

THE BROTHERHOOD 13:
INCUBUS CALL



Loose Id

WILLA OKATI

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Willa Okati

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Dedication

Dedication: To “the Quad,” to my patient editor Olivia, and to all the readers who have come with me on this madcap journey. I love each and every one of you!

Previously seen in The Brotherhood...

From Once Upon a Liam (series prequel):

Jordan drew out the simple pleasure of leisurely stroking his cock, diverting only now and then to cup and roll his balls. He let himself imagine he wasn't alone, that he had another man in bed with him, lavishing all his attention on the goodies being displayed.

God, I wish. I wish. I wish.

"Liam," he breathed, his hand drawing to a standstill. His imaginary partner developed a face, almost androgynous and fucking gorgeous. A head full of autumn-colored curls topping a slender body able to perform a thousand and one tricks that should be illegal -- and probably were in more than a few states. "Liam."

And just like that, Jordan knew with a sudden certainty he was no longer alone. *Ahh. There we go.*

Warm fingers closed over his hand, tightening Jordan's grip on his own shaft.

"Do what you want." His voice came out husky. "I'm yours."

“Yes, you are. Wholly. Others may come and go, a pretty body may catch your eye, but it is \$me@ you call on.” Liam rearranged himself in the bed, dropping down in prime position to suck Jordan's cock. “Feed me, Jordan.”

And later...

“I must go.” Liam freed himself and sat up. He reached for the blue crystal hanging at his neck and gave it a tug. Jordan recognized the gesture as a need for self-reassurance. “There are matters that demand my attention. But, Jordan, know this -- if I were free, I would be yours.”

“You are mine,” Jordan said in sudden, firm decision. He nudged Liam's knee insistently. “Someday I'll figure out where you go, you know. And then I'll come after you, so if you call me, I'll be right there.”

Liam brushed his fingers against Jordan's temple.

“I gave you a map. You will not be able to access it unless I am truly in need of you, but if you hear me calling for you, then come, Jordan. Follow the directions to my side.”

Jordan had a nasty suspicion his incubus was heading for something big, some place he knew he'd need a helping hand...

From The Brotherhood 12: Believe It Or Not

Jordan watched Lilith disappear, not in a cloud of smoke, but just simply fading away as if she had never been there. When she was gone, he went to Liam's side and knelt by his lover, resting his head on Liam's lean thigh.

Everything else could just go to Hell for the moment. The gathering forces -- the Night Mare, renegade Lilim, even that treacherous little weasel Silas -- they were waiting, but some

of them had been standing in line for centuries. They could just keep simmering away on the back burner for all he cared until Liam and he were both damned good and ready to get up and fight their final battle.

So mote it be, as Magicians would say.

Until Liam woke, Jordan would stand guard.

The story continues...

Chapter One

“Hey, buddy. I guess you don’t know it, but I’m here; I’m watching your back. So, you get as much sleep as you can.”

Liam, his head resting in Jordan’s lap, mumbled and stirred.

“Shh. Take it easy. Remember how you taught me to listen to silence?” Jordan massaged Liam’s temples in soft, irregular patterns. He knew better than to draw deliberate symbols on anything. You never knew what you might summon up, and -- in a place like *Amour Magique* -- it’d be double-dare danger.

The floor they rested on, hard and cold, wouldn’t have been anyone’s first choice for a snooze, but Liam hadn’t been picky. Sound asleep, he’d tilted sideways out of his computer chair. Jordan had only just managed to catch his lover on the way down, and there they now sat, Liam’s soft reddish-brown hair spread over Jordan’s thighs.

Jordan kept talking, hush-hush, but keeping his lover grounded, teasing Liam to keep the guy there with him even in his dreams. “I thought you were nuts the first time we met. I was sure the guys with the little white coats were going to come take you away any second. Then, when I got to know you and started to believe, I thought about checking myself into a rubber room. You knew better, though. Didn’t let me be stupid. You’ve always known the

score with every game going, so why'd you want to go and get yourself into a mess like this one, huh?"

Liam shifted slightly, making a pained noise. His forehead furrowed.

"Hey, shh, shh." Jordan stroked between Liam's eyebrows until his lover's face smoothed out. "I'm not upset. Come on, you can play along with me. I want to hear what the quiet has to say."

Jordan held Liam's face between his palms, let his own eyelids slide closed, and began to take deep, shallow breaths, matching them to Liam's respiration. He let himself fall into the rhythm of air flowing in and out, the sound washing away like the ebbing of the sea.

He heard the silence.

The whisper-soft tick of a clock sweeping away seconds.

The low, yet high-pitched electronic hum of computers and video monitors, all gone dark, but still turned on.

The drip of a tap somewhere nearby.

The faintest hint of the party raging beyond the control room on Amour Magique's dance floor, where everyone's dreams came true.

*Where you did your best for eleven guys who barely know you, much less like you.
Where you put everything on the line to give them happy-ever-afters.*

*I love you, Liam, and I know what you are: incubus. I'd walk through Hell for you --
but I don't think I'll ever really understand you.*

Jordan blindly brushed his fingertip ever so lightly across Liam's cheeks, then traced the shells of Liam's ears. "Gotta say the quiet isn't helping much. I'd hoped something would pop out with handy instructions on how to save the day. I know you need your rest. That's fine. I'm not going anywhere, especially not before you wake up. You *are* going to wake up again, aren't you?"

Jordan, do hush, he imagined Liam saying sleepily, humor in the drowsy slur of words. *I will be fine. Fear not. Hold me while I regain my strength; I need no more than your company.*

Or so Jordan hoped.

Liam had warned Jordan that he might be heading into danger, that he might need Jordan's help.

In Jordan's opinion, the incubus had understated the point. There were big, bad monsters -- with teeth too sharp for his taste -- battering the gates, trying their hardest to get to Liam. What kept them from breaking through, Jordan didn't know. Lilith had tossed around words and phrases like "gifts" and "calm before the storm" and "barrier they don't know how to cross..."

Jordan didn't get it, but he was grateful for the brief respite all the same.

He'd also never seen his lover like this before. Zonked-out after a marathon fuck or dozing in the afterglow, sure. But not flat-out dead to the world, with only the slight rise and fall of his chest to let Jordan know Liam was still alive.

"Hey." Jordan gently jostled Liam's shoulder, trying not to wake him and yet perversely hoping he would rouse. "When you're immortal, does 'alive' mean the same thing as it does to humans?" He pretended he heard Liam's chuckle, followed by some Yoda-type bit of wisdom, which made absolutely no sense if you took the words at literal value. Instead, Liam sighed and nestled his cheek against Jordan's groin.

"Don't worry, tough man. I'm here."

"Yes," Liam whispered, raising his small hand to cover Jordan's larger one. "You are. You came."

Jordan couldn't hold back a sigh of relief, which trailed into a chuckle as he lifted his lids and looked at his lover. "I've been here all along. You just didn't recognize me."

Liam seemed to be struggling to remember. “The blanket? The coffee? Those were you?”

“All me. The video control room, now...was that all you?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Liam blinked his lids open, sleepy eyes hazy and unfocused. “Did you bring food? I smell herbs.”

“Er...sage, actually. Basic hedgewitchery I learned along with the mythology. A ring of sage around us, a ring of salt around that, and I doused the whole mess with holy water.”

Liam giggled. Guys like Liam did, but it didn’t make them any less masculine. “A mythology expert, and you come armed with hedgewitchery?”

“Give me a break, pal. I was in a hurry.” Jordan shoved Liam playfully. “Grabbed the sage from my spice rack, the salt shaker from my table, and got down here without wasting time.”

“I see. And where did you get the holy water?”

“I had a bottle from the cathedral at Lourdes.”

“Jordan...”

“Okay. I stole it from a church.”

“Jordan, you are a terrible liar.”

“Fine. Mr. Schnezki down the hall used to be a priest. He blessed a Dixie cup of tap water for me for ten bucks. Happy now?”

“Quite.” Liam smiled dreamily. “The most implausible explanation is always the correct one.” He sighed, seeming content for the moment. “How did you find this place? How did you know where to look for me?”

“You don't remember when you -- no, never mind. How about you take it easy on all the questions? You're definitely still out of it, and you need some more rest.”

“There is little time left -- even now I can hear what remains to me sweeping by. Winds of change that blow fast and fierce.” Liam pushed his head deeper into Jordan’s thigh. “I would not do what I know I must while I have yet the chance. Forgive me?”

“For what? Nearly getting yourself killed, or passing out on me?”

“Neither. I do not regret helping the Brothers, as this was a gift I wanted dearly to give. As to the other, I could not help myself, and so I have nothing to repent for.” Liam closed his eyes again, still awake, but looking too weary to keep them open. Jordan could tell. “Yet here you are, by my side, as you have ever been. You are a treasure.”

“Nah. I’m just a guy.”

“A guy who is head over heels for me?” Liam teased.

“A guy who knows you don’t have to fish for compliments, buddy. Head over heels so many times I’ve done somersaults, and let me tell you I’m not so young and flexible anymore.”

“You have shown great agility in bed.”

“Now you’re being a smartass. You want agility? Let me be on the bottom sometime. I’ll hook my ankles behind my ears for you when you fuck me.” Jordan ruffled Liam’s hair. The banter made him feel better. Some warriors carried swords, some toted pistols, and some knew how to use words better than any other weapon. Liam’s quicksilver tongue had gotten him into and out of more scrapes than Jordan would’ve thought possible -- and all that during the couple of years he had known the little guy.

God only knew what kinds of tangles Liam had woven and danced out of over the millennia since his birth. Could those activities be what had sparked the pressing forces’ anger against the incubus?

Stay back, Jordan silently warned the gathering throng, hoping they could read his thoughts. They probably could. *You don’t get him yet. You won’t ever get him if I have anything to say about it.*

True love conquers all, right? That has to be why he wanted me here -- to beat you. So, up yours, and you can spin on it.

"You did not answer my questions," Liam chided, jolting Jordan back to the there-and-now. "How did you make your way to my side?"

"Remember the Equinox a few months ago?"

"As if I could forget." Liam's smile returned and stretched wider.

"You juiced me up. Warned me you might be heading into the deep stuff and planted a map in my noggin so I could track you down if things got really bad. Guess they did."

"Ah...yes. I should not have."

"Too late, so tough." Jordan softened his words with a caress. "I was cooking dinner when I felt this *click* inside my head, and I saw everything. I saw you in this control room, and I saw the Army of Darkness gathering. So, yeah, I know just about everything now, what you're up against. I ripped off my apron and made tracks, because if anything was big and bad enough to have you worried, I'd be damned if I didn't try to come and help."

"Did you leave the stove on?"

Jordan winced. He imagined, all too vividly, his apartment building going up in flames as the chicken risotto he'd been fixing scorched through the bottom of the pan and... "I'm homeless now, aren't I?"

"No. Do not trouble yourself." Eyelids still shut, Liam patted Jordan's leg, fingers curling to dig in ever so slightly. "I know how you get distracted, so I laid a few enchantments on things that might cause you trouble. Your food will be inedible, to be sure, but that is the only thing which will have come to harm."

"Enchantments? And when did this happen?"

One of Liam's eyelids slowly opened, a sort of reverse wink. "Ah, but that would be telling."

“Can’t have that, of course.” Somehow, despite the fact that the angle was off enough to make Jordan have to twist and kink in all sorts of fun and unnatural directions, he managed to bend and kiss the tip of Liam’s chin without budging his lover too much.

“I do hope you were aiming somewhere else.”

“The spirit was willing, but the flesh doesn’t move that way unless one is a contortion artist. Which I’m not. I do want to kiss you, though. Kind of need to, actually.”

“Then let me do my part.” Liam shifted stiffly, worming his way around in Jordan’s lap despite Jordan’s protests -- the guy needed to lie still, for Christ’s sake! Liam never listened, though. Now he had himself arranged on his knees between Jordan’s legs, gazing at him as if he, Jordan, was a prince among men. Jordan felt heat staining his cheeks under that worshipful gaze and turned to look aside.

“Stop.” Liam took Jordan’s chin and brought him back. “You always say ‘I’m just a guy, I’m just a guy.’ You are far, far more than merely ‘ordinary.’”

“So, what am I?” Jordan joked, expecting Liam to rib him about being a tiger in the sack or something along those lines.

He didn’t expect to see a flash of dark knowledge and the guardedness of a well-hidden secret flicker between them, quickly suppressed, but there for a second all the same.

“Liam?”

Liam regarded Jordan steadily. “You are more than a mere ‘guy.’ You are my beloved. Without complaint, you have borne the knowledge I planted in your mind, and you have come to an understanding of the forces which I must now face. There are many evildoers at work here, yes, you are correct. But must I burden you further with the terrible knowledge of what is to come? It is not a pain that can be lessened by sharing.”

Jordan bit the inside of his cheek, thinking. “Okay. You’re telling me later -- and don’t think I’ll let you off the hook. We’ll talk when we’re both out of here.”

“That will not be for a while.”

That's what you think.

"Sooner or later, I'm right behind you." Jordan chafed Liam's arms. His lover's skin felt cold through the thin shirt he wore, which was probably good for the dance floor where half-a-thousand bodies put out thrashing heat, but nowhere near suitable for a small room with the A/C running full blast. "You should have worn a coat."

"There are many things I should have done and many tasks I failed to accomplish. I must pay the piper now, but before he calls me away, I still have time for one last move -- no, two. I have this last chance before the clash and fray commence, and I will *not* waste it."

Jordan shook Liam. "Would you get off your Mr. Miyagi soapbox for five seconds? A last chance at what? You're done with the Brotherhood. I know you are. I've been watching you all night long, and trust me, what I've seen is too strange even for TV. Given what the networks air these days, that's saying a lot."

"You have seen?" Liam looked worried. "What have you --"

"Pretty much everything. Nice glamours. If that's what all those versions of you were. I didn't know incubi had the power."

"They do not, and neither do I. They were not glamours or any sort of trick. They were all me. I divided myself so that I might conquer. Simulacra. Each new fragmentation of self sapped my energy and brought no strength back upon their returns to me, but I had no choice."

"Liam, that's serious stuff."

"And I am not serious?"

"Not the point. And you did have a choice. You could have stayed home, watched VH-1, and drank some wine. Maybe invited me over. Not gotten involved."

"True. But would you love me half so well if I did not look after my friends?" Liam gently bumped his forehead against Jordan's. "I know your answer is both 'yes' and 'no.' Do not apologize. I am not an easy man to be with."

“I wouldn’t know. You come, you cum, you go.” Jordan got a grip on the back of Liam’s neck, holding him in place. “How about you come and you stay put some time?”

“Would that I could,” Liam said, so softly Jordan almost didn’t hear. “Ahh. I can read you so easily; I can see how eager you are to fight, to help. You are a big man, Jordan. Tall enough to dwarf me, with muscles so strong and firm. You would battle on my behalf, but, beloved, this is not a war that brute muscles can win, and I must wage the campaign on my own.”

“The hell with that!”

“No!” Liam’s nails dug into Jordan’s arms. He held Jordan far more tightly than anyone of his size should have been capable of doing. “To battle against these forces would mean your death. They have toyed with others; they mean to destroy me. If they slaughtered you, I would have nothing left to fight for.”

“Millennia of wine, men, and song, and I’m all you’ve got left?” Jordan joked with dark humor. “Not much when you come down to the fact, is it?”

“More than I had ever dreamed of, and far more than I am worthy of. Forgive me for what I must do.”

“You keep apologizing. Stop.”

“Yes, I do, but I cannot cease until I am forgiven. And I am too much the coward to explain myself. Now, hush. Time moves ever faster, and although I have no right, not any more, I must ask one thing of you before the sands run out in the hourglass. I need you. Your lips to kiss me, your hands to touch me, your cock to fuck me. Please.”

“Incubus food, huh?”

“I would be lying if I claimed I did not need or want an energy boost. However, I should wait. What do I matter? I am far more concerned with what might become of you if I do not survive --”

“Don’t go there. Don’t you even...”

“Jordan, this night may see the end of me. I have lived a long, long life and seen so many things, but none so pleasant to my eyes as you. If I do perish, I would have my last good memory be of you inside me that I may shuffle off this immortal coil with a smile on my lips.”

Hope flared. “Key word there is ‘immortal,’ Liam. You can’t die, can you? Ha! I friggin’ love loopholes. Nothing to worry about -- as such -- if you can’t kick off.”

“Can I not? There is so much you do not understand.” Liam raised his face to Jordan’s. “No more questions now; no more talking. I offer myself to you. If you care for me at all, take me.”

Jordan had nothing to say in response. Not anything useful, no speech for the troops. No words came to his lips, whether of love or humor or demands for Liam to watch his back, or -- although the idea was tempting -- an order for Liam to zap them out of there to someplace safe. Tahiti sounded good.

Didn’t matter where they went, though. The Night Mare, the Lilim, all the other bastards -- things he’d known were real but had never really thought about in the flesh -- here and ready, with a thirst for blood. They could find Liam no matter where he ran, and bless his stubborn hide, he *wouldn’t* run.

All the same, Jordan could still wish.

Liam stroked Jordan’s biceps and murmured something in his own language, one Jordan knew had died thousands of years before he himself had been born. Not a problem. He didn’t need to know the words to get the meaning.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Me, too.”

Their lips met in a kiss, lingering and slow. Jordan memorized the texture of Liam’s mouth, silky-soft and full-lipped, pressing against his with both the experience of countless ages and the need he swore was for Jordan alone. He relished the taste of his lover, salty from pretzels, bitter from coffee, slightly charred with cigarette smoke.

Jordan broke their kiss with a snort of laughter. "You taste like Cracker Jacks!"

"Do I? Then take me out to the ball game, as they say. I do believe I have found a good ball, two of them, a matching set." Liam cupped Jordan's groin through the thin-washed denim of his jeans, giving him a squeeze hard enough to make him grunt in pleasure, yet gentle enough not to hurt. He fingered Jordan's zipper, drawing the metal tab down with the slightest pressure, and pushed his way inside. "Yes, these are very fine."

"So long as you're not planning to pitch them." Jordan peeled Liam's form-fitting pants down his hips, exposing the incubus's cock. "Talk about baseball. I think I found the bat. That, or the special prize inside every box of Cracker Jacks."

"How about both? And why not enjoy your discovered treasure?"

"Rush, rush. You can't get enough of my body, can you?"

Jordan had been joking, but Liam took him seriously. "No. I cannot. Time goes so quickly now. Those who would attack me know I am weak from the energy expended on my Brothers. They have watched me for millennia, awaiting their chance, and now they will strike. We have no moments left to spare for foreplay. You must --"

"The Hell with no foreplay." Jordan tilted Liam, easing him down from his lap to the floor. He wished he had a pillow for his lover's curly head, but beggars couldn't be choosy. "Don't you get it? I'm anchoring you here. Salt and sage and holy water are simple magics, but they're working so far, right? I'm part of what's keeping the bad guys back, and as long as I'm standing guard, they can't launch their assault."

"Would you keep me safe forever? I must do this, Jordan. The war has been a long time coming, and I would not live with the threats any longer, forever looking over my shoulder."

"Keep you safe? Absolutely. I'm not going to stop you, though. You do what you have to do, and then you come back to me. We clear on that?"

"Quite so. Jordan?"

"Yeah?"

“Do shut up and kiss me.”

Yeah. That he could do. Bracing himself over Liam, hands by his shoulders and knees by his legs, Jordan lowered his body push-up style and pressed their mouths together. He wanted fast and frantic, digging for every morsel of goodness and zap of sizzle, but he swore he'd go slow if it killed him.

“Bad choice of words,” Liam spoke against Jordan's mouth in between playing with his tongue. “Select others, quickly. Someone might be listening.”

I'll take my time come hell or high water, Jordan thought.

Liam shook his head.

I want to make this last as long as possible.

“Fast, then. Fast is all the time we have for this.” Liam seized the collar of Jordan's T-shirt and tore, ripping the cotton fabric down its middle. He spread his palms over newly bared skin, tweaked both nipples with a savage pinch, and grinned like the demon he really was rather than the man he pretended to be. Canting his hips, he teased the hard-on nudging its way out of Jordan's jeans with his own erection. “Kiss me if you want. Then fuck me hard, fast, and forever.”

Jordan had hissed and bucked when Liam twisted his nipples, the zing of pain sending another rush of blood down south where it wanted to get to work on some serious fun. He licked his lips. “One condition. You *do* come back.”

“If I can, I will.”

“Nuh-uh. No ifs, ands, or buts.”

“I will do all I can.”

“Do it right, then. I'll be waiting for you.” Jordan slid Liam's shirt up the smaller man's chest, baring his neat, trim muscles. “This one's for you.”

Dipping his tongue in the small dimple where Liam's navel would have been if he were human, he trailed the tip up Liam's chest in a thin, wet line until he reached the incubus's

nipples. Jordan treated them as if they were made of spun glass, licking with flicker-light touches and sealing his lips around each one in their turn without sucking.

Liam made happy noises and looked suddenly far more relaxed. Jordan closed his teeth with the greatest of care, barely applying pressure to the nipple in his mouth; before Liam's gasp died away, Jordan had moved on. He traveled up as far as Liam's shirt would let him go, the loose garment giving him access all the way to the dent between Liam's collarbones.

He hadn't forgotten his hands. As he kissed Liam, Jordan braced himself on one arm and let his free set of fingers wander where they wanted over his lover's body, smoothing over hard muscle here and soft skin there. Then they zeroed in on the best place he could think of, Liam's cock, resting hot and heavy in his palm. He squeezed, making Liam swear in his strange language and moan, arching his pelvis up for more.

Not yet, though. Not yet. Jordan skipped over the bunched-up fabric of Liam's shirt and went for Liam's throat, tracing a path of kisses up the line of his neck, nuzzling in with a bite under Liam's jaw, and a sharp teeth-tug on his earlobe. Playing it slow didn't get any easier as he went along; his own dick's demands were growing ever more insistent, but Jordan was a stubborn bastard, and he hung in there until he'd savaged Liam's mouth. Liam was an enthusiastic participant, and their tongues battled in play, becoming eager and desperate in their thrusting.

