

The Chalice War: Cauldron

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Chapter 1

The train had just pulled out of Redfern station when the first frisson of magic brushed across Sara's skin. She shivered, tasting darkness in its touch.

Fomhoire. Here, in the middle of Sydney. Nearby and closing in, accompanied by . . . by what? Wight? Demon? Yes, demon. All this she read in that initial contact. More, she sensed the Fomhoire had already found her, was intent on her and closing the distance between them.

Sara stood, crossed to the nearest of the sliding doors, and stared out into the inky black of the railway tunnel, desperate for the light of the next station. Never had the distance between Redfern and Central felt so great. The train car rocked, and she grabbed hold of the steel pole beside her to keep from tumbling into the lap of a young businessman.

"Pardon me," she whispered.

His gaze flicked to her. He answered with a nearly imperceptible nod and turned his attention back to the *Herald*.

Morning commuters crowded the CityRail trains and stations. Surely Fomhoire assassins wouldn't attack her here, in front of so many.

A small voice in her mind replied, *Why not?*

She wore work clothes, carried her briefcase, was on her way to her office in the CBD. Roger, her tabby, her conduit, was at home, safe in her flat, too far away to help her with spells. She was powerless, defenseless.

The train slowed—finally!—and the train guard announced their arrival at Central Station.

“Change here for Northern, Carlingford, North Shore, Cumberland. . . .”

The moment the doors opened, she pushed her way out, heedless of the men and women in front of her and those on the platform waiting to board. People shouted after her; a few muttered obscenities. She didn’t care. She hurried to the nearest stairway, one that would take her to the concourse. The magic followed, aimed like a weapon at her back.

By the time Sara reached the top of the stairs, she was breathing hard, sweating through the blouse she wore beneath her blazer. She switched her briefcase to the other hand, wiped her slick palm on her skirt.

She kept to the crowd, surrounding herself with people, using them as shields and searching frantically for anyone who might give off enough glow to let her defend herself.

How can there be Fomhoire in Sydney?

She and the others maintained a network, a web of magic. Like Sidhe in other parts of the world, they watched for portals and Fomhoire incursions from the Underrealm. As far as she knew, they had sensed nothing.

For decades, Sara and her fellow Sidhe had protected one another, warned one another. These last several years had been quiet, peaceful. She knew other Sidhe in countries far from Australia had battled Fomhoire recently. Harrowing reports had reached her from the States, from Europe and Africa and Asia. But here Relative peace had reigned for so long, she had grown comfortable, lax. Caution needed to be a routine, like exercise. And she had grown lazy. How many mornings had she left her flat without taking the simple precaution of warding

herself? This morning had been no different from yesterday, from the day before, from the one before that. Except it was entirely different. And she might well die because of it.

She exited the gates, threaded her way through the throng in the concourse, hoping to lose her pursuers among the masses. She would exit the station onto Pitt Street and grab a taxi. That was her plan anyway.

As she neared the doors at the west end of the concourse, she sensed more magic. Wights probably, but without Roger, she wouldn't stand much chance against them, either. She slowed, halted. People flowed around her on either side, as if she were a stone in a stream.

Eddy Street then—the nearest exit.

After a single step in that direction she stopped again. More magic. They had her surrounded.

Another train perhaps. If she could return to the gates and get to a North Shore platform, or maybe the Illawarra line

A spell electrified the air and made the hairs on her neck stand on end. Sara could do nothing except brace herself for its impact.

Magic fell upon her an instant later, obliterating thought, will, consciousness. She couldn't say if she remained standing or fell to the floor or ran in circles like some ridiculous child's toy. Time was lost to her.

When next she became aware of her surroundings, she was still upright in the middle of Central Railway Station's Grand Concourse. A woman stood before her radiating so much power Sara had to resist an urge to shield her eyes.

"Hello, Sara," she said in a cool alto and an accent that would have convinced any native

Aussie.

“Who are you?” Sara asked, surprised she could speak.

