

WEATHER

ISOBELLE WINTER

*Loyalty will cost him
everything he loves.*

*Escape will cost him
everything he is.*



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By
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Credits Page

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Dedication page

To my parents: thanks for the happy childhood. It did not, in fact, destroy my every chance of becoming a writer.

Every book, and especially a first book, has a lot of people who deserve thanks. This one is no different. There are doubtless many people I can't credit by name, but you know who you are.

Whether it was assigning a short story of 1,000 words in sixth grade or turning a blind eye to late assignments while I wrote the first draft of this novel in high school, I've been lucky to have had many wonderful and encouraging teachers. Thanks, guys.

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To the writers and friends I met on the forums of National Novel Writing Month's website, thank you. Your screen names are too numerous to list here, but despite what anyone else may say about the internet, you're real friends to me.

To my aunt, who spent ten days ferrying me around to various historical sites on the East Coast while I was researching the novel. Finer points like the pot scrubber and the correct way to eat a banana are entirely due to you.

To my advisor, who, aside from being shockingly tolerant of my scientific shenanigans (flooded laboratories notwithstanding), has also been wonderful about having a deeply distracted advisee.

And on a more official note, I'd like to add especial thanks to the University of California at Santa Barbara's Map and Imaging Laboratory without which my descriptions and general idea of the layout of 19th century cities would be hopeless.

And lastly, to my friends, especially my housemates, who have put up with me and my outrageous sleep schedule, my cooking and, worst of all being woken up at something approaching midnight by joyful yodeling about publishers, thanks.

Chapter One

“Very well, gentlemen, we will begin with a definition of what an incarnation is. It can be male or female and is the living representation of an ideal. Whoever controls the incarnation controls the perception of the ideal.”

—Opening of a lecture delivered to recruits by Doctor Frederic Von Zerich, Head of the Guardian Council, September 19th 1839

“Why are you here?”

A decent young gentleman would be at home warming his toes by a fire on a night like this. I looked down the barrel of my captor’s revolver and tried not to think about the shapes my brains would make on the tree trunk behind me.

The man snorted, plunged his hand into my jacket pocket and rummaged around. Uncommon courteous. Some would have shot me out of suspicion. He, at least, was making sure I was a Guardian and not a fool fond of taking walks late at night. I didn’t dare glance about for Harold. I hoped he had the sense to stay where he was and not attack in the idiot hope of saving my skin.

The hunter withdrew my card, examined it with a practiced air.

“Guardian Julian Lambert, is it?” His finger moved on the trigger. I gulped.

“Don’t shoot him,” said one of his companions.

“Why? He’s a Guardian.”

“He’ll know where the incarnation is. Shouldn’t be difficult to make him squeal.”

I glared in the general direction of the voice. I might look little and weedy, but never a coward.

My captor lowered the gun out of my face. I kept my hands raised, couldn’t meet his eyes for a moment. I wasn’t a pigeonheart, but I didn’t like how pleased he looked, as if he’d hoped for this.

“Where’s the girl?” he said.

I swallowed back a knot of fear, and said nothing.

There was a gap between the two men to my right.

“Where is the girl?” he said again.

I looked away. He’d had something involving capers for supper. There was one trapped in his beard.

“Don’t think I’m going to kill you fast.” He moved the revolver, rammed the muzzle hard into my shoulder and shoved his face into mine. Garlic, too. Damn. I wrinkled my nose, backing farther against the tree. “One more time, prettyboy. Where’s the incarnation?”

I sneered back at him as best I could, hoping he didn’t notice how hard I shook. Nerves. Maybe if he meant to shoot me, he wouldn’t waste so much time in talking. It would be nice to think so.

I wouldn’t hand the first-tier manifestation of Liberty over to a marking. I’d lost one of my charges to that fate, another first-tier incarnation. She’d been taken only a few months ago, dragged away to have a spell bound on her that punished any small disobedience with maiming, madness or death.

If it took my last breath, they would not have another.

“Are you mute as well as stupid?” A sharp cuff. Nothing for it, best to be shot cleanly.

I seized his wrist and wrenched. Left hand to back of waistband—my revolver. His thumped on the ground. His companions were doubtless armed, but he was between us and that gave me the moment needed to fumble my own piece into the open and clap it to his head.

He froze. His companions moved back. I snatched my card out of his limp fingers, and picked his

pocket for good measure. Served him right.

I sidled past the tree so there was nothing behind me.

“To hell with your threats, sir,” I said. He made no protest. Like most bullies, he was a consummate coward. I didn’t want to shoot him. Even if he was a murdering slaver, I wouldn’t kill someone I had at my mercy. This was a failing. It was likely to get me killed, but I could not bring myself to it. I gave him a hard shove, and fired above him, into the air.

By the time they’d figured out that they still had heads, I’d run.

Feet thudding on the frozen muck, the only light came from the lanterns behind me. At least that illuminated the trees, if not the dips and rises of the muddy ground. Twice I tripped, catching myself before I went sprawling. Branches whipped against my shoulders and snatched at my head. It’d be a wonder if I got out of this without losing an eye.

Their lights faded. I couldn’t see where I was going. Walking through these woods was entirely different from charging through them in panic. So much for all my training. I was lost.

A tree trunk clipped my shoulder. I stumbled, recovered, kept running. Something small broke cover almost under my feet, its panicked scrabble the only sound aside from my own breath and stumbling boots.

I got a few more paces before I caught my foot in a burrow, and went flat on my face, the breath knocked out of me. I managed to turn over, struggling to get air into my lungs, my eyes closed.

When I could breathe again, I opened them, just as the first hunter came into the clearing, his lantern held high. I reached for a weapon to defend myself. My fingers closed on a branch.

“Julian?”

A familiar voice. God, not a hunter. I felt as if the breath had been knocked out of me once again. “Harold, thank God, you’re safe.”

Liberty was with him, a small dark shadow—good, the obstinate girl hadn’t run off without him.

My partner lowered the lantern. “The hunters?”

Liberty glanced behind him, handsome dark face still. She settled her wings under her coat, an abrupt, nervous gesture.

“After us.” The noise of my pursuers grew. I pushed myself to my feet, wincing at the prickle of rocks and sticks under my battered palm. “Not a moment to lose, I should think,” I said, and we ran again.

At the edge of the woods we found ourselves in a meadow—now a flat wasteland of snow and mud, no cover at all. We stumbled forward, the slushy mud sucking at our boots. Too slow. The hunters would take us before we reached the river.