Jordan tore his mouth away, dragging in lungfuls of air.

"Do not get lost in me," Liam warned, his voice intense despite being filtered through Jordan's hazy fog of pleasure. "Remember that, Jordan."

"Sure. No problem. Can you get rid of these jeans? Both sets?"

"You do not listen, but I am desperate enough to be a fool. Jeans. Yes." Liam seized the edges of Jordan's open fly and rent them asunder. The denim parted easier than wet tissue paper. God, but incubi were strong. Liam wriggled his own pants down his legs to the ankles and kicked them off. "We are both wicked men, eh? Nothing but the jeans to remove."

“Past experience has taught me to come prepared when you’re around. What’s your excuse?”

“None at all, save for hope.” Liam spread his legs. He pushed Jordan’s hand off his cock and replaced it with his own small fist, pumping the shaft. “Fuck me. Fill me. Now. *Please.*”

“Hey. Hey, big guy, hold on.” Jordan fought for control. He had to do this right. “I’m not taking you dry. We need lubricant.”

“We do not. Feel for yourself.” Liam laughed at the face Jordan knew he made when he pressed his cock against Liam’s exposed hole and found the entrance already slick, giving under pressure. “Optimism under fire, would you say?”

“I’d say.” *I love you. I’m going to keep you. We’re almost there.*

Liam wriggled against Jordan, making it hard for Jordan to think. All the feeling in his body had rushed to his cock, pulsing with eagerness, leaking drops of clear fluid. No more talking. No more need to talk.

Jordan pushed inside his lover, his incubus, his immortal -- tight, hot, slick -- and the world ignited. He lost himself like Alistair through the looking glass, knowing nothing but the pressure around his dick -- the friction building as he thrust until he lost count of his strokes -- the taste of Liam’s skin wherever he could land a kiss, and the rich, earthy smell of fucking. Vaguely, he heard Liam shouting incomprehensible strings of curses or pleas as he clutched Jordan with what felt like desperation. Jordan shook sweat out of his own unseeing eyes and pumped faster, harder, deeper.

Liam’s voice rose to a higher pitch, almost a wail. Jordan shouted in triumph as his incubus stiffened against him, and wetness exploded between their stomachs. He raced on, wanting both for this to last forever and to feel the top of his own head come off with the mother of all O’s.

Jordan could almost hear the countdown inside his head. He knew it was coming, and he fucked Liam quicker than firing pistons, desperate for as much as possible now that he knew there would be an end. Three...two...one...

Blast off.

Jordan clutched Liam as fiercely to him as he possibly could while his hips spasmed and he let rip with all he had in him. They clung to one another until the thundering of their hearts and the rapid pace of their breathing slowed.

"I came to you, just like I promised," Jordan said hoarsely, muttering the words into Liam's hair. "I'm promising you this, too. As long as we're together, we're safe. I swear."

"Ohh...beloved...my love...no. Would that you could protect me thus. I am sorry, Jordan. This battle is far from over; in truth, it has only just begun." Jordan felt Liam's kisses burning brands into his skin, while Roman candles went off in his field of vision. "This is our good-bye, Jordan. For your own sake, I release you."

Jordan reared back. "Wait a second. I've heard this kind of build-up before. Don't tell me this is going where I think it's going."

"I told you I had to do the most unpleasant thing. I do it for your safety. You are severed from me, Jordan. We are no longer lovers, and it would be best if we were not even friends. There. I spare you that part of the speech at least."

"What? Liam, don't --"

"Shh. You came, you let me rest, and you fed me. I have repaid you in fool's gold. Forgive me, Jordan, and think of me no more, for we part ways here."

"No. Not now. Come *on*."

"Good-bye," Liam whispered, the scorch of his lips sending Jordan skyrocketing over the final edge and on a zooming arrow-flight down a deep, dark well of absolute nothingness.

* * * * *

Jordan landed alone on the hard floor, no Liam beneath him to cushion the blow. “God!” Jordan squeezed his eyes open and shut to clear his vision, struggling to regulate his breathing, praying in vain -- he knew -- that he’d find his lover still there with him.

No such luck. Gone. Worst of all? He himself was right back where he'd started, smack dab in the middle of the control room. Liam was nowhere in sight.

“Damn it! These -- these *things* and their fucking parlor tricks!” Jordan slammed his fist into the floor. He slumped. “Go ahead, and laugh it up, guys. I'm not done with you yet.”

“Sorry, kid, but you kind of are, for now at least,” said a female voice he’d learned to recognize. “Yeah, it's me. I'm back. He's gone. You did your best, but he had to take off all the same.”

Jordan shifted onto one side, not giving a damn about his full-frontal nudity or his still half-stiff cock. This wasn't a woman who'd mind. He felt sick, scared shitless, and his temper was on the rise. *Damn* it! “They got him, didn't they? Hocus-pocus, abracadabra. They pulled him right out of here and carried him off to fuck-knows-where.”

“Yeah.” Lilith's throat worked as she gazed at the patch of flooring where Liam had lain, her focus a million miles away. “Yeah. They did. Sort of. He let them make the first move; probably figured it'd be better than putting off the inevitable. Still, you tried. That counts for something.”

“Sure. Right. Fat lot of help I was. I thought you said that if I claimed him with vows and body he'd be okay. Guess what? Didn't work.” Jordan rubbed the back of his head. “Jesus. Talk about adding injury to insult.”

“Tone it down, kid. I didn't promise anything. It *could* have done the trick, and it was better than doing nothing at all. I had to try, too.” Lilith shook her head as if coming out of a reverie; then, all business again, she tossed a fresh T-shirt and jeans at Jordan. Where they'd come from, he had no idea. Stored there all along, or more magic? “Get dressed. You have a lot of work to do.”

“What?”

Lilith sighed and tapped one foot, now shod in a lace-up boot with a needle-sharp heel. “Don’t try to fool me, kid. Liam tried to get you two to part ways to keep you safe, sure -- chivalry, sheesh! -- but from what I’ve seen, you’re way too stubborn to let things end there. You could leave, yeah, walk right out the door, but uh-uh. You still want to help him. You’re going to. Am I right or am I right?”

Jordan swallowed and nodded. Yeah. No matter what Liam said, and just a human or otherwise, Jordan wasn’t letting his guy walk through this valley alone, facing his demons all by himself, maybe going under and not coming back up. Not if he could help it.

“Good. Clothes on. Think of them as armor.”

“Thanks.” Jordan stood and thrust one leg into the jeans. “I know you can’t help any other way, so...thanks. The rest is my job. So. Where do I start?”

Chapter Two

Lilith stared at him, artfully plucked eyebrows going up. Her mouth twitched in a sudden smile. She hooted. “Where do you start? Geez. Do you mean physically, metaphorically, or emotionally? Guess what? The answer’s all the same.” She shifted her weight to lean on one leg, a hip thrust forward. “The puzzle we’re looking for tonight is ‘answer.’ R, S, T, L, N, E. You have ten seconds. Talk it out.”

“Are you insane?”

“Audience, it’s important that you please be very quiet.” Lilith lifted her wrist, regardless of the fact that she wasn’t wearing a watch, and began clicking her tongue in a sort of off-key rhythm. “Your ten seconds starts now.”

“Uh-huh. Okay, that’s it for me. Goodnight, everybody. Nice job making me believe you weren’t a psycho during the big Brotherhood countdown, but right now I’m thinking I’ll be better off on my own.” Jordan stuffed his other leg into the jeans -- crisp, new Levis, a darker blue than he liked -- and pulled up the stiff zipper. His feet were bare and he hadn’t put on the shirt, but in a place like this no one would bat an eyelid.

Hell, they probably wouldn’t look twice if he *didn’t* bother with the pants, either.

Lilith ignored him for the sake of her cuckoo-clock melody, tapping her wrist with the point of one fingernail.

“You just keep on doing...whatever it is you’re doing. Good meeting you, Liam’s mom. Have a nice...whatever.” Jordan headed for the door.

“Don’t even think about it.” Lilith made no showy gestures -- nothing sparkled, there was no whoosh of wind -- but all the same, the door she’d entered through slammed shut hard enough to send a crack splintering down its wood frame. Jordan heard a solid deadbolt shooting home, then another, and yet another. “Stay put. It’s not safe out there.”

Jordan considered his options. He was big enough that he probably *could* kick the door down, locks or no locks.

On the other hand, if Lilith didn’t break a sweat -- much less her concentration -- over some impressive telekinesis, he wasn’t sure what she’d try next.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “So it’s dangerous. So what? He’s alone. Somewhere. I’m in here. You see the problem and solution?”

“Urgh ugh.” Lilith tsked. “Jordan heap big man. Go find Liam, thump on head with club, bring home to cave. You Tarzan, him John.” She shook her wrist. “Sorry, you’re out of time. Want to find out what the correct answer was? What you should do first?”

Fine. He’d bite. “What?”

“Nothing.” Lilith pulled off a perfect Gallic shrug. “Not a single damn thing, Jordy. Sorry. I don’t make the rules.”

Jordan’s jaw dropped. “But you...and I...with the clothes, and the...what the hell, woman? *Ahh!*” He bucked, hands grasping his groin, which felt as if someone had just applied the electric end of a Taser to his balls. “Hell!”

“Jordy, if you think a zap to the nuts is hell, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet. Let that be a reminder to treat me with a little respect, hmm?” She wiggled her fingers at him. “I’m not limited to electricity, just so you know.”

“So, I can hang out here until whatever monsters out there chew up and spit out my boyfriend and remain intact myself, or I can go rescue his ass as a eunuch. Love my balls, lady, but right now the choice is clear.”

Lilith chortled. “On or off, you definitely *do* have balls. Look, Jordy, c’mere. Have a seat and listen, ’kay?” She plopped down in Liam’s computer chair and glided to the center of the room. A wooden box marked with the logo of a Mexican brewery skidded out to face her. “Sit. I won’t bite.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t, right?” Jordan asked warily as he sat down, taking great care. Ouch. “I’m starting to figure you out.”

Lilith rolled her eyes. “Scholars. Always gotta know everything, and most of the time, you don’t have a clue. Sonny Jim, let me give you this piece of advice for free: you are never going to be able to figure out anything about any woman. It’s not coded into the male brain. Metrosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, trisexual, omnisexual...doesn’t matter. If there’s a ‘Y’ in your genes, you are never gonna learn what makes a lady tick. We are an eternal mystery, and I’m the big bad momma of them all. I *invented* Woman Power.”

“Okay! Jeez. Sorry.” Jordan raised his hands in surrender and with the hope that Lilith would stop ranting. He considered it definitely in a man’s best interests to keep pacified a woman who was capable of castration at twenty paces. “I’ll never understand females. I never really thought I would. Or that I’d need to try. Fine. You win. But can I ask a question?”

“A guy who talks that pretty can ask, sure. Whether or not I answer is up to me.”

“Why can’t you help? Why aren’t you letting me help?”

“That was two questions. You get the answer to one.” Lilith crossed her legs at the knee and kicked one small foot in its custom-made combat boot. “What’s more important to you? Or, if you want, you can ask something else altogether and get the answer you really want right now.”

Jordan took a deep breath. “You know way too much for your own good.”

“And yet not nearly enough. You live for a few million years and see how much you pick up. Anyway. Want to rephrase the question?”

“Yeah.” Jordan picked at the edge of the beer crate, pulling up a shard of old wood. He focused on the splinter instead of Lilith, not wanting to see anything in her eyes, whether pity or amusement or more of her damn Obi-Wan Kenobi juju. “Say I choose to stay.”

“Thought that was a *fait accompli*.”

“Whatever. I’m deciding to stay. You mentioned ‘barriers they couldn’t cross.’ And armor. I think I’m reading between the lines. If I’m here, even if I can’t get out there and kick ass, just being around is helping him.”

Lilith pointed finger and thumb at Jordan, miming a pistol blast. “Bulls-eye.”

“I really can’t put on my shit-kicking boots and try?”

“I can’t let you.” Lilith fiddled with her collar, worrying a loose thread. “Liam did what he did because he thought it would be for the best, but come on. We both know he still loves you. Problem is, the bad guys and gals know that, too, and they’d love to get to him through you.”

“Okay. Fine. For the time being. What’s happening to Liam right now?”

Lilith picked up a small black remote control shaped like a dildo -- leave it to Liam -- and pointed the business end at one of Liam’s monitors. “If you really want to know, if you need to, then here we go. Pay-per-view special. My son versus the biggest, baddest, and ugliest.”

Jordan scooted his beer-crate chair closer. The video screen showed a poky, cluttered room shrouded in shadows, a single weak lamp illuminating the planes and angles of Liam’s small body. He looked dead.

“Shit. Liam!”

“Sit *down*.” Before he realized he’d stood up, Jordan was jerked off his feet by Lilith, his spine jarring as butt met crate. “Yeah. Liam.” She rolled the dildo remote from palm to palm, her gaze fixed on the set.

“Don’t tell me. Let me guess. Silas. I saw him sneaking around behind Liam’s back before, on the monitors.”

“That’s the man. Weaseliest weasel ever to set foot in Amour Magique, much less run the place. Now, hush. I have to pay attention.”

“You want popcorn?”

Lilith slapped the back of Jordan’s head. “Shaddup.”

* * * * *

Liam didn’t know who’d spirited him away from the control room, but he frankly doubted it was anyone who meant him good. He came out of the void swinging, using the demon strength he’d not employed in decades. His fists met soft, giving flesh with satisfying crunches, drawing yelps of pain.

Human cries?

“Easy!”

Liam’s vision was blurry, perhaps a side effect of his traveling; he couldn’t make out whom he had attacked, who it was that now spoke to him. The person, a man, made him think of a slippery eel, sly and sneaky.

He knew he couldn’t trust the fellow.

The man struggled away from Liam’s continued punches, babbling frantically. “Hey, hey, take it easy, Liam! It’s just me. Silas. You know, the manager of this place? C’mon, put the fists away.”

Liam struggled to see clearly. “Silas?”

“You recognize me. Good. That’s a start, right? Geez, guy, good thing I got you outta there, huh? I saw what was about to go down, so I called in an IOU from the Heart, and a little razzle-dazzle, and bungeed your butt to the safest place in this joint.”

“Your office?” Liam asked sourly, recognizing more and more as his sight began to clear.

“Where else?” Silas seemed genuinely surprised at Liam’s reaction. “I got enchantments like whoa all over this place. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out. Sorta like quarantine. You’re gonna be safe here.”

“Am I?”

“Course you are. I’m on your side, Lee.”

“Liam.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry. What are all those bastards that’re after you? And by the way, you’re welcome.”

“Ah.” Liam gathered himself. Silas was swimming into focus, unfortunately, in all his lamentable lack of charm. Red face, greasy hair overdue for a wash, spindly limbs, and other deficits. The overrun wreckage of his office, papers piled high and a half-score of coffee cups growing mold were all familiar and utterly harmless to look at. “Yes, well. My apologies, and I do thank you.”

“There. Much better. Now we’re all friends, right?” Silas winked. He tucked an oily string of hair behind one ear. “You want a drink?” He sat on the edge of his desk, rummaged through various ignored bills and memos, and came up with a bottle the like of which had never been sold in a mortal alcohol mart. It was made of blue glass with silver netting decorating the smooth sides, most likely Elven in origin. The bottle, at least.

“God knows I could use a swig. Give me a heart attack, why don’t you? I thought you were headed to be a goner.”

“Thanks to you, I am not.” Liam stood, checking himself for bruises. Surprisingly, he found none. “May you reap the rewards you deserve for your actions.”

“Hey, cool. Thanks, my friend.” Silas offered the bottle a second time. “So, have a drink with me?”

* * * * *

Jordan sat back on his crate, insomuch as he could since it didn’t have the support of a real chair. “I don’t trust him.”

“Gold star.”

“He’s got something up his grubby sleeve.”

“Ooh, you’re good. You get a cookie, too.”

Jordan gritted his teeth, counting to ten before he spoke again. “If all you’re going to do is crack wise...”

“I was serious about the cookie. Here.” Lilith thrust a chocolate chip pastry into his field of vision. Surprised, Jordan took her offering. The cookie was still warm, the chocolate melty and sticky on his fingers. “You okay with sugar and carbs?”

“I’ll live.” Jordan took a bite and almost moaned in bliss over the flavor. Chocolate wasn’t usually his thing, but this tasted like it had been made from scratch by the hands of a goddess.

Er...

He snuck a look at Lilith. Maybe his guess wasn’t too far off the mark.

Chewing thoughtfully, he let his thoughts gather. After swallowing, he asked, “This guy Silas is only human. Even I can tell. So why is he pinging my danger meter?”

Lilith fiddled at the base of her throat, as if she were missing a necklace she’d worn for ages and had somehow lost. “Supernatural creepy-crawlies are one thing. A human with a jones for power can be a lot more dangerous. Trust me. Liam did it for his Brothers, and he

didn't know this would happen, but he lent Silas a big dose of mojo when he traded my Tear for all-access passes. You lay hands on the Tear, you get some juice. Simple as that. But it's like cocaine, right?"

"Silas wants more," Jordan guessed with a sinking sensation in his stomach.

"Yep. Brrr. Upper management. And they call demons evil." Lilith produced her own cookie and started to munch. "Comfort food," she explained.

"Can I go after this one? He's human. I could take him."

"Mano-a-mano, you could pound him into a greasy spot. That's not the point."

"Then what is?"

"Sometimes you've got to dig your own tush out of the hole you made for yourself." Lilith devoured another mouthful of cookie. "Besides, there's more to Silas than meets the eye, human or not. I don't want you getting creamed before Liam *really* needs you. So stay put."

"For God's sake! Enough with the games! Let me *do* something, would you?"

"Hey! Give my boy some credit, and stay *put*," Lilith reiterated.

Jordan's automatic struggles told him right away that his suddenly paralyzed muscles wouldn't be letting him go anywhere soon.

"Liam can still take care of himself," Lilith soothed, popping a bite of cookie between Jordan's lips. "Watch. You'll see."

* * * * *

"I am not thirsty. Thank you." Liam bowed politely at the waist. "Perhaps in a bit, when I have recovered."

"Up to you, Lee. Have a seat. Here, let me clear this off." Silas put down his bottle and hopped off the desk, stumbling clumsily to what Liam suspected was the chair he'd referenced. As Silas scooped off mounds of paper and piles of books, dumping them on the

floor, a once-fine but ill-treated leather armchair emerged. “There ya go. Comfiest place to park your ass in the office.”

“Except your own seat,” Liam pointed out.

Silas paused, his red cheeks flushing purple. “Well, yeah. I’m the boss.”

“Of course you are.” Liam found himself not at all surprised to see a flicker of anger cross Silas’s ruddy face. He folded his legs, dropping into a casual seat on the floor. “I am not so important that I should sit upon leather, especially as I am nude and somewhat dirty. Fine craftsmanship should be respected.”

Silas twitched, the anger more easily visible now. Liam exhaled a deep breath. Really, did the man have to be so transparent?

“I cleared off the papers and crap for you and everything,” Silas insisted. “I don’t give a damn about stains on the upholstery. Look around you. You think I’m picky about keeping things spack and spun?”

“Spick and span,” Liam murmured. “I am quite comfortable where I sit, thank you.”

He has tried twice to offer me gifts. Two strikes, one to go. Do get it over with, you tedious little man.

Silas made an obvious effort to recapture his false bonhomie and forced a laugh. He sat on his desk again and rummaged among the mess for another bottle of booze, this one good old Maker’s Mark, and screwed off the cap. He took a healthy swig and smacked his lips. “Better. Okay, fine. You’re cool, I’m cool. You know, it’s been a while since we had a chat. While we’re waiting this out, we can shoot the breeze.”

Not an offer, but an assumption. Splitting hairs, yes, but likely safe enough. “What do you wish to speak about?”

“For one, this was the big night for your friends. How’d they do?”

“All very well, as I am sure you know. You even made one of my men a job offer.”

“Christian? Yeah, that kid can seriously dance. We’ll rake in big tips when he hits the jive cage.”

“I imagine he would, if he accepts the position. Which he has not, nor will he.”

Silas nearly dropped his bottle of whiskey. “What? The kid was desperate. Hooking out of a strip joint, eating those crappy ten-cent noodles. You told him to turn down the big bucks I was going to shell out?”

“I gave Christian to understand that if something sounds too good to be true, it generally is.”

“I ought to kick your ass, Lee. Christian would have brought the men in like wolves on a sheep.”

“Precisely why I advised him as I did.” Before Silas could react, Liam continued. “Do you really need more customers? Amour Magique is busier than I have ever seen it in any incarnation. You are, without a doubt, the most financially successful manager the club has known.”

But it isn’t enough, is it? Liam watched Silas with a keen eye. He wasn’t disappointed. The gleam of greed came and went almost too quickly to see, but not for Liam.

“Yeah. We’re deep in the black. No more red days. Here’s to profit margins, huh?” Silas lifted his bottle. “Sure you don’t want a drink?”

“Thank you, but no.” *Do you really think me such a fool?*

Silas seemed to be having a harder time quashing his irritation but managed to snap back. Like a rubber band too often stretched beyond its proper limits, though; he was becoming brittle. “Profits are good these days, all right, but we’ve only seen the really big boom since you traded me that little trinket.”

“The Tear, yes. We come around to that again.”

“The Tear,” Silas agreed. “Kind of like the one you’re wearing now. The only thing you’re wearing. I don’t mind the free show,” he leered, “but you want some clothes?”

Three strikes, and he is out. Does he even know he has lost his chance?

"I will take no clothes from your hands." Liam stood, deliberately casual. "One, two, three. You see, I know your game, Silas. You have been playing with the Unseelie Court, have you not? They love to fool the unwary. They contacted you rather than the other way around, correct? They offered you such a chance as a greedy man could never turn down. You were a pawn in a joke, Silas. I knew Mab long before you were born, and I suggest you believe me when I say she laughed in the lace of her sleeve all the while when she lent you enchantments and gifted you with a bottle of Underhill wine."

"Hey! You want to watch the accusations? I didn't make any deal with no Faerie bitch." Silas struggled for good cheer. "Calm down, friend. I'm not gonna hurt you."

