



Out of The Dark

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ISBN 1-59578-023-8

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Published 2004

ISBN 1-59578-023-8

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
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Cover Art
by Laura Givens

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication:

This dedication is to all of my wonderful critique partners: Sable, Shake, Janet, Ruby, Spring Rain, Kayelle, Terri and Flo. Without your help and encouragement through countless revisions of Cait's continued adventures I never would have completed OUT OF THE DARK. Thank you ladies.

Chapter One

In the close quarters of the ambulance ship, the discordant repetitive blare of the emergency alert rattled Indio's teeth. He rolled over in his bunk and unhooked the Velcro-fastened safety webbing. The next blast stopped in mid-blare. Tiny must have slapped the shut-off switch.

With a grateful sigh for small favors, Indio grabbed the selkieskin sack from the wall hook, untied the top and tilted it in the direction he wanted the symbiotic spacesuit to go. The selkieskin oozed out onto the floor like an oversized blob of black gelatin. Except this blob was alive, felt like warm velvet against his skin and had a limited ability to move and link with his body.

Indio stepped onto his selkieskin and waited while it flowed over his body and inserted pseudopods into his body's orifices. A quick brush of his hands over the selkieskin when it got to his neck halted it until he was ready to pull it over his face. He used the Velcro straps on the wall and hauled himself hand over hand to the control console.

Tiny sat in the pilot's seat. Red and blue swirls flickered across his matte black selkieskin. Indio grinned. Most people who didn't know Tiny always did a double take the first time they saw him wearing a selkieskin because Tiny's natural skin color was so dark, you couldn't tell at first where his skin ended and the selkieskin began.

Tiny flipped the microphone switch. "Got it. Code Six Three Nine in sector green."

Indio slipped into the co-pilot's seat. The safety webbing deployed itself and secured him for flight. Hopefully this would be a simple run with no casualties involved.

Tiny leaned forward and opened the mike again. "EMS Five Seven ready to go. Now." He pressed the override control button for the Traffic Control computer to take over and sat back.

Indio took a deep breath and sat back too. He hated this part. It didn't feel right having Traffic Control do all the piloting by remote command while they sat there.

The engines engaged. A heavy three-g thrust slammed them against their seats like a giant's hand pressing against their bodies. Indio gritted his teeth against the pressure and spoke. "What do we have?"

The ship lurched sideways and then leveled out under them. Tiny grimaced at the sudden change in course. "A private yacht got holed. It's in lunar orbit right now. Four wounded, three dead and two able-bodied ready to evacuate."

Indio nodded as best as he could under the sickening twists and turns of their craft. "How many other ambulances did they call up?"

Tiny flashed him a sardonic grin. "Three. You know how it is. The high rollers get full service."

Indio snorted. "And at the end of our shift too." He closed his eyes. If they were lucky, they'd finish this job without having to go past their shift schedule. Two more hours and they'd be with Cait for another long, glorious weekend. Just thinking about her sexy smile gave him a raging hard-on. Too bad bigamy was illegal or they'd be a happily married triple instead of a plain old 'ménage à trois.'

The console beeped. “EMS Five Seven stand by for grappling hooks. All living evacuees accounted for. Your job designation is now Code Seven Two.”

Tiny reached over to the control panel, uncapped the switch for the magnetic-tipped grappling hooks and deployed them. The hooks shot out, connecting them to the disabled ship while computerized arms reeled them in as close as possible.

Indio slapped the release button on his chair. The safety webbing retracted itself. He pulled at the top of the selkieskin bunched around his neck and let it flow over his face. Thin, flexible pseudopods inserted themselves into his mouth, nostrils and ears. Oxygenated air, converted by the symbiote from the water pouch on his back, flowed into his lungs.

The skin sealed itself over the top of his scalp, inserted even smaller pseudopods into his eye sockets and linked its eyes directly to his. His eyesight shifted. Now he could see up into the infrared spectrum along with his normal vision.

Indio turned. Tiny had pulled the rest of his selkieskin over his face too. He looked like an alien creature—coal black with huge dark eyes in a face that had no mouth, nose or ears.

Indio unlatched the supply drawer, pulled out two equipment belts and handed Tiny one. He pointed at the ship's view screen recorder and flipped the switch for the exterior searchlights. Not having a mouth to speak with while wearing the selkieskins had made sign language a very popular course of study station-wide. Learning how to sign was a small price to pay, though, in return for all the pluses of wearing a selkieskin for space maneuvers.

Indio fastened his belt around his hips and signaled that he'd go first. Tiny nodded and buckled his belt. With three other ambulances already on site, Code Seven Two meant his and Tiny's roles had been switched to forensics. Apparently, Traffic Control had taken the fact that Indio was a police officer into consideration while monitoring the entire rescue and evacuation mission.

Indio reached up to the Velcro straps hanging from the ceiling and pulled himself hand over hand to the airlock. Tiny would be right behind him. The lock cycled open. They swam inside, grabbed more Velcro straps on the wall and held on while the door closed itself behind them and the ship removed all the air from the cramped compartment.

A green light flashed over the exit door. It cycled open. Indio kicked off from the wall, snagged the grappling line and hauled himself down.

Earth's sunlit crescent wheeled in the background, a blue jewel in the black sky. The cold white light of the moon glowed behind the gutted ship. Indio ignored the view. They had plenty of time off-duty for sightseeing.

The yacht was an elongated ovoid, which was dictated by the need for shielding versus the need to mount engines in the rear. The bow, which should have been a round blunt shape, had a crumpled tear in its side. Fused and melted metal radiated out from the point of impact. Non-explosive as far as he could see from this distance. The tear had the classic deformation and damage ratio of a good-sized meteorite, possibly the size of a baseball. Streamers of hardened white foam sealant flowed from the gaping wound—ten seconds of critical time would be used before it filled the gap and prevented explosive decompression of the yacht.

Too bad they hadn't yet figured out how to attach individual solar flight wings to the selkieskins. Direct flight, using the solar wind to maneuver, would be a lot easier than hauling himself hand-over-hand along the tether lines hooked to the yacht from bow to stern.

He risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Tiny was busy clamping a modified camcorder below the largest searchlight. Right. They needed a double record—distance and close up—of the damage for the insurance claims investigators. Indio pulled himself along. The yacht's hull inched closer. The entry hole loomed jagged and ugly. Minute particles of ice drifted from the edges of the frozen sealant at the shattered bow. With his selkie vision, they looked like snowflakes falling from the ship into the black sky.

Indio unclipped a smaller digital camcorder from his belt and carefully recorded every inch of damage caused by the meteor. He clipped the camcorder to his belt again and turned his head sideways. Tiny was hauling himself to the yacht's open airlock.

Indio shifted his grip on the tether line and grabbed onto the handgrips on the side of the yacht. The grips were normally used by the crew for emergency repairs while still in flight status. From this angle, it felt like he was climbing a ladder up the side of the ship to the airlock entry.

When he came to the hatch, he boosted himself inside as if he were climbing out of a swimming pool. Tiny grabbed his hand and pulled Indio to his feet inside the airlock. He held up a message cube. Indio accepted it and studied the interior diagram of the yacht glowing within. A bright red X marked the third door on the left side where the two casualties of today's accident awaited his inspection and professional judgment as to probable cause of death. After they'd bagged and transported the bodies to the Station Hospital, an autopsy would determine the actual cause of death.

Tiny clipped a searchlight to the ceiling and turned on a second camcorder. A floating conglomeration of frozen debris hanging in mid-air in the corridor gave them an instantaneous portrayal of the meteor's path through the interior. The minute gravitational attraction of the bits of rubble had pulled them into clusters .

Indio launched himself down the corridor to the door of the third stateroom. His gait was a unique adaptation of free-fall and weightlessness. He used gentle thrusts of his feet and hands against deck, wall and corner—a slow-motion swim through the airless hallway.

He stopped his momentum at the third door and rested his hand on the entry panel. It glowed bright green and then the door slid open. Two bodies lay tangled on the floor beside the bed: a naked man and woman frozen forever in their last frantic attempt to end their sexual embrace and don their bulky spacesuits.

Selkieskins might have saved them, but they didn't have that option. They'd run out of time to save themselves. Hell, when the Columbia shuttlecraft disintegrated upon re-entry sixty-three years ago in 2003, the entire incident happened in only fifteen seconds from beginning to end.

Indio unclipped his camcorder and recorded the couple from every angle. Tiny waited in the doorway with two green body bags. A few more minutes and they'd be headed back to station. A tow ship would show up in another hour and haul the yacht to the station for a complete forensics exam.

Cait would never die like this. His daughter Socorro would never die like this either. Cait and Socorro had first claim on the symbiotes because they had discovered the abandoned cache of selkieskins on the asteroid expedition three months ago.

* * * *

Indio leaned over the countertop at the Orbital Police Station, pressed his palm against the ID panel, slid the data card into the slot, then hit the send key on the computer console and downloaded his report into the police files. His part in today's accident was over for now.

He turned, nodded at the police desk sergeant on duty and exited through the frosted plastic door onto deck two. A woman in an indigo uniform with silver belt and boots entered the other end of the corridor. She wore her dark blond hair pulled back into a severe bun, and the logo for United Planets Security Forces glittered at her collar. Indio shifted the duffel bag that contained his selkieskin to his right shoulder and kept walking.

Her gaze skittered away from the old burn scars ridging the left side of his face. Bright red spots flared on her cheekbones. "Are you Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo?"

He stopped. What the hell did she want with him? Or rather, what the hell did the United Planets Security Force want with him? "I am."

She handed him an old fashioned sealed white envelope, held up a sofscreen computer and pointed at the one centimeter-square glowing in the corner. "Place your thumb on the grid to verify receipt, please."

* * * *

Tiny waved an envelope at Indio, crumpled it up in his hand and jammed it into his jeans pocket. "They're out of their fucking minds." He slammed his fist against the elevator wall. A satisfying boom shook the cubicle. "What the hell do they think they're doing, trying to place an injunction against the usage of selkieskins?"

Indio shrugged and leaned against the wall. Like it or not, they had been subpoenaed. They had no choice but to obey the court order and testify about the selkieskins at the Interplanetary Trade Council meeting thirty days from today. The elevator moved smoothly to the next level. "I bet Cait received a subpoena too."

Tiny swiped his hand across his bald scalp. "And I bet she's pissed off." A grin twitched at the corners of his mouth.

Indio chuckled. If Cait was pissed off, then she needed both of them to calm her down. "More than likely, she's already waiting at the apartment for us."

* * * *

Indio sat on the bed and pulled off his shirt and pants. His swollen erection jutted up between his thighs, thick and hard. Tiny sat on the other side of the bed, equally naked, equally aroused. His coal-black skin looked like onyx against the white sheets. He stroked his hand up and down his thick shaft, pleasuring himself.

Cait paced back and forth between them, naked. Energy simmered within the lush curves of her body. A thick five-strand braid confined her hair. Her heavy breasts and

rounded ass caught Indio's gaze while her braid slapped the backs of her thighs with every step she took. "They're idiots." She curled her hands into fists. "We only have six hundred selkieskins. What the hell are they afraid of? Unfair competition? We'd need millions of selkieskins before we'd put the spacesuit manufacturers out of business. We're still trying to figure out how to make more of them in the lab."

Indio shrugged. They'd cross that bridge when it happened. "We don't have any choice but to obey the subpoena. They can't file an injunction against the selkieskins until after the hearing." He smiled and stroked the hard length of his erection. "Right now, we have better things to do."

Cait stopped and looked Indio over from head to toe. She didn't flinch at the scars that ridged his face, his left arm and leg. There was only arousal in her gaze. Her nipples were hard and ready for sucking. Moisture already saturated the curls of her pubic mound.

He stood. Tiny rose to his feet too. They went to her and held her close, sandwiched between them front and back. Indio moved his hardened shaft against the soft wetness of her crotch. He knew Tiny was already rubbing his cock between the crack of her buttocks. With Cait's stature of five-nine versus Tiny's height of six-six, all she had to do was lean back and tilt her head to exchange kisses with him when he stood behind her.

No need to talk anymore. Just kiss and feel the heat of her arousal ricochet from her into him, to Tiny and back into her again. The unique mental link of their triple dru-bond joined them into one entity whenever they touched body to body like this. Their dru-bonds sealed them into a telepathic link that allowed Indio to feel her excitement and Tiny's excitement all mingled together in his mind. It made him throb with need. Over and over, the bonds pulsed between the three of them, creating an instantaneous feedback loop of mutual desire and pleasure.

Indio went to his knees, parted her thighs, inserted his tongue past the wiry curls of her crotch and tasted the creamy moisture of her arousal. Cait groaned and pushed against his tongue. He licked her clit to a hard little peak. When she leaned into his mouth for more, he sucked it even harder. His erection throbbed in unison with her soft mewls and the eager thrusts of her hips while she ground herself against his tongue for more.

Indio glanced up. Tiny was busy too, muffling her groans with tongue-tangled kisses, kneading her breasts and pinching her nipples with his big hands, increasing her arousal to a fever pitch. After three months of making love with them every day, her body was more than ready to handle both of their cocks at the same time.

She opened her legs wider. Indio pushed his fingers into her while she bucked her clit against his tongue, crying out with pleasure, suspended in joy between him and Tiny. He sucked harder, deepened the strokes of his fingers inside her pussy and matched the even thrusts of Tiny's fingers in her anus. Her moans cascaded into a keening wail while they drove her to her first climax, a climax that shuddered through their empathic dru-bonds with her and made their cocks jump and throb for completion.

Moving easily, from long hours of practice with her, they changed positions. Indio stood behind her while Tiny picked her up in his arms and impaled her in one glorious rush on his erection. She wrapped arms and legs around Tiny's neck and waist. Shivers raced up her body when Indio spread her buttocks apart, coated her anus with lubricating gel then inserted the engorged head of his erection.

Tight. Cait's anus felt so tight around his cockhead. *Tight, warm and ready for him to bang her good.* He slid his cock inside, inch by inch, groaning when she relaxed and accepted the entire thick length of him inside her.

They moved slowly at first, guiding themselves in and out. Tiny thrust his penis deep inside her from the front. Pleasure shuddered through her at the sensation of Tiny's cock grinding against Indio's through the thin wall of tissue that separated them inside her and rocketed back across her dru-bonds into both men. In and out they pushed, harder and harder, deeper and deeper. Their cries of pleasure echoed each other and climbed to the next peak.

Cait shuddered. Her body spasmed between them. She screamed. Her body milked them dry while her climax exploded across their empathic link.

Indio felt Tiny slamming into her from the front while he pistoned into her rear entrance. Indio released long, wet jets of semen into her and felt the erratic spasms from Tiny releasing more semen deep inside her from the front.

Love, total love and acceptance, soared across their dru-bonds, filling them with warm satisfaction and contentment. A long, eternal moment of pure completion joined the three of them into one entity.

The insistent ringing of the vidphone brought them back to reality. Indio pulled his still-turgid cock from Cait's ass, grabbed a towel from the bed and wrapped it around his hips. Tiny lifted her from his cock and set her on the bed. Cait grabbed a robe and hurriedly belted it while Tiny covered his hips with the other towel.

Indio grinned. Now that they were decent, he pushed the button to accept the call. The viewscreen shimmered to life and showed them an image of Cait's brother, Kevin. Black-haired and dark-eyed, you couldn't tell by looking at him that he was her twin. Cait had calico hair, a gorgeous mélange of copper, gold, brown and black, and hazel eyes—eyes that changed color with her moods.

Kevin leaned forward and peered into his side of the viewscreen. Humor glinted in his dark gaze at their attire. “Sorry about the interruption. I got a subpoena a couple of minutes ago and was calling to warn you about it.”

Cait lifted her braid from the back of her robe and let it fall down her back. “We got our subpoenas already. I want you to make reservations on tomorrow's shuttle. We might as well go to Earth now and see what's going on dirtside before we show up for that hearing.”

Kevin nodded. “What about Socorro?”

Indio slid his arm around Cait's waist and pulled her against his side. “I'll call the station school and complete all the paperwork for her home schooling coursework. We're not leaving my daughter behind. Reserve a seat for her, too.”

Cait leaned closer and brushed her lips across his forehead. “You're right. There is no need to separate her from her family while we respond to this subpoena. Your daughter is my daughter now.”

Chapter Two

Cait took Socorro by the hand and pulled the child aside. They moved away from the baggage inspection zone to stand beneath a huge holoimage of the United Planets' Enclave floating in the middle of Lake Michigan. Too many people surrounded her at O'Hare Spaceport. Their discordant emotions scratched at her empathic senses like fingernails on an old fashioned chalkboard.

A pair of tourists hurried past. The control chips on their belts emitted a series of blue flashes. Six automated suitcases followed the man and woman like ducklings.

Socorro's brown braids bounced on her shoulders while she placed the pet carrier on the floor in front of the holoimage. She radiated a calm sensibility and maturity for her nine years. "Will we have time to take a tour?"

Cait shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe." She turned sideways. Her twin Kevin stood in the customs line with her two husbands. The tension coiled within her loosened its grip. A few more minutes and they'd all be together again.

She smiled at Tiny. It was hard to miss him. Bald-headed, two-and-a-half meters tall with skin so dark he could have been carved from coal, he stood out in any crowd. He stepped up to the countertop, duffel bag in tow and loomed over the customs agent like an avenging warrior. His demeanor was better suited to a ravaged battlefield than a bustling spaceport.

Socorro squatted beside the carrier and peered inside. A mournful meow greeted the child's scrutiny. "Licorice's tired of being cooped up too. She wants me to let her out."

"We'll let her out later when it isn't so crowded," Cait murmured. She shifted her attention to the customs agent and shook her head. Stringy brown hair clung to his scalp like a spiderweb. Why he couldn't keep his hair clean? Were they rationing water on Earth now?

Indio propped his hip against the counter in front of the custom's agent and waited patiently for the line to move. Tall and lean with old burn scars on his face, he looked like a hardened criminal instead of a cop. He should be standing here with his daughter Socorro, but coach tickets had placed them on opposite ends of the shuttlecraft.

She dredged up a reassuring smile for Socorro. "Your daddy and Tiny will be finished soon."

Socorro's gaze grew even more distracted. She slipped her hand into Cait's and whispered. "They have selkieskins in their luggage. Won't they get in trouble?"

Cait blinked. The child was right. Their discovery of the skins on the asteroid had caused an interplanetary uproar. She and Socorro had opted to leave theirs in storage at Sanctuary Station.

She turned around again. Her husbands had just placed their luggage on the counter. They should have left their selkieskins behind instead of bringing them dirtside, but there was no reasoning with men. Stubborn and capricious in their logic, they had decided to keep the valuable biological spacesuits in their possession.

The agent gestured for them to open their luggage. They looked at each other and shrugged. With a flick of their wrists they unzipped the bags, turned them over and spilled the contents on the countertop.

Two selkieskins oozed out from the stack of clothing—two quivering masses of dark plasma. Shimmering moiré streaks of iridescent reds, blues and greens rippled across their black surfaces in random pulses.

The agent puffed his potbellied paunch out to its fullest extent and poked his finger at one of the skins.

“Wait! Don't touch it!” Indio and Tiny shouted.

The skin rippled and oozed over the agent's hand. He staggered backwards while the selkieskin flowed relentlessly past his elbow. His fear slammed into Cait like a punch in her gut. Being a telepath was a painful nuisance at times. She needed to get away from everyone and reset her mental shields.

Indio stepped behind the agent. He wrapped his arms around the terrified man and held him still while Tiny reached out with his gloved hands and peeled the selkieskin off.

“They're bio-engineered symbiotes, legally registered as artificial life-forms at the Space Station Sanctuary.” The distinctive sound of Indio's raspy voice rose above the muted murmur of arrivals and departures coming from the ceiling loudspeakers.

A second customs agent, her dreadlocked hair tied back into a bushy ponytail, stepped up to the counter. She held her body very stiff and kept her distance while Tiny and Indio let the selkieskins slither back into their bags. “I heard about those things on last night's news. May I see the customs clearance vouchers from Sanctuary, please?”

Indio released the first agent, patted him on his arm, then pulled a coded chip from his belt and handed it over.

The woman inserted it into the sofscreen wrapped around her left wrist. Her co-worker stared at the information scrolling up on the sofscreen. “It functions as a spacesuit? How?”

Explaining that would take them forever. Cait raised her arm and pumped it three times to catch her brother's attention. Kevin looked up and smiled at her. She pointed at the ped-walks. He nodded and motioned at her to go on ahead.

She took Socorro by the hand. The guys didn't need her here to handle the customs agent. What she needed to do was get Indio's daughter settled into their hotel room and wait for the others to catch up. “Let's go.”

Trade Commission delegation walked past the customs area without their luggage being searched, drawing a swarm of newsvid reporters waving mikes and vidcams and yelling questions.

Socorro yanked her hand away and tried to see past the reporters. “Where are we going? Isn't Daddy coming with us?”

“I already let Kevin know we're leaving. He'll tell your father and Tiny. We'll meet them at the hotel.”

“Okay.” Socorro adjusted the backpack over her shoulder and picked up the pet carrier. The kitten yowled but the little girl ignored its protests.

The back of Cait's neck tingled. She turned sideways. Two dark featured men lounged beside the newsstand. Their hostile gazes slid past her to the United Planets delegation. Even though she wasn't the focus of their attention, they still made her skin crawl.

It was just nerves. She was jumping at shadows.

Cait straightened her shoulders. Her first priority was Socorro's safety and the best way to keep the child safe was to leave this crowded area as soon as possible.

They made their way over to the ped-walks. She chose the one on the end because it was vacant. She didn't want anyone to come close enough to touch her or Socorro. They stepped onto it and let it carry them down a long tiled corridor.

Socorro tugged at her sleeve. "After we meet the rest of your family, are you and daddy and Tiny going to get married?"

The confused emotions swirling around inside Socorro gnawed at Cait's empathic senses. She hesitated. Was Socorro's emotional turmoil the real reason behind her uneasy feelings about the crowded terminal?

Cait rubbed the tiny laser scar on her right arm. Socorro wasn't her daughter but the dangers they'd faced together on the asteroid had forged an emotional link between them. Talking this out should soothe them both. "According to the customs of my people, we're already married."

Socorro's shoulders sagged.

Poor kid. All she knew was that they'd hadn't had a proper wedding ceremony yet.

"My family will have a big party to formally recognize our marriage and..." Cait let her voice trail off into a tantalizing promise.

Socorro bounced on her heels with excitement. "And what?"

"Do you know what the word cater-corner means?"

Socorro frowned and wrinkled up her forehead with concentration, then lifted her finger in the air and traced a diagonal line. "It's the corner at the end of a slanted line."

Cait touched Socorro's cheek and sent the child a burst of reassurance. "In my family, we have a special relationship called caterkinship. There's a ceremony that goes with it. We fast for one day and go out into the forest. While we wait for the night to turn to day, we pledge catermorf with moonlight, starlight and silver. Would you like to become my caterdaughter?"

Socorro's pupils grew larger and changed her green eyes to almost black. Wonder filled her face and flowed into Cait. "Yes, I would like that very much."

Cait smiled. Socorro would be the first daughter of her sisterline. "I want this too. When we arrive at my home in North Carolina, we will take this oath."

Happy anticipation brightened Socorro's face. The ceiling soared above them while the ped-walk carried them into an underground parking garage. Cait sucked in her breath. The cavernous space clawed at her senses.

It felt wrong. All wrong. She'd let her instincts overrule her common sense. Safety was above. *Not here.* She studied the ped-walk. There weren't any controls for her to reverse it. She gnawed at her lip. There should be another exit.

The sudden clang of metal on metal reverberated throughout the garage. Cait whirled around and shoved Socorro behind her. A stout woman with short, white hair stood in front of a recycling bin about fifteen feet away from them.

Dirt smeared rags covered the woman's stocky frame. She dumped a load of old computer wafers from her motorized shopping cart into the container and the machine spat a credit chip into her hands.

They approached the woman. "Excuse me, ma'am." Cait said softly. "We've lost our way. Can you tell us how to get back upstairs?"

The woman straightened the grimy rag on her shoulders. "Such lovely hair you have, dearie. My name's Rachel. What's your name?"

Cait tightened her grip on Socorro's shoulder. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to ask this woman for directions.

Rachel pointed to the right. "Keep going that way. The exit's behind the sign that says Rest Rooms."

Socorro bobbed her head in a quick nod and shifted the pet carrier in her hands. "Thank you, ma'am."

The woman peered inside the carrier. "Ooh! What a pretty little kitty."

Cait fished a credit chip from her pocket. "I appreciate your help."

The woman snatched the chip and tucked it away inside her rags. There wasn't any odor coming from the woman's filthy clothing. Was Rachel a special operative stationed here to sniff out potential thieves? Was her presence here an added precaution because of the arrival of the Trade Commission delegation today, or was there some other reason?

The elevator was exactly where Rachel said it would be. Cait spared a swift glance over her shoulder. The woman had turned her back to them while she dumped another load of computer wafers into the recycling bin.

Cait stood in front of the elevator's closed doors and spoke into the sofscreen embedded in the wall. "Upper level concourse, please." The sound of a descending car told her it was responding properly to her request.

A distant *crrrump* drowned out the smooth purr of machinery. Had the machinery malfunctioned? She pulled Socorro away from the entrance doors, back against the opposite wall and shielded the child with her body.

Socorro twisted around in her grip. "What's wrong?"

There was a brilliant flash of light; sound slammed into them and the ground swayed under their feet and bowled them over in a jumble of arms and legs. It felt exactly how she'd imagined being caught in the middle of an earthquake would be like. Thick, black smoke billowed up around them, making them choke and cough in an instinctive struggle to keep breathing. Cait's inner eyelids slid down to protect her eyes. Slabs of concrete rained down upon her head and shoulders and pinned her to the floor.

She heard a sharp snapping sound from her right leg. Pain soared through her in a nauseating whirl. *Goddess above! Socorro needs me. I can't pass out now!*

The thunderous roar gradually died down. She shook her head and concentrated on taking slow, careful breaths. The pain settled down to the level of a throbbing toothache. It was bearable as long as she didn't try to move. She concentrated on wiggling her toes inside her sneakers. Her toes moved. Good. That meant her spinal cord remained intact. She felt Socorro wriggle out of her grasp.

Sirens wailed in the distance. First one, then several, then an orchestra of them. She blinked her tears and the inner membrane from her eyes and tried to focus. Was Socorro hurt too? Had there been an earthquake? Or a bomb within the spaceport?

More smoke and flames billowed in the distance. She heard Licorice screeching and frantically clawing at the latch of her cage.

The entire left side of her face hurt just like a migraine. She wiped at the moisture trickling down her face and stared at her hand. Blood covered her fingers, not sweat. She reached up and felt the swollen bulge of a goose egg.

The pet carrier blocked her view. She pushed it aside and saw Socorro on her knees in a relatively clear patch of the floor. Dust and small fragments of concrete

covered the child's head. Socorro crawled over the broken slabs to Cait's side. She grabbed her hands and tried to pull her out.

Panic seared through her from the child's touch. "No," Cait managed to say. "Don't try to move me. Not yet. I think my leg is broken."

She reached into her pocket. Moving with exquisite care, she removed her computer sofscreen and passed it to Socorro.

The child unfolded the sofscreen, squeezed the corners to stiffen it then tried to call for help. It didn't respond.

The elevator doors opened behind them, then started closing again. Socorro jumped to her feet and lunged for the doors. Cait grabbed the child's pants leg and gritted her teeth against the agony of that move. *Goddess above*, she prayed. *Give me strength*. Taking shallow breaths made the pain easier to bear.

Tears streaked the dirt and grit on Socorro's face. "Why'd you stop me?" She sniffed.

Cait chose her words with care. Frightening Socorro out of her wits wasn't going to solve the problem. "You can't use the lift. It might leave you stranded between levels. Use the ped-walk instead. It's safer, especially if it's stopped moving. Find your daddy, Kevin and Tiny and bring them here to help me."

Socorro wiped her tears away with her hand and smeared the dirt on her face even more. "I'll bring them." She picked up the pet carrier. "I promise." Then she climbed over the debris and disappeared into the smoke.

Cait rested her head on the cold concrete and closed her eyes. All she had to do now was wait. An ominous rumble sounded in the distance.

Chapter Three

A disturbance, a rumble, the echo of a sound shuddered through the blue clay walls. Mider stopped. The familiar weight of his braided hair slapped against his ankles. Had there been an explosion?

He finished winding the strip of leather around his shirtsleeve and tied it at his wrist. Should he use the escape pod built into the tunnel walls and flee to the surface?

He went to the oversized four-poster bed that dominated the room, pushed the embroidered canopy aside and slumped on the edge. Why bother? So what if there'd been an accident on the streets above, an accident that might flood the tunnels? Did it matter if he died in his sleep or ignominiously like a drowned rat?

Either way the end result would be the same. His empty life would be over. He would die alone and unknown the same way he'd lived hidden under the streets of Chicago, in the small section of the abandoned freight tunnels he called home.

No mother, no father, sisters, and brothers. No grandparents, no children. No family to mourn his passing. No lovers.

Would he ever have the opportunity to love, to have another eagerly waiting for caresses in his bed? To lie there, body to body, and feel his lover's heart beating under his hand. Heart to heart, mind to mind, open and willing to love and give love in return. Would he ever feel the salt of a kiss upon his mouth and know the sweet agony of his lover's climax searing through his mind and body?

A trio of miniature Nubian goats stuck their heads past the half opened door on the other side of the room, then scampered inside and curled up on the floor by his feet. The smallest one butted her head against the soft leather of his boots.

The goats might miss him. The small garden and water fountain at the farthest end of the series of rooms carved out of the blue clay cavern would sustain them until they died of old age.

Rachel would miss him. She was his only friend. Fifteen years ago when she retired from her job as a private investigator, she'd helped him liberate the parents of these goats from a hidden military base.

After he brought them here, the first thing he did was take the few surgical instruments he owned and remove the male goat's scent glands. Washing them twice a month with scented shampoo also kept their odor to a bearable level within the confines of his underground home.

The results of that foray had given him another reliable income source. Milk from one goat produced as much silk as ten thousand spiders. Five times stronger than Kevlar, ten times stronger than steel, spidersilk was a highly prized commodity.

Rachel was human. Another twenty or thirty years from now, she would die. Human lifespans were so brief—unlike the normal Sidhe lifespan of over three centuries. Human bodies aged so rapidly. Even now, Rachel looked like his mother despite the fact that he was older. And after she died, then what remained for him? Another two centuries of loneliness?

Mider stood. If he busied himself making more spidersilk clothing, his melancholy should retreat. Rachel was his friend. He did not want to cause her sorrow or

force her to mourn him during the brief years that remained for her. When she died, then that would be the proper time to end his life. He went to the heavy wooden door of the adjoining chamber and pulled it open.

Blue clay walls and ceiling soared above his head. Tiny florescent lights embedded in the walls lit the room. A black cauldron simmered on a hot plate. A remote viewing sofscreen hung on a hook on the wall opposite the hot plate and cauldron.

The soft chiming sound of the security perimeter alarm broke the silence. That alarm signaled the approach of another within his section of the tunnel system. Mider frowned. Rachel wasn't supposed to arrive for another six hours. Her visits were like clockwork. If she'd planned to change the time of her visit, she would have left him a note at their pre-arranged message drop in the sub-basement of the Chicago Tribune building, or sent him an email. He went to the sofscreen on the wall and turned on the corridor spy cam.

The screen's image showed Rachel riding down the coal chute entrance. She leaned against an ancient metal shopping cart piled to overflowing with scraps of cardboard and rags. Her gaze darted from side to side as if she expected pursuit. Mider leaned closer to the screen and *reached* for her mind with his.

Fear and worry were the strongest elements of her emotional aura. Rachel fussed and pulled at her cart as if it contained a precious object d'art instead of trash, keeping it steady until she exited the chute. She would be at his door in a few moments.

Mider nudged the goats out of his way and rushed into the next room. There he took a deep breath to calm himself and went to the metal door that sealed his apartment from the corridor. The wheel in the center of the door spun easily under his grip.

Rachel pushed the cart inside. He pulled the door shut behind her. She tore away the top layer of cardboard and exposed an unconscious woman, her supple body curled in a fetal position.

Goddess above! Had Rachel gone mad and kidnapped this woman for him?
“What are you doing? Why did you bring the woman here?”

Rachel glared at him as if he were a mere youth. “Ask your questions later. I need your help. She's hurt.”

Moving with extreme care, Mider reached inside, picked up the woman and carried her to the bed. Rachel moved in front of him and pulled the canopy aside. He laid the woman on the embroidered coverlet. There were markings on her left arm, a spiral of blue lines. A tattoo? He leaned closer. Then rocked back on his heels. “That's a Sidhe tattoo!”

Rachel smiled. Satisfaction glowed around her like a beacon. “As soon as I saw that tattoo, I figured she might be one of your people.”

Mider touched the unconscious woman's arm and let his fingers stroke the dark blue lines. That particular design came from a sisterline he'd thought had vanished over twenty five hundred years ago. He pinched the woman's eyelids open and found the second pair of inner eyelids. He opened her mouth and traced the delicate curves of her fanged eyeteeth. She was real. This was impossible. A young Sidhe woman lay upon his bed with dried blood matting her calico-colored hair.

He turned to Rachel, took a deep breath and controlled his urge to grab her by the shoulders and demand the information he needed. “How? Where?”

Rachel shrugged. "She arrived at O'Hare Spaceport this morning. I have no idea what flight she came in on."

Oh goddess. He must remain calm and ask the right questions. "Where did you find her?"

"I found her in the parking garage at the Spaceport. I went there to check out a lead about Mair."

How many times had he told her to leave Mair alone? The last thing he needed was for that sisterline to find out he'd survived their Wild Hunt.

Rachel sat down on a bright red cushion and untied the filthy rags wrapped around her sneaks, kicked them aside and discarded her ragged coat. A stylish jumpsuit of soft denim covered her plump body from neck to ankles. "This woman came down to the parking garage and asked me for directions. There was an explosion. She was hurt. The fire was spreading. I couldn't leave her behind."

He turned to the unconscious woman, lifted her head slightly and felt the goose egg on the side of her face and the smaller lump in back of her scalp. He risked a quick probe at her mind with his empathic senses. A faint echo of awareness answered his efforts. She was far, far down the path to oblivion. Could he help her? He didn't know. His healing skills were mental, not physical. He had neither the training nor knowledge to do the kind of delicate physical surgery she needed.

Mider hauled a small leather trunk from under the bed, opened it, pulled out the med-kit and got out a gel-filled ice pack. He pressed it against the back of the unconscious woman's scalp and laid her down very carefully onto the pillow. "How long ago did this happen?"

Rachel bit her lip. "I don't know. About two hours ago. I wasn't thinking too clearly at first. What was I supposed to do? Leave her there and hope someone found her before the fire did?"

She twisted her hands together. "I hid her under the scraps in my cart and rode the El into town. By the time I got her down to Lower Wacker Drive it was too late to flag down an ambulance and explain why I had her hidden in my shopping cart."

"Was she alone?"

"She had a little girl with her. The little girl ran off to get help."

"A girl child." He managed to croak the words past his suddenly parched throat. If there was a child, then it meant this woman had already chosen her life partners. He dared not dream that she might choose him also.

"Was the girl her child?"

Rachel shrugged. "I don't know. The girl had dark brown hair. She didn't look like her at all."

He sat on the bed and touched Rachel's hand. "The child ran off to get help. Who was she going to find?"

"I heard her tell the little girl to go get her daddy and someone called Tiny."

He pulled his sofscreen from his pocket, unfolded it and initiated a search. "Two hours is much too long a time for her to be unconscious. She needs a physician."

Rachel stroked the white fur that covered his arm. "But what about you? Are you going to risk people finding out about you?"

He braced himself against the sudden flare of panic that surged up inside him from Rachel's touch. No matter how many times he'd explained it to her, she kept

forgetting his empathic abilities. But he'd become accustomed to her habits and knew enough to shield himself from her emotions whenever she touched him. "This woman you found. She's Sidhe, like me." He pronounced the word "Sidhe" in the proper Gaelic manner, as "*Shee*."

"I don't want her to die."

Rachel wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. She spoke in a fierce whisper that echoed the strong and abiding love that flowed into him with her touch. "I've lived my life. I've watched my children grow up and I visit my grandchildren every month but you have no one. I've hated to see you living all alone like this."

"I know." He brushed his lips across the top of her head. "I cherish our friendship. You've kept me sane."

She sat back and stared past him for a few moments. Then her face brightened. "Dr. Nour owns the women's clinic on Lower Wacker Drive. I can ask her to come down here with me."

He shook his head. It would take too long for her to go back up to the surface, speak to Dr. Nour and return to his home. This woman needed help as soon as possible. "I'll come with you."

"You can't let other people see you. They wouldn't understand."

"Dr. Nour is Muslim, correct?"

She nodded slowly.

"The women who frequent her clinic, they wear the chador, do they not?" Mider didn't have to touch Rachel's hand to feel her confusion. The expression on her face told him that. He went to the chest at the foot of the bed, opened it and selected two black chadors. Rachel usually got a fair price for his chadors at the street market. "I am small-boned. Five foot eight is tall for a woman but I should be able to pass as long as I'm decently covered."

Rachel pursed her lips. Then sighed. "That should work."

Mider grabbed a pair of tinted sunglasses and willed his heart to slow its headlong pace. If he wanted this Sidhe woman to survive, this was the only choice he had. He stopped. His heart skipped a beat. What about the child that had been with this woman? Where was that child's father?

He coughed.

Rachel turned around and arched her eyebrows.

The sudden tightness in his throat made it hard to say the words, but they must be said. If this woman had kin within the city ... he shook his head. She was wounded. They didn't have the luxury of time to seek her kin right now. "After Dr. Nour has treated her injuries, you should return to the Spaceport and find her family. They must be frantic with worry over her disappearance."

* * * *

Dirt and small stones flew up around the billowing skirt of Mider's chador. He balanced the Sidhe woman in his arms and followed Rachel up the narrow sidewalk. Cavernous warehouses and loading docks loomed over them. Side streets led up to the parking garages and luxury hotels on Upper Wacker Drive.

His heart thundered in his ears. He was walking on the surface in broad daylight and no one saw anything strange about him. Why hadn't he tried wearing a chador before? Why had he been so cautious, always creeping about in the shadows like a thief?

Huge concrete posts supported Lower Wacker Drive. This section contained two lanes of tractor-trailers zooming by in both directions. No cars. Gas was too expensive now for private cars. Concrete arches let in patches of sunlight from the river and lightened the dim twilight of the expressway.

The new was always layered on top of the old. That was the way of every city. The rich and mighty flew on the glittering skyways high above the decrepit trains and battered sidewalks used by the poor. Only a few obscure historians knew about the network of abandoned freight tunnels forty feet below the streets of Chicago.

A group of adolescents flew three inches above the other side of the sidewalk on their airskates. Pastel pink and blue dyes colored their spiked hair. Silver and gold rings glittered against their eyebrows and ears. Their jeans were all glitz and shine. They yelled threats at Mider and Rachel. Knives and chains appeared in adolescent hands, deadly toys that matched their cruel promises.

Mider stepped back and placed his burden on the sidewalk. If these ruffians tried to harm his companions, his Sidhe strength should catch them unawares. "Rachel. Step aside. Please."

But Rachel was looking down the street and waving her arms at a trash truck going the opposite direction in the farthest lane.

Brakes squealed. The trash truck skidded across two lanes of traffic. Horns blared, more brakes squealed as the other tractor-trailers fled from this obviously maddened driver.

Air brakes hissed and moaned. The trash truck rolled to a stop and slammed its claw arms on the sidewalk in front of the skaters. They twisted in midair to avoid the claws, crashed into each other and screamed more obscenities.

The driver opened the door of the truck and jumped down to the sidewalk. Blue tattoos of dragons and snakes spiraled around his thick muscled arms. Intricate blue curlicues covered his bald scalp and neck. The chain swinging from his hands was twice as thick and long as the flimsy ones wielded by his younger opponents.

Fright flickered across the adolescents' faces. They backed away and airskated in the opposite direction. The truck driver nodded at Rachel. "Kids have no respect nowadays."

Rachel grinned. "Thanks, Jesse. Can you give a lift to Dr. Nour's clinic?"

Jesse clipped the chain to his belt. "No problem. Let me check this bin first." He turned around, climbed to the top of a large green garbage bin and peered inside. "Rise and shine, Billy. You know I hate cleaning blood and guts out of my rig."

Mider lifted the Sidhe woman from the sidewalk and cradled her in his arms again. It took only a few moments to climb into the passenger side after Rachel.

Jesse climbed into the driver's side, drove them six more blocks and left them off at the front door. A heavy grillwork of iron bars provided extra security for the small storefront tucked beside a modest kiosk and fast food console. *Women's Health Clinic* read the neatly stenciled sign on the door. In smaller print the next line said: *Dr. Fatima Nour, M.D.*

Rachel led Mider inside. She walked up to the receptionist and whispered. The receptionist nodded and allowed her to enter the door at the other end of the room.

Mider took the last seat along the wall. Even though he was dressed exactly like them, the other women's gazes seemed to penetrate the thick folds and veil of his chador. He sensed their recognition of him as male. A few of the younger ones sat unveiled. Their chadors hung on hooks by the door.

Perhaps it was because he cradled an unconscious woman in his lap. How could they bear the weight of these heavy robes with only a small slit for their eyes? The building's climate control wasn't much help either. Dried sweat matted his fur. He felt like ripping the chador off and scratching himself all over.

The receptionist tilted her head and peered at him through the narrow slit in her veil. Her curiosity stabbed into him across the room. She said nothing and continued to type data into a computer using an old fashioned keyboard. The soft clicking sound of her typing filled the silent room.

The door behind the receptionist dilated open. Rachel stood there and crooked her finger at Mider. He rose to his feet and carried his burden into the next room.

The only difference between the physician's chador and his was the caduceus pin clipped to her left shoulder. The top of her head barely reached his shoulder when she stood to greet him.

He laid his charge upon the gurney in the middle of the room and wrinkled his nose against the odor of strong disinfectant that permeated the sheets. Dr. Nour touched his arm. The sleeve of his chador had risen past his gloved hand and exposed his white fur. He felt her shock change to intense curiosity. "Rachel said you were different. She didn't say how different." She pointed at his face. "Pull your veil aside and remove your sunglasses, please."

He obeyed her command. Dr. Nour's pupils dilated while she studied his eyes. She stared at his furred face, touched his cheek and then withdrew her hand as if she'd been scalded. Dr. Nour's confusion spilled over him, then swiftly changed to inquisitiveness. Questions, a ton of them, surfaced in her coffee-colored eyes. There was no time to explain. Mider hurriedly removed the chador from the unconscious woman.

Dr. Nour motioned at him to move out of her way. She took his place, lifted the woman's eyelids and found the inner membrane. Her shoulders stiffened under the heavy material of her chador. She turned around. Her hands twitched. "Do your eyes have the same membrane as this woman?"

He nodded and braced himself for her next question.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know her name. She is Sidhe."

A sharp burst of anger flowed from Dr. Nour into him. "She is she? What kind of answer is that? Do you take me for a fool?"

Patience, he reminded himself. *Patience*. She had handled her shock fairly well all things considered. "Sidhe is a Gaelic word. It means 'the fairy folk.' It's spelled S-I-D-H-E but pronounced *Shee*."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Mider. I am also Sidhe."

Dr. Nour gestured at the unconscious woman on the gurney. "She has no fur."

He took a deep breath and exhaled carefully. This physician was his only hope. "The furred ones are genetic throwbacks in our sisterlines."

"Ah." Her gaze went abstracted. "Sidhe ... is that another word for Djinni?"

He smothered a sigh. The last thing he needed was to be mistaken for one of her country's ancient legends. "We're empaths, not daemons. We have no magical powers."

She tilted her head. Her dark gaze showed serious consideration. "Your pupils are red."

"I'm an albino."

Dr. Nour blinked. "This is true."

"This Sidhe woman needs your help." Rachel's voice, harsh with anxiety, interrupted them.

Mider pulled out a leather pouch, untied it and poured loose gemstones intermingled with silver and gold coins onto the countertop. "This should be sufficient to pay for your services. List it in your files as an anonymous donation. She needs an exoskeleton brace for her leg while it heals. I want her to be able to walk out of here when you're finished."

Dr. Nour slanted an oblique glance at the unconscious woman. "Are there any other anatomical differences that I should be aware of?"

He shrugged. "My people have interbred with humans for thousands of years. Our basic anatomy is the same."

She jerked her thumb at the squat machine on the other side of the gurney. "Bring that here."

He hurried to comply with her command. It took only a moment for her to position a wafer-thin silver cap on her patient's scalp. She keyed up the sofscreen embedded in the top of the machine and watched the images and numbers scrolling up on the screen.

Her gloved finger stabbed at a dark mass within the red-tinged image of the skull. "There's a blood clot pressing down on her brain. We'll have to shave that lovely hair and drain the clot or she'll die."

"You're going to perform a trepanation?"

Dr. Nour spun around. "Are you familiar with the procedure?"

He inclined his head in a stiff nod.

"Have you ever performed a trepanation?"

"No."

"Can you assist me with this procedure?"

He didn't think she'd appreciate knowing his previous surgical experience consisted of removing scent glands from a male goat. "I've read about it. I understand the procedure. I have no training in physical surgery. I will do everything you tell me to do."

"I'll help too, if you want." Rachel's voice quavered despite her brave words. "We don't want anyone else to know about Mider."

Dr. Nour gave her a considering look. The heavy black fabric draped around her head and body made her look like a death goddess. He sent a cautious mental probe at her emotions and found cautious hope. *She wants ... no ... she needs something from us.*

Dr. Nour turned to him. "Rachel told me you live in the abandoned freight tunnels under the city."

He granted her a wary nod. What did she want? Why was this important to her?

“If I help you now, will you agree to help me with other women and conceal them if necessary?”

He blinked. “Other women? Muslim women? Conceal them? Why?”

“Their husbands beat them and they have no place to hide.”

He gestured at her dark robes. “I don't understand. You say you want freedom for Muslim women but you continue to wear a chador. Why?”

Dr. Nour shook her head. “I believe I can help more women by working within the system.” She plucked at her robe and rubbed the material between her fingertips. “The freedoms I seek involve property rights and education, not the freedom to display my body.”

Her ideas held merit. Working with her to help other woman in need would also allow him to form a lasting friendship with this intriguing woman. He held out his hand. “I will assist you to the best of my ability.”

Her fingers felt strong and steady within his. They sealed their agreement with a simple handshake. She rolled up the sleeves of her chador. “Wash your hands and put on a pair of surgical gloves.”

* * * *

Such lovely hair. Mider stroked the thick braid shorn from the Sidhe woman's head. It held gold, black, brown and russet tinged streaks mingled together in a glorious mélange. He tried to imagine how it would feel to have the fur shaved from his body.

He coiled the braid in his hand. This was neither the proper time nor place to sit around thinking silly thoughts.

