

ME AND MY SHADOWS

AN IRON SHARPENING IRON
COLLABORATION

EVELYN PUERTO

Copyright © 2020 by Evelyn Puerto

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

ME AND MY SHADOWS

He told me he was a sucker for lost causes. I should have believed him.

But there was no time to think of that now. Not when a crazed timeweaver was pointing a gun at me.

“Why do you want to know where I’ve been? And when?” Her voice started as a whine and ended in a shriek.

I held my hands up. “I’m sorry, we must have the wrong person.”

Her dark eyes relaxed, but she didn’t lower her weapon.

“Look, put the gun down.” Patience was never the strong suit of my colleague, Eafisa. The fire genasi’s hair took on a glow. Never a good sign.

I waved at him, hoping he’d get my cue that I would handle this. Now if my other colleague would get the message as well, we’d have a chance. Maybe.

“You said you were studying magical beings. You can’t fool me. That means experimenting on us.” Her voice shook, but from anger or fear, I couldn’t tell. Her pattered skirt with its vivid colors moved as if she stood in a strong wind rather than inside an apartment crammed full of tacky pottery figurines and pictures of unicorns.

“No, really, I am a researcher with the University of San Francisco.”

“That’s what they all say, Afsana.” She spit my name out as if it burned her lips to say it. “How much did the humans pay you to procure their specimens?”

I understood her concern. It had only been twenty years since the humans had even acknowledged the existence of magical beings, nine since they agreed that we should have the same rights and status they did. During those two decades, many atrocities had been committed, many abuses perpetrated. By both sides. And there were many on both sides who still considered the other fair game.

“I don’t work for that kind of researcher.” My shadows leaked out of me, as they did when I was outraged or felt threatened. They swirled around my legs and arms as if forming a moving shield. I pressed my lips together.

She shook her head, making her red curls bounce. “You’re a shadowslinger. How could you work for them?”

I knew the sight of my shadows would only make things work. Why couldn’t I have had better control? “I’m also a medical doctor.”

“See? You are one of them.”

I suppressed a sigh. “I’m looking for ways human medicine can benefit from magical beings.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I’d blundered.

“You want our blood, our magic, to use for your own ends. And you’re trying to control all of us.” She waved the pistol at Eafisa. “Don’t you see?” She spoke to him, pleading in her voice. “I can help you break away from her, to be free.”

“Really?” He smirked at her. “Make me an offer.”

I sure hope he’s joking. Maybe I should wield my shadows to create darkness so we could slip away.

Thankfully, James, the third member of my team, chose that moment to intercede. He wrested the pistol from the

timeweaver. At least, that's what I think he did. What I saw was the pistol in her hand jerk away from her and vanish.

James had that effect on things. Six months ago, he'd fallen prey to a pixie's prank and went from average human to invisible. All except one toe.

I glanced to the floor near the timeweaver, who by this time was sobbing. There it was, one lonely toe. Strange that his clothing was invisible, but the toe was not.

James spoke, his deep voice reassuring. "I'm unloading your gun and putting it in the corner. Then we're leaving." A moment later, a handful of bullets clattered to the floor in one corner, the gun hit the wall with a thud in the opposite corner and fell behind a rocking chair. "Don't try to stop us."

I waited for him to touch my arm, then I backed out of the room, Eafisa in tow. As soon as we'd left the timeweaver's apartment, we bolted down the corridor and down the stairs.

Once on the street, Eafisa laughed. "That went well."

"No thanks to you." I'd given him strict orders to wait for my cue. "You just about set her off."

A hand on my shoulder cut off my response. "We'd better report back, right?"

As always, James was right.

I thought back to the day I had accepted this crazy mission.

"Afsana." Dr. Bedsole's voice had been insistent.

"Oh, what?" I'd been lost in my own speculations, wondering if he was crazy, or if I was the one who'd gone crackers.

"Enough with the shadows, already."

I must have retreated into my shadows. "Sorry." With a breath, I pulled the shadows back into myself. I depended on them like that, to give me space when I needed to think. "Beware that you do not lose the substance by grasping at the shadow." Maybe he'd think about Aesop's words and give me time to consider what he'd told me.

He ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. “Dear girl, your deflecting tactics won’t work on me. Will you take the job?”

He’d called me dear girl for years, ever since he started mentoring me when I entered medical school. I leaned toward him. “Can you explain it to me again?”

“If I must.” He leaned his elbows on his desk and rubbed the palms of his hands together. “As you know, illegal experimentation on magical beings has not been stamped out.”

I nodded. “Right. And last week, after an explosion on Fisherman’s Wharf, two magical beings vanished.” With a frown, I rubbed my chin. “People just don’t vanish. Not in front of hundreds of witnesses.”

“These two did.” He shook his head. “One is a tree fairy. Her friends call her Blue. She’s disabled, has four wings instead of the usual two.” He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “The other is stranger. Some kind of humanoid, looks like a small child. She’s called Pinch. Was last seen with Blue.”

“Can’t the police take care of this?”

“They’re of the opinion that sometimes people want to disappear. And don’t intend to be found.”

“How do they know that’s true of these two?”

He tipped his head. “Are you beginning to see the problem?”

Maybe. “Why don’t you agree with them?”

“Because two weeks ago, someone else put on a disappearing act. A dragon. Emerald green. Goes by Starblaze.”

I wrinkled my brow. “So? Maybe the dragon had somewhere to be.”

“No, her employer was the one who filed the missing person report.”

“The dragon has a job?”

“Yes. She works in a tent city for the homeless. On chilly nights, she warms up the tents with her breath. But her main

job is security. The mayor wants her back. Whenever she's on duty, they have zero problems with theft or assault."

"I can see that. But who would kidnap a dragon?" I didn't believe any of this. "And why do you think this is suspicious?"

"Because in both cases, there were traces of timeweaving."

I frowned. "Meaning what?"

"There was a ripple in time, indicating someone crimped it. Probably for a few hours. Whoever did this jumped to the middle of the night when Fisherman's Wharf was empty, then overpowered the victims."

With my head tipped to the side, I studied his face. He seemed like he really believed what he was saying. "OK, suppose I buy that. Why me?"

"Because you're a researcher in magical beings. You've done a lot on timeweavers, right?"

"Yes." I dragged the word out.

"Then you're the one to go looking for timeweavers. You could ask all kinds of questions. Once you find our victims, you can spring them."

"Why are you so interested in this, anyway?"

"The mayor, well, just say I owe him. He's raised the funds for this mission, by the way, and transferred them to my account. But he doesn't want his name involved. He doesn't need any timeweavers coming after him."

I shook my head, letting my long dark hair fly around my face. "I get the part about me doing the looking. But not the part about springing them out."

Dr. Bedsole shifted in his seat and twitched his lips into a smile. "Oh, dear girl, you'll have help."

The look on his face made me narrow my eyes. "What kind of help?"

"Do you want to meet them?"

