

Friendly
PLEASURES
Jill Knowles

Loose Id

FIENDISH PLEASURES

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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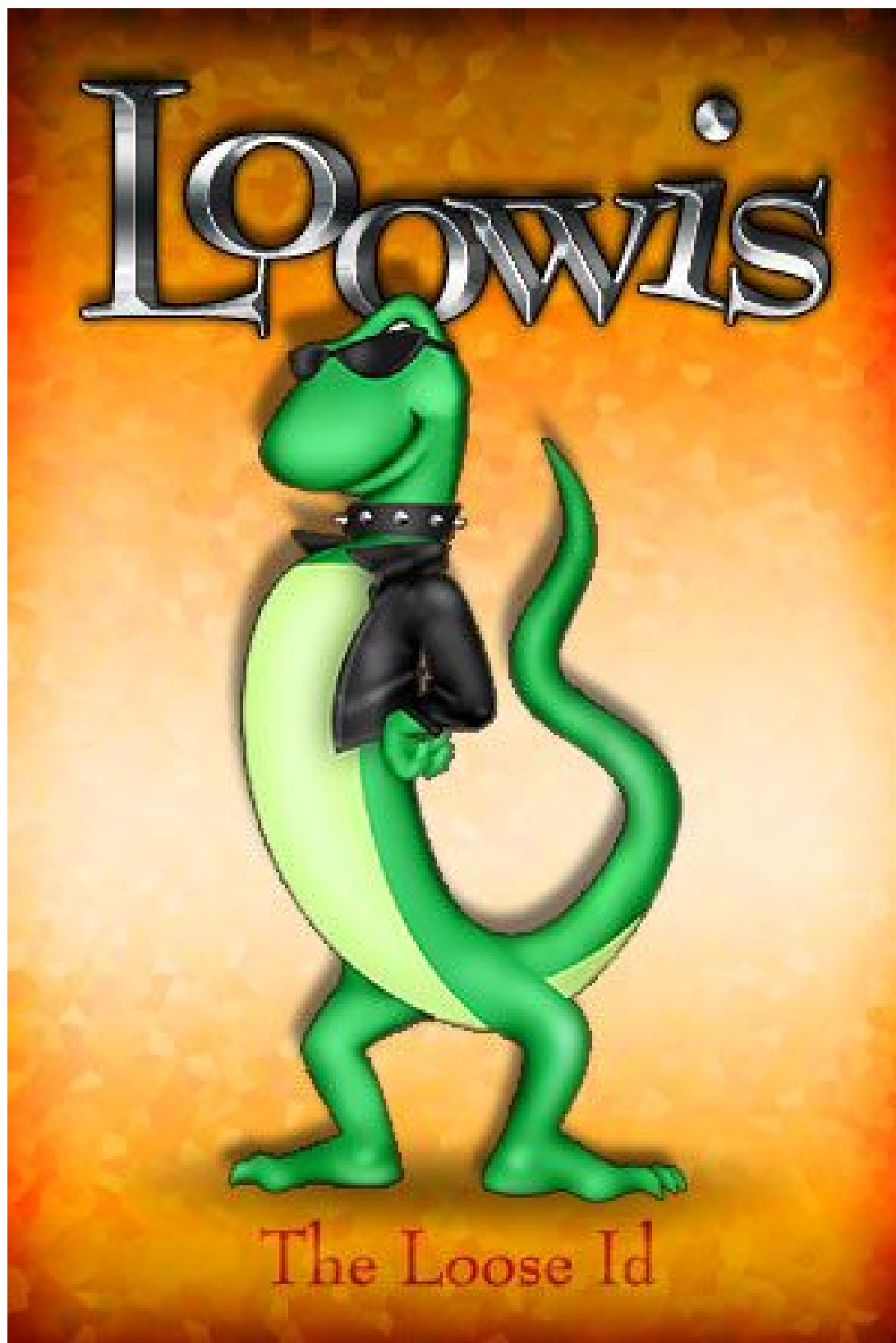
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ISBN 978-1-59632-587-6

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Barbara Marshall
Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin



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Chapter One

Josie turned the ignition off and rested her head against the steering wheel, letting the calm darkness of the garage interior seep into her. She was home.

She loved her job as a third grade teacher, but sometimes she wanted to run away and join the circus for a little normalcy. Her students were still unsettled two months into the new school year, and Josie was determined to discover why. She'd modified a scrying spell generally used with a map to work with an aerial photograph and examined the school grounds, hoping to find a cause. *Google Earth, tool for witches. Who knew?*

She'd found more than she bargained for. Imps. The baboon-sized predators were vicious, and a pack of them was more than capable of attacking and killing a child. Right now, the fence surrounding the school playground would keep them out, but the nasty creatures had to be removed before they hurt someone.

She needed to change her clothes and get the new marshal. *Great, I get to face my worst nightmare and a gorgeous guy at the same time.* Then again, showing him the location of the imp nest would give her a fantastic reason to spend some time with him. Rumor around town said he was conscientious and pleasant, if a bit standoffish. Even if he turned out to be a jerk, the imps would be destroyed, and that was the most important thing.

Leaning back, she rolled her head on her shoulders, feeling her vertebrae crack. With a last self-indulgent sigh, she grabbed her purse, the canvas tote bag holding papers that needed to be graded, and the binder with her next weeks' lesson plans, and left the car.

"Thanks for getting me home, Mirabelle," Josie said, patting the purple haze-colored Mini Cooper on its dark green ragtop. "You're a good car."

The car projected an aura of smug pink satisfaction.

Josie grinned, gave the Mini one last pat, and walked from the garage into the kitchen.

After dumping her things onto the table that separated the kitchen from the dining room, she trotted upstairs to her room, desperate to get out of her work clothes and into something comfortable. Blouse and slacks went into the hamper. Josie stood still for a moment, gauging the temperature, before pulling on a pair of faded knee-length gray sweatpants and a bright purple tank top with the words “Runs With Scissors” emblazoned on the front in canary yellow. Just the thing to wear on an imp-locating expedition. Imps hated bright color almost as much as she hatedimps. And if the new marshal was turned off by seeing her in ultracasual clothes that was too damned bad. She was tired of men who always wanted women to look perfect.

Back downstairs, she went to the utility room and grabbed her gardening clogs. The dark green plastic clogs were the closest things she had to closed-toe shoes, and were worn mostly for outdoor chores like using the weed whacker.

After grabbing her purse, she stopped just inside the front door and concentrated. Was there anything else she needed? Nope. With a brisk nod, Josie jogged next door. What a difference. Sofa’s house was a comfortable two-story painted butter yellow with white trim, black storm shutters, and a dark red front door. It shouted, “Hey, I belong to someone who’s whimsical, proud, and fun.” In contrast, the small slate gray ranch-style house Walker Morgan occupied muttered, “Rental.”

Stop stalling, Josie, she scolded herself. Raising her hand, she rapped three times on the front door, counted to ten, then twenty, and rapped again.

She’d just raised her hand to knock again when the door opened and Walker Morgan scowled at her. He was seriously yummy. Long, long black hair that begged to be touched, nice body, handsome face, and the neatest aura she’d ever seen. They’d waved to each other over the fence on the rare occasions they were outside at the same time, but she hadn’t had an opportunity to introduce herself yet.

As always, the first thing she noticed about him was his aura. Black and filled with glittering multicolored lights, it whipped and crackled around him like a thousand tiny serpents. It was all she could do to resist reaching forward to touch it.

“Yes?”

Her vision snapped back to normal. “There’s an imp nest close to the elementary school,” she blurted.

Dark green eyes widened. “My car or yours?” His thick, waist-length black braid slithered across his chest, almost as if it were alive. “Mokey,” he called, turning back toward the living room.

Josie tightened her hands into fists, the itch to unbind his hair and run her fingers through it almost a physical sensation. *Now is not the time to get hot and bothered over pretty hair.*

“Now, Mokey,” Walker growled.

An apricot-colored standard poodle trotted out and down the front steps. Sitting on the walkway, he looked over his shoulder and then lifted his leg and proceeded to lick his butt. Deep blue, shot through with green, swirled lazily around the dog. Interesting. Josie was certain he was much more than an ordinary dog, though she had no idea what that might be.

“Josie Reynolds.” She offered her hand. Walker gave it a brisk shake. His skin was warm and soft, his handshake firm without being overpowering. A shiver trembled through her at that brief touch. Her notoriously unreliable clairvoyance told her this contact was important to her future -- though whether or not that was a good thing, she didn’t know.

Shaking off the momentary brush of fate, she pulled her hand away. “Let’s take my car,” Josie said, stepping over the dog and walking toward the garage. Pulling her key ring from her purse, she pressed the garage door opener. As soon as Mirabelle was visible, she pressed the unlock button, ducked under the still-moving door, and climbed into the car.

Walker Morgan -- arguably the most dangerous being in town -- and his poodle waited patiently beside the driveway as she backed out. She had to bite her lip to keep from giggling at the oddness of that thought. The urge to laugh got away from her as Walker held the Mini’s backseat forward so that Mokey could climb inside.

“Not how you were expecting to spend your evening?” the marshal said, grinning at her. He had a lovely smile. White, even teeth gleamed between thin, kissable lips.

“Nope,” Josie said. “Let’s hope this is the weirdest thing that happens tonight.” A chill prickled the back of her neck. She looked around the neighborhood, searching for something that might explain the hint of unease she felt. Nothing. Well, except for the aspen tree in front of the Garcia place. Its energy was as brown and desiccated as its leaves. She made a mental note to remind Maria to give it a nice soaking and some fertilizer.

“Yeah.” He ran his hand over the black and purple leather seat, almost caressing it. “Do you know how many imps? The exact location of the nest?”

“I’m not sure how many, and the nest is in the willows along the river. I can get you within a few feet of the exact location.” Because she had no intention of getting close enough to pinpoint it further. She’d learned that lesson twenty-five years ago.

“Willows. Oh, joy.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. The flickers of light in his aura turned the color of soured milk.

He doesn’t like willows; curiouser and curiouser, she thought. No one in town, with the possible exception of the police chief, knew anything about Walker’s background or species. It was beginning to look like he had a broad range of experience.

He pulled his braid over his shoulder and toyed with the rubber band binding it. “How’d you stumble across the nest?”

The end of the braid was as big around as his wrist. Josie licked her lips, imagining his hair falling around her like a dark curtain. *Josie Reynolds, you are such a pervert*. She gave herself a mental shake. “I did a divination spell this afternoon, and I recognized the auras

imps give off.” Surreptitiously, she rubbed goose bumps from her arms. She backed out onto the street, hoping he wouldn’t ask further questions.

“You recognize imps’ auras? That’s a useful skill. Do you mind my asking how you learned it?”

“Yes,” she bit the words out. “I do mind.” The image of bloodstained pink sparkly shoelaces made her flinch.

“I apologize, Ms. Reynolds.” His aura pulled in tightly around him as he spoke, the warm yellow sparkles cooling to icy blue-white.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she forced herself to relax. “I’m sorry, Marshal -- ugly memories. I don’t talk about it. And it’s Josie, please.”

“Walker. And I should apologize for asking intrusive questions.”

“No worries,” she said. It struck her suddenly, how lost he must feel coming into a small town like Franklin’s Bend. “It must be hard, being an outsider in a position of power and not understanding exactly why people are happy to see you or resent the hell out of you.”

He glanced over at her. “It’s been interesting. I know the town’s had a pretty big shake-up in the past few months, but I don’t know the details. The police chief told me some of it when he hired me, but I understand he’s recently become the werewolf alpha and may have some biases.”

“Oh, yeah, I’d guess he does.” Chief Evans had defeated and killed the former alpha when it was learned that the creep had been sexually abusing young wolves. The town had been horrified to learn that someone they trusted had done something so revolting. Even worse, the abuse had gone on for several years without anyone noticing. Trevor Dawson had done an exceptional job of covering his tracks, and would likely still be alive had his mate not chased a rabbit into the wrong mine shaft and gotten a nose full of horror. She’d exposed her husband’s crimes and fled the town the same day, taking their children with her. Luckily, Rex Evans had stepped up and taken over the traumatized werewolf pack.

Traditionally, the chief of police and the marshal were the same person, but Chief Evans had insisted that he would only take over as the new police chief if someone else was given the position of marshal. The town agreed with his assessment that the former police chief/marshal’s crimes might have been discovered long ago if the victims had someone stronger than their alpha to turn to for help. They didn’t want to make the same mistake again, and the fact that Rex Evans made the suggestion gained him the staunch support of most of the townsfolk.

Josie turned into the school’s parking lot, pulling the Mini Cooper into a space close to the playground. Three children played on the swings, but otherwise the playground was unusually empty. Normally, there would be a dozen or so kids playing together after school on such a nice day. The sense of wrongness skittered up her spine. *What is happening in this town?*

Walker unhooked his seat belt and turned to face her. "Is there anything you think I should know? Things people know not to ask about? I'm getting a little tired of inadvertently stepping on toes."

Including mine. Ouch. "Don't ask about the old alpha." Dawson's betrayal of his pack and the townsfolk was still too raw a wound. "And whatever you do, don't walk on the courthouse lawn. It's got a two-days-of-bad-luck curse on it that no one's ever been able to break." Shrugging, she added, "If I think of anything else, I'll let you know. I was born and raised here, so I know things I don't think about knowing." A subtle scent teased her nostrils, a hint of musk and exotic spices. She snuck a glance at Walker, wondering if the intriguing fragrance was his.

Before she could do anything embarrassing, like lean over and sniff him, she put the car in park, turned it off, and got out.

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that." He left the car, holding the seat so Mokey could climb out as well. "Let's find those imps."

Chapter Two

Walker followed Josie, enjoying the way her brisk, no-nonsense strides made her calf muscles flex and stretch. He'd always been a sucker for a woman with nice legs, and hers were tanned, toned, and delicious. He wanted to run his hand over that taut skin, to see if it was as silky as it looked. His hand still tingled from their first contact. He'd felt the jolt of static electricity when her palm touched his, seen the flash of curiosity in her blue-green eyes. Something had passed between them, something more than an electrical accident.

Pulling his attention away from her, he scanned the playground, alert for any signs of imps or other nasties. The soft *snap-snap* of her shoes lent an oddly compelling percussion to the soft bird calls and distant sounds of childish laughter from near the playground equipment. He took a deep breath, scenting tar, dying grass, and a hint of sweet berries and rich cream. Concentrating on the subtle scent that teased his nostrils, he lost track of his feet and nearly stumbled as they left the asphalt and continued on soft grass. Walker gave himself a mental smack upside the head. *Tripping over your own feet is not the way to win Josie's admiration, fuzzbrain.*

Mm, delicious Josie. When he'd hoped to get to know his pretty brunette neighbor, he hadn't quite imagined this particular scenario. It wasn't a bad situation, though. Now he knew she had guts. Hopefully, she wouldn't want to follow him into the willows to eradicate the imps. Courage or not, she was human, and a nest of imps was nothing for a human to play around with.

"They're over there," she said, breaking into his reverie.

Walker stepped up to the ten foot tall fence, peering though at the tree-lined riverbank. Aspens lined the outer banks closest to the fence, and a tangle of willows hid the river from view. "I didn't realize the river passed this close to the school. Isn't that kind of dangerous?"

“Yes,” she said, hooking her fingers through the chain link and giving it a rattle. “Hence the fence.”

“Okay, now I feel dumb,” he said, grimacing. Beside him, Mokey let out a soft *chuff*. Walker gave the hellhound a dirty look.

“Hey, at least you get that kids and rivers don’t mix.” She shook her head. “When I was a kid, the fence was one of those miniature white picket types that people use to keep rabbits out of their gardens. It took an imp pack --” She stopped, her lips pressed tightly together.

Ah, Josie, I’m sorry, he thought, wondering if she’d been attacked or if a friend had been hurt or killed. In a deliberate attempt to lighten the mood, he said, “Do any of the little darlings ever go ‘over the wall?’”

She snorted. “Of course they do. That’s why it’s warded to send up bright red sparks the moment a child crosses the top.” Her smile was back, if less genuine.

Glad he’d been able to distract her from what he guessed were unpleasant memories, he said, “Cool.” When he was a kid, he might have climbed the fence just to see the show. Then again, with his peculiar immunity to magic, it might not have worked. His werefox foster brothers and sisters would have tunneled beneath the fence with a few minutes’ digging, and laughed at him from the other side, leaving him no choice but to climb over and chance setting off the wards.

“The first day of school we always demonstrate. That way the kids know what it looks like, and hopefully get the curiosity out of their systems.” She pointed to a depression next to the fence a few feet away from them. “And to show them that the wards are sunk into the bedrock, so they don’t try to dig their way under.”

“You read my mind,” he said, chuckling. “Will I set the alarm off when I climb over?”

She cocked her head, looking sideways at him. “No, you’re an adult.” Pausing. “You *are* an adult, right?”

He glanced at her, hiding a smirk. “For my species? I’m pushing middle age.”

“Ah. That’s good to know.” She looked relieved, then curious.

Walker wondered if she’d ask. The police chief was playing things close to the vest and not making any announcements about him. He knew a bit about the former chief’s crimes, and sympathized with Rex’s desire to let people find out just how powerful their new marshal was a little bit at a time. Walker had gone along with the plan, and wasn’t volunteering any information, though he’d answer any direct questions. Fiends didn’t have the most savory reputations, though no one argued that they weren’t tough.

So far, only his secretary, Verity Taylor, had asked. She’d been impressed to find out she was working for a fiend -- one of the rarest and most dangerous species of demon -- for about two minutes. Then she’d handed him a stack of messages and told him to get to work. He still wasn’t sure exactly what Verity was. He’d asked and she’d just smiled and said, “A lady never tells.”

Walker waited a moment to give Josie a chance to ask, and was disappointed when she didn't. *Ah, well.* He jumped up, grabbing the top of the fence and pulling himself up. As he swung a leg over the top, he heard a sharp *rrriipppp*. "Crap," he said, feeling the cool metal against his skin. *Way to impress the pretty lady.*

"You okay?" Josie called.

"Fine," he said as he dropped down to the far side of the fence. "Can't say the same for my pants, though." A quick examination revealed a seven-inch tear just above and beside his knee. At least his ass wasn't hanging out in the breeze. "Damn it, these jeans aren't that old." Yet another expense to add to his invoice. The city treasurer was going to have a coronary when he saw Walker's bill.

"Ouch," Josie said, giving him a rueful smile. "I guess you've got a new pair of cutoffs for next summer, and hey, no bloodstains. Bonus."

He grinned at her. "But the blood adds character."

"Boysenberry juice works better, and is much less painful." She paused, then added, "Well, not for the boysenberries, obviously." Shaking herself a bit, she looked to his right, and the playfulness leached out of her expression. "Over there," she said, pointing. "Five of them."

"Got it." Walker tugged the band from his braid, stuffing it in his front pocket. "This shouldn't take long."

Woof!

Walker stopped and turned around just in time to see Mokey jump and then scramble up and over the fence, landing on the bank with a grunt.

"Okay," Josie said, drawing the word out. "I'm guessing he's not an ordinary poodle."

Winking at her, he said, "Nope." Walker turned away, weaving between the white trunks of the aspen trees and pushing into the willow thicket. Willow branches clutched at his clothing and hair. *I hate these things.* The whippy branches were too much like his hair for comfort, but without the guidance of an intelligent mind.

The smell of decaying leaves and moist soil underscored the heavier scent of rotting meat. His hair writhed as adrenaline coursed through his veins. This was the sort of thing his kind had been bred for. As much as Walker despised their creator, the goddess had done a fabulous job of creating a species of warriors. And after a month of dealing with the town's bureaucracy, he was ready for a good fight. Strangling the board members would probably be bad form, at least this early in his employment.

A low, thrumming growl came from Mokey as the hellhound blurred into his true form. Gingery fur faded into thick black scales, and the hellhound's eyes glowed orange in anticipation of the kill.

Walker let the human façade fade from his form, unsheathing his claws. His hair unbound itself, and he shook his head to limber it for the coming altercation. A nasty smile

twisted his lips as he ran his tongue across sharp teeth. A small clearing opened on the boundary between the aspens and the willows. A thigh-high pile of fist-sized river cobbles held pride of place in the center. "Huh," he murmured. "I wonder what this place is used for."

The bull imp, a hundred and twenty pounds of teeth and bad attitude, slunk from behind a tangle of willow branches, snarling. Its muddy yellow-green horns signaled that it was in full rut. It reared up, forearms held out in a defensive posture, its three-pronged penis engorged and drooling viscous yellow fluid.

It was a good thing Josie'd called him. Another few hours, and the imps would be gathering food for their forthcoming brood. Mokey looked up at him, whining. "Go," Walker murmured.

Mokey advanced, feinting at the bull imp to lure it from its nest.

Walker circled behind the bull, intent on the does. They were much smaller than the bull, maybe eighty pounds each, but they were quick and dangerous.

Two darted forward, one doe aiming for his legs, the other trying to maneuver behind him. Walker stretched his hair into a long, narrow rope twice its normal length, catching the doe around the neck and breaking its spine with a quick jerk. The second doe dove at his legs, razor-toothed jaws gaping open. He dropped to one knee, catching it before it could strike, his claws tearing its throat open as he tossed it away from him. Dark red blood splashed the willows, making them moan softly with delight. Unnerved by the dreadful sound, he stood, turning his attention to the remaining imps. Walker wanted this fight over with so he could put a tall fence between himself and the all-too-alive trees.

The last two does attacked as one. Walker used his hair as a whip, keeping the larger of the pair at bay. He caught the smaller doe when it jumped at him, strangling it as it twisted and snarled, trying to bite his arms. He snapped a rope of hair around the last imp, lifting it and dashing it against the ground until he felt the brittle *crack* of its spine breaking. Dropping the corpse of the imp he held, he scanned the area, looking for any he might have missed. Only the bull still stood, trading insults and snarls with his hound. "Stop playing with it, Mokey," he said, settling his hair back into its neat braid.

From beginning to end, the altercation had taken maybe two minutes. Not his best time for destroying a nest of imps, but respectable. And maybe Josie would be impressed and want to reward him. Walker snorted. *Yeah, right, all hail the conquering hero.*

A low howl split the air, telling him Mokey had tired of toying with the bull imp and was ready to make a kill. Walker turned to watch as the hellhound caught the imp by the throat and dispatched it with one crunch of its powerful jaws.

"Good boy," Walker said, walking to the hellhound's side and scratching between Mokey's sharply pointed black ears. Still growling, the hound let go of the imp's throat and sat back on his haunches, accepting the praise as his due. Looking at the corpses, he sighed. The clean-up wasn't going to be any fun. Dead imps began decomposing almost immediately.

It was tempting to just leave them where they were, but he couldn't justify letting the corpses rot so close to the school no matter how much he wanted to avoid picking up the bodies. They were already beginning to ooze and steam, and he really, really didn't want to get the vile fluid on his hair. His foster brother's description of his hair flashed into his mind: "Elastic, enormously strong, and prissy as all get out about touching icky things."

A susurrant whispering surrounded them as thin willow branches snaked from the thicket to grasp the dead imps and pull them inside.

Walker felt his shudder of revulsion echoed in the quiver that shook Mokey as they backed away from the hungry trees. Before he could consciously think about it, his braid slunk beneath his shirt, hiding from its arboreal doppelgänger. Hair squirming against his scalp, he said, "Trickster protect us," shaking his fist twice and casting the ill-luck away from him. Remembering Josie, he forced himself back into his human guise as the sound of bones breaking came from the willow tangle. Swallowing, he tapped the hellhound on his head. "Hide, Mokey."

With a barely audible whine, Mokey shifted back into his poodle aspect, the pom-pom on the end of his tail tucked firmly between his legs.

In a few more steps, he was out of the aspens and against the fence. Josie waited for them, pale and shaken. After giving Mokey a boost up and over the fence, Walker followed.

"Are the willows walking?" she asked, her even tone at odds with the wildness in her eyes.

Absently, he placed himself between her and the fence. "No. But they're awake." Without taking his eyes from the subtle motion of the thicket, he pulled his cell phone from his front pocket, opened it, and hit speed dial.

"Talk to me, big guy," Verity said.

"We need a green mage or a dryad at the elementary school as soon as possible."

Her voice went from little-girl breathy to no-nonsense. "I need more information, boss. Give me details."

"I killed a pack of imps, and before I could dispose of the bodies, the willows beat me to it. They're mobile, but not walking. Not yet." *Not ever, if I have anything to say about it.*

"On it. I'll have Brenda pick Holly Lawrence up. She can spell them back to sleep."

"Good." He handed his phone to Josie. "Tell Verity where we are." While Josie spoke to his secretary, Walker scanned the riverbank, looking for any sign that the willows were more active than they realized.

"Here," Josie said, handing him his phone. "They're going to come from the neighborhood side. There's a gate over there, and the bank's much clearer. They'll be safer with the river between them and the willows."

Walker nodded absently, shoving his phone back into his pocket. "You don't need to wait; I can get a ride with Brenda." His deputy would resent it, but she'd take him home.

"I'll wait." Josie touched his hand to get his attention. "Walker."

The brief contact of her skin against his made him shiver. "Yes?" he said, turning to look at her. She looked determined, frightened, and so damned gorgeous he wanted to take her in his arms and never let go.

"I have the *sight*. I see auras as easily as other people see color. I'll be able to tell if they wake up completely and we need to run."

He took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Thanks." After a few moments of silence, he said, "How did you find the imps?"

"My third graders are nuts this year. More than usual. I did a divination spell, hoping to find out what was causing it."

"That's right, you're a teacher." He glanced over at her. "So it's not usually so" -- he paused, looking for the right word -- "exciting around here?" Hopefully, it wasn't. When he'd signed on as marshal he hadn't expected the job to completely take over his life. Though to be fair, he hadn't minded before spending time with his sexy neighbor.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Usually, the most interesting thing is finding a place in Fred Bernstein's leaf-raking schedule. Maybe the occasional twixtie infestation, or an imp or two. Teenage pranks. Nothing like what's been going on in the past few months."

"Yeah, I'm starting to understand that." He realized that he still held her hand, and she didn't seem to be in any hurry to pull away. "Can I buy you dinner tonight?"

She looked up at him, her lovely blue eyes searching his face. "As a thank you for this?" She waved a hand toward the river.

"A little. But mostly because I'd like to get to know you, as a friend, and maybe more."

She turned her hand beneath his, linking their fingers together. "I'd like that."

Working on instinct, Walker lifted her hand and brushed his lips across the back of her knuckles. "Good."

She shifted closer to him, and it was the most natural thing in the world to slip his arm around her shoulders. On his other side, Mokey leaned against his leg. For the first time in too long, Walker felt like he belonged somewhere. It was a nice feeling, one he wanted to keep.

Chapter Three

Josie kept watch as the willows' auras went from an iridescent green creepily reminiscent of spoiled ham to a more sedate greenish blue. Breathing a sigh of relief, she sagged against Walker, letting him take some of her weight. He responded by tightening his arm around her and snuggling her close. His energy was a pleasant pressure against hers -- not intrusive, just a steady, comfortable weight.

"It's done," she said, turning in his arms so that she rested her cheek against his shoulder as she looked at him. She fit perfectly against him, neither too tall nor too short for comfort. The musky, spicy scent surrounded her: the comfort of homemade ginger cookies mixed with the wildness of a big predator. "The willows are sleeping."

"Good," he murmured.

There was a breathless instant where they gazed at each other; then their lips met in a brief, sweet kiss.

Josie pulled back a bit, smiling at him before pressing her lips against his once again. It was surprisingly intimate for a chaste kiss.

"Mm." Walker's soft sound of pleasure tickled her lips.

She giggled, licking the itch away, and accidentally brushing his lower lip with her tongue. Josie froze, then leaned into him as he deepened the kiss. In a moment, the contact went from sweet exploration to sizzling passion.

Walker tasted of spice and wildness, and was warm and solid against her. He held her loosely against his body, stroking her back in a gentle caress.

Josie looped her arms around his neck, holding tight, shivering as her palms pressed against the silken strands of his hair. For a moment, Walker's hair seemed to move beneath her hands.

"Excuse me."

Josie felt Walker sigh against her just before they separated. "Hello Brenda," he said.

"Walker. Josie," Brenda said, a smile playing around her mouth. Her aura rippled around her in an amused wash of lavender satin.

"Hey, Brenda," Josie said. She could feel a flush against her cheeks, but wasn't sure if it was embarrassment or passion. Having her aunt's best friend catch her in a lip-lock was worse than being caught by her mother. Josie knew her parents had sex, but Brenda had always been as sexless as a spinster librarian.

"I hate to interrupt, but we've got a twixtie beetle infestation over at the Voltares place." The half-elf wore dark jeans and a pale green polo shirt. The green was a good color for the older woman, bringing out the green threads in her graying brown hair.

"Phooey." He released Josie, and stepped back. "Can we switch dinner to tomorrow night?"

"Sure," Josie said, disappointed but a bit relieved. That kiss had been amazing, and a little frightening in its intensity. She wanted some time to think about her incendiary attraction to the marshal. This interruption was annoying, but probably for the best.

"Can I call you?"

She quickly fished a business card from her purse, handing it to him.

Walker tugged one of his own from his wallet. As he handed it to her, he grinned. "Exchanging business cards -- the courtship dance of the modern couple."

"It could be worse," Josie said, laughing. "At least this way no one has to catch any horses for a courting price."

"True." He offered his arm. "May I walk you back to your car?"

"Of course," she said, linking her arm through his. She probably should have declined; it was still light outside, after all. But she was still shaken by the close call they'd had with the willows. If the trees had awakened completely while school was in session, they could have lost children. *Bright copper hair against verdant grass...* She pushed the memory away. The school had seen enough death for a dozen lifetimes. So had she.

"I'm parked on the other side of the playground," Brenda said, pointing to her dark green SUV.

Josie started. She'd completely forgotten about the other woman's presence.

"I'll meet you there," Walker said.

"Okay." Brenda grinned at Josie. "Tell Sofa I said 'hi' and that I have news for her." She winked as she said the last.

"Brenda, you are a bad elf," Josie said, with a smile as forced as the joke.

A slow smile made Brenda's average face gorgeous. "Josie, sweetie, you have no idea."

The walk back to the Mini was silent as Josie pushed the ugly memories back into their cage. The false smile on her face became real as she remembered the warm press of Walker's lips on hers.

Josie's brain skittered back and forth between "what if?" and "what a kiss!" When they reached Mirabelle, she unlocked the door, but hesitated before climbing inside.

"Thanks," she said. "If you hadn't come down tonight, things could have gotten ugly." *Been there, done that, had the therapy bills to prove it.*

"Thank *you*," he said. "You're the one who found the imps." He leaned forward, brushing a kiss across her lips. Stepping quickly away, he said, "Stupid twixties."

Josie licked her lips to capture his taste. "Have fun tonight."

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said, backing away and nearly tripping over Mokey. "Damn it, dog."

The poodle *woofed* up at him, pale pink amusement edging his aura.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here and guess he didn't just say 'sorry boss,'" Josie said. The poodle gave her a doggy grin.

"No, probably not." Walker strode forward, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her again. "Tomorrow," he repeated, turning to jog toward Brenda's car.

"Tomorrow," Josie murmured, getting into her car.

* * * * *

Padding downstairs, she went into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of iced mint tea, and flopped down at the table. She closed her eyes, resting her head on the back of the chair. Willows and Walker. Both beautiful, both secretive, both dangerous. Willows were mindless killers that, once roused, would devour any living thing that crossed their paths. Walker Morgan was the Bend's new marshal. *I hope Rex Evans knew what he was doing when he hired Walker*, she thought. *I hope I know what I'm doing getting involved with him.* Her instincts told her to take this chance, and she was going to trust them for now.

