

# Save the Cat

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# Chapter One

Clíodhna "Cleo" Peaseblossom, executive assistant for the law firm of Heatherwood and Malone, did not like the little man sitting in the reception area who composed himself like royalty. She didn't like how he sat--head erect on his perfectly aligned spine--she didn't like the silver-headed cane leaning against the chair next to him, the ferrule showing plenty of wear. His Anderson & Sheppard suit and his fancy Manolo Blahnik boots irritated her. On top of everything, she didn't like him because he was short.

She remembered a news program where researchers enticed women to choose a short man from a group of men on the other side of a one-way glass. Without making all the other men convicted serial killers, none of the women would pick the shorter guy. Having a relationship with a short man had never been one of Cleo's issues. Guillyn Veggey had been short, but they'd had plenty of fun together. Oh, yes... Never mind that. This one was just an ass. She was an excellent judge of masculinity, and this one was definitely an ass. The short thing just helped seal the deal.

However, he was Mr. Malone's client. Ultimately that was the deciding factor. She would comport herself as a professional. But she still took her position very seriously. She was Mr. Malone and Mr. Heathwood's first line of defense against unstable clients. Cleo was on full alert for this one. Just give her one reason...

A light on her console blinked once. Mr. Malone was available. She let the gentleman stew for a little while longer. A casual glance showed her his fidgeting, his green eyes glaring at her. That was enough; the alligator at the front desk had made her point.

"Mr. Malone will see you now, Mr. Fellini."

"It is pronounced 'Fee-lie-nee,'" he said. "And it's about time. I should charge him for my time!"

Cleo hid a smirk as Fellini stood, snagging his cane as he stood and strode across the reception room, down the hallway, and grasped the knob to the office door. The door was solid oak, a gift from a grateful client. Fellini gave the knob a violent twist, pulled the door open, and stepped into the office of David Malone, attorney-at-law.

Fellini's first impression was of a room filled with books, most of which were thick editions, some modern, but many old with cracked bindings or soft leather covers. A huge desk piled with papers captivated the center of the room. His next impression involved an eerie, uncomfortable shift in his viewing angle, the desktop receding as if it were growing up above him. He realized,

instead, that he was shrinking and transmogrifying!

He was surrounded by his clothing which was now much too big for him to wear. Fellini ducked out of his shirt, slipping out between the shirt tails and the top of his pants. He jumped out of his boots and hit the floor on four padded orange feet.

"Please take a seat, Mr. *Feliney*," a rich voice spoke. It felt as if it vibrated from all the walls in the office. "And might I recommend the tall stool to your right. That way we may converse at eye-level."

Fellini spotted the stool covered in deep purple fabric. He crouched, sprang, and easily attained the top, curling his long orange tail around his feet like a boa. From his vantage point, he could now see the man seated behind the desk. He was an older gentleman, not elderly, clearly human, with bright, intelligent eyes and a thick head of graying hair. At the front corner of the desk rested a simple name plate that read, "David K. Malone."

"I am incensed at your use of *magick*, sir, to gain such an advantage!"

The man behind the desk was silent for a moment. He looked up briefly to regard the cat sitting on the stool.

"I don't recall searching you out, Mr. *Feliney*," said Malone.

"I was hoping for Mr. Heatherwood," said Fellini.

"Mr. Heatherwood is currently indisposed." Malone went back to his reading. His left index finger traced down the page, his lips moving slightly as he read.

"Then I have no other choice."

"Of course you have other choices, Mr. *Feliney*. The being who says he, she, or it has no choices is the one who has unexplored creativity."

"You mock me, sir!"

"No!" Malone said, slamming the palms of his hands against the desktop, nearly causing the cat to fall from the stool. "I state the obvious: you are the way you are now in my office, because you have been forced to some degree to admit the truth about yourself. You, sir, are a cat!"

Fellini was dumbfounded. All he could do was stare at the attorney.

"Now that we have established certain parameters," said Malone, "we can begin."

Malone leafed through one particularly imposing pile of papers. Very few were of a uniform size, shape, color, or consistency. No standard 8-1/2" by 14" yellow legal bond paper here. Some of it was not paper at all. One missive was written on shed serpent skin, translucent and still bearing scale impressions. Pages glowed with a pale light; those were from the more powerful of Faerie judicial bodies. Not the level of Oberon, of course. That sly potentate rarely put his decrees on anything as incriminating as paper. It made deniability much easier. Faerie was as ethereal as moonlight and as predictable as an earthquake, with just as much power to destroy souls and property as said earthquake.

Tiny pages mingled with large, pillowcase-sized documents. One set of writs had sequestered themselves to a separate part of the desk as if not willing to be seen in close proximity to lesser, more pedestrian decrees and requests.

Not for the first time, Malone regretted not having a larger office with a much larger desk. But *magick* was expensive to use, and not usually from a monetary perspective. The office had to be exactly the size it was to perform its functions successfully.

Ah, he thought, that's what I've been looking for! Malone extracted two sheets of plain yellow legal paper. The text was written in a familiar female hand. The initials "O" and "E" in calligraphic font took up the bottom quarter of the second page. Those two thought quite a lot of themselves. Malone chuckled and thought, rightly so.

"Did you speak, sir?"

Malone started. He was slipping in his old age. He had nearly forgotten his potential client. But Fellini was quite the cantankerous fellow. Probably had not rubbed Ms. Peaseblossom the right way if he knew her, which he did.

"No, I did not, Mr. *Feliney*. I was merely remarking at some of the information my operatives have gathered on you."

The cat spat, pulling his ears close to his skull. Yet Malone noticed his claws were still sheathed.

"Your histrionics do not change the fact that you have many little secrets," said Malone. "As do we all... as do we all... Have you had much experience with what masquerades as justice to the Fey?"

Fellini had resumed his more relaxed yet alert posture. "I have had no need of it up until now."

"You have lived by your wits? Clearly you have some impressive tricks. Nothing a more talented denizen couldn't unfrock, but I take it you don't regularly deal with that level of society."

"No," said Fellini, quietly.

Malone raised an eyebrow. "The truth, Mr. Fellini," he said, this time without using the previous affectations to his client's name. "Or whoever you are. For the moment, it doesn't matter... Our only weapon against the injustice and thuggery that have always plagued this world is the truth. It is on a plane even Oberon in his ebony palace cannot attain. It is free of manipulation in its purest form, powerful enough to overcome the greatest foe. It is patient and relentless, because it owes us nothing. It is above us all and is often the undoing of us all."

Swiveling his chair, Malone stood and marched around the desk, seating himself next to the cat on his stool, who turned to face him, startled.

I must make a note concerning the skittishness of cats, thought Malone.

Fellini now looked down at the attorney and had a clear view of the man--thin, simply, almost cheaply dressed in a common suit coat, slacks, shirt, and crimson tie. This was one of the most powerful barristers in all of Faerie? Fellini's shoulders dropped, and his whiskers sagged.

"As I was saying," said Malone, leaning toward Fellini. "Law in Faerie is as twitchy as an eel and as elusive as a banshee. Case law and precedents are unheard of. Even if it were available, everyone would ignore it. So every proceeding is number one of one. Each case is settled on its own merits, whatever those might be, and treated as if it were the ur-case, the Aphrodite stepping from the sea-foam, newly-arrived and unique. A play toy to be batted around by bored, spoiled children who have the power to unmake reality... As if no one had ever wanted justice before.

"I am a mere mortal man. My colleague, Mr. Heatherwood, has his own unique turns, yet we both use one weapon and wield it accordingly."

"The truth?" said Fellini.

"Precisely. You experienced some of that power when you walked into this office. It is my way of helping you understand how we approach every case in which we are involved... Now then, I've spoken enough. How can Heatherwood and Malone be of service?"

# Chapter Two

The assassin needed to find a ghost to eat. He had unfolded himself out of Faerie and into the mortal world with such a goal. Stepping out of an alley, he paused for a moment to take in his surroundings. It was always important to know where you were at all times. Where the easiest paths for escape were. What could be used as a weapon if cornered. He was of medium height, average build, and nothing in particular striking about him. No one noticed him as he stood there. People walked right by him, some almost brushing against him. They didn't notice him, and he didn't notice them. That was how he'd become as successful as he had. The invisible assassin just because he was so plain. He smiled an unremarkable smile.

After he was satisfied he was securely in this place, he sniffed the air for the traces of energy he was after. Yes, he had chosen the right place. He walked easily across the street and toward the construction site.

There was just something about the mortal world that leant itself to the kind of quality he was looking for in a ghost. Faerie was too close to the world of the dead to be of any use. Even though most of its inhabitants could claim extremely long life if not immortality, there was still the stink of death about all of them. But they lived in denial. Now, a ghost in the mortal world: that was something else! All around were these brief flickers of life, like tea candles. A few moments of existence, a few insights into the workings of the universe, and then snuffed. Even the most peaceful of deaths had an edge of abruptness, of violence to it. That's what made them the most desirable. Then if you could get one who had somehow been caught here for any length of time... Well, it was like a fine wine, an impeccable Bordeaux. His mouth watered.

Slipping between two trucks unloading sheetrock, the assassin sauntered onto the work site. He walked across plywood sheets laid out across frames for the sidewalk yet to be poured and into the building. Of the three men who looked directly at him as he crossed to the elevator, the first mistook him for an occupational safety inspector, the second thought he was his foreman, and the third had just come back after finishing his second of six joints for the day and didn't even notice him.

Once in the elevator, the assassin headed for the basement. The door opened to a partially completed parking facility. The lighting was sporadic and workmen absent. He stepped out and paused. He could hear the sounds of construction pulsing through the building and echoing through the elevator shaft. He concentrated all his senses on locating the source of weird power. To his left. He walked slowly, waiting for the activity he knew would come. His presence would be like a magnet once he was close enough. His breath came out in a cloud even though the temperature was not cold enough for it.

