

Part One

Prologue.

Bodmin Moor, Cornwall. 2006.

Anger – he had never known anything like it.

It propelled him across the moor until he reached the crest of the hill, where he stopped, his eyes finding the distant stones at once. The rolling heath was shrouded in a fine mist, softening the features of moor and village but not those beautiful, deadly stones. Never them. They spoke to the deepest part of him, always eliciting the same mixture of repulsion and helpless magnetism.

They had collapsed inward as the years took their toll on the ground around them, but from where Richard stood the shape of the circle was clear, the flat stone at its heart glistening in the steadily falling rain. Waiting.

His attention was caught by movement, and he adjusted his gaze to take in the two figures approaching the circle from the direction of the old copper mine; one tall, male and garishly dressed, the other outshining him even in her grey sweater and jeans as she struggled against his grip.

Laura.

Richard closed his eyes as relief allowed a flicker of light through his dark fury, but as he opened them again he saw the man bend his head to Laura's ear, and she twisted away, her knees buckling as if she'd been struck. What had she been told? And what gave anyone the right to etch such crippling grief into that calm, trusting face?

He tensed as footsteps, not quite muffled by the grass, stopped just behind him: Dean, or whatever he chose to call himself here. They had been closer than brothers once, but through the wind Richard heard echoes of a lifetime of lies and his heart lurched so violently it hurt, hammering against his ribs, each supposedly life-giving beat threatening, instead, to destroy him.

Dean did not speak. He moved away, taking another path down to the stones, and Richard breathed again – there may be time later for apportioning blame, there may not. It didn't matter. He took off once more down the hill, his feet finding their unerring way across the hillocks and pits of boggy ground, every muscle taut, his blood thrumming through the hot wires of his veins.

He was moving fast now, inhumanly fast; the hills surrounding him were a blur. His long coat snapped out behind him, and the chill November wind cut through his shirt and whipped his hair back from his face, but all he felt was this terrible, gut-wrenching rage, driving him down across the rough heathland.

She turned, saw him, and even from this distance he clearly saw the relief on her face dissolve into horror, but he kept moving, silent but sure: he knew who he was now, knew *what* he was, and what he had to do.

Here was where it all ended.

Chapter One.

Bodmin Moor, Cornwall. Early Bronze Age.

The villagers began gathering as dusk crept over the high ground, the sky growing heavier as the time passed. Talk was scarce and conducted in low voices, from mouth to ear with hardly a sound carrying in the damp air. Some stared, grim-faced and pale, at the granite slab in the centre of the circle, while others averted their gazes, unable or unwilling to contemplate the full horror of what was to come.

Dense fog coated the standing stones in a light skin of moisture that dripped soundlessly onto the grass, and they came at last, into the cold from a nearby round hut: a babe in arms and his trembling, ashen-faced mother. As they were led towards the circle of stones with its terrible centrepiece, neither they nor the hushed villagers saw the flashing, furious eyes that watched from the darkest hollows of the heath.

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Loen felt his brother's hand on his arm and shrugged it off. "I know! The blame lies at my feet."

Borsa sighed. "They already fear us, believe every change in the weather is caused by us, every frost that destroys a crop, every storm that kills a tree. To lie with one of them, Loen, to create a mixed child —"

"Enough!" It was nothing more than a harsh whisper, but Loen could have shouted it and still gone unheard by these people who, as Borsa had said, walked in awe and superstitious terror of the spirits of the moor. Yet he had subdued one of them with

barely anything more other-worldly than his own beauty — the irony tasted bitter now, against the joy of pleasuring the human female. There had been a certain dark humour at the ease with which he had deceived those who despised him, but it had been swept aside by fury at the village chief's judgment.

“Hear this, and heed it well, Borsa,” Loen said, his voice tight. “If Ulfed carries out his threat to kill my son I will destroy his bloodline by my own hand. What I have done is wrong, but it is nothing, *nothing*, when held up against the deed that foul mortal intends, and his line will not survive while I am able to prevent it.”

His conduct had indeed been questionable, especially for one of his royal lineage, but Magara had captivated him from the moment he saw her; the sister of the village chief, powerful in her own right and a singularly beautiful creature. He had watched outside her hut night after night, unseen by the villagers – the Elementals were fully human-sized but could easily appear no more substantial than a passing breath of wind when the need arose. Loen attracted no attention as he waited for her.

Magara had emerged, that perfect night, framed briefly in the doorway, the dim light from the moon glancing off golden hair braided tightly to her head. Even in this half-light she had the bearing of royalty – a worthy partner. She hurried around to the pit area at the back of the huts and still he waited, heart beating fast until she reappeared, her attention on re-adjusting her cloak at the shoulder.

Loen released the shadows that had cloaked him, and glanced around before stepping up to her, silencing her startled cry with a firm hand on her mouth. Frightened blue eyes stared at him, but he smiled and she visibly calmed under his touch: there was nothing to fear, he was just a traveller, a passing moment of passion and promise ... his mind eased hers without a word passing between them.

Their union had been satisfying and purely sexual – they made no sound beyond the

low, breathy murmurs of mutual pleasure, and as they parted he had seen a glow around her: the beginnings of his child in a glistening aura that fell about her like a cloak, formed of some exquisite fabric only he could see.