She'd never seen an aura like Walker's that seemed composed as much of shadow as light. Many of the demon-kin had darker energy, but she'd never seen any that twinkled. It should disturb her, and yet she hadn't seen or sensed any hint of wrongness about him. Not like she had with former police chief Dawson. Dawson's twisting, squirming orange-black aura had always nauseated her, making her avoid looking at him. That should have been a clue that he was not a decent being. Guilt nipped at her. She'd let previous bad experiences with the local wolf pack cloud her judgment, just assuming that most werewolves had energy that made her uncomfortable. *I won't make that mistake again.*

A knock at the door startled her out of her thoughts. Josie reached out with her senses, finding a familiar yellow-gold aura. Handy, being able to *see* through doors and walls, though the trick only worked here in her own home where the magical shields amplified her

abilities. Fred Bernstein waited patiently on the front step. He did all sorts of odd jobs around town, including mowing lawns, raking leaves, and shoveling snow.

Opening the door, she smiled at him. "Hey, Fred, come on in."

"No time, no time," he said, grinning at her. His open, honest face was quite handsome, though his features marked him as having a mild form of Down syndrome. "I'm just here to get you scheduled for leaf raking." He held up a spiral-bound notebook with a brilliant yellow cover. Opening it, he said, "I have you down for Thursdays at one-thirty. Does that work for you?"

Josie nodded. "It should. Aunt Sofa's archery group meets at three, so she should be here getting ready until at least two-thirty."

"Great." He pulled an orange and white striped pen from its place behind his ear and noted the time in his book. "I'll see Sofa tomorrow, then."

"Thanks, Fred."

He shivered as a breath of wind tousled his dishwater blond hair.

"Are you sure you don't want to come in for hot chocolate?" she asked. "I even have mini marshmallows."

He shook his head, a solemn look on his face. "Can't. Gotta get everyone scheduled." Cocking his head, he studied her for a moment. "You see the colors, right, the auras?"

She nodded, bracing herself for the question. Fred always asked a question instead of saying good-bye. He explained that this way, he would always learn at least one thing whenever he talked to someone, and that way, he'd never be boring.

"What makes the colors change?"

Oh, good, an easy question, and one she knew the answer to. "Mood mostly. People's auras look different if they're happy or sad or mad, or whatever. Health can change things too. Sickness shows up in the aura." Her earlier thoughts about the former police chief made her add, "If you ever see someone whose energy looks wrong, tell your parents or your sister about it."

"I will." He nodded at her. "Thank you, Josie. Have a nice night." Before she could answer, he turned and strode down the sidewalk.

"Bye, Fred," she called after him. *So he can see auras too. I'll have to talk to him about that later.* Fred knew everyone in town; maybe he'd have an idea about why things felt so unsettled. She knew it was no use calling him back now; when Fred was on a mission, he was impossible to distract.

As he reached the sidewalk, Sofa pulled up into the driveway in the land yacht otherwise known as a dark blue Buick Park Avenue. Fred detoured and spoke briefly with Sofa, then continued on his way.

Josie held the door open for her aunt, studying the older woman's aura as she did so.

There was just a faint tinge of muddiness along one edge. Josie breathed a sigh of relief. Since her aunt Sofa had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure three months ago, the older woman's bright aura had a tendency to dim alarmingly when she wasn't feeling well. And that had happened far too often in the past few months. As far as Josie was concerned, the sale of her rental house to some newcomers had happened at the perfect time. She would live with her aunt for the next year or so, save rent money, and keep the older woman from doing too much too soon.

"Hey, sweetie," Sofa said, coming inside and bussing Josie on the cheek. "Meet me at the table; I've got to show you my loot."

Grinning, Josie followed her aunt, settling back in the seat she'd vacated to talk to Fred. And speaking of Fred... "What did he ask you?"

"Why I park in the driveway, and you park in the garage."

"Ah," Josie said. This should be good, since Sofa was the one who insisted that Josie use the garage.

"I told him that Mirabelle is a sweet little foreigner, not used to the cold winters we get around here, and my Blue-Bu is too much of a gentleman to allow a lady to be chilled."

"Works for me," Josie said. Pointing at the pale green tote bag sitting on the table between them, she said, "Well?"

Sofa pulled out a scrap of sapphire-colored lace, handing it to her niece. It was a gorgeous color, a perfect match for Sofa's -- and Josie's -- eyes. "They got all my bras done, and they're perfect. They even managed to match all the colors." Sofia Couchman, Sofa to her friends, adored pretty lingerie.

"Great," Josie said, examining the square of blue felt that had been tacked into the inside of the right band. The pacemaker defibrillator that Sofa's doctor had installed two months ago was located on her side, just below her right armpit, making the bra band rub uncomfortably against the skin. Josie put the blue bra down and picked up a peach-colored one, noting that, again, the felt patch was a near-perfect color match. *And I know color.* "Let's hope this works." She was sure it would, and if it didn't, they'd keep trying until they found a solution. Congestive heart failure was not going to steal anything more from her aunt, not if Josie had anything to say about it.

"It'd better. I have a hot date with Wu Chang tomorrow night." Sofa's blue eyes took on a calculating gleam. "You know, Wu's nephew is single now, and he's thirty-three. That's only what, four years younger than you?"

"Five. And I'm not interested. He's still heartbroken over Sheila leaving him; I don't need to rescue another wounded man." *Not that I'm bitter.* She ran her fingers across the ample bra cup. *And speaking of bitter...* The women on her mother's side of the family were all quite well endowed. Josie, unfortunately, took after her father's side of the family. She looked down at her own breasts. Depending on the manufacturer, she was either classified as a generous "A," or a stingy "B." Luckily, in her family, tits were the anti-psi. Her big-breasted

female family members were all competent witches, but had no particular psychic abilities. Josie had psychic ability in spades, and not much in the way of boobs.

"He's not wounded, more like bruised, or sprained."

"Oh, please, he crashed and burned on the highway of love, and he's still picking gravel out of his teeth." Josie giggled at the image. She pictured him brushing dust and twigs from his double-breasted suit, a sour look on his face. "Besides, Ned Chang has to be the most boring dragon to ever come out of Australia. I do have standards, Sofa." *At the top of the list: No More Musicians!*

"True." Sofa reached across the table and grabbed Josie's tea, stealing a sip. "I worry about you being alone. Not all men are like Kevin or Erik."

No, some of them aren't needy, self-centered jerks. "I know. And eventually, I'll probably fall in love again. I don't need a relationship to be fulfilled; being single is just fine." She shrugged. "Although it would be nice." Nice to have someone to snuggle with, to share expenses, and good times and bad times. A partner. *With long, luxurious hair, a kiss that carbonates my hormones, and an aura that glitters like a starry night.*

Sofa took another drink of tea. "You've been reading women's magazines again, haven't you?"

"No," Josie said, reaching across the table to reclaim her glass. "And get your own tea, this is mine."

"Eek, aunt cooties, the horror." The older woman stood and poured herself a glass of tea, then sat back down. "So? How's third grade?"

"Argh," Josie said, taking handfuls of her short brown hair and pretending to yank it out. "The kids were bonkers today. I was afraid my eyes were going to start bleeding with all the clashing shades and textures." Sometimes, Josie wished she saw the world like it was on television -- just normal everyday living things, with no corona of color surrounding them. Not that she watched TV all that often -- too dull. "I did a scrying today, after school, and found a nest of imps."

"Goddess preserve us," Sofa said, her hand going to her breast.

"I showed the marshal where they were, and he destroyed them." Quickly and efficiently. Josie still wasn't sure if she should be impressed or dismayed by how easily he'd handled the dangerous pests. *Am I sick for thinking it was kinda hot?*

"Hm," Sofa said, giving her niece a sideways glance. "And did you have a good time with the hunky Mr. Morgan?"

"Ask Brenda." Josie put her empty glass in the sink and jogged from the kitchen and up the stairs to her room, Sofa's outraged demand for details following her.

Chapter Four

“Duck!” Brenda yelled, shooting a stream of geranium and salt water into the sky.

Walker and Danny hit the ground, hands covering their heads. Several hundred bright pink twixtie beetles buzzed over them. Walker was glad they’d skipped using the water guns and gone straight for the fertilizer attachment on the garden hose.

Shhhsshttt, foom!

Sharp pieces of carapace, legs, antennae, and bug guts rained down over him. A piece of grass tickled his nose, and he concentrated on that sensation, rather than on his hair shivering against his scalp in revulsion.

“Gods blast it, Gilbert, what were you thinking?” Brenda’s angry tone ramped up to infuriated by the end of her sentence.

Walker risked a glance from beneath his arm and sat up when nothing dive-bombed him. The formerly well-kept lawn looked like ground zero of an explosion at an antacid-and-glitter factory. He raised his hand to scratch his nose, stopping when he saw the twixtie beetle innards covering it.

His female deputy continued to berate the hapless witch. Walker was impressed. This was the most emotion he’d seen from Brenda since he’d been hired. “You aren’t some rosemary-and-sprinkles, wide-eyed newcomer; you were born here. You know better.”

“I know,” Gilbert said, running his hands through his short, dark hair. “We had a huge order for a color-changing potion, and I forgot to set the trash out last week.”

“Color-change, huh?” Danny said, picking up a piece of carapace. “That explains the pink.” The mage tilted the shiny chunk of debris back and forth in the beam from the floodlights, making it sparkle.

Walker climbed to his feet, wincing at the harsh crunching sound each movement generated. Leaning down, he offered a relatively clean hand to the deputy. Danny looked at him for a moment before accepting the assistance.

Wonders never cease, Walker thought. The young human had made no secret of the fact that he felt he should have been given the job of marshal for Franklin's Bend. Although he worked with Walker, his resentment was front and center in all their encounters. It didn't seem to matter to Danny that he was only a journeyman mage, and that the marshal was always a nonhuman -- in order to deal with those beings too dangerous for a human to irritate.

"Wow," Danny said, staring at Walker. "Do I look as silly as you do?"

Walker snickered at the sight of the mage. Blooms of bright pink dotted the younger man's light brown hair, and garish splotches marred his pale skin. "Sillier." Grinning, he added, "I love being immune to magic."

"What?" Danny squawked, looking down at his arms. Then further down at his boots. The mahogany ostrich skin was liberally splotched with bright pink.

Walker winced. The mage was almost psychotically proud of the garish boots. *This could get ugly*.

"Voltares, you are a dead man," Danny yelled, lunging forward, hands opening and closing in the classic "strangling" motion.

"Now, Danny," Gilbert said, backing away. "It was an accident." He let out a yip when he backed into Brenda.

Deciding his deputies could handle things while he got cleaned up, Walker picked up the hose and removed the fertilizer container from it. He sprayed clean, cold water over his arms and the back of his head, washing off most of the twixtie guts. His braid tugged itself out of his shirt and unplaited, sending tiny tentacles out, searching for and removing beetle parts. Peering over his shoulder, he groaned at the mutant pink polka dots all over the back of his shirt. Luckily, he kept a change of clothes in his car. He spared the time to glare at Mokey, who'd refused to leave the car, and who had a doggy grin plastered across his furry face.

Walker pulled his wet shirt off, stuffing it into the empty garbage bag he kept in the trunk. He twisted around, looking at the back of his pants. *Great*. They were also soiled with pink dye and beetle guts, and uncomfortably damp. Shaking his head, he stripped them off, glad he'd worn dark boxers instead of going commando. He pulled his wallet, keys, and cell phone from his pockets, then tossed his jeans into the trash with his shirt. Hoping no one was getting an eyeful, he quickly pulled the clean jeans on.

"I will never get used to that," Brenda said, coming up behind him, her pale green eyes fastened on his hair.

He smirked at her, making a show of shaking the last of the beetle debris and water from each tentacle. "Did we get the whole nest?"

The half-elf brushed a hand through her short greenish gray hair. "Danny's checking as we speak." She'd escaped the worst of the explosion. Small splatters of dye dotted the front of her shirt, and she had smattering of bright pink freckles over the bridge of her nose. It took years and elven dignity away from her, making Brenda look young and carefree.

"How dare you?" a woman yelled.

Brenda winced, hunching her shoulders, the illusion of youth fading away. "Oh dear," she muttered.

Walker looked toward the house's front door. A petite woman in a pale pink dress stood on the porch.

"You have your mother's gifts, Brenda Leaforn, diluted though they might be; you should have called those poor creatures away. No mere twixtie can refuse to answer when one of the Leaforn bloodline calls."

Brenda closed her eyes for a moment then murmured, "That would be Lourdes Malcado, Gilbert's mother-in-law. Desert pixie."

"Ouch," Walker said. He only knew of the desert pixies by reputation. They were vegetarians who didn't believe any living thing should be harmed -- though apparently verbally savaging someone was okay. They only ate fruits and vegetables after they'd fallen and treated everything -- even imps and cockroaches -- as precious living things. Needless to say, they weren't comfortable around demon-kin like him.

"And you, Danny Graziani, you're not so pitiful a mage that you had to resort to violence. Shame on you both." Lourdes's gaze trailed over Walker, barely pausing before continuing to her son-in-law. "It's going to take days to clean the negative energy from this home."

Ode to Joy blared from Walker's pocket. *Saved by the cell*. He pulled his phone free and opened it. "Yeah?"

"It's Verity. Get to the Van Cleef place now. The Harker girl 'mated' with Tobias Van Cleef, and then he dumped her. Wayne Harker's over there with a gun and a marriage demand."

"On my way." Walker climbed into his car as he spoke. Looking up at Brenda, he said, "After you're sure this place is twixtie free, patrol over by the new mall."

"Gotcha, boss. Danny and I can clean up the mess. You go do your thing." The half-elf squared her shoulders and turned away to deal with the enraged pixie.

* * * * *

"The little punk is going to marry my daughter," Wayne Harker said, brandishing his .38 Special in the direction of the sneering teenager. A single father, he was fiercely protective of his little girl; he'd said so repeatedly tonight.

Walker would be worried if the gun was loaded, but he couldn't smell the telltale scent of gunpowder and lead. At least the brownie hadn't brought any sharp silver daggers with him.

Kelly Van Cleef, also a single parent, stepped out from behind the powder blue couch, stopping between her son and the irate man. "He may be a punk, but he's only sixteen, and that's too young to get married."

"My Catherine is only fifteen, but they're mated, and they *will* marry."

Walker watched the cause of the problem as he listened to the two adults argue.

The teenager in faded yellow flannel pajamas watched Wayne Harker avidly. Small, piggy brown eyes laughed at the conflict, and smugness radiated from the boy's bare feet to the tips of his bristly red hair. The mingled scents of triumph and arrogance emanated from the boy, making Walker's nose itch.

The mate-and-switch game. Walker pursed his lips, considering. The game, which had become steadily more popular in the past year, encouraged humans and nonhumans with no instinct for monogamy to seduce teens of those species that did mate for life. Then, after having sex, the gamers would dump their victims, counting on Franklin's Bend's laws to protect them. From the town's beginning, "life-mating" could only be enforced among members of the same species.

And why were kids like Catherine Harker still being victimized? *Because no teenager wants to believe they are being courted as a part of a game.* This had to stop. Walker's lips curved into a grin as the solution popped into his mind. Years ago, a local middle school student had started a fund to plant flowers and trees in public areas around the town. She'd died not long after, and the town kept the fund active in her memory.

"Tobias," Walker said, interrupting the ongoing argument. "What species is Catherine?"

The teenager shrugged, saying, "Brownie."

Walker nodded, "And you are?"

"Wereboar."

"Do wereboars mate for life?"

Tobias made a rude sound. "Not even."

Walker nodded again. "And do brownies?"

"Yeah," the boy said, rolling his eyes. "That's why the freak is here with the gun."

Walker glanced over at the brownie. "Wayne, put the gun away before you piss me off." He waited until the brownie had holstered the pistol. "There is not going to be a

marriage.” Holding his hands up to forestall the protests, he continued, “However, Tobias has admitted that he knew the facts before going into the relationship with Catherine.”

Kelly and Wayne were both nodding.

“So, this is what’s going to happen. Tobias Van Cleef, I find you guilty of playing the mate-and-switch game. You will pay a fine of five hundred dollars, to be donated to the Kristin’s Flowers Fund, and you will do fifty hours of community service with Kristin’s Volunteers.” It was a perfect solution to the problem. Word about the stiff penalty would get around quickly, and meanwhile, a worthy cause would get both money and manpower. And he would personally see to it that Tobias got the messiest, most backbreaking jobs. “You’ve got many, many wheelbarrows full of crap in your future, kid.”

“What?” The wereboar shouted, “You can’t do that.”

“You’ll find that I can,” Walker said. “As marshal, I have *carte blanche* to impose any penalties I choose.” This was the first time he’d created a brand new rule, though he’d modified others. *Let’s hope it’s accepted.*

“Sounds fair to me,” Kelly said. “Wayne?”

The brownie nodded. “I agree.”

Yes. Walker wanted to pump his fist in the air in celebration. He settled for smirking at the outraged kid.

“No way,” Tobias said. “I’m not doing *shit*!”

Letting his fiendish nature come to the forefront, Walker stepped closer to the teenager, crowding the belligerent boy. “You’ll do as I say, or you’ll regret it.”

The sharp stench of urine accompanied Tobias’s frantic agreement.

* * * * *

Walker dumped his clothes in the hamper and stepped into the shower. A soft moan escaped his throat as the hot water pounded his shoulders. Tilting his head back, he wetted his hair. *Hells, what a night.* The little bastard had pissed all over his shoes. *There’s yet another work-related tax deduction.* If he was ever audited, it was going to be very interesting. So far, he’d lost five shirts, two pairs of pants and a pair of tennis shoes. If the town stayed this busy, he was going to end up replacing his whole wardrobe.

The creepy crawly sensation of magic morphing into its daylight aspect loosened the knots from his shoulders. Dawn was here, and he was officially off duty. Once he was clean, he could get a few hours’ sleep before he had to be at the office. Unless Verity called with another assignment. Hoping he wasn’t tempting the god, Walker shook his hand and figuratively cast the Trickster’s dice away, sending a prayer for uninterrupted sleep with the motion.

Picking up the shampoo bottle, he squirted a generous dollop of mint and vanilla scented cleanser onto his palm and worked the shampoo into his hair, enjoying the luxurious

glide of lather against the sensitive tendrils. The last of the twixtie debris washed away, and he felt his hair shiver in relief. Gods below, he hated it when his hair was filthy.

He rinsed the shampoo away and then soaped up the rest of his body. Would Josie find his hairless skin attractive? Or would she, as others had before her, be disgusted to learn that other than the hair on his head, he had only eyebrows and eyelashes, the rest of him being completely bare?

“Mmmm, Josie.” He trailed his fingertips across his nipples, remembering the sight of her high, firm breasts beneath her tank top. Those sweet little tits would fit perfectly in the palms of his hands. He stroked his hands down his belly and over his cock and balls.

I want to pull her shirt up and lick her nipples until they're tight and swollen against my tongue. He rubbed his cock, bringing it to full, leaking hardness. *I'll nibble each peak, teasing her until she gasps my name, and then I'll suckle first one, then the other.* Fisting his cock, he leaned against the side of the shower stall, letting the pleasure take him. His hair bound itself into a single, thick tentacle, then stretched down to cradle and massage his balls. Walker closed his eyes, imagining licking and kissing his way down her body until he found her center. *Oh, yeah, she tastes so good, salty and sweet, and so slick against my tongue.* A low groan escaped his lips as he imagined fucking her with his tongue and sucking her clit until she came. *While she's still shuddering through her first climax, I'll cover her, pushing my hard cock into her hot pussy.* His hand moved faster as he neared completion, and he bit through his lower lip. The coppery taste of blood pushed him over the edge, and he cried out as milky blue fluid spurted from his cock.

After licking his fingers clean, he rinsed one last time and turned off the water. His hair shivered itself mostly dry, and a brisk rubdown with a towel removed the moisture from his skin.

Walker padded naked to his bedroom, and crawled beneath the covers. The digital clock on his bedside table read 6:37 a.m. That gave him four hours to sleep before he had to get up and get ready for his next shift. *I'll be glad when breeding season is over and things calm down.*

Just before sleep claimed him, he let his thoughts drift to his new next-door neighbor. “Sweet dreams, Josie.”

Chapter Five

The night surrounded her, stroking her with tendrils of velvet blackness. Her back arched as a cool breeze curled around her breasts, kneading them and teasing her nipples to hardness. A creeper of star-spattered darkness trailed down her belly, pausing to dip playfully into her navel. Josie giggled at the gentle touch. She bit back a moan as the caress slipped downward, massaging her mound and the tops of her thighs. Her legs fell open, and a questing breeze slid between them, finding her wet, swollen pussy. The breeze broke into thin tendrils. All but one of them concentrated on petting her hot flesh, sensitizing her almost beyond endurance. The last tendril pressed between her pussy lips to find her clit. It covered the sweet pearl, pulsing around it with hot, rhythmic squeezes.

Josie's head thrashed against her pillow as a thick shaft of night pushed inside her, filling her with mysterious, silken heat. Soft mewls and cries of pleasure escaped her as it moved inside her. She held out her hands, wanting to touch, but there was nothing there. Her mouth opened so she could cry out her lover's name, but what came out was, "Why is darkness always beautiful?"

As her climax seared through her, she heard a familiar voice say, "Darkness is only beautiful until it has you in its clutches; then, all bets are off."

* * * * *

Josie started awake, aftershocks still coursing through her muscles. Staring up at the ceiling while she caught her breath, she fixed the memory of the dream in her mind. This one was important; she didn't dare lose it.

"Wow," she said, running a hand through her sweaty hair. *That was one heck of a dream.* It had been more than a year since she'd had a premonition, and she'd never had one like that. She turned onto her side, hugging her extra pillow to her chest.

Okay, so it looks like I'm going to be, um, "dating" Walker Morgan. But what's with all the night imagery? Was it just because of her fascination with his hair? Did it have anything to do with his position as marshal? Had Dawson's crimes tainted the office of marshal in her mind?

Josie thought that might be part of it. The former marshal had turned out to be far more of a monster than any werewolf portrayed in popular culture. And the marshal was never a human, that hadn't changed. She'd never heard what species Walker was, though his aura said that he was some sort of demon. Or maybe the darkness was just representative of her own fears about getting sucked into another codependent relationship. Whatever, the imagery was something to think about. Josie had never been afraid of the night, but she also knew enough to be wary of it. Things were different after dark, more inclined to bite.

Her alarm clock went off, jolting her into full awareness. After she turned it off, she climbed out of bed. *Another day to warp young minds. Yay for me*, she thought, padding toward the bathroom. Glancing out her bedroom window toward the marshal's house, she blew him a kiss. "Pleasant day, Walker."

* * * * *

The teacher's lounge couch transcended its ugly green and black tweediness. It called to her like an oasis called to someone dying of thirst. Josie flopped down onto the worn cushions, cursing herself for agreeing to teach art. At this point, not even the sight of her favorite sandals -- dark blue with lapis lazuli cabochons and rhinestones -- cheered her up. *Thank the goddess for PE*. Both third grade classes had physical education from 11:00 to 11:50, then lunch, so she had the next two hours to recover from the morning.

"Damn, girlfriend, you look like something the cat barfed up."

She peeled one eye open and saw waves of deep brown energy shot though with pale ivory, like roots snuggled in thick soil. "Hi, Nort." Norton Holloway was the other third grade teacher. Josie raised her fist and popped up her middle finger. "I hate you."

"Is that any way to speak to your best friend?" he asked.

She sat up, glaring at the big, furry bear of a man. "You abandoned me to forty eight-year-olds and ten different colors of fingerpaint." At his snort of laughter, she added, "You're going to be lucky if I don't call the vengeance of the art goddess down onto you." At least Billy Thornton had seemed to be his usual energetic self. He'd monopolized the blue fingerpaint until she'd made him share with his tablemates. It always made her grin when kids went for the paint, crayon, or marker color that most closely matched the signature color of their auras. Seeing kids dressed in clothes that matched their parent's energy, but clashed with the child's, was frustrating, though all too common. Sometimes the only time young children got to surround themselves with the colors that spoke to them was during art class. Josie loved that she could give the kids the freedom to choose; she just wished it weren't so messy.

“Poor little,” Nort said, handing her a cream-filled chocolate doughnut. “Here, eat this. It will make all the bad things go away.” His amber eyes were full of humor. “And remember, I do the music lessons. You don’t have to listen to the tone-deaf little darlings try to belt out songs praising the harvest deities.”

A fit of giggles overcame her. “Oh dear, talk about sacrilege. It’s a wonder we’ve never been struck by lightning.” She took a bite of the doughnut and licked a bit of cream from the corner of her lip. “It’s a good thing all kids are cute, regardless of species; otherwise this planet would belong to the cockroaches, the imps, and certain aging rock stars.”

He stirred the last of six packages of salt into his coffee and sat down next to her. “The negotiations are finished.”

The scent of fresh-turned earth surrounded her. She looked at her friend. “And?” *Please let the answer be yes.*

A slow, sweet grin transformed his homely face. “We *are* getting a new husband.”

His aura went from bright to blinding. “Yes,” she said, pumping her fist in the air. “Shall we do the happy Snoopy dance?”

The troll bounded to his feet and pulled her up. They linked arms and twirled in a circle three times, singing, “Happy, happy, joy, joy, happy, happy, marriage, marriage.”

Josie hugged her best friend tightly, and they sat back down, only slightly winded. “So?” Nort was the youngest of Inga’s three husbands, and had been looking forward to getting a younger spouse for several years.

“He’s twenty-six, a Libra, and has been trained as a chef,” the troll said, practically vibrating in place. “We won’t learn his name until after the ceremony -- which will be a week from Saturday.” He grinned at her. “Which reminds me, will you be my witness again?”

She returned his smile. “Of course I will.” Being a witness at a troll marriage mostly involved wearing pretty clothes and eating incredibly rich food. And the naked mud fight afterward was always a hoot. “Are you excited about not being the youngest anymore?”

“Spirits of the Sacred Stones, Josie, I can’t wait. Not only will I get to sleep in on weekends now, a fourth husband should give us enough seed for a child to quicken.”

Troll women were notoriously hard to impregnate, one of the reasons they took multiple husbands. Something about the mixing of semen from several men allowed the egg to quicken. Josie wasn’t exactly sure of the mechanics, but she was genuinely happy for her friend. Nort would be a fabulous father, no matter whose semen eventually fertilized Inga’s egg.

The door slammed open, startling both of them. Libby Bernstein and Amy Hubbard tumbled in, laughing like loons. Josie glanced up at the clock. It read 11:38. The two kindergarten grade teachers must have let their classes out early for lunch, a rare occurrence.

"It's so perfect," Amy said, twirling around, blonde hair floating through the air. When she saw Josie and Nort, she stopped abruptly, almost falling. Her brunette partner grabbed her until she recovered her balance, then pulled her in for a brief kiss.

Josie basked in the positive energy the pair exuded. Libby, a mage, was surrounded by shades of orange and yellow. Amy was a softer bluish, purplish pink -- unusually gentle for a werewolf, even a beta. Together, their energies mingled into the colors of a spectacular sunset.

Someday I'll find a partner I'm so in tune with, Josie thought. The image of a shadow studded with diamonds of light danced across her mind. *Someday*.

"Did you hear the news?" Libby asked.

Josie glanced at her best friend. He shook his head, indicating that he hadn't said anything about his upcoming marriage. "Nope, tell us."

Amy pulled a bottle of soda from the small refrigerator. "Walker Morgan has imposed a penalty for the mate-and-switch game." The older woman flung herself into one of the faded blue armchairs, and twisted the top off her soda, taking a long drink.

Libby perched on the arm of the chair, hazel eyes sparkling. "From now on, anyone who admits to playing the game will have to donate five hundred dollars to Kristin's Flowers, and put in fifty hours as a volunteer as well."

"That is the perfect solution," Nort said.

Josie agreed. As grade school teachers, they didn't see the fallout of the game in their students, but all four of the teachers had taught some of the older kids who had been victimized. Kristin had been a good friend before her death, and Josie volunteered frequently. She'd make damned sure those kids worked hard for every minute of their sentence.

"Walker Morgan is such a hottie," Libby said, fanning herself. "I'd consider switching teams for him."

Seeing her chance, Josie pounced. "What do you guys know about him? I'm living next door now, and, like you said, he's a hottie. Any deep dark secrets I should know before I start flirting?"

* * * * *

His paperwork multiplied each time he looked away. That was the only explanation for it. Walker stared down at the pile of papers, willing them to suddenly be filled out properly. The top of his desk was covered so thoroughly no hint of the pale oak shone through.

When he'd agreed to take the job as marshal, he'd never imagined there would be so much bureaucracy involved. *At least I have the training to deal with numbers*. Since graduating from the University of Arizona eight years ago, he'd been living in Sierra Vista, Arizona working as a CPA. It had been nice living less than two hours away from his

extended adopted family, but as his son had aged, it hadn't been safe for him to stay so close. Jake was on both the basketball and debate teams for his middle school, and they occasionally traveled to Sierra Vista for matches. All it would take was one miscommunication to bring him and Jake into contact with each other, and that would be a disaster. It felt odd, being so far away from his family, and he hoped to create a circle of close friends here in Franklin's Bend to pick up some of the slack. Having a steady girlfriend would help as well.

"Walker?" Verity Taylor poked her pert nose into his office. "The police chief is here to see you."

Walker blinked, surprised at her words. He and the chief had an uneasy truce, but avoided each other as much as possible. Rex Evans, the local werewolf alpha, was used to being in charge. He really didn't like the fact that Walker outranked him. Walker kept a smirk off his face through force of will. Evans would have tolerated it if the dominance was merely professional, but in the supernatural world, fiend trumped werewolf every time.

"Show him in, please, Veri." If nothing else, the interruption would keep Walker from going insane staring at paperwork from the city council's accountant.

His secretary winked at him and turned away, saying, "He can see you now, Chief." She stood aside while the werewolf entered the office, then left, pulling the door closed behind her.

Evans stared after her for a moment before turning to face Walker. "Verity was cute when she was a little girl, but damn, she sure grew up into a knockout."

"That she did," Walker said. Verity Taylor defined the term "blonde bombshell." She typed a hundred and twenty words a minute, had a genius IQ, and curves in all the right places. She also had a knack for playing the stock market, and in addition to being his secretary, she was his broker. Veri made excellent coffee, rarely filed her nails in front of customers, was prone to wearing soft, clinging sweater dresses, and wasn't afraid to tell a customer they were being a jerk. He'd be completely lost without her.

After waiting several minutes for the chief to state his business, Walker asked, "What can I do for the Bend's finest?"

The werewolf fidgeted in his chair, adjusting the band on his watch. "That was a nice call last night." He glanced up at Walker, and continued, "The mate-and-switch penalty, I mean."

"Thanks." Walker studied his colleague. The older man looked pale, exhausted, and uncharacteristically unkempt. Iron gray hair drooped out of its pompadour, and his uniform shirt was wrinkled and stained. Walker breathed in through his nose, and scented a mishmash of chili, garlic, and skunk, with a faint hint of fear. *Fear?* "Rex, what's going on?"

"There was a murder last night." He licked chapped lips. "The body was discovered by the victim's parents just before noon."

"Gods." Walker pulled two bottles of water from the small fridge behind his desk and handed one to the older man.

Rex twisted the top off and took a long drink.

"Who's the victim?" Walker had a bad feeling about this. The werewolf wouldn't seek help on what would normally be a police matter unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Fred Bernstein."