The woman smiled. She was beautiful, of course. The Fomhoire always were here in the Above, regardless of how they appeared in the demon realm. Pale blue eyes, flawless olive skin, golden brown hair that fell in a shimmering curtain to her shoulders. As brilliant and superficial as a Carnival mask. She wore jeans and a long sleeve Sydney FC T-shirt; nothing that would have made her stand out in a crowd.

A second form hovered at her shoulder, as hideous as the woman was lovely, as ethereal as she was solid. It appeared to be little more than a cloud; shapeless, smoke grey, undulating. What might have been eyes shone dully from within the shadow, like stars partially obscured by a nighttime haze. Its lone substantial feature was a mouth at its very center, nearly round and armed with several rows of spiny teeth.

Two demons. One ghastly, the other lovely. Both deadly, no doubt.

None of the people passing by took note of them. Sara sensed that she, the Fomhoire, and the cloud demon were invisible to all.

Sara searched for the woman’s conduit, but saw no animal, no bird, and no people loitering nearby. Could the demon be a magical source?

“You won’t harm me here,” she said, pitching her voice to carry, and speaking with false conviction.

The woman cocked an eyebrow. “Won’t I?”

Before Sara could answer, the Fomhoire backhanded her across the cheek, her hand little more than a blur. Sara staggered back a step.

No one stopped to gape. No one so much as glanced at them.

“Misdirection spell,” the woman said, in a tone she might have used to discuss the latest change in the train schedule. “They can’t see us or hear us. They couldn’t care less what I do to you. They’ll never know if you survive this encounter or die by my hand.”

Sara took another step back.

The cloud dove at her, its jaws snapping with a sound like stones clacking together. She cowered, shielding herself with her briefcase.

“Don’t run,” the Fomhoire said. “You won’t get far, and it will be very bad for you. Very, very bad.”

“What do you want?” Sara asked, the words like motor oil in her mouth.

“Exactly what you think.”

“I don’t—”

Agony. Sara dropped to her knees, feeling like she’d been gutted by a saw-toothed blade. She clutched at her stomach, briefcase forgotten, mouth open in a silent scream, eyes squeezed shut and streaming. She felt no blood; this was a magical attack. Knowing this did nothing to lessen the torment.

Commuters continued past them, oblivious.

The Fomhoire woman walked a tight circle around Sara, ten-centimeter heels clicking on the polished stone floor. “This will be easier for us both if you don’t lie to me.”

If Roger had been here, Sara would have turned her into a torch.

“Why don’t we begin with this: Where is it?”

Her gut still aflame, Sara could do nothing more than gasp.

“Oh, of course.”

As suddenly as it had come, the pain vanished. Sara dropped her head forward and pressed her brow on the cool stone.

“Better?”

Sara reached out with magic, searching for anyone, any creature she might use as source for a spell. She might have used the cloud demon, but she feared the Fomhoire would sense such an attempt. She needed to surprise the woman, and she would get only one chance. Besides, she and the Fomhoire were surrounded by Milesians; one of them had to be giving off some glow. Just for a single spell, just enough to get away.

The woman dug a toe into her side, and she toppled over.

“I asked if that was better?”

“Yes,” she rasped.

“Then get up.”

The shadow demon swooped closer.

“Now!”

Sara forced herself up, weathered a spell of dizziness. The woman continued to circle her. The cloud of evil and teeth hovered at Sara’s shoulder. She stared straight ahead, her gaze fixed on the clock at the eastern end of the concourse. Seven minutes before nine. She should have been exiting Wynyard station by now, making her way to the brokerage office on George Street. Instead, she would die here, at the hands of this Fomhoire beast, surrounded by unknowing strangers.

“Where is it? Where is the Cauldron?”

Her gaze darted in the woman's direction. She couldn't help herself. This was their worst nightmare realized. Not only had Fomhoire found their way to Sydney, they knew of the Cauldron. They knew it was here.

A smug smile tugged at the woman's lips. "It's close, isn't it? In the city perhaps?"

