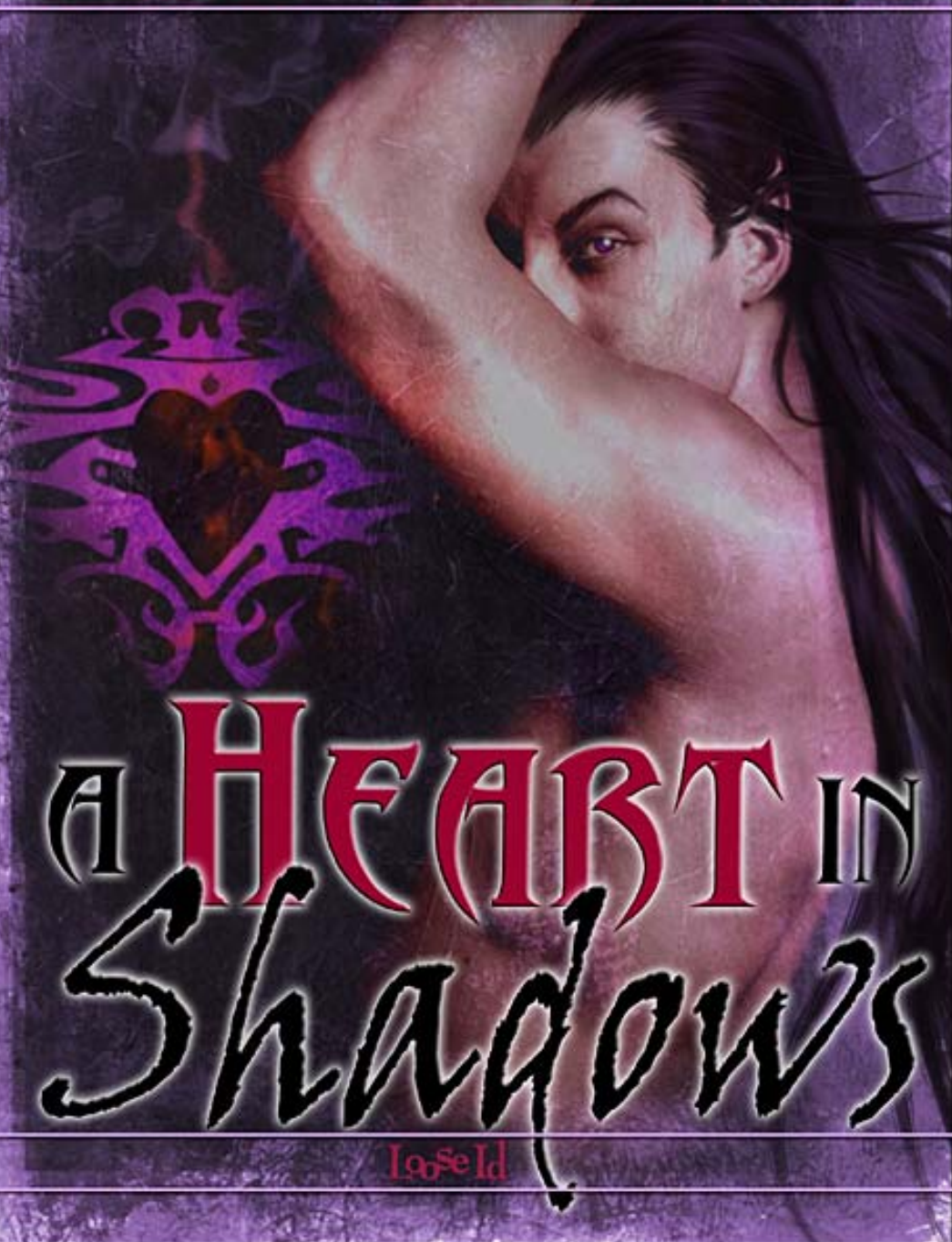


EMILY VEINGLORY



Loose Id

MAEWYN'S PROPHECY 4: A HEART IN SHADOWS

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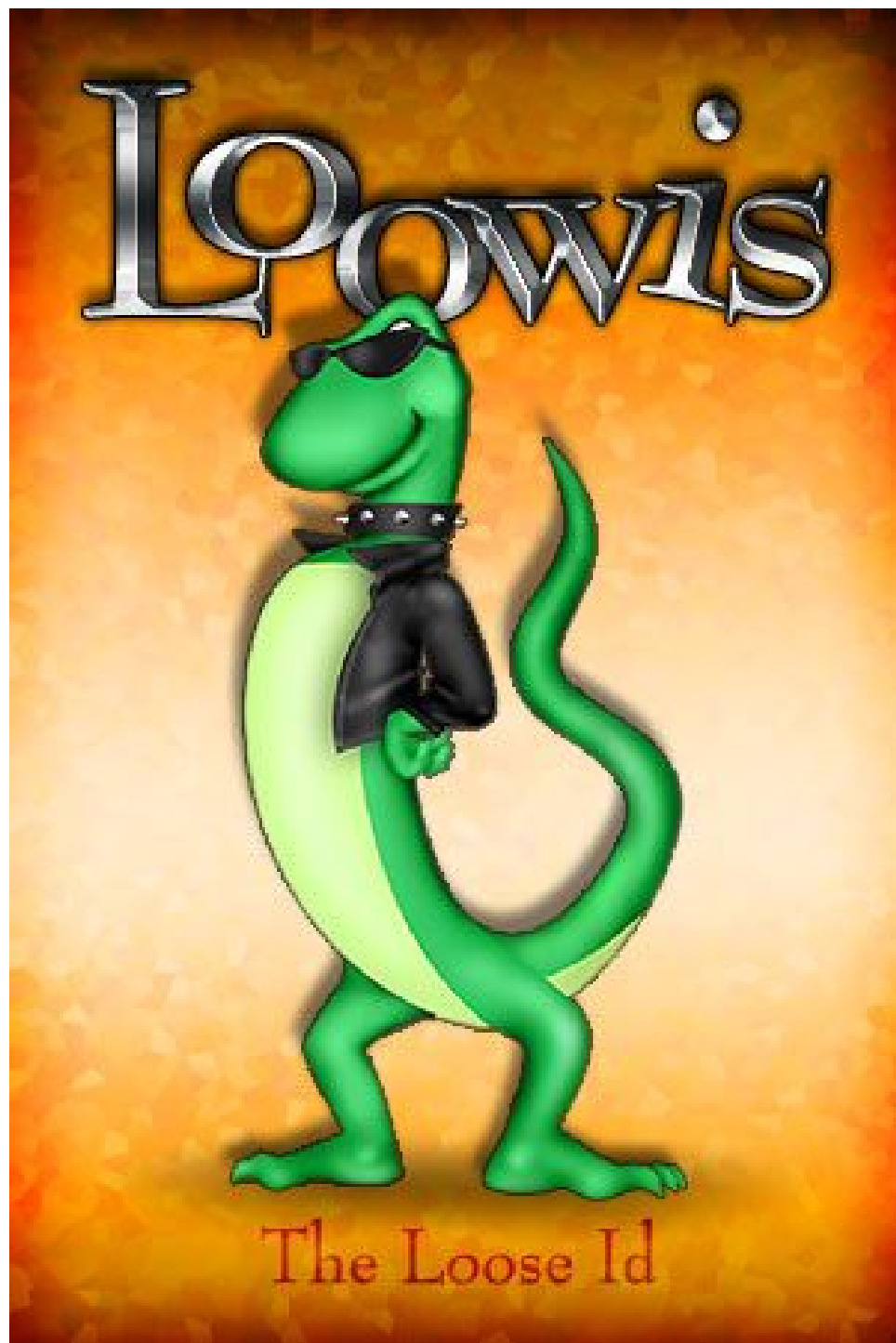
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Chapter One

Giffen kicked back in his accustomed chair in the library, listening to King Kapsi on his iPod. Angry antipodean hip hop overlaid the predictable sight of the other denizens of the house ambling in for breakfast. Scott House, that was, the Edinburgh outpost of the Society of Fairy, home to elves and the humans who loved them -- magical defenders of the British Isles.

It looked like everyone was here and that they were all inclined to get out of bed sometime before noon on a Saturday. Bear was bundling them all off on one of his intermittent, thinly disguised bonding trips. Giffen wasn't having any of that. Apathy and a little distance from his comrades was his best defense against the sight. If he cared, he started to 'see', and he rarely liked what he saw. His visions about young Archer were already keeping him up at night, and not in a good way. To see a person's death was bad enough, but to be its cause ...

Giffen turned it over and over in his head, but months had passed and he wasn't getting anything but a growing feeling of helplessness from it. Here he was, a so-called prophet, knowing he would be a murderer. What kind of twisted God would do that to a man? And his latest prophecy was also very much upon his mind: *The pilgrim heart finds what it seeks.*

A heart aflame shall venture forth, a lone heart drawn to shades that break it. A trinity gives freedom birth. Trite, opaque, and infuriating -- no matter how he thought on it, it made little sense.

Peter had been the first to come down this morning, wandering into the kitchen with his elven lover, Veleur, trailing in behind and dropping onto the sofa. They were not surprised to see Giffen; though he had never been an early riser, he was a lifelong insomniac who sometimes did not sleep for days.

Given Peter's history as a Catholic priest, there was no doubt his was the 'pilgrim heart'. Peter had found what he sought. Love. Sure, he'd also helped save the life of every elf in the British Isles, but he hadn't been looking for that; it just came with the territory if you were part of the Society of Fairy. When Giffen had first foreseen his own membership in this group, he had figured it would be a lot of fun. Magical love matches, kick-ass magic, and daring deeds ... not so much, as it turned out. Solitude, scary visions, and plenty of opportunities to get killed by angry fanatics, *jinkies*.

Giffen tried not to look too much at Peter. He was sure worth looking at, with his buff body, wavy hair, and utterly sincere eyes, deeper than the proverbial sea. He was worthwhile all round. But there was no point dwelling on that now that he'd patched things up with Veleur. Giffen wasn't too down on himself, but he'd just passed his fiftieth year and had never learned a speck of charm, so -- big fairy love spell aside -- he wasn't competition for Veleur, the gorgeous, silver-haired elven warrior.

The 'heart aflame' must surely be the ill-fated Archer, although he had sacrificed his fiery power in a fit of guilt before uncovering a plot by the unseelie sidhe to infiltrate the seelie court. *Never a dull moment, right?* The whole point of that had apparently been to collude with a Catholic cult to break the great spell that caused elves and human witches to fall in love. Things tended to keep busy at Scott House, and most of the houses of the Society. But Giffen was glad that the insidious love spell would still be out there mixing things up -- even though his certainty that he was destined to meet his own elven lover had never

come to fruition. Archer had been different since then, thoughtful and full of ideas about how to get rid of that Maewyn ward -- not that anyone was listening much to the meta-magical theories of an ex-Aussie backpacker.

Archer and Roman came in, arm in arm. Another of Scott House's happy couples. Roman seemed to say something as he passed by, but Giffen's lip-reading ability fell well short of knowing what it was. He just scowled. Roman was something of a priss, even for an elf, but he was probably the most head over heels in love of the lot. He'd even made himself look human just to please his lover. Giffen was honest enough, with himself at least, to know his foul mood was fuelled mainly by jealousy. Not only about never finding love, but about being all but a eunuch without it. Turning fifty just rubbed it in -- this was it; this was his life, and it was time he faced up to it.

He thought he'd got used to being alone, numb, spared the perturbations of love and lust. But a little, altogether unexpected and entirely unrequited, amore for Peter had stirred it all up again. The gods only knew what had brought that on. So, sure, he was bitter about never finding his own destined partner. Hell, bitterness was the heart note of his whole less-than-suave personality. Giffen had to get back to a place where he didn't give a damn. At least his almost-friends in the house were content to leave him alone -- except for Bear, who only stepped in when things slipped towards frankly suicidal. Or so Giffen had thought.

Giffen had felt some suspicion as soon as Bear suggested the outing. The big empath had been building up to something a little more proactive in the last little while. Bear, the token heterosexual male, ambled in on cue. He came right over into Giffen's secluded corner. Pointing to his ear, he mouthed, *Turn it off*. Not many people got away with giving Giffen any kind of instruction, but Giffen cut the big Bear some slack. He'd stuck with Giffen through his rants, rejections of his gift, and depths of fatalistic despair. And more than that, he'd kept it to himself -- Giffen was willing to bet that even Bear's lover, Wolfy, didn't know how bad it got at times. Grudgingly, Giffen tugged on the wires and pulled out his earphones.

“What can I do for you?” he said. “Except tell you to stay out of the kitchen until ...” A shattering crash from the kitchen interrupted him. “... Peter has cleaned up after dropping the coffeepot.”

Little things like that; all he had to do was relax control over his tongue and let the words come out. Whether the result was micro-prophecy or just the opportunity to tell someone what he really thought ... well, it was win-win either way.

“I’m taking the happy campers out before the traffic gets bad. You’re still invited, you know.”

“Oh, yes?” Giffen raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Nature walks, fishing, tales around the campfire with s’mores ... A less trusting soul would suggest that’s a plan for an overnight trip that’s outright designed not to appeal to me.”

Bear guffawed but did not deny it. “You’ll be in to hold the fort? We have one of the royal librarians coming today, and you know as much about this stuff as anyone.”

He gestured vaguely to the glass-encased cupboards and open shelves around them. The remnants of Merrin’s library, which Peter had proven was rather more valuable than the fairy queen, Tania, had assumed. *Catholic magic -- who knew? But why not?* Giffen thought as he popped his earphones back in. *If a Samoan can come up with kick-ass hip hop, all things are possible.* He looked up at Bear’s grinning face, framed with a ruddy beard. In a flash another face floated atop it -- thin, brown-haired, and pensive. A handsome but fragile-looking young man with a fussy hair style.

“I’m not going to like him,” Giffen said, looking away. That was the problem with happy couples; they wanted everyone else to have what they did. No doubt Bear had been combing the halls of London House for eligible young queer librarians. Because, as was commonly quipped down there, at Scott House pretty much everyone was a fairy one way or the other.

Giffen slouched back in his seat and waved the big man away in disgust. Bear just laughed as he went to join the others. Giffen closed his eyes, but what he saw in the darkness was no comfort. A light sparked, flared, and died out, snuffed beneath his hands. He opened his eyes again, letting his gaze wander over the scene of unconventional domesticity before him. It felt like watching a tableau within a sparkling snow-globe -- little plastic people who just didn't see the darkness all around them. *And what would be the point of tapping on the glass?*

That had been last thing real vision he had seen -- young Archer, dying on a windswept stretch of sandy ground, and because of him. No point telling them what lay ahead, now that it couldn't be changed. A vision that was already fixed, the threshold had been passed over, and that fate was immutable now. He watched with detachment as they milled about over breakfast, joking and bickering. Peter, Veleur, Archer, Roman, Bear, and now Wolfy, the closest thing to a girl in the house, if you stretched the definition to elven warriors with golden eyes and pointed teeth. She waved the old-fashioned toast rack in his direction, but Giffen shook his head. He hadn't been hungry in days. His gut knew that something bad was coming; now if only his mind could figure out where from.

The darkness was everywhere. If only he had been given the comfort that his comrades shared -- the destined love he thought was due, but which never came. Someone to share the scant joys and many burdens of modern magic, of being the only living human seer. A prophet, if you will, for all that Giffen did not believe in any god who would do these things to people. And he knew he never would.

* * * * *

Once Bear went over to them, everyone got their shit together and went on out, with conspiratorial alacrity. Giffen drifted back and forth tidying up the remnants of the breakfast dishes and brewing new coffee at the acrid strength that he preferred. He itched to keep busy, feeling an increasingly black mood descending. Tossing aside the iPod, he turned on

the old stereo stack and cranked up the Dead Kennedys as loud as the old speakers would go without buzzing. But he just felt it, hanging over the house, the shadows starting to pool in the corners of the ceiling waiting to fall down over him.

“Let’s try this, then.” For a change of pace, his old Nina Simone LP. He skipped straight to “Here Comes the Sun” and closed his eyes. The house rebounded with echoes of Nina’s thick, warm voice. Giffen laid his hands down over the old record player, feeling the faint vibrations of the music shiver under his fingertips. If he could have chosen his talents and plotted his path, he’d have given his life to music and never looked back. Giffen breathed in and out slowly, trying to draw the music in. His dirty secret as a neo-punk, the blues was always his muse of last resort.

The unmistakable touch of a hand fell upon his shoulder. Reflexively he shrugged back and spun around. A stranger stood there, a slight young man drawing back with his hands raised in mock surrender, every part of him built small and lithe but for a nose that would fit on a normal-sized person. The intruder’s brown hair was on the long side and artfully cut, his small eyes dark, an indeterminate color. The song crooned on, booming louder than any real voice could, acid and honey, lamenting and rejoicing. Giffen didn’t bother to smooth the frown from his face as he flicked the stereo off, cutting down sharply to the burr of sudden silence. Unsurprisingly, this was the face the morning’s fleeting vision has shown him.

“The queen’s librarian,” Giffen said coolly.

“That’s one way of putting it.” Even the way he smiled was apologetic. He put out his hand tentatively. “Derek, Forth.”

“Well, you don’t have the manner of a Derek *First*, do you? The stuff is all in here. I’ll leave you to it.”

He turned on his heel and headed back towards the foyer. Not that shutting himself up in his rooms was going to help his mood any. As he went, he fumed. Yes, that would be what Bear and busybodies incorporated would pick out for him. Small, dark, just a little ‘fey’ in the

mundane meaning of the word. For a man who had the Clash and Sham 69 lined up on his CD rack, he also had a stash of old movies under the bed, the young Dustin Hoffman featuring heavily. There was no mistaking Giffen's 'type,' although it was all very academic, really.

Was he being arrogant thinking Scott House and London House were colluding to match-make? Well, Bear had been hovering; as an empath he was less worried about the state of his associates' minds than the state of their hearts. Now that everyone else was matched up and predominantly happy, Giffen was Bear's last lost sheep. And London House had been wanting Gif to move down there for some time. Ever since their only other seer defected to the unseele.

It wasn't impossible, that was all. Bear and the queen putting their heads together to give him a good reason to settle down with a pretty Londoner ... and they could sure pick 'em. The young man's wardrobe was a little fussy, Giffen mused, but hey, it didn't need to stay on. Giffen was pushing that thought, even in jest, out of his mind. But as he got to the doorway, he turned. Derek stood scanning the shelves in all their blatant disarray.

"Is there some kind of index?" he asked timorously. "On the phone Peter said you knew where everything was, as much as anyone."

"Except him. But he doesn't seem to be volunteering." Giffen swayed. There were several indices contemporaneous to Merrin's entire collection, but many of those books had already been moved to London House. Peter had made some more recent checklists, but they were stored up in the attic between the spare fuses and some kind of creepy taxidermy collection left behind by the house's original owner.