Rachel had left when Dr. Nour began drilling the holes into the woman's skull. She'd become too nauseated to help them finish the procedure. Technically, the surgery was a success. They'd drained out almost two ccs of blood from the hole in her skull to relieve the pressure against the soft tissue of her brain.

The young woman remained comatose and it wasn't from anesthesia. They'd used only a local on her scalp. In ancient times, that type of surgery was done with no anesthesia because there aren't any nerves in the brain itself to signal pain. How much damage had her mind sustained from the head injury?

He laid the braid on the gurney. His hands trembled. He wiped the sweat from his palms then placed his hands on her face and probed. *Down, down, down.* He fell deep into her mind until he found a small, faded spark of awareness.

Slowly, carefully, he fed his strength to the spark. It glowed, then flared up into a steady flame. Her natural empathic shields flared up with the flame and pushed him away.

He kept himself inside her mind. There was one more thing he could try, an ancient technique his grandmother had described to him. It should work.

He *reached* into the brain stem, into the primitive area of her mind that controlled the automatic functions of her body.

Dru-bonds pulsed inside her mind, withered and torn, coiled in upon themselves like wounded children. He *reached* back inside himself, uncoiled a dru-bond, pulled it out like an umbilical cord and let it connect to her. It shimmered into a bright flare then flowed all the way down into her.

It was done. He withdrew from her mind.

The woman sighed. A faint smile flickered across her mouth for a split second. He stepped back, took her wrists and pulled her to a seated position on the gurney.

She sat there with her face blank, her eyes closed and her hands relaxed. The shiny aluminum wires of the exoskeleton around her right leg glinted under the harsh fluorescent ceiling lights.

The door dilated open behind him and Dr. Nour hurried inside. "What did you do to her? Why is she sitting up like that?"

"I put her in a healing trance for her mind. We call it 'cael marrach'." He shrugged. "The literal translation is 'enchanted sleep.' She can walk now. Her body will continue to function but she cannot speak or see or react to anything or anyone until her mind heals."

Dr. Nour grabbed his arm. Excitement blazed through him. "Can you do this to other comatose people?"

"I don't know. I've never tried this on a human before. I only know that it works for my people."

Mider pulled his arm from her grasp. "I can't stay here too much longer. Later, the next time we meet, we can discuss this in more detail." He grabbed the discarded chador from the chair. "I'll have her dressed in a few minutes. Is there a back door to this clinic?"

She pointed at the curtained wall behind him. "Wait here. I'll get Rachel."

The bright dru-bond that linked him to Rachel flared up like a torch and disappeared. He staggered back, sank down upon his knees and held his hands to his head. A mindless desolation raged deep within him. Distant shouts and screams penetrated the empty space in his soul.

He opened his eyes and found himself lying on the floor with his head cradled in the physician's lap.

"Are you an epileptic?" Dr. Nour stroked his furred cheek. Her concern leaked into him from her fingertips. "You fell down and had a series of convulsions. It looked to me like you just had a grand mal seizure."

"Rachel..." he croaked past his parched throat.

"What?" Dr. Nour leaned closer. The pupils in her eyes were half-dilated.

He grabbed her arm, rolled over onto his hands and knees and pulled himself back into the chair. *Oh, Goddess.* He didn't want to know. *Not now. Not Rachel.*

Catching his breath, he managed to say, "I'm all right now. Rachel's hurt. I felt it. Please, find out what happened to her."

Dr. Nour's pupils dilated to their fullest extent with her shocked surprise and comprehension. She rose to her feet and left the room in a hurried rush.

It couldn't have been more than five minutes but it seemed like forever before Dr. Nour returned. Fresh blood stained the hem of her chador. She walked in slowly then sat down beside him. She took his hands and held them between hers. "I don't know how to tell you this..." Her voice trailed off in a soft sigh.

She shook her head. Compassion glowed in her dark gaze when she resumed talking. "Apparently Rachel went outside for a breath of fresh air. It's dark now. It's quite possible that she missed her step and stumbled off the sidewalk just when that truck came around the corner. I tried to help her but it was too late. Too much blood. Too much damage..." Her voice trailed off again.

He sagged against the wall. That explained why the pain and desolation had raced through him so swiftly. It was over. “She's dead.” The word echoed through his mind. *Dead, dead, dead.* His heart lay within his chest like a stone, numb and empty.

He swallowed the bile that clogged his throat.

Dr. Nour touched his arm. “The police will arrive soon to investigate. You'll have to leave. I can't explain your presence here.”

His mind went blank. He felt too numb to think anymore.

Her fingers dug into his arm. “Wait. I almost forgot. How will I contact you?”

Her words penetrated the fog in his mind. He blinked. She was correct. He must leave and she needed a way to contact him. “The only legal ID I have is a business one. My corporation tends the Winter Gardens in the Chicago Library. I could 'ghost' my sofscreen to yours like I was 'ghosted' to Rachel's.”

She shook her head. “That's too risky. I don't want anything that can be traced back to me.”

Her logic was impeccable. They must be cautious.

He sorted through the possibilities. “At the Chicago Tribune, they have daily tours. In the basement are the pneumatic mail slots. No one uses them anymore. You can send me your messages in the tube for the Editor's office. I've re-routed it to another location on the rooftop. I'll check it daily.”

Dr. Nour grabbed his hand. Curiosity and compassion flowed into him from her. “Be careful.”

Chapter Four

Indio wanted to blow away the blast-proof partition and pin the snot-nosed excuse for a cop against the wall. On the other hand, assaulting a female officer in the middle of the police station wasn't going to get him the assistance he wanted. He counted to twenty-five before he spoke. "This isn't just a missing person's report I want to file. I'm talking about a possible abduction."

Officer Jameson raked her hand through the pale blue curls on her scalp. "The only witness you have for this so-called abduction is a nine-year-old child. That's rather dubious grounds for your assumptions." The tiny speaker chip in the plastic shield around the cubicle added a squeaky texture to her voice.

Indio leaned against the partition. It creaked under his hand. "Ma'am, I know what I'm talking about. If you'll enter a request for my name under covert ops, you should be able to pull up my status as a fellow police officer, both dirtside and off-planet."

Jameson rewarded him with a blank stare. She pointed at a red line on the floor. "Stand behind the line and look straight ahead so I can verify your ID."

He positioned himself per her instructions, gazed into the pulsing blue dot of the partition's scanner and waited while it transferred his ID into her computer. A few seconds later, the console beeped. Strips of red, green and blue data from the sofscreen flickered across Jameson's face, giving her the appearance of a multicolored zebra. Hell of a way to spend your life, cooped up inside a transparent shield.

He shook his head. Letting his mind wander like that wasn't going to help him find Cait.

Jameson looked up, her expression more sympathetic. "Did you check out the morgue?"

"We did. None of the bodies were hers."

Jameson tugged at her lip for a moment. "I'd like to help you. But..." She spread her hands apart and shrugged.

He gritted his teeth and kept his voice calm and reasonable. "But what?"

"We've had thirty-seven murders, sixteen rapes, twenty-nine assaults and sixty-five drug cases today. On top of everything else we have this terrorist bombing at the spaceport on the highest priority level. Unless you can produce concrete evidence of an abduction or a link to terrorism, I'm afraid your report will remain in the pending file."

"How about the bag lady my daughter saw? Do you have an address in your files for her?"

Jameson stroked her chin. Gold glitter sparkled on her fingernails. "I can't release personal files on citizens just like that."

"Not even for a fellow officer?"

She pursed her lips, then keyed up the security grid for O'Hare Spaceport. "Where did your daughter see her?"

"In the sub-basement parking garage."

Her hands moved swiftly over the console in a request for more specific files. The image shifted to views of the subterranean garage. She pursed her lips and leaned closer

to screen. Another quick stab of her finger and the images blanked out except one that showed Cait, Socorro and the bag lady standing together.

Indio wished he had the ability to morph himself through the plastic partition for a closer look. Instead, he had to plaster himself against it like a leech. The image tilted in a dizzy whirl, then steadied. He saw falling debris and black smoke fill the sofscreen, then drift upwards.

“Don't you have any sound? I'd like to hear what they're saying.”

She gaped at him. Shock transformed her thin lips into a distorted frown. “You're a police officer, you know we're only allowed to use visual scans.”

He coughed and cleared his throat. “Oh yeah, the People versus the State case of 2052. I forgot about that. My unit specialized in covert ops.”

Jameson rolled her eyes and tapped another series of commands into the console. More data scrolled up on the screen. She peered at it. “No fixed address. Full name Rachel Shoenfeld. Transient housing grid on Lower Wacker Drive.”

“That's it?”

A haughty sniff accompanied her response. “I didn't see anything that qualifies as a criminal act. That's why the computerized security review didn't flag this during the investigation of the terrorist bomb. What the cameras recorded there was a rescue, not an abduction.”

He stepped back and spread his hands apart. “You have my phonenet number, don't you? Let me know if my wife shows up on any other vids. Okay?”

She jabbed her thumb at the exit door. “Okay. I have to keep the line moving, you know.”

Indio glanced over his shoulder. The line stretched out past the door into the corridor stairway. It had taken him two hours of standing in that line just to get this far. He'd be damn lucky if she contacted him later. Hopefully, Kevin and Tiny had better luck checking out the hospital emergency rooms within ten miles of the spaceport.

* * * *

Indio hitched his chair closer and squeezed himself in between Tiny and Kevin while the connection went through. The viewscreen lit up on the desktop and showed them Julisa's face.

The image was a bit grainy. There was a thirteen-second delay on account of the distance from Sanctuary Station. They had to make every word count. The rates for a satellite relay call to the L-5 LaGrange position of the station were astronomical.

Julisa leaned over the screen as if she wanted to reach through it, grab one of them by the neck and shake him. “How did three grown men manage to lose one woman?”

Just because his sister Julisa was practically engaged to Cait's twin Kevin didn't mean she had the right to treat them like idiots. Indio took a deep breath, swallowed his anger and chose a diplomatic response instead of yelling at her. “We're not leaving until we find her.”

She blinked then nodded her head. “Of course you're not leaving until you find her. Did you call Grandpa yet?”

Indio snorted. “Of course I called him. His flight will arrive here tomorrow morning.”

The hotel room door computer beeped twice. Indio reached for the cut-off switch. "We have company, Jule. I'll call you back later."

She leaned closer to her screen and whispered, "Send me a fax. Keep me posted. Okay?"

"Sure." He flipped the cut-off switch and ended the call.

"Entry request," the door's programmed voice said in dulcet tones. "Lilith Harker."

Kevin jumped to his feet. His chair toppled backwards onto the plush carpeting. "Aunt Lily!"

Indio exchanged a flustered look with Tiny. How were they going to explain Cait's disappearance to her aunt?

Kevin positioned himself in front of the door and said, "Entry request granted." It slid open.

Feeling like a condemned criminal being sent off to permanent deep freeze, Indio rose to his feet.

Their visitor stepped inside and the door slid shut behind her. Lilith Harker's platinum hair shone almost pure white against the warm caramel color of her skin. She looked like she might be in her early forties even though her chronological age was a hundred and twenty-eight.

She hugged Kevin then took three long strides across the room and stopped in front of Indio. Her dark eyed gaze was quick and appraising. "You're Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo?"

He nodded. Indio already knew from his experiences with Cait and Kevin not to extend his hand to another empath. If and when Lilith wanted that kind of close contact with him, she'd make the first move.

She turned to Tiny. "Tamerlane Jehu Barnett."

Tiny inclined his head and gave her a polite smile. "Miz Harker."

She reached out and grasped their hands. "Strong names for strong men. Cait chose well. You're family now."

She released Tiny's hand and focused her gaze on Indio. "Cait's gone. We must accept this and move on with our lives."

Why was she talking about Cait in the past tense? He pulled his hand out of her grip. "Who told you she's missing?"

"We know she's gone because we can't feel her anymore." A sad finality colored her voice.

Kevin lunged forward. "Cait's not dead. I would have felt it when she died."

Lilith spun around and stared at Kevin with a faint hope in her gaze. "What do you feel?"

Kevin exhaled a deep, shuddering sigh and shook his head. "Nothing. I can't feel a damn thing from her anymore."

Lilith frowned and rubbed her forehead. "Neither can I. So it's quite possible that..."

Kevin held up his hand and shook his head. Anger clouded his dark-skinned face. "She's my twin. If she were dead, I'd know it."

Lilith reached for his hand. He jerked away from her touch. She sighed. "There's another factor to consider. Our bloodline has changed over the centuries of interbreeding with humans. It's possible that our dru-bonds aren't as deep anymore. Maybe..."

The way she kept referring to humans as a separate species grated on Indio's sensibilities. He suppressed a sudden urge to shake her. "If you've interbred with humans, why do you keep calling yourselves Sidhe?"

She smiled, a slow lingering smile that reminded him of Cait. "Sidhe refers to our culture more than anything else."

"No." Kevin crossed his arms. A cold, smoldering glare transformed his face into a bitter mask. "It doesn't matter how much we've interbred. I've always felt it when something happened to Cait. You can't tell me I wouldn't feel her death. She's not dead, she's..."

"She's what?" Lilith held her hand out to him again.

He shook his head and slumped against the wall with his eyes closed. "She was hurt. I felt that. Then nothing. It was like she'd stepped off into a void."

"A lot of debris fell down in the garage from the explosions." Tiny's deep voice rumbled through Indio's bones.

Indio snapped his fingers. "The debris knocked her out. That could be why Kevin can't feel her anymore."

"I'll find her. I'll feel her when she awakens and..." Kevin's voice trailed off.

"And what?" Lilith jabbed her finger into his chest. "You know there's no sense of direction with the dru-bond. How will you find her?"

"We'll find her." Indio clenched his hands into fists. "No matter what."

Lilith turned to Indio. "Your daughter? Where is she?"

He frowned. What did Socorro's whereabouts have to do with finding Cait?

"I'm right here."

Everyone turned around at the sound of Socorro's voice. She stood in the doorway that linked the two-bedroom suite. Her kitten, Licorice, lay curled up in her arms like a baby. "Kevin's yelling woke me up. I don't believe Cait's dead either."

Lilith held out her hand. "I'm Cait's Aunt Lily. We have a large house in North Carolina with lots of land. You'll be safe with us. You'll be able to play with Cait's sisters and brothers."

Indio took a deep breath and exhaled carefully. Lilith had no right to propose this arrangement without consulting him first. Socorro was his daughter, not hers.

Socorro shook her head. Bright red spots stained her cheeks. "I don't want to go away with you, I want to stay here with my father and Tiny."

Indio went over and placed his hand on Socorro's shoulder. "Her great-grandfather will be here tomorrow morning. He'll take care of her."

Lilith seated herself on the edge of the bed and smoothed out the cover with her hand. "Please, I want to get to know you better. Your grandfather can stay at my house. We'll help him take care of Socorro."

Tiny swiped his hand across his bald scalp. "We can't stay here. It's too expensive. We'll have to find a cheaper place. And the most logical place to start our search is..."

"—the transient housing grid where Rachel lived." Indio completed the thought automatically. He turned to Kevin. "What do you think?"

Kevin shrugged. "I'm with you."

Indio's phonenet unit beeped. He unclipped it from his belt and held it to his ear. "Mr. De Arroyo?" It was Officer Jameson. Her voice sounded squeaky on the phonenet transmission too. Maybe that was her normal voice.

"Speaking."

"That woman, Rachel."

"Yes."

"She's dead. The report just came in. There was an accident on Wacker Drive. She died instantly."

The room slipped away from him in a dizzy spiral. The best chance they had of locating Cait had disappeared. He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "Did anyone claim her body?"

"Her daughter claimed it ten minutes ago. Here's her address and the address of the funeral home."

"Wait a minute." He keyed up the datapad on the phone. "I'm ready now. Give me the addresses."

She rattled them off. He typed the information into the datapad, recorded it onto a datachip, thanked her for taking the time to call him and hung up. They didn't have much time. Jewish burial customs forbade embalming, which meant the funeral would occur within the next twenty-four hours at the latest.

Tiny stepped forward. "Whose body?"

"Rachel's body." Indio pulled the datachip from the phone and held it up. "I have the addresses for her family and the funeral home. Our best bet now is to contact the funeral home and find out when and where they've scheduled the burial."

Chapter Five

Mider led the young Sidhe woman across the room and stood her beside a stationary bicycle. With her mind wrapped deep in the healing trance of the cael marrach, she moved like a robot. The exoskeleton's silver frame glittered against her jean-clad leg and hip.

He nudged her into a seated position, placed her hands on the handlebars and tightened the stirrup straps around her sneaks. After a few pushes of his hands, her legs moved automatically on the pedals. No sense in letting her body deteriorate while her mind healed.

"That's good. You're doing fine, my friend; I found your ID chip but it was damaged." He winced. Calling her 'my friend' felt so impersonal and insincere.

Perhaps he should make an attempt to find her family by placing an ad describing her appearance on the WorldNet. Her sisterline would never forgive him if he left her in an emergency room and exposed her non-human origins to the authorities.

Was there a connection between the bomb at the spaceport and Rachel's death outside the clinic? Had someone followed Rachel from the spaceport and lost her trail when she went into the tunnels?

Mider shook his head. Until he had the answers to those questions, there would be no ad. Her family would understand the need for secrecy even if they believed he'd kidnapped their daughter. He must hide her until she healed.

A cloth bandage concealed her scalp and mottled bruises marred the right side of her face and eye. The colors had darkened to black, green and purple.

He kept his voice soft and soothing, as if he were speaking to a small child. "Because you're Sidhe it won't take long for your hair to grow back."

Her eyes moved at the sound of his voice as if she was trying to locate him. That was good sign. It meant her mind was healing too.

He went to the far corner of the clay-walled chamber and sank to his knees in front of a leather-bound trunk. He lifted the lid and pulled out a heavy book, wrapped in oilcloth, a Torah Rachel had given him for his birthday last week. He kept it wrapped up in the trunk because the damp tunnel air warped and damaged books.

Today was Rachel's funeral. Mider selected his finest white linen shirt from the chest and put it on. The white purity of the cloth would show his honor for Rachel's memory. He bound the long shirt to his waist and arms with leather strips that matched his brown pants and boots. Then he plaited his white hair into a five-strand Sidhe braid that swung down to his ankles.

Candles flickered on the shelves all around him. He selected a stool, sat down, opened the Torah and ran his finger down to the passage he wanted to read. "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever."

Rachel was dead. He was alive. The young Sidhe woman pedaling away behind him was alive. "The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north: it whirleth about continually and the wind returneth again according to its circuits."

Aliah was the old folklore word for the storm wind. It was the wind that whirled out of the dark to scour and sweep away everything old, leaving behind a clean landscape, a new beginning. He would call the young Sidhe woman Aliah.

He turned the page. This wasn't his religion. These words were not his beliefs. Still they comforted him with their simple truths. "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

* * * *

The funeral itself had been a simple closed coffin affair, which suited Tiny just fine. He had no desire to stand and stare at some woman's dead body. He'd always hated funerals, but he'd attend a thousand funerals if that's what it took to find Cait.

When they introduced themselves to Esther, Rachel's daughter, she invited them to her house. Tiny glanced at the yarmulkes on the wooden table. Positioning himself beside the table and handing out the skullcaps gave him the perfect excuse to observe the mourners.

The cantor's pure tenor voice spiraled above the quiet murmur of the guests. "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

Tiny crossed his arms and watched Indio work the crowd, showing Cait's holoimage around and asking questions. He knew better than to try and interfere with his buddy right now. Indio was a born cop, a damn good cop. It was a way of life for him, not just a job.

He smothered a grin at the sight of Socorro walking hand in hand with her father. Having her here like this was a big help. Those who hesitated when they saw the burn scars on Indio's face relaxed at the sight of a little girl holding her daddy's hand.

He shook his head. Keeping track of things, handling finances, that's what he did best. He and Indio were opposites. Like yin and yang, they were two sides of the same coin. That's why they got along so well. They didn't have to compete with each other. Cait was the glue, the hinge piece that joined them together.

Two more guests walked in. They wore plain white t-shirts and black jeans. Dark blue tattoos of elaborate curlicues covered the taller man's bald scalp. They made his pale skin look chalk white. Tiny let his gaze travel down and peered at the dragons and vines that circled the man's thick muscled arms.

Tiny picked up two yarmulkes and handed them over while he studied the second man. Whipcord lean, with black hair, dark eyes and smooth, caramel brown skin, the shorter man flashed a wary smile then accepted the skullcap.

The tall man offered Tiny his hand and said, "Hi. My name's Jesse Donovan. This is Ibrahim Nour. We're Rachel's friends."

* * * *

The cantor's sweet tenor continued over the muted bustle of the crowded room. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Esther Shoenfeld led Indio and Socorro over to a line of stools set up along the back wall. "Mom didn't have to live the way she did and wear the kind of clothes she

wore. I told her it was dangerous but she wouldn't listen. She'd pat me on the arm and say, 'Don't worry, no one's going to mug a bag lady.'"

Indio suppressed a sigh and seated himself. This was a waste of time. Rachel's daughter didn't know a damn thing about Cait or her whereabouts.

Esther wrung her hands. "My mother wasn't crazy, you know, just a bit eccentric. She used to be private investigator but she retired over twenty years ago."

He cleared his throat. "Do you have any of her personal effects?"

Esther's face lit up with eagerness to please him. "I have her sofscreen. I'll get it for you," she said, then walked off before he could stop her.

He shrugged. It made her feel helpful and the files embedded in the sofscreen might contain crucial clues. Researching them was a tedious but necessary process in any investigation.

Socorro sat down on the stool beside him and put her hand on his knee. "Daddy," she said, "I've been thinking."

He waited for her to continue.

"The first time you met Cait, was she real quiet and standoffish like her Aunt Lily was yesterday?"

He stared at her, then grinned. Pretty smart daughter he had there. "Yes, she was; I liked that. It meant she'd be a good student and pay attention to her flying lessons."

Socorro picked up one of her braids and twirled it round her fingers. "Cait wanted me to meet the rest of her family. She said they might seem cold at first 'cause they have to hide who they are from other people. When Grandpa comes here tonight, I'm going to ask him to take me to visit them in North Carolina. That way you won't have to worry about me while you look for Cait."

Esther chose that moment to return with a sofscreen and a handful of coded computer chips. "Is there anything else I can do to help?"

Indio glanced across the room at the two men standing beside Tiny.

Socorro jumped to her feet and twisted the hem of her dress in her hand. "I have to use the ladies room."

"Why, of course, dear. It's right over here." Esther placed her hand on Socorro's shoulder and guided her away.

Indio rubbed his chin. Socorro had read him like a book and handled Esther like she'd been a special operative all her life. He stood up and made his way over to Tiny. No sense in wasting the opportunity she'd given him.

* * * *

Jesse twirled the holocube in his fingers and peered at Cait's image. The casual move of his arm made the tattoos ripple across his skin as if they were alive. "I'd like to help you, man, but I've never seen this woman before. The last time I saw Rachel she was with two Muslim women wearing chadors. One of the women carried the other one in her arms."

Indio inclined his head and waited for him to continue. Silence was the best interrogator. It made people uncomfortable and they started talking again just to fill the empty air with sound.

Jesse rubbed his tattooed scalp and screwed up his face in deep thought. "I think Rachel took them to Dr. Nour's clinic."

Ibrahim rubbed his chin. "The chadors conceal a lot. I'm not tall for a man. I could pass as a woman while wearing one."

Jesse stared at Ibrahim. "You're right. I watched her carry the other lady three blocks without slowing down once. She could have been a guy."

Tiny straightened up from where he was leaning against the doorframe and exchanged a startled look with Indio.

Ibrahim shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. My esteemed cousin, Dr. Nour, is very strict. Her clinic is for women only." He raised his hand. "It doesn't matter if she's my cousin. That's not going to do you any good. I'm the black sheep of the family. No one speaks to me because I'm gay."

Jesse cleared his throat and broke the awkward silence that settled upon them at Ibrahim's announcement. "Ibrahim works at the new food storage warehouse half a block down from the clinic. When he goes to work there on Monday, maybe he can find out if someone saw them go inside the clinic."

Indio filed this additional scrap of information away in his head. Having a place where they could blend in with everyone else while they kept track of who went in and out of the clinic might come in handy. There must be a connection between Rachel's death and Cait's disappearance, and he intended to find out what it was.

Chapter Six

Indio sealed his insulated coveralls and donned a pair of heavy leather gloves. Huge overhead lights bathed the loading machinery and long racks in a harsh white glare that made the shadows look darker than normal. It felt like he was back on the asteroid again wearing a spacesuit instead of selkieskin.

He climbed a metal ladder to the narrow catwalk and joined the rest of the loading crew fanning out among the racks. Standing around thinking was a good way to get killed. He'd already seen what happened when the hydraulic brakes jammed. A canister had bounced off the chains to the floor, split in half and crushed three men into masses of bloody pulp. Six other workers remained hospitalized in critical condition.

One six-meter wide can passed him, then another. Frost covered them from top to bottom. Touch one with bare hands and your skin would rip off—that's how cold the cans filled with frozen foods were. One started to wobble. He glanced down the line. They didn't need that. It could oscillate down the line and bump a whole row onto the lower catwalk. He kicked it. The wobble slowed down.

Tiny leaned over the railing a few yards farther up the line from Indio and grunted with effort as he pushed the canister back in place with his gloved hands. Kevin leaned over his side of the line and shoved another can back on track. Indio moved into his usual spot and fell into the rhythm of catching and hitting, over and over again, until the only thing left in the universe was the line of cans moving down the chute.

The last can flew by. Indio grabbed at air, stopped and pulled himself away from the edge. Last day, last hour at this job where they'd wasted an entire week looking for Cait.

Speculation ran rampant in all the newsvids regarding a Jewish woman's death outside a Muslim clinic. One hour after Rachel's death, armed guards appeared at the doors and escorted Dr. Fatima Nour to and from work.

Dr. Nour refused to respond to email, phone calls or letters requesting a few minutes of her time. The guards at the clinic denied entry to all males. The spy cams Indio and Tiny had placed outside the clinic and along Dr. Nour's daily commute had revealed nothing of Cait's whereabouts.

Without police jurisdiction, they couldn't demand entry inside the clinic. Suspicions and gut instinct wouldn't give them a search warrant. Breaking and entering wasn't an option. Not yet. Not unless the payoff made it worth the risk of criminal charges.

Giant doors slid up into the ceiling at the end of the loading ramp. Indio nodded at Tiny and Kevin, climbed down his ladder to the floor and followed them outside. They sat down on a low cinder block wall and watched the rest of the dockworkers stroll past onto the cracked and stained concrete sidewalk.

Ibrahim Nour came down the ramp after them, flipping a flat metal rod. Every day he climbed up above the hauling chains, watched for snags and untangled them with precise jabs of that metal rod. Human hand and eye coordination was faster and cheaper than a computer program. Small, dark, and compact, every move he made was graceful and flowing, like smoke on water. He seated himself beside Kevin.

Indio hunched his shoulders and stared down the street at the clinic. No way was he going to give up. Even if it meant finding Cait's body. Then he'd know for sure instead of wondering for the rest of his life what had happened to her.

He jabbed his thumb at the clinic. "There's a new set of guards on duty. Maybe they'll agree to let us pass a note to your cousin."

Ibrahim slanted an idle glance at the guards. "I've told you before. My esteemed cousin won't allow men in her clinic. Did you notice weasel-face and his buddy, jackal-eyes?"

Tiny removed his gloves and clipped them to his belt. "What about 'em?"

"They're Abdullah Fasir's bodyguards."

Tiny stared at the bodyguards. A frown etched his forehead. "The Iraqi Ambassador?"

"Yeah."

Kevin slapped the last piece of ice from his gloves. "Why are they guarding the clinic instead of his penthouse in the United Planets' Enclave?"

Ibrahim gazed at nothing in particular for a few moments, then shrugged. "I heard the ambassador likes to beat his wives on a regular basis. Says it keeps them docile. My cousin treats their injuries."

"Does Dr. Nour report their injuries to the police?" Kevin asked.

Ibrahim widened his eyes with mock surprise. "If she did, he wouldn't bring them to her for treatment."

Indio rubbed the thick scar tissue on his face. They needed more information, more pieces to the puzzle. "Who's the third guard?"

Ibrahim frowned. "I don't know him. He's not Muslim. He's a Tuareg from the Sahara Desert. The local gossips at the Muslim market say he's tough and very professional."

Indio rose to his feet and jammed his hands into his pockets. "I'm going to pick up the spy cam tapes and try one more time at the clinic. Who wants to come with me?"

Kevin and Tiny stood.

Ibrahim shook his head. "They'll never let you in. You're wasting your time. I'll wait for you at the market."

Tiny pulled a handful of credit chips from his pocket. "How much do you wanna bet on that?"

* * * *

Indio strode up the street with Kevin and Tiny. Weasel-face stiffened at their approach and fingered his automatic rifle.

The indigo veil and robes of the Taureg guard shimmered in the sunlight that slipped in between the concrete archways of Lower Wacker Drive. Leather belts with embossed silver ornaments crisscrossed his chest and waist. His dark robes looked like they were pure spidersilk which meant they were both bullet and laser resistant. The sword slung on his left wasn't ornamental. The worn hilt matched the holstered gun on his right hip. Indio knew Taureg cultural customs were the exact opposite of the Muslims, but their reputation as incorruptible guards guaranteed them regular employment. Taureg women went bare-faced while the men wore veils. Their religious beliefs were closer to American Indian spirit guides than any other religion he'd encountered.

The other two guards wore business suits and white headdresses. The weasel-faced one glared at Indio, spat on the sidewalk and said a long string of unintelligible words. Probably a curse that said they were eaters of camel dung and fornicated with sheep. Indio wished he knew enough Arabic to commit that particular phrase to memory. Next time he'd drag Ibrahim along to translate.

Tiny and Kevin stiffened and moved closer. Clenched fists and menacing stares spelled out their intentions.

The Tuareg guard didn't make the mistake of reacting. He kept his hand on his sword hilt, turned his head slightly and aimed his words at the two guards behind him. "There is no need to hurl insults when none were given." Sullen stares at his back greeted his soft-spoken voice.

Indio relaxed. The Taureg was a worthy opponent who knew exactly what he was doing. No wrong moves made in anger. Every move watched with calculating eyes.

Indio pulled a holocube from his pocket and gave it to the Taureg. "We're looking for this woman. We have reason to believe she may be a patient at this clinic."

The Taureg turned his gaze to Cait's image. A few moments later, he looked at them and shrugged. "I have not seen her."

Kevin stepped forward. "We need to talk to Dr. Nour. We're looking for my sister."

"It is not permitted. The clinic is for women only."

Indio pulled a datachip from his jeans pocket and handed it over. "Can you give this to Dr. Nour? It's very important that we speak with her."

The datachip was accepted. "I cannot give you any guarantees."

Indio placed his hand on Kevin's elbow and motioned at Tiny to back off. No need to aggravate this confrontation any further. They'd gotten as much as they could for now. This weekend, though, was a different story. More and more, it looked like breaking and entering might be their best option.

* * * *

Ibrahim had chosen the perfect spot to watch and wait for them. He sat cross-legged on one of the abandoned cars that blocked the side street. The sudden surge in gasoline prices over two decades ago had caused a massive switch to solar powered vehicles. Stripped and gutted of their major parts, the rusted shells loomed like baby dinosaurs in the warm summer darkness.

He jumped down from his perch to the street. "Any luck?"

Tiny reached into his pocket and handed over five credits chips. "I'm never betting against you again."

They walked through a narrow opening between two of the cars. The savory smells of spicy cooking drifted past Indio's head. Strings of colored lights hung from the fire escapes. Makeshift booths and card tables lined the sidewalks. '*Yard Sale*,' '*Crafts*,' and '*Farmer's Market*' read the signs above the booths.

Brightly colored clothes hung from rusted fire escape steps. Street hucksters commandeered the curbs, playing music with cups for spare change placed at their feet. The sound of a violin concerto competed with the angry squeal of an electric guitar. Drumbeats accented a rapid-play juggling act on the opposite curb.

A Muslim woman strolled past. A black chador and veil concealed everything except her eyes. Her daughters walked behind her, chador-clad girls with soft doe eyes. The smallest daughter at the end of the line carried a baby on her hip. The baby looked almost as big as the girl who carried it.

Indio shook his head. The Muslim religion had become even more restrictive during his years in space. It used to be they only required chadors on grown women, not young girls.

He followed Kevin to the food vending booths. They bought bowls of fried rice and noodles at the first booth. Platanos and potato balls with meat filling from the second booth quickly changed hands under the flow of credit chips.

Indio accepted a pair of chopsticks from Kevin, scooped some hot rice into his mouth and stepped back into the street. He watched Tiny and Ibrahim hesitate between the spicy Pakistani food section and a Cambodian rice vendor.

A pre-adolescent boy with slanted eyes and night-black hair tied back in a ponytail caught Indio's attention. Then the crowd thickened on this side of the street and obscured his view for a few moments. Tiny eased past Indio and headed towards the Cuban food booth.

The crowd parted in front of Indio like a herd of panicked deer. Two men, their hair rucked up into spikes, wearing Kevlar vests and carrying automatic rifles at their hips strutted out into the middle of the street.

In that moment, time stood still for Indio. It felt like everything moved in slow motion. Walking between time was how his grandfather described it.

The skinny boy's hand slid into Indio's pocket. Indio reached back without looking, grabbed the boy's wrist and handed him the bowl of hot rice. "Get out of the way."

He glanced at Tiny, Kevin, and Ibrahim. They had already positioned themselves to his left and right. Slender chains dangled from their hands. Indio's hand had already moved of its own accord. The cool metal links of his chain flowed between his fingertips.

The dirtsider gang members raised their weapons and fired them above the heads of the crowd. Chips of cement and brick sprayed down upon the sidewalk. Screams and shouts filled the air while people threw themselves flat on the ground and scrambled for cover.

Indio threw his chain. It spun through the air and wrapped itself around the gun hand of the first gang member. Kevin's chain flew through the air next and wrapped itself around the second man's torso, trapping his hands against his sides.

Out of the corner of his eye Indio saw Tiny and Ibrahim flick their wrists and release their chains. Their chains whipped around the men's legs.

Indio spun around and kicked his opponent in the chest. The man's body crashed into a table filled with melons and toppled them to the ground.

A backhanded slap from Kevin took care of the second bully. The man's eyes rolled all the way back in his head until they were totally white. He toppled backwards. Tiny stepped in, caught him with one hand and lowered him to the ground without causing any further damage. Sirens wailed in the distance. The city's anti-crime sensors had picked up the sound of gunfire.

Indio knelt on the sidewalk, unwound the chains from the unconscious men and passed them back. No sense in leaving evidence of their intervention behind.

He stood up and ran down the quiet street. Kevin, Tiny and Ibrahim's steps paced his. Tattered scraps of paper flew in the air. Overturned bowls and chairs decorated the sidewalk. They ducked into the doorway of the warehouse on the corner. No fancy computerized door, just an old fashioned coded lock. As long as the rent was paid up to date, the key card worked.

Indio slid his keycard into the slot. The door opened. He stepped inside, followed by his companions. The skinny boy ran in with the bowl of rice clutched to his chest.

Indio shut the door, locked it and leaned against the frame. Duct tape held the boy's sneakers together and his shirtsleeves and jeans barely covered his wrists and ankles. Indio shrugged. He always was a sucker for kids in trouble. The boy was safer in here with them than outside.

The stark apartment held hardly any furnishings. White cinder block walls and a concrete floor gave it a cold and impersonal air. Steel strips reinforced the cheap plywood doors. Three mattresses shared the living room floor with a worn out sofa and a battered coffee table. Loose clothes and blankets lay across each mattress with half-emptied duffel bags positioned at the top for pillows.

A touch panel by the door controlled light strips in the walls. A shaving mirror was strategically positioned to give them a clear view of the street. Two doors on the rear wall led to a bathroom and an adjoining bedroom.

Kevin and Tiny plopped themselves down on the mattresses. Tiny pulled out his sofscreen and unfolded it. Ibrahim went behind the countertop separating the small kitchen from the living area and leaned against it. A beat up microwave, solar-powered refrigerator and two synthwood cabinets added the finishing touches to the kitchen's decor.

No one said a word. They didn't have to. Indio was the one who'd fed the boy. The decision of what to do with their newest companion rested with him. "What's your name, boy?"

Kevin looked up. "She's a girl, not a boy."

The child's grip on the bowl tightened. Angel-brown eyes directed a baleful glare at Kevin.

Indio narrowed his eyes. *A girl?* The delicate features under that unruly mop of hair held the promise of beauty. She was painfully thin. Where were her parents?

She glanced at the closed door behind Indio. He moved out of the way. "You can leave any time you want."

Tiny laid his sofscreen down on the mattress. His movements remained slow and non-threatening. The message **SEARCHING** appeared on the sofscreen. He pulled a holocube from his pocket and spun it between his fingers. "We're looking for our wife, Cait. She's missing."

The girl inched backward to Tiny's mattress and seated herself. She picked up the cube and twirled it between her fingers. The blue and red lights of the police carrier flashed in the mirror behind Tiny's head.

Her sullen gaze moved from the holocube to the images reflected in the mirror. A police carrier and Medivac 'copter settled to the ground. Their helicopter blades whirled to a stop. An armored door panel slid up into the top of the police carrier. Two helmeted figures climbed out with heavy-duty stun rifles in their hands. Two Emergency Med Tech

workers climbed out of the Medivac 'copter. A robotic carrier with telescoping arms trundled out behind the EMT workers.

One policeman stood guard while the second officer retrieved weapons and collected evidence within a five-meter radius of the unconscious gang members. Four more EMTs hurried out of the Medivac 'copter and waited until the policeman gestured at them to approach the bodies. They examined the bodies, rigged up oxygen masks and IVs then laid them on the robot carrier. Both policemen walked backward with their stun rifles ready while the carrier trundled back into the Medivac 'copter followed by the EMTs.

The door panels of the police cruiser and Medivac 'copter slid shut behind their passengers. Then both 'copters started up their engines and departed in a cloud of dust.

The girl looked away from the mirror and returned the holocube to Tiny's outstretched hand.

Indio motioned at Ibrahim to come to his side.

“What?” Ibrahim asked.

“When the market reopens buy us more food.”

The girl flashed a tentative smile. “My name is Emily Nguyen.”

Emily might be the key they needed to get inside the clinic. Indio grabbed Ibrahim's wrist, pulled him close and whispered in his ear. “And buy Emily a chador.”

Ibrahim let his eyebrows scale his forehead at this added request then nodded.

Indio went to Kevin's mattress and seated himself close enough to talk to the girl without getting so close that she might mistake it as a threatening move. “Where's your mother?”

She hunched her shoulders. “Around.”

“Why aren't you with her?”

Her fingers tightened on the bowl. She reached into her waistband and pulled out a sofscreen with the words *Chicago School District* imprinted on its cover. “If I stay with her, she'll sell me for drugs. As long as I'm registered online for school every day and hand in my assignments, no one bothers her or me.”

She tilted her head. “What happened to your face?”

Her question didn't surprise him. Kids always asked. Adults usually got uncomfortable, looked away and tried to pretend his scars didn't exist.

“I used to be a cop. There was an accident.”

Kevin laid his sofscreen down on the mattress between them. Images of a Native American man with his white hair hanging down his shoulders in two thick braids flowed across the its screen. “Here's an old newsvid recording. That's Indio's grandfather. He led a protest march against gambling. Someone tried to run him over with his pick-up truck but Indio pushed his grandfather aside and got hit instead. It pinned him against a wall and crushed his left arm and leg.”

“Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo.” Emily read the name that scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

Indio grinned at her. “I was named after my grandfather but everyone calls me Indio because it's easier to remember.”

She looked at his left arm and leg and snorted. “Did they give you an artificial arm and leg too?”

Indio rose to his feet, leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. She was asking questions. That was good. “No, they used bone putty, muscle scaffolding and massive blood transfusions to rebuild everything. My people's beliefs say I need all my body parts when I die. I wore an exoskeleton for a year and a half until I learned how to walk and use my arm properly again.”

Emily turned her attention to Kevin. “Who are you?”

“My name's Kevin O'Keefe. Their wife's my twin sister, Cait.”

She looked at Tiny. He flashed her a reassuring grin. “My name's T.J. Barnett. You can call me Tiny.”

“Are you a cop too?” Her expression remained wary.

Tiny leaned back and stretched. The thick, corded muscles of his arms flexed with his movements. He swiped his hand across his bald scalp and smiled. “I'm ex-military, a veteran of the Mars expedition.”

Indio glanced at the mirror. People were drifting back out into the street by ones and twos. Food and articles of used clothing magically appeared at the makeshift stands.

Emily jabbed her thumb at Ibrahim standing by the door. “What about you?”

He bowed from his waist, executed an elaborate salaam with his hands, then straightened and put his hand on the doorknob. “Ibrahim Benjamin Nour at your service, Ms. Nyugen. This humble abode is my apartment. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a few purchases to make.” He opened the door and slipped outside. It closed behind him.

Emily pointed at the holocube. A frown furrowed her brow. “Are you Mormons or something that this woman is married to both of you?”

Indio leaned over and tapped the forgotten bowl of rice in her lap. “Eat. You're too skinny. No, we're not Mormons. Cait's people believe in multiple spouses of either sex.”

Emily nodded and dug into her rice. A few bites later, she wiped her chin with the back of her hand. “Is it some kind of new religious cult?”

Kevin shook his head. “No. It's just the way my people are.”

Indio stood up and went into the kitchen area. He opened the fridge and selected a container, shook it, then opened the top and sniffed. The milk smelled all right and he didn't see any lumps in it. He located a reasonably clean glass from the cabinet, filled it to the top and carried it back to the mattress.

Time to shift the questions back to Emily. “Why did you follow us?”

She pushed the empty bowl aside, accepted the glass of milk from him and scuffed her sneakers on the rough concrete floor. “You're spacers. Only spacers use fighting chains like you guys did.”

“Lots of spacers in Chicago.”

Emily twisted her hands together in her lap. “You're new. Even though the newsies blanked out all the faces, selkieskins and spacers have been in the newsvid headlines for months now.”

She flipped her sofscreen around and showed them the latest headlines. “Everyone knows the Interplanetary Trade Council subpoenaed spacers to testify about selkieskins and that the hearing's going to be three weeks from now at the Enclave. It wasn't that hard for me to figure out you must be the spacers who came dirtside for the hearing.”

“Were you thinking maybe you might be able to steal one and sell it?”

That earned him a sharp glance from downcast eyes. A flush stained the pale cafe-au-lait skin of her face. "Heard they're alive," she mumbled.

"Would you like to try one on?" Tiny asked.

The eagerness glowing in her eyes answered that question.

* * * *

Emily sat cross-legged on the mattress wearing a selkieskin. She looked like a deep-sea diver in a wet suit except this suit had shimmering moiré patterns of gold, red and blue rippling across its blackness. "This is skaggy."

Indio kept his voice quiet and matter of fact. "I'd like you to do something for us."

She stiffened and gave him a very suspicious glare.

He held out the chador Ibrahim had purchased. "Tomorrow's Saturday. The Free Women's Clinic is open until three PM. All you have to do is wear this, go to the clinic, show Dr. Nour this holocube and ask her if she's seen Cait."

"After I do that, then what?"

"Would you like to get out of here?"

She sucked in her breath. "Will you take me up to live with you on Sanctuary Station?"

Emily was a minor child. Technically speaking, they needed her mother's permission to take her off-planet. Rather than make a promise he couldn't keep, Indio said, "If we can."

Chapter Seven

Mider took the young woman by the hand and led her to the middle of his bedroom. Two weeks had passed since the accident and she no longer needed the exoskeleton. The discarded framework of titanium struts lay in the corner like a pile of silver sticks.

The blue clay walls of the cavern reflected the candlelight back onto the soft, bouncy curls on her head, curls that hid the surgical scars on her scalp. The rapid hair growth, the fading of her bruises and swift healing of her broken leg served as more proof of her Sidhe blood.

He shook out the jump rope in his hands, positioned her to face him, and held her hands while he started them moving to the familiar cadence of the childhood rhyme. “Lady Moon, Lady Moon, turn around. Lady Moon, Lady Moon, touch the ground.”

She moved easily. Her jumps matched his exactly. Her hazel eyes opened, half-covered by the nictitating membrane. The membrane withdrew, but not completely. Her fixed gaze told him she was unaware of his presence. He kept her jumping while he chanted the next verse. “Lady Moon, Lady Moon, do the kicks.”

His braid bounced against his hips and legs while they jumped. It felt good to reenact the simple games of his childhood. He sent his pleasure into his charge and felt it rebound back into him. Soon she would awaken and see him. Soon. Very soon. Was the familiar rhyme helping her remember who she was?

* * * *

Cait laughed with her brother, Kevin. His black braid hung like a raven's wing over his shoulder. He smiled a gap-toothed grin back at her. His two front teeth hadn't grown in yet from last week when he knocked them out playing hurly ball with their cousins. “Lady Moon, Lady Moon, pick up sticks. Lady Moon, Lady Moon, do the splits.”

Her ponytail bounced against the back of her legs while they jumped. Being twin-born, they needed only to look at each other to feel their dru-bond slip into place. The hot summer sun flowed around them like liquid gold.

A whippoorwill sang in the background and matched the rapid pattern of the jump rope chant. “Lady Moon, Lady Moon, do the curlie round. Lady Moon, Lady Moon, get out of town.”

* * * *

Mider tossed the jump rope aside. Sweat soaked his fur-coated back. Perhaps it would have been wiser if he removed his shirt before they started jumping rope. Too late now. It was time to slow things down. He took her into his arms and began to sing the words for an old Sidhe ballad. “An earthly nourris sits and sings, 'Ba lilly wean, little ken I my bairn's father. Far less the land that he steps in.”

Aliah fit perfectly into the curve of his arms. Of equal height with him, her body felt strong and supple in his grip when he spun her around in a circle. With her hazel eyes, broad cheekbones and a full-lipped mouth, she was more, much more of a woman

than he'd ever dared dream to hold in his arms. "He came one night to her bed feet. And a gromly guest was he. Here I am, thy bairn's father though I be not comely. A man I am upon the land and selkie in the sea."

Aliah's eyes flickered. They seemed to focus on Mider's face. His heart lurched in his chest and filled his throat. He spun her in another slow circle and managed to sing the next verse. "He took a purse of gold and lay it upon her knee saying, git to me, my little young son and take thee up thy nourris-fee."

Mider knew he had nothing to offer Aliah that she couldn't get elsewhere. Why would she want to stay hidden here with him when she had the freedom to roam the surface? He tightened his arms around her waist and finished the song. "And ye shall marry a gunner good, and a right fine gunner I'm sure he'll be and the very first shot that he e'er shoots, will kill both my young son and me."

He led Aliah to the bed and sat her down. The heavy curtains framed her slack face and empty gaze. His heart thundered in his ear. Mider turned and fled. He grabbed his cloak, turned the wheel to open the heavy metal door of his home and stepped into the narrow passageway. The door fell back under its own weight and slammed shut behind him. Blue clay walls and ceiling and floor echoed the frantic beat of his footsteps.

