

Chapter 1

Beijing

June 12th 1959

I longed to lean back in my chair and rub the back of my neck, shake my hair loose. My suit had moved into a very irritating position and I really wanted to fix it. That was the problem with the full-spell glamour suits, they always crept up somewhere uncomfortable.

My fingers hesitated over the abacus as I glanced around the bare, badly-lit room in search of the supervisor, wondering if I could risk a 15 second break for some quick adjustments. Just then the hateful man slammed a small paddle down on the side of my desk.

“Chin lo, if there is no life threatening reason for your hands to be still, I suggest you get back to work.” The supervisor, a short man in his 40s, continued his walk up to the front of the room. I didn’t dare watch him, I leaned over my paperwork feeling the silent snickers and half smiles that my coworkers were directing at me.

Pursing my lips, I got back into the job at hand. While quickly calculating, by aid of the abacus, the long rows of numbers on the pages before me, I couldn’t help but think that this was the most tedious and worst assignment I had ever had. Two solid weeks of days filled with accounting and the accompanying clack of a roomful of abacuses was really taking a toll on my nerves.

And what was I looking for? A needle in a haystack. Mistress’s ridiculously vague instructions: “We are trying to find evidence that the Arcanimus are providing weapons for the Republic of China. If they are, there will be evidence of payment going through the government’s central accounting office. Find it.”

Find it, ha! I thought. After two weeks, I had only come across two items of any interest. A large payment to a small bank in Syria and a similar sum to a Gobi Animus Co. with an address in Patagonia. Two hot spots of Arcanimus activity. I had dutifully recorded both entries with my Witness glass, but neither bit of information was conclusive.

I also was beginning to feel the language charm wear off and I didn’t have the ready means to renew it. The Chinese characters were slowly losing their comprehensibility. Every time I opened my mouth I was sure a Chinese-English hybrid of gibberish was going to come out.

I stifled a sigh. Better apply myself—the sooner I found concrete evidence, the sooner I would be able to go home.

After my day of work was through, I was once again on the noisy, smelly streets of Beijing and feeling much better. Sitting at that cramped desk for 10 hours a day was unbearable. I couldn’t imagine how those poor fellows who worked alongside me could do it day after day for most of their lives.

But they were none of my concern. I was glad it was only temporary for me. Walking back to the boarding house where I was staying while undercover, I decided that I was hungry enough to

enjoy even the most revolting meal served by my landlady and that I would hog the communal bath for a long time in order to get out of my disguise and relax.

Dinner was as disgusting as I thought it would be. Sitting at a long bench and plank table with my fellow boarders, I wolfed down the rice and slimy vegetables before me. I tried not to think of the filet mignon at Flaubert's in New York, but I was feeling malnourished after eating the same slimy vegetables and rice everyday.

Following several of the other boarders, I climbed the stairs to the bare, minimalist room I shared with three men. Each roommate had one corner of the room in which to place their belongings and in which to face in order to get some semblance of privacy. I laid down on my small cot and stared at the stained ceiling already disgusted with the smelly men I was confined with. Two of my roommates started playing a game with dice. The fourth had not returned.

I knew that there would be a line for the bath this early in the evening and decided to wait a few hours so that I would, hopefully, be the last person. I lay on the bed going over the scanty bit of evidence that I had come across so far. There were the two previous payments to suspect companies or individuals, but that afternoon I had added a third item to my list.

I had come across a paid-in-cash invoice for a large number of something called Medallon X113 from a company called A.R.C. Corporation located in Basil, Switzerland. It seemed odd that I had never heard of anything by that name, but the name of the company made it very suspicious. I had dutifully recorded the invoice.

Nearly dozing off, I sat up abruptly. I checked the time on my cheap wristwatch and saw that it was nearly 10 o'clock. The perfect time to get in line for a wash. I leaned over the small bureau and pulled open the top drawer to retrieve clean under garments and my toiletries. As I made to leave the room, one of my roommates called out, "Hey Chin, did your mama raise you in a whorehouse to make you that fastidious."

I turned sharply on the man who had flung the insult. He was the oldest of my roommates. Wearing only his undershorts and scratching his big belly, he laughed heartily at his own joke. The young man seated across from him never took his eyes off the dice. I didn't say a word even as my eyes flared with anger. I left the room quickly. Insults and outrages flew threw my head, but I couldn't risk saying anything. The language charm was definitely losing its strength. It had sounded to me as if the old geezer had said "Knock your Chin low, the dog fed you to the grass which is why you dress in mauve." The words had taken a few seconds, much longer than it should, to descramble in my mind.

I sighed as I got in line for the bath. There were only two men in front of me. I wondered if I would have enough time and privacy to renew the language charm that night. After that last flub, I knew that it probably wouldn't last through the next day.