"No. You are not." Liam plucked up the bottle of wine and let it fall. The blue glass shattered when it hit the floor of Silas's office, spilling a wide puddle of mercury-colored alcohol that sizzled and steamed. "My, but that would have been a tasty treat, would it not?"

"Not like it would've hurt you." Silas sulked. "The dealer said you like that shit."

"Oh, I do, but I know better than to take it from hands I do not trust. Let us get to the meat of this discussion, Silas. You want something from me. You have asked your three questions; now I have the right to ask one. What do you believe I can give you?"

Silas's piggy sights zeroed in on the blue crystal pendant hanging around Liam's neck. He chuckled, letting the nastiness through, no longer pretending. "I could give you three guesses, but I bet you only need one. Hand it over, freak, or I'll get out some other toys that came with the booze."

"This crystal does not leave my neck unless my head is separated from my body."

Clumsy to the last, Silas wrestled a silver sword from its hiding spot beneath the mess on his desk, sending memos flying. "That can be arranged."

* * * * *

“How about now? Do you think you might want to let me go *now?*”

“Hush.”

“You’re a lunatic. He’s about to shish-kebab Liam.”

“No, he’s not.”

“Hello? Great big sword?”

“He’s still okay. Stay tuned.”

* * * * *

Swords, Liam reflected, were nasty things. He had wielded them himself on more than one occasion and knew how a blade such as the one Silas held could sever meat and bone as easily as a plastic spoon through tofu. Indeed, when one was about to be on the receiving end of a strike from a Faerie sword, he had best put his affairs in order before the swing completed its arc.

However, the logic only applied when the swordsman had a bloody clue what he was doing.

Liam ducked and feinted left as Silas swung from the shoulder, the move as awkward as if he were attempting to chop wood. For his part, Silas -- who had evidently been expecting a nice, clean victory, who had probably planned to laugh in the best villainous style while Liam’s head thunked to the floor and his body slumped, incubus blood dripping from his blade -- gawped at his uninjured prey with a shock that might have been comical.

No. It *was* comical. Liam’s laughter bubbled up. “Really, Silas. Quite anticlimactic. Here. Allow me to show you how this is properly done.”

Liam found it child’s play to take control. He snatched the sword from Silas’s loose grip, wrapping his fingers around the pommel -- ah, how familiar, how easily the knowledge came back to him -- and before Silas realized he’d lost yet another prize, the point of the sword came to rest gently below his Adam’s apple.

"I recommend you do not swallow," he suggested. "You may be aware of how keen the sting is from this blade."

Silas's throat jerked against advice, dealing himself a shallow slice. "Ow! Fuck! What did you wanna do that for?"

"If someone tries to kill me, I feel that returning the favor is merely fair play."

Silas backed up a few steps. Liam let him go. The oily man rubbed his throat. "Heh. Think you're smart, don't you?"

"You think I am not?"

"Nope, Mr. Don't-Know-It-All. See, the thing about Mab's sword -- yeah, yeah, I did get it from her, big deal -- the first blood it tastes gives the one who got pig-stuck the power over life and death." Silas made an ungainly grab for and regained the weapon. He brandished the finely-forged work of art as awkwardly as he would a chopstick. "I win. You lose. But, hey, I'm a generous man. Pass over the *real* Tear and we both walk away, me happy and you alive. What d'you say?"

"I say I am fascinated. I have never heard of such a magic laid upon a sword before."

"No shit?" Silas frowned. "Mab said this kinda stuff's been around for ages." He rubbed his bloody fingers along the length of the blade, cackling when the crimson droplets hissed, spat, and dissolved into the silver. "Check it out! Better than fireworks."

"Indeed." Liam folded his hands loosely before him and waited.

"Damn, man, you have ice water in your veins, don't you? Is it really not sinking in that if you don't pass over the pendant, I'm taking it for myself along with your head?"

"As you say."

Silas's hand began to shake. "Oh, I get you. I know this game. You're tryin' to throw me off. Giving me that calm, cool, collected jazz to make me nervous. Make me crack. I've got the upper hand here, buddy. Can't fool me."

"Of course not."

“What, you think I'm playing, here? I'll show you, you smug bastard,” Silas jabbed Liam's shoulder with the sword. Liam stood perfectly still as the blade slid into the muscle and chipped bone and then glided back out, dangling from Silas's fist as he exulted, all but dancing on the spot. “Whoo! Gotcha, didn't I? Hurts, don't it?”

“A little.”

“Bullshit, a 'little.' Stung like a son of a bitch when you nicked my neck, and I just sliced you but good. You're bleedin' like a --” Silas paused. “Hey. You're not bleeding.”

“No.” Liam smiled. “Silas, I suggest you take a second look at your Faerie sword.”

“What the hell for? It's big, it's bad, it's...” Silas trailed off, his eyes bulging. “It's gone.”

“Precisely.” Liam tapped Silas's hammy hand. The man dropped the pommel, the only remaining bit of his Faerie weapon. “I imagine Mab will be ill-pleased to discover your foolishness. She does not care for waste and, truly, the sword was the finest example of Fey smith work I have ever seen. What did you trade for this blade, Silas? You are notorious for making bargains and beggaring deals. Why else would I have offered a Tear if I had not been certain you would leap at the chance, snickering to yourself and thinking you had the far better end of things?”

“But how...”

“The thing you wanted most defeated you.” Liam lifted the Tear from his flesh, letting its cool weight rest in his palm. “I imagine you believed you would have unlimited power over men, the might of a born Lilim, were you to manipulate the gift of my mother. The real Tear. The one I gave you is merely a trinket. What I wear contains true power, yes. It has its own intelligence, and it does not take kindly to those it cares for being threatened. It is limited, but it can deal with a sword, Faerie-forged or no.”

“But...but...my blood on the blade. Mab promised.”

Liam rolled his eyes. “Oh, for the sake of sweet mercy. I have already *told* you what folly lies in believing the queen of the Unseelie.” He gave Silas a push, light as a tap, sending

the man flying into the far wall. “Wine to drug me, leather to trap me, clothes to bind me, a sword to kill me. Toys, nothing but toys. You have been played, Silas. You have been a pawn from the moment you were chosen to work within Amour Magique. I myself played you without ceasing since we made our arrangement.”

Silas wiped at his bloodied nose. “You -- you --”

“Yes. Me. Despite what you perceive as appearances, I am not a creature to tangle with, Silas. Perhaps you will know better now.” Liam picked up a heavy book, its ancient leather binding crackled and broken. A book of magic, the sort of joke tome sorcerers wrote as pranks on those fools who would try to learn the dark arts via shortcuts. A medieval version of a *For Dummies* text. He clicked his tongue. “I suppose this should not feel as satisfying as it will, but I have had a long day.”

“What are you --”

Liam’s aim proved true. The book bounced off Silas’s forehead. He made a small, mouse-like sound and slumped into a heap.

“Yes,” Liam murmured. “I feel better now.” He patted the crystal around his neck. “Faithful friend, and true. Tell me, where do I go next? What enemy seeks their personal pound of flesh?”

The room began to blur. “It would appear I am about to find out.” Liam spread his arms. “I am flying! Look, Jack! I am flying!”

If this is your best, he exulted, then do your worst.

Perhaps I need not have worried after all.

Ah. I should not have thought that, should I?

Depressingly on cue, something not unlike a vast fist crashed into Liam’s jaw, sending him spinning through the strange abyss.

Or perhaps I am about to be squashed into jelly, he thought dizzily as space went black and time ceased to exist. We shall see, shan’t we?

Chapter Three

“I appear to be in a warehouse. Charming.” Liam had landed on his back for a second time, a submissive position he already found most trying. “Well? Come out, come out, wherever you are. We have all night, yes, but I have little patience remaining.”

Echoes of a thousand stifled snickers, nasty around the edges, echoed around the cavernous room, bouncing off fallen steel girders and filthy concrete flooring.

“I know you,” Liam said slowly. “I think I do. Please, show yourselves.”

The laughter screeched. “Come. Come. We come!” the voices chanted. “Brother came home!”

* * * * *

Shadowy wraiths made of mist, a thousand different shapes and curls and thicknesses, flowed into the room that Jordan and Lilith saw displayed on the TV. The things, whatever they were, swam in a circle around Liam. He looked cool and collected. Good for him.

Jordan knew if it had been him in there, he’d have needed a change of shorts. Fog. Looked innocent enough. So had Dahmer. The mocking laughter and voices, male and

female, jabbering shrilly before cackling like hyenas on crack -- those were what scared the bejeezus out of him.

“What are they?” he asked, unable and unwilling to look away.

Lilith sounded grim. “The Lilim.”

“The -- your children? Liam’s brothers and sisters?” Jordan wanted to bang his ear to make sure he’d heard her right. “What do *they* have against him? Can’t you step in and Mom-slap them down?”

“No.” Jordan couldn’t help but notice the way she dodged his first question in favor of the second. “Together, they’re too strong and it’s not like they ever listened to me anyway. I’m not tough enough to take them on my own, just like Liam won’t be.” Lilith raised one shoulder. “Look, things weren’t always...let’s just say I should have raised them better than this. I didn’t. They hate me, and they *really* hate Liam. He kind of screwed them over once upon a time. Now, there’s hell to pay.” Her lips tightened. “Literally.”

* * * * *

“Welcome home, make-believe man.”

“Welcome home, clown.”

“Wake up to us and smell the coffee.”

“Smell the roses.”

“Smell the *blood*.”

Liam shivered. Icicles trailed down his skin. The frozen shards traced deliberate paths across his bared flesh, still spattered with lubricant and semen, jabbing every soft spot in turn. As he wriggled without thinking, trying to escape the frigid touch, laughter rang out in high-pitched chimes. The sound put him in mind of choir of cracked silver bells.

“He knows us,” a masculine phantasm of a voice chattered gleefully. “Look, look. He dreams no more.”

“Dreams, dreams. Always such silly dreams.” Five spears of ice ruffled through Liam’s curls. “Dreams he’s a real boy, doesn’t he?”

More laughter broke out, echoing against far distant walls. Liam stayed perfectly still, refusing to flinch again even when the frosty fingers parted his ass cheeks and the cackles turned to snarls of disgust.

He was expecting the first slap and took the blow without wincing when it cracked against the back of his skull.

“Pervert,” a more feminine voice hissed. “Unnatural. Abomination.”

“Double dealer. He cheats. Works from the bottom of the deck.”

“Bottom!” Another one of the creatures surrounding Liam snickered. “He likes being on the bottom. Spreads his legs for any man with a cudgel and a kiss.”

Sub-zero spittle bounced off Liam’s cheek. One gob became a flood, hundreds of pea-sized balls of hail battering him from the top of his skull to the soles of his bare feet. They hurt, yes, and they bruised, but he had lived through worse, had he not?

And now he knew for certain whom he dealt with. Only love could be so cruel and so cold, and only those whose lives were shaped for the art could use these weapons. His brothers, his sisters, long since twisted into almost wholly heartless demons who had deliberately warped their already foul natures; who reveled in using the semblance of love to cause pain.

“Bloodkin,” Liam said, forcing down a growing sense of terror as he dragged himself stiffly to a kneeling position. He kept his expression unruffled as he gazed around at the whirling cloud of incubi and succubi. “It has been too long since last we met.”

“Not our fault.” The mist thrust out a female face, surpassing in its sharp, icy beauty. Blue-eyed and silver-haired, she bared teeth sharpened into points and snapped them at him. “You’re the runaway. Happy now, ‘Liam?’ Happy now, Asmodai, King Demon of Lust?”

Ah. Now, he knew why they had been angry enough to join the ranks of his enemy forces that night. The long-banked embers of an old grudge were bursting once more into flame.

"I have abandoned the title and the name." Liam held himself in check. "There is another Asmodai by now, surely."

"No!" Another face appeared inches from Liam's and champed its teeth a half-inch from his nose. "Asmodai passes on when the holder is dead. You live."

"Stole the title."

"Kept it to himself."

"Made us weak."

More and more faces whirled out of the fog, all of them brothers and sisters Liam had once known, with whom he'd danced in the dawn of Creation, all younger siblings to whom he'd taught the skills they had since wielded with devastating precision, whom he had watched at work in the beds of sleeping mortals...and laughed with, drinking to one another's health with goblets of mixed wine, blood, and seed, consumed in the middle of battlefields and sullied marriage beds.

"I renounced Asmodai. I turned my back on the Lilim. I am dead to you. Choose another."

"Can't," a succubus snarled, scratching a line down Liam's cheek. "Not yet. Maybe tonight."

"Do you plan to kill me, then?" Liam asked lightly, as if he cared not at all.

"So many games," the silver-haired succubus returned to challenge him. "We owe all allegiance to Asmodai, the King of Lust. 'Way it's always been, 'way it always will be. Others make the rules, let you slide underneath. They know we need a leader. Just don't care. Don't love us." The succubus's razor-tipped nail dug a matching furrow in Liam's other cheek. He felt blood streaking down in the manner of tears but did not flinch. "You, though. Mother-

may-I, way back when, Mother's favorite set over us as King. Faugh! Always were her pretty boy, you."

"Perverse!" an incubus protested. "Doesn't make sense. Not fair. I am incubus, I take women while they sleep, give them dreams to make them come, and drink up all their happy noise."

"You siphon their natural joy in sex," Liam corrected.

"Do not." The incubus sulked. "If I do, so what? Made to do this. Born for nothing else. Don't have to quaff, just like to. You swam in oceans of juice so long, so long. Why men, though? Why?" Liam could make out genuine bewilderment in his sibling's expression. "Not what you were made for."

"You think not? How little you know me." *Poor fool*. "I heeded my preferences and I chose a path for myself, something none of you will ever be able to understand. You wander like blinded sheep, too stupid to think for yourself and not knowing what ends you race to meet."

"Pervert!" the succubus blurted after a confused pause. "Pervert, pervert!"

"It is in our nature to be perverse, bloodkin," Liam pointed out, taking the chance of wrapping his hands around his knees. "The Lilim are perversion made flesh."

"What do you know?" an almost-unfamiliar incubus mocked. "*You* aren't *we* no more. Turned your back on us."

"Ah. As you remind me, over and over, once I was Asmodai; I ruled all of you who have come here. I know all there is to know about you, brothers and sisters, perhaps more than our mother Lilith. She was the first to make these rules you speak of, and you are right in saying she does not care." Liam threw out the cruelty with casual abandon. "She has changed her ways, as I have done. We no longer live for the hunt and the kill."

"Never killed."

“We did, sister. We destroyed trust and faith. We sucked the fertility from women and left them barren, shamed, bereft. We drew the virility from men and left them to die weak in the dust.”

“Pah!” another of the swirling Lilim spat. “Cried tears of butter over the poor, poor play toys. Tore your hair, beat your breast. Couldn’t do it anymore. Chickenshit.”

The cloud tilted on its axis, buffeting Liam’s shoulder, nearly knocking him down. The silver succubus settled in front of Liam, blue eyes glowing, deadly as the hottest part of flame. “You see? Asmodai and not-Asmodai. King and not-King. ‘Liam.’ Silly name.”

“A derivative of Lilith, she whom I yet love and adore.”

Liam expected the slap to his bleeding cheek, but the force jerked his head so sharply to one side that his vision swam dizzily. “A good one,” he mumbled.

“Pay attention!” The succubus -- ah, her name was Mezriel, Liam remembered now -- how could he have forgotten? -- took Liam by the shoulders, her fingers burning prints of fire and flame into his skin. She shook him as easily as if he was a puppy; his teeth would have rattled were they not gritted shut. “Doesn’t matter who you ran away to be. Matters what you ran away from. Matters that you left us to scatter, run wild. Couldn’t act, couldn’t feed, couldn’t have fun. No king, little power, big mess. Cattle, sheep. Your fault.”

Liam regarded Mezriel without fear, despite the murder clearly on her mind, such as it was. She had been his dearest ally once upon a time, his prize pupil and the terror of more than one kingdom. If he had ever cared for women -- and he knew he had not, from the moment of his first half-hearted dalliance with one of the ladies he visited in dreams -- he would have taken her as lover and mate. They had come together once, only once, when neither was in their right mind, yet she had seemed to think their shameful tryst gave her some power over him.

How wrong, how wrong. If he had remained a heartless beast, he might have taken her as his slave. Either way, she would have gone willingly.

Perhaps she loved him a little, still, insofar as the bloodkin could love. Perhaps that was also why she hated him. Mezriel was the one behind the Lilim's concerted attack, he was certain. As a whole, they were dangerous, but stupid; in his prolonged absence, she would be the only force stubborn or canny enough to mass the milling animals together. Not a good thing. They had almost destroyed him the last time they joined forces.

He had known she -- they -- would come. He had known that leaving them without a ruler would weaken the Lilim. But it had had to be done.

He had been just as certain that they would gather enough strength to band together and seek him out one day and, now, while he was weak, would be their best chance at getting what they wanted: his death.

Clever, clever Mezriel.

She returned his gaze, reading him easily. He made no attempt to cloak his thoughts. Why not let her see the truth, rather than have her invent a wild tangle of lies?

"You will die," she warned, puncturing the center of his bottom lip with her thumbnail. "We are strong enough. We can kill you, choose another Asmodai, bring back our merry games." Her expression took on a cunning gleam. "Or come back to us. We don't ask much. Strength to play, fields to dance in, harvests to reap. We bring you pretty men, the best we find, to drain dry. Young meat tastes sooo good. Remember, Asmodai? Remember?"

Liam clenched his hands into fists, nails piercing his palms. Blood dripped from between his fingers.

An idea sprang to life in his spinning thoughts. Perhaps...perhaps...

"Yes," he stalled. "I remember all too well. And never again, Mezriel. I will not lead the Lilim forth to drain the world dry."

Mezriel clawed at Liam's face. He dodged, not quite in time, receiving five slashes across his forehead. Blood ran into his eyes. "Then I kill you myself. Bet I can," she gloated. "Then *I* be Asmodai. I lift the bars and let us run free."

“You could not, no matter how hard you tried. You lack the power, lesser creature.” He tried a stray gambit in the hopes that it would work. “Do you wish to risk the wrath of Lilith?”

“Pah! You said yourself: Lilith don’t care. Mother turned her back. Only one demon, anyway. Can’t stop us. *We* are thousands. Maybe weaker one at a time, but we smash her good all together. Then,” Mezriel added slyly, “maybe, maybe, maybe we take this pretty-boy, this Jordan, and we make him our special pet. Like puppy. Keep him safe in a cage. Nice cage. Never grow old, never die, just watch us make merry till end of the world. Don’t worry. Won’t be lonely. We put your body in the box with him. Lovers forever and ever. Nice, hmm?”

Liam flared with rage, though he carefully kept it hidden. “Why ever would you want to hurt my plaything?”

Mezriel giggled, the sound appalling, coming as it did from a being such as her. “Fun! Fun, fun, fun. Yes. Will hurt him. You can’t stop.”

Liam shook his head and allowed himself a smile. “You are wrong. I can stop you. And I will.” Mezriel had a second to look baffled before Liam opened his fists, flinging his gathered palmfuls of blood in a wide, scattered circle. Those who comprehended what he was doing stopped in their place in the swirling ring of spirits, faces forming with lips parted in shock.

They understood the inherent mightiness in blood, one of the fluids of life that they needed and worshiped. It had power over them, and Liam intended to *use* that power to his best advantage.

He raised his hands above his head and shouted louder than any bell on heaven and earth. “*Asmodai!*”

The remaining Lilim that were still on the move ceased their whirling dance of terror at once, immediately obedient to their king’s command, as they had been made to be. The

thumps of thousands dropping to their knees sounded like gray rain hitting a windowpane. They bowed their heads to Liam, who surveyed them without a trace of the pride he had once felt for his siblings.

Only Mezriel lingered in place, hovering insubstantially before Liam in a mix of shock and suspicion. "You not rule again," she accused. "Don't have the heart. Never had a soul. You trick us."

Liam planted his crimson-wet fingers in the middle of her terrifying, perfect face. "Join your bloodkin, Mezriel. I am Asmodai, and I may crush you if it so pleases me."

Mezriel snarled. "I challenge you!"

"Then there is your final, and fatal, mistake." Liam's hand sank through Mezriel's face and seized her *chem*, the insubstantial strand of immortality that drove her to her madness and kept her alive. He crushed the *chem* to wisps of smoke, letting them drift away. Mezriel had time for one shocked cry, a wail of outrage and desperation, before she disappeared.

He glared at the Lilim. "Does anyone who stands here doubt me? Who will not follow where I lead? Is there a one among you who will call me a perversion for preferring men?"

The Lilim shuffled uneasily, sharing glances and troubled whispers.

Liam waited. "I will kill more of you if I must. Or you may surrender. Acknowledge me as Asmodai, and follow where I lead. It is not such a hard choice, is it?"

The Lilim sighed with the sound of winds at sea. Heads bowed as one, trembling hands coming up in supplication. "Lead us," they chanted. "Give us strength again. Make us what we were. We give you present. See?"

"You back," a small voice piped. "Papa. You back to play."

No. *No*. It could not be.

He was dead and gone, and had been for millennia.

He could not be there...and yet, he *was*.

“Lyche.” Liam's heart ached at the sight of the demon child, whose impossible existence he had marveled at, whom he had loved insomuch as he was capable of in the old days. “How is it possible? You were gone, a victim of the budding Church.”

The Lilim began a new round of snickering. “Told you he died,” one explained between sniggers. “When you left, told you Lyche died to make you sad. But see? Lyche, your boy, mixed together from your spirit, you and she who loved you best, he still alive. Always has been.”

“Papa. Come play with me!” One of the demonic spirits, far smaller than the others, stood and nimbly picked his way through the crowd. Liam could not look away as he, Lyche, his son, approached. Lyche, with long autumn curls and Mezriel's bright blue eyes.

Lyche stopped in front of Liam and lifted his arms in a plea to be held. “Papa. Missed you so much.”

The Lilim waited, breathless, to see what their Asmodai would do.

“I have missed you very much, myself. I never thought to see you again.” Liam smoothed Lyche's tangle of curls, then twined one around his finger. “It broke my heart to think of what had become of you.”

