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*For Susan, Carolyn and Liz  
Sisters who never doubted,  
David and Mark  
Brothers who accepted and  
Cynthia and Kenneth,  
Parents who taught by example*

"Damn, Treece, what happened here?" I asked softly as I stood outside of the yellow and black crime scene tape. I watched more than one veteran cop rush out of the house and around the side. I could hear the sounds of retching because everyone was subdued. The whole scene was unnaturally quiet. Then came the gurneys, three of them, with a black rubber body bag on each. My eyes shifted away from the uneven lumps.

Red and blue lights strobed from police cars, flashed lurid shadows across pale, scared faces and the surrounding houses. Neighbours, wrapped in warm jackets and dressing gowns, stood silently in perfectly manicured front yards, afraid to come any closer.

Faux Victorian streetlamps every two houses cast a sickly yellow glow along a pristine street. No litter, not even a leaf rested in the gutters. This should have been contented suburbia, yet *For Sale* signs dotted lawns like soldiers on parade. I guessed that this perfect 'Stepford' neighbourhood wasn't so perfect after all.

The crime scene house was a large white two-storey with dormer windows jutting out of the black-tiled roof. Behind the house I could see dark stands of trees and shadowy bush. Each house was on a block big enough for *two* homes. Nice, if you could afford it.

Dom, my sometimes partner, stood beside me grim and unmoving; his Brad Pitt mouth, a tight line, his compelling blue eyes constantly shifting to the surrounds as if waiting for some horror to leap out. Even his broad shoulders were hunched in against more than the cold night air. It took a lot to put that look on Dom's face: disturbed, horrified, sickened and we'd seen some awful things during our enforced partnership.

"This is your arena, Scott." He said with roughened softness and looked down at me with angry eyes. "I don't think *we* have the firepower to deal with the perp."

*Uh, oh, he was really pissed off.* Another preternatural crime; it was going to be messy.

"You're gonna make me look, aren't you."

He slowly nodded his head. "Oh, yeah. If I knew the killer was human, I wouldn't have called you, *Daya*." He sneered. "But he's not; he's a rabid *animal*."

"I'm guessing you mean *in truth*, not as a metaphor."

In reply, he gripped my upper arm hard and dragged me towards the house where a wife and two children had been slaughtered. That's all he'd told me; used that word: slaughtered. Imagination can be cruel sometimes. Could what I envisioned be as bad as reality? Guess I was about to find out.

My skin warmed where Treece held me, my blood thrilled at his nearness and my heart thudded with anticipation; so inappropriate, but there nonetheless. Letting him know how he affected me would fill him with disgust, and give him a weapon to use against me. Every time he touched me, which was rare, I wanted more, *craved* it.

I swallowed hard and let him take me where he would, tried to still the hammering of my heart and the tingling of my skin. His grip tightened as I attempted to pull away. He wouldn't let me. Detective Dominic Treece was nothing if not determined.

"You're not allowed to be squeamish." He growled. "*Your* kind aren't supposed to be skittish; you're kind *revel* in this kind of shit." He pushed me through the front door.

\* \* \*

All my senses went to red alert as I stumbled over the stoop, Treece right behind me, blocking my exit.

As much as he got my hormones hopping, Treece didn't like me very much. I knew this because in the ten years I'd known him, I'd never had a genuine smile from him. He had an aggressive, belligerent stare, as if he didn't want to be close to me, which sucked because I sure wanted to get up close to him; *real* close. He knew little of me beyond rumour and he'd never, ever seen the 'other' me. I avoided that like the plague. For ten years I'd been successful, but he kept on about it, wanted to see the 'true' me: the *creature* that lived inside. Not from any curiosity, that would be too easy. No, he wanted to know, absolutely, that he hated me for a reason, not simply because of prejudice.

Ever since the preters had come out of hiding during the Second World War, the humans had treated us as either saviours or demons. We were, as a whole, worshiped, feared, loved and hunted.

Unfortunately for humanity, there were a lot of preter flavours, from the generic undead vampires to shape-shifters, from the Elder races of ubiquitous elf, dwarf, gnome, fairy, to – well, you get the picture. Then there were '*us*'. The never heard of, never seen Gargoa. We were nowhere in myth and legend; there were no ancient depictions painted on cave walls, no remains to

be found; nothing. We just... appeared – or so it seemed to the humans. The Gargoa had simply better camouflage skills the other races.

Treece despised us all. I think he lacked the understanding that we had the human genome *plus* a little extra. He saw us as monsters. That was all. If you weren't pure human, you were anathema to him.

Orders from his superiors were the only way he'd work with me. Orders from *my* superiors was the only way I'd work with *him*. Proximity to such a hunka spunk and not being able to touch is tougher than most people know, which is why it took a direct order from Cicero to make me assist Treece.

Dominic laying hands on me, however briefly, guaranteed I wouldn't leave before the job was done. It was his way of warning me; the next step would be the drawing of his gun to force me to comply, after that... he'd see just how well I could survive a bullet at close range. And he'd suffer for it. I would *guarantee* that. No matter my feelings for him, my kind frowned on attempted murder and punished accordingly. Dominic had tested that limit often enough for me to know he wanted that confrontation.

For now, I had a job to do. I stood in the hallway but could see none of the expected carnage. A side table with a deep blue, hand-potted bowl, a gilded mirror for checking you don't have spinach in your teeth, pale, ice blue paint on the walls. To the left was an arched opening and, with a glance back at a stern-faced Treece, I tiptoed to it. I could see the dark grey couch, the cushions torn and stained with splashes of darker colour. I stepped closer, checked the room with the help of the light that came from the foyer.

Treece flicked the switch for the overhead light. Brightness bloomed over the wreckage. Red-black splashed across pale blue walls and shattered pinewood furniture. Blood had soaked into the powder blue carpet in random patterns. There was a smashed television and fragments of lamps and other debris.

My attention snapped to the scene and away from the man behind me. The destruction and inferred death had my complete focus.

I walked around the pools of dried blood, through another archway and into the next room. The kitchen; also done in pinewood and ice blue. There was no damage. It was spotless as if designed for *Home Beautiful* magazine. The back door was deadlocked, with a cheery blue-chequered curtain drawn over, I assumed, a small paned window.

I returned to the foyer and crept down to the dining room, bathroom and study. Treece followed in my wake. Nothing. No damage; perfect housekeeping. There was something wrong with this picture.

I returned to the staircase. Treece leaned against the dark wood newel and raised his head. My gaze followed.

"There's more?" I whispered. Treece kept his eyes on the second floor, then he lowered his gaze to glare at me.

"Okay. Okay." I wiped sweaty palms on my jeans. "Okay." I said to myself and made my way up, heart pounding; Treece followed close behind me.

The first of the children's bedrooms was splattered with blood. Neon coloured but broken furniture was scattered haphazardly; the bed clothes gone, and wide, dark stains on the mattresses. I assumed the cops had taken the sheets and whatever else they thought they needed, including the doors. I felt my heart break a little at the cute, underwater themed wallpaper; hundreds of Nemo's swam around the room.

The wall next to the small bed of the six year old daughter had four gashes where long, curved claws had gouged the plaster. I placed my fingers at the top of each mark and followed it down. The hand that had done this was bigger than mine. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and the breath squeezed out of my lungs. My hands trembled and I swallowed the thick fear in my throat. The brutality, the sheer *rage* of what had been done here staggered me, scared me down to my bones.

Whatever this creature was, it was big, vicious, psychopathic and strong; maybe stronger than me. I needed to...

"It takes a monster to know a monster." Treece said and I jumped. I didn't bother to turn around. He was in a wicked cruel mood and got the reaction he was looking for. I couldn't blame him; not when kids were the victims.

"Not all monsters are obvious, Treece, some wear the face of ordinary humans." I stood up and looked at him. He was leaning against the door jamb, arms folded, contempt in his eyes.

His eyes travelled from the top of my head down to my toes and back. "I look at you, with your short black hair and pale blue eyes and wonder when the monster will emerge to gut some poor unfortunate." He lifted his chin to indicate the room.

I lifted my lip. Treece was looking for a fight and I was in the mood to oblige. "You forgot the porcelain skin and slim, bouncable body. As for the rest, you know *nothing*."

"I know you should've been drowned at birth. Come to think of it, *what* exactly are you?" He asked as if I were a lab experiment gone wrong.

"Nothing you wanna mess with." He refused to believe that I was Gargoa, no matter what I said. Now, I simply avoided that particular taunt.

One eyebrow lifted and I felt a surge of anger rush through my blood.

"It's good you're so pissy, now you can put aside sympathy for your unnatural cousin and get on with it." He turned on his heel and left me alone.

"Prick." I whispered.

\* \* \*

There was nothing I could add. I had plenty of questions but no answers.

"Well?" Treece asked as I stepped outside into the chill night. I rubbed my denim-clad arms, but I couldn't get warm. Dom had his hands in his pants pockets, jingling change. The sound got on my nerves.

"Well, what?" I asked without looking at him. I studied the surrounds instead. It was quiet; the quiet of staggering tragedy, the silence of people who simply didn't know what to say. I understood that.

Police stood together in huddles near the police cruisers, the neighbours had returned to the warmth and security of indoors.

"Got a bead on what flavour monster we're dealing with?"

"No." I said and began to walk towards my Jeep. Treece followed.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"No, as in I don't have a clue." I stopped walking. "Okay, not true. It's something with *claws*, probably a shape-shifter, but you guessed that already."

"I did, since I'm a detective and you're... not."

My shoulders slumped as tiredness weighed me down.



"Why did you bring me down here, Treece?" I looked at him. His face was in shadow and I narrowed my eyes. Now, I could see him. Enhanced vision was a good thing sometimes, but he looked so forbidding, so angry, I was sorry I looked.

"To tell me what did this to a little girl, a little boy and a housewife. To tell me what *other* type of diseased animal did this."

I turned away and continued walking, hurt by his tone and his words. I wasn't diseased, but that's how he saw us: sick, dangerous and in need of killing.

"You don't need me here, Treece, other than get in some kicks. So," I reached the Jeep, unlocked it and climbed in. "You can fuck off." I started the engine, missed whatever venom came out of his snarling, gorgeous mouth.

I drove away without glancing in the mirrors. It was hard enough to feel this... this attraction to a man who couldn't bear to be around me, I didn't want to look at him any more.

\* \* \*

Back in my office, I slumped onto my comfy couch and threw an arm over my eyes.

I have two rooms: the first has a large oak desk with a telephone, computer and banker's desk lamp; a cushioned client's chair that didn't numb the butt; a wooden filing cabinet, also oak, behind and on my right next to the window; and a faded red material covered and battered-looking couch for naps to the left of the door. Snuggled up at the far end of the couch, was a mini-fridge with a coffee maker on top. The other room is a fully appointed bathroom, for when I worked late on a case.

I dealt with crimes committed by the preters and the Gargoa. Too often, the local constabularies couldn't handle the perpetrators. Police had been enthralled by the vampires, ripped to shreds by the shape-shifters, bespelled by fairies...

We were in this world now, and the humans knew they could not win against us in a war we didn't want, so peace was the only option. The upshot was the Federal Government had passed into law that preter crimes be worked by the preters themselves. The heads of each 'new' citizen group agreed to set up their own investigators. Each species had a fear of something, be it their Rulers or another species.

Since the passing of Mulligan's Law, preter crime had dropped significantly. The human world didn't want to know what happened to the criminals, as long as they weren't able to continue their wicked ways. For most perps, the punishment was death, and the humans had no problem with it.

For my part, Cicero was the ruler – at least of this country; he owed fealty to the Queen as did all the other Regents.

Whatever he'd been thinking when he sent me on this mission, it had just gone pear-shaped.

I sat up, stared at my telephone for a few seconds and came to a decision. Cicero had to know.

His secretary, or Praetorian, answered after two rings.

"The lovely Daya." Marcus crooned into my ear. Caller ID is a wonderful thing. "How may I be of service?"

"I need to speak with him."

"Ah. I'm sorry, Daya, but he's indisposed at th..." In the background I heard an unearthly shriek of sheer agony. That it sent shivers down my spine would be an understatement. Someone was being punished.

