Chapter 1

"Dawn is the death of night."

The first scarlet glow of morning was touching the horizon, slicing the edge off the black sky. The stars began to dim, icy brightness fading, diminishing to bare pinpoints, devoured by the day.

"And so, the dawn must die."

The speaker was a tall elf, his lanky frame dressed in deep blue robes covered in embroidery, flowing figures and sigils. Long silver hair hung in braids down his back and shoulders, framing a sharp face, curves connecting planes. He stood on top of the tallest tower in the city of Nychta, on the west coast of Ivernia, facing east, the dawn light touching his pale skin, glowing on his hair, reflecting in scarlet glints from green eyes.

For a moment he remained still, breathing slowly, regarding the sky, before turning to a small table beside him. A crown rested there, or what resembled a crown, a perfect circle of pure platinum, deeply engraved with arcane symbols, set with brilliant clear gems that glittered like the stars in the sky above. It was too large to fit comfortably on either a human or elf head, but then, that wasn't its purpose. The elf picked it up, turned once again to face the dawn.

A stone pedestal stood before him, a small pyramid with the peak cut off, the sides engraved with sigils like those that decorated his robes. He reached forward and placed the crown into a circular groove cut into the flat surface.

Light leapt out of the crown, not a white light, not colored. It was a dark light, a glow that wasn't a glow, a light that didn't illuminate. A wind rose, a gust coming down from above, striking the tower's surface with an audible thump. The air swirled around the elf, and he lifted his arms and began to chant.

The dark light continued to grow, moving with the wind, agitated by the elf's words. It formed a column, spinning around the crown, reaching upward, spreading wider and wider. The elf's voice rose in intensity and volume, words

driving into the glowing cloud. Bolts and slashes of an impossibly deeper hue appeared, flashing to the sides, dragging the column outwards, sending it arcing over the city.

Cries of fear rose from the street as the inhabitants of Nychta caught sight of what was happening in the sky. The circle of darkness reached the city walls, seeped over the parapet, above the heads of the guards who cowered there. With a final rush and massive flashings of the sable lightning, the edges of the sorcerous glow drove to the ground, and with an audible crack, the dome of darkness was complete. The wind died, the lightning ceased. The elf lowered his arms, gazed up into the new sky that encompassed the city. Night had returned to Nychta, the stars once again sparkling, though not in any constellation the citizens knew. The dawn was banished, the night ruled, the celestial bodies seeming to flicker and dance in celebration.

New tendrils of dark light oozed out of the crown, now in deep shades of blue and purple. They slipped off the pedestal, most of them moving to the edges of the tower and sliding down the outside. One slithered over to the elf. He watched as it came to his feet, circled his legs, entered through his skin, and moved up his body. He cried out, feeling it as a cold wave, ice water seeping through his veins. His clothing took on some of the strange glow; as it filtered down his sleeves and moved over his hands, his skin turned from pale white to a deep, indigo blue. His eyes changed from green to sparkling darkness, and his vision cleared, growing more acute, giving him the clarity normal on a sunny day at noon. His hair remained silver, the shade altering subtly to match the brightness of the stars. The colors of his robes transformed, shifting through different dark shades of blue, black, and purple.

With a last rush of power, the magic spun away. He staggered a little, put his hands to his head, not sure what he was feeling — was it the sudden vacuum created, the dissipation of power, or a sign of the change? He breathed deeply, rubbing his temples, willing the residue of vertigo away.

He straightened, shook his head; he had no time for this, he just had to deal with it. Turning, he strode to the stairs leading into the tower and descended into the palace. He walked the corridors, passing through wide rooms, where the

walls, floors, and ceilings had turned from gray and brown stone to onyx.

Servants and guards stared at him fearfully; none had gone through the changes he had, though the guards' armor had transformed to shining black steel. He ignored them all, turning down a final hallway, its floor covered with carpets, the walls hung with long tapestries, depicting scenes of darkness and night: deep forests, mountain ravines, nighttime cities.

He came to the tall doors of the throne room. The guards stationed there bowed as he passed through.