Sara said nothing.

"Where?"

New pain blossomed at Sara's throat. She stiffened and hissed a breath through clenched teeth. This time she did feel blood, a warm trickle running down her neck and staining her collar.

"You will tell me, Sidhe, or you will die horribly."

"You're going to kill me anyway."

"Yes. But death comes in many forms. I can kill you quickly, painlessly. Or I can set the Brollachan on you. I know it's something of a cliché, but they really do prefer to feed on live prey. Not a pleasant way to die, or so I'm told."

Sara cast a quick look at that shapeless form.

"It's your choice," the Fomhoire said, orbiting. "Your answers to my questions will determine your fate." Her smile broadened. "Think of it as a game. A diversion before you go."

A tear slid from Sara's eye at the thought of those she would leave behind. Her mother, her sister, a handful of friends. She had lived a quiet life, one dictated as much by the exigencies of her magic and her people as by personal tastes. She might have traveled more. She had always wanted to see America and parts of the Middle East. But she had spent her youth in Ireland and Wales before moving here, called by duty and her hatred of the Fomhoire. Of creatures like this woman.

There were worse ways to live, even for one who had walked this earth for as long as she had. There were worse ways to die than defending those she loved and this world she cherished.

All of this occurred to her in a scintilla of a second, a single beat of her heart. The thoughts warmed her, brought a smile to her face, despite the tears.

The Fomhoire's grin slipped.

And in that moment, Sara felt it. Power. Distant, but approaching. A human conduit, unbound, its strength neutral, balanced between the murky dark of Fomhoire and the radiance of Sidhe. Glow, ripe for the taking. She would have but one chance, and she couldn't try yet. She needed the conduit to come closer.

"What are you smiling at?"

"You," Sara said, emboldened by hope. "You think I fear death."

"I know you do."

She shook her head. She needed time, and that meant provoking the woman. A dangerous game, but as long as she could keep the Fomhoire casting spells herself, drawing upon her own conduit, she wouldn't notice the glow of this other source.

"You know nothing. You're a child, like all Fomhoire. You have power, and I'll grant that you might have cunning as well. But you believe those qualities bring you wisdom, and you're wrong. Your ignorance will be your undoing."

"Where is the Cauldron?" the woman demanded, her studied charm forgotten.

Searing torment in Sara's chest drove her to her knees once more. This time she did cry out, though doing so did her no good. No one heard. None of those around them paused to stare, much less help.

“If you kill me, you’ll be no better off than you were. You’ll have wasted your time and your magic, and you’ll have alerted others of my kind to your presence here in Sydney.”

“Where?” the Fomhoire shouted.

Drawing on strength she hadn’t known she possessed, Sara raised her head and smiled again. At the same time, she reached for that glow of power. She would have preferred to wait a few seconds more, but she didn’t believe she had much time left. She hoped arrogance and overconfidence had kept the Fomhoire from warding herself.

Sara lashed out with her spell. Hers were not the magics of a warrior. She couldn’t cast blade or impact spells. She would have relished the chance to crush the Fomhoire’s skull, but she couldn’t. She could throw flame, though. She could light the woman’s hair and clothes on fire. Which is exactly what she did.

The Fomhoire screamed like a wild thing and tore at her burning clothes. The Brollachan flew around them both, as if unsure of what to do.

Sara cast again, a second fire spell directed at the woman’s heart. It didn’t kill the Fomhoire instantly, as she’d hoped, but it added flame to flame, allowing Sara to believe for an instant that she might incapacitate the Fomhoire and escape.

But the woman was too strong, and Sara was no warrior. She didn’t possess the power necessary to kill a Fomhoire as strong as this one. And before she could throw another spell, the Fomhoire cast a spell of her own. A warding. Sara’s next conjuring had no effect.

A new spell fell upon her and she crumpled to the floor, her limbs useless, her will shattered, her ability to resist torn from her. What hope she had of an easy death withered.

“You will pay dearly for that, Sidhe!”