Harold stopped and put the lantern on the ground. “Go,” he said.

I caught Liberty by the hand, stumbled on, trying not to think about abandoning Harold. He could hold his own in a fight far better than I.

Get the incarnation onto the river and to safety.

Everything had gone wrong. With no preparation for the transfer, the terse panicked orders arrived in the middle of the night via a mechanical pigeon. I had no idea of what prompted the message. We’d alerted our contacts. They’d missed the transfer. The hunters must have intercepted their orders, and killed them. Our only choice was to keep going.

Shouts and cries sounded behind us, with Harold’s voice rising over the others for a moment. My stomach turned over, my hand tightening on Liberty’s, but I didn’t look back. A final grove of trees stood ahead of us, the river shining beyond.

Someone had known enough to monitor supernatural activities. That was the only explanation for

this disaster.

I prayed whoever it was didn't know about the outpost on the Seine. It was our last hope to get Liberty away—if it was taken, they would enslave her and shoot me. I'd have the better end of it. At least I wouldn't have to undergo the agony of the marking process.

"Quietly now," I said to Liberty, and sidled through the last trees to the banks of the river.

One of those silly pleasure boats sat on the bank, with two dark shapes huddled in the bows. I motioned Liberty to stay where she was and approached.

"Whose boat?" I asked.

"That of those with urgent business, sir," came a man's voice, and I let out a breath. Correct response.

"Julian Lambert," I told the first of the two, who stepped forward to take my card, squinting at it in the faint light reflected by fog and river. Now I was no longer moving, the cold came down about me and I fought not to shiver.

"Thank you," he said, and presented me with his. It was genuine, the spell glowing. I motioned Liberty out into the open. I saw a glint of metal in her hand, quickly hidden. She must have armed herself before we left. Another reason to prefer incarnations to humans. They didn't waste time on things like feminine sensibilities.

"What's the commotion, anyway?" the same man asked in a harsh, gravelly voice.

"No idea. Our contacts failed to make rendezvous. Liberty." She turned to me, dark eyes wide in her inhumanly beautiful face. "They're Guardians. Trust them as you would Harold or me. They'll keep you safe."

I'd phrased it very ill. A flicker of irritation crossed her face, but she nodded.

"Good luck," I added, and the first of the river guards said, "We'll do what we can."

"Godspeed," the second said. The voice was familiar—possibly one of my many mentors, and I felt a stir of pride that he'd seen my success. Then they launched the boat. I squashed the desire to watch them down the river and stumbled back into the icy murk to find Harold.

Hunters had stolen Truth from under our noses, months ago, and shot my junior partner. They left him to bleed to death in an alley. I caught up with him in time for him to die in my arms. I imagined Harold meeting the same fate and forced myself on.

There was no one as I crossed the meadow. As I dived back into the trees, a hand seized my wrist. I spun, ready to fight, and found myself staring at Harold. "She safe?"

"Yes," I said. "The rest of them?"

"Lost interest," he said.

"Glad to see you alive." We shrank back. Lamplight flickered over our faces. I closed my eyes to hide their gleam and leaned back into the shadow of a tree.

The quantity and the quality of its bearer's language declared him one of the hunters. I smiled in the hazy darkness.

Of course, we were far from safe. We still had a good distance to go before we reached the safety of the city. Our angry hunters were armed but their hopes dashed. The incarnation was now well out of their hands.

Sense would dictate that they go to the river and follow Liberty. Temper would demand the deaths of those responsible for the incarnation's escape. I doubted they were sensible. Besides, I still had someone's pocketbook. Unlikely that it had any useful information, but there was the principle of the thing.

Once the lantern passed, Harold said, "Could we ambush them?"

“No, too many,” I said, and immediately regretted having spoken. Three hunters came into view. They’d heard us. I met one’s eyes, seized Harold’s sleeve, turned tail and fled.

The first shot rang out. A complete and clean miss. The ball flattened against a half-buried rock ahead of us. A curse behind us, then several shots. Much closer.

The wind rose. A stitch in my side stabbed deeper with every breath. Should one of those hunters hit his mark... Fear pushed me further. The wind rose, groans of protest sounding from the trees around us.

A crack like gunfire, but larger, and a scream. Harold glanced over his shoulder, the pale shape of his face flashing in the gloom.

“A tree,” he said and gasped, skidded to a halt, doubled over, wheezing. “A tree.”

“Keep running,” I snapped at him, but looked back as well. One of the trees had split and fallen directly atop a hunter. They halted, milling about, the garble of their voices all fear and confusion.

“Quickly. This way,” I told Harold, diving toward thicker cover.

“That tree.”

“Wind’s calming. Quickly, man.” Indeed it was. Now that the hunters halted, the wind died down. Had I been inclined to an overabundance of religion, I’d have called it divine providence.

Once in better cover, we slowed to a walk. Some time after that, we found a dense clump of young trees, their bare branches enough to afford us shelter.

Harold sat down with his back against a barely sufficient sapling and sighed.

“Thank God,” he said.

I nodded. I doubted they would attempt us again. The wind would have made them wonder if one of us was a magician, and make them more cautious. Most likely they’d leave us be, pocketbooks notwithstanding. It wasn’t as if, and my mouth twisted, they didn’t have other things to do.

At least we were both alive. I settled in a depression formed by two of the saplings, ignoring the moisture of the ground, and leaned my head against one of them.

“What do you think happened?” I said, after an hour or so had passed. My watch had long since run down. I was very bad about winding it. I still didn’t feel as if it belonged to me.

Harold shrugged. “Another raid on seditious groups? It’s certainly been volatile enough of recent. I wouldn’t put much past your government at this point.”

I snorted. “Don’t call it *my* government. It’s not as if anyone there listens to anything but his pocketbook. Maybe someone got enough guts up to launch a rebellion. Again. Speaking of such...” I pulled the hunter’s pocketbook out and looked it over. Nothing but a few loose coins—no banknotes, no useful information. I let out a grumbling breath.

“Where did you get that, Julian?”

I glanced up at Harold. “From a gentleman who held a gun to my head,” I said.

His face set in deep disapproval. There was no new argument he could use, so he settled for, “You know it could be spelled.”

I shrugged. “I’ll make sure it doesn’t go back to the house. Not as if there’s terribly much in it.”

He snorted, settled himself more comfortably, and ignored me.

Neither of us slept. By the time light reached us, the wood was empty. We made our way back to the city, leaving the picturesque scenery to the gentry.

