

Taylor Davis

and the Quest for the Immortal Blade

Taylor Davis, book 3

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Lesson #1
Absence Makes a Heart Grow Fickle

“Get out, Taylor! Get out now!”

“Are you crazy?” I threw back. “It’s my rental car.”

“Then pull over and I’ll get out.”

A wiser man than I once mused how the best-laid schemes of mice and men often go awry. I don’t know much about the calculating capacity of rodents, but I can testify to the rest of it. I thought my life was finally looking up. I thought the lessons I learned during two tours of duty against Swaug, trolls, Gorgoks, and other miscellaneous forces of evil had prepared me to face anything. But they were proving entirely useless against my current adversary.

I drove into a parking lot and braked but kept the car in gear so the front doors wouldn’t unlock. “Jen, just calm down a minute and let’s talk this over.”

“There’s nothing to discuss, Taylor. You’ve already admitted you like Cali. I heard you tell Shaun that you think she’s pretty.”

“What was I supposed to say? He asked me what I thought of his date.”

She pouted, arms crossed over her chest. “You could have at least said she wasn’t as pretty as me.”

I stared at her in disbelief. This kind of behavior was so un-Jennifer. She’d been quiet since we’d left the movie theater, where we’d watched a kick-butt comic book movie with my best friend Shaun Runyon and his newest flame, but that was nothing unusual. Jen had never been one to talk just to fill space. But this? I had no idea where these accusations were coming from, let alone how to counter them.

“Jen, you know beauty has never been a critical factor in our relationship.”

Her eyes widened in outrage, effectively underscoring my verbal ineptitude.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I faltered. “Of course, you’re pretty. I just meant that wasn’t what attracted to me to you initially.”

Jen rolled her eyes in exasperation as she turned to look out the window, effectively closing off further conversation. I thumped my forehead against the steering wheel, wishing I'd inherited even a teaspoonful of my brother's finesse with the ladies.

I'd spoken true. Jennifer and I had been infants together. Friendships formed around dirty diapers and grape jelly faces simply didn't involve boy-girl attraction. I was referring to her character traits that held our friendship together during the cooties stage—her tolerance of spiders, frogs, and snakes when our moms planned play dates; her ability to keep some of my select school exploits secret; a strong constitution during the years in which I took as few showers as possible. Her drop-dead gorgeous, make me bug-eyed beauty came later. But how could I possibly verbalize all that?

“Just admit it, Taylor. You wish you could have traded places with Shaun tonight.”

I reeled with the unfairness of her statement. Hadn't I caught the first plane out of Santo Domingo after Zander National Academy closed its doors for the summer and flown 1500 miles to see her? The ticket had burned three months' wages, not to mention the car, dinner, and a movie. She had absolutely no cause to be jealous.

But maybe this wasn't jealousy at all.

I peered at Jen in the dim glow of the dashboard but found I could no longer read her like I used to. In the sixteen months since we'd declared ourselves a couple, I'd seen her exactly three times. The first had taken place right after I rescued her from a hostage situation in the anteroom of Hades, so maybe it didn't count in the relationship-building department. The second had been a family vacation back to Somerville last fall, when our parents had been stingy on granting us alone time since we were both only fifteen. Technically, today was our first real date, a rite of passage I'd anticipated for four years, but Jen had just taken it way off script. Maybe she wasn't as keen on the idea as I had been.

“This isn't really about Cali, is it?” I asked quietly.

Her shoulders hunched forward, a dead giveaway.

“What's wrong? Did you hate the movie? Did your burger give you indigestion? Did you get low score at the arcade?” I grasped at faint hopes.

“No.”

“Bad day at school?”

“No.”

“Your parents giving you crap?”

She signed heavily. “No.”

Then that pretty much left...me. But I'd only arrived that afternoon. How had I ruined everything so quickly?

“I'd rather hear the truth than keep guessing.”

She looked up and shook her head in frustration. “I'm sorry, Taylor. I shouldn't have said anything. Let's just go back to my house and pretend it didn't happen.”

I gave a little cough-laugh. “Sure. Let's have a jolly time hanging out with your parents while you pretend not to be mad, and I pretend to understand what the heck this is all about.”

“I'm not mad.”

I pointed to the road where our conversation began. “Did I misinterpret ‘get out now’?”

She hung her head, and I'm pretty sure the tear she swiped away was born of genuine remorse. “I am sorry, Taylor. I didn't mean to be so harsh. It's just been hard, you know? When we're so far apart all the time.”

“That's why I got on an airplane this morning,” I said. “I thought it might be a good remedy for that distance thing.”

She smiled weakly. “You know what I mean. I am glad you're here. I just wish you didn't have to miss out on so much of the normal stuff. Like football games...or studying for exams.”

I risked putting the car in park and turned on the seat to face her. “I know it's been tough. I don't like it either, but we've only got two more years of high school. Then I'll be back in the States for college, and we can be together whenever we want.”

“But what about all the stuff between now and then? Like homecoming. And prom. I don't want to miss those.”

“Then don't. Go. Have fun. Tell me all about them when we video chat.”

“It's not the same, and you know it.”

My perfect first date suddenly felt like it was morphing into the worst-ever first breakup.

“Two years, Jen,” I repeated, a little desperately. “We can hang on that long, can't we? We're halfway there.”

It took her a moment to answer. “Let's talk about it tomorrow. You're here all weekend, and I'm probably too emotional to make a rational decision right now. Okay?”

I nodded reluctantly, though I was agreeing primarily with her irrationality, not to the postponement. But the one came with the other, so I let it go and drove her home. I didn't accompany her inside. I figured my stomach had made its way too high into my ribcage to carry on a normal conversation with her family. Instead, I beat it back to the Runyons' house, where I'd camp out for the rest of the night. If I could just talk to Shaun and get a good night's sleep, maybe everything would work out in the morning.

I had just settled down on Shaun's bed to wait for him when I heard a voice at my elbow. "Why'd you drop Jennifer off so early?"

I jolted upward, tossing a dog-eared paperback into the air before I realized it was just my guardian angel Mike, whom I had forbidden to ride in the car with me during my date. I'd seen him drifting over traffic in my rearview mirror, keeping an eye on me. Most likely, he'd taken in the movie a few rows back. Since my last sighting, he'd changed into ragged blue jeans, a white muscle shirt, denim jacket with ripped-off sleeves, and aviator sunglasses. A rolled, red-printed bandana tied back an artificial thatch of curly brown hair.

I groaned. "Who are you supposed to be this time? Wait, don't tell me." I'd had enough experience with his infatuation of outdated musicians to make an educated guess. "Bruce Springsteen?" My mom had some of his albums.

