

Chapter 1

Connor was at the bar of the opera house when she arrived, which didn't really surprise her. She had dressed up enough to satisfy the dress code, flashed her badge to get in, but she looked like a tourist who was stretching her budget to be there. He noticed her almost as soon as she cleared the doorway, and she sighed slightly to herself as he extricated himself from the conversation with the – yes, the senator – to cross the room to meet her halfway.

“Adelaide! Oh, my God, is that really you?” he said. He refrained from an embrace, but with a noticeable effort. It had been five years...

“Don't get all excited to see me,” she said. Her accent wasn't quite as strongly British as it had been last time she had seen him. “You won't like the reason.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They said, ‘Oh, you used to date him. You go get him; maybe he'll be agreeable,’” she said, heading back in the direction of the door. Connor kept up with her without really realizing it.

“Date? Christ, Adelaide, I proposed—”

“And I turned you down because I'd been lying to you for three years. You need to get out of town.”

“What?”

She sighed again, stopping in the relative privacy of the hallway to talk in a lowered tone. “The oracle sent Henderson a note. The trolls have found you. They're sending one here tonight, to kill you. You have to get out of town.”

“Trolls? You don't know what you're talking about, Adelaide. Trolls haven't made an appearance in a human population center—”

“In four hundred years. I know,” she said, turning slightly to face him, and he could see the faint tattoo around her left eye, the statutory mark of a trained and practicing magus. The lines were of gold, highlighting the amber of her eyes when the light made the tattoo shimmer.

“Adelaide—”

“I told you; I was lying to you for three years.”

He was silent for several long moments before speaking again. “So Henderson is talking to the oracle again.”

“No, she sent him a note. She thinks that you dying would be very bad.”

“Holy God, sixth order?” he said when he had deciphered the pattern of the tattoo, and his hand went to the mark around her eye. She didn't shy from the touch but gently caught his arm before it could linger.

“If you stay, it will kill you. That would be bad,” she said.

“I've fought trolls before.”

“With your bare hands? These guys don't understand *retired*, Connor. We have to at least get you out of the city.”

“So what if I don't want to go?”

“Heh. I'd rather you didn't make me find out if I can *make* you go. But seriously. Do you know what a troll in a human population center does?”

His eyes were growing angry.

“I *am* here under protest,” she said more quietly, letting her gaze drop. “I'm quite familiar with what you used to do and your opinion of the whole operation.”

“But yet here you are.”

“Turn down too many jobs and Henderson starts to take it as a critique of his management.” She shifted her eyes to the nearby clock. “We’ve got a narrow window, Connor. He’ll skin me if I don’t get you out of here before it gets here.”

“And how do you proposed to do that?”

She shifted her eyes back to him, her gaze suddenly mischievous. “We have to go see the ex you beat the snot out of for something a bit rare.”

“Who?”

“Leon Stronwitz.”

“Christ, Adelaide, he deals in borderline—”

“*Shady* focus components. Every student of the Ars Magica in the city knows him.”

“Including you.”

“Well, yeah. You don’t get where I am by skipping classes.” She nodded at the clock again. “I can’t play with time, Connor.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“To talk to Henderson. You’ve got options, but since you’re a civvy now, he has to actually let you pick amongst them. The trolls are hunting you pretty seriously, and they’re likely to keep doing so.”

He paced half a dozen steps off for a few minutes before returning to her, still angry. “Fine. Fine, but I’m not going to be *nice* to him.”

She just shrugged slightly. “All right. Leon’s, then.”

They had just gotten to the top of the stairs down to the lobby when the troll broke through the front doors; Adelaide caught Connor’s arm to keep him from engaging it.

“You’re *retired*, Connor,” she said flatly. “Get to the roof; I’ll meet you there.”

“You can’t possibly—”

“There are other people in the city who can handle it. Get to the roof.”

He swore under his breath as he headed back to the building’s fire stairs, back down the hallway they’d come out of. When he was out of sight, Adelaide picked up a small, ornamental flower pot and flung it at the troll’s head. It was close to twelve feet tall, covered with matted, moss-like hair, its limbs bent at grotesque angles.

“Hey, ugly,” she hollered over the railing in the trollish tongue, “if you want him, you have to get through me!”