Ahead of him, the gauzy figure of a man appeared. The apparition appeared dressed in a hunting outfit: jacket, cap, breeches, and

boots. Its eyes scanned around it without registering anything, as if its connection with the world was a tentative thing, which most like it was becoming that way more each day. This was the one, waiting probably close to 50 years! The assassin stepped closer, to within six feet of the ghost.

Suddenly the ghost's eye turned and focused on the assassin's face. A look of horror filled the ghost's face. It tried to turn away, its body thrashing around, but it was too late. The trap was sprung.

The assassin opened his mouth wide, too wide for a human being, but then he wasn't human. The ghost's mouth opened in a silent scream as it was sucked into the assassin's mouth. Then it was gone. The assassin could feel the power coursing through his body. Yes! This was the power he would need to carry out his employer's request.

He used a fraction of that power to return to Fairie. Now he could start planning his steps should he be needed.

# Chapter Three

The never-ending cotillion swirled about like a motley pinwheel--its participants dancing and cavorting, mingling and canoodling--yet Caspian Heatherwood regarded it all with only mild regard. The activities of the elite of Faerie had become almost boring for the little man who currently stood on a silver plate carried by a troll whom he had hired to convey him for the evening. From his vantage on the plate, he had an excellent view of Faerie's finest as they paid homage to their patron, King of Shadows, the great Oberon.

But Caspian was convinced Oberon was now doing all this out of habit. I mean, who could possibly stand to go to a party that always was in full-swing no matter what the time of day? Caspian liked any opportunity to attend because of the excellent Banbury tarts.

"Lower me a bit, Morrowight," said Caspian, yelling up at his hideous transporter. "I'd like another of these most magnificent tarts!"

"Berry bell, dir," said Morrowight, who despite his monstrous appearance, was the very model of professionalism and self-control. Morrowight dipped the silver plate, and Caspian reached out a tiny hand to snag a tart from a passing tray. Though small, Caspian had a huge appetite, especially for the sweets.

"That's quite a nasty cold you have there."

"Allerdies, dir. Dree bollen. Dets be lide dis ebry dear."

"Sorry to hear that, old chap," said Caspian as he indulged.

Once he had satisfied his craving, Caspian directed Morrowight to press through the crowd toward a distinguished figure standing apart from the roiling throng. Carlus Fít heal, Lord High Inquisitor of the dark elves, appeared in full dress attire, as he often did at such affairs since his appointment by Oberon. His stockings, doublet, and gloves exhibited the work of the most renowned needleworkers in Fairie, covered in embroidery, pearls, and rare gems. His cloak was held out behind him by two ominous elves. He clearly wants to get laid, thought Caspian.

Morrowight stopped several paces in front of Fít heal, allowing the proper courtesy afforded to an elf in his position by a lesser being. It also made it less likely that Fít heal would unleash some hex upon him. Caspian, because of his influences with Oberon,

was also not someone to trifle with, but he had no desire to lose an excellent employee like Morrowight just because some bureaucrat wasn't scoring and decided to take it out on him.

Eventually, Fitheal's eyes turned toward Caspian and Morrowight. With a wave of his hand, a bright blue transparent gemstone appeared around them, effectively muting the sounds of the party. They stood in the hollowed-out core. "Ah, Caspian Heatherwood! So glad you could meet me here this evening... morning... or whatever time it is."

"I wouldn't dream of ignoring your request," said Caspian, while performing the customary obeisance.

"Your reputation precedes you, Master Heatherwood," said Carlus Fitheal. "As is it well-known in the Courts of Chaos, should any dilemma arise requiring a gentle hand, one must only call on Caspian Heatherwood, and, poof, problem solved."

"I'm afraid you've been taken in by the hyperbole, Grand Inquisitor. In this realm of miracles, I can claim none for myself. I merely bring a voice of reason to impassioned conflict. I encourage the parties to find common ground. They tend to work it out themselves from there. Nothing more complicated than that."

"Nonsense! You have the opportunity to counsel with Oberon himself! I don't know how you did it; maybe it's feeling of kinship, what with that whole 'size' issue he dealt with some time back." Fitheal turned and leveled a not-so-subtle grimace at the royal box, now quite vacant. I wonder if he'd be so transparent if Oberon were actually there, thought Caspian.

"I simply performed services for him in the past, very minor ones, I assure you. Our King is nothing if not gracious to those who serve him."

"Yes, of course," said Fitheal, the corner of his mouth twitched in his version of an understanding smile.

"So, what is this issue you spoke to me about, Grand Inquisitor?"

"Ah, yes... I'd been told of your directness... Some say even verging on rudeness."

"Never rude. It is an understandable misinterpretation. Merely my native curiosity emerging. Enthusiasm and a need to be of help is all. A dog after a bone."

"Or an unhealthy obsession with all things mortal."

"Occasional preoccupation only. A hobby perhaps. But never obsession."

"I assume you have the Lord of Chaos' endorsement on such a... preoccupation?"

Caspian affected a hurt expression on his tiny face. "How would you think otherwise, Grand Inquisitor? I am far from being a loose cannon."

"Undoubtedly, but you may find some day soon your allegiances torn between the two worlds. Greater beings have fallen to that malaise."

"I shall stay on my guard... and keep Lord Oberon advised during our monthly conference."

Fitheal's eye twitched at the thought of such access to the ear of Oberon. "Wonderful!" he said, though his eyes said otherwise.

The two silently faced each other. Even through the privacy gem, the sounds of the cotillion throbbed like a heartbeat, and the bodies slithered around each other and the gem's exterior. Morrowight stared off into the crowd and picked his nose with his free hand. The one holding the plate was rock solid.

"The, uh, request, Grand Inquisitor?" said Caspian.

Fitheal gave him a smarmy smile. "As you well know, it is my position as Grand Inquisitor to guard our realm from the dangerous influences of the mortal world. Hence my concern for your... well-being."



"I appreciate your concern, certainly. But haven't there been five grand inquisitors in the last two years? The turnover appears to be quite steep. Who looks out for your well-being?"

Fitheal's eyes bulged a bit, but Caspian was impressed by his self-control. Be careful, he thought. You may very well be facing a mad dog.

"It is indeed a demanding occupation, but I believe I have endeared myself to the proper patrons. I do have quite the winning personality, do you not agree? Warm and sensitive to the needs of Faerie? Clearly it is because lesser beings than I have been chosen previously... As I was saying, such mortal influences take many guises. A grand inquisitor must always be vigilant, must always analyze the patterns to see where the next crisis may occur. There are rumors that mortals have developed a new weapon against Faerie. Not that they fully understand the significance of the weapon. Their science plays out like a game to them without repercussions. I would like you to explore these whispers."

"Clearly you have resources at your disposal?"

"There is no doubt. However, once word is broadcast that the Grand Inquisitor is focused on an issue..."

"The problem and its participants go underground."

"Precisely."

"Very well, Grand Inquisitor. I will provide my help and see what can be done."

"I'm sure you will get the kind of results I am expecting. I will have my adjutant send the specifics to your office. I cannot stress that this situation must be handled discretely."

Without another word, Fitheal waved his hand again, and the gem popped like a soap bubble. The renewed cacophony assaulted them like a bottle to the head. Fitheal and his entourage turned and exited.

Morrowwright leaned down to speak. "Dat was quide disdurbing, dir."

"Yes, it was. And your analysis?"

"Wouldn't drust dim, dir."

"Quite insightful."

"I did mayg it to da dird grade, dir."

# Chapter Four

"My story is a sad one, Mr. Malone."

"They all are, Mr. Fellini. I would appreciate removing the commentary as it tends to cloud the facts."

"Facts! Ah, yes, your beloved truth!"

"The truth, sir, shall make you free." Malone moved his pencil like a conductor's baton. "Please continue. As you may not realize, as you tend toward the self-absorbed, I am a very busy man."

Fellini huffed, then surrendered to the man. "Not all creatures of the realm share the full privileges of Faerie. I am the result of a liaison between Faerie and mortal. My father was a pixie of the *Riabhach* clan, and my mother was a pure-bred European Burmese. Understandable, I suppose... The litter produced only two, but my twin died. Even as young as I was, I had at my disposal the realization to disguise my intelligence lest I be imprisoned and paraded about like some carnival freak. As I grew, I survived by my wits, at first, remaining mute, and then once I discovered my Faerie roots and access, I added speech to my repertoire."

"Your pursuits were more of the unsavory kind?" said Malone, his eyes unfocused as he thought.

"Yes. I will not bore such a busy man with the details. Of those years, I built my skills until I realized the only way to truly profit was to align myself with someone of stature or at least full *Faerie-ness*. I would be the brains; he would be the figurehead. I was able to find myself a silly fellow who could be easily manipulated with the right kinds of encouragement. I then tricked a wizard into making a fatal mistake and assumed ownership of his properties for my new master. Perhaps you have heard of the Viscount Prescott de Duvet?

"I am aware of the name but can't pinpoint the reference."

"Perhaps you heard of him in relations to his untimely, accidental death!" Fellini paused. "Yes, well, the circumstances were suspicious. Hence my need for your services."

"You will find no one in Faerie who will care about your plight, Mr. Fellini. You won the property because of your trickery. All's well. Faerie applauds a good game and those who play it well. You may have attracted enemies. They have chosen to take your king in

their first move. Never the less, we are not a police force; we are a law firm in a lawless realm. Our few victories are short-lived. So I do not see how we can help you."

Fellini opened his mouth, showing sharp, white teeth, but it was out of shock instead of aggression. Slowly he closed it and stared at Malone. The cat could not have looked more pathetic had Malone produced a bucket of water and doused him with it.

