

As Darkness Falls

Hypnotic Journey, Book 3

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Chapter One

A dark shadow rose from the depths of the watercourse. Forced to crawl out of the oceans rolling waves, it struggled against the pull of the undertow. Rising, it moved further up the white sandy beach, away from the cold water. The creature collapsed onto the wet sand, as the crescent moon above shone on his sleek gray skin, revealing two immense leather-like wings protruding from his back. Exhaustion clouded his mind.

The darkness of night was soothing, refreshing. Somehow he knew it would bring him strength and sustenance. The creature watched as an enormous rolling storm cloud sunk into the salty water before him, and he tried to remember why he had come.

Summer passed quickly for Sarah. Thoughts of Cabal hardly ever entered her mind. The fall air brought fresh breezes and orange and red hues to the usually silvery-green trees. She tied her long, curly red hair back with a black ribbon. Sarah smiled in fascination. The delicate little tree nymph's hair was also changing from shining silver to auburn with the change of the weather. The small child-like creatures danced and swayed in the cool breeze of the meadow, just outside the Woodland Village. Sarah was enjoying her stay under the hospitality of Gravid. The stout, boisterous leader of the Woodland Elves and his delicately beautiful wife Tirana, gifted with second sight, the ability to see brief glimpses into the future, were excellent hosts.

Sarah finished her apprenticeship with the Queen's brother, and only remaining elf wizard Ahmity. Then rushed to spend the remainder of the summer learning all she could about the mysterious magic of the Woodland Elves, and the forest that surrounded them.

The magic of their forest was naturally occurring. No spells or incantations created the creatures that roamed this land. They were ancient beings that cherished their isolated serenity, and as such did not welcome strangers. It was difficult for Sarah to gain their

trust, but with Tirana's help she was slowly allowed into their world. Now everywhere Sarah went; she could see the small magical creatures that thrived so well due to the blind ignorance of those not a welcome part of their lives. The trees, flowers, tall grasses, streams and lakes, were teeming with nymphs and fairies, all contributing to the growth and nourishment of the plants and animals around them. They were as much a natural part of the forest as the trees.

Now with Ahmity's arrival, plans could be set in motion to search for elves with the potential to learn the craft of wielding magic. Gravid was building a school to house a hundred candidates. Throughout the winter, the candidates would be schooled and evaluated through a series of tasks. These tasks were designed to measure not only their level of magic, but their dedication to its proper use. Next Spring, twelve would be chosen to become apprentices, and be taught by Ahmity and Sarah in the art of wizardry.

Sarah and Ahmity stood on the edge of the cliff gazing out at the turquoise water of the sea. The elves worked behind them to construct a small school that would house the candidates. Sarah turned to look at Ahmity; she smiled at the ancient elf wizard. His blue almond-shaped eyes reminded her of Cabal. Ahmity's long, thin, silver beard was secured to his flowing crimson robe by a small wooden toggle. Ahmity had become like a father to Sarah. She had almost lost him in the struggle with Puissant. His long, crimson robe echoed hers, each carrying Queen Brie's small emblem, the crest of Fortress City, on their chest. Sarah said, "It's hard to believe that just a few months ago this site was a battlefield. Now Puissant is gone, and this school will help to insure no other sorcerer grows to such extreme power again."

Ahmity turned to smile back at her, then gazed back at the construction. The frame was nearly complete on the second floor. "This school offers us the chance to begin again with the Sorcerers Circle. You were right to open the school up to all candidates, regardless of race or nationality. It is my hope that all the elven villages send candidates, and the nymphs and fairy creatures consider it as well. Perhaps even a barbarian or two will apply." He turned back to her, and gave her a wink.

"I hope that my presence has broken the archaic belief that humans from across the sea are treacherous and wild." Sarah tried to hide her amusement, as she frowned at him.

Leaving the school site, the two headed back to the trees and a short walk back to the Woodland Village. Sarah never tired of gazing at the immense trees that seemed to grow up into the sky. They were ancient, thousands of years old, as big around as a house, and as tall as a mountain. Gravid appeared on the path ahead of them. He was dressed in the customary outfit of the woodlands, a white shirt, dark green leather vest and pants, with his sword in his belt. His short, blue-black hair was disheveled a bit, and he smoothed it back as he reached them. Judging from the stern expression on his face and a slight green glow in his eyes, there was a problem, a magical problem.