Already the Fomhoire had extinguished the fires. Her hair and the blackened tatters of her clothes continued to smolder.

With a snap of bone, pain exploded in Sara's arm. The magic pinning her to the floor didn't even allow her to scream.

"I'll break every bone in your body. I'll pull out your nails and take out your eyes. You'll beg me to stop, to have done with it and kill you. And even after you've told me all I wish to know, I'll let the Brollachan feed on your living form."

She couldn't move. She couldn't fight back or flee or cry for help. And even if she could, none of it would have done her any good. Here, surrounded by thousands, she was as alone as she had ever been. But she was not helpless. She would not submit to this dark fate.

The Milesian conduit had passed them by, but a hint of glow lingered within Sara's reach. She reached for it now, glimpsing a last path to salvation. Not an attack. Rather a way to spare herself.

One final fire spell.

She thought again of her ancient mother, held in her mind an image of the smiling face, the bright blue eyes.

Forgive me!

She whispered the incantation in Gaelic, shaping each word with precision, unwilling to risk getting this spell wrong. Flames, aimed at her own heart.

"What are you doing?"

Sara tried to smile, hoping to confound her enemy. Small vengeance. She released the magic.

Gods!

It hurt more than anything the Fomhoire had done to her. This reassured, soothed in a way.

We are strong still. You haven't won yet!

Her back arched with the agony of her own casting. Even the woman's magic couldn't prevent it. Another small victory. As if such things could matter anymore.

The Fomhoire's wail of frustration seemed to come from a great distance. Sara heard her shout something at the demon, felt an odd sensation in her midsection. The flame in her breast, however, had carried her beyond pain, beyond caring.

A last thought: *Who will alert the others?*

Darkness took her.

Chapter 2

“Shooting again today, Riann?”

She knew Craig’s voice well enough; she didn’t need to look up from her novel.

“What else would bring me here? The gourmet food?”

“The scintillating company,” the guard said, lowering himself into the chair next to hers.

“The sparkling wit.” He leaned toward her. “The movie-star good looks.”

She did face him then, her eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, all right,” he said. “A shoot, then. Something fun, I hope.”

“Actually, it is,” Riann said, a smile creeping over her face as she set her book aside. She didn’t mind Craig. Sure, he pushed the flirting too far. He was married and at least twenty years older than he thought she was, but unlike the other security guys who worked at Central Station, he knew something about photography.

“I have my rig up in the vaulting above the concourse,” she said. “I’m using a twenty millimeter lens and taking really slow exposures; a couple of minutes each. Any people walking around will be faint blurs, kind of like ghosts.”

“Aren’t you worried about reciprocity failure?”

She grinned. “Good question. You’ve been studying.”

“A bit. I’m learning.”

“No, I’m not worried about it. If the exposures were any slower, it might be a problem.

But I’ve been experimenting with shoots of this sort. I think I have it about right.”

Craig nodded, stood. “Well, good on you then. I want to see some prints when you have them.”

“All right.”

He started to leave the bookstore but returned to where she sat. “You say your camera’s up in the vaulting?”

“That’s right.”

“Then how are you—”

She held up the camera remote. “New toy,” she said. “Works from up to a hundred meters.”

“Nice. See you later.”

Riann watched him go, then checked the stopwatch on her phone. The last exposure was done. She clicked the remote to start another.

She’d made an effort to cultivate relationships with security and maintenance here and at other spots across the city. It helped that she worked as a staff photographer for the *Morning Herald*. She had worked enough stories in Central Station to establish a reputation—an industrial action among the rail workers two years ago, the death of a homeless man just outside the station about three months after that, a bomb scare right around Christmas, and, a few months ago, the overdose of a young man in the concourse men’s room. After the death of the homeless Aboriginal man, they started to recognize her. By the end of that harrowing, beastly hot afternoon in late December—there was no bomb, but the threat disrupted rail service throughout Sydney and the surrounds for the entire day—she had gotten to know most of the guys who worked in the station. When she began to request their help with shoots at odd hours, and from

unusual perspectives, they were happy to oblige.