Malone avoided eye contact, dismissal implied rather than explicit. He went about his work. A signature here, a bit of wax dripped there to seal a summons complete with conveyance spell, very volatile...

"You and your firm were my final hope, Mr. Malone. Your exploits are renowned, and your very interest in a situation brings about at the least unease and at the most, a solution. You have Oberon's patronage, yet everyone knows it is not that simple. You did not gain this patronage as a lark. That is why I came to you.

"And now I truly do have nothing. The truth? Yes, it is true I gained my wealth through trickery—though it is all gone now. My motives were not to take from those who did not have. I do not possess the personality to comport myself as do those who daily carry out the machinations of Faerie. Its liege even encourages it! I am a cat with a brain. It is my curse. And with that I return to my beginnings. I had hoped you and Mr. Heatherwood would show compassion on me; you are clearly capable of it while the creatures around me are not. I am thwarted at every turn. Hope is gone. My only choice is to cast myself into the nearest abyss to hasten my doom."

Malone set down the candle and completed the seal.

"Why is it," he said, "that everyone who enters this office asking for assistance starts with flattery and then is obliged to punctuate the request with the threat of suicide? Do I look like a dunderhead? Are you the first person who has ever faced need? Or is it a romantic idea infecting all of you? Let me assure you it is far from romantic and most abruptly final..." He sat up straighter in his chair. "However, I am feeling particularly charitable today. I shall take your case."

# Chapter Five

"A what?"

"A cat."

"A what?"

"A cat."

"Oh, a cat," said the Minotaur. "Wearing a necklace?"

"A pendant, but yes," said the painfully thin young female.

"Why didn't Malone just ask the cat about the necklace?"

"Pendant. Because he knows how to play the game."

"Hmphf! Suppose you're right."

An ice-blue full moon cast the castle and its surroundings in corpse light. It even robbed the radiance from the emerald the Minotaur knew his companion wore in her hair.

"I don't recall the ramparts being quite this high before," said the Minotaur. Morgan's been screwing with the dimensions again, he thought.

"However, I do recall you forgetting things. This time it's the grapnel... I just hope you can get me to the top of the wall."

"Judging distance is a whole lot different than remembering stuff, Oz. And anyway, if you had wings, this wouldn't be an issue."

"Don't start with me, E." Ozymandia tied a loop of rope securely around her waspish waist. She looked frail enough to blow away in a wind gust, but E knew from dealing with her after one particularly vigorous drinking binge--triggered by family issues; don't go there--she was tough enough to chew steel spikes.

Oz raised her arms over her head. E bent down and lifted her one-handed at the waist, hefting her like a javelin.

"You miss, and I'll have your ass." Oz thought of clawing her way back down after colliding with cold hard stone.

"I miss, and I'll catch you, kid. Don't be such a baby!" E hauled back, man-bovine muscles bunching, and slung her upward.

Her silent, black form arced toward the battlements, the rope whipping out from its coil on the ground.

E tensed as the rope abruptly stopped playing out, scanning the night sky for Oz's plummeting body. Then, a tug on the rope and another: Oz's signal the rope was secured.

Letting out a deep sigh, E jumped, grabbed the rope in both hands, planted his feet against the castle wall, and started the slow trudge up to Oz's position. It wasn't an easy task. Minotaurs were meant for *berserking* in flat, unencumbered places like the plains of Ilium, or a barroom, or, shudder, a labyrinth. Not pulling themselves up the sides of a building like a bloated arachnid!

Finally, he pulled himself, with Oz's assistance, onto the parapet, gasping and sweating like a prize-fighter--he did have sweat glands--and smelling like a cattle yard.

Oz wrinkled her nose, but said nothing. She was already analyzing the surroundings. A single window in the keep was the only light glowing in the castle that either of the two could see.

"I'd say she wants us to go there," said E, panting, leaning against a large stone pillar.

"Evidently." Oz coiled the rope and hung it over one shoulder. "We can go ahead or back that way." She pointed to the two dark archways exiting the parapet.

"I'd say back," he said, pointing as a team of soldiers in helmets and chain mail, swords drawn, swept out of the archway ahead.

"Give us a little time, E," Oz said, motioning to the pillar next to him.

E nodded, applying his considerable strength against the stones. The pillar teetered and toppled toward the soldiers, crushing the first three and blocking the way for the rest.

Oz led the way toward the other archway with E lumbering behind her. Once through the archway, Oz ignited a glow globe and sent it floating into the air. Spiral stone stairs curled down toward the ground. Oz scampered down, her soft leather boots making scuffling noises, while E's hooves clacked noisily. They encountered no other resistance the rest of the way down.

Moonlight created harsh shadows in the courtyard as they exited the base of the turret.

"One group of soldiers?" said Oz. "Seems a bit weak for a response."

"This might change your mind." E pointed at a wall on the opposite side of the courtyard that had begun to move. Stone ground against stone as the wall formed into a rough humanoid shape, a single glowing red eye in the center of its stony forehead.

The ground shook with each step the stone giant took.

"It couldn't be this obvious, could it?" yelled Oz. Out of a leather pouch she carried, Oz pulled out another glow globe, this one the size of a grape. Holding it in the palm of her hand, she spoke to it. The globe flashed white and then turned to a smoky red, the color of embers. She took out her sling and loaded the transformed globe into it. E took a few steps back out of her way.

Oz twirled the sling over her head and let the globe fly directly at the giant red eye. The globe exploded on contact, shattering the eye and blowing a hole through the stone giant's head. It immediately froze where it stood and disintegrated into a pile of rubble as the stone lost cohesion.

"I'd say it was that obvious," said E.

The pair skirted the destroyed stone giant and entered the keep. Torches lit the stairway to a landing at the top. The landing was comprised of multi-colored tiles.

"Another trap?" said Oz.

"Don't they come in threes?" said E. He put a hoof out and tapped a tile. Nothing happened. He stepped out on the first tile, expecting it to give way at any moment. "Still nothing."

Oz stepped lightly out onto the landing, watching the floor, the walls, and the ceiling for any sign of attack. Nothing happened. "Looks fine to me."

E stepped out and followed Oz's trail tile for tile until the two of them stood in front of the large wooden door to the lighted room they'd seen from the ramparts.

"Be my guest," said E. He could see his partner could hardly wait to open the door. "But expect anything."

Oz turned the latch and pushed to door open.

Oz and E entered the room; E ducked under the lintel. Every candlestick in the room--and there were many, both floor and tabletop--held a burning candle. The room blazed with light and smelled of cinnamon and exotic coffee. Shelves burdened by glass jars of unrecognizable flora and fauna. Tables piled with stacks of books and rolled parchments. Walls festooned with weapons and animal heads. Live animals perched or hanging from the rafters.

"Welcome, adventurers," said a bored female voice--flavored with smoke and alcohol--from the back of the room by the only window. "You have prevailed against my vexing traps and trickery."

"Weren't that hard," said E.

"Shhh!" said Oz.

"What is it you seek?" said the voice.

"Aunt Morgan? It's me, Ozymandia." She winced speaking her full name. Damn Father and his obsession with the Romantic poets and that infernal Shelley. Probably wanted to roll his wife! And if she heard Father say, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" one more time at a family gathering, someone was going to roast!

"Ozymandia, my darling!" The voice gathered some enthusiasm. The great sorceress Morgan appeared with a flourish, her black and crimson cape undulating behind her and continued to do so even after she stopped moving. Nice touch, thought E. For someone as old as she was, he was always impressed with how beautiful she was. Of course, chances were good there was some witchy air-brushing involved.

"Aren't there supposed to be three traps?" said E. "I only counted two."

"I'd swear there were three," said Morgan, coiling herself into a large, throne-like chair in the center of the room.

"Two," said E.

"Seriously? Soldiers on the rampart."

"One."

"Rock giant in the courtyard."

"Two."

Morgan paused. "Uh..."

E waited. It was bad enough he'd called her out; there were certain protocols to be observed in situations like this, however. But

there was never any good to come from antagonizing a sorceress, even if she was your partner's relative.

"The stairway was dark," said Morgan.

"More of a tension-builder, don't you think," said E.

"Oh, I suppose... Damn! Nothing else, huh?"

"Lots of potential," said Oz.

"Story of my life, honey." Morgan gave a weak smile. "You always were the little encourager, weren't you? Well, sit down, you two. Makes me nervous with you standing around. You are staying for a bit, aren't you?" Her face brightened. "I've been experimenting with a new dark roast. Maybe do some marketing."

"Of course, Auntie," said Oz. "But we are here on business."

Oz found a chair and pulled it up close to her aunt. Glancing around, E nervously perused the available chairs, realizing most wouldn't handle his bulk. He settled for a stool, easing himself down on it as it crackled in protest, ending up perching more than sitting. The Minotaur smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry about the place," said Morgan. "I haven't been in the mood to do any cleaning. I just got back from doing some catting about mortally. Have you ever tried speed-dating?"

Oz shook her head.

"I picked up a couple gamers; rocked their little virgin worlds, that's for sure."

E shifted uneasily on the stool, which popped in protest.

"How've you been doing, sweetie? You still working for that pixie and his mortal slave?"

"Uh, yes, I am," said Oz. "Except he's not a pixie and Malone's not his slave."

Morgan dismissed her with a wave. "And your dad? Still as misguided as ever, I see."

"He's doing fine."

Morgan let out a sigh. Oz could smell the sickly sweet aroma of processed wine. "Only two, huh?"

Both nodded.

"And not particularly inspired, I'd guess... No, no, you don't have to spare my feelings. I'm not living under any misconceptions. It takes a concerted effort to develop memorable challenges. You don't want them too hard or no one survives; where's the fun in that? I kill you off, and I have more trouble than I care to have! Your dad can be a real bastard, truth be told..."

