

Vellum and Green Vitriol

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These are not books, lumps of lifeless paper, but minds alive on the shelves.
-- Gilbert Highet --

The First Conjunction
Seal I

October 1925

With the storm clouds spitting overhead, Green Alley didn't look very green. Rather, it was a pitch dark maw surrounded by dirty buildings and paved with pitted cobblestones filling up with muddy rain. Hesitation allowed a gust of wind to tug at my umbrella. Firming my grip on the handle, I decided to move.

The only indication that Parrish Books existed was a few wooden steps leading up to a door which had probably seen fresh green paint some time in the last century. A small tarnished plaque was mounted to the right and faint light emanated from the small window panes on the top half of the door. I tugged on the handle and pushed. A small bell on the threshold tinkled at my entrance.

I managed to shake my umbrella closed and stepped inside. Dim electrical lighting hung like flat demented fireflies from the ceiling. Dark wood shelves lined a small room—each crammed with books, leather-bound and paper-bound. All old and well used. The smell of musty tomes permeated the air. I imagined that it was what I would have smelled like if I had not been walking on two legs.

A counter sat in the left corner, laden with more books, a lamp with a hideous shade the color of molding olives, and a white-haired man bent over doing accounting. He did not look up even as I squelched across the floor to pretend to examine the nearest shelf. Beyond the counter was an archway to the rest of the shop—the back room, I guessed—that was either a kitchen or a storage room. As I slowly sidled my way toward the proprietor, I noticed another customer in the opposite corner of the shop—a dark-haired man in a tweed jacket deeply absorbed in what looked like a heavy reference book. An unkempt professor, I assumed, and turned my attention back to the old man.

Finally at the counter, I cleared my throat. "Mr. Parrish?"

Pen continued scratching on paper. "How may I help you, Miss?"

"I am quite hopeful that you can. I've been directed here by an acquaintance of mine. He told me that you would know something about a particular book that I have been trying to find for my research."

"What book is this?"

"The *Liber Tutelarum*."

The pen stopped and a trembling hand set it down on paper. Curiously, I watched the old man raise his head and meet my eyes with a rheumy blue gaze. "Who is your acquaintance?" His voice hid a nervous energy. Or Parrish was just annoyed because he needed to go to the water closet at the moment. Even after all these years, I sometimes still found it hard to distinguish human emotion. I took it as a good sign that the old man did not just tell me no.

"Professor Wallace at the Institute. I work as his research assistant. He's on a short sabbatical, currently, so I am working on a pet project of mine. There was this small sect of monks in the thirteenth century who had dedicated themselves to copying some texts..."

Parrish slashed a hand in the air to cut me off. "Tell your professor that he is misinformed. I know of no such book. Parrish Books specializes in first editions of epic poetry—preferably from the eighteenth century. If you're looking for a book written by a monk, go to a church."

"Not all books copied by monks have remained in church libraries," I argued. "Even if you have never come across the book that I am looking for, perhaps you have some idea, some acquaintance of yours who I could ask."

"I know no one."

"Mr. Parrish." I straightened and looked down my nose at him. I knew the expression combined with the short-brimmed cloche hat on my head had the effect of rendering the opposing person into a contrite mess. "That is impossible. All antiquarian booksellers have their sources. Otherwise, how would they get any of their stock?"

A faint chuckle had me reflexively whipping my head around to glare at the offending person. The other customer was peering up from the book he was browsing with evil amusement. "You'll never get anything out of Parrish," he told me ominously.

I turned my attention back to the bookseller. "Surely you have a colleague who knows something of thirteenth century literature," I said, attempting to sweeten my tone.

It didn't work.

"Do I have to repeat myself? I. Know. No. One. Now, Miss, either take a look at some of the fine copies of love poetry on that shelf or go away."

"That's a fine way to treat a potential customer." His hostile attitude intrigued me. Obviously he had something to hide. "Do I look like I'm looking for love poetry?"

"Bah. You're probably one of those suffragettes," the old man sniffed.

With one more glance at the interior of the bookshop, I decided on a strategic retreat, for now. Parrish would probably clam up further if I were to forcefully pursue my inquiries. "Pardon me, then. Good day."

The bookseller ignored me.

I let out a breath and squelched back towards the entrance. But before I could open the door, it slammed open, striking me on the shoulder. Unbalanced, I stumbled back and tripped over a small footstool.

The First Conjunction
Seal II

"Nicholas Parrish! I've come for my order."

While rubbing my shin, I squinted up at the entrance. A figure cloaked in a black greatcoat with silver buttons and a tricorne stood at the doorway, highlighted faintly by the falling rain behind him. "That's rude. Don't you watch where you're going?"

Again, I was ignored.

"I want that book."

I contemplated tripping the man with my umbrella when he strolled across the small shop, boots thumping heavily. The bit of indoor light hinted at

blond hair and pale parchment skin under the tricorn. When he stopped in front of the slack-jawed proprietor, the desk lamp illuminated a curving mouth that was at odds with a sharp, shaven chin.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Although his voice quavered, Parrish remained stubborn.

"I told you before that price was no object to me," the figure continued, "when I ordered that book. And don't pretend you don't know what I mean."

The bookseller fisted his hands. "I don't have what you're looking for. And even if I did, I wouldn't sell it to you. I've made some inquiries about you..."

A black gloved hand shot out and grasped the old man by the collar. Parrish gargled. "You did what?"

"I have morals, you know. Someone like you is no one to deal with."

Back on my feet, I wondered if I should intervene. The old man was turning a bit blue in the face. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the other customer make a shooing motion with his hand. He was slowly moving closer to the duo.

The sensible thing, of course, was to leave and call the constable.

I stepped towards the threshold. The new stranger raised a hand and the door slammed as if a strong wind had shut it.

"You might have morals, Parrish, but I don't. I have no scruples. Even if it means that after I get my book, I have to get rid of some witnesses."

Sorcerer. I suppose at this point, I could have screamed like a little girl. But that would have just brought more trouble.

Just as the stranger started to bring up the hand he used to spell the door shut to start choking Parrish further, the other customer hurled himself at the sorcerer. The sorcerer roared in annoyance and let go of Parrish to make some strange gestures. The bookseller staggered back from the counter, breathing heavily, before slipping to the floor in a faint.

The customer ignored the sorcerer's hand waving and lunged again, getting the man into a head lock. The tricorn tumbled to the floor. I gripped my umbrella and looked for an opening.

The two men seemed to be muttering at each other between wheezing breaths. Did the two know each other? Who cared? I swung my umbrella and it connected with the back of the sorcerer's neck. But instead of rendering him unconscious, it seemed to enrage him, and with a burst of sudden strength, he flung the tweed-wearing customer in my direction. I landed flat on my back with what seemed like an entire set of encyclopedias on top of me.

"Don't get in my way," the blond sorcerer warned.

"Does it matter?" The lump on top of me retorted. "You're going to kill us anyway."

"That's great of you to put that idea into his head," I mumbled. "Because maybe before he thought to spare us before." Before I could shove the oaf off to emphasize my point, he got up himself to face the other man.

The sorcerer point a finger and the other customer shoved his right sleeve up to reveal his forearm. Something quick and light erupted from the sorcerer's finger and seemingly bounced off the other man's arm when he raised it to eye level. I scrambled up in disbelief. Were there actual black characters appearing on that customer's skin?

"You're one of the Keys!" the sorcerer hissed, his glittering eyes narrowing in anger. "No wonder."

The sorcerer sneered at us as if we were beneath his notice. Or rather that the other book was beneath his notice. What were the odds of encountering a book that was like me? But I shoved the speculations aside. There were more important things to be concerned about. Like the apparently homicidal sorcerer in our midst.

"I should have known one of your kind would have shown up sooner or later," the sorcerer said, his mouth curving maliciously. "Do you want to know what I did to another Key a few years ago when it got in my way?"

"Not particularly," the other customer, the "Key", replied.

The sorcerer raised his hands, fingers outstretched. "Very well then. None of you have ever had a sense of humor anyway." Sparks flew from his fingers, deceptively harmless like the sparklers children handled during holidays, but some great force followed, shoving the Key back.

He stumbled backward, hitting me with a wayward arm on his way down. For

the second time within moments, I was sprawled on the floor. Again.

"Hey, are you a klutz or something?" I huffed. Something was digging into my lower back. A stray book probably. I should have ran directly to Scotland Yard. This was an ignoble position to be in.

"Miss, would it hurt you to be quiet for just one moment?" the Key groaned.

"No, but I don't like to miss a moment to complain."

The sorcerer waved his arm and another invisible wind struck the Key, sending him sliding next to the shelf by the proprietor's counter.

"Mouthy," he told me, even though he was eyeing the sorcerer who was in the middle of waving another attacking spell.

I let out an exasperated breath. Only an idiot would waste air trying to argue at me at this particular juncture. I managed to crawl toward the Key, hopefully not in such a conspicuous manner as far as I could tell—since the sorcerer still had his gaze fixed on the Key. Fortunately for the moment, I had not revealed anything, appearing still as a simple human, easily ignored.

Just as the sorcerer reached back as if to grab an invisible object to be hurtled, I reached out and grabbed the Key by his argyle covered ankles. I could feel him jerk under my fingers and his gaze switched from the sorcerer to me. "What are you doing? *What are you?*"

The sorcerer let go of his invisible weapon and for a split second, I saw a sickly green-yellow sphere of energy hover above his fingers before dissipating toward our direction.

"Take it," I hissed.

The Key narrowed his eyes, an odd almost colorless glimmer in the dim store light. But I could feel my energy seeping into him.

Something ricocheted past the Key's magical shield, rendering part of it blue-black as if a flying rock had bruised a knee in some magical space-plane. The invisible weapon briefly became visible again and I saw it fly towards the sorcerer as if it had been targeted like a returning spell. The sorcerer quickly blocked it, but he also growled under his breath—a curse, perhaps.

"We're evenly matched," the Key said lowly. "It's a stalemate. He will have to

retreat first since..."

Before I could utter a warning, the sorcerer grinned with some sort of internal realization and suddenly threw a spell about the room which rattled the furniture and whipped loose paper about like a frenzy. Everyone else was thrown around like rag dolls. The unnatural wind forced me against the wall near the door and made sure to pin me down with the Key's body, whose ankle I was still gripping.

And then there was a horrible screeching sound. A nearby bookshelf of reference books tumbled over the top of us. A particularly sharp edged dictionary struck my temple. And I knew no more.

The First Conjunction
Seal III

For a book, purgatory would be the perpetual state of being shelved between two enormous indices for sports statistics and left moldering like some neglected antique at a country estate that no one has ever heard of. A part of hell, I suppose, is being squashed by an entire bookshelf of such indices.

When I first came to, I was immediately aware of the pressing weight as if I had unaccountably tangled myself up in blankets while asleep. But then I slowly began to realize that no, I was not underneath a bunch of suffocating blankets. I was still in the clothes that I had put on that morning. Clothes that no longer fit me because I was no longer in the form of a person.

Some books, you know, don't particularly find much edification in being a book once they've found the advantages of being something else.

And thirdly, I became aware of a voice in my head. Not my own voice—my internal dialogue. No, it was someone else entirely—a masculine tone, very angry and hurt considering the amount of cursing peppering his speech.

Will you shut up? I mentally shouted at the voice.

Blessedly, he went silent for a moment. And then he started up again.

I can do whatever I like, he told me. You, the subconscious, are merely along for the ride, even if you don't sound like how I imagined you to be.

I am no one's subconscious. You're intruding on my own thoughts so go

away.

There is no possible way for me to go away. I'm trapped under a mountain of almanacs.

Indices, I corrected him. Then dig your way out.

I can't. The last spell the sorcerer used on me completely sapped my strength. I'm going to have to remain a book for a while. Not that that hasn't happened to me before.

I paused before I blurted out my next comment—something about being reckless which I was sure he would not appreciate. Then I said, *You're the Key, aren't you?*

One of them.

One of them? There were more than one? The only Key in existence that I knew of was some old moldy volume literally kept under lock and key at the Institute least someone unscrupulous actually got their hands on it. I had visited it once—the poor sod had absolutely no ability to walk about on its own.

How many are you?

That would be telling, wouldn't it?

You're answering a question with a question.

Does it matter?

A loud clomping noise from outside the book pile disturbed my internal dialogue with my supposed unconscious. I strained my senses and distinguished two sets of footsteps, one heavier than the other.

"The report of the noise disturbance was quite adamant, sir. The witnesses said that it sounded like someone was getting murdered in here."

"Lots of people get overwrought whenever they hear something, Lieutenant. It was raining and there was wind. Anything could happen."

"But the proprietor of this bookstore is dead, sir."

"He was old. Maybe it was stress. From the looks of it, I'd imagine he died

from his heart finally giving out."

"Sir, why don't we go through the Parrish's belongings. Perhaps we could find out a clue that may relate to his death."

"Don't bother. Old men who living alone die of medical complications, not of some romantic reason like getting involved with criminal conspiracies."

"No heirs as possible suspects?"

"Unfortunately none as far as we know. You know these kinds of fellows are reclusive and paranoid."

The Lieutenant gave a disappointed sigh. He sounded like he wanted a mystery to solve. "I suppose we'll just have to wait for the coroner's report."

"Exactly. And I can tell you right now that the report will not contain anything of much interest. Come on, there's nothing here but a mess. We'll just leave the state and the creditors to clean this place up."

When the authorities finally left, I said, *What exactly happened? I how the sorcerer attacked you, but why am I affected?*

I would guess it was because of the fact that you were holding onto me. You and I are connected. His tone turned almost salacious.

I was a book. I wasn't human. I wasn't supposed to care about whether or not I had turned back into a book. But I did. Ever since I was liberated from the backlash of a spell my last owner had inadvertently bungled, I had freedom. And I treasured it.

My irritation had me reaching out—had my covering and pages expand until torso filled suit and arms filled sleeves. I gasped under the pile of bibliography and then sneezed from all of the disturbed dust. I tried to worm my way out of a collapsed shelf that had fallen from its wall mooring during the fight between the sorcerer and the Key.

Darling, are you going to leave me here moldering in all of this rubble?

I ignored the endearment. I had observed during my many years up in the human world that protestations would only drive the offender to use it more often to hound their target to distraction.

"Maybe I should. I'm not connected to you. I've Turned. I can walk away

from you."

You didn't take the brunt of the sorcerer's attack. That's why you can feel free to walk on two legs. Face it, you owe me.

I ignored his further whining and looked around at the bookshop.

There were papers scattered all around the room and a few other shelves had toppled over. That made me wonder why the authorities weren't even more suspicious—the entire place looked like it had been ransacked by extremely messy thieves. Over the counter, where the bookseller had been stationed, I saw the account book that Parrish had been writing in, the last line smudged with ink. The desk lamp had burned out, but the overhead lights were still on providing a little light. My hat and my umbrella was nowhere to be found on top of the mess, which irritated me. I was forced to dig back through the pile that I had crawled out of.

I tossed a few shelves out of the way and lobbed some reference books aside. That was when I saw the rumpled tweed coat and pants, the scuffed shoes.

I'm in here.

"How long, exactly, are you going to be in that form anyway?"

About a day, usually. I don't really want to be here when the creditors arrive.

"I guess not. I wouldn't want to be tossed into a half-pence bin."

That's harsh.

Carefully, I took up the clothes and wrapped them into an easily carried bundle I could fit under my arm. But as I had pulled a shirt up to be included in the bundle, a volume tumbled out onto the pile below.

Watch what you're doing.

"Sorry."

I picked up the volume. The cover was bound in a light brown leather, soft and supple to the touch. I frowned. It wasn't precisely leather—something else perhaps. I turned the book over to look on its spine. There was no title, but there was an uneven finger-thick line running down the spine, dark red-

brown. Dried blood.

I tucked the book under my arm as well. I would ponder the puzzle of the Key later when I finally got out of this place. Under a few more books, was my umbrella and crumpled hat. I tried to smooth my hat down as much as possible before I put it back on, but it probably still resembled a wadded piece of paper on top of my head.

There was a small space between the counter and the wall and I managed to squeeze through to the other side. There was no body, but then I remembered that the medics had probably taken Parrish away to be examined by the coroner. The space connecting the back of the room to the front of the store was only large enough for one person. It might have been easier to haul a body over the counter rather than carrying it past that space.

Aside from the lamp and the accounting book on top of the counter, there were a pile of histories shoved to the side and a receipt from the previous week. Under the counter were more histories and a scratched wooden stool. I looked past the arching threshold to the back room that I had assumed was either a kitchen or storage room.

The exit is the other way, you know.

"I know that. I just want to take a look around."

You're looking for the Liber Tutelarum, aren't you? I'd hate to tell you this, but Blackthorne probably filched it after he incapacitated us.

"Blackthorne?" I stepped into the gloom. There was a small window at the very back set into a door. The bit of light that managed to filter in illuminated a small porcelain sink with a shelf over it that held two bottles, a mug, and a shaving razor. Opposite of that was a desk with a high-backed chair. Papers and books were stacked haphazardly.

The sorcerer, the Key clarified. Reginald Blackthorne. Or at least that was the alias he was using when I first met him. I had information that he had business with this bookseller. I didn't know exactly what book he was going to obtain, but I was sure he was going to obtain a powerful book.

"How do you know that the *Liber Tutelarum* isn't really just a translated volume of Greek poetry I was looking for?" The papers on top of the desk were all receipts from recent transactions. Hm.

You're a grimoire of some sort. Like me. An animate encyclopedia would have never had the ability to feed me energy to help deflect Blackthorne's spells. And what are the chances of a grimoire looking for an ordinary book of poetry?

"Have you met any animate encyclopedias? How do you know that they don't know how to weave spells? And what's wrong with poetry? Maybe I just like to collect books."

No, I haven't met any animate encyclopedias, but who on earth would want to animate one anyway?

"I have no idea. But I suppose they'd be boring company anyway. They would probably think that they know it all." I flipped one of the receipts over and found something that was dated for the previous day. "Aha!"

What is it now?

"Information." But before I could read it out loud to him, I heard some commotion at the front of the store. Voices were drifting in past the front door.

"He said there was a book he was looking for," came a muffled voice. "He said he accidentally 'forgot' it the last time he was here."

"In his haste to get away, you mean?" There was a bit of laughter. "Blackthorne is a coward."

"Don't say that to his face. They say he has terrible temper tantrums."

"I can imagine." There was a pregnant pause that made me inadvertently shiver. "They say those who had witnessed his tantrums personally mysteriously disappear. I wonder what has him so frightened to come back here?"

"I don't think he's frightened. More likely, he's just lazy. It's easier to send us grunts to do the work, you know?"

The front door clanged open.

You know, now would be a good time to get out of here.

I tucked the receipt in my coat pocket and tested the handle to the back door. It twisted under my fingers and creaked open. I froze.

I suppose Parrish never bothered to oil his doors, huh?

Do you always state the obvious? I thought to him testily.

"What was that?" whispered one of the henchmen. There was a slap and then an, "Ow!"

"There's no one here, you idiot. We've been watching the place the entire morning. The only people in here were the police and some medics. We saw all of them come out of here. You probably stepped on some creaky floorboard."

Loud rummaging was heard in the front room as Blackthorne's thugs tossed aside books. Mentally, I cringed at the rough manhandling. I would definitely not want to be flung across the room if I weren't a volume that someone was looking for. While all the racket was going on, though, I slowly slipped past the door and entered a damp back alleyway. Dark clouds still crowded above, but I had the feeling that most of the rain had already been dumped onto the city for the past day. I wore modest shoes, but the heels still made clacking sounds on the pavement—a bit too loud for my peace of mind.

The alleyway soon wound back to the main street. Few people or vehicles were about—but that did not mean a thing. It could be in the middle of the day as far as I knew. Purposefully, I took an even pace north. I'd imagine it would look rather suspicious if I had taken a faster pace. And I wanted no one to take a closer look at me, or the unusual bundle under my arm.

I hope we're not going to the city refuse center, the Key drawled in my mind. I don't fancy recovering amidst a pile of rubbish.

I found the edge of my mouth quirking upward. "Well, what if I am?"

The First Conjunction
Seal IV

The buildings on Castor Street had seen better days--now they all sat in a gray row, slowly decaying in their complacent gentility. My flat was in one of those buildings. The third floor to be exact. I did not relish climbing up the stairs. Although I had not been as severely affected as the Key, I was not particularly in an energetic mood either. At my building, I let myself in and glanced around the first landing. I didn't see anyone, but that didn't mean

that no one was watching from their peepholes--especially the landlady.

Heels clattered on the stairs above me. A woman appeared in black heels and silver sequined dress. Her short brown hair was a waved bob accented with a matching sequined headband and black feathers.

"Why Ana, you look terrible!"

Trust Darla to tell it as it is.

"I know," I replied. I've known from experience not to contradict my neighbor. "I had an accident with a shelf of books."

Darla made a tsking sound at the back of her throat. "You work too hard. I thought you were on vacation since that professor you were working for was on sabbatical."

"I am. I was just working on one of my own projects." I shifted the Key and his clothes more securely under my arm. The Key wasn't saying anything now, but that didn't mean that he wasn't trying to get away. "You look all dressed up to the nines, Darla. Isn't it a bit early to go out?"

She gave me an odd look. "Early? It's about six in the evening."

"Really? I suppose time got away from me."

The honk of an automobile outside almost startled me from losing my grip on the Key.

"Oh, there's Gerald. He's taking me to the Gardens for dinner," my neighbor gushed, her rouged lips curving in pleasure. "It's the most elite restaurant in Colchester. I have no idea how he managed to obtain a reservation. And afterwards, we'll be seeing Hamlet at the theater."

"That sounds marvelous," I said, pretending enthusiasm. "Well, you'd better go. You don't want Gerald to wait too long for you."

Darla tittered in laughter as she waggled her fingers and then disappeared through the front door.

The Gardens may be elite, but the food is terrible, the Key announced as I began trudging up the stairs. She's going to get indigestion and then will have to suffer sitting through a depressing play.

"You say this from personal experience?"

The woman I took to the Gardens later accused me of poisoning her, he sulked. One of my few failures, I'm afraid.

"It sounds like you're quite successful at wooing the ladies." I unlocked the door to my flat and stepped inside before turning on one of the living room lamps. A floral couch and floor to ceiling bookshelves greeted me.

I am. He said it as a fact, with no arrogance. After my many years of observation, I find human females to be terribly easy to understand.

"Well, don't tell that to the next woman you meet. She would be quite offended." I put my hat and umbrella on a rack next to the door. And then tossed the Key and his belongings on the couch.

Hey!

I wandered off to the kitchen to fill a kettle with water while the Key continued his grumbling about having his hide bruised. I put the full kettle on top of the stove and turned the gas on. Then I started going through my cupboards, trying to find tea. Ah, I still had the tin of oolong I had gotten a few months ago. Ambling back into the living room, I took out the receipt I had tucked into a pocket.

"L.T. Greenglass Auction House."

Excuse me?

"It looks like the *Liber Tutelarum* went to Greenglass." I tapped the receipt against my chin, thinking. "Parrish probably sent the book to the auction house in the hopes that it would get a better price than simply selling it from his store outright."

Then we'll have to get to Greenglass.

"We?" I stood over the couch and frowned at the Key. The book, of course, had no expression in response to my disapproval. "You're not looking for the *Liber Tutelarum*."

But I am looking for Blackthorne. He'll figure out where that book is sooner or later. I just have to get there before he does.

I still wasn't quite sure why a Key would want to seek out an obviously

dangerous sorcerer like Blackthorne. "What do you have against him? Granted, he is crazy, but..."

Just trust me that I have my own reasons for going after him. So what's the Liber Tutelarum to you? Grimoires are usually loners.

I sighed and turned to face my shelves of books. Yes, it's nice to be surrounded by other books if you yourself are a book, but it's still very lonely if none of them have the ability to talk back to you. "The *Liber Tutelarum*, seventh edition," I clarified. "I've been trying to find all the editions, but this so far has been the only solid lead. The seventh edition is one of my siblings."

Does this mean that you're also the Liber Tutelarum? The Key sounded suspiciously excited.

"Yes."

What edition?

"Tenth. As far as I know, I'm the last."

I had heard rumors about the tenth edition--it had passed through the hands of many sorcerers with many strange and unique spells added to it with each owner. And then some time in the sixteenth century, it mysteriously disappeared after the murder of the famous occultist, Edward Talbot.

"So you already seem to know much about me," The kettle whistled when the water started boiling. "Who are you? I can't keep calling you 'The Key'." I took the kettle off the stove and poured the water into a teapot to seep. Then I made myself a cup of tea and went back to the living room. I sat down on the couch, feeling suddenly tired. I put the cup down on a small table nearby and leaned back and closed my eyes, briefly I promised myself.

Rhys. The Key finally answered. *I go by Rhys Lattimore.*

The First Conjuration
Seal V

The sun streaming through the living room woke me. Not to mention the atrocious singing coming from my kitchen. Rubbing my eyes and sitting up, I

discovered only a cold cup of tea and a tweed jacket beside me.

Feeling a bit out of sorts, I stood up and headed to the kitchen. The grimoire I had lugged up to my flat the previous day was standing at my stove making scrambled eggs.

"Don't tell me. You're the Key to Cooking."

The singing stopped. He slightly turned his head. His longish dark hair was slick and curling from a recent shower, but stubble still shadowed his jaw. And there was a mean glint to his gray--almost colorless--eyes. "Do I look like Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management?"

"No. You look more like an overwrought tract of Byronic poetry. But if you burn those eggs, you'll give Mrs. Beeton a run for her money."

There was a particularly insulted clang of crockery as I stepped back out of the kitchen and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. About ten minutes afterwards, finally in some clean clothes, I went back into the kitchen to see him setting the table.

"Eat," he said as I sat down. He was frowning as he sat across from me and took a cup of coffee. "Because we're going to be leaving soon."

I paused with the fork halfway to my mouth. "Leaving? Soon? What exactly have you decided to do without my knowledge?"

"Bossy." His mouth twitched. Was the Key amused? "I haven't really decided on anything. But I assume we're leaving soon. Greenglass, is it?"

"The train," I said. "The Midland Express leaves Colchester for Greenglass every day at two in the afternoon. Since it is about nine now, that will give us a little time to pack and get to the station. Assuming, of course, your residence isn't all the way across town."

"It isn't far. I can call a cab."

"Fine. You can go and I suppose we could meet up at the station."

He set down his coffee. "Oh no, I'm not falling for that trick."

"What trick?"

"I bet there's an earlier train. You strike me as the type of person who'd

leave without me."

"What you're really trying to say is that I'm the type of person who would break my word." I squinted at him for a moment. "You know, I could lie and say that I would never break my word, but it isn't true. I'd break my word, if it suits me."

"Ah, you're a sneaky woman after my own heart."

"You don't have a heart. You just look like you do. And I'm not precisely a woman."

"Well, you certainly look like one to me."

"It's just the clothes. You know as well as I do that books don't have gender."

"Now where's the fun in that?" He picked up his coffee again and took a sip while he watched me eat. "If we follow your logic, books aren't supposed to be having breakfast either. But here you are, slurping down my cooking that you must admit is not burned."

I glared at him as I swallowed. "Exactly what kind of Key are you anyway? The Key of Annoyance?"

Something dark green flickered across his eyes and then was gone. I almost thought I had imagined it. "I'm one of the *Clavis Umbrium*. Key of Shadows. There are four of us, the editions named after the elements. The last I've heard, Air was in Germany and Water was heading to the Americas. Earth has chosen to remain in book form, in a very private collection."

"You're Fire then." I drank some tea before saying, "Keys mostly contain spells that summon things. Is there a significance to why the editions are named after elements? You summon the element fire, don't you?"

"Actually, it's much worse than that, but that's neither here nor there."

"Neither here nor there?" I said in disbelief. "You summon demons, don't you?"

He put a hand to his chest. "I didn't say I was a good book."

"Objectively, there is no such thing as a good book," I pointed out. "Just books that people think are right."

* * *

"Did you put half your library in this suitcase?"

I snapped on my gloves before I opened the door to let him and my luggage out of my flat. "Stop whining. I just put in some necessities."

"Oh right. Necessities."

I ignored the sarcasm and locked the door behind me. The cab I had called would be here any minute. Besides, he had volunteered to carry my things. I wasn't going to get in the way of a masochist. "One can never be too prepared. Take for instance, the clothes iron."

"Clothes iron? What the bloody hell is a clothes iron doing in your baggage?"

"It just won't do to go about with a wardrobe full of wrinkles," I replied. "Besides, if a particularly amorous fool decides to invade your private room, you can always whack him on the head with it."

With a free hand, he rubbed his head at the thought. "You're not precisely a docile girl, are you?"

Before starting down the stairs, the door to the flat across the hall opened, revealing my neighbor Darla. This time, she was wearing a jaunty skirt under a navy blouse. It was her tennis outfit, I remembered. She smiled at me, but the stretch of her mouth became wider at the sight of Rhys.

"Why Ana, what a surprise. Are you going out? Why haven't I met your beau before? Please introduce us."

I couldn't help but make a face. "He's not my beau. He's just helping me carry my things down. Darla, this is Rhys Lattimore. Rhys, this is Darla St. Claire."

"How very nice to meet you, Mr. Lattimore."

"The pleasure is all mine," he purred. "Please call me Rhys."

I fought a snicker. And managed to win. "I won't be back for a little while, Darla," I said before she could say something to him. "I decided to take this vacation thing a little more seriously. I will be heading out to Greenglass for a bit of sight seeing."

"Oh, good for you, Ana. But isn't it getting a bit cold for sight seeing at this time of year?"

"I heard there were some museums there," I lied.

"I see. Well, as you can see, I'm not particularly dressed for the weather either."

I cocked my head, pretending to consider her outfit. "Tennis? In October?"

"Well, the evening with Gerald at the Gardens didn't go exactly as planned," Darla confessed. "So he decided to make it up to me by taking me to a squash match at the Piccadilly Conservatory this afternoon. I have heard that it is a greenhouse in there, so I want to be prepared."

"That does sound exciting," I said.

"I very much hope so." Darla waved and said her good-byes before heading back into her own apartment.

We headed down the stairs, thankfully not running into any more of the neighbors, before reaching outside. A black cab was already waiting at the curb, the driver--a whipcord lean man in a black uniform studded with brass buttons--standing beside the front passenger side smoking a cigarette. Once he spotted us, he flicked the cigarette to the ground and stubbed it with a heel. He opened the trunk without a word. When we were seated inside the cab and Rhys had given the directions to his own residence, the driver easily maneuvered the cab onto the street in silent efficiency.

"There are some museums in Greenglass," said Rhys, startling me from my contemplation with the passing scenery. "There's one on Roman antiquities beside the Greenglass Auction House."

"You've been to Greenglass before?"

"A few times, on business. I work for Hauntley's which has some dealings with the Greenglass Auction House."

"Hauntley's is the antiquities dealer in Colchester, isn't it?" I had heard my employer mention the name occasionally since they did sometimes deal with manuscripts. "Are you on vacation too?"

"Not exactly. I'm a bit of an appraiser and a consultant for Hauntley's so I often make my own hours. Going to Greenglass won't be such a hardship--it

can be put under the heading of business."

The cab soon reached Rhys' address, a pale sky-blue townhouse in a well-tended neighborhood. Apparently, being an antiques appraiser paid very well. I got out of the cab while Rhys paid the driver and carried my luggage again. He set it down just inside the front door of his residence as he headed to his rooms to pack his own things. He told me to "make myself comfortable" as I waited.

Whatever that meant, I wandered about in the front rooms which seemed fairly typical of a bachelor who spent little time in his own house--sparse. Past the front parlor was a sitting room that had been converted into a study. I examined the shelves to see if there were any titles I could recognize. There didn't seem to be any order to how the books were shelved. Latin histories and engineering manuals sat side-by-side with poetry and novels and...what was this?

I pulled out a slim volume that was more like a pamphlet. The cover was made of some sort of white hide which was streaked with a wine-colored stain. *Dux Bestia*. The Guide to Animals or Familiars. But before I could open the cover, the book grew quite warm in my hands. In fact, it just *grew*.

Startled, I dropped it. At my feet, the pamphlet morphed into something black and furry. Cool gray eyes with a hint of green blinked up at me.

Meow?

Good grief. What have I done now?

The First Conjuration
Seal VI

The cat that was not a cat rubbed against my left leg and purred. Images poured into my head. I covered my eyes. The small beast was hungry.

I stalked out of the study in search of a kitchen. It was down a short hall. After a bit of searching, I found a milk bottle in an ice chest and a saucer from one of the cupboards. Once I had poured the milk and set it on the floor, the cat briefly sniffed at it before contentedly lapping the liquid up with a small pink tongue.

"Why do you have to complicate things?" I asked the cat. "Couldn't you have

just remained what you were?"

"Remained what, who?"

I looked up to see Rhys standing in the kitchen doorway, changed into a casual dark gray traveling suit. He had even shaved. But whether he looked like a rumpled professor or a civilized gentleman, it was all a façade.

"What?" he demanded. "Did I misbutton my shirt or something?"

"Uh, no. Your shirt is fine. I just want to say that this is not my fault that one of your books Turned."

His gaze flickered towards the cat, which amazingly ignored his presence. "You mean Thor? He comes and goes as he pleases. Sometimes he's a book. Sometimes he's not. I have no control over him."

I looked from him, to the cat, and then him again. "His name is Thor? After the Norse god?"

"Don't knock the name. It's actually more accurate than you can imagine."

"All right," I replied, not hiding my skepticism. "So you're just going to leave him here while you go gallivanting to Greenglass?"

"Thor can take care of himself." When Thor was finished with his milk, he raced off to who knows where. Rhys bent down to take the saucer and rinsed it before putting it back on a rack. "You seem particularly worried about his welfare. Are you partial to animals?"

"I'm not a pet kind of person." I never kept pets because their lives were so short. "The cat just surprised me, that's all. I did not know that books could turn into animals."

"They could. It all depends on the sacrifice." His eyes had turned into a dark green.

I averted my gaze, thinking about the blood I saw on his spine. "An animal sacrifice, then."

He didn't confirm or deny. He simply said, "The sacrifice may be a very long time ago, but you never forget, do you? Just a mirror is a reminder."

"We should get to the train station," I said, not caring if the subject change

was too obvious. I didn't want to think about his remarks. They dredged up very bad memories. Not my memories, but over the years they have somewhat become mine. I didn't want to think about that either.

"So there is an earlier train." His voice took on a light, teasing tone. "It's not even noon yet."

"No there isn't. I want to get there with enough time to spare so that we'd be able to get tickets. I'm not sure how crowded the trains are at this time of year, but I know that in the summer, one has to practically call ahead for reservations since everyone is on a summer vacation."

* * *

Grand Central in Colchester was a mix of ancient classical and art deco. Inside the station, pale marble floors gleamed, punctuated periodically by ridged columns. Wide glass windows let in the noon sunlight, washing everything with a golden glow. Travelers bustled purposefully from one platform to another just as the twelve-fifteen to Birmingham pulled out with a rumble and a whistle of steam.

"What do you mean there's only one berth left on the Midland to Greenglass?" I repeated, pitching my voice above the crowd and the departing train.

The cashier at the window wiggled his pencil-thin mustache at me. Ugh. What was with fashion these days? The man looked like a weasel. "Sorry, Miss. Only one berth. Otherwise, the two o'clock is completely booked. Of course, the berth does hold up to four people."

"If you want to be squashed like sardines."

"Come on, Ana, how hard can it be?" I turned to glare at Rhys. "It's just an overnight. Think of it as being on a bookshelf."

"A very crowded bookshelf." I turned back to the cashier who gave me an oily smile. "All right, we'll share a berth. But if anything happens, I hold you responsible."

"Oh nice," Rhys remarked as I came away from the cashier window with two tickets. "I'm sure your threats have me shaking in my shoes."

"Empty threats." I sighed and turned toward the platform. "We have about two hours until departure. I thought I saw a small café over near the south

entrance. Sandwiches and coffee, I think."

"You're hungry again?"

"Would you want me to pretend I'm not?" I said as we slowly made our way past the crowd. "I think this current fashion for being waif thin is ridiculous. But at least there is one upside to the whole thing."

"What's that?"

"No corset."

"What's wrong with a corset?" I saw a few older people give us strange glances. Maybe talking about undergarments was probably not the thing to do.

But did I care? Stupid social conventions. "Have you ever worn a corset?"

"Er..."

"It's like being in a vise. You can't breathe."

"Well, books don't have to breathe."

I caught sight of the café, which looked like a small dark stand among a sea of people, all with the same idea for getting lunch. "Sure, books don't have to breathe. But neither can they walk. It's a trade off--be a book and you don't have to breathe, but you sacrifice movement. You're susceptible to the same things regular paper are. If you're a person, you must breathe, eat, and sleep, but you can move. You can talk and interact with other people."

"Since you put it that way, I suppose there are pleasures as a person that I would be very hesitant to give up on."

The end of the line to the café food stand curved around a few wrought iron tables, all filled with travelers. Nearby, a toddler decided to throw a tantrum. "Mass transportation," I muttered, mostly to myself. "If only the mass of it weren't so massive."

"It does seem a bit unusual, doesn't it?" Rhys remarked, loud enough to be heard over the toddler's screams. "One would think that this time of year wouldn't be so crowded. Is everyone going on a holiday?"

"Of course it is a holiday." A thick looking woman in a fur-lined coat turned

to eye me skeptically, but she smiled at Rhys. "You haven't paid any attention to the calendar, have you? Samhain and All Hallow's Eve are coming up. Everyone is trying to get to Cairnpapple. Of course, there is no train there, so everyone takes the East-West to Birmingham or the Midland to Greenglass and then drive there."

"Cairnpapple?" I frowned. "What is exactly in Cairnpapple? Standing stones? I don't really see why that would be of any importance."

"She's not very bright, is she?" the woman said to Rhys.

"Just a bit slow," he replied.

I clenched a gloved fist. "All right. Since you know so much about it, tell me about the importance of Cairnpapple."