Mike beamed. "I thought a return to American soil would offer an excellent opportunity to celebrate the man who penned some of its most iconic songs."

I settled back on the bed. "Whatever."

"So why are you home this early?" he pressed. "I figured I'd be tailing you for hours."

"I don't want to talk about it." I rolled onto my side and ignored him. But the moment Shaun popped through his bedroom door—looking entirely too self-satisfied—I tossed the paperback on the floor. "What is up with women?"

He paused in mid-step, his eyebrows flicking upward. "You and Jen have a fight?"

"I have no idea, but I think I narrowly avoided a breakup."

"Dude, after you came all this way?" He pulled up his desk chair and straddled it backward. "What happened?"

"She got on my case about living so far away. Like I asked my father to take a job in the Dominican Republic."

"She seemed okay at the theater. A little quiet during dinner, maybe."

“Trust me, she was saving it up.” I snort. “She wants to talk about it in the morning. I’m terrified to find out what that means.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

The room grew unnaturally quiet. Even Mike couldn’t think of anything to say. It was so still, I could hear the faint drone of an aircraft in the distance.

“I suppose one could appreciate the irony,” I quipped bitterly. “I spent a quarter of my life dreaming of taking Jennifer to the movies. It finally happened and…” I drift off, flipping my palms up helplessly.

Another awkward silence. I think the plane was getting closer.

“Honestly, I’m sort of surprised you two have lasted this long,” Shaun admitted quietly.

I sat upright, my fingers instinctively tightening into a fist. I could feel the smooth surface of my Schmiel gloves sliding between my clenched fingers. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I don’t think distance is the only thing bothering her.”

“If you don’t want your face to have a close encounter with supernaturally designed body armor,” I gritted out, “you’d better come up with a clearer explanation fast.”

“*That’s* what I’m talking about,” Shaun exclaimed, backing up a foot. “You’re like a living, breathing superhero, with your weapons and gadgets, your battles against Hellhounds and water demons. Dude, you killed a guy who couldn’t die!”

Shaun and Jennifer were the only two people outside my family and teammates who knew the nature of my assignments. Being able to talk freely with them about the crazy things I’d encountered felt like taking a deep breath after a long dive underwater. I counted on them.

“I thought you were cool with what I do.”

“I think it’s freakin’ awesome!” he burst out. “But I’m not so sure Jen does anymore.”

I rocked back, stunned. Had I lost the respect of my own girlfriend?

He saw the pain in my expression. “She was over the moon after you rescued her. It just about killed her, not being able to tell anyone what happened. She was here three nights a week talking about it. Once the novelty wore off, she got real sober. I think she began to understand what those battles really meant. Now if you go too long without texting her, she calls me, wondering if I’ve heard from you.”

“She doesn’t need to worry. I haven’t been on assignment since.”

“But you could leave anytime.”

“Or I might never get called up again.”

“The stress comes from not knowing.”

I let my breath out in a puff and lay back against Shaun’s pillow. Jen was tough. Tougher than any girl I knew. But I guess I never thought about what it might be like to be in her position.

“What do you think will happen in the morning?” I asked.

Shaun shrugged. “You know her as well as I do.”

The drone of the airplane had been getting steadily louder until it sounded like it was right on top of us. Mike peered out Shaun’s front window. “Um, I think you might have to postpone your sweetheart summit meeting. Q’s here.”

Shaun and I leaped to join him at the window. My eyes nearly popped out of my sockets. The streetlights had inexplicably blinked out, but enough moonlight filtered through the clouds to illuminate a World War I biplane idling in the street in front of Shaun’s house.

Lesson #2

Heaven's Taxi Service Keeps Getting Classier

“What’s he doing here?” I blurted.

Mike coughed guiltily. Turning, I could see him scrolling through his messages. “I, uh, may have turned my phone off during the movie and forgotten to turn it back on. I’ve got a dozen texts from headquarters.”

I sighed in resignation, glad it wasn’t my head that was going to roll, and turned to Shaun apologetically. “Sorry. Looks like I’ve got to bail on you.”

He didn’t seem too bothered. “That. Is. Awesofeakintastic!” His chin was hanging past his collar. “Do you get to ride in it?”

“Apparently.” I gathered my few belongings and threw them into my bag. It didn’t pay to keep the brass waiting. Not to mention that every one of Shaun’s neighbors was probably gawping from behind their curtains. Best to leave before the cops showed up. “I’ll call you later.”

A mixture of curiosity, excitement, and dread gripped me as I jogged down the stairs and out the front door. Excitement won out. The antique plane *was* pretty cool. I could just make out Q sitting in the cockpit, clad in his usual flight jacket and goggles. I climbed onto the wing and tumbled into the gunner’s seat behind him. Q rummaged in a leather bag he wore draped across his body from shoulder to his opposite hip. He tossed helmet, goggles, and a radio headset back to me and gunned the engine. We took off with a surge of power that slammed me back in my seat.

I fought the force of the acceleration and wrestled the gear onto my head. “What kind of plane is this, Q?” I chirped into the microphone.

Q’s voice came back at me, crystal clear and unusually cheerful. His antique armament collection always made him forget his petulance.

“Bristol Fighter, a combat and reconnaissance craft put out by the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company in 1916. They were flown by the Royal Flying Corp—precursor to the Royal Air Force, you know—as well as the Polish Air Force. A Rolls-Royce Falcon V12 engine

gave it enough power to compete with lighter single-seaters. I, ahem, I may have tweaked this one a bit. The Bristol came standard with a synchronized, fixed, forward-firing .303 Vickers machine gun as well as a single flexible .303 Lewis Gun on a Scarff ring over the observer's rear cockpit. You can still see the mounting brackets. The plane was so popular, it remained in service well into the 1930's. It's the first time I've had it up."

That pretty much answered every question I never would have thought to ask.

"I haven't finished my modifications yet. Schmiel's been too busy to help me with the final touches. But it will get us where we need to go tonight."

"Where's that?"

"You're wanted in Montana."

Montana. That's where my teammate Elena had been living for the past year. The summer after our last mission, her boyfriend Damien decided he wanted to be a free agent at his university that fall and broke up with her. It didn't take long before she decided to move back in with her mom.

"Why?" I asked.

"Beats me. No one ever tells the Timekeeper anything." I heard him sigh over our radio connection, and his voice took on its usual dourness. "Oh, no. I might be trusted to guard the Timeline of future events. I might be busy preparing for the Millennial Review—which is scheduled for this very evening, mind you—but am I given any details? No. It's 'Q, we need you to deliver Mike and Taylor to Montana immediately.' And do you think that was accompanied by any word of appreciation? Of course not."

