

When Magic Fails

Hypnotic Journey: Book 2

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Chapter One

“Group hypnosis. How many times do I have to say it? Group hypnosis, do you understand what I mean? Group hypnosis, a group of people who get hypnotized all at the same time.” Tom cringed at the detective’s stare. “My friends went to Landon, Kansas over three weeks ago for a weekend session.”

The blank expression on the officer’s face was incredibly frustrating. The dimly-lit offices of the second precinct in the St. Louis police department did little to get rid of the dread eating Tom’s insides. The detective’s giant hands tapped against the top of the desk as he stared at Tom.

Tom pushed his dark-brown hair back from his face as he took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t care what your opinion of hypnosis is. What I do care about is getting an investigation underway.” Calming himself, Tom rubbed his temples as his headache returned. “These four people are intelligent, dedicated professionals; all of whom failed to report to work the Monday after their departure. No one has seen or heard from them for over three weeks.”

“Why is it that you’re just now getting around to reporting this?” The detective adjusted his computer monitor and started typing on the keyboard.

“As I said before, I’ve spent the last week in the hospital. I had spinal meningitis, and had to cancel my plans to go with them on this vacation. I went to the hospital a couple of days after they left, for tests that resulted in a spinal fluid leak. I’ve spent the last three weeks flat on my back under heavy sedation.” He glanced down at his clenched fists and tried to relax. He took a deep breath and glanced around the small office, breathing slowly and deeply. The smoke-stained walls were cracked and peeling. There was a musty scent, which Tom suspected came from the lack of a janitorial staff.

Crumpled papers and various burger wrappers from local fast food restaurants littered the floor. Tom noticed a young woman speaking to another detective at the desk across the room. She was pale; the dark rings under her eyes screamed of exhaustion. Her stringy dark hair hung in a loose tangle of knots from her tiny ponytail. He knew just how she felt. Someone she cared about was lost, and these people couldn’t find a stray dog at the pound.

Tom's hand went instinctively to his hair. Did he look as crazy as she did? Probably; he hadn't slept without medication in so long he wasn't sure he knew how.

He'd spent the last three weeks in his personal version of hell. He didn't know if he was going to live or die for those first excruciating days. He'd actually reached the point where he wasn't sure he wanted to live any longer with the pain. Then he'd returned home, with no sign of Nicole to help him face the pounding pressure in his head that threatened to increase each time he sat up, only to find she was missing. Where were they? Nicole was too methodical, too obsessed with her work, to go off without a word to anyone.

Someone who wanted to be the next District Attorney, perhaps the first female U.S. President, wouldn't just disappear without a word. Jack, on the other hand, did this kind of thing all the time. Becoming a travel agent was the ultimate experience for that lovable rogue. He was born to vanish at a moment's notice. But not Todd; he had commitments. His coach was screaming that his best player was probably laying in the gutter somewhere, with his guts spilling out. Todd never missed a practice, let alone three games in a row.

"Alright, give me their names again," The detective muttered, sliding his bulk forward in the tiny wooden chair.

"Todd Hopper. He should already be on your list."

"The hockey player?" the detective glanced up.

"Yes, and his girlfriend, Sarah Sims. She's a nurse practitioner at Montgomery General," Tom continued. "Jack Tyler, he's the third one. He's with The Traverse Agency. Finally, Nicole Waters, my fiancée. You might have heard of her. She's the DA's top attorney."

"Waters and Hopper were together when they disappeared?" The detective sighed and reached for a pile of files on the corner of his desk. "Let's see what the latest is on Hopper, and check to see if your other two friends have been put into the system yet." The detective rose slowly and moved across the room to sit in front of another computer. "Were Miss Waters and Mr. Tyler ever romantically involved?" he called over to Tom without glancing up.

"Hardly," Tom stifled a nervous chuckle, envisioning the two as lovers. "She met Jack through me. Jack's a friend of mine. Typically, they don't associate. He was kind enough to fill

the empty spot on that trip for me when I got sick.” Tom didn’t want to reveal the animosity between the two people he cared about the most.