"It's an ancient burial site, supposedly the resting place of an ancient Celtic god-king," said Rhys, sounding very much like the professor I had originally pegged him as. "Pagans and spiritualists claim that it is the center of a powerful crossroads of ley lines. It's supposedly most powerful during Samhain."

"Not supposedly," the woman interrupted. "It is so. I've been to Cairnpapple many times and I have literally felt the power there--but then again, I'm a medium, so I am especially sensitive to it."

"Oh. Well, I guess we will have to bow to your expertise, ma'am," I said.

She glanced at me, narrow-eyed. "You're an unbeliever."

"I'm not saying I disbelieve anything," I replied. "I just think that everything will be explained in a reasonably scientific manner. Eventually. Even if it's many centuries in the future."

"You're one of those Rationalists!" The woman huffed and turned her back on me.

"Being rational is wrong?"

Rhys chuckled. "Really, Ana. You of all people should know not to bring science into these kinds of conversations. Some people are entrenched into one way of thinking and will hold on to it tenaciously, even when evidence of the contrary is staring them in the face."

"That's so..." I let out a breath. "I give up. I'm never going to understand people."

The First Conjunction
Seal VII

"Ma'am. Sir. Number eight."

I peeked into the berth as one of the train line's orderlies in a fastidiously pressed navy uniform hefted my suitcase, and then Rhys', into an overhead compartment. Two long seats, upholstered in discrete brown and yellow geometric patterns, faced each other in the berth that was probably about three and a half paces wide and maybe twice again as long. The door to the berth was a dark varnished wood, the same as the corridor in the train car. There was a window in the berth as well. At the moment, the curtains were drawn aside, revealing the bustling Colchester station.

"Thank you," I said as I showed the orderly our train tickets and Rhys discretely dropped a tip into the man's hand. I entered the berth and took the left seat, feeling suddenly drowsy. My employer, the professor back at the Institute, claimed that large meals made people sleepy--that was why he made it habit to miss lunch.

He dropped into the seat across from mine. "So, what's your plan?"

"Plan? You mean once we get to Greenglass? I'll go to the auction house first and see if they have the *Liber Tutelarum*."

"And if they do?"

"Buy it."

"You have the funds?"

"I've had centuries to accumulate funds. Of course I have funds."

"I apologize. You just don't seem..."

"Affluent?" I took my hat off--a cloche hat similar to the one that had been badly wrinkled in the incident at Parrish Books, except it was a dark green which matched my coat. "I don't like living the lifestyle. It makes one too obvious. If you blend in with everyone else, no one will notice that you never

age."

"It's also possible to buy a manor somewhere out in the country and be an eccentric who no one sees."

"That's boring. I might as well hole myself up in someone's private collection."

He appeared to take an interest in the activity outside. "I know it's not a polite question for a lady, but then again you're not precisely a lady--in the person sense, of course. Exactly how old are you?"

"I was first penned in 1252." I leaned back and closed my eyes. "I became aware about three hundred and fifty years later. What about you?"

"You're a baby."

"I'm an ancient compared to your girlfriends."

"Fair enough. I was written in 934. But became aware in 1066."

I opened my eyes and regarded him warily. "1066. That isn't a coincidence, is it?"

"No."

I wanted to ask him about what had happened, if he had anything to do with William the Conqueror, if he had any role at all in the invasion of England. But even if his expression appeared serene now, I knew the act of becoming aware was not a pleasant thing. And if he told me what had happened to him, I would be obligated to share my own past. And there were some things which I had never shared with anyone.

"You said before that you knew of the other editions of yourself," I said finally. "How did you find out about their whereabouts? Are they aware as well?"

"Yes, they are aware. We had been kept as a set up until that time. And we awoke together. We have kept in touch off and on, but we mostly go our own ways. Our natures, I suppose." He shrugged. "And we've always had different goals. I wasn't the one who always had the conscience."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Sometimes I sold my services--as a grimoire--to the highest bidder. My employers were not nice people."

"People who want to get their hands on grimoires are generally not nice people." There was a whistle and the train car jerked into motion. "But that is the curious thing. Now you are after a sorcerer, the kind who could have employed you before."

"Yes. It's a little complicated."

"Revenge?"

"I'm a book. I don't feel revenge." But his eyes were curiously flat. "I just don't like leaving loose ends about."

* * *

Something jolted me awake. A bad dream? As far as I knew, I didn't dream. Or at least I never remembered them. That was something to ask Rhys--if he ever had dreams.

The rest of the berth was empty. I assumed my traveling companion had probably gone out to walk about the train. He didn't strike me as the kind who would bother staying cooped up in a berth if there was something else to do. Perhaps he was out taking advantage of the pleasures being a person afforded--like flirting with the female passengers. The curtain was pulled down so that the berth was mostly dim. I brushed the curtain aside and peered out. In the waning afternoon light, I saw grassy plain and mountains or hills in the distance. I remembered maps that had shown that Greenglass was located in a small valley among a mountainous region peppered with plateaus and strange formations. During the summers, people went to Greenglass to see these strange formations which the locals called fairy chimneys.

I let the curtain drop and raised my arms for a stretch. Perhaps I should also get an informal tour of the train.

When I exited berth number eight, the corridor was empty. Vaguely, I recalled one of the porters pointing to the right to the dining car. As I walked, I felt the almost imperceptible sway of the coach. The clacking of the rails was a muffled staccato keeping time like a metronome.

One of the berth doors slammed open revealing an older woman, perhaps in her sixties framing the doorway. She was wearing one of those evening wear

gowns, a blue satin dress with a sash of a slightly darker hue riding low on her waist. She also had on a wrap made of gauzy lace and a necklace that dangled down into a knot of pearls. Her hair was dyed an unnatural yellow.

Her eyes were a cold, clear blue and she was staring at me.

"Young lady," she said in an imperious voice used to command, "That would not do for dinner."

I probably was her elder by several centuries, but I looked down at myself anyway. My skirt was slightly wrinkled from napping in it. I didn't think anyone would notice. And I said so.

The older woman made a disapproving sound at the back of her throat. "Young people these days!" She nearly yelled in my face. "They have no sense of propriety."

I suppose it would be out of the question to tell her that as an "unmarried woman" I was also sharing a berth with a man. She wouldn't understand that it was all right because we were both books.

There was some banging from a berth nearby and another passenger's voice called out, "Will you be quiet, old lady? Some of us are trying to sleep."

"See?" she said furiously, even though she did lower her voice. "People have absolutely no respect these days. It's those stupid girls trying to fight for 'equality' which is the start of all this trouble."

"Actually, I think it is a good thing if everyone was considered equal."

"Not you too," the woman huffed. "No matter. You don't seem like some of the other imbeciles I've met on this train. I'm Lenora Battington. I'm the second cousin to the Earl of Waverly."

I wasn't particularly impressed--especially since I've never heard of someone named the Earl of Waverly. "I'm Ana Talbot. And I don't have any second cousins."

"A terrible thing that," Lenora said, hooking her arm with mine without a by your leave. "Second cousins can come in useful sometimes."

"I'll keep that in mind."

At any time, I could have walked off and ignored the old woman, but I was

bored and curious so I just let her drag me through the corridor and through the connecting doors to the next car--which was not the dining car as I had originally guessed, but a sort of observation car with a few tables but mostly couches set up. Did I inadvertently blunder into a first class compartment? Well, as long as no one checked my ticket, no one would know.

"This is Oswald Henry," Lenora announced as she pulled me abreast to a table where two portly men in black suits were playing cards. "And this is Robert Pendington. They're of Pendington and Henry, the well known solicitor's office at Cambridge."

I blinked at her blankly.

"They're single and rich as Croesus," she whispered loudly in my ear.

Was she trying to set me up with these corpulent specimens? But just to be polite, I said, "Nice to meet you, gentlemen."

Robert Pendington just grunted as he slapped down a six of spades, but Oswald Henry managed to look up and nod rather civilly. "Good evening ladies. Who is your lovely companion, Mrs. Battington?"

"Ana Talbot of...where did you say you were from, dear?"

"Of nowhere," I replied. "But my father was an Italian monk," I added helpfully.

Pendington was in the middle of his drink which he almost chocked on. Lenora gave an outraged gasp. Henry merely seemed puzzled.

"Aren't monks supposed to be celibate?" he asked.

Lenora faked a laugh. "Oh, don't pay attention to her words, Mr. Henry. You know how young ladies are these days. They will say anything to get a shock out of everybody."

"Even if it is true?" I said slyly.

The old woman gave me a scathing look. "Just like that. But otherwise, she is charming."

"Now that's the first I've heard of it." I crossed my arms and took a look at the cards on the table. And since I was standing, also a peek at the hands. So far, they weren't playing very intelligently, but then again, I had no

inclination in helping them. It wasn't my game.

"You're being rather hard headed about this, my dear," Lenora said when she pulled me aside. "Just say some sweet words and you'll have them eating out of your hand."

"Thanks, but no thanks, Mrs. Battington. I'm not looking for a rich husband. Which, of course, begs the question, exactly why are you trying to play matchmaker? What's in this for you?"

"Why nothing's in it for me! I'm just a natural born matchmaker..."

"You know what I think? These gentlemen are paying for you to find them some young noble thing for an evening's entertainment."

She gasped. "You would never imply such a thing! I am not some...some madam for a brothel."

"You said it, not me."

"Ah, Ana. I've been looking all over for you." Rhys had reached my side, but he was smiling at Lenora who had a ferocious frown on her face. "I didn't see you at the berth."

"I decided to stretch my legs," I replied. "Rhys, let me introduce you to Mrs. Battington. I bumped into her on my way to the dining car."

"Good evening, Mrs..."

"You didn't tell me you had a husband," she interrupted him in an annoyed gush. "Now I've made a fool of myself."

Rhys furrowed his brow. "What?"

I patted his elbow. "Just humor her."

"You know, I'm beginning to think that you're trying to humor *me*," he said. "I think you're willfully omitting things."

"I'm not that kind of person." I uncrossed my arms and shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket. "Besides, I was heading to the dining car."

"Would you care to join us for dinner?" Rhys asked Lenore with a winning smile.

"The old lady still looked unconvinced. "Thank you, but no. I'm already promised to some dinner companions."

I nodded and moved towards the end of the observation car. I was aware of Rhys shadowing me as Lenore made her way back to the gambling lawyer partners.

"I just leave you for one moment and you disappear on me."

I didn't turn around as I pulled open the connecting door. "I'm not some chained book. I'm not a child."

"But you were sleeping."

"I awoke."

The dining car was already half full when I stepped into it. I chose one of the tables further away from the other passengers. Outside, the sun had set and the countryside passed by like dark blue shadows in a wrinkled piece of velvet.

A waiter soon passed by our table, rambling off the night's menu choices. I ordered some chicken and rice. Rhys chose the steak. A moment after conveying our orders to the chef, he came back with a bottle of cabernet sauvignon.

"If we're fortunate, the auction house will still be in possession of the book," I said as I idly swirled the wine in my glass. "I can't really imagine anyone wanting to buy it immediately, aside from Blackthorne. But he doesn't have the receipt so I would assume that we have a head start."

"I wouldn't be so optimistic," he replied. "There are some bidders who are like gamblers; they are addicted to the act of buying no matter the object. And you would be surprised by the number of book collectors in the country who actually make the trip to Greenglass."

"Then we'll track down the buyer."

"You won't give up will you?"

"Not at this point, no." I switched my hand to the glass of water. "You don't know how long I've been trying to find my siblings. You're lucky you know where your siblings are."

"Have you ever considered that maybe your siblings don't want to be found?"

I swallowed some water and said simply, "I'm going to find them because I want to know if they still exist. If they don't want me in their lives, then I won't bother them."

"Persistent. Although I must admit that it would be nice to have a sibling who cared enough to find out if I was around."

"Really?"

"Yes. Because then I could probably have someone I could depend on to do favors for me."

I rolled my eyes. "You sound like a leech."

"Did I ever say that I was a nice person?"

"Quite the contrary as I recall. I doubt that you would be even here traveling with me if it weren't for your--whatever it is you have against the sorcerer."

"True. Although I must admit that traveling with you isn't at all boring."

"Ah, what you mean is that I'm annoying."

"Well, I wouldn't say exactly that. You're not exactly what I would have expected. I've never really met a woman or a book like you."

I found myself chuckling. "I think what you said was a bad thing."

Soon the waiter arrived with dinner and the rest of the evening was spent talking about Greenglass and its auction house.

The First Conjuration
Seal VIII

"Is that silk?"

I wrapped the red kimono closer to my body as I shut the compartment door. I had just come back from changing in the bathroom located at the end

of the car. Both of the fold out beds in the berth were pulled down and someone had helpfully turned down the sheets.

Rhys wore light blue pajamas, although I wasn't entirely sure whether it was a concession to the prevailing fashion or in deference to what he perceived was my sensibilities. He was leaning back casually against his pillow with some sort of journal in his hands and with his overhead light on. He looked over me with what could only be described as an interested gaze.

"No," I replied, "It's actually wildebeest hide."

"I take it that it is silk. You know, you didn't strike me as a silk kind of girl."

"I guess I'm full of surprises then."

He closed the journal and tucked it in a shelf above. He then slid under his covers, closing his eyes. "I'm not looking."

I just shook my head and finally took off my kimono and raised a knee to get into bed. Something that made the hairs at the back of my neck rise had me turning around.

His eyes were open. He grinned at my glare. "I lied."

"Pervert." I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over my head.

* * *

A scratch and a scream jolted me awake. At first, I thought I had finally remembered a dream. But another scream punctuated the air.

"You're trying to make my night miserable, aren't you?" came a low groggy voice in the darkness. "You're making me pay for just a look."

"It's not me, you idiot." I scrambled out of bed and struggled to tug on my kimono. "Someone's outside."

Before I could turn the handle to the compartment door, an arm wrapped itself around my waist and pulled me back. "And you shouldn't be an idiot and barge out there without seeing what's out there."

"Who said anything about barging outside?" I managed to wiggle out of his grasp. "I was just going to look." I edged the door open a crack and peered outside.

Faint electrical light from another open berth illuminated the car corridor. A faint burning smell reached my nose. Several of the other passengers were poking their heads out into the corridor, heedless of any danger.

"Did someone get murdered?" one of the passengers remarked.

There was an audible smack. "Harold! This is not something to joke about."

"Ow. Martha, you have a mean right."

An intrepid passenger in a night cap ventured out into the corridor to examine the corridor. "Nothing here," he announced to everyone. "Of course, it could have been from one of the berths."

At that, everyone else scrambled out of their cabins and began banging on the doors of those who had slept more heavily. After a moment, with everyone accounted for, someone suggested that perhaps it was the engine's whistle that had sounded. Seemingly satisfied with that answer, the passengers went back to their berths, grumbling.

Once the corridor was empty, I stepped out, following my nose.

"What do you think you're doing?" Rhys whispered.

"Something's not quite right." In the flickering moonlight, I examined a bit of scorched wall across from berth number seven, our neighbor. The older man residing in that compartment had not appeared to be a suspicious figure-- but then again, bad people didn't necessarily appear bad. "You're the expert with fire. What do you think? Is it just a cigar burn?"

He regarded the burn and in the dark, his eyes glimmered green. "I think it's a bit bigger than that. Exactly what made it, though, is still debatable."

"Debatable between what? Was someone simply a little careless with a match or something more serious?"

"I'm not sure, although there is a taint of something to it." He glanced around the corridor. "No one's here, but I'd feel more comfortable discussing this back at our berth."

Curious now, I led the way back to number eight and scrambled back onto my bed as he locked the compartment door. And for extra measure, he also shut the curtains. "So what did you notice?"

"I can't be completely positive, but I think it was some sort of summoning spell. Why someone would do it in the corridor of a train car is a mystery to me."

"A sorcerer is one of the passengers then?"

"Not necessarily." He slid into his own bed and yawned. "I guess I'm more wiped out from that encounter at that antiquarian bookshop than usual. Maybe I'm getting too old. But anyways, not only sorcerers know how to wield that kind of power. Untrained persons who have an affinity for such things may have done it. It's the most likely scenario, really. A seasoned sorcerer would have remained in his berth, or at least used the dining car when no one was around."

"Or it could have been a grimoire."

"How likely is that to happen? One chance in several million, perhaps."

"I met you, didn't I?" I pulled up my covers and turned off my overhead light.

"You probably used up all your chances with me," he replied, clearly on the verge of sleep now. "You and I have gone centuries without meeting up with another of our kind."

"I don't know. For centuries, there has only been transportation by horse or on foot. One was stuck in one place most of the time so, of course, meeting up with another talking grimoire was pretty dim."

To that, Rhys replied with a soft snore.

The Second Conjunction
Seal IX

Greenglass Station smelled strongly of exhaust tinged with a heavy oily smell as if someone had set up a frying stand nearby. Perhaps someone had, only to be removed by the authorities for not having a permit. The station itself was a dirty cousin to Grand Central in Colchester, instead of marble, the platforms and the station floors were an unadorned concrete, the only concession to decoration the curling iron railings and the thin wrought iron girders holding up the roof embellished with rough swirls.

Most of the passengers departing the Midland Express headed straight towards a line of cabs just outside the entrance to the station, fiats painted in a garish shade of yellow, whose drivers were holding signs indicating that they were heading to Cairnpapple. At the curb, Rhys set down our luggage.

"Watch these for a moment, will you? I'll try to get us some transportation to town."

"Good luck," I said under my breath as he strode away. Judging from what the woman at the Colchester station had said, there was going to be a flock of people heading to Cairnpapple for the holidays. And for the drivers, a longer drive would be more profitable than a short jaunt into Greenglass downtown.

From what I could glean from my own knowledge, Greenglass was located in the center of the country, in the middle of some rather difficult terrain. On the last leg of the journey, the Midland Express had taken a rather circuitous route around a rather large hill that could have arguably been a mountain. It was a rather odd route, come to think of it. It would have been more efficient to have just blasted through a mountain and laid a track through a tunnel.

"Miss Rutherford?"

Turning my mind back to the present, I focused on the man in front of me. He was somewhat young, perhaps in his mid-twenties, and he was wearing a different sort of driver's uniform--one that broadcasted the fact that he was employed privately by someone very well to do.

"I'm sorry. You've got the wrong person."

"Excuse me, miss. I'm expecting someone who was supposed to be here from the Midland Express. Well, it is quite a crush here--difficult to find one person here."

"Yes, I suppose so."

He tipped his hat and disappeared back into the crowd.

"I see you've been chatting men up while I was gone. Planning on leaving me?"

I tilted my head up to meet Rhys' gaze. "Of course. Practically everyone else

is a much more pleasant conversationalist than you."

He picked up the luggage and bent his head towards the end of the station to indicate that I was to follow him to whatever transportation that he had managed to snag. "Well, conversation isn't exactly my strong point."

"Then what is your strong point?"

"You'd probably argue that it isn't," he replied enigmatically. "At any rate, I have managed to obtain a cab to take us into Greenglass proper."

"Impressive." I regarded the black fiat as the mustached driver came to secure our bags in the back of the automobile. "It's not yellow."

"Not all of the autos in the fleet have been converted, ma'am," said the driver as he opened a door to let us in. "The newer cabs have been painted yellow before they were put into service. They're also being used for the long distance trips to Cairnpapple."

"This is an older model, then?" I said. "Afraid that this might break down in the middle of the journey away from civilization?"

"My boss isn't afraid of such things," the driver replied. "But rest assured this won't break down in the middle of your trip."

"So he says," I sighed.

Rhys chuckled. "Don't pay any attention to her. She's a cynic."

"I see." The driver turned on the ignition and slowly pulled out of the line of cabs being loaded with holiday travelers. "You said you wanted downtown Greenglass, sir. Which address?"

"The Greenglass Hotel." At my inquiring glance, Rhys added, "It's a nice place. I've stayed at that establishment before when I came here on business. There's also a restaurant there and a hot spring spa in its basement."

"I drove a visiting scientist to the Greenglass Hotel once," the driver interrupted. "He said he was a geologist. He told me that Greenglass is in a very unique geological area that has a lot of hot springs here. There are quite a few Roman baths around if you look around--dating to the time of the Roman occupation, I believe."

"If that's true," I said, "then the museums at Greenglass will have quite a few curiosities from the classical era."

"Probably," said the driver. "I've never visited a museum, to tell you the truth. I'm just the driver. So what are you two doing in Greenglass? Visiting relatives? It's rather unusual at this time of year for tourists. Usually everyone wants to come to Greenglass for the summer holidays. In October, people are just passing through on their way to Cairnpapple for their silly new age holidays."

"We're on vacation," I said, before Rhys could open his mouth and blab something outrageous. "We just wanted a place to relax."

The driver nodded just as he turned down a road that headed into the downtown district. I could see the tops of buildings and what looked like a gleaming museum or opera house in classical style--not so surprising considering the city's history. "Greenglass is just the place for relaxation--especially since the majority of the people are going to Cairnpapple. If you ask me, it's the perfect choice, really. I hate crowds when I'm trying to relax."

"I suppose you're not for going down to the coast for summer holiday then," said Rhys.

"Good God, no. Of course, the missus would vehemently disagree with me. She loves the beach. She says it's the place to see and be seen. I'd say such things are a bit scandalous these days with the kind of fashion that is popping up."

"Well, I suppose some fashion these days is deplorable," I said. "But I think beachwear these days is actually quite practical. Just consider twenty years ago. To go swimming, women had to don these long heavy dresses. You'd be more likely to drown in those things."

The driver had an odd look at his face when he glanced back at us. "You're a suffragette, aren't you?"

"And what's wrong with lobbying for a right to vote?" I retorted back.

"You're one brave man," the driver told Rhys.

He grinned. "Well, you've got to admit that it makes things interesting."

The fiat soon turned into a busy main street with mostly automobiles but few

pedestrians except for the ones debarking and boarding other cabs. The driver, heedless of whether or not his passengers really wanted to hear him yammer on, gave a running commentary as if he were the tour guide.

There was an imposing church crowned with a rosette of stained glass which the Bishop of Canterbury had visited a few months before to perform a wedding ceremony for the daughter of a friend of his. Then there was the Greenglass museum which was housed in a rather derelict structure that appeared to have originated from some time before the Roman occupation. The gleaming classical building I had spotted before was indeed the opera house which was having an all Mozart week: The Magic Flute on Saturdays and Sundays, The Marriage of Figaro on Thursdays, and Don Giovanni on Fridays.

"Isn't that a bit taxing on the opera company?" I asked. "Or are there separate groups of singers for each piece?"

"I have no idea, ma'am," the driver replied. "All I know is that this is a special week when they're playing Mozart all the time. On the rest of the days, the orchestra will be performing some Mozart symphonies. To be honest, I only hear the broadcasts on the radio after dinner, if they happen to be doing it."

"If I were a musician," said Rhys, "I'd be sick of Mozart before the week is over."

"Well, no one is forcing you to go to the opera," I told him.

A block later, we passed the Greenglass auction house which was a brown three story building in a neoclassical style. I felt my fingers itch at the prospect of getting into that place to see if they had indeed obtained a copy of the *Liber Tutelarum*. Apparently sensing my eagerness, Rhys quashed it by saying that the auction was probably closed at this late afternoon hour. They were usually open during the mornings and on particular times in the evenings when there were special auctions going on. Ten minutes later, the driver pulled in front of a white rectangular building with the name "Greenglass Hotel" painted above the front double doors. A doorman in a burgundy uniform stood at attention.

After paying the driver and getting our things together from the back of the cab, a bellhop appeared seemingly out of nowhere and offered to take our bags. The inside contrasted from the cool, darkening outdoors with its warm lighting and plush carpeting. A clerk, dressed in a similar style as the doorman, did his work behind a polished mahogany counter. The clerk

seemed happy that we were taking separate rooms--perhaps with all the tourists going to Cairnpapple, the number of patrons to the hotel during the colder seasons was normally fairly low.

Our rooms were on the second floor, with Rhys' room right across from mine. As the bellhop carried my things into my room, I noticed Rhys gazing down the hallway with an odd expression--as if he were trying to puzzle something out.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "It's nothing. I just thought I saw someone I knew, but you know how some people just look like other people by coincidence. Maybe it's just because they were dressed the same."

"Maybe you just saw an associate of yours when you came here on business before," I suggested.

"Maybe." He didn't sound particularly convinced, but he didn't appear alarmed either. "It's actually quite close to supper time. Why don't we meet down in the front lobby in about half an hour? I know this pub not quite far from here that has a surprisingly diverse menu."

The Second Conjunction
Seal X

"Good evening, Miss."

Startled, I turned from locking the door to my hotel room and encountered an older couple heading towards the lift. They were perhaps in their fifties--the woman was wearing an elegantly flowing dress the color of pomegranates and a matching wrap, but on top of her head appeared to be something that was a cross between a brimless beaver cap and a turban. The man wore a thin lapelled suit complete with waistcoat and tie in a sort of dark gray. He tipped his boater in greeting, revealing a balding head.

"Um, hello."

"You must be here in Greenglass for a vacation," said the woman. But she frowned. "Are you staying here alone? If you like, you can join us for dinner."

"We're heading to the hotel restaurant," the man added helpfully. "However,

I'm afraid you'll have to excuse us afterwards since we'll be attending the opera later tonight."

"Thank you, but no. I'm actually meeting a, uh, friend downstairs." I glanced at the lift. I had taken it earlier with Rhys and the bellhop, but the grinding noises of the gears made me rather queasy. One would think after all these centuries I'd be used to the rapid change in technology. But there was just something about being trapped in a small box that gave me the shivers. Possibly this fear stemmed back to the old days when I was hardly aware. I once had an owner who once kept me in a locked iron chest and took me out only for New Years when he had the urge to cast hexes on his visiting in-laws. Of course, since all of my spells were of the defensive sort rather than offensive, all of the spells he had used did not work.

"Very well. Aren't you going to be taking the lift?" asked the man when I headed towards the staircase.

"It's not that far down. Besides, I need the exercise."

The woman gave a snort as they stepped into the lift. She probably thought she was whispering, but I could hear her all the same. "Young women these days! All that exercise is bound to be unhealthy. And mark my words, she's probably meeting some man down there. I don't understand why these girls feel it is perfectly all right to flaunt their affairs in public!"

I found myself hiding a smile as I made my way down the stairs. Apparently the woman had lived a fairly sheltered life. If she had witnessed anyone really flaunting their affairs, she might as well be reaching for her smelling salts.

I managed to reach the hotel lobby before the lift opened. Rhys was sitting on a couch reading a wrinkled newspaper. The headlines declared a scandal involving the mayor of Greenglass and several mistresses.

"Shocking isn't it?" He folded the newspaper back and placed it on a nearby table that was topped with a fake plant. "The mayor had been visiting his mistresses for years. It helped that they all lived in different parts of the city--his wife never knew about the mistresses. The mistresses never knew about each other. Of course, until an intrepid reporter turned stalker and a disgruntled former employee at the mayoral office decided to exact some revenge from being fired."

"That just sounds so silly."

"Silly? It's a scandal of major proportions. The city council is calling for him to step down."

"I say it's silly because all of this could have been avoided if he hadn't married in the first place," I explained. "Then he could visit as many women as he wanted and no one would care because he would be a bachelor."

"I suppose that would work. But I don't think a public would elect a womanizer."

The lift chimed and the couple I had met earlier walked out, heading towards the clerk at the counter. The man inquired about a cab. The woman turned to shoot me a haughty look.

"What was that about?" Rhys remarked as he steered me out of the lobby and out into the night.

"The usual," I replied. "People are always disapproving of young women traveling about on their own."

"I wouldn't fault them too much. Just a few decades ago, young women weren't allowed to do anything on their own unless they were accompanied by a chaperone, a father, a brother, or a husband."

"Or if you worked as a companion."

"You worked as a companion?" he seemed surprised. "You seem so... independent. You don't strike me as someone who would willingly attach herself to an employer who would literally treat you as a servant."

"It depends on employer. Deaf old ladies don't really care what you do except that you always bring them tea at four." I looked about on the street. There was a fair amount of pedestrian traffic heading to various restaurants in the area. "So what is this pub of yours called?"

"Wellington's."

"Wellington's? Don't tell me. The proprietors are history buffs."

"Not really. The owner just happens to be a distant descendant of Wellington. And he just used the name because he liked it." He pointed out a two storey building on the opposite corner. In the darkness, it was all dark angles and lit windows. A talkative group emerged from the building to head down the street. "That's Wellington's. Come on. Sometimes it is a bit of a

wait to get a table."

"It's crowded?" I quickened my pace to match his stride.

"You sound as horrified as a dowager duchess forced to mingle with hoi polloi. Since you seem so eager to find your 'sibling', one would think you would have no problem with people at all."

"Finding a book is one thing. I'm used to being around books. People are another. They're, I don't know, loud."

"Oh, poor Ana. You just wanted a quiet dinner, didn't you?"

"I suppose I won't get one as long as I hang around you."

"You make it sound like it's such a bad thing." He pushed the pub door open and almost immediately, a wave of heat rushed out, mellowing out the sting of the cold outside air. There was a tang of pipe tobacco mixed with food in the air. Low laughter and the sound of a confident clarinet drifted around like fingers, tugging patrons inside.

"Is that jazz?"

"Played by one of the local bands," he confirmed. "I find some of the recent music a little too loud, but the Renaldi Players are actually quite good."

"You don't usually like jazz? Then why do you come here?"

"As I mentioned before, Wellington's has a wider selection of food. Over there, I think I see a empty booth."

"All right." I weaved past some other diners and a harried looking waiter before sliding into a well worn wood booth pushed up against the back wall. Rhys slid in across the table and then tried to get the attention of one of the waiters. "So you come here for the food, not the music. Do you even like music?"

"Sure. I like Beethoven. He's rather intense. Some of the French impressionists are also quite good."

I didn't hide a grimace. "You're thoroughly inured in the classics, aren't you?"

"As you recall, I did say that I would be sick of Mozart after a week."

"Excepting Mozart then."

"You don't like Beethoven?"

"He's fine, I suppose. But I've always enjoyed folk songs better. I know this will sound a little odd and counterintuitive, but they're a bit more human, if you know what I mean. Freer. Not so constrained by rules. I like jazz because it's like that--more improvisational."

"I can see your point."

A waitress came by to rattle off the day's specials. At the moment, I was too hungry to really care what I ordered at an unfamiliar pub so I just chose the first thing she had mentioned. Rhys seemed to take his time debating on whether or not he wanted lamb or steak which made her tap her pencil against her pad impatiently. Finally, he decided on chicken. The waitress rolled her eyes and said bluntly, "If you were any uglier, I would have just left you hungry."

"Was that, just now, bad service and an insult?" he said when she turned away.

"I don't know. It was more like a backhanded compliment. And I think she was justified, really, to say that. You were being rather obnoxious. Do you always take so long to order?"

"No. But sometimes I like to see how far I can go before someone will blow up."

I raised an eyebrow. "I'll keep that in mind."

The Second Conjunction
Seal XI

"Why, what's a pretty lady like you doing here in a place like this?"

At first, I paid no attention to the voice, assuming it was some desperate man trying to chat up one of the women who had just walked in with a large group. But when the question was repeated by the man who had slid into the opposite booth that Rhys had briefly vacated to go to the restroom, I was forced to turn my attention to the stranger.

For a human, I suppose the man wasn't that bad looking. Wide blue eyes, a slightly crooked nose--possibly from a previous fight--and sandy blond hair combed back and slicked back with some sort of cosmetic oil. He wore a black jacket and a matching tie, a bit formal compared to most of the patrons and even the band members of the pub. He appeared to expect some sort of answer from me.

"I'm just visiting. With a friend."

He didn't even blink at the hint. "Visiting, eh? So where are you from?"

"South."

He grinned as if what I had said was a huge joke. "Being mysterious, hm? Wait. Let me guess where you're from. I'm actually quite good at accents. You're from Birmingham, aren't you? That's a terrific city."

"No."

"People from Birmingham have variable accents anyway," he said, trying to explain his error. "You must be from Orkney."

"That's in the north."

"What about Manchester?"

"No."

"Brighton?"

"No."

"Duneth."

I crossed my arms, feeling slightly amused and exasperated. Where was Rhys anyway? Probably accosting other ladies like this bloke. "No," I said firmly.

"All right. I give up. Where are you from?"

"What if I'm not inclined to tell you?"

"Hey, no need to act so defensive. You needn't tell me anything."

"Why should I tell you anything when you haven't volunteered any information about yourself?"

"Touché," he replied as the band began to play an upbeat melody with plenty of bright, energetic trumpet. "Hey, I love this song. Why don't you come dance with me?"

"I don't even know your name. I don't think..."

He had already gotten out of his seat and had grabbed my elbows, pulling me out of my own seat. I was too surprised to slap his hands away. For one thing, no one had ever really dared to force me to do something before.

"Oh come on," he called out over the music. "It'll be fun."

Somehow, I was maneuvered onto the dance floor which was filling with other couples and trendy young women in skimpy silk dresses and long pearl beads which reached their waists. They laughed loudly and stomped their heeled feet in exaggerated steps. The Americans would have called them flappers--apparently the trend had managed to cross the Atlantic.

"Isn't this terrific," he yelled out. Unfortunately, since he was right in front of me, he was practically bellowing into my ear. "Sorry," he said later, when he saw me wince. "It is a little loud in here."

Strong cologne mixed with something odd reached my nose when he put his hand on my waist and tried to steer me into a few dance steps which I stumbled over. Books did not dance, I thought in consternation. And it was too bad that in this form I had to breathe because the man's perfume seemed to envelop me in this noxious cloud.

"You're doing great, honey," he said loudly. "Just follow my lead."

Forgetting my personal rule about ignoring endearments, I said, "Don't call me honey. And what if I don't want to follow your lead?"

"Too bad, because I'm leading."

The crush of people felt a little uncomfortable, although I was glad that I had yet to manage to step on someone's toes.

He steered us closer to the band. The trumpet player decided at that moment to start a loud cadenza at the top of the instrument's range. I let

out a little sigh. Apparently, my ears were going to have a hard time to recover after this outing.

As the band slowed toward the end of their current song, he leaned over as if to whisper something in my ear, but sensing he was perhaps attempting to take advantage of an opportunity, I turned my head and pulled away at the same time.

"I believe it's my turn to cut in," said a dark voice just as my unwanted dance partner tried to pull me back.

The man froze. "I saw her first."

Rhys gave him a grin that was not entirely pleasant. In the somewhat dim pub light, his eyes flashed green. "Actually," he drawled, "I did. I was the one who brought her here."

For one moment, he looked like he was about to argue, but after what felt like a prolonged staring contest, he stepped away, hands slightly shaking. I watched him quickly disappear into the crowd and then turned to look back at Rhys.

"What was that?"

"What?" He took my elbow and led me to a more secluded part of the dance floor. But once there, he didn't let me go, even when the band was starting another song, this time one that was slower and slightly mournful.

"You scared that man away with your powers somehow."

"I did nothing," he claimed. "I was just saving you from a man who wanted to take advantage of you."

"I don't need any rescuing. I'm perfectly fine saving myself from awkward social situations. You, however, came across as possessive and domineering."

"I prefer the term protective." As if to emphasize his words, he pulled me closer until we were almost touching chest to chest. His right arm was wrapped around my waist. The fingers of his left hand were laced with mine. His eyes were still green. "Why are you looking like I am about to bite at any moment?"

"Well, you look like you're about to cast some sort of spell over me," I said.

"A bad sort of spell."

"I would do nothing of the sort."

He turned me, abruptly, and my feet scrambled to catch up. Unlike the other man, he was blessedly not doused with cologne. Instead, he smelled like the air in a library, reminding me of stacks sitting near a window with light streaming in like golden ribbons.

There was movement, and then I realized that my nose had been buried in his lapels. Quickly, I straightened and clipped his chin with the back of my head.

"Ow," he said, although he didn't sound particularly pained.

I felt heat rush up to my face. And hoped that he couldn't tell that I was blushing. Books weren't supposed to blush.

"You've never danced before?" he inquired.

"Of course I've danced before," I replied. "Just not anything modern. The last I danced...well, it was a very long time ago."

"How long ago?"

"Try the Sun King's court."

"No wonder you're rusty at this."

"I assume you've had practice."

"Not as much as you've been implying." The music was still playing, but he was already leading me off the dance floor. "It's getting a bit late."

I pulled away from him. Rhys put some pound notes down on the table that we had formerly occupied. I tugged on my coat and my hat, feeling somewhat reluctant to leave the warmth of the pub.

We walked back to the Greenglass Hotel. At the entrance of my room, I said, "When does the auction house first open?"

"At eight. We can meet down in the hotel restaurant for breakfast at seven."

I nodded. "Yes." I opened my door and stepped through.

"Ana?"

I looked back. He was still standing at his door, key in hand. "Hm?"

I noticed an almost imperceptible tightening of his fingers around the key. "It's nothing. Good night, Ana."

"You too."

I closed the door after me. A moment later, I locked it.

The Second Conjuraton
Seal XII

The auction house didn't look like something that was imposing, but nonetheless, I felt a bit nervous. It was quite possible--more than possible in fact--that the seventh edition of the *Liber Tutelarm* was inside right now. How did people feel when they met family after a long separation? It was like meeting a stranger.

Apparently everyone called the place Greenglass Auction House although officially it was called Severin's, after the proprietor. But for some reason, no one called it that even though it was shorter and easier to say. Perhaps people found it not descriptive enough.

"Actually it was called Greenglass Auction House before Otto Severin purchased this place," Rhys said as I voiced my thoughts. "The city inhabitants are just more used to the old name."

"It's inertia, then. What does the owner think?"

"From all appearances, he doesn't seem to mind, however my only interactions with Severin have been in a professional capacity." He walked up the two steps to the front door and pressed on the buzzer. "He is an easy man to work with and there is nothing I've heard about his reputation that is bad."

"But is he helpful?"

Before he could respond, the door opened revealing a rather short and stocky man, perhaps in his thirties, dressed in a pin-striped suit of black and

powder blue that was one size too big for him. There was something about his cautious expression that immediately made me feel more alert myself.