I looked around the cramped space, aware of my guardian angel's absence for the first time.

"Say, where is Mike?"

"No room for him in the bi-plane. He had to ripple." He paused and added in a lower tone.

"You might want to not mention that to the brass."

"My lips are sealed."

The sky opened above me, black velvet shot through with a million stars. I wasn't the slightest bit cold, nor did I have any trouble breathing. It was similar to the other flights I'd made with Q, only this time we stayed within Earth's atmosphere. And I had a seatbelt—which I'd fastened securely around me, even if Mike wasn't present to inadvertently knock me from the sky.

“What’s a Millennial Review?” I asked.

“Once every thousand years or so the Chief likes to review the Timeline.”

“The Chief? You mean one of the first-class agents?” After several trips to Heaven, I’d become familiar with angel hierarchy.

“No, I mean the Head Honcho. The Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End.”

My mouth formed a circle. “Oh, *that* Chief,” I said weakly.

“As I was saying, the Chief likes to review the Timeline every now and again. Not to make changes. It’s set in stone, so to speak, and he’s the only one allowed to open it. But he does like to make sure the brass are up to date with their orders. It keeps everyone on the same page.”

“And you bring the Timeline to this event?”

“He doesn’t trust anyone else with it,” Q said proudly. “I’m headed there as soon as I drop you off.”

“Wow.”

My comment seemed to please him. I could see him sitting a bit straighter in the cockpit. Now that I was properly awed, he felt free to be magnanimous. “I hope my showing up like this didn’t interrupt anything important.”

“Nah, I’d already dropped Jennifer off at her...” I let my eyes drift closed in dismay as I remembered my precarious situation. I would get called away on some mysterious errand exactly when I hoped to reassure her that my job really wasn’t all that dangerous or unpredictable.

Of all the rotten luck.

I groaned. I couldn’t call her. The roar of the engine would make conversation futile, and this wasn’t the kind of thing you could relay in a text. She’d probably be sleeping by the time I got to Montana.

I sent Shaun a text: *Will you apologize to Jen for me and tell her I’ll call her as soon as I can?”*

He replied immediately. No doubt he was still gawking out his bedroom window. *Sure. I’ll explain what happened.*

And bring my rental car back?

On it.

I slouched in the gunner's seat, thankful for such a great friend, apprehensive about whatever waited for me in Montana, and terrified of what it meant for my chances of ever scoring a second date with Jen.

Lesson #3

Home On the Range Sounds More Glamorous In Old Ballads

I must have fallen asleep. Dawn was breaking over the rugged Western plains as Q guided the bi-plane into a wide valley between two mountain ridges. We jounced over a dirt road that ran alongside a pasture, sending a herd of horses into a heel-kicking stampede, and stopped in front of a modest ranch house with peeling paint and a wide front porch.

I'd like to say Elena was happy to see me, but that might be an overstatement. She stomped down the porch steps, looking as queenly and arrogant as I remembered. Her skin glowed the color of hazelnuts in the pastel light of morning. Faintly, I could see her guardian angel, Ranofur, standing in the murky recess of the front porch. Other than that, she seemed alone.

"Davis, what are you doing here?" she barked, marching to the plane and scowling up at me. She turned to my pilot and gave him a sweet smile. "Good to see you, Q."

He gave her a wordless salute.

I clambered out onto the wing, lugging my bag after me. "A fine hello to you, too. Is that any way to greet an old friend?"

"I've got things to do today that didn't include babysitting a...shrimp."

She faltered as I dropped beside her. At our last meeting, my eyeballs had barely cleared her collar. I knew I'd grown over the past year—my mom complained constantly about the way I'd burned through three sizes of jeans. I just hadn't put that into perspective until I straightened...and looked *down* at Elena.

I grinned at her from my two-inch height advantage. "You were saying?"

She looked me over with exaggerated disdain and turned toward the house. "You'd better come inside, I suppose."

I took two steps, stumbled over some kind of cactus, and nearly went down. Elena glanced back with a smirk. "Your coordination hasn't kept pace with your growth spurt, I see."

My face burned. Actually, that surge of testosterone I'd awaited for so long had done much to rectify my athletic ineptitude. I mean, college teams weren't beating down my door or

anything, but I hadn't injured myself in months. Why had I reverted to a five-footed beagle the moment Elena set eyes on me? No, scratch the beagle. I'd graduated to five-footed Great Dane.

"Is Mike here?" I asked, directing attention away from myself.

"I haven't seen him."

"Huh." Odd, but he'd done odd things before. Mike could look after himself. I gazed around the homestead, taking in the dirt yard, the scrub vegetation, and the precarious lean of the barn. It was a far cry from the mansion Elena had lived in with her father in Santo Domingo.

"You had no idea we were coming, did you?" I asked.

"What was your first clue? The lack of a brass band? No flashing welcome sign?" She tromped up the porch steps and glared at Ranofur. "Did you know about this?"

"Of course." He appeared unflustered, leaning against the railing with his bulging arms crossed. Dressed in his usual loafers, Polo shirt, and Dockers, he looked like an off-duty WWE wrestler. "I didn't want you to have to worry about it until they got here."

She threw her hands up in frustration. "Why do these urgent meetings always spring up at the worst possible times?"

"You're telling me." I snorted. "I was going to find out this morning if I'll have to change my social media status back to 'single'."

Elena's face softened incrementally. "Jennifer's losing interest?"

"Let's say she's not thrilled with my career choice."

"Taylor, I'm sorry."

Her sympathy sounded genuine, and I took a measure of comfort from it. Elena might be the only human in the entire world who truly understood my situation.

I brushed it off. "Yeah, well, hazards of the trade. What was so important that you had to do today?"

"Visit my mom in the hospital."

I instantly felt like a schmuck. What was a spat with a girlfriend compared to the life of her mother? "What happened?"

"You can wipe the horror off your face. She just broke her leg. But it was bad enough to require surgery. Our church put together a rotation of volunteers to help out with daily chores while she's out of commission. Today's shift will be here in an hour."

I looked toward a large pasture swarming with cattle. “Aren’t you supposed to hire ranch hands for that sort of thing?”

“There used to be a bunkhouse full of them, but Tick downsized a few years ago.”

“Tick?”

“My uncle, Tick Burton. He’s Mom’s uncle, actually. He made Mom a partner after she moved back from the Dominican. Usually, the three of us can handle the work.”

“You seriously have an uncle named after a parasite?”

She grinned. “It’s a Montana thing.”