Marcus cleared his throat and went on calmly. He'd gone through this too many times to be phased by it. "Is it something you can tell me?"

I blew out a breath and steadied myself. 'Punishment', of the nature I could hear, meant torture unto death. That I knew only too well, having witnessed it. Once was enough and I had declined Cicero's invitation to more, ah, 'disposal of cases'. His words, not mine. In this country, Cicero was judge, jury and executioner.

To my shame, my part was hunter. I belonged to a select group who hunted down the miscreants and delivered them to Cicero, with evidence. Had I ever been wrong? You betcha. But I learned from my mistakes. No more heresay, no more assumptions, no more being taken in by false evidence. I got the facts straight, I got witnesses if I could, I got unimpeachable evidence, I got *confessions*.

I did not want any more innocent Gargoan deaths on my hands; four in fifty years was four too many.

"Daya?"

"Sorry, Marcus, just thinking. You can tell Cicero that I've visited the scene, confirmed it's a monster, probably a shape-shifter, and left the cops to it. If they want to contact Medira, it's up to them."

"Had troubles with that tasty human, Treece, isn't it?"

Even the sound of his name made my throat tighten. "Yeah." I whispered.

"Never mind. His Lordship will contact you..." I heard another scream. Marcus waited until the cry eased off. "Later. He'll contact you *later*."

"Thank you, Marcus." I murmured and hung up.

Sometimes, I think Dominic is right: that we're just monsters doing monstrous things. Tonight, after hearing some poor bastard being slowly torn apart, I agreed with him.

I went back to the couch and lay down, tired. I didn't think I'd sleep, not with imagining the terror and pain of that criminal and of the two kids, but the persistent buzz of the telephone jerked me out of blankness. I thanked the Goddess for the lack of dreams or nightmares and answered the phone.

"My darlin' girl." Cicero said with smooth joy. That he was happy after meting out punishment, repulsed me, but I let none of my revulsion show. I concentrated on the dawning day. Pale orange bathed the buildings across the street from me and that simple beauty helped calm me.

"Lord Cicero." I said formally, pleased my voice didn't shake.

"You'll be having no more problems with that detective of yours." He chirped, the brogue of Ireland thick in his tone.

"Thank you, Lord Cicero, but I..."

"It is well that you hunt this creature, daughter, for Medira denies it is of her making."

I took the phone away from my ear and stared at it for a moment.

"How can she deny it? There are claw marks!"

He blew a raspberry at me. A *raspberry*! At *me*!

"As she rightly pointed out, her people are not the *only* clawed citizens."

"Well, no, but..."

“Ah, there’s a pet, you’re already thinking on it. I suspect your lack of enthusiasm has to do with that handsome detective, than the crime itself.”

I felt the heat creep up my face. Did *everyone* know? Of course they did; Treece and I had been working together for ten years, and yet the Gargoa failed to understand his attitude towards me; they saw it as him playing hard to get. The Gargoa, after all, lived for centuries and had time to play before settling down to procreate.

I closed my eyes and prayed for strength.

“But, Lord Cicero, I don’t...”

“Now, girl, there’ll be no more of that. He’ll be seeing you, by and by, with all the information you need.” He murmured encouragement, then his voice changed into the cold, ruthless Regent I knew him to be. “Solve this. I’ll have no more human victims by this creature.”

“Yes, Lord Cicero.”

He hung up and I slumped into my office chair, turned it towards the sash windows and watched the orange shading brighten to yellow. That conversation did not go as well as I wanted. Treece was stuck with me, and I with him until the case was done. It was going to be a hurtful exercise on both sides, I just knew it.

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I did not feel any better even after a hot shower, a change of clothes and the delivery of bagels with cream cheese.

The knock on the door had me choking down the last, tasty morsels. I wiped my mouth as I rose and tossed the napkin into the trash basket.

Treece, his dark hair rumpled and blue eyes stained with lines of red fatigue, stood at the door in yesterday’s clothes and a buff-coloured file under his arm.

I opened the door wider and he strode in, dropped the file on the desk and slumped into the visitor’s chair in front of my desk.

Taking pity on him, I poured him a cup of fresh coffee and placed it before him. He picked it up and sipped without a word.

In silence, I sat and reached for the file. It was flimsier than I’d expected and I gave him a narrow-eyed stare. If he’d removed information, this

'partnership' was about to implode nastily. He returned my gaze and sipped his coffee.

I read everything before commenting. The autopsy report was pending, but I knew they hadn't had time for it yet. Forensics were still testing. Only witness statements, which amounted to nothing, the call register and Treece's observations were in the folder.

"Not much to go on." I said, lifting my head.

He raised an eyebrow. "*You* said it was a shape-shifter."

"And I stand by it." I muttered and leaned back in my chair. Treece was looking for another confrontation. I would *not* give him one.

His lip curled. "Unfortunately, that covers all manner of... *sin*."

Treece was going to be his usual pissy self. Fine. I needed my own coffee before I got pissy right back at him. I got up and moved around the desk to the coffee maker. He chuckled and I turned. He wasn't amused.

"What?"

The familiar contempt slid into his eyes. "You're not up for this, are you. You'll just find some poor slob and hand him over to your Regent." He put his cup down and shoved back in the chair. "Well, let me tell you something, *chickie*, that's not going to happen."

With forced calm, I poured the coffee.

He came up behind me. "I'm going to stop this creature, *my* way. Then, I'm going to take him apart, piece by miserable piece."

"Hmm." I murmured after a sip. "Fancy that: a *cop* suggesting an *execution*."

"Oh, def-i-nate-ly." He whispered slowly in my ear. My nerves thrummed and my blood heated, even my neck tilted, ready for those lips. I waited. No touch. At all, dammit!

I closed my eyes, willed my heart rate to slow, for my nerves to stop jumping. The next sip of coffee was cautious, casual, I hoped; choking would not do. I lowered the cup slowly turned as if the tickle of his breath hadn't done anything, but he'd backed off, *way* off. He was sitting as calm as you please reaching for his own mug on the desk.

A quiet breath eased out, a little shaky. If he meant to throw me off stride, he was successful. I'd meant the words as a taunt, but he'd taken me at my word. He was truly going to kill this creature, without the benefit of a trial. But, why? He was a straight arrow cop. No matter how evil the criminal, he always strived to bring them in to face justice. Now he was turning vigilante?

After another gulp of coffee, I was ready to face him.

"I didn't take you for a killer, Treece." I said as I sat.

The corner of his mouth turned up. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Fine." I waved his comment away. "Let's get to work." I set the mug aside and lifted the call sheet. "The husband called it in."

Treece didn't answer and I glanced up at him. He gave me a shrug.

"Not helping here." I said and his eyes lit with something close to amusement. He used his right to remain silent. The bugger.

"Okay." I bent my head. "The husband, Benedict Tulley, of the investment firm Banks – hah! – Sanders and Thomas, comes home from a fund raiser for the mayor – that'll cause trouble – and finds his family slaughtered. Calls it in." I frowned. "He wasn't at the scene when I arrived." I looked up. Treece shook his head.

"Doesn't say he needed medical attention. He took off?" A nod.

"Was he panicked? Scared?" Treece shrugged.

I carefully placed the report on top of the other sheets. "He did it. He slaughtered his family then disappeared to avoid... the cops." I said, picked up my mug, leaned back in my chair and waited.

Treece watched me watching him. I couldn't tell what he was thinking and I fought to keep my own expression blank.

After a minute or so – well, it felt like it – he set his mug on the desk top and pushed to his feet.

Unsure of his intentions, I followed his movements, but closed the file and picked it up.

Without a word, he went to the door and through it.

“Hey! Do I need my guns?”

Treece stopped and turned, a sneer firmly on his lips. “I thought you had... other weapons at your disposal.”

“None I’m showing you, pal.” I sneered right back and went to my filing cabinet.

Inside the top drawer were my projectile weapons: handguns, small crossbows, small tubes that fired stiletto knives and throwing knives. I stared down at the German Luger. To some it was an antique; to me it was a memory. I’d taken the gun from an SS officer who thought he was *scarier* than me. Imagine that. I left the Luger and the memories it represented alone.

My main gun is the Kimber SWAT Custom II .45, with all the trimmings; my two back ups are Kahr T9 and the Bersa Thunder-5. Each gun is loaded with hollow-point Starfire rounds so I can make sure that once I hit something, it ain’t getting up in a hurry. One shot will blow a monster’s heart to soup; I like that idea. Anything in a smaller calibre and you may as well throw the gun at your target.

Once I’d checked ammunition and strapped on the weaponry, I breezed past a stunned Treece.

My exit would have been perfect – except I had no idea where we were going. Not that I was going to let Treece know that.

I stepped onto the street, lifted my face to the sky and breathed in the morning. The air was redolent with fresh baked bread, car exhaust, the salty sea and fresh mountain air. Damn, I *loved* this city.

“You comin’ or what?” Treece asked.

I lowered my face and opened my eyes, gave him a look that made his sour expression disappear.

His hands rested on the roof of his car; his *personal* car. A cherry red Mustang. I watched as his hand formed fists and his expression darkened.

“Get in.” He snarled and vanished into the driver’s seat.

Satisfied I’d made my point, I climbed into the passenger seat.

“Some ride, Slick.” I murmured and snuggled down into the leather.

Treece grunted and pulled away from the curb.

"Tell me," he said gruffly, watching the traffic, "how is it you're a monster and yet you need all those guns?"

I didn't reply. I was through being stung by his callous remarks. Oh, it still hurt, but I wouldn't dignify his question with an answer.

He glanced at me, anger in his eyes. "What are you, Scott?"

"Gargoa." I replied, but he knew that already.

Treece snorted. "No, you're not. I've met Gargoa and you don't have giant bat wings, you don't have sharp teeth, though when you go for the jugular, it can be brutal. You go out in daylight without sunglasses, you don't have fur..." he paused, glanced at my lap, "though I'm guessing..."

"What? Wanna see just how *human* I am?"

He returned his attention to the road, ignored my comment. "You don't have pointed ears, you don't slur your speech, and you sure as shit don't have claws and dusky orange skin." He tilted his head to the side. "Of course, I mean literal claws not those metaphoric ones you display from time to time."

The man was giving me a headache. "You may have met the Gargoa, but you don't know shit beyond appearances. What does that make you, Treece?"

"Hey, I'm an equal opportunity bigot, thank you."

"Treece, it's *not* a good thing to be in this world."

He pulled up at a traffic light and turned to me. I could've sworn there was a smile lurking in those blue eyes of his.

"Daya, please. I can't run this case if I don't know what my back up is."

My eyebrows all but climbed over the back of my head in surprise. *Oh, man*, he was using *charm!* On *me!* What was next? Confessions of undying affection?

"Back up? Since when did I move from the Creature from the Black Lagoon to back up?" Was Treece finally willing to see me in a different light? Not the monster, but someone worthy of respect? Maybe there was hope for him yet.

"Nothing so drastic. You've just gone from future road kill to temporary back up is all. You'll go back when this is done." He moved off as the light turned green, and there went my happy thoughts.



I huffed out a breath. He was, I suppose, right. He had no idea what I could or could not do, but talking about my nature was... unsettling. Every other case we'd worked, we'd brought in the crim without my need for more... drastic measures, like changing into a Gargoan killer. But if he hated me now, in human form; what would he think when I turned? Why did I *care* so much?

Tired of ten years being defensive about who and what I am, I let my guard down. "I am a Daystrider." I said quietly.

"You say that as if it should be in capitals." Treece murmured.

"It is. I am a Daystrider, Treece, heir to the Regency."

"Whoop-de-do."

I slumped sideways in my seat and stared at him with disbelief. "You have no idea what goes on beyond the human world, do you. Worse, you don't give a shit."

"You got it, babe." He sneered. "This world is *ours*. It's a *human* world. You lot are aliens here, interlopers, bastard creatures from nightmares come to life and I am making it my personal responsibility to kill as many of you as possible."

*Oh, boy. Why the hell did I love this idiot?*

I didn't have time to explain the politics of why he was tilting at windmills, we'd pulled up in front of an apartment complex.

