

Necromancer's Whisper

Hypnotic Journey Book 5

Alaina Stanford

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Chapter One

Nicole stood at the edge of the cliff gazing out at the rolling waves of the Calpernous Sea. Her Elven vision scanned the horizon as the glow of the rising sun painted the sky a turquoise hue, matching the crystal water. Her husband, Jack, had been gone too long, far too long. Something was wrong. She glanced back at the small two-story building that held the Wizard Council's School. Reaching into her tunic pocket, Nicole pulled out a black ribbon and pulled her long blue-black hair back into a ponytail, revealing her delicately pointed ears. She sighed and turned back toward the water.

A tall, elderly, Elf appeared in the doorway of the school. His burgundy robe held the queen's dragon crest indicating he was of royal blood. Ahmity was the queen's brother. Hundreds of years ago he surrendered the throne to seek a life of magic. Currently, he was charged with rebuilding the Wizard Council. Determined to groom wizards of pure heart that would hold the safety of the Elven people above all, Amity created a school. Choosing candidates from all the creatures of magic, Amity found ten children suitable to school in the art of wizardry.

The Queen's son, Prince Cabal, and the human sorceress Sarah Sims assisted Ahmity. Nicole and her human husband Jack, spent their days alternating between schooling the children in the art of psychical defense and caring for their five-year old twins, Jordan and Missy.

Jack was orphaned at a young age. As such, he had a fierce devotion to home and family. So when the schools only human student's parents failed to arrive for graduation, Jack travelled across the sea to find them. That was three months ago.

Nicole turned to find Ahmity moving toward her. She forced a smile and said, "How are Delindi and Doran doing this morning?"

Ahmity met her gaze, his kind blue eyes filled with concern. "They are as anxious as you for Jack to return with news of their parents."

Nicole's smile vanished. Ahmity always knew what she was thinking. "I'm going after him," she declared holding his gaze. "There is a merchant ship leaving from Zalfon this afternoon. I plan to be on it."

“Elves are not welcome in the human land.” Ahmity spoke softly but with purpose. “The barbarians have forsaken magic and all beings associated with it. That is the reason why Jack travelled alone.”

“If lack of finances kept Delindi and Doran’s parents from attending graduation, Jack would have returned long ago with them in tow.” Nicole’s green eyes flashed in warning as she added, “Something is wrong. It must have happened quickly or Jack would have sent word. So don’t waste your breath. I’m done waiting. I should have gone a month ago. I never should have allowed you to talk me out of it.”

“You aren’t going alone.” A deep voice called to her from the edge of the tree line a short distance away.

A human female with long crimson hair walked beside a tall, Elf warrior with short blonde hair and broad shoulders. Both were dressed in the green leather tunics of the Woodland Elves. Nicole frowned in annoyance at her friends. Of course, Sarah and Cabal would insist on accompanying her, but not this time.

Nicole moved quickly to meet them. Shaking her head, Nicole held out her hands as she reached them. “I *am* traveling alone. I need to move quickly and without detection if I’m going to discover what happened to Jack.”

Cabal’s handsome chiseled face turned to stone, his dark blue eyes to ice. “Nicole, I am not going to argue with you. The land across the sea is entirely human that’s true, but it isn’t filled with the skyscrapers and motor cars of your human land. It’s a land of vagabonds and killers. The humans are not called barbarians in jest, they earned it. Food is scarce and disease is prevalent due to filthy living conditions. The law enforcers are as few and scattered as the government. Women are little more than slaves and have no legal rights. More importantly, life is not precious there. The punishment for nearly all crimes is death, which is a considerable mercy compared to their prisons.”

“I don’t care.” Nicole snapped, “I’ve spent plenty of time with the worst criminals my old world had to offer when I was prosecuting attorney in St Louis. I know how they think. I know how to deal with them. I am not an innocent that sees the world through the eyes of a child. I’m

not frightened by a bunch of greedy men seeking to bully and kill their way through life. I can take care of myself.”