"Fred?" Walker shook his head. "No. Not Fred. He's a sweetheart." Though in his mid-twenties, Fred had the mind of a child -- a loving, friendly child.

"Yeah." The chief ran a shaky hand through his hair, mussing it even more. "His parents were down in Reno for the night, at some sort of awards banquet, and got back around eleven-thirty. They found him then."

"How did it happen?" Walker took a drink of his own water, having to force it past the lump in his throat. Fred mowed the lawn, both here at the office and at his home during the summer months. He'd come by yesterday morning to schedule shoveling snow during the upcoming winter. Closing his eyes, Walker called up the image of the last time he'd seen the young man. Sweaty, smiling, and covered with pieces of grass, Fred had been full of life. Not for the first time, Walker envied those beings with the ability to cry.

"That's the thing." Evans leaned forward, resting his clasped hands on the desktop. "If this were an ordinary murder -- not that any murder is ordinary -- we would handle it in the department."

Unease coiled in his belly. "But this isn't an ordinary murder."

"Near as we can tell, someone used magic to stop his heart."

"Trickster bless," Walker said. There weren't many unbreakable laws when it came to magic, but the proscription on using pure magic to kill was well known. He remembered his teachers stating it over and over during his adolescence: *Magic is the energy of life. Using it to kill is a violation of the laws of the magic.* People who broke the law were hunted down and put to death in the old fashioned way -- with a noose and a sharp axe.

The chief touched his fingers to his red, runny nose. "My forensic mage, Julieanne, found spell bundles in each room. We're screwed, magic-wise."

"I don't understand; I'm immune to magic, so I've never paid all that much attention to it beyond the basics."

"Ah. It's a sort of magical stink bomb. Julieanne said there's no way she can get any magical trace; everything's too badly tainted. In addition, a real stink bomb was placed in the house, and it's wiped out any scent of the killer. Whoever they are, they know enough about the town to destroy all the evidence."

"Damn," Walker said, a dull rage beginning to seep through his veins. "Can I see the crime scene?"

Rex nodded. "I was hoping you'd be willing to look." He rubbed the stubble on his jaw, looking exhausted. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Walker pressed the intercom button on his phone. "Veri, please call Brenda and Danny and have them meet me at Lois and George Bernstein's home."

"Will do, boss."

"Let's go catch a killer," he said, smiling grimly at the police chief.

Chapter Six

“So, you’re saying Walker’s hair is prehensile?” Josie said, not sure if she was intrigued or freaked out. Then again, all that wonderful hair draped over her, caressing her... She shivered as her pussy got wet. *Okay, so that works for me. Cool.*

The theme from *Finding Nemo* rang from the pocket of Libby’s slacks. Rolling her eyes, she said, “My brother loves this movie, but I’m getting a little sick of it.” She pulled her phone out and looked at the numbers. “It’s my parents; that’s odd. They know I don’t usually answer my phone when I’m at work. Hello?” Libby listened, her eyes growing wider and her body becoming absolutely still. Her partner, Amy, put an arm around her.

As Josie watched, Libby’s aura went from sunny to a hazy, soiled orange, like the color of water when too many different colored paintbrushes had been dipped into it. The thin thread that normally connected all living things to the local energies began to fray as Josie watched. She nudged Nort with her elbow, and held out her hand. He nodded slightly, and placed his left hand in hers, leaning forward enough to get his right hand on the floor.

Nothing like a troll as an anchor for helping someone ground and center herself. Josie pulled in the earth force with her best friend acting as an amplifier. She shifted the color of her own aura to Libby’s signature color and then pushed the extra power out toward the distraught woman. The energy fought her for a moment, then gave in and went where she directed it.

Some of the tension drained from Libby as warm red-orange enfolded her. Josie pulled her energy back as Amy wrapped her arms around her lover. As Libby sank into Amy’s embrace, tears began streaming down her face. She nodded, saying, “Yes, I understand. Have them go to my house.” She closed the phone and let her hand fall into her lap. “Fred’s gone. Dead.” She closed her eyes, sagging against Amy. “Murdered.” Jagged streaks of vile, black-red marred her aura.

Josie recoiled; it looked like Libby was splattered with congealing blood. She concentrated on what she could do to help, rather than wondering what insensitive asshole would give news like that over the phone. She could almost hear Fred's soft tenor asking, "Miz Josie, I have a question for you: who would tell that kind of bad news on the phone?" Specks of gray shadow capered in the air surrounding Libby and Amy. Tensing, Josie narrowed her focus, trying to locate to source, but they vanished too quickly.

Bales of weirdness, as Fred would say. Fred. The reality hit her then. Fred was gone. His solemn voice spoke in her mind. *Fred, not Freddie. Freddie is a baby's name, and babies don't shave.* Josie's eyes filled with tears. Fred nearly always radiated brilliant, sunshine yellow, an exact replica of his personality. The sun would lose some of its radiance with his death.

Josie choked back a sob. Now was not the time. Her friends needed her. "Go. I'll take both of your afternoon classes. Nort can take both of our classes." She looked at him for confirmation. After he nodded, she continued, "Amy, would you like me to contact the pack?"

The werewolf nodded, her mouth set in a grim line. "Yes, thank you." Moisture trickled from the corners of her eyes. "Tell them to come over to our place. Lois and George's house is a crime scene right now; they're going to stay with us." Violet deepened to magenta as the blonde woman squared her shoulders and pulled Libby to her feet.

"I will," Josie said, blinking back tears.

The two women left the room, the werewolf supporting her human mate.

Josie looked down at her watch. It was nearly time for lunch to be over. They had about five minutes before the bell called the children back to class. The principal needed to be notified, both as a friend and as a supervisor. "Nort, will you let Vera know what's going on while I call Neely Evans?"

He said, "Of course," stood, and started for the door. "We'll do story time for the rest of the afternoon. Janni Lee Simner's book just arrived." He paused, one hand on the doorknob. "When school is over and the children are taken care of, we will weep together."

"Yeah." Josie swallowed around the lump in her throat. "We will."

* * * * *

The walls were painted greenish blue, darker on the lower part, lighter near the ceiling. The actual ceiling was bottle green, with lighter areas -- sunlight through water. Colorful fish swam on the walls, and a replica of a giant sea turtle hung in one corner. The room was clean and neat, except for the black fingerprint powder on every hard surface.

The unmade twin bed had sheets covered with happy fish, one pillowcase with a smiling Nemo face, the other showing Dory's. Walker recognized all the characters from

Finding Nemo because the movie was a favorite of his son, Jake's. Walker had watched the movie several times so he could discuss it with Jake whenever the boy wanted to. When he was ten, Jake wanted to be just like Crush, the turtle, and surf the world's oceans. Walker didn't have the heart to tell his son that fiends and sand were a bad combination. His hair shuddered against his scalp at the thought of all that grit infesting it.

Strong smells and fiends didn't go together either. Walker rubbed his hand against his nose, trying to stop the oncoming sneeze. It was disrespectful to sneeze uncontrollably in the place where such a heinous crime had been committed. The whole house reeked of skunk musk, mace, garlic, and pepper spray. His sensitive nose was rendered completely useless by the combination of odors, and that pissed him off.

His hands clenched into fists. The pain of his talons cutting into his palms startled him with the knowledge that his human aspect had faded away.

"Holy *fuck*." Rex's voice came from behind him.

Walker spun around, hissing in annoyance at the interruption.

The police chief recoiled and backed away, head tilted back to expose his throat. He stopped when his back hit the wall. Eyes never leaving Walker's face, the alpha werewolf hunched against the wall, as if trying to make himself appear smaller.

Walker's hair whipped around in a frenzy of rage. *Control, damn it, get control*. He reached for his center, willing himself to calm down. Several deep breaths later, his human face was back in place, his hair no longer lashing the air around him. He knew trying to get it back into its braid would be impossible, so he didn't even try. The dark strands hung down his back, their rustling and twisting betraying his masked turmoil.

Slowly, carefully, the werewolf lowered his chin. "Walker? Are you back with us?"

Walker felt a rueful smile crease his lips. "Sorry about that, Chief. This murder is pushing all my buttons." He kept his tone light, hoping his show of temper hadn't destroyed his tenuous relationship with the alpha werewolf. *I can't let it. Fred's murder is going to be tough enough to handle without the two of us at each other's throats*.

Rex shook himself like an itchy dog. "That was enlightening. Have you found anything?"

"No." His eyes narrowed as the anger threatened to swamp him again. "This stench has shorted out my sense of smell. I can't even smell Fred's scent in his bedroom." The room should be saturated with Fred's essence. Instead, all Walker could smell was the unpleasant stink bomb.

Evans peered closely at Walker. "Why aren't your eyes leaking tears? Mine haven't stopped since I stepped into this place."

"Nictitating membranes protect them, since I don't produce tears like most people do."

* * * * *

Josie sat cross-legged on the grass in the center of a triangle of pale pink Tranquility roses. Her hair, still damp from the shower she'd taken when she'd gotten home from work, fluttered in the light breeze. The unbleached linen tank dress she wore was almost too light for the cooler fall temperatures, but she needed natural clothing for this. For the same reason, she wore no bra or panties; nothing to impede the flow of the energies. Ideally, she'd be completely naked, though that simply wasn't practical when one had close neighbors. No matter how hunky those neighbors were. She giggled as her aura blushed red.

In her hands, she held a baseball-sized smoky quartz river cobble. A quarter of the cobble had been sliced away on one side, giving a flat, clear window into the inside of the stone. It was a beautiful piece, one her geologist mother had found in a trip to the Gem and Mineral Show in Tucson, Arizona. The outside had been worn to smooth, opaque beauty by years of tumbling in a riverbed, yet the inside of the smoky brown stone was still clear.

Arms raised up and out in front of her, Josie positioned the stone so that the late afternoon sun shined through it. Peering into the transparent window, she focused her will. "Show me the face of the person who killed Frederick James Bernstein."

The quartz flickered, but remained clear.

"Show me the face of the person who killed Frederick James Bernstein."

Again, the crystal flickered, sparks of brown and blue shimmering in its depths. Again, it went clear.

"Show me the face of the person who killed Frederick James Bernstein."

Yellowed beige snow filled the crystal, solidifying into a vague form for a moment before scattering again.

Josie gritted her teeth and pushed her will into the stone. The snow swirled and twisted, coming together and breaking apart. Finally, a face became visible, and it was one she knew well.

Bartholomew Franklin, the enterprising mage who'd built a town where the axle of his wagon had broken.

She blew out a frustrated breath. The picture changed, showing a lean-faced blonde woman with a mouthful of sharp teeth. Josie knew the faces nearly as well as she knew her own. She taught a unit on local history every spring. Lilith Austin, the *ban sidhe* who'd married Bartholomew and helped him create a town where magic-users and nonhumans felt comfortable enough to share their secrets.

The picture changed again, and then again, showing men, women, and children of all ages and species. Josie recognized all of the faces, including that of her paternal grandmother, and her own.

What on earth?

Face after face filled the cobble. She tried to lower it, but her arms were unresponsive. She couldn't close her eyes, and even breathing became a struggle. Josie lost track of how long she'd been caught in the crystal, helpless and nauseated, unable to break free.

The crystal went dark.

Josie's breath stuttered in her lungs as a fist of icy cold air surrounded her. The quartz was charcoal gray now. Deep inside, something moved. It was subtle, more an artifact of instinct than truth. Like the difference in color between gray and grey -- a difference that couldn't, shouldn't exist. But it was there all the same, Josie could feel it. More important, she could *see* it.

The surface of the crystal moved against her skin as fissures mazed it. She closed her eyes and wrenched her head to the side as the cobble shattered in her hands with a loud *crack*.

Letting the shards drop, she fell backward onto the grass, staring at her injured hands. Blood dripped from her fingers onto her cheeks in a warm, crimson rain.

"Josie, I heard a noise... Goddess bless." Her aunt stood beside her, one hand clasped to her ample bosom.

"I heard a shot, is everything all right?" Now Walker was there too. He knelt beside her, taking her hands into his. "You've got some cuts here, but nothing looks too serious. Can you sit up?" His hair was loose. She'd never seen it unbraided. It fell past his butt in a smooth river of black.

"Yeah," she croaked. With his assistance, she pulled herself upright, groaning as her muscles protested the movement. *How long was I sitting there?* She looked toward the sun. It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes, but it felt like days. Walker wrapped an arm around her, positioning her so she could rest her head on his shoulder. It felt good to be close to the marshal, safe.

"Josie?" Sofa said, wrapping a clean dishtowel loosely around her niece's injured hands. "Do you think you can walk? I want to get you inside and make sure there aren't any slivers in your hands." She looked down at the dull pile of quartz. "Was that the river cobble?"

"Yes." She stood, her legs shaky.

"Will I anger your inner feminist if I carry you?" Walker asked, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

Looking up into concerned green eyes, she smiled wanly. "I'm secure in my femininity. Carry me, big boy." She squeaked as he swung her into his arms, cradling her as easily as he would a child. *Safe*, she thought as they entered the kitchen, *I feel so safe in his arms*.

A hank of his hair fell over his shoulder and down into her lap. Remembering what Amy'd said about his hair, she blushed. She was definitely okay with sentient hair.

* * * * *

Walker set Josie down so she was sitting on the countertop next to the kitchen sink. He could hear Sofa bustling about behind him as he ran the tap, adjusting the water until it was lukewarm. He unwrapped her hands and guided them beneath the gentle stream, wincing in sympathy when she hissed as the water touched the cuts.

"The bleeding's stopped," Sofa said, taking up a position on the other side of the sink.

"Yeah." Josie held her hands up, looking at both the palm and back of each hand. "There aren't any fragments in the cuts, so we can slap on some Band-Aids and then figure out what the hell happened out there."

"Are you sure?" he asked, peering at the small cuts. The coppery scent of her blood mingled with the fragrance of berries and fear.

"Yep, I'd see if there was anything there."

He could hear the emphasis on the word "see." "Good." He wiped the streaks of blood from Josie's face, then lifted her down from the counter. Ready to catch her if she fell, he walked behind her to the table, sitting across from the two women.

The grassy scent of woundheal filled the air when Sofa opened a small brown jar of salve. It soothed his sore nostrils. "What happened?"

"Yes, Josie," Sofa said as she dabbed salve on the cuts and placed small purple and green flowered Band-Aids on each one. "How did the crystal shatter?"

Josie slumped in her chair, looking exhausted. "Sofa, could I please have some tea? I feel like I've been rode hard and put away wet. And not in the good way." Her blue eyes widened comically as she remembered his presence. "Um..." She trailed off, biting her bottom lip, a blush tingeing her cheeks. He was glad to see some color in her cheeks; she'd been pale as milk before.

He grinned at her. "If you'll tell me where the glasses are, I'll get it for you." He wanted to lean forward and press light, nibbling kisses on her lush mouth. At the same time, he wanted to crush her to him and warn away anyone who might harm her.

Sofa chuckled with forced humor. "You two keep flirting. I'll get the tea. Walker, would you like some? We have both regular and herbal."

We're all trying to pretend that everything is normal, that there isn't a Fred-shaped hole in our lives now. "Just water for me, thanks." He watched Josie fidget, picking at the edge of one of the Band-Aids while her aunt poured tea and water. Josie picked up her glass and took a long drink. The smooth line of her neck made his mouth go dry. A stern command to his hair prevented it from reaching out to caress her tanned skin, but it was a near thing, and he could feel his roots quiver with the need to touch.

She set the glass down, her finger tracing the rim. "I was trying to find out who murdered Fred."

His gut clenched at her words. "Did you find anything?" Gods of the nine tails, make it so.

“No. It was strange. I have a strong gift. I should have been able to see the killer’s face.” She looked up at him. “The crystal fought me. It’s never done that before. Then it showed the faces of Bartholomew Franklin and Lilith Austin. And then it started flipping from face to face to face. Some humans, some not. People who’ve been dead for years, and people who live here today. I even saw my own face.” She pounded a fist against the table, flinching as the movement jarred her injuries. “It should have worked.”

Not stopping to think, he reached out and caught her hand before she could damage it further. “Hey, don’t hurt yourself.” Her skin was warm against his palm, and he gave in to the temptation to stroke his finger over the back of her hand.

“I’m just so frustrated.” Tears sparkled in her eyes. “What kind of person would hurt Fred?”

“I don’t know, but I promise you, I will find out.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.” Her hand tightened on his. A grim smile on her lips, she repeated, “Anything.”

A crisp knock on the front door startled all three of them.

“It’s Wu,” Sofa said. “He’s taking me to dinner tonight.”

“Go,” Josie said. “I’ll be fine.”

Sofa looked uncertainly at her niece. “I could stay...”

Walker seized the chance to spend more time with Josie. “I don’t cook, but I order a mean pizza. Josie, would you join me for takeout?” *Smooth, big guy, real smooth.*

She cocked her head to the side, studying him. “I’d like that.”

A second, more emphatic set of knocks sounded.

Sofa rolled her eyes. “For an ancient Australian dragon, Wu Chang has the patience of a three-year-old.”

Walker bit the inside of his lip to keep from laughing.

“Have fun,” Josie said, winking at her aunt.

“You’re sure?” Sofa waited for her niece’s nod before turning to Walker. “Make sure she eats.”

“I will.”

The older woman bustled from the room, calling out. “Keep your shorts on, Wu, I’m coming.”

“Not yet, but I bet she will be later,” Josie murmured, winking at him.

Laughter burst free from him. “I think Wu’s met his match with her.”

“I hope so. They seem to make each other happy. Sofa deserves some happiness after the past few months.”

“How is she doing with the pacemaker?”

“Good.” Melancholy blue eyes captured his. “The doctor says it’s regulating her heartbeat, and she’s been given the okay to drive and to exercise.”

“I’m glad.” He deliberately lightened his tone. “And now, the make or break of any first date. What do you like on your pizza.”

A slow grin brightened her expression. “Pepperoni? Olives? Extra cheese?”

“Pepperoni and extra cheese, yes. Olives, yuck. How ’bout mushrooms?”

“Mushrooms, bleah.” She looked hopefully at him. “Pineapple?”

Walker thought for a moment. He loved Hawaiian-style pizza, but pepperoni and pineapple? “Why not?” He reached into his pocket for his cell, but didn’t find it. *That’s right, it’s on my desk.* “Mind if I use your phone to call it in? I forgot my cell when I rushed over here.” His eyes widened and he brushed his braid over his back pocket. “Luckily, I did remember my wallet.”

“I’ll call. Pizza Villa okay?” She stood -- too fast -- and had a moment of dizziness.

“Josie!” He was around the table and holding her before she could blink.

Chapter Seven

Purple sparklies danced around her.

“Josie, are you okay? Talk to me, sweetheart.”

“Whoa, head rush,” she murmured, rubbing her palm against her forehead. “I guess I stood up too fast.” The chair beneath her legs shifted, and she realized she was sitting sideways across Walker’s lap in the chair she’d recently vacated. His left arm curved around her, hand resting just below her breasts, and the other hand brushed her hair away from her face. *Scrying must have taken more out of me than I realized.* “Thanks for the catch,” she said, brushing a kiss onto his cheek. *Even if I didn’t really need it.*

“Anytime,” he said, the words a caress.

The soft touch of warm air on her skin made her suddenly aware that only a few inches and a layer of flimsy cloth separated his hand from her nipple. *Yes, this is right. I want this.* Her breath caught, and she licked her lips, tilting her head forward to press a kiss against his mouth.

His lips moved against hers, warm and inviting.

She flicked her tongue over his lower lip, tasting him and asking for entrance. Walker’s mouth opened, and the kiss went from sweet to spicy in the space of a heartbeat. He tasted of cloves and shadows, and Josie couldn’t get enough. Between them, energy rubbed and teased, the caress of aura against aura intoxicating. Squirming, loving the feel of his taut muscles beneath her legs, she maneuvered until she was straddling him, her dress rucked up around her waist. Surprised and turned on by her uncharacteristic wantonness, she grabbed the bunched material and broke the kiss long enough to pull it over her head. *Dizzy to fucking in less than thirty seconds flat. Yay me!* She knew part of the desire she felt was born of a desperation to cling to life in the face of death, but that wasn’t everything, not by a long shot.

“Trickster bless, Josie,” he whispered, green eyes hot as they trailed over her bare flesh.

Lush burgundy starbursts flared around them as she captured his mouth again. Her hands went around his neck, brushing against his braid. He smelled of exotic spices and rich musk. The urge to bury her hands in his glorious hair was strong, but she wasn’t sure if that was allowed. They needed to have a conversation about dos and don’ts, just not now. Now was for feeling.

Walker’s hands roved down her back, finding and kneading her ass, pulling her tight against his denim-clad groin. *We fit together*, she thought with a certainty that should have been startling. The sensation of rough cloth against her most tender parts was incredible. Moisture seeped from her aching pussy as the swollen flesh grew slick with need. She rubbed against him, his low growls of arousal making her want more contact.

This time, Walker broke the kiss. He tilted his head and licked her right nipple, and Josie gasped as it tightened beneath his tongue. Closing his lips over the taut peak, he teased it with a series of barely-there flicks. Just when Josie wanted to scream out her need for a firmer touch, he pulled back, blowing across the sensitized bud.

“Oh, Goddess.” Her nipple grew almost painfully hard. Before she could catch her breath, he took as much of her breast as he could in his mouth, suckling greedily. Cold and heat, like shadows and stars, coursed through her veins. She wanted to pull him inside, to absorb and learn the colors that defined him even as she learned his body.

Josie cried out, clutching his shoulders as her first orgasm shook through her.

Pulling his mouth away, he grinned at her. “Sensitive, I like that. I’ve never made anyone come just from sucking her nipple.”

She looked down into laughing green eyes. “I’ve never come from just that before.” After several wonderful, sloppy kisses, she said, “I want to come with you inside me. Will you fuck me, Walker Morgan?” The words had the weight of ritual. *Give yourself to me, that I can gift you with myself*. She’d read that in a poem once and hadn’t understood it. Now, she did.

His gaze darkened. “Yes, Josie Reynolds, I would love to fuck you.” A hand trailed down her belly, finding and parting the silken folds of her pussy. “Mm. You’re wet for me.” A finger slid into her, his thumb discovering and massaging her clit.

I like a man who can multitask. She snickered as the odd thought crossed her mind. Arching her back, she pressed into his caress. *I can’t wait to show him my skills*.

“You’re going to have to stand up so I can get undressed,” Walker said, pulling his finger out, then sliding two back in. He varied his strokes, fingers twisting and petting her inner walls as if he were trying to map her pleasure.

“No.” Josie let go of his shoulders and fumbled at the front of his jeans. The button opened easily, but the zipper was uncooperative. Tugging at it, she said, “Please tell me you

have a condom in your wallet.” She had some in her purse, but didn’t want to break the mood by going to fetch them. The real world would crash down on them soon enough.

He laughed, bucking up against her. His left hand reached up just over his shoulder and came back with a blue foil packet.

Since his right hand was still doing obscene things between her thighs, Josie was a little startled. *Definitely need to talk later.* After finally getting his recalcitrant zipper down, she reached in and guided his rigid shaft out through the opening in his boxers. He was long and thick, and deliciously hard. *Oh, yeah.* She rubbed her thumb through the clear precum leaking from his cock and then put it in her mouth, tasting him. Cloves and brandy. “You taste good. Next time, I want to suck you.” *And there will be a next time.*

“Sixty-nine has always been one of my favorite numbers.” He rolled the condom down his shaft. “How do you want to do this?” As he spoke, his hands trailed gently across her thighs.

“Like this.” Josie stood up, positioning herself over his erection and reaching down to guide him to her opening. Once the head of his cock breached her, she braced her hands on his shoulders and lowered herself slowly down onto him. The feel of his shaft stretching and opening her was wonderful, making bolts of rich, deep rose dance around them. The sparkles in Walker’s aura took on a matching rosy hue while dark starbursts frisked in her energy.

“So hot, Josie, you’re so hot and tight around me.” He cupped both hands around her ass, bracing her, and helping her move against him.

Kissing him, she rolled her hips. His groan harmonized with her soft moans of pleasure. Rocking against him, she set a brisk rhythm, glorying in the feel of his shaft sliding in and out of her. Around them, color undulated, ebbing and flowing with the motion of their fucking.

Walker leaned forward, catching the nipple he’d neglected earlier, sucking and nipping at the tight peak.

Her head fell back, and she moved her hips faster, riding him hard. Her hands clutched his shoulders as she fucked herself on his cock. He felt glorious inside her, filling empty places she didn’t know she had.

Teeth bit down on her nipple, the almost painful pleasure ripping a climax from her. For a split second Josie was in Walker’s mind, feeling her muscles clench against his hard shaft. She cried out as her body bucked and spasmed against him.

Walker’s hips slammed upward, jerking as he spilled his seed.

Panting, Josie rested against him, her head on his shoulder, arms wrapped loosely around his waist. Had she really felt that moment of connection? Had their auras blended? She smiled as his shaft twitched inside her, setting off tiny aftershocks of bliss in her pussy. A soft caress on the back of her hand made her shift so she could look over his shoulder to where her hands rested on the small of his back.

A wisp of black hair caressed her fingers with a barely-there touch. Giving in to temptation, she rubbed a finger over the tendril.

Walker tensed.

"Okay?" she asked, hoping she hadn't done something horrible.

"Very." He looked up at her. "And you? Are you okay with it?"

She pressed a kiss against his neck and petted his braid. "Yes.

"Good," he said, relaxing.

Her stomach chose that moment to let out a loud growl. Josie flushed, wishing the floor would open up and swallow her. *Oh, Goddess, how unsexy was that?!*

Chuckling, he said, "Pizza?"

* * * * *

Walker chewed the pizza, giving it the same consideration he'd give a fine wine. Spicy pepperoni, sweet-tangy pineapple. "This is surprisingly good." They'd managed to dress and place the order without molesting each other again, though it was a near thing. He'd been tempted to say to hell with the pizza -- until his stomach began a dialogue with hers -- probably discussing crazy people who thought sex was more important than food. It should have been embarrassing and not sexy in the least, but their shared laughter had gone husky as they looked at each other. Then a dual grumble of protest broke through shared desire.

"Yeah, I know," Josie said. "When I was in high school, we'd dip it in ranch dressing and eat it."

He was unable to stop the shudder at the description of willful pizza desecration. "Yuck. That's disgusting." He squinched up his face and shook his head. "Ranch dressing. Bleah!"

"Philistine," she said, tossing a napkin at him.

His braid snapped up, catching the floating paper and offering it back to her.

"Oh, wow," she said, catching the tip of his braid gently in one hand. "Can I? Is it really sentient?"

He dropped the napkin onto the table and let his hair wrap around her hand, petting her wrist. "Just don't pinch or pull. And it doesn't have a mind of its own, though my son swears his does."

Rubbing the strands between her fingers, she said, "It's like warm, velvet wire." She looked up at him, blue eyes bright with curiosity. "Can you feel this? How sensitive is it?"

"Each strand is like a tiny finger. It's very, very sensitive."

She set his braid down on the table, giving it a gentle pat before pulling her hand away. "That's so cool." She took another bite of pizza, watching avidly as he drew the braid back over his shoulder.

"I'm glad you're not bothered by it." Ecstatic was a better word, but he didn't want to sound like an idiot by saying so.

Shaking her head, she said, "Nope, I have a bit of a thing about long hair, and long hair that likes being touched as much as I like touching it? Bonus." A pause, then, "You have a son?"

"Jake." Walker claimed a second piece of pizza. "He's thirteen, and just discovering the nasty surprise puberty plays on our species. Our hair is crew-cut short until the hormones kick in; then it grows two and a half feet in a few months. Imagine having hundreds, thousands of extra fingers all at once."

She winced. "Yikes. You're a fiend, right?"

Walker nodded. "Yep." He tensed, wondering what rumors and half-truths she'd heard about his kind. Fiends were rare, and tended to have short, violent lives, leading to some wildly inaccurate stories.

"I really don't know much more than the name and now the hair thing. I'm interested, though, if you want to elaborate."

He shrugged one shoulder with a mental sigh of relief. At least he wouldn't have to change any misconceptions. "Not much to tell. We're demon-kin. We have the usual sharp teeth, claws and weird eyes that most demons have. You already know about the hair." He made a helpless gesture with the hand not holding a slice of pizza. "Ask me what you'd like to know, and I'll answer."

Reaching across the table, she caught his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I will. I grew up here, remember? I'm not going to freak out on you." She cocked her head to one side. "Tell me about your son. Does he ever visit?"

"No, gods willing."

She blinked at his vehement words. "Okay, not what I was expecting."

"Sorry." Walker finished his second slice and snagged a third. "All that incredible sex has made me ravenous."

She nodded and said, "Me too," then grabbed another piece.

"Fiends are very territorial. Very, very, psychotically territorial. We literally can't be near each other." He used his braid to reach across the table with a napkin and wipe the smear of pizza sauce from Josie's chin.

"Thanks." She caught the tip and pressed a kiss to his hair.

The sensation of her soft lips pressing against the sensitive strands made a shiver run through him, straight to his hardening cock. Dragging his gaze away from the dark tips of her breasts, clearly visible through the pale linen dress, he tamped his libido down. Clearing his throat, he said, "My kind were originally created by Shendic the Viper. She used us as weapons in her war against the Trickster, and she treated my ancestors horribly. Eventually,

the fiends rebelled, refusing to fight anymore.” He smiled ruefully. “She wasn’t amused. Since she couldn’t destroy us without breaking the rule against unmaking.”

“I’m not following you,” Josie said. “What is the ‘rule against unmaking’?”

He was surprised that she wasn’t familiar with it, after growing up in a town where magic was an accepted piece of reality. Then again, maybe Franklin’s Bend had a shortage of evil goddesses. “As I understand it, the gods can’t destroy a species they’ve created, I’m not entirely sure why.” He shrugged. “I do know that if she’d waved a hand to kill every fiend, she would have been the one destroyed. Maybe it’s like the law against using magic to kill.”

“That makes sense. If it’s prohibited for mortals to kill each other using magic, I’d guess killing an entire species would be forbidden.” She looked down at the table, pressing her lips tightly together.

He reached across the table and took her hand. “Instead, she placed a curse on us. When two fiends meet, we fight -- generally to the death of one or both. Fiends come together only to breed, and even that may end up with one or both dead. I’ve never spoken to my parents, and have only exchanged a few phone calls with Lola, my son’s mother.” He drank some of his water. “The Internet is a blessing for my kind. I can be there for Jake, even though I can’t physically *be there* for him.”

“Does he live with his mother?”

“No. As soon as he was born, he was given to his foster parents, the same werefox clan that raised me.” He missed visiting the clan, but was glad that his son had such a loving family.

“Wait, aren’t werefoxes followers of the Trickster?”

“Yeah. All the Trickster’s children were so grateful that the fiends stopped the war that they’ve raised our children. It’s another way to show their butts to their enemies: take in the children and teach them to follow the Trickster.” He grinned. “At least, that’s what Mom and Dad always told me.”

“Good folks?” she asked.

“The best. Even if they did foist an uppity hellhound off on me.” *Oh, no.* “A hellhound who hasn’t been fed yet this evening.” Walker looked at the digital clock on the microwave. It was nearly seven o’clock. “My shoes are doomed.” Mokey didn’t chew them or piss on them or any such canine tricks. He would simply drop both shoes in the toilet, ruining the leather.

“Mokey?” Josie was laughing at him. “Mokey, the poodle with the silly haircut, is a hellhound? That’s too funny.”

He preened at being able to distract her from her sorrow -- even if it was at his expense. “Oh, sure, laugh. It’s not your favorite leather shoes that are being destroyed as we speak.”

“Pobracito, poor little,” she said, snickering.

He stuck his tongue out at her and then dove into his fourth piece of pizza.

