

Delia Hunter approached the late-model Corolla with some trepidation. As she glanced at her four companions, she realized things were going to get very uncomfortable very quickly.

“Sh...” She began.

“I’ve got shotgun. You three freeloaders can figure out who sits where in the back seat.” Green Bean announced diving into the front passenger seat.

“If I have to share the seat with these two bozos, I’m so getting a window seat.” Delia complained.

“Don’t think so.” Grey commented winking at Devil.

“Nope, never gonna happen.” Devil agreed.

“I called it first.”

“It’s a forty-five minute drive. I’m not having Devil practically sitting in my lap for that long.” Grey explained as he got in the driver side of the car.

“Yeah, if I have to shoved up against someone, it’s going to be a female, even if is just you.” Devil continued pushing Delia into the passenger side and then sliding in after her shoving her into the center.

“Look guys, my legs aren’t removable.” Delia complained as she tried to figure out what to do with her long legs which were jammed against the center bump in the car.

“Too bad” Devil grinned evilly “that could make things very interesting...” He wagged his eyebrows.

Delia punched his shoulder before trying to settle back into a comfortable position and put on her seat belt.

As Casper, the driver, started the tight turn to head them in the opposite direction, Delia ‘accidentally’ jabbed her elbow into Devil’s ribs. “Oops, sorry!” She claimed unrepentantly. Devil wisely resisted comment.

For the next few minutes, at each bump or turn, she continued to jab the guy on the appropriate side of her to no avail. Eventually, as they got onto the long straight highway that would lead them to Los Angeles, she lost interest in her revenge and tried to find a comfortable position.

Delia turned slightly and rested her head up against Grey, who shifted against the door to support her head and back more thoroughly.

“How’s that?” he asked slipping his right arm around her waist to keep her solidly leaned against his shoulder and chest.

“Excellent!” she admitted starting to feel like maybe this arrangement would work to her advantage. She closed her eyes and tried shifting her legs to a more stretched out position. After a minute of trying to find one, she lifted her legs and laid them across Devil’s lap.

“Hey, what the...”

“Deal with it!” Delia overrode him, closing her eyes and preparing for a few Zs.

Devil sighed and looked across her to his friend. Grey had one arm tucked around her waist and was watching the face of the girl they both called friend. Devil contemplated the heavy combat boots currently digging into his thigh muscles for a moment before starting to unlace them.

“What...?” Delia questioned as he pulled them off her feet.

“Deal with it.” He responded tongue-in-cheek as he started to massage the arch of her right foot.

Delia moaned slightly at the pain/pleasure caused by the sensation.

“Try not to do that.” Grey admonished before joining the assault by rubbing his thumbs in circles against her temple.

“Go to sleep.” Devil advised “you’re less trouble that way.”

Delia responded with a sigh and slipped into a light sleep.



## Opportunity Knocks

By Jill Irving

Delia stretched as she stepped out of the car. The house they stopped in front of was a small ranch, but the yard was neat and flowers were planted along the walk. Green Bean had pulled both his and Delia’s packs from the trunk.

“This is where Delia and I get off.” Green Bean announced.

“Really?” Devil waggled his brows.

“Stuff it, moron.” Delia responded shoving him back into the back seat. “Get him out of here, Casper.”

“We’ll see you in a while; after we get settled.” Casper responded. He put the car in drive and pulled away.

“You’re going to stay in Dad’s room.” Green Bean explained as he led Delia into the house.

“Won’t your Dad miss his room?” Delia asked surprised by the arrangements.

“He’s not here. Mom and Dad are divorced, but when he visits he throws his stuff in the extra bedroom. Mom always keeps it ready for him.”

“I’m sorry about your parents. I didn’t realize.”

Green Bean shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not permanent. Mom got tired of the constant moving, couldn’t take it any more. Dad thought she didn’t love him any more and they divorced. But after the first time he visited me, they both realized they were still in love. When he ‘visits’, he really sleeps with her. He just keeps the room for the proprieties or something. I figure when he finally retires and settles down, they’ll get back together.”

Delia shook her head. “Weird. Still, I guess it’s nice to know your parents love each other.”

Green Bean nodded sagely “Yeah, but your parents were still together until...?”

“If Mom had been more stable or Dad had a less overly developed protective instinct, they wouldn’t have been. I don’t know if Dad ever loved her, but he felt he had to protect her and because of that couldn’t leave her.” Delia elaborated.