The detective turned back to stare at Tom, “So they were never involved?”

“No, Nicole is my fiancée; she hardly knows Jack.” Tom’s brown eyes met the dark stare of the detective.

Concentrating on the computer, the detective tapped a few keys and then motioned for Tom. “Three of your friends have been reported missing. Mr. Tyler has not. You’re the only one who’s given the slightest indication of where they might have gone, and revealed the fact that they disappeared together.”

“It was a business vacation. Nicole wanted to keep it quiet, and Hopper didn’t want his fans following him to Landon. Jack has no family; his parents died a few years ago,” Tom explained. “So are you going to send someone to Landon to talk to this Dr. Strong?”

“Have you talked to Jack Tyler’s people?” the detective asked, without taking his eyes from the screen.

“He’s an orphan; he has no family,” Tom sighed in frustration. “Hopper and I are the closest thing he has to family.”

“Yeah?” The detective stared at him, waiting for an answer.

“I already told you, they haven’t heard a thing.” Tom looked over as a young woman slowly followed the officer into a small windowed office. He could see the dark clouds that covered the sky through the windows of the small glass-encased room. The gloom seemed to deepen as the female detective offered the frail woman a seat. Tom couldn’t take his eyes off the young woman as the detective sat down across from her, and began to speak. The woman’s face paled, and she began to sob. They’d found her missing person.

“Jack Tyler; is that his full name?” the detective asked, snapping Tom back to the business at hand.

“I don’t know his middle name.” Tom’s stomach churned as he caught the stricken expression on the woman’s face. “So, no one has gone to Landon to talk with Dr. Strong?”

“We didn’t know he existed.”

“I called his office. There was no answer,” Tom said, trying to quell his panic. “I wanted to go up there myself, but I just can’t take any more time off from the bank. I’ve used up all my vacation and sick days with meningitis. “

“No one expects you to find them,” the detective said. “Do you think you were the last person to see your friends?”

“I don’t know; I guess so. Nicole had left my apartment an hour before they were scheduled to depart. I’m sure there were plenty of people at the airport who saw them. Listen, I have to get back to work. I’m supposed to be on a business call right now. I’m putting my job on the line to find out what you people are doing about Todd Hopper and my friends!” He rubbed his forehead, breathing deeply.

“Mr. Norton, we can only go so far in an investigation without any leads. Now that you’ve given us something to go on, we can contact the authorities in Landon and have them interview Dr. ...”

“Strong; Elias Strong,” Tom finished for him. “How long will that take?”

“Well, this case is three weeks old.” The detective hesitated. “But, since a public figure like Todd Hopper is involved, they’ll get right on it. After all, a small town like Landon’s probably never had a missing person before.”

“So you’re saying some small-town sheriff is going to handle a missing person’s case that involves four prominent St. Louis citizens,” Tom sneered.

“That’s not the point.” The detective rose and motioned to a small enclosed office, next to the one where the young woman still sat, crying. “I’d like to discuss your friends’ plans in more detail,” he added, waving at the female detective as she left the girl to recover on her own.

“I’m glad to do it, but it will have to wait until after I am done at the bank.” Tom rose to leave.

The detective moved swiftly around his desk, and took hold of Tom’s arm to guide him toward the vacant office. “We’ll need a statement about this Dr. Strong, and proof of your whereabouts during the last three weeks.”

Tom shook his head as it began to spin. “Am I a suspect?”

“You’re an intelligent man, Mr. Norton. Surely you can understand why we need to verify the information you’ve just given us.”

The courtyard below the sorcerer’s white stone tower filled with the sounds of pounding metal. Sarah brushed back her long red hair and gazed out the small oblong window. Her deep blue eyes focused on Elf Prince Cabal as Jack, the tall, dark haired barbarian, swung his blade high, arching down swiftly as the blond-haired prince met his blow with unhesitating power. They tested each other’s skills in combat each morning, before tending to their duties instructing the young elf warriors. Never before had a human held his own against the mighty elf prince. Then again, Jack was no ordinary barbarian. He was not from this world.