He felt it, like this, all the time. A tipping point. No telling what would happen if he kept on going up to his room, but if he went back into the library, there were flames and shadows -- though the flames just made the shadows darker. There was lust and love and then a broken heart.

Well, he'd not got much use out of that particular organ in his life so far.

Damned if no matter how hard he tried to give up on it all, there was always something in him that just shrugged and grinned and said 'what the hell'. Giffen sighed and turned back.

* * * * *

Derek, bless his methodical little heart, wanted to see all of those indices and cross-reference them using a spreadsheet on his tiny but very expensive-looking laptop before laying out the books on the floor. There was a lot of floor, but also not an inconsiderable number of books.

"If you wouldn't mind moving the furniture to the side," Derek mumbled as he bent over his computer. "Then I can chalk up a grid, and we can start arranging the books according to their listings in the two main records. I can see a great deal of inconsistencies even between those, and the London House catalogue doesn't match well with either, and there are similar listings across all three that may or may not actually be the same book. But the house is empty now, right? Nobody will be tramping all around here?"

Giffen folded his arms. He'd already crawled around in the attic to find the records, dug up an extension cord, and made coffee. That was more help even than pretty Peter had got when he went through these books, and he'd been trying to save the country from insane Catholic alchemists, not just update some paperwork.

"I don't recall signing up to be assistant royal librarian," Giffen said, leaning back against the windowsill.

Derek looked up, blinked, and regarded him nervously. And there it was again. The man had eyes so wide and open that his soul must be in constant danger of defenestration. Giffen couldn't deny, or understand, the way his heart kicked at the stable door every time he looked at this altogether unremarkable little man. It was delightfully terrifying and most

certainly some kind of distraction to pull him back from the brink of his old friend, the black pit of depression.

"Oh," Derek said, by way of a less than witty retort. "I just thought that if you had nothing pressing to do ... I certainly don't mean to be telling you what to do."

Giffen knew damn well that what he should be doing was preparing for his own ad hoc version of a ritual of invocation, so that he could have one last long look at his premonition about Archer's death -- murder. The fate was fixed, but there were still some things surrounding it that might be altered. And a truly drastic ploy -- say, ritual suicide on his part -- might still have some effect. He didn't hold out a lot of hope, though. If the fate was fixed, then the odds were he would actually have to kill Archer when the time came, to avoid some even more horrendous fate. Predestined or not, it was something he was going to do for a *reason*.

Still. He may as well get on with finding out, if the only other option was moving around dusty furniture.

Derek's eyes flicked aside nervously, and his lips thinned. Then he said, "After all, if the queen can't get you to follow orders, I don't see how a humble librarian would manage it. And far be it from me to make the *royal seer* dirty his hands with mere laboring."

Oh, ho. Derek seemed to be quite deliberately trying to annoy him, even though such rudeness clearly went against his nature. Maybe he'd had a little coaching from people who knew Giffen's ways -- playing nice wasn't really his style. Giffen stayed where he was and watched calmly as the young man started to fidget nervously. He waited patiently until Derek finally looked directly at him again.

"Are you trying to get a rise out of me?" Giffen asked coolly.

"Is it working?"

Giffen wasn't about to admit any such thing. "So tell me," he said, "what exactly did Tania send you up here to do, other than catalogue some musty books, that is?"

“These books really are very important,” Derek said with the outrage of truly geekish conviction. “They have the potential to explicate a whole new region of the magical arts and allow us to directly nullify the workings of the Catholic cults. I mean, all this time we had assumed the League of Maewyn’s work was based in alchemical principles ...”

Giffen made a fast-forwarding gesture with his hands. “But just before you left, the queen of fairy popped down and made a friendly suggestion in that whimsically omnipotent way that she has.”

Derek looked off to the left guiltily. Clearly not a hard man to beat at poker. “They do need you at London House. Since Vavasour defected, you are the only seer the Society has to call on and --”

“Grandmothers,” Giffen interjected as he took a step forward. “Eggs, the sucking thereof. She hardly expected a banal retelling of the facts to suddenly make me see things her way. What else?”

Derek was now no more than a foot away. Looking at his plain but increasingly pleasing face, Giffen was hit hard by a flash of visceral foresight -- skin and passion, sweat sliding between their bodies, tender lips parting before his insistent tongue. His cock ached with sudden arousal, and his breath caught. Hardly a familiar sensation and more than a little disconcerting.

“What else?” he hissed.

Derek watched him closely. His expression remained honest and earnest. “Why wouldn’t you do as she wants?” he said softly, refusing to concede the point. “You serve the Society. You’ve risked your life in that service many times. Your sight is true, but if you stay out here it will not be focused, trained upon the perils we face. She doesn’t know why you flaunt your disobedience by remaining here -- just when the society is at its weakest, torn by schisms and threatened on all sides. She cannot afford the time or the ignominy of coming here to plead for your co-operation.”

"So she sent you."

In reply Derek closed the distance between them. His hand settled lightly on Giffen's waist as he leaned up and kissed Giffen gently on the lips, pressing into him along the whole length of their bodies. It was a sudden, unpredictable, ridiculous, and probably entirely calculated gesture, and in his mind Giffen pushed the young man away in disgust. In his mind, he did.

But his body did not seem to be listening. Giffen stood, his hands held out to his side in a vague, helpless gesture as he felt the heat building between them. The lips, soft as he had foreseen, parted obliquely over his own, teasing with a flick of tongue. Derek pressed in close, and Giffen was acutely aware of his own cock pressing impatiently against his jeans, feeling a body pressed against him, sliding and easing against him. And this was no usual thing for him; in his whole life he had rarely been so aroused and never with such alacrity.

A little spark of awareness at the back of his head cried out that there was magic afoot, but he could barely hear it over the sound of some distant illusory sea, no doubt his own heated blood in his ears.

For a long, long time Giffen had simply thought himself immune, even to lust, certainly to love. Peter had cracked open the door on that denial and half-realized visions blurred with reality in his mind. His fate could still be changed; he could still pull back now and save himself. There was no clear or safe path ahead, no matter how he chose, so why deny himself this comfort? Save himself from what? From sex, from love?

From love planned by a conniving queen that ended with heartbreak and wound round a destiny of murder and despair like a vine crushing the life out of an aging oak. He could pull back, and it was in his mind to do it. In his mind and floating to the surface of his volition ... when Derek stepped away from him.

The young man's breathing was harsh; whatever else he might be feigning, the lust in him was real, from his tussled hair and dilated pupils to the altogether obvious erection straining his slacks.

"Do you think she told me to do that, too?" Derek said hoarsely.

He sounded defensive. And perhaps she hadn't. She'd just done some very careful magic and discovered, probably with Bear's collusion, exactly who to put in Giffen's path. Bear would want Giffen to be happy, to have the love in his life he had always yearned for. The queen wanted a lure to get him, a handle to manipulate him with, but even she was motivated by a desire to serve -- to save -- her people. And Derek? Derek was probably exactly what he seemed to be, a bit timid but not without his own passions, honest and utterly available. So it was altogether likely that she hadn't told him to do that -- she just knew that he would.

And how had she known that it would work? In his whole long and intermittently eventful life, Giffen had had sex a few times. Frankly, he'd never seen the appeal, but the occasion sometimes called for it. He'd been in love once, and to some extent still was with virtuous Peter, who would never reciprocate that stifled impulse anyway. But right now his heart was racing, his cock hard, and his mind spinning like a flywheel.

And then again, this could be it. Bloody hell, no elf, no great spell, but the real thing with all the 'first sight' clichés laid on thick. Love. And if the goddamned poncy queen was behind it, he really couldn't give a flying fuck.

He was going to have it.

"I thought you wanted some furniture moved?" Giffen said.

Derek's face twitched with a tremulous smile. "It can wait a while. Perhaps you could show me my room first."

Chapter Two

Giffen knew his own room was a disgrace. More like the refuge of a teenager than the long-term home of a grown (rather more than grown, almost bloody *elderly*) man -- a fact that Roman frequently brought to his attention. But up the stairs from the foyer, the bedroom suites were lined up neatly along a corridor with two guest rooms at the end. Poking his head into the first one, Giffen found the bed made up and towels laid out.

There was palpable awkwardness as Giffen dropped Derek's bag at the foot of the bed.

"Is there really no one else in the house?" Derek asked as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The curtains were still closed and the air was still and stale.

"Not 'til tomorrow."

Giffen felt awkward. He knew what he had felt down in the library, but now the immediacy was gone. "Look, Derek ..."

The young man walked over to him, his manner still diffident, but it was almost as if Giffen's own uncertainty emboldened him. He reached up and pushed Giffen's tatty old blazer off his shoulders. Giffen held his arms out and let it fall to the floor. Without another word Derek continued to undress him, pulling up his old Ramones T-shirt.

"You do know there's nothing more than a pallid fifty-some-year-old body under there," Giffen said, catching Derek's hand.

Derek looked up at him, bright-eyed like a bird. "You're nervous," he said.

"Oh, no, I get the come-on from handsome young men every day of the week and twice on Sundays. I just know that joining the Chippendales isn't exactly a fallback career for me."

"Who would have thought," Derek replied. "The royal seer is coy." The nervous energy in his body shifted. "Trust me on this one."

He pulled the shirt up, firmly stripping it off, and Giffen had to admit he was uncomfortable with his body -- skinny, white, not deformed or anything, but nothing to write home about. It was easy to be a smartass with clothes on, but ...

Derek leaned in, pressing his lips to the base of Giffen's throat. Giffen closed his eyes, exquisitely aware of a wet tongue tip tracing his collarbone.

"I know what I'm doing," Derek muttered as he unbuttoned Giffen's jeans and eased them down.

And it seemed he did. Derek pressed him back onto the bed, his hands firm and commanding in a way that seemed in stark contrast to his manner outside the bedroom. How much of it was an act? Giffen wondered vaguely.

"I don't want you to do anything except what I tell you," Derek said softly. "Then you'll have nothing to be nervous about." For the first time he looked Giffen full in the eyes, without so much as blinking. "All right?"

Five decades of contrariness balked at the idea, but as Giffen lay on his back, knees dangling from the bed, he said nothing. He searched Derek's face, but now found nothing there but calm confidence. Okay, it was a little patronizing, but Giffen was in the mood to get laid, something that typically happened once every decade or so -- he wasn't going to argue.

"All right?" Derek repeated.

"Sure, why not." That hadn't come out half as sardonic as he'd intended.

Derek just pulled Giffen's jeans all the way off and then stood by the bed looking down at him. Giffen's heart beat fast; he lay still, feeling like some shellfish prized open and left exposed on the beach.

Derek slowly undressed himself. He did not hurry as he released each small button on his shirt and then dropped it onto the floor. Giffen reached out with one hand, but Derek leaned forward, suddenly tense. He pressed Giffen's hand down onto the covers.

"Nothing," he chided. "You agreed."

Giffen raised his eyebrows slightly at being commanded, but he relaxed a bit, letting his hands lie down by his sides. In a way it was a relief to give up control, to not have to worry about what was expected, what was needed -- all the stuff his occasional trysts had not been enough to teach him.

Derek shimmied out of his gray slacks, revealing a well-proportioned, leanly muscled body like a swimmer's, going commando, which was something of a surprise. His cock, almost erect, was large in comparison to his body and smooth without any obvious veins. He put one knee on the bed and leaned over, trailing his hand casually up Giffen's inner thigh. His gaze roamed over Giffen's body like an explorer mapping the land and considering possible routes.

A smartass comment would have been kind of useful right about then, but Giffen's mind was blank in mute anticipation. Looking up at Derek, he felt a pain in his chest. Already he wasn't seeing Derek's face as a collection of disparate features, but as a harmonious whole, perfection, as love, as suddenly dear and familiar. It wasn't rational. Gods knew Derek was probably the queen's own little starling sent to bewitch him. He had to hand it to the broad; she knew how to use a man's weaknesses against him -- even ones he didn't know he had.

That was pretty much the last suspicious thought he managed as Derek stooped over him. The grip on Giffen's thigh become firmer, like a big cat's securing its prey. Those soft lips barely brushed over the length of his cock, accompanied by a gentle puff of breath. Then two, three heartbeats of nothing, and his cock was gripped by that firm mouth, very wet and sliding down. The raw, slick, animal feeling of it shot straight off the scale. The whole of his body shrank down to the regular stroking, sucking pressure. But the back of his mind couldn't help but stray again.

He's very good at this. Plenty of practice, I bet. Sure, he's going to break my heart. Don't need the sight to see that he's only doing this at the queen's behest. I probably disgust him. Just some skinny, hairy old man to him. Pathetic. And I was even falling for his little boy blue act ...

But all the same his cock shuddered, straining so hard it almost hurt. Derek took him in deeper, and the arch of his neck and back had a kind of fragile, carnal grace that eclipsed anything else Giffen had seen in his life. He felt his balls draw up tight, building to release.

"This is going to be over real soon if you don't calm that down a bit," Giffen said hoarsely.

Derek slowed and then drew back. He took Giffen's damp cock in his hand and eased up half on top of him, but was no great weight.

"So, what if I kiss the royal seer now?" he said, and it was a strange blend of the tentative librarian Giffen had first met and the assured seducer that had emerged within the bedroom.

"On a first date?" Gods, but Giffen was pleased to hold on to just a bit of composure. "Oh, very well, but do use my name -- and for my part, I'll endeavor to remember it."

Derek continued to just hold him, thumb tight just below the head of Giffen's cock and fingers wrapped around almost too tightly.

"Giffen, is that really your name?" Derek said, quite casually, as if they were just going to stop and have a conversation like this. Which apparently they were. With every breath, Giffen felt that hand on him, firm and controlling.

"It's the only one I admit to."

"Where did you get it?"

Giffen really wasn't sure he wanted to be going there, but if he was even going to pretend to be falling in love, there was no point holding back. Still, he evaded a little. "From my father."

"What does it mean?"

Giffen had a sudden memory of the page in the *Kama Sutra* where the lovers were drinking tea whilst still coupled together -- to prolong it. "It's from economics," he said reluctantly. "My dad was a professor of economics, and a Giffen good is generally something pretty substandard so that as soon as it gets cheaper, people use their extra money to buy something else instead. Like, if you're very poor and have to mainly eat potatoes."

"And that's what your father called you?"

"He had a very dry way of insulting a person."

"And it's what you call yourself?"

"I take after my father."

Derek looked down at him quizzically, and Giffen felt his erection beginning to wilt.

"So," Derek said. "What did your mother call you?"

"I imagine she called me Geoffrey. That's what's on the birth certificate."

"Geoffrey."

"Yes."

Then Derek leaned in and it was a real kiss, like a Hollywood screen kiss, for all the sense that made. It started soft and slow and built up. Derek released Giffen's cock and

pressed up, his small, tight body sliding up over Giffen. Giffen reached up instinctively but found both of his hands seized and pressed down over his head, strong fingers intertwined with his own. Derek's tongue parted Giffen's teeth, sensually sliding over and around.

Giffen felt Derek's slender thigh pressing up between his legs, and immediately he was hard again, hard enough to come. His body was restrained, restless, building with unsatisfied passion. Derek bit Giffen's lower lip softly, twisting to kiss him again deeply and pressing down, taunt stomach sliding over Giffen's cock as it lay tight up against Giffen's stomach.

As they ground together, Giffen's touch-starved body could stand it no more, and he came with a contraction of muscles that seemed to run all the way down his spine and through his legs like a tide, and on out through his toes like arcing electricity. His ears roared with static, and it felt as though the warmth of his body rose up out of him in a wave, leaving him cold and drained.

Derek kept holding him down firmly, and Giffen offered no resistance. "I did warn you," he said sheepishly.

Derek gave that little half-smile he had. "If that's how a kiss affects you, I can't wait to see how you like a few other things I have in store."

"Presumptuous, aren't you?"

"Not as a habit. But I know this is something special, and I think you know it, too."

And then it all came back -- the doubts, the background schemes. Was this what Derek thought, or just what he wanted Giffen to think, just part of Queen Tania's expert manipulations?

This time it was Giffen that looked away.

Despite the early hour and his whirling thoughts, Giffen lapsed into sleep in the wake of sex. Perhaps it was the natural thing to do, perhaps just a rare indulgence so as not to leave his lover's arms. He awoke with a jet-lag-like disorientation late in the afternoon to find

himself alone. Well, not totally. There was a shuffling sound from the en suite bathroom, light showing through the cracked-open door amidst the curtained gloom of the room. To the side, a chink in the heavy curtains admitted the unmistakable buttery light of a day well past its prime.

But the bedroom itself seemed somehow too dark, as if he had just walked in from the sun and his eyes had not adapted yet. Other than those two slits of light, it was almost impenetrably black. Giffen craned his neck, blinking to try to clear his vision. Whilst his common sense assured him there should be enough light to reveal the features of the room, at least a little, deeper intuition told him that not only were the shadows totally opaque, but that he was not alone in the darkness.

He slipped his feet from the bed, stifling the urge to call out to Derek. With an act of will, Giffen opened his senses to magical energies. What he saw made him immediately wonder if his sanity was finally gone. It was as if the walls of the room did not exist at all. Other than the pallid portals of door and window, there was not even a dark suggestion of the carpeted floor and painted ceiling, floating in an obsidian void. And just beyond that place where the wall should have been there stood a single, tall elven figure. Watching.

That figure, dressed, perhaps overdramatically, in a loose black garment of traditional elven cut, met his eyes with just a hint of surprise and a barely perceptible tilt of his head. Silence stretched out, and Giffen's heart pounded. Finally he stood, trying to ignore his own nakedness, and walked forward slowly.

The elf watched, his severe face growing clearer, as if it even began to glow, starkly handsome, but only in the most alien of ways. He had long hair tied sharply back, and black brows thick and straight over eyes that were pale and milky, barely any color at all, with the irises impossible to tell from the whites.

An imperceptible barrier hit Giffen across his shoulder and cheek. He raised one hand reflexively and swore, his face smarting. His fingers told him it was simply the wall, the textured wallpaper plain beneath his fingers as his eyes reported not the slightest

impediment. He ran his palms over the surface and then stood, hands raised up, flat against the wall and looked through at his sinister observer.

The elf took one long, skating step forward so that they were not more than a conversational distance apart. Under a subtle light that seemed to emanate only from his own flesh, the elf was most devastatingly beautiful. There was no other word for it. A sliver of his bare chest was smooth, his cinched tunic and leggings draping upon him as artfully as if he had stepped from a classical painting. But his expression was arch and cruel.

The elf reached forward effortlessly through the invisible wall. Giffen flinched back, but the fingers stopped just short of the wall between them.

“Dispense with the little incubus, Giffen,” the elf said in quicksilver tones. “You are mine, and even what I do not have use for, I do not share.”

“...effrey?”

