

TR CAMERON



DRAGONFYE



SECRET AGENT WITCH SERIES BOOK 5

DRAGONEYE

SECRET AGENT WITCH™ BOOK 5

TR CAMERON MARTHA CARR MICHAEL ANDERLE



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DEDICATION

For those who seek wonder around every corner and in each turning page.
Thank you choosing to share the adventure with me. And, as always, for
Dylan and Laurel, my reasons for existing.

— *TR Cameron*

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CHAPTER ONE

Aisling moved briskly through the well-dressed crowd, holding an empty serving tray above her head with one extended arm and wearing a frozen smile. She went unnoticed among the rich and powerful people who ebbed and flowed through the room, not nearly important enough to capture anyone's attention. That situation suited her right down to the ground.

The party she'd infiltrated was on the top floor of a Los Angeles skyscraper owned by one of the world's biggest corporations, which made the gathering as exclusive as exclusive got. Aisling nodded at the Secret Service agents flanking the room's exit as she passed between them. Although she was sure they'd seen her, they didn't acknowledge her, their focus solely on their charge. She wouldn't have liked to be in their position. Guarding the vice president of the United States as he circulated through the crowd, politicking, making deals, or whatever such politicians did would be nerve-racking.

The hallway gave her respite from being "on stage." She lowered the tray to a reasonable level and let the smile fade. She murmured, "You know, when I did that catering gig at the SIS guy's house, I didn't realize I was setting a precedent."

Mia Pederson, the infomancer riding along on her mission, laughed in her earpiece. "Dragonfly loves to punish competence."

Aisling restrained the snort the words inspired. "Don't I know it." The last time she'd been in the States was to visit her sister in Boston for a night out. Now she was on the opposite coast in a city she'd never experienced. Magical transport had delivered her to her hotel, and she hadn't seen anything of the city besides her room and the corporation's building.

The owner of the catering company that served the corporation's needs in LA had links to America's Central Intelligence Agency and had pulled strings to get her on the staff for the event. She had no idea what favors her people or the owner might have called in or threats delivered to make it happen. However, they'd warned her the Secret Service was not in the loop, so she'd best keep a solid distance from the vice president. She had no problem following the instructions since that man wasn't her target.

She was after a member of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service, who Dragonfly believed to have worked with Jameson Hart before and after he'd left the SIS to become a mercenary spy. They'd put out the word that they were looking for leads on Hart. The SIS had produced one Leandro Olivarez, along with the information that one of his known aliases was on the guest list for the party.

It left Aisling caught in the middle of several intelligence agencies who weren't telling each other the whole story while pretending they were, fooling no one. She laughed inwardly and thought, *Just like Dragonfly. Secrets within secrets.*

She entered the kitchen, dodged someone heading out with their tray raised high, and walked to the corner, where she slid her tray onto a stack of empties and picked up a filled one. Her last round had been bacon-wrapped scallops. The new tray held shot glasses containing a single large shrimp and cocktail sauce. It was an attractive display, each one arranged just so. Another server dropped off a tray, pointed at Aisling's leg, and observed, "Your skirt is caught."

Aisling looked down, groaned, and yanked on the bottom edge of the skirt to put it back where it belonged. The garment was clingy and kept riding up on her, a problem she likely wouldn't have had except for the other, more functional outfit she wore underneath. The costumes for the evening were a touch more daring than she might have preferred for anything other than a date. Based on an elegant little black dress, the skirt rose higher, and the top was cut lower than she would have chosen for a work uniform.

That was all irritating for someone who preferred T-shirts and jeans, but the worst part was the heels. They were impractically high and required her to maintain constant concentration to avoid falling. She replied, "Thanks."

The other woman smiled. "Don't mention it. We've got to look out for each other while we swim in this pool of sharks, right?" The corporation's parties were the stuff of rumor and legend, although she didn't think this one

was likely to get too high on the outrageousness scale.

Aisling nodded. “You know it.” She lifted her tray to be sure no one would bump it and headed for the door.

The other woman offered in farewell, “Watch out for the CFO. He’s the one with the bowtie. He’s a little handsy, if you know what I mean.”

Aisling had watched some of the partygoers touching the other servers. No one had tried it with her, fortunately for them. “Thanks for the warning.”

Mia suggested, “Maybe you should break his hands for him.”

As she hit the hallway, Aisling replied, “Nothing I’d like better, but unfortunately I’m here for someone else.”

“Damn your professionalism.”

A small, quickly smothered laugh escaped her. “I know, right? Takes all the fun out of everything.” She passed the Secret Service guards again and slid into the throng. Her contact lens fed her information on each person she allowed her gaze to linger on, and she was careful not to get caught staring. Her gaze wandered in a closer examination of her surroundings.

The walls were glass on two sides, with the other two walls of the rectangular room a lovely golden paneling that glowed in the wash of the setting sun. The windows offered a beautiful view of the city and its surroundings.

She couldn’t see him, but her mechanical dragon partner Shimmer circled the building somewhere out there, rendered invisible by his camouflage scales. His role tonight was to watch for trouble from outside and alert her using the comm system Brodie MacGregor had installed during the last upgrade. Aisling could have looked through Shimmer’s eyes through her lens or by using her magic, but both would be a distraction, and the latter might get her noticed. He hadn’t warned her of anything so far, which was a good sign.

Less positive was the fact that she hadn’t identified her quarry yet. He might be a magical and in disguise, but she doubted it. The lack of anti-magic emitter coverage in the room was a surprise given the vice president’s presence, but she was sure the Secret Service had magic detectors. She guessed they’d chosen to allow magic because someone on the VP’s team was a magical and was keeping him shielded. It was how she would have handled it if she’d been in charge.

Finally, when her tray was half-empty, she spotted the face she’d seen in the records SIS had provided. She turned toward the wall and muttered, “I’ve

got him,” then shifted in his direction while looking away enough that she wouldn’t spook him.

Mia replied, “I agree. That’s our guy. Do your thing.”

Aisling circulated toward him, offering appetizers and evading the guests in motion. One hand surreptitiously reached up under the strap of her dress at her shoulder. She palmed the small tracer hidden there and placed it on his back as she went by. Olivarez twisted at the contact. Aisling smiled an apology. “Sorry. Crowded. Shrimp?”

He shook his head and looked away. Mia announced, “Tracking.”

Once away from overhearing ears, Aisling replied, “Now we wait. And get another tray of appetizers.”

After another ten minutes of circling the room and keeping him in her peripheral vision, she realized she wasn’t the only person interested in him. She looked at the man who’d been watching Olivarez. He was what intelligence agencies called an empty suit, someone with no memorable features. “Wraith, got any idea about that guy?”

Mia replied, “Nothing.” The answer was unexpected since they’d been given the list of party attendees in advance and had done their homework. Aisling watched him as she circled the room and confirmed that he was watching her target. She took a moment to set the tray down and pulled out the lipstick she had tucked under her other shoulder strap. The press of a button ejected a thin tab into her palm. She circled behind the watcher and brought her tray to his left side. “Appetizer?” As she did, her right arm reached around and dropped the strip into the half-empty glass in his right hand.

Aisling stopped as he selected a shot glass from the tray, then moved on once he’d taken it. She muttered, “Keep an eye on him.”

The infomancer replied, “Will do.” Mia had hacked into the outermost level of security, proceeding only deep enough to use the passive systems, cameras, and sensors. She’d said she could probably get a level deeper without detection, but they held that in reserve in case Aisling needed a fire alarm or something similar as a distraction.

She exchanged her tray in the kitchen again. As she returned to the room, Mia reported, “He drank it.” A few moments later, Aisling saw the man lift a hand to his mouth, look around, and rush through the nearest exit. Mia laughed. “Nausea tab, huh?”

“Well, I couldn’t tranquilize him.”

“Fair. Our man’s on the move.”

Aisling looked around and noticed Olivarez leaving the room by a side entrance on the opposite side of the room from the kitchen. She followed and quickly came to a locked door with a keypad on the wall beside it. She pulled the credit card-sized lock pick from the thigh strap on her left leg and pressed it against the keypad. It unlocked in seconds.

She passed through and closed the door behind her. Two guards dressed in tuxedos lay on the hallway floor. She knelt and checked their pulses. “Unconscious. Probably drugged. Not Secret Service.” The vice president’s people had been wearing suits.

The door at the far end of the corridor opened onto an elevator vestibule. The doors were closed. “He must be in the elevator. There’s nowhere else he could have gone.”

Mia replied, “Tracking it.”

Aisling took off her custom shoes one at a time and removed the heels, turning them into reasonable flats. She pulled off her blonde wig, shook out her red hair, and pulled the server costume dress over her head. Underneath, she wore a tight-fitting top and long shorts that unfolded to above her knees. She pulled the top’s shoulder straps up to where they belonged.

The tight dress had only allowed a small equipment belt underneath. It held the pieces of her tiny dart gun and a thin cord that would bear her weight at need. She hadn’t been able to bring any potions or potion packs and felt naked without them. Ignoring the worry, Aisling forced the elevator doors open and looked inside the shaft. “A ladder, thank heaven.”

As she moved to it, Mia asked, “Why not jump?”

“What happens if I do and there’s an anti-magic field down there?”

Mia replied, “Oh. Splat. Good point.”

Aisling grabbed the ladder and descended to where the elevator car had stopped several floors below.

CHAPTER TWO

Aisling stepped smoothly from the ladder to the top of the elevator car. She whispered, “Status?”

Mia replied, “The doors opened and closed. The system doesn’t have a camera inside, but I’m guessing it’s empty.”

Aisling opened the access panel on the car’s roof and dropped inside. She pushed her hair back from her face in annoyance and complained, “Why does no one ever clean elevator shafts? I think I have dust in my brain now.”

“Because you’re not supposed to use them outside of an elevator, of course. What a silly question.”

“What’s beyond the door?”

“It’s a ghost floor. I can’t see anything about it from my current level of access to the security system or the network. I can push deeper if you want, but it risks discovery since I’d probably have to go several levels down if they’re hiding secrets there.”

“Which they almost certainly are. No, don’t do that.” Aisling removed the components of the small dart gun from her equipment belt and assembled them. The base was a tube that could be primed with air pressure and was attached to a narrow barrel. The projectiles were loaded from the front and pushed down the barrel with a small rod. She had four of them, two tranquilizer and two shock, and loaded one of the former.

When it was ready, she requested, “Open the doors for me.” The elevator’s doors slid open, but the ones beyond did not. With a growl, Aisling grabbed the door’s edge, pulled, and slipped through as soon as the opening was wide enough. The floor beyond was downright futuristic. Hallways led left, right, and forward from the elevator. Panes of smoky glass with curved

edges defined the rooms along them. Aisling muttered, “Expensive.”

Mia replied, “Well, they are a major corporation.”

“Whatever. Nobody needs a workplace this nice.” The floor underfoot was white tile, and soft overhead lighting illuminated the entire area. The fixtures didn’t grate on her nerves with the low buzz of fluorescents like the ones in the old Dragonfly base had, and she decided that maybe some comforts were worth having. Strictly for increased efficiency, of course.

Aisling advanced one cautious step at a time with her ears peeled for sounds of her quarry. She would have used magic to amplify her senses, but an anti-magic emitter nearby blocked her access to her powers. She muttered, “Too many people have anti-magic emitters.”

Mia replied, “At least the floor isn’t fully signal-shielded.”

“True.” Doing all this without the ability to communicate with her team would have made everything much harder. “Shimmer, everything okay out there?”

The dragon replied through the comm, “No issues. Boring. As usual.”

“Let me know if that changes.” Aisling tested each door as she went by and found them all locked. While she would have preferred checking them, she was worried about losing her quarry if she invested the time to do so. She decided instead to make a circuit of the floor and double back if she didn’t find him.

As she neared the end of the corridor, soft footsteps from around the corner warned her that she wasn’t alone. She knelt and raised the tranquilizer-loaded dart thrower. A guard in a blue security uniform and bulletproof vest came around the corner, his walk evidencing no sign of alarm. She pressed the release and the tranquilizer dart, which was more of a gel capsule than the pointy version used in her dart revolver, shot out and splashed into his face. His eyes opened wide, and his hand went for the holstered pistol at his belt, but he collapsed before it got there.

Aisling frisked him, but her hope for a set of keys or an ID badge that would give her access to the rooms was thwarted. She took his pistol and noted the un-illuminated LED on the grip as she examined it. Placing the guard’s hand around the grip caused it to light up green. She sighed, dropped the pistol on his stomach, and took out the Taser on the other side of his belt. It had an LED too. She growled, “Handprint locked. Paranoid bastards.”

Mia replied, “Cut off his hand and take it with you.”

“Gross.” Aisling yanked his combat baton from its holder and shoved it

into the back of her belt. After reloading the dart thrower with a stun capsule, she pulled the guard fully into her hallway so he couldn't be seen from the one around the corner and continued her search. The area was annoyingly large, with short hallways frequently bisected by others, providing too many choices. Even the thermal function of her lens hadn't been useful since it couldn't deal with whatever material the glass comprised.

Aisling would have walked past Olivarez, except her subconscious had taken note of the small telltale lights at the top of each room's door frame. It took a while before she realized they indicated whether someone occupied the room or if it was empty. They'd all been red, but when she finally spotted a green one, she presumed it would be her target. She held her keycard in her right hand along with the dart thrower and placed her left hand on the door handle. When the lock released, she yanked the barrier open, dropped the card, and fired the shock capsule at her target.

Unfortunately, Olivarez had reacted to the sound of the lock disengaging by ducking and turning to one side. Her shot missed him and struck the rack of servers at his back. The electrical discharge resulted in a loud *snap* from the electronics and triggered a noisy alarm inside the room. He lashed out with a sudden front kick that she threw herself backward to avoid, and he followed her into the hallway.

Aisling dropped the dart thrower, yanked the baton from her belt, and flicked it out to full extension, but as she brought it up, he grabbed her wrist and punched her forearm. Her hand opened involuntarily, and she dropped the weapon. He flinched toward picking it up, but she snapped a kick at his knee to discourage him.

Olivarez retreated a step to avoid it, and she followed up with a kick with her other leg at his other knee. He stepped back again and used the wrist he still held to yank her forward, his torso twisting to power an elbow strike that would've ended the fight by fracturing her jaw or her skull had it connected.

Aisling had grown up with two aggressive sisters, and her coven's masters taught all of them to fight. His strike was the logical and thus entirely predictable move for the situation. She went with the momentum imparted by his pull and threw herself into a slide between his legs. His strike missed, forcing him to release her wrist to avoid being yanked face-first into the floor.

He jumped away before her punch at his groin could connect. They scrambled up. He reached for the baton, but she stepped forward, put her foot on it, and kicked backward to send it flying down the hallway behind her.

She easily blocked his punch at her head. He followed it with a rising knee strike, and she slammed her fist down on it.

He snarled, "Who are you? Not their security."

"Someone who wants to talk to you." She punched with both hands at his chest, but he swiped down in a block. He responded with a weak left hook that she took several steps backward to evade.

They regarded each other without moving, and Olivarez observed, "Strange opening move for someone who wanted to talk."

Aisling shrugged. "I thought you might need convincing, which would be easier somewhere less public."

"It's probably only a matter of minutes before alarms start going off all over the place, you know."

"You don't have an infomancer running with you?"

He scowled. "Of course I do, but he can't get into this floor."

"Guess mine is better," she taunted although Mia had the same problem, and attacked again. Her flurry of punches forced him to take a quick step backward. When he did, she jumped and kicked his chest with both feet. She landed on her back and flipped back up to stand. The blow had knocked him several feet backward and dropped him to the floor.

Olivarez hadn't recovered as quickly as she had, and Aisling dashed over and landed a stomp on his stomach that blew the breath out of him. It kept him immobile long enough for her to grab her dart thrower, load it with a tranquilizer, and knock him out. "All right, now to find a way to get him out of here."

At that moment, the alarms he'd mentioned began to sound. Aisling hung her head, sighed, and snapped, "Wraith, Shimmer, everything just went to hell. As usual."

CHAPTER THREE

Aisling searched the fallen man and took the only thing he carried, a phone. Instinct told her to check the server room, and she found a small hard drive attached to the servers. It was entirely likely that her stun blast had fried it, but she grabbed it anyway and stuck it under a shoulder strap.

Then she headed for the offices at the far end of the corridor, where she assumed the windows would be. Her short cord could at least get her down a level if she could find a way to secure it. In a perfect world, the anti-magic emitter signal would fray at the building's edge, and she could use magic to escape instead.

She broke into an office using her card but found only a solid wall where she'd anticipated a window would be. She barked a curse, then snapped, "Wraith. I have to use the elevator unless you've gotten me access to some other way off this floor."

Mia replied, "The stairs locked down at the alarm, and there are heavy security barriers. You won't get out that way, and I probably can't get deep enough into the system quickly enough to make it work."

The answer was nothing less than she'd expected. Aisling snapped, "All right. Back to the elevator it is. But go ahead and see if you can get farther into the system. Don't risk getting caught, though."

She gripped the baton in her right hand and held the dart thrower in her left, loaded with her last shock round. As she turned the corner to get back to the elevator, she discovered a guard standing in front of it. He spotted her at the same moment and began shooting.

Aisling ran in a serpentine path, cursing under her breath since the distance was too great for the dart thrower. As soon as she was near enough,

she hurled the baton at him as a distraction. His reflexes must have overcome his brain because he used his gun hand to block it. Her projectile struck his wrist and caused his grip to open. His pistol fell to the floor.

He recovered from the surprise and stepped back into a fighting stance as she arrived. She pistoned a punch at his stomach, but he blocked it with a sharp strike to send it away from him. She used that momentum to spin into a turn and hook a kick into the back of his head. He stumbled forward a half-dozen steps but turned and gamely lifted his arms again.

She saw the damage her kick had done in his unfocused gaze and launched several fast blows that overwhelmed his ability to process and defend. The first, a kick to the nerve bundle in his thigh, caused his legs to buckle. A pair of punches slammed into his face as he collapsed.

Aisling ignored the gun, figuring it would be handprint locked as well, but retrieved her combat baton and took his, shoving both into the back of her belt. She applied muscle power to the elevator doors and slipped into the empty car that awaited her. Despite her lack of penetration, Mia had managed to keep her fallback escape route safe, which was everything at the moment.

She stepped inside and hit the button for the top floor. She'd left the upper hatch open, so she jumped up, grabbed it, and muscled herself through it. The ache in her arms reminded her she'd been skimping on her workouts and needed to do better, or she'd never be able to face her combat instructor Delsanra again. His mocking would be more than she could take.

Once on top, she crouched as the car carried her upward. Most elevator shafts had an area at the top where the equipment was housed, along with an access panel to a maintenance area. Fortunately, this one was no exception.

The thin metal grate separating the shaft from the equipment area came off easily after she'd whacked it a few times with a collapsed baton. She moved into the small room and positioned herself in front of the heavier barrier blocking her from the outside. "I'll be on the roof shortly."

Mia replied, "I have drones vectoring in. Looks like they came out of one of the building's middle floors. I see four right now. Standard security models, at least visually."

Aisling scowled. "Except this is a tech company, so there's no telling what the hell they have inside them. Shimmer, little help, buddy."

Shimmer had seen the drones emerge from the building but had been waiting for the word before engaging them. With that command given, he replied, “Finally, an end to the boredom.” He dove toward the nearest.

The drone was a matte black rectangle with four turbo fans, two on each side. It didn’t appear to have camouflage capability, unlike Shimmer, who was virtually invisible thanks to his high-tech scales. He considered using one of his breath weapons but decided to hold them in reserve since he had the advantage of surprise.

Instead, he flew down toward it, leveled out at the last moment, and slashed his talons through both turbo fans on one side. He’d fought enough drones to know they couldn’t maintain control with unbalanced fans. The drone spun out and detonated a moment later. He reported, “It self-destructed.”

Aisling replied, “Which means somebody’s watching it. Be careful, buddy.”

“I’m always careful.”

“Yeah, right.”

He flew upward again as he circled the building in search of his next target. This drone, doubtless controlled by the same person whose craft he’d destroyed, swooped into its attack as he reached it. Bullets slammed into his scales but ricocheted away without penetrating. The sheer volume forced him to evade against the chance that multiple hits on the same scale could do substantial damage.

His computer brain tracked which ones got struck and how often. Brodie insisted they swap out any damaged scales between missions, and Shimmer had no problem with that. Optimal performance was his overriding passion, along with protecting his partner.

He slashed through the turbo fans of his second target, and this drone veered to the side and slammed into the building before it could self-destruct. It passed through shattered glass and out of sight. Shimmer flapped his wings to climb again and reported, “Two down.”

Mia replied, “Four more have deployed.”

Shimmer growled, and Aisling interjected, “They’re banging on the elevator door down there. Wraith, send it down so they can’t get in. I’m going through onto the roof now.”

The infomancer replied, “Be careful.”

Aisling laughed. “Always.”

Shimmer knew it was a lie and focused on the next enemy. If his partner was about to enter the battlefield, efficiency was even more important than the moment before. The drone came into view as he turned the corner of the building, only a few feet away from him. His thermal optics had spotted it during his approach, and he was ready.

He breathed electricity over it as he passed, twisting to keep the barrage on it for an extra second or two. It shuddered in midair as if trying to decide what to do. Then its fans stopped spinning, and it fell.

Shimmer dove to follow. When the falling drone crossed paths with the new drone that had arrived on that side of the building, he blasted the damaged one with fire. It exploded and sent shrapnel into the other drone. They both headed for the ground, trailing smoke. "Four remaining."

Aisling crawled out of the small anteroom onto the roof. A drone spotted her immediately and angled toward her on an attack run. She reached reflexively for her magic, but the anti-magic field was still active, hopefully because she was too close to the elevator shaft. If some corner of the roof wasn't free of that influence, she wasn't sure exactly how she would get off the skyscraper.

All that was a secondary concern compared to the oncoming drone, and she dashed to the side to avoid the bullets streaming out at her. She cut to the left and angled toward the drone, only to immediately spin to the side as a bullet slammed into her bare shoulder. Aisling's feet lost purchase on the gravel and tar surface, and she fell and rolled. Bullets stitched the air above her head and the cold realization that the fall might have saved her life washed over her.

She didn't consciously register the approach of the second drone, but as it flashed by overhead, her arms rammed a baton up into one of its turbofans. The motor driving it exploded, and the drone veered away. Shimmer arrived a moment later and blasted the first one that had targeted her with a gout of electricity. It fell smoking to the roof as Aisling staggered up and ran for a corner.

The remaining two drones appeared from her left, but she kept running. All she had was one baton, which offered nothing useful at their current distance. Shimmer vectored toward them, but it was a race she wouldn't win.

Then her magic suddenly returned. The feeling flooded her with relief as she summoned a fireball with her free hand and side-armed it at the nearest drone. It exploded, and a moment later Shimmer flew through and destroyed the other. She called, “Shimmer, let’s go.”

Mia announced, “Third wave launching.”

Aisling replied, “They’re too late.” The other side of the portal showed a small clearing in England near Stonehenge that she used as an escape spot. She and Shimmer darted through, and as the portal closed behind them, she fell onto the grass, exhausted. Shimmer landed beside her and poked his snout into her bullet wound. She snarled, “Ow. Jerk.”

He gave her the dragon-y grin that always seemed to mock her far more harshly than words could. “Just wanted to make sure you’re still alive.”

“I’m going to have Brodie melt you down into a jewelry set.”

He laughed. “Empty threat. You love me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The next day was Saturday, which meant she technically didn't have assigned work to do, although those lines tended to blur after the attack on their base. After sleeping in, Aisling opened a portal to connect the new Dragonfly base in Seville to her apartment in Birmingham. She peered carefully through the opening, then tossed in one of Brodie's detection spheres to ensure no one had left her any nasty surprises. It registered nothing of note, and she and Shimmer crossed over.

A weight fell away as she stepped into her apartment. She'd only returned once to grab gear since the attack on Dragonfly. She loved the place since it was associated with many good memories created while working for Dragonfly. It was hers in a way no other apartment had been since she'd had roommates living under the same roof in college.

She bundled up clothes and other useful items to take to the base. While it didn't seem like their enemies had discovered her apartment, it was impossible to know what intel the invaders might have gotten away with or what Hana Ishida might have given them. Their infomancers had also proven quite capable, which increased the risk of someone tracing her back to here.

Aisling looked forward to delivering a payback with interest to those people. Mia shared her anticipation, still irate over having her defenses penetrated, even though the mole inside the organization had compromised them. Shimmer had pranced around for a while when they'd entered but was now lying on her bed watching her pack. He asked, "Will we be back here eventually?"

Aisling shook her head. "I doubt it. The base is too public now for the organization to use again, and although we can portal to anywhere, it

probably makes sense to be nearby.”

“Too bad.”

“Yeah. But home isn’t a place. It’s people. Well, and dragons. Ours are in Spain at the moment except for those losers in Ireland.”

He laughed. “I liked how Brianna accused you of being personally responsible for the base’s destruction.”

Aisling scowled. When she’d checked in with her family to let them know she was okay, she’d expected sympathy. While her family had expressed genuine regret at the loss of life and the overall trauma of the experience, they had expressed relief at her safety through increasingly rude taunts. “She’s jealous.”

“That you almost died?”

Aisling shook her head. “That her life is boring and mine isn’t.”

Aisling was zipping up her duffel when a text from Eddie Smithton appeared on her phone.

Drinks?

She called him, and his voice was warm when he greeted her. “All healed up?” She’d let him know she was safe after the mission in America.

She replied, “Yep. Healing potions are the best. Isn’t it a little early for drinks?”

He laughed. “It’s three in the afternoon. That’s a quite respectable time for drinks.”

Aisling smiled and shook her head at the reply. He was fairly relentless in his romantic efforts toward her, and she didn’t mind it one bit. “So, you think I’m not doing anything useful and can drop everything at a word from you?”

He replied with an uplift that made it a question. “Yes?”

She laughed. “No. Definitely no. But I’ll meet you at seven.”

“Perfect. Here’s the address.” They hung up without further ado. Her ability to portal from one place to another made their long-distance relationship quite doable, a fact they were both grateful for. After returning to the base with Shimmer, she spent some time dealing with odds and ends, then dressed for her date.

She chose black pants, fashionable black and gray boots that hid stilettos along the heels, and a shimmery turquoise top he hadn’t seen before. It left her arms mostly bare, except for a piece of loose fabric that reached down

from the shoulder to the loop around her index finger. She dabbed on some makeup and asked Shimmer, “How do I look?”

The dragon replied, “Better than he deserves.”

She laughed. Her companion’s antipathy toward her boyfriend was long-standing and good-natured. “Will you come along and watch for trouble despite your disapproval?”

“Of course. You can’t be trusted on your own. You’re danger-prone.”

“I wish you’d stop saying that.”

He snorted. “I wish you’d stop making it true.” Aisling opened the portal and stepped through it to a street in London. She’d never been to the part of the city where the club was but had chosen this destination strategically. A Starbucks stood nearby, its glass lobby revealing people of all stripes inside, talking, working, or fortifying themselves with caffeine to prepare for a night out.

She headed inside, moved to the back, and used her magic to open the secret door. From there, she descended into the magical underground transportation system. She didn’t use it often, but it came in handy at moments like these. She checked for the destination she needed, then climbed aboard. It whisked her across the city in minutes instead of an hour, and she came out only a block away from the club.

Aisling turned the corner and saw it glowing across the street from her. The club’s name, Aqua, was written in huge blue neon letters on its façade. It was visually distinctive, a cylindrical structure amid a row of standard, flat-faced buildings.

A line had formed outside the venue, but she checked with the host and learned that as usual, Eddie had pulled the necessary strings so she didn’t have to wait. She was unsure whether he did so using his government contacts or if he knew the town’s restaurant and bar owners well. The worst-case option of him bringing so many dates to these places that they knew him, she rejected on trust.

Her steps slowed to a stop as she entered, struck by the sight that greeted her.

The club was one huge room. The walls appeared circular from the entrance. In the center of that circle, dangerous-looking creatures swam inside a four-story cylindrical aquarium. At least two sharks glided by as she watched, in addition to several other fish with spines and teeth that seemed less than friendly. The strategically lit column sent glittering reflections from

the water onto all the walls.

The outermost section, probably three-quarters of the space, was filled with tables, most occupied. The ones on the outer wall were tall with high chairs around them, while the ones closer to the center were more like couch arrangements with small tables interspersed among them. The decorations were black and dark blue with occasional touches of a sandy tan. The place was gorgeous, and she loved it immediately.

Aisling walked toward the bar that circled the tank. It was glass as well, with more water and fish inside it. These appeared less threatening, thankfully.

Eddie must have been watching for her entrance since he stood and waved. As usual, he wore a well-tailored suit without a tie tonight. He'd added a vest that had black-on-black embroidery.

She hugged him and kissed his cheek as she arrived, then nodded at his outfit. "Daring. Be careful. You might stand out in a crowd."

