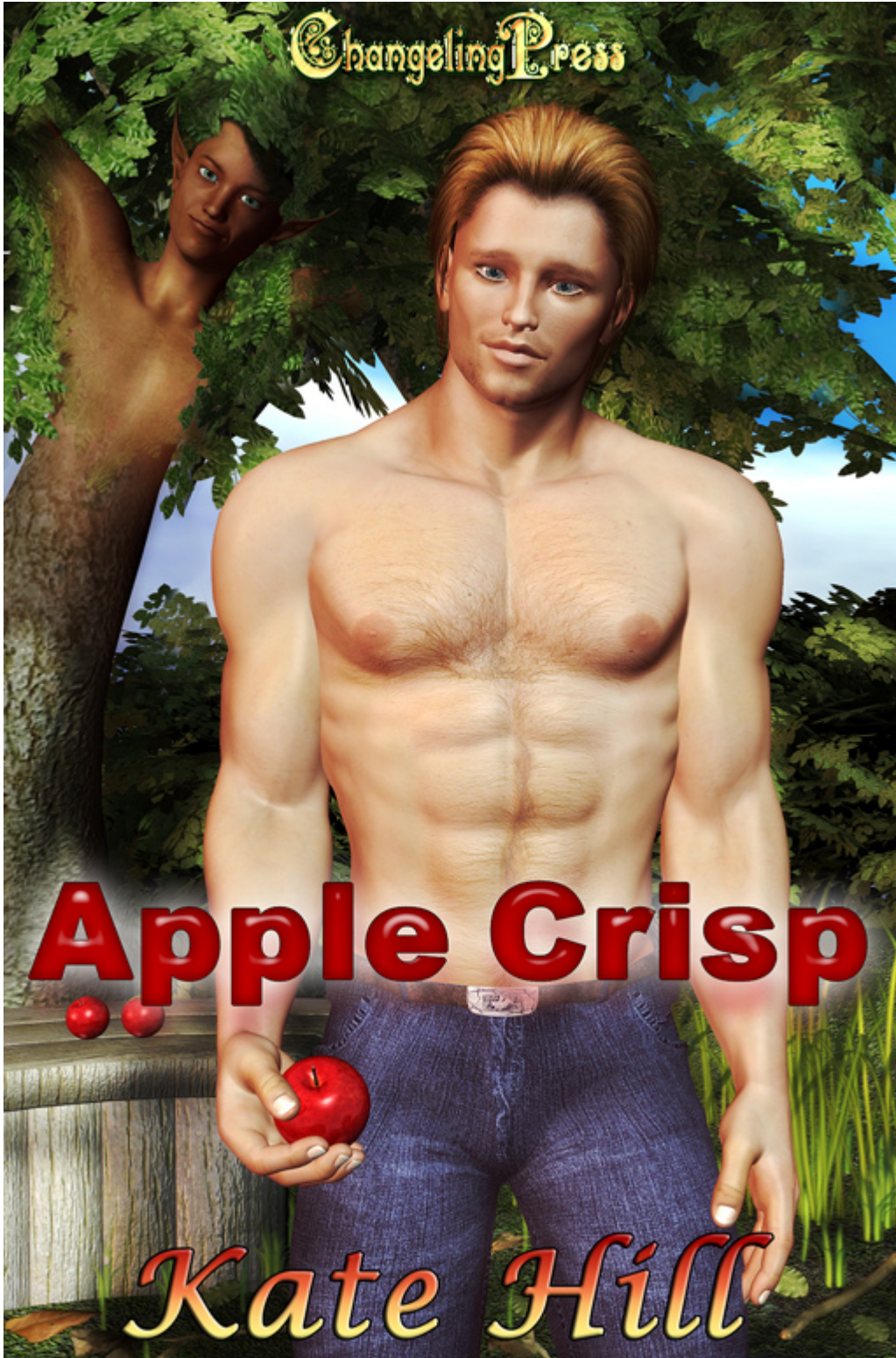


Changeling Press

Apple Crisp

Kate Hill



Yummy Love 3: Apple Crisp

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Yummy Love 3: Apple Crisp

Kate Hill

Cass is a gardener at a magical museum near Hot River. He takes loving care of all the trees and plants and is pleasantly surprised when Fidel, a Transcendent apple tree sprite, decides to show his appreciation. Cass quickly learns that Fidel is harder to resist than his favorite dessert.

Since his Transcendence Ceremony, when he changed from an ordinary tree sprite to a shapeshifter, Fidel has stood silent and alone. Hurt by his former lover, he thought he'd never fall in love again, but Cass has lured him out of hiding.

Cass finally believes he can put his dark past behind him and find a new life with Fidel. Then a killer begins stalking Transcendent sprites. Fidel suspects his old lover of the crimes, and he and Cass must risk everything to stop him.

Chapter One

Cass never dreamed he'd be living the quiet life in the country. He'd been struggling for as long as he could remember, and there had been a time when he thought past mistakes would haunt him forever.

Two years ago he'd been given the break of a lifetime and the chance for a new and better life for himself and his mother and sister. He'd been caring for them since he was twelve years old, taking over for his father who had been sentenced to life in Grimton City Prison for murder.

Cass wasn't proud of the things he'd done to keep his family together, things that in the long run had almost torn them apart.

That was in the past for him. Since then he'd taken a new job -- a legitimate job -- doing something he loved. He'd started as an assistant to the gardener in the Fairy Museum located just outside Hot River Campground.

Hot River ran through the entire world of magic, connecting and nourishing it. For most of his life Cass had only known the Grimton City area of Hot River. Until coming to the museum, he'd never realized how peaceful and beautiful the world could be.

When the chief gardener retired, Cass had been offered his position. It included a pleasant house on museum grounds as well as decent pay. Best of all, he got to care for a wide variety of magical trees and plants. The museum had almost every kind of magical plant in existence and was home to hundreds of sprites and nymphs.

Cass had always felt a connection to magical plants and flowers. Even in Grimton City he'd worked in a greenhouse, but it wasn't the same as the sweet country air and rolling meadows at the Fairy Museum.

Cass' favorite residents were the Transcendent tree sprites -- sprites who had

undergone a ritual that transformed them from tiny treetop residents into shapeshifters who became trees themselves. Not all sprites became Transcendent. It was reserved for particularly dedicated ones who fully understood the philosophy of Hot River. Few Transcendent sprites existed and the museum was lucky to have several living on its grounds. The pear and oak Transcendents had been Cass' first friends at the museum. They'd made him feel at home and helped him adjust to his new job.

Though he did his best to make sure all the plants and flowers were healthy and happy, he took special care of the trees, harvesting their fruit on time and seeing that they had plenty of water even in the dry season. Not that much vandalism occurred in this part of Hot River, but he made sure no one carved words or symbols in their trunks or mistreated them in any way.

Each Transcendent tree sprite had a little sign posted near it with his name imprinted on it. Not that Cass needed signs anymore. They were for the tourists. Cass recognized each and every sprite, except for one.

A particular apple tree never changed to his human form. Cass sometimes wondered if he was a sprite at all, or just an ordinary apple tree. Not that it mattered. Cass loved all trees and had no problem with caring for this one, regardless of whether or not it shifted into a sprite.

At the moment Cass was standing on a ladder, picking fruit from that particular tree. Fidel was the name on the sign beside it. Fidel, a sturdy apple tree who bore the most delicious fruit on the premises.

Cass had spent all afternoon harvesting apples from Fidel. He didn't want the fruit to turn bad or the weight to burden the tree for too long. Even if he never changed to his human form, he deserved respect for the quality of the fruit he provided. So what if he didn't feel the need to so much as introduce himself after two years? After all, who was Cass, a simple human, to make a judgment on a noble sprite?

He paused a moment and gazed skyward. Dusk was setting in and Cass' stomach grumbled with hunger. "It's time for me to go home for dinner, Fidel," he said. "But I'll be back in the morning, after I do some weeding in the rose garden."

He reached for a large red apple and shined it on his shirt, then took a bite, loving the firmness of the fruit and the snap as his teeth sank into it. Sweetness filled his mouth and he took a moment to chew and swallow before climbing down the ladder.

Cass sat under Fidel and leaned his back against his trunk. He rested a moment while enjoying the apple. When he finished, he tossed the core in the trash bag in his pickup truck. Then he loaded the ladder and baskets of apples he'd picked onto the truck. Before going home he needed to drop off the apples at the museum café, where the cook would use them to create a variety of dishes. Cass intended to take some home too and make his favorite dessert, apple crisp.

A short time later, he was on the way home. To get there from the museum's main building, he needed to cut across the field where the fruit trees grew.

By now night had fallen, but the full moon made it easy to see. He noticed movement by Fidel. Silhouettes of two children stood by the tree. Cass saw the glint of a blade in the hand of one boy and he shouted, "Hey! Get away from that tree!"

He jumped out of the truck and ran toward the children, who fled. Cass prided himself on being very athletic and he had no doubts about catching the brats. No one destroyed museum property, especially these beautiful tree sprites. Not on his watch.

He'd nearly caught up to the children when a hand fell on his shoulder and dragged him backward.

Frustrated, Cass jerked away from his pursuer and turned sharply. "Get your hands off me!"

He would have continued, but shock stole his speech.

In front of him stood the most wildly gorgeous creature he'd ever seen. Well over six feet tall, with skin the same rich brown as bark and hair the same deep green as leaves, this tree sprite took Cass' breath away. The sprite's eyes were such vivid green that their color was noticeable even in the moonlight. Sleek muscles sculpted his rangy body. From his broad shoulders to his long, chiseled legs, he was sex appeal personified. He stood towering and half-naked, those vibrant eyes locked on Cass.

The gardener licked his lips, his heart beating fast from more than his recent

sprint.

"Calm yourself," the sprite said in a deep, soothing voice. "They're only children."

"They wanted to defile you."

"I think they merely wanted to carve their initials in me."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"It's something many trees must put up with."

"From humans who have no knowledge of magic maybe, but not from children who live along Hot River. They should know better." Cass' voice faded a bit and he closed his eyes momentarily. He was the last person who should make judgments about others. Not with all the terrible things he'd done in his past.

"Your reaction took me by surprise, Cass. You're usually gentle."

Cass' brow furrowed. "I'm sorry, but I don't recognize you. I thought I knew every sprite on museum property, but --"

"You do know me." The sprite smiled, his white teeth gleaming against his dark skin. "In fact you know me so well that you tasted my fruit just a short time ago."

Now Cass was really surprised, and thrilled. He smiled. "Fidel?"

The sprite bowed from the neck.

"I've wanted to meet you since I started working here."

"You have made life here pleasant, Cass, and you have my gratitude."

"Thank you, I..."

The sprite turned and walked away. The sight of Fidel's sinewy back and tight, rounded ass stirred thoughts that made Cass' cock twitch.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Cass jogged to catch up with him. Fidel had incredibly long strides.

"Back to my space," Fidel replied, glancing at Cass from the corner of his eye. "I'm afraid there will be no more apples to harvest tomorrow. You know when my kind shift shape we lose our fruit."

"It's all right. I've already picked tons of apples. You had a great yield."

"I'll miss your visit tomorrow now that there's nothing left to harvest."

"You will?"

Fidel nodded.

"I'll still come by," Cass told him. "If... If you want me to."

They had reached the area where Fidel always stood in his tree form. The sprite paused in front of Cass, his lovely gaze locked with the gardener's. "I would like that very much."

"Then I'll see you in the morning." Cass took a step toward his pickup truck, then turned back to the sprite. Another thrill shot through him when he saw Fidel hadn't stopped staring at him. "Fidel?"

"Yes?"

"When I come tomorrow, will you talk to me again?"

A faint, almost longing smile touched the sprite's lips. "I look forward to it."

"Good. So do I."

They gazed at each other for another long moment, then Cass walked toward his truck. He paused after a few steps and glanced back at Fidel. The apple tree stood, still and strong in the moonlight. His branches seemed to wave at Cass, or perhaps it was the wind...

* * *

Cass was so excited about talking to Fidel again that he scarcely slept that night. He rose from bed even earlier than usual to begin his duties in the museum garden.

When he arrived in the field where the Transcendent sprites stood, the morning chill had faded. The heat of the day prompted Cass to remove his plaid shirt, leaving his simple blue tank top beneath. He parked his truck not far from Fidel, stepped out and stretched his arms over his head while gazing back toward the museum's main building.

"Now that's a fine sight to wake up to."

At the sound of Fidel's voice, Cass spun around. The sprite, in his human form, stood nearby, a pleased smile on his lips. He was absolutely gorgeous with sunlight

gleaming on his dark brown skin, highlighting the chiseled muscles of his lean body.

"Fine?" Cass repeated dumbly. Last night he'd thought about all the things he wanted to say to Fidel. Now faced with him, his mind went blank.

Fidel's smile broadened and he approached, standing so close that their bodies nearly touched. "Your body is beautifully developed," Fidel continued. "Like the athletes I knew long ago in Greece."

"You're from Greece?"

"I spent over a century living among the trees there, but I lived in other places as well." The Transcendent sprite reached out and grasped Cass' chin, gently turning his face to the side to better examine his profile. "You look to be of Celtic origins. Very handsome."

Cass never thought anyone, particularly another man, could make him blush. Not after the life he'd lived. Yet heat rose in his face. It wasn't merely Fidel's words that made him feel like this, but the way the sprite looked at him, as if he were handsome.

He glanced at Fidel from the corner of his eye and his heartbeat quickened. He had the feeling tall, dark, and gorgeous was about to kiss him.

Then Fidel released him and stepped back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound overly familiar, but I've been watching you since you arrived at the museum. You've grown, Cass, in so many ways. I want to know you better."

"I'm okay with that." Cass shrugged, trying not to appear as excited as he felt.

