

Shattered

A short story in the Twisted Luck Series
Ternion Universe

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"Stevie, Cori, get your stuff. I'm dropping you off at the park before I run to the office. I'll only be an hour." Mom's voice rang through the house and I finished tying my shoes. Maybe the new monkey bars would be open and I could play on them.

I stuck my head in Stevie's room. "Come on. Mom's waiting and you know how she hates waiting." I hated it too. I wanted to go now.

"I'm coming," he whined. He always whined. And he was a slowpoke. It made me glad I was the older twin. Being a baby was annoying.

"We're coming!" I screeched before launching myself down the stairs.

"Where is your jacket?" Mom stood there looking at me, her mouth pinched tight. Her "annoyed" and her "trying not to laugh" look were awfully similar, and I wasn't sure which one it was.

Better safe than sorry. "I've got my sweater," I offered, darting into the closet to grab my long sweater-jacket.

"Uh-huh. Stevie, last warning, then I'm leaving you here." She glared up the stairs, jingling her keys.

"Coming!" My twin thundered down the stairs, making twice as much noise as I had. Even worse, he had his jacket on. I just knew he'd heard Mom's question. His smirk at me sealed it.

I sniffed and darted out the door to the car. At almost twelve, we didn't need boosters anymore, but Mom still didn't let us ride in the front seat. I preferred to be behind her, making it harder for her to see me poking Stevie. He liked that seat for the same reason.

"No fair. Mom! She got out the door first," he cried as I buckled my seat belt. I smirked knowing Mom wouldn't make me move since I already buckled my belt.

"In, or I'll make both of you sit in the office while I gather up files," she said as she got in to the driver's seat.

That shut both of us up. Sitting in the office was boring. The radio came on as we backed out. First up was news about a merlin moving into town. The chatty voice of the music host talked about how great it was to have a merlin here and that surely now Rockway would be much more exciting.

"Maybe they'll have another showdown, or do you think he's a rogue mage?" Stevie whispered.

My twin was my best friend, my nemesis, and hater of all things Mage Barbie. But we both agreed the rogue hunters were cooler than cool. We also knew we'd never be mages.

"What do you want to play at the park?" I whispered. Mom had opinions about our games and didn't understand the way we connected sometimes. I always knew where Stevie was and him me. So Hide and Seek or Tag wasn't much fun. Instead, we created our own adventures.

"Nancy Drew, Mage Investigator!" Stevie said with a grin, and I nodded. One of our favorites. Nancy was a newly emerged mage who always had strange things happening around her. Nancy and her best friends, George and Beth, tried to figure out the mysteries while still learning everything they needed for their degrees. Being a mage would have been neat, but no one, as Mom said all the time, in either of our families had ever been a mage, so we needed to get that idea out of our heads.

It was still fun to pretend though.

We managed to not get Mom annoyed at us by playing Slug Mage as she drove to the park. Every time we saw a mage, walking or driving, we slugged the other, whispering the name of the mage and where.

"Chaos, white Honda," I hissed as I whapped him on the arm.

"Spirit, walking the Lab," he responded with a lightning-fast whack. We froze as Mom's eyes met ours in the rear-view mirror.

"If you two get in trouble at the park, I will ground you for the entire summer. Two hours. Behave yourselves for two hours." Her tone was hard, and her eyes narrowed. This was the 'mom means business' look.

"We will," we chorused. The park was fun, and who wanted to be grounded all summer? We tumbled out of the car as soon as Mom parked. "I'll be back in twenty minutes, an hour tops. Stay here!" It was her 'stern, don't talk to strangers, don't disobey, and don't get into strange vehicles' voice.

"Yes, Mom!" Stevie chimed, and we waved as she pulled away, then turned to examine the world of wonder that was the park. We had a good park: swings, rings, monkey bars, tetherball, basketball, picnic tables, barbecue pits, and a track that went around it.

People were around tables and on blankets cast out on the grass. We headed to the playground area, not seeing anyone we knew. But that was okay; because we loved our games that made no sense to anyone else.

"There," Stevie said, pointing to a bunch of adults next to a table.