Did I? He didn't give me time to answer. He raised his voice. "You can come in now." He shrugged and rolled his

eyes. “I told them not to, but I’m sure they were eavesdropping.”

A side door of his office opened. I’m not sure who I was expecting to saunter in but a fire genasi wasn’t it.

“Afsana, meet your team.”

I stared at the fire genasi. He looked about twenty-five, five or so years younger than me, but elementals were hard to gauge. His skin wasn’t as dark as the typical genasi, his hair not as flame colored. And unlike the genasi, he wasn’t much taller than me. Maybe half human. The eyes, though, they burned with fire. “I see only one.”

Dr. Bedsole chuckled. The fire genasi smirked.

Heat rose in my cheeks. “Is someone going to let me in on the joke?”

“I’m sorry, Afsana.” He gestured. “Meet Easifa Al-Kali. Easifa, this is Afsana Parween. The leader of the team.”

Nodding to Easifa, I smiled. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

He grinned. “Me too.”

Narrowing my eyes, I turned back to Dr. Bedsole. “You said team.”

“He thinks this is funny.”

I jerked back at the sound of the deep, unamused voice that didn’t belong to either Easifa or Dr. Bedsole. “Who? What?”

Now Easifa was cackling, and Dr. Bedsole tried, unsuccessfully, to keep his smile from widening.

“I never met a Nyxian before,” said the voice.

“You haven’t yet.” I tried to keep my voice steady. But it was unnerving to talk with a disembodied voice.

“Let me correct that.” Dr. Bedsole pointed toward the door Easifa had entered. “That is James Grayson.” He held up a hand. “Yes, he’s invisible. No, there isn’t time to explain. He’ll fill you in later.”

I scowled but kept silent.

Dr. Bedsole tapped on his desk. “Now, to business. Your

mission is to track down timeweavers who have been in the vicinity of the disappearances. I've provided a line of credit for your expenses and transport for you. Interview them, find our captives, and free them. Simple." He smiled as if he'd just giving me a list of items to pick up at the store.

"How much credit?" I was glad Easifa asked the question.

When Dr Bedsole named the amount, I gasped. That would keep the three of us well fed, no matter what our expenses. "The mayor raised that much?"

"Well, have you forgotten? Thaddeus Hassard is a war hero. He's got the ear of a lot of people. He used his contacts to raise the money and to develop the list of timeweavers."

"What's his interest?" James asked a good question. "Other than the dragon?"

"I'm not sure. He said it was personal. Maybe he has a connection to one of the victims. Does it matter?"

"Nah." Easifa shrugged. "When do we start?"

"One more thing. Thaddeus got hold of a collar that interferes with a timeweaver's powers. Fasten it around her neck, and she won't be able to bend time."

That would come in handy, I had to admit.

This seemed like a hopeless mission. But I needed the money, so I could pursue my own quest. Probably Easifa and invisible James were in a similar pickle. So, it was up to me to figure out how the three of us could take on a timeweaver. And spring a dragon, a disabled tree fairy and an unspecified humanoid.

Which is how I ended up staring down the barrel of a gun wielded by an enraged temporal manipulator.

A few hours later after we got away from her, we debriefed with Dr. Bedsole, discussing our failure. He suggested we try the others on Thaddeus' list. If none of them were the culprit, we could return to our angry friend. "Only this time, make a plan."

Duh. Like I hadn't thought of that. What I had overlooked

in my planning was the impetuous fire genasi who couldn't keep his mouth shut. If we couldn't figure out how to get these timeweavers to talk to us, we had no hope of rescuing the kidnapped victims.

A lost cause indeed.

After our failed first attempt, we spent the next few days in the workroom Dr. Bedsole provided. It had overstuffed couches, a worktable and chairs, and computers. Everything we needed to review the missing persons reports, the intel on the timeweavers on our list, and plot our strategy.

While we were at it, I set up strict ground rules. Eafisa and James would let me do the talking. Any use of our powers had to wait for my cue. We also developed a code, a series of taps on the hand or shoulder that James could use to communicate with us when we wanted to be silent.

Then we started tracking the timeweavers on Bedsole's list. The traces were the best clue we had. Alibis were meaningless when it came to timeweavers, since they could easily be in two places at once.

We studied the traces the timeweaver left behind, and decided we were most likely searching for a woman. Two of the six on the list were male, so we eliminated them. One of the others was half-human, so the trace didn't match. The other was part fae. The trace we were following was a full-blooded time weaver.

So now we just had to track down the last two and convince them that I wasn't plotting to perform vivisection on them. At least just long enough to discover if she was the kidnapper or not.

After some debate, we set our sights on Sydeera Gibbor.

I asked James to read her profile, mostly because I found his deep voice easier to listen to than Easifa's scratchy tenor.

"Sydeera Gibbor. Estimated age: 237."

"So about right for a middle age crisis?" Easifa snorted.

I ignored him. "Go on, James."

“Now this is promising. She lives in Seattle. Travels extensively. Visits San Francisco frequently. Just seems to pop in and out.”

I took a sip of tea. “What does she do in Seattle?”

“She’s an antiques dealer. One of the top ones. Which would explain all the coming and going.”

Frowning, I leaned back against the cushions of the sofa. “Maybe. Anything else?”

James scooted his chair back, scraping it on the floor. “She’s also been accused of conning people. Selling fakes. Her last was a copy of the Magna Carta.”

I sat up. “How often has she been accused?”

“Oh, looks like—” He muttered under his breath, counting. “Seventeen times in the last twenty-two years.”

Easifa crossed his arms. “So, she’s a crook. Comes here to snatch unsuspecting victims.”

“Could be.” I rubbed my chin. “She could be the right one.”

Easifa stood up. “Then what are we waiting for?”

Two days later, we made use of a private jet one of Thaddeus’ donors made available to us. That saved us having to try to smuggle James onto a commercial flight. Or pack him into a suitcase, as Eafisa suggested.

We spent the next few days visiting antiques dealers and other shops run my magical beings. The idea was to establish ourselves as researchers into timeweavers and other magical races.

At the end of the week, we decided it was time to visit Sydeera’s antique shop. We took a cab to the city’s Mission District and disembarked a few blocks from Sydeera’s place of business.

As we walked through the crowded streets, we got into the formation we’d come up with earlier. I pushed through the crowds, Eafisa about a foot to my right. James followed behind us. When things got really crowded, Easifa and I held hands,

which earned us a few strange looks. But that was nothing to how people would react coming into contact with an invisible man.

When I saw the shop selling antiques, books, and other notions, I squeezed Easifa's hand. He pointed with his other hand. "Let's try that one, shall we?"

I assented, hoping James had heard and would follow.

We entered the dimly lit shop. Just going through a door was like a tightly choreographed dance. Easifa went first and held the door open. I hesitated on the doorstep, pretending to search my bag for something. That gave James time to slip past me.

