



A CHILD OF
TWO WORLDS
MARK COLE



Contents

[Title Page](#)
[Copyright Page](#)
[Dedication](#)
[The Guardian](#)
[Captured](#)
[Alley Dance, Ten Months Ago](#)
[An Early Start](#)
[Columbia, Two years ago](#)
[The Coming Storm](#)
[On Wings of Light](#)
[The Fall of the Arcane City, Five Years Ago](#)
[Imprinted Souls](#)
[Eyes of the Stars](#)
[Darker than Night](#)
[Midnight Revelations](#)
[The Truth](#)
[I am Your Shield. I am Your Sword.](#)
[Oration and Hors D'oeuvres](#)
[A Hard Man](#)
[Adorac Falls](#)
[The Harbinger of the End](#)
[A Gift of Things Forgotten](#)
[Leave None Alive](#)
[The Massacre at Highwind Point](#)
[Cut Off](#)
[A Hard Landing](#)
[A Place Without Mercy, Twenty-seven Years Ago](#)
[They Never Came](#)
[Everyone is Needed](#)
[The Gap of Druun](#)
[Taken](#)
[The Architect](#)
[A Fading Light](#)
[The Hammer Falls](#)
[Azreal](#)
[The Way the World Ends](#)
[The Beginning](#)
[The Penning](#)

A Child of Two Worlds

Mark Cole

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A CHILD OF TWO WORLDS

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To my beautiful wife and amazing daughters.

The three of you keep me writing.

Chapter One - The Guardian

Night had fallen, and the screams of the dying beyond the wall of the Arcane City sent shivers down Darren Wright's spine. *We are all going to die here*, he thought. Smoke billowed from the watch fire at his back, causing the sixteen-year-old guardsman to cough. Sweat trickled down his forehead. His helmet was stifling in the oppressive summer heat; the sun being down did nothing to lower the temperature. Another scream of anguish and he gripped his white ash spear tighter.

"We are all going to die here," he muttered to himself. "If the city wasn't surrounded..." *I could escape.*

The innumerable army of demons and undead had appeared the day before, charging across the plains toward the city. Sounds so terrible he could not describe announced their arrival. The gnashing of teeth and rending of flesh haunted his waking mind. Darren had watched from the walls as the squad of guardsmen commanded by his brother, Sir Trevor, was cut down by the undead monstrosities the day before.

His brother, one of the four Commanders of the Guard, had been devoured by the zombie horde. Darren knew the reanimated corpse of Sir Trevor Wright was beyond the wall, hungering for the flesh of those within. *He's hungering for my flesh.*

Darren took a step back from the crenellations. "I can't do this," the young man said, terror clear in his voice. He began to turn, but a large hand on his shoulder made him pause. The guardsman looked up into the blue eyes of a man standing head and shoulders above him. His blond hair was disheveled and his chainmail spotted with gore, but Darren recognized him all the same. *The Bear*, he thought in awe. *I can't believe the Northman gladiator who was just crowned Champion of the Grand Arena is here.*

"Have heart, Guardsman," the tall gladiator said in a deep baritone.

"Why, Bear?" Darren cried. "We're all exhausted. They've attacked throughout the night."

The Bear nodded. "We are, and they have," he said as he lowered his hand from Darren's shoulder to the war hammer at his side. "Night is the time for such evil magics." The champion of the Grand Arena smiled. "But the dawn approaches."

Darren looked to the east for the oncoming sunrise, but it was far too early, and the sky was still black. "I don't understand," the guardsman said as he turned back to The Bear. The Northman was peering farther down the wall, up to the top of the south tower.

Darren followed The Bear's gaze. A woman stood close to the edge of the fortifications. Plate armor covered her from shoulder to toe. Her head was uncovered; red hair flowed down her back, stopping just above her hips. The watch fire behind her made her hair seem aflame in the orange light.

"Is that..." Darren started to ask, disbelieving.

The Bear's hand returned to his shoulder and gave him a squeeze of reassurance. "My wife," he said, his voice full of emotion. "She is the dawn, Guardsman. She will see us through this. My angel will save us all." The horns sounded. "An attack is coming." The Bear laughed.

"What's there to laugh about?" Darren asked, his fear back on the rise.

"Watch the sunrise with me, Guardsman."

"Hold your positions!" the woman shouted, her voice magically empowered so all could hear.

Motes of light began to fly to the woman's gauntleted hands. They came slowly at first, engulfing her hands with a luminous ball of pure energy. The sphere of energy grew with increasing speed until it covered her like a blinding cocoon. Had the sun been out, it would have been a guttering candle flame.

comparison.

With a roar akin to a thousand unending thunderclaps, she released the force in a beam that disintegrated all the undead and demons it touched. Tens of thousands were incinerated in the blast of cleansing light.

Perfect silence filled the air after the display of unimaginable magical power faded. Darren flinched when The Bear began laugh mockingly at the failed assault. The guardsman shook his head and began to laugh as well. He felt his fears ebb. A whooping cheer went up around them, and in no time, the entire city was cheering.

Darren watched as the woman descended the stairs and walked to her husband. "I don't know how many more times I can do that," she said.

The big man wrapped her in an embrace. "You shouldn't drain yourself so."

"I know." She stepped back. The woman studied the night, trying to discern any advantage she could. "I just hope we find something to break this siege." She shook her head, apparently dissatisfied with what she saw. "I could kill thousands a day, and they would not need reinforcements. We would all starve first."

Darren's mother had told him stories of a person who appeared when the forces of evil overstepped their bounds and upset the equilibrium of the Nine Realms. A person storied to be so mighty that demons ran at the mere mention of his name. "What of the Guardian?" the young man asked without thinking of whom he addressed.

The woman stepped around her husband and looked Darren in the eye. "I would have to abandon the defense of the city to search out the Guardian. Earth is not as small as Dae. It could take a very long time to find him."

"Oh," Darren said, embarrassed at not addressing her properly.

"Don't worry," she said. "As soon as we beat these demons back to Hell, I will search out the Guardian and bring him back to us."

* * *

Five Years Later

"I don't know, Max. It's just a feeling like something bad is going to happen," Alex said. The twenty-six-year-old sat behind the shop's counter as he spoke with his friend.