Since coming to the museum, he had focused completely on his work and keeping out of trouble. Most guys his age were hanging out with friends and meeting new people. They didn't usually sleep alone every night, like Cass had grown accustomed to. He feared falling in with the wrong crowd again. Not that he'd ever willingly revert to his old ways, but he'd learned that life isn't always about what you want to do. Sometimes you were simply forced to choose between the lesser of two evils.

"Why haven't you talked to me before?" Cass asked.

"I haven't spoken to anyone since my Transcendence Ceremony," Fidel said, his

voice almost a whisper.

“Why?”

Fidel’s dark eyes held his for a long moment and Cass’ stomach tightened. Maybe he shouldn’t have asked.

“For selfish reasons,” Fidel finally said. “I should be ashamed of myself really. As a Transcendent sprite, I should have progressed beyond that.”

The reply was evasive and didn’t really answer Cass’ question. He decided not to press the issue. Maybe in time Fidel would learn to trust him. In truth, if Fidel had asked about his past, he wouldn’t be comfortable discussing every detail either. Yet he wondered how much the sprite actually knew about his history. The old gardener might have spoken of it. Though Fidel hadn’t talked to anyone in years, he certainly appeared to listen to what went on around him.

“How long have you been a Transcendent sprite?”

“Three years.”

That seemed a long time to stand in silence, even for a creature who shape shifted into a tree. The other Transcendent sprites changed into their human shape often, except during the harvest when they generously kept their tree shape to provide fruit. Fidel’s solitary life seemed more punishing than selfish.

“Why did you finally decide to talk to me?”

“You seemed unusually angry at those children last night. I was concerned that if I didn’t interfere you might do something you’d regret.”

“I wouldn’t have hurt them, but someone needed to teach them some respect.”

“I don’t disagree, but I don’t believe they were trying to be cruel. They’re simply ignorant and curious. They’ve visited the museum before and since I’m the only Transcendent sprite they’ve never met in human form, they suspected I was merely an ordinary tree.”

Again Cass felt heat rise in his face. Smiling slightly, he shrugged. “I’m afraid that same thought crossed my mind.”

“Ah. It is said that seeing is believing.”

"Well, now that I see, I finally believe, that's for sure." Cass' gaze once again swept Fidel and he felt a new rush of desire. With each passing moment the sprite's strong brown body and exotically handsome face became harder to resist.

Cass knew what he'd be dreaming about tonight. A lustful thrill shot through him and his cock twitched.

"I know you have work to do, Cass. May I help?"

"You want to?"

"Very much. After three years as a tree, I'm craving company, especially if it's you."

His words flattered Cass, yet he also sensed they were true. This beautiful Transcendent sprite had no reason to lie.

Together the men took baskets from the back of the pickup and began picking fruit. Cass had been harvesting steadily, knowing that the sprites were no doubt eager to change their shape. Another week of work and he'd have taken most of their fruit. With Fidel's help, they made even faster progress. The rangy sprite was so tall that most of the time he didn't even need a ladder.

By midday they'd finished one of the pear trees and loaded the fruit onto the pickup to take to the main building.

"Do you want to come home with me for lunch?" Cass asked. "That is, if you can still eat like a human?"

"It's been so long since I've been in human form I almost forgot what it is to be hungry for food. Thanks for reminding me that's why my stomach is growling at the moment."

"Then let's go. My mother and sister went to the city for the day, so I have the place to myself."

The idea of being alone in the house with Fidel excited him. It seemed like forever since he'd been with a lover and he couldn't help fantasizing about this sexy sprite. By the way Fidel talked to him and looked at him, he sensed that the feeling was mutual.

Still, Cass had no intention of rushing things, no matter how much he wanted to lick and kiss every inch of Fidel's long, hard body.

When they arrived at the main building, they drove to the back and brought the fruit to a storage room. Several museum employees were walking by and stopped to meet Fidel, surprised to finally see the most elusive sprite on the grounds.

"I'd almost forgotten how pleasant it is to communicate like this," Fidel said as he and Cass finished unloading the last of the fruit.

"You must have been lonely," Cass ventured.

"I was brooding. Not sure if that's the same thing," Fidel admitted with a sad little smile.

"Why were you brooding? You'd just become a Transcendent sprite. So few progress that far."

"Every sprite has the potential. When we first received our magic from Lady Autumn, we were shapeshifters. During a dark time long ago, sprites abused their shapeshifting powers and Lady Autumn locked our ability to change. It's only unlocked if we pass rigorous tests. Most sprites are content to remain in their non-shifting form. Their lives are pleasant and not everyone wants to enter training to become a Transcendent sprite."

"If you went through all that, why were you upset?" Cass asked. "Shouldn't you have been happy?"

"I had a lover," Fidel said with a deep sigh. His brow furrowed. "We both entered the training together, but he was... wild. Maybe that wildness attracted me in a way, but I should have seen it was leading him toward trouble."

"Yeah," Cass murmured, recalling his past. "I know how that can happen."

Again Fidel took Cass' chin in his hand, this time even more gently than before, and stared deeply into his eyes. "I know some of your history, Cass. You've overcome much. You're not like Myles. He surrendered to his bad side, but you've fought against it."

"Myles. That was his name?"

Fidel nodded. "He failed the tests and Lady Autumn didn't allow him to become a Transcendent sprite. He and I parted... most painfully."

Cass reached up and took Fidel's hand. He squeezed it, relishing its coolness and the feel of their callused palms pressed close. "I'm sorry."

A faint, sad smile touched Fidel's full lips. He nodded slightly and edged even closer. Cass' head spun as the urge to kiss Fidel almost overcame him.

Somehow he managed to regain control of himself and stepped away, his pulse thumping wildly. Perspiration beaded on his forehead and trickled down his back. He couldn't remember the last time someone had turned him on this much.

"Let's go get lunch," Cass said, his voice gruffer than he'd intended.

"Good idea."

They climbed into the pickup. Cass started the engine and headed for home.

Chapter Two

Cass' farmhouse stood on the westernmost edge of the museum property. It was just the right size for him and his family with room to spare for a guest or two. It had a cozy living room with a fireplace and a spacious kitchen that faced the meadow where Fidel and most of the other Transcendent tree sprites stood.

It felt strange when Cass glanced toward the meadow and didn't see Fidel, but also exciting knowing the gorgeous sprite sat beside him. After so long they were finally getting to know each other. Cass had never imagined this sort of attraction between them.

They parked in the gravel driveway and Cass led the way to the house. Fidel was so tall that his dark green hair brushed the top of the doorway as he stepped inside. He paused and glanced around. In front of them was the stairway leading up to the bedrooms. The living room was to his right and the kitchen to his left.

"I've never been inside a human's house before," Fidel said. "It's similar to the homes of tree sprites, but much larger of course."

Normal sprites lived in the trunks of the trees they inhabited. Several on museum grounds had invited Cass to look into their miniature homes. They were usually simple, just a room or two. Sprites were experts with wood, however, and their tiny furniture was quite detailed.

"You must have missed your house when you became a Transcendent sprite," Cass said.

"A little at first, but it was worth the tradeoff." Fidel winked, then glanced toward the living room. "May I look around?"

"Be my guest." Cass extended his arms in an invitation. "I'll get lunch."

Fidel wandered into the living room while Cass went to the kitchen where he

made sandwiches and poured two glasses of juice. His mouth watered at the sight of the apple crisp his sister had made the previous night. Though Cass was into physical fitness -- one of his favorite hobbies was bodybuilding -- he couldn't resist dessert every now and then. Apple crisp was his absolute favorite and no apples tasted sweeter than Fidel's.

His brow furrowed as he wondered if Fidel would eat a dessert made from his own fruit. In the two years he'd worked at the museum, he'd never asked a Transcendent sprite that particular question.

He'd just brought lunch to the table when Fidel joined him.

"You have a welcoming home," said the sprite. "And you've done well for your family."

"It took me a while to figure out how to do it right," Cass admitted.

"During my long silence I observed much and I know that you were caring for a family when most boys had families to look after them. You're still a young man, Cass, with so much ahead of you."

Sighing, Cass shook his head. "I don't feel so young."

"It's not surprising."

The turn this conversation had taken made Cass uncomfortable, mostly because for the first time he could remember someone was telling him exactly what he wanted to hear. He loved his family and was grateful to the friends who had helped him abandon a life of crime, but he'd never met anyone who seemed to understand him like Fidel did.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Fidel said.

"It's not that. I just... I'm not much of a talker. At least not when I'm the topic." Cass tried to sound humorous and he forced a smile.

Fidel didn't reply, merely stared at Cass with those soul-searching green eyes.

"Let's eat," Cass said, diverting their attention to the table.

They sat, and while Cass ate with his usual enthusiasm, it took Fidel a few minutes to remember what it felt like to ingest food like a human -- or a normal sprite.

"There's apple crisp for dessert," Cass said. "But it's made from your apples, so I'm not sure if there are rules about eating your own fruit."

A smile played around Fidel's lips. "No such rules. Actually, I'm curious to know what my fruit tastes like."

"Yours is my favorite," Cass admitted.

"I'm glad to hear it."

Cass brought the apple crisp to the table and took a large forkful. He loved the crispiness of the topping and the soft sweetness of the apples.

"This is delicious," Fidel said, taking another bite.

Grinning, Cass said, "If you do say so yourself."

"I think I only deserve part of the credit. Most should go to the cook."

"You can thank my sister for that."

"I will do that."

They finished eating dessert in silence, but the looks that passed between them said more than words ever could. Finally they collected their dirty dishes and brought them to the sink. Fidel stood so close that Cass felt the warmth of his body and caught the fresh, outdoorsy scent of his leafy hair.

Cass turned and tilted his head up to meet the towering sprite's gaze.

Placing his hands on Cass' shoulders, Fidel bent and brushed his lips with a kiss.

Cass' heart thumped wildly in his chest and his cock twitched to life. He reached up, took Fidel's handsome face in his hands and tugged it downward for another kiss.

This time their mouths were more confident and demanding. Their lips pressed harder and parted simultaneously. Their tongues met with hungry thrusts.

Closing his eyes, Cass groaned with pleasure and slid his arms around Fidel, relishing the feel of his hard, rangy body and the smoothness of his warm skin. It seemed like ages since he'd been with a lover and Fidel wasn't just any lover. Cass couldn't remember feeling this way about anyone. Not ever.

When the kiss parted, they both were panting slightly. Fidel's eyes gleamed with desire and his dark lips shone plump and moist from their kiss.

"You've tasted my fruit many times," Fidel said in a husky voice. "Allow me to taste yours."

Cass swallowed hard and drew a deep breath. There was no mistaking Fidel's offer and Cass had no intention of refusing. This was almost too good to be true.

"Well?" Fidel asked, his voice lower yet even rougher than before. There was no mistaking the desire in his eyes. His hands trailed lightly over Cass' back, then came to rest on his hips.

"It wouldn't be fair of me to refuse," Cass said.

Fidel chuckled softly and his hands moved toward Cass' fly. His fingers fumbled a bit, but Cass wasn't surprised. He couldn't recall ever seeing a sprite wear jeans.

Cass unfastened the button and zipper himself, but Fidel dragged the jeans down to his ankles, sinking to his knees on the way down. One hand curved around Cass' cock and stroked while the other grasped his balls.

To Cass, this was like a fantasy come true. He could scarcely believe this irresistible creature was touching him like this. When Fidel's hot, wet mouth covered his cock head, Cass gasped. His buttocks tightened and his hips thrust against Fidel. It didn't take long for him to match the sprite's rhythm. He was so aroused by Fidel that he wondered just how long he'd be able to last.

Cass closed his eyes and grasped handfuls of Fidel's hair. It slid coarse and thick between his fingers. His hands roamed over Fidel's shoulders and he relished the feel of smooth, warm skin over rock-hard muscle.

Fidel's tongue flicked the underside of his cock head and swirled over the crown. Then he pulled away.

Panting, Cass opened his eyes and gazed at Fidel. The sprite's eyes gleamed with lust. He ran his tongue over his lips and smiled, then rose to his feet and placed his hands on Cass' shoulders.

"Let's go up to my room," Cass said, pulling up his jeans though he didn't bother zipping them.

"You read my mind."

Cass cupped the back of Fidel's head and kissed him before leading the way out of the kitchen. They ascended the wide wooden stairs and walked to Cass' bedroom. It was spacious, with multicolored rope carpets strewn across the polished wooden floor. A large bed stood against the wall opposite a picture window that overlooked the family's vegetable garden.

With his love of plants, Cass had always imagined living in a place like this. Sometimes he could scarcely believe it had happened. Now more than ever, with Fidel here, it seemed like a fantasy come true.

Cass drew the drapes across the window and the pale cotton fabric offered privacy without darkening the room. When Cass turned to Fidel, the sprite tugged off his leafy loincloth. His thick, dark brown cock stood out stiff and proud, the balls pulled up tightly beneath. Obviously Cass wasn't the only one aroused by their play in the kitchen.

Cass' cock swelled even more. Wrapping his hand around it, he stroked a few times before he kicked off his boots and pulled off his jeans.

Smiling faintly, Fidel approached. He slid his hands underneath Cass' tank top and caressed his stomach. Though warm, the sprite's palms were almost as rough as tree bark, yet he didn't touch Cass too hard. For someone who hadn't been with a lover for three years, Fidel had remarkable self-control and seemed as interested in Cass' pleasure as he was in his own. This touched Cass deeply. Few people concerned themselves with how others felt, even those they took to their beds.

Cass pulled off his tank top and flung it aside. Fidel ran his hands over his lover's chest. He liked to keep his chest smooth and since he wasn't especially hairy to begin with, it wasn't difficult.

"I'm surprised I was able to keep away from you for so long," Fidel murmured. His gaze followed his hands that roamed across Cass' pecs. Then he trailed his fingertips over the well-defined muscles of his stomach. "At one time I thought nothing would make me want to leave my tree form. It's much simpler to abandon this kind of life. Emotions. Love. Hate."

