

**DIGITAL**

*Magic*

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# CHAPTER

# One

The great shadow crept the length of the roof as silent as a prayer; each paw finding its way unerringly to the path of least noise. The half eaten moon made its dark fur dance and for a moment it was haloed in silver light. At this even fragmentarily disturbance, the black lip curled back revealing a creamy expanse of fang. An unvoiced growl rumbled within the deep chest.

Shoulders scything the panther resumed his ascent. On either side the roof sloped sharply away into the unlit manor's garden and though he could not hear any yet, he knew that the guards would soon be reaching the front door. Even his feline power and silence was no protection from night-scopes and high power splinterguns. Stealth and the dark were his only allies in this shape.

The curved dark ears twitched this way and that, tracing even the faintest noise for the danger it might bring. Nothing was stirring in the distant wing of the house where the owner lived but the northern wing that housed the art collection was humming with barely concealed activity. Yet the best prizes were always worth the risk.

He reached the small window used for ventilation in those days before central heating. The older the building the better as far as a twenty-first century thief was concerned. The cat paused again, sniffing the rim of the window. Good, no recent scents, perhaps if he was lucky the window was so unremarkable from below that it drew no attention. His stealthy paw made short work of the fragile ancient lock and without pause he slipped into the room.

It was museum-like—thick with the scent of beeswax and age. Moonlight ran in faint streams through the still evening air to glitter momentarily on the glass-topped cases below. Inside were mementos of lost ages, cleaned, dusted and displayed for tourists to gape at but it was there that his target lay. The cat's eyes narrowed and its posture stiffened as if sensing prey. The smell

of well-varnished wood made his nose twitch but that sense also bought him more important information. The guard had just passed here, his half-eaten salami sandwich tucked into his back pocket and his boots just recently cleaned of mud that reeked of dog. Yet the cat's nose was the least of his advantages.

A flicker of cool mist enshrouded the beast—for a heartbeat hiding his form; when it cleared though there was a far different one. The tall dark-haired man was already moving along the walkway while ducking his body low against the windows. If any had been there to observe they might have noticed that he moved with the same graceful economy as the cat. He was better equipped; his dark leather hushsuit dropped thermal temperature to that of a passing moth and strapped to his hip was the darkest and ugliest of pistols.

No normal shapeshifter would have been able to retain clothes and equipment but he had never been anything like normal. Magic ran pure through his veins and the pesky details of logic and physics did not intrude.

But then this world had not left him completely unchanged either—money, for example, had already exerted its power. So he was not here for random violence; he was here for something far more interesting and profitable.

Others in his trade sacrificed flesh for metal and soul for machine, but he disdained all that for his natural talents more than made up for a somewhat traditional approach to thievery. His body after all, was the only thing that was left to him of a dangerous and tragic past and he was not about to cut into it merely for fashion.

He reached the end of the walkway and after only a momentary pause on the varnished handrail dropped three floors down onto the stone floor. It was a fall that would have broken the legs of any other. Dark eyes scanned the shadows. Something about this place felt wrong. A prickle of fear ran on hot feet up his back and he knew better than to ignore instinct.

Yet his prey was only an arm length away. The glass topped display case seemed little protection indeed for such a prize.

8 He'd seen many beautiful things in his time, acquired them by fair means and foul for his customers. This was different. He knew that immediately.

It was a mask—simple and elegant. The empty-eyed female face looked back at him and seemingly into him at the same time. The mouth rested slightly open, caught in the act of speaking while the full white lip trembled. It was a face beautifully familiar and it spoke of his childhood when he had thought those times long forgotten. This mask, with the hint of spiraling curls framing it, had captured the form of two people: both captured when young and foolish.

It was run through with such a delicacy and power that it could mean only one thing. No other place could have created such a frail thing of pale stone and infused it with such spirit.

This was the moment where any other person in his line of work would have smashed and grabbed. And yet the man waited; his warm breath in the chill air almost fogging the glass, nostrils flaring wide. Far off, outside the walls of the mansion, a dog barked and a guard's stiff curse followed. Still he did not move. He was part of the world—quiet but awake. Simply waiting for it to whisper all of its mysteries to him. Dark eyes never left the velvet couched mask though; tracing it, trying to find its meaning.

He suddenly remembered to breathe and the scent of jasmine plunged into his body. It was like a hammer blow across the face. Something so vastly unexpected, he almost cried out. It resounded through his bones like nothing had for centuries but at the same time a dreadful ache lodged itself under his ribs. The smell of it flooded his nose and mouth, sweet and heady like a summer wine or a field choked with flowers—made all the more powerful simply because he knew what it was.

