

The book cover features a muscular man with a beard, shirtless, holding a silver handgun. His body is engulfed in flames, which serve as the background for the title. The title 'Hell Cop' is written in large, bold, orange-yellow letters with a flame texture. The authors' names are listed in white serif font at the bottom.

Hell Cop

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Loose Id

HELL COP

Astrid Amara,
Nicole Kimberling & Ginn Hale

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NEXT OF KIN

Astrid Amara

Chapter One

The emergency room doors burst open, and a dozen burned, half-eaten, and blood-spattered children were rushed inside.

Brian initially assumed it was just a normal day at the Parmas City Hospital. He had only lived in the city a month and was regularly presented with extraordinary sights and events that no one else seemed to blink at. Brian had seen levitation and copulation, prancing ghosts, vanishing sprites, and talking wrenches. He saw drug users shooting up and horned beasts shot down. Nothing in his prior twenty-one years on the commune had prepared him for the reality of the big city. So maybe in this wicked metropolis such emergencies were commonplace.

But previously unseen nurses and doctors poured into the emergency ward as paramedics wheeled in gurneys laden with wounded.

Frightened parents streamed in minutes later, screaming for their children, and little faces cried out, explaining in rushed gasps their recent calamity. Brian looked to Tyra, his boss, for direction, and when he saw the shock on her face, he understood that this was a disaster beyond common expectations, that children were not regularly eaten by demons, no matter how depraved the capital city seemed to be.

“God help us,” Tyra whispered.

It sounded a lot like something the old pastor at the commune would say, and Brian was more shocked by this first hint at faith than at the chaos building around him.

Brian was only a temp, and this was his third day at the hospital. He had been hired to help the triage administrator reorganize the hospital’s filing system. What aid he could offer in the present emergency seemed insufficient, but he felt the electric buzz of panic in the air and needed to do something.

“What do you want me to do?” Brian asked Tyra.

“Get names of the family members in the waiting area,” she barked at him. “Find out which children belong to whom.” She rushed toward one of the curtained beds, diving into the fray.

Brian scrambled for his pad of paper and a pencil. He looked at the crowd of shocked visitors, wondering where to start. They all looked stunned, in varying stages of grief. Their eyes rose in unison as the front doors of the hospital automatically opened, wafting in a large gulp of humid sea air. More children rolled by on gurneys, and the parents in the waiting room craned to see who they were.

Another gurney followed, this one carrying a man, his face obscured by blood and matted hair, IVs needled into his arms, a half a dozen men and women running beside him as they rolled him toward an operating room.

A cop trailed behind them, his blue armored uniform stained dark with spatters of blood. The operating room door swung shut, and he stared at it, immobile.

Behind Brian, a woman sat softly weeping. She seemed as good a candidate for him to start with as any, and so he knelt beside her.

“Ma’am? Can I get your name, please?”

“Laura.” Her voice was weak and scratchy. She stared blankly ahead, eyes wide and brimming with tears. “Laura Othnan.”

“And your child’s name?”

“Nicholas Othnan.” She burst into tears, covering her face with her hands. He wrote down their names, careful to spell them correctly.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, feeling the inadequacy of the words. “How old is he?”

“My son is four.” She shook her head. “Four! What could the demons want from him?”

A month ago, when he still lived on the commune, Brian would have assumed the reference to demons was purely metaphorical, a scathing commentary on the depraved immorality of urban life. Now he had seen actual demons, working as delivery boys and cleaning the city streets. He knew that magical parts of demons were harvested to operate machines like cameras and cars. But he had learned quickly that the portals between the human and demon worlds were tightly controlled by the Department of Demonological Affairs.

So who would have unleashed wild, uncontrollable demons so violently into a day care?

Brian tried to think of something encouraging to tell the woman, but the only words that came to him were religious texts from his childhood. He hadn’t found them very comforting himself, so he couldn’t imagine them being any more beneficial to this grieving parent.

“The doctors and nurses are very good. I’m certain he’ll get the best of care.”

The woman gave him a small smile. “Thank you.”

Brian made his way around the waiting room, gathering the names of relatives and deflecting desperate questions that he could not answer.

In the corner, Brian saw the police officer, sitting on a child’s plastic chair that looked far too small for him. His eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, and his face was ashen. He had blood oozing from a shallow wound across his neck.

And he was on fire.

Brian glanced around, but no one else seemed the least bit concerned about this. It was just another thing about Parmas City that amazed him. A man sat around, on fire, and other than giving him a wide berth, no one seemed to care.

The man was handsome in a roguish sort of way. He had delicate facial features, but his build was brawny and strong. He had long, almost feminine, eyelashes that contrasted nicely with his five o'clock shadow. His brown hair was longer and shaggier than Brian expected on a police officer, cut just below his ears. And every inch of exposed skin flickered and flared with blue and yellow flame.