Inside, my first impression was a musty smell of old books. And being hemmed in by furniture, statuettes, and tables covered with old pottery and artifacts, some of whose use I didn't want to guess at. Cabinets along the wall held jeweled objects. Paintings hung on the walls.

I scanned the room. Good, we were the only customers. No witnesses.

A willowy middle-aged woman with flowing dark hair wearing a flowing skirt and tunic wove her way through the cluttered shop. "Good morning. May I be of assistance?"

Her melodic voice had a calming, reassuring tone. The perfect quality for a con artist.

I put on a smile. "We're looking for Sydeera Gibbor."

She touched her chest. "I am Sydeera."

I held out a hand. "I'm Dr. Afsana Parween, a researcher with the University of San Francisco." When she didn't shake my hand, I used it to gesture to Easifa. "This is my research assistant, Easifa Al-Kali. We're doing a study of magical beings in the empire and would like to ask you a few questions about timeweavers."

Her smile broadened, but it didn't reach to her eyes. "Of course." She pointed to a grouping of overstuffed couches in the center of her shop.

We followed her and sat. Easifa pulled out an electronic tablet and nodded. "I'm ready."

I tipped my head at Sydeera. "First, please tell us which branch of timeweavers you descend from."

She laughed like the chime of tiny bells. "Is it not obvious?" She waved a graceful hand. "My people are related to the elves."

I smiled and asked her several innocuous questions about when her powers manifested, the kind of training she received, and if others in her family had the same abilities. Then I edged closer to what I really wanted to know.

"Do you find a use for your abilities in your daily life?"

She stiffened slightly. "Well, you know how it is." She giggled. Something seemed fake about it. "You get behind with your work or are running late for an appointment. So, I slow time down so I can catch up." Another giggle. "It confuses people sometimes. I tell them I'm going to be late, then show up early."

Easifa and I chuckled, mimicking her amusement.

"I'll tell you a funny story. I was due to meet a client who wanted to offer me a 13th century illuminated manuscript of elvish origin. I was so nervous I could barely walk. Then I got lost on my way to his house. I tried to bend time to catch myself up. Instead I ended up on his doorstep five hours early."

I nodded. "So, you can't always control it exactly. Has that happened lately?"

Her eyes flickered, then relaxed. "Happens all the time." She studied Easifa, then shifted her gaze to me. She let out a tiny gasp.

Then time slowed. I felt like I was in a bubble, moving with great effort, like I was underwater. Easifa's mouth moved, his lips forming words but too slowly for me to understand.

There was a pinch, and a jolt, and we landed in a damp cave, trapped behind iron bars.

Sydeera stood on the other side, arms crossed across her body, a fierce glare on her face. “I believed you at first. Then I noticed your invisible companion who you didn’t bother to introduce.” She crossed her arms. “You didn’t think the sofa cushions sinking under your weight wouldn’t give you away?”

James sighed. “I never knew timeweavers to be observant. You’re an odd one.”

If I knew exactly where he was, I would have elbowed him. Insulting our captor wasn’t helping.

Sydeera turned to me. “Are you going to tell me what you’re up to, Doctor? If you really are one?”

I looked over her head, thinking. What could I tell her? If she was the kidnapper, telling her about our mission would only threaten our lives. But if not, maybe she’d help us.

“Humpf. Since you’re not about to tell me, you can stay there. I have all the time in the world.” With another breath, the air rippled and she vanished.

“How does she do that?” James asked.

“Timeweavers pinch time, like gripping different sections of fabric together. To move us, all she has to do is pinch time forward, to when we would have arrived here if she brought us the usual way.”

James touched my arm. “Then we have no idea where we are, because—”

Easifa interrupted. “Because we don’t know how long it would have taken to get here.”

“Well, guys, what do you think? How do we get out of here?” I assessed our surroundings. The opening of the cave stretched about twenty feet wide. A shake of the iron bars told me they were firmly grounded into both the floor and the roof.

James’ voice came from the right. “The bars are driven into the side, too.” He let out a muffled grunt. “Immovable.”

“Not a problem.” I summoned my shadows, and fashioned one into a key. Then I guided it to the lock. Reaching my

hand through the bars, I jiggled my shadow key. After a few tries and a little reshaping of it, the lock clicked. I pushed the door open. “And that, gentlemen, is how—”

A dull thud cut me off.

Eafisa pushed past me. “You were saying?” His smirk vanished as he pushed on the door. An invisible barrier blocked the door from opening more than a few inches.

Scratching my head, I turned to Easifa. “Can we burn through?”

He snorted. “By we, do you mean me?” He extended a hand and shot flame toward the barrier. After several minutes, he stopped, panting and sweating. “I can’t.”

“Ouch.” James’ voice was now near the spot Easifa had aimed his flames at. “It’s hot, but that’s about it.”

I let out a sigh. “All right. We can’t force our way out.” I spun in place and stalked to the back of the cave, about fifteen feet from the bars. The walls were damp, smooth and as far as I could tell, had no cracks or crevices. Easifa examined the walls to my left, and James was on the right. Neither of them found any weak spot.

Only then did I allow my attention to stray to the cave’s furnishings. A pallet of straw lay in one corner and a bucket with a lid stood in another. A few faelights cast a pale blue light on the corridor outside our cell. “Not exactly high-class accommodations.” I moved to the straw and sat down. Rustling on my right told me James was taking a seat next to me.

Easifa continued to pace back and forth in front of the bars. “We have to get out of here. We can’t just wait, trapped like rabbits in a snare.” His hair took on a glow, as did his hands and face.

I debated trying to calm him. He might feel better if he combusted, shot off some of his flame. And that might do something for the chilly dampness in the air.

He was on his fourth trip back and forth when his flame

burst from his hands. He aimed it at the bars, the barriers, walls, the roof. His flames flickered and dimmed, then extinguished. He stood, his head hanging and shoulders drooping.

I winced. That wasn't good of me to let him burn himself out like that. "Easifa. Come sit."

He shuffled toward me and dropped onto the prickly straw. With a grunt, he fell back onto the pallet.

I patted his knee. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For getting rid of the damp. It's much warmer now."

He snorted. "What, so you want to get comfy? Planning on a long stay?"

I suppressed a retort. "No, I think better when I'm not shivering. And that's what we need to do now."

"Right." He waved a hand in the air. "Thinking now."

James let out a huff. "Just don't burn up our bed, OK?"

Time dragged in our dimly lit prison. At some point Easifa starting pacing in front of the bars, seven left, seven right, as even as a metronome.

James tapped his foot on the floor, his lone visible toe jumping up and down. "Did someone say something about a hopeless cause?"

"Even in the grave, all is not lost."

Eafisa scowled at me. "Where did that come from?"

"Edgar Allan Poe." Why was he annoyed? Perhaps talking about graves wasn't a good idea. "Oh, sorry. Maybe not helpful." To calm my nerves, I tried to make conversation. "James, you never told us how you became invisible."

