Combustion

Shadowlands Heat, the Prequel

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Chapter 1

Detective Bridget Campbell pulls up in front of the crumbling Victorian mansion in the Parkdale neighbourhood of Toronto. Fire trucks pull away from the curb outside.

Ranjit gets out of the car first. Bridget follows him up the front stairs. The forensics team has someone waiting at the door.

"Morning, Detective Malhotra, Detective Campbell."

The woman's voice and blue eyes are familiar. "Good to see you, Nowak," says Bridget. "No visible signs of smoke damage down here."

Nowak hands them white jumpsuits. "The fire was entirely contained in one bedroom upstairs. Cosmetic damage only to the house itself.

Bridget and Ranjit step into the jumpsuits and pull up the hoods. Bridget pushes her chestnut ponytail underneath the hood and ensures no stray strands escape the hood. Ranjit's turban already covers his hair. They complete their ensembles with face masks, shoe covers, and blue silicone gloves.

Nowak sweeps an arm towards the staircase. "The body is up there."

Bridget takes the lead, stepping around piles of clothing and food detritus. In a room to the side, two people lie on the floor, immobile. Two others lean on each other on a grimy sofa, staring at their phones, one of them crying, the other with a dreamlike look on her face.

Bridget indicates the two on the floor. "Are they dead?"

"Passed out," says Nowak.

Grime streaks the cracked linoleum beneath her feet. The air smells of rotting food and unwashed bodies. The house is listed as a rooming house. In this case, that's code for crack house.

People cram the room opposite–the kitchen. They lie across each other on the floor, sit crammed against each other on the counters or in corners. Almost all of them stare at phone screens.

Something bothers Bridget about the scene. Something is off, but she can't quite put her finger on it.

"We chased them out of the upstairs rooms," says Nowak.

"Do they all live here?" asks Ranjit. "Surely that violates zoning laws."

Nowak shrugs. "Not our problem."

Something catches Bridget's eye as she passes. She backtracks and looks into the room. A heavy-looking silver candlestick floats in the air. As soon as Bridget sees it, it falls with a thud onto the moulding shag carpet. She goes over and picks it up. No strings attached, no battery compartment. She places it in the sink. Her mind must be playing tricks.

The bottom of the stairs is blocked by yellow tape. The man guarding it moves the tape to let them through.

In the first bedroom on the right at the top of the stairs, Zhou crouches over what remains of a bed. Bridget and Ranjit peer over his shoulder.

"It looks similar to the other cases," says Ranjit.

Bridget wrinkles her nose at the smell of burnt flesh and melted foam rubber. It occurs to her that, apart from humanity and food, this is the first distinctive smell she's noticed since entering the house. In a place like this, one would expect the sharp ammonia smell of meth or the burnt plastic smell of crack. Perhaps fentanyl, odourless, is the drug of choice here.

Very little remains of the body. The legs from the knees down, the head and the shoulders. "From here, it looks much like the others," says Bridget.

Zhou nods. "Most likely natural causes. The vic fell asleep smoking, clothes caught, body fat provided fuel."

"I didn't see any evidence of smoking in the house," says Ranjit. "No cigarettes, no joints, no bongs, no pipes. Nothing."

That's it. That's what's been bothering Bridget about this house. It's full of people giving their best impressions of drug addicts, despite a complete lack of any drug paraphernalia.

"It could be anything with a flame," says Zhou. "A lighter. A candle."

"That makes how many this week?" asks Ranjit.

"Three," says Zhou. "Six in the last two months."

"How many of them were smokers?" asks Bridget.

"One," says Zhou.

"Six in two months seems like a lot," says Bridget.

"I looked it up," says Zhou. "In the last three centuries, there have been about two hundred reported cases of spontaneous human combustion."

Bridget whistles. "That's a huge increase. I can't imagine we have a sudden rush of people falling asleep with lit candles on their laps. Are you sure it's natural?"

"The last five showed no signs of foul play," says Zhou. "And no sign there was anyone in the room other than the victim. So far, this one is no different."

"Keep looking," says Bridget. "I'll start questioning the people downstairs."

"Good luck with that," says Zhou.

Bridget and Ranjit head back downstairs. A paring knife flies out the kitchen door, clanks against the opposite wall, and falls to the floor. They flatten themselves against the wall and pull out their weapons. Bridget peeks around the doorway. No one inside is armed. Bridget holsters her gun. Ranjit does the same. They enter the kitchen and show their badges.

"I'm Detective Campbell," says Bridget. "This is Detective Malhotra."

"We're not doing anything illegal," says a vacant-eyed black woman mashed among several people on the counter.

Usually a sure sign they're doing something, if not strictly illegal, at the very least questionable. "We just want to ask you some questions about the fire last night," says Ranjit.

"I had nothing to do with that," says the woman.

"Can I ask your name?" asks Ranjit.

"Sharon."

"Okay, Sharon." Ranjit's tone soothes. "We just want to know what happened. Do you know the name of the victim?"

Sharon shrugs. "I'm new here."

"Who isn't new?" Bridget asks.

Sharon points to a man in the opposite corner of the room wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts. One hand grips a phone; the other presses against the floor. His hips convulse in what looks like–. Bridget and Ranjit look at each other. A darkening stain on the man's boxers confirms it was an orgasm. Judging by the crusting and the stiffness of the fabric, not the first one since he last changed his underwear.

"What's going on with him?" asks Ranjit.

"He always gets the good trips," says Sharon. "All I ever get from that one is holy terror."

Bridget is about to ask what she's talking about when a drawer slides open midway between the floor and the counter. Several wooden spoons rise out of the drawer.

Bridget's jaw clenches. She looks around. People are pointing at the spoons and laughing.

"Are you seeing this?" asks Ranjit.

"It's a trick," says Bridget. She grabs a spoon and yanks it. No string. She drops it. It floats back up. What the hell?

A skinny boy on the counter, a few people down from Sharon, holds out a hand. "I'm doing it, man. I'm doing it." The spoons fly around in all directions.

Bridget ducks as a spoon flies by her head. "Stop it now."

The boy laughs like a hyena. He throws his head back. "Oh, yeah."

Bridget grabs the boy by his shirt and pulls him off the counter. When he nearly collapses, she throws him against the cupboard to keep him upright. The spoons clatter to the floor.

The boy whines. "What'd you do that for?"

A hand rests on Bridget's shoulder. She turns to tell off whoever it is, but it's Ranjit. His dark eyes look into hers, and he subtly shakes his head. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. When she turns back to the boy, she releases him.

A movement in the doorway catches her eye. A man stands there. He has wavy black hair, olive skin and high cheekbones. His unusual amber eyes are even more striking for being clear and lucid, unlike everyone else in the place, save Bridget, Ranjit and the forensics team.

A woman on the floor cries out. She tugs at the stranger's pant leg. "Do you have any money? I need some money."

The man looks down at her. "I have no money." He gently puts a hand on her head.

The woman takes a shuddering breath. Her eyes lose focus.

Bridget opens her mouth.

The man puts out a hand. "Don't touch that."

Bridget turns. Ranjit is taking the phone from someone on the counter. He glances at the screen and becomes transfixed. His expression changes from mild confusion to horror. His eyes widen above his mask, his brows knit together.

Bridget reaches for the phone. The stranger touches her arm. "It will be worse for him if you do."

Ranjit throws the phone and curls up into a ball on the floor. Its owner picks it up and returns to his mindless state. Bridget rushes to Ranjit.

"What's wrong with him?" she asks.

The stranger pulls off Ranjit's mask. "He needs some air. Help me get him out of here."

Bridget rubs Ranjit's back. He relaxes a little.

"Are you okay to walk?" Bridget asks.

Ranjit nods.

Bridget crouches on one side of him, the stranger on the other. Together, they help him to a standing position. Once up, Ranjit manages to get himself to the door. As he steps outside, his footsteps become steadier, as if he's shaking off whatever had a hold of him.

Outside, Bridget pulls off her hood and mask. She produces her badge. "Detective Bridget Campbell. And you are?"

"Moric Ashwood," says the stranger.

"What do you know about this?" asks Bridget.

"The apps are addictive," says Moric. "They work on the pleasure centre of the brain."

"That was not even remotely pleasurable," says Ranjit. "I have never felt such fear in my life."

"How do you feel now?" asks Moric.

"Good." Ranjit takes a breath. He smiles. "Really good."

"That's the dopamine hit," says Moric.

Ranjit furrows his brow. "Am I addicted?"

"It affects everyone differently," says Moric, "but assuming this is your first time, probably not. You might feel a lingering longing for more, though. I advise you not to give in."

"How do you know all this?" asks Bridget.

"I'm also a detective," says Moric. "I've been investigating the cartels who deal in these pleasure apps."

Pleasure apps? If Bridget hadn't just witnessed it herself, she'd think he was a complete nutcase. "If you're a detective, let's see your I.D."

Moric pats his pockets, then shrugs.

"Right," says Bridget. Two marked squad cars pull up behind her car at the curb. "You stay right here," she says to Moric. She gestures for Ranjit to come with her.

She turns back to tell Moric to go back into the house, but he's not there. She looks in every direction. No sign of him."

"Where'd he go?"

Chapter 2

Ranjit searches around the house for Moric, but comes up empty. After instructing the constables to question the residents of the house, Bridget jogs back to the house.

Inside, she finds Ranjit with the woman who was begging for money earlier. Her whole body shakes. She's foaming at the mouth. Ranjit calls for an ambulance.

He glances up at Bridget. "I'll stay with her."

The forensics team descends the stairs.

"All done?" asks Bridget.

Zhou nods. "Just waiting for transport to get here for the remains.

Bridget glances into the downstairs rooms. No sign of Moric. Her eyes drift up the stairs. "Hey, can I have another mask?"

A tech hands her one from a box. She hooks the loops over her ears and pinches the nose wire, then raises her hood. She takes the stairs one at a time, careful not to make any noise. He's probably one of those true crime podcast morons looking for a story.

When she reaches the next floor, she tiptoes, back against the wall. Sure enough, Moric is bending over the victim. She pulls out her gun. "Hands in the air."

"I need to do this. It's important," says Moric.

"Back away." Bridget flips the safety off the gun. "Hands in the air."

Moric raises his hands. "It's not what you think."

"You can tell me all about it at the station." Keeping the gun on him, Bridget takes out her cuffs. "Hands behind your back."

"It's not necessary to restrain me," says Moric. "I'll go with you."

"Hands behind your back."

"Am I being arrested?"

"Not yet," says Bridget. "For now, you are being detained. I am restraining you because you have already disobeyed an order to remain in place."

Moric puts his arms behind his back.

Bridget cuffs him. "You are being detained under suspicion of police interference. You need not say anything. You have nothing to hope from any promise or favour and nothing to fear from any threat, whether or not you say anything. Anything you say may be used as evidence. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Bridget continues with the standard warnings and advises him of his right to seek legal counsel. "Do you wish to consult a lawyer?"

"No," says Moric.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

As she marches him down the stairs, an ambulance siren starts, then fades as it drives away.

Ranjit sees Bridget with Moric and joins them.

"I caught him bending over the remains, dropping his DNA all over the scene."

"I've done all I can here," says Ranjit. "The uniforms are rounding up everyone, inviting them to come to the station. It'll be more efficient to question them there."

"They're agreeing to come?" asks Bridget.

"They're not objecting," says Ranjit. Someone bursts out of the house, yelling something about dirty swine. "Most of them, anyway."

Bridget calls for another squad car. They deposit Moric into the back seat and get back into Bridget's car.