"I need you both back at the village; there's been an incident with one of the children." Gravid explained, taking Sarah by the hand, and turning back the way he had come.

"Are they hurt? Did you find Crasis, to come and heal them?" Sarah asked, and she allowed him to lead her quickly back to the village.

"The child is fine; it's what he found that's the problem." Gravid said, not slowing his pace. Sarah glanced behind her to make sure Ahmity was able to keep pace. She should have known better than to look, he was on her heels, walking as fast as someone half his age. As the village came into view between the giant trees, Gravid veered off the trail and headed deeper into the woods. "I have never seen the likes of this before." Gravid explained, "And I hope to never again. But I fear this may be only the beginning."

His words chilled Sarah to her core. The tall elf was not one to exaggerate or panic. Whatever had Gravid concerned, must be very serious to have caused him to be so upset. They reached a small clearing where many of the elven children gathered to play games or music. In the center of the clearing, surrounded by several of the woodland guard, was some sort of creature caught in a chain mail net. The guard's swords were drawn. They stood close by the netting to insure the creature would not escape.

Moving closer, Ahmity took hold of Sarah's arm, pulling her away from Gravid. "Hold one moment my child." He said, staring at the netted beast. "This is not a creature to rush upon."

The animal looked as if it had once been a squirrel. Yet now, its gray fur was matted, and bare skin showed in places. Tiny leather-like wings protruded from its back. As they walked slowly closer, the small creature bared its long, sharp, yet black and rotting teeth, revealing a black tongue.

"This creature has been infected by a nether beast." Ahmity explained. "We should contact Hopper and his troll village. He would know if there has been a breach in the barrier to the netherworld."

"Can we cure it?" Gravid asked, keeping his distance behind them.

"No, There is no cure for the poison that is flowing through its veins." Sarah offered quietly. "A creature infected by a nether beast, doesn't have long to live. It would be merciful if we dispatched it." She turned to look at Ahmity for his approval. He nodded; Sarah turned back and stretched out her hand in front of her, summoning a ball of fire. The heat from the flames felt like an oven against her face, yet her palm remained cool. The woodland guard fell back, as she moved forward to throw the flame at the tiny creature. The creature didn't have time to scream. The flame was too powerful; it was engulfed, and in an instant it turned to ash.

"There is more." Gravid moved to stand beside them. "There are rumors of small creatures being found in the woods dead, the blood drained from them, but no meat eaten"

A small cabin, nestled into the side of a hill, was not what Jack would have pictured as his ideal honeymoon. Back at home, the tall brown-haired travel agent would have whisked his wife Nicole off to an exotic destination on a private beach, where they could swim naked in the salty waves. But this world was not like home, there were skyscrapers and cell phones back home. Here, there were only elves, trolls, and mysterious magical creatures. Yet he would take this world over his last one, any day.

The small, placid lake outside their cabin was teeming with large fish and beautiful waterfowl. Jack stood on the porch and watched, as his pregnant woodland elf bride swam deep into the center of the lake. Nicole's long blue-black hair flowed down her back, as her

naked form sped through the water. "That's my girl." Jack grinned, and headed for the lake, leaving a trail of his clothes behind him.

Jack's muscular form dove off the small wooden dock, and swam out to join her. There was nothing he liked more than making love to his wife in the clear blue water of the lake. Nicole spun to face him as he reached her. Her dark green eyes and pointed ears made his heart pound with desire, as he reached for her.

A familiar voice boomed from shore "Hello!"

They turned to find the blonde-haired elf Prince Cabal astride his horse, at the water's edge near the dock. "I hope I'm not interrupting," Cabal shouted with a smile.

Nicole gave a squeal of delight and swam for shore, with Jack close behind. Cabal dismounted as they reached the shore, and allowed the still naked and dripping wet Nicole to embrace him. "Well you two haven't changed a bit." Cabal laughed, as she released him. He pulled his dark blue cape off his shoulders and draped it around Nicole.

As Jack reached them, Cabal said, "Don't think you're giving me a hug like that." He stretched his arms out as a warning.

Jack laughed and offered him his hand, pulling Cabal to him for a boisterous hug, despite his resistance. "Nicole, take him up to the cabin, I'll rub down his horse as you two decide what's for dinner." Jack grinned. "It's been too long Cabal." Jack caught the breeches Cabal tossed to him, took the reins of Cabal's horse, and headed for the small stable across the clearing from the cabin.