"I'll explain why you should accept us as a part of this world, and why it has never been a human one, but later. Why are we here?"

He shut off the engine and gave me a sardonic grin. "To talk to the chief suspect, of course."

I held on to my temper. "If you have a suspect, why do you need me?"

"Like I said, back up, sweets. In case he turns into a boogedy-boogedy." He waggled his fingers at me.

"Oh, charming. The husband, I presume?"

"Correct!" He got out of the car and walked towards the slowly spinning front door.

I rotated my neck and prayed for patience. Then I got out and followed.

Inside was cool and bland: beige walls, beige floor tiles. Even the security guard was dressed in a tan uniform. The only colour came from virulent green pot plants: two of, beside the front door. It eased my temper and impatience. If I'd been more fashion conscious, I probably been outraged at the insipid décor. Well, I wasn't fashion conscious and never had been. The decorating merely sucked the life out of me.

"Sign in." the guard, with the look of a retired cop, said mildly. His brown eyes were empty, his face expressionless. Guess it sucked the life out of him, too.

The officialdom out of the way, Treece and I strolled to the elevator. He pressed the button, I leaned against the wall and waited.

"Tell me your skills." Treece ordered.

I lifted a shoulder. "General mayhem, lots of blood and guts."

"Any intimidation value?"

"That's not intimidating enough?" I asked over the ding of the elevator bell.

Treece went in first and pressed another button, leaned against the wall facing the doors. "I haven't seen the *real* you. What do I know?"

I followed him in, went the back of the elevator. "Treece. Both natures are the *real* me."

He snorted as the doors closed.

"Oy, but you're an insufferable prick!" I slouched in the corner and refused to look at him.

He was fast, I'll give him that. Before I knew his intentions, he had me caged in the corner of the lift, his hands on either side of my head.

I turned my face away as he leaned in close, stared at the brushed metal doors.

"You have no idea just how *insufferable* I can be." He whispered grimly. "What you are, now, is a *lie*. What you turn into, now *that* is truth. And when you do turn, *sweetheart*, I'll be waiting."

I felt my blood begin to boil and tried to ease it back. I let a little of that anger flow into my hands. The pain of shifting bones and stretching skin felt almost pleasureable, but I kept my gaze on the doors and my expression empty. When it was done, I turned my head to him. He was within kissing range, but I ignored that temptation.

Instead I brought a black-clawed, orange-skinned hand up under his chin and looked him in the eye. "Then it's a good thing you'll never see me completely change, Treece, because given half the chance at the moment..." I pricked the soft skin under his jaw hard enough to sting but without drawing blood... "I'd gut you like a fish." I said and raised an eyebrow.

His blue eyes narrowed on mine. His palms rasped down the side of the elevator.

I thought he was going to step back. Instead his hands grabbed my hips and pulled me close as his mouth came down on mine. I pulled my claws back just in time, and sank into the hot silky splendour of his mouth. *Finally*, I thought vaguely.

*By the Goddess*, he was magnificent.

I felt the wobble in my knees and braced them, returned his passion with a heap of my own.

The ding of the elevator button dragged him back. Me, I was stunned mackerel material. Heat flowed through my veins, not anger this time but something entirely different.

Treece didn't look at me. He walked into the hallway and when he realised I wasn't following, glanced back at me. His expression was unaffected, cold and distant, while I could still taste him, still feel that rush of lust. My muscles shook with a fine quiver of *want*.

"We have work to do. Or did you *forget*?" He said with a curl of lip and vanished from my view.

I slumped against the wall of the elevator. How could he *do* that? Simply walk away? How could he do that to *me*? Leave me humming and blurred? Kissing wasn't supposed to be a punishment.

My head fell to my chest. It was as if he'd sucked all the energy out of me. Then I saw that my hands were human again, without my conscious changing. Cold washed through me, rinsing the lust and confusion away and leaving clean worry and focus. Not good; not good at all.

"Damn." I muttered and pushed off the wall, followed Treece down the... beige carpeted hallway.

He knocked on apartment door number 1409. It opened as I joined Treece, my doom – or so it felt.

The chief suspect had light hazel eyes, almost yellow, a narrow, tanned face, straight nose and hair streaked a golden, surfer-type colour.

He was dressed in a grey suit with a white shirt and dark blue tie.

"Benedict Tulley, meet Daya Scott. Scott, Tulley." Treece muttered.

I murmured a hello while he looked me up and down, then up again. A smile creased his cheeks into dimples.

"Well, now," Tulley said and brushed his suit jacket back to plant his hands on his hips. The effect tightened his shirt over a fine set of pecs and abs. "It is certainly a pleasure, Ms Scott."

The guy's wife had been dead for maybe thirty-six hours and he was *hitting* on me?

I gave him a slight smile. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr Tulley."

His expression eased into sorrow, his hands fell from his hips and he cleared his throat. "Thank you, Ms Scott. Ah, won't you come in?" He opened the door wider. "I'm sure that since you're with Detective Treece, you must be with the police, too, or something."

"Or something," grumbled Treece and he preceded me into an apartment decorated in 'man' style. Two buttoned dark brown leather couches faced each other. A low coffee table between with *Architectural Digest* and *Hot Rod* magazine on the glass top vying for space with *Penthouse* and *The Economist*. A mega wide-screen television sat on a broad TV unit. I could see a slim line stereo system, but no speakers.

The walls were pale green, the carpet... what is it with *beige*? Glass fronted bookcases lined one wall and ahead three windows framed a spectacular view of the city.

"Have a seat." Tulley waved a vague hand at the couches. "Can I get you a drink?"

"A little early for whiskey." Treece said.

"Coffee would be nice, Mr Tulley." I smiled, earned a glare from my partner.

Tulley returned my smile with interest. "Call me 'Ben'. I'll be right back." He moved off to the left, towards the kitchen, I assumed.

"Don't get friendly with the chief suspect."

I eased down on the couch, brushed my hand across the soft leather. *Nice*. Probably good for a lie down, something I could use.

"You interrogate your way, and I'll interview my way."

Treece sat opposite me, leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs. "Look, this guy is important to the case. I don't need your hormones getting in the way. You need to focus on the case, not your..."

"Fine." I said cutting him off. I had no intention of going after Tulley, but Treece was going to think the worst of me anyway. I leaned back against the leather and waited for the suspect to serve us coffee.

Treece kept silent, figured he'd made his point judging from the cold light of derision in his eyes.

Tulley returned carrying three ceramic mugs. He'd taken his suit jacket off and loosened his tie, exposing a nicely tanned throat.

I gave him a half smile as he handed me a mug of stygian black coffee. He set the second mug in front of Treece then eased down onto the couch next to me, laid his arm along the back.

I turned to him, brought my knee onto the couch and tasted the coffee. Spoon-meltingly strong and bitter. I managed not to choke. Instead I nodded. "Good and strong," I said into his eyes, "just the way I *like* it." The stuff was strong enough to keep the city buzzed for *days*.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Treece grimace and put his mug down.

Tulley gulped down a full mouthful and I saw what I'd missed before.

"That must have hurt."

"What?" He raised startled eyes to me and I nodded towards his fingers. The index and middle fingers were bruised black.

"Looks like you got them caught in a window or something." Like a rage-filled, spontaneous change in shape. The shape-shifter energy would have forced claws through still human skin, causing some nasty bruising.

He lifted a shoulder and studied the injury before lifting his gaze to mine. "I, er, got involved in a brawl." He gave me a flicker of a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

I looked at his unmarked face and raised an eyebrow.

"Not *my* fight, but when I was crawling around on the club floor," he studied the bruises, "I got stepped on."

"That's awful. When did that happen?" I asked and brushed my own fingers along the back of his hand resting on the couch. He pulled away from me, curled his fingers into his palm.

"Few nights ago at Revolution." He said, naming the top club in the city. It was notorious for outrageous behaviour by the patrons. *Not* for the faint-hearted.

"Iced them?"

"Yeah." He studied the purpling. "Hurt at the time, but then it kind of went numb. Until the next morning." He finished with a short laugh.

Treece cleared his throat; I ignored him.

"Must have been tough at the fundraiser."

He looked at me blankly.

"Explaining what happened, I mean."

Tulley stared down into his mug. "I just kept my hands out of view. No-one noticed."

"You have a lovely apartment." I said, looking around, if you went for minimalism, "did your wife decorate it?"

Treece squirmed with impatience, Tulley shook his head.

"No, this is mine. The house is for her. *Was* for her and the kids. She didn't like city living that much." He sighed and lifted his head. His expression was bleak. "I use this when I have meetings that run late, or I need to work on proposals, projects and research." He gave me a lopsided sad

smile. "It's tough to concentrate with young kids running around whooping it up. Christa understood. Sometimes, she'd join me, leave the kids with the neighbours."

"Do you like your job?"

His body tensed, but his face was relaxed. "Sure. It's made me a wealthy man."

"For which, I'm sure the Mayor is grateful."

"What do you mean?"

"The donations to his re-election. A man of your stature would be able to pull in businessmen from all over." I smiled knowingly at him.

"Yes," he said, hesitant. "But, I still don't get your meaning." He frowned.

"There would be many grateful people at a crowded fundraiser. So grateful as to cover for someone who stepped out for half an hour or so?"

He looked like I'd punched him.

"You can't possibly... think... that I..." His face leached of all colour except a tinge of green. He shook his head. "I didn't do *that* to them. I *couldn't*. They were my *family* for God's Sake!" He set his mug on the coffee table and put his face into his hands. "Jesus." His voice was muffled. "I couldn't, I didn't; I *loved* her!"

Tulley's hands dropped and he glared at me. "You can interview everyone at the fundraiser, anyone of them will tell you I was *there*. At all times. Talk to the doorman, the wait staff. I. Did. Not. Kill. My. *Family*! Now, get out!"

I glanced at Treece. He was supremely pissed. At me. He stood up.

I slid my almost full mug onto the table and rose. "I'm sure we'll have more questions for you. But that will do for now."

Tulley's hands fisted and he slowly rose. I think he would have thumped me, but Treece grabbed my arm and hauled me to the door. Tulley followed and slammed it behind us.

"That went well, I thought." I risked a look at Treece. Thunderous was a good description for his expression. "Didn't you think it went well?"

In lieu of a reply, he all but threw me into the waiting elevator. He viciously jabbed the down button and slowly turned to me. "Well? You think it went *well*? You accused one of the top businessmen in the country of murder and bribery! Accused, by inference, the Mayor of graft, corruption *and* fraud!" He shouted.

Yep, he was pissed.

"Look, I..."

He used his fist and punched my shoulder. My back hit the wall and I winced.

"No, *you* look. This is *my* case; now made that much more difficult because you made unsubstantiated allegations! Oh, you can bet Tulley is on the phone to Mayor Watson, right now, who will call my boss, who will then call to carpet *me*! I cannot do my job if my avenues of investigation are compromised. Do you get it now?"

"*He*. Did. It." I replied and rubbed my shoulder. I knew he'd pulled it, but it hurt just the same.

Treece eased back, crossed his arms. "Prove it."

"In order?" I asked brightly.

He gave me a warning look.

"First, he hit on me. Second... don't roll your eyes. A man who's lost his wife and kids in such a brutal fashion less than two days ago does *not* hit on another woman!"

Treece rolled his hand for me to continue.

"Second, he offers alcohol at..." I checked my watch, "ten o'clock in the morning. A man who drinks that early is trying to settle his nerves."

"Or he's being polite."

I shook my head. "Not even. He was nervous we were there. Third, his hands."

"Hands."

"A man does not get to the top of his profession by being a pussy. Nope, he hid them when I noticed the bruises, no way he got them..."



"There's a police report on the near riot at Revolution."

I raised my eyebrows. "Tully told the *truth*?"

The elevator doors opened and I followed him out across the sea of beige.

"Yes. The guy doesn't have a lick of physical courage. Have you got anything else?" He pushed through the revolving doors before I could answer. Damn, there went that scenario.

I caught up to him and got into the Mustang. He started the car up and pulled into the traffic, all without looking at me.

"The apartment."

"What?" Treece asked, distracted.