The sprite's words flattered yet disturbed Cass. It felt good knowing Fidel wanted to know him better, but it was almost frightening meeting someone who feared life as much as Cass sometimes did.

He decided not to comment. Now it was better just to feel. Sometimes the best kind of communication was touch. There were fewer complications and misunderstandings that way.

Fidel grasped his shoulders and covered his mouth in a kiss that was demanding yet tender. Cass thrust his tongue against the sprite's. He placed his hands on Fidel's lean waist and pulled him closer, then reached around and clutched his ass. Fidel was nearly as solid as in his tree form, except he was covered in smooth, warm skin instead of bark. The need to taste every part of him overtook Cass and he broke the kiss to run his lips down Fidel's neck and across his chest.

Scraping his teeth over Fidel's nipples, Cass reached down and fondled his lover's cock. He stroked it, feeling it throb and swell against his palm. Sinking to his knees, he kissed and licked his way down Fidel's flat stomach. In the kitchen, Fidel had pleased him and now he wanted to do the same.

The sprite's large, long-fingered hands threaded through his hair as Cass ran his tongue up and down his dark brown shaft. Glancing up, Cass saw Fidel's eyes close and his chest expand as he drew a deep, pleased breath. He turned his gaze back to his work, focusing his full attention on Fidel's cock. One hand grasped it, squeezing and stroking slowly, while he sucked on the head. His other hand kneaded Fidel's balls. By the way the sprite moaned and thrust his hips, Cass was giving him just what he wanted. He sucked deeper, then pulled out almost to the tip and flicked his tongue along the underside.

Fidel groaned louder and clutched Cass' hair tighter. His own cock ached and tingled, but he kept teasing Fidel. He wanted to make sure this gorgeous sprite remembered today -- his first day in human form in three years.

"If you want me to last, you'd better stop now," Fidel panted.

Shaking his head slightly, Cass sucked faster, his hands squeezing and stroking

Fidel's shaft and balls. The shifter braced his hands against Cass' shoulder, his hips working in time with Cass' mouth.

With a ragged cry of ultimate pleasure, Fidel exploded. Still Cass didn't release him. He licked and swallowed, his heart pounding with his own impending passion.

Fidel relaxed, his eyes closed and chin dropping to his chest. He murmured something that Cass didn't quite catch. Cass rose to his feet and wrapped his arms around Fidel, who returned the embrace, his cheek resting against the top of Cass' head.

After a moment, Fidel walked to the bed and sprawled on top of it, his ankles crossed and arms folded behind his head. His eyes, still shining but their expression relaxed and satisfied, lingered over Cass then fixed on his powerful erection.

Cass glanced down at his cock. It wasn't quite as long as Fidel's, but it was thicker. The veins shone purplish against the pale flesh, except for the head that was flushed dark pink. A droplet of moisture beaded upon the little eye. Curling his fist around the shaft, Cass stroked slowly, his heart racing. Just looking at Fidel aroused him. His long, lean body draped over the bed and even in its relaxed state, his cock was gorgeous.

"Come here," Fidel said in that soft, rich voice.

Cass obeyed, his hand still on his cock.

"I'd almost forgotten what it's like to feel this kind of pleasure," Fidel said.

"I'm glad I could remind you," Cass said with a quirky grin.

"It's time I repaid the favor to the fullest."

Cass lay on the bed and Fidel moved toward his feet. He settled between Cass' legs and slid his arms beneath his thighs. The sprite took Cass' balls partway into his mouth. He sucked and licked them, his seductive tongue rolling over them. Then he grasped Cass' cock and lapped it greedily. He sucked on the head, sweeping his tongue over it.

Moaning, Cass closed his eyes and reached up to clutch the headboard. His body stiffened and he thrust his cock into Fidel's mouth. The sprite stroked his shaft while sucking the head.

Everything else seemed to fade for Cass as he focused completely on the powerful sensations Fidel aroused.

The gorgeous sprite sucked him deeper, drawing out his essence. It was more than Cass could stand and he cried out sharply, his body racked by pleasure. Never in his life had he come this long and hard. His eyes closed, he surged and bucked until he thought he might black out.

Finally he collapsed, his chest heaving and a smile on his lips.

Fidel disentangled himself from Cass, who dozed for a short time. When he opened his eyes, Fidel lay beside him, his gaze fixed on him.

"I hate to say this, but I need to get back to work," Cass said. More than anything he wanted to linger here with Fidel, but he couldn't. Not today. "The rose garden needs weeding and I have to feed the greenhouse plants."

"And I have neglected my meditation today."

"You must have spent most of your time as a tree meditating."

"All of it, really, but there are different forms of meditation. Some are specifically for oneself and other forms connect you to other Transcendent sprites and trainees."

This nabbed Cass' interest. "Like telepathy?"

"Similar. Every Transcendent sprite pledges so much time each month to connect to others, in particular trainees. Our magical energy reinforces theirs and guides them until they master shapeshifting. I usually lend my magic daily to trainees on the island."

"I didn't mean to cut in on your work."

"You didn't. I'm grateful to you, Cass. If not for you, who knows how long I'd have been stagnant?"

Cass shook his head. "No. You probably just needed time. I know what that's like. I've been kinda hiding too. My old friends -- my real friends I mean, not the tricktus freaks -- have asked me to go back to Grimton City for a visit, but I've been..." Cass' voice trailed off. He didn't want to look like a wimp and admit being afraid. Yet after all the shit that had gone down in the city, he was leery of returning.

"You've been apprehensive?" Fidel offered.

Cass raised his eyes to the heavens. "Who am I shitting? I've been scared."

"Everyone is afraid sometimes."

"I guess." Cass sighed deeply.

Stepping closer, Fidel tugged him into a firm embrace. Cass returned it, feeling strangely comforted. Usually he was the one taking care of someone else. It felt good having someone to lean on.

After a moment, the men stepped apart, but continued holding each other's gaze.

"Can I give you a ride back to the field?" Cass asked.

"Please."

Cass reached to the floor and picked up Fidel's loincloth. Handing it to the sprite, he said, "I hope we can do this again?"

"As do I."

"Maybe tomorrow?"

Fidel smiled. "As humans say, it's a date."

After dressing, they left the house and climbed into the pickup. Cass switched on the radio, hoping to catch the weather report. He caught the middle of the news.

"The Council of Witches has appointed a new secretary, Anita Laurence. She is scheduled to meet with Mayor Alberts of Grimton City next week. The Mayor is also planning his second annual visit to the Realm of Snake Shifters. He will be accompanied by Prince Seth who was the city's first snake shifter resident."

"That's my friend Antjuan's partner," Cass said.

"The mayor?"

"No." Cass chuckled. "Prince Seth."

"The last I remember, snake shifters were solitary," Fidel said.

"You've been standing in a field for three years. A lot has changed in the world." Cass glanced at Fidel and winked.

"Shh!" Fidel said, his brow furrowed. "Listen to this."

The newscaster continued, "This morning a Transcendent tree sprite was found

lying dead on the site at Hot River Campground he had occupied for the past three years. The sprite was chopped down late last night. Authorities have no suspects at this time and the sprite's name has not yet been made public. The crime area is still under investigation."

"Gods," Cass murmured. "That's horrible. Who would chop down a Transcendent sprite?"

Fidel's brow furrowed and he shook his head. "Why wouldn't anyone have heard something? I can't imagine a sprite standing in silence while someone chopped him down. The pain would be excruciating."

"No kidding. Wouldn't another Transcendent sprite have known what was happening to him because of the telepathy thing you told me about?"

"Possibly, even though we usually have to be in a tranquil state for meditation and telepathy. Still if someone happened to reach out to him they should have felt something."

"What if he was drugged?" Cass suggested. In the past he had used compulsion dust to render victims unconscious while he robbed them. He also knew of much worse crimes committed through the use of compulsion dust. "Wouldn't that knock him out completely so no one could contact him through meditation, not to mention he wouldn't have felt any pain? Compulsion dust is strong stuff."

"Compulsion dust doesn't affect Transcendent sprites. Unless..." Fidel paused and shook his head. "It's not possible."

"What?"

"There is a particular herb, Essence of Bark, that affects Transcendent tree sprites. If an expert in compulsion dust were to get hold of it, he or she could possibly create dust that would manipulate my kind."

"That's probably what happened."

"But Essence of Bark is only grown in the Walking Woods on Transcendence Isle."

Transcendence Isle was home to the oldest Transcendent sprites in the world.

The training for prospective Transcendent sprites took place there as well as the ceremony when the time came for them to take their place among the elite group.

"The island is well protected," Fidel continued. "No one there would betray us."

"It might seem that way, but they say everyone has a price."

"Not everyone," Fidel said in a soft yet authoritative voice.

"Not everyone is a Transcendent sprite, Fidel. Most of us have weaknesses."

"I never said my kind didn't have weaknesses, merely that we wouldn't betray each other. And remember, everyone on the island is a Transcendent sprite and believes in our code of ethics."

"What about the trainees who don't make it? Like..." Cass let his voice trail off. He wanted to put this as delicately as possible, but it seemed there was no easy way to voice this particular thought. "Like your old boyfriend."

Chapter Three

Fidel's chest expanded and he drew a deep breath. Glancing out the window of the truck, he turned over Cass' words in his mind. As soon as he'd heard about the murder, a sick feeling churned in the pit of his stomach. Now that Cass brought the subject up, there was no avoiding it.

Before he and his former lover had parted ways forever, Myles had sworn vengeance against the Transcendent sprites as well as Lady Autumn. Fidel thought -- and had hoped -- that he'd merely spoken in anger, yet he couldn't forget the look of hatred in Myles' eyes.

"Some sprites who try and fail might be bitter," Fidel admitted, "but once it's decided that they've failed the training, they're asked to leave the island. No one but Transcendent sprites or trainees that are given another chance may return."

"You're allowed more than one chance?"

"Oh yes. The way to Transcendence isn't easy. If the potential is there and the sprite truly believes in our code, then he or she may try again."

Cass sighed. "I guess it can't be someone from the island. But someone, somewhere, figured out a way to keep that sprite quiet while he was chopped down. Hopefully the authorities will find the basta --" Cass stopped suddenly and glanced at Fidel. "Are you allowed to swear? In all the time I worked here I've never heard a Transcendent sprite swear. This is so strange. We... you know... in my bedroom, but you're like a priest or something. I keep forgetting that. What we did; was that allowed?"

"If it's not, then I'm in trouble, aren't I?" Fidel smiled. "Don't worry. We're not like priests. Swearing is frowned upon, but lovemaking is altogether different."

Cass sighed with relief. "Good. I have enough marks against me without

corrupting a sacred tree.”

“I’m not sacred.”

Cass glanced at Fidel affectionately and said, “You are to me.”

Fidel squeezed Cass’ knee lightly.

They drove in silence for a few moments, then Fidel said, “As tragic as the murder is, I hope it’s an isolated case.”

Why then, did he feel this was only the beginning?

After Cass left Fidel near his spot in the field, he watched the handsome blond drive off. Cass waved a muscular arm out the window of the truck and Fidel waved back. He still tingled in the aftermath of the most wonderful afternoon he’d had in years.

After what happened with Myles, he had no interest in binding himself emotionally to another lover. Transcendent sprites could never turn their back on spiritual attachments to the creatures around them, but taking a life partner was strictly optional. Fidel had fully intended to spend the rest of his life alone, right here in this field.

The other Transcendent sprites who resided at the museum had tried coaxing him out of his tree form to no avail. Finally they left him alone. Only Cass continued talking to him daily. He was a human with an uncanny talent for connecting with magical plants. Cass had fascinated Fidel right from the start, and after two years Fidel could resist him no longer.

He sighed as Cass’ truck disappeared over a hill, heading down the road to the museum greenhouse.

Fidel took his place in the field and closed his eyes, his arms relaxed at his sides. After so many years of preparation, shifting shape came easily to him. He felt his torso mold into the trunk and his toes elongate, becoming sturdy roots that dug into the earth. His hair sprouted into hundreds of leafy branches and the sensitivity of his human skin dulled, replaced by thick, protective bark.

Though it felt good to be a tree again, he missed the warmth of Cass’ body

pressed close to his. Tomorrow they would be together again.

In the meantime, Fidel cleared his mind, focusing solely on connecting to other sprites on Transcendence Isle. He wanted to find out what he could about the murder victim and hear what the ancient leaders of the Transcendent sprites had to say about the crime.

As a tree it was easier for Fidel to sink into a meditative state. Time seemed to pass differently in this form. When he allowed the calmness of his tree state to take over, days, even weeks and months felt like moments.

His spirit reached outward, soaring through his outstretched branches until he floated on the air. He followed a nearby stream to a major vein of Hot River, then to the lake where Transcendence Isle stood.

Other Transcendent sprites mingled there, many in their spirit state.

Fidel reached out to them and they greeted him. Finally he met Natasha, who had been one of his mentors. He asked about the murdered sprite.

"Everyone on the island was stunned by the tragedy," Natasha said. "Rarely is such violence done against our kind."

"Has the victim's identity been revealed?"

"Yes," she murmured, her pale pink aura dulling in grief. "It was Dolan."

Sadness struck Fidel like an ax blade. Dolan had also mentored Fidel during his training. He'd been a compassionate sprite, one of the oldest of his kind. Shortly after Fidel's Transcendence Ceremony, he had retired to Hot River Campground.

"What a horrible end for such a gentle sprite," Fidel said.

"He was a great loss. I must go, Fidel. My students are waiting. It was good speaking to you. I only wish it was under better circumstances."

"So do I. Good night, Natasha."

* * *

Cass awoke early the next morning. Though usually eager to begin his days, his new relationship with Fidel made him look forward to rising even more.

His happiness was tainted by the news of the Transcendent sprite's murder. Just

the thought of harming such a creature disturbed Cass greatly.

In the kitchen he started making breakfast and a short time later his mother and sister joined him.