Elves filled the space, all of them changed as he was, skin a deep indigo, eyes and hair sparkling slightly. Room was left through the center of the crowd, and he strode through it across the floor, past the heads that lowered as he went.

Reaching the dais that sat against the end wall, a series of steps leading up to a wide platform, he sank to his knees, leaned forward, and touched his head to the flagstones between his outstretched arms.

"My Lady Nyx, it is done."

"So I see. And well done, it is."

She rose from her throne, a wide seat of writhing darkness, carved in swirling clouds and branches of ebony, dark blue and deep purple. But as grand as the throne was, it was barely noticeable beside her who stood there.

She was tall, strong, neither young nor old, but with an air about her of power, ancient power, an aura of someone, or something, that had simply existed forever. Her robes were as multicolored as those of anyone in the room, but somehow of deeper and richer hues. Her hair was silver, flowing in long curls, her pupils black, irises bright mercury. Unlike those gathered around, her skin was the palest white, without a hint of color: no pink, no rose, no flush, no bruise or shadow. The twin bows of her lips were as black as the night sky outside. She was the only living creature present who wasn't an elf, her ears lacking points, her features even more beautiful than those around her; a terrible, demanding, dominating beauty.

She looked down at the elf kneeling before her.

"Rise, Jamison."

The elf came to his feet, head bowed.

"You may regard me."

His head rose, and he looked into the dark shine of her eyes. "My lady, you do me too much honor."

"Perhaps." Her lips curled into a slight smile. "But you've succeeded in the task I gave you. You have helped me expand my world." She strode to the edge of the dais, gazed out over her acolytes. Male and female, young and old, heads slightly bowed. "All of you, regard me."

They did, heads fearfully raised, almost flinching at the cold, deathly beauty above them. She laughed lightly.

"Ah, my people, my true believers. Are you afraid? There is no need, as all is done as I asked. The night has come to Nychta, as it should, as it was meant to be. A new universe, built by me, with your help, where the darkness may reign." She strode slowly across the dais. "I could have made something myself, from the raw chaos that exists outside of this place. But, this is so much more interesting, what exists here, there is so much power in what my daughter created, in what she dreamed. It's filled with the changes wrought by the human mind, by all of you and every other creature descended from humanity. It flows through the chaos magic here, making something so much richer, so much more alive than what moves through the void." She stopped pacing, nodded. "And now we've sliced off a piece of that, and changed it to suit ourselves. To suit me. And that is perfect. All of you in this room are transformed, given more, made a part of what I am. You are my guardians against the day, your skin the hue of the sky that lines the horizon just before sunrise, the last barrier of the night that battles the light. Do you feel it?"

"Yes, Lady Nyx," came the murmured replies.

"Is it good?"

"Yes, Lady Nyx."

"Excellent." She turned to Jamison. "Come, we have much to discuss."

She walked down the stairs from the dais, strolled through the crowd of bowed heads, passed through an open set of doors, Jamison following silently in her wake. The doors, tall panels of dark wood covered with images of stars and moons, swung shut behind them.

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Nyx swept into her chambers, Jamison following. The rooms were decorated like the rest of the palace, all in black, blue, purple and silver, the walls and floor smooth stone, the ceiling a carved tangle of dark weavings. She strode to an arched window, open to the night, leaned on the sill and looked out.

"It's perfect."

"It is, my lady. I no longer sense the chaos well that sits outside our walls. All I know now is your power, your chaos magic, and its darkness."

"Yes." She turned to him. "I've taken what my daughter created, that my granddaughter Mischief broke, and built this." She closed her eyes, raised her arms. "All those eons in the void, sensing nothing but the moving currents of the universe. Why did none of us create a place like this? Because we're not dreamers; it took one such to have the imagination to escape the void. Now she's shown us the way, and it's so much more alive, full, vibrant." She opened her eyes, lowered her arms. "I thought I felt the need for something before; now I know what that was — to simply, actually *feel*." With a whisper of air, she stood beside him. "It's time for your reward, time for you to taste the changes I've made within you."

He closed his eyes, trembled slightly. "Please, my lady, please…."

She chuckled. "Does that mean you want it, or fear it?"