“You kill spirit-Mama.” Lyche pouted, then brightened. “We find a new Mama. We play! Come on, Papa. Come play.”

“Yes.” Liam's shoulders slumped. “We will play. But come here first, Lyche. I have a secret which I must whisper in your ear. Here, I will bend down to speak, so no one else can listen.”

Lyche nodded eagerly. Liam knelt and laid his lips to the side of the Lilim child's face. He waited until Lyche had begun to quiver in anticipation, all but bouncing up and down. “Tell me!” Lyche begged. “Tell me, tell me, tell me, Papa! Asmodai!”

Liam swallowed, tasting bitter ash. "I am not so easily fooled," he whispered. His hand penetrated Lyche's vaporous skull and swallowed up the boy's *chem*. Withdrawing, he thrust the fragment of spirit into his mouth and choked it down his throat.

Lyche stared at Liam with a neat copy of Mezriel's stunned blue eyes. He fell, disappearing into nothingness before his spirit body hit the floor.

"A nice try," Liam mused into the stunned silence, licking his lips. "You would have completely hoodwinked a lesser man. My congratulations."

"But...but...your son!" a succubus protested. "You eat him!"

"Not at all. I never had a son." Liam bared his teeth, loathing his own lies, knowing he could not reveal the pain he felt at what he had done. "I started the rumor eons ago. I needed to know to what levels you would stoop one day. I am certain now of what I must do."

"What?" the Lilim shrilled in a harpy's chorus. "What do? What do?"

Liam felt ill; he had had his fill of the bloodkin and wanted nothing more than to see them gone. "Enough! I grow tired of this pointless playing about. Games are all the Lilim are good for when they have no king and little better when they are led." He pushed the crowding spirits back, the incubi and succubi shuddering away from his murderous touch. "I am still your Asmodai? Am I?" he demanded.

The bloodkin cowered before him. Liam regarded them with disgust.

"Very well. I will rule, and these orders are to be set down, never disobeyed. You will part ways, scattering to the far corners of the earth, and there you will live alone. You will never touch me or mine again. Incubi and succubi are no longer to be feared. No, you are foolish, pitiful demons, small and easy to slaughter. Oh, you protest now? Sheep. By your own rules, you cannot break the laws I have made. In the words of a friend of mine: suck it, punks."

He made to dust his palms off, then stopped when he felt their stickiness.

He gazed at the blood on his hands and began to chuckle.

He was still laughing when the Lilim rose up, enraged, and lunged at him. He tilted his head back to whoop freely as their hands encircled his neck --

-- and then, just as he had arrived, he was gone.

* * * * *

Jordan didn't like the way Lilith was looking at him. He could feel her probing around in his soul, which was off-limits in his opinion. "Knock it off."

"Hmm. You're freaking, aren't you, Jordy?"

"Jordan."

"Touchy, touchy. Even if I couldn't take a peek inside, I'd hear your nerves jangling like a closet full of dancing skeletons. I'm guessing you never saw Liam's scary face before, huh?"

Jordan shifted, the slats of the beer crate digging into his ass and adding to his discomfort. "No," he said, the word reluctant on his tongue.

"I figured. He doesn't pull it out for everyone, especially guys he cares about. It's a part of himself he's worked damned hard to erase. Only slips out when he has to pull rank, or when he forgets where he is. Who he is. It happens to everyone. Sometimes he loses his cool when he's sad or stressed. Kind of like a full-facial tic."

"He..."

"Yeah?"

Jordan knew it would be all too easy to trust Lilith. Despite her Goth-girl appearance, she had the kind of motherly/sisterly warmth a man could fall into for the sake of comfort and never escape. She'd helped so far, but that didn't mean she always would. "Why are you asking? Actually, why are you still here? I thought you said you couldn't help him."

"I can't. You can," Lilith said simply. "And I never said I couldn't help you."

"You call this helping? Let me go play Hulk! Smash! That'd be helping."

“Big man use big fists. Sorry, Charlie. That’s not the way it works, and that’s not really what’s foremost in your mind, now is it? Don’t flip on me now,” Lilith insisted. “We’ve got a long way to go.”

“Asmodai -- what does that mean?”

“What? Oh, that. Not a lot if you aren’t one of the Lilim or a theologist. Pretty much what they said. The Big Kahuna of sex demons.”

“And was he really...?”

“Yeah.” Lilith nestled her cheek against Jordan’s. Her skin felt soft, cool, and smooth; she smelled of patchouli and jasmine and leather. “For a while. He’s my oldest. Did you know that? Bet he never told you. Anyway, I put him in charge way back when. He used to be the meanest, toughest bastard I knew of among my kids.” Her hair tickled Jordan’s cheek. “Not taller, though. He knew about big things in small packages.”

“God. I mean, I’ve read about the Lilim, and here I am talking to *you*, and I’ve been with Liam, but I never...I didn’t...” Jordan scrubbed his face with the palm of one hand. “Was that really his son? Or was he lying?”

Lilith leaned against Jordan’s shoulder. “Which answer would make you feel better?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Me, either. So I’m choosing to believe him. I raised a lot of murderers, but I didn’t raise no fools and Liam definitely has his head on straight. You still love him?”

The question startled Jordan, coming out of the blue as it did, but he answered without needing to pause for thought. “I do.”

“Even after what you saw?”

“He’s still *Liam*. He has a good reason for what he’s doing.”

“Even if it wants to make ya want to blow chunks? Good guy. You’ll be the one who gets him through, wait and see.”

Jordan clenched his jaw and refused to fall into Lilith's arms as he wanted, to nestle his head on her breast and let her comfort him.

"Something's on your mind, huh? Come on," she coaxed. "You can tell me."

The question slipped out without permission. "I *do* love him, but...is who I saw really who he is, or is he actually the man I fell for?"

"Both. Jordan...he's been playing the role of cute, happy-go-lucky human so long it's become part of him -- that is who he is -- but you've got to remember he *is* also a demon. A Creature from the Pit. People forget. I know I do, and I'm Hell spawn myself." She crossed her arms. "Chew on that one a while, 'kay?"

Chapter Four

Lilith relented after a moment of laser-beam staring. “Listen,” she said, waving dismissively, “I shoot off at the mouth a lot. Don’t pay too much attention to me.”

Uh-huh. So you’re playing “good cop” now? “Let me get this straight. You’re telling me to listen to you telling me not to listen to you.”

Lilith smacked the back of Jordan’s head. “Smartass. Keep your mind focused on Liam and off the wisecracks. I’m talking so I don’t have to think too hard about what’s going on. Like I said, I can’t help. Not the way I want.”

What the hey. Jordan asked, for a second time, the question that had been burning on his tongue for hours, the one Lilith had sidestepped. “Why not?”

Lilith looked stunned. “What?”

“You heard me. *Why* can't you help?”

She stared at him, biting her lip. He saw uncertainty in her eyes and, with a sinking depression, thought he understood.

“You can't tell me, can you? It'll break some kind of rule and push Liam further down shit creek. Am I right?”

“Jordan...”

Jordan studied the petite, forever-young immortal, marveling at how someone who looked like you could break them in half had mothered thousands of demons and had the balls to walk away from Eden. A monster of legend and a mother worried over her kid.

Dichotomies were a bitch.

Lilith sighed, sounding lost. “Do you know if there’s a coffeemaker in here?”

Jordan stretched stiff limbs, cracked his neck, and stood to arch his back. “Over there,” he pointed. “In the corner. Watch yourself. I don’t think it’s been washed in a while.”

“Yech. And cool. Look, I...I...oh, hell. I wish I *could* help. I do.” Lilith held the empty decanter up, squinted at its innards, and made a face. “Yeesh. This really hasn’t seen a scrub brush for a few decades, has it?”

“You’re good at segues and tangents,” Jordan noted. “Looks like Liam learned from the loquacious loveliest.”

“Extra points for alliteration, and spot-on target. He’s always been my favorite. He’s got a way about him, y’know?”

“That he does.” Jordan flashed back on a memory of the first time he’d seen Liam. They had both been in one of the city’s poky old bookshops, the kind that smelled of dust and old glue and a thousand attics, with the added tang from the cat a place like that always had, a plump orange tabby winding around Jordan’s legs.

He’d been petting the cat, amused by the shine the animal had taken to him, when he’d spotted a small man stretching up on tiptoe to reach a hefty volume on one of the high shelves. Jordan had made to step over and grab the book himself, just being friendly...

Things might have turned out a lot differently if the tabby hadn’t ducked between Jordan’s ankles, sending him sailing into the little guy with a tackle the NFL would shed tears over. He’d crashed his shoulder into the bookcase, and tomes, which felt as if they were the approximate size and weight of Buicks, had rained down on their heads.

When his ears had stopped ringing, the first thing he'd heard was helpless mirth; he'd looked down to see a pair of eyes with a sparkle that made his heart beat double time. He hadn't been able to stop himself from grinning back.

He'd ended up with an irate lecture from the bookshop owner, one hell of a bill for damaged merchandise, a mild concussion, and a boyfriend. Who turned out to be an incubus. Who became the love of his life.

Jordan didn't take the phrase lightly, not like some of his friends. They fell in love at the first glance at a tight ass or an artfully arranged package packed into a pair of 501s. They fell for a wink, a kiss, a smile. One glass of wine or shot of whiskey, pick your poison, and before the night was over, they'd have taken seven-plus inches up the ass or turnabout.

Most times love's sweet song ended with the shrill of an alarm clock and a hasty, embarrassed fumble out of bed -- if they made it that far. Some of them had gotten lucky, sure. They'd found a buddy to hang out with as well as fuck.

Liam, though...for one thing, you couldn't shake the guy loose even if you wanted to, not if he had his eye on you, and he had refusing to take no for an answer down to an art form.

Yeah, the little guy had proved love at first sight was possible, even to a jaded cynic like Jordan, and he'd also spread the joy to his Brothers. Eleven one-night-stands that would last a lifetime, in return for a mystical trinket and putting his life on the line.

A small, crazy, adorable White Knight, who deserved a hell of a lot more than a man with a pocket full of pipe dreams.

Lilith's voice broke into his reminiscence. "I was going to ask how you two met, but I guess I don't have to now."

"He never told you? And, hey, you want to stay out of my brain?"

“Sorry. Couldn’t help myself. Some things are second nature to demons, even if they change -- which is a bitch, let me tell you. Liam...it was harder on him. He’s been tried by fire, but he turned out to be a good guy.”

“Yeah. Look. There's something else I'm wondering about. Maybe you'd know. You'd be the only one besides Liam who could know.”

“Shoot.”

“I have to wonder...since he is what he is, why do *I* matter to *him*?”

Coffee started gurgling into the coffee decanter as Lilith squeezed his shoulder. “If you have to ask, you’re a dummy.” She kissed his cheek. “You’re perfect for each other.”

“Thanks. I think.” Jordan moved over on his crate to make room for Lilith. Pretty skimpy room due to his own size, but she squeezed in fine. He waited for her to snuggle against him in her way -- that is, not at all erotic, more like a contented cat -- before he made a lunge for the dildo remote. “So, what is it you don’t want me to see?” His finger was on the button when Lilith hissed and pinched his wrist.

His hand flew open on pure reflex. The remote dropped back into her possession.

Giving Jordan a narrow look, Lilith shoved the clicker down the front of her bodice. “You want it bad enough to come get it now?”

“Contrary to popular opinion, not all gay men think women are the devil, and I want to know what you’re hiding from me.” Jordan went where he doubted many dared to travel -- and the zap he got this time didn’t just fry the hairs on his nuts, but sizzled away the curls on his chest, as well. “*Jesus!*”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I *am* a devil. For the last time, behave, or I’m moving a few steps up from static hell.” Lilith patted the bulge in her corset and cuddled back against Jordan, sunny as could be and apparently impervious to the stench of burned hair. “Look, kid. Believe me. You don’t want to watch what’s happening.”

“You really are insane.”

"I lived through the Garden, the Black Plague, and the Osmonds. Duh. Anyone would be a Fruit Loop by now."

Jordan chortled, surprising himself. Lilith nudged him. "Made you laugh. Come on. We'll tell campfire stories until it's safe to look again."

Sobriety returned in a flash. "Uh-uh. I say we watch now. Why shouldn't we, and what the hell else can I do?"

Lilith looked down. "Jordan, he wouldn't want you to see him this way," she said quietly. "Let him have that much dignity, 'kay?"

Jordan closed his eyes and growled sub-vocally. "Bitch."

"Damn right."

"You're really not going to let me go find him, are you?"

"If you want, you can walk on out any time. And probably get killed. Up to you."

"I'll take my chances."

Lilith shrugged. "Your call. But do you really want Liam to find out you torched yourself if he makes it back in one piece?"

Jordan's hands curled into fists. He took in several deep breaths. "You really are a bitch."

"Too bad, so sad, buddy."

"All right. Fine. Just be sure I *am* getting out of here sooner or later."

"More than likely."

"I am?"

"Can't stop you forever." Lilith swung one foot back and forth. "You have a question?"

"Yeah." Jordan steeled himself for whatever her answer would be. "Where is he now?"

“A place no one else can go, not even me -- if I were allowed. He’s gone inside his own head, and that’s where the meanest monster lives. One who’s been chomping at the bit to get him for centuries.” Lilith wrapped her hand around Jordan’s arm and squeezed.

Her fingers trembled.

* * * * *

Liam came to himself in the midst of bitter chill and the sort of perfect blackness that accompanied a total absence of light. No moon, no stars, no lamps. Nothing but the cold swirling up in blasts of wind harsh enough to flay the skin from his hide. Liam ground his teeth, dug his fingers into the roots of the thick, sharp, reed-like things beneath him, and hung on.

He had no idea where he was. No sight. Sensation? Of a certainty. Sound, yes; the wind and the screech of the rustling reeds. Smells? Liam inhaled deeply, and wished he hadn’t. The air stank of decay, sickly-sweet rot, thick and cloying in his nose. He decided against testing his sense of taste, which became moot as the reek slid down his nasal passages to coat his tongue. He gagged but refused to vomit. The Lord or Lady of this domain might take it as a compliment.

And who might that be...?

A shrill neigh rent the silence.

Ah. My friend, my mount, my foe, my enemy.

The Night Mare.

Liam sat up, despite not being sure if the direction was actually vertical, and kneeled to wait. He knew better than to run. No matter how fleet of foot a man might be, the Night Mare ran faster and loved nothing more than to drive a man to earth.

She it was who galloped through dreams by darkest night, picking and choosing the tastiest morsels within men’s minds to graze on.

She it was who drew seed for her foals from the horrors in those minds and birthed night terrors by the hundreds.

She it was who left men bereft of the comfort sleep might bring.

She it was who filled men with despair deep enough to break their minds, to take their own lives.

She it was whose influence Liam had smelled on Collin and Harrison, at the least, though he had said nothing.

She it was who he had driven away from those in his care.

She it was who had borne him on her back when he reigned over his own terrors in the darkness, and she it was who had nearly torn him to bits between her razor-edged hooves when he had turned his back on horrors.

The Night Mare was nothing like the Lilim, who were as simple and vicious as children...and just as easily fooled. Nothing like Silas, a greedy little man with neither skill nor wit to get what he wanted.

The Night Mare would not ask, or barter, or parley.

The Night Mare saw through the coal-blackness of night and took what she wanted.

Hooves thudded dully, crushing reeds beneath them as she approached. Liam knew, of old, how she preferred the up-close kill. He counted his heartbeats in time with the chopping rhythm of her trot, ticking down the seconds of his life.

I am truly sorry, Jordan. Forgive me.

Twin funnels of frigid air blasted the back of Liam's neck as the hoofbeats drew to a standstill. The Night Mare chuffed, snorted, and whinnied, making him think of a small child chanting "nanny, nanny, boo, boo!"

"I am, as you see, at your mercy." Liam bowed, pressing his forehead to the strange "ground." He stretched his arms forward in the deepest supplication and encountered the

Night Mare's hooves. They were wet with blood and slimy with other things, including insects skittering over them to feast. "I only ask that you kill me quickly."

Liam, the Night Mare's voice shivered through his mind. Do you think I would harm a single curl in your crop? We have so much history between us, you and I. Our rides through the Caucasus. The night markets at Marrakesh. The fields of the dead.

"You know I no longer tread those grounds."

Of course. It has been an age since we rode together, dearest. I have missed your way with the reins and the spurs. You hurt me so well.

"I do not cause pain for the sake of pain. Not any longer."

Yes, yes, I know. But if you are resigned to death, then accept this as well. Before I kill you, I would have one last taste of you as you were.

Suspicion, far too familiar by now for one night, prickled the short hairs on Liam's neck. "What would you ask of me, Lady?"

One small ride, my lover, my enemy. A gallop on my back through the lands I rule. One moment of free-wheeling bliss, the wind in your hair and blood singing through your veins, before I kill you. One ride, and I will be quick in my slaughter as you ask. She pawed the ground with a sound like iron scraping iron. *Do we have a deal, sweet one?*

Liam's mouth was almost too dry, but he gathered all the moisture he could and spat at the Night Mare's feet. "I know you," he rasped. "One ride on your back is never enough. You would drug me into eternal sleep with your potions brewed from raw dream-stuff, and make of me in night terrors the monster I used to be. I will make no bargains in your foul realm."

He sensed the Night Mare's amusement at his defiant gesture as she lowered her face to his. The dry, tangled fringe of her mane prickled his cheek, and her horse's kiss left his forehead wet. She scraped her lower teeth against his scalp. Nothing more than idle playing, the sort she indulged in before the kill.

Liam relaxed his muscles and waited.

I will not kill you, my love.

“What?” Liam’s eyes flew open, staring into the blackness. He saw a split-second’s flicker of lightning in the Night Mare’s grin, a sight once seen and never forgotten.

She nuzzled him tenderly as a foal. *No, darling. You will not die. It will be far more entertaining to let you live.*

“In dreams?”

Come, Liam. Will-you or will-you-not, you ride with me. The grassy ground began to speed away beneath them. *You see? You need not be on my back. Here. Let us give you a look at what you have traded your life on earth for.*

And remember: I can only show you true dreams. That is what makes them the terrors they are, after all. She whickered a maniacal laugh.

The charcoal glimmer of a mirror carved from onyx appeared in the distance. The Night Mare came to halt when Liam rested at the feet of the looking glass, which were carved in the shape of claws. He clutched them as she mocked: *you think you have done well tonight, do you? Foolish boy. You know nothing, but I know all. My dreams reach into the future as well as the past, and I would have you see what harvest your “good deeds” will reap.*

“Do not try to play with me,” Liam warned, careful not to beg. It would do him no good, and provide her with amusement. “There is no need for games.”

I play no games. I merely show you the future fruit of your labors. Strong horse teeth closed on Liam’s neck, holding him in place. *Now look into the mirror, my love, and behold history in the making.*

Liam looked, and Liam saw...

He saw Bree by the side of the vampire Julian. The tough punk had added enough piercings to make his bloodless skin bristle, no soft spots left anywhere. His bars and hoops had ends like needles, weapons and play toys for his kills.

Liam had known of Bree's transformation into a vampire, of course. He had trusted Julian to keep the boy in check. Julian knew how to survive in this day and age; he did not kill when he fed.

And yet...Bree did. Bree tore the throats out of his victims and drank them dry, howling for glee. Julian? Julian watched, a thin smile of approval on his lips as Bree sucked the lifeblood from a small, skinny blonde girl, no older than sixteen, then let her fall into a boneless heap like so much rubbish.

Julian opened his arms, mottled with patches of black, gray, and green. Bree cozied up to his lover and let himself be embraced, rubbing his head back and forth to score dozens of dry slashes on Julian's chest.

"One down." Bree snickered. "How many more to go?"

"As many as are in the world will do for a start."

"The world's not enough."

"It's a good place to start. Now come. Did you save the larger portion for me?"

"Yeah. Damn, that was a good fight. They were tough. You better not turn the boy like you did that kid in New York. I'm not doing the gladiator shit again. I know I'm worthy."

"I would never betray you, my love. Go and fetch the boy." Julian rippled with silent mirth as Bree, after a brief and crimson kiss, went to do as he'd been told. Liam could read Julian's thoughts: he would turn the male victim, the girl's first true love, and pit him against Bree. If Bree should survive, he would do the same again and again and again. *Forever...*

Liam tried to tear his gaze away. "Enough!"

The Night Mare's teeth sank deeper. *We've barely begun. Look upon your works, O ye mighty, and despair.*

The mirror flashed.

Three dragons, red and blue and green, soared and danced through the night sky above Charleston. They looked to be at play until Liam heard the harsh chopping of helicopter blades and the sounds of bullets chambering in rifles.

"Do we have an all-clear for the first wave?" a man's voice came in, harsh static through a radio.

"All clear. Kill order is a go. You may fire at will."

Scarlet holes exploded in the dragons' hides as gunshots rang in Liam's ears and the bitter taste of cordite filled his mouth. One dragon arched his neck to roar in agony, eyes wide.

Collin's eyes.

More, the Night Mare insisted.

Liam sat with his jaw fixed so tightly it ached.

He saw Simon struggling beneath a team of nurses and orderlies, flailing clumsily as he had tried to dance while they pinned him down. "I'm not crazy!" he shouted. "Swear to God, I'm not! I'm telling the truth about Finn!"

"Jesus. He actually believes in leprechauns. Guy's had one too many bowls of Lucky Charms," a techie grunted. "You want to pass the nurse the Seconal like she asked?"

Simon bucked, nearly shaking his captors free. "You don't understand!" He seized a nurse by the collar of her colorful scrub shirt, the Hello Kitty pattern smeared with mustard and hyssop. "He's not dead. He's not. He's faking. Leprechauns can't die!" Liam could see the insanity glittering bright in Simon's desperate smile. "I'm a lawyer. Let me go. I promise I won't sue."

"Anything you say, pal." The techie flicked off the cap to the syringe he'd been handed and wasn't any too careful about going easy when he thrust the needle into Simon's arm.

Simon stared at her with the confusion of a child. "What...what did you..."

