

The Saturday Morning Breakfast Serial Vol. 1

RUN

It must have been putting the key in the lock that set off the trip spell. All I knew was that I saw a flicker of something out of the corner of my eye. I grabbed Bobbie Jo, flinging her bodily out of the line of fire so that the shaft of power missed skewering her. Instead, it passed through the empty air where she'd stood moving like lightning seeking the first solid object in its path. In this case, a battered old pick-up truck which went careening into the intersection amidst the sound of tearing metal and blaring car horns.

I didn't stop to help, not the driver, and not Bobbie, who was sprawled on the ground with her jaw hanging open with shock. There wasn't time. And damn it, they'd all be safer without my help. The best I could do for the innocents in the way was to run. I was the target.

I grabbed the key, twisting open the deadbolt that held the office door as the air shimmered not ten feet from me. I was diving through by the time the hound began to materialize. Slamming the door behind me I bolted past the marble topped counter that had once been the cashier's station of the bank. I was past the secretarial area and halfway down the hall when I heard the plate glass windows shatter. A muscled black form hurtled through the air, eyeless snout raised in the air to bay as he scented the fear of his prey.

"What in the he. . ." I zoomed past the figure of my boss, standing in the open doorway of his office. I only caught a glimpse of his expression, wide-eyed and horrified.

"Get back! Close the door!" I ordered, hoping he'd have the good sense to listen. I didn't wait to watch. My goal was in sight. The ancient bank vault that now served as our file room. My only hope was that the heavy steel door was thick enough to hold off not only the hound, but whoever held his leash long enough for me to open a gate.

I was running full out, but it wasn't going to be enough. The beast was right behind me. I could smell his foetid breath. Instinct made me dive, head first into the vault rolling to absorb the impact. The hound howled in frustration, his jaws having snapped air where my neck would have been.

A shotgun roared, and the nearest best squealed in agony. Blood and meat sprayed across the front of the old metal file cabinets. I rolled to a stop in time to see Robert Jacobs pump another round into the chamber and turn to aim down the hall. I scooted around the beast's carcass, grabbed the vault door. Pulling with all my strength I managed to get it moving. It swung to with a

clang that cut off a second shotgun blast.

(AND I'M OUT OF TIME, SO THAT'S IT FOR TODAY FOLKS. SEE YOU NEXT SATURDAY.)

Cie/C.T. Adams

CHAPTER 1 - RUN (CONTINUED)

Okay, I'd like to say that my first instinct was to protect Bob and Bobbie. I'd be lying. My first instinct was to run like hell. But looking at the dead hound on the floor, I couldn't. I couldn't abandon a 16 year old kid and her 86 year old grandpa to deal with what would be coming behind that hound. Yeah, she was a smart kid. And he was a tough old Texas coot who kept a loaded shotgun in his office, his truck, and by the front door of his house. But that didn't change anything. Not really.

So I gathered up my wits and my courage, and when I opened a seam in reality, instead of travelling to. . . oh, Barcelona, maybe the Bahamas, I went back into the front office. Making damned sure, by the way, that I was not in the line of fire from the hallway. Just in case Bob had the chance to reload.

In other words, on top of the counter.

I crouched down, preparing to attack the back of the dark-clad figure gathering a glowing ball of pure power in his left hand to throw at the defiant old man who was charging up the hall, shotgun held like a club.

"HEY UGLY" I screamed the words at the same time I threw the first thing that came to hand—a stapler. He spun around at the sound of my voice, the ball of power flying straight toward me.

Shit! I dived off, into the small space between the counter and my desk, raising my shield, as the marble where I'd been exploded, sending hot shards of stone and dust in a stinging rain that had slowed just enough not to break skin.

"You should've run while you could child." Evan Shadows, smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes. His handsome features were as cold and beautiful as carved marble.

I watched him gathering his will and his power for a strike that would, undoubtedly, kill me, and I wondered why? Why me? What had I ever done? I wasn't the strongest. Obviously, I wasn't the smartest. In the three years since I'd been discovered by the magical community I hadn't done anything to set myself apart as special. It didn't make sense.

Bob hadn't stopped his insane charge. He was behind the wizard now, and he swung his makeshift club with all of his might at the back of Evan's dark head, only to have it bounce harmlessly off an invisible barrier.

"Get back Grampa." Bobbie's voice was calm, steady. "And you, drop the . . . whatever, or I'll shoot. I've already called 9-1-1, the cops are on their way." Like I said, smart. God love her.

Evan snarled, and let the power dribble away. It was a smart move. Because he couldn't put up a new shield without dropping the old one, and he couldn't shift the old one without giving gramps an opening.

He looked down at me, his expression one of pure malice. "This isn't over."

"Of course not." I answered. But he wasn't there. In less time than it took me to form the words he'd opened a way, cutting a seam in reality, and was gone.

END OF CHAPTER 1 - RUN

NOW ON TO CHAPTER 2

PEACE THROUGH SUPERIOR FIREPOWER

"Get *out*." Roberta Jacobs Ross was a lady, and an attorney, so she was *far* too dignified to shout. But her face was an ugly, mottled red, and the body beneath her exquisitely tailored dove gray suit was quivering with suppressed rage. The paramedics who'd showed up to check on Bob had stopped by the door. He might be fine, but it looked as though she might stroke out if her blood pressure went any higher.

"But *mom*. . ." Bobbie Jo interrupted. "She saved our lives."

"Irrelevant. You wouldn't have *been* in danger in the first place if it wasn't for her."

"Roberta Elaine . . ." Bob's voice was stern. I decided to interrupt before things went downhill.

"It's all right." Everybody, up to and including the paramedics turned to stare at me. "I need to go anyway." I reached down to grab the backpack Bobbie had brought in for me. "You can take the damages out of my final paycheck."

"I fully intend to." Roberta answered, her chin rising so that her nose was even further up in the air than usual.

"*Roberta* . . ." Bob's voice was a low growl, but I didn't stay to listen to what he had to say. She was being a b****. But I couldn't blame her. She'd come to work

planning for an ordinary day and discovered something out of a horror or disaster movie. When she'd seen the corpse of the hound . . .

Oh, crap.