He had never made himself known to her again, knew he must not, but over the months he had watched her belly swell as his son grew within her, and he had gloried in the knowledge. Such possibilities awaited a child who carried his enchanted, but ultimately weak blood, mingled with that of the woman's – human strength and human freedom might yet carry such a creature far from the moor, to undreamed of worlds and unimagined wonders. A blessed child indeed.

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The night of the child's birth was balmy. Magara watched with sleepy appreciation as women hurried to and from her hut with cool water and herbal preparations, but she felt no fear. The ease of her pregnancy had long since confirmed her suspicions about the stranger she had lain with: there had been no sickness when she woke, she had suffered no aches or stiffness as her back bent to support the weight of the growing child, and now the time had come her pains were mild, despite the obvious advancement of her labour.

Fear and superstition had been swept aside as she'd looked into those eyes, such a clear, vivid green, and when she had acknowledged the cessation of her cyclic bleed she had felt nothing but gratitude; any child born of such a man would reflect the beauty to which she had so willingly surrendered, and would live well because of it. Every day she had looked out over the moor, and once or twice she thought she saw movement in the grass, but she never saw her mysterious lover again.

Summer lightning bloomed soundlessly on the horizon as the child was born. His first cries were the only disturbance in the still air, and the villagers attending the birth

looked at one another in shared pleasure at the arrival of another healthy life.

But their delight quickly soured. The elderly woman who had helped Magara through the final stages of childbirth took a closer look at the black-haired boy, and backed out of the hut, mumbling incoherently. Unwrapped and unwashed, the baby squalled while Magara cast about for something in which to swaddle him, puzzled but too exhausted to give it much thought.

The hut emptied as the village chief came to honour the birth. Magara held her son to her breast and smiled proudly up at her kinsman, but she felt the smile falter in the face of his unexpected tension.

“Who fathered this child, Magara?” Ulfed demanded.

Magara looked away from his accusing stare. “I do not know,” she replied, keeping her tone light. Mating was not confined to a single partner, and promiscuity actively encouraged – many of the village men had been happy to claim the honour of starting the child with the chief’s sibling, but she knew it had been none of them.

Ulfed’s voice was softer now, and it was as if he were reading her mind. “It was no-one here, was it?”

In response to his gentleness, Magara opened her mouth to tell him a carefully edited version of the truth, but before she could speak the old woman burst back into the hut, raising shouts of alarm from outside. Two women came in quickly after her, clearly startled, but protective of the new mother

The midwife’s eyes flashed fire in the semi-darkness, and she raised a bony arm, pointing at the child. “Cast it out!” she bellowed. “Let the evil ones take back their fiend before it destroys our village!”

Magara drew an outraged breath and pulled the baby closer, her eyes going from the woman to Ulfed. “She is mad! What can she know of my child?”

“I know enough,” the woman hissed, her eyes locking onto Magara’s. “I see much that is hidden and I *know*. The child is fair to look upon, but its soul is stained with evil.”

Magara shook her head. “What are you saying? How can he be evil?”

“For many long moon cycles now, our crops have suffered,” the woman said, turning her attention to Ulfed. “We knew nothing of why we should be punished so, but now it is clear.”

Ulfed laid a calming hand on her arm. “You cannot blame —”

“She has angered the Goddess!” The woman shouted. “She has lain with a demon and brought forth an abomination from her own womb! Deny it if you can, Ulfed. You cannot!” She turned back to Magara and said it again, her voice quieter now, but harsh enough to tear at Magara’s heart. “You cannot.”

Ulfed gestured to the two village women, hovering by the doorway in nervous excitement. “Take her out.” He sounded bleak now, the pain of the decision he must make clear on his face. Magara went cold at the sight of it.

The villagers led the woman from the hut, talking to her in low, soothing voices to ease her distress, leaving Magara and Ulfed to face each other in the sudden, frightening silence. She held the warm, squirming bundle closer still, as her son took his nourishment, feeling the pleasurable ache at one breast and the sympathetic leaking of the other. Tears burned her throat but would not fall.

Ulfed remained silent, but Magara had no need of explanation. The elder woman was held in high regard, her pronouncement would not be questioned, therefore Ulfed’s choice was simple; let the child starve or end its life swiftly. It was no choice at all.

Now, one full day after the birth, Loen stared in disbelief as the villagers brought Magara and the child to the circle. The woman barely had the strength to walk herself, and was supported on both sides but would not allow the baby to be taken from her. Her chest hitched violently, and there were bright rivers of terror on her cheeks.

Finally Ulfed stepped forward and took the child from her grief-weakened grip, with hands that Loen could see were shaking. His voice also shook, as he cried to the darkening skies.

“We are here to make amends! We have allowed a woman of our people to couple with an enchanted creature, we therefore beg Your forgiveness and ask You to restore Your favour upon us.” He raised the baby above his head. “We offer this tainted child to You, O Mother, as a sacrifice to Your name –”

“No!” Magara’s barely maintained composure dissolved. Ulfed laid the child on the stone slab in the centre of the circle and Magara’s supporters became her jailers. She sank to the ground in stunned, throat-locked silence as Ulfed stepped back from the stone.

Loen stared at the scene in horror. Had he really believed this man might find the strength to defy his precious goddess? He started forward and felt Borsa grip his arm.

“Where are you going?”

“I can take the child, they will not see me –”

“No, but think! They will see the babe vanish before their eyes! And then the mother will be put to the knife instead. You would wish her blood on your hands? Her who you chose in selfish greed, and whose life you have destroyed because of it?”

