

Chapter 2

The Auguste Santi Exhibit,
Bishop-Florian Memorial Hall, Angels
15 Amerian 580, 2145 hours

“Bishop-Florian security is tight for this exhibit,” Louis had told her, stretching out the floor plans for the venerable old building over his desk. *“They’ll have attack dogs, of course, and extra guards besides. That’s nothing new,”* he’d smiled; a mirthless expression, but Angel had already become engrossed in the drawings in front of her.

She had always been a quick study. It had been one of the qualities that had originally endeared her to him. The woman who greater Fernwall knew as Lady Angelique Blakesly, in fact, possessed a suite of talents that had once made her a desirable apprentice in the slippery, chaotic world of post-war Püran-Khir: keen intelligence, fast reflexes, good instincts, decent strength, and cold-blooded fearlessness when faced with a challenge.

Happily, these were also traits that made her an even more valuable “associate,” lacking a better term for it, in the confines of peaceful, civilized Fernwall. Louis had watched her avidly, almost greedily, as she pored over the drawings, delighted with what he saw. Angel’s mind was taking in the information before her at a phenomenal rate, memorizing and collating data with an ease that surprised anyone who might have mistaken such loveliness for shallowness.

This job was much more challenging than any she had previously attempted. Still, he had few doubts she’d succeed. Any woman who could successfully deceive the entire noble class of Fernwall and keep that web of lies intact for years could certainly figure out how to infiltrate a museum and take whatever she wished. In this case it was a mere bauble, a necklace crafted by dwarven smiths so far back in history, humans had no clear record of it. The necklace, *‘Mâgun-Zak,’* had been a gift to the royal family of Vin-Nôre from their dwarven neighbors, and was quite literally priceless. The metal wasn’t silver, but *niobitan*. The centerpiece was molded and etched to resemble a raven’s head and wings, bejeweled and shining iridescently. Each stone, tear-drop cuts scintillating like the source of light

itself, were “flawless” by human standards. When one looked closely, one saw that each delicate link in the interlocking chains had been etched with countless dwarven rune-letters, reputedly a prayer to Eldar their ancient God, to bless the wearer with health, protection, good fortune and long life.

Louis didn’t believe any of it. But then, Louis had lost his faith in a lot of things long before The Great War was over, and had resigned himself to the reality that most people stubbornly insisted on clinging to theirs. What he believed in today was power—and money, because money was the fuel every engine of power required. To that end, he’d once recruited a very young girl in a very bad place, raising her up into what had become a very interesting and lucrative partnership.

“Angelique Blakesly” was a fiction, of course. A cover, suitable for hiding her true purpose in the city: gathering information, from the inside, for the high-stakes thefts he selected, and directed. *A quite lovely fiction*, he mused, watching her complete her first study of the floor plans. Louis understood young Vincent Sultaire’s fancy for her. He didn’t quite understand what she saw in Sultaire; but then again, a woman’s mind was always a mystery. He’d resigned himself to that, too.

“*You’ve studied The Spider’s methods,*” he’d then said, puzzled at her extended silence. “*Do you know how you’ll do it, yet?*”

Only then did she lift her gaze to his, a small flickering smile playing about her lips. Louis was arrogant beyond the bounds of belief when on his own ground, but these were her strengths, learned even before she became known as “the Iris,” there in the shifting, shadowy wasteland of post-war Püran-Khir. After she’d come under Louis’ protection, he’d helped her hone those skills, first by making a child’s game of them, a way to amuse her, or keep her quiet. As she grew, they changed into contests, and became more difficult. Her technical skills in thievery and disguise had surpassed his by the time she’d turned sixteen; by the age of twenty she was better known as “Iris” than as Louis’ little play-toy, “Angela,” and knew quite a bit more about his life and pursuits than she’d bothered to share with her erstwhile mentor.

“*In reverse, of course,*” she’d replied. Now, peering at the imposing edifice of Bishop-Florian from the seclusion of the cedar grove in the park just beyond, she felt a little giddy recalling her own supreme arrogance at the remark. *In reverse. Sure, Angel. Only it’s not as easy as you made it seem.*

She checked her watch, a piece much more costly than was apparent from its carefully antiqued look. It had to be. For work like this, seconds sometimes meant the difference between success and failure—life and death.

