Chapter 1: Pursuit

"It's over there!" Carlisle shouted. I readied a cocoon spell just in case. I was getting better at weaving cocoons on the fly, but it still took a few seconds. I hoped I could stay close enough to feel the ghost, since that's what we were after. Only Carlisle could see them. I thought I could figure out where it was headed though, so I went back for Carlisle and Sheila with the hope that my guess wasn't wrong and teleported all three of us inside a cocoon.

We reappeared between one of those extra school rooms and the big doors where lunches are brought in. We were in pursuit of what we'd been told was a poltergeist that was terrorizing a school. I had my doubts. The spirits did not indicate to me that the ghost was evil, and my necklace had not turned cold when in its presence.

"What the hell just happened?" Sheila snarled. I hadn't told either of them my intentions when I'd grabbed their arms and brought us there. She didn't appear to take kindly to surprises. How weird would it be not to be able to sense magic, and watch all this strange stuff happen?

Carlisle was staring at me, nonplussed. "Since when can you do *that*?"

"I'll explain later, can you see it still?" A loud crunch and rumble made us look up. The parapet at the top of the brick building was crumbling, sending a shower of bricks and mortar heading straight for us. I held my right arm in front of my face and spoke into the turtle charm on my bracelet. "Gwneud cragen*!*" A bubble of protection snapped in place over us. I snagged Sheila's arm before she could run away. At the same time Carlisle moved to stand as close to me as he could. Sheila put her arms up to shield herself and the bricks hit the bubble and slid into a pile, circling the dome. She slowly lowered her arms and blinked at me.

"It's on the roof," Carlisle announced, rather unnecessarily. I sent the spirits up to trap it in air and hold it. They did, but I felt their disappointment when the ghost melted through the floor and escaped. I'd found that lesser spirits have a difficult time holding other spirits. It takes an actual embodiment of an elemental spirit to catch and hold another one. Lesser spirits can lend each other power, and work as a team to do amazing things, but to trap an individual spirit using other spirits wasn't what they were made to do. Unless that spirit resided in a body. Spells were what worked for that, and I had just started getting the hang of using those. By escaping that way the ghost made it clear

to us that it was more aware of its surroundings than most ghosts were. Something was lending it power, and purpose.

"The ghost doesn't feel evil to me. I think something else is helping it." I felt the spirits give a nod to that idea. "Or is this normal for a poltergeist?" I asked Carlisle.

Before he could answer Sheila said, "It tried to crush us!"

I sent a wave of calm her way. She was the type who was used to being sure of herself; a leader in charge of things. I didn't blame her for being uptight.

"Well shit!" Carlisle snarled. Then went on to explain, "Poltergeists can cause a lot of damage, but it's usually random. Can you sense what else might be here?"

"Not yet." A window two stories up broke and shards of glass rained down onto the dome protecting us. Sheila didn't try to run away that time but stayed by my side and watched the glass slide down to join the bricks. She was a quick learner.

I wracked my brain for a spell that might work to encase the ghost. We needed to hold it so Carlisle could find out why it was here, and hopefully get it to release the grip this world had on it and move on. I was at a loss. I searched for Sylvio's feelings in my mind and found he was not occupied with anything pressing. There were no strong emotions. Relieved, I sent, *"Sylvio, can you help us out?"*

After only a moment Sylvio sent, *"What are you up to?"*

I cringed a little. He would not be happy that I had gone into a potentially dangerous situation without him. *"Chasing ghosts with Carlisle."*

Not being sure what would happen if he tried to pop in while the bubble was around us I let it go and headed for the protection of the wall. The other two followed me.

Carlisle asked, "Why'd you drop it?"

"We're going to have company."

The buzz made Sheila jump; I was beginning to feel sorry for her. On the other hand, she had volunteered for this.

Sylvio appeared where we had been standing. “Having fun without me?” I could tell by his tone he was annoyed at me, I didn’t have to delve his feelings. We had recently had a heated discussion about me going into dangerous situations without letting him know. He took in the broken glass and pile of bricks then headed our way.