En route to the station, they see an ambulance at a curb. The back doors are open. Smoke billows out. Bridget pulls over in front of it and motions for the squad car to do the same. She, Ranjit, and a constable from the squad car, go to meet the paramedics.

"What happened?" asks Bridget.

A paramedic wrapped in a blanket answers. "She just went up in flames." His face is very red.

"Was there a leak in an oxygen tank or something?" asks the constable.

"If an oxygen tank blew, the ambulance would be in pieces, and I wouldn't be standing here talking to you. I was sitting in the back with the patient. She caught fire and burned. There was nothing I could do."

"People don't just burn for no reason," says Bridget. "Something must have started it."

"Whatever it was, I didn't see it," says the paramedic.

"I'll inform Zhou," says Bridget.

Bridget and Ranjit return to the car. Bridget's hand is on the door handle when she hears a tapping noise. Moric is rapping his knuckles on the back window of the squad car.

Bridget walks over.

"What happened?" asks Moric.

Bridget tells him as the officer gets back into the front seat.

Moric's mouth is a grim line. "The cartels have much to answer for."

Bridget wonders why he thinks these cartels of his are setting people on fire from a distance. Or how they would pull off such a thing. He's probably a conspiracy nut, but interviewing him should prove entertaining, if not productive.

Chapter 3

Bridget leaves Moric to stew in an interview room. When the residents of the house arrive, she shows them to the waiting room. To get through them faster, every detective on site takes one to a different interview room.

They cooperate, more or less, though it's difficult to pry anyone's attention away from their phone. More than one person names the victim as Amanda Wong, a newly arrived at the house a week ago. No one knows her very well. Bridget isn't surprised; none of them seems to interact with each other.

Leaving the interview room for the second time, Bridget hears a commotion coming from the waiting room. She enters to find the coffee pot boiling over, chairs swivelling around with constables sitting in them, and lights flickering on and off. Three of the waiting interviewees double over with laughter. The remaining are so absorbed in their phone screens they don't seem to notice anything happening.

A constable jumps up from a spinning chair. She staggers a few steps before finding her balance. "Do we have a poltergeist?"

Bridget grabs the still-spinning empty chair. When it tries to fly out of her hand, she glares at the interviewees. "Stop it now, or I'll take away everyone's phones."

Chairs stop spinning. The lights turn off, then back on and stay on. Coffee in the pot settles down, though it has spilled all over, and the room smells of burnt coffee.

Bridget turns the chair upside down. She runs a finger along the underside of the seat. "There's got to be some kind of receiver."

"On every chair?" asks the constable. "On the lights and the coffee maker, too?" She glances at the interviewees. "How could they have done it in a room full of police officers without anybody knowing?"

Bridget rights the chair and sets it on the floor. "Do you have a better explanation?"

The constable shakes her head.

Bridget sighs. "You know what?" She turns to the interviewees. "I'm going to hold on to your phones until you're done here. She grabs an inbox off a desk and starts down the line. "Put your phone in here. You can have it back when you're done."

Predictably, no one puts their phone in the basket. Bridget feels a tension headache starting. They're swimming upstream trying to get any information out of these people as long as they have their devices, but she doesn't have any legal reason to justify confiscating them. If they won't voluntarily give them up, there's nothing she can do. Normally, Bridget likes the discipline of the force. The clear rules that exist to curb police tendencies to abuse rights. But occasionally, like right now, she wishes she could bend those rules without jeopardizing an investigation.

She approaches a tousle-haired young man and speaks with as much authority as she can muster without sounding belligerent. "If you put

your phone in here, we'll interview you next. Then you can have the phone back and leave."

The man looks at her. "You need to chill out." He turns the phone around to face her. "Try it."

"I don't want–" Bridget sees a glowing yellow stylized human figure surrounded by swirls of pink, blue and red. The swirls spin, leaving her dizzy. A switch flips inside her. She's seized by an overwhelming desire to take that phone and ram it down his throat. Her hands shake. She has to get out of here.

Bridget drops the basket and walks away, her steps speeding up until she's at a near run. Pressure builds inside her chest. She clenches her teeth to keep it inside. When she reaches her office, she throws open the door, passes through, then slams it shut. A scream hurls itself out through her mouth.

Fury blinds her. She spins around, her surroundings a blur. Her arms hit solid objects, sometimes painfully. The pain only increases her rage.

Then it's over. She collapses on the floor, spent. Her eyes regain focus. The office looks as if it was hit by a tornado. Pencils, trays, reports litter the floor. The pressure in her head lifts. She feels airy, almost as if she's floating. Warmth spreads from her centre to her limbs. Every nerve in her body tingles.

She jumps to her feet, full of energy. She's about to rush out into the hallway, back to the interview rooms, when she glances at the surrounding destruction. Dropping to her hands and knees, she pushes everything into a pile, then lifts the pile onto her desk to sort out later. Now, Moric Ashwood. Maybe he can tell her what the hell just happened.

Chapter 4

Bridget steps out of her office and nearly runs into Ranjit.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I heard someone from the house showed you the app, and then you ran out of the room," says Ranjit. "You were heard yelling inside your office. Someone heard things being thrown around. They were concerned, so they called me."

Bridget starts walking. "I had a moment, in private. It's over now."

"Are you sure?"

"The effects of the app are temporary. You know that." She stops by the reception area to pick up some more swabs and a pair of rubber gloves.

"I do."

Bridget arrives at Moric's interview room.

"Would you like help with him?" asks Ranjit.

"Nope. I want to do this alone. You take whoever's next in line."

Ranjit nods.

Bridget enters the room.

Moric leans back in his seat, an ankle resting on the opposite knee. When he sees her, one corner of his mouth turns up.

His calmness increases her heart rate and clenches her stomach. For a moment, she's afraid the blind rage is returning, but the sensations dim as she sits down. She places her hands on the table.

Moric narrows his eyes at her. He scrutinized her face. The hairs on Bridget's neck rise. She has the uncomfortable feeling he knows what just happened.

Bridget clears her throat. "Would you mind telling me what you were doing with the remains?"

"I did no harm to your investigation. I intended no harm."

"You went in with no protective clothing. You contaminated the scene."

"I didn't contaminate anything."

"The whole time you were in there, you were dropping hair strands, skin cells," says Bridget. "Your DNA is now all over the body."

"Such a crude method of investigation." Moric leans over the table. "When you brought me in, you told me I didn't need to say anything. Unless you intend to arrest me, I'd like to go now."

She'd like to arrest him for interference in an investigation. But by the time he went into that room, all samples had already been taken. Nothing he dropped then makes a difference. However, it is possible he was in there earlier.

"You may go, but first, I'd like to take a DNA sample." Bridget pulls a sealed plastic tube out of her pocket.

He eyes the tube. "Absolutely not."

"It allows us to track your movements inside the house," says Bridget. "Should evidence of foul play be found, having your DNA could help rule you out as a suspect."

"You are not arresting me, and I am free to leave," says Moric. "Therefore, I must assume I am not required to give you this sample."

Bridget swallows. "Not at this time. However, if you choose not to cooperate, we can get a warrant, and then you'll be required to."

Moric stands. "Then you shall have to get a warrant."

Bridget stands. "I'll walk you out."

In the hallway, when they're alone, Moric takes her aside. "Is there anyone listening to us now?"

"No."

"There was in the interview room, yes?"

Bridget nods.

"I will tell you what you want to know," says Moric, "but there must be no witnesses."

Bridget cocks her head. "Follow me." She leads him to her office and seats him across from her desk.

Moric eyes the haphazard pile of papers and debris on one side of the desk. He kicks a stray pen out from under his chair.

Bridget pretends not to notice. "Now, would you mind telling me what you were doing with the remains?"

"That's not what you want to know," says Moric.

"It's not?" Arrogant asshole.

"You want to know about the apps and what they're doing to your people."

Bridget startles a little. My people? "I do, but that's not–"

"There are two," says Moric, "each trafficked by different cartels. SoulFire and IgNite."

"What do these apps do?"

"SoulFire gives users the temporary ability to perform minor magic. Levitation, disapparition, that kind of thing. IgNite creates intense emotional states, usually euphoria, but it could be sadness or anger."

Magic apps. "Cut the bullshit. Either give me the real story or quit wasting my time."

"They're real and they're addictive and they're killing your people." Moric takes something out of his back pocket and hands it to her.

It's a police badge. At least, it looks like one. It says he's a detective with the Austrellien Magical Investigations Squad, Organized Crime Unit. As Bridget reads, the words fade into a blank space.

She drops it on the desk. "It's blank."

"Sorry about that. Security feature. It resets if someone else holds it for more than five seconds." He waves a hand over it, restoring the words.

Bridget sucks in a breath.

"I'm investigating two competing criminal organizations that both claim Toronto as their turf," says Moric. "They deal in magical apps. They hook users by allowing them to play for free initially, then charging increasing fees as they become increasingly addicted."

"Let me get this straight," says Bridget. "These criminal organizations are magical, but they want hard cash."

"They use your money to buy gold and silver, which they fashion into counterfeit coinage they can use in our world."

Bridget smiles. She can't believe she almost fell for it. "Who put you up to this? Was it Detective Ryan?"

"Who?"

Her lapse was so long ago very few people still on the force remember it. It has to be one of the old-timers. Unless they've been talking to the younger officers. Still, she can't think of why anyone would bring it up now, after all these years.

"It's real," says Moric, "and I believe you know it, which is why I'm speaking to you now. For millennia, our two worlds were separate, and mostly stayed that way. But in the last two or three decades, my

people have figured out that your technology can be used to enhance our magic, and so there have been increasing incursions into the Shadowlands."

"Shadowlands?"

"Yes," says Moric. "Your world. More recently, some of the more corrupt elements of our society have figured out that everyday magic can be addictive to shades. Your people. That it's also destructive doesn't concern them at all, except in that they continually need to replenish their customer base. I need help bringing these criminals to justice. Someone who understands how the Shadowlands work. And I think you need help ridding your world of this scourge."

Bridget sits back. "I've heard enough. You may go now."

Moric doesn't move. "When you came into the interrogation room, your pupils were pinpricks. You were out of breath and sweating. You were high. Either you like to duck into your office here to do narcotics, which I doubt, or you tried one of the apps." He eyes the pile on the desk. "It's difficult to say which one."

Bridget doesn't answer.

"You've experienced magic before," says Moric. "I knew it from the way you reacted at the scene. Your desperate need to prove it wasn't real. You've seen it before and been harmed by it."

Bridget clenches her jaw. "I need you to leave."

He stands and offers her a card. "Take this. Call if you need my help."

She takes the card. There's a phone number and an address–20 Stone Raven Road, apartment D4, West Estrellien. "If you're magic, why do you need a phone? Why can't I just send you a thought?"

"I'm magic, not telepathic. Since you're neither, I'll have to settle for a phone call." He takes a phone out of his back pocket and fingers the screen. He winks at her and vanishes.

Bridget leaps up and spins around. He's not in her office. She flings open the door and looks both ways down the hallway. A pair of constables passing by startles.

"Sorry," says Bridget. She closes her door and returns to her desk. On top sits the card. She puts it in her back pocket.

She takes out her phone. SoulFire and IgNite. Those are the apps. She searches and finds both of them. They exist.

Magic exists. She witnessed a man disappear right here in her office. Objects floated around at the drug house. She didn't imagine it, and no one will be able to tell her she did. Not this time. The question is what to do about it. If she's lucky, it will all go away on its own. She's not usually that lucky.