* * * *

We reached the house around nine in the morning. While Harold fumbled for his key, I looked around, jumpy. ~~Getting back into the city had been difficult. I'd spun a tale of a broken carriage we'd had to abandon, a steam-horse that threw a cog. My tale passed. Either that or the bribe I'd slipped the lieutenant, the coins from my attacker's pocketbook.~~

The street stood empty. The air stank of smoke. Somewhere in the city, far enough from us to be uninteresting, gunshots sounded. Another revolt, then—Paris, like most of Europe, had been in a state of uproar for the last five years or so. Was this an explanation for the timing of our orders and the difficulty of executing them? I glanced at Harold, and shrugged.

There was no one to note that we looked more like disreputable workmen than the unattached young gentlemen we claimed to be. I kept a sharp eye on the street until Harold found the key and opened the door.

The first one in, he walked straight into the two flintlock pistols aimed at our heads.

“That’s quite far enough, gentlemen,” said a matronly voice. The door clicked behind us. Harold and I shared a look of profound relief.

“Madame Eavers, it’s us,” I said. Our landlady’s face loomed out of the darkness, wrinkles deep with suspicion. Then the pistols lowered, and we relaxed somewhat more when two clicks announced that she had uncocked them.

“Good.”

“Er, trying morning, Madame?” Harold took the billed cap from his head and shook it out, then ran a hand through his hair. It was gray with dried mud, and stuck out at odd angles, its usual coppery shade muted. He even had mud in his mustache, rather ruining his air of square-jawed heroic adventurer.

“Extremely.” Madame put the pistols in a drawer of the side-table. “Boots off before you come any further, gentlemen. I’ve just replaced the spells.”

We complied. Facing hunters was one thing. Madame Eavers’s reputation had another menace.

“It’ll be a bit before anything in the way of breakfast is ready,” she said when we emerged from the hall, blinking in the light. The main room was spacious, though that was mostly because the wall between the parlor and dining room had been removed. The wood was needed to reinforce the scullery door.

The house itself had been old and respectable before the Guardians purchased it. Time, hard use, and the liberal application of defensive spells of the most virulent sort had rendered it merely old, the wallpaper faded and peeling, the mice abundant, the walls thin. At some point, I would need to get Harold to go scrub the soot stain off the north face. He was the junior agent. Things like petty repairs fell firmly within his purview. Besides, I wasn’t tall enough to reach it.

Madame fixed us with a stern eye. “Is the girl safe, Julian?”

“I saw her on her way myself.”

“What happened to you two?”

“We were chased.”

“You had a bit of a scrap, I see.” She nodded to Harold, who sported an impressive cut lip, and then looked me over with faint amusement. I probably looked terrible.

“Yes. Had to lie low for the better part of the night.” My hands itched. I looked down at them and found my palms were scratched badly, probably from that mad dash. My fingernails were caked with mud.

“I think a wash would be in order,” I added, even though I dearly wanted to hear Madame’s account of things. She, too, had seen the state of my hands, so there was no question about what order this

would happen in. I might be the senior of the two active Guardians in the house, but Madame outranked me, entirely aside from the fact she thoroughly intimidated both of us.

* * * *

Cleanliness felt wonderful, but wasn't much of an improvement in any other respect. I would always exude a faintly tarnished air no matter how hard I scrubbed. I frowned at the narrow, ill-bred face in the mirror, running a hand over my chin. I didn't need to shave to look presentable. That was relief. I should most likely slit my own throat out of exhaustion if I attempted it now.

The shirt would take hours to repair. I was considering calling it a total loss. The front was torn and had more stains than I could count, in a striking combination of green, red and brown. The waistcoat had already seen enough of this. It had been wearable before last night, but now had become stained and holed beyond hope. Not that I was much good at repairs to start with. I did them out of necessity. Madame's duties concerned the safety of the house, not the state of her juniors' clothes.

By the time I'd dressed and come downstairs, a meal bearing more resemblance to dinner than breakfast greeted me, and Madame was now in a mood to talk.

"You two were damned lucky, considering recent events." She put a folded paper on the table. "Doubtless you've seen these about, and haven't bothered to read them."

I fingered the paper, then unfolded it. It had been posted somewhere—the pads of my fingers felt sticky. I read the announcement. I handed it to Harold, wordlessly, then stared at Madame.

"No, I didn't think he had the guts for it either," she said.

"Or the wit," I said, and Harold looked up with eyes wide and mustache animate.

"Louis Napoleon managed a coup?"

I sighed and put my head in my hands, looking down at my plate. We would have to much more careful from now on. Not that we were ever careless—as Harold once remarked in a fit of pique, we ate, drank and breathed 'care'. Sometimes caution was simply not enough. A coup meant civil unrest, martial law, searches of private property, arrests on mere suspicion. It would be too easy for the supernatural agencies in the government to slip in a few of their own searches and arrests.

There was one thing to be thankful for. It came home to me with more strength than ever later, as I wrote my report without thinking about the words on the page. They were all the same words I had written a thousand times before, recounting the safe escapes of other incarnations. At least we didn't have an incarnation in residence now.

Chapter Two

“It is unlikely you will have much to do with the more powerful incarnations. Pray you do not. Aside from the obvious dangers, they are quite capable of turning that underused excuse for a brain of yours into so much porridge.”

—Instructor, Guardian Council, to recruit, 1841

The next morning came far too soon. I blinked up at the ceiling for some time, running over the previous day’s events. No one had broken down the door in the night. Good. As long as the new government left us alone, I didn’t much care who held power. I supposed I ought to have more nationalist feeling on the matter, but the Guardians had picked me up too early to form such a sentiment—so early that English now came with more ease than my native French.

At last I crept out from under the covers and made myself presentable. I wanted a walk, no matter the number of soldiers at large in the city. Our attackers had not been soldiers, and I sincerely doubted any hunter had gotten a good look at my face.

It would be some time before they sent us a new incarnation to escort, so we all had some time to ourselves. Harold still slept—his snores were quite audible on the landing. Madame Eavers was doing something in the kitchen involving much clashing of pots. I winced at the din, and made my way out into the cool air without pausing by the kitchen. I didn’t want to be hauled back in to wash pots.

I was half asleep. I didn’t notice I had tucked my revolver into the pocket of my coat until I was some distance away from the house. I debated turning back. It might cause me trouble if I were stopped. I doubted I would be. Better to be armed than not.