He laughed. "There's only one person I want to be noticed by. I thought you might appreciate something a little more fashionable than usual."

She shook her head with a grin as she climbed onto the bar chair. "You're so smooth."

He matched her expression as he reclaimed his seat. "Guilty as charged. Thanks for coming."

"Entirely your pleasure."

He laughed. "It is indeed."

"What have you been up to?"

"The usual. Wondering how your mission went."

Aisling scowled. "Not as well as I'd hoped it would. Found him trying to steal some data. Unfortunately, I couldn't get him out. I did get a hard drive and his phone. They're being analyzed as we speak."

He winced in sympathy. "That couldn't have made you happy."

She paused as the bartender took their orders. "It did not. I'm getting tired of things not going right, to be honest."

Eddie chuckled. "I wonder what other couples talk about."

"Their lives, just like we do."

He grinned. "So, you admit it. We're a couple."

Aisling rolled her eyes. "You're a doofus. That's what I admit."

His laugh chimed out. "Don't try to deny it. I heard it, loud and clear." Their drinks arrived, and he tucked his hand inside his jacket. "While we're

on the topic of business, I have this for you.” He pulled out a small computer chip. “It’s our surveillance of your base in Birmingham. You’ll see that we were watching you pretty carefully. Hope that doesn’t offend.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing more extreme than what we have on your place.”

“Really?”

She grinned. “Wouldn’t you like to know? So sad, learn to live with disappointment.”

The conversation turned from there to other things, and after a couple of drinks, they headed outside. Eddie asked, “I don’t suppose you’d want to come back to my place for coffee?”

The look in his eyes suggested he was not thinking about coffee. Aisling shook her head, already regretting the decision she had to make. “On any other night, the answer would be yes.” She held up the chip. “But you gave me this, and I need to check it out. I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the coffee.” She put a strategic pause before the last word.

He laughed, stepped in, and kissed her. When he broke it, he shook his head. “You’re something, Aisling. Just remember. We’re a couple. You said so.”

She gently smacked his chest. “You’re a chucklehead. Good night, Eddie.”

“Hope your dreams about me are sweet.”

Aisling called Shimmer down and opened a portal. Before they left, she replied, “Hope your dreams aren’t sweet at all.” She offered him a wicked grin, stepped through, and let the portal fall closed.

Shimmer laughed. “You’re evil.”

“That’s why everybody loves me. Now, let’s go find Mia.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Mia was where Aisling had expected to find her, in the improvised infomancy area of the new base. She and Thomas Scott each had a computer setup in the room, but he wasn't present. A three-dimensional model of Mia's exoskeleton spun on one of her screens while code flew by on the other.

Aisling and Shimmer sat on the room's small couch and waited. After ten minutes, Mia leaned back in her chair. As she stretched, the metal framework of her exoskeleton was visible on her arms and the back of her neck. She yawned. "Sorry for the delay. I was in the middle of something complicated."

Aisling replied, "Well, Shimmer feels offended, but I'm fine."

The dragon snarked, "Truly, I should be everyone's top priority. Have you come up with any new upgrades for me?"

Mia laughed. "Sorry, my friend. I'm working on my upgrades at the moment."

Aisling asked, "Is the new exoskeleton still working out as well as you'd hoped?"

"No complaints. But I've only scratched the surface of what it can do. I have an appointment this week to get the old one removed."

"Is it complicated?"

The infomancer stretched again. "Not at all. You saw how it's assembled. All the pieces will come off one by one. It's tedious. Fortunately, it won't require me to have a sedative or anything. The new exoskeleton will allow me to suppress the pain signals."

Aisling whistled, impressed. "It can do that?"

Mia smiled. "It can do a lot."

“Need me to come along?”

“No. Thank you for asking. You’re a sweetheart.”

Shimmer chirped, “Well, *Eddie* certainly thinks so.”

Mia grinned broadly. “I sense a story. Make with the telling.”

Aisling groaned, then told Mia about her date. When she finished telling the tale, she offered the computer chip. “Shall we take a look?”

“Definitely.” Mia plucked the device from her hand and shoved it into a port in her system. Aisling moved to stand behind her chair and lean against the wall as the monitor came to life. It showed twelve images arranged symmetrically across the wide screen, each of which appeared to be time-locked. Mia said, “Damn, that’s a lot of surveillance.”

Aisling shrugged. “Cameras are cheap. I guess bandwidth would be the only concern, right?”

Mia absently nodded as she watched the video play. “And discovery.” Then she pointed at a pair of people moving deliberately toward the entrance to the Council House. “I think those folks started it.”

They let the video roll and watched the pair disappear down a hallway inside the Council House. The familiar black-suited invaders they’d faced emerged from the same hall shortly after, confirming Mia’s conclusion. Mia paused the video from the lobby as the playback continued to capture headshots of each person who appeared on the screen. The view wasn’t great since the camera had shot it from outside through the glass doors and windows. With computer enhancement and magnification, the system could identify people by comparing the faces to its files.

Aisling scowled as a familiar face arrived in the lobby and exited through a different portal than the intruders were pushing the captives into. She snarled, “So it was her. Hana Ishida. That scumbag.”

Mia nodded. “Well, if nothing else, confirmation is good. I’ll make sure the powers that be see it in the morning.”

Aisling yawned and stretched. “I still can’t believe that freaking Lance is now one of those powers that be.”

Mia laughed. “Right? Deplorable state of affairs at Dragonfly. The stupid leading the clueless.” Aisling smacked the infomancer gently on the back of her head. Mia replied, “Ow. Wench.”

“Call me clueless again, and I’ll put an electrical blast into your exoskeleton.”

Mia laughed, spun her chair, and stood to look Aisling in the eye. “Once

I've got this thing fully functional, bring it."

Aisling grinned. "It's a date."

First thing the next morning, Aisling headed down to the small gym on the first floor, remembering how much her arms had hurt on the last mission. She spent some time pounding on the heavy bag, then ran on the treadmill for a half-hour. After a quick stretching session, her next stop was one of the building's several showers. She didn't love any of them as much as the ones at the old base or her apartment, but all were at least adequate. She threw on shorts and a T-shirt and headed barefoot down the stairs.

She intended to visit the first-floor kitchen for breakfast, but someone called her name before she made it past the second level. She turned and saw Annika Lind's door open and the woman gesturing at her from behind her desk. The new Dragonfly head looked perfectly put together and unflappable in a navy blue business suit.

Aisling entered and suppressed a groan as she also spotted Will Blackwood and Lance Stone waiting inside for her. Both men were in business casual clothes and looked dapper as usual. She shook her head. "You have to hang out with a better class of agent, boss."

Lance laughed. "Surely, you're not suggesting that might be you. Nice job bringing that guy out on your last mission. Oh, wait."

She resisted the urge to flip him off and sat in the open chair. She asked Will, "Anything to add?"

He shook his head. "Not with that look on your face."

She offered him a sweet smile and turned her attention to Annika, who began, "Good work getting the information from SIS."

"I didn't have to do anything, really."

Will quipped, "Is that what they're calling it these days? You might not be doing it right."

Without turning her head, she ignored the restraining impulse and flipped him off. Annika scowled. "Behave, agents. Maintain a minimal level of decorum, at least, please."

Lance retorted, "She started it."

Annika shook her head. "Actually, you started it, as usual. So, Aisling,

the confirmation you got on the mole was good. We've got Thomas Scott digging even harder into her history while Mia is working on the phone and hard drive you brought back from the mission."

Aisling replied, "Anything new and exciting?"

"Unfortunately, not a lot from the hard drive yet. I want to know what he was after there."

"What does the corporation do?"

Will replied, "Everything, more or less. If it's high-tech and cutting-edge, they're into it."

Aisling sighed inwardly, again annoyed that she hadn't managed to get the guy out of there. "Well, at least he didn't get away with whatever he came for."

Annika replied, "Hopefully. The hard drive has a wireless interface on it. We're pretty sure the building's defenses should have prevented it from broadcasting."

Aisling sighed outwardly this time. "Well, hell. Is there any good news out of that mission?"

Lance replied, "One thing, at least. The guy didn't have anything super useful on his phone, not even text messages, but Mia broke into the record of his deleted calls. From there, she hacked a backdoor at his cell company. We have a line into all of them. Wouldn't be legal for prosecution, but that's not what we're after."

Annika added, "The calls were to Spain. Specifically, Barcelona."

The discovery of the lead brought Aisling's spirits up. "Well, I guess I'm heading there next."

Will cautioned, "That might be what they want."

"If they want a fair fight, I'm happy to oblige. Assuming I can't turn it into an unfair one to my advantage, of course."

Annika grinned. "That's the kind of attitude I like to see in my agents. We have almost everything on hold while we search for Jameson Hart. So, get there, let us know what support you need, and you'll have it."

Aisling nodded. "What do you have on any remnants of Maslov's group?"

"Nothing yet. But we're watching and searching."

"You'll let me know when you find something."

Her boss met her eyes. "Yes. But it's not our priority."

Aisling returned the look, willing the other woman to see her

commitment. “I understand. Hart has to come first.” *But if I happen to run across some of Maslov’s people along the way, I’d be fine with that.*

Aisling left the trio in the office and headed for Victoria’s workspace. The blonde was there, also clad in shorts and a T-shirt. As soon as she arrived, Victoria snarked, “Where’s my coffee? I swear, you’ve lost all your good habits since we’ve been here.”

Aisling laughed and moved to the pod machine in the corner. “Coming right up, your highness.”

Victoria knelt beside Shimmer, who’d padded in behind Aisling, and hugged him. “It’s good to see you.”

Aisling replied, “You, too.”

“I was talking to the dragon.”

Aisling finished her preparations and delivered the coffee, resisting the urge to dump it over her friend’s head. Victoria asked, “You’re okay?”

“Right as rain. How about you?”

“It’s a little weird working in here with Brodie and his people, but not bad. Less lonely than after you left me and became an agent, anyway.”

They talked for a while, then Brodie came in. They exchanged greetings, and Aisling remarked, “I’m glad to see you. I need some reloads.”

He waved toward the rear of the room. “Got them right here in the back.” She followed him and accepted cases of projectiles for the small dart thrower and the larger dart revolver. She noted something odd in his attitude and asked, “How are you dealing with the new place?”

He frowned and scratched his goatee. “I have most of what I need here or will shortly. All the work is slower than I’d like now, though.”

“Because of missing equipment?”

He shook his head. “Some. Mainly it’s because several of my technicians didn’t make it out of the building before it collapsed.”

The anger in his voice kindled hers. She put her hand on his where it lay on the table. “Don’t worry. We’re going to make every last one of them pay. I promise.”

Brodie nodded. The solemn moment held only a little longer before Shimmer added brightly, “I promise too. You know you can trust my

promises, even if you can't hers."

Brodie laughed, and Aisling shook her head. "You're a bad dragon."

He flicked her with his tail, fortunately keeping the needle blade at the end sheathed. "Yet everyone likes me more. What does that say about you?"

CHAPTER SIX

Jameson Hart stepped through the portal into Kali's bunker. As with his last arrival at this destination, Kali's assistant awaited him with her beautiful brunette-to-black curls and pale skin. Charlotte smiled. "Welcome back, Mr. Hart."

He returned a polite nod and a smile. "Thank you. Hopefully this visit will be less adventurous than the last." His previous presence at the bunker had involved killing one of Kali's underlings in a rather public and messy fashion. He had little doubt that she had a recording of the event to use against him if necessary. It was how things were done, and he didn't take offense. He also didn't intend to give her any reason to doubt his loyalty.

Charlotte replied, "I'm sure I wouldn't know. Dea Kali's intentions are forever a mystery." She gestured for him to follow and headed down the corridor. He doubted the veracity of that statement. From what he'd seen, Kali leaned quite heavily on Charlotte, although doubtless even she wasn't privy to everything.

He half expected to be taken to the waiting room near the meeting space again but was delivered to a part of the bunker he hadn't been in before. Charlotte opened a door to reveal a small lounge, entered, and gestured at a couch. "Can I get you a drink?"

He nodded. A little fortification wouldn't hurt. "Vodka tonic?"

"Easily done." She headed for the bar in the corner of the room. He sat and plucked at his pant leg, which had gotten caught on his boots. They were equal parts form and function. He was never armed when visiting Kali, but neither was he completely weaponless. The footwear had reinforced toes and heels and a support shank he could remove in dire need. Fortunately, he

doubted any such thing would be necessary today.

Kali smiled as she entered the room, reinforcing his hope for a simple meeting. Her hair was in a simple ponytail, and she wore something that looked like a satin robe over her clothes. She reclined in the chair set at an angle to the couch. “So. I have followed the news and read the reports. Tell me your impressions of the raid on Dragonfly now that we’ve gained some distance from it.”

Jameson waited while Kali accepted a drink from Charlotte, who then delivered his. The assistant faded back toward the corner of the room but didn’t leave. “Effective in most respects, Dea. Their base is demolished and inaccessible to them unless they have an insanely high tolerance for risk. Our surveillance hasn’t detected any efforts to get back in.”

Jameson sipped his drink, then continued. “It’s almost certainly too dangerous without a full team of magically assisted excavation experts. I’m sure they’ll get around to it eventually, if only in a sentimental effort to recover those they lost, but I’m sure at the moment they’re reeling.”

Kali swirled her drink in her glass, looking down as if watching the patterns it made. “And the less successful parts of the operation?”

He lifted a shoulder in a negligent shrug. “They reclaimed the captives before we could get much out of them, which is unfortunate. While we got one of the leadership team members, others escaped and are doubtless reforming Dragonfly in some limited fashion. Nothing else notable.”

“Do you believe we are at risk from this remnant?”

The answer to that question was more or less an unknown to him, as well, and one he’d like clarification on. “Not in any significant way, I’m guessing. After all, it was Apocalypse who undertook the raid. Nothing should come back to us.”

“Good. Dragonfly will prove less troublesome now, in any case, even if they try to come after us.”

Thinking over her last question, he asked, “Would it be wise to drop a hint in their ear about Maslov’s people? Give them something to focus on? I’m sure I could manage it through channels that would make it look like legitimate intelligence.”

Kali crossed her legs and didn’t reply as she considered the question. Then she shook her head decisively. “No. We don’t base any further actions on whatever remains of Dragonfly. If they pop their heads up, we’ll simply chop them off. Until then, our original plan for Apocalypse stands.”

“Of course.” He would present options, but he wasn’t in a position to argue with his superior’s decisions. In a way, he liked the arrangement. It was nice to have someone else in charge every once in a while.

Kali gestured at him with her half-empty glass. “To that matter, it’s time for you to go and explain their new reality to them. The sooner we begin integrating their organization into ours, the sooner we’ll be able to use them.”

From the corner, Charlotte asked, “Would it be desirable to move more slowly in this case, Dea, in case Dragonfly does have an inkling of who attacked them? If the merging proves difficult, it would amount to a battle on two fronts.”

Low laughter came from Kali. “Always my careful conscience, Charlotte. It’s a valid point, but I think the reward is worth the risk. Besides, I’m sure they’ll be reasonable.”

Jameson replied, “They might not take it all that well. Especially after the fallout from the event.”

Kali nodded. “Maslov’s death is sure to have hit them hard. Which is all the more reason to act now while they’re still processing the loss and trying to recover. As to them taking our message badly, I’m sure you can smooth any ruffled feathers.”

It’s not the feathers I’m worried about. It’s the talons. Jameson smiled. “I guess it’s either that or you’ll be looking for a new troubleshooter.”

“Try to avoid that outcome, please. Good help is so hard to find.”

The humor in her tone took the edge off her words, but the dismissal was clear. He finished his drink and stood. “Count on it, Dea.”

Charlotte tapped him on the arm as she passed. “Come with me.” He followed her down several corridors and into a small room filled with racks of fighting equipment. She gestured around. “Take anything you need.”

Jameson walked slowly along each wall-mounted display, taking in the options. One wall was dedicated to armor, two to weapons, and the final one held shelves containing several gadgets he recognized and an equal number he didn’t. It was almost as good as the stuff he’d had at SIS and better than what he’d had since, except for a few pieces of custom gear he’d splurged on. “Nice selection.”

“Dea Kali insists that those who serve her have access to the best tools.”

“I see that. Smart long-term thinking, if you have the money to pull it together.” He took a Glock-43 and a matching inner pants holster. After inserting a loaded magazine, he tucked it away at the small of his back.

Another rack provided a switchblade and forearm sheath for it. “I think that’ll do it.”

“Are you sure?”

He turned to face her. “I see two likely outcomes of meeting with them. One, everything goes fine, in which case it doesn’t matter what I bring, and even this is overkill. Two, they decide violence is the answer, in which case surprise will serve me better.” Even if he brought an arsenal, they would most likely take it away from him as he arrived, and coming in spoiling for a fight would certainly start the meeting off on the wrong foot.

Charlotte opened a small case and handed him an earpiece. He’d noticed the matching one she wore. As he put it in his ear, she explained, “This will connect you to me and to Drim, who will provide magical transport and backup.”

He smiled. “Much better than flying. Appreciated.”

“Unfortunately, it’s the best we can offer without further exposing ourselves.”

“I get it. So, we’re going to do this now?”

“We are.” Charlotte led him into a locked room, and another man joined them a moment later, presumably Drim.

The wizard said, “I’ll keep my distance, naturally, but I’ll have an eye out for trouble.”

Charlotte opened a small case on a shelf and requested, “Pull up your pant leg, please.”

He complied, and she knelt beside him and pressed a cold metal cylinder against his calf. A moment later, he felt a sharp, piercing pain and calmly remarked, “Ow.”

She rose and patted his shoulder. “Surely, you’re strong enough that such a tiny sting didn’t hurt, Mr. Hart. I’ve injected you with a dissolving tracker. It will be active for forty-eight hours or so. Then it will break down naturally.”

Jameson shook his head. “Somehow I think you, personally, are a hazard to my health.”

Charlotte laughed. “You don’t know me well enough yet to make that accusation, Mr. Hart.”

Something in her voice suggested that circumstance might be changeable. He dragged his brain back to the moment with an effort. “All right. Let’s do this.”

She exited, and a moment later the sound of locks *clicking* came from the door. Drim opened a portal to Stavropol, and they walked through together. The wizard pointed. “Two blocks that way and one to the right. You go first. I’ll follow in about fifteen minutes.”

Jameson nodded. “The tracker’s working?”

“Just fine. We’ve got you.”

“Well then, guess I’m out of excuses.” He followed the directions to Apocalypse’s hotel and entered the bar. He sat and nodded at the familiar bartender, who delivered the same drink he’d ordered on his previous visits.

Jameson quietly nursed the drink until the magical came in and sat across the room from him, then waved at the bartender. When the man came over, he ordered a refill and said, “The place seems pretty deserted. I hoped to continue a conversation I started the last time I was in here.”

The man shrugged. “Been pretty slow around here the last week or so. Lots of regulars missing.” He went back to work without providing any useful clues.

Jameson dropped a couple more hints, but none seemed to land. Finally, he finished his drink, tossed some currency on the bar, and headed out. As he turned the corner on the way back toward where they’d arrived, thinking he’d need to try again later or the next day, he felt an impact on his shoulder. He turned to see a huge man, easily six-and-a-half feet tall, with bulging muscles and a bald head. He bit back the angry comment he had reflexively loaded.

A moment later, whatever the guy had jabbed him with took effect, and he crumpled. The man supported him as a car screeched to a halt at the curb. Jameson’s vision spiraled into darkness as his assailant unceremoniously tossed him into the empty back seat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first thing Jameson heard after a seeming eternity spent in a dark and silent void, was a female voice with a Russian accent and a nasty edge remark, “He’s finally coming around.”

Another female voice with a similar lilt replied, “You shouldn’t have given him so much.”

“I’ll let you explain that to Gennady.”

The second voice laughed. “No, thank you. Besides, I’m pretty sure he has romantic designs on you.”

“I don’t think he’s attracted to anything other than barbells.”

Jameson forced his eyelids open. They felt glued together. He tried to say, “Where am I, and who are you,” but all that came out was an odd, slurred sound combined with a moan.

A hand slapped his face and made his head ring, but when he tried to speak again, the words came out properly. Kira smiled. “Surely you remember me, Jameson Hart.”

He nodded gingerly. “I do.”

“This is my sister Irina, who was the unwilling guest of Dragonfly for a short time.”

The other woman scowled. “Too long, believe me.”

“A pleasure.” He tried to move his left hand up to his right forearm to check for the switchblade but discovered it wouldn’t move. Adrenaline spiked as he looked down to see his arms and legs strapped to a simple metal chair.

Kira said, “If you’re considering resisting, I wouldn’t bother. Irina and I are both good fighters, especially against an immobilized person. And

Gennady is outside the door. He wanted to break a few of your bones as an introduction, but we dissuaded him.”

He coughed. “Thank you for that. Water?”

Irina laughed. “Bold, to be requesting things.”

“I presume you want me to talk, and that’s a little hard right now. My mouth feels like someone shoved cotton into it and pressed it all around the sides instead of taking it back.”

Kira replied, “An unfortunate side effect of the sedative.” She rose, grabbed a bottled water from somewhere behind him, uncapped it, and tipped it up to his lips.

He smothered an instinctive choke as Irina asked, “Is that the one with the poison in it or the truth serum?”

Kira laughed darkly. “Please, don’t alarm our guest. After all, he only had a pistol and a switchblade. He wasn’t intending to kill us, were you, Mr. Hart?”

He finished swishing the water around his mouth and swallowed. “Please, call me Jameson.”

“Oh, we’re all friends now, are we?”

“I’d like to be. More to the point, the woman I serve would like us to be.”

Irina said, “Finally, something interesting out of your mouth. Who is this woman?”

“I know her as Kali. I doubt that’s her legal name, of course, but that’s the only one I’ve been given.”

Kira sat down on her chair again. “Where would we find this Kali?”

He shrugged as much as his bound arms would let him. “No idea. She summons me, not the other way around. I always get there through a portal created by one of her people.” The comment made him think of his magical backup. Drim was hopefully somewhere nearby, assuming the tracker worked as it should.

Kira replied, “That’s smart. I respect operational security.”

Irina asked, “Why did you visit our hotel?”

“My employer wanted me to share a message with you.” Jameson was working hard to keep his language as non-authoritarian as possible despite how unlikely it was to do any good. “She thought having me deliver it was the most respectful way to go about it.” He was embellishing the truth there as well, but since they had him strapped to a chair, he didn’t feel bad about that.

Kira nodded. “Perhaps we will send you back broken in reply if we don’t like this message you’re here to deliver. So, what is it?”

He coughed again. He wanted more water but couldn’t afford to show any more weakness than he already had. “She has decided your organization should become part of hers. With the demise of your leader, she feels this will be best for you as well as her.”

Irina laughed, and it wasn’t a pleasant sound. “Oh really? How bold. What makes her think we will accept this magnanimous gesture on her part?”

“First, because you’re all logical businesspeople. Dragonfly made a shambles of your organization, but you still have good connections, trustworthy underlings, and knowledge of the market here. I have no doubt you would continue to lead in your area.” Another lie. “I have seen her council of subordinates. There are many, organized geographically. I have little doubt you would be granted a seat at that table.”

Kira replied, “Two seats, one would hope.”

He nodded. “Two seats, perhaps. I am not in a position to negotiate for Dea Kali, unfortunately.”

“What does this proposed partnership give us that we don’t already have?”

He smiled. “A chance to strike back. I won’t lie. Dragonfly is not Dea Kali’s primary concern. But her lieutenants are given a great deal of latitude. Although my position is rather amorphous, so am I. Together, we can use her resources, combined with yours and mine, to locate the remnants of Dragonfly and finish the job you began.”

Both women were silent for a moment, looking at one another. Then Irina said, “Let’s assume we agree to this venture. What are the next steps?”

Jameson laughed. “Hopefully, untying me would be high on the list. Then, maybe some food in a more civilized spot? I could eat a horse.”

Kira sighed. “That is logical. You’ve been unconscious for twenty-four hours.”

“Seems like a bit of overkill.”

Irina replied, “That’s exactly what I said. So, if we agree, do we get to meet Kali?”

Jameson answered, “I can’t say. Subordinates handled me at first. I believe that might be standard operating procedure for Kali’s organization.”

“Even for important people like us?”

He nodded. “Even for. It’s not my party. I don’t make the rules.”

Irina commented, “I think we should have Gennady break most of his bones and dump him on the street.”

Kira rolled her eyes. “That’s your solution to everything. Like an ogre in a fairytale.” She swiveled her head to stare hard into Jameson’s eyes. “The truth now, and I will know if you lie. If we refuse this offer, your Kali will eliminate us and take over anyway, is that correct?”

Damn. “I don’t have specific information.” The woman tensed, and he quickly continued. “I imagine that to be true. Believe me, you will be stronger if you accept. Your organization will be stronger. Most importantly, you will get your revenge.”

Irina tapped a long fingernail on her chin. “There’s more to this, isn’t there? Your voice tells me that you have a personal issue with Dragonfly.”

He nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“So, we will be simply tools of your revenge.”

“As I will be of yours. We share a common goal. As does your organization and Kali’s organization. I don’t know any way to express that better.”

The two women looked at each other, then Kira nodded. “Very well. We’ll see how this works. But rest assured, if at any point we are undermined or tricked, you won’t survive it.”

Irina nodded. “At that point, we’ll be talking about eighty-five percent of your bones broken. Gennady will enjoy that.”

Kira stood, pulled his switchblade from her pocket, snapped it open, and cut the duct tape binding him to the chair. He winced as she yanked it free and ripped out the hair on his arms and legs but resisted the urge to rub them. “So, how about some good food, a few drinks, and some planning?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sun shone down brightly enough to wash the streets in pastel glory as Aisling sauntered down them. The buildings along this particular street in Barcelona were colorful five-story affairs with abundant windows.

She strolled casually, without an apparent destination, clad in a wig of curly blonde hair, more makeup than she'd ever worn, and a pair of overly large, truly hideous sunglasses. The flower-covered sundress wasn't quite her style, although she liked the sandals and would probably keep them. She'd been thrilled to learn that Arthur had made it out of the building alive. However, its demolition had destroyed his stores and forced her to go off the rack for these clothes after arriving in Barcelona.

Shimmer flew above, invisible to sight, and regaled her with things that caught his eye. The latest had been, "Woo, pretty flowers. And there's a bird. I could go scare that bird out of years of its life."

Mia was also on the comm channel and laughed. "Leave the birds alone, or I'll mess with your brain so you love every bird you see."

"You wouldn't do that. I'm unique now." Aisling had to admit that he'd certainly grown beyond the basic programming of the AI Mia had installed.

Mia replied, "Try me, bozo."

Aisling covered her mouth and murmured, "Quiet, you two." Tracing the calls on Olivarez's phone led them to an area triangulated between three cell towers. Unfortunately, it was still a large space, and she had no idea what she was looking for.

She'd been at it for half an hour and was already bored with the exercise. Looking for trouble had become people-watching, which meant she needed a change to get her mind back on track. "This is stupid. It's like finding a

needle in a haystack when you don't know where the haystack is. I need ideas."

Mia replied, "If you keep walking, I'm sure some person you look at will eventually give us a hit in my system." Aisling's lens still worked underneath the sunglasses, and Mia was cataloging everyone she saw.

"No. Boring. Are you listening?"

"Then maybe ditch the disguise."

Aisling replied, "Annika told me not to."

Mia laughed. "Oh, and you have such a history of rigorous obedience to the rules."

Shimmer's laughter joined the infomancer's. "She has a point there."

Aisling growled, "Shut it, both of you." She found an out-of-the-way spot and ditched the wig and the glasses. The hat wasn't bad and shaded her face, so it got to stay. She pulled a pair of wipes from the small crossbody purse and wiped off the makeup.

Mia, who had a feed from the phone Aisling used as a mirror, complained, "No one's going to think you're a working girl now. I was hoping to hear you get propositioned."

Aisling shoved the phone back into her purse. "You people are no help. I'm hungry." A nearby restaurant with a colorful awning caught her eye. The canvas shaded a selection of outdoor tables, and she sat at one and accepted a menu. She wanted sangria but settled for iced tea instead and ordered an assortment of tapas.

Her drink arrived first, and she sipped it while she watched the people on the street. She didn't spot anyone of interest during her meal and sighed in annoyance as she finished and resumed strolling, looking for anything that would provide a clue to Jameson Hart's whereabouts.

After another hour, she was ready to return to her hotel and nap. "Maybe we'll have more luck in the evening. Criminals tend to operate at night, right?"

Shimmer replied, "And in the daytime. You have a friend following you."

Aisling forced her steps to remain steady. "I do?"

"Yes. Male. Brown trousers. Green button-down shirt. Sunglasses. Stubble. Brown hair. Over-styled."

Mia laughed. "Since when did you get so critical about people's looks?"

Aisling replied, "He's always comparing everyone to Eddie and gets upset that Eddie is always better looking."

Shimmer softly snarled. “Untrue.”

Aisling asked, “Does he look like he’s getting ready to make a move or anything?”