Sarah stepped closer, reaching out to touch Nicole’s arm. She knew Nicole was frightened, frightened of losing Jack. Sarah’s eyes glistened with tears, “That’s what we’re afraid of Nicole. Your determination to find Jack has blinded you. Stop and consider the consequences to the Elven realm if a female Elf warrior goes on a rampage through the human world.”

Cabal’s face softened and he added, “I know you’re worried about Jack. So am I. Nevertheless, we have to tread softly. We don’t want to bring attention to our realm. The humans have all but forgotten us. The few merchants we allow to enter our waters, land only at the small village of Zalfon and are allowed to tarry on the docks just long enough for the evening tide.”

Sarah glanced at Ahmity and said, “The school is closed for the summer. We have nearly a month before the student's return. Gravid’s son, Ny, has agreed to take on our duties until we return. Amity can begin the fall session with his assistance.”

Nicole frowned at Cabal as her anger began to fade and asked, “Ny has taken Gravid’s place as Captain of the Woodland Guard. He’s currently in Fortress City for the King’s Council. How will he have time to school a group of teenagers in swordsmanship and manage the guard at the same time?”

Cabal grinned and said, “He’s already assigned his youngest warriors the task. They will do just fine until you and Jack return. Gravid’s wife Tirana will help with the student’s lessons and her daughter Nana will keep an eye on your twins when they are not with the Elven teachers. I have secured our passage on a merchant ship. We will have to share a cabin. They believe we are all human. I am a farmer traveling with my wife, returning my sister to our parent’s home after her husband’s death. They have no idea we are two Elves traveling with a sorceress.”

Hopper’s immense troll nose was, surprisingly, not his most significant feature. Tom laughed at himself. He had no right to judge the nine-foot beast, being a creature of darkness himself. But, Hoppers mouth, filled with razor sharp teeth was so huge it nearly overwhelmed his other features. The flowing blonde hair that covered Hopper was unusual for a troll, most were dark

brown or gray. Hopper reminded Tom of a giant upright golden retriever. He certainly had the personality to fit, except for the rare occasion when he acted like a shark-toothed grizzly.

Tom glanced down at the razor sharp talons extending from the end of his fingers and shrugged. They certainly were a pair to be reckoned with. Arching his back, Tom stretched out his large leathery wings and flashed Hopper a wicked grin showing off his fangs. Hopper rolled his large eyes and glanced around in the utter darkness for the moor lion named Pony.

Pony's eyes gleamed in the blackness a few yards deeper into the small cave on their right. Tom glanced over Hopper's shoulder and said, "I haven't eaten in three days. If we don't find a nether beast soon for me to feed on I'm going to have to head out on my own before *your* ass starts looking tasty."

Hopper turned and pointed further down the tunnel to a wide open space. "Feel free to mosey down the tunnel to the fire demon nesting ground. I'm sure you can find a tasty throat to nibble on in there. But don't wake any of them. You haven't experienced PMS until you've woken a female fire demon during breeding time."

Not waiting for an answer, Hopper turned and ducked through the entrance of the cave. His eyes were as keen in the blackness of the cave as a hawk was flying over an open field in broad daylight. His nose was even more sensitive than a bloodhound. They were not alone. Tom was going to have plenty to sate his palette before they left this cave behind.

A slight movement to his left and Hopper leapt on top of the blue centipede demon before it could strike out at him. Tom jumped past Hopper to slam into two more as they rushed to their leader's aid. There was no need to look to Pony for assistance. Tom knew the large cat was already in motion. Pony darted past Tom leaping toward the cave ceiling. The power of her attack left no doubt that the demon clinging to the ceiling would be in pieces before its corpse hit the floor.

Tom sank his teeth into the moist flesh of the first demon as he tore the head off the second. Hopper sliced through the leader's thick flesh with his clawed hand and slammed each half onto the floor. "I hate centipedes." He grumbled spinning around to face Tom.

"Their blood is sour," Tom admitted with a grimace of disgust. "But it does the trick."

For a brief moment, Hopper could see the old Tom standing in his backyard back in Missouri, waving a baseball bat around as he hit the ball Hopper tossed into a neighbor's yard. A wraith stood before him, but Tom's deep brown human eyes stared back at Hopper. Still, the wraith's gray skin and blood lust dominated Tom's features now. Hopper never would have allowed Sarah and the others to come on this journey if he'd known how it would end. Sarah was transformed into a sultry sorceress and his athlete's body was stretched and mutated into a giant troll, a troll that could never love a human.