"Good morning, sir. Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm Rhys Lattimore. I'm here to see Mr. Severin about a transaction that has recently passed through his hands."

"One moment." The door closed.

"I noticed that you neither confirmed nor denied that you had an appointment," I said.

"That's the trick of it. You have to be assertive and make people think you are entitled to something to actually get it. If you appear unsure, people will just take it as a liberty to deny you access to whatever you're trying to get into."

"It probably also helps that the proprietor knows you as an associate."

"Well, there is that."

The door opened again and the short man gestured us inside. "Mr. Severin is in his office. I'm Jethro Mayhew, Mr. Severin's assistant. If you need anything, you can call on me."

Rhys just nodded and purposefully strode down what looked like a long foyer which was wallpapered in some sort of beige and red crisscross pattern that reminded me of a certain era several decades before when women were required to wear hoop skirts that were too large to fit in the doorway.

Past two doors, Rhys stopped and knocked. Someone from within bade us to come in. Inside was a thin man in an old fashioned burgundy jacket. Under the electrical light, there was a sallow cast to his skin. His thinning gray hair was brushed over a bald spot and his chin was as smooth as a baby's. I doubted that he even needed to shave.

Otto Severin was surrounded by a heavy wood desk that was not only littered with papers for auction transactions, but also small knick-knacks. With a little closer inspection, I realized that these knick-knacks were all snuff bottles--jade, stone, glass, porcelain. Large and small. Different shapes. The rest of the office was surrounded by shelves, but none of them held books. Instead, they contained odd looking artifacts and sculptures.

"Lattimore, what a pleasant surprise," Severin rose up from behind his desk and extended his hand to shake with Rhys'. "Who is your lovely companion?"

"Ana Talbot," I cut in, shaking the auction house proprietor's hand. Severin's skin felt papery and dry.

"So what may I owe to your unexpected visit?" he asked as he gestured to us to sit down. "It is quite a journey from Colchester. Did you take the train or did you come by automobile?"

"By train," Rhys replied. "We were fortunate enough to obtain tickets on the day we wanted to travel."

"Indeed. It is about this time of year that everyone is going on holiday. Well, not everyone, I should clarify." Severin gave a rasping laugh. "Many people, I should say."

"At the stations, it does seem everyone is there even though it is only part of the populace. At any rate, to the point of our visit."

"Please."

"Miss Talbot is a friend of mine..."

Severin raised an eyebrow, clearly thinking about something else entirely. I found myself scowling. Couldn't he have said client instead?

"And she came to me with an inquiry which I hoped I could help her with. She is looking for an item that may have passed into your premises?"

"The auction house does acquire many things," Severin conceded. "Too many for my poor mind to keep track of as you can see." He swept an arm over his desk, indicating his haphazard organization of papers. "I'm in the process of training my latest assistant--you have met Mr. Mayhew have you not? I am hoping soon that he will be taking over all of this paper work. In the mean time, what exactly are you looking for? Perhaps it will jog my memory."

"It is a rather old book," I said. "I'm not quite sure how large it might be or the details of how it looks like. It might be made of vellum since it dates back to the thirteenth century. It is called the *Liber Tutelarum*, and it is the seventh edition."

"The *Liber Tutelarum*, hm?" Severin took on a pensive expression. "I do

seem to recall getting a shipment of books not too long ago. My back was acting up so I had Mr. Mayhew store it. Yesterday, one of the auction house's most frequent customers came by and bought the whole lot. He is a rather avid book collector and he tends to prefer the old volumes. I'm not sure if the book you are looking for was included in that purchase. But tell you what, you can look in the storage rooms yourselves to check. I'll have Mr. Mayhew show you the place."

As Severin made his way around his desk, we got up from our chairs. Rhys held the door open for the rest of us.

"Who is this book collector?" I asked. "If he indeed has the volume I am looking for, perhaps I can contact him to see if I could purchase it from him. Or at least to take a look at it."

"Oh, the book collector." Severin tilted his head thinking. "Ah, I remember now. Archibald Chesterfield. He's a rather elderly gentleman who used to own a bookshop himself. His address is in Fairmont, about half a day's drive from here. I have his contact information somewhere in my office. I'll get it to you as soon as I find it."

We walked down the hallway and turned into what looked like a showroom filled with classical busts sitting on pedestals. Mayhew was holding a feather duster and wiping down what looked like Julius Caesar's head.

"Mr. Mayhew! May you be so kind as to show Mr. Lattimore and Miss Talbot to the storage rooms? They are looking for a book that Archibald Chesterfield may or may not have bought the other day."

"Of course, sir. May I inquire to which book you are looking for? Perhaps I can help."

"The *Liber Tutelarum*," I said. "It's the seventh edition. But I'm afraid I don't have a physical description."

Mayhew shook his head. "The name does not strike any recognition with me. But it may be in storage anyway."

As Severin wandered off back to his office, Mayhew motioned towards a small, unadorned doorway at the end of the display room.

"The storage rooms are upstairs. One of them is entirely dedicated to books the auction house receives from booksellers or estates dismantling their libraries." Severin's assistant took out a ring of keys and opened the door.

He flicked on a switch which turned on an overhead light that illuminated a narrow stair which angled up towards the floors above.

"How often does Severin's receive books from booksellers?" Rhys asked. "Are there any particular booksellers who often send their inventory here?"

"Every so often," Mayhew replied vaguely. "Of course, I can't disclose exactly who these booksellers are. They all like to remain anonymous. The auction house merely makes the transaction for them."

"One would imagine that the booksellers could sell their own books without a middleman," I remarked.

Mayhew stopped on the second floor landing to wait for us to catch up before proceeding down a hallway. "Some booksellers don't have the resources to reach certain customers. The auction house, however, does."

"Severin caters towards more high end clients," Rhys murmured.

"To be bluntly put," Mayhew agreed. "Ah, here it is. The book storage room." He took another key from his key ring and unlocked the door at the end of the hallway. "Take your time looking through all of this. I'd have to warn you, though, that we will close at three. If you have any problems, I will be downstairs."

As Mayhew stepped out, I moved to the threshold of the storage room and found a switch near the door. Light flooded a room filled with boxes and shelves.

Rhys glanced at the place with a resigned expression. "Even if any of this is in any order, we're going to have quite some time trying to find anything in here."

I moved to the nearest shelf and scanned the titles on the spines. These were newer books, apparently arranged by the author's last name. But a little further down the shelf, it was a jumble with no order in the titles, the authors, the subject matter, or the dates. He looked through the nearest box and sneezed.

"This place is a dust trap."

I looked at the end of the room and noticed that a few trunks were stacked against the wall. There were tags on them, indicating that they had been shipped from elsewhere. Was that a tag from Abu Dhabi?

"There has to be an easier way to sort through this mess," I said out loud.

He looked up at me, eyes a colorless gray. He blew out a breath and raked a hand through his hair. "If you do find out an easier way, don't hesitate to tell me. I can think of a lot of other things I'd rather do." His lips curved up at a stray thought. "You know, we could have called this place and had them try to sort through all of this."

"What, and let them take their time about it and give us the answer six months from now?"

"I suppose you do have a point. I haven't had to work with Severin on actually finding anything. Judging from his organization, it would be a miracle if he found anything at all."

As I pulled out a book to glance at its title, a thought came to me. "Rhys, exactly what sort of spells do you know? I know you're a Key and you're the *Clavis Umbrium*, but that's not particularly descriptive."

He turned from his searching to regard me warily. "I told you before that some of my spells aren't particularly nice."

"Do you have a spell for finding things?"

"Do you?" he shot back.

I raised my empty hands. "I'm a book of protection, written by a monk. I only have defensive spells. And some other random useless ones like turning water to wine."

"I'd like to see you do that."

I shook my head. "Well, I do have finding spells but they're very specific. They might be helpful if you're wandering around in the desert thirsty."

"You sound like a survivalist." He got up to sweep a gaze around the room. "I do have a rather general finding spell, but it only works in a short range capacity."

"How short?"

"About the size of this room."

"Great. Then we can cast your spell and see if the book is here."

"There's only one problem."

"What?"

"I can't exactly cast the spell without any idea of what the book looks like."

"Look, this book is simply another edition of me."

"Sure, I see you, but you're in a person form."

I paused for a moment. "You're not suggesting what I'm thinking you're suggesting, are you?"

He crossed his arms. "Maybe I can tell you the spell and have you cast it since you know what you look like as a book."

"That's ridiculous. I don't know what I look like as a book--even if I'd been placed next to a mirror. In that form, I don't have eyes. You know as well as I do that being a book is a fairly limited existence. You can sense things, but not as how a human would."

"Then I suppose we'll have to search the hard way."

"Wait." I bit my lip. "I'll turn into my other form. But promise me you won't do anything--like sell me."

"Well, since you didn't throw me away as rubbish when I was a book, I think I can manage that."

I turned my back on him and willed myself to change. It was disorienting for a moment, but then my senses simply converted from sight and hearing--to something else. I was aware that I was on the floor amidst a pile of clothes.

I could sense someone picking me up, his hand slightly rough and warm against me.

"Impressive."

That I turned myself so quickly?

"I was thinking of something else, but yes, there is that." A finger ran down my spine, tracing the binding. It felt pleasant and mildly narcotic. "There is

no title on the cover or your spine." A finger stopped at a corner. "There's blood here."

There was blood on you too.

"On my spine," he confirmed. "But it just seems so, I don't know. You'd be an impressive volume without the stain. A book of your type in pristine condition would fetch a substantial sum."

And now I'm cheap because I'm damaged goods?

"No. This adds character. Especially if there's a story behind it."

So you are thinking about selling me.

"Oh, I'd never do that." He opened my cover. "Ah, so you are the *Liber Tutelarum*. Tenth edition. Written by Brother Francisco Manatelli in 1252." He flipped several pages. "You're blank." I could sense the frown in his voice.

I'm blank because I only show my spells when I choose to, I explained. It's either that, or the person has to know a spell to force me to show the writing on the pages.

"Very ingenious. I suppose the monk who wrote you was very paranoid."

I don't think so. This was the work of one of my later owners.

"I see." I could feel him turning me about in his hands. "All right. I think I've got a pretty good idea about what the seventh edition looks like--if it looks anything like you."

Fine. Put me down then and let me change. When I felt myself on the floor, I added, And turn your back please.

"Oh come on, Ana. What's a bit of transformation between books?"

A lot.

"All right. Keep your modesty. My back is turned."

I stretched myself into form and once I was finished, hastily got back into my clothes before Rhys decided he had waited long enough.

"So are you ready to cast that spell or is there still something you haven't

told me about?"

Rhys turned, his eyes tinged green. He held up a hand showing me black markings running along the skin of his palm. "I've cast it while you were dressing. Let's see if it's here."

He walked around the room with his arms outstretched, sweeping the shelves and boxes. I waited, letting him do his work. His brow was furrowed in concentration. Finally, he swept the last box and he shook his head.

I let out a breath and I could feel my shoulders slump. I thought I was so close to finding the seventh edition! I didn't realize I would feel such disappointment for not finding what I was looking for.

"Oh, cheer up, Ana." He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tucked my head under his chin. "It's not the end of the world. As someone might say, it would be too easy for you to find it here."

"I like the easier way rather than the harder way." I reluctantly stepped out of his hug. "We should go down and see if Mr. Severin has found the contact information for that customer. I guess we'll have to make a trip out to Fairmont."

The Second Conjunction
Seal XIII

Mayhew was still dusting the sculptures in the auction display room when we came down from the storage room. He looked up.

"That was quick. Did you find what you were looking for already?"

I shook my head. "Unfortunately not, Mr. Mayhew. However, I thought that it would be easier to contact that customer who bought all the books first. If he doesn't have it, then we could concentrate on searching the storage room."

"That sounds like a reasonable idea. It's easier to exhaust the easy routes first. I wouldn't want to dig around in those storage rooms unless I absolutely had to."

"Mr. Severin mentioned that he may have the customer's contact information," Rhys said.

"Of course. Mr. Severin is still in his office." Mayhew had an odd frown on his face, slightly squinty-eyed. I assumed it was his thinking expression. "But with his organization, good luck on trying to get the address."

When we headed back to Severin's office, the proprietor of the auction house was rummaging through his papers, looking somewhat harried, since the hair he had brushed over his bald spot was a bit askew.

"I must apologize for my mess," said Severin. "I really should get a secretary eventually. I was sure I had the address for Archibald Chesterfield right here on my desk, but when I came back from a telephone call, it was gone. It was as if the sheet of paper had moved on its own."

Rhys and I exchanged a glance. Rhys said, "Don't worry so much about it. Miss Talbot and I will merely make the jaunt out to Fairmont and make some inquiries."

"If you are sure about that. If I find Chesterfield's telephone number, it would save you a lot of time."

"That's all right, Mr. Severin," I told him. "I haven't been to Fairmont before. It will be a nice day trip."

Severin gave me an unbelieving glance. "Maybe it would be a nice trip during the summer, Miss Talbot, but at this time of year, I'd imagine it to be mostly rain and mud."

* * *

Outside of the Greenglass Auction House, I glanced at my watch. It was an hour until noon. "There aren't going to be any automobiles for hire since everyone is on holiday. And even if there was, we would get to Fairmont late this evening."

"Don't give up before you've tried," said Rhys. He flagged down a cab. "We'll ask around first." Once in the cab, he asked the driver, "Excuse me, I don't suppose you know of a place where we could hire the use of an automobile for a few days?"

The driver didn't even look back at us as he maneuvered his vehicle out onto the street, but he did respond. "Heading out for holiday at Cairnpapple, are you? Well, there is this place in South Greenglass that hires out autos for travelers. I can take you there if you like."

"Yes, that sounds excellent." To me, Rhys smiled smugly. "What did I tell you? With a little effort, transportation is easily within our grasp."

"You also pointed out to me that things usually aren't so easy back at the auction house," I said.

"Well, some things are easy while others not so much." He shrugged. "This was easy because automobiles are becoming ubiquitous. And we aren't so peculiar about what automobiles we will be using."

"You might not be so particular, but I don't want one that will break down in the middle of the road."

The cab driver let us out on a small street off Main in the south side of the city. There was a wide brick building here consisting of large arches which were entrances to a massive garage. A small sign at the corner of the building pointed to an unobtrusive door as the entrance. On the side of the building, the business name was painted in a bold yellow: Carruthers and Sons.

"This looks like the place," Rhys remarked as he made his way to the entrance. "Let's see if they have any transportation available." The office to Carruthers and Sons was stark besides a desk, clear except for a telephone, and the man behind it, who looked like a boxer forced into a starched shirt. At our entrance, the man smiled, revealing a gap between two of his front teeth.

I left Rhys to it to discuss the rates and the available automobiles. There was another door besides the entrance which I assumed led into the garage. And there was one window in the office covered in grime. I could faintly see the street outside.

"Well, Mr. Lattimore," the man, who had introduced himself as Carruthers senior, said as he got up from his desk. "Why don't we go out to the garage to pick one to your liking? I'm afraid most of them are rented out to holiday travelers at the moment, but there is still a selection."

The garage surprised me. The place was clean, smelling faintly of oil and polish. Five black fiats gleamed under the overhead lights. A sixth automobile was being washed by two muscular men dressed in only trousers. I looked from them to Carruthers senior, noticing the similarity. His sons, I guessed.

"This model is very reliable," Carruthers was saying as he gestured to the fiats. "This one I recommend to all my customers if they want reliability. They're not very flashy but they do the job."

"I like cars that don't break down," I said.

Rhys gave an almost imperceptible sigh. "What is it about you and breakdowns?"

"You've never had to wait for help for a day and a half in the middle of the countryside."

"Each car is equipped with emergency tools in case a break down does happen," said Carruthers. "Granted, they would only be useful if you know how to use them in the first place."

"I'm sure it'll be easy to figure out," said Rhys.

"I wouldn't recommend a reliance on hubris, darling," I said, imitating his laconic drawl.

My traveling companion twisted his mouth in irritation. "What other vehicles do you have available?"

"There are some others out at the back of the garage. I have to warn you, we haven't gotten around to servicing some of them recently so you would have to wait until tomorrow for them. One is the sporty Alfa Romeo. The rate, however is higher although it is kind of flashy. We also have some American cars if you want to be different--we have several from the Essex line with an enclosed coach. We have one Studebaker with a canvas top. An one French automobile we did recently refurbish, a Rochet-Schneider."

I felt myself perk up. "A Rochet-Schneider?"

Rhys gave me an odd look and then said, "Perhaps you should show us the other cars you have out back."

* * *

I grinned as Rhys pulled out of the Carruthers garage. I bounced once in my seat and heard the new leather squeak. He maneuvered the Rochet-Schneider to the main road. His eyes were on the traffic, but I could tell he wasn't exactly thinking about driving.

"What is it about this automobile that has you so ecstatic?" he finally asked. "It's not especially out of the ordinary."

"That's because you were too busy paying attention to speed and gasoline and mileage. This one has brass."

"Brass?" He didn't bother hiding his disbelieving tone. "Just because you liked the brass trim, you picked this?"

"What's wrong with liking brass?"

"Well, nothing. It just makes you seem like a person who is easily distracted by shiny things. Aren't you even worried that this will break down in the middle of our journey? You seemed really worried about that before."

"I still am. But a Rochet-Schneider is fairly reliable. The company that manufactures this has been around for a while. Besides, the first automobile I ever rode in was a Rochet-Schneider. I was walking back home from work when a nice young man offered me a ride home in a similar vehicle."

Rhys quickly risked a look at me and his knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "Oh, that's nice. You met a former beau in a Rochet-Schneider."

I leaned back in my seat and admired the gleaming brass headlights that peaked over the black painted hood. "You don't have to sound so sullen about it. It was just one ride, even if he did kiss well."

"I don't want to hear this."

"The ride or the kiss?"

"Both."

"Oh come on. What's wrong with riding in automobiles and kissing?"

"It distracts the driver."

For some reason, his grievous tone made me chuckle. "All right, I won't say more about the subject. We'll just have a calm drive back to the hotel to get our things and then head straight to Fairmont."

"Right."

I turned to look at him. "You do know the way there, don't you?"

"Not really. But that's why you're in the front passenger seat. You're going to help me navigate."

The Second Conjunction Seal XIV

The map made a crinkling sound as I clenched the edges with my fingers. "You don't need a navigator. You need a talking parrot."

"Why do you say that?"

He said it in such a calm voice that it was easy to imagine that he was immune to my growing agitation. But the small smile at the corner of his mouth convinced me that he was deriving great pleasure in needling me.

"Every time, you say something like, 'Oh, so do we turn right here?' And then I look on the map and simply corroborate your guess. It's not a guess, is it? You know exactly where you're going. You're just giving me something to do with this map you filched from the Greenglass Hotel management."

"I did not filch anything. I just borrowed it."

"Semantics," I sniffed. I folded the map back into its proper orientation and proceeded to watch the passing scenery.

In the fading afternoon light, the strange rock formations in this hilly area rose like sand cones burnished in deep umber. The stone was pitted with dark, evenly spaced holes, like black eyes watching the travelers on the road.

There were two theories about the formations of these fairy chimneys. One, the fanciful theory, was that these were chimneys from a vast underground city built by fairies. The more scientific version was that these formations were the results of unique volcanic action millions of years ago. It was only later that humans took residence here and then abandoned them later when they no longer had to hide from marauding barbarians.

I wondered if people still stayed in these formations now--whether they be stranded travelers or vagabonds.

"Well, the route is fairly easy to follow," Rhys admitted. "There were signs

indicating the direction to Fairmont."

"I didn't see those," I frowned.

"That was because you had your head buried in the map. Anyways, I have the feeling that we aren't that far from the town. If we stop into one of the local gathering places, we'll be sure to find someone who knows this Archibald Chesterfield."

"And if not, maybe by the time we came back to Greenglass, Severin would have found his contact information."

"Maybe."

The automobile turned at the bend of the road and suddenly we were driving into a dense evergreen forest. The trees were tall, blocking the setting sun. With the encroaching darkness, Rhys flipped on a switch to turn on the headlights.

"Tell me," he suddenly said, "How you ended up here when you were originally created in Italy."

"I only became aware when I had already arrived here." I replied. "My journey here would only be conjecture. I assumed that while I passed through many owners, I had also traveled. I mean, I know all the times that I've been used--but I wasn't aware of the place." I peered into the dark trees, as murky as my past. Sometimes, I did see things, like memories, but other times, it was nothing.

"So you don't even know who had owned you?"

"Oh, I know. But it's rather academic. Say someone knows that they were born at a particular date and a particular place. They know it, but they don't remember. You say that you were created in the tenth century. You did originate here, did you?"

"No." After a moment, he added, "I was created further east than you. In Constantinople, now of course known as Istanbul. I wasn't written by a monk, though."

"I wouldn't imagine that you were."

The evergreen forest soon thinned out, revealing a widening road and what looked like a small town in the distance. I could make out buildings and even

the top of a steeple. The setting sun was now very low in the horizon, washing the sky in a pale rose, punctuated occasionally with lavender clouds.

In a few more minutes, we were driving into the main street of Fairmont and passed a white stone building that had flower boxes underneath the windows with flowers still in bloom. Mums, I deduced. Any other flower would already be dead from the October frost.

"Wait, go back. I think that building was an inn," I said.

"Is it?" But since there was no other traffic on the streets, Rhys braked and pulled automobile into reverse. He parked in front of the building and finally I could make out the sign just sitting next to the front door: Fairmont Bed and Breakfast.

Apparently, someone had observed our arrival as the front door was flung open before we even reached it. A stout woman in an embroidered apron was standing at the threshold with her arms spread as if in welcome. Brown hair was pulled back in a bun and a wide, crooked smile was framed by red cheeks, possibly from standing next to an oven all day. Or judging by the way she was batting her eyelashes at Rhys, she was blushing.

"It looks like you have an admirer," I said lowly.

"Fantastic." He didn't sound like he was exactly pleased.

"I thought you liked the ladies. It wasn't so long ago that you were bragging about how you knew all about them."

"Oh sure. But you try working up some enthusiasm after driving half the day."

"I thought books didn't get tired."

"Well, that's wrong. You overestimate my stamina."

The woman fluttered her hands towards the interior of the inn. "Welcome! You must be from Greenglass. We have room already prepared. I'm Tabitha, by the way. I run this place with my brother Edgar. I'll go get him since he is in charge of the business side of things around here."

The Second Conjunction

Seal XV

Edgar looked like a male version of his sister Tabitha, the same rotund shape, the same smile, the same red cheeks--although this time, I suspected it might be from drinking or laughing too much rather than blushing. His hair was a short brown mop, a bit sparse and graying. He shook our hands and briefly ushered us into a small office where he quickly had the practicalities out of the way. Meanwhile, Tabitha had insisted on carrying our luggage up to our rooms.

"You know, Tabitha and I are happy that you've chosen to put up here, not just because you're visiting Fairmont, but well, it's the beginning of the holiday season," Edgar confided as he led us back out to the foyer of the bed and breakfast. "Most people are avoiding the small villages like this one in favor of Carinpapple."

"We've met quite a few travelers heading off in that direction," I replied.

The proprietor of the Fairmont Bed and Breakfast gave a small shudder, at odds with his seemingly cheerful disposition. "It's those pagans and New Age dabblers. Strange people."

"Well, I can say that they aren't exactly tradition," said Rhys. "But I wouldn't say that they were all strange. Most of them are probably chasing a trend, anyway. People like doing new things. Sooner or later, the newness will wear off and they will be doing what they did before."

"I would have to disagree with that last part," I said. "They won't do what they did before. They would do the next new thing. Take fashion, for instance. I am sure that in ten years, there will be something totally different at the dressmakers."

Rhys chuckled. "Speak for yourself. Gentlemen's clothes change very little over the years."

Edgar nodded. "That's very true. At any rate, I must say that we are a bed and breakfast, so we do not serve dinner and lunch. However, I can recommend several places on the main street that may be to your liking."

"What is Fairmont's central gathering for the locals?" Rhys queried. "I'd like to soak up a bit of local color while having supper. How about you, Ana?"

"Local color is all right," I replied. "As long as it doesn't include brawls."

Edgar gave a loud guffaw. "Oh, not to worry, Miss Talbot. Even out here in the countryside, we are fairly civilized. Not like up north in the Hinterlands--say in the Orkneys. Most of the locals are rather sedate in their manner, I should say. But if you want a bit of local color and none of the rather touristy stuff, you might try Barney's. It's just down the street that way." He waved his arm in a vague direction. "There's a sign and a lantern right above the entranceway--hard to miss."

"Is it more like a café and a restaurant or a pub?" asked Rhys.

"Pub," replied Edgar. "Every week, they have the local band play a jig or two to liven things up. I'm not sure if they're up tonight, though."

"All done!" Tabitha came down from the upper floor in a huff. "I have your things in your rooms. You'll both find that the rooms are quite nice--they overlook the back gardens. Have you had supper yet?"

"Ah, no," said Rhys. He smiled when Tabitha batted her eyes at him again. Apparently he wasn't as tired as he had tried to convince me earlier. "We were about to head on over to Barney's, a pub your brother recommended to us."

"Oh!" She fluttered her hands in excitement. "Why, we could come with you to show you where it is. Couldn't we, Edgar?"

Her brother shrugged. "Since we don't have any other boarders and it is unlikely that any others will show up for the remainder of the day, I don't see how we would not. Besides, I had promised Garrett that I would catch up with him soon on some things. He'll be at the pub."

In the evening, the main street of Fairmont was quiet and dark except for lights at the windows. As the four of us walked down the street, I breathed in the clear air--not as sooty as an industrial city such as Colchester or even Greenglass even though it was pretty much located in the middle of nowhere. The sky above was also surprisingly clear. Without a multitude of lights blazing in the village streets, I could clearly make out the stars. Mentally, I made a note of the pole star and its surrounding constellations. I could hardly remember the last time I actually saw any stars in Colchester. There was a time, long ago, when I had regularly looked up into the night sky and pondered the orbits of the planets and the stars.

I knew that I had once had an owner who had been an astronomer. It had been in the fifteenth century--at the time, I was still in Italy. The astronomer

was himself a hoarder of books and had merely left me on a shelf, only rarely paging through me to find a spell to decontaminate his food. His patron had been a powerful Italian count of a ruthless ruling family. Because he had been affiliated with the count and his studies often strayed toward the heretical--for that time--the astronomer himself had gained enemies. Some of them desperately wanted to see him dead.

Unfortunately, the astronomer had dropped his vigilance one day and that was the end of him. Soon after, I had been shipped off to a collection in Switzerland owned by the astronomer's estranged nephew.

"So what brings you to Fairmont?" said Tabitha as she looked up at Rhys. "On holiday? Visiting relatives? Just to see the sights?"

"Fairmont seemed a little off the beaten path," remarked Rhys. "This village seems to have a lot to recommend it as far as I can see."

The woman preened.

I stifled a snicker with a cough.

Edgar seemed oblivious to any byplay. "Forgive me for being forward, Miss Talbot, but what relation are you to Mr. Lattimore?" Tabitha had pulled a reluctant Rhys further ahead to point out something so that they were out of earshot.

"We're not criminals on the run, if you're implying that."

"No. No of course not. You don't look like a criminal."

"It's the lack of unibrow, I suppose."

"I wouldn't know."

I tucked my hands into my coat pockets. "We're friends, sort of. Not that kind of friend, you understand. We're just traveling companions. Somewhat like business associates."

"Business associates on holiday?" Edgar seemed perplexed.

"We're looking for a particular item. We had been directed here by the Greenglass Auction House. One of their customers may have the item we are searching for." At his curious expression, I clarified, "It's a book. It's an academic matter, you see. I'm actually a research assistant for a professor

back at the Institute at Colchester."

"Ah! I see." The inn proprietor seemed to muse over that bit of information for a moment. "Well, I'm not sure if I can help you. Anyone who wants to purchase books usually takes the trip to Greenglass. Fairmont is a small village--we only have the necessities. Perhaps you will have better luck asking some others around at Barney's. Some of the locals are real gossips, you know. They would definitely know if anyone around has a private library at their disposal."

The pub, Barney's, was just as how the inn proprietor had described it with the sign and lantern at the entrance. The interior was like the front parlor of someone's house--worn but clean and warm. Tabitha had already dragged Rhys over to a table near the bar counter where some older men were sitting, drinking foaming pints. A middle-aged woman, thick-jawed and curly haired briefly came over to flirt with Edgar before taking orders. Edgar soon excused himself to talk to Garrett, one of the men at the counter.

Three musicians stood on an upraised platform next to a gigantic, smoldering hearth. The fiddler was tuning his instrument as the two others--one holding a tin whistle and the other a bodhran--chatted with an older couple sitting at a nearby table.

"We're in luck!" exclaimed Tabitha. "The local band is playing tonight. Joe, Jack, and Will call themselves the Flying Dutchmen--even though they aren't Dutchmen and they definitely don't fly."

"They must be admirers of Frederick Marryat, then," said Rhys.

Tabitha looked blank.

"Marryat wrote a book called *The Phantom Ship* about the Flying Dutchman legend," he explained.

"Ah! How clever!" she laughed.

I cupped my chin under a palm and took in the atmosphere of the pub. "Well, it's either that, or they like Wagner very much."

"I doubt it," Rhys replied. "Wagner was a blowhard. Or at least that's what my brother told me."

"Your brother?" said Tabitha.

"He was living in Germany the last I heard of him. He, ah, was under the patronage of a rather eccentric baron who was heavily into the music scene. He met Wagner once."

She leered at him. "I hope he's as good looking as you."

Rhys appeared nonplussed. "My brother looks exactly like me."

"Twins!"

I barely suppressed a wince at her squeal. "So, which one is which? Who's Joe, Jack, and Will?"

Tabitha forcibly tore her attention away from Rhys to address my question. "Joe plays the bodhran. Jack plays the tin whistle. And Will plays the fiddle. The three of them have played together since they were wee lads and they often use the pub as their practice. Of course, considering how wonderful they are, I doubt they need any practice."

As our server came by with dinner, the Flying Dutchmen finally got into position. With brief eye contact, they started into a lively reel that reminded me of rustic dance halls filled with shy country misses and even clumsier lads at social dancing events. When I had been hiring myself out as a companion to aging widows, I had been forced to attend to such events. Such things were amusing for the first couple of times, but after a while, they were rather soporific.

"Ana?"

"Hm?" I forced myself to take a sip of the tea and a bite of the veal.

Rhys frowned as he finished his supper. "You look quite odd. Is the food not to your liking?"

"Oh no, it's fine. It's just that this music reminds me of something." I grimaced. "Sorry, they're some not very scintillating memories. Not bad ones, just some very boring ones."

After the first set of reels, the trio took a rest by ordering several pints of ale. They chatted with some of the pub's other patrons before getting back onto the platform and launched into an energetic jig. Some of the patrons began clapping in time and Edgar and the woman he had flirted with earlier had gotten up to dance. Apparently, this was one of the villagers' favorite tunes.

"Come on, Mr. Lattimore! We can't miss this one!" Tabitha said, dragging Rhys to his feet.

"What?"

Amused, I watched the plump proprietress of the Fairmont Bed and Breakfast stomp her feet to the music. At first, there was a flash of consternation across Rhys' face, but then it was gone as he smoothly eased into the dance. I found jigs somewhat too energetic for my tastes, but he seemed to dance well.

"Better be careful," said a voice nearby. "She might not look like much, but she's fairly aggressive when she wants to cuckold someone's spouse."

I turned my head to see a man sitting in the seat that Tabitha had vacated. I wasn't quite sure what age he was since the part of his face that showed from underneath his cap was tanned and slightly wrinkled--a farmer's face. A pungent smelling cigar was clenched at the corner of his mouth. He didn't take it out of his mouth when he spoke, rather he just spoke around it.

"You mean Tabitha?" I looked back to the dancing couples. The plump woman just looked like she was having fun to me. "She looks harmless."

"Men can't resist her," he said, making me blink in surprise. "I'd bet my left pinkie on that. So you'd better keep your man close to you."

I cocked my head. This farmer seemed almost enigmatic--but was he jealous? I wasn't quite sure, so I did not call him on it. Instead, I said, "Rhys isn't mine. He can take care of himself."

"You've got a lot of trust in him," he said ominously.

"Well, it isn't really a matter of trust." I shrugged. "You must be one of the locals. I was wondering if maybe you, or perhaps someone you know, might know of a person I am looking for."

"Oh?" He squinted at me as cigar smoke wreathed his head. "It's a small village. Everyone knows pretty much everyone. Visitors don't come here that often, and any that do are fairly obvious."

"I'm not looking for someone who passed through. I was told that a book collector takes his residence here. His name is Archibald Chesterfield."

"Ah, that bastard." The farmer puffed on his cigar. His dark eyes glinted in the pub light. "You might want to talk to Widow Fitzgerald."

"Widow Fitzgerald?"

"Everyone knows her. She lives down the road, next to the grocer's. You might want to take an evil eye amulet with you when you meet her though."

"Why?"

"She's a witch."

The Second Conjuraton
Seal XVI

"Ah!"

A black fur ball leaped out of my suitcase which I had just opened and bounced onto my bed. The cat glared at me as if it were my fault that it was now in this state. I scrutinized my luggage but found no signs of forced entry. Then I looked back at Thor who had decided, in his inscrutable way to curl up and lick down his fur into a more presentable order.

"How in the bloody hell did you get in here? I swore I left this closed when I was back in Rhys' flat."

Thor did not answer. Perhaps he did not feel like he had to explain anything. After all, he was a magic pamphlet. Perhaps magic pamphlets contained spells for getting into places one had no business getting into. I certainly knew no such spells. Although if I did, it would have saved me a lot of time and trouble in the past, probably in the present, and mostly likely in the future as well.

"I know you understand me, you miserable excuse of a book. You're not supposed to be here. I don't think this bed and breakfast allows animals. Why, if Tabitha and Edgar found out--they'd probably be apoplectic!"

The feline paused in his grooming to give me a quizzical stare. Thoughts of milk flooded my mind.

"You can't possibly be hungry at this time of night. You can't expect me to get you something to eat. I want to take a bath and then go to sleep."

The floorboards just outside my door creaked.

"Mrrrow?"

"Shh! Be quiet and I'll get you some milk." I stepped toward the bed and made a decision. I hauled the feline off the bed. Thor did not reach out and scratch me--he just flicked an ear in curiosity. Then I opened a wardrobe and put him inside. "Stay, all right? I'll be right back." I shut the wardrobe and opened my room door.

Out in the hallway was Tabitha in a peach nightgown and her hair down. She was holding a tray with a mug in it. I sniffed the air. Hot chocolate with possibly something else in it?

"Er, hello Miss Talbot." She shifted on her feet, obviously uncomfortable for some reason. "I thought you had already gone to bed."

"Not quite," I replied. "I was feeling a little thirsty. Would you mind if I just hopped downstairs to get a glass of milk?"

"Oh, not at all. The kitchen is downstairs and down the hallway. It's hard to miss. You'll find some glasses in the cupboards."

"Thank you." I quickly closed my door and made my way to the stairs before I could witness Tabitha seduce Rhys. Or the other way around. I didn't particularly care as long as I didn't see or hear anything. "You're an uptight coward," I told myself as I groped about in the darkness downstairs, searching for the light switch to the kitchen. My fingers finally found the switch and light illuminated a rather ordinary room with a long island table in the center with copper pots hanging on hooks above. A brick oven was built into a recess in the corner. I rummaged a bit in the cupboards, finding a wide mug that almost looked like a soup bowl. The milk, I found in the ice chest.

While I was pouring the milk into the mug, I noticed a book sitting out on the table. It was open to a very unusual recipe.

As I put the milk bottle back into place, I heard the scrape of something--the back door in the kitchen. The knob turned, revealing two dark figures who were strangely giggling.

"Miss Talbot! What a surprise to find you here. I thought Tabitha was around. You could have called her for help." It was Edgar and the woman he had

been flirting with at Barney's. They looked a bit out of breath as if they had been running. Although I had a fairly good suspicion that running had not actually been involved.

"I don't mind," I replied. "Besides, Tabitha was busy. I was about to go back up to my room anyway. Good night."

I escaped the kitchen in consternation. These humans were like rabbits! And Rhys, who should know better, was probably encouraging it. At the stair landing, I passed Tabitha who had a smug smile on her face and an empty tray in her hand.

Back in my room, I opened my wardrobe. Thor trotted out as if nothing had happened at all. I set the mug on the floor and left it for the cat to drink. Then someone knocked on my door. I wanted to bang my head on something. Couldn't I get any peace?

"Does this smell odd to you?" Rhys asked when I opened the door a crack.

"Yes. Tabitha probably put an aphrodisiac into it. When she comes to collect the cup, you'll be putty in her hands."

"You don't have to sound so irritable," he replied. I noticed that he had already changed into his sleeping clothes--his robe tied tightly to his waist. "Anyways how would you know? You recognize the aphrodisiac? I thought it smelled like cinnamon or vanilla at first, but I'm not so sure."

"I don't deal in love spells. But I did notice an herbal in the kitchen. It had a spell for invoking a couple dozen love gods and goddesses. And the ingredients included chocolate, honey, walnut oil, ginseng, and, um, arugula."

"Arugula?" He peered down at the hot chocolate in deep suspicion. "Maybe it's not an aphrodisiac. Maybe it's poison."

"An aphrodisiac is probably not going to hurt you," I said. "You're a book, remember?"

"A book in a human body." He looked at me; his gray eyes had a green sheen. "Why don't you try this if you're so confident it won't have any effect?"

"You're the one who ordered it."

He shook his head. "Tabitha said that she just wanted to offer me a nightcap before bed."

"If you don't want to drink it, why don't you just pour it down the sink and pretend that you did?"

"Maybe I will." He looked over my shoulder. His eyes widened. "Is that Thor?"

I gave an exasperated sigh. "Your cat decided to hitch a ride in my suitcase. I have no idea how he got in there. It was closed when I visited your residence."

"Well, Thor does manage to go wherever he wishes. I've had him for a while, but I still have no idea what he is capable of."

"As far as I can tell, he only bothers to demand food."