I sensed him moving an arm, perhaps to rub his chin. "Well, I wish I could. Six months ago, I was an average human, had a job, friends, the whole works. Then a co-worker invited me to a party with some of her magical friends. Some pixie girls convinced me to try their punch. Now I know why they call it that. I woke up on the floor feeling like I'd been

whacked over the head. The girls were screaming with laughter. And I was invisible.”

Easifa stopped pacing long enough to let out a huff. “Sounds like a dirty trick to me.”

“It was, especially because they had no idea how to reverse the effects. Meanwhile, I lost my job, my friends, everything.” His voice was sharp. “No one wanted to help.”

“Can’t anyone reverse it?” I wracked my brain to think of anyone who’d might have some possible solutions for him.

This time the bitterness in his voice was unmistakable. “Everyone I consulted had a different opinion. One said pixie spells often burn out. In about fifty years. I can’t wait five decades. Others said for a price I might be able to find an elf healer. And without a job, how can I afford a healer?”

“So that’s what dragged you into this caper.” Easifa chuckled. “I wondered.”

Bitterness dripped from his voice. “I prayed. It didn’t so much as make another toenail visible. Where was God when I needed him?”

I chewed on the inside of my mouth. So, James was losing his faith in ancient superstitions. Before I could comment, a low moan made me grab James’ arm. “Do you hear that?”

The moaning came from the cell next to ours. I rushed to the bars and peered through. Lying on a pile of straw was what looked like a skinny female elf. A long braid of dark hair stretched behind her, twisted among four drooping wings.

James and Easifa joined me.

“Hello?” My voice sounded unsure. “Are you all right?”

The elf rolled over to face me. Her skin was gray with a touch of green. She stared at us, unblinking. “I’m fine.”

“Was that you moaning?” I didn’t think she looked fine, no matter what she said. “I didn’t know elves were gray.”

She snorted. “Shows what you know. I’m a tree fairy, not an elf. And don’t you forget it.”

A tree fairy. That made sense. Shut up in this damp cave

with no vegetation, her life force would weaken. But four wings?

“Since when do tree fairies have four wings?” Eafisa never failed to be tactless.

The tree fairy sat up. “And what’s it to you?” Her wings quivered.

“You’re right, it’s none of our business.” James was obviously trying to placate our fellow prisoner.

It didn’t seem to be working. “You’re right it’s not.” She plopped herself back on the straw and faced away from us.

The four wings triggered a memory of something Dr. Bedsole had said. “Excuse me, may I ask...”

The tree fairy glared at me. “What?”

“Are you Blue?” I held my breath.

She eyed me. “And if I am?”

“We’ve come to rescue you.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them.

The tree fairy laughed. “Good thing I wasn’t counting on getting rescued.” She shook her head. “Yes, I’m Blue.”

“Why is a green tree fairy named Blue?” Eafisa still hadn’t gotten the I’ll do all the talking memo. He grunted. “Why’d you elbow me in the gut?”

James laughed. “To shut you up, of course.”

Blue looked from Eafisa to me. “I’m not sure about him, or you, but I like your invisible friend.”

“I’m James.” He paused. “Are you alone here?”

“Well, there’s Pinch.” She waved her hand at a corner of her cell.

A small girl walked out of the shadows, a girl who looked human but didn’t seem quite. With her pale golden-brown skin and greenish tint to her hair, she looked fragile, almost ethereal. Her eyes were a kaleidoscope of colors that swirled, the blue, gray and green shifting into tawny yellows, browns and black before turning hazel and back to blue. She glided over to the bars and gazed at us.

Blue coughed. "Pinch doesn't talk."

"Then how do you know her name?" I thought that was a fair question.

The tree fairy wrinkled her brow. "She communicates telepathically." She sagged back onto the straw. "I think she can move emotions."

That didn't make any sense to me. In any case, we'd found two of the three we were looking for. So, we had a waif who didn't talk, and a seriously ill, if not dying, tree fairy. "Anyone else here we should know about?"

"You must mean Starblaze." Blue pointed to the cell on the other side of hers.

I squinted and could just make out an emerald green hump curled up on the floor, its wings folded back on either side of the spikes that protruded from its spine. It surveyed me with lazy eyes, then lowered its head.

"Starblaze the dragon?"

"How did you know her name?"

"I told you, we're here to rescue you."

"And I don't think you'll be able to." Blue coughed and closed her eyes.

I pressed my lips together. "You underestimate us."

Slow, heavy footsteps echoed in the corridor. The flickering shadows in the corridor dimmed as the footsteps drew near. I held my breath, wondering who Sydeera had sent to us.

What I wasn't expecting was a monk.

At least, that's what I thought he was. His clothing looked exactly like the monks in Robin Hood movies. He wore a brown robe that fell to the floor, tied around the waist with a white rope. The hood of the robe covered his head and the upper part of his face, casting his mouth and jaw in shadow.

He stood outside the bars, silent and observant. I had the sense of being appraised and judged. Was he our jailer or our

executioner? My thoughts swirled at I tried to think of a way to ask.

Instead, he pushed his hood back. “Friends, are you hungry?”

I stared into his pale, lined face, noting the bald patch on the top of his head, fringed with hair around the sides. “Who are you?” Maybe not the politest response, but the words jumped out of my mouth before I could stop them.

With an upward twitch of the corners of his mouth, he gestured to himself. “I am Brother Aiden. Here to serve you.”

“Really?” Easifa jumped out. “You can serve us by letting us out.”

Brother Aiden shook his head. “That would not be serving my lady. She told me who you are. Afsana and Easifa. And an invisible man. But I can bring you food, if you like.”

“Yes, please.” I patted my stomach. “It has been many hours since we ate.” While he went to get it, we could figure out a way to overpower him and escape.

He tipped his head. “Very well.” He turned and strode away.

“You’re hungry?” Easifa’s tone was tense.

“I think,” said James, “that she wants to use his absence to plan our getaway.”

“Oh, right.” Easifa sat down. “So, plan.”

I rubbed my chin. “First, who is this guy? He looks like a monk from the Middle Ages. Perhaps England.”

James’ deep voice held a note of confusion. “You’ve studied history more than I. But what would a medieval monk be doing here?”

“In a timeweaver’s prison?” I shrugged. “He must have gotten in the way of one of her schemes.”

“About the escaping part.” Easifa jumped up. “If he is a human monk, he doesn’t have any powers. Maybe I should just threaten to burn him if he doesn’t let us out.”

“Let’s save that as Plan B, or maybe C. We don’t want him alerting Sydeera before we’re out of this cell.”

“Agreed.” James touched my arm. “Perhaps when he opens the barrier, we can get out them? He won’t be able to see me, maybe I could slip out. Or you could use your shadows to mask Easifa. Either way, with one of us out of the cell, we’ll easily be able to overpower him.”

