

Chapter 1

INCURSION

QUAYLA

The burning need for coffee nearly cost Quayla her life.

The green Humvee careened onto the exit 252 onramp. It whipped across Quayla's lane in a mad dash for the empty shoulder, tires sliding from two nearly ninety degree turns that at least should've put the behemoth up on two wheels.

An instant later, deprived of a clear path, the Humvee's driver forced both Quayla's Jahammer and the minivan directly in front of her to jerk left. The minivan overcorrected, skidding down the embankment into morning interstate traffic.

The Humvee took advantage of the cleared space to cut Quayla off again, headed to the left lane. Quayla glanced at her mirrors as she locked her handbrakes to avoid the collision. Her luck held. The cars behind her managed to stop without hitting anyone, though the headlights of the pickup behind her braced her back wheel with mere inches to spare.

Quayla snarled under her breath. "Light, you wafers make it *really hard* to care whether you get slaughtered, let alone throw myself between you and obliteration every hell-blighted day!"

She glanced at the tiny bronze archangel mounted just beyond her gas cap. Its arms stretched upward toward the heavens, but its outstretched wings braced the figure like a feather shield version of see no evil. A vinyl dog, two cats, four children and a mom grinned at her from the Humvee's back window. Dad's decal offered a sideways grin from where his head had been ripped off and stuck between his legs.

Quayla shot a venomous glare at the stick figure family.

The Humvee jockeyed across a gap left by an instant's too slow reaction. Horns blared. Quayla tapped the handlebars with both thumbs and gritted her teeth.

Great plan, orphan your family to get that so-called green monstrosity a few more feet down the road.

Quayla's Vespa didn't have a lot of power—though certainly more than provided by the manufacturer, and the scooter offered little protection against the herds of selfish drivers and their metal behemoths. It did, however, let her flow through traffic along paths of least resistance.

She leaned right, slipping between a timid SUV and the sidewalk onto Howell Mill. The hummer followed her example, mounting the sidewalk and cutting across her path, the fast lane and the turning lane in a desperate dash through oncoming traffic toward the Starbucks.

Gentle ponds. Babbling brooks.

She took a deep breath.

Shields serve the light. They do not punish wafers too self-centered to realize their lives aren't the only ones cherished in the great plan. Besides, I can't spare the cleanup time. I have to stop this incursion on my own so Vitae will finally treat me like a real shield.

Stop and go morning traffic, navigating commuters with delusions of supremacy, and the crazy low speed limit she refused to arrogantly ignore, all increased how hard she tapped her thumbs. Her eyes shifted eastward toward the impending birth of morning twilight delivered by the coming dawn.

Come on. Come on.

A narrow gap in oncoming traffic converged with her destination's driveway. A self-conscious glance shot to the angel's stern expression. She licked her lips and thumbed the booster Caelum had added to the little scooter. The engine's whine intensified to a banshee's shriek.

Horns blared at her as she whipped onto a side street and into the Humane Society, pulling to a hard stop under the guest awning. She pulled off a helmet, which law required her to wear, and hung it on the scooter's handlebars. She tapped the angel's head, its arms now folded. "I'm here."

The hilts of two karambit knives stuck up, index-finger rings visible between the console and the passenger seat. She grabbed both and leapt from the pearl white Vespa.

Excited barking joined the sounds of angry traffic.

Quayla flipped the knife hilts around on their finger rings, tucked the bladeless knives into her jean's belt loops, and scented the hot, early morning wind.

More dogs barked beyond the building's attractive façade. Mournful howls escaped dark, windowless metal buildings, twisting her heart even more than the scent of so many animals kept too close together. Her pulse rushed as images of imprisoned puppies and kittens flashed through her mind.

Focus. You're here to stop the faeries from committing another assault.

She forced away righteous indignation and rising disgust. She inhaled deeper in search of the dark faerie. She circled the unlit building, sniffing for faerie and scanning for a Veil entrance from a Sidhe court.

Wish Caelum and his nose were here.

She berated herself.

Stop whining and move, every moment is a life consumed.

A change in barks sent her running back around to the front of the building. Quayla hooked a hilt out of her belt. She took a deep breath, tightened her hand around its ridged grip and pushed on her center.