It helped that she was young and fit, and that most of them were . . . well, guys.

Likely, they assumed she was in her early twenties. Like all Sidhe, she aged slowly. They never would have guessed her actual age. She wore her hair short and spiky on top, and shaved over her ears on each side, plus she had piercings—seven in the left ear, three in the right, four in her left eyebrow, and one in her nose. Most people she met guessed she must be gay, but that didn't stop the guys at the railway station from hitting on her. A nuisance, but one she could handle.

The guards also acted like she needed protecting, which bothered her more. But she wasn't big, and she couldn't come out and say, "Relax, guys: I have divination, warding, healing, and blade magic, among others. I can take care of myself." So, she dealt with the patronizing remarks about how cute and dainty she was, and she enjoyed access to every nook and cranny of Central Station.

She eyed the stopwatch and, when two minutes were up, started another exposure. Her camera battery wouldn't last forever, but she intended to get as many shots out of this set-up as she could. Situating the camera had been no small task.

As Riann waited through this next exposure, an odd sensation tickled her skin and danced along her spine. She was slow to recognize it.

Magic.

Someone had cast a spell. More than one. She sat up, glanced around the bookshop. No one inside radiated power. She stepped out of the store. The tingle of power was more intense here, and she ventured farther into the concourse. A man talking on a Bluetooth nearly walked

into her. He scowled and hurried on.

She saw nothing unusual, but the sensation remained. Some Sidhe, including her mother, could discern the nature of magic from the lightest touch, and so would know whether this power belonged to Sidhe or Fomhoire or wight. Riann was still learning to do this. Her mother would have said she hadn't tried hard enough.

Another spell charged the air around her and was followed by several more in quick succession. A chill ran through her. She eased still farther from the store. Commuters packed the station, and she wasn't tall enough to see past those nearest to her, even standing on tip-toes. She scanned what she could see of the crowd, considered climbing into the scaffolding to where she had left her camera. Doing so would afford her the best view of the concourse.

More magic pebbled her skin.

In addition to her attack magics, she also possessed misdirection and temporal. She might reach the steel girders of the vaulting without being noticed. But only if she had been smart enough to bring Quinn with her.

Even if her conduit was here, casting would have been risky. She was alone and knew nothing about these other sorcerers. The last thing she wanted was to draw the attention of a band of Fomhoire.

She remained in the concourse, watching, listening, waiting for the next spell.

It didn't come.

Had they gone? She stood amid the moving throng for another ten minutes. Three times she triggered new exposures, hoping to capture with the camera something she couldn't see herself. At last, convinced the other sorcerers were no longer in the station, she returned to the

bookstore and took up her novel once more. She continued to trip the camera's shutter every few minutes, but her heart was no longer in her project.

She couldn't be certain what sort of spells she'd felt, or who had cast them, but she trusted her instincts. The magic had felt . . . wrong, reminding her too vividly of the night her father died.

Some time later, when another conjuring brushed her skin, she hurried back into the concourse. The morning rush had ended; she had a clear view from one end of the station to the other. Yet nothing she saw explained the castings she'd sensed.

She returned to the store, gathered her things, and tracked down one of the maintenance workers. He brought a ladder out to the concourse and held it in place for her as she climbed and retrieved her camera. She thanked him, slipped two folded twenty dollar notes into his hand, and headed to the train platforms.

She remained watchful as she waited for the Illawarra line train that would take her to Banksia, where she lived. Once she was on the train and seated at the rear of the car where she could watch the other passengers, she pulled out her camera and began to scroll through the images she had captured. She couldn't make out many details on the LCD screen. The people in the concourse were supposed to be blurred—that was the point of the long exposures. Nevertheless, in some of the later photos, Riann thought she'd captured a dark shape in the lower left corner. By the time she shot her final images, it had vanished. In one photo it was there; in the next it was gone.

Odd.