“It’s amazing the stuff that adults perpetuate on their kids...” Green Bean commented as he threw open a bedroom door. “The bathroom is across the hall. Take a few minutes to freshen up. The guys will probably be back in about fifteen. I want to take a shower...a really long one.”

“I need to call the gang, let them know I’ll be a few days later getting home.” Delia sat down and pulled out her cell phone.

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Devil was sprawled across the hood of a classic mustang, wearing cargo shorts and a muscle shirt, when Delia and Green Bean stepped outside twenty minutes later. Grey and Casper were looking equally casual in their own way.

“Nice wheels.” Delia admired joining them.

“It’s Dad’s.” Casper grinned. “He agreed we’d all be more comfortable in it.”

“Somehow I bet I’m still stuck in the center back.”

“Whatever would give you that idea?” Devil drawled dropping his arm around her shoulders.

Green Bean asked, “Where are we going?”

“Beach” Casper, Devil and Grey responded simultaneously as Delia responded “shopping”.

“Looks like you are out-voted again, Deal.” Green Bean announced grinning.

“There seems to be an unfortunate theme developing...maybe this was a mistake.”

“Come on, Deal, don’t be a spoilsport!” Devil cajoled, “you can’t expect us to spend our first day of freedom in eons shopping for girl stuff.” He watched her expression turn mutinous. “Besides, I haven’t seen a real live babe in a bikini all summer.”

“Oh, well, THAT changes everything.” She glared at him. “And I don’t want to shop for ‘girl stuff’!”

“Too bad!” Grey commented. As Delia glared at him, he shrugged. “I’m with Devil on this one. I’d rather go to the beach today. But I promise, my word of honor, that I will go shopping and anywhere else you want to go tomorrow.” He held his hand across his heart in his promise.

Delia sighed. “What am I supposed to do at the beach?” She whined.

“Lie in the sun and get a tan?” Casper suggested.

As Delia glared at Casper’s suggestion, Grey offered. “They say swimming in the surf is one of the best physical exercises...” He watched her eyes light with the possibility.

As she nodded thinking it through, she realized her problem. “I don’t have a swimsuit with me.”

“You came to California without a swimsuit?” Casper asked incredulously.

“I came to boot camp. There’s rarely time for swimming...”

“What will we do with this girl?” Devil asked in mocked horror.

Green Bean smothered a grin, “there’s a swimsuit shop near where we park at the beach.” He winked subtly at Casper.

Casper agreed, “Right, it’s across the street, won’t take more than a couple minutes.”

Delia sighed with resignation. “Fine!”

Green Bean ran back towards the house. “Give me a couple minutes to grab some towels and sunscreen.”

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**D**elia was going up in flames. Devil could barely contain his mirth as they stood in front of “Babe’s Bikini”. Green Bean had slipped behind him for protection. Delia was still wearing her fatigues and combat boots; walking into the store, she looked like one of the guys. Not surprisingly, the counter girl thought so too.

“Sorry guys” she walked forward with her bouncy personality and dazzling smile, “we only sell women’s suits here.” She smiled up apologetically at Devil.

Delia pulled off her sunglasses and glared at the girl for a moment. She shifted her attention to an itty-bitty string bikini on the rack beside her. “If you guys think I’m getting into something like that, you should get your heads examined.”

The sales girl immediately realized her mistake and recovered quickly. “Of course, that’s not you at all.” She agreed quickly reexamining the girl in front of her. “Sorry about that mistake, I just saw the five of you come in...”

“Don’t worry about it” Delia cut her off, reading her name tag. “Do you have any one-piece suits, Holly?”

Holly’s smile was apologetic again, “no, but I think I have just the thing for you. It’s in the back. Come with me.” She turned and headed to the far end of the store.

Delia reluctantly followed the much smaller girl. She pegged Holly as just the type that Devil would like to see in one of those string suits.

Holly pulled out a suit with a lot more material to it. “I don’t think black really works for you, maybe orange?” She saw Delia’s immediate and emphatic headshake “No. How about brown? That would work with your coloring.”

Delia looked at the proffered suit as if it might bite. “I suppose this is the most concealing thing you have?”

Holly nodded smiling. “I think you’ll find it very flattering. Why don’t you go try it on?” She pointed to the changing rooms. “We’ll see how it looks.”

Delia reluctantly took the suit and went to the changing room. A few minutes later she stood staring at herself in a bikini.

“How’s it fit?” Holly asked from outside the door.

“It fits, but it doesn’t look quite right.” Delia complained.

“Open the door let me see.” Holly ordered.