"But make them too easy... Then your reputation starts to slide. The caliber of adventurers starts to deteriorate... The first clue is you start getting more dwarfs. The little tunnel-runners surface just for the sure thing. Then they go home and brag about their exploits, how they bested the great sorceress, Morgan le Fay!" Morgan's eyes went glassy for a moment.

"Enough of my problems." She perked up. "What do you have for me? Working on one of your cases?"

Morgan's childlike enthusiasm made Oz smile. Oz had encountered plenty of opinions concerning mortals since signing on with *Heatherwood & Malone*—rampant racism, outright disgust, and, in one case, unsatisfied hunger. But universally among the Faerie folk they exhibited fascination about the relationship she had. There was something enigmatic about creatures who lived such a short time. Probably similar to how mortals felt about mayflies or Copper butterflies.

"Mr. Malone sent this." Oz pulled a folded piece of parchment from her pouch and handed it to Morgan.

Morgan licked her lips and unfolded a drawing of the pendant Fellini wore around his neck.

"He's got a nice understanding of composition for a mortal," said Morgan.

"You should see his nudes," said E. Both females scalded him with a glare.

"Pretty straight-forward," said Morgan. "I've seen a couple of these. The depiction of Janus, the two-faced Roman god. A real asshole. One-night stands, then he's out the door and never calls... so I'm told." Morgan stood. "You'll need to move back a bit, sweetie."

Oz pulled the chair next to E.

"I have to access my *faytabase*. Little joke." In front of the sorceress, hissing as it sizzled into the room, a complex spiderweb of light flashed vertically into being between Morgan, and Oz and E, then started humming quietly to itself. At points along the strands and cross fibers were places where the web bunched up as if knotted. Morgan ran her hands over the strands, giving an ecstatic jump every time she brushed a knot. "You'll need to try this sometime, sweetie. Once you do, you'll never go back." She winked; Oz blushed.

"So what is it," said E, "other than your *you-know-what*?"

"Don't get snotty, bully-boy! This grid contains the histories and locations of all the magical items in the worlds—amulets, pendants, buttons, boxes, mummified animal parts, furniture, clothing, confections. It's all here... I tried using something more modern once. Some guy named Isidore tried to convince me it would speed up my response time. The damn thing kept crashing, and I could never load enough RAM on it to make it run fast enough. Then there was Vista! Don't even get me started about that fiasco!"

Oz and E sat blank-faced.

"Never mind," said Morgan. "Here we go... Janus pendant: forged 12 C.E. Classified Schedule 2 Shape-shifting properties, meaning you need a certified necromancer or equivalent to approve the creation. Blahdy, blahdy, blah. Several times used for impersonation with intent to seduce. I'll read those sections later for research purposes... Purchased by 'stepped' feline, otherwise known as a cat with the intelligence and ability to communicate; non-Faerie. Must have to deal with all sorts of shit for that."

"So we've heard," said Oz.

The stool popped as E shifted his weight. Oz turned and gave him a smile. E wrinkled his nose at her. They both understood the problems the non-magical like E and Fellini faced, caught between the worlds. Sometimes you just wanted to shake some immortals like a rag doll!

Morgan's brow wrinkled as she rubbed the info-knot between thumb and forefinger. "Hmm."

"What?" said Oz.

"Magic is a funny thing. As much as Faerie likes to think we have control over it, we don't. It's like dropping a stone into water; eventually those waves return and interfere with the original event."

"Like Father says, 'The best magic is no magic.'"

"Your father is one to talk about no magic! I wouldn't go that far. But the less you use, the less concerned you have to be about the repercussions."

"So what's up?" said E.

"There's a problem with the histories. Because that pendant is so powerful, able to hide a shape-shift event from almost anyone, it's causing echoes, repeating info. Waves from this one makes it look like there is more activity going on than there really is..." Morgan sighed. "Maybe Isidore was right. Auntie Morgan needs to do some clean-up work on this."

Morgan placed the full entry on one of Oz's glow balls. They really were quite handy and on the low end of magic usage.



"You do know that even small magic events have to draw energy from somewhere," said Morgan.

"Doesn't everyone know that?" said Oz. "What are you getting at?"

"Magic is not infinite. It has its limits. Even a small amount of use shifts things around. Large events can rock the worlds. Like everybody flushing the water closet at the same time makes the water table drop."

"So even my glow balls..."

"Some nasty little pixie now has a few new wrinkles. Don't worry, sweetie. I'm sure you don't know him. Little bastard probably deserves it. Can't stand pixies.

"Hence the reason why near-immortality is necessary. Mortals don't have the critical-mass of power to keep this enterprise going. The way we sling magic around it's a wonder we all don't just end up as dried husks."

Morgan tossed the glow ball to Oz.

They finished the evening with tea and cakes. Oz marveled at E's artist hands as he stuffed a cake into his mouth—long-fingered, human hands, no bovine influenced except for the rich brown color. You can't blame someone for what and who they are, she thought, avoiding his eyes when he turned to look at her.

Oz and E bid their hostess a good-night. A couple soldiers from their earlier encounter showed up to escort them safely from the castle.

"I'll work on some better challenges for next time, don't you worry," said Morgan. "And you kids be careful. How that cat got a hold of that pendant is a mystery. Maybe your Mr. Malone can find out. But not everything is revealed in the histories. Magic plays just as many games with us as we do with it."

# Chapter Six

With their discussion over, Malone advised Fellini in the proper routine for leaving his office. As he instructed the cat, if he should leave the office without his clothing and the proper jog to the right so that he could make it to the shelter of a changing blind, then there was a very good chance that Ms. Peaseblossom would get a view of Fellini that he wouldn't appreciate.

Once Fellini left the room--sans any high-pitched response from Ms. Peaseblossom (which would have been mainly for effect as she was hardly ever surprised by much of anything)--Malone took a moment to stare out into the room, focusing on nothing in particular, letting his thoughts chase each other about concerning his new client.

He still wasn't quite sure why he'd chosen him. Then again it could very well be the same reason why he selected E as one of his investigators and took a chance with Ozymandia... Oz! I must remember to address her by the abbreviated form, he scolded himself. There were just some people who didn't fit in though they tried to be a part of things. Yet they did their best to avoid being victims. They would ask for help but only when they had realized their own person talents were at an end. So was it pity? Perhaps. Some show of benevolence in an attempt to feel superior? Malone couldn't deny that such feelings were mixed in their somewhere. No one did anything purely for selfish reasons. Not even the citizens of Faerie could escape that.

As much as they would have hated him saying so, if it weren't for their mystical abilities and their longevity, Faerie was not much different from the mortal world.

Once again, Malone found himself entranced by the requests he was seeing, things he could never even have imagined he would ever do as a lawyer. And time slipped by. It wasn't until he yawned that he realized the time. He had learned early in his career that sleep was one of the most potent weapons in his arsenal. It was important to let his mind review all the incidents and information he had encountered during the day. Malone made some last notes to himself for the following day, arranged his unruly desk using his own system, which looked no different from the way the desk had looked just moments before.

He stood, feeling the creaks in his back, walked to the coat rack next to the door, took his coat and hat and put them on, and exited his office. As he expected, Ms. Peaseblossom's desk was unoccupied. She had gone home for the night. He would probably find a flashing light on his desk the next day proclaiming her departure.

Night was full on as he exited the building. His office occupied a uneasy location between the mortal and Faerie world. Surprisingly, occupants from either side had little trouble finding him should they require his services. The temperature was starting to dip down

below freezing and Malone pulled up the collar of his coat, pulling his hat tighter atop his head.

The street was silent and dark except for a few meager street lights. He stood for a moment and allowed the silence to envelope him. It was strange how infrequently he had taken the time in his previous experience as a lawyer to mortals to actually listen. That lack of listening had included his clients, his friends, his... wife. Becoming too self-absorbed had been the cause of his need for a change. He smiled to himself. Funny how opportunities arise when you are least expecting them.

Malone shrugged and walked down the street toward his apartment, his feet clapping against the sidewalk, the sound echoing among the dark buildings.

But eyes watched the lawyer as he walked along. It was not time yet to act. The assassin had learned the lesson as a young man that it was in your best interest to listen to the people who were paying your price. For now he would observe and note his actions. It paid to understand your target. It lessened the chance that the unexpected would happen.

# Chapter Seven

Percy Wainwright, Ph. D. in physics, was perplexed when the funds had mysteriously appeared in his bank account. It was exactly the amount he needed to continue his research. For a month, he left the money alone, suspicious that it could be some terrorist group funding him or more likely some covert government cadre just waiting for him to spend the money so they could spring the trap. Off to some CIA black ops political prison nestled in the crags of some Turkish hinterland, never to be heard from again. But after the month was past, his desire to get on with things overrode his paranoia. And it beat checking and re-checking findings he knew were impeccable.

Percy was on the fringe, the cusp, the bleeding edge. Percy was a whack job. But somebody believed him enough to give him money. And now he was enough to solve the problem, win the game, plop the old maraschino on top of the hot fudge sundae of discovery.

He started using the money. Each night when watch said it was precisely Pi (3:14 AM, of course; no self-respecting brainwashed government battlebot would be skulking around at 3:14 in the afternoon), he would step outside his apartment and bellow, "Come and get me, you rat bastards!" Percy totally expected at any minute to see zip lines appear—the black copters were silent, you moron!—and black ninjas slip down to the ground like spiders to take him away. So far no zip lines, no ninja spiders. He had been clobbered by an old shoe—Addidas running shoe, looked like circa 2004—and the local Gestapo masquerading as city cops had shown up twice. But the jails were full, Percy wasn't drunk or molesting anyone, and it was only one sentence per night, granted it was in the bull's eye of everyone's REM sleep cycle. The cops lectured Percy, then left. It was his sign that he was on a mission from God, if he believed in her, which he didn't.

