

“Hai!” Her instructor shouted in a staccato fashion. They had just bowed to begin their confrontation. Lexie, her curly black hair pulled into a tight bun, faced him with deep concentration, her dark eyes focused with laser like precision.

They each moved slightly in a circle, looking for an opening. When he lunged, she was ready. Fending off his attempt to grab her shoulders, she broke his grip on her clothes, using his momentum to turn the tables on him. A feigned kick to his groin, and he bent over. Spinning with ease, her perfectly timed kick to his knee sent him sprawling on the mat. It was over. She then turned and bowed to the crowd in the dojo, and respectfully reached out to help Mr. Kim up off the mat. His pride in her skill was obvious.

“Alexandria, it has been an honor. I shall miss you.” Mr. Kim always used her formal name. Even though this was her last class, he could not break the constraints of his upbringing and hug her, so he bowed deeply, emotion spreading out on his face, revealing his true feelings. She had come to learn from him as a shy, insecure eight-year-old girl, newly arrived in New York from her other life in London. She was leaving as a confident sixteen-year-old, ready to face the world.

“Mr. Kim, the honor is mine. I will carry your teachings always.” With a deep bow to him, she turned and headed into the locker room to change into her street clothes. Her emotions were high. Everything in her life seemed to be in a state of flux right now. She sat down on the bench in front of her locker, wiping away a tear. Dressing quickly, and stowing her white cargo pants, white top and black belt in her backpack, the teenager headed for the exit. A few of the younger girls came up to her to say goodbye. With a smile, Alexandria offered words of encouragement, finally escaping out the door. *Goodbyes are the worst thing ever*, she thought.

The fresh cool air felt wonderful. The dojo was always stuffy to her. Pulling the twisty out of her hair, she let it shake loose, her curls spilling down the back of her black cropped jacket that she had slipped over her white tank that read “Hapkido – It’s in my blood.”

“Hey, honey.” Her father was waiting just outside the front door, leaning up against the brick building just across from the doorway.

“Hey dad. I saw you slip in before the demonstration.”

“How did you feel about it?”

“Oh, you know. Hard. But, like you always say, goodbyes lead to new beginnings. New adventures await.” She said it by rote, repeating what her father had told

her every time he had to travel for a few months or when they were uprooted again because of his job. She had been lucky this time. Eight years in New York. He had been the one to commute back and forth to London when necessary, so she and her mom had the stability of staying in one place. All of her friends were here. Now they had to go back to London. A place she didn't know anymore.

As they hailed a taxi and headed for their apartment, she wistfully looked out the window, watching all of the familiar sights pass by as they traveled up Central Park West. Her father was enveloped in his own thoughts. She looked out of the cab window into the night and recognized someone she shouldn't have seen standing on a street corner in New York. As a matter of fact, Rowan shouldn't have been on any street corner in this world at all. Lexie turned quickly to see if the Priestess was still standing there as they drove past or had she imagined it. Rowan raised her hand to wave. A flush of excitement swept through Lexie's body from head to toe. It had been a year and a half since she last traveled to Anara. What perfect timing.

"Are you ok, pumpkin?" her dad asked.

Smiling broadly, she said with a little too much enthusiasm, "Yeah, dad, it's all going to be ok. Adventure awaits, right?"

"You know, honey, you have really matured these past two years. You seem more like an adult than most of the people I know who have twenty years on you. I know you will love getting reacquainted with London."

Softly smiling, she reached out and slipped her arm through her father's. If he only knew that she lived between two worlds now. An apprentice priestess in one; the daughter of a diplomat in another. Moving back to London had its downside, but her life view had expanded beyond anything New York or London had to offer.

They pulled up to their brownstone on Columbus Avenue just off of 73rd street. Stepping out of the cab, a tremor of fear raced up her back. Instantly all of her senses were heightened. She knew they were there before she saw them because of the smell. Lounging at the corner, tucked into the shadows, two dark elves were leaning up against the corner of her building.

Lexie knew after her last adventure that others were not able to see these visitors the way she did. She had the Sight now. Grotesque in facial expression, they looked like gargoyles with hooked noses and elongated ears, dingy, crooked teeth and stringy dirty hair sticking out from leather brimmed hats pulled down low on their brows. The stench from their body odor and shabby clothes hit her nose even at twenty feet. It wasn't likely they would try anything with this many people around. As her father paid the cabbie, the two deliberately walked between her and her father and muttered "Nice night for a full moon, eh?" She recoiled involuntarily, shuddering as she watched them disappear down the street. Why were they here? What did they want? What her father saw as he turned were two men in their twenties dressed in dark clothes who did not look out of place on a

damp autumn evening. Following her father into the building, she glanced around before she passed the doorman, hoping to see Rowan. No luck there.

“Mom?” Lexie called apprehensively as they entered their apartment on the fifth floor. “Are you here?”