Nicole, an ebony-haired woodland elf, sat on the stone wall, watching the pair with great amusement. She had also found herself a unique member of this new world of fairies and magic. As beautiful and mysterious as she was, Nicole found herself to be one of the last woodland elves in existence; half elf, half wood nymph. Sarah could see Nicole’s seductive smile. She stood, enjoying the struggle between the Elf Prince and her handsome husband. Suddenly, Cabal sent Jack reeling into the dirt at the edge of the large, grassy yard. Sarah’s lips moved ever so slightly toward mirth as her gaze landed on Cabal’s upturned eyes. His gaze met hers for only an instant, before turning back to face Jack.

The increased force of the assault took Jack by surprise. Jack’s broad, bare back glistened with sweat as he fought. His dark breeches held sweat and grass stains, down to the top of his short black boots. Cabal was swiftly getting the better of him. Stumbling backward, Jack tucked his legs under and somersaulted swiftly across the grass, out of reach. “I’d prefer to finish this intact.”

“My apologies,” Cabal said, grinning viciously. “I keep forgetting you’re only human.” His smile softened to full amusement as Jack raised his sword in challenge.

“Human or not,” Jack said, as he slowly approached him, “I carry the advantage of unworldly knowledge.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Cabal laughed. “Something unworldly?”

“I have a vast library of knowledge from my homeland inside my head.”

“What knowledge could your world offer that would be useful here?”

“How about a flushable toilet?” Jack winked at Nicole.

“Perhaps you should build one, and leave us all in awe,” Cabal declared.

“People could call them ‘Jacks’ for short,” Nicole added to the conversation.

“Knowledge, power, wisdom; it’s never appreciated until it’s missing,” Jack said casually, moving in for a swift lunge.

“Don’t listen to him, Cabal,” Nicole said. “He was no one special in the *real world*. He arranged journeys to secluded tropical islands for wealthy merchants.”

“I see,” Cabal smiled, still staring at Jack. “You were a liaison between the client and their ship captain; an errand boy, very impressive, almost compelling.”

Sarah watched as Jack surged forward, attacking the laughing prince. She knew it would take much more than a few casual remarks to anger Jack. Prince Cabal and her two companions had become inseparable since they joined forces to destroy the beast from the Cave of Sorrows. The three of them saved Cabal’s life that day. Sarah often wondered if that was why he remained close, despite their lack of popularity. In fact, they were the three most despised people in the entire kingdom.

Prince Cabal had made a point of leaving Sarah to her thoughts these last few months; never approaching her, yet always close at hand. When they’d arrived at the wizard’s stronghold, the prince was attentive to the extreme. Yet all Sarah wanted was to attend to her studies, and forget the past. Nearly a year had gone by since she’d heeded the elf queen’s wishes of apprenticeship to the queen’s sorcerer, Ahmity. Finally, less than a fortnight ago, she had completed her training. In all that time, no one, not even Ahmity himself, had managed to discover what had happened to Todd. Her heart still ached for him. His transformation into a troll didn’t matter to her. She loved him. Terror sprang anew for him each time she thought of his end at the hands of the trolls. How could they have saved him? His injuries were too severe.

Pushing him from her thoughts, she watched the lighthearted battle below. The skills her friends prided themselves on were more than they appeared. Time and time again, they stood by her side, risking their lives to protect her. Now she had mastered her magic. In any situation, she was capable of keeping a foe at bay. At least that was what Ahmity had told her. If this were so,

why was she so compelled to learn the uses of the small sword that Nicole wielded? Why was Ahmity resisting her constant badgering to take a weapon of her own?

“Wizards don’t consider the sword a useful device,” his soft voice often explained.