"What about them?" I looked that way, just seeing people and a picnic with some frisbees on the table, then I saw the mage tattoos on all their faces. "Ooh, mages."

We looked at each other and, without speaking, nodded in unison. "Bad guys. We need to get evidence they killed the meanest teacher on campus."

His face squinched up, considering. "Yes. The frisbee is evidence. We have to get it without them knowing."

"Of course, because they put a sharp edge on the frisbee and used it like a knife. The blood trace will still be there," I contributed. We grinned our matching grins and headed out on our mission. One of the best things about playing Mage Investigator was we had to seem like normal kids. So we played tag and ran near them, hoping to snag the elusive frisbee and break the case.

Sometimes we got distracted by racing each other from one edge of the interior of the track to the other, or twice by butterflies, and then we stared and watched the mages cause flames to dance from their hands, or water to rise up from a bottle and twist like it was a snake dancing to music we couldn't hear.

"Wouldn't it be cool to really be a mage? To be able to make fire and water obey you?" We were sitting under the geodome bars, spying on them. His voice had a wistful tone that surprised me. While we played Rogue Mage Hunters, Nancy Drew Mage Investigator, or even Mage Tester, it never occurred to me to want to be a mage. Mage Tester involved impossible things like walking on air or changing water to root beer. We tried every so often, but all we proved was we weren't mages.

I shrugged, my skin crawling at his words. "I don't know." Frowning, I kicked at the chips. "They have all these rules and school. So much school."

He wrinkled his nose. "Oh yeah. School is boring. I don't know that I want to keep going. But still, I'd be able to light candles without a lighter."

"That's lame. Fireballs are cool, but lighting candles? Just get some matches. But we can't be mages," I pointed out, my voice in the big sister I know better than you tone 'cause I was older than him.

"Who says?" he fired back, lip stuck out as his eyes narrowed. "They say anyone can be a mage."

I rolled my eyes and flopped on my back, looking at the clouds. If I was a mage, could I fly? That might be fun. "Sure, anyone can. If their parents are a mage. See if you can name one."

"John Sizemore," he said triumphantly after three minutes of puzzling. I'd spent the time more profitably and had figured out a way to get the frisbee.

"True," I admitted. "But his grandparents are and all his aunts and uncles on both sides. His parents are the only ones that aren't mages. You know not everyone gets to be magical, only a few lucky people emerge as a mage. Most everyone we know isn't a mage." I said this with absolute assurance. They talked about it on the TV all time. "Even famous mages, like Tom Cruise. Remember none of his kids are mages."

"Yet?" Stevie didn't sound sure. "Aren't they still young?"

"Maybe?" I didn't want to admit I didn't know, so I brushed it off. "See. None of our family, as far back as we know, are mages. So we won't be mages." I stood up, shaking out my hands. My plan for the frisbee was about to go into effect.

"I'm going to ask Mom. I bet somewhere someone in our family was a powerful mage. Maybe even an archmage." He rose too, a stubborn look on his face.

"Fine, ask her. If you want to be a mage so much you do that. I'm going to get the clue we need to solve this case." I straightened my shoulders and put on my "talk to adult" smile.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, worry coating his voice. "Cori, if you get us in trouble, I'm never going to forgive you. I like the park."

I waved my hand at him. "I never get in trouble."

Stevie gave me a disbelieving look. "You got in trouble the time you brought the cat home. Then the notebook you accidentally read. Or should I talk about the chocolate cake that happened to fall into your hand when you opened the refrigerator."

"Details. I have this." I grinned at him, then spun around and marched over to the picnic table with all the college kids. There were three girls and two guys, chatting and picking at the remains of their lunch. The heat of Stevie's glare at my back made my smile all the wider as I walked up to them. "Excuse me?" My voice as innocent as I could make it.

The students turned and looked at me, smiling as they saw me. I didn't know the symbols well enough to know what types of mages they were, but the colors were pretty and none of them were a merlin. Disappointment at that.

One girl smiled at me. "Hiya, honey. What's up?"

"My brother and I think your red frisbee is magic." I waved at Stevie, who had followed me at a distance. "Can I see it and prove that it isn't?"