His mind was stalled. The abstract pattern of the wallpaper right in front of his face and a man he’d just met calling him by the name he hadn’t used in over thirty years -- between this and the echoing darkness, he wasn’t sure which felt more like the real world, like home.

“It’s, um, nothing,” he said, turning. The room looked entirely normal now, gloomy but every piece of furniture and corner clear to see. “Or rather, it would take some explaining and probably just leave you thinking I’m crazy.” *Or have you going straight to the queen with a story I can’t even make sense of myself.*

He went to the window, which overlooked the rose garden, not well tended but still a fine sight as it came into bloom with rampant rafters of pink and white blossoms. Golden light poured into the room, and Giffen squinted out at the azure sky. The sunlight dazzled him and seemed out of place. Like what he really wanted to do was turn back into that absolute illusory darkness, into the arms of that ice prince of an elf. None of it made any sense. His heart was still thumping, and what he’d seen, no matter how beautiful or how

familiar ... could not be real. And yet, just one long moment looking at the cruel, sardonic face of that elf seemed to have emblazoned it indelibly upon his mind's eye.

Derek came up behind him, laying a hand upon his shoulder. "Did you have some kind of vision?"

"No. That is, it hardly seemed like ... well, maybe. Fuck." Giffen turned with a sigh. "Look, you must have been traveling late last night or early this morning to get here, so maybe you could use a little rest. Or get started on those books. It seems to me that I need to see to some of those royal duties we have been referring to and clear up some of these things buzzing around in my head. And I need to do that alone. Something along the lines of a meditation, you know."

He stepped around Derek and cast around for his clothes.

Derek watched him somberly. "So how long does something like that take?"

Giffen dressed as he mulled it over. "Well, there are candles to light and certain pointless things to get me in the mood, and then it really just takes as long as it takes." With that he pulled on his shirt.

Derek stayed, standing awkwardly by the windowsill with the light gilding his silhouette. "I will be downstairs," he said. "How long do you think I'll wait up for you?"

"I guess I'm going to find out."

Everything was awkward and at odds, but then Derek walked slowly past him and out the door. Poking his head out the door, Giffen saw him walking down the hall and turning onto the main staircase, still quite naked and looking good with it. Lean, but neither too muscular nor too thin. With a deep breath, Giffen tried to remind himself that whoever was pulling the strings, Derek might well be the nice young man he seemed to be. Giffen certainly hoped so.

Chapter Three

Giffen wasn't much for chants and dances, all that arcane guff aimed mainly at one god or another. When he made any effort at all, it was for the sole purpose of getting inside himself and letting whatever-the-hell-it-was that fueled his visions come through loud and clear. It came down to getting himself alone in a room with no music and nothing to look at or do, until he got excruciatingly bored. And then he would be hit by it. The vision.

Not a new one. The full-on, long-distance Sight-with-a-capital-S would get stuck on something, and until he got it out of the way, it wouldn't show him anything else. He just hoped to discern a little more, to glean some clue as to how he would come to be in the yellowed grass, holding Archer's limp and lifeless body and knowing that he'd killed him.

Faint hope at best, but looking about his room, he knew it wouldn't do. Piled about was just about every source of entertainment his restless mind could desire, from comic books to crossword puzzles. Normally he'd use the basement or a guestroom, but the perfect place would have to be the chapel up behind the main house. It couldn't hurt that Archer had spent a lot of time in the place, doing it up.

Maybe that was how religion worked anyway. Lock people up in a dull room with the most god-awful hymns and bore them right into God's arms. And as to what exactly Peter,

the only Christian in the house, would think about him using the place, he didn't know. But then, Peter didn't need to find out. Giffen had to search pretty hard to find his one prop -- a thick candle -- and a Bic lighter that he had no other use for since he'd quit smoking a few years back. With the white candle in one hand and the lighter in his pocket, he went down the stairs and stuck his head through into the library.

Derek was sitting cross-legged on the floor with his computer and paper spread out all around him. He glanced up, his eyes flicking over the half-burnt candle.

"Have you replaced me already?"

"Now, when we first met, it seemed to me that you were more the 'inherit the earth' sort -- and here you are making off-color remarks. Really, Derek, I am shocked."

Derek leaned back, seemingly as happy naked as clothed. "I suppose I'm not usually the forthcoming sort. But I also suppose I thought that, with you, I could be something different."

"Well." So once again Giffen was left short of anything to say. "I'll be as long as I'll be," he said, and it was with a tone of apology.

Derek just smiled.

* * * * *

Such a mundane little conversation, but it stayed on Giffen's mind as he walked up the long, sloping hill, through the trees to the chapel. The white wood gleamed, freshly painted, through the swaying branches. The woods smelled of rain and virtuous decay, leaf litter, living soil, and the air itself under the moist cover of the canopy. The late slanting light struck down through the leaves like a golden invitation to hope.

At the door of the chapel, Giffen turned and looked out at the estate, running wild now but still a carefully crafted vista, meant to please the eye. Meant to look wild, but every hill

sculpted and every tree carefully positioned and planted, so many years ago. None of those who'd planned the view could possibly have foreseen he would be standing here now.

Giffen shook his head and stepped into the building's dark enclosure. He sat cross-legged on the floor, his back against the altar, and set the candle on the floor. Its broad base sat flat on the old boards; he lit the wick and sat to watch the flame, letting his mind wander.

Had he gone mad, to see that dark expanse, that elf? No vision had ever seen and spoken to him, nor been so lucid, inseparable from real life. If it was madness, it was not some trifle that he could ignore. He must believe what his eyes chose to see, in some form.

And if he did believe, what could it mean? An incubus? Derek? Well, would that explain how the young man got a rise from him so easily, at least. Giffen did not embrace it, but he knew himself to be as close to perfectly asexual as any largely healthy man could be ... 'til now. But what was an incubus, exactly? How had he never heard of them before, when his work had brought him in contact with so many other kinds of magical creatures?

And how could he even try and make sense of his personal confusion while the same, terrible vision always beat at the margins of his awareness: Archer in the scuffed, sandy soil. Dying in Giffen's arms, the certain knowledge he was the cause. What little peace of mind Giffen had would leave him when fate delivered that day. What could be the cause? He could not help but wonder if it was mixed up with Archer's crazy idea that, if properly lit, the Maewyn ward that kept magic out of Ireland would actually *burn*.

The small windows faded into darkness by degrees. His mind whirled with each partner, each puzzle in his life. And suddenly the vision engulfed him, just like a dream but that, with practice, he came to exert some control over how he viewed it. The wind blew hard, the field, dry yellowed grass, was by a beach. The sky, so open and so high, seemed to invite his eye.

Then Archer, weakly, "I did it, didn't I?"

And with a smile, he died.

With a smile.

The vision endured past the point it usually ended. He sat stooped. Cradling the young man, he looked around. There was no one anywhere to be seen. He lifted the lax body in his arms and began to walk down a blurred and stormy beach.

He seemed to walk for such a long time, blankly, stumbling. The scenery just vaguely familiar, but less so with any step. It could be anywhere upon the coast and any time in the summer extending out before them.

The strand of sight, like leaded glass, stretched out ever more tenuous and brittle and, in an instant, snapped. Giffen bowed his head with a sigh. The candle snuffed, the darkness broken by a single soft sound.

He raised his head to see Derek seated in the first pew, waiting how long?

"My little incubus," Giffen said wearily. He had hung on to the vision too long; it tired him.

"The queen said that visions do not give such specific information." Derek sounded more tired than surprised.

"The queen should limit herself to speaking of things that she understands."

Derek frowned. Such loyal creatures, these followers of hers. Giffen got to his knees, standing stiffly, with one hand on the old altar. By some old reflex, he mentally apologized to whatever god might care about the informality.

"I'm pretty sure you'll be in danger if you stay in my company, Derek," he said, wincing at his back's protests in straightening.

"You saw that?"

"No I just made it up, to chase off the first guy I've fancied in ... ever. I'm just that kinda self-destructive. There ought to be a word for that, you know. Self-hating -- like misanthropic, but the only one you really hate is yourself." He dropped down next to Derek on the pew. "Or is that what it comes down to in the end, either way?"

“Geoffrey, it’s three in the morning, and I think you need to get some sleep.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“It’s what my mother must have called me. I haven’t been Geoffrey in a long time.”

Derek put an arm around him, and all Giffen wanted to do was lean into that lean, warm body and sleep again right there in the chapel and forget he’d ever become anything other than little Geoffrey. Little Geoffrey, who didn’t need anything more than his mother’s love and approval. Because once that was gone, the world became a great, black place without walls, without mercy. Without options, without love.

Giffen wrenched himself up and pulled Derek with him. “I didn’t even know there were such things as incubi,” he said. “It’s not like every creature of myth exists even in our crazy corner of the world. Or is it incubuses? What is the conventional plural, the collective noun and all that?”

“We’re a small group. One family is all that’s left, as far as I know, and I’m something of the white sheep in the family,” Derek said. “Incubus librarian -- you can probably work out the problem.”

It was a hot night, quiet but for the sound of traffic of in the distance, as they ambled back.

“So, what ...” Giffen said. “You’re meant to be a hot little number all the time, not only in the sack.”

“It’s a matter of family pride.”

“Family pride? Screw ’em.”

“They’d only take me up on the offer.”

Giffen started to laugh and found he couldn’t stop. They walked down through the trees and across the wide lawn.

“Stop it,” Derek protested. “It wasn’t that funny.”

But then he started, too. They made their way back to the guestroom, where Derek stepped into the bathroom, closing the door emphatically. Giffen collapsed back onto the rumpled bed. His pointless giggles faded. What of the looming elf he had seen in this very room, and his warning? The house had protections; even if he was real, he should be powerless here.

And then Derek was there, naked, pulling at his clothes. His touch was electric, affecting Giffen quite literally like nothing else. Even as he succumbed to lightheaded lust, he knew that there was so much hanging over his head, so much he should be more concerned about than this creature in his arms. Derek spooned against him, lithe and warm, Giffen's stiffening cock rubbing between Derek's small, hard buttocks. The invitation was clear.

"Derek, we shouldn't be doing this. We should ..." But there was musk in the air, driving the thought from his head. This was no normal infatuation; it was ...

Giffen pushed up on his arm, resting his other hand upon Derek's slim waist. He leaned forward to kiss the tender skin of Derek's neck; a taste both sweet and salty beguiled him. He became almost blankly focused upon sensations, not new to him, but for the first time potent.

Derek raised his thigh, Giffen's cock sliding between his legs. Feeling the way, Giffen eased his fingers up. The young man was quite clearly prepared for him; one tentative fingertip found a hole already slickened. No doubt that was what Derek had been up to in the bathroom. Giffen nestled closer, holding his cock in hand, eager and almost fully hard. With his fingers curled around the head, he teased the opening with his thumb. Circling, he felt the smooth flesh ceding. Derek pressed back against him, impatient, but Giffen did not hurry. He felt a sort of lazy, almost drunken, pleasure.

In a perfect moment that was not overshadowed by the slightest hint or shadow of prophecy, threat or duty, he pressed forward. Pushing past and through that tight ring was pure heady lust, gentle but total possession. Derek yielded to him, met him eagerly yet still

trembled beneath his hand. It was perfect, and even as it was perfect, some dim sense within him knew it was ... too perfect.

But he held off any thought of the implications. Another day, another hour, damn it ... just another few minutes. On his side, he pushed in smooth and tight. The young man moved back against him, bringing them deep together. Giffen moved his hand to help Derek keep his thigh raised, and he keep his movements slow to hold the awkward but intimate position. They found a languid, almost detached rhythm.

With every stroke, Derek pushing back to meet him, he began to feel more drained. Clutching at Derek's waist, he felt a twitch deep in his groin. With them pressed close together, Giffen collapsed to lie flat on the bed, his face pressed against Derek's curling hair. His hand dropped over to brush Derek's hard cock.

With a series of stifled jerks, he spent himself more in collapse than climax, and it was as if that last burst of strength passed straight to Derek, who came in his hand.

Giffen lay drained, hanging tight to Derek. He felt the detached nonsense entering his brain that was the precursor to sleep. But even so, he snatched a moment of lucidity. His life was seriously out of control. He saw a peril ahead and could do nothing alone to stop it. Contrary as he wished to be, it was time to go to London House and the queen. Let her have the victory, so long as someone else would know what he had seen.

Chapter Four

Morning came as something of an unwelcome surprise. It was as if he had slept deeply and truly for the first time in his life -- and could go on sleeping for some time. Giffen stretched. The cold, empty expanse of the bed prodded his thoughts. Why was he so quick to feel that was wrong and unfamiliar? The cluttered, disorderly room. The generic alarm clock on the bedside table glaring its red, rectangular numbers at him: five past noon. What the hell?

Of course, between one thing and another, he probably hadn't gone to sleep 'til four or five in the morning, and holding a vision as long as he had normally took it out of him. The bed in here was soft and warm, and it seemed rather difficult to muster the strength to do anything. Even more so because there was just so much to do.

It seemed like a romp with a, quite possibly literally, irresistible incubus had steered Giffen clear of the deep blacks of despair, but the day rolled round real, flawed, gritty, and gray. Love at first sight seemed like a delusion again. His emotions balanced on a teeter-totter, never quite finding their balance. Maybe if he'd woken up in his lover's arms rather than his own crumpled bed, the rose tint would have stayed a little longer. He was rather sorry to see it go. Ah, well, the only way to get through the gray was action.

Giffen rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. Mentally he made a list. Ask Derek just what the hell an incubus was, make sure he stayed here at Scott House, get online and grab a last-minute ticket on the Caledonian Sleeper train to London. That would at least begin to deal with the mysterious and possibly hallucinatory elf, and let the queen do whatever her considerable resources allowed to stop his vision about Archer falling true. Not that he seriously considered that possible, but how could he not at least try? After all, there had been a full staff in London supporting the elven seer Vavasour before he defected to the unseelie. They must know something about these things that he didn't. Things about going mad and seeing the room fading away into an inky void ...

With a sigh, he heaved himself over and slipped his feet off the bed and onto the floor. As he stood, he felt dizzy, almost drunk. He moved about tentatively, gathering up his stale clothes -- jeans and T-shirt yet again -- and pulling them on, forgoing shoes and even so much as a glance in the mirror. If he looked anything like he felt, well, he just didn't want to know. Opening the door, he could feel people in the house. There wasn't so much as a discernable sound, but the air seemed fuller and warmer. So he wasn't surprised to come down the stairs and see the shoes and backpacks of the returned housemates lying haphazardly around.

In the library, Bear and Wolfy were on the sofa watching TV, Wolfy leaning against her lover with a proprietary hand over his stomach. Wolfy was always a bit of a glyph, hard to read; she noticed Giffen's entrance, but her golden eyes were blank of any particular reaction. Bear's expression was more cheerful, but tinged with worry.

Derek came through from the kitchen with a mug in hand, acting more diffident now, like when they'd first met. He showed only a flicker of a smile before glancing down. "Morning, Geoffrey," he said quietly.

"Geoffrey?" Wolfy echoed.

"It's my name."

"How is it that we didn't know that?" Bear said, his eyes moving speculatively between Derek and Giffen.

Giffen still felt unsteady, brushing his hand along the wall as he entered the room. "I imagine you never as--"

Giffen was interrupted as Peter came through from the rear hallway. In his hand was the even more diminished stub of Giffen's candle. For a normally sanguine man, he held himself stiffly, but his voice was no more than chiding.

"Giffen, could you not find a better place for whatever this was than the chapel?"

Giffen felt his patience snap, knowing even as it happened that Peter was not really the cause.

"I needed a peaceful place to think some things through. Or would your God be so horrified by my presence ..."

Giffen's vision fogged over, and he heard a shrill sound. Something slapped him hard on the side of his face, and he belatedly realized that it was the floor. All of the building alarm burst forth inside him just as his body refused to answer him at all. He blinked his eyes, trying to orient, to see. But all he felt was another lurching disorientation as he was lifted up onto the leather sofa.

Peter's arms. Strong arms, just the sort that he would like to collapse into and forget all his worries. Giffen realized his hands were thrown up defensively, although he hadn't felt himself do it. He could still hear nothing but a high piping sound that gradually faded to reveal the contours of words that he could not quite make out.

The sofa was firm beneath him, those muscular arms holding him safely in position. Giffen let go, wanting nothing more than to lie there -- and immediately the world snapped back into focus. Peter leaned over him. Behind his shoulder, Bear, and only very distantly Derek's pallid peering face. Faith, hope, and charity, in more or less that order. The man of God, the optimist, and the pity fuck. Giffen laughed.

“Giffen, are you with us?” Peter said. “I’m sorry. Of course, you’d think I’d be beyond my closed-mindedness by now. I shouldn’t have --”

“Giffen, what was that?” Bear asked. “Have you been feeling unwell?”

“No, no.” Giffen pushed them away. “Just a big vision, a little incubus, and not enough coffee.” He set his feet on the floor with determination, slapping off Peter’s restraining hand. God damn the man.

“Giffen, I don’t think that you should ...” Bear, as well intentioned as ever.

Giffen ignored them, steadied himself on the sofa back, and aimed for the kitchen doorway. The floor seemed to list a little as he walked over that meager expanse of floorboard, so he barely got as far as Derek, standing a few feet out. He put his hand on Derek’s shoulder, mainly to steady himself.

“Fresh pot?” Giffen asked, looking down at the mug of milky coffee Derek held.

Derek raised one hand to Giffen’s side; those two points of contact seemed to set up a circuit, warm and carnal despite the fact that Giffen barely had the strength to stand.

“Take mine,” Derek said, holding out his mug.

“Somehow I don’t think it works like that,” Giffen replied wryly. “Besides, I prefer my coffee straight up. Why don’t you go book me a berth on the sleeper out of Waverley tonight. Scotrail. It’s in the book.”

From there he made it to the kitchen door and, turning, saw Peter exchange a glance with Bear. As usual, Bear was delegated to deal with Giff’s obstreperous moods. Well, he couldn’t hide, and he couldn’t outrun the bugger just now, so Giffen gritted his teeth and headed for the coffee percolator. With one hand clamped tight on the bench, he contemplated the Perspex bowl that was standing in for the carafe Peter had broken. There was a murmur, then a figure at his back, but it wasn’t Bear’s hulking frame.

Derek reached past him for the bowl, pulled a mug down from the wooden rack, and poured.

"You might benefit from putting a little sugar in that. And, uh, my race is being kept something of a secret by the Society."

"Well, nobody briefed me on that. I suppose that shouldn't surprise me." Giffen kept his hand on the old wooden bench top as he turned. "Nobody had all that much use for me whilst they had the great elven seer Vavasour. Stored me away up here like last year's model. Not as powerful, not as pretty, not much use, until they found out Vavasour had turned to the dark side half a century ago and had been playing them all that time."

