

Chapter 1

INCURSION

QUAYLA

Someone's unbridled need for morning coffee nearly cost my life. Dying isn't normally the end of the world, but this time it really was the beginning of the end.

A green Humvee rocketed onto the exit 252 onramp and whipped across my lane in a mad dash for the empty shoulder. The maneuver required two ninety degree turns that at least should've put the behemoth up on two wheels, but only amounted in a pair of reckless slides.

Deprived of a clear path, the Humvee's driver cut back across the off-ramp, forcing the minivan in front of me to slam its brakes and jerk left. Slick concrete betrayed the van's traction, transforming its overcorrection into a spinning slide through my lane and down the embankment into rush hour traffic.

I wrenched my Jahhammer motorcycle around in a tight, full throttle circle inches ahead of the Ford pinball paddle. Praying heightened reflexes and Caelum's modifications to my baby sufficed to save my tail, I jerked my pearl white jelly bean with wheels to a jarring stop.

Squealing brakes cut short a relieved breath and brought my attention up to oncoming traffic, certain my escape had been a hollow victory thanks to drivers more focused on phones or applying makeup than me and my bike.

I beat the odds.

The rush of adrenaline lifted a smirk onto my lips. A pickup slid to a halt rather than splatter me under its huge tires. My smirk died

when its headlights ended up close enough for me to count the bug carcasses.

All the cars behind me managed to stop without hitting anyone.

A snarl launched from my lips toward the Humvee. “Selfish, hell-blighted wafer!”

Anima’s voice emerged from the tiny bronze archangel mounted just beyond my handlebars. “Shield Quayla? Do you require assistance?”

Dread welled up to fill my throat. Pleading with our Shield’s automata had taken considerable wrangling. If she chose to back out and read the other shields in on my operation, I’d lose my one chance. “Ani, you promised. This is just between us girls.”

“Might be best if I notify the Shieldheart,” Anima said.

“I need to handle this myself.”

With a cringe, I checked the angel. The figurine wasn’t Anima, merely a way for the automata to communicate with us in the field. The angel itself stretched arms upward toward the heavens. Outstretched wings braced the figure like a feather shield version of see no evil, but it didn’t otherwise appear disgruntled by my not totally unwarranted outburst or my departure from protocol.

“Okay, but please keep me up to date,” Anima said.

Dread exited in a single exhale. “Thank you.”

Warranted or not, neither my outburst nor curse were fair to the wafer in the Humvee. She knew nothing about where I was headed or the lives that were at stake.

Nor should she.

Truth was, I’d screwed up and my mistake had cost hundreds of mortal lives. If I didn’t redeem that selfish choice, I was dead—really dead, like couldn’t be reborn again True Death.

I couldn’t blame the last few decades of increasing everyday selfishness for my mistake. I’d made my choice and caused all those deaths over a century ago on another continent. I’d tried to save myself and cost others their lives—something I’d tried to make up for every day since the Shieldheart had let me off probation and out of our sanctum.

Even though humanity had grown more selfish in my time sequestered, they were still worth protecting. Of course, when weighed opposite their great potential for goodness and caring, such blatant disregard for each other threatened to exceed disheartening on the way toward nauseating.

Today's shining example blared her horn when a car in front of her blocked a path the Humvee driver felt entitled to have to herself. It would've been more fitting if the vinyl family on the Humvee's back window made rude gestures. Instead a vinyl dog, two cats, four children, a mom and a decapitated dad with his head stuck to the window between his legs offered only innocent grins.

My Jahammer had a lot of power—certainly more than provided by the manufacturer, but the motorcycle offered little protection against the herds of selfish drivers and their metal behemoths. It did, however, let me flow through traffic along paths of least resistance—just the way I liked it.

Leaning right, I slipped between a timid SUV and the sidewalk onto Howell Mill. The Humvee following my example, jockeyed across a gap left by an instant's too slow reaction to the sound of blaring horns. She mounted the sidewalk and cut across my path.