The troll immediately barreled in her direction, and she darted through a gap in the mass of panicking people fleeing the lobby to throw herself through the doors to the main balcony. The ceiling at the top of the stairs was too low for the troll to easily pass, but it found the main doors to the floor of the opera house as Adelaide launched herself over the railing of the balcony. She landed in the rapidly emptying aisle as the troll squeezed through the doorway and rolled to her feet to run headlong at the orchestra pit. She vaulted onto the stage from the top of the piano, scaled the curtain ropes, and swung into the catwalks above the stage to search for an upper egress.

There were seven orders of magehood, a ranking system used to rapidly identify a mage’s strength by the corresponding tattoo around the left eye. Both a mage’s natural talent and the depth of any training were reflected in their ranking; examinations were given similar to driving tests. A member of the sixth order was either extremely naturally talented or had had years of formal training. Adelaide was a watered-down mix of the two.

A highly trained mage could use focuses to achieve greater effects than his own innate talent could normally allow. Adelaide, however, had none. She had not anticipated actually

fighting the troll, and Henderson had insisted she go low-profile and leave all the *implements* behind. No staff, no dagger, no robe. Fine; she could do magic without them. It would just give her a nosebleed...

The troll tore down the curtains attempting to climb up after her; Adelaide caught the railings of the catwalk as it shook. The troll plucked the piano out of the orchestra pit to throw it at her. She caught edge of the walkway above her and pulled herself up as the catwalk she had been standing on crumpled out from under her.

“Where is he, little girl?” he growled.

From a troll, the trollish tongue was an intimidating, echoing bass in the opera hall. Adelaide didn’t even try to answer; she was not finding doorways at the end of any of the catwalks, just ladders back down. The troll jumped, barely missing catching the catwalk she was on now. She stood a moment, looking back down at it as it recollected itself to jump again, her brain briefly uncooperative as it tried to process that the troll could almost jump three stories.

“Where *is* the demonspawn?” the troll spat at her, then jumped again. Adelaide dove off the catwalk, reaching out as if to catch hold of the air, *pulled*—

It had been probably fifteen years since she had done any kind of translocation magic without an attuned focus, and Adelaide could feel the surge of magical energy release like the beginning of an ice cream headache. She *whiffed* out of the space above the stage before claws raked through the air she had vacated, only to find that she had overestimated of the distance to the roof by about two and a half feet.

The troll crashed back down onto the stage somewhere below her, but the layers that comprised the building’s roof and the opera hall’s ceiling muffled the impact. She lay a moment on her side after falling the few feet to the roof, her sinuses burning, before pulling herself to sitting and digging a tissue out of the clutch dangling from her wrist to dab at the blood seeping from her nose.

Connor was standing at the edge of the roof at the back of the building, smoking, and Adelaide just watched him while listening to the troll raging somewhere below them. He had quit the habit about halfway through their time together; she wondered briefly how long he had lasted after she had left—

“You’re just going to leave it down there?” he said when she walked over next to him and took the crook of his arm.

“As I said, there are people in town who can and will deal with it. The oracle has warned us against letting them kill you, so for the moment, your safety is my priority.” She frowned at him a moment. “Which, in the strictest sense, probably means I should object to the cigarette, but she really only mentioned the trolls.”

She reached out, metaphysically this time, to pull them through the air to the roof of the building next door, drifting as gently as soap bubbles. The tissue remained clutched to her nose until, four buildings over, she let them float to the ground and started walking swiftly in the direction of Leon’s shop.

“Are you all right?” Connor asked when he saw the blood on the tissue.

“Eh, I was expecting some kind of roof access over the stage,” she said. “Forgot trolls could jump like that.”

“I didn’t think translocation was that big a deal for anyone beyond the second order.”

“Without a focus, it’s like getting punched in the nose for me,” she shrugged.

“Ah. A mage of your standing would normally have several.”

“Could have improvised, but it probably would have consumed most of my clothes.”

Easier to bleed.”

“Not like I haven’t seen it before,” he said under his breath, but not so much that she didn’t hear. She just pulled him onto a bus with her; it was headed away from the opera house, in the general direction of the shop.

Traffic was congested in the vicinity of the opera house, but after a few blocks it was moving relatively smoothly again. Adelaide kept her eyes focused out the window.

“I guess knowing me was useful in dealing with Henderson,” Connor said to her.