"Don't borrow trouble, my old man always told me," Max said. The large man let out a laugh that filled the small electronics store he owned. "You really shouldn't worry about whatever it is," he said.

"You know I hardly worry about anything," Alex scoffed. His eyebrows drew down in thought. "Just... I don't know, it feels like something is breathing down my neck, about to snatch me up and shake me like a rag doll."

"It's time to close up shop." Max put his hands out soothingly with a smirk on his face. "Don't worry. I've got this."

Alex snorted. "Sounds good, Boss. Whatever you say." He picked up his green wool jacket from the peg next to the register. Alex ran his hand through his short, brown hair as he looked around making sure everything was in order before he left. "All right," he said. "How's the traffic?"

Max laughed. "Not nearly as bad as the traffic was in Bogotá. You remember all the traffic we had there?"

"The only traffic I remember was all the mortars and bullets I was trying to keep us from running into face first," Alex said.

Max smiled his easy grin. "Me too. Nowhere near that bad tonight. I didn't get shot at once."

Alex chuckled and patted Max on his shoulder as he walked past him. "Night, Tiny," he said with a smirk. Max hated that nickname, and he glowered at Alex.

"Night, Sarge," Max responded, knowing that it was likely to get a rise out of Alex.

"I'm not in anymore. You should know that, especially since you were there when it happened," Alex said as he closed the door harder than was necessary.

Alex pulled on his jacket as he walked out of the store. He watched the steam rise from his breath into the cool night air. He had only recently moved to Seattle and was pleasantly surprised by how mild the winters were. *If only it didn't rain so much it would be perfect... There's always a price for balance, I guess.*

He pulled up his hood to ward off the light rain and still couldn't shake the ominous feeling. Digging in his pocket for his car keys, he walked to his Sentra. The car was old, but she got him from Point A to Point B well enough. He made a mental note to take her in for a check-up as she sputtered to life. Alex dialed his girlfriend's number and pulled out of the parking lot while the phone rang.

"You shouldn't talk on your phone and drive," Terra told him as she always did. "Especially in the rain."

"Well, you shouldn't call me while I'm driving in the rain," he said for the hundredth time.

A moment of silence passed. Alex knew she was rolling her eyes at him. "You know you called me a frustrating man."

He laughed, and true a smile finally crossed his face. "You know you love me, and it's always raining."

Alex and Terra had only been living together a few months when Max called him about opening an electronics store in Seattle. Max had gotten the loan he needed from a local bank and offered Alex a job. With the economy as bad as it was, Alex had leapt at the chance.

"Are you stopping by the dojo on the way home?" Terra asked. "Dinner will be ready soon."

"Nah, I'm beat, and sword practice was moved to Tuesdays."

"I love you, see you soon."

"Love you too. Be home in a bit, Babe."

Alex drove home from downtown Seattle in the light rain. Even though the sun had set a few hours ago and it was raining, he still enjoyed the drive home on back roads with trees on his left and the occasional view of Puget Sound on his right. The houses across the sound cast broken lines of yellow light across the water.

A black streak flashed in front of his car while he was slowing down at a red light. *What was that?* Alex thought. *Looked like a big cat.* He tried to peer after it, but it had charged into the darkness between the trees. He shrugged and drove the remaining two miles home without having to stop again.

Alex parked the car in the community lot outside his building and got out. He glanced in the window to his apartment. *Weird, I wonder why there aren't any lights on.* He walked down the three steps to their door on the ground floor, reached the landing outside the entrance, and froze.

A quick glance at the door revealed that it had been forced open from the outside. The splintered doorframe where the deadbolt and knob had ripped through showed that whatever hit the door, had hit it hard.

Terra was home when we talked! Alex flew into his apartment, snatching up the wooden practice sword he kept near the door. He stopped a few steps into his living room and glanced around. *Nothing's missing.* The sound of someone moving came from the bedroom, and he ran that direction.

Alex noted a pale light coming from the doorway just as he burst into the room to find Terra hanging limp over the shoulder of a tall man draped in a black cloak. Terra's red hair covered her face.

and from her lack of movement, she appeared unconscious. The light was coming from a yellowish portal that wavered behind them.

“What are you doing with her!” Alex shouted, his knuckles whitening from clenching the sword hilt. The man turned to face Alex. The hood cast his face into darkness, and he laughed at seeing Alex in a fighting stance with a wooden sword.

The man laughed again and lifted a hand. Alex was hurled against the wall where he slumped to the floor. The cloaked man's hood slid back to reveal a porcine nose with tusks jutting from a quasi-human face. The monstrous thing fixed an evil grin on him.

“Put her down, now,” Alex growled, the threat clear in his voice. The unseen force smashed into him again, slamming his head against the wall. Blinking away stars, he watched as the monster sent Terra down and drew a long, wicked knife from behind its leather belt.

The ebon-cloaked figure began to stalk toward him, but before it could close the distance, a low growl issued from the hallway. Alex glanced over to see cat eyes reflecting golden light from the hallway. The hooded man squealed, scooped up Terra, and leapt through the golden doorway just as a panther walked into the room.

Alex lifted himself back to his feet a second time and picked up the sword. *I'm going after that thing and getting Terra back!* He moved to the floating door, but the panther blocked his way. He tried to step around the large cat, but froze when it growled at him.

“Wait. If you go through now, you will die,” the panther said.

“You talk?” Alex asked. His head still rang from hitting the wall. The panther regarded him with knowing eyes. Alex looked up at the doorway hovering in the air. He saw his own reflection in the shimmering golden gateway, but it also showed a natural stone wall. *Maybe it's a view through to the other side*, he thought. He tried to push past the animal, but the beast wouldn't let him by.

“Move!” Alex shouted. “That... *thing* just took Terra! I have to save her!”

“Weren't you just on the floor about to be gutted?” she asked, taking some of the fight out of him. “You must wait.” Her voice sounded like a young woman's, but she had an undeniable air of command. “If you go through now they will kill you, and everything is lost.”

Alex shook his head slightly. *I must have hit the wall harder than I thought. I'm hallucinating.* He looked back to the panther. The urge to touch it, to see if it was real, almost overwhelmed him. “What do you mean everything is lost, Cat?” he asked, fighting down the potentially deadly impulse.