He licked his lips, swayed slightly. "I…I want it, my lady."

"Feeling the effects of the change, I see; I'm sure it will go away, and won't diminish the pleasure. Anyhow, we both deserve it."

She took him to the wide bed, where she took her time, tasting and savoring her creation. And her creation, from what she could tell, was more than pleased with the attention.

Not that he'd have been able to describe any of it; even before the change, these times with her consumed him, and little of conscious thought passed through his mind. But now, she was all: the night, the cold, the darkness. Thin threads of ecstasy, pain, terror, all wound through and around him. The odd vertigo he'd been feeling ever since he completed the ritual on the tower was redoubled, and he barely knew where he was or what he did. It was good, in a

strange way he didn't even try to understand. A goddess blessed him, and that was enough.

She lay beside him, one translucent white finger trailing over the blue skin of his chest. "One last thing," she said. "Where are the tarot cards I made for you?"

"I…I don't know, my lady. I don't know how to call them. I was a mage, not a shaman."

"They should have joined with you during the ritual, and you should be able to recall them with a thought. But…." She frowned. "I can't sense them within you." She sat up. "Fetch them."

He rose, picked up his discarded robe, and slipped it over his shoulders. Padding across the room, he stepped through a doorway into his own quarters, crossed that room, and passed out the doors that lead into the temple. It was empty now, a wide, open space lined with rows of seats, Nyx's empty dais at one end facing them.

He went to a large chest that sat near a wall. He reached down to grasp the lock that kept it safe, that only opened to the magic in his touch, and saw that the hasp that secured it was broken away from the wood. Frowning, he lifted the lid; the chest was empty.

He froze. Someone had broken into the temple and laid their hands on things no one should have known about but himself and Nyx. How? He looked up, around at the doors that lead into this place. No guards secured this room; no one in their right mind would steal from the temple of the goddess of the night. At least, so they'd thought. But, apparently, there were those in the city who had a tad more brass in their makeup.

"They're gone?" Her voice, low, crackling with anger, came from behind. He spun, found Nyx standing there, her eyes wide, small streaks of lightning sparking within them. "You're so careless with my gifts?"

He fell to his knees. "My lady, I never believed anyone would have the temerity to steal from your temple!"

"Then you're a fool." She smirked. "Perhaps I should find the thief, and make them my high priest, if they're so brave and smart enough to get in here. But then, apparently, it wasn't that hard, was it?"

"My lady, I'll find whoever did this!"

"You do that. Retrieve what they stole."

He bowed hurriedly. "Yes, my lady. Immediately."

"And ensure such an intrusion doesn't happen again!"

"Certainly, my lady."

"Remember Jamison, who you are, and who I am." She pointed a long, white finger at him. "I raised you up to be my chief acolyte. I gave you magic when you had none. As long as you please me, all will be well. Unless I get bored with you, of course. Or" — she smiled — "you fail me."

"I…." He swallowed. "Of course, my lady."

He rose, strode off toward his room, hearing the crackle behind him, knowing what was coming before the small lightning bolt struck him in his backside. He stifled a yelp of pain, kept his hands down, kept moving, not hurrying any more than he had when he left her. Her low laugh followed him. "Getting used to that, are we? It's an old family punishment. I'll have to come up with something new. I'll consider that while you're gone."

"Thank you, my lady. I'll look forward to it."

She chuckled dryly. "As will I, dear Jamison, as will I."

Chapter 2

An ogre fist is a solid weapon, even on a backhand, and a fist attached to a drunken ogre is something in particular to be avoided. Perhaps that thought drifted through the mind of the bouncer as he flew through the air before landing with a crash on a table full of mugs of beer. Table, beer, and the customers seated there were all thrown in several directions.

Cantor and Robin had just finished a tune. They sat on a small stage in a corner of The Leaping Centaur, surrounded by the sweaty crowd. It was a hot summer night, and the tavern was packed. The windows and doors were wide

open to catch a little fresh air, without much success. Too many patrons, both humans and creatures, making too much noise, dancing, singing, arguing, and, yes, getting into the occasional brawl.