A blonde girl in pigtails waved through the window as her mother made a desperate dash through oncoming traffic toward the Starbucks.

Great plan, orphan your family to get that so-called green monstrosity into the drive through for some burnt coffee.

Thumbs tapped my handlebars as I gritted my teeth.

Gentle ponds. Babbling brooks.

I took a deep breath.

Shields served the light. No matter how self-centered a wafer was, no matter how ignorant they were of the other cherished souls surrounding them in the great plan, we did not levee punishment upon the untainted.

A phoenix has to do what a phoenix has to do if she wants to avoid probation.

Yeah, phoenix. Five of us comprised my Shield—part and parcel of a cosmic Plan B. We'd each been created from the essential energy

of a given element, including a fire of course—his name’s Ignis. If we died protecting humanity from the Sidhe Courts, we could be reborn from the enchanted essence of our individual elementals

Or if we get mowed down by a caffeine deprived soccer mom.

Our Shieldheart had a real grudge against me. Maybe he didn’t like water. Maybe he disliked girls. Maybe he just couldn’t be bothered to look up from his books and train a younger shield, but most likely, it was because of my history. Whatever his reason, I was pretty much our Shieldheart’s whipping girl.

Caelum—our air phoenix—maintained that I was overreacting, but I *knew* our Shieldheart was collecting evidence to prove I deserved True Death.

Luckily, he wasn’t the real boss, just the boss’s old pal. That’s where stopping the incursion alone came in. Faeries from both of the major Sidhe Courts had been breaking through the Veil inside animal shelters, killing and stealing the animals. My mission was about more than just saving a bunch of waggy-tailed puppies and precious little kittens. I had to stop the incursion and figure out what the Sidhe were up to before humanity caught them in the act and our whole fragile world—yours, mine and ours—went to hell in a djinn’s lamp.

I had to stop the incursion, save the animals and figure out the Sidhe’s plan without the others along. If I succeeded, there’d be no way for our Shieldheart to give credit for the mission’s success to one of the others.

Save the world, rescue some furbabies, and redeem myself enough to save my own feathers in the process—no pressure.

Stop-and-go morning traffic, navigating commuters with delusions of supremacy, and the crazy low speed limit the angel on my dash made me follow knotted my shoulders. I tapped my thumbs harder and checked the horizon. Dawn lurked just behind the impending birth of morning twilight. Cleanup had to be complete before wafers started arriving for work.

Come on. Come on.

A narrow gap in oncoming traffic converged with my destination's driveway. A self-conscious glance shot to the angel's stern expression. I licked my lips and thumbed the booster Caelum had added to my bike. The engine's electric hum intensified to a banshee's shriek.

Horns blared as I whipped onto a side street and into the Humane Society.

"Get out of the way, lady!"

I didn't return the mortal's rude gesture—I swear.

I pulled to a hard stop under the animal shelter's guest awning. The required-by-law helmet I didn't need mussed my hair as I yanked it free. One hand sorted my hair, and the other hung the helmet on the bike's handlebars.

The angel glared at me over folded arms. I tapped its head, "I'm here, Anima."

The finger rings of two Karambit knife hilts stuck out from the custom sheathes mounted at opposite angles just behind the handlebars. I grabbed both and leapt off my baby.

Excited barking rose over the sounds of angry traffic.

I flipped the knife hilts around on their finger rings, tucked the bladeless knives into my jean's belt loops, and scented the already muggy, early morning wind.

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

I forced away righteous indignation and rising disgust.

Focus. I'm here to stop an incursion, not lecture wafers.

I inhaled deeper in search of dark faerie taint. I circled the unlit building, sniffing for faeries and scanning for a tear in the Veil from a Sidhe court.

Wish Caelum and his nose were here.

I berated myself. We all had our gifts, standing around and whining profited no one—especially not the lives caught in this newest faerie machination.