"I'll finish cooking," his mother said. "Do you want blueberries on your pancakes?"

"I was going to have apples," Cass said.

"Don't you ever get tired of apples?" his sister, Kay, teased. "You eat apples for snacks, apples in salad, apple crisp for dessert, now apples on pancakes."

"I can never eat enough apples," Cass said, a smile playing around his lips, mostly because he was thinking about where the apples came from. "Speaking of apples, you'll never guess who talked to me yesterday."

"Who?" Kay asked.

"Fidel."

Kay's brow furrowed in question and his mother said, "That name sounds familiar, but I can't place who it is."

"The Transcendent apple tree sprite," Cass told her.

His mother smiled. "Ah! So after two years you got him to talk."

"What's he like?" Kay asked.

"He's... unbelievable. I don't know where to start." Cass felt his temperature rise just from mentioning Fidel.

Narrowing her eyes, Kay said, "I know that look, Cass. Is he hot?"

She grinned and he was certain this time he blushed.

With a little chuckle, he walked to the refrigerator to get the orange juice. He'd never been able to hide much from Kay. Years before, when he'd been dealing with tricktus pushers, she'd tried to turn him away from that life. She'd been a child, but she'd been the main reason he'd finally taken a long, hard look at himself and decided to straighten out. Kay had believed in him. She'd found Dylan's shelter and introduced him to the people who had helped turn his life around.

Two years ago, when his former ties on the street had forced him to work for

them again, Kay had known almost immediately something was wrong.

"Well?" she pressed. "Is he hot or what?"

"Yeah," Cass said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I've never met anyone like him."

"Sounds like there's potential," Kay said, a playful gleam in her eyes.

Cass noticed his mother kept silent. Though she knew he was gay and didn't interfere in his life, he had the feeling she didn't approve.

Finally she said, "I think everyone should be concerned about the Transcendent sprites, with the murders going on."

"Murders?" Cass stared at her. "I thought there was only one."

"So did I," Kay said.

Their mother shook her head and sighed. "I turned on the news while I was getting dressed and heard more Transcendent sprites in the area have been killed."

* * *

After learning that Dolan had been the murder victim, Fidel had spent a restless night. Through telepathic conversation, he learned that other sprites at the museum were also disturbed by the crime. One in particular, Leda, a pear tree in her Transcendent form, was especially upset. She and Dolan had shared the same Transcendence Ceremony and had been lovers for several centuries before parting ways.

In the morning, Fidel and Leda met in their human form. The female sprite was tall and willowy with light brown skin and flowing golden hair, the same color as the sweet fruit borne by her tree.

"I can't believe Dolan is gone," Leda said. "We still kept in touch. It's strange not being able to link with him anymore."

Fidel placed a hand on her shoulder and she placed hers over it.

"I'm glad to see you've decided to change form, Fidel. It's been so long since we've seen you as a man. I know you've made our young caretaker very happy."

The mention of Cass sent a feeling of warmth throughout Fidel. It had been years since he'd felt like this and he welcomed the sensation.

"Speaking of Cass, I believe that's his pickup truck heading our way," Leda said with a knowing smile. "I'll give you some privacy."

"That's not necessary."

"Yes, it is." She met his gaze and he grinned. The lady was right, of course. He did want to be alone with Cass, but he wasn't insensitive to what Leda must be feeling over her old friend's death. If she wanted company, he was more than willing to give it and he didn't doubt Cass would feel the same way.

"Besides," Leda added, "I need further mediation to help settle my mind. I feel sad and restless. I couldn't relax last night."

"I understand."

She touched a hand to Fidel's cheek and said, "You and I both know what it's like to lose a lover. If there's something between you and Cass, don't let it slip away."

Leda walked across the meadow and paused. Moments later a pear tree stood in place of the lady.

"I won't," Fidel said, his voice scarcely a whisper.

The sound of Cass' truck rolling nearer drew his attention and he turned around. Cass waved out the open window and parked.

"Hello," said the handsome blond and stepped out of the pickup truck.

"Good morning," Fidel replied, but his smile faded when he saw the serious expression on Cass' face. "What's wrong?"

"Two more Transcendent sprites were killed last night. My mother heard it on the news."

A feeling of doom swept over Fidel. "The same way?"

"Yes. Chopped down in tree form. No sign of a struggle. No one heard anything." Cass shook his head. "I thought shit like this only happened in Grimton City, but two of these killings were at Hot River Campground and the other was in the Wicked Wild not far from an elfin village."

"Evil happens everywhere."

"Evil yes, but murders for no apparent reason?"

"What could be more evil?"

Cass ran a hand through his short blond hair. His brow furrowed in thought.

"Why kill Transcendent sprites? I just don't get it, but there has to be a reason."

"Did they release the latest victims' names?"

"Yeah. Conn and Zander. I know you guys don't use last names. By the way, the first victim's name was --"

"Dolan. I know. Last night I contacted a friend on Transcendence Isle. Dolan was one of my mentors."

Cass stepped closer and placed a hand to the back of Fidel's neck. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you, but Leda needs our concern even more. She and Dolan were close."

Glancing toward the pear tree, Cass said, "I'll spend some extra time with her before going to the greenhouse. You know, Fidel, this whole thing has me concerned. I'm talking to museum management today and asking if they can put extra security on you sprites. Hot River Campground is just a few miles away from here. That's --"

"Too close for comfort?" Fidel said, unable to keep the quirky smile from flirting with his lips. "We're in no more danger than any other sprites, it seems."

"I'd still feel better knowing security is on top of the situation."

Fidel wrapped an arm around Cass and tugged him close for a kiss.

"It's good knowing you care," Fidel spoke against Cass' full lips.

Wrapping his arms around the sprite's neck, Cass said, "Are you trying to get me fired? I need to get to work."

"The last thing I want is for you to be fired. Could you use any extra help today?"

"How can I resist an offer like that? I was on my way to the Micarose caves. It's time for their weekly feeding. Want to join me?"

Micaroses were beautiful glow-in-the-dark flowers created a century ago by a witch scholar. Their delicate nature made them difficult to grow, so the caves filled with the rare flowers were a main attraction at the museum.

After spending a few moments talking to Leda, who remained calm and lovely in

her tree form, Cass and Fidel climbed into the pickup truck and headed for the Micarose caves.

If not for the illumination of the beautiful flowers, it would have been impossible for the men to see in the pitch-black caves. The Micaroses created a soft glow in a variety of colors -- silver, pink, lavender and yellow. They were big flowers, each rose the size of a large man's hand. The caves wouldn't be open to the public for several hours, so Cass and Fidel were quite alone as they nourished the flowers with the magical plant food created specifically for them. Cass was in charge of making the food and he was proud to say that since he'd taken over, the Micaroses bloomed even more beautifully than under the previous gardener.

The farthest cave housed the newest flowers, still small and giving off the faintest light. Once they grew larger, Cass would move them to one of the other caves. He and Cass had just finished feeding the last of the young plants and they stood for a moment, admiring the multicolored blossoms.

"It's so quiet here," Fidel said, his voice just above a whisper.

"I know. I like it," Cass said, his voice also hushed. He reached out and touched one of the flowers and Fidel wrapped his arms around him from behind.

"So do I," Fidel said, his voice husky. He nuzzled Cass' neck, pressing firm, moist kisses to it.

Cass drew a deep breath and leaned his head to the side, giving Fidel easier access to his neck. Reaching behind him, he caressed the sprite's thigh and a thrill of desire shot through Fidel.

"You really do want to get me fired," Cass teased.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't distract you." Fidel loosened his hold, but Cass turned to face him.

Slipping his arms around Fidel's neck, Cass spoke against his lips. "Please. Distract me."

Fidel didn't need further encouragement. He grasped Cass' hips and tugged him even closer, his mouth covering his in a passionate kiss. The sprite's hands slid between

them and he fumbled for a moment with Cass' fly before finally unfastening it. Cass' shaft, already thickening with desire, popped into Fidel's hand. He stroked it and pushed down Cass' jeans so he could freely knead his balls.

Groaning with delight, Cass took Fidel's face in his hands and kissed him intimately while at the same time thrusting his hips into the sprite's talented hands.

"You have a fine cock," Fidel told him, kissing the side of his neck. "You should be proud of it."

"Well, I ain't exactly ashamed." Cass chuckled. He reached down and momentarily pulled up his jeans only to retrieve two sample size packages of magically enhanced lube from his pocket. He ordered the stuff from Dylan's cousin, Shane, who ran a magical salve shop in Grimton City.

He opened the package and offered some to Fidel who grinned and unfastened his loincloth. It dropped to the cave floor, revealing Fidel's long, dark shaft. Cass couldn't resist grasping it and stroking.

Closing his eyes, Fidel sighed with pleasure and stood as still as possible while Cass teased his cock. Cass squeezed some of the lube into his hand and continued stroking Fidel's sexy equipment to full mast. The lube was created to increase pleasure and Cass knew it worked very well. He smiled as Fidel's muscles tensed and he groaned with lust.

After a few moments, Fidel grasped Cass' wrists and met his gaze. His green eyes blazed with desire.

They didn't need words to know what they wanted. Fidel took the package of lube Cass offered him and opened it while Cass pulled down his jeans and braced his hands against the cave wall.

Moments later, he felt Fidel's warm, rough hands on his shoulders. He caressed Cass' back and kneaded his ass before spreading the cheeks and teasing his sphincter with lube-slicked fingers. Heat and desire spread through Cass, making his cock ache and his ass pulse with need.

Slowly Fidel's shaft thrust into his ass. Cass panted, his fingers biting into the

cave wall. It had been so long since he'd been with a lover and he'd missed this kind of physical contact so much.

"Gods, Fidel," Cass practically growled with passion. "Yeah. Fuck me. Keep fucking --"

"Cass, you have the most gorgeous backside. I could explode just looking at it."

"Then don't hold back, baby," Cass panted, almost on the verge of orgasm.

After several fast, hard thrusts and both men came almost simultaneously.

Fidel leaned against the wall, his breath warm and sweet against Cass' cheek and his hard, rangy body pressed against him.

To Cass there was nowhere else in the world he'd rather be.

* * *

"I can't believe management refused to put extra security on the grounds," Cass said, pacing the kitchen. Earlier that day he'd spoken to his superiors at the museum about putting nighttime patrols on the Transcendent sprite field. They said there was no need to panic and no reason to believe their sprites would be targeted, though they would discuss extra security during their next meeting.

Cass knew it was their way of pretending an employee's concern mattered, but their main focus was on keeping the budget low. Hiring an extra guard or two would cost them. Cass feared that until one of the museum's sprites was chopped down in the dark, nothing would be done to protect them.

"Sit down before you burn a hole in the carpet," his mother said from where she stood by the stove, cooking dinner.

"I don't blame Cass for being upset," Kay said. "After what's been going on, I'm concerned about all the sprites in this area too."

"These things happen," their mother continued, shaking her head. "We saw enough of this sort of thing in Grimton City."

"That doesn't make it right and it sure doesn't mean we have to accept it," Cass said, unable to hide his anger. His teeth clenched, he shook his head and walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Kay asked.

"The basement. I need another workout."

"You worked out when you finished your shift," his mother said.

Annoyed by the management's cavalier attitude about the murders, Cass was in no mood to deal with his mother. Sometimes he thought she'd become so accustomed to crime, first with his father and then with Cass, that nothing, no matter how terrible, affected her anymore.

He was on his way to the basement when someone knocked on the door. "Who's there?" Cass shouted.

"Fidel."

Cass' breath actually caught in his throat and he felt the proverbial butterflies kicking around his stomach. Though he wanted to play it cool, there was no denying how he felt about Fidel.

He opened the door and gazed at his tall, dark and handsome lover. "Hi."

"Hello," Fidel said. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all. Please come in."

Fidel bowed his head, mostly because he was a bit too tall for the doorway.

"Cass, who's there?" Kay asked, approaching the men. She glanced curiously at Fidel and smiled.

Cass introduced them and Kay shook Fidel's hand enthusiastically. "Cass has told us a lot about you. Nice to meet you."

"He speaks of you often as well," Fidel said. "You also work at the museum?"

"Part time at the café, but I'm a student."

"Yes, Cass tells me you study fairy art. Perhaps one day you'll work at the museum in a different capacity."

"I hope so," she said.

"Cass! Kay! Time for dinner."

"Would you like to join us?" Kay asked Fidel.

He glanced from her to Cass. "I don't want to be any trouble."

"No trouble." Cass reached for his hand and tugged him toward the kitchen.

"I think Transcendent sprites are fascinating," Kay said. "Would you tell us about it?"

"Kay, I'm not sure Fidel wants to discuss that," Cass said, recalling the unpleasant memories attached to Fidel's past.

"I'd be happy to tell you what I can," Fidel said with his usual charm and a gracious smile that actually made Cass' knees weak. He drew a deep breath and made a conscious effort to toughen up -- at least in front of his family. Not that it really mattered as far as Kay was concerned. She'd already guessed what Fidel meant to him.

In the kitchen, Cass' mother looked surprised upon seeing Fidel.

"Ma, this is Fidel," Kay said.

"A pleasure," their mother said with a rather forced smile. She held out her hand and Fidel took it in his large, brown one and bowed over it gallantly.

"The pleasure is mine," he said, his green eyes intent upon her.

This seemed to thaw mother out and this time her smile was genuine, if a bit flustered. "Well... you're not exactly how I thought you'd be. I expected someone more -- Never mind. You're most welcome to join us. Please sit."

"Thank you." Fidel bowed his head again and took the seat Cass offered to him next to his at the round wooden table.

"I know very little about Transcendent sprites, Fidel," Cass' mother said. "Are you allowed to mate?"

"Ma!" Cass snapped.

"It's all right, Cass. I don't mind answering personal questions. Yes, we're allowed to mate if we want to," Fidel replied.

"Have you --"

"No. I don't have a mate, however, there is someone I've been interested in for quite some time."