“No. Just following at a consistent distance. I can neutralize him easily if you wish.”

Aisling shook her head. She wasn’t about to let the dragon chase away her first lead. “No. Let’s see where this goes.”

Mia clarified, “So, you’re making yourself bait.”

“Accurate. I seem to recall it was your idea.”

Shimmer added with a note of satisfaction, “See? It’s like I’m always saying. You’re danger-prone.”

Lucia Hernandez nodded at her assistant as he entered the living room of her new condo, where she was lying on the couch going over figures on her phone. Frankly, she’d preferred her place in Madrid and looked forward to returning to it. When Kali had asked her to relocate to Barcelona to pick up some of the pieces that had dropped in the city, she naturally acquiesced. She asked, “What news?”

He replied, “She stopped at a hotel. Our man saw her get in the lift. Presumably she’s staying there.”

“How convenient.” She lifted her phone and dialed the number for Jameson Hart. He picked up and greeted, “What a lovely surprise. I hope this call is for pleasure. Do you want to know what I’m wearing?”

Lucia chuckled. She enjoyed his company, and he was pleasant to look at, but business would always come first. “That girl you wanted me to watch for? She’s here.”

“How did you find her?”

“She’s out walking the streets.”

His voice held a note of surprise. “Not disguised?”

“Nope. Brazen as hell, all by herself.”

“She’s trying to provoke a response.”

“Of course she is. Want me to pick her up?”

His smile was audible in his voice. “No. Just keep an eye on her. I have a better idea.”

Jameson hung up and dialed another number. When Kira answered, he relayed, “A little birdie told me the current location of someone you’re going to want to chat with.”

“Who is it? Someone from Dragonfly, I presume?”

“Not just someone. The witch you’re looking for.”

Kira’s voice turned hard. “The one who killed Maslov. And Anya.”

“The very same.” The anger in her voice was exactly what he’d hoped to hear.

Her voice was muffled for a moment, presumably as she shared the information with Irina, then the sound changed as she put the phone on speaker. Irina remarked, “This seems rather convenient that you should have found her so easily.”

Jameson chuckled. “Oh, she’s definitely trolling, looking for leads on you all, probably. I’m not sure how she found her way to Barcelona, but obviously Dragonfly has at least a little more of a clue than I gave them credit for.”

Kira asked, “You think it’s a trap?”

“Almost certainly. But it’s also an opportunity. Probably the best one we’re likely to get.”

The phone went silent as they muted the connection. Finally, sound returned as Irina replied, “Very well. What time is it there?”

He did the mental calculations. “About six in the evening.”

“So. We will strike at one a.m. while she’s sleeping.”

Perfect. “Let me know when you want to go. I’ll arrange transport to get us there.”

Kira added, “And you’ll come along on the mission. Personally.”

It was more than he’d planned, but arguing was pointless. He’d made himself the guarantor of the relationship with Kali, and this was part of the price he would have to pay. “Of course.” They hung up, and he activated his earpiece. “Charlotte?”

Her voice came back almost instantly. “Mr. Hart?”

“I’m going to need Drim’s assistance again. And a visit to your equipment room.”

“Are you planning to cause trouble?”

He laughed. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

CHAPTER NINE

Aisling's defensive preparations had begun with setting sensors up in the hallway to give her advance notice of oncoming trouble. Since joining Dragonfly, she'd batted around ideas with Mia and Brodie during shared downtime about how to deal with threats like her. It wasn't her favorite pastime since magicals had plenty of challenges already, but it made sense from a big-picture perspective.

Together, they'd developed a detector that combined a laser tripwire, a motion sensor, and a small camera. A tiny computer chip on the bouillon-cube-sized device compared the feed from each sensor on a second-by-second basis. If anything was out of alignment, say the camera showed nothing but one of the other two sensors was activated, it would signal the possibility that magical concealment was in use. The device would only be useful in very specific circumstances, but it was perfectly suited for the confined bottleneck of the hotel hallway.

She'd placed several of the devices in the hallway before retreating to her room. She waited while Mia ran through the setup process and verified they were each working. Then the infomancer put each video feed onto her lens so she could see them. Aisling reported, "Looks good to me."

Mia replied, "Agreed. We've got that handled."

"How far were you able to get into the hotel's systems?"

Mia had explained several times that it was always a question of risk versus reward, that risk exponentially increased as one accessed more important systems.

"Not too deep because I didn't want to give anything away. I can see through the building's cameras and have access to some pretty basic hotel

operation stuff. Like, if you need to know what floor an elevator is on, I'm totally your girl. But I'm confident I can get deeper fast if you need me to."

"Let's hope there's no need. It would be nice if something were easy for a change."

Shimmer interjected, "Of course, there will be a need. You're danger-prone."

Aisling scowled at the dragon sitting upright on the king-sized bed. "I *really* wish you'd quit saying that."

His chin lifted as he gave her a look. "Which is exactly why I don't."

"Mia, remember when I said we shouldn't risk losing his personality? I'm starting to rethink that. The risk might be keeping his current one."

The infomancer chuckled. "At this point, erasing him would be unethical."

Aisling stuck her tongue out at the dragon and replied to Mia, "Oh, and you toe the ethical line so well."

"Better than you."

"Shut it." Before heading to Barcelona, she had portaled back to her apartment to grab a couple of backpacks full of gear she'd prepared against this need. She unzipped one to access its contents and attached a flat disc to the room's door by pressing its adhesive side against the metal. She attached a sticky pad to the wall beside the door, then ran a thin line from the disc to the pad. If someone opened the door, the string would snap, and anyone nearby would get a substantial blast of electricity. Not enough to kill, but sufficient to render them unable to function normally for long enough that she could deal with them.

She set her weapons on the dresser and changed clothes quickly, donning her standard uniform trousers and boots with a top that clung tightly but left her arms bare. She slipped on her bulletproof vest, which had been custom-made to fit her body. The armor had been an expensive investment her sister had arranged with someone she knew in Boston, but it had the distinct advantage that she could wear it under clothes without being obvious about it.

She threw a black button-down shirt over it and fastened it high enough to hide the vest. She was worried about being forced to run inside the hotel. If she was obviously armored, innocents might react unpredictably. One of her greatest fears was someone trying to be a hero, getting mixed up in the fight, and not realizing she was one of the good guys.

Her equipment belt, a smaller, lighter version of her normal one, went

under the shirt where it would remain unseen. She clipped a pistol loaded with anti-magic rounds and an extra magazine to her right hip, and a Taser with a reload cartridge mirrored it on her left. She had a smoke grenade that threw up glittering particles to mess with other sight modes and her swords in their loops at the back. That was all the belt could handle. It would have to be enough.

Aisling had tied a carefully measured black rope around the base of the bed, calculated to carry her two stories down, where it would bring her back toward the building. It was a response to her concern about her enemies bringing along portable anti-magic emitters. If she needed to escape and had her magic, it would be enough to jump out the window. She said as much to Shimmer as she recoiled the rope to be sure it was ready to deploy.

The dragon replied, “Good plan, unless they have drones outside waiting. If it were me, I’d have drones.”

“Well, not everyone’s a tactical genius like you are, fang face.” His point was valid though, and she added that possibility as one more thing to worry about. “Okay. This room is ready. Shimmer, you’ll be in the bathroom if we get an alert, with the door mostly closed. That way, if they break in and come after me, you’ll be behind them.”

“Check.” For once, he didn’t criticize the choice.

“It seems to me that whoever comes after us, if they do, will get way more than they bargained for. They won’t know we’re ready, and they might not know I’m a magical.”

Shimmer snorted. “Which would go badly for them.”

She laid on the bed, ready for combat, and closed her eyes. “That’s the plan, buddy.” Aisling focused on the meditative techniques she’d learned and allowed her mind to drift in a restful peace while she waited for the word to move.

Kira scrutinized the fighters they’d assembled for the mission. At her side, Irina did the same. They’d pulled together all of Apocalypse’s remaining trustworthy personnel for this operation, which added up to only five units. She’d have preferred more, but if they couldn’t manage a surprise attack with five, they’d probably still fail with fifteen.

She laughed inwardly at the thought, which sounded so much like Maslov's grumpy words that she almost looked around for him. He was gone, never to return, and while she remained above ground without him, she'd never stop working to make those who'd killed him pay for taking him from her.

Four of the squads would comprise four troops plus a magical in each. She would have preferred a couple more fighters per unit, but one did what they could with what they had. The fifth team would be her, Irina, two fighters, her most trustworthy wizard Ganyan, and Jameson Hart.

All the groups would enter under magical cover, allowing them to carry concealed weapons. Each team had a mix of heavy shotguns and rifles plus sidearms. The weapons that could use anti-magic bullets had them. Everyone carried a knife in case things got up close and dirty. She dreamed of getting the opportunity to plunge hers into the witch's heart.

Kira began, "You all know who we're going after. The witch who killed Maslov and Anya. This might be our best chance to get her, and failure is not an option. Our fallen cry out for revenge, and yours are the hands that must deliver it."

Irina took over. "She's a slippery wench, so opt for overkill. Don't get clever. While I'm sure every one of us would like to see her dancing on the end of our blade as the light fades from her eyes, this is no time for a poetic death. The only reason we don't blow up the hotel with her inside is that she's proven adept at getting out of situations that should have killed her. It needs to be direct and confirmed."

Kira nodded. "Tonight we won't let her escape. Tonight, we'll end her. Any questions?"

If anyone had a question, the speech had dissuaded them from asking it. Only silence greeted her words. She nodded at Irina. "We should get moving, then."

Jameson had spent more time in the equipment room during this visit to the bunker, inspired by the fact that his life was very likely soon to be at risk. He had borrowed a bulletproof vest and lower body armor plates. Sheathed knives rode on the outsides of his lower legs, and both thighs had pistols

strapped to them. His equipment belt held several grenades, some lethal, some not.

He'd also grabbed some less-likely-to-be-used objects, a garrote, a telescopic baton, and a custom gun that shot tiny needles called flechettes. It used ammo cartridges and its current load-out was tranquilizer-tipped ammunition. Charlotte, who'd stood nearby watching him make and don his choices, remarked dryly, "You cut a very martial figure, Mr. Hart."

He lifted an eyebrow with a rakish grin. "Shall I assume you approve?"

She lowered her eyelids demurely. "It is not my place to approve or not."

He shook his head. "When I return from this mission, I'd like to take you out for a drink."

A soft smile flashed across her face, quickly gone. "Then I have another reason to hope for your success."

His phone buzzed, and he looked down at it. "Looks like they're ready to go."

Charlotte nodded. "I'll call for Drim, then. Do be careful, won't you?"

"Because you'd miss me if I weren't?"

"Because Dea Kali would regret being deprived of your services."

He moaned dramatically. "That's what you send me off to battle with. Cold, Charlotte, cold." Drim opened the door and entered the room, and Jameson continued. "All right. First the hotel room to gather the Apocalypse people, then to Barcelona to ruin Dragonfly's day again."

CHAPTER TEN

Kira stepped through the portal into an alley near the target building. Hart had offered to rent a hotel room in the place and take them directly in, but Kira had declined for two reasons. First, the risk of the witch noticing him if she had surveillance up was substantial, and any professional would almost certainly be watching their surroundings. Second, she didn't trust him enough to rely on him for anything more than information and transport. That was why she'd insisted he come along on the mission, so if he betrayed them, he'd be risking himself to do it.

She needed to examine the lay of the land for herself, to see the entrances and exits firsthand. It was all part of calculating what her enemy might do and what her supposed ally might be up to. Nothing in her expected Hart to tell the whole truth, but that was fine. He was a means to an end, and if he proved a problem, she or Irina would be the means to *his* end. She looked at her sister and ordered, "Form up. Magical cover. Let's move."

The trip to the hotel wasn't difficult, but it required careful attention to avoid attracting notice. Even at this early morning hour, pedestrians were out and about. The potential for discovery if a drunken reveler blundered into one of her teams was higher than she'd like.

On a comm channel that included everyone except Hart, she instructed, "Teams One and Two with my group. Teams Four and Five will take a position in the stairwell halfway up to her floor and hold there to await instructions." Affirmatives came over the radio. She toggled the system to include Hart and switched to English. "Any last-minute intelligence, Jameson?"

He sounded irritated. "None, Kira."

She chuckled at the thin-skinned response since she didn't like the man all that much in any capacity and needling him was entertaining. Her mind shifted into action mode as she announced, "All right. Here we go. One and Two, you'll take the elevators to her floor first. Let us know when you're clear, and the rest of us will enter the lobby behind you. No one attacks until I give the word."

Aisling's eyes flicked open as Mia's voice sounded in her ear. "An elevator car opened on your floor with no one inside it." She swung her legs out of the bed, rose to her feet, and pointed toward the bathroom. Shimmer jumped off his side of the bed and headed for his combat position.

She asked, "Any sensors tripped?"

The infomancer replied, "Not yet."

"What are you thinking?"

"I don't see anyone in the hallway. Magical recon, maybe?"

Aisling shook her head as she moved to the back corner of the room near the windows, partially blocked by the dresser and television that faced the bed. "We gave them abundant clues about where I was. If they're here, they'll almost certainly be here in force."

"What do you need from me?"

"Keep your eyes open and get ready to improvise."

Shimmer laughed. "Great plan."

Aisling countered, "You be ready to tag them." Shimmer had a substance on his claws that would be detectable for a short time, and Mia had identified satellites to borrow to search for it. All that was required to make the mission a success was to get a line on Jameson Hart, and tagging one of the attackers was a solid step in that direction.

Of course, if the Russians showed up in person, she wouldn't turn down the opportunity to take them out. Part of her hoped they wouldn't be involved and this was all Hart. She didn't want to be denied the pleasure of working the man over to get all the information he had about Apocalypse.

As he rode up in the elevator with his assigned Apocalypse attack squad, Jameson said, "I would've thought you'd want more firepower on our team."

Irina flashed the condescending smile that always seemed an instant away from her lips. "Lots of eggs, many baskets."

"Do you think that's the right approach against someone like this?"

Irina snapped, "Close your mouth. Ready your weapon." All humor had left her face, and the vicious ferocity in her voice set him back enough that he had to suppress a reflexive flinch.

He drew his pistols and held them at his sides. He didn't appreciate the woman's attitude and wanted to express that opinion, but he was stuck with them, and it wouldn't accomplish anything to do so. However, if anyone thought he would lead the way into any dangerous situation, they had another think coming.

Chatter flowed past in his earpiece, all of it in Russian. If he'd had his comm gear, the system would have automatically translated it into a language he was fluent in. The one provided by the women seemingly didn't have that capability. He wondered if that was a sign of shoddy equipment or a deliberate choice to exclude him from their conversation.

It hadn't escaped his attention that they might consider him partly responsible for their losses in the attack on Dragonfly's base. To be completely fair, that assessment might not be entirely wrong, although since he'd been working on Kali's behalf, she was the one they should logically be upset with.

He laughed inwardly and thought, *Yeah, logic has so much to do with this situation.* Then the doors opened, and the time for action replaced the time for thinking.

Mia announced, "The sensors have detected movement in the hallway. Definitely veiled. Nothing on the cameras, even on thermal."

Aisling replied, "So their magicals are competent. Good for them." She forced herself to relax as she waited for whatever came next with her pistol held loosely at her side. One calm breath followed the next as she remembered Sashura's and Delsanra's teachings, which emphasized calm out of combat and ferocious focus in it, and put it to use.

She called up her magical defenses and reminded herself of the command words for her charms. The kinetic, lightning, and shadow shield spells held within had all served her well. She still had room to slot several more into the amazing wand bracelet Grash had created for her but hadn't yet found the time to create them. She pushed that irritating thought aside and asked, "Ready, Shimmer?"

"Just tell me who to claw."

Aisling chuckled low. "I think that will be pretty obvious, my friend, even for someone of your limited brainpower."

Mia interrupted, "More movement, this time from the other side."

"Coming from both directions. Sound planning." Aisling added another shield layer around her and crouched behind the partial protection of the dresser. She muttered, "Well, come on, kick this nonsense off, you jerks. Waiting is boring."

Shimmer laughed. "My thoughts exactly."

Jameson stopped when the rest of his unit did. The comm switched to English, presumably for his benefit, and Kira demanded, "Report in." Teams Four and Five answered first, confirming they were in position in the staircases and ready to respond. Teams One and Two were next to reply and flanked the door to the witch's room.

His group was halfway down the hallway toward the elevators. Based on the numbering, he presumed the Russians intended for Teams One and Two to go in first. *Cannon fodder*, he thought, and hoped he was wrong.

He reached into his pocket and pressed a button on his phone. Unknown to those he was with, he had been sending messages to Lucia throughout to keep her apprised of their progress as Kali instructed. He wasn't sure what form her response would take, but he assumed it would include ground-level forces and possibly drone coverage of the roof and exterior. Given the witch's magical abilities, which doubtless involved jumping to a nearby building or something, he would've placed sharpshooters around too. Unfortunately, Lucia hadn't consulted him. The signal would let her know that they were about to engage.

Kira ordered, "Team One will go in first. Team Two, you're right behind

them. Deploy as you need to. We don't stop until the witch is dead. Go.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A isling heard the shotgun blasts go off an instant before the door's entire handle and lock area blew inward. The impact triggered the stun blast, but it was ineffective since the only thing to come into the room was a pair of bouncing grenades. She covered them in force spheres, grabbed them with her force magic, and hurled them through the window beside her. Glass shattered outward, and they exploded a few feet outside the room. The barrier she'd put in place confined the blizzard of shrapnel they created. She snarled, "Thank the universe that anti-magic grenades aren't a common thing."

Troops surged through the door. The front two held shotguns. The weapons were big combat models, doubtless what had blown away the lock, and they fired at her simultaneously. The dresser took the brunt of the blast as she ducked behind it, and the large pellets that got past it banged harmlessly off her shield.

As the men sought to correct their aim, she stood, raised her pistol, and pulled the trigger twice. Two rounds punched into the first man's leg. She couldn't assume that torso shots would get through their armor, so firing below the waist was her next best option. The second man with a shotgun fired another blast that failed to penetrate her shield, and she put him on the floor next to his friend with another double tap.

A magical stepped into the room and waved a wand to send a blast of electricity at her. She automatically modulated her shield to include her lightning, which gave her a stronger defense against his attack and siphoned away some of his power. She sent a force blast at him to knock him into the two riflemen who'd appeared behind him, but the magical blow didn't connect.

The wizard gestured, and the television flew off the wall at her head. Aisling deflected it with a force blast but dove to the side, past the open window, and into cover behind the king-size bed. The magical took a step, which gave the riflemen room to move farther in, and they took another step forward to stop opposite the bathroom door.

Aisling peeked over the bed to watch as Shimmer exploded out of the bathroom. The dragon slammed into the nearest rifleman and knocked him into the other one. Gunfire chattered, and she winced as rounds entered the walls and ceiling. She hoped those in the rooms nearby were safe.

Shimmer rebounded from the first attack, jumped on the magical's back, and sank his claws deeply into the man's shoulders. The wizard shrieked and went down. Shimmer leapt off him and spun to face the shooters.

Aisling shouted, "No fire."

He blasted electricity over the trio and dropped them to the floor.

The comms had been full of chatter and the hallway filled with noise as the first wave entered. Jameson presumed it hadn't gone well when he heard the screams coming from the room. Kira shook her head, raised her rifle as if it was a token of comfort, and commanded in an emotionless voice, "Wave two, go," although she'd told them they were free to act on their judgment.

Jameson tensed. After two would be three, his group. To be honest, he had hoped the witch would be down or at least injured after the first. He wasn't afraid to fight, but all things considered, he preferred it when others took care of that minor detail on his behalf. His hands tightened on the grips of his pistols as he waited for the next command, hoping it wouldn't be for his group to run into the room after the others had failed.

Aisling snapped, "Fire alarm, please, Wraith." An instant later, a siren sounded, and a light flashed in the room. "Hopefully that'll create some chaos for them."

Grenades heralded the arrival of more enemies. Again, Aisling threw them out the window encased in protective shields. That they exploded into

fire told her they weren't kidding around. She snarled, "They're upping the stakes. Too dangerous to stay in this small a space. Shimmer, out."

For once, the dragon didn't argue. He spun, ran toward the broken window, and launched himself out of the room. Gunfire followed him, exactly as Aisling had hoped, knowing his scales would stand up to it better than her flesh.

She rose and fired a double tap at the man in the front with a shotgun, then emptied the rest of the magazine into the magical. He attempted to pull furniture in front of him to block it, but it was attached to the wall. The extra second it took to rip it free let her bullets reach him. He dropped, damaged or dead.

She grabbed the small canister from her belt, primed it with a hard squeeze, and tossed it. When it went off and filled the room with smoke and thermal sparkles, she dashed to the window in Shimmer's wake. An act of will and a burst of magic brought the rope's end into her hands, and she leapt out of the building, gripping it tight.

Shimmer warned, "Drones."

Aisling growled, "They're yours, buddy. I'm a little busy."

Bullets fired by the drones flew through the air around her and deflected from her shield as she swung toward the window two floors below.

Shimmer had spotted the drones and angled toward them the moment he'd left the room. In his computer-assisted vision, white lines outlined them against the night sky, and information about their armaments and defenses scrolled in his visual field. He sent it to Mia and asked, "Any more?"

The infomancer replied, "Only those two so far."

"Good." The attacking drones had spread far enough apart that he couldn't strike them with the same blast, but that was fine. He flew a direct route to the nearest, which was shooting at Aisling as she fell. It didn't react to his presence as he flew by and slashed his claws through all four turbo fans. Bullets trailed downward as it dropped.

Hard impacts struck his scales as the other drone lined up behind him and began firing. Shimmer flew down, up, then diagonally down again to lose it, but it remained doggedly committed to staying with him. Fortunately, he had

some advantages the drone didn't.

He quit flapping and wrenched himself around so he was still traveling in the same direction but facing the drone. Parting his jaws, he bathed it with fire. It attempted to veer away but couldn't in time and passed through the gout of flame. It emerged from the conflagration trailing smoke, and an instant later something inside detonated. Pieces of metal flew off, and the craft spiraled down.

Shimmer crowed, "Two down."

Aisling recovered from crashing through the window into the room with a quick roll on the floor and wrapped her arms over her head as she slammed into the far wall. The momentum she'd built up was an unwelcome surprise. She popped up and took distant note of the beginning of a headache that would doubtless become much more painful soon.

Having Mia rent this room to ensure it was empty proved to be a good precaution. She snapped, "At least three are left standing from upstairs. Any sign of others?"

Mia replied, "A bunch of people in police uniforms entered the lobby. Their weapons and attitude say soldiers, not law enforcement."

"Great."

The infomancer's voice was suddenly full of excitement. "I broke into their comms. They're speaking Russian."

Something between a shiver and a thrill passed through Aisling. "Apocalypse?"

"Doesn't it have to be? Whoever's left of the organization is bound to hate you."

Aisling ejected her pistol's magazine and swapped in a fresh one. "If they found me in Barcelona, that confirms Hart is in bed with them. That bastard is the spider in the center of the web." Her mind raced as she calculated her options. "This op just changed. Screw the trackers." She had a couple of gel packs on her belt that would work the same way the stuff coating Shimmer's claws did and had been planning to go upstairs and tag someone.

"It's now a hunting expedition. Try to identify the leaders for me." They'd come hoping to bag Hart. If she could capture one of the leaders of

Apocalypse, she could pry them for information about him as she'd planned to extract information from him about them. Either way, she'd get what she needed and some payback in the bargain. "Activate the sprinklers."

Aisling yanked open the door and ran for the nearest stairs heading up. *I'm coming for you, you bastards, and you're going to pay in blood and information for every person we lost.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Aisling ran up the stairwell, the door to that floor banged open. The falling water from the sprinklers revealed the outline of a cloak, and she fired her pistol blindly into it as she charged ahead. The invisibility fell away, and she saw the magical Shimmer had wounded being supported by a soldier. Three others rounded out the group, all of whom she thought she'd seen in the room above.

Her bullets had only struck armor, and she launched herself into the air on a burst of force magic to avoid their counterfire. She landed in the middle of the group since the staircase wasn't big enough to allow her to fly past them. She slammed a knee into the wizard's stomach, which doubled him over for a moment before he collapsed. She rammed an elbow into the face of the next nearest, then threw herself forward as she sensed an attack coming from behind.

The rifle's butt connected in a glancing blow on the back of her head and added to her growing headache. She flipped over onto her back, drew the Taser with her left hand, and fired it and the pistol simultaneously at the remaining pair of enemies. Both dropped without further counterattack. She shoved the Taser back into its holster as she struggled to her feet.

She needed to move fast before her quarry decided the odds no longer favored them and left the field of battle. She ensured they would stay down, then ripped the door at the top of the stairs open with her magic and peered out. Bullets slammed into the wall near her head, and she jerked it back.

She'd seen the hallway, which contained six people. Two women, both of whom she'd seen before, two men she didn't know, an unfamiliar magical pointing a wand in her direction, and Jameson-freaking-Hart in the rear.

Aisling snarled, “Jackpot. They’re all present. Shimmer, get in here.”

Shimmer replied, “I can’t do that. More drones. Some are police, but some aren’t.”

Mia added, “At least one other group besides Apocalypse is in play. I believe the actual police are, too.” Aisling spat a curse and ducked back into the hallway as gunfire slammed into the area around her. A ricochet caught her in the leg, penetrating her shield as if it wasn’t there, and she shouted in anger. She slapped the shoulder with the healing potion pack and grimaced as the bullet was expelled from her body and her flesh closed. “They’re all right here. I can get them.”

“I’d say you have a minute, maybe less, before it gets messy. If the police come on the scene, it could be a bloodbath.”

Aisling thought furiously about how to turn the tables in the short time she had but couldn’t come up with anything useful. “Sometimes the old tricks are the best. I’m going to take a shot at them.”

“You should run.”

Shimmer added, “You should *definitely* run.”

Aisling set herself and took a quick moment to reload her Taser. “I’m not going to run.”

Kira snapped, “That’s her. Go get her.” The soldiers and the wizard moved forward, followed by the two women. Jameson hung back until Irina turned, grabbed his armor, and pulled him forward. She hissed, “You’re in this all the way, Hart. Act like it, or I’ll shoot you myself.”

He considered, *really* considered, shooting her at that moment. It would be so easy. His guns were already in his hands. He could put his first shots into her thighs to drop her and finish with one from each gun to her head. He’d probably be able to get rid of Kira as well before the others reacted. Unfortunately, that would leave him facing the witch, which wasn’t a substantial improvement over his current situation. He raised his weapons. “Ready to cover.”

Kira snapped, “Then move.”

Aisling drew a deep breath, knowing that what she was about to do was risky, probably stupid, and undeniably ill-advised. None of that mattered. The people she was hunting were within striking distance. She charged out from around the corner. Bullets immediately whined around her, but she'd gone low and moved forward on all fours, and her opponents had expected a foe of normal height. The positioning also prevented those behind the front rank from targeting her.

Aisling pulled the trigger on her pistol spasmodically, firing bullets blindly forward at floor level. One of the first two guards went down, and someone behind them yelled in pain. She had no time to analyze the incoming information and was already straightening, using the other man in the front row as a shield to protect her from the rest.

He shifted his rifle to bring the barrel to bear. She dropped her pistol, slapped his weapon away, slammed into him, and pushed to propel him backward. She had intended to shove him back into the people behind him, but her luck failed, and he fell. She flicked her fingers and sent a burst of flame into the mage's face, but it struck his shield and failed to penetrate.

Her luck ran out as bullets slammed into her vest, one punch after the next driving her off balance. She staggered backward and felt a rib break under a sustained impact. She rammed her knees together to activate the potion packs there, reached out with her force magic, grabbed the falling guard, and shoved him into the pack. The mage's shield held, and they were at an impasse for a moment.

It broke as a grenade sailed over her head and clattered on the floor at her back. With a curse, she amplified her shields and used a force burst to knock it down the hallway. Fiery liquid spewed out and stuck on the walls as it exploded, where it started to burn. The molten fluid slid down her shield but didn't penetrate. Another bullet struck a glancing blow, hitting her despite her human shield.

She realized that she wasn't going to win, so she chose the only logical option and ran. She spun, used her force magic to blast open the nearest door, and pelted through it as bullets ricocheted off the metal behind her. She dashed all-out for the window, reinforcing the shields at her back even though they had anti-magic bullets. It was an act of pure instinct, as was slamming into the window and flying out into the air.

Shimmer had already taken out a pair of police drones and one of the more powerful military-style ones. Mia acted as a strategist, instructing him which to attack next, and he obeyed without question. Their shared goal was efficiency, to finish the drones off in time to help Aisling.

She hadn't given a warning before she flew out the window. He swirled into a frantic dive after her, as did the drones. He spread his wings wide to shield her from their bullets, taking countless hits as he did so. She seemed less in control than usual, but he had no way to help her other than what he was doing. He wished for a line that he could shoot out for her to grab or a way he could catch her. Much to his annoyance, they had already established that he wasn't strong enough to carry her. He did all he could, taking bullets that would otherwise have struck her and trusting she could save herself.