“But my child –”

“You must not! You have done enough.”

Borsa was right, Loen knew it, but unspeakable rage and grief lashed at him at the sight of the knife poised above his son. Unable to look any longer he lurched away, only anger preventing him from falling to his knees. He clenched his fists and felt a stirring around him, pressure building until the air itself seemed to push at him with hard, insistent fingers. He raised his face to the sky and his voice rolled out across the moor; ancient words of untested power, commanding obedience from the elements, fury and bitterness fuelling the demands.

The rains came first – sudden, freezing, heavy. A weighty curtain falling across the gathering by the stones, all but drowning out the bewildered cries from the villagers as they ran for shelter. Then the winds swept across the moor, a hollow boom rising to a shriek that split the evening air.

Loen felt his brother pulling at his arm, trying to drag him away, but shook him off once more. Ulfed raised the knife higher above his head, staring around in superstitious dread, clearly wondering if this act had further angered his goddess instead of appeasing Her.

The only person unmoved by the storm was Magara. She remained, stupefied, on her knees at the foot of the stone, where the baby boy lay unprotected from the storm, his tiny legs kicking, fists beating at the air in futile anger. Loen silently exhorted her to rise up, to save her child, but her mind was unreachable.

As the ferocity of the storm increased, Loen grew fearful, realising he had exchanged one mortal danger for another. Once more he cried out his demands, this time for peace, but his fury had created the storm and, like that fury, it was now beyond his control. Thunder shook the ground and lightning flashed time and time again – now close, now on the distant horizon – always deadly.

Confusion and indecision twisted the chief's expression and Loen knew he had only

one chance. He moved swiftly and was almost at the stones when he felt his hair lift from his scalp and a blinding white light engulfed him. Crashing to the ground he tasted wet grass and mud, and each blade of grass beneath his cheek felt like a laceration in his skin. For an excruciating moment each sense was heightened to an unbearable degree and then, as he tried to rise, numbness began to creep over him, stealing the strength from his limbs. He couldn't even raise his head. He struggled for breath, his heart hammering in terrifyingly erratic bursts, and he acknowledged with dull finality that the lightning had no loyalty to its creator – he had brought about his own destruction as well as that of his son.

As he lay, helpless, on the soaked grass, he could feel his strength ebbing away into the churned mud. He was aware of Borsa somewhere above him, weeping, crying promises of revenge, but they made little sense.

His ancient flesh was withering now, drawing in on his bones as it paid the price for longevity, but there was no more pain. He was past that. He heard the outraged screaming of the child and twisted his gaze once more to the tableau at the stone circle, hope flowering in the darkest corner of his heart. But as his vision faded he saw Ulfed come at last to a decision. The chief's hoarse, sorrowing cry echoed among the stones and the knife swept down.

Chapter Two.

Bodmin Moor, Cornwall. 1986

The old engine house rose from the rough hillside, glassless windows glaring down, the crumbling chimney standing stark and black against a blameless blue sky. Laura couldn't look away, as if it were the first time she'd ever seen it. Why did it suddenly seem so scary? It was just a lump of stone and she wasn't a baby anymore, she'd been a teenager for almost five months now.

She glared at her brother's back. "It's alright for you. If someone catches us it'll be me who gets into trouble, I'm supposed to be in charge."

Thomas snorted. "Who's going to catch us?"

Without waiting for a reply, even if she'd had one ready, he parted the safety wire and scrambled down the short, grassy slope to the overgrown tunnel. Laura glanced back wistfully at the disappearing daylight and crawled after him, under the flaking warning sign and into the tunnel.

Years later, as the man she loved fought for his life here against his own history, she would recall this moment with razor-sharp clarity as the first step on the path that had led him to this place. But for now there was just the hard ground under her knees, the stone walls, and the memory of warmth and home, just ten minutes behind her yet feeling impossibly distant.

Her unease grew as they descended. She shivered, picturing piles of bones lying, forgotten and crumbling, deep in the hollow hills. What if there were actual ghosts

drifting in these tunnels?

She thought she felt a whisper of movement against her skin, and her mind wanted to shrink in on itself. She could feel it closing in, and the tunnel seemed to be doing the same until all she could think about was how the roof would soon be brushing the top of her head. Even the roots of her hair seemed alert to the imminent touch of cool, living stone.

Laura's heart grew tighter and her breath more panicky. "Turn the torch on, Tom."

"I'm saving it for later."

"Turn it on *now!*"

Thomas did, but instead of comforting light it created strange shapes, shadows that came to life as he moved the narrow beam around the inside of the tunnel.

Laura tried to focus on something. A single stone. She concentrated on its colour, its roughness, the way it lay, snug and ordinary against its neighbour. Her constricted mind opened a little, as did her chest, and she felt her breathing ease. It was just a tunnel after all, incapable of moving, no narrower than it had been when she had first entered.

It went dark for a moment, then Laura uttered a scream as a face loomed, inches from her own, with glowing red distended cheeks and staring eyes.

Thomas took the torch from his mouth, laughing. Laura slapped him hard on the shoulder and he did it again, adding a low growling noise. This time she just gave him a withering look, and he removed the torch, wiped it on his jeans and crawled on down the tunnel.

"You should never have taken this dare on," Laura said to his grubby backside as she tried to keep close.