How could this part of home could be merely another possession, stared at by mindless tourists who could never understand its true meaning? The desire to hold it and feel the cool stone was intense. Every fiber wanted to reach out and take it. His mouth twitched. The pain was sweet and terrible and he wished it both gone and eternal.

It was mead and madness to senses deprived for so long. In that one heady instant all that he had become since the last time he had sensed this was swept away. Knocked back to childhood he couldn't help it. "Home." He whispered against the night, longing stretching his voice out into the friendless darkness.

The security system picked him up straight away. He might as well

have stood up and shouted his name to the world. The moment was broken. The sliver from his past vanished while the scent dissipated into reality. The mask had reclaimed its mystery and now he was in real trouble. The rattle of metal against the window told him the security system was rapidly blocking any escape. Harsh technology locking the intruder into the hall until the guards arrived with guns blazing and questions left to the morning.

Still faintly dazzled by what he had seen habit nonetheless got him to his feet and running. He bounded back the way he had come, changing mid-air to faster form. The pale feline claws now sunk deep into the wooden floors. Below him the room was being flooded with murky-gray gas so that the red criss-cross of infrared beams could be seen. As he leaped and bounded past them he felt a vague fuzziness steal over him. And then cat ears picked up the whine of sentrybots powering up.

The powerful panther's haunches bunched and hurled him along the walkway, ears flattened and mouth held in a silent snarl. Behind came the snap of electricity as the air became alive with electronic fury. Every section of his dark fur rippled with it and his rational mind told him he didn't have long. Ahead the small window that had allowed him entry was chugging relentlessly shut behind a security screen. The thin bar of moonlight it allowed in was too narrow even as he leapt the last few feet. He barely missed a beat though.

Now the dark man dropped to one knee, smoothly unsheathed the blunt ugly weapon he carried at his hip and let two sharp blasts rip open the descending metal between him and freedom.

Cat form carried him free of the hall even as the guards were responding to the alarm. He scrambled along the roof, leapt ten feet into the trees and galloped away just as they were opening the doors. The only hint they had that he even passed was the rabid barking of their dogs.

The panther retreated to the quieter, deeper shadows. He stared fixedly at the huddled mound of the great house, yellow eyes half-hooded. A few quick licks over his shoulder assured him that he was alive and though the incident was humiliating he had at least survived. Still neither domestic cat nor leopard likes to fail.

Huddled under a thick yew tree he shifted back to his human

shape the better to think. The urge to swear and punch something was powerful, perhaps a hangover from the feline rage that still pumped in his system. However, the remembrance of that scent quieted him a moment. It called him back to a time where he had been quite another thing; when his world had been something different, something far more beautiful. He half-laughed to suddenly realize that tears were running down his cheeks. Thrusting them aside with the back of his hand Ronan knew it was a foolish thing and one that he thought he was long past.

“Bloody fool.” He reprimanded himself. The weapon on his hip felt suddenly heavy and ugly. He couldn’t help thinking that once he would have had no need of such a thing, indeed when it would have been a humiliation and a travesty to carry one.

But he was quite used to this life now, settled almost. It was just stupid to yearn for what could not be, it would only drive him mad. And yet....

The sigh would not be contained. It was a mystery that had to be unraveled. Until it was he couldn’t simply travel on. It would itch at the back of his head forever otherwise. This little village must have the answer to that glimpse and he could not rest until he found it out. Still that would have to wait till morning. Then he could get the lie of the land and work out just what sort of mess he had stepped in.



From the shifting shade of the oak Ella watched the cat figure enter the bushes and the man’s one emerge a few minutes later. How strange her sleep befuddled brain thought. But then this dream was strange right from the very beginning.

Ella couldn’t even recall falling asleep in her little cottage. Goth had been curled on her feet, the fire had been blazing so she must have fallen asleep. Looking down she was wearing her clothes but her feet were damp in the wet grass. That confirmed it; she couldn’t feel the cool metal of spinebridge against her back and without its digital signal her legs would normally be useless.

Still she was not far from home. Obviously dreams were not all distant alien landscapes—this was Penherem Manor. She’d watched the cat fleeing the sudden blaze of light from there and

half expected to see Tania Furlion's elegant shape in pursuit. The Lady of the Manor would never have done any such thing but then in dreams anything was possible.

Ella leaned against the elm that sheltered her as the man loped further away from the scene of the crime. She felt sure it was a crime. At this distance he was more silhouette than reality—all lanky frame and nice long legs.