Everything seemed more alive, the splashes of sunlight on slate brighter, the smells of smoke and manure stronger. This pleasant everyday world was a balm to the senses after the darkness and the wind. Even *if*, and this was a purely reflexive thought as I stepped out of the way, the newfangled steam-driven horses produced more smoke than was excused by their usefulness.

I paused in an alley, thinking I heard something odd. Instinct and long years of training bade me keep quiet. I leaned against the opposite wall and tucked my chin into my collar. It was a chilly day, and this alley had a light little breeze running through it. It made things colder, but I wasn’t inclined to complain.

I stood there for some time, wondering if I was being foolish. The sound had simply been out of place.

A sudden pounding of feet just outside of my alley brought me upright, pressed back against the wall. I hoped it was not the *gendarmarie*—the very last thing I needed was someone asking where I’d been last night. I didn’t even have my partner to guard my back.

They’d be around the corner in an instant. I reached for my revolver.

Not the police. A girl. A tiny, slender girl, running with her head down and her fists clenched. She slammed into me, and sent me reeling back against the wall before I could dodge. I reached to steady her—poor thing, she looked hardly more than twelve.

I swore, looking down at where her eyes should have been. They were covered by a bandage. She held a pair of scales in one hand, and a sword in the other. Her face was pretty rather than handsome, with a stern mouth and dark eyebrows. Damn it all, we’d just gotten rid of the last one!

She must have just manifested. Civil disturbances did tend to raise manifestation rates. They’d done up figures that showed it, but why the devil did I have to deal with one immediately? I was still

half-asleep from our last goddamned rescue.

~~This one looked like an incarnation of Justice. She was unearthly beautiful, for one, and the blindfold, sword and scales identified her still more certainly. Apparent age and lack of wings proclaimed her a new manifestation. There was someone after her—shouts and cries in the street outside our alley. Duty called.~~

She turned to run again. I put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m a friend,” I told her, realizing I sounded anything but. I couldn’t feel too badly about that. I was as steady-nerved as any other man, but the prospect of engaging in a repeat of last night already was rather daunting. Besides, she’d been the one to run into me.

She wrenched away with inhuman strength, spat a curse at me and turned to flee. The first of her pursuers came round the corner, and I fired at him. He ducked back with a yelp. At least he wasn’t in uniform. He wasn’t National Guard, then. Good.

“Don’t be a fool,” I called after the incarnation. “I’m a friend, damn your eyes, a friend! Do you want to be marked?” A clatter of feet—I should have done better to shoot the bastard at the beginning. His friends had joined him. They were probably bounty hunters. If they’d been government boys, they’d be better prepared.

The incarnation hesitated, then deciding, turned, dropped the scales with a clatter in the street and raised the sword.

“Smart girl,” I muttered.

The hunters were upon us. The incarnation didn’t seem terribly good with her sword—none of the blows she struck hit anything. She had to be very recently manifested, within the past hour. I beat about with the revolver, ducking as the sword flashed by my head.

It was not the only time I nearly was killed by her, but her enthusiasm did have its advantages. Intimidated, our attackers fled, before either of us had to do much damage. I looked over to her, to see her grinning widely.

“We’ll have to work on your swordplay,” I told her.

She shrugged. “It worked. Thank you. I shall be on my way.”

“I’m a Guardian,” I said.

No sign of understanding, and I sighed, stripped off one glove and put my hand to hers. A long pause, as I looked at the end of the alley—the hunters might return at any instant—wishing she’d hurry up and learn what she needed to. If she didn’t, if she couldn’t... I’d heard of such incidents, a mistake in manifestation, not as uncommon as might be hoped. The incarnation in question often die soon. The direct contact, scandalous as it was, would let her poke about in my mind to satisfy herself as to my trustworthiness. She should be able to do at least that much.

It was surprising the gunshot hadn’t already drawn the attention of the police, but even now, the hunters might have paid them off. It wasn’t as if the *gendarmerie* didn’t have its hands full already.

Finally she removed her hand, and I shoved my now-icy fingers back into the glove with much relief. “Shall we go?”

She nodded, and I offered her my arm.

As we walked, she with her cold hand on my arm and probably looking out at the world through my mind, however dimly, I tried not to panic. I wished once again that I had never had the bad sense to sign up, and wondered what the hell I was supposed to do *now*. All the incarnations we guided to safety had been handed on to us from other Guardians. We had never had to deal with the training or education of a new incarnation, one who would have very little idea of what her powers were or what dangers awaited her. I would, of course, contact the Council immediately, but in the meantime? It

would take at least three days to get a response, even by telegram. Quite aside from the hunters, she could well have the house down around our ears before then. Or we could all end up insane, if she were that powerful and didn't know how to control it. In those potentially disastrous three days, everything would be on my head, as I was senior.

I had no other choice but to bring her back to the house. There were too many hunters about to do anything but. If she sprouted wings in the next day or so, that was when we'd really start worrying. Liberty had been within her third week of existence. Someone else had trained her to control her considerable powers. If Justice was as powerful as Liberty, there would be no one to train her, no one to teach her how not to use her powers to warp our perceptions to the point that all the residents of the house went stark staring mad.

All things considered, it was an uncomfortable walk back.

Justice hesitated before following me up the steps. I stopped as well, letting her get past her fears. She knew—at least, she *should* have known—neither I nor any of my compatriots meant her any harm but at least she seemed cautious. Liberty had been anything but.

Then, stubborn chin setting, she stepped forward again. I bent and unlocked the door, pushed it open and stepped inside. I made sure to close it after me—no sense in letting anyone on the street see inside the house for a second more than they had to. Then I turned.

I stopped dead in the face of Madame and her pistols. “Madame,” I said very carefully, “if I didn't know any better, I should feel quite unwelcome.”

“I heard two sets of feet,” she said. “Who is she?”

I stepped aside, and Justice, who had placed herself directly behind me on hearing the second voice, gulped and folded her hands in front of her.

“Oh,” said Madame. “I see.” She put the pistols down on the sideboard. “Relax, girl. You're safe now. I'll see to those scales and that...sword.”

“I'd like to keep the sword with me, thank you,” Justice said in a very small voice.

Madame gave me a look that spoke volumes about lack of manners, but only took the scales. Justice turned her head to me as if looking for reassurance, and I patted her arm. “It's perfectly all right,” I said. “You're safe now.”

“Safe from what?” she said, stepping away. “You've given no more than the slightest of explanations, sir, no more than a general reassurance I can trust you and that the men after me were evil.”

“You read me,” I said. “You do know that when you read a person, they cannot lie?”

“I do. It was enough to get me here. Who are you people and what do you want with me? You cannot be doing this out of charity.”