After finishing her third slice, she said, "How did you end up here? And where are you from?"

"I grew up in Bisbee, Arizona, went to the University of Arizona in Phoenix, then settled in Sierra Vista as a CPA for the past eight years. I heard about the job as marshal from a college buddy of mine, applied, and here I am."

"We're lucky to have you." She closed her eyes, her shoulders drooping. "Especially now."

Fred. Walker felt the familiar sensation of sorrow and rage. There was a hint of guilt there as well. He and Josie were taking tentative steps toward a future when Fred only had a past. "We have no leads. Yet."

Something would turn up. In a town with this many magic users and magical beings, somebody would find something, or conjure something, or smell something. The idea that Fred's murderer would go free was simply unacceptable.

"I meant what I said earlier. I will help in any way I can." Josie's voice was low and fierce.

"Keep your eyes and ears open for anything unusual, anything that might lead us to the killer." He pushed his plate aside and leaned back in the chair. "I'm not a detective. I'm more like hired muscle, here to keep the rowdies in line. I'm out of my depth." *I'm an accountant with no training in law enforcement. I don't know how to catch a killer.* Unfortunately, the cops didn't have much more experience than he did. There just weren't many mysteries in Franklin's Bend. And surprisingly little violent crime.

"You're smart and tough, and you've done far more for the town than Trevor Dawson ever did."

Walker growled as he heard the previous marshal's name. Dawson had been the previous alpha werewolf, and had spent far more time ruining lives than doing his job. Rex had done the town a huge favor by killing the former alpha and taking over. "Rex is a good cop. Hopefully, he'll figure out who the murderer is, and I'll just get to help with the takedown."

Josie kissed her fingers and held them up in front of her. "Your mouth to the goddess's ear." She placed her plate on top of his. "Danny didn't find anything?"

The mage had used every spell he could think of, working himself past exhaustion, all to no avail. "No." Walker didn't elaborate. At this point, he didn't want to give away any details the chief might want kept quiet.

"How about Brenda? She's got a decent psychic gift."

"She couldn't find anything either." She had tried until sweat stood out on her brow and tears leaked from her eyes, and seen nothing. He sighed. "I'm not trying to be coy, I just need to get Rex's okay before I talk about the case. Sorry." He found himself wishing he'd

known Fred Bernstein better. Anyone who could command such strong feelings from Josie had to be a wonderful person.

She shook her head. "Don't be. I understand. When you can talk, I'll listen, brainstorm, whatever." Pausing, she thought for a moment, then added, "I can sometimes do psychometry -- touch something and get images from it. If you think that would help, I'm willing to try."

Gorgeous, brave, talented, and determined -- what more could any man ask for in a woman? *And she likes my hair.* "I'll keep that in mind. Hopefully, Rex will call me tonight and ask me to help him with an arrest." He stood, picking up the soiled plates and carrying them to the sink. "I need to go and feed the mutt, then patrol."

Josie pulled a zipper bag from a drawer, tucking the three uneaten pieces of pizza inside. Her face solemn, she offered them to him. "To tame the savage Mokey."

Walker took the bag and pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you for an incredible evening, Josie." He captured her mouth in a kiss, tasting pepperoni, pineapple, tea, and a subtle, berries and cream flavor that was pure Josie.

She pulled away, panting. "Be safe tonight, Walker."

"I will."

She walked him to the door, kissing him briefly before unlocking it.

"Can I call you tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'll be cranky if you don't."

He kissed her again, and opened the door before he stripped them both naked and started round two. "Goodnight, sweet Josie."

Chapter Eight

I feel pretty, oh so pretty... The song played in his mind. “Aarrgh!” Walker flopped down on his bed, groaning. *Sewerlings. Why did it have to be sewerlings?* He pulled the crisp cotton sheet and velvety blanket over him, snuggling down in the cool fabric.

Sewerlings were dark green, slug-like creatures that lived in the sewer pipes beneath buildings. Harmless, non-sentient invertebrates, they would live lives of obscurity, if not for one thing. They sang. Loudly, incessantly, obsessively. Family clumps of them moved from house to house every few months, taking their musical repertoire with them.

The clump infesting the Broadbent family’s pipes apparently liked show tunes.

...pretty, and witty, and gay.

He shook his head trying to dislodge the song. Getting rid of the sewerlings required a strange, icky ritual involving a white nylon stocking, a black chicken, a karaoke machine with the proper range of selections, and a voodoo priest. Luckily, his human deputy, Danny, had minored in voodoo and was able to complete the spell. Walker winced, remembering the mage’s face as Danny and Brenda were sprayed with chicken blood. Danny had been apologetic; Brenda quietly furious. *I wonder what it would take to make her loudly furious?* On second thought, he didn’t want to know. The half-elf was scary enough when she glared; he didn’t want to imagine how terrifying she’d be at yelling.

A low whimper from the floor made him roll over and look for Mokey. The hellhound lay with his paws over his ears. *Guess Mokey can’t get rid of the memory-music either.* At least the hound’s misery drowned out the song he couldn’t get out of his mind. Mostly. Walker pulled the covers up over his head and hoped for sleep.

* * * * *

Josie hugged Nort tightly. He leaned into the embrace, his large, solid form providing an anchor in the face of sadness.

"Have you heard anything from Amy or Libby?"

"No." Josie pulled away. Seen through the glitter of her unshed tears, the rich brown light surrounding the troll sparkled as if sprinkled with diamond dust. "Sofa and I took a platter of cold cuts over right after I got off work. We didn't see any of the family. Neely answered the door, and you know how she is." Josie straightened the pile of corrected spelling homework in the center of her light brown oak desk.

Nort made a rude noise.

Neely Evans, the alpha bitch of the werewolf pack, was rude, abrasive, and secretive. A transplant from San Diego, she didn't approve of mingling with humans. She'd tried to make an issue of Amy and Libby's mixed species lesbian marriage, but her husband, Police Chief Evans, had told her to back off. Much to everyone's surprise, she had.

Josie's heart ached for her two friends. They'd endured some ugly comments from the bigoted Neely, and just when things had quieted down, Fred had been murdered. *Oh, Fred, wind to thy wings, my friend, wind to thy wings.*

"Inga and Carl took a chicken pot pie over. They were also greeted by the alpha bitch."

Josie snorted, running her hand along a scar on the desk where some long-ago student had carved "DJ + BL."

Nort's expressive amber eyes opened wide, bright golden innocence shining from him. "What? That is the proper word for a female canine." As he spoke, he rubbed his index finger along the side of his nose.

"Both literally" -- Josie paused, thought for a moment, and continued -- "and literally." She knew it must be driving Neely crazy, having the pack gather to protect and support a human. Fortunately, the chief would insist that the pack be supportive; family took care of family.

I miss Mom and Dad, Josie thought. Her parents were currently in Iceland. Becky Reynolds, a geologist, was enraptured by the active volcanics of the island. Geoff was having a blast researching Icelandic sorcery. The map on the far wall held a number of sunny yellow pushpins marking her parents' travels. They'd wanted to go to Iceland for more than two decades, had even made arrangements to do so when Josie was thirteen. The plan had been for Josie to spend the school year with Sofa, then join her parents for the summer, returning with them in time to start her freshman year in high school. Then Kristin had been killed. Josie blinked against more tears. *I miss you, gorgeous.*

She forced the memories back into their corner. *At least things are heating up between Walker and me.* A smile tugged at her lips. They planned to see each other again tonight. *Nothing like a sexy guy to chase away the lonelies. And Mom and Dad are having a blast!*

Ever in tune with her, Nort said, "Have you heard from your parents lately?"

“Mom’s annoying her guides by getting too close to the lava.” Josie rolled her eyes. “Dad emailed me about something called ‘Necro-pants.’”

“Necro-pants?” The troll’s expression was a mixture of horror and curiosity. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

Josie pasted on a bland, professorial smile. “Apparently, it involves digging up a dead man, flaying the skin from the lower half of his body, and then wearing it. If you do the *extremely complicated* spell correctly, you can pull silver coins from the scrotum.”

Nort opened his mouth, closed it, blinked, and said, “That may very well be the grossest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Yeah, that was my reaction.” Leave it to her father to find the weirdest spell the Icelanders had ever invented. *Miss you guys, be safe, be happy.* She sent the thought out to her parents. Looking up at the accordioned beige vinyl curtain that separated the two third grade classrooms, she said, “Would you mind if left the curtain open?” Generally, the curtain was closed except for activities like art, music, and story time.

“Not at all,” Nort said, deep green-ivory waves lapping and undulating around him. “I think we all need the comfort of seeing our friends close by.” He stared out at his classroom for a moment. “What do we tell the kids?”

All the children knew Fred. He was as much a fixture in town as City Hall. Even more so -- people liked Fred. Josie blew out a pensive breath. “I don’t know. I’ve been pondering that since I got up.”

“Any conclusions?” The big man’s brows were drawn together, his face lined with unhappiness.

Josie knew this was even harder for Nort to accept than it was for her. Trolls simply couldn’t understand how anyone could harm a child. Because of the difficulties trolls had conceiving children, they valued them above all else. For all he had been in his twenties, Fred had still been a child in many ways.

“Answer questions as honestly as we can without frightening them, and refer them back to their parents if they want more details.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m just glad it’s Friday, so hopefully we won’t get too many questions we can’t answer.”

Nort nodded, a melancholy smile curving his lips. “You know, the last time I saw Fred he asked me why troll weddings always ended in a naked mud fight with all the guests.”

Josie felt a smile tug at her lips even as sorrow tugged at her heart. “What did you tell him?”

“That we did that to publicly celebrate our joy in our links to each other and to the earth.” Nort chuckled softly. “I was glad he didn’t ask for details on the *private* ceremony.” His smile faded. “Speaking of details, have you heard anything specific about what happened to him?”

Josie debated telling him that Walker Morgan was involved, but decided against it. Walker had been worried about confidentiality last night; she wasn't going to say anything to anyone without his consent. Her ex-husband had taught her all too well about the betrayal of trust. She'd vowed never to be like him. Shaking her head, Josie said, "Just that he was murdered. The police are playing this one close to the vest." And that was disturbing. Secrets were difficult to keep in such a small town. "I hope that means they've got a good suspect."

"And not anything more sinister," Nort said.

It should have sounded melodramatic, but it didn't. Josie shivered as a chill tickled up her spine.

* * * * *

Walker poured a glass of Diet Dr. Pepper and took a fortifying sip. The artificial sweetener zinged through him, waking him up as mere caffeine never could. If anything, caffeine made him sleepy. However, give him a can of NutraSweet laden soda and he was shaking like a nudist in a freezer.

The local radio station segued from a country ballad into a hard rock song, making him grin. The eclectic mix of music could be annoying, as they played stuff he hated as well as things he enjoyed, but it drove the sewerlings' music from his mind. And it was always entertaining; where else could he get hourly updates on the weather and the atmospheric conditions of ambient magic? *I could learn to love this town.* The scent of berries and cream teased his memory. *I could build a life here.*

At his feet, Mokey grumbled in his sleep. The hellhound had refused to stay at home this morning. Walker frowned. Mokey usually enjoyed spending time alone, only insisting on accompanying Walker on rare occasions. *Maybe he was just afraid to be alone with the music in his mind.* A snicker escaped him at the thought.

Linking his hands in front of him, Walker raised them above his head, stretching his back and shoulders. These late nights were murder. Fred's image flashed before his eyes. Talons popped from his left hand, scoring deep gouges in the surface of his desk. The killer had to be found or the town would never feel safe again.

Chief Evans hadn't come up with anything new on the murder, and neither had Brenda or Danny. The half-elf had still been tight lipped and angry when they'd parted company this morning. She'd tuned her elven senses into the natural world, but found nothing and no one out of the ordinary. Danny's emotions had been written all over his face, and his usual irreverence had been missing. He'd stretched his magical abilities to their limits and beyond, all to no avail.

If only I wasn't so damned helpless. A sliver of wood buried itself in the flesh below his index talon. Glad for the pain's distraction, he pushed his nail farther into the wood, driving

the splinter deep. Blue-red blood welled from the puncture, staining the desktop. He pulled his hand away, using the claws on his other hand to dig the splinter out and flicking it into the wastebasket beside his desk.

He hated this, hated being unable to protect his territory, his people, and Josie. Hated the fact that he was a glorified exterminator, bouncer, and mediator, not a detective.

A soft knock on his door alerted him to his secretary's presence. She took one look at his hand and walked back outside the office, her shapely ass swaying beneath her pale green knit dress. She returned a moment later with a bottle of antiseptic and the box of bandages. Full pink lips pursed in annoyance, she held out her hand. Wordlessly, he placed his injured hand in hers.

"Veri," he said, subsiding when a perfectly arched brow rose, as if she dared him to stop her from rendering first aid. He knew better than to argue with his secretary when she was on a mission. Walker pressed his lips closed, flinching when the antiseptic stung his wound. She dabbed it with healing salve and wrapped a Band-Aid around the injury. Finally, her blue eyes dancing with solemn glee, she pressed a kiss on top of the bandaged finger.

"Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome, boss." She looked down at the desk. "Would you like to borrow my emery board?"

It was too early for witticisms, or for wit. "Huh?"

A manicured nail, painted the exact shade of her lipstick, tapped the damaged wood. "To file out the gouges."

"Not necessary, thanks," he said, giving her a quelling look. It didn't work. They rarely did with her.

"Did you still want me to help with your new budget plan, or would you rather continue to mutilate your desk?"

"Pull up a chair," he said, turning his computer monitor so she could see it.

The blonde sat down beside him, her subtle, orange blossom perfume teasing his nostrils. It was a pleasant fragrance, but it couldn't compare to the scent of musk and sweat Josie'd worn after their lovemaking last night. A smile quirked his lips. As much as he'd enjoyed fucking her, he'd enjoyed the closeness more. It had been too long. And the smell of Josie's sweat on his skin could easily become addictive.

The phone rang, and he reached for it out of habit. Veri beat him to it.

"Marshal's, this is Verity, how may I help you?" She listened, tensing. "I see. I'll tell him right away." She carefully placed the receiver in its cradle. "That was Chief Evans. He needs you at the Algers' house."

* * * * *

Josie stared at the image she'd called up on Google Earth. It showed the school and its surrounding streets, and the colorful auras that surrounded them. What the heck? She gently touched the screen with the tip of her finger, watching as the plasma darkened around the pressure. A faint sparkle caught her attention. Amethyst powder, left over from the spell she'd done a few days ago -- and apparently still active. *I guess I didn't clean the screen as well as I thought after my scrying the other day. My computer may never be the same. Oh well, might as well use it.* She let a part of her awareness sink into the image on the screen, searching for any dissonances.

A thousand sharp red lines of agony sliced through her. Josie grasped the edge of her desk, her vision graying out. It hurt. Goddess bless, it hurt. She blinked, trying to bring color and light back to her sight, but the fog refused to lift. And inside that gray fog, something moved. One fumbling hand reached out and turned her computer screen off.

"Ms. Reynolds? Ms. Reynolds?"

Josie mentally sank purple filaments into the ground below the classroom, pulling strength from the earth. She looked up into her aide's concerned, muddy gray gaze. "Yes, Terri?" Her head felt as if a red-hot ice pick had been driven into her skull between her eyes. The fingers on her right hand worried the hem of her teal green shirt. Rubbing over the ribbed cotton, she concentrated on the feel of the fabric, rather than the pain inside her skull. The bandages on her fingers caught at the material and gave way. *I'd better stop before I pull the bandage off.*

"Are you okay? You went really pale." The black gill slits on the gremlin girl's neck flared, showing concern.

"Just a bit of a headache." She forced a smile. "Please ask the kids to line up for recess."

Terri looked up at the clock. "It's only 9:20." Recess didn't start until 9:30.

Josie's smile widened and became sincere. Soft pink glitter surrounded Terri's mousy brown hair like a halo. Her energy was as delicately beautiful as her gremlin exterior was homely. Her father, the mechanic who'd raised the Mini Cooper from a beautiful sports car to Mirabelle, was downright ugly. And one of the nicest people Josie'd ever met. His aura was amazing: a supernova that swirled around him like quicksilver. *Sometimes, the clichés are exactly right.*

"They've been good today, and I think we could all use some cheering up." She looked down at her sandals. The strap that went over the top of her foot and down between her big and middle toes was studded with gorgeous, greenish black faux moonstones. She loved these shoes, and had spent far too much money on them. She tilted her foot to make the stones catch the light, wincing as a sharp pain stabbed into the third eye chakra point in the center of her forehead.

Terri placed her hand over Josie's. "I'll take over as recess monitor. I can be back late for PE; Mrs. Steninger won't mind." The PE teacher had been there since long before Josie'd attended Franklin's Bend's high school, and would probably be there long after everyone was

dust; an impressive feat for a human who had little magic. The ageless woman had a horror story for every sport ever invented, and never hesitated to share the stories of deaths or dreadful injuries with her students. Terri wouldn't get into any trouble for helping out, not if Josie gave her a note for Mrs. Steninger.

"Thanks, sweetie," Josie said. She kept a brittle smile on her face as the children lined up and walked quietly from the room, though with none of their usual exuberance. News of the murder had spread rapidly throughout Franklin's Bend, leaving everyone shaken and worried.

Billy jostled Jimmy with his shoulder, and the young witch jostled him back. Both boys giggled, their earlier disagreements apparently forgotten. Nola Anderson rolled her eyes at the boys' antics, whispering something to her best friend Amity. Josie's smile softened and became genuine. Children were amazingly resilient at going on with their lives during times of tragedy. It was a survival trait most adults should envy.

"All right, girls and guys," Terri said. "No talking until we get outside; we don't want to disturb the other classes." Terri gave Josie one last, worried look before following her charges from the room.

Josie leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples. In the next room, she could hear Nort sending his class out early as well.

Once the children were out of both classrooms, Josie reached out with her mind, searching for the source of the pain that had blindsided her. She didn't have to go far.

In her mind's eye, she saw a map of the neighborhood, laid out in a crayon box of color. The pain-filled red came from a house right across the street from the elementary school. "Noreen and Bob Alger," she murmured.

"Josie?" Nort's soft voice pulled her from the trance. "I think you'd better come look at this."

Opening her eyes, she saw him standing at the window. Granite gray surrounded him in a tight sheath.

What now? She stood and joined him at the window. Three police cars were parked in front of the Algers' house, their lights off. Glad the playground was on the opposite side of the building, Josie stood, watching police officers leave the house and swarm around it, presumably looking for clues.

"What's going on in this town?" Nort whispered.

She looked up at him. "I wish I knew."

Chapter Nine

Walker sat on his front steps, head in his hands.

Bob Alger was in the hospital. The werebadger had been nearly decapitated when the glassed-in porch/dining nook on the back of his house collapsed.

Walker replayed the testimony in his mind, hoping to find some clue to why and how the freak attack had occurred. Noreen and Bob Alger had been at their pinochle game until after one in the morning. This morning, just after nine, Bob had settled at the table for a late breakfast. He described hearing a loud bang and then blacked out. Noreen had seen the whole thing from the kitchen. Bob had been lucky. The pane of glass directly above the table had fallen, pinning him to the ground, a sharp dagger of glass poised over -- and partly in -- his throat. Noreen had grabbed the glass with her bare hands, pulling it up and away from her husband before it could do any more damage. Thanks to her quick actions, and were-folks' accelerated healing, Bob would make a full recovery.

I can't imagine what she felt, he thought, shuddering. *To see Josie in such danger, or my son...* He shook the horror from his mind, forcing himself to concentrate. As an accountant, he'd had to solve some pretty convoluted bookkeeping strategies, and that was just another kind of mystery. *Forget the fact that someone was injured. Pretend it's a set of books you're trying to reconcile. Put the pieces together, and that will give you the answer.*

After the call from Chief Evans, Walker had gone straight to the hospital, arriving just after ten. He bit his lip, tempted to draw blood. Noreen had been stoic. The werebadger had puttered around, answering questions and straightening the immaculate hospital room, the bleakness in her brown eyes the only outward sign of her worry for her husband. Neither of them had any idea who could have attacked them.

The scent of berries and cream teased his nostrils. He looked up at Josie, his lips curving into a more pleasant grin. She was truly a sight for sore eyes in cutoff denim shorts

and a rust colored tank top. Glancing down, his grin widened when he saw her shoes: orange flip-flops, with the strap done in a green and brown palm tree motif. A small red-brown monkey climbed the tree. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," she answered. "Mind some company?"

"I was hoping for it." He scooted over. "Pull up a step."

She sat down, her right leg and shoulder pressed against his left. Giving in to temptation, Walker wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. He captured her hand in his, bringing it up so he could press a kiss against the bandages she still wore.

Josie made a soft "hm" sound in her throat and rested her head on his shoulder. "What happened?"

He wished he could pretend ignorance. "A magical bomb was set off in the house. Whoever did it knew their routine. Had they eaten breakfast at their normal time this morning, this could have been a murder."

She nodded against his arm. "I used to baby sit their son when he was little. We always played *Candy Land*, and Bob always made sure to have my favorite coffee ice cream for me to snack on. They're good people."

"So I understand," Walker said. He didn't know the son at all, and had only met the older Algers briefly a few weeks ago. "Rex and I are sure Fred's murderer is behind this. The same magical stink bomb was used in the Algers' house -- garlic, chili powder, and skunk musk. Bleah."

"Was the explosion caused by magic, or by an actual physical bomb?"

"Magic, we think. The crime scene guys couldn't find any sort of device that could have done this." He forced his jaw muscles to unclench. "Of course, we can't find any traces of a spell either."

The loud growl of a motorcycle made both of them look up. Walker recognized Brenda Leaforn, his deputy, from the forest green leathers and helmet she wore. Pulling into Walker's driveway, she set the kickstand on the Harley Davidson and climbed off. Her helmet and gloves came off, and were placed on the bike's cargo rack.

Both Walker and Josie stood to greet her.

Brenda strode over to them, hands in her pockets. Her face had that "I'm a serene elf, and you're not" look that was both endearing and aggravating. Sometimes Walker wanted to stick out his tongue and blow a raspberry at her, just to see if she'd respond.

"Brenda," Walker said. Josie echoed him.

"Hello, Walker, Josie. I'm glad to find you together." Brenda's smile was a bit strained, as if she were embarrassed. "I'll cut to the chase," she said, focusing on Josie. "Walker mentioned that you broke your scrying stone looking for Fred's killer."

Josie nodded, flashing Walker an unreadable look. "I did."

He hoped he hadn't overstepped himself telling his deputies and the chief about Josie. He hadn't thought Josie would mind. After Brenda left, he would explain that he did so in hopes the chief would agree to bring Josie in on the investigation. Rex had agreed to do so without hesitation. Walker frowned. There was something strange going on with the alpha werewolf. It could be a response to murder coming so close to the pack, but Walker didn't really believe that. *It's as if he's relaxed, and yet, even more professional than usual.*

Brenda pulled a dark purple velvet bag from her pocket. "I want you to have this." As she spoke, she handed the bag to Josie.

Josie took it, loosing the drawstring and spilling out a baseball-sized amethyst globe into her cupped palm. "Goddess bless, Brenda," Josie said, her voice breathless, "I can't accept this." She held it out to the older woman.

Walker studied the globe. It was a beautiful piece, deep gleaming purple, and clear, with no inclusions he could see. Expensive, but not prohibitively so.

A wistful smile playing around her lips, Brenda closed her hands around Josie's, trapping the amethyst between them. "My mother gave it to me years ago, but I've never been able to use it." The half-elf's eyes were soft. "You're the niece of one of my childhood best friends, and you've become a friend in your own right."

Walker stared at his deputy. The half-elf was showing more emotion right now than she had in all the time he'd known her. A stray thought wandered through his mind. *I wonder if she's in love with Sofa?* He hoped not. That way led to heartbreak. Discreetly, he took a breath, looking for any scent of emotion. Nothing. Just the smell of sun on green leaves, with an undertone of fertile mast.

"Even if I'm a rotten card player?" Josie asked.

Brenda chuckled. "Even so." The half-elf took a deep breath. "You're almost as strong a seer as my mother. If anyone can help with this nightmare, it's you."

She seems so alone. When did she last see her mother? Walker wondered. Brenda's mother was a full-blooded elf, and had moved away three years ago, after her husband, Brenda's human father, died of cancer. He'd heard some vague rumors about an estrangement between mother and daughter, but nothing concrete. And he didn't know Brenda well enough to ask. Yet. Hopefully, his relationship with his senior deputy would solidify soon, though he still had reservations about his relationship with Danny, his junior deputy. Maybe he needed to invite them both over for a barbecue, get to know them away from work. *And I will. As soon as things calm down.*

"I didn't inherit her gift for scrying -- too much my father's daughter, I guess." She shrugged one shoulder. "I've held onto it out of sentimentality more than anything. Let me do this, Josie. I need to do this."

"Oh, Brenda..." Josie trailed off.

"There's a monster stalking this town." The half-elf's voice was fierce. "We have to catch him. We need you. You need a scrying crystal." She grinned, though it held little humor. "So there."

"I will accept the loan of the crystal. I'll give it back when the killer's been caught. Deal?" Josie held out her free hand.

"Deal." Brenda said, sealing it with a handshake. She transferred her attention to Walker. "Danny and I will cover the patrols tonight. You help Josie find this maniac."

Raising an eyebrow at his subordinate's instructions, he nodded. "The captain's doubled the patrols during dusk and dawn. Touch base with them if you see anything strange, and be careful."

"Wait," Josie stepped forward and hugged the older woman. "Thank you, Brenda. I'll take good care of the stone."

The half-elf suffered the embrace, but stepped quickly away. "You're welcome. Stay safe."

* * * * *

Josie sat on the floor in the center of the detonation zone. The glass had been swept away, but nothing else had been moved. A black candle and a white candle burned at each of the cardinal points around her. She'd placed them in unglazed ceramic containers made by her third graders, hoping the positive "vibes" would add protection during this ritual. *I'll take any protection I can get, at this point.* A light circle of salt and rosemary joined the candles. Salt for purity, Rosemary for protection. And the amethyst of the globe in her hands provided clarity of focus.

Holding the new scrying stone, she concentrated on seeing the moments of the attack. The strong scents of skunk, mace, chili powder, and garlic tickled her nose, threatening to make her sneeze. Josie twitched her nose, hoping to soothe the itch. When it seemed to work, she focused her awareness back on the deep purple globe. She positioned it so that she could look through it at the empty window panes in the ceiling. Inside, she saw lavender lightning bolts of energy. They hissed and crackled whenever they crossed, making it difficult to separate them. What an amazing stone the half-elf had loaned her. She'd never worked with a crystal of such high quality. *Goddess, let me be worthy of this exquisite tool.*

"Show me," Josie murmured. The stone was stubborn, not yet attuned to her. "Show me." Amethyst lent mental acuity and strength to seers, but wasn't easy to master. "Show me."

Glittering shards of glass rained down around her, sparkling like diamonds in bright sunlight. She pushed the vision backward in time, looking for the moment when the magical bomb was placed. She saw the room gradually go dark, illuminated only by moonlight shining through the windows. Then the image froze, as though it had been placed on pause,

showing the moon framed through the glass panes on the ceiling. Josie gave the vision a nudge of power, but it refused to move. A push, then a shove had the image wavering in and out of focus. A familiar parade of faces began deep inside the crystal. She heard a stealthy *creak*, and the stone went gray. A shade moved within it, laughing.

Josie wrenched her awareness from the crystal, shaking her head to clear the insane laughter from her mind.

The candles flared, burning poison green. Within a few seconds, the six-inch flames winked out with a sharp *pop*, leaving only traces of gray wax in the cracked ceramic holders.

Josie placed the amethyst back in its bag and stood. Facing the east, she said, "Spirits of the East, I thank you for your assistance and protection." After thanking the spirits of South, West, and North, she dismissed the circle and stepped out, sliding her bare feet back into her sandals. *I should have changed shoes before coming here.* The cheerful monkeys didn't belong in a place where such violence had occurred.

"How did it go?" Walker said, handing her a bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade.

"It didn't. I saw the glass fall, but I couldn't see whoever it was that placed the spell." She shook her head, frustrated. "It was like someone hit the pause button. I could only see so far, no further." Her shoulders slumped. She'd let herself down, she'd let the Algiers down, and she'd let Fred down. *Unless...*

Josie tucked the globe and the ceramic candleholders into the red canvas tote bag she'd left on the table. "There's one more thing I can try." She'd never done this for such a large area before, but the theory was the same as the scrying she used.

"What do you need from us?" Walker asked.

"Just stay out of my way, and catch me if I fall," she said, trying for a bit of humor. The shakiness in her voice made the words go flat.

"Will do," Chief Evans said, settling back into his spot against the wall, near the back door.

"I've got your back," Walker said, throwing the werewolf a puzzled look.

Josie took a deep breath, grounding and centering herself. When she was calm and balanced, she opened her eyes. Muting her regular vision to the bare minimum, she turned her sight up full blast. The "real" world faded to a pale shade of itself, just enough to keep her from walking into things. Her sight, however, saw something else entirely. The black glittering form with whips of raw energy snapping around it was Walker. *Beautiful.* Near the back door, a midnight blue wolf shared space with a sky blue human, merging in and out of each other like a hologram.

The rest of the room wasn't nearly as pleasant. Bits of color were strewn about like confetti. Josie focused on the place where Bob had nearly died. There should have been a strong image; violence was not subtle. A mishmash of dried blood, bile green, and moldy gray rippled sluggishly across the floor. It was as if someone had placed a bomb in the center

of all the normal energies, shattering them into a million tiny shards. The wrongness of it sickened her and told her nothing. She pushed herself, tightening her focus. The fragments of energy swirled randomly about in a nausea-inducing haze.

Skirting around the area, she walked carefully toward the center of the blast area, alert for any scrap of useful information. There was nothing. She centered herself, pushing more power into her sight. Feeling Walker fall in behind her with a *fitz crackle* of raw sparkling power, she stopped in front of the door. "Chief, can you open the door for me?"

"Sure thing." The indigo man-wolf reached forward, trailers of sea foam and denim following the movement.

The door swung open, and Josie studied the outside of the door right next to the doorknob. Somewhere, she'd picked up the information that that was the best place to kick a door in order to break it down. Jackpot. Faint gray cobwebs clung to the wood. She pulled the focus in as tight as she could, but could learn nothing more about them. "Damn it," she said, hitting her thigh with a clenched fist.

Biting back her mounting frustration, she turned her attention to the lock. *Goddess protect me.* Josie's eyes watered as a squirming, roiling gray on gray shadow oozed from the keyhole. *How did I not see this when we came in?* As she watched, the fist-sized mass slid free of the lock and fell down, and through the floor. Just before it disappeared completely, she felt it concentrate on her. This wasn't a spell, and yet it wasn't *alive* either. *This isn't possible.*

"What the heck?" She knelt, not quite daring to touch the place where the shadow mass had vanished.

"Josie?" Walker said, his voice quiet and intense.

She stood, letting her sight fade to normal. "There was a --" What should I call it? "An energy mass inside the lock. It detached itself from the door and went to ground. Like it knew where it was going." There had to be a way to follow it, but how did one track a shadow that shouldn't exist? *I'll just have to make something up.*

"Is that unusual?" Chief Evans asked.

"Very." Josie rolled her head on her shoulders, stretching stiff muscles. "I've never seen energy act like that. No one I've talked to has ever seen anything like that." Alive, but not. Separate, with no ties to the earth, or anything else she could see. And that simply couldn't be.

"Explain, please," Evans said.

