

To Tame a Demon

By Kevin McFarlane

Chapter 1 - In Search of the Sceptre

“Gentlemen, if we are to gain control I must find the sceptre. Without it, we’re powerless.”

“I beg your pardon, sir, but we’ve already searched the entire highland area. After McFadden, there’s no account of where it went.” Steeley Hadden motioned for his brother to join his defence with a not so subtle jerk of his head.

Peter Hadden shifted against his seat and decided he was most comfortable on the edge of the slick black leather. “They’ve hidden it pretty well. They knew we were coming and prepared themselves.”

“Of course they knew we were coming, you idiot,” Alfred Devay scolded. “They knew it even before I started this wretched search.”

The two brothers looked to each other with a mixture of uncertainty and disbelief. To them, old man Devay was definitely off the deep end but he paid well enough that both were willing to deal with his psycho rumbblings.

“My entire plan is about to come apart because of a bunch of half-witted shepherds,” Devay seethed. “I thought you two said you could handle it.”

“We thought we could,” Steeley replied. “How hard could it be to find some stupid gold rod?”

“Somebody should have warned us,” Pete said wistfully.

If only the two brothers had known what they were getting into when they’d first agreed to the job. It had seemed a sweet deal. An easy score even by their standards. All the old man wanted was for them to track down an ancient wand used by the Scottish King Alpin in the 9th century.

The sceptre was traced from a museum in Ottawa, to Vancouver, then New York, Chicago, Portland, and finally across the great ocean to France where it was boldly stolen by a renegade pagan group and returned to Scotland. Shortly thereafter the wand disappeared.

They’d come up against the Deo-Phaisten, a group claiming direct lineage as Protectors of the King, and thus ownership of the sceptre. Here they hid in the high regions, spread out through the farms and tiny villages, their numbers impressive enough to make it impossible to track.

The rod could be anywhere, a fact that thoroughly annoyed Mr. Devay. He would need an army to search the area but didn’t possess the resources. He was rich, far beyond what either of the brothers would ever know, but even his vast wealth would not be able to penetrate all the different places the sceptre could be hid. The land was immense, and well known by those who had spent most of their lives tending it.

Steeley surveyed the surrounding hills. From here, at a crossroads just outside of Penroy, he could see four farms. There were hundreds of them spread out across the countryside, a vast network of clans working together to preserve their heritage. The only hope they had was that one of the clans would contest ownership and the resulting stir would be enough to draw their attention. “Everyone knows the sceptre was returned to Scotland and taken to Glengowrie but no one seems to know where the group is hiding it?”

“Someone knows where they are,” Mr. Devay said. “We must convince them of the importance that the sceptre be returned to its rightful owner.”

More of the old man’s psycho rambling. Devay believed, truly and honestly considered himself

the re-incarnation of King Alpin and that once in possession of the sceptre he would regain control of the demon spirit Gwanfeye.

Born from the destruction of an ancient magical scroll utilized in the ruin of the Norse invasion, the unleashed monster had devastated the country for nearly three decades before encountering the young prince Alpin, who tricked the vile demon and trapped it inside his sceptre.

Harnessing Gwanfeye's awesome power proved too much for the young boy and slowly the bubbling energy inside the metal rod corrupted Alpin's emotions and consumed his thoughts. By the time he was ready to take his seat on the throne, his innocence and compassion were all but gone, replaced with a malicious desire to control his empire. Over the years of his rule, many evil deeds were perpetrated by the King in Gwanfeye's name.

"From what we've learned, the Deo-Phaisten have been trying to reclaim the sceptre for nearly thirty years. They insist their ancestors were charged with ensuring its protection against the one who would return to set the demon free." Steeley had a lot of time to read up on the history of the sceptre while globe-hopping in the search. Accounts of the time were sketchy and mostly fantastic adventures filled with witches, fairies, and magical potions. The legend surrounding the sceptre ended with an evil wizard freeing the demon and unleashing a terrible devastation for all of mankind. Steeley, of course, didn't believe a word of it.

His brother, on the other hand, spent most of his free time in the library of whatever city they were working out of, his nose stuck to the pages of the mystical legends and lore of earlier generations. Pete chased ghosts, called on spirits to help guide him, but wanted to be done with this nonsense because it scared him. To frighten Pete was not an easy task, and the idea that his brother was scared made Steeley uncomfortable.

"They've known all along I would come," Mr. Devay said. "As long as I am close, they will remain hidden."

"We're packing it in?" Pete asked hopefully.

"Absolutely not," Mr. Devay replied, his face twisted in a scowl. "I hired you both to help me retrieve the sceptre and until it is in my possession your services will remain loyal to me. I will return home while you two continue the search. When the last hint of my presence has cleared from the land the hidden weasels will venture from their burrows and you will be ready to cut off their heads."

Steeley felt his uncertainty float away, carried off by the King's words. The old man wasn't crazy. He knew exactly what he was doing, knew how to unlock the secrets of the sceptre. He would show them, if only they were patient. The brothers would be spared, would become the favourite pets of the King. Together, with Gwanfeye at their command, they would help the King with the transformation and reap the rewards of the conquered lands.

Steeley didn't even realize his sudden switch of attitude toward Mr. Devay. What he'd thought before didn't seem to matter anymore.

Transfixed by the spell, the two brothers climbed back into the car. Steeley drove in silence, his thoughts only of the future and helping the King. The money, the other hunts he and Pete had gone on were all forgotten, faint memories from another lifetime.

The brothers were dropped off in Penroy with enough money to cover a couple of weeks expenses. Mr. Devay would drive alone to Iverness, return the rental car, and then fly back to London to await further word. They were to contact him only when they were in possession of the sceptre.

Once the car passed the final house and disappeared around the bend, the spell finally broke

and some of Steeley's uncertainty returned. He looked to his brother, whose dreamy stare was as suddenly snapped off, instantly replaced with confusion and fear.

"There's something about that guy," Pete said as they went in search of a place to stay.

"Yeah," Steeley answered, still trying to shake the cobwebs clouding his thoughts. By the time they found a house to rent, the King was already a fading memory. Mr. Devay wanted a golden rod and Steeley and his brother would find it for the crazy old man.

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Two weeks passed without even the slightest hint of the Deo-Phaisten or the sceptre. Gradually the brothers integrated themselves into the small community, consisting mainly of farmhands who couldn't make the long trip back and forth to the city. There were shearers and herders, bakers and shippers, mechanics, and the rest of the usual assortment of those who preferred living directly from the land.

Pete was befriended by the village priest, an aged man of seventy-five, who didn't have a shock of hair on his entire body. The priest seemed to enjoy the inquisitive newcomer and the two spent hours talking of the ancient Celtic traditions. Pete was continually amazed by the depth of Father Ferguson's knowledge. He had access to sacred texts filled with practices long ago abolished and was more than willing to share with such an enthusiastic listener. Pete hadn't quite worked up to asking about the sceptre, but figured he was only a day away, two at the most.

Steeley spent his days at the local pub, growing more sullen as each day passed without any additional information surrounding the group. No one was willing to talk about the sceptre or even acknowledge the Deo-Phaisten existed. Of Gwanfeye, Steeley could only get local legends from hundreds of years ago.

Mr. Delay would soon lose patience. Steeley could feel his employer's thoughts spending more and more time focussed on their efforts. Eventually, he would realize they weren't getting anywhere and pull his deposit. The loss wouldn't be enough to break them, it was more a matter of professional pride. Steeley and his brother had always managed to retrieve the desired item for their clients, whether it be a prized painting, stolen heirloom, or a stupid ninth century wand.