But why are they risking exposure to steal a bunch of animals?

Exposure could've been the goal. We kept a lid on Sidhe existence the best we could, but once in a while they got to a mortal, offered a seemingly good deal in exchange for granting mortal desires, and stole, enslaved or perverted the wafer. Still, the Sidhe seldom played a simple, straight forward game.

A change in barks sent me running back around to the front of the building. I hooked a hilt out of my belt. With a deep breath, I tightened my hand around the hilt's ridged grip and pushed on my center.

Frothing water slid out the hilt's heel, solidifying into a forward curved blade of glistening blue. I swept my essence knife up the seam between doors, severed the lock, and charged in.

An alarm console chirped.

Dammit.

I considered going back and using my helmet to conceal my face, but the haloed angel Caelum had painted along its surface for me was unique and readily identifiable. I bent my face toward the ground, freeing my hair from an aquamarine hair tie to hide my face as I concentrated. My wavy black hair took on the wet blue-brown appearance of Atlantic waves. Strands of living water flowed around my head, coming together in an undulating mask that only resembled hair at a first, distant glance.

I charged inside and through the administrative area, eyes scouring everywhere for trouble. A frame wrapped in black ribbon brought me up short. The picture displayed a mousy, bespectacled woman holding a humongous orange tabby almost as big as her torso. A label included birth and death dates too short to apply to the cat's owner.

I wasn't allowed a pet, but several strays I'd kept fed had died on me. In light of the crisis, the itch behind my eyes had to be pushed aside, but I allowed myself an instant's sadness for her loss before

continuing toward the panicked barking of living animals in need of my help.

Movement flashed in my peripheral vision.

I slid to a halt on paw-printed linoleum and threw open the door to the kitten cages.

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

My nose rebelled. The stench of dank mold seldom teamed up with rotting meat, but together the potent miasma overpowered shelter smells of litter box and Lysol. The stink nearly overwhelmed my gag reflex even through a filtering mask.

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

Pinching my nose offered immense appeal, but I toughed it out and drew my second hilt.

"Put those kittens back." I pushed my essence out of the end in shimmering blade. "Breakfast hours are officially over."

Dropped kittens skittered everywhere, mewing their objections.

The grendlings gibbered insults at me in Wyldfae and drew knives from behind their backs. Shaped troll bone throbbled with magic so dark green it was almost black. While the acidic magic's primary purpose lay in subduing the regenerative abilities within the troll's bone pressganged into a weapon, the acid and magic also combined to arm the primitive blades with poison and agony.

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

That little shit lied. He told me the raiders were Unseelie.

I relaxed into a fighting stance, sweeping my feet in smooth circles. I clinked my 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 rather than settling in forests or ruins. Grendlings maintained fierce independence from other faerie and prided themselves on the mold colonies cultivated on their skin.

They rushed me from either side.

I sought the room's acoustic center and pitched my voice to boom like the legends of Hera on high. "By the Undying Light, I command you to surrender."

My echoing voice folded the grendlings' ears against their heads, stealing a vital battle sense—equivalent of dropping a flashbang in front of an eye-stalker. I used their disorientation to slip between them, body flowing around their strikes quick as class six rapids.

My blades sliced across the shorter's leathery skin, parting its spotty blue hide to expose even darker flesh. Sidhe taint rippled nausea up my blade and into my gut. Black blood glooped from the cut like a month-old blood pudding.

His partner thrust for my 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 my thigh. Denim protected me from the worst of the damage, but the shallow cut burned like cuddling a welding torch. I punched the grendling, finger ring breaking teeth from its mouth.

The shorter hurled his knife and scrambled for the door.

A fluid weave escaped the blade's path.

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

Disgusting black blood splattered my face.

I gave up a surprise wake-up massage for this?

I turned away.

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

I sucked the water blades back into my body, partially filling bite wounds.

I scooped the kittens away from the blood before they could lick it up. I rubbed their purring little heads against my cheeks and cooed reassurances.