Chapter 5

Two days later, Bridget and Ranjit are called out on another suspected case of spontaneous human combustion. This one is in a garden near the Toronto Metropolitan University campus.

Ranjit leans over Zhou's shoulder. "This one is different."

"I agree," says Bridget through her mask. The chest is a gaping hole, the ribs spreading out, as if something exploded behind them. The limbs and lower abdomen are largely intact.

"There are no footprints," says Ranjit, "other than our own."

"No plant breakage, either," says Zhou. He lifts a branch of the nearest bush. "No drag marks, no scuff marks. It's as if the body just materialized here."

"Maybe it was dropped here," says Ranjit. He peers up at the building façade in front of them. It's several stories high. "Could it have fallen from one of those windows?"

"I don't see any evidence of that kind of trauma," says Zhou, "but I'll be able to see more once we get it back to the lab."

Bridget backtracks, careful to put her feet down only in her own footprints.

Nope. Never that lucky. When she's well away from the scene, she removes her gloves and mask and opens her jumpsuit. An exploded corpse materialized from out of nowhere. She reaches into her pants pockets for her phone and Moric's card, and calls the only person she knows capable of making sense out of this.

Within seconds, Moric strolls around the corner of the neighbouring building. "Where's the body?"

Bridget is prepared with a fresh jumpsuit, mask, and gloves. "First, put these on."

"To prevent contaminating the scene?" asks Moric.

"You got it."

Moric puts on the gear, and Bridget leads him to the body. She instructs him to step carefully, using her footprints if possible.

Moric leans over Zhou's shoulder.

Ranjit notices him. "Who are you?"

"Moric Ashwood. We met the other day, though I don't believe we were properly introduced."

"Didn't we question you about the body at the crack house?"

"Detective Campbell did," says Moric.

Ranjit turns his head to see Bridget.

"He works for a different police force," she says.

"Which one?" asks Ranjit.

Bridget and Moric exchange a look.

"Does he have any jurisdiction here?" asks Ranjit.

"We're just using him as a consultant." She turns to Moric. "What do you think?"

Moric backs away from the scene. He glances at Ranjit. "I'm working on a theory."

Chapter 6

Bridget, Ranjit and Moric walk into the morgue. Zhou has the body laid out on a table.

"What have you got for us?" asks Bridget.

"It looks like the heart exploded," says Zhou. "Bits of cardiac tissue splattered all over the inside of the chest cavity. The lungs were bruised by the impact."

Moric's face hovers over the gaping hole. "Meaning it must have happened before death, correct?"

"I'd say immediately before," says Zhou. He lifts his eyebrows at Bridget.

"He's a consultant," says Bridget.

Moric inspects the cavity. "Barbaric, yet fascinating."

"Any idea what caused it?" asks Ranjit.

"None whatsoever," says Zhou.

"Tox screen?" asks Bridget.

"Negative," says Zhou. "No drugs in his system, not even alcohol. The stomach contents are strange. Meat, some kind of fowl, I think,

and vegetables, but we can't readily identify them. Perhaps they were altered by whatever killed him."

"Radiation?" asks Ranjit.

"Nope. We tested for that on-site," says Zhou. "Nothing radioactive."

"Natural causes?" asks Bridget.

"I know of nothing natural that can cause this kind of damage," says Zhou. "Having said that, I know of nothing unnatural that can do this without leaving any trace. There's no evidence of any device, no evidence of previous surgeries anywhere to insert a device. I'm completely stumped."

"You're not the only one," says Bridget.

Moric stands watching, a neutral expression on his face. He's not stumped, thinks Bridget.

They leave and walk back out into the sunshine.

"No answers, only more questions," says Ranjit.

Moric waggles his eyebrows at Bridget, which she interprets as a request to talk. She tosses Ranjit the keys. "You head back to the station. I'll join you shortly."

She watches him drive off, then turns to Moric. "Well?"

"The victim's name is Elfric Henbane. He's an enforcer for the Conjurer."

"The who?"

"The Conjurer," says Moric. "He's the head of NecroNet, one of the two crime cartels claiming Toronto. He's very secretive. Nobody knows his real name or who he is. Elfric rarely operates in Toronto, though. His responsibility is ensuring businesses continue to pay their protection money."

"Sounds like a real upstanding citizen."

"I also know the cause of death. The Heart Fire curse. It's a signature of the cartels, reserved for members of criminal organizations. Usually, it's used against rivals in retaliation, but sometimes they use it against their own if betrayal is suspected."

"So, we know this is the work of a cartel, we just don't know which one or why. Why dump the body in Toronto?"

"The dump site is a place of higher learning, correct?"

"Yes."

"That's ripe ground for finding potential customers," says Moric. "Likely, it's become disputed territory. Elfric is very high up in NecroNet. Leaving his body in such a spot sends a clear message. I suspect Bloodline, the rival cartel, killed him. I need to go question some of them."

"Where? In Estrellien?"

"Of course."

"Take me with you."

Moric hesitates.

"I let you tag along on my investigation," says Bridget. "My turn."

"Okay," he says. "But everything that happens in Estrellien–"

"–stays in Estrellien," says Bridget. "Don't worry. I know better than to talk about anything close to magic around here."

Chapter 7

Moric leads her down the street and into a deserted alleyway. They walk to the end, behind a dumpster.

He takes out his phone. "Hang onto my arm and don't let go."

Bridget grasps his upper arm with both hands. She inhales and catches his scent – something woody and resinous, vaguely familiar, but she can't quite name it.

She watches him scroll through the apps on his phone. She notes he has both SoulFire and IgNite. One hand involuntarily loosens its grip for a second, moving toward the phone. She looks away and readjusts her grip. Muscles ripple beneath fabric in reaction.

Moric looks at her. "Are you all right?"

She nods. "Fine."

"Good. Brace yourself."

The world around them winks out of existence. Bridget finds herself in a stone archway on a street of cobblestones in a very different city. She looks up and out. Stone towers and spires dot the streets between lower stone buildings.

"You can let go now," says Moric.

"Right." She releases his arm. "So, you travel between worlds using a cellphone?"

Moric grins. "Shade technology is fantastic. We used to have to carry relics and chant spells, and only the most skilled mages could do it. Now, anyone with the authorization to use the app can do it with the touch of a finger."

"Who has the authorization?"

"Some law enforcement, a select few government officials. Really, very few people. Unfortunately, black market versions exist, which is how criminals get through."

A dark, winged shape flies across the sky, landing on top of the tallest tower. Bridget points at it. "Is that a dragon?"

"Starwing. She's the city's guardian."

People bustle all around them, wearing cloaks over dresses or baggy pants and tunics. Several people turn to stare at them. Moric starts walking. Bridget walks beside him.

"We're not really dressed for Estrellien, are we?" asks Bridget.

"Of course not. I'm dressed for a visit to the Shadowlands."

"Why is my world called the Shadowlands?"

"Because the people there have no magic," says Moric. "You're all living in the shadows, with only half a life."

"How condescending of you."

"I didn't make it up, but I suppose it is meant to emphasize our superiority," Moric shrugs. "There isn't another term."

"That's why we're called shades."

"Yes. So you're aware, most magical people consider it an insult. They consider shades to be beneath them."

"You don't?" asks Bridget.

"Not anymore. I've spent too much time in the Shadowlands to think of your people and mine as being very different at all."

A man appears in their path. Moric and Bridget nearly collide with him.

The man says something in a foreign language. Bridget thinks it sounds like German. A few seconds after he starts, an audible translation emanates from somewhere. "Apologies. I just transported from Turmkastel. Bit of a bumpy ride. I'm afraid I missed the apparition port." The translation continues after the man stops speaking.

"No harm done," says Moric.

The man goes on his way.

"Where did he say he was from? Turmkastel?" asks Bridget. "Is that another world?"

"No, it's another city in this world."

"Oh. Estrellien is the city, not the entire world?"

"Just this city." He turns right onto a broader street with shops on either side.

Bridget notes that the streets here are meant for walking. Twisting and winding, and not wide enough for vehicles. After what she just witnessed, she supposes vehicles are unnecessary.

"What is your world called?" she asks.

"It doesn't have a name; it's just the world."

"You have a name for our world, but not your own?"

"What is your world called by the people who live there?" asks Moric.

"We haven't needed to give it a name because we didn't know any other existed until now." She glances at the goods on display outside the shops. Racks full of cloaks, bins full of coloured powders (spices, perhaps?), a basket piled high with–Bridget leans in for a

closer look–whole dried frogs. She's about to ask if it's food when a ghost-like head appears in front of them. She jumps back.

"Detective Ashwood, report to Warlock Plaza. Incident in progress. Constables are already on site." The head turns to vapour and floats away on the breeze.

Moric turns down an alleyway. Bridget follows behind him. The alleyway opens into a square. In the centre is a massive fountain. Above the basin, a stone sphere hovers and spins. Instead of water, coloured smoke billows.

Several people crouch on this side of the fountain. Now and then, one of them reaches above, or around, the stone structure and points a wand, sending crackling electricity through the air. Electricity shoots back in the other direction.

Moric pulls a wand from his waistband and peeks around the corner. He waves the wand, and a burst of electricity envelopes him. A shield? He motions for Bridget to stay. He walks into the plaza.

Bridget unholsters her gun. She'll stay in the alley, as requested, unless Moric gets into trouble. For now, he's her partner, and she won't leave him without backup. She sidles to the end of the alley and peers out.

Moric jogs over to a group wearing identical silver robes. Uniforms? Tiny bolts of electricity bounce off his shield. The shield flickers. Moric ducks behind the group. All of them band together to build a larger shield, protecting all of them. They send electricity flying.

Bridget surveys the scene. A knot of people at the far corner of the plaza, who were attacking the ones behind the fountain, now must defend themselves against the police onslaught. Those behind the fountain see their opportunity. One by one, they sneak off and disappear, some of them literally, others by sneaking down alleyways. Bridget takes a step out. A second group of police advances from the

opposite end of the plaza, enclosing those trying to flee. She ducks back into the alley. She's a stranger here to everyone except Moric, and it's probably best she doesn't get mistaken for a criminal.

One by one, the criminals fly back, landing on the ground. Police confiscate their wands. Bridget sticks her head out far enough to see Moric's end of the plaza. All but one criminal lies on the ground, rigid, but squirming. Alive. Of the police, Moric is the only officer still standing. The others lie crumpled, inert.

The remaining criminal points a wand at Moric. Bridget runs into the plaza, gun poised. She won't lose a partner. Not again. "Drop it."

Moric turns to her, his eyes wide. The criminal freezes for about three seconds, staring at her. He raises his wand. Bridget isn't sure what happens next. She's aware only of the breeze on her face and the sensation of flying. She covers her head with her arms. Her body slams into something hard. She rolls. When the motion stops, she lies on her back, staring at the sky.

Moric's face appears above hers. He dangles her gun at the end of his wand. "I told you to stay in the alley."

She sits up and nearly falls over. Her head throbs. "You were in trouble. Did you get him?"

"Yes. Your little stunt startled him enough so I could disarm him."

Bridget takes her gun off the end of the wand and returns it to the holster. "You're welcome." She pushes herself up to standing. The world spins, and she reaches out an arm.

Moric catches her and holds her until she can stand. "Did you hit your head?"

The concern in his eyes makes the breath catch in her throat. She pats her head all over. It hurts, but only on the inside. No tender patches on the outside. "No, but I do have a headache and I feel fuzzy."