"You and your brother don't do much," the bartender said, setting down Steeley's sixth drink of the day.

The drinks had done a good job of loosening his tongue. "We're archeologists, actually."

The bartender raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Treasure hunters. People pay us to find lost articles."

"Like hidden gold?"

"One time we went on a Mayan expedition to the lost city of Coroqua. Legend told of a huge cache of goods stolen from the royal family and hidden there. Our team spent eight months searching every inch of the ruins but we never found any gold."

"What idiot pays for something like that?"

"We financed that one ourselves, actually. It wasn't a total bust. We were able to excavate some of the statues and sell them to the local museum, which made up for most of the costs. Usually we deal with private collectors."

"Rich men looking for expensive toys to show off to their mates, then? So, what would bring you to Penroy? Not much 'round here's worth more'n the dirt it's covered in."

"A unique case that has seriously challenged our resources." Steeley finished his ale. The bartender brought over a fresh mug without adding it to his tab.

“Not ’aving much luck, then? Out with it, what might ye be looking for?”

“King Alpin’s sceptre,” Steeley said. Despite the amount of liquid he’d consumed, or maybe directly because of it, the words felt dry against his throat.

“What are you needing that for?” the bartender asked in disbelief. “The sceptre is cursed...”

Steeley didn’t hear the rest. He was suddenly cut off from the rest of the world. His sight, his hearing, the sour stench of the bar were all instantly erased. Steeley was thrust into a black void where not even darkness existed.

And then he was choking. Steeley couldn’t breath. There was no air.

The bartender realized something was wrong when Steeley reached up to clutch at his throat. He gagged as he tried to draw a breath, started to turn an angry purple when he couldn’t get it. The bartender raced around the counter and wrapped his arms around the choking man’s chest.

A sharp tug did nothing to clear the airway. Steeley began to sag in his seat, fading too fast for the bartender to save. As he hit the floor, his eyes fluttered open in one last spasm before death finally took hold.

The bartender almost passed out. Beyond the lids, empty sockets stared back.

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About the same time his brother was working on his sixth drink, Pete was in the basement of the Penroy Presbyterian Church, locked away in a hidden room with Father Ferguson and his library of forbidden books. Necromancy, healing herbs, curses, all subjects seemed to be crammed into the tiny room concealed behind the stairwell.

Pete whistled appreciatively as Father Ferguson pulled out a volume containing Wiccan spells. Most covered curses and remedies but the priest excitedly pointed out a complicated summoning incantation he’d been preparing to try for nearly a year.

“I haven’t been able to find all the ingredients yet but now that I’m hooked up with an internet connection I should be able to locate some of the harder to find items. I just wish you could be here when I’m finally ready,” Father Ferguson said with a shy smile.

The two had become close friends in the two weeks. Most of his congregation were simple men, farmers who had come to accept it was their own ingenuity and hard-work that would tame the land. They only had time to pray to one god, and if he wasn’t listening then there wasn’t much they could do to change it. Pete was different and understood the complexity of the universe.

More importantly, he understood the human need to simplify. Take all the spirits, all the deities, wrap them up into one package and call it Creator. Only, the world they lived in wasn’t as simple as that. Many strange and wonderful forces were at work to keep the Balance. Everything moved in cycles, neither bad nor good, until categorized by man. An earthquake could be a devastating force of destruction, wreaking lives and causing billions of dollars in damage. Or, was it simply a restructuring Mother Nature needed to make herself stronger? Carrying the weight and burden of so many could not be considered an easy task and if She had to shift around a little every once in awhile to stay comfortable, who were they to decide it was so terrible?

Pete could see these things and at least partially understand the awesome nature of the beast, much the same way King Alpin had when he’d looked past the horrible destructive power of Gwanfey and saw the potential the demon could bring him.

The treasure-trove of secrets bound together in the room promised to answer so many of the

questions vexing Pete's adult life. The fact Father Ferguson trusted him enough to share his hidden treasures, the fact he was so willing to open the books to a virtual stranger, made Pete feel guilty enough to finally reveal the true reason for his coming to Penroy. He was about to share his misgivings over working for Mr. Devay, right around the same time that his brother was telling the same story to the bartender at the pub.

Pete's throat suddenly felt dry. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Father Ferguson leaned forward to clutch his arm.

"Are you all right, lad?"

"Can't breath," Pete managed to stammer before he too was cut off from the rest of the world, never to return.

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"Incompetent fools," Alfred Devay roared, his hand slamming down and knocking off a corner of his desk. The wood was as thick as a grown man's thigh but splintered easily under the force of the blow. "I thought you said they were the best there was."

"They came highly recommended" the dark little rat, Escobar, simpered. As a personal servant he was proving quite useless. He couldn't remember when to bring the meals or keep important meetings straight and would often have them scheduled on the wrong days.

Mr. Devay, King Alpin, had given him one final chance to redeem himself. A simple task but again the quivering rodent had failed him. "All that was expected from you was to find a team who could find the sceptre and keep their lips sealed. These fools you brought could do neither."

"I apologize, my lord. I thought the appeal of such a secret venture would be enough."

"Then you were wrong." With a flick of a single finger, the King sent Escobar sailing across the room. The servant hit the far wall with a sickening thud and slid limply to the floor. Instantly, a couple of grotesque, slathering golems descended the stone walls and were atop the fresh meat before the body stopped twitching. Ripping, tearing, the meal was appreciated by the evil creatures but not by the King, who moodily stared at the empty chamber in which he sat.

What was he to do now?

The Deo-Phaisten would expect him to come for the sceptre himself. Their numbers were still too strong to defeat alone and sending his legion of demons would only alert those who wished to stop him.

No, he could not simply barge in and take what was rightfully his. There must be another way.

Resting in his palms, two sets of eyes. He tossed them to the feeding golems, who sucked them dry with drooling grins. The brothers were now decided to their eternal damnation, their forever to be spent in the stomach pits of the foul monsters. At least they would have each other.

Feeling a little better for the sacrifice, Mr. Devay rose from his throne and confidently strode from the chamber. A woman's charms was what he needed. A lady who could sweet-talk her way into finding out where the sceptre was being kept.

He found her at a bookstore a few blocks from his downtown apartment. A redhead with a fantastic set of legs, full pouting lips, and warm blue eyes that immediately drew attention. She was perfect, and under his spell before she even realized his approach. Startled fear drifted into a dreamy smile.

"Oh yes, you will do. You will do indeed."

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The Briarbear Bookstore, located in the upper district of Sherbrooke, was one of London's busiest specialty book shops and renowned around the world for its collection of original prints of some of the greatest literature ever written. For a modest fee, they promised they could locate any book ever printed, no matter how rare or bizarre. Over the years they had gained a solid reputation among their clients. Very few customers walked away in disappointment and even those they couldn't serve wouldn't leave empty handed and were likely to find another gem hidden amongst the vast array of bookshelves, ensuring their return.

Amber Reese couldn't believe she was actually standing in the middle of the store. Here, in London!

Amber had spent most of her young adult life in search of specialty copies of the books she'd read and loved, and now here she was surrounded by volume upon volume of incredible works. The history, the ideology contained in this one small section sent a dizzying shiver down her spine. If only her father could be here to enjoy it with her.

This was Amber's first trip outside of the United States, a trip she and her dad had been planning for years. He too had been a collector and passed his obsession on to his daughter. Together, they had dreamed of one day stepping inside the specialty shop, of spending days lost amongst the innumerable stacks of books.