"Seconal. It's for the best," the techie said dispassionately. Liam could tell he did not care how Simon felt, and he saw that Simon understood as well.

"No...that's not..."

"Give it up," the techie grouched, leaning back against a dusty crash cart whose bright red paint had faded to orange. "You're going to sleep now, Simon, and you're going to behave or we'll put you in Solitary again. Clear?"

Simon began to weep.

His Finn stole a cache of gold, you see. Poor Finn, such bad luck. He stole gold to keep Simon happy and deluded, and Simon drove the getaway car. He simply didn't get away when they shot Finn. Poor Simon.

"This is ludicrous," Liam scoffed, refusing to believe. "You show me the candy floss of madmen's ravings."

Do I? Let us skip past Micah's wasting disease, contracted from the oh-so-humorous purple alien semen. The Night Mare snorted, sounding disgusted. I would have expected better of you than such puerile jokes.

"I knew you had no sense of humor."

We will pass by Quentin's blood sugar crash while riding Tezcatli's back in the sunset, far too far away from any glucose and nary a drop of juice in sight. Poor fellow, not to have even a single chocolate of yours in his pocket. Poor fool, dying under the desert sun.

"Filthy bitch," Liam snarled. "You are lying."

I am not. Would you hear about Jory, the sweet little vampire, losing control and slaughtering your teddy-bear David? How he tried to turn his plump lover, but did not know how? He was not made for such tasks. Over the cooling corpse of his beloved, Jory thrusts a stake through his heart and crumbles to ash on David's still chest. No one will find them for months.

"No. It will not be this way."

Why? Because you will it so? Tell me, would you like to see Laurence enslaved in Underhill as a plaything of Black Malice -- his soul bartered to her for a rare chance at meeting his Elven lover, Keelan, who loves him no longer and sleeps safe in the arms of one called Nerys, a female?

Shall I show you how Christian turns away from Ewan, unable to bear life underground, and returns to hooking until he is too diseased and drug-addled to go on?

Would you like to see Alex drown while Dylan watches, neither caring what happens to him nor lifting a finger to help?

Perhaps you'd like a look at Allen as he is savaged by the werewolves he and his Chance foolishly believed would not come after them.

Or Harrison, my pet, ripped to pieces by a spell he tried for the sake of curiosity? A spell Martin failed to realize he would attempt? Harrison, ever wanting to learn more.

This is what you have done, and this is what will be. This is what you have wrought by mingling the beasts of legend with mortal men.

"Countless others have done so over the years."

Yes, oh, yes, and I have had such fun with them.

Bile rose in Liam's gorge.

Nothing to say for yourself?

"No," he said, barely a breath of air in his word. "No."

Do you doubt that I show you true dreams? Do you question the clarity of my foresight?

"No. But I know one other thing for certain." Liam ripped free of the Night Mare's teeth, disregarding the pound of flesh he left behind. "Did you think I had forgotten the future is fluid? What you show me is but one of the paths that may be. What I have seen here is not necessarily what will come to pass."

And how do you plan to stop these catastrophes, sweetling? You are mine, you know. My prisoner, and no one escapes my realm without the help of another. No one has a clue where you are. No one will ride to your rescue.

“They will not.” Liam released the clawed feet of the mirror, still merrily flashing glimpses of the futures the Night Mare had taunted him with. “By the Tear, you sicken me anew with your lust for misery. You should have written for the pulps and made an entirely different sort of killing from the twists in your diseased imagination.”

The Night Mare reared indignantly, champing the air. *You mock me? How dare you? You are here to stay in my realm@ forever, \$little incubus. Do you wish to make your life even more of a misery?*

“Not at all.” Liam clasped the Tear he wore in his fist. Rounded soft through millennia of such caresses, the Tear nestled into his palm with the tenderness of a lover’s kiss. “You are right. No one knows where I am, and they will not.”

The Night Mare whinnied. *They never shall.*

Mother, forgive me. “Unless I do this.”

Ripping the pendant from his neck, Liam slammed the Tear into what passed for the ground in the Night Mare’s lands, one shard chipping off and shattering. “Good-bye.”

Jagged blue light flared, blinding Liam and knocking him flat.

He landed on something soft and deliciously warm. Sunlight kissed his cheeks as he turned his head on what felt like a goose-down pillow. The sheets, for he realized he lay between two crisp linen sheets, smelled of sex and something familiar.

Someone familiar.

A heavy weight settled on the edge of the bed Liam realized he lay in. “Hey, sleepyhead. You want to wake up?” A big hand cupped Liam’s chin and gave it a playful wag. “C’mon, big guy.”

Sweet relief spread through Liam like warm maple syrup. “Jordan,” he sighed, opening his eyes to look at the face of his beloved, broad and square and unhandsome...and all the more precious for his rough-cut charm. “I dreamed of the strangest things. I thought I was an immortal caught in a monster’s web. Horrible.”

“Yeah. You were pitching a fit. No worries, babe. You’re still the same old Andy Lee Owen I went to bed with, born in the 1970s and aging like a fine wine. Immortals. Christ. No more cold Chinese leftovers before bed, buddy. Munchies aren’t worth their payback.”

Jordan bent to kiss Liam. Against his forehead, he whispered: “Trust me, Lee. You really don’t want to do that again.” His lips brushed the edge of Liam’s -- no, Lee’s -- hair. “It sounded like one hell of a nightmare.”

* * * * *

Lilith stood over Jordan’s hulking body, crumpled on the floor. He lay where he’d fallen after taking a sip of the coffee she’d made, dropping the Styrofoam cup and rolling his eyes back into his skull.

She dragged her fingernails through her hair. “Well. Didn’t see this coming. What a bitch!”

Chapter Five

“A nightmare...yes.” The images were already fading from Lee’s memory. Horrible things. Men he didn’t know transforming into monsters out of fairy tales and legends. A rotting horse. Something about a crystal. Dreams. Who could understand them? “I wonder if I have the cold pork lo mein or the reheated egg foo yung to blame for disrupting my sleep?”

“Me, I’d pin the blame on the kung pao chicken. Swear to God, I don’t know where you put it all, even though it’s only just starting to show.” Jordan poked Lee in the soft spot between ribs and hip. He ached terribly -- *Strange; I wonder why*-- but could not help convulsing with laughter at the power of the tickle, which led Jordan to set about chasing all his hot spots. The soles of his feet, the backs of his knees, his armpits, and under his chin -- none of them escaped Jordan’s wicked workings.

“Stop, stop! Uncle! I cry Uncle.” Lee struggled up to brace himself on his elbows. *Ouch!* What had he done to make himself so sore? Curls had fallen in a tangle over one eye. He tried in vain to blow them away, but as he was still laughing, he didn’t have much success. “You are a sadistic bastard, my love.”

“And *you*, my friend, are way too easy,” Jordan informed him, standing up.

Lee admired the view. He hadn't noticed before -- odd -- but Jordan wore nothing. No T-shirt or boxers to conceal the lovely muscles layered on his football player's frame. Jordan's cock, half-hard as it often was early in the morning, jutted out fatly, making Lee's mouth water. Lee did a quick mental assessment and realized he, too, hadn't a stitch on.

But, no, of course they would be naked. They always slept nude, all the better to fuck when the mood took them. As it often did. The night before, for example. Lee purred deep in his throat, languidly stretching his legs. Ach! Why did he hurt so? His ass still ached with the good soreness of being well-fucked, and he could feel other sore spots on his throat that promised rising hickeys, yet the wounds felt as if they went deeper than the surface.

His coworkers would give him hell for the love bites, but they always found something to make fun of. Ah, well, at least this time he could taunt them with being jealous.

If he could walk. "Jordan, have I injured myself?" Liam asked, confused.

Jordan ignored Liam's question. He scratched his chest, rumpling up the thick mat of hair, and yawned. "We didn't oversleep too much. You want actual breakfast before work?"

Lee considered the notion. Yes...yes, his stomach grumbled. "I believe I could eat."

"You can always eat, babe. Question is, if I tie on the apron, will you actually take the time to strap on the feed bag? You gotta stop with this forgetting-to-eat-during-the-day-shit. Starving yourself from dawn until dusk, then pigging out like you've been through a famine. Your metabolism might still be hanging on to the last gasp of youth, but you wait and see. One day you're going to wake up looking like Porky Pig in a Harpo wig, and then I'll have to dump your fat ass." Jordan winked. "Kidding."

Joke or not, the casual threat stung. Lee felt uncertain and nervous as he forced a small laugh. "Yes, of course. I promise I will eat whatever you cook for us."

"Cook?" Jordan snorted. "As if. I work a mean microwave, but that's it. You want a sausage-and-egg breakfast bowl or a bagel?"

Lee perked up hopefully. "With cream cheese?"

“Strawberry cream cheese, even, you little fairy.” Jordan rubbed his right bicep. “Damn. I must have pulled something at the gym last night.”

“I suppose our own private exercise failed to help matters,” Lee teased.

“Nope.” Jordan made no additions to his statement, frowning at the muscle currently worrying him. No comments on whether the sex had been good, bad, or mediocre. Lee vaguely remembered enjoying himself a great deal, and that Jordan’s erection had put him in mind of a battering ram.

He recalled no kisses, though. No softly-spoken words of love or even harsh grunts to *go faster, harder, or stop or start*.

The more Lee thought about their last bout of sex, the more he realized they had done nothing more than go through the motions. A wonderful fuck that had released clouds of endorphins but was utterly loveless. As emotionally powerful as riding a bicycle.

He kept these thoughts and their accompanying sorrow to himself. “Strawberry cream cheese would be lovely. Thank you.”

“Stop using words like ‘lovely,’ for Christ’s sake. You sound like a dipshit. And put some clothes on before you come into the kitchen,” Jordan ordered, stepping into a pair of blue sweatpants that had been discarded on their bedroom floor.

Lee glanced around said floor in dismay. Piles of laundry and wadded-up sheets, which smelled as if they should have been washed long ago, littered the carpet, trodden-down in paths leading to the en-suite bathroom and the bedroom door.

“Do I have any clean clothes?” Lee asked, seriously in doubt.

“Nope, and guess whose fault that is? It’s still your turn to do the laundry, lazy-butt. No one cares what I smell like driving the truck, but the guys at your office have got to be waving their hands in front of their noses when you walk by these days.”

Lee’s heart sank further at his lover’s words, and at the realization that the dirty laundry was easily a day’s work, or possibly two. “Will you help me?”

“No fucking way. I *said* it was your turn.” Jordan shoved his feet into a pair of down-at-heel trainers. “I’m not cleaning one damn sheet until you make good on your part of the deal.”

My part of the...oh. Lee recalled now. Funny how things were coming back to him in bubbles, each memory rising to the surface whenever he spotted a gap in his mind. He remembered now how he and Jordan had agreed to split the household chores when they’d moved into this house. Jordan took care of the outside, mowing the grass and fixing the shingles and trimming the hedges; Lee was meant to keep the floors mopped, everything that might get dusty free of dust, and, yes, do the laundry when it was his turn.

“I am sorry I have let this slide so. I have been...” He struggled to remember. “...busy at the office these past few weeks. All the overtime for the launch of our new product. They have needed me there.”

“Yeah? I need you here, so tell them to fuck the overtime.”

“If I refuse, they will fire me. Yet, apparently, you are and will continue to be angry with me if I do not refuse.” Lee bristled. “What, pray tell, am I supposed to do?”

“Work it out for yourself. You’re the one who says he’s got the brains.” Jordan snapped the waistband of his sweatpants. “I want a sausage biscuit. Make up the bed and come eat.”

He walked out without a backward look, leaving Lee feeling small and exposed despite the sheet covering his lap. What made Jordan act so cruel this morning? Jordan loved him.

Didn’t he?

Lee lifted the sheet, peering at himself in search of bulges and pockets of fat. He had a small belly, yes, but one could hardly call it the first step on the road to piggishness. And if he did gain weight, would one’s true love not turn a blind eye?

“Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,” he murmured.

"Say what?" Jordan yelled, presumably from the kitchen. Liam flinched. He always forgot how small their apartment was, and how thin the walls were. "Are you talking to yourself again? I warned you about that."

"Yes. I am sorry." The apology came quickly, as if it were old habit. Lee remembered that it was. He seemed to be making more and more mistakes these days, annoying Jordan, yet he couldn't manage to make himself stop or play by the rules. He never ran out of new ways to get his feet tangled in a new web of trouble.

"I am sorry," he called again, louder. "I will try harder, Jordan. I swear I will."

"Whatever." Three electronic beeps sounded. "You can start by hauling ass out here and eating like I told you to."

"Yes. I am on my way." Lee swung his legs over the edge of the bed, dismayed to find them spindly instead of lithely muscled. Wait. They had always been so, had they not?

Peculiar.

When he stood, he had one pleasant moment in which he enjoyed the contentment that came from a solid night's sleep. Then, the pain struck. Breath refused to enter his lungs, his ribs suddenly ached with a fierce-burning fire, and his gut spasmed, doubling him over. Then, in that position, in clear light, he saw them.

Bruises on his thighs. Dark purple and black fingerprint shapes overlying greenish, half-healed marks.

He could not recall what he'd done, but it must have been awful to warrant such discipline.

No matter; he could not wait until the misery faded. Nor could he let himself hobble into the kitchen. Any displays of weakness would lead to more of the same. He should not complain; after all, Jordan was only trying to toughen him up. A small man with nothing going for him but some small intelligence with computers -- yet not enough to advance in his field -- had to be grateful for any favors that came his way.

“Lee!” Jordan yelled. “Move it!”

“I am coming, yes, I am coming.” Lee straightened with an effort and breathed shallowly as a head rush came and went. When he could see again, he steeled himself against accidental flinches and went to find Jordan as the man had ordered.

His lover was leaning against the kitchen’s center island, a black plastic bowl in one hand and a fork in the other, shoveling pale eggs and crumbles of bacon into his mouth. Jordan swallowed a messy bite and said, with the flatness that trumped any hollered accusations, “You ate the last biscuit. Fucking cow.”

Lee blushed guiltily as his memory supplied a recollection of sneaking one for his sack lunch the day before. “I --”

“Shut it.” Jordan poked at his microwaved breakfast, upper lip curling. “This tastes like cardboard.”

“I could cook,” Lee offered, brightening. He darted -- carefully -- to their refrigerator, stained with grease spills and fingerprints. To his dismay, the inside of the cool box needed cleaning far more than its exterior. Ah, yes. Something else he hadn’t had time to take care of. “Eggs, not yet expired. Onions. They are a bit hairy, but that is easily remedied. Cheese. I can cut away the green spots. Omelets. I could make omelets. Or pancakes.” He glanced at Jordan over his shoulder. “We have some syrup left, and I believe there is a box of dry mix in the cupboard.”

“No time.” Jordan stuffed the last bite of woody-looking bacon in his mouth. Talking around the food as he chewed, he said, “Stop trying so hard. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Yes. Of course he was. Lee shut the refrigerator door, awash with waves of humiliation. He always overreached himself. All he wanted to do was help, yet no matter how hard he tried, it all turned to shit.

“Seriously, Lee.” Jordan threw his empty dish and fork on the island, which Lee saw now lay heaped with similar bowls, wrappers, and emptied boxes. He could see no evidence

of insects crawling among the filth but had no doubt they were there; he shuddered at the thought. Jordan frowned at him, likely misinterpreting his reaction. "Would you chill? You haven't fucked up enough -- yet -- to be flinching like a little girl."

"The island," Lee blurted, instantly regretting his words.

"Screw the island." Jordan swept his arm over the piled-up refuse and sent the lot clattering to their floor -- also filthy, as Lee could not help but notice. Tiles which had probably once been white were now dingy gray and spattered with spills of coffee and other unidentifiable stains. Lee stared at the mess with such dismay that he missed Jordan's approach and could not stop himself from releasing a yelp of pain and surprise when Jordan heaved him off his feet, tossing him on the grimy top of the island.

Lee found that he did not like the way Jordan looked at him. His lover had a predatory gleam in his eyes that Lee recognized from times past and from the *Discovery Channel* -- that of a carnivore with prey in sight. "Breakfast time," he teased, tone wicked. "How about protein instead of bagels?"

A ripple of revulsion made Lee's skin pop up in goose bumps. He loved Jordan, of a certainty he did, but the things Jordan took in his mind to do sometimes...well, they were not the way lovers should treat one another, were they? He felt sure of it.

Yet Jordan had taken Lee in when no one else would give him a second glance in even the filthiest of dives, the places Lee had resorted to out of sheer loneliness. Jordan had come down to slum and laugh at the desperate schmucks who'd do anything to get or give a blowjob, and he'd brought Lee home with him for kicks.

Lee owed Jordan. For that, for the two years they'd been together, and for still more.

Jordan had also used his network of buddies to secure Lee a good job with what he'd been told was excellent pay at a friend's IT company. His lover had taught him how to dress, how to dance -- although he still laughed at Lee's attempts -- and how to fuck. Really, Lee

felt deeply ashamed of how ignorant he had been of the ways between man and man...and of how he continued to disappoint Jordan in everything that counted.

Lee loved Jordan. The man was a good person, truly he was. Everything he did, he did for Lee's benefit. Lessons could be painful, but as Jordan pointed out, nothing worth having ever came easily.

And he could be tender. He kissed Lee sometimes, lingering brushes of lips over lips, when Lee had managed to please him. Occasionally, when they walked together down the streets or in a store, Jordan put an arm around Lee's shoulders and hugged/jostled him. Once, Jordan had even held his hand during a movie.

"Well?" Jordan challenged, planting one heavy fist on either side of Lee's precariously balanced hips. "Gonna give me what I want or leave me hanging? Come on, baby. Be good for me."

Lee sternly reminded himself of the pleasure he found in Jordan's body. He *did* enjoy the sex between them. Going down on his knees or raising his ass for the plundering his lover provided tapped something primal within him, a lust burning deep down, but with great, scorching heat.

"Baby." Jordan ducked down to nuzzle Lee's throat. "Be good."

Yes. Yes, he could be good. If he made Jordan happy, the odds were excellent of having a better day than he might have otherwise borne. "What would you have me do?" Lee asked, head bowed the way Jordan preferred, gaze on the tent in Jordan's sweatpants. "Would you prefer for me to suck you, or do you want to fuck me?"

"Decisions, decisions. What would *you* like, hmm?"

Lee wiggled. His ass still felt sore, the ache sharper now that he did not have a bed to cushion him. "You suggested protein?"

It was only when Lee hit the floor and the shock of agony lanced through his ribs and cheekbone that he realized Jordan had hit him hard enough to knock him off the island,

landing among the scattered and broken dishes and utensils. He started to struggle up, then remembered how Jordan did not like any sort of defense and huddled in place.

Jordan's foot landed in his already-bruised ribs, no less painful for wearing no shoe; his legs were powerful enough to make any kick hurt like the very devil. "Are you telling me what to do? Are you?"

"No!" Lee cowered against the filthy floor. "No, Jordan, no. Forgive me."

"Forgive you?" Another kick. "You don't get to demand anything. You're losing the one shitty piece of mind you had left."

Lee scrambled for words, spitting them out in a desperate attempt to make Jordan stop. "I am sorry! Please. I am sorry."

"Damn right you are." Jordan nudged Lee roughly in the sorest part of his side, where new black-and-blue flowers would soon be blooming. "You don't know how lucky you are, Lee. Anyone else would have tossed your ass to the curb long ago. But I'm good to you, aren't I? You know I'd never really hurt you if you didn't need a lesson."

"No, Jordan," Lee whispered.

"Good." Lee heard feet shoving aside the mess around him and the heavy thumps of Jordan dropping to his knees, the man's vast weight bracketing his hips. "Are you still slick from last night?" He pushed a finger between the seam of Lee's ass and probed roughly at his hole. "Damn. That's one thing you do have going for you. No matter how hard I try, you stay tight as a virgin." He laughed, a braying sound. "At least I know you're not fucking around on the side."

He seized Lee's hair and yanked the curls, drawing up tears of shock and pain. "You aren't, are you?" he demanded.

"No! There is no one for me but you."

"Better not be. If I ever catch you fucking, sucking, or so much as kissing another man or a woman on the cheek, you're going to wish you'd never been born." Lee shivered, afraid

of what he suspected Jordan might do to drive his point home -- but then Jordan dealt his ass a hard slap and laughed cruelly. "I know what you're thinking, you pansy. I could, but I won't. You're not worth the time."

Lee shuddered.

"Clean up after yourself, will you?" Jordan ordered as Lee vaguely registered the sounds of him getting up and walking out. "I'm going for a shower."

"Yes, Jordan," Lee whispered, unable to move. He wanted nothing more than to curl up and die, to disappear where he lay. Love hurt.

The howl of -- rage? -- barely caused him to bat an eyelid.

The sight of Jordan plowing back into the filthy kitchen, horror written across his face, however, did.

"Oh, fuck *no*, they don't, whoever the hell's playing this game." Jordan charged back into the kitchen, wet feet slapping the floor. "God, it stinks in here! Jesus. Liam. Liam, are you okay?"

Lee flopped bonelessly in Jordan's arms as the man carefully turned him over. Carefully? He stared at the one who held him, vision blurry. This could not be Jordan. He wore the same clothes, yes, and he had the same voice, but Jordan would never...not like...

"Listen to me, Liam. Listen, listen, listen." Jordan shook Lee gently, trying, Lee suspected, to force eye contact. "They used me against you. They sucked my brain, my spirit, *whatever*, right out of my body and put me in this place. I don't know if it's real. I hope not. I think it's a shared dream."

"Dreams." Lee chuckled despite himself. "Who would or could influence our dreams, Jordan? Why should anyone want to?"

"They want to hurt you! They used *me* to hurt you. They played me. Made me beat you down. But they screwed up, see? Had to get one last laugh in. I saw myself in the bathroom

mirror, I looked into my eyes, and I remembered me. The real me, the man I know I am, not that self-satisfied asshole who'd do these kinds of things to you. I realized they wanted me to think what this 'me' had done wasn't real -- but that as far as you knew, it was all too real -- and I threw up. And now I have to fix it before they realize I've figured it out and scrape me out of here."