Hopper allowed Sarah to slip from his grasp and into the Elf Prince Cabal's arms. All he got in return was a bloodthirsty wraith and his sidekick Pony, a changeling. Hopper's eyes fell to the floor in shame. Tom was more of a victim than any of them. They had all chosen to participate in the experiment that landed them here, but not Tom. Tom was an afterthought, a last ditch effort of the scheme's mastermind, Puissant, to seek revenge on them all. Poor Tom was only trying to find and rescue his friends from whatever horror had caused their disappearance.

As a reward for his efforts, Tom was thrown into an alternate universe and transformed into a blood-sucking wraith with no memory of his human life. A wraith whose sole purpose was to destroy Hopper and the others, but just like his other schemes, Puissant's plan failed. Although Tom could not escape his wraith form, he had regained his memory and his humanity was intact.

Hopper kicked at the demon that lay at his feet. He looked at Pony who turned and sauntered toward the cave entrance. He watched mesmerized as the large black moor lion transformed into a tall slender human female with long black hair. Hopper frowned at her in annoyance as she turned to gaze at him with big amber eyes. "I've asked you before, Pony. Please transform into a woman with clothes on!" Hopper moaned as his eyes ran down the length of her pinup perfect body.

She flashed him a seductive half smile as her eyes moved past him to Tom. "Tom doesn't mind." Her sultry voice answered a deep melodic tone.

Tom chuckled and he tossed the centipede to the floor. "You never have to wear clothes as far as I'm concerned, Pony."

Hopper rolled his eyes once more and sighed. "Get a room." He grumbled and strode past Pony to head for the next cave.

Jack kept to the shadows moving around the edge of the tavern, stalking his prey. If the general population wasn't going to speak of the Preston's disappearance then he was going to have to force it from someone. His target was the town big mouth. Borid Temple was a farm worker and a drunk who slept in his employer's barn. He'd followed Borid through town today and the man loved to gossip. He moved from one person to the next sharing every juicy tidbit he discovered. Borid would tell him what he wanted to know, with the right motivation.

The musky smell of sweat and ale snaked up his nostrils. Jack thought of the good old days in St Louis and yearned for a cold beer instead of the lukewarm dark brew that the barbarian section of this world sported. Borid Temple leaned up against the far wall drinking his ale from a large mug. The liquid dribbled down his chin and saturated the front of his dirty brown tunic. Jack moved to an open table near him and sat down to wait.

Using what few coppers he had, Jack bought some rye bread and a piece of cheese. He washed it down with a mug of rum. Finally, Borid had his fill and pushed off the wall to stagger past Jack. Rising quickly, Jack laughed boldly and said, "Now here's a man who can hold his ale!"

Jack slapped Borid on the back and took hold of his arm urging him toward the door. They stumbled across the tavern and out the door like two old drunken friends. Jack steered him down the dirt street deeper into the forest surrounding the rural tavern. When the tavern vanished behind them through the trees, Jack pushed Borid off the road and into the trees. Jack shoved him up against the nearest tree and pulled a knife from the sheath his belt.

"Tell me where they took the Prestons." Jack growled as he pressed the knife against Borid's throat.

Borid's eyes grew wide as his face filled with fear. Then Jack's words sunk in. He flashed Jack a smile filled with rotting teeth and cackled, "The Prestons? What are you going to do? Rescue them?"

Jack fought the urge to release Borid as his putrid breath curled the hair in his nose. Instead, he pulled him closer until they were nose to nose and said, "Tell me or die."

Borid shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands out to his sides in surrender. “Friend, you think your sweet blue eyes and handsome face are going to get you close to the King’s mistress? She’s the only one who can save the Prestons. Hers is the only voice the King hears and she likes powerful men. You don’t look powerful to me.”

Jack moved the knife ever so slightly cutting into the flesh of his throat.