We debated that idea. In the end, we decided our first move would be James slipping out, then grabbing the monk from behind. If that didn’t work, I’d obscure Eafisa with my shadows, and he’d do the grabbing.

And if that failed, we’d have to resort to the threat of burning. Not something I wanted to do to the gentle soul who might be as much a prisoner as we were.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor drew our attention to the front of the cell. As we’d agreed, I stood in front of the door, Easifa to my right. James positioned himself just to the left of where the door would open. And we waited.

Brother Aiden came into view, carrying a covered tray. When he reached our cell, he paused. “Pull the door shut.”

Eafisa complied.

Then Aiden touched the barrier. It shimmered. He stepped past it, tipped the tray vertical and slid it between the bars.

I stared at it.

“Don’t you want to eat?” Brother Aiden sounded amused. “I made it myself.”

I took the tray and righted it. “Thank you, I suppose.”

He stepped back, reinstated the barrier and ambled off.

Stunned, I looked at Easifa. “So much for that plan.”

“Yeah, major fail. Let’s eat.”

We sat on the bed and I uncovered the tray. Inside in little recessed sections lay three wrapped sandwiches. In other sections were three shallow bowls, also covered. On opening one of them, I found it contained tea.

With a shrug, I held the tray out. Easifa took a sandwich. I watched a second sandwich lift, then disappear.

Taking a bit, I discovered the sandwich to consist of a nutty-tasting bread and sharp cheese. And it was only sufficient to blunt my hunger, not erase it.

While we ate, I questioned Blue. She wasn't able to tell us much. "I don't know about Starblaze. I was at Fisherman's Wharf, talking to a friend. There was a ripple in the air, and this woman appeared in front of me."

"Sydeera."

"Right. She grabbed my arm. Just then someone jostled me and I bumped the girl. There was a flash of light, and we were here. Me, Pinch, and Sydeera."

"Did Sydeera say anything?"

"She looked at me and started wailing. Another mistake, she said. Brother Aiden came and shoved Pinch and me in this cell. The dragon was already here."

"Has she done anything to you? Experimented on you?"

Blue winced. "No, nothing like that. I was hoping that wasn't her plan."

"Do you have any idea of what her plan is?" I rubbed my chin.

"All she said was she had to stop Thaddeus."

I stared at her. Thaddeus was the one who put us on to Sydeera. "Why?"

Blue shook her head. "No." Her voice was growing fainter each time she spoke.

"We need to get you out of here," James said.

She nodded.

"Guys, let's think about this. When the monk comes back, let's see if we can talk him into letting us out. Like to help Blue, maybe."

Easifa frowned. "There's no way he'll do that."

Footsteps in the corridor made me look up. Brother Aiden had returned, this time with food for the others. Idly I

wondered what Pinch ate, and what kind of fresh meat he'd found for Starblaze.

Pinch stood at the front of her cell, staring at Aiden.

He twitched, shook his head and scratched his chin. "I'm truly sorry you are all captives. I'll pray for you."

James snorted. "Pray? Like that's going to help? I've been praying to shake this pixie curse, and I've gotten nothing."

"You must have faith."

"God doesn't deserve my faith. Not after this."

I didn't want to waste time on a theological discussion of foolish myths. "Brother Aiden, do you think it's right to hold innocent people in prison?"

"My lady seems to think you are not so innocent, or she wouldn't do this."

"How do you know? And besides, Blue isn't doing so well. She needs to be around plants, not surrounded by rock. She may not last much longer."

He stepped closer to the bars. "She does look rather gray." He rubbed his lips. "I'll have to ask my lady—"

A faraway look grew in his eyes. Pinch was still staring at him, her own eyes wide, the colors swirling intensely as if a hurricane was stirring them up. Aiden shook himself. "I can't allow any harm to come to her. To any of you. If I let you out, will you promise not to harm me? Or try to escape?"

What had caused him to change his mind? Was it little Pinch, using her telepathy? Did she have some kind of mind control power, or just the ability to influence people's emotions? She looked paler than usual, almost verging on translucent. She must have done something to drain herself like that.

Almost in unison, James and Eafisa responded to Aiden. "Of course."

I knew full well they were all lying but nodded my agreement.

Brother Aiden unlocked the cell next to us. He helped

Blue to her feet, then allowed Pinch to assist Blue out of the cell.

He came to our cell. He removed the barrier and unlocked the door. I strode out, followed by Eafisa. I took three steps away from the door, then sent my shadows to bind Brother Aiden's hands.

He stiffened, then drooped. "You gave me your word."

"We did." Eafisa smirked. "You shouldn't have believed us." He took the keys from Brother Aiden and went to Starblaze's cell. "She, um, won't eat us, or anything?"

"No, she'll be happy to be free." Blue's voice was so faint I could barely hear her.

"Let's go." I pointed to the stairs. "We need to get Blue out of here."

"But what about Sydeera?" James asked.

"Yes, what about her?" I turned to Brother Aiden. "Where is she?"

"She won't return until the evening." He narrowed his eyes. "And those are words spoken in truth."

I turned my back on him so he wouldn't see me blush.

We climbed the stairs out of the dungeon. To my surprise, the building was an ordinary house, not a stone castle or oversized mansion. We found a sitting room decorated with potted plants, ferns, African violets, and a ficus tree. Once Blue was seated near the tree, her color began to improve.

The rest of us surrounded Brother Aiden.

"So why do you help Sydeera?" I stood close to him, glaring into his face.

"She rescued me."

"How?"

"My superiors plotted to kill me, after I spoke up for the true gospel and against their corrupt ways. They had me trapped in a tower, when..."

"When what?"

"You won't believe it."

“I just might.” I had suspicion where this was going, and it led to Sydeera.

“All of a sudden, there was a ripple in the air, and a woman appeared in front of me. She cursed and said something about making a mistake. Another stupid mistake. I backed away from her, pleading that she not kill me. She staggered, and I smelled wine on her breath. She stepped toward me and would have fallen if I hadn’t caught her in my arms.”

A drunk timeweaver. Nice. “And then?”

“The hired assassins were pounding on the door. I had no doubt they’d soon break through and find us.”

“What would they have said had they caught you with a woman?”

Brother Aiden shuddered and blushed. “Any doubts the assassins had about killing me would have vanished. And the woman would have been tossed over the parapet. Such evil men.”

When he didn’t continue, I touched his arm. “And?”

“I roused her and told her of our danger. She stared at me, with round eyes and an open mouth. ‘This isn’t happening,’ she said. Then there was another ripple, and a jerk, and we were here.”

“In the dungeon?”

“No, upstairs. She took one look at me and shrieked. Between her curses, I gathered she hadn’t wanted to bring me here. When she calmed herself, she informed me that I would have to be her servant. Grateful that she’d saved me from certain death, I agreed.”

“Hm. Do you want to go back?”

“I do. I don’t belong here, and my work is there. But it’s impossible. My lady will never let me go.”