I had a flash of intuition. Or, maybe I finally managed to collate a lot of random information. Whatever. Normal people do not keep loaded guns within hands reach---even in Texas. Roberta's animosity had been strong from the start. I'd overheard her accusing her father of "taking in a stray cat" by hiring me. He'd answered "*Everyone* deserves a second chance Bobbi Sue."

She'd been on the run once too. Maybe even from the same type of danger I was.

It changed everything; and absolutely nothing. I needed to go.

I brushed past the paramedics on my way out the door. Yes, I could've opened up a seam, but you don't use obvious magic in front of the humans. Bad form and all that. Besides, you can trace back a seam--if you get back to the origin point quick enough. I did not intend to give Evan any reason to go back that office.

So I walked toward the one place that would have its own natural shielding. A church. Any church.

I wouldn't have to walk far. Tucker, Texas is a tiny town, but there are a LOT of churches. The closest was the Catholic church. Just three blocks -- straight up the tallest hill in town. And me in heels. UGH.

I'd only gotten halfway up when I heard the wheels of a truck crunching on the gravel edge of the paved road right behind me. The engine sounded familiar. I turned to look just as Bobbi Jo put her grandpa's old behemoth in park and cut the ignition. "Sahara, wait up."

"Are you *insane*? Your mother's going to kill you."

She opened the door and jumped down. (It was a *big* truck.) Reaching back in she grabbed a shoebox. "Grandpa wanted me to give this to you. He said I needed to catch you before you made it to the church, or we'd never see you again." She gave me a look that held equal parts anger and sadness. "Are you really leaving? Without explaining anything? Without saying *goodbye*?"

I looked into a pair of blue eyes that were shinier than they should have been. Dammit, dammit, dammit. I *like* Bobbi Jo. She is the closest thing I have to a friend next to Tracker. She wasn't that much younger than me, but she'd been raised to be an innocent and I did *not* want to get her killed.

"Bobbi, your mom's right. I'm trouble. Now that they know I'm here . . . You've got to go."

"Sahara Jones isn't even your real name is it?" Her voice was harsh with accusation. She thought I'd lied to her. That everything was a lie. I hadn't. At least not any more than necessary.

"It's what I want to be called."

She shook her head, and a single tear escaped.

I sighed. I should leave. Just go. Standing here was wasting time I might not have. It was probably a weakness to care what she thought. I'd never even see her again. But I couldn't leave it like this. I just couldn't.

"Fine. My real name is Beulah Emmaline Cotter."

"*Beulah?*"

I nodded.

"Ew. I mean, that's. . . that's the kind of name they'd give your great-great-maiden aunt or something."

"This from the woman whose family has only used *one* name for *how many* generations?"

She shook her head, presumably at the perfidy of parents and nomenclature. But when she looked at me next the tears were gone, and there was even a hint of amusement in her expression "So, *Sahara*. My grandfather told me to give you this." She shoved a battered cardboard shoebox, the lid held down with a large rubber band, toward my chest.

"Open it."

I did. And blinked. Slowly. Twice. At which point I remembered to close my jaw before flies could fly in. Because the inside of the box held cash, worn 20 and 100 dollar bills. A lot of them. And with the cash there was something else. A handgun. A *Ladysmith* revolver (undoubtedly loaded---this was from Bob after all) with a *pink* hand grip. And extra ammo.

"The gun was my grandma's. I'm supposed to tell you 'It may not do anything against that bastard, but it'll take down his dogs. And that's something.'"

It was my turn to blink back tears. I mean, to the Jacobs, this gun was a family

heirloom. And that was a *lot* of cash.

"Gramps has kept this box in his bottom desk drawer for years. 'Just in case.' I never knew what was in it."

"Bobbi, I can't . . ."

"You saved my *life* Sahara. You could've just run, but you came back and saved my grandpa. You take it."

I did.

Chapter 3 - Old Friends/Old Enemies (Part 1)

It was cool and dim inside the church. The only light was the sunlight streaming through the glass front doors, and casting beams of bright color where it passed through the jewel tones of the stained glass windows. I could feel powerful residual energy thrumming up from the floor, but it was calm, soothing. I needed to be soothed. I'd put the money and the gun in my backpack, and even though they didn't weigh that much, I was painfully aware of it.

I don't like guns. Don't get me wrong. I think in the hands of someone like Bob, they're perfectly okay. He knows what he's doing, and is careful. And I'm damned grateful he had that shotgun handy to keep me from becoming a "Scooby Snack". But I'm not Bob. It was going to take training and practice before I was comfortable shooting. But it might be worth investing the time. Because compared to my enemy I was practically helpless. Hell, compared to virtually any mage out there.

I did not curse my father. I was in a church. Honor thy father & mother and all that. And curses in my world carry weight. AND cursing is offensive magic. Oh no. So no. Because in the process of almost drowning me during my "baptism" he'd done something. My mentor hadn't been sure exactly what, so she hadn't dared mess with it. But there was an inhibition in my skull that made it impossible for me to use offensive magics. To the point where I collapse to the floor screaming in blinding pain if I so much as think about doing it.

So maybe the gun wasn't such a bad idea. But it still made me nervous. I walked toward the front of the church, approaching the altar a little timidly. I'm not religious (probably in reaction to dear old Daddy), but I have a healthy respect for the divine. I needed to come close enough to that altar that its latent energy would obscure evidence of my passage. But I didn't want to risk irritating the Almighty. If he/she exists. Which I'm not sure of. But I'm not sure he/she doesn't. So better safe than sorry.

I was dithering. I don't dither. Which meant the incident back at the office had

shaken me more than I wanted to admit. Damn it I liked it here. I'd made friends. I felt a surge of helpless rage. Not that it mattered. If I cared about these people, I needed to not endanger them. It was time to leave.

Casting one last look around, I gathered my will and created a seam. There's a trick to moving about using seams. You have to be able to clearly imagine where you want to go, where nobody's liable to be, and where you're not liable to set off electronic alarms and/or get arrested. (So no popping into the bank vault, or robbing the museum.) Once I realized that I would be needing to move around a lot to stay ahead of the bad guys I made a point of going to the library, looking up the landmarks of various locations. The internet is a marvelous thing. You can, given enough time and patience, find the floor plans of most public buildings. And I can extrapolate. I might not know which colors they use for the bathrooms in Grand Central Station. But I betcha I know the basic layout. And just how much variety of layout is there in your average Super WalMart?