The panther's fur bristled. “My name is Caitlyn, not *Cat*. And I mean that your world, and mine, will end. You will get her back, but the force on the other side of the gate is too powerful for just the two of us. You obviously don't know how to defend yourself.”

“I can defend myself well enough,” he said with a glower. “I'm not just going to stand by while she gets farther away!” He tried to push past her again, but Caitlyn growled threateningly. Alex stopped trying to force his way and settled against the wall facing the gateway. “Fine! If you won't let me go after her, then at least tell me what that thing was!”

“That ‘thing’ was a Halfman, a type of Demon-spawn,” she said, pacing in front of the gateway. “and from the looks of it, a shaman. If I had come moments later, it would have killed you. What are you going to do against twenty of them, hmm? I saw at least that many before I was able to follow through to your world.”

His anger began to fade, and Alex noticed his knuckles ached from squeezing the hilt of the wooden sword. He forced his fingers to loosen and propped the practice blade against the wall. He put a hand to either side of his head and squeezed. *I must be going insane. A pig-thing takes Terra through a floating door, and I'm talking to a panther.* “This can't be real.”

Caitlyn snorted derisively. "It's all too real, Human."

"Alex," he said. ~~"My name is Alex Zane. And if this is real, then I can't just let them have her."~~

Caitlyn looked at him. "You have no choice. ~~We~~ have no choice," the panther said bluntly. Her voice became hard. "We will die slow, horrible deaths if we go through and get caught. I don't plan on dying today, and I also don't plan on watching someone kill himself." She resumed pacing in front of the gateway. "We will need help for this."

"What are they going to do to her?"

"They will take her to their leader, the Demon Lord Azreal. What he intends to do with her and her powers is beyond me, but I get the feeling that it's nothing good."

Confusion bubbled up beneath Alex's receding anger. "Powers? What powers?"

Caitlyn stopped pacing. She stood on her hind legs and put a paw against the wall to either side of his head. The panther's wide golden eyes stared into Alex's green ones. "You aren't linked to her?" she asked, alarm seeping around the edges of her voice.

"Linked to her?" he echoed. "I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Terra never told you where she was from? About her past?"

Alex shook his head. He wasn't proud of his past and didn't want to talk about it. Terra knew that and he had gotten the same feeling from her. Alex didn't bring up his past, and Terra didn't bring up hers; that was the unspoken agreement they had lived by for the last ten months. He wished that he had broached that subject now.

Caitlyn closed her eyes with a deep sigh. She pushed herself from the wall and sat down. The end of her black tail flicked back and forth in irritation. "If she hasn't told you then it isn't my place to give you the specifics, but Terra's past has just caught up with her."

Alex took a deep breath and ran his hand through his brown hair. He touched the spot on his head that had hit the wall and felt a knot beginning to rise. Every beat of his heart made it throb. "I don't care about her past. I just want her back! What do I need to do?"

"It's almost time to go through. I'm waiting for the portal to settle again and the Halfmen to gather some distance from it. If there is anything you need to bring, you have a few moments."

"How long will I be gone?" he asked. "What season is it? Will food be easy to find?"

"I can hunt food for us easily enough, and it's early winter. I don't know how long you will be away from Earth."

Alex shook his head. He didn't have any heavier clothes than what he wore, and the utility knife in his pocket was the only blade he had that could be carried easily. Alex thought of the large, half-moon battleaxe on his living room wall. *The axe is way too big. Ugh, my head is killing me. I'm forgetting something.*

"Will we have the means to make a fire?"

"Yes," she said.

"Seems like we have the necessities covered. Is it time yet?" he asked impatiently.

"Soon."

A memory from his drive home clicked into place. "I almost hit you with my car. Two miles from here."

Caitlyn glanced at him, and then resumed looking at the gateway. "No, you didn't. Your *car*"--she said the word oddly--"did come near me, but by no means did you almost hit me. It would be a bad day if I let some metal machina crash into me, even on a rain slicked road."

"Didn't mean to insult your cat-like reflexes."

Caitlyn ignored his jibe and stood back up. "The path should be clear now. Bring that stick with

you. It isn't much, but it's better than nothing. The Halfmen should have moved on from the gatewa
but you should be prepared for any... surprises.”

Chapter Two - Captured

Terra awoke to the harsh, squealing voices of Halfmen. “Do we get to eat her now?” one of the asked. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she took silent appraisal of herself, trying not to move and draw their attention.

Terra’s head throbbed where the shaman had thrown her against the wall and knocked her unconscious. She was firmly tied to a litter with no way to move her arms or legs. Terra felt the heat of a fire to the left, warming her through the thick woolen blanket that covered her from the shoulders down. She lay on the ground of a camp that had the bustle of one recently made. *At least there’s a fire* Terra thought, *or else I would be frozen solid.*

“The master said she must be brought to him alive,” she heard another Halfman say. “He would be very... displeased if she was killed.”

Her breath curled in the air as she cracked open her eyes. Terra looked out of the corner of her eye at the one who had talked. The cowl of its black cloak lay back, revealing its pig-like features. A necklace of bone hung around the Halfman’s neck. *That must be the shaman*, she thought.

Terra berated herself for being taken captive by a lone Halfman. *If only I hadn’t hesitated*, she thought. Too much time on Earth had dulled her sense of caution. She slowly took count of the monsters surrounding her. Without moving her head, she could only come up with a rough estimate. She saw eight, but from the sound of it, there were many more she couldn’t see.

If I can kill the shaman first, I have a chance. I’ll just have to bide my time.

“She’s awake,” the shaman said.

Terra swore under her breath and opened her eyes the rest of the way. “Where are you taking me?” she demanded.

The shaman cocked his head to the side and snorted a laugh. He walked over and kicked her viciously with a cloven hoof. Terra heard her rib crack in the silence, and a wheeze of breath escaped her clenched jaws.

The shaman looked over his shoulder with an evil grin. “He didn’t say that we couldn’t hurt her, though.”

Terra tried to reach for her power, but nothing came. She felt as if an invisible wall was blocking her off from it. She pushed against the wall but couldn’t find a weak point.

“Problem?” the shaman sneered. He kicked her again and broke another rib. “Your power is sealed. Nexus. The master saw to that.”