"Threw up? I will clean the mess..." Lee ventured.

"God. Don't." Jordan clutched him tight. "I love you, Liam. Please believe me. I'm not the man they've tricked you into believing I am. I would *never* hurt you."

Lee found himself laughing through dry, cracked lips. What harm would there be in honesty at this point, as Jordan had clearly gone insane? "Ah, but you did," he rasped. "Over and over. This was not the first time."

"Wrong. Look, I don't know where we are -- besides the obvious designation of shithole -- but this isn't us, not in the flesh, and this isn't where we belong." Jordan lowered Lee to lap level, then grasped Lee's cheeks between thumb and forefinger, shaking him firmly, but with a kindness such as Lee had never felt at his lover's hands. "There's a way out. There has to be."

Lee gave up on anything making sense. "What are you telling me? You are not yourself today?"

"Not the me you know right now. And this isn't you, either."

"Oh, really? Then who am I?"

"Someone who wouldn't lie here and take that kind of beating without raising a finger to defend himself."

Lee smiled. He wanted to enjoy Jordan in this mood, in the role of a chivalric knight, regardless of how confusing it might be, and thought a smile might be allowed. "A pretty thought, but not true."

Jordan growled and butted his head on Lee's chest. He came right back up, blinking. "Your blue crystal. What happened to your pendant?"

"Pendant?" Lee frowned. "You forbade me to wear jewelry when we met. You said it made me look foppish. 'Stupid' was the word you used." Really, he was quite enjoying this brief excursion into free speech. "I got rid of my rings, my bracelets, my ear cuffs, all of them, just as you ordered."

"Ordered. Right. Exactly the kind of thing a prick like me, *him* would do. Tell me you didn't throw them all out?"

Jordan's desperation puzzled Lee. Why would jewelry matter so much? "I secreted away a box beneath the bed," he confessed. "One piece is hidden there. I could not bring myself to dispose of that particular one, not even to please you."

"Tell me it was a blue crystal."

"No."

"Damn." Jordan grew red with anger, frightening Lee, but the fury did not seem to be aimed in his direction. "Okay. Maybe whatever it is still matters. Hang on. You okay if I put you down? No. Stupid question. God, I wouldn't drop a cockroach in here if I had any kind of choice."

"Needs must when the devil drives." Lee chuckled, then wondered why Jordan gave him an odd look. He sighed as Jordan lowered him with great care, apparently to avoid jostling his injuries, and waited patiently for the man to take care of his business. They had danced to this tune before, and Lee knew how the song would end -- with more blows and cutting words.

There was nothing he could do but lie still and wait.

Jordan made a mad rush back to Lee's side. He had the small, wooden cigar box Lee had hidden beneath their bed. Sliding the splintery top off, Jordan dumped out its rattling contents.

A necklace. A cheap, tacky piece of junk jewelry. A pendant, yes, but crudely done and in the shape of a bulky horse's head. The fool's gold had long since tarnished to green.

Horses...

Wait.

"Damn it! This is junk!" Jordan brought his fist down on the horse's head.

Lee caught one glimpse of brilliant cerulean light and heard Jordan yell before the room shattered into pieces, sending him freefalling through a void where he knew no more.

Chapter Six

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

Though his eyes remained closed, Liam recognized the speaker in a strange, distant sort of way. He had heard the rounded tones before, although the Deep South accent threw his memory for a twist.

Who spoke?

And why was he floating? Truly floating, as he had seen in videos of zero-gravity. He hung like a hot-air balloon without wind to buffet it about, peaceful and still. His aches and pains had subsided, from Silas's stab wound to the bruises of the Lilim to the marks of the Night Mare's yellow teeth to the wounds received from a simulacrum of his lover -- oh, that had been a wicked trick.

He felt whole, well, and healthy.

Obviously, then, something was deeply wrong.

Give me the courage to change the things I can, the voice went on, soothing as one of the good old breeds of priests at Mass.

An impulse to greet the speaker rose up strong and mighty, but if the truth were to be told, Liam did not have the heart at that moment. Memories of the hellish parallel life the

Night Mare had shown him -- he could only assume it had been the Night Mare playing a particularly cruel and cunning trick -- those memories tormented him, crawling through his mind like slimy, multi-legged insects.

He now understood what men meant when they claimed to want to scrub their brains with bleach.

Give me the wisdom to know the difference. The voice paused. *You look like you've walked through Hell and back, kid, but it's your turn now.*

"My...?"

Your turn to talk. No pressure. Just say whatever comes to mind. You're as clogged up with bad dreams as Fabio's bathtub drain is full of hair. So you gotta get them out. Purge yourself. Follow my lead. It'll help.

Perhaps it was the height of foolishness, but Liam felt nothing save benevolent affection from whatever entity spoke to him. He had no reason to trust them. And what if this was a dream within a dream, the Night Mare sinking him deeper in to her muck?

Don't be scared. Just talk. I did the Serenity Prayer, sans named deity. Your move.

Liam sighed. He combed his mind for something suitable as a rejoinder, and words fell from his lips before he realized he was speaking. "Make me an instrument of peace."

Good. Great start.

"Where there is hatred, let me sow love."

Just like you did for the Brothers. They were empty and bitter before you got to meddling. Now they're full of joy. Not a bad night's work.

Liam felt new strength flooding his limbs. He kept his eyes closed. "Where there is injury, forgiveness."

Not gonna be as easy. Don't let the Night Mare's boogedy-boo twist on Jordan infect your head. But, that's a start.

"Where there is doubt, faith."

It's a cliché, but you gotta believe in yourself, kid. This is only half true, but in the end you're all you can count on to know right from wrong.

"Where there is darkness, light." Liam paused. "I recognize you now. You are the Heart of Amour Magique."

I am, and let me tell you that when it comes to shedding light, you done good. The blue light from the Tear you have around your neck, for example. A tear wept by Lilith when she was forbidden to sex up a thousand demons a day. Not what you'd call purity, huh? Wrong. That Tear is the essence of sex, love, desire, passion, lust, you name it. Power that some ignoramuses would consider nasty, but it's pure, son, pure as the driven snow. Can't even the Night Mare touch you for keeps with your pendant Tear.

"Where there is sadness, joy." Liam's voice broke on the last word.

I know. I know. They, the bad guys, they made you hurt like this. It's not your fault.

"I killed my son," Liam confessed. "I lied. Lyche did spring from a single drunken metaphysical experiment with Mezriel. I looked into his eyes and saw, beyond the false innocence, a wicked and evil cunning and a lack of any other emotion. A sociopath, a psychopath, call him what you will. He had the might of an Asmodai without the title. He could have risen up to lead the Lilim if he had worked me around to obey his will. He would have slaughtered me while lisping promises of love. So I killed him. My child, and none will ever know his name to mourn him save for the Lilim and myself."

Yeah. I saw. For what it's worth, I'm sorry.

"Silas," Liam remembered aloud. "The weasel dabbled in dangerous waters to try and take me down. Sweet mercy, what a fool. But I wonder if I killed him, too. Is his blood to be on my conscience as well?"

Nah. The little bastard's coming to. He'll have a fuck of a headache and a whole lot more respect for you. Besides, he's out on his ass soon. I made up my mind about that. Once he's not a part of me, he's powerless. Not someone to worry about.

“The Night Mare.” A full-body shudder racked Liam’s frame. “The things she showed me. The evil my Brothers caused.”

Balls and bullshit, son. They won’t do any such things nor suffer the miseries she showed you.

“She claimed they were true dreams.”

You pegged her when you said the future was fluid. It is. Ain’t nothing set in stone until it’s already happened. Well, okay, not even then, since history is written by the winners and some pretty sore losers, but you get the point. Those dreams were only true, as in “could come to pass,” not as in “will be for sure.” Trust me, son. I know men, and I’ve had a good gander at all your Brothers. They ain’t saints, but they ain’t the kind of killers and crazy men she made them out to be, either.

“And Jordan?”

Don’t be a jackass. You know the boy worships the ground you walk on. I’m personally jerking the Mare’s tail into a knot for that particular trick. You were never this “Lee” you dreamed about, and neither was Jordan an abusive ass. Lies, son, all lies. You’ve got to see them for what they were: stinking falsehoods.

Liam shivered. “I understand, and I want to believe, to accept. Yet they seemed so real, these dreams. I fear to open my eyes to find I have been dreaming again, or that I am dreaming still.”

Don’t be. You’re safe here.

“I have heard as much, time after time.”

True, but I’m not letting you walk out of here -- hell, I’m not letting your feet touch the floor -- until you and I have a chat. I’m not gonna hurt you, son. Swear.

“Holding me captive is not hurting me?”

Boy, don’t test my patience. I’m not keeping you a prisoner so much as I am keeping the monsters out. Once more with feeling: you’re safe. I guess it’s up to you to trust me,

though, huh? Can you still trust, Liam? Don't tell me they broke you already, after all these centuries.

Liam felt a wash of rage. "They have not so much as chipped my spirit!" he snapped, opening his eyes.

He floated in a room so entirely white he could not tell up from down, floor from ceiling, or left from right. His nakedness had been covered with a form-fitting white garment which contained his body but could not restrain his hair, the curls spreading out in a halo.

Much better. And, hey, just so you know, I'm behind you.

"How do I --"

Oh, right. You've never done zero-G before. It's like flying, except without wind resistance. I'd circle around, but I'm kinda stuck where I stand.

Concentrating, Liam found himself able to twist his hips and pump his arms to crawl around one hundred and eighty degrees. The sight that greeted him, an oddly-shaped heart carved from a massive diamond, made him grin broadly. "Hello, old friend."

The Heart glimmered at him, twinkling like a Christmas tree. *Hey, kid. Long time, no see.*

Liam winced.

Oh, yeah. Not a good phrase for you tonight. Me and my big mouth. Er. The Heart juddered, much as a human would cough or clear their throat. *Let me get a look at you. I had a nice view of the internal -- couldn't help it; you were broadcasting like Casey Kasem on PCP -- but I want to see the shell. Hmm. Looking good. Nice human disguise. Take you a long time to get the details down right?*

"A century or so," Liam admitted. "Most of which I spent in observation. I examined the shapes of eyebrows alone for ten years. Noses for five. Eyes for fifteen." He found himself grinning. "Cocks I already knew about."

And you made yourself a prime piece of man-meat, didn't you? Kind of obvious there in your, um...

"Leotard?" Liam suggested dryly.

Yeah. Leotard. Let me tell you, it leaves nothing to the imagination.

"Yes." Liam patted the fabric. Slick as oil, smooth as spider silk, so tightly fitted it might have been a second skin. His blue crystal Tear hung around his neck on a new chain of golden links, the sort of craftsmanship that sang with magic. It could be nothing else but a gift from this, his old friend. "Thank you for the courtesy," he said, fondling the necklace. "I would be lost without...I..." He hastily changed the subject. "Do I mistake myself or are you expressing displeasure with my outfit? I can only assume you chose this garment, as I know I did not. Why did you clothe me?"

Symbolism, I guess. Those other bastards stripped you naked inside. I figured the least I could do was give you some armor.

"This is like unto chain mail, then?"

Pretty much. As long as you wear this, can't nothing cause you harm, not from blade or from bullet or from fists or teeth or nails or any other nasty trick someone might have planned.

"Others. I have been attacked several times over. Do you mean say there are more who would come for me?"

Son, you have more enemies than most men alive. Granted, the majority of them are smart enough to stay out of your way. But then, there's always going to be a few who are brave or stupid enough, sometimes both, to try and get a dig in when a man's down. You really did wipe yourself out over those Brothers. Dividing your essence into twelve parts? I ought to smack you upside the head. When you divided, you gave them a chance to conquer, so hard as this might be to hear, you did bring the whole mess down on your head all by your lonesome.

“Yes.”

I think I know, but let’s hear your answer. Why’d you risk so much on a bunch of sad-sacks?

“Because they needed me. Because they would have lived long and loveless lives without my help.”

So would hundreds, thousands of others. Happens every day. Why these men?

Liam pinched his lips shut.

You don’t want to confess. Fine. I’ll do it for you. They all remind you way too much of yourself. Bree’s bad attitude, Collin’s lack of compassion, Simon’s rotten luck, Micah’s sense of entitlement, Quentin’s grief, David’s shyness, Laurence’s closet space, Christian’s desperation, Alex’s habit of flirting and getting his ass burned, Allen’s belief that no one could love him the way he is, and Harrison’s cynicism. Every one of them done wrong by love or by life and hurting bad.

“Please. Do not.”

Finding those guys lumped together was like a chance to put right a few buckets full of your old wrongs. You figured that if you helped them, part of your nasty slate would get wiped clean.

“I did not do it for myself alone,” Liam protested.

Didn’t say you did. Well, okay, I did sort of imply it. Imply? Infer? Imbue? I’m near about as old as you are and I’ve never figured out the difference. Anyway, yeah, it wasn’t all about you as such. The thing we’re focusing on here, Liam, is what sets you apart: you care about people for their own sake. You might well have put your nose in the Brothers’ business even if helping them hadn’t been an act of contrition. Hell, no “might” about it. I know you. Been keeping my eye on you, so to speak, since you walked away from the Lilim. You caught my interest, and I’ve gotta say you’ve restored some of my faith in humanity, which is kinda funny since you’re not human at all.

“Thank you. May we pause in this examination of my character? I grow tired of hovering here like a crib mobile. Would you be so kind as to set me down?”

In a few. We’ve still got something else to talk about. Someone else, I should say.

Realization sank in, a dark weight in Liam’s stomach. “Jordan.”

Bingo. Liam, you know you’ve got to do the right thing by that boy. He’s a good man, a decent man, and he’s in love with you. You said good-bye, sure, but you know he’s too damn stubborn to take one “no” for an answer. You’ll have to lay it all out again, plain and simple and too clear to deny.

You don’t have a choice. You know what you have to do.

* * * * *

“Easy does it, easy. My God, you’re heavy. Not enough fat on you to grease a muffin tin, sure, but damn.”

Jordan struggled against Lilith’s attempts at helping him get upright. “Give me a sec, and I’ll do it myself.” His voice sounded muffled, as if he were speaking through a gag. His tongue felt thick and unwieldy, too.

Remembering where he’d been and what he’d done -- they’d worked him like a puppet, but it had still been he who had hurt Liam -- made him sick in body and mind. His soul felt violated. What did he matter, though? Liam was the important one, and he, Jordan, he’d...he’d...

It was almost too much to think about and, God, all he could hope was that Liam would forgive him some day.

He wouldn’t blame the incubus if he couldn’t.

“Oh, man.” Jordan put a hand to his forehead, which had decided to help matters by sending him a stabbing ache behind one eye. It was cowardly of him, but he couldn’t stop

himself from grabbing at a momentary distraction from the filth stuck in his thoughts and the ache in his heart. “Who *was* that bitch, and did she kick me in the head?”

“Knowing her, she probably did. And she's a nag I'd've liked to have sent to the glue factory centuries ago, except she's immortal, and the powers that rule this dust ball of a planet say she has to stay. She's a dark mirror people have to look into from time to time, but she loves spending the rest of her days and nights playing torture games.”

“That's helpful.” Jordan ground the heel of his hand against his forehead, just above the literally blinding pain. “She have a name?”

“Night Mare.”

“Figures. Okay, I'm getting up now. One, two, three --”

When the dizzy spinning of the room cleared, Jordan found himself looking up into Lilith's face, which held a mixture of amusement and concern.

“You want to try for four, five, and six?”

“Maybe I wouldn't refuse a hand up this time.”

“Good boy. I like men who can learn a thing or two, and I love guys who aren't afraid of accepting help from a woman.” Lilith took Jordan by the arm. Between the two of them, they had him hauled to his feet, then parked him hastily on the beer crate for stability.

The room went on another tilt-a-whirl ride, but Jordan managed to keep his seat. He wanted to spit to get the filthy taste of the Night Mare's stink out of his mouth, and he would have killed for a shower to make his skin stop crawling. Burning the clothes he wore wouldn't hurt, either.

But none of that could heal the hack-and-slash gouges in his mind.

“Why did she do this to me?” Jordan asked, looking for -- he didn't know what -- from Lilith.

“Because she could. Because she thought it would be fun. Because she figured it just might break Liam. She probably hoped the realization of what you'd done would make your

brain snap, too.” Lilith mimed breaking a twig in half with the accompanying sound track. From her position crouched in front of him, she looked so young, so girlish and intense that he had a moment of disconnection, unable to reconcile the way she appeared with what she was.

He thought about that, then thought about Liam and cringed.

“Nuh-uh. Stop it. Stop right there.” Lilith slapped Jordan’s calf, a sharp sting of a blow. “Liam has never lied to you. I’d know. He was honest with you from day one about who and what he was.”

“He didn’t tell me what he’d been.”

“Would you have been all *True Confessions* about the things he’s been through?”

“It’s sort of like finding out your *Dream Date* is the Unabomber.”

“Hey, you remember *Dream Date*? Me, too. Used to be one of my favorites.”

“Still dancing with words. Don’t you ever get tired of waltzing around?”

“Yeah, I do.” Lilith sank lower, looking up at him through a fringe of spiky-cut hair. “What else do I have, though? But if you want me to give it to you straight, here’s my advice. No matter what anyone says or anyone does, don’t you stop loving my boy. He’s changed, and that’s not a sugarcoated half-truth. He might still be an incubus, but he is *not* a monster anymore. All he wants in this world is to help others and to come home to you. You asked before why you, out of all the men in all the world, mattered to him. I told you once, and I’m telling you again. You matter because you love him. Don’t let the bad guys win by turning your heart aside. Love him.” Lilith squeezed Jordan’s knees. “Love him, and don’t you ever let go. It’s the only way you’re both going to survive.”

* * * * *

“Is there no other way?”

Wish there was, Liam, but there's nothing I can see. I've been working to crack this nut from every angle, but the meat inside is always the same, and it's rotten through and through.

"But to do as you direct..."

It's not just me who thinks this is for the best, buddy. Some folks I can't name, not even to you -- which is an unfair bitch, and I'm sorry -- but for one, your mother.

"Lilith? I did not know Lilith even knew about Jordan."

Your ma doesn't miss a trick, especially when it comes to you. Yeah, she knows about Jordan. She's known since the day you two met, and she's let you have your fun, but the time for horsing around is over.

"She thinks I should turn away?"

Yeah. She told me so herself.

"Herself? When did the two of you come together?"

Not my secret to tell. All that matters is we agree. Jordan's got to go for keeps.

"But why?"

Liam, Liam...you gotta ask? It's because of who you are, what you are -- and who and what you were. You're on a mission of redemption, and you've made pretty decent headway, but you're nowhere near the finish line. Jordan's too good for you right now.

"But I love him. Does that count for nothing?"

Sometimes, Liam, love ain't enough. You know that better than most, even if you want to believe true love conquers all. This time around, you've got to face facts. If you tangle Jordan any deeper in your mess, he'll go down like the Titanic. Lilith and I and a few others all see eye-to-eye on this.

"I cannot bear to..."

You don't have a choice. The Heart of Amour Magique sounded gentler than the most ideal father. *I can give you a chance to say good-bye. Bring his spirit and yours together in a safe room, no monsters, and let you find some closure. Hey, cheer up. When one door closes, another opens, right? Jordan's gonna hurt, sure, but I'll help. I can make him forget any of this ever happened.*

"Wholly?"

It'd be the merciful thing to do. He'll forget you, and he'll move on. I can see one possible path for his future, and if I nudge him just right, he'll walk that road. Get the degree in mythology he's always yearned for. I can see him on a stage, taking that hard-won diploma in his hand. Diplomas. Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate. See him taking a job at an Ivy League college, setting students on fire. They'll love him, not exactly like you did, but he'll have more friends and admirers than he can count. He'll write books, all kinds, from fiction to study texts, and he'll bring some belief in magic back to the world. Ripple effect, right? Because he'll believe and so many people'll believe in him, he will be a gateway. He'll make the world a better place.

"Alone?"

No. He'll meet a man, a good man, not a big star or a flashy type, but a quiet guy who'll do that whole wind-beneath-his-wings schtick. Not some immortal who flies in by night and goes playing superhero by day. Someone Jordan can come home to every night and wrap his arms around, kiss, make love to, and share meals with. Who'll keep the fires burning and be faithful so long as they both shall live. Do you see what I'm getting at here?

"Yes." Liam bit his lip, breaking the skin. Thanks to the protective powers of the white clothing he wore, the small injury closed immediately before he caught a mere hint of the taste of blood. "Would that I could be such a man. Be *that* man."

You can't. You are what you are, buddy.

"For him, I would trade it all."

Not allowed. You can't swap immortality to be a real boy like you would food stamps for marshmallows. He needs someone like him. Someone human, and Lee, that can never be you.

"I see. I only...I do not know if I am that unselfish."

You can be. And you are going to do what you have to. Aren't you?

"Yes!" Liam snapped. "You have made yourself perfectly clear. I have no choice. Jordan is better off without me. Those who chase me will leave him alone, and my sacrifice, my pain, they will allay the beasts for a time. Long enough to carry on putting right what I shaped to be wrong."

It hurt, oh, how it hurt to even think such a thing, but the Heart was right -- Lilith was right -- and Liam knew, deep in his heart, he could not cause Jordan any more of the pain that came with loving a creature such as himself.

Liam made himself say the words, to give them the power of shaping a reality. "I will let Jordan go for good and for all time."

Good boy. The Heart's inner fire warmed from a glimmering gleam to a painfully blazing white, forcing Liam to shut his eyes and turn away. *Hang on tight, Lee. You're going for a ride.*

Chapter Seven

Jordan sat poised on the edge of his beer crate, a splinter poking him where it ought to have been cause for a major ouch. He held one finger raised in the air. A coffee cup balanced between his knees, half full and slopping over as he'd moved forward to make his point.

Hell, even his toes looked indignant, flared out and bent at the joints.

Lilith poked him gloomily, not expecting a response. He stared directly ahead, eyes wide open, but not seeing a damn thing in the control room. The coffee spill hung in mid-air, drops of scalding black java frozen in time where they'd been heading for his bare feet.

