

Morphalle Chronicles - Thieves Guild

CHAPTER ONE

Ellen landed deftly between the trees edging the courtyard, folded her wings back and cocked her head to one side as if looking for worms. Anyone seeing the approach would not think this an unusual event for a common thrush. However, the tilt of the head was not a downward facing glance but an upward one to give her a better view of the house.

Hopping across the manicured lawn, she repeated the tilt several times, occasionally stamping her feet as if to charm the worms out of the ground. The house looked secure with its solid oak doors and windows. Each of these would likely have inbuilt multiple point locking mechanisms over both floors and across the substantial width of the multi-million-pound Georgian style facade. There was, however, one drawback to the security. A trellis replete with clematis nestled within a shaded corner just shy of the guttering led to a shallow roof with a skylight framed with inexpensive cedar.

Taking flight once more, she landed briefly on the trellis to check on the fixings before arcing onto the roof. The trellis had seemed secure enough with multiple masonry bolt fixings and it was within a black spot for the security cameras. The skylight, as expected, had a few weak points around the frame which would allow easy removal of the whole double-glazed panel.

Of course, this research would not have been necessary if the job was hers alone, but the guild had insisted this was a minimum two-person job and that James would be required for the safe. "James of ALL people," thought Ellen. As he could

only shift into a damn moggy, the access had to be adapted for all guild parties involved.

The Guild of Research and Recovery was a rather polite and politically correct name for the re-founded thieves guild. It was essentially the same as other guilds of a similar nature, although the secret but unique shape-shifting abilities its members possessed gave it the edge over them.

Ellen lifted off once again, circling the house before landing on the branch of a nearby oak just above a scraggy, mottle coloured cat which had been impassively watching. It instinctively licked its lips as she approached. Without turning its head, it purred "Well?"

"What? No good morning? No, how are you? Just ... Well?" chirped Ellen indignantly.

James tilted his head towards Ellen with the makings of a snide smirk. "Good morning, Ellen. How are you, Ellen? Lovely to see you, Ellen." he sarcastically responded.

Ellen and James had worked together once before, and the job had not ended well. When the guild had first informed her of the intended team effort required for this contract, she had protested vehemently and requested an alternative before being 'Categorically Told'.

Ignoring the tension between them, she kept the partnership as professional as she could. "The route in looks clear enough, as does the exit, as I think the trellis will provide enough support for you both in and out in your current form. Once I deal with the alarm wiring and the CCTV, the skylight is your point of entry. You're likely to have approximately 3 minutes to be in and out before they realise something is wrong."

"When will you be ready?" asked James tersely.

"Give me three to four more days," replied Ellen. "I've brought in a third party to scan the interior in more detail and get a view of the occupants' activities. Couple this with the material I'll need to gather and used to short the alarm we should be ready on Thursday."

James pondered this for a moment, though a slight twitch from his whiskers gave away his nervousness. "A third party?" he asked.

"Just someone I've used before," she mused. "Very reliable and discreet. He's been there a few days already, but a job like this can't be rushed. Not only do you have the risk of any family member stumbling upon your activities, but the armed guards also supported by the state-of-the-art security system need careful circumvention plans mapping out."

"As long as we don't end up going down the proverbial creek without a paddle like last time," snapped James, waving his tail in annoyance.

Ellen paused and took a few deep breaths. It had been James' fault they were on the creek without a paddle the first time. In fact, they hadn't even got a damn boat or life jacket if you wanted the full depth of the issue, yet James seemed to have conveniently forgotten this. Right now, Ellen was under orders, and having it out with James was something for later.

Ellen sighed and carried on. "The preliminary report is that you have a maze of rooms both upstairs and down, but we may have a primary and secondary route for you. The safe is a Chubb Trident Grade six, inside a built-in wardrobe in one of the first-floor bedrooms. It's concreted into an exterior wall. The office is on the ground floor in between the security room and the lounge at the back so through the

skylight definitely provides a less risky entry ... it'll just take time and stealth to complete."

"Stealth? Stealth?" said James. "Stealth is my middle name."

Ellen once again snapped her beak tight rather than speaking, or rather shrieking her mind. "One other thing you'll need to be aware of is there appear to be some less-than-optimal movement patterns by the family and staff, so you'll need to keep alert at all times. I may bring in a couple more aviary morphs to help and we should be able to provide distractions from outside to help if needed."