We stalled outside the front door. Elena and I had established a respectful working relationship, but we’d never been besties. Now we hadn’t seen each other in a year. An awkward pause fell between us.

Ranofur spoke into the silence. “Might as well go in and make some breakfast. No sense starting the meeting until Mike gets here.”

“Do you know where he went?” I asked.

“No idea. But he’ll be along soon.” He pocketed his phone with smug satisfaction. “Unless he relishes a stint in data processing for the next few centuries.”

Elena pushed open the door, and we stepped into a living room with shabby but comfortable furnishings. A variety of animal horns, skulls, and hides decorated the walls. “You’ve got a quite a death motif going on here,” I observed, staring into the hollow eye sockets of what had once been an antelope.

“They’re Tick’s,” she said, shooting me a haughty look. “But everyone decorates like this around here.”

“Barbaric chic,” I muttered. “It’ll be all the rage in New York this fall.”

“I’ll have you know we ate every one of these animals.”

“That’s...comforting.”

“Shut up, Davis.” She sent me sprawling onto a brown suede couch. “I fought you for a cheeseburger once. Stupidest move I ever made, but it proves you eat meat, too.”

I sniffed deeply of the delicious scent of frying bacon. “You’re right. I do.”

We followed the aroma to the kitchen, where Ranofur stood at the stove in his oversized pink apron. “Anyone ever take you up on that?” I asked, gesturing to the glossy lips and “kiss the cook” graphics screen printed on the front.

He waved a spatula threateningly. “No.”

Elena snickered behind me. She opened the fridge, snatched out a jar of dill pickles, and sat at a rickety wooden table. “Want one?” she asked, tipping the jar in my direction.

“I’ll wait for the meat, thanks.” I pulled out a chair.

“Savage.”

She bit off the end of a pickle and smirked at me across the table. Behind me, Ranofur whistled tunelessly as he pattered at the stove. The familiar scent of dill and vinegar punched my sinuses. Suddenly, our unexpected reunion was starting to feel oddly normal.

Ranofur usually went in for gourmet entrees, with French names and exotic ingredients, but it turned out he could whip up a mess of chuck wagon grub to rival the most hardened of cowboys. Within moments, Elena and I were digging into greasy platters of bacon, eggs, fried steaks, and toast dripping with butter.

“So, how’d your mom break her leg?” I asked, swabbing up egg yolk with a crust of bread.

“Tossed from a horse. She was patrolling the ranch’s western perimeter, checking fences, looking for signs of wolves or cougars. It was sort of weird, actually. Sparky is our steadiest mount, but something spooked him. Mom’s lucky he didn’t bolt. She managed to drag herself back in the saddle and got herself home. If she hadn’t, it might have been hours before Tick or I thought to go looking for her.”

Mike chose that moment to wander in through the kitchen wall.

Elena inspected him curiously. “The Boss?” she guessed. No doubt her mom had the same antique Springsteen albums as mine.

Mike beamed with delight. “You even know his nickname!”

“Where have you been?” I demanded with my mouth full.

He cast a wary glance at Ranofur. “I went back to the arcade to kill some time while you were in the air.”

“The arcade?” I repeated. “The one I took Jennifer to last night?”

“I wanted to conquer the final Muddrunner course.” He proudly held out his hand. “I won enough tokens to trade for this.”

Incredulously, I examined the GPS dog tag stamped with a lime green dog print. “That’s really great, Mike. If you ever get a dog, you can keep better track of it than you did of me.”

Mike's shoulder twitched, and he threw another uneasy look toward Ranofur. "Never mind. I'm here now, and you're fine." He pulled out a chair and helped himself to a strip of bacon. "What's Nigel on about this time? A rouge Wasitter? A suspicious new virus? Nigel ordered Taylor and I to get our tails out here ASAP, but he didn't tell us a thing."

We hadn't heard from Nigel—Mike and Ranofur's boss—for over a year, and I had a feeling he wouldn't have bothered with a reunion unless something serious had happened.

"Alfonso Giovetti's back on the radar," Ranofur stated.

"The pizza parlor dude?" Elena asked. "The one under Swain's curse?"

"The same."

Sometimes I hated being right.

Bartholomew Swain was clever, despicable, and dead, but that hadn't stopped him from causing all sorts of trouble for my team and our heavenly allies. Centuries ago, he had eaten a fruit fallen from the Tree of Life, which cursed him with an eternal half-life. I had eventually slain him with Findul's fire, the flames that would one day bring about Earth's final destruction, but sending him to Hades had only caused more trouble. Last year, we'd barely stopped him from starting World War III with a bacteria that gave him control of the masses.

"What's Swain up to this time?" I ask wearily, half afraid of the answer.

"We don't know yet," Ranofur stated. "That's why Nigel is putting us back on the case. He wants us to do some sleuthing to prevent another situation like last time."

"What has Giovetti been doing?" Elena asked.

"He's been spotted poking around some old churchyards—including the one in Luxet."

Swain's hometown in England. I remembered it well. It contained the parish Swain had supported with his ill-gotten wealth, the cemetery where his family was buried, and not much else.

"What harm can he do?" Mike asked. "The dead are already dead."

"Somehow, I don't think he was there putting flowers on graves," Elena drawled.

I had to agree. Granted, Giovetti was a living, breathing man, which meant he carried out normal human activities. Visiting a cemetery wasn't all that alarming. Hanging out in lots of them? More so. Add in the fact that he'd been cursed to do Swain's bidding, and Nigel was probably right to initiate an investigation.

"Do we know where Giovetti is now?" I asked.

“No. A squad of Churkons engaged our field agent just outside London, and he lost Giovetti in the melee.”

“Someone posted a guard,” Elena murmured.

“Which means Giovetti is acting under orders,” I add.

“Exactly,” Ranofur confirmed. “Nigel wants us to check out the areas Giovetti visited. See if we can find a connection.”

“They sent *you* the list of sites?” Mike asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. Florence, Talas, Damascus, Alexandria, and Luxet. Can you think of anything they have in common?”

“Why did you get the list and not me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because I answer my phone?” Ranofur said dryly, handing it over.

Mike scrolled through the messages, muttering to himself about who was the brains and who was the brawn of the operation.

“When do we leave?” I asked in resignation. My hopes for a second date with Jennifer had just downgraded from Still Possible to Never Gunna Happen, joining other wistful fancies such as winning the lottery or playing a pick-up game of football with Tom Brady.

“Immediately,” Ranofur answered, handing Elena and me each a small parcel. “As soon as we can get a flight out of town.”

I opened my package and pulled out what looked like a pair of transparent thigh-high pantyhose. “Um, I think you gave me Elena’s.”