Delia surprisingly found her self opening the door for the petite girl.

“Oh yes, it does fit right.” She reached out and grabbed the bikini bra from the bottom. “This should make it look perfect.” .

Fighting her instinct to stop the girl, Delia allowed her to slide in some kind of supports.

“There!” Holly announced happily. “Have a look! All lifted and pushed in. You look perfect!”

Delia was amazed at what she was seeing.

Holly contemplated the look on the taller girl’s face. “You’ll take it? Will that be cash or charge?”

“Yes...um” Delia attempted to reach for the tags, but Holly clipped them off with small scissors she’d pulled from thin air. A quick glance the suit’s price had Delia rethinking, “actually, take the tags out there. Add in a pair of flip-flops too. The tall, beefy guy will pay for them. He answers to the name Devil. Next week we hope to teach him to sit.” Delia added as Holly nodded and left her in privacy. Delia dressed and slipped her underwear into her bag.

Outside she could hear the conversation as Holly approached Devil.

“Hi Devil” she smiled approaching him.

“Hi Holly” he flirted back with the attractive salesgirl.

“Your ‘friend’ says you’ll be paying for this.” She handed him the tag.

“She did, did she?” He took the tag and raised his brow as he looked at it. Never the less, he followed the girl to the counter and tugged out his wallet.

As Delia stepped out of the changing room, all the guys looked back at her expecting to see something different. Her fatigues looked the same as they did when she went in. Devil rolled his eyes toward the ceiling briefly before completing the financial transaction.

As they all left the store, Delia turned back to the smiling salesgirl. “Thanks Holly, for everything.”

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The guys were clearly enjoying the view on the beach as they all trudged along through the crowd looking for a place to settle down. After a while, Grey located a spot and they all settled their bags and towels onto the sand. Devil immediately threw off his street clothes and headed off to introduce himself to the local ladies. Grey and the others settled down with sunscreen to catch some rays and do some bikini watching.

Delia contemplated her situation for a few minutes before pulling off her street clothes. “I’m going to swim.” She announced as her shirt flew down onto her towel.

As she walked away dressed in her bikini, all three guys stared after her. “Who would’ve thunk?” Casper asked rhetorically before shifting his attention to nearer scenery. Grey continued watching the figure in a brown ‘boy shorts’ bikini as it dove into the water and started a strong breaststroke out into the waves.

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“Let’s go get some food. I’m starved.” Casper ordered as Devil and Green Bean meandered up behind him.

Grey had just finished slathering sunscreen across Delia’s back. He’d had to forcibly remove her from the beach volleyball game that the others were in after she accidentally spiked the ball straight into one of the beach bimbos, causing the girl to cry. As much as he had to admit he enjoyed watching Delia in action, he didn’t relish having to cart one of the other girls off to the ER.

“I just convinced Delia to relax for a bit.” Grey complained.

“No, let’s go. I’m hungry too.” Delia jumped up and threw on her shirt.

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The restaurant they chose was next to a tattoo parlor. When they stepped outside after eating, Casper led them into the small shop.

“This is the best tattoo artist in L.A. When I get in the Marines, this is where I’m getting my tattoo done.”

“What if you end up in another part of the country?” Devil couldn’t help but play devil’s advocate.

“I’ll fly back just to get it done.”

Devil was looking at some of the designs on the wall. “Maybe we should all get one to show that we survived two years of camp together.”

“We don’t even have a group name. Let alone a symbol.” Delia reminded them.

“Chicken.” Casper teased her. “Besides, we were kind of referred to as the Barstow kids while at Pendleton, maybe we could play around with that.”

Grey listened to the babble around as he watched Delia looking at all the designs displayed on the walls. As a large guy came out from the back of the shop, she seemed to

make up her mind. She stepped up to the counter the man had leaned against. Pulling her necklace over her head, she clicked it down on the counter.

“Are you the artist?” She asked him.

He nodded. “Joe.”

“Can you reproduce this?” She showed him the Protector’s symbol on her pendant.

He nodded again, “How big?” Delia held up her fingers. He grabbed a sheet of paper and a pen and sketched it out quickly.

“Nice.” She acknowledged as he turned the rough sketch to her. “How much?”

“Colors?”

“Just the outline, in blue, like the color of woad.”

He considered it for a moment, “I could do it for eighty.”

Delia hesitated as the others watched her. Grey had come over to look at the drawing while the others remained at the front of the shop. Grey watched Delia’s eyes for a few minutes before pulling out his wallet. He slapped some bills down in front of the owner. “Do it!”