"Oh." Cass' mother looked pleased. "I hope she feels the same way."

"He," Fidel corrected. "And something tells me things might work out very well

for us.” His gaze met Cass’, making him tingle all over.

“More peas anyone?” Kay asked. Cass glanced at her, grateful for the change in conversation, and she cast a knowing look in his direction.

Sometimes he wondered what he’d have done over the years without Kay.

After dinner, Cass and Fidel walked back to the field.

“I don’t care what management says. You guys need extra security. I’m going to stake this place out myself.”

“That’s a noble gesture, Cass, but you can’t stay up all night and then work all day. Besides, the other museum sprites, Transcendent and traditional, have formed our own watch.”

“That’s a good idea. If there’s anything I can do --”

“You do more than enough for us already.”

They had reached Fidel’s place in the field and the sprite pulled Cass into his embrace. Their mouths met in a hungry kiss and when it broke, Cass stared into Fidel’s eyes and asked, “Who was the potential mate you were talking about at dinner? Anyone I know?”

“Intimately.” Fidel kissed him again, then cupped his face and said, “He’s you, Cass.”

“Wow,” Cass breathed, momentarily closing his eyes.

“I’m sorry. Have I moved too quickly?”

Cass chuckled. “You call two years too quickly?”

“I’ve been watching you during that time, but you weren’t given the same opportunity. I stood at this museum for a year before you arrived, but the two years since you’ve been here have meant more to me than you realize. I feel like I know you and I want you to know me too.”

“I feel like I do know you, Fidel. Two years of harvesting a guy’s fruit and you get to know him in a way you can never know a mortal man.”

Raising an eyebrow, Fidel said, “I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Good night, Fidel. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tightening his hold on Cass, Fidel whispered against his lips, "Tomorrow."

They reluctantly stepped apart. Cass headed back toward home and when he glanced over his shoulder at Fidel, the apple tree stood in his place.

Chapter Four

By the end of the week, three more Transcendent sprites had been killed, also in the vicinity of Hot River Campground. At the museum, the sprites continued their watch, but luckily witnessed no suspicious activity. In spite of reassurances from Fidel, Leda and the other sprites, Cass spent more of his free time in the field, often waking in the middle of the night to take a walk through, just to alleviate his concern.

It was late on a Friday night when he decided to take one of his midnight walks. He stopped by the Micarose caves first and was halfway to Fidel's field when he heard shouting. He instantly recognized his lover's voice and started running.

Reaching the crest of the hill, he looked down to the field and saw Fidel and another tall, powerfully-built man fighting for possession of an ax. Moonlight illuminated their skin -- Fidel's dark and his enemy's pale. The ax blade dripped blood and Cass prayed it wasn't Fidel's.

"Hey!" Cass bellowed, racing down the hill.

The men ignored him and continued their struggle. Fidel's opponent tore the ax from his grasp and struck out with it. Fidel leapt back, but not enough to fully avoid the blow. The blade sliced across his chest.

Cass shouted in rage and fear. He picked up a rock, hurled it at Fidel's attacker and struck him in the head. The man staggered and glanced at Fidel, who lunged at him, but the ax man disappeared in a silvery cloud of dust.

"Fidel," Cass shouted, closing the distance between him and his lover.

The Transcendent sprite stared, glassy-eyed, at the spot where his attacker had stood. Cass examined the wound on his chest, thankful to find it more shallow than expected. If Fidel had been any slower in backing away, he could have been killed.

"Myles," Fidel murmured, his breathing labored from the fight.

"Hey." Cass grasped his chin and forced his lover to face him. He didn't like the look in Fidel's eyes, as if he was high on tricktus powder or had a sniff of compulsion dust.

"Who was on watch tonight?" Cass demanded. "You?"

"No," Fidel murmured, then shook his head, reality beginning to dawn upon him. "It was Randall."

Randall. A traditional tree sprite who lived in one of the regular maple trees bordering museum property.

"No!" Fidel snapped, glancing a short distance away where the tiny sprite lay, almost hidden by the tall grass. He and Cass raced toward him, but there was nothing they could do.

"He's dead," Fidel said, momentarily closing his eyes. He picked up Randall, who was about the size of his palm. "Compulsion dust overdose. I'm sure of it. I got hit with some too, when I tried to... damn!"

Fidel handed the little sprite to Cass then took off running as quickly as his ultra-long legs could carry him.

"Fidel!" Cass shouted, then shook his head. He placed Randall on the ground, then removed his T-shirt and wrapped the little sprite in it.

Beyond the next hill, Fidel gave a cry of grief.

"Now what?" Cass said and once again ran toward the sound of his lover's voice only to be struck by a sight he would carry with him for the rest of his life.

It was so horrific that he stopped running and turned away. Cass had seen horrible things before and was no stranger to death, but nothing had prepared him for this.

Leda, somewhere between her tree and human form, lay dead by her name plate, the grass stained with blood. Her stump was the only rooted remainder of the beautiful pear tree.

Taking control of himself, Cass approached Fidel, who knelt beside Leda, his eyes gleaming with unshed tears. He glanced at Cass, his face etched with rage and

sorrow.

"I remember now," Fidel said, his voice tight. "I couldn't relax again tonight. Something felt wrong, so I decided to have a look around. I heard the ax and when I got there, he'd finished with Leda. She'd been hit with compulsion dust."

"You said Myles."

"Yes." Fidel gritted his teeth. "I don't know how, but the man who did this was my old lover. When we last met, he was the size of a traditional sprite. I assume the same evil magic that has allowed him to create compulsion dust to control Transcendent sprites has given him his new size. I tried to seize him and he blew the dust at me and ran. I chased, but by the time I caught up with him, the dust had me in its grip."

"You're lucky you didn't get killed too," Cass said, angry. "We need to clean and bandage that wound."

"I'll be all right," Fidel said, though he didn't look all right to Cass, at least not emotionally. His physical wound wasn't serious, but the impact of this attack would linger. "You need to call the authorities and report these murders."

"But you --"

"Don't worry. I doubt Myles will be back tonight. I'm going to change to my tree form. It will accelerate the healing process. I also want to contact Transcendence Isle right away."

"I don't like the idea of leaving you," Cass said.

"I won't be alone." Fidel glanced toward the hill.

Cass turned and saw other sprites approaching. Upon seeing Leda, the horror Cass still felt was reflected on their faces.

"Go," Fidel told him.

"Let's see if the damn management does something about security now," Cass snapped. Not that it mattered. For Leda and Randall it was too late.

* * *

When Cass arrived at the museum, the guard on duty placed a call to the local

authorities and museum management. The first to show up at the scene was Jeb Princeton.

For centuries the Princeton family had been in charge of magical animal control in the Hot River Campground area.

Jeb was tall and athletic with black hair and blue eyes. Damn handsome, Cass admitted, though not his type.

His looks weren't important. Jeb seemed competent and genuinely interested in finding the attacker. He questioned them carefully, went over every inch of the crime scene and closely examined the victims' bodies. The man appeared as thorough as any lawman, yet Cass couldn't figure out why he'd been sent instead of the local police.

"Excuse me, but I'm not sure why you're involved," Cass told him. "It wasn't an animal who attacked these sprites."

"It was another sprite," Fidel said. "His name is Myles. I knew him years ago, only he's changed somehow."

"I know," Jeb stated. "That's why I've been called in. The local police have been working with us since the first murder. My brothers and I have had some cases recently that seem to connect to these Transcendent sprite murders. We brought our info to the police and started putting everything together. It seems we're looking at a shapeshifter."

Fidel's brow furrowed. "Myles wanted to become a Transcendent sprite, but he didn't succeed. His shapeshifting gift was never released by Lady Autumn."

"We believe we're dealing with a cursed shapeshifter. However he got his power, it wasn't through legitimate means," Jeb said. "The information you've given me about Myles fits our theory."

"Which is?" Fidel demanded.

"Usually I wouldn't be free to discuss this," Jeb admitted. "However, I need help from both of you, so I'm going to clue you in."

"How can we help?" Cass asked.

"In the Wicked Wild just outside Hot River Campground there's a pack of female

wolves.”

“I know about them,” Cass said. “A friend of mine back in Grimton City has a cousin who’s married to their former queen.”

Jeb looked a bit surprised. “Are you talking about Shane and Charity?”

“Yeah,” Cass said. “Shane is my friend Dylan’s cousin.”

“Oh man.” A quirky little grin touched Jeb’s full lips. “Small world, ain’t it? Anyway, a hunting party from the wolf pack was traveling several miles outside of their territory. From what I gather they’d headed deep into swampland. The kind of place that’s dark even in the middle of the day. They saw this strange looking tree. White bark, but it wasn’t a birch tree. The trunk was huge and twisted and the branches covered in dark red leaves. The bark looked dark in places and as the wolf women stepped closer, they saw the trunk and branches were stained with old blood. Bones littered the ground nearby. From what the women told us, some of the bones were human.”

Cass wrinkled his nose. “Human?”

“While they were poking around, the tree branches reached down and took their youngest huntress,” Jeb continued. “The wolves attacked and the tree fought back. According to the women, there was such a frenzy of branches and werewolves that no one got a clear view of what happened. Just that the young wolf was devoured, apparently by the tree. The rest of the hunting party sustained injuries and managed to return to their pack, where their wounds were tended. The werewolf queen, Magda, immediately formed another party and followed their sisters’ tracks to the place where this allegedly happened. When they got there, they found the bones all right, and the remains of the young huntress, but no tree.”

The entire story sickened Cass and by the expression on Fidel’s face, he was just as disgusted.

“I’m telling you guys this because one of you is a Transcendent tree sprite and the other is a magical gardener. Have you ever heard of a tree like this?”

“No,” Cass stated. “And I hope I never do again.”

Fidel shook his head. "I've never heard of something like this either. During all my studies on Transcendence Isle, I never so much as saw a reference to that kind of monster."

"I didn't think so, but I had to be sure," Jeb sighed. "Non-sprites aren't allowed on Transcendence Isle, but a couple of sprites from the campground have gone there for us and questioned your ancient ones. This was a mystery to them too. We have figured out that Essence of Bark is being used to create the compulsion dust that renders the Transcendent sprites unconscious before they're killed. Apparently your old friend Myles didn't have enough dust left to fully sedate you, or else you most likely would be dead too, Fidel."

This time a shiver ran down Cass' spine. Glancing at his lover, he thought how awful it would be to lose Fidel, especially in such a brutal way.

"I'm not so sure about that," Fidel whispered.

"What do you mean?" Jeb demanded.

"Myles and I weren't just friends. We were lovers. In spite of... I don't believe he intended to kill me. When we were fighting, my strength and reflexes were down because of the compulsion dust. He could have destroyed me, but he didn't."

"He nearly split your chest open," Cass reminded him.

"No. That was just a warning," Fidel said quietly. "I know him."

A twinge of jealousy darted through Cass. The familiarity with which Fidel spoke of that murdering bastard affected him more than he wanted to admit.

"If that's true and you believe you can somehow get to him emotionally, we might need your help further," Jeb said.

"I'll do whatever I can to stop this violence," Fidel stated without hesitation. "But if you don't need me right away, I would like to join the other sprites in preparing for Leda and Randall's funeral."

"Of course," Jeb said. "I'm sorry about your friends."

Fidel nodded. "Thank you."

"Is there anything I can do?" Cass asked.

"You must be tired," Fidel told him. "You should go home and rest."

Cass wasn't sure if Fidel spoke out of genuine concern or if it was his way of gently rebuffing his offer. Unsure of what else to do, Cass said, "All right. Besides, it looks like management is headed our way."

Fidel and Jeb turned in the direction Cass indicated. The museum's curator and chief of security strode toward them.

"What happened here?" the curator demanded. "We've been told there was an attack."

"Which could have been prevented if you'd listened to my suggestion about additional security at the Transcendent tree sprite field," Cass said, unable to hold his tongue.

The curator, a pudgy man of faun and human origins, glared at him, then turned to Fidel. "Explain."

"Fidel, I'll talk to them," Cass said, resting a hand on his lover's arm. "The other sprites are waiting for you."

"He'll go when I'm finished with him," growled the curator.

Until that moment Cass had never fully understood the expression "seeing red" from anger. Balling his fists, he took a step toward the pompous little half-faun, but Fidel placed an arm around his shoulder.

"It's all right," Fidel whispered in his ear.

"Well? I demand to know what's going on," the curator continued.

"I might be an attraction here, but I'm not an inanimate object," Fidel stated. "If you wish to speak to me, you may do so after I have buried my friends, and only if you can conduct yourself in a respectful manner." Glancing at Cass, he asked, "Will you be all right?"

"Yes," Cass stated. Though no less angry, Fidel's calmness and dignity helped him regain control of his emotions.

"We'll talk soon," Fidel told him, then turned and walked away.

Once he was out of earshot, the curator muttered, "That arrogant, condescending

--"

"You mean the guy who just lost two of his closest friends because you didn't make the right management decision?" Jeb said, his blue eyes fixed on the curator.

Cass glanced at him with a thankful look. He'd heard about the integrity of the Princetons from his friends in Grimton City. It seemed they hadn't been exaggerating.

"I have questions for you," Jeb continued brusquely.

The curator and the security chief started to speak, but Jeb interrupted, "I suggest we go back to your office. I assume you've got one?"

"Of course I do," the curator said.

"Then let's go. I'm on a tight schedule. Cass, I'll be in touch." Jeb turned to him and gave a reassuring little wink.

Cass nodded and headed for home.

An hour later, Cass sat in the living room, watching flames leap in the fireplace. He was still too upset to sleep. His mother and sister had been awake when he arrived, and he'd told them what happened. Both were shocked and saddened. Cass was more worried than ever. Regardless of what Fidel told him, he didn't think Myles had intentionally spared his life. Was Fidel still in love with his old flame? Maybe he didn't want to believe a man he had once cared for was capable of killing him?