Moric lets out a breath. "Good. That means it's just a hangover from the spells. It'll pass. I can take you home and do the interviews myself."

"No way I'm missing this. I can walk it off." She takes a few steps. The world shifts a little, but she stays upright.

Moric walks close beside her. "You are very brave, Detective Campbell."

She gives him side-eye.

"Not too bright, but very brave."

Her face relaxes. She almost smiles. "What happened back there?"

"That was your first introduction to the cartels," says Moric. "NecroNet's shipment went astray. They blame Bloodline."

"Shipment of what?"

"Ancient relics, they say. All properly documented, of course."

"Of course."

"This way." Moric leads her up the steps of a castle-like building, complete with turrets. "The headquarters for Bloodline."

"It seems a trifle conspicuous."

"They do have a legitimate side." Moric opens the door and ushers Bridget inside before entering himself. He shows his badge to the receptionist and asks to see Calliope Darkmoon.

"Ms. Darkmoon is the matriarch of the entire clan," Moric says to Bridget. "Everyone answers to her."

The receptionist speaks into the air, explaining that the police are here. Bridget can't hear the response. The receptionist focuses on Moric again. "Ms. Darkmoon will see you. Follow me."

At the top of an almost endless spiral staircase, the receptionist opens a door. Bridget follows Moric. Glass cases around the walls display strange objects. A broken clay cup. A piece of driftwood. Something resembling a fancy cigarette lighter with a hinged lid.

"My apologies for disturbing you," says Moric.

Calliope Darkmoon sits in a high-backed chair behind a desk. Behind her, a curved glass window offers a magnificent view of Estrellien's spires. "Not at all. I'm always happy to meet with the police. Please have a seat."

Moric sits down facing Darkwood.

Brigitte takes a seat next to Moric. She takes several deep breaths to stop her head from spinning after that climb. She places her phone on the desk. "Do you mind if I record this?"

Darkwood looks at her. "Do what?"

"Record the conversation."

Darkmoon glances at Moric.

Bridget taps the record button. "So I can play it back later." She plays the line back.

Darkwood glares at Moric. "You brought a shade into my office?"

Bridget blinks.

"The case I'm investigating occurred in the Shadowlands," says Moric. "I need Detective Campbell's assistance."

"Hmmph," says Darkwood. "If you must, I suppose."

Bridget isn't sure if she's referring to her presence or her request to record the conversation. She puts her phone on the desk and taps record. If Darkwood objects, she'll say so.

"I'm looking into the murder of Elfric Henbane," says Moric.

Darkwood shakes her head. "I don't know that name."

"He works for your rival. NecroNet," says Moric.

"You must be confused," says Darkwood. "I have no dealings with the cartels. I am a simple businesswoman. I deal in magical objects." She sweeps her arm around, indicating the display cases. "As you can see."

Bridget furrows her brow. That junk is magic?

"Hypothetically," says Moric, "have you any idea why an enforcer for a major drug cartel would be murdered with a Heart Fire curse and dumped in the Shadowlands?"

Darkwood puts a hand to her heart. "None. I wasn't aware the cartels had infiltrated the Shadowlands."

Moric stands. "Thank you for your time. He turns to leave.

Bridget grabs her phone, turns off the recording, and hurries after him. After sitting, her legs are stiff and sore. She feels every single stair in her thighs. When they exit the building, Bridget blinks, the sunlight intensifying the throb in her head.

"Are you sure you don't want to go home?" asks Moric.

"I'm fine." Bridget points a thumb back at Bloodline's headquarters. "Was that it? You didn't ask about her whereabouts at the time of the murder, or for witnesses."

"There's no point. If she were with the victim, she wouldn't tell us. Witnesses are useless because she could have disapparated, committed murder, and apparated back before anyone noticed her missing."

She trudges along after him. After a few turns, Moric knocks on a heavy wooden door. A panel at eye level slides open. A dark face scowls.

Moric shows his badge. "We're here to speak to the Conjurer."

"He's not available."

"When will he be available?" asks Moric.

"He won't."

"Is there someone else in charge we can talk to?"

The face grunts. "Alasdair is in charge when the Conjurer is unavailable."

"Alasdair Boneshaker," says Moric. "May we speak with him?"

The door swings open.

Alasdair Boneshaker is a very tall, barrel-chested man with a shiny pink bald head. His face is set in a permanent scowl, with deep lines

running between nose and mouth. "I hear you want to speak with me. Follow me." He leads them to a room with an enormous stone fireplace. He takes an ornately carved chair facing the fire. "Please sit down."

Moric sits next to Boneshaker. Bridget takes a seat closest to the fire, facing Boneshaker at an angle. She turns to the fire and waves a hand. "There's no heat."

"Of course not," says Boneshaker. "It's high summer." Realization dawns on his face. He turns to Moric and points at Bridget. "That's a shade."

"She is Detective Bridget Campbell, of the Toronto Police Services in the Shadowlands," says Moric. "She is assisting me in my investigation."

Bridget's request to record the conversation meets the same skepticism it did from Darkwood, but Boneshaker doesn't object, so she places her phone on the end table nearest to him.

"I understand Elfric Henbane is an associate of yours," says Moric.

"Yeah, he's my right-hand man." Boneshaker leans back, taps a foot. A little too casual, Bridget thinks.

"Why, is he in trouble?" asks Boneshaker.

"There's no easy way to say this," says Moric. "He's dead. Murdered."

"What? How?"

"Heart Fire curse."

"That means–" Boneshaker clenches his fists.

"It was almost certainly a cartel member who did it." Moric rises and approaches Boneshaker, but stays out of arm's reach. "I'm sorry, but you know I have to ask. How was your relationship with Henbane?"

Boneshaker takes a step toward Moric. "You think I did it? You think I killed him? He was like a brother to me. I never would have–" He trails off. His chest heaves. "This is Bloodline. They did this." He shakes his head. "I swear I'm going to–"

"Let the police handle it?" I say.

Boneshaker glares at me, then glances at Moric. "Yeah. That's what I was going to say."

"Thank you for your time," says Moric. "And we're very sorry for your loss."

Boneshaker nods.

The guard at the outer door lets them out. This time, instead of piercing her skull, the sun feels pleasantly warm. Bridget blinks, and the last of the fog lifts.

"You look much improved," says Moric.

"My head is clear." Bridget stretches her limbs. "The rest of me is still sore, though."

"We need to discuss the case. I was going to suggest the department, or perhaps a pub, but somewhere more comfortable might be better for you. Would you be okay with coming back to my place?"

Bridget thinks. She doesn't know this man. She could be walking into a dangerous situation. Then again, she's been completely at his mercy since they arrived in Estrellien, and he's treated her with nothing but consideration. He's not a threat.

He raises an eyebrow. One corner of his mouth turns up.

Bridget's stomach flutters. Her nether regions flush with heat. She should say no. "Yes, that would be fine."

Chapter 8

Moric's apartment is in the basement of a crenellated square building. It's small and dark, but clean and comfortable. The centrepiece of the living room is a burgundy velvet-backed sofa with raised arms and clawed feet that makes her want to drape herself across it in a swoon.

Moric claps his hands, and a shining orb appears in the centre of the ceiling. He makes himself busy in the kitchen while Bridget sits on the end of the sofa. She sinks into the soft plush.

In a few moments, Moric enters with a steaming goblet in each hand. He gives one to Bridget as he sits on the opposite end of the sofa.

Bridget eyes the drink.

"It's herb tea," says Moric. "I bought it in the Shadowlands. Chamomile. No magic, but it will help relax your aching muscles."

She sniffs. It smells slightly herby and a little fruity. She takes a sip. Not bad.

"So, what did you think of the interviews?" asks Moric.

Bridget places her goblet on the coffee table. Moric slips a coaster underneath it.

"Darkmoon seemed sincere," says Bridget, "but Boneshaker is hiding something. At first, he seemed like he was trying very hard to remain casual. His grief and his anger seem sincere, though."

"You read people very well," says Moric. "My people need magic to do that."

"It's a skill I've worked at. It comes from experience."

Moric takes out his phone. "Our police have an app called Veritas. Look." He shows her a screen with a report on Darkmoon. He swipes the screen, and a report on Boneshaker appears. Both reports agree with Bridget's assessment.

"You don't need me, then," says Bridget.

"I do. The app has about a twenty per cent error rate."

"That's pretty high."

"That's why I need confirmation," says Moric. "I'm guessing your skill isn't infallible, either, so having another opinion is valuable to both of us."

"You're right about that." She picks up her goblet again and takes a sip. Now she's the one trying to look casual. "I noticed you have both SoulFire and IgNite on your phone. Should I be worried? Are you an addict?"

"I have the apps as part of my investigation. And no, you shouldn't be worried. The apps aren't addictive to magical folk. They aren't even very interesting to us. That's why the cartels sell to shades."

"I don't like that word."

"Sorry," says Moric.

Bridget stares into her goblet. "You were right before. I tried IgNite. Not on purpose. One of the addicts we brought in shoved it in my face." She shivers.

"It was unpleasant?"

"Horrible. I've never felt rage like that. It took over my whole body. I had no control over what I was doing."

He grasps her hand. "That must have been terrifying for you."

She nods. "Yeah. And then after, I felt better than I have in years. I was drained and exhausted, but perfectly at peace. And–" she looks at him.

"And you would endure that horror again knowing it ends in pleasure."

"If that were the only price to pay, I would be sorely tempted," says Bridget. "Fortunately, my desire not to go up in flames trumps my desire for dopamine."

Moric releases her hand and drains his goblet. "Glad to hear it." His eyes glitter in the orb light.

Bridget leans her face closer to his. He touches his forehead to hers, rubs his nose against hers. Every nerve ending in her body buzzes. She's not sure who kisses whom first, but the moment their lips part, she pulls him back. His tongue probes inside her mouth.

He moves to her cheek, nuzzles her neck.

She places a hand on his chest and pushes him away. "I should go now."

He sits back. "I'm sorry."

"Just take me home."

They go back out onto the street to a stone archway. An apparition port. Bridget holds onto Moric's arm as they cross over. Moric nods as he crosses back alone.

Bridget hops a bus back and returns to her apartment. As soon as she opens the door and flicks on the light, Milo appears, miaowing. She picks him up and scratches the ruff around his neck. She looks

around her living room. Square beige sofa, ordinary floor lamp to one side. Quiet, empty. She sighs.

Chapter 9

The next morning, bruises mark Bridget's shoulders and legs from her encounter with the cobblestones.

She pushes open the station door and heads for Ranjit's office. She hesitates before knocking. Last night, tossing and turning, telling her partner everything seemed the obvious thing to do. Now, she's not so sure. She knocks on the door.

"Come in," says Ranjit.

Bridget opens the door and steps inside.

"You're back." Ranjit lets out a breath. "When you didn't come back at all after the morgue, I started to worry."

"I was working the case," says Bridget. "I tried to call, but my phone died."

"Rogers is looking for you. I covered for as long as I could, but he eventually noticed your absence."

Bridget sighs. "I'll go see him when I'm done here. Make any progress yesterday?"

"Not much. More interviews, not much more information."

It's now or never. She opens her mouth.

Detective Sergeant Gerald Rogers pokes his head in the door. "Campbell. Good of you to drop by. My office. Now."

"We'll continue this later," says Bridget to Ranjit. She follows Rogers into his office and takes a seat facing his desk.

"I assume you have a good reason for being out of touch yesterday," says Rogers.

"I spoke with Ranjit. I'm up to speed."