"Me?" Tom protested. "Soon as Mike said about this place you were keen as

mustard to show him how brave you are!”

Michael was the same age as Laura, and for each of them he held a different allure: ten year old Thomas was in awe of his popularity and daredevil reputation, Laura was just starting to notice his laughing blue eyes.

Uncomfortable with her brother’s observation, she returned to the attack. “You’re already in trouble, getting kicked out of youth club. What if someone saw us?”

“They didn’t.”

“Well what if something happens then?”

“Like what?”

“Anything, it’d be easy somewhere like this.”

“Yeah, easy for a *girl*...”

“Anyway,” Laura said, “I reckon Michael was just winding us up, there’s no cave.”

“No?” Thomas’s voice held a grin now and Laura saw the shadows change, becoming taller. Thomas stood up and swept the feeble beam around the massive cavern in an attempt to see all their surroundings at once.

Laura joined him, her heart lightening with relief. Thinking about how impressed Michael would be, she put her annoyance to the back of her mind and let out an experimental whoop. The sound bounced back, distorted, and they both jumped up and down, shouting to test the acoustics of the chamber, each trying to outdo the other in volume and variation.

After a while Thomas began walking around the edges of the cavern, stopping to peer into holes in the wall and shining his torch above his head to see how high the ceiling was.

Laura waited by the entrance to the tunnel, remembering how it had felt back there, picturing the two of them lost and screaming for help. Nobody would ever find them,

they would be left here to die ...

Her good feelings slipped away. "Alright, let's go now," she called out in a wavering voice. There was no answer. Thomas's torchlight vanished, leaving Laura struggling against swiftly increasing alarm. "Tom!" she shouted again, trying to keep her voice steady. "Don't muck about, you little sod, I want to go. Come *on!*" She waited in the darkness, mentally cursing her brother but at the same time longing to hear his stupid, whiny voice.

The torch bobbed back into view and she heard an excited cry: "Come and look at this!"

Laura glanced back at the relative safety of the tunnel, then, finding a thread of courage she picked her way, hands outstretched, across to where Thomas had disappeared behind a stony outcropping at the far side. When she found him he was shining his torch on a large wooden box, pushed back several feet onto a wide shelf.

He played the light over it from end to end. "What do you think of that?"

"How the hell should I know?" Laura snapped, anxious to leave despite the find.

Thomas handed her the torch and boosted himself onto the ledge. "Keep the light on the box."

She was tempted to tell him to get lost, and to take the torch and get as far away as possible, but instead she sighed and directed the beam just ahead of him.

The ceiling was high enough for Thomas to stand, and he scrambled in until he was right beside the box. His body blocked out some of the light, but Laura heard a scraping sound and realised he was prising off the lid – something in her balked at the notion and she turned uneasily away.

That was when she saw the first one.

On the periphery of the circle of torchlight, a figure half the height of the boy stood,

but in the split second she had to take the image in, she could see this was no child. She stared, her throat too tight to cry out, and the torch fell from her numbed fingers and clattered to the ground. It went out.

“Hey!” Thomas’s voice held a trace of fear along with irritation, and Laura knew she had to get the light back just so she could breathe. In the silence following Thomas’s protest, she heard a scratching, scurrying noise in the huge cavern behind her.

Galvanised by the sound she groped swiftly by her feet, but her outstretched fingers instead found the stone floor with bruising impact. Tears of pain sprang to her eyes, still she could make no sound through her tightly pressed lips. Finally she found the torch and brought it up, switching it on in the same movement. There was nothing there except an annoyed looking Thomas, and the wooden box with the lid now standing open.

“Who rattled your cage?” he demanded. “Shine that thing back in here a minute, I’ve found something brill. Look!”

The beam shook wildly as Laura brought it reluctantly back towards her brother, keeping her head screwed back over her shoulder, her eyes aching with the strain of trying to penetrate the seemingly solid blackness. How could she have imagined something like that? But she would rather believe she was going mad than speak of it aloud, accepting it was real.

“Keep still!” Thomas grabbed her hand and directed the torch beam to the object he was trying to show her. Finally she looked.

A jar. That’s all it was, a crummy little jar with a pointed lid, while out *there* were ... what? Goblins? Gnomes? Did those things even exist outside Enid Blyton books? She tuned out Thomas’s excited voice, trying to detect any more rustling sounds but

there was nothing. Slowly her heart began to return to its normal rhythm; she must have imagined it, built something solid from the shadows –

“Ow!” Thomas’s voice cut through her concentration. “Something stung me!”

Laura swung the torch so the light illuminated the corner of the ledge. Finally the scream came out, short and terrified and, unable to speak, she slapped Thomas’s arm and pointed.

There, standing on wizened legs, shrivelled looking yet oddly menacing, stood the creature she had seen before. His head, seemingly huge on puny shoulders, tilted to stare at Thomas, and his hand reached out to take the jar. With his other hand he jabbed a small, long-tined pitchfork at the boy’s leg, eliciting another shout of pain, this time laced with bewildered horror.

Thomas scrambled back, still holding tightly to his prize, and began to drop his leg back off the ledge in preparation for running away. But as Laura reached out to steady him she felt a sharp stabbing pain in the back of her own leg, and screamed again, instinctively kicking backwards.

