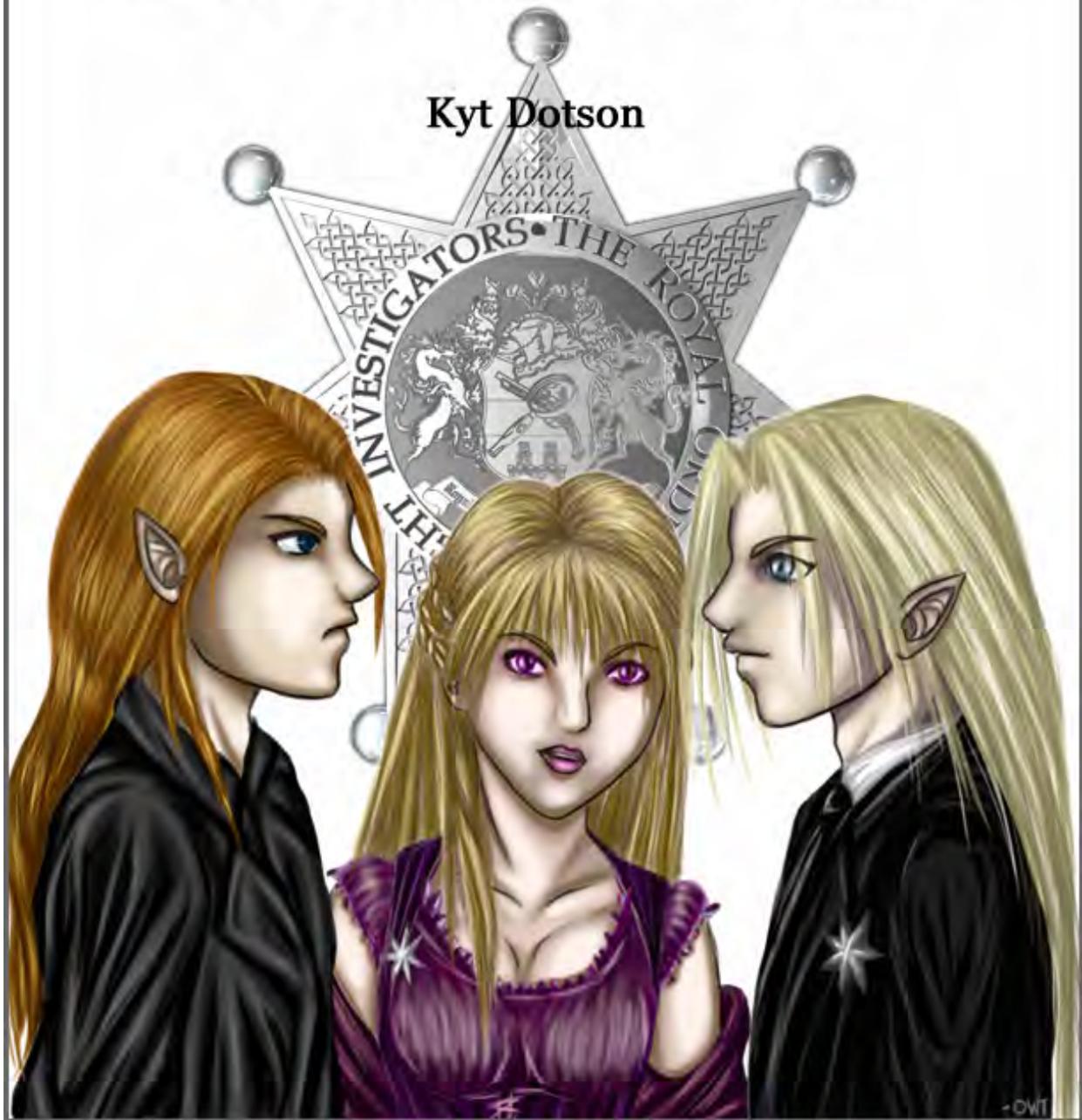


Perfume of Blood and Ashes

Kyt Dotson



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Published by iUniverse:
The Specter in the Spectacles

Available Online:
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of
Blood and Ashes

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for Djenna Hirshman

Through whom much of the world of the Knight Investigators was born.



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Prologue

An Assassin's Wait

Snow had begun to come down in fat, lazy flakes. It peppered the landscape in white and black as the troughs and valleys began to fill. It was an early morning hour and the crisp sunlight turned the snow to silver against the grey sky. Winter in the Deathspell Mountains of the Nightmare Lands was not something to be sniffed at; it could kill even the most experienced woodsmen within a few days.

The temperature had been dropping rapidly as the storm clouds rolled in. Hawthorne knew that he had little time to finish his task.

The mist would rise soon. It would start from the Deathspell River, far to the north, and slowly seep through the valleys of the mountains until it engulfed everything in that dead lit veil. The cold air of the snow storm would usher the mists before its winds and engulf the region in snow blind madness. A perfect killing ground.

Hawthorne had dressed himself in the wrapping white garb of the natives of the Deathspell region, only his eyes were visible as glints of reflection in the darkness of his cowl. This dress was necessary to protect his skin from the intolerant chill that would fall by midday when the storm came into its full fury.

His breath turned to white puffs as he toiled at the quickly vanishing dirt of the road. The road, if it could be called that, was really a back way path pounded down by years of use by carts and men on horses. The rock and dirt that made it was packed tight and resisted Hawthorne's shovel strokes tenaciously, forcing him to fight for every inch of soil that he removed.

2 *An Assassin's Wait*

When Hawthorne finished he surveyed his work. Three troughs had been dug into the road, the first one wide enough to cross the entire roadway, the other two ahead and smaller but spread far enough apart that they would match the breadth of a carriage. Snow was already beginning to fill them with its white luster, but Hawthorne had other plans for that snow.

Reaching into his pack, he removed handfuls of sea salt and spread it liberally in the troughs as the snow began to come down in thicker flakes. He then went deep into the woods near the road and started to add snow and salt to each of the ditches. Very quickly, the snow in the troughs began to melt and formed pools of water at the bottom. As more snow fell it melted into the water and the level rose.

After several minutes of work, Hawthorne had all three ditches filled; only a few more armfuls of snow remained to fill them to their brims. Nearby, hidden under the new fallen snow, three mats of thinly woven grass lay. He grabbed them and slid them over each trough, letting the grass float lightly on the surface of the water. The frozen grass was colder than the water it floated on and snow that landed on it stuck. The troughs quickly vanished under the sheen of the falling snow.

Pleased with his efforts, Hawthorne moved away from roadway and knelt down in the snow on the leeward side of a tree. He carefully unlimbered his rapier and one of his guns and set them side by side on the ground as he also laid his white cloth pack on the ground behind him. He would not need it for his upcoming performance. He unlashed the pack and from its confines withdrew a silver mask. It was a killing mask, suited perfectly for these situations. He carefully fit it onto his face and waited.

The assassin sat so still as to allow the snow to cover him. Soon he and his weapons were invisible against the staccato brilliance of the white forest. To the outside observer he would appear to be a snowman. Snowmen were a creation of sticks and snow by the natives of the Deathspell region that looked like men; they were designed to frighten travelers in their region and lead them away from encampments. There were many legends about them coming to life and slaughtering or leading travelers astray. Undoubtedly, those myths came from the activities of Sluagh assassins such as Hawthorne.

It took his quarry over two hours to arrive. During the time he waited the mists had arisen, covering the bleak landscape in a harsh breath of white. The presence of the mists gave the roadway a surreal cut-away look, as if the roadway were bounded by the woods on both sides, when actually the other side of the road fell away into a cliff of black rocks. All this became invisible in the fog, a blanket of false comfort.

In preparation, the Sluagh assassin put snow into his mouth so that his breath would not be visible in the cold air.

Two large horse drawn carriages trundled out of the fog and came into view. That was one more cart than Hawthorne had expected. There would possibly be sixteen men rather than simply eight guarding two carts. They were still a mere obstacle; it was the carts that were important, not the men.

He could see his estimation was accurate when seven men came into view marching alongside the carts; there would be seven more on the opposite sides where Hawthorne could not see them. They were three musketeers and four swordsmen. The Seileigh had not yet discovered the usefulness of camouflage accordingly they were wearing the faded blue uniforms of the Seileigh House Uther. They stood out from the terrain like blue birds caught in winter.

The first cart rumbled past Hawthorne's concealed location and the first of its wheels struck the lead trough.

The hours of dropping cold had allowed a crust of ice to form over the surface of the water hidden beneath the snow and the weight of the cart broke through with a splintering creak.

Hawthorne smiled; his plans had worked their best: the animal drawing the cart had not been heavy enough to break the ice.

The cart lurched violently and the driver fought to hold onto the reigns that controlled his animal. The horse neighed in surprise and rolled its eyes in fear, stamping up and down its mighty hooves, but the driver retained control and spoke soothing words to his animal. The cart had listed dangerously towards the cliff edge and the wheel was stuck in the rut. Hawthorne had hoped the wheel would break, but the Seileigh carpenters who built it had been good at their craft.

A shout went up amongst the Seileigh soldiers. Each and every one was sidhe by their looks: pointed ears, sharp features, and all the airs of that noble race. With that same grace they flowed forward with the calls and moved to assist the stranded cart, leaving the rear cart barely protected.

The men began to call out the *heave-ho* and that was when Hawthorne made his move.

A single stroke to the heart and the driver of the second cart slumped with the reigns. His death produced not a sound. Another stroke later and the beast that drew the cart was cut free; Hawthorne saw no reason the creature would have to suffer for its masters.

Silent upon the snow, he grabbed a large chain that he had set there a long time earlier for just this purpose and latched it to the top beam of the covered cart. Then he placed his foot against the nearby weight disguised as a rock. The heavy chain ran to the weight and the weight was placed upon a part of the road on the edge of the cliff and sat atop a sheet of ice. The weight slid easily and tumbled from the cliff, drawing the heavy chain and some particles of snow over the edge.

Hawthorne rolled beneath the toppling cart as it teetered over and also tumbled into the gorge.

By this time the soldiers were fully aware of the commotion and the strange absence of the other cart. The lead cart had been mostly extricated from its trap and the driver immediately urged his horse forward, away from the threat.

Before the soldiers could muster themselves and make ready, Hawthorne was upon them. Two fell instantly to twin blasts from his pistols and tangled the legs of their companions as they crashed to the frozen ground. To them, Hawthorne was just a blurry figure of white wearing a silver mask rushing at them from the depths of the snow and fog. Their fear gave them a momentary hesitation that served to save their lives.

Hawthorne did not have enough time to kill them and be certain of his mission.

The fleeing cart then struck the two narrower ditches and it lurched as once again ice broke and the wheels crashed. This time the weakened cliff-side wheel could not take the strain; it splintered under the force of the jarring stop. The cart creaked dangerously and the driver screamed as he crashed to the ground.

The assassin wasted no time cutting through the lashing that held the horse to the cart and then brought his boot down hard against the back of the broken wheel near the axel. The damaged axel creaked ruefully, crackled, and then snapped like a twig under the weight of the cart. The cart, without that wheel or axel to hold it up, keeled over to its side and promptly followed its companion into the misty depths below.

Already four of the musketeers had recovered themselves and four lethal barrels were leveled at Hawthorne. The gunmen shook as they waited for the billow of snow that had covered the assassin to clear. Then suddenly one of their number simply fired his gun, followed at once by his companions. The hesitation would bring them no shame; each man knew that they faced one of the Unseileigh Sluagh. To them, they faced a legend of the battlefields, that silver mask of death.

The spray of powdery snow cleared with a whisper of wind leaving the soldiers to stare at the downed corpse of the horse that had drawn the cart. Blood burned like a bright crimson banner against the purity of the snow.

The assassin was nowhere to be seen. He had vanished like a ghost into the winter.

4 *An Assassin's Wait*

Deep in a vale below, Hawthorne walked through the splintered wreckage of the carts. It was warmer near the edge of the cliff and snow that had settled on the long branches of the trees there was melting, dripping down into long icicles that overhung a frozen creek like a curtain of glass teeth.

The mellow scent of the fog and the sharp tang of wood smoke mingled as Hawthorne set the carts to the flame. There could be no evidence of what they carried left behind. The instructions for his mission were explicit about that.

He had removed his silver death mask and replaced it with one that was white and did not cover his chin or lips. This was not a time for killing so a mask that covered his entire face was not necessary. The new mask had ashen feathers about the sides and glistening elements shaped like snowflakes. Hawthorne had chosen it because it would help him hide more easily against the backdrop of white.

It was while he was unceremoniously destroying the carts by fire when a very small faerie came upon him. It was tiny creature called a never, closely related to the pixies who lived outside of the Nightmare Lands but subtly different for their adaptation to live in that harsh territory. The never halted herself at eyelevel with Hawthorne, she was tiny, less than three inches tall, and wore nothing.

She held in her tiny hands a small loop of ribbon which she dropped in Hawthorne's outstretched hand. Once she had deposited her gift she whisked away like a shot from a gun and vanished into the mist.

The ribbon held a simple message: "Return with all haste to the caerhold. News awaits your arrival."

The caerhold that quartered Hawthorne's garrison was concealed on the side of a mountain on the edge of the Deathspell mountain range. The very halls of the caerhold had been carved out of the living rock by a tribe of gnomes hundreds of years before the Unseileigh had taken up residence there, but it suited them just fine. Hawthorne found the dank atmosphere, lack of light, and general serenity of the secluded caerhold to his liking.

The wilding labyrinth of hallways offered him many locations he could move, places to hide, and a way to vary his routes and schedules so that he could not be easily tracked by his peers. The numerous exits allowed him to slip away unnoticed when he so chose. The very nature of the place set his paranoid psyche at ease by giving it numerous avenues to pursue.

Hawthorne's black cloak fluttered behind him as he stalked through the main hall. He had changed his mask yet again. This time he wore a mask more fitting to his station as Spymaster of Assassins. It was black and bleak as the night and covered with intricate Celtic knotwork. It was also a death mask; a Spymaster must always be prepared to kill.

Half way to the central chamber the stench of mold and damp changed subtly, the smell of fresh fruit blended with the usual dungeon scent. A shipment of new supplies had obviously arrived and their superiors had been gracious enough to supplement them with the niceties of the warmer climes.

Presently a new person joined Hawthorne in his trek towards the central chamber.

She was shorter than he by a head and also wore the flowing black cloak that was common fashion among Sluagh spies. He knew her instantly: his second in command, Esmeralda. Her mask as well was blacker than spite and etched with knotwork, but she wore hers not as a death mask but instead in a more social fashion as her chin and lips were not covered. Hawthorne knew Esmeralda only by the tone of her voice, the sound of her gait, and the suppleness of her red lips. Lips that were right now curled down into a frown.

“Agne is dead,” she said.

Hawthorne sighed and stopped in his tracks. His cape fluttered about his feet in a sullen wake.

“He was a good assassin,” he replied.

“I know that he was your pupil.”

“My best pupil, but in time we all meet our *nyrd* and *nyrd* meets us all.”

“I want the assignment.”

Hawthorne didn’t even look at her. “Your dedication is admirable, Esmeralda, but the assignment shall not go to you.”

“Who then?” She sounded angry, perhaps jealous.

“I am taking it.”

Esmeralda stopped, Hawthorne turned to look at her. An emotion played across her lips.

“That is your prerogative,” she said slowly. “Still, I urge you to reconsider.”

“You shall find the glory that you seek yet,” he said. “Just not this time.”

“As you wish, master.”

The assignment was simple: kill a Knight Investigator named Bridie MacFenna. So simple that three of Hawthorne’s best assassins had died attempting it.

It was in Agne’s reports that Hawthorne discovered the reason that she was such a difficult mark. Agne reported that Bridie was also a veteran of the Nightmare War. She had fought the Unseileigh on the front lines and undoubtedly encountered Sluagh soldiers during her tour of duty. This assignment was very difficult indeed. A perfect challenge for a master.

The reasons behind this assignment, Hawthorne also knew. For some time the Unseileigh had been smuggling powerful magical artifacts out of the Nightmare Lands and into the Mundane realm. Through their bumbling the Knight Investigator’s were coming dangerously close to the operation. This Bridie MacFenna, a Detective Captain, had stumbled upon something that she probably didn’t understand, but it was enough to galvanize the Unseileigh into requesting her assassination.

There was no mention of any other targets being included with Bridie but Hawthorne wasn’t so naïve to think that there weren’t. Other assassins had undoubtedly been sent to sow confusion in the ranks of the Investigators to lead them away from the actual reason for these deaths. What did cause him vexation, however, was why the Unseileigh weren’t willing to change their operations to avoid the Investigators.

Something big was going to happen soon. Soon being about six months. As that was the deadline set on the assignment. Apparently, his superiors had also anticipated it was going to be difficult.

Deep within the caerhold, sitting in his well hidden study, Hawthorne folded up the last of Agne’s reports and went to prepare to do something that he had only done twice before in his entire life: leave the realm of the Nightmare Lands.

Chapter 1

Bridie MacFenna

So, Hawthorne pretended himself a Seileigh and passed out of the Nightmare Lands and into the Mundane realm as a new and disguised man.

It was a strange experience for him. Shedding his mask was something never done among the Sluagh. Hundreds upon hundreds of Seileigh Faerie came to see Hawthorne's naked face, but all of them remained as much a stranger to him as another of the Sluagh, who never saw it. Invisible in plain sight, Hawthorne passed in and out of the memories of those hundreds.

The Seileigh lands in the Underhill were easy to infiltrate, even for someone from the Nightmare Lands. It did not take Hawthorne very long to book passage out of the Underhill and into the Mundane country of Ireland from where he made his way from the city of Galway to the city of New York. A place Bridie MacFenna called her home.

He set himself up as a clerk at a local noble House under the guise of a bastard low-born noble. It was the sister House to Bridie's, who also was a low-born noble. From there he set himself six months to complete his mission, if necessary. And he began to watch.

Also, being a clerk, gave him the reasonable expectation that he would interact with her in the background as something of a non-person. Since Bridie was one of the members of the House who was an Investigator she was given duties within the House's holdings to be liaison to them, and she reported to the House Watch which in turn ended with her reports crossing his desk. He was certain that the several times that she passed him in the hall or glanced at him in his office she hadn't really even seen him. Servants were invisible, even to the trained eye.

All of these factors gave him a chance to observe her without her realizing his intent. He was never so bold as to actually try to talk to her, however; that would have torn his fragile veil of non-

personhood asunder and left him open to her suspicious scrutiny. It was best to seem to be one of the cogs of the great machine that ran the House, an unimportant piece that only cared about its own little world and nothing else.

Hawthorne became fascinated by how intelligent and well versed Bridie was. How she capably balanced a wit sharper than a rapier and took her duties with a ruthless tenacity. She hunted down her targets with a brutal ease that would have been cherished among the Sluagh. She even once walked into an ambush, fully aware. The fury of blades and magic that she brought against her opponents left Hawthorne filled with awe. He even killed one of her ambushers—a sniper with a crossbow—because he wanted a better vantage and the sniper could have ruined the show.

Her reports and information to be added to the House records were eloquent, cultured, and extraordinarily intuitive. Hawthorne found himself examining her as if he were taking the measure of someone who was going to become one of his assassins or spies back in the Nightmare Lands. He could easily see why she had bested all of the other soldiers sent against her; she was a far superior creature to all of them.

Two months had passed and Hawthorne saw a break coming—but he dreaded his duty as a hunter might dread damaging a beautiful bird with a gunshot. Yet, Hawthorne was no stranger to regret, but some things could not be avoided.

A masked masquerade ball was coming in a week's time and she and he both were going to be in attendance. The type of ball was one where *glamour* would be used to disguise all of the patrons, but Hawthorne knew several cantrips for breaking those wards. He knew that she most like could be caught vulnerable at this event, making it the perfect time for him to conclude his mission.

So he made himself a date to the ball of a giggling trollop without more than two feathers in her head and set out to prepare his spells for that night.

Of course, the first thing that the girl he brought did was to lose herself in the crowd, but Hawthorne had expected that. It would leave him time to start his cantrips in motion—but they would take time to come into effect.

The first order of business at the Ball, oddly, was to take partners who were not those you came with, and waltz. Annoyed, but not foiled, Hawthorne permitted the first lark to fly his way to take his hand to the floor.

She was an averagely tall girl with a slight build wearing a mask of moon and stars. Some of all of this could have been illusion, but Hawthorne could not tell—it would be several hours before his cantrips could be used. So, he decided to have fun with his partner and committed her to the most complex waltz he could think of.

Hawthorne felt frustrated with having to end his assignment and could not but feel compelled to exercise some of that frustration out on one of these courtly tarts. Perhaps there would be amusement in letting her trip up and have to catch her.

To Hawthorne's amazement, however, she did not stumble. Her rhythm was poor and uncertain at first, but her balance was perfect. Quickly she regained her grace and started to follow his movements with a perfect ease.

Curious, Hawthorne asked, "Where did you learn to dance like this?" Yet her reply was vexing: "From you."

With those words, his partner pressed her hands against his and turned, taking the lead in the waltz.

"Follow and learn from me," she said.

Hawthorne found himself pulled into motion and it took all of his deft skill to follow her lead. Together they twirled in the music and he bore every ounce of his concentration not to fall short of the example she had shown him.

It was a glorious eternity of kaleidoscope beauty and elegance that held Hawthorne and his partner at the center of a universe of masks, colorful fabric, and gaiety. It was a feeling of freedom that he had never experienced before.

As quickly as it had begun, the waltz came to an end. Simmering down like confetti caught in a whirlwind would settle down onto the ground afterwards.

In the strange silence that passes over crowd after a great event she pulled herself close to him. Hawthorne could see, in the hush, that they were standing in a clearing of the floor where other dancers had paused and given them room.

“And now, you have learned from me,” she said, whispering in his ear. “My secret is that I did not come with my lover, but another instead, because he is away and has been for some time.”

Hawthorne was taken aback. He had nearly forgotten that part of the waltz—pick an unknown partner at random, dance with them, then tell them a secret. Like any other information, her secret was a clue to who she was.

Before replying, Hawthorne glanced at her hand that was resting on his shoulder, her left hand, and it bore a ribbon of metallic silver. How careless, he chided himself, for not noticing that before. It was a *carriad* ribbon, and a silver ribbon meant high nobility. He was waltzing with none other than the Lady of the House. It was said that her husband had abandoned her for another, but as tradition required she waited. That time would be up soon.

Carefully choosing his words, Hawthorne replied, “I too arrived with one who is not my lover as I am not taken. She abandoned me as soon as she entered the ball, so while I would not like it be known, I am now without a partner.”

She smiled at that and shifted her weight. “My companion has also seen fit to leave me hanging in the wind, would you serve as my escort for the rest of the ball?”

Hawthorne felt that he could hardly refuse a request from the Lady of the House, and he had no reason to. So he acquiesced, pleased with this development.

She proved not only to be an expert dancer, but also at conversation when she began to quiz him about his skill during the waltz. She returned far less information that she got, nodded at the appropriate places and laughed at the appropriate times.

She was a bonnie girl with a bright and inquisitive mind and waltz after waltz she kept Hawthorne on his toes. Both in matters of his feet as well as by matters of the tongue.

Hawthorne found it difficult to appease her; as she had no patience for trifle talk and preferred to engage the discussion on a level of complexity that fit her style of waltz. He did his best that he might impress her, but he did not lie, nor lead the conversation astray—as Hawthorne figured that this Lady possessed an innate sense that would have ferreted him out should he attempt to deceive her. Furthermore, Hawthorne did not want to deceive her; he had come to respect her too much to do so. As such he gave as good as he got by both philosophy and dexterity.

For a time, they sat out of the waltzes and continued their discussion in hushed tones, away from the rest of the carousing.

“You have brought me a most lovely evening, sir,” the Lady said. “I do hope to see you again, but I must go. For I have duties to attend.”

Presently, Hawthorne realized what hour it was: almost 1 A.M. If she was the Lady of the House it was indeed time for her to cast the masquerade to an end—the time when his cantrips would be able to break the illusion *glamour*. He had precious little time to set them in motion!

She rose and smiled at him, and made to leave the room—but she paused a few steps away and turned to face him.

“I would be pleased if you were to seek me out for the last dance...but in case you don’t—”

She reached up and touched her mask as if to begin a bow and committed instead the masquerade’s greatest taboo and removed it.

The words of his cantrips died instantly upon Hawthorne's lips in shock.

Awestruck, he was not gazing up on the Lady of the House, but the beautiful visage of Bridie!

Before he could arrest his own actions he too—as if compelled—removed his own mask.

Her violet eyes twinkled in recognition and she bowed finally, replacing her mask once again afterwards. Without another word, she turned on her heel and vanished into the crowd beyond the door.

As if in a drunken stupor, Hawthorne stood bedazzled. It took him several long moments to replace his own mask.

Cursing himself for his foolishness, Hawthorne let the cantrips dissipate as the useless *glamour* they now were.

Knowing that his chances of completing his mission here and now were none—as removing his mask also removed whatever protections the glamour of the Ball had afforded him from discovery—and that suddenly he was uncertain that he even wanted to complete his mission tonight he chose to bid the masquerade a farewell and made a hasty retreat.

From somewhere behind him a pair of shimmering violet eyes watched his egress. Yet even they, nor the young wizard that they belonged to, could truly comprehend the turmoil of his passage.

The next day had dawned and Hawthorne filled himself up with rage. Like a goblet filled carelessly from a decanter beyond overflow. But his anger brought him no comfort.

He had stupidly revealed himself to his prey and thereby obliterated a perfect chance to complete his mission. Yet, this was not truly the total of his aggrievance. It could not be; the situation could still be salvaged. But this also brought him no comfort.

There was no solace from the newest onslaught that had stricken him. Doubt.

If he had made these mistakes in the Nightmare Lands he would have become very dead—or worse. These were not behaviors befitting a Sluagh Master of Assassins. His time among the Seileigh and their decadence was obviously making him weak.

Presently, Bridie came upon him in his clerical study and his reverie broke. She must have noticed his astonishment as she flirted with her hair for a moment to allow him time to collect himself.

She was wearing a sharp black tunic pulled taut over a grey blouse. Her legs covered by black slacks and black striding boots. Her Investigator badge became like a brilliant white star upon her tunic breast and her pert red lips curled up into a smile.

“As I recall, I missed a dance with someone last night,” she said, haughtily tossing her head back. “I have come to request it.”

Hawthorne frowned at this new development.

“Surely you jest,” he replied. Hawthorne folded the record keeper's tome he was writing in and set it atop one of the many precarious stacks that littered his desk.

“No jest, sir,” she said, a smile teasing at her lips. “I see it more as a contract. I was promised an escort for the night, but I was defrauded one waltz. My payment in full is all I ask.”

Hawthorne could not help but smile at her humor. “And if I refuse will you place me under arrest and clap me in irons?”

The tease of a smile blossomed into a full and savage grin.

“I can think of far more preferable places for you...”

Hawthorne let himself chuckle and he lowered his head in surrender.

“If you put it that way, then I must accept your terms,” he said. “When shall we complete this transaction?”

“Meet me in the ballroom at midnight,” she said. “That is the place I choose.”

She turned to leave and Hawthorne raised his voice to call after her.

“Wait, I still do not know your name!”

She paused there at the threshold for just a moment to say, “Nor I yours, bring it with you when you come to the ballroom.”

This is perhaps the first time that I am trysting with my mark, Hawthorne thought sourly to himself as he waited in the shadows of the ballroom.

It was not yet the stroke of midnight, but Hawthorne was one to be early for any event that required his presence. Not one to dress down for any occasion either, Hawthorne had decided change his ensemble slightly from what he had worn to the Ball. It consisted of lightly worn black boots, with black slacks and wrapped with leather about the ankles so that he could dance in them. The outfit topped off with a tousled shirt of black silk with a brocade of grey lace at his throat. Over that he wore an elegant black duster that he had bought a week prior. He had even clipped his hair back with a long silver barrette, else it would sluice wildly over his shoulders and that would not have been fitting.

“Do you always wear your sword when called to a dance, sir?”

Hawthorne smiled when he heard Bridie’s voice from across the ballroom. He had heard her footsteps just moments before she spoke, but the echoes produced by the room made it impossible for him to tell exactly where she stood.

“Pay it no mind, my lady, for I carried it only tonight lest some brigand steal my heart before you had your chance,” he replied. He had realized that it was unlikely that she would call him out to such a place at midnight if she did not have some sort of interest in him. This was all the better made apparent when he noticed that she was not wearing her *cariad* ribbon.

Instead, Bridie’s arms were adorned with white gloves that tapered off near her elbows. She wore a décolleté gown of emerald green with white lace trim that complimented the purple hue of her eyes most flatteringly. Her legs were unadorned and she only wore simple pale green shoes that were suited better for dancing than actual notice. She too had chosen to clasp her hair with a barrette; it hung like a shimmering waterfall of gold burnished silver flowing down the nape of her neck.

Her laugh was lilting and pleasant as she strode softly into the middle of the ball and extended a gloved hand.

Hawthorne obliged her and strode boldly onto the floor, taking her hand in his and bowing to it. He paused for a moment with his lips near her wrist, but did not touch her. She smiled at him again, obviously she was impressed by his knowledge of courtly culture—as he knew she would be.

Bridie waved her free hand slightly to the side in a fluid gesture and summoned up a soft musical score. The music began playing from nowhere and everywhere all at once. Soft in tone and lead by a piano which was followed in turn by a pair of fluttering flutes and a single, lone, violin.

Knowing his cue, Hawthorne drew her closer to him and took the lead in the waltz.

“Whatever gave you the impression that I was here to steal your heart, sir?” Bridie’s gaze was bold and piercing, and though she never took her eyes off of him it did nothing to affect her following grace. “Perhaps I simply asked you here to take your measure.”

“As much that you shouldn’t steal it,” Hawthorne said. “For I know that you have a lover, who undoubtedly would become jealous should someone else desire your affections...but alas, I should be struck blind, deaf, and dumb if I were not aware of your beauty and brilliant character.”

With those words, Bridie shifted her grip and managed the elegant maneuver of taking the lead on the waltz without causing Hawthorne to stumble. He could feel a strange aggression timidly testing the chains of her resolve underneath the veneer of her dancing movements. Her cheeks were

slightly flushed and her fingers tended to wander along his back. Still, her gaze did not waver from his eyes; it remained as bold and striking as ever.

“And if he became jealous,” she asked, her brows furrowing slightly. “Would you fight him for my hand?”

“I would prefer not to fight anyone, if I could avoid it,” Hawthorne said. “You are lovely, and I am blessed to have this one night with you—but if it must be the only night, then I will accept that in my heart and go on.”

Bridie’s gaze suddenly became like steel and her cheeks darkened with the blush of stormy anger. In a single, deft movement she pushed Hawthorne away, but kept grip on his hand, spinning away to face the opposite direction. One hand grasped her shoulder and the other kept his fingers firmly clasped as she gazed down.

“Your silver tongue flatters me first, then insults me, what am I to believe?” she spat, her violet eyes shifting beneath her lashes and her lips pursed into an angry line. “Am I not worth fighting for if I am so lovely? Who am I in this society if I cannot have men die for my affections?”

Hawthorne was caught for a moment in astonishment; he should have seen that trap coming! She was toying with him, that much was obvious, but he could still yet not ascertain why. He opened his mouth to reply, but Bridie had not finished.

She tossed her head back and flashed a scowl his direction, letting his hand drop.

“So be it, if you would not fight my dear lover for one a treasure such as I then you will fight me instead!” Bridie took a swift step back and uttered a phrase into the air, casting her hand to the side, her eyes flashing in a mask shadows cast across her face. A brilliant silver rapier materialized from the air in her hand and she pointed it in challenge at Hawthorne. “Draw, sir! I demand satisfaction!”

All but overcome with shock, Hawthorne took a hasty step back. While this new behavior, and side of her that he had never witnessed before was startling and surprising, it was oddly compelling and spoke to his Unseileigh nature. Still, he knew that she had to be bluffing, the Bridie that he had come to know by watching her was by no means so violent as to actually threaten a man she probably figured to be a poor swordsman—what clerk could wield a sword enough to defend himself against a child anyway? Still, if it was a fight she wanted, then Hawthorne figured that he might oblige her.

If she died tonight his assignment would end and he would have done her the honor of slaying her in combat. A fitting respect for the beautiful creature she was.

So, Hawthorne drew his blade.

Bridie did not give him a moment’s reprise. The very second his blade was free of its sheath she lunged; the arc of her weapon was such that he would have been slain had he not had the deft sense to step out of her way!

As Bridie bobbed away and whipped her sword back around to point at him, Hawthorne noticed a sting on his chest. A neat gash had been sliced in his shirt and blood dripped through it. There were no doubts now; indeed it seemed that this little lark he had been so fond of was not unwilling to slay her potential suitor.

“I see that even lovely things have their sting,” Hawthorne said ruefully. “Still, I am not so easily dispatched...do not force me to harm you, lady.”

“Would you be so callous as to injure your lovely treasure?” she snapped and lunged once again.

This time, Hawthorne was prepared. He had seen her in battle numerous times before and knew her style as intimately as any man could know a woman without having kissed her first. He swept his blade around and down in a small described arc and deflected her lunge to the side; then quickly followed with his own riposte aimed at her leg.

With a sparkling clash their blades met again as she deftly parried his riposte and cackled as she leapt away.

They circled each other carefully like a pair of tigers pacing out their cage, eyes never leaving their opponents; it was much like the waltz they had held together mere minutes earlier. A flicker in her eyes and Hawthorne knew she had taken the lead in this dance as she was upon him again.

Their blades kissed in the moonlight pouring from one tall window. Hawthorne fought with every inch of his resolve to parry each blow in her onslaught; the clash of steel and the sound of quick footsteps became his replies. Across the floor they danced, their blades conversing in the air, a sporadic and angry argument of lethal steel played out over a few feet of ground.

Once again silence hushed the ballroom as the pair stood taking measure of one another. During their last engagement Hawthorne had managed to nick Bridie's arm, and blood was slowly trickling down onto her white gloves. She looked over the wound for a moment with an appreciative smile, but the scorned ire in her eyes had not abated.

Hawthorne knew that he was going to have to end this; until now he had not been fighting as hard as he would have had he wanted to actually kill her. Every passing moment he spent with her she surprised him with a new facet of her personality. Still, he could not believe that she would prove to be the superior swordfighter here

"Am I just a precious trinket for you to discover and win, sir?" she spat, swishing her blade into a new position.

Hawthorne did not reply. He was too busy steeling his own heart against what he was going to have to do, and it would have to be now. He doubted that he would have another chance; Bridie was too intelligent to have missed recognizing his fighting style. If she had not caught it already that he was Unseileigh. Still, it pained him greatly that he was about to kill her...he was about to kill someone who he had come to have nothing but adoration for.

He wanted to answer her. No, she was not just a precious trinket, she was a spectacular, radiant wonder who, if only she had been born on the other side of her worlds little war would have probably been his cherished companion. He wanted to tell her that it hurt him that he had to kill her only for the accident of her own birth, but these were trifles in his own head. He had no time for such foolish emotions; he had a duty to dispel.

It was his turn to take the lead and end this.

Bridie was weak in guarding her left flank from attack, Hawthorne knew this from watching her fight brigands in her role as an Investigator, she made up for it by leading her blade on that side and moving away when attacked. If she had an Achilles' Heel, it was there.

Hawthorne lead the attack with a simple high feint and struck low, which Bridie anticipated brilliantly and smacked his blade aside with her parry, but instead of blocking her riposte Hawthorne stepped inside of her attack. He aimed a blow for her lower stomach from the left. With a yelp, Bridie swung herself out of the way and backhanded Hawthorne as she turned away from his blade.

Using the impetus of motion given him by her own hand he let himself spin with it and savored the sting on his cheek as he brought his blade around for the killing blow that would slice her neck open—

Bridie threw herself off of her feet and landed hard on her back as Hawthorne spun about, his blade narrowly missing its mark as it did so. She would have been blind to miss the look of abject sorrow and determination on his face as he passed, but surely she didn't miss the look of startled shock when her boot smashed into his shin and then caught his sword hand.

Hawthorne cried out as his rapier suddenly was torn from his grasp and his legs were knocked out from underneath him. He rolled frantically to the side and tried to throw himself to his feet knowing that Bridie was only a moment behind him.

He looked up just in time to see her blade come down upon him...

A stabbing pain in his head woke Hawthorne. A light so bright as to eclipse any other light he had ever seen was beating down onto his closed eyes. He threw his hands up to shade himself from it. Suddenly, the events of the night came crashing back to him and he sat bolt upright where he lay.

A quick inventory and he discovered that he was still in possession of his life and his rapier. That was lying on the ground a few feet away.

Blinding sunlight streamed down through the window that had framed moonlight the night before. It gave a distinct sharpness to the shadows of the ballroom and brazenly illuminated the exit to the place.

After reliving the last moment of the night, and divesting himself of the shock that he was indeed still alive, Hawthorne bridled with anger. That woman! That lark of a lass had called him out, bested him at swords, insulted him and his...and she even let him live!

Probing his outfit, Hawthorne discovered that his daggers were still there. Good. He had every intention of using them this morning.

The sun had just barely crested the horizon over the city and only the most diligent workers had already risen. Since it was a Sunday morning Hawthorne knew that Bridie would not have lifted herself from her own slumber and he was vitally aware that he could find her in her bedchambers. So he tasked himself with getting there.

The ballroom was only a few blocks away from the mansion that her House employed as sleeping quarters, and as part of his earlier research he had already learned how to infiltrate the mansion and knew intimately where her bedchambers were. She would not escape his blade this time.

Fuming with anger, hurt, and raked with his shaken self-confidence, Hawthorne slipped like a spook through the shadows of the garden and went totally unnoticed by the gardeners sleepily tending to their flowers there. He stealthily entered through a servants' door and ascended the stairs, carelessly ignoring that his garb would not go unnoticed should anyone set eyes upon him. He had but only one task in mind and he did not care if he was caught in the commission of it.

The hallway aside her bedchamber was empty. Hawthorne stalked boldly through it ever nearer to her door and stood outside it for but a moment, listening. He could hear the soft echo of her breath on the other side and the timbre of it told him that she was indeed asleep. Perhaps it was better this way, that she die in her sleep; if she could not have the decency to allow him to kill her in a fight, then she would have to perish this way.

Hawthorne slid his dagger from its secret scabbard and activated a cantrip that he had prepared for just this purpose. The *glamour* rendered him momentarily insubstantial and he passed through her door like a ghost and entered her room.

The entire room was cast over with the golden light of a single lamp set on the far side of the room and he could see Bridie's sleeping form peaceful upon her bed.

So softly he crept across her floor that not even the most sensitive owl's ears could have sensed his approach. There he stood over her to admire her for one last time before he sent her in all of her beauty to the grave, and this final moment would serve as her epitaph in his memory...

That moment of reflection held Hawthorne in its icy grip. He was frozen in doubt, for the first time in his career as an assassin he could clearly see his plan of action, but did not want to execute it. Yet he knew that if he did not use this moment, now, his entire life as it was over.