"Giffen, I didn't do any of that. I haven't done anything that deserves this anger." Derek wouldn't even look at him. He stood there, trembling with tension, as he added a third spoonful of sugar, keeping his eyes on the cup.

Every fiber of Giffen's no doubt atrophied heart called out to him to believe Derek, to believe that he was what he seemed to be. But every little gray cell in his head counseled him to know better. What happened every single time something looked too good to be true? Answer: it *was* too good to be true and far worse than he'd ever suspected, to boot.

"Cry me a river," Giffen said. "And book the train. Tell the queen you did what you were sent to do."

"She doesn't use me like that."

"Grow up. She uses everyone like that."

"She just ..." Derek struggled to find the words. "I mean, I knew she wanted you in London; you knew that. But she just put me here. Anything else -- and I mean anything else -- was up to me."

"Was it up to me, though? Was it really?" Giffen asked. "How many people turn you down? How many, really? I want to know." He kept his voice too low to carry, but it was harsh.

Damn it, this guy had him in some deep Pavlovian way, Giffen felt like a real ass for saying what was, objectively, nothing less than his true feelings. He wavered on the point of apologizing, but then he realized he hadn't got an answer yet. He waited.

Derek pushed the coffee at him. "Did you want to say no?"

Giffen reached forward, pushing Derek's chin up so their eyes finally met briefly before Derek looked aside again.

"I guess I'll book my own berth, and it's for one. I was not kidding when I said that it would be dangerous for you to be around me. And that stands, whether I am here or at our United Kingdom's blessed capital. So stay, look at dusty books. When I'm not actually looking at you, I'm pretty sure that you're just as bad for me as I could be for you."

But he *was* looking. Derek's was not really a handsome face, but it had its own harmony, symmetry. And in his eyes, sincerity. Could it be?

Whatever. The vacillations of his heart -- more like cock -- had to wait. He had already gone on too long on his own trying to work a way around Archer's fate, and it was time to accept that he had failed. His only hope was that the queen had some kind of trump card.

Giffen pulled his hand away and turned to face the wall. He gripped the coffee cup hard enough to feel the handle creak in protest and drank it, bitter and sickly sweet.

"I'll make the booking," Derek said, rather too meekly.

Chapter Five

The television in the train station waiting room buzzed and flickered. Giffen sat watching it anyway, as a pretext for ignoring Bear, who had decided to 'keep him company' until it was time to board.

"I could come along with you," Bear said, again.

"I was looking at Wolfy's face when you suggested that the first time. You're an empath; you shouldn't even have to look."

"Yes, well."

"Yes, well. You have some stuff of your own going on. You're allowed to, you know, have stuff of your own." Giffen finally turned to look at Bear. "I'll be at London House by breakfast. How much trouble can I get into between now and then?"

"You look like death warmed up, Giff. Even for you. And I'm more worried about the trouble you'll start after you get there."

"Gee, thanks. On the compliment *and* the vote of confidence."

Bear sighed heavily. "You've never got on well with authority figures. You tend to see yourself as being deliberately marginalized out here, but it was as much for your benefit as anything. As soon as someone looks like they're trying to tell you what to do, you --"

“Act like a complete asshole,” Giffen added. “I have --” He made an ironic quote marks gesture with his fingers. “-- *insight* into my issues, Bear. I just can’t be fucked doing anything about them.” A lady a few seats over tsked at his profanity. Giffen gave her a blank, unapologetic look. “Of course, with you and she-who-must-be-obeyed setting me up with the pocket Casanova, I’m not really all that in the mood to act the model courtier, anyway.”

“He seems like an okay kid to me.”

“So he does. But then, my predecessor as Tania’s soothsayer *seemed* to be a seelie elf loyal and true. You seemed like the last person on earth that would let me walk into a fucked-up situation like that without warning --”

“I let you know, Giffen. Not in so many words, but I let you know.”

Giffen pursed his lips and looked back to the flickering screen of the television as some soap opera rolled upwards in a series of swaying frames. Bear had, of course, done just that.

Bear huffed and broke the silence again. “Be careful. The queen has been pushing hard to get you, and it makes me think she may have a need. Archer’s druid friends say Vavasour was seen on a ship bound for Ireland.”

“No elf, not even he, could enter Ireland while the Maewyn ward keeping magic off that land still exists. It’d kill him.”

“Nor does an elf like him do something without a purpose. I trust the queen’s judgment rather better than you do, but even I am inclined to counsel caution. Her prime concern is her own people, and there seem to be things we are not told -- that maybe even elves with human companions are not told.”

Giffen was rather startled to hear his own cynicism given voice this way. There seemed a great deal they should be talking about, unpacking from those nascent suspicions, but this, it seemed, was not to be the time. A uniformed man came in through the automatic doors. “Caledonian Sleeper, ready for boarding at platform twelve.”

Giffen stood and threw his backpack over one shoulder. "Look, Bear," he said. "Just do me a favor -- keep Archer and Derek up here for a while. There's some bad fate waiting to happen with either of them if they get near me." Bear reached out, grasping him by the shoulder. Giffen tensed but suffered the touch. "Look," Giffen added, "you're an okay guy. You've always looked out for me, and I appreciate it. I should have gone to London House a while back, and now I am, and I'll be their problem for a while instead of yours."

"You're not a problem, Giff. You're a friend. I still hope to hear you say the same, one of these days."

Bear hugged him, a gesture Giffen returned only vaguely before walking away. He turned and stepped out into the great covered expanse of the station.

"Call!" Bear shouted after him.

Grudgingly Giffen turned and gave an awkward smile before escaping out of sight.

The sleeper was normally pulled up to twelve, the furthest platform. Giffen always used it when he had to go down south. It was just a nice thing, falling asleep in Edinburgh, waking up at Euston Station in London to hot coffee and a leisurely start to the day. Of course, the service was hardly in its prime now, worn, torn, and full of ruddy backpackers as often as not.

Giffen consulted his ticket. It looked like Derek had booked him his own compartment, an unnecessary extravagance, but one he appreciated on this occasion. The thought of London House ... well, at least he didn't have to face it 'til morning. A night on a train was pretty much the most appealing prospect he had at the moment. If he was honest, there was something about the sensation of sleeping on the Caledonian. The rumbling rhythm of the locomotive was something like being held, having someone else there as he slept, humming and holding him. Of course, on this occasion he was leaving behind a flesh-and-blood man -- well, probably a 'man' only by courtesy, but someone who was quite willing to do that for real.

Giffen sat on the lower berth and eased off his unlaced Docs, then stowed his bag away, turned off the lights, and pulled up the blind to reveal a curtailed view of Victorian brickwork. He didn't get too comfortable until the conductor came by and checked his ticket, took the orders for tea and coffee, and ambled off. Then he stripped down to his boxers and slipped between the predictably torn sheets and under the scratchy woolen blanket. On reflection, it said rather a lot about his life that riding a sleeper was one of his comforts. Perhaps he should let the little incubus suck him dry and -- double entendre entirely appropriate -- go out with a bang.

He sighed, rolled onto his back, and stared up at the pitted metal of the bottom surface of the upper berth. There was a tap on the door. Assuming it was the conductor again, Giffen reached over from the bed to tip up the latch. As he did so, the train lurched and began to move. All of which made it quite clear what was in Derek's mind as he slipped in through the door, tugging a battered suitcase after him. Giffen lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. How did he feel about this? He really didn't know. He just felt tired. Too tired to even think about it.

He could feel Derek standing in the narrow space beside the equally narrow bunk-bed platforms. Waiting. Giffen didn't want to look at him; he knew that as soon as he did, he would weaken. The sight of Derek was enough to brush away his anger at being manipulated, his certainty that this feeling could by no means be real ... love. Love. Ha.

He lay there in the darkness behind his eyes and concentrated on not give an opening, not giving a damn. He felt a touch upon his cheek and slapped it away reflexively, twisting towards the wall, his right hand reaching up to cover his own face. Ignoring the little monster might not be enough to get rid of him, but it was sure as hell worth a try. Derek must have a booked seat after all. He had to have either a sleeper or a seat to get on the train, and it wasn't in this cabin, which was secured in Giffen's name alone.

Slight noises seemed sharp. The scuff of the suitcase being pushed over towards the window. The scrape of the small ladder being slid that same way, the click and snap of the

door being shut and locked, the rustle of cloth. Giffen realized he'd left a space, pressing himself so close to the wall. Had some part of his mind wanted ...?

Derek sat next to him and then slid into that narrow space on the mattress. Giffen contemplated the uncharitable gesture of pushing back and toppling Derek off onto the floor, of asking just how rude he had to be to get his point across. It was probably more eloquent proof of his inner feelings that he did nothing.

They lay together in the rumbling darkness. Derek reached his right arm tentatively over, curling across Giffen's chest and nestling the hand just inches from his face. Giffen let the silence continue, and by degrees his body relaxed as if it had its own opinion about things. He opened his eyes and stared at the dark metal wall.

His body wanted to be with Derek. And despite a few lackluster liaisons, he had never been attracted to another person in this way. If he was honest, not even Peter. Perhaps it was because he was meant to be with an elf, part of the big elven love spell nobody talked much about. It would make sense if the spell built in a little discouragement of interest in anyone else until the 'destined' match was made.

It was all speculation, but it made sense. And if there was anyone who knew more about that spell, and how to work around it, it was Queen Tania. Tania, who sent Derek out to lure him in.

"So tell me about being an incubus," Giffen said.

Derek eased closer against him. "There are stories about where we came from," he said haltingly. "They're all relatively modern. Nobody really knows. When the elves came, the incubi allied with the unseelie. There's a similarity. There's a need for contact with ... normal people. Like the unseelie, the incubi tend to simply ... take what they need."

Giffen could feel the faint puff of Derek's breath against his ear. He should have felt justified. The weakness he felt was not just his imagination or usual frailties; this incubus was

feeding off him. And like any good parasite, there was a mechanism to make him enjoying being the psychic equivalent of dinner.

But Derek's voice was so quiet, almost ashamed.

"So you would eventually need to ..." Giffen said.

"Like the elves, one can struggle by without it for some time. Go weeks or months, years even, of awaiting the first time, and we don't exert our special powers. The difference is, the seelie elves draw power through a human host, not *from* them. They are more powerful and more versatile in their abilities. Incubi, like the unseelie, need to use human psychic energy directly and are more limited in the channels open to ... us."

Giffen's rational mind worked through this. Tania had sent Derek to him hungry, it seemed, and to a house where all but one person was paired up anyway. It seemed to rather stretch credibility to think that Derek was anything other than a willing part of this scheme.

"And an incubus's powers?" Giffen prompted.

"To mesmerize and attract, but I had no such strength when we met. I had gone too long. I did not, could not, make you do anything. I swear."

Perhaps not. But by his very nature Derek offered the kind of connection Giffen intrinsically wanted. Although given that a seer's powers were inwardly focused, he was far from well equipped to accommodate an amorous parasite. Yet all his habitual cynicism aside, Giffen couldn't make himself believe that Derek was anything other than a well-meaning pawn in the events unfolding. Trouble, certainly, but not by his own will and making. That was probably self-delusion, but there it was.

"Bloody hell," Giffen muttered. He tried to turn to speak to Derek properly, but in the cramped space he banged his elbow on the wall and thrust Derek out of the bed. "Fuck. Sorry."

It was too dark to see properly, but Derek's voice floated up from the ground. "For what, exactly?"

"We'll start with sorry for pushing you off the bed; any other apologies are still under review by what remains of my cognitive faculties. You best use the top berth. Even if I was up to it and so inclined, this is not the sort of space for cohabiting."

"Since we were together, Geoffrey, I have some small idea what you want," Derek said. "In my heart I believe that was how our people evolved. Not to take without caring, but to give people what they want but cannot reach out for on their own."

"Well, that's all very touching," Giffen snapped. "But if I do not ask for something, perhaps I do not want it. Who are you to say otherwise?"

Derek just fumbled back to the berth. He crawled over Giffen and infiltrated himself against the wall. He eased down and reached his arm around Giffen's shoulders, gathering him in. Giffen was on the verge of shoving him away, but something about Derek's calm surety stopped him.

Derek seemed so hesitant most of the time, but then, physically, he seemed suddenly to have confidence in himself. Giffen leaned down slowly, his head resting on Derek's narrow shoulder, breathing in the subtle musk of his body. He was angry with himself even as he was beguiled. Derek just held him, firmly but gently. The train ambled on into the darkness, street and window lights sometimes sliding by, brightening the tiny cabin with their passing gaze.

Despite himself, Giffen began to feel his drowsy mind slipping away. Past resentment and future fears fading into soft focus, and the now -- the simple comforts of the now -- ceased to vex him.

Held, comforted in the darkness by a man he hardly knew and scarcely trusted, Giffen had to confess. This was what he wanted.

Chapter Six

Waking brought a wordless truce. Giffen disentangled himself from Derek's slender limbs as the train lurched into Euston Station. He dressed in crumpled clothes and got his things together, leaving the complimentary coffee and bagged breakfast untouched. Derek mutely followed after him. The conductor scowled to see an extra man in the cabin, but did not make an issue of it.

Weariness persisted. Giffen wondered if even platonic embraces served an incubus's purpose. The balance of his trust shifted so easily and uncertainly, but Giffen was already afraid of being left alone again. He hailed a black cab, which slid through the streets, already busy and loud with London traffic. He was surprised that Derek stepped forward to pay the driver and grabbed Giffen's bag before he could reach it.

"You're not my secretary, Derek," he said, trying to tug it back.

"You'll need to be announced and wait to see the queen. I can arrange accommodations."

Giffen could not be bothered to argue. Derek must know the place better than he, after all. He stepped inside the cavernous entrance way of a building that seemed little different from others in this long, arcing stretch of Georgian homes turned modern workplaces. The

black-painted door was heavy but unlocked. He crossed the threshold with a slight jolt, knowing his entrance would be immediately known.

A tall elven woman walked smoothly down an angled stairway. Her pallor and blonde hair were all but a Tolkienesque cliché. "Mr. Bourke," she said coolly. "If you will come this way." Derek, it seemed, did not even qualify for comment.

Giffen shoved his hands in the pockets of his ragged jeans. Glancing back, he saw Derek already taking his leave, heading down a dark side corridor with the confidence of someone familiar with the house's crooked ways. Giffen straightened, did his best to cast off the dour fugue of the last few days, and went as he was bid.

He had had cause to enter the queen's own chambers on a few, widely spaced occasions. They had not changed, nor had the lady herself. She was as dark as her assistant was pale, her eyes brown and warm as she stood to greet her visitor. Giffen wasn't fooled; what was not achieved by a subtle glamour was achieved with the acting ability learned in a long and scheming life.

"Giffen," Tania exclaimed, reaching out her hand. Giffen recalled that in the past she had made him wait, sometimes hours, for an audience. This time she must need something from him.

"I gather I can be of service to you in some way."

Tania indicated a chair. "Giffen, you do not change."

We have that in common. "I have grown old and bitter," he contradicted without rancor. "You, on the other hand, are just as I remember. Perhaps we might do each other the courtesy of being direct."

Tania perched on the edge of her polished mahogany desk. "By all means," she said with a raised eyebrow. "Although that is something of an oxymoron, by all means speak what is on your mind."

"You wished me to come here to you. Ergo, I am here. Perhaps you will tell me why."

Tania's expression hardened slightly. "You go where you please. You might begin by giving me your reasons."

Giffen shrugged. "I have two visions, one that baffles me, one that I have done all I could on my own to avoid, and failed. These matters I would put before any of your staff who might have expertise that I do not."

Only the faintest shade of tone made it clear that the queen replied in mock amazement. "You have come to me for help, Mr. Bourke."

"Giffen, please. After all, I am sure that now we have put our differences aside, we are going to be *such* friends."

The room suddenly seemed to darken, and for a moment Giffen thought it was somehow a tangible effect of the queen's displeasure. But then he saw, behind Tania's shoulder, the bookshelf-clad wall was dissolving entirely. A black void extended behind her, featureless but for a single figure. The elf he had seen before.

He stood, tall even for an elf, arms crossed. He had a long face with a straight, thin nose; large eyes; thick, dark brows; and the expression of a languorous angel.

"I did warn you," the apparition announced.

A glance at the queen suggested she perceived nothing amiss. Giffen's mind tracked quickly. In a house as well defended as this, it could only be an illusion -- perhaps one tailored specifically to his sight. The elf stepped back, taking the darkness with him, and was gone. So if it was not Giffen he threatened, it must be --

In a shock of adrenaline, Giffen vaulted from his chair and careened through the door and down the stairs. The blonde secretary stood in the lobby. Giffen skidded to a halt and grabbed her by the scruff of her oh-so-stylish linen jacket.

"Derek. Where did he go?"

The bitch looked up the stairway to the queen and replied only at her nod. "He stepped out, to the convenience store at the end of the --"

Giffen released her, wrenching the door open. There was only one store in sight, to the right on the very corner. Weariness was the dimmest of memories. The rough cobbles of the old street skimmed beneath his feet. But the queen's blonde lapdog was even faster, overtaking him and arriving first at the glass door as she called up her glamour to appear human. Fucking elves.

She threw open the door, and he followed her in. The small, crowded shop seemed empty but for the man behind the counter. The elven lady stopped at the threshold, tense, nostrils flaring. Giffen barged past her.

"A young man came in, just now," Giffen said to the shop tender.

The man seemed startled at the interrogative tone, but raised a hand to indicate a dark corner of the shop crowded with spices and sundries. Coming around a rack of grimy greeting card, Giffen saw the fading edge of that uncanny shadow.

In protected places like the houses of the Society of Fairy, the elf's visits could be little more than visual, but here, with Derek gone, Giffen gambled that it was something more. As he leapt for the shimmering and diminishing darkness, he felt the queen's secretary snatch for him, grabbing the edge of his old blazer, but it tore with a ripple of snapping threads.

With a wince, Giffen threw himself into the emptiness and fell through onto a smooth surface, cool beneath his hands. Absolute dark encompassed his vision, so featureless he felt like he had gone blind. Craning back, he saw nothing behind him.

Crawling cautiously on all fours, he edged back the way he had so rashly entered and found nothing except perhaps a slight roughening of the seamless surface below him. He felt faint, his heart cantering unevenly. There seemed to be very little point in caution now.

He stood, straightened, and tried to orient himself the way he had been originally going. With his hands stretched out, he gathered his courage and walked with a deliberately even step into gods-knew-what.

“Oh, very good,” a quiet voice commented, from no discernable direction. “But I don’t suppose my destined mate would be some kind of coward.”

Giffen turned his head, aching to locate the speaker. Silver in the voice like only the elven had, it was his sardonic dweller in the darkness. For some likeness of love, Giffen had gotten himself into a truly screwed-up situation, but ramming a closed fist into that elven bastard’s face would really make him feel better about it all.