So, where was I going? Washington, D.C. home of the Lincoln Memorial, the White House, the Jefferson Memorial, Congress, etc. DC is cold in winter and early spring. There might be people around, but not many. And if I remembered correctly, the weather channel had announced they were in the middle of a blizzard. I might freeze my tuchus off. But I wasn't likely to land on top of anybody. I stepped through my little gateway in reality. In less than a minute I went from the dim shadows of a little local church, to the *cold* shadows of a marble monument.

Shit. Why couldn't I have looked up the major landmarks of Grand Cayman, or Bermuda --- no not Bermuda, not risking that triangle thing. Bad mojo. But still. I stepped out from beside the huge sculpture honoring the 16th President of the US. A tall blonde woman in a thick winter coat and plaid muffler blinked at me, looking a little startled, but she was standing on the South side of the building, where she'd been reading the inscription of the Gettysburg Address. I nodded in greeting, trying to act perfectly normal, and not as though I'd just appeared, literally, out of thin air, and moved purposefully out of the entrance and down the wide flight of steps toward the reflecting pool and the main part of the mall.

Wind cut through my lightweight jacket like a knife, and my teeth started chattering. I didn't swear out loud. But the language going through my mind wasn't pretty. I needed a coat. And gloves. And sooner rather than later. The thing is, while I could visualize the monument from pictures on Wikipedia. I had no idea where the nearest store was. I moved as quickly as I dared across the icy walkway. There was a major thoroughfare up ahead. I could see a bus stop. Buses are heated. Right now heat sounded good. Oh yeah. And who knew, maybe the bus driver could tell me how to get to the nearest shopping center. I could only hope.

Chapter 3 - Old Friends/Old Enemies (continued).

I parked my butt under the heater vent as the bus lurched forward. Fate being as it was, I had a ton of money in my backpack, but had been forced to scabble for enough change for the fare. I was so not putting a twenty in the slot. I mean, dream on.

I only took the bus a few blocks before exiting at one of the better hotels. There was a line of taxis out front, and taking a taxi would be quicker, warmer, and would drop me off right at the door to the store. Once there, I grabbed one of the blue plastic carts and went on my squeaky-wheeled way through the aisles. First stop, juniors where I was picking up the warmest coat I could find. Then accessories, for hat, gloves, scarf, etc. I was beginning to feel as if I'd never be warm again. There are folks out there who love the cold.

I'm not one of them.

I was in the toiletries section, stocking up on some of the things I'd left behind, like oh, you know, a toothbrush, hairbrush, that sort of thing, when I heard a familiar voice.

"Sahara, wait up!" I turned to find Tracker loping down the main aisle, headed in my direction.

My first thought was Oh hell. NOW what? Don't get me wrong, Tracker is my cousin. He's also my best bud. We'd worked together back when I'd had a job for the new age crystal manufacturing company my mentor's family owned. But he shouldn't know I was here. And he'd always promised not to use his best skill (you guessed it -- tracking) to hunt me down unless it was an emergency. So instead of staring at his studly form with lust (which was the reaction of 3 cashiers and two female stock clerks) I probably wore an expression of flat out horror.

"We need to talk." He said it sotto voice. Of course that didn't matter when half the folks in the store are staring and listening as avidly as they can. They couldn't really help themselves. He's just so stareworthy. He's big, around 6'8" or so, built lean but muscular, with the smooth grace of a hunting cat. His eyes are jade green, his hair tousled and naturally blonde. If I wasn't related to him I'd probably be a drooling idiot like everyone else. He'd had the sense to come here dressed for the weather, and was wearing jeans, work boots, a heavy plaid flannel shirt and distressed leather bomber jacket.

"Oh hell." I looked around, hoping for somewhere with at least a semblance of privacy amongst all the wide aisles and bright lighting, and finally found it when I caught sight of the sliding doors leading out to the garden center.

Nobody in their right mind would be out there right now: which should make it just the perfect place for the two of us.

We'd barely made it through the doors when he started talking. "You have to turn yourself in."

"Hunh?" Clever, I know. But I'd had a rough day. Repartee was beyond me at the moment. Besides, I didn't have a freaking clue what he was talking about. I hadn't done anything turn in worthy. Then again, I hadn't done anything worth having people hunt me down and kill me either. So maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised.

"I know you. It had to be an accident. If you just come in and explain." He was so damned earnest. I just wished I knew what he was talking about.

"Explain what?"

"Sahara." He used that tone. You know the one. Sad, a little condescending. The 'don't bullshit me.' tone.

"I haven't done anything."

"Exactly!" He smiled. "Which is why you need to come back with me and turn yourself in. My dad can help you."

I wasn't sure how to answer that, but I didn't get the chance. I felt the shift of energies, saw the air a few feet away blur, just as a seam split reality. I caught a glimpse of Helena Troy (yeah, that really is her name), Evan's apprentice.

Oh crap. This was going to be bad.

Old Friends/Old Enemies - Continued (again)

"Oh shit." Tracker muttered. I couldn't have agreed with him more. Helena, at her best is hell on wheels. I don't even like to think about what she's capable of at her worst.

She's stunning, really seriously beautiful, with blue black hair that hangs down to her hips and milk white skin that wouldn't dare get a pimple. Her features are absolutely perfect. She'd be utterly irresistible if she wasn't so damned scary. As it is, most men, women, children and small animals are smart enough to stay out of her way. There was no way her coming here was a good thing. And if she'd found us, her mentor wouldn't be far behind.

Helena's a great match for Evan in looks, attitude, and power. Oh, and she was my supervisor on my first job. She knows me just as well as I know her. That

was so bad. Because she'd know that no matter what she did to me, I couldn't use magic against her.

Life is seriously unfair.

While I am occasionally dense, I am not generally completely stupid. I swore, grabbed my backpack from the cart, and ran down the nearest aisle, dashing past fifty pound bags of potting soil and spray guns with fertilizer. I felt magical energies shifting as Helena gathered power to strike, and her reinforcements arrived through a portal.