In the manner of dreams she suddenly realized she was not alone in watching. The back of her neck prickled and a wash of fear flooded through her. With an empty heart, she turned to face the other woman. Ella's dream throat was suddenly dry and she swayed slightly now, relying the tree to hold her.

The other woman was more frightening than she should have been. So Ella concentrated on looking very hard at the physical. A pale mist wafted from her shoulders giving the appearance of near nakedness but somehow managing to swallow form as well. The face though was turning to Ella as if suddenly aware of her presence. The line of jaw was perfect, sharp and unforgiving. The hair was bone white and long enough to mingle with the mist. But then the ruined eyes lifted. There was nothing there. Only a grim, wrinkled expanse.

That broken face though was no accident, Ella felt her own eyes burn. No car accident, no fate of birth had denied this apparition her eyes. She had taken them, like some mythical Cassandra, sacrificing it all for deadly powers. She couldn't say how she knew, she only did.

The blankness was watching her; it saw what she was, measured her and was perhaps interested. But Ella did not want to be interesting. She wanted to be bland. She wanted to melt into the landscape.

What are you? Why are you here? Where are you from?

That voice was peeling her apart, revealing her hollow inadequacy, laying her naked in the dark.

I'm not here, I'm nothing. The broken sobs in her throat finally woke the shaken woman to her living room but nothing would destroy the fear that had lodged in her heart. Nothing could erase the void that had seen her. She burrowed into her pillows and tried to hide herself from the memory of the nightmare.



But the woman and the man-cat were not the only things awakening into the night. Neither could know what else was stirring in the darkness.

For something more had felt the brush of power and Art. It responded as the man had—with longing and memory. The earth stirred and cracked as the man-sized seed gave up its long hidden spawn, ripe with hatred and plans. Foxes and night owls fled the ancient scent, rustling the half dead leaves of autumn while even the smallest mouse followed after; prey and predator united in terror.

This newborn monster unfolded in the dimness of Penherem's plastic perfect forest, a dark purple putrid flower that was just beginning to bloom. The trees unable to uproot themselves still pulled back in horror. A dark nightmare stepped out on sticky feet ready to find its target. Within the smooth skull ideas bubbled and seethed as it pushed its infant powers out into this new world, sucking up all the knowledge from it. With a sigh its lips pulled back from teeth in pleasure.

Tourists traveled from all over this festering globe to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors and what they imagined was what they got—rather than what had actually been. It knew. It had seen. It had been there. Nearly six hundred years it had waited, a fungal spore looking for the first hint of rain.

The Between gates were still closed, the Nexus changed. That it could feel well enough but the taste of that other realm had stirred it awake. A chance was all it needed and perhaps there would be only one. It had to proceed cautiously for the world was changed from when it had last stalked the fields and forests. This new woodland of technology, of steel and shared hallucinations, was unfamiliar. It would have to find a guide, someone's lead to follow until it knew its way.

But mankind could not have changed that much in six short hundreds of years and if there was one thing it knew it was people. It could hunt out the best hidden weakness, even those ones that the human did not acknowledge and use them to its Master's gain.

It pulled its shadow-thin legs free of the casing and shook its many eyed head in anticipation. If the Art was here it would find it and if it was the time of the Healer even better. The mere thought of rejoining with its beloved master sent a hiss of delight rippling out from its pierced carapace. Ancient wrongs would be undone.

It stretched in a curved sickle of darkness and made its way off on tender and strangely delicate feet. Time to be about. Time to shake this new millennium up.



Ella woke with a gasping breath the world spinning around her. For one dreadful moment she didn't know where she was, what her name was, everything was superseded by panic.

But then she was used to panic, used to the sound of her heart thundering in her throat. Two nightmares in one night was bad even for her. First the eyeless woman and then the razor sharp image which she couldn't quite remember, except for the terrific fear it had bought with it. She lay very still on the couch letting her breathing return to something near normal.

Like she had a thousand times before Ella repeated her mantra to still the fear. I am home; I am not in London.

Any day where that was true was another good day—better than those she'd fled. She'd left that life and Nill behind. She was Ella and that was how it was going to stay.

But even to think of him and those times was to give them power over her. With a resolute tightening of her jaw Ella reached out and grabbed the spinebridge from where it lay on the coffee table. It resembled nothing so much as a glittering silver bug, only a cascade of green lights on its outspread legs and central column showing it was more than a hand-sized sculpture.