Even so, she couldn’t help but feel that the situation that now faced them warranted extreme measures. She knew something terrible was happening, but Ahmity would not discuss it. Sarah watched Ahmity carefully each time a messenger came to the castle. The first had sent the old wizard into seclusion, causing him to hide deep within the bowels of the stronghold for days on end. With the third messenger, he called her into his chambers. His dark, narrow eyes searched hers for some unknown reaction as he informed her that they were the only two wizards left to guard the realm. Like the others before them, the elf wizards vanished suddenly during a monstrous lighting storm. Several days later, their lifeless, disfigured bodies appeared at the gates of Fortress City.

This, and nothing else, was told to Sarah. Ahmity turned aside her questions, claiming nothing more was known. Her mind went to Puissant, but he could not enter this world. He had given Sarah all of his magic to help her complete the quest; a quest that had turned out to be a lie. No, it was not possible for Puissant to be behind the murder of the elf wizards; it had to be someone much more powerful.

During her studies as Ahmity’s apprentice, Sarah had learned much of this land of enchantment. The dwarf wizards had disappeared in nearly the same way. Afterward, their cities, each in turn, vanished in a pillar of black dust. Ten years had passed with no hint of the dwarves. The elves had become so enthralled in their battle with the evil wizard Puissant that they had forsaken the dwarves in order to save themselves. Puissant had somehow found a powerful source of magic, and had used it to gain power over the elves. All the elf wizards joined forces against Puissant. They managed to drive him from this world. The alternate realm was his punishment.

However, the evil wizard’s undoing left Sarah and her friends stranded in this land of magic. Tricked into participating in what they thought was a simple adventure, they found themselves in a land so foreign that Todd died before they realized the Fantasyland had become their new reality. Sarah had chosen to stay, chosen to withhold Puissant’s powers from him; powers he willingly sacrificed to return and seek vengeance on the elves. Nicole was supposed to inherit his

powers. Ahmity foresaw their coming, and altered their identities as they were transported into this realm. The result caused Puissant's failure. Sarah was partially responsible for that failure. She was the only human wizard who had ever befriended the Elves.

Puissant's downfall was of little comfort to her, although it eased her thirst to avenge Todd. Sarah turned away from the window to find Ahmity's bright-blue, almond-shaped eyes studying her.

"Your thoughts are far away this day," the ancient elf surmised from where he sat, smiling gently from beneath his long white beard.

"Not as far as you would believe," she frowned back at him.

"Ah, I see. You are about to lecture me on the uses of the sword again," Ahmity chuckled, turning back to his large wooden desk. His long, thin fingers pushed aside an unusually high pile of books. Glancing up at Sarah through the channel he had made, he added with a sigh, "Very well; I shall elucidate, again. You are a sorceress, powerful beyond my expectation. You have learned all that I can teach, except the wisdom that only comes with experience. Therefore, I advise you to heed my counsel. In all my years as a student of sorcery (and one always remains a student), I have never found the need for physical defense. It is an unnecessary and cruel barbarism."

"If the others had learned the art of swordsmanship, perhaps they would have lived to warn us of the danger that threatens our very existence," Sarah said as she pulled a black ribbon from the pocket of her long, green robe and tied it around her long, curly red hair. Her dress, hidden safely underneath, gathered under her bust line and flowed freely to her ankles. She moved forward and leaned over the piles of books on his desk, staring at him.

"An experienced wizard can throw a defense spell with one simple thought. Why would one ever need a sword? I blame your human heritage for your tendency toward physical protection," Ahmity said with a sigh.

"But what if there are too many attackers in close quarters? Keeping them all at bay would be difficult. Or, if you became flustered and couldn't think of a powerful enough incantation," Sarah said, too wrapped up in her argument to listen to Ahmity. "Being human in this realm is difficult enough without adding stubbornness to the list of my faults."

“I apologize.” He smiled softly. “Being human also has its rewards. You have a different perception of magic than any of my previous students. That is why I have taught you to use your thoughts to fire the spells. Words are time-consuming and bothersome. You have taken the spells into your heart; they have become a part of you. You have learned the art of calm reasoning. With its help, you simply picture what it is that you wish to occur and call upon your gift to accomplish it. It is highly unlikely that you will misfire and need the aid of a warrior. All that I have taught you is held deep inside. In a moment of crisis, it is merely a thought away.”