"Helena NO." Tracker shouted. "Don't. She's innocent. She didn't do it!"

"Of course she didn't." Evan's voice was smooth, seeming to come from a spot not twenty feet away from me. I couldn't see him over a pallet of landscaping bricks, but I could tell he was sneering. "I did."

I felt him loose a bolt of pure power, and Tracker began to scream.

Old Friends/Old Enemies (Continued yet again)

Tracker was screaming.

CRAP. I had to do something. Had to. I had a gun. I even know the basics of how to use one. (You can't work for Bob and not get the firearms safety lecture. Too many loaded weapons lying around.) But you have to see the target. To do that I'd have to get in a position where they might see me first. I shuddered with real and reasonable fear, and with revulsion as I began to smell burning hair and flesh.

NO! Taking a deep breath, I slung my backpack on my back and began climbing the metal shelving like a spider monkey. I was trying not to make much noise, not that they'd be likely to hear me over Tracker's screams and Evan's laughter.

Yeah, LAUGHTER. The bastard.

They hadn't noticed me. Laying flat on the top shelf I got in the pack and pulled out the revolver as quickly as I could. Praying, I switched off the safety, and began firing. He stopped laughing when the first shot (my third) hit him in the thigh. Screaming in rage and pain, he fell to the ground, his left leg useless. Helena screamed too. Ducking around the corner, she gathered her magic and sent a blow where I'd been, missing me by a scant inch as I crawled down the top shelf until I was at a point just above and beside Tracker's moaning form. I felt Evan and Helena gathering for another blow. There was no more time. Gathering my own power I decided to try the only thing I could think of, opening a seam in reality beneath Tracker's body and diving in after

him.

It was our only chance. It had better work.

I managed to grab a deep breath on my way down. Good thing, because the seam I'd created opened into the deep end of the swimming pool of my former high school.

It's not as stupid as you think. First, it was wet, to put out Tracker's fire, and cold, to help with the burns. Too, it was not a place that would spring immediately to the minds of my enemies. Oh, they could follow, but they'd have to work magic to do it, and with Evan injured and the trouble my gunshots had probably caused, I didn't think they'd have the time. And it wasn't like I intended us to stay here. Besides, it was the first place I thought of, and the one place I was sure I'd be able to link to. It was, after all, the very first place I'd ever created a seam to.

My feet touched bottom, and I pushed upward with all my might. The wet backpack felt like a lead weight in my arms, but I wasn't about to let it go. Opening my eyes, I focused on the dark shape bobbing slackly on the surface of the water, ash darkening the water around it.

Oh God. Tracker!

I'm not a great swimmer, but I managed to get over to him and turn him over. Wrapping my arm around him from behind, I struggled to drag his limp form across the pool to the steps at the shallow end. He was breathing, but it sounded raspy and wrong. And his skin, where it hadn't been protected by clothing . . . I shuddered. He needed healing; needed help, and needed it now, if he wasn't going to have permanent scarring and permanent disability. I couldn't let that happen. Never mind my past. Never mind what issues I might have with my former mentor. My friend needed healing, and she was the best healer in the business. Checking to make sure the safety was on on the Ladysmith, I shoved it into the main compartment of the backpack.

Swallowing my fear for Tracker, and my own nerves at what I was about to do, I unzipped the little inner pocket and reached inside. The crystal she'd given me when I'd started as her apprentice was where it always was, dangling from a delicate gold chain. If it still worked, Tracker and I would be able to pass through her wards.

I slipped it over my head. Pulling Tracker's still form close, I opened a seam to my master's home, all the while praying that she hadn't recalibrated her defenses and that I wasn't about to obliterate us both.

I stepped through the seam in reality, dragging Tracker's limp body into the lab of my former master's home. Chlorinated water pooled around us, as I lay him gently on the floor and stripped off my backpack. I screamed "CASSANDRA" at the top of my lungs, my voice echoing off of the thick stone walls.

Something was wrong.

Other than the obvious.

There was dust. Cassandra doesn't do dust. Dust can ruin a potion. In any quantity it can disrupt a spell. I can't tell you how many times I was lectured on appropriate housekeeping habits. But there was dust in the lab. And Cassandra didn't answer my call.

I heard footsteps crossing the floor above me, but they were the heavy, ponderous movements of Lucille, Cassandra's housekeeper. There was no time to think about it. Tracker was badly injured. Shock was a very real possibility. I ran across the lab to the locked storage cabinet. Using my crystal I was able to get past the wards and open the lock. Everything I was looking for was inside. There were two large crystals their edges diamond sharp, their color the deep vibrant rose of Cassandra's orders. Several other crystals were there as well. My own, apprentice attempts. They would not be nearly so powerful, but they were mine, which meant that I could unlock every bit of their power, and there were a lot of them.

Pulling the hem of my shirt out to form a "pocket" I scooped all of them from the cupboard. "Buelah?" Lucy's voice called down the stairwell.

"It's me Lucy. Get Cass. I've got an injured man. He needs help!" I dashed back to where he lay. Kneeling in the sooting water beside him, I grabbed the largest of Cassandra's healing crystals and set it on the center of his chest. Closing my eyes, I concentrated. I wanted to remember this perfectly. Mispronunciation would diminish the power of the spell. Tracker couldn't afford that. Gathering my talent around me, I began chanting. I opened my eyes as a strong, clean wave of power flooded out of me and into him. Tracker's back arched, his entire body straining as the magic did its work. I watched as blistered and blackened skin sloughed away, replaced by new, healthy tissue. I focused the power, concentrating on his eyes, his face. It was important the healing be perfect, so he wouldn't be blinded, or hideously scarred. It was working! I felt a surge of satisfaction as I reached for the second rose crystal.

"NO!" Lucy's hand swatted mine away. Grabbing me by my collar she hauled me forcibly to my feet. It was easy for her. Lucy is not a small woman, standing six-foot two in her bare feet and weighing in at over three hundred pounds. She shoved me toward the stairs, glaring at me when I turned to look back. "The boy will be fine. I'll tend to him. You must save her."