Thomas slipped. The jar crashed to the floor and the sound of it shattering was deafening in the tiny space, echoing off the stone walls, each piece of pottery seeming to make its own audible crash as it landed. Thomas immediately began coughing, dragging in harsh breaths, and Laura saw his face was covered in blue-grey dust that coated his lips. Each breath dragged more of the stuff into his mouth, and his eyes were wide with dismay and revulsion. She was about to try and bang him on the back when she was halted by a howl of rage from the creature on the ledge.

Her head swam as she heard a noise behind her and turned to see two more, one brandishing a short, sturdy piece of wood, the other had taken off his belt and was swishing it angrily in front of him. It was an almost comical act that struck a darkly

amused note in Laura's mind despite her terror. This proved it was a dream ... she pinched the skin on the back of her hand hard enough bring fresh tears to her eyes, but nothing changed.

The goblin-things were almost upon them now, and Thomas was right behind her, still coughing, pushing her forwards in his attempt to escape. She couldn't move of course, but he didn't know that until he pushed her aside, and then she heard him moan quietly. The tiny sound galvanised her; she was the big sister, she had to take charge.

She swept the torch from side to side, searching for some way past the creatures. Suddenly that belt-weapon didn't look so funny after all, it had a large buckle on the end and was cutting the air with a heavy whooshing sound.

The goblin-thing behind them had dropped to the ground and was moving in, his voice huffing in angry little coughs. To Laura's bemusement he actually sounded as if he were crying, and she swung the torch around to shine full on him.

Sure enough, tears were running down his wrinkled face, leaving tracks in the dust and plopping off his chin onto the dark green jacket he wore. Laura was so astonished she could do nothing but stare, as he squatted beside the broken jar and began to scoop the pieces into his pockets.

Thomas tugged at her arm to bring the light around once more on the two newcomers, but she was paralysed by astonishment and a strange kind of sympathy for the ugly little man. He lifted his face to hers, as if drawn by her fixed stare, and the compassion dropped away, replaced by crushed ice, creeping through her bones and freezing her breath.

The creature opened a hideously outsized mouth to shriek his fury through great, gulping sobs. "Cursed! Oh, *cursed* you are! Wicked children, you should never have

come here!”

Behind Laura, Thomas stopped coughing and burst into shocked, rasping tears. She wanted to comfort him, but her attention was fixed on the little man with the oversized head as he carried on scooping up dust and broken pieces of clay, and was only torn away when she realised the cavern behind them was now as empty as it had appeared when they arrived. The creature on the ledge melted into darkness and the sounds of his furious distress faded.

Thomas’s sobs subsided into hiccups. “What was it?” he gulped.

“I don’t know,” Laura muttered, “but we’re getting out of here now.”

She pushed at him and he stumbled out into the main cavern. Together they made their way across, making slower progress than Laura would have liked as they kept looking over their shoulders. She swept the torch across and behind them as they went but the cavern remained empty.

When they were halfway across they both had the same, unassailable urge to be out in sunlight again, and simultaneously broke into a run, fighting each other to be first into the tunnel. Thomas won, and took the torch from Laura.

Crawling behind him, Laura could imagine the creatures closing in on her from behind, could almost hear them - they were small enough to run, hunched but still on their feet, a major advantage in here. So vivid was the picture that, when the goblin-thing in her mind finally reached out to grasp her ankle she jerked away and screamed. Thomas cried out too, and half-turned, shining the torch in her eyes.

She pushed at him in panic. “Just go!”

At last she saw sunlight above Tom’s head, reaching weak fingers along the roof of the tunnel as if to draw them out. Each impact of her knees on the stone floor made her wince now escape was so near, and Thomas had to be feeling the same but they

didn't slow.

Thomas disappeared from sight as he reached the entrance, and, weak with relief, Laura pulled herself out after him and stumbled up the slope and under the wire. Her strength spent, she sank to the ground, relishing the feel of the grass under her hands and the breeze on her burning face, and then, with no warning at all she was crying. There was no embarrassment, no awkward sniffing and turning her head away, she let out the shock and relief in a wash of sobs that hurt her chest and made her head ache.

Thomas reached out and touched her arm. She saw her own terror reflected in his eyes, but neither spoke. Eventually she got to her feet, and this time it was he who followed her.

“Lau?”

Looking back, she gasped; she was staring at someone she didn't know. Thomas appeared much older, his features more finely cut, even his eyes seemed longer, more oval, had a greenish tint ... then she blinked, and he was just Thomas again.

“There was nothing there really, was there?” he said.

Laura hesitated, and saw his guarded determination fade as a frightening blankness took its place; acknowledging the truth could tumble him into some dark place from which he may never return. She swallowed hard and shook her head. “No. Nothing.”

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Deep below the surface of the moor a tall, regal woman beheld the sorry sight of a misshapen little man hunched before her, sobbing out the story of a broken jar, a lost

treasure and the wickedness of human children. Hearing his words she felt cold rushing through her, freezing her breath as she contemplated the full horror of what had happened. Loen's dusty remains lost to the human world? He would claim the revenge promised him by his brother so long ago, but at what cost to her own family? Dread clutched at her heart, but anger swiftly pushed it aside and she raised a staff as tall as herself, poised to deliver punishment.

The creature lifted his head and whispered through his tears: "Jacky Greencoat knows a secret, yer Majesty, a big, old secret. Spare Jacky and Jacky will tell."

A short while later the heavy curtain was pushed back and a tall, slender boy stepped into the chamber. He was almost a man now, the future king, and Queen Deera swallowed tears of mingled pride and fear.