“Then why have you kept me here?” she demanded. “My apprenticeship is finished, yet you deny me the simple luxury of an afternoon of leisure by the river for no other reason than it is outside the walls of this prison!”

“Prison, is it?” he questioned calmly, the color of his eyes deepening to sapphire.

“What else would you call it?” she snapped.

“I wish only to keep you safe.” Ahmity rose, and came around the desk to place his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m not a child! You may have seen hundreds of years of life. Humans are a fragile breed, but we’re considered adults at the age of 18. I have surpassed that by several years.” She turned away. “I can’t stay here forever.” Sarah glanced toward the long, narrow window and added, “Isn’t it time I tested my strength?”

Ahmity’s fragile form seemed to shrink slightly with her words. “If we only knew what power lay in wait,” he began.

“Maybe our mistake is in waiting for it to come,” she offered quietly.

“Perhaps,” he answered, gazing out the window toward the sky as he slowly moved back behind his desk. He sat for several minutes in silence before locking eyes with her. “I suppose a few lessons in swordsmanship wouldn’t do you any harm.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

“Only basic defense, mind you,” he said.

“Of course!” She rushed to embrace him, and then pulled quickly away. Her eyes narrowed. “Something to keep me here a while longer?”

He chuckled and waved her toward the door. "I have dealt with the most powerful kings, queens, and wizards of this realm, and the human land across the sea. Of them all, you are the only one who challenges my honor."

"That's because none of them have been locked up in this dungeon with you for nearly a year," she grinned as she headed for the door.

"Get on with your new adventure, child!" He glanced down at his work, and added, "Cabal is best for the job."

She stopped at the door and turned back to him. Her heart pounded in her ears. Forcing her voice to remain casual, she stated, "I'd prefer Nicole."

"Would you?" His expression softened. "As you wish."

Bounding down the tower's stone steps, she rushed across the large, dimly-lit dining hall, and sailed out into the courtyard, just as Jack and Cabal finished their session. Sarah was smiling brightly as she ran straight to Nicole, who waited expectantly on top of the stone wall. The sun flashed on Nicole's long, black hair, displaying its dark-blue hues.

Nicole's transformation into the petite, curvaceous form had given Sarah twinges of jealousy for several months after they arrived, until she realized that her athletic figure was just as pleasing to the eye.

Nicole's eyes glimmered with amusement as Sarah stopped before her. "You finally managed to convince that old goat to allow you a hobby?" she remarked as Sarah stopped before her.

Nicole's laughter brought Jack to her side as he said, "Did I hear right? You're going to take up the sword?"

Jack grinned and pulled Sarah against his sweaty, bare chest for a quick hug.

"Yes!" she smiled, and squirmed to escape his grasp. "He has conceded to my wisdom." A low throaty chuckle came from behind her. Sarah stiffened, realizing Prince Cabal had followed Jack to the edge of the courtyard.

"If Ahmity has granted you a favor, I'd be wary of its repercussions," Cabal said with a grin.

Sarah forced herself to turn and face him. She glared at Cabal with more anger than intended and snapped, "I don't care what his motives are; I want to learn."

Cabal's chiseled features and disheveled hair made her pulse race. Sarah couldn't help but notice the glistening sweat that clung to his muscular arms and chest. She took a deep breath and concentrated on the one physical trait that separated humans from elves: his long, pointed ears. Cabal's smile faded at her abrupt remark, and he glanced quickly at Jack. Nodding at her in silence, he opened his hands before him in submission, and turned to head across the courtyard.

"You could at least try to be nice to him," Nicole chastised her gently. "His response might surprise you."

"I came out here to learn how to use a weapon; not for a lecture on my manners." Sarah spun around, confused by her own reaction to Cabal.

Nicole grinned. "Well, then, tell me, Jack, my loving husband, what is an appropriate weapon for a sharp-tongued sorceress?"

Jack forced a smile from his lips as he placed his hands on Sarah's shoulders and turned her toward him. "Well, I'd say a short sword, although she is not the petite wisp of a thing that you are."