"That's not the point. As the lead investigator, you should be the one leading the investigation. If you were out collecting information, Ranjit should have been with you, the station should have been informed of your whereabouts, and you should have maintained phone contact. You know all this."

"I do know, and I'm sorry, but it was unavoidable," says Bridget. "Where I was, there was no cell service. I didn't take Ranjit with me because I didn't know how safe it was, and I didn't want to ask anyone else to take the risk."

"If it was dangerous, all the more reason to bring backup and let us know where you were."

"This is bigger than any of us imagined. But before I tell you what I found, I need you to promise to hear me out. Let me tell the entire story without interruption, no matter how strange it sounds."

Rogers leans back in his chair and folds his hands over his chest. "Go ahead."

She tells him about Moric and her visit to the other world. About the cartels and the apps, the interviews and the wand fight. When she finishes, Rogers stares at her.

"I know how it sounds," says Bridget. "That's why I brought proof." She puts her phone on his desk and plays the interviews.

Rogers looks at her, one eyebrow raised.

"Surely you don't think I faked those recordings?"

"No, but I think you're being scammed. This Moric person is playing some kind of colossal joke."

"What would he have to gain from it?" asks Bridget.

"Attention," says Rogers.

"I was there. I travelled from this world to another, completely different one."

"You're not the most reliable eyewitness."

Bridget's jaw clenches. "That was twenty years ago. And after what I witnessed yesterday, I no longer think I was hallucinating back then." She looks up at the ceiling. "If I'm right, we're being exploited by this other world, and I've been given an opportunity to put an end to it."

Rogers rests his hands on his desk. "You're a fine detective. The best. But even if all this is true, it's going to look like you're having a relapse. The department can't afford that. You can't afford it. Keep your investigation grounded in reality."

"Fine. Can I leave now?"

Rogers makes a shooing gesture.

Bridget heads to evidence storage. If her previous episode wasn't a psychotic break, if it really happened, there might be proof. If she can find it, Rogers might let her continue her investigation. She searches through the shelves, finds the right box and takes it back to her office. There's very little in the way of physical evidence, but there are pages and pages of witness testimony. She reads through it. Reports of levitations, bolts of light, people appearing out of thin air. Reports of Mike–she closes her eyes–of one of these bolts hitting Mike, his dropping to the ground. Later, many witnesses changed their statements, saying they hadn't seen those things. But not all. She could try to contact the ones who didn't recant, but for now, the reports are all she has. She hopes it's enough.

She knocks on Rogers's door. He tells her to come in.

She plunks the reports on his desk. "I found these statements from the time of my incident. They corroborate my version of events."

Rogers scans them. "None of this is proof. It could have been mass hysteria."

"A dozen people had the same hallucination? That's your theory?"

"I can't authorize this. You are to drop it immediately."

Bridget huffs. "Fine." She leaves, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter 10

Bridget heads straight for the reception area to get some coffee.

"Hey," calls Ranjit as she passes his office. "I have something new."

"I'm just going for a caffeine shot. I'll be right back."

After pouring her coffee, she nearly collides with Moric. "What are you doing here?"

Moric's eyes dart around. "Do you want to do this here, with all these people?"

Bridget leads him back to her office and closes the door.

"I'm so–"

Bridget raises a hand. "No need to apologize. We both crossed a line." She looks at him, sitting casually, one leg extended, his curls hanging across his forehead.

Moric nods. "Luckily, we didn't cross too far. That would have been regrettable."

"Yeah."

They stare at each other.

Moric sits straight and rests his hands on her desk. "I assume you've had time to speak with your partner. Any more leads?"

"Unfortunately, my supervisor has ordered me to drop your case, so I am no longer assisting you."

"But we need each other."

Heat flushes Bridget's face.

"I meant to bring down the cartels."

"Perhaps your supervisor and the head of your government should come over here, introduce themselves formally and request cooperation," says Bridget.

"How do you see it working out if everyone in both worlds knew of each other's existence and there was free travel across the veil?"

Bridget thinks about the huge multiplication of the magical cartels in Toronto, about the influx of human victims wandering around the other world.

"Magic only exists as it is because the worlds are separate," says Moric. "Should the veil fall, the magic would rush into the Shadowlands and be diluted."

Bridget doesn't think that would be a bad thing. "It seems we both have much to lose. What about your police?"

"They're working on it, but they can't all come here. We need to work together."

"Fine. But we bring Ranjit into it. I don't know how you do things in Estrellien, but here in Toronto, we work in pairs."

"I'm used to working solo."

"Well, I need to have someone here who knows what I'm doing and where I'm going, in case anything should happen to me."

Moric leans forward and looks into her eyes. "I will make sure nothing happens to you."

"You are not omnipotent."

Moric tilts his head. "Sadly, no. Fine, we bring in Ranjit."

"He's waiting for me now. Let's go."

They walk down the hall to Ranjit's office.

"What have you got for us?" asks Bridget.

Ranjit eyes Moric. "CCTV footage." He clicks some keys. A grainy video starts. The timestamp shows it's about two hours before the murder. Elfric Henbane is speaking to a woman. He pauses the playback so they can clearly see the woman's face.

"Any idea who that is with the deceased?" asks Bridget.

Ranjit shakes his head. "We're canvassing the area, trying to track her down."

"She looks very much like Andromeda Darkmoon," says Moric.

"Any relation to Calliope?" asks Bridget.

"Her granddaughter."

Ranjit looks from one to the other. "Mind filling me in?"

Bridget closes the office door. "You're going to find this unbelievable."

"Let me," says Moric. He taps his phone and disappears.

Ranjit jumps up and looks around. "What–"

Moric shimmers back into existence.

Ranjit stares.

"I'm from a different world," says Moric.

"The Otherworld," says Bridget.

"Excuse me?" says Moric.

"You don't have a name for it, so whenever I think about it, it's always 'the other world.' The Otherworld."

"How condescending of you," says Moric.

Bridget smiles and raises an eyebrow.

Moric turns to Ranjit. "I am a detective with the Estrellien police force. Specifically, I investigate organized crime." He gives Ranjit a summary of the case so far, including Bridget's involvement.

Ranjit sinks into his chair.

"It's probably best not to talk to D.S. Rogers about this," says Bridget.

"Right," says Ranjit. "So, about this footage. There's more." He clicks on play.

Andromeda and Elfric kiss passionately. She pulls away. He clutches at her as she walks out of camera range. Elfric follows.

"Whoa," says Moric.

"Send me that footage," says Bridget. "They appear to be in a romantic relationship."

"I doubt that very much," says Moric. "Andromeda owns one of the most popular nightclubs in Estrellien. She's its public face, a trendsetter in both music and fashion. Elfric was as staid and boring as they come. They have absolutely nothing in common."

"You'd be surprised," says Ranjit. "Sometimes the most unlikely people get together."

"They're both fiercely loyal to their cartels," says Moric. "It makes no sense."

"It looks like she wanted to get away from him, and he didn't want her to leave," says Bridget. "Maybe he chased her and tried to get physical, and she killed him."

"I don't doubt Elfric might have tried something like that," says Moric.

"I'm not so sure," says Ranjit. "His movements were awkward." He replays the footage. Henbane's stiff limbs jerk as he clutches at Andromeda. His knees barely bend as he follows her.

Moric nods. "You're right."

"Injury?" asks Bridget.

"Maybe," says Moric.

"At least now we know how information is leaking between NecroNet and Bloodline," says Bridget.

"If I'm following correctly," says Ranjit, "It seems unlikely that anyone in Bloodline is the murderer because killing Elfric would have cut off a vital source of information."

"That leaves NecroNet," says Moric. "I'll go track down Adromeda Darkmoon."

Chapter 11

Bridget enters the nightclub with Moric. Metallic screeching fills the air. Bridget clamps her hands over her ears.

"What is that noise?"

"Music," says Moric.

"That is not music.

He approaches the bar and shows his badge. "We're here to see Ms. Darkmoon. She's expecting us."

The bartender shows them to an office in the back. Andromeda welcomes them. "Please, come in and sit down." She closes the door. The room becomes, mercifully, soundproof.

They sit in ornate high-backed velvet chairs.

"Can I get you something to drink?" asks Andromeda.

Moric gives Bridget a subtle head shake. "No, thank you. We're here on police business."

Andromeda flounces her skirt as she takes a seat. Her fuchsia curls bounce on her shoulders. "Always happy to help the police."

"Elfric Henbane was found murdered in the Shadowlands yesterday morning," says Moric.

Andromeda shakes her head, her eyes wide. "Is that name supposed to mean something to me?"

"You didn't know Henbane?" asks Bridget.

"No, I didn't."

Bridget starts the playback of the CCTV video and turns her phone around so Andromeda can see it. Andromeda's face falls as the scene progresses.

"What kind of magic is that?" she asks.

"That is you, is it not?" asks Bridget.

Andromeda bites her lip. "Yes, it's me. Elfric was constantly bothering me. He was obsessed."

"It wasn't mutual?" asks Bridget.

"Of course not," says Andromeda.

"What were you doing in the Shadowlands?" asks Moric.

"I was on business."

"There is no legitimate business in the Shadowlands for anyone who isn't a shade," says Moric.

Andromeda sighs, heaving her entire upper body. She places a finger on her lips and waves the other hand around.

Bridget looks at Moric, eyebrows knitted.

"I just reinforced the protections in this room," says Andromeda. "There's no telling who might be listening." She leans forward and whispers. "Elfric and I were in love. The only place we could meet without getting caught was the Shadowlands. Nowhere else was safe for us." Her breath catches, and she wipes away a tear. "NecroNet must have found out about us and killed him." She sobs.

Bridget goes to her and rubs her back. Andromeda grabs Bridget by the waist and sobs into her blouse. Bridget looks at Moric.

He conjures a clean handkerchief out of the air and offers it to Andromeda. "We're very sorry for your loss. And I'm sorry, but I need to ask. Do you have any proof NecroNet killed Henbane?"

She shakes her head. "No proof, but of course it was them. Who else would it be?"

"Okay," says Moric. "We're going to go now. Can I get you anything before you leave?"

Andromeda shakes her head.

Bridget covers her ears as soon as the door opens. Unfortunately, not fast enough. Loud crashing and blood-curdling yelling have joined the screeching metal.

"Do you believe her?" asks Moric when they're back on the street.

Bridget lets out a breath. "Well, her story is certainly believable, and there was a relationship. Nothing is inconsistent. The crying was a little over the top; it could have been fake, but it could have been real. Hard to say."

Moric checks his phone. "Veritas says she's telling the truth. That's one vote each way."

"My vote was a maybe, not an unqualified no."

"That's one-and-a-half against. She could be hiding something."

"Agreed," says Bridget.

They return to Boneshaker's office and show him the footage.

"I think you found out about this relationship, knew that Henbane was the one leaking information to Bloodline, and killed him," says Moric.

"I didn't kill him," says Boneshaker.

Bridget looks at him. "But you knew about the affair."

"We're done here," says Boneshaker. He calls for someone to show them out.

"I don't need to consult you or Veritas to know he's not being honest with us," says Moric. "Drop you off at home?"

"The station," says Bridget. "I have some paperwork to file before morning."

"How long with this paperwork take?" asks Moric.

"About an hour, maybe less."

"Maybe after we can get something to eat."

Bridget lets out a breath.

"Just two colleagues unwinding after work," says Moric. "There's an Asian fusion restaurant near the station. I don't know what that means, but the food is good."

"Thai Tanic. I know it well." She nods. "Okay. Come to the station and wait for me."