She took a deep breath and went to him, taking his hands in hers. There was no other way but to speak it aloud. "Maer, you have always known your life would be in danger should the ancient King Loen find the means to return." He nodded, light blue eyes fixed on hers, evidently sensing the worry behind her deliberately measured tones. She sighed. "The jar is broken. The king's spirit was freed and has taken hold within a new form, a child."

"But surely that is good?" Maer said with a relieved smile. "If he has found a living form already he will have no need of mine."

"I would give my life for that to be true, but the child is fully human." Deera struggled to remain calm. "Loen can only use it for a short while, to grow, to become strong enough to take over a more suitable body. But not yours!" her voice rose as she

saw fear start into his eyes. "I will not allow it!"

"Then who do you mean him to have, mother?"

He was just a boy again now, his voice trembled and Deera longed to take him to her breast as she had done when he had been that child, to soothe him. But she could not.

Instead she took a couple of steps away. "I have learned of another child, half mortal, half Elemental," she said. "He lives far away in the mortal world and must be protected, kept safe from all dangers. And then he will be brought here when the king is ready."

"Brought here? By whom?"

"By you, Maer."

His eyes widened briefly in excitement, but then he looked puzzled. "I do not seek to shy away from such a duty, but why must it be me?"

"I allowed the jar to be destroyed, and in accordance with Borsa's promise, which my ancestors swore to uphold, I owe the king a body. If it is not to be yours, it must be this half mortal child. His situation is perfect: he has no parents, he is wise and fair, he will appeal to the king's vanity as well as his needs."

"How do I find this boy?" Maer asked, and she could hear the eagerness in his voice at the prospect of travelling.

"You will use the Gateway to go directly to him – it is simply a matter of readying yourself."

"Now?"

"Yes, my love, you must leave now. You must return at least once in every full cycle of seasons or you will become weak and ill. My brother Gilan will tend to the boy at those times and you will take over his duties here."

As she moved forward to embrace him she saw the light of adventure brightening his expression, and her heart eased a little. She would miss him, but this way he would grow well, and enjoy the chance to learn something of a world she could scarcely imagine.

And he would live.

Chapter Three.

Highland Park, Illinois. 1986

The boy who showed up at the park that morning was like no-one Richard had ever met before. He just stood, hovering on the fringe of the argument the gang always had before the first pitch of the day.

Steve had seen him first, and nudged Richard. They both stared and the boy stared back, unfazed and almost arrogant-looking, only the tiny hint of nervousness saving him from serious ridicule. He looked to be about fifteen, the same age as most of the kids in the game, but he was way too pretty for a guy.

Steve yelled out, "Hey, beautiful, where's your purse?"

The boy's nerves visibly melted away under the open taunt, becoming a wry smile, and he called back, "It goes better with my other dress!"

The masculine tone blew that angel-boy look right out of the water, and Richard grinned. "You know how to throw a ball?" The boy nodded. "Okay, argument over - meet our new pitcher." Richard tossed the ball, and the blond boy caught it easily and moved into the group.

Afterwards, he caught up with Richard as he started across the park. "Thanks for bringing me into the game."

"Hey, don't thank me, you pretty much won it for us. Best knuckleball I ever saw."

"Thanks. You're Richard, right? I heard the guys yelling."

"Yeah, Richard Lucas."

"Dean Mayer" the boy offered. "Just got here a couple days ago. My parents thought I should come live with my uncle, figure I'll get more chances in the city."

“Cool, good choice.”

“Yeah, they’re okay. What are your parents like?”

Richard kept his gaze fixed ahead and swallowed hard. “Don’t have any. They died when I was eight.”

“That’s rough. How’d they die?”

“Car wreck. After seven years the grief still struck Richard breathless and he deliberately brightened his expression to shake the feeling. Sometimes it worked, and this was one of them. He gestured to a kiosk at the edge of the park. “You wanna get a drink?”

“Sure, that’d be cool.”

As they sat sharing coke in the autumn sunshine, talk turned to school.

“I guess you’ll be at Highland Park High,” Richard said. “I go there, it’s not so bad. But if you ever tell anyone I said that I’ll have to track you down and kill you.”

“Message received and understood,” Dean said solemnly. “So, what are the girls like?”

Richard whistled and shook his head. “Now you’re asking. Bet you had your pick at your old place, huh?”

Dean shrugged. “About as much as you do here.”

“Yeah, right.” Richard took a drink to hide his flush. He knew girls generally liked him, although he’d never been able to figure out why. Not that he’d tried too hard, it was embarrassing to think about it at all. Girls were still something of a mystery to him and some of them were downright terrifying with their skinny jeans and huge, spiked hair.

He communicated none of this to Dean though, as two teen princesses swayed by, giving both boys a long, inviting look as they went.

“Wow, they’re really up front out here!” Dean whispered in awe, and Richard laughed, causing the girls to turn back for another look. One of them gave a coy little wave, curling her fingers over her palm before swinging around to give maximum flounce to her hair. “I don’t know about you, but they scare the hell out of me.”

Richard grinned. “You and me both,” he admitted with some relief.

Dean took the bottle back and saluted him with it. A tiny smile touched his lips “Well then, here’s to discovering a little courage.”

