

The Price of Magic

Hypnotic Journey: Book 6

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Chapter One

The force of Jack's attack was brutal. It took everything Nicole had to hold him at bay. It was not a fight she wanted to win. "Jack," she called as he arched his sword high and pounded at her with his blade. "This is not you. Family is everything to you. Your fight is with Demetria, not me. Fight her, Jack, fight her magic. You don't have to do this."

He kept coming, oblivious to her words. Nicole spun, striking his blade aside. He wouldn't stop. He pounded at her with his sword. She lost her footing and staggered backward. "No! Jack!" She screamed, "I love you!"

He was unaffected by her cries. Nicole spun and lashed out quickly, trying to drive him back. She gasped as her blade struck bone.

Jack's eyes grew wide in surprise. He stumbled back a pace. A stream of blood spurted from the large gash in the side of his throat. His eyes met hers. He tried to speak. Blood poured from his mouth. She watched helplessly as the light left his beautiful sapphire eyes. He staggered forward and fell dead at her feet.

"No!" Nicole screamed, bolting upright in the bed.

Jack's arms were around her in an instant. He pulled her against him and whispered, "It's okay, Niki, it's only a dream."

They sank back into the bed. Nicole gasped for air. Jack stroked her head. He brushed her long blue-black hair away from her face then kissed her delicately-pointed ear and added, "You have to get past these dreams, baby. The Necromancer is dead. She'll never hurt us again."

Nicole felt his lips press against hers in the darkness. Her arms slid around his neck. She nuzzled the hollow of his throat with her nose and sighed, "I keep dreaming of our battle in Demetria's bedchamber. Only, every time, instead of freeing you from her spell I slit your throat..."

Jack cupped her chin, and he gazed into her emerald eyes. "Baby, it's just a bad dream. You could never hurt me. I may be a lowly human, but if we were ever to fight a real battle, you know I would kick your ass."

Nicole laughed and pushed against his chest. He responded with a passionate kiss that sent all traces of the dream from her thoughts. They made love until the pale orange glow of dawn filtered through the lace curtains beside their bed.

Nicole rose and slipped into her dark green tunic. She stared at the watercolor painting on the wall above the head of the tall four-poster bed. The posts were draped in cascades of blooming ivy that climbed up from a small pot on the floor and surrounded the bed. The painting was a family portrait, a gift from Cabal. She and Jack stood behind the twins in a flowery meadow. They were all dressed in the common green leather tunic of the Woodland Elves. Jordan and Missy's dark hair and small, delicate pointed ears matched hers. Jack's unruly brown hair masked his ears. If no one was the wiser, he could have been an elf as well.

Jack climbed out of bed and reached for her hand. She spun to face him.

"You never asked me about the time I spent with her." He gazed into her eyes.

Nicole leaned against him. "I don't need to know. I trust you."

Jack slid his arms around her narrow waist. "There is only one woman I want in my bed until I breathe my last breath, and that's you. There is no evil, no magic in this world that could ever change that."

She kissed his neck and sighed, "The day you take your final breath haunts me. It will come far too soon."

Jack pulled back to gaze down at her. "I've made peace with that. You should as well. You were transformed into an elf as we entered this world. I remained human. That's the hand we were dealt. There's nothing we can do about it."

She searched his eyes. "But what if there were? Sarah is a human, but she'll live a thousand years because of her magic."

Jack shook his head. "All magic has a price. Even Sarah had to pay it. She lost Hopper. It's just too risky, Nicole. I'm not willing to risk everything that we have for a few more years of life. It's not worth it."

Nicole's eyes filled with tears. "I want more time."

Jack nodded. "I'm human. I'm as mortal as they come. You'll live to see a thousand years, and I'm fortunate enough to be able to share a portion of that with you."

She buried her face in his chest. "I want to share all of it with you."

He tilted her face up to his and added, "I promise you, we'll make enough memories to last a lifetime. I'm counting on you and the twins to carry on my legacy. Maybe name a grandkid after me. So, let's not dwell on the distant future. Let's focus on here and now. The future will come soon enough. Don't let it taint our happiness."

A knock came at their door and Jack called out, "Naked!"

Jordan's young voice grumbled back at them, "You're always naked! Get dressed; Cabal and Sarah are here."