Delia looked up and started to argue, but stopped at the resolute look on his face. She mouthed a thank you to him.

“Come on back here.” Joe ordered. “Your friends can wait out here.”

“I’m paying, I’m going with her.” Grey argued.

Joe turned and raised his brow. “You think I’m going to try something? I’m a professional.”

Grey shook his head. “Even if you did try something, I’m sure she could handle it. I just want to make sure I see it, since I am paying for it.” He stepped into the room behind Delia.

As Joe closed the door, he asked, “Where do you want it?”

Delia pulled off her fatigue shirt. “Small of my back.”

As her t-shirt followed the fatigue shirt, Joe commented, “That’s not necessary!”

Delia replied, “It’s easier.”

“If I’d known what I was gonna get to see, I might have given you a discount.”

“You still can.” Grey grinned.

Joe shook his head. “I’d give her the discount, not you.”

As Delia’s pants slipped down she said, “good thing I just got this swimsuit, this could be embarrassing otherwise.”

“Lie on your belly on the table, I’ll adjust it to straighten your back.” As Delia followed his directions, he added, “We’ll need to lower the suit bottom a little.”

Grey stepped forward before Joe could take care of it. “I’ll get it!” He rolled the suit down an inch to bare a clear line of her back.

Joe stepped over with his equipment and went to work. “It will hurt a bit, but try to stay still.” He looked up at Grey and said, “Maybe you should hold her.”

Grey took Delia’s hand, but grinned in response, “She won’t move.”

She didn’t. A half hour later, Joe put some ointment and a bandage over the tattoo he’d just shown to Delia using mirrors. “Keep it covered for a few days. Rub in the ointment every few hours to keep it moist. Keep an eye on the redness. It should go away soon, if it doesn’t go see a doctor. I’ve never infected anyone, I keep this place clean, but it never hurts to be careful.” Delia was getting dressed as he went through his spiel. He glanced at Grey again, “you should put on some more ointment before bed.”

Grey grinned at the look that Delia gave him. “Will do” he said grabbing Delia’s elbow. “Thanks, Joe.”

Joe slipped the cash Grey had left into his pocket. “My pleasure.”

“So let’s see it.” Casper ordered when they stepped out front.

“It’s bandaged right now. Some other time.” Delia countered. “So what did you guys decide on?”

“We couldn’t come up with anything appropriate.” Casper explained.

“My mom would skin me anyway.” Green Bean admitted, his face turning a bit red.

“What will your mom think of that?” Devil asked Delia.

Delia shrugged. “She’s going to kill me for the hair anyway.” She ran her fingers through her buzzed hair that had just grown to an even  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch all over. “Besides, she’ll never see this.”

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**D**elia had just slipped into her sleep clothes when a knock sounded at her door. She glared at it for a moment, before calling out. “Enter.”

Grey stuck his head into the doorway. “Hey. You quitting on us?”

“How can you guys keep going? It’s after midnight. I’m exhausted. I need to recharge my batteries.”

“We’re all just getting relaxed after two months of boot camp.”

“I need sleep. I short changed myself for two months trying to get everything done. She rested her hand on her book. I just want to sleep. I can’t stay up for the movie marathon. I may sleep for a week.”

Grey grinned. “I seriously doubt that. But I guess you have been burning the candle on both ends with all your obligations. This year wasn’t quite the same as last year.”

“Not even close. Last year I just had my own running and exercise schedule to maintain. This year there was the meditation and translating the tome, plus I had all these letters to write to people....”



“It’s complicated being part of other people’s lives, isn’t it?”

“Tell me about it!” Delia slipped under the covers. “Go back to the guys. Just let me get some Zs.”

“Sure, just let me get that ointment put on your back first.” He picked up the tube from her dresser.

“Oh...I guess I’d forgotten.” Delia pulled down the blanket as she shifted to her belly.

As Grey revealed the fresh tattoo, he observed. “It already looks less pink. Probably be just fine. Why’d you get this?”

“I need the talisman to open the book. Some of the power seems to lie in the symbol itself. It occurred to me that if it was on my skin, maybe I wouldn’t need to wear the pendant all the time. Necklaces can be dangerous...”

Grey gently rubbed the ointment into her tender skin. “Does it work?”

“I haven’t tried it.” Delia admitted reaching towards the book.

As Grey continued the application, Delia shifted the key into the lock and turned it. The book opened. “Yeah, it seems to. The pendant is on the nightstand.”

“That will make it convenient I guess.”