* * * *

Thirty-six floors should be high enough for the wind to clear the cobwebs from his brain. The pink glow of the setting sun flared across the sky. Mider's black cloak and long white braid whipped his ankles. He leaned over the crenellated battlement that circled the top of the Tribune Tower and watched the flickering lights of office workers flying to and from work.

The Tribune Tower was one of his favorite perches. He could sit here and feel like he walked the walls of an ancient castle. The flying buttresses and arches were considered too dangerous for commuters.

Traffic lights and electric grids restricted the commuters to well-lit flight lanes below his perch. Mider reached up and gave the carved bats over his head an affectionate pat. He had access to every major building in the city. Sixty-odd miles of abandoned freight tunnels forty feet below Chicago's streets that hardly anyone knew about gave him an advantage over its human inhabitants.

He carefully lowered himself to the twenty-fifth floor and mezzanine level. The wind tore at his arms while his feet scrabbled for a foothold on the crumbling limestone facade. It felt like his arms were going to be ripped from their sockets as he swung in midair until he managed to hook his legs around the stone railing and fall onto the balcony. He pushed himself to his feet, strode to the small paneled door in the wall and unlocked it.

The twin effects of Prohibition and Al Capone had influenced the construction of escape routes in this unique building. On the original blueprints, these stairs were labeled as "file rooms." Old keys and forgotten escape hatches were always useful knowledge. Mider pulled a metal cylinder from the small slot in the wall, opened the cap on its end and pulled out the rolled up slip of paper. Using the old pneumatic message tubes within this building had made it a simple task for Dr. Nour to contact him.

He unrolled the scrap of paper and read “Three men came to my clinic today looking for the woman you have in your care. Meet me at the library garden tomorrow night where we can discuss this.”

The note had yesterday's date on the top. He should have checked the message drop last night.

Mider took a deep breath and willed himself into a reasonable sense of calmness. This was bound to happen sooner or later. Aliah was young and fertile. Her foremothers, her sisters, her brothers, aye, even her husbands, they'd turn over every stone, pursue every clue, every rumor of her whereabouts.

They would not stop until they found her. As to what he would do when they found him with her, he had no idea.. It all depended on how they reacted to him.

If he hurried he still might be able to meet Dr. Nour at the library.

* * * *

Indio paced the perimeter of the living room for the thirty-seventh time. He had the dimensions memorized—fifteen steps for the length and ten for the width. Ibrahim had left a half an hour ago with Emily for the clinic. With any luck they'd return soon with a lead on Cait's whereabouts. Waiting for them to return was pure misery.

Tiny sat cross-legged on the mattress in the far corner. Kevin lay stretched out behind Tiny with his arms propped up behind his head and his eyes closed. Tiny picked up another datachip from the pile on the floor by his feet and slipped it into the side slot of his sofscreen. The screen looked like a child's toy in his hands. “Well, well, well. Look what we got here.”

Kevin rolled over to a sitting position and peered at the images on the screen. “Interesting.”

Indio plopped himself down on the other side of the mattress. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know what Tiny had found.

Tiny held up the sofscreen. “Most of Rachel's files are encrypted and password sealed.” He turned it around so Indio could see the display panel. “But here, in the unsecured file are receipts for two tickets to the Tenth InterWorldCon—one for her, the other ticket for someone named Mider. The convention starts next Tuesday at the Regency Center on the United Planets' Enclave Island.”

“Mider?” Indio scowled and pulled up the notes on his phonenet screen. “That name doesn't appear on this list of her relatives and friends.”

Kevin leaned over and studied Tiny's sofscreen. “Mider could be a nickname. He's a dealer.”

Indio swallowed the rage that threatened to cloud his thoughts. “A drug dealer?”

Kevin shook his head. “A science fiction dealer. They sell stuff at the conventions.”

Tiny nodded, tapped at the screen and changed to another page heading. “Stuff like old books and costumes, trinkets, earrings, swords and chain mail bikinis.”

“Mider's the name of one of the Celtic deities of the underworld,” Kevin muttered.

Indio blinked. “Do you think there's a connection?”

Kevin shrugged. “It's hard to say. He could have picked it out because it sounded neat.”

Indio frowned. "Can we get tickets for this convention?"

Tiny tabbed down and typed in a query. "I might be able to make a deal with them. I have a good rep with the science fiction groups because I own the VR game room at Sanctuary Station."

They waited a few minutes until Tiny looked up and flashed an enormous grin. "We're in. I got us three free passes and a reduced rate for two more guests at a hundred dollars each. In return for the free passes, all I have to do is set up my Solar Wing and Silverhand games at the convention."

Indio took a deep breath, exhaled it, then wandered into the kitchen area. His stomach was growling. He hadn't eaten anything since last night and it was way past breakfast time. Hopefully this Mider guy knew something that might help their search.

* * * *

A half an hour later Ibrahim and Emily returned. Emily stomped into the apartment, yanked the thick folds of the chador's head covering away from her face and tossed it on the floor. "I hate this thing! It makes me feel like I'm choking to death."

Indio opened his clenched hands. "What happened? What did Dr. Nour say?"

Emily tilted her head up. Her slanted eyes looked like dark coffee against her lightly bronzed complexion. "She doesn't trust us. She said I have to bring her proof that you guys are on the level and gave me another appointment for Tuesday morning."

Emily grabbed the skirt of the chador and pulled it up. She yanked it over her head and tossed it on the floor with the headcloth and veil then shook herself like a dog shaking off water after a bath.

Indio smiled. The relieved expression on her face was priceless. And he had to admit, Emily looked a lot more comfortable now in her jeans, t-shirt and sneakers.

Emily scrunched up her face, then shrugged. "She wants proof that you're Cait's husbands."

Tiny stared at her as if she was crazy. "What kind of proof does she want? We're not legally married to Cait. Bigamy's against the law on Earth."

Kevin raised his hand. "How about proof that I'm Cait's brother? I can produce our birth certificates and my pilot's license."

Indio rubbed his chin. "What about Cait's passport chip? That has her photo ID on it. Can we get a copy of that by Monday?"

Kevin snapped his fingers. "I'll call Mom. She'll send it by courier express."

Tiny grinned. "We still have our ticket chips. Those chips prove that all of us, including Cait, arrived here two weeks ago on the same flight from Sanctuary Station."

Indio rubbed his hands together. "And, tonight, when the clinic closes, we have another job to do."

Ibrahim studied Indio's face. "And what job might that be?"

"We're going to follow Dr. Nour. Maybe she'll lead us to Cait."

* * * *

Mider leaned his back against the trunk of a massive olive tree in the middle of the Winter Garden. The top of the tree rose up thirty feet above his head with over fifty feet more to go before it touched the skylight of the tenth floor.

The Beyond Worlds Café behind the Winter Garden had closed ten years ago due to lack of customers. He loved to walk around under the trees late at night; it felt like he'd stepped into an alternate reality. Some nights, he'd stop in the kitchen, cook himself up a meal and eat it under the trees with the Moon and stars shining down upon him through the skylight.

Securing the gardening contract forty years ago gave him keys and complete access to the Harold Washington Library at any time of the day or night. It also allowed him to grow and harvest herbs, fruits and vegetables above ground. Because he gardened late at night after the library closed and conducted all of his business transactions online, the library's Board of Directors had yet to meet him face to face. All they knew about him was his corporate name, Imbolc.

The library's security system was set up to keep books in, not people. They'd forgotten about the basement entrances that led to the old freight tunnels. And as long as he never tried to take any books past the building's perimeter, no one ever knew he was there.

A soft breeze caressed the fur on his face. He peered around the tree and watched the main entrance door open. A young black-haired woman stepped inside. Her hair hung down her back in a loose braid. She wore a scoop-necked white dress with long sleeves. The full skirt swirled around her ankles and white sneakers as she turned and anxiously scanned the thick canopy of trees and plant life. She clutched a large plastic bag in her hand.

Mider's breath stopped in his throat and his suddenly erect penis pushed against the front of his pants. He hadn't recognized her at first because she wasn't wearing her chador. He slipped around the side of olive tree, raised his arm in the air and called her name, "Dr. Nour."

She started, turned around and saw him, then lifted her finger to her lips, hurried to his side and touched his hand. Her tension flowed into him like a sudden storm. "Someone's following me. I didn't really see who it was. I kept catching sight of movement out of the corner of my eye while I walked down the street. We have to get out of here fast."

Whoever followed her would still be looking for that distinctive black chador, not a young woman in a white dress. "Come with me then." He clasped her wrist and pulled her with him to a vine-covered wall at the rear of the garden. He lifted the vines and showed her the service door that led to the empty kitchen area. "We'll use the service elevator. It'll bring us to the sub-basements and the tunnels."

* * * *

Indio ducked into the alley behind the library. The other buildings in the block had their windows barred or bricked up. Webs of razor wire around the rooftops glinted under the moonlight and harsh glow of fluorescent streetlights. Kevin, Tiny and Ibrahim stood with their backs flat up against the red brick wall. A four-foot tall granite owl gazed down upon them from the library's rooftop.

"Are you sure she went inside?" Indio whispered.

"Yes," Tiny whispered back. "I think she spotted us. She ran up the stairs like she was running away from a pack of wolves."

Ibrahim jerked his thumb at the razor wire shining in the windows. "It could be the neighborhood that has her jumpy."

Emily ran around the corner and almost collided with Tiny. "Hurry up! I lost sight of her when she went inside."

They followed Emily back around the corner. Tiny stopped at the bottom of the steps and stared up at the five-story tall arched windows that broke up the solid brick façade. Five more floors loomed above the windows. "This place is huge."

Kevin led the way up the granite steps with Ibrahim at his side. "The Guinness Book of Records lists it as the largest public library in the world."

Emily grinned and skipped up the steps behind them.

Indio grabbed Tiny's elbow and towed him up the steps. "Discuss the architecture later. We've got a job to do."

They stepped into the lobby and walked past the computerized book theft-screening grid. A glass wall showed them a lower level auditorium and the escalator rising up through the second and third floors.

Emily inserted her library card chip into the barred gate. It opened for her but when they tried to enter, the gate slid shut. "Insert library card for admittance," the gate's console chimed.

Tiny tried to push the barred gate open. An alarm started ringing. "Intruder alert! Unauthorized entry!"

Kevin slid the backpack off his shoulders and peered at the jumbled assortment of small electronic tools inside it.

"Hey!" A worried looking adolescent in a rumpled security uniform strode out of a side door. He looked like he was barely past puberty. Acne scars pitted his cheeks. Were they that desperate that they were hiring guards while they were still in high school? Indio grimaced at the thought.

The guard pulled an electro-stun gun from his holster. "Put your hands up in the air where I can see them."

They backed away with their hands raised. Indio would rather face a squad of Space Marines with laser cannons. This snot-nosed kid could shock someone into cardiac arrest if he used a full charge.

Emily skipped over to the guard and tugged on his sleeve. "They're with me."

He stared at her as if she were a hallucination. "Do you have a library card?"

She handed him her computerized ID card. He studied it for a moment, returned it to her, and then reholstered his weapon. "What's in the backpack?"

Kevin went down on his knee again and tilted the open bag so the guard could see inside.

Indio found himself holding his breath. Would the sight of electronic gear alarm the guard?

Emily asked, "What are you looking for? Bombs?"

The guard shook his head. "Books. I'm supposed to check for stolen books."

Indio's hands started to sweat. This was ridiculous. Their quarry was getting farther and farther away. "Can you let us in? We don't have library cards because we arrived here a couple of weeks ago from Sanctuary Station."

Tiny slumped his shoulders and looked disappointed. "Yeah, I've always wanted to see this place. It's in the *Guinness Book of Records*."

The guard gave them a look that said they were crazy for coming down from the Space Station just to look at a library. He held out his hand. "Show me some ID."

They dug out their ID chips and passed them through the barred gate. The guard inserted the chips one at a time in the console and waited while it created library cards for them.

"Here." He passed everything back. "Now you can get in. Check your books out at the console when you leave or the gate won't let you out of the building."

One at a time, they inserted their new cards and walked inside.

"Where are the rest rooms?" Indio asked.

The guard stopped, turned around and pointed at two doors partly obscured by racks of books. "Over there." Then he strolled down the aisle back to his cubicle.

Kevin hurried over to the ladies' room door. He placed his hands on the door, closed his eyes and concentrated.

Emily tugged at Indio's pants leg. "What's he doing?"

Indio whispered. "He's an empath. He's trying to sense Dr. Nour's presence inside the room."

Emily's face brightened. "Does he read tarot cards too?"

Indio groaned and motioned at her to be quiet. She rolled her eyes and stopped asking silly questions.

Kevin turned around with his eyes still closed. "She's not there, she's..."

"Where?" Tiny tapped his shoulder.

Kevin opened his eyes. "She must have gone up. If she went down, we would have seen her on the steps when we came in."

The escalator steps were frozen in place. They ran up to the second floor and paused when Kevin concentrated a second time. He opened his eyes. "Higher."

They passed the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh floors then stopped at the top of the stairs to bend over with their hands on their legs and catch their breath. Indio glared at Kevin. "Aren't there any elevators in this place?"

Kevin shrugged. "How should I know? I've never been here before."

"How much farther?" Tiny asked.

Emily stretched herself out full length on the floor at the top of the stairs and panted. "There's ten floors all together. We took a class trip here when I was in third grade. I don't remember where the elevators are."

"Nice artwork on the second floor." Tiny rubbed the back of his legs, then stretched his arms over his head. "Only three more flights. We can do it."

Halfway up to the ninth floor, Kevin stopped, sank down on the steps and put his head in his hands. "I can't feel her anymore."

Indio exchanged a worried glance with Tiny. "Why not?"

Kevin rubbed his forehead. "Strong emotions leave a residue for me to follow but that fades with distance. I don't know Dr. Nour. I don't have any bonds with her."

Emily plopped herself down beside Kevin and put her hand on his arm. "Can you feel me?"

He smiled. "I feel you very clearly now because you're touching me. You're projecting comfort at me."

Ibrahim touched Kevin's arm then pulled his hand back quickly as if he'd touched a flame. "What about me? What am I projecting?"

Kevin gave him a long, penetrating stare. "Love and concern."

Ibrahim stared at his feet for a moment, stuck his hands in his pockets. "And my esteemed cousin, Dr. Nour, what was she projecting?"

"Fear and her need to escape and hide. Then it stopped."

Indio nodded. "You can't feel her anymore because she's no longer afraid."

Ibrahim studied the steps at the entrance to the Winter Garden area. "Which means..." His voice trailed off.

"...Dr. Nour found a place where she feels safe or she met someone who will protect her." Indio automatically finished off the thought.

Tiny jabbed his thumb upwards. "Well, she darn well didn't come back down this way or we would have noticed her. Since we can't depend on Kevin sensing her fear anymore then we might as well keep going up until we find her or find out where she went."

Indio nodded. It was the only logical solution. If there were another exit, another way down, they'd find it up ahead.

* * * *

The last thing he expected was to have to use the tracking techniques his grandfather had taught him as a child. Indio raised his arm and waved at everyone to join him behind the trunk of a giant olive tree.

"What did you find?" Tiny asked.

Indio gestured at the evenly spaced depressions in the soil that led away towards the back of the garden. "Someone stood here. Another person joined him or her and they went that way."

The trail led them to an empty restaurant. Scuff marks on the dusty floor brought them into the kitchen area with abandoned stoves and refrigerators and back to the rear service elevator.

After they piled into the elevator, everyone looked at Indio. "What floor?"

He pointed to the one button that contained a slight mark in its grime. "The basement, of course."

When they reached the basement, it was a simple enough matter to follow the footsteps in the dust to another flight of stairs going down. And down they went into the sub-basement level, past the furnace to another flight of stairs.

Those stairs ended in a tunnel carved out of blue clay, about fifteen feet wide, with an arched ceiling. There were grooves on the puddled ground and streaks of rusty rail tracks. At one time there may have been light bulbs in the empty sockets that snaked along the top of the arched ceiling.

The tunnel curved around to the right. It was too dark to see very far. Indio turned around and eyed Kevin's knapsack. "Well?"

Kevin shook his head. "I don't bring flashlights or light bulbs. I have a couple of penlights but they're not going to be any use down here."

Tiny unclenched his hands. "We'll use the penlights then. We're not giving up now."

"No," Kevin's sudden denial startled them all. "We're not going in there."

"What's wrong?" Emily tugged at his hand and stared at his face.

Kevin tilted her chin up with his finger. "You've heard of Jack the Ripper, haven't you?"

A chill raced up Indio's spine. It felt like a brujo had just cursed him and all his descendants. "What does an ancient killer have to do with us?"

Kevin dropped his knapsack on the floor, slumped back against the wall and rubbed his hand across his eyes. "Mider's the Celtic name for one of the gods of the underworld. We've lost track of our people. Not all of the Sidhe were good. We had rogue males and females who preyed on others. They fed upon the pain of their victims. Jack the Ripper was one of the evil Sidhe."

The puzzle pieces were slowly shaping into a picture in Indio's mind. "The most dangerous place to meet an enemy is upon his home turf."

Kevin opened his eyes. They were filled with pain and worry. "We dare not follow. If we use flashlights, he'll see us coming a long way off. We don't know our way around. We don't know how extensive this tunnel system is. We need maps."

Tiny snapped his fingers. "Mider will be at this convention in two more days. Maybe we better wait until he's busy there before we search the tunnels."

Ibrahim raised his hand. "The Archives room is on the ninth floor. I saw the sign when we passed it. They should have maps of the tunnel system there."

Indio turned around and studied the dusty footprints on the floor. Kevin was right. The trail had been too easy for them to follow. This entrance could be a trap. The sensible thing to do was obtain more information and come up with a plan of action instead of rushing blindly into danger. But dammit, it hurt. He didn't want to back off now. Not when they were this close to finding Cait.

Chapter Eight

Mider handed Dr. Nour his cloak and night vision goggles. The goggles let her see the infrared light of his hand beam—light that wouldn't trigger the police sensors. His albino eyes were sensitive enough that he didn't need the goggles as much as she did.

Side by side they walked. Dr. Nour's absolute trust in his guidance through the abandoned tunnel system flowed through him. The sweet lines of her face and the gentle grace of her steps filled his mind. His erection pushed against his pants with a painful intensity.

He had no idea what to say to her, so he said nothing. Under normal circumstances, if he wanted to speak alone to a young Sidhe woman, he'd ask his sister to speak to the woman's brother first. But Dr. Nour was human, not Sidhe. Their customs were different. As for Aliah, well, his situation with her wasn't exactly the norm either.

When they arrived at the entrance to his home, she peered at the steel plated door with the wheel lock in its center. "What's this supposed to be? An abandoned bank vault?"

"The tunnels run under the river." He spun the wheel, pulled the door open and gestured at her to enter. "This door is my safety net."

She looked inside. "Is this the only entrance?"

"I have an emergency exit at the other end where my plants grow. You step inside it and push a button like in an elevator. The pod dumps you into the river itself."

Dr. Nour nodded and stepped inside the chamber. "What if I don't know how to swim?"

He pulled the door shut, spun the inner wheel and sealed it. "I have wetsuits, air tanks and floatation devices inside the escape pod."

She removed the goggles and cloak, handed them to him, then went to the four-poster bed. Candlelight flickered on her dark hair while she pulled the gauzy curtain aside and gazed down at the three miniature goats curled up beside Aliah's sleeping form.

The candles burning in their wall scones added a pleasant scent of lavender to the room. Mider gave silent thanks that he washed the goats weekly with herbal shampoo. Otherwise his home would smell like a barn.

He hung the cloak on the hook behind the door and glanced down at his pants and shirt. His erection had subsided during the long walk and his deep concentration on his grandmother's teachings about courtship rituals. His shirt was reasonably clean and unwrinkled. The leather strips that bound the material to his arms and legs were neatly tied.

If he had known Dr. Nour would be here in his home tonight, he would have selected something more presentable than his old black leathers and a well-worn white linen shirt.

Dr. Nour turned around slowly and surveyed the rest of the room. Her gaze stopped at the smaller bed in the far corner of the room. Surprise blazed out at him from her like a sudden flash of sunlight. "You sleep in a separate bed from her."

The flashlight fell from his slack fingers. Surely she didn't think he'd be such an animal as to try and force himself upon Aliah while her mind remained totally unaware.

“Wait, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...” Dr. Nour held her hand out and walked toward him.

He backed away.

She stood there with her hands stretched out. Genuine concern and apology flowed from her anguished gaze. “It’s my fault for assuming you’re just like all the men I’ve known. You’re different. Everything about you is different. Please forgive me.”

He schooled his face into a semblance of serenity and managed a formal bow. “Dr. Nour, you are forgiven. The misunderstanding is already forgotten.”

A blush darkened her cheeks. “Dr. Nour is too formal. Please call me Fatima.”

He swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat, picked up the goggles and flashlight and piled everything on the shelf beside his bed. Did this mean she wanted a closer relationship with him? His hands shook slightly. He turned around.

Her bemused gaze followed the swaying end of his ankle-length braid. He gestured at the two stools beside the small table in the center of the chamber. “Please, take a seat.”

He walked to the shelf behind his bed, selected a pair of long-stemmed glasses and opened the battery-powered refrigerator. “Which do you prefer? Juice? Or wine?”

Fatima coughed. “My religion forbids me to drink alcoholic beverages.”

He selected the orange juice, carried it over to the table and poured it without spilling a drop. A minor miracle on his part, considering how shaky he felt inside.

He seated himself. The delicate scent of her perfume filled his lungs. His erection pulsed. *Goddess above! Such sweet torture to have a woman awake sitting barely two feet away from him and fully aware of him as an adult male.* With the table hiding his lap, she wouldn’t see the rampant evidence of his arousal.

After they had taken a few sips in companionable silence, she pushed her glass aside and laid her slender hands on the table. The pale brown color of her skin complemented her chocolate-cream eyes. “Three men came to my clinic today. They stood outside and spoke with the security guards.”

He inclined his head at her to continue.

“They showed the guards a holimage of my patient.” Fatima’s gaze flickered to the young Sidhe woman sleeping in the bed behind Mider. “Two of the men said they were her friends. The third man claimed to be her brother.”

Mider put his glass of juice down and traced the line of moisture on its side with his finger. He dared not lie. Lying would destroy the fragile trust Fatima placed in him. “The two friends might be her husbands. My culture believes in multiple spouses for a woman. I can see them using the word ‘friends’ to describe their relationship with her rather than ‘husbands’ because bigamy’s against the law in this country.”

“I see.” The pupils in Fatima’s eyes dilated with shocked comprehension. She moistened her lip with the tip of her tongue.

Mider’s erection strained uncomfortably. *How would it feel to have her tongue on his penis? How would it feel to kiss her, to nip the soft curve of that mouth?* He folded his hands and stared at the white fur that covered his skin. This was critical information. He must put aside his personal concerns and concentrate on those things that might help him deal with Aliah’s husbands once he met them. “Describe these men, please.”

“One was as black as coal. He was huge, well over six feet tall, bald-headed and very strong and fierce looking. The other looked like he was of American Indian descent. He was tall and lean and strong also. Half of his face was disfigured by an old burn scar.”

Mider sighed. Aliah had chosen husbands on the basis of strength and maturity instead of youthful beauty. It showed a wealth of common sense on her part. “Go on.”

“The one who said he was her brother didn't look like her. He was tall and lean with dark coppery skin like her other husband and had his black hair cut short in a buzz cut.”

He brushed that concern away with a flick of his wrist. “If her mother has at least two husbands, which is the norm for my culture, then different fathers would cause a disparity in appearance between her and her brother.”

Another blush stained Fatima's face. She lowered her gaze and rubbed her hand across the smooth grain of the table. “The security guards stopped them at the door. Only women are permitted inside my clinic. The next morning, they sent a young girl dressed in a chador to the clinic with the same holoimage. My cousin, Ibrahim, escorted her. She repeated their claims and wanted to know if I knew the whereabouts of their woman.”

“What did you do?”

“I gave her an appointment for Tuesday morning and asked her to bring me some proof.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Why?”

Fatima lifted her head. Her gaze was fierce. It blazed through him. “Your friend Rachel was killed right outside my clinic. That's why armed guards were posted outside to screen all visitors. We don't know if her death was a terrorist attempt against the clinic for allowing a Jewish woman inside.” She twisted her hands together on the table and lowered her voice. “It gets even more complicated when you add in the fact that I'm a member of Miriam's sect.”

“Miriam's sect?”

“Muslim women have been mistreated, more than ever during the last century. Miriam's sect goes back to the time of Mohammed's great-granddaughter. We believe his words about Muslim women were deliberately altered to promote male domination. The original teachings proposed equality between Muslim men and women. And...”

Mider waited. Fatima would continue her explanation when she had gathered her thoughts together.

“...I can't be sure if Rachel's death has a connection to those who are against my sect.”

He laid his hand on the table. “At the same time, you can't be sure if these men who came to the clinic are who they claim to be.”

She reached over the table and took hold of his hand. Fear, her *need* to feel safe, curiosity, desire and caution crashed into him in a sudden turmoil of emotions.

He wanted to take her in his arms and protect her, to kiss away her fears and fan that tiny spark of desire within her into a raging flame. To hold her warm body in his arms and feel her legs open under him for easy entrance. He jerked his hand out of her grasp. “That was a wise decision on your part to ask for proof of their identity.”

“You trust my judgment.” Her surprise rushed into him. She projected her emotions so strongly he didn't have to touch her to feel them.

He studied her face. Had he offended her in some strange fashion? “You’re an educated woman. A physician. Why shouldn’t I trust your judgment?”

Fatima blinked. A slow smile softened the lush contours of her mouth. “I keep forgetting you’re not human.” She leaned forward and propped her elbows on the table. “Tell me more about the Sidhe. How do you court your women?”

Now it was Mider’s turn to blink and reorder his thoughts. His erection felt like it was going to burst from his pants. He moistened his suddenly dry lips with his tongue then began carefully, “I have no sister to help me begin a proper courtship.”

Fatima frowned. She picked up the end of her black braid and twirled it around. He could almost see the gears shifting within her brain while she took his words and sorted them out. “If you have no sister to present your suit, you need to find another female relative to intercede for you?”

He nodded. Her logic was impeccable.

Fatima pointed at Aliah’s sleeping form. “What about her? What would you do if she approaches you?”

Why was she asking these things? Was there a purpose to her questions? Mider sighed. He wasn’t going to find out unless he did his best to give her the right information. “That’s highly unlikely. If she already has two husbands, they have the right to scrutinize me and approve me as a suitable mate before she makes any overtures.”

Fatima raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Why not? Life partners don’t own each other. They share equally in all decisions regarding family unity and stability. It makes no sense to have the sisterline fractured by jealousy and bickering.”

“What about relationships between Sidhe and humans?”

His heart thundered in his ears. Was this an overture to him on her part? Or was he assuming too much? “Humans have their own customs. Many times in the past they have approached us without intermediaries and we have accepted their suits.”

Fatima nodded slowly. “And afterwards...”

He kept his voice calm. “There were regrets and misunderstandings. The women feared to return home with their Sidhe offspring and gave them up to us. We then brought these children to our sisters to raise as children of their sisterlines.”

A smile softened the lines of her distracting and beautiful mouth.

“You find this amusing.”

“Oh no!” She laid her hand upon his again. That spark of desire he sensed in her earlier was stronger. It flickered about him in tantalizing and tentative warmth. “I’m just trying to understand you better.” She pulled her hand away and sat with her head lowered and her fingers knotted in her lap. “I need to think upon this a bit more.”

He didn’t mind waiting. It felt good to watch her and have her there with him. Finally she looked up and met his gaze with complete trust. “Can you take me back on the surface now?”

He dared not stand up. Not yet. Not with his acute arousal so evident in his pants. “I will bring you back by a different route. We will return in the basement of the Chicago Tribune.”

Fatima bent over and opened the bag by her feet. She pulled out two wafer chips and laid them on the table. “I almost forgot. Here are the building plans for the ambassador’s penthouse suite. You’ll be helping one woman and two children escape.”

Mider accepted the chips and tucked them in his belt pouch. "Have you warned them about me? I have no wish to frighten children with my appearance."

Fatima brushed that concern aside with a flick of her fingers. "The science fiction convention is taking place in an adjacent hotel during their escape. I told them you'd be disguised as an alien space warrior."

Mider smiled at her cleverness.

She pulled her chador from the bag. "I must return to the surface before my absence is noticed. The library closed over an hour ago."

He gestured at the adjoining chamber. "You may use that room to garb yourself." This would also give him a few precious moments to grab his cloak and conceal the evidence of his body's eager desire from her.

* * * *

"Spoilsports." Emily shook her fist at the library's entrance. "Why'd they have to throw us out?"

Indio put his hand on her shoulder and steered her back onto the sidewalk. "Because it was closing time."

Tiny folded his sofscreen up and tucked it away in his pants pocket. "I'm surprised they kept it open until midnight. Besides we scanned everything about the tunnel system onto my computer before they kicked us out."

"How'd the building know we were still there anyway?" Emily jammed her hands into her pockets and trudged alone ahead of them.

Kevin fell into step beside Emily. "They have heat and light sensors in the ceilings. The security system goes on automatic after midnight. It won't stop nagging until it senses that everyone has left the premises."

Emily tilted her head up and scowled at him. "Well, it's a stupid system. It doesn't know about the tunnel entrance in the sub-basement."

Indio sighed. He didn't want to think about it right now. Leaving without exploring that tunnel hurt more than he thought it would.

Kevin said. "One thing for sure. We know Dr. Nour's not going back there tonight. The tunnel system has entrances all over the city."

Indio snarled. "There's almost sixty miles of tunnels under these streets. It'll take us forever to search them."

Tiny moved up alongside of Indio and Ibrahim. "At least the library files told us the police installed light sensors in the major tunnels to catch illegal entry."

Ibrahim grinned. "We'll buy infrared goggles and flashlights. That way we won't trigger any alarms. No sense in getting busted for trespassing."

When they turned off onto one of the side streets, Indio took notice of Emily's hunched posture and haunted expression. He tapped her on the shoulder. "We don't have to go to your mom's apartment tonight."

Emily glanced at the flickering lights of the skypaths flowing high above their heads. "It's perfectly safe. We won't have to worry about rich kids swooping down on us. One look at you guys and they'll hunt for weaker prey."

She shook her fist at the skypaths. "Effing cowards, that's what they are. Picking on us just because we're walking and not flying around in fancy rigs like them."

Indio gestured at the lurid stains of fluorescent graffiti decorating every square inch of the concrete building they passed. "What about gangs? We're crossing their turf now."

A wicked grin lit up Emily's face. "Everyone knows how you guys took out the Nasties without blinking an eye. I bet the gangs have declared you off limits."

She shrugged. "Besides, I'd rather get it over with now. Mom's pimp will be too doped up to stop us from grabbing my things. As long as you leave her my welfare allotment chip, she won't give a damn if you take my clothes. It's not fair for you guys to buy me clothes when I have perfectly good ones there."

They walked for another five blocks in silence. The night was quiet. Too quiet for Indio's taste. A feeling of danger lurking around the shadows settled into his bones. He slowed down and studied the street.

A man's outraged shout shattered the silence. "Bitch! Where's my money? Don't tell me you wasted it all on yourself." A woman's frightened scream rose to a climax, then stopped abruptly. Indio and Emily ran side by side in the next alley. He heard Tiny's, Kevin's, and Ibrahim's running footsteps behind him.

A scuttling figure slipped around the corner of the alley ahead of him. A shapeless bundle of clothing lay sprawled beside the garbage bin.

Indio slowed down. The shapeless bundle on the ground was a woman, her skull smashed in by the impact of her fall. He looked up. There was a broken window four stories up with a naked light bulb swaying in the ceiling behind it. Tiny and Kevin ran past him after the fleeing figure.

Ibrahim took hold of Emily's hand and pulled her aside. Indio went down on his knee by the dead woman.

Emily slumped against Ibrahim, buried her face in his side, and moaned. "Mom."

Indio sank back on his heels. Damn it all to hell. She didn't deserve to see her mother die like this.

He froze at the sound of running footsteps approaching them, then relaxed at the sight of Kevin's face at the other end of the alley. Tiny followed at a slower pace. Frustration warped his face into an angry mask. "He got away."

Emily pushed away from Ibrahim's chest. Tears smeared her cheeks. Tiny exchanged a worried look with Kevin. Kevin studied the dead woman's face, and turned to Emily. "Your mother?"

Emily nodded. Hatred turned her eyes to cold, black chips. "Yeah, I'm really screwed now. Her pimp will probably show up at Juvie hall and claim temporary custody because he's listed on the lease as her boyfriend. He'll expect me to take her place hustling for him."

Kevin went to Emily, tilted her head up and stared into her eyes. "You're old enough to reject the pimp's claim. Especially if he has a criminal record, which I'm sure he does. You have the legal right to accept adoption by any other couple."

Emily scrubbed the tears from her face and shook her head. "Who's gonna want me? I'm fourteen. I'm too old to be adopted."

Kevin reached for Ibrahim's hand and pulled him close. "You're not too old for me and Ibrahim to adopt."

Comprehension and wonder filled Ibrahim's face. He tightened his grip on Kevin's hand. His voice came out in a husky whisper. "Will this be a real marriage or a marriage of convenience?"

Kevin gave him a gentle smile. "Whichever way you want it, I also want."

Ibrahim's radiant face told them his answer. He cleared his throat. "I accept."

Kevin turned to Emily. "It's your choice now. What do you say?"

Emily stood real straight and managed a shaky smile. "I'd be honored to have you adopt me."

Indio put his misgivings aside and pulled out his sofscreen. No matter how uncomfortable he felt with Kevin's idea, this was neither the time nor place to argue about it. "Now that we settled that. I have to contact the police."

* * * *

Indio leaned back on the wooden bench and stretched his legs out. It was four in the morning. His left arm and leg ached. After having them crushed and rebuilt fifteen years ago, they always ached whenever he overexerted himself.

The social worker stepped forward. A tall, elegant black woman with dreadlocked hair, she kept her face stern while she extracted a datachip from her sofscreen. "My name is Ms. Burrows. I believe your petition might have a chance with the judge. The only other available space we have for Emily is in the juvenile detention unit and she has no criminal record."

She walked up to the massive doors of the courtroom and presented her ID for scanning. The doors opened.

Kevin and Ibrahim stood up and positioned themselves on either side of Emily. She accepted their outstretched hands and walked proudly into the courtroom with them. Indio exchanged a weary smile with Tiny, rose to his feet and they followed the others into the courtroom. The bailiff led them right up to the judge's desk.

The judge was a thin white man with jaded eyes that had seen too many senseless examples of man's inhumanity to man in his lifetime. He rapped his mallet on the imposing desk and called the court into session.

Ms. Burrows held up her datachip and inserted into the slot on the judge's desk.

He studied the information that flickered past on his sofscreen, then leaned forward and peered at Emily with a puzzled expression on his face. "It says here that you have Down's syndrome."

Emily's shocked indignation made her voice sizzle. "Who told Welfare I'm a retard?"

The judge tapped his sofscreen. "Your mother. That's what she put on your welfare application."

Indio rolled his eyes. Great. Just great. Throw a case of welfare fraud into the picture.

Emily pulled out her sofscreen, handed it to the judge and held up her arm. "Here. Look at my grades. Take a DNA test. It'll prove to you that I'm not a retard."

The judge looked at Kevin and Ibrahim holding hands with each other behind Emily and cleared his throat. "The objection filed by the Child Services has been withdrawn. The possibility that you were potential child molesters has been ruled out. Mr. Ibrahim Nour's foster care records from ten years ago list his sexual orientation."

Ibrahim lowered his gaze and stared at the floor. Kevin tightened his fingers around Ibrahim's hand.

The judge studied Indio and Tiny. He glanced lower. They weren't holding hands. "Who are you and why are you here?"

Indio coughed. "We're Kevin's brothers-in-law."

"I have three sisters." Kevin said quickly.

Indio stared straight ahead and maintained his poker face. Kevin's ambiguous statement explained their relationship to him while neatly avoiding the exact details of which sister was their wife.

"You're not petitioning the court to adopt this minor child?"

"No, sir." Tiny stared straight ahead and snapped out his response as if he were standing in line in front of a drill sergeant.

The judge jabbed his thumb at the door behind them. "Go wait in the lobby. You have no business in here. We'll conduct the rest of this hearing without your presence."

As they left the room, Indio heard Kevin say. "I don't want any welfare or food stamps for her. I'm employed and my family has an excellent medical insurance plan."

Chapter Nine

Had he answered all of Fatima's questions properly? Mider sat on the edge of his bed and yanked off his boots. A single candle flickered on the table. Being an albino had its advantages. His eyes were so sensitive to light that one candle made the chamber look as bright as day for him. He pulled his shirt off and tossed it aside. Tomorrow he'd wear his gray spidersilk pants and shirt just in case he saw Fatima again.

As for Aliah, she'd responded with rapid eye movements and abrupt shifts of her hands and feet the last time he'd read a book of Shakespearean sonnets to her. Hopefully, this meant she'd regain normal consciousness and awareness of her surroundings. What would it be like when she awakened? Would she look upon him, see him as Sidhe and open her heart to him?

Mider sat back, unbuttoned his pants and released the hard, tumescent length of his penis. He circled the shaft with his hand. His foreskin slid back and a single white bead of his seed glistened at the engorged tip.

Would she smile and crook her finger to invite him into bed with her? Would she let him feel her pleasure when he kissed her sweet mouth, then suckled her nipples into swollen arousal? The slow slip and slide of his hand up and down his erection matched the gasps coming from his open mouth. Would she part her legs, allow him to plunge inside her warmth and feel her orgasm rippling through him while he released his seed deep inside her womb?

The curtain around Aliah's bed moved and his heart skipped a beat. *Oh goddess! She's awake.* He shoved his penis inside his pants and hurriedly rebuttoned them.

"Baaaa." Desiree popped her black head between the folds of the curtain then jumped to the floor. Only half-grown with white markings on her legs and chest, the little minx was hungry again. Mider reached for the baby bottle tucked in the back corner of his bed and held it up. She trotted across the room to him, braced her tiny hooves in the faded carpet and started drinking. Her belly grew hard and round and her tail spun as the level of milk in the bottle quickly decreased.

"Where am I?"

Mider dropped the bottle. It fell to the floor and rolled against his discarded boots. Desiree chased it and nudged it with her nose.

Jezabel and Nemeniah jumped down to the floor from the curtained bed. Aliah's fingers grasped the edge of the curtain while he sat unmoving. She pulled the curtain aside, hesitantly lowered her feet to the carpet, then reached up and touched her scalp. "Who cut my hair?"

Her wide-eyed gaze, as dark as night yet filled with light like the moon, focused on his face. "Who are you?"

The fur on his back rose under her intent stare. "My name is Mider." He picked up his shirt and fumbled with it. "What is your name?"

Her surprise flowed into him then stopped abruptly as if she'd slammed a wall down between them. Who had taught her such superb control over her emotional output?

Aliah stood, picked up the lit candle from the nightstand beside the bed and walked around the room. Mider held his breath. What was she thinking? Did his home meet her approval?

She peered at the boxes of spidersilk in the corner, the discarded exoskeleton brace for her leg, the dismantled spinning wheel in the opposite corner and haphazard collection of books beside his cot. Nothing missed her scrutiny.

Her curious gaze returned to Mider's face. His heart stuttered in his chest. She touched the side of her head and winced.

Goddess above! Mider glanced away, took a deep breath and willed his mind into silence. He shouldn't be broadcasting his emotions at a Sidhe woman like an unruly child. No wonder she winced.

"My name is Cait. Am I a prisoner?"

Mider shoved the panic aside that welled up at this question. "You are not a prisoner." He released his grip on his shirt and held out his empty hands. "You were gravely injured. I kept you here until you healed."

"Where am I? How did I get here? Who injured me?"

He pointed at the blue clay ceiling. "We're in the abandoned freight tunnel system forty feet below the streets of Chicago. This is my home."

She studied the ceiling, then sat down on the edge of the bed. He felt nothing. Her emotional control was excellent.

Aliah—no, Cait. Her name is Cait. From now on he must think of her as Cait, not Aliah. The more information he gave Cait the better it would be for both of them. Mider kept his voice neutral. "There was a terrorist attack at the spaceport. You were injured and knocked unconscious by falling debris. My friend Rachel found you and brought you to me."

Jezabel, Desiree, and Nemeniah bleated and butted their heads against the closed door on the opposite side of the chamber. Mider rose to his feet with the wadded up shirt clutched to his chest. He didn't have to worry about her seeing his erection. That had disappeared under the sudden shock of knowing she was awake and aware of him.

Her eyes followed every move he made as if he might be dangerous. *Oh goddess. Help me reassure Cait that I mean her no harm.* He gestured at the goats. "They're hungry. There's a small garden in the adjacent chamber."

Cait managed an abrupt nod. He inched past her, opened the heavy oak door and let the goats scamper into the adjoining room.

A surreptitious look over his shoulder showed him that Cait had changed her position. She stood by the bedpost now. Mider turned around completely. Her intent gaze studied his face, then moved down and lingered at the middle of his chest where his fur was thicker and curlier. "Where is Rachel?"

Mider pushed the door closed and swallowed the sudden tightness in his throat. Feeling very conscious of his state of partial nudity under her continued scrutiny, he held up his shirt. "May I?"

Cait averted her eyes from his chest and nodded. A sudden flush stained her cheeks.

The prosaic actions of pulling the shirt over his head, rearranging his braid and tucking the shirt inside his pants gave him a few moments to control the turmoil inside

him. There was no graceful way to explain Rachel's demise. He blurted the truth out like a callow child. "Rachel's not here. She's dead."

Cait stiffened. Her cold stare sliced through him like a dagger of ice. "How did this happen?"

He pointed at the padded chairs by the table. "It's a complex story. Please, sit down and I'll try to explain it better."

* * * *

Emily skipped along ahead of Indio, Tiny and Kevin. Kevin held hands with Ibrahim. In Kevin's hand was a pillowcase stuffed with the few articles of clothing they'd managed to retrieve from her mother's apartment.

Emily jumped up and kicked a discarded soda can aside. The distant rumble of garbage trucks making their morning rounds created an interesting counterpoint to her laughter.

Indio shook his head. Emily's actions gave her the appearance of an amazingly adaptable and resilient child. Last night her mother had died. Now she was skipping along like she didn't have a care in the world. It could also be denial. They'd have to keep an eye on her for delayed reactions of grief and guilt.

The sun crept up over the horizon. Ribbons of red and green lights that marked the commuter flying lanes between the skyscrapers faded against the dawning sky. Pigeons rose with a sudden rush of wings and coos and circled the area looking for food.

Indio turned to Kevin. "I thought you had an understanding with my sister."

Kevin glanced at Tiny and back at Indio. "My understanding with Julisa is that we're taking our time to see what happens between us."

Kevin made it all sound so reasonable. Indio gave Tiny a pleading look to help him out on this. This was his sister they were discussing, not some strange woman Kevin had dated a few times. What was he supposed to tell Julisa? Your boyfriend just entered into a marriage of convenience with another man in order to adopt a young girl. Maybe you need to reconsider your relationship with him.

Tiny grinned and pointed at Ibrahim and Emily. "Isn't this arrangement going to complicate things a bit between you and her?"

Kevin's reaction was another oblique glance. "Which arrangement? My arrangement with Ibrahim or Emily?"

"Both," Indio said.

Kevin shrugged. "Julisa already knows my people are bisexual. I will wait and see what develops between me and Ibrahim. And Emily, well..."

The rising sun seemed to blaze brighter behind Kevin's head. He opened his arms as if he wanted to embrace the entire city, then dropped them to his side with a slap. Joy filled his face. "A changeling child was always a welcome addition to our sisterlines."

Indio wished Cait were here right now to shake some sense into her brother. Why was he talking in riddles?

Kevin rubbed his hand across his hair. "It's rather complicated. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Indio jerked his thumb Ibrahim and Emily. "Now's as good a time as any."

Kevin spread his hands apart. He included Tiny in his look. "Both of you are part of my family now. As family, you need to know about our past. I'm not saying my

foremothers were right. Some of the things we used to do were cruel and hurtful to humans.”

Tiny crossed his arms. “The past is past. What matters to me is what's happening right now.”

Indio snorted. “Some of my ancestors were Aztecs. I don't walk around and boast about the fact that they practiced human sacrifice on a regular basis.”

Kevin nodded his head in abrupt acknowledgement of that fact. “After my people came to Earth, many died. We became inbred. If a man's sister had a stillborn or sickly child, she might sicken and die from grief over the death of her child. Since his first responsibility was to his sister, her brother would go out among the humans and trade her child for a healthy one. Changeling children brought new hope and a fresh bloodlines into the sisterline.”

Tiny rubbed his chin. “I read folktales about that. Humans feared and hated the fair folk because they did this switching of children.”

Kevin's face grew dark and somber. “Like I said. It was a cruel and senseless thing to do. The last time it happened in my sisterline was over a thousand years ago.”

A brilliant smile brightened his face again. “With Emily, I have a changeling child to give Cait without any resentment from humans. It's legal. Cait will be so pleased with me and...”

“Goddess. Oh shit!” He reached out and grabbed Indio's and Tiny's arms. “Cait's alive. She's aware again. I can feel my bond with her. It's as if I had a dark place inside of me and now it's all lit up again.”

A shiver raced up Indio's spine.

“You can sense it too, can't you?” Kevin whispered. His fingers dug into Indio's arm. “You have a dru-bond with her. You should be able to feel it too.”

Indio exhaled a very shaky breath. “A couple of minutes ago, I wanted to turn around and tell Cait to shake some sense into you.”

Tiny's dark face changed to an odd shade of greenish black. He held up his hands. They were shaking. He stared up and down the street. “I almost said something to her too. It felt like she was walking right beside me. Why can't we sense exactly where she is?”

Kevin pointed to his own chest. “The dru-bond is a part of me, like my heart. There's no direction for that except right here inside of me. All I know is what I feel inside of me. I know she's alive.”

Tiny smiled. His face returned to its natural color. “Maybe she was unconscious all this time and that's why we couldn't feel her.”

A lopsided grin twisted Kevin's mouth. He turned to Tiny. “Why didn't I think of that?”

* * * *

Mider heard his heart thundering in his ears while he finished his explanation. “One man claims to be your brother. I believe the other two men are your husbands.”

Cait's eyes widened with shock. She shook her head. “That's impossible.”

She pushed herself to her feet and stalked over to the bed. Anger flared around her in an almost visible aura. “I can accept the fact that I have some amnesia from my head injury.”

She bent over, grabbed her backpack and sneaks from under the bed, sat on the floor and put them on. "I don't see how I could have obtained two husbands during the last four months. I may be impulsive, but I'm not crazy. I can't stay here. The last thing I remember I was at Duke University getting ready for Spring Break. Now, I'm under the streets of Chicago recovering from a head injury and broken leg. How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

Mider shook his head. "You know I can't lie. You'd feel it if I lied."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "Just get me out of here. Let me go. That's all I want from you right now."

