

# **Digital Magic**

**A work in progress**

**by**

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The great shadow crept the length of the roof as silent as a prayer. Each paw found its way unerringly to the path of least noise- it was truly part of the night. The half eaten moon made its dark fur dance, for a moment in silver light it was haloed. At this even fragmentarily disturbance, the black lip curled back, revealing a creamy expanse of fang. The growl however remained unvoiced, instead rumbling within the deep chest. Shoulders scything, the panther resumed his cautious ascent. On either side the roof sloped sharply away into the unlit manor's garden, and though he could not hear any yet, he knew that the guards would soon be reaching the front door. Even given his feline power and silence, there was no protection from the night-scopes and high power splinterguns. The remembrance of previous encounters sent him moving on his way. Stealth and the dark were his only allies in this shape.

The curved dark ears twitched this way and that, tracing even the faintest noise for the danger it might bring. Nothing was stirring in the distant wing of the house where the owner lived, but the northern wing that housed the art collection, was humming with barely concealed activity. But the best prizes were always worth the risk

He reached the small window, used for ventilation in those days before central heating. The older the building the better, as far as a twenty-first century thief was concerned. The cat paused again, sniffing the rim of the window. Good, no recent scents, perhaps if he was lucky the window was so unremarkable from below that it drew no attention. His stealthy paw made short work of the fragile ancient lock, and without pause he slipped into the room.

It was a room that would have done justice to a museum, thick with the scent of beeswax and age. This place was very sure of its own importance, and the panther's tail twitched in derision. He let he paused for a moment as his feline eyes adjusted.

Moonlight ran in faint streams through the still evening air to glitter momentarily on the glass topped cases below. Inside were mementoes of lost ages, cleaned, dusted and displayed for tourists to gape at, but it was there that his true target lay. The cat's eyes narrowed, and its posture stiffened as if sensing prey. The smell of well-varnished wood made his nose twitch, but also bought him other, more important information. The guard had just passed here, his half eaten salami sandwich

tucked into his back pocket, and his boots just recently cleaned of mud that still reeked of dog. The cat's nose was the least of his talents.

A flicker of cool mist enshrouded the beast, for a heartbeat hiding its form. When it cleared though, there was a far different one. The tall dark haired man was already moving along the walkway, ducking his body low against the windows, not giving any unseen watchers an easy target. If any had been there to observe, they might have noticed that he moved with the same graceful economy as the cat. He was of course better equipped. The dark leather quirtsuit he wore dropped his thermal temperature to that equating to that of a passing moth, and strapped to his hip was the darkest and ugliest of rifles. How did he manage to shapeshift and retain all his equipment- he didn't know, except for the fact that he was no normal shapeshifter. Magic ran pure through his veins, and the pesky details of logic and physics did not bother him.

But then this world had not left him completely unchanged either; money for example had already exerted its power on him. So he was not here for random violence; he was here for something far more interesting and profitable.

Others in his trade sacrificed flesh for metal in an attempt to gain the edge, he disdained all that for there were far greater things than technology he knew. His natural talents after all more than made up for his somewhat traditional approach to thievery. His body after all was the only thing that was left to him of a dangerous and tragic past, and he was not about to cut into it merely to go with the times.

He reached the end of the walkway, and after only a second's hesitation on the varnished handrail, dropped two floors down onto the stone floor. It was a fall that would have broken the legs of any other. Pausing a moment, the dark eyes scanned the layout. It did no one any favors to be foolish at this point, and something about this place felt wrong. A prickle of fear ran on hot feet up his back, and he knew better than to ignore it; instinct had always done well by him.

His prey was only an arm length from him. The glass topped display case seemed little protection indeed for such a prize.

It was a mask, as had been worn in human ages past, but run through with a delicacy and power that meant only one thing. Only one place could have created such a frail thing of pale stone, and infused it with such spirit.

The empty eyed female face looked back at him, and seemingly into him at the same time. The mouth rested slightly open, caught in the act of speaking perhaps, the full white lip trembling. It was a face as beautiful and familiar as the one he wore. It spoke to him of his childhood, when he had thought those times long forgotten. This mask, with the hint of spiraling curls framing it, had captured the form of a soul that had been two people: both that had captured him when young and foolish.