“We expect nothing from you,” I said. “Our duty is to protect people like you, those with unusual abilities.”

“Unusual abilities? Explain.”

I looked around, feeling resigned. “Would you like to sit down, miss? There's no point to discussing this here. You must be tired.”

She looked suspicious, then shrugged, nodded.

“Right,” I said, and started down the hallway. I hoped Harold wouldn't be in the parlor. The last thing we needed was this incarnation spooking. She had a sword. I didn't want to be run through—she looked terribly nervous.

I waited for her to sit before settling down in one of the armchairs. It was overly soft, and I had to perch on the edge to keep from sinking. “You're an incarnation,” I said. “You are a physical

representation of a concept or ideal—in your case, Justice. You control and manipulate the perceptions of people around you.”

“I know,” said Justice. “I used it to stop one of the hunters. I made him feel it was wrong. The others I couldn’t affect.”

“Exactly,” I said, wondering again how powerful she was. To stop someone dead on the street... I had no clue of how to train her. We were doomed.

“Then what do you do?” She turned her face to me. I knew she couldn’t be looking at me, but I shifted uncomfortably all the same.

“We’re agents of the Guardian Council,” I said. “I’m the senior officer at this safe house. We keep those with unusual abilities protected.”

“From what?”

I was finding it harder and harder not to quote from the training book but that would sound trite and she was suspicious enough. One could hardly blame her. “You’re valuable. Do you know what a mark is?”

“No.”

“It’s a spell. A magician places it on you...” no need to give her all the details, she was a lady, after all, “and then you must obey any command the person who placed it on you, or the person they authorize, gives you. If you don’t, you may go mad or die horribly.”

The dark brows came together in concern, Justice’s hands clenching in her lap. “Why?”

“To control you. They can buy and sell you, and use you however they see fit. You could be forced to convince a court a murderer should walk free, even if he murdered in broad daylight on a busy street.” I ignored her immediate revulsion and went on, “Or people might wish to kill you. ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ and all that.”

“You’ll protect me from that?”

“We will. It’s what we do. For both incarnations and others with...unusual abilities. Natural magicians and so on.”

“I thought you needed a magician to place the spell.”

“Magic is usually learned rather than inherent,” I said. “Natural magicians can cast spells without the need of any sort of instruction.”

Madame came back into the room with Harold in tow. “Mister Lambert, you are neglecting your report,” she said, and glanced at Justice. “This is Mister Harold Carlton. He will answer whatever further questions you have. Will you want anything to eat?”

“If you please,” said Justice, politely. “I am quite hungry.”

“Will you still be needing that sword?”

“No, madame.”

I struggled up out of the chair. “I’ll be back as soon as I may.”

I have never written a report so quickly in my life—though the novelty of actually reporting a manifestation was huge, the fear Harold might make some sort of misstep and terrify the girl haunted me. As soon as I’d finished it, I ran out to the old pigeon coop. Our neighbors would have been shocked to learn it was occupied, and even more so at the nature of its occupants. At least if the damned thing fell out of the sky, they would be unable to read any message attached—it would be in code. It would also be in English of course, but being in an educated neighborhood meant *that* would be no obstacle.

I stepped into the dark confines of the coop, shuddering at the thick close air around me. The smell of oil and of pigeon surrounded me, and the burbling, mindless cooing was obscenely loud in the

confined space. Eager to get out, I seized one of the devices at random, got soundly pecked by the pigeon next to it, somehow managed to disentangle myself from the maddened bird, and staggered outside, clutching the metal skeleton in one hand. Its feathery covering was becoming worn in places and it rattled as I put it down. It was a horrible object, and one of the real pigeons must have perched directly above it. I wiped my hand as best I could on the grass. Then I stuffed the message into its little container on the machine's 'leg', and wound it. It made unpleasant creaking noises the entire time. They all did that, apparently, but I never was completely sanguine, and dreaded the day one of the devices failed midair. One wing caught me across the nose, and I threw it skyward, with more force than perhaps was strictly necessary. I have never liked clockwork pigeons.

I watched it out of sight, a small, white feathery thing that looked somewhat like a pigeon at this distance. A strong gust of wind followed it, bearing it further aloft. Then I went back into the house, desperately wanting to wash my hands. The aroma *clung*.

"The Council has been informed," I told all three of them, as I passed, trailing loosened feathers and the smell after me. "Harold, come with me. We need to check the house."

Harold nodded and got to his feet.

"Do you think she's first-tier?" he asked some time later, on the roof, as we muscled a slate bearing an uncommonly powerful combustion spell into place. It was one of Madame's own creations. Anyone climbing over the roof incautiously would burst into brief flames and then disintegrate into ash. It was one of seven spelled slates.

"I don't think so," I said, as we settled it into position, snugged between two of its fellows. I straightened up, pushing the hair out of my eyes. Smoke rose from another part of the city, across the river, and at a long distance, the pop-pop-pop of rifle fire, none of our concern. "At least, I hope not. I've no idea what we're supposed to do to train her in the first place. If she's got that kind of power, we'll all be mad before I figure it out."

Chapter Three

“All safe houses have at least three Guardians in residence at all times—a junior, a senior, and one whose duties are composed solely of the maintenance and preservation of the house and its safety.”

—A Handbook for the Recruit

Two days later, still sane, I jolted awake to a thunderous knocking on the door. Six thirty in the morning, according to my watch. I rolled over, reaching under my pillow for my revolver. I sincerely hoped it wasn't some sort of raid. I should hate to be arrested in my smallclothes. I listened.

As the door wasn't broken down, Madame's ancient flintlocks did not fire, and the National Guardian didn't come pounding into my bedroom, I assumed there was no immediate emergency and returned the revolver to its place under my pillow. It took me a while to gather the will to dress, shave, and make myself presentable. Whoever it was, they should know better than to frighten us so.

I still had plenty of spleen to vent by the time I came downstairs, though I made an effort to compose myself before looking over at our guest, a tall, lanky man with brown hair, blue eyes, and a smile so wide I immediately dismissed any possibility of his being honest.

“Mister Lambert,” he said, a deep, cheerful voice that mutilated my last name, turning it into ‘Lamb-Burrt’. He reached to take my hand, and I fought to keep myself from wincing as his handshake nearly crushed my fingers.

“I'm your new superior, at least for now.” He handed me his card, and I looked it over. To my intense dismay, it was legitimate. *Ivan Williams, Senior Guardian, Second Class.*

“Why are you here?” I asked, handing it back.