Two more minutes. Like the clockwork gears within her watch, Angelique’s mind worked its way through tonight’s preparations, piecing them all together with facile precision. Time pulsed through her with every beat of her heart, every indrawn breath. Every cell, every fine hair on her body was achingly *alert*, aware of each breath and heartbeat in a way she’d only ever duplicated in Raven’s company.

Raven’s tears. He’d wept earlier, silently, even as they both approached the pinnacle together, then lied about it, preferring to turn away from his

own feelings rather than share them with her. She knew he'd lied about it; she'd felt it in the way only another deceiver can sense deception. The woman in her longed to know why he wept, yearned to comfort him, to promise him anything to honor the tears he cried, but he smiled, and lied, and danced away from the precipice of truth, leading her away from it, too.

"*Mâgun-Zak*," a dwarven gift in honor of a human king. Named for both the clan that crafted it, and for the heraldic device of the king who had accepted it. *Mâgun-Zak* meant "raven's tears," and the irony of it was damned distracting.

She shifted the wide leather belt over her shoulder, welcoming its bite into her flesh, and the pain that brought her back into her task. It was a piece of jewelry, no more. An exquisite artifact which would this night be stolen by one who could take it, sent on to another who would pay handsomely to own it, or so she assumed. No one else in this city may ever know the truth of its theft besides Louis and herself, but that was all right. Secrets like *this* one were best kept as closely as possible.

The low, metallic '*bong*' of the Clock Tower echoed to her from the harbor below. It was time. She again shifted the weight of her pack, and worked her way around to one of the side entrances to the old building. It had originally been constructed to honor performance arts, and later expanded to showcase every art form imaginable. Those late expansions added architectural peculiarities that made it a security nightmare. The committee of the Ladies' Auxiliary that was responsible for this exhibit had been prevailed upon mightily to change the venue by the police force and the security agency they'd hired to bolster the Hall's normal precautions. But Bishop-Florian Memorial Hall was so immersed in custom and tradition that the noblewomen of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Guardian Paladin Church had believed no other venue would do. Lady Angelique Blakesly of Carlisle had carefully kept her opinions to herself during those discussions.

Tonight, that stubborn, righteous, arrogant blindness of her so-called 'peers' would be turned to her advantage. Raven would have loved the idea, if he'd known of it. Not that she could ever tell him.

Late afternoon sunlight, angling through the bedroom window, glinting mockingly in the shining rivulets on her lover's face. . . .

Firmly, she pushed down her heart's memories and wrenched her concentration back to the matter at hand.

The guards on the grounds changed shifts at twenty-two. At 2201, Angel was letting herself into a well-used side door to the building, one that permitted staff and maintenance personnel entrance and exit, out of sight of visiting patrons. Since Angelique Blakesly was a junior member of that committee of the Ladies' Auxiliary, she had been given responsibility for the many tedious details to which the senior members didn't wish to attend. Such duties had made it necessary for the Lady Blakesly to keep a partial set of keys to the building.

This key hadn't been on the ring when the baroness had accepted it, but it was a rather convenient addition. She slipped into the interior without

so much as a breath of air to mark her passing. The halls and offices were quiet. Even with the bolstered number of guards on duty, they hadn't found it necessary to patrol these areas, since nothing critical was kept in the office wing.

She checked her watch again. *It takes a few minutes for the guard shifts to resettle themselves*, Louis had discovered, and shared with her during their supper together three nights previous. *But no longer than twenty-two ten, Angel darling. If you're late, your neck is as good as collared.*

Quickly and silently, she flew through the narrow corridors of the ground floor, then up a maintenance stairwell. *Collared. . . and unlike Raven, my father wouldn't save me from my fate. He'd probably be the first to throw me into chains, if he knew what I've become. Raven's luckier than he knows.*

With the keys in her gloved hands easing her way, Angel was on the proper floor by 2208, their use having nullified several magical alarms designed to defeat unwanted intruders. She ducked into a pre-selected janitorial closet, her pulse pounding in her ears, but she'd pushed herself beyond fear to ride the swelling crest of nervous energy and exhilaration. Her motions smoothed and tightened to the barest economies, but her heart, suffering on her lover's behalf, continued to stray.

He'd rolled us over, locked together. . . his tears falling like rain, as clear as truth. . . steeped in lies. . .

With great care, she pulled a blowgun from her pack: silent, deadly with the right darts, but subject to random drafts. These darts had been tipped with a potent drug that would cause temporary paralysis and unconsciousness for several hours, if it could only find purchase in the skin—

Heavy, booted footsteps turned the far corner of the hall, grinding away distraction with each thudding crunch. Angel froze, deliberately pulling air into her lungs to force her blood to move. The point of no return was almost upon her. She could hear the man's breathing now, guessed him to be overweight by 20 kilos, irreverently glad that the drug itself could have knocked out a dwarf with a single dose.