"That apartment. Comfy couches for watching the mega screen. Nothing else. No papers, no laptop, nothing to indicate he worked there."

"Maybe he's just tidy. Maybe he has an office off the kitchen."

"Not if he brews coffee like that." I muttered.

"Now, you've lost me." Treece sighed. "What does his truly awful coffee have to do with *anything*?"

"People who drink coffee regularly, in my experience, know exactly how to make it. That stuff was way beyond strong. He didn't know how to do it and over filled the filter."

"So?"

"So he never finished his own. *Other* people make his coffee. I doubt he works there if that's the case. Anyone with as much work as he has would have someone else to do the..." I waved a hand, searched for a word that would come, "doings. Like cooking, like cleaning, like laundry. That apartment is for assignments or it's a hideout, a stage, for something else."

Treece snorted with disbelief. "Right. Got anything else?"

"He never mentioned the kids' names."

"Grief." He tossed back.

"Lack of interaction with them; no emotional engagement. He didn't care for them. He only mentioned his wife once and that was in passing, as if to make the apartment their secret love nest. Doesn't work for me."

Treece pulled up in front of my office and got out. I followed him. Mr Manners he wasn't.

I walked beside him upstairs and opened my door.

"Next item?" He asked and slumped down onto my couch, threw an arm over his eyes. He was acting strange, no, weary. As if he just didn't *care* any more. I recalled he'd turned up at my door in the same clothes, face smudged with exhaustion. He was tired, that was all; just tired.

"His outrage was over the top, or not enough, I can't decide which. Yeah, he was pissed at the accusations, but his response was all wrong. He put the coffee mug on the coffee table *before* he 'went to pieces'." I made quote marks with my fingers. "No one does that, Treece. His hands didn't even shake; not a tremble. Too cool, too rehearsed, too..."

"Angry that you accused him straight out?"

I waved him off. Something was nagging at me. Something about this whole set up. I temporarily shrugged it off.

"Then there's money. He has enough money to cover himself. Enough money to bribe anyone and everyone at the fundraiser. He could have slipped out..." I tilted my head in thought and went to my desk.

"What?"

"Monster." I murmured as I rummaged around my desk drawers for a map of the city. I found it, opened it onto the desktop and pulled out a ruler, measured the distances between City Hall and the Tulley's suburban residence.

Since I was no good at mental arithmetic, I did some number crunching on my calculator. "Hmm... possible; probable."

"What are you muttering about?" Treece called.

I bundled up the map, the calculator and the ruler and went to the couch, laid everything on the table.

"Look at this."

Treece rubbed a hand down his face and sat forward. "What have you got?"

I pointed to the seven storey City Hall. "This would be his starting point." I circled both City Hall and the Tulley's residence, and, as an after thought, Tulley's apartment building. I drew a line between the points, formed a triangle.

"By my calculations, and they are by no means, absolute. Tulley would have had time to get from City Hall to the suburbs, do the deed, get back to his own place, change and be back at City Hall within about forty minutes."

Treece heaved a great sigh, then chuckled. An honest-to-God chuckle. For me.

My heart sighed with the pleasure of it. For a moment.

"Benedict Tulley is *human*. There is no way he could have done the trip in such a short time. Not even with all the lights going his way. And he would have been spotted. By someone. Try something else. It's not Tulley."

"How do you know he's human? Who says so? Did I miss something in my explanation?"

Treece slowly rose, as if he were a hundred years old. "I ask for proof and you give me fairy tales. Fine. I'm going home to sleep."

He walked out with me still gaping at him.

I went back over my thought processes, how I'd explained everything to him...

"Uh, oh." I muttered as I carefully tried to fold the map. I'd forgotten to tell him what Cicero had said. Shape-shifters weren't the only creatures with claws; nor were fairies the only creatures who could fly. One other species had both: the Gargoa.

\* \* \*

I spent the rest of the day going over what I knew, my conversation with Cicero and thinking of what I saw at the Tulley's house; those claws in particular. I re-shaped my thinking, compared it to the known preters, and wrote one word down on my notepad: Nightstalker.

The mid-morning light was too bright across my desk. I reached out and tugged on the cord to drop the Roman blind. I flicked the switch for my desk lamp and stared off into space to think.

The Gargoa came in three flavours: Your standard Gargoa who were often mistaken for oversized gargoyles, usually around seven feet tall, overly muscular, orange-skinned with fur down the back, hands and feet tipped with lethal black claws. I'd seen those claws dismember animals and humans in the space of seconds; even had them slash at me a time or two. They have giant bat-like wings, even have a bat-like face, with a blunted snout and needle sharp teeth, but with round, almost human eyes; a uniform dark chocolate colour. They moved under the moon as if it were the sun, but were all but blind in broad daylight.

The second kind were like me, a Daystrider; a Gargoa who could walk under the sun in human form because of shape-shifter, er, contamination from way back in the dark mists of time. We were rare, but exceptionally useful. We were human in our human form, Gargoa in our Gargoan form. On the down side, we only lived a few hundred years, as opposed to 'pure' Gargoa who could live for a thousand or more, and we healed human slow; that part of shape-shifting we didn't get. Oh, we were much, much tougher to kill, but if we were injured, it made our suffering that much more extended.

Then there were the Nightstalkers. Twisted abominations who thirsted for blood and destruction. They had an animalistic urge to kill. Those unbalanced creatures were... terminated: by Gargoa hunters, like me. No one knew where they came from. They were psychopathic Daystriders, able to hide among the humans during the day, and the Gargoa at night.

The Nightstalkers and Daystriders had one thing in common: severe stress can cause us to spontaneously change: the fight or flight syndrome. It was why relationships with humans were frowned upon. The progeny were at extreme risk of being a Nightstalker.

And that made me sigh; had me resting my cheek in my hand and doodling hearts over the notepad. Me and Treece could never be. He hated what I was, no matter that the kiss he laid on me had my skin heating again, my heart pounding and lust rising.

Nightstalker. Right. I had to focus on what I could change, not what I couldn't.

That it *was* a Nightstalker, I had no doubt. I recognised my mistake in identifying the creature as a shape-shifter as a subconscious attempt to get away from Treece.

I couldn't work with him any longer, it was just too painful. When this case was done, so was I. I would rather be in another city, creating fantasies of Treece I could accept, than to remain here and face the reality of his constant insults and contempt. I just... couldn't do it anymore. I felt a kind of grief rise, as if it were a *fait accompli*, as if I were already gone. I blinked back the stinging tears, dragged in a deep and shaky breath and blew it out again, just as shakily, rubbed the ache under my breast bone. Leaving would be hard; but staying would destroy me.

I looked down at the notepad. Some of the hearts now had arrows through them with tiny drops of blood, others had jagged lines through their centres.

I tossed the pen down and leaned back in my chair.

Before the object of my unrequited love returned, I'd better have some more compelling information as to why I thought Tulley was the killer. The sooner I nailed his ass, the sooner... the sooner I could leave.

I booted up my computer and ran a deep search.

\* \* \*

The scratching at my sash window distracted me from my reading. Tulley had an *interesting* history, to say the least.

I glanced over my shoulder, surprised to see darkness riming the blind

Leaning back in the chair I tugged on the cord and stared at the creature standing on the sill; his clawed hands above the window holding him upright.

The bat-like features split into a grin.

I got up and opened the window, waited for my visitor to fold his wings back and climb inside.

"It is good you have an upward window." He grinned, his voice sibilant.

"Plato, what brings you to me?" I asked and resumed my seat. Plato was one of the Praetorian's messengers. I neither liked, nor disliked him, he was a Messenger. A young one, barely out of the Brood, but his grasp of English

was excellent, though accented. I wondered what language he was most comfortable with.

"Lord Cicero demands the head of the Nightstalker." He said without preamble.

"What?"

"Lord Cicero demands..."

I waved him off. "I heard you the first time. What does he know about it when I've just worked it out?"

Plato shrugged his shoulders. "He commands; I obey."

I rubbed a hand down my face and cursed quietly. "Time?"

He tilted his head at me, not understanding.

"How long has Lord Cicero given me to bring in the Nightstalker?"

Plato's dark eyes went blank. "He commands..."

"And you obey. Yeah, I *got* that." Cicero wanted the head *now*, and I had none to give him. I pushed back the chair and went around the desk, began to pace in front of it.

Cicero, from our conversation this morning, must have already put it all together. His comment that Treece was 'coming by with all the information I needed' was simply to give me a heads up to get Tulley. He assumed that Treece had the proof and all I needed to do was to execute Tulley.

But I couldn't do that.

I had no *absolute* proof, nothing incontrovertible, only speculation and theory. I couldn't *kill* someone because I *thought* they were the killer and *then* present the proof... or could I?

Plato got in the way of my pacing. I looked up at him. He folded his arms across his furred chest, muscles bulging.

"Lord Cicero *demands* the head of the Nightstalker." He said again, with more force.

"I *know*, Plato. Believe me, I *do* understand. But I don't have it. *Yet*." I chewed on my lower lip and tried to come up with a plan.

"Does Lord Cicero know who the Nightstalker is?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How does Lord Cicero know?"

Plato frowned. "He went to the house. He scented the creature. He could not locate the Nightstalker."

"He went to the house."

"Yes. But the humans come; he left."

*Ah.* And there in lay the problem. If Cicero and his guards had caught the Nightstalker, this wouldn't even be an issue; they would have executed him right there and then.

The Regent liked to keep his hand policing his own people. A kind of proactive measure to assure the Gargoa he was in control, in charge and looking out for their interests.

Unfortunately, this time the police had turned up before he could get further information. Once the police were involved, it wasn't just a Gargoan problem; thus the pairing of me and Treece.

With his knowledge and Treece's human information, Cicero had thought it a simple case of going after Tulley. It had, after all, worked that way in the past.

Not this time. Oh, no. Benedict Tulley was a well-respected businessman. To simply kill him would cause all sorts of repercussions. The media were all over this case as it was. To kill Tulley without accompanying proof would lead to major political ramifications for both the humans, a lot of whom thought us monsters anyway, and the preters.

I let out a sigh. This just got better and better.

"I do not have the head of the Nightstalker." I confessed.

"Lord Cicero *demands*..."

"I *know*, dammit!" I rubbed my forehead, put a fist on my hip and again tried to think of a plan. If I did not hand over the head, Cicero would call me home to explain. That could lead to an 'interrogation' of why I failed to comply with his demands – which were sacrosanct.

I went to the telephone and dialled the Praetorian. Maybe he could help me out of this squeeze I suddenly found myself in.

Marcus answered after three rings. "Daya, we are pleased by the conclusion of this case." He said cheerfully.

"I don't have it, Marcus."

There was silence at his end.

"You have to explain it to him."

"Explain what, Daystrider? You have the information. All you had to do was destroy the Nightstalker." His voice had lowered to a growl of disappointment and warning.

"Explain to him that without absolute proof, the humans won't countenance an assassination!"

"This is not an 'assassination', Daystrider, this is an execution! You must do your Lord's bidding in this!"

The problem with the Gargoa is that they are so alien to humans that they generally keep out of sight. Gargoa are not as pretty as the fairies, as intriguing as the vampires, as dynamic as the shape-shifters nor as courageous as the Underworlders, the dwarves, gnomes, trolls and the like. Fiction had served them well. We, on the other hand, were unknown in history, in fables, in legends and are therefore treated as some scary nightmare, with caution as if we were the most dangerous of the preters; we weren't.

But staying out of sight meant staying out of contact and staying out of contact with the humans meant the Gargoa had little understanding of the way humans worked; socially, politically, *legally*.

The human world did not operate in black and white, like the Gargoa world did; it was why they needed Daystriders; to be the conduit.

I had been at pains to explain this to Lord Cicero and I had thought he understood. But every time I *did* think that, he turned around and acted precisely as he'd always done. The coming out of the preters after World War II hadn't changed his attitude at all, no matter what I said.

Marcus had a limited understanding of the human world; he had to be the link between the Daystriders and Lord Cicero himself.



I stared at a blank faced Plato and turned away. His hearing was good enough that he could hear both sides of the conversation. Messengers could and did report hour long conversations word for word. There were no secrets when a Messenger was around.