It seemed a long moment that he stood, dagger poised over Bridie's throat prepared for the killing blow, when her eyes fluttered open and focused on him.

"I know you can't do it," she said in a soft, dulcet voice. Her violet eyes looked past his dagger as if it weren't there and into his own troubled eyes. So gently she reached up and took the

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dagger from his hands as if he were a child holding a dangerous instrument and she gingerly set it to her side. "You love me."

Without another word—as words were no longer necessary—Bridie reached up and drew Hawthorne down to her.

Chapter 2

A Short but Subtle Courtship

“**D**ouglas Clenwyn...is that your real name?” Bridie’s voice was gentle like a soft summer rain when she spoke. Her fingers caressed Hawthorne’s nude chest in the dim flicker of the orange candles of her bedchamber.

“Hawthorne,” he said. Then he winced as Bridie’s hand strayed too close to the wound she had inflicted during their duel the previous day. She smiled apologetically and moved her hand to his exposed shoulder and arm. “My name is properly Dougal Hawthorne.”

“So, a bit of truth hidden in the lie,” she said.

“How long were you aware?”

Hawthorne saw a brief flicker in Bridie’s eyes and her chest swelled slightly with the slow intake of breath as she thought. He had known this to be a gesture meaning she was gathering her thoughts.

“You were more clever and wiser than those of your counterparts to come before you,” she said. Again a wry smile teased at the edges of her lips. “Pretending to be a clerk of the House certainly allowed you to escape my suspicion, but it was at the Ball that you gave yourself away. Did you intend to do it then?”

The boldness of her question made Hawthorne flush, a reaction that was by no means invisible in his unclothed state. Bridie sighed and brushed a misbehaving lock of hair away from his face, but her gaze did not waver. She waited patiently for his reply.

He reached up and touched her hand; the scent of her skin was intoxicating. After expending all of his frustration and turmoil with her during the midmorning, now as ruby light of sunset filtered slowly through the curtains he found himself brought to curiosity.

“Yes, you are correct,” he said. “It was then. How is it that I gave myself away?”

“I had been noticing you for quite some time, the *clerk* you, that is. No, no, your disguise was perfect, but I fancied perhaps that you—being a low-born noble—had come from a sordid past that explained your haughty charisma even for your lowly job. The task of recording numbers, figures, and sorting records seemed ill-suited for you. Did you not come to notice how often I began to bring you my reports directly?”

A memory came back to Hawthorne then. That in fact she did seem to suddenly begin to reply her reports to him with a strange regularity. He frowned at the notion that he missed this. Still, it had seemed appropriate to him at the time. Bridie was a courteous and well organized type from being an Investigator, it seemed quite natural that she would prefer to have her reports seen to a person rather than dropped into an impersonal box.

“I hadn’t thought much of it,” he replied, angry at himself. “I simply used it as another avenue to observe you.”

“Well, you are quite handsome despite your demeanor, Dougal,” Bridie said. “But it does not do for an engaged lady to be seen talking to a man beneath her station. It is that I just never found a way to get your ear to myself... When the upcoming masquerade was announced, however, I knew my chance.”

“How did you manage to choose me out of the crowd, there was the *glamour* illusion—”

Bridie’s eyes twinkled with a delight he had seen in them before; it was the expression they held when he had removed his mask at the Ball. Hawthorne now knew that it was the quality of her own knowledge that she had been right.

“There was one thing that could not be masked by the illusion at the masquerade: your poise. It was the way that you so blithely accepted the way that Gwen—oh yes, I did pay close attention to whom you chose to take to the Ball; it disappointed me a little at first, but then I realized the reason afterwards. That is, when Gwen fluttered herself off like the little trollop she is and left you by yourself.”

“I see,” he said. “She was but a prop anyway; I knew that she would not keep my arm as soon as I chose her.”

“It was during our first waltz together that I first became aware that you were more than just a pretty face to me. Though, even then I was beginning to suspect something else of you entirely, that perhaps your sordid past that I fancied for you was something else altogether. If anything I knew one thing for certain, you were meant to be no mere *clerk*.”

She sighed then, her bosom moving ever so delicately in the soft orange light. Hawthorne remained silent, as he knew this pause was only an interlude in her retelling, and he let himself be held by the mellifluous timbre of her voice.

“Then we talked together and I was astonished to discover that you were just as intelligent as you were masterful on the dance floor; but what weighed most in your favor is that you treated me as if I were the Lady of the House herself”—Hawthorne half-chuckled when Bridie said that—“and that decorum was breathtaking. It was by the time that we were dancing in each others arms on the dance floor that my heart ached for want of you.

“Still, in a strange notion tickled the back of my mind—intuition perhaps—that told me there was something not quite right about your manner and expression, and the mystery goaded me on and gave my heart’s desires a greater passion. There was something too familiar with your *facilité de grace* during our waltz when I had turned the tables on you.”

“Is that why you called me out for the last waltz that I missed that night because I fled the scene of my unmasking?”

“Only partly my reason,” she said. “By the time that night was over—and because you ran away. I had to be with you again, but I also did need my doubts purged.”

“Why did you urge that duel with me then?”

Bridie gently let her fingers settle on Hawthorne’s lips and her eyes regained that twinkle yet again.

“A woman does not tell her secrets to men, especially those she uses to ensnare their hearts.”

“Is that what you’ve done to me? Ensnared my heart...is it in these subtle secrets that gave you the augur that I would not kill you when I came upon you sleeping in your room?”

As Hawthorne finished speaking Bridie slid herself close to his body. Her hands slipped about his ribs and she brought her lips close to his, letting her breath out in a slow exhale.

“If you had tried you would have died instantly, slain by a ward I had set just in case I was wrong.”

Hawthorne’s heart swelled for a moment with appreciation for this woman. A woman who had bested him in combat, out thought even his best Unseileigh wiles, and retained a quickness of mind that made the made even the sharpest blades dull in comparison. She could not have been more perfect even if she were Unseileigh.

She kissed him then and those thoughts passed from his mind.

Captain in the Knight Investigators is no small rank to be sniffled at. The person who filled that rank, Bridie MacFenna, was no person to be taken lightly. Records are strange things when they are produced, stored, and confirmed by a single authority. With all of her influence, her experience, and that same guile that so caused Hawthorne to admire her, Bridie made him disappear. The next day, Douglas Clenwyn was dead and the records, fact, and findings of his death were sealed documents known only to the Investigators. Upon that same day House Galadmohr suddenly had one extra enlisted servant who had been with them for two years known only by the initials D. H.

Nobody did notice that the faceless clerk who used to work in an office in the basement was now pacing the grounds tending to minor errands. Nobody cared to notice such things.

For almost a week, Hawthorne and Bridie ignored the rest of the world. She cut back on her regular duties to arrange the things she needed during the day, and at night, she spent her time with him. Though now they trusted in secrecy. Keeping the fires of their passions quietly muted when others were around and acting cool and invisible to each other when they passed—as was proper for a noble and a servant to behave around each other. Those same fires, though, burned as bright as they ever did when once again they were alone.

Though now Hawthorne did not have to worry about reprisal from the Seileigh world, and the Unseileigh would remain unawares of his “death” for many months, he remained troubled. He had given up his past with the Sluagh for her. It was not as difficult to cast off as he had suspected; it was only a title, a place to be, and a thing to do, he knew in himself that it was not the whole of him. Yet, even with this newfound love, Hawthorne knew that if she did not stay her current investigation she would remain threatened by the Unseileigh.

He did not know how to urge her to desist without betraying his people. Now that he had time to himself, time to think on his own without the passions of love, he feared that like an ankle dragon from the Nightmare Lands once she had sunk her teeth in, she would not let go.

The night outside Bridie’s bedchamber was sharp and brisk; the cold wind rapped against the windowpanes that gave way to its interior. Hawthorne brooded as he gazed out the window and into the dark gusts of wind as they chased wet leaves between the trees.

He had dressed himself up in black and wrapped his hands with sweet-smelling leather, a preparation only held by the Sluagh before they walked into a great battle, or intended to do a terrible deed. Bridie would be gone for the entire night on her duties and this left Hawthorne the span of time he needed to set himself a new assignment, one that would keep his beloved safe from the reprisal of the Unseileigh.

He stalked across the room, grabbed his guns, *Arget* and *Òr*, from his pack and made way to the door.

Hawthorne's black clad figure vanished from sight of the mansion like a highwayman melting into the night.

It had snowed by day but for a few hours and the white settled dirty with soot upon the buildings and eaves. The night near the harbor warmed enough that the snow had turned to rain, but even the rain abated quickly. Now the snow formed slushy puddles on the sidewalks and in the gutters. As it melted it dribbled water down in dismal spills into the alleyways.

Bridie's boots slurped softly as she stepped into a small puddle of slush near the entrance to a wharf-house overlooking the harbor. The prickling cold air was cast aside by a gush of warmth as the door was slid open by her partner, Jaelwyn Ruthven. There was no danger expected here, but still he took the lead being ten years her senior and always clearheaded to his duty therefore.

She watched as his shaggy white head and pointed sidhe ears vanished inside. He was one of those sidhe who had taken up this new absurd tradition of piercing them and wearing tiny silver studs in either ear to represent the number of royal honors they had received. Two in his left ear; three in his right. Even if he was her senior, Bridie would not have had enough ear to fit how many she would need to wear.

A suitable count after he had entered, Bridie followed, her rapier held high and her free hand ready to engage a defensive *glamour*.

Spell and sword were both lowered once she saw the scene within. If there was any danger here it had passed some time ago. Now, the would-be culprits that she was hunting lay in the embrace of death upon the floor at the far side of the unfurnished wharf-house. Jaelwyn had knelt over one of them.

"A nereid," he said after a brief examination. There indeed was a slight bluish tone to the man's skin that could not have been caused by the cold—as it was quite warm within the house—and, now that Bridie was closer, his ears had the telltale shell-like scallops as well as a point. His arm was gripped on the other dead man's shoulder and his other hand seemed to be holding something against his chest. "I think that the one that was stabbed is a sidhe."

Bridie nodded. Jaelwyn shifted his weight and examined the knife protruding from the dead sidhe's chest. He ran his hand up the hilt of the knife where he could feel it but once his fingers touched the blade he recoiled as if burned.

"*Iaranncræft!*" he snarled. The blade of the weapon was cold-iron; its primary purpose was to kill Faerie, the weapon of a criminal.

"Well, we can see how the sidhe died," Bridie said. "What happened to the nereid? It seems that he should have survived this fight."

"There isn't a mark on him," Jaelwyn said after a short examination of his clothing. "How should we proceed?"

"Well," Bridie said, "This is our case after all." She hunkered down over the bodies and wove a memory spell over them while placing a piece of parchment onto the ground. A few minutes later and she had the entire scene recorded in every detail as it was viewed upon the page via the spell. After she finished, she folded up the page and nodded to Jaelwyn who set about separating the pair from their murderous embrace.

He took special care not to dislodge the knife from where it was and instead removed the hand of the nereid from the hilt; that was no small feat, however, as the nereid's death grip was tight around the weapon. After he finished he stepped back and allowed Bridie to examine the body.

First, she checked all of his pockets for material and immediately came up with a piece of folded paper. She unfolded it and began to read. The more she read the deeper her look of disbelief became.

"What is it?" Jaelwyn asked.

"Is there a crate in this room?" Bridie asked without looking up.

Jaelwyn stalked across the room and stopped near a small crate that had been shoved up against the wall. "Right here, it looks ordinary enough."

"Open it," Bridie commanded.

Obliging her, Jaelwyn lodged a knife underneath the top and cracked the top open. A few more levers of the blade later and he had pulled the top clear off to reveal its contents: iron spearheads. There were nearly twenty of them carefully laid across the top. It could have been over ten layers deep.

"More *iaramncraft*," Jaelwyn said, shaking his head. "The boys back at the Yard won't believe this. Looks like we've found the mother load here."

"I know," Bridie said. "That's partly what bothers me."

"Why?" he asked. "Isn't this exactly what we've been investigating all along?"

"Yes, and no," Bridie said and roughly handed him the folded piece of paper. "We've been following shipments coming *into* the States from Galway, see, this one is *going* to France. These two may have been mixed up with those smugglers who are trafficking from Ireland, but...this is not what I expected."

Jaelwyn studied the note and scratched his head as he was wont to do when something troubled him. "You're right, Bridie, this is really quite useless to our investigation. It shows that there is smuggling here, but not only is it the wrong type, it gives us no real leads on those weapons they're brining in."

While Jaelwyn was speaking, Bridie was giving the dead nereid a more thorough examination. She went so far as to pull his shirt up and examine his unmoving chest. It wasn't until she flipped him over that she found what she was looking for. A small betraying mark was visible on his back near the left side that looked like a round bruise a little smaller than a penny.

"Elfshot," Bridie said, standing up.

On a hunch, Bridie decided to try an extremely mundane tactic and removed a small flashlight from her belt and turned it on. This got an eyebrow from Jaelwyn, who, being ten years her senior had a tendency to take things the "old-fashioned" Faerie way and use magic... Bridie could never quite explain to him how not everything found its solution only through one tool.

She began to scan the walls with the flashlight beam, walking up close and running it over them slowly as she went.

"What are you looking for?" Jaelwyn inquired from across the room.

"I'm not sure." Bridie kept up her quest and slowly ran the light over the wall, watching carefully as she went. "I'll know when I find it."

"Whoever shot this nereid is an expert marksman," Jaelwyn said while rustling about somewhere behind Bridie. "He was hit in the back in exactly the right spot to puncture the heart."

Bridie squinted when she noticed a strange flicker on the wall under her flashlight and backed up a little. Waving the light back and forth over a spot in the wall about half a foot under her eyelevel she noticed a place that seemed to have an opalescent sheen, it reflected the flashlight's beam with the same rainbow effect seen on soap bubbles.

"I found it," Bridie said, feeling smug. It was good to be right.

“Found what?”

“An *elfbore*,” she said. “This is probably where the sniper fired from; right through the wall.” She tapped the spot with her finger. “Your expert marksman shooter is also a practiced assassin. The *elfbore* is just large enough for a gun muzzle.”

“Looks like a deal gone wrong to me,” Jaelwyn said. “The nereid gets upset about something in the deal, stabs the sidhe, the sidhe’s bodyguard fires, kills the nereid... That would be pretty straightforward.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Bridie said glumly. “But...if I had a bodyguard I wouldn’t have him lurking outside the building, I’d want him in here being intimidating. Wouldn’t you?”

“What if our sidhe didn’t want to spook the nereid, but also figured maybe he could keep an ace up his sleeve by having his guard skulking in the shadows? Deal goes bad, bodyguard fires, but not in time...”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

“Well, since we these two were already dead when we got here there’s no way we can interview them,” Jaelwyn said, saying exactly what was on Bridie’s mind. “We should cordon off the area and send for a forensics team; nothing else we can do here.”

Bridie nodded her agreement. On her way out she set a block-ward on the door so that none could disturb the scene before the forensics team arrived and followed Jaelwyn to their car so that they could call the Yard and inform them as to the situation.

That night, Hawthorne was going about his duties as a house servant, hunting down and dispatching a type of pest called *logodenn*, Faerie mice. The creatures were small, quick, and capable of leaping short distances by simply disappearing from one place and reappearing in another with a soft *pop* noise. Dispatching them wasn’t an easy task, but it was certainly entertaining. Hawthorne was forced to use a birch wand that had been imbued with a spell that would stun the creatures; he really wanted the use of one of his guns. This was target practice after all.

He and several other servants had made a bet as to who could bag the most *logodenn*. As a jest, they invited Hawthorne to involve himself in their bet, and after he refused the first time they teased him about his cowardice until he relented. So far his companions had three of the softly glowing bluish balls of fur with tiny eyes and mothlike antennae between them; Hawthorne had a pile of over six.

His companions each were impressed by Hawthorne’s amazing accuracy, but he could tell that they were becoming just a little bit suspicious. His next few shots he made deliberately poor, and their pile began to swell against his as well, but he kept himself firmly ahead of them.

“Just really lucky, I guess,” Hawthorne said. He was really enjoying this task. It gave him a chance to do something he was good at: picking off the weak.

It was shortly after he said that when he was Bridie disembark from a carriage nearby and head towards the mansion house. She was in her Investigator’s uniform and her badge was clearly visible; she was also home early. There was a troubled distemper about her gait and a stormy look on her face.

Suddenly, it seemed, Hawthorne’s luck had changed.

By the time that they had rid the area of a suitable number of *logodenn* his companions had ten and eleven of the creatures and Hawthorne only had eight. They laughed together and clapped each other on their backs, all but Hawthorne, who remained stoic and troubled about Bridie.

Grace, the winner of the contest and a keen observer herself, tried to ask Hawthorne as to what was the matter but he simply shook his head in reply.

“I really must go; I have other duties to attend to.”

“Perhaps you will be at the servants dance on Saturday, then?” Grace said as Hawthorne turned away. “I’d like to see you there. I know that you keep to yourself, but as you can see it can be great fun with company.”

Hawthorne turned back for just a moment. “I’ll think about it. Thank you.”

Without another word, he made his way to the house, entered through the servant’s door and ascended the stairs there as swiftly as he could. A touch of *déjà vu* crested his thoughts then as he recalled making this same trek once before, in almost as much haste, but for a completely different reason. Except this time when he reached Bridie’s bedchamber door he simply opened the lock with the key he had instead of using a cantrip to pass through it.

Bridie had removed her cloak and her Investigator’s uniform vest revealing a white blouse beneath. She was pacing the floor when Hawthorne entered and broke from the trot she was wearing in the floor to glide over and embrace him as soon as her eyes caught his.

“I have had a truly vexing day at work,” she said softly into his chest.

“I’ve had a very boring day at work, though I cannot say that it was vexing...what troubles you? Perhaps I can help.”

Bridie chuckled and regarded him a moment with her violet eyes; then she shook her head as if disagreeing with something unsaid.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Why?” Hawthorne asked, leveling his shoulders. “You are an Investigator, a hunter. I did as much research, coying out my prey, and examining scenes with deduction and intelligence as you must. I could be a valuable asset to you also because I am also familiar with the devious mind, having *been* one myself.” He carefully put stress on the word “been” despite his most recent escapade which suggested that he was hardly done with it.

“I know that you mean well, my love, but I think it would be best that I don’t discuss this particular posting with you.”

Hawthorne knew exactly why she was hesitant to let him in on her thoughts; it was plain in her manner. That wasn’t the whole of it, however, since he had known what cases she was posted to before that fateful night that brought them together. There could only be one such that would trouble her now.

“It involves the Unseileigh, doesn’t it?”

Bridie did not reply, she just looked into his eyes with a soul searching expression.

“You are right to think that I would not betray my own people,” he said. “However, the dealings of those in this world whose matters you will encounter on the streets are hardly those who I would have even considered my own people when I was in the Nightmare Lands.”

Bridie tilted her head back and slipped her arms away from his neck. Her face changed slightly in the light. Hawthorne could tell that she was about to broach a subject that he knew she was avoiding ever since they had become lovers.

“Why were you sent to kill me?”

“Because three others had failed at the same task,” he replied.

Bridie shook her head. “That’s not what I’m asking.”

“You had stumbled too close to a particular Unseileigh plot involving the corruption of certain officials in the local government here and killed one of their agents,” he lied. It was the first lie he had ever told her and it churned like sour milk in his stomach. “I have made sure that the focus of the attention of those who want you dead has been dissolved.” That part was the truth at least, though it may have been more than he should have told her, but he didn’t care. “If they send anyone else after you I will stop them myself, but I doubt there will be any others.”

Bridie frowned. Had she noticed the change in cadence of his voice when he was speaking? Did she realize that he had hidden the truth from her? Perhaps she did, and perhaps she didn’t. All

that mattered to Hawthorne was that Bridie was safe and she did not continue her previous investigation into the smuggled weapons that would eventually put her back into the crosshairs of the Sluagh.

It had been luck that he found that cargo ledger on the Merrows nerid that pointed to that shipment *leaving* New York to the Port of Bordeaux, France. It made an interesting twist also to the strange story that would likely come from how the two had died. All of that in one night, Hawthorne was quite proud of his work especially. It discredited Bridie's entire case, making it moot and it forced the Unseileigh trafficking the weapons to choose a slightly different route to do it. Meaning that the New York Merrows would probably not be chosen to handle the next shipment and therefore not come under Bridie's jurisdiction.

Bridie nodded slowly in acceptance finally; then she waved her hand dismissively.

"No, no..." she said. "Not on this case. It's just frustrating to me, what it is. The case is gone. There is nowhere to go with it and it looks like our original theories were wrong anyway. No. I think that all I need is a relaxing night and not worry about it any longer. The case has been taken out of my hands now and I can't investigate it further if I wanted to."

That was an unexpected gem! If Bridie had been taken off of the case it didn't matter what happened now. Someone else would have to take the heat if they were to come upon the trail of those traffickers again and it would not be her.

"Well, my Lady, my beloved," Hawthorne said. "Should you ever find the need to avail yourself of my services, I would gladly lay them down for you. I am sorely under challenged by the dolesome dullness of being a servant and wish that I could find myself once again facing some sort of intrigue. I fear that with too much more of this I may die of boredom."

Bridie's gaze flickered up to meet his own and a smile teased at her lips. "I will see what I can do, but as for the time being, your first duty will be to treat me to a comforting evening after my hard and frustrating day..."

With those words she slid her hand around Hawthorne's neck and with her other hand she began to draw out the laces of her blouse.

Chapter 3

Rivals

A fluffy snow had begun to fall as Captain Huron's boat floated lazily into the harbor. It was the type that just seemed to float down from the sky like flakes stirred in a snow globe. The melted snow made the metal deck of the boat slippery and wet and it collected in white sheets along the canopy tops of the main quarters and on parts of the aft deck. In the sea that churned a dull white from the passing of the boat, though, the snow had no purchase. It vanished there the moment that it touched the placid waters on either side of the prow.

Huron was greeted by the stench of brine and sweat as he unceremoniously disembarked the boat and strode down the gangplank. It had just been laid a few minutes before by silent crewmen from the boat. They were bundled up against the cold such that only their eyes were visible. Huron himself was from a far colder land in the Underhill and only wore a heavy trench coat and gloves, the cold itself barely registered.

A trio of dark clad Investigators awaited him a short distance from the gangplank. Delicate puffs of white breath billowed from their nostrils with each breath as they waited patiently for him to step up to them.

"Captain, my good lad!" Tolworth, the shortest of the trio, spoke up. He was a short man, but tall for a ballybog. Snow was already beginning to collect on his wide nose and in his bushy eyebrows. He didn't seem to notice.

"Lieutenant," Huron said and then nodded to Tolworth's two companions, a pair of detectives according to their badges. Huron could tell that they were both trollds, but he did not know either man. They appeared to be brothers at least, by Huron's eye, with craggy Germanic

features, blonde hair and brilliant blue eyes. Each one wore an outfit of leather and metal clips. Each detective was a full two heads taller than Huron, and he was by no means a small man.

“Captain Huron, meet Koen and Rockne Steinhauer,” the Lieutenant said after a moment. “They’re brothers and have transferred to the New York Precinct from our Germany Chapter.”

Both curtly thumped their rather large fists against their chests in a common troll gesture of respect, keeping their knuckles inward. Huron had never worked with trolls before, but he had been briefed before on their culture, so he returned the gesture. First, though, he filled his lungs with air so that he could reproduce the hollow thump.

The trolls nodded with appreciation after Huron had completed the ritual.

Trolls were a strange breed of Faerie. In the Underhill they were nomadic almost, living in the wilderness and mountain passes, swearing allegiance to neither the Seileigh nor the Unseileigh. Their close-kin, the trolls, however dwelt mostly in the Nightmare Lands and served at the behest of the Unseileigh and were rarely found in the company of the Seileigh. In the Mundane world, however, the trolls were not nomadic. They would form small communities among Mundanes and even take on the cultures and names of their adoptive cities. Since trolls did not live as long as the sidhe, soon there were trolls of many different Mundane nationalities.

“It is my pleasure to meet you, Captain Huron,” Koen said—Huron assumed it was Koen speaking; he could not really tell the difference between the brothers. Koen spoke in a deep baritone, the voice of a mountain. Huron would have expected no lesser voice from a man of his stature.

“Likewise,” Huron replied.

Rockne did not speak.

“The Commissioner could not spare a larger welcoming committee, I’m afraid,” Tolworth said. “Since we were going to be in the area, and I am introducing these two to the force, I figured this would be as good a time as any.”

“I agree,” Huron replied. “I suppose that I am shortly due for a debriefing at our precinct, are you here to take me there?”

“Indeed we are, but I wanted to be the first to tell you that the case that you were following is now officially closed. Captain MacFenna has exhausted all possible avenues of approach and with the latest deaths of two known Unseileigh smugglers we have no further leads or reason to suspect any more shipments are coming through New York.”

“She has, has she,” Huron said. His thoughts leapt instantly to Captain MacFenna—Bridie MacFenna, his fiancée. They had been separated under unfortunate terms when he was sent to Galway to exercise his talents as an investigator on a case involving the Unseileigh smuggling Fomhóire artifacts from Ireland and into the States. He was able to gather very little information about the operations from that end, but surely he knew that he had at least caused their work some discomfort. No doubt Bridie had also capably forced them into a freeze of operations. Operations going through New York at least.

“Indeed she has,” Tolworth echoed. “Meanwhile, you are being assigned to a new case along with a task force of Investigators from the New York Chapter House. Koen and Rockne will be on your team, which is why I decided to introduce you here.” He sniffed for a moment. “Speaking of here, perhaps we can relocate to someplace warmer.”

By this time Tolworth had a truly glacial amount of snow climbing his brow from his eyebrows. Still, the ballybog did not seem to notice, and Huron did not feel like pointing it out.

Instead, he said, “Yes, I would like that.”

“Follow me, then,” Tolworth said. As he began to move he brushed the snow from his brow. “Now, this task force you’re going to be part of. The case at hand is possible Unseileigh spies may have come in our midst. Information has come to us that due to our work into the case we just

closed we have come to the attention of the Sluagh. There have been some attempts on various Investigator's lives."

Huron's heart skipped a beat. "Bridie?"

"Yes, she is one of them," Tolworth said. "However, she is perfectly fine. That girl of yours is quite the soldier when it comes to protecting herself. Others, however, have not been so fortunate. We need to discover this element and eliminate it before it becomes a dire problem."

"She is a veteran of the Nightmare War, after all," Huron commented proudly.

"Indeed she is."

"Detective Koen." Huron looked at the towering troid man as he spoke. "I have never had a chance to spend much time with the troid people, I have some questions. I hope that you would be willing to suffer my ignorance for the purpose of getting to know my teammates better."

"Of course, Captain Huron," Koen boomed. "I would prefer no less. Please, ask me anything."

"Thank you, Detective," Huron said. "Could you tell me is it true that trolds drink sour ale from gigantic mugs on every occasion or is that just a rumor?"

Tolworth pulled open the door to a black car that was idling, awaiting their arrival, as Koen began to regale Huron about how the troid not only drank sour ale from large mugs, but of how oftentimes those mugs were just as big as the Mundane's kegs.

Huron's mood was bitter like the weather outside. He had arrived at the local Yard for his debrief and had hoped to see Bridie there. It would be the first time he'd seen her in four months. His posting to Galway had come up so quickly that he was unable to say goodbye to her. Not that this would have mattered much, their relationship at the time had been strained and he feared near the breaking point. Still, after four months without her he yearned for her presence.

He could not understand why she wasn't at the Yard. She should have known that he was due to return this day. Perhaps she was too busy with another posting. Like Huron, Bridie was wed to her duty.

Huron had brought with him a single red rose. It was a single prick of red against his greenish-grey shirt and white gloves. He had shed his trench coat in the foyer of the mansion as they were unnecessary in the indoor warmth. He could recall the route to her quarters clearly, his feet knew the path by rote. He followed their lead while his mind was awash with thoughts of what he would say and do when he presented himself to his fiancée.

Those thoughts stammered themselves into a shocked silence once he emerged from the top of the front stairs and had half-way turned the corner into the hallway there. A dark clad man had just crept silently from Bridie's room! He was sidhe by the looks of him, but there was an ill favored manner about his motions.

The man was wearing a long, black winter duster and a cloven hat atop his head with a large black feather plume. Hair red as flame spilled down his back as he carefully locked the door behind him using tools that looked to be fashioned for thieves' work. An intruder had been in Bridie's room!

Suddenly, Huron recalled his briefing earlier about the assassination attempts on Bridie's life, about successful attempts against other Investigators.

With as much stealth as he could muster, Huron stole across the wooden planks of the hallway towards the black clad man, keeping his footfalls matching in time with those of the intruder. The clasp of his rapier undone he drew the newly oiled blade as silently as a whisper.

Then, he was upon the intruder.

Hawthorne was the survivor of many assassination attempts. Still, this particular assault nearly caught him completely off guard. His attacker had been preternaturally silent; it was as if he had

materialized out of thin air. Yet, there had been a moment. A split-second where Hawthorne's instincts had warned him of impending doom—the sound of a rapier slicing through the air.

In that moment, having long years to know that trusting his instincts would lead him to certain death, Hawthorne slammed himself bodily into the wall. In that moment, he caught a glimpse of a slightly curved *elvenstele* blade, pouring blonde hair, and pointed sidhe ears. All of these things sliced past him in a blur of motion. His attacker, the blonde sidhe, tripped and fell. He crashed into a sprawl on the ground further down the hallway.

The time it took his attacker to clamber to his feet gave Hawthorne more than enough time to unlimber his own blade. He readied the lethal steel just in time for his opponent to make his second pass. With a curse and a flourish their blades met in the midst of the hallway.

Now they were on equal footing. Each brandishing a rapier, and caught together in a narrow hallway.

“Villain!” his opponent spat at him, his blade brandished high. His attack came on no less sharply than his tongue. The bad footing on the slippery floor forced Hawthorne to retreat from the attack to seek a better defensive posture, but he knew that if he kept falling back eventually he would hit the railing.

His opponent came on with an advanced, but straightforward, assault. His blade jumped in here and there seeking weaknesses in Hawthorne's defense. Each strike forced Hawthorne to parry closer and closer to his body as the young Sluagh sidhe was forced to step backwards to lighten the onslaught.

That's when Hawthorne remembered the carpeting in the hallway on the other side—beyond his opponent. He knew now that he was fighting a master swordsman. Though, he also realized that this man was probably not Unseileigh, as he was certainly not Sluagh. Hawthorne began to wonder who indeed this person was.

Suddenly, Hawthorne switched from defense to attack.

“I guess someone left the door open and a bugbear got into the house,” he jibed.

Blocking Hawthorne's latest high lunge, his opponent gave him a confused look. There was a brief reprise in the flurry of blades when the man paused for a second. His blade remained poised.

“My name is Kylemore Huron,” his opponent said. “You are under arrest.”

Hawthorne's eyes widened, he had not noticed before, but hidden in the folds of his opponent's shirt was a badge. He was a Knight Investigator, certainly not Unseileigh. Still, this had become personal. This Investigator had insulted his honor by sneaking up on him; he would have to be taught a lesson for that.

“Perhaps another time!” Hawthorne said while laughing and leapt forward.

Huron deftly blocked his blade, but Hawthorne had something other than a riposte in mind. Instead, he slashed back with his weapon and heavy-handedly drew Huron's blade upwards and grabbed the other sidhe's shirt. For a bare moment the two stared into each other's faces. Hawthorne could see a keen, but subdued, rage in his opponent's blue eyes. Hawthorne wondered what Huron saw in his.

The Sluagh assassin turned the sidhe Investigator around and the other man shoved him away roughly. Together they were flung from each other, each one sliding on the wooden slatted floor, rapier primed and high pointing at his opponent. Hawthorne now had his back to the carpeted area of the hall, and to better footing.

Not waiting for his opponent to realize his folly, Hawthorne pranced backwards several steps and then ran boldly away from Huron. The Investigator must have been ready for this because he was hot on Hawthorne's heels a moment later.

As soon as he reached the carpet, Hawthorne stopped suddenly and lunged.

Huron darted away and swatted the thrust aside with a hasty parry. Once again the two faced each other over the tips of their blades, but this time, Hawthorne knew that he had the upper hand, and better footing.

Huron's eyes flickered down to the carpet for a moment, then back up to Hawthorne.

"If you won't come quietly, I may be forced to kill you," he said.

"If I am under arrest, what is the charge?"

"Burglary."

"I haven't stolen anything, you ugly *boggie*."

"Then you have nothing to hide and could come with me to the Yard to prove it."

"I think not, I have a pressing engagement elsewhere," Hawthorne snipped. "I would ask you to allow me to get to it."

The next exchange between the pair resounded in the clash of steel. Snapping here, bilking the blade there, feint, parry, and riposte. Every attack was replied to and countered in a sudden flutter of feet and sharp metal. Hawthorne expertly caught Huron's blade with his own and corkscrewed his wrist, sliding his sword's tip along the lie of the Investigator's weapon. There he caught the hilt and with a flick Huron's rapier was imbedded in the wall.

In what Hawthorne could only guess was an act of desperation, Huron lunged forward, hands outstretched. He caught the Sluagh by his throat and his other hand froze his sword. Together they stumbled backwards and smashed into a door.

The door flung open and the pair tumbled onto a hard stone floor.

Hawthorne lost grip on his blade and it went skittering across the room.

A scream went up from several sidhe women in the room who were folding and pressing clothing. Newly dried linens were draped all over the room, and steam expelled from a nearby vent that was used to remove creases from wrinkled cloth. They had emerged into a laundry room.

The women fled while the two men struggled with each other on the floor, each one trying to wrestle the other into a pin. Hawthorne discovered that despite his thin stature, Huron was remarkably strong. He would not be able to best him in a match of grappling.

Hawthorne struck his opponent hard in the stomach with his knee and Huron gasped. Together, they rolled away from each other and jumped to their feet.

Huron's hair was in a horrid state of disarray, some of it was covering his face, his shirt was torn in several places, and his hand was dripping blood. Hawthorne did not know whose blood it was. It did not matter.

The two men lunged at each other, grabbing each other's shirts. At the same time they drew their fists back and—

"What is going on here?!"

It was the intensity of Bridie's voice that caused both sidhe to freeze. Two pairs of eyes turned to look at the open doorway.

Bridie stood there wearing her usual winter outfit, Investigator's badge shining on her vest. Held in her hands was a broken rose, several petals had wilted off and it had become limp. Hawthorne and Huron had stepped on it several times during their personal *mêlée*.

"Bridie?" Both adversaries said in unison.

Then suddenly they looked at each other.

"You know her?" Huron said sharply. Turning to Bridie. "You know him?"

"Unhand him!" Bridie barked.

Uncertain of who was being addressed both combatants released one another and stepped back. Hawthorne was in a state of shock. His sword lay nearby his foot, but he was not about to reach for it—not until he knew really who this man was.

“Dougal,” Bridie said, setting her jaw. “You stay right here.” Then she turned to Huron. “Kylemore, come and walk with me right now.”

She turned on her heel and stepped out of the room, disappearing around the corner.

Huron gave Hawthorne a bewildered look before exiting the room to follow Bridie, but neither previous foe chose to antagonize the other. There was suddenly a strange sense of relationship now that they were both tied to Bridie.

Hawthorne paced like an impatient tiger at the edge of a cage. Bridie had bid him sit down three times already, but after trying to stay still in a chair for more than a minute he would get up and begin to pace again. After that third time she had given up and not asked again.

The snow outside the window had turned to sleet, mixed with rain. The frozen slurry outside drizzled against the window and added the sound of its intermittent patter to the crackle of the fire in the room. Hawthorne could smell the sharp, cold scent of peppermint from one of the salves that Bridie had applied to a wound he had taken to his chest during his fight with Huron.

Hawthorne’s mind boiled. Bridie had been tight lipped about this other sidhe man who also knew her ever since she had broken up their fight. He could only wait and let his curiosity about him bridle until she chose to explain the situation. She could be even more stubborn than he.

The shadow silhouette of Bridie’s body, half-nude in the firelight, turned towards Hawthorne suddenly. She was behind the changing screen; she had gone there immediately after entering the room as if attempting to shield herself from Hawthorne’s fiercely curious and heated gaze. Her shoulders heaved a sigh and she dropped her frilly blouse onto the floor.

“He is my fiancé,” she said finally, answering Hawthorne’s mental question. “You already knew that I had an intended when we first started courting. We are together no longer, but I have not told him about you.”

Hawthorne’s hand fell to where his sword would be if here were wearing one.

The sudden reappearance of Bridie’s previous suitor was a problem. It was obvious that she still had feelings for him. He had brought her a rose to her own quarters. Suddenly, Hawthorne could see the dire sequences of his appearance. This new man was a danger to him like none other. He could take Bridie from him.

“I see,” he said. He swallowed as if attempting to swallow his own rage. “You have chosen not to denounce him and leave me in the dark. If we were in my homeland I would have hunted him down and killed him—”

“You are in my homeland,” Bridie hissed. “Not in yours. Kyle is a good man and I forbid you from harming him! You should not have fought him. You must avoid contact with him from here on.”

Already, the Sluagh assassin’s mind was rife with plans of how to eliminate this suitor. What was the use of being an assassin, he mused, without using those talents to his own ends. The Knight Investigator would be an easy target for a Master of Assassins and he would not have to use the same stealth as he did in tracking Bridie. The body need never be found.

“He came upon me from behind,” Hawthorne muttered. “I should have slain him then, but I would not condone killing a man in your house if I knew not the reason. I could have dispatched him right there.” His voice softened with a sense of nostalgia then. “I have seen many assassins come for me.”

Bridie fell into an uncanny silence then. She was holding something in her hands. Hawthorne could not make out what it was through the wardrobe screen, but she was intent upon it. He tried to move toward the screen to get a better look at what she was doing but she seemed to notice his approach and the silhouette of her hand shot up. He stopped in his tracks.

“There is a phrase that the Mundane’s use,” she said slowly. “You can take the boy out of the country, but not the country out of the boy. Perhaps this can also be said of the Nightmare Lands.”

Hawthorne stood absolutely still. It was difficult to fathom what Bridie was getting at. He had discovered in his time with her that she was sometimes slow to make her point when it was very important to her. She would think out loud as if explaining her process of thought before finally concluding.

“Dougal,” she said his name with a soft but reverent lilt, the tone of one lover to another. “You are my only suitor. The only suitor that I want. Still, I loved Kyle once. With the same passion that I now love you...but he was too tightly wed to his duties as an Investigator to ever truly keep me. I would not see him harmed by anyone, but nor should I have to prove my love to you. Still... There is a fear within me. A fear that I must not submit myself to.

“There have been some dark questions that have gone unanswered. Unanswered because I did not want to know. Now I must.”

“What are your questions?”

Bridie let her head drop for a moment and she sighed. Flexing her fingers over the object in her hands.

“Today, I discovered something that I never wanted to know,” she said.

Hawthorne’s beautiful lover stepped out from behind the dressing screen. She was nude from the waist up, wearing only a silken grey skirt that billowed about her feet. Her bare shoulders and breasts were caressed with the soft red glow of the fire. In her hands she held one of Hawthorne’s pistols, *Argent*.