Come on. . . come on. . .

Silence. A window latch rattled, tested secure, and the man clomped towards her again. Her heart kept time with his slow march even as her nerves screamed out for him to hurry it along.

Close, closer, closest. . .

Pah-whunk! The tiny dart streaked through the air, almost invisible in the dim light. The guard turned, slapped at his neck, then caught sight of his assailant in the shadowy recesses of the closet. Angel caught her breath, sure in that expanding moment that the drug had failed. The guard opened his mouth as if to shout, even as she primed herself to move, *move now!*

The shout froze on his lips. Panic took him, silently. His eyes widened, then they rolled back. Knees crumpling, he crashed to the floor.

Already propelled forward by her own moment of panic, Angel dashed out, grabbed the inert lump by the belt and collar, and exerted all her strength to drag his unconscious form back with her. With two lengths of fine silken

cord (amazingly tough for its slenderness), she bound fast the man's hands and feet, then rolled him over so his snoring wouldn't alert anyone else.

One down.

She'd no sooner risen, sweating, than the footsteps of the next guard turned the same corner. Concealed in the darkness, Angelique felt no fear this time, only anticipation.

Again, she waited. Again, the window rattled, the footsteps approached. Once again, the dart flew true.

The female guard fell as easily as her male counterpart had and, within moments, she too was bound and sleeping comfortably at his side.

Two down, outer hall secured. First objective complete.

Freed now of her distractions, yet still mindful of the press of time, Angel turned her thoughts to the next set of challenges. She had spent several long nights combining what she knew of the exhibit layout with the details Louis had discovered about the security involved. She thought there might be a way to get to the item without killing anyone. Only close observation of the situation within the hall itself would allow her to know, either way.

Four guards patrolled the exhibit hall where the *Mâgun-Zak* was displayed, along with many other works of art from the collection of the renowned Vin-Nôrëan art dealer Auguste Santí. Ordered to patrol with some precision, they could see at least one other of their number within seconds of losing sight of the last, and were to sound the alarms if there was any lapse, any at all, in the rhythm of those sightings. The bells would ring loudly, alerting the guards several floors down. One of them would run to the closest police precinct. If Angel failed in muscle, nerve, or timing, she'd have just that margin of time to get what she came for, and get clear. Or simply get clear, if things went horribly wrong.

She watched for a quarter of an hour, learning the rhythms of each guard, checking them against her watch; seeing which guards looked in which directions, and at what things first, and which they ignored. It was easy to mark where they might rely on the sightings of the others, from the layout of the exhibit during the baroness's duties here, earlier that day.

Yes. Just so. There. Start with the tall, bald one, then the husky female. The blond woman always pauses there. . . and then hurry to take down the last. Timing: One minute, fifty three seconds to disable all four guards, consecutively, moving against their clockwise pattern. She'd have to move faster than she'd ever moved in her life.

Angel crouched, never so alive as in that moment, caught in the interval between the plan conceived and its execution. Her pack slipped silently to the floor. There she crouched, waiting for him to come within her ambit, waiting through the diminishing seconds. . .

Do it. She moved toward her first position, spinning the ring on the middle finger over as she went. The exhilaration of the challenge rose within her as the first guard approached.

She let him pass, then jumped him from behind. A quick blow to the neck put him down. She flipped the cap on her ring, and pricked him with the

needle.

Thirty-five seconds.

Silently, she raced to her next position, ducking behind an ornate suit of armor and shaking out her garotte. Between two more heartbeats the next guard was down, the slender cord twisted sinuously about the woman's slender neck.

The needle kissed its victim. Angel hurried on.

Sixty seconds.

Time. Time. Time. It froze around her, and she moved through it like a wraith. From behind an arras, she pricked the third guard, who collapsed where she stood.

Minute twenty-three...

They met eye to eye, his expression rife with disbelief. The flashing heel of Angel's hand removed that thought. Stiffening, he toppled backwards. The last dose of the drug entered his skin.

One minute, fifty-one seconds.

It was done. Triumph thundered through her, as heady as orgasm.