"Huh. Magic frisbee. Why didn't I think of that? What do you think, change the coefficient on the air molecules to increase the fric-"

"Stop. Save that for your thesis in flight mechanics. I'm not listening to it here," one of the other girls interrupted him. "Sure sweetie, here you go." She handed me the frisbee.

I gave her a bright smile, forcing myself to not grab the frisbee and run. "Thanks. I'll bring it back in a bit."

"Sure thing, kid." She gave me one more smile, then turned back to her group. "Frank, I swear if you start talking friction coefficients again I will dump your ass here and now."

"Nanc, language!" one of the other girls hissed, and they all turned to me. I gave them a bright smile and scampered off, the frisbee clenched tight in my hand.

Stevie waited for me in the shade of a tree, his eyes wide. "You did it? Weren't you worried they'd realize you were a detective trying to figure out how they are murdering people?"

"That's the great part about being a kid detective," I replied. We pretended we were child geniuses to explain why we were in college so early and just happened to have emerged as kids. It was magic. Surely there were weird things that happened.

I shot a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure the college students weren't watching us—they weren't—and we darted behind the tree. Now to decide if the frisbee had magic and had killed the poor victim.

Much to our dismay, it seemed a normal frisbee, and Stevie proved it by throwing it where it went a dismal distance, just like every other frisbee he'd ever thrown.

"This didn't kill her," I announced, my shoulders dropping. We'd been so sure.

"I know. But there is always tomorrow to figure out how to find the killer. For now, swings?" He brightened at the idea. I wrinkled my nose.

"Let me return this and you can go to the swings. I think I want to play on the bars." He shrugged and trotted off to the swing set while I trudged back to the college kids.

"Heya, honey. Did you find any magic?" the same girl asked me and I peered up at her, checking to see if she was making fun of me, but her question seemed honest.

"No," I sighed, not that I was sure how I'd tell.

"Hmm," she said, looking at me. "Let me see if I can fix that." She tilted her head, thinking. "Georgie, what's the structure for the glitter plastic you've been working with?"

Another girl grabbed a piece of paper and sketched something out on it. "Here, Nanc." Nanc picked up the paper and nodded, then looked back at the frisbee. In front of my eyes it started to morph, a ripple spreading across it. The red plastic shifted, becoming glittery and clear. In less than a minute it had changed from old, red, and normal, to a disk of glitter that sparkled in the sun like Mom's favorite necklace.

"Wow. All mages can do that?" I asked as I stared at the frisbee in astonishment.

"Well, I'm a Transform mage, so it's kinda what I'm learning to do." Nance frowned at it. "Though it was supposed to stay red, with the glitter becoming an overlay. But that explains why the offering was so big." She started at a lopsided chunk gone off the bottom of her hair. "I've got to get better at offering."

The third girl, the only one wearing a dress, came over and sighed. "Really Nanc, you need to pay more attention in cosmetology class. At least then you could maybe offer more neatly."

"Bethie, you're good at that. Not me. It'll grow out, or I'll try to use up the rest with homework, okay?"

Bethie sighed, her perfect dark hair in a neat braid down her back. "You always say that. Come on, Frank has the keys. Said he wants to be back in time to watch the game and Georgie has a paper to write."

Nance nodded and stood. "Keep the frisbee. After all, it is magic now, isn't it?" She shared a grin with me, then turned to help the others pack up their stuff. I turned and headed to the bars, the glittering magic frisbee clenched tight in my hands.

For some reason I didn't rush right over to show Stevie. He was doing super high swings, and I just wanted to enjoy the sparkle from the frisbee. I hung upside down on the monkey bars until the blood pounded in my head, making me dizzy. There was a pulling sensation inside me and I leaned into it, enjoying the way the world seemed different when you were upside down.

I swayed back and forth, focusing on the sparkles and marveling at the pull in my chest. Why didn't it pull down? Instead, it pulled to the side. It was the strangest sensation. It pulled at me and I pulled back. I closed my eyes, the sparkles still visible in my mind as I hung there. Another tug and I swung the other way, feeling the tug of pulling against me and the sensation.