Aisling was flickering in and out of consciousness, losing time as she fell. She didn't know the cause. It could be from the headache, blood loss from the rib she was pretty sure had splintered enough to poke out of her skin by the way it burned, or something else.. The potion packs were either consumed or not working quickly enough, and the street was coming up fast.

A car screeched to a halt below her. She screamed and slammed a burst of force into it to absorb her fall, hoping that whoever was behind the wheel would get out in time. She slammed into the unyielding metal hard enough to break another rib, then rolled off and hit the ground. Only the magical energy packet pumping power into her blood kept her from blacking out.

She marshaled her scattered thoughts enough to open a portal to safety, stagger through, and hold it open until Shimmer was through. Then she dropped to her knees in the living room of the Dragonfly base, moaned, "Little help, please," and passed out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A isling wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, but she rose out of her dreams with the same sick feeling she'd had when she went to bed. It was mental pain manifesting in her body. The complete failure of the operation in Barcelona was like a stone around her neck. She wasn't sure she'd ever been so unsuccessful at anything.

She sighed, opened her eyes, and muttered, "Lying here thinking about it sure isn't going to help." Shimmer was on his charging plate in the corner, either shut down while he recharged or didn't feel like talking to her. *Yeah. Because I'm a loser. Good decision, buddy.*

A hot shower was the balm she needed to banish her self-destructive thoughts. She was fortunate that generally, disappointments rolled off her rather than taking hold and digging in. Not getting discouraged when something didn't work right but finding a different way to do it had been one of her greatest talents as a technomancer. *That's what I need to do here. Find a different way. Eventually, I'll get all three of them.*

Their names ticked off in the back of her mind like a metronome. Russian girl. Irina. Hart. She'd forgotten the other one's name if she'd ever known it. She'd have to fix that so she could send proper vibes of destruction out into the universe.

After pulling on jeans, a T-shirt, and a sweatshirt, she headed to the first floor. She was most of the way through her breakfast when her phone buzzed with a simple message that instructed her to report to Annika's office. Her stomach fell at the summons, but she swallowed, threw the rest of her breakfast away, and headed up the stairs.

Her boss's door was closed, which was unusual. She knocked, a terse

“Enter” followed, and she stepped inside. Annika requested, “Close the door, please.” Aisling complied and turned back to face the head of Dragonfly. Annika was wearing a pantsuit, black fabric from top to bottom, with an ornamental dragon pin the only thing breaking up the look. She stood behind her desk and asked, “You can magically isolate this room so no one can listen in, correct?”

Aisling nodded. “Yes.”

The other woman crossed her arms. “Do so.”

Aisling cast the required magic. “It’s done. Do you have new information for me?”

Annika laughed harshly. “Aisling, this meeting is not about your desires. It’s about your failure.”

She winced and started to explain, “About yesterday,” but a raised hand stopped her.

“No talking. Only listening. I’m not sure if you are aware of this, but I was once an agent. I didn’t have your diversity of skills, of course. My specialty was disguise and infiltration, and I was very good at it. In becoming a master of my craft, I had to be able to set aside my personality, my desires, even my needs, in service of the role I was playing at any given moment.”

She paced and gestured as punctuation. “Doing so gave me a useful perspective that Franz felt was valuable and led to my retirement from fieldwork and eventual promotion to my current position.” She stopped moving and met Aisling’s eyes. “Now, I want to share that perspective with you.”

Aisling nodded. “Okay.”

“What you did yesterday was incredibly foolish. Your mission was to gain information, not to provoke an attack.” Aisling opened her mouth to interrupt, to defend herself, but Annika raised her hand again. “You may speak freely when I’ve finished, and I promise to listen. For now, no more interruptions.”

Aisling nodded, and Annika paced again as she continued. “I understand your motivation. It’s all very personal for you, and sometimes our needs color everything around us without our knowing it. I fully believe you had only the best intentions in mind, possibly tempered by one or two internal warnings you might have ignored because you were so sure you were doing the right thing.”

Aisling drew in a breath. Annika had described her mental state before

and during the operation perfectly. She didn't know whether she was more irked at being so transparent or impressed with her boss's skills. With that left undecided, she listened as the other woman spoke.

"You'll be glad to know that the fight had no significant collateral impact. Some scared guests, but nothing more. Triggering the alarm to clear the space was wise, and the sprinklers drove out anyone who might have ignored the initial alarm. So, well done on that."

Annika stopped pacing, leaned against the bookshelf behind her desk, and crossed her arms again. "What was not well done was forgetting why you were there in the first place. The movies are filled with the solo agent who overcomes all odds to save the world, one episode after the next."

She shook her head. "It rarely works like that. We'll get the people you're after, but we'll get them through hard work and careful planning, not by throwing reason to the wind and offering yourself as a target."

Thus far, Annika's voice had been calm and her expression neutral. Now passion crept into both. "However, I cannot ignore this incident. So, consider this your official warning. Step out of line like that again, and you'll be back to investigation."

"I won't lie. We need you in the field." A choked laugh escaped her. "It's not like we have a surfeit of agents at the moment. But you're a danger to yourself and others if your head isn't in the right place, and I will pull you if you force me to. Do you doubt my resolve in this matter?"

Aisling sensed it wasn't a rhetorical question. "I don't. Annika, I'm sorry." That hurt to say. "I understand. I see your perspective and admit that I forgot the bigger picture. It won't happen again."

The other woman seemed about to reply when the phone on her desk buzzed. Irritably, she picked it up and lifted it to her ear. "Yes?" Her face went hard. "Important enough to interrupt me?" She nodded sharply. "Okay, we're on our way."

Annika shoved the phone in a pocket and gestured at the door. "Mia says they've broken the encryption on the hard drive and we'll want to know what's on it right away."

Aisling followed Annika into the infomancers' area, where Mia and Thomas were present. Mia announced, "It's bad, boss."

Will walked into the room a moment later. "What's bad?"

"This." Mia gestured at her screen, which displayed an open silver metal case. Foam cutouts inside it held three cylinders, a cube, and a remote

control. It was impossible to judge the scale based on the image.

Annika growled, "Explain."

Mia replied, "By the search commands this thing recorded, our guy was looking for weapon schematics. He didn't get those, but he pulled this off their system. It's an internal product brochure."

Will requested, "Overview, please."

"According to the marketing, it's a sonic weapon called DragonEye. That's rare but not exactly new. However, this one operates at a level humans can't sense—but magicals can."

Aisling scowled. "That seems rather specific."

Annika replied, "And deeply problematic. What are its effects?"

The infomancer answered, "According to the documentation, it has a variable level of intensity. At the lowest setting, it gives magicals a headache that will probably reveal them as magicals. At higher levels, it claims it can completely disable them."

Aisling asked, "Temporarily disable us?"

Mia rotated in her chair and shook her head. "It doesn't specify. Which is kind of an answer in itself, isn't it?"

Annika remarked, "This sounds like a horrible weapon. I can see where it might be a logical successor to an anti-magic emitter for defensive purposes at moderate levels, depending on the actual impact it has, but the mention of disability is troublesome. Does the product exist, or is this brainstorming?"

Mia shook her head. "We have no way to tell from existing data. This could be a mockup of a potential product. It could be a sales tool, essentially, to get funding from the government or military."

Will finished for her. "Or it could be a brochure for something they're already delivering." Mia nodded.

Annika growled, "Then we need to get that data. Mia, you and Thomas do whatever you can to find out about the company. Will, work your contacts. I'll do the same with mine. Also, brief Lance and get him working on this. Aisling, you'll check in with your boyfriend."

Aisling nodded. Hopefully Eddie would come through with something useful again. As everyone left the room, Annika took her aside. "Remember what I said about staying focused. Take the weekend away from the base to clear your head. I don't want to see you here again until Monday. That said, if you find out anything from your boyfriend, report it immediately."

Aisling wasn't averse to spending a few days at home with her family to

get herself back to normal. “Will do.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jameson had arrived at the restaurant early for his date with Lucia. He'd been surprised at the invitation from her given the previous day's disastrous operation. In the SIS, such an event would result in at least a brief period of being ostracized by colleagues while everyone waited to see the official results. Far more successes than failures had marked his career, but this one stood out among the latter.

They'd done serious damage to the hotel, which wasn't a big deal. They weren't any worse off than before the attack, except now Dragonfly would know someone was still interested in its agents. In retrospect, he'd gotten too clever for his own good. He should have asked Lucia to grab the witch off the street as soon as they'd spotted her rather than going for the big splashy finish. Something in him missed the dramatic feeling of a heroic win.

He was staring down into his martini, stirring it with an olive, when soft lips kissed him gently on the back of his neck. Lucia whispered in his ear, "You should've let me get her for you." He scowled as she sat in the seat next to him, evoking a laugh from her.

"Oh, let it go, Jameson. Don't take yourself so seriously. Even the best of us have a setback now and then. Besides, I'm here now. Doesn't that make you happy, at least?"

Her tight, summery dress had a loose skirt that reached her knees. She wore sandals, and small combs held her hair piled on her head. She looked beautiful, and his mood lightened at the sight of her and the sound of her words. "You're right. I'm sorry. Shall we go eat?"

"Definitely. I'm starving." The host escorted them to their table, and plates of cheese and olives arrived a moment later, the restaurant's standard

meal starter. She lifted one of the latter in her long fingernails and nibbled on it. “Are you ready to leave the witch behind?”

He nodded. “I think I am. It felt personal, but now, I’m not so sure. Whatever. It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t matter.”

“Good.”

The waiter arrived, and they placed orders. When they were alone again, he asked, “How are things on your end?”

She raised an elegant shoulder and let it fall. “Fine. Improving. My business was already going pretty well, but Kali opened several new doors. Lucrative ones. We’re not at the point where demand will put a crunch on supply, but I can foresee us reaching that circumstance in the next few months.”

She might’ve been talking about guns, drugs, or olives and cheese, for all the inflection in her tone. He replied, “That’s all good, then. Certainly, it explains what Kali sees in you. How did you meet her?”

“I guess I didn’t really meet her. She found me. Everything was business as normal. Then it wasn’t. It was like she’d dropped out of nowhere and was suddenly in charge of everything.”

“That seems to be her way. Cold. Logical. Focused.”

Lucia looked uncomfortable for a moment. Then her face settled back into its normal expression. “From what I hear, not so much.”

Jameson frowned. “Really?”

She nodded. “Like she *is* all those things, right up until she’s not. Then she’s a complete wildcard.”

He considered what he knew about Kali, especially how different her everyday demeanor was in comparison to someone who would order him to execute one of her underlings in front of all the others. “I can see that.”

Lucia stared into his eyes without speaking for almost half a minute. “She might...” then paused before the rest of the words spilled out like she wanted to get rid of them. “Not be the right person to lead the organization in the long term.”

Jameson's eyes widened. Whatever he’d anticipated she might say, it wasn’t that. “That’s a bold statement.”

She shrugged. “We’re just talking, right? I don’t mean right away or even anytime soon. What she’s doing with the Russians doesn’t seem smart. It’s like she’s preoccupied or obsessed with something.” Her laugh sounded like something rasping across gravel. “I wish I knew what it was.”

Jameson sipped his drink. “Maybe. I don’t know. I’m just the hired help, really.”

Lucia’s smile returned. It was almost like everything she had said was a joke, and she was back to being her light-spirited self. “Well, let’s not worry about that. We have plenty of other interesting things to keep us busy tonight, don’t we?”

The summons to visit Kali wasn’t a surprise, but the fact that she’d waited a full day and a half after the events in Barcelona was. Jameson stepped through the portal, nodded at Drim, and smiled at Charlotte. “Well, hello, beautiful.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Hello yourself, Mr. Hart. How is Ms. Hernandez doing?”

He kept his smile locked on his face as he tried to figure out whether she was teasing him, was jealous, or both. Nothing was markedly different from the last time he’d seen her, so even if it was a reference to knowing he’d spent the night with Lucia, she didn’t seem perturbed by it. He said, “She’s fine. Things seem to be going well in Barcelona.” He frowned as his words hit his ears. “Well, most things.”

Charlotte nodded. “A suboptimal outcome, to be sure. But you’re safe. That’s the important thing.”

Jameson chuckled. “Is it?”

“To me at least. Almost certainly to Dea Kali, as well. She’s waiting for you. Shall we go?”

“Of course.” She led him back to the lounge Kali had chosen for their last meeting. His superior was already inside, and this time, Charlotte left after delivering him. He sat on the couch across from her chair. “Dea.”

“Jameson.”

“How can I serve?”

A long sigh escaped her. She seemed disconcerted, perhaps, and was less energetic than usual. “Stick your head into the hallway and tell Charlotte we need some coffee.”

He complied, not surprised to find the other woman waiting outside the door, then returned to his seat. “Anything else? Bake some cookies? Arrange

high tea?”

She chuckled. “Let’s discuss the recent events in Barcelona. I presume it’s safe to say our new Russian allies are unhappy?”

Jameson replied, “They were when I left them. Not with you. Possibly with me, although I fail to see any logical reason for that to be the case.”

“You think they are that? Logical?”

He paused as Charlotte came in with tall mugs of coffee and set one in front of each of them. He smiled at her and replied as she left, “More passionate than logical where Dragonfly is concerned, for sure. I think Maslov was the one with the head for business. But they’re both smart. I believe they can handle what you want of them if properly motivated.”

Kali sipped her coffee. “Good.”

Jameson blurted, “I have to tell you something. Lucia seems to have some doubts about your leadership.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

He shared what she’d said, and Kali chuckled. “I would’ve expected nothing less from her, although she reached that point rather more quickly than I expected. It’s a problem sometimes, hiring the most competent people. They always want to grow, reach, expand, and conquer. And generally are self-confident enough to believe their way is the only correct one.”

She shook her head. “It’ll work itself out. But speaking of competence, I was quite disappointed in the effort to kill the witch.”

Jameson winced. “In what way?”

She leaned back in her chair and sipped coffee before answering. “The objective itself was useful. But there are better ways to accomplish it that don’t involve direct action. Especially such a public operation.”

He attempted to push down his defensiveness. “Kira and Irina wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

Kali waved it off. “I understand. I’m not criticizing you, exactly. To continue your stellar work for my organization, you must learn to think more broadly than you have in the past. We have access to assassins. To heavy weaponry. To things you almost certainly lacked in your previous occupation. This gives you additional options for most situations, and you should use them.”

He nodded. “You’re not upset?”

“At the failure? Of course. I detest failure. But it is, unfortunately, a part of life. So, let’s do better next time. If taking out the witch is important for us

or our allies, let's figure out how to do it right.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rajani Tristesse had sat through several meetings that day, some good, some bad, some landing somewhere in between. Running a criminal enterprise on this scale was always challenging. Doing so while attempting to bring other organizations into the fold and dealing with thorny issues such as the persistence of Dragonfly made the challenge far greater.

She finished her next-to-last meeting, then leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes with a moan. From behind her, Charlotte asked, “Some coffee, Dea?”

“If I have any more coffee, I think it will have completely replaced the blood in my veins. No, make me a drink.”

“Any particular one?”

She rocked her head from side to side on the top of the cushion at her back. “Anything is fine, as long as it’s not tequila. Tequila gives me a headache.” Despite that, she loved margaritas and was usually willing to accept the pain. With one more meeting to go, possibly her most difficult of the day, she couldn’t afford the distraction.

A shaker signaled progress on the drink behind her, and a minute later, Charlotte placed a martini glass in her hand. The frothy red liquid filled it to the brim, and she sipped it. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Any cosmopolitan in a storm, that’s what I always say. Plus, we had pomegranate juice. It was a no-brainer.”

Rajani closed her eyes again and allowed her mind to drift as she sipped the drink. Her thoughts quieted more slowly than she would have preferred, but finally she found her focus again. She set the half-finished drink on the table beside her. “I hate to waste it, but I believe it’s time for my next

appointment.”

Charlotte replied, “They’ll wait.”

Rajani chuckled. “And get angrier with every passing second. I don’t think that’s a good tactic with these two.”

The other woman whisked the drink away. “In here?”

She straightened and tugged the bottom of her skirt to unwrinkle it. “Might as well.”

Charlotte went to the door, opened it, and headed into the hallway. She returned moments later with two women trailing her. The first, Kira, had curly red hair pulled back from her face. The second wore a glower of distrust, which meant she was Irina. Rajani didn’t rise, only gestured at the couch to her right.

The two women sat stiffly on the edge of the cushion, and Rajani read the potential for violence in their postures. She told Charlotte, “Drinks for our guests, and I’ll have a coffee. Hot, please.” That particular order served two purposes. First, it gave her an innocuous weapon she could throw in the face of someone trying to attack her. She doubted this meeting would involve violence, but it was always good to have a backup plan.

Second, it was a coded instruction to Charlotte. Doubtless the other woman was already aware of the potential for danger and had guards posted nearby. If for any reason that hadn’t happened, the signal would ensure Charlotte summoned them to the hallway outside the room.

She smiled at the two women. “Thank you for coming.”

They both nodded stiffly. Kira replied, “Thank you for your invitation.”

Irina added, “It didn’t seem like we had a choice in the matter of this meeting.”

Rajani smiled again. “Clearly, you are suspicious of me and my motives. That’s fair. In your place, I would be as well. If you’ll do me the courtesy of listening with an open mind, I’ll do you the courtesy of laying my cards on the table.”

Again, they both nodded. Irina answered, “That would be a welcome change.”

Charlotte delivered tumblers of vodka on ice to the women, each with a wedge of lemon inside, and the requested coffee to her. She toyed with the special, exceedingly well-insulated mug that would keep the coffee hot throughout the meeting and thought for a moment about how she would move to throw the scalding liquid inside it.

Rajani began, “We had a common enemy in Dragonfly, which you have more or less taken off the table. I very much appreciate your effort in that regard. Unfortunately, that operation resulted in the loss of your top-level leadership. I mean no offense when I say that while you are both intelligent and skilled, as I understand Maslov Anokhin and what he accomplished for your organization, neither of you is ready to lead in the same way he did.”

Irina snapped, “Together, Kira and I can handle anything.”

Kali nodded calmly. “You are both capable women. However, and I mean no insult when I say this, neither of you seems the type to play the necessary games that are required when working with other organizations, governments, and such.”

Kira chuckled. “Not completely incorrect.”

Rajani nodded. “That is where I come in. By drawing your organization underneath the umbrella of mine, I can handle all that for you. It’s a simple economy of scale since it’s only an expansion of what I’m already doing. That frees you both to do the things you do best.”

Irina growled, “What do you think those are, oh wise woman?”

Rajani leaned forward and met the woman’s eyes. She recognized the game the pair was playing, one aggressive, one reasonable, and had used it to good effect herself in the past. It had no effect on her. “I think you, personally, are a fighter, an enforcer, and a disciplinarian. You get stuff done and eliminate problems.”

The other woman blinked. “Perhaps so.”

She shifted her gaze to the other woman. “You are a tactician. You see the game a couple of moves ahead and are skilled at directing your pieces where to go and what to do once they arrive.”

Kira nodded.

“But neither of you is a strategist. That is my particular strength and is also what I most enjoy.” She leaned back into a relaxed pose. “So, you see, we complement each other’s abilities quite well.”

Kira replied, “Right now we have total control of our organization. Why should we share it with you?”

Rajani resisted the urge to explain to the women that this wasn’t a meeting of equals. In her mind, she’d already claimed their organization, and this was simply an interview to see if the women would be allowed to continue as a part of it. There would be plenty of time to establish the truth of their relationship once they finished this initial dance.

Instead, she countered, “Right now you have a hundred percent of a rather small pie. Joining with me means you receive a smaller percentage, to be sure, but of a far larger pie.” She inclined her head toward Kira. “You will continue to make the tactical decisions for your organization.” Next, she inclined it toward Irina. “And continue to make sure everything is done properly on the ground. I will provide overall direction.”

Irina replied, “I don’t like being told what to do.”

Rajani lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. “It’s all in how you look at it. I won’t tell you what to do, but I will let you know what needs doing. How you handle it within a certain set of boundaries will be up to you, as it has always been.”

Both women nodded. Rajani shifted her face to a neutral expression. “Now we must discuss a slightly more difficult topic. The Dragonfly witch. I know you have bad blood between you. That concern must be left in the past. Going forward, you will focus on restoring your operations to full capacity. I will handle dealing with the witch.”

Her guests’ faces twisted with anger. Kira said, “I want her alive.”

Irina added, “So we can kill her. Slowly.”

Rajani shook her head. “No. That is what you wanted before, in Barcelona, and you see what that desire got you. Henceforth, you want to do your very best to be a thriving part of my organization, which means leaving her behind. I promise that if I can deliver her alive, I will. If I cannot, you’ll have to make do with only her head.”

The meeting continued for another fifteen minutes, shifting from big picture to small picture and back several times. Finally, they left, seeming satisfied. Rajani headed for a different room, a private lounge that only a few had access to, and reclined on the couch with several large pillows at her back.

A few minutes later, Charlotte appeared, having dealt with the visitors’ departure, and a minute after that, handed her another pomegranate cosmopolitan and sat on the chair beside the couch with one of her own. Her assistant noted, “At least that’s over, with far more success than challenges, from what I heard.”

Rajani nodded. “True enough. Although I don’t think I got everything I wanted out of any of the meetings.” She sipped her drink, then looked at the other woman’s face to watch her reaction. “Do I have to worry about you killing Lucia Hernandez over Jameson?”

Charlotte laughed. “Not immediately, no.”

“I’m sure he will choose wisely in the end. He does in most things. For a member of the male gender, anyway.”

They laughed together. Then Charlotte sobered. “Except the witch.”

The mention of the pebble in their collective shoe inspired her to down the drink and hold the glass out for a refill. Charlotte took it and headed to the bar. Rajani observed, “She seems to have a unique capacity to cause trouble. Frankly, I wish she was on our side. Since she’s not, I want you to take charge of finding out everything you can about her. Use whatever resources you need except those who are already compromised where she is concerned.”

Charlotte didn’t reply until she returned with the second drink. “The Russians.”

“And Jameson.”

Charlotte’s head bobbed. “Yes, Dea. What do you intend?”

“What I promised. To remove her from the board by capture or execution. The foolish woman has placed herself in our way and will receive the appropriate reward for doing so.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aisling arrived at her family's house in Ireland in time for a remarkably normal breakfast. Her father was present, having returned from a trip to Oriceran that he regaled everyone with information about, and so was her sister Cait, who was spending a long weekend at home. The only unusual note was that Aisling hadn't arrived early enough to help cook, which wasn't by design—she'd overslept. Her mother promised she'd probably be forgiven someday.

Shimmer was under the table beside Aza, Cait's dragon companion. She slipped part of a blueberry muffin down to the flesh and blood dragon and momentarily regretted that she couldn't do the same for her partner. Cait regaled them with stories about the Marshal business in Boston after her father finally ran out of things to say about his trip.

Her mother shared details about the coven. Some people were criticizing her leadership, which was nothing new. Now and again someone got a bee in their bonnet, and her mother and sisters would have to smooth things over with them. When Cait wasn't around and Aisling was, she stepped in to help.

Today, no one had anything for her to do, so she headed for the nearby town of Westport. Tourism had come back after the battles fought against the werewolves, and the streets that had been a combat zone during that difficult time were full of people.

She entered one of the less busy shops and smiled as the dwarven craftsman Grash hustled out of the back. When he saw her, he growled, "Oh, it's only you. I thought I maybe had a paying customer up here."

Aisling rolled her eyes. "Rude. Shimmer, blast him."

The dwarf and the dragon laughed simultaneously. Shimmer offered a

halfhearted snap at Grash's leg as he came forward to hug Aisling. He asked, "What can I do for you today? Did you bring me any of that magical metal yet?"

She hated to dampen his spirits but replied honestly, "No, not yet. My dad was just on Oriceran, though, and he says he thinks he has a lead on it. So, hopefully soon."

Grash shook his head sadly. "I'll tell you what, girl, your priorities are way out of whack."

Shimmer laughed. "I tell her that all the time. She doesn't listen."

Aisling countered, "You don't listen. Also, shut up." She waved an admonishing finger at him and returned her attention to Grash. "Well, since you're not busy with those pesky paying customers, I thought we might work together on a couple of charms."

"Of course. Come on back." She followed him to the small table where they'd worked on charms before. He asked, "How are the ones you have working out so far?"

She raised her wand bracelet to look at the thin pieces of metal embedded in it. "The kinetic one you created is a marvel, of course, like everything you make."

He chuckled deeply and tugged his beard, something he did when he was pleased. "Quit blowing smoke up my chimney, Keane."

Aisling laughed. "No, it really is. No kidding. The shadow shield is fine, and lightning skin is great."

"So, what are you looking for today?"

"Recently I was in a situation where I was falling from a pretty big height. It occurred to me, in one of those brilliant epiphanies you get right before you're about to slam into the concrete, that I might want to have something on hand to deal with that if I'm injured or compromised. I'd love to say it will never happen again, but that's kind of out of my control."

Grash narrowed his eyes at her in mock offense. "I sense there's a story to be told that you're cruelly keeping to yourself. You owe me."

Aisling returned a solemn nod. "When you have time to go out for a drink, I'll pay that price."

He laughed heartily. "When doesn't a dwarf have time to go out for a drink?"

"When he's busy running a successful business."

At that moment, the sound of the door opening in the front of the shop

caught their ears, and he commented, “Be right back.” It was almost five minutes before he returned. “Nice couple. Bought the short sword I had in the display cabinet. That’s good because I’ve wanted to make another one but had nowhere good to put it.”

“You really do love your work, don’t you?”

Grash nodded. “I really do. So, safety charms. What are you thinking?”

“I usually use a force blast to break my fall and absorb my momentum right before I’m about to reach the surface. Something to do that, for sure. And for when that won’t work, a charm to open a portal.”

“That one won’t kill your velocity, though.”

Aisling was well aware of that wrinkle in the plan. “Yeah. So, I think it needs to open above Lake Cannith.”

The dwarf frowned. “If you’re having consciousness problems already, is plunging into a bunch of water at potentially high speed a smart idea?”

“Shimmer said the same thing. It’s better than splatting on the concrete, anyway. Like I said, these are emergency options only.”

He shrugged. “Then let’s do it. The force magic one will be easy. For the other one, I’ll need you to open the portal before it will be properly primed. We can set it up, but it won’t be functional until you’ve given it the memory of the location, so to speak.”

She frowned at him. “Wait. Are you telling me I have to jump from here into the lake?”

He shook his head. “No. You only need to do the jump before you can use it in the field. If I were you, I’d take a boat out into the middle, launch myself up as far as I could, and open the portal not going anywhere. You’ll pass through, and it will remember the location.”

“There has to be a better way.”

Shimmer remarked, “Quit complaining. A little water won’t kill you.”

Aisling resisted the urge to retort and focused on the work at hand. It took them a couple of hours to finish the charms, during which Grash was repeatedly pulled away to deal with customers. He didn’t seem upset with that situation. As she departed, he reminded her that she owed him a drink.

Aisling returned home and moped around for a while, at a loss for what to do. She’d called Eddie to ask about the company and their weapon, but he hadn’t replied. They each knew that the other might be out of communication for a while if they were out on a mission, so the missed calls didn’t make her worried about the state of their relationship. She was concerned about his

safety, though.

After she'd been lying in her bed staring at the ceiling for half an hour, Shimmer tried to distract her and failed. "All right. Time to bring out the big guns." He left the room.

A moment later he returned with Brianna, who ordered, "Get off the bed, loser."

Aisling covered her face with her hands. "Go away. Leave me to my desperate ennui."

"If you're not up by the count of three, I'm going to start sparring with you anyway." The meaty *thwack* of wood on flesh was a warning that her sister was carrying her shillelagh. "One."

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." She glared at Shimmer as she stood. "You and I are going to have a chat about boundaries, metalhead."

The dragon's smile was mocking. "Empty threats with you. Always empty threats. You love me."

After an intense sparring session, Aisling felt tired but still tied up inside. This was evident to Brianna, who instructed, "You're going to go shower, then we're going out for a drink and some music. Don't argue, just do it."

Forty-five minutes later, they were at Connolly's Folly bar in Westport. Unlike the ones on the main street, this was a place the tourists rarely found. Its signage was small, and it had no windows to betray what was inside. The interior was all gorgeous aged wood, brightly lit and clean. A band played on a small stage in front of a modest dance floor, delivering instrumental tunes.

The real music would start in about an hour, last until early morning, and involve singing, dancing, and doubtless some drunken patron trying to climb on stage with the band before the place closed for the night. It was all good-natured. Aisling loved the place. As far as she knew, nothing bad had ever happened inside Connolly's Folly except for a fistfight or two that always wound up being resolved over a round of drinks.

When they each had a drink in front of them, Brianna a Guinness and Aisling a Strongbow cider, her sister ordered, "Spill."