“I’ll still need the key to open the book, but it will help that I can keep the book open without it...”

Grey completed his task and put the bandage back into place. The tome slammed shut. Delia and Grey looked at each other in surprise for a long moment.

“It would appear it can’t be covered; maybe you should have put on your hand...”

“I’ll give some thought to what that means some other time.” Delia pulled the blanket up and laid her head against the pillow as Grey stepped out of the room, turned off the light and closed the door.

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**I**t was late morning when the guys were finally ready to shop with Delia. While waiting for them, she had put together a list of likely sounding magic shops from the phone book. She figured some of them were likely to be New-Agy shops catering to tourists and flakes, but she was hoping she could find one shop run by a genuine practitioner who could get her some of the more exotic items on her list. Marianne had given her hints that some of the items seen in her vision might be difficult to locate, but Delia was hoping to get them all and cast her cleansing spell as soon as possible. She had the anxious feeling that she would need to access her magic as soon as she got home.

Casper had parked in a central location to most of the shops that she’d found in the address book, they would walk around to go between them, that way the others could do some site-seeing at the same time.

Both Devil and Grey had made purchases and everyone was in need of some fortification before Delia found anything resembling a real magic shop. Delia stood looking up at the sign of nearly the last store on her list.

“Deal, I’m hungry. Let’s go across the street and eat.” Devil complained.

Delia was frustrated with her progress, although she too was in need of sustenance. “Go ahead and get a seat. I’ll be over in a few minutes.”

Devil and Casper immediately agreed and started across the street. Grey and Green Bean both watched her for a moment.

She smiled and reached out to gently push Green Bean. “Go. I just want to check this last place. Probably won’t take long.”

The boys crossed the road as she stepped into the incense scented shop. Light, tinkly bell music was playing discreetly. Several customers were looking at the collection of different mineral rocks, herbs were apparent at the back of the store, and two women in gauzy dresses stood behind the counter. Delia sighed as she approached.

“Blessed Be.” One of the women addressed her.

“Blessed Be.” Delia responded as she caught a glimpse of a rather serious looking spell book behind one of the saleswomen. “I’m hoping you can help me. I’m looking for a few items.” She put her list down on the counter.

The elder of the two picked up the list and glanced at it. Her brows drew together in confusion. “We have several of these items, but several I’ve never even heard of.”

Delia lowered her voice and moved in closer. “Are either of you genuine practitioners?”

“Of what?” the younger one asked.

But the elder responded, “I am Wiccan, but I am no witch...”

Delia sighed, and started to take her list. “...but the owner is” the saleswoman continued.

“Can I speak to her?” Delia asked.

“I’m afraid she only deals with a certain clientele.”

“Would you please ask her?” Delia started to lose her patience.

“She’s not here right now.” The younger woman chirped in.

Delia pulled out her notepad and scribbled a quick note. “Would you please leave this for her?” She tucked her list into the note. “I’m going to go across the street to eat, but I’ll swing back later to get her response.”

The older woman took the note and looked at the serious young woman before her. She didn’t look like the owner’s usual clientele. “I will give her the note.”

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**D**elia told the guys to make themselves scarce as she went back into the shop. From across the street she had seen a woman heading into the shop with several cups of coffee. It seemed likely to her that the owner had returned. The saleswomen were busy as she came in, so she picked up a couple of the minerals to examine.

As she looked up again, the elder saleswoman caught her eye.

“You’ll find what you are looking for in the back.” The saleswoman told her, nodding towards the herb section.

“Thanks.” She offered as she complied.

The herb section had many shelves filled with all sorts of dried and fresh herbs. Delia tested her memory of her lessons as she passed them. A door marked Private was at the far end of the shelves. As she stepped towards it, it opened a scant inch. She approached the door.

“Come in” she heard a deep melodic voice from within.

Delia stepped in and closed the door. The room was an office of sorts. There was greenery all around; all sorts of crystals and books were on bookshelves across the walls. A door led to what Delia assumed would be the storeroom.

“Hello.” She addressed the attractive woman sitting at the desk.

“You are Delia?”

“Yes.”

The woman’s green eyes looked her over carefully. “You aren’t what I would have expected. Do you know anything that won’t incinerate my shop?” She asked glancing at the spell word that the girl had put in the note to show she was serious.

Delia smiled slightly. “Nothing that won’t do some damage.”

The woman’s arched brows drew down in a frown. “I’m afraid a demonstration is required before we can do business.” She pointed to a folding chair leaned against the far wall.