I glanced back at him then to the open window, felt the rush of cool air against my heated skin.

"Marcus. *Listen* to me. I can't do this without proof! It would be disastrous any other way!"

"Then you risk Nightstalker status, you *know* that. If Lord Cicero brands you thus, every hunter will be looking for you."

My shoulders slumped. I was a dead woman if that happened. Maybe Marcus could intercede for me.

"I need time, Marcus. I *know* Tulley is the Nightstalker; I just need to get absolute proof. How long can you give me?"

I heard him sigh. I'd put Marcus in an awkward position, but not one he hadn't been in before.

"One day."

"*One?* But Marcus..." The breeze cooled my skin, but Marcus's words chilled my soul.

"One is all I can give you, Daystrider. The Lord commands and I obey. So do you. One day. Lord Cicero plans to use the Nightstalker as a lesson, though about what and to whom, I have no idea."

A feeling of helplessness swept over me. "Thank you, Marcus, I'll do my best."

"Bring Cicero the head of the Nightstalker, Daystrider. You know the punishment for failure in this." He said and hung up.

Nausea rolled through me at the thought of what Cicero would do to me; he was a 'hands-on' kind of a Regent. I replaced the handset. Indeed I did know the punishment, and it wasn't something I'd survive.

\* \* \*

Plato grinned at me, the *mongrel*.

"Need help?" He asked brightly.

I frowned. "Why would you help me? You're a Praetorian Messenger."

He lifted a shoulder; a very *human* thing to do.

"I change." He said then tilted his head, the muscles in his jaw working. "I *want* change." Plato bared his teeth in frustration. "I want *a* change."

I stared at him in surprise. Gargoa didn't *change* their job descriptions, they were what they were. By genetic predisposition, he could recite any conversation he'd heard. He didn't have to *understand* the conversation, merely repeat it.

There was no *changing*. If there were, I'd be a... well... the question had never come up. I'm a Daystrider; that was it, that was all.

"Change?" I snorted. "Plato, can't *change*. You are a Messenger."

He drew up to his full height, puffed out his chest. "I am *more*."

I had a chilling thought and went over what I'd said since his arrival. If he was a spy for Cicero...

"Plato, you'd better explain yourself." I said and lowered into the visitor's chair. Plato dropped to his haunches, made himself comfortable and looked up at me.

"I am more, Daystrider. I remember words, lots of words." He was so earnest, so believing I understood the difference.

"I know; it's why you are a Messenger."

He shook his head. "No, Daystrider, I *remember* the words, I *understand* the words; I do not *forget* them." He hesitated while the words sank in and I understood what he was trying to say.

Plato lowered his head and glanced up at me shyly. "I would be a Regency Guard, or a diplomat for the Court."

*Oh, boy.* How did I let him down gently?

"Plato." I tried to think of something less harsh. "Plato, you know we're vetted as younglings?"

He nodded.

"That happens throughout our youth. If you were to be a Regency Guard or a... diplomat," I said with his emphasis, "you would have been accepted as one and guided by the mentors."

His expression didn't change. He still looked at me with anticipation that I would somehow fix this for him. I was, after all, heir to the Regency. I couldn't fix it for him, though, heir or not. Until Cicero died, was deposed or gave up the Regency, I was like every other Gargoa, subject to the Regent's whim. I had no special standing – not that the humans understood that, but that was an explanation better left alone.

"You know I can't..."

He shook his head as rose to his full height. "I will prove to you that I am more. That I can be what I wish."

"Plato, there's never been a change."

He went to the window, climbed onto the sill and looked out into the darkness. He was filled with youthful exuberance, accepting the challenge I'd inadvertently handed him.

"Then I will be the first." He said and launched himself off into the night.

"Shit! *Plato!*" I went to the window, but he was nowhere in sight.

I slapped my hands on the sill. "Great. Just bloody *great!*"

"What is?" Treece said and I turned. He looked better; actually, he looked tasty. His t-shirt was white and stretched across his chest, his blue jeans were clean and had faded to white over his muscled thighs, and he was wearing joggers, with a black swoosh. I didn't need Cicero's tender mercies to be tortured. Every time I saw Treece, I hurt.

He closed the door quietly and wandered over to make coffee.

"Gargoa politics." I huffed.

Treece raised a questioning eyebrow, but I shook my head. Not his business...

I dropped into my seat. Actually, it *was* his business.

"From that sigh, I'm guessing it's not good news."

"The worst." I muttered, leaned my elbows on the desk and dropped my head into my hands.

"Anything I should know about?"

I lifted my head. He had his back to me, giving a very, *very*, good look at the way those jeans fitted his butt and his t-shirt stretched across his body. *Not* good. My head went back into my hands.

"Eventually."

"Cryptic."

"Oy." I agreed.

"Have you been working all day?" He asked without pressing for more information or tossing out an insult. That alone was suspicious, but the scent of fresh coffee drifted in the air.

"Yeah." I laid my hands flat on the desktop, onto the paper I'd printed out on Tulley.

Treece placed a full mug between my hands and sat in the visitor's chair.

"What's this?" I wrapped my hands around the steaming brew.

"It's coffee." He said and sipped from his own mug.

"I know that. Why?"

"Because you looked like you needed one."

"Too kind," I said sardonically and gulped a hot mouthful. "Hmm. Good."

"Okay, let's get to work." He put his mug on the desk and waited expectantly for me to begin. Why was he being so... accommodating? Our relationship was built on distrust, dislike and discord; all the 'dissing' being on his side. I couldn't really trust this calm, affable creature, *could* I?

"Ahm... we've, er, hit a snag."

"Since you mentioned Gargoa politics, I'm assuming it's really *you* that's hit a snag, rather than 'we'. Am I right?"

*Bastard.* I glared at him. "Yes." And he's back...

Or not. I nearly dropped my coffee when I saw a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. But he braced himself and the near-smile vanished.

"You'd better tell me then."

I stared at him over the rim of my coffee mug. Confused: *throw into disorder*. That was me, and another 'dis' for him. One I couldn't trust. What was he playing at?

He kept his expectant gaze on mine.

This was so not good. If I told him of Cicero's command, it would give him the opportunity to drop me in it, to get in the way of what I had to do. If I didn't kill Tulley within twenty-four hours, I was dead. And, according to the gospel of Treece, any dead monster was a good monster.

If I *didn't* tell him... what? What *could* he do about it? Investigate the killing - or if I had my way, *disappearance*. I'd done this often enough that no matter how good a cop was, the case remained unsolved. Treece, though, would be on the trail forever. He was that kind of a cop.

While I considered my options, I shuffled the papers together and handed them to him. He could chew on Tulley's history first. Depending on his response, I would either fill him in or get rid of him and go and do the deed anyway.

"What's all this?"

"Read it." I said and swivelled to face the open window, mug in hand, and enjoyed the cool breeze and sounds of the traffic below.

Treece would not appreciate my dumping him to go and kill someone. Oh, he'd *know* it was me; *proving* it would be another matter. And if I did this job without his knowledge the break in our relationship would be total. He'd never stop chasing me for the murder; and I... I might eventually let something slip. For a monster to commit a crime against a human, the penalty was death; a 'public' one, in front of human representatives and the species involved, just to make sure the monsters didn't hide the perpetrator. It was a 'good intentions' exercise all round.

Nor could I enlist Treece's help or his silence: he hated the monsters too much to entertain any of those thoughts. A no win situation for me. I would have to wait until he went home, or off to investigate something and then kill Tulley any way I could. There was no time for a plan. It would be fast and ugly, and I would probably leave clues around. Dammit.

Depression suddenly descended and I felt, for the first time in an aeon, the need to curl up in a ball and weep. I was doomed to face his suspicion, his hatred for the rest of...

Oh.

I was leaving. In just over twenty-four hours. And, damn, didn't that thought put a spike through my chest?

"So what are we waiting for?" Treece asked behind me.

I swivelled back. "What?"

He placed the information on my desk. "According to your most intensive research, Tulley – or Galbally as he was known then - had a family in Arizona that met a similar fate. Since it remains unsolved, I'm thinking he got out of Dodge, fudged his identity and landed a nice little job here." He flicked the sheets with a long finger. "Tulley also managed to find himself a nice, ready made family to blend in with."

"Yes." I said hesitantly, watched his fingers fondle the mug and wished...

"But it doesn't explain *how* he could have done it." Treece tilted his head at me. "Where did you get this information from anyway?"

"Ahm..." I dragged my eyes from his hands and glanced at the computer. "Detective work. I followed his trail backwards." His look of disbelief had me rolling my eyes. "I searched for similar crimes in the last five, ten, fifteen and twenty years. A Nightstalker..."

"A *what*?"

Oh. Right. I'd forgotten. "A Nightstalker is a Gargoa who is... um... a Daystrider and who is also psychologically twisted."

"Insane." He leaned forward, placed in mug on the desk.

"Oh yes, that and more. They have an uncontrollable need to feed on flesh and blood..."

"Like a vampire." His nod was one of understanding. But he was wrong.

"Um, no. Not really. Look, you've met Gargoa."

"Yes, Marius, the guard." His expression turned pensive. "Remember? We had to interview the Gargoa on that werewolf case a couple of years ago."

*Ah, yes.* I'd forgotten. Treece had been determined to prove the murder of a schoolgirl had been committed by us; I had to introduce him to a Gargoan to show that it couldn't have been one of us who did the deed. Treece had been surly, sour and disappointed.

The problem with Treece was that he liked to blame crimes on the monster *du jour*. He'd made no effort to learn the difference between the species: a monster was a monster was a monster in his book.

"Okay then. Vampires are controlled unless there is a battle going on; then they can be tempted into a berserker rage and off they go, killing anything warm-blooded and breathing. A *Nightstalker* on the other hand is like a, like a psychopath. The need builds and builds until they simply cannot control themselves. Their need is like an animal, it literally cannot control itself once it gets beyond a certain point. Once that control is gone, anyone in the way *will* be slaughtered."

"Ah." He said as if taking mental notes. "So Tulley has been able to control himself up until now."

"Yep. A *Nightstalker* can function within a society up to a point. I wouldn't be surprised if he had self-mutilation scars somewhere on his body to ease the urge, or, as I have already discovered, a number of disappearances around where he has lived before. I'm thinking that there are a few disappearances around here that can be attributed to him."

"This is all well and good, but we don't have any absolute *proof*." He sounded almost... conversational, as if this were an academic exercise.

"Now that Tulley has temporarily slacked his thirst, *proof* will be harder to get." I said and he scoffed.

"There is always evidence of a crime. We just have to find it."

Here was the opportunity to tell Treece of the deadline over my head. I opened my mouth, but he cut me off.

"Walk me through it."

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Walk me through how Tulley did this. If it's feasible, then we follow his trail and find the evidence. Or do you need more of that excellent java."

This was becoming *too* much; this was *not* the Treece I'd been working with, this was *not* the Treece I lusted after... okay, he was, but this Treece was *different*.

I put elbows on the desk and leaned forward, gave him a gimlet eye. "Why the change of heart, Treece? You hate monsters and up until you walked in here, the *only* monster around was me and yesterday you were defending Tulley because you *knew* him to be human; and in your eyes, that made him innocent. What's changed?"

He shrugged and looked away, but I saw the glint of some knowledge in his eyes.

"Explain, Treece, or you're outta here."

"Threats, Scott?" He said softly and turned back.

"You are creeping me out with all this 'understanding'."

He stared at me and I stared at him. "Let's just say I've... come to an agreement with my... superiors."

"Let's *not* and you *tell* me instead."

He broke eye contact. "I can't."

"You... can't? Or won't?"

The dark eyebrow lifted again. "Pick one."

"This is not conducive to a working partnership." I muttered.

"Live with it and move on." He rose and stretched; firm muscle rippled beneath the t-shirt and I simply could not look away from that oh, so, finely tuned body. The shirt was a teaser to what lay beneath, what I wasn't allowed to touch. How many more nights would my dreams be filled with what I knew to be just out of reach? Of how well we'd fit together. I'd had a taste yesterday and it was one more thing I'd have to do without. I could always change my mind about leaving... but no. I'd had enough torture.