She scrolled back to one of the images with the dark form and zoomed in as much as she

could. She had used a wide lens, and at this level of magnification, the image began to pixilate. Even so, Riann was almost certain the dark form was a prone body. It appeared to be a woman, and she bled from her torso and her neck. Riann went back through the images. The stain on the woman's midsection grew from one to the next, and she thought some blood might have pooled around the body on the floor. When the body vanished, so did the blood. All of it. Completely.

Impossible.

She scrutinized the last image in which the body appeared, zooming in and out several times. Then she shoved her camera back in the bag, stood, and stepped to the nearest door. At the next stop, she exited the train and crossed to the other side of the platform, intending to board a northbound train that would take her back to Central.

She needed to see that spot on the floor, not on a screen, but for herself. The wait for a return train seemed interminable, as did the gaps between stops along the route.

At last, she emerged from the platforms into the concourse and strode to the spot where the body had been. She checked the screen as she walked, making certain she had the right location.

She found nothing. No body, of course. No blood either. No indication the spot had been mopped recently. There were stains on the floor, a piece of dirty old gum stuck to the tile. Not a drop of blood.

She searched for Craig, and when she couldn't find him, settled for the next security guard she saw. She didn't know Pete as well, but she had no doubt he would recognize her.

"The great photographer," he said, spotting her as she drew near. "I thought you were here earlier. That's what Craig said."

“I was. Have you had any incidents today?”

His smile vanished. “Incidents? What do you mean?”

“Injuries? Illnesses?” *Murders?*

He shook his head. “No, nothing like that.”

“You’re sure?”

He shrugged. “It’s not that big a place, darlin’. If there’d been something like that, I’d know about it. You think something happened on one of the platforms?”

“No. It would have been here in the concourse.”

He gave an emphatic shake of his head. “Definitely not. I would have heard something for sure. Everyone would have.”

She nodded, frowning.

“What’s this about?”

“I don’t know,” Riann said. “I spotted something in several of my images. It looked like . . . a body.”

“Like a corpse?”

“Well, I thought there might be blood. I haven’t looked at the image on my computer yet.” She pulled out her camera and showed him.

He studied the image, and with Riann on his heels, walked to where the body would have been.

“I don’t know what to say.” He handed the camera back to her. “We’ve had students from the Uni here before, making videos—low budget films. They’re supposed to check in with us first, but most times they don’t. It could have been them. Because something real, that looked

like this?” He shook his head again. “That would have been news. Big news. This place would have been crawling with police and media people. It would have been a circus. It would still be a circus now.”

“Of course. Sorry, to bother you with it.”

“Not a bother,” he said, his tone surprisingly gentle. “It’s good you checked in. That’s just what you should have done. But I don’t think you need to worry about it.”

Riann thanked him and walked away.

All he said made sense, but it didn’t convince her. Not completely. She sought out the maintenance worker she’d seen earlier and asked him the same questions. Surely, if a Uni crew had been in the concourse someone would have noticed.

This man’s response, though, was much like Pete’s. “I didn’t see nothin’. And I woulda. You don’t have something like that go on in a place like this, and people don’t know about it.”

She walked through the concourse one more time, scanning the floor, walking the entire length of the station, in case her orientation—or that of the camera—was off in some way. Nothing she saw explained the image on her SD card.

She returned to the platforms and waited for the next train to Banksia, feeling she had wasted a lot of time, not to mention a train fare. She looked through the images again, zooming in on that dark form as she had before. There might not have been a commotion at the station—maybe the security and maintenance guys never knew anything was amiss. But that was a body on her LCD screen. And none of the people near it held anything that remotely resembled a video recorder.

All of which left only one explanation. The spells.

Magic might explain the body *and* its disappearance. An attack, or a murder, would also explain why the touch of unknown power had left Riann so uneasy. She needed to see these photos on her computer.

She owned a small, one-story house on Gloucester Street, a short walk from the Banksia station. Her yard wasn't much to look at, but it did include an orange tree that gave fruit during the summer. Palm trees grew out front along the avenue. To her mother, back in the States, they were the most exotic and exciting things in Riann's life.