The last man in line ahead of me finally exited the bathroom, the attendant was already fast asleep. I waved a hand over the boy's head, thinking the charms for peace and rest, ensuring a long and peaceful sleep for the boy. The door did not have a lock, so I placed a chair in front of

it. Looking around I saw that bathroom was a mess. For each of the men who had used it had splashed water and soap grime everywhere. By the looks of things, many of them had been very dirty to begin with. The bathroom attendant, my landlady's youngest son, was only responsible for keeping track of who visited the room and filling the tub with the maximum 4 inches of water. Good thing that I was prepared to make do without the attendant.

Looking at the filthy tub, I held my hand out, fingers spread. Concentrating I waved my hand a bit then pinched my fingers together. I tugged with my hand as if I were tugging at a cord that wouldn't come free. Then I moved my hand from one side of the tub to the other and flicked my fingers to the other side. The spell had peeled away all of layers of dirt and grime that ringed the tub. Coming free it flew through the air and landed with a splat against the far wall and from there oozed down into a filthy puddle on the floor.

I concentrated again on the tub and watched it as it began to fill with very hot, soapy water. The water was far too clean to be from the old taps fixed to the wall behind the tub. Not exactly by-the-book for an undercover agent, but I was too tired, dirty, and cross to care.

Smiling to myself, I began to undress. Starting at the crown of my head, I began to peel off my skin. As if I were peeling a banana, I took off the glamour that made the 5 foot 8 inch-tall European-featured woman into a 5 foot 2 inch-tall pudgy Asian male. Stepping out of the superfine, fake skin, I stretched my arms tall above my head and rotated my neck, loosening up my shoulder muscles. I shook my hair free and rubbed my face. I draped the suit over the back of a chair. It laid rumpled like a deflated person, the short hair standing on end nearly touched the floor.

I climbed into the bubble-filled water. I had bathed within the confines of the glamour for the previous two weeks. As the suit could be hot, cleanliness was a key factor in these long-term undercover assignments. One wouldn't want to give oneself away by an unpleasant personal odor. I knew I was taking a great risk by bathing undisguised, it didn't stop me. Instead I luxuriated in the soft warm bubbles.

Knowing I would have to renew the language spell sometime during the night I was considering the few places in the building that would offer enough privacy for me to work the spell. Language and communication spells weren't difficult, just time consuming and noisy. I was considering paying a visit to my own apartment in New York to work the spell when I heard a sliding noise. It sounded suspiciously like a chair being slid across the floor.

I turned my head in the direction of the door. The chair I had used as a failsafe was fully two feet from the door. As I looked up, I saw the door open a crack and a face concealed in shadow watching me. When my eyes met those of the spy, the door shut quickly and I heard feet padding softly away.

From the chair's position, I knew it had to have been moved, not with someone's hands or even a tool slid under the door, but by magic.

“Damn it all to Hades,” I quietly cursed. I quickly climbed from the tub. Putting my open palm out in front of me I said, “Robe.” An instant later a bright orange robe appeared in my hand. Appalled at the color, I quickly put it on tucking the glamour in to the belt. Within 10 seconds of the closing of the door, I was following the spy.

The bathroom was at the end of a long hallway. The stairwell was at the opposite end. I had not heard another door open or shut, so I was certain the spy had traversed the length of the hallway. As I moved stealthy towards the far end I used my free hand to begin a shield spell, calling the symbols of defense and stealth, and holding it out in front of me. Near to the end of the hallway, I slowed down. For a split second someone poked their head around the corner. The next second I heard someone taking the staircase. I gave pursuit.

I knew that I was likely being lead into a trap, but if I had any say in the matter, I wouldn't let that spy get the better of me.

When I reached the stairway landing, I saw that the spy had taken the stairs upwards. I knew where the spy was headed. The roof. It was the best vantage point from which to make a leap. I was on the second floor of a four story building. Deciding instantly what I must do, I hesitated at the landing and reached into one of the inner pockets of the glamour. I removed a small medallion and slung it around my neck using the cord that was attached.

Next I waved my hand over the rumpled glamour and sent it to my apartment in New York. Without another second to lose, I tightened the belt on the ugly robe and ran up the stairs in pursuit.

I had barely made the fourth floor landing when I heard the door to the rooftop bump close. A smug smile of satisfaction crossed my mouth as I continued to the roof. I was right. The spy had made for the rooftop and it was a trap.

Just behind the door to roof, I stopped to reach for my magic—my full connection to magic. I closed my eyes and gripped the medallion about my neck and in my mind described the protection I would need as I walked through the rough wooden door in front of me.