Sheila had taken a few seconds to catch up, “You!” She snarled at Sylvio. The events of the past hour had taken a toll on her temper. Sylvio was a convenient outlet for it. “I know what you’ve been doing to me and it’s going to stop!” Her dark face darkened more than it already was. He simply raised an eyebrow and regarded her with unconcealed amusement.

“You lied, you said you would leave me alone if I joined your cause, but you haven’t. You’ve kept me enthralled so I can’t speak about you to any of my colleagues except Carlisle.” She looked directly into his eyes and glared. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see smoke coming out of her ears. She radiated righteous anger.

In the silky smooth tone he used when amused Sylvio said, “If you recall, Marshall Johnson, I did not state I would leave you entirely alone, but I assure you I have only kept you enthralled enough to ensure your silence regarding my kind.”

“You don’t trust my word?” she fumed.

He tilted his head and looked thoughtful, “Perhaps I should have after all.” He reached out and brushed the back of his hand against her neck. Her anger melted, replaced with desire, and her lips parted as the need for him swept through her. She attempted to back away but her feet would not move.

“Your mind may be blocked, but your body remembers.” Sylvio voice was a purr. “Those with a powerful will are alluring to me. You have a strong mind and a pure soul, it is a temptation. I will agree to leave you alone. I have not fed often enough, nor shared my blood with you, to make you completely mine. I can release you and all your body will feel is an undefined craving for a little while. However, you will see me with clear eyes, and fear me. If that becomes too much of a burden for you I will enthrall you again.”

He brushed his thumb over the vein in her neck, then let his hand fall and took a step back. “Would you like to be totally free, to see the preternatural without rose-colored glasses? Most of us are

quite unsettling to contemplate." I felt it as he released his spell on her. It was like a warm blanket had suddenly been taken away to be replaced with a bitter chill.

She shuddered. Desire warred with resolve in her. Anger battled with fear. She licked her lips and stared at his hand. Without knowing it her own hand had replaced his. When her fingertips touched the spot where he had surely bitten her in the past her eyes widened with comprehension. Terror began to creep in on the edges of her mind. She fought that fear, but it was still there.

"You see," Sylvio continued, "My reasons for keeping you enthralled were not entirely selfish. Let me know if you would rather return to how things have been."

I folded my arms and narrowed my eyes at both of them, "*Really?* I think we have more pressing things to sort out right now."

Sylvio pretended surprise. Inside he felt both annoyed at me, and amused. I was mostly irritated that he felt so unconcerned about our situation that what he'd thought of when he spotted Sheila was having a snack.

Before I could say anymore Carlisle cleared his throat. "We need to catch a ghost and hold it. Can you remember a spell that will do that?"

"Is it tied to this building?" Sylvio asked, looking up at the broken window.

"Seems to be," Carlisle nodded, "It's had plenty of time to go away. Rachel thinks something is helping it, or maybe making it, do things,"

Sylvio gave me a puzzled look, I shrugged. "The ghost doesn't feel evil."

He scanned all three of us up and down. "Lend Rachel your shoelace," he commanded Carlisle. Sheila and I exchanged a look, we were at a loss, but Carlisle's face cleared. He bent down immediately and worked the lace free then handed it to me.

"Tie it into a lasso," Sylvio said.

I did as he asked and waited for more instructions.

"It's likely it can hear us. I'll tell Rachel what to do silently. You two stick close. Let's go in and see what we find." His frustration with me had been set aside. I knew we'd be having a debate later

about my safety. At that moment he felt reckless and excited. He loved pursuing spooky things, regardless of the danger. Secretly, I thought he was a little bit crazy.

"Throw the little lasso at it when Carlisle tells you where it is and say Ligare." I heard the emphasis on the last word, each syllable was distinct. I hoped I could copy it correctly.

He put his hand on the metal door. The lock clicked free and the door opened easily at his touch. He held it open for us. When Carlisle passed him Sylvio asked, "Can you see it?"

"Not yet."