"Hold on to my arm. I go to Thai Tanic every chance I get. I love Shadowlands food."

Bridget smiles. "You are new to my world if you think that's typical Shadowland cuisine."

They apparate in the alley next to the station.

"Campbell."

Bridget startles at the sound of her name. D.S. Rogers stands in front of them.

"I didn't expect you to be here at this hour, sir." Her stomach flutters with nerves. He knows she didn't drop the case, but then again, he also knows magic is real.

"Clearly." Rogers eyes Moric. "I recognize you. You're that Ashwood guy."

Moric sticks out a hand to shake. "Detective Ashwood. Pleased to meet you."

"You can leave now," says Rogers.

Moric looks at Bridget and places a hand on her shoulder.

"It's fine," she says. "Go."

Moric casts Rogers a look and walks away.

Bridget trudges along behind Rogers into the station to his office.

"You were ordered not to pursue this," says Rogers.

"I'm fully pursuing the other line of investigation," says Bridget. "I only followed this one at the end of the workday, on my own time."

"As of right now, you're on suspension until further notice."

"But you saw me appear out of nowhere. You know it's real."

"That's not the point. You disobeyed an order."

"How did you know where I was and when and where I'd come back?"

"Malhotra told me."

"Ranjit?" says Bridget.

"He's concerned about you."

Bridget thinks. She told Ranjit she was crossing over, but not when or where she'd be back. She agreed to text him after she returned to let him know she was okay. Even she didn't know when she'd be back until shortly before she arrived. Or where, for that matter. That was Moric's choice. Moric. He used his phone to apparate. He could have sent Rogers a message at the same time. She shakes her head. He has nothing to gain by hampering her ability to investigate with him.

"Okay. Fine," says Bridget. "I'll do the counselling."

Chapter 12

Bridget flops down on her bed. She fishes out Moric's card and calls him.

He picks up on the first ring. "Bridget? Is there something wrong?"

"There's good news and bad news. The good news is I am now completely at your disposal. The bad news is that I no longer have access to any of my station's resources. I just got suspended."

"I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"Not unless you've been in contact with my D.S. behind my back."

"Certainly not," says Moric.

"Someone has. It can't be a coincidence that he was there when we apparated."

Moric takes a moment to respond. "I thought the same thing. Did you ask him?"

"He said Ranjit told him, but he couldn't have. I told Ranjit I was crossing over, but not when I'd be back. We arranged for me to text him when I returned. If he didn't hear from me by eight hundred hours this morning, he was to tell Rogers."

Moric whistles. "Your superior is lying to you."

She takes a breath. "Yeah. And until we know why, he can't be trusted with any details of our investigation."

Moric appears in front of her.

"You didn't need to come over right now. Tomorrow would have been fine." She scrambles to sit up.

"You sounded upset." He looks around. "Sorry. I didn't realize where you were. Shall we move to a different room?"

She leads him into the kitchen/living room. He sits on the sofa.

"I'm not upset," says Bridget. "I'm angry."

"Understandably."

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Have you got any chamomile?" he asks.

"Sorry, no. I have coffee or water."

"Water is fine," says Moric. "Caffeine affects the magic. I might not be able to get home."

We definitely don't want that. She brings him a glass of water and sits beside him. Milo jumps up onto the arm of the sofa.

Moric scratches behind the cat's ear. "What is your familiar's name?"

"That's Milo, and he's my pet, not a familiar."

Milo decides Moric is okay and settles onto his lap.

"Are you ever going to tell me about it?" asks Moric.

"Your previous experience with magic."

She takes a breath. Maybe it is time she talked about it. "It was twenty years ago. I was a rookie constable. Not a detective yet. My partner and I were called to the scene of a street fight. But it wasn't like any fight I'd ever seen before." She shifts her weight. "There were two people with what looked like wands. Every time they pointed one

of those things, something would explode or launch itself through the air or someone would fall to the ground." She falls silent.

Moric sips his water, waiting.

A lump forms in Bridget's throat. "Mike–my partner–pulled a gun and ordered them to stop. One of them pointed a wand, and he dropped. I tried to go to him, but something I couldn't see slammed into me. I flew through the air, hit my head on the asphalt." Her voice quavers. "When I came to, I was in the hospital with a concussion. They told me Mike didn't make it. Cause of death was presumed to be an aneurysm, but none was ever found. The killers were never caught. Vanished into thin air, according to witnesses."

"Were you and Mike close?" He peers at her over the rim of his glass.

"Not like that," says Bridget. "He was a mentor. Good cop. His wife was expecting their third child when he was killed."

"How awful."

"It gets worse."

"How?"

"When I started talking about what happened, it was dismissed as a brain injury," says Bridget. "Hallucinations. When I insisted it was real, I was ordered to undergo a psychiatric assessment and care before being allowed back onto the force. Eventually, I gave in and agreed with the doctors, the chief of police and everyone else that what I thought I remembered wasn't real. After all these years, I had finally convinced myself that was the truth."

"Until you walked into that drug house."

"Yeah."

Moric puts his glass on the coffee table. "Twenty years ago. That would have been at the very beginning of the incursions into the Shadowlands. Perhaps the cartels were staking out territory."

A thought occurs to Bridget. "Were you there? Were you assigned to the case?"

"Twenty years ago, I was an adolescent in school, desperately trying to do well while avoiding the recruitment gangs of the organizations I now try to stop. It was another five years before I joined the force."

"You had a rough childhood."

Moric nods. "I grew up in a poor neighbourhood. My older sister and some of my friends ended up in gangs and couldn't get out. Some didn't make it to adulthood."

"Your sister?"

He shakes his head. "She tried to leave, was murdered in revenge. Heart Fire curse."

Bridget squeezes his hand. He looks into her eyes.

She releases his hand. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

"Thai Tanic delivers."

"How convenient."

When the food arrives, Bridget spreads it out on the coffee table. They eat on the couch, plates balanced on their laps.

"You don't seem to have a dedicated eating space," says Moric.

"It's just me and Milo, and he has lousy table manners."

"Have you always been on your own?"

Bridget hesitates.

"Sorry, that was too personal," says Moric.

She shakes her head. "It's okay. I used to have someone. He was a doctor. Between his shifts and mine, we rarely saw each other. Then he took up with one of his colleagues."

"Clearly, the man is an imbecile."

She smiles. "Thank you for saying so." Her pulse quickens.

"I mean it. He's a fool."

She puts her plate on the coffee table. "I'm not looking for a relationship."

He puts down his plate and stares off into the distance.

Bridget's stomach clenches. She misread things. What an idiot.

He turns to look at her. "Okay. We can enjoy the moment. No obligations."

Her hands tremble. She didn't misread a thing.

"If you want to," says Moric.

Her first instinct is to walk away. Tell him to leave. Her second instinct is to give her head a shake. She can't remember the last time a man looked at her like that. He wants her. The fact that they're working together, even unofficially, complicates things, but not for long. When the job is done, he'll be gone, and she'll never have to see him again.

She leans over and kisses him. Breathes in his woody scent. Right now, she can't think of a good reason not to.

She stands and gestures for him to follow her. He closes the bedroom door behind him and reaches for her. Lips locked together, they unbutton each other's shirts, pull them off. Bridget tenses as the fabric swipes the bruise on her shoulder.

Moric kisses the purpling mark.

Bridget bends her head, teases his nipples with her tongue. She unbuckles his belt, unzips his pants. He kicks them off. She stands back, admiring his taut frame.

Bridget kneels on the bed and pulls him closer. She nibbles at his neck and reaches a hand between his thighs, massages his balls. His erection grows firmer against her belly. She moves her tongue down his chest. She rearranges herself into a sitting position and takes him into her mouth, alternating between licking and sucking. He runs a hand through her hair.

She pulls back and lies across the bed. He lands on top of her, mouth on one breast, a hand on the other. She wriggles out of her pants and panties, throws them across the room. He runs a finger along her inner thigh. She shivers. His finger explores her folds, penetrates her. He kisses her navel, draws his tongue down her abdomen, along her appendectomy scar. To her clit. She arches her back and moans.

"On your back," she says.

He rolls over. "You don't like that?"

"Oh, I like it."

He looks at her, brows furrowed.

"If you keep it up, I'm going to come way too fast." She straddles him. "I want this to last."

She rubs against him a few times before using a hand to guide him into her. He closes his eyes. She adjusts her position and movement until his hardness massages her inside and out. She moves her hips gently, allowing the pleasure to course through her.

She places one hand beside his face and leans down to kiss him. Her hair hangs like a curtain, brushing his bare skin. He cups her face with one hand. With the other, he grabs her ass, driving himself deeper inside.

Her hips increase their gyrations. She presses both hands against the bed. "Pull me closer."

"I thought you wanted to make it last."

"Too late."

He holds both of her hips, raising his to meet hers. Her body spasms. He flips her onto her back, reversing their positions. He thrusts frantically before collapsing on her.

She brushes hair back from his face. He looks up at her, kisses her nose.

Chapter 13

Bridget opens her eyes to light filtering through the curtains, her body still warm from repeated orgasms. She rolls over. Moric is gone. She feels a pang. She did tell him she didn't want a relationship, but she deserved more than a midnight disappearance.

She gets out of bed, gathers her discarded clothing and puts it in the laundry. She shrugs into a bathrobe. When she opens the door, cooking smells waft in from the kitchen. Fish with garlic butter. Some kind of vegetable. She steps into the hallway and peeks into the kitchen. The mess from the night before has been cleaned up. Moric is scratching behind Milo's ears. A pan sizzles on the stove. While she watches, green flecks pour themselves into the pan.

After a quick visit to the bathroom, she joins Moric in the kitchen. She kisses him. "Good morning."

He casts a look down her bathrobe. "Very good morning. I hope you like fish." He wraps his arms around her.

"I do. I don't usually eat it for breakfast."

"It's my favourite breakfast. I had to zip back to my place to get food. Your storage receptacle is nearly empty. You might want to replenish it."

A cupboard opens, and two plates float out and onto the counter. Portions of fish and asparagus arrange themselves on the plates.

"If I could get food to cook itself, I'd need to keep more on hand because I wouldn't need to buy so much takeout."

Moric smiles. They take their plates into the living room and sit on the sofa.

"We need to discuss what we have so far."

"Ah. The case," says Bridget. "This is the first debriefing I've ever done in a bathrobe."

"You should try it more often."

"I think the D.S. would object."

"I doubt that very much."

She shoves a forkful of fish into her mouth. "This is delicious."

"Thank you," says Moric. "I noticed you have a mark." He draws a line across his abdomen with his thumb.

"I thought you wanted to discuss the case."

"This is about the case."

"Okay. Yes, I have a surgical scar."

"When we saw the body at the morgue, the chest cavity was open," says Moric. "If the body had any marks in that area, would the coroner have noted them?"

"Absolutely. It would be in the report, and there would be photos."

"Can we read this report and see the photos?"

"I no longer have access, but I'm sure Ranjit would send them to me." She sends him a text.

After breakfast, Bridget takes a quick shower and dresses. By the time she returns to the kitchen, Ranjit has sent the report. She reads it.

"You were right," she says. "There's a burn mark on the chest." She pulls up two photos–one close-up to show the mark, the other further back to show the position. "How did you know?" She hands the phone to Moric.

"You can tell how far away the wand was by the pattern of the burn. If the wand is very far away, as is usually the case, there's no burn at all. But if there is a burn, the more diffuse it is, the further away the wand."

"The burn is sharp."

"The wand touched him."