Borid’s smile was replaced with a sneer as he added, “I’d be happy to show you the way to Salona, for nothing more than to watch you die.”

They walked without speaking for hours as Borid led Jack through the forest, following a dry creek bed. They eventually reached a narrow dirt road that grew wide into a crossroads. From there, the dirt road continued until it came onto a rolling grassy plain.

Jack shoved Borid out in front of him saying, “Keep moving, I’ve wasted enough time with you.”

Borid picked up his pace. The night air and exercise were clearing his head. He glanced up at the full moon. Its orange hue indicated harvest was near. “You are an educated man.” He tossed over his shoulder at Jack. “Why are you wasting your time on the Prestons? They’re poor farmers who have been sentenced to death. There is no reward for their rescue. You are only inviting your own death.”

Shoving him again Jack said, “They are good people charged with an absurd crime. I won’t stand by and allow innocent people to die because they tried to better their children’s lives.”

Borid stopped and turned to stare at him. “They sent their children across the sea to worship the devil.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jack sneered at him and pulled his sword from its sheath. “They were sent to school, not a cult. No one there worships the devil or any other creature of evil.”

Borid’s eyes opened wide in surprise, “You are one of them! I knew it! I knew something was different about you.” His eyes narrowed. He stared at Jack as if he were seeing him for the first time. “Do you have magic?”

“No,” Jack snapped and rolled his eyes, “Borid, you’re an idiot. Now get moving.”

Borid raised his hands in defeat, “There are rumors, stories that tell of people with magic. Fairies and sprites, demons and trolls, you are none of those. Tell me what your magic is and I will help you willingly.”

Jack growled, “I’ll show you your blood on my sword if you don’t turn around and get moving.”

Borid turned and started walking adding, “It doesn’t really matter what magic you possess. Unless you are a dragon in disguise, you will be dead soon. The moment you try to free them you will die. No one escapes the King’s dungeons.”

Stopping at the crest of a grassy hill Borid pointed toward the horizon. The deep turquoise sky promised a hint of the approaching dawn. Jack came up beside him and they stood watching as the turquoise turned to green, then blue. Tall, dark spires appeared in the midst of the dawn as a blemish on a perfect pallet.

The castle walls held jagged peaks that ran its length. Guard towers sat on each corner with stone and wood platforms in the center of each wall. Each held a crossbow catapult used to hurl boulders or burning bundles of tar soaked straw. This castle was prepared for battle.

Smiling, Jack said, “You’re free to go.”

Jack moved off the road into the shadows of the trees heading toward the castle. The undergrowth was dense and filled with thickets, hollows and a winding creek. Jack found himself trudging ankle deep in the mud, being bitten by every bug around. Luckily, as the sun grew high in the sky the mosquitoes became few and scattered.

He cleared the trees and stepped onto the road as a group of travelers passed. Stepping unnoticed into the group Jack approached the castle gates. An archer stood every few yards along the walls. The wall’s consisted of large gray stones that towered over Jack’s group as the road came up alongside the castle. A moat filled with dark murky water ran along the exterior of the castle. Jack wrinkled his nose at the stench of the stagnant water that drifted up as they walked across the drawbridge and through the gate.

They entered a small open area filled with vendors selling food and supplies. Jack immediately separated from the group and wove his way through the narrow streets toward the

keep at the center of the city. That's where the dungeon would be. That's where the Prestons shivered in hopeless fear.

The cabin was small and smelled of urine. It was no bigger than Nicole's walk-in closet back in St Louis. There was one small dresser that sat next to the door, a wobbly wooden chair and two bunk beds strapped to each wall, both of which could be raised and secured to allow room to move about. Nicole paced back and forth from the door to the wall near the head of the beds nearly out of her mind with claustrophobia.

She cursed Cabal. He was the lucky one. He traded his passage as any poor farmer would, by working all day out in the sun and wind as a deck hand. Nicole was supposed to be a recent widow and as such was a prisoner to the cabin. How could she have been so stupid? Why did she agree to be newly widowed? She yearned for the sunlight and fresh air. Yet a widow in mourning gallivanting on the deck in the bright sunshine would be inappropriate.