Feeling the pulse of the magic flow, I reached for the door handle before me and pushed. As soon as I was beyond the door frame on the flat roof, a flash of gold light tore through the night. It came straight for me and I turned to face it, whipping my shield spell in front of me. Just inches away from contact it suddenly rebounded as if it had hit an invisible trampoline. It flew back from where it came, overtaking, with surprise, the person who had flung it.

I saw a figure dressed in dark clothes lit up by the light of the magic fire ball. It struck the figure and I could just see the body rolling along the roof. In what certainly should be too little time, the person had stopped herself and flung another ball of light at me. This time I was even more prepared. Walking towards it, I reached through my shield and caught the ball absorbing it into my hand. The dark figure threw three balls in succession as she tried to back away.

I easily caught them all. I held the third ball letting it hover above my hand to cast a bright glow across the rooftop. I was only a few feet away from the spy by that time. The only feature visible underneath the dark mask she wore were her dark, fearless eyes.

The next few seconds were of essence. I quickly calculated the situation. If the dark figure were given more than 5 seconds of inactivity, she would vanish and I would never know who she was. I threw the ball of magic at the spy just as I leaned into a fighting position. The spy jumped out of the way, using an elegant cartwheel.

I was expecting something of the sort and executed a whirling jump to land in the proximity of the spy. A small glow began to grow in the hand of the spy. I moved fast and struck her in the chest with a sidekick. The magic glow vanished as the dark figure rebounded from the blow in a backwards handspring.

This time the figure was ready for my attack and she leapt to meet me half way. Had anyone been in a position to see the fight that ensued, that person would have been witness to an excellent example of a duel between two very well-trained fighters, if I do say so myself. I had brought the confrontation down to hand-to-hand combat for two reasons. One, I was one of the best combat fighters in my field. Two, I hadn't a chance to gauge my opponent's magical skill. This was not the ideal situation to find that I was dealing with a powerful novice or a skilled coward. I knew she couldn't be an accomplished mage. She was doing someone else's dirty work.

As we faced each other for another series of blows and kicks, I found myself reveling in the adrenaline. This is what I had been craving for these long weeks during my undercover work. I loved the action and reaction of a good fight. The instantaneous and breathless decisions and actions. This is why I had joined up with the service, not that there had ever been a question about it.

However much I enjoyed the fight, I knew I was going to have to take my opponent down soon. We had been too long on the roof and by this time someone was bound to be wondering what all the scuffling was about.

As the dark figure kicked out at me from low to the ground, I jumped into the air, somersaulting over my opponent. As I landed, I turned. My opponent, expecting a kick or a punch, leaned in and to the side of me. Exactly as I had planned it. I took a firm grip above my opponent's elbow, which I found surprisingly thin and easy to grasp. I turned her to face me. Our fight was now a wrestling match. I had five inches and 30 pounds on my opponent. As we locked into a pushing war that would have been the envy of any sumo wrestler, I smiled at the smaller figure.

In the blink of an eye it was all over. Summoning the direction with my breath, I took a step towards my opponent and twisted to the side sending my foe off balance. Without losing hold of the dark figure, I took the leap to headquarters.

From the unevenly floored rooftop darkened by the night, suddenly we were in a well-lit windowless hall. The dark figure, still masked, immediately realized the trouble she was in and

tried to roll away from me. Before she could wrench herself free, another woman ran forward and threw out a nearly invisible net. As the net floated down around the spy, it disappeared as it covered the dark figure.

The entrance hall attendant, a graying middle-aged woman with round cheeks and short legs, began reading a typed up speech to the silent figure hugging her knees on the floor. "I hereby notify you that your magic has been bound by the powers invested in me, Agent Harker, of the American Mage Intelligence Service. You will be bound until further investigation of the committee looking into illegal entry into the American Mage Intelligence Service headquarters." The woman swirled her finger around in the air to indicate the building we were in.

When the attendant was finished, I reached over and pulled off the mask of my opponent. Sullenly sitting before me was a small woman with short dark hair. Her bright black eyes were set off by wide cheekbones and a fine mouth. While of Asian descent, she was not Chinese.

I eyed her intensely. "Interesting," I said more to myself than to the other agent. I looked at the other woman and smiled brightly. "Thanks Hennie, I was hoping you would be on duty."

"Any time Esme," Hennie said with a wink. I made to protest the shortened version of my name, but she said first, "I know, I know, I'm not supposed to call you that any more, Esmeralda. Its hard to get out of a habit of a lifetime you know." I rolled my eyes at yet another reminder that to most of the agents, I would always be a child. Both Hennie and I looked down at our captive. "I see you haven't lost your touch for trouble."

"You know me Hennie, trouble always just seems to turn up."