Missy's giggles floated down the hall behind Jordan as their footsteps disappeared. Jack chuckled and winked at Nicole. "We're always naked."

Hopper was never more aware of the thick golden fur that covered every inch of his body than at this moment. Walking naked in the mountain snow felt as natural to him now as skating on home ice in full hockey gear did to his human counterpart back in the real world. He glanced up at the gray sky and blinked his large blue eyes. A snowflake landed on his thick stubby eyelashes.

He caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye and froze. A bull elk came into view on the top of the far rise. From a distance, Hopper could easily be mistaken for a human covered in a fur coat and leggings if it weren't for his oversized head. He doubted the elk bothered to distinguish between human and troll before it bolted from sight when Hopper dared to reach for his bow.

He shrugged at the loss of the large amount of tasty flesh and continued through the deepening snow. He slung the day's catch over his shoulder with a grunt. Beaver was not as plentiful, but it was one of his favorite meals. He would eat well tonight without the elk. Increasing his pace, his eight-foot form sporting a pair of long legs made quick progress.

Hopper took solace in the beauty that surrounded him. Tall snow-covered peaks nestled around a small frozen lake. A tiny cabin sat next to a two-horse stable that overlooked the frozen water. The cabin was small with a ceiling just high enough to accommodate him. It offered shelter, but that was of little concern. Climbing the porch steps, he shook the snow out of his fur. He hesitated at the threshold and inhaled deeply. Nicole and Jack's scent still lingered.

Ducking low so the large branch strapped to his back he used as a weapon would clear the door, he stepped inside. His eyes went to the quilt-covered sofa that sat against the wall to his left. For an instant, he could almost see Sarah's slender form lying on the floor next to Cabal's injured body laid carefully on the small sofa. Cabal, the Elf Prince, was recovering from a wraith bite. Sarah's delicate face was pale from exerting too much magic trying to save him.

He shook the image from his thoughts and sat the four frozen beaver carcasses on the kitchen table. His long razor-sharp nails clicked together as he released the beavers and laid his bow on the table next to them. Suddenly, a wicked shark-toothed grin spread across his large face. Nicole's disgust and annoyance that he was butchering a carcass on her clean kitchen table brightened his day. He chuckled and went to work skinning the beavers. When he was done, he spread the meat out on the table. The temperature in the cabin was cold enough to freeze the meat overnight. He stretched each fur out taut on a board he kept in the cabin for such an occasion and leaned them up against the far wall.

He gave the cabin one last glance, stuffed a few handfuls of meat into a leather pouch, and headed back to his cave. The freezing temperatures were tolerable during the day, but once the sun went down, even he couldn't survive long without a fire. His cave was always a nice 60 degrees. That's where he belonged. Trolls belonged underground. Most trolls anyway. His son Mikado was the one exception.

Despite being sired by two trolls, Mikado was born with a smaller head and quickly lost most of his fur. What remained was thin and sparse, similar to a very hairy human, perhaps a nearly bald ape. To this day he displayed the human traits of Hopper's past life in the real world. That's why Mikado was better off with the Elves. He couldn't live in Hopper's world, and Hopper couldn't survive the harsh temperature shifts on the surface.

He hesitated at the tall narrow slit in the rock wall that led into his cave. Something wasn't right. He set the bag of meat next to the entrance of the cave and fingered the large branch

strapped to his back. Pulling it free, he stepped into the cave. His eyes adjusted instantly. A tall winged figure stood at the end of the narrow entrance. Its leathery wings relaxed and folded behind him as Hopper neared. Its leathery gray skin held a stark contrast to the dark wavy brown hair and smiling blue eyes that greeted Hopper.

The wraith lifted his hands out to his sides and opened his fingers wide, allowing his razor-sharp talons to extend into the darkness and said, "I come in peacefulness."

"How did you find me, Tom?" Hopper's deep voice boomed throughout the small cave. Tom's attempt to mock the troll greeting sent a shock of irritation through him.

Tom chuckled, "This is literally the last place we looked. Pony and I have searched every tunnel from Fortress City to the ocean looking for you. Honestly, I was getting pretty pissed off."

There was a shift in the shadows behind Tom and a massive lion with coal-black fur and a short mane stepped out from behind Tom. She stood as tall as the wraith. Her amber eyes flashed with annoyance at Hopper.