Aisling considered denying she had any thoughts to share. Then she considered editing them to ensure she didn't reveal any inconsistencies with what she might've said before. Instead, she told Brianna everything. Her real job, the attack on the base, her relationship with Eddie, her hunt for Jameson Hart, and the failed effort to get him in Barcelona.

It took another round of drinks before she finished, and Brianna shook her

head in something that looked like amazement mixed with surprise, probably at her stupidity. “You could quit.”

Aisling countered, “You know I can’t.”

“I know you *think* you can’t. But you could. There are plenty of opportunities in the coven where your skills would be a perfect fit. You would still be doing good work, making a difference.”

Aisling shook her head, appreciating that Brianna hadn’t said anything about her keeping secrets and had moved on to trying to solve the problem. That was so like her sister. “No. I love my job. I love my colleagues. I’m just...” She hated the word as it came out of her mouth. “Scared.”

Brianna snorted. “You’re not fancy. We all get scared sometimes.”

Shimmer had been sitting quietly at her feet. He interjected, “I don’t.”

Her sister retorted, “Shut it, you, or you will feel the wrath of my shillelagh.” The dragon laughed, and Brianna added, “I have the solution for you though, sis.”

Aisling turned in her chair to face her sister squarely. “This ought to be good. What is it?”

“Quit being a whiny witch and do what you have to do.”

Aisling choked on her drink and coughed until her eyes were running. Finally, she eked out, “Seriously?”

Brianna looked *very* satisfied with her timing. “Seriously. It’s the same thing Sashura or Delsanra would tell you, and you know it. Sometimes you big-brained people think too much.”

Aisling frowned. “Who are you who is so wise all of a sudden, and what have you done with my sister?”

“I’ve always been this way. I don’t show it because then people would expect things from me. Now, the best thing for you is a night of relaxing, drinking, singing, and dancing. So, let’s get serious about it.”

“I bow to your wisdom.”

“Rightly so.” Brianna waved for the bartender, and Aisling finally let the bad feelings stemming from her failure to capture Hart fade away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mia finished the tall can of energy drink, crumpled it, and tossed it across the room. It banged off the wall behind Thomas, who shouted, “Jerk.”

She laughed. “Just checking your reflexes, cyber-warrior.”

His scowl was evident in his voice, getting the message across despite his screens blocking his face. “You know, you only act like this when you’re worried.”

Mia sat in her chair and began typing furiously on her keyboards. “I’m not worried. Whatever would I have to be worried about? Everything is sunflowers and honey.”

“Cracking into a scary corporation, maybe?”

“Lightweights.”

He laughed. “Yeah, that’s what Melliston is. For sure.”

She flatly rejected the notion that she was worried but would admit that she felt at least more caution than usual heading into this particular run. It wasn’t impossible for the feedback through a computer connection to kill an infomancer. It was highly unlikely since everyone built buffers into their systems to protect against such things.

As with all forms of magic, organizations were always working to figure out ways to deal with those who practiced it. *Just like the sonic weapon.* The fact that her system was newly cobbled together didn’t increase her confidence on that score, either.

Mia shook her head at her nonsense and brought her mind down to focus on the task ahead. “What do you think is our best way in?”

Thomas, whose hands were also moving across his keyboards from the sound of things, replied, “I’m guessing procurement. It’s a business system

that needs to connect to the outside world. I would think they'd want the researchers to have direct access, as well. Otherwise, their buyers would be answering inane questions all the time instead of being able to do their jobs."

Mia laughed. "That sounds exactly like every researcher I've ever worked with. Always wanting to know irrelevant things like when their supplies would arrive and stuff."

"I know, right? Same here. What's your opinion?"

Code began to scroll on both of her vertical monitors as she called up offensive and defensive programs, preparing them for quick access during the assault. "Procurement could be read-only access beyond the business system, though. One way, inward, which would make it more challenging to use as a way into the researchers' area. I think we'd be better off bridging into the main system from their security company."

Thomas replied, "In any other circumstance, I'd probably agree with you. But, as you might've forgotten, their security company is a subsidiary of the corporation. That means it's going to be well-protected, likely with the same stuff we'll find in the core of their internal system."

Mia frowned. She had forgotten, which wasn't like her. "Yeah. Point." Unable to come up with anything better, she gave in. "All right, we'll try it your way."

The infomancers entered the enemy system together through the web portal for the procurement office. They materialized as generic avatars. The only difference between them was her longer hair. Their bodies were androgynous and clad in boring brown suits with white shirts and green ties.

Windows that resembled mouse holes from classic cartoons, flat on the bottom with an arching top, covered the room surrounding them. Behind each stood an identical woman, spokesmodel beautiful with long blonde hair, glittering eyes, and perfect teeth displayed in a flawless smile.

Other people in suits were busy at the windows conversing with the women. Mia exchanged a look with Thomas, who shrugged, not having any better clue than she did about what subtleties they didn't yet see might be present in the room's code. She headed to a short line in front of one window. When the person in front of them was taken care of, the woman behind the window announced brightly, "Next."

Mia stepped up. "We'd like to take a look at inventory, please."

Without changing inflection or the brightness of her smile, the system's avatar replied, "Please provide one or more model numbers."

Thomas stepped forward. “Camel birthday ocean cat,” followed by a string of numbers and letters. The woman in the window jerked her head to the left, then to the right. She froze without answering, but a door that hadn’t been there a moment before opened at the far end of the room. As he pulled Mia toward it, he added, “Told you this would get us in.”

“Yeah, yeah. What was that nonsense?”

“Buffer overflow attack. It’s an exploit that targets a hardware flaw. We’re lucky they’re using that particular piece. I know a few more, but we got lucky.”

“What would have happened if they weren’t using it?”

Thomas waved it off. “Probably alarms, security, that sort of thing.”

The simulation changed when they passed through the door, which vanished as soon as they were through. The room they’d entered was strangely technological in an industrial way. The walls were a dull gray metal with numerous panels and devices attached to them, featuring blinking lights and LED displays in a language she didn’t recognize.

A door *hissed* as it lifted a short distance from the black floor, and a small, wheeled robot whirred in. The device was roughly rectangular with a curved front and back and moved with a series of small *beeps* and *boops*. It rolled toward her foot, stopped before smashing into it, and darted away into a small hole in the wall.

Mia growled, “What the hell is this place?”

Thomas laughed. “Some sort of riff on *Star Wars*, I think. Or at least sci-fi as made by someone who’s seen the movies. My Gallandro threads are going to fit in well here.” He wore his futuristic gunslinger outfit, as usual. “I’m afraid you’re not going to find anyone rocking that cyberpunk hair you’ve got, though. Wrong color, and far too high.”

Mia liked her cyberpunk look and rewarded his comment with an upraised finger. She moved toward the wall as he asked, “All right, where to?”

A bit of searching revealed an interface that was, thankfully, modeled after an ethernet port. She flexed a certain muscle in her arm, and a small panel popped up to give her access to a corded connection that she attached to the socket. Information immediately started to flow across her visual field as she accessed the system within the system. After only a few seconds, she had a map and a destination.

“I found research. Seven levels up and four sections over. This place is

pretty much a cylinder according to the schematic.”

“That’s a long hike.”

“It is. We better get moving.” The door opened automatically at their approach, and they peered out into a hallway. The walls here seemed to be shiny plastic, as was the floor underfoot. Lighting tubes ran horizontally and diagonally at various heights along the walls and looked almost like an intentional design as they climbed and dipped.

Men and women in black uniforms with medals pinned on diagonal sashes approached, and they waited until the uniformed figures had passed to exit the room. After only a step, they ducked back inside again as a group of troopers in black armor with full-face reflective helmets walked by. Mia scowled and observed, “I hate this place.”

She was amazed when they reached the elevator without incident. The place seemed strangely deserted. She hit the button and looked around nervously. “We stick out like a sore thumb here. I can’t believe we made it this far, to be honest.”

Thomas replied, “We might have to adopt a movie trope and steal disguises so we’re less obvious.”

“Guess we need to look for some of those armored guys, huh?”

The elevator doors slid open. Thomas countered, “Nope” as she registered four black-armored figures in the elevator car. The soldiers were already reacting to their presence by whipping the rifles they carried in parade position down into firing position.

Thomas leapt into the elevator, and she did the same. Mia wrestled with one for his weapon, which blocked another from firing at her, and she presumed Thomas was doing something similar. She kicked out with one boot and connected with the control panel, thinking anything other than fighting with the door open would be an improvement. The door closed, and the elevator lurched into upward motion.

Her opponent tugged hard on the weapon, which slipped from her hands. He overbalanced backward. She jumped, put a foot on the handrail that ran around the inside, and leapt onto his shoulders. He swung the weapon at her like a club, but she leaned sideways to avoid it and yanked his helmet off. She used it to smash aside the strike from the butt of the next nearest soldier’s weapon, then brought it down hard on her mount’s head.

He went down, and she took a ringing blow to her head from the other as she slid off. She slammed into the wall and the floor simultaneously, barely

avoiding smashing her skull on one or the other, but bounced gamely back up. Damage wasn't quite as damaging in the virtual world as in the flesh-and-bone one.

A blaster sounded suddenly, and one of the troopers fell. The weapon went off again, and her remaining opponent went down. Thomas spun his blaster around his finger and shoved it into its holster with a flourish. "Perfect. We wanted armor. Now we have armor."

Suddenly, the elevator lurched to a halt. A voice said, "This elevator is now in secure mode. Please stand by. You will be detained shortly."

Mia managed a dark laugh. "Perfect, you said."

Thomas knelt. "Perfect, but time-sensitive. Get a move on."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The elevator started to move again as they finished changing into the armor, but this time it was in the opposite direction. Mia grabbed a device from her belt and stuck it into the elevator's data port. A moment later, she said, "It's going the wrong way. We didn't get high enough."

"Time to leave, then." Thomas climbed onto the handrail, produced a torch from his belt, and used it to cut a square into the metal ceiling. He punched the panel away and climbed through. She handed both helmets up to him, then jumped and grabbed his arm. He donned his helmet when she was on the car's roof, and she did the same. He shouted suddenly, "Time to jump."

He was already in motion off the side of the elevator as she yelled, "What?" Mia only had a split second to choose and decided to trust him. If he'd gone crazy, they'd be unable to accomplish their objective anyway. Her jump left her in the air for only a couple of seconds before a rising elevator struck her boots. She fell to her knees and might have toppled off, but Thomas grabbed and held her while she reclaimed her wits.

He pulled her to her feet. "Can you tell where we are?"

She checked. "I'm still in the system by wireless. Might not last much longer as we get away from the remote I left in the other car. We need another five levels up."

Thomas reached for the trooper's equipment belt and pulled out a metal cable. He made a large loop in the end. "You should grab onto me."

Again, she trusted him and followed his direction.

He laughed. "Finally. You realize that you adore me, that you've *always* adored me. A dream come true." Before she could reply, he threw the line

and jumped off the car.

The line halted them after a short drop by slamming them into the side of the elevator shaft. Fortunately, whatever the cable attached to didn't fail, and they hung there while Mia tried to remember what breathing normally felt like. She reached over and slapped the override next to the elevator doors. They slid open, and together they swung on the line until they could hurtle out of the shaft and land awkwardly on the floor of the hallway beyond.

Mia scrambled up, ready for another fight, but no one saw their dramatic entrance. She snarled a curse as she realized she'd left her blaster rifle behind, and her only weapon was the stun stick on the belt she'd stolen. Thomas had brought his blaster along, although the way it was stuck through his belt would make it a difficult fast draw.

She reported, "We have to walk through three areas to get to our destination. The schematic shows a service tunnel connecting them, so let's use that." The stolen credentials built into the uniforms gave them access to the tunnel. The narrow space was full of equipment, blinking lights, and humming devices. In addition, several androids were present, walking stiffly through the corridor's cramped confines attending to one task or another.

None of the machines reacted to their presence, and Mia assumed their suits were pumping out the right recognition codes or whatever they used to differentiate friend from foe in this place. They emerged from the tunnel outside their destination. Ahead of them was a single large door that presumably led to the research area. Their credentials were sufficient to unlock it, and they entered a large, sterile space beyond.

The giant room wasn't rectangular. The wall they entered on was smaller than the far wall, and the ones to the left and right angled outward as they progressed deeper into the room. Androids engaged with equipment and monitors lined those walls with a few humans pacing behind them with tablets.

The middle of the space held tall plastic and metal tables at which more androids worked. As in the corridor, none of the mechanicals reacted to their entry. She couldn't tell if the non-mechanicals had noticed and dismissed them or hadn't registered their presence yet.

Mia accessed her schematics. "I think what we want is behind that door at the back of the room."

Thomas replied, "You mean the heavy metal one that looks like a vault with those robotic guards standing beside it?"

She nodded. “Yeah, that one.”

Thomas grunted in annoyance. “Of course. And with that level of security, they’ll notice as soon as you try to hack it. I’ll create a distraction. You work on getting the damn thing open.”

Thomas lifted his blaster pistol and fired at the nearest android. It caught the humanoid figure in the back of the head, destroying it, and the body fell like a puppet with its strings cut. All activity in the room stopped as everyone turned toward him. He smiled underneath his helmet. “Hi there.”

As the androids nearest him started to move, he ducked and scuttled to the right. Their motion, combined with his change of location, put the androids in the path of the blaster bolts fired by the ones guarding the steel door. The guards didn’t stop firing as androids fell useless to the floor.

Thomas continued to use the androids for cover as he moved steadily deeper into the room. One of them, either heedless of its safety or possibly taken over by a live infomancer, lurched into him and pinned him against the wall. He grunted as he freed his arm, then wormed his pistol up between their bodies until he had it under its chin. His finger squeezed the trigger several times before the android went down and freed him from immobility.

Thomas landed hard and threw himself into a diving roll, knowing the guards would have been waiting for a clean shot at him. Blaster bolts ricocheted from the metal floor behind him as he moved. He’d wanted the chaos but had underestimated how powerful the guards’ weapons would be.

He dashed under a table and rose, pushing it upward. It was heavy, but once he got it moving, it was easy enough to flip it over and take cover behind it. Blaster bolts deflected from its polished surface, the outcome he’d hoped for. He doubted it would last long but he only needed a few moments.

He popped up behind it to get his bearings, then ducked again before the guards could shoot him. Working from memory, he stuck his blaster over the edge and fired it until its power went dry. The return fire was still present but halved. He reported, “One down. How’s it going?”

Mia answered, “Focus on your work.”

That probably meant it wasn’t going all that well. His hands finished the automatic task of replacing his spent power source with another, and he

risked another look over the top. A blaster bolt slammed into his helmet.

He toppled backward as his head jerked back from the impact, but the bolt failed to penetrate. He groaned in pain, forced himself to his feet, leveled his blaster at the remaining guard, and fired until it dropped. By then, the room had emptied of androids and workers, and they were clear. "All right, Wraith, it's your time to shine."

Mia had been battling with the security system while Thomas was fighting. It had asked for deeper and deeper levels of authorization, which she was forced to build on the fly based on codes in her suit's ID signal. It wasn't the hardest hack she'd ever done but knowing that the clock was ticking as Thomas fought made it more stressful than it should have been. Finally, she succeeded and gained control of the door.

She yanked her attention out of the system. "Let's move." She ran to the door and pressed the suit's palm on the reader. The door swung ponderously open as enemies appeared at the doorway they'd used to enter the room. Both of them fired as they waited for the door to open enough to enter, and as soon as they were inside, she slammed her palm against the closing mechanism. They fired through the remaining gap until the door closed completely and locked them inside.

Thomas remarked, "I guess whatever we want better be in here, huh?"

Mia replied, "Nowhere else on this level to try. It has to be." The large space appeared to be a working lab with no one in it. She pulled off her helmet and threw it aside, then did the same with her gauntlets. Her nimble fingers worked on the interface as she flew through menus and authorizations until she finally found what she was looking for.

Her stomach dropped through the floor. She bit off a curse and growled, "Damn it to the very bottom levels of hell."

He replied, "What?"

"Two things, and they both suck. The weapon is real. They have inventory records for it."

He came over to stand beside her and looked over her shoulder at the record. "Bloody hell. They have a lot of them."

"Yeah. Even worse is the fact that this says the schematics are accessible

only through an internal system housed in the corporation's building. If we want to figure out how to defeat that weapon, someone will have to go in after them."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aisling crouched in the cover of a small grouping of trees a dozen meters off the path and panted. She'd been running through the forest for what her body assured her was at least several hours but was only twenty minutes or so. This demonstration that she was, as some had suggested in the not-too-distant past, not in the best shape of her life did not make her happy.

From where he perched above her head, Shimmer asked, "Do you think we slipped away from him?"

Aisling wiped the sweat from her brow. "Not a chance. He's playing with us."

"Really?"

"Really. There's a reason Delsanra is the one who teaches combat to everyone in the coven. He's *that* good. We never had a chance of escaping him, only of delaying the encounter until we could find a good place to fight."

From her left, a deep baritone interjected, "Very true, Aisling, so perhaps you and your friend should come and meet your destiny."

She stood with an annoyed grunt, and Shimmer landed on the ground beside her. He asked, "Is he always this dramatic?"

She nodded as they headed toward the voice. "He is. And if you complain about it, he hits harder."

"Right. No complaining. Gotcha."

They found him in a small clearing that would offer reasonable space for a fight but not enough room for easy evasion. It was a battleground that suited the better fighter, and Aisling knew that wasn't her. He was tan and lanky, and his usually short-cropped hair had gotten a little shaggy since

she'd last seen him.

Aisling drew her swords from the back of her belt and flicked the switch to extend them. The blades cascaded out of the hilts and locked into place, and she gave them a short twirl that finished with them raised in guard position. Delsanra reached over his shoulder with one hand and drew one of his paired blades, then pulled a long dagger from a sheath on his thigh with the other. Shimmer crouched at the edge of the clearing, waiting for her instruction.

She said, "You're free to act as you wish, Shimmer. Keep everything sheathed, though. It's unlikely you'll get through his defenses but pull anything that penetrates. We're training, not fighting for real." She chuckled. "Of course, if you can knock him over and pin him down so I can stab him a few times, that would be optimal."

Shimmer replied, "You don't seem confident that I can take him down."

"I'm not confident *anybody* can take him down."

Delsanra replied, "Less talking, more fighting." He stepped toward her in a calm advance, and she lifted her swords and brought them down in a diagonal slash. He caught them on his sword, then circled his dagger up and around to slap them aside as his blade whipped in toward her face.

Aisling bent backward, and it swiped above her head. His blades were coated in force magic, so even if it had connected, it wouldn't have cut her, and she had healing potions on her belt in case of an accident. She'd considered adding a force sheath to Shimmer's claws, but concentrating on that while he was in motion and she was in combat was too much to keep track of. Besides, her comment to him had been accurate. The chances of either of them getting a strike through Delsanra's defenses were minimal, at best.

She put her fists on the ground behind her, turned the backbend into a flip, and came up already spinning, knowing his blades would be seeking her flesh. Her right-hand sword batted his thrust out of the way, and she stabbed her left sword out. He caught it on his dagger and pushed it wide, then snapped a kick at her unprotected torso. She jumped backward to avoid it.

Shimmer chose that moment to flash between them. He snapped at Delsanra's leg, but her teacher was already airborne, riding a burst of magic up and over her. Aisling flicked her sword up in case he had made a rare mistake and stayed low enough to catch, but he hadn't. She spun and was ready when he hit the ground. Shimmer snarled in anger behind her, and she

laughed inwardly. *Yeah, Delsanra makes us all feel that way, buddy.*

She brought her left-hand sword around in a looping strike, and he raised his blade to block it. She whipped her right-hand sword down toward his leg. He stabbed the dagger to intercept it, and she collapsed the weapon to avoid the block. Her blade snapped out again after passing the obstruction, and she reversed it in a slash at his unprotected leg.

Delsanra didn't seem alarmed as he raised a booted foot and stomped on the flat of her sword. She released the hilt to avoid being pulled downward and stabbed her remaining sword at him. He shifted his feet and twisted his torso, and while her blade passed within a hand's breadth of his stomach, it didn't connect.

Aisling disengaged as Shimmer darted in again and used the moment Delsanra devoted to blocking the dragon's attack to reach out with her force magic and summon her sword back to her hand. She smiled at her teacher, turned, and ran. Shimmer crashed through the canopy above her a moment later, making a serious racket, and shouted, "Really? Running away?"

Aisling panted, "Think of it as a strategic redeployment." She'd retracted her swords again and ran with the hilts in her hands. "We'll never beat him in a fair fight, so we need to be unfair. As soon as I find a good spot I'm going to stop, and I want you to hide. We'll only have one shot at your surprise arrival, so you'll have to choose your moment perfectly. If you do, I think we can get through his guard. For once. Maybe."

"Your coven must be full of good fighters with a teacher like this."

"True, we're all pretty good." She ran into another clearing, a little larger than the last one. "This will do. Hide yourself." Aisling sank to her knees and rested her swords on her thighs. She worked to focus her mind by taking deep breaths in through her nose, holding them, and expelling them from her mouth. While doing so, she let her magic spread out to amplify her senses to better detect Delsanra's approach.

Her eyes opened as he entered the clearing. He stopped, looked down at her, and asked, "Running away? Really?"

Aisling laughed at his presumably unintentional echoing of Shimmer's words. "You chose the first battleground. Someone wise who sounds exactly like you once told me that you should never let an enemy select the location for a fight. I like this one better."

She exploded upward and used her magic to sweep dirt and sticks from the ground and throw them at his face. They struck a shield and didn't

penetrate, but the distraction gave her an instant to charge. Both her blades were out, and she stabbed them forward at him, one high and one low, balancing on one foot as she made the strike. He blocked them both in opposite directions. Had she not already been in motion for her next move, the impacts would have knocked her down.

Her thrusts had been a distraction and the one footstep a momentary transition. She spun backward into a hurried leg sweep. It almost caught him, but he jumped over her head in a somersault. Aisling threw herself forward into a somersault to gain some distance and came up with one sword ready to attack and the other sweeping around behind her back to block.

Her sword connected with his and knocked it away. His dagger whisked past her ear as she dropped and rolled to the side. She turned toward him in time to catch the next pair of attacks, but he kept pushing, forcing her toward the edge of the clearing. She growled under her breath, "Any time, buddy."

Maybe Shimmer heard her, or perhaps he'd chosen his moment properly. He flew in silently, only a creak as he launched himself from a tree branch giving away his presence, but it was enough. Delsanra spun with his blades raised and slashed at the dragon, who wrenched his body around to avoid the swords. The defensive move was enough to break the flow of his attack.

Once again, that attack served as a distraction to set up another. Aisling raced forward and tackled her teacher while her partner occupied him. She landed on top and placed a hilt holding a collapsed blade point downward on his chest. She smiled. "All I have to do is flick the switch."

He smiled and replied, "All I have to do is move my arm a few centimeters." She looked down to see his dagger positioned over the large artery in her thigh.

Aisling scowled. "Damn it. Draw?"

Delsanra grinned. "Draw. But only because of your dragon." She rolled off and sat beside him. He adopted the same position. "Not bad. I believe you needed that fight."

Aisling nodded. Whatever stress she'd been carrying had been banished by the battle, which had required her entire focus. "I think you're right."

"I believe you spend too much time thinking, Aisling."

She laughed and mentioned Brianna's comment along the same lines. Delsanra said, "Your sister sees much but talks little."

Aisling rolled her eyes. "Oh, she talks plenty. It's just that most of it is nonsense."

Shimmer had come over and sat at their feet. He added, "Or insults."

Delsanra rose smoothly to his feet and sheathed his weapons. "Okay, round two of three."

Aisling groaned. "Three?"

"You come home out of shape, and that's what you get."

"I'm in fine shape."

He shook his head. "Not good enough. Remember the werewolves. We must always be vigilant."

Aisling scrambled to her feet as Delsanra sent a blast of lightning into the ground beside her. "Okay, I'm going. Geez. I thought teachers were supposed to be patient."

"I'm not that kind of teacher. Run."

Aisling ran.

CHAPTER TWENTY

After the workout with Delsanra, Aisling had spent the rest of that day recovering and resting. She got ready for work at her family's house and portaled into the Dragonfly base. After stopping upstairs to drop off her bags, she headed for the impromptu command center in the living room.

The last time she'd been in it, information about Jameson Hart had covered the walls. Now, data about Melliston hid those materials, including shots of their skyscraper headquarters taken from every angle imaginable. Mia was present, as were Lance, Will, Maria, and Isla.

Aisling wandered over to the infomancer. "Did we catch a break or something?"

Mia shook her head. "No. The opposite, actually."

"Care to explain?"

Whether she would have or not was destined to be a mystery since Annika walked in. She announced, "First the bad news. According to what Mia and Thomas found, the product is real." She nodded at the infomancer. "They're selling it. For all we know, they've already delivered it."

Aisling cursed under her breath. "Not cool."

Annika replied, "Definitely not cool. To make matters worse, in order to get any more information about it we have to access a closed system inside their headquarters." She gestured at the picture of the skyscraper.

Maria remarked, "Well, damn, that doesn't sound easy."

Will replied, "Understatement of the year, right there."

Annika took over the conversation again. "This has become our number one priority. I'll keep people looking into Jameson Hart where I can, but we must deal with this."

“I don’t like the threat it poses to our magicals. I don’t like the threat it poses to *all* magicals. And Dragonfly is unique among the intelligence agencies that could do something about this. For all we know, their governments are in favor of this development.”

Isla added, “Hell, they probably funded it from the start.”

Annika nodded sharply. “Exactly my point. The possibility that they will see this device as being in their best interest and failing to act is too high. We can’t count on any others addressing it properly.”

Mia asked, “What’s the plan, boss?”

“A team will be deployed to Los Angeles. The first is to see if we can find a way inside. From there, we improvise. Ideally, we can get someone in the building and tap into their system without any other fuss. Of course, if that can’t happen, we’ll have to figure out something more direct.”

Annika turned and walked out. The other agents exchanged looks and followed her. Aisling noted that no one had looked specifically at her. She asked Mia, “Do you think there’s any resentment there?”

The infomancer shook her head. “No. You might be the most prominent magical at Dragonfly at the moment, but you’re not the only one. This goes beyond such petty concerns. It’s the type of threat that we exist to face.”

“I take it the run against Melliston didn’t go well?”

“I think it went as well as it could, given that the most important stuff is on an unconnected system inside the building.”

Aisling replied, “Guess I’ll be bringing a lot of infomancer relays.”

Mia chuckled. “I guess you will, assuming you’re the one to go in. I heard that Annika was a little irritated with you.”

She winced. “That’s one way to describe it. She has a right to be, though. I screwed up. I deserve the displeasure.”

“Admitting you have a problem is the first step to solving the problem.”

“How many more steps are there?”

Mia laughed. “In your case? Hundreds, I’m guessing.”

Aisling stuck her tongue out at the other woman. “How’s the new exoskeleton?”

Mia held up her arms so Aisling could see the metal framework that ran across them. “Old one’s totally gone. The new one is proving to be something solid. Wait, let me show you.” Mia closed her eyes for a second, then opened them again. “Punch me in the face.”

Aisling laughed. “What?”

“You heard me. I want you to see something.”

Aisling shook her head. “This feels like a trap. This is most definitely a trap.” She activated her earpiece’s connection with Shimmer. “Come here, please.”

A moment later, the dragon padded in from the other room. “What?”

“I want you to record this. Mia, say that again.”

The infomancer laughed. “Aisling, for the official record, I am asking you to punch me in the face.”

Shimmer asked, “Has she lost her mind?”

Aisling replied, “Not sure, but it seems like as good an explanation as any at this point.”

Mia put her hands on her hips. “Seriously. Do it. Give me your best shot.”

Aisling threw a punch, not at full speed or power, ready to stop it before it struck flesh. Mia’s arms surged upward, the left one circling from inside to outside to block as the other came across to punch her. The strike hit the nerve in her forearm and numbed it to her fingers. Aisling snapped, “What the hell?”

Mia grabbed her arm gently. “I didn’t damage anything, did I?”

Aisling pulled it away and shook it out. “No, no permanent damage. How did you do that?”

Mia lifted her arms to show the metal framework again. “The exoskeleton can trigger my nerves. It knows kung fu, so now I know kung fu. Kind of. It’s hard to let go enough to surrender control to the system. And of course, it can’t make my muscles work any better than they are able. So, I’ll be working out more in the future, looks like.”

Aisling shook her head. “Wow. Now you’re both a physical and virtual badass.”

Her friend looked pleased at the development. “Pretty cool, right?”

“Seriously cool.” Aisling’s phone buzzed with an incoming call. She lifted it, saw that it was Eddie, and showed it to Mia. The infomancer nodded and walked away, and Aisling picked up. “Eddie. Good to hear from you. I was worried.”

He sounded more stressed than usual. “That I’d run off with another girl?”

“About your safety. Although it’s fair to say that you would’ve been quite unsafe had you run off with another girl. From me, in case that’s not completely clear to you.”