She grabbed the fallen crystals, shoving them at me as she pushed me toward the stairs. "I've done everything I can, but I haven't got any magic. She needs you. She's in her bedroom." The terrified urgency in her voice spurred me on at a run up from the basement lab, through the house to her third floor bedroom, my wet shoes squelching and sliding on the hardwood floors.

I'd always admired Cassandra's bedroom. It was a large room, a windowed turret letting sunlight or moonlight stream in. The walls were covered with cream wallpaper decorated with delicate pink roses. All of it, bright, light, airy. But that very brightness made it unmercifully apparent just how ill the woman lying on the antique four-poster bed must be. It illuminated the streaks of gray marring the tangle of midnight hair sprawled across her pillow, the crepey texture of the pallid gray skin with marks like dark bruises beneath her closed eyelids. Her grey tomcat, Maurice, was curled up on the bed beside her, refusing to so much as budge when I rushed over to the bed and sat down beside her.

"Oh my God. Cassandra, what happened to you?" Grabbing the healing crystal she had made, I set it onto her chest. As I had with Tracker, I gathered my will, and began the chant. I felt the power of the crystal rise and release, felt it recognize the woman it had originally come from, rushing home to her. But it didn't heal her, didn't stop. I felt it move onward, as if Cassandra's body were nothing more than a conduit.

What in the hell?

I concentrated, using my gift to follow the flow of power. It was going into the wards, to protecting the house. My mouth went dry, and I found myself swallowing convulsively, trying to work up moisture. Cassandra had tied her life force to the wards, to protecting this house. And in finding that out, I also learned why. There were old magics, ancient weapons hidden in this house; terrible, fearsome things that had been entrusted to her family in antiquity. She could not, would not betray the trust her family had held for generations. She would protect them with her last breath if need be, and that was exactly what she was doing.

I grabbed several of my own crystals, laying them in a circle on her breast and repeated the chant. Less power came out, of course, but this time, with the wards fully charged, the power stayed in her body. Color slowly came back to her pallid skin. Her eyes opened, and ever so slowly she turned her head toward me, a pale shadow of her usual smile coming to her lips.

"That wasn't half bad apprentice. You're learning." She whispered the words from a parched throat.

"Cass . . ."Sometime during the healing I'd taken her hand, and she squeezed it gently to silence me. "Shush. I need to tell you something while I can. You were right about Evan. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Rest. . ."

"No!" Her voice only held a fraction of it's old strength, but her dark eyes flashed. "You must listen. I can't hold him off forever. He's pulled back to regain his strength, but he has something planned. I know it."

"Yes. He does." I squeezed her hand. "I know. He's been attacking me. And now I think I know why." I met her gaze. "He wants my crystal. Wants to use it to let himself through the wards."

She moved her head a fraction in what might have been a nod. "It's why I had Lucy come here. To keep her safe. I would have called you back too, but I didn't know how to reach you." Her eyes were fluttering closed. I could see she was utterly exhausted, but too stubborn to give in.

"It's all right. I'm here now. We'll fix this."

I tried to make it sound like I actually believed we could. I didn't. But it was what she needed to hear, and I could lie for a good cause.

"Move aside." Lucy's voice was rough. I turned to see her standing with Tracker in the bedroom doorway. She crossed the room, pushing her way past me to take a post beside the bed. "I'll take care of her now. She needs broth, and rest." She gave me a look. "You look like something the cat," she nodded to Maurice, "dragged in." She cast a glance over her shoulder at Tracker. "The two of you get into some dry clothes and fix yourself something to eat. We'll talk in the kitchen."

It was a dismissal. I didn't mind. Lucy was more than Cassandra's employee. She was her friend, had been for longer than I've been alive. I dragged myself across the floor, feet heavy with sudden, overwhelming exhaustion. She was right. I needed rest. And food. I'd done one hell of a lot of magic today, more than I should. I was going to be useless until I had a chance to recharge my batteries.

I just hoped that Evan would give me the time.

"Did she call you Buelah?"

"Shut up . . . Buford." Tracker flinched. "How do you know . . ."

"We're named for the same ancestor dude." I tried to make it sound ironic, but I

was probably too tired. I was only a few steps from my bedroom and bath, and I wasn't completely positive I would make it that far. The adrenaline had drained off, leaving me weak and weary.

"We're related?" He sounded shocked, horrified, and betrayed. It made me stop and blink at him stupidly. I mean, I'd always known. It hadn't occurred to me that he hadn't.

"Yeah, cousins. My dad was the black sheep of your dad's family."

He just stood in the middle of the hallway staring at me.

"Look, I'm wiped. You will be too, when the after-effects of the spell wear off in a couple minutes. There's a bathroom two doors down on the right, and the guest bedroom is the next door past it. I don't know where we'll find clothes to fit you, but we'll worry about it later."

He nodded. His face was red, and he looked really annoyed, but he didn't say anything, just stomped past me. Fine. Whatever. I was too pooped to care enough to try to figure out what his problem was. I dragged myself the last few steps to my bedroom. Closing the door I stripped, leaving my clothes in a trail that led to my beautiful, soft, inviting . . .

* * *

I woke up to the smell of steak, and the warmth of a purring cat curled up beside me.

"The boy told me you didn't eat." Lucy scolded.

"Too tired." I admitted. I shifted carefully around the cat, yawned hugely and tried to get my bearings. "How're Cassandra and Tracker doing?"

"Better. Much better." Lucy was already walking out of the room. "Now eat. We can talk after you've had a shower and gotten dressed. We'll be down in the parlor when you're ready. There are plans to be made."

Great. We'd be making Plans: Like how to protect the magical equivalent of weapons-grade plutonium from the evil wizard who was bent on killing me.

A part of me wanted to stay in bed and pull the covers over my head. Instead, I cut myself a big bite of steak and tried to think of something, anything, I might be able to contribute to the cause.

I walked into the living room and into the middle of a conference. Cassandra had apparently set up a circle, and used it to contact Tracker's parents. It wasn't a difficult spell, but it was a complex one. Way, way beyond my abilities at this point. Still, it was useful. From the doorway I could see the magical version of a hologram showing me my aunt and uncle, perched on the very edge of their couch, staring at their son, looking worried and upset. Aunt Eleanor is thin to the point of emaciation, her long dark hair untouched by gray, her skin untouched by time. My uncle is an older, less handsome version of his son.