Now this strange little man shows up. Percy didn't believe in coincidences any more than he believed his daughter cleaned his house once a week because she loved him. Belief's for wimps, he thought.

"Clarence Woodward," said the little man. He was dressed impeccably in a conservative charcoal Paul Smith suit. Percy noticed a British accent and estimated his height to be about five foot, well below the average. How such genetic mutations could be sustained, Percy hadn't a clue. Though his ancestors probably were well-suited for cramming themselves under rocks to avoid *Machairodontinae*, *Metallurini*.

"I'm with the AEC," said Woodward, offering Percy his identification.

"Uh-huh," said Percy. Not with that suit you're not, he thought, giving the identification a cursory glance.

"May I come in?"

For a moment, Percy considered slamming the door in his face. Smug little bastard was probably acting as reconnaissance. Checking out the house layout. Whether or not he had firearms. But then, he thought, what the hell. Live dangerously. He knew he'd regret it.

"Yeah, come in. But don't expect any hospitality."

"This is not a social call, Dr. Wainwright. I'm interested in your work."

"You responsible for funding my project?" Percy watched Woodward's face.

The little man paused. "What would you say if I said no?"

"I'd say you were a liar."

"Then let's leave it unsaid. No need to chalk up a mortal sin."

Percy grunted. "How many of you expect me to finish with all these constant interruptions..."

"I won't stay long. So can you explain your concepts to me? The execution is not as important."

Percy smiled. "Exactly! It's the solution to the puzzle that's the goal. All the shenanigans they come up with afterward is just masturbation! They wouldn't know real brain sex if it stood in front of them and dropped its panties!"

"Coarse, yet accurate. By all means, Doctor, proceed."

Percy was beginning to like Woodward despite himself. Maybe it was the old eyes that never broke his stare (Did he ever blink?). But once you let the devil in, it was too late anyway.

"When I first heard it in 1973, my favorite quotation has always been the one from Sir Arthur Clarke: 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable...'"

"... Is indistinguishable from magic," said Woodward. "I know it well, Dr. Wainwright."

"Fine then, Mr. Smart Guy. There are all these technologies flinging themselves around. What we get are the echoes, except these echoes bounce directly off your brain without the use of the myrinx. You see UFOs or ghosts. You think you astral project, see the future, or consider yourself a member of the master race."

Percy walked to a whiteboard filled with incomprehensible notation. Percy created the notation language so he didn't have to erase his work each night and thus foil the attempts of the CIA ninjas peeking through his windows and a small pseudo-AEC agent who happened to appear at his door.

"This proves the brain echoes come from other neighboring universes. Some are far away; others are quite... quite close. I can't see them yet, can't ogle their women. But I can listen to them. I can see their contrails in my thoughts."

Woodward gave no hint to what he was thinking or feeling. He thinks I'm crazy, Percy thought, but I'm not.

Striding to the door to one of the extra bedrooms, he twisted the knob and nudged the door open with his foot. He could feel Woodward behind him.

"If you kill me, you won't have a chance of duplicating my work," said Percy. He jumped when Woodward responded; his voice seemed to come as close as a whisper, though when he turned, the little man was several feet away.

"Why would I kill you, Dr. Wainwright?"

Percy smirked and entered the room with Woodward following. The room was filled with computer equipment in racks and a mass of Mylar balloons. The balloons floated and mingled like guests at a cocktail party, parting as Percy sailed in.

"The key," Percy said, "is quantum computing, the final piece to my work. While the dunces are trying to create artificial intelligence and a working holodeck, I've wiretapped our neighbors in the next universe!"

The sounds emitting from the speakers pulsed and faded, the volume levels fluctuating. Woodward cocked his head like a dog. His eyes lost their focus as he listened.

"I know what you're thinking," said Percy.

"I suppose you know from listening to the voices in the next universe?" said Woodward.

"In a way. In a way. I'm not a ghost hunter. I'm not listening to EVP or voices of the dead. I'm a practical man, Mr. Woodward or whoever you are. These voices are quite live.

"Brains aren't computers, you know. Penrose has it right. You can program a computer and fashion a shell that looks, acts, and even sounds human and passes the Turing test with flying colors! It will fool the fools, but they want to be fooled anyway. The adepts, the madmen, the witches had quantum computers in their heads and then some. They could hear the neighbors and interpret what was spoken to them sometimes, but that's about all."

Percy pulled the collar of his shirt down and turned to show Woodward the back of his neck. A round black disk attached to his skin at the base of his neck. What looked like a tiny antenna emerged from it.

"This isn't just a computer, is it?" said Woodward.

"Nope. Like I said, computers can't do it... But together, I'm going to knock our neighbor's wall down!"

# Chapter Eight

"Why do they get to be the real world, and we have to be pretend?" said the hulking man in the overcoat, homburg, and dark leather gloves. His companion, a petite young woman with slightly pointed ears and a tattoo at the corner of her left eye, wore a down jacket and earmuffs yet still shivered.

"We know we're real, E, and that's what matters," said Oz, trying to control her chattering teeth.

"I guess," E snorted.

Oz patted his arm, drawing closer to the big man's warmth. "You gotta let it go, big guy. Think 'mayfly.'"

They stood in front of the monstrous estate of the late Viscount Prescott de Duvet. It was planted firmly in the mortal world, hence the need for Oz and E's shape changes. Perhaps a near-human person like Oz could mingle with mortal folk, but it would have been much harder for E's horns to avoid comment. The main house was in disrepair. It's grounds were unkempt and several window panes were missing, the glass shattered on paths and roadway.

"It's just sad to see a place like this falling apart," said Oz.

"They just make me claustrophobic," said E. His nostrils flared. "I smell trolls."

"Hold your fire, soldier. We're here on a fact-finding mission. Let's try to keep that in mind... Then we can kick some ass."

"Goodie!" E flexed his hands.

"Nice gloves, by the way."

"It's nobody I know."

Their boots crunched glass, crockery, and other debris as they walked up the gravel drive. They had specifically chosen early morning on this dreary, drizzly day to avoid any lookouts. Oz noticed no hexes or bewitched artifacts as they closed on the main house. Nothing registered at the front door.

"They aren't expecting visitors," said Oz.

"Trolls ain't known for their brain power."

"How'd you become a part of civilized culture using language like that?"

"Attained my stature by good looks alone." E gave her a lop-sided smile.

"Undoubtedly. Knock, if you would."

E pounded a meaty fist against the front door, which quaked with each blow. The sound reverberated through the house.

"Nice construction," said E. "I've been impressed with the workmanship of these older homes."

They waited.

"Can't expect them to move quickly after a night of debauchery," said Oz.

"Definitely not... Should I knock again?"

"Certainly not. That would be rude."

"I suppose so."

After several minutes, they could hear what sounded like a large black plastic contractor's bag packed with lard-filled balloons being dragged across a tile floor.

"Trolls," they said in unison.

A number of locks slid free before the front door opened. Through the opening, Oz could see nothing but blackness. All the windows had been boarded over so very little light leaked in. Against the blackness, a bloated, pale figure appeared, its eyes blinking in the morning light.

"What you want?" said a voice like a dog's growl.

"We've come to see the owner of the estate," said Oz. "We'd like to ask some questions."

"Who are you, the cops?"

"No, just private citizens."

"This is our property, and you're trespassing."

"We did ask nicely."

"Sod off!"

"I've never been fond of rudeness. E?"

E put a foot to the door and sent it crashing back into the attendant behind it. There was a crack as wood undoubtedly met flesh and bone, and the pale shape was no longer visible. Oz pushed the door open and lit one of her glow globes. Stretched out like a great beached sea creature, the corpulent doorman lay on the tile floor, completely unconscious.

"Not dead, I'm afraid," said E.

"We're not here to rack up a body count," said Oz. "Mr. Malone wouldn't like that. He doesn't believe in violence."

"He doesn't work as closely with the common folk like we do."



Leaving the doorman behind, the two cautiously made their way through the house. Few of the original furnishings were left intact. The floor was strewn with debris, which made their progress slow. They could hear the snoring of several occupants in different parts of the house.

"It sounds kind of like a choir," said E.

"Remind me to avoid your music recommendations."

"One man's trash..."

They encountered no more ambulatory trolls, though they did catch glimpses of gelatinous forms through doorways, poured into furniture, and crammed into corners.

"I'll tell you what," said E, "some of the best parties I've ever been to were thrown by trolls."

"Thrown up, most likely."

"There is that... You know, Oz, you need to loosen up a bit. You're always so tense."

"I'll take it under advisement, Dr. E."

At the main ballroom, they eased open the large, purple double doors. The creaking would have been an issue if it hadn't been for the snoring echoing in the room beyond. The huge ballroom was immaculate. The absence of troll-sign told that the room was probably off-limits to the creatures. The floors were polished to a high sheen, reflecting the flickering torches spaced along the walls in ornate holders. Statuary, which Oz and E initially thought were living soldiers, stood at petrified attention in two long columns ending at an enormous jade-green throne. On the throne, a figure slouched to one side, the source of the snoring.

Oz and E halted ten feet from the sleeping person. Oz examined the throne's composition.

"Looks like a lodestone," said Oz. "Probably our host's power source." She pulled a small, round stone from her pocket and bounced it off the sleeper's forehead. He snorted a great watery snort and sat instantly upright.

"Who dares awaken Asbrakken the Great and Mystical?! And if it's one of you nimrods, I'll distill you down to troll sludge!"

"Ass-brakin'?" said E. "What kind of name is that? Doesn't sound so great and mystical to me."