"I needed space," Hopper snapped a bit too harshly in response to Pony's expression.

Tom's smile vanished. "I get it, Hopper. You lost your entire tribe to the renegades. It was a harsh blow. But you're not the only one who lost someone. The Woodland Village is in ruins, and Fortress City was devastated by the attack and is still trying to rebuild. The death toll among the elves is staggering. Add to that the return of the dwarves into the tunnel system and our land is in utter chaos. This is not the time for isolation. We need to come together, forge new bonds, strengthen our alliances, and comfort our loved ones."

"I have no loved ones left," Hopper answered quickly, knowing it was a lie.

"So Mikado means nothing to you?" Tom sighed and turned to walk into the larger adjacent cave. Pony's gaze never left Hopper.

Hopper grunted in frustration and fetched the bag of meat from the entrance then followed Tom into the adjacent cave, ignoring Pony completely. Tom sat on a large boulder and stared up at Hopper expectantly as he tapped his razor-sharp talons on the rock. "I'm sorry, Hopper. This whole thing sucks; it's a freaking tragedy for everyone. But it's been six months. It's time to return to reality. You can't hide in this cave forever."

Hopper dropped the bag of meat and glared at Tom. “Tell me something, Tom. How have you helped with the recovery efforts? Did you rebuild the towers of Fortress City? Perhaps you cleared away the debris from the burned cabins in the woodland village? How much time did you spend scouting tunnel system for the ancient family caves so the dwarves could return to their ancestral homes? Did you take any time to help your friends and neighbors? Or did you spend all your time searching the tunnels for someone who didn’t want to be found?”

Tom rose slowly as Hopper stepped closer and offered, “I was worried about you. We all were. No one wanted to say it but... hell, Hopper, all the trolls are dead. You disappeared so quickly after the battle at Fortress City. I thought you might have gotten caught in the aftermath when the troll council was slaughtered.”

Hopper’s face screwed into a knot of anger. “What do you know of the aftermath? You and Pony darted off into the woods for a quickie as soon as the battle was over. Where were Cabal, Jack, and the others when the troll council was murdered? They were too concerned about returning to the woodland village to worry about my people. I was the only one who went into the troll tunnels to search for survivors. The elves were too intent on sealing the tunnels to even give thought to the trolls who sacrificed their lives to save Fortress City. For all I know, the elves turned on the few trolls who survived the battle and slaughtered them mindlessly.”

Tom held out his hands. “I didn’t come here for a fight. No one, I repeat no one, turned on the trolls after the renegades fled.”

Leaning closer Hopper demanded, “Then where are they? Not one survivor returned to the troll caves.”

Pony appeared at Hopper’s side and forced her way between them. Hopper stepped back and glared at the large cat as its form shimmered and changed into that of a naked human female with olive skin, coal black hair, and amber eyes. She gazed up at him and reached out to lay her hand on his chest. “Mikado is sick.” Her deep sultry voice was barely audible.

“If that’s true,” Hopper answered darkly, allowing his gaze to linger on her large round breasts, “get Sarah to heal him. There’s nothing I can do.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “What happened to you, Hopper? You’re a jock, a professional hockey player for crying out loud. You’ve never run from a fight in your life. But it seems like that’s all

you've done since you came to this world. Sarah told me how you disappeared for an entire year and let everyone think you were dead. Then, as soon as Mikado was born you dropped him off with Gravid and Tirana so you could go chase after the rebels."

Hopper growled, "Leave Mikado out of this."

Tom continued, "Why do you keep running away? Your son needs you to step up to the plate."

A flash of movement and Hopper sent Pony flying across the cave. Hopper had his hands around Tom's throat in an instant. Pony rolled into a ball and shimmered back into the black lion. She bounded off the far wall and darted back toward them. Tom raised his hands high into the air and extended his talons to reveal the venom dripping from their tips. "Don't piss me off, Hopper," he managed. "I don't want to hurt you."

Hopper shoved Tom backward and spun to meet Pony's advance. The large lion didn't hesitate. She slammed into Hopper and they careened across the cave. Pony rolled on top of Hopper and dug her nails into Hopper's chest.

"Ouch! That hurts!" Hopper roared, and punched the lion in the face.