Robin lowered her flute, shook her head. “Could we not find some more refined places to play?”

Cantor chuckled. “Why? It’s a lively crowd; what more could a minstrel ask for?”

“I’ve had enough of lively. Are there no wealthy lords or merchants who need entertaining, whose halls would be a little less raucous?”

Cantor shrugged. “Well, we can look. Those kinds of people are around, and they hire minstrels. But I’ve always enjoyed the energy in places like this.”

“Energy? That’s what you call it?”

“Yes. I was brought up playing in taverns. My parents taught me not to judge; everyone is here for a good time, and that’s enough.”

A burly fellow, another of the bouncers, fair skinned, his hair a long mane of yellow curls, sat right beside the stage. He laughed loudly at Cantor and Robin’s exchange. He’d been sitting there the entire night, only occasionally rising to do his actual job; apparently, it was more enjoyable to drink mug after mug of ale while making eyes at Robin and directing suggestive remarks towards her. She’d been ignoring him, as she usually did to such men and women, a steady stream of them being inevitably attracted to her petite frame and sweet face.

Cantor smiled. He knew better than to step in and ‘protect her’. He collected his own set of admirers, male and female, but they tended to be more circumspect in their approaches, him being considerably taller and stronger than his diminutive partner. Not that she was less aggressive about shutting hecklers down, it was just that they seemed to find her rebuttals easier to ignore.

John, the tavern keeper, skin deep brown, hair a ball of tight black curls, was glaring at the bouncer. He bellowed across the room. “Freddy, move your lazy ass and do your job.”

Freddy stood, smiled at Robin. “Ogres are pretty loud, ain’t they? I’ll just go ask him to shut up.” He smirked at Cantor. “Maybe we can talk more when I get back, if your fella there don’t mind.”

Robin rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t aware that we were talking.”

Cantor leaned on his guitar and waved a hand. “And I’m not her ‘fella‘.”

The big man smiled. “Well, that makes things easier, don’t it?”

Robin sighed. She and Cantor watched his heavy body pushing through the crowd towards the table where the ogre sat.

Cantor shook his head. “Chaordics. Whatever the angels do to them seems to screw up their common sense.”

“Or,” replied Robin, “the angels just choose idiots to start with.”

“Good point.”

“You’d think that when they were creating magical warriors, some of that magic would include brains. Though, I guess if you’re going to be a berserker, common sense gets in the way.” She waved a hand towards where the bouncer was leaning into the ogre. “I mean, would you stick your nose up to an ogre’s like that?”

The ogre’s fist slammed down on the table in front of him. He surged to his feet.

The bouncer stepped back, reached into a pouch around his waist, and pulled out a clay vial. He raised it, thumb resting on the stopper. The tavern fell silent, everyone watching, wondering, fearful. Those closest moved away.

The ogre hesitated, looking from the vial to the grinning face of the bouncer. Then he carefully lowered his hands and walked away through the crowd, out the tavern door. The big man laughed, tucked the vial away in his pouch, and strolled back to the stage, where he stood, hands on hips, grinning.

“Well, darlin’, that’s how a man handles trouble; no one wants to fight a Chaordic pumped up with alchemical juice.” He leaned on the stage, looking into Robin’s face. “Maybe we could go for a walk outside, ‘cause you know you’ll be safe with me.” He glanced over at Cantor. “Unlike some folks.”

Cantor’s eyebrows rose. “Looks like this could be fun.”

The Chaordic’s broad lips curled into a sneer. “You think so?” He reached for Robin’s arm.

“Oh, I know so.”

Robin smacked the Chaordic’s hand away. “Buddy, you’re not getting the

message, are you?"

A nasty grin slipped across his face. "I'd say you're not listenin' to *me*."

He lunged forward, aiming a wide slap at her head. But before his hand made contact, Robin shot off her stool, her left arm blocking the blow. Her knee flew up and caught the Chaordic right on the chin. His head snapped back, and he fell, sprawling on the floor, where he lay still.

Robin spun, pointed her flute at Cantor. "Sin's wages. Were you going to just sit there?"