Frothing water slid out the hilt's heel, shaping into a forward curved blade of glistening blue. She swept it up the seam between doors. She yanked open the door and charged through. An alarm console chirped.

Damn it.

Quayla considered going back for her helmet, but the haloed angel Caelum had painted along its surface for her was unique and readily identifiable. She bent her face toward the ground, freeing her hair from an aquamarine hair tie to hide her face as she concentrated. Her wavy black hair took on the wet blue-brown appearance of Atlantic waves. Strands of living water flowed around her head, coming together in an undulating mask that only resembled hair at a first, distant glance. She charged through the administrative area. A frame wrapped in black ribbon caught her eye, the humongous orange tabby nearly bigger than the torso of the mousy, bespectacled woman holding it. A label included birth and death dates too short to account for the cat owner's age.

Quayla shook off the distraction the bright, orange tabby had caused, allowed herself an instant's sadness for the woman's loss and hurried toward the kennel where living animals needed her.

Movement flashed in her peripheral vision. She slid to a halt on paw-printed linoleum and threw open the door to the kitten cages.

Two waist-high grendlings whirled. They clutched kittens to their molding-blueberry chests and spat like angry cats through needle teeth.

Quayla's nose rebelled. The stench of dank mold seldom buddied up with rotting meat, but together the portent miasma overpowered shelter smells of litter box and Lysol. They nearly overwhelmed Quayla's gag reflex even through her filtering mask.

So glad I don't have Caelum's nose.

It was a tough choice between drawing another blade and pinching her nose.

"Put those kittens back." Quayla drew her second hilt, pushing a shimmering blade from its end. "Breakfast hours are officially over."

Dropped kittens skittered everywhere, mewling their objections.

The grendlings gibbered insults at her in Wyldfae as they slid knives from behind their backs. Shaped troll bone throbbed with magic so green it was almost black. The acidic magic's primary purpose lay in subduing the regenerative abilities within the troll whose bone had been pressganged into a weapon. Acid and magic combined to arm the primitive blades with poison and agony.

The pack hunters circled her, one moving slower to position themselves on either side for best advantage. Their extended bat ears twitched eagerly forward.

Grynnberry lied to me. He told me the Unseelie were the ones raiding shelters.

Quayla relaxed into a fighting stance, sweeping her feet in smooth circles. She clicked her hilt rings together, keeping an ear on the sound.

Grendlings weren't goblins. They possessed the same intelligence and mentality, but grendling tribes dwelled in caves, were fiercely independent of other faerie, and prided themselves on their mold colonies.

The grendlings rushed her from both sides.

She sought the room's acoustic center and raised her voice. "By the Undying Light, I command your surrender."

Her echoing voice folded the grendling ears against their head, stealing a vital battle sense—equivalent of dropping a flashbang in front of an eye-stalker. Quayla used their disorientation to slip between them, body flowing around their strikes.

Her blades sliced across the shorter's leathery skin, parting its spotty blue hide to expose even darker flesh. Sidhe taint rippled

nausea up her blade and into her gut. Black blood glooped from the cut like a low tide scented pudding.

His partner thrust for her heart. An upward sweep decapitated his blade and a downward counter sliced across the shorter's side.

The other grendling's broken blade bit into her thigh. Denim protected her from the worst of the damage, but the shallow cut stung out of proportion for its depth. She punched the grendling, finger ring breaking teeth from its mouth.

The shorter hurled his knife and scrambled for the door.

Quayla slid back out of the blade's path.

The other grendling caught the blade, reversed it and thrust once more for her chest. She slid downward, doing a split. Her head snapped back, turning to follow the blade mere eyelashes from her nose. Her attention whipped back to her opponent as her shimmering karambit sliced upward. Empowered essence focused to a razor's edge severed the grendling's arm at the elbow

Disgusting black blood splattered her face.

I cut short Dylan's surprise candlelit massage for this?

She turned away.

The armless grendling sank teeth into her extended arm and shook it like a terrier. Quayla cried out and cut its head off with her other knife. The thing's jaws didn't release in death, if nothing else they bit down harder. She tried to shake the stubborn thing away so that she could pursue the shorter grendling but was forced to saw open the still-locked jaws from her arm while the other grendling escaped.

Quayla sucked the water blades back into her body, partially filling bite wounds.