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Maer – no, he must think of himself as Dean now – watched Richard surreptitiously as they made their way back across the park. The boy was pretty self-assured for a fifteen year old, and already undeniably handsome, with thick black hair falling untidily over arresting, clear green eyes. No wonder girls were drawn to him.

He walked with a long, easy stride that belied an average height, and as Dean walked beside him he felt the associated kudos of being with a boy people genuinely liked. This would be no chore, this would be a whole new life. A human life! He still felt unsettled and a little sick from his journey through the Gateway, but he couldn’t deny the thrill of anticipation that coursed through him at the thought.

“Shit.” Richard stopped, looking towards the perimeter fence.

Dean followed his gaze. “What’s up?” He allowed himself a moment’s congratulation at the ease with which he had adopted Richard’s form of speech.

Richard gestured with his head. “See those guys over there?”

“Over ... oh, yeah. What’s wrong with them?”

“They owe me something.”

“Oh. Okay, you want to go get it?”

Richard cast him a crooked smile. “Are you kidding? I think it may involve broken

bones.”

Dean gaped at him, but only for a moment, then he shut his mouth and set his shoulders firm. This was what he was here for: to protect this boy, to keep him safe until it was time to take him home. He felt a little vibration of fear – he had never lifted a hand in anger in his life – but he had a job to do and now was the time to prove he could do it.

Three of the boys by the edge of the lot had broken away from the fence and stood closer together now, watching them. Dean stole a glance at Richard and was astonished, and somewhat dismayed, to see the smile hadn’t left his face. In the name of the Goddess, he was going to *enjoy* this!

Richard was looking back at the boys. “How fast can you run, Dean?” he asked mildly.

“Run? Um, pretty fast I guess.”

“Good. I suggest you start now.”

“Suggest again.”

Richard looked at him and the smile was still hovering around his mouth, but he had a serious look in his eyes. “Look, this isn’t your fight, okay? You seem like a nice guy and these assholes have no quarrel with you, but if you stick around you’re liable to get all caught up in something you don’t need.”

“There are four of them and one of you!”

“I’m not going to pretend I can take them all, there’s no way. But you don’t have to get involved.”

“So what, you’re going to stand here and wait for those guys to come over here and kick you into the middle of next week?”

“No,” Richard grinned, “I’m going to run too, when it’s time. Go on and get out of

here, Dean, I'll catch up with you later."

"Screw that." Dean felt the thrill separate into strands of excitement and fear. But the fear was manageable, and he could see Richard's chin come up and the hands at his sides form into loose fists. He took his strength from that. It was really going to happen; newly arrived in this miraculous land, and already he was facing his first fight.

"Hey, Lucas!"

"How's it goin', Tanner?" Richard sounded older than his years as he returned the hostile greeting with a friendly one of his own. He barely raised his voice but it carried clearly across the park. The biggest of the boys, a burly guy who looked a couple of years older than Richard, was already walking towards them.

"You little bastard, you're going to wish you'd stayed home with gran'ma today."

"Why, does it look like rain?" Richard still sounded calm, but Dean could see his knuckles whiten and his breathing change as he readied himself. His own heartbeat speeded up as he matched Richard's stance, and Tanner threw him a curious but unimpressed look as he drew closer. The other two trailed by a few yards, this was clearly between Lucas and Tanner

"You know, if you hadn't been such an asswipe over that whole thing with Steve Shelby, you would never have gotten arrested," Richard said. This was no way to defuse an incendiary situation, but that didn't appear to be his goal. He stood rock steady as Tanner came within striking range, and Tanner scowled.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Lucas?"

"Someone who doesn't like to stand by and watch big lugs like you beat on a kid half their size."

"So you thought it was worth making me look a total jerk?"

“Did that all by yourself, my friend,” Richard said. Dean saw the tightness of his jaw and realised extreme anger had been there all along, hidden behind the insolence.

But Tanner was too wound up to notice. “So who’s your pretty little friend?” he said, looking at Dean properly for the first time and raising an eyebrow. “You two going to slide off for a little boy-fun after I kick your lily ass?”

“This has nothing to do with him,” Richard said. “Or them,” he added, gesturing at Tanner’s friends. “Come on, Tanner. What do you say we finish this once and for all?”

“Just you and me?”

“Just you and me.”

“Sure. Back off, guys,” Tanner said, turning to his cronies, and from where he was standing Dean saw something Richard clearly hadn’t: Tanner winked.

Before he could open his mouth to warn Richard, Tanner had turned back and thrown a punch all in one swift movement. His fist connected with nothing more solid than the air where Richard’s head had been a split second before. His balance was thrown off, and Richard planted a sneaker square in the seat of the older boy’s pants and pushed.

Tanner went sprawling and Dean groaned: humiliation was hardly going to bring about the end Richard wanted, and he started to say so but a sudden stinging blow beside his left eye sent him staggering backwards. He turned to see one of Tanner’s friends sucking his knuckles and grinning, although tears of pain stood out in his eyes.

“Enjoy that, pretty boy?”

“More than you did by the looks of things – are you crying?” Dean returned, and felt a twinge of pride as he heard Richard laugh.

After that everything became a blur of adrenalin and swinging fists as Tanner and

his friends weighed in on the two younger boys. *Younger, my ass, I'm nearly two hundred years old...* Dean ducked under a flailing arm and delivered his first ever punch, to his assailant's jaw.