Her right side was on fire, and the pain blossomed anew with every breath. She tried to take small breaths to keep her ribs from moving as much.

“Who is your master?” she asked through gritted teeth.

The Halfman cocked its head to the side as if it contemplated kicking her again. “The all-powerful Overlord of Hell, Azreal,” he said with a reverent tone.

The blood drained from Terra’s face, and ice ran through her veins. She struggled against the ropes holding her, but they would not budge. The Halfmen laughed at her as she tried to escape her bonds. The pain in her side became too much to bear, and she stopped thrashing.

“At least she has more fight in her than the man that tried to stop me.” The shaman laughed over his shoulder to his fellow Halfmen before facing her again. “Too bad neither of you had the power to stop me.”

Oh no, Terra thought. She denied the panic screaming through her and glared at the Halfman. “Wh

did you do to Alex?" Her voice turned hot with rage. "If you hurt him, I will slaughter you all like the pigs you are."

The Halfman took a step back from the bound and helpless woman, fear plain on its porcine face. The Halfman lifted its leg as if to kick her again. It laughed as she flinched away from the kick, making the dampening pain in her side ignite anew.

"Last time I saw 'Alex'," it mocked with bravado, "he was bleeding from his throat, ear to ear."

Terra's resistance faltered. "He's dead?" she whispered.

The shaman grinned. "Died trying to save you, Nexus."

Tears came unbidden to her eyes. She hadn't known Alex for long before they moved to Seattle, but Terra had hoped he was the one she was looking for. She agreed to move in with Alex because after four years of searching because he was the most promising one she found. She fell in love with him after they had moved. Even though he possessed the characteristics of a Guardian, there was no pro he was one. And loving him complicated things more.

Alex was a good person, kind and forgiving, but Terra had been afraid of how he would react after he found out what she really was, and why she was on Earth.

Terra shook her head, refusing to believe what the Halfman was saying. But she knew that if Alex were dead, it would have been her fault. He hadn't known how dangerous it was just being around her. Terra had never told him.

"You," she said. The Halfman turned to face her. "Will die." Her glare could have seared flesh from bone. "Very soon." It snorted and turned away, but the fear in its eyes gave her a sense of grim satisfaction.

* * *

The frigid wind on the cliff pierced the light jacket Alex wore like a knife cut paper, and the blue jeans he had on offered even less protection. He immediately started to shiver and rub his arms. He couldn't see the sun, but from the looks of the sky, the mountain was blocking the view. A rough granite path only a few feet wide overlooked a thousand-foot drop. Alex leaned against the cliff wall, staying as far from the fall as he could.

Caitlyn looked at him. "We will be in the valley within the hour. The climb down will keep you warm. It'll be night soon, so we need to hurry."

Alex pushed the wooden sword between his belt and pants, wedging it firmly in place by his hip. It was uncomfortable but kept both of his hands free. He followed Caitlyn as they slowly made their way down the path.

The smell of pine filled the crisp winter air. Alex used the height to study the lay of the land. The forest stretched as far as he could see. He glanced at the sky. His eyes locked with something he didn't want to think about too hard.

Two moons? he thought. Alex was having trouble processing the image of a crescent moon high above and another near the horizon.

"Caitlyn," he said, voice rising, "where are we?"

"We're on the northern edge of the Adorac Mountains. My sister is about a three-day walk from here. She will know what to do about getting Terra back."

Alex frowned. "I've never heard of the Adorac Mountains before."

The panther laughed. "I would be surprised if you had heard of them. We're no longer in your Realm. We are in the Realm of Magic, on the planet Dae."

He froze in his tracks, bewildered by her casual statement. "Like a different plane of existence?"

Caitlyn also stopped and turned to regard him with her golden eyes. "Yes," she said. "Keep moving."

if you don't want to freeze.

~~“The Realm you're from is but one of nine,” she continued when he started walking. “The plan Earth resides in the fifth, the Realm of Balance. Dae resides in the Fourth Realm, the Realm of Magic~~

“Life, Good, Order, Magic, Balance, Science, Chaos, Evil, and Death, the Nine Realms counteract one another to create balance. The equilibrium shifts from time to time resulting in changes on the Realm of Balance. Right now, the balance lies closer to the Outer Realms.

“The planes of Magic and Science, being adjacent to the Realm of Balance, exert the most influence on Earth. As you can see from the status of your world, the balance leans heavily toward science.”

“I would say so,” he muttered. “There isn't any magic on my world.”

Caitlyn's keen ears caught his comment over the whistle of the wind. “Just because you can't see doesn't mean magic isn't there. In the deep jungle, far under the ocean, and within the lightless caverns of your planet, magic still exists. It isn't much, and most of what remains isn't good. It *is* still there but fades as the balance continues to shift.”

She's serious, Alex thought, disbelieving. “What happens if magic goes away entirely?”

“None really know for sure,” she said. “But some think anything could happen. It could cause the very nature of reality to unravel and destroy everything we know.”

Well, that would suck. “What causes the balance to shift?” Alex asked.

“About two hundred years ago, the Realms were at a state of perfect equilibrium. Then, a powerful Demon Lord, Azreal, killed all of the other lords of the Eighth Realm, the Realm of Evil. He began to covertly exert influence in the Realms of Chaos and Death.

“Without raising the suspicions of the Inner Realms, Order, Good, and Life, he marshaled a large army. With blinding speed, he struck a devastating blow. Five years ago, his armies were able to gain footholds on three of the Realms.

“The Realms of Good, Order, and Magic were all occupied. The only one to repel the invaders was the Realm of Life, the innermost Realm.”

“How does Terra tie into all of this?” Alex asked.

“I'm sorry, Alex, but I can't tell you. She must have had reasons for keeping you in the dark. Suffice to say that Terra is one of the key elements to the success of the war against Azreal.”

“You can't tell me?” he asked. “Or, you *won't* tell me?” His question was met with silence. “Finally, what can you tell me about her? Is she from here? From this Realm?”

Caitlyn was silent for a few moments as she contemplated answering him. “Yes, she was born here on Dae, but there's more to it, to her, than that.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked. He took the panther's silence as refusal to answer and instead asked, “Why was she on Earth?”

“She was looking for... something.”

“What was she looking for?” Silence answered him again. “Why did that thing, that Halfman, take her?”