Looking at Tracker, I couldn't blame him. Yes, the burns were mostly healed, and there probably wouldn't be any permanent scarring. But his hair was scorched off, he was dressed in a lavender track suit with pink stripes and no shirt, and his color looked *bad*. Worse than it should have considering the amount of healing he'd received. Which meant he'd been up to something other than resting. Damn it.

"I had to." He was arguing with his mother, chin thrust forward aggressively. We can't afford for the shields to fail."

Oh *crap*. He'd reinforced the shields? Didn't he realize . . .

"SO, without consulting us, you've tied yourself to Cassandra and her spell."

Eleanor Cotter's voice dripped icicles and I was suddenly very, very glad I was all the way over here and behind a serious set of shields.

"He's an adult Eleanor." Tracker's father had a low voice, with a gravelly rumble to it. I've never really taken to much to him. He reminds me too much of my own father. No surprise, they're brothers after all. "He's entitled to make decisions without our input."

"No matter how stupid?" She asked.

"No matter." He agreed.

Tracker flushed, and his eyes were flashing dangerously, but he didn't say anything. Probably just as well.

"So, where's the girl?" Eleanor asked. "Still hiding?"

"Cassandra told you mother, she didn't *do* anything wrong."

"Then she should have come forward and explained herself."

"Oh yeah, that'd work so well, considering how understanding and willing to listen you all have been." I muttered it under my breath, but they all heard.

Tracker turned to face me, giving me a look that said as clearly as words that I needed to be careful. He was probably right. His mother is from one of the oldest families in the magical culture, practically royalty. And she has *no* sense of humor. His father isn't much better.

"Eleanor, you're being unreasonable." Cassandra spoke calmly. "Sahara left immediately after I struck her and never called or checked back. She had no way of knowing I'd been attacked, let alone that Evan had blamed it on her. And as she still hasn't got the ability to work offensive spells the most sensible thing she could do was go to ground."

"*Beulah*" Eleanor used my given name as if it were a curse, "nearly got my son killed."

"Mom, she saved my life. She attacked Evan and Helena, and brought me here."

Eleanor turned to Cassandra, "You *said* . . ."

"I didn't use magic Mrs. Cotter. I used a gun."

There was a long silence. Every one of them turned to stare at me, eyes wide. It would've been funny if the situation weren't so damned serious. The thing about wizards/magic users is that they generally see magic as the only solution. It would never occur to any of them to do what I'd done, or that someone like Bob might have a snowball's chance in hell of defending his family. It's a blind spot, and a weakness.

"You *shot* him?" Buford senior blurted out the words everyone else had been thinking.

"Yeah. But I didn't do a very good job of it. Just got him in the leg." Bob would be so disappointed. As soon as I got a chance I'd need to clean the gun and find a way to get out and practice with it.

"She *shot* him." He repeated the words, sounding somewhat stupid.

"And saved my life." Tracker answered. "Then she brought me here---even though she didn't know Cassandra hadn't changed the wards. She risked her life to save me."

"And now you're risking yours." Eleanor was displeased.

"It's mine to risk."

I decided to interrupt. The family squabble was liable to go on indefinitely and Cassandra was starting to wear out. She'd never admit it, of course. Too proud.

But I could see it, even if nobody else could. "Look, this is all very interesting, but it doesn't solve the problem at hand. Evan tried to kill Cassandra and blame it on me. He wants whatever it is that's hidden in the basement and we can't afford for him to get his hands on it."

Everyone turned to look at me. I hate being the center of attention, especially with everybody so hostile. But somebody needed to get this discussion back on track. "Cassandra is wearing herself out. So can we please get back to basics? What are we going to do? What's the plan?"

"We haven't come up with one yet." Tracker admitted. "My tying my life force to the shields has bought us some time, and should give Cassandra a chance to recover. But other than that, we haven't done a damn thing but argue."

Great. Super.

"All right. Can I make a suggestion?"

"Go ahead." Cassandra was the one who agreed. Everyone else just glowered at me.

"He wants my crystal."

She nodded.

"Let's give it to him."

There was a cry of protest from Eleanor. Cassandra and Buford Sr. just looked thoughtful, as if they were pretty sure they knew what I was thinking, and were trying to test the possibility in their minds. Tracker just looked worried. He turned to me his voice filled with concern.

"Sahara, he's going to be able to tell if we change the wards. He knows his sister's magic too well."

"I'm not suggesting we change the wards."

"You're not?"

"I'm suggesting we *move* them."

"Is that even possible?" He turned to his mother. She nodded to him and answered.

"Barely."

Cassandra gave me a long, assessing look. When she spoke her voice was firm, as though she was expecting argument from everyone here and was determined not to give in. "We are not sending you out to deal with my brother unless you are fully capable of defending yourself."

"Well that would be lovely," I admitted. "But since I've *never* been able to do offensive magic . . ."

"Cass believes she knows how to heal you." Lucille spoke for the first time since I'd walked in the room. I blinked a few times. She'd been so silent, sitting in a dark corner at the far side of the room, that I hadn't even noticed she was there.

"You're in no shape to heal anyone right now." Uncle Buford stated. "And we can't afford for you to pull your power back from the shields."

Cassandra sighed. "I know. But it doesn't have to be me. We just need someone with healing ability, and someone else whom she trusts implicitly."

"I can do the healing." Eleanor didn't sound happy about it. That was all right. She couldn't possibly be *less* happy about the thought than I was. And then there was that other, trick question. Who did I trust implicitly?

I was sweating like a pig. It wasn't that hot. Not really. The weather was pleasant, and the church was air conditioned. But I was nervous. Oh, hell, who was I kidding. I was *terrified*.

Cassandra had explained the plan to heal me back at the house. It was simple enough in theory. We needed to recreate as closely as possible the circumstances where my powers were bound. When we reached the point where they'd initially been blocked, my subconscious would react, my magic would flare, and Eleanor should be able to see what my father had done and cut through the bindings. Theoretically.

It actually stood a good chance of working. And it wouldn't hurt me a bit . . . physically. Psychologically on the other hand . . . well, let's just say I wasn't having a good time.