He caught sight of a shadow in the window and rose to his feet, his muscles tense. Was someone creeping around outside?

Glancing out the window, he saw a tall, familiar figure standing a short distance from the house.

Fidel.

The Transcendent sprite glanced his way and Cass motioned from him to come inside. He walked to the front door and found Fidel standing there.

"I didn't want to disturb you," Fidel said. "It's just that..."

"What?" Cass asked.

"I really needed to see you. Just to know you're around."

"Come on in." Cass stepped aside and Fidel entered the house. "How was the

funeral?" Cass shook his head and muttered, "That was a stupid question."

"That's all right. It was fine."

"Your mother and sister?" Fidel asked.

"Asleep. This way." Cass led the way to the parlor and motioned for Fidel to join him on the couch. Once seated, he tugged Fidel into his arms. With a deep sigh, the lanky, green-eyed sprite seemed to melt against him.

"I never imagined anything like this happening," Fidel said softly.

"I learned a long time ago that if something bad can happen, it usually does."

Shaking his head, Fidel met Cass' gaze and caressed his face. "You're too young to be this cynical."

"I don't feel young. Actually, I've never felt young."

"There's a lot you've missed out on."

"I guess."

"Maybe together we can uncover some happiness in spite of everything that's going on."

A slight smile touched Cass' lips. "I hope so. Fidel?"

"Yes." The sprite brushed his lips across Cass' temple then began kissing his neck.

Cass closed his eyes and sighed with pleasure. "Be careful, Fidel. I don't think Myles is the same guy you remember."

"He's but a shadow of the man I knew, yet inside he's still a sprite. Whatever has happened to him, part of him must still remember that."

"Not necessarily." Cass moved away slightly, only to meet his lover's gaze. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"You have no idea what your presence means to me, Cass. Not just now, but ever since you arrived here. You've helped me in ways you can't imagine."

"When I got here I couldn't even help myself. I was brought here by my friend Dylan's lover, a Grimton City cop, who put me into protective custody when I ratted out a couple of tricktus pushers I was working for."

"I know what you were, Cass, and I know the kind of man you've become. I also know you were working for those pushers because they threatened the lives of your family. That cop might have given you the opportunity to escape your life, but you're the one who truly made it happen through all your hard work."

"Thank you." Cass smiled slightly. Did Fidel have any idea how much hearing those words meant to him?

"No. Thank *you*."

They reached for each other simultaneously, their mouths meeting in the most passionate kiss of Cass' life. When it broke, both were breathless.

"If my mother and sister weren't home --"

"I'd fuck you into oblivion," Fidel whispered.

Overtaken by desire, Cass said in a husky voice, "How about the tool shed outside?"

"Sounds perfect."

"Then let's go." Cass stood, grasped Fidel's hand and tugged him toward the door. The tool shed behind the house wasn't Cass' ideal place for intimacy, especially with a six-foot nine-inch shapeshifter. Still, it was better than being embarrassed if his mother or Kay walked in on them.

"It's a little tight in here," Fidel said. Too tall for the shed, he was forced to bend over.

Cass couldn't resist grasping his hips and rubbing his pelvis against the sprite's gorgeous brown ass, which was partially exposed in his loincloth.

Fidel glanced at him over his shoulder, a seductive smile on his lips, and said, "It might be easier if you do the honors this time."

"I don't have any lube with me."

"It's all right. With my shapeshifting skills, I'll be able to accommodate you." Fidel's smile broadened, his teeth gleaming against his dark skin.

A thrill of desire shot through Cass and he tugged off Fidel's loincloth. He caressed Fidel's taut ass and lightly fingered his sphincter. The velvety flesh pulsed in

time with his prodding finger. Cass' shaft ached and swelled with need. Grasping Fidel's hips, he pressed his cock head between the indentation of the sprite's ass. As he eased inside his lover, Fidel's flesh seemed to expand to accommodate him, then tightened around Cass like a hot, throbbing glove.

The sensation was unlike anything he'd ever experienced with previous lovers. Cass' heart pounded and his temperature rose. His eyes closed, he tightened his hold on Fidel's ass and pumped into him. The sprite moaned with pleasure, his body molded to Cass' size and shape, ensuring the most perfect lovemaking experience.

Cass reached around and grasped Fidel's cock, stroking and squeezing as he continued pumping into him. Soon their motions quickened, becoming frenzied as their passion grew. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Cass realized the tiny shed was shaking from the force of their fucking, but he was beyond caring. "Fidel, ah hell!" he bellowed.

The sprite seemed beyond words. He grunted and groaned, his sleek muscles tense and his body throbbing around Cass' cock until they both exploded in red-hot passion.

In the midst of the longest, hardest orgasm of his life, Cass gave a shout of surprise as the little shed tumbled over. He extracted himself from Fidel and both men sat up amidst a tangle of shovels, rakes and pails. The sprite stared, wide-eyed, then both men broke into laughter. "We better fix the shed before my mother sees it," Cass said.

"Agreed."

Chapter Five

Early the next morning, before he left for work, Cass received a call from Dylan.

"Hey, Cass. I heard about what happened at the museum last night and wanted to make sure you're okay. I know you take care of the Transcendent sprites," said the Elf.

"It was really bad," Cass admitted with a deep sigh. "I lost two friends. My lover was injured and I'm afraid he'll be targeted again."

"Wait a second. What lover?" Dylan asked. "I didn't know you were seeing someone."

"His name is Fidel. He's a Transcendent tree sprite living here at the museum. His old lover, this scumbag named Myles, is responsible for the killings."

"Yes. Joel mentioned there is a suspect now."

Joel, Dylan's lover, was a detective with the Grimton City Police. Cass paused, his thoughts churning with last night's attack.

"Hello? Cass, are you still there?"

"Yeah. I just can't get what happened out of my head."

"Do you need anything? I can come over."

"All the way from Grimton City?"

"It's not that far. Sabrina can run things at the shelter and I can be at the museum by this afternoon."

That was Dylan. Always ready to help someone. A smile tugged at Cass' lips and he thought how lucky he was to have a friend like that. Still, Dylan had enough to deal with. He spent his whole life helping people. Cass had Kay, Fidel and even Jeb Princeton seemed concerned about the situation.

"That's all right, Dylan. We're handling it over here, but thanks."

"Joel says the Princetons are on the case. They're really good at what they do."

"Jeb Princeton was here last night. He seems to care about his work, not to mention he told my asshole boss off."

"Work problems?"

"Not with the job itself, but when I told the dickwad to put extra security on our Transcendent sprites, he put me off. It would have put too much of a dent in his budget. Now look what happened. We've got two dead sprites."

"If there's anything you need, just let me know."

"I will. Thanks. How are things going in the city?"

"Pretty well. Antjuan and Seth are in Ireland on an exchange program with some of the snake shifters. We're planning a Halloween dinner at the shelter. I think the best news of all is Shane and Charity adopted a half-wildman, half-human baby that was left at Grimton City orphanage. Cute little guy. Or should I say big guy. He's taken after the Wildmen as far as size goes."

Hearing Dylan talk about their friends made Cass feel a little better. Sometimes times he really missed the people from Grimton City. Maybe someday he and Fidel could visit. For the first time in years he started to feel as if he could handle returning to the city, though just for a short time. He'd never want to live there again. Not when he enjoyed the country life so much.

After talking to Dylan, Cass drove to the Transcendent sprite field. It felt strange not seeing Leda there. Her fellow sprites had dug up her stump and roots and burned all her remains during the funeral ceremony last night. The scent of smoke still filled the air.

Cass stood near where the pyre had burned and paid his last respects. When he turned around, he was a bit startled at first to find Fidel standing behind him. He hadn't heard the sprite move.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," Fidel said.

"Just surprised. How are you doing?"

"I've been better. After the funeral I contacted my old mentor, Natasha. She told

me all sprites, Transcendent and traditional, are on the lookout for Myles. I told them about his parting words to me three years ago, how he threatened all our kind and Lady Autumn."

"He did?" Cass said.

"I thought he'd spoken in anger. If I had said something earlier, perhaps these killings could have been stopped."

"You can't blame yourself for his crimes. People say things they don't mean all the time. Talk isn't against the law."

"I should have known he was unreasonably upset by his failure."

Cass grasped Fidel's shoulders and shook him slightly. "Listen to me. This is not your fault. I know. In the past I went against the law and no matter what my reasons, I'm the one who ultimately committed the crimes."

"As I said before, you're not like Myles. What you did was out of love for your family. What he's doing is out of revenge. And why does he feel he deserves revenge? He failed the training."

"There. You see what I'm talking about? You're not to blame."

"He committed these crimes, but I should have revealed what I knew."

"No matter what I say you're going to feel responsible."

"Partly."

Sighing, Cass shook his head. "Crazy."

A horn honked and they turned toward a black truck heading toward them, Jeb Princeton behind the wheel.

"Hey guys," Jeb said, coming to a stop nearby. "I've got some new information about the case and I need your input. Would you take a ride to Wolf Whackers headquarters?"

Wolf Whackers Inc. was the name of the Princeton Family animal control business.

"Sure," Cass said. "But I need to check with my boss first."

"It's done," Jeb told him. "I was just in his office. Don't know how you can stand

working for that pompous little shit.”

“Probably because I scarcely have to look at him,” Cass admitted. “I spend most of my days working alone.”

“How about you, Fidel? I need your expertise most of all. Got a few hours to spare?”

“I have as much time as you need,” Fidel said.

“You need a lift?” Jeb asked.

“We can follow you in my pickup truck,” Cass said. “Do you mind if we ask what this is about?”

“We have someone at headquarters who might know how Myles got his new powers and also where we can find him. I want to know what you guys think of her story.”

Cass and Fidel exchanged glances, then headed for the pickup truck.

A little under an hour later, they parked in front of the log cabin that served as Wolf Whackers Inc. headquarters. They stepped into a quaint yet spacious room warmed by a fireplace. An attractive, dark-haired woman sat behind a desk. Seated on the edge of the desk, his hands folded across his broad chest, was a handsome, black-haired man who looked exactly like Jeb.

“Fidel and Cass, meet Tracy and my brother Oakes,” Jeb said as a hasty introduction. “Are they still in the back?”

“Waiting for you,” Oakes said. “We’ve already contacted the Realm of Snake Shifters. They’ve agreed to help.”

With a grunt of approval, Jeb motioned for Cass and Fidel to follow him to an adjoining room. It was smaller, windowless and unfurnished except for a table and chairs. Inside Cass saw three creatures that provoked his curiosity. The two standing across the room were fantastically beautiful. He’d heard about water nymphs, but had never seen them in the flesh. The female had vibrant blue eyes, pale blue hair and lavender skin. If Cass had been straight, her curves would have taken his breath away. He caught a glimpse of her translucent, pastel-colored tail flicking behind her. The man

was tall and built like an ancient Greek statue. Covered in pale aqua skin, he had reddish hair and a bluish-green tailfin.

As beautiful as these nymphs were, the creature seated at the table was ugly. Tall and gaunt with greenish skin and stringy mud-brown hair, she stared at Cass and Fidel with glowing green eyes. Dark brownish nipples tipped her teardrop-shaped breasts. Her lips parted slightly, revealing jagged teeth.

"This is my cousin, Brady Earl, and his wife, Nadine," Jeb said, gesturing toward the water nymphs who nodded in greeting. "They run Serpent Slayers. Aquatic animal control. This here is Devil Fins. She's --"

"Eager to return home," replied the strange green female, her voice shockingly soft and sweet.

"You agreed to help us," Nadine reminded her.

Devil Fins glanced sharply at her. "You know why."

"Yes, because you finally found a creature more dangerous than yourself," Brady said, curling his lip.

"Tell them what you told us," Jeb said. "Cass, Fidel, sit down if you want."

Cass shook his head, his gaze fixed on Devil Fins. He was well acquainted with evil, and there was no mistaking this woman's sinister aura.

Fidel, calm as always, took a seat at the table. His gaze locked with Devil Fins' who seemed to challenge him to look away. She failed.

Finally she began, "I live in Leechwell, a very private area of the Wicked Wild."

"It's a backwater swamp," Brady interrupted, his lip curled in either annoyance or disgust.

"A wonderful place with water so black it's like diving into the depths of hell," she said, her voice even sweeter than before. "While walking down a path near land belonging to a Warlock called Crystal Eyes --"

"Crystalize?" Cass asked.

"No, boy," Devil Fins sneered. "*Crystal Eyes*. I came upon a tree I had never seen before. It was strangely beautiful with white bark and leaves as red as blood. Naturally

I was drawn to it.”

“Naturally,” Nadine said softly, her gaze sweeping Devil Fins.

“If I’m constantly interrupted, I might miss something important,” the green creature seethed. “As I said. I was drawn to the tree, but as I neared it, its branches reached out to me. At first I thought it was a misplaced Transcendent sprite. We don’t get many who choose to live in Leechwell.”

Brady raised an eyebrow. “Many?”

“All right. *Any*. But when this particular tree began choking the life out of me, I realized it wasn’t a Transcendent sprite. You’re all above hunting, aren’t you?” She fired a goading look toward Fidel who looked as serene as ever.

“We do not condone murder,” he stated.

“Usually I reserve judgment in such cases,” Devil Fins seethed. “But not when I’m the victim. I’m a shapeshifter too, but even in my most powerful forms I couldn’t overcome this tree. Finally, in the shape of a crocodile, I bit off one of the thorny branches and it dropped me. It changed into its man form and chased me until I sank into the swamp. From there I can only guess either it couldn’t swim or could no longer see me in the dark water.”

“After Devil Fins filed a complaint with us, we turned it over to Wolf Whackers,” Brady explained. “We only deal with water creatures. We understand this is the guy you might be looking for. He matches the description of the tree that killed the female wolf and according to Devil Fins’ description, in his man form he could be your guy Myles.”