Riann was four doors shy of her home when she heard Quinn barking from within the house. Despite the thoughts weighing on her, she smiled. She'd had pets before. She had grown up in a home filled with dogs and cats. Only later, as she learned what it meant to be the daughter of Sidhe sorcerers and came into her own power, did she realize that at any given moment at least one and usually two of the animals in her house were conduits for her parents. Iris, her first conduit, was a calico, and Riann loved her. When she died, Riann cried for a solid week. But even she hadn't been like Quinn.

Her father found the dog; an irony given all that happened later. A few months after Iris died, a friend of the family, someone who didn't know the Donovans were Sidhe, called the house. Her Siberian Husky had given birth to a litter of puppies. Knowing how the Donovans loved animals, she thought they might adopt one or two.

Her parents didn't want another pet, but her father went to see the puppies anyway. He later told Riann he had an inkling of what he would find.

Even then, only days old, one of the pups gave off an aura of power that could have brightened a stormy sky. Riann's father bought the dog and presented it to her that day.

It was love at first sight.

Quinn, named after the song “Quinn the Eskimo”—her father was a huge Dylan fan—was little more than a ball of red and white fur with stunning ice-blue eyes. She was playful and affectionate and fiercely protective of Riann, despite being tiny and clumsy and way too cute to intimidate anyone. Her power burned like magnesium—brilliant and white-hot.

She was the perfect conduit for a young Sidhe, and the perfect companion for a young woman who had never been good at making friends. They’d been inseparable ever since.

Reaching her house, Riann unlocked the door and allowed Quinn to bound into the yard. The dog ran pell-mell for several seconds, all tight turns and sudden changes of direction. Then she stopped, her ears pricked, her curved tail held high, her tongue lolling.

Every ounce of her seemed to scream, *I want to play!*

“All right, you,” Riann said. “Let me get the leash.”

She grabbed an old beat up frisbee as well and they walked to a nearby park. Technically, dogs weren’t supposed to be off-leash there, but the park was nearly empty, and Quinn always came running the instant Riann called to her.

They stayed for maybe half an hour. Quinn would have been happy to stay the rest of the day, but Riann wanted to examine those images. Upon returning home, she gave Quinn a treat, checked for texts from work, and retreated into the office at the back of her house. There she had her desktop computer and its huge, color-calibrated screen.

Some Sidhe, she knew, struggled with technology. Her father used to claim that magic and tech were incompatible. Riann had no trouble and she dismissed this as an old person phenomenon. She loved her techie toys.

She pulled out her camera, removed the memory card, and put it in the reader atop her desk. While Riann waited for the photos to download, Quinn padded into the room and laid her chin on Riann's leg.

“Didn't you get enough attention in the park?”

She scratched her conduit behind the ears, and Quinn canted her head to the side so she could lick Riann's wrist.

Riann kept her eyes on the screen. The instant the download finished, she opened her photo-editing app and looked through the exposures.

The first sixteen photos turned out much as she had expected and hoped they would. The lighting was a tad bright, but nothing she couldn't fix, and she had gotten a nice, smooth blur on the people walking through the concourse. Had the project been all she cared about she would have been pleased.

According to the time stamp, Riann captured the first unusual image at 8:46, around the time she felt the first brush of magic in the bookstore. This photo showed a dark figure in the lower left quadrant, exactly where Riann had seen it on the LCD screen. The form wasn't as opaque as it appeared in photos taken later, indicating that this person wasn't in that spot for the entire two-minute exposure. Riann zoomed in. The woman might have been on her knees. She wore a navy blazer, a matching skirt, and a white blouse. She had shoulder length hair, blonde or white.

The next image—time stamp 8:49—showed the same woman in about the same spot. Her form was more blurred in this one. Perhaps she had risen from her knees during the exposure, and was on her feet for some of the time.