Eleanor was using my cell phone to talk to Cassandra, going over last-minute details. Neither Cass nor Tracker could leave the house at the moment, and a spell like the one they'd used last night was too likely to interfere with what we were trying to accomplish here. So they were conversing the way normal humans did it. A new experience for them, I think.

"You don't have to do this you know." Bob laid a hand on my shoulder. "They

can't force you."

"It needs to be done." I shuddered. "I know that." But oh, Lord, I did hate it. Oh yes I did.

"If you're sure." He sounded dubious. "Now tell me again how this is going to work."

I gestured toward the baptismal pool. Most of the churches I was familiar with didn't do immersion baptisms. So no pool. We'd wound up going back to the same actual church. Which was probably why I was so freaked. "I put on the robe. Uncle Buford will be the minister. The three of us step into the pool." My mouth went dry, and I had a bitter taste on my tongue. I had to close my eyes and force myself to continue. "It'll start like a regular baptism. Only you hold me down."

"Hold you down?" He was frowning, clearly unhappy with the thought. Him and me both.

"As if you're drowning me."

"Sahara . . ."

"I've got magic. When I panic, I'll draw on it instinctively, try to lash out. And that's when Eleanor will cut the bindings."

"It sounds damned dangerous."

"Uncle Buford will be shielding you to make sure nothing happens to you."

"It's not me I'm worried about."

"I trust you." And I did. He was just about the only person I could say that about. Which was why I'd chosen him to do this with me.

He grunted acknowledgment. Obviously still unhappy.

"If everyone is ready," uncle Buford sounded snappish. "The night isn't getting any younger, and we don't want the reverend, or the police to interrupt."

Across the room Eleanor finished her conversation and folded my cell phone closed. She set it onto the table next to my backpack and strolled over to the edge of the pool. She looked over at Bob and me. "It's time."

Oh joy.

Chapter ????

When in Doubt . . .

I slid the white baptismal robe over my head and walked, barefoot, to the edge of the pool. Bob was right behind me. Uncle Buford had already waded in holding a big bible wrapped in plastic. Eleanor was sitting on the edge of the pool, looking more serene than I'd ever seen her.

"Is the residual magic of this place going to cause a problem?" Because there was a lot of it. As much as the Catholic church where I'd taken sanctuary. I felt it humming around me, pressing against me, as powerful as a high-tension electric wire.

Eleanor answered. "If your father could do enough magic to bind you, I should be fine."

When does confidence become arrogance? Then again, she might just be that good. She had quite the reputation.

"Enough stalling." Buford growled. "Get in."

Crap.

The pool was bright blue, and the lights beneath the surface reflected through the water, giving the entire room a blue-green tint, with ripples of light and shadow that moved across the walls as ripples flowed across the pool.

Bob waded in ahead of me, his expression still worried. It almost made me smile. I'd been right to choose him. He'd look out for me. A sudden thought occurred to me. "Bob, can you swim?"

"Like a fish. Why?"

"Oh good." I didn't answer his question. It was kind of embarrassing really. But if this went sideways, and I wound up creating a seam, we'd probably wind up in the deep end of the high school pool again. It was where I'd gone the first time; where I took Tracker; and for some weird reason I couldn't explain, my 'default setting' under stress.

We stopped facing Buford, who began reading the words of the baptism ceremony, his deep voice booming and echoing through the big room. He had a certain natural theatricality, and made the most of the reading. The words were beautiful, moving. And in that instant I wished, very much, that I did believe. I wanted to. I really did.

I felt Eleanor's power building, but it was as if from a distance. Everything

seemed . . . odd. . . almost surreal. It occurred to me that I might be going into shock. For a brief instant I thought about calling the whole thing off. But no, I had to do this. I *had* to.

And then the moment I'd been dreading came. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and ducked under the surface as Bob's hand pushed down on the top of my head, and held me under.

Panic! Absolute total freaking panic. The logical part of my brain might know and trust Bob, but I couldn't BREATHE. Elbows and knees lashed out, but the blows were slowed by the water, and he held me inexorably under. As the pressure of the breath I was holding built in my lungs, my magic built too. Sparkling stars shot across my darkening vision, and I felt a stab of blinding pain as my power tried to shoot outward, slamming against the dam my father had built. Then a sharper, lance of pain, like a scalpel slicing across my mental skin.

I felt the rush of power hit me like a speeding truck. So *much* power. Damnation, was I really *that* strong? Wow. In the same instant, Bob released me and I rose to the surface to gasp for sweet, glorious oxygen.

"Did it work?" Bob asked. "I hated holding you like that, but they insisted."

"Oh yeah." I looked into his eyes and smiled "It's okay." Turning to Eleanor I started to say thanks, when I saw a telltale shimmer in the shadows behind her, felt power wash across my skin.

Nor was I the only one. Eleanor whirled around, power at the ready. Buford started wading as fast as he could toward the end of the pool. Glancing over his shoulder at me he shouted "Get him out of here!"

"What's going on?" Bob looked back and forth, trying to grasp what was happening, and failing.

"We've got company coming, and not the happy kind. Hang on!" I grabbed him by the arm, gathered my will, and opened a seam.

I opened a seam to the office. I'd worked there long enough, I could envision the place in my sleep. And while it might not be the perfect choice, it was, at least, better than the deep end of the high school swimming pool. Certainly it would be drier. And he was close enough to home to be able to get a ride.

I didn't stay to talk. Unless I missed my guess, there was a battle going on. A battle I was a part of.

I gave Bob a fierce hug, quick thanks, and opened a seam next to the ruined counter. "Be careful Bob. I don't know how, but Evan knows I care about you, and he found this place before. He could be back if we don't stop him."

We had to stop him. The question was how? Not only how to manage it, but HOW was he finding me? I'd been careful. Damned careful. And there's no way he could've traced us to the church using magic. Not with the ambient energy of the place interfering.

As I stepped through and into a pitched battle the realization hit me. There was only one way Evan could have found us here. Someone told him where we were going. But *who*?

I had set my seam to empty me into the small space in the main room behind the altar. It was a bit of a ways away from the action, but I didn't want to materialize into the middle of a fireball, or gunshot. And there were gunshots. Helena had apparently gotten tired of the interference with her magic and decided that less was more. She wasn't a very good shot, and her stance was all wrong. But that wouldn't make the bullets hurt any less if by a stroke of bad luck you got hit.