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

It would've been nice to bask in their purring adulation, but I rushed them back into their cages and bolted back into the hall.

Black blood trailed away from the frantic barking, crying, yelping tumult. The roar pounding in my ears like surf on sand demanded I chase down the little bastard, but I couldn't turn my back on the heartbreaking sounds coming from the main kennel.

I cursed and let the grendling escape.

I'll hunt him down after.

My first glimpse through the kennel door's window stole breath from my lungs. Dozens of grendlings—enough for several tribes—swarmed the kennels. A winter-deadened tree dominated the play space between runs, stretching up from a crack in the concrete floor until its dark limbs scraped the ceiling.

Two decoratively armored grendling chieftains braced either side of a foul portal. They disdained each other, the larger's muscles poised to fend off his one-eyed rival as they paid less attention to the raid than their one up man's contest of posture, glower and stance.

Dark magic throbbled through the whole tree, as if the heavy breathing of some carnivorous tree from a dark forest. The skin-crawling throbs worsened, shooting nausea through me as each grendling fed a stolen animal to the tree's dark, gaping maw.

The grendlings and their prey disappeared the moment they touched the seemingly two-dimensional cartoon tunnel, transported into the Unseelie realm—or perhaps in the case of wild grendlings, Faery's Wyld Wastes.

My fingers wrung the grips of my Karambit hilts. I squeezed harder on my essence, forcing more of myself through the veined handles until it formed into curved blades. Considering the fight ahead, I ratcheted up the pressure from uncomfortable to the edge

of painful in order to extend guard blades across my knuckles from the finger rings.

I took a breath, centered myself and 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 me—one biting the head off a Chihuahua. A nervous giggle escaped the grendling nearest me.

The one-eyed chieftain’s dark chuckle filled the room. “You’re outnumbered, little bird.”

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

“A couple of grendling tribes aren’t enough to worry a shield.”

The other chieftain, Muscles, cracked his knuckles and added his own laugh. “Our two tribes might not, but how about the six raiding the other rooms?”

Hell’s gates!

Muscles eyed his opposite. “We’ll deal with this one. Sound the retreat before the rest of her Shield arrives.”

Grendlings around the room pressed their ears against their heads.

One-Eye 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.” I whirled to the wall behind me. I leapt onto it, spearing blades into drywall and climbing several quick arm lengths. I threw myself backward off the wall atop the row of chain-link kennels. My landing ended up slightly off balance, but I recovered and raced across kennel tops toward the central play area.

Grendlings shimmied up in a swarm, but I cut through three in short order in my rush toward the tree. I like high ground—it's a bird of prey thing—but I needed to destroy the Arch.

I somersaulted off the kennels nearest the tree, whirling to face the two chieftains. Muscles and One-Eye met me with nasty swords honed from troll leg bones. I flipped over One-Eye, drove a blade into his skull, spun to deflect Muscle's blow and kicked him in the face. The little faerie flipped end over end once, then slid across urine wet floors.

I didn't want to, but I turned my back to him to deal with the Arch. Two slashes of my water-essence blades sliced a gleaming X into the portal's surface—disrupting the magic and cutting the faeries off from escape. The effect was all but immediate. As grendlings howled outrage, the tree shuddered then shrank away, smearing odd orange chalk marks on the concrete as the shrinking gateway connecting Creation and Faery took its death stench away with a pop.

Muscles bellowed his best Minotaur imitation and charged. I slipped around his blow, following up with a counter that missed him by a few bristly hairs.

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

Blighted hells!

Muscles charged again. I slid under and behind Muscle's blow then took off his head with a scissor cut. Taking up a defensive stance, I started a slow fluid dance that oozed confidence and menace far beyond what was truly warranted for a single shield against such daunting numbers.

The horde swarmed me.

They raced up between the runs.

They leapt at me from atop the kennels.

They circled the cages to attack from behind.