He chuckled. "It's clear."

"Were you on a mission?"

"I was. Nothing particularly dangerous, but it got a little complicated along the way. In any case, all's well that ends well. I've got a minor leg injury that'll take a week or two to heal, but nothing worse."

"If you're calling to ask me to be your nursemaid, I'm not really cut out for it."

That comment drew a real laugh from him. "Oh, I think everyone who's ever met you knows that. No, that's not it. Your message asked me to look into Melliston Corporation."

He lowered his voice as if confiding a secret. "I did some digging. But I hit dead ends really fast in every direction I tried. Then I straight out asked. Three different people claimed they didn't know anything and the fourth told me to quit asking."

"Damn it."

"For them to close ranks like that means they know something about it they don't want to share."

Aisling had come to the same conclusion. "Like the SIS is a client."

He added, "Or the government itself."

She fought back a surge of anger. Everything about the DragonEye sonic weapon felt personal, but none of that was Eddie's fault, and she certainly shouldn't take it out on him. "Okay. Thanks for checking. Don't stick your neck out any more. We'll be addressing it from a different angle."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I'm not sure of anything. But that's what we're doing. It wasn't my call, but I agree with it in principle, although obviously some serious risks are involved."

"I'll let you get to it, then. Good luck. Let me know if you need anything, and I'll do what I can to make it happen."

"Take me out on a date afterward?"

Eddie laughed. "You got it. Stay safe."

"You too." She killed the connection and looked down at Shimmer. "I think this is going to go from bad to worse before it gets better."

His muzzle moved up and down as he nodded his agreement. "I have that same feeling."

"Let's go pack. I bet Annika will tell us to get ourselves to Los Angeles sooner rather than later."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Aisling's prediction proved correct. Only an hour later, she got the word to grab her essentials and head down to the dining room to be portaled. Anti-magic emitters fully covered the base, ready to be activated at need. Fortunately, since their new location was still completely clandestine, Annika had decided not to use them.

Aisling was happy about that decision. Having her workplace be uncomfortable was something she'd long resigned herself to. Since they were also living there, having anti-magic emitters constantly running would be incredibly uncomfortable for her and any other magicals. She presumed they hindered infomancers too, although she didn't know for sure. *Something to ask Mia one day, maybe, if we ever have the luxury of social time again.*

She threw on her backpack, grabbed her duffel, and headed downstairs with Shimmer in tow. The portal was already open, and she walked from one continent to the next without stopping. It was early morning in Los Angeles, to judge by the sky outside the room's windows.

Lance was already there, standing in a living room. "You've got the second bedroom on the left."

Aisling turned in a circle, taking in the expensive-looking furniture, the huge living area, and the almost equally large dining room attached to it. All of this, and they were up high somewhere in the main part of the city. "How did we come up with the bucks to rent this place?"

Lance laughed. "It belongs to a celebrity who's out shooting a movie. I don't know who has an in with them, but someone in the organization must be at least a friend. Enjoy it while you can because we'll be back to our real lives soon enough."

Aisling put her hands on her hips. “I’m not leaving. If you want me to go, you’ll henceforth have to provide me with his level of luxury. It’s your fault. You reset my expectations.”

“Uh-huh. Good luck making that argument stick with Annika. Now, go stash your bags so we can get to work, won’t you?”

She complied, finding the bedroom more than adequate, complete with a bathroom, wardrobe, dressers, and vanity. Everything was empty though, as if this room was a movie prop or maybe kept this way against the random chance that they might need room for a dozen guests.

Aisling fell back on the bed to test it and discovered it was as comfortable as it seemed. “I don’t know who really lives here, but I hope they’ll be fine with having us for roommates, Shimmer. Like, forever.”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t have thought money would suck you in so easily.”

She sat up with a groan. “Not money. Luxury. Sure, they’re usually tied together, but I’m in it for the experience, not the dollars in the bank account.”

As it turned out, Lance was wrong. They didn’t need to get to work right away. The plan had been to watch in real-time as people entered the building, but their surveillance wasn’t set up yet. That gave Aisling time to nap in an effort to get herself closer to being in the correct subjective time zone. The bed turned out to be even more wonderful to sleep in than to lie on.

When she woke up, she found Lance. “I thought of something. Can Dragonfly get us concert tickets? Since we know celebrities and all?”

He shook his head. “You’re a secret agent. You should be able to charm people out of concert tickets. It’s entry-level spy stuff.”

“You’re useless, you know that?”

Lance grinned. “Only in some contexts. So, ready to watch some doors?”

“Oh, please, let’s. That sounds like so much fun.”

“Go grab your floppy hat and sunglasses. You’ll be on the north side of the building. Maria’s got the south, I’ll take the west, and we’ll use a camera in a nearby building to watch the east. We planned to have cameras on all sides this morning, but everything went too fast for that. We’ll have it for tomorrow, though.”

Aisling grabbed her tourist clothes, and they all headed out at a short delay from one another. Their apartment was a dozen blocks away from Melliston’s skyscraper, but the walk was nice if a little sweaty. They were all in position by four o’clock, which Lance had said was the right time to get

there to catch the early departures.

A coffee shop across the street from her entrance offered outdoor seating on the sidewalk, and she claimed a table and ordered a cappuccino. As people emerged from the building, she made mental notes on their features and outfits. It was automatic for agents because recognizing someone you'd seen before was often the first warning of imminent danger.

A stream of chatter continued in her earpiece as Thomas shared the information he could get on those they spotted. He'd explained that their systems had spent the day crawling social media, especially the business-oriented ones, for information about the company's employees. The top executives were public knowledge, but they had nothing on the researchers except for the executive in charge of that division. Naturally, it was the researchers they were most interested in.

After forty-five minutes, Aisling paid her bill and strolled along the sidewalk, pretending to look around like a tourist. This was the boring side of the life of a spy that the books and movies never mentioned. When the flow of egresses from the building finally slowed to a trickle, they still hadn't made any headway in finding anyone who worked in the research division. Lance said, "Aisling, circle the building. Use your mystical powers to see if you can find any secret entrances or anything."

She replied, "Are you joking or being an idiot?"

"Walk around and look. I don't think you'll find anything because it's far easier to portal than to worry about a secret entrance, but we need to check all the boxes. I'll be doing the same in the opposite direction."

"You got it, mini-boss." She inwardly laughed as she imagined him grinding his teeth. He hated when she called him that, so she did it as often as possible as long as it was only agents and infomancers around. Her walk around the building was pleasant, but she discovered nothing useful with either magic or mundane senses. The return to the apartment was uneventful, and an hour later, they were gathered in the living room eating takeout and discussing the most interesting people they'd seen.

When the food ran out, they pored over the intel they'd acquired that day. There wasn't much of it, and very little was useful in any practical sense. All the people they'd identified were low-level workers or middle managers. About a third of them had no profiles on social media to use to identify them, and the face-matching software was crunching away to figure them out. The pattern seemed fairly clear. The important people inside the company weren't

using the ground-level doors.

That meant they needed to find out more about the company. Aisling suggested, “We could snatch one off the street tomorrow and bring them back here for some questions.”

Lance shook his head. “Nope. We’re going to do it the old-fashioned way.”

She frowned. He said that like it was going to irritate her. “And what, exactly, may I ask, is the old-fashioned way?”

He laughed. “You and Maria are going to go on a date.”

She exchanged a glance with the other agent, who asked, “With each other?”

If anything, Lance’s amusement increased. “Not exactly.”

Aisling replied, “I’m going to hate this, aren’t I.”

Lance nodded.

“You’re getting me back for the mini-boss comment, aren’t you?”

“No. Of course not. I would never do such a thing. I’m a consummate professional.”

“You’re a consummate chucklehead.”

He laughed again. “Remember that when you’re out on your date.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lance remained mysterious about what he meant for the rest of the evening. The next day, he said, “Well, getting the information we needed from surveillance was Plan A. That didn’t work out, so it’s on to Plan B.”

Aisling asked, “Okay, what’s Plan B, smart guy?”

Mia replied over the room’s speakers. “While you were at the party, I recorded images of everyone there. Since then, we’ve been digging into their backgrounds, trying to figure out who they were. Some we were able to. Others, we weren’t. Those people also weren’t spotted during yesterday’s surveillance. Which begs the question of what they do at the company.”

Lights went on inside Aisling's head. “You think they have something to do with the weapon.”

Lance nodded. “Yes, we do.”

Another connection fired. “Wait. Was the party somehow tied to the weapon?”

He pointed at her. “It’s good to know you’re not only a pretty face and a magic wand. Especially since, you know, the first part is kind of lacking.”

“I will kill you, you know.”

He chuckled, seemingly unafraid. “Sure, sure. Anyway. Yes, we now think the party might have at least involved some discussion about the weapon. It might explain why the vice president was in attendance.”

“Interest in this weapon goes that high?” That was not a happy thought for Aisling.

Lance shook his head. “No. But it’s a fairly common practice to insert important people in a VIP’s retinue. Happens at diplomatic meetings all the time. Those folks can have off-the-record conversations while the figurehead

attracts all the attention.”

Aisling nodded. “All right, I admit it. I’m impressed. From now on, I will consider you mini-boss with a capital M.”

He looked exasperated. “Gee, thanks.”

Mia took over. “We’ve identified three people who were at the party through facial recognition and social media. None of them are publicly connected to the company. Two are men. One is a woman. Since we discovered that we might have to infiltrate the tower, we’ve been doing a deep dive on them. Two are single and use dating services. The third is married but open to infidelity based on his recently accessed profile on a certain website.”

Aisling replied, “Slimy.”

Maria laughed. “I’m guessing he’s mine, then?”

Lance nodded. “You’ve got more experience in this area than Aisling does. I’m sorry, Isla, you’ll be staying home. Our other gentleman has a thing for redheads.” He shifted his attention to Aisling. “You’ll have to suppress your accent, though.”

She switched to her northeastern-charged Midwest American voice. “Not a problem.”

“I get the woman. We’re pretty sure the men will bite for a get-together tonight. At least, that’s what the people pretending to be you all online are saying. The woman is a question. She has a girls’ night out set up for tonight, but she might decide to cancel to see me. I am pretty hot, after all.”

Aisling replied, “In your mind, maybe.”

Maria added, “What little there is of it.”

Lance shook his head sadly. “So rude. So mean. Life sure is lonely when you’re in charge.” His dramatic tone changed back to normal.

“Anyway, assume you’re going out tonight. Either head back and get with wardrobe or go out and buy something new, whatever you prefer. You’ll want to be ready to leave here by about six. The meets will be set up for drinks first with the possibility of dinner since if it was a real date, you’d want the chance to bail if they’re creepy. Of course, you won’t be bailing no matter how creepy they are.”

Maria asked, “Do you expect we’ll have to go all the way with these people?” Aisling hadn’t considered that and wondered how she’d handle it if it were expected.

Fortunately, Lance answered, “No. I mean, if you like them, you do you,

but all we need is information. Being in proximity will give our people the chance to hack their devices. That should, hopefully, be enough.”

Aisling replied, “And if it’s not?”

Lance shook his head. “I don’t have a Plan C ready yet. So, let’s try to make this one work, please.”

Aisling opted to buy something new since her wardrobe was scattered across three different locations at the moment, and she was in none of them. Shimmer pointed out that she could teleport, and she told him to shut his fangy mouth and watch for trouble in the skies above her while she shopped.

She didn’t hit the most expensive outlets, but the one she went to offered her a fancy coffee and the assistance of a salesperson to guide her to the right outfits. It wound up costing a couple hundred dollars for the ensemble, but she looked good enough in it that she felt it was worth the cost. Especially since it wasn’t her money. If all went well, her date would be so busy staring at her exotic beauty that he wouldn’t notice she was electronically robbing him blind, so to speak.

Aisling returned to her room with her purchases. She’d bought appropriate underthings for her pleasure, not because the man she was about to meet had any chance of seeing them. Eddie had been the one in her mind when she’d chosen them, and the thought of her boyfriend brought a smile to her lips. She resisted the urge to call him again and focused on the matter at hand.

She put them on and pulled the dress over her head. It was a darker red than her hair and probably made her look a little more one-note than desirable, but she’d fallen in love with it. The front was low enough to catch the eye but not so low that she’d look like a trollop, and it ended at mid-thigh. She’d have to be careful about how she moved unless she wanted to show off her lingerie to people other than Eddie. But she could manage it with a little thought.

She sat at her vanity and styled her hair, putting enough product in it to keep it where she wanted it, then did her makeup. She applied more than she usually did for a date, but again, not so much that it would look overly obvious. She’d checked out the profile the Dragonfly team had put together for her fictitious persona, and that woman came across as a little more socially daring than her. The makeup and clothing would close the gap between her real self and the persona.

When she finished getting ready, she got down to *really* getting ready.

She'd opted for an over-the-shoulder purse to provide space for the things she wanted to bring. She opened the small bag that held the Dragonfly makeup kit and checked the compact. The sensor disc was in place, hidden under the powder compartment. It was the emergency fallback option if the wireless device they hoped to use didn't get the job done. She'd have to place it on his phone, which meant he would likely have to be incapacitated. *In the case of Maria's date, that might be desirable.*

Her lipstick extended when she twisted it in one direction, and she applied it to her lips. When she twisted the other way, the thin garrote came out. She muttered, "If I need that, I'm pretty screwed already."

Brodie's kit had originally included a mascara brush for the next tools. Her eyelashes weren't impressive enough to warrant carrying it. She opted for another lipstick he'd created for her. If she pressed the small latch on one side, a tab that would induce nausea would pop out. If she pressed the other, a tranquilizer would appear.

Finally, she opened the eye shadow palette. Small capsules hid underneath the paints. One was a poison antidote, another a stimulant, the third a painkiller, and the fourth an adrenaline tab.

Her dress wouldn't permit her to wear the potion packs she usually did so the things might come in handy on this mission. She closed it, threw it back in the bag, and zipped that container. The purse had several small interior pockets, and she slid a healing potion flask disguised as a perfume bottle into it. Combat was unlikely, but going into the field without a potion was stupid. Another small perfume bottle went into another pocket, containing her anti-poison concoction.

A small wallet with her electronic lockpick, credit cards, and cash was already inside the purse. As a final preparation, she put in the pack of gum with infomancer relays inside it. One relay would be active as she entered the meeting place. Ideally, that would be all Mia and Thomas needed to crack into her date's phone.

Aisling went through everything one more time to be sure, then blew out a breath. "All right, I think I'm ready."

Shimmer replied, "Be careful. Don't die."

She swiveled to stare at him. "That's a bit much, don't you think?"

He grinned. "It would be if you weren't so danger-prone."

"I think I hate you."

More laughter. "Nope. You love me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As Aisling's autonomous car pulled up to the curb outside the restaurant her date had chosen for their meeting, she grouched, "This is all your fault, Lance, and I hate you."

He laughed from his car. He would arrive at his date almost simultaneously with her, while Maria had yet to leave for hers, which was starting a half-hour later. Lance sounded like he was anticipating his date when he replied, "Come on, this is the fun part of the job. There was a Bond movie called *The Spy Who Loved Me*, for goodness' sake. Live a little."

The car pulled up at the curb, and Aisling replied, "Yeah, well, your date seems smart and good-looking from her profile. Mine, a little less so."

Maria, who had undeniably drawn the worst date, interjected, "I'm sure it will be great. If it's not, you can always turn to alcohol."

Aisling held the phone to her ear as she walked toward the restaurant, pretending to talk into it. "Yeah, right. Annika is already justifiably irritated with me. Getting drunk on an op probably wouldn't help."

Lance replied, "No, no. The boss is wilder than you give her credit for."

"Really?"

He laughed. "No. I couldn't even keep a straight face on that one when I'm not looking at you."

"I hate you." Aisling entered the restaurant and spotted the bar off to the right. The place was upscale but not overly snobby, with ceiling fans spinning lazily overhead throughout the bar and dining room. The bar was wood and brass and made her think of the tavern she'd been to in Westport with Brianna.

She recognized her date right away but made a show of looking around

the room for him since she didn't want to seem overly bright. The more he underestimated her the better, as long as she got him to commit to dinner so the infomancy team would have time to hack his phone. Finally, he waved, and she smiled, shrugged the purse carrying all of her covert gear a little higher on her shoulder, and walked over to him.

He rose as she arrived, and she stuck out her hand. "Good to see you."

He grasped it and leaned in for a quick kiss on the cheek. "And you. I'm glad you were available tonight."

"Me too. Worked out perfectly." She took her seat, and he reclaimed the one beside her.

He was tall and thin, clean-shaven, with perfectly styled brown hair, green eyes, and no jewelry other than an expensive-looking watch on his wrist. He wore a sports coat and button-down shirt without a tie above a fashionable pair of jeans that probably cost more than her dress. His overwhelming impression was "smooth." She didn't hate him immediately, but her instincts told her not to trust him.

The bartender came over, smiled at them, and asked her, "For the lady?"

She replied, "Boulevardier, please, with a couple of extra cherries."

"Excellent choice." He turned to her date. "Sir?"

Simon replied, "Gin martini, but with just a tiny bit of vermouth. Really more a thought than a reality."

She watched the bartender's face shift into neutral with a hint of tightening around the eyes and mouth. He'd thought the comment was deeply pretentious, too. He replied, "Coming right up."

Simon turned to her. "So, Beverly, what do you do?"

She wondered why the Dragonfly folks had created a persona named Beverly for her. It seemed like a name out of time. She didn't personally know anyone with that name. It had been the right honey to trap this particular fly, though.

"I'm in media. Head of public relations for a large group that owns television and radio stations." Her fake résumé online showed a nomadic history that had taken her across the United States. She hoped he wouldn't ask any questions about where she'd been since this wasn't her country and improvising would be a challenge.

He replied, "Aren't those industries dying?"

She resisted making a sour face at him. It was a fairly rude comment for a first date. "Not really. We're going through changes, of course. It's been that

way forever in our industry. We keep rolling along and figuring out new ways to make money.” She faintly laughed as if to dismiss the topic. “How about you?”

He answered, “Sales. For a large company.”

When he didn’t venture any more information, she asked, “What do you sell?”

His fingers drummed on the bar. “Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that. My clients are generally government and military.”

She made an effort to look impressed. “That’s a hefty clientele. Our government and military?”

He offered a thin smile. She read it as self-satisfied. “Not exclusively.”

Aisling rubbed her fingers together. “Sounds rewarding.”

Simon grinned. Money was a topic he liked. “Could be worse.”

Their drinks arrived, and they spent the next fifteen minutes making small talk about things other than work. At the end of that time, he asked if she’d like to have dinner, and she agreed. She headed for the restroom to freshen up while he took care of getting them a seat.

Aisling touched up her lipstick while waiting for the others in the room to leave, then muttered, “So annoying. Can I please shoot him?”

Isla was back in the living room with Will, watching over the operations. She replied, “Nope.”

“Make him sick?”

“Also no.”

“You people are no fun.” She would’ve liked to know how the other dates were going, but they weren’t connected anymore, only back to the base. There, everything said was also being recorded for later review. Since it wasn’t pertinent to her mission, she didn’t want to ask. “How’s the phone hack going?”

Will came on. “Thomas says not well. You might need to seduce his phone away from him.”

“Eww. In that case, I will knock him out.”

Isla laughed. “No need for such measures quite yet. The infomancers should be able to pick up where they left off when you are next to him again.”

“Okay. I’m heading back in. Pray for me.”

Unexpectedly, dinner turned out to be an enjoyable time. The food was good, and as a salesperson, Simon had a talent for leading a conversation.

They shared some stories, and at least a couple of his rang true to her ears. None of hers were real, although she drew on people she'd known in the past to illustrate hers.

Midway through, Isla whispered in her ear, "We're into his phone. Everything's good. Just keep near him for a while longer while we pull the data."

By the time dessert rolled around, they'd mostly run out of things to say to one another. On the upside, she'd received word that the phone hack was complete and she could let the date end naturally. Will had advised her not to burn any bridges since it was always possible they might need to use him for access.

He suggested an after-dinner drink, but she declined and asked, "Rain check? Maybe tomorrow night?"

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Sure. I'll check my calendar." Aisling figured that was code for "If you're not coming home with me, there won't be a second date." That was okay by her.

Her car arrived as they stepped outside, and she remarked, "That's me." As they'd finished their desserts, she'd stealthily palmed the small tracking pad she planned to tag him with. She'd hoped to put it on his phone, but that hadn't worked out since he'd kept it protectively close throughout the meal. Even showing him cute animal pictures on her phone hadn't resulted in him doing the same for her.

With an internal reluctant sigh, she stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek goodbye. He twisted his head at the last minute and turned it into a kiss. She stumbled, which she'd planned to do anyway, and grabbed his arm for support. As she pretended to fall, she slipped the disc under his watch and pressed it there.

When the kiss broke, she smiled. "Well. That was a lovely end to the evening. I hope I can see you tomorrow night, Simon."

He didn't reply, only opened the car door. He was in position to try to kiss her again, but she ducked past him with a quick turn of her head. He closed the door, and the car pulled away. She leaned back and exhaled a long breath. "How did the others do?"

Isla replied, "As hard as this will be for you to believe, Lance is charming. His date is going well. Maria, on the other hand, is striking out hard."

Aisling closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to be in her bed in the

celebrity's apartment. "Do I need to rescue her?"

Will replied, "She can handle herself just fine. Her guy's phone is downloading, too. You all did very well tonight."

Aisling relaxed. "Good. Let's hope this was all worthwhile. If this is what dating is like in America, I think I'd stay single."

Will and Isla laughed, but it was more *at* her than with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Aisling had stayed awake waiting for Lance to return. Then they'd waited for Maria, who was only a few moments behind him. They'd shared the gory details of the dates, complained about their partners for the evening, and discussed whether they should all be single forever. Lance was the only one who had enjoyed himself. She fell asleep thinking he deserved a solid punch in the face on general principles.

When she made it out to the living room the next morning, everyone else was already there. Will commented, "Good timing. We're starting to get information in."

She poured herself a cup of coffee from the carafe. "What's the deal?"

"All the people you spent last evening with go to the same area each morning, according to the logs we pulled from their cell phones. We have several operators nearby watching for them to figure out exactly which building they're using and how they're getting into it."

Aisling asked Will, "Do you think that's their transport to the base?"

He nodded. "I do. Their top-level execs probably have personal assistants who can portal them. For those below that level but still important, they'd want a one-to-many arrangement with the magicals, I would think."

"I guess I can't complain since it works to our benefit. But it seems inefficient. A magical could pop by each of their places rather than them walking to a central location."

Maria replied, "No thanks. Privacy is a thing."

Lance quipped, "That's what anti-magic emitters are for."

Will added, "Or sonic defense devices," which killed the mood, probably as he'd intended.

Aisling asked, "Did we find anything else useful about them?"

Isla answered, "The areas they work in. Your guy works in sales, Lance's date is in the science department, and Maria's is in 'relationships,' whatever the hell that is."

Maria crossed her arms and declared, "That guy was a scumbag."

Lance replied, "So you've said. Repeatedly. And may I say, venomously."

"I want to shoot him before this is over."

Lance laughed. "Meow." He made a clawing gesture.

Maria glared at him witheringly and added, "And maybe you, too."

Will replied, "Perhaps you'll get your chance." Maria looked at him in question, and he continued. "We're going to try to set up second dates tonight with all three. If we get one, the plan is to have one of you ready to abduct them. That way, we can use them to get into the building, assuming we identify the transport location. That's a Plan C, at least, though."

Isla asked, "What's Plan A? The plans seem to change with some speed."

"Glad you asked. Since no one at the company knows you yet, you get to recon the place today."

An hour later, Isla approached Melliston's skyscraper. She wore a simple blue business suit and white blouse and carried a purse full of innocuous items, including one of the makeup kits all female Dragonfly agents received.

The rest of them clustered around a set of monitors in the living room. Mia was on the comms from Seville and planned to use Isla's cell phone as a link to gather information on the building.

The screens showed the feed from her lens, which allowed them to see everything as if they were right there. She headed for the revolving door entrance to the headquarters and passed through it. As soon as she crossed the threshold, the feed from the lens degraded from crystal clarity to something that looked like an ancient cell phone had recorded it.

Will asked, "Mia? What's the deal?"

The infomancer replied, "Signal degradation. The building must be well shielded."

Aisling replied, "Did we have that problem during the party? I thought we had a good connection."

"Everything was fine during the party."

"So you're saying they might've beefed up their security."

The infomancer confirmed, "Yeah."

Aisling frowned. “Not awesome.”

Isla wasn't included in their conversation to avoid distracting her. She walked across the lobby, her high heels *clicking* on the hard floor, and looked at the security guard when she arrived at the central desk. He was a muscular guy with a thick neck, no facial hair, and a blond military crewcut. He asked, “May I help you?”

Isla's gaze scanned to the left and right, and Aisling figured she was looking for a receptionist. None were evident. The security handled that, too. *Also not great.* Isla said, “I'd like to apply for a job. I guarantee I'll be the best employee Melliston ever had.”

The guard's face softened. She'd put a lot of young enthusiasm in her voice. He replied, “I'm afraid the corporation uses an outside company for all interviewing and hiring. Here's their card.” He reached below the edge of the desk, then slid a small paper rectangle toward her.

Disappointment filled Isla's words. “Well, darn. Okay. Thank you for this.” She turned away, then turned back. “I don't suppose you have brochures or information about the company or anything?”

He reached out of sight again and produced a few promotional brochures. Isla took them. “Thank you so much. I'll take a look at these right away.” She turned away from the desk and walked a few steps, scanning the area. It was notable for its lack of seating. The lobby was wide, two or three stories high, and filled with glass, tile, and metal furnishings. No chairs, couches, or stools.

She turned in a full circle before another guard, this one a woman, walked into her line of sight and instructed, “If you don't have any further business here, ma'am, you'll have to leave.”

Will prompted, “Time to go,” in her ear.

Isla replied to the guard, “Thanks. It's all so overwhelming.” She turned and headed for the exit.

By the time Isla returned, Mia had completed her initial analysis. Her face appeared on the screen as they all gathered around. She said, “Point one. They've increased security since the party. That signal block will be a problem for comms, video, and us trying to hack the place from outside, even once you've placed relays on the inside.”

Will replied, “How do we address that?”

“I'm not sure. I'll come up with something by the time we're ready to act. It will probably require creating a hole in that coverage.” She sounded almost

excited at the prospect of having a problem to solve.

“Second, obviously, the lobby of this place is a veritable nightmare. They have detectors, security, and cameras everywhere. Plus, there wasn’t a building directory anywhere in the lobby, not even an electronic one.”

Isla replied, “I noticed that. I thought it was weird.”

Will countered, “Not from a security perspective. It suggests a general concern with security issues, though.”

Mia said, “I counted two banks of elevators and two staircases in what I saw.”

Isla replied, “Agreed.”

“While it would be optimal to go in through the lobby, that’s out. Also, the security people looked tough.”

Isla agreed. “Very tough. Intimidating, even.”

Aisling interjected, “They had the corporation’s security company logo on their uniforms, so they’re in-house, too. No way to exploit that angle I can think of.”

Isla added, “I saw pistols, Tasers, batons, handcuffs, and a cylinder in a holder that I presume is pepper spray or mace. Also, their shirts fit weirdly, like maybe they have vests underneath. It might be that they’re all super muscular, too.”

Lance observed, “Either way, they should probably be avoided if possible.”

Isla spoke next. “They all had earpieces. Seems like they’re in frequent contact by how quickly they escorted me out.”

Mia concluded, “Given that we can’t use the lobby, your work getting us the location of the transport building will prove instrumental.”

Will remarked, “Plan B it is.”

Aisling asked, “We charge in?”

Will shook his head. “Not during business hours. And there’s no guarantee the portal is manned after hours.”

She thought about that for a second. “So, somebody needs to sneak in through the portal.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Meaning a disguise.”

“Yes.”

Aisling pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers. “It’s me, isn’t it.”

Will nodded again. “Also yes.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Aisling had a picture of the woman she would be impersonating on her phone, which she had propped on her vanity. A disguise kit portaled in from the Dragonfly base also rested on the vanity's glass surface. In addition, she'd spent the day studying the woman's voice patterns and physical gestures gathered during Lance's date the night before.

He had set up a second date with the woman at five-thirty for drinks. They hoped that would get her out of the building by four-thirty, giving Aisling time to get in before five in case the transport closed down then. None of them thought it would, but no one wanted to leave it to chance. Neither she nor Maria had scored an invitation for a second get-together.

Other possibilities for penetrating the building existed, but this was the best. Everyone had breathed a collective sigh of relief when the woman had accepted Lance's invitation, seemingly enthusiastically. Aisling had told Lance to behave, and he'd laughed. "Do you even know me?"

She'd countered, "Well enough to know you're trouble."

Shimmer, who'd stayed mostly in the background since their relocation to LA, had added, "But you're danger-prone." He'd said it in front of the other agents, so now everyone was sprinkling it into conversation whenever they could.