Caitlyn hesitated before answering. “She's... important.”

“Why is she important?” Silence. “You said she was born here, which implies she has origins of another kind from someplace else. What are they?” Silence.

Alex clenched his teeth in frustration. He ran his hand through his hair. “Did she find what she was looking for, or is that something else you won't answer?”

A golden eye peered over Caitlyn's shoulder at him, regarding him in silence as they continued to walk down the path. “I hope so,” she muttered.

“Are you an off-limits topic also?” he asked, irritated by her obtuse treatment of his questions.

“No,” she said, her voice as mild as warm, summer rain.

“Are you from here?”

“Yes, I was born not far from here. That’s where we are going.”

“Where’s that?” Alex asked.

“Starfall, the ancestral home of my kind.”

“And what kind of being are you?” Alex asked. His ire was beginning to get the best of him, and he used a much more harsh tone than he intended.

Caitlyn stopped, and he bumped into her. She spun on the narrow path and fixed him with a glare. She growled at him, a low rumble he felt in his chest.

“I understand,” she said, annoyance clear in her voice, “that you have been plucked from your normal life, and you are likely afraid of dying for the first time. But I will leave you here, on this freezing mountainside, if you don’t start talking with some civility. Luna knows I could get to Starfall faster without you slowing me down. The only reason I brought you was because of her, because she might have seen something in you.”

Alex drew himself up and glared at the panther. The cold forgotten, his clenched fists shook with anger. “Look, *Cat*, I have seen more blood and death in my short twenty-six years than any man should have to endure in a lifetime. I’ve seen women nailed to walls with railroad spikes. I’ve seen the corpses of mothers and fathers who were killed after watching their children burn to cinders in front of their eyes.

“I have killed enemies with these hands,” he said, holding his hands out in front of himself as they dripped blood. A pained expression crossed his face. “And had friends die in my arms. If you think I’m being impolite now, keep dodging my questions, and you’ll find out just how *impolite* I can be.”

Caitlyn gave him another appraising look. “I apologize,” she said. “I spoke in haste, but I have done nothing wrong for you to show me so much disrespect.” She turned back down the path. “Let’s keep going.”

Alex took a deep breath and let it out slowly, vapor curling up in front of his eyes. *And, yes, I thought as he followed her, I am terrified right now, but it wouldn’t do me any good to give into it.*

Night was beginning to fall, and Alex was having trouble seeing Caitlyn. *Following a black panther, in the dark, on a narrow trail, with a drop that would easily kill me a few feet to the right seems safe.* “It’s getting hard to see,” he said. “Are we getting close to the bottom?”

“We will be soon,” came the reply. “Just wait a minute, and stay calm.”

Good advice in most any situation, I guess. Wait... “Why do I need to stay calm?” Alex started to ask as he heard the crack of bone and snap of sinew. He backed away from the sound, but as sudden as it started, it stopped.

“Caitlyn? Are you all right?”

A glowing light appeared above the palm of a young woman now standing in front of him. She was about eight inches shy of his six feet and very lean. The white light made her black hair shimmer. Golden eyes studied him. The woman wore a simple light green dress with a darker green woolen cloak draped over her shoulders. Her boots looked to be made of light brown leather.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said in Caitlyn’s voice. As she talked, Alex could see that her canine teeth were longer than normal.

“Caitlyn, is that you?” he asked, astounded by the transformation. “Are you a shape-shifter?”

She gave him a deprecating smirk and shook her head. “Not exactly, but close. A few more minutes and we’ll be down.”

I should apologize for being such a pain. “I’m sorry for snapping at you,” Alex said. His voice lowered in volume. “I’m just worried about Terra. Do you think she’s all right?”

A few seconds of silence passed while Caitlyn considered not answering. “I don’t know. If they wanted her dead, they would have just killed her.”

I saved her once, Alex thought, and I’ll do it again. “We have to help her, Caitlyn.”

“As soon as we can get more people to help us, we will. Blindly charging in to save her could get me captured alongside her. Or killed.” The ground beneath his feet turned to soft, damp earth and heard winter grass.

“We’re down,” Caitlyn said. “Gather firewood, I’m going to leave the light with you and hunt for dinner.” She changed back into her panther form and bounded into the woods.

Alex went about the task assigned him, and the light Caitlyn had made followed him at a short distance. He kept glancing at the light. *That thing is following me, but it keeps dancing around like it has a mind of its own.*

The forest they were in was mostly pine and oak trees. Alex was able to find a few branches long enough to the ground to be broken off and was able to supplement them with some already on the ground. When he thought he had enough for a small fire to last the night, he returned to the camp.

The trees blocked the worst of the biting wind, but Alex still shivered in the frigid night air. He stacked the firewood but had no way to light it. *Idiot! I should have brought a lighter or something. You always do this! Someone’s in danger, and you charge in half-cocked. Oh no, I didn’t call Maria to leave a note, or anything. He’s going to see the door and think something horrible happened.*

Alex took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had made arrangements for his things to be taken care of in case of an emergency some time ago, so he banished the distracting monologue and focused on the task at hand. *Caitlyn said we would have the means to make a fire. Maybe she has flint and steel or a bow drill.*

He paused when he heard something approaching. As if summoned by his thoughts, Caitlyn came into the camp holding a rabbit in each hand.

“I don’t have any way to light the fire,” Alex said.

Caitlyn set the rabbits down. “I’ll take care of it.”

She held her hand out, and the ball of light floated to it, hovering over her palm. It shifted in color from white to orange with flames that licked the air. She faced her palm toward the kindling, and the ball of fire shot from her hand, lighting the wood.

Magic! “That was amazing,” Alex said.

She smiled at him. “Simple conjuration, that’s all. I can’t do much else. Fire, light, preservation—nothing really amazing. Not many changelings have strong magical power.”

“A changeling? Is that what you are? Is that different from a shapeshifter?”

Caitlyn nodded. “Put simply, changelings are sentient animals that are able to take on a human form. We are only able to change from our animal form into a human form. A shapeshifter is a wizard or sorceress who can change into many different animals.

“It takes many years of study for a wizard to be able to change into one animal, but changelings are able to turn into a human from a very young age, with no study or training.”