“He was on Crystal Eyes’ land, so he is most likely linked to the warlock. If he was once a mere sprite and is now an evil tree, there’s a good chance Crystal Eyes granted him the power to shift shape,” Devil Fins said. “All creatures on his land are linked to him.”

“Then why were you there?” Fidel asked. “Are you linked to him?”

Devil Fins smiled wickedly, once again exposing her ferocious teeth. “Occasionally. When I’m in a particularly sadistic mood.”

Nadine raised her eyes to the heavens and shook her head.

"However, usually his creatures don't attack me, which is why I've never bothered reporting them before. So tell me, brave warriors," she sneered, "are you going to do something about it?"

"When you said Crystal Eyes granted him the power to shift shape, how did he do it?" Fidel said. "Only Lady Autumn can unlock a sprite's natural shapeshifting power."

"There's nothing natural about a warlock's shapeshifting spells," Devil Fins stated.

"Then you're saying he's cursed," Cass said.

"This is an abomination," Fidel whispered. "Could he have wanted to become a Transcendent sprite so badly that he'd accept a mutation of our ceremony? To become a tree cursed to kill and devour the living?"

"Oh yes." Devil Fins grinned. "If he hadn't attacked me, I'd think the whole story is positively wonderful."

"You would," Nadine snapped.

"Have I provided enough information?" Devil Fins asked. "I do so want to leave this chipper little campground for my swamp."

"Yeah. We're done," Jeb told her.

Devil Fins stood and left the room. Cass caught a glimpse of her naked green butt and nearly curled his lip in revulsion. Seeing an ass like that only made him appreciate Fidel even more.

"We need to get back to the water too," Brady said.

Water nymphs could only spend a limited time on land.

Jeb held out his hand and Brady shook it. "Keep in touch, cousin."

"You bet."

"Nadine." Jeb nodded to her and she smiled, then turned to Fidel and Cass. "I'm sorry about the loss of your friends."

"Thank you for helping to find the killer," Fidel said.

After Brady and Nadine left, Oakes stepped into the room.

"What do you think?" Jeb asked Fidel and Cass. "Any of this sound familiar, gardener?"

"No," Cass stated. "There's no magic I know of that can create an evil version of a Transcendent sprite."

Nodding, Jeb turned to Fidel.

"You seem to know the tree that attacked Devil Fins is Myles. I'm not exactly sure why you need me," Fidel said.

"Our plan is to go to Crystal Eyes' territory. If Myles is bound by his magic, he probably won't be far from his master. You said you didn't think Myles wanted to kill you. If you come with us, maybe you can help us catch him with as little violence as possible."

"What?" Cass demanded. "You want to deliberately put him in danger?"

"Cass," Fidel touched his lover's arm, "I understand what they're trying to do and I'm willing to help."

"I'm going with you," Cass stated.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Oakes said. "I know you're concerned about your friend, but --"

"Damn right I'm concerned. Management didn't want me to help protect him. Fidel himself didn't want me to protect him, now you don't want me to. I've had it. As far as I'm concerned, he's better off with me than without me. If you go, Fidel, I'm with you."

"I don't see a problem," Jeb said. "With Cass' knowledge of magical plants, he'd be more help than hindrance in the Wicked Wild."

"All right. This party is as big as it gets, though," Oakes said. "The snake shifters have agreed to send a guide since their Realm is right near Leechwell. They're sending a guard named Stowe. He's coming with his girlfriend, who's on the Council of Witches. They thought that since we're dealing with a warlock, her knowledge of spells might help."

"Makes sense," Jeb said.

"I know both Kelly and Stowe," Cass said. "They're dance students at my friend Antjuan's school. No one knows the snake shifter area of the Wicked Wild better than Stowe, and Kelly is a talented witch."

"That's good to know," Oakes said and turned to Jeb. "You're up to this, right? Because Tripp can handle Wolf Whackers if you need me to go too."

"Why?" Jeb asked. "Like you said, we have a full team. We put in an order for anti-compulsion dust serum and the sprites on Transcendence Isle have agreed to give us compulsion dust made with Essence of Bark to sedate Myles if we have to, providing Fidel goes with us of course."

"They agreed to that?" Fidel looked skeptical.

"Yes. Actually you need to contact them ASAP," Oakes said.

"When do we leave?" Cass asked. He needed to let the museum know where he was going and hope that they didn't fire him for taking a sudden leave of absence. Even if they did, Cass didn't care. Yes, he loved his job, but protecting Fidel was even more important.

A short time later, Cass prepared to return to the museum while Fidel traveled with Jeb to Transcendence Isle. Jeb wasn't allowed to set foot on the island, but would wait by the edge of the river while Fidel retrieved the compulsion dust.

Fidel walked with Cass to the pickup truck and said, "I'll be back by the evening."

"Be careful."

"I will. Thank you for volunteering to come with me to the Wicked Wild."

Cass smiled slightly. "I have the feeling you'd do the same for me."

"You're right. I would."

"Fidel, I'm sorry about Myles."

"As you said, he made his choice." Fidel sighed deeply. "I only wish it had been a better one."

Cass brushed Fidel's mouth with a kiss, then stepped into the truck. "Take care

of yourself, Fidel.”

“You too. I’ll see you tonight.”

Chapter Six

The next morning, Cass and Fidel returned to Wolf Whackers headquarters. Jeb Princeton awaited them along with their snake shifter guide, Stowe, and the young witch, Kelly. The delicate, black-haired witch and the powerful, green-skinned snake shifter made an even stranger couple than Cass and Fidel, yet they seemed just as much in love. In spite of their bickering, there was no mistaking the lustful yet affectionate looks that passed between them.

"It's good to see you again, Cass," Kelly said.

"We only wish it was under better circumstances," Stowe added.

"Hopefully we'll be able to tie this up quickly then maybe we'll have some time for socializing," Jeb said. "Everyone ready to go?"

"The sooner the better," Fidel stated.

Cass glanced at him, realizing that while no one liked the idea of this journey, it was even more difficult for him. Though he and Myles were ancient history, Cass sensed Fidel still cared about his old lover.

They climbed into Jeb's truck and drove as far as they could into the Wicked Wild. When the vegetation became too thick, they left the truck and continued their journey on foot.

It took them most of the day to reach Leechwell. They traveled with magically-enhanced lanterns, since it was always as dark as night this far into the Wicked Wild.

They followed the swamp for a mile before Stowe said, "This is it. Crystal Eyes' land. Be very careful."

"Like we haven't been already," Jeb muttered.

Cass couldn't disagree. Nothing he'd seen in Grimton City could compare to the desolation he'd felt since entering this part of the Wicked Wild. The stench of the

swamp hung heavily on the air and their boots sank into muddy ground with every step. Along the way, Stowe pointed out dangers, like quicksand and magical insects that trapped victims by spraying them with a naturally produced compulsion dust. Not to mention the Wicked Wild crawled with savage beasts, many with supernatural powers.

Cass found the plant life fascinating, however. If he hadn't been involved in tracking down Myles, he'd have liked to stop and examine some specimens.

"I'll be glad to guide you back at another time," Stowe said. "Perhaps take you to more pleasant places as well. The Realm of Snake Shifters has some interesting plant life."

"Thanks. I might take you up on that offer," Cass said. He glanced at Fidel who walked beside him. "How are you doing? It's been a while since you shifted shape and I know you have to become a tree for so many hours every day."

"I'm fine," Fidel said. "However, if this search goes into the night, I will need to change shape for an hour or two."

"That's a weakness of Transcendent sprites that I luckily don't share," came a deep male voice from behind the group.

They spun around. Jeb pulled his handgun and Stowe shifted to his snake form, but remained by Kelly's side, ready to protect his lover from danger.

Tall and pale, his eyes aglow, Myles approached them. "There are many weaknesses of Transcendent sprites that I avoided," he continued.

Fidel took a step toward him, but Cass grasped his arm.

Myles' slim lips curved into a sinister grin.

"You're still a sprite, Myles, regardless of what evil magic has tainted you," Fidel said.

"I am a new and improved sprite. Crystal Eyes has given me powers you could never comprehend. It's something Lady Autumn can't give and take at her whim. She is no longer my mistress."

"You traded her for a master. That warlock owns you now, doesn't he?" Fidel

continued.

A strange, almost sad look flickered across Myle's face, then he snorted with contempt.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Fidel asked, his voice deep and calm, though Cass knew that inside his emotions must be raging. "Did you ask him to make you a killer or was that merely a side effect of the shapeshifting curse?"

"I thought Transcendent sprites considered shapeshifting a gift," Myles sneered.

"Natural shapeshifting yes, but not this abomination you've become. A bloodthirsty killer. A mockery of the Transcendence that once meant so much to you."

"I was a fool," Myles seethed. "What was the point of the toil and groveling on Transcendence Isle when Crystal Eyes gave me what I wanted in a heartbeat?"

"This is really what you wanted?" Fidel gestured around the swampland.

"Don't be so condescending, especially not when you're so stupid."

Cass' head ached and his vision dimmed.

"You all right?" Jeb asked.

"I don't feel very good," Cass whispered.

Jeb lowered his gun, his face pale. "I don't either."

"Guys, stay awake," Kelly said. "This is a spell. I can feel it. We need to stay awake."

Her words faded as Cass slipped into blackness.

* * *

Fidel awoke on his back. The aftereffects of compulsion dust prevented him from moving right away. Gradually the lethargy faded and he pushed himself onto his elbows.

"Hey," Jeb said from where he leaned against a nearby wall. "You all right?"

"Yes," Fidel replied and glanced around. Stowe, Kelly, and Cass lay unconscious nearby.

They were all locked in a windowless stone dungeon with a narrow stairway in the farthest corner of the room. Magically illuminated stones in the walls supplied the

only light.

Fidel approached Cass and placed his fingers to his neck to feel for a pulse. His stomach clenched at the thought that Cass might be permanently injured all because he wanted to accompany Fidel.

"They're all okay," Jeb said. "I already checked."

Cass groaned and started to come to. Nearby, Stowe also began to revive.

Placing a hand to his lover's cheek, Fidel said, "Cass?"

The gardener's lovely blue eyes opened partway, but took a moment to focus.

"Rest a minute," Fidel said. "The effects will fade. Compulsion dust."

"Not compulsion dust," Kelly murmured, her voice heavy. Stowe slid toward her and took her in his arms. She continued, "It's a spell, but I sensed it too late. Myles distracted me. I tried to warn you. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Jeb said, rising and walking toward the stairs. "Things are weird out here. Shit's bound to happen."

"Jeb, I wouldn't walk so close to those stairs," Kelly warned, but Jeb had already reached the danger zone. As he tried to take a step up the stairs, he was thrown flat onto his back.

"What the hell?" Jeb muttered.

"It's another spell," Kelly said.

"You knew?"

"No, but I assumed."

"Very good guess, little witch," said a husky male voice from the top of the stairway.

The click of footsteps on stone echoed through the dungeon and a shadow loomed closer. Then a tall, gaunt man with long, dark hair came into view. He wore a crisp white shirt tucked into black trousers. Toward the bottom of the stairway he paused and glanced at his prisoners.

"I think you can guess who I am."

"Crystal Eyes," Stowe said.

The warlock's pale gray eyes flickered toward Stowe and a smile touched his lips. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you in particular, snake shifter. It will make my experiment so much more interesting."

"What experiment?" Jeb demanded.

"As you might or might not know, I have a keen interest in the feeding habits of creatures. Werewolves tearing apart their prey. Vampires sucking blood. Snake shifters," he gestured toward Stowe, "squeezing the life out of victims."

"Is that why you made a common sprite into a man-eating tree?" Kelly asked.

"Precisely. He makes a fascinating study."

"What about us?" Cass demanded. "You said we're an experiment. What kind? Do you plan to curse us too?"

Crystal Eyes' pale brow furrowed and he said, "Oh no. That won't be necessary. You're trapped here by one of my strongest spells and as you can see, I haven't even taken your weapons. I intend to see who has the strongest will to live. Will it be you, snake shifter? Will you crush the bones of your friends and devour them whole while in your snake form? Or will it be you, Jeb Princeton, beast hunter? Will you kill your companions for a taste of their flesh? Perhaps it will be you, Transcendent sprite." Crystal Eyes stared hard at Fidel. "Your kind abandoned Myles. You taught him what it is to hate, but he's paid you back, hasn't he? And he's only just begun."

"Any hate that plagues him comes from within himself," Fidel said, his voice much calmer than he felt. Faced with Crystal Eyes and the realization of what Myles had become, he needed to call upon all his training to remain focused and impartial.

"Oh, of course," Crystal Eyes mocked. "Because everyone knows Transcendent sprites are perfect. Godlike. They're not touched by things like hate, jealousy, or greed."

"I don't expect someone like you to understand us," Fidel said.

"Nor do I want to," Crystal Eyes quipped. "As pleasant as this little chat has been, I have other business to attend to. I'll see you in a few days. You should be good and hungry by then. Water will be provided, of course. I wouldn't want you to dehydrate before you have a chance to cannibalize each other." Crystal Eyes ascended

the stairs. The door at the top closed.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Jeb muttered.

Cass approached the stairs and held out his hands only to be thrown backward by the warlock's spell.

"Didn't I already try that?" Jeb asked.

Cass stood and shrugged. "A second try couldn't hurt."

"We need to do something," Stowe said.

"Yeah, because I don't want to see what happens when this guy needs to turn into a tree." Jeb jerked his thumb in Fidel's direction.

"I still have a few hours before I must change," Fidel said. "Though I doubt we'll find a way out of here by then."

"Don't be so sure," Kelly said, walking the perimeter of the room. She paused near the stairs, her eyes closed. "If I'm correct, a hate spell is locking us in here."

"Makes sense. Crystal Eyes seems hateful enough to conjure a powerful one," Stowe said.

"Is there a way to counter it?" Cass asked the witch.

"Yes," she said. "A love spell should do it. Not just any love spell. Crystal Eyes' spell is quite powerful. It will take equally powerful magic to destroy it."