Ella didn't know how to feel about the bridge. On one hand a generation before she would have been confined to a wheelchair, suspended in that curious state where people either looked at you extra hard or not at all. But on the other is was old technology. The bridge had to removed while sleeping as there was a limit how long wiring and the human nervous system could be connected. And it did not shield her totally from sympathetic eyes; she still walked oddly and under thin shirts the curved dome was clearly

visible even if it hadn't been for the flashing lights.

Ella though counted her blessings and slipped the cool metal under her shirt to lie against her T11 injury. The steel legs snapped audibly into the array of sockets and sensation returned to her legs. One day she might be able to afford the astronomic price of biomelding and consign the bridge to the past.

Still with a hint of caution, Ella levered herself out of the couch. The morning light had already crawled across the carpet to rest on the floor to ceiling bookshelves to rest lightly on Tolkien and Lewis.

But Qoth had not waited for the sun to reach her. The chocolate cat was perched on the window seat and, even though her back was to her mistress, Ella could imagine the expression of contentment on her face. The feline lived for warmth and it was her ritual to watch to make sure the sun returned. It had already clambered above the rolling green hills and was slowly washing over the thatched and cozy roofs of Little Penherem. It would be filtering down the narrow streets and running in long swathes across the village Green.

Ella leaned her head against one overstuffed chair and watched the cat with lazy amusement. Every day it was the same. As if the chocolate tabby needed to see the dawn to make it happen.

Ella could only dream of having the same kind of lifestyle—there were already three deadlines blinking from her notepad and her own personal goal of another three thousand words hanging overhead. The freelance work as always took priority, it did after all pay the bills, but the novel had to be done by the time summer rolled to a close.

Ella had just managed to turn her mind to filling her notepad with at least some perfunctory words when someone began banging on the door.

Qoth gave her a yellow-eyed glare that might have been reproach from the window but her human had already accepted the offer of procrastination.

Limping slightly Ella went down the hall to answer the unremitting thumping. When she finally yanked it open with a small growl she found it was Bakari leaning against the doorframe, one hand already raised ready to give another battering.

He looked at her through golden eyes and flicked back one

of his dreadlocks from his shoulder. Bakari was too exotic for Penherem; he looked like was made out of beautiful deep wood that someone had spent hours of love polishing. Few believed he was in fact an English librarian.

Then again she was almost certain that librarian was not all her friend was. The faint musk of him reached her and like every other female in Little Penherem she couldn't remain totally immune. In morning light he almost gleamed and as always he made her feel more than a little dowdy.

"Weren't napping were you, Mouse?" He smiled enough to excuse the use of that terrible pet name he had for her. "You'd better watch out or someone might think you have a social life."

"Cheeky bugger," she replied without malice and ushered him in. "You know that you have the social scene all wrapped up round here. There's none left for the rest of us."

He shrugged while prowling around the edges of her domain—too hyped up to sit down perhaps. "Perhaps if you bothered to go outside now and then..."

Her notepad was blinking determinedly so she replied distractedly. "I do go out."

"Playing maid to the Furlion woman twice a week doesn't count. Writing a book isn't an excuse to become a hermit you know." Bakari gave Qoth such a firm stroke it made her blink in surprise.

Sometimes Ella wished that Bakari would try and fit in more. If he were more accepted by the rest of the villagers the two of them wouldn't be forced into each other's company all the time. The man was a delight to look at and smarter than was healthy in this day and age, but still sometimes he had a way of prodding her with her own inadequacies. That was probably why she alone was unmoved by his charms.

Bakari folded his dark form into the wing-backed chair by the window and smiled disarmingly. "Don't pout Mouse—I just wanted to check on you."

Ella sighed and waited for the lecture; this was familiar territory. She'd made the mistake of telling Bakari some of why she'd moved to Penherem, just the bit about Nill. Somehow he thought this qualified him as her guardian. Easing herself back into the chair by the fireside she watched him scan the bookcases

that lined her parlor with professional interest.

“You can tell a lot about people by what they read.” He muttered, “You know some people have got rid of their paper editions altogether...”

She stiffened defensively, “I don’t like plugging into all those gadgets—gives me the willies messing with your brain like that.”

Bakari flicked back the hair behind his ear revealing the tiny silver IO plug. “Lining makes life worthwhile.”

“But you work in the library—you need it. Me, I prefer the classics. Reading may be slower but it’s more satisfying.”

He snorted, “I didn’t get this thing put in for pleasure Mouse, nothing but a business tool. After all, it’s all about information. Who has it, who doesn’t, who wants it and who is willing to pay for it.”

She wondered not for the first time what sort of business he’d been involved in. Someday he might share his reasons for becoming the librarian of such an insular village. He wouldn’t be the first to think that it was a good place to hide.