He sat for a moment while he thought it over. “How were you clothed when you changed?”

Caitlyn seemed surprised by his question. “Why would I change into a naked woman? I would be freezing right now.”

He laughed and shook his head. *I don’t think she understands my question.* “You would, but you don’t have any clothes on as a panther. How do you have clothes as a human?”

“I’ve never thought about it before,” she said pensively. “It’s just the way it is. You can’t always apply logic to magic, Alex. Magic has rules, just like everything else, but they aren’t always set in a way that makes sense. Do you know how to skin a rabbit?” she asked.

Alex was confused a moment by the off-topic question. He scratched the back of his head and thought, “I did skin a few when I was a kid, but it’s been a very long time. I could use a refresher.”

“Pull out that little knife, and do what I do.” She pulled a small knife from her boot.

Alex wiped the razor blade clean on his pants before he started to skin the rabbit. He watched Caitlyn cleaned and dressed hers. In short order, both of the rabbits were cooking over the fire.

Utility knife with four spare blades, he thought, taking mental inventory of everything he had in his pockets. Cell phone, could use it as a light I guess, but Caitlyn’s magical one makes it near useless. Car keys, improvised weapon. Wallet, completely useless. The knife will be useful, until I run out of blades for it.

Caitlyn studied him from across the fire. Light glinted off of the metal disc on the bottom of his sword, catching her attention. “May I see your sword a moment?”

Alex pulled the wooden sword from his belt and handed it to her. She inspected the metal piece of the pommel for a moment and ran her hands across the length of the wooden katana. “Terra gave this to you?” she asked.

He nodded, looking at the wooden sword, lost in memory. “For my birthday. Some guys get useless stuff like jewelry or watches.” Alex smiled. “She knew I like to practice with older weapons, so she gave me a sword. It doesn’t have a guard, but I just need to be more careful with my hands.”

“Are you any good with a sword?” she asked.

What does it matter if I’m good with a sword? “I’m better than most. I’ve been practicing with blades of different sizes and shapes for a very long time. Longer than I care to think about, but I remember sometimes.”

She pointed to the metal disc on the bottom of the sword. “Do you know what this is?”

Alex shook his head. On the disc were nine circles, each connected to the one next to it at two points.

“It’s the symbol for the Nine Realms,” Caitlyn said.

“Really?” Alex asked. Caitlyn nodded. “Where did Terra get it?”

“She took it when the Arcane City fell, before she left to go to Earth to...” Caitlyn stopped herself before she said more. “Guard this blade with your life.” She handed the sword back to him. “How do you meet Terra?”

He thought about it for a moment before he started. “Well, I had just gotten out of the military...”

Chapter Three - Alley Dance, Ten Months Ago

Alex frequented Mickey's, an Irish pub in Chicago, on a number of occasions. People came to relax in the quiet atmosphere while enjoying a cold beverage. Alex found the smell of beer and hot wings familiar, like an old friend. The murmur of conversation was masked by soft piano music.

"I can't believe she actually stood me up," he muttered under his breath. *Last time I ask her out,* he thought, taking a drink of his beer. Alex surveyed the half-empty bar and shrugged. *Doesn't look like there are any single girls here tonight. Finish this one, then home.*

Alex spun on his stool back to the bar and motioned the bartender over. "Check please, Ann," he said when she came over. The voluptuous woman wore an apron over one of the green shirts the bar had sold.

"Lady friend not show up?" Ann asked with a British accent as she handed him the tab.

"Nope." Alex looked at the check. "Seven bucks for two beers! You're killing me, Ann." She smiled at him as he pulled a ten from his wallet. "Keep the change, you brew-bearing vixen." She laughed as she took his money.

A smile and a laugh, better than nothing, I guess. Alex watched as she put the money in the register and closed out his ticket. Movement out of the corner of his eye brought his head around.

A long fall of red hair most of the way down the woman's back caught Alex's attention. She was facing away from him, but Alex could see she had a black leather jacket on with jeans. "You pig!" the girl shouted, throwing her drink in the face of the man on the other side of her. She slammed a bottle down on the counter and stormed out.

She's a fiery one. Alex watched the fat man walk to two of his friends. "Let's go teach that bitch a lesson," the roly-poly of a man said.

Alex sighed and left the unfinished beer on the bar as he stood. *Looks like it won't be an uneventful evening after all.* He scooped his brown leather jacket off of the stool he had been saving and put it on as he followed the three men to the door.

Ann had picked up the phone to call the police, but Alex motioned her to stop. "I'll take care of it," he said. "Those three will have gotten away by the time the cops get here." Ann nodded as he turned to leave.

Large snowflakes glowed orange under the lampposts that lined the road and sidewalk. Alex saw the three men turn down an alley not far away. He breathed into his hands and rubbed them together. He put them into his pockets as he walked toward the opening of the alley.

A lamppost cast its golden glow a way down the alley, but the three men had cornered the woman from the bar just past the circle of its light. "Come on girly, we just want to have some fun," the fat one said, reaching for her.

She snatched her arm away and fixed him with a deadly glare. "You will turn around and leave now or else you may not live to regret it."

Her tone and glare set the big man back a step. One of his buddies laughed. "Looks like this one got some fight in her, Harry." Fat Harry smirked and stepped back toward her.

Alex took that as his cue to intervene. He put an arm around the two nameless men's shoulders. "How are you three gentlemen doing this fine evening?" he asked.

The two men nearly jumped out of their skin at Alex's sudden appearance. Fat Harry spun toward him. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Alex smiled in his friendliest manner. "The name's John, John Smith, and I just saw you three here

in this alley and thought I would come see if I could interest all of you in a drink. I know a good bar just up the way.”

“Beat it,” Harry snarled. “We’re going to teach this bitch a lesson in manners.”

“Who’s this bitch you are going on about?” Alex squinted his eyes and looked past the big man to the red-head. Her leather jacket not zipped up and revealed a white t-shirt underneath. “Jane?” Alex asked, doing his best to sound surprised. “What are you doing out this time of night?”

Alex walked past the three men, making a show of tripping over a loose pipe and put his arm around the woman’s shoulders. He felt her tense under him, and he squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

“What are you doing?” she whispered through clenched teeth.

“Getting you out of this, hopefully without hurting anyone,” he whispered back.