“Yes, honey, I’m in the kitchen. How was your last class with Mr. Kim?”

Relieved to hear her mother’s voice, Lexie smiled at her father as they entered the kitchen. “Well, it was more of a demonstration, one where he let me have the upper hand. It was kinda funny, really, ‘cause in a real fight, there probably isn’t anyone in New York City who could take him down.”

“Sounds like he was very gracious. You okay?” her mom asked.

“Yeah, it’s ok. Things change, right?” Lexie said.

“Yes they do, my young philosopher. Sure you’re not a forty year old hanging out in a teenager’s body?”

“I think that all the time,” her dad said as he laughed.

“Funny, mom.”

“Did you eat?” Her mom asked.

“Yes. I had some pizza before class. I’ll come get some ice cream in a minute.”

“Ok, hon.” Her mom said.

Lexie couldn’t wait to get into her bedroom and close the door. She immediately looked out her window, but no Rowan in sight. Tossing her backpack on the bed, she headed for the closet and pulled back the carpet in the right corner. Removing several loose floorboards, she pulled out an ancient wooden box exquisitely carved and inlaid with pieces of crystals and gleaming gemstones. With reverence, she carried it to her bed and lifted off the lid.

The first time she crossed two years ago she had been initiated as a neophyte in the Order of the Seven Sisters. The second time she had advanced two levels to Secondary Apprentice. In honor of that achievement, she had received the Medallion of the Order, an intricately designed gold necklace. She reverently lifted it from the box and secured the clasp at the back of her neck. It would assist her in conjuring spells she had learned. Searching through the box, she found her apprentice ring and placed it on her right hand. Pulling her tank top over her head, she headed for the closet and found a black long-sleeved sweater, replaced her skirt with a pair of jeans and put her black boots on. Removing her wand from the box, Lexie tucked it into her jeans. A rush of memories

came back as she picked up the box and placed the lid back on, returning it to its place in her closet.

While waiting for Rowan to arrive, she opened up her computer and logged on to play for awhile, constantly checking the window. As her game ended, she closed the lid and watched the alien eyes close as she shut it down. Looking out the window again, she was relieved to see Rowan, who lifted her hand and waved. Chills ran up and down her spine in anticipation of another journey to Faery. Moving to her bedroom door, she opened it slowly. She could hear her mother and father chatting in the kitchen, catching up with each other. Slipping silently down the hall and out the front door, she just made the elevator. Thankfully it was empty. Entering the Lobby, she hugged the back wall and exited out the side door. Rowan said in a low voice, "Did you see them? We have company."

"Yes. Why? Who are they?"

"I'm not sure. They were probably sent by Malleus or Ludgorn, who else? That's not important right now. We will have to hurry." Lowering her voice, Rowan leaned in and whispered in Lexie's ear, "the portal is at the Alice in Wonderland statue in Central Park. It is the small toadstool in front of the Mad Hatter."

Lexie nodded. It was a place she knew as well as her own bedroom. Before she could respond, an elf shot was sent in her direction. She ducked just as it hit the side of the building, exploding against the bricks. The two dark elves had just turned the corner and were moving fast. Rowan hit them with a stun spell, and the two girls were already on the run as the two elves slumped to the ground. Running up Columbus Avenue, dodging pedestrians as they made their way to 74th Street, they turned right, going as fast as they could.

The goddesses were with them tonight. As they made Central Park West the signal was green. Entering the park, they ran down the footpath in the direction of the Alice in Wonderland sculpture as dusk turned into night. Dodging the few remaining visitors, they were making good time when Lexie motioned to Rowan that she needed to catch her breath. Pulling up behind a massive oak tree, Rowan spoke urgently. "I will try and fend them off. It is my duty to keep you safe. You might have to reach the portal on your own."

Lexie started to protest, but Rowan's look silenced her and she nodded obediently. "Do they know where the portal is?"

"I doubt it. They will try and stop you. You outrank them but you are still an apprentice. You will need to use all of your talents and what you have been taught if they get past me. As soon as you touch the toadstool, you will leave this realm. The portal has been prepared for you and will take you on the Dragon Matrix near the main doorway, where Wheezer guards the entrance. I will meet you there."

Lexie nodded. Looking out from behind the tree, they couldn't see the two, but just to be safe they tracked left to a higher path that would lead down to Conservatory Water and Alice. Rowan looked up at the trees, raised both of her arms, and invoked two red-tailed hawks to show her where the intruders were. The birds immediately soared above the trees, made two large looping circles, then dove with a piercing cry into the woods a half mile below their location. "Good. Let's wait for a minute. They might keep going and we can get to the portal before they realize they are on the wrong path."

"What is going on?" Lexie asked.