“There’s no mistake. Those are Schmiel socks.”

“You want me to wear these?” I exclaimed.

“They’ll protect your feet, ankles, knees, thighs, and femoral artery in battle. I’ll expect them on you before we leave, along with the breastplate and gloves you were given last year. You’ll find a neck gaiter that will stretch to cover the back of your head in there, as well. They’re all lightweight and invisible, but vital.”

I held the stockings up with distaste. “Why can’t Schmiel just finish his suits?” I was pretty sure Jen would find me irresistible if I had my own superhero suit. Maybe something in a bold shade of blue. But no, I’d been issued women’s undergarments.

“They’re not ready yet.”

“Of course they’re not.” I shoved the pantyhose back in the package and tossed it on the table. “At least I’ll be prepared if Schmiel sends us battle-ready cocktail dresses.”

“Never mind battle gear,” Elena protested. “What’s this about the next flight out of town? I can’t up and leave while my mom is in the hospital.”

“Does she know? About all this, I mean?” I ask, spreading my arms to encompass our supernatural companions.

“In theory, yes. I told her what we do, and she’s become accustomed to having Ranofur around. But she can’t possibly understand what it really means.”

I had a feeling my parents were blissfully unaware, as well. Mom always had a dozen story plots to insulate her from reality, and Dad stayed busy with his chain of resorts. It used to bother me, but I’d come to accept that they were incapable of truly grasping the importance of what I did. And that was okay. *I* knew. Besides, their ignorance simplified things. I wouldn’t even bother to tell them about this mission until my vacation weekend was up.

“We’re going, regardless,” Ranofur stated. “But we can stop at the hospital on our way out of town. I don’t think Mina will argue. And she’ll be well taken care of in your absence.”

Elena crossed her arms haughtily. “What am I supposed to tell the church people?”

“Tell them it’s a college visit,” Mike said, handing back Ranofur’s phone. “Several of these locations are very close to institutions of higher learning.”

Elena looked doubtful.

“Or you could tell them the truth,” I put in.

She sighed. “All right. I’ll get them started on chores, then we can saddle up and head into town.”

I froze. “You mean on horseback?”

She smirked. “What’s the matter, Davis? Too scary for you?”

I remembered my last adventure on the back of one of the beasts. Even if Elena’s horses couldn’t fly, I would rather face a room full of Gorgoks any day.

“She’s kidding, Taylor. It’s just an expression in these parts,” Ranofur explained. “We’ll drive.”

“It would be faster to call Q,” Mike pointed out.

“No can do,” I said. “He’s in a meeting. A Millennial Review.”

Mike frowned. “Those can last for days.”

“Then I guess we book that flight,” Ranofur said.

“Last time we flew into England, a Churkon was waiting for us in Southampton,” Elena reminded him. “If Swain suspects we know about Giovetti—and he’s bound to since our London agent blew his cover—he’ll have more welcoming committees in place.”

“Good point.” Ranofur pulled out his phone and started thumb typing. “Let’s try Italy. Maybe we won’t have to fight our way in.”

With that upbeat proposition, the realization hit me full force. My teammates and I were back on active duty.

Lesson #4

That Big Montana Sky Is Grossly Overrated

An hour later, we piled into a battered old pickup truck, and Elena's uncle drove us to Missoula, a bumpy journey that took almost two hours. Mike had secured tickets to Florence, with stops in New York and Amsterdam. Our flight didn't leave until four, leaving us time to bring Chinese take-out up to the hospital to share with Elena's mom. She was scheduled to be discharged the next morning, so Tick would stay overnight in the city and drive her home.

Despite his unfortunate name, Tick seemed respectable enough, if a bit rough around the edges. Tall and lean, he'd let bristly white stubble overrun his face, giving him a rascally appearance. The skin that showed through looked as leathery as the wing of a Churkon. Not that you could see much of it beneath the cowboy hat that had probably been clapped to his head since Springsteen recorded his first album. The rest of his getup included faded Levi's, a sweat-stained shirt, boots worn low in the heel, and an old-fashioned six-shooter clapped to his hip. A big one. The kind you can use as a club if you're not a good shot.

Tick was the real deal, all right. It was sort of comforting having him along. His revolver wouldn't be much use against the kinds of enemies we faced, but I could tell he was a fighter. And we might very well need him before we reached Missoula. I wondered if Elena had told him anything about the true nature of our errand.

As we jounced over the dirt roads, I fingered my new neck gaiter and kept an apprehensive eye peeled for anything out of the ordinary. Ranofur and Elena sat in the cab with Tick, and Mike and I had taken the bed. While my new body armor was light enough that I soon forgot I was wearing it, it in no way accommodated for the abysmal springs on Tick's old truck. Within twenty minutes, my joints had stiffened into concrete. At least I had an unobstructed view. Nothing was going to sneak up behind us.

It was entirely possible that the enemy had posted someone—or something—to keep tabs on Elena's ranch. I thought about watchers every time I left Santo Domingo. Currently, we weren't in any danger from Swaug's unless they'd learned to shapeshift into vehicles. Anything non-motorized couldn't cover with any speed the miles of rugged, open ground that surrounded us.

Likewise, we hadn't passed a body of water on these plains large enough to house a Wasitter. That just left the sky.

And there was an awful lot of it.

I scanned the horizon continually. About an hour into our trip, I spotted a black speck circling high above us, lazily riding the updrafts. My stomach clenched. Past experiences had taught me the creature's attributes all too well—a cry like gravel in a car crusher, wings like the jump surface of a trampoline, man-crushing beak, not to mention the built-in flame-thrower. As I tracked the corkscrewing flight pattern, I noticed six more specks ahead and to our left, some spiraling much lower to the ground.

As nonchalantly as I could, I pointed them out to Mike, aware of the monsters' keen vision. Then I knocked on the truck's back window. Elena slid open it open a couple inches.

"Ranofur, take a peek outside," I murmured. "Ten o'clock. I count at least seven Churkons."

Elena gave an almost inaudible gasp while Ranofur scoped out the sky through the front windshield. Counting Tick, there were only five of us. These weren't good odds. Not good at all.

Suddenly, I was grateful for heavenly-issue body armor. Even the pantyhose.

"What's the matter?" Tick watched us curiously from beneath his wide brim. "The Russians flyin' over?" He ducked to follow Ranofur's gaze then chuckled as he straightened. "Nothing but vultures. Antelope got hit up here some days ago. They're just scoping out their dinner."

Nope, Elena hadn't told Tick a thing. At least nothing that would help us now.

"Weapons out," Ranofur mumbled.