Bridget takes her phone back and examines the photos again. The burn is on the lower right side of the chest, angled upward. "The murderer would have been standing to the right and behind him." She turns Moric around and reaches her right arm below his. "Like this."

"Like a lover," says Moric.

"Andromeda," they say together.

Bridget leans back against the counter. Something doesn't feel right. "Why attack from behind? He trusted her. She could have more easily hit him straight on."

"And she has no motive."

"Unless he was a double agent. Spying on Bloodline while feeding them information about NecroNet. Is there a way to look into his business dealings in the weeks leading up to his death?"

"There is," says Moric, "but it's illegal."

"Illegal as in criminal?"

"No, illegal as in can't be used in court."

"Can you do it?"

"Not me, but I know someone," says Moric.

"Let's go."

Moric brings her to a tower on a plain outside the city of Estrellien to meet with one of his informants. At the top of a stone spiral staircase looms a heavy wooden door. Moric taps out a rhythm. The door opens to reveal a man with a long white beard dressed in black robes.

"Ah, Moric. I've been waiting for you," says the man.

"Orion Moontide, meet Bridget Campbell. She's helping me with this case."

Orion studies Bridget. "A shade." His tone is curious.

"This murder took place in the Shadowlands," says Moric.

"Ah," says Orion. "Please, come in." He leads them to an ornate brass stand containing a large bowl of water.

They look into the water. Bridget sees only their reflection. "How does it work?"

"With the right spell and the right herbs, the water will show us Elfric Henbane's life," says Orion.

"All of it?" asks Bridget.

"If we want," says Moric, "but we don't need to see his whole life, just the last few weeks."

"It will show us everything? Everything he did? Twenty-four hours a day?"

"Yes," says Orion.

Bridget shudders. "Such an invasion of privacy."

"That's why it's illegal," says Moric.

"How accurate is it?" asks Bridget.

"Completely," says Moric. "This spell replays one's mind. It can't be faked. Unfortunately, it is strictly visual. No sound."

Orion sprinkles herbs into the water. He closes his eyes and mutters words in a language Bridget doesn't recognize. He waves a hand above the surface of the water.

As Bridget watches, an image forms of a dark street. Concrete buildings pass by. The image sharpens as it plays. Sometimes the perspective changes, as if the camera changes direction. Men's shoes appear walking along the asphalt. The scene swings to the side and only one side of the street shows.

"Is this from Henbane's perspective?"

"Yes," says Orion.

"That's Toronto," says Bridget.

Orion swirls a finger and the image speeds up. Much of it can be sped through–Henbane eating, walking, peeing.

"There's Andromeda," says Moric.

Orion slows the playback to normal speed. The scene blurs as Henbane puts a clumsy hand on Andromeda's hip. She turns away.

"Like the video front he night he died," says Bridget.

"But this is weeks earlier," says Moric.

This video follows the pair, allowing them to see what happens next, what might have happened again the night of the murder, after they moved out of camera range. Far from running away, Andromeda maintains a slow pace, frequently allowing him to touch her before pushing him away again. She leads him to a motel room where she proceeds to strip off her clothes and his.

"You can speed up again," says Bridget.

The replay shows several similar encounters.

Bridget requests a pause. "Every time he sees her, the image loses focus a little, and he follows her around like a lost puppy."

"It has the look of an enchantment," says Orion.

"I agree," says Moric.

"Andromeda cast a love spell on him?" asks Bridget.

"It appears so," says Moric. "Such a thing is criminal, of course. It's a type of rape, and it certainly doesn't produce genuine emotions. The love ends as soon as the spell does."

"It sounds ideal for someone who isn't interested in love, but needs a source of information," says Bridget. "But why have sex with him? She could have kept teasing him, letting him think she would. It might even have been more effective."

"Sex magic," says Orion. "It enhances the charm, makes the lover a complete slave."

Bridget looks at Moric. Moric's eyes widen.

Orion leans against the stand and continues the video.

Towards the end, Henbane meets with Boneshaker. Henbane puts a hand to his forehead. The playback jerks around as if he's ranting. Or crying. Boneshaker puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Boneshaker knows," says Moric.

Henbane turns his back on Boneshaker. The video ends.

"What happened?" asks Bridget.

"He died," says Orion. "No more video."

"But it didn't show how he died," says Bridget. "That's what we need to see."

"It can only show what Henbane saw," says Orion. "If he didn't see his killer, neither can we."

"We know Boneshaker was with him when he died," says Moric. "Thank you for your help."

"For you, anything," says Orion. I'll show you out.

When they're out on the street, Moric says, "We should talk to Boneshaker again."

"Agreed."

They apparate close to downtown and start walking toward NecroNet's headquarters. Moric turns to Bridget. "I didn't use sex magic, or any other kind of magic, on you."

"I didn't think you did. I was in full control of my faculties and acted completely of my own accord."

"Oh," says Moric. "It's just–the look you gave me."

"I was reminded that you could use magic on me. At any time."

"I'm not interested in anything fake."

Bridget looks away.

"And you're not interested in anything real," says Moric.

"If it's any comfort, I'm not interested in fake, either."

"If you're so disinterested, why did you make love to me at all?"

Bridget cringes at the L-word. "To be honest, I–" she's about to say she just needed the release, but she only needed it because he created the need in the first place. "I can't say."

"Can't or won't?"

"Prefer not to."

They walk for a while without speaking.

"If I were a crime boss," says Bridget, "and I found out that one of my top operatives was being manipulated into divulging top secret information, I would probably kill the operative, but I would want revenge."

"So would I. And I would do it where I was least likely to face any consequences."

They look at each other and speak at the same time. Bridget says, "Toronto." Moric says, "The Shadowlands."

"We need to warn Bloodline," says Bridget.

They turn toward Calliope Darkmoon's offices.

Around a corner, they can see the turrets of Bloodline's offices. They climb the front steps. Moric knocks. The door swings open.

"Hello?" says Moric.

The reception desk is vacant. Their footsteps echo in empty hallways. They push open doors. Nobody.

"Do you think it's already started?" asks Bridget.

Moric nods. "Back to the Shadowlands."

Bridget holds on to his arm.

"Not in here," says Moric. "The place will be protected. Only the family can apparate in and out."

They leave and head for the nearest apparition port. Bridget grasps Moric's arm.

Moric's body stretches out, as if he's being pulled by his head. He loses substance.

Bridget reaches out for him. "Moric." Her hand passes through his body.

Bridget's head spins. She watches her hands as her fingers distort and become translucent. She opens her mouth to scream.

Chapter 14

Bridget lands on a hard surface. She examines her hands. Normal size and shape, fully opaque. She looks around. Walls of large, irregular stones. Low ceiling. Small windows at the top of the wall, opening to street level. A basement.

Moric's face appears above her. He offers her a hand.

She accepts and stands. "What happened?"

"It appears we've been kidnapped."

"NecroNet?"

"That would be my guess," says Moric.

"How do we get out of here?"

Moric takes out his phone and touches the screen. He shakes his head. "Can't disapparate."

Bridget tries the door. Locked, of course. "Can you unlock it?"

Moric pulls a wand out of his waistband. He points it at the door. A surge of light throws him through the air and against the far wall. He slides to the floor.

Bridget rushes to him, her heart pounding. She brushes the hair from his face. His eyes meet hers, clear and lucid. She lets out a breath and offers him a hand.

"What happened?" She asks.

"There are wards on this place to prevent the use of magic."

"What if we don't use magic?" She stands in front of a window and removes her blouse.

"What are you doing?"

She wraps the blouse around her elbow. "Lift me up."

"It won't work."

"Probably not, but we don't know until we try it."

"But–"

"Stop arguing and lift me up."

"Okay." He bends at the knees, grasps her by the hips and lifts.

Bridget pulls back her arm. She strikes the window full force with her elbow. She screams and holds her elbow with her other hand. The window is undamaged.

Moric puts her down. "Unbreakable glass."

"You might have told me."

"I tried to."

Bridget puts her blouse back on and looks around. There's a grille in the corner of the ceiling. She walks over and looks up. The grille covers an empty space beyond. "What's that?"

"Ventilation system."

She places herself directly under the centre of the opening and studies the size of it. She looks at Moric, then back at the grille. It's probably big enough for head and shoulders to pass through.

"I know what you're thinking," says Moric, "and even if we get into the vent, we have no idea where it leads."

"Do you think whoever took us is going to let us live?"

Moric shakes his head. "No. I think they'll use whatever means necessary to find out what we know about the cartels and then dump our bodies somewhere very public."

"Then we have nothing to lose by trying."

"Lift you up?"

"Please."

Bridget pushes on the grille and finds it isn't fastened at all. It simply rests on a rim. She maneuvers it around until she can pull it out through the hole. Moric brings her down so she can place the grille on the floor.

"Now what?" asks Moric.

"Hoist me up. Then I'll pull you up."

Moric looks doubtful, but he lifts Bridget from the thighs. She grabs hold of the edge of the hole and hauls herself in the rest of the way. There's no room to turn around, so she backs up over the hole and lies flat on her belly.

She leans over the hole and reaches her arms down. "Good news. It's all built of stone. It'll hold us both."

Moric grabs her lower arms. "What else would it be built from?"

She grabs his lower arms and backs herself away. When he's high enough, he hauls himself in the rest of the way. They face each other.

"One of us is going to have to crawl backward," says Moric.

Bridget backs up. "Let's try this way."

After a few moments, the shaft dead-ends.

Moric backs up.

Past their prison, the shaft darkens, but not completely black. Soon, it starts to brighten again.

"There's a glow up ahead," says Bridget. "Coming from above."

The next grille is in the top of the shaft. Peering through, Bridget doesn't see any movement. She doesn't hear voices, either. They push the grille up, and Moric pokes his head through.

"Anything look familiar?"

"Not a thing."

It's the same at the next opening, but at the third, Moric announces they're in NecroNet headquarters, and this is Boneshaker's office. He steps out of the hole, followed by Bridget. She recognizes the stone fireplace.

They try the door. It opens. Bridget draws her gun. They tiptoe down the corridor.

A low rumble.

"What's that?" whispers Bridget.

Moric shrugs.

A shadow appears at the end of the corridor. Bridget stands in front of Moric, gun ready.

A lion's head turns into the corridor, followed by a goat's head. They share a tawny-furred body. The front legs have paws; the back legs have hooves. The tail writhes alongside the body, staring at the humans with slit-like eyes. It flicks a tongue.

"What the hell is that?"

The lion head opens its mouth.

"On the floor!" says Moric. He knocks Bridget down and lies beside her.

Flames shoot down the narrow space. Heat flares along Bridget's back.

The beast advances.

Bridget sits up and aims her gun. She pulls the trigger.

The creature drops. Blood pours from a hole in its chest.

Moric and Bridget step over the body. The snake tail leaps at them. Moric crushes it under his heel.

When they get to the door, Moric stops Bridget from opening it.

"We were taken right after leaving Bloodline headquarters. Someone was watching the building and saw us leave. We should suspect someone is also watching this building."

She nods.

Moric takes out his phone. "As soon as we step outside, we disapparate."

"Got it." She holsters her gun and takes his arm as they open the door and step through.

The world around her disappears, to be replaced by Queen's Quay. Several pedestrians gape at them. People point and stare through the darkened windows of a city bus.

"Sorry," says Moric. "I needed to get us out fast. I couldn't pinpoint our destination as closely as usual."

"We're alive and in one piece. That's all that matters. Where to now?"

Moric checks his phone. "I'm picking up a high level of magical activity here." He shows her a map.