Aisling realized her thoughts were drifting and focused on the moment. The woman's face was similar to hers but more rounded. Her disguise probably wouldn't stand up to a long look from anyone who knew the woman she was impersonating, so she didn't plan to give anyone one. Looking down, or aside, would be key. She applied her makeup to emphasize the roundness, insinuating curves on her cheeks where none existed.

Aisling's hair couldn't be mistaken for the woman's under any circumstance, so they had procured and appropriately styled a wig. Maria had gone out to buy her an off-the-rack suit that matched what the woman wore that day to finish the disguise. She gazed at the phone, then in the mirror, and adjusted the makeup until she thought she had it as good as it was likely to get.

She donned the wig and shifted it around until it was in place. Fortunately, the woman's hair was pretty generic, a sandy blonde with hardly any style she could use to hide her face. Aisling had figured that was the scientist's influence in her, completely focused on the life of the mind. *Maybe that's why she's interested in seeing Lance again. Doesn't get many dates with good-looking men.*

She thought of her date, shuddered, and rose from her vanity to get her purse ready. They had noticed what the woman had carried into the building that morning and had bought the most similar thing they could find nearby. Aisling shoved her makeup kit and the other standard items into it. Pieces of the dart gun went in separate pockets, and the ammunition capsules in yet another, hidden in a container that had once held ibuprofen. She doubted she'd be searched very thoroughly, and none of the items would trigger metal, magic, or explosives detectors.

Next, Aisling changed into the suit and slipped on a pair of shoes she'd gotten from her stash at the base. She headed out into the living room and did a slow turn so everyone could admire her. A few laughs sounded, but people mostly agreed that she looked somewhat like the woman. From the Dragonfly base, Mia said in her ear, "You plan to be careful, right?"

She laughed and muttered, "As careful as I can be." Louder, she urged, "Shall we get this freak show on the road?"

Isla replied, "Lance's date left the building about fifteen minutes ago, so you're all good."

Will followed at a discreet distance as she headed toward the building they'd identified. He was the only one who hadn't been seen around Melliston personnel or property, so he was the only logical choice for her immediate backup. The others were pulling together equipment and getting things ready for the operation they all hoped would happen later that evening. The first step, the most important step, was up to her.

She would have preferred a magical disguise but couldn't risk it. When they'd been discussing the reasoning behind the transport location, they'd

talked about it being a security issue. She had to assume there would be detectors at one end, the other, or both. She turned the corner toward the building and noticed the keypad immediately. She muttered, “Do we know her code?”

Mia replied, “Use the card.”

She took out her wallet and pressed the credit card-sized electronic lock pick against it. The door released a moment later, and she pulled it open and walked inside displaying a confidence she didn’t feel. The outside of the space had made it look like a garage, all gray cinderblock with only a single metal door. The inside was clean, sterile, and notably utilitarian.

A couple of padded chairs sat near the center of the room, one occupied. Guards in identical uniforms and gear to those inside the skyscraper leaned against the wall on the left and right walls. The man in the middle was dressed in street clothes and rose at her appearance. He smiled. “Forget something, Ms. Saunders?”

Aisling nodded, waved as if to display how forgetful she was, and did her best to imitate the other woman’s voice, something she’d practiced all afternoon. “Yeah. Too much stuff in my head, I guess.”

“You sound a little throaty. Maybe watch out. There’s a nasty cold going around.”

She ducked her head and forced herself to cough. “Thanks for the advice.” He circled his wand and opened a portal. She walked through with a wave and entered a small room. A keypad adorned the wall beside the space’s single door, but it was otherwise empty. Once the portal collapsed behind her, she pressed her key card against the number pad.

Once again, the lock pick did its work. She passed through, immediately feeling the suffocating sensation of losing her magic. She was in a hallway and encountered her next obstacle. It was entirely unlabeled, with nothing around to give her any indication of where she was. She growled, “Damn. Anything useful you can give me?”

Her earpiece sounded hollow, and some words dropped out, but she got the message that she was on the third floor and the security office was in the basement. She assumed that either Mia had broken into the directory system, which wouldn’t be all that well guarded, or that they’d decided to abduct the woman Aisling was imitating and got the information from her. She hoped it was the former. “Good enough.”

She walked along, again noting the small lights in the doorframes. When

she found one that was empty and somewhat isolated at the end of a hallway, she held up her card to the keypad and moved inside. The office looked like one that remote workers used when they came in for a day since it lacked any personal touches. It also had no computer, although it had connections for one. She checked the drawers and the single cabinet but found nothing of use.

The chair looked comfortable enough, and Aisling sat in it and closed her eyes. She fell into a light meditative state with her senses still ready to react to anything that might trigger them but otherwise relaxed. The lack of focus might cost her a second of reaction time, but this was only the prelude to the main event, and she needed to conserve her energy for when it counted.

At nine o'clock, several of the building's patterns she'd become accustomed to changed all at once. The ventilation system sounded different. The lights in the hallways dimmed or turned off, and an almost insubstantial hum simmering in the background stopped. If that hadn't been enough to signal that the building was going into secure mode, the fact that even the slight hiss of the connection in her earpiece vanished told her they'd locked the facility down even more tightly than it had been earlier. She muttered, "Time to get to work."

Aisling opened her purse and stashed all the items in the pockets of her outfit in case the next part didn't go as planned. Then she assembled the small dart thrower and loaded a stun capsule. Finally, she cracked open the door and waited for someone to notice and care.

After about fifteen minutes she heard footsteps approaching. She'd hoped for one guard, but two were patrolling together from the sound of it. She couldn't see them from her position behind the door, tucked into the corner of the room. One entered the room, the light flicked on, and his hand curled around the door in preparation to pull it aside and reveal her. She slammed into the door and knocked it against the guard in the room. He stumbled and fell, but she sacrificed the advantage it gave her to grab the one standing in the hallway by the front of his shirt and yank him inside.

He tried to resist, but she had surprise and leverage. Once he was in, she kicked the door closed, fired her stun dart at the one down, and punched the second in the side of the neck. He gagged and fell to his knees, which gave her time to load a tranquilizer dart and shoot it into his face. He went down too, and she spent several seconds focused on calming her breathing. Then she took the earpiece out of his ear and put it in hers. She stripped the other guard's comm too.

She half expected and wholly dreaded that she would hear alarms going off, but it sounded like business as usual on the channel. Quiet voices reported in, and the routine nature of it reassured her that she hadn't been discovered and warned her that when these two failed to report in on time, things would likely get dicier.

“Well, waiting isn't going to make it any better.” Aisling took the stuff out of her suit pockets, set it on the desk, and got to work stripping the uniform off the smaller guard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Every second of the many that it took Aisling to change into the guard's uniform irritated her. Everything was a little big on her, and she had to do a set of clever folds and tucks into the equipment belt to ensure that fact wasn't noticeable. The boots were okay, thankfully, once she'd stolen the socks from both men.

The gun and Taser were on the belt in case someone saw her but were useless to her since they were handprint locked. At least the baton and pepper spray might come in handy depending on what she encountered.

She stuck the rest of her stuff into the uniform's assorted pockets, loaded the dart thrower with her remaining shock blast since it required a less precise aim than the tranquilizer, and exited the room. She used the guard's ID to lock it behind her. The guard she'd shocked had gotten a dose of tranquilizer to take him out the rest of the way, which she thought meant she would have twenty to thirty minutes before either of them woke up. It wasn't a lot of time, but it would have to do.

Despite the fact that the building had locked down for the night, she presumed it could go into a further level of security, and she needed to have her allies inside before that happened. She resisted running, as much as she wanted to, and located the stairs leading down to the next level. She walked past it, pretending to check the rooms and look around in case the cameras overhead were watching her, then returned and used her ID to open the door.

If she were lucky, no one would remember that she should have a partner. Or realize she probably wasn't making her assigned rounds. Ideally, no one would notice her. She hoped the nighttime security crew would be lax, tired, distracted, or all three. Her circuit of the second floor pretending to patrol it

revealed nothing useful, and she bypassed the lobby level on the way to the basement. *If I'm supposed to patrol the lobby, I'm burned because I don't have time.* Her mental clock continued to tick the seconds of safety away in her head.

The doors to that level were heavier than those above, but the first she came to still succumbed to the guard's ID and opened without a problem. Aisling breathed a sigh of relief as she entered the corridor because unlike the floors above, this one had signs stenciled on the white-painted cinderblock walls. Two arrows pointing in the same direction told her where to go, one reading "Locker room," the other saying "Main." She presumed that meant the primary security station and walked that way.

She came to the locker room first and darted inside. Her skin had been crawling with a sense of imminent danger for too long. *This sneaking around is for the birds. Give me a real fight any day.*

An entryway split into men's and women's areas, and she followed the arrow for the latter. The locker room was pretty standard, on the small side but with oversized lockers capable of handling the vests the security guards wore under their shirts.

Aisling pulled out her toolkit, quickly picked the lock on one of the lockers, and opened it. A moment later, an unexpected voice from the back of the room said, "I don't recognize you."

She controlled her breathing and turned with a smile. A woman had wandered in from the back of the room wearing civilian clothes. Aisling replied, "I just transferred in. Only the best of the best here at HQ, right?"

The other woman laughed. "Right. Well, have a good night. See you around."

Aisling exhaled as the other woman left the room and seriously considered going after her to knock her out. Leaving that thought aside as being born of panic, she picked a couple more locks, but all offered the same results—nothing useful. Uniforms, standard body armor, standard weapons with handprint locks. She'd hoped for something that would give an advantage and muttered, "Fine. Guess we'll go with what we've got."

She stepped back into the entryway and stuck her head around the corner into the men's locker room. No one was present. She would've taken them out if they had been since she was fairly sure no cameras were active in the locker rooms. At least, she couldn't see any.

Aisling headed back into the hallway and walked toward the main

security office. It was simply a metal door set in the cinderblock when she found it. She'd hoped for windows. Hell, she'd hoped to find it unlocked, the door open, and no one inside. She drew a deep breath and raised her ID to the door. It failed to unlock, and she cursed as she dug in a pocket for her Dragonfly lockpick. That one opened the door.

She pulled it and stepped inside. She saw more or less what she'd expected to see. Two technicians sat with their backs to her in front of a security console with abundant buttons, levers, and built-in keyboards. In front of them was a wall with one enormous monitor segmented into many smaller boxes. Cameras throughout the building, she presumed.

Aisling hadn't expected the two guards flanking the door. They were already reacting to her presence as she fired the tranquilizer dart at the nearest technician and ran for the other one. She got to him before his reflexes caught up to the moment and kicked his chair over to knock him away from the desk. He hit the floor hard, and she followed up with a kick to his groin to keep him down.

She spun and launched herself toward the nearest guard. He'd reached for his Taser, which a corner of her mind thought was a notable lack of respect on his part. She caught his hand as he was bringing it up. Behind him, the other guard was moving deeper into the room, possibly to get a better line on her or trigger an alarm. Either way, she had to deal with him right away.

She lifted the guard's arm, ducked under it, and wrenched it around to bring the Taser in line with the other guard, pointed upside down in her guard's grip. Her finger squeezed the guard's, and the darts struck the other man's throat. He shuddered as the electricity coursed into him, then fell to one knee with the spacey look of someone going into shock.

The guard beside her twisted and smashed an elbow into the back of her head. It wasn't a hard blow because the angles weren't perfect, but it was enough to make her release her grip on his hand. She chopped at his throat, but he blocked it with a rising strike. It would've been better for her if he'd gone for his gun, but instead he stepped back into a fighting stance to block her next punch.

This time, he held onto her arm and yanked her forward toward an elbow strike. She fell to her knees to avoid the blow and punched his kneecap. He twisted and took the blow on the side of the joint, which saved it from breaking, then brought his foot up in a short kick that caught her on the chin. Stars exploded across Aisling's vision, and she gasped in pain. She refused to

pass out and threw herself against his legs, driving him backward.

She didn't stop until he hit the wall. Then she rose to her feet. She threw a kick into the side of the Tased guard's head to stop the stirring that suggested he might be coming back to the world. The delay allowed her opponent to connect with a front kick to her chest. The bulletproof vest absorbed much of the blow. Aisling spat blood at her foe courtesy of his prior kick to her face, and he recoiled reflexively.

She darted in and shot her right hand out for his throat. He reflexively brought both of his in to block it, and she delivered a ridge hand strike with her left hand to his temple. He staggered, and she repeated the strike, then did it again to take him to the floor. She shook out her hand and swore at him, then dug in her pockets for her lipstick. Thirty seconds later, all of them were tranquilized.

Aisling sat at the computer terminal and poked through the menus as best she could. She'd gotten spoiled by infomancers handling this part of the job and felt rusty as she searched. Finally, she found what she was looking for—controls for the facility's anti-magic emitters.

Her hopes of being able to employ her magic immediately were dashed as she discovered that this console only had control of the one in the reception room she'd entered. She closed her eyes in annoyance, pushed all the bad thoughts up and out of her head, and hit the button to deactivate it. She pulled out an infomancer relay and attached it to the underside of the desk, then put another one under the chair for good measure.

Before leaving, she used the three pairs of handcuffs to bind the four people together in as good a pretzel as she could manage in the short time she had. She entered the hallway, pulled the door closed, and headed to the locker room. Once there, she washed the blood off her face, made sure she wouldn't look out of the ordinary to anyone she came across, and headed back to where she'd entered the building.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Aisling arrived at the transport chamber without further incident. She'd heard a guard patrol on the floor but had delayed until she'd heard the stairwell door open, fretting every second. She used her ID to enter the room and closed the door behind her. The feeling of the anti-magic emitters falling away was like a gorilla climbing off her chest and finally allowing her to breathe freely. She magically extended her senses to listen for trouble from the hallway and opened a portal to the apartment's living room.

The others were waiting right where they should be. Will watched from the monitor setup, there to be a liaison with the base and exercise operational control as needed. The others were armed and armored for combat. Maria tossed a duffel at Aisling's feet as she came through. Aisling looked for Shimmer and found him at the back of the line with only one person trailing him. That person was a complete surprise. She asked, "Mia, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Remember when I said I'd come up with a solution to that signal problem? Well, I wasn't sure we'd have enough connection to do it from outside. So, here I am. Thomas will work with whatever signals can pass through this portal. Or, rather, the one that the magical who will join us shortly will keep open for us."

"Will the anti-magic emitters be a problem?"

The other woman frowned. "I'm not sure. Certainly they'll have an impact. I'll be at a disadvantage to my normal prowess if I can't influence the simulation." She chuckled darkly. "A lot of what I do is technological, and my magic is kind of in my blood and bones. Hopefully it'll be sufficient. If I prove to be a burden, I'll hide in the back and whimper a lot."

“Perfect.” Aisling knelt to unzip her duffel. Inside it was all of her proper equipment for the attack on Melliston’s skyscraper. “What happened at nine o’clock?”

Mia answered, “The whole place went totally signal silent. Not a peep leaking through. They’re not screwing around with their security.”

“Hooray for the increased degree of difficulty. Do we know where to go from here to find the damn schematics?”

Mia moved to the wall and sat with her back against it. “Not yet. But we will.”

Mia had never operated quite like this before. She’d done hacks in the field, but not against such a secure system and not without better equipment. Her remote gear at the old Dragonfly base had been out of date, but at least it had been put together with careful intention. The one in her backpack was cobbled together with what she’d stashed away and what was available at the new base, plus several off-the-shelf components.

Her magic connected with it, and she instructed the system to seek out the wireless system that must be present in the building so she could start her hack. After several seconds she realized that as ridiculous as it sounded, there wasn’t one. She opened her eyes and stood. “There’s no wireless network. At all. It’s like we’ve regressed a century in the name of paranoia. I need to find a physical port.”

Aisling replied, “I saw one in the office I was in. Maybe all the offices have them?” She grabbed the uniform shirt she’d removed from the floor, pulled something off it, and tossed it to Mia. It was an ID card on an extendable line. “That should get you in.”

Mia nodded. “Rock?”

Lance pointed at Maria, “Scalpel, go with her.”

Maria responded, “You got it, boss,” and headed for the door.

They walked down the hall to the nearest entrance and opened it with the ID tag. A standard connection cord rested on the desk.

Mia pulled an extension from her backpack and plugged it in. A moment later, she was in the login area. Normally, her magic made it appear like a fancy Victorian living room. Today, it was a blank room with a heavy steel

door at the end, nothing Victorian about it.

The door had no handle, keypad, or visible lock, nothing she could interface with. Mia shifted her visual mode to display what was happening inside the walls, like an X-ray. A single electrical path connected the door to a spot in the right-side wall. Mia pushed on that spot, and a panel slid aside to reveal a keypad.

In the real world, she had inserted code to detect what type of input the system wanted. Her fingers flew much faster than any real ones could as she input code after code into the pad. When she found a proper partial sequence, the system communicated that information with a small trembling under her fingertips. It took a long time subjectively for her to hit upon the proper eight digits, but only a dozen or so seconds in the real world.

The simulation's door opened to reveal a corridor much like the one she'd walked through to get to the room. She felt the touch of Thomas' presence in the wireless component of her system a moment before he spoke in her earpiece. "I'm here, but I don't have enough bandwidth to join you in the simulation."

Mia replied, "Not a problem. It's stupid in here."

He chuckled darkly. "Why? Science fiction again?"

"No. Not a bit of style. A skyscraper like the one we're actually in." Among infomancers, making your simulation the same as the real place it represented was considered deeply lazy or a sign of an uncreative mind.

"All the better for you to tear it to shreds."

"I guess we'll see. Everything feels weird." She walked down the virtual corridor and entered a virtual office that looked almost exactly like the one her real-world body was in. The only difference was that this one had a computer. She sat down and quickly bypassed the login request. She called up a directory of the building, examined it, and scowled. "Public version. Ghost floors."

Thomas replied, "Come on, Wraith, you can do better than that."

A few moments later, she had the full directory for the building downloaded to her system. She logged out of the simulation, disconnected her cable, and pulled a special infomancer relay out of her pocket. Wearing the full body armor and uniform was a new experience for her, and it took her a few extra seconds to find what she needed. The device wasn't only a relay. It generated a wireless signal.

When she searched for a wireless signal again, she found it. She stepped

into the system again, entered the code, and stopped, able to move on when she wanted to. Without logging out, she told Maria they could return and followed her to the transport room. On the way, she advised, “Thomas, you should be able to get into my wireless network.”

“I see it. I’ll start working on compromising the system.”

“Excellent.”

Aisling finished pulling on her equipment, shoved the guard’s uniform in her duffel bag, and threw it through the new portal the Dragonfly transport wizard had created for them. Instead of linking back to the living room, it connected to the cellar of the Seville base, presumably to give Thomas the least complicated access to the computer network.

Lance told the wizard, “If there’s any sign of trouble, you’re through the portal and closing it, got me?” The man nodded.

Aisling was ready to fight. Her rifle’s strap was around her neck and shoulder, and she had her pistol and dart pistol at her belt. She’d slipped on potion packs at shoulders and knees as she’d changed and had more flasks on her belt, plus her swords and the canister that held Brodie’s sensor spheres, which he’d upgraded to interfere with electronics as promised.

She’d strapped armor plates at her thighs, shins, forearms, and upper arms. A bulletproof vest finished her protection and held extra mags for her weapons. The dart pistol had one of each kind of dart inside it. She wasn’t sure it would be useful but hoped they could get through the place without killing if they could avoid it. With that in mind, she asked Lance, “Rules of engagement?”

He gave her the most serious look he ever had. “The boss thinks this is worth doing whatever is necessary short of blowing up the building.”

“She’s very committed to this.”

He managed a thin smile. “Dragonfly has always worked in the gaps left over by other agencies. This is no different. Unless there’s an all-magical intelligence agency somewhere that we don’t know about. If there is, say so, and we’ll all go home and leave you to it.”

The idea sparked a dark laugh. “No. Not that I’ve been invited to be a part of, anyway. And, you know, you’d think they’d want someone as awesome

as I am.”

“Damn. I was hoping.”

Mia came back into the room, and everyone turned to her. She announced, “The stuff we want is on the forty-second floor.”

Aisling flashed her friend a lopsided smile. “Where they store life, the universe, and everything?”

Mia’s expression matched hers. “Exactly.” The infomancer apparently saw something she didn’t like in the faces of the others in the room. “OMG people. Read a book.”

Aisling knelt beside Shimmer and murmured, “Okay, buddy. I need you to watch out for Mia. She’ll doubtless be distracted with virtual stuff, and even though her exoskeleton gives her skills, she’s not practiced with them yet. She might find herself in trouble as we go along.”

The dragon replied, “Will do. You take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

“Promise me.”

She chuckled. “I promise, Dad.”

Shimmer said, “I’m only worried because you’re so—”

Aisling closed her hand over his muzzle. “I swear to you, if you say it, I’m gonna blast you with electricity until it overloads your absorption and shuts you down.”

Shimmer stopped talking, but his eyes were laughing at her. Lance interjected, “All right, people. Let’s move out. Sparks, you’re on point. Then me. Then Wraith and Shimmer. Scalpel and Coal, you’ve got rear guard for the moment.”

He hefted a duffel bag that had been delivered while they waited. “We’ve got the climbing gear. Our destination is the elevator shaft. Wraith, if you can get control of them, send the elevators to the bottom and leave them there. That should make life a little more difficult for anyone trying to get to us. Any questions?” He didn’t wait for a response. “Good. Move.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Aisling led her teammates out into the hall, her rifle swiveling to cover each access to the hallway as they moved along it. The guard's radio earpiece was still in her ear, but it had gone silent without a carrier signal. She assumed they'd noticed something was up and had begun locking down the building to an even greater extent, which probably meant extra security measures.

As much as she hoped not to hurt anybody, the company that made the weapon was the same company that provided the security. Her conscience would be clear, assuming the other people tried to kill them first. She was fairly sure their rules of engagement would be immediately lethal.

The elevator was several turns away, but they reached it without incident. Mia muttered, "Elevator cars are at the bottom. I put a hold on them but can't guarantee it will last. No sign of any unexpected openings of doors on any floors."

Lance ordered, "Scalpel, Coal, get the doors open. Sparks, Shimmer, guard."

She and Shimmer each moved to one side of the others, where they could cover the hallways in front of the elevators, one to the left, one to the right, and one down the middle. Metal struck the floor with a muted *clang* as Lance and Mia pulled the climbing equipment out of the duffel bag and assembled the pieces.

When the attack came, it did so without warning. One minute, she was flicking her gaze back and forth from the center aisle to the hallway on her side, seeing no danger, and the next, attackers ran into all three corridors at once. Aisling snapped, "Contact," and raised her rifle but delayed pulling the

trigger.

The guards reacted at the same moment and two got shots off before she could respond. The bullets missed her and her allies as everyone dropped to the floor. *All right, they fired first.* She pulled the trigger repeatedly with her rifle at floor level. The first guard on the side went down quickly. The second jumped to avoid the flurry but landed before it was over and joined his partner on the floor.

More gunfire sounded from behind as her teammates took care of the ones in the central corridor. She spun in time to see Shimmer breathe electricity over his pair. They shuddered and fell. Aisling grabbed the lipstick from her pocket and put tranquilizer slips in the mouths of the guards, all of whom were only wounded. She took a second to tie a belt around a leg that was bleeding hard and observed, “Well, they’re not out to capture us.”

Maria replied, “Would you be if you saw a bunch of people with rifles in our base?”

“Maybe if I had my magic.”

The other agent laughed. “We don’t all have such choices, you know?”

Aisling had to admit that was entirely understandable. “I get it. Rock, are we ready to roll?”

His voice held a note of appreciation for the stupid joke. “Yep. Let’s get those doors open.” Maria and Isla did so, and Lance took the custom rifle and shot a grapnel with a line attached up into the shaft. He fitted two more, one after the other, and launched them into the shaft. Then he threw the weapon over his shoulder. “Let’s go. Next stop, floor forty-two.”

Aisling was the last to clip herself on the line as she stood rearguard. More security appeared at the far end of the corridor as the line pulled her into the shaft and out of their sight. She called, “Wraith, close the doors.”

Mia muttered, “I’m on it.”

The gunplay had shaken Mia, although she’d done what she could not to show it. She hadn’t known how to react when the fighting began and was relieved that her decision to drop to the floor had turned out to be a popular one.

Her mind was bifurcated, part of it paying attention to her immediate

surroundings while the rest worked to deepen her access in the virtual space. At Aisling's request, she focused on the requirement of the moment. She'd been negotiating access to each subsystem as she encountered it, moving from one to the next along the path of least resistance.

She hadn't yet made it into the transportation and security functions of the building, although she'd mapped their locations. Now she threw herself into them as the rope attached to her equipment belt pulled her upward. She closed the eye without the lens as the dizziness of the doubled motions threatened to overwhelm her. Her avatar ran up several floors on the virtual staircases without encountering any opposition. When she reached the floor she sought, home to control of the elevators, doors, and office monitoring, her avatar skidded to a halt at the sight of the guards dashing toward her.

She reached for her belt, pulled the large pistol from its drop holster, and fired it at the guards. They looked exactly like the ones in the real world, which again spoke of laziness or a lack of creativity by the enemy infomancers. They went down quickly, which told her she was still fighting bots.

She didn't imagine that would last much longer. Aisling had knocked out several people before they'd arrived. Those people would wake up before long and shout the alarm. That would mean serious opposition, both physical and virtual.

She dashed down the hallway and kicked open the door. Inside, two people sat at a security station. She pulled the trigger and shot them both. Like the guards in the hall, they evaporated into pixels. She took a step forward, and iron bars slammed down to seal her into the back portion of the room. She barked a curse and reported, "Internal defenses are active."

Thomas sounded scratchy. "Infomancers?"

"Not here yet. I'm guessing they're on their way."

"I can't help you. I don't have the connection."

"Do what you can. The more systems we can get into, the greater our chances of success in the end."

"You got it. Be careful."

She raised her arm and activated one of her built-in gadgets with a thought. An arm panel popped up and a laser beam shot out of it. She swept the line of energy across the iron bars in front of her and cut away the lower section. Then she turned and did the same around the door to ensure her escape route. Once she finished, she retracted the laser, ducked under the

front bars, and accessed the system. “Okay. I’ve got the elevator door. Locking down everything. Wiping the registry so the doors won’t open to anyone’s ID.”

Thomas replied, “Got it. I’ll keep chipping away at it.”

Mia dashed out of the room and headed for the staircase to hide. She couldn’t afford to log out and lose her foothold in the system but needed to shift her focus to the real world to share her information.

Mia reported, “The elevator doors are locked down. I’ve also crashed the system that controls the other door codes. It means we’ll have to force any door we want to use, but it also keeps them from moving around.”

Lance replied, “We brought plenty of boom. That’s no problem.” They each stepped onto one of the beams in the shaft at the forty-second floor and unclipped the grapnel lines.

Then Maria took an almost paper-thin camera attached to a cable from her belt and pushed it through the smallest opening Lance could make by pulling on the door.

She advised, “We’ve got company waiting for us inside. It’s a single corridor running directly away from the doors. Guards in weird uniforms with big helmets holding heavy weapons. They know we’re coming based on their deployment.”

Lance quipped, “Guess they figured out what we’re here for. Point to them.”

Aisling replied, “Let’s make up that shortfall with some points of our own. What’s the plan?”

Lance replied, “Here’s what we’ll do. Scalpel and I will pull the doors open. Shimmer will be our first wave. He’s bulletproof, right?”

Aisling winced. She hated the idea, but it made sense. Before she could answer, Shimmer interjected, “I’m right here, you know.”

Lance lifted a hand in apology. “Sorry, you’re bulletproof, right?”

Aisling answered, “To a degree. But he is fully backed up, so even if he’s destroyed, we won’t lose him. However, if that happens, you need to build a fabrication lab or rent one, fast, so I can get him back.”

“Will do. Can you tell what kind of weapons they have, Scalpel?”

“Other than big? No. These people look like some type of sci-fi soldiers.”

Aisling suggested, “Maybe they’ve got electronics in there. I’ll toss one of my spheres ahead of Shimmer. Might give us an advantage.”

Lance nodded. “Worth a try. You follow the dragon since you’ll know best what he might do. Then Scalpel and me. Coal, you’re keeping Wraith safe.”

Mia muttered, “I’ll keep this door open if I can.”

Lance replied, “Good. Do that. Everybody ready?”

“Yep,” Shimmer replied. Aisling echoed it.

“Here we go.” They yanked on the door, and it slid open.

Knowing that she had time before she would have to engage with the real world again, Mia focused on the virtual. Her avatar ran up several more levels in search of the next area she needed to infiltrate, the system in control of the building’s static defenses. She emerged from the stairwell on the appropriate floor and a pair of different guard types with large black helmets immediately set upon her. It reminded her of their previous hacking effort against the company.

It also looked exactly like what Maria had described in the hallway. They carried large weapons with big barrels. She imagined the suits might have some mechanical support to assist with them. A massive slug slammed into the wall near her head as they fired, and she dove for the floor and slithered around the corner.