Even naked, Bridie’s presence and authority was not diminished, if anything it accented the intensity of her gaze.

She thrust the gun out, straight armed towards Hawthorne, holding it with its barrel pointed down. Instantly, Hawthorne understood. She knew.

“This is your pistol,” she said. “The weapon uses *elfshot*. I suspect also that you know how to craft an *elfbore*.” Having used her prop for what she needed, Bridie tossed the pistol away with a violent lob. It soared across the room and clattered onto the floor near the door. Hawthorne did not flinch.

Three bold steps and Bridie stood directly in front of Hawthorne, her violet eyes burned into his even as they shimmered with unspent tears. She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and gripped him tightly.

“Dougal Hawthorne,” she said. “You are mine! I will have you pay fealty to no other mistress! I know *Unseileigh* you are, but... I dared not ask you before, but I dare not be ignorant now. What Troop did you swear to?”

Hawthorne’s breath caught in his astonished silence. He looked down at the naked wisp of a sidhe girl standing before him. Though smaller than he and nude, she managed to tower over him.

“*Tell me?*” she cried. “I must know!”

Hawthorne found himself unable to speak. He had faced assassins, soldiers on the battlefield, witch mages, and scores of beings more terrible than any Seileigh could have imagined—yet here he was, cowed by a naked girl.

But Bridie already had her answer. He did not need to speak for her to know it.

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

She released him fiercely and rushed to the bed where his pack was sitting and wrenched it open. Hawthorne made no move to stop her. In moments she had torn all of its contents out and they were scattered across the bed, save one item.

In her shaking grip she held a silver mask. Bridie crumpled over the thing as if it were a dagger thrust into her breast.

Hawthorne knew that mask as intimately as he knew the body of any of his lovers. It had been fashioned for him by a *sidhe* artifex on the day he was initiated into the ranks of the Sluagh and his career as an assassin had begun. It was both beautiful and terrible, a shining monument to his rank and stature. The silver curves of the mask matched his own face in perfect symmetry and while the visage was similar none who saw him wearing it would ever recognize him again.

It was a Sluagh *cidbis*, a mask of their lethal masquerade. *Luchd cidbis dubh* the Sluagh were called by both Seileigh and Unseileigh alike. A mask that hid the entire face was worn for only one purpose: to face death.

A chill shot through Hawthorne when Bridie finally looked up. The hurt in her eyes was unbearable. He wanted to go to her, but he feared to touch her. He longed to bring comfort to his disconsolate love, but he knew that he was the cause of her pain. Hawthorne was paralyzed, frozen to the spot where he stood.

“No!” Bridie screamed and bolted for the balcony doors. She rushed them madly and flung them open, racing barefoot into the freezing cold.

When the doors crashed open, Hawthorne’s paralysis was broken. Fearing for her sanity, he moved to follow. Bursting into the bristling cold intent on preventing her from throwing herself from the balcony or...anything worse.

She stood at the edge of the snow-covered balcony holding the mask triumphantly overhead, and over the drop onto the jagged obsidian stones in the crystal garden below. Her face was twisted in a tempered rage, caught between passion and sorrow.

A cold rain had started to fall. The snow had ended. The frozen rain dripped down her body and over her naked breasts, but her skin did not rash with gooseflesh. Instead she was flushed. Her hair wet and sticking to her body as she breathed heavily, white plumes billowing out with each heave of her chest.

“I have fought the Sluagh in the Nightmare War,” she said. Her wide eyes held a fey look. “They come at you from the mists. The darkness their begotten ally. Wearing the night like a cape they come from every direction at once.

“Terrifying and beautiful they cut you down before you even see them coming. The screams of your companions ring in your ears even as you stand fast, waiting for the blow that will take you. Yet, when your time comes you are not ready.

“You fight with every inch of your ability to keep the bare steel from your skin. Your opponents fight with an easy brutal elegance, their faceless forms swimming in your vision as every ounce of your being is put to the test. Aside from her blade you can only see one thing of your enemy: her mask. A glowing silver thing shining like demon light behind the flickering of her blade.

“Then it happens, *wyrd* or luck, it does not matter. You pierce her through the breast and she falls, struck down at your feet. With her dying breath she curses you in an unknown tongue and perishes. Though even then it does not end, as you stand alone. All of your companions, their bodies broken and bloody, lie everywhere. And the silence crashes down all around you. You are alone.”

“I am of the Sluagh no longer,” Hawthorne said. Cold rain pummeled his face mercilessly even as he was forced to spit those words out.

“Nay! Nay!” Bridie shouted back. “You still kill with your old talents! You still carry your *cidbis*...your death mask!” She thrust the mask at him as if rebuking him with a holy relic. “You have given up your ties to the Nightmare Lands and the Unseileigh by choosing to forget your assignment and become my beloved. You cannot go back. You cannot be mine and still bear the pennant of the Sluagh in your heart.”

Bridie stepped toward Hawthorne, away from the edge of the balcony.

“Destroy this and renounce your ties to the Sluagh,” she demanded. “And be *mine!*”

She pressed the mask into his hand and stepped back again, she had placed herself perilously close to the precipice edge of the balcony.

With the *cidhis* in his hand old memories sprang back of wearing it. All of the glory he had accumulated behind its visage, all of that he would be leaving behind should be renounce it. In that flood of memory, he looked up at Bridie, her naked body dripping with the freezing rain, standing near the edge of the balcony. The chin of the mask was as sharp as any blade, Hawthorne knew that he could simply slide his fingers through the eyes, step forward and...

With Bridie dead he could return to his old life, his assignment would be complete. He wouldn't have to be a lowly servant for some sniveling Seileigh house. He could return to all the glory and power that came with being a Sluagh Master of Assassins. All he had to do was kill Bridie, remove her from his life. She would remain the beautiful memory that she was and he would be able to return to his own world.

It would be so simple; she had made it so.

Hawthorne slid his fingers through the eyes of the mask and raised it up. Bridie looked at him, her eyes compelling him to decide. Even exposed to the elements, defenseless, and distraught she was beautiful. Her sweet body was reflected in cheek of the mask as he lifted it up.

The mask came down.

Hawthorne swung with all of his might. The *cidhis* struck the balcony's marble deck with a splintering crackle.

It shattered. Silver pieces of the mask sprayed away from Hawthorne's hand and scattered across the balcony floor, many of them slid past Bridie's feet and fell over the precipice and into the crystal garden below.

Hawthorne could hear them hitting the crystals, chiming as they did so.

“I renounce the Sluagh for the love of a woman,” Hawthorne said as he rose. “I renounce my ties to the Sluagh to give myself completely to you, Bridie MacFenna. I am yours.”

Bridie swayed worryingly; Hawthorne dove forward and caught her in his arms before she could fall. Clutching her tightly he looked into her weakened purple eyes and he knew that he had made the right decision.

“I am yours, my love,” she said quietly. All of her energy spent, she fainted in his embrace.

Chapter 4

A Sidhe Without a Past

Huron spent the next week in an addled daze. He could barely believe his misfortune. Bridie was lost to him and taken by another in a single fell swoop—a man he knew nothing about. Every day that he went into the Yard and every day he saw her once or twice; she didn't ignore him, nor refuse to speak to him. Still, their tight little conversations could have been nonexistent for the talk they exchanged. Huron couldn't tell if it was Bridie would was not speaking to him, or he not speaking to her.

So much pent up emotion prickled within him that he could not separate his waking thoughts of Bridie from his duties. Very quickly his work suffered.

At first he blamed himself. He hadn't written her enough. He hadn't paid her enough heed. He had taken that posting across the ocean to search for clues to the whereabouts of those accursed specs. It was him, for several days he wallowed in it. He became unable to bring himself to speak to Bridie because she represented his complete and absolute failure.

Each time he saw his beautiful violet flower of the north walk into the Yard he wilted a little more. If he were a plant he would have dried up and blown away in those few days.

Soon, though, his emotions turned. They twisted within his gut like a snake and brought to him a revelation he had not originally realized. It was not Huron who was at fault here so much as that *man*. That red haired sidhe with the malevolent look, *he* was to blame for this. He must have bedazzled Bridie so that she could not see, there was something ill favored about him that set Huron on edge when he first saw him.

The guise of the task force to seek out and discover Unseileigh spies in the midst of the Faerie community in New York was perfect cover for Huron to do a little detective work of his

own. It was for Bridie's sake. Certainly Huron could accept that she was intelligent—brilliant even—but something had blinded her to this man's real intentions, or at least his nature. If Huron could tell that there was something dishonest about this fellow then she too should have sensed it.

That explained it best: Bridie had taken leave of her sense. Most likely not of her own free will.

Huron's research into the past existence of Bridie's lover was difficult, and fruitless. He found only one entry dating two years back in House Galadmohr's logbooks that listed him as "D. H." with no date of birth, no original House, and no kingdom of origin. Worse, there were no records of him having ever been in New York before that point—not even Mundane immigration records. D. H. was a nonperson up until the point that he became a title of House Galadmohr there in New York two years prior.

Realizing that he could easily have D. H. marked as a possible Unseileigh Huron wrestled with the idea only shortly until his better conscience won out. Though he knew that there was something altogether unsavory, and now forebodingly mysterious, about the fellow, he was not about to compromise his own honor to prove it. No, he would not ruin this man's reputation by abusing his own powers; he would have to gather real evidence against him. Especially if he was not Unseileigh—which was likely—the evidence he sought was evidence to regain Bridie's affections, not to imprison her lover.

It was in passing conversation the next day that he heard Bridie use his name: Hawthorne.

So now, Huron had a name to go with the initials. D. Hawthorne. Also granting Huron name to go with the dark image of his grinning face and dark eyes in his memory of the first day that they met. Hawthorne had made himself very scarce after that encounter, Huron had heard nothing about him, nor seen him once.

The research into the history and records of D. Hawthorne had been completed, so Huron moved onto the next step of his investigation. It was time to start interviewing the servants at the House mansion that worked with him.

"He is a very kind fellow, just doesn't talk much," Grace Galadmohr said to Huron in response to his questions. "He goes by Hawthorne. I think his first name is Douglas but I cannot be certain—he doesn't say much about himself. Still, I rather fancy him. Is he in trouble?"

Other servants who had worked with Hawthorne replied similarly. Though none were certain of his first name, Grace was the only who was even semi-certain. Tried as he might, Huron couldn't find anyone who didn't like Hawthorne. Mostly, it seemed, because Hawthorne kept to himself too much to raise anyone's hackles.

Most of the wait staff and servants at the mansion hadn't even heard of Hawthorne. Some recognized him from pictures, but knew nothing about him.

"Aye, he started with the grounds keeping staff about two months hence, yessir," Groundskeeper Pilly said during an interview a few days later. "He is a good lad, works hard at his job, stays around during his duties, and always checks in at the proper times. A strangely clockwork fellow. Wouldn't think it of him, he dresses so ragamuffin."

"Two months ago you say?" Huron said. "What was he doing before that?"

The groundskeeper shrugged. "Pulling weeds at some other mansion, my supposing. I couldn't say. I just keep 'em in line."

This was the first time that Huron had been told a span of time that Hawthorne had been there. Others, even Grace, could only tell Huron about recent encounters with the strange sidhe, but had a sense he'd been around for quite some time. He was too familiar with the grounds, he was good with other people, they cited. Just nobody was sure where he came from; most expected him to disappear the same way.

The records of Hawthorne's joining the House Galadmohr staff at this mansion dated back two years, but they didn't state what he was doing at the time. There were probably better documented records at the clerk's office in the mansion proper. Armed with the name of the groundskeeper and some knowledge of how House Galadmohr was run, Huron headed to see the head clerk.

"Douglas Hawthorne?" the head clerk said in a dull tone. "Can't say I've heard of such a man."

"He was entered in the records as D. H." Huron pressed.

"D. H.? Just initials?" the head clerk was Kin, and rather old. Gray hairs were creeping through his hair and he had slicked it back with grease. He was slow and made meaningful gestures at everything that he did, like he was doing right then. "Ah, ah. Oh. Yes. D. H. I have seen those records."

"You have?" Huron said hopefully, finally a break.

"Yes, they were destroyed."

Huron's face fell. "Destroyed?"

"Water," the man said. "Gets in, destroys the paper. Very bad."

"Yes, very bad," Huron said. "Do you mind if I showed a picture of Douglas Hawthorne around the office to see if anyone recognizes him?"

"No, not a problem, not a problem," the head clerk said.

Huron showed the picture to everyone in the office and not a one had anything to say about him. Except that they thought maybe his first name was Douglas. Most had seen him on the grounds before, but nobody actually knew him. He was a common groundskeeper, why would a clerk be caught dead talking to him? The head clerk was no use to Huron; the detective was beginning to feel that the old man's memories were moldier than the destroyed documents anyway.

Huron was about to give up on this avenue completely when a young sidhe traipsed into the room wearing a very low cut dress and her blonde hair in a long braid. She stopped hard in front of Huron. She was difficult to miss; she was wearing so much perfume that it made Huron's eyes water.

"Hey, it's Douglas," she said taking the picture from Huron. "I haven't seen him in a few months. Whatever happened to him?" She leaned very close to Huron and looked up at him flirtatiously. "Did he die?"

"Did you know Hawthorne?" Huron asked.

She gave him a confused glance and back up a little. "Hawthorne? Who do you mean?"

"Douglas Hawthorne," Huron pointed at the picture.

"No," the girl said. "Douglas Clenwyn." She shoved the picture back to Huron, grinning. "I went to a masquerade ball with him two months ago. I kinda left him standing at the door alone. I haven't seen him since. I think he took it personal."

"Clenwyn?" Huron placed a finger against his chin. "You are certain of that?"

The girl was taken aback. "Yes I'm certain. Why wouldn't I be?"

"No, nothing," Huron said. "Thank you for your time..."

"Gwendryla," she said offering her hand to Huron. "You can call me Gwen."

"Thank you, Gwen," Huron intoned as he bowed over her hand. "You have just made my day."

"Come back and see me any time, handsome," Gwen quipped as Huron made a hasty exit. Her eyes narrowed shrewdly followed closely by a predatory smile. "I'll happily make your day any time—any time."

Huron lingered near the stow room at the Yard like a ghost haunting a room. It was over three hours off of his shift and high time that Bridie came onto duty. He'd been staring so long that he was sure the dark ceiling and deep set doors of the room had been etched into his vision. Only the regular *drip-drip* sound of a leaky pipe somewhere in the wall kept him company. The sweaty smell of dirty laundry and overworked Investigators tickled his nose as the clock on the far wall silently floated through the hours.

All of the time Huron spent sitting in wait gave him a little time to reflect on what brought him here. When he was transferred to Galway during the Fomhóire artifact smuggling case earlier that year she had argued that he did not have to go, that he could let some other investigator take the case. He had argued that he was the best and therefore had to be the one to go. Bridie did not always see things this way; she felt that a person was better for their company than their talents.

Huron sighed. Also, he suspected that Bridie knew why he had argued so hard to go to Galway. She knew that was where he lost track of the Spectacles over a hundred years earlier when he had first joined the Knight Investigators. Huron feared for some time that Bridie was beginning to feel like she was an afterthought to his interest in locating the evil artifact and removing it from the Mundane world. It was his fault, after all, that they had escaped Ireland.

His thoughts dwelled in the past, working over perhapses and ifs and all myriad of things that he could have done differently. Still, Huron knew too well that he could not extract himself from his duty to track down the Spectacles. It was because of his passion for the now long defunct case that had brought him to New York in the first place, and thereby brought him to Bridie.

Now he had lost the Lady MacFenna, and it seemed at the same time the trail that led to the whereabouts of the Spectacles was growing cold. Soon, Huron feared he would have nothing; he could not bear to think of it.

Presently, Huron was rescued from his thoughts when Bridie entered the room. She was surrounded by the same aura of loveliness that Huron had always known. The fragrance of her skin brought old memories back to the surface of his mind of her soft smile and violet eyes.

She stopped just inside the door once she saw him. Her expression seemed stunned for a moment, but then she narrowed her lips and set her jaw.

"Kyle," she said. "What are you doing here? Your shift ended hours ago."

Huron shook his head. "And yours should have started very shortly after mine ended."

"Have you been waiting here that long? For me?"

"Bridie," he said. She gave him a level look; the type he knew meant that she was not going to suffer nonsense. "Listen. This Douglas Hawthorne that you're with...he is not at all what he seems."

Bridie narrowed her eyes and turned her head to regard Huron with a sidelong look. "Kyle, you do not understand what you're talking about."

"Actually, I do," Kylemore said while standing up and pulling a piece of paper from his pocket. "I probably know better than you think."

Bridie shook her head. "Stop," she begged, showing her hands. "Stop this now, Kyle. Please. Don't investigate him. Leave him alone."

"Did you know that he arrived here on a boat from Galway under an assumed name?" Huron persisted. He held up the piece of paper like it was a murder weapon. "That he didn't exist before he disembarked in New York? There is no record of him getting onto the boat in the Galway. I know, I can get those records. This man is not who he seems to be."

"Kyle..." Bridie said slowly. "I already know all of this."

"Or do you only know the version that he's told you? You're smarter than this—"

Bridie's expression darkened. "Don't patronize me, Kyle."

“I love you, Bridie,” Huron said softly. “I see you with this man, and he is more than just a mystery he is a man running from something. Possibly from a dark past. I have here an affidavit of the harbormaster, who he bribed to keep his name out of the berth records. Hawthorne paid him in Underhill gold. You know as well as I that many criminals in the Underhill flee to the Mundane lands.”

Bridie’s angry expression softened and her shoulders fell slightly. “Kyle... I know you’re concerned, but I can take care of myself. You have to trust me.”

“It’s not you that I don’t trust—it’s him,” Huron persisted. “I know that things can probably never be the same between us again, but I still care about you greatly.”

“Sadly, Kyle, that’s just it,” Bridie said. “When things were the same between us, before, you put me beneath your duties.” She shook her head. “I can’t be treated that way. You running off looking for things that cannot be found. We are best off as friends—but right now you need to let me be. For the sake of your love for me, let me be.”

Huron wanted very badly to say, “I can’t do that,” but he could not bring himself to speak the words. So instead he pressed onwards.

“Bridie, there is a task force forming even now in the Investigators to root out Unseileigh elements in our midst. This fellow stands a good chance of being a suspect from his past—”

The look on her face stopped his speech in its tracks. Suddenly, Huron wished that he could take back every word that he had just said. The softened expression shored up quickly into an iron mask of grim rage.

“Captain Huron,” she said, “you *will* leave me be, and I *will* not tolerate this sort of behavior by you. Now *stand aside* and let me pass or so help me by Danu...”

Bridie let the threat linger unspoken, she did not have to say anything; her eyes told all the tale she needed. Suitably chastised, Huron stepped out of her way and she walked briskly past him. The door to the stow room slammed behind her, leaving Huron alone with the dripping pipe.

Chapter 5

When the Bell Tolls

A month wore on since Bridie's confrontation with Huron and he never brought up the topic again. Still, she bid Dougal be careful in his movements and asked him to stay generally out of sight, which he did extremely well at.

The worst of the winter was over and it had been a strangely warm one nonetheless. The feelers of spring were beginning to touch the streets as twigs on the long bare trees began to turn greenish and spots of grass showed signs of life again. The snows had stopped two weeks before and were replaced by scattered, cold rains that flooded the streets and dampened the demeanor of everyone. Everyone but Bridie.

Bridie stood under an eave on a street corner staring into one such rain. She wore a wizard's trench coat—the sleeves were cut into wide cuffs so that she grasp her wrists with either hand beneath—over a simple grey uniform that was favored by many of the Investigators. Cars drove past through the water filled streets, causing the large churning puddles to tremble as they gushed down into the overfilled storm drains. The smells and sounds of midday rain surrounded Bridie in a rushing, never-ending gasp.

She watched a weary business man walk past. His posture slumped and his nice business suit soaked through with water. He did nothing to protect himself from the deluge, but Bridie could tell that more weighed on his mind than a little cold water falling from the sky. Depression had set in like a great beast onto the population. With the rain it seemed that gaiety had gone out of the city and was replaced by this harsh grey.

Bridie kept her spirits up by thinking warm thoughts. The fire in her quarters burning brightly; her bed sheets, freshly tossed and ironed and pulled onto her bed; Dougal waiting for her in the shadows of her bedroom curtains...

The ex-assassin had been acting strangely lately. Bridie could tell that something troubled his mind, but he would not tell her, nor did she press the issue. She knew too well that when something vexed her, Hawthorne would belabor it all the more; it was best to let him work it over and then bring it back to her. Oftentimes he would work it out in that time anyway and instead bring her the solution. Sometimes Bridie worried that he didn't need her as much for support. He was used to being alone, after all.

Today, though, today he told her was going to be something special. Bridie could only fathom a guess at what he meant. Though with winter turning itself into spring one thing did tickle the back of Bridie's mind and she saw herself set to it. She had been with Dougal Hawthorne long enough that she had a mind to keep him—not that her mind wasn't set to that originally; it was just a tradition of hers to wait a few months before deciding if her heart was in the right place.

Her thoughts drifted a little from her current assignment and onto her plans for that night. It was to be another masquerade ball, this time without the guise of *glamour* to hide the patrons from one another. Dougal would enjoy a masquerade, she knew; it was in his nature. She had every intent of making this occasion momentous.

In her hand she held an offering. Something she was finally willing to present her beloved and she knew that he was deserving of it.

Bridie smiled at the object of her attentions as it lay in her palm, a bit of golden color to contrast against the rainy grey all around her. She closed her hand up and held her fist into the falling rain, enjoying the sensation of water tumbling over her knuckles.

A simple *glamour* cantrip kept the rain from touching Hawthorne as he strode with a purposeful gait across the street. His heavy black duster whipped about his feet and billowed when he jumped across the puddle at the edge of the sidewalk and onto the slick cement. The gentle wind howled overhead tossing the rain about in slashing sheets.

That sidhe Investigator, Huron, had been back at the mansion again. Hawthorne figured he was the man's target. This time he'd arrived with a pair of trolds, obvious due to their near eight foot statures. Doing as he was bid by Bridie, Hawthorne remained out of sight and only watched the trio from a distance. He could not listen in on their conversations with the head groundskeeper, but Hawthorne easily guessed the subject of the conversation.

So, instead of remaining on the grounds where discovery was likely, Hawthorne set out to the city. New York was a big place, with big buildings, big streets, and more than enough people to vanish into. Even a sidhe, who would normally stand out to other Faerie from a crowd of Mundanes, could blend into the background in a crowd.

There were few crowds now. Most people had taken themselves under eaves, or rushed to and fro to avoid the increasingly present, bone chilling rain.

Hawthorne had taken this chance to collect a prize that had been a month in coming. A month earlier he had discovered that a local jeweler had moved recently from Ireland and was Kin. The man's eyes had the look to them like they had seen too many things, Mundane and Faerie alike. Hawthorne queried the man if he knew how to get sidhe silver on a lark, which proved extremely fruitful, as the man replied that he could. Delighted by the prospect Hawthorne asked for the item that he had now tucked carefully into his vest's pocket: a length of perfect sidhe silver.

It had cost him every cent of his earnings since the time he had come to New York, but it was worth every penny.

Over the past few weeks, Hawthorne had noticed a slight change in Bridie's attitude. As if something vexed her thoughts, but he was not so rude to press her; he knew that if she had something to ask she would present him with it. Though not completely certain, Dougal had some guesses as to what troubled his lover; she was a sidhe woman and like most sidhe women possessed a degree of desire to know that her beloved was indeed hers to keep.

Hawthorne patted the ribbon in his pocket gently. He would prove to her this night that he was intent to be hers and if she accepted his ribbon she would know that he meant to marry her. The concept of a wedding was a very Seileigh tradition. Keeping a mate wasn't unknown among the Unseileigh but the chances that they could be killed or vanish into the wilds was very high. Relationships between Unseileigh were usually short and passion filled, and unceremonious like their general deportment.

Bridie was Seileigh and as such Hawthorne considered wooing her in the way best suited for a Seileigh sidhe.

The masquerade ball was held in the same place as it was the last time. The ballroom of the mansion was spacious and flanked by two banister stairways on either side that lead up to a second level. The second level's terraces overlooked the center ballroom and the platform for the orchestra with trellises of white ivy twisting among them. The white ivy dotted itself with blue blossoms smelling of fragrant freesia.

Smaller rooms and grand hallways abutted the ballroom on all four sides. The black and white tiled floor of the ballroom spilled into them like round pools of checkers cut out of their wooden slats. Each hallway was lined with silver statues with their hands extended so that platters of food could be placed on them for the patrons of the ball. The halls were designed such that the music played by the orchestra in the main ballroom would echo into them and sound as if any of the audience in them were in the ballroom itself.

Bridie arrived with the second wave of guests, those who chose to be fashionably ten minutes late. The real bulk of the masqueraders would not arrive for another half-hour; that was when the standing banquet would start.

She had dressed herself up in her best courtly gown. A dress that she'd only worn once before—to preside over an Investigator's presentation while in audience with the Elven Queen of Meath. It was a strapless ball gown with careless looking loops that hooked just beneath her shoulders on her arms, but had skin-tone colored elastic beneath to hold them in place. The gown itself fell to the floor in a shimmering cascade of material burnished to the cast of moonstone. She had completed her outfit with her tapering gloves and an emerald green sash pinned with an elven ruby.

The mask that Bridie wore had been crafted by one of the sidhe artisans of House Galadmohr for an event such as this. She made a gesture of adjusting it as she wiped some sweat from her upper lip; the heat from the glaring lights of the foyer brought a sheen to her skin. Her mask was feathered white with small silver sequins around the eyes of cut pearls; it was made to look like the face of a snow owl. The Lady of the House had let rumor spread that she would be attending the ball wearing a peacock costume. Most of the women at the ball tonight would probably also follow a bird motif.

"Look for me when the first bell tolls," her beloved Dougal had told her earlier that day.

The first bell to which he referred would be tolling any moment. At the start of the standing banquet feast each bell in the towers of the mansion would be rung once. The resulting crescendo of clock bells would signal the arrival of a crushing bevy of sidhe, noble and common alike. Bridie wondered if Dougal chose to make his entrance with them. Not a soul at the masquerade would

know who he was—especially when he was wearing a masked disguise for the ball—but surely he had made himself obvious enough for Bridie to pick him out.

“Do you expect your boyfriend?” a haughty voice lilted near her ear. Bridie turned to gaze into a pair of watery blue sidhe eyes. The owner of the voice, and the eyes, was about her height and wearing a stark azure ceramic mask fashioned to look like a blue jay.

“Gwen?” Bridie asked. The girl’s husky voice had not given her away at first; it was the way that she swayed her hips and bent her back. “What do you mean?”

“The tall, dark one,” Gwen said, rolling her eyes and swaying. “Do you think I missed it last masquerade? I know who he is, you know. And—I’m pretty sure you know who he is *too*.”

“I would not dare to fathom the murky depths of all the men that you *know*, Gwen,” Bridie drawled, doing her best to put the appropriate sneer in her voice. “Trawling down there might dredge up something unpleasant.”

“No woman is an island,” Gwen quipped. Irritated at Bridie, she flicked at one of the blue feathers on her own mask.

“True enough, Gwen,” Bridie said while turning her head to look to the side, “but you yourself manage to be an entire archipelago, complete with the unclothed natives and unscrupulous sailors.” Then she subtly shifted her posture so that she was leaning slightly closer to Gwen and lowered her voice. “No wait; did I just expose the last few visitors to your bedchambers? No matter, I’m sure that they’ll set sail soon enough for other lustier horizons.”

Gwen set her jaw and puffed out her chest even more than before like an angry bird. Bridie wondered if it would burst if she pressed the matter. Knowing herself outmatched, and too angry to come up with a response, Gwen made a small *hmpb* sound, turned on her heel, and tromped away.

Bridie smirked at the trollop’s retreat and went back to watching for her beau.

A crowd was already emerging from the giant double doors of the foyer from the darkening gardens in the front of the mansion. The rain clouds from earlier in the day had passed and in their wake there was a brisk, but moist, wind, it wafted in with the newcomers who chattered amongst themselves. It reminded Bridie of a gaggle of geese gathered at the edge of a lake, which seemed to fit for the number of bird masks that were present in the assemblage.

Presently, the first bell tolled. Its clarion ring resounded through the entire mansion and shook the very air around Bridie and all became still. Moments after the ringing began to fade another bell struck, adding its own note to the air. Bridie turned her head back and forth looking at the frozen crowd, hoping for a glimpse of Hawthorne. The next bell rang, its pitch higher than the two previous, it resonated with them like ripples on a pond. Faces, faces, everywhere but she did not see her beloved.

Then the last bell sounded and he was there.

As if the crowd had parted before him, Hawthorne stood before Bridie in regal splendor. He dressed completely in black and wearing a floor length cape of black silk. His fiery orange hair spilled in glowing waves over his shoulders and down his back. He was wearing a straight-collar shirt with a notch cut in front for a royal purple gemstone set right at his throat and adorned with silver. He was wearing a simple raven mask with two large black feathers across his brow. Dougal bowed deeply to her, his cape swirling around him.

Bridie as looked upon her beloved her heart swelled in her breast; he had become beauty inspired.

“My Lady,” he said while reaching for her with a black gloved hand.

All around Bridie people began to applaud. Their clapping coincided perfectly with Dougal’s arrival and the offering of his hand that she was confused. They were applauding for his entrance? In her own amusement Bridie applauded as well. Then suddenly she realized what had happened, in

her daze she had missed the Lady of the House stating that the banquet had begun—they were clapping for that, not for her beautiful lover.

Dougal gently took her hand and she drew him close to her.

“You look so fine tonight, *mo mhúirín*,” Bridie breathed into his sweet-smelling hair as she held him close to her. Despite herself she trembled in his embrace.

“I have a gift for you, Bridie,” Dougal said and produced something from his vest.

Bridie’s heart pounded in her chest as she turned her eyes to look. “What is it?” she asked.

Then she saw.

It was a silver *caraid* ribbon. A ribbon only given with the intent to offer one’s hand in marriage to another, and only worn when the intent is accepted. Bridie’s heart swelled in her breast with pure elation and a smile exploded to her lips. For in her own pocket she had kept a similar gift for her wonderful love, but in the form of a ring, they had both come this night to offer the same thing!

“I—” she started to say, then stopped, her throat catching on near-tears. “I have also brought a gift for you, my beautiful one. We should wait to exchange them, though,” it hurt for her to say those words, she felt as if her heart might burst from her chest this night, “we should enjoy the night and then with the solace of solitude make our pledges.”

“By your lead, my Lady,” Dougal said to her. “The night is yours.”

Bridie smiled, pressed his hand against her stomach, and stepped close to him. She pressed her lips against his and enveloped herself in the scent and presence that was *him*. In that instant she knew this was the man she was going to marry. That moment and the clarity of the universe surrounded her on all sides and filled her up with the simple ecstasy of being there with him.

Together Bridie and Dougal took to the ballroom floor. They waltzed together like they did the first time they were together and the other patrons cleared room for them to dance. As they took each other through intricate steps and patterns a small audience developed in a circle around them. Bridie did not notice; to her, Dougal was the only thing left. He kept her so smoothly in the atmosphere of the waltz that Bridie felt as if her feet never touched the ground while she was held in his dance.

When she was dancing, Bridie felt herself filled with elation unparalleled by any other sensation of her entire life. When she was standing on the side to allow Dougal to catch his breath she chatted gaily with the other party goers. Whenever the wine passed around she took herself a cup and merrily quaffed the contents of each glass. She could feel the heat of the alcohol on her cheeks already, more so than could be accounted for by the blush that her lover’s attention breathed into her body.

Hawthorne remained the astute gentleman always at her elbow and in her attendance and very quickly, Bridie was the envy of every other lady at the ball. Once or twice, Bridie caught a girl or two looking at her and Dougal, only for them to snap their gazes away an instant later. By the time that half bells sounded, Bridie felt very pleased with herself and the ball altogether.

Time flew like a golden winged bird and soon Bridie noticed that the masquerade had begun to wind down. Couples had taken to the floor and the orchestra, stripped to only three people, played soft and slow music while the lights reflected the intimacy of the setting. A gentle heat caressed her cheeks as she took Dougal by the hand and drew him from the room, through the hallway, and out into the forest behind the mansion.

Ghostly mists had risen up from the loamy forest ground and filled the dark spaces between the trees with a grey illumination. Moonbeams gently cast ribbons of light between the black trunks of the trees, throwing odd shadows of dark and light across the landscape. In the midst of the trees, the same trees that had guarded the mansion for centuries, Bridie stopped Dougal and kissed him again.

“Now, show me your gift, my beautiful lad,” Bridie said to Dougal.

He reached into his vest and produced the sidhe-silver *cariad* ribbon. He handled it with extreme delicacy and held it up into a shaft of moonlight.

“I offer my ribbon to the fairest lady in all of the Mundane Lands and the Underhill combined,” he said as Bridie smiled. Her heart’s joy unfettered in her chest and she could feel it swell around her with such warmth as she’d never known before.

Bridie reached to a hidden pocket in her dress and removed a black pouch from there. She undid the drawstrings of the pouch and dispensed the contents into her palm.

It was a ring. One crafted by the finest sidhe artifex in House Galadmohr that she knew. Two thin bands of sidhe-silver edged a center labyrinth of rose-gold Celtic knotwork, on one side of the ring, the Claddagh two hands clasping a heart wearing a crown was worked into the knotwork. The ring glowed with an ethereal light in her hand as she held it to her beloved.

“With this ring, I thee give my hand. For tonight, for always,” Bridie intoned looking deep into Dougal’s midnight blue eyes. “With this ring I thee wed and bind myself, and my heart to thee. I love you.”

Suddenly and unbidden, Bridie’s legs gave out beneath her like they were made of water. A sharp heat exploded in her chest.

She fell into Dougal’s comforting embrace and she could feel all the love that she ever needed close around her as she stumbled to regain her balance. His face swam in her vision as he held her up.

“*I love you,*” she said again—uttering her love with her last breath; she collapsed lifeless into his arms.

Chapter 6

In Her Wedding's Wake

Dew dropped slowly from tiny fronds of grass as glimmers of sunlight began to crest the New York skyline. The rising sun cast stark golden shafts of light through the murk of the woods around the mansion. Lieutenant Tolworth wearily wiped moisture from his brow; sweat dripped from his nose despite the crisp temperature. It had been three hours since he arrived and Investigators still cased the surrounding scene.

A white sheet had been thrown over Bridie's body, a minor comfort for which he was grateful. Tolworth joked with himself that she had managed herself the easiest job of any Investigator on the scene at the moment.

Tolworth crouched near Bridie's body and gazed across the wooded plot towards where Rockne's towering figure moved carefully between the trees. The detective scanned the ground diligently as he went, searching for anything that seemed out of place. Every Investigator on the scene kept a stricter discipline than usual; one of their own had been killed here.

Bridie had been left where she fell. Her arms had been folded carefully over her chest and a silver *carriad* ribbon tied to her wrist. Red blood had pooled over her chest from the bullet wound and it stuck to the silvery material. The gentle, peaceful look to her features gave her an eerie sleeping appearance. Tolworth didn't want to fool himself into think that she'd just wake up.

There had been two wounds on her body. One was obvious, the hole in her chest just above her breast, and the other less obvious, a dark bruise on the opposite side just beneath her last rib. Bridie's body rested otherwise unscathed. Not even the dirt and sticks from the ground stuck in her hair.

He shook his head slowly. The scene was obvious. Her assassin shot her with a pistol loaded with elfshot. One bullet pierced her body. Another was found on the ground near her body, probably thwarted by a ward. Two witnesses—mansion guards—had said that they heard several shots fired. They had also found a sidhe man standing over her when they came to investigate, he carried two pistols. Of course, he escaped them.

The footprints at the scene were muted and blurred by *glamour* designed to obfuscate their identity. The only footprints easily recovered belonged to Bridie, and those of a few other people from the masquerade. They would all be taken back to the Yard for further examination.

Rockne stood nearby casting a giant shadow over Tolworth.

“Nothing?” the Lieutenant asked.

Rockne shook his massive head.

Tolworth sighed and looked over his shoulder. A trio of Investigators wearing bright white shirts had arrived and were making their way through the trees. Two of them carried a stretcher between them. Tolworth waved them over.

“Rockne,” he said, “find Koen and tell him to call the Yard and make sure that they keep Captain Huron there when he arrives this morning. I don’t want him getting wind of this.”

The skies over the New York Queens Yard became a brilliant sapphire blue as the sun ascended above the building. Huron woke up early that morning, an impending sense of significance brought him from his restless sleep, but he couldn’t quite center his mind on it.

Dressing for the day became his morning meditation. It let him clear his mind as he chose his suit, slipped on the starched white shirt, ceaselessly tucked it into his black slacks and shrugged on his vest. Like clockwork, every morning before he entered the Yard, Huron would check his appearance in the front window. Not because he was vain or too self-conscious, but more because he feared one day walking in with his tie askew. One needless adjustment to his navy blue tie and he judged himself ready for his shift.

Emptiness greeted Huron when he pushed through the second doors of the Yard. The entrance he used was to the right of a bookstore. It allowed immediate access to the front offices to anyone, even Mundanes. Usually the desk sergeant sat in a chair behind a tall wooden bar with her bored eyes watching everyone who entered the Yard, but today she wasn’t there.

A group of Investigators straggled past. They kept their voices hushed as if in reverence, but when they saw Huron they became completely silent. A few of them greeted him as usual, but in general everyone he passed avoided eye contact.

Curious, but not yet suspicious, Kylemore made his way past the front desk and into the offices. They seemed strangely desolate as well. A few desks eternally occupied by Huron’s friends and coworkers sat strangely vacant. The sensation of significance thrummed all around the young detective and bristled against the back of his mind.

“Captain Huron,” a voice said from nearby. “There you are. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Detective Adelline White smiled at Huron as she walked over, her green eyes gazed at him considering. She was small, but plump, and her busty figure and round face kept her busy with the number of Mundane’s who thought she was cute. Kylemore himself had to admit a certain fondness for the sidhe woman; she was kind, caring, and a savvy investigator.

“Detective White,” Huron said. “What can I do for you? Or, moreover, what’s going on?”

Adelline licked her lips and brushed some errant black strands of hair from her face, her eyes flicking over Huron’s shoulder. “To what do you refer?”

“The Yard seems empty,” he said. “Something has drawn an entire shift out into the streets.”

Adelline nodded. "There are several large cases pending." She shrugged. "What can I say, not one of mine. I'm in to get some paperwork done. You?"

Huron looked her over for a moment. It was obvious that she wasn't telling him something, but with Adelline it could have been that a small banquet had arrived upstairs and everyone had gone to gorge themselves and she didn't want to embarrass them. There was no way to tell.

"Yeah," Huron said with a sigh. "Paperwork here too. I have some cases that I can follow up on, but really should get on that. Thank you for reminding me."

"Glad to be of help, buck-o!" Adelline said cheerfully. She flounced off past Huron to the other side of the offices. As he made his way to his office, Huron got the distinct impression that Detective White was watching him. She paused in her walk to the other side of the office and stood between him and the outside doors.