Delia hung her head. “I’m sorry. The items I’m looking for right now are for a cleansing ritual. I can’t and won’t use magic until it’s been performed.”

“Tell me about where you learned of this ritual.” The woman gestured to the chair in front of her desk.

Delia sat down. “My mentor explained that cleansing is personal. You can’t just read a spell in a book. You have to seek your own ritual. I’ve spent the last two months meditating to find one. These items are what I saw in my vision of the ritual.”

The owner nodded her head. “Blessed Be. I am Kaila.” She lifted the list and glanced at it. “Several of these items are available out front. You should go to an herbal grower I know for the Linden. The flower must be used before it dries.” She stood and reached for a spherical crystal off her shelf. “This is a Dolphin’s eye.”

“I’m relieved that it’s not the real thing.”

“It’s not our way to harm others, even animals, let alone something as noble as a dolphin.”

Delia chimed in, “And it harm none.”

“It is said that these crystals allow you to see whatever it is your ‘looking at’ as a dolphin would see it, with their wisdom and perspective.”

“Does it work?” Delia asked staring at the crystal.

“I’ve not used it. It would be no use to you if I had. When used properly the properties of the stone will burn themselves out and it will be no more than a pretty blue crystal with a smoky star shape within.”

Delia peered at the stone more closely. “It doesn’t have a star in it.”

“Not yet.” Kaila handed the stone to Delia.

“Oh.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you directly on the ink. I don’t write spells down, but I do know where you can get a few drops.”

“Where?”

“A rare book store here in town. There are many shall we say, interesting, books in the store. They have a bottle of the required ink. It will not be cheap though, especially since you will need to pay a fee to enter the store.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of a store that charged you for entrance.”

Kaila smiled. “You are young. Rare book stores are for collectors. They go around looking for that rare find. They rarely buy. In order to support these rare find books, the owners of such places must charge admission to see their collection.”

“How much?”

“I have an idea.” Kaila offered without answering the question. “I will write you a note. The owner has allowed me to buy ink before; he did not charge me entrance. You will go with my note saying I need few drops. They should allow you to buy it without paying the fee.” She scribbled the note as she wrote.

“Thank you. How much is all this going to run me?” Delia finally asked.

Kaila looked over Delia’s fatigues. “I don’t suppose you have a rich daddy who’s going to pay for all this?” She sighed at Delia’s headshake. “Let’s see what we can work out.”

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Delia rang the buzzer at the rare book store as the first drop of rain started to fall. The guys were pulling the cover up on the mustang around the side of the building. A short, rather ascetic looking man answered the door and gave Delia’s appearance the once-over.

“Can I help you?” He sneered.

Delia pulled out the missive from Kaila. “I have a message for Lavell Blackthorn.”

The man pulled a dollar out of his pocket and handed it to Delia. “I’ll give it to him. Thanks.” He started to close the door.

Delia shoved her foot inside the door, surprising the shopkeeper. “A response is expected.”

“Fine.” He responded and glared at her foot still trapping the door open.

“It’s raining.” She announced in a flat, isn’t-it-obvious voice.

The man glanced down at the shop name on the envelope, before nodding and opening the door for her. He gave her a pointed ‘stay here’ look as she stepped in, and then headed into the dark recesses of the store.

Delia waited for a few minutes marveling at the smell of the old tomes and the history that must be held in the pages. She could hear the footsteps as the bookseller returned.

“He agrees to the sale. You have the payment?” Delia nodded and pulled out the wad of cash she’d prepared.

“That’ll be \$40.” He held out his hand for Delia to place the bills on it. He nodded and walked back around the counter to ring in the sale. “It’ll be a few minutes.” He picked up a solid looking bottle from behind the counter and started off to the backroom again.

Without the warning to keep her in place, Delia decided to explore. She felt an urge to enter a side room beside the counter. As she crossed the distance to the room, she glanced around for signs of occupancy, but no one was around. She entered the room without being seen. The tomes in this room seemed older to her untrained eye. While perusing the bindings, she noticed a familiar symbol on an ancient looking volume. As she rubbed her thumb over the protector shield on the binding, she felt the pendant on her neck warm up. She carefully lifted the book off the shelf and opened it. For a moment the text seemed to swim in front of her eyes, but quickly resolved into Latin. Turning the pages, Delia thought she recognized a familiar formatting for spells similar to a book that Trim shown her.

“What are you doing in here?” The bookseller had returned. His voice sounded angry.