"I'm not sure I can." She rubbed her temples, hoping to soothe away the incipient headache. "It seemed to have a mind of its own, and that isn't possible." Goose pimples shivered down her arms. "I didn't think it was possible; it shouldn't be possible." Her gaze shifted between both attentive men. A shiver of another kind coursed through her, settling low in her belly. It was arousing to have two such powerful males hanging on her every

word. Lust had her nipples tightening and moisture soaking her panties. Glorious, handsome alpha males -- with keen senses of smell. Her eyes widened as that thought dumped cold water on her libido. *Please, Goddess, don't let them notice.* A flush warmed her cheeks when Walker raised his eyebrow at her. He stepped closer to her, placing himself between Josie and Evans, as if marking his territory. The primal part of her mind was pleased at his attention, even as the more rational side of her brain wanted her to roll her eyes at the posturing.

"Explain," the police chief said. He tilted his head slightly, like a dog after a scent, his lips twitching as if he were suppressing a grin.

Edging closer to Walker and trying to hold off a blush through sheer willpower, Josie said, "Energy isn't sentient. It can be directed to do some pretty amazing and magical things, but it doesn't think for itself." At least that's what she'd always been taught.

"How can you tell?" Walker asked, sliding his arm around her.

She relaxed into him. *Okay, how do I boil years of training into sound bytes.* "Whether it's magical, psionic, or mundane, all power links back to its origin." They were still looking expectantly at her.

Trying again, she said, "Every living thing has a thread of energy tying it to the earth. Every time a magic-user, singer, writer, or other artist sends the magic out, it is still tied to its creator with a tiny thread."

She checked her audience. They were attentive, and clearly waiting for the explanation to make sense. The sight of the ugly brass floor lamp gave her an idea. She stepped away from Walker, reached down, and unplugged it. *Cool. Visual aid, the teacher's best friend.* Stifling the chuckle that went along with her thought, she straightened, holding the cord up in front of her. "Okay, pretend this lamp is a person. We'll call him John."

Eyebrows raised so high they were lost in his silvery bangs, Chief Evans had his head cocked to the side, looking for all the world like a curious puppy. A short wisp of Walker's hair had come loose from its braid and curled and uncurled itself at his temple.

"Like all living things, John is bound to the earth." She plugged the cord into the wall. "John decides to do a spell to, um, bring rain." *You are such a dork,* she thought. "So, he gathers the proper ingredients, chants the incantation, and voilà." She turned the lamp on, breathing a sigh of relief when it lit up. "His magic goes out into the clouds." She pointed to the circle of light on the ceiling. "The energy has left him, but it's clear that it comes from our John-lamp, right?"

"Right," Walker said.

"Gotcha," the chief said.

Thank you, Goddess. After taking a drink of Gatorade, she finished her explanation. "The path the power travels is clear. Wall, to lamp, to ceiling." She pointed to each in turn. "The mass I saw moved with purpose, but had no anchor point. That shouldn't be possible."

They all looked at each other, the silence broken only by the ambient hiss of electricity.

A low growl rumbled from Walker's chest. "What is going on in this town?"

Chapter Ten

“Let’s sit down and see if we can’t figure this out,” Chief Evans said.

“Here?” Josie asked.

Her cheeks still held a faint blush of embarrassment at her earlier arousal, and Walker concentrated on the pleasant musky scent of desire, using it to filter out the less pleasant smell of the stink bomb.

Walker was surprised that the werewolf wanted to stay, as well. He wanted to scoop Josie up in his arms and take her away from this dreadful place, not sit down for a chat.

“Where better?” the chief said. “The whatever-it-was is gone. The magics in this room are completely messed up, and therefore resistant to any new spells -- or so my mages tell me.”

Josie nodded slowly. “You’re right. I guess I’m just a little creeped out by the whole crime scene thing.” She looked pale and shaken, but determined to see this through.

Walker felt the same; he just didn’t want to say so out loud. His hair kept trying to get loose, and lash around him to warn off enemies. He was wary, ready for anything to attack at any time. Not a pleasant feeling.

The maple tabletop had been swept free of broken glass, but the table held fresh gouges, a stark reminder of the vicious trap someone had set. Four plush sea green velvet chairs surrounded the table, and several books on card games were piled to one side. Walker guessed they’d once been stacked neatly, but now they were messy, most likely left that way by one of the police officers who’d searched the place.

He held one of the chairs out for Josie, then seated himself in another. Rex took the third. “Why don’t we start with what we know?”

“I’ll go first,” the werewolf said. “Fred died of magically induced cardiac arrest.” He pulled a small notebook out of his breast pocket, opening it. “He had no criminal record, and

no enemies that anyone can think of.” Rex shook his head. “It’s the same with the Algers. They’re well liked, no run-ins with the law, nothing. They had a bit of a set-to with the neighbors about placement of their back fence, but that was reconciled over a year ago. And the neighbor has since moved.”

“Did Fred take care of their lawns?” Josie asked.

“Nope.”

“No,” Walker said. “Werebadgers are very, very particular about their territory. They don’t like anyone else messing with land they consider theirs.” He and his foster sibs had learned that one the hard way. Trailing his fingers over the tabletop, he grimaced at the feeling of grit beneath his fingertips. *I guess the crime scene team didn’t get all the fingerprint dust cleaned up.* Poor Noreen would be stressed out further by having to deal with the aftermath of outsiders searching her house. He wished he could offer to clean things up for her, but knew she wouldn’t be comfortable until she’d done it herself, reclaiming her territory from strangers. “I haven’t heard anything from the magical community about any conflicts. Then again, I haven’t been here long enough to learn the long-standing feuds.” Being the new guy was rapidly becoming tiresome, and he knew it was going to take months, if not years before he had any real acceptance here. When he’d taken the job, he’d known what he was getting into, but he’d never expected he’d be dealing with a murder mystery.

Rex looked down at his notebook, flipped a page, and said, “Fred was killed just after dusk, when his parents were out of town. The bomb here was set to detonate at ten a.m., the time Bob and Noreen normally eat breakfast.”

“So the bad guy had to know both families well enough to know their routines,” Walker said. He looked over at Josie, glad to see that her color was closer to normal. “You probably know everyone the best, would you know this much detail about their routines?”

She thought for a moment, tapping her index finger against her lip. “I knew that George and Lois, Fred’s parents were going to be out of town. Libby mentioned it to me at work. I didn’t know the Alger’s breakfast routine, but I did know they’d be away from the house last night at the monthly pinochle game -- Aunt Sofa and Brenda used to play as partners before Sofa’s illness.” She blushed. “The four of them were tied for this year’s championship until I screwed things up in a single night. Bob and Noreen are so far ahead, Brenda and Sofa probably won’t be able to catch up.”

“Ah, the conversation from earlier is beginning to make sense,” Walker said. “What happened?”

“I have to concentrate not to see auras so I can avoid cheating. I spent so much time trying not to see things that I couldn’t concentrate on the cards. Poor Brenda must have wanted to strangle me before the end of the night. She’s such a sweetheart, though; she just laughed it off.”

Sweetheart wasn’t the word Walker would use for the half-elf, but he didn’t interrupt to say so. He wished he could mush the overemotional Danny and the stoic Brenda together,

and come up with the perfect deputy. Josie's words sparked his curiosity. "How do you keep were-folk and others with good noses from cheating by smelling changes in mood?" Walker asked.

"We burn cinnamon scented candles."

"So people are used to compensating for species differences. Why the overkill with the stink bombs used at the crime scenes?" Walker asked. In his case a scented candle might muffle other scents, but it wouldn't block them completely. As he was thinking this, the chief was speaking the same thought aloud.

"Cinnamon won't do more than mask surface scents. Our bad guy knows the town well enough to have a handle on folks' routines, and to know he has to deal with experienced predators," Rex said. "He also knows more intimate details about folks, so he's almost got to be a long-term resident."

"He?" Walker said, wondering if the chief knew something he wasn't telling.

"Generic pronoun," the werewolf said. "Easier than saying 'his or her' every time. We honestly don't have any idea as to the gender of the suspect."

The more the chief spoke, the higher Walker's respect went for the older man. Rex Evans came across as such a good ol' boy that it was easy to forget that no alpha werewolf could get and keep a pack if he was dumb.

"The town's energy's looked more, well, energetic," Josie said. "I've been watching the movement and change in color and intensity, and it's definitely increased in the past few weeks. I haven't been able to trace down the reason, but I'll keep looking." She massaged her temples, and Walker winced at the dark circles beneath her eyes. He had to jam his nails into his palms to keep himself from suggesting they go home so she could rest. Josie wouldn't thank him for being overprotective, he knew that.

Rex nodded. "Thanks, Josie, I appreciate that." He turned the page again. "Let's talk this out. What did Fred and the Algers have in common?"

"Fred and Bob are both male, though the target of the second attack might have been Noreen, so that's not a definite," Walker said. He cast his mind back to his earlier encounters with the Algers and Fred, but nothing really stood out except for Fred's penchant for asking questions.

"All three are long term residents," Rex said.

"They're all nice," Josie said.

"Nice?" Walker asked, not sure it was relevant.

"No enemies," she answered. "All of them have great auras. Fred's was the color of sunshine, Bob's is lighter, more of a cantaloupe color, and Noreen's is goldenrod, the color of ripe wheat."

"Huh," Rex said, making notes on his pad. "That's interesting. None of my folks picked up on that."

She shrugged one shoulder. "My gift is pretty strong. I can't *not* see energy."

Cool, Walker thought. *I wonder what it's like to see the world that way. I'll have to ask.* "They were either were-folk or had close ties with were-folk."

"True." The werewolf made a note. "Someone with a grudge against the were, maybe?"

"I'm not sure that makes sense," Josie said. "I mean, the clans are so different. Wolves are social, badgers aren't."

"No," Walker said, thinking it through as he said it. "But for someone not raised around the clans, it might be easy to lump all were-folk together." Hearing himself, he winced. "Damn, am I falling into the trap of wanting it to be an outsider?"

Rex chuckled, and patted Walker's shoulder. "Relax, boy, the fact that you're thinking about it means you're aware it could be a problem."

Walker looked at the older man, and the weirdness was just too much to take. "All right, where's the pod?"

Looking startled, the werewolf said, "What?"

"You're all jolly and nice. We aren't growling at each other." Holding up a hand, Walker added, "Not that I'm complaining." *That made no sense.* He gritted his teeth, trying to figure out a better way to voice his thoughts.

Josie's hand was over her mouth as she tried to hold in her laughter.

"Ah." Rex had a shit-eating grin on his face. "Well, it's like this. I'm the alpha wolf in this town, and as police chief, the only person I answer to is the mayor, a mage so strong he could fry me where I stand without half tryin'. You're also an alpha by virtue of being the marshal. My brain was telling me that you are my equal, and that messing with your kind is a bad idea. My instincts had other ideas. The wolf part of me wanted to challenge you in order to figure out which of us is dominant. After your little demonstration of temper in Fred's room, the wolf knows you'd kick my ass."

"That's it?" The words escaped before he could stop them.

"It's a werewolf thing."

Josie gave an inelegant snort and burst out in laughter. "Sorry, it's just, your *face*, Walker." She shook herself. "I had a similar issue with Ivy Pederson when we were both cheerleaders in high school. I was head cheerleader. She didn't like that a lowly human could tell her what to do. She went furry and jumped me. I screamed really loud. She backed off. Apparently, her ears rang for days afterward."

Walker blinked. Josie had fought a werewolf and won? His cock strained against his zipper. Gorgeous, smart and tough. Wow.

Nose twitching, Rex smirked and said, "Do we have anything else relevant about the murders?"

Walker winced, guilty of teasing when so much was at stake. "I think Fred's questions might have something to do with it."

The chief cocked his head, looking puzzled. "Fred's questions? But he's always asked them."

Josie was nodding.

"Haven't you ever noticed that no matter what Fred asked, you'd both take the time to answer fully and truthfully?"

Josie started to speak, then stopped and blinked. "Huh?"

"What was the last question he asked you?" Walker was sure he was onto something with this.

"He wanted to know why auras changed colors." She paused and thought for a moment. "You're right, I did take the time to give him a good answer rather than just brush him off." She looked at Rex. "Chief?"

"He asked me if werewolves ever chase our tails." Rex grinned. "I told him 'sometimes you just gotta.'" His eyes narrowed, and Walker could smell the anger coming from the older man. "Who told him a dangerous truth?"

"Or," Walker spoke slowly, feeling his way to the right words. "Did the fact that he asked about a particular thing he'd noticed make him a threat to the killer?" The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that this was the key. "We need to ask people about Fred's questions."

The chief held up a hand. "Hold it. The last thing I need is one of you getting killed." He held up a hand to stop Walker's protest. "No one's completely invulnerable. Let's think this out before we get ourselves in trouble."

"How about doing it as a memorial of sorts," Walker said. "One of us could suggest it to the newspaper -- let's remember Fred by celebrating the ways he made us notice the world around us, or something like that."

"Leave that to me," Josie said, her eyes narrowed in thought.

"Promise me you'll be careful," Rex said.

"I will."

"I'll keep her safe." Walker hoped his words weren't too possessive. He got the feeling Josie would kick his ass if he tried to get overprotective.

"Thanks," Josie said, giving him a brief smile that warmed him all the way to his toes.

"Anything else as a motive for our bad guy?" Rex asked, rubbing a hand across his forehead as if trying to stop a headache.

Josie's shoulders slumped. "Nothing I can think of."

"Me either," Walker said.

“All right, here’s what I’d like from the two of you.” The chief ticked the points off on his fingers as he spoke. “One, keep your eyes open. Two, don’t talk about the case with anyone but me.” He frowned. “That isn’t to say you shouldn’t talk about it at all, just don’t mention the specifics we’ve learned.”

“I understand,” Josie said.

Walker nodded agreement.

“And three,” the chief grinned at them, rubbing a finger alongside his nose. “Watch each other’s backs. Or watch something, anyway.”

Walker looked at Josie, who was blushing. “Not a problem, Rex.”

“Good.” The werewolf stood. “It’s easy to get caught up in the investigation, and other new things. Don’t forget -- even for a second -- that we’ve got a murderer loose in Franklin’s Bend.”

Chapter Eleven

Walker mopped up the last of the cream gravy with the last bite of homemade biscuit. He popped it in his mouth, devouring it with a sigh of satiation. The Bend Café had the best chicken-fried steak in the known universe.

“Gonna lick the plate?” Josie asked, picking up one of her fries.

“If I’d run out of biscuit before I’d run out of gravy, I would have.”

“I’d have given you one of my fries.” She slid the plank fry slowly between her luscious pink lips before biting it in half with strong white teeth.

Walker’s dick jerked in his pants. He resisted the urge to leap across the table and pounce on her. Somehow, he thought that wouldn’t go over well in the busy café.

Blue eyes wide with innocence and glittering with mischief, she said in a breathless, little girl voice, “Would you give me some of your gravy?”

His brain vapor-locked at the image. Distantly, he heard a jingle as the café’s door opened, but he was too flummoxed to turn and see who it was.

Josie burst into laughter. “Oh, Goddess, you look utterly gobsmacked. How do other women flirt like that and keep a straight face?”

“I’d answer, but all my blood’s gone south.” He pantomimed wiping sweat from his brow. “Wow, Josie, you’re hot.”

“Thanks.” Her smile stiffened, losing all warmth. “Hello, Lisa.”

Walker looked up just in time to get a finger shaken in his face. He resisted the urge to bite it off.

“How dare you?” Lisa Van Cleef screeched. The peroxide blonde woman was flushed an unattractive red with anger.

Heads all over the café turned, and the room went silent.

Oh, joy. Starring in an impromptu dinner theater, just how I wanted to end the day. “Lovely evening, isn’t it?” he said, refusing to play a part in her little drama. The little wereboar punk’s mother was okay with the punishment; Walker certainly wasn’t going to be swayed by a mere aunt.

“That Harker brat’s just a little slut.”

“The weather this fall has been wonderful, but I wouldn’t say no to some rain.” He kept his voice as bland as his smile. Across from him, Josie was calmly finishing her French dip sandwich. Remembering the conversation at the Algers’ house, he said, “What did Fred ask you the last time you saw him?”

She paused for a moment, a half smile creasing her lips. “He wanted to know why I’m so mean to everyone.”

Ouch. “And the answer?”

“I told him I don’t know any other way to be,” she looked lost for a moment, then shook herself and glared at Walker. “Leave me alone, and leave my family alone.” Lisa turned away and stomped from the café.

“Huh,” Walker said, after the door slammed shut in a jangle of cowbells. “That’s the second time I’ve been yelled at in public since I’ve been here.” Back home, when he and his brothers and sisters had been yelled at, it was because they were up to mischief, not trying to stop mischief in its tracks. *This town is so weird.*

Josie shook her head, blue eyes filled with compassion. “Poor thing. She looked so sad there for a moment.”

“Yeah.” Pity warred with annoyance inside him. Lisa was a grade “A” bitch, but he couldn’t see her killing Fred, not even for exposing a bit of vulnerability. Then again, there was certainly a great deal of anger inside the wereboar. He’d ask around about her, do a bit of discreet investigation.

Around them, conversations started up again. Walker overheard several people say how rude and uncooperative Lisa was, and several more gripe about the “damned new lawmen.” Dangerous. *I hope these crimes don’t end up polarizing the town.* “I knew that Psych 101 class would come in handy someday.” He watched as she finished her last fry, this time without felling it first, damn it. “Interested in” -- he paused with what he hoped was sexy intent -- “dessert?”

Josie shook her head. “Nope, too stuffed.”

That didn’t work. Oh, well. “Me, too.”

There was a moment of comfortable silence before Josie spoke.

“I wanted to thank you for creating such an appropriate punishment for the mate-and-switch game. That’s a sport I’ll be glad to see the end of; too many kids have been hurt by it.” A melancholy smile graced her lips. “And it’s wonderful that you’re making them plant Kristin’s flowers. She’d have liked that.”

"She was a friend?" he asked, hoping this was the right time to ask.

"My best friend. She won a contest for designing a Good Samaritan project, beating several adults, including my aunt and Brenda. Keeping the project going after her death helped us all heal, me especially."

"What happened?"

She took a deep, shaky breath. "Imps."

Before he could ask further questions, the waitress stopped by, leaving the check on the edge of the table. After glancing at the total, Walker pulled a few bills out of his wallet and placed them on top of the check. A glance at the shuttered expression on Josie's face told him not to say anything more than, "Ready?"

She took a last drink of her iced tea and stood. "Yep."

He stood as well, letting her precede him from the restaurant.

Outside, the night air was clear and crisp. Overhead, a fingernail moon gleamed.

"Fair evening, my lady," Josie murmured, looking up.

Walker offered her his arm for the short walk to his car. He didn't want this evening to end. "Can I interest you in a walk beside the river?" He wasn't terribly worried about their safety; this killer seemed to want privacy, and lots of it.

She smiled at him, licking her lips. "That sounds wonderful."

He opened the car door for her, stealing a quick kiss before she sat, then went to his door. The trip to the Chewaucan River Park only took a few minutes, and they were both silent during the drive. Walker found a place in an out of the way corner beneath a large aspen tree, parking and turning the car off. As he turned to her, he mused that it didn't matter if things got physical or not; being with her was perfect.

He didn't know who moved first, but suddenly they were kissing as if their lives depended on it.

Josie tasted of onion soup, French fries, and lust, and Walker couldn't get enough of her. His hands worked up underneath her shirt and bra, rubbing and pinching the hard buds of her nipples.

She gasped into his mouth, her fingers finding and stroking his hair, both her actions and her musk-drenched scent communicating how much she enjoyed touching him this way.

He moaned into her mouth, letting his hair unbind itself and fall around them.

Josie made a needy sound and buried her fingers in his hair, petting it and drawing it over his shoulder and between them. Breaking the kiss, she took a handful of his hair and pulled it to her face, pressing kisses to it as she inhaled deeply. "So beautiful," she murmured.

Walker's back arched at the exquisite sensations coming from every follicle.

"You like?" she said, teeth gleaming as she smiled and flicked her tongue over a tendril.

“Yes,” he gritted out, his cock hard and throbbing against his zipper. He’d never had a woman play with his hair so freely. It was far more arousing than he’d ever imagined.

“How ‘bout this?” She grasped a large hank, twisting it gently together and sliding it into her mouth.

Heat. Wetness. Suction. Her tongue worked over his hair, exploring and caressing it. Vaguely aware of his talons slicing through the upholstery, Walker climaxed, shuddering through one of the most intense orgasms he’d ever had.

Fighting for control, he sheathed his claws and pulled her close, pushing his hand down her pants and finding her swollen cunt. Josie bucked against him as he pushed a finger between her wet folds, massaging her clit. A section of hair quickly plaited itself and followed his hands, pushing inside her with a gentle thrust.

She screamed, her passage clenching around him as a powerful climax claimed her. Her pussy was tight and wet, so hot it was almost scalding against the sensitive strands of his hair. He twisted his braid inside her, stroking and petting her, driving her to a second, stronger climax as he captured her mouth in a rough kiss. She felt so good inside. It was like being clutched in a fist of creamy velvet. He pushed two fingers into her, one on either side of his braid, and kept the firm pressure on her clit. She stiffened in his arms, screamed again, and went limp.

Something was pressing uncomfortably into the center of her back. Josie blinked, her breath coming in short sharp pants. Her pussy walls quivered as shiver after shivering aftershock coursed through her. “Mmmmmm.” Walker’s hair traced random patterns over the skin on her thighs.

“Back with me?” Walker asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” She stretched, loosening overworked muscles. “Wow. That was amazing.”

“Ditto,” Walker said, pressing a kiss to her lips.

She petted the end of his braid, now slick with her cum. It had felt so good inside her, so exotic, so *right*. “I like your hair, Walker.”

“I’m glad.” His energy rubbed up against hers like a friendly cat.

“I like you, too.” The words escaped before she could stop them. And, once she said them, she was relieved. She did like him, very much.

“Good. ‘Cause you’re quickly becoming one of my favorite people.”

His words melted into her like fine chocolate. She glanced at the car’s steamed up windows. They certainly had chemistry between them. But, more importantly, she genuinely liked being with him. *I’m going to take the chance. Maybe we can have a future together.*

Reaching past her, Walker cracked a window. "It's a bit stuffy," he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "Would you like to take a walk?"

A walk would be a nice way to cool down, but smelling so strongly of sex made the prospect dangerous since any one of several nasty creatures might be drawn by the scent. "Why don't we go back to my place, or your place, cuddle, and rest up for round two?" She fastened the button on her pants and pulled her shirt down, smoothing a hand over it in a vain attempt to flatten the wrinkles.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," he said. He kissed her again, then scooted back to his side of the car. Popping his fingers into his mouth, he purred out a moan. "You taste so good on my fingers. I want to lick you, get your sweet honey right from the source."

She shivered. "Yeah, me too. I want to feel that yummy cock of yours moving in my mouth while your tongue fucks me." And she wanted to play with his hair somewhere it was light. *I'm such a hair slut. Literally.* A giggle escaped her. "Let's go home so we can shower, then get sticky again."

"My place okay?"

"Perfect."

Chapter Twelve

As they pulled into the driveway, Walker's phone rang. "Damn," he said, answering with a curt, "Morgan."

Josie sighed. It seemed like they couldn't spend much time just being together. They were always in crisis mode, or fucking like minks. *Not that that's a bad thing.*

"What's up, Danny?" The languid, starry-night aura around him began to swirl and churn, stars going bright and bursting in fury. "Ghouls?"

Josie came to attention. There hadn't been ghouls in Franklin's Bend for more than sixty years. *And what is it with the bogeymen of my past coming back to haunt me?*

"Give me twenty minutes. Watch them, but keep out of sight." Walker hung the phone up and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. "Gods of the lower hells. Ghouls."

"I'm going with you. I'll meet you back here in twenty." If she could get her knees to quit wobbling so she could walk.

He sat back up, staring at her. "Excuse me?"

"It's too much of a coincidence -- the murder, the attack, and now ghouls. I want to see if there's any connection." And this time, she wouldn't stop until all the ghouls were destroyed.

He gave her a long look, then nodded. "Twenty minutes."

They exited the car, each going inside their own house. Josie did a quick cleanup and pulled on a pair of old jeans, a faded blue sweatshirt, and a pair of worn blue flip-flops that hugged her feet so well they made hardly any noise. If worse came to worst, she would just go barefoot. She was back down and waiting beside Walker's car before he arrived.

Ghouls. She rubbed goose bumps away from her arms. She'd encountered them for the first time while she was in college at Oregon State University. Driving by a cemetery on the

northwest side of Corvallis with her ex-husband, she'd seen dozens of sickly green lights just below the surface. She'd asked him to stop the car so she could investigate, and he'd done so. As soon as they'd parked, she'd jumped out of the car. He'd opened a beer and settled in to wait for her.

Moving cautiously, she'd crept through the gates and toward the place where she'd seen the most lights. What she found had fueled her nightmares for months. Small humanoid creatures swarmed around the base of an old stone monument. They were barely six inches tall and naked, with no visible genitalia. She recognized them from pictures she'd seen in her magical biology class. The ghouls were dancing around something that held a faint spark of yellow energy, then disappearing.

Sharpening her sight, she focused in on the scene. An opossum lay panting on top of the grave. Each of the ghouls would approach it with a strange hopping-sliding step and rest tiny hands on the animal's fur. As Josie watched, the ghouls pulled energy from the opossum, then sank into the ground. Following their energy signatures down into the grave, she saw them release the energy into what she realized had to be a desiccated corpse. As the opossum lost more and more energy, the corpse became animate. As she watched in revulsion, the corpse began to writhe and convulse inside the coffin. All the ghouls sank into the earth then, and began to feast on the squirming body. The worst thing, the very worst was seeing the ghouls' malicious intelligence. They knew exactly what horrors they were committing; they reveled in them.

Fighting the urge to retch, she leaned against Walker's car taking deep breaths. She and a few of her friends had tried to drive the ghouls from the Corvallis cemetery, but they'd been unsuccessful. The colony was too well established, and the cemetery too large for them to get every one. The most they'd been able to do was set wards to keep animals and people away from the grounds.

She'd seen the signs of ghoul infestation in other cemeteries, and had always passed the word to local magic-users, but she'd never gotten involved again. *I'm such a coward*. She hated knowing that ghouls were destroying cemeteries, but she'd hated seeing what they were capable of even more.

That wouldn't happen here. For one thing, Franklin's Bend cemetery held few bodies. People who died were cremated before burial, the most practical solution in a town that held so many different species -- many of them predators. The only graves that held bodies would be the very oldest. Unfortunately, the oldest graves were the most vulnerable. Wooden coffins wouldn't be more than a momentary hindrance for the vile little beings.

The click as Walker's front door closed startled her. Looking up, she saw Walker and Mokey come toward her, man and beast gleaming with blue-black purpose.

"Ready?" Walker asked.

"As I'll ever be," Josie said. She didn't want to do this. Rubbing damp palms on her jeans, she concentrated on regulating her breathing. Already tired from the earlier scrying

she'd performed, the energetic car sex she and Walker had indulged in had drained most of her remaining energy. *You can do this, Josie*. If she was right, and there was a link between the murders and the ghoul infestation, time was of the essence. The sooner she saw the scene, the more likely any evidence would still be present.

They drove to the cemetery, silence a heavy fourth presence in the car. Danny Graziani and Brenda Leaforn met them at the front gates.

Josie climbed from the car and stood facing the cemetery gates.

"Report," Walker said.

She studied the mage. Danny Graziani was younger than she was by several years, putting him in the small category of people with whom she'd never attended school -- either as a student or a teacher. People who knew him had mixed reviews. On the one hand, he was a talented mage, on the other, his arrogance pushed him into trouble on more than one occasion. And yet, she liked him. He could be funny when he wasn't being an ass, and he was an expert with water magic.

"We followed a breeding pack of imps inside. That's when I spotted the ghouls," Danny said.

"They're in the back corner," Brenda added.

Josie knew that's where the oldest graves were, and it was also the part of the cemetery farthest away from the road. Steeling herself, she stared toward the back of the cemetery. Flickers of ghastly green were easily visible.

"What's the plan?" Danny asked.

"We need to see how many there are, and where they're feeding. I'd rather they didn't know we're here, but I'm not sure that can be avoided."

Josie swallowed, trying to force down the lump in her throat. "I can get an accurate count for you, I just need someone to watch my back." She shuddered. If one of the ghouls touched her, she wasn't sure she'd ever stop screaming.

"You don't have to do this," Walker said, putting his arm around her.

"Yeah, I do." She leaned into his embrace for a moment before pulling away. "I've seen what these things do. We have to stop them, and I'm the best equipped to find them all." Clenching her fists, she repeated, "I *will* find them all."

Walker nodded. "Lead on; I'll be right behind you."

She eased through the front gates and picked her way between the gravestones, glad the landscapers were doing a good job. Springy grass cushioned her steps, and luckily nothing obstructed her path. *Too bad my sight doesn't give me perfect night vision*. She really, really didn't want to fall down right now. The idea of being vulnerable this close to ghouls made her want to retch.

While in high school, she'd visited the cemetery regularly, fascinated by the tangible remnants of history written on the memorials. Josie smiled slightly at the sight of the

gravestone she always thought of as “the tipsy angel.” He perched slightly leaning on the pedestal, as if he had imbibed a bit too much ceremonial wine before landing. Brushing her fingertips across his wing, she sent a plea for stealth into the ether.

Mokey fell in beside her, a welcome presence. Walker, true to his word, stayed just behind her. Reaching down, she petted the dog’s soft fur. Warm green energy crackled between her fingers as the poodle leaned up into her touch.

There weren’t as many ghouls here as she usually saw, thank the goddess. Josie could see -- she squinted and tightened her focus -- twenty-one of them. The tiny creatures were gathered around a fallen sparrow, stealing its life force and carrying it to an unearthed memorial urn. The brass lid had been forced off; the cremated remains spilled onto the grass. As she watched, the last of the sparrow’s stolen energy was pushed into the remains, making them jump and sizzle like water on a hot grill. The ghouls fell on the pieces, scooping them up and playing with them as if they were popcorn.

Josie felt her gorge rise, and kept her dinner down through sheer force of will. *Show me*, she thought, focusing her sight even further. A barely-there flash of light drew her attention away from the cavorting ghouls and into the grave next to the one that had been violated.

This one held an old coffin and was the location of a violation of another sort. A queen ghoul had nested in the body’s chest cavity. Sullen green eggs littered the inside of the body, pulsing with ripe, wicked promise. Two male drones attended the queen, one feeding her gobs of energized flesh, while the other copulated with her. A fragment of magical biology text popped into her mind. “Ghoul queens eat fresh meat while they are nesting. Queens can lay up to 500 eggs in a single night, and will continue to lay eggs for several days.”

Oh, Goddess, no. Josie scanned the graves on either side of the queen’s nest, finding three more bodies containing eggs, and one boiling with just-hatched larvae. A dark, oily gray shadow wallowed among the larval ghouls, engulfing them briefly before moving on and leaving behind dried husks.

What are you? She stared at the shadow, trying to find any clues as to its origin. The difficulty she encountered surprised her. It was as if the shadow was coated with a thin, slippery rime of grease. Her sight slid off it, unable to fully focus. The mass paused, a knobby pseudopod extending from its top, nodding in her direction.

It waved at me. It knows I’m here. Chills skittered along her spine.

As quickly as it had appeared, the knob sank back into the shadow, and the gruesome feeding continued.

Josie pressed her nails into her palms, using the mild pain to ground herself. *One thing at a time.* For now, getting an accurate count and location of the ghouls was most important. Later, she’d tell Walker about the shadow, and begin research on what it could be.

She looked at the rest of the nearby graves, but found nothing more than the remnants of old protective magic.