Mia drew her pistol, drew a deep breath, and leaned out again. The guards were advancing toward her. She fired into their feet, having seen Aisling do so successfully a short time before. They fell onto their stomachs but didn’t vanish. She popped up and shot at their helmets as she ran toward them, but the bullets ricocheted.

The pair rose, and she jumped onto one of their backs. She grabbed the helmet, yanked it up, and saw a hint of cloth underneath. She fired through it, and the guard fell motionless. The other one whipped an arm around that caught her in the chest. It sent her flying, and she slammed into the wall a dozen feet away and slid down it.

She grabbed a tiny grenade from her belt, primed it, and threw it. It

exploded on impact at his feet and knocked him down. He didn't get up again. She wiped the blood off her mouth as she regained her feet, then turned and froze. Two large robot dogs with weapons bristling on their backs stood before her. She turned and ran for her virtual life, positive that these were the enemy infomancers she had anticipated.

As the doors finished opening, Mia warned, "Be careful. Dogs."

Aisling didn't know what that meant. Shimmer was flying down the hallway in front of her with his wings spread wide to protect her advance behind him. She'd already grabbed one of the spheres and threw it as soon as she thought she was close enough.

She screamed in surprise when a massive slug hit the dragon's wing and sent him careening into the wall and down to the floor. She hurled the other sphere like an attack, raised her rifle, and fired. As her bullets ricocheted from their armor, she growled, "Not good," and dropped her barrel to stitch a line of shots down the guard from head to foot, hoping for one to catch something unprotected. Again, the effort failed.

At that moment, the spheres pulsed and sent out their electrical disruption signal. All four guards stiffened simultaneously, and their next shots went wild into the floor, walls, and ceiling. The latter exploded a light and rained glass on the floor. Aisling growled, "Thank you, Brodie," jumped over Shimmer, who was struggling to his feet with one of his wings broken and dangling, and jump-kicked the first guard.

He went down backward, and she landed on top of him and wrenched his rifle away. It was ridiculously heavy, but all her enemies were prone, making them easy targets. She pointed it at his faceplate and was about to pull the trigger when she realized they weren't moving. She threw the weapon aside with a laugh.

"You do have electronics in there, don't you? How unlucky for you." She pulled their helmets off and forced tranquilizer tabs into their mouths as the others joined her. When she finished, she stored the lipstick in its pocket and looked at Mia. "Which way do we go from here?"

The infomancer raised a finger and pointed behind Aisling. "Through them."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Shimmer's head snapped up at Mia's words. The slug had dramatically damaged him, breaking the skeletal pieces in his right wing and dozens of scales. The unexpected injury had taken several seconds to process before he'd tried to get up. Then it took several more seconds before his system calculated the necessary adjustments to deal with the balance difference caused by his damaged limb.

The sight of the robot dogs at the end of the hallway sent cold worry cascading through his circuits. If someone had set out to design killing machines that looked exactly like what they were, these might have been the result. The four-legged, low-slung creatures were made entirely of shining black and silver metal. Gun barrels protruded on their backs and either side of their heads, which showed wicked fangs on the open jaws. He instinctively knew they would be fast, well-armored, and lethal, which left him only one real option.

Shimmer threw himself at them as fast as he could run, his claws gouging the floor as he charged. The first bullets they fired slammed into his torso. Fortunately, the rounds were smaller than the slugs, but they were still bigger than pistol ammunition. Each one damaged the scales it hit, but Brodie's design allowed them to spread the damage to avoid allowing the bullet to penetrate, and they did their job well.

A corner of his brain marked off the damaged scales as it always did, and after a moment he laughed inwardly. It would take a miracle to get out of this fight with any part of his body intact. He feigned jumping into the air, and both dogs lifted their heads and shot at where they assumed he would be. Instead, he hurled himself across the floor in a slide. He clamped his jaws

around the leg of one to stop his momentum underneath it and slashed at the other one.

One of Aisling's spheres rolled by but unfortunately did nothing to affect the dogs. His systems were hardened against interference. Theirs must be too. He clawed the thing's belly, but the armor was as thick as everywhere else. The dog whipped its head from side to side, trying to get at him, but Shimmer stayed underneath it.

He shifted fully onto his back, wrapped his claws around its torso and dug in, then started chewing on its underside. One way or another, he would get through its armor. All he needed was a small hole, and he could blast its insides with fire. Surely that couldn't be too difficult to achieve.

Aisling and the other agents backpedaled at the sight of the dogs. They were about the size of German Shepherds, and they struck an instant fear deep into her belly. Her bullets were accomplishing nothing against them, and with Shimmer that close, she hoped the others would refrain from throwing whatever grenades they carried. She shouted, "Any ideas?"

Lance called, "Wraith said we have to get through them."

Maria replied, "Keep firing." A moment later, she went down as a barrage of bullets slammed into her chest. Aisling growled, settled her sights on the left one's eye, and held down the trigger of her rifle. When she'd spent her entire magazine, the dog was still unaffected. "Bloody hell."

Lance called, "Grenade," and a canister flew down the hallway and clattered on the floor.

Shimmer heard Lance's warning. He coiled up in a circle on the floor, wrapping his legs and body around his damaged areas as best he could. The explosion came a moment later, sending out a wave of fire followed by a hail of metal shards. When it was over, he threw himself awkwardly to his feet and saw that the explosion had been enough to penetrate the dogs' armor in several places. With an inward victory cry, he breathed fire on both of them.

Mia smiled as Shimmer's attack caused the two robots to seize up and stop moving. Something happened inside them, and one stayed frozen while the other fell over smoking. Her happiness was short-lived, however. Two more dogs roughly twice the size of the ones they'd fought emerged around the far corner of the hallway and started firing. The agents dove to the floor. Isla dragged her down with them.

Mia threw herself into the virtual space, knowing that her team could never take out the new arrivals before they got taken out by them. She had finally analyzed enough of the system to be able to act rather than react. She switched to code view, which allowed her to see the simulated elements around her with the code that created them superimposed inside.

She altered some of that code to make the walls permeable. She stepped inside it and stopped. It was a delicate operation, immersion like this. If one of the infomancers found her in this position, she would be unlikely to fight free. While being dumped out of the system wouldn't likely be damaging to anything other than her ego, maintaining her presence was beneficial for their attack on the company.

Once inside the code, she could skip from section to section in the system more easily. She traveled through the walls and furniture until she encountered the dogs again. Then she jumped inside one of them. She landed in a featureless white room with an infomancer standing there as if he'd been waiting for her.

He was all black and silver like the dog had been, a robot. Everything about him was utterly still until he exploded into motion toward her, seemingly intent on beating her to death, given his lack of weapons.

Mia drew her pistol and fired four shots, three into his torso and one into his head. None had any effect. She shoved the pistol into its holster and spun away from his first punch. He twisted with superhuman speed and launched another. Her block was a little later than it should have been, but she deflected it. She would have earned a bruise or a fracture from the impact in the real world.

He punched again, and she redirected it away without meeting his force with hers, which put her on the defensive. The fight went on for several seconds without revealing any clue about how to break the impasse. Then Mia realized what she'd have to do.

Without taking time to think about it, she jumped into *his* code. Fighting inside his avatar was as uncomfortable a hack as she'd ever done, requiring her to adjust everything on the fly. None of her prebuilt programs were adequate as they were but had to be customized as she fought against his efforts to kick her out.

Slowly, *slowly*, she wrestled away his control of the avatar and thus his accesses inside the system. When she had it, and before he could break the connection, she used it to jump into the code that controlled all the dogs in the facility. She didn't have time for anything subtle, so she did the electronic equivalent of reaching in, grabbing a handful of cables, and yanking them. Her eyes snapped open to see what her efforts had accomplished.

Aisling had charged the new, larger dogs, not knowing what else to do. She skidded to a stop as they turned on one another, snarling and biting. She shouted, "Wraith, which way?"

Mia stumbled forward and went down on one knee, then refocused on the world around her. "Up ahead to the right. Blow the door. That's the lab we want."

They all raced in that direction. Lance rigged the door, then blew it open. They all rushed inside, eager to escape the insane scuffle between the robotic canines. The room they entered was huge. Computer consoles were positioned around the outsides, easily forty or fifty of them if her quick count held up, and lab tables marched down the middle. Robot arms hung from the ceiling over each table. The space was almost more like an auditorium than a lab and had a raised platform in the center, where presumably someone could address the group or watch over them.

A man in a charcoal suit stood on that platform, someone Aisling recognized from the party. A bigwig from the company, if she remembered right. Someone whose affiliation with Melliston was public knowledge. He didn't seem shocked at their arrival, and his lack of fear set off warning bells in her head. Her gaze met his as she reached for the dart pistol to tranquilize him. He smiled, and it was a grin of victory.

Electricity suddenly crackled all around them as a stun field deployed. Her comrades went down one after the next according to their resistance.

Aisling was one of the last to fall, but she couldn't stand against it without her magic. Even Shimmer succumbed, probably because of his damaged scales.

The man chuckled as he left the platform and walked toward them. Aisling found it hard to track his movements through the sensory overload she'd experienced. He called, "You can come out now," and six guards with the weird helmets emerged from the shadows at the back of the room.

He gestured at her and her colleagues. "Not very nice, coming into my building and breaking up the place. It's not like I did anything to you. Or to your organization."

Lance grunted, and the man laughed. "Yes, I know who you're with. It didn't take all that long for us to figure out someone was at the party who shouldn't have been. From there it was a simple matter of asking our government to look at the recordings."

He shook his head. "The CIA is like a sieve. You shouldn't trust them. Not that you'll have the opportunity to make that mistake again, most likely." He stopped about ten feet away from them. "I presume you're here because of our new toy. I'm aware your organization has magicals in its employ. Maybe some of them are here right now. If so, let me give you a taste."

He held up a remote Aisling had seen before on Mia's monitor and pressed a button. Immediately, pain sliced through her head. She tried to move her arms to cover her ears but couldn't. She didn't know if the stun blast or the sonic weapon caused the failure.

He made a face of false sympathy. "Oh, that looks like it hurts. I'm so sorry." His voice went back to normal. "Oh right, you're the ones breaking into my place. I'm not sorry. In fact, I'm looking forward to turning you over to the authorities."

The guards moved forward and used zip ties to bind the others. They left Mia and Aisling until last since they were under the hammer of the DragonEye weapon. The pain she felt had to be visible on her face. She looked at Mia, who was also visibly in pain. The infomancer deliberately winked, and she suddenly wondered if Mia had a trick up her sleeve.

While the anti-magic emitters she'd been dealing with all along irritated Mia,

she had concluded during this run that they weren't as fully debilitating to infomancers as they were to other magicals. Something about the technical component, maybe. They degraded her performance and ability to customize a scenario, but she'd still been able to function in the virtual realm. Whether she was or wasn't vulnerable to them, or if her technological abilities were taking up the slack, didn't matter at the moment.

While she couldn't use her physical body, her technological interface was still active enough to receive. She heard Thomas say, "I've detected where the anti-magic emitter is for your room. They wanted local control. It's in roughly the center of the room, on the left."

Mia used the eye-tracking function of her lens to send a message.

Shimmer, do you still have your sphere?

Shimmer had gone completely offline for several seconds after the blast, and it had taken almost half a minute for some of his systems to come fully back to life. Not all of them had. His vision was impacted, showing him the world in a strange array of colors and fuzzy edges, and his audio sensors weren't picking up anything, even though the man's mouth had been moving.

The internal comm connection was working fine, and he got the message from Mia. He tried to send an affirmative reply, but that wasn't functional, either. He readied himself, then as a guard neared him, shot up from the floor, slashed the guard across the thigh with a claw, and lurched toward the middle of the room. The electrical blast had exacerbated the balance issue created by the wing.

Bullets struck as he was about halfway there, presumably fired by the other guards. One of the rounds bored in through a weakened spot and hit one of his motors, causing his rear legs to quit working. He crashed onto the floor but twisted as he fell and ejected the small sphere. It rolled to the center of the room, and he sent it the signal to activate.

When the anti-magic field disappeared, Aisling's instincts took over since her

brain was still recovering from the shock and subsequent sonic attack. She reached out to touch the two guards nearest her who'd shot Shimmer and activated her lightning skin charm. Electricity sizzled out of her hands and up their uniforms. She maintained her grip until they fell, then wrenched herself onto her back as heavy footsteps came her way.

A guard was a couple of feet away, raising his rifle to point at her face. She activated another charm and opened a portal in front of him. His momentum carried him through it, and she closed it immediately after, leaving him stranded in her landing spot near Stonehenge since she had yet to teach the charm where the lake was. No other guard was an immediate threat since her allies had joined the fight, and she twisted her body around to face the center of the room.

The man stood there in shock at what was happening. She raised the bracelet and triggered the force blast. Powerful enough to save her from a fall, it slammed into him and threw him backward. He landed awkwardly on the platform, and she thought she heard the *snap* of a bone breaking.

Aisling turned, ready to deal with the remaining guards, but Lance and Maria had taken care of them. The guards had bound their arms but not their legs, and both were excellent martial artists. The guards were down on the floor, and any move resulted in another kick.

She struggled up to her hands and knees, crawled across the room, found the remote, and hit the off button. She didn't know how much damage the sphere might have done to it and didn't want to find out by turning it on again. The boss guy was near her, and she fell forward and landed with her knees on his stomach. He groaned and gasped for breath. She snarled, "You wait there, scumbag."

Everyone struggled up, and Aisling went to Shimmer. He was still functional, but she thought it would be easier to rebuild him than to repair him at this point. She knelt beside him. "Good job, buddy."

"Someone had to save us."

She laughed. "Yeah. We're lucky Wraith was there."

He snorted, but it didn't sound quite right. "It was Thomas. And you're a jerk."

She patted him and rose to her feet. "Wraith, what do you have?"

"I have the schematics. I've inserted a virus that will erase their research system. We're good. Also, I have a backup of Shimmer's system memories so nothing will be lost if we can't get him home."

Shimmer called, "I'm right here, you know."

Lance had freed the others. "Time to get out of here, then."

Mia replied, "Soon, yeah, but I thought you might want to know the fabrication room for those things is also on this floor."

Aisling carefully gathered up Shimmer. She looked at the boss guy, who still looked unhappy, and regretted that she couldn't kidnap him. That would be a step over the line. Fortunately, a little more property damage wasn't. "Well, let's definitely trash that before we go, then."

CHAPTER THIRTY

They'd all headed back to the base after destroying the fabrication room. Thomas had worked to erase the security footage from the incident and was fairly sure he'd gotten it all. That had been his primary goal, aside from assisting their assault. It had been a reckless attack, all things considered, but it had needed to happen.

The agents had slept well, but Aisling doubted the infomancers had since they were the ones who usually had to parse the data. They all gathered in the early afternoon in the living room. Annika had called them together. "I thought you might want to watch this. Keep quiet."

A large monitor in the corner of the room activated, showing an annoyed-looking older man in a suit. Annika greeted, "Deputy Director."

He replied in a gravelly tone, "Ms. Lind."

"What can I do for you today, sir?"

"For starters, you can explain why your organization attacked an American company in Los Angeles yesterday."

She frowned and looked confused. The performance made Aisling want to applaud. "I presume you're discussing the incident at Melliston? First, they're multinational, not American. Second, do you have proof that we were involved?"

His face flushed with color. "We know it was you."

Annika smiled. "Knowing is not evidence, Deputy Director."

"Listen. Your people, either under your orders or as rogue agents, infiltrated a company and stole government secrets."

"Sir, I'm getting confused here. Is it a company or government installation?"

He snarled, “Don’t try wordplay with me, Lind.”

Annika smiled at him again. “What I hear you saying is that you have suspicions but no evidence. When you have proof, do let me know.”

He growled, “I’ll be contacting your superior.”

Annika laughed. “Good luck with that.” She killed the signal, muttered, “Moron,” and turned to face them. “First, well done, everyone. Second, Mia, Thomas, what do we know?”

Mia looked exhausted, while Thomas only looked tired. She answered, “We deleted the schematics and smashed the fabrication stuff. Unless they’re the biggest idiots ever, they’re sure to have backups. At least we’ve delayed them.”

Annika asked, “How many units are out in the world?”

Thomas replied, “Six, after we stole the one from their headquarters for Brodie to take apart. They finished the design a month and a half ago. The party was the debut, I guess.”

Will asked, “Who has them?”

Mia replied, “US military, US Secret Service, Israeli Mossad, German government, UK government, and SIS.” She looked at Aisling in apology.

Aisling murmured, “Damn.”

“Yeah.”

Lance deadpanned, “Thank goodness we’re in Spain now.” Forced laughter greeted his words.

Aisling asked, “What’s next?”

Annika frowned. It wasn’t anger driving the expression but rather discomfort as Aisling read it, and she wasn’t sure she’d ever seen it on the woman’s face before. The head of Dragonfly replied, in a tone that made it clear she was speaking in that role, “I don’t think these things should be allowed to remain out in the world, do you?”

Will replied, “Certainly not if it can be avoided. What are we supposed to do about it, more than we’ve done?”

“Steal them back.”

A couple of people laughed, then Lance questioned, “Wait, you’re serious?”

Annika nodded. “Completely.”

Maria dubiously clarified, “From governments. From the bloody Mossad.”

“Yes.”

Aisling asked, "What about Hart? And Apocalypse?"

Annika shrugged. "We'll keep working on it. But it would be secondary to this."

Will cautioned, "If we do this, it's crossing a pretty big line, boss. There will be no going back to what we were. Shattered alliances, distrust, possibly pursuit and threat of imprisonment, the whole giant ball of dirty wax. Especially with the UK involved."

Annika had clasped her hands behind her back and stood rigidly straight as if she was standing at attention for review. "I know. Which is why, rather than ordering it, I'm going to ask you all to weigh in. Once we've chosen a path, either way, I will respect the decision of anyone who feels they need to leave the organization over it."

Will replied, "So Dragonfly as we know it is done."

"Yes. I'm afraid so."

A pall settled over the room. They'd all imagined that having their base destroyed was the hardest possible blow they could take and had been proud that they'd weathered it and recovered. Now the very existence of the organization and the goals that drove it were at risk. Will asked, "Do you plan to tell everyone else in the organization?"

Annika shook her head with another frown, one Aisling read as regret. "No. Only the people in this room get to choose. Everyone else will keep following orders. I'll ensure that's formally recorded in case I'm arrested or killed. I'll provide as much cover as I can for everyone."

Silence reigned. After half a minute, Aisling spoke. "I'm in. They've got to go. I don't see who else would step up to do it." One by one, the others agreed, making it unanimous. The sense of shared purpose when the last yes was given was almost overwhelming.

Annika smiled, but sadness or regret touched it. "Okay. Rest. Especially you two." She pointed at the infomancers. As everyone funneled out, she cupped Aisling's arm and pulled her to the side, away from the others. "You can't tell your boyfriend."

Aisling nodded. "I know. And I understand why. Don't worry."

"I'm sorry."

Aisling managed a half smile. "Me too."

That night, Aisling was back in London. Being there felt weird, knowing that she would soon be acting against the expressed interests of the country's government. Expressed only by their purchase of the sonic weapon, but it still applied even if it wasn't an official law or policy.

She knew it was for the greater good, but the situation was still difficult to process. Her spirits lifted when she saw Eddie. They had a nice meal together and avoided talk of the operation until dessert, when he finally asked what had happened.

Aisling told him how it had gone, described the sonic devices, and said there were several of them out in the world, which concerned her personally and Dragonfly as a whole.

He asked, "What are you planning to do about it?"

"I don't know. Something, though. I think Annika will try working her diplomatic contacts or something." She'd practiced the lie and delivered it cleanly.

"That's good. Are any of them around here?"

She'd anticipated that question too, but somehow, delivering this particular untruth hurt more than the last. "Nope."

"That's even better." The moment hung, then Eddie smiled his attractive grin. "So, ice cream? Then maybe coffee back at my place?"

She returned the smile. "Ice cream for second dessert, definitely. Coffee, we'll see."

He laughed. "Good enough."

Shimmer was on a nearby rooftop in an earlier version of his body since his most recent one had proved damaged beyond functionality. He snarked, "You could find someone more handsome than him. You should consider raising your standards. Currently they seem to be at gutter level."

Aisling laughed.

Eddie asked, "What?"

She patted him on the arm that was holding her other hand. "Shimmer says he likes you."

The dragon retorted, "I did not say any such thing."

Aisling grumbled, "Shimmer, go away, or I will deactivate you. I'm not kidding."

He cackled with laughter. "Please. You love me."

THE STORY CONTINUES

The story continues with book six, coming soon to Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

AUTHOR NOTES - TR CAMERON

AUGUST 10, 2023

Book 5. It's the turning point, the response to what happened in book 4, which always ends an arc in an 8-book sequence. In this case, Maslov's. So the fallout is revenge-seeking, new-base-building, and an unexpected threat – the DragonEye. I think this one came together quite nicely, to be honest.

I'm taking inspiration from all sorts of places for this series. Bond, obviously. But also some *Mission Impossible*, some *Matrix* (the exoskeleton – “I know Kung Fu”), and a host of other spy movies. I'm rewatching *Red Sparrow* at the moment for inspiration going into book 6. It's been a lot of fun. I love espionage. My first experience was Ken Follet's *the Eye of the Needle*, if I recall correctly.

I'm mourning the end of summer break, bigtime. My kid and I have had such an adventure-filled summer. I don't want to see it go away. Concerts so far: Louis Tomlinson x2, The Cure, Melanie Martinez, Ed Sheeran, Tommy Tutone/Paul Young/Hooters/Rick Springfield. Concerts in August: Pentatonix and 5 Seconds of Summer. Hoping we can sneak in a trip to Hershey Park in September. Taking the kid to their first Penguins hockey game in October.

Seeing Hooters was great. I loved them in the eighties, and aside from a single cover song that I was meh on, I loved their entire set. Especially “All You Zombies,” which has always been a favorite. I didn't expect to like them as much as I did. Rick Springfield proved again that, like They Might Be Giants, his magic really comes across better live than in the studio. He did a new song that was amazing live and just okay when we listened to it on the way home. His set was truncated from the other times I've seen him, which was unfortunate but understandable. His band played backup for Tommy

Tutone and Paul Young, which I found frankly impressive. They're a tight band.

Once again failed to get on the verified fan preorder for Taylor Swift. That's 8 cities worth of failure for those keeping track. It's irritating. My wife tells me it's because I'm "quest-driven" that I care so much. This is entirely possible and would actually explain a lot about me.

Your monthly reminder - If you haven't picked up the short story that takes place during Dragonfly boot camp, you can find it here: <https://bookhip.com/JSTPANQ>.

Random song lyric that's stuck in my head: "You'll be okay, we can talk tomorrow / I'm on my way, with some time to borrow." (From *Angels Fly*, Louis Tomlinson)

In audio, I gave a listen to the first book of the *Black Jewels* Series by Anne Bishop and enjoyed it. I've read those books easily a half-dozen times. Now I'm back to Chuck Wendig for *Wayward*. It's such a wide-ranging story, and I have no idea where it's going to go.

I'm reading the Safehold series again at the moment. I'm not going to stick with it, because I have *Cassiel's Servant*, the first new Jacqueline Carey book in a while, waiting for me. I need to be in the right headspace for it though. I've been anticipating this for a while and don't want to rush it. Her writing is luxurious and deserves full-brain attention. Assuming I'm still capable of such things.

My small screen lineup is a weighty one. I'm working my way through Season 2 of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*. The crossover episode with the animated *Lower Decks* was something special. I don't love *Lower Decks*, but I did love the blending of the two. I'm not sure how to feel about the upcoming (for me) musical episode. On deck, finishing *The Boys*, *Sandman*, and *Secret Invasion*. Excited for *The Witcher S3*, *Good Omens S2*, and the new *Castlevania* series.

I'm looking forward to seeing *Barbie* on the big screen. I love the press that Ryan Gosling has been doing. I think of him as the character from *Blade Runner 2049*, so having him act like Ken most of the time is quite the brain bender for me.

I'm playing through *Baldur's Gate 2* now. I finished *Baldur's Gate 1*, although I had to use cheat codes to win the final battle. I would care, but I'm in it for the story, not for endless head-bashing against an immovable object. The story in *BG2* is so strong. Mind Flayers are the worst. I hates them,

precious.

I've got two big games on deck, *Baldur's Gate 3* and *Starfield*. I'd love to do let's play videos on BG3, but really, I don't think I'm entertaining enough to pull that off. Plus, I'm not very good, and no one wants to watch me die and reload a dozen times in an hour. Trying to decide whether to play it on my Playstation or my Mac. Better graphics on the one, more portability on the other, as well as probably a better control scheme. If it's on my mac, will my colleagues notice if I'm playing during office hours? Possibly.

This was a less focused communication than usual, which for me, is saying something. I'm a little scattered. Thank you for bearing with me to this point. Today is a prep day for fall semester, and my brain is all over the place. I'm so not ready. But when day one comes, I'll be ready – or ready to fake it, if I'm not.

If you enjoy my babble, you should sign up for my newsletter, which includes babble, book discounts, and the occasional recommendation. The link is below.

Until next month, joys upon joys to you.

Standard monthly reminders - If you're not part of the Oriceran Fans Facebook group, **join!** There's a pizza giveaway every month, and Martha and (usually) I and all sort of fun author folks show up via Zoom to chat with our readers. It's a great time, and the community feel to it is truly fantastic. The group is very welcoming and enthusiastic. Oriceran Fans. Facebook. Your phone is probably within reach. Do it!

Important note: I've written an Aisling short story for you to enjoy, about her earliest days with Dragonfly in the new employee boot camp. You can find it here:

<https://bookhip.com/JSTPANQ>

It's yours for the minor commitment of signing up for my newsletter. I have absolutely no problem if you want to then unsubscribe for my newsletter. But with social media as quirky as it's been of late, I'd love to have a channel to communicate with you that I can depend upon.

Before I go, once again, if this series is your first taste of my Urban Fantasy, look for "Magic Ops." I promise you'll enjoy it, and you'll get more

of Diana, Rath, and company. You might also enjoy my science fiction work. All my writing is filled with action, snark, and villains who think they're heroes. Drop by www.trcameron.com and take a look!

PS: If you'd like to chat with me, here's the place. I check in daily or more: <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorTRCameron>. Often I put up interesting and/or silly content there, as well. For more info on my books, and to join my reader's group, please visit www.trcameron.com.

AUTHOR NOTES - MARTHA CARR

SEPTEMBER 7, 2023

Life is nothing but change. Trying to stand still while everything keeps moving around us only leads to frustration, and sometimes hoarding. Fortunately, there are sweet periods of time that feel like coasting because we did the hard work, we went through the transformation, and we are just enjoying the new landscape. I love those days. Everything is clicking and much like driving the same route every day, I can not think so much and just go.

This is not one of those periods of time — at all.

I didn't exactly set out to transform every corner of my life, but I suppose I could have seen it coming last October when I decided to venture to Rythmia in Costa Rica and try ayahuasca for four nights. It was like lighting a rocket, but I had no idea just how far and wide it would reach.

Here we are about a year later and so much has changed.

Not all of it easy or welcomed but part of life. I'm sitting here with the sweet pittie, Bluebell behind me, sleeping away on painkillers. Her cancer has taken a turn and this is her last day. Frankly, she was not supposed to last more than a few months and it's been more than a year. But it's still hard. The good dog, Lois Lane is still the wild child, barking and running as fast as she can. A constant and we've already had a chat about her not going anywhere for a while.

Somewhere back there in this year of change, I started going to the gym and lifting weights and running again. Yoga is thrown in there for good measure as well. So far I've lost forty pounds and it's easier to do everything. This is a habit I will be keeping.

My business got an overhaul too. Michael Anderle and I are still working

together, but I've also ventured out on my own with the trilogy, Queen of the Flightless Dragons and Eamon. I even have my own store online now at www.authormarthacarr.com. There's even some happy news coming for Leira fans. (That's a big enough hint, right?) Very soon.

And out of the blue, minding my own business at a workshop on communication, a forty-year-old named, Mike asked me out. (What is it about me and that name?)

Yep, he knew my age and if you're wondering, I turned 64 yesterday and no, I don't look it and I can't explain it. I'm ageing backward. We're still going strong and I'm having fun. Go figure. Thank goodness he's older than the Offspring. Just saying.

Those are the biggest pieces of change and they're still ongoing. I have no idea when I'll hit the coasting part or what it will look like, but it's okay. I trust that the universe knows what it's doing and everything is about the journey anyway. Not the destination. Stay tuned, though, because it could be anything.

In the meantime, I'm going to go sit on the floor next to a sleeping Bluebell with my hand on her back and do nothing for a while. Let the world move past us for just a few more hours. More adventures to follow.

At the same time, I've created an online store with my name on it that will have the paperback and hardcovers, and yesterday were my first sales. You can check out the store at www.authormarthacarr.com.

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