Cancer had prevented them from realizing their dream. In his honour, she had come, the trip a final good-bye to the man who had taught her to appreciate the wondrous works. It would be hard to say farewell but she was comforted by the surrounding books, so lost in happy memories that she didn't even notice the man come up behind her. By then, it was already too late.

Amber's thoughts turned to some of the high-fantasy adventures she'd read, perilous battles waged between good and evil. She had spent so many nights dreaming of herself caught in the marvellous escapades, in dream living out a golden age of knights and chivalry, or riding rockets away to far-off planets.

The man's approach represented an opportunity for Amber to realize her dreams. Without a word spoken between the two, she knew what he offered was real and genuine and that she had no choice but to follow. She went willingly, her excitement barely contained as she followed him from the store and a few short blocks to his apartment. He did not speak but Amber didn't expect him to. This was a dream, after all, and reality had ceased to exist.

Life was what took place between dreams and death, reality nothing more than a loosely defined word used to explain what happened during that time. But reality could be different for any number of people, a belief system built on a whim. The world was once flat, witches couldn't swim, and Afro-Americans served no better purpose than to be slaves. With each passing year another layer of humankind's ignorance was peeled away, bringing with it new perspectives and slightly altering what had once been considered real.

After her father died, Amber's reality was turned upside down so harshly it had taken her months to recover. When she'd finally come around, the new world awaiting her seemed so much colder, a lonely place she hardly knew.

Her hurt and loneliness would be taken by the man, replaced with a sense of adventure and purpose. He would accept her pain as willingly as she had followed him from the bookstore and all he asked in return was for her help in recovering something that had been stolen from him.

It was important that he retrieve it, this man who understood so much. Amber wanted to help. She would never understand the true depth of his knowledge but she quickly realized not a word need be spoken for one to know the other's needs.

A bond, deeper than any Amber had ever shared before. She and her father were so close but they hadn't even touched the tip of the iceberg of the kind of connection she felt with this mysterious man.

Only, he wasn't much of a mystery. He was a King, returned to rule over his people.

The communication, the overwhelming overload of emotions the bond created left Amber feeling tired and worn out. She still hadn't recovered from the long flight but she assured him she would help before drifting into a dreamless sleep.

There was no need for dreams anymore.

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Amber awoke in darkness. She had been moved from the cold stone-bricked room where she had fainted, a comfortable mattress beneath her. Of the rest of the room she could see nothing and could only guess at the ghosts and monsters lurking close by. Amber could feel their eyes on her, could hear them scuttling about. Along the wall. At the foot of the bed. A frightening scratching just beside her head. The haunting noises filled the room.

Amber wanted to scream, knew the noise would not matter, the horrible creatures already knew she was there, could probably see her in the gloom. She had no idea where she was or where a door might be. If she moved, she would surely bump into a table or dresser, to be trapped and slaughtered by sharp claws and teeth.

If the nightmarish creatures had wanted to eat her, they would be finishing her toes now, instead of stalking her. This was a test. It had to be.

Amber remembered the mysterious man she'd followed, how he'd spoken to her without words and asked for her help.

A hiss at her ear. Something flicked along the lobe, causing her skin to burn. The overwhelming stench of decay assaulted her nostrils as Amber imagined a gigantic serpent coiled inches from her face, its maw filled with razor sharp prongs opened and ready to strike. The monster taunted her, begging for her to make a sound.

Amber clamped her mouth shut and bit back on the scream. There was no hiding her fear, it oozed from every pore in her body and filled the room with an electricity that made the monsters hiss and cackle and move excitedly about. They fed from her fear but wanted her helplessness.

A slick, oily tentacle landed in Amber's lap and began to wriggle about in an annoying search. She held perfectly still, not even drawing a breath, letting her muscles relax, closing her eyes. Her fear was swallowed up as a calm peacefulness drifted over her.

A sudden light from above. Amber opened her eyes and was surprised to see the King standing above her, holding open the lid. Sitting up, she realized she hadn't been moved at all. Instead, she'd been placed inside a coffin set in one corner of the stone-walled chamber. With the top closed, all light had been blocked out and she hadn't realized the tight confines of her bed.

The King smiled and offered his hand to help her out. "Such a marvellous creature you are. So strong-willed, so self-assured. Indeed you will be perfect to carry out my wishes."

"I thought..." Amber began to say but the King cut her off with a wave.

"It will be much easier if we communicate through the usual methods. You will need to save your strength for the journey and what lies ahead."

"Then you really are sending me on a quest?" Amber asked, unable to contain her excitement.

The King looked quizzically at her. "I thought it was decided last night."

"About that. I'm not really sure what went on It's all a little foggy."

“There will be time for you to sort it all out on the plane. Your flight leaves in forty-five minutes. One of my men will drive you to the airport. I have already prepared your bags, passport, and everything else you will need.”

“Wait? Where am I going?”

“To retrieve my sceptre.” The King reached out and placed his hands against Amber’s forehead. He whispered a blessing in the ancient tongue. His words soothed her and brought back the events from last night. They filled her with a new confidence and a determination that she would find the sceptre, no matter the cost.

“Then go to do my bidding,” King Alpin commanded.

Chapter 2 The Deo-Phaisten

“I told you to stay away from that cupboard, lad.”

“But Da, I just want a quick look.”

“There’s nothing in there for your eyes to see, Jimmy. Now go finish your homework, supper’ll be ready soon enough.”

“Couldn’t I just, Da? What’ll the lads think if I go to school tomorrow and ‘ave to tell ‘em I didn’t even get a peek.”

“Make it up,” Kly Macqueen said as he ruffled his son’s hair. “Wouldn’t be the first time and probably won’t be the last.”

“Da!”

“You don’t think I hear what you’re telling the other boys. They’ve got fathers, you know. >From what I’ve heard, your imagination ought to come up with a decent yarn. Now ge’et.”

Jimmy went upstairs to study his books, or more likely one of the infernal atlases he always had his head buried in. Jimmy had big dreams of being a traveller one day, of seeing exotic destinations and getting far away from the mind-numbingly boring routine of the farm life. There would be no holding his son back when he finally decided to go and Kly was secretly proud of his son’s strong will. He took after his mother, through and through, and would someday realize the proud tradition of becoming a Protector. His travels would help him learn and appreciate his home.

Here, in the Hills, watching over the flock was the only life the Macqueen’s had ever known. Kly never needed to travel, had been content with the serenity and hard-work it took to survive out here. Kly’s father had bestowed upon him the legends of the Deo-Phaisten and the title of Protector on his eighteenth birthday. His own son would not realize the honour until much later, but it didn’t bother Kly. They were two different men, or would be when Jimmy was old enough, which would be much sooner than Kly could ever admit, and although their destination would prove the same, the paths they took to get there would be much different. Jimmy’s potential was much greater than his old man’s had ever been and with the proper nurturing he might even one day reach a higher level than that of Protector.

When by himself, as he was now preparing the evening meal, Kly sometimes would toy with the idea that his little boy was the one written about in the texts, the one who would return to tame the demon Gwanfeye and turn the Balance in favour of the Mother. Standing here, alone in his kitchen with only the chirping of birds outside the window and the baying of the sheep from the meadow, slicing carrots and celery for the soup, the idea of Jimmy as demon tamer might have seemed a little far-fetched, if only Kly didn’t see so much potential in the boy. While the other lads were out playing their games and showing off for the girls, Jimmy was more apt to be found walking in the meadows or talking to the sheep. He was a social enough boy at school and had a decent enough circle of friends to stop any worry, it just seemed Jimmy preferred the company of animals and nature.