He tried not to think too much about the ‘destined mate’ comment. Destined to be with an unseelie -- how could that be possible? And given the inexorable nature of the spell, if it was true, how could it be resisted?

“Oh, I’m a coward,” Giffen said. “Don’t you know, in a tight corner it’s the cowards you have to worry about.”

There was pale laughter, fading like the source was getting further away, but still the direction was impossible to judge. But what about Derek? If the connection to an incubus was even slightly like between a human and elf, there should be some magical link between them. Giffen opening his senses as widely as he could to light and magic, but still he saw no more than if his eyes were bound closed. Intuition. Magic always came to intuition first. Rather than just stay and die in whatever this damned realm was, he might as well gamble on the hope that deep down he knew ...

Giffen burst in with all the confidence he could muster, careening forward. He collided with a confusion of forms, and they toppled onto the ground together. Giffen’s grasping hands wound in cloth too fine to be a human’s. Well, it seemed he might get his first wish after all. His groping fingers fastened over a face, the fine face of his visions, and he pulled back his hand.

But Giffen faltered. An ambiguous sensation washed over his body, and light sparked behind his eyes so bright it hurt. The tall elf pried him off, and suddenly Giffen could see him. See his beautiful face glinting like polished pewter. A little further off, Derek had

tumbled to the ground and curled to his side, but Giffen could barely make himself spare a glance for the man he had just risked so much for.

The elf's face contorted with anger as he stood, fastidiously brushing himself off. Giffen could not tear his eyes away. Oh, he had seen plenty of elves before. They were a damned attractive lot.

But this was something altogether more viscerally real. The strange, glowing light painted the elf's long, disdainful face and glistened on the exposed flesh of his lean torso. His black robe draped down to the floor, which gleamed like obsidian in reply, picking him out now from the absolute darkness around them.

"Who are you?" Giffen said.

"Geoffrey?" Derek called out, getting up on his knees.

Fear made Giffen too irritable to curb his tongue. "Damn, I wish you'd stop calling me that," he snapped.

The elf made one lazy gesture towards Derek, and the young man slumped forward, reaching out with one arm before toppling and lying still. The elf watched dispassionately, as if he were observing nothing more than an insect clambering over the ground.

"What have you done to him!" Giffen demanded, his heart thudding in alarm.

The elf turned to Giffen. "I told you to get rid of your little pet here."

Giffen watched, but made no move. "He takes a bit of getting rid of. But all the same, if you hurt him --"

"I don't think he would take very much 'getting rid' of at all." The elf drew a small blade from his belt and turned the blade. "The same could be said of you. What is it you think you are threatening me with?"

He stepped towards Giffen; Giffen stood his ground. His eyes flicked to Derek's motionless form. It was fear more than courage that straightened his spine. The elf touched

the keen blade of his dagger under Giffen's chin, just close enough to tickle. Then he reached out a finger towards Giffen's brow.

"That thing lives just so long as I choose for it to live. As do you."

Giffen dared not move or speak, for any slight movement of his jaw would be enough to cut him.

"You are not much to look at," the elf added. "That made it easier over the years to stay away. I knew it would be different if we touched."

With one fingertip, he traced across Giffen's brow, slowly. That slight touch was enough to prove it. The elven dark energy crawled over Giffen's body, energizing him, making him yearn for more, even right here in this unknown realm. Giffen was frozen in place only by the threat of the blade. Looking aside, he saw Derek, his eyes still blank and unseeing. But his face was turned to them, nostrils flaring.

"So who are you?" Giffen repeated.

The elf stepped back from him; removing the immediate threat of his weapon, though he still held the blade ready. His expression of disdain was broken, his face flushed and his chest betraying unsettled pants of breath. "I am Vavasour," he said. "Do give Tania my regards. Tell her to enjoy the celebration of Shreve; it's the last she'll reign over as queen."

He stooped to grab Derek with his free hand, taking the back of his shirt like the scruff of some stray animal.

"Wait," Giffen said. "You don't need him. You must know it's not ... the same. There's no need."

"It is by no means your place to tell me what to do." But Vavasour turned. "And what would you have to offer me in return?"

"What would you have?"

Vavasour paused. He seemed to deliberate. Giffen knew that at any moment the elf might take a fancy to following through with his casual murder. A line of Shakespeare flitted

through Giffen's head: 'Screw your courage to the sticking-place...' He leapt for Vavasour's knife hand, grabbing the wrist as tightly as he could.

Vavasour barely shifted. He dropped Derek, and his freed hand darted up. Giffen barely had time to flinch. His back hit the ground so fast that it hardly made sense. A choking grip upon his neck showed Vavasour had followed him. The elf loomed over him, face blazing and enraged. But almost immediately his grip began to soften. The heated energy between them swirled, throwing glints and motes into the air.

Vavasour stayed frozen, down on one knee with his hand pinning Giffen down -- more lightly now, but still rather more than a token gesture.

"You," Vavasour said with the air of an elf beginning a sentence he had not yet decided how to end. "I could take you at any time." And there was a quality to how he said 'take' that didn't bear much contemplation.

"But?" Giffen offered hoarsely, in the sincere hope that that particular coordinating conjunction was required.

"But I would find it more amusing to have you without worrying about pesky little escape attempts -- or rescues. Dear Tania's minions have been adept little rescuers, and it would be quite the distraction right at the moment. One I am not inclined to entertain."

"So?"

"I'll send the little leech back to the big, bright world without so much as a hair out of place, if you stay in his place and join the unseelie."

"I hate to rain on your parade, because a plan that doesn't involve murder is something I can get behind. But I'm not on board with the unseelie vision statement, so I can't really promise to be a good little cheerleader, concubine, or whatever it is you have in mind."

Giffen squirmed. The palm pressed to his throat was growing slick with sweat, and Giffen could feel his own pulse beating hard against it. He just couldn't be all that terrified with his cock stiffening in his jeans.

“It’s very easy to become unseelie,” Vavasour said with a bitter laugh. “You simply retract your allegiance from Tania and you are counted as one of us. The Society and George W. have that in common.”

Giffen’s brain put that together rather belatedly. ‘If you’re not with us, you’re against us.’ “So, I recant my oath and what?”

“Leave the Society shelter and employ. Live somewhere other than one of those magically protected mausoleums they favor.”

“And you’ll leave Derek alone.”

“Yes.”

“How do I know you’ll let him go back?”

Vavasour leaned forward. “You’d argue with the devil, wouldn’t you? You can go back with him. Then you’ll know he’s all right and safely ensconced in Castle Tania. But by dawn tomorrow I want to see you out on the footpath again. And you can’t tell them.”

“Cause that would be cheating?”

“*Cause* then I’d take some time out of my busy schedule to hunt down and kill any person you’ve ever felt even tepid about. Well, actually, no. I’d keep my schedule and pencil that in at the bottom, for when I have time. But it would get done, and very thoroughly, I assure you.”

And there was no doubt that the bastard meant it.

“Sure, fine,” Giffen said. “Deal.” Save Derek; hope for the best. It wasn’t much of a plan, but it sure beat the alternative.

Vavasour drew back his hand. Giffen stayed on his back, quietly gasping. Vavasour leaned down until their faces were just inches apart. The elf’s long black hair fell like a curtain around them. His breath was cold, and then his lips were cold. His touch was electric. It pulled at Giffen like a thousand fishhooks deep in his gut, but instead of pain, each

one was a tiny, piercing ecstasy so that he ached to give every drop of his blood and every fiber of his body over to it.

Giffen lost any grasp on his reason and pressed up hungrily until Vavasour pushed him away and stood. Giffen curled on his side, watching mutely as the elf reached down for Derek, shook him, and set him carefully on his feet. Derek looked wide-eyed and dazed, swaying.

It was enough to make Giffen stagger up and go to steady him.

Vavasour was already walking away. "Behind you," he said. A glance showed a tear opening in the void through which the dinky little shop could be seen, rather more crowded than it had been before.

Vavasour paused and turned, just for a moment.

Dawn, he mouthed silently. *Tomorrow*.

Chapter Seven

It didn't seem possible that it could happen just like that that. Giffen staggered back into a display of crisps and was caught by a tall, pallid man with the look of a glamour-clad elf. He was one of a row of four, with the queen, her platinum sidekick, and a dour, gray-haired man all crowded into the corner of the store, which was closed up tight with the 'OPEN' sign showing in.

Giffen shook himself free and stood up straight. His balance wasn't all that certain, and he felt like he was standing about an inch above the ground, but he held it together. Derek was at his side, look paler than a living man should, but not bad enough to keel over in the next little while.

Tania stepped forward, and a clear way was made for her. "Well, Giffen, I did not see you as the sort to charge in on a white horse."

"What I do might just stop being your concern, one way or the other," Giffen snapped. And if that wasn't clue enough for her, she could go to hell.

He saw everyone in the room tense up at his tone towards *Her Majesty*. They let the woman get away with far too much. Hell, for an elf she wasn't even all that old.

But she had the 'queen' act down pat. Tania drew herself up tall. "*I* say what is my concern, within all the domains of the fey."

Most days of the week, the hot, golden tones of a fairy queen with her ire raised would have cowed even Giffen. But he'd just thrown away the only thing he was good for, for a man he wasn't even sure he loved. If Tania tore his throat out right there on the dirty linoleum, it would only be a fitting end to the day.

"It must be a record. I've pretty much had enough of this place already," Giffen said, but weakness was showing in the crack in his voice. "If you want to know what I *saw* before I get the next train out, I suggest you ask nicely."

He brushed past Tania and was feeling pretty pleased with the exit, but then he couldn't get the damned door open. Fumbling with the lock, he felt the strength fade out of him, starting with the ankles and knees and weakening every vertebra in his spine. He slid down, still clutching at the handle. Damn it, but this was becoming a habit.

Unconsciousness was never quite complete. Derek tried to get him up, but it was the dour elven soldier that hefted him and carried him back to London House as effortlessly as if he were some kid that had fallen asleep in front of the television.

Derek was trying to explain, but they hushed him up. In a little while Giffen was laid out on a bed with a round-faced human woman bending over him. They stripped him down to his jeans and paid him about as much personal attention as a morgue specimen. His leg was lying crooked, straining the knee in an uncomfortable way, but he just couldn't muster the will to move it. The same gray-haired man from the shop was there and the queen's aide -- her name was Orchid, as far as Giffen could recall. There were plenty of rumors about Orchid and the queen.

They muttered over him, poking and prodding with fingers that were cool as ice and eyes that saw right through him. They fed him an acrid potion and motioned over him with a

stone amulet that seemed to glow as it moved. Giffen wanted to know what they hell they were about, but he had to assume it was to help him. And besides, they were talking amongst themselves without break the whole time, but mostly in that elven tongue. People in the bigger houses tended to pick it up, but Giffen had never learned. At Scott House it was easier for a handful of elves to adapt to human ways, and better in the long run, as far as he could see.

The round-faced woman, Margy, was some kind of healer. She laid her hands on him, warm and soothing. "That'll let him rest; that'll do it," she finally said in English. "There's not a lot more that we can do."

They left him alone but for Orchid, who drifted about the room. Even as his eyes drooped closed, he could hear her moving around. The door opened, and Giffen swore he intended to look, but his eyes stayed closed.

Chair legs scraped the floorboards as someone came to sit by the bed. Giffen mustered some fading anger in him and forced his eyes open for all that they fluttered and fought him.

It was Tania. "I meant to tell you about Vavasour," she said. "A minute or two, and it would have been done. I thought that once you were in the house, you were safe from his influence until I had time to explain. That's why I had to get you here. Of course, Vavasour knew how to turn it against me. You cannot beat the unseelie for cunning."

And as his flaccid will absorbed that little monologue, Giffen's mind was still on when Vavasour had kissed him. It was like fresh rain on parched soil, taking a while to sink in. He thought he'd found something like the real thing with Derek, but this was something else. Entirely. Something he wanted more, something he hated more, something he feared more.

"You could have called," Giffen said wryly.

"Is it something you would want to learn over the phone? Do even you know what you would have done?"

"Meaning you thought I might run off and join the unseelie. Just like that."

There was an eloquent silence. Belatedly the queen replied. "The spell is powerful, and your allegiance to us never seemed particularly ardent."

Now Giffen found his focus. He sat up in the bed, leaning on his arm so that he could look Tania straight in the eye, although his arms shook to do it. "I have always been for doing the right thing, the honest thing. Maybe not with bended knee, and please and thank you and trumpets and white fucking horses, but I always did the right thing. At any cost. And a lot of that cost came down to the high-and-mighties not telling people what was going on."

"Last time you were here, you'd had a vague vision of Archer's light going out."

"And so it did. He gave up fire magic."

"And that's all it was about. You came to this house then and never told us all you saw, but you were in a hurry to leave."

"I saw Archer's death. I still do."

"And you told him this."

Giffen looked aside. He should have, but it wasn't that easy. Which was no doubt Her Majesty's point. "So I'll tell Archer his days are numbered when you tell me why Vavasour thinks you won't be queen much longer and I'll be making my way as a shadow-mage's catamite."

The queen leaned back, gripping the arms of her chair.

"Shreve's Day," Giffen prompted. "I think I've heard the phrase, but Scott House is not what you'd call observant."

"The elves of Scott House have all but gone *native*. Shreve's Day marks the day elves came to this land and made the arrangements needed to survive. A year to the day later, the elves who became the unseelie rebelled."

“And what exactly happens on that day that makes it so significant to Vavasour?” And it was in the back of his mind that elves and their little holidays typically had a lot to do with magic.

The queen stood. “That is not something I can share with ...”

“A human?”

“With you, Mr. Bourke. You’ve been of service to the crown, and we remain grateful for that. But you were never reliable. You should, in turn, be grateful for the degree of tolerance you have been shown. Margy’s prompt healing may even have saved you from forming an indissoluble bond with that unseelie traitor. Although it would have been better if you had avoided contact with him altogether.”

And with that she took her leave, Orchid following after. Giffen would have enjoyed cursing her up and down and storming out of the house without a backward glance, but it would have to wait until tomorrow. Indissoluble bond? It made him realize that it had been something of a relief to finally know what had happened about that, even though it could hardly be worse. Vavasour was truly the one, the one he was meant to be with -- the one he had waited for almost all his life.

Giffen lay back down. What was he to do? A good subject would slink back to Scott House to convalesce and leave the queen to mind her own affairs. His rebellious heart urged him to throw it in her face, recant his oath, and leave the Society altogether. But Vavasour was planning something for Shreve’s Day. Something that wouldn’t just bring down the queen but probably have implications for everyone in the Society, right down to Bear, Wolfy, Peter, Veleur, Roman, and Archer. People whole-hearted in their own service, whom he wasn’t in a hurry to leave behind. And then there were Vavasour’s threats.

Lost in his thoughts, Giffen realized only belatedly that he wasn’t alone. Derek stood beside the bed. He wore a simple white bathrobe, tied conspicuously tightly at the waist.

“I don’t know if you want me here.”

Looking about the room, Giffen had to wonder which of them was the intruder. Although demur, it was obviously a man's room, not some vacant chamber. "Unless I miss my guess, this is your room."

"Putting you here was the queen's decision. I can go somewhere else and let you have some peace."

"The queen's done a lot of putting people in places. And the dose of humility she got after Archer and his druid pals exposed her confidants Heron and Vavasour as unseelie -- well, it seems to have worn off rather quickly."

Derek didn't seem to be listening to him terribly closely, his eyes darting around what must be a familiar enough place for him.

"What's your problem, Derek?" Giffen asked.

"I felt something of how you felt, with Vavasour. He's the one, isn't he? The one."

It wasn't really a question, which made it easier to say, "It does rather look that way."

"So why would you want me anymore? You weren't even sure before."

"Ah, Derek. So I was baulking a little at falling under your somewhat occult influence, mainly because it seemed a little convenient for the queen and I haven't perfect faith in her judgment. So what makes you think I put more faith in this big elven spell, which exists mainly to serve the elves' needs rather than for the benefit of some poor slob like me?"

"And you ..."

"What?"

"You gave something to Vavasour to make him release me. I don't really understand why you did that."

"Hell, I could say it was wuv, *twue* wuv," Giffen said sarcastically. "But I might just not have it in me to know that when I'm feeling it, Derek. And no matter how things were between us, I would beg and plead for an innocent life. For all my many faults, as I was explaining to her royal blitheness, I do try to do the right thing -- from time to time."

“Thank you.”

“Thank *you* for putting up with me going hot and cold from the second we met.” Giffen laid his head back on the pillow. It was a soft, fresh down pillow, and it was making a suggestion to him that he meant to take. “I could have been a little more emphatic. I could have explained why. I guess I’ve just got so used to people ignoring my advice, I’m only going through the motions now.”

“So you want me to stay,” Derek asked.

“You do what you want to do.”

“I want to stay.”

“All right, then.”

And despite it all, as Derek settled down on the bed next to him, Giffen felt a smile on his face. Now he could rest.

“It does work both ways, you know,” Derek commented in a self-consciously casual way.

Giffen was heartily tempted just to let that comment lie, but in the end he couldn’t do it. “What?”

Derek leaned over him. He laid his hand flat upon Giffen’s chest. It felt warm, tingling over the skin. It felt ten times better than anything that dour healer had done, and that was only at the slightest touch.

“Derek, have mercy. I’m not really up for this.”

“Trust me; this is exactly what you need.”

Derek eased over, releasing the belt of his robe so that their bodies met, skin to skin. Giffen’s skin immediately felt clammy and flushed with warmth. Their bodies slid together as if sealing together into one being. Derek fumbled impatiently with Giffen’s jeans and pulled them down. He knelt between Giffen’s legs, his cock sliding upright against Giffen’s stomach.

All weariness ebbed away as Giffen easily supported his lover's small, firm body. They kissed, gently at first, but then more eagerly, wetly.

When a moment presented itself, Giffen gave voice to what his body was already saying. "Derek, I want you to --"

"I was hoping you might."

The little incubus was in his element again. His actions were assured as he reached to the side of the bed for the crumpled tube of lube that Giffen could not help but conclude had seen a fair amount of use. With one hand, Derek twisted off the lid with his thumb and squeezed out a liberal measure. He twisted his hips aside just enough to reach down. His fingers traced the delicate seam down from Giffen's balls, and Giffen curled up his spine, raising his thighs up around Derek's hips.

That teasing finger reached Giffen's hole and eased in gently, dipping in deep enough to part the tight rings of flesh. Giffen's whole world was dominated by that single intrusion. One finger first twisting, teasing, and then circling slowly to ease him open. His whole body responded with a luxuriating sort of relaxation, like stretching after a long, deep sleep.

Derek did not hurry. He ventured two fingers, twisting slowly. Derek looked down, directly into Giffen's eyes. "Are you ready for me?"

"I don't ever seem quite ready for what you're going to do next. But on this occasion I'm ready for you right now."