Delia carefully placed the tome back on the shelf. “Sorry. I was curious.” She apologized lightly following him back out of the room. “How much would something like that run?” She asked trying to sound merely curious.

“Books in that room are all special; they each run into the thousands of dollars.” His voice reeked with ire.

Delia swallowed hard. “Um...sorry. I didn’t realize. My hands are clean.” She held them up for inspection.

“People pay a fee to look at those...” the clerk looked over her clothes, and sighed.

“Here’s the package for Kaila. You should go.”

The way he was looking down his nose at her was amusing since she had nearly a half foot on him in height. Delia reached out to take the wrapped package. “Thanks.” She rushed out into the rain.

At the car, she jumped in next to Grey.

“Got it?” He asked. “That’s everything right?”

“Yes. I have everything I need. Now I just need some time and privacy...”

“We’re headed back to Green Bean’s house. His mom’s working.” Grey volunteered.

“We’re going to the Chinese Theatre tonight, but we’ll give you some time.” He glanced at her tight face. “Something happen?” He asked in lowered tones.

She leaned in closer. “There was a book there. It had the Protector symbol on it. It made the pendant get warm.”

“Did you look at it?”

“Briefly. The clerk caught me and was a little upset. He said the books in the room I was in sell for thousands of dollars. I think it was a spell book.”

“Do Protectors cast spells?” Grey asked softly in her ear as the car moved through the rainy streets.

“Damned if I know. The Age Of book speaks of powers that the Protectors through the ages have used, but it doesn’t say where they come from or how they got them. I sure as hell don’t have any of them.”

“Maybe you aren’t translating it correctly. Or maybe you need this other book to unlock them.”

“Well, if I do, I’m out of luck. I spent a good part of what I earned this summer on the stuff for this ritual. The rest is for some clothes for school and incidentals.” Delia sighed. “I need a job.” She announced loudly.

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Delia sat in the middle of her pentagram mediation rug focusing on the crystal on her knee. White candles were lit all around her providing the only illumination other than the weak, watery light of the rainy afternoon. In front of her rested the items that she had faithfully collected. On parchment Delia wrote neatly with a feather quill and special ink the words “Darkness be gone” in Latin. Lighting the parchment from a candle, she dropped the flaming paper onto a mirror. Picking up the requisite herbs she dropped them onto the burning mass. Finally she picked up the Dolphin’s eye and placed it gently onto the center of mirror, risking burning her own hand. The flames went out the minute the crystal touched the mirror. The candles around the room went out simultaneously.

“So mote it be.” Delia finished, a great weight lifted from her shoulders.

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Waking from a very vivid dream, Delia saw the clock read midnight, the witching hour. As she settled back into a comfortable position, she noticed a curious weight beside of her. Reaching out her hand, she found a leather bound book. At first she thought she had fell asleep translating, but eventually remembered having gone to the Chinese Theatre with the guys. She had fallen into bed as soon as they’d returned. Delia flipped on the bedside light. Lying beside her on the bed was the tome she had glanced at in the rare book store. She opened it again and watched the text dance around on the page. When she touched the pendant hanging on the bedpost, the text coalesced into words again.

The tome seemed to have no title; the only hint of its meaning was the familiar shield with fist and sword. Delia moved the tome to rest on the Age Of tome. She turned off the light, but lay awake considering the meaning of this discovery.

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The same ascetic shopkeeper responded to her buzz the next day at the rare books store. He seemed surprised to see her again.

“I need to see the owner.” Delia announced pushing her way in. The boys followed her this time.

“This is most irregular.” He complained.

Delia waved him towards the back of the store. “You don’t know the half of it. Get him.”

The boys glanced around the store, staying near the entrance way as Delia approached and put a bag on the counter.

“I’m Lavell Blackthorn. What is this all about?” A dignified gentleman entered, his black hair worn a tad long and silvered at the temples, his deep voice held a touch of unidentifiable accent.

“I’m sorry Mr. Blackthorn. I delivered the message from Kaila yesterday.” Delia responded.

“So Wilson said.” Blackthorn stopped in front of Delia and glanced at the others waiting in the doorway.

“While I was waiting, I wandered into that room. There was a book there that...looked familiar. I took a quick peek at it.”

“Wilson mentioned that as well.” Blackthorn’s tone was laced with a little bit of impatience.

Delia started opening the bag. “I left it on the shelf. Wilson can confirm that too.” She glanced at the man. “But last night I found this in my bed.” She pulled the tome from the bag.