Kly dumped the rest of the vegetables into the pot and then finished grinding up the meat. His daughter, Corinna, was much better equipped to handle the cooking but she hadn’t yet returned from school. His wife, Magdeline, was out of town for the week visiting her sister in Aberdeen, a big reason the sceptre was being kept there.

A certain danger accompanied possession of the sacred rod, it’s legendary instability made most of the farmer’s wives nervous. Such heightened emotions would surely draw in the one’s who wished to take the sceptre, the thieves no better than a pack of wolves circling their prey.

They fed off fear, would easily sniff out panic, and so the sceptre would be kept with Kly until the end of the week, when his wife returned. The next in line would then find a safe place and the trail of anyone following would lengthen.

The Protectors were sworn to ensure the safety of the sceptre. They had failed the first time but now that they had it back they would not lose it again. Not before they found a way to either tame the demon or abolish it altogether.

Destroying Gwanfeye was impossible. There had been many attempts over the years, including burying it under the mountainside, which had only led to their losing it when an archeologist accidentally unburied it and donated the sceptre to the London Museum. The only solution was to find a way to send it from this world.

Was Jimmy holding the key?

Corinna burst through the door. Out of breath, obviously excited, she managed to get out, "Papa, I have the most amazing news," in between pants.

"What is it, me lady. You've gotten yourself a new beau? Let me guess, the young McFadden? Or maybe it's Tomas McCuddy?"

"Pappa! No!"

"A little too skinny for ya?"

"Would you just listen to me. PLEASE!"

"What's got you in such a tizzy?"

"I've just met the most incredible woman, Pappa. An American, this amazing, wonderful American woman."

Kly didn't like the idea of Corinna going into town alone. At sixteen, she was well old enough to make the trip to Penroy on her own, but with what they were hiding, they couldn't exactly invite strangers into their homes.

"She's a book collector, Papa, and she said she would take a look at some of my stories. If she likes them, she said she'd show them to some of her friends. In America, Pappa!"

Some parents might have been disappointed that both their children were growing up to be dreamers. Jimmy was to be the traveller, Corinna a novelist. That both expected so much from the world almost made Kly's heart burst from pride. The world needed farmers, labourers, bakers, and builders. Probably, it needed politicians. About lawyers he wasn't so sure. But what would the Mother be without stories to entertain her, and adventurers to appreciate her marvels?

Kly wiped his hands and then wrapped up his daughter in a huge hug. "That's fantastic, darling. I'm very happy for you."

"I told her she could stop by later to pick them up."

"You know we're not to have any visitors until after your mother returns."

"Please, Pappa!" Corinna pulled up short of the bottom stair, a pout already beginning to form. "This is important to me."

"Then you can take the stories to town after supper."

"Really?"

Kly nodded and couldn't help his grin when a vibrant smile exploded across Corinna's face. She too was so much like her mother that Kly couldn't help but miss his wife, if only for a moment. His daughter's excitement was too much and it quickly crushed the melancholy sneaking into his heart.

"Get your brother, I'm starting to set it out now."

"Oh, thank you Pappa." Corinna came back into the kitchen to smother her father in kisses.

"Go on, now. If we don't eat soon, you won't make it back before dark."

Corinna ran upstairs to get her brother while Kly set out the food. Before they ate, a brief prayer of thanks, and then under his breath Kly prayed for the protection of his daughter. Maybe he was being overly protective but as a father that was his job. If anything were to happen to her, especially with Magdeline away, he would never forgive himself.

Kly might be a Protector but his family would always come first.

“Are you really letting Corinna go into Penroy on her own?” Jimmy asked after the first few mouthfuls of supper were safely in his belly. A carefully controlled whine underlined his tone, he already knew the answer and was cautiously working up to arguing he should also be allowed to go.

Kly decided not to humour him. “I need you here to help get the sheep into the barn. The tele is reporting a storm coming up the valley.”

“Why can’t she do it?”

“The animals like you better.”

Jimmy stuffed another mouthful of food in, chewed angrily as he slammed his fork down and stomped out the back door.

“That went fairly well,” Kly said.

Corinna shovelled in her food, scrambled from her seat for a kiss on his cheek, and then she’d grabbed her carrying sack and was gone. Kly took his time enjoying the meal, it deserved a little appreciation after his effort, before going out back to find Jimmy. He was already herding the first group into their stalls.

“I’m sorry, Jimmy, really I am, but what if something were to happen when you were gone? Who would help?”

“It’s not fair. What if something happens to Corinna?”

“She’s getting to be a big girl. Your sister can handle herself.”

“But you don’t think I can,” Jimmy huffed.

“Is that what you think? Jimmy, don’t you know how proud I am of you.”

“Then why won’t you let me do anything? I’m not allowed to see the sceptre, I’m not allowed to go to town, all I ever get to do is spend time here helping you.”

A car pulled into the laneway and bumped along the dirt path to the front of the house. A tall, young blonde woman got out of the driver’s side, Corinna from the other. Leaving Jimmy to finish his chores, Kly went to meet them.

“Pappa, this is the woman I was telling you about.”

“Hi, Mr. Macqueen, I’m Amber Reese. I hope I’m not intruding, it’s just Corinna said she had some stories she’d been working on and I just happen to have a few connections to some of the more prominent publishing houses back home. I thought if her writing showed some promise, I might take some of it back with me.”

“Very nice to meet you, Miss Reese. It’s no intrusion at all, we just don’t get very many visitors out this way.”

“Seems such a shame. This part of the country is so majestic.”

“What brings you to Penroy?”

“I’m on the trail of an ancient Celtic legend one of the men in the village has supposedly heard of. Unfortunately for me, he’s away until the end of the month so it looks like I’ll be sticking around for a bit.”

“Must be nice to have the time to just wait around.”

“Actually, I have my laptop with me so I can start working on my next acquisition. And from what Corinna has told me, I should be busy with her stories for the next little while.”

Kly invited the young woman in for a cup of coffee while Corinna went to fetch her stories. There was something about her that put him at dis-ease, a shiftiness in her eyes that was well hidden behind a friendly brightness. To the untrained observer she would seem a sociable, attractive young woman, very focussed by her obsessions, unwilling to compromise until she attained exactly what she wanted. Confident. Unabashed. Harmless. Or so it would seem to anyone who spent two minutes trying to get to know her.

What they might not notice was the quick scan of the room as he went to get the boiling water from the stove, the slight tilt to her head as she listened to the sounds from the other rooms of the house. Kly's adult life had consisted of watching. Learning the habits, the tell-tale signs of facial expressions and body language, eventually attaining a deeper level of understanding where he could hone in on a person's feelings. Her smile was genuine as he set her mug down, her interest sincere.

Too sincere. There was little doubt she had come for more than Corinna's stories.

"How long has your daughter been writing?" Amber asked, taking a cautious sip from the steaming mug.

"She was four when she first realized pencils weren't just for colouring. Within a year she was putting words together and that pretty much broke the dam wide open."

Corinna staggered down the stairs with an armload of papers and dropped the stack on the table in front of their visitor. It rose high enough to block Amber from Kly's view.

"This is most of the stuff I've worked on in the last year," she said excitedly.

"It certainly looks like you've been a busy young lady. I can't wait to get started."

Jimmy came in the back door. "The herd are in the stalls, Da," he said as he started to take off his shoes and coat. He stopped when he noticed the newcomer. "I thought we weren't allowed to have anyone over until after Ma got back."

"This is Corinna's friend, Miss Reese. She's from America and is staying in Penroy for the next little while."

"What's she doing here?"

"She came to look at some of your sister's stories."

"But you said no visitors!"

"Watch your tongue, lad, and show our guest a little courtesy."

