

Edge of Night 1: Betwixt and Between
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Chapter One

Even as the first haunting chords drifted up the cement stairwell, Ezekiel detected a nibble on his bait. He pressed his bow more firmly to the strings on his violin and pulled his elbow back. His prey drew closer.

He'd had his doubts about setting up in midday and in such a busy, public spot, but a tug at his instincts had guided him here. Over the centuries he'd learned to never ignore that tug. The music echoed nicely, penetrating the dull roar of the Pike Street Market above and the viaduct below. From the open staircase, he had a partial view of the waterfront and Puget Sound beyond.

He'd set up on a landing below street level on the stairs that led from the waterfront to the market. On a rainy Tuesday in February, the market wasn't the teeming morass of humans it usually was, and Ezekiel easily sensed the motions of the *lios*a as it descended the stairs.

He threw a little more passion into Smetana's symphonic poem, *Vltava*. The lines cast out by the music shimmered darkly in the dull light. Like the strings on his violin, the lines vibrated and emitted sounds only he could hear beneath the music. The *lios*a's thoughts whispered in his ear. It was cautious but curious. Untrained. Ezekiel detected no significant magical protections, and thanked his lucky stars for this gift.

Don't lap at the blood before it is spilled, he cautioned himself. Though he sensed his prey was utterly unaware of the trap, he could be spooked if Ezekiel revealed any of his power too soon. And so he played on, risking only a quick peek from beneath his eyelashes.

The *lios*a had paused a few steps up from the landing, just beyond the wall that blocked the view of the rest of the stairwell. He lingered in the shadows but did not

radiate any fear. Ezekiel caught a glimpse of wind-tousled blond hair, large dark eyes, a lumpy coat, and battered hiking boots.

Ezekiel pulled some of the liosa's essence toward him along the strings and conjured a clearer picture. Human male, slim and tasty. Ezekiel's favorite form. The man had the dark mocha-colored eyes of a High-Wood *alfar*, but Ezekiel recognized no clan markings, no talismans, no link to the past. This was most excellent. No one would miss him. A fresh, unclaimed source of power, his for the taking. Even the dark queen Ysolde might not be aware of him.

The liosa held a camera and was about to take Ezekiel's photo. He was as good as caught.

FIRST MISTAKE.

Ian was already late, but when he heard the whispered strains of classical music drifting up the stairwell from the lower levels of the market, he instinctively followed them. He didn't know why. He remained oddly compelled even when the music lured him from the sidewalk and down the stairs, well away from his intended path. Buskers often plied their trade down here, taking advantage of the great acoustics and heavy tourist traffic. Foot traffic was pretty light today, it being off-season.

Ian was due to meet Dijeree at the coffee shop on Pine and 4th, but she'd be happily surfing the net and wouldn't mind waiting a few extra minutes. He'd sensed magic afoot and couldn't pass it up. That was his job, after all—finding and cataloging the magical creatures lurking in Seattle's shadows. Readers of the tabloid he worked for, *The Cosmic Eye*, gobbled up his stories, and with every contact, however dubious, he inched a bit closer to unlocking the vast magical mystery that shrouded his life.

A flash there, a ripple here. A haunted rowboat. A flying spoon. A burning book. A talking cat. All these things added up to something. He just didn't know what yet.

His first impression of the musician in the stairwell was that, yes indeed, he'd stumbled across a magical creature. Shadowed lines resolved into a dark-haired figure in

a long, heavy coat and high leather boots. The outfit looked like something a down-and-out musketeer might wear, the coat being old-fashioned, fastened with two rows of brass buttons, and well-worn. His shoulder-length black hair hid most of his face. He was tall, and he posed in a jaunty fashion with one leg up, boot resting on a concrete block. His violin case sat open before him, and gleaming coins speckled the black velvet lining, though no one stopped in the few moments Ian stood watching.

The man radiated magical energy but otherwise looked perfectly normal except for the outfit, which could be considered normal among the odd musical and dramatic types that wandered the market. For a while he made no indication of being aware of Ian, but then with a flick of his head he tossed the hair out of his face and quickly moved his gaze from the violin to Ian. That was when Ian knew for sure the man was some sort of magician.

His eyes were smoky blue or stormy gray or some combination of dusty sapphire and silver. Whatever they were, they weren't human. And he was ridiculously handsome like he should be fronting a rock band, not busking for quarters in a dark stairwell. This made Ian wonder if it was lust rather than magic drawing him in. *Could just be an ordinary guy.* He doubted it. The music was penetrating Ian's soul, rooting him to the spot. He'd fallen for glamour casting 101.