“I need your assistance with freeing an incarnation. She's one I'm responsible for—a second tier manifestation of Truth.”

Oh, he'd been responsible for her and he let her get caught, had he? He didn't look as if he'd put up much of a fight at all. My opinion of the man went down a bit more.

“Of course,” he continued, “the other reason I'm here is the Council wants a more senior Guardian than you in charge of things, especially since the powers of the new incarnation you found are uncertain, and you are, well, rather young. Better experience, and all that.” He smiled an indulgent smile. “Nothing personal, just orders,” he added, sounding as if he would be disappointed if I *weren't* offended.

“I understand entirely,” I responded, mustering up a smile even more insincere than his. Harold's expression declared it an absolute failure.

“Good, good!” Mister Williams pressed his hands together, still grinning. “I'm sure it will be a pleasure to work with you, Mister Lambert.”

“Likewise,” I managed, and then the yawn I'd been fighting for the last three minutes got its way, and I covered it clumsily with my hand. Mister Williams' expression went entirely offended.

“Forgive me,” I said. “I have not slept much of recent days.” That, and six in the morning was not civilized hour to call on anyone.

“Ah, of course. I can imagine the sort of stress you've been under. Looking after an incarnation in her first stages is quite hard on the nerves, especially for someone with your inexperience in the matter.” He made no mention of any of the other circumstances. Had he missed the entire coup? Maybe the newspaper was reading material too difficult for him. Maybe he had underlings to read it

for him.

“Who is it?” asked Justice, feeling her way down the stairs with the aid of the railing. I closed my mouth, which probably saved my career, as Mister Williams turned and said, “Ah, Justice! Well, now.”

Justice nodded in the direction of his voice, and, once she gained the bottom of the stairs, held out her hand. “Good to meet you, Mister...?”

“Williams,” he said, not taking the hand. “I’m sorry, my dear, I can’t have you read me. Too much classified information.” He smiled again. He probably thought it made him look attractive. It didn’t.

He was a senior Guardian, one so senior he wasn’t to be read. Now wouldn’t that be an absolute pleasure. I spent a moment wondering how he’d gotten to such a rank. He had to be slightly less stupid than he looked, or he’d be dead, but it was hard to imagine.

Justice hesitated, favoring him with a very doubtful expression, then nodded and stepped back. Williams acted as if he hadn’t even noticed her reluctance. Perhaps he hadn’t, I thought, folding my arms.

“No wings yet,” he said jovially. “That probably means you’re not a first-tier incarnation, my dear, and a good thing too. It would be far more dangerous that way. Of course, Mister Lambert has already told you this.” I winced inwardly at the repeated mutilation of my name.

“Mister Williams—” I started, but he interrupted me.

“Please, Mister Lambert, if we’re to be working closely together, we might as well use our Christian names. It’s Ivan.” Then he looked at me expectantly.

I hesitated. Certainly, it would mean he’d cease mistreating my name, but the familiarity galled me. I gritted my teeth, and said, “Julian.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Ivan, and then smiled. “I’m expecting quite a lot from you, Julian. The reports have made much of your abilities, despite your youth.”

“Have they?” He’d managed to make ‘youth’ sound like an embarrassing disease.

“Indeed! I expect it will be a delight working with you.” This time, he had the nerve to clap me on the back. I tried to move away from him as unobtrusively as possible. “To have risen as far as you have must have taken a great deal of resourcefulness. I hope to see you in action soon.”

“Now, Julian, Mrs. Eavers,” and he mutilated her name as well, “I want you to show me around the house, show me what sorts of protections you have up, all of that. You’ll need some additions now you’re caring for a young incarnation.”

* * * *

If I disliked him before, the time we spent going over the house made me wish I could throttle him. He was snide about some things, condescending about others, and dismissive of any suggestion that didn’t come from him. Even Madame’s patience was beginning to fray, and her responses became briefer and sharper. Ivan didn’t notice, and at last Madame lost her temper entirely and, with a comment about getting dinner finished, vanished.

This left me to deal with Ivan. I suppose I managed well enough, all things considered, as he didn’t take noisy and immediate offense. I finally managed to pass him off to Harold, and retreated back to the kitchen to speak with Madame.

Her first words to me were, “The things in the sink need washing.” I knew better than to argue. She was in astounding ill temper, and would make it an order if I hesitated. I set about the task and tried

not to appear reluctant.

“Our new guest seems to have made a similar impression on you as he has on me,” I said at last.

“Indeed—he has even fewer manners than you do.” A loud clang, as a pot was put down rather too hard.

“You could say we need to preserve one of the rooms for the incarnation he’s lost, and give him the china closet.”

She snorted. “Leaving all the poor china at his mercy? It’d be Harold who would have to move.”

I sighed and contemplated the pot scrubber, startlingly vicious for its innocuous employment.

“Then I’d have to deal with him at close quarters.”

“Have you done anything recently that would vex the Council?”

I bit back my irritation that she assumed Ivan’s arrival was due to a lapse of *my* manners. “Nothing of the sort.”

She snorted, but, to my relief, did not press the matter. I finished the washing in silence, and made for the door before she could give me another task.

“There’s something for you in the cupboard there,” she said before I crossed the threshold. I turned and blinked at her in incomprehension and she jerked her chin at the one closest to the door. I opened it.

There, in a little square of paper, was a fat, very pink, very tiny marzipan pig.

“You are a goddess among Guardians, Madame,” I said, and picked up the pig, being careful to keep the paper between it and my damp fingers.

“Teach you to lend a hand about the place more often,” she said. “Besides, you dealt with him longer. Thought you deserved it. Now get out.”

Cradling the pig in its paper, I did as ordered. I found the parlor unoccupied and settled down in an armchair, regarding my present with great pleasure. I had a fondness for the stuff bordering on the absurd—I first encountered marzipan when I was fourteen, in a decoration on a cake, and had adored it since. It wasn’t as if I had enough of an income of my own to afford it on a regular basis, so it remained a rare treat.

I took a bite of the pig, enjoying the mild sweet graininess of it. I could almost imagine a faint flavor of peppermint to it, overshadowed by the almond. I had nowhere I had to be immediately, so I made it last, taking only tiny nibbles, just enough to keep the flavor fresh in my mouth.

When there was nothing left of it, I tucked the paper in my pocket and went upstairs.

There I found Justice earnestly endeavoring to pick the lock on Ivan’s door with a hairpin. She was not succeeding, and didn’t notice my approach until I was directly behind her.