Grudgingly, Jimmy tipped his cap to the newcomer but a cheated scowl remained across his face. Amber would not be welcome as long as the prized sceptre remained under their guard and Jimmy's daily routine continued to be skewed by responsibility. If he was expected to sacrifice, then why wasn't Corinna? Being the older sibling, she was constantly afforded these special privileges and Kly could plainly see his son's patience over the injustice had pretty much run out.

What Jimmy was still too young to realize was, their visitor easily picked up on his unease and automatic distrust and knew within that instant they were hiding something. Kly felt her nervous anticipation suddenly switch gears. Amber slightly, unnoticeably withdrew within herself to hide her anxious excitement. A cool, calculated woman indeed!

"You should consider yourself lucky to have two such good-looking, strong men around, Corinna. When I was growing up it was just me and my dad," Amber said, studying Jimmy too thoroughly for Kly's liking. Her eyes were still friendly and inviting, there was no threat or malicious intent behind the look, but it made Kly wonder if maybe she had read the legends surrounding King Alpin's sceptre. Maybe she too saw Jimmy's blossoming potential and somehow knew he was the one who would finally tame the demon.

“I guess,” Corinna replied without much enthusiasm. “Jimmy can be a bit of a brat sometimes.”

“Am not.”

“Are to.”

The argument, so harmless in its childish simplicity, continued for nearly a full minute before a clap of thunder rolled across the hilltop with enough intensity to shake the house. Both children stopped their quibbling and looked skyward in startled bewilderment.

“I told you, your bickering was enough to wake Gwydion. You best be behaving yourselves before He decides to get serious,” Kly snickered.

“And I better be going before it starts to pour.” Amber finished her coffee and began to gather up the papers.

“Jimmy can take those out for you,” Kly said as he accompanied Amber to the door. “Corinna will stop by in a couple of days to see what you thought.”

Jimmy and Corinna split the stack and each took half.

“Actually, I thought I would bring them back here after I finished. That way I can take some time to go over the more promising material with her.”

Of course she had. Why not come on out and stay for dinner the next time? Then you could have a good snoop around and make sure we have what you are looking for. Kly wasn't about to be tempted by the casual hint for an invitation.

“Corinna goes right past there almost every day,” Kly said as he opened the door and ushered her outside. “I'm sure she'll be anxious enough to hear what you think that you'll be lucky if she doesn't sneak in your window in the middle of the night.”

Outside, the first few drops of the coming storm freed themselves from the darkening sky. The air was filled with a thick electric stench, the trees lining the back portion of the field set to swaying against the strengthening wind, aligned in their sombre serenade with the Mother.

An ancient communion was about to take place, a primal dance so deep no human could ever hope to understand. The trees were living things and as such they too needed the reassurances of their Creator. Rain brought growth, growth meant continuance, and so followed the cycle, all one long ballad, strung out over eternity. One had only to stop long enough to look, truly and honestly see the beauty around them, to appreciate life's little mysteries.

Amber didn't notice as she said her good-byes and hurried to the car. The children followed, hunched over their loads to keep them dry. Kly watched from the doorway as they stuffed them into the backseat. Corinna hugged her new friend and then stood back as Amber said something to Jimmy. She didn't get a chance to finish whatever it was, suddenly the clouds let loose their loads as if an army of giant bombers locked onto their target. One moment there was only a sparse splattering against the rooftop, the next Kly could no longer see the three or the car. He was about to go after them when all three appeared, seemed to grow from the sheets of rain as they splashed back to the cover of the house.

“Pappa, we can't make Amber drive back in this weather. Can't she stay the night?”

Corinna asked.

“I really don't mean to impose, it's just that I don't know the roads very well and...”

“I guess it would be okay.”

Jimmy's head whipped around to glare at his father.

Kly ignored the look. “Corinna can take you upstairs. She has an extra cot in her room.”

“This is so great, Mr. Macqueen. I can't thank you enough.” Amber beamed as she was dragged off by an obviously ecstatic Corinna.

“You need a little work on controlling your emotions,” Kly said after he heard Corinna’s door slam.

“Da, you’ve gone mad letting her stay.”

“And you’ve obviously lost your senses, talking to me like that.”

“What if she finds out?”

“She already knows, Jimmy.”

“Are you sure?”

Kly nodded. “She may not know where we are keeping it but she definitely knows it is here.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Not to worry. I’ve been planning for something like this. One day, you too will learn how to read the signals of approaching danger and how to ask the Mother for help. When you do, you will become a Protector. For now, go upstairs and make sure the girls are busy while I find a more secure place to keep the sceptre.”

“Where are you taking it?”

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“It’s not that, lad...” but he didn’t get a chance to explain himself. Jimmy stormed off, upstairs, and slammed his door.

Quickly, Kly went to the cabinet and whispered a spell in the forgotten tongue of his ancestors. The bolt released and the doors opened, revealing the grand sceptre. Made entirely of gold, the handle was jewel encrusted with diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, running up to the encrypted shaft. At the top, a glass box that had once shone with a heavenly light. Legend spoke of the sceptre possessing the power to foretell the future. King Alpin had risen to the most powerful position in Scotland with aid of the sceptre.

Centuries had passed since last the light had glowed. After the imprisonment of Gwanfeye, the magic of the sceptre was completely consumed in containing the demon. The sceptre was a dangerous weapon, its true power known to only the chosen few who were blessed with the title of Protector. Carefully, they preserved the traditions and rites of the Druids, passing on their knowledge from one generation to the next, rebuilding the almost extinct religion.

Kly wrapped the sceptre in a thick wool blanket, wrapping around and around until it was undistinguishable in the folds. He went to the cupboards, pulled out the bottom drawer, and then two floorboards which he had cut out earlier. Letting the blanket drop down into the hole, Kly shoved his arm in after it to make sure he couldn’t reach it. He replaced the floorboards and then the drawer. From his back pocket he took out his wallet, from this he took a single, long strand of hair. His wife’s, Kly always kept a few locks on him for good luck. He fastened the hair to the handle of the drawer and then the one above it. If anyone opened it, he would now know.

With his trap set, Kly stood up, turned, and came face to face with Amber.

“Is everything okay? I heard some bumping around.” Her eyes went right past him and to the bottom drawer.

“I was just cleaning up.”

“Need some help?”

“No, I think I’ve pretty much got it.”

“All right. Well, I guess I’ll see you in the morning,” Amber said and then went back upstairs.

Kly saw her peeking back, though. Now she knew exactly where the sceptre was being hidden.

The next morning Kly was surprised to find the hair still intact across the cupboards. It was early, not much past five, and most mornings he would be alert and aware, completely comfortable with the hour. A life on the farm had done its part to acclimatize him to the early day and the quiet time afforded him the perfect opportunity to make his peace with the Mother.

At least most mornings he enjoyed the time. This morning his stomach was heavy and filled with a nervous tension that made his feet drag and his back ache from a kink that had never bothered him before.

The rain had finally tapered off around two. Kly knew this because he'd still been awake, listening to the sounds from the house, simply waiting in the darkness of his room for any creak or groan that might be the intruder slipping downstairs.

He hadn't heard any strange noises and now that he saw his trap hadn't been sprung, Kly began to wonder if maybe he hadn't misread Amber. With the added tension of having the sceptre in the house maybe he was simply being overly protective. Her deception was real, he had no doubt of this, but it didn't necessarily have to do with the sceptre. There were a hundred different reasons she might lie to them, just as many for her to want to hide.