Under Sidhe law, if he had taken her into his home without her consent, she had every right to order the Wild Hunt upon him. A hunt with only one ending. He'd be ripped limb from limb and his name purged from the sisterlines forever. Mider kept his voice calm and reassuring. "Why not wait here until Tuesday when Dr. Nour returns with more information for us?"

Cait's gaze darted wildly around like an animal caught in a trap. "I want to leave."

He held his empty hands out and bowed to her. "As you wish."

She rose to her feet, picked up her backpack from the floor, slung it over her shoulder and waited.

He went to his cot and pulled on his boots. His hands shook slightly but that was to be expected. Nothing was happening the way he'd anticipated. He selected two pairs of night vision goggles from the shelf beside his cot and tossed a pair to her. "I'll bring you to the nearest exit to the surface. It's at the Four Deuces."

Cait's fingers tightened around the goggles. She stared at him. "The Four Deuces? Is that the nightclub where..."

He unlocked the front door of his chamber. "Yes, it used to be Al Capone's nightclub. Of course, the place is in ruins now. It's perfectly safe for us to return to the surface at that location."

Mider strode through the narrow blue clay tunnels alone, yet not alone. Aware of the young woman beside him, yet not daring to touch her or even dream of what might have been. She'd believed he wanted to imprison her here with him. The thought shuddered through him like a curse and he cast it aside. He couldn't do that. It was against everything he believed.

Hope blossomed in his heart when she stood on the dirt floor at the bottom of the cellar steps. Her slim fingers curled around the rusty metal handrail. She pulled her goggles off and gazed at him. The pale streaks of dawn coming in from the cracked floorboards above them illuminated her wide, staring eyes.

He pulled off his goggles and pointed at the wrench hanging on the wall above the remains of the sewer pipes going into the dirt floor. "If you change your mind, use the wrench to hit the pipe in this sequence. Three long, three short and three long, and I will come for you. Don't venture into the tunnels alone. They are dangerous and easy to confuse with their twists and turns."

A swift smile softened the lush curve of her mouth. "A true labyrinth. I will remember your warning." Then she turned and climbed up the steps into the morning light.

* * * *

It felt like she was walking in her sleep. The boarded up windows, the cobwebs draped over battered tables, the tarnished mirrors behind the disintegrating bar felt unreal, just like a dream to Cait.

The front door was boarded up. No use in trying to leave that way. She went into the abandoned kitchen. Old cast iron grills and stoves gaped at her while she walked to the back door.

She put her hand on the doorknob, turned it and pushed. Stuck to the frame by years of grime and dust, it resisted her efforts at first, then finally creaked open.

She stepped out onto a grimy pavement and studied the narrow alley. A stinking garbage dumpster painted an ugly shade of green took up most of the room at the other end. There was a narrow gap between the front of the dumpster and the brick wall of the adjacent building where she could squeeze by. Pigeons flapped noisily into the upper levels of the building when she moved into the alley.

The thin sound of a baby's wail filled the air. She stopped. The rumbling roar of a large vehicle shook the ground. She ducked back and peeped around the corner of the trash container. A bald-headed white man with tattoos covering his arms and scalp climbed down from the cabin of the garbage truck.

Her first thought was to shout at him about the baby, but it wasn't necessary. The tattooed stranger climbed up the side of the trash container with an ease of long familiarity and threw the lid back against the brick wall with a clang. He looked down. "What the hell?" Placed his hands on the edge of the container and reached inside.

Cait couldn't stop herself. She stepped out from the shadows and stood on the ground below twisting her hands together.

The stranger stood with a bundle in his hands and stared back at her with total amazement upon his face. "Cait O'Keefe! Where did you come from? They've been looking all over the city for you."

She backed away. "Who are you? Do I know you?"

He tucked the tiny bundle against his chest. "My name is Jesse. You don't know me but they gave me a holocube with your image and I've been helping them look for you." He reached into his pocket and tossed the glittering cube to her.

She caught it and peered at the image shimmering within it. Yes. That was her face. She didn't want to think about the two men standing beside her in the image. Not yet. So she changed the subject "Was that a baby you just found in the trash bin?"

Jesse grinned and held the bundle out. "Yes I did."

* * * *

Cait rocked the baby in her arms and stared out the window while Jesse drove the garbage truck up another street on his route. This baby felt more real to her than the city around her. She unwrapped the thin blanket and examined the child. It was a boy. Judging by his swarthy skin and dark hair, he was of mixed racial heritage but that wasn't an uncommon thing nowadays. It didn't explain his abandonment.

She cleared her throat. Jesse turned his head and waited for her to speak. "These men who are looking for me. Did they explain their relationship to me?"

Jesse glanced at her shorn scalp, then returned his attention to driving his vehicle. He shook his head. "You must have gotten hit pretty bad not to remember them."

She folded the blanket back over the baby and let him hold onto her finger. He had a nice strong grip already. "I suppose."

Jesse gave her another sideways glance. "One of them's your brother, Kevin. You haven't forgotten your brother, have you?"

"I remember my brother."

Jesse pulled the truck to the curb and parked. He turned sideways and studied Cait's face. "The other two guys are Indio and Tiny. They didn't exactly say so but I got the impression that they're, um, your husbands."

She sank back against her seat and gazed out the window again at nothing in particular.

Jesse gave her a reassuring pat on her knee. "It won't be long now. I'm not allowed to deviate from my route or use the truck's phone for personal calls. Wait here a few minutes while I hop out and snag one of the public vidphones around the corner to call them. They're bunked down in Ibrahim's apartment about five blocks away from here."

* * * *

Sitting with the baby in her lap, waiting for Jesse to return, Cait found herself having second and third thoughts. Why should she trust this stranger? He admitted it himself that he'd never met her before today.

Ground traffic lumbered by the garbage truck. They were mostly heavy-duty industrial models with a few flimsy electric passenger vehicles. Warehouses loomed over the street on both sides, turning it into a concrete and brick canyon. A few pedestrians hurried along cracked sidewalks. An elevated train rumbled by two stories up from the street.

Ten stories higher were busy commuter skyways filled with office workers wearing single flyer harnesses. Yet another ten stories higher were the flight lanes for helicabs and hoverlimos.

All this activity and no one noticed her. Cait rubbed at the dull ache that had settled in above her left eye. No matter how she tried to put the pieces together, they just wouldn't fit. If those two men with Kevin were her husbands, how had they managed to lose her?

Mider was a Sidhe from another sisterline, living below the streets of Chicago. One of the furred kind. The Sidhe had scattered centuries ago and lost touch with one another. Interbreeding had always been a danger. The furred ones were the most fertile of all the Sidhe. She should know. Her truefather, Nathaniel, was furred. Except his fur was brown because he wasn't an albino like Mider.

What had she done when confronted with another Sidhe from one of the scattered sisterlines? Instead of staying with Mider and finding out about his sisterline, she ran away like a scared fool. Had her head injury knocked every vestige of curiosity out of her skull?

She should be excited over the possibilities. Even if she found out that Mider wouldn't be a suitable husband for her, her sisters and cousins deserved the opportunity to meet him.

Whoever these guys, Indio and Tiny were, they could wait. She'd sort that issue out later. Solving the mystery of Mider's solitary existence under the streets of Chicago

was more important. Besides which, finding out about Mider gave her some breathing room. Maybe she'd remember Tiny and Indio if she had a little more time and then wouldn't feel so frightened at the thought of meeting them face to face.

* * * *

Indio leaned against the door and peered inside the empty truck. Empty except for the baby wrapped in a grimy blanket on the seat.

Jesse paced up and down the sidewalk. His face was flushed. "I'm not lying. I swear it. She was here. Right here with me. I don't know why she decided not to wait for us."

Ibrahim and Emily stood on the curb, holding hands with identically confused expressions on their faces.

Indio leaned into the truck for a closer look. He pulled out a few strands of hair from the rough fabric back of the passenger seat. They were short strands, barely long enough to curl around his finger. *Why were they so short? Had someone cut her hair?* Copper, blond, black and brown, the separate hairs seemed to glow in the sunlight.

He turned around. "She was here, all right. This is her hair."

"What are you going to do with the baby?" Kevin asked.

Jesse gave a guilty start and hunched his shoulders. He jammed his hands in his pockets and stared down at the pavement. "My wife's sterile. This baby will be our fifth child now if you catch my drift."

Indio rubbed at the burn scar on his cheek. He didn't care if Jesse was breaking the law by claiming unwanted babies as his. All he cared was that the babies had a good home instead of winding up in foster care.

Emily gave him a wary stare. Ibrahim tucked his thumbs in his belt, rolled his eyes heavenwards and murmured. "As Allah wills."

Kevin and Tiny exchanged long, assessing stares. Then they shrugged.

Indio turned to Jesse. "What baby? I don't see any baby, do you?"

Chapter Ten

Cait slung her backpack on her shoulder and hurried down Wabash Street with the wind nipping at her heels. The human predators who normally prowled the streets under the cover of night had slipped away from the harsh glare of the rising sun into their hiding places. Morning commuters flew high above on the skyways, oblivious to her presence on the grimy streets below them.

Her stomach growled. The blank eyes of boarded up windows watched her step carefully around the fragments of broken beer bottles.

A newsprinter beside the escalator for the maglev train system flashed a series of headlines. She did a double take. "What the hell..." She went to the stand, hit stop then scroll back and read the headline that had caught her attention. "Selkieskins found on asteroid."

She snagged a handful of credit chips from her jeans pocket and deposited a five-credit chip in the reader slot. Although he'd had the opportunity, Mider hadn't robbed her. A printout slid into her outstretched hand and she hurried down the street to skim the words.

The article was brief. There were no names listed. Apparently the selkieskins were bioengineered symbiotes found on an asteroid three months ago. The miners were using them as spacesuits. The spacesuit manufacturing consortium had obtained an injunction against any further usage of these symbiotes until after the hearing.

Cait shoved the flimsy mylar sheet into her pocket and continued walking. The discovery of the selkieskins had happened during the last three months. This was so frustrating. Would she ever recover those missing months in her memory? Should she contact her parents and ask them to send someone to pick her up?

No. Not yet. Not until she had something more substantial than her word that she'd found a strange Sidhe male. Her family wasn't the last of the Sidhe. She must find Mider and find out what happened to his sisterline. There had to be others. He hadn't just materialized out of the air. Where were his foremothers, his sisters and brothers? How long had he been living under the streets of Chicago?

The tantalizing aroma of coffee and fresh baked bread pulled her into another shop along the street. It didn't take long—only a minute or two to purchase a cup and bag of sweet rolls and continue down the street.

By the time she reached 2222 Wabash, she licked the crumbs from her fingers and sighed. Three rolls and a single coffee weren't enough to satisfy her hunger. She should have bought more.

Too late now; she had already arrived at her destination, the old Four Deuces nightclub. Retracing her steps to the food shop just to return here would be a waste of time and effort. Boarded up windows and doors blocked entry at the front of the building. A brief empathic probe told her someone was inside. Could it be Mider?

The distant clang of a garbage can lid echoed from the next street. Cait glanced over her shoulder. Her street was devoid of pedestrians at the present time. She shifted the knapsack on her shoulder to a more comfortable position, strode into the shadowed alley entrance, then squeezed past the dumpster. The battered rear door of the Four

Deuces club awaited her at the end of the narrow street. She grabbed the rusty doorknob. It moved easily under her fingers.

Dust motes swirled in the narrow beams of sunlight that filtered past the cracks in the boarded up windows. Old grease caked the wooden floorboards of the abandoned kitchen area. A rat scuttled past and squeezed into a slit in the wall behind one of the huge stoves. She ignored it.

The worn soles of her sneaks gave her the advantage of a quiet approach. She eased herself into the next room. The floorboards were better quality here and gleamed with the shine of old wax under their coating of dust. She turned and stopped. Mider sat on the floor with his arms clasped around his knees and his back propped against the raised wall of the stage. His eyes were closed. With his white hair and fur, he looked like an old man. No—one glance at the corded muscles of his arms and legs under the black leather of his clothes broke that illusion. He had the body of a young man, not an old one.

What was she going to say to him? How should she begin? Where were his people? Why was he alone?

She shook her head. Was he a mabgli? Was he one of the rogue Sidhe who savored the power of drinking in the fear and horror of his victims while he drained their lifeblood away like a vampire? No, he wasn't. A mabgli wouldn't have let her go when she wanted to leave.

Should she tell him her sisterline had been isolated for so long that they hadn't encountered any other Sidhe in the last five hundred years? *No. Her first priority would be to learn about him and his sisterline. Only then would it be safe to let him know the location of her sisterline.* She inched closer. The floor creaked under her foot. Mider's body jerked at the sound and his eyes flew open.

She held out her hands. "It's just me."

He gaped at her. Astonishment then joyous relief slammed into her in a tumbling wave, then stopped when he pulled his emotions back inside himself. He placed his hands on the floor, tucked his feet under himself and stood.

A scant meter of space separated them. "I was confused and frightened." Cait mumbled in a nervous rush. "You took care of me and I ran away. I realized my mistake and decided to come back and apologize and..." Her stomach growled again.

He blinked and looked down at her stomach.

A soft chuckle bubbled past the lump in Cait's throat. "I'm hungry."

Joy glowed within Mider's amused gaze. "I am remiss in my duties." He extended his arm with fluid grace. "This way, please. Within the hour, you shall be fed."

She placed her hand upon his arm and allowed him lead her into the basement and the tunnels.

* * * *

Cait toyed with the last piece of cheese on her plate. "How do you get your food down here?"

Mider untied a black pouch from his belt and spilled a handful of gold and silver coins on the table. "Rachel used to go to pawn shops, redeem them, then buy fresh food for me when I needed it. Dr. Nour is my go-between now." He smothered a yawn behind his hand. The inner membrane slid over his eyes and changed their pink color to pale gold.

A smile tugged at the corner of Cait's mouth. Her brother Kevin would often forget about hiding the extra membrane in his eyes when he was tired too. "How long have you been awake?"

Mider blinked. The membrane slid back and exposed his eyes again. "Twenty-six hours. I've been awake for almost twenty-six hours."

She stood and extended her hand. "You're dead on your feet."

A yearning desire flared when he gazed at her hand, then muted into a hum of pleasure when he accepted her hand and allowed her to lead him to the small bed along the side. Lavender scented candles glowed softly on the bookshelf above the bed. He seated himself with a weary sigh.

Cait went to her knees and started pulling off his boots.

Mider put his hand out as if he wanted to stop her, then pulled his hand back. "Why?" he asked.

She put the boots aside, tilted her head, and flashed him a reassuring smile. "Why am I taking your boots off?"

He shook his head. "I am one of the furred ones. Why do you accept me so easily?"

Her heart lurched to a stop. "Your sisterline rejects the furred ones?"

He nodded, sagged against the wall and closed his eyes. A combination of misery, desolation, and loneliness flowed into her then vanished abruptly.

Who had taught him that? Males were notoriously sloppy when it came to controlling their emotional output. "My true father is furred." Cait rose to her feet. "His is brown."

Mider's eyes flew open again. They were dark red pits within the white fur of his face.

She jumped back from the sudden hope burning in his gaze. Her face felt like it was on fire. The furred Sidhe were the most fertile males in the sisterlines. Every Sidhe knew that. Thousands of years ago, the furred ones enjoyed the honor of being the Wild Man or Brown Man at human fertility rites. Over the centuries that awe changed into fear of the Sidhe as shapechangers and werewolf.

There was a soft rustle of fabric. Mider stretched himself out on his bed and closed his eyes again. "I am weary, weary beyond words. We will talk of this later."

Cait exhaled her pent up breath. He was too tired to do anything to her now. She was safe. A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth again. Besides which, what was she afraid of? He had no intention of harming her or of forcing himself upon her. He desired her. That much she knew already by his physical reactions and emotional output during the past hour. At the same time, he kept his distance and refused to act upon his body's lust. He adhered to the Sidhe cultural constraint of waiting for the woman to make the first move.

The bed where she'd been sleeping loomed in the middle of the room. Runic inscriptions and plants decorated the sturdy wooden frame. Sheathed stems of grass twined up from flowery clusters cut into the bed's feet. Oak leaves topped the high posts and thick embroidered curtains fell gracefully to the faded carpet.

She lifted a corner of the heavy fabric and studied images of Sidhe men and women standing on a beach. Iridescent mounds lay by their feet. Other men and women chased each other through the waves. They were covered from head to toe with the same

iridescent material as those mounds on the beach. Did Mider's sisterline still have selkieskins? Her sisterline had lost their selkieskins over two thousand years ago along with many other Sidhe artifacts.

* * * *

Although she felt guilty snooping through his possessions while he slept, Cait couldn't stop herself. This might be the only chance she had to find out about Mider and his sisterline.

She seated herself cross-legged on the floor in front of a large cedar chest and lifted the top. The hinges protested with a loud creak. She stopped, hunched her shoulders, and risked a peek around the corner of the bed. A sigh of relief escaped her parted lips at the sight of him sprawled out in a deep sleep on his cot.

She reached into the chest and held up a rocking horse with wings and golden horn spiraling up from its forehead. The paint around the six-inch tall toy was faded and worn. How many years ago had this toy been carved?

Tucked in the corner behind the bed was a harpsichord in mint condition. A smaller cedar chest under the bed held a collection of oil painted portraits and a locked diary. Whose diary was it? Was it the diary of the woman whose clothes filled yet another chest?

This underground apartment would have taken a good number of years to dig out, especially if it was done by hand. The abandoned freight tunnels were only six feet in diameter with an antiquated lighting system and trolley track.

From what she remembered of her history lessons about Chicago, the actual sewer system was located a hundred feet below these tunnels. Did he carve out this dwelling alone? Or had there been other Sidhe living here in the last century? If so, where were they?

The goats were litter-trained. She'd found that out in the garden chamber. They followed her while she explored the series of rooms, butting their heads against her legs and bleating shamelessly for caresses. Silver nametags dangled from their collars.

Twenty-five years ago, there had been a huge uproar because of the military monopoly over these goats with the spider gene enhancement that enabled them to produce spidersilk milk. The Anti-Fur league had raided the military compounds and "liberated" an entire herd. These might be descendents of those liberated goats. Had Mider participated in that raid?

She found no sign of a family burial plot in the back chambers. Only a milking machine for Jezebel hooked up to a high-speed jet sprayer and a bicycle-powered spinning wheel.

The jet sprayer made perfect sense. Spiders, when they spun their webs, squirted out a liquid that solidified when it hit the air. The jet sprayer duplicated that effect with the goat's milk and created the spidersilk threads for Mider's fabrics.

His garden was meticulously cared for with battery-powered ultraviolet lights in the ceiling. Everything that required electricity was battery-powered, a sensible precaution on his part. It guaranteed no investigation by the utility companies for theft of services.

His bathing facilities weren't hampered by that concern. He had a direct hook up to the water main for a complete shower, toilet and bath system. Probably because there were so many larger leaks in the main pipes his usage didn't even rate a second glance.

The washing machine in the last cavern was an ancient hand-cranked wringer model. Sitting beside it was the latest microwave-flash-dryer model for fabrics.

She leaned her cheek against the carved wooden post of the larger bed—the bed Mider had left empty for her use. It wouldn't hurt for her to take a short nap too. That way she'd have her wits about her when he woke up.

She scarcely had time to stretch herself out on the bed when the three tiny goats jumped up, wiggled in under the bed curtains, and snuggled up against her body. She stroked Nemeniah's soft fur. A hint of lavender floated up from the sachet hanging from the tiny goat's collar. Mider had done his best to keep the goats smelling as sweet as possible under the circumstances.

There were too many unanswered questions. How was she going to ask them without giving away her ignorance? What she needed to do was sort her information into a coherent order, then decide what questions to ask him next.

Cait pushed the bed curtain aside and studied Mider sprawled out under the thin coverlet on his bed. He never even twitched when Desiree, the smallest goat, bleated. His thick braid trailed over the edge onto the faded carpet that cushioned the blue clay floor. What it would be like to feel the silken length of that hair slide over her skin?

With that thought, her nipples hardened and pushed against the thin fabric of her t-shirt. How long had it been since her body had been pleased? A memory of warm hands at her crotch and hot mouths on her nipples flashed into her mind. Cait slid her hands under the shirt and cupped her breasts. Her nipples felt like hard pebbles under her fingers. She tweaked them and sighed at the liquid warmth that flooded her groin.

The air seemed to thicken around her. An irresistible hunger saturated Cait's body. She unzipped her jeans, slid her hand past her panties and plunged her fingers into the wet curls at the top of her pussy.

Her clit throbbed for release. What would it be like to have Mider lying in bed with her, sucking on her breasts and impaling her with his fully aroused cock? Would he be gentle or would he ride her body with rough, desperate need? She pulled at her nipples with her left hand and teased her already swollen clit with her right hand. Slow and easy at first.

Mider moaned. His breathing shifted into guttural gasps.

Oh goddess! It was too late to stop now. A tenuous dru-bond shimmered between her and Mider. *Need, desire* and *pleasure* soared back and forth between them in an emotional roller coaster careening out of control.

Cait tweaked her nipples and groaned. She pinched her clit and stroked it faster and faster. Her panties were drenched with the moisture of her arousal. The tension in her groin peaked to an unbearable *need* for release. Faster! Harder! More! She needed more!

Mider cried out in his sleep. His hips jerked and bucked under his cover in reaction to her pleasure. He kicked the covers off his body and unbuttoned his pants. His fully erect cock jumped up into his hands and he started stroking it.

Oh goddess! He's feeling me. He's aroused too!

Cait bit her lip and smothered the keening moan in her throat. *Too late to stop now.* Her pussy was throbbing too much for her to stop.

She let the bedcurtains fall back and conceal her. That way Mider wouldn't know she was awake and fully aware of his actions.

Cait pinched and rubbed her swollen clit between her thumb and forefinger, faster and faster, harder and harder. She saw the swollen length of Mider's cock between his hands and knew he was stroking it and thinking about her. She visualized him pushing the curtains aside, climbing into the bed on top of her and plunging his hard cock deep inside her.

Pleasure soared through her, into her crotch and exploded out in a series of long, hard pulses.

Soft, guttural moans came from outside the curtain. Mider was coming too.

Oh goddess above! Cait closed her eyes, visualized his semen spurting into her and let the sudden pleasure of their shared climax ripple through her.

Chapter Eleven

The sound of metal banging against metal echoed through Cait. Then it stopped. She rolled over. A shadowy figure led her through endless tunnels carved from blue clay. Soft white fur caressed the length of her body. She lifted her head to kiss him. The shadow vanished. She stumbled half-blind in the tunnels, lost in silence.

A woman's voice woke her up. "Where is she?"

Cait sat up. She was in an old-fashioned four-poster bed. Thick curtains with embroidered scenes of Sidhe hung from the carved posts. She blinked. The bed was real. The bed curtains were real. This wasn't a dream.

"When did she regain consciousness?" Excited curiosity washed over Cait along with the woman's voice. "What did she say? Can I talk to her now?"

Cait hurriedly tugged her t-shirt down over her exposed breasts and zipped her jeans. Heat flared into her face at the memory of how she'd masturbated while emotionally linked to Mider. Hopefully, he didn't realize she knew what had happened between them. She pulled the bed curtain aside, swung her legs around and sat on the edge.

A strange woman stood in the middle of the room. Her eyes were dark pools of coffee and her skin was a deep, creamy brown shade, almost as brown as Cait's brother, Kevin's. She was tiny, maybe five one. The top of her head would just reach Cait's shoulders. Her hair was a soft black, coiled into a bun at the nape of her neck. A sleeveless white shift flowed past the curve of her hips to her ankles.

Mider hovered behind the woman. Anxiety and eagerness to please shimmered across the faint dru-bond that linked him to Cait. "Cait, this is Dr. Nour."

The woman held out her hand. "Please, there is no need to be formal. My name is Fatima."

Fatima's eager curiosity was overwhelming. Where had Mider found this woman, this physician? How had he convinced her to accept the fact that he was Sidhe? Cait managed a polite nod and smile. The last thing she wanted to do right now was shake hands with Fatima. The woman's emotions were very intense and uncontrolled. As long as she kept her distance, she'd be able to think without this woman's emotions distracting her.

Fatima moved closer. "Are you all right? How do you feel?"

Cait rubbed at the scars on the back of her head. "You're a physician. Did you operate on me?"

Fatima nodded. "I had no choice. You had a subdural hematoma."

Mider gestured at the three padded chairs arranged around a small wooden table. "Please. Come here. Let's sit down and talk this out together."

Cait ducked her head and smothered her relief at this reprieve. Common sense in a man was a quality she always appreciated. His efforts to keep the situation calm and secure were admirable.

She climbed out of the bed and seated herself while Mider bustled around setting out plates of cheese and glasses of fresh mango juice. Cait exhaled carefully and braced herself against the constant emotional output swirling around her.

Fatima leaned her arms on the table. Blatant curiosity flared within her dark eyed gaze. "The men who came to my clinic looking for you. Are they your husbands?"

Cait considered the best way to explain her dilemma. "How do you know that they're not the ones who injured me in the first place? Did they say that they were my husbands?"

Mider exchanged a startled glance with Fatima. He cleared his throat, then gave a graceful half shrug. "Who else could they be?"

Fatima nodded. "My cousin escorted a young girl to my clinic. We don't allow any men inside. She told me your brother, Kevin, was with them and that the other two men were your husbands."

Cait picked up a glass. There was a swan etched into its side. Her hands trembled. All of this was rather sudden. "The last thing I remember I was at college getting ready to go home for the winter holidays. That was almost four months ago." She took a sip and let the cool juice soothe her parched mouth. "I was single then."

Mider sat up very straight. Hope flared from him and sliced into her. She slanted a warning look at him. He sat back and the burst of hope she sensed vanished as if it had never happened. *Goddess above!* What had she gotten herself into? One thing for sure, she needed some time to sort this out first.

She focused her attention back on Fatima. "I don't see how I could have acquired any husbands in that short a time period." She placed the glass on the table and steepled her hands in front of her face. "What are their names?"

Fatima reached into her pocket and took out a sofscreen and a holocube. "They sent emails to the clinic asking about you." She unfolded the screen, squeezed its corners to stiffen it properly, keyed in a few commands, then handed the holocube and sofscreen to Cait. "I kept copies of their messages and I ran an inquiry on the net for data on their names."

Checkmate. Cait picked up the holocube and stared at the image. It showed her standing arm in arm with her brother, Kevin. Flanking her and Kevin were two strange men. One man was black, the other of American Indian ancestry.

Carved from obsidian, the bald-headed black man's massive build matched his protective stance beside Cait. A burn scar covered the left side of the Indian man's face. Tall and wiry, his eyes were dark pools that captured her attention.

Cait sighed. Even though she couldn't remember them, the images showed she had used good taste and common sense by choosing equally strong and masculine husbands. Older men who were sure of themselves. No pretty boys or smooth talking Romeos for her.

In front of her and Kevin stood a small girl with a black kitten cradled in her arms. The girl had long brown hair and hazel green eyes. Instead of a thick waist long braid draped over his shoulder, Kevin's black hair had been shaved off in a buzz cut.

She pointed at Kevin's image, then hers. "This is my twin brother and me." She touched the image of the little girl. "Is this the child who brought this holocube to the clinic?"

Fatima shook her head. "It was a different girl. Her hair was black. She had Asian features and was a few years older than the child in this image."

Cait picked up the sofscreen and read the information displayed there. Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo was the Indian man's name. The black man's name was T.J. Barnett.

Edelmiro's stats listed his age as thirty-six. He was an ex-reservation cop and the current flight instructor at Sanctuary Station for the individual solar wings used by the EVA crew.

The stats for T.J. Barnett listed his age as thirty-two. He was ex-military, retired with honors for service on Mars and on the construction crew for the UP Enclave in Chicago. He owned a used goods store and VR arcade at Sanctuary called Tiny's Emporium. Cait pursed her lips. Tiny must be his nickname.

She put the sofscreen down. "They seem legit. What did you tell them?"

Fatima twisted her hands in her lap. Uncertainty radiated from her in an almost visible aura. "I gave the girl an appointment for Tuesday morning and asked her to bring more proof of their identity. I wanted to make sure they weren't the ones who had injured you in the first place."

Cait sat back and folded her hands in her lap. "A sensible precaution on your part." Heat flooded her face. "I'd rather wait a bit before I talk to them. What am I supposed to say to them? Sorry guys, I don't remember you. I think I need a couple of more days for my brain to heal up and..."

Fatima leaned forward. "Short-term amnesia is a common side effect from head injuries. It's a safety mechanism built into our bodies. Our brains compensate for the trauma by deleting an hour or two prior to the actual injury." She frowned. Concern shadowed her expressive eyes. "But four months? That's very unusual. I've never heard of it taking that large a chunk of anyone's memory."

She tapped her mouth with her finger. Her gaze went distant. "But you're Sidhe, not human. There could be differences in your brain chemistry. Perhaps Sidhe are more sensitive to head injuries."

She blinked. Determination ruled her intent gaze. "I could refer you to a neurologist or perhaps a psychiatrist for an in-depth study of your memory loss."

Cait shook her head. "I'd rather not."

Fatima sat back. "You're right. What was I thinking? The less people who know about you, the better." She drummed her fingers on her knee for a few moments. "I could take you to my clinic tomorrow morning and run a few tests, an EKG, maybe even a CAT scan."

Mider nodded. "That would be a good opportunity for you to take the goats above."

Cait stared at him as if he were insane. What the hell did his goats have to do with her taking medical tests?

Fatima snorted, then burst out laughing. After a few minutes, she finally settled down and wiped the tears from her eyes. "She doesn't know about the science fiction convention."

Cait turned to Mider and raised her eyebrow. "Please explain."

He cleared his throat. "I earn most of my money now by selling spidersilk..."

* * * *

As he finished his explanation, Jezabel butted her head against Cait's leg. She smiled at the goat and scratched her behind the ears.

Fatima smiled. "I've closed my clinic for most of the week. The original plan while you were unconscious was for me to take you and the goats home with me while Mider went to the convention."

Jezabel bleated plaintively and trotted around to Cait's side while Fatima continued speaking. "Now, I can take the goats home tonight. My sister-in-law will gladly take care of them for the week. This way we can go to the convention together."

Cait picked up a sliver of apple from the plate and fed it to the tiny goat. "That sounds like a good plan. I'd rather wait a bit and see if my memory comes back on its own before you run any tests on me."

Chapter Twelve

The strong odor of wet clay reminded Indio of lazy summer days with his sister wading in the shallow streams of the reservation. Bare feet were best. You always knew when you found a patch of clay because it felt cold and slippery under your toes, like stepping on a snake hidden in the mud.

There wasn't any hot sun scorching the top of his head. It was dark and cool here in the tunnels under the streets of Chicago. And instead of a t-shirt, jeans and bare feet, he wore his selkieskin.

The fact that they didn't have extra selkieskins for Emily and Ibrahim had proven to be a blessing in disguise. It meant they didn't have to worry about their safety while they searched for Cait inside this labyrinth. Some of the tunnels were dry. Others contained puddles that ranged from a few centimeters to a meter and a half in depth. And Indio had done his share of slipping during the last five hours.

The only other times he'd actually worn the skin had been in space when there wasn't any air around to transmit scent. The last thing he expected to notice when he wore the selkieskin in the tunnels was how everything smelled.

Back then, just getting used to walking around wearing a skin that felt like his own had been a pretty unsettling experience in itself. No matter how cold or hot it was, the skin kept his body at normal temperature. None of the problems with sweating and condensation fogging up the interior of his helmet. When the skin flowed over you and covered your body it also inserted psuedopods that handled breathing and the excretion of your bodily wastes. He didn't have to wear a diaper or worry about finding a space porta-potty with these skins.

But now that he had a chance to think it over while trudging through this endless maze, it made perfect sense. A symbiote was a primitive life form. The skin's interface connected him directly to the selkieskin's senses. Animals can smell fear. Did this mean he now had the capacity to smell the pheromones of fear, lust and anger while wearing the skin? No wonder he kept noticing the smell of wet clay down here.

The shape and texture of the walls, floor and ceiling filled his mind. The floor was uneven and gouged out in sections where scrap hunters had ripped out the old tracks and copper pipes over a hundred years ago when the tunnels were abandoned. If he wanted, he could close his eyes while the skin sensed out any obstacles and debris hidden in the puddled water. Was this how dolphins and seals used their natural sonar to feel the shapes and dimensions of everything around them?

The only drawback was the fact that covering your head and mouth with a flexible living skin put a cramp in eating, drinking and talking. It also meant they had to use sign language to communicate.

Indio raised his hand and stared at it with his selkie eyes. The moiré patterns of the selkieskin rippled over his hand and body in tune with his pulsing blood. At the same time, he sensed Kevin's and Tiny's hearts pulsing a few feet ahead of him in the arching tunnels.

He shook his head and waded through another knee-deep puddle of muddy water. He'd better keep his mind on what he was doing before he slipped and fell on his face again.

He stopped and let the selkieskin's sonar sense show him a vast void a few meters ahead. Was it a secret chamber? He stepped around the curve of the tunnel into a wider passageway and found Kevin and Tiny with their selkieskins pulled away from their faces and cowed on their shoulders. They had changed the filters in their handheld lights from infrared to normal light.

He moved closer until he stood beside them, peeled his selkieskin down to his neck and gazed down at what they were looking at. The floor of this tunnel sloped down about fifteen yards ahead of them at a very steep angle, like a funnel. Even with his skin pulled back, he had the feeling that this lower level cavern extended miles beyond what his eyes could see. The sound of vast quantities of running water vibrated under his feet. "What the hell is this?"

Kevin shrugged the knapsack from his shoulders and settled down on the floor. Indio and Tiny followed his lead and made themselves as comfortable as they could under the circumstances. Tiny's booming voice broke the silence. "Wish we could use our Sofscreens down here."

Indio switched the setting in his flashlight from infrared to normal and said, "We're too far below the surface for normal radio contact with the satellite netlink."

Kevin pulled out a thick stack of printouts and spread them out on a reasonably dry section of the clay floor. "The only way we'd be able to use them is if we can tap into one of the phone company's fiberoptic lines and I wouldn't recommend that. They've set too many traps on their underground cables for saboteurs. At least I took the time to print everything out before we went underground."

Indio said, "Fat lot of good that did. We found too many extra tunnels along the way that didn't match up to those maps you secured."

Tiny rearranged his backpack and settled himself back against it with his arms behind his head. "Looks like someone added a few more twists and turns to the system. I wonder how long it took to dig them out?"

Indio jabbed his thumb at the hole below their feet. "And this?"

"It's called the Deep Tunnel," Kevin said while he selected a printout from the stack. He shone his flashlight on it and started reading out loud. "Six sections of the freight tunnels run right under the river. Anyway, back in 1992, a contractor driving pilings for a new boat dock pierced the ceiling for one of the tunnels that went under the river."

Tiny's booming voice echoed in the tunnel. "That must have created a giant whirlpool that sucked tons of water into the tunnel system. How did they plug it up and drain it out?"

Kevin picked up another sheet of paper and continued reading. "The fire department tried to keep up with it by pumping as fast as they could, but they couldn't stop it. It took over a hundred dump trucks of hydraulic cement and gravel to seal the breach. Then the engineers dug another hole from the freight tunnel to the sewer system called the Deep Tunnel and drained all the water from the freight tunnels into it."

Kevin turned his light around. They stared at the shaft for a few moments. The clay was furrowed as if it had been liquid at one time.

Tiny cleared his throat then verbalized their unspoken thought perfectly. "Nice to see they drained it out so well or we would have slid down like a bunch of kids on a ride at the waterpark."

Indio rubbed his hand across the scar tissue on his face and scowled. "Did you bring any extra maps of the city and aqueduct system in that stack of papers? I want to see where we are in relation to the surface. Stumbling around half-blind in this mess has screwed up my sense of direction."

"Sure." Kevin dug out another printout, unfolded it and laid it out on the clay floor. He pointed at the large blue blob on the right-hand side shaped like an inflated condom. "That's Lake Michigan. Chicago's the little brown blotch on the bottom left side."

Very impressive. Indio shook his head. "Chicago looks like a squashed fly on the edge of the lake."

Kevin turned the map over, showed them a grid of Chicago's streets and pointed at the blue line bisecting the top of the city. "Here's the Chicago Tribune and the east branch of the river. Wacker Drive, where we're staying, parallels the other side of the river."

Indio pointed at the section where the river flowed into Lake Michigan. "That's where they have those locks to keep it from polluting the lake, isn't it?"

He traced a line in the opposite direction. "Here's the library where we entered the tunnels. It's about eight blocks south of Wacker Drive."

Tiny leaned closer for a better look at the map. "Where does this Deep Tunnel begin and end?"

Kevin tapped his finger on the spot that said O'Hare Spaceport. "It starts here and flows south for a hundred and thirty-one miles under Chicago out to the suburbs."

Interesting. Indio turned and shone his light down into the cavern below. He didn't need the selkieskin to smell the stench from that section. They were standing at the edge of a hole that led down into a vast man-made underground sewer system below the city.

As near as he could figure out so far, they had wandered through about four miles of the sixty-odd mile labyrinth of abandoned freight tunnels. Cait had to be hidden in this upper level of tunnels, not down in the sewer system.

"What do you think?" Tiny asked.

"About what?" Indio tried to tone down the frustrated irritation in his voice. "The Deep Tunnel or our search so far?"

"Our search." Tiny said.

"I don't know." Indio wanted to hit someone, preferably this Mider character, whoever he might be. "I'm beginning to wonder if we were set up."

Tiny stretched his legs and snorted. "You're right. This feels like a wild goose chase to me too."

"Whoa. Wait a minute." Kevin turned his flashlight on Indio, then Tiny and back onto the selkieskin that covered the rest of his body. "While we were talking, I noticed this. Look at our selkieskins. Their color has changed."

Indio peered at his selkieskin. Instead of a deep black with shimmering moiré patterns of red, gold and blue flowing swiftly across it, the color was now a dull orange with the patterns moving in a sluggish fashion. Was the symbiote dying? Poisoned by pollutants?

His sister Julisa would know. Her Master's Degree in extraterrestrial biochemistry had guaranteed her a secure berth on the science team at Sanctuary. In last night's email, she'd mentioned a whole new series of tests and experiments on the skins during the last couple of weeks. He'd have to wait until tomorrow morning to ask her any questions. She was coming down on tonight's shuttle flight and planning to meet them at the SF convention. Emails weren't allowed during shuttle flights. But, until then, maybe they'd better get the skins off, just in case.

Finally Tiny said, slowly, as though he was surfacing from the depths of fascinated cogitation. "The river's been polluted for years. That's why they have a lock system to keep it from going into Lake Michigan."

Kevin extended his bright orange arm and muttered. "The skins might be reacting to the polluted water."

It was amazing how their thought processes matched his. Indio rose to his feet. "We better get back on the surface and change out of them before they die on us."

No one voiced any disagreement with this prudent suggestion. They retraced their route to the library freight entrance without wasting unnecessary exploration on side tunnels along the way.

* * * *

Was he delirious? Mider wasn't sure. *Be calm*, he reminded himself. *Don't do or say anything foolish.*

Cait braced herself on her stool, reached up and tilted his head sideways. "I used to do this for my father all the time. You see how the fur on his face blends right into the beard."

The hesitant stroke of her hand against his cheek gave him a taste of her confusion. He drank in the brief glimpse of her emotions, savored it like wine, and stored away every trace of it inside his heart.

Fatima hitched her stool closer and handed Cait a tiny pair of scissors. Her jasper brown eyes held only warmth. The seductive scent of both women filled his head with dangerous hopes.

The scissors moved across his beard under Cait's guidance. A sense of familiarity, of a task well done flowed from her into him. He relaxed under her touch and enjoyed the sensation. His grandmother used to trim his beard and cut his hair just like this.

He focused his attention on the four-poster bed behind the women. His grandmother's bed. She had woven those curtains. His weaving skills were childish compared to hers. Now, more than ever, he wished she were here to advise him, to tell him how to talk to Cait and Fatima.

Cait tapped him on his arm. "Have you always lived here alone?" Curiosity flowed from her touch.

He swallowed against the painful cry in his chest and shook his head. "My grandmother..."

Fatima rested her hand upon his knee. "Where is she?" The additional dose of sympathetic curiosity threatened to overwhelm him.

He stood up and went to stand beside the bed. It was easier to speak if he didn't have to look at either woman. He picked up a fold of the curtain and rolled the heavy material under his fingers. "She is dead."

“What about your parents? Where are they?” Cait's hesitant voice penetrated the ice that sealed his mind.

“Dead also. I never knew them.” Mider knew his voice sounded harsh and cold, but he couldn't think of any other way to say it. He leaned his face against the post. Cait and Fatima—their faces promised comfort, a comfort he wanted to accept.

Cold rage threatened to explode from his tight control while he spat out the ugly truth. “My mother's sisterline discarded the furred ones in order to hide their presence among humans.”

Fatima jumped up and paced back and forth. Her anger raged around her face like flames.

He shrugged. “It's past now. I survived.”

Cait went to the bed and stroked the curtains. “Did you make these?”

“No. My grandmother brought them down here with her.”

“What happened to her?”

Mider wrapped his arms around himself and stared at nothing in particular.

“There was a cave-in. She died instantly.”

Comfort flowed into him from Cait. The same warm comfort he'd always taken for granted all those years with his grandmother. She asked, “How did you survive her death?”

He looked deep into her eyes. Cait knew what it meant to be Sidhe. No sense in trying to hide his shame. “I went out of my head for awhile.”

The quiet sadness that surfaced in her eyes made him want to walk away from her, like a rude child. He wiped his hands on his pants. “I lived like an animal without thought or reason until, one day...”

Fatima tried to touch him. Cait grabbed her wrist and prevented her from touching him. “What happened then?” Her neutral tone told him she understood how hard it must be for him to admit his weakness like this.

He closed his eyes and let the memories flow through him.

A Goddess Moon lit up the sky that night. He had no idea how long it had been since his grandmother's death. It could have been a day, a week, perhaps a year. Rage filled his heart. Rage against the Sidhe. Rage against humans. He heard a woman's scream slice through the night air. He followed the sound and found a pack of human wolves around a lone woman. An older woman, like his grandmother. The scent of blood filled his lungs while he drove the humans away from their prey.

Mider opened his eyes and whispered, “Until I met Rachel and regained my sanity.”

“How long ago was this?” Cait's voice remained gentle and reassuring.

He uncurled his clenched fingers. “Two decades ago.”

“Now we're here with you.” Wonder flowed from Cait to him. “I'd like you to meet my family.”

He looked away and gestured at the final load of fabrics. “I need time to prepare myself for that meeting. I have a task to complete at the convention first.”

Fatima wrung her hands together. Uncertainty flickered within her anxious gaze. “When I recruited Mider, he was a stranger. Now, I'm not so sure I want to lose either one of you for my cause. I don't know if it'll work. Maybe we should wait for a better time to help this woman escape from her husband's abuse.”

Cait's conspiratorial smile and wink blinded Mider. "We're not going to back down now, are we?"

Goddess above! He'd do anything to keep her smiling at him like that. "Of course not."

Fatima sank back with an exasperated sigh and shook her head at them. "Promise me that you'll be careful. Please."

Cait gave her a reassuring squeeze of her arm. "We will. I have too many years ahead of me to take foolish risks."

Mider smiled. "I have gifts for both of you."

They turned to him. Their surprised and expectant stares filled him with pleasure. He went over to the small leather chest beside his bed, unlocked it and pulled out two tissue wrapped packages.

The larger package he placed on the table in front of Cait. "My grandmother used to wear this for parties and other special occasions. I believe it will suffice as a suitable costume for you to wear at the convention."

He placed the second package in front of Fatima. "I made this spidersilk chador especially for you. Please accept it and wear it for me."

He held his breath. Would they accept his gifts?

Cait exchanged a long look with Fatima and picked up her package. Fatima smiled and reached for hers also.

* * * *

Cait peered into the dust-streaked mirror and adjusted her blue wig one last time. Feathers skillfully sewn onto spidersilk ribbons flowed down from her scalp to the back of her knees. Pale moonstones glittered upon her earlobes.

Mider had given her a few tantalizing glimpses of his past but not enough for her to guess his age. His manners, the way he carried himself and acted were old-fashioned. At the same time, the few fragments of emotions that escaped from his control whenever she or Fatima came near him felt more like one of her younger brothers. She fingered the shimmering material draped across her legs.

The matching spidersilk shirt fitted her torso like a second skin. The square cut neck showed off the moonstone and silver collar around her throat to its best advantage. Long sleeves came down to a narrow point that looped over the middle fingers on her hands. The frothy swirl of her layered skirt skimmed the top of her knees. Shimmery tights and thigh high boots added the finishing touch to her outfit.

Fatima settled back on her stool. The golden folds of her new chador added an extra glow to the warm brown skin of her face. She touched the feathers flowing down Cait's back. "It makes you look like a magical creature who stepped out of a fairy-tale book."

Cait stroked the shimmering sleeve of Fatima's chador. "This makes you look like a desert princess. Mider must have worked for days to create this for you."

Fatima ducked her head and folded her hands in her lap. "It's beautiful," she sighed. "I'm not sure if I should keep it. Pure spidersilk is so expensive. He'd probably be better off trying to sell it instead of giving it to me."

Cait grinned and tapped her shoulder. "You don't have the time to worry about that. It's almost three-thirty in the morning. You know Mider's eyes can't tolerate strong

sunlight. The first ferry leaves at four. We have to catch that one in order to arrive at the island before sunrise.”

Chapter Thirteen

They caught the four a.m. ferry with only seconds to spare. Eager conventioners packed it from stem to stern. The costumes ranged from the basic Alpha Centurion warrior to fairy tale princess. Mider escorted Cait and Fatima to the starboard rail where they had an unobstructed view of the complicated lock system that let the river into Lake Michigan. He couldn't help but notice the admiring looks that followed his exotic companions. The subdued charcoal gray of his pants and shirt provided a nice contrast to their more colorful attire.

Pride filled every cell in his body. He wanted to strut and shout his joy out to the world because these two women had chosen him as their escort. He wished his grandmother were here with him. The stability of her presence and her calm voice lecturing him on proper behavior and control of his emotions would be very helpful right now.

He leaned against the rail and stared up at the sky. A sickle moon drifted out from behind the clouds. Would he ever have the chance to see the glories of space firsthand? A handful of days every year spent walking freely among the SF conventioners had only whetted his appetite for acceptance.

Cait moved closer. Her feathered wig fluttered in the breeze. She let her arm brush against his sleeve. "What are you thinking?"

He gestured at the moon. "I was wondering about the exact location of Sanctuary Station."

Fatima pointed to the sky at the left side of the moon. The sleeve of her chador slid back and revealed the smooth dusky skin of her arm. "We can't see it from here. There's too much smog in the air. It's west of the Moon, at the L5 point."

Cait's warm chuckle filled the cool night air. She clapped her hands like a small child. "East of the Sun."

He laughed and finished the words for that old fairy tale. "At the back of the North Wind." Cait's mouth softened into a smile of pleasure.