"Not Ass'-brakin', you dolt! The 's' makes a 'z' sound!"

"Sounded like you said an 's' to me."

"Believe me, it's a 'z'! Who the hell are you two?! And how the hell did you get in here?! For the love of Mike, where are my enforcers?!"

Asbrakken grabbed his staff and slammed it on the floor twice. They waited. Nothing happened.

"For crying out loud! Where are those two wastes of space?!"

"We'll wait," said Oz. "We get paid by the hour." E nodded.

"Clearly your employer had higher quality to choose from!"

"Yelling doesn't make things happen any faster," said Oz.

Asbrakken glowered at her.

A door on either side of the throne opened, and a muscular ogre dragging a club appeared out of each. They were lethargic, and

their eyes failed to focus properly. They stopped on either side of the throne, and leaned on their clubs for support.

"Barrell! Grutts! Where the hell have you two been?!" said Asbrakken. The ogres responded to the yelling by attempting to come to attention. And failing. "Our security has been breached!"

The taller of the two looked sheepishly at Asbrakken. "Did we have security, sir... your great and mysticalness?"

"Course we did, Barrell. Gormandblower's at the front door."

"That's right!" said Barrell, brightening a bit.

"Then who are they?!" said Asbrakken, pointing his staff menacingly at Oz and E. The two ogres looked at the duo and shrugged.

"I suggest you don't point that at us unless you plan on using it," said Oz.

"Oh, I'll be using it, my pretty!" Asbrakken swiveled his head back and forth, glaring at the ogres. "Well?!"

"Well what, sir... your great and mysticalness?" said Barrell.

"Who are these people and how did they get in here?!"

"You certainly do yell an awful lot," said Grutts.

"That's what I said," said Oz.

"Great galloping Gertie! Will you two get rid of them?!"

"They have evidently vanquished Gormandblower in combat," said Grutts. "Two against one: bad form."

"Excuse me," said E. "She wasn't involved."

"Point well taken," said Grutts. "I apologize."

"Accepted."

"You did observe he's no worse the wear from his encounter," said Barrell.

"So noted, Barrell," said Grutts.

"I'm not asking for play-by-play analysis from you two rejects!" said Asbrakken. "Kill them!"

Oz went for her pockets like a shootist for his six-gun, and E shrugged out of his greatcoat, and flexed his arms, ready for battle.

The ogres flickered a glance at each other. Barrell raised his hand shyly.

"What what what?!" said Asbrakken.

"Well, sir... your great and mysticalness, there is one trifling detail we must discuss prior to us taking action."

"Which is?!"

"The matter of payment," said Grutts. "As in we've not seen a tinker's damn yet."

"Hairy Oberon on a crutch! You vast brainless vats of seasoned fatuity! You blotchy columns of solid imbecility!" Asbrakken's face turned maroon. He began stomping the floor, and sputtering and hissing like a cat in a trap.

"It's almost Shakespearean, isn't it?" said Barrell, addressing Oz and E, who responded with wary nods.

"Without payment," said Grutts, ignoring the ranting wizard, "the best you can expect is a paltry attempt at a stern look."

"Or perhaps some half-hearted verbal threats," said Barrell.

"Body language communicating displeasure: foot tapping, crossed arms, and the like."

"A harshly-worded letter of rebuke?"

"No letter, Barrell. Don't have proficiency for that even with pay."

"True."

Asbrakken finally caught his breath. "I don't need you rejects! I shall handle these two myself!"

Two things occurred simultaneously: Asbrakken's throne and staff began to glow with an eerie pulsating light, growing in intensity, and E began his metamorphosis into his Minotaur form—height increasing, muscles amplifying, clothes popping and tearing, face stretching and widening, horns bursting from his forehead!

A lick of hot green flame erupted from Asbrakken's staff. E hauled Oz behind him and took the full force of the blast... and withstood it! However, Oz knew his tough hide could only stand the onslaught for a short time, and her thin hide couldn't stand it at all.

"Mr. Barrell! Mr. Grutts!" Oz shouted. "Care to accept a temporary position with Heatherwood and Malone? Starting now?"

"A most reputable firm!" said Barrell.

"Cousin Morrowight says they provide a superb work environment and retirement plan," said Grutts.

The two ogres make eye contact, nodded slightly, and swung their clubs to connect on either side of Asbrakken's head. His great and mysticalness dropped like a sack of mashed potatoes.

The green firestorm died. The dirty dead stench of singed Minotaur hair and skin made even the ogres' noses wrinkle.

"Did we kill him?" said Barrell.

Oz walked up to Asbrakken and nudged him with her foot. He groaned weakly. "Wizards are made of tough stuff," she said. "Merely stunned him."

"Good. I'd hate to be responsible for his demise. He does have his endearing qualities."

# Chapter Nine

Of late, the office of David Malone had become quite busy. Any more than himself, though, was too many for his tastes as he tended to be a solitary soul. He could be a patient fellow, but the amount of time he spent to the cultivation of patience was extremely limited.

The presence of one great and mystical wizard was sorely taxing his ability to remain non-violent.

Asbrakken sat across the desk from Malone and glared at the lawyer while rapping on the chair's arm with a large silver ring afixed on his left hand. Malone did his best to ignore the wizard whose face bore a mass of bruises. Still dressed in the robes in which Oz and E found him, Asbrakken was beginning to emit a rancid funk. Malone had smelled worse--Faerie could produce some exotically sticky stuff--but he had never been keen on those who neglected personal hygiene.

Of course, it wasn't entirely the wizard's fault. His movements had been limited to the waiting room under the supervision of Ms. Peaseblossom who brooked no shenanigans, especially from second-rate wizards who had attempted to harm some of her charges.

"She called me second-rate!" said Asbrakken, a vein bulging in his neck.

"You take umbrage with that for what reason, sir?"

"Because I'm not!"

"Brilliant response! At this moment, your testimony cannot be construed as the most reliable, so it remains to be seen. However, one thing is apparent: you are much too loud for this enclosed space."

"And I should care because...?!"

Malone locked eyes with the wizard. "Because if you do not, I shall be forced to bring in Ms. Peaseblossom. You can imagine how the prospect of removing some body part from you to quiet you down might appeal to her... considering how well you've gotten along so far."

Asbrakken broke eye contact first, stopped the ring rapping, and sat back in his chair, arms crossed.

Malone picked up the familiar yellow legal sheet exclusively used by Oz and E.

"You know!" Asbrakken started out at his normal volume, then thought otherwise when Malone's eyes flicked up from his reading. "You know, there's nothing keeping me from walking out of this office."

Malone placed the report flat on the desktop. "You are correct, sir. I cannot, nor would I, physically restrain you."

"Good. That's settled." Asbrakken sat up straight in his chair.

"However... It might behoove you to stay here for your own safety."

Asbrakken hesitated. "My safety? Who do I need to be afraid of? I assure you I shall not be blindsided again by a couple of nitwit ogres."

"I would ask you to contain your comments directed at Heatherwood and Malone staff... No, I was thinking about much more formidable enemies. Would you by chance know anything about the throne and staff you were using?"

"They're mine, of course."

"Of course."

"Been in the family for ages. Something you humans could not possible understand."

"Ages, uh-huh." Malone touched a button on his desk.

"Ms. Peaseblossom? Can you contact Supreme Necromancer Lucidian for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Malone." Peaseblossom's crisp tones seemed to come from the walls around them.

"Hold it," said Asbrakken. "Why do you need to talk to him?"

"Wait a moment, Ms. Peaseblossom... You are used to playing your game with those of simpler disposition. Let me assure you, Asbrakken, you are now playing by my rules. And you cannot win. The throne and staff are not yours."

"They *are* mine!"

"Ms. Peaseblossom, tell the Supreme Necromancer we've recovered the missing artifact he has been looking for... and we know who the culprit is."

"What?!" said Asbrakken.

"Yes, sir."

"Wait wait wait!"

"Your were in possession of magicks from the now-deceased original owner of the estate."

Asbrakken paused. His eyes blinked rapidly. "Do you know what Lucidian would do to me if he thought I'd stolen magic in my possession? Even if I didn't steal it?!"

"It is not my concern. You are a bully, a liar, and a thief masquerading as a wizard. Anyone with the right tools can demonstrate sorcery."

"You have to believe me; I didn't know they were stolen!"

"You have given me no reason to believe you."

"Okay... You're right. You don't have any reason to trust me. But ending up with me dead isn't going to help you either."

"Go on."

"I don't know anything about the people who set us up in the house. All I know is that I was supposed to bring the throne and staff to the estate and then pretend to be a wizard to prevent people from coming onto the property."

"Clearly not very successful, were we?"

Asbrakken paused, not in anger, but in what appeared to be serious thought. "I don't really think they expected me to keep people out. Like maybe they were tricking me."

"Why would you think that?"

"I didn't see any money. They kept promising it was on its way. They filled the house full of trolls and a few ogres and enough alcohol to keep everyone busy for several days. But no one came until your two... people showed up."

"So you believe you were duped into bringing the stolen throne and staff to the estate?"

"That's the only thing I can think of."

"For what purpose?"

"Look, I'm just an actor... and not a very good one. If you hand me over to Lucidian, he'll know in an instant I'm not a wizard. I'll be eliminated. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

"Mr. Asbrakken, you do not know me well enough to ever expect to understand how I do things. But let me tell you that if by some means you ended up under Lucidian's control, the weight of that transaction would not result in the least bit of consternation on my part. You took on this job knowing full well that you might have to confront someone. When the situation presented itself, you were completely willing to sacrifice members of my staff so that you could satisfy some belief in future compensation. You are a criminal and not a very good one considering you spent all your time babysitting a house full of trolls."

Chapter

"Now are you going to kill me?" said Percy.