He shrugged. "I'd have stepped in if I had to." He looked at the figure on the floor, who was starting to move, making small noises of pain. "Which, apparently, wasn't necessary."

Robin lowered her flute. "No, I guess not."

John pushed through the crowd, followed by two more bouncers. He glared at the Chaordic. "Freddy, you're an ass. And you're fired." The two bouncers dragged the prone figure to his feet.

Freddy groaned. "Won't look so smart when I drop a potion."

"Brainless chunk of meat!" replied John. "I'm already going to talk to the head of the guild. You want to make it worse, go right ahead. Get out."

Freddy rubbed his chin, glared at John, Robin and Cantor, then strode slowly out of the inn, pushing people out of his way.

Cantor turned to John. "Do we need to worry about him?"

"No, probably not. He's not a bad sort, really, when he's sober. Just a little too drunk, and not too bright."

"Yeah," replied Cantor, "we were discussing that."

"Sure. Well, fun's over. Music."

Cantor watched as John and the bouncers headed to the bar. "You know," he said to Robin with a laugh, "if you'd just turn into your dragon self, the ultimate badass, you'd have none of these kinds of problems at all."

"Right," she replied. "Not only do I not like the thought of being the 'ultimate badass', I wouldn't fit on the stage, much less get through the door, and I don't think John would be happy to have a dragon in his bar."

"I know, I know. Just kidding. Though, you never seem to mind showing

people that you really are a badass, and a singing dragon would be a big draw."

"Well, having a reputation as being a badass is fine, but I'd rather not have people being terrified of me. And the joke about the singing dragon is getting stale. That might have worked when I was an angel, but it won't work now, and we don't need the notoriety."

"Ha. No, we don't. Could you even change to a dragon here? Can you feel the chaos well?"

She closed her eyes, concentrated for a moment. "No. The nearest well is out in the forest, quite a ways away."

"That's what I thought." He gestured to the floor where Freddy had ended up. "You do seem to be more fierce these days. A little dragon coming through, maybe."

She chuckled. "Maybe."

"MUSIC!" bellowed John from the bar.

Cantor waved at the tavern keeper. He checked the tuning of his guitar, then launched into a song. Robin came in on the flute at the second bar, and with the magic of the music, the tavern was back to normal, people and creatures dancing, singing, and drinking.

Cantor glanced over at his partner. A bead of sweat was running down the perfect straight line of her nose, and more was gathering on her forehead. But despite the heat, the noise, the loud patrons, her stated dislike of the venue, laughter ran in her eyes, a flow of happiness at being here and doing this. Whatever complaints she had about the place, playing gave her as much joy as it did him.

Making music with her had lifted his own happiness to a new level. He still wasn't sure what was going on between them, and he didn't think she did either; neither of them were willing to talk about it. She was so like him, cautious with other people; both had their reasons and history for being wary about getting close to others. For now, they were partners in music and in other things, more family than friends, along with Cantor's Uncle Seamus, his only surviving relation by blood, who'd raised Cantor after his parents died. Right now, that was enough, more than Cantor had enjoyed for many years.

If there were any doubts between them, they were around the other jobs Cantor did from time to time. One of which was supposed to happen tonight, and it wouldn't be easy. Would she come along? More, would she decide in the end to stay with someone like him, take the risk of being around a thief?

She finished singing a verse, looked over, smiled. He laughed, came in with her on the chorus, and the entire tavern came in with him, shouting out the words, banging fists and boots in time. All of it enough to drive thoughts of the future from his mind, and pull him back to the moment, the music, and the woman singing beside him.

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They took a break at a small table off to the side of the stage. A man-wolf server brought two fresh pints of ale. They guzzled long drinks, wiped the sweat off their brows, and relaxed into a comfortable silence.

Robin considered the scene. Growing up in the plains, under the rule of Lord Constantine, this mix of creatures and humans would never have happened. Any creatures that appeared there, by walking, flying, or crawling from a chaos well, were immediately murdered by Constantine's soldiers and priests, the Order of Dialectics. Robin had been a member of that order, though she'd never had to actually kill a creature. She hadn't been unhappy in her life, but neither had it brought her much joy.