He didn't have to say it twice. I slid Emblazon from my Schmiel belt, its orange flames dancing wildly in the relative wind. Most of the belt's features had slowly malfunctioned, but the multiple panels with their extra-dimensional lining still proved indispensable. Around me, I could hear the snick and click of Raybold steel emerging from similar hiding places.

The truck jerk slightly as Tick got a look at our armament. "Jeepers creepers! Y'all take your wildlife sightings a mite too serious. Tell 'em, Elena. Vultures are harmless."

"We're just being cautious, Tick," she replied. I could see her crossbow laid carefully across her lap.

Tick blew out a breath and muttered something about her being out of the country too long.

He drove steadily, and our tension increased as we closed with the birds. I kept my eyes fixed on the grotesque forms, noting another perched in a spindly shrub some distance from the

highway. Suddenly, there was a great fluttering of wings as four more of the vile things lifted from the roadside. I was on my knees in an instant, sword raised.

Tick slowed and pointed. “See there? What did I tell you?”

The bloody bones of an animal lay just off the gravel, stripped nearly bare. A single vulture still stood beside the carcass with wings raised threateningly and a wicked hiss rasping from its naked neck.

Ranofur tucked his mace back into his shirt. “False alarm.”

I sheathed Emblazon with an audible sigh of relief. I was out of fighting trim and hadn’t been too keen on jumping into battle first thing.

Tick kept driving as if nothing had happened, but every now and again I noticed him glancing sidelong at Ranofur. At one point, he nodded toward a doglike creature trotting parallel to us, a hundred yards off the road. “It’s just a coyote. Nothing to worry about,” he assured us. But none of us truly relaxed until gravel gave way to blacktop and the city closed around us.

“Just a couple more miles.” Tick turned onto a busy boulevard. “The airport is some way out on the other side of town, but the restaurant’s just ahead.”

“Oh look, Elena, there’s our first college,” Mike blurted as we passed an entrance to the University of Montana. “Established in 1893, only four years after Montana became a state, it has a student population of 10,782 students and is best known for its Business, Social Sciences, Education, Conservation, and Arts programs.”

“Thanks, Mike,” Elena said dryly. “I’ll jot that down.”

After a quick food stop, we pulled into the hospital parking garage, and the last of the tension seeped from my bones. We’d made it.

“Is your uncle going to wear his gun into the hospital?” I whispered to Elena as we followed the old cowboy toward the main entrance.

“He’s never without it. I told you, this is—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I broke in. “This is Montana.”

The western mentality took some getting used to, but further comments would make me a first-class hypocrite. Between the four of us, my teammates and I were carrying enough weapons to hold off an entire cavalry brigade.

Mina Cartagena was a pleasant woman who shared Elena’s tall, thin frame. She was also very White. Even after long hours spent working outside, she paled beside her daughter’s mocha

coloring. Elena gave her mother a hug and a kiss, then sat beside her on the bed. I thought they looked like a pair of matching salt and pepper shakers.

“Mom, this is Taylor,” Elena said. “He went to school with me in the Dominican. He and his Uncle Mike are in the states visiting colleges and invited me along.”

“How nice!” Mrs. Cartagena took my hand and then Mike’s, shaking them warmly. “Please, call me Mina.”

“Hope you’re hungry,” Ranofur said, holding up the bags of Chinese.

Mina sniffed appreciatively. “After three days of hospital food, I’ll eat anything you brought.”

Elena and Tick caught Mina up on the happenings at the ranch. As it didn’t concern me, I devoted myself to eating—one of my more celebrated skills. Kung Pao chicken, orange chicken, sesame chicken, crab Rangoon, three shrimp egg rolls, and a full pound of lo mien noodles all found their way down my neck. When I finished, Mike slyly switched containers with me, as angels don’t require food like humans do. I grinned at him and scarfed that too.

Tick, I noticed, had done considerable damage, as well. When Elena and her mom fell to a discussion comparing state and private universities, he stifled a burp. “I need something sweet to bind my meal in place,” he muttered. “Cafeteria has coffee and cinnamon rolls. Anyone else want something?”

“I’ll take a roll if you’re buying,” Elena said.

“Right. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

Elena waited until the clomp of his boots faded before she confessed, a little guiltily, “Mom, we’re not really going to visit colleges.”

Mina’s mouth opened like she was going to say something, but she closed it and waited for her daughter to explain.

“Mike isn’t Taylor’s uncle; he’s his guardian angel. The four of us have been assigned a new mission. We’re leaving for Italy this afternoon.”

Mina’s face blanched, and she pressed fingers to her temples. “It’s true, then? Those stories about Ghana and Mount St. Helens and hypnotized motorcycle gangs and women who turn into lions?”

It sounded like Elena had told her a good deal more than I’d told my parents.

“All of it, Mom,” Elena said softly.

The bed began to shake with Mina's trembling. "I'd only half-believed it, even after Ranofur walked through the wall."

Elena took her mother's hand. "I'll be well-guarded. And we have resources you'd never imagine."

Mina nodded. "I gave you into God's keeping when you went to live with your father all those years ago, and I'm not going back on my word now. You'll be careful?"

"I'm always careful."

"Does Tick know any of this?"

Elena shook her head. "I didn't think he'd believe me."

"You might want to try him," Mina said. "At any rate, I'm not sure I can endure your absence without having someone to talk to about it."

The object of their discussion returned a short time later and slipped quietly into the corner as the women talked. Elena noticed him first. "Hey, where's my cinnamon roll?"

His face opened in surprise. "I plumb forgot. Want me to go back?"

"That's okay. I probably don't have room for it anyway."

"We should get going," Ranofur suggested. "Our plane leaves in two hours and we don't want to get stuck in the security line."

Elena fluffed her mother's pillow and moved her television remote within reach. "I should be home in a few days. Try not to worry about me, okay?"

Her mother's smile looked a little forced. "Tell him," she whispered as Elena knelt to give her a hug.

"I will."

I rose. "It was nice to meet you, Mina."

"You too, Taylor. Mike. Have a good trip. And stay safe."

Elena didn't say anything as we walked back to the truck. From her expression, I guessed she was debating how best to break our crazy story to her uncle. I knew from experience that there was no simple way to explain it.

As we pulled out of the parking garage, I settled against the side of the truck bed so I could see into the cab. Elena's voice came clearly through the open back window. "Tick?"

He grunted.

"What would you say if I told you I'd met my guardian angel?"

He raised one eyebrow and pulled carefully onto the main road. “I suppose I’d ask what foolhardy thing you’d done to warrant it.”

“What if I said it was because I chose a cheeseburger in the school lunch line?”