To make sure, Kly tugged loose the strand of hair and pulled the drawer out. The floorboards were still in place and didn't look disturbed. If he were to be absolutely certain the sceptre was safe, he would have to go down to the basement and cut a hole through the ceiling to retrieve it. Kly decided to wait until after he'd fed the sheep and gotten them back into the field. By the time he was finished, Corinna would have breakfast ready. They could eat and Amber could be on her way. Kly would take the sceptre to the next in line. He didn't expect any arguments for the early reprieve of his duties considering the circumstances. Until Amber was out of Penroy, keeping the sceptre would be dangerous, even if she wasn't the threat they'd been warned of. If she really was a collector, she'd be apt to gossip with the locals and it wouldn't take long for word to spread of any strange goings-on at the Macqueen farm.

Amber's arrival had signalled a change to a new cycle and Kly was aware enough to recognize the message.

As he replaced the drawer, a still sleepy-eyed Jimmy staggered into the kitchen. "Morning, Da. Where are the girls?"

"Still asleep."

"Corinna wasn't in her room."

"What do you mean?"

"Her alarm clock broke last week and I've been waking her up every morning before I come down. Only, this morning there was nobody in her room."

"Amber wasn't there?"

"Nope. I figured they were already up getting breakfast ready."

Kly raced past his son, yanked open the cellar door with a vicious tug, and pounded down the wiggly wooden steps in a mad rush. At the bottom, he stopped, his eyes going to the ceiling and scanning the area just below the kitchen.

And then he saw it. A small hole, just large enough for a slender wrist to slip through. Without checking, Kly knew the sceptre was gone.

More distressing, so was his daughter.

Chapter 3 - The Demon and the Master

Stirred from slumber by a violent shaking, the demon Gwanfeye opened its slitted eyes to glare at the sullen darkness of its prison. The once glowing orb, extinguished by the horrible monster's rage, the eternal flame burned out but not gone. The flame now flickered inside of the creature, its shimmering brightness stealing Gwanfeye's power and calming the demon's anger.

Gwanfeye's power could not be completely contained but with the magic of the sceptre the human's had found a way to harness the churning cauldron of hate and destruction that was its soul. Each time they summoned the demon, a small piece of what gave it substance and made it real was painfully shredded away and used to do the Master's bidding.

A long time had passed, at least by mortal standards, since last they had called on Gwanfeye and it had given the demon a chance to heal and grow stronger than it had been for centuries. The creature, reared for the sole purpose of destruction, could feel the anger and hate bubbling with a renewed intensity from the pit of its hellish stomach. Soon, the demon would be free to smash the hated cell. To completely obliterate the aphotic chamber that had held him for too long.

The Master was close by. When he came, he would release Gwanfeye and then the entire world would find out just what happened when a demon was chained and left to stew in its own juices.

* * *

"I have the sceptre and we're just checking out. We should be back in London by midnight tonight...."

"No, not found it. I actually have it with us."

Corinna's head was covered with a silk black hood, making it impossible for her to see who Amber was talking to but she figured it must be over the phone since she hadn't heard anyone else come into the room.

Amber had brought her here to the hotel, woken her before the first pinkish hues touched the morning sky, and rushed her from her home. Corinna followed unquestioningly, still half-asleep and thoroughly confused. She still wasn't sure exactly what was going on, or the need for the hood, only that Amber had promised it would protect her.

"Don't worry. I have a plan to sneak it through customs," Amber said. "I'm sure I can hide it with the extra little surprise I picked up."

There was a slight pause, Amber took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I told you not to worry. I haven't done anything to compromise your plans. I just bought us a little extra insurance is all. I'm sure you'll be pleased."

Another moment passed and then Corinna heard the click of the phone being replaced in its cradle. She sat up a little straighter in her seat and cocked her head in the direction of where she thought Amber was standing, waiting for her to say something. When she didn't, Corinna started to stand up, certain Amber must have left her alone in the room.

Not once did it occur to her to take off the hood.

"Oh, don't try to move," Amber said. She came over and helped Corinna back into her chair. "Just sit tight. We're almost ready to go. A few more minutes, okay?"

Corinna nodded. The silky black veil tickled her chin but there was no complaint. She liked the feel of it against her face. The cool material rubbed across her brow, felt soft against her cheeks, but most importantly, it seemed to slow down the million and one thoughts constantly buzzing through her brain.

Memories, fantasies, day-dreams, they usually rushed through in such a mad-rush it was all she could do to keep up and get some of them down on paper. The hood calmed the onslaught of ideas so that she could take her time and properly examine each one, carefully turning it over and over for consideration. Corinna was so distracted with this new experience she didn't even notice the danger staring her straight in the face. The hood effectively masked the threat.

Amber flitted about the room, from the sounds, gathering up the rest of her belongings and then led Corinna by the arm back to the car. Corinna climbed into the backseat and layed down, her head resting on one half of her manuscripts. Immediately through the thin material of the hood, the stories began rehashing themselves with improved vigour, the plots taking strange twists she'd never considered, protagonists showed vulnerabilities she hadn't seen, and endings that weren't really endings at all but instead potential portals to whole new adventures.

Despite her excitement, Corinna voiced none of these thoughts to Amber. She simply lay still in the rear of the car, listening delightedly to her stories and letting the gentle rumble of the motor lull her deeper still into the very fabric of her fables.

* * *

It wasn't until their third try that Kly and his son Jimmy found where the American woman was staying. There weren't many places for visitors in Penroy, mostly families with a spare room or one of the two pubs in the village would have extra space above their shops for rent. There was a loosely run hostel, which was nothing more than a hut with sheets strung up to separate the rooms and a place a couple kilometres outside the village that rented cottages. With no luck at either of the pubs, Kly decided to check Thistle Hill Estate, where they were met by the owner, William MacCrodan, a short skinny man with a huge smile that ate up most of his face. He greeted Kly with the obvious gusto of a natural salesman and from the look of the overgrown grounds and the one dilapidated cottage Kly could see across the meadow, would need to call upon the skill considerably to convince potential clients of their enjoyment during the stay. The perfect place to hide, for someone who needed to lay low.

"We're looking for a woman, her name is Amber Reese."

"You mean the book collector? Wonderful gal, she nearly charmed me into letting her stay for free."

"Then she's here?"

"I'm afraid you just missed her."

"She's gone?" Kly looked to Jimmy and hoped his own face hadn't gone as pale as his son's.

"Packed up her stuff and paid her bill about twenty minutes ago. Something funny though, she had someone with her. When I asked, she said it was her niece and that she was allergic to the sun which is why she had to wear this cover over her face. Only, I never heard of anyone like that 'round here."

Corinna! MacCrodan would have recognized her without the shroud, would have surely stopped them if his mind hadn't been befuddled by Amber's spell. Kly could smell the black magic hanging in the air, its acrid stench burned his nostrils. Obviously, Amber was a more worthy adversary than he'd given her credit for.

"Where were they going?" he asked, already pushing Jimmy for the door.

"She didn't say. Is there trouble?"

"There will be if we don't stop her in time." Kly hustled Jimmy into the car, jumped in, and tore off down the laneway. "Where would she go, where would she go?"

“To the airport,” Jimmy said. “They are going to fly out of here.”

Without having to ask if Jimmy was certain, Kly knew his son was right. Jimmy was tracking them now.

* * *

Two hours passed before Mr Devay, the re-incarnated King Alpin, received any word on the sceptre. After the original phone call from Amber, he'd paced listlessly across the grand stone floor in front of his throne, anxiously waiting for news. When an hour passed without anything, he decided he could no longer stand to wait and with a muttered word, a piece of his spirit broke away from the rest of his body and sped off into the sky.