"The Distillery District. It's a long walk." She looks at the crowd. Several people are speaking into their phones. Probably best to make a quick exit. "Disapparate us out of here."

"Are you sure?"

"The damage is already done."

They materialize just outside the district. Inside, two groups face each other across the cobblestone street. Bridget picks out the figure of Andromeda Darkmoon on one side, and Boneshaker on the other. Boneshaker stands a head taller than almost everyone around him.

Arcs of light fly across the street. Sometimes they meet each other and send sparks flying. Other times, they hit a building, taking chunks out of the red brick.

Uniformed Toronto police officers hide behind planters, occasionally taking a few shots. Magic deflects the bullets.

Civilians huddle against buildings, behind planters. Bridget guesses there are many more inside those buildings.

Bodies litter the ground. Some of them Estrellien, some are civilians. Three of them wear Toronto Police Services uniforms. Bridget can't tell if they're unconscious or dead.

Bridget and Moric take cover behind a building.

"I'm calling for backup." Moric touches his phone screen.

Bridget monitors the action. NecroNet advances, Boneshaker in the lead. Andromeda falls. She gets back up, cradling an arm. Boneshaker raises his wand.

Bridget picks up a chunk of broken brick and hands it to Moric. "Throw this across the street."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Moric sends it sailing through the air. Bridget shoots it, sending shards of red clay flying off in all directions. It's enough to distract Boneshaker. His shot goes wild, landing on the building behind Andromeda.

Bridget slips around to the front of the building and creeps along its façade. She joins other police behind a planter.

"I thought you were on suspension," says a voice. Ranjit.

"I can go home and leave you to it, if you prefer."

"It's good to see you."

"What's our status?"

"There are officers inside the buildings on both sides of the street," says Ranjit. "We have them surrounded."

"Now what?"

Moric joins them.

"Nobody knows," says Ranjit. "Nothing we do makes any difference. As soon as anyone makes a move, they get shot down."

"Backup is on the way," says Moric. "We just have to hold them off until it gets here."

"How?" asks Ranjit.

"You said IgNite isn't addictive for magical folk," says Bridget, "but does it work on them?"

"Yes, it works."

"Is there a way to broadcast it only to the cartels and not to any of the bystanders?" asks Bridget.

"It can be directed to a specific area," says Moric, "but the signal isn't strong enough to get all those people. I can boost it a little, but not enough."

"We might be able to help with that," says Bridget. "Will buildings shield civilians from IgNite?"

"Mostly, but they should be told to stay down and keep their eyes closed."

She turns to Ranjit. "Send out a call to all the officers inside. Tell them to look for a signal booster. Some of these stores must use them. Also, tell them to get the civilians inside and stay away from outside walls."

Ranjit relays the information over the radio system. Within moments, someone has located a signal booster.

"I need to get higher," says Moric. He points to a shop window down the street. "That would be ideal."

"Not a window," says Ranjit.

"It has to be a window," says Moric. "The app needs a line of sight."

"I'll go with you," says Bridget.

"No," says Ranjit. "Neither of you has a radio. We need to communicate."

"I'll go," says a voice. Sergeant Marino.

"Get him up there, but stay away from the window," says Ranjit.

Bridget watches the window until she sees movement. "He's there."

"I see him," says Ranjit.

They watch the cartels. Their numbers are somewhat diminished, but the fighting continues. Bolts fly through the air in both directions. People fall. Most of them get back up again.

"Nothing's happening," says Ranjit.

"It will," says Bridget. "He'll do it." She looks at the window. She sees nothing.

A figure steps forward from the other side of the street. Boneshaker. Andromeda charges him. He raises his wand. Andromeda screams and fires. Boneshaker flies backward down the street, landing on the cobblestones. He lies still, unconscious or dead.

The radio buzzes. "Go ahead," says Ranjit.

"We're having trouble linking the phone to the booster."

"Keep trying."

A man from the NecroNet side rises off the ground. He looks from his phone to the window.

Bridget points to him.

Ranjit talks into his radio. "Step away from the window. Repeat. Step away from the window."

"We're not near the window," says the constable.

"They know where he is," says Ranjit.

"Their phones can trace magical activity," says Bridget. "We need to buy him time."

"I'll get him, sir," says a constable. He steps out from behind the planter, gun raised. A bolt hits him. He falls.

Bridget trembles.

Another constable stands. Several combatants turn towards them.

"Everyone down," says Ranjit. He turns to Bridget. "They know what we plan before we can execute it."

Everyone ducks down, but it's too late. People turn towards them, pointing wands.

Bridget crawls to the other end of the planter and hides behind it. She wills her breath to slow down, her hands to stop trembling. She peers around the corner. Another constable falls.

She closes her eyes. This is not happening again. It can't. I won't let it. She opens her eyes and returns to Ranjit. The combatants drop their wands, almost in unison. They smile. They start hugging each other. Some of them huddle to hug several people at once.

"What's happening?" asks Ranjit.

Bridget smiles. "He did it. Moric did it." She stands up.

A man winks into existence on the former battlefield. Another man follows, then two women.

"And there are the reinforcements," says Bridget. "It's over. At least, this part is." She looks around at the carnage. Now begins the identification, the notifying of the next of kin, the cataloguing of injuries.

Movement catches her eye. Boneshaker slides along the wall. He was unconscious when Moric broadcast IgNite. Bridget follows him. He immediately turns and fires. Bridget jumps down and rolls across the ground.

They know our plans before we can execute them. They know our plans. That's it. Don't make a plan. She gets up in time to see Boneshaker enter the shop. Bridget empties her mind. She thinks of

her childhood dog, Duke, and of walking him down the sidewalks in town after school. She bumps up against the door to the shop as if she hadn't known it was there, opens it and goes in.

Marino is halfway up the stairs. Bridget catches up with her. "What are you doing?"

"Ashwood ordered me back here, but I saw someone coming up–"

"No," says Bridget.

"What?"

"They know what we plan to do before we do it. So, we have no plan. We're not going into a dangerous situation. We're just going to enjoy the view from up here."

Marino stares at her.

"Our lives depend on it. Holster your gun."

She nods and holsters the gun. "Okay. Just taking a stroll."

Bridget opens the door at the top of the stairs. Boneshaker's wand points at Moric. Moric's feet dangle above the floor. He clutches at a band of light around his neck. His eyes bulge; his face is purple.

Marino draws her weapon. "Release him now."

Bridget leaps at Marino. At the same time, she pulls her gun and fires. She knocks Marino down, but not before the beam hits her. It glances along Bridget's side as they fall.

Boneshaker falls back, clutching his shoulder.

Moric drops to the floor, gulping air. He rises and points a wand at Boneshaker. Light flows from the end of it and binds Boneshaker.

Bridget's wound burns. All of the nerve endings on her right side scream. She examines it and is surprised to see that, although the edges are singed, it seems to be superficial.

Marino lies gasping. Her wound stretches diagonally from one shoulder, across her chest to her waist. Bridget can see rib bones, but there isn't much bleeding. It seems to have cauterized itself.

"I'm placing you under arrest for the possession of illegal weapons, for inciting violence, and for the murder of Elfric Henbane," says Moric.

Bridget turns to look at Boneshaker's imposing size. Henbane was not exceptionally tall, close to Moric's height. "No," she says. "He didn't kill Henbane.

Moric looks at her.

She stands to face him, wincing as the movement aggravates her injury. "The burn mark is too low. Boneshaker would have had to crouch down. Andromeda could have made that mark, but it would have been unnecessarily complex. She had him in her thrall. She could have killed him at any time with no effort at all. That wound was self-inflicted. Elfric killed himself."

Boneshaker clenches his jaw. Moric pokes him with his foot.

"It's true. Elfric came to me, confessed he'd been under Andromeda's spell, unable to resist. He'd been feeding her information against his will. He was so ashamed of himself, he thought the only way to make it right was to kill himself and frame Bloodline."

"It wasn't murder," says Moric.

"No," says Bridget.

"It was murder," says Boneshaker. "Andromeda Darkmoon killed Elfric by turning him into her captive. She needs to pay."

"She will pay for her crimes," says Moric. "And so will you."

Chapter 15

Sergeant Hana Marino hovers over the street while an Estrellien medic examines her.

"You're very lucky," says the medic. "It didn't hit you directly."

"Will she recover?" asks Rogers.

The medic nods. "With treatment, yes. I'll have to take her to Estrellien."

Bridget holds Marino's hand with her left. She rests the right one on her left shoulder to keep her arm away from the dressing on her torso. "You showed both courage and grace under pressure. That's going in my report."

"Thank you," says Marino. She vanishes with the medic.

"From what I hear, Marino isn't the only one who acted with bravery today," says Rogers. "Consider your suspension over."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Don't thank me. You're on probation for the next three months. If you disobey another order, you'll have a longer suspension."

"Understood," says Bridget. "Did you always know this was real?"

"Not always. Not twenty years ago, when you went through it the first time. But for a while now, yes."

"How did you know when and where I'd be returning from the Otherworld?"

"I already told you. Ranjit."

"Right."

They look at each other.

Rogers nods. "Welcome back." He walks away, checking on other officers.

"Hey." Moric points his chin toward Rogers's retreating back. "I saw you two talking. How did it go?"

"My suspension is over. I can go back to work."

"Why aren't you happier about that?"

"Rogers is sticking to his story that it was Ranjit who told him about my return to Toronto."

"I'll keep an ear out in Estrellien," says Moric, "see if I can find out who his contact is."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. I'll do the same here."

Estrellien police have gathered the civilian witnesses and are waving their wands around.

"What are they doing?" asks Bridget.

"Erasing memories," says Moric.

Bridget gasps. "That's why witnesses changed their statements when Mike was killed."

"Probably."

"How effective is it?"

Moric tilts his head. "Not perfect. Maybe ninety per cent, give or take. It depends on the person."

"So, the cat is out of the bag."

"Excuse me?"

"It means the knowledge is out there. There's no taking it back."

"Unfortunately, yes," says Moric. "Both worlds are going to have to deal with an increasing awareness of each other."

"What happens with the cartels now?"

"We couldn't have planned a better sting operation if we tried," says Moric. "The big bosses weren't here, but we've got a number of higher-ups in both organizations. I don't expect any of them to talk, but it'll be some time before well-trained people can take over. They'll be vulnerable for a while."

"And the apps?"

"Being shut down as we speak. We'll make personnel available to help addicts through withdrawal without combusting."

They look at each other. For a moment, Bridget thinks he might kiss her, and she can't decide whether she wants him to or not.

"The danger is over now," says Moric. "We have time to get to know each other, if you want to."

She started with him because she thought she'd never see him again. Now, with him standing in front of her, those warm amber eyes looking at her, she knows that's not what she wants.

"Yes, we could get to know each other. As friends."

His mouth tightens. "Friends."

"Friends with benefits."

He nods. "What are these benefits?"

She smiles. "That's Shadowland slang for a sexual relationship without any long-term obligation."

He smiles. "I like these benefits."

She kisses him.

Books by Lisa Llamrei

Ma'at Series
Feather of Ma'at
Quest for Ma'at

Godborn Series
The Storm Within
Daughter of Sekhmet

Divine Measure Series
Synchronicity
Carriers

About the Author

I was born in Toronto, Ontario and have lived my entire life in the surrounding area. During my brief university career, I studied languages at York U. At various times, I have been an actor, professional belly dancer, holistic nutritionist and entrepreneur. My other career is travel agent, which allows me to combine my love of travel with my writing life. I live north of Toronto with my family.