Four of them! She wanted to shout, laugh, scream, dance! For an absurd moment, she wanted Raven there to share this victory with her, wanted to hurl herself into his arms and laugh out loud, chasing away the tears he'd cried... but those thoughts sobered her abruptly. Tonight, Sir Vincent Sultaire would not have been her lover. Police Inspector Sultaire would have been yet another in the ranks of the opposition.

Sobering indeed. Shaking it off (and grieving just a little for what her lover would never know), Angel returned to where she'd left her pack, retrieving an odd-looking pair of spectacles, and then unwrapping the most precious enchanted things she'd ever seen. The double set of paired crystal wands thrummed in her hands; apparently, one needn't have been mage-born to sense the magical power held in those clear depths, for she couldn't cast a spell to save her life. But, placed properly, they would nullify the magical protections placed around her objective. Placed improperly...

She glanced at her watch again. Twenty-two twenty-two. She had forty minutes to steal the necklace and get clear of the premises. After that, she would leave it and the crystals at the pre-arranged drop point, then rush back to the gardening shed where she'd left her gown and jewels, change, and return to the party just five kilometers away.

The most time consuming part, she thought irreverently, as she approached the clear crystal case where the *Mâgun-Zak* was displayed, *is going to be getting back into that damned gown.*

When the artifact itself was before her, Angel found herself staring at it through the glass in abject fascination. It really was a breathtaking piece of artistry, and she paused a moment to appreciate it. A warrior might wear it across an armored breastplate; even with the seeming delicacy of the feathered "wings," it had a very martial appearance. The jewels, fashioned into tiny teardrops, seemed to attract all the light in the room, throwing off scintillating flashes of fire. The minute etchings were indistinct from where

she stood, but discernible. They gave the entire piece a ‘feathered’ look, muting the glimmering metal, and somehow accentuating the brilliance of the gems. They danced before her eyes as if they were alive, and she found herself almost mesmerized by the effect.

Pay attention, Angel! Shaking her head, she placed the pair of specially-crafted spectacles over her eyes. Abruptly the necklace and the rest of the room disappeared. All she could see were scintillating lines of arcane energy, wherever magic had been used to secure the items on display. There were quite a few, and now she knew with certainty where each and every one of them were.

Within the crystal dome that covered the display, four of those brightly sparkling lines interlaced, touching the edge of the covering in eight places, equidistant around the circumference. Two lines were red. Two more were blue. The key to blocking the spell was *not* to place the crystal wands where any of the lines of force touched the clear crystal dome, but alongside where the red and blue lines met in brilliant violet stars.

Had a thief placed the wands in four of the places where lines touched the circumference of the dome, it would dispel them completely, thereby triggering a more subtle alarm in the guard headquarters below. Part of the genius of this crime was that the magical protections were left in place. The item itself? Vanished.

Focus.

Angel readied the first two crystal wands, forcing her sweating hands, tense arms, and shoulders to relax, lest that tension cause the kind of trembling that made unfortunate accidents likely. She’d never used the real things in her practice sessions, of course, just simple glass substitutes of the right size and weight; handling the truly enchanted versions, she would have taken an oath that the two devices seemed to interact with each other as she handled them, though it was impossible to describe the effect.

She dismissed imminent concerns of failure from her mind. *The crystals are enchanted to work in pairs, that’s all it is. Like lodestones, maybe. You don’t have to be a mage to know what that’s like. This is going to work.*

Drawing her focus down once more to the task at hand, Angel lifted the first set of crystals and alighted them with their appointed positions. With exacting precision, she lowered them down into their appointed places outside the dome. Sweat ran from her brow, threatening to blind her. Time lost all meaning. It was neither frozen in place, nor hurtling onward. There were four glowing violet stars in her universe and two crystal rods. No more.

Millimeter by millimeter, each hand sought and adjusted minutely during the descent of the rare, precious things. For a moment, she thought she felt a very faint “shimmering” from the wands when she had them positioned correctly. It was so very subtle, she wasn’t entirely sure she felt it at all, but she found that when she relaxed to it, the descent flowed very naturally.

Angel knew nothing about spell-work, but her muscles and nerves understood what her mind could not. The crystal wands touched the base of the display simultaneously; the two sparkling violet points pulsed once, then

resumed their steadily glittering glow.

She wiped the perspiration from her hands and brow, then picked up the second set of crystals. This time it was somewhat easier. Not only did her body know what to expect, the effect was consciously noticeable; she suspected that was due to the first pair already being in place. When their companions were properly aligned, all four points began pulsing in steady rhythm—and their component lines withdrew perhaps one centimeter away from the circumference of the crystal dome.