“So you, a man of God, as you say, are willing to help a kidnapper? And she nearly killed Blue. What do you say to that?”

He bowed his head and shuffled his feet. "I am greatly troubled in my soul."

"Well, I can help you. Help us free the prisoners, and capture Sydeera, and you won't have to be tormented. And we can find another timeweaver to take you back, and even get you to a place of safety in your own time."

"I gave her my word."

"Is a promise made under duress worth anything?" I held my hands out to him. "We can debate the morality of this later. Once we have Sydeera. Are you with me?"

"Promise you won't kill her."

"That I can do. But she'll have to stand trial."

He surveyed my face. "I need to pray about this."

Fine. He was welcome to his beliefs. As long as they didn't interfere with our plans.

I watched him leave the room. "Ideas?"

A huff from my right preceded James' reply. "Wait. And hope Sydeera doesn't show up first."

We waited. Paced the room. Debated different courses of action. And tried to keep Eafisa from setting the room on fire.

James noticed Aiden's return first. "Done praying?"

"Yes, and I received the guidance I sought."

James spoke before I could. "And you think God spoke to you?"

"He often does. Not audibly, but in my spirit."

A snort from James was his only answer.

Brother Aiden looked in James' direction, his brows pulled together. "You doubt that God speaks?"

"I doubt that he speaks, that he heals, that he cares about any of us." James paced back and forth.

I suppressed a giggle as I watched his toe move across the carpet as he strode.

"It seems to me," Brother Aiden said, "that if we are to get out of here, we will need a miracle."

I thought it was time I steered the conversation to more

practical matters. “We are like hummingbirds attacking a stealth bomber, that’s certain.”

“Then I will pray for a miracle.”

James laughed. “Good luck with that.”

I asked Brother Aiden to describe the house, especially the rooms Sydeera usually used, and places to hide in each. We decided that James and I would hide in her library, where she usually spent her evenings. Easifa, Blue and Pinch would be in the next room, if we needed them. The dragon, as the hardest to conceal, would wait in a storage room, and only come if called. Blue communicated with her the best, so would be the one to go get her, if we needed more firepower than Easifa could summon.

But I didn’t think we’d need her help. Because we still had the collar that would block her powers. Brother Aiden’s role was to make Sydeera’s drink stronger than usual. We’d wait for her to get a buzz on, then James would grab her from behind with the collar, I’d use my shadows to bind her even more, and we’d call Thaddeus to rescue us. What could go wrong?

The first complication was Sydeera didn’t return home that night. Brother Aiden reassured us that this was normal. She often spent a night out. But rarely two in a row. James and I spent the next day snooping through Sydeera’s study, looking for any evidence of other prisoners or notes as to what she was up to. The only clues were found in a file of missing persons reports, all about magical creatures.

When consulted, Brother Aiden affirmed those missing persons had never been there, to his knowledge. Sydeera clearly had a deep interest in missing magical beings. But for what purpose?

By evening, we were all on edge. James and I secreted ourselves in Sydeera’s library. It was perfect for our purposes. Floor to ceiling shelves were crammed with books, most with gold lettering gleaming on their spines. A patterned rug

covered the floor. Dark red curtains hung over the windows, echoing the dark red wingtip chairs and sofa arranged around the fireplace. Brother Aiden lit a fire, and the flames made the shadows dance. Just what I needed to blend in.

James stood on one side of the fireplace, I on the other. We'd wait for Sydeera to finish her second drink, then we'd move in.

The door opened and Sydeera stormed in, her dark hair tousled as if she'd been in a windstorm. She flung her bag on a side table. "Monk! Where's my drink?"

She needn't have shouted. Brother Aiden had followed her into the room, a bottle of gin and a tumbler on a tray.

She threw herself into the chair nearest James. Good.

Brother Aiden set the tray on the coffee table. He filled the glass and handed it to Sydeera. She drank it down in three gulps.

I nearly choked watching her.

She held the glass out to Brother Aiden, who refilled it. His order must have been a silent one, since serving without speaking seemed to come naturally to him.

She waved a hand, and Brother Aiden left the room. She leaned back in her chair, sipping her drink. She frowned, scowled, and pressed her lips together. She tipped her head back, then sat up and nodded. And took a hefty swig.

If only I could read her mind. She clearly had made some kind of decision.

She took another gulp, then set the glass down. She settled back, leaning her head against the wing of her chair.

I nodded, and eased forward, my shadows flickering around me in imitation of those cast by the flames. Slowly I counted my steps. One, two, three, hoping James was tracking with me.

Sydeera yelped. James had succeeded. The collar Thaddeus had given us was fastened around her neck. I sent my shadows to bind her hands and feet.

Then I revealed myself. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, Sydeera, but it’s over.”

She stared at me, mouth opening and shutting like a fish that had landed on the shore. “You. You ...”

I braced myself for a curse.

“You stupid girl. You’ve ruined everything.”

“Well, that was the idea.” James chuckled. “I’ll get the others.”

Sydeera glared in his direction. “And you’re equally stupid.” She shook her head. “I suppose you convinced my servant to help you?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. “Another one of my many mistakes.”

“Care to tell me about the others?”

She snorted. “No, I think not.” She curled her lip. “Now what?”

I pulled out my phone. “Time to call in reinforcements.” I dialed Dr. Bedsole’s number.

He answered on the first ring. “Afsana? Where are you?”

“In Sydeera’s library. We’ve bound her and freed the three prisoners. Let Thaddeus know he can come for us.”

“Will do. And great job, Afsana.”

I hung up. Sydeera’s howls assaulted my ears. “No! Not Thaddeus. You’re stupider than I thought.”

“Of course, it would seem that way to you, since he was trying to stop your evil plans.”

“Whatever you do, don’t let him get the tree fairy or the dragon.”

I was interrupted by voices in the hallway. Thaddeus walked into the library, escorted by two high fae warriors. “Afsana, I can’t thank you enough.” He smiled at Sydeera. “And we have business.” He tipped his head toward her. The fae picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. “You can take your shadows back.”

I dissipated my shadows. “The others are here. Can you transport us all out?”

“I’d be happy to. The fae can teleport everyone.”

Brother Aiden gathered the others in the foyer, the only place large enough to comfortably fit Starblaze, let alone all of us. We were joined by a dozen more fae warriors. Four of them took the arms of Brother Aiden, Easifa, Pinch and Blue. Two others wrapped their arms around Starblaze’s legs. Two more grasped Sydeera. Another took my arm. James’ hand gripped my shoulder. Good. This way he wouldn’t get overlooked and left behind.

“Now, if you’re ready, we can be off.”

Sydeera writhed in her captors’ grip. “No. I can’t let you—”

I gasped for breath, as the room blurred and the air was squeezed from my lungs. With a jolt my feet hit the floor of a brightly lit lab. Metal tables shone, cabinets lined the walls, and a chair with tubes and probes occupied the center of the room.