"Very well." purred James, flicking the tip of his tail irritably. "Let's talk again on Thursday when you have a 'Full' report". With this, he hopped onto the lawn, sauntered through the gate and, when out of sight of the wall-mounted cameras, morphed into his human form and disappeared.

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Ellen's third-party help had been in the house for a few days now. Simon was indeed discreet as his silent movements and ability to peer out of tight crevices without being seen were second to none. At this moment he was huddled next to the passive infra-red security unit in the living room noting the movements and black spots for the sensor, his eight legs poised for reaction should they be required, while his many eyes were constantly monitoring the room below. Most spiders have poor eyesight, usually relying on touch and vibrations through their legs, but as a Morphalle, he was able to alter this disadvantage at will. In fact, he'd even managed to add in the ability to focus his eyes on multiple directions at the same time.

The risks Ellen had outlined to James were minor compared to what Simon was having to deal with. He'd managed to map out the upstairs and the various

personnel movements up there within the first couple of days, but there were two primary issues, which could mean either additional mitigation or just good luck. First, the damn maid was likely to be an ongoing problem. Unlike the guards, and to some degree the Parson family members, the maid had a penchant for wandering when bored, and during one of her many cleaning spells, which she seemed to have a bit of OCD over, she'd nearly caught him with her pink fluffy duster twice now while he'd been traversing about the mansion. Second, the Parsons had two Springer Spaniels and usually, that spelled disaster as, of all the dogs he'd dealt with in the past, Springers were highly unpredictable.

Given what Ellen had told Simon about the last job James had been on, the thought of him being chased around the place by loopy spaniels brought a wry smile to his face. Despite what he thought of James and his unsavoury past, he would have to find a way around the problem, or the contract would be delayed, or worse, given to a competing guild unit ... 'Not on his watch,' he thought.

On seeing an opening between the family and staff movements, he slipped out of his hiding place and ran down the crease of the wall, tucking behind the bookcase. A quick diagonal shimmy from there brought him out near the skirting boards and the edge of the door partition between the lounge and the hall. He paused, waiting. Scanning with *all* his eyes and feeling the boards beneath him for vibrations ... nothing. He needed to get into the security room again, but knew the door wasn't an option because of the unusual seal around it. However, for someone his size, there was always a way. He headed across the door frame into the opposite corner and dipped under the skirting. This is where the latest fashions for 'Olde Worlde' feels in newer housing became an advantage for him; the skirting from an older house had been re-purposed but hadn't remained untrimmed. This lack of

perfection provided him with the gaps he needed. About halfway up the hallway, he skirted left into the wall cavity and up to the mid floorboards. From here, he had easy access to the modern air conditioning and a straight through, unimpeded run to the security room vents.

On arrival, he slid through the vents at the back of the room and took place next to a corner mounted camera, taking in the sights below. At the other side of the room, opposite the main door, sat wall to wall screens taking feeds from the twenty-four cameras dotted around the house and grounds; including the one he huddled against. Phase three of the scoping exercise was now well underway while he watched the watchers.

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Ellen knew she had to plan for additional contingencies. Especially if James was on the job, as she didn't trust him. However, despite not understanding the Guild leader's insistence on his inclusion, she would follow orders. Lifting off, Ellen took one last look around the perimeter and security before heading towards the city centre. Within 100 yards of home, she landed on the ground in a group of bushes in the park.

She knew the area well, as she'd lived here for most of her 23 years of life with her unwary parents. It was unusual for a Morphalle to be born to non-morphing parents and no-one had been able to tell Ellen why she had the ability, but boy, had it been fun growing up; and of all the secrets she kept from her kin, this was by far the most precious. Although this was one of the safest areas to land and morph, you never could tell who or what was around. She waited and listened intently for 2 minutes before deciding on the all-clear. Re-joining humanity always felt a little more

comfortable than the opposite direction as you were expanding rather than squeezing your being into such a substantial change. It almost felt like a relief. A bit like an overweight man releasing his paunch after sucking it in and holding it as a woman passes by.

In human form, Ellen was just shy of 5 foot 8, with a slim build. Her clothing held many similarities in colour to her thrush form, which made it easier to utilise as part of her metamorphosis, not feathered but soft. Her hair was slicked back, almost feather-like. She felt across her face and wriggled her jaw to ensure completion before stepping out onto the path and heading out of the park towards her home.