"Yes, that sounds like Thor." He stepped back. "Thank you for your advice. Good night, Ana."

"I don't know about that," I said as I shut the door. The cat had finished his meal and had decided to make my pillow his bed.

The Second Conjunction Seal XVII

The Widow Fitzgerald stood just inside her doorway looking at me with rheumy eyes. "Yes, I know Archibald Chesterfield. He stays in Fairmont for a few months of the year. The rest of the year, I am not quite sure. Somewhere down south, I think. He rents a cottage from me. It's on the lake. I am not sure if he is here in Fairmont now, quite frankly."

The woman was tall and dressed in an old-fashioned style--a black dress with puffy sleeves that buttoned up to her neck--something that would not have looked quite out of place twenty years ago. Her gray hair was pulled severely back in the old style too and she walked with a cane--black ebony that was topped with a silver knob. Her hand clutched claw-like to its support. A ring with a very large black stone winked at me from her finger.

"Thank you for the information, Mrs. Fitzgerald," I said. "I think I shall see if Mr. Chesterfield is in--I am quite eager to see if he is in possession of the

book I am looking for."

I almost missed the slight narrowing of her eyes. "I see. Well, before you pay Mr. Chesterfield a visit, would you like to come in and have tea with me?"

I remembered the old farmer's words, that the widow was a witch. I didn't believe in the evil eye--just personal bad luck. And I suppose witches did exist although I had been fortunate enough to have never been owned by one or run across one before. Sorceresses on the other hand, seemed to be fairly numerous--it perhaps it seemed that way since there had been a time when I had been owned by a succession of them. Unlike sorceresses, witches were not academic spell casters. They relied on more natural and folklorish ways. The widow, on the outside, did not look particularly fearsome. She looked like what she purported to be--a poor old widow.

Nonetheless, it would have been nice to have someone else with me to back me up. Rhys, unfortunately, was poking around town, claiming that he was going about trying to find clues. His talents had led him to believe that Blackthorne had been to Fairmont at one point. Passing through or staying, he couldn't say.

"Thank you for your offer of tea, Mrs. Fitzgerald," I said, trying to put on an earnest and polite sheen to my voice. "But I'm afraid I must decline. I have a prior engagement on having tea with, uh, Tabitha at the Bed and Breakfast," I lied. "I do not wish to inconvenience my hostess for anything that she had planned."

"I see. Well, even if you do not have time for tea, please come in. It will take me a while to find the key to the other cottage on the lake."

"A key?" I found myself stepping through the threshold. It was like stepping through a time warp back to the late nineteenth century, when Queen Victoria sat on the throne rather than King George V. The front parlor of the widow's residence was crammed full of over-decorated furniture and flowery accents. Lace draped over a floral couch. The legs of the chairs were discretely covered by cloth. Photographs littered every available surface, except for the mantelpiece which was home to a painting--the portrait of a lantern-jawed man with a haunted look to his eyes.

"I don't want to waste the opportunity to advertise the places I have up for rent," the widow called out as she went into the next room, presumably to find the key. "While you're out there checking up on Mr. Chesterfield, you might as well take a look at the other cottage. Who knows, you might find it

to your liking and perhaps you might choose to rent it during the summer for holiday."

There was a small table next to the sofa that held a rather clunky lamp decorated with pewter angels at the base. Beside the lamp were three photographs--all of the same man depicted in the portrait on top of the fireplace. In one of them, he was standing next to an old fashioned horse drawn carriage. In the second, he was standing in some sort of room, posed in formal garb. In the third, he was wearing spectacles. And under his arm, he held a book. I bent over and squinted, trying to make out the book's title.

"Here is the key."

I almost leapt out of my skin at the sudden closeness of the widow's voice. But I managed to make myself straighten up slowly, as if I had not been disturbed at all. "That is very kind of you, Mrs. Fitzgerald. I cannot guarantee that I would ever rent your cottage, but I do have some colleagues who often take country holidays. I can mention this to them."

She gave me a thin lipped smile. "That is excellent." Her eye briefly landed on the photographs I had been examining. "I see you were looking at Victor."

"Your husband?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes. Bless his poor soul, wherever it may be." She took out a white lace handkerchief from a pocket and dabbed her eyes. "He always had a rather delicate constitution."

"Ah, I see. I hope he went away peacefully." I felt a bit awkward, not sure that I was saying the right thing. I had no idea if the widow had lost her husband recently or, if like Queen Victoria, still mourning the love of her life after many, many years.

"I have no idea," she said, startling me. "He was a scholar, you know. He specialized in old books he called grimoires. I never paid much attention to that--books are simply books to me. I am no scholar--I don't know Latin or Greek. I only know English. Victor was quite intelligent--he had mastered five languages before he was twenty."

"Hm." I took another peek of the photograph where Victor Fitzgerald was holding the book. "Is that a grimoire that he was holding?"

She nodded. "He was obsessed with it. It was written in Arabic and called

the *Nacermom*, or something like that."

My skin suddenly felt cold. "The *Necronomicon*?"

"Yes, that's it. How do you know it?"

"I'm somewhat of a scholar myself. You were saying before that you had no idea about your husband's death?"

"Oh, Victor." She sighed. "One day, he decided to go to Greenglass to do some research at its museum library. He seemed very excited--that he was on to some breakthrough. But he never came back. Some travelers found him lying by the side of the road. The local doctor said that he had died from heart failure. It was inevitable, given Victor's health, but still, it was quite a shock."

"I can imagine." I glanced up at Victor's portrait and haunted eyes. My intuition told me that his heart failure had not been the result of his health, but something else. "Tell me, Mrs. Fitzgerald. Do you still have the *Necronomicon* in your possession?"

"Actually, I do," she said, surprising me yet again. "I've kept it here all these years simply because, well, it was what Victor had always had with him." She went toward the fireplace mantle and took something off that had sat right beneath the painting. It was an old volume covered in leather--or maybe it wasn't leather--and an iron studded latch. There had been a title on the cover, but most of it had rubbed off. From what I could tell, it looked faintly Arabic. "But it's a rather ugly old thing. I can't open it since I don't have the key to it--I have no idea where Victor had misplaced it--and I wouldn't be able to read it even if I could."

"It does look rather ancient," I managed.

"To be honest, I never really liked it much," she said. "Victor would always study it, forgetting to eat and sleep. Perhaps it would be more useful in your hands since you are a scholar."

"Mrs. Fitzgerald, I couldn't possibly..."

She handed it to me. Numbly, I took it. The book itself was somewhat heavy and cold. I looked from the volume to the portrait. Strangely, the eyes on the portrait seemed to be looking at me now. Its gaze burned with some sort of unholy glee. I shuddered.

"The cottages are along Fairmont Lake. Just go south on Maddock Road. Mr. Chesterfield has rented the Sewell Cottage. The key is to the Tern Cottage which is right next to it. When you come back and I am not home, just drop the key off with the postmaster. He will see to it that I will get it back."

I found myself ushered out of the widow's house. For a moment, I stood outside, glancing at her house, the benign grocer's store beside her building, and then the grimoire in my hands. I wasn't a babe in the woods. I knew what I had in my hands was what some people would consider pure horror.

"Judging from the look on your face, visiting the widow wasn't that bad, was it? She wasn't truly a witch?"

I shrieked and swung the book around.

"Ow! It's me, Rhys."

"I don't like people sneaking up on me like that!"

"Sorry, Ana." He glanced down at my hands. "What's that?"

Not what, boy. Who.

Rhys jerked back as if someone had slapped him. I shrieked again and dropped the grimoire.

Stupid girl! Pick me back up at once!

The Second Conjunction
Seal XVIII

My fingers itched to roll down the passenger side window. Outside, along Maddock Road leading out of Fairmont, oaks lined the avenue and bright red leaves swirled in the wind. The early afternoon light--although strong--failed to penetrate the canopy of the surrounding woods. The only sound was the hum of the automobile engine and Thor's tail as it thumped against the *Necronomicon*.

Rhys and I had managed to get back to the Fairmont Bed and Breakfast before noon with the old grimoire in tow. It constantly grumbled about being dragged around by ignorant youngsters and insane owners. I had checked the book for any blood stains and had found none--on the outside at any

rate--so I had privately speculated that it could not Turn. But it was an old book. Who knew what it would do? Perhaps it was just remaining a book because it preferred that form.

Thor, however, had taken an immediate dislike to the *Necronomicon*. The cat had hissed and had attempted to scratch it up although his paws had curiously skittered across its cover without finding any purchase. Perhaps it was the book's self defense. On its part, the *Necronomicon* had complained about uppity animals with no sense of place and order.

I had decided to visit the cottage on Fairmont Lake after the lunch at the pub, Barney's. I could have driven the rented automobile myself, but Rhys insisted on tagging along, calling himself the chauffeur. Reluctant to leave the old grimoire lying about the bed and breakfast where someone could get their hands on it--namely Tabitha who would probably attempt to open it thinking there would be love spells in there--I had taken it with me and leaving it in the back seat of the automobile. Thor had decided to follow in order to continue his abuse on the grimoire. Since the cat couldn't tear it up, he had settled on trying to bash it into submission.

The *Necronomicon* had made threats against the cat, but so far had not even attempted to follow through.

"There has to be someone in town who knows the whereabouts of Archibald Chesterfield," said Rhys as he drove. "You did say that the Widow Fitzgerald claim that he was only at this cottage for only a few months during the year. And she said that he was somewhere south the rest of the year."

"Yes, that's right. But if we're lucky, we might catch him at his cottage today."

"Sure. If we're lucky."

"You sound like we're having terrible luck so far. And that's simply not true. We've been stymied, yes, but it's not like we're not making any progress at all."

"Hm. I suppose things could be worse."

The trees thinned out a bit revealing a bit of grassland beyond. And then there was the lake. Flat. Cold. Dark blue. Several willow trees grew by the edge. Tufts of cattails skirted the shore like the last hairs on a bald man's head. A row of ducks beaded in the shallows, bobs of dark feathers.

"So Al, what do you think?" I called back. The old grimoire had insisted on the nickname which was derived from its original Arabic title. "You've been in Fairmont for far longer. Is Archibald Chesterfield around?"

I'm not clairvoyant.

Thor thumped the book again.

"All right," I drawled. "So do you know anything about Archibald Chesterfield?"

Very little. He didn't seem very memorable. From his conversations with the widow, he didn't seem interesting. He was a book collector and he did seem to take an interest in me.

"If Chesterfield bought the *Liber Tutelarum*," said Rhys, "and he knew what it was, it would certainly make sense that he would take an interest in Al. I bet he made an offer to the widow to obtain you."

He did. But for some reason, the widow did not sell me to him. At the time, I thought it was merely human sentimentality--that she did not sell me because I had belonged to her dead husband. But since she gave me to you, I'm rethinking that. Perhaps there was something about Chesterfield that made her uneasy.

I crossed my arms and tapped a finger against an elbow, thinking. "Do you think that humans might have some sort of sense that we don't have?"

"I wouldn't put it against them," Rhys replied. "When we're in book form, they have all sorts of advantages. They have vision. We don't."

"True. But why give Al to me? Sorry Al, but I'm probably not very qualified to take care of you."

Young people take care of their elders all the time.

"I think I'd have to pass."

Selfish chit. Be thankful that I never asked to be given away in the first place.

I ignored the insult. "So we're basically back to where we started."

"Oh, I wouldn't exactly say that." Rhys was frowning as he turned the

steering wheel, guiding the Rochet-Schneider from the main road to a smaller rutted turn-off. The automobile jolted and jerked on the unpaved smaller road which headed closer towards the shore of the lake and to a small copse of trees framing a squat cottage with denuded branches.

He parked next to one of the trees. I got out and breathed in the cold, moist air. Two magpies on a branch swooped down, barely missing me as they chirped angrily. I clutched my hat to my head and quickly made my way toward the cottage entrance. The door was painted with a rustic shade of burgundy that was slowly chipping away, revealing the wood underneath. I tried peering through the window nearby, but saw nothing. Was anyone home?

I knocked. We waited for a few moments. Then Rhys pounded on the door.

It creaked open and a plume of stale air hit my nose. Coughing, I tried waving it away. "I don't think Chesterfield is in residence. Perhaps he has not been in residence for quite a while."

"That doesn't make very much sense," said Rhys. "Severin said that he had visited the Greenglass Auction House recently to buy a batch of books."

"But that doesn't mean that he had to come straight back here." I took one step into the cottage and paused for my eyes to accustom to the gloom. "He could have just been visiting Greenglass from elsewhere and had decided to go back there rather than coming back to Fairmont. It makes a sort of sense if you assume that he keeps this cottage for his summer residence."

"All right. So let's assume that he hasn't been here. But that doesn't mean that you need to snoop around."

"But no one's going to know."

"Hm."

The windows, I discovered, were covered in curtains--which blocked out the light and any attempt at peering into the interior. The front room of the cottage did not look very remarkable. There was a couch, some chairs, an armchair, a table, a lamp--typical things one would expect of a receiving room. Off to the left of the front room was a relatively sparse kitchen. Beyond that was a bathroom. To the right was a stair leading up to darkness.

"There's something wrong about this place," I said as I climbed the stairs

and entered into a sparse bedroom.

"What?" Rhys had followed me. He went to the window to look out onto the lake. "This looks like an ordinary enough cottage to me."

"If this was rented out to someone who collected books, wouldn't he have books lying around?"

"Well, considering that we don't see anything lying around, I would assume that Chesterfield had packed up all of his belongings when he left."

After a glance at the room, I moved toward a wardrobe shoved up against the far wall. I opened one of the doors. It appeared empty. "This is so disappointing. I suppose we will have to get back to Fairmont and question some more people. Someone surely knows where Chesterfield lives the rest of the time."

"And that would assume that Chesterfield ever mentioned this to anyone in the village."

I tugged the handle to the other door of the wardrobe. It jerked open. Something flew out. A flock of somethings flew out. My scream was only muffled because I had covered my face with my arms. Rhys cursed loudly and the door to the bedroom slammed shut.

"Ana, are you all right?"

He was still here. Slowly, I lowered my arms and blinked. Rhys was standing over me with my hat in his hand. I looked past him. Towards the ceiling drifted paper birds--all of them animated by strange black sigils that twisted and changed on the parchment.

The Second Conjunction
Seal XIX

The paper birds rustled like leaves as they waited close to the ceiling of the cottage bedroom. I slowly got back to my feet, as to not make any sudden moves. I doubted that these things could actually see me, but one never knew if they could actually sense me in some other way. Rhys took the liberty of putting my hat back on my head.

"They're spells." His eyes were fixed on the paper birds, his jaw taunt. "With

the writing changing so rapidly, I can't tell if it's a really bad spell."

"Maybe it is. Perhaps it's sort of a defense in itself in case they encounter a sorcerer. If the sorcerer can't read it, he has no defense against it."

"It's strange that there are any words at all."

One paper birds broke from the flock. A scout? It drifted down ward, plummeting, and the paper seemed to change shape as well--into a sharp, dark point. Rhys reached out with an arm to fend it off, but it slipped passed him, heading toward my head. I grabbed it before it reached my eye. The paper crinkled in my hand, briefly struggling like a rodent in its final death throes. Above, the flock quivered and hissed. The formation changed into a balled cloud. A couple of the paper birds in the formation wriggled more violently than the others, clearly on the verge of attack.

"Ana..."

The paper bird in my hand died, but I could still feel some sort of energy coating my hand. I opened my fist, revealing my ink stained palm. The ink was black although I sensed something more from it, as if there was some other color it was reflecting that my vision couldn't detect. I concentrated. The ink began to gather up into small droplets as if it was oil sitting on a pond.

"Stop fooling around, Ana." Rhys took my shoulders and tried to propel me toward the door. "I can't figure out what these things are, but they sure don't look happy." At his words, two more of the birds detached from the flock. They circled quickly above us, as if they were looking for an opening. I could sense Rhys trying to reach out with some sort of defense, but his energy seemed to flow right past the animated parchment.

"Surely you know a bunch of fire spells," I said impatiently as I watched the ink roll toward my finger tips. Part of me focused, hoping what I was doing--a variation of something that I knew already--would work. "You're the fire volume of the *Clavis Umbrium*, aren't you?"

"Don't you think I haven't tried that?" Frustration laced his voice. "If it were that easy, the whole think would be already up in smoke. Come on, we have to get out of here, preferably fast enough before the whole thing comes after us."

The drop of ink dropped from my finger and hit the floor. But it didn't make a splattered mark on the paneled wood. Instead, the ink spread fast along the

floor and faded as if it had never existed in the first place. The two paper birds suddenly attacked--and struck an invisible barrier. They dropped to the ground, twitching. The flock began to move.

Rhys looked down at me. "What did you do?"

"I'm not quite sure. It was a long shot, I must admit." I glanced at the crumpled paper in my hand. The ink was completely smeared, but I could still see some symbols on it. Now that it was effectively dead, these symbols no longer changed or moved. "I used the energy of this spell on itself."

"Well, whatever you did, I hope you can do it again, because those things are coming." He was right; the flock was really fluttering about in a frenzy now.

"I think the wall is still holding although I'm not sure how much longer since it is powered by only one of these." I wondered why this couldn't be easier. Rhys was trying to drag me to the door now that I've bought us some time, but I was still standing there. It was both stupid and stubborn. "Could you try immobilizing them somehow?"

"Do I look like I have a net with me?"

"I guess not." Something caught my eye. The two paper birds on the floor were shaking themselves out, reading to take flight and attack again. Surprising him, I finally made for the door.

Once we closed it behind us, the door faintly trembled as if someone had aimed peppered shot at it. Apparently, the flock had broken past the wall that I had briefly created and was now attacking the door. Without saying more words to each other, we made our way back out of the cottage and ran to the automobile. Rhys furiously cranked on the engine and peeled out back onto the road.

Thor, who had been taking a nap on top of Al, raised his head and gave an inquiring meow.

I sat in the passenger seat, trying to catch my breath.

You have a broken spell.

I jerked around to look at the *Necronomicon*. "What?"

I can feel it. Let me have a look at it.

"You might as well," Rhys told me, his eyes on the road. "Perhaps Al would have an idea of what those things were. I had a bad feeling about them."

Things?

"Al doesn't have any eyes to actually look at anything," I replied, even though I reached back to put the crumpled bit of paper next to the old grimoire. Thor pricked his ears up in curiosity, but made no move to bat the paper around. "Although I'd have to agree with you about the bad feeling. Al, those things were a flock of these paper spells. But why would those things be in a book collector's cottage? Obviously, no one is living there now, so what would the point be of putting something like that there?"

Perhaps it was a trap.

I felt myself stiffening. "A trap? There wasn't anything in that place to steal."

Maybe there used to be something.

"But who else would come out to this cottage--besides Chesterfield and the widow?"

"Somebody did," said Rhys. "The door was open when we arrived--someone had gotten into that place somehow unless Chesterfield forgot to lock the door."

It's a rubric.

"Excuse me?" I said. "A rubric? That's not a spell."

"Yes it is," said Rhys, who finally spared me a glance. He seemed a bit angry. "And if I had noticed that it was a rubric, I would have carried you out of the cottage even if you kicked and screamed."

"That's barbaric."

Pay attention to the boy, Al berated. A rubric is a type of summoning spell. Like the usual rubric you might find on a code of conduct, this sort of spell gives direction. I can't tell the precise parameters of the spell since some of it has been muddled, but what I can tell you is that this rubric was seeking a target. Then it would only need a catalyst to fully activate its summoning portion.

"What sort of catalyst?"

"Blood," Rhys responded flatly. "Rubric originally meant the color red. So it is no wonder that the term has been used for these things."

"Even if that is true, I don't see how activating a bunch of flying papers would be even remotely effective."

"Ana. You don't understand. Any amount of blood would be sufficient to activate a rubric to do a summoning. A single paper cut would be sufficient to make the world fall down around your ears."

The Second Conjuraton
Seal XX

The smoke from the old farmer's pipe drifted and curled towards the ceiling. He squinted at me as if I had grown a third hand. I tried to ignore his weird stare by concentrating on the soup that I had ordered from Barney's management.

"There's something strange about you."

I paused. "Strange?"

"Strange." He nodded. "Something about your eyes."

"It's the trick of the light." Old farmers weren't supposed to notice eyes. Particularly not this farmer who I had originally pegged as Tabitha's admirer. Or maybe, since he could not get me worried enough about Tabitha's interest in Rhys, perhaps he was trying to frighten me with something else. Or at least attempt to make me paranoid.

There were people like that--people who were only happy when other people weren't. The best thing, I suppose, was to ignore them.

The farmer gave another puff of smoke and his mouth curved downward, but he didn't say anything else.

Rhys had abandoned his dinner--mostly due to the fact that Tabitha had forced him onto the dancing floor. The Flying Dutchmen were playing a jig. The fiddler bowed furiously to the fierce tempo that the bodhran player had set, looking as if the hounds of hell were after him.

Rhys and I had come back from the cottage at the lake and had arrived back in Fairmont proper in the late afternoon. The Widow Fitzgerald had not been home so I had to return the key to the post master--who also happened to be the owner of the grocer next to the widow's home. The post master had been a rather short-middle aged man, rather non-descript and oblivious. He had no idea where the widow had gone to, although he had hinted that she often had taken trips up north to visit a lover. And if that were true, her maudlin reminisces about her dead husband had been a farce.

Tonight, Barney's seemed bare. Few of the locals loitered in the main room besides the old farmer. There were two other men at a corner table having a private conversation. Another group--three housewives on a girls' night out--were seated next the a window having a light supper. Tabitha had somehow tagged along as Rhys and I had headed to the pub in hopes of finding a gossip who might tell us the whereabouts of Archibald Chesterfield. Her brother had instead decided to stay back at the inn.

In the middle of the musicians' ditty, the front door to the pub banged open, revealing a heavy looking figure in a thick dark gray coat, a roughly knitted scarf and a dirty cap. A hand with fingerless gloves took off the hat revealing a red faced older man. He immediately sauntered up to the bar to order himself a drink. I noticed the old farmer's eyes tracking this newcomer. I didn't think much of it, until Tabitha abruptly abandoned Rhys on the floor to make a beeline towards this new man.

When she reached a couple paces from this new stranger, the old farmer declared, "Excuse me." His chair scraped along the floor as he got up and headed toward the two.

Fascinated, I put my spoon back into my soup bowl and pushed it away as I watched. The three of them were talking. None of them seemed pleased by what the others said. In my absorption, I did not even notice that the Flying Dutchmen were finished playing until Rhys tapped me on the shoulder.

"Ana. Come on."

I tore my attention away from the two men and one woman and looked up at Rhys. "I'm not dancing."

He smiled. "I'm not asking you to. Come on. There's someone you might like to speak with."

"Oh?" I finally got up and followed him across the dance floor, heading

towards the Flying Dutchmen. The musicians, on a brief break, had taken seats on some low three-legged stools and were downing pints of beer.

"Joe mentioned that he worked for Archibald Chesterfield last summer."

"Joe?" I frowned glancing at each of the musicians.

"I'm Joe." The bodhran player set his lager on the floor and tipped his cap, revealing brown locks. His instrument was on his lap, skin down, revealing the inner framework. "As I was telling Rhys, I did indeed work for Mr. Chesterfield. Mostly it was just muscle work, you know. I helped him move some of his things to the cottage he rented from the Widow Fitzgerald."

Sensing a lead, I asked, "What was Mr. Chesterfield like?"

Joe shrugged. "He was a rather average sort of fellow, I suppose. He looked a bit like Tabitha's brother, Edgar, except with more hair. He also wore rather thick glasses--probably from reading all those books of his."

"So he was a book collector."

The bodhran player grimaced. "Too many books, if you ask me. No one needs to read or own that many. It's as if he had carted the entire Royal Society library with him. And when I told him that, he just laughed in my face and said that it was just a mere fraction of his actual collection."

"I see." I glanced at Rhys when he suddenly put an arm around my shoulder. He wasn't really looking at me though. I saw him focused on something past my head. But to Joe, I said, "Did he say where he came from? Or at least where he stored the rest of his collection? Mrs. Fitzgerald mentioned that he may be from the south."

Joe shook his head. "No, miss. I remember Mr. Chesterfield distinctly telling me that his permanent home was in Haven. He was quick to point out that the city afforded better access to places that sold books. And he had rich friends there who also happened to be book collectors."

"Did he say who his friends were?"

"Sorry." But then the bodhran player also looked in the direction the Rhys had looked at. He grinned and flipped his instrument over and tapped out a quick rhythm. "Well, Rhys, if you take the initiative, I'll get the others."

"Perhaps I will," Rhys replied. "So Ana, are you up to some country

dancing?"

Suspicious, I said, "Not very."

"Well, too bad."

At that, Joe called out to the fiddler and the tin whistle player. They put down their pints and took up their instruments. On the first note, Rhys jerked me into the lively reel.

When I whirled around, I caught a glimpse of the bar. Tabitha was staring at the farmer and the stranger with her hands on her hips. The men looked like they were about to go to blows with the angry words they were exchanging.

"What's that about?" I managed to ask, after a turn.

"Ever been in a three-way fight?"

"No. It sounds painful."

"Perhaps. But it's also sort of fascinating. I think it's a love triangle."

I thought about it. "Fascinating? Er, well, I suppose so."

"You haven't been in a love triangle before either, have you?"

"No." I found myself smiling in self-deprecation. "I'm not the sort of girl who inspires men to vie for her hand. I don't really understand why humans would want to get into that sort of complication."

"I agree. It's terribly messy."

"Hm. It would be messy if one of them manages to draw blood."

"That's not what I was thinking of. It's emotionally messy."

"I try to steer clear of that."

The reel was coming to a close. Rhys stopped, his hands on my upper arms. He looked down at me. "Of course that's why you don't understand why humans would get into such a complication. You deliberately avoid emotional entanglements."

I looked away, focusing my gaze on a nearby chair. "It's getting late. We

have a drive tomorrow back to Greenglass before catching a train to Haven."

His hands tightened on my arms. "Ana."

Something in his voice caused me to look back. Then I stepped back, shaking him off. "Does it really matter if I understand or not?"

He was silent.

"I'm sorry."

Rhys sighed. "There's nothing to be sorry about. Sometimes, I forget that you're not really a person at all."

"Well, you're not a person either."

"Sometimes, I wonder." His expression seemed pensive, and strangely enough, if I was reading it correctly, a little sad.

The Second Conjunction
Seal XXI

Only the sound of the automobile engine cut through the drive back to Greenglass. Rhys seemed intent on maneuvering the Rochet-Schneider through the damp roads--it had rained earlier--as if he were still lost in his own little world. In the back seat, Thor snoozed and the *Necronomicon* was silent.

Outside, the sky was dark gray, still threatening rain. The trees on the side of the road were mostly denuded, few leaves still clinging to branch tips like the highlighting gold on the page borders of an illuminated manuscript. The wind, however, threatened even this last vestige of autumn. I could hear it buffeting at the vehicle; a fickle cat playing with its prey.

I glanced over at Rhys, his hair tousled as if the wind had reached inside and yanked at his locks. His eyes seemed to mirror the sky, colorless and bleak. It seemed beyond my comprehension that a book would have the audacity to sulk. But a man was a different matter.

"You're annoyed with me." After saying that, I felt as if I could breathe a little easier. The thought had been running through my mind the entire morning ever since Rhys had given me an excruciatingly polite greeting at

breakfast. We had said little to each other since then besides coordinating the loading of our luggage back into the automobile.

He hadn't even asked me to help him navigate the roads.

"I'm not annoyed with you." He sounded gruff.

"You are. You've hardly given me the time of day since we left Fairmont. Or even that bed and breakfast."

"Don't assign feelings to me simply because you think you know. You said you didn't understand. Maybe I just feel like not talking."

"That's the most I've heard you say all day."

He didn't reply to that.

"I'm not like you," I finally said. "It's true that I enjoy having the mobility that this form gives me, but I haven't really bothered with getting into what being a person really means. I haven't really seen a need to."

"One wonders, then, how you've even managed to function in this world in the first place."

"I can function just fine by staying out of everyone's way."

"If that's true, then why are you even bothering to find the other edition of the *Liber Tutelarum*?"

I hugged my arms to myself and watched the countryside outside go by. The forest had given way to the strange geological formations in the area. Towering fairy chimneys that littered the landscape. Each standing by itself.

"I'm alone," I admitted. "I can't very well make a person my friend. They have short lives."

Rhys opened his mouth, then closed it. His brow beetled as if he were thinking about something. Then he said, "You can't go through your existence not enjoying anything because they have some sort of time limit. Enjoy it while you can."

"Memories can be cold comfort."

"Probably because you don't have many good ones."

"How would you know about that?"

"Ana, it's..."

Stop!

Rhys paused. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't say anything. I was waiting for you to finish your comment."

Stop, stop, stop! It was the Necronomicon. Stop right here. There's something...

Rhys braked hard and the automobile jerked to a halt. Thor slid from his perch on top of one of the bags and mewled in protest. Outside, the rocky landscape was a pale brown blot against a damp horizon. The wind battered at the windshield.

"What's wrong?" Rhys asked.

Out, out. The old grimoire laid inert on the back seat, but I could imagine a red-faced, livid old man gesturing wildly. *There's something out there we have to find.*

"There's nothing out there," I said. "Just rock and stone and dirt."

Pick me up and I'll show you.

I reached back and took the grimoire into my left arm. I opened the passenger side door and stepped out.

"Wait, Ana, I'll come with you."

"No use abandoning the vehicle, Rhys. Besides, if it decides to rain, then only one of us will be wet."

"I don't like this. What if that old book is leading you astray? Into a trap?"

I am not just any old book, young man!

Rhys ignored the *Necronomicon's* outburst. "We hardly know that thing. Considering its reputation..."

"I'll be fine. We'll just humor the old book and soon we'll be back on our way to Greenglass." I shut the door before he could protest further.

From the edge of the road, the rest of the land was stony and rocky. I was glad I had on some sensible flats--otherwise I would have tripped on a pebble and fallen ignominiously onto my face.

To your left. The old grimoire directed. *You're almost there.*

"Where? All I can see is a boulder and a bit of a rock face on the side of a hill. Do you want me to climb it?"

No. Go around the boulder.

A particularly gusty wind blew up--crystalline and cold. Instead of buttoning my coat, I used my free hand to hold onto my hat. The air smelled wet. Imminent rain.

"Is it close by?"

To your right, near the ground. There might be some sort of crack in the boulder. Do you see a bit of metal?

I squatted down and looked. The rock itself was smooth, without cracks or pits. But there was a wedge of dark space between the rock and the ground. The shadow it cast seemed a little odd. I reached out.

This was where he died.

I picked up an odd key made of wrought iron. At one end, it was shaped into a strange unnatural symbol that made me shiver as if another gust of wind had caught me. At the other, the tines seemed blunt and unfinished. But upon closer inspection, I saw more symbols etched upon the metal.

"Who died?" I asked, straightening up. I put the key into a pocket and made my way back to the automobile.

Victor Fitzgerald.

"I remember now. His widow did mention that his body had been found between Fairmont and Greenglass." I reached the Rochet-Schneider and got in. Just as I closed the door, the skies opened up.

Rhys gave an exasperated sigh as he turned on the car, the headlights, and

the wipers. "If we're lucky, we might get to Greenglass on time to catch the late afternoon train. So what was so important out there?"

"Al showed me where his former owner died."

"How morbid."

"And I found a key, presumably to open Al."

Despite the worsening conditions on the road, Rhys shot me a sharp glance. "That's dangerous."

"Don't I know it. But I have no inclination of using it. I can probably do a fair amount of damage myself."

"Let's be thankful for your own personal self-control." From his flat tone, I could not tell if he was being sarcastic or not. "So Al, how did you know that the widow's husband died out there? You weren't with him, were you?"

I was.

There was a moment of silence as we contemplated that.

When the travelers found the body, they took everything, including me, back to Fairmont for his widow. Victor Fitzgerald was searching for something, and he believed that I held the answer.

I couldn't help but ask, "What exactly did Victor Fitzgerald do? Summon a demon and get heart failure for his troubles?"

I have no spells that would summon demons--not the kind that the religious would call demons unless that is what you call gods who are not part of the current dominant beliefs. Victor Fitzgerald was obsessed with the future. Whenever his wife looked the other way, he would consult those whom some humans call as fortune tellers or oracles.

"I gather that the usual fortune teller didn't satisfy him."

No. When he bought me, he began studying my spells as if one of them would give him an answer. My spells aren't for the weak of heart, let alone those with weak minds. If he had gotten any further with his studies, he would have gotten certifiably insane.

"What a pleasant thought," Rhys remarked dryly. "So apparently Fitzgerald

came out here to perform some sort of spell, not because he was heading to Greenglass to do some research."

Yes. He had found a spell for summoning one of the ancient gods who knew all of time: past, present, and future. His spell worked. But he died after just gazing at the elder god's visage--even before he had the opportunity to voice his request.

"He died of fright," I concluded. "Which is understandable. I wouldn't want to look at a god's face either. So what happened to this ancient god? The deity isn't running amok in the world, is it?"

Fortunately for everyone, the elder god found this plane of existence boring and went back to its own dimension.

"That's a relief."

Maybe.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

I said it left, but that didn't mean it didn't leave something behind.

Rhys' knuckles went white on the steering wheel. "Then we should go back and see what this thing is. It would be bad if a human stumbled over it."

You're too slow, boy. It was never found when they took me and Victor Fitzgerald's body back to Fairmont. That was why I had told you to stop back there. I had her retrieve it.

"What?" I reached back into my pocket and pulled out the key. It seemed normal enough. Cold.

It used to be ordinary. But I'm not sure what happened to it when Fitzgerald dropped it when his heart stopped. It's connected to me so that I had sensed that something had happened. But I'm not sure what or why. I don't even know if it can be used to open me anymore.

Rhys shook his head. "That isn't terribly specific although I suppose we can't worry about that right now."

The Second Conjunction
Seal XXII

If tickets had still been available, we would not have missed the Hinterland Express to Haven. As it was, there was still a large volume of travelers heading off to holiday. It was five days until All Hallow's Eve. Everyone, it seemed, was either going to Cairnpapple or to Haven which was the home to a massive carnival celebration. So instead, we had managed to procure tickets for the next morning train and had checked back into the Greenglass Hotel for our overnight stay.

In the late afternoon, I felt restless with nothing to do before dinner. It was then I remembered that Greenglass had a museum. Perhaps a tour of a couple displays of some classical relics would put my mind at ease.

Because Al had insisted, I put the old grimoire into a drawer of a desk in my hotel room. The *Necronomicon* claimed that it wanted some rest, especially since Thor had given it no peace. The cat didn't like it when I put the book into the drawer. He yowled in consternation and proceeded to pace around the desk, periodically scratching at the wood. I assumed the old grimoire had instituted some sort of spell to keep the drawer closed, even if Thor finally figured out to get his paws onto the drawer handle.

"I thought you were going to take a nap." Rhys' voice gave me a start just as I closed my room door.

"I'm not feeling tired," I replied. "I wanted to go see a bit of Greenglass before getting dinner. What are you doing about? You were the one driving half the day."

He shrugged. "I'm fine. So where were you thinking of going?"

"The museum. I heard that there were some antiquities on display."

"I know of a better place than the museum."

"What?"

"There's a library next to the museum."

"Really?" I remembered to take out a crumpled piece of paper from my pocket. The smeared symbols seemed to glimmer. "I want to know the origin of the rubric. It's too bad that Al couldn't tell us."

"I somehow doubt that the Greenglass library would have the answers you

are trying to find, but I suppose it's worth a look, for the books if nothing else. Where's Al, anyway?"

"It had me putting it into a desk drawer. He was getting fed up with Thor."

"Well, the cat does have a mind of his own."

A cab took us to the end of the main street where a building of classical architecture stood. The front entrance Rhys pointed out, was the museum entrance for the public. The library was at the back--mostly for practical reasons. Few people, except for book collectors, came to visit the archives just to look at moldering tomes.

The back entrance itself was almost hidden at the back, a plain door painted the same color as the building walls. Inside, there was a small dark foyer where the guardian of the library sat at a desk illuminated by a lamp, scribbling away on his accounts. At the sound of our approach, the short gnome-like man in tortoiseshell spectacles looked us over and stood up. He came around his desk to greet us. His expression revealed nothing.

"Ah, Mr. Lattimore. I did not get a call that you would be visiting. Are you trying to find a reference for an appraisal you are doing at the auction house?"

"Not an appraisal this time, Mr. Hornby. This is a friend of mine, Miss Talbot. I'm trying to help her on some research."

Hornby cocked his head and adjusted his spectacles as if he was trying to see me better. "Now this is definitely a surprise. Miss Talbot, did you say? You're not Ana Talbot, Professor Wallace's research assistant at the Institute back in Colchester?"

Startled, I replied, "I am one and the same. I did not imagine that my name ever traveled up to Greenglass. How do you know of me?"

"Professor Wallace traveled up here occasionally to use our library and he would often extol your work ethic. I had, however, imagined you to be older."

I found myself amused. "I am older than what I appear to be. I am flattered that you've heard only good things about me."

"Indeed. Otherwise, I would be questioning Mr. Lattimore's choice in companion." Hornby slanted a look at Rhys which made him cough in

embarrassment. "With his reputation, I was thinking maybe the library would be a new thrill for him for his list of exploits."

I laughed. "Oh, I don't think you would have to worry about your library being violated, Mr. Hornby. I'll let you in on a secret. Mr. Lattimore actually thinks of books as people. A library would be for exhibitionists."

Rhys gave a mock frown. "How do you know I'm not an exhibitionist?"

I shook my head. "If you are, you've been very discrete about it."

That made Hornby crack a smile. "That's a bit of an oxymoron, don't you think? Is there such a thing as a discrete exhibitionist?" He finally waved a hand. "All right. The library is just down the hall. We have quite an impressive number of volumes if I do say so myself. If you need any help, don't hesitate to ask me."