Pony shimmered back into the form of the human female and stared down at him. "Stop!" she snapped, rubbing her cheek, "Gather your things. We're heading to the Woodland Village in the morning."

If a troll could pout, that was the expression Hopper's massive mouth formed. He sighed and asked, "What's wrong with Mikado?"

Pony climbed off him and glanced at Tom, who answered for her. "It started out like a minor cold, but it won't let go of him. He's developed a nasty cough and has a fever that comes and goes like clockwork, always spiking in the middle of the night." Tom glanced at Pony then added, "He's lost all his body hair. He looks almost... human now. Tirana isn't sure if that's related to the illness."

Hopper ignored Tom and sat up, addressing Pony, "Is he weak?"

Pony's eyes locked on his. She reached out and touched his arm. "He's as strong as any human male of equal size, but he's weak for a troll. Sarah tried to heal him, but so far nothing

has worked. Tirana is afraid living on the surface may be the cause, but without his thick fur he could easily take a chill in the troll tunnels.”

Rising to his feet, Hopper announced, “If we leave now, we can reach the village by dusk tomorrow if we travel through the mountains.”

Sarah placed a plate of fruit and sweetbreads on the table as Nicole and Jack entered the kitchen. Sarah’s long scarlet hair was tied back with a ribbon. She no longer wore the long crimson robes of the queen’s sorceress. Instead, she wore the same green leather tunic and skirt as Nicole and most of the Woodland Elf women.

Jordan and Missy finished filling the glasses with milk as Cabal poured a pot of steaming water into a kettle of herbal tea that sat at the center of the table. His black leather tunic and breeches bore the crest of the queen, declaring his title as Prince and heir to the throne of Fortress City. Jack mussed Jordan and Missy’s blue-black hair as the two six-year-olds took their seats on either side of Mikado.

Nicole leaned over the back of Mikado’s chair and wrapped her arms around him. Mikado was only six years old but, due to his troll stature, he sat a head taller in his chair than the twins. His large head, big eyes, and wide mouth gave him almost a doll-like appearance. He shared his father’s blonde hair, but it was streaked with the normal brown hair of the tunnel trolls. Nicole kissed his cheek, and he smiled through shark-like teeth like his father’s. Nicole snatched a napkin from the table and wiped the mucus from under his long nose then lay her hand on his forehead.

“No fever this morning.” She smiled. “That’s very good, Mikado. Are you feeling better?”

“Sari made me noodles with the chicken pieces,” Mikado answered in deep voice. “So good.”

Jack chuckled and sat down next to Cabal. “The ancient remedies always work the best.”

Cabal’s elven form was large in stature. His height and weight equaled Jack’s, who sat beside him. There was nothing petite about the elves in this world. His broad shoulders and tall stature afforded Jack the perfect sparring partner. Cabal’s deep blue eyes frowned at Jack. He glanced at Sarah as she took her seat next to him. She explained, “An old wives’ tale in our world touted that chicken noodle soup was the best thing to speed recovery from an illness.”

Cabal scratched behind one pointed ear and said, “Were the chickens in your world magic?”

“Only to old wives,” Jack answered with a wink at Nicole.

The twins’ blue eyes focused on their father as they asked in unison, “What’s an old wife?”

All three adults responded with, “Nicole...”

Nicole rolled her eyes and sat down next to Jack, adding, “‘Old wives’ tale’ is an expression that means some people long ago believed something was true, even if it really wasn’t.”

Sarah smiled and added, “Nicole, ever the attorney. It sounds like you’re setting up the basis for a legal debate on the validity of chicken noodle soup as a medicine.”

Nicole grinned back at her. “Can we ever truly leave our old lives behind, Dr. Sims? Your magic does most of the healing these days, but I do recall your jumping back into OB-mode while I was giving birth.”

Sarah’s big blue eyes darted to the twins. “It’s hard to believe that was seven years ago. It seems like yesterday.”

Cabal’s hand slipped into hers, drawing her eyes to his. “Seven is a lucky number to elves. We have been as one since the twins were born. I think a celebration is in order.”

“Birthday party!” the twins shouted, jumping from their seats.

Mikado bolted from his chair, caught up in the excitement, but stopped short as a series of deep whooping coughs wracked his body. Sarah rushed to his side as the young troll fell to his knees. She grabbed a napkin from the table and covered his mouth. The napkin came away soaked in blood.