This was the moment where any other person in his line of work would have grabbed and run. And yet the man waited, his warm breath in the chill air almost fogging the glass, nostrils flaring wide. Far off, outside the walls of the mansion a dog barked and a guard's stiff curse followed, and still he did not move. He was part of the world, quiet but awake, simply waiting for it to whisper its mysteries to him. Dark eyes never left the velvet couched mask though, tracing it, trying to find its meaning.

He suddenly remembered to breathe, and the scent of jasmine plunged into his body.

It came to him as he waited there- like a hammer blow across the face. It was something so vastly unexpected that he almost cried out. It resounded through his bones like nothing had for decades, but at the same time a dreadful ache lodged itself under his ribs. The smell of it flooded his nose and mouth, sweet and heady like a summer wine, or a field choked with flowers- made all the more powerful simply because he knew what it was.

How this part of home could be merely another possession, to be stared at by mindless tourists who could never understand its true meaning cut into him. The desire to hold it, and feel the cool stone was intense. Every fiber wanted to reach out and take it- and yet he did not. His mouth twitched. Ah the pain was sweet and terrible and he wished it both gone and eternal.

Under this assault he finally surrendered. It was mead, and madness to senses deprived for so long. In that one heady instant all that he had become since the last time he had sensed this was swept

away. Rendered back to childhood, he couldn't help it. "Home" he whispered against the night, longing stretching his voice out into the friendless darkness.

Of course the security system picked him up straight away, he might as well have stood up and shouted his name to the world. The moment was broken, the sliver from his past had vanished, the scent dissipated into reality. The mask had reclaimed its mystery, and now he was in severe trouble. The rattle of metal against the window told him the security system was rapidly blocking any escape. Harsh metal locking the intruder into the hall until the guards arrived with guns blazing and questions left to the morning after.

Faintly dazzled by what he had seen, habit nonetheless got him to his feet and running. He bounded back the way he had come, changing mid air to faster form. The pale feline claws sunk deep into the fake wooden columns speeding him up in a way no human body could. Below him the room was being flooded with murky gray gas so that the red criss-cross of infrared beams could be seen, and the cat ears picked up the whine of guardbots powering up. The powerful panther's haunches bunched and hurled him along the walkway, ears flattened and mouth held in an silent snarl.

Behind the snap of electricity as the air became alive with electronic fury. Every section of his dark fur rippled with it, and his rational mind told him he didn't have long. Ahead the small window that had allowed him entry was chugging relentlessly shut, fractionally too swiftly for even his mad rush. A thin bar of moonlight was rapidly narrowing even as he leapt the last few feet. He though barely missed a beat, his body twisting mid-air once more. The dark man dropped to one knee, smoothly unsheathed the blunt ugly weapon he carried at his hip, and let two sharp blasts rip open the descending metal between him and freedom.

Cat form carried him free of the hall, even as the guards were responding to the alarm. He scrambled along the roof, leapt into the trees and galloped away, just as they were opening the doors. The only hint they had that he even passed was the rabid barking of their dogs.

The panther retreated to the quieter, deeper shadows that were far more familiar. He stared fixedly at the huddled shadow of the great house, yellow eyes half hooded. A few quick licks over his

shoulder assured him that he was alive, and though the incident was humiliating, he had at least survived; still neither lion nor leopard likes to fail at anything.

Huddled under a thick yew tree, he shifted back to his human shape the better to think. The urge to swear and punch something was powerful, perhaps a hangover from the feline rage that still pumped in his system, however the remembrance of that scent quieted him a moment. It called him back to a time where he had been quite another thing; when his world had been something different, something far more beautiful. He half laughed to suddenly realize that tears were running down his cheeks. Thrusting them aside with the back of his hand Ronan knew it was a foolish thing, and one that he thought he was long past.

"Bloody idiot," he reminded himself, adjusting the bitter weapon on his hip, but couldn't help thinking that once he would have had no need of such a thing, indeed when it would have been a humiliation and a travesty to carry one.

But he was quite used to this life now- settled almost. It was just damn stupid to yearn for what could not be- it would only drive him mad. And yet....

The sigh would not be contained. It was a mystery that had to be unraveled. Until it was, he couldn't simply travel on, it would itch at the back of his head forever otherwise. This little village must have the answer to that glimpse, and he could not rest until he found it out. Still that would have to wait till morning. Then he could get the lie of the land, and work out just what sort of mess he had stepped in.

r the Trickster it was merely survival.