"You have quite the obsession with death, Dr. Wainwright. Does death somehow justify the work you've done? Do you desire to be a mythic character?"

"So, you're not here to kill me and abscond with my work?"

"Uh, no, sir."

Percy's shoulders sagged.

"Does that really disappoint you?" said Woodward.

Percy slumped onto a stool. "I was hoping there'd be some intrigue surrounding all this. What was it Oscar Wilde said? 'The only thing worse than being talked about...'"

"'Is not being talked about.' I do see your point. The idea that someone somewhere is interested in your work enough to kill you for it does lend a certain amount of credibility. However, it is not necessarily true. Your work has come to the notice of... important people."

"That's a relief! I don't know how much longer I could have lasted before I did something violent just so someone would raid my house and look through my notes."

"I don't believe violence is ever a necessity. There are always alternatives. Leave it for the last resort."

"Fair enough. What do we do now, Mr. Woodward."

"If you are willing, I think it's time for you to present your findings to those who can appreciate the work you've done."

"Very well. I'll gather up a few things and then we can be off... But I have to admit to you the one problem I have yet to solve involves boosting the power source. I'm afraid I need to develop another source of energy to boost the power of my device. Everything I've tried up until this point has resulted in fried circuitry."

"I think it's best that we just take a little trip. That way you can present your findings and we can decide on next steps."

Percy busied himself with gathering a number of complicated hardware into a large plastic bin, placing sheets of cardboard between each layer of devices. "This is reasonably solid-state, but I don't need things getting caught when I take them out." He stood next to the bin and regarded Woodward with a quizzical look. "Where's your vehicle?"

"That won't be necessary, Dr. Wainwright."

Percy blinked as the room tilted, the colors smearing as if someone took a palette knife to a painting of his workroom. Then it was like pages in a book riffling. Woodward shrunk, and Percy's eyes rolled into his head.

# Chapter Ten

"Why are we here, Mr. Malone?" said Fellini. The cat had returned to his humanoid form again, using his cane for support rather than as an accessory. Malone had noticed this since their first encounter.

Malone and Fellini stood in a large empty room made entirely out of translucent material. Flashes of light would zip across their field of vision, and the room was lit from below by a pulsing golden light.

"This room was designated by Lord Oberon for the trying of cases here in Faerie. But as you know there is no clear view of justice. Knowledge of law or precedents, even the concept of ownership, has little place here. As a cat, you may have a better grasp of all this. Faerie has a very animalistic, natural selection approach to life."

"I have noticed as much. I won my house in a duel of wits with a wizard. He made a fatal error; I capitalized upon it... And someone was able to discover a way of taking all I'd earned away from me. I suppose I should just accept that I have been outsmarted and leave it at that."

"You can. However, my time here as a lawyer has also provided me with insight into the games that these people play. Gamesmanship is valued much more than the concept of right and wrong, which tends to be strictly situational. It takes all my will to hold tight to those principles I believe in while this world goes madly along, not caring who is damaged. But such is life for those who can conceivably never die."

Malone stood silently for a moment. Fellini was about to speak but noticed the look on Malone's face--one of deep concentration--and decided to be silent as well. After his many years in Faerie, Malone learned to trust his gut instincts. Currently, his gut told him something was about to happen, that events were being manipulated in a certain direction. He believed initially that it was most likely Oberon behind his feelings, but why would Oberon be concerned about an issue of property ownership? Clearly this case was more serious than he thought.

A bright light flared at the center of the room, then cooled to nothing. Malone let his eyes adjust. In the center of the room was a throne.

"Do you have any idea why this throne is here?" said Malone.



"I do not know why it's here, but I am convinced I know what throne it is."

"Please elucidate."

"It goes back to my story of how I came to own the estate. The previous owner was a wizard. In my cat form, I challenged him to a test of skills. He was overly confident. I was able to convince him to change his shape into that of a mouse."

Malone smiled wryly. "Quite wily of you, sir."

"I was not dealing with a particularly clever individual. I had no desire to work overly hard on obtaining my new abode."

"So you found a wizard who was not the head of his class."

"Exactly."

Malone chuckled. "I don't normally ascribe to the philosophy of exploiting the weak-minded, but I also know the general nature of wizards in Faerie. They are notoriously depraved and abusive."

"As was this one. Beytleford was his name. Power had gone to his head. A tyrant to his serfs. It was simple to obtain the people's confidence once they realized Beytleford was no more."

"And this is Beytleford's throne."

"The same. During one of his lectures concerning his favorite subject—himself—he told the story of how he found a rock that had fallen from the sky and reworked it into his throne. He had been a simple stonemason but discovered that the stone possessed power he could channel to his purposes."

The air shimmered and two figures appeared: one tall and thin, balding, wearing glasses, the other only coming to the tall one's mid-calf, yet perfectly proportioned.

"You are in luck, Fellini," said Malone. "You have the opportunity to meet the illustrious Mr. Heatherwood."

At that moment, Heatherwood noticed the other pair, tugged on the pant leg of his tall, clearly bewildered companion, and walked towards them.

"Pleasant to see you as always, Caspian," said Malone. He introduced Fellini, and the two shook hands with Fellini stooping low, nearly losing his balance.

"Is it some sort of ailment, Mr. Fellini?" said Caspian. "Your vertigo, I mean?"

"One of the failures of my transformation. While I may have the body of a man, I still have the brain of a cat. Without my whiskers, I must rely on my cane to stabilize me."

"I see."

"What is it, Caspian?" said Malone.

"You know me too well, David. It is perhaps nothing... It appears we have additional participants in this game."

Again, the shimmering and the appearance of people, this time the Mutt-and-Jeff duo of Oz and E.

"What is happening, Mr. Malone?" said Fellini, who was steady once again.

"We are experiencing the Faerie equivalent of a subpoena. Our judge, whoever he or she may be, is gathering together the parties involved. Once you and I arrived, it was the judge's cue to begin the assemblage." He motioned to the Minotaur and elf. "Those are my employees... I do not know your associate, Caspian."

"That is Dr. Percival Wainwright, physicist and destroyer of worlds." Percy remained unmoved, content to stay with his equipment

and look extremely befuddled.

"Less *bang* than *whimper*?"

"Oh, no. Don't let looks deceive. There is quite a considerable amount of bang in Dr. Wainwright." Caspian glanced at the throne.  
"Quite a lot of bang."

A bell rang thrice, deep and sepulchral, the floor vibrating in response. All occupants in the room covered their ears.

A patch of floor began to swirl like a black pool or cauldron's potion. Out of the pool sprang a judge's bench, towering over everyone. Atop the bench, clothed in a robe glistening like a scarab's carapace, sat Morgan the sorceress.

"We shall have order in our court. Is that understood, Mr. Heatherwood? Mr. Malone?"

"Perfectly, m'lady," said Caspian.

"We also expect these proceedings shall be completed within ten minutes as we have a dinner date with a most fabulous centaur... Proceed, Mr. Malone, and do not try our patience... Oh, hi, sweetie!" Morgan called out to Oz who responded with an embarrassed wave.

"Very well, m'lady. I will be brief. In the case of my client, Mr. Fellini, I ask you to restore ownership of the Duvet Estate to him. As a nexus point, Faerie has jurisdiction over the property. In addition, include a sum of money to cover the restoration of the property to its former state."

"Basing this on what?" said Morgan.

"Prior to my operatives' appearance at the estate, it was being used as a staging area for the completion of a weapon that would spell the possible overthrow of Lord Oberon!"

Morgan sat forward. "Oberon, eh? And what weapon conceived in Faerie could possibly have such an effect on Oberon?"

Caspian stepped forward. "It was no simple weapon of Faerie, m'lady. Or not completely of Faerie." He gestured at Percy. "This mortal has perfected the plans to break down the walls that keep Faerie separate from the mortal world. It is an unstable wall as we who pass through it from time to time well know. The right force could drop that barrier. The outcome is... unknown."

Morgan bit into an apple she pulled from her robes. "Not all from Faerie," she said as she chewed.

"No, m'lady," said Caspian. "The weapon was merely missing a suitable power source."

"The throne!" said Oz.

"Precisely!" said Caspian.

"So," Morgan said after a swallow, "who is behind this plot? Certainly not this mortal man!"

"No, m'lady," said Malone. "In fact, you provided the biggest clue."

"Me? I mean, us?"

"Yes, you reported to my operatives the geneology of the emblem my client wears around his neck. This amulet provides shape-shifting abilities, so he can mingle with mortals as a resident of the estate."

"We are aware."

"Your trace of the Janus amulet produced a shadow or echo as you called it. It was not an echo, m'lady."

"Then what was it?"

Shimmering air interrupted them, announcing the entrance of more participants to the trial. First, two familiar ogres stepped out. Each carried a fanfare trumpet. They blew a short, terribly off-key fanfare.

Oz elbowed E in the thigh. "Our friends from the estate," she said. E nodded without taking his eyes off the ogres.

"Introducing Carlus Fitheal, Lord High Inquisitor," said Barrell and Grutts in unison.

Through the shimmering space, two elves, eyes shifting in anticipation of trouble, carried an open palanquin upon which the Inquisitor sat.

"I didn't ask for the Inquisitor!" said Morgan.

The elves set the palanquin down, maintaining their vigilance.

"I am here in my position as Inquisitor to identify Caspian Heatherwood as a traitor!"

There were gasps among the attendants. Morgan had started checking her watch.

"We *knew* we weren't going to get out of here in ten minutes! Damn judicial rotation!" She sighed and turned to Fitheal. "Very well, proceed with your accusations. And you'd better not be wasting our time."

"I shall not, m'lady. Heatherwood brought the mortal here with the full understanding of the potential damage he represented. The final ingredient to the mortal's plan was the throne, a power source not available in the mortal realm."