Even more curious than before, Huron made as if going to his office, but then abruptly changed course and instead walked into the rear briefing room. Apparently appeased by that decision, Adelline wandered away towards the front desk and stopped watching him. Once she could no longer see him, Huron moved out of the briefing room and headed for the side stairwell.

By now Huron suspected something was going on. He racked his mind to try to remember every anniversary and birthday that could possibly fall within this week. Maybe they were planning a surprise for him...maybe this was near his anniversary when he became a Captain, or when he joined the Investigators...

The metal door to the stairwell swung open as Huron reached for the handle. Two cadets stumbled through speaking loudly.

"Did you hear, an Investigator got shot last night," the first one was saying. Then he saw Huron and froze, as did his companion.

Suddenly, fear crept into Huron's suspicious thoughts and his heart beat loud in his ears.

"Who?" He couldn't bring his voice up above a whisper, but the cadet knew exactly what he'd said.

"A D-Detective Captain, sir," the cadet said. "M-MacFenna." The boy's eyes were wide and frightened, and Huron realized suddenly that he was gripping the boy's shirt so hard that his knuckles had gone white. Startled at himself, Huron released the boy.

"Are you okay, sir?" the cadet's companion, a young girl with piercing grey eyes asked.

Huron's thoughts swam. He couldn't see straight. Nothing in the world made sense anymore. He brushed past the two cadets and into the stairwell roughly. His feet propelled him down the stairs even though he didn't want to discover what he feared was down there. For downstairs was the forensic morgue...

The doors to the crypt room flung open at Huron's entrance that they rattled like rusty gates when they struck the walls to their sides. Dread and certainty propelled him into the room with such intensity that he didn't even notice the lone figure standing directly in his way.

Lord Commissioner MacAvee did not move a muscle as Captain Kylemore Huron barreled into the room. MacAvee stood no taller than Huron, and weighed twenty pounds lighter, but Huron stopped dead in his tracks with the other man lifted a hand in warning. The commissioner's silvery hair crested over his shoulders and trickled down along the lapels of his grey suit. A suit not that dissimilar from the one Huron wore.

A knot in Kylemore's throat made it nearly impossible for him to speak. "Bridie?" he croaked.

The Lord Commissioner shook his head. "I was called as soon as it was known, lad. I figured this would be the first place you'd show. Tolworth thought he could hide it from you. I knew better."

Kylemore felt as if the strength had gone out of his legs. They became weak, like limp rope, but he fought to stand.

"Where is she?" he asked. His voice had returned, partly. His mind battled between two opposing thoughts, one where he knew it had to be true of MacAvee was saying it so, and the other denying even the possibility: Bridie could not be dead.

"Her body is at the Kings Yard," Commissioner MacAvee said, the icy calm of his voice barely registered to Huron. "Tolworth has asked me to put you on a leave of absence pending this investigation—"

"Bridie is dead..." Huron said, interrupting his superior, "then I should be part of that investigation. I *owe* it to her." His mind seethed, he also *owed* it to the person who killed her.

Huron quieted once again as once again MacAvee raised his hand. The gesture proved more potent than any words he could have used. Huron set his jaw and closed his eyes.

"Tolworth is of the mind that a person bereaved with grief would be ill suited to do their duties as a Knight Investigator," the Lord Commissioner said, "but I am of the mind that we would be remiss if we left our best detective out in the cold. What say you?"

Huron straightened up and gave Commissioner MacAvee the most level look he could possibly muster. "I say that I would do no less than my best ever. To investigate and to bring those responsible to justice."

"So we are of like minds," MacAvee said. "There is one issue remaining. You have no partner—"

"I would like that assignment," a girl's voice said from the doorway to the crypt.

Huron turned and the cadet he had seen earlier was standing there. She was wearing the black and grey Knight Investigator's uniform, her badge gleaming noticeably on her vest. It was then that he noticed her eyes again, the piercing iridescent grey. She had elven eyes.

"I don't think that a cadet would—" Huron began.

"Detective, sir," she interrupted. "Detective MacAvee, at your service, and if I could have my father's blessing I would proudly serve as your partner on this case."

Huron was struck speechless. If she was Lord Commissioner MacAvee's daughter and he agreed to this—Huron glanced at the Lord Commissioner and saw him nod—then there would be no refusing. One simply did not refuse a lord commissioner. The ploy was evident, Lord Commissioner MacAvee could easily force Huron to take his daughter as a partner and thereby allow him access to the case, and nobody would question it, but her involvement would also act as a chain to keep him from doing anything too rash.

Huron didn't want to bear the burden of dragging the Lord Commissioner's daughter along with him, but he had been given no choice in the matter. Refusal would probably mean true suspension.

"Alright then," Huron said, resigning himself to the situation. He swallowed. "There is something that I must do today. It will take the entire day. I expect you to report to my office tonight, with the full reports and forensics on this case, and be prepared to begin the investigation."

"Yes, sir," Detective MacAvee said. "You will not be disappointed."

Huron said nothing, but nodded to Lord Commissioner MacAvee, then walked from the room in silence. He walked away from one crypt and set off for another. The pair he left behind dissolved from his mind as he let the silence and emptiness of the Yard consume him. As he walked he listened to the sound of his footsteps.

On his way out, he ignored his reflection in the window.

The clear azures skies of the day quickly faded into an endless, brooding grey. Storm clouds without any fight in them hovered over the city like spectators at a fight. The lights of the city gave the

clouds a back lit effect as the cityscape skyline slowly stole the red rays of the sinking sun. The arrived by midmorning and covered everything in their dismal shroud but not a drop of rain fell. The street in front of the Yard had the atmosphere of a crowd holding its breath as Huron walked through the front door.

Detective MacAvee sat waiting at a desk in front of his office. As he approached, Huron took a moment to size the young detective up. She was about four inches shorter than him, which actually made her somewhat tall, even for a sidhe, but that was the other thing—Detective MacAvee wasn't purely sidhe. Her eyes glistened with an opalescent sheen when she glanced up at him, the aesthetic of her eyes proved that there was elven blood in her lineage, just enough to have changed her eyes. Her face was slim and framed by her honey-brown hair, with a sharp nose, giving her a shrewd gaze. Even when she was staring at a piece of paper and a piercing gaze when she was looking at a person.

"Captain Huron, sir," she said. She even stood up in proper respect for his rank as he approached. Huron waved her to sit down again.

"If we are going to be partners," Huron said, "call me Kylemore. I know that it is not common for a high ranking Investigator to ever be partnered with someone of junior rank, but I think that we can make the best of it."

"Call me Saffirwen," Detective MacAvee said, "my closest friends call me Sapphire or Saffir. Please feel free to use either nickname. Ah, I must warn you. My father, he permitted me to take this case because he feels that putting me with you will prevent you from doing anything—if I may be frank, wool headed. I assure you though, sir, that I have no intention of compromising this investigation and I am honored to work with you."

"Detective Saffir MacAvee. You and I know your father well. That is exactly what I suspected myself. I think that we will get along marvelously enough. I have reviewed your file. You are an exemplary detective."

Saffirwen colored noticeably and lowered her gaze for a moment. "I am not worthy of your praise, sir, but I will do my best to live up to it."

Huron shook his head. Saffirwen was still a cadet at heart even if she had earned her detective's badge a month earlier. Her father had chosen well. A young cadet just out of training, taught to follow orders, think on her feet in caution and follow rules and regulations. She would be a perfect regulatory force to prevent any bereaved Investigator from straying from his duty.

Kylemore grabbed a chair and rolled it over. His office felt small and stuffy on good days and he didn't feel like having to share the small room with a nervous detective who was worried he might do something unexpected.

"The scene reports and forensics?" he asked.

Saffirwen presented him with a folder with one hand and tapped two fingers down on a small stack of papers on the desk. Huron opened the folder and scanned the contents as she spoke. The detective recited as if she were reading from the page, summarizing everything Huron had just scanned.

"The victim was shot at an unknown range by two elfshot bullets. One penetrated her breast-plate just to the side of her heart causing her to die almost instantly. The second was found on the ground nearby and simply bruised her solar plexus just below the last rib on her right side. We think that the shooter fired twice. The first bullet was thwarted by her magical defenses—and not to mention it was a dud, which I'll explain in a moment—and the second penetrated and killed her.

"The elfshot bullets were enchanted with penetration *glamouries*, designed to prove effective against her wards, but the first shot's enchantment was tainted." A perky smile came to her lips as

she held up a plastic bag with two round containers in it. "I have the bullets here for your examination. It took a little finagling but forensics had finished with them."

Huron nodded his approval. "Tracks and footprints?"

The scene report outlined all of this already, but he was discovering that Saffirwen's reporting intelligently filled in blanks that the scene detectives left out.

"There was one other pair of tracks aside from Bridie's in her general vicinity. Probably sidhe, but forensics is having a very hard time bringing back anything else. No fingerprints and no *glamour* telltales. The tracks of the second person were obfuscated by a stealth magic that I don't think that we can get through, but we can tell where they went. There is a diagram with the file I gave you."

Huron flipped the pages up and looked at the diagram. The second pair of tracks exited the mansion with Bridie's footprints, moved away from her at the kill point for about ten feet, then back. There they circled around her at least once. Several other tracks were also shown on the overall diagram, but much further away, and they bumbled about in drunken paths. Kylemore focused on the second pair with Bridie.

"Suspects?" Huron asked.

"A male sidhe with red hair wearing a black masquerade outfit was seen by the House soldiers when they arrived to investigate the sound of gunfire," Saffir said. Her eyes watched him intently.

Realizing that he had tensed up, Huron relaxed himself. The man that Saffir described could only be one person: the mysterious Douglas Hawthorne. Huron tried not to rebuke himself for not pressing Bridie more about the man, she could have been wrong about him, she could have been wrong to her death. Still, he knew that he needed some sort of proof to tie this to him. If he had been at the scene of the crime was more than enough to request him brought in for questioning.

If Douglas Hawthorne had killed Bridie, Huron wanted to be the one to bring him in. Huron wanted to be the one who made sure the man paid for his deeds.

Ignoring Huron's reverie, Saffirwen continued, "Four or five gunshots were heard by the soldiers, and the suspect had two pistols drawn. However, isn't it strange that only two bullets were recovered?"

Beyond hearing, Huron was staring at the bullets. There was the possibility he could close this case around Douglas Hawthorne with only one piece of evidence. It wouldn't be enough to convict the man, but if Huron had that one piece to the puzzle it would be more than enough to arrest him with.

"I know who the prime suspect is," Huron said coolly.

Saffir smiled. "Great! We should let the detectives in charge know about that knowledge and—"

"No," Huron said. "We have to do a little bit of legwork first. I do not want this man to be aware that we are already after him. He is far more dangerous than you might suppose. There is something we need to check up on first, then we can let the others know."

Saffirwen gave him a skeptical look but held her tongue.

"Okay," she said finally. "Where are we going?"

"Guthry's Gunshoppe," Huron said while shaking the elfshot bullets. "With our evidence. Grab the ballistics reports on the bullets." He stood up and pulled his coat off of the back of the chair and shrugged it on. "We're going to need it."

"But, sir," Saffir protested. "Ballistics and forensics already knows the make and type of the bullets and the origin of the enchantments. It's all in the report."

Huron placed his white fedora onto his head gave Saffirwen a casual glance. "First thing you're going to have to learn about detective work, Saffir, is that ballistics doesn't know everything."

Chapter 7

Dying to Tell

The clouds overhead continued to threaten rain, bristling with their potential, but Huron knew that for tonight they had no intent on delivering. Cars swished along the moist streets as he and Saffir walked along a roadway only a few blocks from the main entrance of the Yard.

“You’re wondering where I went today,” Huron said suddenly, his eyes stayed looking straight ahead as he spoke. “Why haven’t you asked?”

Saffir glanced at him momentarily. “It would be improper.”

“You still wonder.”

“What makes you think that, sir?” Her expression changed and she breathed in slowly.

“You are a very good detective, Saffir,” Huron said. “It is right for you to be curious.”

“You went to see her,” Saffir said after a long moment of silence. Her voice had changed slightly in timbre. Huron could tell that she was trying to avoid saying something impolitic.

“Yes I did,” he said, a smile flickering on his lips. He had gone directly from the Yard to where Lord Commissioner MacAvee told him that he could find her. It hurt to see her dead upon the metal table, her violet doe eyes closed to the world forever. He had left her alone out of love, but he feared that because of his inadequacy as her lover he had let her to her death. “How did you guess?”

“If my father were to be killed I would want to go see him,” she said solemnly. “Until I saw that he was dead, touched his cold flesh, and said my goodbyes...I could never accept his death. I could not be whole.”

Huron remained very silent as he passed a line of shop fronts. The windows reflected the pair of Investigators walking together in a fluid lockstep. Huron's coat fluttered behind him as he strode and for all his natural poise he looked like a man crushed by the weight of responsibility.

"I'm sorry," Saffir said. "I said something I should not have."

"No," Huron replied. "You said exactly what my heart needed to hear. It was improper of me to bring this matter up with you. You are a junior officer and I should present myself with a greater bearing than I have."

"I won't tell if you don't," Saffir quipped coyly. "Partner."

Huron smiled. "Partner."

Guthry's Gunshoppe didn't look altogether that different from the other storefronts around it. On its own it didn't stand out much, but for the fact that instead of windows it had wide wooden plaques. The plaques had different guns from various eras painted on it with carefully painted names and dates, mostly antiques on the first window-plaque, but becoming more and more modern as the windows approached the door. To the mortal eye it looked just like an ordinary gun shop without windows. Very few Mundanes knew that the sole proprietor was a sidhe.

The strong scent of leather and gun cleaner tickled Huron's nose as he pushed open the door and stalked boldly into the starkly lit interior of the store. The front of the store consisted of a wide area with two sitting benches on both sides and a counter. In the middle of the counter was a heavy ironwork lattice that separated the room proper from the cashier's area and the guns.

The purpose of the ironwork was two fold. The first that it separated potential customers from the proprietor of the store in the case that they decided to become violent or steal his guns—a very foolish endeavor indeed being that the cashier had several loaded weapons around him at all times; it was a gun shop, after all. The second purpose lay in how ironwork affected Faerie magic. Any *glamourie* directed across the ironwork would be reduced to nothing.

"Kylemore!" Mr. Guthry threw his hands up in greeting from being the ironwork lattice when he saw who entered. "Will it be business or pleasure, my old friend?"

Mr. Guthry was chubby about the cheeks, which was rare for sidhe, but his features betrayed a narrow boned face beneath the healthy plump he'd acquired. His light blue eyes lit gaily with his face splitting smile as he fumbled with a large loop of silver keys at the gate of the ironwork. He made special care not to touch the iron as he did and used the wooden handle to swing it open.

"Business today, Guthry," Huron said. He held up the plastic bag with the two elfshot bullets in it. "I need you to help me identify these bits of shot and the enchantments on them."

"Business, business," Mr. Guthry said and waved Huron and Saffirwen through the lattice gate. "Ma'm," he said, nodding as Saffir walked past him. She gave him a smart smile.

"Guthry here is also a genius gun smithy," Huron said as Saffir followed.

They were led into a wide back room. Several large work tables had been set up in the center of the room and a black dust covered the floors. Guns of all makes and models sat, strewn about in various stages of disassembly across the work tables. Guthry stamped up to one table and pushed aside the bits and pieces laying on it to make a clear space.

Saffir wrinkled her nose, but remained silently at Huron's elbow.

Mr. Guthry grabbed a small magnifying glass and dumped the two bullets onto the table from the bag that Huron handed him. He examined them through the glass one by one. All the while he made *hmmm* and *aaaah* sounds. Each time it looked like he was going to say something significant about one or the other he just shook his head and then went about the process all over again.

"So?" said Huron after a long pause of silence from Guthry.

"These are Helwick shot," he said. "Both of 'em. In fact, if I were pressed I would say they are Ballenworth and probably made in Lis Boyenne. That first one, it's a dud. The enchantment on it

struck a ward designed to turn aside bullets. The second one the enchantment is intact. I'd hate to end up in that one's path."

Huron's expression darkened. "So, these are not Unseileigh in origin? Lis Boyne is near the border to the Nightmare Lands isn't it? Could there be a possibility?"

"That is something else interesting, my friend," Guthry said. "This is the second time today that someone came by to ask me about Ballenworth shot and if it was Unseileigh made."

Saffirwen's head shot up and her eyes flickered between Guthry and Huron. "What? Someone else was asking the same things we were?"

"Yes," Mr. Guthry frowned to himself and nodded. "He even paid me quite extensively for any knowledge that I had. A red headed fellow. He had an ill favored look about him." He wagged his finger at Huron. "Told me that I should avoid speaking about anything I told him, he did, but since I know you, and you're an Investigator and all, I wasn't about to not talk."

"Did he give his name?" Huron asked.

"Nope, no name, just questions."

"How did he pay you?"

Mr. Guthry shoved his hands into his soiled suspenders and fished around. Soon, aside from the two bullets, there was a small pile of other various types of ammunition, several coins, and a tattered black rabbit's foot.

"Brings me luck," Guthry said. "Ah, 'ere it is..." He handled a large gold coin. The image of a gryphon rampant, claws reaching for a spear wielding sidhe. "It was actually quite interesting, I thought, this is a Dun Sidariel doubloon is it not?"

"Yes, it is," Huron said, and then he turned to Saffirwen. "It was him."

"Our suspect?" she asked.

"Yes. I have no doubts."

"I had a call today from some of the other gun experts in town," Mr. Guthry said. "They told me that they'd been visited by the same man. He's a suspect, ey? A suspect in what?"

"A murder," Huron said dourly.

"Strange," Saffir said. "It seems like he's investigating the same leads we are."

"Or he's trying to scare the local gunsmiths into not talking about it."

"Why did you ask if those shot were Unseileigh in origin?" Saffirwen asked as Huron let the door to Guthry's shop close behind them.

"I have strong reasons to believe that Hawthorne is an Unseileigh agent," he said. "I have been following him for some time."

"Hawthorne? I have not heard that name before."

"My prime suspect," Huron said. "The redheaded sidhe who was seen with Bridie right after she died and the same who just paid Guthry using Underhill gold from Dun Sidariel. The very same gold that he used to buy his way from Galway to New York."

"We should have him brought in for questioning."

"He'll be too smart for that," Huron replied. "I have also fought this man. He is not to be trifled with. When we encounter him it must be with the intent to arrest him. It may take several men to do so."

Saffir nodded as if making a mental note. "Where are we going now?"

"To the mansion where Bridie used to live," Huron said. "The groundskeeper, Pilly, he knows more than he's told me before. I should question him again."

"In the middle of the night?"

“Night is when most of the grounds workers do most of their duties. I think it’s fitting that Hawthorne was a creature of the night. If he truly is what I suspect him to be, a murdering Unseileigh, it would certainly not despoil his character.”

The mansion belonging to House Galadmohr lay in the Bronx borough of New York City right across Bronx Park East from the Bronxdale community. The Mundanes had set aside most of the area for the New York Botanical Gardens and in fact some of the Galadmohr mansion’s grounds extended into Bronx Park and the gardens. The Faerie who lived in the mansion took into their responsibilities to tend to the gardens and park. It was a fitting and beneficial arrangement, especially for the Mundanes as the Faerie were experts at nurturing gardens.

For Huron and Saffirwen the trip went swiftly. From the Guthry’s Gun Shoppe they returned to the Kings Yard and the by way of several different inroads through the Underhill they moved through the Kings Yard to the Bronx Yard. One of the exits from the Bronx Yard into the Mundane realm was three blocks away from the House Galadmohr mansion.

The clouds that stared down darkly over Brooklyn dropped a fine mist on the Bronx. A callow wind blew in from the east bringing with it the smell of the ocean and moisture. Large swaying trees grew up next to the roadway spaced with bright white lights that turned the edges of the neighborhood up against the Bronx Park into pools of brightness against the formless dark.

When Huron and Saffirwen arrived at the front drive of the mansion they were greeted by a pair of Investigators. At first they held up their hands to stop them, but then once of them noticed the rank on Huron’s badge. A captain was not easily dismissed.

“What’s happened here?” Huron asked as one of the men waved him past.

“There was a murder on the grounds,” the man said. “We’re keeping the area locked down while the forensics team goes over the scene. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“We have other business,” Huron said. He waved for Saffirwen to follow him. The two Investigators at the gate nodded and let them pass, moving to close up the front drive so that nobody else could pass.

“Two murders of people from the same House in the same night and who lived in the same location,” Saffir said. “This is shaping up oddly.”

“We will have to locate the Investigator in charge,” Huron said, nodding to a group of well dressed Investigators standing together in a cluster near the front entrance to the mansion house. “I think I know who it is too.”

“Who?”

“Captain Engel,” Huron said. “She’s the tall one wearing the white scarf looking like a cat roused her from bed too early.”

Captain Engel furiously stabbed her finger at one of the nearby Investigators and when he turned and trotted off to do whatever she’d asked of him she turned to another man. Her eyes flashed in the darkness with an annoyed expression as she continued to rattle off more orders. She wore the usual grayish Knight Investigator uniform outlined with white lace trim along her vest and the ends of the sleeves.

“Captain,” Huron said when he came rolling to a stop a short distance from the group. Engel’s pinched expression did not lighten when her eyes came to rest on him.

“What are you doing here?” she snapped. Her eyes slid off of Huron and onto Saffir as if to say the question was intended for both of them, regardless of who had initially spoken.

“I’m investigating Bridie MacFenna’s murder,” Huron said. Saying Bridie’s name produce a pang of hurt but he refused to be ruled by his pain. “I am checking with you out of courtesy. I assume you are in charge of this scene and I don’t want to trample through it without your knowing.”

Huron's words seemed to give Captain Engel pause but she quickly recovered. "Bridie," she said, "yes...it is always worst when it's own of our own who is killed. My condolences." Though her voice never softened nor did she sound like she cared, Huron knew that those terms were rarer than gold when spoken by her. "You have free rein, Huron, just stay away from the crime scene itself."

"Who was murdered?" Saffir had been completely silent up until this point, but she kept her tone matter of fact. She did not look away when Engel turned her heated gaze to her.

"The head groundskeeper," Engel said, flipping up some papers on a clipboard. "Shot twice, head and chest."

"Groundskeeper Pilly?" Huron asked suddenly.

"Pilliman Grant," Engel replied. "I think probably the same man. Is he important somehow?"

"I was coming here to interview him."

"His next interview is going to be with the coroner," Engel said, stuffing the clipboard under one arm. "I don't think he'll be saying much to you. Does this mean that I can expect you to be on your way and not mucking up my crime scene?"

Huron felt irritated at Captain Engel's anxiousness to get rid of him and Saffir but he could sympathize with her reasons. Still, he had work to do.

"Yes, I suppose so," he said, "but one last question. Groundskeeper Pilly, you said he was shot? What kind of weapon was used?"

Scowling, Engel pulled the clipboard back out again and flipped up a few pages. "Well, I can say without looking that it was elfshot that killed him. Very rare. Ah, yes, here we go. It would seem to be pistol caliber elfshot. Armor piercing. Magically enchanted to penetrate wards."

"Thank you, Captain," Huron said.

"Will that be all? I should go check up on my men," she said. Her eyes turned between Huron and Saffir as if they were about to become suspects themselves.

"Yes, that will be all. My partner and I will just be taking a brief trot into the house to get ourselves something to drink..." Huron said, then he added, "If that's alright?"

"Fine, just make it brief. And Huron—when you catch the bastard who killed Bridie, slug him in the teeth once for me." Captain Engel did not look back when she stalked away after a sidhe Investigator who was standing nearby talking to a groundskeeper. Huron motioned for Saffir to follow him into the mansion as Engel started shouting again.

"She doesn't like you very much," Saffir noted.

"She doesn't like anyone very much," Huron said with a chuckle.

The interior rooms of the mansion were vast, like a castle built out of wood and brick. It had been constructed by sidhe architects from Ireland in the early 1800s when a large number of Irish immigrants had begun to colonize New York. They brought with them some ideas about how a house should be constructed from the great sidhe cities of the Underhill. The walls were covered with colorful tapestries depicting the former and current royalty of House Galadmohr. The tapestries displayed prominent elves with their opalescent eyes and golden or silver hair holding various artifacts of power, usually scrolls, swords, and scepters.

Antique wood panels inlaid with intricate Celtic knotwork peeked out from beneath the tapestries and sank into the wooden paneled floors. Various old-fashioned tables and display cases lined the walls holding different collections of various types. The foyer of most sidhe houses was built to be a reception room, and almost always held numerous interesting elements so that visitors would not be bored while they waited for their audience with Lord or Lady of the House.

House Galadmohr was one of the few Great Elven Houses, which instead of vying for power in the Royal Court of Meath had taken their holdings here to the New World. The mansion

was only one of the grand holdings of that House here in New York and the United States in general.

Huron lead Saffir through several elaborately decorated rooms. The decadence and design of the rooms slowly wore off the further they intruded into the mansion, but the tapestries remained. The further that Huron lead Saffir away from the main audience chamber—near the center of the first floor of the mansion—the less the necessity for the walls and furniture to be expensive.

“Sir,” Saffir said, a hint of curiosity edging her voice. “I know you probably know where you’re going, but the kitchen was two rooms back. I could smell it.”

“We’re not going to the kitchen,” Huron said.

“But you told Captain Engel—”

“I told Engel what she wanted to hear.” Huron paused to check his bearings when they reached a four way intersection in the hallways. “If she thinks that we are about to get out of her hair she will leave us alone.”

“I see.” Saffirwen sounded skeptical. “What are we doing then?”

“We are going to visit the clerks’ offices,” Huron said.

“What’s your guess that the groundskeeper was killed by the same bullets that killed Bridie?”

“I have no doubts that the same bullets were used,” Huron said briskly. “You heard Captain Engel; the enchantment was the armor piercing, exactly like the last ones. Pilly was probably killed because he knew something about Hawthorne’s past. Another reason why we must get to the clerks’ offices before—”

Huron grabbed the latch-handle to the office doors and pulled. It was barred solidly.

“Locked,” Huron hissed.

The door to the clerks’ offices was large, foreboding, and made of some heavy wood that Huron could immediately surmise would not bash easily. While Huron glanced around, looking for something heavy and thin to use as a pry bar, Saffir stepped past him and laid her hand on the latch. The lock behind it made a soft rattling noise and with a click the door popped open.

“Something I learned when I was younger,” she explained. “My mother would lock the front door and I was an adventurous child.”

Huron gave her a significant look but said nothing. He pushed the door open and called the lamps to light. At his word the oil lamps throughout the room ignited to flame and cast an ever-present yellow-orange light all around the room. Rows of small desks lined up in a perfect square in the middle of the room greeted Huron and Saffir as they slipped into the room. The desks were bare, but for ink stains with sharp corners and lines from pens that had missed their marks. The distinct smell of curative agents and paper lingered in the air.

Saffirwen moved off to the side while Huron moved forward. She stalked along the wall with measured steps, always keeping Huron in full view. He smiled when he realized that she was taking up a defensive position while determining that the room was empty.

“You’ve seen combat,” Huron said. “That’s good to know. Your dossier didn’t mention anything.”

After she had finished casing the perimeter of the room, Saffir returned to Huron’s side.

“When I was a Cadet at Arms,” she said. “My supervisor and I went to arrest a cigar smuggler. He did not want to come quietly. So, can you tell me what we’re looking for?”

“Documents.” Huron moved to the large desk at the far end of the room where the head clerk would sit. “Hawthorne was working in this office under the assumed name of Douglas Clenwyn before he ‘disappeared’ into the groundskeepers. The head clerk wasn’t too forthcoming with any records to me the last time that I questioned him, but there has to be something here.”

“Tell me where to look,” Saffir said, brushing some of her honey brown hair behind her ear.

“To your left, I think,” Huron said without looking up. “You’ll see a line of drawers marked ‘Employment.’ Look for the files with more recent dates; I suspect that employment files are ordered by month and year.” With a careful hand he caressed the lock on the widest drawer of the desk and it unhitched for him.

“I’m on it,” Saffir said and made her way across the room.

Huron slowly slid the drawer open and started to finger at the papers within when a shadow crossed the doorway.

“Who are you and what are you doing?” a sharp voice requested.

Saffir and Huron looked up instantly. She was wearing glasses and her blonde hair was pulled back tightly, but he could tell it was Gwen, the sultry girl he’d met at these offices before. This time she was dressed far less provocatively and instead wore the unlikely outfit of a white collared shirt, a red tie, and a suit jacket. She did not have the look of a person who had been in bed.

“Detective Captain Huron,” Huron said. “We have met before. We have Investigator business and I did not want to rouse the head clerk, so we let ourselves in.”

Gwen licked her lips and narrowed her eyes. “I’ve saved you the trouble and roused him myself when I noticed you prowling about in the clerks’ ward. I suppose he cannot be put back to sleep now with this inconvenience.”

The way that she spoke seemed strange to Huron, she didn’t sound anything like this when he met her before. He wasn’t sure what to make of it. It might not have been the girl he thought it was; her features were true enough to have been a close sister perhaps...

“I have some questions to ply him about Douglas Clenwyn,” Huron said to her. “Do you remember him? He used to work here.”

“I think I remember the name,” the sidhe woman said. “I may have spent time with him; I am too tired to think straight. I have been up all night with special records and I was about to go to sleep when I saw you.”

“That’s fine,” Huron said. It seemed strange that she would forget so quickly about the Douglas Clenwyn that she took to the masquerade ball some months past. She did seem to be the type who wouldn’t remember how to tie her own shoelaces when he first met her, but right now she was all business and propriety, although, Huron could see the sleepiness in her eyes.

“What do you want to know about him?” she asked, casually leaning herself against the doorjamb.

“He is a suspect in a murder investigation,” Huron said. “I am hoping the head clerk can give me access to records about his employ, or more specifically tell me anything he can about the man.”

“Oh,” Gwen said in an uninterested tone. “Here he is.”

The head clerk pushed his way past Gwen with a round lantern in hand. He looked disheveled and wore a simple nightgown. His graying hair wasn’t combed and his eyes only opened half-way. The man looked harassed and upset, but he kept a light smile on his face and his eyes widened slightly when he saw Huron and Saffir. They widened even more when he saw Saffir’s eyes.

“Oh, detectives,” the clerk said. “Gwen made it sound as if we had thieves.” He turned to Gwen and waved her away. “Tell the guards, who will be right behind me, that it is no matter, would you? And go get some sleep, you look ragged.”

Gwen curtsied politely and briefly placed her hand on the head clerk’s shoulder on her way out.

“Gaurds?” Saffir said. “If you thought we were thieves then why didn’t you wait for the guards to enter first?”

The head clerk chuckled. It was a sound a bit like the rustle of dry papers. "I still have a little fight left in me, lass. I guess I feel like I could take a pair of thieves who were only after pieces of paper. Now, how can I help you?"

The head clerk set his lantern down on a table and sat himself slowly down in a chair.

"You are he head clerk?" Huron asked. "I spoke with the head clerk a month ago, he wasn't you."

The head clerk waved his hand at Huron. "No, you must have spoken to one of my assistants. Thomas perhaps? He has more grey hair than I do, and he's smaller, thinner. He is the head clerk for this section. I am the head clerk for the entire mansion."

"Yes, that sounds like the man I spoke to," Huron said. "Could you tell me about Douglas Clenwyn? He worked as a clerk here for a time, but I haven't found many people who could tell me much."

The head clerk sat for a moment to collect this thoughts and pondered over Huron's words for a long moment.

"Clenwyn? Clenwyn... Yes, yes, I recall the man," he said. "Red hair, a fiery gaze the brooding quiet type, but a reasonably clerk. Always on time. He hasn't worked for me in several months now. I don't know where he went. He came with a letter of recommendation from a House Helwick custodian. He applied for a very low responsibility position so I didn't check up on it.

"He was here today, you know. Asking about the disposition of Lady MacFenna's things. Tragedy that. It makes me so sad—"

"Wait," Huron said suddenly. "He was here? Today?"

"Yes, I just said that," the head clerk said. "Your hearing going too? Yes, he was here."

"He was asking about Bridie MacFenna?"

The clerk didn't answer; there was a pained expression on his face. Sweat glistened on his brow.

"Are you okay, sir?" Saffir immediately asked, moving move and kneeling down next to him.

"I'm okay, lass, please forgive me," he said. "I'm an old man. These things happen. Now, what was I saying, yes ... Douglas Clenwyn was here to pick up some of his old files and to ask about what we were doing with Lady MacFenna's things...and..."

"Sir?" Saffir's voice hardened with concern and she waved Huron to come over. "He needs a doctor."

The old clerk slumped slightly and Huron caught him as he walked over. After he checked the man's throat, there was no pulse. The man's eyes were still open but there was no life in him.

"He's dead," Huron said flatly. He pushed the dead man back in the chair and slid his eyes closed.

"What happened?" Saffir asked. "We should tell Captain Engel. Two deaths?"

Huron took the man's hand and pressed his finger against the skin. Watching the color of the skin under his finger as he did so; then he pulled open one of the man's eyes and peered at it.

"Two murders," Huron said. "This man was poisoned."

"Captain Engel is not going to like this."

"If there's something that Captain Engel actually likes I'll let you know," Huron said with a sigh. "Lets go, we can't get any more information out of him and this is now another crime scene. We can't go looking around any more."

Saffirwen obediently followed Huron out of the room and they made their way back down the hall towards the front entrance and certain reprimand. Huron didn't look forward to the tongue lashing that undoubtedly was coming but he'd been on the raw end of Captain Engel's annoyance before.

He had walked past one of the stairwells leading up when he noticed a very recognizable odor.

“Do you smell that?” He put a hand on Saffir’s arm to stop her.

She paused a moment and lifted her head, then her eyes widened. “Smoke! Something is burning!”

Without another word the pair rushed into the stairwell and mounted the stairs. Together they burst into the upper hallway. A thin veil of smoke was seeping from one of the rooms and beginning to fill the hallway. In the distance a woman with blonde hair ran away and vanished around a corner.

“You figure out where she’s headed,” Huron said. “I’m going to check out the burning room.”

Together they sprinted down the hallway and Huron stopped in front of the door with the smoke. There was something oddly familiar about the door but he couldn’t quite place it. With a swift kick he smashed the door open and put his arm against the sudden flare of heat. Then it struck him: this was Bridie’s room.

“Saffir!” he shouted at her, she was only a short distance down the hall. “This is a residence hall! There are people sleeping in those rooms! We must rouse them! Forget the girl!”

“Yes, sir!” she shouted and started hammer on a nearby door shouting warnings before she moved onto the next one.

Huron turned away from the doorway into Bridie’s room with the intent to do that same but a flicker of motion in the heat and fire caught his attention. A black clad figure in the room rushed to the curtains on the opposite side and onto the balcony. Huron could distinctly see that the person had red hair.

“Hawthorne!” Huron shouted. “Saffir! Hawthorne just left Bridie’s room! He must have set it on fire! I’m going after him!”

“What?” Saffir shouted back. Multiple doors on either side of the hallway had opened up. Smoke now poured out of the burning room like tea from a pot. The black acrid smoke stung her eyes and made it difficult to breathe. “No! This is too much! I’m calling for backup!”

A pair of frightened maids had come to the door that she was standing at and stared at her expectantly. Their gowns were hastily donned and they clung to each other.

“There’s a fire,” Saffir told them. “Start waking everyone else up and getting them out of here. I need to go help my partner. Help will be on the way. Just get out of here.” The maids nodded and Saffir rushed to the door of the burning room.

She snatched her radio from her belt and depressed the send button. “This is Detective MacAvee, we have a fire in the Bronx Galadmohr mansion on the second floor.” She said it as quickly as she could while she ran into the room.

Flames were all around her. The smoke and heat were nearly unbearable. Huron was nowhere to be seen. The smoke was blowing upwards and towards the open doors at the back towards the balcony so she instinctively moved that direction.

“My partner is in pursuit of a murder suspect and I need backup! They are currently headed away from the mansion towards the New York Botanical Gardens! I repeat Investigators requesting backup at the Bronx Galadmohr mansion!”

“Backup is on the way, Detective MacAvee,” a voice said on the other end. “And you said there’s a fire?”

Saffirwen had reached the balcony and she put one hand down on the cool railing at the end. She could see Huron running from the garden below into the darkness of the trees. In a confused daze, Saffir glanced around the outside. She had seen Investigators swarming all over the front of

the mansion. Where were they now? Calling for backup should have brought at least two dozen of them flooding into the area!

Moments later several echoing cracks resounded. Gunfire!

“Investigator in peril!” she yelled into her radio. “I have shots fired! Get backup out here now!”

Saffir backed up a little and ran towards the rail. She vaulted over it and hit the ground harder than she expected. The radio crackled at her hip as she recovered herself and started to run blindly into the black woods.

Chapter 8

To Catch a Killer

Crickets chirped in the moonlight as Huron sprinted across the ground. Newly growing undergrowth crunched underfoot with moist sounds. A soft roll of thunder growled in the distance as the clouds overhead grumbled their disappointment. He ran so quickly that he could feel the heat rising from his body; his palm became sweaty against the hilt of his rapier.

He did not let up in his hard dash for even a moment. Hawthorne remained ahead of him the entire time. Huron could see the sidhe's red hair and dark figure skipping between the trees like a thief stealing through the night. The assassin would not evade the piercing devotion of Huron's wrath.

The Botanical Gardens had a large stand of oak trees here that dwindled into a wide grove of magnolia trees and abutted the Bronx River. Huron's suspect charged directly for the river along the edge of the magnolias. His silhouette flickered in and out of Huron's vision as he ran like a seasoned sprinter towards his goal. It took all of Huron's endurance just to keep up with Hawthorne, but Huron could tell that he was gaining.

The smell of moist wood and rain assaulted Huron's nose as his legs burned from the exertion. His tortured muscles screamed in pain but he charged on through the wicked darkness.

Huron momentarily lost sight of his quarry. The assassin vanished like a wolf blending in with the undergrowth. Forced to pause in his run, Huron stopped next to a large oak tree and squinted into the murky forest. No mists had risen tonight to obscure his vision and the moon was full enough to envelop the area in an eerie half-light that did not hinder nor assist his vision.

Then Hawthorne stepped out from behind a tree directly in Huron's line of sight. The man stood barely a dozen feet from Huron. His dark eyes stood out like blots of black in his pale face,

and his scarlet hair tousled over his shoulders. He had his rapier drawn and pointed down in a warning, but did not threaten Huron otherwise.

"You follow me, Investigator," Hawthorne said. "One would think that you intend to arrest me."

Huron growled and drew his rapier; he did not honor the man by pointing it down, but instead directly at him. "I come to take you to justice, murderer." Huron could barely contain his rage. This was the man who killed Bridie; the same man who stole her from him. "You killed my love, Bridie, and if you do not come with me then I will gladly send you to your ancestors."

Hawthorne shook his head and lifted his own sword in challenge. "If you seek the person who slew Bridie you look in the right places but you are blind to what you see."