A scream cut short my musings, and I opened my eyes, the tug stronger than ever, but I knew that scream. I flipped off the monkey bars; it was a good landing, the tug and my heart leading me to the same place. People were looking at Stevie, who lay on the ground under a broken swing. Fear lent speed to my feet, even as everything in me pulled at him.

"Stevie!" I screamed, running to him, my hair blowing in my face, and then I was there. The world went away and I held him in my arms, his head in my lap. "Wake up? What's wrong?"

His eyes opened, looking at me, wide and dark. "Cori?" Shadows surrounded us, and the wind died as I sought an answer in his eyes. The world narrowed to a place where only we existed, everything else gray and far away. Like we were in our own little bubble. Even sound disappeared.

Heat radiated so hard from him it felt like he was on fire. I wanted to pull away, strip off his shirt because it was so hot.

I hurt because I was so hot. Heat surrounded us, radiating between us. And that pull, that stupid pull yanked so hard at the center of me, I cried out. I didn't have time for this stupidity. Stevie was sick. Maybe I was sick. Pain lanced through me so great I couldn't breathe and everything disappeared for a minute, even Stevie.

Another world of light and need battered at me, a cord of power, hope, and need pulled at me, demanding my attention. At any other time, I would be fascinated, wanting to figure out this new thing, but some part of me, arms I could not see, legs that were still folded under me, told me I still held Stevie, and he needed me. Needed something from me. I didn't know what it was, but I had to give it to him. Which meant I didn't have time to mess with this.

Frantic with worry about Stevie, I reached down to the center of my being and yanked hard and fierce, putting everything into it, wanting the tugging at inner self to stop. It resisted, and I relaxed for a moment and the pull doubled, yanking at my very essence. I wrapped my hope, my fear, my love around it and I set my teeth and I pulled with all of it. That cord of power, of love, of magic snapped at the other end and came flying back into me like a seesaw slamming

into my chest. It rocked me back so hard I felt like I might fall into an abyss and everything spun around me. I felt like I was dying as it filled me so full that there was no space for air, for thought, for me. Eternity where I couldn't breathe, or feel, or move. Then it subsided, pooling up like a puddle sinking into the earth and it was gone.

The need to breathe battered at me. I sucked in a lung full of air and squeezed, my arms still wrapped around Stevie. Still gasping, I fought waves of light-headedness. I was not Beth, Nancy Drew's best friend; I would not swoon when something scared me. With a grunt of effort I forced my eyes open and looked at Stevie. His eyes had rolled back in his head and his entire body arched. Then he went limp in my arms and the world rushed back to reality.

The wind blew at my hair, knocking it into my face and I spit, trying to get it out of my mouth while I held Stevie tight to me, trying to protect him. I felt hot and flushed as he felt cold in my arms.

Why was he cold? He'd just been burning up, on fire, and so had I. Hadn't we? He shouldn't be cold if he'd just been hot. I stared at him, my fingers white as I held him to my body, hunched over him, protecting him from something, anything, everything.

Nothing made sense, the weird pully thing couldn't have happened. This was real. Stevie was sick. Maybe I was sick?

"Stevie, come on. Mom is going to be so mad. We weren't supposed to get into trouble." I was pretty sure him getting hurt qualified as trouble. Why wouldn't he wake up? Part of me hurt, the part that always knew where he was hurting, but I didn't care. That I'd worry about later. Right now, I just wanted him to wake up.

I swallowed hard and pulled out my mom voice. He hated it when I used it on him. "Stephanos Munroe, you wake up now!" Even I shivered, as if I could really hear Mom yelling that. But he didn't move.

Why wasn't he moving? Mom was going to ground us for a month!

"Stevie?" My voice cracked as I whispered to him.

"Cori? You need to let him go. We can't help him while you're holding him."

The voice cut through the whirling thoughts in my mind and I looked up. A woman, her dark skin and braids what I saw first. Then I blinked and realized it was a police officer. A mage. Her tattoo bright against her skin.

"What?" Had she been talking to me? Were there words I should have heard? My mind and thoughts scrambled, but everything was mixed up. Why was I thinking of a sparkly frisbee?

"Cori? I'm Lieutenant Amosen. I need you to let Stevie go." Her voice was low and kind as she spoke. I nodded at her words, looking down at Stevie. He felt like ice, but that wasn't possible. My hands still locked around him and I couldn't release him.