This prompted a frank stare. With a helpless shrug, Elena related our meeting with the pirate Davy Jones and his guardianship of the Tree of Life. Then she told him about Davy’s shipmate, Bartholomew Swain. About my killing him in Findul’s forge, and about the bacteria that had pushed Europe to the brink of war. As Tick turned onto airport property, she finished by relaying a few details about our new assignment.

This summary made our adventuress sound even worse than I remembered them. But then, revealing the truth to the uninitiated always felt a bit ticklish. I had to admire Tick’s complete unflappability.

“So, this fellow Giovetti works for Swain?” he asked mildly.

Elena sounded encouraged by his even response. “Yes, and he’s been sighted in several churchyards. We need to find out what mischief they’re up to now.”

“And you’re sure Swain’s behind it?”

“Pretty sure.”

“But you don’t have any idea what his plan is?”

“Not a clue.”

Tick sucked thoughtfully at his teeth as he maneuvered through airport traffic. I had the feeling the sky could fall and he’d just keep driving.

Instead of delivering us to the main entrance, Tick turned into long-term parking and pulled into the farthest spot. The lot was only half full and contained a solitary man wheeling a suitcase in the direction of the terminal. Tick put the truck in park and turned to face his niece. He stared at her for a long moment. Finally, he said, “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with you leaving your mom and running off like this, Elena. You’re heading into a potentially dangerous situation, with people you barely know.”

I blinked in surprise. Tick had seemed too chill to pull the overprotective uncle bit.

“It’s not my first mission,” Elena reminded him.

“But those didn’t take place on my watch. I feel a measure of responsibility for you, especially now that your mother is indisposed. I just don’t think this is a good idea.”

She answered carefully. "I'm touched by your concern, Tick, but I'm leaving. The brass isn't going to cancel this assignment. Not for Mom. And not for you. It's too important."

Her reply had been kind but firm, and the empty moment that followed swelled with tension. I glanced at Mike. We'd once had to steal Elena away from her uncooperative father, and that outcome hadn't been pretty. I sincerely hoped we wouldn't have to repeat it.

After an age or two, Tick relented with a sigh. "All right. I won't make a fuss. But I do have one condition."

The pent-up pressure inside me began to leak out.

"What's that?" Elena asked.

"I want daily updates. Where you are, what you're doing, what you're uncovering."

I stiffened, glancing warily at the old man.

"I'm not sure I can share that kind of information," Elena told him.

"I think you owe it to your mother and me. We'll want reassurances of your safety."

My eyes narrowed. His response didn't add up. Exactly when had Tick become such a worry wort? And what did he care what our investigation unveiled?

Elena must have been growing suspicious, too, because she continued to study him, frowning slightly. Suddenly she went rigid.

"Tick, where's your revolver?"

Lesson #5

Wrangling Angry Bulls Requires Supernatural Stupidity

The transformation happened so quickly it stunned even Ranofur. With a roar that rivaled the decibels emitted by a steam engine whistle, Tick exploded into a huge, horned monster, blasting the truck's cab into jagged chunks of confetti.

Someone screamed—I wasn't sure if it was Elena or Mike. Ranofur recovered first, ripping the passenger door off its hinges in his haste to remove Elena while I stood in the bed gaping stupidly at the newly minted monster. It was massive and hideous, a cross between a nine-foot Terminator and a great, ugly cow. Snot dribbled from its nose, and vacant red eyes gave me the impression that it suffered from both poor eyesight and diminished mental acuity.

“Taylor, get out of there!” Mike shrieked. “Minotaurs are impossibly strong, with unreasoning tempers.”

His words snapped me into action. I backed away, slowly drawing my sword. Unfortunately, a brilliant, shimmering flame is the one sure way to draw the attention of a nearsighted simpleton. The red eyes locked on me, dilating with rage and hatred. Without a hint of warning, it charged.

I flung myself off the truck bed and rolled beneath it. The rear axle snapped under the minotaur's weight and missed impaling me by inches. Probably not my brightest idea, but my disappearance did seem to confuse it. My pursuer stood with shoulders hunkered, blowing heavily and tearing the ground with one cloven hoof. I had bought my team enough time to regroup.

Mike filled the air with a lethal assortment of Raybold blades, while Elena fired bolt after bolt into the monster's hide. It bellowed in rage and pounded straight toward them. They split apart, diving in opposite directions. Ranofur tried to cut off the monster's charge with a powerful swing of his mace.

The minotaur saw the blur of movement just in time to snag the chain. With a mighty wrench, he sent the mace—and the attached angel—soaring twenty yards to the left. Ranofur

slammed into a parked Dodge Ram, setting off an alarm that punctuated the air with rapid, ear-piercing blasts.

Distracted, the minotaur stomped toward the Ram's flashing taillights, its expression folded in bovine fury. I slinked toward my teammates and watched openmouthed as the beast grabbed the half-ton vehicle beneath the tailgate and neatly flipped it onto the Toyota parked in front of it. Then, like a child indulging in a temper tantrum, it leaped onto the truck's now-visible undercarriage and stomped it into the ground. The truck fell silent, bent and twisted into something unrecognizable. The car had disappeared altogether.

"Holy schnikes," Mike breathed. "He turned that Toyota into a stadium blanket."

Elena was more philosophical. "Shouldn't drive a Prius in ranch country."

Ranofur ended our awed interlude. He sprang from behind a vehicle with a tremendous swing that swept the monster's legs and sent it toppling to the asphalt. "Taylor, the sword! Plunge it through its heart!"

Too late. The minotaur had already sent the two nearest automobiles spinning across the parking lot like oversized tops. I skittered out of the way, narrowly missing a crumpled fender.

Another hail of Raybold steel silvered the air, but Elena and Mike had to back off when Ranofur resumed the attack. I ran to join him, dancing at the perimeter of twisting limbs and mindless wrath, landing blows whenever I could. They only served to enrage the beast further. Frenzied with pain and blind with fury, it kicked out, catching me squarely in the sternum with a hoof the size of a dinner plate. Every atom of oxygen left my lungs as I arced over a Volkswagen and crumpled in a heap at Elena's feet.

She dropped beside me in alarm. "Taylor! Are you all right?"

I tried to pull off suave and nonchalant, but the high-pitched squeaks I emitted may have ruined the effect. That and the violent retching afterward.

When my stomach had given up its full wealth of Chinese take-out, I collapsed onto my back, gasping painfully. Elena yanked up my shirt and prodded my chest diagnostically, tracing a neat, cloven imprint that was already turning a delicate shade of lilac beneath my Schmiel breastplate. A lot of good it had done me.