“You shouldn’t do that,” I said. She started, hid the hairpin in her sleeve, and scrambled to her feet.

“I—” she started, flushing. A wave of guilt washed over me—who was I to be lecturing Justice on right and wrong? She certainly knew what she was about. She could not make a mistake.

“Stop that,” I said, and the guilt subsided. “Lock-picking is useful and may save your skin someday, but you should not be trying to spy on a Guardian. If you were to be taken, your captors would know everything you do about us.”

I didn’t have to finish. Its meaning sank in quickly, and she flushed again and fidgeted.

“Fine,” she said after a while, almost petulant, “but I don’t like him, and I don’t trust him, and I think he’s hiding something.”

She was newly manifested. I’d been told they could take strange fancies in the early stages. “I don’t like either. We have to put up with him.”

She snorted. “Fine. Do you have anything else I could practice on, then?”

“I could leave my door locked, if you’d like.” It wasn’t as if I were in the habit of keeping things c

importance there.

She cocked her head to one side, then nodded. “Thank you. What about the sword?”

“What sword?” I felt a fool the moment I said it, as it was rather difficult to forget nearly losing my head. “Oh. Ah. Harold might be better at teaching that.” Swordplay had been in our training, but it hadn’t seemed immediately useful, and I had paid it little mind at the time. I’d never had cause to regret it before now—truncheon and revolver and knife had always been sufficient. Harold, on the other hand, was a gentleman.

“I asked,” she said. “He refused.”

Harold also had a gentleman’s sensibilities, damn him. “I’ll have a word with him. In the meantime, you can practice on my door and ask Madame if she has any tricks she’d like to teach you.”

She nodded. “Thank you.” She tucked the hairpin back in her hair and turned with a rustle of petticoats. There was some hesitation to her movements—after several days, she still wasn’t accustomed to weighty and cumbersome skirts.

“You shouldn’t encourage her,” said Ivan, as she vanished down the stairs. I flinched, startled. “Incarnation or no, you should still consider her feminine sensibilities.”

“The hunters won’t,” I told him, angry I hadn’t noticed his approach. “Everything she learns makes our jobs a little easier, and gives her a better chance at escape should we fail.”

“Her mind is that of a child. She’s only three days old. You shouldn’t frighten her so.”

“Did she look frightened to you? If I were in her position, I should find it a comfort.”

He snorted, and my hackles went up at his derision. “You’re very idealistic.”

I took a breath, and said, “Excuse me. I need to speak with Mister Carlton.”

A moment as he connected first and last names. “Oh. Harold. Understood.”

“Indeed.” I turned my back on him, half-expecting an objection for my rudeness. None was forthcoming.

I approached Harold with some trepidation. I didn’t want to insult him, and maintaining his good opinion was all the more vital with an incompetent superior—under Ivan’s command, our lives were in more danger than ever before.

“Harold?”

“Yes?” Harold leaned back in his chair from the book he’d been reading. Judging by its girth, it was either the Bible or a book of practical medicine. I hoped the latter—it had a far more immediate application.

“Do you think you could teach Justice to use that sword of hers?”

“If you think it appropriate.” I didn’t like the note of caution in his voice.

“I’d prefer that she be able to defend herself. Liberty could.” It was a bit of protocol our handbooks were maddeningly mum on. “Besides, she almost had my head off the other day. I’d prefer to avoid a repeat.”

“If you insist,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, and with that good deed accomplished, retired to the drawing room to read all the bits of the handbook having to do with new incarnations, and wish I hadn’t eaten the marzipan so quickly.

* * * *

I didn’t have to deal overmuch with Ivan until the next morning. It was after breakfast, and I was

concerned—Justice had staggered off, sat abruptly in an armchair, and fallen deeply asleep, in a position that must have been terribly uncomfortable.

“It’s quite normal for the young incarnations to sleep a great deal. I should have thought you would be familiar with it.” Ivan shrugged. He glanced at Justice, who mumbled something and turned over.

“Oh.” Well, yes, incarnations were supposed to sleep a lot in the first week or so, but I had only read about it, and never imagined it being so drastic. She had only just woken up, after all.

“She’s likely to dream a lot, too,” added Ivan. “About past wrongs, and all that. It’s likely to be unnerving.”

I’d read about that as well—we’d *all* read about it. There was no need for him to tell me in that supercilious tone of voice, as if he expected me to have slept through all my classes.

A feathery thump outside made us both look out the window. A mechanical pigeon flopped around in the mud as its clockwork wound down. Wondering exactly what the Council wanted this time, I went out to collect it.

I got buffeted by a wing for my pains. Ivan’s amusement was clearly audible through the door. I wrestled its wings back into place, gritting my teeth, wishing I could throw it at him. It smelled as if it had flown through several smoke stacks on its way here, and smudged soot and mud all over my cuff. On closer examination, I found one of the little glass eyes had fallen out, exposing the gleam of the metal skull. I wondered again at how the Council had managed to create something even stupider than a real pigeon.

Once the clockwork’s struggles ceased, I pried open the little container on its leg, removed its contents, then put the machine back in the coop. Ivan was waiting for me at the door of the house, along with Madame. He held out a hand for the little roll of paper, and, irritated, I gave it to him.

He read it. His eyes widened, and he read it again, his lips moving slightly. Then he handed it to Madame, whose eyebrows rose as she scanned the paper. At last, she gave it to me.

My reaction was, I fear, much the same as Ivan’s. I had to read it twice for the meaning to sink in, and then I looked up at Madame, almost certain she would say it was a joke.

“So you’re her permanent Guardian,” said Madame, raising her eyebrows. Ivan turned and left the room without another word.

“I suppose so,” I said, allowing the surprise to creep into my voice. “I would have thought they’d assign her to Ivan. He does have more experience...”

“Where do you think he got that experience?” she asked. She was wearing what was as close to a smile as she ever got.

“I...suppose you’re right,” I said.

“In any case,” said Madame as she folded her arms, “it seems you’ll have your work cut out for you.”

I nodded again. “We all will.”

“Hm. It’s good Harold is here.” Madame took the orders, flicked them open again, read them through, nodding every so often.

“Julian’s been assigned as her Guardian?” asked Harold, coming down the stairs, Ivan behind him. I nodded. Harold opened his mouth to say something.

Justice sat bolt upright, tears dampening her blindfold. All four of us jumped at the sudden movement.

