Amabel, pounced onto the desk, causing papers to fly and a quill to roll off. The ferret continued to pounce until I grabbed it by the scruff of its neck. I shot up from my desk.

"Eamon!"

The doors flew open. Eamon burst in with a hand clutching his sword, as if some real danger had arose. But there was no danger, just an annoyance.

“What in the world is your ferret doing here?” I demanded, shoving the squirming rodent forward.

“I’m terribly sorry, Captain.” Eamon hurried over and took the ferret into his arms. “I don’t know how Amabel got in here.”

“You need to keep an eye out,” I retorted, glaring at the ferret that currently cuddled under Eamon’s chin.

“Sorry, Captain,” Eamon said, holding Amabel close to him. “I’ll make sure she stays in my cabin.”

“Good. Get back to your station. Now,” I ordered.

“Yes, Captain.” Eamon saluted me once more and quickly exited the cabin.

I huffed and glanced out of one of the windows. A speck of black flew in the distance like a fly crawling on the window’s glass. My eyes squinted. I wondered if it was the Black Sting ... or perhaps it was something else. Either way, I knew I shouldn’t dwell too much on it. I didn’t want to hear anymore of Eamon’s lectures.

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