He detested surprises, couldn't stand the idea of an unknown factor spoiling his plans. He needed to find out, even at the cost of leaving himself temporarily vulnerable during the search. Amber was proving a brilliant student and a more than able mage. Already she had found a way to block him from entering her mind, thus leaving him completely blind to the happenings surrounding his prized treasure. She hadn't broken his hold over her, by the time she figured out how it would already be too late and her purpose would be served. Not that he was worried, the King needed a magician by his side, and when she realized the true potential of her newfound powers, Amber would become a more than willing servant and help him in the continued obedience of Gwanfeye.

Within moments he had transcended from one plain to the next, in an instant transporting from the stone chamber of his London apartment to a private airfield just outside of Iverness without really leaving at all. Amber was to meet his private jet here, where the custom checks were much more lax. Mr. Devay would have met them himself and negated the entire process, only his presence would alert the other at this critical time. He needed to be patient. Soon enough the sceptre would be his.

Mr. Devay floated just above the air tower, his spirit suspended by natural forces so complete he had no reason to fear falling, and thus lose a major part of his make-up. He could almost feel the burning, scaly skin of the demon under his palm as he spotted the approaching headlights bobbing along the private driveway leading to the terminal. A sinister smile twisted his face as he let himself float off.

* * *

With nightfall Amber's allergic-to-the-sun-niece story wasn't about to hold up so after wrapping Corinna in a menage of heavy scarves, she prepared a completely new one in which Corinna was the daughter of Sheik Ali-Bahmanee visiting with the royal family. The guards at the customs check weren't completely convinced but knew enough not to delay any political dignitaries for fear of losing their jobs.

“What's she got under the blanket?”

“A gift. From the family.”

“We 'aven't the authorization...”

“That's fine. If you want to examine one of the family's most private heirlooms...”

“It'll be okay, Mack. Just let 'em pass.”

Amber led Corinna through the security check, out of the terminal, and directly on to Mr. Devay's private jet, which was already fuelled and ready for departure. As the plane climbed into

the sky, Amber watched the darkened landscape below with a triumphant smile. She'd retrieved the prize and gained so much more along the way. Mr. Devay would be most pleased.

Her smile was erased, wiped clean off her face, as she looked out and saw two dim headlights racing up the road to the airport. She wasn't sure how, but Corinna's father had found them.

You're safe. You are already in the air. He's too late. But as Amber settled back into her seat, these thoughts did little to comfort her.

* * *

Speeding along the path, Jimmy suddenly clutched the dashboard with both hands, his eyes going up to follow a red light ascending into the dark sky. "We're too late, Da," he whispered so low Kly almost didn't hear over the roaring engine.

"We can still catch them, Jimmy. There's still time!"

"No, they are already gone." Jimmy pointed to the flashing signal.

Kly wasn't about to give up. Corinna was on that plane and he couldn't just let her slip away. The car skidded to a stop in front of the terminal and he ran full-steam to the reception desk.

"The flight that just took off, where was it going?"

"I'm really not allowed to say, sir."

Kly grabbed the attendant by his collar and yanked him half-way across the counter. "Where?"

"London, sir."

"Then get me two seats on the next plane going to London."

A pained, fearful expression lined the clerk's face when he answered. "I'm afraid we're a privately run strip and handle mostly cargo, sir. We don't have any other flights going to London tonight."

"Then find me a pilot!" Kly screamed into the terrified man's face.

A uniformed guard rushed up and tried to pry Kly's grip loose. He was well built, very strong, and got a good hold on the nerve just above Kly's wrist, but the farmer held tight, his eyes bolted to the clerk's.

"Sir, if you could just calm down."

"Get 'im off. He's choking me."

"A pilot. Someone who can take us to London." Kly released the clerk and at the same time side-stepped away from the guard with a neat little deke. "You have to help me."

"There's really nothing I can do."

"If you could just be on your way, sir before we have to call the authorities."

"You don't understand what you are doing. If she makes it back to London..." Kly stopped before he could finish. Jimmy was standing just past the doorway, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open in shock. He had seen the whole thing, watched his father assault a man, and Kly realized how crazy he must look. How insane it would sound if he tried to explain. His shoulders slumped as he took Jimmy and left the two men to stare warily after them.

Defeated, dejected by his failure to fulfill his sworn duty and protect the sceptre, distraught over the loss of his daughter, Kly's tears fell freely against his son's shoulder in the parking lot.

Neither noticed the young man approach or watch silently from the shadows until Kly's sobs subsided. It wasn't until he was already beside them and gently cleared his throat that either realized he was there.

"Did you need a lift somewhere?" The stranger asked, his words thick with a strange accent. "I think I might be able to help."

* * *

When the plane finally levelled off, Corinna was allowed to take off the hood. Immediately, her eyes widened in horror as her mind cleared and she saw the sceptre cradled in Amber's lap, held lovingly, a mother and her child.

"You stole it! How could you?"

"We're a little past the point for indignity, my dear. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

Corinna was furious, absolutely and completely disgusted by the horrible woman who had pretended to be her friend and interested in her work. She was even more angry with herself. Her father had trusted her and still she'd brought the stranger into their house despite his strict warning. Corinna had allowed Amber to use her and her father had trusted her instincts. The sceptre being here now was as much her fault as anyone else's. Only, it would be her father who suffered.

"You evil witch."

Amber simply smiled before leaning her head back, closing her eyes, and snuggling the sceptre tighter in her arms. No hint of worry showed on her face and it wasn't a protective hold she had on the sceptre, she knew Corinna wouldn't try anything, for even if she did manage to regain the powerful wand, where would she go with it?

Corinna needed a plan. Her eyes fell upon the discarded hood on the seat beside her. Cautiously, with the slightest of movements, she reached across and gathered the silk into her palm and after making certain Amber hadn't noticed, slipped it inside the waistband of her panties. When the time was right, she would make her move.

* * *

The stranger wouldn't give his name nor where he was from. He spoke in a precise English tongue but his accent was evident, his accentuation of each syllable a trial, as though he had spent many years studying the words with little time to actually practise the dialect. Kly and Jimmy did learn the private airfield was owned by a friend of his and he'd stopped over to refuel on his way to London.

The plane bobbed and jerked mightily in the air. The pilot seemed to over-compensate each adjustment and Kly found himself wondering just how far the pilot had come to get to Iverness and if they really had a hope in hell of making it as far as London.

"A little choppy tonight. These small planes certainly don't handle the wind as well as I'd like."

"You are used to flying something bigger?"

"Oh yes. Much bigger." The pilot smiled a huge buck-toothed grin as he squinted into the darkness and rechecked their heading against his dials.

A gust of wind slammed them sideways. The pilot fought with the yoke, grimacing against the strain it took to get them righted again. Just as they straightened out, a cross-current clipped the wing of the plane with enough force to spin them completely around, losing three hundred feet before the pilot regained control.

"What's going on?" Kly asked after he'd checked on Jimmy. The boy actually seemed to be enjoying the bumpy ride, his face beaming with excitement as he anxiously strained for a better look outside.

“The weather radar called for light winds and rain but nothing like this. We better try and climb above it.”

The storm fought the plane all the way, pushing and pulling, blowing and huffing, a natural force intent on ripping apart the steel intruder. They were just into the clouds when the wind cut off suddenly, vanished as if pulled back to earth by a mighty set of lungs. All three whooped and cheered. Kly grabbed the pilot’s hand and pumped it with enthusiasm.

“Great work, mate. You really pulled one out of the fire there.”

Above the clouds, they found clear sailing all the way to London.