Derek eased forward, positioning himself, still leaning down tight against Giffen, just sliding forward like a piston finding its shaft. There was not a moment's pain as Giffen's body accepted the intrusion, grudgingly but without pain. Giffen stretched out to meet him, and they pressed together tight. Derek was buried in him, and they stayed still, mated together.

Derek pushed his arms up under Giffen's shoulders, the heat between their bodies building and tension itching across Giffen's skin. He ached for Derek to work him, hard and fast, but that did not seem to be his inclination. Derek slid back only slowly, pulling his cock

all but out, and then drove his full length back in, seeming to push a fraction deeper each time.

The feeling of being taken, held, was intoxicating. Giffen tried to spur Derek on, but received only a knowing smile. "There's no need to be in such a hurry, my love," Derek said.

Continuing his steady pace but easing again to his side, he reached down and took Giffen's cock in hand. The sweat between their bodies made it slick. Giffen matched the rhythm, sliding tight. Time seemed to draw out in a plateau that was sweet and heavy and laden with salty sweat and patient lust.

Giffen felt his orgasm growing slowly like a rising tide. It built in convulsive tightening across his frame, and he felt his body gripping Derek's cock so hard he almost feared it would hurt his lover. He tried to hold it back, his body twitching, pushing against Derek, who answered with a sudden, short stroke that ran against the grain of his languid lovemaking. Giffen felt the wetness within him, Derek softening even as he continued to move. With a feeling of incomparable completion, Giffen came.

They lay pressed together, linked, in a silence that Derek seemed no more inclined to break than did Giffen. Giffen's mind felt blank, dark, and blessedly unconcerned for a moment that stretched out and out until he felt his body begin to cool as the air stripped off the sweat of their exertions. He felt strong, well, not inclined to rest ... and where had this vigor come from?

It works both ways, you know.

He made every effort to not realize what that meant. If an incubus depended on the psychic energy of others, much as an elf did, there was only one way that Derek could come by enough to share. From another human.

They lay, content, together on the soft bed. It was barely lunchtime, and Giffen had no need now for rest. He put a lot of effort into not asking. Gods, but he didn't want to know

where Derek had gone to get all juiced up like that, presumably for Giffen's benefit, but maybe not. Maybe he was just like that. Maybe ... hell.

He was to leave this house soon, and he could hardly take Derek with him like some kind of house pet, so at least this way they'd have a little more to remember each other by.

My love. Was that just some empty sound from Derek's mouth, or a sincere sentiment?

Giffen stirred restlessly and stood, separating himself with some difficulty from Derek's reluctant arms. The window was small and high, giving a view out behind the house, where a verdant swath of trees cut across the relentless gray of this old part of the city.

He turned to see Derek lying on his side like some gay parody of every portrait of a prone Venus. Most people would have said something, just to fill the silence. Derek didn't; he just waited.

"Something is preying on my mind," Giffen said.

"What is it?" Derek asked obligingly in reply. His body didn't really move but a tenseness sharpened the altogether too distracting lie of his limbs. Gods but he could get up for it again, given half the chance.

"Shreve's Day."

"Shreve's Day."

It didn't seem like that was what Derek was expecting. "Yes, Shreve's Day. How long have you been at London House?"

"A little over two years now. Since I graduated."

Graduated what? Well, that was beside the point, and now was not the time for swapping life histories. "How do they celebrate it here? It's tomorrow, right?"

"There's a room in the basement," Derek said. "It's an elf thing, you know. Some ritual. They say ..."

"They say?"

“There’s gossip, you know, in any house. But the queen has her reasons for keeping some things confidential for now.”

“And you always do what the queen says, even when you don’t know her reasons?”

Derek pulled up the quilt to cover his body. “Why shouldn’t I? She took me in, gave me a way to live without serving the unseelie ...”

“Just like she did me. I suppose we should both be groveling and grateful.” Giffen hated how Derek looked down and away at his sharp tone.

Giffen looked out the window again. “You don’t have to tell me,” he said.

A ritual room, down in the basement. Giffen looked out at the waves of foliage beneath the city’s subtle haze. He knew that he could find it, alone if he had to -- better that Derek not be part of that. The sight twitched beneath the surface of his conscious mind, energized and alive. It wanted to show him; it was linked to the vision, to Archer’s death. But did that mean it would simply bring him a step closer to carrying out that murder?

“The rumors are that they have been building to something,” Derek said. “There was a change last year, although damned if I know what it could have been. Maybe another change this year, something even more dramatic. It’s a little light on specifics.”

“I have a feeling that if I could just see what is in that room, it would all begin to make sense,” Giffen mused.

“I can show you where it is.”

Giffen looked over to see Derek dressing. “You probably shouldn’t.” Despite everything, it was a kind of relief to know that Derek wanted to be by his side, even in this.

“Is that your usual sort of advice? The kind you don’t expect people to take.”

“Have I ever been able to tell you what to do?”

Derek pulled on his shirt, straightening the lie of the collar with a sudden twitch. He looked up and smiled in a quick flicker of expression. “I think it’s cute that you try.

Chapter Eight

Derek led the way to a fire stairs, where only a few smudged footsteps in the grimy dust indicated any use at all.

"No-one uses these," Derek said. "They used to be the servants' stairs."

He led all the way to the bottom, but when Giffen reached for the door, it did not budge, locked tight.

Derek frowned. "That's new," he said.

Well, it was an old door, and an old dodge would probably work on it. Giffen dug in his pockets for his debit card. He could see the bar of the latch, obligingly curved on the underside. A gentle shimmy was enough to ease it back.

"You do that sort of thing a lot?" Derek asked.

"No, I just watch a lot of television."

Cracking the door open, he saw a dark hallway lit only by a flickering oil lamp upon a small table. Derek edged past him.

"They like to keep things basic here," he said. "Some of the rituals involve the human partners, a few even the whole household. So I have been down here a few times."

The air had a stale, dank smell to it, and although on the right-hand side of the hall there was a row of doors, to the left there was only one.

"This is the ritual space," Derek said in a stage whisper.

This door was a little newer, and beside it a modern keypad was mounted on the wall. The queen would have done better to use some state-of-the-art card key. There was at least some chance his sight, in its most immediate and unreliable aspect, would do the job.

"I don't have the --" Derek began, pulling on Giffen's arm and obviously eager to be away. *A man cannot serve two masters. Isn't that what they say? Well, by dusk tomorrow, I'll have solved that problem for him.*

"Give me a moment," Giffen said, pulling away.

He stood before the door, letting his mind grow still. It was sort of a Zen thing, really. One had to be willing to wait. Wait just as long as it took for that small, faint impulse to well up, nothing more than a gentle breeze of volition that could easily be taken for nothing at all. And then one went with it.

His finger reached out and stabbed a sequence of five buttons and then the hash key. The door beeped twice chidingly and did not open. Damn.

"Come on," Derek said, already edging towards the stairway. "There's no way."

Had his finger slipped on that second key? What was the order again? More carefully, more steadily, he pressed the keys again. With a cheerful ping, the lock released. Giffen grasped the handle and prayed nobody was inside.

He had not expected the sheer size of the space. It was like standing at the back of a theatre, except that instead of chairs there were simply wide platforms like large, shallow steps that extended downwards to a kind of stage. Behind this area, the wall stretched up to the ceiling he now stood so close to, and near the top, a row of thick glass-brick skylights provided just enough light to see by. They must be hidden somewhere near the back of the house and smoked enough to prevent any intruder peering through them.

Giffen looked back, but saw only an empty hallway. He closed the door, stifling the lurch that Derek's desertion gave to his heart. He began to walk slowly, two steps across and one down. To the side he could see cushions and throws neatly stored for a large audience. Down upon the stage there was a table with some lumpy shapes upon it, too dark to see clearly at a distance. Slowly he drew closer and closer.

It was almost disappointing to see merely the usual occult accoutrements. A plain wooden wand, a neatly folded cloth, and a cup. He stepped across a faded chalk line onto the wooden boards of the stage. The table was round and about waist height, and the cup -- more of a chalice, really -- at its centre gleamed like the polished silver it probably was.

It went against good sense, but Giffen was compelled to reach out for it. As his fingers closed about the rim, he felt a sensation like pins and needles flowing, not up from the cup, but down his arm. With a shiver, he dropped the chalice back on the table.

He took a few steps back. The ritual, unless he missed his guess, was not just symbolic. It gathered the collected will of the elves of the house and powered a spell, and there was only one spell he knew of that existed on a scale which would require that kind of effort.

The big elven love spell, the one none of the elves liked to talk about too much. Just like they didn't like to discuss Shreve's Day.

He heard only a whisper of footsteps before he was grabbed and tossed, quite casually, a dozen steps up into the audience seating. The sharp edge of a platform hit the small of his back viciously so that he could do little more than clutch at the floor and curse as Orchid's shapely legs climbed up towards him.

Sitting up, Giffen raised his hands. "I give up," he said. "You needn't do that again. In fact, I'm not totally convinced that you needed to do it the first time."

Orchid wiped her hands together disdainfully, as if feeling they were soiled. "The door sends a signal to my station whenever it is opened," she said. "And I knew that nobody with business being in here would be here right at this moment."

“Do you think you could escort me to the door without employing an aggressive variant of the Heimlich maneuver?”

“I assure you I have no desire to be in such close contact.” Orchid took one step backwards, and Giffen took it as his cue.

He stood with a wince, his lower back complaining, but he tried to cover his pain. Orchid glanced back to the table; apparently satisfied, she allowed him to precede her up the aisle without any sort of physical contact at all.

“Vavasour is going to pervert your little ceremony,” he said as if by way of conversation.

Orchid merely snorted. She remained at his side through the door, which she closed firmly, and over to the main stairway that led up to the foyer.

“Well, as pleasant as this has been --” Giffen began.

Orchid interrupted. “That was not the door I was escorting you to.”

She took his upper arm in a grip too firm to warrant any attempt at struggle and went through the winding entrails of the house to the front door of the house. With a quick thrust, she cast him out onto the sidewalk. Stumbling, Giffen managed to keep his feet.

“What the hell do you mean -- No, wait!” Giffen said as she made to close the great door. Orchid paused. “I suggest that you clear this with the queen. I have things to tell her. An attack on the ritual will occur. There will be a death, soon, if she cannot stop me --”

“I mean to stop you myself, Mr. Bourke. I knew the stink of unseelie was on you from long before we knew you were Vavasour’s mate. Which I think you have been, for some time. Go back to him and tell him his plan has failed. The ritual will proceed as planned, and you can do nothing to prevent that.”

The door closed with some finality and the clunk of a turned lock.

Bloody hell. Bloody hell and fuck. Other than narrowing his vocabulary some, this development left him with very little idea of what to do. Then he heard an echo from the past. Bear's gruff voice calling after him.

Call!

This seemed as good a time as any.

* * * * *

"Scott House, Roman speaking."

"Can you get Bear for me?"

"Hello, Giffen. He's rather busy right now. Is it urgent?"

"Just get Bear, okay?"

"Giffen, he really is ..." Giffen held the payphone away from his ear, his fingers crushing tight around the plastic receiver as he watched his time tick away. It really was time he got a cell phone, but he just hated the damned things, and most of the time he didn't want to be at the beck and call of anyone who knew how to dial. Taking a deep breath, he put the receiver back to his ear. "... not necessarily a good time for him to be dealing with your histrionics."

Roman was always very bad for Giffen's blood pressure, but right now he didn't have time to be pissing around. "Roman, get Bear on the phone, now."

There was a long pause and then a clank. Giffen waited as he watched the small digital display on the payphone counting down. Finally there was a rustling sound and the blessedly familiar voice of a rational man.

"Hey, Giffen, you actually called. I've got some great news for you."

Well, for bear he could make a little time. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Wolfy is pregnant."

"I'm happy for you. You're going to be one hell of a dad."

“You know what? You’re the first damned person who did that. Who was just happy for us without any kind of pause or reservation.”

“What the hell else would anyone feel at that news?”

“You know elves and humans aren’t meant to be cross-fertile.”

“Yeah, I was also paying attention when they found out Heron and Vavasour were trying to expand the Maewyn ward and kill every elf on the planet for the very reason that apparently that wasn’t true anymore. You can say many things about me, Bear, but I do pay a little bit of attention to what’s going on in the world.”

Bear laughed. “Well, I’ve asked around, and as far as anyone knows, we’ll be the first. It’s a new age.”

“Well, then, you’ll be the father of a new age, too, and I can’t think of anyone better for the job.”

“Aw, hell, you’ll make me blush. Was there anything you were calling about?”

“Just checking in, you know.”

Bear took an audible deep breath. “Come on, Giffen. What is it?”

“It’s Shreve’s Day. I think maybe Vavasour is up to something. Something relating to the ritual. It might be a good idea if one of you would put a call in to Tania. Whoever you think she’ll listen to. Because I’ve just got a very bad feeling about what might happen tomorrow.”

“Why can’t you tell her that yourself?”

Giffen shook his head, wishing to hell he could lie about this, but too much was at stake. “Apart from the fact that I don’t see her listening to me, I got myself chucked out of the house by Her Majesty’s right-hand bitch.”

“Giffen.” Was the scolding tone for getting chucked out, or for calling the fragrant thug a bitch? And should he tell Bear the rest, right when he needed to have his focus there at home?

"Just try and get her to be careful, okay? Whatever Vavasour is up to, it will be carefully planned and probably not good news for the little one -- you know what he and Heron thought of that. Oh, hell, and here I am pissing on your good day. I wish ... I wish it was something I could just let go, but we never seem to have that luxury."

"No, we don't," Bear agreed. "I understand. I'll call her. What are you going to do?"

"I'll stay up here somewhere nearby. I don't know, maybe I'll still be able to do something."

"So what is it that you're not telling me, Giffen?"

"You'll have to get Tania to tell you the rest. I'll, um, let you know when I have a doss, but I could use some cash for a room somewhere. I don't have much in my account."

"I'll have Roman sort that out for you. You know he deals with that sort of thing."

"Yeah, well, he's been a bit frugal with me since that little party I threw last New Year." Bear laughed and it was good to hear. "You take care of that lady of yours, Bear. I'll work stuff out here somehow."

"Yeah. Look, I know you said to keep Derek here, mate, but he --"

"It's okay, really. But do keep an eye on our Archer. There's still a danger around him, and it's best he stays up there."

"I will. And do you see anything? I mean, about the child?"

"It's going to be my new policy --"

"What?"

"No scrying about the baby. Kid's got a right to find his or her own fate the same as everyone else."

"Okay ... okay. You take care, Giffen. Let me know where you are, and I mean tonight. I don't want to go to sleep worrying."

“Not tonight. You’ve got other things to do, and I’m a grown man who can get a hotel room without coming to any grief. Some time tomorrow, all right?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll bring back some booties.”

“You do that.”

Giffen sat on a crumbling stone wall next to a scratched up bus stop and compared his options whilst resisting the urge to buy a big pack of the most tar- and carcinogen-laden cigarettes he could find. Now, if this were a movie, he would dress up in black and break into the ceremony just in time to snatch the chalice from the queen’s hand and dash it on the floor. Of course, interrupting the ritual might well have even worse effects than what Vavasour was planning -- assuming Giffen even had the right of that.

Option two, recant his allegiance, throw himself into Vavasour’s alabastrine arms, and try to winnow his plans out of him in time to stop them. Yeah, because the elf looked to be some kind of hopeless romantic. But then, he had let slip enough hints to make Giffen suspicious, and if that was deliberate, what possible reason could he have?

Option three ... Was there an option three? He sure hoped it involved Benson and Hedges. Giffen stood and went in search of a phone booth with an intact phonebook. The day was starting to get a little cold, and the age of the Bic lighter followed by the age of the cell phone had apparently put an end to Yellow Pages in the public domain. With a sigh, he made a call to a number he knew by heart, scrounging a bit more credit from the anonymously dulcet tone of a VISA call-centre girl. Then he resorted to a cybercafé.

Roman wasn’t making with the alacrity. Giffen’s account was flat-lined, and his credit card was going under the water for at least the third time, except that the helpful lady from some far distant and cheaper shore had got his credit bumped up pretty much instantaneously. Not that it was a massive amount, but given his current life-as-I-know-it

expectancy, it probably only had to cover one night. *That's right, Giff. Look on the bright side.*

* * * * *

Hotel rooms have a look. Who knows why the decorators they hire think everyone will love a shade somewhere between salmon and terracotta, or that a bunch of fake brass will make a place classy. Giffen lay on his back on the bed and smoked a Pall Mall, tapping the ashes into a coffee cup resting on his stomach. Oh, gods, it felt so fucking good. Every pull was a little spike of joy. Sure, he'd feel guilty about it later, but it was well down the list of things he had to feel guilty about. The window was wide open, and the curtains flapped intermittently in smoggy gusts of wind. He had no great hopes for the BLT coming up from room service, but if he had another smoke or two, he probably wouldn't be hungry anyway.

There was a change in the quality of the light, like all the color was being sucked out of it, and then the world went black, like the bed was sitting under a starless sky upon an obsidian mirror so perfect it showed no glint or reflection.

Vavasour stepped into what would have been the room from what would have been the wall behind the headboard. He sat on the bed and reached over, casually lifting the cigarette from between Giffen's fingers and tossing it away. Giffen's consciousness separated itself into two distinct streams. One rather mundane thought: was the burning cigarette doused in the mystical darkness, or lying even now on the hotel carpet and smoldering, waiting to light the whole building on fire? And another equal mundane but rather more compelling thought: even when Giffen was looking upward, essentially up Vavasour's shapely nostril, the elf was undeniably the most ravishingly attractive man -- scratch that, *humanoid* -- alive.

Vavasour looked back down at him like a man deciding whether to have horseradish sauce with his steak. "Time for us to go."

“Far be it from me to contradict you, but I am still one of the queen’s pledged and loyal servants.”

“So recant. Repudiate her.”

It seemed like a good idea to go back to looking at the ceiling, but Giffen’s eyes did not seem to be willing to oblige him. He watched a very artful frown crease Vavasour’s immaculately sculpted face. Please, gods, don’t let him touch me.

“You left the house,” Vavasour snapped. “Are you intending to go back?”

“I think they’ve pulled in the welcome mat.”

“So, go forward instead.”

Not exactly ‘walk towards the light’, was it? Giffen looked at the wry angle of Vavasour’s dove-wing eyebrow and the arch of his slender neck and wanted nothing more than to feel he could reach out for that exquisite body without taking the risk of being skewered to the headboard by the elf’s dagger rather than his ... well. Hell, perhaps it was worth the risk. The impulse was as powerful as it was irrational.

“I have another day,” Giffen said unsteadily “I’m taking it.”

“Giffen, dear,” Vavasour drawled. He reached over and laid his hand on Giffen’s abdomen, making Giffen acutely aware of the single layer of cloth between them. There was just the most subtle hint of satisfaction in the elf’s eyes. “You can’t have it both ways. Stop clinging.”