Damn, I would miss looking at him.

His fingers waved in front of my face and I jerked back, remembered that he wasn't just eye-candy.

"I said, 'Are you coming?'" I heard the smirk in his tone.



*Oy, touch me and find out.* I shoved back the chair and turned my back on him to close the window, to give me a little breathing space. Night air wafted in, cooled my heated cheeks. I slowly lowered the sash and then the blind.

Instead of night, I could now smell Treece, his citrusy after-shave and underneath that, the man. It was something more to miss about him.

"Do we need weapons?" I asked.

"I don't know. Do we?" He murmured behind me.

"He's more vulnerable to change at night, hence the 'night' in Nightstalker."

"Does that mean you're more vulnerable to change during the day?" He asked softly, curious.

I shivered at his touch of his breath on the back of my neck. "No, I am completely in control at all times." *Not.* "I change at will, or under severe emotional distress."

"Then we need weapons." I felt his body heat as he stood close. I didn't dare turn around.

"Daya?"

Oh, shit, he'd used my name and I slowly shifted to face him. He was standing so close to me, leaning towards me, an intensity in his eyes I'd never seen before.

"Yes, Dominic?" I asked softly, expectantly and moved closer.

"We need to go." He stated abruptly and went towards the door.

I saw red. "*See?* This is exactly the kind of *shit* I don't need anymore!" I strode towards him, my anger tightly controlled but no less fierce. "You hear me?" I poked a finger into his wonderfully formed pectoral muscle. "This time tomorrow I'm *gone!* You get me! I am *outta* here! You can find yourself a new partner because I have Had IT!"

I opened the door and shoved him through it, slammed it shut and stormed down the hallway. I didn't care if he followed, he'd pushed the damn button once too often and I wasn't tolerating it anymore.

"You're... leaving?" He walked slightly behind me. "Why?"

He sounded genuinely concerned, but I'd heard that before too, right before he cut me down again.

"Because you're a condescending shit, a patronizing bastard, a hateful, ignorant, ill-tempered bigot and I'm tired of your sniping at me. For ten fucking *years* I've let it slide. No more." I raced down the stairs to the ground level; Treece kept pace with me.

"Flatterer. I thought you liked me." He said, and I heard the ill-concealed mirth in his tone.

I stopped in the foyer and leaned over, placed my hands on my knees. I had to control the sudden spike of rage or I would change right there and then. He had no idea. No fucking *idea* how close I was.

"Hey," he placed a warm palm on the centre of my back. "Are you okay?"

"Get. Away. From. Me."

His hand left, but he didn't.

"You don't really want me to leave do you?"

"The further, the better, you asshole."

He sighed from a few feet away. "You mean it, don't you, about leaving. You're really going to do it."

I nodded, the anger draining away with the rising of the ache of longing in my chest. I eased out a breath and stood up. "Yeah."

"Is there nothing I can do to convince you to stay?" He walked over to me, stared down into my face searching... for what I don't know.

Why now? Why did he ask *now* when the decision had been made?

"I doubt it, Treece. I know you too well to think this change of attitude of yours will last. You might not be too much of an asshole today, but tomorrow, or the next day, you'll be right back where you were yesterday: bitching about how evil the monsters are and how they should all be destroyed so mankind can be free. Your words, Treece, not mine. Every time we have to work together you point that out. Well, *I'm* a monster. I can't change that, nor do I want to. So no, I don't think there's anything you can do to make me stay." My throat tightened on the last word.

He stared down at me, and I let him, damn me; I had no defences against this man, not anymore and I wondered, as I gazed into his blue eyes, if I'd *ever* had any resistance to him.

His head lowered and he brushed my mouth with his. "Stay." He whispered and pressed his lips against mine, moved seductively, called to me to respond. "Stay with me." He murmured and pulled me against him. His hands moved to cup my butt and he held me tight, thigh to thigh, chest to breast.

I nearly said 'yes'. Gods, it almost spilled out; I was close to begging, close to giving in if only he would hold me like this forever, but a tiny, cynical voice wondered if he were trying to manipulate me again. I backed off; slowly drew away, though it was painful to do so.

"I... can't." I stared out into the night, took a step away from him. "There's too much..." I could do this, I *could*. I cleared my throat. "There's too much... *hurt*. Too much mistrust."

I went around him out into the street lit night. Treece's car was parked in front of me.

He came around and opened the passenger side door for me. "Give me time to change your mind, then."

"I don't *have* anymore time." I said as I got in.

Treece jogged around the front of the car, my eyes tracked him all the way until he climbed in next to me and started the engine.

"As cryptic remarks go, that's a beauty." He pulled into traffic. "Why don't you have any more time?"

"I don't think you need involve yourself in monster politics." I grumped and watched the late night pedestrians. Some were hunched in coats, others were striding down the footpath with purpose, others, tourists most likely, were swivelling their heads at the tall buildings, the shop displays, the people.

"I'm sorry." He sighed.

"For?"

"Everything, I guess."

Silence reigned for three blocks. I had nothing more to say to him, and he had sunk into his own thoughts.

"You're the best partner I've ever had." He confessed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him turn his head to me, then back to the traffic, as if gauging my reaction. I was empty; at least it felt that way. Too much stress. I had to go and kill someone, come home, pack and leave for parts unknown. The man of my dreams who for ten years had been a royal prick had, apparently, changed his mind and now wanted me to stay. There was too much emotion. *I* was too emotional about this and I couldn't cope with it all.

No, that wasn't true. I could cope with everything except the despicable, ill-timed, irrepressible *hope*.

There was a part of me that wanted, *needed*, the change in Treece to be permanent and I knew it simply couldn't be. Men did not change. Treece, in particular, didn't change. He was too set in ways, too used to doing things *his* way.

But how did I crush hope? How did I kill love?

All the way to Tulley's apartment, I tried to come up with an answer. All I came up with was despair.

\* \* \*

Tulley, surprisingly, wasn't in.

Treece used his police badge to get the super to open the door.

The place was spotless, as if the World's Best cleaner had come through and picked up every speck of dirt. That or the dust bunnies were in hiding.

I picked up the scent of pine cleaner; it was subtle, faint, but there.

"Someone's cleaned the place up." Treece murmured as he walked in.

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. My Gargoan senses could barely pick the pine up, so how could his human one's.

"How did you know that?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Look at the place. Not a magazine out of place. All the cushions are perfectly aligned, and the carpet has brush marks on it."

"Oh."

I followed him through the apartment. If *Home Beautiful* wanted the perfect place, this was it. If we hadn't talked to Tulley this morning, I'd have thought the place uninhabited. And that's when it hit me; what felt wrong about Tulley's house, felt wrong here. It was all way too neat. No knick-knacks, no photographs, no kids' hand-drawn pictures, no indication of affection for his family. It was as if they never existed here.

The kitchen gave it away, though. It had fresh fruit and vegetables, a litre of low-fat milk, yoghurt, cheese, a half loaf of bread, jams and other spreads. The cupboards, too, had cartons of high fibre breakfast cereal, canned goods, pasta, jars of stuff.

"Man, this guy is *healthy*." Treece closed the cupboard door.

"No, he's not, he's *anal*."

Treece glanced at me.

"He's got all the right food stuffs, but everything is organised and set precisely, not a jar or box out of alignment. That's just... *wrong* on so many levels."

Treece granted me a full blown smile that lit up his face as he chuckled.

*Oh, man. Heart, don't fail me now!* But it was wavering; I could *feel* it.

"So it is." He agreed and walked down the hallway. I followed cautiously in his wake. If Treece kept up this relaxed agreeable state, I'd either throw my self at him, or out the window, and the window was looking good for it.

The master bedroom was perfect. A king sized mahogany bed, tightly made with a duvet of black and red, two side tables, lamps, a wooden blanket box at the bottom. Ceiling to floor drapes done in a dark, almost black red; built-in wardrobes, a mahogany chest of drawers.

Treece shifted to the right, towards the closed door. Bathroom, I figured.

He opened the door and I lifted my chin. A scent... something sharp, bitter, old. I concentrated, closed my eyes and followed it to where Treece was standing.

"Neat as a pin and dry." He said and my eyelids lifted to a scene of absolute white. White paint, white tiles, even white towels. The only other colour was of the night through the bevelled glass window.

The shower screen had no water droplets, there wasn't any dampness around the drain either. If this room had been used, it had been mopped up by someone who had an obsessive-compulsive disorder, the same compulsion that made Tulley organise his cupboards and fridge.

But the *scent*...

I turned my head left and right, tried to identify where it was coming from. Everything was spotless and, as Treece pointed out, dry. The ceramic, the towels, everything one would associate with bathing was dry.

Treece lifted the lid on the white laundry basket and replaced it with disgust. "Nothing."

I was drawn to the window. This high up, it should have been sealed shut, and yet a tiny draft of night air came in over the sill. I reached out and lifted it, expecting it to be tough. The window slid up soundlessly. Cold air poured in, but I only had eyes for what lay beyond.

"Treece?" I called softly.

The heat of his body next to mine was welcomed, but it didn't dispel the chill I felt inside.

On bricks outside the window were dark stained scratches. Here was the smell I caught; dried blood.

Tulley, in his Nightstalker form, didn't care about neatness; that was evidenced by the mess at the crime scene. But in his own domain, when he'd returned to his human form, he compensated by being obsessed with neatness.

"I'd say that was proof, wouldn't you?" He said and leaned out for a closer look.

I joined him. "Feet claws." I said. "He stood here, dug the claws in for purchase, opened the window and climbed in, scratching the brickwork."

Treece reached out but didn't touch the marks. "By the look of the gouges, I'd say he's done this more than once."

"That's a given." I said and pulled back in. If nothing else, Tulley had doomed himself by not thinking outside the box. My main concern was that if he wasn't here, at this time of night, the only other place he could be was out hunting for another victim. If he found one before I found him, there'd be nowhere I could hide from Cicero.

Treece stood back and closed the windows. "I'll get forensics up here. Maybe we'll be able to connect him to some disappearances. It's enough, I think."

"Yeah, but Treece?"

He glanced at me then back to the window, gnawed on his lower lip in thought. "What?"

"I think he's hunting."

I had his full attention. "Then we'd better find him and stop him." He walked past me and I followed.

Treece pulled out his mobile and made the call. Now that he'd done that, he'd have to stay and await the police, just the opening I was looking for.

"No, Treece, *I'm* going to find him, and *I'm* going to stop him. *You* have to explain things to your colleagues."

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "You can't..."

"He's a *Nightstalker*, in his most powerful and dangerous form. You cannot hope to match him." I raised a hand to stop any protest. "That's not an attack on your masculinity, it's the simple truth. Not even I can face him as I am."

"So hurry up and change and we'll both go get him."

Just like him to keep it simple. "Not even in your wildest, Treece." I went to the door. He quickly followed and put his hand over mine as I grasped the doorknob.

"Where are you going?"

"Don't try to stop me, Treece, you won't like the results."

"I'm not trying to *stop* you. I'm just following procedure, so in the hunt for Tulley we don't double up on the search area." His hand released mine and I turned to him. "Where are you going to try first?"

His expression was of a total professional.

When he was like this, it was hard to be petulant, impossible to blow him off. I had to be professional in return. It was the *only* way our partnership worked.

"His house in the 'burbs, first. It's familiar to him. Now that I have his scent, he'll be that more easier to track from there."

Treece nodded, as if he understood. He opened the door and leaned against it. "Good luck," he said as I passed him, "stay safe."

I turned at that comment. He touched two fingers to his forehead and closed the door.

Just when I got a handle on him...

\* \* \*

The Tulley residence was as I'd left it, except for broken crime scene tape. I expected that; kids, an accident, a strong breeze and a weakness in the tape, anything could have done it. It added to the air of tragedy, as if no-one could be bothered to maintain the integrity of the scene.

The house was in darkness. I got out of my Jeep and leaned back against the hood, studied the area.

Nothing moved, but that didn't mean the area was safe; he could be anywhere.