"I'm not sure. Of late, things have been changing in our world. Ludgorn grows greedy and wishes dominion over all things. I have no reason to believe he would send anyone to follow me here. Malleus has long had a problem with humans entering our realm, even if they have our DNA. He could be behind these two. Dark elves will sell their services to the highest bidder, they have no affiliation except with gold coins. Our Order has always been protected and left to exist in peace. It worries me that this ancient agreement has been breached."

They continued to move quickly, then hung back as the Conservatory Water came into view. They had a clear view of the Alice in Wonderland bronze statue just north of the water. A large blackbird with red markings on his wing landed on a tree above their heads. He flew off with a squawk and a shrill call.

"I will move out into the open first. They have cloaked themselves, but we can get around that." Rowan moved out of the cover of the trees. A blast of elf shot came from a stand of birch trees, hitting a branch above her. A loud crack pierced the stillness, as the branch fell to the ground. "Good thing they are bad shots," Rowan said under her breath. Then facing the trees, she raised her wand and commanded "Reveal all." The two elves became visible in the copse. Realizing they were no longer hidden, they raised their wands in unison. The Priestess aimed her wand and commanded "Disarm." Their wands fell to the ground. With a circular motion, Rowan sent them spiraling upward into the sky. Turning to the young girl, she said urgently, "Go, now, I'll hold them off."

Lexie burst from behind the trees and tore up the path. Rowan advanced against the two elves. "Who sends you to interfere with the business of a priestess of the Seven Sisters?"

"Well that is for you to find out, now, isn't it?" the taller of the two said. Their eyes kept darting to follow the running girl, seeing their gold coins disappearing into the settling dusk. "There are those who do not think bringing humans into our realm is a good idea."

"Malleus needs to mind his own business." As Rowan looked up the path to see Lexie make for the bronze sculpture, the blackbird swooped down from a branch and transformed into another dark elf now standing between the girl and the toadstool. In a flash, Rowan realized why it had been so easy to catch these two. She had been tricked.

There were three of them. Realizing she had been outmaneuvered, Rowan raised her wand to immobilize these two, but she was too late. From under the cover of their filthy clothes they had produced elvish rope. They flung it up in the air and as it fell it neatly encased the priestess, binding her wand to her side.

Lexie stopped abruptly as the bird morphed into a third elf right in front of her. He was missing a front tooth, and the stench was unbearable. At 5'8", she was tall for a young girl, but he still had a few inches on her. After years of practice, her instincts were automatic. It was not the apprentice who turned to her advantage the lunge the elf made for her neck. It was the years of training she had loved and embraced from day one in Mr. Kim's Hapkido Class. In a series of moves she had practiced for half of her life, she grabbed his wrist, twisted under his outstretched arm, and without holding back, landed a swift kick to his groin. Pushing his wrist back towards his body, the young girl felt the bone snap as the elf crumpled into a heap on the ground.

"Run, now...." Rowan shouted at the girl. Turning to run to the toadstool, Lexie realized the other two elves were bearing down on her. There was no way she could make it to the portal before they got to her. Stopping, she stood perfectly still. Lexie knew she had very little time. As she watched them close the gap between her escape and her doom, she lowered her arms straight down, and pulled up through the earth what she needed, as she had been shown. She called forth the power of her Order, and felt the magic flow into her body, up through her legs and torso and flow into her arms. Raising them, she whispered an incantation and in an illuminating flash, blasted the two elves bearing down on her. In a loud pop, they disappeared. She wasn't sure if she had killed them or sent them back where they came from, she was just relieved to see that they were gone.

As soon as the dark elves left this realm, the magic spell on the rope ceased to work. Running to Rowan, who had already begun wriggling out of her bonds, Lexie could barely contain her excitement. "Wow, did you see that? Can you believe it?"

"I have to admit. It was quite impressive. On both counts." Rowan said. "Men always have a tendency to underestimate women in combat situations. They should have known better."

Lexie took an exaggerated bow. "What about that one?" she said, pointing to the moaning elf on the ground.

"Leave him to me. You go ahead. I'll be all right. You will be safer there."

"Can't I help?" The apprentice asked.

"Must you always question orders?" Rowan said. "You were not going back to the sanctuary this time anyway. You are to join several others on a journey to Castle Caernag."

“Ok, that sounds different.” Lexie said, perplexed.

“Yes, as life, whatever realm you are in, comes in different experiences. It involves horses, so you should enjoy that. Think of it as an outdoor classroom experience.”

“Cool. What is”

“Enough questions. Now go,” Rowan said, smiling as she pointed to the smaller toadstool in front of the Mad Hatter.

Lexie reached out to give her a hug. They both walked to the Alice in Wonderland statue. “See you on the other side,” Lexie said as she knelt down and put both of her hands on the toadstool. With a loud pop, she disappeared.

Rowan smiled to herself. That young girl is exactly what she used to be like at sixteen. Walking back up the path, she said to the moaning heap on the ground “Now what shall I do with you?”