No words were spoken then as Huron lunged forward and caught Hawthorne's blade hard and threw it to the side. The conversation of steel was brief and to the point and ended with the pair exchanged in position. Now Huron had his back to the river and Hawthorne stood with the flat of his blade lying over Huron's sword.

"Listen to me, Investigator," Hawthorne said coldly. His eyes could have well been made of coal as they reflected nothing in them. "I am not the man who killed Bridie. I loved her."

"Unseileigh scum," Huron snarled and swiped his blade at Hawthorne's midsection.

The Sluagh caught Huron's blade easily and turned it aside with his parry. Huron lifted his blade high and feinted for the assassin's face but then aimed low, forcing Hawthorne to move quickly back on his feet. Smiling, Huron pressed his advantage.

A few more exchanges of steel and clashes and Hawthorne skipped behind an oak tree as big around as Huron's reach.

"She spoke of you fondly," the assassin said. Huron's ears rankled with his words. "She said you were a wise man. She said you were an intelligent man. Is this how you grace her legacy, by failing to use the same facilities that she so lauded in you?"

Huron moved around the tree, pulling slightly away from it, trying to draw Hawthorne out.

"Cowardly Unseileigh," Huron spat. "You hide behind the tree where I cannot see you and regale me with these words? I know their poison when I hear it, just like you poisoned the head clerk."

That seemed to give Hawthorne pause. He did not speak for a long moment.

"He is dead then," he said finally.

"So you killed him."

"No," Hawthorne said. "I did not harm him. Nor did I harm the head groundskeeper. Another did that in my stead. I do not know who but I feel that it has something to do with Bridie's death."

Huron backed away from the tree and decided to take a different approach. He pulled himself further away and stealthily moved over the ground perpendicular to where he'd last heard Hawthorne speak. Still, the assassin was too clever for the ploy and Huron could not find him.

"You would be aware of the circumstances of her death, assassin," Huron said. "You killed her."

"I have protected Bridie from harm more times than you could have ever wished."

In a fit of reckless anger, Huron charged around the tree with a scream and caught Hawthorne standing there. They exchanged a quick flurry of parry-ripostes and Huron forced his foe away from the tree and its easy cover. Hawthorne gave ground easily, moving back with a fluid gait and only defended against Huron's attacks. He did not respond with any strikes to even barely threatened Huron himself.

Moonlight filtered between the trees with pale tendrils of light and flickered on their blades as the two circled each other. An owl hooted nearby, annoyed by the activity. Huron could see sweat

glistening on Hawthorne's brow; if he was winded or otherwise taxed by the conflict it did not show. Huron knew that he still had one ace up his sleeve, but he needed Hawthorne to be off his guard to use it.

Huron twirled his blade in a grand *coupe* strike but Hawthorne anticipated the leap of Huron's blade and swatted his lunge aside with a deft hand. As their blades struck one another a resounding crack rang out through the forest and the bark of a nearby tree exploded. Bits of wood splinters flew and they both instinctively ducked. A second shot sounded and Huron could hear the bullet whistle past.

Hawthorne wasted no time in drawing one of his guns and returned fire.

Flashlights and lanterns appeared in the distance in the direction of the mansion. Huron smiled. Investigators were on their way and Saffir would be somewhere in the lead—though, she did not carry a gun.

Momentarily off of his guard, Hawthorne was vulnerable, so Huron made his move. He lunged at him with his sword and drew his dagger. The Sluagh assassin anticipated the move and caught Huron's blade with his gun and forced it down, but Huron's dagger cut very near his throat. So, the Sluagh embraced Huron with both his arms and spun him.

Surprise and shock blinded Huron as he felt himself lifted from the ground and Hawthorne took his sword as Huron crashed face first into the ground. He had moved them so that a large oak tree stood between him and the angle of the original gunshots.

Fearful for his life, Huron rolled over onto his back and made to stand, but found Hawthorne's blade at his throat.

"I would kill you now," the assassin said with a distant calm, "but my hands are bound by a promise." He holstered his gun and reached into his pocket. Something small and soft struck Huron in the chest and bounced into his lap. "A gift, Investigator, as I cannot give you your life as a gift because it already belongs to someone else. Use it wisely."

"Halt! Investigator!" Saffir's shout clamored from the darkness. It was followed shortly by a hastily cast *levinbolt*. The magical lightning sizzled through the air and struck Hawthorne in the shoulder. The magic splashed across his trench coat like a wave cresting into black cliffs and harmlessly splattered to the ground near his feet.

Huron watched helplessly as Hawthorne drew and spun his gun without even a glance or a flinch. He fired a single shot and Saffir screamed in pain. There was a crash of wood and undergrowth and then no sound at all. White smoke whispered quietly from the barrel of the assassin's pistol.

"Saffir!" Huron wailed. Hawthorne's sinister expression pinned Huron to the ground almost as effectively as did the Unseileigh's sword.

Hawthorne shook his head at Huron as if in disappointment and then stepped back into the shadow of a tree. There he vanished completely, melting away into the shadow. Gone from the Mortal world and faded into the Underhill. Huron remained staring into the empty place where Hawthorne stood before for a long moment before he could command his limbs to move again.

Terror crested Huron's thoughts as he rose to his feet. Saffir was shot! Huron could barely contain his fear. If she were dead it was his fault and his responsibility alone. She was the second woman that he had failed to her death. He rushed to where he knew she would be and found her laying still beneath a branch from a tree.

Without a second thought, Huron wrestled the branch from her body and threw it aside. Her pale face glowed with an ethereal light in the moonbeams slicing between the trees.

"Saffir, oh please." Huron knelt down next to her. "I should not have put you into this sort of danger."

With a jolt, her eyes came open and she gasped. It was a ragged choke followed by a flutter of coughs. Carefully, Huron helped her sit up and she leaned on one arm and sputtered for breath.

"The branch," she said, gasping. "It struck me and I fell down. I'm sorry. He was warded against my attack. I feared you dead."

Huron smiled with relief. "I see that we are both made of tougher stuff than either expected."

"He got away," she said mournfully.

"Yes," Huron said. "This is all very strange."

"Are you injured?" she asked. "I heard gunshots. Did he hit you?"

Huron paused for a moment and thought back through the fight. He could distinctly recall what seemed like gunshots near the end.

"It wasn't him," Huron said. "He didn't shoot at me; he shot at whoever was shooting at us. I had assumed it was an Investigator."

"Not me," Saffir said; "I don't carry a gun."

"How do you feel," Huron asked.

"For having a tree fall on me," she said while rising and brushing at her pants. "I feel great."

"That too is also extremely strange," Huron said.

"What do you mean?"

"Me... He said that he couldn't kill me because of a promise. Now I can think that perhaps Bridie could have made him promise not to harm me. I can see that. But I cannot see him promising her he wouldn't hurt anyone else. This man, Douglas Hawthorne, he is obviously a practiced assassin. He could have killed you on the spot. Instead, he dropped the tree branch on you."

"I see your point," Saffir said.

Presently, four other Investigators arrived; all of them with swords drawn and bearing severe expressions. They surrounded Huron and Saffir in a defensive circle and queries as to health and status went all around. After enough answers to the affirmative two of them broke off and made way to secure a perimeter just in case.

Certain that Saffir wasn't badly injured and could stand on her own; Huron left her in the company of the backup Investigators and walked back to where he fell at Hawthorne's feet.

"What is it?" Saffir asked. She moved slowly and with a slight limp. Huron could tell she was more badly injured than she let on. He knew that he would have to convince her to see a healer, but that could wait.

"He gave me something," Huron said. "I don't know what it was..."

He scanned the ground. The moonlight could not cut the darkness enough for him to see the ground.

"You." Huron pointed to one of the other officers who carried a lantern. "Come over here please and shine your light over here."

The Investigator happily obliged Huron and brought light over. The area surrounded the base of a large oak tree and its gnarled roots twisted through the soil there. Here and there sodden bits of moss and newly growing grass peeked out. It took a moment of scanning the area before Huron discovered what he was looking for. It was a small cylinder of green in the damp soil.

He reached down and picked it up. The object that Hawthorne threw at him had been a cigarette. It was partly smoked, but mostly intact, the bottom portion near the filter was a dark forest green and the rest a mint green color. The filter and the rest of the cigarette were separated by a ribbon of gold and there was the barely visible impression of a yellowish, Edwardian "S" in a circle.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, Captain Huron," Captain Engel rebuffed snappishly as she strode up out of the darkness of the night.

“You’re right, Captain, there is a lot of explaining to do,” Huron replied. His eyes slid over to look at her. “But not here. I know that you would like to flay my hide for all of this but I need to request something of you. Have your detectives remove the bullets from the tree next to me, and then locate one or two more possibly also imbedded in a tree in a line directly opposite their trajectories.”

Captain Engel folded her arms irritably. “Why would I do that?”

“Because we have a murderer to catch.”

Chapter 9

Assumptions and Malfeasance

Huron felt sick to his stomach but it did not show in his bold stride as he marched out into the woods where Bridie had been killed. Under one arm he carried a folding table but barely noticed its weight; the weight of the situation bore down on him like a thousand rocks. Each rock inscribed with another piece of the inexplicable evidence that he attempted to collect.

Before his arrival at the mansion where the masquerade took place, Huron sent Saffirwen on an errand. He hoped that it would allow him enough time alone in the nighttime woods to clear his thoughts and collect himself again. His breathing felt ragged and his legs still burned from his encounter with Hawthorne, but he was no worse for wear. The assassin had decided not to kill him. However, the Unseileigh's words still echoed in Huron's head.

"I would kill you now but my hands are bound by a promise..." If Hawthorne had truly promised Bridie that he would not hurt Huron then there was a great deal that Huron did not understand about the Unseileigh; either that or the man really did love Bridie and even in her death refused to relinquish his oath to her.

Kylemore unhitched the folding table and struck its four legs into the moist forest floor. The darkness of night surrounded him on all sides but the bright lights of New York City gave the sky an eternal half-light glow. The disk of the moon made a blurry circle high up in the sky visible to his gaze and the smell of rain and forest moss came with his inhalation.

Huron folded his arms and tapped a finger on the table a few times. It was going to be a very long night.

He reached into his pocket and removed a pouch filled with a white powder: bootdust. The type used by Investigator's to give footprints life and make them visible for examination. Some of

this same powder had already been used on this scene when Bridie was killed. Like bootdust reacted to like bootdust more prominently than undusted footprints.

Huron poured some of the powder into this palm and then blew on it with a powerful exhale. The dust billowed out in a voluminous cloud and spread out from Huron over the scene. The wind shifted it slightly to the right but most of the dust cloud covered an area of a grand audience hall within moments. As if following a mind of its own the individual particles of dust began to trickle down in twinkling lines and flowed as if drawn into tracks on the ground.

Seconds later two pairs of tracks became clearly visible in white on the ground. Those tracks were surrounded by less prominent tracks of numerous types. The two most visible tracks would be Hawthorne and Bridie; the rest of them the Investigators who cased the scene.

The soft snap of a twig from behind foretold the arrival of another person. Huron turned his head to see Saffir pacing her way between the trees carrying a box under one arm, and a stack of tall-torches in the other. She dropped the box heavily on the table and unlimbered the torches.

“I brought you those files, sir,” she said, leaning on the torches. “You expect to find something the others didn’t?”

“Something like that,” Huron said. “Here, hand me a torch.”

She gracefully obliged and handed him several torches. Together they placed them around the scene and lit them. Their hollow white light gave more than enough to see by. Huron placed two of them directly on either side of the table so that he could read and study the documents while overlooking the scene.

The scene where Bridie died. As much as Huron tried to objectify what he was looking at he couldn’t separate himself from the fact that this was where she drew her last breath. Huron glanced at Saffir. She did her duty better than he’d expected. She came back with every document produced along the entire case and then some. It included the ballistics on the bullet—which Huron still chose to ignore—and the autopsy, and the photos, which he also didn’t want to see. Seeing her dead on the silver table seemed more than enough.

“I gave that cigarette to Forensics,” Saffir said. “They said that they were extremely busy but that they’d push it ahead due to...circumstances. On my way out they verified that telltales show three different sidhe individuals who handled it. Two of them obviously you and our prime suspect.”

Huron nodded quietly and carefully slid the autopsy reports under a different set of documents. He didn’t want to see the Coroner’s seal staring up at him accusingly. He only barely listened to Saffirwen. A strange pattern emerged from the footprints that attracted the bootdust.

Disgusted with himself, Huron pulled the Coroner’s report back out from where he hid it and slid it open.

He looked down on the picture there and his heart sank.

For all his grim façade and how much he steeled his heart. The sight of his lovely fiancée’s dead body brought fresh doubts back to his mind. Fighting to keep his emotions from his face he reached down and turned the page. Why the Coroners always liked to clip the images of the dead victims to the front page he never knew. A picture of her face should have sufficed. He knew who she was.

The rest of the pages were sketches. Making them far more easy to take in. The back of the glossy paper that the photograph was printed on reflected the light of the torches back on him. It’s corner poking out from beneath a clip. Huron refused to look at it again. Echoes of his own failings reverberated in his mind. He knew he had gotten her killed. If only he hadn’t lost her to that scoundrel, Hawthorne, she would be alive today.

A hand touching his arm brought Huron from his reverie.

“Sir?” she said. “You were too quiet and you don’t look so well. I’ve already sent for something to eat, but I also brought this.” In her other hand she held a steaming cup of coffee. “You should try some.”

Huron didn’t like coffee that much but he accepted it anyway. He thanked Saffir for her thoughtfulness. The warm taste took his mind off of his thoughts and let him focus on the evidence at hand.

The Coroner’s sketches displayed the wound pattern with extreme detail. Depicting the entry of the elfshot bullets, their deflection against her ribs, and finally how they came to strike her heart. Something seemed strange about the overall design of the shot. It seemed sloppy. On a hunch, Huron flipped through the sketches and looked at the other perspectives of the wound.

“The shooter missed,” he said suddenly.

Saffir shook her head. “What do you mean he missed? The shot killed Bridie, I think that was the objective.”

“No,” he said. “That’s not what I mean. This is a very precise shot but I remember something about snipers using elfshot. To be lethally effective it has to hit the heart near the apex, this bullet hit the crown—after it deflected off of a rib and down. The shooter was aiming too high. That doesn’t make sense.”

“So the shooter was aiming higher,” she said. “Maybe Bridie tripped or ducked down for some reason.”

“Hawthorne had Bridie point blank,” Huron said. “I’ve fought him twice. He’s extremely skilled with this sword. You recall that shot me made to bring that tree branch down on top of you? I doubt he misses often.”

“So he missed this time,” Saffir said with a shrug.

“I guess he did...” Huron frowned over the sketches. Other suspicions already began to form in his mind. Years of experience as a detective pushed him not to discount discontinuities in the facts, but his fingers still ached to take grip on Hawthorne’s person. The man who certainly had part in Bridie’s demise.

Disgusted with himself and weary of looking at sketches of Bridie’s dead body, Huron roughly put the autopsy papers back into their folder and threw them roughly back onto the table. He folded his arms across his chest and shoved his cold fingers under them. He stood there glaring at nothing for a moment when another sound intruded into his angry world.

Fuming and teeth clenched, Huron turned to look at a startled detective walking into the pool of light cast from the torches that Saffir had set up. The newcomer looked young, almost too young, and his face paled at Huron’s expression. Not wanting to go around startling young detectives, Huron sighed, let his expression soften, and waved for the young sidhe to speak his piece.

“Uh, Captain, sir,” the detective said. “I am here from Forensics to help collect bullets from the scene as Captain Engel requested.”

“*What!?*” Huron snapped. “Is that woman insane? I never requested Forensics for this scene; I wanted them at the other...” The younger detective cringed away from his tirade and Huron forced himself to calm. He felt as if his blood was on fire. Looking at pictures of Bridie dead, failing to capture the Unseileigh Hawthorne...and now this. “Wait, wait. Sorry, it’s been a long day. What is your name?”

“Detective Tavin, sir,” the detective said softly, obviously cowed by Huron’s bluster. “Warren Tavin.”

Huron suddenly felt somewhat ashamed for his mistreatment of the young detective. He thought about the situation of having Forensics here again as well. Then he recalled something else of interest from the crime reports, something that Huron felt was unresolved.

“Warren, just a moment,” Huron said and turned his head. “Saffir, could you refresh my memory? How many shots were reported fired when Bridie was killed?”

“Five shots,” she replied.

Huron turned back to Detective Tavin and smiled. “Well, we’ve only recovered two, haven’t we? I do apologize for snapping at you, detective, but I must also apologize for what I’m about to ask. I have a considerable task for you and your team. Do you think you’re up to it?”

Tavin’s face suddenly changed from slack and startled to grim and determined. Huron had brought his pride into challenge and the young detective straightened up and gave him a level look.

“My team and I are ready to handle anything you throw at us, sir,” he said. “What would you have us do?”

“I want you to scour these premises better than the previous team. There are three more elfshot bullets out there.” The younger detective nodded to Huron as he spoke. “If you give me the most thorough sweep you ever have and get me at least two of those bullets and their trajectories I will see that you and your team are commended.”

“Yes sir!” the detective said, a smile crossing his lips. “We won’t fail you sir.”

Without another word he turned and ran off into the darkness. Already several more detectives strode into the clearing carrying large sacks of magical tools and other forensic equipment. He stood and spoke with them for a moment.

Saffir turned her attention to Huron. “What was that about?”

“We’ll see when they find those other bullets,” Huron said. “In the meantime, let’s break camp—as it is, and go to Forensics in the Bronx and check out how they’re doing on that cigarette. Hawthorne gave me that for a reason. I figure it has some bearing on all this. It’s an unresolved clue.

“I hate clues without an obvious connection. If nothing else it will help me take him into custody. Hopefully we can make more sense of this senselessness once we have him where we want him—instead of him having us where he wants us.”

Chapter 10

Very Bad Habits

New York Chapter Forensics located itself in the Underhill with a multitude of doorways that connected it to most of the New York Yards. The New York Forensics Lab was one of the oldest in the entirety of the Kingdom of the New World and the only of its kind to have been constructed in the Underhill. With the permission of King Belthion, it represented one of the few Underhill holdings of the Knight Investigators whose Royal Charter only gave them a mandate in the Mundane Realm and not in the Underhill.

By Mundane standards it would have been thought an imposing building constructed of bluish marble with arching Gothic curves and imposing ramparts; to the Faerie it was a squat and unimpressive building with a dull municipal grandeur. The labs rose almost six stories upwards and three down to contain over twenty different magician and alchemical laboratories of varying disciplines. The largest forensics lab the Knight Investigators ever had constructed.

For the first time in two days, Captain Kylemore Huron drew more stares and confused looks than Saffirwen. He marched down the overly ornate hallways of the building with a purposeful bearing and a withering glare for anyone who strayed into his path. Saffir scampered behind him trying to keep up with his long legged gait. Her shimmering honey-brown hair fluttered behind her as she kept speeding up to keep astride her partner.

“It hasn’t been very long since I gave them that cigarette,” Saffir said breathlessly. Huron glanced back at her and noticed a tightness in her walk that suggested her legs hurt. He slowed down a little, letting her catch up. “They may not having anything on it yet.”

“Did you attach the case number to the finding?”

“Well, yes,” Saffir said with a hint of confusion. “Of course I did.”

Huron nodded. "They'll have something by now." To Saffir's querying look he said, "When an Investigator is killed the case number of the investigation into their death gets a special tag. As you might suspect the Forensics folks tend to make those a priority."

"Ah," Saffir said. "I see."

The detectives pushed their way through a pair of heavy oak doors and entered the midlevel laboratory. Huron had been here many times but still the sudden change in scenery from the fineries and ornamentation of the rest of the building into the pale, unremarkable square room jostled his senses.

The lab seemed to take its refined sense of blandness from a Mundane office building. The walls were flat and white, without any adornment. The door frames each cut with a perfect rectangular exit without any doors, except for the one that he'd just entered. Through the room marches of exactly similar cubicles made of silver metal stretched away in a twisted labyrinth of walls.

Huron had been born and raised in the Underhill city Dun Sidariel and didn't see much of the Mundane World until he joined the Knight Investigators. Unlike most sidhe born in the Underhill he had no distaste for the Mundanes and their aesthetic sensibilities, but it still irked him to see this sort of blight appearing in the midst of the usual Faerie grandeur. The marks of Mundane civilization could be seen intermittently through Faerie society even in the Underhill.

Saffir appeared completely unfazed. She was probably born in the Mundane Realm and her excursions back to the Underhill were like visits to an unknown homeland; she was used to seeing Mundane architectures and room designs.

Allowing himself only the slightest pause for his musing, Huron quickly turned on his heel and stalked into the midst of the maze of silver walls.

The place was lousy with pixies. Their tiny glowing bodies zipped about to and fro through the air, possibly on various assignments or just playing around. Huron headed for the most immediate concentration of them: a small wizard girl wearing brightly colored robes and directing the tiny creatures about tasks.

The girl looked up at Huron's approach and said, "Hello detectives, how can I help you?"

"Huron and MacAvee," he said, "here to see the detective in charge of a cigarette entered for examination not that long ago."

The girl's features became distant for a moment and then she smiled.

"Oh, yes, that!" she beamed. "There is only one cigarette in examination right now." She flipped through a book on her desk and ran her finger down a page. It came to rest on an elegantly written line. "Thomas O'Rourke is handing that right now. In the Orange Room." The wizard girl made a gesture with her hand towards the wall of the room. "Just look for the door with the orange frame and go through. He's difficult to miss."

"Thank you," Huron said and motioned for Saffir to follow.

Huron made a bee-line for the door with the orange frame the moment he spotted it. It entered into a wide room with dimly lit walls, giving the illusion of far greater space than was available. Low tables lay scattered around the room in a haphazard grid. Each one held a different type of equipment or a pile of papers and books.

A large figure dominated one table in particular. Huron suddenly understood why Detective O'Rourke would be "difficult to miss." The detective happened to be an ogre. He stood more than three feet taller than Huron and probably outweighed him by over four hundred pounds of Faerie flesh. Despite his gigantic size he seemed to be making some extremely delicate adjustments to the equipment he held in his hands.

The large man noticed Huron and Saffir when they entered and mumbled that they should wait a moment. Huron was all too happy to wait while the Forensics detective completed whatever task he was working on.

“Hello, hello, good detectives,” O’Rourke boomed when he finally turned away from his project. The room seemed to reverberate with his voice. He grinned gigantically, his teeth gleamed bright white against his thin, but gigantic, lips. His huge head was framed with ragged red hair combed carefully down the sides of his face and spotted with numerous weaved braids. He cocked his head to the side. “Quite lovely too. How can I assist your selves?”

“Thank you,” Saffir said.

“Not too long ago a cigarette was sent down,” Huron spoke up, his voice becoming matter-of-fact and as all business as he could get it. “I need to know everything I can about it as soon as possible.”

“Done,” the giant boomed. He moved to the side. Huron noted that the ogre had been standing next to a large contraption made up of lenses and lines. In the center of a complex series of magnifying lenses and lights glowed the cigarette that Hawthorne had tossed at him. “I have just completed all the cursory tests necessary on the cigarette, I’ve even identified it.”

“I’m impressed,” Huron said. “Tell me about it.”

O’Rourke grinned mightily and moved further to the side. He directed Saffir to gaze through one of the many lenses. She slipped over and complied, tilting her head side to side.

“What am I looking at?” she asked.

“A bad habit,” O’Rourke said with a rattling chuckle. “The specimen you’re looking at is a Silk Cut Emerald. Produced by the Gallaher Group of Ireland. It would be the menthol version of their normal slim cigarettes. Quite popular among Irish women I discovered.” The ogre folded his hands behind his back and rocked back on his heels. “Above and beyond certain other cigarettes, quite popular indeed, and the Silk Cut series has even made a certain amount of inroads into the New World as well from the Britannic Kingdom.”

“It’s something that Mundanes smoke,” Saffir shrugged. “It’s not unlikely for a Faerie suspect to become interested in Mundane vices.”

“Not uncommon, but certainly not something that’s easy to hide.” Huron said. Still, he felt like O’Rourke was holding something back, he wanted to be asked. “But, would be? What is it then?”

The ogre grinned again, his gleaming teeth catching all the light in the room as he did so.

“It’s not a Mundane cigarette,” he said. “The Silk Cut Emerald is designed to look exactly like a Silk Cut Menthol, but it is laced with embenethol instead of nicotine.”

Saffir’s head snapped up. “That’s a sidhe vice; not a Mundane vice.”

Huron frowned.

“Smart!” O’Rourke boomed. “Yes, I discovered that during one of my tests. The person who smoked this was definitely sidhe—or related. A Mundane wouldn’t have gotten anything from the embenethol. There are very few shops in this area that carry this sort of cigarette, and it’s quite difficult to import them.”

“I doubt that Hawthorne smokes,” Huron said. “It doesn’t fit his character at all. Still, why would he toss this at me?”

Moving right along, O’Rourke lifted his mighty hand to his chin. “There were three telltales on the cigarette from people who had handled it. One of them was you, Detective Huron, the other two are unknowns. Both sidhe.”

“One of those is Hawthorne,” Saffir said promptly.

“I will need something we know that he has touched to identify his telltale,” the ogre said shaking his head.

Huron nodded and reached into his pocket. He fished around a little bit and removed the Dun Sidariel doubloon he had retrieved from Guthry. Huron dropped the doubloon in O'Rourke's giant, meaty hand and waited while the ogre stomped over to a different set of equipment and fiddled around with it.

A silvery glow emanated from a pad that the doubloon sat upon. Even at the distance he stood, Huron could see three distinct threads of light extending upwards from it. They wiggled like ribbons in the wind and shifted through various colors and variations as he watched. Tiny sparkles and undecipherable symbols danced around them.

"Three telltales," O'Rourke said. "One of them is obviously you, Detective, but we have one more that I need to eliminate now."

"The other one is Kilroy Guthry," Huron said. "He owns a local gun shop. His telltale should be on file already."

Hmm went O'Rourke and he reached over and picked up a stack of books so large that Huron himself would have had difficulty moving it. After shifting several of the manhole cover sized tomes around, the ogre settled one onto the table near the wavering lines and opened it up. It took him several minutes but soon he grunted.

"Isolated and eliminated," the ogre said finally. "I am marking down the final telltale and then I will retest the cigarette."

The retest went as quickly as when O'Rourke had tested the doubloon. When he finished he took a paintbrush and carefully duplicated the remaining telltale. After making a duplicate of it he took the paper and folded it gently and passed it to Huron.

"This is the remaining telltale," he said. "I'm not really supposed to do this—it's all to go in the file—but if you're investigating the death of an Investigator you need all the help you can get." He winked a huge eye.

"Thank you, O'Rourke," Huron said. "I won't forget this."

"Just catch the bastard who did it," O'Rourke said. "That's all the thanks I need. Ah, and one more thing about it. I almost forgot: that cigarette has *glyph* powder on it."

"Is that so?" Huron said with a frown. "I'll keep that in mind."

When Saffirwen and Huron opened the final door from the Bronx Yard onto a wet New York street the sun had already risen. Its bleak light filtered through the grey clouds and seemed for the moment that the rain had subsided. The muted sunlight pushed aside the ever-present dirty light of the city at night and replaced it with the glare of directionless shine from puddles of water and apartment windows.

Saffir yawned tiredly behind Huron but kept up with him as he moved swiftly through the street.

"What's the plan now, sir?" Saffir asked. Weariness dripped from her voice. Nobody had slept for the entire night and Huron could tell it was beginning to wear on her.

"The plan now is that you get some sleep," he said.

"I—" Saffirwen started to protest but Huron put his hand up.

"You look like a wreck, Saffir," he said. "Last two days you haven't gotten much sleep, of that I'm certain. It's about time that we both took a breather. You especially. I doubt that your father will look kindly on me wearing out his daughter on an assignment."

Saffir frowned and licked her lips. She glanced around taking in the glowing sky, the wet street, and Huron's stern gaze.

"Fine," she said finally. "You're not a basket of fruit yourself, sir. I hope that you're getting some rest yourself."

Huron smiled and adjusted his white fedora with a chuckle. He didn't feel as tired as Saffir looked, but the adrenaline and anger that had sustained him since taking the case was beginning to wane. He knew she was right.

"Yes, yes, Saffir," he said with a throaty sigh. "I promise that I'll be right up to some rest..." He nodded sharply to her and started to turn away. "Right after I get one thing done."

If Saffirwen had anything to say about that she didn't voice it. Huron could feel her eyes on his back as he walked away. When he reached the far corner he looked back and she had already gone.

"Never take a rookie into the underworld," Huron's father had said to him once. He was trying to explain to his son why the young man had to stay behind even though he was a full detective. *"The first time you find your way to the darker element of our society, you go there yourself. Nobody else holds your hand. When you're ready, if it's for you, you'll be there. Take a rookie with you who hasn't been there before and you could get them killed."*

The Faerie underworld of New York wasn't in The Bronx. It wasn't anywhere *per se* but Huron knew of one place worthy of that title.

The place was a dive carved out of a forgotten warehouse near the East River in Whitestone. Huron could already smell the rancid salty air coming up from some forgotten garbage left by the waterfront. With the Faerie influence in the area the Mundanes all but forgot about certain parts of the waterfront. The Black Mussel Hotel and Bar, hold the hotel.

The Knight Investigators had been aware of the place for its entire existence. Could have shut it down at a moments notice but then the criminal element would suddenly scatter throughout the city and become even harder to locate. While the Black Mussel had become a central staging ground for most of New York's Faerie ruffian population it proved to be a far greater asset to the detectives than it was a hindrance. As such, it was permitted to eek out its miserable existence.

A short walk back around the corner brought Huron back to the door that entered into the Bronx Yard. From there he made his way to the lockers and quickly went through a transformation from his high-class outfit of silk and white into something less respectable.

Sidhe commoners had a fashion to braid the locks of hair on either side of their faces called flesclocks; often then braided together behind the head to hold down long flowing tresses of hair behind the head like a headband. Soon, Huron's glowing blonde hair fell roughly over his brown-leather clad shoulders with a pair of flesclocks tying the rest of the disheveled strands out of his face.

With a grim smile at his reflection, Huron carefully hid his badge within the inside of his vest pocket and grabbed a rumpled black fedora that he used for specifically this purpose. The Mundane's liked to call it slumming; the detectives in the New York Chapter simply called it getting dirty.

Huron fully expected to get very dirty before he got any sleep.

Chapter 11

The Black Mussel

A boat coughed as it chewed through the grey-blue water of the East River to Huron's right. Waves sloshed against the beach and the deep ringing of a shallow water buoy rang out its solemn warning. The sun had taken a higher perch in the sky but the overcast clouds kept it hidden well behind their blanket of ashen grey.

A gull angrily squawked at Huron's approach as it sat on a set of nearly rotting steps. The steps lead a garish and splintered path up to a low, wide doorway. A pair of swinging saloon doors painted an incongruous turquoise color stood out from the brown boards and green trim of the tavern itself. The final decorating touch being the sign hanging from a pole above on nearly rusted through chains reading: The Black Mussel.

Captain Kylemore Huron stalked up the stairs and the seagull fled his path as he reached the swinging doors. He pushed the swinging doors aside and stepped inside as a smuggler and scoundrel named Chase Kilpatrick.

The first room of the Black Mussel looked as if it had been torn directly from the pages of some Western magazine doing an expose of an old-time saloon, and then updated with harbor and maritime regalia. A ratty old life preserver hung from the wall above an old, but well kept, wooden staircase leading up the back wall. Through the smoke-filled air a few heads looked up from tables and the bartender, Marseilles, nodded grimly to Huron.

Marseilles ran herself a tight bar and she wasn't stupid. The tall, broad shouldered Siberian Wolf pukka picked Huron out as an Investigator the first time she laid eyes on him. He found his way there on a missing person's case so many years ago and didn't know the extent of his

foolishness of walking right into the lap of the underworld. Marseilles had herself an unspoken deal with the Investigators; they didn't shut her establishment down and she didn't let it get out of hand.

Most of the tables bustled with the criminal element like a picnic swarming with hands. Most of the patrons were pukka. Huron could see cat ears, tails, dog ears, whiskers, feathers, and all manners of different sorts of pukka throughout the room. Here and there the glowing hair and smooth features of a sidhe struck out amongst the tables and one or two trollds.

Marseilles' bouncers all stood lurking in doorways like menacing shadows. Huron counted three trolld bouncers and one ogre. The trollds he recognized as her usual help, but the ogre caught him off guard. The large man hunched over against the door to the refurbished "kitchen" which had been renovated into a crockery rather than a grill or diner as it had been for the would-be hotel.

After finishing off a conversation with another patron, a small white-eared cat pukka, Marseilles waved Huron over.

"Hello Chase. What brings you back to my place?" she asked, leaning heavily on the bar. "The sparkling conversation?" She slowly poured a spot of whisky into a shot glass while she spoke.

Huron made a complicated activity of removing his fedora, picking up the shot glass, rolling the whisky under his nose to then slowly take a gentle swallow. The drink burned his throat like liquid fire and the pain helped to set his mood. The scent of the whisky held the gentle smell of melon, a strange cool counterpoint to the blaze of the alcohol.

"No, no, Marseilles," Huron said, setting the glass down. "It's the Dewmohr Whisky that brings me back every time."

That was the pitch. With those words and the drink, she knew that Huron wasn't on duty, but that he was looking for something. With a slow look she quietly washed a glass with a white rag and reached over to pour a little more.

"Embenethol," Huron said while she was leaning close. He kept the timbre of his voice as low as possible as not to be easily overheard in the din of the room.

Marseilles licked her lips and folded her muscled arms across her chest. She cocked her head to one side and Huron could see the dull lights glint in her golden-yellow eyes.

"You have expensive tastes today, Chase," she said chuckling to herself. She clucked her tongue a few times and shook her head. "Most of my patrons are pukka, as you can see..."

Huron gently pushed the whisky glass away from himself without trying any. He knew instantly that she knew what he was asking for. She always came to the point when the answer was no. She just liked to play a little song and dance before giving up the goods. Huron felt happy to comply.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a half-crown coin. The sum the gold coin represented far outstripped the price of the drinks she had poured and it clicked softly when it touched the wood of the bar. With a slight scrape he pushed it out towards her, keeping it under his hand.

Marseilles gently placed her large but soft hand atop his and let out a slow breath. It was a gesture of great care. Huron recognized her expression as severity tempered with concern. Drugs like embenethol were smuggled in the Underhill at great risk. That risk intensified by one hundred fold when the Mundane Lands were taken into account. The demand of them in the Mundane Lands was a higher, but their import came at a very high price.

"Are you sure you want to be mixed up in glow smuggling, Chase?" she said leaning closer to Huron. "I hear that it's risky business if you catch my drift."

"I'm moving up the ranks, Mar," Huron said. "I might as well try my hand on it. I have some very high class buyers who are extremely interested in the investment."

Marseilles made a jerking motion with her hand towards one of the balconies dotting the far side of the room. A few secluded booths were visible with smoke brimming around their tables with shady silhouettes lurking around dim orange candles.

“Tommy Jay,” Marseilles said. “He’s in the third booth, the one with the tall white bird pukka lounging against the beam. Go talk to him. He’ll be able to set you up with something, or if he can’t he’ll let you know who can.”

“Thank you, Mar,” Huron said with a smile. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Live longer maybe,” she said as he grabbed his fedora and set it atop his head.

Huron walked over to the staircase and trod his way up the entire distance. As he ascended the steps a few faces in the room turned to look his way, and here and there large bruisers and other muscle for the various criminal gangs about the room. Huron could feel a few eyes burning into his back after he passed one particularly unsavory and bad-smelling dog pukka on the stairs. The man reeked of alcohol, but Huron could tell his eyes were awake and alert under the façade of whisky-dulled lids.

A figure clothed in light colors detached from a table in the gallery below and made for the stairs after Huron. He caught the motion out of the corner of his eye but simply filed the dress of the person in his mind without looking. Suspicious behavior for an Investigator in disguise would be a foolish move in the midst of this den of the underworld.

A bird pukka with white feathers through her hair and a sharp nose stepped in his way when Huron tried to walk past her. She put her hand against the middle of his chest and raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, uh,” she said. “Do not disturb. Come back another time.”

Huron sized her up and noticed that she wore several daggers, one of which lay against the inner side of her left wrist. When he finally looked at her face again her eyes held him with a hawkish stare. He let the corner of his mouth turn up slightly in a small smile. Tommy Jay sat quietly in the shadow of the booth. The discussion around him had gone silent and everyone in the chairs sat and waited for Huron’s next move.

“Mar tells me Mr. Tommy Jay is a businessman,” Huron said. “I’m a businessman. Unfortunately, the deal I have to set on this table has a quick expiration.”

“Let ‘em over, Tre,” Tommy said, waving to the bird pukka. She stepped aside and Huron slid past her carefully. Tommy rubbed his nose and leaned forward. “Mar sent ya, did she? I think then we have some business.”

Huron glanced from side to side. “Is there somehow we can speak privately?”

Tommy Jay nodded solemnly. He was a sidhe. A black beret topped of his snowy white hair which cut short over his shoulder except for a multitude of flesclocks. His clothing was covered with random chains and zippers which jingled as he cast about with his hands to dismiss several pukka sitting at the table with him.

They quickly cleared out leaving Tre, obviously Tommy’s bodyguard, and another white bird pukka who could have been Tre’s older brother. The second bird pukka kept his hands carefully resting on a silver revolver on the table. Marseilles’ name became Huron’s invitation to dance, but the ball certainly wasn’t out on if Tommy Jay could trust him or not.

“What’s your game?” Tommy said.

“Small time smuggling,” Huron said. “The name is Kilpatrick. I also happen to be interested in offering my services, for a small fee, of course.”

“Okay,” Tommy replied. He stubbed a cigarette that he was smoking out on the table in front of him. New plumes of smoke joined the already hazy air. Huron spent a moment to note that the cig looked quite similar to the one he had in his pocket. “How is this going to benefit me exactly?”

"I hear that you're into the distribution of glow." Huron spoke low and quiet as if merely mentioning the street-name of a controlled substance would draw attention. "Not just any stuff, but the real refined, pricy stuff. The kinda stuff you expect the more refined connoisseur to purchase. Do I got it right?"

"You got it right," Tommy said. He sounded cautious but he looked interested.

"Now, as I hear it this sort of refined stuff is manufactured in Ireland," Huron continued. "Most of my racket is out of Galway. It's discreet, it's large bore for shipments, and—um, at your disposal if you like."

During his entire speech Huron kept his eyes keenly on Tommy Jay. Years of experience as an Investigator had given him a certain innate sense. A slight bulge in Tommy's vest suggested a small rectangular object. Probably a book. As Huron spoke of distribution and locations, Tommy unconsciously stroked his vest, tracing out the lines of it. Huron wondered if he was foolish enough to carry his client list with him.

"As a matter of fact," Tommy said. "I do have some need for an operation out of Galway. Though, not as interesting as smuggling glow. I need someone to transport paper."

"Paper?" Huron said. Paper wasn't a slang he recognized, Tommy Jay was either testing him or dismissing him. He didn't like that. It didn't matter if he was being dismissed or not, this wasn't the direction he wanted this deal to go. "I haven't been spending years building up my routes and boats to smuggle no paper. I want in on the big stuff or I'm out."