He heard Richard grunt, and looked up to see him taking a series of body blows from Tanner, but before he could get to him Tanner had gone down beneath a swift karate chop to the back of his neck. Richard straightened and flashed Dean a brief grin, rubbing the edge of his hand. He jerked his head towards the fence, where their fight had attracted the attention of the rest of Tanner's cronies.

"I think it's time," he said, and Dean nodded.

They ran.

Through the park towards the wooded area beyond ... Dean felt relief surging in his blood; something familiar at last, amidst all the noise, and the heavy bellowing of traffic.

The road, when he had first seen it, had struck a note of such terror in his soul he'd felt momentarily faint. Of course there were roads in the village near his home but he'd never imagined such monstrous byways as these.

Now the two boys hurtled, side by side, into the blessed greenness of the trees, hearing the thunder of boots on the grass behind them. They ducked in behind a large elm tree and stopped. Something about the sound of Richard's breathing struck a suspicious note, and a glance sideways confirmed it: he was laughing. Dean wondered if he realised he was hardly out of breath, neither of them were. He'd checked his speed at first, not wanting to alert Richard to any of his strangeness, nor to leave him behind, but he'd quickly realised it wasn't necessary, he had extra speed here but nothing even close to the way he was at home.

The thought of home, and what it meant to be here instead, clenched his gut for a

moment, but Richard's words banished the feeling. "You're quite something, Dean."

"Something what?"

"Something else!" Richard grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. Surprisingly, for one born to royalty and adoration, the simple gesture of acceptance and approval from this half-mortal boy gave him a warm rush of pleasure and pride.

"Where's whatisname?" he said, turning to hide the flush he could feel on his face and neck.

"He's coming."

"Then why are we hanging around here?"

"Because this isn't over yet, and it's damn well goin' to be before today is out."

There was a grim note in Richard's voice now, and the smile had fallen away. Even as he spoke they heard the sound of crashing footsteps in the undergrowth, and Richard stepped out from behind the tree, directly into Tanner's path.

"There you are, you fucking coward!" Tanner spat, dragging in deep breaths.

Richard looked beyond him. "Where are your buddies?"

"Coming."

"Tell them to back off, no tricks this time."

Tanner looked at him, amazed, then uttered a short bark of laughter. "Or you'll what?"

Richard shrugged. "We'll just outrun you again." He leaned against the tree, arms folded. "And I'll make sure everyone knows you need help to fight a kid three years younger than you are."

"You little ..." Tanner shook his head. He stared at Richard, and Dean wasn't entirely surprised to see a new expression there: Richard had already won, although neither he nor Tanner knew it yet.

“Just you and me, Tanner,” Richard said once again. Eventually Tanner nodded, and Richard levered himself off the tree. He walked up to Tanner and held out his hand. Bemused, the older boy shook it, then glanced over his shoulder to make sure his friends hadn’t seen. They arrived in the clearing just in time to see him step away from Richard, and looked at each other with evident satisfaction.

“Stay out of it,” Tanner said.

“Sure,” one of them, the one who’d hit Dean, grinned.

“I mean it this time. I don’t need no help with this little shit.”

A chorus of murmuring as his friends fell over themselves to agree, and Dean caught Richard’s eye and nodded his understanding: the rule went for him too.

“You know, you keep telling me how ‘little’ I am,” Richard said. “Let’s see how well you deal with little shall we?”

Tanner swung and, once again, Richard’s quick movement avoided contact. He let fly a short, controlled punch that smacked Tanner on the cheekbone, and turned easily to avoid Tanner’s furious retaliation.

He continued to step out of reach for several minutes but eventually Tanner’s superior size and weight carried him forward, knocking them both to the ground, and Dean winced as he saw a large fist swing into his new friend’s ribs. Richard gripped Tanner’s shirt front and dragged him around until he was able to roll on top and straddle him.

They fought hard for control, and Tanner’s hands flashed upward and gripped Richard’s throat. Dean almost stepped in then: Richard’s eyes had closed briefly in pain, but he brought his own hands up and out between Tanner’s outstretched arms, breaking the stranglehold, then shot his own fist out and clipped it hard under Tanner’s chin, snapping his head back. He adjusted his position, pinning Tanner’s

wrists to the ground above his head.

He leaned in close. "Stay away from us, you're done here."

Tanner started to struggle, but Dean saw realisation in his half hearted movements, and it wasn't because Richard was astride him, holding him helpless; there was something blazing in Richard's eyes that jolted him, and it was obvious Tanner saw it too.

In the years to come, Dean would see that look time and time again, that absolute conviction in the rightness of his own actions, and his belief in the boy, and the man he would become, would be strengthened by it.

For now though, there was just the insane urge to laugh with relief that it was over, that he hadn't failed his duty within the first few hours of his arrival by allowing Richard to be beaten to a pulp by a mindless thug. Tanner's friends were less easily cowed, but then they hadn't been subjected to that intense gaze. They moved together and readied themselves for Tanner's order to step in, but Tanner shook his head.

"Not now. Later. When you're not expecting it," he spat this last at Richard, who nodded. Tanner was merely saving face but this was no time to bait him with it.

"Look forward to it," he said, and rose in a single, fluid movement, allowing Tanner to clamber to his feet. "Later, guys."

His grin, and the little wave he gave, nearly kicked the whole thing off again and Dean sighed with relief as Tanner called his gang away: it was pretty clear that, charisma and charm aside, Richard Lucas was going to be one hell of a full time job.