In the center of the seemingly endless sea of violent, violet monsters, I just tried to stay focused on the forms I'd learned. One

after another, I flowed through dodges and punches, weaving and slicing as each opportunity presented itself.

My Karambit blades flashed like schools of silverfish through the tide of attacking Wyldfae. But each slice of my razor-edged essence through tainted grendling blood nibbled at my strength. I fought to purify my essence as I also fought for my life, but so much taint overwhelmed my ability to counter.

Troll weapons sliced and stabbed through holes in my guard.

Poison and dark magic burned away my strength even further.

Grendlings died, but at the cost of my blood. The tide of oncoming grendlings never abated. They poured into the room, dead or panicked animals in their filthy-nailed clutches.

I forced more essence into my blades, pushed until that pain rivaled my injuries. All the effort only added a few inches to the knives' maximum lengths.

Despite my grace. Despite the slippery defensive nature of my fighting style, there were just too many grendlings.

Their weapons struck at me from enough angles to take advantage of vulnerable openings. Acid magic and troll poison burned through dozens of slices, invading my veins like liquid fire.

I knew stopping the incursion was about something bigger than just the animals, but the soft brown eyes and tucked tails and whimpering puppies needed someone to save them. I'd chosen to handle the incursion myself instead of calling backup.

I could've retreated. I could've fought my way clear, escaping to my bike to call for help. If I did so, the faeries would open another Arch. More animals would suffer and die to fuel whatever Machiavellian plot the Sidhe had hatched to plague humanity.

I can't let that happen, I just can't.

I decapitated another faerie and kicked the severed head into the grendling behind. "I won't! I will not let you use these innocent animals, not again, not today, not ever."

Dark laughter and darker insults proclaimed their derision.

Heavy impact atop a chain-link kennel drew my eye. A larger—well, he wasn't exactly a grendling, but I'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.

Demi-grendling? Greater grendling?

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

Sudden terror squeezed my heart tighter than any grip I’d ever used on my essence until the hammering organ lodged in my throat.

My blades kept striking, but my 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.

I squeezed my insides harder to mimic the condition of my heart. I compressed it with all of my will in preparation for one last desperate choice.

Anxiety squeezed back even harder. I couldn’t breathe, frozen on the brink of making the same choice that once murdered countless mortals.

Ignis’s training held up transmogrification as a valuable tool in our arsenal, but changing into my true form in public had led to burnings and torture. That mistake had cost me my first family. It had landed me ostracized, on probation, and justifiably terrified my next mistake meant True Death.

I considered attempting a shield, but not only was it not a skill I’d honed, a makeshift barrier would waste my potential arsenal.

My gut writhed, wrestling with faerie taint and the ramifications of choosing to change.

I’m not afraid of dying, not this time. This is about stopping this incursion, saving these innocents. Changing is the correct tactical choice.

My eyes shot to the web cameras mounted around the room.

Please, God, let no wafers witness my change this time.

I dropped into a crouch and forced my essence to condense into a tiny, throbbing star.

Grendlings mobbed me.

They abandoned their weapons. Grendlings sank teeth into my flesh, laughed and licked their bloody chops like they were at a Labor Day barbeque.

I drew in my hair, forsaking my mask to push as much essence into my center as I could. My core became a black hole, drawing all water in from around me.

Urine puddles slithered across the concrete.

Water bowls around the room spilled 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 me like time-lapse fog.

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

I exploded out from within the mob.

Graceful, sweeping wings threw grendlings back in all directions. I shot upward on wide, outstretched wings of shimmering liquid a dozen feet wide—a great bird of prey. Wing beats sent a torrent of storm-scented wind whirling through the building. Despite the flapping, my lithe, natural 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 that was the true me. My talons caught some, shredded others. High jumpers felt the wrath of my beak.

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

I'd killed so many among their horde, shed so much blood, the little faeries were driven into a mindless blood rage abandoning all thoughts of retreat. They threw themselves at me above and below. They stabbed up at me. They hurled knives and clubs.