Alex grinned again. “This is my little sister, Jane, and I just couldn’t let anything happen to her, so how about we all go have that drink I was talking about and laugh about this later?”

The three men looked at one another. “Bullshit,” one of the other men said.

“It’s the truth,” she put in. “I didn’t realize you were going out tonight, John.”

“Sister or not,” Harry said, “She’s not getting out of this scot-free.”

Alex talked with his hands while he dug his foot under the pipe in front of him. “You sure there’s no way I can convince you to leave my sweet, loving, harmless baby sister alone?”

Harry shook his head and pulled a knife from his pocket. “Not a chance.”

Alex sighed. “I’m sorry to hear that.” Before Harry could react, Alex kicked his foot out. The five-foot-long pipe he had been working his foot under caught the fat man square in the groin. Harry doubled over in pain. Alex snatched the airborne end of the pipe and held it across his body like a staff.

He struck the second man on the side of the neck. Spinning with the rebound, Alex swept the long end toward the third man at ankle height. He went down hard. Alex slammed a groaning Harry to the ground with a blow across the back.

“Let’s go,” Alex said to the girl, grabbing her hand. He watched from the corner of his eye as she slipped a knife back into a holster at her waist.

“What you just did was either very brave or very foolish,” she said.

Alex laughed and shook his head as they turned back to the street, walking away from the bar. He let go of her hand as they kept walking. “Doesn’t matter which, it worked. What’s your real name?”

“Jane,” she said with a sly smirk. “Jane Smith, in case you don’t remember. Now, my foolishly brave or bravely foolish guardian, what is yours?”

Her tone made Alex laugh. He stepped in front of her and started walking backward, facing her. With a deep bow befitting a guardsman meeting his queen he said, “Alex Zane, milady, humbly at your service.”

Her laughter made him smile as he fell back in step beside her.

Chapter Four - An Early Start

“It was a week before she told me her real name. She called me her guardian after that, as a joke he finished. He put the last piece of rabbit in his mouth.

Caitlyn raised one of her eyebrows. “She called you her guardian?” Alex nodded. “Interesting,” she said.

“Why is that interesting?”

“Don’t concern yourself with it,” Caitlyn replied. “You should sleep now. I’m going to cast a few wards around us. Nothing will come upon us in the night without us knowing well ahead of time.”

“Do you think Terra is all right?” Alex asked as he lay down.

“We have to get an early start tomorrow, you should get some sleep. I’ll be right back.”

Alex nodded. Caitlyn hadn’t answered his question. He lay there and listened to her walk away. *“We are going for reinforcements, Terra, as fast as we can.”*

His sleep that night was fitful. Alex awoke feeling more tired than he had before he slept. He groggily lifted himself to his elbows. The small amount of sky he could see was still black with stars. Alex looked around, but didn’t see Caitlyn anywhere.

“Caitlyn? Where are you?” he called.

“We need to go. Now!” She crashed through the brush behind him in her panther form.

Alex jumped to his feet, all weariness forgotten at the sound of panic in her voice. “What’s going on?” he asked as he followed quickly behind her. He heard the howls of wolves in the distance.

“Hellhounds,” she said, fear evident in her voice. “Four of them. They are big, like wolves, but meaner and smarter.”

“You might be able to, but I don’t think that I can outrun anything like a wolf,” Alex said.

“I know that,” she snapped. Her black fur stood up straight. “Keep going the same direction, use the larger moon as your reference so you don’t get lost. Don’t stop for anything. I grew up hunting in these woods; about half a mile from here is a boulder in a wide clearing.

“It juts out of the ground at an angle, so they will only be able to come at you from one side. I’ll do my best to lead them away from you. If I don’t come back before dawn, keep going west. Starfall is only two more days walk that direction. The scouts should find you and lead you the rest of the way in.”

The howls were closer. “Keep going!” Caitlyn shouted as she spun and ran back the way she had come. Alex charged through the brush and brambles, small rips appearing on his jacket sleeves. He spied the moon through breaks in the trees. His throat and lungs began to burn in the frigid night air.

He heard a sharp yelp of pain and more howls from behind, closer still. The trees suddenly stopped as Alex crashed through more brush into the next clearing. He saw the boulder and angled toward it. He scrambled up the low side of it. He drew his sword and held it in front of himself with both hands.

Clouds covered the face of the moon, casting the clearing into inky darkness. He listened as the howls began to trail off to the south. Alex let his breath out when he realized he had been holding it. He slumped down to a sitting position, keeping his eyes on the line of trees.

A pair of glowing red eyes stared at him from the tree line. He watched as they stalked into the clearing. Alex heard a low growl as he stood back up. The crimson orbs stopped about thirty feet away.

Alex brandished the sword. “Come at me, then,” he shouted. Red eyes blinked. Alex watched as the cloud slowly moved from in front of the moon, light racing to bathe the clearing in shades of gray.

The hellhound stared at him, saliva dripped from slavering fangs. Blood reflected from several claw marks on the hellhound's back. The grass around its paws was withering to ash.

"So, you're the one Caitlyn jumped," Alex taunted, not knowing if the beast could understand him. Hearing himself talk helped reinforce his courage. "Looks like she got you good."

The hellhound growled at him again. *I think it caught my drift*, Alex thought. The hellhound began to pace around the boulder. Alex slowly turned to keep it in front of him. The demonic dog came closer as it circled, the gap closing to ten feet from the base of the boulder when it completed the circuit.

The hellhound leapt through the air, its jaws in line with Alex's throat.

Alex yelled as he dove backwards and thrust his sword forward. A flash of light and heat stole his vision. The pommel of his sword dug painfully into Alex's stomach as the demon crashed into him. The demon's hot breath on his face smelled of sulfur. The grip felt suddenly foreign in his hands. As his vision cleared he saw the red light was gone from the beast's eyes.

Alex pushed the hellhound off of him. He planted a foot on the dead beast and pulled his sword out of it. The blade came out with a fiery hiss.

Alex blinked a few times to clear his vision. Flames enveloped the length of the steel blade, and the aggressive cross guard swept upward, leather wrapped the hilt, and the pommel had become three dimensional. Nine rings slowly spun, making it look like a nine tiered gyroscope.