Then the unthinkable happened; entirely against her will, she'd been pulled into a chaos well by Erebus, the ancient god of darkness, who'd transformed her into an angel. He'd done a terrible job of that. Cantor had been sent to her; she was supposed to do what angels did, and enhance his nascent shamanic powers into something much stronger. All she'd managed to do was create a set of rogue tarot cards for him that would later cause all kinds of magical mayhem. Erebus then forged a sorcerous bond between them, resulting in Cantor unwillingly dragging Robin out of the forest, back to his hometown of Gallagher. Mischief, trickster goddess of the Medials, had been investigating the strange occurrences Erebus had instigated; she showed up in Gallagher, looking for Robin, and after questioning her and finding no fault in the young woman, had changed the broken angel back into a human.

Cantor and Robin had then wound their way across the Medials together to take Robin home, battling threats in the monster filled wilderness, only to see Robin imprisoned on arrival. Cantor, aided by a few friends, had rescued her. They'd then sought out Erebus where he hid in a secret cave, which resulted in him once again transforming Robin, this time into a dragon shifter. He'd subsequently been caught out and restrained by Mischief and Mother, the ruler and creator of this corner of the universe.

As a plains dweller and Dialectic, Robin had hated magic. Constantine's society didn't embrace the chaotic power that flowed through the world; the Dark Lord actively discouraged any magic use by not only killing the creatures, but by burning alive any human caught using the stuff. Dialectics only used magic to detect other magic users, to force them into the order, or mark them for execution. None of this history was, of course, conducive to Robin loving being in the Medials, or being around creatures, and especially not being an angel or a dragon. But because of what had happened to her, she couldn't return to the plains, not unless she embraced a future as a pile of ashes. And truth to tell, she didn't really want to; she'd learned how much of what she'd been taught was a lie, that the creatures were no more evil than humans were, and that magic and alchemy were useful tools indeed.

She glanced over at Cantor. She was still sorting out her feelings about her partner. He was a handsome enough fellow, of a good height, a solid breadth through his shoulders, with hazel eyes, and curly brown hair that reached his back. He carried himself well and easily, confident, with a lazy smile that warmed her when sent in her direction. They were mostly comfortable together, not without verbal sparring; their banter grew a little sharp. But she felt closer to Cantor than she had to any other man in her life so far.

She certainly still had questions about his character; his morals were a trifle gray, especially when it came to the work he did outside of being a minstrel, as a high end thief of hard to obtain items. He regarded these jobs as grand adventures and encouraged her to do so as well.

To her surprise, she enjoyed the adventure part. She wasn't so sure how she felt about the stealing. Tonight would be the time she needed to make a decision

on that life, and she still wasn't sure which way she'd go. She was with him, she was his musical partner, they said they were family; so if he was caught, she'd be implicated whether or not she aided him in the theft.

Did it feel right? Was stealing from other thieves really all that bad?

A small figure fluttered through the open tavern door, a pixie. He hovered for a second, searching the room, until he saw the two minstrels. He zipped over the heads of all the drinkers and dancers and landed on the table between Cantor and Robin.

"Ah, Ellis, welcome." Robin smiled, looking him over. "My, that's interesting — what have you done with your hair?"

The pixie preened, ran a hand down his long pink braids. They sprouted in every direction, making his head look like a tiny, glowing mop. "I wanted a new look. What do you think?"

"It's…nice."

"Thank you." He turned to Cantor, braids dancing like small antennae. "And…?"

Cantor remained expressionless. "I'd be careful where you land and give everybody lots of warning. Someone might think you're a large bug and squash you."

"Humph." The pixie glared, eyes slits, arms crossed. "No appreciation for when someone makes a little effort to look good." He walked over to the edge of the table, eyed Cantor up and down, took in the old boots, the brown wool trews and tunic. "You could use a little spiffing up yourself."

"Maybe. And maybe I should save someone else the trouble, and just swat you myself."

"Nice. I missed you, too."

"Doubtful."