Pressing her hand against her mouth, she made her way back to the front gates. Once there, she allowed Walker to take her in his arms. Shaking, she embraced him, pulling in deep gulping breaths. His musky, spicy scent surrounded her, and she used it to anchor her in the here and now. Safe. She felt so safe in his arms. Her aura clung tightly to her, desperate not to touch any of the tainted energy in this place. Mokey pressed against her legs, whether to offer comfort or receive it, she wasn't sure.

"Let's go up the road a ways, just to be safe," Walker murmured, his breath warm against her ear.

She nodded and let him help her into the car. *And when I get away from this place I'll stop acting like the helpless, hapless heroine of a B-grade bodice ripper. I hope.*

Breathing a sigh of relief when she saw the others, she absently noted that Danny's energy was an unpleasant swirl of spiky blue-green and oily orange. Brenda, as always, was a cool block of satiny lavender. *Thank the goddess they didn't have to face the ghouls alone.*

* * * * *

Walker drove toward town one-handed. Josie had his other hand clutched in hers and didn't seem inclined to let go anytime soon. *Yet another reason to be glad my car's an automatic.*

He wasn't sure what exactly she'd seen, but it must have been bad. About a mile down the road, Danny's pickup pulled off onto the shoulder. He and Brenda climbed out and leaned against the side of the pickup, waiting.

"Josie?" He wondered what, exactly, she'd seen. Knowing a bit about ghoulish dietary preferences, he suspected it was not pleasant. She was still uncharacteristically subdued, and it was starting to freak him out.

"I'm okay," she said, her voice tight with suppressed emotion. She let go of him long enough to exit the car, and then her hand was back in his. Walker liked the feel of it there. It was nice to be the one offering comfort, rather than being the person who caused the distress. It was all he could do not to loose his hair and surround her with it.

"What do you have for us?" Brenda asked, an oddly intense look on her face as she watched Josie.

"Twenty-one ghouls. One queen, two drones. Nests with eggs in four graves. One grave with hatched larva, but something is eating them." She looked up at Walker. "One of those shadow things like I saw at the Algers' house."

What the hell? His braid twitched against his back. *Not what I was expecting to hear.* Or what she was expecting to find, he thought, noting Josie's pale face and strained expression.

"Shadow things?" Danny asked. He was giving Josie a dubious look, obviously uncomfortable with her presence. Walker hoped Danny wouldn't take this as a threat to his

place on the team. For such a cocky young man, Danny could be remarkably insecure sometimes. The tip of Walker's braid twitched in agitation. He didn't have time to nurse the younger man through a bout of jealousy.

"I don't know what it is. I've never seen anything like it before the Algers' house." Her hand tightened on Walker's. "It's alive, but not. And I'm pretty sure it's intelligent." The sharp scent of adrenaline mingled with the berries and cream that was her signature. He wanted to lick the tang of fear from her body, tasting her as fear transmuted into lust.

"How do we deal with the ghouls?" Danny asked, the expression on his face saying he was dismissing Josie's concerns over the shadow.

Walker didn't like Danny's attitude, but now wasn't the time to discuss things with the mage. "Fire. The only way to destroy an infestation is with fire. Tomorrow, late morning. They can't come above ground during daylight, so their escape routes will be limited. If even one of those nests hatches out, the ghouls will spread throughout the area, and be nearly impossible to eradicate." He'd seen that happen in one of the large cemeteries in Tucson, Arizona. The result had been a series of steadily escalating attacks until the entire graveyard had been set alight by a fire elemental, burning everything nearby down to sterile soil, which had then been salted to cleanse it. Something to avoid here if at all possible. The ghouls had to be exterminated completely. While the creatures preferred easy prey, they would go after more ambitious kills if they had no other choice. Homeless people, the elderly, and children were the most vulnerable to attacks, because their tales of tiny green men were likely to be dismissed as drugs, dementia, or overactive imagination.

"Wu Chang," Josie said.

"Excuse me?" Danny said, his voice bordering on hostile. "I'm quite capable of casting a fire spell."

Walker bristled at the younger man's nasty tone, and had to take a deep breath so he could speak without growling. "No. You're a water mage, Danny, we both know it won't work," Walker said. Last spring, the mage had attempted a fire spell and injured both himself and Brenda. The half-elf had made a point of telling Walker to keep Danny away from the fire spells.

"I've been practicing. I can do it." His glare moved back and forth between Walker and Josie.

"I'm not willing to take the chance, not with ghouls." Walker's nostrils flared at the scent of anger coming off Danny. "This is going to take precise, controlled burning. Who better to do that than a dragon?" He looked at Brenda, who stood a short distance away, her expression shuttered.

"If he'll do it," Danny drawled, crossing his arms over his chest, his chin tilted at an arrogant angle.

"He will, or my aunt will know the reason why," Josie said grimly.

“Sofa?” Danny said, startled from his anger.

“She and Wu have been dating for three weeks now.”

“They used to date years ago, back when she and I had just graduated from high school,” Brenda said. “I don’t know what happened, but both of them were devastated by the breakup.”

“And now they’ve come back together,” Josie said. “There’s a wonderful symmetry to their relationship. Sofa’s really happy. I think Wu is too.”

Danny looked at his watch. “I guess it’s just you and me, Brenda; everyone else seems to have paired up.” He yawned, stretching ostentatiously. “Ready for our ghoulish stakeout?”

She nodded. “Quite. Good night, Josie. Walker,” she said, nodding politely to them.

“Night, Brenda; night, Danny,” Josie said.

“Night, John Boy,” Danny said, throwing them a careless salute.

What crawled up his ass and died? “I’ll call you tomorrow after I touch base with Wu,” Walker said, irritated at his mage’s cavalier attitude. “Be available.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Danny said over his shoulder as he climbed into his truck.

Walker and Josie walked back to his car, Mokey pacing them.

“Home?” he asked her after they were both settled.

“Yours?” she asked. “I really don’t want to be alone tonight.”

Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to her lips. “Then you won’t be.”

Chapter Thirteen

Walker fumbled with the phone, finally getting it open and next to his ear. "Hello?"

"Dad?"

His son's hesitant voice pulled him into complete wakefulness. "Jake? What's wrong?"

"She -- it was -- I couldn't control it." The words came out in a rush.

"Slow down, take a breath, and tell me what happened." He shifted so he was sitting up, his back against the leather headboard. Beside him, Josie muttered in her sleep.

"I didn't believe you." Jake's voice wavered. "I mean, I did, but deep down, I didn't. I thought you and Mom didn't want me, not really."

Trickster bless, Walker hoped he'd never have this particular conversation with his son. At least it *was* with his son, and not his foster brother calling to give him the bad news. "You met another fiend." He rubbed his forehead. At least Jake was still alive, and didn't sound physically injured.

"Yeah."

Walker could hear his son panting for air. "Talk to me, son. Tell me what happened so I can help." *Please let me say the right things. Don't let me screw this up.*

"We wanted ice cream. The Polar Bear is across from the bus station, you know?"

"I remember," Walker said. The small fast-food restaurant had soft-serve ice cream, and the best burgers he'd ever tasted.

"The bus pulled in and I felt her. It was like millions of fire ants were crawling over me, biting me, burning me. My hair kept trying to get loose, but the tape was too strong."

"Tape?" The non sequitur leapt out at him.

A raw chuckle. "Yeah, I braid it, then Benny duct tapes it to my back while I'm at school. It hurts like hell when I take the tape off, but that's better than having it try to touch

everything.” He drew in a shaky breath, and continued, “I had to get inside the bus. All I could think was ‘mine!’ Dad -- Tony-Dad, not you -- realized what was going on, and he and Mom and Benny got me away from there.”

Walker released the pent up breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “So you didn’t fight.” And it would have been a fight. Hair growth or not, Jake had another year before reaching sexual maturity. At his age, he’d be easy meat for any adult fiend. *Like me.* Walker’s heart stuttered at the knowledge that if they ever met, he and Jake would fight to the death.

“No. I could hear her, though. Screaming and growling, and fighting to get off the bus.”

This was bad, but not bad enough to put the depth of horror and pain in his son’s voice. “What happened, Jake?”

Jake began to shiver, the chattering of his teeth distorting his words. “Pregnant, Dad. She was pregnant.”

“Gods of the nine tails,” Walker whispered, bowing his head. “Tell me you didn’t see it.”

“No.” The boy gulped in air. “But I heard it. And I wanted to help, to kill the intruders.”

“Jake...” Walker trailed off, searching for words. He wrapped a tentacle of hair around Josie’s forearm, seeking comfort in touch. He started as gentle fingers stroked him.

Josie was awake, her expression concerned.

Rubbing a hand over her smooth shoulder, he offered his son the only comfort he could. “I’m sorry, Jakey. I’m so very sorry this happened.” Josie’s free hand grasped his in a gesture of wordless sympathy.

“She’s dead, and the baby’s dead, and it’s my fault.”

“No.” Walker pushed all the force of his will into the word. “It’s not your fault. It’s nobody’s fault, no more than the tsunami in Thailand or Hurricane Katrina were anyone’s fault.” The crisp scent of curiosity drifted up from Josie, a hint of sweet concern underneath.

“If I hadn’t been there...”

“Then she might still be alive, or she might have encountered another fiend, or just lost control and gone for the baby. It’s a horrible, horrible tragedy, but it is no one’s fault.”

“But...”

“Listen to me and believe, Jake.” Walker made his voice as firm and as kind as he could. “It was not your fault. Say it with me, ‘It wasn’t my fault.’ Ready?” He didn’t wait for his son’s agreement. “It wasn’t my fault.”

Jake’s voice didn’t chime in until the last two words.

“Again. It wasn’t my fault.”

Jake whispered the words.

“Louder. It wasn’t my fault.”

Jake’s voice was stronger, now, almost steady.

“Third time’s magic, Jakey. It wasn’t my fault.”

This time, Jake shouted the phrase, his voice breaking on the last word. There was a scratching, thumping sound as the phone changed hands.

“Walker?”

“Tony.” Walker relaxed when he heard his foster brother’s voice. His son couldn’t be in better hands. “Is he okay?” *Dumb question, Walker.*

“He will be. He’s your kid after all, and a Morgan. They don’t come any tougher than our family. Laurie’s got him wrapped up in a blanket, and she and Benny are hugging the stuffing out of him. He hasn’t been alone since it happened. But he wouldn’t calm down until I let him call you. I think he’ll sleep now.”

“Good.” A faint smile curved Walker’s lips. As awful as the situation was, it warmed his heart knowing that he was important to his son. “Thanks, big brother. My son couldn’t have a better dad.”

“He’s got two dads, and I’d say he’s equally lucky in having you.” The werefox’s voice held fondness and a hint of exasperation. “And my Benny knows he can go to his Uncle Walker for anything.” A quiet sigh. “I wish he and Jake could get to know you for real, instead of over the phone and the ’Net, but don’t ever make the mistake of thinking you’re not an important part of their lives.” A woman’s voice murmured something. “I’ve got to go; Jakey needs to be fox-piled. Love you, small brother.”

“Love you, too. Take care of the skulk.” Walker closed his phone and set it on the nightstand.

“Skulk?” Josie said, her fingers absently stroking his hair.

“Group name for foxes.”

“Ah.” She placed her hand on his thigh. “Anything I can help with?”

“Not really.” He scooted down in bed until his head was on the pillow.

She wiggled close, placing her head on his shoulder.

“I told you how territorial fiends are, right?” He could still remember meeting Jake’s mother, the push pull of hot-fucking, cold-killing driving him to pin her down and possess her fully. She’d writhed beneath him, fighting to get him inside her and trying to gut him at the same time. He shook himself, trying to force the memory of the horrible pleasure from his mind.

“Yeah. What did your son see?”

He pulled her tight, hoping his next few words wouldn’t convince her that his kind were too alien, too dangerous. And trying to convince himself as well. “He encountered a female fiend. Fortunately for him, my brother was able to prevent them from getting close

enough to fight. Unfortunately, she was pregnant.” He paused for a moment searching for the right words. “Fiends aren’t cross-fertile with any other species. There aren’t many fiends in the world, because even if we manage to mate successfully, there is a chance the female will lose control and claw the fetus from her womb, killing both of them.”

“And the encounter with Jake pushed her into doing that,” Josie said, an undercurrent of dismay beneath her steady tone.

“Yeah.” If he ever got within grabbing distance of the goddess who’d cursed his kind, he’d wring her vindictive, scrawny little neck.

“Did he see it? Is he going to be okay?”

“He didn’t see it, but he heard the screams.” He took a breath, drawing in the comforting berries and cream scent of her skin. “The first time I encountered another fiend, we mated and produced Jake. I killed the second fiend I met, widowing his human wife. Tony got me through that. He’ll help Jake.”

“That must have been horrible.” She hugged him, petting his chest. “How old were you?”

“Nineteen when Jake was conceived, thirty-two for the other.” He could still see the woman’s face in his mind. “His name was William Madison. Her name was Betsy. Their adopted son Tom was getting married that weekend.” A fist squeezed his heart. “Funny how you remember things. They were originally from Alabama, and had never been west until their son decided to get married.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said, leaning up to press a kiss against his cheek.

“Thank you. I know.” He nuzzled her hair. “It still hurts.” His hair had tangled with the male fiend’s, trying to rip it out at the roots. Blood had slicked his claws and filled his mouth, so much blood spilled that they slipped in it. The other fiend had gone down, and Walker had fallen on him, tearing the other man’s intestines out in long, steaming shreds. Betsy’s shrill screams of terror had nearly drowned out the roaring in his ears as the interloper died beneath his hands.

“What was it like being raised in a family of werefoxes?”

Walker grasped onto her words, using them to force away the memory of murder. “Fuzzy,” he said. “Really, really fuzzy.” His heart released the worry that was keeping him tense. “Any time one of us was hurt or upset, the family would do a ‘fox-pile.’” A smile creased his lips. “Whoever was upset would lay down on our parents’ bed, and everyone -- except me, of course -- would shift into their fox form, and we’d all curl up around the person who was hurting. Just knowing the family was there, ready to help, was enough to fix most of the problems.” His hand strayed down over her belly. “Jake will be fine, because our family will make sure he is.” Like they’d made sure he was okay after his encounter with William Madison. Tony and their parents hadn’t left Walker alone for several weeks afterward.

Josie's hand slid upward, brushing across his nipple. "And I'll help by making you feel better."

As the tender bud tightened under her fingertips, he leaned up, pulling her beneath him. "You do make me feel good, sweet Josie." Touching her drove the last of the terrible images from his mind. He lost himself in the warmth of her embrace, letting her comfort him.

"I'm glad," she said, pulling him down for a kiss. He was hurting; she could see it in the subdued energy surrounding him. Only a few gray-green twinkles relieved the blackness of his aura. Josie wasn't sure what to say to him, so she offered herself. Closing her eyes, she altered her aura so that it matched his, and warmed both energies with spangles of rich burgundy passion.

Urging him on top of her, she opened her legs, moaning as he settled between her thighs, his hard shaft hot against the skin of her belly. It was so good to have him over her, his solid weight resting lightly on her, comforting her even as he accepted her offer of solace.

Pressed mouth to mouth, chest to breast, cock to pussy, they rubbed together. Sweat-slicked skin stroked against her, sensitizing every nerve. Walker's kisses were demanding, devouring her, a sharp contrast to the lazy thrust of his body. She gave as good as she got, sucking on his tongue, tasting every inch of his mouth. He was spicy and exotic, and she wanted to taste more, wanted to take him inside where she could keep him warm. Drawing away, slightly, she said, "I want to suck you."

"Yeah," he breathed the word against her lips. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled them over, so she was on top. "Sixty-nine, remember?"

"Mm." She pressed open-mouthed kisses against his chest, suckling each of his small nipples before working her way down his belly to his rigid shaft. He didn't have any pubic hair, which was odd, but interesting. His naked balls looked soft and vulnerable. A wave of protective joy washed over her. She could give him this, soothe him with her body, distract him with her voice. Josie petted his cock, grinning when it jerked at her touch, drooling dark precum. *Dark?* "Walker, is there anything I should know before I swallow you whole?"

His body clenched at her words. "If you keep talking like that, this is going to be over before we get started." He blew out a breath. "Okay, um, need to know. My cum is kind of bluish colored. It won't hurt you, and I don't have any diseases. And I really like the image of you deep throating me."

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Then it's a good thing I have almost no gag reflex, isn't it?" A skill she'd perfected in college, with the help of a good-sized zucchini. Her ex-husband had loved fucking her throat after he'd played a gig at one of the local bars.

Dragging her tongue across the head of his penis, she grinned as she heard his squawk. The taste of cardamom and musk was stronger here, richer. "You taste good." She licked him

again, tracing his shaft with quick, teasing flicks, before taking the head of his cock in her mouth.

“Oh, yeah, Josie, that’s so good.”

Interesting, she’d never had a vocal lover before. It was nice to know she was doing this right. *Now, to drive all the ugly memories away.* She cupped his balls in her hands, rolling the silken orbs gently in her palm. Touching him so intimately was incredible, and she felt a hot rush of moisture between her thighs. Walker made a low growling sound deep in his chest, his hands caressing her hair.

“Turn around, I need to taste you,” he said, fingertips brushing across her cheek.

Lapping the head of his weeping cock, she shifted so her legs were pressed against his side. “Get your hair out of the way.”

“Move, hair,” he said with a husky laugh. “Okay, done.”

Carefully, she raised her leg, letting him guide her until she was straddling him, her cunt poised over his face.

“Nine-tailed gods, Josie, you have a pretty pussy.” A hot, rough tongue swiped across her swollen flesh.

Josie squeaked, not ready for the rush of pleasure. Most of her other lovers hadn’t been all that interested in eating her, so she wasn’t used to the intense sensation.

“Like that?” He licked again, and again.

“Yes,” she said, dropping her mouth back to his erection. Two could play at that game. Taking him inside, she bobbed up and down his shaft, sucking and licking him.

Walker’s mouth covered her labia, drawing it inside so he could tease and suckle her clit.

It was so good, devouring him, feeling him devour her. Their energies twined together, writhing and pulsing around each other in a passion storm of color. *I wish Walker could see this, see how perfect we are together.*

Since he didn’t have the sight, she’d just have to let him feel it. She concentrated on breathing through her nose and relaxing the muscles in her throat, and drew him all the way into her, until her nose was pressed against the soft skin of his groin. The muffled shout of pleasure he gave made the slight discomfort worth it. Josie swallowed around him a few times, feeling him twitch inside her throat.

His mouth worked her pussy, licking, stroking, suckling. His teeth found her clit, nipping gently, the pleasure skirting the edges of pain. *So good.* A hot rush of pleasure surged through her, threatening to carry her away. Josie instinctively fought against the frighteningly intense bliss trying to swamp her. Nearly blinded by the lightshow surrounding them, she realized that the boundaries between their auras were blurring.

Yes. A low hum of satisfaction vibrated her throat, making Walker shudder against her. He roughly pushed two fingers inside her, biting down on her pleasure bud as he did so. Josie

let his cock slide from her mouth at the incredible sensation. A universe of stars burst inside her mind as her body arched and shook in a powerful climax.

After he'd wrung the last drop of sensation from her, Walker gently eased her onto her side next to him, and sat up. Josie watched him, her body still shivering with mini-orgasms. Rolling onto her back, she spread her legs, reveling in her wanton display. Her desire to make him feel good was submerged under a more basic desire. She wanted to feel him inside her, over her, sheltering her.

Licking his lips, Walker knelt between her thighs. With careful, urgent hands, he urged her legs up and over his hips, so she was open and ready for him. His cock penetrated her, inch by slow, delicious inch. Incandescent, swirling light danced between them as their bodies merged.

Josie groaned as he filled her, reawakening her passion. Finally, he was completely sheathed, filling her with his strength. Never had a man gone so deep, taken her so fully. She reached up and cupped his cheek in her palm. "Fuck me."

He shuddered and began to thrust, measured, steady motions that made her ache for more. "Damn it, Walker, fuck me hard."

Her words startled a bark of laughter from him. "Are you sure?"

Giving him a nasty look, she said, "Would I be making demands if I wasn't?"

"True." He kissed the tip of her nose. "Hang on, darlin', it's gonna get bumpy." He pulled away, and slid back inside quickly. The tempo of his thrusts grew as he built a fast, savage rhythm. Around them, the lightshow stabilized into a steady, rhythmic, white-hot glow.

Josie moved with him, transfixed by the beautiful man claiming her body. His head was thrown back, long hair snaking over his shoulders and down onto his thighs. As she watched, it slithered further down, a thick section finding and stroking her clit, and two smaller tendrils twining up and over her breasts, circling and squeezing her nipples. Lost in pleasure, she let her cries urge him on, begging him wordlessly to move deeper, faster. He complied, letting his human façade fade away.

As a second, more powerful orgasm washed over her, Josie lost herself in the safety of straining muscles, sharp teeth, wild hair, and gentle, feral spirit.

Chapter Fourteen

Sipping her coffee, Josie watched her aunt and Wu Chang dance around each other. Sofa leaned down to get a pan from the cupboard, and Wu reached over her head to pull cinnamon from the spice rack. As she stood, he leaned back, paused just long enough to kiss Sofa's cheek, and turned to add the cinnamon to the French toast. Sofa twirled around her lover, placing the pan on the stove, and the scrambled eggs into the pan.

"Thanks, love, you're a right handy sheila," Wu said.

Josie stifled a giggle at his accent. One just didn't picture a dragon named Wu Chang as a middle-aged blonde Australian dressed in rumpled khaki shorts and a pale green golf shirt.

Beside her, Walker snerked.

Wu looked around at them, the red lights glittering in his dark eyes a perfect match for his aura. "I haven't forgotten Sofa's name. In my country, sheila is slang for woman."

Brilliant ruby coiled around him, tendrils reaching out to merge with Sofa's butter yellow. The colors should have been jarring together; instead, they were beautiful. Josie's heart melted at the irrefutable truth that her aunt had found love. Expressions, voice tone, and body language could be faked, but the colors never lied.

I want that. Josie was surprised at the fierceness in her thought. It was already beginning. When she'd awakened this morning wrapped in Walker's energy as well as his arms, she'd gotten a glimpse of what the future might hold for them if they dared to grasp it. A second call from Walker's son Jake had severed the connection, but Josie knew it could be rebuilt. That knowledge curled inside her, warm and content as a cat snuggled onto a hearth.

Poor Jake was still upset, but doing better. Josie had given father and son privacy, coming home to shower and change, finding her aunt and Wu sitting in the kitchen checking the newspaper for yard sale notices. Walker had come over about half an hour

later, hair still damp, eyes saddened by his son's horrible experience. Now, he sat next to her at the table, and they watched as the older generation made breakfast.

Sofa's energy was clean and clear, with none of the muddiness that indicated illness. The silver spot marking the location of her pacemaker no longer stood out as an intrusion; instead, it was almost like a gemstone, a necessary accent to the whole of Sofa's being.

"I know; I watch *Tracking Australia*," Josie said, working hard to keep her voice and expression innocent.

"Oh please, what a wanker." Wu rolled his eyes. "I'd like to see him wrestle a really scary critter, like a wyvern."

"Now, Wu, there's no need to be nasty. Gator Irving seems like a perfectly nice young man," Sofa said, stroking a hand across the dragon's shoulder.

"And my third graders love him. They've learned as much about conservation from his show as they've learned in school. More, maybe, because we've only got so much time to devote to teaching it." It was even more difficult to get a significant amount of instruction about the environment in, considering they had to teach about both the mundane and magical flora and fauna. The image of the exuberant Australian herpetologist/entertainer holding a crested salamander as it tried to flash-fry his fingers made her wince.

"And let's face it," Walker chimed in. "He's cool." The fiend caught a flying piece of bacon with a tentacle of hair. "Was that nice?" Not bothering to transfer it to his hand, he ate the bacon.

"Wu Chang, were you born in a barn?" Sofa's voice held outraged affection. "We do not throw food in my kitchen." Hands on her hips, she shook the "finger of doom" at him.

He grinned at her, his nondescript face lighting up with mischief. "What about --"

She cut him off. "That wasn't thrown, now was it?"

"Hey," Josie said, laughing. "TMI! I have to eat in this kitchen."

"That's, mmph."

Sofa clamped her hand over her lover's mouth. "Quiet, bad lizard." She pulled her hand away, saying, "Ew, gross, dragon spit," and wiping her palm on her jeans.

"I find it interesting that the most well-behaved creature in this room is the hellhound," Walker said dryly.

They all stopped what they were doing and looked down at the poodle lying quietly at Walker's feet. Mokey looked up at them, liquid brown eyes guileless. Josie reached down to scratch behind his ears, getting a sigh and a tail wag from the dog.

"Okay, I've got the first pieces of toast ready to go," Wu said. "Josie, bring me your plate; Walker, you too."

"The eggs are ready, too," Sofa said. "Chop, chop, you two, we need to eat and make ghoulish-killing plans."

* * * * *

“Are you sure this isn’t overkill?” Sofa asked from where she stood just outside the front gate, between Rex and Walker. In daylight, the cemetery was a lovely scene of green grass and quaint stone markers. *No sign of the evil that lurks beneath the ground.* Josie bit back a giggle at the melodramatic thought. “Yes. We have to stop these things, there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of eggs in these graves. If we miss any of them we’ll have to come back.” *And I’m not sure I can find the courage to do this again.*

“And each time we do, they’ll be harder to find,” Walker said, his voice grim.

There was a wealth of emotion in his expression, giving Josie the feeling there was quite a story there. Later, after things had calmed down, she’d ask him about it. Talking always helped, and she was a great listener.

“Right, then,” Wu said. “Where are the nasty little bleeders?”

Josie dimmed her vision and brought up her sight. Peering down at the ground, she checked the graves where she’d seen the eggs the night before. They still held their vile nests. The queen ghoul and her two drones slept, surrounded by all the other ghouls and the newest batch of eggs.

Tamping down her revulsion, she checked the grave that had held the larva and the shadow-thing. No sign of the shadow, and only a few rapidly maturing larva remained, now with vestigial limbs. Shuddering, she scanned the rest of the area. She found no more signs of the ghouls, and just a few places where traces of old magic still lingered.

“Start here,” she told Wu, indicating the grave where the adult ghouls slept. The gravestone honored a woman named Mavis Wilke, who’d died in 1897.

Wu sat cross-legged on the grass, pressing both palms to the ground in front of him. “I’m going to push a bit of fire into the ground. Tell me when I’m just above the coffin, and then step back. I’ll hit it with a big blast.”

“Will do,” Josie said. Watching his hands, she saw a thin thread of scarlet fire edge down into the soil. When it was about six inches above the ghouls, she said, “About half a foot, and you’re there.”

“Here goes.”

His aura pulsed. A fist-sized ball of blood red fire left his hands and sizzled down the thread, exploding in the midst of the ghoule nest. One of the drones was hit first, writhing and twisting beneath the flame. Josie’s stomach twisted as the drone’s energy went from sickly green to agonized blue-black as the creature tried to get away from the heat. The rest of the ghouls squirmed and struggled to save their queen and themselves, pulling her toward the foot of the coffin -- closest to the grave with the larvae.

“More fire, Wu.”

“Right,” he said. His aura pulsed again, and this time the ball of flame was larger and brighter. It incinerated the nearest ghouls, making their energies wink out like snuffed candles. Still, the queen and a few stragglers fought to get away.

What’s so important down there? Josie glanced toward the grave holding the larva, surprised to see them shift around in agitation. *It’s like they can feel the heat.* And maybe they could. She knew they tunneled into graves; maybe they linked their nests together. It made sense; ease of travel and an established bolt hole.

“I think they’ve got passages to other graves.”

Wu looked up at her, reptilian eyes glowing like miniature ruby suns. “Move back, I’m going to destroy these things once and for all.”

Josie backed away, wide-eyed, as he stood, flame dripping from his fingers in a steady stream. His aura pulsed a third time, flaring around him in a dragon-shaped corona.

Fire flooded the first grave, filling it and pouring down a narrow pathway into the second grave, killing the adult ghouls and then engulfing the larva. It rushed onward, finding more passages to more graves and more eggs, until the ground was lit from inside by fat laser beams of flame. It hit one of the old magics, and flared sapphire for a moment before consuming the magic and burning even hotter.

“Ya know,” Rex said, “When I was a pup, I thought werewolves were at the top of the food chain. The older I get, the further down I move.”

Walker grinned at the older man. “I know exactly what you mean.” He cocked his head, peering at the dragon. “Wonder if Wu ever gets that feeling?”

“I really, really hope not.”

“Yeah.” Walker didn’t want to imagine what might have dragons on the menu. It was weird enough realizing that the easygoing Australian could toast them all without breaking a sweat. Speaking of sweat... As he watched, the cemetery’s grass withered from the ground up, darkening and twisting with the heat baking its roots. Just a hint of vibrant, living green remained at the top of each blade of grass, though that would soon wither as well.

Her feet were getting warm. *Oh, dear.* Josie dimmed her sight, bringing her vision back on line, and hurried to where the others waited. Standing next to Walker, she leaned into him when he placed his arm around her shoulder.

“Wow,” he murmured, his breath tickling her cheek.

“Yeah,” Josie said.

The nondescript Australian stood in the center of the graveyard, hands outstretched as he filled the ground with fire. His clothing and fine blond hair moved as they were stirred by the force of his magic. Wu held the position for several long minutes before relaxing and

letting the flames die back to nothing. He shook himself, then turned toward them, a bright grin on his face. "Well, sweetheart, did I get them all?"

Josie checked the graves. Nothing of the ghouls, or any other living thing remained. Except -- she stepped forward, peering downward into the grave with the unmarked headstone -- there. A gray on gray shadow nodded at her, before fading into nothing.

Chapter Fifteen

“Where are you, you son of a bitch?” Josie stormed into the cemetery, grass crunching beneath her feet. Her eyes were trained on the ground as she stopped atop the grave with the blank headstone.

Walker and Rex shared a long look, and Walker went cautiously toward the seer. He didn’t want to disturb her, but needed to be closer to protect her. If she’d let him. If she didn’t belt him one for crowding her. Stopping beside the grave, he watched as she paced with short, jerky steps. It was a cliché of the worst sort, but she was beautiful in her anger. Her short hair was fluffed out, almost as if it had a will of its own, her cheeks were flushed, and her blue-green eyes glittered like jewels.

The heat coming from the ground was pleasant against the soles of his feet. He was glad he’d worn his work boots though, and not his tennis shoes. Pulling his braid over his shoulder, he absently stroked the tip as he drew in the intoxicating singed berry fragrance of Josie’s anger.

Syrup and fury, mm. He squirmed a bit as his cock filled, making the crotch of his jeans uncomfortably tight. His hair tingled from the roots down as he recalled the sensation of her tight pussy surrounding him.

Josie turned toward him, her eyes still sweeping the ground. The sweetness of her anger sharpened as it was seasoned with acrid fear.

“That damned gray shadow was back,” Josie said, her voice shaky.

A surge of anger nearly choked him. “Is it still there?” Walker growled. He wanted to snatch Josie up and carry her off to safety, then come back and make the shadow into ugly gray confetti.

“No. It nodded at me then sank into the ground. I can’t see it anymore.”

He could smell faint traces of Josie's blood, and realized that her fists were clenched so tightly her nails were cutting into her palms. It took every bit of will power he possessed not to wrap his arms around her and pull her close. That would be a huge mistake, however. Right now, she had too much manic energy to tolerate any restrictions on her freedom of movement.