If she didn't get some fresh air soon, Nicole was convinced she would kill someone. Probably Cabal. Yes most certainly Cabal. She'd kill him the next time he came through that door with a bright red sunburn and an exhausted smile on his face.

Sarah watched Nicole pace. Elves were not used to being shut up indoors, especially woodland Elves. She had to get Nicole up on deck, but there was little she could do. Her magic was weak. The further they moved away from the Elven lands, the weaker her magic became. Sarah glanced at the small porthole Nicole stopped at to stare silently out at the rolling waves.

"Nicole," She began, "I'm going to get you out of this room."

Nicole spun around to face her. Sarah's heart melted, Nicole was drenched in sweat. The cabin was hot and stuffy, nearly unbearable for Sarah. She could only imagine what the thick musky air did to Nicole's senses.

Nicole crossed the short distance to where Sarah sat on the lower bunk bed and said, "Thank you, thank you! I'll do anything you ask if you'll just get me out of here for a few minutes."

Sarah's smile brightened. She explained, "I have enough magic to enhance the effect of the port wine the sailors drink with dinner. I can send them into a light sleep for a few hours. Cabal can take over the helm and you can have free reign of the deck. You won't feel the sun on your face, but the night air will be cool and refreshing."

"Sarah, you are the best!" Nicole hugged her and they parted quickly both wishing this realm had deodorant.

Sarah rose and headed for the door. "I'll have to get close enough to cast a spell without anyone noticing and I'll have to toss a spell at the officer's aperitif as well. I'll come and get you once it takes effect. You should wear a scarf to cover your ears, just in case. It's best to let everyone keep thinking you're both human."

Cabal noticed Sarah the moment she stepped onto the deck. Her long red hair flowed about her in the wind. He adjusted his stance as his pants tightened at the mere sight of her tight fitting tunic pulled over her athletic form. It had been nearly two weeks since they had spent any time alone and his body ached for her touch. Cabal quickly tightened the bowline onto the bitt to keep the weathered edge of the sail taut in the strong wind, and then walked quickly to greet Sarah.

"I'm glad you took my advice." He said with a smile. "I know Nicole is miserable, but she has no choice. You shouldn't force yourself to suffer along with her." Pulling her against him, Cabal kissed her quickly adding, "I can't talk long. The wind is rising. The captain is concerned there's a storm building behind us. If we maintain speed, we might outrun it."

Sarah's heart raced from his kiss. It felt as if he hadn't touched her in months. She took a deep cleansing breath and said, "I've got a plan to help Nicole."

Cabal's smile vanished and he quickly pulled her aside. "We don't want any trouble. Nicole will be fine. It's not worth the risk, Sarah. You don't know what these men might do if they discover she's... it's not safe."

Sarah frowned at him. This was the first time he'd refused to even listen to her idea. "What happened?"

Cabal glanced around noting the eyes of the crewmen were upon them. "It's nothing, tell me your plan."

Sarah followed his gaze to the nearest sailor. He was a pot-bellied man with no front teeth, his clothes looked like they hadn't been washed in years. She shook off the shudder that threatened, turned back to Cabal and whispered, "It's nothing elaborate. I'm going to cast a sleeping spell on the crews wine and once everyone is asleep Nicole can come out on the deck for a little while."

"No," Cabal said quickly.

"They won't even realize they fell asleep." Sarah insisted. "They will fall where they stand. They'll wake up a few hours later as if nothing happened. I'll toss one on the officer's rum and everyone will pass out. You can watch over us and the helm and Nicole will get the breath of fresh air she needs."

"I don't like it." Cabal snapped quietly, "Sarah you don't understand. Magic is... not favored here. We can't risk it. I'd rather we break decorum and bring her on the deck as a grieving widow, then risk using magic."

A sick feeling grew in the pit of Sarah's stomach. Her eyes opened wide as she gazed at him in horror. He wasn't worried about Nicole. He wasn't worried about being discovered as Elves. He was worried about her being taken for a witch. "The humans burn witches in this world don't they?"

Cabal's blue eyes turned to steel. "I won't let anything happen to you. On my honor, I will guard your safety with my life."

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