Sylvio sent out a spell to delve for whatever preternatural beings might be lurking. Sylvio had never adhered to custom, or let others' beliefs cloud his mind about what was possible. Most vampires didn't bother to learn anything about witchcraft because it was generally believed that kind of magic would not work for them. Sylvio had studied it for centuries. Few spells actually did what he wanted, but the one he sent out at that moment was one he'd perfected long since.

He'd recently taught me how to use it. I said, "Magicae invenire"

Sheila turned and gave me a "What?" look.

I felt my spell blend with Sylvio's as it washed through the entire building, seeking all the crevices and hidden corners. It hit a preternatural creature that was below and to the east of us, and one clinging to the ceiling above Carlisle's head.

The concealment spell that had encased the ghost washed away, Carlisle said, "Holy shit!" and leaped sideways, dragging Sheila with him.

I still couldn't see the actual ghost, just the outline where our spell clung to it. I tossed the lasso and prayed I would pronounce the word right, "Ligare!"

The ghost had begun to melt back into the ceiling when the lasso hit it. Ceiling tiles rained down along with the ghost as it crashed to the floor. The shoelace expanded until it looked like a ribbon tied around an invisible package. The string wiggled a foot or so off the ground, then it rose in the air in front of me. It was obvious Carlisle could see the ghost inside the string; the rest of us saw only the string.

"He's in agony," Carlisle said. "He's wrapped in what looks like hot wires."

As soon as he said that I felt the thing's emotions. Agony was putting it mildly. "Can you see a way to remove them?" I asked. He shook his head.

"Why isn't the shoestring burning?" Sheila asked.

She had a point, the shoestring hadn't changed. It kept dancing and wiggling with the ghost. The wiggling was getting more desperate.

"Delwai," Sylvio said.

We all looked at him.

"Say it Rachel, pull on your air spirits and blow on your palm while you say, *delwai.* Think of ice."

I felt the magic of the spell that had delved the school vibrate. The thing lower in the building was moving our way. I lifted my hand, blew on it, pictured icicles when I did, and said, *Delwai!*

White fog engulfed the entire hallway and settled on the ghost. We could see an outline of it then. The string stopped wiggling. The ghost seemed to have been startled into stillness. Clouds of vapor came from us when we breathed and my arms got goose pimples.

Carlisle reached out and grabbed something the rest of us couldn't see, but when he began to pull a rope materialized. It looked like black licorice with frost on it. It crackled and cracked but didn't break as he kept pulling. The ghost in the shoestring began to spin a slow circle. The rope seemed to be coming through a white wall. Finally the black rope snapped free and Carlisle let it fall, wiping his hand on his pants as if the thing felt slimy.

The ghost shook itself, which sent a shower of tiny ice sprinkles falling to the floor to join the rope. I still couldn't see anything but an outline in the fog, but I felt its relief, and its fear. It knew that other entity was coming our way. I reached out and pulled on the end of the lasso. The loop came undone and the shoestring was an ordinary string once again.

We all felt the breeze when the ghost dashed past us through the open door and out into the night, taking the bitter chill with it.

"Why'd you do that? I could have asked him what is going on." Carlisle snapped.

“I think we’ll find out soon enough without his help,” I said. The thing below us was getting closer.

Sylvio pushed the black rope with his toe. “This isn’t from this world, something has crossed over.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I was sure that wasn’t a good thing. Neither was the sudden ice cold feel of my necklace. It always felt that way when something with strong magic was near.

“Which world?” Adventures with Sylvio had taken me to two so far, Underhill, and Purgatory.

Instead of answering that he asked me, “Can you sense fae?”

“I sense strong magic. I can’t tell what kind of being it is.” As soon as I said that I realized the thing must be able to block me, and that in itself said it was quite powerful.

“What kind of magic?” Carlisle asked.

“The spirits are uncommitted about that.” They had never done that before. Always they had categorized whatever being somewhere on a scale of darkness and light. So either the thing was too strong for them to sense clearly, or it could block the spirts themselves.

“All of you stand as close to me and Rachel as you can,” Sylvio commanded. “Until we see what sort of creature shows itself.” We all turned to look down the long hall. “Rachel, make a cocoon ready in case we get separated.”

“Where should we meet?”