I moved to the far wall, moving quickly and in silence toward the battle. As I did, I gathered my will, wondering if what I was about to try would work. If Helena couldn't do magic here, could I? If I couldn't, there was always the Ladysmith. But it was in my backpack in the farthest corner of the room. No, magic was my best bet. Assuming, of course, that our little ceremony had worked. It *felt* like it had. But, oh. . . crap, what if Well, there was only one way to tell.

Taking a deep breath, I positioned myself, carefully hiding the bulk of my body behind the door frame leading into the baptismal area. Gathering my will, I tried to envision a ball of fire the size of a tennis ball. I felt the power being pulled from deep within me. It was painful, but not the spike of disabling pain of before. No, this was deeper, but more tolerable. It made me ache to my bones, but I could stay upright, could still *think*. Narrowing my eyes against the pain, I made a motion like throwing a fastball into the center of Helena's back. At the end of the "pitch" I released the energy I'd been holding.

A blue-white ball of flaming energy the size of a beach ball hit between her shoulderblades hard enough to lift her off of her feet and send her flying, face-first, into the far wall, leaving an indent like a cookie-cutter form in the drywall before she collapsed limply to the ground.

Oh my.

My knees weakened, and I wobbled a little, both from the effort it had taken

and from sheer surprise.

Evan snarled. Whirling, he launched a fireball at me that was just as powerful, and far more controlled than my own. I dived and rolled, managing to get mostly out of the way. My borrowed robe was scorched, but it was too wet from my faux baptism to actually catch fire.

Evan gathered his will, and would've attacked me again, but Buford was on him. The fire that blazed in his dark blue eyes was a match for the lightninglike power that was loosed from his hand, flying in an eye-searing bolt over Eleanor's prone body and into Evan's hastily-raised defenses.

I crawled toward my backpack. Helena wasn't moving; wasn't breathing, but I wasn't ready to try magic again just yet. I'd put too much of myself into that one blow. Besides, the lack of control frightened me. If I tried to loose a blast at Evan, I'd be likely to take Buford with him. So I didn't dare. But I could shoot the bastard. Oh yes I could!

I was holding the backpack, drawing the gun when I felt . . . something. A shudder ran through me, from head to toe, and the crystal of my necklace burned like fire against my chest.

In my mind, like a pained scream, I heard Cassandra's voice. *Sahara, I NEED YOU!*

WE ARE BETRAYED!

I opened a seam into the first-floor bathroom of Cassandra's house. Strange? Not really. It was the one place I was pretty sure wouldn't be affected by a pitched battle. I could seam in there and not be in the way.

I appeared in the middle of the ancient-claw foot tub, and almost fell on my ass. The house was shaking. Not just a little either. We're talking major tremors, resulting from explosions.

Oh shit.

I could smell smoke, even feel heat rising up through the floor as I ran. I could feel Cassandra's pain. I don't know how. But it *hurt*, making me stumble as I made my way to the staircase leading down to the lab.

As I steadied myself against the stairwell wall I realised, I still had the Ladysmith in my hand. It was loaded, but the safety was on. I remedied that, and continued downward, moving as quickly and quietly as I could. Not that anyone was liable to hear me over the sounds of battle and Cassandra's screams

of pain and defiance. Still, I was hoping for some semblance of surprise.

I should've known better.

After all. Tracker had tied himself to the shields. He'd have *felt* me coming. I was two steps from the bottom when he turned to me with a cold, hard, smile on a face that both was, and wasn't as familiar as my own.

"Well, well, you're finally here. Hoping to save the day?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. It was one thing to have Cassandra *say* we were betrayed. It was another to see, with my own eyes, that Tracker was the betrayer. Tracker, my best friend. It didn't make *sense*. I felt a wave of pain that had nothing to do with Cassandra's injuries, or my own exhaustion. It was purely emotional. I fought not to let it show, and failed.

He laughed. "I guess I played my part well then. I'm the last person you would've expected to betray you." With insulting casualness, he threw a blast of magical energy at me. I got out of the way in time, moving behind a ruined counter for cover, steadying the gun to take aim.

"Still no magic? Then they interrupted in time. Too bad for you."

He lobbed a ball of energy up so that it hit the countertop, spreading like magical napalm, over the formica, down the sides of the cabinets. Everywhere it went, it burned white hot, like magnesium. The light from it was bright enough to make my eyes water, or maybe that was the smoke, because smoke was filling the basement making my breath burn in my lungs. Through watering eyes I saw Cassandra's form, crumpled on the ground in the center of her summoning circle. Not far from her was a large, still smoldering corpse that had once been Lucy.

A tidal wave of rage surged through me. With a roar of defiance, using a two-handed grip, I began firing the gun. Steady, measured shots. Of course he was shielded against them. That wasn't the point. He thought I didn't have offensive magic; thought the gun was my only weapon. When the last shot was fired, he'd let his guard down. When he did, I was going to kill him.

I pulled the trigger that last time; saw the concentric rings of light and shadow as the bullet impacted his shield an instant before he dropped it entirely. Gathering my will and my power, I prepared, and threw, my best magical punch at him.

But in the instant I released the power I felt something else. A seam was opening, the shields had crumbled enough that someone was coming through. Whether it was a friend or enemy I had no clue. I turned, readying myself. But

so did Tracker, and my blow, which would have killed him had it hit full on, only clipped him, setting his right side on fire, sending him into a staggering spin as he screamed hideously. I saw Buford step through the seam, Eleanor's limp form in his arms, his body interposed between me and his son. I shouted for him to get down, but he simply stood there, in dumbstruck horror. And before I could move around him, before I could do anything, I felt another seam and knew that Tracker was gone.

#

Helena and Evan were dead, the church burned to the ground around them. Lucy was dead; Eleanor and Cassandra gravely enough injured that they will never fully recover. I didn't chase Tracker. It was more important that I get the wards and shields back up around the house and its contents. And it was more important to me that I save my friends lives if I could.

The battle was over. Not the war. He'd be back.

And I'd be ready.

THE END