Tommy sniffed and withdrew another cigarette. Huron glanced at it for only a moment. He knew he had to be on the right track, it was another of the Silk Cut Emerald line. Tommy's second bodyguard lifted his hand with the revolver and raised a lighter with his other to light the cigarette.

Huron noticed Tommy glance across the room for a moment as if checking for someone. He made a very slight inclination of his head and his eyes flickered back.

He took a slow puff and filled the air with sweet, mint-smelling smoke. Huron's sensitive nose detected the sharp peppermint undertone of embenethol in the cigarette smoke beneath the veil of the menthol which Huron suspected was designed to hide it.

Tommy spoke slowly. Tendrils of smoke curled from his nostrils as he spoke. "You're not getting in on my business without some show of faith. Anyone here can drop Mar's name. We all know her. I don't know you."

Huron could feel someone moving behind him. Probably the other bird pukka with the knives.

"You can ask Mar about me, she'll tell you I've been smuggling since the early seventies into this area."

Tommy Jay removed the cigarette from his mouth and blew a neat stream of smoke across the table.

"I'll tell you what I think, Kilpatrick," he said lowering his head. Huron sensed tension in the air and he frowned. Tommy couldn't possibly know, but suddenly Huron's intuition warned him that something had changed dramatically about this exchange in the last few seconds. "I think that you might be working for the gennies and I don't need them breathing down my throat right now."

Huron straightened suddenly as the cold touch of a knife settled against his throat. "Don't move," the bird pukka said from behind him.

Doing as he was told, Huron did not move. He couldn't tell if Tommy was bluffing or not but he knew that most of the newer distributors were getting younger and more paranoid as the years went by.

"If you ask Mar she'll tell you that I'm legit," Huron said. This wasn't completely true, but it would keep him out of hot water. Marseilles wouldn't help nor hinder the Investigators but she also wouldn't want one being killed on her premises. Very bad for business.

“You know too much, Kilpatrick,” Tommy Jay said. “I’m going to ask Brun here to check your pockets.” He blew another long, smooth billow of smoke. “You won’t give him any trouble now will you?”

Brun, the white bird pukka with the revolver, cast Huron a snaggletooth smile. Huron’s heart sank; this was the last thing he’d anticipated in the public arena of the Black Mussel. Deals here were usually safe from this sort of behavior. Huron tried to think fast.

“Why don’t you just let me go,” Huron said. “I’ll take this as a no. I don’t need to deal with sniveling disrespectful druggers who don’t know to respect a good businessman.”

“I think that only helps prove you’re a snitch,” Tommy said, stubbing the cigarette out. “Check him.”

Brun started to move towards Huron but suddenly froze mid rise. He swung his gun up and fixed his eyes on someone Huron couldn’t see.

“Lower the knife and the gun or your boss dies,” a voice harder than steel demanded.

Huron turned his head despite himself. The knife loosened at his throat slightly but he still felt the metal bite into his skin. When he saw who was speaking his heart dropped.

Saffir pointed two fingers menacingly at Tommy Jay. Anyone who had any experience with combat magic knew that she currently had one of the most lethal gestures aimed directly at him. Electricity crackled around her and caused her hair to stand away from her body. Huron could tell that she wore a pillyweave vest underneath her shirt and jacket, the ribbing was too obvious beneath the white garments.

She didn’t know it, but their cover was blown. Nobody else would mistake someone wearing a pillyweave vest for anything but an Investigator.

Huron once again recalled his father’s words about rookies and the underworld but he didn’t have much of a chance to think on it.

Presently, all Hell broke loose.

Chapter 12

Reprimands

“W*hat do you two think you were doing!?”*

Two hours, a multitude of bumps and bruises, and some substantial collateral damage later Saffir and Huron sat through an altogether different sort of Hell. One brought down by the heavy hand of Lord Commissioner MacAvee himself.

The Lord Commissioner’s blue eyes burned with fury as he glanced between his daughter and Captain Huron. He had spent the better part of the last five minutes berating them and now a silence hung over the room filled with menace. He glowered at them both as if he couldn’t choose between them.

“Alright, I’m giving you a chance to speak,” MacAvee said, setting his jaw. “What just happened?”

Neither Kylemore nor Saffir felt the need to take the bait. They both remained sucked up in a sullen silence.

“Two of my best detectives,” MacAvee growled. “One of them my own daughter, the other a very good captain...decide to take on the entire New York underworld all by themselves! I really hope for your sakes that Marseilles is in a forgiving mood after you ripped her place up like that.”

He looked between them again. Nobody felt like talking.

“Captain Engel reports to me today that Forensics was called at the Staten Island Lydon Mansion,” the Lord Commissioner continued. He paused there, not mentioning that it was the scene of Bridie’s murder. He must have realized that it was unnecessary to mention that. “Witnesses in the event report that only two shots were fired, Forensics already combed the area, it is a waste of manpower to call them out again.”

Huron froze. His eyes narrowed at he looked at the Lord Commissioner.

“Two shots?” Saffir spoke up suddenly. “The Investigator who interviewed the guards is a friend of mine, Detective Hallymore, and she said one of the guards possibly heard four or five shots.”

“Her report says two,” the Lord Commissioner growled, placing both hands on his desk. “With the behavior of you two recently how can I assume that you even read it? I have a mind to put you both on report for this.” He cast an icy look at Huron. “You are too emotionally involved in this case and I know now that it was a mistake to allow you, even as a cursory investigator, to be part of it.” He turned his gaze to Saffir. “I had expected more of you as well.”

Silence crashed down through the small office as MacAvee’s angry voice tapered away.

“Captain Huron,” Lord Commissioner MacAvee said finally. “You are officially suspended with pay for two weeks. I suggest you take it as a vacation and get your thoughts in order. You have overstepped your own authority in these matters! You are not to continue any of your regular duties nor harass any of the investigators in charge of Bridie’s case. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal clear, sir,” Huron said quietly.

MacAvee nodded with a disapproving glower and turned to look at Saffir. She stood ramrod straight, her eyes staring directly forward without blinking.

“As for you, Detective,” he said, “I expect you to take today off and clean yourself up. Then report back to the Kings Yard early tomorrow morning and see Sergeant Irons for reassignment. I want you on your best behavior for Irons, consider this a punitive measure. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Saffir said, barely moving.

“You are both dismissed,” the Lord Commissioner said. “Get out of my sight and don’t let me see either of you in the Yard today.”

Huron didn’t say anything until he heard the door to Commissioner MacAvee’s office close behind him.

“I must apologize, Saffir,” Huron said as they slipped away from the office and into an adjoining hallway. It would be unlikely for them to be noticed dallying if they weren’t in the main Yard. “I did not intend to get you mixed up in that.”

Saffir’s eyes twinkled as she stared at Huron closely. “So, what exactly was your intent out there at The Black Mussel? Why didn’t you bring me along?” She rubbed her head absently with her hand where a broken chair had struck her during the brawl.

“I figure that I underestimated you by not thinking you might decide to follow me,” Huron said. “You fought extremely well back there.”

Weariness had stretched Saffir’s voice thin. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I’ve been suspended, Detective,” Huron said as he walked away. Saffir made no move to stop him. “I think that I’m going to get some sleep. I’ve been going without for way too long. Your father’s instruction gives me leave to rest, at least.”

“It’s that cigarette I gave to Forensics isn’t it?” she called after him. “You went to The Black Mussel to ask about the drug that was in it.” Huron didn’t listen, he just kept walking away. “I don’t get it, sir! Why aren’t you arguing against this suspension? It wasn’t your fault, what happened in the bar.”

Saffir watched him go sullenly. She stood in the corridor silently even long after his footsteps faded away. Her father’s berating still echoed in her ears as she stood alone. Something truly strange struck her from the way Huron had reacted to his words. When he suggested that the two bullets from the scene of Bridie’s death had been the only two, Huron had become stiff.

He seemed to accept his defeat silently. Though, Saffir felt that she knew better than that.

She understood how involved Huron felt with this case and even understood why he—and because she chose to go with him—had gone without sleep for several days now. Fatigue pulled at her like a heavy wet rope dragging her down but stubbornly she marched herself through the corridors heading for her desk.

Saffir meant to look at that report again.

The door to the tenement building swung open on newly greased hinges when Huron pushed on it. Some of the red paint was flaking from the spot where most people put their hands to open the door. Like the door, the entire building had a sense of fading wear about it.

Mr. Doyle sat behind his desk with the mailboxes to his back. Huron wondered if the man ever left his post to sleep. Mr. Doyle never seemed to move from the spot, he seemed to be rooted to the chair. The tenement building had long since been converted from a hotel arrangement to a building that leased long term residence, but Mr. Doyle, who was the original owner, stayed on as superintendent and still sat behind the desk as if prepared to receive guests who might stay.

Huron paid Mr. Doyle little heed going past, he didn't need his mail. The man was a Mundane of the most mundane sort anyway. Like most Mundane's he was completely unaware of the Faerie and any doings with them. Certainly a time or two he mentioned offhandedly that he sensed something *odd* about Huron and some of his companions but he simply left it at "As long as you're not one of those poofy underhand sorts." Huron decided not to determine what the man had meant by that.

Small droplets of water scattered on the steps as Huron ascended them. Something higher above was leaking into the hallway and dripping down into the stairwell. He decided not to bother Mr. Doyle about it. This past few days were shaping up extremely badly for any sort of contact he had with anyone. The super would discover the leak with or without Huron's help so there was no need to make a fuss about it. He wasn't in the mood anyway.

Sleep deprivation gave a strange edge to reality as Kylemore made his way down the hallway. The edges of paranoia lingered in his footsteps as he approached his apartment. He wanted only to get into his apartment and vanish into his bed.

Before leaving the Yard, Huron had attempted to retrieve the file on Bridie's death from his desk where he had left it. To his surprise, it was gone, along with his key to the armory. The Lord Commissioner's agents had sterilized Huron's desk during their meeting perhaps in light of his enforced vacation. The strangeness of that occurrence still remained in Huron's thoughts; made only more peculiar by the fact that Huron wasn't requested to relinquish his badge or sword.

The apartment in the Mundane Lands was a retreat that he usually took himself to when he didn't want to go into the Underhill to his residence there; A place of solitude where he could avoid his family and acquaintances and actually think. Huron remained the only person alive who knew he retreated here when things seemed rough around the edges.

A chill cast through Huron's arm when his fingers touched the doorknob.

Certainty struck him like a bucket of icy water. Someone else apparently knew about the apartment.

Checking his points, Kylemore glanced right to left and determined that the hallway was indeed completely empty. The sense that something seemed dangerously amiss came only from his own door.

Huron needed no other signs when his light touch on the door caused it to creak slightly as it settled against the doorjamb. The door had been opened since the last time he had closed it.

In a motion practiced of long experience, Huron let his trench coat fall from his shoulders and onto the floor, his rumpled black fedora floated down to land on top of it as he unlimbered his

sword and let the door swing open silently. Releasing the *glamourie* of a silence charm onto the hinges and the floor masked Huron's entry into the apartment.

The gloom from outside appeared to have crept through the window and cast a haze over the inside of the apartment. The furnishings were sparse to nonexistent; Huron never saw fit to keep anything in the place that could distract him. The stark walls displayed dull shadows from the drapes and the light dimmed and brightened as passing clouds crossed over the sun.

Kylemore stood motionless a few feet inside the doorway, his sword poised defensively as he stilled his breathing and focused on his surroundings. He knew the layout of the apartment intimately, and to that also many of the sounds that might be produced. He listened for anything out of place.

He heard nothing.

Not just that he heard nothing out of place. There was no sound to the apartment altogether. Not even the small refrigerator in the kitchen which whined late in the day, nor the fan in the bathroom window that chugged through the night, nor the leaky pipe. The apartment revealed no secrets; comfortable to resign itself to a cast of silence.

Sweat began to bead on Huron's brow as he carefully paced his way through the apartment. The usually familiar floor and walls seemed somehow alien, as if touched by an unseen corrupting force.

He slipped, silent as a ghost through rooms he'd known for years now.

The living room's wood floor showed no signs of footprints or other visitation. The table in the center remained untouched. Huron glanced over the room only barely, certain that even invisible persons would have been easy enough to spot in his own abode. From there he followed down the hall and checked the bedroom and the window there. The sheets still tucked tightly and the closet closed tightly. Nothing seemed out of order with the closet when Huron pulled it open so he closed it again. The bathroom also proved to be empty.

Huron had cased his entire apartment and not a single room proved to hold an intruder. The eerie silence maintained its veil as he carefully began to go through the rooms once again. Experience told him that the first time through a situation shouldn't act to relieve fears but to clarify the situation.

Without relaxing his guard, Huron made his way back into the bedroom. The latch on the window proved to be solid. If anyone had entered they came and left via the door. Standing near the window he could see outside. Clouds scuttled overhead across a grainy blue sky and cars drove past in the streets below. Everything seemed unusually calm. The world held its breath.

A scraping noise whispered behind Huron.

He spun on his heel and brought his sword around. The room remained empty still. The sound echoed softly in his ears but he couldn't pinpoint its origin. All he could tell for certain was that it was somewhere in the apartment.

Despite his years of training and experience in situations like this, Huron could hear his heartbeat in his ears. He approached the closet trying to map the sound in his head. That gave the impression of a likely place.

An unwelcome sense of dread flooded into him as he tugged on the closet door. Though only a minute earlier he had checked it and it proved empty. The door swung open easily and Huron's jaw dropped as did his sword from what he saw inside.

Standing there, real as life, was a sidhe woman wearing a white dress. Crests of blonde hair curled down her shoulders. Violet eyes bright and real as life stared back at him pleadingly.

"Bridie?" Huron said in astonishment.

The specter reached for him with both arms, palms turned upwards. She opened her mouth to speak...

A flicker of movement in the corner of Huron's vision caused him to glance to the side. A dark shape billowed out from the hallway into the room; a pair of gleaming guns came into view. Huron jumped, his blade leading the way. The bared silver steel of his weapon plunged into the dark figure as he stepped close and the guns fired.

Huron turned just long enough to see blossoms of red explode on Bridie's chest and he found himself alone in the room with her. His sword imbedded in the wall.

Her face serene in the mask of death, she looked exactly as she did in the Coroner's report photos.

Kylemore sat up suddenly in his bed. Sweat dripped down his forehead and cheeks. He had forgotten to remove his trench coat and he lay on top of the covers. The sun was setting outside of the window throwing long crosshatched shadows from the window across the tightly closed and latched closet.

As the light diminished all around him, Huron listened to all the small sounds of the apartment around him. The whine of the refrigerator in the kitchen, the soft chug of the fan in the bathroom, and the soft drip of the leaky pipe somewhere in one of the walls filled his ears.

Anything to keep his mind off of the heavy thud of his heartbeat and the sullen hurt that curled up in his chest. The sorrow that he wouldn't see Bridie again but perhaps only in his dreams and nightmares.

Chapter 13

Intuition

The clouds all vanished from the twilight sky, leaving only the dim half-light of the fading sunset to contest with the ever-present glow of the city. A thin sheen of hazy fog seemed to mist up from the buildings and streets themselves. The low heat of the day faded away with the night and the chill of dark settled down over the cars and pedestrians moving about in their usual routines.

The foggy tendrils of the nightmare Huron had experienced still clung to him like a damp cloak as he pulled items out of his closet and tossed them onto his bed. It took him until the sun had completely vanished beneath the horizon and its foxfire red twilight vanish completely before he had laid out all of his gear: a black pillyweave vest, his *sidbesteele* rapier, two daggers, a specially warded black trench coat, an old Kings Yard commission radio, and finally his rumpled black fedora.

In the living room a black book sat conspicuously on the table in front of the couch. Small enough to fit in a coat pocket. Huron had scarcely looked at it since he hid it on his person after pilfering it from the unconscious Tommy Jay. He knew that if he was right it would hopefully hold the next lead he needed to track down Bridie's killer.

With careful deliberation, Huron worked to cleanse any protective *glamour* on the book that might have destroyed it when he opened it. Most simply he was thankful that none of them had activated already being out of their master's grasp.

Huron already knew about Tommy Jay and his smuggling racquet, but embenethol didn't exactly pair up there with some of the harder Faerie drugs that the Investigators constantly cracked down on. In fact, Tommy had himself a good niche if he didn't want to attract too much attention. Embenethol wasn't altogether that common and very little crime—with the exception of black

market smuggling—was attributed to its use. Known as glow on the street it was just a mild euphoric that only affected sidhe; a common vice for the children of high nobles.

The book listed a short number of names and dates and sets of numbers that Huron couldn't decipher immediately. After reading for a bit he came to realize that some of them were dollar amounts—Mundane money—and others seemed to be liters of embenethol. Tommy must have had some clever operation going on; the drug was highly unstable in its liquid form and difficult to transport. The Investigators were obviously underestimating his assets.

Huron frowned darkly when he discovered a name he recognized as a resident of the House Galadmohr mansion in The Bronx: Séamus Dunne, the Head Clerk of the Bronx mansion. Too bad he was a dead man. Still, it did make it a very difficult link to ignore. However, it did paint a line between Hawthorne, the cigarette, and the old clerk's death.

Kylemore kept scanning the pages and found a set of scribbled notes that included addresses. One address was actually part of the Bronx mansion, the grounds maintenance houses had their own separate address on the same street. It seemed obvious now that the sign pointed towards certain elements of the Galadmohr mansion being interested in shipments of the Emerald Cut cigarettes. The dollar amounts along with the addresses weren't matched to liquid units but instead units marked as "packs."

None of the addresses in the back of the book even landed close to the House Lydon mansion where Bridie was killed. This did not mean that that house was clean of drugs themselves but one thing about the cigarette that tugged at Huron's thoughts. The *glyph* dust.

Glyph dust was used by Forensics to help locate objects and telltales produced by the use of glamour. If the dust had been on the cigarette that meant that a Forensics team had dusted it, possibly without knowing it. Huron knew that it was a huge leap following the hunch that Hawthorne had deliberately snatched the cigarette from the scene of Bridie's death and thrown it at him so that Huron would come to this sort of a conclusion.

It seemed extremely sloppy for a Forensics team to miss something like that. Murder scenes were generally combed for anything and everything that might have any context to the murder. Absolutely nothing else in the report on Bridie's death suggested them finding any cigarettes at all; but what was a lone embenethol laced cigarette doing in the woods where Bridie was killed?

Huron frowned at the new questions he was coming up with.

"Am I going crazy?" Huron said to himself, sighing. "This could all be an elaborate misdirection by that Unseileigh assassin." Indeed, he accepted that it could have, but every investigative nerve in his body clamored at him that the evidence didn't make enough sense for that sort of speculation. Inside he wanted to hate Hawthorne with all he had for taking Bridie away, for being there when she died when Huron couldn't be.

Huron's knuckles turned white as he clenched his fist.

A glimmer of light lead a ribbon of sparkles from his front door and Kylemore looked up with a start. A tiny form sped through the darkness of the room in front of him and drew a weaving band of luminescence in the air. A pixie.

The tiny creature bobbed and weaved through the room, ran several loops around his head, and then zipped away into his room. Curious, Huron rose to follow. Shortly after the pixie vanished into his room, he could hear the soft whine of his radio crackling to life.

"Captain Huron," a voice emanated from within his bedroom. "Sir, are you there?"

"Saffir?" Huron said, suddenly bemused.

"Sir, I am sorry to intrude," she said through the radio. "But I need to speak with you urgently."

Kylemore slipped into his bedroom and grabbed the radio from the bed.

“Well, I’m impressed,” he said. “That is enough to get you an audience. You’ll have to tell me how you—”

“Later,” Saffir said tersely, cutting him off. “Uh, oh I’m sorry for interrupting you sir.”

“No problem,” Huron said. “Go on.”

“I am breaking the rules here,” she said. “In fact, if my father catches me here in the Yard I’m in it for sure. Anyway. Something very strange is going on. Suddenly after we get thrown off of the cases the files on Bridie’s death have been sealed. Fortunately, I was able to get extra copies and stash them out of sight before the orders came down to confiscate them.”

“Sealed by whom?” Huron asked slowly.

“I don’t know,” Saffir said. “Someone higher up than my father. Also, I got my hands on the Coroner reports on the two murders that night that you encountered Hawthorne at the Galadmohr mansion. You won’t believe how the head clerk was poisoned--”

“Don’t tell me,” Huron said. “Embenethol overdose.”

There was a long pause and some shuffling paper on the other end of the radio.

“Yes!” Saffir exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“A hunch.” Huron remained silent for a moment. This was not shaping up well.

Saffirwen took advantage of the silence and continued. “There’s more. There’s something bizarre about the Forensics reports from the scene where Bridie was murdered and when you fought with Hawthorne. Especially when I compare them to the report from the team that Captain Engel accidentally sent to re-sweep the murder scene...

“As it turns out Detective Warren Tavin is listed as being at the murder scene both times. You remember talking to him, nearly scared him witless. Well, let me tell you, he couldn’t have been at the first scene. In fact, it’s impossible.”

“Impossible?” Huron echoed.

“Yes,” Saffir continued nearly breathless to get the information out. “I have him in several reports at being with his Forensics team across town in Queens during the entire time he supposedly supervised the team at the Galadmohr mansion in The Bronx. There is a lot more paperwork tying him to the Queens locations and even his presence in several reports that outweighs his presence in the reports from Bridie’s murder—in fact, he’s not even mentioned!

“His badge id is wrong too.”

There was a pregnant pause, Saffir definitely felt good about her skills and waited for Huron to ask.

He decided to oblige. “What was wrong about it?”

“The badge id from the murder scene and the badge id for the Galadmohr shooting—at you, that is—are both the same, but the names are different. It matches one Seoirse Buckley...”

Quickly, Huron opened the black book again and flicked through it. Bugley, Bangrey, Buck... George Buck. The name of a buyer of a small amount of Emerald Silk Cut packs from Tommy who apparently lived in Manhattan. Seoirse often became George in the American tongue.

“...what’s even funnier is that he’s not with Forensics, he’s a Detective Sergeant from the—”

“Manhattan Yard,” Huron said grimly.

Saffirwen went completely silent. “I see you already know. Am I missing some crucial information here?”

“Learned anything else, partner?” Huron said. His heart had already sunk to his shoes; he didn’t feel good about this situation. A Knight Investigator caught up with embenethol wasn’t altogether that big of a deal, but a connection to Bridie’s murder seemed too much.

Saffir was all too cheerful to go on. “I tried to check the files as to the number of shots reported fired at the scene and I couldn’t get my hands on those reports, but sir, I could have sworn it said five. Now, I know that five and two can look similar, but I am not mistaken.”

“Sometimes witnesses renege statements, Saffir,” Huron said. “You know that.”

“No sir, I don’t think that is the case here,” she said. “With your permission I would like to go re-question—”

“No.” Huron cut her off and made a sharp intake of breath. “Saffir, someone is trying to take over this case. I do not know why but it seems to me that your father did the right thing taking you off of it. I suspect that he saw this coming. Our encounter at the Mussel had nothing to do with my suspension. He’s trying to protect us from something.”

“From what?”

“It doesn’t matter. I want you to stay away from this case and lay low for a while. I’ll do the same.”

“But sir,” Saffir started, then she sighed loudly and Huron could hear what sounded like pages of paper sliding together. “You’re just like my father, sir. However, I have come to understand it when he gives me advice in the form of orders. I will do as you say.”

“Thank you, Saffir,” Huron said. “I promise you, if I discover anything you will be the first to know.”

As the radio clicked off again Huron smiled to himself, knowing that Saffir was going to be trouble for her father yet.

All activity in the Kings Yard deadened when the large glass double-doors in front swung open to admit the most unlikely trio of individuals. Each of them clad completely in flowing black with red scarves twisted around their throats. They moved as if their feet did not touch, their black garb floating behind them in a chilling parade. The three sidhe ignored everyone in the room bearing expressions more severe and bleak than their dress.

Grizzled Investigators and greenhorns alike moved out of their way with the same quickness of step as the trio stalked through the Yard. All eyes kept on them as they moved past. Not a single individual stood idly as the three glided by, every eye alert; most faces of the younger detectives remained neutral but wary, while several senior inspectors wore dark, openly hateful glares.

Inquisitors. Agents of the Wizards Inquisition: the most hated rival organization to the Knight Investigators. Many of cadet detectives wouldn’t know much about them but from history lessons except those who had served tours in the Kingdom of Britannia. The Knight Investigators as an organization used to serve the Wizards Inquisition until the Elven Queene had been persuaded to give the Investigators their own mandate—separate and outside the control of the Inquisition. Ever since that fateful writ the Inquisition continued to harry the Investigators at every turn hoping to one day regain their once extremely useful tool.

The Inquisition had less power within the colonial atmosphere of the Kingdom of the New World but they would have the world see them as a law unto themselves no matter the setting. The Wizards Inquisition had to learn to tolerate and work along side the Knight Investigators in the Kingdom of Brittainia. Here, in New York, things often proved different. The Inquisition’s long reach often got chopped off at the wrists by shrewd Investigators unwilling to put up with old rivals.

Detective Captain Engel remained the only Investigator who did not shrink away from the three as they managed to both swagger and glide across the room towards her. She folded her arms beneath her breasts and leveled a withering glare.

“I don’t care how you comport yourselves in London,” Engel said hotly, directly obstructing the path of the lead Inquisitor. “Here you have to follow actual rules and announce your presence before disrupting one of our offices.”

“We are here,” the lead Inquisitor replied coldly. If Captain Engel’s glare meant anything to him, he didn’t show it. “Inform the Lord Commissioner.”

Engel began made as if to protest but the door to Lord Commissioner MacAvee’s office swung open behind her.

“You may show them in, Captain,” he said from within.

Clenching her teeth, Captain Engel stepped to the side and pointed through the door. “Be my guest.”

Without a word, the trio of Inquisitors glided into the office and the door closed with a soft click behind them.

Slowly, cautiously, as if the Yard were a forest waking up after a massive disturbance, the soft chatter of discussion began to rise again among the Investigators. Eyes still constantly flickered to the silhouettes of the three Inquisitors inside of the Lord Commissioner’s office. Not a soul in the room dared to tempt their curiosity to discover what was going on.

It did not take long before Lord Commissioner MacAvee’s calm but polite voice to change to a cold and angry tone. The actual words of what being said between the quiet Inquisitors and the quickly angering Commissioner couldn’t be overheard due to a ward muffling the words. The tone of the discussion, however, came through loud and clear.

Captain Engel waited a total of five minutes until the door to the office opened of its own accord and the trio slid out. Their faces seemed stretched and emotionless, but Engel could tell that something the Commissioner said had given them pause: they did not look happy. Not that Engel had seen many Inquisitors to know when one was happy or not, but she was glad that something had bothered them. Anything that bothered one of them gave her cause to grin.

The Inquisitors quietly made their exit from the Yard, followed by suspicious expressions from every corner of the room.

The wary hush in the room cracked like a sheet of ice with when the door closed behind them and questions exploded throughout the room. Several detectives even strayed to the still-open Lord Commissioner’s door only to be turned away. Finally, Commissioner MacAvee called for Captain Engel and she stepped into the doorway, pausing at the threshold.

“What can I do for you, sir?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“I need Captain Kylemore Huron located immediately,” the Lord Commissioner said. “The Wizards Inquisition has been kind enough to inform me that Captain MacFenna and anyone close to her in any capacity is coming under investigation as possible Unseileigh sympathizers.”

“What?” Captain Engel exclaimed. Her face reddened. “Sir, you can’t really expect that such charges can even be real. Everyone *knows* about Captain MacFenna’s involvement in the Nightmware War. And Kylemore... He’s a royal pain in the ass and doesn’t listen to his peers but given the chance I’d choose him over most anyone else to lead an investigation. Unseileigh sympathizers they are not.”

The Lord Commissioner held up his hand in a warning gesture and Engel went silent.

“You are not alone in your outrage,” he said slowly. “I intend to shield all of my detectives from this activity and I do not want Inquisitors soiling Bridie’s memory. Not on my watch.” With a loud sigh he lowered himself into his chair and looked very weary. Engel glanced at the desk and frowned. On it laid a folded piece of parchment with the green and orange royal seal of the Elven Queene. “If this Chapter does not show that we are cooperating in the fullest of our abilities I have a feeling that Alderman MacCionnaith herself may intervene.”

Engel remained silent as Commissioner MacAvee rose from his chair.

“I am going to retire to my private office, Captain,” he said slowly. “Once you have located Captain Huron, please have him report immediately to me for a briefing on this situation. I am about to order a full inquest into these proceedings. If the Inquisitors return, direct them to me and

only me. Do not heed any of their orders. I must be seen first about anything else pertaining to this matter.”

“Of course, sir,” Engel said sharply.

“Please keep the search for Captain Huron confidential, Engel,” Commissioner MacAvee said. “I don’t want anyone getting any ideas. Nor do I want the Inquisitors getting wind of where he might be. I do not like this.”

With that, the Lord Commissioner left his office. Surveyed the Investigators milling about in the Kings Yard office and headed out of the room. Engel waited for him to exit the office before she closed the door to his front office and listened to the door lock.

The Commissioner had been so distracted by these new matters that he had forgotten to close his own door.

Engel diligently set about locating her lieutenants and getting a canvassing party out to locate Captain Huron and pull him in before anything worse could happen.

Chapter 14

Dissent in the Ranks

It did not take the detectives under Captain Engel's command to deploy to Huron's usual haunts. With their typical meticulousness they canvassed everywhere he might have gone. Two detectives arrived at his "secret" apartment within a few hours of being set on his original trail. Four detectives passed into the Underhill and visited his house there. Three units of others split themselves up across New York City with a small legion of scout pixies.

Detective after detective reported back with empty hands. The search widened, more pixies were conscripted to aide. It would be slow going, but Captain Engel knew that her lieutenants would not leave any stone unturned in the search. The presence of the Inquisitors and the request to bring Captain Huron back to the yard had come too close together. While most of the detectives were not eager to find him, most of them worked under the belief that one of their own was possibly missing, not AWOL.

All eyes turned to the streets of Brooklyn and The Bronx.

The Manhattan Yard seemed quiet and sleepy when Huron pushed his way through the front doors. It was one of the few Yards that had a complete Mundane building issued to its purpose. Directly neighboring a Mundane police precinct it was designed to look to Mundanes as if it were part of the same bureaucratic mesh, in fact, if a Mundane were to pass through the doors they would find themselves in the precinct and not in the Yard. Huron himself didn't know how it worked; just that it did so, and did so extremely well.

The Yard had been constructed with the same black-grey stonework as the surrounding buildings to match the precinct almost exactly. Blue letters across the entrance read "Manhattan Yard" which probably would have displayed something altogether different to Mundane eyes. The

front desk dominated the entryway with the detective on duty sitting behind a gigantic oak desk the height of a judge's stand and looking down at all who entered.

Huron hadn't visited the Manhattan Yard many times but had understood that it was constructed as a fortification, hence the reason why it had a Mundane building it was placed in. Iron latticework hidden through the front desk could protect a large troop of defenders against a siege while reinforcements mobilized to the location. The Manhattan Yard originally had been intended to become the Chapter House for the New York Knight Investigators Chapter, but the Kings Yard had instead received that distinction instead.

The detective behind the desk, a young fox pukka woman with grey eyes and grey ears, nodded to Huron as he stepped into the shallows of the room. The polished blue floor beneath his feet reminded Huron of what the bay looked like at high noon.

"Visiting, Captain?" the desk sergeant asked. She smiled at Huron.

"I'm looking for Sergeant Seoirse Buckley," Huron said. "I had an appointment to see him earlier today but he didn't show. I was hoping to catch him in his office or if he's not here I have a note that I must drop off for him. His eyes only."

The pukka detective grinned and put her tongue between her sharp fox teeth as she clattered away at something out of Huron's field of vision. It sounded like pages flipping rapidly. After a few gentle pauses she looked up—or down as the desk required—at Huron.

"His duty ended just three minutes ago sir, you might catch him," she said helpfully. She sounded happy that she could be helpful to a Captain. "His office is located downstairs in the new AIU level. Normally you need a pass to go down there, but I think that I can make an exception for you. Having missed an appointment and all."

Huron didn't like the fact that people from outside Yards could walk through the defenses so easily but he couldn't pass up the chance.

"I would appreciate that greatly Detective—."

"Aubrey Olsen," she said eagerly. Pleased that he wanted to know her name.

"I won't forget this," Huron said. "You have a lovely evening."

"You as well, Captain, sir," she said behind him as he moved to and descended down the stairs.

When Huron made his way out of sight of the young desk sergeant he paused and let himself think. The involvement of the AIU, otherwise known as the Anti-Infiltration Unit, certainly made for big problems. To Huron the AIU was a bad venture held over from the days when the Knight Investigators were part of the Wizards Inquisition. He felt that its only purpose was to harass normally law abiding Faerie citizens and anytime they showed up a fair amount of dissent could be heard ranking in the mouths of those Investigators who had to work with them.

The primary purpose of the AIU was to mirror a similar organization in the Underhill known as the Grimhill Council, whose entire purpose was to protect Seileigh society against Unseileigh infiltration. The Mundane Lands added a great difficulty to keeping the Unseileigh out of Seileigh territory and spies often slipped through their nets to reach the Mundane Lands. However, all of the major inroads into the Underhill from the Mundane Lands remained in the control of the Seileigh the Unseileigh stood little chance to do much.

The Knight Investigators didn't need a specialized division to do their duties of bringing Unseileigh spies and insurgents to justice in the Mundane Lands. The AIU was just another ploy by the Wizards Inquisition and the Grimhill Council to attempt to focus more control over dealings in the Mundane Lands.

Tangling with the AIU meant tangling with the Inquisition.

“I hope you brought a lot of burn cream;” Huron said to himself, “you’re about to drop into a lot of hot water.”

The AIU level seemed to be exactly in the state that Aubrey suggested it was: new.

Huron could tell that the area had originally been mostly archives. Many of the shelves from the original layout remained in long rows stretching from side to side. Shadow covered the entire room except for a single lit pathway down the center. Yellowish lamps hung a long distance from the high ceiling only adding to the gloom when their light wasn’t quite strong enough to penetrate to the corners and far walls.

The far side of the basement area gave Huron the impression of branching hallways. Several walls ahead looked as if they were quite new. The stone still had dust from the quarry on it and tools and masonry equipment was littered about the dimly lit basement area. It looked as if a crew had been slowly working from the furthest end of the basement—now hidden by the new renovations—towards the entryway.

Looking up, Huron realized that the room’s ceiling seemed so high because the basement area was built like a library auditorium. A second level of balconies ran around the edges that spread away from the center in wings. Rock dust from the recent mason work glittered, dimly visible on the railings and sides of the empty shelves.

The emptiness of the archives seemed almost pervasive, the skeletons of the shelves echoed back Huron’s footsteps even when he tried to move as silently as possible. Soon, though, he became aware of another sound: voices. The sound grew louder by the moment.

Nimble as a cat, Huron slipped out of the lit central path and stood up against the back of one of the vacant bookcases. The sound of voices and footsteps became louder until Huron could discern three different voices. He didn’t know what Detective Buckley might sound like so he couldn’t tell if his voice was among them.

“A stroke of genius them setting us up in the old archives,” said a voice with a faint Brooklyn accent. The footsteps paused a short distance away. “You think that we got all the files before they cleared them out?”

“Yes,” piped up another voice. This one had the distinct shrillness of a bird pukka. “They were near the back, last to be took up. If that danky had gotten the job done right we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

The word danky was a common insult meaning an Unseileigh sidhe. Huron pressed himself against the bookshelf a little harder, trying to raise himself so that he could hear the words better.

“We still haven’t gotten all of the files relating to the Merrows,” a third voice spoke. It was the soft croon of a Dun Sidariel accent, immediately recognizable to Huron. The voice conveyed a sense of noble authority.

“The Merrows is dead,” the pukka said.

“The Investigator who was trailing that operation may be dead now also but her reports are still available,” replied the Dun Sidariel sidhe, he did not sound pleased. “The ‘quizzes are not happy with how the operation is going. I suggest that you stop blaming others and get your jobs done.”

“Never can trust smugglers,” Brooklyn interjected. Huron could hear uncomfortable shuffling of feet. “Didya hear that an Investigator was onto Jay earlier? How could they even have found a connection between him and the Merrows? Isn’t that case closed?”

“Yes,” Dun Sidariel said. “It’s closed. It’s been closed. It would have stayed closed if it weren’t for that dank trying taking that shot without thinking it through. That operation should have been aced a month earlier when we had a grip on things going on. That op is tanked.”

“So, what happens to the dank?” the pukka asked, chirping softly afterwards.

“None of our concern,” Dun Sidariel said. “The Inquisitors say they have that handled.”

The bookshelf creaked softly behind Huron and he froze. The voices paused for a moment. Huron could almost sense the trio's eyes glancing out into the vast array of shelves and their heads swiveling around. He held his breath and held still.

The uncomfortable shuffling returned for just a moment, but then subsided.

"Never did like the 'quzzies much myself," the bird pukka said.

"Well, if we can get this op out of the way without further notice we won't have to worry about them anymore," Dun Sidariel said in a clipped tone. They were moving again, towards the exit. "You all have your orders. You both will report back to me once you have secured the docu—"

"Hey boss!" Brooklyn shouted abruptly, an arms length away from Huron.

Rough hands grabbed Kylemore and hauled him out of the shadow. Struggling, he struck the sidhe who had grabbed him hard in the chest. The man cried out and crashed into the nearby bookcase. The distraction gave Huron enough time to unlimber his sword.

He executed a perfect heel-to-toe *en garde* twirl and brought his sword between him and where he knew the other two were standing. Only to find himself staring directly into the barrel of a large, silver revolver.

Kylemore froze.

There were two more people than he had anticipated in the group. Aside from the two sidhe and the pukka he'd heard speaking earlier there were two other pukka, both foxes, wearing black berets and aiming flintlocks. Neither one wore a badge, Huron noticed.

"Captain Huron." The sidhe pointing the revolver at him was Mr. Dun Sidariel accent. Brilliant blue eyes set in a long sidhe face with flowing auburn locks tasseled in braided locks down his shoulders. A large, black tricorne cap with a green feather protruding from it topped off his head and his Dun Sidariel fashion sense.

Huron heard a flintlock being cocked from behind him. The bird pukka that he had struck down still struggled to stand up from beneath the shattered remains of shelf boards, so it was probably Brooklyn accent who had the second gun on him.

"George," Huron spat. The badge on Mr. Dun Sidariel accent's vest glimmered yellow in the feeble light but Kylemore could easily read "sergeant" on the banner.

Seoirse grimaced behind his silver revolver but did not reply. Deliberately mispronouncing a sidhe's name using a Mundane style was considered a high insult.

Out of the corner of his eye, Huron could see that the pukka wore a detective's badge. Soon another revolver was trained on him.

"Your sword, please," Seoirse said, taking the weapon from Huron and handing it to the bird pukka. The bird took the sword and threw it into the shadows between the shelves where it clattered in the shadows.