A second blurred form appeared to circle her, remaining in motion throughout the exposure. Riann could make out no details beyond a vague impression of colors: dark blue pants; pale blue shirt; light brown hair, also shoulder length. Another woman?

Riann also noticed a flare of light in that circular blur. It was irregularly shaped—a conjured flame, perhaps.

The image after this one—8:52—showed the prone form that first drew her attention on the train, as did the seven photos that followed. The circular blur had vanished, but an odd gray shape hovered over the prone woman in at least two of the images.

Even on her computer, Riann couldn't see much of the woman's face. Having used such a wide lens, she could only zoom in so far before the capture turned blocky and unreadable.

She tried sharpening and resampling at a higher resolution, but nothing worked. The woman was one tiny figure in a vast image. Still, as a staff photographer at the paper, she'd shot plenty of crime scenes and had seen more than her share of recovered bodies. She had also taken the opportunity to chat up the coroner's court officers and so had learned a few things about forensics and the identification of corpses. With the images at her disposal, she could develop a general description of the woman in the suit.

Comparing images of the woman on her feet and on her knees, Riann counted pixels to get a sense of her height. She did the same with the circling figure and a few other figures in other quadrants of the photo who stood in one spot long enough to be captured by the camera. The dead woman, as far as Riann could tell, was a little over 1.6 meters—average height. She was slim. Riann guessed she weighed no more than fifty-five kilograms. The woman walking around her might have been a few centimeters smaller; the image wasn't clear enough to allow

for an accurate estimate of her weight.

She saw nothing unusual about the briefcase lying beside the woman on the floor; it could have belonged to an attorney, a banker, an insurance broker. Central Station was close enough to Sydney's Central Business District to make any profession possible.

The flare in the 8:49 exposure didn't change much no matter how much Riann magnified the image. It had to be fire. Conjured fire.

Yet no one reported any of this, and when Riann scanned the concourse from outside the bookstore at that exact time, trying to find the source of the magic she felt, she saw nothing. Which suggested spells had been used not only to summon the flame, kill the white-haired woman, and remove the blood and corpse, but also to conceal all of this from the people around them.

Who had done the summoning, the killing, the concealing?

Had this been a magical battle, or had the woman in the blue pants and pale shirt attacked a Milesian? More to the point, why had the woman been killed? If her attacker was Fomhoire—and Riann couldn't imagine a Sidhe doing something like this—what was she after? Why was she in Sydney?

Other Sidhe lived in the city. Riann wouldn't have called them friends, but they allowed her to attend at least some of their meetings. Many, she gathered, maintained a magical network, a web of sorts that should have allowed them to sense Fomhoire incursions and to locate any magical portals the demons used to travel between the Underrealm and the Above.

Sidney's Sidhe didn't trust Riann enough to let her be part of the network, and even if they had, she wasn't sure she had the skill or power to be of much help. But working for the New

South Wales desk at the newspaper kept her attuned to events in the city. Forbes Conrad, the one Sidhe who had shown appreciation for her possible value to their circle, wanted her to inform them of any unusual sightings or occurrences or crimes. Including, she was sure, unexplained deaths.

“The Fomhoire rely on demon assassins and spies from the Underrealm,” he once told her. “The crazy reports that editors and writers are likely to laugh about—those are the ones that could save lives by warning us of a Fomhoire attack.”

She didn’t know what would draw Fomhoire warriors to Sydney, or why her fellow Sidhe were so vigilant. There had to be a reason, but they hadn’t told her. Again, it came down to trust.

They didn’t know her history, or she didn’t think they did. They knew enough, though, to be wary of her. If they had known more, they might have cut her out of their circle entirely. She could hardly blame them for keeping her in the dark.

Which begged the question: What should she tell them about her photos and what she thought had happened today at Central Station? Would the images be enough to convince them?

Convince them of what?

She studied the images for the balance of the afternoon, until she felt confident that if this poor soul turned up in the New South Wales Coroner’s Court, she would recognize her.

Of course, first someone needed to find the corpse. Riann didn’t expect that to be so easy.