Giffen had a flash of that stupid poster of the kitten hanging off a branch. Considered so cute, despite that fact that, as far as the kitten knew, he was about to plummet to his death. People just don’t really have much empathy, when it comes down to it.

“Dusk tomorrow, you said.”

Vavasour’s mood seemed to have changed, edged towards the more indulgent edge of his rather narrow range of affect. “Well, then. If you must hold me to my word, I will see you tomorrow. I expect you to be ... ready.”

Giffen was feeling more than a little 'ready' already, and his physical state could hardly be any mystery to the elf sitting next to him. But some contrary instinct made Giffen do his very best to simply disregard that fact. It was strange that he was so attracted to Vavasour but didn't feel the slightest instinct to think better of the elf. There would be plenty of ways to justify some kind of positive conception -- maybe the unseelies were right all along, or Vavasour was misled by a bad childhood and just needed true love to guide him back to the true path, or ... but he didn't feel any of those things.

He just wanted Vavasour to fuck him, now, hard, fast, and brutal. But his brain had just enough executive control still functioning to hit some kind of cut-off switch. He lay still.

Vavasour sat there next to him for some time, silently. Then without preamble, he stood and left, striding off in the same direction he had come from, without a backward glance. Giffen rather expected the occult darkness to vanish with him, like the flapping cape of a movie villain. Instead it lifted only in slow degrees, too slow for him even to discern, but as he lay there, the room did reappear like a developing photograph.

Giffen realized he had been hearing a sound for some time, but had disregarded it in favor of his confused thoughts and bemused eyes. Someone at the door, knocking, not loudly but with persistence. Giffen huffed and stood, wincing as his enduring hard-on shifted in his pants.

"Okay, yes." Digging around in his pockets brought up some change conspicuously short of a decent tip. No more room service after this unless he was willing to accept sputum as a condiment.

He positioned himself against the doorframe to obscure his ragging hard-on. Out in the dingy hallway stood Derek with a large sandwich in one hand.

"Bloody hell," Giffen said. "If you had a six-pack, you'd be pretty much all my dreams in one package."

"I could nip back down and --"

“There’s such a thing as being too obliging, Derek. And all things considered, you’d better hand over the sandwich and piss off before the queen’s mastiff misses you.”

“It’s a little late for that,” Derek said. “Can I come in?”

“I, uh, really don’t think --”

“He’s been here, hasn’t he?” Derek darted a look up and down the vacant corridor, as if Tania herself was about to leap out from behind the plastic fichus. “Vavasour?”

“Yes,” Giffen hissed. “And for now, he’s gone again. He does a fine line in entries and exits.”

Derek slipped inside and dropped the BLT on the writing table. Giffen leaned against the sliver of wall beside the half-open door. His cock continued to ache sullenly and demand further attention. His skin felt clammy and cool, and his eyes dry.

Derek came up in front of him, pushing the door slowly closed with his left hand. “He seems to have left you somewhat unsatisfied.”

“Derek, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” That slim body edged in closer. Derek leant his right elbow up on Giffen’s shoulder and draped his hand across casually. “Your hair’s a mess, you know,” he said, toying with the haphazardly gelled hanks that had, no doubt, suffered from a day of pointless aggression and one steamy tryst.

“Leave it.”

“‘It’ doesn’t generally like that.” Derek took hold of the neck of Giffen’s T-shirt and tugged, drawing him towards the small hotel bathroom. At the threshold, Giffen hesitated. “Geoffrey ...”

“Please, for gods’ sake, call me Giffen, won’t you? It’s who I am.”

“If it’s what you want.” In the cramped doorway, Derek crowded against him. “And I think I know what you want.”

"The part of me that wants that does not think. And if it did, it would not be thinking of you."

"It doesn't matter; I only want to be with you." Derek's fingers slid under Giffen's shirt, up along his back.

Giffen stayed tensed. "It matters."

"It doesn't matter."

"It *matters*."

Derek's head lolled back. "It's because you think it matters, that it doesn't."

"That doesn't make a blind bit of sense." But Giffen was not some kind of marble saint; with willing flesh pressed against him, he had no more denials in him.

Derek drew him in and shut the door. The bathroom was little more than a cubicle with a half-sized tub and a shower above it across from a Formica vanity and a clouded old mirror, leaving just enough room for two people to stand, with the rest of the room taken up by a big ceramic toilet with a mismatched plastic seat.

Every move Giffen made seemed to make him hit his shin or elbow against some grimy surface. Derek did not seem so constrained. He stripped off his clothes impatiently and kicked them to the side, then turned to Giffen. The desire may not have risen for Derek, but he seemed determined to claim it now.

Giffen was sick of feeling like he shouldn't be doing this. Sure, he was going to be in trouble and was going to drag Derek into it with him. But that had to be Derek's choice now.

Derek pushed him back, urging him to sit up, naked, on the cold counter. He eased back, and Derek pushed his knees apart, leaning in. Tiny plastic bottles of pointless toiletries toppled and skittered off onto the floor. The mirror was cold against his shoulders as Giffen braced his palms on the countertop and leaned back.

His cock jutted up hopefully, objectively a rather ridiculous sight. Derek's hands splayed over Giffen's thighs, pressing down firmly. He licked his lip and descended. Giffen's taut prick ached with anticipation.

Derek teased, opening his mouth wide around Giffen's cock without actually touching him, then moving down slowly 'til Giffen felt the head of his cock nudge the roof of Derek's mouth, brushing against its slight ripples and then fitting tightly into the portal of his throat. Derek paused. Giffen tensed, terrified to even move with the head of his cock set tight, the hood sliding slightly down, and the exposed head gripped tightly.

Then Derek pressed forward, leaning so that Giffen's cock slid halfway down his tight, straight throat. Giffen clutched at the towel rail to his right, feeling it give under his grip. He fought the urge to try and push yet deeper, to reach out for Derek -- he hardly dared move at all. His gaze fell on the small bath-shower unit with its chrome rack at one end stacked with towels.

His balls ached, coiled tight as Derek pushed his face fully down, then began to work Giffen in slow, smooth thrusts. Giffen shuddered. "Derek, I ..."

Derek relented, finally pursing his lips tight as he drew back all the way, his mouth tight and wet over the whole length of Giffen's cock. He leaned in, kissing his way up Giffen's stomach.

Giffen reached out, moving Derek back as slid off onto the floor. "Derek, you know you're one crazy fuck for sticking with me?"

"I found a few things out before I left. I'm not sure I'd be any safer staying in there."

Yes, well, he might have been a way to get in, but never mind. Giffen guided him towards the shower. "Not another disenchanted subject?" he muttered, making a grab for the small bottle of shower gel that had landed on the closed toilet seat.

"It's just that when I started specifically asking about the ritual --" Derek jumped as the water hit him.

Giffen fumbled quickly to edge the warmth up without risking a scalding. The water poured over his shoulder onto Derek's chest in high-pressure, needlelike streams.

"You were saying?" Giffen squeezed out the gel, scented heavily with something akin to lavender. He was tired of being passive, not just in the queen's and the unseelies' machinations, but in his angst over his feelings for Derek. *Time to get to grips with things.* He smiled at the thought.

He smoothed the gel over his hands and ran them across Derek's chest, feeling his ribs faintly beneath his lean flesh, rubbing to lather the soap in loose swirls.

"It's said that last year ..." Derek said hoarsely as Giffen reached further down, running his fingers through Derek's sparse hair and up over his balls. "... the spell was moved further towards its ultimate goal."

Giffen had a rather more proximate goal in mind. He felt Derek's cock half-hard in his hand, smoothing his fingers over it 'til he felt it swell. "Its ultimate goal ..." he prompted.

"I, um, integration with the human world will eventually require elves to all have some small degree of --"

He lost his footing in the soapy water, and Giffen steadied him with his free hand, pulling them together. He pressed his lips to Derek's and let his hands steal around to caressed Derek's firm buttocks as their slick cocks rubbed upright together between their bodies. Derek ground against him, welcoming Giffen's probing tongue and grasping at his shoulders. Giffen gritted his teeth, willing himself to hold on just a little longer.

Derek moaned and bucked against him, slippery and wet. He reached down and gasped Giffen's cock, pressing down the hood and running his thumb over the head, pushing Giffen over the edge to come so hard he barely kept on his feet.

The water was starting to run cool and then, within a few moments, cold. Giffen reached back to shut it off. "Some small degree off?"

"What?"

“Never mind.” Giffen reached over for the folded towels, which seemed to be one thing this hotel did not cut corners on.

They lay together on the lumpy bed, sated and lax. Finally Derek seemed to find the loose end of his thoughts and pick them up again.

“They seem to think the Underhill will not last forever. Right now an elf can only live permanently in human lands if they have a human conduit. The rest must return to Underhill periodically. It seems that the long-term goal is for all elves to have a small amount of human genetic material to let them draw energy from this land.”

Giffen pondered that a while. “So the unseelie were reacting not to a general fear of the blending of the races, but a deliberate plan?”

“It seems a little that way. The love spell, as we call it, connects elves to a suitable conduit, but not every elf has a suitable match. And that was only the beginning. Last year’s ritual ... one of the healers thinks it built upon the spell to allow, for the first time, for children.”

A squall of conflicting emotions washed over Giffen. A secret manipulation of the spell, but it was bringing a blessing into the lives of Bear and Wolfy. “Wait a minute, a small amount of human genetic material. How can they make sure it’s anything but a free-for-all -- hybrids of all degrees?”

“The spell,” Derek said. “Children that combine the lineages will be better conduits than full humans. There will be more matches, and fewer of them will be fully human. I think that’s why Margy told me so much. She knows better than anyone how elves with human lovers are treated as suspect, humans always held at arm’s length in seelie plans. Some even keep their love a secret. Margy might not be willing to admit it openly, but she is uneasy. The London House and Underhill elves pull back from humanization. Now the spell is beginning to reach its full potential, it may be the beginning of the exclusion of humans

from elven business, from the occult powerbase -- effectively from the most powerful magics at use on this planet.”

Giffen laid his head back with a sigh. “So who are the good guys here, really?”

“You think there are good guys here?” Giffen turned his head to the side, meeting Derek’s gaze. Derek couldn’t sustain his cynicism. “Maybe it will have to be us?” he added.

“Gods help us all.”

So if Vavasour was trying to stop the spell, or stop it from moving forward ... Why? To keep elves pure? That would mean that things would continue as they were. Full elves with full humans. If Underhill would not last forever ... He had no idea what Underhill really was and why that might be the case.

“She also thinks that the spell was designed from the beginning to develop in this way. That it had begun to take its final form and can only be completed or destroyed, but not just go back to how it was.”

“Oh, brilliant. Bloody hell. And you think this woman was telling you the truth.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. She’s, um, we’re pretty close.”

That brought images to mind that Giffen really didn’t want to pursue. *How close? No, don’t ask. You don’t want to know.* “So what else needs to be done to the spell? There will be children now. That’s what they wanted. What else could they want?”

“What about the rest of the world?”

Damn, but it was definitely time to stop thinking of Derek as cute but a little dimwitted. His neurons obviously fired pretty damn quickly. Why would the queen be going to all this trouble to be part of the human world, only to limit herself to Britain? It is, after all, in the nature of queens to want to be empresses. “More power to expand the area. But how the hell does Vavasour fit into this?”

“Whatever the unseelie plan is ...?”

“What if the unseelie Underhill is stable?” Giffen mused aloud, thinking of Vavasour’s trailing realm of shadow.

“Then without the spell, they would inevitably be the survivors. They would still have the elven energies they need to live. But that’s just speculation.”

“It makes sense.”

“Unless they are really just bigoted enough to risk death rather than blend even slightly with the human race they deem so inferior.”

Giffen put his palms against his eyes, wishing to the gods that he could block this whole damn mess out, but facing the fact that he couldn’t. There was a horrible chance that this was all down to him. And that his role so far had not been exactly heroic. “When Vavasour was here, it was like he was checking on something,” Giffen said. “Like once he had looked at me, touched me, he was satisfied, and he just left.” It started to come together in his mind. “He put the suspicion about the ritual in my mind. And when I went into the ritual space, I touched a chalice and felt some kind of energy pass. At the time, I assumed from it to me. But what if it was something Vavasour put in me that passed to it? What if I’ve already done the worst and made sure the ritual will not be completed, the spell will not be expanded -- and may even be destroyed? What if --”

“That’s a bit of a stretch, Geoffrey.”

In a fit of nervous energy, he lurched to his feet and paced to the window. “No, it fits. It feels right. Or wrong, in the right way.”

“We need to tell the queen.”

Giffen rested both hands on the windowsill and bowed his head. “You think she’ll believe a word from me?”

“Like it or not, she knows more about what’s going on. She’ll have ways to find out if what you say is true -- before it’s too late.”

The sun was just starting to set over the cityscape before him, smoggy and purple-tinged. "You go tell her, Derek. I just ... I just don't even know that I'm sure she's on the side of the angels anymore. Maybe Vavasour --"

"Giffen, you can't trust any feelings you have about that elf. You can't forget everything the unseelie have done over all these years!"

Derek sat up, clutching the covers. Giffen looked over to him and felt his loyalties teetering upon a brink, but in the end he could not fall so far from a cause he had supported all these years. *Not even knowing for sure, Giffen. A blindly loyal follower after all?*

"I've not forgotten."

"We'll go to the queen tomorrow," Derek said, reaching out. "We'll go together. She'll listen. If she doesn't, we'll speak to as many of the rest as will listen to reason."

Chapter Nine

It was hardly surprising that Giffen was awake the next dawn. Derek slept curled up inside the covers that Giffen had tossed aside as frustration made a kind of fever in his body. He gathered up his by now rather grimy clothes and struggled into them as silently as he could.

Dawn.

He had the inkling of a suspicion. Just the dawning of an idea, and it went something like: Queen Tania was probably much more likely to listen to Derek if he went on his own, but was bullheaded and arrogant enough not to listen to anyone. The elven love spell was set to expand across the world, and one of the first things it would encounter on the way was the Maewyn ward around Ireland, which stopped elves and magic from entering that land. And Vavasour had been seen on a boat heading that way a few weeks ago, if Bear had the story right. So big elven love spell and big Irish anti-magic spell might be meeting with less than benign consequences.

Plan B -- trying to get the truth out of Vavasour -- had never made a lot of sense, but it was the only plan he had left. Derek slept on, oblivious as the shadows leeches up and across

the wall, deepening into that occult void from which a figure approached. Giffen squared his shoulders and walked into the darkness.

Vavasour stood stiff-necked and haughty, but beneath that all he seemed intent on Giffen as he reached out his hand. Giffen's breath caught as he looked into those pallid eyes; he could not break his gaze away.

"So what are you going to do with me now?" Giffen asked.

Vavasour took him proprietarily by the upper arm. Even that muffled touch sent a sensation so acute it was painful shooting to Giffen's heart. "Today promises to be interesting," Vavasour said as he guided Giffen through the darkness. "I shall have to secrete you away somewhere and begin upon your necessary education tomorrow."

Vavasour spoke with relish that put a chill through Giffen. He found it hard to walk, between the elf's hard grip and the ground too dark to see. What was this realm of shadow? Where could you go using it? He knew that Vavasour could watch but not enter the houses of the Society of Fairy, and presumably he was barred from Ireland like all other magic-workers. But were there any other limits?

The smooth ground began to grow uneven. Tufts and growths like obsidian parodies of grass and trees began to emerge, illuminated only by the slight silvery glow that emanated from Vavasour's body. But then there appeared a hint of muted stars in the sky and a path of cobbles, every object perfectly black. A sound like waves and a stone wall, a house whose extent was hard to see except where lamps glittered at the door and from a few scattered windows.

"This is all unseelie Underhill," Vavasour said quietly. "Some parts are given more form; others are simply the darkness. And in the formless darkness only a shadow-worker can walk and not be consumed. So you would be wise to stay within the house until you understand the dangers."

The wide doors, tall as two men, opened smoothly as they approached, and Vavasour propelled Giffen inside, releasing him.

"It will be interesting," Vavasour added, "to have company in this house other than dour servants. I am sure you will manage to be ... entertaining."

Giffen rubbed his arm and scowled. So how exactly did one get the villain to expound upon his evil plans? Especially standing in his palace that floated within the featureless shadow?

"I suppose it depends upon your perspective," Giffen said sharply. "How entertaining would it be if I tried to stop whatever business it is you're planning for today?"

Vavasour smiled. The expression did not sit quite properly on his face. Like a Greek statue's, his beauty was by its nature solemn, even cruel. "That is most certainly not in your power."

"I don't believe you. Why would you go to such lengths to shut me up in here with all your threats and dire warnings if there was nothing I could do?"

Vavasour breezed past, leading the way through a high-ceilinged room draped in black velvet and out onto a patio that overlooked a rippling sea that extended to the uncertain horizon. "There are creatures out there," he said. "They hunt in the darkness, which stretches as far as a man's mind can imagine, with no way out for those without the power to shape the darkness to their will. And it is not in your power."

Vavasour rested his hand on Giffen's shoulder. "Bide your time, my little seelie seer. I will see to it that your tenure here is not without its pleasures."

His hand drifted over to the back of Giffen's neck, his fingers brushing through the short hair at the nape. Giffen felt weakness flooding through him, and that was not the only sensation. This was the elf he was destined to be with, despite everything.

But who determined that destiny? Some sour-faced seelie elf playing at being a god?

"Of course," Giffen said faintly, "after tonight you may well find your interest in me waning."

"We shall see, shan't we? How much is enchantment and how much is truth."

So Vavasour was anticipating the end of the spell. But how to bring it about? Giffen stepped away from the elf's beguiling touch. "Look at me properly, Vavasour. I think you know the truth of that."

Vavasour did look at him, with a cold and appraising glare, but his whole body seemed tense as if he felt passions he struggled not to show. "It would be a pity not to know what it is like to be with the one who is meant for me, the one person who can make me part of a world with real seas and real trees, a world with light as well as darkness. The seelie Underhill is always light, you know; it has no night -- just as here there is only darkness."

Vavasour watched him, and it seemed for a moment like there was a yearning in him that matched the longing Giffen had always known. The need to be complete. He expected any moment for the elf to reach for him again, and he knew that he did not really want that touch. That his heart was already taken by some foolish, promiscuous little incubus. But his body knew only that without Vavasour's touch, it would die.

Vavasour just shook his head. "It is an insidious spell, the conceit of the unseelie, by which they sought to make willing slaves and breeding stock of those humans they deemed worthy. It does the same to the elves it chooses, also. I will wait until tomorrow, for although it would please me to satisfy these coerced lusts, I will not risk falling prey to you and your wants now that I am so close to putting an end to it all."

"When the spell reaches Ireland and is destroyed by the ward."