I kept the largest of my feathery blades going in a whirlwind orbit. Dark grendling blood coated their edges. I dissolved the smaller castoff feathers into thin razor-wire ribbons of glistening, hardened water—a translucent thresher crafted by a vindictive but masterful glass blower.

The frenzied grendling mob threw at me anyway. My watery Cuisinart shredded them into foul, sun-rotted, purple coleslaw.

Wholesale slaughter proved insufficient to stem the entirety of the faerie tide. For every few I killed, they landed a strike that cost me essence. The tainted blood coating me leached away strength.

Another large grendling charged in from the other kennels, his lanky frame bedecked in feathers. The new chieftain assessed the carnage and screamed at his minions. “Retreat!”

Anima had to have already sensed my transmutation. She’d summon others to save me, but they would be too late this time. I was going to protect these innocents and stop this incursion even if thwarting the Sidhe schemes cost me everything.

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

I forced more and more of my essence into the assault. I robbed my wings to fill out a solar system of spinning feathers. Watery tinsel trailed off the jagged planets like orbital rings.

I let out another screech, hoping additional hesitation might add just one more feather to Justice’s scale and doom my prey.

They bolted instead.

I spun in the air in a rapid pirouette, unleashing my 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.

I held onto control of the aqua kinetic assault for all I was worth, screeching once more with the effort to either avoid dogs or soften sections of my weapon to keep from hurting them. Rapidly

exhausting my ability to stay aloft, I drove dwindling wings down for a quick climb then dove at the greater grendling.

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

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

I'd done it. I'd stopped the incursion all by myself. Rather than spit his foulness from my beak with my last breath, I smiled.

Then I died.

Chapter 2

INTERNAL TROUBLE

VITAE

An agonized shriek drew my eyes up from my morning read. I draped a silk ribbon between the vellum pages of my mentor's copy of the Iliad and set the twenty-five-hundred-year-old book in my lap. I turned toward five pedestals arrayed atop an unlit river stone hearth. A phoenix cast in blue-white crystal tucked its head down between folded wings.

My eyes fixed upon the statuette, tightening in time with my jaw. My youngest shield had died again. "Light save me, Aquaylae, what have you done this time?"

My concern didn't center over her fate so much as the circumstances of her death. I didn't need her habitual carelessness rekindling the fires of another witch hunt.

There'd only been one shriek, but I checked the other four statuettes as I rose from the comfort of my fine leather chair. Each figurine held its head high and its wings outstretched, the intricate detail of their crystal feathers illuminated from within by a mote of each phoenix's magical essence. My eyes lingered longer on the milky, yellow topaz of my other young shield, but Caelum's likeness showed no signs of distress.

I moistened lips and pressed them back together.

She went alone. Why won't she learn?

I set my book reverently on my side table, turned off the antique lamp so as not to bleach the cover and strode from my study.

The march up mahogany stairs to the penthouse's second story doubled back halfway up toward twin metal doors covered by

paneled oak. My patent leather shoes made no sound on the wooden stairs on or off the runners despite the heat in my chest.

“Anima.”

The one word to our sanctum automata was enough. It knew to open up the biometric scanner Vilicangelus had mandated. Using technology less than a century old to secure the second most vital room in our sanctum seemed foolhardy. New, unproven tech ripe for modern day piracy didn't deserve so vital a role, but then again the contents of the room were no more deserving.

My hand upon a biometric scanner started the entry process. Considering any death would change my hand and require recalibration just proved its faulty nature. The next lock opened by recognizing my voice, another variable element that the technology didn't take into account. I spoke my access code in Ancient Babylonian, my best effort to ensure the doors unlocked for me rather than a faerie counterfeit.

Foot-thick doors parted to either side.

I strode into the control room, lights and monitors flickering to life around me. “Anima?”