Little Penherem was one of those darling satellite villages, orbiting around the not-so-distant planet of London. It catered to tourists, local and foreign, that wanted a taste of England. They demanded an England that only existed in a plastic, no-crap, no-dirt place like Penherem. It was history watered down and made palatable for the masses—and not a history that anyone who had lived then would be able to recognize. Rape, spitting and bigotry were filtered out. Mass hallucination and feel good atmosphere poured in. Penherem was a pretty cardboard cutout.

However the danger that Ella sensed hanging around Bakari tasted all too real. It seemed almost familiar perhaps because Nill had shared that too.

“In fact,” he pulled out the hair-width silver cable from one of the pockets in his trousers and waved it in her direction, “Mind if I check my messages?”

Ella had seen him at the business end of a Line in the library. Not the dusty front of house where the books were mere window dressing, but out the back where the information center pulsed with a more modern beat. Bakari was a real lion there, prowling the corridors of information that had replaced the motorway in importance.

Trying not to show her discomfort she shrugged, “Sure.”

Bakari pounced on her Line, attaching the monofilament and

then inserting the other into his head IO. Just like that he was in and gone. Those golden restless eyes drooped a little as Bakari concentrated on that far off distant world. Very few were brave enough to go for the full head gear—most retained some residual fear of having hardware implanted directly into the brain. In Ella’s eyes it was a very reasonable concern.

She hadn’t worked out exactly where to look when someone was running the Line—was it impolite to stare or was it worse to ignore them as if they weren’t there at all?

“It’s alright Mouse.” His voice was soft and slightly slurred as if he’d had one too many beers down at the Green Man. She realized that his irises had swallowed up the whole of his eye, “I’m not doing anything illegal. I just need to speak to a friend and I’d rather not have the book squad interrupt.”

Ari’s sarcastic comment on the dozen or so local ladies that occasionally helped run the library still made her smile a little. They carried on that ancient tradition of interfering village wives with great vigor.

Still Ella couldn’t really see why he would be worried about what they thought—he certainly had never shown much regard for it up until now. While she was deciding if she believed him or not, he finished. The speed of that other realm was another unnerving thing about it.

He had already removed the cable and tucked it away somewhere. “Thanks Ella... it’s just a pain wondering whose going to come into the library when I’m busy like that.”

Surely it was over so swiftly he could have found some time to do that. Whatever it was he didn’t look too happy about it.

“I better move and so should you, Mouse.”

Resisting an urge to bark back, she shooed him to the door once more. “I’m on my way.”

“Maybe you’d come over to mine for some breakfast tomorrow,” he embraced her swiftly and had released her before she could muster a complaint, “You know how much you love my French toast.”

“Well, if that’s on offer I guess I can manage it.”

“I’m holding you to that,” he grinned before trotting down the steps and vaulting over her picket gate.

Ella waved him off from the doorstep her mind worked in

little circles. Despite his cheerfulness there was something wrong with her friend. The smile on his lips was not reflected in his eyes. He was hiding from her. And Ella was somewhat afraid that she had worked out what the emotion was she had seen on her friend's face. Fear—and what could make a lion afraid she hated to think.

Ella was about to go back inside when a giggle sounded from just beyond her garden wall. For one confused minute she thought it could have been Ari. Then the jasmine that climbed the broken down brick wall shook and Penny Two Dolls emerged. Her wide blue eyes gleamed with mischief as she completely ignored the twigs that had caught in her hair.

Ella bent down to the girl's height and for the second time that morning tried not to be angry, "Have you been peeking in the window again Penny?"

That gap-toothed grin spread across her face was impossible to be annoyed with but Penny tucked her battered Two Dolls into her pants pockets just in case Ella meant to take it out on them. The broken eyed toys wobbled as she shoved them further down into her tiny overalls.

Looking over her shoulder Ella hoped to see Alice Thorn. She had yet to quite work out the relationship between child and older teenager. She could have been sister or young mother but whichever she was the only person who seemed capable of getting Penny Two Dolls to behave anything like a normal child. But there was no sign of Alice's ragtag bone-thin form.

Ella sighed. Much as she liked Penny, there was something vaguely worrying about the way she managed to get into anyone's house and that innocent blue-eyed look didn't mean she would think twice if something she liked took her fancy. Ella had very few possessions really but the ones she did have she treasured.

Ella rolled her eyes skyward. She couldn't stand out here all day exchanging words with a little girl who had so far shown no signs of having any of her own. By the time she looked back the girl was gone.