“At the cave.” That answer was not spoken out loud.

How do I describe what came into the hallway from the lower stairwell? It filled most of the space in the hall. It had several legs, like an immense bug, or crab maybe, since there seemed to be eight of them. Its carapace was multi-colored and shimmered under the dim lights. Its eyes were slits, like a snake, and its claws made an uneven click, click, click on the tile floor. Three of the legs on one side were withered and twisted, making it move oddly. As soon as all of it had emerged it dropped the spell it had been using to hide its presence, and something that felt similar to fae magic washed over us.

Oh good, I thought, *it's not a demon.* Strange how my perspective about what to be the most scared of had evolved. Fae can be reasoned with. They are mostly concerned with personal gain. Demons want bad things to happen.

Sheila managed to sound relieved and suspicious at the same time, "Is that man dangerous?"

I looked at her. She was staring at the same place I was, but no one would call that thing a man.

"What do *you* see?" I asked her.

She scowled at me like I was an idiot and pointed, "Him." Louder she said, "What do you want?" I noticed she had her gun drawn and was holding it down by her side.

Both Sylvio and Carlisle asked, at the same time, "What do you see, Rachel?" Except Sylvio added Miss to my name.

"That's not a man."

"Dammit, this just gets better and better!" Carlisle growled.

The thing's eyes (there were four of them) were now focused on me. I probably shouldn't have given away what I could see. I remembered a spell Chris and I had used recently. I didn't have a charm on my bracelet to go with it, but maybe it would work anyway if I asked the spirits for help. I gulped down the lump in my throat and said, as loudly as I could manage, "*Ostende te".*

Sheila was looking at me like I'd lost my mind. Then she looked down the hall and screamed. I was sure she wasn't used to doing that. She raised her gun. Sylvio put a hand on her wrist so she wouldn't shoot.

I thought, *it must have worked!*

In the same conversational tone he'd used in another place, to speak to a cougar that wasn't a cougar, Sylvio said, "What are you doing here?"

The thing had a mouth with several moving parts that I was sure could not form words. It stopped advancing down the hall and continued to stare with all its eyes on me rather than Sylvio. In a normal male human voice it said, "I work here."

Good hell, it's a teacher! I thought. Sylvio's lip quirked up into a smile on the side I could see, and he gave a soft chuckle – at me, not the fae. I'd left our mental connection open.

"Why torture the ghost?" Sylvio asked.

"It was scaring the children," the thing replied. His reply sounded reasonable, except most fae like to *eat* children, not protect them.

"You're saying the ghost was the bad guy?" I scoffed. "If you had the strength to hold it why not simply chase it away?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

Carlisle gave me an 'I told you so' look. I assumed for letting the ghost go. "You don't believe what that thing is telling us do you?" I snapped at him.

Sylvio was still feeling amused by Carlisle and me, damn him.

"Have we met before?" Sylvio asked, "You have a familiar feel, although I do not recognize your current form."

The thing looked at Sylvio for the first time, "Yes, child of Adonas, we have. You continue to deny my master's daughter her desire."

Sylvio gasped in surprise. I had never heard him do that before. I felt a wave of alarm pass through him and his good mood vanished. Cautiously he asked, "Crios, isn't it?"

The thing stopped moving toward us and settled for a moment. Then it began to shrink in on itself, its parts rearranging and losing their brilliant colors, turning to flesh. In less than a minute it had resolved into a man of medium height and build. One side of his face was quite handsome, the other had scars, as though from a burn. He had wavy salt and pepper hair cut a little long, and eyes that were ultramarine, the color of the deep ocean. His clothes were business casual: starched blue shirt, no tie, creased navy slacks. He held an elegant walking stick in his right hand and leaned on it a little, indicating he actually needed it, and his shoes had a high shine.

Then what the spirits were doing became clear to me. They were alarmed, quiet, and stayed out of the creature's way. For the first time that night true fear washed over me.