“I didn’t actually tell them we were acquainted until about a year ago.” She dabbed at her nose again to see if it was still bleeding. “Henderson likes to throw stories of you at the newbies, but I ignored them until he tried telling one that had you drinking vodka martinis.”

“What?”

“I know. Forget the dating aspect – I was your bartender for three years. The *only* time you’ve ordered vodka martinis was that Halloween party where you went as Bond, and you could barely gag them down,” she said. “So I felt compelled to call his bullshit on that one.”

“Great. Dare I ask what he’s been telling people about me?”

“Not really.”

“I suppose you’re still not looking for something long-term.”

“Not in New York,” she said, standing as the bus stopped, and she pulled him off after her.

“I don’t really have ties here...”

“Connor, you got out of this world for a reason, remember?” she said, walking swiftly down the block away from the bus. He stood a moment, marveling that she could move that quickly in heels, which was really just an excuse to watch how she walked, but she stopped half a dozen paces off and turned to frown at him, so he caught up with her.

“You realize I’m still in love with you, right?” he said.

“I’m not sure you’d still be interested if you knew what I’d been doing the past five years.”

She pulled the door to Leon’s shop open and headed straight for the counter. Connor slipped inside, but he hung back at the door. The shop itself had always reminded him of a sleazy comic book shop: shelves overcrowded, dusty boxes lining any space without shelving.

“Adelaide!”

There was enough purr in Leon’s voice that Connor moved further into the shop so the other man could clearly see who he was. He had, as she’d mentioned, roughed up Leon Stronwitz years ago, when he had showed up at the bar where she had been working and tried to start trouble for her.

“What is he doing here?” the shopkeeper said to Adelaide, and she rolled her eyes.

“You really don’t want to know,” she said. “You keep wyvern barbs in stock, Leon. I need one, at least four inches.”

“I didn’t think you were into that kind of magic,” Leon said to her, raising a brow. He’d also taken half a step back and settled one hand under the counter, probably on a gun, Connor guessed. Adelaide just grinned mischievously.

“There’s quite a lot more you can do with wyvern venom than what third order huffers are into, Leon. Four inches is worth what, three-fifty?” She pulled a wad of bills out of the little clutch she was carrying. “Does the cash talk well enough, or do I have to flash the badge at you, too?”

His expression melted into a glare. “You’re working for the agency now, and you’ll

show your face here? What the hell are you trying to do, Adelaide?”

“Get out of town before the troll catches up,” she said, still grinning. “The bus should throw its tracking off long enough for the local office to intercept it before it gets this far.”

The word *troll* had sent him out from behind the counter towards the door to the back room, and Adelaide counted out money while she waited. Connor walked over to her.

“What the hell *are* you doing?” he murmured.

“Getting us out of town. I was in the graduate program for magic at Columbia when you knew me. I got to sixth order mostly via research, not talent.” She put the extra cash back into her purse. “If I don’t have a focus to burn off, translocating that far will probably consume most of my blood and a few internal organs. Wyvern venom is probably all I can afford that’s strong enough.”

Leon came back out of the back room with a small, ancient-looking wooden box. He set it gingerly on the counter, and Adelaide opened it as she pushed the pile of bills across towards him. A smile flickered onto her lips.

“Oh, from a Baltic blue,” she said. “This might not even give me a hangover. Did you have a hypodermic for it?”

Leon’s glare just deepened, and she rolled her eyes at him again.

“Fine, fine, the old-fashioned way.” She lifted the four-inch, translucent barb delicately out of the box and stepped back from the counter. Connor found himself frowning as he watched her pick out the largest visible vein in the elbow of her left arm.

“Are you sure about this, Adelaide?”

“I did say you might want to rethink your feelings for me,” she said, then thrust the point of the barb into the vein, grimacing as she did. She shifted her grip on it slightly and began to gently squeeze the venom out of the barb. “Four inches gives me probably a fifteen minute window for the magic before the venom will incapacitate me, so we should have plenty of time.”

“*Should?*”

She let the drained barb drop to floor so she could clasp a hand over the bleeding vein. She wagged her free elbow at him. “Grab a hold of something, eh?”

Connor walked over and took her arm. “I’ve never met a mage willing to risk killing herself for a spell like this.”

“There’s a reason I’m working for the agency,” she said. She shifted closer to him, closing her eyes, but the sudden fire in them was bright enough to be visible despite that. “You... you might want to hold your breath...”