The library was a maze of shelves interspersed periodically with thin windows which let in little natural light. It was gloomy once we entered, forcing us to resort to the electrical lighting. The place was cramped and claustrophobic, making me feel as if I had turned back into a book myself and somebody had crammed me onto an already full shelf filled with thick volumes of dry prose by long dead authors.

But leaving aside the fact that there was little space, I didn't even know where to start. On the first shelf I came to, I saw herbals and biographies about ancient kings stacked together.

Seeing my bewildered expression, Rhys tugged me deeper into the stacks. "The texts on symbols and sigils are a couple shelves over. You would never know it unless you had somebody who was familiar with the library guide you through."

"This place is as jumbled as that store room back at the auction house."

"On the surface of it, it does seem so. But there is a method to the madness. This collection was originally bequeathed to the museum by a very eccentric book collector. He had his own system for organizing books. And it was his stipulation that people kept using this system if they wanted to keep these books."

"Is this book collector dead?"

He gave me a strange look. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"If he's dead, then he won't be around to really see how the books are arranged. Someone could now organize all these stacks into a more intuitive order."

"Ah, but you're not taking into account inertia. Once things are done one way, people are hesitant to change. Hornby might seem like a congenial fellow to you, but he would be the first to complain if he were forced to reorganize."

"That's too bad that laziness causes this to remain a mess."

"Well, there is one upside to this disorganization. It discourages most people from wandering into here. Ah, here they are."

I examined the volumes on the shelf that Rhys indicated. It was located in an alcove of the library, away from direct sunlight. I took out a promising candidate and flipped it open. Then I took the crumpled piece of paper from Archibald Chesterfield's summer cottage that used to contain a rubric. I tried to compare the symbols.

"Hm. Reminds me of old journals with flowers pressed between their pages. Lilac and violets, perhaps."

"What?" I twisted around, finding Rhys behind me. He seemed perilously close. Perhaps he was looking over my shoulder, examining the symbols with me. "What did you say about flowers?"

He didn't answer my question. Instead he said, "I don't think that's the right book. Try that one."

"All right." I put the book away and took out another one. "You know, this place feels like a crowded train terminal. Even if there isn't another person in here, I feel as if there's someone watching or listening."

"Does it really matter that much to you?"

"Don't make fun of me because I'm naturally more paranoid than you."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

His comment caught my notice, but I continued to examine the book in front of me. "Speaking of dreams, do you dream? I want to know because I don't."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that. Perhaps you forget your dreams once you awake."

"So you have dreamed."

"Sometimes I remember them," he replied vaguely. "Have you found anything yet?"

I tapped the page of the book. "This looks very similar although I can't be certain since the rubric is smudged. But if it is this, the spell has its origins in fifteenth century black magic. If it was going to summon something, it would be something quite bad."

"You can't be more specific?"

"No. The rest of this rubric is rubbed out." I put the reference away and the paper back into my pocket. "Thank you for showing me around this place. I would not have found anything otherwise."

"You're smart. You would have figured it out with or without my help." One moment, his hand was on my elbow as if he was about to escort me out. The next, my back was against the shelf and he was looking down at me, his eyes green. "Perhaps," he said lowly, "You should run."

I tilted my chin up and took him in the eye. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Maybe you should be." He reached up to tug on a lock of my short hair and then tucked it back. The brush of his fingertips on my ear felt like a brand. "There was a time back in the day when I did not hesitate to take what I wanted."

"Why do you hesitate now?"

"I could blame social conventions." His face was close to mine. I could feel his breath on my cheek. His pupils were wide and black. "Or maybe I've gone soft and patient."

"You don't strike me as the soft and patient type."

"I think I've been uncharacteristically patient. But patience only holds out for so long."

My heart seemed to beat through my chest as he leaned a fraction closer

and his bookish scent enveloped me.

"Mr. Lattimore?"

At the sound of the nasal voice at the entrance of the library, he stepped back. I turned to the shelf and pretended to look at the titles. My face felt hot and my pulse was still too fast.

"Ah, Mr. Lattimore!" A thin man appeared, his hair lacquered to his skull and his brown suit meticulously pressed. "Mr. Hornby told me that you were in town. I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to meet with you."

Rhys stiffly nodded. "Mr. Witford. It is good to see you again."

"Same here. Say, I've gotten some new antiquities in and I was wondering if you could do me a favor, just to look over them. I wouldn't want the museum to be fleeced, of course."

"Yes, of course."

Witford slanted me a glance. "The new load is already in one of the museum back rooms. Your acquaintance is welcome to come along. I am quite sure that it will be more exciting than all these old books."

I was an old book myself, but I replied, "I'll be delighted to accompany you gentlemen. I admit, I do have a bit of curiosity about classical antiquities."

The Second Conjunction
Seal XXIII

"The next time I get it into my head to see some antiquities, please shoot me."

Rhys hooked his arm around mine without asking as we exited the Greenglass Museum through its front entrance. "Why? You put up a convincing front. You nearly convinced me that you had a special fondness for classical antiquities."

He radiated warmth in the cool autumn air, but I made sure that I wasn't walking too closely. Getting too close to the fire would get you burned. "Anyone can playact. But if I had to listen to one more of Witford's monologues about the provenance of such and such, I would be hard

pressed not to take one of his precious pottery jars and smash it over his head."

"Quite the violent girl, I see."

"I've had enough spare time in my existence to hone my skills on certain weapons. I'm quite fond of the pistol."

"Are you a good shot?"

"Good enough. How about you?"

"The sword."

I made a face, not bothering to hide it. "Aside from fencing, isn't that rather barbaric? The only thing you can do is to hack at your opponent."

"Well, if that's how you feel about it, I won't bring up my proficiency with the mace either."

"Exactly why do you know how to use the sword? And dare I say the mace as well?" I turned to look at him, but he seemed to be gazing ahead on the street, thinking.

"They were the first weapons I used soon after I became aware. I had no choice, really. There was a war going on. And I had no idea whether or not this body is indestructible. Even now, I would not dare to test it."

"Good choice." I thought about suggesting a cab to take us back to the hotel, but it wasn't that cold. Besides, walking down the street seemed more intimate than the cab. Other pedestrians ignored us. Whereas one would always be cognizant of the eavesdropping driver.

"I used to have a friend. A human friend."

Not sure what he was talking about, I prompted, "Used to?"

"About fifty years ago. I counted him as a true friend because he knew my real nature."

"Ah." I had never told another human being about my true nature. If the people around me started getting suspicious about my lack of age, I just moved elsewhere and started over. It wasn't that hard since I took care not to form any long term attachments.

"We were in business together. It wasn't the usual sort of business. It has had its hazards. And then there was the sorcerer."

"Blackthorne?" I said, thinking back to the incident at Parrish Books.

"No. It was another. Suffice it to say, I wasn't quick enough and my friend was killed."

At his chilled tone, I found his hand. "You can't blame yourself for your friend's death. If that sorcerer was intent on killing somebody, he would have done it regardless. Is this why you're chasing Blackthorne?"

He looked down at my fingers, wrapped around his. "What does it matter why I'm doing something?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure bundled up in a voluminous cloak heading in the opposite direction. His eyes were fixed on the ground and his boots made quick agitated taps on the pavement. Sensing my change in attention, Rhys looked up as well.

"Mr. Mayhew, what a surprise to see you," he called out.

The figure halted and I saw a face peer out from a wide-brimmed bowler. Eyes widened as Mayhew recognized us. He seemed to burrow himself even further within his overly large greatcoat as if he had taken a sudden chill. "Mr. Lattimore, Miss Talbot, the same to you. You've come back to Greenglass so soon? Did you already talk to Mr. Chesterfield about the book you were looking for?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Chesterfield was not in residence when we arrived at Fairmont," I said. "However, we have heard that he has a permanent residence in Haven."

"I am sure Mr. Severin would have information as on that as well. Unfortunately, he has still not found Mr. Chesterfield's contact information. Will you be coming to the auction house to look through the storage rooms again?"

Remembering the finding spell that Rhys performed that turned up nothing, I replied, "We're going to Haven tomorrow morning. Perhaps we can catch up to Mr. Chesterfield then."

"Haven?"

"If Mr. Severin does find Mr. Chesterfield's information, please have him wire it to us at Haven," said Rhys. "I'll give him a call once we get there to let him know where we're staying."

"Yes, of course," said Mayhew with a nod. "I'm sure Mr. Severin will be happy to do that for you. I must say that you're lucky to get on tomorrow's train to Haven. It will be the last one for this week."

"Really?" I said. "I suppose we are lucky."

Mayhew shifted nervously on his feet. His gaze darted to something beyond us. "Please excuse me, but I am in a hurry." He gave a dry laugh and a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "You know how things are about wives. Mine won't tolerate me being late."

I looked down at his hands, but Mayhew had them tucked into his coat out of sight. We would never know if his excuse was a truth or a lie.

"We won't keep you then. Good evening Mr. Mayhew," said Rhys.

I replied similarly and soon, we were heading back to the hotel again. I didn't think much about our strange encounter with the auction house assistant until I reached my room and noticed there was something odd about my door.

"Someone broke into my room." Rhys had taken the room across from mine. I could hear the cold fury in his controlled tone.

His door was ajar. I followed him as he stormed into his room. "Are you going to tell the hotel management?" I asked.

His suitcase was open, but he only gave a cursory glance at his clothes. "Nothing was taken. They wouldn't believe me." He looked at me. "Ana. What about your room?"

"I don't really have anything worth taking unless the burglar really wanted a clothes iron." Nonetheless, I went to my door. I turned the knob and it moved easily in my hand. "Huh. I thought I locked it."

Close behind me, Rhys said ominously, "There's nothing here that would stump a competent lock picker."

My room appeared untouched. Even the suitcase beside the bed looked like

it was still locked. But there was still something quite odd...

"Where's Thor?" I asked suddenly.

"That doesn't mean anything. The cat could be out for a walk." But he sounded doubtful. He was already opening a wardrobe, checking its contents.

"Hey Al, where did Thor go?" I asked out loud. "Did he get bored with bothering you?" I opened the drawer where I had placed the *Necronomicon*.

It was empty.

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXIV

From the observation car, the moors passed by in an undulating gray-green blur as if the Hinterland Express was riding on the back of a gigantic snake. Occasionally a tree or a copse of trees would appear in the distance, only to disappear in the next moment when the train crested another hill.

I flipped over another card in the deck I was going through. The three of diamonds. I put it face down. The concierge, seeing me alone, had offered several games to ease the boredom of travel. The cards had seemed like a safe choice although I had no inclination to play solitaire.

After discovering the *Necronomicon's* disappearance, Rhys and I had gone straight to the hotel management to complain about the loss. They claimed that they could do nothing about it since we did not put the old grimoire into the hotel safe, but at least they offered to move us into new rooms in case the thief struck again. The local authorities were also called and I had given a description of the old grimoire to the detective, without mentioning its true identity.

Rhys had called Otto Severin to notify him as well, in case the thief tried to sell his stolen goods to the auction house. He had also inquired about the whereabouts of Mr. Mayhew, but Severin could not say for sure about anything except that his assistant had gone home for the evening.

The rest of the night, we had prowled around the hotel using Rhys' finding spell, but found nothing. Whoever took the old grimoire did not stick around. In the morning, I had found myself in a quandary. We had tickets to Haven

where we could go find the other edition of the *Liber Tutelarum*. Or we could stay in Greenglass searching for the *Necronomicon*. And Thor, come to think of it. But if we stayed in Greenglass, the next train to Haven would be a week later.

"AI can take care of itself," Rhys had told me. "If it is still in existence even after its former owner called up some strange god, there is a good chance that it is fine."

"But I can't help but worry."

"The old grimoire never asked to be taken care of in the first place so in some ways, it might be for the best."

"What if it ends up in the wrong hands?"

"What if any of us ends up in the wrong hands?" he had countered. "Even if a lock picker stole it, I doubt ordinary lock picking skills could stand up to a grimoire's lock. And you still have the key."

I thought about that key which was still in my pocket. It had alterations. I didn't mean that it would still work. And even with the key, that didn't preclude the use of a blow torch to destroy a lock by brute force.

The clacking of the rails was a soporific drum, easily lulling one into sleep. I blinked to clear my head. It was true that I had little sleep the night before since I had been looking for AI, but I wasn't that tired.

"Miss, would you care for some coffee?"

I looked up from the most recent card I had played, a king of spades. The concierge was a rather young man dressed in a black uniform. He seemed hairless, aside from his pencil-thin mustache. Even Rhys--a book!--had to shave every morning. I idly wondered how long it had taken him to grow it out. Maybe it was possibly a fake.

"Yes please. Cream but no sugar."

He nodded. "I will have it for you shortly."

I gazed back down at the cards before me. Like the ordering, shuffling, and reordering of cards, the current journey didn't feel like I was making any progress. I had yet to even contact Archibald Chesterfield and even after all my pains, someone had stolen the magic pamphlet on familiars and the old

grimoire.

"Are you winning?" I could sense Rhys taking the seat across from mine, but I did not look up.

"Nobody wins at solitaire. It just isn't the same playing with yourself."

After those words came out of my mouth, there was a distinctly charged pause. Slowly, I looked up from my cards to find him watching me like a very hungry wolf after a plump rabbit.

His mouth turned into a wicked grin. "Why don't you play with me?"

I wanted to kick him underneath the table--in the shin if I was unlucky in my aim--but I managed to restrain myself. Calmly, I gathered up the cards and began shuffling them. "Poker."

He put his hands on the table. Large unadorned hands with long blunted fingers. The movement of sinew and muscle under the skin made them seem almost sensitive. "What kind?"

I turned my attention back to the game. "Five card stud."

"An American variant." His eyes narrowed, but his grin did not disappear. "Stakes?"

There was a discrete cough and then a porcelain cup on a matching saucer appeared at my elbow. A small pitcher of cream and a silver spoon soon followed. "Your coffee, miss."

"Thank you. Oh, and would you be so kind as to bring a bowl of nuts as well?"

The concierge nodded. "As you wish, miss. We have walnuts, peanuts, and cashews."

"Cashews will be fine."

"And you, sir? Do you wish for any refreshment?"

"It is a little too early for alcohol," Rhys remarked. I shook my head in exasperation which made his eyes glitter in amusement. "So I suppose I will have the coffee. Black, no sugar or cream please."

"Certainly, sir."

When the concierge left, I said, "The stakes will be cashews." I put down the deck to stir some cream into my coffee. "Winner takes all."

"Aw, nuts." He sighed. "I was hoping for something more exciting."

"Too bad."

"Oh come on. Anyone can play for nuts. I propose new stakes. If I win, I get a kiss."

I rolled my eyes. "Why am I not surprised? That isn't exciting. It's as predictable as a Sunday sermon on the tortures awaiting sinners in hell."

"You think kissing me will be torture?"

"Quite possibly," I said, infusing my tone with serious doubt. "I have a counter offer. If you win, I'll give you one of my spells."

His normally gray eyes flashed green in anticipation. "One of your spells? Which one?"

"I'll choose."

"Oh great. It will probably be the one where I can turn water into wine." His fingers tapped against the table as I slowly sipped my coffee. The concierge came back with Rhys' coffee and a bowl of cashews. "So what will you get if you win? A spell from me?"

"That is an appropriate exchange. Or, you would owe me a favor if you prefer keeping your spells to yourself."

"Most of my spells aren't nice spells."

"Did I ask you for a nice spell?"

"No." But then his grin came back. "But I have the perfect spell I could give away."

Distrusting his gleeful expression, I wondered if it was even a good idea to even try to win.

The Third Conjunction

Seal XXV

I awoke to darkness and the splattering of rain on the window. For a moment, I was disoriented about my location until I registered the somewhat sterile smell of my blanket. I reached up, fumbling for the switch, and soon light flooded the berth.

It was then I noticed the relative silence and the stillness. The train was not moving. The lack of noise had jolted me awake. Hastily, I tugged on my kimono and shoved my feet into a pair of slippers. I opened the berth door and peered out.

The compartment corridor was dark and empty. Apparently no one else had noticed the stopped train. Or at least not enough to be awakened by it. I made my way to the door of the next compartment and knocked.

The door opened almost immediately. Rhys stood on the threshold, his dark hair sticking out at odd angles and his pajama top partially unbuttoned. He rubbed his face, attempting to wipe the sleep from his eyes. Finally registering me at his doorstep, he managed a leer.

"So, are you going to finally going to collect on your winnings from the poker game?"

"Maybe next time," I said, wanting to put that off as much as possible. Maybe indefinitely. "The train stopped."

"Oh, it's probably nothing. We're probably at a station."

I turned to the corridor windows and peered out. "I don't see a station."

"It's too dark to see anything."

"I don't know."

"Go back to sleep, Ana. When you wake up tomorrow morning, the train will be running again and we'll be well on our way to Haven."

"I hope you're right."

* * *

It was at breakfast when the bearer of bad news came.

I was buttering a scone. Someone had delivered a hot pot of tea. Outside, the landscape was rolling away, just as Rhys had predicted. The bleak moors were now replaced with craggy, uneven hills as if a demolition team had wandered into the area before us and had decided to blow up the landscape, just because they could.

There was no rain in the morning although the sun still appeared weak as it occasionally peered out from behind thick clouds. The scenery was not completely devoid of life either. A moment ago, I had thought that I had spotted a herd of deer roaming about. But that didn't make much sense since there was little cover on the ground. I amended my deduction to goats--unfortunately nasty creatures that like nibbling on paper.

"We'll be in Haven before nightfall," Rhys said as he took a sip of his coffee. In front of him was a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and was that kippers? I fought a shudder as I concentrated on his comments. "Haven has a reputation for harboring an astounding number of well connected book collectors. I am sure we could probably go into any book shop, inquire about Archibald Chesterfield, and get some information."

"You sound awfully confident. Wouldn't it be easier to just go to the telephone exchange? I'm sure they have a directory where we can find his address."

"That sounds entirely too sensible."

"It is sensible. Why, we could just call up the operator and have someone else look for his information while we sit back. We don't even have to wait for Mr. Severin to find it."

"I would feel more comfortable if I did contact him. Think of him as a backup."

I narrowed my eyes as I swallowed some tea. "Actually, I don't know if we should trust Severin. You only know him on a professional capacity. He knew we were driving out to Fairmont. It is quite possible that he--or rather he had his assistant--take Al."

He seemed to think about that for a moment. "It is possible. But neither Severin nor his assistant knew anything about Al."

"How about this--they think Al is the *Liber Tutelarum*."

"That is more plausible. I suppose Severin could be regretting his decision to sell that book to Chesterfield on a discounted price so he had his assistant take it to get a greater profit. But my gut feeling tells me that Severin is not that unscrupulous."

"Maybe your intuition is wrong."

"Hm."

"Excuse me, ma'am. Sir." A stout man in the rail line's uniform came up to our table. He wore a cap with a long brim that failed to disguise the beady eyes above his red nose. "Is your destination Haven?"

"Yes," said Rhys. "What seems to be the problem?"

"We had a bit of an accident last night."

I raised an eyebrow--mostly directed at Rhys.

"An important part of the engine became non-functional."

I wondered if something broke or had just fallen off.

"Of course, as you can see, that part is not vital to move the train. However, it will become extremely important when the track goes into the mountains. I'm afraid this line's termination will be at Newcomb. You will have to find alternate transportation to Haven or wait for the train coming next week. I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

"I suppose we shall have to take this up to the transportation department for a refund for an incomplete trip," I said.

"Come now, don't be so harsh. I'm sure it was an accident," Rhys replied.

"You've never been stranded..."

"I've heard all of that before. That didn't stop you from admiring that Rochet-Schneider."

I shut my mouth and concentrated on my scone.

The stout man gave a small bow. "Again, my sincere apologies. If it is of any comfort, Newcomb is only half a day's drive to Haven. Our estimated time of

arrival is at five PM."

"You didn't have to sound so annoyed with him," Rhys told me when the man went to the next passengers. "He has to apologize to everyone. I do not envy his job."

"Perhaps I should be sorry. But I was right that something was wrong when the train suddenly stopped last night."

He concentrated on his own breakfast. "No one likes people who say, 'I told you so.' It gets on people's nerves."

"It gets on your nerves, you mean."

"Exactly."

"Look, I would be perfectly happy if I was proved wrong. But I suppose I can look on the bright side. The train is moving. It just can't get over the mountains and into Haven."

"Yes, there's that."

"Have you ever been to Haven--being the well traveled antiquities consultant and all? You seem quite knowledgeable about the book collectors there."

"I just hear gossip, that's all. I haven't been to Haven before, really. For one thing, it's too far and in this day in age when we can communicate by telephone or telegraph or even by letter which can be relatively quick," he shrugged, "there isn't even a need to travel so far."

"So you haven't been to Newcomb either."

He shook his head. "It could be a city or a small village for all I know. But I can tell you one thing. I am not looking forward to getting into Haven."

"Why not? It can't be worse than any other big city."

"You forget--Haven is throwing a carnival for All Hallow's Eve shortly. I have a feeling it is going to be a mad house compared to the celebration in other places."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXVI

Acrid smoke spilled out from beneath the wheels of the Hinterland Express. The passengers hurried off the train cars, one hand on their baggage, the other hand at their faces, attempting to filter out the foul air. I stepped onto the platform of Newcomb station and my eyes watered. I fumbled for a handkerchief and put it against my nose. I had never recalled stopping at a station to be so bad. Perhaps that essential part that had broken from the locomotive was important for things other than getting a train up a mountain as well.

Inside the station, the place was swamped with passengers jostling in lines at the ticket windows, demanding either refunds or alternate lines that may be passing through Newcomb. Apparently, no one wanted to stick around this town.

I managed to carry my own luggage across the station and back out to the entrance on the other side. An old cab sat at the curb--a Studebaker by the looks of it--accompanied by an old driver chewing on something. He smiled at me, revealing gums and stained teeth.

"Eh, miss? Where to?"

Steps halted behind me. "How about Haven?" said Rhys.

The driver's eyes went wide at the sight of my traveling companion. "Now see 'ere mister. She was first. You'll just have to wait your turn."

"Don't worry," I said, feeling a smile tug at the edge of my mouth. "He's with me. So what's the going rate for Haven?"

"I don't go to Haven," the driver responded with a woeful expression. It seemed a bit too dramatic for me--perhaps as a benefit to a potential customer. "The mountain roads are hard on autos. You'll have to take the train."

"That would mean we would have to wait the whole week!" Rhys sounded irritated. "Fine. What's the local hotel?"

The driver brightened. "There's the Montport Inn. It's not far from the station. For only a few quid, you can get a room with a beautiful view of the mountainside. A fair number of travelers who have stayed there will give you recommendations."

"You sound like an advertisement," said Rhys.

I handed my luggage to the driver who chortled as he stored it into the back of his cab. "Well, whatever it is, we can't really be picky, can we? I think it would be better that we reserve a room now, before the crowd in the station realizes that no matter what they do, they will be stuck in this town for the better part of the week."

On the drive through town, I noticed that Newcomb was indeed a rather small village. Most of the buildings were no larger than two stories. Mostly shops lined the main street. But unlike the shop buildings, the church on one side of the street was much older, built with rough hewn stone. Only a thin iron fence separated its graveyard from the rest of the street. The driver turned at the end of the main street and plunged into a more residential part of the town--mostly small one story cottages. The road soon sloped upward to an old stone manor perched on a ledge, overlooking the village and gazing towards the mountains in the north. Sixteenth century, I judged.

"The Montport Inn used to be Newcomb Manor," said the driver as he maneuvered the cab up the steep slope. "It used to be owned by a Baronet until he was found guilty of treason by the crown a few decades ago and was stripped of his titles. The former Baronet went bankrupt and had to sell the place. Now it's owned by a Mr. Middlebury who had found his fortune in ironworks."

"I see that since this Mr. Middlebury turned the place to an inn, he had more mercenary plans for the place than just some extra summer home," I remarked. I looked out the window, seeing the sprawl of the town and the countryside. Just beyond the hill where the Montport Inn stood, there was a fenced field and then a clearing with some odd structures erected in what looked like a rough circle. "What is that?"

"What is what?" said Rhys. He leaned over me to look through my passenger side window. His scent tickled my nose. "Those look like standing stones. Is that a stone circle?"

"Ah, you mean the Bidracon Stones?" said the driver. "That's been here forever. Some say they've been here even longer than Stonehenge. A few archaeologists had stopped by a few years ago and had concluded that they had been used for astrological purposes."

"Aren't they all," I said. "What does Bidracon mean?"

"I have no idea. The name certainly didn't come from the area. Some people

think the druids gave this place that name. At any rate, some druids still come here to do their rituals. Some of them are already staying at the inn. They're preparing for All Hallow's Eve, you know."

The cab stopped near the entrance of the inn. As I got out, a small movement caught my eye. I looked up, and saw the movement of a curtain at a window on the upper floor. In front of the manor was a fountain, but there was no water, only a few dry leaves skittered at the bottom as a stiff breeze came up. Gravel crunched under my shoes as I made my way to the front door. From the manor's perch, I could see the bleak fall countryside and a clear view of the standing stones. The late afternoon sun dipped close to the horizon, washing the clouds above in purplish-reds. Down in the town, two cabs were winding their way toward the manor. Soon, the other passengers thwarted from reaching Haven would come to the inn.

Rhys got to the door ahead of me. I pulled my suitcase inside when he opened the door. The lobby seemed small and intimate despite the high ceiling with a few stuffed chairs circling a roaring hearth. An old man with a pipe and a blanket sat at one of the chairs, apparently asleep. Above the mantle was an enormous stuffed head of a stag--fourteen points. At the desk, a woman in a professional looking peach blouse was sorting papers. Her hair was bobbed and waved in the latest style, but her spectacles had an odd frame--that looked like it was made of horn and studded with sparkling rhinestones. She looked up and gave us a professional smile.

"Good afternoon ma'am. Sir. May I help you?"

"Good afternoon. We're looking for rooms," I said as I put down my suitcase.

"You're in luck. We still have openings. In fact, there is one room still facing the north. It has a wonderful view. Shall I book it for both of you?"

"Actually, we'd like two rooms," I replied. "I suppose it doesn't matter which ones."

"Oh? You're not staying in Newcomb for the New Hallow's Eve celebrations?"

"Sorry, no," said Rhys. "We were heading to Haven until the train broke down."

"How unfortunate! Well, here are two keys to the rooms. They are on the second floor, to your left, at the end of the hall." The clerk handled our transaction for the rooms quickly and efficiently. "Are you sure I can't convince you to stay for the Newcomb festivities? They are rather

spectacular. The Order of the Silver Moon really does put on a performance over at the Bidracon Stones."

"The Order of the Silver Moon?" I said. "The druids, you mean."

"No, no. They're not druids." The clerk shook her head. "Well, they do call themselves priestesses, but they aren't druids. They're part of some sort of new religious group that claims to practice magick--with a "k" at the end--derived from the moon goddess that they worship. Yet I don't understand why people have to alter the spelling to a perfectly fine word just to be unique or special. It just makes them seem odd and not particularly serious."

"Ah."

"Well, I shouldn't complain. They do bring in business." The clerk grinned. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"In fact you can," I said. "I would like to make a telephone call if it is possible."

"Of course!" The clerk pulled out a telephone from underneath the counter.

"Are you contacting the Haven operator?" asked Rhys.

I nodded as I took up the receiver and began dialing.

"I'll take your luggage up as well and put it in your room," he offered as he hefted my suitcase along with his.

Glancing at the stairs that led to the level above, I said, "Are you sure you will make those stairs?"

"I'm fine."

The operator's voice soon came on the line. After I put in my request and jotted down some information on some paper that the clerk helpfully provided, I was connected to Archibald Chesterfield's number in Haven. I waited for a while, hearing the ring on the other end. Then, I sighed and put down the receiver. Apparently, Chesterfield was not at home. I would have to try later.

"No luck?" queried the clerk.

"I'm afraid not. I will try to call again tomorrow."

"I'll be here to help. If you need to find me, my name is Thomasina Chambers. But I'm sure any of the other hotel employees will be happy to help. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention, the dining hall is on the first floor at the back. There will be some double doors which you can't miss. There's a bar and we will be serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner. On the lower levels, we also have some hot baths--powered by the local hot springs. This place was built on top of an ancient Roman bath, in fact. You might want to mention that to your traveling companion."

"I will."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXVII

Despite the mostly full inn, the dining hall was mostly empty. One couple sat at a table at the far corner of the room having dinner. The hall itself was cavernous, the ceilings soaring up into thick exposed oak beams, decorated only with an electrical chandelier made of black metal and glass. Paper screens, painted in bright, stylistic art deco designs, lined the walls. The tables themselves were already prepared, covered in dark red linen tablecloths, polished silver, and thick glass wine goblets, the edges glinting in the light.

A large hearth sat at one side of the room. The opposite side had windows looking out over where the manor perched. In the twilight, one could still make out some landmarks outside--the town of Newcomb, the train station, and the field with the standing stones--the Bidracon Stones.

I was to meet Rhys at the dining hall for supper, but I had arrived early. I made my way to the far side of the hall where a bar was located. I took one of the stools and surveyed the rest of the room on my seat.

"Good evening, miss. May I help you with anything?" The bartender had been polishing some wine glasses, but he had put down his towel to come over to where I sat. He was thirty or thereabouts, I guessed. Neatly trimmed brown hair with chestnut highlights and inquisitive blue eyes. He had a strong, cleft chin--shaved. No pencil-thin moustache, thank goodness. Maybe that horrible fashion trend had not yet reached the countryside. He wore a white dress shirt which stretched over broad shoulders. Again I guessed: perhaps a farm boy trying to make ends meet during the cold

months by working at the inn.

"Thank you for the offer, but not at the moment. I'm waiting for someone."

"Perhaps I can get you a drink while you wait."

"Hm. Water will be fine."

He smiled. "Coming right up, miss."

I turned back to look at the hall. The other couple at dinner seemed intent on their own conversation. From the window, the last bit of light faded, leaving the land bathed in purple-black clouds. I glanced at my watch. It was six in the evening. Generally at this time, everyone would be having dinner. Where was everyone?

"Here you go, miss."

"Thanks." I took a sip as the bartender went back to polishing the glasses. "I have a question, if you don't mind me asking. I thought this was the dining hall."

"It is. You must be surprised by our, uh, lack of patrons."

"Yes, I did notice that."

He shrugged. "In my opinion, we have quite a fine cook. And most of the time, when we do have a full house, we do fill out the hall. But our recent visitors prefer the pubs in town."

I frowned, trying to remember what the desk clerk had called them. "The Order of the Silver Moon? Those magick, with a "k", practitioners?"

"That's right. I take it you're not with them. And you didn't come to Newcomb to see their All Hallow's Eve celebrations."

"No. My friend and I were on our way to Haven to meet with someone. Unfortunately, the Hinterland Express broke down. We did ask a cab driver if he could take us to Haven, but he claims that his automobile will not make it up the mountain."

"Oh, really?" The bartender paused in his cleaning. "That's odd. Are you and your friend in a hurry to reach Haven?"

"You could say that. I would definitely not want to wait around for next week's train if I can help it."

The bartender seemed thoughtful. "My brother is heading to Haven tomorrow morning. I'm sure he has enough room for you and your friend to tag along. He'd be happy to take you if you could pitch in some money for the petrol."

"I'm not in the habit of taking rides from strangers."

"Don't worry. Just tell him Finn MacDougal sent you his way. My brother's name is Patrick. He's a local artisan. He makes ceramics and drives down to Haven every two weeks or so to sell his work to an art dealer in Haven. I'd have to warn you though, he gets going at about the crack of dawn."

When this sort of opportunity comes ones way, seizing it would be the appropriate thing to do. But I still felt hesitant. "I don't know. Let me think about this and talk this over with my friend."

"Well, you'll have until tomorrow. Patrick will come by the inn tomorrow morning at six to take the post down to the town so you can catch him then."

I nodded. "It does sound like a good chance for transportation. Thank you for offering your brother's services. I'll have to talk with my friend first."

"Of course." Finn's gaze flickered towards the door. "Oh, there's the head priestess of the Order of the Silver Moon now. She's probably heading out to Newcomb proper for dinner."

I followed his gaze. Past the dining hall doors which led into the inn lobby, several women dressed in formal gowns were milling around on the floor. However, it was two central figures which caught my eye. One was a tall shapely woman wrapped in a gauzy silver--her features perfect and porcelain. On top of her head was a matching silver turban and curling, golden locks cascaded down her back. She seemed to be in deep, animated conversation with the man beside her. Rhys.

My fingers clenched around my water glass.

"Lucky man," the bartender remarked. "I asked the head priestess if she would have lunch with me on the day that she had arrived. She brushed me off, saying that she was saving herself."

Rhys and the group of women moved off. What did I expect? Of course he would seize any opportunity immediately as soon as it presented itself. I turned back to my water. "Perhaps she's picky."

"Yes, apparently Mistress Arial Goldenhair is picky."

"Is that her name? It sounds fake."

"It's her priestess name," Finn said patiently as if I was a particularly dumb child. "Of course she would not use her real name. The Order of the Silver Moon claims that real names have power and that one should not misuse them."

"Right." I took a sip of the water and wished for something stronger. "I don't suppose you have any whisky, do you?"

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXVIII

Dinner was a strained affair. One wouldn't imagine it to be strained, especially if one was eating alone, but it was. Especially if your dinner companion failed to show up in pursuit of prettier prey. But at least there were only a few other hotel guests at the dining hall to witness my embarrassment. Besides, none of them appeared to have paid any attention to me.

I felt restless, and made my way to the main lobby to take a seat on the sofa next to the fireplace. The stag head above the mantle piece stared out into space, glassy eyed. I was feeling a bit glassy eyed myself--I had managed to finish off quite a few glasses of pinot noir which had accompanied a succulent dish of veal and fennel. The whiskey I had before had probably numbed me too much to really appreciate the dish.

A low table nearby held a few periodicals and books. I picked up one of the books. Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream*. What better way to feel like one is moping about like a stubborn donkey's rear end than to read about a character whose head got turned into one?

"Good evening, Miss Talbot. Are you not turning in yet?" It was the desk clerk, Thomasina Chambers.

I didn't feel like socializing, but I didn't want to be rude either. "No, I'm not

turning in yet. I'm waiting for my friend to get back. Meanwhile, I'll just do some reading."

"Would you like to have some coffee or hot chocolate while you wait?"

"Hot chocolate would be lovely."

When she left, I felt a pounding in my head--a tremendous headache. I winced and rubbed my temples. Hangovers were supposed to be for the next morning--not right after dinner.

Ana.

I jolted upright and twisted around. There was no one else in the lobby. For a moment, I could have sworn that Rhys had spoken to me. Maybe I was getting tired and hallucinating.

Ana. Where are you? I can't...

This time it was fainter. I blinked my eyes and rubbed my forehead. Maybe I really did need some sleep. It was either that or Rhys was speaking into my head again. Maybe I should have never lent him my energy during that fight with Blackthorne. Who knew in what sorts of ways I was now tied to him. Telepathy might only be the tip of the iceberg.

"Here you go, Miss Talbot. Is there anything else I can get you?" Thomasina had come back, bearing a black lacquered tray decorated with faux mother-of-pearl blossoms. The hot chocolate pot looked like a vase of white porcelain drawn with good luck symbols in blue glaze. Two matching cups sat next to the pot on the tray. The clerk put the tray down on the table and I put the book aside to pour myself a cup.

"Not at the moment," I replied. I took a sip of the hot chocolate. It was thick and slightly sweet. I peered over my cup to watch the clerk pour herself a cup and settle down on a chair across from me. I noticed that she had a rather large volume under her arm, but she made no move to open it. Apparently I would not be able to get out of socializing after all.

"I hope your stay has been pleasant so far."

I made a noncommittal sound at the back of my throat.

"I know you are eager to get to Haven, but is there no way I can convince you to stay in Newcomb to see the New Hallow's Eve festivities? For one

thing, Newcomb is a little out of the way. There will be fewer tourists--unlike Haven."

"Is that true, or are you just trying to sell me on staying? After all, it will be good for your business."

"You are right. But many people prefer the more restful countryside for the holidays. Haven will be crowded with people. It would be very hard to get a peaceful rest there."

"I'm looking for a person, not a peaceful rest." I turned my head to watch the crackling flames in the hearth. The first several hundred years of my existence had been a peaceful rest. So peaceful, I might as well have developed mold if my previous owners had not occasionally taken me off the shelf to look up a spell.

The clerk regarded me with a skeptical expression as she was about to take a sip from her own hot chocolate. "You don't strike me as the adventuresome sort. You could have stayed at home and made telephone calls if you had wanted to instead of traveling all the way up here."

"You mean I look like the bookish sort of person." Well, I was a book, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

"I'm not trying to insult you. But I've seen many adventurous females come through this place. They have a certain sense of, I don't know, a go getting sort of attitude. They act as though life were a safari in Africa."

"Well, I think you probably do have it partly right. I have no desire to go around shooting large animals." I looked down, regarding my wool skirt. Uninteresting, plain, and not a little prim. But I wasn't going to don lavish colors because I wasn't that sort of person in public. It had been too ingrained in me to blend in, to make sure that the people around me didn't take notice and then realize that I wasn't really like them. "But that doesn't mean that anyone has a right to make assumptions about what I am simply because I look one way."

"So I shouldn't judge a book by its cover."

"Exactly. You can look at any newspaper and have that be confirmed. How many crimes do you hear about that are caused by people who look totally innocuous? Someone might not look like much, but perhaps he is planning to rob the local bank. Just because a woman is wearing pants and ties like men doesn't mean she's a suffragette. Maybe she's just following fashion."

"I suppose so."

I put down my cup and opened the Shakespeare. Then I looked pointedly at the book she had in her own arms. "What is that you're reading? It looks quite substantial."

"Oh, this?" She looked down at the tome. "It's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe. Gothic fiction. It's not as dreary as it may sound. It's quite exciting, really with all the strange and unusual circumstances happening to the main character." She sighed. "Sometimes I wish that something interesting would happen here at the manor. Maybe a few ghosts to liven things up, especially since All Hallow's Eve is coming up."

I shook my head. "I don't know about that."