Sarah’s face went pale. She didn’t need to look at Cabal. He was at her side in an instant, sweeping Mikado off his feet. Jack moved quickly toward the short hallway to the bedrooms and said, “Put him in the spare bedroom.”

Nicole went to the stove and put a pot of water on to boil then began to search through the various herbs and roots she had stored in the drawer next to the stove. She called out, “I’ve got eucalyptus... I’ll get a steam bath going.”

Cabal reappeared from the guest room and headed for the door. He glanced at Nicole and offered quickly, “Crisis is in the roundhouse. His healing touch has soothed Mikado’s cough before. I’ll return shortly.”

Jack appeared in the hallway as Nicole stared after Cabal in amazement. She smiled at Jack and said, “Cabal is a prince, heir to the throne of the entire land, and yet there he goes darting out the door without hesitation in search of a healer for the son of his fiancée’s ex-lover. He’s amazing.”

Jack nodded and glanced back down the hallway. “He’s a good man, and he’s scared. I can see it in his eyes. Mikado is getting worse, and no one seems to know why.”

Nicole glanced at the stove. She rubbed the dried eucalyptus leaves in her hands to crush them and added it to the water. “Do you think it has anything to do with the fact we aren’t from this world? Could Hopper’s humanity have left his son susceptible to some ancient disease the elves have grown an immunity towards?”

Jack frowned at her. “Niki, that’s way too sci-fi for me. He’s just got a stubborn bug that we haven’t figured out how to beat. It might even be asthma, but Sarah will figure it out. Our kids are fine, so there’s no reason to suspect our past has anything to do with this.”

Nicole took a thick linen towel from a drawer and pulled the pot from the stove, covering the steaming vapors with the towel. “I hope you’re right. But if Crisis can’t heal him, it’s time to ask Ahmity for help.”

Jack followed her down the hall. “Ahmity is a great wizard, but he still hasn’t recovered from the battle at Fortress City. I’m not sure he has the strength...”

Nicole stopped abruptly and turned to face him. She snapped, “We’re running out of options. Mikado has been sick for too long. This illness is going to take a turn very soon. We can’t let it to go in the wrong direction.”

Jack nodded silently. The fear in Nicole’s eyes shook him to his core. He followed her into Mikado’s room, and stood at the end of the bed as the two women created a tent with a linen towel so Mikado could inhale the steam. The feeling of helplessness was overwhelming. All he could do was stand there. Jack clenched his fists. Mikado was just a little boy. Yes, he stood

taller than Jordan, but he was barely six years old. Jack's jaw clenched. Hopper should be here. He'd know what to do. Where the hell was he?

Cabal appeared beside him with a young black-haired youth. Crasis had just come of age and was no longer considered an apprentice healer. The tall lanky youth moved to sit on the bed next to Mikado. The young troll smiled and reached out to him.

Crasis grinned back at Mikado and took hold of his hand. "What's this I hear about you refusing to milk the cow again? How many times have I told you that cows make milk and milk makes sweet cream to pour on your berries?"

"I want frozen cream," Mikado managed with a raspy cough.

Crasis laughed, "Yes, frozen cream is delicious and would feel good on your sore throat, but I'm not sure your stomach would appreciate it." He placed his free hand on Mikado's chest and held it there.

Mikado's cough grew dry then faded, and the young troll fell asleep. Crasis rose and locked eyes with Cabal, then left the room. The others followed him into the kitchen. Crasis waited until they all had gathered. He looked at Sarah and said, "Every time I heal him is the same as before. I cleanse the infection from his body and it returns. Each time he grows sick earlier than the time before. We are losing this battle. Has he responded to the moldy bread you have given him?"

Sarah's eyes fell to the floor. "It has no effect. I'm concerned this is beyond simple medicine." She glanced up at Nicole. "If I could do a CT-scan or x-ray his lungs... but I don't even have a freaking microscope..." Her voice broke.

Cabal wrapped his arms around her. "We won't give up," he whispered.

Nicole's eyes went to Jack. "I'm going to get Ahmity. Surely there's something he can do." She didn't wait for a response. She rushed for the door, grabbing her cloak off a hook as she left.

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