The golden dome of the Enclave filled the horizon. The wind flattened the golden veil against the contours of Fatima's face. "Have you ever been here before?" she asked.

"Twice." Mider managed to speak past the lump in his throat. This was the first time he'd come here accompanied by two lovely women.

"This is my first time," Cait admitted with a rueful twist of her lips.

The sky lightened. Pink tinged the edges of a cloud drifting above the lake. Mider adjusted his sunglasses. Two police Fastboats pulled up alongside the ferry and escorted it into the channel opening of the seawall.

Cait shaded her eyes with her hand and peered at the Fastboat. "That's a laser cannon in the bow, isn't it?"

Mider kept his voice and body movements casual and matter of fact as if they were discussing the weather. "They also have fifty-caliber machine guns and a twenty-five millimeter cannon." He jerked his thumb at one of the emplacements on the seawall. "And the same armament with the sonar towers."

Cait studied the flashing lights around the towers. "Active or passive sonar?"

“Both.” He kept his voice low. No need to alert the other passengers of their interest in the island's security setup.

Fatima tightened her fingers on the railing. Her knuckles went white with her tense grip. “Don't take any chances please.”

Cait's life was too precious for him to risk. Everything would have to be meticulously planned. If it looked like it wasn't going to work, he intended to call it off. “I won't,” he whispered. “I promise.”

The seagates opened up and the ferry passed through into the inner harbor. The golden dome of the enclave soared above them. Freighters moored at the docks unloaded huge crates and canisters. No small craft were permitted in this harbor. The island's airstrip allowed only emergency medical flights and security teams. After the destruction of New York, every precaution that could be taken had been implemented here.

“Yo! Mider!” Jamil Abdullah's familiar booming voice rose above the steady whine of the UP Security Fastboat's turbines while it passed the ferry.

He turned around and watched Jamil move his bulk through the crowd. A staid business tunic and slacks covered the Muslim man's girth and well-rounded stomach. “It's good to see you again. Please introduce me to your lovely friends.”

Mider rolled his eyes. Jamil was a notorious flirt. He usually sold handcrafted scimitars in the dealer's room. At the last convention they had attended, Jamil spent most of his spare time cajoling flustered smiles from Rachel.

* * * *

The late morning sunlight bounced off the dark blue waters of Lake Michigan. Indio squinted against the glare while the ferry moved past the sea gate at a sedate pace of five knots. The interior lagoon for the Enclave formed an inverted triangle about three kilometers across at its widest point.

Tiny positioned himself beside Indio and peered at the water below the boat's hull. “Too bad we missed the first ferry. The sunrise must have been spectacular.”

“What are you looking at?” Indio asked.

Tiny leaned over the side and gestured at the island. The railing shook under his weight. “This is the first time I've had a chance to see it from above. It's a new perspective for me. When I was in the SEALs, I used to dive under the hexes and look for flaws and possible sabotage. A couple of hundred well-placed limpet bombs could sink the entire island in two hours flat.”

Indio closed his eyes and visualized the island's layout. He'd seen it three weeks ago during their flight down into O'Hare Spaceport—a giant dark green turtle floating in the middle of Lake Michigan. A honeycomb of interconnected floating hexagons a hundred meters wide formed the foundations of the island. The golden dome in the center of the turtle's back was the UP Enclave. He opened his eyes. “How does it look from the bottom?”

Tiny grinned like a kid showing off his favorite toy. “You feel like you're swimming in a forest of giant blue trees with honeycomb leaves. The tree trunks are thermal energy pipes. They pull up cold water from the bottom of the lake to cool the motors for the electric turbines. The rest of their power they get from solar panels all over the island itself.”

The ferry pulled in at the last pier and the passengers hurried over to line up in front of the exit ramps. Indio nudged Tiny with his elbow. "Let's get in line."

The pier was hot—heat came up from the concrete though the rubber soles of their sneakers. Kevin and Ibrahim were walking about ten feet ahead in the line holding hands. Emily walked proudly beside them. Her pale green slacks and shirt matched the ribbon that confined her shiny black hair in a neat ponytail.

Tiny waved his hand at the iridescent dome rising up in the middle of the island like a mountain of gold. "Hard to believe that's made out of spidersilk and aluminite, isn't it?"

The line moved slowly into the air-conditioned terminal. Holographic arrows directed them to the InterWorldCon welcome zone where they picked up their nametags and room keys. A minor delay halted them at the maglev-boarding ramp. They stood there for ten minutes and watched the conductor argue with a heavy-set Muslim man.

Indio jerked his thumb at them. "What's going on now?"

Kevin shrugged. "He's one of the dealers from the first ferry. They want to confiscate his scimitars as illegal weaponry."

Indio gritted his teeth and stared at the dome rising in the distance. A sudden chill raced down his spine. Where was Cait? Why had she run away from them after Jesse found her? Didn't she want them as her husbands anymore?

Chapter Fourteen

The dealers' room wasn't scheduled to open for another hour. Tiny tapped his fingers on the edge of the control panel. He should be concentrating on setting up the VR games properly but his mind kept circling back to Cait. Was she all right? Would he see her soon?

The Entertainment Committee for the convention had pulled out all the stops and given him top-of-the-line equipment. One-way glass separated the computerized control panel from the game room. Three comfortable chairs were positioned in front of the sofscreens. The other half of the control room contained two huge sofabeds, a complete kitchenette and fully stocked bar complete with barstools.

Emily strolled past him and scratched her fingernails along the matte black panel. He exhaled carefully, turned around and said, "Please, don't touch the controls."

She jerked back at the sound of his voice, clasped her hands and skipped back to the couch, an innocent look on her face. A grand total of three seconds passed before she started bouncing up and down on the couch in a valiant attempt to break its springs.

"Emily! Stop jumping around!" Indio's raspy voice echoed the tension in the room. "We don't want to have to pay for damaged furnishings."

She plopped back, then eased over to the side of the couch and unzipped one of the duffel bags. Tiny did his best not to raise his voice. "Emily! Leave the selkieskins alone. We have no idea what's wrong with them."

Kevin pulled a couple of cans of cola from the fridge and tossed them to Ibrahim and Indio. He arched his left eyebrow. "Maybe we should wait outside with Emily. That way when Julisa arrives, we can head down to the dealers' room and look for this Mider guy."

Tiny waved at them to leave, then slumped back against the wall and closed his eyes. His nerves were shot. Kevin had the right idea. Taking Emily out into the corridors should keep her occupied and out of trouble.

A few seconds later, he heard the soft click of the computerized door locking itself after their hasty exit. He opened his eyes, stretched his hands over the VR controls and flicked the first series of switches. A holographic image of Stonehenge flickered into life in the adjoining chamber.

Color and texture flowed into the full-sized avatars waiting to step onto the VR stage. That part was easy. He pulled up the master program and checked the story grid. Random coding was his secret formula for the Silverhand game.

Every action chosen by each player created five random scenarios. They couldn't cheat by re-booting the game and trying the same action they did in the previous one. The computer automatically selected a different outcome each time. The unpredictability of the game was what kept them playing over and over again.

He flipped another switch and typed in his commands on the antique keyboard. An old Percy Sledge ballad rumbled out from the loudspeaker. *Cover me. Cover me. Spread your precious love all over me. Oh can't you see the need in me. Oh cover me.*

Just the thought of Cait and his cock got hard as a rock.

Hide me. Hide me where no other love can find me. Oh I'm feeling low. I need you so. Oh cover me. Cover me.

If he knew he had the time, he'd jack off before everyone returned. That way, when he saw Cait again, he'd be able to talk to her without tripping over his tongue.

Girl my love for you is stronger everyday. Oh temptation might be waiting down the way. When I'm lonely and I get astray. Find me. Find me.

Tiny knew he couldn't carry a tune if it had handles but it sure helped him concentrate.

Oh darling, I don't want to lose you. Cover me. Cover me. Spread your precious love all over me.

One last check of the panel told him that the games were all ready to go. He keyed in the authorization code and opened the door to the VR room. A few seconds later, two prospective players drifted inside.

He keyed up the security sofscreen outside the VR room. It showed Indio, Kevin, Ibrahim and Emily standing in the corridor outside eyeballing the confused traffic of middle-aged and costumed conventioners.

A young woman with cinnamon colored hair hanging down her back in a profusion of narrow braids swooped past with ponderous dignity. Tiny estimated her weight at three-hundred and her height as five-six.

A pale blue gown flowed over her ample curves from neck to toe. The black leather corset of her medieval gown squeezed and cantilevered the generous mass of her breasts up to her chin. The crowd parted in front of her like the ocean before the figurehead of a Viking warship.

Tiny snorted at the enthralled expression on Emily's face. Julisa better show up soon before Emily asked them to buy her one of those corsets. He turned around, strode up to the one-way glass for the VR room, clasped his hands behind his back in parade rest position and studied the gamers.

A brown-haired adolescent male with acne pitted skin walked past the one-way glass. His brand new VR skinsuit clung to his lanky frame. Multicolored wires soared from the back and scalp of the skinsuit like porcupine quills. The quills were actually fiber optic filaments that allowed the VR player to interface directly with the holographic images.

The kid plopped himself down in one of the empty seats around the Silverhand game. The chair's sensors responded to this activity by lowering a VR shell from the ceiling. It snapped into place around his head and body and gave him the appearance of a human crab wearing a matte black carapace.

An avatar shimmered into shape on the holographic stage. It was a sinister figure wearing druidic robes and carrying a runic carved staff, its face concealed by a dark hood. The avatar trudged up a grassy slope to the moss draped standing stones and joined the other players. The VR player's arms and legs twitched slightly in unison with the avatar's actions.

Good! Tiny rubbed his hands together. The VR equipment was running in perfect order. Instead of thrashing around like someone having convulsions, the player lay there in a pure alpha dream state.

A holographic gargoyle with slate-gray wings swooped down onto the stage. Drops of liquid fire fell from its claws and sizzled on the ground while it attacked the druids. They swung their staffs around in panicked circles trying to defend themselves.

The door behind Tiny intoned. "Your ID is validated. Please step inside." He pivoted around just in time to watch the door dilate open and see Indio stride inside with Socorro on his shoulders. Emily came in next, followed by Kevin, Ibrahim, Julisa and Indio's grandfather, Edelmiro.

Slashes of red and white paint striped Edelmiro's dark mahogany face. A red headband bound the top of his white hair back and exposed the heavy silver and turquoise earrings that adorned his ears. A dark red shirt, brown pants stuffed into knee high fringed moccasins and brown vest completed his attire. He stood beside Indio, straight and proud.

Tiny jerked his thumb at Indio's grandfather. "What the hell's going on around here?"

Edelmiro crossed his arms on his chest and winked. Indio bent over, took Socorro off his shoulders and let her stand in front of him. The top of her head barely reached his chest.

Socorro's light brown hair hung down in two neat plaits tied off at the ends with white feathers and red beads. Instead of her usual jeans and t-shirt, she wore a white sundress and sandals. *Very pretty. She's going to be one fine looking woman when she grows up.*

He turned to Julisa. She'd cut her hair short and it clung to her scalp in sleek black curls. An ankle-length sleeveless yellow sundress caressed her curves. Tiny white feathers dangled from her earlobes.

Julisa strode over to the couch and opened one of the selkieskin pouches. "Oh yes. This is good."

Tiny peered at the bright orange color. "What's good about that? It looks like something you'd wear during hunting season. I liked them better when they were black."

Julisa opened the other two sacks and peered inside with a satisfied nod. "It means they're pregnant."

An image formed in his mind of selkieskins oozing out of their bags in the middle of the night, forming sexual pseudopods from their shapeless forms and madly fornicating with one another, while everyone snored on totally oblivious to this activity. Then he pictured them separating and flowing back into their individual sacks. "Sneaky little buggers," he muttered.

Julisa sat on the arm of the couch. "It didn't happen the way you're thinking. They're symbiotes. Their reproductive system is totally different than ours."

Socorro tugged at Tiny's hand. She led him over to the couch and sat him down beside Julisa, then climbed onto his lap and snuggled up against his chest.

Julisa continued her explanation.

"That means it's a two-way street. The symbiote protects your body from temperature and atmospheric extremes. It takes over your breathing functions and the process of eliminating your body's wastes. What do you provide for the symbiote?"

He thought about it for a minute. "Food," he said, "We eat the food and digest it for the symbiote. That's why we're always starving and eat like pigs after we wear the skins for more than five hours at a time."

He glanced at the smug expression on Kevin's face. "She must have explained this to you already."

Kevin shrugged. "It was worth it just to see the look on your face when she told you they were pregnant."

Julisa opened her mouth to speak again but Tiny motioned at her to wait. He wanted to figure this out himself. Since they did the actual work of finding, eating and digesting food for the skins, what happened next? The skins grew fat. What other form of reproduction was there besides sexual? He snapped his fingers. *Asexual reproduction!* It was the only logical answer. "We feed them and they grow. When they reach the maximum size, they shift into a reproductive stage and make clones of themselves. How long does it take before they finish making a copy of themselves?"

Julisa snorted. "Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen anytime soon. It takes seventy-two hours for them to reproduce themselves."

He frowned. Almost twenty-five hours had passed since the skins changed color yesterday morning. Which meant... "We'll have six skins by eight tomorrow morning."

Socorro tugged at his shirt. "We're going to confront Mider now. It's my idea. Kevin's email said this guy might be Sidhe and holding Cait against her will. I asked Cait's Aunt Lilith what she'd do and she told me that the eldest female in the sisterline has the right to call a Wild Hunt down upon him. Aunt Jule is Daddy's eldest sister and she's here now to lead us and challenge him."

He held up his finger and shook it at her. "Whoa. Hold on a minute now. This ain't one of those live action VR games. This is for real. We can't walk up to this guy in the middle of the dealers' room and call a Wild Hunt on him just like that. That's crazy. We don't even know if he's another Sidhe or if he has anything to do with Cait's disappearance."

Kevin walked up and gave him a silver torque shaped like a snake biting its tail. "If this guy is Sidhe, wearing silver in the traditional manner will show him we understand the old rules of combat. I bought these from a woman on her way to the dealers' room. The price was outrageous, of course, but it's the best I could do on such short notice."

Tiny turned the torque around in his hand. "Are you sure this is a good plan?"

Indio shrugged. Julisa was busy attaching white feathers into the tip of his braid. He fingered a matching silver torque around his neck. "If this guy is Sidhe, the threat of a Wild Hunt might work. If he's not, then we'll have to play it by ear."

What if Cait wants Mider instead of you? A little voice whispered in Tiny's head. *What will you do then?* He snapped the ends of the torque together around his neck. Even though it made him feel like he was wearing a slave collar, he straightened his shoulders and smiled. He'd do anything for her, even this.

Chapter Fifteen

Cait folded a red spidersilk shirt and placed it on the pile at the end of the long table. She straightened out the collar and felt the smooth texture of its tiny white buttons.

Fatima strolled over to the next booth and examined one of Jamil's scimitars. It didn't take long for them to become engaged in a brisk bargaining session. Fatima's pleasure at this friendly duel flowed back over Cait.

A clutch of teenagers ambled past the booth. Lust, curiosity and excitement splashed against her in jagged splatters. She ignored them.

A burst of raw panic rushed into her. She jerked her head up and stared at a young boy, maybe four years old. His eyes were wide and frightened.

A second burst of panic stabbed into her. She turned towards it and saw a young woman moving rapidly down an adjacent aisle, her head swiveling back and forth in a desperate search.

The toddler opened his mouth, all ready to cry.

Cait clapped her hands and caught the child's attention. He gaped at her. She pointed at his mother. His face lit up and he ran after her and hurled himself at her leg. The woman's fright tumbled away into relief while she picked up her son and hugged him to her chest.

Cait shook her head and stared at her trembling hands. *Focus*. She told herself. *You need to focus*. There were too many people around her giving her too much input, overwhelming her normal empathic senses.

At the same time, she was acutely aware of Mider hovering behind her. His presence prickled at the back of her neck. She weighed the risk of linking herself to him in order to shield her mind from the ambience of the crowd.

No, she decided. Reaching out for him like that would leave her mind wide open to him and deepen the dru-bond between them, a bond she dare not attempt without knowing more about him and his motives. She was just going to have to grit her teeth and do her best to ignore the overload seeping into her from the crowded room.

She touched the holographic ID badge pinned to her shoulder that identified her only by her first name, Cait.

It was a deceptively simple yet efficient security device. Embedded within the name itself were microchips that told the doors her status as a dealer and permitted her entry into restricted areas of the convention. Guests of honor, gofers, panelists, and VR gamemasters had different codes embedded in their badges.

Fatima returned with a scimitar and a leather scabbard covered with intricate designs. Mider moved back to attend to a group of customers at the front of his booth while Cait unlatched the side gate in the booth to let Fatima back inside.

Fatima leaned close and whispered in Cait's ear. "Jamil's my contact person. He's finalizing the arrangements to get us inside the Iraqi Ambassador's penthouse. He told me he saw your husbands arrive on the ferry that followed ours. They went into the VR control booth at the other end of the hall."

Cait's heart slammed against her chest. She wasn't ready. What was she supposed to say to them?

“Ma'am.” A chubby Caucasian male with pale blue eyes held up a piece of lime green spidersilk patterned with gold streaks. “How much are you charging for this?”

Fatima went over to take his order.

Cait leaned against the countertop and concentrated on slowing her racing heart down to a reasonable rate.

A dark-haired woman grabbed hold of her wrist. The name on her badge said *Mair*. Cait gazed into a pair of old eyes, Sidhe eyes. She stood very still under the woman's frigid stare.

Mair's voice was cold and filled with disbelief. “You're wearing Suisan's blue gown and feather wig. Where did you get it?”

Cait pointed at Mider. He turned around and stared at Mair. “It's his grandmother's. He gave it to me.”

Mair clung to Cait's wrist and cold rage flowed out from her touch. “What is a lovely young Sidhe woman like you doing with a creature like him?”

She leaned closer. Pure unalloyed disgust shuddered through Cait's senses. Mair whispered, “Look at him. He's an animal, with twisted root-like hair up to his eyes. He's ugly. Under his bristling snout, his cursing mouth, his tusks snarl at us like a hungry wolf. His head is frontless, a swinish mane grows over his shoulders.”

Cait froze, one second passed, then another. She turned to Mider again. He flinched under her gaze.

Sweat poured down her back. Cait felt sick to her stomach. She jerked her hand from Mair's grasp and saw three Sidhe men standing behind the woman. Dark-haired, dark eyed, cut from the same pattern as Mair, they watched her with raw hunger in their gaze. She read the names on their badges, Angawdd, Cadwr and Myrdyn.

Cait closed her eyes and pushed away the hatred simmering in her mind. She saw Mider standing on the boat, in the moonlight, laughing with her and Fatima. Slim, fluid and strong, his height the same as her five foot-eight. She darkened his albino red eyes to brown and mentally stripped the soft coating of white fur from his face.

The resemblance was clear. Their bone structure identical, Mair and the Sidhe men with her were Mider's kin. They were the sisterline who cast him aside at his birth like trash.

A young girl's voice shouted. “Cait!”

She opened her eyes. A girl with light brown pigtails bouncing on her back ran up the crowded aisle.

Mair turned around and glared at the child.

Cait looked into the girl's jade green eyes and the familiar warmth of a dru-bond wrapped its tendrils around her. Even though she didn't remember this child, her heart did. She glanced down at the girl's nametag and said her name. “Socorro.”

Socorro went down on the floor and crawled under the fabric-covered countertop. She stood up and stared at Cait's feathered wig. Socorro's eyes grew huge with admiration. She slipped her hand into Cait's, ducked her head, peered at Mider and whispered, “He's furred just like your father. Where did you find him?”

Cait tightened her grip on Socorro's hand. Total trust flowed into her from that touch. “I can't talk now. The important thing for you to remember is that he's my friend and we need your help.”

Socorro's eyes darkened with solemn comprehension. She nodded her head eagerly and waited proudly beside Cait.

The crowd parted before a wedge of tall, broad-shouldered men and women. Kevin stood there. Twin-born to Cait, his dru-bond pulsed in time to her heartbeat. A short, dark, slim man and a tall, dark woman flanked him, holding his hands.

A young oriental girl, on the cusp of womanhood, maybe fourteen years old stood beside them and stared at Cait. Her green tunic and pants matched the pale green ribbon in her black hair.

A silver torque glittered around Kevin's neck. Three men stood behind him. Two of the men were Native Americans. One was elderly with pure white hair; the other much younger with coal black hair and old burn scars on his face.

Two white braids flowed past the shoulders of the elderly man's scarlet shirt. Heavy silver earrings dangled from his ears. Garish streaks of red and black paint marked his face.

The third man was tall, muscular and bald-headed with coal-black skin.

Silver torques adorned the necks of all the men.

The nametag clipped to the shirt of the man with the burn scars on his face told her his name was Indio. Cait looked into his eyes and felt the familiar texture of a dru-bond with him curl around her heart like an embrace.

She turned her head and gazed at the black man. His nametag said Tiny. Another dru-bond slid into place around her soul in a warm cocoon of protective love. Her brain carried no memory of these men yet the dru-bonds that bound her to them were solid and real. Two strange and very masculine men intimately linked to her heart and soul.

Mair stepped forward and held up her hands. "Go away. She belongs to us. You have no claim on her."

A murmur rushed through the crowd like the wind before a storm. "Over here!" A man shouted. "They're putting on a play. An improvisation. A special show."

A lanky teenager, with gold streaks tipping his black hair, held a vidcam to his face and moved closer. The crowd swirled around him. People nudged one another to get a better look. Excited curiosity swirled in the air.

Cait motioned at Mider and Fatima. They moved closer to her. She whispered, "Stay with me. Follow my lead."

She tightened her fingers on Socorro's hand, stepped up to the gate of Mider's booth, opened it and strode out into the open. Mider and Fatima followed her.

She raised her voice above the confused murmurs of the crowd. "You have no claim on me."

Mair turned around. She held out her hands. "We are Sidhe. They're human. You belong with us, not them."

With the cocoon of dru-bonds shielding her from empathic influences, Cait felt nothing while she studied the Mair's face. She walked towards her brother. The three Sidhe males with Mair moved forward and blocked her way.

Cait took a deep breath. Her hands shook. She wiped them against her pants legs and kept a tight lid on the rage flaring up inside her at Mair's clumsy attempt to influence her emotions. "I am my own self. I don't belong to you."

With nervous glances at the conventioners eagerly watching them, the three men stepped aside.

She breathed a sigh of relief. The crowd was her protection. Sidhe usually avoided publicity because they needed to keep the fact of their existence hidden from humans.

Mider and Fatima followed her while she went up to Kevin and released Socorro's hand into his. She turned around and announced, "This is my twin-born brother. You have no claim on me."

Mair pointed at Mider. "He's furred. He's not kin to you."

Cait stood very still. "Is he your kin?"

Mair backed away, horror etched on her face. "No! He was cast out at birth. He is alone. He should never have survived."

The crowd thickened. The teenager continued to film the events with his vidcam. Cait lifted her head. The pale blue feathers of her wig fluttered around her face. She held out her hands for Fatima and Mider.

Fatima's coffee-colored eyes glowed with pride through the slit in her golden chador. Mider smiled and his fanged eyeteeth glinted within his swift smile. His braid shifted against his gray pants. They accepted her outstretched hands and stood beside her.

She looked at Mair. The crowd pushed closer and grew quiet. There was no need to raise her voice.

She tightened her grip on Mider's hand. "In front of these witnesses, I claim this furred one for my sisterline and place him under our protection. If you call a Wild Hunt upon him now, you also call it upon my sisterline. We will not give him up to you without a fight."

While she spoke, confused surprise swirled around Cait through her dru-bonds, then shifted and solidified into a wall of fierce determination against Mair and her companions.

"You're fools!" Mair shouted.

Cait inclined her head at Socorro and Emily and shook her head. "My sisterline has prospered. Where are the children of your sisterline?"

Mair's face went white. She stared at the boy filming her with his vidcam. Rage glittered within her swollen gaze. She straightened her shoulders. "We will discuss this at another time. Privately."

"No," Cait shook her head. "The next time we discuss this will be in front of a council of our peers in the Sidhe court."

Mair stalked away. Her companions followed her.

The crowd opened up and let Mair and her companions depart. Applause and cheers burst out all around them.

People unfolded their sofscreens and turned their attention back to Cait. "Fabulous! Wonderful! When's the next show scheduled to take place?"

Kevin put Socorro down, stepped forward and held his hands up in the air. "Because we're an improvisational troupe, we cannot say when the next event will occur. That would spoil the surprise."

Cait stepped forward, linked hands with him and bowed to the crowd. She glanced back under her arm and saw the rest of her group following her lead and managing hasty bows.

Scattered bursts of polite applause greeted their bows. The crowd started to disperse. Kevin slipped over to the side and tapped the young film artist on his shoulder.

The name badge on his shirt said *Carlos*. Kevin held out his hand. "Give us a free copy now and we'll sign over full permission for you to sell as many copies as you want for whatever price you want."

Cait smiled. Her brother always knew how to tie up loose ends. That copy was their best means of defense if this fiasco flared up into wild accusations from Mair's sisterline.

She turned to Mider. "Can you close up your booth now? We need to talk things over."

He crooked his finger at Jamil. The Muslim man stepped forward and bowed. "I can close up the booth for you if you want."

Mider moved his head in a jerky nod. The first graceless gesture she'd seen from him. "Yes. Please. Thank you."

Cait shivered. *Oh goddess. Did I do the right thing by claiming him for my sisterline? What does he expect from me now?*

Chapter Sixteen

Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

Kevin was here with her. Everything was as it should be. Her dru-bond with him was the same as it had always been.

Cait was drowning in quicksand. Her face was flushed and hot.

Mider stood beside her. Emily and Socorro stared at him with their faces glowing. Questions, a ton of them, filled both girls' eyes.

Two husbands she couldn't remember stood on the other side of the elevator. Sexual tension crackled in the air every time she glanced in their direction. Her heart rate increased. It felt weird, as if she had two different images overlapping themselves in her mind.

She glanced at Tiny's large hands and wondered how it would feel to have those hands bringing her body to pleasure. She let the raw passion of Indio's emotional aura seep into her. It would be so easy to go with the flow and let them...

Stop that! This is neither the time nor place to be thinking about seduction and pleasure.

She moved closer to Kevin, laid her head on his arm and closed her eyes. Her feathered wig rustled under the movement. She inhaled the familiar scent of lavender that permeated her brother's shirt and tried to think calm, soothing thoughts while her heart rate settled down to a more normal pace.

Kevin raised his voice. "The thirteenth floor, please." The elevator responded automatically to his command and started moving. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and held her close. Comfort and reassurance seeped into her.

Fatima touched her hand. "Are you feeling all right?"

Cait opened her eyes. "I'm okay. Just tired."

The sexual tension coming from her husbands faltered and shifted into sympathy when Fatima spoke. "You need to rest. After all, it's only been two days since you regained consciousness."

They really do care for me. She risked a tentative smile at them. Their response was instantaneous. They lifted their heads like a pair of puppies eager for her touch.

Kevin tightened his arm around Cait and dug his fingers into her shoulder. *Oh Goddess! It's not what he thinks. Well, yes, maybe I am playing upon everyone's sympathy right now but I really do need a little more time to sort this out first and I can't think of anything else to say.*

The elevator stopped moving. The doors opened and they went into the hallway.

A few minutes later they stood in front of two doors at the end of the hall. Soft red carpets covered the floor and pale gold paint covered the walls. Kevin inserted his keycard into the door slot for room 1331. Her husbands moved closer to her. She exhaled a shaky breath and studied the thick carpet under her feet.

Kevin tightened his grip on her shoulder. "Give me a few minutes alone with my sister first. Okay?"

Her husbands exchanged confused glances. Tiny flashed her a wistful smile. "Sure. We'll be in the next room. Call us when you're finished talking."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Kevin leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "What's gotten into you, sis?"

Cait went to the bed and sat down. After handling spidersilk all morning, the yellow satin bedspread felt rough under her hand. She yanked off the feathered wig and combed her fingers through the sweat-drenched curls on her scalp. "It's hard to explain. I don't even know where to begin."

The bed creaked under his weight. Heavier bones made a shocking difference in weight versus physical size for a Sidhe. "Who cut your hair?"

She turned her head sideways for him to take a closer look. "Dr. Nour had to shave my scalp when she operated. I had a head injury and was bleeding under my skull. If she hadn't operated on me, I would have died."

His long fingers probed her scalp and traced the scars hidden under the short curls. His love and concern flowed over her. "I nearly went crazy. I didn't know where you were or if you were alive or dead. All I knew was that I couldn't feel you anymore and Aunt Lily and Roan thought you were dead."

Cait sagged against him and savored the wonderful security of her brother's arms around her. She cleared her throat and confessed everything in one long glut. "Fatima told me that short term amnesia is the brain's defense mechanism for head injuries. She said it's normal to lose up to six hours of memory prior to the injury itself. The fact that I'm part Sidhe may have caused more of a reaction to that kind of trauma. As near as I can figure it out there's a gap of four months in my memories. At the same time I can feel the dru-bonds linking me to my husbands. My heart recognizes them but my mind doesn't remember them."

Kevin hugged her closer. She listened to his heart beating under his shirt. His dru-bonds held her in a cocoon of golden warmth. "We'll take this step at a time. First tell me about Mider. How did you find him?"

* * * *

Cait leaned back against the pillows propped up behind her and stretched out her legs on the bed. Telling her brother about Mider had helped her organize her thoughts a bit more.

Kevin squatted down on his heels in front of the room's miniscule drink and snack bar. "Goddess above! Their prices are outrageous!"

He inserted his credit chip in the payment slot and keyed in his selection. Two colas popped out into the bottom tray. He opened one, took a hefty swallow, then tossed the other can to her. "You're a lightning rod for finding Sidhe stuff, you know that? You found the selkieskins on the Pot of Gold asteroid and now you found Mider."

She blinked. "Selkieskins?"

He tapped her leg. "Scoot over."

She scooted. He plumped another pillow up, climbed in and stretched out his jean-clad legs beside hers. "Yep. Real, live selkieskins. We have three pregnant ones stashed away downstairs in the control room for the VR games."

She opened her can very carefully and took a long, satisfying drink. A good jolt of caffeine might help her brain function better. "Pregnant selkieskins," she murmured.

Kevin grinned. "We came down here to Chicago because we were subpoenaed by the Interplanetary Trade Commission to tell them exactly how you found them. The

hearing is scheduled for next week. The only reason we're is because we snagged Rachel's computer and it showed ticket purchases for herself and Mider for this convention. We were hoping to find out if Mider knew anything about you."

How the hell was she going to testify about something she couldn't remember? She glared at Kevin. "It's your turn now. Start from the beginning. Tell me how I met my husbands. Tell me everything you know about them. Tell me when and how I found the selkieskins and how they got pregnant."

* * * *

Mider watched the door close behind Cait and Kevin. Their actions made perfect sense to him. Kevin was her brother, the one who guarded his sisterline's interests. She needed to consult with him and decide what to do next.

Leaving him to face her husbands' scrutiny was only natural. He'd already felt their intense reactions to Cait. She'd already cemented their dru bonds to her with the most powerful of all links. They'd sealed themselves to her sexually and emotionally. They were her husbands. There was no doubt about that in Mider's mind. They had every right to question him about the time he'd spent with her.

Cait's husbands stopped in front of the door to room number 1315. They turned around. Antagonism boiled under their poker-faced stares at Mider.

Julisa cleared her throat and gestured at Fatima. "I'm taking Dr. Nour downstairs. She wants to examine the selkieskins."

Indio inclined his head in a slight nod. Fatima's gaze held a question for Mider.

No, Mider decided. *I don't need her help. I can do this myself.* He turned away from Fatima.

The white-haired man grinned. Mider felt himself responding to the sensation of relaxed and open friendship coming from this man. "Hotel rooms are very boring. I'm taking Socorro and Emily to this establishment's ice cream parlor. I heard the selection is excellent, over a hundred flavors."

Ibrahim placed his hand on Emily's shoulder. "I will accompany your grandfather and keep these energetic young ladies from running amok."

Mider wiped his hands on his pants. Events were moving too fast for him. He needed a few more pieces of crucial information before they left and the most likely source was... "Socorro."

Everyone stopped. Socorro's eyes widened with surprise. She glanced at her father. Mider's heart jumped into his throat.

Indio's raspy irritation scratched at his senses. "What do you want with her?"

Mider held up his hand. "Two questions. That's all."

Indio crooked his finger at his daughter. She went to him and slipped her hand into his grasp. Her father glared at Mider. "Ask your questions."

Mider studied her solemn face. He'd never spoken to a child before. Her gaze was intelligent yet wary. At the same time, her bond with Cait was strong and pure. He'd seen that when she'd jumped into Cait's arms in the dealers' room.

"How many brothers and sisters does Cait have?"

A shy smile blossomed on Socorro's face. "She has two sisters and three brothers."

"Aside from her parents, what other bloodkin to her sisterline are still alive?"

The child unclasped her hand from her father and counted out the names on her fingers. "There's her Aunt Lily, Cousin Roan, Cousin Naula, Cousin Ainsel, Great-Aunt Elizabeth and Great Uncle Percy."

He breathed a sigh of relief and bowed his head to Socorro. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She managed a small curtsy, left her father's side and returned to her grandfather.

Tiny stepped forward. "What's so important about this information?"

Never again would Mider regret his grandmother's teachings about Sidhe law. "If this situation comes before a full Sidhe Council, Cait holds the advantage. There are four generations represented in her sisterline versus Mair's three generations."

Comprehension flickered across both husbands' faces. Their gazes measured him with heightened interest. Mider relaxed even more. Despite her youthful tendency towards impulsive decisions as evidenced by placing him under the protection of her sisterline, Cait's choices were wise beyond her years. She'd chosen stable husbands who were prudent enough to disregard their emotional response to him as a rival for her affections and view him as a potential source of useful information.

Becoming a part of this sisterline wasn't going to be an easy task. Having lived in solitude for most of his life meant he'd have to make major adjustments in how he interacted with them. But he'd rather experience the rough and tumble ambience of a family's dru-bonds and emotional interactions than loneliness for the rest of his life. That route led to madness.

Did Cait plan to formally adopt him as one of her brothers? Nervous ambivalence flooded him at this thought. He knew the theory but he'd never actually assisted in childbirth. Would he shame her with his lack of experience in a brother's skills? Or was she considering him for the position of her third spouse? His skills in that area were lacking also.

Fatima looped her golden veil back and smiled at him. "I expect the three of you will have a lot to talk about then."

A flash of sexual interest rippled through Mider. He risked a sideways look at Cait's husbands with their attention focused on Fatima's lovely face. A slight flush stained her cheeks. She averted her eyes from their prying gazes and pulled the veil back to conceal her features.

He felt the husbands' awareness of him shift into a bemused regard after Fatima's generous gesture of support. He exhaled slowly and opened his hand. Only time would tell if their wariness of him would gradually change to acceptance.

Socorro tugged at her grandfather's sleeve. Her plaintive voice broke the tension. "Can we go now?"

Mider suppressed a sigh when they left. The hardest part was yet to come. Cait's husbands would now interrogate him.

Tiny used his keycard to unlock the door and motioned for him to step inside.

Long hours of training in deportment from his grandmother kept him from fleeing for his life. He entered the room, went to the nearest chair, looped his braid over his shoulder and seated himself all in one fluid move. No way was he going to make himself look foolish by sitting on his hair. He kept his expression composed, neutral and inoffensive and waited to see what they would do next.

The husbands selected two more chairs and placed them on either side of him. They turned the chairs around backward and straddled them. Antagonism simmered beneath their intent stares.

Indio spoke first. "Start from the beginning. Tell us exactly how you found Cait."

He told them everything from the beginning to now.

Afterwards, silence ruled the room while the husbands sorted through the sequence of events as told from his side.

His nerves were stretched to the breaking point. He stood up and went to the window. He pulled the drapes aside. Tiny figures frolicked in the hotel swimming pool thirteen floors below.

Because of the constant danger of flooding in the tunnels, swimming was a skill he'd acquired. He doubted if he'd ever have the opportunity to join the swimmers below. If he did, they'd know his furred appearance was natural and not a costume.

Tiny's voice interrupted his wandering thoughts. "Why didn't you try to find her family?"

He turned around. "I didn't know if there was a connection between the bomb at the spaceport and Rachel's death outside the clinic. I decided to wait until she regained consciousness rather than risk drawing dangerous attention to her whereabouts."

Indio frowned. "You said Cait has short-term amnesia. How extensive is it?"

He hesitated. What should he say? It was possible that the shock of seeing her husbands had awakened her memories.

Indio stood and waved at him to remain silent. "Forget it. That was a stupid question. How the hell are you going to know what she doesn't remember if you never knew her before her injury?"

Tiny leaned forward. The chair creaked under his arms. "Cait remembers us. She told Mair we were her husbands."

* * * *

Kevin leaned over the bed and hugged Cait. "Avoiding them isn't going to help matters any. You should let them know about your amnesia."

She groaned. "I'm scared."

Kevin grinned. "That's not the only thing you feel."

She picked up a pillow and threw it at him. "Stop teasing. Just you wait until I get the goods on you."

He batted it aside with an easy flick of his wrist. "I'm going to get them now. While you're sorting things out with them, I've got a whole list of questions for Mider."

Chapter Seventeen

Mider swallowed the lump in his throat and tried not to think about Cait and what she was doing in the next room right now with her husbands. He turned and stared at Kevin. Her brother radiated a cool sensibility that provided a sharp contrast to Cait's fluid personality.

He gestured at the sterile walls and carpet around them. "I didn't expect to spend my entire time at the convention hiding in a hotel room. Can we continue our conversation in another location?"

Kevin glanced sideways at the wall separating them from Cait and her husbands. He raised his eyebrows, then slapped at the control panel to open the door. "I'm hungry. What about you?"

Mider glanced down at his hands and unclenched them. He took a deep breath and walled his emotions off properly.

At least her brother hadn't ridiculed his transparent eagerness to escape the raw sexuality seeping through the wall of the adjoining room. "I am famished."

* * * *

Cait ordered the room to adjust the lights to their brightest setting. She didn't want it to look too cozy, too encouraging. Her hands trembled. She sat on the bed. No. She better not sit there. That looked too obvious, like she had only sex on her mind. Cait jumped to her feet and went to the window.

She opened the curtains and stared down at the clear blue waters of the swimming pool thirteen floors below. The chairs and blankets looked like toys, the people like dolls.

A clump of tables on the patio overlooking the pool, tables where a waitress moved past the patrons enjoying their meals. Cait's stomach growled. She smiled and patted her greedy belly. "Hush now. We're going to have company."

"Entry request," the door said behind her. "From Tiny and Indio."

Cait sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It didn't stop her heart from racing out of control. She said, "Entry permitted." A breeze brushed the back of her neck as it opened, then closed. She turned around to meet her husbands.

Strong, well-forged dru-bonds linked her to them. Their *need* shimmered across the five meters of pale gold carpet between them.

Tiny, the taller, bald-headed, ebony-skinned man flashed her a yearning smile. He lifted his hands as if he wanted to pull her to him then dropped them to his side.

She shivered. His hands were large and strong. His love pulsed in a slow steady beat through their dru-bond—deep and strong like the Earth. His protective warmth enveloped her as if he had already wrapped his strong arms around her and stroked her skin with callused fingers.

Tiny said, "Do you still have a headache?" His deep, low-pitched voice rumbled through her bones like thunder. Dark, warm and gentle, his voice fit his massive body perfectly.

She remembered reading in his bio that his full name was T. J. Barnett and wondered what how he'd gotten the nickname Tiny from T. J. "I feel fine, thank you."

She turned to Indio. According to the bio she'd read on Mider's sofscreen, Indio's full name was Edelmiro Jesus Santiago de Arroyo. Cruel flame had marked his face and seared his soul. Fire flared in the dru-bond that linked her to him. A hot devouring heat scorched her soul. Moisture drenched her panties at the thought of his mouth touching her skin.

Cait swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat. She let her gaze follow the line of scar tissue down the left side of his face and neck to the top of his t-shirt.

He didn't say a word. He didn't have to. His *need* seared across their dru-bond like a bolt of lightning.

The burn just missed his left eye. Clear and dark, his intense gaze held her trapped. Numerous small faded scars etched his left arm. Lean and sinewy, his arm showed the results of extensive reconstructive surgery and the interconnection points for an exoskeleton. How far down did his burn scars extend? How much nerve damage did he endure?

She bit her lip. *Air describes my nature, I move swiftly from thought to thought. I'm impulsive and fickle with my desires. Water fits Mider's personality. He's slow, patient and enduring.*

Fatima holds Earth in her soul. Cait blinked as this last thought flickered through her head. *Stop wandering off on tangents!* She told herself. *You need to focus on now!*

Indio moved closer. "It's good to see you again." Rough and guttural, his voice scrabbled at the edges of her empathic senses.

He must have sustained severe damage to the soft tissue inside his throat and voice box. She automatically added another scrap of information to the mental file in her mind about this husband's background.

Tiny moved closer. His low voice deepened into a lower octave that caressed her skin. "We missed you." His gaze wandered over her face, the contours of her eyes, cheeks and mouth.

He ran his thumb across her lips. Warmth flowed from her mouth, through her belly and into her crotch. Her heart slowed down to match the steady pulse in his neck.

Indio reached for her hair. He twisted a short curl around his finger and smiled a lopsided smile.

More nerve damage inside his mouth. Her bemused brain automatically cataloged this fact.

He cleared his throat and spoke in a raspy whisper that stroked her senses with the undercurrent of erotic purpose beneath his casual words. "You look good, real good."

Her heart thumped like a runaway rocket. She looked into Indio's night dark eyes and liquid heat flooded her pussy.

Tiny held her chin with one of his big hands. She went up on her toes and let him pull her close. He fastened his mouth upon hers in a long, devouring kiss. She moaned and opened her lips to his invading tongue in delicious mimicry of penetration. He cupped her ass with his other hand and lifted her against him. Easily. With one hand, he picked her up as if she weighed nothing.

The sudden shock of his cock pushing against his jeans, the shattering sensation of his *need* to shove that cock into her pussy roared into her across their dru-bond. She

wrapped her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist and humped her body against him as if she could rub their clothes away and bring them skin-to-skin with her actions.

Indio snaked his arms around her waist and leaned into her back. The thick, hard column of his erection against her butt had her pussy so wet now she could hardly think, let alone breathe. *Oh goddess*. If they had her this hot with their clothes on, what would it be like when they actually stripped and made love to her?

As if they'd read her mind, Tiny pulled his mouth away from hers while Indio tugged her shirt up and exposed her breasts. Coherent thought didn't matter anymore. She wanted this just as much and maybe even more than they did. Cait unwrapped her arms from Tiny's neck, leaned back and stretched her arms up.

Tiny grinned, reached down with his other hand and steadied her ass tight while he continued to pump his hips against her thrashing body.

Indio peeled her shirt off and tossed it aside. She didn't even have time to catch her breath before he cupped her breasts in his hands and pinched the taut nipples between his rough fingers.

Cait arched in Indio's arms, helpless under the sudden pleasure of his hands. She reached back, clasped her hands behind to his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. Totally open, totally accessible to both men.

Indio squeezed her breasts tighter and pinched her nipples harder and faster.

The wet crotch of her jeans rubbed between the spread lips of her pussy. Tiny ground his jeans-covered erection into the wet fabric. "Come on, girl. That's it. Let yourself go." His pleasure roared into her.

"Never hurt you, Cait." Indio's voice deepened into a raspy growl. "Only want to love you."

Their absolute love shuddered through Cait and rose to an unbearable peak. Her body twisted and writhed mindlessly between them as if she were in the throes of a grand mal epileptic seizure. Her soft moan scaled up into the unmistakable keening scream of climatic release.

They carried her to the bed and laid her across it while the aftershocks of that orgasm rippled across her body. By the time her breathing returned to normal and she opened her eyes again, both men had already removed their clothing.

They knelt on either side of her, gloriously naked. Their cocks jutted straight out in long, thick protrusions of arousal. Drops of pre-cum dripped from the swollen tips of their engorged cockheads. Two men with hard-corded muscles waited to satisfy her again both physically and emotionally. Their *need*, desire and love pulsed between them and into her across the thick lines of their dru-bonds.

Indio removed her sneakers and socks. Tiny unzipped her jeans and peeled them and her panties down her legs in a sensuous and uncomplicated gesture that spoke of long familiarity.

Oh goddess. If she thought she was wet and aroused before, that was nothing compared to liquid heat that melted her pussy into pure desire under their molten gazes.

As for her nipples, they jutted up in hard little peaks that itched for attention.

Again, it was as if both men read her mind. They stretched themselves on both sides of her, pressed their cocks against her body, then each grabbed a breast with one hand and fastened their lips on her nipples. She clung to the sheets, threw her head back

and arched her body into their hot, wet mouths, lost in the exquisite pleasure of two men sucking and nipping at her nipples. The soft, wet tips of their cocks bumped against her sides.

They slid their hands to her pussy. Strong, experienced fingers probed the moist curls, found her clit and drove her crazy with their strokes.

Two fingers, three fingers, then four fingers stretched her vagina, sliding in and out just like a cock while she pumped her clit against the man's wrist. Another finger dove into her anus easily, swiftly followed by a second finger. She had no idea whose hand, whose finger was which.

They sucked and bit her nipples harder and harder.

They moved their hands and fingers harder and faster in and out of her. Both of her husbands knew exactly when, where and how to probe and stroke her. Love and pleasure slammed into her from both men. She twisted between them, pinned to the bed under the sensations at her breasts, pussy and ass.

Tiny moved up, framed her face between his large hands, and pinned her against the pillow with his hungry kisses. He released her mouth and smiled at her.

Then Indio moved down, rolled on top and pistoned his hard cock in and out of her eager pussy. This time instead of keening wail, her voice peaked to a full-fledged scream. Indio slammed down with a hard, twisting shove of his hips and poured his seed into her and rolled out of the way for Tiny.

The sudden shock of Tiny's thick cock pushing her pussy lips apart felt perfect. He slammed himself deep inside her with eager abandon that flooded her mind along with his joy at plunging inside of her.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him and matched his rapid thrusts with her body's *need* to feel his seed gushing into her womb. He answered that *need* with long, hard pumps until his cock pulsed and swelled and poured every drop of cum into her.

He pulled out and rolled off. Warm, strong arms and two hard muscled bodies cradled Cait in an embrace of mutual and total relaxation.

Her stomach growled.

Surprise flared up across their triple dru-bond.

Indio and Tiny raised themselves up on their elbows on both sides of her, exchanged startled glances then stared down at her belly.

Cait cleared her throat. "Maybe we better ... um ... you know ... wait a bit first before we try anything else."

Tiny threw his head back and laughed. He stopped and wiped the tears from his eyes. "We better feed her. Remember what happened the last time we tried to ignore her stomach."

Indio's grin went even more lopsided. He shook his head. "Yeah. Her stomach kept growling, we'd burst out laughing and lose our hard-ons. We gave up trying to make love to her and took her out to eat instead."