A flickering green glow lit the room. The participants turned to see Percy with the palms of his hands pressed against the smooth space stone of the throne. His mouth was stretched into a wide skeletal grin.

"It's working!" Percy's voice shrieking over the growing thrumming coming from the throne. "Soon all this make-believe will be pulled down and only reality will remain!"

E was quickest to react, his massive legs propelling him toward Percy. A *ba-room* shook the room like a cannon blast. E pinwheeled off as he was deflected by an invisible shell surrounding Percy and the throne.

"We don't have much time!" said Caspian to Malone and Fellini. "Morgan's echo was no echo! There are two identical amulets and they are now both in this room!"

Fellini's face reflected first bewilderment and then understanding. Taking the chain and amulet from his neck, his body melted back into his true feline shape. Jumping out of his human clothing, he bounded across the room directly at the Inquisitor. The elf body guards drew their short blades. A lightning fast orb exploded against the chest of each elf from Oz's sling. The elves flew across the room, crumpled on the floor.

Fitheal flung up his arms to fend off Fellini's claws, but the cat had other plans. Reaching down the Inquisitor's collar, Fellini pulled out the chain and twin to his own amulet. Bracing his back feet against the Fitheal's chest, Fellini tugged until the chain broke. Fellini somersaulted backwards clutching the amulet while the Inquisitor shifted into...

"Fellini's twin!" said Caspian.

Malone reached down, picked up Fellini's amulet, and tossed it to Fellini who leaped, snagging the second amulet from the air. With the chains and amulets in his teeth, Fellini rushed to Oz.

"Use your sling," said Fellini, dropping the amulets at Oz's feet. "At the throne!"

"Are you sure?" said Oz.

"Yes! Now!"

Oz took and loaded the amulets into her sling. Whirling now, launching now, the amulets sizzling across the room, striking the invisible barrier, passing through and striking the throne!

The amulets penetrated the surface of the throne like a stone dropped into a pond. The throne rippled, the ripples passing up Percy's arms and through his body. He struggled to remove his hands from the throne but they were sealed as if welded there. At the amulet's entry point, the material began to pucker and pull into itself, a straw sucking the stone throne out. Before long the throne and Percy began to stretch as some massive force pulled them into it. With a final scream, Percy and the throne disappeared, fluid down a drain. Then there was silence.

Oz patted Fellini on the back. The cat purred in response, noticed what he was doing and quickly curtailed the sound, embarrassed.

"You've ruined me!" Fitheal yowled and streaked toward his brother. In a second, the two cats were a ball of hissing, clawing fury with bits of fur flying about.

A cymbal crash sounded. Again everyone held their ears. The cats even paused from their fighting.

"You know him!" said a rich booming disembodied voice. "You love him! Let's give a big Faerie welcome to your liege, Lord Oberon!"

This time a full, on-key fanfare sounded. A flash of lightning and a tympani of thunder, and Lord Oberon appeared, dressed in his royal finery.

"Howdy, everyone," he said. "Looks like you all handled that one quite well... Good shot, Ozymandia!"

"Thanks," she said, dropping her eyes, "Daddy."

"And once again, a brilliantly handled case by Heatherwood and Malone. You two truly amaze me."

"Always at your service, my lord," said Caspian, bowing.

Oberon next turned his attention on the two cats. The problem was now that their human shapes had been discarded, they looked identical to each other. "One of you is a traitor and shall fry over a slow flame in the lowest pits of perdition... So which one?"

The two cats immediately pointed at each other. "That one!"

Oberon turned to Caspian and Malone imploringly.

"Easy enough to solve, my lord," said Malone. He pointed to the first cat and motioned him to step forward. "Please tell me the name of my receptionist."

A smile came across the cat's face. "I shall never forget her name... Peaseblossom!"

Rage filled the other cat. His fur stood out, changing his appearance to twice his size. Then he froze in place.

"That will be quite enough!" said Oberon to the petrified cat. Out of a shimmering passageway, three of Oberon's guard appeared: one each for the elves who were still unconscious from Oz's attack and a third who picked up the cat and tucked him under his arm. Then all three guards departed the way they had come.

"Let it be known that Oberon does not take treason lightly!" said the Lord of Faerie. "These traitors shall suffer my full wrath, as will anyone who decides to do likewise."

Another series of pyrotechnics and Oberon disappeared.

"Always was quite the showman," said E, who had recovered and returned to his place next to Oz.

"He never ceases to find some way of embarrassing me!" said Oz.

"So how did the whole amulet thing work?" said E to the others.

Morgan leaned down from her place at the bench. "Dear, it's quite simple. Even though the throne was made of ancient stuff, the amulet of Janus goes back much farther. Nobody knows quite how far. Janus is the god of entrances... but also exits. Oz just

allowed Janus to usher the doctor and the throne off the premises."

"So where'd he go?" said Oz.

"Anyone's guess," said Malone. "I would assume some alternate Earth or Faerie. Chances are good the power that works here will not work the same there. Or else, the alternate location will unfortunately have to deal with the berserk doctor."

# Chapter Eleven

Malone dripped wax onto the folded report that would go to Lord Oberon concerning the Fellini affair. Morgan had awarded the estate to the cat who without the aid of the Janus amulet would most likely need to align himself with a new owner. But Malone had little doubt that the cat would find a suitable *master* to allow him to live in comfort for the rest of his life.

After pressing the seal onto the wax, picked up the report, rose, took his hat and coat from the rack, and left his office. The hour was late, and Ms. Peaseblossom's desk was understandably empty. He dropped the report on her desk. She would arrange for it to make its way to Oberon in the morning.

Leaving his building, a cold wind caused him to pull up the collar of his coat and pull his hat down tighter on his head. The street was empty. The sky was clear with stars staring down at him. Streetlights made pools in the darkness. He began to walk down the sidewalk toward his apartment.

From behind him, he heard a faint sound, like fabric brushed with a broom. Malone turned. "Ms. Peaseblossom?" There was no one in his view and no answer to his question. Malone continued on. Then came the the scuff of shoe leather against the concrete. Someone clearly wanted him to know he was being followed. He turned again. About ten feet away, a man had come out of the darkness and stood facing him, his face hidden in shadow.

"I suppose this means you are up to no good, sir," said Malone, his voice even and calm.

"I am insurance," said the man with a voice like a serpent. "And it is time for the premium to be paid." The man's hands began to glow ghostly white.

"One of Fitheal's cronies, I suppose," said Malone.

"I don't know my benefactor, nor do I care to."

"Part of the safeguards for someone in your line of work, I suppose."

"I have no time for idle chatter. It is time, sir."

"Very well... but you should be aware of something."

The assassin paused. "What's that?"

"Oh, it's of no importance."

"Very well." The assassin spread his arms wide, pointing his palms at Malone. The glow of his hands intensified. Malone stood still.

The head of the enormous alligator jutted out from the alleyway as the assassin passed by, its jaws clamped down with a bone-crunching snap engulfing the assassin head first, its front teeth catching the man at mid-calf. The alligator lifted its head and the rest of the assassin disappeared down its gullet.

"I assume you are able to withstand the energy the gentleman possessed?" said Malone. "I wouldn't want any harm to come to you."

"I have dealt with much more powerful in my day, sir," said the alligator, its voice a rumble like rocks cascading down a mountainside.

"Good. Thank you... I left a letter to Oberon on your desk. Please make sure it gets to his lordship in the morning."

"Certainly, sir," said Ms. Peaseblossom.

# Chapter Twelve

Oberon swallowed from his goblet. "My Self!" he gasped, liquor dribbling from the corner of his mouth. He used his sleeve to wipe himself clean. "I'll never gain an appreciation for mead, no matter how many millennia I drink it! It always reminds me of dirty feet."

Caspian Heatherwood sat atop Oberon's table at an identical table perfectly proportioned to his stature. It was his monthly meeting with the Lord of Chaos who was now trying to stop choking. Set before him was a wide variety of sweetmeats and pastries, made all the more exquisite by the proximity to power. No wonder beings are seduced by the promise of such rewards, he thought.

"It is definitely an acquired taste, my lord. However, one philosopher marks it as the passage 'from nature to culture.'"

"You have a flair for understatement, Caspian. And give me nature any day." Finally, he was able to get control, his face flushed. "Ironic I should sidestep insurrection at the hands of a shape-shifting cat, yet be felled by a simple cup of mead." Oberon's eyes narrowed.

"Merely 'a simple cup of mead,' my lord," said Caspian.

Oberon relaxed. "No one truly understands the weight resting upon my shoulders. Not even Titania."

"And how could they possibly, my lord?"

"Indeed... You come the closest."

"I am honored, my lord... So I might understand more fully?"

"Ask away. I knew you were bursting to." Oberon's eyes twinkled like a child with a new toy.

"You're not really going to torture that poor, misguided creature."

Oberon paused for dramatic effect. Caspian spied no tells. "You know me too well, Caspian. Of course not. However I am considering exiling him and his fellow miscreants. I shall turn the others into cats and send them all to a land filled with rocking chairs!"



"And the theatrics?"

"Part one, because I was bored, and it was a grand game. Like convincing your enemy he's your friend and then betraying him... Present company excluded."

"A relief, my lord." Caspian worked another scone into his mouth. Somehow sweets tasted just that much more delightful in Oberon's presence.

"By the way, your Mr. Malone has a nice touch for the game. You are sure he is free from guile?"

"I'd stake my life on it, my lord."

"As long as you've counted the cost... So where was I..? Secondly, as an example to those with greater potential for success. 'What did Oberon know? When did he know it?' I want them asking those questions at every turn, at every clandestine rendezvous... It's not easy ruling a kingdom of lunatics."