“What brings you to this place and time?” Sylvio asked, and my arms got new goose bumps. I realized several things at once. The magic of Crios was greater than mine – he could show whatever he wanted us to see, no matter what magic I sent his way. He simply hadn’t been prepared for me to see past his disguise at first. And, Sylvio was being extremely polite. He had also stepped forward, between the rest of us and the fae. Crios was obviously a *power* among the fae, someone with standing. And, to me, he felt *ancient.*

“That is my concern,” he said. His tone was also polite.

There was silence in the hall. Carlisle, Sheila and I could sense we were separate from this exchange. We kept quiet and waited. I built the beginnings of a cocoon, and Carlisle slid a step sideways to stand next to me and Sheila.

Unexpectedly, Sylvio asked, “Is Morgen in danger?”

I caught a flash of the thing’s true eyes and shape then the fae was only the man again. When he spoke there was menace in his tone, “Has she asked you for aid?”

Sylvio chuckled, but it sounded forced, “She would never ask directly for *my* assistance. She has been manipulating the training Miss Rachel receives. Morgen wants her to know her true potential, and be willing to use it. What game is she playing?”

“One she is likely to lose.” He took a step forward and I saw that he had a limp. His right leg was bent at an odd angle.

“I have no designs on Morgen and no interest in her affairs,” Sylvio said.

“Ah, but she has always had an interest in you. I think you are the only male who has continued to deny her a kiss.”

Sylvio absorbed that. It seemed he wasn’t sure how Crios felt about that. “I prefer to rule my own life, and don’t want a fae, even as lovely as her, as a pet. What would you rather I did?”

Anger flared in the fae, “She toys with things she assumes she can control. She has forgotten the lesson her sisters learned too late.”

Sylvio was truly alarmed at that response, “I have never met Vamiri. I am not him, nor do I have ties to him.”

Once again Sylvio might have been speaking in a foreign tongue. I had no idea who either Crios or Vamiri were.

Anger and hate suddenly radiated off Crios at the sound of that name. He fixed Sylvio with a stony glare.

Sylvio continued, “I will say this, Morgen is your charge to protect, her safety is your concern. Miss Rachel’s safety is *my* concern. I will not allow Morgen to compromise that.”

Crios studied me for several seconds. Sylvio put a hand on my forearm. I could sense he was ready to jump us to safety if need be. I felt uncomfortable under the fae’s steady gaze.

I glanced at Carlisle and saw he had gone pale. Sheila was staring from Sylvio to Crios with her mouth in a tight line. What I was getting from Sylvio was a mix of feelings, he was unsure of his power against Crios, and at the same time ready to battle if it came to that. He was also worried – about my safety. He fiercely protected the things he considered his. It was stifling sometimes. I finished building the cocoon and met the fae’s gaze once again.

Crios’ eyes slid from mine, down to Sylvio’s hand on my arm, and up to his eyes. Then he spoke again, “Morgen cannot run forever. She is out of time. She must come back to me, or be consumed.” He sounded positive, resigned to that inevitability. I was sure it was not a choice he would have made.

“When I see her I will relay that message,” Sylvio promised.

Crios took another step forward, nodded, and vanished. Not like I did it, or like Sylvio. There was no apparent spell. One moment he was there, the next he was gone from my own senses and that of the spirits. There wasn’t even lingering evidence of fae magic.

It was Carlisle that thought of something to say first, although it wasn’t a question I would have asked. He blew out a long breath, rubbed his face with relief, and asked, “What would be capable of permanently injuring a fae that powerful?”

“Vamiri did it, eons ago.” Sylvio said, relief flooding him. “It’s an ancient battle between them that has never been resolved. I think Morgen is the only sea nymph still in existence, at least I haven’t heard of any others for some time. I see now why she concerns herself with humans and stays away from the ocean as much as she can. If Crios still exists in this realm, then it’s likely Vamiri does too.”

Carlisle's eyes got wider and wider at that explanation. I was glad when Sheila spoke up.

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" I think she'd hit the end of her rope by then.

"Gods, Sheila," he smiled and patted her cheek, like a father would a child, or a priest would an acolyte. "That's what people used to call them," he added.

It said something about her current state of mind that she didn't shoot him for his patronizing gesture. Maybe she'd forgotten the gun was in her hand.