Anger seeped through Huron's senses. Defenseless and surrounded his thoughts went to stalling the men so that he could weave a *glamour* either to bring Investigators from above or perhaps create a distraction. Unfortunately, Huron was never much of a wizard so he couldn't do it quickly.

"How is it that you're involved in Bridie's murder?" Huron growled at the sergeant

Brooklyn snickered behind him and Huron could hear him shift his weight.

"Ah, yes," Seoirse said, rubbing his face with his free hand. "That. Well, your girlfriend, she was onto something that she shouldn't have been. Though, I had less to do with that than you think. The issue we had with *her* was over when the Merrows died."

"We should just waste him," the bird pukka said suddenly.

Sergeant Seoirse Buckley cast a hot glare at the pukka. "What and bring the entire Manhattan Yard down on our heads? I think not. Though, fortunately, those doors at the bottom of the stairwell. They're soundproofed. If I were to close them, things would be different."

Then Sergeant Buckley grinned wickedly. "Since I have an occasion that I must keep, I think I'll be doing just that."

"Unseileigh sympathizer," Huron growled. He wasn't even half-way through the *glamour* he was trying to weave. Fortunately, his insult garnered the desired effect.

Something struck Huron from behind. Light splashed through his vision and he nearly lost his footing.

"You stupid clod," Brooklyn snarled.

Seoirse Buckley simply shook his head and placed his revolver under Huron's chin. "We're not working with them. We're using them. The Unseileigh here are tools. Tools to help us protect the community from them. Don't you just love the irony?"

"Letting them into the city when it's your duty to protect the peace," Huron said under his breath. Only a minute more and he would have the weave. "That's enough proof for me that you're a sympathizer."

The sergeant only smiled grimly. "Protecting the peace, you put it. Perhaps from the underworld you too will see that there is more to protecting the peace than chasing the dark. That even in the ranks of the Investigators there are those who pose a greater threat than any Unseileigh.

"If it will let your soul rest any more soundly: we did not order Bridie's death. It was the Inquisition that saw to that and the treachery from within her own House. For what reasons I cannot say."

Huron only fixed the man's face in his vision, trying to memorize his features, every nuance of his skin, the smell and sensation of his presence. This *sidhe*, despite not being directly involved with Bridie's murder, Huron marked for death in his own mind.

"When you hear the door close behind me," Buckley said shortly. "Kill him. Shoot him in the chest, above his vest, that way you can say that he was trying to break in. The 'quizzers are looking for him in relation to something anyway. They'll believe you. I'll make sure of it."

"You're a suckling dank symp!" Huron spat at Seoirse as he stepped around him and walked away. Brooklyn bashed Kylemore in the back of the head again, pushing him forward and off balance. He regained his step and a flintlock barrel edged him forward.

Frantic now, Huron fought to keep his concentration as he walked as slowly as possible towards the far wall. His ears perked and keen for the sound of that door closing, he prepared. The weave was nearly complete as he moved his fingers subtly out of sight. He could feel the *glamour* begin to take shape. Even the soundproofing on the door wouldn't contain this.

The *thunk* of the door closing in the distance caught Huron before he was ready.

He grit his teeth as hands roughly turned him around and faced him at the toothy grin of Mr. Brooklyn, a hunched over ballybog with strangely white teeth.

"Now hold still and this won't hurt a bit," Brooklyn said with a snarling grin.

"Hey!" Huron said, putting one hand up and flashing back a grin of his own. "You forgot something."

"Nah," the ballybog said and then shouted: "Shoot him!"

The weave unraveled in Huron's hands as he threw the *glamour* into Brooklyn's face. In the same moment the loudest sound Huron had ever heard exploded through the room.

One of the thugs must have fired too; because Huron felt something strike him in the chest. Pain erupted from just below his neck and he felt himself being flung backwards. The wall stopped him and knocked the wind out of him, but he couldn't draw in a new breath.

Huron could feel himself sliding down the wall and he couldn't get his legs to respond. Something wet soaked down his chest and his arms tingled numbly. The world turned into a cacophony of the echoes of gunshots and shouts of surprise.

Then silence fell like a hammer on an anvil, punctuated by the soft thuds of something hitting the floor. Kylemore could feel his limp arms fall into his lap moments before he couldn't feel them anymore.

In a strange disconnected way Huron thought to himself that this wasn't how he imagined being shot would feel like.

Chapter 15

Misdirection

“Y*ou may stand, Investigator, your enemy has fallen.”*
“Perhaps you were struck harder than I thought. No matter. We still have unfinished business to attend, you and I.”

“I still need you. Do you remember what she said about Lis Boyne Calone? How the smell of the city burning hung in the air like a perfume of blood and ashes. Great soldiers deserve better than to be cut down in the dark.”

“You have brought me what I needed to know. If you still wish to fulfill your vendetta against me you can find me in memory. There we can finish this.”

“This one’s still alive!”

“There’s blood everywhere. How could anyone have survived this? Fan out, check the other areas. Move in pairs, the *glamourie* that wrought this damage still lingers in the air. Don’t get cocky.”

Sensation slowly returned to Huron like the sun creeping above the horizon of a vast, black ocean. It started with the feel of gentle hands upon him, the briefest flicker of light beyond his eyelids, the sounds of voices.

A pair of hands carefully brushed his hair away from his face and lightly shifted his face.

“Captain?” the voice nearby was surprisingly familiar. “It’s the captain who walked in not that long ago. Captain? Can you hear me?”

“Aubrey?” Huron croaked the first name that came to mind. His voice cracked and he sputtered when a sudden sharp pain made itself present in the center of his chest. It felt as if a spike had been rammed there by a great hand.

“You remember my name,” the girl chirped. “Sergeant! He’s conscious. We need a healer here now.”

Huron couldn’t get his eyes to open. They refused to obey his mind’s commands and remained closed. It was either that or he had them open and he couldn’t see anything. Another pair of hands came down and gripped him tightly, bearing him aloft. He could feel himself being moved. Urgent voices barked commands around him, but he couldn’t make out any of the words.

“How bad?” he tried to ask.

The hands replied by deftly running over his entire body. No voice replied. He could feel fingers near his face, then his throat, carefully searching for something. They moved down his neck and undid his shirt. There they paused for a long moment. Low spoken words exchanged somewhere in the darkness above him and he felt himself lifted into the air.

“...a lot of blood isn’t it?” another voice asked.

“Take him to the infirmary on the third floor,” another voice added, sharp and angry. The tone, the posture, the distinct command could not be mistaken: Captain Engel. “Post a guard there and let nobody pass for any reason until the healers have seen to him. Nobody is to know that he is in that room, understand?”

Huron faded from consciousness again before he heard the other’s assent. Nobody refused a request from Captain Engel.

A mysterious fog lifted out of the air near the wharf, glowing in the light of a gibbous moon. The dockworkers nearby decided it was a good time to take their union sanctioned break and stayed away from the water’s edge muttering superstitious phrases underneath their breaths. No ships were coming in, nothing needed to be unloaded; the crane and other equipment sat lifeless as the strange fog crept by.

Huddled together around a small TV and laughing with one another to ward off their fears the dockworkers did not see him as he walked past. The man kept near the edges of the wharf, where the dockers did not yet dare look. His dark cloak swaddled around him like the secrecy of his activities.

A short distance ahead, a small figure leaned casually against one of the buildings. Most of the garages were shut up against the night and large crates littered the dock, but he could clearly see that the person was alone. The soft glow cherry glow of a cigarette flickered for a moment before the figure exhaled a puff of smoke, a pair of eyes glittered beneath the cowl, watching him as he approached.

“Your fondness for the smoke will be your undoing one day,” he said.

The other didn’t smile, he could not tell but he was certain of it. He had discovered that she didn’t have much of a sense of humor.

“State your business,” she said as smoke poured from the cowl. It seemed to him like the entire area where her face should have been had become cigarette smoke. The small green cigarettes produced large hazy white clouds whenever they were lit. “I do not appreciate being summoned in this manner.”

“I’ll summon you whenever I like,” he growled. The woman was only Unseileigh, a creature of the darkness and beneath him in every way. He only felt the need to deal with her because he needed the services she provided. It was good to use the Unseileigh as tools of their own undoing. As long as they weren’t aware of their involvement.

“Do you want me to finish him?”

She was smart, this Unseileigh. To the point. Quick of mind. He didn’t know if that was a good thing, but it certainly saved him a lot of trouble. She anticipated his needs before he knew he had them. Also, she followed orders implicitly; a brilliant soldier and the perfect assassin.

“No,” he said quickly. He didn’t need her getting any ideas into her head. Nor did he want her to start to think that he wasn’t in control. “The death of the girl has changed a great deal of things. It has brought other elements that stand against my interests into the open. No, I have a different target for you.”

“Who then?”

“Someone that you’ve wanted to dispose for quite some time, my dear,” he said slowly. He knew that it was a dangerous move, giving this sort of an order. There were so many elements to keep track of, too many that could go awry, so much that could go wrong. Not that it mattered; she was disposable, after all. If she refused, he had other means to do the deed.

Waiting for his reply she took the last of her cigarette from her lips and flung the butt onto the wet ground. The cherry exploded into red-yellow sparks and sputtered out quickly. He could feel her eyes on him.

“The Lord Commissioner.”

Saffir nursed her sore wrist as she flipped through a large stack of files on the desk in front of her. Among the bumps and bruises she had sustained during the fight at the Black Oyster that and her ribs—where Huron had struck her to throw her out of the way of some well aimed gunfire—had not yet stopped hurting. A large black and blue welt had formed on the inside of the joint of her wrist and snaked up her arm nearly to her elbow. For the life of her, she couldn’t recall how exactly she managed such a bruise.

Picking a fight in the midst of a bar full of pukka was the last thing that Saffir had intended to do that day, but it looked as if things were going badly for Huron. He admonished her for quite some time afterwards—even before her father did—but really the punishment that her body and mind took during the brawl proved a far better punishment than any bruises to her pride.

Determined to right the wrong created by ruining Huron’s lead with the embenethol smuggling ring, Saffirwen decided to take a different route to determining buyers. One that didn’t involve armed smugglers and bars full of ruffians. The most grievous wound Saffir expected to face now would be an errant paper cut, or at worst, a burn from spilled tea.

Doing research through papers and requesting documents really wasn’t her forte. Saffir studied combat magic aggressively to avoid having to carry a weapon with her and found that she felt at home in the midst of that brawl despite the eminent danger to her life. Her father did his best to keep her assignments simple and safe, but once and a while Saffir had the chance to taste actual combat. It wasn’t until the brawl in the bar that she discovered that truly it was a taste to her liking.

The documents on the desk in front of her proved to be a different sort of battle altogether. Instead of fighting hand to hand she found herself fighting a headache. Still, just like in the heat of a battle, her honor was at stake here. She’d put Huron into a bad position and couldn’t just let him down.

There was one thing that Saffirwen understood intimately: a detective was only as safe as his knowledge made him. Her actions had snuffed out one line of detection for Huron; Saffir intended to give him a new one. He seemed to be well ahead of her on the scenes where Bridie had died and Hawthorne had been sighted, but not being in the heat of that mess, Saffir realized that there were more avenues to follow. She smiled. Huron was going to be very happy.

The concept of smuggling embenethol somewhat puzzled Saffir. The substance wasn’t precisely illegal. Many did frown upon the use of narcotics but they permeated everyday life for many of the upper class sidhe. Only, House Galadmohr prohibited the use of embenethol by its members, most of the other Sidhe Houses in New York didn’t care one way or another. To be smuggling a substance not very tightly controlled suggested two obvious possible motives: avoiding tax duties of some sort, or trying to use the supply lines of a House aligned against the substance.

To Saffir's surprise she had just stumbled upon and discovered a third: to hide the smuggling of something else.

The clue that set her on this line of study came from how Bridie had been assassinated and then someone had also tried to assassinate Huron. The connections between Bridie and Huron were immediately obvious to anyone who knew them. They were engaged to be married at once time, however, this is not what piqued Saffir's interest. It was how their Investigator assignments intertwined.

By tying Hawthorne's presence and the embenethol laced Emerald Silk Cut cigarette into the equation a whole different pattern emerged from the assignments the pair shared.

Huron spent many long months in Galway, Ireland investigating leads on smuggling operations out of the Underhill leading into the New World. Most of which were the usual innocuous stuff of Houses trying to secretly move resources from their holdings in the Underhill in large quantities; but some were terrifyingly scary. A rumor of Fomhóire artifacts taken from the Nightmare Lands in the Underhill being moved through Galway to the Kingdom of the New World. The person writing the report quickly dismissed the rumor as pure hysteria and speculation, but Huron obviously had taken it to heart. In one of the confidential letters back to the New World he noted that minor magical weapons were being smuggled through routes regularly used for artwork and that *iaranncraft* weapons had been uncovered. His reports warned most tersely that Galway was not the only route that these weapons could be taken into the New World.

Bridie's assignments during the same period were raids on possible smuggling operations. Saffir puzzled at the large number of Merrows nereids who were targeted by the raids that Bridie lead. Most of their routes lead from Ireland and France into New York City. The Merrows were a well known group of seafaring Faerie consisting mostly of nereids—who loved water and the oceans of the Underhill anyway—but often were extremely law abiding and would not involve themselves with the Unseileigh. What did not escape Saffirwen's thoughts was that Unseileigh nereids could not be distinguished from Merrows nereids on sight and could easily pose as members of that seafaring group.

One report in particular that caught Saffir's attention from Bridie had been posted a short time before Huron had arrived from Galway. Bridie and her partner, Jaelwyn, had closed in on what they truly believed had to be a shipment of those Fomhóire artifacts that Huron was so concerned about. Instead of terrifying weapons of lethality, Bridie and her partner stumbled on something almost just as sinister: a large cache of *iaranncraft* weapons. The two smugglers who had brought them in were found dead at the scene.

A Merrows nerid and sidhe. The sidhe killed by a dagger wielded by the nereid; the nereid killed by an expert marksman with an elfshot weapon. Bridie's report seemed worded strangely to Saffir, like she had a suspicion as to who had assassinated the nereid, but couldn't prove it and didn't want to say it. With a mind about it, Saffir examined the Forensics report from the scene and double-checked that no cigarettes were found at the scene. The elfshot that slew the nereid was Ballenworth Helwick shot; the same type that killed Bridie.

Saffirwen frowned.

"Why would Hawthorne want to kill some nobody smuggler Merrows?" she said softly to herself as the report's words swam in front of her eyes. Reading between the lines suggested to Saffir that Bridie felt mixed emotions about the marksman who slew the nereid. She did everything but thank them for making sure that she didn't walk into a lethal situation; but she finished by condemning them in a heated tone and left off with an obligatory flourish that lawbreakers never escape the Investigators.

Saffir rubbed her temples. Flesh and blood opponents were far more easily to disarm than a headache.

Presently, the phone rang.

Saffirwen jumped at the sound. Her cup of hot tea crashed from the table onto the floor and shattered. With a yelp she jumped up onto the chair to avoid the shards of the teacup and steaming tea as it splashed onto the floor.

The phone continued ringing unabated.

Glaring, she reached down and snatched it from the receiver.

“What do you want?” she snapped.

“Detective MacAvee?” spoke the voice on the other end, startled and cautious; it was Detective O’Rourke from Forensics. “Have I caught you at a bad time? I can call again.”

“Sorry...” Saffirwen sighed into the phone. “Sorry, detective, I’m having a bad day. Headache. No, it’s okay, go ahead.”

“The forensics team found another cigarette at the second scene,” he went on after a moment. “Yes, it’s from the same scene, and there’s some residuals suggesting that the one you and Huron gave me is from the exact same pack and that it was sitting in the same place—same type of dirt on it. Oh yes, and one other thing of interest, we found bee’s wax on the cigarette’s filter. A trace amount, but enough to sample.”

As Detective O’Rourke spoke, Saffir could feel the phone slipping from her fingers. Her palms were becoming sweaty and her breathing shallow. This news was too strange to be true; it changed too much, if nothing else it meant that Huron was right about too many things.

“One of my staff has determined that it’s Vale Anu wax,” he continued sounding very proud of that member of his staff.

“Are you absolutely certain, detective?” she asked carefully.

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Thank you detective,” Saffir said quickly. Her boots crunched the remnants of the teacup on the floor as she rushed around the desk and snatched up her coat. “I have to get this news to Captain Huron immediately. Thank you very much.”

Chapter 16

Conspiracy

Something creaked nearby. A door perhaps. With a sudden start, Huron was wide awake. The fog on his senses and memory blazed away as if touched by sunlight and he became fully alert. He could barely remember anything past the point where he was shot. Strange sensations returned to him in fleeting glimpses of a pair of boots moving between his attackers and the soft thuds, like the sounds of bodies striking the floor.

The room was pitch-black. Kylemore could tell from the smell of it that he was in an infirmary. Possibly still in the Manhattan Yard. The sharp, nose-tingling scent of healing unguents spiced the air along with the ever-present smell of cleaning fluids and fresh linens. Huron knew that if he could see there would be a number of cupboards all around and multiple beds for taking the injured. The floor would be immaculate and smooth and there would probably only be one door in or out.

During his short contemplation, Huron realized that he had heard no other sounds. No sounds of breathing, or movement, the room seemed empty. Deciding was a risk worth facing; he took account of his injuries, being careful to move as little as possible as not to make any noise. His hands quested along his sternum to discover his pillyweave vest had been removed and paused near his chest where a throbbing bruise answered the light pressure.

Breathing shallowly and with a sense of dread he led his search upwards. To his surprise, the bruise simply followed all the way up to the very base of his throat. There was no hole. He wasn't shot. He remembered distinctly where he felt himself struck. The pillyweave vest didn't protect his body that high up. Whatever it was it hit him like a ton of bricks and slammed him backwards, a bullet would have penetrated. He would be dead.

Confidence and resolve building slowly, Kylemore decided to test his muscles. He quickly found that his legs felt weak from the experience, as were his arms, but despite their previous incapacitation all of his limbs seemed to be fully under his control now. Adrenaline from awakening with a start began to warm his body and he could tell that he was completely intact. The injury he sustained in the battle had little lasting effect. Still, Huron lamented looking at himself in a mirror anytime soon.

The creak sounded again. This time Huron knew exactly what it was: the only door into the infirmary.

The door opened slowly with a practiced hand and a light spilled in from the hallway. The light was dim by the standards of most lighting but to Huron's currently ill-used eyes it barged in like a train down a tunnel. It took all of his willpower to simply close his eyes and not throw his hands up to block the glare. As soon as the light flooded in it subsided and the door slid closed again with a soft click.

The sound of gentle footfalls loped across the room and another light came on. This time a far more gentle light formed by several lanterns set about the room against the walls at ground level, designed to allow healers to move about the room with good light to see by without disturbing sleeping patients. With the new light Kylemore was more clearly able to see the individual who had entered the room: Captain Engel.

"Kylemore," she said with a low voice.

"Engel," he replied. He wasn't accustomed to her addressing him with his first name. He didn't even know hers so he couldn't use it, but it struck him as odd that she would have jumped to a first name basis after so many years of near outright rivalry. The tone in her voice, however, stopped him short of calling her on it. She sounded distracted, if not a little concerned.

"You are an amazing man, Captain Huron," she said as she strode over to his bedside with deliberate steps.

Now that she knew he was awake, Huron made no pretense of being asleep and went to sit up. Engel immediately held her hand out to bar him but he pushed it aside and sat up anyway. Mild annoyance criss-crossed her features but she said nothing. It took Huron a moment to realize he still wore most of his clothing. His pillyweave vest was gone, and his shirt was unbuttoned down to his sternum, but apparently the healer who had tended to him stopped there.

He started to button his shirt as Engel watched him. Her eyes glowed in the dim light of the lanterns.

"We thought you were dead," she said, noticing that he had nothing to say at the moment. "How do you feel?"

"Like I was hit by a subway tram."

"There was a lot of blood. The healers were amazed that none of it was yours," she went on. "You have a wicked bruise on your chest where something hit you—*hard*. Maybe your wards didn't completely stop the impact of a bullet. It doesn't matter. You managed to survive whatever killed all of the others in the room. There will be questions, though."

Huron regarded her for a moment. So was this why she sounded so distracted? Was Engel here to question him like he was a suspect? Those were Knight Investigators that died in that room.

"As strange as it may sound," Huron said. "They were trying to kill me. I hit them with a very large bang charm. I doubt it could have killed them."

"Well," Engel said hotly. "They're all dead." That sounded more like the Engel he knew. Irritated and flustered like a chicken roused from her roost. Huron grinned. "There's blood everywhere. Most of them were shot to death, I doubt with their own guns. There are footprints leading up out of the room... What were you doing here anyway?"

"Investigating Bridie's murder," Kylemore said flatly.

“What lead you here?”

“It was a hunch. I was right, too.”

“What did you discover?” Engel pressed.

Huron narrowed his eyes. He was feeling stronger already. He wondered how long he’d been lying in that bed. It couldn’t be that long.

“You know something,” he said. “What is it?”

Captain Engel folded her arms across her chest. She didn’t like being pushed. Kylemore was in no mood not to push her, either, if those Investigators he met down in the AIU level were any indication, Huron wasn’t sure he could even trust her.

“There’s been some developments—” she paused a moment to glance over her shoulder needlessly, like a person making sure they weren’t being overheard “—the Inquisition has gotten involved. We also have new evidence linking an Unseileigh Sluagh assassin so-called The Black Gaze to Bridie’s murder. Since the Lord Commissioner took you off the case—and you should be *off the case*, Captain—we have been able to trace his whereabouts and activities for some time after he arrived from Ireland.

“It seems that he himself initiated and sent other assassins after her. Needless to point out, she survived the previous attempts. We were able to tie his movements in with her cases and locations. He stalked her for some time.

“This isn’t the best of it, though,” she went on, “the Inquisition shows up on our doorstep looking for *you* not long after these discoveries are put together. They want everyone associated with Bridie round up and questioned because of her involvement with a Douglas Clenwyn.”

“Hawthorne,” Huron corrected her. “Douglas Hawthorne.”

“So you already know, why didn’t you report this?”

“I hadn’t completed investigating the man, furthermore, it wasn’t important to make note of.” Huron very quickly didn’t like the direction this was going. His mind reeled on the precipice of finally having the proof he needed to be certain of Bridie’s murderer, but something still seemed out of place. It didn’t matter, he felt the desperation of man searching for water in a vast desert, and prepared for a mirage.

“Ballistics and forensics have gotten in bed again on the new evidence located at the scenes you had them scour,” Engel said slowly. “They’ve discovered the same telltales and types on the bullets Clenwyn shot at you as killed Bridie. A near perfect match with the quickest test they have, I’m told.

“It would seem that The Black Gaze, who had been trying to kill Bridie for a great deal of time, and this Douglas Clenwyn—Hawthorne—are one and the same.”

Huron’s mouth went dry as she continued.

“When brute force failed him he decided to take a more insidious route and wooed Bridie. She had killed many assassins before him and so he took to her like a lover, drew her out, and when her guard was down slew her.

“This is our man, Kylemore,” Captain Engel’s voice became low and serious. “If you have any information to help us locate him, his whereabouts, anything that you didn’t report—and you didn’t report a lot—then please tell me. We can bring this man to justice. Stop protecting Bridie’s honor, I know you feel ashamed that she chose him over you, that you couldn’t protect her, but this is the way it went—”

A knock on the door caused Engel to snap out of her intense, drilling dialogue. She looked into Huron’s eyes for a long moment before turning away and walking to the door. The door opened before she reached it and a young detective poked his head in.

“Captain, I’m told to warn you,” he said quickly, “the Inquisitors are on their way here. They’ve discovered that Captain Huron is here.”

“We have to stall them until we can get Captain Huron moved to a different location,” Saffir heard Captain Engel say as soon as she entered the Manhattan Yard. The Captain stood in the midst of seven detectives, all eager to do her bidding. “I need people to station themselves at the doors. This place was built like a fortress, let’s use it like one. Bar them entry, if they resist step in their way, they have no jurisdiction here.”

All of New York’s Investigators had heard about the “incident” here by now. Not many knew what it was about, but as soon as Saffir heard it go over the radio a mere two hours earlier, she knew exactly what had transpired. What she didn’t know—what wasn’t broadcast—was that Huron had been injured. That much she immediately surmised from the tone of Engel’s voice.

“You and you to the back. You and you take the front. Sergeant I want you and Detective Mallory to cover the front, the desk is already your position. Grab anyone else you can.” Engel moved down the line of detectives giving orders like a commander of the line. “It won’t take them long to get a Commissioner to order you off but I need you to stand fast until that happens. Don’t disobey orders, but go out of your way to inconvenience them. Understand?”

The detectives all nodded. This was one of their own being hunted by the Inquisition. Nobody was going to stand for that, they didn’t even need to be ordered to inconvenience an Inquisitor; but the extra incentive would guarantee it would be completely over-the-top and extremely difficult to bypass.

As the Investigators moved to their respective posts, Saffir made her way towards Engel. The captain glanced up and noticed Saffir instantly.

“Detective MacAvee,” she said with a sharp tone. “Since I have to move Captain Huron to a new location before the Inquisitors get here you can help me. You were his partner for a short time. Perhaps you can help me convince him to actually come along and not do anything rash.”

Captain Engel turned away and immediately began to ascend the stairs behind her. She wasn’t used to people not listening to her or questioning her orders. She simply assumed that Saffir would follow in an instant without even checking to see that it was done.

“Good,” Saffir said, once she caught up to the Captain on the second flight of stairs. “I need to see Captain Huron immediately. I have news for him that cannot wait—.”

“Inquisitors,” Engel growled under her breath with a curse. She spoke over Saffir as if she hadn’t heard her at all. “It’s just like them to ruin my day by showing up. They don’t even have any jurisdiction here but the Lord Commissioner sees fit to give them free reign...and if he had only listened to me about assigning MacFenna and Huron to those smuggling cases we could have had so much more luck with them—”

“*What!?*” Saffir yelled abruptly.

At the top of the stairs, Engel suddenly stopped in the midst of her tirade and glanced back at Saffir, without missing a step she continued down the hall, a puzzled look crossing her face.

“Oh,” Engel said finally. “Right. I apologize, Detective, I am out of line addressing your father so.”

Saffirwen shook her head. “No, that’s not it,” she said. “You say that my father assigned both Huron and MacFenna to smuggling cases? Weren’t they on opposite sides of the world? I mean, he set both their assignments?”

“Yes,” Engel said breathlessly. “Those assignments were linked. Because of their previous relationship, and their records, they received those postings...” She slowed her pace and waved ahead, saying, “He’s in the infirmary up ahead.”

“That cannot be good,” Saffir said, barely noticing Engel’s motions as she strode ahead of her towards the destination. “If my father posted both of them, that’s another link, another person he could be—”

“Detective MacAvee,” Engel said with sudden urgency. “You said you had to tell Captain Huron something, he may not be conscious, what was it?”

“Oh,” Saffir said, reaching for the infirmary door. It began to swing open as she pushed her way in. “The person who shot Detective MacFenna—”

When the infirmary door opened light spilled across the dark room and Saffir’s shadow rose like a towering monolith to drape across an unmade but empty bed. Huron was gone.

“—was a woman,” she finished in surprise as her eyes darted around the room. Seeing the open window on the other side of the room, the drapes billowing in the wind and feeling the chill of the air, Saffir turned back to Engel. “You said—”

However, Captain Engel too, was gone.

Chapter 17

In Memory

A pair of large ravens sat languidly in a nearly leafless tree watching Hawthorne as he slowly sharpened his knife on a gravestone. They had been watching him for quite some time with their unblinking black eyes and severe expressions. The predawn of the day had lit the graveyard with tendrils of golden yellow light and slowly melted into the harshness of a cold, overcast noon. The birds seemed content to listen to the grim rhythm of Hawthorne's meditation.

The purpose of the ritual had been lost into antiquity by the Unseileigh and followed by very few Troops. The Sluagh among them. Though a Sluagh no more by his own oath, Hawthorne still found it comforting to fall back on his own traditions when doubt clouded his path.

Today was a dying day.

Hawthorne once again wore a *cidhis*, the death mask. He had fashioned it from the mask he wore to the last masquerade that he and Bridie had attended alive. The very same night of her death. The raven's feather mask peaked fluidly at his brow with the feathers hardened and pulled around his head such that it would not come free during the violence of combat. The mask completed with a black scarf tied with metal links to cover his mouth and chin. A mask that covered the entire face; the mask of a Sluagh prepared to take life.

Today was a killing day.

As the knife scraped quietly against the gravestone, Hawthorne recalled the times before he had practiced these same motions. Every time one of the Sluagh was killed in battle every member of the troop would take a stone from the grave and sharpen their knives. The other Troops of the Unseileigh spoke of the sound as bone chilling; the sound of metal scraping on stone coming from every direction at once in a nearly perfect surf-crashing rhythm. Even the bravest and most

bloodthirsty Unseileigh would not cross a Sluagh troop when vengeance for one of their own set behind their eyes.

The only time a Sluagh practiced this ritual alone was when he expected to die. The communal scraping paired down to the sound of one knife became a lonely funeral dirge. Hawthorne had done this many times before. Once for every duel he had fought to rise through the ranks of the Sluagh finally to attain the rank of Master of Assassins.

Now, once again, Hawthorne returned to the traditions of his people. The stage was set.

Since leaving his homeland he had traded one prey for another more than once. The last trade coming with the death of his beloved. Though it was impossible to feel hurt for something he couldn't control, Hawthorne wished he could have traded places with her in that moment. Somehow the fantasy of her hunting his killer suited him more than the current reversed situation.

Hawthorne had all of the information he needed to put the person who murdered Bridie to task. The hunt was over. The Investigator had done admirably in his own right, even though Bridie had shirked him for Hawthorne, it was difficult not to admire the man. The blonde sidhe, Huron, Bridie's ex-lover took to the duty of hunting her murder with the same grim determination that Hawthorne himself felt in his own soul.

The score to settle between them would decide who would finally capture and kill the culprit.

The Investigator had been invaluable in giving Hawthorne the leads and associations necessary to track down the one responsible, and now that he had done most of it, it was endgame. If he were to die today he could die knowing that Bridie herself would be avenged and he would not have to live with the agony of losing her as did Hawthorne.

However, if through some stroke of *wyrd* or strange luck, it was Hawthorne himself who was struck down, his pocket held the insurance that still the one who had slain Bridie would still burn. The Investigator was not a stupid man, Hawthorne doubted that Bridie would have suffered him her lover if he was. He would find the evidence that Hawthorne carried, tie it together with what he knew and end it.

Now all that mattered was giving the Investigator his chance to redeem his vendetta.

The Investigator had a perfectly acceptable reason to hate Hawthorne. Though, Hawthorne understood from what he knew of the Seileigh that the trivialities of romance and passion ran rampant in their lives. Duels over lost love weren't as common as the legends told, but Hawthorne had a feeling that they had their places even in modern Seileigh society.

Out of respect for him, Hawthorne prepared this duel; gave him the chances to complete his side of locating Bridie's murder and to escape possible death; and now that it was done waited in meditative anticipation for his rival to arrive at this appointed place. The clue that he had left for the Investigator to follow would not be missed.

So Hawthorne waited—in memory—until he could hear the sound of approaching footsteps. The crunch of leaves and graveyard gravel underfoot echoed through the gravestones; the footfalls of a determined man. Hawthorne had heard the sound of footfalls such as those before: it was the sound of a man walking with murder in his stride.

Oblivious drivers in cars sped by as Huron turned away from the black roadway and set up the side of the hill towards the graveyard. The dark clouds that brooded high in the sky had gathered during his trek from the Manhattan Yard and echoed the sentiment of his own heart. The streets of the usually bustling city seemed vacant to him. The stares of those he passed glanced off of his back like rain off of a stone face.

The last of his clothing and armor had been placed beneath the only window at the far side of the infirmary. His sword, hat, and white trench coat were laid out as if expecting to be grabbed

and donned in a hurry. Huron did just that when he slipped out of bed in Engel's absence and slipped through the window without listening to see what she was doing about the Inquisitors.

The Black Gaze, indeed. Huron wished that he had slain the man when he had met him first in the hallway outside of Bridie's quarters. All of this could have been avoided. Behind him soft thunder echoed his thoughts as the wet sidewalk slapped beneath his boots. The smell of oil and human occupation lingered in the air like an evil fog. It broke before him like water before the prow of a ship.

A raven on a nearby leafless tree squalled in anger down at Huron as he passed too close. The bird's eyes flashed fiercely in the dimming light and he came to a rolling stop.

"Perhaps you too know this place," Huron called up to the raven. "It seems strange that they would build a monument to a memory of the Underhill here in the middle of the Mundane Lands."

The sound of metal against metal resounded as Huron drew his sword. The unique sound of a *sidhbesteele* blade rang out from the obsidian stone monoliths all around that did not grace bodies in the ground, but a memory of a city: Lis Boyne Calone.

Six of the monoliths paired together with a long capstone that connected both together, leaving the seventh, and final, standing stone alone and slightly taller than the rest to face north. The graveyard possibly never saw grass so green as grew within the circle of obsidian standing stones erected during the first colonization of New York by Faerie populations along with the majority of Irish migration to the New World. The names of the heroes and soldiers who fought—and many who died—graced the stones. Bridie's name would be etched somewhere on one of the seven monoliths.

The city had been struck by the Unseileigh in a surge of violence that would never be forgotten by history. Lis Boyne Calone no longer existed but for a forgotten smudge on old maps and the memories of the people evacuated before the Unseileigh advance swallowed the city whole.

Huron stood in front of the seventh monolith. Unlike the other six it didn't hold the names of those heroes and soldiers, but instead a ballad written by a *sidhe* poet who had seen the destruction at Lis Boyne Calone. In glittering silver and opalescent shifting colors the title stuck out above all: "A Perfume of Blood and Ashes."

A soft sound brought clarity to Huron's thoughts. A metallic double-click that echoed from the stones nearby. The sound brought back the dim recollections and memories that brought him to this place immediately after his short convalesce. It was the sound of a flintlock pistol being reset. The same sound Huron heard after he had been struck down.

"I know that you are here, Douglas Hawthorne," Huron growled. "The presence of an Unseileigh on this hallowed ground is an insult unspeakable. Especially one of the Sluagh, though why anyone would call themselves The Black Gaze I wouldn't guess."

Only the sound of cars driving by in the distance and the angry flutter of a raven answered Huron. Still, he waited in silence. He could almost feel the presence of the other man, watching him. Knowing that Hawthorne used guns Huron had taken the liberty to prepare his vest with wards that would prove proof to even the armor piercing type that slew Bridie.

"My name is Dougal," Hawthorne's voice cut through the silence like a knife. "Not Dougal-less. And perhaps, yes, it is time that we bring all insults to an end."

With those words the Sluagh assassin stepped out between two of the obelisks. He seemed to slide away from the black of the stone with the grace of a hunting panther, his black duster fluttering behind him in the building wind like a regal cape. Huron watched as the assassin turned towards him, the only color visible on his body came from the cascading orange tresses of his hair and the silver gleam of his sword—of his face, only his eyes were visible and they looked as cold and severe as cut bits of coal.

Chapter 18

Judgement

Lightning sizzled through the clouds behind the Seileigh and Unseileigh as they paused in each other's glares. The ravens had stopped calling. The wind died down with like the hush of an audience prepared to watch a performance. A chill ran through Huron like none he had ever felt before, despite the desolate location he felt as if every eye in the city watching him in that moment. His hand tensed on the hilt of his sword.

Hawthorne added no more commentary to last words and stood like a statue, a rock into which Huron stared. The man seemed frozen in time. Even the wind refused to touch his light duster or the blades of grass at his feet. For a moment of silence it seemed that he and everything else was encapsulated in serenity.

Like the stroke of a violin bow serenity shattered and the performance began. Hawthorne threw himself hard to the left, feinting high but bringing his weapon extremely low, aiming a slash at Huron's Achilles tendon.

In his own world, Huron could feel the blow coming; the whistle of Hawthorne's blade was just another instrument in Huron's mental orchestra. He stepped out of the way and brought his blade in behind Hawthorne's. Steel clashed with steel like cymbals as Huron tried to use the momentum of the Slauch's weapon to throw him off balance, but his opponent was ready and swept himself out of Huron's reach.

Once again the pair faced each other across the grass. Thunder rumbled in the distance with an angry grumble. The sky wanted blood, as did Huron. His own desire to kill this man—the man who had taken everything from him—warred with his doubts and duties. Keeping his blade high,

Huron stepped forward with a threatening poke; Hawthorne retreated, his eyes betrayed no turmoil, no uncertainty.

“Why did you save me from those rogue Investigators?” Huron asked. He kept his tone casual, as if he were sitting across from Hawthorne on a subway car and not across several feet of lethal steel.

Hawthorne’s masked face betrayed no emotion. “I cannot fight the dead.”

The pair circled slowly, one moving, then the other. Forcing one another to slide carefully across the grass and changing their footing. Just as Huron attempted to take Hawthorne’s measure with his words now he could tell the Unseileigh was taking his measure with different words—the words of reflexes, muscles, and the flash of the blade. It was a conversation that Huron realized he may not win if he couldn’t manage to be more clever than Hawthorne.

“Why is it that you want to fight me?” Huron said. He picked his words carefully, like a conductor choosing which instrument to solo during a concert. The ugly crackle of thunder once again entered its growling vote of no confidence in the discussion.

Something in Hawthorne’s stance seemed to relax for a moment as if considering Huron’s words. Huron knew that in the scheme of things it was his turn to make an offensive gesture, Hawthorne had been waiting for a reply in steel and obviously wasn’t expecting one in words.

“Is that the way you Seileigh duel?” Hawthorne asked, clearly agitated. “Do you talk each other to death? No wonder we cut you down so utterly when we come through your ranks.”

“Just answer the question,” Huron pressed. The war was subsiding. Duty was winning. “You didn’t kill Bridie. Although, I do know that you were sent here to murder her. It could not have been you. Unless the Sluagh are the most lunatic assassins ever, nothing else makes any sense.”

“I was sent to kill her, why does it matter, Investigator?” Hawthorne said and pressed his foot once more against the grass. His stance returned to the stone-cold rigidity he held before. “I called you here to finish this, not prattle about—”

Huron flicked his blade up in a whisking motion and stepped to the side. “You didn’t call me here, Hawthorne.” The rain was beginning to fall. Large, fat drops slammed into the ground, striking quickly; striking hard. “I came of my own decision. I came because you could not possibly be worthy of Bridie’s love. The dim-witted garbage you’re trying to shovel me now is proof of it.”

Without a word, Hawthorne launched himself at Huron; his blade flashing low. Huron caught the tip of the Slauch’s blade to keep it from striking his body and supinated his hand. Dancing away from the attack, Huron immediately tried to turn it in his favor, only to find Hawthorne’s fist waiting. The sound of a thousand drums exploded in Huron’s head.

The wet smack of striking one of the obelisks dimly registered in Huron’s mind as he felt the cold stone against his face. Instinct driven he recoiled to the right with all of his strength. A spray of tiny white sparks dazzled through his peripheral vision as Hawthorne’s rapier stroke struck the stone dead on where Huron lay a moment before. The sword’s strike resounded like a tuning fork.