* * * *

Kevin had chosen a table in the back of the patio above the swimming pool. The emotional ambiance from their fellow diners held overtones of pleasurable anticipation of delicious foods. Splashes from the swimmers below punctuated the silence while they shared platters of fried rice and curried vegetables. A selection of iced mint sherbets for

dessert provided a cool contrast to the spicy meal. A true Sidhe, Kevin's hearty appetite matched his robust frame.

Mider activated the matte black privacy cone and watched its fiber optic umbrella unfold above their table. It provided a basic screening pattern and white noise amplifier that blocked out most electronic and sub-sonic eavesdropping and guaranteed privacy for their conversation. What it didn't do was block out the emotional overflow from the other diners.

He wiped his lips with the napkin, sat back and studied his dinner companion's face. Dark-featured, with black hair and eyes, his nose broken at least once, Cait's brother radiated rock solid stability and common sense. Faint scars marked his knuckles. The calluses on his hands spoke of hard manual labor, an unusual combination when you considered the softscreen folded in his shirt pocket and the mini-vidphone and beeper clipped to his belt.

Kevin finished his water with a few hearty swallows. He twirled the slender stem of the glass between his fingers and studied Mider's face as if he wanted to memorize its contours.

Even though he knew it was a psychological ploy, Kevin's gaze scraped at his empathic senses like sandpaper. He found himself missing the sense of completeness he'd experienced when Cait claimed him for her sisterline. He wanted that feeling of belonging, the sensation of being accepted, warts and all, simply because you were family.

He knew better than to guess the chronological age of a Sidhe based on his or her physical appearance. Judging by the age of Cait's human husbands, he suspected her true age to be well over hundred. Once she found out that his true age was only sixty-nine, she might think him too young to become one of her husbands and adopt him as a brother instead. He must prove himself worthy enough to be considered as a husband before he divulged his age.

If her brother accepted him as an ally this would help him advance in status within her sisterline. Mider cleared his throat. Being as truthful about his motives should clear the air between them. "Please accept my apologies. I hid Cait because I feared for her safety. She had been injured and I wasn't sure if revealing her presence in my home would bring her enemies down upon us."

The small muscles along Kevin's jaw twitched. He inclined his head in a barely perceptible acknowledgment of Mider's apology. "Your caution is understandable."

Mider decided to risk an indirect inquiry about Cait's actual age. "Are you her full sib?"

Kevin's gaze darkened slightly. "Yes and no."

Mider caught his breath. Had he chosen a sensitive topic?

Kevin held out his left arm and displayed the tattooed spiral of blue lines that spelled out his ancestry. He touched the ogham tattoo of his mother's name, identical to the name inscribed on Cait's left arm. "We're twin-born." He stroked the dark blue letters of his father's name intertwined with the mother's. "Our fathers are cousins. Cait's truefather has brown fur. My truefather is furless."

Cait and her brother were full sib on the mother's side and half sib on the father's side. The image of a brown-furred man lying on a bed within tangled sheets with a

smooth skinned man and woman filled his head. He lowered his eyes, stared at the pristine white tablecloth and waited for his heart to slow down.

“Mider!”

The privacy umbrella had muffled the shout, but no screening device could ever fully block the awesome power of Jasmine's lungs. She moved through the crowd with ponderous grace. Pale blue sateen and a black leather corset struggled to confine her well-endowed shape, all three hundred odd pounds of her. Mider smiled. Jasmine's unrestrained friendship had always made him feel welcome at the conventions.

Jasmine's husband, Paul, trailed behind her. His wine red toga provided a bright contrast to his curly black hair and full beard. A huge bear of a man, he pulled Jasmine back by her waist and gave Mider an apologetic smile for their intrusion.

Mider glanced at Kevin. Kevin shrugged, reached over to the privacy cone and shut it off. The “umbrella” swiftly folded itself.

He knew better than to stand and place himself within Jasmine's reach. The last time she hugged him, he'd barely survived her enthusiasm.

She pouted. “Why didn't tell us you were going to give a surprise presentation in the dealers' room?”

Surprise presentation?

Kevin rose to his feet with easy grace, bowed over Jasmine's hand and lightly brushed her knuckles with his lips. He straightened up with a smile that lit up his saturnine features and released her hand. “But if we told you ahead of time, then it wouldn't have been a surprise, would it?”

Paul bobbed his head in full agreement and grinned back at Kevin. “I told you that's what they'd say.”

Jasmine gave a theatrical sigh. Her thick cinnamon-colored braids swayed with her exaggerated movements. “Where is that lovely young woman you had with you this morning? I wanted to get her autograph.”

Kevin coughed and cleared his throat. “She's with her husbands.”

A bright red blush suffused Jasmine's face and ample cleavage. “Her husbands?” She managed to say.

Kevin's smile turned wicked. “We must remain true to our characterizations throughout the entire convention.”

Paul threw his head back and laughed. He wiped the tears from his eyes. “Yes, of course. You're absolutely right. You must remain within the worldview of your characters.”

He pulled a card from a pocket hidden within the vast folds of his toga and handed it to Kevin. “Thank you for reminding us of this. We've purchased the first video. Please give her our card. We would be eternally grateful if she'll contact us later at her convenience and give us her autograph.”

Kevin accepted the card. He remained standing and watched the flamboyant couple select a table on the other side of the restaurant before resuming his seat with Mider and activating the privacy cone. When the fiber optic umbrella unfurled itself, Kevin leaned forward and rested his arm on the table. “Mair appeared very angry and upset to see you with Cait. Why?”

Mider sat back and sucked in a startled breath. Kevin wanted to know more about his background. No pretense, hedging or word games from this Sidhe. He found this

blunt approach very refreshing. "Mair's sisterline always killed the furred ones at birth. Seeing me would shock her. She didn't know I survived that fate."

"No." A frown marked Kevin's brow. "That's not what I want to know."

He stacked up his used plates and utensils and put them aside. "This isn't the first science fiction convention you've attended. Why now? Why didn't Mair find you before at one of the other conventions?"

Mider picked up his glass of water and risked a shallow sip to moisten his suddenly parched throat. "You're right. She must have been in the area for another reason entirely."

Kevin sat back in his chair with a satisfied sigh and stretched his legs out. "And what might that reason be?"

His hand trembled slightly as he placed the glass back on the table. "My grandmother's clothes."

A raised eyebrow greeted this cryptic response.

"Mair is my grandmother's half-sister. The outfit I gave Cait to wear at the convention belonged to my grandmother. My guess is that someone must have spotted Cait from a distance, recognized the outfit and reported this to Mair."

Mider wanted to jump up and start pacing. He took a deep breath and willed his heart to slow down to a manageable level. "Mair arrived at my booth looking for Cait. When Cait pointed at me, Mair looked at me and realized who I was..."

Kevin leaned forward. "Why? Why was Mair there?"

"I don't know."

Kevin pulled out his sofscreen, unfolded it and squeezed the corners. The screen stiffened properly. He laid it on the table and waited with his hands poised over the keypad. "What is the surname for her sisterline?"

Mider gave him a startled look. Kevin was right. They needed to find out why Mair was at this particular convention when she'd never showed up at one before. "The family surname is Underhill."

Kevin scooted closer to the table and sent a request for the computer to search all public files linked to the Underhill name for the last two hundred years.

Watching this intensely focused search for information reminded him of another important fact. "Rachel used to be a private investigator. Even though I told her to leave well enough alone, I believe she built up extensive files on the Underhill sisterline."

Kevin looked up. A flash of surprise flowed over Mider. "We have Rachel's sofscreen and memory chips. A large portion of her files were encrypted and blocked. Would you have any idea what passwords she might have used?"

Mider pulled out his sofscreen and unfolded it. The best way to prove his value to Kevin would be by assisting him in every way possible and find out if Mair's sisterline had business interests that might endanger Cait. Cait's safety was her brother's primary concern. "My sofscreen used to be "ghosted" to Rachel's. I might be able to bypass her security codes."

Chapter Eighteen

When they walked into La Casa Grande restaurant, Tiny spotted Mair and her guys at one of the tables. His first impulse was to leave and find another place to eat. Cait hesitated for a split second, then went to the headwaiter and requested a table right beside Mair's.

Then when he saw how disturbed Mair became when Cait ignored her, Tiny kept his mouth shut and seated himself at an angle where he could keep an eye on things. He stretched his legs out and traded a long stare with Mair.

With her black hair pulled back into a severe bun and white skin, Mair looked like she never exposed herself to sunlight. The dark business tunic and slacks she wore gave her the appearance of a high-powered business executive. Kind of hard to ignore someone who kept eyeballing you like you were the scum of the Earth, but the way he had it figured, as long as she left Cait alone he didn't give a damn.

As for Mair's companions, they wore identical sober business slacks and sleeveless shirts with discreet silver tabs on mandarin collars. They kept their hair cropped short in the front with longer ends in the back that skimmed their collars. Looking at the combination of pale skin, dark hair and black suits, the first thought that popped into Tiny's mind was how much they reminded him of a couple of vampires wearing cheap suits.

The tallest one with broad shoulders that matched his height was Angawdd. The shadow of a beard marked his jaw. It looked like he had to shave two to three times daily just to keep it under control. The absolute hairlessness of Angawdd's arms reminded him of a weight lifter he knew back on the space station who'd paid big bucks to have all of his body hair permanently suppressed in order to showcase his musculature for competition. Angawdd's hungry-eyed stare at the back of Cait's head begged her to turn around and look at him.

Tiny felt like walking up to him and telling him to stop staring at her.

Cadwr, the shortest one, had dark brown hair instead of black. Mair's third companion, Myrdyn had black hair with a slight wave to it that made it curl at the top of his collar.

During the confrontation in the dealers' room, Angawdd had stared at Kevin's tattoo the entire time. Mair and her guys didn't have their family trees tattooed in blue ogham script on their left arms like Kevin and Cait. Was this a custom peculiar to Cait's sisterline? Or did Mair's sisterline tattoo their arms with special dyes that glowed only when exposed to ultraviolet light?

Mair unfolded her sofscreen and punched in a series of inquiries. The light from the screen flickered on her face while she studied it. She tapped Myrdyn's and Cadwr's arms on either side of her. They leaned closer to her and listened to what she had to say, then sat back in their seats. Cadwr turned and whispered something to Angawdd. Myrdyn rose from his seat and left the restaurant.

Indio's gaze also tracked Myrdyn's abrupt departure. *Good.* Tiny rolled his shoulders in a vain attempt to loosen the tightness across his back. *I'm not the only one who's wondering what they're up to now.*

Cait looked up from the menu display in their table's sofscreen. "I'm placing an order for the full dinner and dessert buffet. What about you?"

Indio stood. "Add me to that order."

Tiny took a deep breath and inhaled the fragrant aroma of tortillas and arroz con pollo coming from the huge buffet in the center pit. His stomach growled. "I'll take the buffet too."

It didn't take long, six minutes maybe, for them to devour their first helping from the buffet. Cait stood up again "I'm going for seconds."

Myrdyn strolled back into the restaurant and Angawdd stood up at his table as if he was going to follow Cait. Tiny grabbed his plate and hurried to catch up with her. No way was he going to let one of them near her.

Just as they reached the buffet area, Angawdd took a sudden turn and collided with the waiter carrying a tray loaded with plates of steaming tortillas. It was a close call but the waiter managed not to spill any of his food.

Myrdyn loaded his plate up with arroz con pollo and tortillas. Tiny heard him mutter at Angawdd, "Watch where you put your big feet next time."

Angawdd ducked his head and gestured at Cait to enter the line first. Tiny moved right in behind her and cheerfully ignored the guy's baleful stare. He made sure he took his time and loaded his plate from the same batch of arroz con pollo Myrdyn had selected.

They reached their table without any further incidents and settled down to eating again. Tiny popped a heaping spoonful of flavored rice into his mouth and finished it in two bites. Cait piled a third helping of mangoes and ice cream onto her plate. What had Mider been feeding her anyway? She looked like she'd lost a good ten pounds during the last three weeks.

Stick thin women who looked like they were born and raised in concentration camps had always grossed Tiny out.

Fucking one of them would be like fucking a skeleton.

For foreplay, you could play tunes on their rib cages. He preferred women with decent meat on their bones like Cait. Voluptuous women who had soft skin, ripe breasts and nice round asses for loving and squeezing.

Cait sat back. Her sweet mouth relaxed into a warm smile. Tiny's heart skipped a beat. The last time he'd seen that particular smile, she'd crooked her finger at him in invitation and stretched herself out on the bed like a cat, with smooth golden skin and dark brown nipples sticking up for him to suck and bite.

He looked across the table at Indio and waited for his breathing to return to normal. Indio put a small scoop of rice into his mouth and chewed it carefully.

Cait leaned on the table. Her soft hazel eyes focused on Indio's mouth. "Is there something wrong with your food? You're not eating con gusto."

Indio sat up very straight. He picked up his napkin and wiped his mouth.

Oh shit. A cold dark pit opened in Tiny's gut. *If she had to ask him that then it means she really doesn't remember us.* He pulled his legs back under his chair and laid his hand on his buddy's arm.

Indio shook Tiny's hand off. He touched the stiff mass of thick scar tissue on the left side of his face. "The nerves were damaged. If I'm not careful, the food dribbles out of my mouth."

Cait blinked and sat back with a startled look on her face.

Indio laid the napkin down on the table, pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. "I don't need your pity. I don't need you." He turned around and walked away.

Her face went very still. You couldn't tell it by looking at her, but Tiny knew exactly how she felt, as if Indio had just slapped her face. His throat felt bone dry all of a sudden. He coughed but that didn't help. The parched feeling intensified.

She looked at him.

He motioned at her to leave. "Go. Find him. Talk some sense into him." He pulled out his charge chip. His voice sounded raw like he'd been screaming his lungs out for the last hour. "I'll catch up with you."

She nodded, tossed her napkin aside and left. When he inserted his chip into the table's payment slot, out of the corner of his eye, Tiny saw Mair and her companions leave their table. He turned his head. They followed Cait out the door.

"Thank you," the table said while it spat out his receipt. "You have a ten percent discount if you choose to dine here again within the next twenty-four hours."

Tiny grabbed his credit chip and the receipt, stuffed them in his pocket and went to the exit. His chest felt like he'd just run a couple of miles. He shouldn't have sent her out alone after Indio.

A pack of costumed conventioners blocked the doorway: three vampires, two fairy princesses and a Medusa with rubber snakes glued to her wig. Tiny elbowed the Medusa's warty tentacles out of his way and stepped into the corridor. About thirty meters ahead, in front of the elevator, Angawdd caught Cait against him and lifted her into his arms. She lay slumped against his chest like she was sleeping. Her calico hair and baby blue outfit stood out like a beacon on Angawdd's black shirt.

Lots of different ways they could have knocked her out. Tiny lengthened his stride. A quick squirt of sedative spray in her face was the most likely method.

"Hey!" He yelled, but the only sound that came out of his mouth was a hoarse whisper. Tiny sagged against the wall and put his hand on his neck. It felt hot and swollen to his touch. Air rasped in and out of his throat like a dying fish.

The elevator door opened. Mair and her companions entered. Mair turned and looked back at Tiny over the throng of conventioners hurrying along with their list of events clutched in their hands. Triumph glittered in her gaze as the door closed.

Shit! Tiny closed his eyes and swallowed against the closed sensation in his throat. Mair must have checked out the standardized guest profile he'd posted for the convention and read about his shellfish allergy. That's why she sent Myrdyn out. It wouldn't take much—a few drops of concentrated oil in the rice—to trigger this type of reaction. It must have been high quality oil because he hadn't noticed any fishy taste.

He opened his eyes and fumbled one-handed in his pocket for his cell phone. Pushing against his throat with one hand helped him breathe a little bit better. Even though he couldn't talk, as long as he could breathe, he still had a chance of survival. He punched the rapid dial code for Indio's phone. His ears started ringing.

The line was busy. A cold sweat broke out on his body and he started to shiver uncontrollably. His hands were shaking. He counted to thirty and punched Indio's number again. Still busy. Four times he tried until he got through and heard Indio's voice. He opened his mouth to talk. Nothing came out. His throat had swollen shut. He punched in

911, 911, 911, slid down the wall and sat on the floor. The phone fell from his slack fingers.

A middle-aged Pakistani wearing a gaudy starship trooper's costume stopped in mid-stride and pushed through the crowd. He squatted down on his heels put his hand on Tiny's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

* * * *

Indio pushed his way through the crowd. He started walking faster but it didn't stop the words in his head. *She doesn't remember me. She doesn't remember me. She doesn't remember me at all.*

He stopped. The crowd swirled around him but gave him plenty of room. He'd grown used to that. People usually avoided getting close to him. They looked at him, did the eye slide, and snuck another quick look at him like he was some kind of freak show.

Even though she didn't remember him, Cait hadn't given him the eye slide. His scars didn't embarrass her. Hell, she'd kissed him and humped him like he was the best-looking man in the universe an hour ago. Why was he running away from her like a damn fool?

I'm afraid. I'm afraid of having to start from square one with her. Afraid she might not love me this time around.

His vidphone beeped. He almost jumped out of his skin at the sound. He pulled it out of his pocket, flipped it on and held it to his ear. "What?"

It was Kevin. "I hate to have to interrupt your reunion but this is important. We're on our way up to see you now because we found out some very crucial information about Mair."

"We're not upstairs." Indio told him.

"Where are you?"

"We ate dinner at La Casa Grande."

Kevin said, "Wait for us. We'll meet you there."

Then hung up.

The phone beeped again. He stared at the caller ID screen. It was Tiny's number. What the hell did Tiny want? He flipped it on. "Yes."

It chirped at him. He looked at the screen. The numbers 911, 911, 911 scrolled across it.

* * * *

Indio's raspy voice pulled Tiny back from oblivion. "What happened to you? Where's Cait?"

Tiny struggled to lift his hand and lay it on Indio's shirt. He tried to grab hold of the cotton fabric but his fingers wouldn't cooperate. His hand fell back to his lap.

Comprehension filled Indio's face. He jumped to his feet and shouted. "This man's having an allergic reaction! Does anyone have a bee sting kit handy?"

A multitude of brown, black and white faces whirled around above Tiny. A roaring sound filled his ears. A young Asian woman elbowed her way past two middle-aged men and thrust a white plastic case into Indio's hands. Indio dropped to his knees

again and ripped it open. He pulled out an ampoule filled with clear fluid and uncapped the needle at its tip.

“Where?” Indio asked.

Tiny lifted his hand and tapped his leg. Indio jabbed the needle in through his jeans straight down into the muscle. He squeezed the bulb and injected a full dose of epinephrine.

The shot of eppie ripped through Tiny like a bolt of lightning. His arms and legs twitched uncontrollably. He hated this part—it always made him feel like a dying fish flopping around on the dock.

Tiny gasped. Air, cool precious air, filled his lungs in a sudden rush. He held up two fingers.

Indio stared at the upheld fingers. “Two shots. You need two shots because of your size and weight?”

Tiny managed a weak nod.

Indio fumbled through the bee sting kit and pulled out a second ampoule.

Tiny braced himself for another dose of eppie.

Chapter Nineteen

Mider leaned against the wall and schooled his face to remain detached. He concentrated on relaxing his hunched shoulders and clenched hands.

With only sixty-nine years under his belt, he knew he was much too young for Cait to consider him as a possible spouse. Why had she chosen humans for her husbands? Perhaps she had become impatient with her sisterline's rigid rules.

But then, Cait's sisterline had been isolated from other Sidhe for the last twenty-five centuries. It was possible that she'd had no other choice but to choose human husbands because of the danger of interbreeding within her sisterline.

Human lives were brief and bright like moths. It made perfect sense for her to take this fact into consideration when she chose them as spouses. Her husbands would be much younger than Mider.

Regardless of their chronological age, the simple fact that they were her husbands placed him at a disadvantage. He found himself automatically deferring to them because of their favored position in her family.

Or were the customs of her sisterline totally different from the lines that reigned in Chicago? He dared not ask. Asking would expose his ignorance. He tucked his hands in his belt. His immediate concerns should be about Cait, not himself. He must hold himself ready to help them retrieve her from Mair's clutches.

Indio paced in front of the bed where Tiny rested. Guilt wrapped itself around Indio's aura, a black cloak that weighed him down. Socorro and Emily sat cross-legged on either side of Tiny ready to wait on him hand and foot.

Their actions and attitudes fit that of true daughters to the sisterline. Were they Cait's physical daughters from pleasure liaisons she'd engaged in prior to the time of her century birthday celebration and marriage to these humans? He couldn't tell. He'd never met any Sidhe/human interbreeds. He didn't know if they retained the inner membranes and elongated eyeteeth of full-blooded Sidhe.

Mider sighed. His hands twitched. He tucked them back in his belt and stared at Indio's grandfather, Edelmiro.

Edelmiro had seated himself at the foot of the bed. His back was straight but not rigid. His heavily lined face was serene and calm, just like his aura. A formidable ally or opponent no matter how you looked at him.

Mider risked a quick perusal of the others in the room. Julisa, Kevin, Fatima and Ibrahim sat on chairs lined up neatly around the small end table.

Was he doomed to remain on the outside looking in, never belonging to a family? He exhaled carefully. *Don't go there! Anger destroys clear thoughts.*

Now, more than ever, he needed to prove himself as a worthy ally to Cait's family. He opened his mouth and asked, "Have you ever played chess?"

Indio spun around, his hands clenched as if he wanted to hit him. "What does chess have to do with what happened to Cait?"

He projected serenity despite the human's glare. "When you play chess, you plot every possible move before you commit yourself to action."

Indio's grandfather smiled. The man's warm approval flowed into Mider as he spoke. "And you study your opponent's previous moves in order to figure out their plan of attack."

Socorro raised her hand. "If Cait's our Queen, then we're the pawns. Right?"

Her father turned around and said, "You're right. In Mair's eyes, we would be the pawns because we're human and not Sidhe."

Tiny nodded. "That's why she used my allergy against me. She wanted to take me out of the game."

Indio's eyes showed too much white around them, like a wild animal about to bolt. When he spoke, self-hatred thickened his voice. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have walked away like that. If I had stayed, Mair wouldn't have been able to take Cait."

Mider blinked. Was it normal for humans to be so explosive and free in expressing their emotions? He held up his hand and caught the man's attention. "Are you sure this is your fault? If anyone is to be blamed, then look to me. I gave Cait my grandmother's clothing. Someone might have seen that and reported it to Mair. It's possible that Mair was the one who spotted the clothes. Whatever the reason, the end result is that she came here and found Cait."

Kevin pulled his sofscreen out of his pocket, unfolded it and squeezed the corners to harden it for usage. "Mair's business interests are neatly catalogued in Rachel's encrypted files. I think this goes back even further."

Mider shrugged. "That makes sense. Her sisterline's interests, her business dealings—all involve the manufacture of spacesuits. The only reason she was at the UP Enclave is because her company is going to present testimony against any further usage of the selkieskins."

Julisa snagged Kevin's sofscreen and peered at the display. "The selkieskins are lost Sidhe artifacts. Is Mair against them because of her business interests or is she against them because the discovery of selkieskins might cause humans to become aware of the existence of the Sidhe?"

Mider caught his breath. Julisa's idea held merit. If they knew the true reason behind Mair's opposition to the skins, they would know how to combat this.

Tiny braced his arms and levered himself up to a seated position with his back against the pillows. "Mair didn't know Cait was Sidhe until she saw her at the convention."

Mider straightened his shoulders and gathered up his courage. Now was the perfect time for him to bring another crucial issue to their attention. "You *are* aware that the Sidhe can use their empathic abilities as weapons."

Kevin lifted his head. Horrified comprehension moved within his gaze, liquid and dangerous. "That's forbidden. She wouldn't dare."

He raised his hands and gave an elaborate shrug. "There hasn't been any contact between your sisterline and Mair's for over twenty-five hundred years."

"Wait a minute," Indio's raspy voice interrupted them. "What are you talking about?"

Kevin switched his abstracted gaze to Indio. "I didn't think about this until Mider brought it up. It's forbidden in my sisterline. But we've lost touch with each other over the centuries, it's possible that Mair's sisterline doesn't follow the usual constraints."

Indio made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Okay. I get it. Cut to the chase."

Kevin shrugged. "The Sidhe aren't just empaths. We're telepaths. We can project emotions and share them with others." He inclined his head at Emily and Socorro, cleared his throat then said, "I'd rather not go into explicit detail. You already know how your close relationship with Cait sets up and reinforces an emotional feedback loop between the three of you."

Cait's husbands exchanged wary looks and stiff nods. Mider studied his hands. He'd rather not think about the implications of the kind of feedback loop needed to establish the dru-bonds he sensed between Cait and her husbands. The strongest bonds used a sexual format.

Kevin continued smoothly. "At any rate, going back to the topic of how it can be used as a weapon, here's a possible scenario." He paused and looked around at everyone.

Edelmiro nodded his head at Kevin to continue. His white braids slid across his shoulders with the slight movement.

Kevin said, "When Tiny and Cait went back to the buffet and refilled their plates, Indio sat alone at the table. Mair could have projected paranoia at Indio and primed him to suspect Cait's motives when she asked him a simple question."

Mider frowned. Kevin's extrapolation fit most of the facts except for one thing. "I don't believe Mair intends any physical harm to Cait. Harming a female Sidhe would bring down the wrath of five Sidhe sisterlines in Chicago. What's happened so far would be considered a private matter between her and us. No one will actively intervene unless we have clear and convincing proof that she intends to harm Cait, or has already harmed her. She'll be extremely wary of attracting that kind of attention from the other sisterlines."

Indio's grandfather lifted his head. "Perhaps we can forge an alliance with one of the other sisterlines?"

Why hadn't he thought of this? He bowed his head in acknowledgement and said, "This is an excellent idea. The sisterlines respect age. You would be the ideal person to approach them about an alliance."

Tiny slid his legs over the side of the bed and gestured at Kevin to pass the sofscreen to him. "What are the surnames for the other sisterlines? I can run a search on the net for them."

Mider relaxed. They needed his knowledge. Kevin had already figured out that the surnames had been deliberately altered over the centuries in order to hide Sidhe existence among humans. "Their current surnames are Weirwold, Ashcroft, Seelietree and Nialhart."

Julisa said, "We know how to create selkieskins."

Mider stared at her. His heart thundered in his ears. The Sidhe had lost that piece of information over a thousand years ago with the destruction of the last selkieskin. If she knew how to create more, then they had knowledge well worth trading.

"No!" Indio started pacing again. "That's not enough. I think the best way to negotiate is from a strong position. We need to capture Mair and trade her back for Cait."

He stopped and pointed at Mider. "And we don't need him to be a part of this. I don't trust him. How do we know he's not working in collusion with Mair? Maybe he set us up so Mair could kidnap Cait."

The light blurred for Mider. The fur on his back rose. It rippled across his shoulders and arms. He blinked back the betraying membrane in his eyes. His heart

resumed its normal beat. The words had been spoken. The chasm that separated him from Cait's husband lay exposed between them. No longer a vague sense of discomfort to be tiptoed around while they tried to bridge their differences.

Mider opened his hands. Pride ruled his voice. "You don't have to tell me twice. I know I'm not wanted here."

Kevin stood up. His stance was stiff and unyielding. "Don't be a fool," he said. "Mider's Sidhe. He can't lie. I'd know if he were lying."

Kevin's words healed nothing within Mider. He slapped his hand on the exit panel. The door opened under his touch. He stepped into the hallway and strode away with his head held high.

Chapter Twenty

The scent of lavender prickled at Cait's nose while soft fabric caressed her bare skin. That wasn't too surprising. She usually slept naked. Cait eased her hand down to her stomach and felt a skin-plast bandage over the location of her anti-pregnancy implant, the coiled wires hooked to the plugs blocking her fallopian tubes. *Not good.* She didn't recall a sudden decision on her part to have her implant removed.

She opened her eyes slightly and turned her head a fraction of an inch. Gold light surrounded her. It coated the bed sheets and her hands like butter. *Oh Goddess! Not again!* Waking up in strange bedrooms was one habit she needed to break.

A circular skylight in the ceiling was the source of the golden light all around her. It didn't assault her vision like direct sunlight. Cait knew she couldn't be off-planet in a sulfur-tinged atmosphere because sulfur smelled like rotten eggs, not lavender. She looked past the bed. A peach wall overlaid with silver glitter met her gaze.

The most logical explanation placed her in one of the penthouse suites near the top of the golden spidersilk dome for the UP Enclave. She braced her hands on the mattress and levered herself into a seated position.

A shapeless bundle of cloth in the corner suddenly rose to its feet.

Cait blinked. The shapeless bundle was a young woman wearing a loose white tunic and pants. Her thin face looked ill and pinched and she had bruised circles under her lackluster blue eyes. A piece of string confined pale blond hair at the nape of her neck.

The woman tensed. Her entire body cringed as if she expected a blow. A wave of guilt and fear washed over Cait. "Mistress," the woman said with a jerky inclination of her head. She inched forward a few steps and stopped at the foot of the bed. "I beg forgiveness for not noticing when you awoke. What do you desire?"

Cait said the first thing that popped into her head. "Clothes. I need to get dressed."

The woman lifted her head, gave Cait a swift glimpse of her terror-filled eyes, scurried over to the wall and pressed her hand against a small matte black ID panel. The wall slid back. A multitude of brilliant gowns from palest yellow to red, to darkest blue hung in the closet. Fantastically detailed designs of silver embroidery decorated their flowing skirts.

Cait frowned and shook her head at this display. She wasn't in a party mood. "A pair of jeans, a t-shirt and sneaks will be sufficient."

The woman opened another panel and selected a pair of chocolate suede jeans, a gold spidersilk blouse, brown sneaks and two white wisps of fabric that turned out to be a bra and panties.

Cait brushed aside the woman's attempts to assist her and hurriedly slipped on the bra, panties and jeans. She pulled the t-shirt over her head and ran her fingers through the tousled curls on her scalp. "What's your name?"

The woman stopped. She became utterly still. Once again, there was a quick lift of her head and a startled flash of blue eyes. Her voice came out in a frightened whisper. "My name is Ruth."

Goddess! What have I gotten myself into now? Cait sighed. The last thing she remembered was running out of a restaurant after Indio and having one of Mair's companions grab her arm.

Cait spun around. "Mair! She brought me here. Where is she?"

Ruth jumped back with her hand over her mouth. "I beg your pardon, Mistress. I neglected my duties. Do you wish to speak with her now?"

What's going on around here? Cait cleared her throat and murmured, "Am I a prisoner?"

Ruth clasped her hands together and bowed. "Oh no, Mistress. You're an honored guest."

Cait raised her left eyebrow. "Then I can leave anytime I want."

Ruth coughed. "Mistress Mair fears for your safety if you should leave. She wishes for you to remain here for a few days."

Cait felt her face stiffen. Cold rage filled her voice. "Am I confined to this room?"

Ruth lifted her head. Her face was still and quiet as she gestured at the door behind her. "The suite has your palmprint on file and Mair's private code is listed on the computer if you wish to contact her."

Plush carpeting cushioned her feet. She walked from room to room followed by Ruth's hesitant shape. The suite was enormous. She found a sitting room, a reception room, a secondary bedroom, three full baths, a kitchenette, a dining room, a breakfast room and a computer/VR room. Each room was furnished in an understated and impeccably luxurious style.

She placed her hand on the last door in the suite and walked out onto a rooftop patio and swimming pool. Mair turned around. Her dark hair seemed to glow against the spidersilk dome that soared above the building. There was no moon, no sun, no stars, no clouds, only a solid gold dome shimmering overhead. A tangerine colored gown swirled around Mair's ankles. She hurried over with outstretched hands and said, "It's good to see you're awake now. Come. Sit down. We have much to discuss."

Cait moved her hands behind her back. No way was she going to let this Sidhe woman touch her and influence her emotions. She held herself as tall and stiff as she could and glared at Mair with haughty distrust. "Surgery was performed on me without my permission. Why?"

Confusion flickered across Mair's face. "Limiting the number of half-breed children is a commendable desire when the only husbands you have are human." She waved her hand at the swimming pool where three men swam briskly back and forth. "There is no need for such devices now when you have my sons to choose from."

Cait looked away. A red haze filled her vision for a moment. She took a deep breath and thought about Indio and Tiny. She saw them before her, standing straight and tall with love glowing in their eyes. The mind-image sharpened into a solid presence until it seemed like she need only reach out with her hand to stroke the Indio's scarred face and feel the thick, corded muscles of Tiny's arm.

She thinks I chose human husbands because there weren't any Sidhe candidates available for my sisterline. Her rage dissipated into tattered smoke under this realization. I must not say anything to enlighten Mair about my family's history. Her false assumptions are weaknesses I can exploit and use to plan an escape.

Cait gathered up the bright coils of her dru-bonds with Indio and Tiny. She wrapped them around herself into a shining shield. "But it's not that simple. They're sealed into my heart and soul. I cannot put either one of them aside."

Mair flinched back. She bowed her head in a reluctant acknowledgement. "Your bonds are strong and clean. Bonds that cannot be broken except by death."

She shrugged her shoulders, then said in a flat monotone, "My only desire is that you consider signing contracts for secondary husbands and perhaps a wife or two to bear more children for your sisterline. As a woman who has already passed her first century, you are well versed in the advantages of such contracts."

But I'm only twenty-one. Cait took a deep breath to control the panic that welled up inside her. *Not a hundred years old.*

She turned her head away. The dark blue water of the swimming pool shimmered under a sky of liquid gold. The air should feel hot and heavy, not cool and light. *Thank you, Goddess, for giving me those dru-bonds with my husbands. Dru-bonds to shield myself so Mair doesn't know how much this has startled me.* Nine hundred years separated Mair's sisterline from hers. Marriage customs had apparently changed considerably during that time frame. What other customs had changed?

An uncountable number of poker games with Kevin proved their worth. Cait strolled around the swimming pool, her face devoid of expression as if she were examining the male bodies within the clear waters. The strong odor of chemical disinfectants from the pool assaulted her nostrils. Cadwr climbed onto the diving board and balanced on his toes for a moment, then jumped up and jackknifed himself into the water: neat, clean and compact just like his smoothly muscled body. The thick black hair sleeked back against his scalp reminded her of a seal's pelt.

Myrdyn swam to the edge and levered himself out of the water with his arms. That move displayed his upper body strength and the taut muscles of his abdomen to perfection. Tall, slim and graceful with black eyes in a sharply compelling face, he stared boldly back at Cait.

Are he and Cadwr twins?

Angawdd, the tallest, clung to the edge of the pool. He hunched his shoulders, ducked his head and did a credible impression of trying to make himself invisible under her gaze. His arms had long roping muscles with thick veins. Of the three, the air of embarrassed guilt in his aura caught her interest the most.

Triumph oozed from Mair's pores. "You find them pleasing to the eye. Which of my sons would you choose to sample tonight?"

Cait shook her head. Mair's choice of words had almost caused her to lose control. She strode away with her head held high and stopped at the roof's edge. A low concrete ledge about a half a meter high bordered it. Identical rooftops with swimming pools and the squat shape of penthouses surrounded this building.

She estimated the distance between each rooftop to be about twenty meters, much too close together for a rescue attempt by helicopter or a backpack flyer. Besides which, she already knew the Enclave's security regulations forbade any type of flight under the dome.

The flags above the other buildings were diplomatic ones. The Iraqi flag swirled from a pole directly opposite her position. Fatima's friends had already compromised the

security codes for that building so the easiest way for her to escape would be through there. There wasn't enough time to hack into Mair's building.

Cait saw huge black batwings, gargoyle wings in her mind's eye and her breath stuttered to a stop in her chest. A long string of memories unknotted their threads and cascaded through her mind.

She felt the silent thrill of swooping within a trillion stars sprinkled across dark sky down past the shining rim of the space station. The power of the sunlight and moonlight flowed through the solar wings into her body, pushing her onward and up into a giddy spiral.

She remembered the sudden ache of her back and shoulders after a long afternoon of flying. Indio waited for her wearing a coal-black spacesuit, with a matching helmet tucked under his arm. Gargoyle wings, solar-powered wings unfurled behind him while he smiled a crooked smile because of the scar that bisected his face.

Tiny picked up a pair of wings and handed them to her. She remembered how it felt to clip those wings to the sockets implanted in the spine of her spacesuit.

"Are you ill?" Mair's worried voice pulled her back into reality.

Cait threw her head back, stretched out her arms and let her mouth relax into a radiant smile. "I love heights. It makes me think about flying high above the world like a ladyhawke, all wild and free."

Even though there weren't any shackles about her wrists and ankles, Cait knew she couldn't just walk away. The suite had her palmprint. No other doors in this building would open to her hand. An invisible cage imprisoned her.

Mair held out her hand. "Come with me. Sit down by the pool where we can discuss a marriage contract at our leisure."

Cait shook her head. Contracted marriages were a relic from a thousand years ago—transient agreements for sole purpose of breeding daughters for a sisterline. What did Mair have to gain from such an arrangement?

A vague glimmer of an idea shaped itself from the old tales of her childhood. Tales that spoke of feuds and temporary alliances forged between unrelated Sidhe sisterlines. The contracts could be written with very specific conditions. One could be that all female children born from any matings with Mair's sons would revert back to their sisterline when the contract expired.

Cait stretched her mouth into a smile. *Mair's sisterline has no daughters. She needs me.* Then smothered a fake yawn with the back of her hand. "I'm tired. I need to lie down and consider your proposal."

Chapter Twenty-One

The sofscreen hummed and clicked while it spat out yet another pile of flimsy printouts.

Indio picked up the flimsy. It gave them latest public stock market reports for the Seelietree Corporation. All very interesting but not particularly relevant to what they needed to get Cait back.

Indio handed the printout to Tiny. It didn't take long for him to read it, about thirty seconds. Tiny crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the waste can. "When they bring Mider back, you know you're going to have to make an effort to trust him."

Indio jammed his hands in his pockets and looked away. Tiny was right but that didn't mean he had to like it.

Tiny picked up the sofscreen and keyed in a request for another search. His voice was soft and reasonable. "How do you know your distrust of him is real? What if it's a lingering side effect of Mair's empathic projections at you?"

Indio stared at his hand for a moment then closed it into a fist. The facts fit. He'd been had. Mair had wielded his insecurities against him and turned him into a paranoid idiot. "Cait always said the best way to find out if what you're feeling is real was to sort it out with logic."

Tiny gave Indio a considering look. "Is there a logical reason for you to distrust Mider?"

Indio took a breath and stared blindly at the wall. There was no use denying it. He was afraid that Cait would reject him and Tiny and choose Mider for her husband now instead of them. Because Mider was Sidhe and they weren't. Because when Cait met them, she didn't know any other Sidhe existed other than her family. Why choose human husbands when she now had a Sidhe male to contemplate?

He inclined his head in a brief nod. "You're on the right track. Keep talking."

Tiny reached back and pulled the sofscreen down to his lap. "We need more information about Mair, and Mider's our best source."

Indio sat down on the bed, flipped his braid over his shoulder and absently rubbed his fingers on the bedspread.

Tiny pursed his lips and let his fingers dance over the keypad in a rapid flurry of commands. His voice softened into a wistful rumble. "Remember how she reacted to us when we made love to her. You felt it too. She wanted us, both of us. If her stomach hadn't interrupted us, we would have sealed her heart to us even more completely by making love to her again and again."

Indio hunched his shoulder and walked over to the sofscreen embedded in the door. "That's not going to help us now. We can't do a damn thing about how she feels about us until we find her and we have a chance to talk to her again."

He keyed in a request. The door's screen lit up, then projected a 3-D image of the hotel into the space between him and Tiny. "Mair's corporation owns this hotel." He tapped the blocked out section at the top. "She's probably holed up in the penthouse suites and I'll bet you she has the entire area rigged out with the latest security devices"

Tiny arched his eyebrows. "Mair hates Mider."

Indio sighed. "All right, all right. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. We need Mider and his knowledge. I'll behave. I promise not to jump up and down, scratch my balls, roar, or pound the ground with a big stick when he's around us."

* * * *

The hotel room's door contracted and closed itself behind him. The lights switched themselves on. Mider winced under the sudden flare that assaulted his eyes despite the dark protection of his sunglasses.

"Dim lights," he said.

The lights dimmed slightly.

"Dim them again to candlelight status."

The lights shifted themselves down to the proper level. He yanked off his sunglasses, blinked and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "Keep all lights at this level from now on."

The lights remained at the selected level.

He sighed, tossed the sunglasses on the nearest bed and took a long look around at his sterile surroundings. On the surface, it appeared to be an innocent arrangement, renting a room for the convention with two double beds and a cot because it was cheaper than renting separate rooms.

Now, he had a room with three empty beds, all to himself. The opportunity to spend five days and nights with two lovely, intelligent women had vanished along with the hope that during those five days, they might relax enough to think of him as more than just a temporary ally.

He'd pictured them watching a selection of old science fiction movies and devouring a platter of cheeses and fruits along with a bottle of wine. Perhaps later in the wee hours of the night, they'd talk and laugh and whisper and share their innermost thoughts and hopes.

"Fool!" He strode towards the bathroom, his fingers fumbling at the soft strips of leather that bound his gray shirt to his arms. For twenty years, he'd been alone. Twenty years with no physical needs, no desires tearing at his mind and body. Long, empty years they had been. Years that disappeared in a flash with the hope of not being alone anymore.

He turned the water on high and hot, as hot as he could bear to touch with his hands, then sat down on the edge of the tub and pulled off shirt, boots and pants. He unbraided his hair and let it flow around his body in silken cloud. Steam billowed up all around him as he pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the shower.

Mider lathered perfumed shampoo onto his scalp and body. Thick suds squeezed through his fingers. He scrubbed his hands through the coarser hair that curled on his chest, down to his crotch, then slid the foreskin of his jutting penis back with a gentle swipe of his fingers and exposed the red, swollen head.

He closed his eyes. Images flowed into his mind while he slid his soapy hands up and down the length of his erection. Cait stroked Fatima's face with her hand and pull her close for a long, slow kiss while he waited for them to turn around and pull him into their embrace. Their pliant, eager hands lingered upon his furred body and sent waves of their desire and pleasure into him.

He lay upon twisted sheets beside Fatima and Cait and caressed their bodies. Warm brown skin and pale bronze skin, both women smooth and hot and eager under his questing hands.

Cait went to her knees, straddled Fatima's body and suckled her nipples. Fatima's eyes went distant with desire. When Cait moved lower and fastened her mouth on the wet bounty of Fatima's pubic mound, Mider cupped Fatima's face in his hands. Fatima's lush mouth opened under his and he smothered her eager mouth with his thrusting tongue.

Cait slapped his buttocks. He released Fatima's mouth and looked over his shoulder. Cait tilted her face up from the dark, wet curls of Fatima's mound, grinned at him and wiggled her hips in open invitation for him to penetrate her. He crawled back, positioned himself behind her while she bent her face to Fatima's crotch. Cait arched her back and spread her knees apart for easy entry by him.

He grabbed her by the waist and positioned the hard, swollen head of his engorged penis against the wet lips of Cait's pussy. Hot! She was hot and wet and ready for his erection, an erection that felt like he would explode if he waited any longer. He plunged into her in one long, glorious shove then banged himself over and over again into the warm wet center of her body. Fatima stretched her arms back, grabbed the top bed railing, smiled at him and twisted her hips against Cait's eager mouth.

He held Cait's waist tight between his hands and shoved himself in and out of her hot, eager body. Faster, harder, he plunged into her as if he would split her apart with his swollen cock. Soft keening moans from both women shifted into screams of pleasure. Yes! Long, hard waves of pure sensual delight shifted and crested and ripped into him from both women.

Mider screamed with the joy and glorious sensation of feeling their orgasms soar through him.

He sagged against the wall of the shower and gasped with the shuddering spasms of release. Hot water and suds flowed down his legs, swirled around his feet and gurgled down the drain. His breathing steadied and slowed down to a normal pace. He fumbled blindly for the faucet and turned off the water.

Empathy had proven to be more of a curse than blessing. Like a blind man craves the light, he needed the emotional link during sexual encounters. When he was a mere youth, his grandmother had hired prostitutes to pleasure his body. After a decade of mindless coupling, he'd told her to stop bringing them into the tunnels for him. Drugged out of their minds, they never focused on his face. They were blank, soulless husks who had shared nothing of their emotions or themselves with him.

Now, it was too late for him to retreat into the tunnels again and live in solitude. Having had a glimpse of what could be, he had no choice but to try and transform his dream into reality.

Four towels and ten minutes with the hairdryer later, he dumped his discarded garments and towels into the room's automated laundry system. One more charge added to his account balance when this was over.

He selected a pair of black spidersilk pants and shirt. Dipped into flame retardant, the material gave him the best protection possible against most weapons, including lasers, without the obvious and clumsy bulk of a bulletproof vest. He slipped a spidersilk rope, retractable grapples and boot suction cups into the pouch tied to his belt. A pair of sturdy black boots completed his attire.

He sat on the bed, unfolded his sofscreen, squeezed its corners to harden it and inserted a wafer thin chip into the side slot. A detailed map of the interior security grid system for the diplomatic hotels appeared on the screen.

Mider leaned over the bed and switched the screen to rotate the view from top to bottom. The holographic image moved slowly in a circle. His chances of getting inside alone were almost impossible. Hopefully, Fatima's contacts would have direct access to the security system.

He brushed his hair out of his eyes, flipped the shining length off his shoulders and tied it off with a strip of leather. While the images moved floor by floor through the building, it required no conscious thought on his part to coil his hair into a thick knot and secure it at the nape of his neck with a slender silver rod.

A soft chime behind him told him there were guests requesting entry to his room. The viewscreen in the door showed him who waited in the hall. Fatima, Kevin and Ibrahim.

Mider straightened his shoulders and smoothed his shirt down with hands that trembled with nervous tension. Pride weighed nothing compared to what waited for him on the other side of that door. This was his last chance to prove his worth to Cait's family and bask in the warmth of Fatima's approval.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ribbons of multicolored lights glowed outside the window. Tiny glanced down at the conventioners milling about thirteen floors below on the concourse level. He pulled the drapes shut and turned around. A 3-D holographic map of the security grid for the diplomatic hotels floated above the bed in the semi-darkened room.

Jamil, Mider's friend who sold scimitars in the dealers' room, was their contact person. He'd escorted a young Muslim couple named Saad and Khansa to this meeting. The faint glitter of exoskeleton wires traced the muscles of Saad's arms. Without it he'd be confined to a wheelchair and braces. Khansa wore a pale orange chador that made her hazel eyes look like embers glowing above her veil.

Khansa pointed at Mider's furred face. Silver bracelets slid down her arm. "Your costume seems a bit out of place for this rendezvous. Why are you still wearing it?"

Mider fingered the thicker fur of his bearded chin and favored her with a slight nod. "Meeting with you in order to coordinate our plans had a higher priority than wasting time removing my makeup."

Khansa backed away. Her wary eyes studied Indio as if he were a wild beast ready to rip her head off. Probably because of the burn scars on his face and neck. Indio kept all expression from his face and ignored her scrutiny. What she thought of his appearance was irrelevant.