Using the same care, Angel lifted the dome and set it aside. The jewels in the necklace were iridescent in the room's bright light, much like a raven's wings, glittering in quick, unpredictable flashes of light.

Mâgun-Zak... Raven's tears hadn't glinted so colorfully in afternoon sunlight... but they were no less precious...

Wait. Where did that come from?

Irritated with herself, she stuffed the precious thing into the velvet pouch she'd brought, then carefully replaced the quartz crystal dome on the bare pedestal.

The crystal wands were easier to retrieve than to set; the arcane energies resumed their caress of the inside of the dome. For all reasonable purposes, the guards below would not know what happened until it was much too late. It left her... twenty minutes, she thought, then checked her time-piece to confirm it. Plenty of time to put the final artistic stamp on the job.

From the floor-plans she'd studied, and from her own explorations of this end of the building, Angel knew her egress would be at the other end of this particular addition to Bishop-Florian. It was ridiculously easy to avoid the sole guard still conscious, and still very clueless as to the fate of his co-workers this night. There were three locked doors, and though she had the keys for all of them, she picked the one nearest the guards' patrol route, and into the keyholes of two other doors she poured an acidic solution *after* opening them. The smell was horrible, so acrid it burned her nostrils. Angel was careful not to touch any of it. She had no idea where Louis had gotten the stuff, and in truth had not wanted to know.

A deep bay window had been selected for her exit, complete with soft pillows where patrons might rest themselves from their artistic pursuits. She unlocked the window, and pushed it open. The last piece to this amusing game of misdirection was at hand. From her pack, she removed her miniature crossbow, able to be held and fired with one hand; and then the specially constructed bolt which, when fired, carried a long length of silken cord upward, burying its head obligingly into a wooden support beam near the roof. With a casual flair that belied the intense triumph she felt, Angel fired off her bolt, safed her tools, and then secured herself to the line. Pausing only to push the window closed, she shimmied up the fine, spider-like twine to the roof above.

Guards and their trained attack dogs, blissfully unaware of what had just occurred, continued their patrol routes below.

A fine caper by anyone's standards, she thought, gazing down on slumbering mass of towns and villages that had become Fernwall, during The Great War. It spread out before her, the lights on the masts of the ships in the harbor sparkling just beyond. For a moment, Angel ignored the press of time and took in all of the vista before her. Fog filled the Thieves' Quarter and the lowest levels of Docktown, twining insubstantial tendrils into the winding streets of Merchants' and the gentle hills and well-manicured lawns of lower Angels. Even from this distance, she heard the faint cloppings of horses' hooves, pulling the innumerable hired traps and hacks carrying people to and from their engagements. A low warning note from the lighthouse on the other side of the harbor flashed light through the thick mists, warning ships at sea of hazards near.

The entire city pulsed. *Life... life... life...* It was in the breath, the movement, the very air—the whole city *lived* and loved and hated by full measures, stinting nothing to those who were willing to throw themselves in its flow. Standing atop the roof of Bishop-Florian Memorial Hall, having taken down six security guards to pull off one of the most spectacular jewel heists ever, Angel felt herself vibrantly alive, *tingling* in every pore for the first time in almost a year. Only her irregular sexual escapades with Raven had come close, but even they could not make her mind and body sizzle like she'd just missed getting struck by lightning.

A remarkable thing, by anyone's measure, she thought again, turning her mind reluctantly to the remaining loose ends of this caper. Her alibi must be firmly established. That meant returning to the party at the summer home of the Earl and Countess of Liberaune, the noble family who had been the Patrons of Name for the exhibit.

It also meant returning to a way of life that forced her to live as if she were half-dead. After all of this flushed, pulsing, vitality of being, it was as if a tomb door yawned open below her and began to suck the life-pulse from her, pulling her back into the lonely, gray nothingness. The dead never willingly released their grasp on their own.

For a brief moment, Angel angrily resisted that pull. It was entirely possible to throw over Angelique Blakesly completely. The baroness could disappear, and she could become Iris permanently, and live very well here in greater Fernwall by her wits and talents, much as she'd done in Püran-Khir, only this time in a city where one might enjoy being rich. . .

And always one breath away from death, or maiming, or a collar, she reminded herself, sighing quietly. She'd made her choices, back when all her choices had included the fiction of Angelique Blakesly, by default.

Time to return to the coffin.

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