He'd gone somewhere, or been taken -- *again* -- and no one had seen fit to leave a note.

"This is really starting to yank my chain," she muttered."

* * * * *

"-- and okay, *now* I'm pissed." Jordan finished his complaint with a drawn-out snarl of frustration. "I get it! I'm not in Kansas anymore. Satisfied?" he yelled to who or whatever might have brought him there, in case they'd hung around to watch the show.

He dragged a hand through the short bristles of his hair. "Whoever you are, could you at least tell me where I am? A hint? I'll go for charades or Pictionary if you want to make me

dance for the answers. See? Here's my pride on a silver platter. Now cough it up. What kind of place is this?"

Answers failed to come. Jordan growled under his breath and took stock of his surroundings. Everything he'd seen in *Amour Magique* -- where he assumed he still was, albeit in one of its tiny multiple-pocket universes -- had blown his mind for one reason or another. He'd glimpsed dragon caves, hotel rooms, way too many bars, and a swimming pool big enough for fifty mermen and their pals.

This, however? This freaked him out.

He was standing in a room that could have been a cover spread for *Home & Garden*. Some kind of kitchen, the kind a man on his own would appreciate even if he lived on beer and take-out pizza.

Warm, honey-toned woods with pale, butter-colored paint for accents, gleaming clean flooring, illuminated by natural warm light streaming in through a window over the sink. Potted plants -- herbs, Jordan thought -- grew lush and verdant on the sill, matched by other growing things carefully placed around the room. The homey table with its ladder-back chairs had been set for two, and though there was no food in sight, Jordan could smell a feast being prepared: savory roasting beef, the tang of Caesar dressing and bite of red onions, the sweetness of apples boiling with cinnamon and raisins.

It was, down to the last detail, the kind of kitchen he'd idly dreamed about building from time to time. The only thing missing was...

"Not Kansas, nor are we in Oz," he heard the last person he'd expected, but the very one he'd hoped for, say quietly behind him, a world of carefully guarded emotions in the tone. "You have never visited Kansas, so far as I know. You were born in Montana, were you not?"

"Liam," Jordan breathed, pivoting to face his lover. No sooner seen than he'd pounced on his main man, swinging Liam up into a bear hug. "Jesus God, I was starting to think I'd

never see you again.” He paused. “Do you remember what happened in that disgusting dream apartment?”

“I do.” Liam kissed Jordan lightly. “And I forgive you.”

Jordan didn't trust his voice, but pressed his mouth against Liam's forehead, breathing deeply.

“Are you well?”

“*You're asking me?*” Jordan shivered. “Yeah. I'm fine. But... I have to ask you something. Don't get mad.”

“I swear I will not. Ask.”

“You are the real Liam, aren't you? 'Cause if you're not, I'm going to kick something's ass for playing yet another sick joke. And what are you wearing? Is that a leotard?”

“Yes, unfortunately so. It is a long story; please, do not ask. You look quite fine in jeans only, neither shirt to hide your chest nor shoes to conceal your feet.”

“Hey, I'm not complaining. I'm enough of a pig to appreciate the way a man looks in tights.” Jordan frowned. “That came out wrong.”

Liam shook with mirth. “Peculiar clothing or not, I am the Liam you know in the real world. However, can you trust me when I make the claim?” Soft hands petted the short hairs on the back of Jordan's neck. “It is, as you say, one hell of a catch-22.”

“No kidding.” Jordan hugged Liam tighter. Liam, bless his heart, hung on like one of those little clinging monkeys, arms and legs wrapped around Jordan's larger bulk. “I could be walking into a bear trap, I know, but it feels so good to hold you and hear you, I pretty much don't care. The Liam I know would sooner cut off his left nut than lie to me, so I'm gonna hug, er, squish you to death, here.”

Jordan didn't understand why Liam uttered a soft cry and pressed his face to his chest. He wasn't much good at the comforting thing, which came so naturally to the guy in need of some, but he tried his best with some awkward pats on the back and a few rocks back and

forth on the balls and heels of his feet. “Shh, shh,” he improvised, thinking, with a slight internal giggle: *what would Lilith do? WWLD? That’d make a cool bracelet, or maybe a T-shirt.* “Shh.”

“I have not said anything of importance yet.” Liam sniffled. Another thing about the little guy, which Jordan secretly admired: he wasn’t the least bit ashamed of crying. He didn’t think it made him less of a man. The rules might have been different for incubi, but Jordan doubted it. Either way, Liam cried with those who mourned and laughed with those who celebrated, shook hands with his feminine side and did his own damn thing without apologies.

Liam was Liam, plain and simple. Unless he had some plan for a guy or gal, Liam was a love-me-or-walk-away kind of guy. Take him as he stood, or don’t bother.

“I can always tell when you are thinking very hard about things,” Liam teased with a glimmer of returning humor, tickling the ridge of Jordan’s right shoulder blade.

Jordan squirmed -- not fair, Liam knew that was a hot spot -- and gave the little guy a friendly shake. “Hey! Behave, you. You don’t want to spoil my happy over getting to see you again, huh?”

Liam’s smile faded. “No. I do not.” He looked away, then tugged at Jordan’s grip. “Put me down, if you please. We must talk, and it will be far easier to say what I must when we are not intertwined like two parts of a challis loaf.”

Uh-oh. There wasn’t a single soul on earth, young or old, who didn’t get cold chills at the words “we have to talk.” They were about the worst ones you could hear, bar “let’s just be friends.”

“I can all but hear you thinking again,” Liam said, refusing to look back. “Please, if you ever loved me, put me down.”

Loved. Past tense. Oh, Lord, that’s not good.

He’s really going to say good-bye, isn’t he?

Part of Jordan wanted to hang on, matching his human strength against Liam's demon might, proof that in some cases size really didn't matter. Part of him wanted to put Liam down, all right, maybe somewhere high up where he'd dangle like a rag doll and stay put until Jordan had had *his* say.

Part of him knew he had to face this like a man, and it was that part which guided him through easing Liam to the floor. A stray beam of sunlight glimmered across Liam's pert face and his tentative smile of thanks. He looked maybe eighteen years old, but with the weary weight of Methuselah's wisdom on his back.

"You are and always have been the sweetest sight for sore eyes." Jordan wished he could kiss the sadness off Liam's down-turned lips -- not a frown, but not a happy face, either. "Why you love me, I don't expect I'll ever really understand." He exhaled, touching one autumn ringlet, twining the curl around his thumb, acknowledging the bad feeling that demanded to be addressed. "I'm getting the feeling I should have said 'loved' instead. Am I right?"

Liam clutched his blue crystal pendant. "Jordan, as often as this is a false statement made to justify one's unpleasant actions, please believe me when I say what I do will hurt me far more than it hurts you."

"Uh-huh." Jordan shoved his hands in his pockets. "Want to tell me how it's going to hurt you more? From where I'm standing, this -- and just taking a wild guess here, you're breaking up with me. *Again*. -- is really damn painful. Sticking a pitchfork into a wall socket kind of painful. So let's hear it from you. How bad does this hurt?"

"Perhaps along the lines of being the wall socket probed by your pitchfork?" Liam toed the sparkling, obnoxiously cheerful linoleum, tracing its green-and-cream colored pattern. Avoidance tactics. Jordan knew those by heart. Distract 'em from the heartbreak and never look 'em in the eye when you leave 'em. It was a chickenshit move, and one he'd have thought beneath Liam.

Guess he'd been wrong.

A pregnant pause, three trimesters and ready to pop, hovered between them. Jordan had never thought he'd see the day. Somehow, he'd always assumed that while Liam came and Liam went purely by nature, he'd never leave for good.

"So this is it," Jordan said for the sake of breaking the silence. He spoke the words he thought Liam wanted to hear, clean out of fight to press on with. "You want to tell me why? All I'm asking for is an explanation. And you, Mr. Chatterbox, ought to have no trouble granting my wish. I've heard you talk for hours on end about the price of fresh tea leaves. Spill. Please. Let me know why you're walking away."

"There is nothing left to say." Liam's stare had fixed itself on one of the potted herbs close to hand. "I need not explain myself. We have had our fun, but now the dalliance must end."

"No. That's not an answer."

"I have no other reply to give."

"Tell me this, then. *Are* you pushing me away to try and keep me safe?"

Liam's flinch told Jordan all he needed to know.

"I don't need your protection, Liam. I don't want to hide under some kind of cover fire. In case you hadn't noticed, after all we've been through tonight and since we've known each other, I'm still here. *I'm still here.*" Jordan discovered he had some strength left after all. Be damned. "I'm a big boy, Liam, and this game might be out of my Little League, but damned if I don't still have a Louisville Slugger ready to beat on the bad guys with."

"Baseball metaphors. Such a fixation on sport. Do you think this is no more than a momentary amusement?"

"Are you even listening to me?" Jordan begged. "I *know* this is life and death on whatever kind of scale things-that-go-bump-in-the-night use. I'm trying to say I've got your back, and it doesn't matter if you try to push me away. I'm not going."

“Yes. You are.”

“No,” Jordan retorted. “I’m not.” He broke off a sprig of the herb that had captured the incubus’s attention. The piney scent of rosemary filled his nose. “Rosemary, that’s for remembrance. You didn’t pick this bit of greenery by chance, did you?”

“Jordan, please. Make this no harder than it has to be. I should go.”

“Tough. I’m not a wizard, and I never took Latin, but I bet I can work some magic of my own. I did before with the salt and sage and holy water in the control room. Didn’t work then, but maybe it will now. Open up.” Jordan dragged the stalk of rosemary along Liam’s bottom lip. His lover’s mouth opened reflexively, and the second it did, Jordan thrust his bit of herb onto Liam’s tongue. He snapped a second bit of rosemary and ate it himself, the taste sharp and bitter. “There.”

Liam’s lips were pursed, as if he held the herb balanced on his tongue and didn’t dare swallow or even taste it more than he had to.

“Eat,” Jordan ordered. “I’m working a charm, and if you don’t put that down your gullet, I’ve got some other ideas up my sleeve. I’m a wellspring of creative thoughts, Liam, although you already knew that. *Eat.*”

Confusion, wariness, despair, and resignation crossed Liam’s face before, finally, Jordan saw his throat muscles work in a swallow. “I have eaten. Are you happy?”

“Not yet, but almost.” Jordan held his incubus tightly to him, chest-to-groin, giving Liam no chance to escape. “You’re too short for a heart-to-heart, but I’ve said that before, haven’t I?”

“You have.” Liam twitched, starting and aborting attempts to hold Jordan in return. “What are you doing? Give me my own answer.”

“I’m asking you for one last favor, lover-boy. I want to say good-bye in style. One for the road.” He paused. “Yeah. Sounds crude. If you want flowery, then I want my last memory of you to be a good one. I want the last thing we do together to be making love. Not

fucking. Taking all the love you felt, that I still feel, and putting them together for the remembrance of a lifetime.”

Liam’s small frame began to tremble. “Do not ask me. It would put you -- us -- at terrible risk.”

“Maybe so. It’s a chance I’m willing to take, because, by God, I am not letting what we had between us end this way.” Jordan put two fingers under Liam’s chin, raising his face. The little guy’s cheeks were wet with tears.

Why was he doing this? He clearly didn’t want to. Why wasn’t he fighting back? What gave with the white flag? The Liam that Jordan had known would have pitched a royal fit at anyone who dared to tell him what he could and could not do -- and zapped them but good.

Someone, Jordan realized, had broken him, or come so near to breaking him that it made no difference in the end.

He’d let Liam think this was good-bye, then. Only *think* so. Jordan himself wasn’t going to quit, and he’d give those bastards riding Liam’s back something tough to chew on. “I love you,” he whispered before touching his lips to Liam’s. They both tasted of astringent herbs. “I love you. From the moment I saw you, I knew you were all I ever wanted. You loved me. I know you did.” He brushed Liam’s mouth in a second kiss, slow and gentle. “Let this be my last request.”

“No,” Liam breathed back. “Let it be mine.”

Jordan did, of course, know about demon strength. He’d also known Liam had always held back when it came to what they did in and out of bed.

But what he hadn’t known was how *much* Liam had kept in check. Or how much speed, for that matter. Jordan’s mind couldn’t keep up with what was happening to his body, how Liam had switched Jordan’s grip on the smaller man to vice versa, then thrown him to the floor. Didn’t hurt a bit, though it should have...and then Liam was on him.

Fingers attacked the zipper of Jordan's jeans, the metallic rasp loud as a rattlesnake's buzz. Liam muttered string after string of liquid syllables in his foreign language while he worked the jeans off his hips and down his legs, the incubus's movements jerky and frantic, racing against some kind of internal clock.

Jordan caught up with himself and tried to help Liam out only to have his hands slapped away. "*Nyet!*" Okay, that word he recognized, and even if he hadn't, he'd have gotten the point. Liam wanted this his way.

Not exactly what Jordan had been going for, wanting to put his personal stamp of ownership on Liam's forehead for all the beasts to see, but he suspected they'd note the incubus's rebellion glowing bright as a neon bar sign: JORDAN WAS HERE. Good enough.

Liam worked the denim down over Jordan's feet and tossed the pants aside. They knocked over a pot of mint leaves, clay shattering on the pristine floor, messy dirt flying in arcs and spatters. A few clumps bounced off Liam's arms, but he paid them no mind. He was obviously focused on other things, or namely, one thing in particular.

Ravenous as if this was his last meal, Liam took Jordan's half-erect cock into his mouth in one hungry gulp. He inhaled deeply -- he'd always told Jordan he loved his scent -- and hollowed his cheeks as he sucked.

Some professor had once lectured Jordan on humanity's survival instinct. In times of great danger, the urge to mate was second only to the urge to run, and if you couldn't flee, you fucked. Life's insistence on going on. Kind of hard to apply that to gay men, and he wasn't at all sure how it worked with immortals, but, *oh, God*, if whatever this was kept Liam doing that thing with his tongue, he didn't *care* what the imperative was.

Jordan dug his fingers into Liam's curls and hung on tight as the incubus bobbed up and down his cock. Jordan had gone from half-mast to full salute as soon as warm lips had touched skin. Dicks didn't care about angst; they wanted what they wanted when they wanted it, and they weren't shy about telling the world what they liked.

The way Liam moaned as he urged Jordan to fuck his mouth almost made Jordan come then and there. All his lover's joy in sex condensed down to the one sound, repeated over and over as he lavished Jordan's cock with all his might.

Only a fool could miss the undertones of desperation and pain beneath the sexual rush.

"Liam." Jordan was fast losing the battle against coming sooner than he wanted to. "Liam, stop. *God! Stop.*"

Liam growled, which Jordan took to mean "no." In mid-suck, the incubus slid down to press his thumb against Jordan's perineum and the far finger on his hole, using that good old demon muscle-power.

Jordan couldn't help himself. He shouted, spasmed, and came, flopping down where he'd started off, shamed at how long he *hadn't* lasted, but just about too blissed out to give a damn. But Liam seemed to hang onto him for dear life, kneading his hips as a kitten would for more milk while he swallowed every drop of spunk he could coax free.

As Jordan panted for breath, tasting drips of salty sweat, he watched Liam rise up above him. *For a little man, he sure can loom when he wants to*, Jordan thought, dazed. *Or did he grow?*

Something about him had definitely gotten bigger. That white leotard didn't hide a thing, and Liam's package looked ready to pop through the fabric.

Oh. Damn. No openings.

Jordan licked his lips. "Take it off," he said, knowing that was exactly what Liam wanted to do. "Be naked with me. Fuck me."

Liam swore, a incomprehensible word spat out with fierce venom. He tugged at the neckline of his leotard, but even half-stoned on an orgasm, Jordan could see that the garment wouldn't part ways with Liam's skin, not even so far as to get a finger underneath.

Jordan decided, for probably the twentieth time, that the things running this circus were prime bastards. He forced his wobbly limbs to support him and clambered up,

searching the form-fitting white suit for any kind of weakness or seam. No luck. They were both too horny to be over-particular, but frantic enough to check and double-check.

“It is *not* going to end this way,” Jordan growled, unable to pry even so much as a pinch of fabric off Liam’s skin to try and tear the leotard. “I have never once had you inside me, and I am not letting you go until I’ve had your cock up my ass. How come you never wanted to top, anyway?”

Liam barked a mixture of sob and laugh. “I loved the way you made me feel loved. As for the other, I think we have no choice.”

“That’s what they say. I’m not giving up.”

“Jordan, Jordan, stop.” Liam caught Jordan’s hands. He shook with the tension of sexual frustration, but after some definite effort, evidently cleared himself of the madness to rut at any price. “I want this as much as you. There must be a way. Let me but think a moment.”

Jordan reluctantly let go. He didn’t like it, but Liam was right. They’d been battering themselves against brick and mortar and gotten nowhere at all. There might be a way through, but it’d take careful planning.

Problem was -- did they have the time? Jordan felt an uneasy awareness of the clock Liam had mentioned a few times that night, its second hand sweeping by ever and ever faster.

What was it counting down to?

He stared at Liam, searching for answers.

He didn’t find the ones he’d sought, but he *did* come up with a wicked notion and put it into practice before he could think twice or better. He cupped Liam’s stiffened cock over the stubborn white suit, feeling the organ warm and hard and ready to fire. Liam sagged and groaned, clinging to Jordan with one arm around his shoulders.

Jordan could have laughed out loud for glee. Now this was more like it!

He dealt out sharp, biting kisses everywhere he could reach and did the best he could with his rough hand job. He couldn't get a decent pumping motion on, and the best he could do was tickle Liam's balls, but Liam sure didn't sound like he minded. He babbled on and on -- always had been a talker during sex -- and his eyes rolled back into his skull. He gripped Jordan's wrist, apparently half instructing him and half holding on for support.

Jordan angled just right for a hard kiss, thrusting his tongue in Liam's mouth, and squeezed Liam's cock with all the power he had.

Never had he heard a sweeter sound than Liam screaming, giving it up for the sake of love.

He held Liam until his lover settled down, shrieks fading into animal cries and then to whimpers, violent spasms to shudders to twitches. The damn white second skin didn't show a drop of moisture, but Jordan knew that had to have been a gusher of an O.

He pressed Liam to his chest and carefully eased them down to rest on their sides, Liam's head over his breastbone.

"Jordan," Liam whispered. "I would give anything to stay by your side. Do you realize this?"

The words were music to Jordan's ears. He nodded, bumping his chin on the top of Liam's noggin. "Same here."

"I have not been honest with you. No, no, do not say anything. I must speak my piece. I was sent here by --" he laughed. "By the closest thing I have to a ather Confessor. He bade me sever the ties between us for your own sake."

Jordan snorted. "Then he can stick that piece of advice where the sun doesn't shine."

"He has always known what is best for those who seek his counsel. He gives them the strength...and the tools." Liam unfurled his fingers. A sharp edge of silver glittered between them. "He gave me this without saying a word; in silence, it fell into my hand. I said nothing,

though I did not understand at the time. I do now. He gave me another choice, an escape hatch. For the both of us.”

Jordan knew he should move. Get some distance between himself and the small but nasty-looking dagger. God help him, though, he couldn’t budge. More magic?

Liam seemed entranced by the blade in his hand. “I hear him, or someone with his voice, speaking to me even now. Guiding me. They are disappointed in my weakness, Jordan, but I cannot regret what passed between us in this room.”

Jordan would have agreed, but his lips were sealed shut.

“They remind me of how I swore I would give up anything to be with you forever and always, and now they show me a way this can come to pass.” The knife quivered, its point slowly coming to rest over Jordan’s heart, positioned just so to pass between his ribs and into the aorta. “One firm push, and we would be safe,” Liam mused, full of wonder. “You would be as I am, if I used this enchanted knife to spill your blood. Unchanging forever. He says. But I do not...it makes no...we would still be in danger, yes, but I would not have to let you go...”

The tip of the dagger pierced the first layer of Jordan’s skin. A few small drops of blood welled out, running down into the hair on his chest. He was just barely able to look away from the wound, back to Liam, but he made it in time to see Liam's expression as it changed from frightened confusion to determination.

“This would be the perfect happy ending,” Liam’s gaze turned inward. “Too perfect. And it is never one the Heart I know would suggest. I have been lied to, and I have had enough. Enough!” He wrenched away, throwing the knife. It thudded hilt-deep in the wooden wall. “I will not do this.”

The screams of a thousand outraged souls screeched in a mighty chorus of fury, millions of nails scraping down chalkboards, and the force of their expelled air sending Jordan tumbling like a stray leaf.

Somehow, he managed to grab Liam and wrap his bigger body around the incubus as the cozy room vanished, and they were catapulted into an abyss, headed who knew where. Maybe into the final battle.

Side by side, into the breach.

Chapter Eight

His emergence into this new reality felt nothing like what Liam had experienced yet. No bumps and thumps, no sensation of weightlessness or cold -- in fact, no senses at all. He seemed to be blind, though he knew his eyes to be open. He could not even see the usual glowing light of his Tear. As previously, he could discern no surfaces, no up or down, and the only thing in his ears was the whole and utter silence he had only ever heard while in an undiscovered cave far below the surface of the earth.

He remained still, daring to hope that Jordan had not been injured and that if a foe was coming, that the next one would emerge soon and get the waiting over with. Jordan would not be accustomed to such things, regardless of what he might have seen and experienced in Amour Magique. Liam feared for the man's sanity.

Jordan? his lips shaped, though no sound emerged.

...here...

Nothing but a faint echo in his mind, and quite possibly a trick, but Liam would have sagged with relief were he able to without awareness of his body.

Jordan, are you injured?

...nah...fine...you...?

I am well, Liam telegraphed back. Telepathy was a skill he rarely utilized, as he considered the invasion of another's mind a cruel discourtesy. No mortal had ever been able to broadcast into his own thoughts.

Yes, yes, likely a trick, then, but in the middle of endless nothingness, who could help but cling to such a slender thread?

...where...?

I do not know, my love.

...danger...?

More than likely.

"Hey, kid." A second voice, brash and female and most definitely not in his mind, broke through the solid silence. "Wakey-wakey."

"Mother?"

The world reappeared with a *pop*, and the alertness of his senses returned in a flood.