She scooped the kittens away from the blood before they could lick it up. With a quick rub of their purring little heads against her cheeks and cooing reassurances.

Dylan's fingers are fantastic, but this is rewarding too.

She rushed them back into their cages. She raced out of the kitten room.

Black blood trailed away from the main kennels.

Frantic barking rose enough to steal attention from the pulsing in her ears. She cursed and turned her back on the fleeing monster.

I'll hunt him down after.

Her first glimpse through the kennel door's window stole breath from her lungs. Dozens of grendlings—enough for several tribes—

swarmed the kennels. A winter-deadened tree grew from a crack in the concrete floor to fill the play space between runs. Two decoratively armored grendlings eyed each other warily as their lessers dragged animals from cages toward a gaping maw in the tree. Dark magic throbbed through the whole tree, as if the heavy breathing of some dark forest carnivorous tree.

The portal didn't fit in the real world, appearing as if it were some seemingly two-dimensional cartoon tunnel. Grendlings and their prey disappeared the moment they touched the darkness, transported into the Unseelie realm—or perhaps in the case of wild grendlings, Faery's Wyld Wastes.

Quayla's fingers wrung her hilts, essence pushed through the grips into curved blades with the addition of guard blades extended from the ring across her knuckles. She threw open the door. "In the name of the Undying Light, I order you to cease this unsanctioned action, return the stolen animals unharmed to their kennels and surrender."

Not being the brightest of faerie, several grendlings just blinked at her—one biting the head off a Chihuahua. A nervous giggle escaped the grendling nearest her.

A chieftain's darker chuckle filled the room. "You're outnumbered, little bird."

His confidence infected the others, spreading the malicious laughter through the room.

"A couple grendling tribes aren't enough to worry a Shield."

His laugh darkened. "There are only two tribes...guarding this room."

Hell's gates!

"Sound the retreat."

Grendlings around the room pressed their ears against their heads.

The second chieftain drew a bone and silver horn and blew a note to make any lighthouse proud.

Another grendling pushed open a back door and blew a similar horn. Half the room's grendlings drew trollbone knives and clubs. The other half increased their pace dragging the animals into the dark, gaping crack in the tree's trunk.

"Oh, no you don't." Quayla whirled to the wall behind her. She leapt onto it, spearing blades into drywall and climbing several quick

arm lengths. She threw herself backward off the wall atop the row of chain-link kennels. She raced across their top toward the play area.

Grendlings shimmied up in a swarm.

She cut her way through three in short order and somersaulted off the kennels nearest the tree. Chieftains met her with nasty swords honed from troll leg bones. She flipped over the horn blower, driving a blade into his skull, spun to deflect the other chieftain's blow and kicked him in the face. The little faerie flipped end over end once, then slid across urine-wet floors.

Quayla turned her back on him and sliced a gleaming X into the portal's surface. The tree shuddered then shrank away, smearing odd orange chalk marks as the shrinking Arch took its death stench away with a pop.

She slipped around the chieftain's enraged charge, but missed her counter.

More grendlings poured out of the adjoining kennels—too many more.

Shit.

Quayla slid under and behind the little chieftain's blow and took off his head with a scissor cut. She took up a defensive stance and started a slow fluid dance that oozed confidence she wasn't sure was warranted.

The horde swarmed her.

They raced up between the runs.

They leapt at her from atop the kennels.

They circled the cages to attack from behind.

In the center of the seemingly endless sea of little, blue monsters, Quayla flowed through forms. She dodged and punched, wove and sliced. Her blades flashed like schools of silverfish.

Every slice through grendling flesh tainted her essence. Corruption stole strength faster than she could purify herself.

Troll weapons cut and pierced through the holes in her guard.

Poison and dark magic weakened her further.

She bled and grendlings died.

The tide kept pouring into the room, grendlings carrying dead and panicking animals in their filthy-nailed clutches.

She pushed as hard as she could into her blades, extending them a few inches to their maximum lengths. Despite her grace. Despite the slippery defensive nature of her fighting style, too many grendlings assailed her. Grendling weapons struck from enough

angles to take advantage of vulnerable openings. Acid magic and troll poison burned through dozens of slices and invaded her veins like liquid fire.

Keep fighting. If I fall, they'll open up another Arch. All these animals will be slaughtered.