"Wisp?" Nicole jumped down from the stone wall, drawing her sword. "Would you care to test this wisp's talents?"

"There's plenty of time for that later, my darling," Jack said with a wink at Sarah as he released her and spun to take his wife in his arms.

Shaking her head at the pair as their lips met, Sarah glanced across at Prince Cabal. He emerged from the small blacksmith shop at the far end of the courtyard, and headed toward her. Sarah watched him. Her heart began to race as he neared. Cabal quietly presented her with a long, delicate sword, and a tiny, jewel-encrusted dirk.

"I hope you will find these to your liking." He held them out to Sarah, his eyes focusing on hers. The thin blade of the sword left it surprisingly light and easy to wield. The bright silver metal glistened in the sunlight. The delicate carving of a wild rose climbed along the length of the blade.

"It's beautiful," Sarah gasped. She immediately felt guilty for her earlier remark.

"It's elven steel," Cabal explained. "It was my mother's. In her day, she was quite a warrior."

Sarah gawked at him. “The queen?”

“She believed the crown would go to Ahmity. By law, being Ahmity’s younger sister, she was to become the king’s protector. It was only natural that she became a warrior.” He pulled the dirk from its sheath. “For years, even after she became queen, she kept this in her boot.”

“These are much too precious; I can’t accept them.”

“I insist.” He grabbed her hand and thrust the dirk into her palm, his smile vanishing. His face softened as his eyes met hers, and he added quietly, “It would be a great honor, to the queen and me, if you would carry it.”

Stunned, she gazed into his eyes as an invisible hand reached out and squeezed the pit of her stomach sharply. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Sarah smiled weakly. “How can I refuse?”

Cabal nodded, then turned, mounted, and swung the horse around to face them. “I’ve been invited to the Elf Council. The trolls Ahmity healed have started to emerge from the valley.”

Sarah’s heart felt like it stopped at his words. She could not move or speak. She could only stand there and listen. Trolls...

“What does that mean?” Nicole asked.

“I’m not sure,” Cabal answered. “The giant trolls were a constant nuisance in the past, but not dangerous. However, the local farmers are concerned their stock will start to disappear, as it has in the past when trolls are present. The council will want to force them back into the valley.”

“That’s not fair!” Nicole said. “They haven’t done anything wrong.”

Jack countered. “Fair or not, we don’t want to wait until someone gets killed before we take control of the situation.”

Nicole stared at him, stunned. “That’s the most biased statement I’ve ever heard you make.”

“Hopper was my friend, too,” Jack offered softly, “but he was nothing like these trolls. They are the same species; that’s as far as it goes. And I don’t think they were innocent where Hopper’s death is concerned.”

“They were under Puissant’s influence when they attacked us!” Nicole said, turning back to Cabal. “We invaded their home. They were defending themselves. It’s a miracle they survived as

long as they did. The plague that swarmed among them was fierce. Have you thought about their suffering? Just because we've had trouble with them in the past doesn't mean their first instinct will be to attack. It's entirely possible they want to join us."

"That's highly unlikely," Jack frowned, taking her hand.

Cabal said, "You're a Woodland Elf; why don't you represent your people at the council? They could use a voice. The Highland and the Mesa elves each have at least three representatives. The Woodlands send only one."

"What do you say to that, Councilwoman?" Jack said. "It's definitely up your alley."

"Perhaps it's time this council of yours had an educated woman of the world among its members," Nicole smiled mischievously, and headed to saddle her horse.

"What about my lesson?" Sarah forced herself to speak. She would not ask all the questions welling up inside her. She would focus on reality and live in the moment. Rushing off to the mountains would not bring Hopper back.

"Get her started, Jack!" Nicole hollered over her shoulder. "But, first, find her something decent to wear."

Sarah glanced down at her flowing robes and frowned. "Everything I own is like this," she mumbled.

"Get her something of mine," Nicole laughed, and galloped toward the large, lowering drawbridge behind Prince Cabal.

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