Vavasour raised his hands and nodded an ironic deference. "Even now they prepare; the ritual has already begun. And can you tell me that you are so sure I am wrong? Let those who truly love stay together or find each other. Let the unseelie solve their own problems

not by making thralls of love, but by going cap in hand to the humans they so admire and begging for it. Wouldn't you like to see that?"

Giffen gritted his teeth, trying not to find this argument reasonable. But wasn't it true?

"And as for the children, these mongrel offspring ..." Vavasour snapped his fingers. "They will be over before they have begun, and any unseelie unfortunate enough to be outside of Underhill."

And with that, Giffen's sympathy was gone. His loyalty to the monarch and commitment to great, overarching plans was tenuous at best. But to Bear and his unborn child, Wolfy, Veleur, and even starchy Roman ... for them he would do anything. But was there anything he could do?

Vavasour beckoned him closer, but Giffen made no move. With an exasperated sigh, the elf took one step forward. He laid his hand on Giffen's shoulder. "Your part in this is over now. Be at peace with that. You did what you could and have been lucky enough to be offered sanctuary. The unseelie are no more ruthless than the seelie, just more honest about it. Stay here with me for as long as I will it, and you will come to no harm. Compared to your brethren, you should consider yourself fortunate."

Vavasour kissed him quickly, lightly, like the distracted peck of a husband leaving for work. Turning, he strode away into the dark, and within moments he was gone.

Giffen searched the house with frantic speed. There were more than twenty rooms across three floors, all grandiose in size and appointments with every modern luxury. Mundane items were strewn around -- books, clothing, ornaments. But most of what he saw seemed formed out of the black substance of the unseelie Underhill. The few scattered lights proved to be archaic lamps magnified by glass globes.

Vavasour had spoken of servants, but there was no sign of life anywhere. Giffen ventured in the grounds where, up close, the plants and foliage had an unconvincing

roughhewn appearance. When he'd walked with Vavasour, it had seemed warm, but now, the further he went from the house, the colder it grew, until he shivered and his breath fogged the air. He went far enough out that there was only a hint of texture to the ground and the house had almost faded from sight. The disorienting blackness was more severe, and for one dizzying moment it was hard even to tell up from down with only the slightest hint of light.

Giffen had no doubt that if he took one more step, he would be lost, unable in an instant to even say which way he had come from. Then he saw a bobbing glimmer of ruddy light. For a moment he thought -- hoped? -- it was Vavasour. But it was coming towards him so swiftly, and the blur separated into several small, glinting lights whose scale became only gradually clearer. Red eyes like those of Baskervillian hounds and almost upon him.

Giffen cursed and turned, bolting back towards the house, which suddenly seemed quite fatally distant. He dared not even look back until he skidded into the polished foyer and slammed the doors behind him, seeing just a blur within feet of him. The doors shuddered with some kind of impact. Giffen slid to kneel on the floor, his hands pressed to the shuddering door as his heart pounded hard enough to hurt.

"Desperate times," he muttered to himself. "Sure as fuck time for desperate measures." And there was only one thing he could think to do.

It's funny how easy it can be to do something that is devastating and irrevocable. Giffen had always felt ill at ease on tall buildings and bridges because of the little voice in the back of his head that would whisper, "You could just step off." And he would see it in his mind, stepping off into space -- wind and rush as he plummeted downwards.

Every person who had magic could destroy that talent-- just pull up the bright thread inside them and break it, like Archer had done in a fit of remorse after attacking Roman and

the elf he thought was Roman's lover. Once done, it crippled the magic so that to use it ever again would be certain death.

It took a little time to get into the frame of mind for this to take. An elf, or a man with magic, was, until he became an adult or first came into his powers, considered undeclared -- neutral and to be avoided by seelie and unseelie alike. But once they were aware of the power struggle, the choice was simple. They either pledged to the fairy queen, or were considered unseelie by default, the unseelie being not so much a single group as a loose alliance of malcontents, rebels, and the disillusioned.

And the choice made was not purely arbitrary. The powers within them seemed themselves to choose a side. Only seelie were seers or fire-workers; only unseelie wielded mind control and the blood magics that allowed for flashy levitation and psychic knives. In recent history, defections to the unseelie were relatively rare. That was why Heron and Vavasour's long infiltration and eventual defection had caused such shock. But Giffen's impression was that the transformation of one's abilities followed a fairly predictable scheme from one thing to its equivalent.

If recanting his pledge to the queen had made Vavasour a shadow-worker, Giffen should be able to do the same. And with those abilities he would have a way not only to escape this house, but to go anywhere other than inside a house of the Society.

And in the back of his mind, Giffen now knew why he was destined to hold Archer's lifeless body in his arms, although he dared not yet fully confront the fact that his actions put him on the path towards the fate that had been his from the moment Heron came to Scott House almost a year ago.

"I recant, from this point forward, all allegiance to the queen of Fairy, Tania, daughter of Erallen. I repudiate her cause and declare myself no follower of seelie, henceforth."

And that was all there was to it. There was a possibility it wouldn't even work while they were in different realms. He would know soon enough. Should he have felt something? Surely.

He sat for a long time, staring out what might have been called a window if there were glass in it. The cold he'd felt outside started to creep into the house. Gods, but he'd look a fool if this transition took a couple of days and it was all over before ... And just how long had he been sitting here in the endless dark?

But it didn't seem so dark now, did it? Every surface seemed to glow with a faint blue light, and beneath the surface, tiny motes and specks drifted in restless currents. Giffen struggled to stand on feet numbed by the cold and his awkward cross-legged position. No matter how he blinked, his eyes never seemed to focus properly, and his mind floated as though he were drunk.

He stood and made his way slowly down to the main door. He looked both at and through its substance. On the other side, the trees swayed, although there was no wind. Some creature with a beating heart moved upon all fours, but Giffen's fear had gone. He opened the door, and something akin to a wolf stood there. Its legs were unnaturally long, especially from below the joint, which gave it a demeanor both graceful and somehow ungainly. Its shaggy fur and every part of it was the same black substance that the whole unseelie realm seemed made of.

It looked at him, blinked its disinterest, and ambled away. The unseelie Underhill stretched out before him, no longer featureless, instead an aurora of subtle hues. But all this majesty still gave no clue which way to go.

Time was passing, though he had no watch to measure it, nor any guarantee time flowed quite the same in here. He could only try to make this work through will and hope. In his mind's eye, he saw Derek. Strange as it might seem, he knew if there was any place his heart could lead him to, any way out at all, it was to lead him to Derek, wherever he was.

Time to face it, Giffen. You're actually, definitely in love.

Chapter Ten

The hotel room looked different. It was like a television picture with the colors turned up too bright, but also the contrast so sharp that he could see every stain and seam and cobweb. Derek sat on the bed, the healer, Margy, sat on the chair, and they were talking, but Giffen couldn't hear any sound. He stood there quite a long time, watching without even thinking of doing anything else.

Then the moment built to the point where he knew he could do it. He stepped forward, and the barrier thinned, parting to let him through. They both looked up and froze, mouths gaping.

"The queen didn't believe you, I suppose," Giffen said.

"I told you he'd come back," Derek said to Margy. "That he'd come back here."

Margy stood. "Is it true? The spell's going to ... go wrong somehow?"

Giffen nodded. "If it expands to the point of contacting the Maewyn ward."

"But they knew they had to take care with that," Margy said. "They planned for it. It's meant to pass through so neither spell is affected."

"Vavasour made some different plans. He went out to the ward; he arranged for me to unwittingly alter something about the ritual cup."

“Orchid swore you never touched it,” Derek said.

“And given the choice,” Margy added bitterly, “Tania will always believe Orchid.”

“Orchid is full of shit,” Giffen replied. “Look, I’ve got a pretty tenuous hold of all this right now.” Already the dark motes that marked the gateway between worlds were beginning to fade, and he wasn’t sure how to get them back if they went all the way. Giffen went back to the wall and stuck his hand through it, just to be sure he still could. “I’ve got to go and talk to Archer about sorting something out about that ward.”

“Geoffrey -- Giffen -- oh, whatever,” Derek said. “We’ve now both pissed off the queen. In front of the whole Society. I told them what I knew, and the only one of the lot of them who believed me was Margy. We’re out in the cold, and we’re coming with you.”

“In there?” Margy said tremulously. “Or out there, whatever it is.”

“Derek, I could just as likely get us all lost or killed.”

“I’ll take the chance,” Derek said.

“I don’t suppose I have much choice,” Margy added.

Scott House. It was clear in his mind as they walked through the unseelie Underhill, structureless and void. It was like he had always understood that everything he saw was just light flying through the air and then bouncing back off the object towards his eyes. But now, in this realm, he saw the light, not the object. His mind grappled with it almost as a distraction from the impending panic.

Derek and Margy held his hands as though on some kind of primary-school outing. His mind was fixed on that house, on Bear and Wolfy and the child ... and Archer. He could feel them as he was walking towards them, like walking towards the sun with your eyes closed.

Then a hard impact, a splash of cold water, a slap of stone. He was blocked.

“Shit.”

“What,” Margy asked tremulously.

What? Oh. “The protections around the house, I think.” He groped around for some seam in the darkness, some way out even though it was short of his goal. They stumbled together out into the afternoon sunlight amidst a copse of trees. It took a few moments to orientate. Giffen shook free from two sweaty hands that had been crunching his fingers.

“This is near the chapel. I think we’ll find Archer there.”

“Archer?” Derek asked. “The Australian?”

“He’s the one we’ve come for.”

“Yes, well,” Margy interjected. “This whole plan could be a little clearer.”

“I’ve explained. Archer can destroy the ward. The Maewyn ward. We’re going to save all the elves outside of Underhill and open up Ireland to magic again.”

“Just like that?” Margy asked, but in a tone that suggested she half wanted to believe it.

Giffen began to move through the underbrush towards the path. “I’ve seen it.”

He made his way up to the back of the little building. It was not hard to see where Archer was, straddling the peak of the roof, with a mouth full of tacks and a pile of wooden shingles. He swung his leg over and disappeared down the far side. Giffen glanced back at his companions and gestured for them to wait.

At the corner of the chapel, he met Archer clambering down a precariously wedged aluminum ladder.

“Hey, Giff.”

“Hey. I have an offer for you. Of the ‘you can’t refuse’ type.”

“Yeah? Try me.”

“In a few minutes the queen is going to boost the power of the elven love spell to expand its range. It’s going to hit the Maewyn ward and flash back, killing every elf outside of Underhill. So you and I are going to walk through an unseelie portal to the shores of Ireland, where you are going to burn the ward down.”

“Which is going to kill me.”

“You can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Archer looked at him, dark eyes balanced between a thousand different reactions. But this young man had gone through a lot of changes in the last few months, changes that made him the kind of man who just frowned and nodded.

“A little tough on Roman, I have to say.”

“Time has run out. Roman is dead either way.”

Archer pulled off his work gloves and rubbed his hands together. There were plenty of things he could have said or done, but he didn’t indulge in any of them. “Unseelie portal, you say?”

“Yes, this way. The only way this makes sense, of course, is that you do know how to burn the Maewyn ward and actually destroy it.”

“Heron showed me -- although I rather suspect he was trying to do the reverse. It will be the last thing I do. You are sure of what will happen if I don’t?”

“Quite sure. Wish I weren’t. You better take my hand; it gets dark in there. Oh, and these two are coming along for the ride. There isn’t time to explain why.”

Chapter Eleven

They stood waist-deep in the surging, frigid surf, clinging to each other just beyond the limit of the swirling ward. Giffen could still barely believe what he was doing. He kept one hand locked in a viselike grip about the arm of Margy, the queen's healer and his last hope at cheating fate.

Archer strode forward.

"Wait," Giffen called.

Archer turned. Wind whipped his curly hair into his eyes. He raised his hand and waved vaguely. "If I'm right, you'll be able to join me soon. And, Giffen, you look after yourself. You only did what you had to do."

The stupid bastard was going to his death, worrying about the man who'd brought him quite literally to it. Giffen saw how Archer's gaze went over his shoulder up into the air. There a great, shimmering light could be seen upon the horizon, magical fire of every color.

Archer cursed and broke into a shambling, wading run. "I have to be on the inside for it to work!" he called out.

Giffen went after him instinctively, but the fluttering edge of the Maewyn ward brushed against him like the cold finger of death, sucking the life from his skin. Derek

reached out and dragged him back. They watched helplessly as Archer waded up onto the beach, water streaming from his sodden clothing. He looked up at the ward and jogged down the beach.

Giffen struggled to match him in the water at the other side of the ward, but the shifting waves were beginning to drag them out, and he couldn't keep up. Soon Archer was lost from sight. The wind-driven water slapped at them, the Maewyn ward fluttered, and the fury of the expanding spell rushed over the surface of the water like a wildfire.

It seemed they were too late. The two great spells were doomed to meet and realize their devastating potential. Giffen had just long enough to despair when the sky was consumed by fire. He reached out for Derek as the concussive force thrust them down under the water. He breathed in wet salt, floundering badly, fearing they would drown.

He managed to get his feet under him and push up for the surface. The air was full of hissing spray; water fell down like rain, and all was still. Over the land of Ireland, the expansion of the elven love spell continued as it dissipated, seeping down over new terrain. Of the Maewyn ward, there was no sign.

If he had read things right, Giffen had saved hundreds of lives, or Archer had at his behest. But no matter how you looked at it, the fire-mage must now be dying -- and back in Scotland, bound to Archer by a love-spell, his elven lover was dying, too. Giffen cast around and saw Margy paddling at the surface of the water, but already out of her depth and being swept further all the time.

For a moment Giffen was frozen. But then he turned to Derek. "Get her," he said. "Perhaps there is still a chance ..."

Derek's expression was resolute; he understood in an instant, pulling off his shirt to swim after the healer. Giffen could see no sign of Archer on the desolate beach. He scrambled towards the shore. Gods knew he was probably leaving two more innocent people

to die, drowning in the surf whilst he searched for one already dead. But the vision had left him one tiny hope.

He had carried Archer's body towards Derek. Why? What would that achieve?

He stumbled up onto the beach and ran in the direction he had last seen Archer. He felt no pain, no weakness. The Maewyn ward was really, finally gone. The home of magic was open to it once again. His feet sank into the fine sand. His eyes scanned back and forth as he sprinted, limbs feeling heavy as lead, gaze investigating every log and stone.

And, of course, it was just as he had seen. Archer lay still, limbs sprawling, eyes open and staring up at the sky, smiling. Giffen bent and grabbed his shoulders.

Archer said, weakly, "I did it, didn't I."

And with a smile he died.

With a smile.

The vision endured past the point it usually ended. He sat stooped. Cradling the young man, he looked around. There was no one anywhere to be seen. He lifted the lax body in his arms and began to walk.

He seemed to walk for such a long time, blankly, stumbling, but too weak to do more than stagger on, looking for the place he'd left Derek. Just as he had felt the last time he'd had the vision, he felt Derek waiting for him. The scenery was just vaguely familiar, but less so with every step. Had he missed the place and walked past it already?

Then he saw them, Derek and Margy, shambling towards him. The healer gaped and spluttered for breath, wearing little more than her underwear and shoes. She all but seized Archer from his arms, flinging the young man down onto the soft sand. The lady's hand, fingers clawed, settled on Archer's chest. Derek reached for Giffen, pulling him back.

"Do you think she really could?" Giffen said faintly.

"She is a Wiccan healer and the queen's own conduit," Derek whispered. "If anyone can ..."

The wind roared, and it began to rain. Glints of golden setting sun struck haphazardly through the clouds, and it seemed to be forever. Forever as they waited to know if fate had beaten them after all.

It was a dim realization of his own selfishness, but as Giffen clutched Derek close, feeling his embrace returned tightly, he knew he could survive even the worst. He had it now, someone to share the scant joys and many burdens of modern magic. Someone who would stay with him, cast-out, unseelie, shadow-mage. He did not doubt for a second that Derek would stay with him all the same, never doubting him. And was not love ...?

It was the single strand of faith that made a dark future seem bearable.

Then Margy collapsed forward, and Archer gasped, his eyes opening wide.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Giffen said.

* * * * *

Giffen tossed the last box in the back of Derek’s old Ford Escort van. Bear hovered.

“I still think --” Bear said.

“That you should take down the wards and have us all live happily ever after in Scott House?”

“I don’t see why not. Between us we have managed to do what the whole seelie court could not, and saved them from themselves, to boot.”

Giffen smiled. He went to Bear and put a hand on each of his shoulders. “You have enough to do with a new child and Margy and, in due course, the queen up here trying to get her back. And enough of your protests, Bear. When it comes down to it, it’s not what we want to do.”

Giffen looked back to see Derek slamming the door with a flourish. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

"I've stagnated in this house long enough, pining for what I didn't have," Giffen said resolutely. "Now there's a whole new country opening up to magic, a new frontier where unseelie doesn't have to mean what it means here. Things will be wide open. Things can, perhaps, be different there."

"And there's Vavasour after revenge or something worse. New powers you can barely control and no clear idea what the unseelie court will do about you both in the end."

"And all that, too," Giffen said with a smile. "Strange that I'm happier than I've been in ... ever, isn't it? Don't worry about me. I'll be in touch when I can."

Bear looked like he had more to say, but gazing past Giffen's shoulder, he paused. Derek came over, looping his arm casually about Giffen's waist. "Ready when you are," he said. In his faded denim jacket, he could be any ordinary young man starting out in life. Giffen knew he was blessed to have a companion as he, rather belatedly, did the same.

Bear glanced between them. Derek saw his look and went over to the van to give them a moment alone.

"I haven't forgotten the prophecy," Bear said. "Freedom may well be coming, but what about the 'lone heart drawn to shades that break it'?"

"Ah, gods, I'm pleased to be done with the sight, I must confess. And maybe heartbreak is something I saw from the start. Isn't it pretty much guaranteed for everyone, eventually? But I saw Archer die, too. Hell, maybe this'll all end badly. But I want what I've got here, and I'm taking it."

"You do that. And if you need us, we'll be here. And, Giffen ... call."

Giffen looked through the van windows to where Derek sat in the driver's seat with the curved drive stretched out before them and all the roads beyond. And for all that he could feel the unseelie Underhill never far from reach all around, the day was bright with sun and birdsong, and none of that seemed to matter anymore. He'd rather live in the snow-globe as long as he could than stare out through the glass.

“Sure, old friend,” he said. “I’ll call.”

 THE END 

Emily Veinglory

Emily Veinglory is an animal behaviorist currently living in scenic Indiana. She writes fantasy, romance and erotica and specialises in gay erotic romance including the Maewyn's Prophecy series and her popular werewolf novellas Eclipse of the Heart and Wildest Dreams (all available at Loose Id). Her first novel-length paperback, King of Dragons, will soon be published by Chippewa Press.

You can visit her website at <http://www.veinglory.com/> or email her at veingloria@lycos.com.