Then I noticed my hands were bound behind me. My elven escort must have done it while we were in transit. The others were bound as well, Easifa and Blue in metal shackles. A muzzle covered Starblaze’s snout and a trace of smoke rose from her nostrils.

My stomach heaved, and not from the dizzying ride. “Where are we?”

Thaddeus laughed. “This is my kingdom.” He waved a hand around. “Surely Bedsole told you about me?”

“Other than you were funding our rescue mission, no.” I tried and failed to summon my shadows. My heart raced. My shadows had never failed to come when called before. Whatever the bonds on my hands were made of, it countered my powers. Most likely the others were also limited.

He shook his head. “Bedsole always believed the best of people. Pity. Such brilliance wasted on idealism.” He walked toward the chair. “You see, for some unexplained reason, magic doesn’t work on me. I want to know why.”

“For what purpose?” I had already guessed, but I wanted him to tell me. Not only would that give me a clue as to how to get out of this mess, but it would give me a chance to figure out where James was. At some point, he had released my shoulder.

Thaddeus tipped his head. “Surely you can figure it out. Look at your friend Sydeera. She has such an advantage over us mere mortals. But by using the collar, she loses her advantage.”

“So?”

He huffed. “Don’t you see? It’s not fair that some beings have powers and others don’t.” He pointed at Blue and Starblaze. “There are people who will pay to know how to subdue fairies and dragons.” He strolled toward Easifa. “And fire genasi and shadowslingers, for that matter.” He made a half bow in my direction. “Thank you for providing me more research subjects.

An icy hand gripped mine. I twisted my fingers to return the grip. James. He’d endured painful and horrific testing after he’d become invisible. Now he’d landed in his biggest nightmare. I thanked whatever deity there was that had caused him to be overlooked. I whispered over my shoulder to him. “Remember what Elvis always said. ‘When things go wrong, don’t go with them.’”

“Too late.”

He was right. We’d already gone to a bad place.

“Who should we start with?” Thaddeus pointed at me. “We’ll save you for later.” One of the fae pulled me to the back wall of the lab and chained me there. “Sydeera, my love, we’ve already had fun with you.” Another fae chained her next to me.

Shortly we were joined by Blue. Brother Aiden, as non-magical and a believer in God was considered to be of inferior intellect. He was relegated to a seat next to Pinch and ordered to stay still or pay the price. His lips were moving, and I

assumed he was praying. At this point, I'd take any help we could get.

While Thaddeus was choosing his victim as coolly as if he was ordering from a menu, James loosened my bonds. The chains just had a twisting mechanism that held them together, requiring two hands to unlatch them. With a click, I was free. He pressed the end of the chain in my hand. If only no one noticed.

From the widening of Sydeera's eyes, I knew he'd moved on to her. I hoped he'd be able to free Blue without being detected.

With a frown, Thaddeus stood in front of Pinch. "What are you good for?"

Pinch hunched her shoulders.

I glared at him. "She can't speak."

Thaddeus sneered. "And what good is she? No matter." He gestured to a guard, who chained Pinch with the rest of us.

Thaddeus walked between Starblaze and Easifa, muttering to himself about who he should start upon.

I fixed my eyes on the fire genasi, hoping, willing him to sense my plan. That the second either of his hands was free, he should let off his flames. I'd add my shadows. If Sydeera could slow time for us and Pinch could work the same magic on the guards as she had on Aiden, we'd have a chance. And if Blue could do something to add to the confusion, all the better.

I caught Easifa's eye. "Wait for the moment," I mouthed to him.

He gave no sign that he understood.

With a sneer, Thaddeus pointed at Starblaze. "The dragon can wait. Put the fire genasi in the chair."

My eyes wide, I stared at Easifa. He gave me a nod, then put up a fight every step to the chair.

I used his distraction to look at Sydeera. "When he has one hand free." I tried to keep my voice low.

A guard slapped my face. “No talking.”

I bit my lip and waited. When he didn’t say any more, I decided he hadn’t heard the words. My head rang from the blow. I’d have a bruise, that much was certain.

Easifa shouted something in what I assumed was his own language. Thaddeus was arguing with the guards.

Starblaze’s head jerked up, then lowered. Her muzzle shifted, then righted itself. James had made his way to the dragon. Spikes extended from her backbone and tail. The dragon was readying herself for a fight.

One of the fae punched Easifa in the stomach. With a grunt, the fire genasi doubled over. Another fae untied Easifa’s bonds, gripping his wrists. Then he shoved Easifa into the chair.

The fire genasi’s hair glowed and his skin shone. He wrenched his hand from the elf, pointed a finger at Thaddeus, and let out a burst of flame.

Thaddeus flung himself behind a metal table. “Subdue him!”

That was our cue. I stepped from the wall, wreathed in shadows. I formed a shadow rope and bound the nearest fae to me. One down, twelve to go.

The fae were fighting with all they had, manipulating water and wind and fire. I cloaked myself in shadow and roped another one. A gust of wind knocked Blue over and she fell to the floor. She didn’t get up. Another fae blasted her with fire. I wrapped a shadow around his neck and squeezed until he stopped breathing.

Meanwhile, Starblaze breathed fire on the test chair. The tubing and wires melted, and the cushions caught ablaze.

Some of the fae were moving as if in slow motion. Sydeera’s work.

And all of them wore bemused expressions. “We don’t want to hurt you,” said one. “We want to be your friends.”

So that's what Blue meant when she said Pinch could move emotions.

With the guards in that state, it didn't take Easifa long to herd them to the wall and for James and me to chain them up. I added shadow restraints for good measure.

That left Thaddeus. Last I'd seen him, he'd been cowering behind an exam table.

A quick look around and I found him, trapped in a time bubble, still yelling for someone to contain Easifa. "Everyone OK?"

Glancing around the room, everyone seemed to be unscathed. Except Blue. She was slumped on the floor, her green skin blackened in many places from burns.

My knees went weak, and a hand steadied me. James spoke quietly. "She had no powers to protect herself, not here, where there are no plants."

I clenched my jaw. "Thaddeus will pay for this."

"Can someone explain what's going on?" Eafisa was panting slightly. "I thought this guy was on our side."

Sydeera stepped forward. "I think I know. He approached me a few months back, wanting my help. He said he was doing research on how to maximize magical powers. To help those in magical communities with disabilities, so they could compensate."

"Ha. That's what he told you." Easifa snorted.

"And I believed him." Sydeera shook her head. "What happened is he experimented on me. That's how he developed the collar. Then he let me go, telling me if I ever told anyone, he'd destroy me."

"Why did you kidnap Blue and the others?"

"I knew he would be coming after Blue and Starblaze next." She turned to Pinch. "You, I'm afraid, were a mistake. You were standing too close to Blue and got caught in my time bubble." She shrugged. "When I get nervous, my control isn't too good."