Finally finished gathering the strength for the sound *glamour* he had been weaving since the beginning of the duel, Huron rounded on Hawthorne. It had worked once before against the rogue Investigators in the basement of the Manhattan Yard and this time Huron had used every sound of their fight to add to the symphony of the magic. As he turned he cast his hand out giving release to the tight coiled spring of magical devastation.

A sharp pain spiked in Huron’s leg as he spun. Hawthorne’s rapier had found an opening and struck him in the calf. The sound charm detonated between the duelists as Huron cried out in surprise and slid down the smooth stone of the obelisk.

A moment froze in time. Hawthorne’s coal grey eyes fixed on him. New York City’s towering buildings rising behind him, storm clouds boiling up with fury and lightning, and then—deafening silence.

The grass at Hawthorne's feet cratered like a green pool of water intersected by a falling boulder. A cacophony of discordant sound blinded Huron and he threw his sword arm up to cover his eyes as he watched Hawthorne thrown out of the circle of stones by the force of the spell. The sound ricocheted between the stones like a great, endlessly tolling bell and finally dissipated after what seemed an eternity of sound.

When it was over, Huron glanced up into the wind and rain. One of the obelisks had been felled. It teetered at an odd angle and had landed on several other gravestones. The obelisk was made of ebony marble from an Underhill quarry and of very high quality. It showed no damage for being uprooted and toppled; the gravestones that it landed on, however were not so well crafted. Broken splinters of white stone where the grave markers had been rendered into gravel splashed out beneath the black plank.

Huron's ears rang. His leg stung and barely supported him as he used it to rise. Through the violence of the onrushing storm he could see Hawthorne's dark shape rising up among the graveyard stones and once again move towards him. The assassin also seemed to be injured; he moved haltingly but the lethal grace had not left his carriage.

Shedding his light colored trench coat, Huron slipped behind one of the obelisks and waited.

"You broke the monument that you were so fond of, Investigator," Hawthorne called over the rain. "I should have guessed you had another one of those spells up your sleeve. It worked well for you before."

"Why are you still here, Hawthorne?" Huron shouted back. As he shouted he pooled his resources and called upon his *glamour* to cloak him in the rain. The cascading rain flooded down around him and camouflaged him from easy detection, causing him to look like a sheet of downpour when he dodged between obelisks to remain out of Hawthorne's notice.

"The time for talking ended when you wouldn't listen to me outside of the mansion house," Hawthorne replied. Huron could feel him searching the gravestones.

"Bridie is dead." Huron's voice nearly cracked as he said the words; the pain of her loss still too close to his heart. "You were sent here to kill her. That alone should be more than enough for me to hate you. I know that you did not kill her. Why are you still here?"

There was no reply.

"If you broke your pact with your people to be with her; it is no longer broken now!" Huron continued. "She is dead. Your assignment is complete. You are still here.

"I examined the crime scene where she died, Hawthorne. I saw the footprints. It seemed almost like a dance. It didn't make sense until I met you outside of the mansion. That bullet was meant for you. It struck her instead. She has a bruise on her stomach where the hilt of your sword struck her when you grabbed her and spun her around to protect her from the gunfire. You put yourself in the path of the bullets."

Hawthorne had stopped moving. He froze like a statue in the deluge.

Seeing his advantage, Huron pressed on and slipped once again between gravestones like a wisp of rain in the wind. "You think that you have the right person who ordered her killed? You don't. It's not related to the smuggling cases. Not directly at least. You have been working under the premise that they were aiming at her!"

"What do you know, Investigator?" asked with a casual tone. Casual enough for a man raising his voice to be heard over the rain while standing in the midst of a graveyard.

"I know that you've been using me to help you locate the people who killed Bridie," Huron said. "I know that you probably feel the same desire for vengeance that I do. I know that you probably blame yourself for her death—I sure do."

“You fight well, for a Seileigh, Investigator,” Hawthorne said. Huron could feel the smile in his tone. “If you die today, I promise you that I will avenge Bridie’s death in your stead. Tell me what you know.”

In that moment, Huron slipped from beneath the cover of his camouflage *glamour* and lunged for Hawthorne. His rapier extended, he charged between the rows of gravestones. Seeing the onrushing blade, Hawthorne’s parry swept his sword aside and the riposte curled around Huron’s arm, aiming with the flat of his blade, trying to lame the attacking arm. However, Huron was too quick for that and dropped his blade over Hawthorne’s in a swift wrist-gesture forcing both blades down.

The ends of the swords struck a gravestone to the side and the tip of Huron’s rapier ignited with a brilliant light. Sweeping his arm in a wide attack, Huron forced Hawthorne back a lurching step. The Sluagh’s sword came up an instant later to parry the sweep, but it wasn’t aimed for him. The blades halted each other wide and Huron switched hands, weaving his blade to the left and stepping to the right. Hawthorne followed the blade, trying to cover his eyes from the light.

Twisting against the trust of Huron’s blade, Hawthorne tried to turn the sword away, but Huron was already gone. He reached out and grabbed the front of the assassin’s shirt with one hand and struck out viciously with his foot. His boot struck Hawthorne’s hand and sword with a crippling blow that left even Huron’s leg feeling numb. The Sluagh’s weapon sprang free of his grip, twirled end over end, and embedded itself in the back of one of the black standing stones.

His enemy defenseless, stunned, and in his grip, Huron thrust his sword into Hawthorne’s vest. The Sluagh screamed in surprise and pain as he fell to his knees and crashed into a gravestone.

Huron looked down at Hawthorne. The assassin labored to breathe but he made no move to attempt to stand up. His mask simply reflected the light from the tip of Huron’s sword.

With a careful motion, Hawthorne reached up and removed his mask, revealing his sweat soaked face. His orange hair stuck to his skull from the damp and rain.

“Bridie slew one of the Sluagh outside of Lis Mabonle,” Hawthorne said grimly, his eyes never leaving Huron’s face. “She says that when the woman died she removed her mask and cursed her. I would tell you now that when that Sluagh died it was not with a curse on her lips.

“You have beaten one of the Sluagh with a blade in your hands, Investigator. You have my blessing. May your blade sing true and never allow harm to touch you.”

Chapter 19

Unmasked

A springtime storm had risen up outside and it rattled against the windows of the mansion like an angry giant trying to gain entrance. Captain Huron had gone missing somewhere outside in the violence of the storm. The Inquisitors were at large and amendable to their own agendas. Captain Engel seemed nowhere to be found. Weary with distress, Detective Saffirwen MacAvee stalked down the hallway.

Through sheer dint of her own authority as the daughter of the Lord Commissioner she had managed to double the guard around the mansion. He had been busy all morning preparing for this courtly ball—just another glittery tithing to the pomp and circumstance of the nobles in a long procession of boring rituals. He ignored her every attempt to get his attention. He never responded to the radios. He was never where she expected him to be when she went to find him.

Secretaries, advisors, captains and even other detectives simply gave her shrugs when she told them she sought her own father. He was in the house but she couldn't get within arms reach of him. Her own father.

Saffir paused next to an overly elaborate window with gold filigree etched into the panes depicting a forest scene. The gold lace seemed invisible except when the sparkle of lightning touched it, bringing the scene out in a brilliant gold light like sunlight casting between mountain peaks.

She couldn't even be certain he would be endangered here. Saffir didn't doubt the ability of the other Investigators and the Galadmohr guard, however, she recalled the people killed at the other mansion and how one of them—the head clerk—had been dispatched even with several squads of Investigators on the prowl.

“Oh, there you are, Saffirwen,” a voice said nearby. She turned to see a young sidhe woman trotting toward her. Saffir recognized the woman as the under secretary to one of the House Galadmohr nobles, but she couldn’t recall the name of the noble, nor the name of the woman. “You are wearing your Investigator’s uniform? To this sort of event? Your father never mentioned your presence.”

“I’m part of the guard tonight,” Saffir replied curtly. She tried her best not to put in that she was on lookout for an assassin and didn’t want to be disturbed.

The sidhe woman completely missed Saffir’s undertone and spent a moment to pin some of her blonde hair behind a pointed ear. “Oh, I see. In that case, so that you know, your father will be speaking within a few minutes. If you want to stand and watch him I can get you a place in one of the balconies or on the floor of the ballroom.”

“The floor will be fine,” Saffir said quickly. She wanted this woman out of her hair as quickly as possible. The promise of being in the room when her father would be most vulnerable, however, she could not miss.

“Just follow to the servants’ entrance on the east side of the ballroom,” the woman explained. “You can easily get in there without disturbing anyone.” She stressed the word disturb carefully and took Saffir by the arm pointing her in the direction she needed to go.

Obedient, Saffir padded away from the woman in that direction. She walked a scant ten paces before she glanced back. The woman had gone off in some other direction, probably to accost some other poor soul trying to make sure that the proceedings went exactly as planned. Saffir hoped to her soul that indeed the proceedings went without any unexpected interruptions.

The vastness of the ballroom expanded around her when Saffir pushed the servants’ entrance door open. It was set into the wall next to one of the ivory columns along the wall and blended seamlessly with a cascade of carved white ivy that flooded up and down the sides of the column. She stood in a large black square that was part of the black and white checkerboard pattern of the entire ballroom floor. Parts of the pattern had been altered slightly—probably via a *glamour*—to accommodate a vast array of tables.

The floor tiles had been given a bluish tint and the tables were green with white chairs set up against them. The entire ballroom floor seemed to take on the illusion that it was a lily-pad filled pond. Bright lily flowers acting as lights sprouted from the centers of the multitude of tables and the lights above were dimmed to allow spotlights to shine down on the stage area in the north of the ballroom where the band would usually be placed. Instead, a long table with a brownish tint and the hint of leaves on it had been set up for the guests of honor to sit at. Saffir’s father sat among them.

Tiny motes of light in the empty spaces between the lily-pad tables flickered like fireflies. Saffir suspected that the nobles who commissioned this audience and dance had been beside themselves with pleasure to have somehow convinced a community of sprites or pixies to turn the role of fireflies. A will-o-the-wisp floated past casting a spectrum of gossamer colors over Saffir’s stark uniform as she peered into the dark and tried to pick out a safe path between the tables and chairs.

Illusory cattails and water reeds rustled near her feet as she skirted the sides of the ballroom. There were several clear paths that lead through the center of the room, but Saffir decided to play it safe and kept to the outskirts. A few of the servants had already given her dark looks when she moved to set foot on the “water” area of the floor where the tables were set.

Saffir stopped moving along the wall when she could clearly see the entire panorama of the ballroom. With the banister stairways and the levels of terraces between and above them fully in view, she took a careful account of all the balconies in the balustrade. They counted seven in total with the intricate bridgework and back rooms that were likely hidden from her view. Most of the balcony seats had people in them. Some did not.

The sound of her father's voice broke her scrutiny.

"I would like to welcome everyone to this ball in honor of Her Majesty the Elven Queene of Meath held by the esteemed House Galadmohr in Her service." A gentle chime of metal on glass followed his first word to garner the attention of all assembled. "I am the Lord Commissioner of New York and having been asked to be the Master of Ceremonies I officially—"

As her father spoke, Saffir's keen eyes spotted a shadow moving up in the balustrade in one of the empty balconies. To the extreme left of the ballroom on the west side, in the soft blue shadowy glow from the "water" on the ballroom floor something was moving, just slightly.

Suddenly, there was no sound to the world; the intensity of Saffir's gaze excluded everything but her target. Shadows could be anything. A cloak left behind by a servant. A tapestry or curtain unloosed by a careless tie. Every instinct gave Saffir the gut warning that this shadow could be none of these things—she had felt this sensation once before: right before a pukka almost shot Captain Huron.

Revelation came in a flash. The momentary flicker of metal or perhaps a pair of eyes. It didn't matter to Saffir; she was already in full charge by the time the shadow stood and took aim. With a shout she grabbed the shoulder of a startled noble and planted her foot on the table he sat at and launched herself into the air.

"Father, get down!"

With a twist of her body she spun herself in a pirouette and flung her free hand out towards the shadowy balcony. Time seemed to inch forward as she felt herself falling through the air. Startled and angry faces rose all around her, dark expressions cast from every direction as she sailed—almost comically—across the head table. The shield spell ignited from her fingertips and spread like a silvery haze between her and the head table...

Concussive shots rang out from the balcony. Lethal elfshot projectiles ricocheted from the shield and blasted fine holes in the ceiling. Pandemonium broke out. Shouts went up all around, people were standing, nobles of all races jumped up from their chairs in surprise—everyone was shouting. The room threatened to turn to riot.

Saffir crashed down into the head table and bowled over her father along with the woman sitting to his right, the Chief Commissioner of the Queens Yard, Saffir's direct superior. Her father shouted something at her, but Saffir couldn't hear him talking. She extracted herself from them with a rolling motion, crashed back over the table, and stood up.

Extending her hand again, Saffir unleashed a *levinbolt* into the balcony where the attack originated. Brilliant ribbons of blue-gold electricity erased all vision for a moment as the bolt slammed into the balustrade and snaked across the wall. Bits of the ivory structure exploded into powder and tapestries on the wall beyond scorched. The shadow with the gun was already on the run. Saffir harassed the retreating figure with two more lances of lightning as it darted across one of the slender bridges.

Pandemonium was in full swing in the ballroom when Saffir lost sight of her target and regained her senses. She panted from the excruciating pain and exhaustion from channeling so much *glamour* to produce such an assault. The floor had almost been cleared of people. Chairs lay upended, several tables were overturned in the panic, Investigators had flooded into the floor and formed a protective circle around the remaining nobles at the front of the ballroom. To her left and right detectives and house guards held shields over Saffir to protect her front and flanks from attacks of reprisal.

Tears dripped down Saffir's cheeks as she tried to stand. Combat magic may have been one of her talents but she had never attempted such a spectacular attack before. Her arms and legs burned with the crushing power that she had channeled into her replies. The same adrenaline and anger that had required such a devastating response to the attack bolstered her up.

“I think we have them on the run,” Saffir said quickly, “they’ll be on the second floor still. Everyone spread out; we need to make a search—”

Her voice suddenly halted when a heavy hand pressed down on her shoulder. Saffir glanced over into her father’s eyes.

“Saffirwen how did you...” he started to say, then he stopped himself. “No, never mind, we can talk later. Get going. You have a job to do.”

“Yes sir!” Saffir tore her eyes from his gaze and pushed her way through the Investigators in front of her. “I need you all to split into five forces, two up those stairways; the other two into the hallways and up those stairways, the rest of you come with me!”

She didn’t know if she really outranked anyone at the proceeding but nobody was arguing with her assessment. As Saffir pushed her way past the last few stragglers who were exiting the room she glanced at the Investigators and guards who followed her. Most of them were young cadets. Suddenly she was reminded of how she must have looked to Captain Huron.

She hoped he was doing alright, wherever he had disappeared to.

Huron understood the network of doorways that weaved through the Underhill and the New York Yards better than most. That knowledge gave him the advantage of speed and time when the call came out over the radios that there had been an assassination attempt against the Lord Commissioner. The basement of the Galadmohr mansion lay only five minutes and three doors away from the graveyard. Huron made it in just less than three minutes.

The first voice Huron heard over the radio when he passed through the final door was Saffir. The Lord Commissioner and Knight Commissioner Olwen had been injured during the attack and both had been issued forth out of the mansion but the Investigators on scene had managed to turn the mansion into a prison fortress: every exit, every foreseeable escape route, every door into the Underhill had been covered or sealed.

A pair of cadets had turned to block Huron’s exit from the doorway but when they both noticed his badge—and subsequently his rank—they stepped out of his way and let him pass without word. He ignored their bows and waved dismissively at them as he rushed headlong past them towards the stairs.

From what Hawthorne had told Huron about Sergeant Buckley’s companions at the end of their duel he understood all too well that Saffir had no clue what she was up against.

The Galadmohr mansion was a labyrinth of corridors and rooms that seemed to stretch on for an eternity. The entire first floor and outside of the mansion were secured by Investigators and House Guard, nothing was getting through them. The intruder wasn’t going to escape unless he could fly. Saffir feared just that.

Rage still boiled her blood as she directed the six detectives who had accompanied her up to the third floor to start securing rooms.

In her haste, Saffir did not request a partner for herself from the group; instead she picked a room and moved in. The storm outside cried its fury against the far window and crackles of lighting cast strange, dancing shadows across the floor. Several small tables with embellished pottery graced the center of the room and tapestries with similar markings flew along each of the walls. Not a thing living moved.

Without further examination, she moved through the next door while listening to the sounds of the other Investigators moving through the rooms adjacent.

It opened up into a long, thin hallway. The width of the hallway seemed strangely incongruous with the room she had just exited. Flashes of light through the doorless openings along the length of the hallway from both sides gave the indication that the hallway must have swung out

through one of the thin upper-wings of the mansion. It would lead a distance and then exit into one of the parapet towers that edged the estate.

A shape moved in the darkness deep in the hallway stumbling through a flash of lightning.

“Freeze, Investigator!” Saffir hollered and prepared a *levinbolt*. The shadow froze. “Step out into the light where I can see you.”

A tall sidhe woman with long blonde hair and wearing glasses walked slowly from the shadows, her delicate hands lifted up framing her face as she moved. Saffir recognized her immediately. It was Gwen from the clerk’s offices. She wore a stately white ball gown with gauzy sleeves and full white gloves. She was probably at the gathering downstairs. Her face glistened with sweat as she looked at Saffir inquisitively.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. Her spectacles glittered in the light as another stroke of lightning flashed nearby and thunder rattled the windows. “I had left some things up here and after all that commotion figured that I should get them before...they are very valuable.”

“It’s not safe up here,” Saffir said quickly. “Don’t move. The assassin is on the loose up here. You could get caught in the cross-fire.” She motioned for Gwen to approach.

The girl pulled up her skirts and walked down the hallway. Saffir noticed that the hems of her dress were darker than the rest of her outfit as if they had gotten wet. Her hair too seemed darker than it should have been in places.

A glint of metal from the shadows far behind Gwen caught Saffir’s eye and she held her hand up suddenly. Gwen stopped cold where she was standing. Saffir waved her to move against the wall. Obediently, Gwen pressed herself against the wall mere feet away from Saffir.

“Saffir,” a voice came from the far end of the hall. “Move away from Gwen.”

“Huron!” Saffir cheered. “I thought that you—”

He stepped further out into the hallway and into a pool of light as she spoke and her words died. In his hands, Huron held a long musket rifle. The same weapon that Saffir was certain the assassin had used to try to kill her father mere minutes before. Rainwater dripped from the barrel and onto the dry floor. He had it aimed carefully at Gwen.

“What’s going on, Captain?”

“Move back, Saffir,” he said slowly. “You are in grave danger.”

“Stand down, Captain,” another voice entered their little group. Captain Engel stood in the doorway behind Saffir pointing a combat wand at Huron.

“Gwen is an Unseileigh agent,” Huron said while carefully adjusting his aim with the gun. “If this weapon is any indication of it, she’s also the assassin who attempted to kill the Lord Commissioner tonight.”

“I am no such thing!” Gwen spouted indignantly. “I am a member in good standing in House Galadmohr and I will not stand for this!” She moved away from the wall and turned her glare towards Engel. “You gave me immunity when I gave you everything that I knew about Douglas Clenwyn. He’s the Unseileigh agent. Not I.”

“Clenwyn is dead,” Huron said coldly. Saffir noticed that Gwen seemed to smile just slightly when he said that. “I made certain of that.”

“Then you have your man,” she said. “Why harass me?”

Huron’s grip on the rifle tightened and his aim never faltered. “There have just been some things that made me think, Gwen. Such as, why you were upstairs in the personal quarters at the mansion when Bridie’s room was set on fire?”

“I was not—”

“Huron and I saw a blonde woman running down the hall from that scene,” Saffir said, her eyes narrowing.

“Did you think I missed the fact that you touched the head clerk just moments before he died?” Huron continued. “Died of a contact poison. Right under Captain Engel’s nose.

“This entire thing has been a series of misdirections designed to aim me at Hawthorne. Including everything that Engel told me when I was in the infirmary. Isn’t that the information you were talking about? The immunity you were granted?”

The soft sound of crackling thunder and the rain pattering on the window was the only reply.

“You may be a good assassin but I don’t think that Buckley knew what he was dealing with when he made you one of his compatriots. Oh, or did you forget? The late Mr. Clenwyn knew that you and Sergeant Buckley sometimes met our embenethol smuggling pukka friend Tommy Jay here on the mansion grounds.”

Saffir shivered and lifted her hand, two fingers pointing towards Gwen. “You’re wearing lip gloss, aren’t you, Gwen?”—her gaze flickered down to the woman’s handbag, a small package of green cigarettes poked out—“Tell me something...do you smoke?”

Gwen looked thunderstruck but the shock wasn’t reflected in her composure. Saffir couldn’t quite put her finger on it until she saw the sidhe woman narrow her eyes. In the flicker of an instant, Gwen went from seeming a timid girl, to possessing the countenance of a practiced killer.

In the same motion, Gwen threw her hands out and both Engel and Huron were struck with bright concussions of light. Directionless thunder erupted in the hallway and both detectives were flung from their feet. Huron fell onto his back and slid away from the corridor; Engel smashed into the far wall and crumpled on the floor. Saffir unleashed a *levinbolt* at close range directly into Gwen’s midsection.

The electrical arc jumped from Saffir’s fingers and bounced off of the sidhe woman like a beam of light bouncing off of a looking pool. It ricocheted off of the ceiling, blowing bits of plaster in all directions, and arced back down into Saffir’s hand. The force of the bolt blew Saffir from her feet and she felt herself slammed into the wall.

Her vision blurred and darkness crept in as she fought to remain conscious. In the distance she could see the malicious glow of Gwen’s glasses but beyond that, Huron was standing up again...but she could also see Gwen reaching down for her.

Chapter 20

Endgame

A hand reached out and restrained Engel when she attempted to walk through the doorway through which Gwen and Saffir had passed.

“She’s got Saffir, Captain,” Engel hissed hotly at Huron.

“I know,” he said slowly. Whatever Gwen had struck him with hurt like few other memories he had, except perhaps for the time something struck him in his conflict against the rogue Investigators. “She is not alone, however, or I should say, her safety is in good hands.”

Engel regarded him silently for a moment and then shook his hand from her arm. “What do you mean?”

“Come with me,” Huron said while gesturing back down the hall with his head. “I know where Gwen is headed.”

The nighttime storm slashed down on Gwen as she labored to move her numbed prey outside, away from the protection of the mansion. Outside of the easy reach of the Knight Investigators. Spent, exhausted, and on the verge of weeping, Saffir was easily herded before the lethal woman, tight wrenching grips and savage shoves forced her out onto the balcony immediately beyond one of the intricate gold filigree windows.

As the pair moved a shadow followed. Tracing their movements as it moved easily along the slippery shingles of the roof.

“You and your father have troubled me for long enough,” Gwen snarled, pulling Saffir along at a good clip. She barely watched where she placed her feet even though the walkway was slick and

slimy from the torrent of rainfall. “I do not need a hostage, it is just convenient. Don’t make this harder on yourself than it needs to be.”

She emerged from the rain into the much dryer interior of the top of one of the parapets. The mansion had tall parapet towers at the ends of each of the extending wings. Inside the middle of the tower would be a long, descending staircase. The wind had yet to blow enough rain into the little room to make the staircase slippery, but due to her unwilling charge Gwen took them carefully.

“You won’t escape,” Saffir sputtered.

“Oh, escape,” Gwen said snidely. She gave Saffir a brutal shove and bounced the girl off of the wall of the parapet. Saffir flailed about with her arms to retain her balance and not go falling down the stairs. “My escape is already well in hand. The only two of your comrades who know what’s happening are unconscious—or did you miss that little exchange?”

Saffir swallowed. “What do you intend to do to me?”

“I intend to trade your life for that of your father.”

Saffir blanched and frowned. She turned to look back at Gwen but the woman shoved her again to keep her moving. For an instant, though, she thought that she noticed someone standing in the doorway at the top of the parapet in the rain.

“Where are we going?” Saffir asked.

“In the basement of this parapet there is a door,” Gwen said, “a door that will take us into the Underhill. Move faster.”

Descending the stairs went rather swiftly. The stone spiral staircase ended on a very flat rough hewn stone floor. A single oak door covered with black bands of metal. When Saffir reached for the handle Gwen grabbed her roughly and shoved her against the wall. A small black blade hovered mere inches away from Saffir’s face.

“This blade is *iaranncraft*,” she said coolly. “I suggest that you stay very still. I will open the door.”

Most Faerie were happy to oblige when an *iaranncraft* weapon was involved; the mere touch of the metal could cause great harm. Being no exception to this rule, Saffir froze in place.

The door unlatched when Gwen turned the handle and she shoved it open. It swung open into a dimly lit corridor that smelled of musty wood. Barrels filled the rooms beyond, visible through empty doorways. The wine cellar.

Assured by whatever she saw, Gwen smiled and moved the knife away from Saffir’s face; then gestured for her to enter through the door ahead of her. Saffir watched Gwen carefully and walked carefully into the corridor.

Saffir felt a sudden gush of wind as she was pushed aside roughly and the door slammed behind her.

Crashing into the wall made her head spin but the sound of the door closing was unmistakable. At first Saffir thought that Gwen had shoved her inside then pulled the door shut—but then she noticed the other person with her.

A pair of midnight blue eyes so dark they seemed like cruel shadows stared into hers. His pale sidhe face framed by fiery orange hair and turned icy with a remorseless smile. Saffir did not need to see the pair of gleaming silver pistols in his black gloved hands to know who she was face-to-face with.

“It may be best for you to run now, Investigator,” he said.

Without another thought, that was exactly what Saffirwen did.

The door exploded from its hinges when Hawthorne kicked with all his might. The wood and metal banding groaned in displeasure as it twisted violently against the doorframe. Splinters and curled bits

of metal sprang from the ruined door with almost comical popping sounds like a music box dropped on the floor.

Gwen raised her knife with a startled motion as Hawthorne stepped through the doorway. She had her other hand raised overhead, a nimbus of magical light emanated all around it like a swarm of angry bees. Her expression changed from surprised to dark and vicious the moment she saw his face.

“I should have finished the job the first time,” she said and leveled her hand.

Hawthorne sidestepped the blast of *glamorie* she hurled at him as if he were walking around an obstacle in his path. His eyes focused on her form. He hated every nuance of her: the glowing blonde of her hair, the glint of her spectacles. This was the woman who murdered Bridie.

One pull of the trigger and the knife flew from her hands and skittered across the floor. He stepped forwards, pushing her back and casually scooped it up as he moved as if he were reclaiming a trinket that she had dropped. He moved with the relaxed gait of a man out for an afternoon walk only his gaze held the lethal intent of his motions.

Gwen retreated before him glancing around in fear. There was no escape. He had her pinned as surely as any prey he hunted before. If she were any other of his victims he would not have spent the time to cross the room towards her. He would not have picked up the iron knife. He would have just shot her. Gwen was a mark like no other.

With a clumsiness born of frantic fear, Gwen caught her foot on the edge of the stone staircase and tumbled onto her back. Hawthorne jumped through the air and landed at her side. *Arget* at the ready he lowered the knife to her throat.

“Don’t kill me, please.” Gwen choked as she tried to speak and pushed herself back away from Hawthorne. He could feel nothing but revulsion for her. She would not have lived long among the Sluagh. No Sluagh would ever beg for her life at the hands of a superior opponent.

“You murdered Bridie,” he said, “for that you deserve no honor. You may be an assassin, but you missed your mark. Now, your mark kills you.”

Huron sent Saffirwen to Captain Engel the moment she appeared. He simply nodded knowingly when Saffir tried to warn him about Hawthorne’s appearance. Which seemed to puzzle the young detective, but she obeyed his orders immediately, nonetheless.

It did not take Huron long to work his way through the wine cellar to the ruined doorway.

The scene beyond gave him pause when he reached the wreckage of the door.

Hawthorne had the knife to a simpering Gwen’s throat and just finished saying what sounded like his last words to the dying. A grim smile touched Huron’s lips as he saw the scene. One assassin to stop another. The plan had seemed ingenious enough when he first asked Hawthorne to assist him. Ludicrous, yes, but it was going to be the only way to catch Bridie’s real killer.

Hawthorne drew the knife back slowly as if savoring its feel and the moment.

Huron stood mute in the doorway. This was the woman who murdered Bridie. She did not deserve to live. The satisfaction of knowing her swift death would be at hand clenched in Huron’s chest. Who better to kill her than one of the men from whom she was taken and by an assassin? An assassin to slay an assassin. The other detectives would not question Gwen’s death; she was a suspect, and everyone would know she was the truly Bridie’s murderer, Huron could easily shift the blame—

A shiver passed through Huron like a crackle of lightning without the thunder.

Blame. He frowned to himself and suddenly found his voice.

“Hawthorne! Stop!”

The Sluagh assassin froze—paused in his killing blow in the instant of the lethal stroke. Gwen gasped in fear and relief as she gazed past Hawthorne to see Huron. The moment she determined the identity of her savior, however, her expression fell. She had no reason to think Huron would stay her execution.

“Do you want to speak your part, Investigator?” Hawthorne asked in a voice more chilly than a wintry storm.

Huron laid his hand carefully on Hawthorne’s shoulder. He could feel the barely leashed rage and hatred bristling in the Unseileigh’s muscles. Huron found it extremely difficult not to sympathize with him. This was the woman who murdered Bridie. She certainly deserved no better than her death.

“We can’t do this,” Huron said softly. “I spared your life even when I thought you culpable of Bridie’s death. I spared it because I believe justice must be unilateral. I know that you cannot go home; you cannot go back to being an assassin because you have turned from it.” It hurt to speak Bridie’s name, but Huron knew only by invoking her could he convince Hawthorne not to proceed—in a way he felt as if he had to convince himself. “You forfeit your old life for your love of her, yes?”

“I am not going to stand here and tell you that Bridie would accept what you are about to do. Honor her memory and let the justice that an Investigator would have take Gwen instead.”

The leather of Hawthorne’s gloves creaked as he tightened his grip on the knife. Gwen had become utterly silent. Her eyes stared up through her spectacles at Huron as if she had prepared herself for death.

A dangerous moment passed between them and Hawthorne’s breathing slowed. He moved the knife to the side, twirling it in his fingertips, and proffered the hilt to Huron.

“My debt to you is ended, Investigator,” he said darkly. “You spared my life as now I spare her. This is not the Sluagh way, but as well I know, I am no longer Sluagh.”

With a single, careful motion, Huron deposited the knife in his belt and pulled his handcuffs free. “Thank you for listening to me, Hawthorne,” he said while he secured Gwen in the handcuffs.

“It was the sound of Bridie’s own words in your own that I listened to, Investigator,” Hawthorne said and slumped to the ground.

Uncertain, Huron glanced back at Hawthorne. His breathing seemed labored again. A pool of blood formed beneath him. Huron had not realized how badly Hawthorne had been injured during their duel—or perhaps it was inflicted when he faced Gwen. Hawthorne seemed to ignore the injury with the casual air of a man going about his usual business.

“You are seriously wounded,” Huron said. “Come with me. I will have a healer see to you. I promise you, I will allow no harm to come to you.”

“I suppose that I can accept your hospitality,” Hawthorne said. “I have nowhere else to go.”

Epilogue

An Investigator's Place

The Galadmohr mansion remained in an unbridled uproar after the assassination attempt. Most of the guests had left but among there were more than enough people who lived in the mansion. The house guards deployed themselves in an orderly fashion with the Investigators to keep the people who remained behind calm, yet still people rushed around like ants from a hill that had just been stepped on.

Huron found a room away from the hustle and bustle and deposited Hawthorne there. Within minutes Saffirwen and Engel joined them. Engel regarded Hawthorne with a dark expression but remained silent. Her uniform torn, wet, and shredded and her hair in a mess, Saffir paused only a moment when she noticed Hawthorne. Instead of standing away from him, like Engel did the moment she entered the room, Saffir walked directly up to the Sluagh assassin.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude," she said. "Thank you for saving my life. Gwen surely would have killed me."

Hawthorne started to say something but stopped when a looming shadow suddenly swallowed the doorway and spoke.

"Then, I as well owe you my thanks," the Lord Commissioner stated boldly. "I am the Lord Commissioner of New York and my thanks is no small thing."

"I'll go find Hawthorne a healer," Huron said. "He needs to be seen, soon."

"The suspect is taken care of?" Commissioner MacAvee asked.

"I saw to it that she had a quick trip to the lockup," Captain Engel said from her corner. "I see no reason we should worry about her until morning. She is in an antimagic cell."

Huron moved around the Commissioner and started to make his way out the door when something outside in the foyer beyond caused him to freeze in place.

A sidhe man wearing flowing black robes with a bright crimson red scarf wrapped around his neck glided across the room. His eyes were set on Huron and the doorway he stood in. He hastily retreated back into the room and grabbed his badge from his shirt. With one deft move he looked to Hawthorne and tossed it. The Sluagh caught the badge without flinching and gave Huron a querulous look.

“Just put it on your shirt,” Huron said; then he turned to the Commissioner and Captain Engel. “There is an Inquisitor coming this way.”

Captain Engel harrumphed. “They must have escaped my maze of red tape. I’m disappointed.”

Hawthorne had just finished putting the silver badge on his shirt when the chill of the Inquisitor’s presence passed over the room. If the Inquisitor were a block of the hardest ice ever cut from a glacier he would have evaporated on the spot from the heat of the glares cast about the room. Not a single friendly eye greeted him as he slid stiffly through the doorway and came to rest in front of the Lord Commissioner.

Lord Commissioner MacAvee towered over the man by a full head and looked almost as if he was surrounded by a golden haze in contrast to the darkly garbed Inquisitor. The Inquisitor’s rounded blue eyes took in the scene slowly with an arrogant air as if the glares afforded him were meaningless, he bore himself with a mantel that spoke of an expectation of immediate submission. Huron figured the man didn’t care if anyone liked him or not, just as long as they listened and obeyed.

“I am here to take your Unseileigh captive into custody.” The Inquisitor’s eyes fell onto Hawthorne, who wisely remained silent.

Huron immediately took control of the situation, stepping between the Inquisitor and the Lord Commissioner. The Inquisitor took a rough step back, his black robes floating around him in a disorganized fashion, his gaze swept between Captain Huron and Commissioner MacAvee as if he didn’t understand why an underling was presenting himself.

“Our Unseileigh captive?” Huron said. “We have more than one, you know, which one exactly do you want?”

Without pause, the Inquisitor lifted a hand clothed with a red glove and pointed at Hawthorne. “Douglas Clenwyn.”

The room went silent like a concert hall after an orchestra had finished playing. Huron rubbed his fingers on his chin and cast a quick glance at Hawthorne.

“You mean Detective Hawthorne?” Huron waited for the Inquisitor’s gaze to find the badge on Hawthorne’s chest. “Or do you mean one of the Unseileigh he helped us capture? Oh, and his name is *Detective* Dougal Hawthorne, not Dougal-less.”

“What trickery is this?” The Inquisitor’s face reddened as he swept Captain Huron aside with his gaze and fixed it hotly on the Lord Commissioner. “Why is it that you are protecting this man! Our mandate clearly specifies that we can take Unseileigh who have passed from the Kingdom of Brittainia back.”

Commissioner MacAvee regarded the man Inquisitor with a level gaze.

“Your mandate is void,” he said. “Detective Hawthorne is one of my deep operatives. He was stationed in Brittainia as part of an ongoing smuggling investigation. Without his aide we would not have closed this case, nor captured those responsible for the murders of several Investigators, commoners, and an assassination attempt against myself.”

The Inquisitor was shocked speechless. He seemed rooted to the spot as if by an unwillingness to accept what he was hearing and an equal inability to do anything about it. Huron

felt glad that the Inquisitor kept his glare fixed on the Lord Commissioner as the same surprise registered in Hawthorne's eyes. Though only for a moment.

"I have had my fill of your obstruction and meddling, Inquisitor." This time Commissioner MacAvee's face reddened.

The Inquisitor lifted a threatening hand and took an angry step forward. "The Inquisition will not stand for this treatment—"

"Captain Engel! Would you please escort this man out of the mansion? If he resists see to it that he is clapped in irons. When he is removed please find a healer for our injured officer."

Engel reached behind her and withdrew a pair of cold iron handcuffs, the Inquisitor balanced when he saw them. "Yes sir," she said and grabbed the man's arm. He made to shake her off but she tightened her grip and shook the handcuffs, which ended all further resistance. "This way."

After the Inquisitor was herded out of the room all eyes shifted back to Hawthorne.

"No small thing," the Lord Commissioner said. "Captain Huron you have a new partner. I am reassigning Saffirwen as of this moment. Both of you report to the Kings Yard in three days. I will have the proper papers drawn up and there will be a badge ready. If that is acceptable."

Huron held his hand out to Hawthorne. "You may find that the same skills that make a good assassin also make a good detective. You may have forsaken your place at home for Bridie and then to hunt down her killer but now you have a place here. Should you accept?"

Hawthorne looked at Huron's hand for a long moment. Huron could see him weighing something behind his eyes.

"I do not give my blessing lightly, Huron. The place you offer me is worthy." Hawthorne took the hand. "I accept."

"It is done, then," Commissioner MacAvee said.

Huron and Hawthorne released hands and nodded.

"You have two days of leave, Captain," the Lord Commissioner said. "After this debacle there will be a tithe to Hell. Stay out of my hair."

"Yes sir," Huron said.

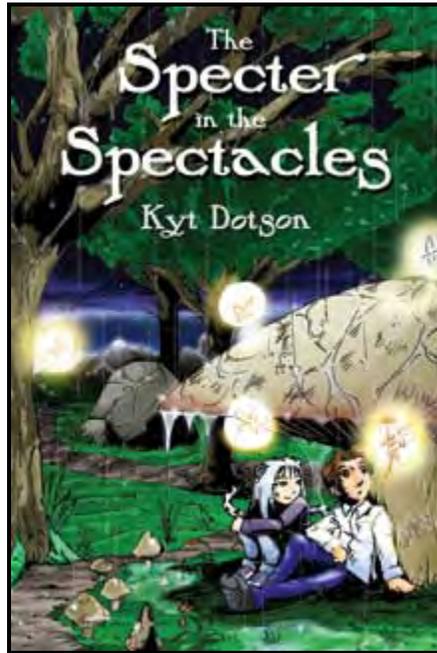
Behind him, Hawthorne smiled; his first genuine smile since Bridie's murder.

About the Author

Kyt Dotson is an aspiring novelist who has written one published work, *The Specter in the Spectacles*, which is set in the same universe as *Perfume of Blood and Ashes*. Lives half the year in Ann Arbor, Michigan with editor and friends, and spends the other half in Phoenix, Arizona. Oft to be found in the Gothic scene of both Detroit and Phoenix, loves cats, children, dragons, and unicorns.

“The written word is the best blessing of the intangible that a person can receive from another, save love. Through my work I can bring everyone I know a little closer to my world as recompense for how much I enjoy living in theirs.” – Kyt Dotson.

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