* * *

The almost silent creak of the inn's front door made me crack an eye open. Sitting in front of the lobby hearth had been quite warm and cozy and I had managed to fall asleep on the couch while reading Shakespeare. The play was open on my lap to the beginning of the second scene of the third act. Discretely, I watched a group of women in evening gowns tiptoe across the floor. And then I saw Rhys. Alarm pounded through my veins, but something stopped me from jumping up and screaming. Circumspection and waiting for an opportunity would have to be my strategy. There was something odd about the group of women dragging his body away--something else more than drunken stupor kept Rhys unconscious.

"Mistress Arial!"

I nearly cringed in my false sleep at the surprised shout, but I kept my breathing even as Thomasina leaped out from her chair to hurry over to the Order of the Silver Moon.

"I almost didn't hear you and the priestesses arrive back from dinner. Can I help you with anything? Perhaps the Order would like to relax in the parlor with some evening drinks?"

Mistress Arial Goldenhair's voice was imperious and cold. "No."

The hotel clerk was undeterred. "We have all manner of spirits. Sherry? Gin? Whiskey? Rum?" Then she paused. "Oh my, is that Mr. Lattimore? He doesn't look well at all. What happened? Perhaps we should get the doctor."

The head priestess of the Order of the Silver Moon frowned. Lines marred her perfect porcelain countenance. She reached out and touched Thomasina on the forehead with a finger. The clerk crumpled to the floor.

With that obstacle taken care of, Mistress Arial motioned to the rest of the priestesses and they moved with her toward the back of the lobby--to the double doors leading to the dining hall. The doors had been locked after the dinner hour, but with only a motion of a hand, the doors swung open. They went inside, dragging Rhys with them.

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXIX

"Thomasina!"

I looked up from my crouch over the hotel clerk. The bartender, Finn, had been carrying an armload of towels towards the stairs leading down to the hot baths on the lower level when he spotted the fallen form of his fellow employee.

"What happened? We should call the doctor!"

I shook my head as he headed toward the hotel desk for the telephone. "I don't think we need a doctor just yet, Finn. She probably just fainted. I don't suppose you have some smelling salts? Cold water might work too."

"I'll go see what we have."

As Finn moved away, I leaned back over Thomasina to gauge her color. She seemed fine, only asleep. Passing a hand over her nose, I felt a puff of air, reassuring me that she was still breathing. Then, I put my palm on her forehead and reached out with my other senses.

Something thick and ugly had latched onto Thomasina's mind, forcing her to unconsciousness. The spell pulsed angry and hot, tenaciously holding onto its anchor until, perhaps, its summoner released it.

I pushed part of my power into my fingertips. Black sigils appeared on my skin, flowing towards the tips of my fingers. They formed a long delicate chain with a hook at its end, like a fisherman's lure. I twitched my fingers in a precise movement, using my hand as a fishing rod, and the hook

disappeared through Thomasina's head.

Almost immediately, something caught. I drew it out quickly before it had a chance to struggle. The sleeping spell dangled on the hook--a writhing silver worm, the body beating as if tiny hearts lay inside, pulsing in synchrony.

I brought up my other hand, a shielding spell etched on my palm like wet ink, and enclosed the worm in a fist. When I opened my fingers, all of the sigils on my skin disappeared. The only thing in my hand now was a small black marble.

At the sound of Finn's return, I put the marble into a pocket.

"Thomasina, can you hear me?"

The clerk's eyelids fluttered at the sound of my voice. "Miss Talbot?" She coughed. "What happened?" Slowly, she propped herself up on her elbows and looked around. "Why am I on the floor?"

"You fainted," said Finn. He kneeled down to hand her a cup of water. "Thank God you're all right. I was about to call the doctor."

"Do you remember anything that happened?" I asked. I wasn't sure if the head priestess of the Order of the Silver Moon had erased her memory as well. If so, the spell would be more dangerous than it first appeared.

"No." She took a drink of water, but her expression was still confused. "No. All I remember is that I was sitting at the hearth reading and drinking hot chocolate and now I'm on the floor."

"You don't remember getting up from your chair?" I prompted.

She shook her head. "I...wait. I did get up. I heard someone come in at the front door. The Order of the Silver Moon had just come back from dinner and I was offering them an evening drink when..." Her eyes went wide and she clutched my arm. "I saw Mr. Lattimore. He seemed incapacitated. Then Mistress Arial touched me."

I patted her hand. "Take a deep breath, Thomasina."

She did as I told her, but she was shaking her head as if she was trying to clear out cobwebs. "I can't remember anything else."

"What's this about the Order of the Silver Moon and Mistress Arial?"

demanded Finn. "Why did they take Mr. Lattimore?"

I put my finger to my mouth to indicate that they should speak in lowered voices. "I don't know what they want with Mr. Lattimore, but most certainly it won't be anything good since he's unconscious."

"You saw him too?" Thomasina whispered.

"I saw your entire encounter with the Order," I replied. "But I had to pretend that I was asleep so their attention was not drawn to me. They took Mr. Lattimore into the dining hall."

"The dining hall?" Finn frowned. "That's locked."

I debated about telling the two about magic. The real kind, not the fancy kind with a "k" at the end. I decided on white lies instead. Most humans in today's rational age would find the lies more believable.

"The Order picked the lock," I said. "And I think the high priestess may have done some martial arts trick to render Thomasina unconscious."

"She used ninja tricks on me?" Thomasina whispered furiously. Color seeped into her cheeks. "She's going to pay for assaulting me!" The hotel clerk made to get up and march towards the dining hall doors.

I put a restraining hand on her elbow. "Wait, we have to think about this. We can't go barging in. It's the whole Order of the Silver Moon against three of us. And it's obvious that they're very dangerous."

"How much havoc can a bunch of women cause anyway?" said Finn. "We can call the police..."

"No, I don't think we should call them right away. Letting the authorities handle the entire situation won't work." Thinking about the Order blasting magic at wholly unprepared policemen made my head hurt. Or maybe that was the alcohol I had for dinner. "We have to find out what they're doing in the dining hall first. Is there any other way into the dining hall besides those front doors?"

"There are some service doors connected to the kitchen," Thomasina said. "They're partially hidden by the screens along the walls."

"There is another door by the bar," supplied Finn. "But you would have to go through the kitchen and then the cellar to get to it."

"We'll check the service doors first," I said as I helped the hotel clerk back on her feet. "We should see what they are doing before we call the police or do anything else rash."

The three of us crept down the first floor hallway to the last room which was the kitchen. Finn shouldered ahead and was the first to peer out of the service door.

"Miss Talbot, I think you should see this."

The service door was opened a few inches and at first, I couldn't see anything except a pair of art deco screens. But then I noticed that the screens weren't placed directly together, that there was a gap between the two which I could look through.

The priestesses were shoving all of the tables aside to make room at the center of the dining hall. Mistress Arial was directing all the activity with her pointing fingers. Two priestesses, who had been propping Rhys up, had dragged him to the center of the room and left him in an ignominious heap. Yet another priestess was pouring a white powder onto the perimeter--like a protective circle.

"This is bad," I whispered. I stepped back to let Thomasina have a peek. "We have to do something soon."

"Police?" Finn said hopefully.

"Not alone."

"Miss Talbot, what are they doing? Why are they pouring stuff on the floor? That's going to be a pain to clean!" Thomasina exclaimed.

"They are going to sacrifice Mr. Lattimore," I said grimly. Rhys was a book, so in a sense, he wouldn't exactly die unless they roasted him, but it would most certainly put an end to his ability to walk about as a man.

Thomasina gasped at my conclusion.

"That's murder!" said Finn angrily. "We have to stop it."

I managed to pull him back from bursting through the service doors. "Storming into there won't work. We need a plan."

"What sort of plan?"

I peeked out again. I noticed that just across from the service door was the bar. One of the priestesses had finished putting down the circle of protection and Arial Goldenhair had just stepped inside. Something sharp flashed in her hand. Directly above, the iron and glass chandelier glittered. A thick rope threaded through a closed hook on the ceiling and held the chandelier suspended. The rope itself terminated behind the art deco screens and was tied to another hook close to the service door.

I reached into my pocket and produced Al's altered key. I brought the end of the key close to my mouth and breathed on it. A thin sigil flitted out of my mouth and attached itself to the key like a thread. The normally cold metal warmed slightly and it seemed to glow in the dim kitchen.

"I have a plan," I said. "It will involve an illusion."

"An illusion?" said Finn skeptically.

I cast a glance at Thomasina. "Contrary to my appearance, I have a few tricks of my own up my sleeves. Finn, take this key and put it on the top of the bar counter. Make sure no one sees you. And no matter what happens, stay down and out of the way."

He still seemed unconvinced, but he took the key to do what I told him.

"Thomasina, call the police. Just tell them that you think a burglary is in progress."

"Not a murder?"

"No. But make it sound urgent."

"All right, I can do urgent Miss Talbot."

When the hotel clerk left, I searched through the kitchen drawers and found a butcher's knife. Then I exited the service door as silently as possible and stood behind the screen at a position where I could see the bar and the center of the room.

All of the priestesses, aside from Mistress Arial Goldenhair, were standing outside of the circle. The head priestess herself was kneeling next to Rhys' body, her arms outstretched and her face pointed towards the ceiling. She was chanting something that sounded like a bastardization of Latin.

Unfortunately, it was too garbled for me to tell exactly what she was trying to say.

I had placed a temporary location spell on Al's key. I waited until I could sense Finn placing it on top of the bar. A second later, I shoved a command through the temporary link I had made with the key--demanding an illusion of the key's maker.

Black smoke began to spill over the bar and a form emerged, oily and slithering, many eyed and many tentacled. The illusion gurgled and hissed, sounding both irate and hungry.

The priestesses screamed and fled through the front doors.

"Cowards!" Arial Goldenhair shrieked.

But they paid her no heed. I guessed that this was the first time any of those women had seen something truly supernatural.

The head priestess waved the dagger in her hand threateningly and jabbed a finger towards the gibbering illusion. "Interfering demon! I'll teach you to disrupt my affairs. No one is going to interrupt the sacrifice to the moon goddess!"

I moved back from the screen. There was only one more thing to do. I swung the knife and severed the rope holding the chandelier aloft.

There was a scream and a crash.

I darted out into the dining hall toward the illusion. Once my hand touched it, it shrank back into the shape of a key. As I pocketed it, Finn popped up from behind the bar counter.

"What an impressive trick! I don't suppose you could teach me that."

I shook my head. "Sorry. Trade secret."

A stream of cursing turned me back to the center of the dining hall. Unfortunately, the head priestess was still conscious. The chandelier had missed her head, but not her body. She was pinned beneath the iron and glass contraption, her silver gown torn, and her matching turban--not to mention a golden wig--some feet away.

This time, I took out the black marble with the sleep spell I had harvested

from Thomasina. I pitched it towards the high priestess. But instead of bouncing off of her forehead, it was absorbed into her skin. The woman fell silent.

Finn helped me shoulder Rhys' prone body out of the dining hall. Rhys murmured incoherently, apparently slowly coming out of whatever stupor Mistress Ariel Goldenhair had put him in. As we lugged him up the stairs towards his room, I could hear Thomasina greeting the police down in the front lobby.

"I'm sorry about the chandelier," I said as we dragged Rhys into his room and put him to bed. "Just put that on my bill."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Finn replied. "There's no cost to rescuing your friend from a murderess. That was quite a bit of excitement. If anything, we'll put it on Mistress Ariel's bill. If she wasn't trying to gut people in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"That's true."

He grinned. "Besides, billing her will give Thomasina her revenge for getting knocked out by ninja tricks, so don't worry. I'll be downstairs dealing with the police. If you need any help with your friend, just come get me."

When Finn walked back outside, I put a palm to Rhys' forehead, probing for any spells the Order might have put on him.

A hand grasped my wrist and weakly tugged it down.

"Rhys?"

His eyes were slitted and green. He released my wrist only to pull my head down for a hard, clumsy kiss. I tasted wine and something bitter--a drug?

Sorry, Ana. But I did get information on Blackthorne.

I flailed about and managed to tear myself out of his loose embrace. "Rhys! What the bloody hell did you think you were doing? You nearly got yourself killed!"

"I was a bit reckless, wasn't I?" his voice sounded hoarse and weak. "But I'll explain later. I have to sleep off this drug."

"What do you mean explain later?"

His eyes were closed. He had fallen asleep.

"Damn it, Rhys! Why do you have to go to sleep just at the crucial moment? I bet all your lady paramours just love that habit of yours."

If I had not been watching, I would have missed the slight upward curve of his mouth at my words.

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXX

The chilly morning air shocked whatever sleepiness that remained in my system out into the open. I took out a pair of wool gloves and pulled them on, glad that I had thought to wear my long dark green coat cut in a military style along with a matching hat that was a size too large for my head. That had been deliberate--the large hat covered my ears.

The dawn sun was just peeking past the horizon, the first rays bathing the front face of the Montport Inn and the empty fountain in front of it in a golden sheen. It also revealed the ruts in the gravel where the police car had skittered as it had responded to a call by the hotel clerk the previous night.

This morning, a battered black truck sat next to the fountain. The load at the back was covered with a brown tarp. The cab part of the truck was surprisingly large for its type, boasting two seats in front and two seats in the back. One of the seats in the back was piled with two suitcases--mine and Rhys'.

"Eh, miss, you needn't stand out here in the cold. The truck is warmer."

I turned my head to see the driver of the truck emerge from the entrance of the inn. Patrick MacDougal--or Paddy as he insisted everyone call him--was the splitting image of his brother Finn, except for his longer hair which he tied back in a queue and his thick beard. He wore a rough wool coat over a pair of obviously worn overalls splattered with paint--the very image of eccentric artist. Under his arm was a package wrapped in brown paper--the mail for the Newcomb post.

Behind him was Rhys in a black greatcoat and a felt hat. He also held a package--a white paper box. His expression, however, was inscrutable.

"I don't mind standing around," I replied. "I'll be sitting half the day anyway."

"Suit yourself," Paddy replied.

We boarded the truck--with me in the back since I was smaller, Paddy in the driver's seat, and Rhys in the front passenger seat. Once Paddy started the engine, Rhys handed me the package.

"Breakfast."

I opened the paper box and peered inside. "Scones and muffins! What would you like, Rhys?"

"A scone will be sufficient."

I picked out the largest one and handed it over. "How about you, Paddy?"

"No thank you, miss. I had breakfast already."

I chose a muffin myself and bit into it. The pastry was still warm. "How did you convince the cook to part with her food, Rhys?"

"My usual charm," he drawled.

"Ha!"

Paddy chuckled. "I was impressed to tell you the truth. No one has been able to charm the Montport Inn cook in the time that I've known her. Of course, I suppose a pretty face does help."

The truck rumbled down the slope from where the inn perched. Outside, the sun's rays began to sweep across the Bidracon Stones, rendering them into gray ghosts.

"Say, I heard from Thomasina that there was quite the commotion last night. Even the police came. Something about one of the guests breaking into the dining hall to do some vandalism? I don't suppose you two knew anything about it?"

"I had an early night," Rhys replied. "I slept through everything."

"Sorry, I don't know anything about it," I lied.

Once we were in Newcomb proper, Paddy stopped at the post master's office to drop off the inn's post. When he got out of the truck, Rhys turned in his seat to pin me with a gray look.

"Blackthorne's been tracking us."

I sat up in my seat and swallowed the last bit of muffin. "What? How?"

"I don't know. Maybe he has a spell to do it. But it seems as if our arrival at the inn was not entirely accidental. The head priestess of the Order of the Silver Moon is associated with Blackthorne in some way."

"How did you find that out?"

"When I was to meet you for dinner, I overheard her saying something to her followers. She mentioned Blackthorne as one of her patrons. So at that moment, I decided to insinuate myself into their group to see what they were planning."

"It would have been nice to tell me what you were doing first."

He shook his head. "I had no time. They were already heading out to a pub in downtown Newcomb. I got into their group rather easily. Too easily, I'm afraid."

"Didn't anyone tell you to be wary of beautiful women?"

"Does that mean I should be wary of you?"

I let out a breath. "Rhys, you do remember that I have a clothes iron, don't you?"

"You wouldn't dare hit me with it, Ana." His lips twitched, threatening a smile. "Anyways, I was not as careful as I should have been. To be honest, I was downright stupid. One of the priestesses slipped something into my drink and a moment later, I was mostly out of it. I could hear the things going around me though."

"I think you tried to contact me before. In my head."

"I did. I was desperate--I wasn't sure you would hear or pay attention."

The driver side door opened and Rhys turned back into his seat.

"The old man was really ornery this morning," Paddy announced as he started up his truck again.

"Old man?" Rhys asked.

"The post master," Paddy explained. He drove the truck down the main street, heading towards the train station. "He was having breakfast and I could tell he was annoyed that I was disturbing him. But he should already know this--I always deliver the inn's post every other week. Of course, I don't get it. He handles the mail every day. If I wasn't giving him the mail, he would have to drive all the way up to the inn himself to pick up the post."

Rhys shrugged. "Who knows what annoys people."

"Maybe he was having indigestion," I said.

Paddy laughed as he turned off onto another road, this one running parallel to the railroad track, heading north into the mountains. "If that's true, the old man is always having indigestion."

* * *

Around noon, we drove through the wall.

Not literally, of course. Someone before us had carved a tunnel through the rock to allow vehicles through to the other side. The wall itself was an oddity. It was perhaps around ten feet high and made of the local stone. It wound around the mountains like an intricate thread, stretching from coast to coast, east to west. It was an oddity because why would anyone build a wall when the mountains were already acting as a natural barrier?

"There are several theories about the wall," Paddy told us as he easily maneuvered his truck on the sharply curving mountain roads. Frost covered much of the area and I shuddered to think how difficult the pass would be to navigate in the dead of winter. "One is that the wall was built to keep out the northern barbarians in ancient times."

"I've heard of that theory," said Rhys neutrally.

Paddy gave him a narrowed eye glance before continuing. "The second theory is that it was built as an aqueduct to transport water from one place to another."

"You could easily check the top of the wall for a water channel to prove if

that theory is true," I pointed out.

"Yes. But so far, no one has found one. On the parts that people have checked, the top has deteriorated so much that it is hard to tell. And then there is the third theory. Which is just a far-fetched fairy tale if you ask me."

"Well, what is it?" I asked.

"It was said that in ancient times, a mad king who used to rule in this area possessed a dangerous magic book. In order to impress his neighbors, he used a spell from the book to summon up strange frightening monsters to build the wall. Unfortunately, he forgot to add a sort of payment to the spell, so in the end, he was killed by the monsters for his debt. The magic book then disappeared. I would say good riddance, if indeed it was real."

I glanced at Rhys after Paddy's story. He didn't seem particularly affected, except for the faint green creeping into his eyes.

"That does sound like a fairy tale," I finally said. "How many people know about that theory?"

"Everyone, I suppose. But it's more like a story parents tell their children to scare them into behaving."

"Just like the bogeyman?"

"Exactly." The truck made another turn and the mountain scenery seemed to magically open up. "Ah, there it is Miss Talbot, Mr. Lattimore. There's Haven."

The mountains sloped downward into a delta plain that washed out into the dark northern sea. Sunlight glinted off the top of the city creating the illusion that it was a crescent-shaped gem at the coastline. From our vantage point heading into the city, Haven truly looked like a haven.

The Third Conjuraton
Seal XXXI

About twenty minutes north of the wall in the mountains, we reached the edge of the city. The art dealer Paddy was in business with lived in a residential area at the outskirts of Haven where the intricate canals of the older part of the city had yet to cut through. The art dealer recommended

the Northern Sea Hotel which was large enough to cater to tourists, yet not so well known that it was already booked full of carnival visitors. And more importantly, it was close to the city library which for some reason Rhys was keen to visit.

Paddy dropped us off at the closest bridge located on the Avido Canal which was the western most in Haven. The ceramics artist told us to call him for a ride the next time he was in Haven, granted that the trains were not fixed by then.

At the bridge, there were steps down beside it, leading to a platform overlooking the murky waters. Rhys and I took our luggage to the platform and waited for a small boat from the north to approach.

It was a bit of a shock to arrive at Haven after living in a southern city like Colchester for a while. The only streets wide enough for vehicles to travel on were in the west and south parts of the city, closer to the mountains and the mainland. The rest of the paths hugged the buildings, wide enough only for pedestrians and possibly bicyclists. The main roads were the canals and the surprisingly ornate bridges that stretched across them. The cabs were not Studebakers and Fiats but gondolas, piloted by gondoliers equipped with long poles with which to steer their vessel. In the late autumn, the gondolier who approached us wore a scarf aside from his large brimmed hat and a long dark fur lined coat.

The gondola approached the platform, the edges of the vessel barely scraping the wood. The gondolier tipped his head in acknowledgement.

"Ma'am. Sir. Where to?"

"I don't suppose you can take us to the Northern Sea Hotel?" I said as Rhys loaded our suitcases into the vessel. Once he stepped in, I followed him into the boat. The gondola rocked with my steps and I would have fallen over if Rhys had not reached out to steady me by the shoulders.

"I know where it is, ma'am," the gondolier replied. "It's on the most eastern side of the city with a wonderful view of the dikes and the sea. I take it that you two haven't been to Haven before?"

"No," Rhys replied as he steadied me again when I nearly fell over my seat.

I gave my traveling companion a chagrined smile. "Sorry about that. There's something about the water that makes me terribly clumsy."

"I suppose I'll just have to make sure you don't fall overboard." He scooted over until he could lope an arm around my waist.

"Rhys!"

He ignored my half-hearted attempts at trying to peel his fingers off me. "It would be very inconvenient if you fell into the canal and froze to death."

The gondolier used his pole to push his vessel out from the platform. His eyes glittered as he maneuvered the gondola into the waters. "You two must be newlyweds."

"We aren't."

"We are," said Rhys loudly, drowning me out.

I glared at him.

Just play along, Ana. It's not like we're going to see him again.

Shut up.

"You will be so glad you picked Haven for your honeymoon," the gondolier enthused. "Lots of people consider this city the most romantic city in the world."

I looked at the buildings on either side of the canal, built in simple lines yet flourished with curving, almost hallucinatory designs as evidenced by the careful molding around the windows and the intricate designs of the railing on the balconies. The sky above was a perfect robin's egg blue frosted with wispy clouds.

"Romantic for most people," I muttered. "I only get excited when there are bookshelves around."

Rhys grinned. "How do you feel about bookmarks, darling? Not the flimsy paper kinds, but the long metal ones?"

"You have a dirty, dirty mind."

"Hey, I wasn't the one who brought up bookshelves."

The gondolier looked confused at our byplay, but a moment later, his expression cleared. "You must be referring to the library. It's quite close to

the Northern Sea Hotel if you want to know. I've heard that it is the largest in the northern counties."

"Is it?" I said.

"That's what I've heard." The rowing pole churned the water, pulling the gondola under another bridge. "Since you're newlyweds, I want to make this trip extra special for you. I will serenade you with a love song."

I bolted upright from my slouching posture. "No, wait..."

He didn't hear me. The gondolier burst into song, putting all of his lung power into the effort.

I groaned and slumped back. Pulled my oversized hat down further over my ears. Since Rhys was still holding onto me, I could both hear and feel him chuckling.

Not fond of opera, darling?

No.

As if to offend my musical sensibilities further, a window slammed open on one side of the canal and an argument erupted between several pedestrians--adding to the noise.

* * *

With a frustrated sigh, I put the telephone receiver back into its cradle and turned my back to the hotel desk, wondering what to do. Perhaps I should go to the address the operator gave me and go to Chesterfield's residence. I could stay on his front porch until he came home. Or if I was in the frame of mind for a bit of breaking and entering, break into his house and search his library.

The lobby of the Northern Sea Hotel was narrow--it was no more than a hallway. The entrance desk manned by a spindly looking clerk was no more than a recess in the wall. An iron, cage-like elevator sat at the end of the hallway leading to the upper stories. An unadorned door beside the elevator led to the first floor rooms. Really, the place was cramped like a closet--the most recent hotel guest signing for his key at the desk took up most of the space with his portly figure.

But the lack of space was made up for the mosaics that tiled the floor and

walls. Small blue and green ceramics fit together creating an impressive tapestry of a battle between a pack of wolves and half a dozen sea dragons. Briefly, I wondered what local myth the mosaic was depicting.

"Any luck, miss?" the clerk inquired.

"None," I replied. "It seems that whenever I ring him up, Archibald Chesterfield isn't home. I'll try again later. Thank you for letting me use your telephone."

"No problem, miss. It's all part of the service."

"Did you say Chesterfield?" said the other guest as he handed his last paper to the clerk. "Archibald Chesterfield?"

I scrutinized the portly man in a brown suit and a checkered tie. He wore an ill-fitting boater on top of his head which I suspected lacked hair. His complexion was rather florid although his expression seemed earnest.

"Yes," I replied finally. "Do you know Mr. Chesterfield?"

"In passing. He is a rather prolific book collector who travels quite a bit. We have a mutual friend, the Baron of Kendel, the honorable Clayton Earham. In fact, I am to meet the Baron today. He has a winter home here in Haven."

"I see."

"How do you know Mr. Chesterfield, miss?"

"I am in search of a book he has recently purchased at Greenglass."

"It must be quite the book since you came all the way here."

"Yes."

The guest abruptly swept his boater off his head, confirming my suspicions about his lack of hair, and bowed. "Pardon me, miss, but I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Doctor John Bickford. Historical scholar."

"Ana Talbot. I work as a research assistant at the Institute in Colchester."

"Ah, it seems as if our meeting was fortuitous then. Are you free this afternoon?"

"Apparently I am since Mr. Chesterfield is not home," I replied amused. "But I thought you were visiting the Baron?"

"I am. But I thought you would like to join me on my visit. Mr. Chesterfield is one of the Baron's friends and I am sure he would have an excellent idea of where to track him down. Besides, I would like to have a chat with someone with mutual interests."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Bickford nodded vigorously. "I suppose the Baron counts me as a friend, but mostly he retains me for my expertise on history. It's hard to get a truly intellectual conversation going on with him if there isn't another knowledgeable person around."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXII

I left a note at the desk for Rhys when I decided to go with Bickford to meet the Baron. I knew he had wanted to visit the library--to investigate Blackthorne he had told me mysteriously--and I would have merely been a useless tag along if I had gone with him since I had little interest in the sorcerer. I had a different goal--to find the seventh edition of the *Liber Tutelarum*. The note itself told Rhys that I was finding information on Chesterfield and that I would meet him later at the bistro across from the hotel.

Bickford had claimed that the Baron's mansion was not far from the hotel. "Just a short invigorating walk to the north end of the city," he had cheerfully informed me.

After a few blocks, it became quite clear that this was not a short jaunt, but the portly doctor seemed to keep up even when he was breathing hard. Discretely, I slowed and shortened my steps.

He kept up most of the conversation while we walked, telling me about his education, his specialty in Roman history, his wife, and his son and daughter-in-law who were expecting a child in a few weeks.

"Children are such a joy," he exclaimed as we passed by a bridge filled with small boys tossing pebbles into the canal. "Why, I'm going to be a grandfather twice over now. The excitement never wears off."

"Hm." I thought about pranks and general mischievousness. And little hands with pencils, eager to mark up valuable texts.

"You don't like children?"

Uh oh. Time to tread carefully. "I never said such a thing," I said cautiously. "I don't have any children so it is hard to say what my opinion on them would be."

"Just wait until you have some of your own. After that, you'll wonder why you never had them before."

"Hm." I decided not to argue. People always tried to convince others that their way of living was best. After all, whoever heard of parents or grandparents telling someone else that their life might have been better off without children? That thought was taboo and blasphemous.

Of course, being a book, having children was a moot point.

"Here we are," Bickford exclaimed as we stopped in front of a gray building overlooking one of the larger north canals. "The Baron will be expecting us."

At a first glance, the mansion did not seem to distinguish itself from the rest of the buildings on the street other than its size, but then I noticed that the balconies weren't lined with iron like the others but with stone carved in a classical style. Even the entrance was framed in a similar style in contrast to the more fanciful decorations in the rest of the city.

Bickford rang the bell. We didn't have to wait long for the doorman to arrive. Inside, the foyer was brightly lit and furnished with glass and gold and crystal and velvet. The doorman took our coats and hats and requested that we wait while he announced our arrival to the Baron.

I peered at all of the bric-a-brac, somewhat impressed by the opulence that made the doctor and I look like plebian wrens in comparison. The Baron had wealth and he flaunted it. My eyes also came to a painting--a female nude reclining decadently in her boudoir. Apparently the Baron was not a prude either.

"All of this is too much," Bickford confided to me in low tones. "Why, some unscrupulous person could just waltz in here and rob the Baron blind."

"Perhaps the crime rate in Haven is quite low," I whispered back.

The doorman came back. "The Baron will see you now." We were led through a hallway decorated with more paintings similar to the one in the foyer. By the time the servant opened the double doors at the end of the hall to a receiving room, a small nugget of unease rattled at the back of my mind.

Inside, the receiving room was sparse except for a table and several chairs at the far end of the room. Electrical lights installed on the walls were in strange crystal and brass sconces that made them look like torches. The floor was covered in a lush and intricately designed oriental rug. Windows at the opposite end of the room faced the canal. Two men seemed to be in conversation. The taller one soon bowed to the other and quickly swept out of the room, ignoring the doctor and me.

I thought I saw blond hair and a strangely familiar angled chin.

"Doctor Bickford!" the remaining man exclaimed as he walked toward us. "I am very pleased that you were able to make it to Haven. Who is your lovely companion?"

"This is Miss Ana Talbot. She works at the Institute down in Colchester."

The Baron shook my hand. His were cold. The man was stocky and moon-faced. His dark hair was rapidly thinning and his dark eyes seemed not to miss anything. In fact, he seemed particularly interested in my blouse.

"Miss Talbot! What a pleasure to meet you. I am quite the avid history buff, you know. The doctor here keeps me on my toes."

"It is nice to meet you, Mr. Earlham. Or should I call you Baron?"

He chuckled. "Oh, let's not be so formal. Mr. Earlham will do nicely. Or Clayton if you prefer. My official titles are much too stuffy."

I couldn't help but frown. It had been my experience that the aristocracy tried at all costs to keep himself or herself above the common rabble. But maybe the Baron was different.

"Well, doctor, I'm glad that you came. Why, I have just acquired..."

A knock came at the receiving room door.

The Baron sighed in mid-sentence. "Yes?"

The door opened and the doorman poked his head in. "I'm sorry, sir, but there is a telephone call for Doctor Bickford." He coughed. "It's from his wife. Something about a child?"

"Oh dear!" the doctor said, looking flustered. "It must be my daughter-in-law. She's having a baby."

"Congratulations?" I said, not sure how to handle the news since Bickford looked panicked.

The Baron made a shooing motion with his hands. "Don't worry doctor. Go and see your family in this time of need. Your expertise can wait."

"Thank you, sir!" said Bickford. To me, the doctor said, "I'm so sorry, Miss Talbot, but I must go. I hope you know the way back to the hotel?"

"The directions are rather straightforward," I reassured him. "You should see your family."

"Yes, I should!" With a bow to the Baron, the doctor hurried out of the receiving room after the doorman.

I looked back and caught the Baron rubbing his hands together. I frowned. "I hope his family is all right."

"Of course it is, Ana. May I call you Ana?"

"That's awfully familiar. I don't..."

"You must be winded from your walk from your hotel." He motioned towards the table at the end of the room. "Perhaps you would like a spot of tea."

I reluctantly took a seat at the table, but did not drink the tea that he offered me. "I must confess something, Mr. Earlham. I did not come here with Doctor Bickford to talk about history."

The Baron sipped his tea while he watched me. "Then why did you come here?"

"I have heard that Archibald Chesterfield is your acquaintance."

"The book collector certainly is," he confirmed. "In fact, I met with him yesterday morning. What business do you have with him?"

"I am looking for a book that Mr. Chesterfield has in his possession. I have been trying to contact him but I haven't reached him yet. I have his telephone number and address, but I was hoping--since you know Mr. Chesterfield--that you would have some knowledge of his whereabouts."

Something subtle crossed the Baron's face, something I would not have caught if I had been busy drinking tea. "As far as I know, Mr. Chesterfield is still in Haven. He often consorts with the booksellers, though, so he is rarely home during the day."

"Well then, I suppose I will have to try to call him during the evening."

"Yes, it is more likely you will contact him then." The Baron put his cup down. "Precisely what book are you looking for? I am a bit of a book collector myself. Perhaps I will have a copy in my library." His tone of voice sent alarm up my spine.

"I really doubt..."

"My library is in the next room."

I did not really want to go to the next room, but I found myself following the Baron out of curiosity--from the receiving room through an archway and into a study about half its size. Most of the place was taken up by shelves of books--obviously in mint condition and published in the past three decades--except near the fireplace where there was desk. I walked over to examine the titles piled on the desk top. Seeing nothing of interest, I glanced up and noticed that above the mantle, there was another painting of a nude.

"Take a look around. Maybe you'll find what you're looking for." His gaze seemed to crawl up my body.

"This looks like a very interesting library Mr. Earlham, but I don't think..."

"I've seen how you looked at me." The Baron managed to trap me against the desk. I felt sweat trickle down my back. Somehow I needed to get myself out of this compromising position. "Don't think, my lovely. Just feel." His hand grabbed at my chest and his mouth puckered like a fish.

I turned my head quickly and felt something wet and cold graze my cheek. "Mr. Earlham, this is wholly inappropriate. Let me up at once."

"Playing hard to get, eh? I'll show you inappropriate."

Before he could swoop down with his lips again, I reached down and grabbed. I forced a paralyzing spell through my fingers.

The Baron gave a choked cry and then fell over as if he had suddenly turned into a statue. All of his muscles, save the ones controlling his vital functions, were frozen. His eyes glimmered in fear as I stepped over him.

"Don't touch me again," I told him. "Your paralysis will wear off soon, but don't try to come after me. Because next time, I will forego any temporary tricks."

I let myself out of the Baron's library and receiving room. At the entrance foyer, the doorman rushed up with my coat and hat.

"Are you leaving so soon, miss?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so. And oh, I have a message from the Baron. He does not wish to be disturbed for about an hour. He is busy contemplating some life truths we were discussing earlier."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXIII

A gondola passed by the Baron's mansion when I stepped back outside into the late afternoon sun. The bright blue of the sky had deepened into a strong aquamarine--no clouds in sight. I headed back to the southern end of the city and recognized the bridge where I had passed earlier and noticed small boys playing. This time, the children were gone. Instead there was a tall man gazing out into the water, his face shaded by his hat. I saw him take a cigarette out of his mouth to blow smoke.

I concentrated on my steps, my heels clicking rhythmically on the stones. I glanced at the watch on my wrist. It was ten till four. I had written in the note for Rhys that I would meet him at the bistro at four. I had not anticipated that the walk to and from the Baron's residence would take too long.

Across the canal, I saw an old woman in a dull brown skirt and a red coat come out to sweep the front steps. On the balcony above her, pigeons sat on the railing, watching. Another pedestrian traveled in the opposite direction and tipped his hat to the old woman who ignored him. The water in the canal had rippled in the wake of the gondola but other than that, it was dark,

reflecting nothing.

Something made me look back. There was no one on the street behind me and I had heard nothing--or at least I had thought I heard nothing--but something fizzled in the air, making the skin at the back of my neck prickle.

I turned back to my route and quickened my pace. The cool air stung my face. And despite the sunshine, I felt a shadow creeping up behind me. Up ahead, I saw a wedge of darkness. An alley. I slipped into it and found myself in a maze.

The buildings in Haven were not built right up against each other. Instead, about three or four feet separated each building, creating a labyrinth of crawl spaces. I turned twice more, passing three unmarked back doors. I paused for a moment and thought I heard the click of shoes. Above me, bits of blue zigzagged along the building forms, but not much light reached into the crevasses. I took off my shoes. And ran.

There were no obvious sounds of anyone else running in these alleyways. Whoever following had used something to muffle the sound of pursuit, but I could still sense something coming--like a rapidly beating heart.

I approached another back door, but something about it made me stop. There was nothing particularly odd about it that made it stand out from all the other back doors in the alleyway. But something drew me to it. I touched its tarnished knob and suddenly felt it, a tendril of faint power shielding the door. I would not have noticed it at all if half the spells that I knew weren't about protections and shields.

Inked words trailed from my fingers to the knob. I felt a slight shock and then the lock clicked open. Quickly, I slipped inside and closed the door behind me.

The interior was dim except for an old fashioned oil lamp on a table that spluttered and smoked. Strange charms dangled from the ceiling like drying herbs--silver crosses and lacquered evil eyes. Pebbles and coins with holes were strung up with hemp. Carved beads and malachite ankhs formed a strange tablecloth over a desk in the corner. An ormolu clock sat on top of a mantle. A black cauldron hung inert over fading coals. Curio cabinets made of rosewood lined the walls, the small brass handles of all the little drawers faintly gleaming. On top of one of the cabinets, a stuffed owl stared sightlessly towards the opposite wall. Beside the bit of taxidermic art, a fat crystal ball sat on its stand collecting dust.

Something rattled. The door at the end of the room opened revealing a woman dressed in a plain linen dress. She wore cloth slippers and a red handkerchief covered her hair. Without that indicator, I found it difficult to tell her age since her skin was clear except for some lines at the corners of her eyes. The color of her eyes reflected the copper coins dangling from the ceiling. Her nose hawkish, her mouth uncompromising.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"I apologize, madam," I said, hopefully in a sufficiently contrite tone. "I got lost in the back alley and I was hoping I could get back into one of the main streets by going through a house."

"No one comes in this place uninvited," the woman said sharply. She reached out and the air between us seemed to crackle. Only belatedly did I realize that perhaps breaking into a home guarded by a spell was probably a bad idea. Her fingers grasped my chin and I gasped at the sharp power she used to probe me. Her eyes narrowed. "A girl who is not a girl."

"I'm really sorry, but I wasn't going to take anything. I was just trying to get back to the main street." I sent a burst of my own energy to counter her grip. It loosened and I managed to pull away and take a breath.