"Point it out to me, darlin' and I'll cook it up nice for you," Wu said from behind them

Walker started. He'd been so focused on Josie that he hadn't heard the others approach. *Sloppy, Walker, very sloppy.* He shook away the arousal he'd indulged in while watching Josie. It wasn't the time for introspections or erections.

As the others speculated on the shadow, he stepped slightly away, concentrating on the sound of an approaching vehicle. Just before it turned the corner and came into sight, he relaxed, recognizing Danny Graziani's gas-guzzler. *I hope he isn't still pissed about not doing the spell.* Walker was in no mood to deal with a petulant brat. The tip of his braid twitched in annoyance at the thought of another confrontation.

He walked to the cemetery entrance to meet his deputy. The mage pulled up next to the gate, but stayed in his truck with the engine idling.

"Well, isn't this cozy?" Danny said, glaring at Walker.

The fiend stared at his deputy through narrowed eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Brenda and I aren't good enough anymore?"

"What?" Walker stepped closer. "We talked about this last night. You're a water mage. Didn't the café incident teach you anything?" The scorch marks still marred the sidewalk in front of the building, and it wasn't easy to burn cement. Danny needed to knock the chip off his shoulder and accept reality. And if the human wouldn't do it, Walker would be more than happy to provide assistance.

"I've learned more since then. You should have let me try." Danny's lowered brows and protruding lip made him look like a sulky four-year-old.

Keeping a tight leash on his temper, Walker said, "You and Brenda were both injured last time. I felt the safety of my team was more important than stroking your ego."

"Oh, hey, Danny," Josie said, coming up to the side of the truck. "We found something really weird. I'd love to have your take on things."

"Fat chance, Yoko." The mage spat in the dirt at Josie's feet.

Walker's braid was wrapped around Danny's throat before the mage could blink. He didn't squeeze, just made it clear that he might.

The human's pale blue eyes went wide with shock. His normally pleasant scent of leather and dust was flooded with the ozone tang of pure adrenaline.

Before Walker could say anything, Josie put her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Danny. I'm not trying to come between anyone." Her hand tightened on Walker's shoulder. "Walker, let him go."

The soft words broke through the haze of rage. "You will treat Josie with respect," he snarled, releasing his hold on the deputy.

Danny stared at him, tight-lipped, before jamming his truck into gear and roaring away in a cloud of brown dust.

Her stomach a tight ball of misery, Josie walked back toward where Sofa, Wu, and Chief Evans waited near the cemetery gates. As they approached, Josie saw her aunt's aura flare brilliant gold.

"Yes," Sofa said, putting her arms around Wu's waist and leaning against him.

Wu looked puzzled for a moment; then a smile more incandescent than any dragon fire lit his face. "Yes?" he whispered.

"Yes, Wu Chang of the Red Rock Dragon Clan, I will marry you."

"Crikey," he said, picking her up and swinging her around.

For a moment, their auras blended so perfectly together that Josie couldn't tell where Sofa stopped and Wu started. Josie had a moment of jealousy before happiness for her aunt overrode any negative feelings. "Congratulations, you two," she said, stepping forward to hug them both.

"Thank you, dear," Sofa said, hugging her niece. Patting her hair into place, she said, "Now, let's stop this killer and find the shadow creature so we can put this unpleasantness behind us and start planning the wedding."

Sofa's practical words shook Josie free of her depression. *That's my aunt: take care of the little details so we can concentrate on the important stuff.* "We should ask Brenda," Josie said. "If she's still speaking to me." She was shaken by Danny's violent response to her earlier question. His aura had been a brittle lime green, the strength of his dislike for her a slap in the face. She leaned against Mirabelle, taking comfort in the car's solid presence. Last night, Danny's energy had been hostile, but nothing like today. Then there was Walker's response. Wow. It was disturbing and disturbingly hot. He'd protected her instinctively, and continued to do so after rational thought took over. Even as his hair was dealing with Danny, his energy had extended out, shielding her as well.

Walker squeezed her shoulder. "I don't know what's up with Danny, but I've never known Brenda to act irrationally. Besides, she wouldn't have given you the amethyst if she didn't want your help."

"True," Josie said, tension leaving her at his words.

"Maybe that's why Danny is so jealous. He feels like everyone around him is dismissing his ability and turning elsewhere for help," Sofa said.

“Maybe,” Walker said, the tip of his braid twitching like the tail of an angry cat.

Josie placed her hand on his arm, feeling his tense muscles shift beneath her touch. “We need to stay focused on the most important issue -- solving the crimes.” *And again, the clichés drip from my lips.*

She took a deep cleansing breath, focusing on the feel of Walker’s warm skin, the smell of dried grass and fallen leaves, and the quiet cheeping of sparrows. The world was going on about its business, unconcerned. Josie smiled, watching a bright blue dragonfly buzz by on wings that carried a hint of elemental wind magic. It was no wonder she was twisted up inside, jumping at shadows; she’d forgotten to appreciate the very things she was trying to protect.

After ordering her thoughts, she said, “Sofa, please call Brenda and see if she knows anything about ungrounded shadows.” The words raised goose bumps on her arms. Absently rubbing them away, she continued, “Chief, would you mind having someone look through the police records?”

He looked up from where he leaned on the cemetery fence. “Already taken care of,” he said, holding up his cell phone.

A flush heated her cheeks. “Oh, Goddess, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tell you how to do your job.” She was mortified by her slip and wished she could just sink through the car’s door and speed away.

“No problem,” he said with an indulgent smile. “I welcome all good ideas, even when they’re not mine.”

Wu tapped a fingernail against his front teeth for a moment, then said, “Anything else we should be doing?”

Sofa shook her head. “Not that I can think of.” She looked around. “Anyone?”

As they all looked at each other, Josie had the absurd thought, *there should be Jeopardy music*. An inelegant snort escaped her.

“Yes?” Walker said.

She hummed the opening of the song.

He grinned, then chuckled.

Rex began to snicker. “I’ll take weird shadows for a thousand, Alex.”

Josie lost it, falling against Walker as she giggled uncontrollably. She could hear the edge of hysteria in it, and took a couple of deep breaths, forcing herself to calm down. Between the ghouls, the murders, and the shadow, her fear tolerance was hitting critical mass.

The chief’s radio chose that minute to hiss into life. “Unit One, this is base.”

He unhooked the receiver from the front of his shirt. “This is One, go ahead.”

“Ten-twenty-one the office, please.”

“Roger, One out.” Lips tightly pressed together, he hooked his receiver back on its holder and pulled his cell phone from its holder. “This is Evans, go ahead.”

Denim blue blazed with sapphire flames as the chief listened. “On my way.” He looked up at Josie. “Don’t do anything yet. Just secure the scene and wait for me. I’ll be there in twenty.” He put his phone away. “Josie, Walker, would you mind coming with me?”

Wordlessly, she nodded.

Sofa took Wu’s hand. “We’ll get started on that research.” The two of them walked toward Wu’s Land Rover.

After they’d driven away, Chief Evans said, “Follow me to the Voltares house.”

“Gilbert?” Walker said, a catch in his voice.

“No.” The chief rubbed a hand over his face. “There’s been an attack on Lourdes. She’s in the hospital right now, but she’s unconscious.”

“But...” The words got stuck in her throat. Lourdes Malcado was Dolores Malcado Voltares’s mother. She was also a desert pixie, with no ties to the were community.

Chapter Sixteen

Josie settled into the driver's seat, letting Mirabelle surround her with calm. She rested her forehead against the steering wheel. *Okay, Reynolds, time to get over yourself and act like a grown up. People are counting on you. No more self-indulgent freaking out.*

Resolve firmly in place, she sat back and started the car. Mirabelle's engine let out a low, grumbling purr as it revved into life.

"Are you okay?" Walker asked.

She flashed him a tight smile. "I am. I've locked my inner-wimp back in her cage. I'm not letting her loose until we've got the murderer in jail."

"Sounds good. Though if you need a shoulder to lean on, I'm here."

"Thanks. I'm pretty lean-worthy myself, if you need me." She put the car into gear and pulled out.

"I guess we were wrong about the were connection," Walker mused.

"Maybe, unless there's something we don't know about." If they were wrong about the were connection -- and it was looking very much like they were -- they were right back at square one where the killer wanted them to be.

"I don't know," he said. "Desert pixies are all about peace and love and vegetarianism. Gilbert had to stop eating meat, and won't let anyone in the house who isn't a strict vegetarian. His mother-in-law had a fit when Brenda, Danny, and I exterminated a swarm of twixtie beetles the other night. From what Brenda told me the next day, Dolores wasn't happy about it either, but she's more worldly, and understood the nuisance of letting them breed unchecked." Shaking his head, he added, "I can't see Lourdes spending much time with any of the were-folk. They're all omnivores at minimum, and most are hunters."

Huh. Interesting. "I didn't know that about Gilbert. I don't know him or Dolores well, just enough to say hello on the street. He was several years ahead of me in school, and they

don't have any kids, so our paths haven't crossed all that often." She paused for a moment. "Older, female, not human. What did she have in common with Fred and Bob?"

Walker gave a half sigh, half laugh. "I don't know."

She turned onto Main Street. "What is it they always say on cop shows? Means, motive, and opportunity. We know how they were killed, we know when -- which limits our suspects. Now if we can figure out why, we'll be most of the way to who the killer is. I hope. At least, that's how it works on TV." She wished everything could be neatly packaged and over within an hour -- or maybe a two-parter during sweeps week.

"I could see the similarities between Fred and Bob, but not with Lourdes," Walker said.

"Me neither. But someone *did* see similarities." She pulled up in front of the Voltares house, parking behind a squad car. "Maybe we need to throw out everything we thought we knew, and start over." *Meanwhile, our crook gets away with it, and maybe gets bolder and escalates the attacks.*

He nodded. "Let's get through this first, and then we'll grab Sofa and Wu and Brenda and we'll all brainstorm. Danny, too, if he'll pull his head out of his ass."

"Deal." She turned her attention to the house. Josie had always loved looking at it. A little piece of high desert had been created on the lot. The siding was painted the silvered brown of juniper bark, with sage green trim. The yard had been landscaped with pale desert soil and such native plants as would grow in the slightly wetter area in town. The brilliant orange-yellow Indian paintbrush lining the front of the house had splashes of brilliant pink on them, and glowed with residual magic. *I bet there's a story there*, she thought, biting her lip to keep the inappropriate grin from escaping.

As they walked to the front door, Josie pulled her sight forward, letting it overlap her vision. At once, she could see the disjointed shreds of magic she'd seen at the Alger home. Confetti-shreds of energy swirled around them as they knocked on the front door, becoming even more animated when Chief Evans opened it and waved them in. She and Walker nodded to Julieanne, the forensic mage, and her two assistants.

Josie sneezed as the powerful mishmash of mace, chili powder, and skunk whooshed over her. This was much worse than the Algers's house, which had been aired out before she arrived. Fumbling in the side pocket of her purse, she pulled out a wad of napkins, using one to wipe her streaming eyes, and the rest to cover her mouth and nose in an attempt to filter out some of the stench and irritants. Beside her, Walker had a handkerchief over his nose, a rope of hair holding it in place like the world's silliest fake mustache. *At least his hands are free.*

The chief, eyes running with tears, nose red and sore looking, motioned for them to follow. He led them up a wide staircase to a second floor bedroom. "It's in here."

Josie hesitated at the threshold, and followed him inside.

Walker peered around the room, doing his best to keep his breathing shallow. The stink bomb was doing its job and then some. He wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to smell anything else. Looking at Rex and Josie's running eyes, he was glad for the nictitating membrane that protected him from the worst of the mace and chili powder in the air.

He looked around the room, deliberately avoiding the "body" on the bed, trying to look at the scene with fresh eyes. He concentrated, pulling the nictitating membrane on his eyes back to see if that made a difference. Pain stabbed at him, and the membranes slid back into place involuntarily. *So much for that idea.*

The room was large -- master bedroom sized -- and painted the color of warm beige earth. The curtains and bedding were all done in shades of sage and brown, with pale pink as an accent. The floor was wood, with a dark brown rug centered beneath the bed. The room was neat, with no signs of a struggle or other disturbance.

Walker studied the bedroom door. Evans stood just to one side, arms crossed over his chest, watching them. Walker nodded at him, and turned his attention back to the door.

The brass knob was dented, but he supposed that could have happened at any time. There was nothing on the door to suggest that the killer had broken in. Unable to avoid it any longer, Walker turned his attention to the form on the bed. *This is seriously creepy.* His hair twitched, pressing close to his skin as he rubbed goose bumps from his arms.

A caricature of a woman lay on the bed, long gray-green yarn hair spread over the pale blue pillowcase. The doll's head was crudely formed with straw, the eyes made from small clusters of juniper berries, the nose a sprig of sagebrush. A gaping mouth had been drawn in with congealing rabbit's blood, and shreds of raw flesh had been forced into the "mouth." More blood stained the blue and purple gardening gloves serving as the doll's hands, and still more stained the white cotton slippers on the doll's feet and the hem of the pink linen dress it wore.

Growing up in a family of mischievous shape-shifters had taught Walker about the relationship of symbols in magic. In essence, the doll symbolizing Lourdes Malcado had walked in blood, washed its hands in blood, and tasted blood. He couldn't imagine the horror the desert pixie must have felt at seeing the doll in her bedroom. This was a brutal, vicious attack, though the perpetrator had done nothing to physically harm the victim.

A flash of bright color near her left foot caught his attention. He went to the end of the bed and knelt to examine it. A fingernail sized, slightly curved crescent of hot pink clung to the side of the effigy's shoe. It looked familiar, but he couldn't place it. As he leaned further forward, his braid slithered across his back, sparking his memory.

It was a piece of twixtie carapace, the piece that covered one of the beetle's wings. *She must have worn these shoes not long after we destroyed the pixie swarm. But does that mean anything? Or is it just a coincidence? How do real detectives ever figure this stuff out?* Disappointed, he stood and looked at Rex and Josie. "Anything?"

Josie wiped her streaming eyes again, trying to dry them enough so she could see. She'd already saturated all the tissue she'd had in her purse, and was now using her sleeve to blot up the moisture. *Stupid stink bomb*. Standing in front of the window, she stared at the door, trying to get a vision of the killer. Scraps of energy swirled around the room, creating a senseless mosaic of color. She blinked as more tears filled her stinging eyes, seeing the faint outline of legs before she wiped the moisture away. The image disappeared. She centered herself, blotted her eyes, and concentrated her sight on the door. *Show me what happened*. Nothing. Biting her lip, she pushed more power into her sight. Again, just before the tears overflowed her eyes, she saw the legs.

"Okay, that's weird." She waited till her eyes filled up with more tears, and this time didn't wipe them away when the image of legs began to coalesce. The picture blurred and faded as her eyes spilled tears. Impatiently, she blotted her eyes, and concentrated her energy on the place where the image had appeared. Now, she just had to wait for the chili and mace to irritate her eyes for enough tears. What had been annoyingly quick now took forever.

And while she waited the son of a bitch who'd attacked Lourdes was free to commit further atrocities. *Screw it*. She reached up and caught the skin connecting her nostrils between her index finger and thumbnail, and squeezed hard.

"Ow, ow, ow," she muttered as her eyes filled. There, legs in jeans. Automatically, she looked at the person's feet. The tears spilled over before she could get more than a faint impression of boots. She was vaguely aware that Walker had spoken, and now he and Chief Evans were staring at her.

"Why tears? What makes them special?" she mused, licking her lips and tasting salt. "Wait, that's it." Salt was a purifier, and was often used in magic circles as both protection and to bind the magic into place. *I need to make my tears saltier*. She pulled her purse around in front of her, unzipping the outside pocket. She kept a supply of salt, rosemary, and ground amber in her bag -- a magical survival kit.

She pulled out one of the restaurant salt packages, tore the end off and poured a small amount on her tongue. She closed her mouth, mixing a bit of spit with the salt to dissolve it, then collected a large drop of salty spit on her index finger. Gross, but she was sure it would be effective, and hopefully the high salt content would kill off any nasty bacteria. "Oh, Goddess, this it going to hurt."

Before she could lose her nerve, she rubbed the mixture inside her lower eyelid.

"Fuck," she shouted as stinging pain stabbed at her eye. A rush of moisture filled it, but that just made it hurt worse. Fighting against the instinct to squeeze her eye closed and rub the tears away, she found the memory-image. Legs, feet, boots. Cowboy boots with roping heels. Brown, no, brownish red. Leather with a pattern of small dots. She recognized the pattern, which led to a better description of the color. "Oh, no."

There was only one person in town who owned a pair of mahogany ostrich-skin boots.

Chapter Seventeen

Walker and the chief stared at her. “I don’t believe it,” she said, shaking her head to chase the image away.

“Don’t believe what?” Walker said. He looked adorably puzzled, and she had a wholly inappropriate urge to kiss him.

“The boots. They’re too obvious. I mean, he’s arrogant, but even he wouldn’t be that dumb.” As she spoke, Josie looked around the room, hoping the extra-salty tears would show her more than a vague had-to-be-false vision. “Would he?”

“Maybe you should start at the beginning,” Chief Evans said, giving her his best “curious wolf” look.

“My eyes were watering, and I kept getting an image just before the tears spilled over.” The words tumbled out of her. “I figured it was the salt, so I added more salt from my kit, and boy, did it hurt.” She rubbed the corner of her still stinging eye. “And that worked, only it didn’t.” That didn’t make any sense. She took a deep breath, trying to center herself in the maelstrom of chaotic energy. “I saw legs and feet. And the feet were in mahogany ostrich-skin boots.”

Walker was shaking his head in denial before Josie finished speaking. Danny couldn’t be the killer. It was just too absurd. It didn’t matter that right now he wanted to shake the mage until his teeth rattled; he knew his deputy wasn’t guilty of these crimes. And there was something else, something missing from her description, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. And yet, his mind noted that Danny had been acting awfully nasty lately.

“I don’t believe it either,” Josie said, her tone a mixture of determination and uncertainty.

"Criminals can be stupid, but I have a hard time believing he'd wear those damned boots, no matter how much faith he might have in his spell-casting ability," Rex said. The werewolf shook his head. "We've got to talk to him, though. Maybe being disqualified from the promotion did something to him, made him crazy somehow. That boy's had a burr under his tail since I didn't make him the new marshal."

Walker felt his lips curve in an unwilling smile. His foster family used the same expression. "A knot in his hair," he said, unable to resist. Any comfort was welcome when the rug had been dragged from beneath his world yet again.

Josie gave the two men an arch look. "A mote in his eye." She went still, blinking twice. "A blind spot. That's what we've all got. A blind spot."

"Go on," the chief said, amber eyes narrowing in concentration.

She spoke slowly. Walker had the impression she was feeling her way through her thoughts. "These attacks aren't new. Fred may -- *may* -- be the first death, but the killer's too good for the murder to be their first crime."

Walker was nodding before she stopped speaking. "He's too good at hiding his tracks." Quoting some of the earliest lessons he learned, Walker added, "No predator makes a kill on the first strike. We all must learn the hunt."

"Exactly," Josie said, glancing toward Lourdes's bed. "That is not the work of a beginner."

"No," Rex said, looking around thoughtfully. "It's not." He shook himself, then smoothed his hair back into place. "I've got reports on some incidents in the last several years that might or might not be accidental. I've kept track of them because there was something a bit too pat, too planned, about them. I think it's time to mosey on over to my file cabinet and have a look-see." He rubbed a hand over his jaw.

"I'll talk to Danny," Walker said. "He and I need to settle some things between us." He wasn't looking forward to the confrontation, but it was long overdue. He'd put it off when Danny's attitude toward him had begun improving, but now they were back at square one -- maybe even worse. It couldn't wait any longer, and it might cost him an experienced deputy. One thing was certain; he wouldn't tolerate any more disrespect toward Josie. If it happened again, Walker wasn't sure he'd be able to limit himself to merely warning Danny. If Danny was the killer, the mage would be lucky to see tomorrow.

"I'll get with Sofa, Wu, and Brenda," Josie said. "Between us, we know most of the people in town, and a good bit of the history and gossip. We can brainstorm about who might have all the relevant information, then get with Chief Evans to see where we overlap. Brenda knows Danny the best of all of us. She'll know if he's capable of these attacks."

"Sounds good," Rex said.

"Yeah," Walker agreed. "Can I hitch a ride home with you, Josie?"

"Of course," she said, smiling at him. He saw the future in her smile and answered it with one of his own.

As they walked out of the house they passed the crime scene team. Walker wished them luck.

Poor Lourdes, Josie thought. *Poor, poor Lourdes*. Bile coated the back of her throat. The gentle, deeply spiritual woman must have been horrified when she saw what had been done. In magic, symbols were as important as reality, and now Lourdes's very spirit had been tainted with blood.

"Hey," Walker said, brushing gentle fingers across the back of her hand. "Are you going to be okay?" Tendrils of star-swept darkness reached out, petting and soothing her agitated aura.

Josie pulled into the dry cleaner's empty parking lot, put Mirabelle in park, and leaned over so she was snuggled against Walker's side. "This sucks," she said, burrowing close to him.

"Yeah," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "But we'll get through it. And we'll catch this bastard."

"We have to." She rested her head against his chest, reveling in the closeness. She was glad that the explosive passion wasn't the only thing between them, that they also had this quiet tenderness. She liked and trusted him already. Love wasn't far away; she could feel it in her core. And he felt it too, she thought. Now, they just needed the world to calm down so they could learn each other properly. And in order for that to happen...

She reluctantly pulled away. "Can I have a raincheck on the rest of this cuddle?"

"Anytime," he said, brushing a kiss against her jaw.

* * * * *

Walker sank down onto his couch, his mind focused on Josie. He wanted more time with her, wanted to see if this romance budding between them would flower into love. *Trickster bless, Walker, you're spouting bad poetry. It must be love*. He rested his head against the back of the couch. It might just be love, and he'd like the universe to please stop throwing problems at him long enough for him to figure his feelings out. There had been a few moments during their lovemaking the night before when he'd have sworn he heard Josie's thoughts, felt her emotions. It was a terrifying, exhilarating, fabulous rush that made him yearn for ever more and deeper contact with her. *Josie. My Josie. My mate*. He started at the word. Yes. That's where this was going. *I am the luckiest man in the world*.

Yanking his focus from Josie to Danny served as a dose of cold water on his happiness. He needed to handle the mage carefully or there would be no going back. *And if he's the killer?* Walker held that thought up to the light and examined it from every angle. Could

Danny be behind these attacks? As someone born and raised in Franklin's Bend, the mage certainly knew the town's residents and the ebb and flow of daily life. Danny was a competent mage when he didn't overreach himself. He was certainly capable of attempting such an audacious piece of magic as was worked in Lourdes's room. He might even be able to pull it off.

And there was the problem. Danny was overconfident in his abilities. The fire at the café last summer was a perfect case in point. Danny had been so certain he could handle fire magic that he hadn't taken the most basic of precautions. As a result, he and Brenda had both been injured.

Walker couldn't imagine Danny completing these attacks so successfully. There was more. Despite his brash overconfidence, Danny believed in the laws of magic and of Franklin's Bend. If he hadn't he would have quit being a deputy when he was passed over for marshal. Danny wasn't the type to break the most sacred of the laws of magic. Either that, or he had missed his calling as an actor.

We need to talk and get things settled between us once and for all. Walker pulled his cell phone from its holster on his belt and hit the speed dial for Danny's number.

"Hey, Walker, I was just getting ready to call you." Danny's voice said cheerfully. "I've got an old friend of yours at the office."

Startled by the lack of resentment in the deputy's voice, Walker said, "Really? Who is it?"

"He wants it to be a surprise." There was a brief pause and the mage's voice dropped. "And I need to, well, I'm sorry I've been so touchy lately. There are things I need to tell you."

Walker breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe this conversation with Danny would be easier than he thought. "I'll be there in a couple of minutes." *And if it's a trap, I'll make him sorry he ever tried to hunt fiend.*

* * * * *

"Brenda's on her way," Sofa said, sitting across from Josie. The older woman placed her cell phone on the table between them. "Wu went on a pastry run; he should be back in fifteen minutes or so."

"Good," Josie said. Biting her lip, she added, "Does Brenda feel the same way Danny does? That I'm trying to take her place with Walker?"

"No." Sofa reached across the table to pat Josie's hand. "Elves are much less sensitive about things like this, and Brenda knows you're no threat to her position."

"I hope so," Josie said, rubbing goose bumps from her arms. She couldn't shake the unease that had crept into her in Lourdes's room. That attack was so coldly calculated, so malicious -- and it was perpetrated by someone she knew. Maybe even someone she liked.

Danny? No. She was certain the mage wasn't their villain. He could be an arrogant jerk, but he wasn't evil.

People change, though, and we don't always see it. That was the thing that bothered her the most. This bad guy, this evil, wretched person had been committing crimes unnoticed for some time -- maybe even years. They hadn't changed, just gotten bolder.

The chorus of Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* broke the silence. Sofa started, then answered her phone. "Hey sweetie-lizard," she said. She giggled, standing and pointing to her bedroom, mouthing, "Back in a minute."

Josie grinned at her aunt and made kissy noises. Sofa rolled her eyes and turned away, vanishing into the bedroom and closing the door firmly behind her.

Looking down at the empty notepad in front of her, Josie's smile faltered. She picked up her pen and wrote Fred's name, then "Algers," "Lourdes," and "ghouls." Frowning, she added "imps," placing a question mark behind it. The town had an imp infestation every few years, but there hadn't been a serious incident since Kristin's death twenty-five years ago.

It had been springtime, when newborn imps needed large amounts of fresh meat to survive. The three local softball teams practiced on the large field beside the grade school. Josie and Kristin's team the "Collin's Cuties" were hoping for another undefeated season. Martina Lawrence had hit a foul ball over the fence and onto the riverbank. Kristin, playing left field, chased the ball into the willows. Then the screams started. Josie, at center field, was the first one to get to her friend. The sight still haunted her nightmares.

"Hello, Josie."

Josie started, biting back a scream through force of will. One hand on her chest, she said, "Goddess bless, Brenda, you scared me to death."

The half-elf smiled serenely. "Not my intention." Her aura surrounded her in a veil of lavender satin.

Josie let the familiar sight calm her. "Can I get you some tea?"

"That would be lovely."

Josie stood, retrieved a glass, and opened the refrigerator. She put two ice cubes in the glass and searched for the mint tea. Brenda Leaforn was nothing if not predictable in her likes and dislikes. But she knew the town and all its inhabitants as well as anyone could. "We've come up with an idea for a sort of memorial for Fred."

"Oh? What is it?"

Josie moved a gallon of milk to one side and grabbed the iced tea pitcher, filling the glass. "What was Fred's last question to you?"

"He wanted to know why the color of my aura didn't change when everyone else's did."

In the middle of turning around, Josie froze. Brenda's aura *never* changed. It was always, always lavender satin. And that wasn't possible. The glass slipped from Josie's fingers and shattered on the floor. *I've been so blind.*

"Oh, dear," Brenda said, standing. "This is a problem."

Chapter Eighteen

Walker parked his car in front of the office and got out. He opened the passenger door for Mokey, shaking his head as the hellhound bounded out and straight to the nearest telephone pole, where it commenced sniffing and piddling. *Sometimes I think it's embracing its "dog" disguise a bit too enthusiastically.*

Leaving his dog to the scent marking, he stopped to admire the red SUV parked behind Danny's pickup. Could it be Tony? His foster brother had been waxing eloquent about the "big red honey" he was going to purchase to haul around the rapidly growing family. Walker planned to tease Tony unmercifully about using the SUV to compensate for his shortcomings. No, Bisbee, Arizona was more than nine hundred miles away. Not even Tony could drive fast enough to get here overnight.

Well, here goes. Either I walk into a trap and know for sure Danny's the killer, or we talk and I remove a suspect from the list. Walker cautiously opened the front door and stepped inside. Danny and another man were in the waiting room, Danny perched cross-legged on the edge of Verity's desk, a blond he didn't recognize sitting in one of the extra chairs, briefcase across his lap.

"Surprise," Danny said, swinging a boot-clad foot. If this didn't prove his deputy didn't have the good sense the gods gave rocks nothing would. Verity didn't like it when her desk was messed up, or even touched by another living being, and her revenge was swift, painful, and usually embarrassing.

Shaking his head at Danny's willful idiocy, Walker noted his deputy's distinctive boots still had twixtie-pink blotches here and there. *I'll have to ask Josie if the boots were spotted in her vision.* He was betting they weren't; otherwise she would have commented. "You have me at a disadvantage," he said to his visitor. "You look familiar, but I can't come up with a name."

"Maybe this will help." The blond pulled a revolver from his briefcase, pointing it at Walker.

"No, still can't place the face," Walker said, slowly raising his hands to shoulder height. Behind his back, his hair unplaited itself. Walker tensed, ready to move at a moment's notice. An odd scent teased his nostrils. Sweat, anger, and something medicinal. Like stale air in a hospital ward.

"What the hell?" Danny said, standing.

Walker caught his deputy's eye and shook his head, hoping against hope that Danny would be sensible for once.

"Ah, ah, ah," the blond said, his aim never leaving Walker. "Move over by the fiend." After Danny complied, the man said, "I'm hurt, Walker. You'd think a man would remember someone whose parents he murdered."

Walker nodded. "Tom Madison." The adopted son of the fiend he'd killed.

"Very good." Madison giggled, a harsh, high-pitched sound like nails on broken glass. "You killed my father the day before my wedding. The next morning, my mother died of a heart attack. And my lovely fiancée broke things off with me soon after. She thought I was unstable." He giggled again.

Utterly mad, Walker thought. The scents of gunpowder, fear, and madness made a heady cocktail in the air.

"I didn't know, Walker," Danny said. "Oh, gods, I'm so sorry. I didn't know." The mage began to murmur under his breath.

"Tom," Walker said.

"Shut up." The blond sighted along the barrel. "You don't get to talk. You only get to die."

* * * * *

Josie stared at her aunt's best friend, shock rendering her mute.

"People only ever see what they expect to see," Brenda said, steeping her hands on the table in front of her. "Even seers like you and my mother only saw what you expected; what I wanted you to see. I don't have much of the sight, but spell-casting? There, I'm quite proficient. And I can call any living thing to me." She cupped her hands together, and a gray shadow filled them. "I pinched off a teeny tiny piece of my shadow to keep all the parts of me that I needed to hide, and no one noticed that it was missing. No one. I'm rather put out by that."

"Hi, Brenda, ready to wrap up these crimes so we can get started planning the wedding?"

Sofa said coming out of the bedroom. She stopped next to Brenda, looking back and forth between the two women.

Brenda stood up, stepping away from the table. "No, Sofa, I don't think that's going to happen."

"What's going on?"

Josie swallowed, trying to force moisture into her parched mouth. "Run," she croaked.

"Josie?" Sofa turned toward her niece, expression filled with concern. "Are you okay?"

"It's Brenda. She killed Fred." Josie held her aunt's gaze with her own, willing the older woman to believe her.

"What?"

Movement pulled her attention back to the half-elf. The gray shadow crawled up Brenda's arms and onto her torso, turning her energy to a vile gray-purple as it moved. Spikes and hooked thorns skittered across the surface of the aura, like pestilent lightning. As her serene façade faded, the deputy began to clap in slow measured beats. "Very good, Josie. You figured it out."

"Brenda?" Sofa's voice broke on the word.

Her best friend turned toward her, lips twisting in a grimace. "I was gentle the last time, but now you've gone too far. I needed the ghouls to feed my shadow, and you told the dragon to kill them." She shook her finger at Sofa. "Naughty, naughty. I won't share you, and I won't let you desert me." Brenda pointed a finger at Sofa's chest. "Die."

"No," Josie screamed, as the shadow surged down Brenda's arm and onto Sofa. Her aunt clutched at her chest and crumpled to the ground.