Blackthorn raised one eyebrow as he lifted the tome and glanced at the binding. He carried the book with him to the side room and immediately located the tome’s previous location. He opened the book suspiciously.

“What did you see when you opened it?” He asked her directly.

“You’ll think this odd, but the text appeared to move.” Delia responded cautiously.

“So you couldn’t read it at all?” Blackthorn asked doubt in his voice.

“Then it seemed to coalesce into Latin. I read a little Latin.” Delia admitted.

Blackthorn nodded. “It was very honest of you to return it.”

“I’m no thief. I don’t know how it got to me, but I didn’t do it.” Delia responded fiercely.

Blackthorn smiled. “I can see that, child. It seems the book as taken a liking to you.” He glanced at the opened tome again. “It won’t allow me to read it.”

“Whether it likes me or not, I can’t afford it.” Delia shrugged. “I’m very curious about it, but I don’t steal.”

“Well, it appears we may have a problem then.” Blackthorn closed the book and slipped it into its place.

Delia frowned, suddenly very worried. “But...”

Blackthorn held up an elegant hand. “I’m not going to call the police or anything. My concern is that the book will find its way back to you again.”

“Why?” Delia asked.

“I couldn’t begin to fathom that” Blackthorn said unconvincingly, “but I do believe it will return to you tonight. When did you find it?”

“Midnight, I woke up and found it.”

“The witching hour; how appropriate!” He smiled thinly. “I will have the tome with me at midnight and we’ll see what we see.”

Delia nodded. Blackthorn reached into his pocket and retrieved a business card to hand to her.

“If the book returns to you, you should call me in the morning, before nine preferably.”

“I’m an early riser. I have a plane to catch tomorrow anyway.”

“Fine.” He nodded, “I suspect we will be speaking tomorrow.” He turned on his heel. “Please, show them out, Wilson.”

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When Delia woke in the night, she knew immediately the tome had returned to her. She slipped it onto the Age Of tome and turned over. She went to sleep thinking of the call she’d have to make in the morning.

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“L avell Blackthorn speaking” he answered the phone at seven a.m.

“Mr. Blackthorn, I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.” Delia began.

“Ah yes, you are quite an honorable female. That is good to know. The tome disappeared from my hands quite on its own. No attempt I made to keep it would stop it from leaving.” He considered the somewhat extraordinary methods he had used and knew there was no way he could keep the tome now.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“So we are left at an impasse. You can not afford the book and I can not keep it from you. It is a quandary, is it not?”

“Yes, sir.” Delia agreed.

“Well, I suppose I will have to report it stolen to my insurance company.” He heard Delia’s deep indrawn breath of shock. “Relax, my dear, no mention will be made of you. But a loss such as this could destroy my business. I must be compensated, and since you can not do so, nor I imagine can your parents?”

“No sir” Delia replied.



“I thought not. Wilson will report that he saw it two days ago, but that it was gone today. That should be sufficient. There are no logs of your business and you were the only one to enter the room in the past two days. All will be well.”

“Thank you sir.”

“I would like your name and address, Miss?”

“Delia. Hunter.” She supplied her address as well.

“Excellent. It may be that at some point there will be a way you can repay me, no?”

Delia paused a moment. “Maybe.”

“Very well, it has been most interesting making your acquaintance, Miss Hunter. Perhaps we will meet again.” The line went dead a moment later. Delia stared at the phone for a few minutes before starting to collect her things.

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“**H**ow’d it go with Mr. Blackthorn?” Grey asked after the others had all dispersed from the terminal at the base. He and Delia were waiting for their planes; Devil’s had taken off moments earlier.

“I’m not sure. He’s letting me keep the book. He’ll report it stolen to his insurance. He promised to keep my name out of the report, but it makes me nervous. He took my name and address saying he might contact me at some point for something. What if he calls in a month and demands the money?”

“No use thinking about ‘what ifs’, Deal. You know that. You just get everything you can out of that weird-ass tome and if he demands money, send it back to him.”

“It will just come back.”

Grey shrugged, “maybe across town, maybe not across the country. Who knows?”

“I guess I’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Can you cast those spells?” He asked as he heard the announcement for her flight.

“I’ll take them to Marianne to examine them. I’m free to cast again, but I’m not jumping in headfirst this time. I trust Marianne to help me learn what I’m ready for and protect me from what I’m not.”

Grey tousled her hair. “Good. You be careful.” He reached his arms around her and pulled her in for a tight hug. “I’ll miss you. Keep in touch” he breathed near her ear.

“I will.” She promised pulling away to board her plane.