"Stop being so stubborn and be quiet." She grabbed my chin again and pulled me along with her, through the door and into one of the front rooms. Vaguely, I noticed a narrow shop front lit by oil lamps. The scent of cloves and lilac curled in the air. Sticks of incense smoldered in a small clay vase sitting on a counter. Beside it, a tortoiseshell cat sprawled on its belly. One eye slitted open at my arrival. The animal yawned, showing small pointed teeth. "Sit."

I sat on a tall stool facing a glass case with a mummy, a few hairs still attached to its desiccated skin, its mouth pinched, its eyes closed. Witch, I thought. Sorceress.

The woman looked me over once. "Put your shoes back on."

I obeyed her.

She put her hands on her hips. "You look quite unremarkable for what you really are, but I suppose that's understandable. Someone was after you."

"Well, yes. But I really must get going."

"People are too much in a hurry these days." She cocked her head. "You still have a little time. What do you usually call yourself?" She moved behind her counter and took out a wooden box.

"I don't see what giving my name has to do with anything."

"Many people call me Magda."

"I'm Ana Talbot," I found myself saying.

"Ah, Talbot. That explains much. You look a bit like a portrait of Edward Talbot I saw in a museum once. Many have wondered what had happened to the great sorcerer and his daughter."

I closed my eyes, trying to suppress the memories that Magda had dredged up. Talbot had attempted a spell. His daughter had inadvertently interrupted, wondering when her father would come to dinner. Screams. Blood. Lots of blood. Her blood splattering on my cover. Magic misdirected.

"I don't see how something that happened over three centuries ago has any bearing on the here and now."

"Perhaps not," the sorceress replied. She took a deck of cards out of the box and began to shuffle. "I could try to chain you. To use you."

My fingers itched. "I don't think you would want to."

"Ah, you have a bit of bite to you." She finished shuffling and laid down five cards. "Come here and see what I've drawn."

"I'm in a bit of a hurry to play cards."

"This is not a game, Ana Talbot."

I got off of the stool and went over to the counter to look at the cards. These weren't playing cards. Strange symbols were etched over them, symbols that I could not interpret. "I don't know what these mean."

"You have an interesting future ahead of you, Ana Talbot."

"I don't think I like the sound of that."

The sorceress's mouth curved into a smile. "Some books are meant to be more than books. I will release you from my home provided that you give

me a spell."

I hid a hand inside a coat pocket and clenched it into a fist. "I don't give things away for free. Any normal person would let me go. Coming here was a simple mistake."

"It was no simple mistake. But I am fair." From within the box, she produced another deck of cards. "I will give you this in exchange for a shielding spell that is stronger than the one I used on my back door."

"These are useless if I don't understand them."

"You will." The sorceress gave me a grin which did not sit well on her ageless face. "Just ask the Key."

I narrowed my eyes. From her probe, the woman knew about Rhys. Really knew about him. The sorceress was a dangerous snake, but she didn't make any move to break my head open and extract all that I knew. She was willing to make an exchange.

"All right," I said after a moment. "I'll give you the spell. I need some paper made of vellum and some ink. Preferably some ink with an iron sulfate base."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXIV

A dark gray statue of a man sitting on a horse stood outside the Limon Bistro. Birds perched on the statue--pigeons, some plain white and gray, some with a bit of green and purple iridescence lining their wings, some pure black with only a bit of red in their eyes. They preened and cooed and took no notice of me as I sprinted across the bit of street to come to a stop at a nearby bench painted the same gleaming chestnut color as the façade of the bistro. I gulped in some air and looked at my wrist watch. Late.

Rhys sat on the bench bent over with his elbows on his knees. He wasn't wearing a hat and the wind was slowly making a mess of his hair. In one hand, he held a brown paper bag. He was tossing popcorn out to the few gluttonous birds at his feet.

"I had a cup of tea," he said without looking up. "A couple of nice girls asked if they could join me, but I had to decline since I was waiting for someone."

About twenty after, I bought a bag of popped corn and decided to play the poor man in the cold."

"I was detained."

"You could have called the hotel to say that you were late."

"I couldn't get to a telephone. Your nose is getting red. And where's your hat? Let's go inside."

He dumped the rest of the popcorn onto the ground and threw the bag into a nearby rubbish bin. Tucking his hands into his coat pockets, he finally looked at me. His eyes green, his mouth in a thin line. "Fifteen minutes ago, I tried to talk to you."

He had tried to contact me, in my head. Fifteen minutes ago, I had been in Magda's shop. I hadn't heard anything. The sorceress was more powerful than I had thought--muddling my head with her probe.

"You didn't respond."

"I couldn't. Look, Rhys. It is a bit chilly out here and it's getting dark. Let's go into the bistro to get dinner."

"They don't have much of a selection. I have a better idea. There's an actual restaurant about a street over." He began walking. "Why couldn't you?"

"It's a long story."

"I have all day. Tell me about your search for Chesterfield." I fell into step with him. What light was left in the sky shaded the buildings around us in a fading orange. The street lights had not been turned on yet, but the stars were already appearing overhead like a smattering of shining paint drops after a palette had been accidentally tipped over.

"I met Doctor Bickford, a history scholar at the hotel. He was meeting up with the Baron of Kendel who is supposedly one of Archibald Chesterfield's friends. I know it sounds a bit foolhardy to go meet with a couple of unknown men by myself. But I didn't want to waste an opportunity and you were already off at the library."

"True. But I would imagine you could take care of yourself against a couple of humans. You've survived for several centuries by yourself, haven't you?"

I let out a breath that I didn't know that I was holding. I suppose I had assumed that Rhys would be angry that I hadn't consulted with him first-- just as he had not consulted with me first when he had gone off with the Order of the Silver Moon to follow up a lead. The only difference was that he had not had to rescue me--which had only happened due to slim chance.

"It's true that I've managed to survive by myself, but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't turn down help if it presents itself. I'm not that idiotic. Or at least I hope I'm not." A boat drifted by on the canal beside the street. It was a row boat. A figure moved a pair of oars in a slow rhythm, propelling the vessel through the black water. Beside the figure was a small heap of wilted flowers--the remainder after the day's selling. "The doctor took me to see the Baron. Then the doctor had to leave when he received news that his grandchild was arriving into the world."

"You had a talk with the Baron."

"Yes." I thought about telling Rhys about the Baron's advances. And decided to keep that to myself. No need to alarm him unnecessarily. "He said that Archibald Chesterfield often visits the booksellers during the day and is rarely home, except in the evening. Perhaps we should pay a visit to Chesterfield himself this evening."

"You don't want to telephone him first?"

"I'm fed up with the telephone. No one answers."

"I suppose there are only so many telephone calls one can make before one gives up that avenue of search. Sort of like creditors. They send letters first. Then telephone calls. And when those fail, they will start pounding down your doors demanding money."

"You've had experience with creditors before, I take it?"

"Not me personally. But I've known other people to be the brunt of their fury."

I tilted my head so that my oversized hat shaded my face. And found myself smiling. "It sounds like it would be a horrid experience. Well, after I left the Baron's residence, I was coming straight to our meeting place at the bistro. Unfortunately, I got sidetracked. I don't have any proof except for what I felt, but I think someone was following me."

"Someone was following you?" His modulated voice suddenly kicked up a

notch. He abruptly stopped, forcing me to turn and look at him. His hands came to my shoulders. His expression was grim. "Who was it? Why didn't you tell me immediately?"

"I was too busy trying to get away to think of that." I shook his hands off. "You said yourself that I could take care of myself. So stop acting so overprotective. I'm here, so everything went all right."

He didn't budge. "What happened?"

"I don't know who was following me. But I ended up in some of the back alleyways and ducked into a strange charm shop owned by an even stranger sorceress."

"A sorceress! That's dangerous. Such people are always trying to ensnare grimoires. If you weren't careful, you could have been shelved indefinitely."

"Well, I managed to wiggle out of it," I replied flippantly. I began to walk forward. He could have pulled me back to him, but he decided to resume our stroll instead. "And she gave me something too."

"It might be a booby trap."

"I don't know about that." I took out the deck of cards from my pocket and gave him one of the cards. "What do you think?"

He gave a bark of laughter. I glanced at him. Rhys was grinning when he handed the card back to me. "It's an odd bit of writing, but it's merely a bit of fortune telling."

"Yes, I've gathered that, but what does it say?"

"I'll teach you how to decipher it, but you'll have to do the actual decoding yourself." His grin turned into something more salacious. "I think you'll like what they say."

"Since you put it that way, I'm not sure I want to know."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXV

Chesterfield's address indicated a street off the Grand Canal, close to one of

the major antiquarian booksellers in the city. After dinner at the restaurant--belly full--a small part of my mind argued for going back to the hotel for a nap. But with the day already over, I knew that nap would soon turn into sleep. So I had insisted on paying Chesterfield an unexpected household call since after a brief querying of the restaurant waiter on the layout of the city, it turned out that his address was quite close to our current location.

Electric lamps winked along the boulevards and at the feet of the bridges spanning the canals. The air was cold and above, the half moon was a crystalline shard against obsidian. Rhys and I passed a band of street musicians bundled up in colorful scarves and fingerless gloves, playing a mournful melody.

"I'm going to visit the city library again tomorrow," Rhys told me. "I have a feeling that I'm getting close to something."

"You did say that you were tracking down Blackthorne," I said. "But wouldn't it make more sense to track down whatever book he said that Parrish owed him? You might try the booksellers. Or better yet, find the *Liber Tutelarum* with me. He might not be looking for that particular book but it is possible."

"I've been tracking him for a while already. He's not above stealing books. No animate grimoires as far as I know, but his previous modus operandi have involved libraries."

"Why libraries?"

"It's an extensive collection. Most libraries are understaffed. And the librarians couldn't possibly keep track of all the volumes at the same time."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just inform the librarians that they have a thief in their midst? Maybe that would make them keep a sharper eye out on their grimoire collections."

"You don't think I haven't tried that already? Librarians are an arrogant lot. They think nothing can get by them since they are the ones wearing spectacles."

"I haven't found that to be the case. In my job as a research assistant, they have been very helpful."

"That's because you've been asking them for help, not the other way around," he snorted.

"Well, I suppose if you were telling them to do something, they wouldn't like it," I replied. "I wouldn't like to be told how to do my job from some random person. Maybe you should have couched it in more conciliatory terms instead. A suggestion, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

We had stopped at the middle of a bridge arching over the Grand Canal. A vessel drifted by below us, strung with tiny lights like fireflies. A group was having an early All Hallows Eve celebration. Laughter drifted up from below. I peered over the bridge railing to see costumed partiers dancing and drinking.

"I admire their balance," I said. "I would have already fallen into the water by now."

"You must be a dedicated land lubber." Rhys stood beside me also looking down. "You've never been on a boat before today, have you?"

"I've been on a ship many times, just not in this form," I said. "After I became aware, I did cross the Channel twice, but I was seasick the entire time. Let's just say I won't be doing too many long sea voyages in my immediate future."

"Look on the bright side," he replied. "You've been around long enough for technology to have progressed. We have automobiles and aeroplanes now."

"I have mixed feelings about technology. I don't like lifts much." I turned my head to say something else, but found his face close to mine. "Um, I don't like telephones much either."

"Oh really? Perhaps you've just had some bad luck with your experiences lately." He moved closer.

My breath stuttered.

Bang!

I jerked backward and Rhys cursed. Several small children in masks raced across the bridge with crackling sparks in their hands. They screamed in delight as their guardian, a large man carrying a lantern disguised as a severed head, lumbered after them, futilely calling out to the children to line up as they headed to an aunt's house.

Rhys finally sighed and raked a hand over his hair.

I shook my head. "I suppose that was our cue to get going."

* * *

In the dark, the narrow townhouse looked identical to all the other townhouses on the street. The shutters to one of the second story windows were open revealing a bit of interior light. The canal and the pedestrian walkway was devoid of traffic when I climbed up the few stairs to ring the doorbell.

I heard the ringing echo through the house I did not hear any footsteps on the foyer on the other side of the door to indicate that someone was coming. I rang the doorbell again. Nothing.

"Apparently the Baron is wrong," said Rhys. "I don't think Chesterfield is home."

"This is ridiculous! He's never home."

"Perhaps he is out with some drinking buddies at a local pub." Rhys was watching the street across from the canal. "The night, after all, is still young."

"This is frustrating." In a fit of annoyance, I pounded a fist against the door. The portal shuddered and then squeaked open. "Oh my. I didn't even say any magic words."

He regarded the door. "Why would a book collector leave his door unlocked? I would assume that he would have some rather valuable volumes in his collection. Not all book collectors are noble creatures, you know. Bibliomania causes some of them to plunge into the unsavory parts beyond the law."

"Who cares about bibliomaniacs," I told him. "This door is practically an open invitation. No one will know we've even been here if we just take a look around."

"Looking only and no touching unless you've got gloves."

"You sound like a professional cat burglar."

I stepped through the threshold into a rather bare parlor. Rhys followed, closing the door behind him.

It did not take long to go over the first floor of the townhouse. The living room and the kitchen seemed unremarkable. There was another door leading to a study filled with books. Rhys performed his location spell for the *Liber Tutelarum* while standing in the middle of that room, but found nothing.

Upstairs, I methodically checked the rooms. The bedrooms were unoccupied. I twisted the knob to the bathroom door and was confronted with a wall of rotting stink.

"Oh God!"

At first glance, the bathroom was a pristine area, tiled with white and soothing light blue. On one side was a white porcelain sink with a mirrored medicine cabinet over it. Next to the sink was a white porcelain latrine. At the opposite end of the room was a claw footed bathtub. A man's head and arm dangled over the sides, the flesh gray-white. The eyes wide open, glazed, sightless.

I had seen far worse during the course of my existence, but death had always unnerved me, no matter the form. I walked inside to examine the body.

Chesterfield lay naked in the bathtub full of water, his only company a bobbing sponge. His skin had taken on the strange waxy appearance that all corpses took on after they had been in the water for a while. Otherwise, there was no blemish on the body--no indication of the trauma that may have killed him.

"Bloody hell." Rhys had come into the bathroom behind me. "This is not good."

"No." I backed away and got out into the hallway to take in some fresh air. I felt like losing my dinner. "He has all the appearances that he's had a heart seizure. But I don't think that's the real cause of death."

"Intuition?"

"Mostly." I looked down the hall. Heard nothing. "But the Baron told me that he saw Chesterfield yesterday. The body in there has been in there for more than one day. More than two days judging from the state of decomposition."

"You think the Baron is in on this?"

"Possibly. It is also possible that the murderer created an illusion so that when the body was eventually found, the date of death would be altered."

"That is certainly a possibility." Rhys took my elbow and began steering me towards the stairs. "Or that might not be Chesterfield at all."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, with everything said and done, we can't say for sure what he looks like, can we? We had only verbal description to go by. We've never seen a photograph of him let alone seen him in person."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXVI

"You look exhausted."

Rhys was tucking into breakfast as if nothing of importance had happened the previous night. We had left Chesterfield's townhouse without calling the police--if we had made the call, suspicion would have immediately fallen onto us since we had broken into his house. His body would be found sooner or later anyway when his other acquaintances noticed his disappearance.

Or if the body had been someone else entirely--well, that would be Chesterfield's problem once he returned to his domicile.

The image of the corpse, whoever it was, had haunted my thoughts. I had had little sleep. Most of the night, I had just lain in bed staring up at the ceiling.

"I didn't sleep well," I replied. I sipped the tepid Earl Gray that the local café had managed to produce. I ignored the pastry on my plate--my stomach was too twisted to hunger.

"Nonetheless, you should eat."

"Maybe I'll save this for lunch."

"Don't tell me you're falling for current fashion now by eating like a bird." He swallowed his coffee. "Or rather not eating at all."

"There are many current fashions that I despise and picking at one's food is one of them. But you must make allowances. The dead...always makes my appetite falter."

He put down his cup, his expression softening in sympathy. "I did not know you would take it so hard. You seemed so stoic last night. Even now, you seem remarkably calm."

"We all show our stress in different ways," I replied, shifting in my seat uncomfortably. "You have no need to bother yourself with my neuroses. My appetite will return. Eventually."

But my words seemed to make him more concerned as he frowned. "It is nothing to make light of. I would gather that your reaction to the dead--perhaps it stemmed from the moment you became aware?"

"How would you figure that?"

"Based on my own experience," he told me. "The sacrifice, which is always the unintended sacrifice, makes for a traumatic experience. Things always go horribly awry."

I grimaced. "Don't remind me."

"I'm sorry. I suppose I got lost in my own memories." He picked up his coffee again. "Did I tell you about the costume shop I passed by yesterday?"

"No you didn't." I picked up my pastry and eyed it warily. I suppose I would have to try to eat it if I didn't want to starve until lunch. "What does a costume shop have to do with anything?"

"The Carnival is coming up very soon. We would stick out like sore thumbs if we didn't wear any costumes during the festivities. I also thought it could be used as cover, for something that I am thinking about."

I sat up straighter. "Cover? What sort of nefarious deeds are you planning this time?"

He smiled, pleased with himself. "I knew that would catch your attention. Besides, a diversion to the costume shop would be just the thing to lift your spirits."

* * *

Juniper's sat at an odd corner where two canals met at a sixty degree angle. On the outside, the costume shop looked like an apartment building constructed in the modern style with sleek lines and painted a bright peach--the color of sunrise. Inside, the front display room was triangular in shape, crowded with faceless mannequins dressed in outlandish outfits. Most of the light was natural, coming in from the wide front windows.

Several other customers were browsing the wares, but the clerks seemed to notice our arrival almost immediately. The woman in a button down suit and a measuring tape for a scarf put herself in our path when we attempted to go further into the shop.

"May I help you, ma'am, sir?"

I glanced at Rhys who gave the woman a charming smile. The clerk seemed completely oblivious.

"Um, Rhys, you did say you wanted costumes to be, uh, a cover?" I prompted.

"Oh, right. Yes, I did say that, didn't I?"

"Could you be more specific by what you meant as a cover?" the clerk asked.

"Some black costumes," Rhys replied. "For both of us. Completely black. No silver trim or gold thread or anything like that." He shrugged. "Can you help me here, Ana? I'm not the world's expert on clothing."

"Well neither am I."

The clerk motioned towards the back of the shop. "I think I know what you mean, sir. The costumes on the first floor are all flashy, for people who want to draw attention to themselves. On the second floor, you will find more subtle designs. Right now, we are quite swamped with orders so we cannot do custom fittings right away, but we will try our best. Just head up the stairs. If you need help with anything, please let me know."

As the clerk had indicated, a winding stair at the back of the shop led up to the second floor. This part of the shop was silent. I doubted there was anyone here aside from the two of us.

There were no mannequins on this floor, only racks and racks of clothes. We wandered through them. Occasionally I would stop and pull out a dress, but then put it back. I wasn't a particularly picky person when it came to style,

but none of the ones that I had seen so far had piqued my fancy.

While I was slowly going through the racks, Rhys had already chosen a few suits and had taken them to a small dressing room at the end of the room to try them on.

I eventually pulled out a dress from the racks that seemed appropriate and headed toward the small changing room. I still heard the rustle of clothes, so proceeded to wait.

A window looked out over the canal. Across the canal, several other buildings loomed, windows open, the inhabitants airing laundry. Beyond the rooftops, a spire stood out against the skyline. A spiral staircase wound itself on the outside of the structure like the skeleton of a conch--a strange architectural curiosity.

Out close to the horizon, the northern sea glimmered, the edges crowned with a series of stone and mortar levies. Much of the city was below sea level and a complicated network of pumps and dikes kept the streets of Haven dry. Most of the time.

Drawing my gaze down, I watched the pedestrians stroll by the street below, oblivious to eyes above. On the canal, a gondolier maneuvered his vessel under a bridge. His passenger reclined at the opposite end, a tricorne shielding his face from the sun.

That couldn't possibly...

"I'm done, Ana. The dressing room is all yours."

I turned to see Rhys coming out of the dressing room with the suits draped over an arm. "You picked one already?"

"Of course."

I glanced back through the window. The gondola was gone.

"Is something the matter?"

"I thought I saw..." I shook my head. "Never mind. I'm probably confusing one person for another. Everyone seems to be wearing the same types of hats these days."

The dressing room was surprisingly wide and spacious. A floor length mirror

stood in one corner while the opposite end contained a bench and a chair. I quickly stripped off my sensible dark blue skirt and blouse and donned the dress which took longer than I had anticipated.

"Ma'am? Sir? Are you doing all right?" called out a voice from somewhere else on the second floor.

I heard Rhys reassure the clerk that we were still looking for the appropriate costumes. A moment later, there was a knock on the dressing room door.

"Are you all right, Ana? You've been in there for quite some time."

"I'm fine. It's just that I didn't realize that there were so many buttons on this garment."

There was a pause. "Buttons?"

"Are buttons going to ruin whatever plan you had in mind?"

"What color are they?"

"The same as this dress."

"I suppose that would be fine if everything is black."

I looked at myself in the mirror. The style was very old fashioned. Unlike contemporary fashion, the dress actually had a waist. It reminded me of the paintings of Renaissance women I had seen at a gallery I had once visited. But in contrast to the bright colors characteristic of that period, this was black. I looked like somebody's widow.

"Black is perfect for lurking about," I said out loud. "Precisely what are you planning to do during Carnival?"

"Break into the library."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXVII

The clerk at Juniper's had boxed our costume purchases--along with some matching masks--into cardboard boxes bearing the store logo. A bit of twine wrapped around the box as if it were a present provided a handle to carry

the boxes back to the hotel.

By the time we had the costumes put away, it was noon. The front desk clerk suggested a small restaurant on a boulevard just past the city library. At the restaurant, we had taken a table at the window. The library was a square structure across the way, most of its façade blocked by nearby shops.

As we had lunch, I watched both tourists and the city inhabitants rustle about like busy ants--going in and out of shops, carrying packages to and fro. Some workers were slowly making their way down the street, stringing last minute electrical lights on the iron lampposts.

"I've never seen so many people make a fuss about All Hallow's Eve," I remarked. "I know it was originally a pagan festival and that it used to have some religious significance. It's also an ideal time for magic workers to weave their spells--but they've all been so secret about it."

"People like to celebrate holidays," Rhys replied. "The way I look at it, it's a bit of desperation. It's the last time people will have any opportunity to celebrate before the harsh reality of winter sets in. It's a bit of a reaffirmation of life. It might seem completely frivolous to you, but I think there's really something else behind it."

"You really do know people, don't you?" I said. "You sympathize with them. You feel like them."

"Don't you?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to deny it, but I caught myself and really tried to think about it. Rhys regarded me over his half eaten lunch with a colorless gaze that made my pulse skitter. It was a melancholy gaze, threatening to draw me into whatever emotional complication he offered--a complication that I was afraid of even looking at let alone taking.

But wasn't this fear something human itself? A book that has never known the existence of flesh and blood would know nothing of fear.

"Ana?"

I concentrated on my food. "I would be lying if I said I felt nothing."

"I didn't mean that you don't feel anything. You're just afraid to admit it." He said this kindly, without any smugness which made me feel worse for my willful cluelessness.

The walk to the library was brisk. A flight of wide stone stairs led up to a long portico framed with thick columns. The top of those columns were decorated by fat, grotesque figures, but from my distant vantage point, I could not tell if they were cherubs or demons.

A series of doors fronted the library--tall narrow doors gilded with carvings of vines and mythical creatures. Ahead of me, Rhys pushed one of the doors open and I walked into a marble glazed rotunda--the ceiling painted with a false skylight. Archways led in all directions to the archives.

A thin man sat at the front desk, dark hair combed meticulously back, thin-nosed, bespectacled. He peered at us over his glasses and spotting Rhys, frowned.

"Mr. Lattimore. What a surprise to see you again." The librarian's tone was nasal and slight disapproving. "Still doing research?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Penddington. Yes indeed, I'm doing more research." Rhys had pasted on a smile that did not reach his eyes. "We will be examining some of the older texts."

At the word "we", the librarian raised an eyebrow and then glanced at me. After a moment, his gaze dismissed me. I found myself smiling. Apparently Mr. Penddington was the type of man who thought females and books couldn't possibly mix.

"Good luck with that," Penddington finally said.

As Rhys pulled me across the foyer to one of the archways, I whispered, "What's wrong with him? Did you do something the last time you were here to annoy him?"

"He's just a dour sort of fellow," he replied. As we walked past the archway, I noticed that the bricks were painted with some sort of varnish which made them look like majolica tiles. "The only interaction I had with him yesterday was when I asked him where the grimoires and the older texts were kept. Every so often, he would come by to check up on what I was doing. He was probably afraid that I was going to deface his precious books."

"Perhaps that has happened to him before."

"Maybe. But to be honest, he looked suspicious even before he opened his mouth. I don't think he likes anyone tramping through his library."

I glanced around and saw no other library patrons in the vicinity. Nonetheless, I lowered my voice further. "Wouldn't that make things difficult? He might be taking precautions to ward the place from anyone crazy enough to break in here."

"I've thought of that. But we're not ordinary crazy people." He grinned. "We're grimoires and there will be two of us. I'm sure we can handle any security measures that prune-faced book guardian will cook up."

"You make us sound like supermen." I glanced at the many shelves before us. Labels were mounted to the end of each shelf--a hint to the collection's cataloguing system. "I'm a book of protection. I don't know anything about mechanical locks."

"Don't worry, darling. I do." He gestured to the far end of this particular room. I followed him, our heels clicking on the stone floor. "I used to work for some questionable characters when I was younger. And I learned quite a few practical skills."

"You were employed by thieves."

"Not exactly, but I suppose you could call them that."

The last shelf had a noticeably dusty air. It faced a stone wall--polished and blank.

"Ah ha! Here it is." Rhys pulled out one of the tomes. "One of John Dee's more philosophical works. Disguised as an alchemical text."

As he started leafing through it, I said, "What does that have anything to do with your search for Blackthorne? If I didn't know any better, I would think that you were indulging in an outlet for your own latent bibliophilia."

He glanced up from his search to give me a hot look. "Who said my bibliophila was ever latent?"

"You know, your attempts to shock me are not working."

"I'm just trying to wear you down, darling." He stopped at a page. "Take a look at this."

I stood beside him and read the inked text. "It's just some ravings of a fool who thinks that he can turn lead into gold."

"Don't you feel anything?"

"Feel what?"

"Put your hand on the page."

I made my disbelief clear on my face, but I put a finger onto the volume. The words began to run on the page and a surge of bright energy connected to my finger.

"Ouch!"

"How is your research going, madam?" Penddington had rounded the corner and was approaching us.

I wiggled my finger to check if it was still working. The words had gone back to their placid positions on the page.

"Everything is going quite well," Rhys told the librarian.

Penddington halted, looking skeptical. "I thought I heard someone scream."

"Don't worry," I said quickly. "I just got a paper cut."

The librarian's eyebrows raised up towards his hairline. Apparently, he didn't believe me. Finally, he said, "The library is not a place for trysts. If anything of that nature is occurring under this roof, I will call the police."

When he walked away, Rhys made a face. "Overbearing prude. Just watch, in ten minutes he will be back inquiring about our progress."

"Well, I suppose that is annoying." I glanced back at the book in his hands. "What was that anyway?"

"Residue," he replied. "And I can recognize the signature anywhere. Blackthorne had used this volume for something. That was what I was looking for when I came here to the library."

"So something made you suspect that the sorcerer used these books. But it doesn't tell us anything else."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. But I don't blame you since you have not been tracking down sorcerers for the better part of your existence. The

residue that you sensed can tell us several things. The strength of its pull tells us that Blackthorne handled this volume recently."

"And if it's recent," I said slowly, "that may mean he is still close by."

"That is one possibility. Where the residue was found also tells us what Blackthorne might be looking for."

"A way to turn lead into gold?" I said skeptically. "There are far more subtle ways to get more money. Like manipulating the stock market. If you suddenly had a pile of gold appear out of nowhere, wouldn't people become suspicious?"

"That is assuming that mad sorcerers still have any reasoning at all," he replied. "But no, I don't think that is what he is looking for. Look again at the exact place that you've touched."

The top of the page had indeed been discussing the methods used for attempting to turn base metals into gold, but I had touched the bottom of the page where a new section had begun.

Summoning.

Carefully, I turned the page by flipping the edge with a fingernail. There was a description of a potion using a variety of chemical ingredients that were to be mixed in a crucible that would aid in calling out and enslaving certain spirits to the summoner's will.

"There are these lists of spirits," I said. "Is he going to call all of them or just some of them?"

"I have no idea." He inclined his head toward the bookshelf. "But I am hoping that one of these other texts will describe exactly what these spirits are so we will have a better idea of what Blackthorne may be attempting to do."

"We're going to search through all these books?" I shook my head. "This is going to take a while." I grabbed a tome off the shelf. I stepped back to lean against the wall for support as Rhys replaced the John Dee tract to take up another book.

Something stung against my shoulder blades. "What the...?" I turned around. The wall didn't look any different.

"Did you find something already?" Rhys asked.

"No." I reached out to touch the wall. Something faint, almost indiscernible shifted, as if the grains of the stone had moved like ripples on the surface of a pond. "Did you see that?"

Rhys looked over, his eyes narrowed. "I've never touched the wall before. I never thought to. Do it again."

I pressed a finger against the stone. Again, the grains subtly moved. There seemed to be a pattern in it, but my mind could not yet grasp it. "I'm not sure what it is."

"I'm not sure either, but it is just one more reason to come back here."

I opened my mouth to say something, but a noise at the far end of the room caught my attention. "Well, you were right. That librarian is indeed coming back over here again to bother us. I suppose we should look like we're busy with scholarly matters."

The Third Conjunction
Seal XXXVIII

Well, that had been a waste.

We had spent the entire afternoon combing through books for information--with frequent interruptions from the librarian--but had found nothing. Tomorrow would be more research in the library, which I was not looking forward to.

It was after dinner and I had retired back to my room at the Northern Sea Hotel. I wasn't feeling at all sleepy, so I went to the room's balcony that overlooked one of the canals. It was cold--late autumn with the approach of winter--so I closed the balcony doors to keep the heat in and bundled myself up in a coat.

The sky was clear, the gibbous moon shining among the dark clouds like a strange coin. The street across the canal was mostly quiet except for the occasional early reveler rambling about in mask and lantern. There was no street below the balcony, just the watery canal.

When I strained my ears, I could hear the sound of fiddles and pipes several

canals over. The musicians were doing a lively jig and despite my usual temperament about such things, I felt an urge to dance.

I gripped the balcony railing, telling myself that it was just foolishness. I needed to focus on the real reason that I was here in Haven--searching for the seventh edition of the *Liber Tutelarum*. I would have to compile a list of the local antiquarian booksellers first. And then go visit each of them one by one.

The pounding of the door from within interrupted my mental planning. I opened the balcony doors and walked across the room to peer through the peephole to see who was paying me a call. When I saw who it was, I made a surprised exclamation and quickly opened the door.

"Rhys, you look awful! Did you lose your mind and decide to take a dip in the canal?"

He scowled as he shouldered his way in, carrying his suitcase. His clothes were damp and his hair was wet, plastered to his head. His eyes burned green in irritation.

"I just wanted to wash my hands when a pipe above my head decided to break," he told me. "My room is flooded. I contacted the hotel management about it, but they can't get anyone to fix the mess in such a short notice."

I looked at his suitcase. "And you're moving in with me because..."

"The rest of the hotel is booked full. It's Carnival, remember? The whole place is filled with tourists."

I glanced around my room. "It's going to be somewhat cramped in here."

"Oh come on, Ana. Don't tell me you haven't been in smaller places. Just remember your experiences being shelved in overcrowded collections. With just me here, this place is a palace."

"Well, you don't have to sound so surly about it!" I shouted back at him as he stormed into my bathroom to dry off.

I locked the room door and closed the balcony doors. It was true, the room was rather spacious compared to some other places. There was enough room for a wardrobe and a desk. Next to the balcony doors was a rather large sofa, but the bed was larger. Rhys would take the bed, I thought. He was taller than me. It was inevitable that he would make some needling

remarks about sharing body heat. I needed to think about a comeback to put him in his place.

The room was warm and I took off my coat to drape it over the chair at the desk. The balcony doors rattled and I assumed that a strong wind had blown up. I finally decided to rummage in my own luggage for my sleepwear. Now that Rhys had disrupted my time alone, there was nothing to do but to go to sleep.

The bathroom door opened, revealing Rhys in a towel.

I found myself gaping at him. "Have you noticed that you haven't finished dressing?"

He gave me a cocky grin. "I'm not that oblivious. Besides, I forgot my pajamas. That water pipe explosion rattled me more than I thought."

"No it didn't. You're deliberately prancing about in my room..."

"I never prance. Strut maybe."

"...strutting about in my room in a desperate chance to get lucky."

"Well, is it working?"

I eyed his naked chest and felt heat rise to my cheeks. "Maybe."

"That's music to my..."

The balcony doors rattled again and burst open revealing a large figure in tight black pants, a white and red striped shirt, and a gondolier's hat. Determined eyes sparkled behind a white mask decorated with small red feathers. Something glittered in his hand. A knife.

"I'm only here for the girl," the intruder gurgled with a fat grin. "Come `ere miss, and no one gets hurt."

"I don't think so," I replied. I lunged towards my suitcase.

"Ana!"

Something grabbed at the back of my blouse. In another second, I was yanked backward. The knife was a cold sting at my throat. I froze in the middle of my struggle.

"The boss says to kill you off since he wants to have a one on one with *him* there. But I think I'll have a bit of fun with you first."

Rhys inched forward, towards the suitcases. *Don't move, Ana. I'll have him under control.*

"Stop right there," the man barked. He moved the knife threateningly against my skin.

Rhys halted.

I was pulled back, out towards the balcony. The cold air pricked at my exposed skin. I noticed a rope and a hook that connected it to the balcony railing.

Just one more moment, Ana.

I didn't want to wait for one more moment. I wanted out of this ridiculous situation as soon as possible. Of course, the pounding terror in my veins and the knife at my throat didn't help matters much.

Forcibly, I willed my left hand to loosen its grip on my captor's arm. I didn't have much time. The man was going to cart me off to who knows where to do his evil deeds. I reached down.

Just when I was about to paralyze him where it would hurt the ego the most, something--my clothes iron?--flew over my head and slammed into the man's face with a sickening crunch. The knife clattered onto the floor and the man howled as he reflexively released me. Bits of white plastic and red feathers rained down next to the knife. Whatever had planted a facer on the intruder fell into the canal with a small splash.

In the next moment, Rhys was there, strong arming the man as he clawed at his own face. With a strained grunt, Rhys hoisted the intruder in a gondolier costume over the railing.

The man made an even larger splash in the canal.

I smoothed down my skirt and then noticed Rhys glaring into the canal. "Bastard!" he growled under his breath. Despite the adrenaline running through me, there was also something else about Rhys that struck me. It made my mouth run dry and my palms damp despite the weather. But I wasn't precisely complaining.

I swallowed. "Uh Rhys, what happened to your towel?"

He finally glanced down at himself. "Bloody hell."

The Final Conjunction
Seal XXXIX

The smoke drifting past the Grand Canal smelled of sweet hay and clover and shone silver in the night. A parade of gondolas and other small boats floated down the canal, propelled by rowing figures in gaudy costumes and outrageous masks. The largest boat held a pyre on which an effigy in the vague shape of a person burned--an orange and yellow blaze scraping towards the sky. Around it, men and women in white robes and white face paint danced and shouted. As the boat passed under the main bridge, revelers dangled over the sides, hollering wordlessly, popping champagne bottles, and shooting small cannons of confetti. More revelers on the streets on either side of the canal waved lanterns and handkerchiefs--the visible vapor of their breaths mingling with the smoking effigy.

All of this was merely the beginning of the Carnival.

The crowd jostled and I stepped back to avoid being trampled by a large person with wide shoes and a fake red nose. Rhys' hand pressed against the small of my back, steadying me from the churning tide of people. The festive air in Haven had been building all day. After a late lunch, we had gone back to the hotel to change into our black costumes and had emerged into a swelling throng. We had eventually made our way to the Grand Canal, only briefly sidetracked by a group of dancing gypsies, and had stood on the side street to watch the opening ceremonies.

Rhys bent his head, his mouth close to my ear. "Let's go," he murmured.

Making ones way through a horde was much like threading one's way through a moving maze. It was as if the entire city was out in the streets tonight and there was no one that we didn't brush by or bump into. At least no one seemed to mind--as if it were a matter of course that there would be feet stepped upon and the accidental crashing of bodies.

Eventually, Rhys and I made it to the edge of an alleyway and we paused to catch our breaths and to gather our bearings. Away from the canal, the air was clear of smoke, but the scent of burning things did not completely

disappear. Rhys took my arm and drew me further into the alleyway. With our black costumes, we easily blended into the shadows. Several revelers passed by the mouth of the alley and completely ignored us.

"This way."

The alley funneled out into another street facing yet another canal that ran parallel to the Grand Canal. In the darkness, familiar buildings took on an odd sheen. But my sense of direction was still intact--I could tell in which direction the Northern Sea Hotel lay as well as our final destination--the city library.

We stopped again, this time in the middle of a narrow bridge as a large group of masked festival goers passed. We stood to the side to allow these people through.

"I don't understand why we have to come out at night at all. Wouldn't it be more productive to find some sort of spell to divert attention during the day?" I said as the last stragglers ambled after the main group and we finally started walking in the opposite direction.

"It's less risky at night."

"I'd rather stay in bed than wander about in the dark freezing my feet off."

There was a soft chuckle. "I'd rather as well, but I don't want to wait. I have a feeling that something is close by. Something big is going to happen soon."

"Well, there is the fact that it's All Hallow's Eve."

"Yes."

Across another street and yet another bridge, we finally stood at the foot the stairs leading up to the library. Few revelers were about in this part of town. None of them took any notice of us.

"We can't just stroll in there from the front doors," I remarked. "There must be an entrance elsewhere as well. A more discrete entrance."

"You may be right. We might as well take a walk around the place--we wouldn't be wasting that much time."