As she rushed toward her aunt, the half-elf intercepted her, punching her hard in the temple. Josie fell over her aunt's convulsing body, darkness claiming her.

Chapter Nineteen

Walker threw himself toward Madison's feet as the gun went off. Shocking pain flared up his hair as a finger-sized hank was truncated about halfway between root and tip. "Fuck," he yelled, forcing his injured follicles to stretch out, wrap around the madman's ankles, and yank, toppling Madison to his back. Walker flung himself up and over Madison's body, reaching for the madman's frantically waving gun hand, but most of his hair was trapped beneath the fallen man, making it difficult for him to move. There was a second shot, and then a series of loud thumps and high-pitched, vicious growls.

Mokey was trying to get into the office -- through doors that were werewolf-proof.

Walker saw a blur of denim and ostrich leather boots and heard an "oof" as the breath was knocked from someone. Madison's struggles ceased.

"I've got the gun, boss," Danny said. As he spoke there was a sharp crack as the hellhound tumbled through the splintered remains of the front door. It went immediately for Madison.

"Mokey, freeze," Walker said.

The hound stopped, red eyes glaring at the fallen human. Its back and neck spines stood up, making it look as though Mokey wore spiked scale armor.

Walker shoved Madison's legs off his hair and stood, wincing as the damaged follicles sent a jolt of pain through his nerves. He could feel blood dripping from the wound and seeping into his shirt. Thank the Trickster that the shot had gone wide.

Danny climbed cautiously to his feet as well, eyes and gun trained on Madison. Taking a deep breath, Walker was relieved not to smell any human blood, though his own lent a sharp spiciness to the atmosphere. The injured hairs had already knotted themselves and had the bleeding almost stopped.

The fallen man paid no attention to them, muttering, "It's a sign. She called and told me where he was and I came and killed him," over and over again.

Exchanging a look, Walker and Danny each reached down and took one of the fallen man's arms, hauling him to his feet. "She called me," he yelled. "She *called* me."

Walker opened the shallow center drawer in Verity's desk and pulled out the handcuffs she kept there. He wrenched Madison's hands back, securing them with the cuffs. Against his back, his hair replaited itself, cradling the damaged strands to protect them from further harm.

"Guard, Mokey," Walker said. The hellhound took up a position just in front of Madison, gazing at the mumbling man with ravenous attention. There was a part of him, the part that was injured and full of guilt that wanted to give Mokey the command to kill. Walker refused to give in to temptation. Despite what Madison said, Walker wasn't a murderer, and he refused to become one. He had too much to lose.

The mage glanced at the hellhound, shuddered, shrugged, and said, "It's Brenda, boss, it has to be." Danny's voice broke on the last word. "Last night, she got weird when I saw the ghouls, didn't want to investigate. Then, after you and Josie left, she made some cracks about you replacing us with Josie. I was so mad I almost called you up and quit right then." He rubbed his face with a shaking hand. "When I found out about Lourdes, I started to think about things I'd seen." He looked up at Walker, tears welling in his eyes. "I wanted it to be you, but it's her. Brenda killed Fred."

Walker stared at the mage. "What? How?"

"Magic. I've felt it on her, though I've never seen her use it. There are other things. Things she's done. She has the Elven gift for *calling*. She tries to pretend she doesn't, but I've seen it. She calls things, and they come."

Walker remembered Lourdes Malcado yelling at Brenda, "*You have your mother's gifts, Brenda Leaforn, diluted though they might be; you should have called those poor creatures away.*"

Danny used his free hand to rub goose bumps from his arms. "I tried to talk to her this morning, but she wouldn't listen."

No wonder Danny'd been such a bastard last night. His entire world was being turned on its ear.

"Call the chief. Tell him to send someone to pick this lunatic up, and meet me at..." Walker trailed off.

"Where is she?" Danny had the phone against his ear, his finger poised to dial.

"At Sofa's. That's where Brenda is right now." Walker felt his heart stutter at the thought. "She's at Sofa's, with Josie."

"Go."

He turned toward the broken door, pulling pieces out of the way and throwing them aside so he could get out. Behind him, he heard a soft whine. Walker was tempted to call the hound, but didn't want to leave Danny alone with a dangerous madman. Josie was fine. There was no reason for Brenda to be suspicious, and therefore no reason for her to commit any more crimes. Without turning around, he said, "Stay until the chief gets here, then find me."

A low *woof* was Mokey's only response.

Walker got into his car, feeling as though he was swimming through molasses. His claws snagged on the pocket of his jeans as he pulled his keys free. He wrenched them loose, absently noting that the denim now had a large hole in it. *Josie*. How had she become so central to his life in such a short time? He didn't know, and didn't care. She was his mate, and he would fight all the gods and goddesses for her if necessary.

Calm down, he told himself. *She and Sofa and Wu and Brenda are probably sitting around the table making wedding plans*. He clung to the image, unwilling to imagine anything else.

* * * * *

Josie woke to someone stroking her neck. "Walker?" she croaked, forcing her eyes open. She was surrounded by green. Deep, mossy green formed a cushion beneath her prone body. The bright emerald of new growth filled the air around her. A tendril of vivid lime -- green as poison -- snaked up and brushed her temple, coming away red.

She blinked, clearing her sight and letting her vision come forward. A willow thicket surrounded her. Looking around, she saw a pile of fist-sized quartz river cobbles. There were twenty-five of them; she'd placed them here herself, one a year, since it had happened. She was lying on top of the place where Kristin had died.

Kristin writhed on the ground, a bull imp's jaws clamped on her bleeding throat. Josie screamed for help and looked around desperately for any type of weapon. A partially buried river cobble caught her attention, and she picked it up and threw it at the imp, using every bit of skill she'd gained from two years of softball. The imp yelped when the rock struck, then turned and started toward Josie. She heard growls on either side of her, and realized there were several doe imps in the thicket as well. She took a step toward her friend with a half formed idea that she could grab Kristin and drag the other girl to safety.

The bull imp rushed her, its aura flaring sullen red. Instinctively, Josie kicked out at it. It caught her tennis shoe in its jaws, pulling her off balance. Josie tried to get away, but the imp's teeth had dug into her shoe. She kicked and squirmed as the does started toward her, but she couldn't get free. Her wide pink, sparkly shoelaces had to be tied in a double knot to keep them from coming untied, and she'd laced them snugly before softball practice. Finally, as one of the does was close enough that she could smell its fetid breath, she wrenched her foot from the shoe and scramble-crawled backward. By then the rest of the team and the

coach were there, and the imps ran away. She looked toward her friend, but she could tell it was too late. No aura surrounded the other girl. Kristin was dead.

Dead. Recent events came back in a rush. *Sofa's dead.* Josie's eyes filled with tears and a sob shook her body. Sofa was dead, and Brenda had brought her to the place where Kristin had died. A hot rush of panic suffused her, making her kick her feet desperately. Her toes clenched in the soft grass. Sobbing in relief, she struggled to sit up. No shoes; nothing to trap her in this horrible place. Except Brenda. Josie scanned the area around her, but found no sign of the half-elf.

Something tickled her arm, and she absently pushed it away. It pushed back. Josie focused on it, recoiling in horror. A willow branch stroked over a scratch on her arm, drinking up the slowly oozing blood.

* * * * *

The car screeched to a halt in front of Sofa's house. Walker threw it into park and was out the door and up the walk almost before the car had stopped moving. He pushed the front door open, senses searching for Josie, finding only blood and fear, and a deep, powerful anger.

Forgetting all about stealth, he ran for the kitchen, yelling Josie's name. She wasn't there.

Wu sat on the floor with Sofa's head in his lap.

"Oh, no," Walker whispered, shaking his head.

"No' is correct," Wu said, eyes glittering like banked ruby coals.

"Not for lack of trying," Sofa rasped out.

"What happened?" Walker asked, sagging against the table.

"Brenda stopped Sofa's heart," Wu growled. "The pacemaker started it right back up again." He stroked Sofa's forehead with a shaking hand.

The scent of Josie's fear nearly strangled him. "Where's Josie?" Walker asked.

"I don't know, mate. That bloody psychotic bitch must have taken her."

"Willows," Sofa whispered.

Walker went down on his knees beside her. "Where?" He leaned forward, straining to hear the words that would take him to his mate. Sofa was his only lead right now.

"She said she wouldn't be gentle like she was the last time I tried to desert her." Sofa struggled upright with Wu's careful assistance.

"Careful, love," the dragon said, settling Sofa against his side.

Walker wanted to scream at her to hurry, but knew it wouldn't do any good. Sofa was in shock from her near death, and a little patience now would save a great deal of time in the long run.

"Where Kristin died. I think she was trying to kill Josie that day, or maybe kill both girls. She was so angry that Kristin beat her in the Good Samaritan contest." Sofa licked her lips, her left palm pressed tightly over her heart. "It worked anyhow. My sister and her husband didn't go to Iceland; so she didn't have to share me with Josie."

"Where did Kristin die?" Walker asked, though he had an idea already.

"By the school, in the willow thicket. Look for the pile of stones."

"I know it," Walker said. He leaned forward and kissed Sofa's cheek. "I'll bring Josie home," he promised them both.

Standing, he turned and strode from the house, unsurprised to find Mokey waiting next to the car. The hellhound hadn't bothered with its poodle disguise.

Walker nodded to the hound and opened the car door, letting Mokey climb in first.

As he drove toward the school, he called Rex Evans's cell phone. The chief didn't answer, so Walker left a detailed message on the voicemail, letting the chief know everything he'd learned about Brenda as well where he believed Brenda had taken Josie.

She's okay. He refused to entertain the thought that Josie might already be dead. It didn't fit Brenda's profile. The bolder the half-elf had become, the more complicated the crimes had become. The glass at the Algers's, Lourdes, calling Madison to town: it was all carefully staged for maximum drama. The only thing that had been simple was Fred's murder. *Maybe she was being gentle with him,* Walker thought, shuddering. The movement shook his hair, making him aware of the dull throb of pain in his injured follicles. His injury was just one more thing to add to the pile of crimes Brenda would answer for.

The chief's file and the list of crimes that seemed a bit too deliberate to be natural came to mind. Brenda didn't want to be caught, but she wanted her crimes to be noticed -- even if people believed they were accidents. Even now, when she had to know it was over and that she was exposed and would be caught, she'd risked kidnapping Josie rather than just killing her outright. She had to continue the game, prove that she was smarter than everyone else.

And, Walker hoped, therein lay her downfall.

* * * * *

Josie gently unwound the willow branch from her arm. It strained back toward the blood, sparking hungry green light.

It reminded her a little of Walker's hair, although he'd touched her with his hair to give her pleasure, not to steal life from her. He'd given her so much -- warmth; humor; delicious, toe-curling pleasure; and the most important thing: possibility. When they'd been together she'd seen the growing connection between them. It might even grow into forever.

A sharp pain on her neck made her cry out. A whip-thin branch tugged at the edge of one of the scratches, trying to pull it open. Moving slowly, she tried to stand. The willows

tightened their hold on her. Each questing branch scrabbled against her skin in search of more blood.

That's why she brought me here, Josie thought, despair flooding her. *They're going to tear me apart.*

Chapter Twenty

Walker parked his car a few spaces away from Brenda's in the otherwise empty parking lot. Climbing out, he lifted his head, scenting Josie and her captor. *Why had Brenda parked here, on school property, where her car was in plain view?* Two long, thin marks led across the dying grass. Drag marks. Josie must have been unconscious when she was brought here. It wasn't wishful thinking; there were traces of fresh blood as well. Being dragged, even over grass, was bound to leave scratches. A tiny bit of tension left him. Josie had still been alive as little as twenty minutes ago. Odds were that she still was.

The longer it takes to find her, the worse those odds get. He pushed that thought away as unproductive. He was moving as quickly as he dared. If he missed something, it would take that much longer to rescue her. Why was Brenda making it so easy? He had to be walking into a trap, but he didn't dare do otherwise. *She wants to see me unable to rescue Josie; she wants me to know I've failed and that she's the winner. I just have to hope she's outsmarted herself this time.*

Walker followed the marks, Mokey pacing him. A high-pitched growl came from the hellhound each time they encountered more blood. Walker was silent, saving all his energy for Josie's rescue. There was going to be a reckoning, and he'd see that his deputy paid in full for every crime she had committed.

As they neared the fence, he noticed that there was something odd about it. *Ah, that's it. Wow.* A doorway had been cut through the chain link. It was about three feet wide by six feet tall, the fence undamaged around it. Stopping in front of the doorway, he became aware of the scent of imps. Dozens of them.

Brenda stepped from the willow thicket, a sword resting negligently over her shoulder. Walker wished he had Madison's gun. He'd love to wipe the sorrow-filled smirk from

Brenda's face. She was about fifteen feet away, too far for him to leap and well out of his hair's reach.

"What a disappointment," she said, shaking her head in a mockery of distress. "It's so difficult to find reliable help these days."

"Where's Josie?" Walker asked, moving cautiously forward. He could smell his mate, but the scent was faint, overlaid by the much stronger scents of the imps and the willow thicket.

"I gave her to the willows. They were so hungry, poor dears."

"If she's hurt, you're dead." He kept moving toward her, trying to get her in grabbing range. The sword was the worrisome thing. He'd have to get her in such a way that she couldn't use the sword on his hair; if she cut enough of it, he'd bleed to death rather quickly.

"Oh, pooh," Brenda said. Darkness gathered around her, shadowing her in the bright sunlight. "Come." Her voice held a peculiar ringing quality.

Imps poured from the willows. Forty at least, probably more. They positioned themselves between their mistress and Walker.

And the trap is sprung.

The half-elf crossed her arms over her chest and grinned at him. "Catch me if you can."

* * * * *

If I panic, I'm dead. If I die, she wins. That is sooo not happening.

Josie ignored the painful tugs on her wounds. She sank into her center and focused on her aura, changing it from the dirty blue-gray of fear and despair to the electric chartreuse that matched the willows' auras. Vision faded away, leaving only feral, starving green.

Alien thoughts filled her brain. There had been food, and now it was gone. They yearned for more of the iron-rich sustenance. It let them feel and think and move.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, was her last thought before her consciousness was absorbed into the hive-mind of the willow thicket.

* * * * *

Josie's scent vanished. "Dammit." Walker ground the word out between clenched teeth.

A black streak shot past him as Mokey exploded into the center of the imp pack, teeth slashing indiscriminately.

He only had a moment to savor the shock on his deputy's face before he was engulfed in a twisting, biting, growling mass of bodies. Walker took a page from the hellhound's book and didn't try to engage any particular beast, just tried to do as much damage as possible with slashing claws and strangling hair.

For a few minutes the ferocity and suddenness of the attack worked in their favor. A pack of imps this size had little to fear, and so weren't used to being on the defensive. They were startled by the unexpected events, and milled around uncertainly.

The confusion didn't last nearly long enough. All too soon, the sheer number of antagonists began to tell against him and Mokey.

Walker heard a squall, and knew the hound had been injured. The squeal that echoed it said Mokey had taken care of its assailant. The sulfurous scent of Mokey's blood made his nose itch. Furious that his pet had been hurt, Walker disemboweled an imp with one swipe.

Sharp pain dug into his calf and a heavy weight hit his shoulder. Walker grabbed the imp on his back with his hair, dashing it onto the ground. A quick slash of his talons forced the doe to release his leg. A large body bumped against the back of his knees, the accompanying high-pitched growls telling him it was Mokey.

For a few precious seconds, there was a lull in the fight. Walker's sides heaved as he tried to catch his breath. Hopelessness clutched at him. More than twenty imps still surrounded them, though he was gratified to see that many of the vile creatures bore nasty wounds.

"Impressive," Brenda said, clapping her hands, the sword sheathed at her hip. "But ultimately futile. I win. I always win eventually."

Walker refused to waste air answering her; he needed every breath he could get. Inside, though, anger seethed through him. Brenda might win this one, but by the Trickster's many tails, she would earn it.

Waving a negligent hand at them, Brenda said, "Kill them both."

The imps closed in.

* * * * *

Now there was food, lots of it. The willows pulled deep-sunk roots from the sheltering soil, branches questing forward for nourishing life. They split around the one who had awakened them, intent on the food inside the small crawling things.

Imps. They're called imps.

The quick-moving crawlers held a great deal of food inside, enough to sustain parts of them for many, many suns. In the center of the crawlers was something different -- two somethings. One held the promise of mineral rich soil. The other, ah, that was fascinating.

Walker.

It promised organics and sunshine, mixed together in a sparkling black package.

* * * * *

There were only a few imps left, but that was a few too many. Walker saw Mokey go down just beside and behind him. Turning to help, he slipped on the blood-soaked grass and fell partially over the top of the hound. The remaining imps formed a ring around them, closing in for the kill. In the distance, he heard sirens, and hoped they'd be in time to save Josie. It was too late for him.

One of the imps squealed as a thin green twig snaked around it and yanked it backward. The others began to back away from him, growling. Walker rolled to his side and froze in relief and horror.

The willows were walking. They surged around Brenda as if she weren't there. The half-elf laughed as she caught his eye, and blew him a kiss.

Josie walked with them, her bare feet pale against the green grass and the dark soil. Bits of greenery were stuck to her clothes and tangled in her hair. Her eyes glowed with madness, and dark blood stained her lips.

Whippy branches made quick work of the imps. Walker watched, mesmerized as green and red stained fingers reached for him.

* * * * *

The black sparkly food came to them. Tendrils caught a part of the thicket, pulling it forward and down. They didn't mind. They were hungry, and the food was willing.

Walker.

Dark, starry night surrounded her, sheltered her. Fingers linked with hers.

Walker.

She'd taken him inside her letting him see all that she was.

Walker.

Josie wrenched her mind away from the willows. She felt their confusion and their hunger and flung it away from her, toward the gray shadow that stood in the heart of the thicket.

There is food, she told the thicket. There is the best food. Take it.

The willows believed her. She was a part of them, and had no reason to lie. Branches that quested forward now reached back toward the one who had awakened them.

Delicious.

Chapter Twenty-one

It was over. Brenda would never harm another living soul.

Walker winced as he heard the wet *snap-crunch* of breaking bones. It was poetic justice out of a story book, the murderer defeated by her own weapon.

Josie began to sob against his chest. As he tightened his hold on her, something brushed against his hair. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed his fear. It was a willow branch, stroking his hair as if curious. For now, it wasn't doing anything aggressive, but that could change at any moment.

They had to get to safety, and that meant Walker had to stand. He struggled to sit up out of the half sprawl he'd fallen into. Sore muscles, scratches, bites, and Josie protested the movement. The willow branch pushed into his hair, finding the injured follicles and making him hiss in pain and revulsion. Walker surged up onto his knees, pulling Josie with him.

Mokey yelped as Walker's abrupt movement jarred his wounds. A knot uncoiled in Walker's belly at the evidence that the hound was still alive.

More willow branches explored his hair and stroked his exposed skin. Biting back the urge to run, Walker took a moment to assess his companions. Josie was relatively unhurt as far as he could tell. Her arms and face were a mess of filthy bruises and scratches, but he couldn't see or scent any deep wounds. She was conscious and ambulatory, but he was pretty sure she was in shock. The poisonous green scent of willows was heavy on her skin and mingled with her usual scent of berries and cream in such a way that it seemed to have come from her, rather than being transferred onto her. And maybe it had. When she'd walked among the willows there had been nothing of Josie in her face.

She was with him now, though. Willows didn't weep.

A tug at his belt pulled his attention back to the matter at hand. A willow tree pressed against his back, branches exploring him as though trying to learn what he was.

Mokey managed to get to his feet, one mangled and bleeding paw held off the ground. He was breathing quickly -- shallow, rasping pants that communicated both pain and fear. Walker would have to help the hellhound, but wouldn't have to carry him, Trickster be thanked.

He climbed to his feet using Josie as a crutch before pulling her upright with him. Stooping, he hooked the fingers of his free hand beneath one of Mokey's neck-frills to steady the injured hound. "Walk slowly forward," he said, trying unsuccessfully to suit action to words.

The tree had hold of his belt loop.

Forcing down the threatening panic, Walker made himself concentrate. Josie had traveled safely amid the willows, and had kept them from attacking him. *It must be something about her aura*, he decided. He focused on the sharp green fragrance coming from the trees, drawing it deep into his lungs. Holding it for moment, he released it, pushing the idea of "willowness" out with it. *We are part of the thicket. There is no need to hold on. We are one with you.*

The branch holding him retreated.

Walker staggered forward, pulling Josie and the hound with him. Through a haze of faint green sparkles, he could see several others, including Chief Evans, Danny, and Verity standing near the hole in the fence. Step by painful step, he approached them, leaving the willows behind.

Finally, *finally*, they were safe among friends. Walker let go of Mokey and sank to his knees, Josie following him down. He turned his head just enough to see the rustling, sighing trees and let go of the sense of belonging with them. For an instant, a rush of not-quite-mindless hunger buzzed through his mind, then winked out like a snuffed candle.

As voices clamored around them and gentle hands urged him to release his hold on hound and woman so their injuries could be treated, Walker studied Josie's bowed head.

He let go of Mokey and used his now-free hand to lift Josie's chin and stare into her eyes. She didn't see him, so lost in sorrow she'd retreated from the world.

Walker gathered every thought, every sight and scent and sound and touch -- all that he'd learned of her in their brief time together. Collecting everything, he imagined it surrounding her, sheltering her from harm, and spoke one word.

* * * * *

"Josie."

Hearing her name, she blinked. Walker's face -- scratched and bloody and much-beloved -- swam into view.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hey," he said, brushing his thumb along her jaw. "Welcome back."

Josie wasn't sure she wanted to be back. It hurt. "Sofa's dead." There should be more, but she didn't have the words to describe the depth of her loss.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "The pacemaker worked. She's okay."

Josie could feel herself begin to shake as relief made her knees weak. "You're sure?"

"I talked to her and Wu. That's how I knew where to find you."

"I killed Brenda." And that knowledge stung far more than she expected it to. The half-elf hadn't just murdered Fred, and nearly murdered Sofa; she'd also murdered the Brenda everyone believed existed. *I wonder which of them was more real. Who Brenda thought she was or who we thought she was?* Not that it mattered. Brenda was dead.

"You saved my life, and Mokey's life, and the lives of everyone else she would have targeted." Walker's voice was firm. "She would have tried to kill Sofa if she hadn't been stopped, and might have succeeded."

Josie knew he believed what he said, could see it in the light and shadow of his aura. Maybe someday she'd believe too.

"Take me home?" she asked, her voice wobbling.

Wordlessly, he folded her into his arms.

Chapter Twenty-two

Josie eased unwillingly into consciousness. Sleep was kind, with no regrets, no guilt, and no mourning.

Earlier that afternoon, after dropping Mokey off at the hospital and checking in on Sofa, she and Walker had gone to his house for a quick clean up then fallen naked into bed. Tomorrow they'd get with the chief and see if they could determine the extent of Brenda's crimes. Josie was worried about the half-elf's shadow. Had it died when Brenda was killed? She wanted desperately to believe that it couldn't survive without its creator, but she hadn't believed something like it could exist in the first place. If it was still hanging around, she had no idea whether or not it was dangerous, and how or if they could destroy it.

Her muscles began to tense with what-ifs. Forcing herself to take a cleansing breath, she willed herself to relax.

The world continued to turn. Things didn't stop just because something horrible happened. There would be a long talk with Sofa as they both came to terms with Brenda's betrayal. Josie'd be teaching again on Monday, and next week she'd stand up as a witness at Nort's wedding to his fourth husband then participate in a naked mud fight.

Tomorrow, they would deal with things. Tonight was for her and Walker.

Walker pulled her close, snuffling softly into her hair. His body was warm and solid against her bare back. His energy blurred into hers, enfolding her in a cocoon of warmth. The stars in his aura glittered like banked coals, ready at a moment's notice to flare into nova with his smile.

She relaxed into his hold. Being awake didn't seem like such a chore anymore. Something tickled her neck, and for an instant she froze -- until the scent of musk and spice teased her nose. She captured the errant tendril of hair with gentle fingers and brought it to her nose, inhaling Walker's exotic scent. The events of the last few days would change her

life, she knew that. There would be more tears and anger, relief, and eventually acceptance. But not right now. Josie refused to let the world in yet. Now, lying in bed with Walker, it was only about them, about their feelings and their future.

"Hey," he said, voice husky with sleep.

Josie turned onto her side, resting her head on his shoulder. "I love you."

A slow, sweet smile lit his face. "I love you, too." He leaned forward just enough to kiss the tip of her nose. "Scratches and all."

She traced a finger across a nasty scrape on his abs. They'd both been lucky. Even Mokey had been given a good prognosis, though the hellhound would likely always have a limp. "Ditto." His skin shivered beneath her touch. "Oops, sorry, did I tickle?"

"No," he said, his voice low and sexy. "Tickle isn't the word I'd use."

Desire coiled low in her belly. "Will you do something for me?" She felt a little apprehensive about asking him to indulge her request.

"Anything."

She rolled to her back and tugged at his arm, urging him to settle between her legs. "Let your hair down and kiss me."

Heat smoldered in his green eyes as he looked down at her, but there was a wariness as well. "Are you sure? I don't want it to remind you of anything...bad."

She understood his veiled reference, she just didn't agree. Never mind that she'd had a bad moment or two just a little while ago. He didn't need to know that, and she'd worked through it. "This," she said, grasping a hank of hair, "is nothing like a willow branch. I've touched and *seen* them both." Goose bumps skittered up her spine at the memory. *Hunger and wildness. The driving need to walk, to feed.* She shook her head, chasing the thoughts away.

"Trust me: my feelings about your hair are only good -- and maybe a little kinky." Ragged ends caught her attention. Looking closer, she saw that his hair had several shorter areas, as though he'd had a haircut via weed-whacker. "Your poor hair," she said, petting the damaged locks. They curled around her hands like affectionate kittens seeking more of her touch. "What happened?"

"Imps mostly, and a gunshot." He braced himself with his elbows on either side of her shoulders. He kept his torso mostly off her, his half-hard cock barely touching her pussy.

She froze, staring up at him. "Gunshot?" What had happened earlier before he'd found her? The chief had said something about having a madman in custody, but she hadn't been paying attention. At that point, her sole focus was on leaving that terrible place, getting home and getting clean.

Walker shook his head, letting his hair fall around them like a waterfall of black velvet.

Josie caught her breath at his unconscious sensuality. Her body clenched as a rush of moisture bathed her pussy lips. He was so beautiful, and he was all hers.

“Long story. Minor injury. It can wait. Kissing is more important.”

Before she could argue, his mouth was on hers. The kiss was deep, sensual, and intense. It lacked the white-hot passion of their earlier encounters, instead starting a slow burn deep inside her. This wasn't a quick heat that would flare up and burn out in the blink of an eye; it was the intense, molten inferno found in the heart of a volcano -- the kind of heat that could destroy entire countries or build a new continent.

Inquisitive locks caressed her skin, making her shiver, making her wet. Two of the more adventurous strands snaked down between their bodies and wrapped themselves around each of her nipples, squeezing and rubbing the sensitive flesh into tight peaks of desire. Still more tendrils traced tickling paths across her belly and the tops of her thighs, dipping down to stroke her mound. It was exquisite torture, and she arched up against him, sliding her slick folds over his erection.

“Josie, my Josie,” he murmured against her lips, before capturing them in another searing kiss. His hips moved restlessly between her legs, rubbing his engorged shaft against her cunt.

The tip of his cock stroked between her labial lips, making them both pause.

She wanted him entirely, wanted to feel his hot slick skin against her most tender flesh. “Now” she said, bucking her hips up to bring him inside her. “I want all of you.” Her hands moved down to clutch his ass, holding him to her. Her aura shone with possessive blood rose passion. His glittered with the secret fire of rubies at midnight.

“You have me.”

She did. Even as his body filled hers, she felt his energy wash through her, felt hers sweep through him, the ebb and flow matching the rhythm of their fucking.

As he moved inside her, his hair continued to knead and fondle her breasts and seethe over her skin like a living silken veil. First one tendril then another would slip between their bodies and find her clit, never quite giving her the pressure she needed for orgasm. The energy surrounding them did the same, creating a feast for her vision.

The constant shifting contact sensitized her skin until she wasn't certain if she wanted to beg him to stop or beg him for more. This was lovemaking. Their bodies built promises with each touch, each moan, each cry of ecstasy. His mouth covered hers, tongue stroking hers in counterpoint to his thrusts. Claimed inside and out, magically and physically, she surrendered to a powerful climax. He rode the wave of her passion, his slow, deep thrusts continuing.

She pulled away from the kiss, panting, and pressed openmouthed kisses to his throat. Salt and cardamom burst into her senses. Intoxicated by his rich, exotic taste, she nibbled on the juncture of his neck and shoulder, drawing a moan from his throat. She trailed her hands up and down his back, enjoying the play of muscles and smooth skin beneath her palms. He

felt so good, so alive; she couldn't get enough of touching him. And she'd never get enough of him touching her.

Abruptly, he pulled away, withdrawing from her body.

She made an incoherent sound of protest and outrage.

Walker grinned at the disgruntled look on Josie's face. "I have an idea," he said. He'd played around with it as he masturbated, but he'd never had a lover he felt comfortable making the suggestion to. Lying on his back beside her, he wrapped a finger-thick tentacle of hair around his cock, ribbing it like an X-rated candy cane.

"Intriguing," she said, straddling him. She positioned herself over his aching shaft, easing down onto him. He had to tighten his grip to keep his hair from sliding down his cock, and the dual sensations made him grit his teeth to keep from coming too soon.

"Oh, my, that's" -- she blew out a breath -- "wow." She rose up and then eased back down, her inner muscles squeezing him like a fist of molten silk.

Walker's eyes almost crossed at the incredible heat and tightness around both his cock and his hair as she rode him. He loved having her on top of him; staking her claim on his body. Wanting to drive her mad with pleasure, he slid his hand between their bodies, finding and massaging her clit. She squealed, bucking against him. A wicked grin curved his mouth as his hair circled her breasts, brushing across their diamond hard peaks with short, teasing strokes.

Her hands rubbed his chest, homing unerringly in on his nipples. She rubbed and pinched them, the rough caresses driving him out of his mind with pleasure. He retaliated by sending another finger-sized tentacle of hair squirming up inside her to wrap around his cock in the opposite direction as the original, making a cross-hatched pattern and adding considerably to his girth.

"You sneaky son of a bitch," she gritted out. Eyes wide at the new sensations, Josie's hips moved frantically over him as she drove herself to orgasm. "I love you," she yelled. "I love your hair. I love you."

She convulsed, her muscles tightening almost painfully around him. His vision filled with swirling, dancing fireworks in every color of the rainbow. This was Josie; this Technicolor vision of exquisite joy. Overwhelmed, his own climax roared through him and he spilled his essence into her.

Spent, she collapsed onto his chest, her breath coming in short gasps.

Walker stroked her hot, sweat-dampened skin with fingers and hair, reveling in the feel of her over and around him. He'd moved to Franklin's Bend on a whim and found his life.

“I really do love you,” she said, pushing herself up just enough to look at him.

“I know,” he raised one hand to touch the place where their auras merged above them.
“I can see it.”

 THE END 

Jill Knowles

Jill Knowles writes dark fantasy, horror, and erotic paranormal romance. This former archaeologist now lives and works in Tucson, Arizona. In her spare time, between working, writing and trying desperately to have a life, she volunteers as a mediator for Pima County. She is owned by far too many cats. Currently, her work can be found in “Forgotten Worlds” magazine, “Modern Magic” print anthology, and online at “Abyss & Apex.”