Stepping onto the curb, she entered a small private garden leading to the front door. At this time of day, she didn't expect anyone else to be at home as mum and dad both had day jobs requiring their presence in other parts of the town. Her mother was an office worker for the local government department and her father was a mechanic for a national car firm. Ellen held a part-time job for a country-wide marketing agency with a level of autonomy and freedom, meaning she could work from home and do the hours she wanted as long as she got the job done. Heading through the door and across the geometrically tiled hallway, she headed into the kitchen to fix herself a sandwich; morphing always made her hungry and despite taking the form of a thrush this time, she never ate worms.

"Ellen?" shouted her mother

"Yes?"

"I'm just about to make a cup of tea. Do you want one?"

"Yes, please. I'll be back down in a minute." Ellen ran upstairs and into her room. She needed to ensure there were no residual effects from the transformation. Occasionally, Ellen might have the odd feather stuck here and there which just

needed to be discarded. The last time she's been spotted shortly after the return from a mission, she'd had to explain away a rogue feather as something which had come from her new duck-down-filled jacket. It always seemed to be birds, which gave her a problem. Never an animal for some reason, though she had only got the perfect hang of small animal transformations so far. Something bigger would definitely need more care. Smoothing down her clothing, she skipped back downstairs and through to the kitchen over-looking the garden. On entering, she ran her hand over the head of their pet cat Samson who rubbed her head against Ellen's wrist. Ellen had been curious when she'd first learnt her ability and had approached Samson as a sparrow. The experiment did not last long and left her with her heart pounding as if trying to explode from her chest. The only thing that stopped Samson at the time was the sudden metamorphosis back into human form as he pounced. Moments later, a somewhat confused kitty had sulked off into the garden.

"Morning mum."

"Morning dear. Your tea's on the table."

"Thanks."

"You had an early start this morning."

"Yeah. I went for a walk to clear my head. Got a lot to do today for work and needed to work through a few things in my head." Ellen hated lying to her mother, but the less she knew, the better. Besides, she considered it a small white lie, as it was not that far from the actual truth. There was a lot to work through, especially with James being included. Samson walked across the table sniffing, confused. He licked Ellen's forearm and sat on his haunch as if trying to work out why he's suddenly got a taste for a human.

"It's okay." Said Ellen ruffling between his ears, while repressing a smile behind her mug of tea.

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John Percival sat in his study pouring over news articles online and in each of the papers strewn across the desk. He knew he wouldn't be disturbed as his man on the other side of the door would give fair warning of impending interruptions.

"Nothing," he muttered to himself as he sipped on his lukewarm coffee. "Nothing. Now why, oh why would the newspapers not be printing about the largest heist outside the Callum brothers?"

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The thieves' guild occupied the top floor of a London high rise. The positioning was perfect as it provided unimpaired views across the city. It also provided easy access to all Morphalles capable of aerial metamorphosis. In the lobby, the office was advertised as R&R Enterprises Ltd.

Grant Tanner sat in the corner office behind his cherished oak desk, surveying the various photographs and documents covering the manor. In his seated position it was hard to tell, though you'd be under no illusions if he arose; At 6 foot 3, he towered above most people, his broad shoulders and chest projecting an air of confidence. As he shuffled the deck, he ran his hand through his salt and pepper crew cut and down the back of his neck, massaging as he went. As Ellen entered, he waved towards a seat opposite.

"Take a seat. I'll be with you in a moment." He sipped his coffee and rubbed his brow. "I'm worried, Ell. The security on this one seems excessive." He looked up, searching Ellen's eyes for an answer.

"I agree," said Ellen. "Simon's report is still being finished, but from what we know so far, the task will need careful planning..." She paused, opening and closing her mouth.

"Spit it out, Ell. You know I don't like prevarication."

Ellen sighed, "You've insisted on James being the lead on entry --"

"Yes. He's perfectly suited for something of this type."

"But -- You know James and I have had issues in the past."

"Yes."

"So, why him? I get that he's suited for this type of operation, but there are others in the guild we could use --" Ellen trailed off.

Pushing his chair back, Grant steepled his hands. "I know about the past issues, Ell. I've considered all the angles and my decision is final. Trust me."

They stared at each other; Ellen searched the steely grey eyes for a chink of hope and Grant waiting for the reality to sink in and acceptance of his last word on the matter.

"Okay," sighed Ellen, frowning. "I'll do what I must." She stood and left the room.

Grant waited a few minutes to ensure no ears could pry before picking up the phone. He dialled -- "We need to talk," he said, before returning the handset to its