A powerful rage inundated him, turning Alex's vision red with the pounding of it in his ears. <I am Wrath>, a ghostly voice whispered in his mind. Shocked by the sudden mental intrusion, Alex dropped the sword.

The sword clattered to the stone and changed back to its normal state. Alex stared at the now wooden sword. He noticed a faint light coming from the pommel. He picked it back up, expecting the sword to burst into flames again, but it remained inert.

"Wrath," Alex said, trying to get the sword to do something, but nothing happened. *Wrath*, he thought. Still nothing. Alex pushed the hellhound's corpse from the top of the boulder. Sheathing his sword, he sat on a space free of blood and thought about what had just happened as he waited for sunrise.

The sky had begun to lighten in the east as Alex heard something stumbling through the woods. His eyes snapped to the south. A large four legged animal stood at the edge of the clearing under the shadow of the trees. In the darkness, he couldn't tell if it was another hellhound or not. One golden eye shined in the dark as a black panther limped into the clearing.

"Caitlyn!" Alex shouted. He sprang to his feet and ran toward her. She limped a few steps before she collapsed. His breath hissed out through clenched teeth when he drew close enough to see her clearly.

Her fur was slick with blood from dozens of bites and claw marks. One of her eyes was swollen shut. She cast him a plaintive look with her open eye. "Alex," she whispered, "You have to go. I only killed three of them, there is another out there still. The leader of the pack didn't chase me. You have to run."

Alex shook his head. "I killed the one you had roughed up. All four are dead. The sword... I don't know, but it's dead."

"Good, at least you will make it. Go, leave me here. I did my part. Two days walk west is the village, the sentries should find you by tomorrow around noon. Send back someone for my body. I don't want to end up as food for scavengers."

He shook his head again. "I'm not letting you die on my watch," Alex said, fighting down

memories of his past. "I'm strong enough to carry you, but not like this. Change into a human so you are lighter."

"Can't," Caitlyn whispered, "the change may kill me."

"And staying here *will* kill you. We have to try," Alex shouted, angry at his inability to help. She nodded.

Caitlyn gasped as black fur turned green and changed into a woolen cloak. Joints and bones snapped and reformed into arms and legs. Her jaw cracked and took on its human shape.

Her dress and cloak were in tatters, and her body was still covered with open wounds. Alex pulled off his jacket and began to cut it into wide strips. She grimaced in pain as he bandaged the largest of her wounds as best he could. He put her on his back and draped her arms across his front. He used his cloak to tie her to his back.

If she was much taller, this wouldn't work, he thought. "You all right back there?" Alex asked as he stood.

"It hurts," she gasped.

"I know, Caitlyn," Alex said, trying to comfort her. "But don't worry, you'll be fine soon. I'll have you back to hunting mice in no time."

She laughed weakly. A sharp twist of pain stole her breath. "I'm ready," she said.

Alex nodded and began to run west. Her breath came in ragged pulls. *This is just like last time. But she's not going to die. I'll get her out.*

Specters of the past rose up around him as he ran.

Chapter Five - Columbia, Two Years Ago

Alex ducked lower behind the short wall as another mortar landed only a few hundred feet from his squad's position.

His unit had been deployed to Bogotá at the Colombian government's request to deal with some civil unrest following their election. They had been fighting almost nonstop for the past five days.

Communications had been difficult as the insurgents had some sort of high tech VHF/UHF signal jammers set up throughout the city. Alex's squad disabled one, but took heavy losses in the effort. Their lieutenant and gunnery sergeant had both died in the attempt. Alex was able to call out to the command, and they were ordered to return with the jammer to the forward operating base for analysis.

"Civil unrest my ass," the 17-year old private, Seamus Kurt, shouted over the sound of gunfire. "We landed in the middle of a damn civil war."

"Stow it, Kurt," Alex shouted back. "Orders come down to take the jammer and EVAC. New building three streets down has a large enough helo pad. Suppressing fire at ten and three at those two apartment buildings." Alex waited for a lull in the incoming fire. "Move!" he shouted.

Their rifles belched rounds up the street as the four men moved toward the road that would take them to the news station. Alex brought up the rear with Kurt almost fifteen feet ahead of him. As they turned the corner to move out of the hot zone, Kurt tripped over some rubble that had fallen from the building next to them. *I'm going to kill that kid*, Alex thought as he drew closer.

Before he could move to help the private up, something blew him onto his back. *That felt like getting kicked by a horse*, he thought with a groan. He shook his head to try to clear the ringing in his ears. A three inch piece of metal was firmly lodged in his chest plate. *Porcupine*, he thought.

Alex remembered the brief he had received on possible enemy capabilities before they inserted into the city. "With every new war comes new and inventive ways to kill people," the report had said. "One thing the insurgents have improved upon, is the simple pipe bomb. They drill holes into the walls of the pipe and attach three to five inch spikes, making it resemble a metal porcupine."

Alex rose to his feet in a daze and stumbled to where Kurt had fallen. The private blinked up at him lazily. His arms and legs were punctured multiple times from the spike bomb. The other two remaining squad members raced over and took up defensive positions.

"Sarge," Kurt said numbly, "I can't stand up."

Alex slung his rifle across his back and knelt next to the ruined form of Private Kurt. *He's bleeding too much, and it's too dangerous to treat him here.* "Don't worry, Seamus, helo has a flight surgeon. He'll have you tap dancing and playing the piano in no time."

"We gotta go, Sarge," Max Gilroy, the squad's heavy gunner, said. He was a giant of a man, seven feet tall and barrel-chested, so of course it was unanimously decided that he be called Tiny. He hated the nickname. "We are sniper bait sitting out here like this."

Alex lifted Kurt. His taxed muscles screamed protest at the extra hundred-seventy pounds, and his ears rang painfully from the explosion. Alex did his best to ignore the pain. "Let's move." Hiding along the perimeter of the buildings, they skirted rubble as they rushed to the news station.

Max scanned the entrance to the building before declaring it clear and entering. Alex followed closely behind. Carter, the squad's engineer, brought up the rear. The men flew up the stairs three at a time as they climbed the twenty-eight story building.

They located the roof access, but it was locked. Max tried to kick it in, but the solid metal door wouldn't give. "My ankle will break before that door frame does."

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