"Does this hurt?" she asked, poking gently.

Like molten fire had been poured into my bones.

"Not much," I gasped.

She left her fingers there, cool even through my armor. Her worried face hovered inches above my own. I felt an odd moment of connection between us.

“If anything was broken, he’d be screaming,” Mike said, nudging me roughly with his boot. “Get up. Ranofur needs you.”

The moment shattered. I drew in one more precious lungful of air and pushed myself to my feet.

Elena backed away. “Be careful, Taylor.”

I nodded and limped back toward the fight, dragging my sword tip behind me.

These were the moments I envied Elena her crossbow. While Emblazon was definitely the showier weapon, it had the distinct disadvantage of requiring me to approach within arm’s reach of various large and vicious enemies, a strategy I didn’t particularly relish. But I reengaged and fought gamely, dodging and twisting, thrusting and slashing. Gradually, the agony in my chest began to recede.

I tried to anticipate Ranofur’s movements and work in tandem, but the beast was too quick, too unpredictable. We fought on, matching blow for blow, horn for thrust, neither side able to gain the advantage. The best we managed was to keep our enemy occupied so it didn’t charge Elena or Mike. Or an airport full of civilians. But as the battle dragged out, the stalemate became obvious to all of us.

“It’s no good!” Ranofur yelled. “We need heavier weapons.”

“I’m open to suggestions!” Mike called back.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Elena sprint toward Tick’s shattered pickup but had no time to contemplate this. The minotaur had just torn a wheel from the Ram and hurled it at me with the force of a siege catapult. I spun away, using my momentum to fling Emblazon desperately at its head. The blade buried itself deep in its horn.

The minotaur let out a roar of fury—still very much not dead—and pawed at the lopsided weight. The blade remained lodged fast.

Great. Now I was weaponless.

“Ranofur, duck!” Elena yelled. This was followed by six rapid blasts of a gun. If the foghorn bellows of a mythological monster hadn’t already alerted airport security to our presence, they certainly knew now.

The wounds only infuriated the beast further. With a stiff-armed thrust, it smashed the two nearest vehicles into their neighbors.

“Normal bullets won’t have any effect on it,” Ranofur shouted. He reached into his shirt and flung a small leather bag in her direction. “Try these.”

The motion caught the creature’s eye. It followed the trajectory of the arc then charged, plunging toward Elena. She watched helplessly, wide-eyed, and unarmed. Caught off guard, Ranofur swung wildly but missed. “Taylor, stop it!”

I gulped. I was the sole obstacle between Elena and the raging beast that still carried my sword in its horn. In desperation, I grabbed its tail as it galloped past and hung on, the rubber soles of my sneakers smoking on the asphalt.

After half a dozen strides, the beast registered my presence. It whirled suddenly, flinging me to one side. Then it lowered its head, horns and my blade now pointing directly at my heart. I closed my eyes, awaiting the fatal blow.

Another shot rang out. Then a second. The minotaur threw back its head and screamed with pain and outrage. Half a second later, it dissolved into green goo. Emblazon clattered to the ground as the wave of slime engulfed me. I collapsed in a heap of trembling exhaustion.

Mike tugged me to my feet. “That was incredible!” he crowed, his bandana askew and his wig dipping dangerously to the left. “I’ve never seen anything like it!”

The others joined us, Ranofur panting heavily and Elena holding a smoking gun.

“What did you throw at Elena?” I gasped, trying to steady the shaking that wracked my body.

“Bullets tipped with Raybold steel. I had Schmiel design them to fit Tick’s six-shooter, just in case we ever needed them. I didn’t know he kept another in the glove box.”

“Taylor’s wrangling gave me enough time to load two bullets.” Elena smirked at me. “You just might make a cowboy yet.”

“Thanks,” I gulped out. I meant her excellent shooting, not the ridiculous compliment, but I think she knew. Her smile became more genuine. “You, too.”

As my pulse slowed and awareness of our surroundings returned, I realized the traffic on the main road flowed on as usual. It had never even stopped. I shook my head in amazement. Mike once told me that people were experts at imagining rational explanations for the supernatural, but

here it hardly seemed necessary. This population was already well acclimated to gunshots and slavering bulls.

“So what do you think that was about?” I asked.

“A spy, no doubt,” Ranofur answered. “Swain probably had it sent in special after Q brought you to the ranch. And he nearly succeeded. Elena told it everything we know.”

“I thought it was Tick!” she protested. Her expression grew horrified. “Do you think my uncle’s all right?”

“I’ll call your mother and find out.” Mike stepped aside and nodded politely to a pair of passersby who paused to observe the wreckage in the parking lot with raised eyebrows.

“Luckily, we stopped him in time,” Ranofur went on. “Once we get on that plane, Swain won’t have any idea what we know or what we’re up to. I don’t think we’ll see any more trouble for a while.”

“I hope not,” I groaned, rubbing my sore chest.

“Good thing you had on Schmiel’s breastplate,” Ranofur noted. “A blow like that should have crushed your ribcage. You ought to be dead.”

I felt the color drain from my face and fingered the tatters that had once been my shirt. It was the same one I’d worn on my date with Jennifer, only now it was coated in a layer of green nastiness. I also smelled faintly of cow. But my ribcage was intact. I vowed to never complain about Schmiel’s armor again, even if the finished bodysuit *was* a cocktail dress.

A touch of the old disdain crept into Elena’s expression as she looked me up and down. “I’m not going anywhere with you dressed like that.”

This return to normalcy steadied me in a way nothing else could have.

Mike returned and assured Elena that her uncle was fine. He’d been locked in a janitor’s closet at the hospital. Mike had already wired him enough money to purchase a new truck. As Elena and Ranofur headed for the terminal to purchase me new clothes, Mike began traveling from vehicle to demolished vehicle, tucking handfuls of large bills under the visors.

Elena soon returned with several shopping bags and an armful of wet paper towels. I did my best to remove all the green from my skin then pulled on the clothes she had picked out—a pink sequined sweatshirt printed with dancing cows and a pair of gray sweatpants with “Montana” spelled across the butt in large Kelly green letters. I glared at Elena accusingly.

“The airport doesn’t have a lot of options,” she said innocently.

“You look like a native,” Mike said encouragingly.

“I look like a grandmother.”

Ranofur slung an arm around my shoulders and nudged me into motion. “We’ll get you something better in New York. Come on. We have a flight to catch.”

We had just started for the terminal when all four of our phones signaled a new text at exactly the same time.

I reached mine first, as I no longer had pockets and was carrying it in my hand. It was from Nigel.

Have any of you seen Q? He never showed up for the Review.