An airy, angelic voice greeted me. “Good morning, Vitae. How may I serve you today?”

“I need a location on Aquaylae.” I massaged the bridge of my nose, trying to relieve the tension headache often brought on when dealing with our Aqua. “Better contact our Praefectus, too. Inform him our Shield has experienced a death.”

The map of Atlanta shifted on the main screen and zoomed. Aquaylae's icon appeared at the Howell Mill Humane Society. Anima narrated the shifting view. “One of Quayla's seeds indicated another impending Veil breach at an animal shelter.”

A muscle throbbed in my forehead at the sound of Aquaylae's shortened name. Before I could correct Anima, it revealed even more irritating news.

“A Seelie contact confirmed portents of probable action.”

“What is *Aquaylae* doing fraternizing with a Seelie, and why didn't she see fit to call in?”

“She notified me but considered the incursion to be low threat.”
Of course she did. Youth constantly overestimates their abilities.

“You didn’t think I needed to be notified that our least experienced shield intended to face a breach alone?”

“Quayla didn’t want me to disturb you. She felt the incident was well within her capabilities,” Anima said. “I was about to notify you that I’d sensed her transmogrification.”

“Aquaylae isn’t qualified to make such judgements. You need to inform me even when she requests otherwise.”

“Acknowledged, Shieldheart.”

I nodded my satisfaction. I didn’t wholly trust the new automata, but at least it took orders. “Were there any witnesses?”

“Dogs and a few felines.”

I frowned. “Probably not an issue. Please display the others’ location.”

The map pulled back. Three other icons blinked around the metropolitan area. Roadways highlighted with traffic levels and accident locations. A small red circle identified hot, fresh Krispy Kreme donuts available at the marked location.

I tensed, glaring at the foreign marker. Modern companies frequently found ways to insinuate their market hawking into technology, but this instance seemed more likely a case of internal piracy.

Caelum. These two are becoming problematic. I’ll address that tonight and reprogram that nonsense out of the sentry net later.

“Iggy is second closest, but he’s on duty at the fire stati—” Anima’s voice cut off.

The undignified nickname for our Pyri sent another throb into my head. “*Ignis*. Traffic will prevent Ignis from arriving in time. We—”

“Vitae, the Isaac advises technological eyes watching Quayla. He is still ascertaining if any mortals witnessed what the eyes observed.”

A reprimand stopped on the threshold of my lips. Aquaylae had been witnessed by mortal electronics. “Convey this development to

Vilicangelus. Anima, we must address this displeasing display of informality.”

Even for a programmed computer automata, her tone grew defensive. “I serve the shields protecting the Atlanta territory. If a shield asks me to refer to them in a certain way, I am expected to comply.”

I glowered at the technological eye mounted atop the largest monitor. I couldn’t reprimand her for performing her programmed functions, but warmth still pricked the underside of my jaw below each ear. Laziness permeated the mortal world, but I’d be Destroyed before I would allow such weakness into my Shield again.

“Unacceptable. Add this topic to the evening’s schedule and prepare a report of all instructions you’ve recorded that were not given by Vilicangelus or myself.”

“Yes, Vitae.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll go clean up after Aquaylae once more. Please include my intentions in your update to Vilicangelus and lock down the garden.”

“Vilicangelus shall be notified. Be careful, sir.”

Another throb stiffened my shoulders. I aimed my displeased scowl at the room in general. “I’m just as capable of handling an incursion as the others.”

“I offered warning, not insult, Vitae. One phoenix has fallen to whatever threat breached the Veil. Protocol requires caution when investigating a death regardless of the shield’s skills or capabilities, particularly when only one phoenix is available.”

Anima wasn’t a living being capable of offering offense. Though I didn’t fully trust the technology that had replaced the viewing pool and oracle of centuries before, taking offense where none was offered remained a choice of perception. I’d chosen to transfer my irritation with Aquaylae to the harmless machine.

“Your caution is correct. I offer my apologies.”