“Which is how you got me.” Brother Aiden stepped to her and patted her shoulder. “I bear you no ill will.”

“So now what?” James asked.

Pinch took my right hand and placed her other hand on Starblaze’s face.

Intense homesickness filled me and tears pricked my eyes. I faced the dragon. “Do you want to return home?”

Starblaze nodded.

“It feels like she’s been looking for a way to return to her own people. Can you do that?” I directed her question to Sydeera.

“Why, yes, I can.” She pursed her lips. “But what about Pinch? Don’t you want to go home, too?”

Pinch shook her head, the swirling in her eyes slowed to a lazy wave. From what I sensed through our connection, she felt she had a mission here, that she needed to complete before she could return home.

“But I’m not,” said Brother Aiden. “I’m trying to submit to the will of our Lord, but I’d really rather do it in my own time. This is just too confusing.”

Sydeera smiled and held out a hand. “I’ll take you back now. Where would you like to go?”

“Rufford Abbey, year 1159.”

“You got it.” She looked at Starblaze. “I’ll be right back for you.”

Brother Aiden smiled gently. “You see, we did get our miracle after all.” He held up a hand. “May the Lord bless you and keep you.” I assumed his blessing covered everyone, including the fae and the still shrieking Thaddeus.

We made our farewells, and Aiden and Sydeera blurred, then vanished.

I opened my mouth to speak, and Sydeera was back.

“Now for the dragon.”

Pinch patted Starblaze’s face.

Starblaze opened her mouth, and I jerked back.

The dragon shook her head. “I just wanted to say thank you.” She had just enough time to get the words out before she and Sydeera blurred and vanished.

This time we waited five minutes for Sydeera to return. “Sorry.” Her hair was mussed, and she shook herself, dusting ashes off her shoulders. “We landed in the middle of dragons’ version of rugby. It took Starblaze awhile to convince them not to use me as the ball. Then I couldn’t remember exactly when we left.”

We put in a call to the authorities, requesting both magical and non-magical officers to take charge of Thaddeus and his fae.

James, Easifa and I waited with Sydeera and Pinch. Muttering from James made me wonder what he was thinking. I moved closer to him and groped until I found his shoulder. “Are you ok?”

“I’m not sure.” He pointed at his foot. A second toe was visible. He took a shuddering breath. “That monk prayed. And God answered. Maybe I gave up on him too soon.”

I stared. It couldn’t be. Miracles didn’t happen. This was just the pixie curse fading. I was sure of it.

When the authorities arrived, we gave our statements, Sydeera released Thaddeus from the time bubble, and I removed my shadows from the guards.

One of the officers took charge of Blue’s body, saying they’d return her to the tree fairies. We stood around her, making our mute farewells. She didn’t deserve to end that way, burned and desiccated. She should have lived long in the forest. I hoped whatever punishment Thaddeus was given would be long and harsh.

Then we left to give our report to Dr Bedsole.

We found him in his study, where we’d last seen him. He greeted us with a smile, then frowned when we introduced Sydeera. “Why isn’t she locked up? Thaddeus won’t pay for half a job.”

“Oh, Thaddeus is going to pay, alright.” Easifa smirked from his perch on the corner of a sofa. “Besides, he gave you the cash up front.”

“That’s right, but you didn’t finish the job. Where’s the dragon?”

I let Sydeera tell her part of the story, ending with returning Starblaze to her people.

Dr. Bedsole’s hands shook. “I trusted him implicitly. How do he become so warped?”

“All I can gather,” James said, “was that he craved magical ability. Above anything else.”

“It’s a miracle we escaped,” I said. “We had all the right people to get the job done.” As I spoke, I realized it had been a miracle that together we were able to thwart Thaddeus’ scheme. James was able to free us. Easifa’s fire power was our best weapon against Thaddeus’ guards, along with my shadows and Sydeera’s timeweaving. Even little Pinch, who I’d discounted as weak, did her part by confusing the fae’s emotions. What were the chances that we’d have the right people for the job?

Dr. Bedsole frowned. “I’ve never believed in miracles. But maybe I was hasty.”

He wasn’t the only one to make snap judgements. Maybe I needed to reconsider a few things myself. It had always been my and my shadows. I’d always been able to rely on them. But maybe I needed something more. Miracles, perhaps.

I’d have to look into them. After I spent the money I’d get from this job.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story came about when I was invited to join a collaboration with nine other speculative fiction writers. Each of us created a character (mine was Afsana Parween, shadow-shifter). Then we each wrote a fantasy story using all ten. Whether each character was hero or villain, a sidekick or just played a cameo role was up the author.

And the world and setting were likewise unique to each story. In other words, each author created their own realm for the characters' story to play out in.

It was an interesting writing challenge to fit in all ten, and fun to see the finished work come to fruition.

While I chose to make my story a gift to my subscribers, several of the others have published theirs.

If you'd like to read the other stories to see how the characters were used, check out these links:

Starblaze

RM Strong

When a dragon hatches in an idyllic 13th Century religious community in the middle of a 27th Century universe, she must learn to survive in her new human-dominated culture. When the humans around her begin to get sick and die, she has to leave the only planet she has ever known or risk certain annihilation.

Starblaze

Perchance To Dream

Jeremy Bullard

The Variance has turned the world on its ear, leaving chaos in its wake. Some people are a shadow of their former selves. Others have become more than they'd ever imagined, as much to their detriment as to their advantage. Still others find themselves more or less ordinary in a world that has become decidedly extraordinary. All struggle to find their place, and to recapture some small portion of a reality that has become more like a dream.

Perchance to Dream

Just in Time

Sherry Chamblee

Up until six months ago, James Grayson had been normal. One encounter on a mountaintop had changed all that. As if becoming invisible for no discernible reason wasn't enough, now suddenly his friend has been abducted and strange aliens are gathering to mount a rescue. Now James needs to help rescue his friend, and hopefully a solution to his own private mystery.

Maybe he'll figure it all out, just in time.

Just in Time

Conflux

David Johnson

Easifa, a half-human, half-Efreet bounty hunter, finds his latest quarry suspiciously easy to acquire. Nothing ever comes easy, and Easifa must unravel the mystery of why someone would put a bounty on a simple monk whose only unusual characteristic is an inordinate amount of good luck.

Conflux

Emerge

Mary C. Findley

Ten souls in a clinic where people with powers are forced to “fit in” to society learn that one group session can be more therapeutic than they thought possible...if they live through it.

Emerge

Good Deeds

Bogna Jordan

When Brother Aiden pulls Doctor Gerand out of a mud-splating inter-dimensional portal, he doesn't suspect that it'll be the start of a demon hunt to reclaim one special medallion.

Good Deeds

The other stories are coming soon.

Give Me Tomorrow

Parker J. Cole

Will one minute bring the promise of tomorrow or end today
in defeat?

Calico Weave

Ron Mitchell

A fabric of events weave people from different worlds together
to forge a new destiny for a broken world.