“They shot him!” she cried. Then she folded up into sobs, her shoulders shaking hard. I went to her and took one of her hands in mine. So this was what they meant by nightmares. I swallowed, unsure of what to do. I felt Ivan’s eyes on the back of my neck. That didn’t help.

“They shot him,” she repeated. “He wasn’t doing anything wrong, just his duty, and they called him a traitor and took him and shot him.” She turned her bandaged eyes to me as her hands tightened around my fingers. “You wouldn’t let that happen to you, would you? Would you?”

“Of course not,” I said, lying through my teeth. “I’m your Guardian, and I’ll always remain here. I’ll always be here if you need me—that firmly excludes being shot.”

“I wasn’t there,” she said, distracted. “How do I remember this? I wasn’t there...”

“You’re a new manifestation. It’s to be expected.” I kept my voice soft, as if I were talking to a frightened animal. I tried patting her hand, feeling this was expected.

She didn’t respond, flopped over again and went back to sleep.

“Poor thing,” said Madame. I extracted my hand as best I could and rose, wondering if we should take her back up to her room.

“At least she’s not a first-tier incarnation,” Harold said.

“A good thing she isn’t,” I said. Especially since Justice, unlike others such as Wisdom or Fortitude, was supposed to be quite active once fully manifested. If the lock-picking was any indication, our incarnation was certainly living up to expectations.

Being active, she was all the more valuable. We’d be far more likely to fail simply because of the number of people trying to capture her. They would only have to be lucky once.

All of us had a particular horror of the fate in store for a captured incarnation, a dread stronger even than that of our own deaths. Marking, agonizing and, if botched, fatal, had to be done while the victim was conscious.

“There are three of us here,” Ivan said calmly, examining his nails with little apparent interest. “Even if Justice were a first-tier incarnation, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

* * * *

“‘It wouldn’t be a problem’,” I spat, much later that day, having escaped the house with Harold on a walk. “Our friend the senior Guardian says it ‘wouldn’t be a problem’. The man never ceases to astound.”

“He might be right,” said Harold, tentatively, watching his boots. The weather had taken a turn for the unpleasant, so we didn’t have to worry about eavesdroppers as we went. “He must have attained that rank somehow.”

“Yes, by sitting behind a desk.”

“I think you’re too critical of him.”

“If anything, I’m being too lenient. He’s a useless, preening idiot.”

Harold shivered as the wind rose, tucking his coat more firmly around himself. I didn’t—the wind didn’t bother me. “He had the gall to leave a book on manners on my place at table. An entire section on table etiquette. As if I could afford a banana, much less figure out how to peel one with a *knife* and a *fork*.”

“Manners,” said Harold sternly, “have a purpose, Julian, and as much as I dislike to admit it, yours certainly are lacking. Even with your background, it’s inexcusable.”

“Better a boor who can do his duty than a preening fop who wouldn’t know Justice from Liberty,” snapped back. “Are you suggesting I neglect my obligations to soothe Ivan’s offended sensibilities?”

“No, but he does have some reason in it. What if you had to pose as a gentleman?”

I snorted. “I’d find something else. No matter what Ivan says. ‘It shouldn’t be a problem’.” It

wasn't a very good imitation, and made Harold sigh.

~~"It doesn't matter," he pointed out. "We have to help him. It's our orders, and our duty."~~

"I know that," I snarled, and rammed my hands deeper into my pockets.

"What rotten weather. I'll be glad when we get home. Whatever possessed you to want to take a walk now, Julian?"

"I like it."

"You're a fool," he replied, stopping at our door and fumbling at the lock.

"Not half as much a one as Ivan."

"We have to deal with him." Harold sounded as if he were talking to a child. I shoved past him into the house, only to be immediately confronted by Ivan.

"Good news," he told us. "One of my informants has just located the nest where Truth's held."

Chapter Four

“With thaumaturgical reinforcement, and the introduction of a respiratory system as is found in vertebrates, there is no reason a large number of organisms could not be so enlarged. Various members of Hexapoda, for example...”

—Doctors Gerald Bernstold and Erik Vossen, presentation to the Royal Society, 1827

“Meet me back down here in twenty minutes, and be ready to leave. I want to take a look at this nest before we go in.”

“Go in?” My voice sounded high and shocked even to my ears. “I—” I cut myself off, not even sure how to articulate the sheer stupidity of what he’d said.

“I never figured you for a coward,” Ivan said, condescending and disappointed. “Really, Julian, I would have thought you’d be bolder than this.”

“You don’t go into a nest with only three people!” There could be anywhere from fifty to two hundred hunters in a nest—it was where incarnations were brought to be marked, stored and sold. They had magicians there, and monsters.

None of us save Madame had a scrap of magic past the bottled spells dispensed by the council, and those were only for tracking, illusions and brief unconsciousness. The spell was suspended in water, and the entire vial had to be thrown so it would burst over its target. The range was only their bearer’s throw, while a magician only needed to see you to spell you. Madame’s only specialty lay in fixed defensive spells, and those could not be moved.

“Trust me, Julian, I know what I’m doing. I’ve been doing it rather longer than you’ve been alive.”

I made no attempt to hide my annoyance at the last dig about my age. As unfortunate as it was, he was quite right. Maybe he knew something we didn’t.

“What are you so certain can protect us?” Damned if I’d be polite about it.

“Our wits,” he said. “Now go on, Julian, get your things. We need to leave directly.”

There went that hope. Maybe his unnatural luck would save us. He was still breathing, after all.

I pushed past him, headed up the stairs to my room. All the things I needed sat in a neat pile on the trunk at the foot of my bed—truncheon, revolver, pouch for spells, with carefully constructed barrier so none would shatter. I frowned at them, wondering how they’d gotten there.

“Julian?” It was Justice’s voice, and I glanced over my shoulder. She stood in the doorway, her head turned toward me. “What is Ivan planning?”

“He wants to go after Truth’s incarnation tonight,” I said. “We’re going to examine the nest now.” Justice frowned.

“Isn’t that rather foolish? Aren’t nests—”

“Filled with hunters. Yes.” *I’ll do my best not to come back dead* was a true statement, but hardly comforting one, and I refrained from voicing it. “Which is why we’re leaving Madame here with you.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t do anything stupid?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Orders,” I said, having tucked the various implements in their proper places, and shrugged my coat back on.

“I suppose offering to come with you would be an idiotic thing to do? I can defend myself. Harold says I’m quite good.”

A handful of hours of practice were far from enough, even if she did have a knack. I wondered how to discourage that line of thought without sounding too condescending. “If it all goes badly, we’ll only

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