"Truth." Ellis turned to Robin, who had pulled a tiny pewter mug out of her bag. She dipped it into her ale, and passed it to Ellis. He sat cross-legged on the table and took a sip. "That's better. So, have you figured out who Borman is yet?"

Robin nodded her head towards the far corner of the tavern. A boisterous group of men and women sat around several tables, laughing, talking, and

drinking. They were a rough lot, some scarred skin, mostly unkempt clothing, hair dragged into ragged tails. All were armed with long daggers; John allowed nothing bigger inside the tavern.

In the middle of the group sat their leader; at least, those around seemed to defer to him, listening to what he said, laughing at the appropriate spots, speaking to him only in response to direct questions. He was dressed better than his minions, in green velvet, a small, jaunty cap perched on his head, incongruous amidst their rough garb.

Ellis nodded. "You got it."

"He's kind of obvious, isn't he?" said Robin. "You'd think a fence, a purveyor of stolen goods, would be more discrete."

Cantor shrugged. "According to Bellows, he's the biggest fence on the coast, certainly in Alarion. So everyone knows who he is, and what he does."

"Yup," said Ellis. He took another long pixie-sized pull on his ale. "I wonder if that's his entire crew."

"Wouldn't think so," replied Cantor. "He must have guards at his compound still, and others in the field."

Robin snorted. "Unusually organized for the Medials. Funny that it's a criminal who's that logical."

"There you go again."

"What?"

"Going on again about logic, how the Medials have none, compared to the plains."

"Really?" She waved a hand at him. "Logic keeps you safe. That's Constantine's promise."

"Sure," replied Cantor, "until you piss the bastard off. Then it's not so safe."

Ellis waved his mug. "Logic makes you crazy. Chaos is the natural state of everything."

Cantor tinked his mug against the pixie's tiny tankard. "Now, there's something you and I can agree on."

"In Mother's name," said Robin with a sigh, "why is this so hard to understand?"

"I think Ellis and I understand perfectly."

Ellis was leaning forward, peering across the floor. "Who's this now?"

Robin and Cantor turned to look. An elf had entered the tavern and was crossing the floor towards Borman's corner. Tall and slender, fine featured as his race generally was, with slightly slanted green eyes, high cheekbones, and long silver hair, all of which elegantly contrasted with his plain robes of brown wool. His gaze moved around the room as he walked, wary, watching.

Two of Borman's people stood to face him as he approached, hands on hilts. Their leader said something, and they stepped back. The fence waved the elf forward, and he passed through the tables and sat down. Elf and human spoke quietly for a moment; then the elf reached under his robes and slipped a package over to the fence. A small bag was returned. The elf rose, and quickly left the tavern.

"Interesting," said Cantor. "Bold, doing business in a public place."

"I dunno," said Ellis. "No one's going to cause a problem in the middle of a tavern, so safer for both of them."

"Logical," said Robin with a smirk. "Seems Medial thieves really are the brightest here."

Cantor could only shake his head and wave a hand at her.

The dismissal irked Robin. "The elf was a handsome fellow, don't you think?"

Cantor turned to her, one eyebrow raised. "That's like saying a box is square. They all are."

Which irritated her even further. "I guess so. Like that pretty elf server in the tavern in Semphis last year that was so interested in you."

"I…." He shook his head. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"The day I left, she seemed quite pleased to have you to herself."

"Maybe," he replied. "When she found out you were a Dialectic, and I'd helped you escape from the city, she spat in my beer."

"Oh."

Ellis' head swiveled back and forth as the exchange grew more heated. "Um, you two aren't going to start stabbing each other, are you?"

Cantor chuckled quietly. "People keep asking us that question. So far, the

answer's been no." He looked at Robin. "I still don't get your point."

She shrugged. "No point at all, apparently."

"Alright." He stood. "Time to play more music." He looked at her. "It's also getting to be time to make some decisions about later."

She nodded sharply. "I know. I'm still thinking."

"And there's your problem," he said. "You think too much, instead of just doing."

"Someone needs to."

He stopped, his head rolled back, eyes closed. "Always the last word."

She laughed and stepped by him. "You should be used to that now."

He could only shake his head and follow her to the stage.