* * *

Corinna’s hopes of using the hood and grabbing the sceptre while they landed were dashed when she opened her eyes to see Amber was no longer sitting across from her. She had only closed her eyes for a moment, long enough to gather her courage and make certain her plan was firmly implanted, but she’d apparently dozed off and given Amber a chance to slip away. Corinna was about to go after her when the pilot announced they would land momentarily.

Cursing herself, Corinna buckled into her seat. Amber didn’t return for the landing and was out the door as the plane came to a stop. Corinna followed slowly, her mind racing for a new strategy. She came out to see Amber with an elderly man, probably early seventies, very lean, with only a spattering of snow-white hair sprouting from the top of his head.

“And this young lady helped attain our most prized treasure,” Amber proudly introduced her as she came down the steps.

The old man stepped forward and bowed. “I am most grateful for your help.” He patted her on the head and turned back to Amber. “We should hurry. I have everything prepared.”

Corinna allowed herself to be led to a car and stuffed into the backseat. She wanted them to believe she was defeated. They wouldn’t even see her coming until it was too late.

As they pulled away from the terminal, another plane came roaring down the landing strip, fast and hard, bumped dangerously from one wheel to the other before settling down. The plane came to a skidding halt, the door opened and out charged two figures.

“Pappa!” Corinna screamed, her hand pressing against the back windshield.

Both Amber and the old man whipped their heads around.

“Drive. Go! Fast!”

Jimmy and her father receded from sight.

* * *

“Quickly, follow me.”

Kly and Jimmy raced after the stranger, through the terminal, past the rows of parked cars, to a van.

“Get in.”

Kly loaded Jimmy into the back and hopped in beside the stranger just as the car Corinna was in passed the toll-booth and sped off down the street. They chased, swerving in and out of traffic with no effort to conceal their pursuit.

Once into the heavier downtown traffic, they were forced to slow down and almost lost them on a couple of occasions. They were nearly a full block behind when the lead car pulled to the curb and three figures hustled inside a massive stone apartment building.

“We’ll get out here,” Kly said. “Thanks for your help.”

“Wait! There’s something I have to tell you...”

But it was already too late. Kly and Jimmy were half-way down the street.

* * *

Dragged into a cold, barren room. The dim lighting made it impossible to make out the sparse furnishings littering the vast expanse, taking up the entire top floor of the building. What Corinna could see was a gallant throne, brilliantly decorated in golds, silvers, and garnets, seemingly blazing from between torches and candles.

In front of the throne, a table containing some kind of harness and a single, unlit black candle. Beside this, a circle encircled again by protective diagrams fashioned from the ancient arts.

“Finally, we will be re-united, my demon friend,” the old man said, rubbing the shaft of the rod and unable to take his eyes from it.

Corinna saw her chance. She lunged forward, her hand pulled up her dress and reached for her waistband. As her fingers searched for the smooth silky hood she slammed into a wall so solid it bounced her off backwards.

Confused, Corinna looked up to the hand Amber was holding out. In it, the hood.

“Looking for this?” Amber asked. She tossed the hood into Corinna’s lap. “We haven’t time for childish games. Your father and brother should arrive just in time for the summoning.”

Corinna was grabbed by her ankle and dragged across the floor, no more than a disobedient pup to an unconcerned owner. She tried to kick loose but a sharp tug put her off balance and she missed her mark, then was dropped when they reached the table and the old man asked for Amber’s help.

There was no fight left in her. Corinna was ready to give up. There was nothing else she could do but watch helplessly as the sceptre was affixed to the table and the candle lighted. Amber winked at her as the old man stepped inside the circle.

“Front row seats for my guests?” the old man asked. Amber nodded. “Very well, then.” He closed his eyes and began to chant, whispering the words of the summoning spell over and over, growing louder with each cycle until his words thundered through the room and bounced off the walls.

The sceptre began to glow. A pulsating beam growing stronger with each word, becoming so bright it hurt Corinna’s eyes to stare at, and yet she couldn’t look away, couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away despite her eyeballs feeling as though they were about to explode right out of their sockets.

Corinna screamed, surrounded by pain, by hate, by fear. She screamed for her father, cried for forgiveness over what she’d caused. She was only a girl! She hadn’t known!

“Corinna, get away from there.”

Mercifully, the booming sound of her father’s voice caused the beam to flicker and in that brief instant Corinna was able to pull her gaze away. As she tried to scramble across the floor, Amber grabbed hold and pulled her close.

“Stay away if you value your daughter’s life. You are too late to stop us.”

“Let her go!”

Corinna couldn’t struggle free, her energy sapped by the light. It called to her, prodded for her attention. It took everything she had to refuse it, every ounce of her will-power to ignore the alluring warmth of the light.

The blazing beacon shone with enough intensity to shatter the glass, sending shards of piercing glass exploding outward. Corinna cringed, hid her eyes under her arm and felt the biting sting as a few pieces impaled themselves into her skin. When she looked up again, she was eye to eye with a creature so ghastly not even she could have imagined it into existence.

* * *

Kly gripped his son by the shoulders. “Jimmy, it’s up to you. Save your sister.” He pushed him toward the table and then went to deal with the wizard. The circle might protect him from any menacing spirits but it would do little to stop Kly.

The wizard noticed him coming a moment too late and the punch caught him squarely across the jaw. He toppled over, out of the circle, with Kly coming down on top of him.

“You fool! What have you done?”

A hate-filled roar shook the room. Kly turned to see the monster leap from the table and come charging toward them.

“Da, what do I do?” Jimmy called. He ran head-long into Amber and bounced harmlessly off. Amber grabbed him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. “Da, help!”

It wasn’t him. Jimmy wasn’t the one legend had foretold would tame the demon. His son was simply his son.

Gwanfeye roared as it reared back to swallow him whole.

* * *

Corinna couldn’t fight the light any longer. It had exhausted her, drained her, left her completely useless. With the demon poised over her father, ready to strike him down, she simply accepted the light and allowed it to flow through her.

It filled her with a new energy, gave her new strength and hope, made her feel stronger.

With a violent shove, Corinna broke loose of Amber’s grip and then sent her flying across the room. She collided with the demon sending the two tumbling to the floor. An angry bellow from Gwanfeye, the demon grabbed Amber in its claws and tossed her inside its mouth. A sickening crunch filled the room as Amber was chewed up.

“Pappa, get inside the circle!”

Her father back-pedalled until he was safely within the chalk outline. The demon turned its attention on the old man, who whimpered and cowered beneath its snarling maw.

“It is me, your master. You can’t eat me.”

The demon roared, licked its chops and then devoured the old man in a single swallow. It’s hunger still not satisfied, it turned to Jimmy, saw Corinna was closer, and bounded across the room with a single hop.

Corinna held her ground, stared up confidently into the creature’s eyes, and saw the true nature of the beast.

“Corinna! Watch out!” Kly screamed as he lunged from the circle.

“No. Stay where you are,” Corinna replied calmly. The light filled her insides, a glowing stream of understanding. She knew what she had to do, how she could take responsibility and right the wrongs she’d brought onto them.

The demon opened its mouth, razor-edged teeth just inches from her face, the awful stench of its breath, all threatening a horrific end.

Only, Corinna wasn't afraid, for it wasn't her end they had come to. Opening her mouth, she let the light flow forth. It came in a radiant stream, flowing out and encircling the demon, pulling it in, allowing her to swallow it whole. The demon struggled to get free, clawed at the air, mewled a painful song as it was swallowed up.

She was to be the demon's new prison. Corinna had tamed the demon.

Her father gripped her tightly, pulling her close. "I thought we'd lost you."

And she knew, he would always protect her.