"I can't," I sniffled, the world blurring as I tried to talk.

"Okay, I'm going to help you." Her hands, skin so dark against my fair and Stevie's pale tones, reached out and pried my fingers loose. I felt dizzy and flushed, but all I could do was stare as she picked him up and walked away.

Everything went gray and my world narrowed to the rubber chips beneath me and then disappeared.

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Hushed voices pulled me from odd memories. Pulling, tugging, breaking, loss. None of it made sense until I saw my mother standing in the corner of the strange room. It had to be the hospital, the. The white walls and beeping machines couldn't be anything else. Her arms wrapped around her waist and she seemed to have shrunk since she dropped us off at the park. A doctor in a white coat and the same nice lady cop that pulled Stevie from me stood at the door, talking to her.

"What do you mean, you don't know what happened? Something had to have killed him." Her voice held a strange anger, and I shrank back into the bed, not wanting her to see me.

"I know, Mrs. Munroe. We've requested an autopsy, but all the witnesses could say is the kids were playing and there was a scream. Then Cori was holding him and incoherent. No one remembers seeing anything but Cori holding Stevie and rocking. When they tried to take him from her, she clamped around him so tight they couldn't get to him. At that point, they didn't know if he was alive or if trying to yank him away would hurt her. They called us."

"And he's dead! Why didn't you do anything?" The pain in Mom's voice made me close my eyes, and I felt tears run down my cheeks, but I didn't dare say anything.

"Ma'am when I got there, your daughter was wrapped around him like an octopus, but he was cold. He had no pulse, he wasn't breathing. There was nothing I could do except try to protect your daughter. We suspect something magical happened, but they aren't old enough and no one remembered seeing any mages around." The cop lady had a nice voice. I kept my eyes closed and listened to them talk.

"Yet she's fine? He died and she wasn't hurt?"

I cracked my eyes open, looking. "We don't know what happened. That is up to the doctors. But if you're saying your daughter hurt him or even killed him, I don't believe that for a second. She is very distraught and most likely saw her brother die. She is going to need all your love." The cop lady kept her body relaxed and easy, even as Mom got smaller and smaller.

"Mrs. Munroe, we are running a few more tests on your daughter, but right now she should be able to go home this evening."

I tuned out, turning my mind back to the last time I'd seen Stevie laughing and guilt assaulted me. It was my fault. I wanted to keep the frisbee to myself. If I'd shared the magical item, he'd still be fine. It was my fault because I was selfish and mean. All my fault. Cold prickles raced up and down my body as I fought with myself, my guilt and fear.

A shrill screeching from next to my head sliced at my ears, hurting to the point I cried out. The man in the white coat headed over to me, with a frown on his face.

"I didn't do it," I gasped out trying to make my tears go away.

"I know. It's a machine. They go wonky sometimes." He hit a button on the machine and the evil sound stopped. "How are you feeling?"

I was tired, scared, and wanted nothing more than Mom to pull me into a super hug. But with everyone staring at me, I lied. "I'm fine. Can I go home now?" My eyes locked onto my mother who just looked at me with the strangest expression. It reminded me of the time the milk had gone bad and she'd taken a swallow. It made me want to hide and promise to be good forever at the same time.

She turned away and said over her shoulder, "Your father should be here soon. I need to tell him his son is dead." Mom walked away, leaving me in the room with the doctor and the nice cop.

The lady cop came over and squeezed my hand. "It'll be okay. She's just upset."

I nodded, rubbing my face with one hand. "Okay."

The rest of the day went by in a weird slow-motion aspect. My dad came in and stared at me, then turned away, standing outside my room holding Mom. The doctors said I could go, and I followed my parents to the car. They didn't talk to me, and both their eyes were red from crying.

When we got home, they just sat in the car. "Go on in, Cori. We'll be in later." Dad's voice was lifeless. I just nodded as I opened the door and climbed out. As I went up the stairs grief pulled at me like I had a hundred pounds of weight on my back. I got to my room and changed my clothes then headed to the bathroom. I just wanted to go to bed. There in the bathroom I saw my period had started again. My body crying for my brother. I stripped, got into the bathtub, and turned on the shower.