There was no rush of traffic here, no noise from the neighbourhood even though I could see lights on in a number of houses. It was... eerie, chilling, as if evil hovered over the one dark-windowed house in front of me. Maybe it was because I was alone, without Treece as back up, I actually felt vulnerable. I suppressed an urge to wipe my hands on my jeans. The hairs on the back of my neck tingled. Was I being watched from the deep shadows beyond the house? From the house itself?

I kept watch, but nothing moved, not even the darkness.

Nothing would get done if I stayed here. I rechecked my weaponry, just in case, and approached the front stoop. It was a desolate, sad place, as if the life had been squeezed out of it. And I guess it had, with less than one hour of bowel-loosening terror.

The closed door, with its cheery, yellow smiley face sticker gave me pause. I hadn't noticed before and it added to the tragedy. A tragedy I'd take vengeance for when I found the evil bastard.

I drew out the Kimber and held up, stance relaxed, but ready for the unexpected. Hinges squeaked as I pushed the door open. It bothered me that



the door was unlocked. Tulley was here, or had been recently; he had the keys.

The interior was dark, but I stepped inside, senses alert.

The air was heavy with the scent of death and the stench of the Nightstalker.

I made my way in, did a quick eye-sweep of the lounge room.

I heard a quiet footfall behind me and spun my finger on the trigger. Too late. Tulley had his own gun and fired first.

Pain bloomed in my upper chest and I took a step backwards under the impact of hot, speeding metal.

He slapped my gun aside with one hand and the grip of his own gun bashed across my cheekbone. More pain flared and I hit the ground and rolled, tried to grab the back up T9 from my waist.

He was on me faster than slick on oil. Fiery heat spiked down from my shoulder, dimmed my vision. Tulley pressed one knee hard into my sternum, the other ground into my right wrist. I let go of the gun; this would not be decided by human weaponry, not anymore.

My flesh rippled, burned with fire, my bones cracked and I screamed. I was helpless, vulnerable, but Tulley was, too. I was dominant to him and my change brought his on.

His clawed hands ripped away his jacket and shirt, bared his chest. Bones snapped, writhed and reformed under darkening skin and he threw his head back and roared with agony.

My own body shuddered and heaved. My shirt and jeans tore; the leather belt and jogging shoes popped. Muscles and bones reformed themselves with agonised snaps, re-knitted and fresh pain shot through my back as the wings began to emerge. My skin stretched with needle-jabbing intensity. I convulsed, threw Tulley off and rolled onto my stomach, into a ball as the pain flashed through me. More bone stretching-spasms shot through me. Then it stopped and I dragged in deep gulps of air, the echoing ache of change throbbed and eased. It was done.

A hiss erupted from my fanged mouth as I crouched, wings folded back and down, out of the way. I could smell him now. Smell him in the blood of innocents spread around the room; knew him for the killer. His scent tainted

everything. My eyes blinked in the harsh brightness of light from the lounge room. Tulley turned his head and hissed back.

His claws lashed out with preternatural speed, and I turned slightly. His strike cut across the back of my shoulder and I jerked away. I backed up into the lounge room. Blood - the smell of old blood and new. I hissed at him again and he growled.

"Been waiting for you... Meat. My *meat*." He crooned, black eyes empty and leapt at me, claws extended, mouth wide.

I reached up and grabbed his wrists. Fire sparked in my shoulder as I used his momentum to push him aside. He fell to my left and pulled his arm free. I followed him down, dug my claws into his upper chest. It was a bad strike. I should have gone for his throat. His own claws raked down my upper arm. I released him and scrambled away, left arm torn, bleeding and numb.

His laugh was a hiss of noise as he crouched. "I've been waiting for you, Cicero pup." He slurred.

I backed up towards the foyer. The guns wouldn't help; my hands were now too big for the trigger guard. I had to take him down bare clawed but he was stronger than I and barely injured. Somehow, I had to outsmart him. The door was closed and I had no time to open it before he eviscerated me. I'd have to take him head on, and that did not bode well for me.

I crouched, one arm hanging, the other ready for an underhand strike, and warily shuffled back into the room.

Tulley was still lying on the floor laughing like the maniac he was. He saw me and his laughter eased into giggles.

He jumped up and ran from the room to the kitchen.

"What the..." I paused in surprise. I heard the crash as he busted through the back door and raced after him.

I couldn't let him escape, not now, not ever, not even if it cost me my own life.

Stupidly, I followed him through the door. I hadn't ventured out into the backyard before and now I regretted it. Deeply.

The back door had an arched overhang, like the front porch and I instinctively knew that's where he waited. I had time to skid to a sort of halt when he landed on my back with his knees and we both crashed to the grass.

White dots exploded in my vision as I slammed into the ground. I felt something break inside me. Ribs, probably; a few of them.

Tulley's clawed feet dug into the flesh beside the base of my spine and he jumped off me. I had no breath left to scream at the agony, but I heard his giggling.

"Easy meat, Cicero pup, but not too easy, like humans." He giggled.

I turned my head, felt my life force leaking out of me and tried to focus on him. I had to end this now, before I died, for surely that's what was going to happen.

Slowly, painfully, I got to my knees. Warm blood slid down my face, chest, arm and back.

His black eyes lit with admiration and appreciation. "Fight me, Cicero pup, *fight* me, make your death worthy and I shall remember you with affection."

He was shit outta luck on that score. I could barely stay on my knees, but if I didn't show some gumption, he'd slaughter me where I kneeled.

I got one foot around, planted it firmly. I had a plan but I needed him closer.

The claws on my other foot dug into the ground, like a sprinter ready to race. One last shot, that's all I had in me, and by the way I was leaking blood, I might not even have that.

"*Cicero* demands your head, and I obey, Nightstalker." I said in a voice stronger than I hoped.

He set up giggling again. "I shall break your wings, Daystrider, I shall tear, them, OFF! Roll around in your gizzards!"

Tulley came at me and I was ready with the underhanded strike, this time, I would crush his heart.

Out of the darkness, a grey shape emerged and leapt at Tulley, knocked him over.

A wolf? *Here?* How? *Why?*

My eyes went to the bushland. Sure enough, there were luminous green eyes staring back at me. Wolf pack. I wondered whose, then heard a squeal and returned my attention to the fight.

Tulley had the wolf by the throat and tossed it aside. I heard it land with a thump in the darkness, but had no time to check if it still lived.

Tulley's eyes were black with rage as he turned to me came at me, wings flared back, claws outstretched.

As he reached for me, I ducked under his arms and struck upwards, under his sternum. His momentum took him over me and I helped him on his way, ripping my claws through to his heart.

He slammed into the ground with a howl. I dug deeper as he reached out for me again, his claws around my torso, digging, gouging, slicing. I had a handful of heart and I wasn't going to let it go no matter how much he hurt me. With one last burst of strength, I pulled it from his body and fell over backwards.

Tulley was done and I lay on the ground, a hot, wet organ in one hand. Slowly I mashed it into my palm then wiped my hand on the grass, my own heart pounding with adrenalin and speeding the blood that pumped out of me. I felt no more pain, only the languid pulse of hot fluid escaping.

My muscles relaxed and I looked up into the heavens. A sense of contentment settled over me as I stared at the multitude of stars.

The night pressed in on me, gentle and familiar. I could barely breathe without the flash of fire from gashed flesh and broken bones. My eyes drifted shut. I couldn't make myself move, had no urge to do so. Here I would be found; I would die surrounded by the comfort of night and warm earth. Someone else would have to return the Nightstalker's head.

*Treece.*

He had got his wish after all that the monsters die. Now there were two more out of his way. But what if his new attitude was permanent? Would he grieve for me? Would he...?

I heard the padding of the wolves as they came closer, then the rough tongues as more than one began to lick at my blood. I felt one lie down on my left wing, settle itself, warm fur against my side and the rough lick against my face.

If I hadn't been so drowsy, it would have grossed me out. As it was, it looked like I was going to get eaten *before* I had a chance to die.

"Daystrider." A voice whispered close to my ear. "You must change."

He was familiar, though I couldn't think why. It took effort but I replied.

"Can't."

"You must or you will *die*."

"Kill... me." I whispered.

"Not even for you, would I do this." His hand was warm on my forehead as he stroked, eased my anguish.

*Damn* him, that wasn't what I meant! I tried again.

I felt the wolf's fur brush further down my body, begin licking down my ribcage. It tickled, it hurt, it went *numb*.

"*Changing*... will kill, me." I murmured and felt the brush of his breath on my cheek.

"Then there is nothing I can do for you."

"St... *stay* with me?" I forced my eyes open and stared into the dark, grief-stricken gaze of Plato. "Don'... let them... eat me...?"

His hand stopped moving and I saw the tears rise in his eyes. "No, Daystrider, I won't let them eat you." He looked away for a moment. "The Nightstalker will do for them."

"You... must... take the head, Plato."

"And I will." He promised, eyes solemn.

I could feel myself fading, black edged my vision and my heart slowed with every beat. "Why are you here?"

Guilt flashed in his eyes before he looked down. "I followed you and the human. I kept watch, from a distance. I was not fast enough to save you, Daystrider. I am sorry." He hung his head.

The head of the wolf lay across my stomach and my eyes dropped to it. It was a grey wolf, big, with a bloody snout. Blue eyes stared back at me, warm, almost... welcoming; familiar? It was the last thing I saw.

\* \* \*

Being in this much agony meant I wasn't dead, though I wished I were. I felt as if I was in a constant state of change, with skin expanding and shrinking, bones breaking and reforming, muscles stretching and contracting.

I came out of unconsciousness like a breaching whale. One moment, nothing, the next, a whole world of hurt.

*The wolves.* That was my all encompassing thought. Then Plato *promised!*

I tried to move, but found I couldn't, not even to turn my head. My eyes flashed opened. I was... *home?* The Gargoan stronghold? How? When? *Gahh...*

"There's a pet." Cicero crooned from beside me and came into my field of vision.

He was larger than most Gargoa, with creases beside his snout and around his eyes. It made him look like he was perpetually in a good mood and smiling. I knew different.

Cicero leaned over me, placed his forearms on either side of my torso and leaned into me. "Gently, daughter."

"Hurt?" I whimpered, child-like.

"I know. It will pass, just relax."

I tried to unclench abused muscles, but Gods...

"Relax, just one muscle at a time, like you were taught as a youngster when changing."

I concentrated on the soothing tones of his words, kept my eyes on his, recalled how it was done, how the Daystrider children of the Gargoa were taught and slowly the pain eased until it was the unrelenting ache of a deep bruise.

"There now. You're fine." He eased up onto his hands.

"How?"

His grin was playful. "Young Plato came for help. Medira was here and sent her closest wolves to you."

"I thought they were going to eat me."

"None would dare touch the daughter of the Regent. None would dare snack on a Daystrider for fear of my wrath."

I don't suppose he knew of the lick-fest, then, and Plato hadn't told him.

"The Nightstalker, on the other hand, he provided a welcome feast for them." His expression held satisfaction. "It was a good trade, I think."

My imagination provided unnecessary images of how that went.

"I must thank Plato for my life, then." I said.

Cicero snorted. "He is a fine Messenger, but he has delusions of being something more. I will have to change his mind for him."

"No, Lord Cicero."

His eyes flashed with warning and I flinched.

I lowered my gaze. "I only meant that he has proven himself to be more than a simple Messenger. Mayhap he would be of better use as a Messenger between the species? He obviously has the stamina, the intelligence and the courage..." I trailed off, hoped I hadn't got Plato into more trouble with my defence of him.

Cicero stood back and stepped away from the bed. "Hmm... an idea worth considering. He gave you strength enough to change and begin the healing process, after all, and bring you here."

"I..." didn't, I nearly said. Instead, I stared down at the sheepskin covering my body. My arms, my human arms, lay on the outside. The left one was wrapped in bandages, stained with blood. I lifted my right and touched my face. Somehow, I'd managed to change back.

I should be dead. *Really*. Dead as a fossil. My injuries and blood loss had been so catastrophic that nothing was going to save me. *Nothing*. Changing took an enormous amount of energy, it didn't heal, but stopped further damage and began the *process* of healing. I'd had nothing left, not even enough to push the wolf away, barely enough to speak. I could *not* have changed on my own. As a human, the shock of my injuries would have killed me anyway. So how was it that I lived?