Fragile silver bells dangling from the hem of her face veil chimed softly with her steps. She stopped in between Saad and Jamil and peered at the tiny swimming pool portrayed on the holographic hotel. "I can smuggle in weapons and explosives for you to use."

Tiny folded his arms across his chest and snorted. He didn't remember putting her in charge of this mission.

"No," Mider said. "No guns, no explosives."

Indio gave Mider a long, considering look. "He's right. No weapons."

Mider flicked an astonished glance at Indio and arched his eyebrow in question. With a slight shake of his head Indio turned his attention to Saad and Khansa.

Tiny exhaled slowly and kept his poker face intact. Watching the two of them circle each other like a pair of wolves made him want to jump up and shake some sense into their heads. Mider and Indio were more alike than they realized. Hopefully, they'd figure this out on their own.

Khansa's eyes darkened with anger. "Why not?" She pointed at Tiny. "You're an explosives expert, aren't you? I don't see why we can't use your talents to their fullest extent."

Tiny did his best not to glower. He cleared his throat and coached his response as diplomatically as he could under the circumstances. Antagonizing possible allies wouldn't help any of them. "My skills will be used to disarm any explosive devices we find along the way, not to set any."

Indio moved closer and positioned himself beside Tiny. His voice came out in a raspy growl. "This isn't a VR game where you blow your opponents away. I have no intention of spending the rest of my life in prison for murder."

Saad laid his hand on Khansa's arm. "Listen to them. Don't take chances with your sister's life and the lives of her children."

She shrugged his hand off. "These unbelievers don't care about Raeesah. All they care about is their woman, Cait."

Should they call the whole thing off? Khansa's arrogant assumptions were beginning to get on Tiny's nerves.

Mider clapped his hands together. Khansa jumped at the sudden noise.

Mider said, "Raeesah and her children have the higher priority. Our plan says we will secure them before we go across the roof to Mair's penthouse."

Khansa's hands curled into fists. "Then I insist on coming along. That way I can talk to my sister and reassure her and the children."

Tiny coughed. The last thing they needed was another amateur on this mission. "No can do." He jabbed his thumb at Indio. "We have exactly seven selkieskins available for this mission. Six are ours, the seventh one was donated by Indio's sister, Julisa."

He held up his hand and counted them off by person. "One skin for me. One for Indio. One for Saad because he will bring us inside and give us access to the security control area. That leaves us with four skins for Raeesah, her two children and Cait."

Saad held up his arm, pulled his sleeve back and exposed the thin wire mesh of his exoskeleton. "Are you sure I can wear one?"

Tiny pulled his sofscreen from his pocket, unfolded it, squeezed the corners to harden the screen, then keyed in a selection. Images from Julisa's download flickered across the screen. He handed it to Saad. "These are the test results from Julisa's experiments at Sanctuary Station. The exoskeleton's microfilaments are too small for the skin to reject."

Saad pursed his lips and studied the schematics for a few moments, then smiled. "This is excellent news." He handed the sofscreen back to Tiny. "Perhaps I can purchase one of the skins afterwards for my personal use. The possibilities of this symbiote are extraordinary."

Tiny shrugged. "We have to wait until the Trade Commission hearings before we draw up any sales contracts."

Khansa sighed. "At least let me record a holocube for Raeesah. That way she'll know who you are when you break into her husband's suite."

Indio and Mider exchanged glances. Mider inclined his head in a slight nod. "That is acceptable," Indio said finally.

Tiny rubbed his hands together. "Good. We are agreed on the basic plan. We have until tomorrow night to coordinate our efforts and pull this off."

Jamil moved forward. "It is a good plan. We have many things to do in order to prepare ourselves for the rescue attempt tomorrow night." He went up to the door and tapped the exit switch. The door dilated. Saad cupped Khansa's elbow and followed Jamil out of the room. The door shut behind them.

Mider turned around and gazed thoughtfully at the holographic image. His bemused words expressed Tiny's thoughts in diplomatic phrasing. "I'm afraid we made a hasty decision in recruiting Fatima's friends for this rescue. Khansa appears to be too young and impulsive with her decisions."

Indio opened the drapes, strode over to the bed, picked up the holocube and switched off the 3-D map. "She's an arrogant little twit. The only reason I'm letting her boyfriend in on this mission is because he has direct access to the security grid."

Mider glanced at the time blinking in the corner of the door's viewscreen. "I must leave now. Kevin wants me to help him contact the other Sidhe families so we can negotiate terms with Mair."

Indio held up his hand. "Mider, can we meet with you on the concourse balcony in a half an hour? I have a few more details I want to discuss with you."

Mider's face showed no expression whatsoever. "I will be there." He bowed stiffly, fumbled with the door control and backed out of the room when it dilated behind him.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Indio turned around and glared at Tiny. "Hey. I was on my best behavior with him the entire time."

* * * *

Indio leaned on the balcony railing beside Tiny and peered down at the concourse. Signing up Socorro and Emily for the costume contest tomorrow night had proven to be a very helpful distraction. When he checked in on them five minutes ago, they were knee-deep in sequins and assorted fabrics, listening to Jasmine's excited instructions.

The convention had moved into full swing for the night. Huge mirrored panels in the walls and ceilings reflected the multi-colored lights and costumed conventioners, and transformed the concourse into a Mardi Gras carnival scene.

A conventioner wearing green tights, a purple tunic and a cap with long white feathers trailing down his shoulder ambled past them. He strummed a guitar and sang a mangled parody of a popular song known as filksinging. He'd changed the words from a banal love song into an ode to an interplanetary space battle.

Another clump of conventioners milled around below them, securing autographs from two gray-haired and balding male authors. Another group rushed around snapping holo-pics of six conventioners costumed as humpbacked frogs garbed in crushed velvet pants and vests. Mider strolled by this group with his head averted, doing his best to blend into the background.

He moved behind two Death Raider troopers and moved swiftly up the staircase like a wraith. When he arrived at Indio's and Tiny's relatively secluded vantage point on the balcony, he slowed down and stopped five paces away.

Indio straightened up and did his best to project friendship at Mider. He swiped his sweaty hand on his jeans. "Well. How'd it go?"

Mider crossed his arms and inclined his head a scant fraction of an inch. "It went well. Kevin's family will arrive tomorrow afternoon. The meeting with the Sidhe sisterlines is scheduled for 9:00 p.m. in another hotel two blocks away from here. Your grandfather is an astute negotiator. He finalized the arrangements."

Tiny lifted his hand. "We're a bit nervous about meeting the rest of Cait's family. What's the protocol?"

Mider's stance relaxed slightly. He uncrossed his arms. "The proper protocol is that the eldest should greet eldest."

Indio nodded. That made sense. It would be like going through a formal greeting line after a wedding reception. He could manage that. He glanced at Mider.

Mider arched his eyebrow. "Is that all you wish to know?"

Indio shook his head. "Explain this dru-bond stuff to us. The only thing Cait and Kevin ever said was that it was like a light linking us together."

Mider spread his hands apart. "That is correct. The color changes depending upon the person and the mood."

Tiny frowned. "Are you trying to say you see an aura around us?"

A puzzled look crossed Mider's face. "No," he said slowly. "It's not an aura. The light appears stronger in certain places on your body." He gestured above his head and down the length of his body to his crotch.

Indio snapped his fingers. "Chakra points. They're the seven psychic energy points of the body. My grandfather used to tell me he could see energy there also."

Mider tapped the middle of his chest. "The heart gives the brightest glow. That's where the dru-bonds originate."

"What about the colors?" Tiny asked. "What do they tell you?"

Mider leaned his hip against the railing. "Mine is the cool blue-green of water." He pointed at Indio. "His glows a hot red-gold for fire." He jerked his thumb at Tiny. "Yours contains the warm strength of Earth tinged with Fire in the center, all the shades of brown with a core of red-gold."

He lowered his hands and his gaze went distant and thoughtful. "Cait's is white and cool with all colors intermingled within, like a rainbow. She is Air. Fatima holds the warm browns of Earth."

"How do the dru-bonds work?" Indio asked.

Mider frowned. "It's hard to explain. The colors link and join together when you are close, like two flames blending together into a larger flame."

Indio swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. Mider's explanation pretty much matched what happened every time he kissed Cait.

"Mider!" Fatima's shout broke the sudden silence. Indio looked up and watched her approach. Her golden chador flowed around her body and muffled her shape, giving her a mysteriously exotic appearance. She held up a bright red shopping bag that bulged with her purchases. "I bought everything we need to remove the fur from your face and hands. Let's go. We have a busy night ahead just getting you ready for tomorrow."

Apprehension filled Mider's face. Using bikini cream to remove his fur obviously didn't appeal to him. Indio exchanged grins with Tiny. "I can't wait to see the results. You'll probably look and feel like a skinned cat when she's finished with you."

"Yes," Resignation and humor tinged Mider's voice. "It will most likely be a very uncomfortable and unsettling feeling."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mider inserted his guest ID chip in the door's entry slot. The door dilated. When they entered the room, he risked a sideways glance at Fatima. She walked with stiff, precise steps over to the mirrored bureau and turned around holding the shopping bag in front of her like a shield.

He spoke the routine commands for the door to lock itself and display a "do not disturb" notice for all visitors.

Fatima pointed at the bed. "Sit down." The sharp edge in her voice echoed the turmoil he sensed within her.

He seated himself on the edge of the bed, poised to jump at a moment's notice, and reviewed everything that had happened between them during the last ten minutes. She had led him away from Indio and Tiny. They entered the elevator and rode it to this floor. They walked down the corridor and entered this room. He had kept himself four paces distant from her the entire time. Not one word had they exchanged.

The closer they came to this room, the more her agitation had increased until it had reached this level of chaos. Was the fact that she was alone in a bedroom with an unrelated single male the reason for her distress?

He said, "I will leave right after you finish removing the fur from my face and hands. I can sleep in the lobby. It's no bother."

She placed the bright red shopping bag on the floor. The carpet was thick and heavy. Its color was a deep, forest green. "No. Stay right there."

He remained seated with his back stiff and placed his hands upon his legs.

She turned around, faced the mirror and removed her headcloth and veil with abrupt motions of her hands. She folded the material neatly, opened the top drawer of the bureau and placed it inside. Her enameled bracelets slid down her arms. She pushed them off onto the top of the dresser. One fell on the carpet and rolled back until it collided with his boots.

He picked it up.

"Don't ask me to walk around unveiled in front of strangers. I don't feel comfortable in public without it."

He turned the bracelet around in his hand. *Why was she telling him this?* "I would never ask that of you."

She loosened the tie at the neck of her chador, let it fall to the floor and stepped out of it. Her movements were slow and graceful like a dancer. He watched her bend down, pick it up, fold it then place it in the drawer. Her black hair swung past the hips of her white sheath dress in a thick braid. Her breathing increased. She stepped out of her shoes and kicked them aside. Her bare feet sank into the plush carpet.

He studied her feet and slim brown ankles. Her foot had a lovely arch. Her toes were small and plump. The skin was smooth and unblemished. He let his gaze follow the line of her dress. It curved around the delightful flare of her hips to the small of her back.

The mirror showed him her nipples jutting up under the thin cotton material. *Goddess above!* His penis hardened and strained against his pants. He jerked his gaze to

her face and saw her watching him in the mirror. Had she seen his reaction? Was she offended?

Heat flooded his face. He hunched forward and let his hands fall between his legs. *Look away! Anywhere but at her!* He twirled her discarded bracelet between his fingers and contemplated his boots. Their toes were scuffed and worn. Maybe he should buy a new pair in the dealer's room tomorrow morning.

"Mider."

His heart skipped a beat. He lifted his head slowly. She had turned around. There was a hairbrush clutched in her hand.

Why did she have a brush in her hand?

"Take your shirt off..."

The bracelet fell from his fingers.

"...Please."

Think! He heard the echo of his grandmother's voice in his mind from past scoldings. *Use your brains instead of your hormones.* Logic kicked in. It would be extremely difficult for her to remove his fur if he kept his shirt on.

He fumbled with the buttons until he managed to undo them all. When he slid the shirt off, she stared at his furred chest as if it were the most fascinating sight in the world. But then when he considered the fact that she'd never seen a furred Sidhe before it made sense that she'd stare at him like that. He wadded the shirt in his hand and dropped it on the floor beside the bracelet.

She walked toward him. Her bare feet moved soundlessly in the thick carpet. The straps of her dress slid from her shoulders. Her swaying breasts imprisoned his gaze. He couldn't look away. She stopped a few inches from him, placed the brush on the bed by his leg, then seated herself to his left with her back to him.

"Brush my hair. Please."

What? Was this? Could this be? A courtship ritual in her culture? His hands shook as he lifted her braid. Hope filled his heart. He removed the stretchy cord that bound the end and spread her hair apart with his fingers. He picked up the brush and brushed her hair with slow, even strokes. His breathing steadied under the soothing repetition of this familiar task.

She said, "Shaving might be too rough on your skin so I bought the lotion I usually use under my arms. It's very gentle and comes with a cream to keep you from getting all chapped and dried out afterwards."

Mider stopped brushing while her words penetrated the fog in his brain. Why was she telling him this now? How should he respond?

She rose to her feet. He laid the brush down on the bed. She lifted her hair out of the way and said, "Unzip my dress please."

His heart slammed against his chest as if it wanted to escape. *The desire he felt echoed hers. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.* Like a puppet, he found himself standing behind her without any conscious memory of how he accomplished the move from sitting to standing.

He unzipped her dress and pushed it from her shoulders and arm. As it fell past her legs, he curled his left arm around her waist, picked her up and held her against him. His right hand moved to her breasts while he stared into the mirror and watched the dress puddle on the carpet under her feet.

She reached up with her hand and pulled the silver rods from the coiled bun on the top of his scalp. His hair spilled down his back and legs.

He stared at their mirrored image. The white fur on his arms against her smooth brown skin matched the thin strip of white panties across her hips. Her breast filled his hand. He rubbed his thumb across the dark nipple and savored the way it hardened under his touch. His heart ached with desire.

Always ask. His grandmother's quiet voice spoke in his mind again. Especially with a human woman. Never assume you know what she wants. False assumptions have caused too many problems between Sidhe and humans.

He set her back on her feet again and turned her around to face him. The top of her head barely reached his shoulder. He lifted her chin with his finger.

"My seed," he asked her. "Do you want my seed?"

Confusion flickered within her dark eyes.

He tried again. The question must be asked now while his brain still functioned in a logical manner. "Or should I leave and buy condoms before we go any further?"

Fatima blinked. She said, "No." Then shook her head, and said, "Yes."

No, she didn't want his seed? And yes, he should buy condoms? Mider released her face. He took a step back.

She grabbed his hand. "No. Don't go." She placed her other hand upon his chest and raked her fingers slowly through the mat of coarser, curlier hair down to his belly.

She stopped at the waistband of his pants for a split second, then traced the bulge with her fingernail. A more exquisite torture he could not imagine.

"Yes," she murmured. "I want to have your baby."

All coherent thought flew from his head with her statement. He scooped her up in his arms like a child, walked around the bed to the top, ripped the covers away and laid her down. He climbed on top and forced her mouth open with greedy kisses.

Her fingernails dug into his arms. She moaned and arched her body against him, meeting his eager thrusts with a wild corkscrew twist of her hips.

Goddess! She's not a mindless animal for me to force myself upon her like this.

He rolled off her. Air rasped from his slack mouth in long shuddering breaths.

Fatima touched his face. She pushed his hair away from his eyes. Her confused concern rolled over him. "What's wrong?"

He raised himself up on his elbow and stared at her bruised lip. "Forgive me." His voice came out in a hoarse whisper. "My experience is limited."

A pleased smile formed upon her mouth. "That's all right. I have a bit of experience. I was married once before. He divorced me after two months because I refused to quit medical school."

He sagged back. That meant he didn't have to worry about how to awaken her desires in the proper manner. Instead she would guide him.

She scooted up to a sitting position and looked him over. Her gaze lingered upon the swollen evidence of his erection as she slipped her fingers under the waistband of her panties and wiggled out of them. "I think this will work better without our pants in the way."

He rolled over, lifted the mass of his hair out of the way and sat on the edge of the bed. The leather strips binding his pants to his furred legs seemed to take forever to unwind with his suddenly clumsy fingers. He tossed them aside in a wadded mass on the

floor, kicked off his boots, unbuttoned his pants and hurriedly removed them. His penis jutted straight out from his crotch with the foreskin rolled back completely. A bead of seminal fluid dribbled out and fell to the carpet.

He turned around slowly. She lay stretched out on her back with her head turned towards him. Her gaze searched his face. The humor in her eyes faded and shifted into desire. He went on his hands and knees and crawled over and lay down beside her. She stretched out her hand.

“No,” He stopped her hand with his. “If you touch me now I’ll lose control.”

She nodded and let her hand fall to her side.

He looked at her, really *looked* at her this time and saw how the flames within had swirled and thickened into a warm glow that centered over her heart, down past the slight curve of her belly into the dark moist curls of her crotch. He moved closer until his body almost touched hers, kissed her brow and inhaled the spicy taste of her skin.

He grazed the tip of her nose with his lips and moved to her mouth. Slowly, carefully this time, he kissed her.

She kissed him back, her mouth and hands and body eager and ready for more.

He pushed himself away, sat back upon his heels and waited for his heart to slow down. He reached for the pillows, grabbed her hand and pulled her up into a half-sitting position and propped the pillows behind her back and head.

He lowered his head to her breasts and licked her right nipple. She moaned and pushed herself closer to his mouth. He latched on to the nipple and sucked greedily while sliding his hand past her belly. The knowledge of her arousal raced through him in a glorious pulse. He parted the wiry curls of her pubic mound, tweaked the swollen bud at the top with his fingers then slid them into the wet opening of her desire.

She tightened her legs around his arm and rode his fingers. He had three of them inside her. She squeezed his fingers within her, over and over. Her low-pitched moan scaled up to a keening wail. The pleasure of her orgasm soared into him in another glorious pulse.

They fell apart and collapsed gasping side by side on the bed. When he could finally breathe again at a semi-normal pace, he pushed himself to his knees and stared at the sticky white globs of his seed splattered across her thighs.

She stared at him, her eyes glazed with satiated pleasure. His penis moved under his hand, rapidly hardening again. He inched himself closer in between her spread thighs, lifted her right leg up and let the engorged tip of his penis touch her wet and open crotch.

“May I?” He asked. His hair lay across his back and her sides in a silky white curtain.

A look of bemused wonderment crossed her face. She reached up and raked her fingers down the hair of his chest. “Yes, you may.”

He leaned back, braced himself on his knees, held her hip with his hand, then arched his back and slammed every inch of himself into her. Joined at the hip now, two bodies, their desire linked and peaked together. She cried out. He moaned as the sudden shock of her excitement soared through him.

He watched her face while he pulled out slowly, then pushed himself all the way in again. She held onto his arms and squirmed her hips against him with that corkscrew twist, trying to pull him in even further.

He meant to keep it slow. But the rapidly increasing tempo of her twisting hips pulled him in, harder and harder, faster and faster, to the rhythm she craved.

The power of her second orgasm flowed into him and through him and triggered his climax in long, shuddering waves of pleasure. His crotch became a diamond hot focus of pure sensation. His penis twitched and jumped and poured seed into her.

He rolled off, lay down beside her, gasping and shaking and waited for his heart to slow down.

“Mider?” Her voice was a shaky moan.

He propped himself up on his elbow.

A smile of complete and absolute satiation softened the lush curve of her bruised mouth.

His limp penis rested across her thigh. He touched the puddle of his seed on the sheet and smeared it across her belly. “My seed,” he whispered. “In your womb.”

His heart felt like it had swollen to twice its size, holding her within him. The soft glow of a newly forged dru-bond pulsed between her and him. Was this what his father felt with his mother when they created him?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mider performed the familiar routine of coiling the heavy length of his hair into a knot above his neck. He secured it with a pair of silver rods, sat on the edge of the bed and positioned the towel over his lap.

Soon, his face, hands and arms would be as furless as Fatima's. Just thinking about it gave him a feeling of queasy disorientation. He let his hands fall onto his thighs and wondered how Fatima would react when she saw his naked face for the first time.

Her soft voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "Mider."

He looked up.

She held up two black patches with elastic straps. "I don't want any of the cream to get in your eyes."

Tension flowed out of him in a giddy rush. His grandmother would be proud of him. He'd linked his heart to a woman who was both practical and intelligent. Fatima had thought this out down the smallest details.

He closed his eyes. She smoothed the fur down on his cheeks and slipped the patches over his eyes.

The crinkling sound of the paper told him she had pulled more items from the bag. He braced himself. Her hand stroked his face in another caress.

"I'm going to put the hair removal cream on now," she said. "It might feel cold. The odor's pretty strong too. Try not to move around too much."

She was right. It weighed down his face with a cold and wet sensation. The odor of strong chemicals made his eyes water.

She smoothed it on his arms, starting from his elbows down to his wrists and the backs of his hands. "There's no hair on the palms of your hands," Fatima murmured.

He nodded stiffly. Did his fur bother her? Did she find it ugly? "Or on the soles of my feet."

A delightful sensuality wrapped itself around him with her sudden chuckle. "Or your penis," she said. "There's no hair there either."

Warmth rushed into his crotch under her approval. He felt his erection returning under the towel. Did this mean she wanted another session of lovemaking from him? He hoped so. They could try different positions and techniques the second time around because he'd last longer.

"Wait here," she said. "I'm going to take a shower now. By the time I'm finished, the chemicals should have dissolved your fur enough for us to finish the process."

The steady sound of the water splashing in the shower reminded him of a spring rainstorm. He found himself humming a nonsense rhyme about seeing magpies under his breath. "Ane's joy. Twa's grief. Three's a wedding. Four's a birth."

Why am I humming a child's rhyme? As soon as he thought that, the answer came to him. It was because he felt safe and comfortable around Fatima. He trusted her to blindfold him and would let her do whatever she wanted. Loving her, allowing her to care for him like this, brought him back to the simple trust and joy of his childhood when he lived under his grandmother's care.

The sound of the shower stopped. "Ane, twa, three, four," he murmured. "Turn around, turn around, see Lady Moon in the door."

He heard the bathroom door open. A slight breeze lifted the fur on his chest.

Fatima touched his arm. "Are you ready now?"

He stood up. The towel fell to the floor.

The sudden feel of her small hand circling his penis sent a surge of pleasure through him like a jolt of static electricity. He surged into a rock hard erection. She tugged on it and he let her lead him away, totally aware of the delightful sensation of her soft fingers around him.

Oh yes. She held him captive, heart, body and soul. Wherever she wanted to lead him, he would follow.

He knew the exact moment when he stepped into the bathroom because the floor changed from plush carpet under his feet to smooth tiles. "Should I take the eye patches off?" He asked.

"Not yet," she said. "Wait until you're in the shower. I don't want any of it to get in your eyes."

He waited and listened to her start the shower up again. Water splashed against the tiles in front of him and steam billowed around his body in a ghostly caress. She touched his arm. He stepped into the shower and let the hot water pour down his face and arms.

* * * *

Fatima sat cross-legged on a towel spread over the toilet seat, wearing his gray shirt. It covered her to mid-thigh and looked perfect on her. She tilted her head sideways. Mischief glittered within her gaze. She shook her hair back. "Aren't you going to look at yourself in the mirror?"

He finished wiping himself with a clean towel and faced her. "I don't need to. The look in your eyes tells me my appearance pleases you."

She lowered her gaze, smiled and crooked her finger at him. "Come here."

He obeyed her order eagerly. She reached out and let her hand curl around his semi-erect penis. It blossomed rapidly under her touch. "Mmmm."

He wished this moment would never end.

* * * *

Cait wished she were anywhere but here. She unfolded a napkin and placed it on her lap. Fluffy scrambled eggs with melted Swiss cheese filled her plate. Moisture beaded the sides of the tall glass of orange juice. The sharp disinfectant smell from the swimming pool wasn't as strong on this side of the rooftop patio.

Elegantly dressed in a creamy yellow caftan with vines embroidered across the cuffs and hem, Mair sat back in her chair and twirled her fork in the air. A silver filigree snood confined her black hair. "Have you come to a decision yet?"

Cait arched her eyebrow, took a sip of orange juice, and placed the glass back down on the table. "How do you expect me to make a decision when I haven't had a chance to get to know any of them?"

Mair folded her hands and pursed her lips. "This is true. I could send Cadwr to service you this morning, Myrdyn this afternoon and Angawdd tonight. That should give you a better taste of what kind of husbands they'd be. Or would you prefer that I send all three to you at the same time?"

Three. At the same time. Heat flared across Cait's face. Mider's face flashed into her mind along with Indio's and Tiny's. *Three men! At the same time!*

She'd almost passed out from the intensity of making love with both of her husbands in the hotel room. What would it be like to experience Mider's love along with theirs?

She stared at her plate. A sudden chill settled upon her soul. Mair had removed her birth control implant. How long would it take for her hormones to return her to a fertile state?

Rage struggled to surface in Cait's mind. She picked up her fork and shoved a large helping of scrambled eggs into her mouth. The last thing she needed right now was to let her emotions guide her thoughts. As long as she kept her mouth full, Mair wouldn't expect her to respond.

The shrill ring of Mair's vidphone shattered the silence. Annoyance flickered across her face while she unfolded her sofscreen and turned it on. "Caller ID."

"Mz. Nuala Seelietree."

Mair stood up abruptly and walked away with the sofscreen. She went to another table beside the pool and activated a privacy umbrella before sitting down and taking the call.

Seelietree. Cait sat back in her chair and stared at the golden haze above the swimming pool. *Seelie's a variation of Sidhe. Could this call be from another sisterline in Chicago?*

A few minutes later, Mair returned to the table. She stood with her head tilted sideways and studied Cait. Finally she said, "Your husbands are resourceful. Apparently they've managed to contact the other sisterlines and obtained open invitations for tonight's Midsummer Ball."

Cait wiped her lips with her napkin. Did this mean she was expected to appear there as Mair's honored guest? That should prove interesting. If the other sisterlines realized she wasn't with Mair of her own free will, then she might have a chance to escape, or at least gain allies.

"My husbands are impetuous." She allowed a warm smile to form on her lips along with a short burst of sensual appreciation. "They must miss me dreadfully."

Mair tapped her fingers on the tabletop. "I could ask for your parole..." she began.

Cait leaned forward.

Mair shook her head. "I can't take that risk." She stroked her chin and stared into the distance. "I can't leave you here either. Your husbands may have arranged this invitation as a ruse to lure me away so they can rescue you."

Cait slowly opened her fisted fingers. *Be calm.* She reminded herself. *Be still. Become a placid pond.*

Mair held the back of her hand to her forehead then dropped it to her side. She turned around, leaned over the table and braced herself there to stare into Cait's eyes.

“I am going to have to move you,” she said. “You have a choice. Either you give me your parole and go willingly to the new location or I’ll drug you again and transport you in a box.” She extended her hand.

It's not much of a choice, but at least she gave me one. The only thing I can do is state my promise in such a way that I don't agree never to escape. Cait inclined her head in bitter agreement and placed her hand in Mair's to let her feel the truth in her words. “I swear this upon my honor and the honor of my sisterline. I will not cry out or try to escape when you move me to a new location.”

Chapter Twenty Five

The hotel lobby was fairly quiet for seven a.m. A two-story reproduction of a fairy tale castle with its own waterfall gushing out of the topmost tower sat in the middle of a moat. An artificial jungle of potted palm trees and ferns dotted the area. Plump velvet couches and chairs nestled in secluded alcoves near the fountain. Six escalators spiraled up and down on either side. Four glass-walled elevators marked the corners.

Tiny had selected a couch that gave them a perfect view of the concourse. Three cubicles away from him were four conventioners draped over their couches apparently recuperating from last night's parties, their snores muffled by the splashing fountain. He stared at them. Were they actual conventioners or spies planted by Mair to watch him and Indio? He grinned. Paranoia had a nice grip on him too. If they had listening devices focused on them, the fountain provided more than enough background noise to make it almost impossible to obtain a decent recording.

He sat back and let his eyes feast on a straggly line of men and women carrying sections of a Quetzalcoatl for the costume competition. Red, blue, gold and black feathers swayed gracefully on the dragon-bird's scales. Two bright blue feathers dribbled off the tail, skittered sideways, then swirled around in the updraft above the fountain.

Three more conventioners wandered by dressed as dinosaurs. The first one towed a drum set with the words "The Lounge Lizards" printed on its side in elaborate calligraphic loops. The second lizard carried a guitar while the third one had a keyboard strapped to his back. Their tails twitched in unison with their steps. Cut-off jean shorts protected the modesty of their costumes.

Indio sat up real straight. His gaze was focused on the escalator behind Tiny. "Looks like we don't have to worry about Mider anymore."

Tiny twisted his head back and spotted him riding one of the down escalators. Mider stood directly behind Fatima's chador-clad shape. At first glance, with his white hair tied back and dark glasses, Mider looked like an elderly man in extremely good shape. A second glance quickly changed that impression. The skin on his face was smooth and pale and gave him a very youthful appearance.

Frothy white lace adorned the wrists and throat of Mider's shirt. Black leather pants and boots completed his outfit. Tiny shook his head. That was one hell of a contrast between the jeans and t-shirts he and Indio usually wore. On Mider it looked normal. If he and Indio tried to wear that kind of clothing they'd look like a couple of idiots.

Mider shadowed Fatima like a stallion with a new mare. Tiny raised his eyebrows. It looked like they might have had an interesting time together last night. He sat back and scrubbed his hand across his eyes. Damn it! If and when they ever got Cait out of Mair's clutches, he was never going to let her out of his sight again.

"Daddy!" Socorro's excited shout pulled Tiny out of his funk. He turned his head and watched her jump into Indio's lap. "We're almost finished with our entry for the costume competition. Emily and I are going to be peasants chased by a giant dragon."

"Will the dragon be breathing fire and brimstone?" Tiny asked with a smile.

"No." Kevin plopped down in the opposite couch beside Julisa and Emily. "Fireworks aren't allowed on stage. We'll be using red streamers instead."

Ibrahim flashed a smile at Kevin and Julisa and sat on the arm of their sofa. “Jasmine's going to be a Valkyrie.”

A moment of silence settled upon everyone. The image of Jasmine's well-endowed splendor squeezed into a breastplate, gown and horned helmet filled Tiny's head. He coughed and cleared his throat. “I'm sure she'll be an outstanding Valkyrie. Who's going to be the dragonslayer?”

“No one,” Emily grinned. “We're going to befriend the dragon by offering him a jeweled crown.”

A new voice behind Emily said, “That sounds like a wonderful plan.”

Everyone turned around and stared at Emily's social worker. The red caftan with yellow zigzags she wore made her dark brown skin look like polished wood. She'd tied her dreadlocked hair back into a thick waist length ponytail. The nametag over her right breast said “Janice Burrows.” A button pinned to the left side of her caftan said, “Welcome to Hell. I'm your caseworker.”

What the hell was she doing here? Tiny arched his eyebrows. The last time they'd seen her was in the courtroom in front of the judge. They didn't need her snooping around and getting in their way while they planned Cait's rescue.

Of course this could be a coincidence. Social workers could be SF fans too. He cleared his throat. “I see you found the dealers' room. Nice button. Me, I almost bought the one that said 'Something Wiccan this way comes'.”

She smiled and fingered the button. “This one literally jumped out of the bin at me. I couldn't resist it.”

“Ms. Burrows!” said Emily. “What are you doing here? I didn't know you liked science fiction.”

Ms. Burrows pulled out her sofscreen and unfolded it. “I'm here for business reasons, not pleasure. I'm supposed to check up on you once a week and make sure you're not being abused.”

She inclined her head at Kevin and flashed him an approving smile. “I really appreciate the fact that you were considerate enough to post an explanation of your whereabouts at your email site. Most of my clients prove notoriously hard to track down. Your efficiency in keeping us informed will earn you many points with Judge Witherspoon when he finalizes this adoption.”

She keyed on the voice recorder on her sofscreen and spoke into it. “Status report for Emily Nguyen, case record number 21042R.” She paused, stared at Kevin, Julisa and Ibrahim seated together on the couch with Emily, and then continued smoothly, “Ms. Nguyen is adjusting well to her new family. Her grades are excellent and she has been promoted to the next level in geometry and pre-calculus. I am accompanying her and her family on a field trip to the Tenth InterWorldCon. She will be a participant in tonight's Costume Presentation. I will remain with her and her family throughout the next twelve hours in order to complete a continuous observation of their interactions in this social environment.”

She turned off the voice recorder, folded her sofscreen and returned it the side pocket of her caftan. She looked at Kevin. An eager smile transformed her face into bright curiosity. “Are we waiting for someone?”

* * * *

Mider scanned the lower level of the hotel lobby and spotted the others already waiting for them near the fountain. He didn't want to talk to them, not yet. Not until he'd sorted out what had changed between him and Fatima.

The bed was cold when he woke up. He rolled over and saw her sitting stiffly in a chair, already garbed in her chador. He tried to touch her hand and she jerked it out of his reach. "Please get dressed," she said. "We have many things to accomplish today and I need time to think this out first."

He recalled all the old tales of human/Sidhe meetings.

So many times, human women had lain with Sidhe men and walked away the next morning, never to return. His grandmother said it was because they believed Sidhe males to be unreliable fathers.

His heart thundered in his ears. He tried to recall all the information he'd read about Muslim family tradition. The male was expected to bring wealth to the woman's family and provide proper maintenance for his wives. Their marriage contract stated the woman could divorce her husband if he didn't provide for her and their children.

Did she believe him penniless and thus unsuitable as a husband? Could it be that she chose him only as a drone to father a child upon her and nothing more? Now was not the right time to broach that topic. There were too many people around to overhear their conversation. Later he might be able to show her his financial portfolio and the earnings report from his spidersilk clothing and the profits from all his years as the gardener at the library's Winter Garden.

Had she found his performance lacking and decided she wanted nothing more to do with him? Perhaps he should locate an erotica store and purchase a selection of sexual aids and books. She hadn't turned him away completely. He might have another chance to be alone with her tonight.

He brushed his hand against the sleeve of her chador. She pulled her arm away from his questing fingers. Why did she do that? Did his touch sicken her now? Or was it a cultural taboo against public displays of affection?

Fatima's cousin waited for them below along with Cait's husbands and brother. Should he pull Ibrahim aside and ask his advice?

He unclenched his fists and willed his heart to slow down. *Be calm*, he told himself. *Let the Goddess show you the way. Seek counsel first. Make no rash decisions.*

* * * *

Ms. Burrows arched her eyebrows and repeated her question. "Are we waiting for someone?"

Emily looked down and twisted a corner of her shirt in her hand. Socorro buried her face against her father's chest. His hand tightened around her shoulders. Kevin's face went totally blank.

Even though Ms. Burrows kept her gaze on Kevin, Tiny felt like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. How the hell were they going to get rid of her without arousing her suspicions? He wiped his hands on his pants. The battles he fought on the Mars expedition were a snap compared to this. When your opponent tried to blow you away with a laser, you blew him away first. No heavy-duty thinking needed, just an instantaneous reaction to danger.

Julisa's cold voice sliced through the awkward silence like a stiletto. "We're waiting for the rest of Kevin's family to arrive, Ms. Burrows. We'd appreciate it if you kept your distance. Having a social worker hanging around and taking notes would put a huge damper on this family reunion."

Tiny smothered a grin. He wanted to grab Julisa and hug her. Putting Ms. Burrows on the defensive by attacking like this was an excellent move.

Ms. Burrows blinked once, very slowly. She managed a warm smile. "I understand your concern. Perhaps we can reach a compromise. I'd really like to expedite Emily's adoption."

Kevin stood up with his gaze centered on the entrance doors. "Speaking of which. They just walked in."

A very pregnant woman with dark, burgundy hair and pale features stood in the entranceway holding hands with a petite old woman with mahogany skin. Towering directly behind those women were two men garbed in white t-shirts and dark blue jeans. One had rich brown skin and whiskey brown hair braided into hundreds of tiny braids and tied back into a busy ponytail. The other looked as Native American as Indio, except he had his scalp shaved on both sides with the single remaining section of hair hanging down in a black braid.

The rest of the group was tall and broad-shouldered. The range in hair and skin color went from Lilith's platinum blond hair and pale gold complexion to a young man with coal-black skin and kinky, waist long dreadlocks. "Only thirteen? Did anyone stay behind to hold down the home fort?"

"No one's at home," Kevin murmured absently. "The entire clan showed up."

Ms. Burrows tapped Kevin on the shoulder. "Just give me a quick run down of who everyone is so I can enter the data into my report." She glanced at the time neatly displayed above the fountain. "I can meet you for lunch at twelve in the Castle Restaurant and we'll continue our discussion of Emily's schooling and medical care."

Kevin wiped his hands on his jeans. "It's a deal."

Mider and Fatima walked up. Kevin motioned at them to wait. They positioned themselves to the side of the couch where they could see and hear what was going on.

Ms. Burrows whipped out her softscreen again, unfolded it and prepared it for data entry. "Who's the pregnant woman?" She spoke into the voice box panel then tilted it sideways for Kevin's responses.

"My mother, Dr. Bridget O'Keefe."

"Who's the tall man with his hair tied back into a dreadlocked ponytail standing behind your mother?"

"That's my sister's father, Nathaniel Harker. This is the first time in my life that I've seen him without a beard." Kevin's voice cracked when he said this.

Tiny exchanged a startled look with Indio. Judging from Kevin's bemused face and voice, the beard wasn't the only thing missing. Nathaniel must be the furred one in the family, like Mider, except his fur was brown. His skin was a deep bronze color, indicating he had some African ancestors too. One thing for sure, he didn't have to worry about Cait's family objecting to his and Indio's race.

He rose from the couch and walked around to the other side of the water fountain. Indio followed him and said softly, "Having fun?"

"I don't like this."

Indio sat on the fountain's ledge, dipped his fingers in the water and flicked a few droplets in the air. "Caseworkers and cops are the same breed. They're born nosy. She knows we're hiding something from her. It's like having a sixth sense for trouble. That's why she's asking all these questions. The more data she collects, the more likely she is to figure out what's going on."

Another glance over his shoulder confirmed Indio's words. Ms. Burrows had her holocam out now and was busy snapping holo-pictures of everyone and everything around her.

Tiny whispered out from the side of his mouth. "I wish we could do something to stop her."

Indio smiled and murmured. "Legally or illegally?"

"Does it matter?" Tiny considered the best way to haul Ms. Burrows out to the middle of Lake Michigan and dump her.

Indio slanted a quick glance at their opponent. "Legally, we don't have a leg to stand on. She's a nice lady. Let Kevin handle her. I'm sure he's had a lot of experience on how not to let people know he's Sidhe."

"Yeah, I suppose so." Tiny sat down beside Indio and plastered a fake smile on his face. Hopefully the water splashing into the fountain behind them would mask their voices from casual eavesdropping. "Diplomacy isn't one of my strong points. I'd rather be doing something instead of fencing with words."

They waited while Ms. Burrows turned to Mider and Fatima and spoke with them for a few moments. She inclined her head in a polite nod at Mider, turned and waved at Tiny and Indio, then walked away.

Tiny shook his head. "That was a close call."

"Too close." Indio stood up. "We'll have to watch everything we say and do whenever she's around."

Tiny stood up too and strolled back to the couches with Indio. They got there just in time to hear Mider ask Kevin, "How long will your family remain here?"

Kevin spread his hands apart and shrugged. "Not long. They're scheduled to fly back to North Carolina at midnight tonight."

"Five generations and three sisterlines," Mider murmured. "This should have give us an excellent chance at negotiating Cait's return tonight."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mider took a deep breath and waited for the introductions to begin.

Kevin cupped the elderly Sidhe woman's elbow with his hand as if she were made of spun glass. She stood a scant five-foot-two beside his lanky six-foot height. Pride saturated his aura. "This is my Great Aunt Elizabeth, four times removed, of the Harker sisterline. Aunt Elizabeth, this is Dr. Fatima Nour and Mider. They found Cait and helped heal her injuries."

Elizabeth tilted her head up and focused on Mider's face. The sunglasses that protected his eyes from the harsh glare of the lobby lights did nothing to protect him from the wise intensity of her gaze. *Goddess above! Her hair is white. She holds the wisdom and experience of at least three centuries within her.*

The technological strides she'd seen the human race accomplish during the last century alone must seem astonishing compared to what she'd known during her youth. Mider went to his knee and inclined his head in the bow of a young child being presented to one of his foremothers.

Fatima shook hands, then stepped back and placed her hand on Mider's arm. Her intense curiosity washed over him with her touch. His muscles twitched under her grip.

Elizabeth reached down and brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. He relaxed and let his awe flow into her questing touch.

She said, "Your actions have created a covenant with my sisterline."

He took a deep breath, rose to his feet and moved down the line for the next introductions.

The two Sidhe men waiting patiently behind Kevin moved closer. He gestured at Fatima. "Fathers, this is Dr. Nour and Mider. They treated Cait's injuries and allied themselves with us."

The taller man, with arms and shoulders to match his six and a half foot height, stepped forward. A silver clasp confined the multiple plaits of his nut-brown hair into a bushy ponytail that spilled over his broad shoulders. He smiled. His white teeth gleamed within the deep brown of his face. "I be Nathaniel of the Harker sisterline. I will honor the covenant you forged with us." His voice rumbled through Mider's bones like crushed stone.

The second man stepped forward. Raven-haired, dark-eyed, and lanky like Kevin, his voice matched Kevin's quiet tenor. "I be Shiloh of the Moonsammy sisterline. My trueson Kevin and I are also indebted to you. Our covenant extends to every generation of your family including the generations yet unborn."

They moved down the line and stopped in front of Cait's mother.

She stood at ease. Dark red hair spilled over her shoulder in a loose Sidhe braid. Her cool gray gaze raked him over from head to foot.

Kevin leaned down and kissed her cheek. He stroked the fertile swell of her stomach. The child within responded to his caress with a lusty kick. "Are you having another set of twins?"

She inclined her head in a gracious nod and slapped his hand away. "Mind your manners, Kevin, and introduce us."

An audacious grin lit up his face. He straightened, cupped his hand under her arm then said in suitably solemn tones. "Mider, this is my truemothers, Bridget O'Keefe."

She smiled and extended her hand.

He bowed over her and kissed it. "Milady."

Shock raced through Mider at the touch of her fingers within his grasp. Cait's mother was human. He knew that now just from touching her hand. Her emotional ambience shouted her humanity at his senses. At the same time, she felt Sidhe to him. He leaned closer, gazed at her eyes and saw no sign of nictitating membranes.

Kevin continued smoothly. "Mother, this is Mider. His sisterline, the Underhills, cast him out at birth because he's furred. Cait claimed him for the O'Keefe sisterline."

Mider didn't know what to say. His tongue lay frozen in his mouth. Their mother was human. His assumption about Cait's chronological age was incorrect. If this human woman were their mother, if Cait had already passed her first century mark, then their mother would be white-haired and fragile, not standing tall and strong and pregnant.

Before he could stop himself, he blurted out the question on his mind. "How old are you?"

Bridget smiled. "I'm sixty-two. How old are you?"

"Sixty-nine," he answered automatically.

Fatima stepped forward. Mider didn't have to touch her to feel her shocked comprehension when she looked back and forth between him and Cait's mother. "What are you saying? That's impossible."

Bridget smiled. "Dr. Nour, like myself, you're a physician. Genetics is my specialty." She stroked the swollen mound of her stomach. "The return of my fertility is a side effect I hadn't anticipated from the gene-splicing. Technically, I'm part Sidhe now. Their life span is much longer than ours."

Mider stared at Kevin then like a thoughtless fool. "How old are you?"

Kevin grinned. "Cait and I had our twenty-first birthday last month."

Now more than ever, he needed to seek counsel. Mider turned around and looked for Great Aunt Elizabeth. She had positioned herself in front of the Lounge Lizard band setting up its instruments beside the fountain. The lead singer's fake tail twitched in unison with his movements.

His feet took him across the floor. One thought moved across the numbness in his brain. Aunt Elizabeth had the age and experience in these matters. She'd know how to advise him and help him sort out his confused feelings regarding future relationships with Cait and Fatima.

* * * *

Cait had gotten used to the thick buttery light streaming down upon her from the golden spidersilk dome above Mair's penthouse. That was the easy part.

The human servant, Ruth, walked past Cait with hunched shoulders. She kept her gaze lowered while placing armloads of gauzy dresses, sheer lace thongs and silken shirts and pants on the bed. *Fear rules Ruth's actions. Why?* None of this made any sense.

She moved closer to the bed. Ruth jumped back and scuttled into the corner, keeping her head bowed and avoiding all eye contact.

Cait ignored her and selected a couple of changes of plain white cotton underwear and three pairs of jeans—one brown corduroy, a black corduroy and the third in a dappled green suede. She packed them into a small leather overnight bag beside the bed.

Having to go along with Mair's wishes grated on her nerves. But she didn't have any other option right now. Cait shrugged. Perhaps she'd have a better chance to escape from the new location. At least it put her in the same hotel room as the abused woman Fatima wanted her and Mider to rescue.

Warned by the soft whooshing sound of the door dilating behind her, she turned around slowly, her face calm and devoid of expression.

Myrdyn and Cadwr stepped over the threshold. Her skin crawled under their rude stares. She felt a strange sense of dislocation, of déjà vu. Then, as if she were watching a VR game played too many times with its images shorting out, the faces of two other young men seemed to flicker in and out over Myrdyn's and Cadwr's features.

Kyle and Dushawn. Those were the names of the faces her mind superimposed on the Sidhe men. She snatched at the ugly sensation associated with the memory of Kyle and Dushawn like a greedy child after a piece of candy and filed it away in her mind. One more missing piece of her past had returned. Later, when she was alone, she'd sit down, take it out and try to find out what it was about the Sidhe men that triggered this memory.

Angawdd stepped inside the open door and inclined his head in a polite nod. Ruth shrank back into her corner and watched Cait and the men like a trapped mouse in a room filled with cats.

The Sidhe men moved forward until they bracketed Cait. Her hands twitched. She felt like pushing them away. *I'm reacting to an old memory of Kyle and Dushawn. Myrdyn and Cadwr have done nothing to deserve this distrust from me.* She took a deep breath, exhaled it and relaxed her fingers.

Myrdyn arched his eyebrows. "Does the sight of us displease you?"

She said nothing. Responding to his taunts would only encourage him.

He smiled. "Ah, but you need not shrink from us."

"Myrdyn." Angawdd's voice held a warning for him to silence himself.

Myrdyn's sly smile broadened, heightening his resemblance to a fox. The memory of another's man's face superimposed itself across his. A name slipped into her mind. *Kyle*. The face she remembered belonged to a human named Kyle. The expression, the emotions she felt from Myrdyn, reminded her of this other man, Kyle. Why?

Confusion washed through her. Her mind skipped back relentlessly. She remembered waking up, naked under the covers in this room. She remembered feeling the skin-plast bandage on her abdomen. They'd removed her contraceptive implant.