I sat there crying under the spray until the water turned cold, something we were never allowed to do.

The next week, I stayed at home. Mom cried all the time and I overheard them talking once when I got up late to get some water.

"I don't understand why he died." Mom was crying. From the sounds Dad made, I guessed he was trying to soothe her. "How did Stevie die and Cori was untouched? I should have never left them there. It was my fault. I can't look at her. Every time I see her face, I see his eyes accusing me. I can't, I just can't."

I crept away as Mom started sobbing again.

The funeral was horrible. Every time someone looked at me they burst into tears. As soon as we got home, I ran up to my room and hid.

Everyone expected me to go back to school on Monday, and part of me wanted to. I got up and got dressed that morning, my hair still neat from the funeral on Sunday.

Mom always made us eat cereal and a piece of fruit for breakfast. Usually, by the time I got up, the cereal and food would be sitting on the table waiting for us. It was our routine. Stevie and I would eat while Mom drank her coffee and Dad got his lunch ready. Then Mom would walk us to the bus and wait until the bus came, after that she went to work.

Today, a box of cereal sat on the table and a banana, nothing else. I looked around, but the kitchen was empty.

"Mom?" I called out, a little afraid. There was no answer. I tiptoed upstairs, my heart racing, somehow sure they had died too. But their door was open and their bedroom empty. I chewed on my lip and shrunk in on myself. The light in the stairway blew with a loud pop and I jumped. Then I stood there waiting. But the rest of the house was silent.

I headed to the garage. Both cars were gone. Mixed emotions battered at me. Should I be relieved or upset? I quietly shut the door and went back to the kitchen where I made myself cereal and ate the banana. Then I grabbed my backpack for school.

The front door had a letter was taped at eye level. My heart sang as I grabbed and opened it, then crashed just as hard.

Cori – here's the key to the house and money for lunch. We've left for work.

There was no signature, no "Love, Mom", nothing. I swallowed past the lump in my throat and put the five dollars in my pocket, ignoring the churning in my stomach. I shut and locked the door behind me as I walked to the bus stop.

It was my fault. The day felt colder, and I went to school, feeling like half of me was gone. Everything went wrong; the. The strap on my backpack broke, I dropped my milk at lunch, the classroom door jammed and wouldn't let me in. But worst of all were the looks everyone gave me.

By the time I got home, I just wanted to hide in Mom's arms and cry. I wanted Stevie back. I wanted my life back.

I let myself in, another change. Mom had always been waiting for us before. The empty house mocked me with its silence. Trying to be positive, I got out my homework and did it at the kitchen table, missing the sound of Stevie muttering

under his breath as he read, and Mom working on dinner. The sound of the door to the garage opening had me jumping up and running to greet whomever it was.

"Dad!" I smiled, so glad to see them. Today had sucked. I started to babble out everything I'd done today and how weird it had been to not have Stevie there, and the looks everyone gave me, but he raised his hand.

"Later. Estelle and I are going out. You're old enough to watch yourself. There are leftovers in the fridge. We won't be back until after bedtime." He turned and started up the stairs to the bedrooms.

Estelle? I stood there blinking in confusion, then I remembered that was Mom's name.

"Oh. Okay," I muttered and then cringed as a picture fell off the stairway wall. He stopped half way up the stairs and gave me a long look.

"Someday you'll understand," he murmured then continued up to their bedroom. I sat in the kitchen and finished my homework. They never even came in to see me before they left.

"I'll never understand," I cried holding my pillow tight. "I need to find out why Stevie died." I had overheard various adults talking about it. They didn't know why he died. No one knew. Maybe that was why Mom and Dad were so upset. "I'll find out. I'll figure out why you died, Stevie, and I'll never forget you."

I lay in bed determined to find out why Stevie had died and to make my parents proud of me again. I wouldn't fail again. I couldn't let anyone else die. It was my fault he had died. My parents hating me proved it. I had to figure it out.

"I'm not Nancy Drew Mage Detective, but I will find out why my brother died." I repeated that as I fell asleep, my mind locked on the last memory of him.