"Rest, darlin', we'll speak on this when you're on your feet." The back of his hand brushed my cheek and he smiled at me with genuine affection and left me to my thoughts.

Right. It would take weeks for that to happen. I made a catalogue of my hurts and sighed. Tulley had messed me up good and proper. It might even take months, rather than weeks for me to get back to normal. And I would have to remain in human form; changing took energy away from healing.

I heard the scrape of claws on stone, but whatever it was stayed out of my line of sight. I heard a wuffling, then a click and the top half of the bed slowly rose.

At first it was fine, then the gashes on my lower back began to stretch. Sweat slicked my skin.

“Stop!” I called and the bed ceased its movements. I waited for the encroaching pain to ease to a pulsing throb.

A wolf raised its front paws onto the bed and laid its head on my right hand. It didn’t look at me, but I knew it for the wolf that tasted my blood.

I could feel my muscles tensing up again, and it turned its head. Those same blue eyes stared at me for a moment. It used its nose to lift my hand.

I obliged and patted the silky head, stroked down its neck and it closed its’ eyes as if in pleasure.

“I thought you and your pals were going to eat me.” I said and the beast looked at me with disgust.

“Yeah, I know that *now*, but then... I *was* expecting to be nibbled on.”

“Wuff.”

“You have my thanks, wolf, but your pal was misguided in jumping Tulley.” The wolf tilted its head. “I was gonna gut him, I just needed him closer.”

The wolf closed its’ eyes and sighed, gave a slight nod.

“Your friend, he’s okay?”

Another nod. “Good. I’d hate for his act of courage to be so poorly rewarded.”

The wolf wuffed again then dropped to the floor.



I heard the scratching of claws again and assumed the wolf had gone. That was fine. I was tired and today marked the first of many where I would nap for hours at a time.

The bone-cracking pop was subtle, but I heard it anyway. And the wet sound of flesh sliding and stretching. I'd changed enough times to recognise when a shifter was altering form. The wolf was about to show me its human face and I waited patiently for the sounds to stop.

The pained human groan was masculine and I felt all the hairs on my body lift as if charged with electricity.

First I saw the dark hair, slicked back with... fluid. Changing was a messy business as one body sloughed off the protection of the other. It would dry soon enough. The lightly tanned, broad and muscular shoulders came into view followed by a chest that made me want to sigh and touch and caress and... washboard abs, too, but the bed stopped any lower view.

His hands came out to rest on the bed before he lifted his head.

Blue eyes stared into mine begging for understanding, but I felt the anger, the betrayal and the hurt that was just as painful as Tulley's claws in my flesh. I looked away from him. I had no words.

"I didn't know how to tell you." Treece's voice was soft, hoarse.

Actually, I had the words after all. "So you belittled me, insulted me, threatened me, humiliated me instead." I stopped because I couldn't squeeze any words past the tightness in my throat.

"I've been like this for two years. I haven't been coping very well."

As far as the sympathy vote went, I didn't give a shit, but it did explain his descent into further aggression and anger and general unpleasantness. His words gave me pause. Two... *years*?

"The school girl case." I shifted until he was in view, then away again. I refused to accept the attraction existed any longer. He'd deceived me for the last time and I would not allow him any forgiveness.

"Yeah. That bastard bit me before we put him down."

"You said you were fine, that he hadn't got his teeth near you!"

"I didn't want you to know."

I just closed my eyes. Maybe if I went to sleep he would leave me alone. But he didn't; he *monologued* instead.

"The other shifters at the scene smelled the bastard on me and took me to Medira. I didn't want to be there, to become a monster. I refused her, but she made me... realise, there was no escaping what I was to become, what I *did* become. And I hated for it; hated her, you, *any* and all monsters. Not even the advantages of being a shifter could convince me I was anything other than what all humans are afraid of: a savage, uncontrolled animal. And a wolf? All I saw was a rabid dog cunning, intelligent, without compassion, without mercy. And the thought of eating raw *flesh*...?"

In my mind I could see the changes that had begun in him back then. Oh, he'd been surly and arrogant to start with, but after the Shifter case, he became more so, sniping at me and others, seemingly on the brink of outright violence, right up until this case.

"Nothing could get through to me, not Medira's teaching, not my research, nothing, until what you said that morning I took you to the crime scene."

I didn't react, though I was now interested. He must have thought I'd fallen asleep, for his voice lowered, softened.

"You said, 'not all monsters are obvious, some wear the face of ordinary humans'. I've been a cop for a lot of years, even before we were partnered, but those words had me remembering other cases, other killers and they *were* human. They were just as monstrous as you... *we* can be."

He was still trying to reconcile his monster side if he included me in the psychopath sect. I heard him move away, heard the slosh of liquid into glass and his gulping the water down.

"I'm trying, Daya. God knows I'm trying, but it was hard, so bloody hard to know that my life, such as it was, was over. That I've become something else, something I've fought against all my life."

He scrapped a chair over to the side of the bed and I felt the pressure of his arms on the covers. He picked up my hand and rubbed it against his faintly bearded cheek. It was an act of unconscious affection, he was too caught up in his... apology, to realise what he was doing. Regardless, his simply touch was urging my heart to forgive, to accept him as he'd never accepted me. I wasn't sure I could do that.

"Last night..." he cleared his throat. "Last night, for the first time, I saw that I had an advantage; that I wasn't a monster at all, that I could help. Seeing you lying there, bloody and torn..." he rubbed my hand harder. "I thought the Gargoan could help you. We tried to clean you up a little, make you feel better, though Cranbrook said there was nothing we could do... I just had to try, Daya." He lay my hand down.

"I heard what you said, but it was too late."

"What did I say?" I asked and opened my eyes. He stared at me in surprise, then acceptance.

"You said that changing would kill you."

"Yes."

"It had already started. The change, I mean." He picked up my hand again, but the guilt and rising red of embarrassment on his face told me he'd done something. "I, er, was licking your face, in the hope you'd open your eyes, that you'd be okay and the skin began to pale, to become... human; the more I did it, the more you shifted, so I kept doing it, anywhere I could. Then you said it would kill you and I stopped, but you were changing anyway. Even after you passed out, until you were human again."

I stared at him and flashed on another occasion it had happened. In the elevator, while he was kissing me; my clawed hands I'd used to threaten him with had turned human without me knowing, without any pain. It had disturbed me on a deep level because I didn't know why or how or what kind of power he had over me. Last night had amounted to the same thing, and now I knew; Daystriders and shape-shifters were genetic cousins of a sort. My shifter part had recognised *his* shiftness and neutralised the power that kept me in either form. I wonder if Medira and Cicero knew of this and would it be in my best interests to tell them.

Heat swam up my face. He hadn't been *tasting* me, he'd been giving me wolfy kisses of assurance, like wolves do to injured pack members.

"Oh, boy." I murmured. The heat burned hotter in my face at the realisation he'd seen me *naked*! Not only naked, but he'd seen what he called my true form.

He'd been right there, just as he'd promised.

"What now? What is it you want?" I asked and he shrugged his shoulders.

"You know what I am now, I know what you are. We can probably work..."

"And there in lies what cannot be fixed." I scowled at him. "You betrayed me, have never trusted me. You..." I shook my head. "No, Treece. I'm still leaving. Just because you're as much as a monster as I am, just because you now feel some sort of remorse... does not change anything."

He winced. "I don't want you to leave." He held my hand again. "For Gods sake, I just saved your *life*!"

I pulled free. "And what? I *owe* you?"

His hands leaned on the bed, his eyes angry, "You're..." he stopped, frowned. "I... I..." He moved back and turned his back on me. I had a good look at the long line of hard muscle. "No, of course not. I didn't mean to infer a life debt was owed."

Damn it. He'd put it out there *anyway*! A life debt was just that: it would bind me to him for as long as we both shall live, at least under *Gargoan* law. I didn't know about any other species.

"Good, because it would really piss me off and the consequences could be tragic." I growled.

He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Do you hate me that much?"

That startled me. "Hate you?"

"After all I've said and done to you over the years, I wouldn't blame you." His shoulders slumped in defeat, an attitude I'd never seen in him and I felt my resistance cracking. "One of the reasons I was... a bastard around you was knowing you weren't human and therefore..." he ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Therefore I couldn't touch you the way I really, *really* wanted to. When I became a... shapeshifter, I still couldn't touch you, I didn't want..." He half turned his head and all I saw was his gorgeous profile. "You'd have thought less of me for hiding what I'd become, as you do now."

"What changed your mind?"

"That day in the elevator. I didn't know I was going to kiss you until I felt your mouth beneath mine. It shook me; the passion, in both of us. It was as if a light bulb went on in my head, and I knew what I meant to you; what you meant to me. I could *taste* it, *feel* it."

"And yet, you were still such a fuck wit."

"Was not."

"Was so!"

He winced and drew in a breath. "I tried to... no, that's not true. I found myself relaxing, becoming more at ease with you, with what we are, with us together. Being a monster wasn't as evil as I thought. If you could be who you are, look like you do, do the things you do to protect the humans and preters alike, how could you be a monster? My thinking you were was the last wall I had against you. Then I became a shifter, though I struggled with it at times and took my anger out on you, I slowly accepted my nature. Yet, in my more... understanding moments, you were suspicious and short circuiting my thinking process." He gave me a smile that went straight through me, dashed all the barriers I thought I'd constructed, sank into me with all the finesse of a sledgehammer.

"You still do." He slowly turned and walked towards me, his eyes on mine. "Such courage last night, I'd never seen. He surprised you, played with you and you would not yield."

"As Cicero commands, Treece, so do I obey." I said. "That means I would take Tulley down even at the cost of my own life. I could not allow him to continue to slaughter. You saw the reports; he's been doing this for years."

He lifted his thigh and sat down on the bed. He even lifted my hand and placed it on his naked, warm flesh. "I promised God and anyone who would listen that if you survived, I would show the same courage. But here, now, as hard as this is for me, I'll never match you."

If I had any chance at all, I would have to hit him where it hurt. The ego. I lifted an eyebrow. "No, you won't. I am a Daystrider and that makes me terribly dominant to a lot of shifters."

"Ah," he said with a wicked smile, "but I know a something you don't." He shifted closer. "I know, for example, that you and I have a partnership that's rarely seen, and never denied."

"What are you talking about?"

"Medira is not only Queen of the Pack, but she is the repository for its history. It is lore of the pack that two matching shape-shifters cannot dominate each other. It is a true partnership."

So he knew what he'd done to me.

"I asked her about your changing without conscious effort. She obliged me by telling me about it. So, no, you're not dominant to me; neither am I dominant to you."

He climbed onto the bed next to me and rested his head on his hand, stared down at me, all mischief gone.

"I love you, Daya Scott, heir to the Regency of Gargoa; and you love me, Wolf Master designate to the Rodvin Pack."

I stared up into his face, no longer tight with anger, his mouth relaxed, not sneering at me, into his eyes that held nothing of contempt and everything of tenderness.

"You're very sure of yourself."

He leaned down and settled his mouth on mine, coaxing, gentle, and oh, so tempting. My right hand rose to the back of his head and kept him still, even though I felt him smile against me. He never failed to bring a thrill to my blood. Never would, I imagined.

His mouth eased off slightly. "Very, *very* sure of myself."

"Partnership." I said, my fingers still tangled in his thick hair.

"Equal." He agreed.

"No sniping." I scowled.

"No threats." He grinned.

"No more insults, belittling or contempt." I warned.

"Only affection, tenderness and... love." His grin relaxed into a smile.

"Arguments?"

"When required." Black eyebrows rose.

"Killing perps?"

"When ordered." Treece nodded.

"I'm a Hunter as well as a Day Strider, you know what that means."

"And I'm a Wolf Master and a shape-shifter, you don't scare me."

I eased out a sigh and tugged him that little bit closer. "It'll never work."

He pretended to give it some thought. Pursued his lips and shook his head. "Nah, probably not."

"Okay."

His mouth hesitated just above mine. "The words, if you please, monster mine."

"Yeah. I love you, too, you prick."

"That's my girl."