Though poorer than a church mouse, Ian felt a strong urge to empty his pockets into the violin case. That would be a mistake. Giving a coin to a magical being created a bond that could link you forever to a malevolent spirit. At least he'd learned that much from his Aunt Cleona. At the thought of his aunt, he remembered the protective token she'd given him the last time he'd run afoul of a fairy living in Gas Works Park. He reached for the moonstone necklace he always wore now, and when he touched it, the grip of the music loosened. He hadn't noticed the tightness in his chest until it was gone.

Further proof he'd been hexed came from the musician's reaction. The remarkable gaze shot up again, and he focused on Ian's face for longer than a second. It wasn't exactly

an evil look, but not friendly either. *Calculating*. That was the word. Ian knew he should turn around and walk away as fast as his feet would carry him.

Second mistake.

But what a find! A full-fledged humanoid magical creature standing in broad daylight, casting his magic out into the dull gray rain for anyone to see. Ian hated to leave without some proof, something tangible to pore over at a safe distance. Aunt Cleona might be able to identify what sort of creature this was.

Ian slipped the camera out of his pocket and checked the meter reading. He always used film because magic tended to elude digital capture. An impression on film was much more reliable.

He waited until the musician entered into a very complicated set of notes before lifting the camera and snapping off a rapid succession of shots. Good thing he'd put in the high-speed film, as the stairwell was full of shadows and contrasts. One beam of sunlight snuck in around a cement beam and lit the violin player like a spotlight. Ian held the viewfinder to his eye and zoomed in. He focused on the creature's eyes, which suddenly bored straight into his soul.

Instantly, Ian lowered the camera, but the mental image of the jewel-chip eyes took on a life of their own. Like blue flames, they danced across his vision and lodged in his memory.

Shit. He'd been zapped with some kind of spell for sure.

He spun around and ran up the stairs, taking three at a time. He burst out into a clump of German tourists all singing along to the strains of the *Vltava* that had reached its climactic conclusion. Ian sprinted up the sidewalk. The farther he got, the easier it was to move and breathe, and the less the image of the stormy eyes burned into his corneas. He knew damn well he should get to Aunt Cleona's as fast as possible and beg her to put a counteracting spell in motion.

Third mistake.

But he was late to meet Dijeree, and she'd be pissed if he blew her off again. She had a confirmed *Windigo* sighting out on the peninsula, and she needed his advice. He stopped running, and as he walked slowly up Pine catching his breath, the intensity of the hex faded to almost nothing. Maybe the violin player had only wanted to scare him off. If so, it had certainly worked. And even more likely, maybe Ian had freaked himself out, disturbed by his attraction to the strange man. Ian wasn't the type to lose his cool just because a gorgeous guy winked at him, no matter how much it made his skin tingle and his cock fidget inside his jeans.

He decided to stick to his plans. He'd see Aunt Cleona later tonight anyway. That was why he'd been at the market in the first place. He'd picked up a vial of essential oils she'd ordered from the Korean flower vendor and witch, Lui Kan. He'd take it to her after his meeting with Dijeree and a flyby of *The Cosmic Eye*.

Chapter Two

Ian burst through the door to Aunt Cleona's apartment twenty minutes late. Seemed like the whole day had gone that way. He'd turned in his copy at *The Cosmic Eye* with two minutes to spare, had missed the 5:10 bus to Fremont, and now he faced the wrath of Cleona.

Lucky for him she was involved in an online poker game. The spaghetti sauce simmered forgotten on the stove, and he took a few minutes to sort out his jumbled thoughts, wipe rainwater from his face with a kitchen towel, and collapse into a chair.

The violin music had haunted Ian all day, making sure he wouldn't forget the spell floating like a loose hook in his brain. He closed his eyes, and the stormy gaze that promised entry to paradise assaulted him. He'd tried to deny it, run from it, bury it beneath work, but the deadly promise was still there as if the musician stood right behind him, whispering breathy enchantments into his ear. Ian shook his head, then put his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. He'd been chasing magic his entire life, and now that he'd found it, it terrified him.

"Look who finally decided to show up!" Cleona bellowed as she swished into the kitchen. Her hips were wider than the doorway straight on, and she had to turn sideways to fit through. Three cats ran in with her like a furry escort, claiming the tabletop and counters with impunity.

Cleona had kinky blonde hair, almond skin, and golden eyes. She wore a purple velour kaftan with gold trim. Golden spectacles sat askew on her head.

"Don't start," Ian said and gave her a forlorn look meant to inspire pity.

She stood with her hands on her hips, giving him a once-over. Her mouth fell open and she asked, "What the hell did you get into?"

"A glamour spell, I think."