On the side, close to the back, Rhys first spotted a small service door that blended into the walls quite well, except for the metal hinges which caught

the stray light from a nearby lamppost. Nothing shaded the side of the library from onlookers so I stood in front of Rhys keeping a watch as he fiddled with the lock.

I heard a quiet snick behind me.

"Ah. It's open. Come on."

We slipped into a long dark hall, the only light coming in from the windows on the outer side. Everything was gray-black. I could hardly make out the shelves lining the interior wall. I took off my mask.

"We need some light or we'll be wandering blind in here."

"That can be easily solved," Rhys replied. He took a book from a shelf and held it up to the window so that the moonlight hit the title. "What's your opinion on theological philosophy?"

"Tedious and useless."

"Well, no one's going to miss this if we take this with us." He took off his glove and something dark crawled from his skin to the hapless text. The cover began to glow with a greenish light. "I suppose this will be our makeshift lantern."

The light extended outward by a few feet, enough so that we would see any immediate obstacles. An archway at one end of the long hall led out into the rotunda. The darkness lent a sinister cave-like atmosphere to the place. However quietly we tried to traverse it, our heels would click on the stone floor and echo like a large slap. We passed close to the front desk which was unoccupied.

It was at the archway to the archives that something dark darted past me. My feet caught on something and with a muffled cry, I went head first to the floor.

"Ana!" Rhys voice was low and rough. "Are you all right?"

The cold stone floor stung my cheek, but I slowly sat up. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Rhys crouched beside me and lifted my chin with a palm to examine my face. "No apparent external injuries."

I batted his hand away. "I'm a little rattled, but I think all my parts are in order. It's about as bad as falling off a shelf."

Meow?

A small black shadow pounced to my side and began rubbing against my hip. In the eerie green light of the book lantern, I could make out a feline shape equipped with shining green eyes.

"Thor?" I said in disbelief.

"What is he doing here? Could it be possible that he followed us all the way from Greenglass without our notice?"

The cat pawed at me. And then climbed up my body to perch on a shoulder.

"You're nothing but a nuisance," I whispered.

Thor responded with an arch of his back and then lazily slumping onto my shoulder like a useless fur.

Rhys took my hands and drew me back up to my feet. "There's nothing we can do about it. We might as well continue in our search."

The Final Conjunction
Seal XL

The shelves loomed, silent sentinels in the unlit library. We had made our way back to the section of old alchemical texts and grimoires that we had been searching through earlier. Except this time, with no one in the library except us, there would be no distractions. Rhys had taken another book from a shelf on the opposite side of the room, some screed on political hierarchies, and had applied an illumination spell to it so I could use it as a lantern to see what I was doing.

As I was flipping through yet another tome on devil summoning," I said, "About that bet."

"What bet?" He was sitting on the floor hunched over another volume.

Since I was leaning against the shelf, I looked down at him, his face lit from below by the glowing religious tract. "The poker game we played back on the

train. I won."

"How could I forget? You have yet to claim your prize."

"What spell were you planning to give me?"

His mouth curved. "I think I shall let you find out when you finally decide to let me give it to you."

"Vicious tease." I flipped a couple more pages. I had placed my own book lantern on a shelf above my head so that the light would shine down into the book I was examining. "I was hoping that it would be a practical spell. Like your finding spell. Or this illumination spell."

"Trust you to think of the practicalities. But where's the fun in the practical?"

"You're thinking about giving me a spell that is completely useless, aren't you? I can just imagine it now, some sort of talisman for summoning a particularly troublesome demon from the fifth circle of hell."

"That would be ironic, wouldn't it? You were penned by a monk."

"Not entirely."

"That's right. You had some owners who added some more spells to you."

Thor stirred on my shoulder. First he stretched and pricked my shoulder with claws. His ears swiveled, trying to catch any noise.

Rhys looked up. "You say that you only have shielding spells. But you do have some for attacking, don't you?"

I thought about what I did to the Baron the other day. "I suppose I could use them in that way. On a very short range basis, though."

The cat suddenly pounced on the book I was holding and used it as a launch pad to fly to the floor.

"Hey!"

Thor raced out of our section of the stacks as if he had suddenly scented some particularly elusive prey skittering about in the library.

I closed the book and took up another. "That cat is completely

incomprehensible. I mean, it's a pamphlet, a small book, right? One would think that a book would know somewhat what another book might be thinking."

"Do you know what I'm thinking?"

A page rustled under my fingers. "Now that you put it that way, no, not precisely. But I can guess. Sometimes anyway."

There was a bit of silence except for the occasional movement of pages while we looked through our respective texts. I did not find any sorcerous residue on any of the pages I had turned, which made me wonder if Blackthorne's trail had gone cold.

"When I find Blackthorne and you find your earlier edition, what will you do?" he asked quietly.

I looked over at him, but he seemed absorbed in his search. "I don't know. Go back to Colchester and work as a research assistant for a history professor. I will continue to search for the other editions--there are others aside from the seventh. I had heard rumors about another edition in France, but nothing had come out of them so far."

"Ah, was that why you made the remark about the Sun King's court a while back? And the crossing of the Channel?"

"That was centuries ago. I'm sure the lead from those rumors has completely disappeared by now. I didn't find my then either when the lead was hot. What will you do after you find Blackthorne?"

"I will dispose of him," he replied, his tone icy. "The world has no need for power hungry sorcerers without qualms."

I found myself shivering. With me, Rhys had been mostly salacious, accommodating, lackadaisical, and, well, warm. But sometimes, like now, when he revealed the other facet of himself, I wondered if he had any qualms either.

A small noise--like that of a shattering tea cup--jolted me from my position. Hurriedly, I stuck the book I had been examining back onto the shelf and took down the book lantern. I tucked it underneath my coat and strained my ears.

"What is it?" Rhys had gotten up from his position on the floor and had put

his text back. He still held his book lantern, illuminating the area between us.

"I heard something. I think there's someone in this library with us."

"It's Thor, you mean. Perhaps he knocked over a lamp in his attempt to catch a mouse."

"Have you ever known the cat to hunt rodents?"

"Well, I've never seen any evidence that Thor has any hunting skills, but that may be because he is more discrete about it. He's always begged for milk from me."

I wasn't swayed. And my suspicions were partially confirmed when I saw the black fur ball race back into our small alcove in an agitated state--definitely not the sort of behavior one saw in a predator during a hunt. The cat pawed at my feet, then at Rhys, and paced about while silently baring his teeth.

"What's wrong with him? Has he gone mad?"

Thor suddenly took a flying leap toward the wall as if were to smash himself onto the stone. Even in the dim light, I saw the wall shift as if the shadows playing upon it had taken up a consciousness of their own. The cat disappeared *through* the wall.

Running footsteps echoed elsewhere in the library. The footsteps were heading in our direction.

"Damn it, I think we've been found." Rhys shoved the book lantern he held into a pocket in his greatcoat.

"But how? It was only Thor wandering..."

Before I could completely finish the sentence, Rhys had grabbed my arm and shoved me into the wall.

The Final Conjunction
Seal XLI

I stumbled, coughing, into dusty blackness.

My feet eventually halted and I slumped against what felt like a stone wall. Deep, ragged breathing sounded in my ears. Rhys. I took out the book lantern from beneath my coat.

The light revealed a narrow passageway heading off into darkness. Thor sat in the middle of the passageway with his tail curled around his haunches. He raised a front leg and began licking down his fur as if everything that had happened before had never existed.

On the sides of the passageway, several wooden crates were stacked up against the wall. Judging from the layer of dust on top of them, they had been undisturbed for quite a while. The other end of the passageway terminated into a stone wall--the other side of which was the library archives. I stepped over to place my hand on the wall. The stone was cool to the touch and I felt the grain subtly shift, but it felt as solid as ever.

"What on earth happened?"

Rhys brushed back a lock of hair that had fallen over his eyes. "There's something strange about that wall. I think there is a spell on it."

"Perhaps there is. But this feels solid to me. How did we go through it?"

He walked over to touch the wall as well. He frowned when it poked at it, his fingers obviously encountering something very solid. "Did you perform some sort of transportation spell?"

"No. Did you?"

He shook his head and then turned to look at the oblivious cat sitting in the middle of the hidden hall. "Thor. The cat went through first, didn't he?"

"Well, yes. Does the pamphlet contain any spells for walking through solid objects?"

"I've never read the *Dux Bestia*, so I wouldn't know. But that makes as much sense as the wall somehow spontaneously deciding to let us through."

A scratching sound made the cat suddenly prick up his ears. I paused at the cat's sudden attention and tried to strain my ears. The sound came again, but it was from the other side of the wall.

"I could swear that I could hear people in here," came a muffled voice from the other side. The voice was too distorted from the barrier for me to tell for

sure who it was who was speaking, but I had a good idea. The librarian, Pendington. Apparently, he was even more paranoid than we had assumed him to be.

"Eh, we're sure you're right about it," said another voice. "Perhaps these intruders are lurking about elsewhere. It is quite possible that they heard us coming and they hid elsewhere."

"Yes, constable. That's it. They're probably hiding somewhere else in the library. I know this place like the back of my hand. No alcove will go without search! I bet the villains have ensconced themselves in the horticulture section."

"The horticulture section? What makes you say that?"

"The shelving arrangements in that part of the library are particularly devious."

"Well, devious or not, I suggest we turn on the lights in this building. It's damn hard wandering about here in the dark."

"But that would ruin our element of surprise! Besides, didn't you say you had the entire place surrounded by your officers? Even if they managed to get out, they'll be caught." Pendington started to say something else, but his voice faded, indicating that he and the constable were already well on their way to that horticulture section in the archives.

Rhys looked pensive. "I suppose it would be out of the question to go back out there. Tonight's expedition is a failure, I'm afraid."

"It's not the end of the world," I replied. "We did go through some of the books tonight. We can come back to the library tomorrow morning and act as if nothing had happened since the last visit we had during the day. That would twist Pendington's knickers."

"He seems too much of a stuffed shirt to be wearing women's underwear."

"Oh, I don't know. Some of the most unlikely people seem to have the strangest predilections."

"Is that a hint that you have some sort of habit that I don't know about?"

"Such as what?" Thor had finally finished smoothing down his fur and had gotten up to pace the width of the passageway. He glanced at us and made

some impatient cat sounds.

"Hm. Plenty of nice girls like to tie their blokes up before they have their way with them."

"Huh."

"What, am I right?"

I found myself smiling as I shook my head. "I think that guess of yours says more about you than it does about me."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong about being tied up."

"You should be careful what you wish for." Thor gave a loud meow and then bounded off into the passageway. "Come on, let's go. I think that cat knows far more than we attribute him for. Perhaps he knows another way out of here."

We jogged after the cat, down the featureless passage. It was long and straight with a slight slope downward, and judging from where we had started, I strongly suspected that we were heading south and underground. Thor raced further, his paws quick and soundless on the stone floor, his tail sticking straight out behind him like an antennae on top of a radio tower. Perhaps he was trying to home into something.

Abruptly, the passageway ended and dropped off into a flight of stairs. Thor didn't stop. He continued to go down.

"I'm beginning to doubt that cat," Rhys said. "He might be on another of his manic episodes."

"I have doubts too," I admitted. "But there isn't anything we can do. At least this passage is straightforward. If we need to, it will be easy for us to backtrack."

"Yes, but if Thor continues to do his own thing, we won't have him with us to enable us to go back through the wall."

So with no other choice, we went down the stairs. As we approached the bottom, there was a familiar sound. Water.

At the foot of the stairs, the tunnel widened into a small chamber. It was more of a stone platform which jutted out into a watery tunnel that branched

into several directions. Water was not stagnant. It lapped at the platform as if it was pulled by an invisible current. An underground canal. A sewer.

Thor made another sound and jumped over the platform. Startled, I raced over to the side to see if the mad feline had decided to drown himself.

There was a boat bobbing next to the platform. The cat sat on a wooden bench and looked up at me as he patted the end of an oar with a paw.

The Final Conjunction Seal XLII

"Isn't this entirely convenient?" I said as Rhys stepped into the boat.

"It's convenient, but do you see any other way out of here?" he asked. He held out his hand. I took it and climbed aboard. And nearly tripped over the bench. Thor yowled in disgust at my clumsiness. "What makes you sound so suspicious?"

"Maybe there's a trap at the end of all this," I replied. I managed to climb back on the bench. Rhys had sat down and used one of the oars to push the boat away from the platform. I put the glowing political tract near the prow. The book lantern cast green light into the water below and was reflected up to the ceiling of the underground canal. "We have to be prepared for the worst case scenario."

"I think it was by chance that we ventured all the way down here." Rhys moved the oars and they made a soft splash as they churned the water and propelled the vessel forward toward the first fork of the waterway. "How can someone be so sure that we would find that passageway? Even if someone alerted the librarian to the fact that we were in the library, how would anyone know that we would be able to go through that wall? It would be far more likely that library prowlers would find some kind of hiding place in the library first."

"I hope you're right."

The entire place was bricked in a simple style, the ceilings arching upward as if we were inside a gigantic mortared pipe. Other than the splashing of the boat going through the water and the rippling of the water lapping along the sides of the tunnels, there was no other sound. A watery tomb, I thought. But where there was movement, there was surely an end to all of this.

Nearing the fork, Thor jumped on top of the book lantern and angled his body so that the light was directed into the left tunnel. I looked at Rhys and he shrugged as he altered his efforts to row in the leftward direction. We might as well follow the cat since we had no other idea of how the underground canals were arranged.

After two more turns and a winding passage which made me doubt that we were going in any direction at all--perhaps Thor was playing with us and turning us around in circles--we approached a wide cavern where the water from all of the tunnels poured into a vast lake-like reservoir. But this cavern wasn't completely devoid of light. When we entered, yellow light spilled out from our right. There was another platform--this one was crowned with real lanterns which hung from poles at the corners of the platform. As Rhys rowed toward it, I could make out another boat, hidden in the corner shadows.

The platform appeared abandoned. Once Rhys docked near some steps, I tucked the book lantern back under my coat. Thor pounced ahead. When I finally got on the platform, I noticed that it was merely an extension of a vast room which petered out into corridors. Stone stairs at the back of the room led upward to somewhere. Below the stairs was a smaller recessed room cut off from the rest of the area by iron bars placed at a width too narrow for anyone to pass through. Beside the small room was a table and then on the wall, empty shackles.

But what finally caught my attention was the floor of the room. Someone had painted a gigantic circle inscribed with a triangle onto the stones beneath our feet. Symbols that seemed vaguely familiar but undecipherable were written on the outer edges of the shapes. In the light, the paint looked dark red, almost black.

"This looks like some sort of conjuring circle," I said frowning. "But I don't know what this says. I'm not familiar with these symbols."

"I can read them." His voice was cold. "Someone is preparing to do some bad magic. I need to read all of this before I can get a handle on what is going on here."

"What sort of bad magic?"

His lips thinned. "Trust me, it's probably very bad."

As he walked around the circle deciphering the sigils, I decided to explore

the rest of the room. There were a couple of old barrels which looked like wine casks scattered about the place. Even an old wagon was sitting in a corner, slowly rotting away. I made my way toward the smaller recessed room under the stairs. It was then that I noticed that the table was not completely devoid of objects. Thor was sitting on the ground beside it, his eyes narrowed, his tail lashing silently back and forth. On the surface of the table was a book.

"Al!"

Well it's about time you got here, the Necronomicon grumped. I've been laying in this godforsaken corner for who knows how long.

"A couple days, I think."

Who cares? I can't keep track of time.

"Al, how did you get here? Who took you? And is he still around?"

Some man. I don't know who he was. Some minion of somebody. A crazy book collector, I thought. And then he decided to put me here. At least the cat was good for something. It followed me here and then came and got you.

"What crazy book collector? Was it Archibald Chesterfield? Did you hear any names?"

Too many questions which I don't know the answer to! Al sounded exasperated. Just get me out of this place.

"If you take that old grimoire, you'll have to take me as well."

The gravelly male voice made me jump back. From within the small recessed room, a face and a pair of hands appeared at the iron bars. Black eyes in a dirty face watched me. The man had a moustache and a short dark beard braided with wood beads. A black captain's hat covered his head. He wore a brown vest and a white linen shirt unbuttoned almost down to his navel. His pants were some sort of loose dark material and his boots were scuffed. He looked like a pirate.

"Who are you? Maybe someone locked you up for a very good reason."

"Look here, lass. No one deserves to be locked up here in the sewers! Let me out."

I put my hands on my hips. "I don't even know who you are."

He bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. "Septimus is my name. But I don't think now is the time for pleasantries."

"That doesn't tell me anything. You could be Al's kidnapper. You could be some crazy serial killer pretending to hide out here."

Al sighed in my head. *Girl, that is the Liber Tutelarum.*

"He's the *Liber Tutelarum*?" I could hear my voice go up in outrage, but I didn't care. I had imagined my sibling to be somewhat like me. Civilized, bookish, reasonable. Not this...this uncouth barbarian.

"You have a big mouth," Septimus told Al.

I have no mouth, you git.

"How can you possibly be the *Liber Tutelarum*?" I said. "You're nothing like me."

His brow angled down in a frown. "You're another edition?"

"The tenth."

"That explains it. All the later editions are all prissy. I'm sure you'll get along famously with Marguerite."

"Marguerite? Who's she?"

"Your older sister." At my bewildered expression, he clarified, "The eighth edition. She's a social climber. She loves Parisian fashion. It's all 'oh la la' with her." Septimus rolled his eyes. "We must simply get you a new hair dresser, Septimus dear," he said in a high pitched voice. "You can't possibly go out into polite society looking like you've just come back ravishing a village of native beauties in the South Seas!" He wrung his hands like a deranged chicken.

"What's wrong with him?" Rhys had wandered over to stand behind me. "Is he some mental patient?" He glanced down at the table. "Hey Al, how did you end up here?"

"He's having some family issues," I replied.

Septimus turned his back to us. "Go ahead. Make fun of me. I'm used to it. No one understands the life of a buccaneer. I'm a free spirit, I tell you. Free!"

"At the moment, you don't look free to me, dear brother."

"Wait. He's your bro-..."

When Rhys was abruptly cut off, I turned to see what the matter was. I only had a brief glimpse of his prone body on the ground when something loomed over me and pain crashed into my skull.

The Final Conjunction
Seal XLIII

"Wakey, wakey." A pause. An exasperated noise. "Oh good lord, save me from soft headed females. Why couldn't I have a demolition expert for a rescuer?"

I opened my eyes and reached up to grab an ear.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

The iron bars clanged. "Quiet in there!"

Septimus subsided into a whimper.

I looked over to the other side of our cell. Our captor was none other than the weasel-faced auction house assistant from Greenglass--Jethro Meyhew. I could still make out his features despite the hat he pulled low over his eyes. He jangled as he took up his post near the cell. On his belt were a ring of keys. Beside that, a pistol was stuffed down his pants.

"Let go of my ear, you evil woman."

I twisted.

My brother hissed in pain.

"Never call me a soft headed female again."

"All right, all right! I take it back."

I let go. "How did I get in here? What happened?" I slowly got up from a small cot that had been shoved to the back of the room. My head ached.

"I don't know. Everything happened so fast. That little man had the element of surprise, I'll grant you that."

"We were foolish to let our guards down." I got up and felt a wave of dizziness come over me. I stood still for a moment to let it pass before I walked to the iron bars. I looked out.

Al was still on the table muttering, *Supid, stupid, stupid idiots!* Thor seemed to have disappeared yet again. Rhys had been chained up against the wall next to the table, his wrists in shackles. His head was lolled forward--still unconscious from the blow he had been dealt with.

"What foolish human have you dragged into this?" Septimus drawled as he flopped onto the cot.

I glared at him as I began to pace. "His name is Rhys. And he's like us."

"Yet another edition?"

"No. He's the *Clavis Umbrium*. And he's on the trail of a sorcerer. Well, we were anyway. I did not expect to find you here."

"He's a Key, eh? How did you two manage to get together?"

"We met in a book shop."

Septimus chortled. "You couldn't pick a duller place. Did he amaze you with his prowess of Latin and Greek? Or maybe his cataloguing skills?" He peered past me. "It was his looks, wasn't it? He does seem to have the kind of face that women would fall for. Got lucky in the human sacrifice department, the bastard."

I shook my head. "You're insane. If you wanted to attract women, you should follow the prevailing fashion. Shave off all that facial hair to start."

He gasped, clutching his beard. "That's an affront to my manhood! You're one of those suffragettes, aren't you?"

"Why are you babbling about your manhood? You're a book, not a man."

She's right, you know, Al chimed in. *Besides, what sort of man wears beads in his hair?*

"They're my lucky charms!" Septimus exclaimed.

There was another clang at the front of the cell. "Didn't I tell you to be quiet?" Mayhew sneered.

Septimus sneered back and then said, "At least I don't have to worry about competition if he's with you. What's your name anyway?"

"Ana. And I don't understand why you're so hung up about competition from Rhys when we're all locked up. Where is your sense of priorities?"

"There are no priorities if you can't get out."

I wanted to berate him on being lazy and complacent, but I didn't want to waste my breath. Instead, I turned to examine the iron bars. There was a lock to the side that was closest to our jail guard. I couldn't find myself continuing to call Mayhew our captor because it was obvious that there was someone else who was a mastermind behind all of this.

Mayhew was yawning and was not paying any particular attention to the cell. Occasionally, he would flick his gaze over to Rhys, but he did not move.

I put my hand on the lock and felt nothing. The only thing that would get us out of here was the mechanical way via a key. Or an explosive spell. And since I had neither, getting out would be nigh impossible.

"So how did you end up here?" I asked Septimus. I started pacing again, feeling frustrated that I could do nothing.

"Just a series of unfortunate events," he replied as he stretched over the cot to stare at the ceiling. "While I was trying to get back to my ship which was docked in Port Devon, I was turned back into book form. I found myself sold to various dealers and then I ended up with some collector who, wonders!, lived in Haven."

"I don't suppose his name was Archibald Chesterfield."

At my remark, I heard Mayhew emit a sinister giggle.

"I don't pay attention to names very much," Septimus replied, waving a hand vaguely. "But that sounds about right. By the time he bought me, I had regained enough energy to Turn. So I waited until he went to take his bath to sneak out of his study. Unfortunately, I was caught by that runt over there and his master before I even set foot out the door."

A shuffling sound pealed overhead. Mayhew suddenly straightened up, blinking his eyes wide awake. Septimus reclined on the cot with a disgusted look on his face as he muttered something lowly under his breath that sounded suspiciously like obscenities. The footsteps edged downward, corresponding to the stairs above the alcove jail. A familiar figure appeared. Blackthorne.

The blond haired sorcerer was walking about bare-headed and clothed in what looked like a red velvet robe. Rings glittered on his fingers. In one hand, he held a jeweled jar and a paintbrush. He walked over to Mayhew and made a gesture with his hands which made his rings flash.

"Go and see if the Baron is ready."

"Yes sir." Mayhew scuttled away and up the stairs, the keys on his belt jangling.

The sorcerer approached the iron bars.

I kept my distance. "I demand to be let out at once."

Blackthorne gave an oily smile. "You were the woman who visited the Baron the other day, didn't you? It is too bad that you got mixed up with the Key. If you had stayed with your associations with normal people, you wouldn't be in this predicament, would you?"

"What do you think you're doing?"

He laughed, as if what I had said was immensely amusing. He seemed to take an interest in the jar in his hand. "Ah, Miss, that would be telling. Haven't you ever read any novels lately?"

"I've read plenty. What does that have to do with anything?"

"In novels, the villains always give away their secrets at the last moment when they think they're at their most invincible. And then they die. I'm not going to be like some poor clichéd character in a book."

"Maybe we are in a book," Septimus replied. "An insanely deranged book written by an author who takes the notion that the universe is a harsh, brutish place too seriously."

Blackthorne peered past me to stare at him. "Or maybe the author just doesn't like you. Perhaps the author likes me."

"Egotistical ass," I muttered.

"What did you say?"

"I said 'I didn't like being called a lass'," I said in a louder tone.

The sorcerer gave me a confused glare. "You're as useless as he is. I thought he was a thief after Chesterfield's copy of the *Liber Tutelarum*, but he had nothing on him. And the collector was eliminated before I could get any information out of him. However the Key..." Blackthorne turned toward Rhys. He slapped at his face twice.

Rhys groaned as if he was struggling to attain consciousness. I saw his head rise. His eyes, almost completely hidden by the locks falling over his forehead, were bright electric green.

"You've been rather persistent, haven't you?" The sorcerer seemed amused as he towered over his victim. "It's too bad that the mechanical failure of the Hinterland Express and those silly women in Newcomb didn't manage to detain you long enough."

Rhys coughed. "So it was you."

Blackthorne slapped him again--apparently just for the hell of it. Rhys slumped back with another moan of pain. "I'm going to take great pleasure into forcing you back into your book form. I will rip your pages out of your spine. One by one. I'm sure you will make some very delightful tearing noises."

Good gods, that's heinous. Al sounded appalled.

Septimus blanched at the sorcerer's remark.

"And then," Blackthorne continued in a lascivious tone, "I'm going to soak you in a nice vintage liqueur and slowly burn each page with one of those branding irons master chefs use to caramelize crème brûlée."

I shuddered. I didn't think that any book torturer would sink to such depravity.

"You need serious help," Rhys rasped.

"I don't need help. I need someone to invent a machine that can shred Keys like you in minutes. All those lovely bleeding bits of paper--like confetti." The sorcerer finally turned his back on his shackled captive. "But I will save all that later. The midnight hour approaches and I must make some final touches." He opened the cap of the jeweled jar and prepared to dip the brush into it.

There was a hurried jangling as Mayhew came back into view. "Mr. Blackthorne, the Baron says he's not ready. In fact, he claims that he will never be ready."

"Damn aristocrats." The sorcerer capped the jar and placed it and the brush on top of one of the nearby casks sitting about in the underground room. "They always think that everything revolves around them. I'm going to show him once and for all who's really in charge." In another moment, he was gone, leaving only Mayhew to watch over us.

The Final Conjunction
Seal XLIV

A slight movement near the ground caught the corner of my eye. Thor was back. And in the cat's mouth was an iron ring of keys.

"Is that where you've been?" I whispered. A quick glance out into the main room told me that Mayhew was not paying any attention at all to the prisoners--he was glancing up the stairs, fidgeting as he waited for the return of the sorcerer. He did not notice that he was no longer jangling.

I crouched and slowly took the keys from Thor's mouth, careful to not make a sound.

"What's that there?" said Septimus.

"Sh." I briefly showed him the keys. "Now's our chance."

"But that runt is out there."

"By himself. It will be him against us." I began trying the keys at the lock as Septimus peered out, keeping an eye on Mayhew's movements. On the third try, I heard a soft click. Success!

Mayhew had taken to pacing and he was muttering to himself about how long the sorcerer was taking. He often glanced at his watch--probably counting down the minutes to the midnight hour which was the appointed time for whatever sinister ritual Blackthorne had planned. Mayhew walked toward us with his head to the ground and his hands clasped behind his back. Then he turned to pace back the way he came from.

Septimus and I moved in synchrony. The door to our prison banged open. Thor leaped out. I rushed towards Rhys with one key ready in my fingers. I jammed it into the lock on the shackles. It didn't work.

"What?" Mayhew was cut off as Septimus crashed into him and both men rolled to the ground, kicking, punching, cursing.

I tried another key, but it wouldn't turn.

"All of this commotion will only draw the sorcerer down here earlier," Rhys said lowly. "You've found your brother. Go rescue him from that fight and leave."

"I'm not leaving you here to get torn page by page."

"I didn't know you cared for me."

"Of course I care about you," I retorted. "Ah." The fourth key finally unlocked the shackles. Metal fell to the ground.

Rhys got up quickly to his feet. "We can't leave him like that."

"No." We made to intervene in the fight, but suddenly the rolling, punching bodies stopped.

Mayhew had his pistol pointed to Septimus' temple. "Take another step and I'll blow his brains out."

I froze. Septimus growled, his eyes as dark as an abyss, his mouth barred and snarling. If the seventh edition was anything like me, he could do nothing in his current position. He had no attacking spells.

Girl, do you still have my key?

I risked a glance at the *Necronomicon*. "Yes, why?"

Open me.

A chill skittered down my spine. "You don't know what you're asking, Al. That's dangerous."

I know I'm dangerous. But open me and keep down. I'll take care of him.

The altered key to Al felt cold against my fingers when I reached into my pocket. Slowly, I edged backward.

Rhys looked back at me. "What are you doing? Ana, don't listen to Al. He's trying to play the hero--instead he'll kill all of us with whatever horror he will unleash."

"Stop right there!" Mayhew barked. "Both of you, get back behind those bars."

Quickly, I took out the key and stuck it into Al's lock. It popped open.

Yesssss.

I pulled Rhys down with me to the ground. Reluctantly, he came with me.

The *Necronomicon* flipped open by itself and a stiff breeze started to blow in the room. Mayhew's eyes widened as he caught sight of something that none of us grimoires could detect. He waved his pistol wielding hand around as if he were trying to brush away a fly. With that movement, he lost his grip on Septimus who wisely rolled away to a safe distance.

Mayhew began screaming. He dropped his pistol and began clawing at his own face. The anguished cries were then stopped by choking sounds. Mayhew went limp.

Al laughed darkly in our heads. There was a thump as the *Necronomicon* closed itself. The key fell out of the lock.

Septimus was the first to get up. He took the discarded pistol and shoved it into his belt loop. Then he prodded Mayhew's body with the tip of his boot.

"Is he dead?" I asked as I approached. Mayhew looked untouched. If I didn't know better, I would have thought that he was just sleeping.

"I don't know," Septimus replied. "But I'm not going to take any chances. Hey you." He nodded towards Rhys. "Help me lock him up in that alcove."

As the men dragged the body to the cell, I went back to the table. Thor had pounced onto it and was sniffing at the old grimoire and making disgusted cat noises. "What did you do to him?"

Oh, nothing that you should worry about.

The cell door slammed shut. Septimus swaggered towards the table and scooped up Al and the key. He peered at both objects with great interest. "You'd be a useful companion to take with me on my voyages."

"You can't," I said. "Don't you realize what sort of book that is? There's some really bad stuff in that grimoire."

"All the better!" Septimus made his way to the edge of the platform and jumped into one of the row boats. Thor pounced after him. "I can use it to defeat all my enemies."

"Exactly where are you going?" demanded Rhys. "You can't leave us. We have a sorcerer to catch."

My brother gave us a sloppy salute as he briefly took his captain's hat off his head. "Hey, all I wanted to do was to get out of here. The sorcerer is your problem. Cheerio!"

I stood at the waters edge dumbfounded as Septimus rowed out into the underground canal. How could he abandon family like this?

Rhys shouted after him, telling him that he was a lily-livered coward.

"The sorcerer is your business," he called back. "But I'll visit sometime. Maybe I'll bring Marguerite too." With a maniacal sounding chuckle, Septimus, Al, and Thor disappeared through one of the canal tunnels.

"Damn, I'm late."

We turned to see a figure in crimson robes rush down the stairs. The sorcerer glanced at us in surprise.

"How did you get out? Where's Mayhew?"

I opened my mouth to say something particularly mean-spirited when he shook his head and stepped into the casting circle that had been painted on the floor.

"There's no time. And you can't stop me anyway." He spread out his arms and red light flickered from the painted circle. No doubt, he had erected some sort of barrier to keep from being disturbed. "I will call the spirits and everything shall be mine!"

As Blackthorne began to speak in strange gibberish, I turned to Rhys. "What does he mean by 'everything'?"

Rhys was frowning as he was trying to make out Blackthorne's words. "I'm not sure. But we have to stop it."

As I tried to think, I took out the book lantern I had put in my coat. The political tract was still glowing, albeit faintly. "This is not going to help, is it? Is that barrier impenetrable?"

"We can test it," he replied. He took out the book lantern from his own pocket and threw it in Blackthorne's direction. The sorcerer didn't even flinch or pause in his litany. The religious philosophy book, however, bounced against an invisible wall and fell with a splash into the underground canal. Rhys sighed. "Well, since you're a book of protection, do you have a spell to counteract shields?"

"Not really, but I suppose I could try." I ran through several spells in my head, wondering which one to use. In the end, I decided to try all of them. I directed my energies towards the book lantern in my hand. Black sigils ran from my skin to the book cover, covering whatever was left of the glow with black viscous ink. I handed it to Rhys. "You're a better at throwing things than I am."

He hurtled the bespelled book into Blackthorne's shield. It went up in a puff of smoke when it touched the invisible barrier. My shoulders slumped in defeat, but Blackthorne finally paused in his chanting to look over at us. The sorcerer was smiling. And his golden locks seemed to shine brighter than usual, as if he had charged himself up on a battery.

"You're pitiful...argh!"

I shielded my eyes with an arm as his hair suddenly flashed into a white inferno. The sorcerer screamed. Squinting, I could see that Blackthorne was engulfed in some sort of strange flame that rose higher and higher until it

blasted through the ceiling, raining down debris. Then as suddenly as the flame arose, it went out and there was no evidence of the sorcerer's existence except for bits of crushed bricks.

Rhys walked over to the casting circle to examine the remains. After a few seconds of searching, he seemed to find what he was looking for. "So that's what went wrong."

"What?" I walked over to him. He pointed to the edge of the circle where the jeweled jar had dropped, splattering dark red paint over several symbols.

"He didn't take time to notice that his circle was ruined. And performing any sort of ritual with imperfect tools can be deadly."

I was about to agree with him when a brick fell from the ceiling and smashed into the ground. Several others began to follow.

Rhys pulled me toward the stairs as the entire room began to cave in.

The Final Conjunction
Seal XLV

A plain wooden door sat at the top of the stairs. Rhys kicked it in and we stumbled into a plush, dimly lit room. I closed the door behind me which muffled the noise of the imploding underground room and discovered that on this side, the door had been painted a deep green. The room itself was lined with books--an eerily familiar study. It looked like a replica of the Baron's study that I had visited the other day, but it wasn't. This study had a strange octagonal shape to it. At the opposite side of the room from where we had come out of the underground chamber, a body lay face down on a desk.

Cautiously, Rhys approached the desk. "How unfortunate."

I edged close to the desk. The lamp on top of the desk illuminated the back of a head, dark hair. The body sat on a chair and slumped over on the table top as if the man had decided to take a brief nap. But there was a pool of blood slowly congealing next to the head.

"The Baron," I said. "I suppose it is unfortunate, but one must consider the fact that he was in league with Blackthorne."

"That's true."

The door out of the study was unlocked. Beyond, the small parlor room was completely dark. Quietly, we made our way out. The building was silent and dark as we made our way through the hallways. It was as if the entire building was abandoned. Perhaps, in anticipation of the sorcerer's midnight deeds, the entire staff was given the night off on the pretext that it was All Hallow's Eve, a holiday. It felt odd that there was no one guarding the doors--perhaps the sorcerer and his henchmen thought that no one would realize what he would be doing.

And mostly, Blackthorne would be right. Most people didn't believe in the existence of magic unless it was the fake kind espoused by cults and pseudo-religions. If anyone had gone to the authorities to claim that a sorcerer was doing nefarious deeds under their noses, they would be labeled mad and put into Bedlam.

We exited the building to an empty unfamiliar street. No one was about to notice our departure.

"Let's get back to the Grand Canal," Rhys said. "We will be less obvious in a crowd."

I put my hand up to my face. "I've lost my mask down there somewhere."

"I did as well. But I don't think anyone will care much."

"Do you know where we are?"

He pointed outward. I focused my eyes on his finger and noticed that up ahead, across from the street we were standing on, the canal forked past a triangular building. "The costume shop. The Grand Canal isn't too far off."

I walked with Rhys at a sedate pace towards our destination. As we neared it, more and more people crowded the streets.

"Well, I suppose your pursuit of Blackthorne has ended. What will you do now?"

"Find another sorcerer to hunt down, I guess." He hooked his arm around mine to steady me against a group of drunken revelers that had rushed by. "And you found the seventh edition of the *Liber Tutelarum*, too. Sort of."

"He wasn't what I had expected."

"I'm sorry he just left you like that."

"Don't be sorry. It's not your fault." I looked up at the sky, a veil of stars. "For a long time, I've been searching for family. It just never really dawned on me that there was a possibility that my family wouldn't want me. I've been alone for so long that I had latched onto this notion that if I had found the other editions, I would find my people. Others who were like me. Who would understand me. And now, I suppose I'll have to content myself with the fact that I'll always be alone."

"Well, you aren't alone."

"I'm not?"

Rhys suddenly dragged me into a hard kiss. I found myself grasping the lapels of his greatcoat, letting his warmth sink into me, driving the chill of the night out. When he finally released me, we were both breathing hard. People passed by us like a stream, ignoring what they had just witnessed.

"You and I. We could hunt down sorcerers together. We made a good team bringing down Blackthorne."

I raised an eyebrow. "We didn't bring him down. It was his own ineptitude and inattention to detail."

"Nonetheless, I think we can really deal well with each other. And I..." he ducked his head for a moment, but when he looked back at me, his eyes had a hard glitter to them. "It wouldn't be the same without you."

Whistling and explosive crackling pierced the air. The revelers around us stopped and turned their faces towards the sky. Fireworks.

"Well," I said after a particularly loud one drew in gasps from the crowd. "It would make things easier since we both already live in the same city."

His mouth curved. "I knew you'd be sensible."

Hard footsteps rushed passed us. "Lieutenant! There was just a call from the Constable! Someone has broken into the city library. He said our suspect is dressed up in a pirate costume." One of the policemen broke away from patrolling the crowd and ran after his colleagues.

"I don't suppose Thor led your brother back the way that we had originally come from?"

I put a hand to my eyes and groaned. "The little visit that Septimus had mentioned is going to come sooner than he had planned. We should probably bail him out before he is incarcerated yet again."

Rhys chuckled. "Leave him be, Ana. Your brother never rushed to your help. And with Al by his side, I'm sure he will soon find a way out of his current predicament." He pulled me further into the crowd, in the opposite direction of the library.

THE END