Liam felt the chilly firmness of a tiled floor beneath him, the slight calluses on Jordan's hand in his own. He inhaled stuffy air that had never been sweeter; he blinked and saw the ceiling he gazed at, appallingly bland and textured after the fashion of an earlier era. He heard the low electronic hum unique to computers and the faint whine of television monitors.

The control room.

"Jordan?" Liam shook his lover's arm. "Are you with me?"

Jordan growled, albeit while squeezing Liam's hand. "Yeah, and with a skull-splitting headache. Again. What happened back there?"

Answers sprang to Liam's tongue, but he had no proof for any hypothesis. In the end, he simply settled on, "I fear I do not know."

“Great.” Jordan sighed. “When we get out of here, first thing I’m going to do is kick your ass. Then I’m going to drag you into the nearest shady corner and fuck your brains out.”

“A fair deal.” Liam hesitated. “Are we as one again, then? You have forgiven me for the error I made, thinking my actions were for the best?”

“I’ve got to teach you how to speak American English. Twenty words to ask me if we’re together again.”

“Twenty-one, to be precise.”

“Shut up.” Jordan’s thumb pressed the back of Liam’s hand. “This looks like we’re back where we started. Think we can get up and walk out of here?”

“I do not believe it would be wise. You have borne with me thus far; stand by my side a little longer. Or lie, as the case may be.” Liam sighed, his relish for the thick air in the control room fading. “I would be certain the danger has passed, but I doubt very much that, although I have won my battles, the war is over.”

“S okay. I’m with you. And you’re with me.”

“And ain’t this just the sweetest?” the female voice interjected wryly. “Hey, Liam. Over here, son.”

Liam rolled his skull on the unforgiving floor, turning to face away from Jordan, toward the rank and file of electronics. A trim cat, black as sooty coal, sat on a Mexican beer crate, daintily washing a forepaw. She wore a spiked collar and a mien haughty as Bastet herself.

He had seen such a cat before. “Mother? What are you doing here? I thought you would not be able to help or interfere.”

The cat twisted around to lick her shoulder. She sneered at Liam, whiskers lifting, then hopped lightly down from her box. Unblinking green eyes never wavered from him as she approached, not with the casual trot of an ordinary moggy, but the slow, rolling hunter’s pace of a wild panther. Were she not so small, she would have been frightening.

Liam had never seen a cat smile before, not beyond the Cheshire Cat of renown; physically, they were incapable, yet this one managed quite well. Never breaking stride, she stretched and swelled in size, reshaping herself perfectly so that when she reached him, the domestic cat had become the panther he had likened her to.

“Mother?” Liam sensed Lilith’s essence within the beast, but he had not seen this aspect of her personality in centuries: the huntress with prey in sight. “What are you doing?”

He caught a glimpse of vicious teeth, far too white to be natural, as Lilith roared. The bellow of sound trailed off into a chuffing not unlike a chuckle. She prodded Liam with one paw, claws sheathed. Her strength was enough to buffet him about, making him think uncomfortably of catnip mice.

For the first time in many, many years, Liam felt afraid of his mother.

“Liam, what’s going on?” Jordan hissed. “Big panther. Big-ass, bad-ass kitty. Why’s she staring at us? Are we dinner, or is this some new kind of head game?”

“Shh. I do not know.” Liam tried to catch the panther’s paw as it dabbed at him. “Mother, please. What *are* you doing?”

The panther chuffed again. She raised the paw she had used to toy with Liam and rested the leathery pads on Liam’s throat. Only a little of her weight lay behind the pressure of the paw, and it would matter not at all if Liam could not breathe, as he could not die for want of air.

Yet he felt another prickle of fear. Lilith held power over many things. If she desired, she might be able to end his life.

But why?

“Let go of the linebacker,” Lilith instructed, the panther’s muzzle unmoving, but her voice clear. “Hands apart, boys. Maybe I can and maybe I can’t with *you*, Liam, but I sure as shootin’ could do some serious damage to *him*.”

Jordan’s grip flexed and tightened. “Liam?”

“Do as she says, love.” Liam kept his outward appearance calm.

“Is that really your mother? She's been with me almost all night. I thought she was on our side.”

“Jordan, please. No questions. Obey her order. If I have any say in the matter, I --”

“You don't. Have any say, that is. This here is my show, kid. You wondered who'd be the final big bad, didn't you? Yeah?” The panther bared her teeth. “Ever stop to think about who put everyone up to all this?”

Liam could not have described what he felt -- horror, despair, betrayal? “Mother. Why?”

“Why do you think?” Lilith swatted Liam's face with the paw formerly on his neck, her claws out. The blow stunned him, causing his ears to ring, and left stinging gashes on his cheek, just as Mezriel had done. “You traded my Tear.”

The blood from her scratches tasted of copper and salt when Liam opened his mouth to speak and some droplets ran past his lips. “You said it did not matter. The Tear I traded was a lesser thing.”

Lilith's paw flattened on his throat a second time. “Yeah. I lied. You might have worn it, might have thought you owned it, but that Tear was *mine*. You traded magic as old as recorded time, and for what? A night on the town for you and your buddies? That gang of pathetic sad-sacks who would have -- *should have* -- grown old alone if you hadn't meddled? Sheesh. You deserve to be killed for the crime of sheer stupidity alone.”

“Do you truly intend to kill me, then?” Speaking around the pressure of the panther's paw proved more difficult than Liam would have thought, or perhaps Lilith pushed harder. He could not tell. “All I did, I did for what I believed to be best.”

“Ever hear about the road to Hell? Know what it's choked with?” Lilith's claws pricked the tender skin of Liam's neck. “Well?”

“I do know. Good intentions,” Liam rasped. “Very well.”

"Don't," Jordan warned.

"I can do nothing to stop her. She is far stronger than I."

"Liam, no. Please."

"Shh." Liam redirected his attention to Lilith. "I have one last request, Mother, if I may still call you by the name. No, wait. Two last requests."

The panther rolled its eyes, an unnervingly human gesture in an animal. "You're pushing your luck, kid. But fine. Name what you want, and if I feel generous I might play Santa."

"I want safety for Jordan. Unimpeded freedom for him to leave this place, and no otherworldly harriers to follow him or cause him harm. *Ever*."

"Hunh." Lilith rumbled thoughtfully. "And what's behind door number two?"

"A simple question. Why?"

The panther sank her claws a fraction deeper. "Why, what? I already gave you the 4-1-1 on what I'm doing and the reasons. You earned this, kid."

"No." Liam found himself smiling. "Why did you not see *this* coming?"

Without giving the panther time to react, he seized its foreleg and wrenched the limb, feeling tendons rip as he lifted it and twisted free, going up onto one knee, guarding Jordan's body with his own.

He wiped blood from his face and grinned. "I have my own powers, Mother, weaker than yours though they might be, and I will not go down without a fight."

"You son of a bitch! That hurt." The panther snarled, rising into the shape of a young punk woman, her jagged black haircut streaked with neon pink. She favored one leg, leaning heavily on the other. "I'm killing you *especially* dead."

Liam sensed Jordan moving behind him, the larger man's body getting his back.

"We can take her," Jordan whispered. "She's tiny."

“You judge the book by its cover, and that is folly. Am I not living proof? Besides, fear not. The trick was well done, but that -- that is not my mother. Perhaps it has not been all along. And with these words and my own strengths, I uncreate her false appearance. Show me who you really are.”

The false Lilith stamped her bad foot with disregard for the pain. “How did you know?”

“I did not. I guessed. The Lilith I know would never let me get the drop on her, as you might say.” Liam felt giddy, suicidal, yet gleeful. “I know for certain now, do I not?”

“Tricked me? Who do you think you are, some kind of Puck? Bah!” Faux-Lilith slashed the air. New scratches tore Liam’s other cheek. He heard Jordan make a stifled noise of pain, letting Liam know she or he or it had hurt his lover as well. “You want to know who I am? Check me out.”

Her form rippled, taller and paler, breasts disappearing and nose hooking. Silas stared down at Liam, rubbing his hands. “You’re mine,” he breathed. “I can’t believe it worked. I get to keep you. You’re keeping this club juiced forever, sex demon. With you around, on my side, the Heart won’t be able to get rid of me. I’ll live forever and this is gonna be my kingdom.”

“False,” Liam snapped. “I am not fooled. Silas is entirely lacking in the sort of power this challenge requires; he needed help from the Fey just to take me on -- and made an ass of himself before he failed. Show me who you really are.”

Silas spat, the gob of saliva sizzling as it struck the floor beside Liam’s knee. “Fine!”

The creature’s body shifted again, turning white and misty. Mezriel floated above Liam, chest-to-chest and shoulder-to-shoulder. Her breath smelled of frozen wintergreen and sex as she whispered icy words against his lips. “Love me as you should have, Asmodai. Return to your kingdom. Together, we rule the world. No more fear. No doubt. No pain. Join me; be King, be Asmodai. I bring Lyche back.”

“And Jordan?” Liam refused to break away from Mezriel’s dead blue stare regardless of how much he desired to turn his eyes. “What of the mortal I love?”

“Leave him here. He goes free, has good life, stays safe. We make sure he’s safe. Don’t need him. Only you. Only me. Me and Lyche.” Mezriel’s mist ruffled through Liam’s hair. “*My* love.”

“No,” Liam replied, feeling nothing but the cold. “Never yours. I know you to be dead; I am sure I am in the waking world and in control of my senses, and you cannot be here. Therefore, you are not real. Yours is not the true face of my enemy. Show me who you really are.”

Mezriel hissed. Her lips touched Liam’s with such a chill, he felt his mouth might crumble away like dry snow. “Your loss,” she whispered, and drew back up into a cloud of mist...

...which grew in size and shape, changing color from frigid blue-white into greasy green, brown, and gray. A stench of rotting meat and frothing horseflesh choked the air. Liam heard Jordan gag and heave; his own stomach flipped. “Do not try to frighten me. I say again: show me who you really are.”

With the sound of an outraged whinny, the Night Mare solidified before them. She snorted, huffing out sulfurous steam, pawing the floor with her iron hooves. Seen in the light for the first time ever in Liam’s memory, she proved more horrifying than her smell. She stood tall and strong, yes, yet the midnight horsehide hung in shreds from suppurating muscle. Dark liquids ran down her legs, fluids Liam would rather not identify. Her tail was no more than a few hairs on a stub of cartilage.

The worst was her face. A twisted mix of woman and horse, both sets of features jumbled together with one wide, terrified human eye and one empty socket. She combined the rictus of death from fear and the wicked glee of that which caused the terror.

She spoke into Liam’s mind.

You called me. I have come. Do you like what you see? I am terrible and beautiful, am I not? I rule the lands of Sleep, and I do not like jackanapes slipping in and out to tug on my mane.

She tossed said mane, its few hairs wispy, braided with bits of bone that clacked together.

I have planned this all from start to finish, and I am the one who brought you here. You think you are awake? Oh, no, little incubus, no. You are asleep still and will be asleep until the end of time, dreaming your way from one horror to another. And your lover, your precious human, Jordan? The Night Mare whickered. *I shall keep him as my groomsman and pet.*

A remote control struck the Night Mare between her fearful eyes. "Like hell you're taking me -- and he isn't yours, either!"

The Night Mare whinnied. *Look at the little man! So brave. He attacks me with a piece of plastic.*

"I am sure it was all he could reach. If you would be so kind as to let him rise, I would take great pleasure in seeing how your intended groomsman will take care of you."

You would let him fight me? A mortal? When you know what I can do to him?

"I know nothing of the sort. Peace, Jordan, though I love you all the more for what you tried to do." Liam sneered at the Night Mare. "Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on you. Fool me three times, and we are being ridiculous. Enough of these diversions and illusions. Show me who you really are."

The Night Mare's decaying lips drew back over yellowed horse teeth. She whinnied, the sound so much like human laughter that when it became that very thing, there was hardly a change.

Lilith stood before them once more, her hair tipped in blue this time as it had been the last time they met, and a henna tattoo of a reversed ankh on her cheek. “Hey, son,” she said softly. “A-plus and flying colors. Good job.”

Liam smiled, satisfied and relieved. “Yes, Mother. I thought so.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Jordan pled. “I’m confused. It wasn’t her but it *was* her, too? Are you both crazy or am I?”

A chuckle escaped Liam. “Jordan, now is not the time to riddle me this and riddle me that. Be silent and still until this is finished.”

Jordan growled without words. Liam waited but heard no more. He sent a silent *thank you* into Jordan’s mind, as well as *I love you*.

“You asked me ‘why’ I was doing all this,” Lilith prompted. “Want to ask again?”

“Will you tell the truth and admit you lied?”

Lilith laughed. “Yeah. All along. I had you fooled pretty good, huh? The Heart tried its best to warn you, but I noodled around in there and you weren’t hearing what he actually said after a few syllables.”

“Liam, I heard what you said, but give me a break,” Jordan blurted. Then, he turned to Lilith. “How did you do all that without me noticing? You were in here making coffee, for Christ’s sake. Watching the live feed and swearing up and down that you couldn’t interfere.”

“Jordan, hush. My mother lied about her lies. Did you not?”

“Yup.” Lilith sank into a crouch and petted Liam’s calf. “I’m good at what I do. Eve fell for the Big Yarn -- not one of my better moves, all things considered but, hey, she had my ex wrapped around what her fig leaf didn’t cover. I was pissed. I told the original fib. I gave birth to the Lilim. I’m the Mother of Lies. Which you’ve always known.”

“Indeed.” Liam wished she would come and take his hand.

Perhaps she read his mind, for Lilith did just that, nestling against his side while she held him. “Jordan can’t keep his yap shut, can he? He did bring up a good point, though, and

I'll fill him in. Jordy, you think Liam's the only demon who can pull off a simulacrum? I split myself a whole lot easier than he did. One part in here, talking to you, one part out there with Harrison for the hell of it, and a whole bunch of other me's doing their thing. Every single bartender your guys ran into, Liam, they were me in disguise. Except Dylan. I played his boss in that gig. I gave your guys a push when they needed one, and a drink when they asked. And the real me? I've been by your side the whole time, son."

"What about the monsters?" Jordan demanded.

"They were real, and really pissed. One more part of me hitched along for the ride to keep an eye on my boy. He beat 'em all but good."

"Then why --?"

Lilith snorted, blowing strands of hair off her forehead. "Please. Liam knows. Don't you?"

"A test," Liam replied. "As with pretending to be a false Lilith to see if I would spot the opening gambit of her final challenge. She needed to know if I was worthy of her efforts."

"Yeah. And I'm proud of you. You need to know that."

Jordan groaned. "I don't understand."

"Nah. You probably never will. This is kind of an incubus thing. And a mother-son gig." Lilith reached to tenderly brush Liam's cheek, healing the wounds she had dealt out. "He's a good kid. He fought the noble fight, won fairy-tale happy-ever-afters for eleven guys, and now it's time for number twelve, the magic number -- if he wants."

Liam puzzled over her words, wrinkling out their meaning. When the truth struck him, it nearly knocked the breath from his lungs. "You cannot be serious."

"Lucky twelve, Liam. It's yours if you give the word." She waggled his chin. "I know it's what you've wanted for a long, long time now."

"We are demons, Mother. Not gods," Liam protested, though his muscles vibrated with hope. "We do not have the power."

Lilith stroked his cheek with her thumb, as tender and motherly as he had ever known her. “You’ve known me since you were born, yeah? You still don’t know all I am. Part of the price of walking away from Adam was keeping secrets. I’ll get my ass kicked for what I’m working here, but I can kick back. I am many things, son. I am the maker of the Heart. I am the greed in Silas’s soul. The Night Mare is my daughter as much as you are my son. The Lilim, well, they are what they are, but Mezriel learned everything she knew from me. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“As am I, Mother.” Liam attempted, but found he lacked the strength, to take her wrist in his hand. He craved comfort, not a fight, yet could barely move. *Her doing, or merely myself at the last drop of my will?* “You knew I would pass the point of no return in what I had to do, did you not?”

“Yep.” Lilith bent to kiss Liam’s cheek. “You’re a damn fool, but you could be a great man. If you want this, you’ve earned it.”

“Earned *what?*” Jordan bellowed.

Liam laughed ruefully, as did Lilith. “Do you truly have the power?” he asked.

“I do. I knew this day would come, son. That’s why I gave you what you needed. You never knew, but you’ve carried the eraser to blank out your slate as long as you’ve had this.” Lilith wiped away one last smear of blood and salt from Liam’s face, then tugged at the pendant around his neck. The chain, forged of gold no mortal could break, snapped easily. She held the crystal, her Tear, in front of him, dangling from her fingers. “The question is, are you ready? I think so, but in the end it’s your call.”

“Liam, don’t. Whatever’s going on, don’t.” Jordan grunted as his straining finally brought him close enough to brush Liam’s back. “This is another trick.”

“No. No, Jordan, it is not.” Liam struggled to reach for the Tear. Lilith lowered the pendant until he could curl his fingers around its sparkling blue smoothness. “All this time,” he murmured. “All this time, and I never knew.”

“So, is that a yes or a no?” Lilith quizzed, one eyebrow lifting in a way that made Liam want to giggle. “I know what you’re going to say, but I need to hear it. Words have power, too.”

A surge of strength flowed from the Tear into Liam’s arm. “Yes.”

Lilith withdrew, settling back on her heels. “Then do what you gotta do, son.”

“Liam, no! Don’t!”

“Shh, Jordan. I have waited many years for this. Fear not. It is not what you think.” The Tear twisted in Liam’s clasp, elongating into a shard with a razor-sharp tip. “I will be with you forever and always, my love. You will see.”

The last thing Liam saw was Lilith’s sad smile, and the last thing he heard was her good-bye. “See you in another life, kid.”

Liam moved faster than Jordan could keep up with, knowing what he had to do. He could not let Jordan stop him for lack of understanding.

This was his *chance*.

He plunged the Tear into his heart, doing to himself what he had refused to do to Jordan, because now he knew it was the right thing. The point of the crystal was so sharp he felt neither sting nor pain.

Jordan grabbed Liam, clearly desperate in his shouted pleas for Liam not to go. Liam savored the feel of his lover’s arms around him, and then...

Then, he let go.

And then, it was all over.

Everything.

Silence. Blackness. Peace.

Waking.

Liam opened his eyes to see the nighttime sky above him, an arc of lightning splintering overhead. A sharp *crack!* of thunder followed immediately after. Rain cascaded on him in heavy sheets, soaking his skin, his new clothes -- jeans and a T-shirt -- his hair, and the lap his head lay in.

Jordan held Liam with an arm around his chest and one on his shoulder, their foreheads touching. Liam could not smell the salt as he would have been able to once, but knew Jordan wept for him, as did the sky.

Both shed healing tears.

"Jordan," Liam whispered. "Jordan, it's all right. Look at me. I'm okay."

Jordan snapped his head up so quickly Liam worried about whiplash. The linebacker wrenched and writhed them around, lifting Liam like a puppet and holding him at arm's length, staring.

Liam hung in Jordan's grasp, raising his face to the sky to laugh and drink the rain. "It worked," he got out through his giggles. "It worked."

"You bas -- how? *I saw you die.*"

"You did. I got better. Put me down?"

Jordan's eyebrows drew together. "Wait. Your voice. What happened to your accent? We're outside. How did we get outside? Shit! Where's the club?"

"They're both gone, I think. Along with a lot of other things, but I hope not the most important." Liam checked his package with a questioning hand. "Still there."

"I-I --" Jordan stumbled. "First, you're going to tell me what's going on. Then I'm either going to kiss you or kill you myself and make sure it takes this time." For all the anger and confusion in his voice, he carefully put Liam down.

Liam wasted no time scrambling into Jordan's arms, burrowing up against his lover's chest and resting his head on Jordan's broad shoulder. "I have so much to tell you," he murmured, "and now I have a lifetime to do it in. One lifetime."

Jordan's muscles drew taut. "Are you saying..."

"I am." Liam laughed again for sheer joy. "I wonder what it'll be like to grow old and gray?"

"You -- you -- my God. Why?"

"The balances tipped. I passed Lilith's test and earned a reward. Mother was free to help me then. Those aren't the big why's, either of them. If you have to ask why I gave up what I gave up, then you're a moron."

Jordan stuttered. Then snorted. Then giggled, chuckled, and finally whooped with laughter. "You little..." he said through spasms. "You gave up eternity for me?"

"I did," Liam agreed happily. "And we'd better be getting old together, or I'll try a little butt-kicking myself."

"You could *try*, little man. You could try." Jordan angled Liam's chin up. "So, what are you going to do now?"

Liam sighed, content for the first time in -- ever. "Live. Love you. Make sure the Brothers and their lovers are on the right track. Get a job." He winked. "Maybe I'll be a private investigator. You know me. I never could keep my nose out of things. Might as well put the skill to use."

Jordan shook his head and cracked up a second time. When he could, he tilted his head to fit his mouth against Liam's in a hot, hard, *human* kiss.

And beneath the thunderstorm raging in the Charleston sky, kissing the man he loved, Liam knew one thing for sure, for the first time, and forever:

It's good to be alive.

Here ends the tale of The Brotherhood, and here begins a new life for Liam.

Thank you all for coming along on this crazy ride. Blessed be!

 THE END 

Willa Okati

Although a relative newcomer to the field of e-publishing, Willa Okati has been writing since before she was old enough to pick up a pen. She thinks she knows where those dictated stories are hidden, but she'll never tell.

Willa is also very interested in the paranormal: magery, Wicca, New Age philosophy, transgender studies, and of course, writing. You can drag her away from the computer if you really fight, but you'd better be prepared for a battle.

Just so she doesn't sound entirely dull, Willa has her fun: she is a practicing member of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) and is involved in her community. She is owned by far too many cats, all of which have serious attitudes, and addicted to anything made out of chocolate or involving coffee. She is quiet, but has a very wicked sense of humor that springs out when you least expect it.

A secretary for eight years, she now writes full-time -- and wouldn't trade it for the world.

She loves to hear from readers, and always responds. You can contact her at willshenillshe@gmail.com, or feel free to visit her website to check out her work at www.willaokati.com.