"Ain't nothing glamorous about the energy you're projecting." She squeezed around the table and put a hand on top of his head. His thick hair snagged on the prongs

of one of her many rings as she massaged his scalp and mumbled incantations. Over the years he'd learned to put up with a lot of strangeness as she'd practiced her piecemeal magic on him, and he sat still, resigned to playing the guinea pig. She claimed to be a natural-born witch, but she'd gathered her power the hard way, through study, spying, and thievery. Sometimes her spells worked; sometimes they didn't.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh. Oh. Not good. Not good at all." She hurried into the living room, taking along several strands of his hair. He rubbed his head and listened to her pull books off the shelf and toss them onto the coffee table. After a few minutes of listening to her thuds, curses, and murmurs, he joined her.

All four walls of the small living room were lined with shelves. Cheap pasteboard bookshelves from the discount store, heavy oak shelves inherited from her mom, plastic crates pinched from the backs of grocery stores, stacked cardboard boxes, tables with smaller tables on top—all these things were there simply to hold books and a sprinkling of odd objects, her collection of rodent skulls being among the oddest.

"Here we go." She licked her fingertips and thumbed through a large book with a dark-green cover and gilt-edged pages. She let out a heavy sigh. "This is bad. This is very bad."

"What?" He flopped down on her red velvet couch, forgetting he still wore his wet raincoat.

"Describe the one who hexed you."

"Tall, dark, handsome. Playing a violin at the market. Dressed like a pirate. Human."

"Human? You wish." She kept her gaze trained on the book, chewing a lip. "Dark, you say?"

"Black hair. Skin sort of a Mediterranean tone. Spanish, maybe."

"Dark eyes?"

"No. Um, bluish, grayish, silverish."

"What did he want?"

"I didn't stick around to find out."

"How did he cast?"

"With the violin. That's what drew me to him. Then when I took his picture—"

"Oh, holy Goddess, Ian."

"What? I always take their picture if I can."

"Have you developed it yet?"

"No. I've had the day from hell. Came straight here from *The Eye*."

"So you went to work and let that spell worm its way into your innards for how long?"

Ian leaned back and pressed a brocaded pillow against his stomach for comfort.

"Uh, three, four hours."

"Jumpin' Jehosophat." She slammed the book shut and worried at her own protective amulet, a large brass circle with a moonstone in the center. "We're gonna need professional help."

"Can't you do something?"

"Sure I can do something, but will it be effective? I don't know. You see, I think you've gone and stepped in a shadow of darkness."

"That sounds bad."

"It is. I need to consult an expert. For now, I'll cast some friendly darkness-repelling spells over you and hope they slow the spread. Too bad we can't visit Alistair tonight, but he's out on his boat hunting mermaids."

Alistair was a self-proclaimed shaman, about a hundred and twenty years old, who lived on a ratty sailboat in Lake Union. Alistair provided Ian with most of his tips about magical sightings in the city.

"He went mermaid spotting without me?"

"Think it's a personal affair. C'mon, let's eat."

“What about the protective spells?”

“I’m hungry. I can’t work on an empty stomach.” Cleona returned the book to the shelf. “I’ll put on the pasta. Take off that wet coat and stop looking like the canary that got eaten by the cat. Most likely, this magical critter will forget about you since you were able to escape his clutches.”

Ian wriggled out of his coat and tossed it across the back of the couch. A black cat named Lotus immediately hopped up and began sniffing and clawing at it. Ian waited until he heard water running in the kitchen, then stood and went to the shelf. He removed the book and let it fall open in one hand. He’d learned the trick from Cleona that if you set your intention and acted quick enough, a book would always open to the last page that was read.

The chapter heading was “Capture and Entrapment Spells.” The entry was “Svarta: Tricks of the Dark Ones.”

The beings who live in the dark realms have an insatiable lust for the powers and energies of those who live in light. A svarta usually uses temptation to lure willing victims into their realm where they are helpless to resist. Svartas use beauty, sex, wealth, comfort, excitement – whatever the unaware prey might be longing for. A svarta rarely uses violence unless truly desperate. Their favorite hex is the Pied Piper spell, instilling into the mind of the victim a haunting tune they cannot help but follow. Through the music, a svarta can ride the vibrational disturbance and enter the victim’s thoughts and dreams.

Ian took a deep breath and flipped to the back of the book. In the index he found *svarta* and turned to page 537.

Svarta: Scandinavian term for the Dark Ones, often considered a branch of the Elvin family, who live in a parallel dimension of darkness which some believe has devolved into a sort of spiritual dead-end. Svarta can gain power by draining the magic and sometimes souls from any magical creature who roams our dimension of light. They are the historical enemies of the liosa, an Elvin branch believed to have been closely related to the svarta in primordial times. (See Liosa, page 322). Since the great wars and time of separation, svarta have preyed on any class of being (including

human) with magical abilities. There is no bargaining or deal making with the Dark Ones. Not to be meddled with.