"No!" Rage seared through her mind and body. Her nictitating membranes slid down over her eyes protecting her vision with their translucent shields. She shoved Myrdyn and Angawdd away, scrambled back to the wall and bared her teeth. They'd used her body while she lay unknowing in a drugged sleep. They'd raped her!

The sound of a woman's voice sobbing and hiccupping caught her attention. *Am I crying? Am I pregnant?* Another surge of rage flared up in her at that thought. She shook her head and forced it back behind a wall of rigid control. *Don't go there. That's what they want. They want me to panic. I am Sidhe. Sidhe women use their intellect, not their emotions to solve their problems.*

Cait blinked. The golden haze that obscured her vision vanished as the nictitating membranes slid back. She saw Ruth huddled in the corner as far away from her as she could get. The crying and hiccupping came from Ruth. Cait turned her head and stared at her hands. She had them stretched out like claws ready to rip Myrdyn's and Angawdd's eyes from their faces.

With icy cold clarity, the reason behind Ruth's behavior surfaced in her mind. *I terrify Ruth, not them. She knows how strong Sidhe are. If she'd been standing near me when I found out what they did to me, I would have killed her during the blindness of my rage.*

“What happened?” Mair's cold voice caught Cait's attention. She turned around and stared at the Sidhe woman.

Angawdd ducked his head and mumbled. “She figured out what we did to her.”

Mair's gaze went cold and distant.

Cait rubbed her arms. The muscles under her fingers shifted and bunched into hard knots while anger flowed like electricity under her skin. Mair knew all along what had happened. *That* was the reason behind the hurry to sign a marriage contract. A quick consummation under contract would blur the truth about any child conceived.

A sudden chill spilled over her. If she refused to sign a marriage contract, killing her might be Mair's next choice.

Cait rubbed her arms one last time and let her hands drop to her sides. She locked gazes with Mair.

Mair's caustic voice matched her brittle smile. “Would you like to hear the details?”

Calm. Be calm. Cait sucked in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. *The woman seeks to inflame me and expose me as incapable of coherent thought. I must not allow emotions to control my responses. Not now.*

She glanced at the men standing in a row beside Mair. Myrdyn's gaze held contempt. Cadwr's stare was equally bold. Angawdd's gaze remained focused on the wall behind her. A flush stained his cheeks.

She lifted her hand to her mouth, smothered a yawn and said in a bored voice. “The details are insignificant.”

The flush deepened on Angawdd's face.

Mair arched her eyebrows. Her gaze widened with mock surprise.

Sparring with Mair felt like walking a tightrope over molten lava. One wrong step, one wrong word would doom her to oblivion. Cait yawned a second time, then shrugged. “I'm sure there was no finesse involved in the act. I was unconscious at the time.”

Mair rubbed her chin. Respect glimmered within her abstracted gaze. “This is true.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Cait leaned against the wall, closed her eyes and focused on breathing in and out, one breath at a time. She stood in a private elevator with only Angawdd as her escort. No sense in thinking about whether or not she carried a child in her womb. If she went down that path, she'd start screaming and try to disembowel him.

Now, more than ever, she needed to use her mind to think this out properly and keep her emotions under control. Twenty-five centuries had passed since her sisterline had contact with Mair's. If she divided that by three hundred that meant at least eight generations—possibly nine or ten at the most—separated their families. How much of a cultural shift had occurred during that time period? How many customs had been altered and how many remained intact? Were Mair and her offspring the norm for every other sisterline in Chicago?

“I couldn't do it. Not that way.”

Cait opened her eyes. What in the name of the Goddess was Angawdd babbling about?

He stood ramrod straight on the opposite side of the elevator. His gaze was focused on the doors. On her reflected image in the shiny metal panels. His voice came out in a tortured monotone. “They mocked me because I couldn't do it, because I couldn't get aroused.”

I really don't want to know, the thought whispered in Cait's mind. At the same time she couldn't stop herself, with a jaded sense of morbid curiosity, from wanting him to say it because she *had* to know.

“They're not my brothers. We're cousins. Mair's my aunt. Her brother fathered me upon one of the servants. She died while giving birth to me. My father survived her death for only one week.”

She dipped her head in automatic acknowledgement of his logic. The survival rate for Sidhe when their mates died was extremely low. Her sisterline had solved that problem by binding their hearts to multiple spouses. Those remaining spouses helped them survive the loss of their mates.

“I may not always agree with their decisions but they're family—the only family I have. And if I don't have family, then I'm nothing. Right?”

This was true. The dru-bonds of an intact sisterline also guaranteed survival for its members.

Guilt flared out from him like a bitter flame and washed over her, searing her heart with his pain. His words spilled out in a final glut while the numbers above the door relentlessly flashed their descent floor by floor. The skin at the back of his neck caught her attention. It was red, bright red. “They mocked me. In order to silence their mockery, I stood above you, and pretended you desired me until I spilled my seed inside you along with theirs.”

His voice, his words, tickled at her mind like thousands of spiders crawling inside her head.

Confession is good for the soul. She supposed it felt good for him but it didn't do a damn thing for her. Her mind felt numb. Her body stood there frozen in place, unable to

move as if a horrible accident had unfolded in front of her, splattering rivers of blood in every direction.

The elevator stopped moving. The letters flashing above the door told her they were in the sub-basement level.

He picked up her bag and motioned for her to follow him. They hurried past a private submarine docking pool that filled the center of the cavernous space to another smaller door on the opposite wall. His shoes clicked on the hard concrete. She walked behind him on sneakered feet, the slight sound echoed by waves splashing against the sides of the docking pool.

She sucked in her breath and inhaled the raw wet scent of lake water. Pollution had taken its toll during the last century and Chicago had spent thirty years dredging and purifying the lake to this level of dubious cleanliness. Too bad she didn't have one of the selkieskins in her possession right now. She'd never be able to hold her breath long enough to escape without it. Besides which, the option of suicide held no attraction for her. No matter how depressed she felt, her will to live was too strong for her to just give up and die.

* * * *

Cait rubbed her arms and strolled to the penthouse window. Despite the warm, golden sunlight dappling her skin and the bright red and green patterns of the opulent carpets under her feet, her body felt as frozen as her heart.

The thin Arabic woman in the apartment remained in the corner with her children. She wore a black chador and veil but she'd pulled the veil aside because there were no men in the room with them. Dark bruises marred the woman's face and arms. She sat on the carpeted floor, isolated and wrapped up in her children to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. The woman had been beaten so many times, fear shimmered over her in a thick, dark miasma.

This woman hated and feared her husband. The baby boy and girl child she cuddled were the result of her husband's unending rapes upon her unwilling body. Yet she loved them with all her heart and soul.

Cait rested her hand on her flat abdomen. If she were pregnant, if a baby grew within her as a result of Mair's connivance, would she be able to cast out this child the way Mair had cast Mider out from her sisterline? Would she be willing to remain pregnant, give birth and then turn and hand her baby over to Mair without looking back and wondering for the rest of her life if that was the right decision?

Regardless of who fathered such a child, he or she would also carry her DNA. This child rightfully belonged to her sisterline, not Mair's. Plus, if she gave her child to Mair, she'd be doing exactly what Mair wanted.

Socorro's mother had aborted her at one week's gestation and decanted the fetus into an artificial womb for the hospital to grow for adoptive parents. The hospital contacted Indio because he was listed as the spouse. When the DNA test proved that he was the father, his sister Julisa agreed to become a surrogate mother for his daughter. They implanted Socorro's fetus in Julisa's womb and she gave birth to Socorro nine months later.

Socorro was not Cait's daughter. Yet the dru-bond forged by the love she shared with Socorro was the same as if she were hers.

Cait straightened her shoulders and hugged herself again. No. If she were pregnant, she could not and would not abort her baby. How was she going to explain this to her husbands?

Fact. She'd made love with both of her husbands an hour before Mair had drugged her unconscious, kidnapped her and had her anti-fertility implant surgically removed. Both Tiny and Indio had climaxed inside her and spilled their seed into her womb before the implant was removed. Sperm remained viable within the vaginal canal for forty-eight hours. It was quite possible that if she *were* pregnant, one of her husbands was the actual father of her baby instead of one of the Sidhe men from Mair's sisterline.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mider stood in a side chamber awaiting entry to the ballroom for the Midsummer Ball and introduction to Sidhe society. Cait's family surrounded him. The aura of their total acceptance curled around him like a giant hug. For the first time in his life, he belonged to a sisterline.

Two of Cait's younger sisters, tall auburn-haired identical twins with pert breasts rising above the pale jade silk of their gowns, looked Mider over with deep consideration. The veiled sensuality simmering within their auras tingled across him like a caress.

He stepped back with panic in his heart. This was too sudden. Fatima had first claim on his heart. He needed her approval before he could accept any other woman or man for a possible pleasure mating, let alone a more permanent relationship. Where was Fatima? He turned around.

On the opposite side of the room, her aura sparkled with pleasure while she conversed with Great Aunt Elizabeth. Mider smiled. The fragile dru-bond he'd established with Fatima flared into life like a shining thread and jumped from his heart toward her. She turned from her conversation with Great Aunt Elizabeth and stared at him.

Entrapped within Fatima's dark, mysterious eyes above the translucent veil of her gold spidersilk chador, he could neither talk nor move. She approached him. Her chador shimmered in liquid splendor over her graceful stride. Mider's heart stuttered in his chest, then remembered to beat again. Had she changed her mind about wanting his baby?

She stopped and touched his hand. Her desire shot through him in a sizzling bolt.

Oh goddess, she still wanted him.

"Mider." Her soft voice was the only voice he heard past the sudden thunder of his heart. "Come with me. I have something I wish to discuss with you."

The cool strength of her grip on his hand kept him from stumbling while he followed her to a secluded window seat and sat beside her. She released his hand. The layers of fabric that concealed her body from public view meant nothing to him. The lush curves of her breasts, the way her large, brown nipples hardened into ripe berries under his fingers and mouth were already engraved in his mind. She'd gifted him with the hidden strength of her lovely arms and legs, and the lavish swell of her hips. He knew the delicate taste of her arousal within the dark curls at the apex of her thighs.

Fatima smoothed the chador across her lap, then tilted her head back and looked at him.

Calm assessment filled her gaze. "Aunt Elizabeth answered my questions about Sidhe family relationships. Now I've made my decisions about us."

Mider's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. All he could do was nod at her to continue.

"I want you to study the Koran and find out if you want to convert to the Muslim religion."

Mider blinked at this astonishing demand. "Why?"

"Because your willingness to do this satisfies my culture's requirement for a potential husband."

Fatima wasn't rejecting him. She wanted him for more than one night. She wasn't saying he had to convert, only that she wanted him study her religion. If that made her happy, well then, he was more than willing to do this task.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and managed a shaky smile. "Yes, I will do this."

Fatima nodded. "Good. I will schedule you with an excellent teacher." She shifted sideways and turned her attention to Cait's sisters who were standing and talking quietly with their mother on the other side of the room. "I know your culture is polygamous. I have no conflict with that because my religion permits each man to have four wives."

Her gaze lingered on Cait's brothers and male cousins, tall and broad-shouldered, including Kevin standing between Julisa and Ibrahim. One by one, the men and youths turned under her attentive stare and flashed interested smiles. "I'm not sure how I feel yet about having more than one husband at the same time, but I will sort that out later." She returned her gaze to Mider and a spark of humor glowed within her dark eyes. "I claim the right to select all potential wives and husbands, do you have any problems with this plan?"

Mider grabbed her hands and poured his joy and relief into her. "I accept your plan. You are my first love, the one who holds first claim on my heart. I know you will choose wisely for us."

The insistent chiming of the huge double doors at the end of the waiting room interrupted them. Fatima squeezed his fingers between hers. The dru-bond linking his heart with hers settled into a shining ribbon of complete acceptance. "Let's get in line. Aunt Elizabeth wants you to escort her inside with me."

Mider jumped to his feet, pulled Fatima to her feet, then escorted her to join the line. He stopped in front of Aunt Elizabeth, bowed and extended his arm. She linked her arm with his under the approving gazes of Cait's family. His heart was ready to burst with pride when he assumed the first position in front of the slowly opening doors with the eldest woman of Cait's family upon his arm.

* * * *

Sweating under the layer of synth-skin that concealed the scars on his face and neck, Indio hunched his shoulders and slouched while he walked alongside the robo-cleaner. Tiny strode beside him.

Indio kept his gaze straight ahead. That was far safer than staring at Tiny's no longer bald scalp. A wig would have been too easy to detect. Instead, they'd chosen the tedious process of gluing the hair strand by strand on his scalp for a more natural appearance. It must itch like hell. Tiny must have nerves of steel because he only scratched his head once in the last half-hour.

They crowded into the elevator. Saad, their interpreter and inside contact person, positioned his body in front of the camera lens and blocked any direct view of Tiny and Indio. Saad placed his hand on the DNA palm scanner. Then, right on schedule, a bored voice spoke from the speaker grill above the scanner. "Saad, you know better than to try and bring in two new guys without going through the proper security protocols."

Saad sighed and grimaced at the camera. "Charlie, I'm on a tight schedule with two brand new trainees from the temp service. We have only an hour and a half to clean and re-wax the grand ballroom floor. How about if we skip the scanning of their DNA

into the files for today? I'll swing by with them first thing tomorrow morning and let you take all the samples you want to keep the system up to date."

"Forget it, Saad. I have no desire to lose my balls just because you're in a hurry." The doors slid open and the bored voice continued, "Bring your guys over to the security elevator. It'll use up ten minutes of your precious time."

Indio kept his head down and plodded behind Saad and Tiny. Perfect! They were in! The next phase of their plan should occur right on schedule.

* * * *

Curiosity, shock, hatred and fear assaulted Mider like storm clouds on the horizon and slid aside without touching him. Total acceptance of him from Cait's family washed through him in a healing balm over the scorched scars deep inside his heart. Their drubonds shielded him against the rampant emotions searing the air at this elite gathering of Chicago's six Sidhe sisterlines.

Fatima and Great Aunt Elizabeth tightened their grasp around his arms and their pride at being his companions flowed into him in a glorious rush that made his heart race. He smiled and escorted them into the ballroom.

Gauzy gowns in every color imaginable, elaborate hairdos, stiff, formal tuxedos, and strong, vibrant Sidhe faces whirled past him in a blur of introductions. At one time, he would have cared enough to study them all closely, memorize their features and envy them. But thoughts of Cait's situation kept intruding. He'd much rather be working with Cait's husbands to rescue her instead of playing the part of a grand diversion at this gathering of Sidhe families.

Envious gazes lingered on the obvious swollen pregnancy of Cait's human mother. Heads turned and watched the tall, graceful figures of Cait's brothers and sisters, her Aunt Lilith, her male and female cousins. Eyes widened at Indio's grandfather Edelmiro with his slate-gray, braided hair, at Cait's Uncle Percival's salt and pepper hair and Aunt Elizabeth's snow-white hair and age-lined face. With a normal lifespan of over three hundred years, white hair and age-lined features on a Sidhe man or woman meant wisdom, great power and accumulated wealth, a combination that boded ill for anyone who crossed them.

The soothing strains of ancient Celtic music and voices played in the background through hidden speakers. When the other Sidhe focused upon Socorro's and Emily's young and vibrant faces, Mider could almost hear their unspoken thoughts. *Five generations from two sisterlines, all healthy and strong!*

Interestingly enough, the presence of Cait's furred father, Nathaniel caused an even larger shock. The ripples from that shock reverberated throughout the various groups of Sidhe milling about the ballroom while Mider led Fatima and Aunt Elizabeth to the buffet table where candles flickered behind elaborate concoctions of food and drink.

Mair moved to the other side of the buffet table with her obvious avoidance of any direct physical contact with Mider. Even though he always knew she wanted him dead, it still sliced his heart to ribbons to see her act out her hatred of him in this manner.

Nathaniel and Mider were the only furred Sidhe there. All the other furred ones remained hidden within the homes of the other sisterlines. Mair's sisterline had ruthlessly cast out and eliminated their furred ones. And the results of that decision showed in an obvious lack of progeny.

Mair is your great-aunt, my younger sister. The sad, discordant memory of his grandmother's voice echoed inside his mind. *No matter what happens, I want you to remember this.*

He sucked in his breath and carefully poured a glass of punch for Fatima and a glass of wine for Aunt Elizabeth. In that moment, between one breath and the next, he found his center. Peace flowed into him and washed away the anger and resentment in his heart. Right or wrong, Mair remained his closest blood relative regardless of his standing within Cait's sisterline. In his heart, he would honor Mair no matter what she thought of him. There was no need for him to gloat over the lack of children for her sisterline.

* * * *

"You're crazy!" The security guard, Charlie, struggled against the deceptively slender spidersilk ropes. Hogtied, with his hands and feet bound behind him, Charlie was as helpless as a turtle flipped over on its back. A rope of spidersilk as thick around as a pencil was strong enough to stop a turbo-boasted airliner in full flight.

Indio nodded with satisfaction. So far, so good. He pointed his plasteel needler at Saad and gestured at him to kneel on the floor. Anyone who accessed the security vids and voice records and saw their swift assault and disarming of Charlie would believe that Saad was nothing more than a pawn forced to do the bidding of his captors. Tiny pulled an ampoule from his coverall pocket, went to his knee besides Charlie's thrashing body, held it against the guard's thick neck and squeezed. Fifteen seconds later, Charlie's cold blue gaze hazed over; he slumped to the floor like a sack of dirt, closed his eyes and a discordant snore came from his parted lips.

Tiny stood, went to the control panel, produced a precoded jammer from his pocket and inserted it into the main data port. The lights dimmed and then shut off completely. The soft hissing sounds of air-conditioning abruptly ended. The bilious glow of the secondary, emergency lights flared into life at scattered intervals in the ceiling. Nowhere near as bright as the normal lighting. Just enough to get by.

Tiny pulled a scanner from his pocket and walked around the perimeter of the room, stopping five times to destroy spy cams and spy ears. No need to give the other side complete visual and voice records to validate and trace their ID's.

Indio waited until Tiny raised his fist and pumped it in the all clear signal before he relaxed, placed his bogus needler on the nearest console and pulled Saad to his feet. The next phase was simple. Again, without speaking, they removed their sneakers, surgical gloves and coveralls and jammed them into two fireproof trashcans. Indio peeled off his skin plast and tossed it into the can next while Tiny poured a solvent on a rag and wiped it across his scalp and chin, dissolving the fixative that glued the hair and beard to his skin. Now the only thing they wore was their selkieskins. Ripples of blue and green swirled across the selkieskins in reaction to their body chemistry and movements.

A handful of flash powder ignited the contents of both cans. Tiny unclipped the extinguisher from the wall and waited until the fire consumed all physical evidence of their disguises before he sprayed the foam liberally around the charred ashes.

Indio went to the cleaning robot, opened the side panel, pulled out the jaws-of-life tool normally used to extract accident victims from their vehicles and handed it to Tiny. Two minutes later, after they had the doors wedged open on the security elevator, they pulled the selkieskins over their faces. The dark interior of the elevator shaft changed into

the glowing infrared heat signatures easily picked up by the enhanced vision of their selkie eyes.

With the entire electrical system on emergency power save settings, this elevator was now locked down at the bottom of its shaft, just like every other elevator in the building. Tiny jumped into the shaft and grabbed onto the thick titanium alloy cables in the middle. He clung to the cable with his arms and legs, clipped one end of a spidersilk rope to the cable and flung the other end to Indio.

Saad was the weakest link in their plan right now. Hauling him up the cable like a sack of potatoes was going to be nuisance but they had no other choice. They still needed his services as an interpreter once they arrived at the penthouse. Hopefully it wouldn't take Saad too long to explain to the Muslim woman how to don the selkieskins and convince her to leave with them as planned.

Indio didn't care one way or the other about that part of their plan. All he cared was that Cait was in that penthouse upstairs and they'd be together. Even though he knew it was impossible, after he got her back he intended to do his best to watch over her and keep her safe twenty-four hours a day.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When the lights went out, Cait stopped in mid-stride and listened. The distinctive sound of the elevator descending to the basement level reached her ears. No surprise there. That was an automatic safety program to prevent people from trying to use elevators and getting stuck in them during an emergency.

She placed her left foot back on the floor and rolled her shoulders against the tension that tightened them. Standing with one foot in mid-air was not a smart move. She cocked her head and listened again. Air circulation had stopped too. Was this a test of the alarm system or a true emergency? Did it mean that Mider and her husbands would arrive soon and release her from Mair's clutches? *Goddess above!* She hoped so, more than anything she'd ever hoped for in her life.

But, if it were her husbands, how was she going to explain her possible pregnancy from one of the men in Mair's sisterline? Cait sucked in a deep breath, counted to ten, exhaled slowly and reined in her wayward emotions. Now was not a good time to worry about that. Escaping was her first priority. The pale yellow glow of moonlight filtered through the Enclave's dome and outlined the windows. It allowed her to see the shadowy shapes of furniture and the Muslim woman and her children curled up in the corner.

At the present time, the only thing Cait could do was wait. If it were a rescue, she sincerely doubted they'd come in through the main entrance. The windows and the elevator shaft were the more likely points of entry.

If the power for the entire building had been shut down, did this mean the computer-controlled front door was unlocked? She crept across the carpet on sneakered feet to the door, weaving her way past the clumps of sofas, chairs and small tables scattered across the oversized room. The doorknob was smooth and cool under her hand. No luck there. It remained locked.

Dare she hope that this also meant the normal security cams and recording devices were off-line too?

Cait turned to the corner and spoke softly to the Muslim woman. "Can you speak English?"

Her voice came out in a hesitant, frightened whisper. "I understand English. A little. Not good."

"Dr. Fatima Nour sent me here."

The woman's head snapped up. Hope flared out from her and flooded Cait's mind. "Dr. Nour?"

Thinking of her as that Muslim woman wasn't helping matters any. "My name is Cait. What's your name?"

"Raeesah."

The shadowed form of the little girl clinging to Raeesah's hand lifted her head. "My name is Saira. I know English from school. I can tell mommy what you say."

Cait retraced her steps across the room, stopped at one of the coffee tables and picked up a statue. She ran her fingers over the statue and felt the hard lines of desert robes over a male figure. It was a nice, solid two-foot tall slab of bronze weighing at least fifteen pounds. Good balance too. "Saira, I don't know if the lights going out is good

news or bad news. If someone tries to get in here with us, I may need to fight. Please, explain this to your mommy.”

The small silhouette of Saira's head nodded in response. She started talking in Arabic to her mother. Her childish voice added a subtle beauty and cadence to the words she spoke.

Cait hefted the statue in her left hand, went to the elevator entrance and positioned herself on the right hand side of the door where she could bash anyone who came out. A furtive, scraping sound reached her ears.

She braced herself and lifted the statue over her head in a two-handed grip.

Even with the door between them distorting and muffling the sound of his voice, she knew it was Tiny. “Cait? Are you there? Can you hear me?”

She lowered the statue. Thank goodness she had the wall behind her for support or she would have dropped to her knees on the floor. “Yes Tiny, I'm here. We're alone.”

“Good. I'm going to force the doors open now. It won't take long. Only a minute or two.”

* * * *

Tiny swallowed the lump in his throat. Cait was alive and waiting for them! It didn't matter that it was pitch black because he'd pulled the selkieskin away from his face to speak and lost the infrared vision capabilities. The elevator doors had a thin strip of faint light outlining their shape.

Tiny unclipped the jaws-of-life from the wide leather tool belt around his waist. With the selkieskin on, he didn't have to worry about leaving fingerprints behind or dropping it on account of sweaty hands. He gestured at Indio to clip Saad to the wire then climb up beside him. Leaning over while holding onto the wire and trying to operate this thing one-handed was too risky. He'd rather play it safe than screw up now.

The thick coils of the wire shook under him while Indio followed his instructions and climbed up hand over hand until they were face-to-face. Tiny nodded, leaned over with the jaws-of-life and wedged the reinforced pincer prongs in between the door. Indio leaned over next and turned the hand crank that opened the arms for the device.

The lock mechanism creaked and groaned in resistance. Indio kept turning the control knob. Little by little, the slit between the two doors widened until they forced them apart to the full two-foot expanse of the jaws. Indio locked the safety catch that kept the jaws-of-life from snapping shut by accident.

A shadowy figure peered at them from the other side of the opening. Tiny's heart slammed against his chest like a wild animal trying to escape. *Cait!*

Tiny unclipped a flashlight from his work belt, held it up and turned it on with the light shining straight up so he wouldn't blind her. “This is a flashlight. Step back, Cait. I'm going to toss it inside. I want you to turn it on so you can see what you're doing and reverse the jaws-of-life so we can get in without dislodging it.”

She retreated. He turned the flashlight off and tossed it inside.

Tiny looked away. Cait turned it on. A brilliant nimbus of light splashed the back wall of the shaft. He waited a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the sudden glare. Then he turned and saw Cait on her knees jamming a metal statue of a man between the open doors. He grinned. Oh yes. His Cait was one smart woman. She probably had the statue

ready to brain anyone who tried to sneak in on her. Now she was putting it to a much better use.

Unhooking the jaws-of-life, climbing inside and hauling Saad up didn't take long at all.

Tiny turned around. Soft blond, brown, black, and red curls framed Cait's lovely face.

Her hazel eyes had darkened into a deep green color and her breasts jutted out under the thin material of her t-shirt. His cock hardened and felt like it was going to explode from his pants.

He smiled.

She shook her head, backed away with the flashlight in her hand and aimed it at the far corner of the room. The light showed him the huddled figures of a Muslim woman in a black chador holding a small baby in her arms and a small girl with dark hair standing beside her in a simple cotton dress and sandals. Cait said, "This is Raeesah and her daughter Saira. I don't know her baby's name."

Yeah. Right. They had a job to do first. Public displays of affection would be too distracting. Later, when they were alone, he and Indio would have all the time in the world they needed to make love to Cait.

Tiny reached for the selkieskin bags hanging from his belt. He tossed one to Cait and held out the other three to Saad. "Go explain to Raeesah exactly how to put them on. The sooner they change, the sooner we can haul them down to the sub-basement and get out of here."

* * * *

Mider swirled the last bit of wine in his glass and put it aside. He flashed a reassuring smile at Socorro and Emily. With their faces lit up in eager anticipation, they distracted him from the simmering tension and nervous auras in the crowded room.

Emily held up her hand and displayed her wristwatch. Its fluorescent green wristband matched the ribbon in her hair. "If we don't leave now, we're gonna be late for the costume contest."

A bolt of sheer rage shot through Mider. He spun around in an instinctive reaction to face the source of that rage.

It was Mair. She strode through the crowd like an avenging demon and stopped five feet away from him. Pure venom leaked from her pores and sizzled within her dark eyes. "You may think you've won but you haven't. I hold the trump card. She'll come crawling back to me. You'll see."

* * * *

Tiny exchanged a worried look with Indio. Raeesah stood with her arms crossed in front of the submersible's exit pond. He didn't need an interpreter to figure out the torrent of words pouring from her mouth while she shook her head. It was quite obvious by her wide-eyed stare at the water that she couldn't swim.

And they didn't dare try another way out. Not now. Not after he heard lasers being used and smelled the distinctive odors of burnt plastics when they climbed past the security section.

The last thing he needed was half-trained security guards using lasers around women and children.

Cait grabbed the baby carrier, strapped it on herself and glared at Saad. “Tell Raeesah she won't drown because the selkieskin will breathe for her. Tell her it's all right if she can't swim. I'll tie her and Saira to me and I'll tow them along.”

Tiny held up his hand. “Everyone listen up now. The Enclave is an artificial island made from plast-concrete hex platforms. From the bottom, it looks like a giant honeycomb with shafts extending down to the lake bottom. Each platform is fifty meters wide. I'm going to lead you to the first wall. It goes straight down under water for fifteen meters and the bottom edge is two meters wide.”

Saad interpreted in a rapid-fire series of words that sounded like an assault rifle on auto fire. The dim yellow glow of the emergency lights made everyone look jaundiced.

Tiny held up his hand. “It's easy to become disoriented. Remember to touch the wall on the way down. When you reach the bottom edge, you'll feel the current. It will suck you under the wall. Don't worry. Let it pull you down and under. I'll be waiting on the other side to pull you free and lead us to our rendezvous point.”

Raeesah relaxed and nodded her head. Cait gave her an encouraging smile, tied a length of spidersilk around her waist and Saira's waist, leaving the little girl tied between both women.

The sudden blare of the ceiling emergency alarm and flashing red strobe lights just about gave Raeesah a heart attack, judging by how high she jumped.

If those alarms were on, then that meant the security console had been reactivated. That meant they had only sixty seconds before the security spy eyes finished reinitializing themselves and betrayed their whereabouts. Time to leave.

Tiny pulled his selkieskin up and let it move over his face and seal itself. Pseudopods inserted themselves in his mouth and nostrils and clear air flowed into his lungs. He gestured at everyone to follow him. Then dove into the water.

Chapter Thirty

The selkieskin translated the feel of the plast-concrete wall into a gritty texture against Tiny's hand. It wasn't as dark as he expected either. His selkie-enhanced vision showed him the wall as a coal black mass within the darkness. He felt the water pushing against his body, a reassuring contact of pressure waves as real as light.

When the current suddenly shifted, he let it sweep him under the wall. He turned over on his back and swam, touching the concrete above. When his hand slipped off the edge, he turned sideways, scissor-kicked out of the current, stopped himself with a back kick and treaded water.

Pale ribbons of phosphorescence outlined the shape of a male swimmer coming under the wall. Tiny reached out, grabbed an outstretched hand and scissor-kicked backwards while pulling the man clear. His companion flipped around and stopped his momentum with the practiced ease of familiarity with zero-g maneuvers.

Tiny grinned. This must be Indio.

Sure enough, the next figure that appeared under the wall flailed with uncoordinated strokes at the water. Indio grabbed one hand while Tiny grabbed the other. Together they pulled Saad out of the current and set him aside to tread water while they waited for the women and children to appear.

Strong strokes of legs kicking in the water pulsed against Tiny's hands. He turned toward the pressure waves and saw the phosphorescent outline of Cait's body with the hump of the baby safely strapped to her back, followed by the smaller shapes of Raeesah and Saira.

Moving with smooth precision as if he'd practiced this for days, Tiny grabbed Cait's hand and pulled her to him while Indio yanked Raeesah out of the current. With Saira tied between both women by a spidersilk rope, they didn't have to worry about her.

The selkieskins made everything so much easier. Instead of the clumsy weight and added bulk of air tanks, wet suits, facemasks and flippers, they had full range of motion. Elation roared through Tiny. He pushed it aside. It was too soon to celebrate. They weren't safe yet.

He lifted his hand and focused on the compass strapped to his wrist. True North was to his left. They must head south in order to rendezvous with the yacht docked in the main bay.

He checked out the glowing pale blue outlines of the hex above them dumping excess heat into the water. Good! That should confuse any attempts to find them using the standardized heat detectors mounted under the walls that enclosed the lagoon and main docking bay for the Enclave.

Lake Michigan wasn't exactly the warmest spot in the world to go swimming. They had the advantage there too because the selkieskins radiated minimal heat while keeping their host bodies warm within the chilly depths.

Tiny turned to the others. They were all treading water and waiting to see what he'd do next. Their dark selkieclad bodies had a nimbus of pale yellow around their heads, hands and feet. He pointed up at the hex. They looked at it, then back at him. He held up his hands, folded his thumbs down and let them see eight fingers. They nodded.

He pointed in the direction that they needed to take. Another nod showed their comprehension.

He turned, kicked away and started swimming. A quick sideways twist of his head showed him the others following his lead through the water. He turned and focused on swimming and counting the hexes they passed under and avoiding the massive pylons linking the hexes to the lake bottom.

Five hexes later, he found his thoughts returning to that moment in time when Cait had backed away from him in Raeesah's penthouse apartment. More and more, he had the feeling it wasn't just because they had company. She was wary of getting close to him. It was as if she was afraid of letting him share her emotions like they always did when they touched. Why? He loved her and he knew she loved him and Indio. What had happened to her during the time she was Mair's captive that would make her wary of him touching her and knowing how she felt?

A sick lump settled into the pit of his stomach. Had they raped her? Anger seared through his veins. He shook his head and kept swimming. He didn't know for sure, he had no proof she'd been raped. No matter what he found out, he better keep a cool head and make sure Cait knew he still loved her.

One more hex to go.

Whatever had happened to Cait while she was Mair's captive, he would deal with it later. Right now, he needed to keep his mind on bringing everyone out in one piece.

Ribbons of different colored lights glowed through the water on the other side of the hex. That must be the moonlight and boat lights shining down on the lagoon. Tiny kicked and swam toward the lights. The dark blobs within the multicolored lights slowly resolved into the fuzzy rectangular shapes of docks and the teardrop bottoms of boats.

He kept swimming until he spotted the prearranged signal. A Moon and star painted in fluorescent green glowed on the bottom of a large yacht. Tiny surfaced between the dock and the boat hull. The strings of light from the other boats after their dark journey under the hexes blinded him for a few seconds. A rope ladder flapped against the side of their targeted boat. At least someone had the common sense to douse the lights on the yacht so they wouldn't be easily spotted climbing aboard.

One by one, the others surfaced beside him. Their dark selkie heads bobbed in the water around him. Looking at them from this perspective, yes, they did resemble a pack of seals. No wonder early humans believed Cait's foremothers to be seal shape-changers when they saw them swimming in the water in their selkieskins.

Tiny grabbed the rope ladder and climbed out first. Two men waited in the shadows on the deck of the boat.

Tiny reached up, pulled his selkieskin down and exposed his face. He heard surprised gasps from both men. They lowered their rifles and nodded at him.

He turned his back on them. One by one, the others climbed aboard. Water dripped down their selkieclad bodies onto the boat deck. One by one, they pulled the selkieskins back and bared their faces. Except for Raeesah. Not that Tiny expected her to anyway. Apparently she didn't feel comfortable exposing her face to strange men.

The animated thumping of party music from the other brightly-lit boats assaulted their ears.

The two armed men gestured at them to enter the unlit entrance they guarded. Tiny exchanged a wary look with Indio.

Indio inclined his head in a bare sketch of a nod, then gestured at Saad to lead the way inside. If this was a trap, Saad should be the one to enter it first and set it off.

It wasn't a trap. Raeesah's sister stood beside a small table and chairs, wearing her chador and jangling bracelets. She led them out into a narrow corridor lined by closed doors. Small nightlights above each door gave them just enough light to see without tripping over each other. The deck rocked under their feet. Two doors were propped open at the end of the corridor. She stopped at the first door. "The men can change into their clothes here."

Then moved to the second door. "I have suitable clothing for the women here."

Tiny gave Cait a pair of gloves and unclipped four of the black spidersilk sacks from his belt. "Make sure you get all the selkieskins in their sacks when you take them off."

The mischievous grin that lit up her face matched the wry humor in her voice. "I'll be careful. We don't want to lose any of them." She hurried into the other room with the women and closed the door.

Tiny stepped into the room set aside for the men. Thick black curtains covered the portholes. A ceiling fan whirled softly and circulated an air-conditioned breeze. A chrome lamp with a green banker's shade lit the desk and chair in the left-hand corner. There was a computer sofscreen embedded in the desktop. Smooth mahogany wood floors, the brightly polished chrome railings and the soft buttery leather seat for the chair proclaimed the yacht's moneyed status. No tacky folding chairs or fish odors to spoil the ambiance here.

Two solid oak bunk beds took up the opposite side of the room. Black jeans and t-shirts were neatly folded on the bunk beds with sneakers and socks on top of them.

Tiny shrugged. The monochromatic Goth look would have to do for now.

Saad hesitated in the center of the room and stroked his hands over the velvet soft selkieskin that covered his body. "I would like to keep this one. It is very useful."

Tiny shook his head and continued peeling his off. "We can't do that. The spacesuit manufacturing companies have requested a temporary injunction against the skins. We're supposed to bring them with us when we testify in front of the Interplanetary Trade Commission next week. Give us an address and we'll contact you after the hearing."

Saad took the bait. He ducked behind the headboard, removed his selkieskin and passed it to Tiny.

While Tiny stuffed it into its sack, Saad grabbed his clothing and hurriedly covered his nakedness. Then he went to the desk, opened the drawer, dug out a pen and pad and scribbled down a few words. "This is my email addy. Contact me after the hearing and I'll arrange payment."

Indio sat on the lower bunk bed and peeled off his selkieskin. Tiny did the same.

Saad laid the pen and pad on the desk, averted his eyes from their casual nudity and fled the cabin. The door clicked shut behind his speedy exit.

Tiny selected the largest pair of jeans and shirt from the stack on the bed and donned them. They were a bit snug but he'd put up with that annoyance for now. Was there another reason behind Saad's hasty departure other than his obvious fear of homosexuality? Was this cabin rigged with spy eyes and ears? He grabbed a pair of sock

and sneakers, then quirked his eyebrows at Indio while he put them on. "Saad's not my type. I prefer women. What about you?"

Indio zipped his own jeans then put on a pair of socks and sneakers. "You know damn well I prefer women too."

Tiny snorted. Indio wasn't taking any chances either. Acute paranoia had kept them alive before, no sense in lowering their guard now.

Tiny went to the desk and tore the slip of paper with Saad's email addy from the notepad. He picked up the pen, scribbled the words *I think they raped Cait* on it, folded the paper in half and gave it to Indio.

Indio opened the note, read it, looked at Tiny with no expression on his face whatsoever and said, "I believe you're right." The only clue Tiny had of the rage simmering within Indio was the sullen heat in his own gut.

Indio folded the note and slipped it into his pocket.

* * * *

Saira and the baby were already curled up and sound asleep on the bottom bunk bed. No surprises there. They'd had a long swim and the selkieskins had fed from them during that time. Cait pulled the blanket over Saira's shoulders, picked up the discarded selkieskins and stowed them in the bags Tiny had given her along with Raeesah's selkieskin.

Raeesah went to the bed, slipped on a loose white dress, and sandals. Relief and calm familiarity radiated from her while she donned a black chador and veil.

In addition to the jeans, shirt, undergarments and sneakers on the bunk bed, another chador and face veil lay there for Cait to wear. She hurriedly changed out of her selkieskin into the selected clothing. When she picked up the chador, the back of her neck prickled. She didn't have to turn around to know that both Muslim women were staring at her. They probably expected her to object strenuously to wearing a chador. Cait twisted her mouth into an ironic grin. They didn't know how much she welcomed the chador's ability to conceal her face and body from unwanted scrutiny.

Cait donned the sack like garment. Thick folds of heavy black cotton covered her from neck to foot. She turned and held up the head cloth and veil. "Can you help me with this? I've never worn one before."

Both Muslim women smiled. Their relief and approval washed away the tension in the cabin. They went to her and arranged the head cloth and veil around her face with deft, assured touches.

Raeesah murmured. "Thank you."

At least fifty bracelets jangled on the other woman's arms. Prurient curiosity glowed in the depths of her wide-eyed stare. She whispered, "Are both those men your husbands?"

Cait couldn't stop the chuckle that exploded from her at this question. "Yes, they are. Why do you ask?"

The woman shivered, rubbed her arms and glanced at the closed door as if it might explode into fragments behind her. "They frighten me. Especially the one with the scars. He never smiles. I can't imagine what it would be like to have two men with the power to do whatever they wanted with me."

Cait shook her head, picked up the sacks with the selkieskins and moved closer to the door. "You have it backwards. Both men are gentle and considerate lovers. They save their smiles for private moments with me. That's why I chose them as my husbands."

Shock and a second wave of prurient interest washed over Cait from the women. She turned, opened the door and walked out into the corridor. One way or another, she was going to have to tell her husbands what had happened to her. *Goddess above!* She prayed. *Please help me find the right words! I love them and don't want to lose either one of my husbands.*

As for Mider, would her husbands be willing to accept him as a third co-spouse? Cait sighed. Maybe later, she'd figure out how to broach that topic.

The other door opened and her husbands exited into the corridor. Cait stopped with her heart wedged in her throat. Thinking about what to say to them was one thing but every time she faced them, she lost all coherent thought.

Tiny and Indio stopped for a split second. Recognition rippled through her along the dru-bonds that linked her heart to theirs. One look and they knew her despite the concealment of the chador and veil. One look into her eyes and both men went to full arousal.

They flashed subdued smiles at her, then moved aside for her to pass and lead the way out. They knew exactly how to demonstrate her favored status in their eyes without being too obvious about it. No displays of public affection within this ship.

Cait lifted her head, straightened her shoulders and led the way without looking back at them. They made her proud to claim them as her husbands.

Chapter Thirty-One

The golden spidersilk dome loomed over them. Moonlight spilled through the dome and painted a muted glow over the buildings on either side of the Enclave's walkway. A few stray tourists hurried up the steps into the maglev terminal.

Indio stopped at the bottom of the steps. A blinking holographic warning instructed all passengers to dispose of trash before entering.

Enough was enough. Ignoring Cait's unspoken discomfort and keeping silent like this was only making things worst between them. They needed to discuss what was bothering her before it festered into an open wound and tore them apart. The archway behind the waste receptacle had just enough room for the three of them to stand without anyone bothering them.

No sense in pussyfooting around the truth either. He looked at Tiny and jerked his thumb at the alcove. Tiny nodded and went back to check it out.

A few seconds later, Tiny pocketed his remote scanner and said, "It's clean."

Indio turned to Cait, took her by the hand and led her into the alcove. "I love you."

She removed her veil, untied the ugly black head cloth and handed it to him. He wadded it up into a ball and shoved it into the waste receptacle. "Do you want to tell us what's wrong now?"

Cait looked away and bit her lip. Her hands shook as she fumbled at the ties around the chador's neck.

Tiny exchanged a worried look with Indio and moved closer. "Cait, I love you too. Let me help. Please."

The ties loosened finally and the chador gaped open at her neck. She sighed, peeled the garment over her head and handed it to Tiny. He forced it into the narrow opening of the waste bin.

The familiar mélange of red, brown, blond and black curls framed her weary face. Two dark red blotches stained her cheeks. She held out her hands to them. "Just hold me first, please."

And they did.

* * * *

Oh Goddess! She wanted to savor this moment forever.

Strong arms holding her. She breathed in their warm, masculine scent and listened to their hearts beating wildly against her. Two firm erections surged up and nudged her on either side. Even now. Even as they suspected the worst, their only thought was how much they loved her, wanted to make love to her and wanted to protect her from harm.

She closed her eyes and let their love and trust and concern flood her mind and wash away the bitter cold darkness that ate at her soul. "I don't want to go to the authorities and file rape charges. I was drugged unconscious and totally unaware of it when they did it. I've bathed and showered at least four times since it happened. If I go through a rape evidence procedure, they won't find any evidence of force or semen."

Cait heard their hearts stutter. Then Indio and Tiny tightened their arms around her while their conflicting emotions ran the gamut from rage to concern and comfort and back to diamond hot rage again. Indio spoke first. His raspy voice came out in a growl. "We'll find another way to take care of them then."

"No!" Cait opened her eyes, tilted her head up and gazed at him. She leaned into Tiny's strong embrace and felt the thick, hard length of his cock straining against the curve of her back.

"It's not that simple."

Indio traced her mouth with the rough tip of his callused finger. Love and concern blazed out at her within his gaze. "What do you mean by that?"

She brushed her lips against his fingertip, sighed and managed to blurt it out without stumbling over the words. "Mair had her physician remove my anti-fertility implant while I was unconscious."

He sucked in his breath and his pure chocolate eyes darkened into black coals. "If you're pregnant, do you want to abort the fetus and give it up for adoption?"

Cait shook her head. "I'm not Socorro's genetic mother but I still love her as if she were born from my own womb." She licked her suddenly parched lips. "Besides which, if I *am* pregnant, it might not be from Mair's sons. I might be pregnant from you or Tiny."

Hope roared through her from both men.

Tiny cleared his throat and said in a strangled voice. "Sperm remains viable within a woman's body for at least forty-eight hours. Both of us made love to you an hour before you were kidnapped."

* * * *

Tiny shifted in his seat. It groaned under his weight. He hated hospital and clinic waiting rooms with their flimsy chairs, antiseptic stench and outdated vidbooks and vidzines. The clinic nurse had given them funny looks while she took saliva samples from them. Their relationship with Cait was none of her business anyway.

He glared at Indio sitting in the next chair with his hands resting on his knees like a frigging statue. Fuck it! How long was this testing going to take anyway?

Tiny sighed, laced his hands in back of his neck and leaned back against the wall. "I've been thinking that Cait's right. If she *is* pregnant, it doesn't really matter who the genetic father is. The important part is that the baby will be Cait's baby."

Indio turned his head and managed a half-hearted grin. "I've been thinking the same thing too. Socorro will go berserk when she finds out she's going to have a baby brother or sister."

Tiny glanced at the time blinking on the wall clock again. Two minutes had passed since the last time he'd checked. He muttered. "You know what I hate most of all? I hate waiting like this. I hate not knowing. I wish they'd hurry up."

The door dilated at the other end of the room and another nurse came out, followed by Cait. This nurse was short and chunky with salt and pepper hair and wore rumpled pale green smock and slacks. Her white sneaks squeaked on the tiled floor and she held a sofscreen to her chest like a shield.

Tiny jumped to his feet. So did Indio.

Cait walked up to them and stopped two feet away. Her face was perfectly still. She wrung her hands together, took a deep breath and said, "I'm pregnant. It's a boy and..."

Her gaze settled on Tiny's face. "You're the father."

Tiny laughed, scooped her up in his arms and kissed her while Indio pounded him on his back.

The End

About the Author:

After thirty years of experience as a bilingual (Spanish/English) caseworker, Ms. Karmazin took early retirement from her day job in order to write full-time. Ms. Karmazin utilizes a unique blend of multicultural knowledge in writing her science fiction novels. When she was seven, she read George MacDonald's "The Light Princess" and became an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy. She incorporates the same sense of adventure and wonder into her SF stories.

During 1999, 2000 and 2001, three of her short stories were published in Hadrosaur Tales, a print SF magazine based in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

DOWN CAME A BLACKBIRD, her first novel, is available from Atlantic Bridge Publishing. DOWN CAME A BLACKBIRD takes place in an alternate future and tells of the extraterrestrial Sidhe who migrated to Earth during humanity's infancy, when their advanced technology was mistaken for magic.

Her second book, the prequel to DOWN CAME A BLACKBIRD, is COVENANTS. COVENANTS tells the story of the Harkers, whose mysterious lineage links Roanoke's Lost Colony to a time when myths walked the land with humanity. COVENANTS was released September 2003 by Atlantic Bridge Publishing.

Her third book, THE HUNTRESS, published February 2004 by Liquid Silver Books takes a unique look at a Puerto Rican vampire legend. In THE HUNTRESS, Rulagh is an alien exobiologist sent to Earth by the Interstellar Humane Society to deal with the feral descendants of lost vampiric pets known as chupacabras (or "goatsuckers" as they are called by the human inhabitants). There he meets Sonia Rodriguez, and together they forge a love that transcends species.

Ms. Karmazin also produces a monthly newsletter that includes one free SF short story each month at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TheSensuousAlien>.

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