She decapitated another and kicked the severed head into the grendling behind. "I won't let you feast, not again, not today, not ever."

Dark laughter and darker insults proclaimed their derision.

Heavy impact atop a chain-link kennel drew her eye. A larger—well, he wasn't a grendling, but she'd never seen anything like him. Splotchy mold grew over bulging muscles several shades too light. He gripped a trollbone sword so large it had to have been carved out of flesh of a greater troll.

"Too young, too alone." His tongue slid along pointed teeth. "Too delectable to resist."

Quayla's blades kept striking, but her eyes slid along the horde to imprisoned dogs. Some faced off against the little faeries with hackles raised and teeth bared. Others cowered in their own urine with ears pressed to their heads.

The sight compressed her heart. Wafers' selfish actions might make defending them hard, but the abandoned and caged animals deserved Quayla's best.

She squeezed her insides harder. She considered attempting a shield, but not only was it not a skill she'd honed, a makeshift barrier would waste her potential arsenal. She dropped her defense, crouched and forced her essence to condense into a tiny, throbbing star.

Grendlings piled atop her.

They abandoned their weapons to sink teeth into her flesh.

Quayla drew in her hair, forsaking her mask to push as much essence into her center as she could. Her core became a black hole, drawing all water in from around her.

Urine puddles slithered across the concrete.

The contents of water bowls emptied in horizontal water falls.

The greater grendling's much smaller ears twitched forward.

Hose spickets burst.

Supply pipes exploded.

Hissing sprays filled the air, converging on her position like time-lapse fog.

He bellowed urgently, dancing side to side looking for an opening. “Kill her, now before she—”

Quayla exploded upward from within the mob.

Graceful, sweeping wings threw grendlings in all directions. A great bird of prey shot upward on wide, outstretched wings of shimmering liquid a dozen feet wide. Wing beats sent a torrent of storm-scented wind whirling through the building. Despite their flapping, her lithe form floated rather than flew.

Their leader dismounted the kennel behind the cages as he called his lessers to the front lines. “Swarm her! Quickly!”

Grendlings leapt from atop kennels at the whirling phoenix. Talons caught some, shredded others. High jumpers felt her beak’s wrath.

Feathers—some purposefully shed and others carved from her by trollbone—tumbled away like fall leaves, glistened in a hundred shades of bluish-white. Shed feathers swirled around her in a spiral of razor edges.

So many deaths among their hordes drove the little faeries into a mindless blood rage. They threw themselves at her above and below. They stabbed up at her. They hurled knives and clubs.

The largest of the feathery blades maintained their whirlwind orbit. Dark grendling blood coated their edges. Smaller castoff feathers dissolved into thin ribbons.

Grendlings hit the translucent razor wire of a master glass blower, shredding themselves into foul, sun-rotted, purple seaweed.

Her defense minced the grendling numbers, but not enough. Quayla lost essence to their strikes. She lost strength to the taint in their blood.

“Retreat!”

Not this time. Not even if stealing your meal costs my life.

Others from her Shield might come, but they would be too late.

A vengeful shriek echoed off the walls. All ears—faerie, canine and feline—pressed tight against skulls. All the animals, even the bravest Chihuahua, cowered in fear. Grendlings froze, her cry somehow flipping some primal terror switch that bought her a moment’s respite.

Quayla forced more and more of her essence into her assault. She robbed her wings to fill out a solar system of spinning feathers. Water tinsel trailed off the planets like orbital rings.

She screeched again, hopeful another hesitation would doom her prey.

They bolted instead.

She spun in the air in a rapid pirouette, unleashing her assault. Layer after layer of razor water sliced outward in every direction.

A few of the shelter's animals leapt at the grendlings, terror overcome by instinctual response to fleeing prey.

Quayla held her control for **ALL** she was worth, screeching once more with the effort to either avoid dogs or soften sections of her weapon to keep from hurting them. Rapidly exhausting her ability to stay aloft, she drove dwindling wings down for a quick climb then dove at the greater grendling.

Talons shredded his flesh as his sword filled her body with searing agony.

Her beak snapped at his throat. Dying heartbeats thundered in her ears. The putrid flavor of rot filled her mouth an instant before the sound and sensation of his snapping spine reached her.

Rather than spit his foulness from her beak with her last breath, Quayla smiled.

Then she died.