Ian felt trepidation and relief at the same time. He hoped Cleona was correct. The svarta wouldn't bother to track down a human like himself who had so little magic to feed off. Maybe if Ian had stepped right into the trap, he'd be a soulless husk right now, but he'd broken away, thanks to Cleona's moonstone. He fingered it, and the music, which had never entirely gone away, faded.

"Ian."

He looked up to see Cleona in the doorway, wagging a wooden spoon at him.

"If I'd wanted you to know about the svarta" – she symbolically spit into her palm to dispel the bad energy of the word – "I'd have told you."

"Why don't you want me to know?"

"Sometimes knowledge is power; sometimes it's a trap. The less you know and think about and fret over that creature, the better."

Ian put the book away, but he didn't agree. "Have you ever seen one?"

"Maybe. Way back. Back when Gwen and I went to Ireland." Gwen was Ian's mother. She'd died, of all things, in a shipwreck. "We were stupid like you back then, chasing after magic as if we could collect it like agates off the beach or pennies on the sidewalk. And sometimes it does come in those forms, but usually the easier it is to get, the more dangerous it is. Like this musician fellow, laying out his beautiful spell for you to stroll right into."

"But maybe if I'd known about these creatures, I wouldn't have –"

Cleona curled her lips up in a smirk. "You really think you would have ignored the siren call of a magical being? I never should have told you any of this stuff, but since you've always been so damn determined, I thought it was safer to give you a little guidance."

"It is safer. Your necklace saved me today."

"But don't go running out ahead of me, Ian. There are places I can't follow. Creatures like this svarta, I've got no juju against. Don't be filling up your brain with information you can't use. Most likely your musician was just a run-of-the-mill conjurer."

"Didn't feel very run-of-the-mill."

"C'mon. Let's eat. Then I'll try to weaken that thread a little and, if we're lucky, break it. You shouldn't be alone tonight. Sleepwalking is a real danger with a spell like this. Yeah, you stay on my couch tonight." She nodded and went back to her pasta. Ian looked without enthusiasm at the sagging, cat-infested couch.

"Dijeree is at the apartment. She'll keep an eye on me," he called out to Cleona.

"If you insist, I'll drive you home, but I'm not kidding. You can't be alone."

He looked out the window into the black, rainy night. He only lived ten blocks away, but the distance seemed vast and fraught with peril. He could see a bit of the Aurora Bridge, lit up and streaming with the gold and red lights of traffic. Beyond the bridge, black water shimmered in the Ballard Locks, dark trees loomed, and music drifted out from around a luring campfire. He could get warm there, be safe, and the handsome musician would give him wine, take him inside—

A sharp rap on the head with the wooden spoon stopped him from opening the front door. His hand was on the knob. He didn't even remember walking over there.

"Damn. You've got it bad, boy," Cleona said from behind him.

* * * *

Cleona had no idea. After dinner she made Ian sit in the middle of her living room in a stiff-backed kitchen chair while she lit white candles and placed them around the room. She'd sprinkled a circle of salt around the chair, dusted him with some sort of talcum that reeked of lavender, chanted spells from several books, gave him suspicious-tasting wine to drink, and rapped him on the head with the spoon whenever he drifted into the promised land the svarta had planted in his head.

All of this helped to quiet the music and keep Ian from wandering out the door, but it did nothing to dampen the lustful thoughts that made his pulse race and his cock throb. He couldn't bring himself to tell Cleona about the powerful desire interfering with his blood pressure. How every time he closed his eyes, he felt the rough touch of the musician's hand on his neck, the swipe of a tongue on his lips, hot breath tickling his ear. She was practically his mother, after all. She'd raised him from the time his mom died when he was nine. Cleona wasn't really his aunt but his mother's best friend from childhood. He had no other relatives. His father had been a stranger Mom met in Ireland. A one-night stand and nothing more.

After the darkness-dispelling hoodoo, Cleona drove the ten blocks to Ian's apartment in her ancient, primer-gray hatchback. The car had dicey brakes, and the clutch slipped more than it held, so climbing and descending the hill between their apartments was exciting enough to keep Ian from drifting too far into fantasy.

He'd explained to Cleona how he was haunted by the image of an encampment in the woods that couldn't exist, located between the Freemont and Aurora Bridges. She warned him he must never ever enter any structure—tent, hut, lean-to, Starbucks, or otherwise—at the invitation of a svarta. It would most likely be a disguised portal to its dark realm, and if Ian went there willingly, he'd be toast.

But he so, so wanted to track down the musician and crawl into bed with him.

Cleona cranked the emergency brake into place and shut off the engine.

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Want to know what happens next?

<http://www.loose-id.com/edge-of-night-1-betwixt-and-between.html>