Chapter 3

Much later that evening, Jamison walked up to the Leaping Centaur. He'd been following the thief for days, hearing whispers, talking to other thieves and fences, who told him about the elf with the tarot cards, with whom they'd refused to deal. There was only one fence on the coast who would traffic a powerful magical artifact like that; that's what each of them said. Jamison had finally found the man, so hopefully the thief.

He stepped through the tavern's front door. Cantor, Robin, Ellis, and all but the most inebriated patrons had long departed. John was wiping down the bar top, while his bouncers attempted to wake up unconscious customers, encouraging them to leave. It was quiet now, compared to what it had been, but the air was still heavy, full of the smells left behind by too many sweaty bodies and flagons of spilled ale.

Everything stopped when the dark elf walked through the door. Everyone who was conscious froze; no one had ever seen an elf with indigo skin, with silver eyes that seemed to sparkle, his lanky frame clad in dark robes

embroidered with runes and sigils. He strode across the room towards the bar; John blinked as he watched him come, there being something disconcerting about the way the light drifted and darkened around the elf's figure, how the colours changed in his robes.

Jamison stopped in front of him. The dark light swirled for a moment, then sucked back into the elf. "Where is the fence?"

John stared, not comprehending the question. "The fence? There's a fence outside, around the back of the tavern. But…."

"No, you idiot. The fence who buys stolen goods."

"Oh, right." John shook his head to clear it. "What are you?"

The bouncers had turned from their task of dealing with the comatose customers, and stepped closer to the bar. "Boss? Should we chuck him into the street?"

Jamison's arms rose, and he chanted a short phrase. Darkness flowed from his hands, twisted rays flowing through the air to wrap themselves around the closest bouncer's throat. The elf raised his arms another foot, lifting the bouncer off the ground, his eyes bulging, feet thrashing, hands clawing at the dark ropes cutting off his air. But there was nothing for him to grab; his fingers slipped through the strands of light, finding no purchase.

Jamison waved, and the ropes disappeared. The bouncer fell to the floor, gasping, holding his throat. Jamison turned to the bar.

"What I am is a servant of Nyx, goddess of the night. And if you want to live, you'll answer the question."

Something more than light was moving in the elf's eyes, something not quite right. Whether he had eye problems and simply couldn't focus, or it was a glint of madness, or something else, it was disturbing.

"You'd be talking about Borman?"

"That was the name I was given."

"He was here earlier, but he's long gone."

"Where did he go?"

"Probably his compound at the south end of town."

"I see. How do I get there?"

"Follow the main road. Go out the tavern door, head right, go through town, out of the south gate. It's the last place before you hit the forest, got its own tall wall with spikes on top. Big stone building, lots of rooms, slate roof."

"Good." Jamison turned to leave, then paused, looked back. "Have you seen him having dealings with any elves lately?"

John shrugged. "He deals with lots of folks. I don't remember any in particular. It doesn't pay to notice."

One of the bouncers, who'd been helping his half strangled co-worker to his feet, spoke. "Was an elf tonight. Normal, not like you. Sold somethin' to Borman, small package."

"Ah." Jamison smiled. "Excellent. I guess I won't blast your shitty tavern to dust, then."

He laughed harshly and strode out the door.

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Jamison stepped out of the tavern onto the main road of Alarion. He looked to the heavens, the night and the stars.

"Not your night, my lady. Not your stars. Perhaps soon, though."

He'd been searching for the cards for too long, and needed to bring this to an end. He'd love to lay his hands on the creature who had stolen Nyx's gift. But that was secondary; he had to find the cards and get back to her. He looked at his hands, weapons of power now, power given to him by her grace. Her strength moved inside his body, unsettling, strange, intense. At times he felt it working against him, that constant whirling change, making it difficult to think. But no matter; it was everything now, and all he wanted to do was please her. He needed to return to Nychta, show her his success, and reap the pleasures of her bed, taste the darkness. It was a ringing summons in his mind, and it was all he could do to ignore it and turn down the road towards the fence's house.

But turn he did, and headed south through the dark, quiet town, towards, he hoped, the tarot cards Nyx had made for him.

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