By the time Jack fed, watered, and rubbed down Cabal's large brown stallion, Nicole had started dinner and poured Cabal and Jack a glass of sweet wine. Their small log cabin was sparsely furnished with rustic wooden furniture, consisting of a small kitchen with a hand pump faucet and sink, a table and chairs, a small pillow-laden sofa, end table, and a large bed and dresser at the far end of the room. A large, pot-belly stove sat only a few feet from the fireplace, near the kitchen table. The Woodland Elf decorating touches were earth tones in green and brown that covered the room via dried flowers and quilts.

Jack sat down at the small table across from Cabal, gazed at his friend and said, "You look no wiser than you did when you left Fortress City, so determined to become an ambassador to each of the elf tribes."

"Perhaps wisdom was not what I sought." Cabal countered with a grin. "It was knowledge."

"Isn't wisdom and knowledge the same thing?" Jack asked, taking a sip of his wine.

Nicole came to sit beside them, now fully dressed in a short white tunic. "You can possess all the knowledge in the world, but still not be wise." She added to the conversation.

"So, did you gain the knowledge you were looking for?" Jack studied Cabal's smile for a hint of satisfaction.

"I did." Cabal said with a sigh, as he leaned back in his chair. "It is so good to see the two of you. While this journey has filled me with the knowledge of my people, and brought me closer to them; my life has been as dull as an old man's sword."

Jack glanced at Nicole with a hopeful expression. Nicole asked, "So I take it you are finally on your way to the Woodland Village?"

"Yes, I'm headed there now. I thought I'd stop by here first, and see if the two of you had gotten bored of frolicking in the mountains, making love all day long yet, and were ready to re-enter the society."

"Well we have visited the village a few times to get supplies, and see old friends." Jack answered, with a wink at his wife. "But we are definitely not bored of frolicking, nor do I ever believe we will be. But in the interest of being good hosts, what do you say we go on a hunt tomorrow, and you can help us stock up on some elk meat? Nicole managed to catch a nursing mountain goat last week, and sang it to domestication. That was quite a sight to see. Perhaps she can sing us a 12 point buck and a bear, as well. We could use a good rug for the baby to lie on."

"I wouldn't miss it." Cabal smiled.

They rose before sunrise and headed deep into the woods. Nicole's seven months of pregnancy didn't slow her pace. She was as agile, and determined to get a buck, as her two male companions. They followed a canyon that led further up the mountain, until the air turned cool, and made camp in a stand of trees that overlooked a creek-lined meadow. The forest was quiet in the early morning. As the sun rose, they watched expectantly for the elk to begin their return to their day retreat. Yet there were no signs of movement.

After several hours and still no sign of their prey, they headed further up the mountain to a second location, where Jack had taken a large elk only a few weeks ago. The forest remained quiet. Nicole searched the underbrush for any sign of life as they rode.

"I don't like this." Nicole said, "There's something wrong. The animals are gone. I don't sense anything, not even a squirrel or a raccoon."

"There's no smell of smoke, and the sky is clear. I doubt it's a fire." Jack added. "What could have spooked them?"

Cabal pulled his horse up beside them. "Could it be a pack of wolves, or a cougar?" He offered.

"No," Nicole said, "There are no animals nearby. As a matter of fact, I haven't sensed any since we cleared this side of the canyon."

"Maybe they sensed our approach, and headed out" Jack said, "Let's not make something out of nothing. Why don't we head back, and I'll make my famous elk spedini."

"That sounds perfectly nasty" Cabal laughed, turning his horse around to head back.

"Hold!" Nicole snapped, jumping from her horse.

Jack and Cabal immediately did the same. There in the grass beneath a large bush was the corpse of a raccoon. Its arm had been nearly ripped from its body, but its flesh was intact. Jack reached for the creature, but Nicole pulled him back and said, "There's something over there." She pointed deeper into the trees, toward a stand of evergreens.

Tom and Cabal pulled their swords, moving protectively in front of Nicole as they neared the trees. A large, dark form lay in the shadows beneath the evergreens. As they reached the trees, they realized it was the body of a coyote. Nicole stepped under the tree and

examined the body. "We've got a problem." She cautioned. "It appears to have been completely drained of its blood."

Cabal's heart went cold. "Leave it, and let's get back to the cabin."

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