"Can you do it?" Jeb asked.

The witch glanced toward her companions. "Yes, but I'll need help."

"We'll do whatever it takes," Jeb said.

"That's nice, Jeb, but I'm afraid you're the only one who can't help."

"Why not?"

"I've brought some generic compulsion dust, empowered by my magic. We can use it for a love spell, but the main ingredient I need is love. Stowe, if you and I make love using the dust, it will help break down the evil magic."

"I think I understand," Cass said. "I'm no expert, but I know something about spells and powders. The compulsion dust will absorb the love energy from you and Stowe."

"You're saying they can fuck us out of here?" Jeb demanded. "Well, hot damn."

"It's not just fucking," Kelly said, raising her eyes to the heavens. "Love must be involved or else the spell won't work. Only the energy of lust and love combined can overpower such a powerful hate spell. Will you help me, Stowe?"

The snake shifter looked rather uncomfortable. He folded his sinewy arms across his chest and said. "Yes, but no one had better watch."

"Don't worry," Jeb said. "I'm not interested in seeing your little green pickle."

"Little?" Stowe curled his lip. "I don't know what sort of proportion problems humans have, but I assure you snake shifters have more than enough to please."

"Usually I wouldn't complain about a conversation involving cocks, but right now I couldn't care less," Cass said.

"The spell will be stronger and work faster if there is more love-lust energy in the air," Kelly said, glancing at Cass and Fidel. "Are you two willing to --"

"No!" Cass said at the same moment Fidel said, "Yes!"

Both stared at each other in surprise.

"You feel no love for me?" Fidel asked.

"Of course I do," Cass admitted. "I didn't think you felt that way about me."

"Why would you assume that? I changed to my human form after three years just to be with you and you think I don't feel for you?" Fidel had been controlling his emotions since they'd entered the Wicked Wild, but now they threatened to burst forth. He thought he'd made it plain how he felt about Cass.

"It just seems like you're still in love with Myles," Cass said.

"You know that Myles and I are long over."

"Not by the way you seem to believe in him, even after all he's done."

Fidel narrowed his eyes, torn between happiness and annoyance. "You're jealous."

"I don't believe this," Jeb muttered. "Hey, guys, time out, all right? This is no time for a lover's spat."

Ignoring Jeb, Fidel continued, "Just because I have pity and compassion for him

does not mean I'm still in love with him. What attracted me to you was your kindness toward others as well as your courage."

"I feel like you're comparing me to him and I don't like it."

Fidel grasped Cass' shoulders. "There's nothing to compare. Myles could never be the man you are. You shouldn't need me to tell you that."

"I know," Cass said. "But it's nice to hear."

For a moment they stared at each other, then they smiled, their anger fading like fairy dust on a windy day.

"I suggest you guys kiss and make up. Literally. We need to get out of here," Jeb said.

"Good idea." Cass grasped Fidel by the hips and kissed him hard.

The sprite responded passionately, his tongue thrusting into Cass' mouth with demanding strokes.

Kelly approached and sprinkled the magical dust over them, then returned to Stowe and tossed it over him and her as well.

"Oh brother," Jeb muttered and turned to face the wall. "Hurry up, will you? And try not to make too much noise."

When the kiss broke, Cass and Fidel held each other's gazes.

"This is weird," Cass said. "Doing it in front of --" He jerked his head toward the others.

Fidel glanced over Cass' shoulder, toward Stowe and Kelly. By their soft moans and groans, even Stowe seemed to have lost his inhibitions.

"Doesn't seem to bother them," Fidel said with a slight smile.

He unzipped Cass' trousers and grasped his cock. Within moments Fidel's stroking had Cass so hard and aroused that he no longer cared about the others in the room. All he could think about was the warmth of Fidel's palm and the perfect rhythm of his stroking.

Tilting his gaze toward Fidel's face, he saw the handsome sprite was completely focused on his carnal work. His green eyes, gleaming with arousal, fixed on Cass' thick

erection. Fidel was certainly doing his part in facilitating their escape. It was time for Cass to do the same.

He unfastened the sprite's loincloth and discarded it. Grasping Fidel's shaft, he stroked him to full mast.

There was something strangely erotic about this entire scenario -- trapped with only passionate love to set them free.

Fidel covered Cass' mouth in a deep kiss. Their hot, wet tongues stroked, mimicking the rhythm of their hands on each other's cocks. Cass already felt on the verge of exploding. His heart pounded with desire and his temperature leapt in spite of the dampness of the dungeon.

Their gazes locked and their grips tightened on each other's cocks.

"I've never come while looking into someone's eyes," Cass said.

"Hey, I don't need that kind of info," Jeb said from across the room.

Ignoring Jeb, Fidel replied, "Then it's about time." He swept his thumb along the underside of Cass' cock head, making him gasp and strain from the almost uncontrollable lust. A tremor of passion shot through Cass, yet he forced himself to keep staring at Fidel and not close his eyes from the sheer physical pleasure.

Cass copied Fidel's motions, flicking his thumb beneath the crown of Fidel's erection then pumping the shaft.

Staring into each other's eyes, they stroked harder and faster. Their breath came in desperate pants and their bodies tensed with impending orgasm.

"Guys, I think it's working," Jeb shouted.

"Shut up, Jeb!" all four shouted, their breathing ragged.

Fidel's green eyes practically glowed with desire. His full lips parted and his gorgeous chest heaved with each excited breath. Just looking at him turned Cass on even more.

They came into each other's hands, their hot cocks pulsing and their hands trembling in the throes of lust. In those final moments, Cass couldn't help closing his eyes, lost in pleasure.

He and Fidel leaned heavily against each other, catching their breath in the aftermath.

"You did it," Jeb said.

Cass forced his eyes open but didn't move from Fidel's arms. He glanced toward Jeb who stood halfway up the staircase.

"Let's go," Jeb called. "Get a move on."

Stepping apart, Cass and Fidel exchanged a heated glance. Cass hitched up his trousers while Fidel bent and reached for his loincloth. Unable to resist, Cass slapped the sprite's gorgeous ass.

Moments later, all five ascended the stairs.

Chapter Seven

They quietly made their way up the stairs and found themselves in an enormous foyer. Like the dungeon, the walls and floor were drafty and made of stone.

Fidel walked to one of the long, narrow windows on either side of the door leading outside.

"I think we should split up," Kelly suggested. "Stowe and I can look for Crystal Eyes and you guys can look for Myles. I have this." She pulled out a talisman hanging from a measure of rope around her neck. "If we take the warlock by surprise, I can temporarily freeze his powers."

"Will that mean when it wears off Myles will revert to his normal sprite form?" Cass asked. "He'd be easier to trap that way."

Kelly shook her head. "It won't destroy any spells or curses already in motion, but it will prevent him from causing further problems for us while we're making the arrests."

"All right," Jeb said. "That'll have to be good enough. Cass and Fidel, let's go. Kelly and Stowe, be careful."

Fidel led the way out the door. They made their way around the grounds, watchful for Myles in either his tree or human form.

"Looking for me?" Myles stepped from behind a boulder.

Fidel pulled out a pistol loaded with bullets filled with Essence of Bark compulsion dust and aimed it at his old lover. Earlier he hadn't wanted to draw the weapon, hoping he could talk Myles into surrendering. Now he knew that was doubtful.

"You intend to shoot me, Fidel?"

"Do it," Jeb hissed, glancing from Myles to Fidel. Fidel was the only one armed

with the Essence of Bark. The ancient sprites had provided them with it under the stipulation that only Fidel would control it.

"He doesn't want to." Myles stepped closer. "He's a Transcendent sprite. Causing harm to other creatures is against their code of honor."

"For you I'll have to make an exception," Fidel stated, his gaze never faltering.

Myles paused, a faint smile tugging at his pale lips. "So there are exceptions to the code?"

"Fidel, shoot him," Cass whispered. He didn't like the expression on his lover's face, and it had nothing to do with any jealousy he felt because of Myles. In Grimton City, Cass had learned to tell who was capable of violence and who wasn't. While he knew Fidel didn't enjoy causing others harm, he seemed to have steeled himself to do what was necessary. The longer Myles talked, the more apprehension Cass sensed from Fidel and Myles seemed to know this.

"There are always exceptions," Fidel stated. "You've proven that by turning against your own kind."

"I wanted revenge," Myles admitted.

"You wanted to kill."

"It's not a matter of want," Myles snapped. "I must kill."

"Because of a curse you accepted from Crystal Eyes."

"His evil has become my evil."

"Really?" Fidel lifted an eyebrow. "Or is that a convenient way to alleviate your guilt?"

Myles' eyes blazed. "Were the ancients guilty about casting me off Transcendence Isle? And don't tell me they had good reason!"

"Why would he say that?" Jeb muttered under his breath.

Myles glared at Jeb. "I'm going to enjoy devouring you." The evil sprite advanced on their small group and Cass couldn't risk waiting any longer.

He reached for Fidel's hand, intending to force him to fire, but long, white branches shot toward him, wrapping around him. Before he fully realized what was

happening, Cass found himself trapped against Myles' trunk. He'd changed shape in a blink, even startling Fidel.

Cass panted, struggling against the branches. Myles' bark cut into him, like thousands of tiny thorns, yet they didn't pierce his skin.

"Shoot him, Fidel!" Jeb bellowed.

"I can't. Not while he has Cass. If I shoot him, the dust won't take effect in time to prevent him from killing Cass," Fidel said. "Myles knows I won't risk his life, but I will make a trade."

Fidel flung the gun into the swamp.

"What the fuck!" Jeb shouted and raced toward the swamp. "That's the only weapon that can work against Myles."

"Take me," Fidel said, walking toward the gnarled white tree. "Cass isn't a Transcendent sprite, and we're the ones you hate."

The white tree quivered and Cass gritted his teeth, his sleek muscles bulging as he fought the tree's strength. The harder he struggled the deeper the jagged bark cut into his flesh.

"Kill him, Myles, and I will destroy you. Not with compulsion dust, but with my bare hands or with my branches. Either way you will be dead." Fidel strode closer. The sight of Cass trapped like this raised his fury in a way he'd never experienced before.

Myles must have sensed the truth in Fidel's words as well as his fury. He dropped Cass at the same moment his branches reached out, grasped Fidel and squeezed. Fidel shouted in pain before his voice was cut off by another branch tightening around his neck.

Cass grasped the branches and pulled hard.

"Cass, let it go!" Jeb shouted from where he stood up to his waist in muddy water.

At that moment, Crystal Eyes raced out of the house, Stowe and Kelly in close pursuit. "Get him!" Kelly shouted. "He has no power! It's in the talisman!"

The snake shifter's long strides gained on the warlock. Stowe's green hands

reached for him, but as they passed by Myles, he dropped his hold on Fidel and wrapped his branches around the warlock.

Cass grasped Fidel, who was nearly unconscious from Myles' stranglehold, and pulled him a safe distance from the tree. Gasping, Fidel leaned against Cass, grateful that they were still alive.

Myles turned his wrath on Crystal Eyes. His white bark stained red with the warlock's blood, he devoured him with his deadly branches.

"Oh gross," Kelly whispered, turning her face into Stowe's shoulder to avoid looking at the gruesome sight.

Fidel understood how she felt. He could scarcely believe what Myles had become. In spite of his disgust, he couldn't help thinking that in a way justice had been served. Crystal Eyes had been destroyed by his own creature.

After a moment, Myles dropped the warlock's ravaged body. No sooner had Crystal Eyes hit the ground than the white tree disappeared, replaced by the unconscious body of Myles in his tiny sprite form.

Cass and Fidel stood. A short distance away, Jeb emerged from the swamp. The three approached Myles and the warlock. "He's dead," Jeb said from where he squatted by Crystal Eyes' bloody remains. "Myles?"

"Just unconscious," Fidel said. With a sigh, he picked up the little sprite.

Cass glanced at Myles with a pensive expression. "It's hard to believe he became such a monster."

"When Crystal Eyes died, it freed him from the curse," Kelly said. "Pretty standard in Crystal Eyes' branch of magic."

"I'll contact the ancients on Transcendence Isle," Fidel said. "They'll decide what to do about Myles."

"In the meantime, we'll keep him locked up at headquarters," Jeb stated, taking the unconscious sprite from Fidel.

Cass placed a hand on Fidel's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Fidel turned and met Cass' gaze. "Are you?"

"Yeah. You saved my life."

Placing a hand to Cass' cheek, Fidel spoke with heartfelt sincerity. "I would have done anything to protect you."

Cass didn't speak, but the look in his beautiful blue eyes was more than enough to express his feelings. Warmth spread through Fidel. In spite of the sadness and violence of the day, or perhaps because of it, the roots of their love had grown stronger.

* * *

The morning after returning from the Wicked Wild, Cass went to the Transcendent sprite field early. As he approached, Fidel shifted to his human form. "Did you sleep?" he asked.

"Some. How about you? Were you able to meditate?"

"Yes. I contacted Natasha. Myles has been taken into custody of the tree sprite tribunal."

"You know, Fidel, in spite of all he did I think you were right about him still having the heart of a sprite. I can't fully understand what made him turn to Crystal Eyes, but I don't believe he intended things to get as ugly as they did."

"I don't think so either," Fidel said quietly. "Yet that doesn't change the fact that innocent creatures are dead because of him. Before we left him in care of the Princetons, he said he was glad it was over."

"That was probably true. After all, it was his decision to kill Crystal Eyes."

"I'm glad it's over too, but I'm also glad of something else," Fidel said, a smile tugging at his lips.

"What's that?"

"I'm glad our life together has just begun. I love you, Cass."

"I love you too. For the first time I can remember, everything feels absolutely right." Taking Cass' face in his hands, Fidel covered his mouth in the deepest, most passionate kiss of his life.

Kate Hill

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, www.myspace.com/katehillromance, or join her newsgroup at groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill. Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at www.amazon.com.