The cop tensed, closing his eyes, and he whispered something under his breath. The flames died. But when he opened his eyes, they burst over him again, smoldering, the air around him wavering with the heat. Still no one reacted.

The cop kept glancing to the operating room. He clearly needed medical attention himself; his neck was bleeding, and he staunched it with his bare hand.

Tyra reappeared then, her expression severe as she quickly leafed through procedural binders and wrote down numbers.

Brian handed her his list of names. "Tyra?"

She didn't respond. He noticed she was writing down phone numbers from an emergency nurse roster.

"Shouldn't someone help that man over there?"

"Which man?" she snapped.

"The man on fire." He pointed.

Tyra looked up, scanned the room, and then scowled at him. "What are you talking about?"

The cop was an inferno. Could Tyra really not see that? Seconds later she was gone again, cell phone and list of numbers in hand.

The least Brian could do was offer the cop some water. Maybe it would cheer him up. Or put him out. He poured a cup and approached just as the cop covered his face with his hands.

Brian hesitated. "Here you go," he said softly, touching the back of the man's hand.

The man flinched away, eyes snapping open.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Brian said. "I just... If there's anything you need, let me know." He pressed the cup into the officer's hand.

The man stared at him, wide-eyed and shocked.

"I'm sorry," Brian said again, lamely. He reached out and touched the officer's head, like his mother used to do to him when he was upset.

Brian left him alone, but when he glanced back, the cop was still staring at him, touching his own head, where Brian had touched him, and looking as though Brian had just shot him through the heart.

Chapter Two

Detective Jay Yervant hated waiting.

Nothing grated on his nerves more than standing in lines or killing time. He was a man of constant movement, and if he wasn't actively engaged in something physical, he had to be on his way to engage in something physically active.

But as he sat outside Peter Marick's surgery, Jay had nothing to do other than wait. And while he waited, his mind raced, calculating, reviewing, judging his actions. He thought too much when given the opportunity to pause, and he hated intense personal reflection almost as much as he hated waiting.

He wanted a drink, badly. Or a smoke. Something to take the edge off his thoughts, which had grown particularly vitriolic in the last hour.

Jay tried pacing the hospital waiting room, but he nearly tripped on a guy's extended foot, and that scared him enough to keep still. Until Bridget came by with his spare pair of gloves, he wasn't going to move anywhere his hands could accidentally brush against something. He had done enough damage for one day already.

Marick's doctor, a nervous-looking man with a sour expression, told Jay that it was unlikely Marick would be conscious anytime soon and that Jay should just do everyone a favor and wait at home.

Jay told him to go fuck himself. And then he sat in a child-size plastic yellow chair, which pretty much canceled out any brawn in his rebuttal.

The chair was too small and uncomfortable, but Jay didn't have it in him to trade places with the distraught relatives taking up the rest of the waiting room.

He counted them. Eight sets of grieving parents. Three single parents or guardians.

And twelve mutilated children. That meant someone was missing.

Jay wondered which kid had no one there. Was it indicative of a motive? Or was it just bad traffic?

Jay patted his neck and was relieved to see the blood had finally clotted. He probably looked like shit. He'd have to disinfect the scratch when he got home. Nothing like surger demon germs to make a person's skin swell up like a balloon.

Jay shifted in the chair, replaying the images of the attack in his mind. It had seemed like a routine call. A passerby had noticed unusual black frost on the outside of the day care, and Jay had thought it was a simple cold hell soldier, nothing he and Marick hadn't handled before.

Inside, it had looked like the Adnihilo Zoo. Eight full-size, unrestrained demons were chewing the children like crackers. As Marick dialed for backup, he was struck by the spiked tail of a red-belly and flung against the wall, badly gored and bleeding.

That was when Jay began to burn. He blasted the red-belly with his shock-volt pistol, dropping the monster in its tracks. He rushed to Marick and tried to drag him out of the room using the shreds of his uniform, but his fist ripped through the fabric, charring Marick's shoulder.

Afraid that his touch would kill his partner, he let go and focused his attention on something he didn't care if he killed: the demons.

The backup did arrive, along with the fire department, and now the parents of all those little kids wept as their loved ones fought for life.

None of the demons had survived for questioning, so now Jay's mind whirled. There was no profit in these murders, so one of the children had to be the target. But who would summon eight demons to kill one little kid?

"Detective Yervant?"

Jay immediately stood as an exhausted-looking nurse approached.

"How is Marick?" Jay asked gruffly.

"He pulled through surgery," the nurse said. "But he's still unconscious. He has trauma to parts of his face, stomach, and lung, as well as severe burns over one arm."

Jay felt like tearing something apart. Heat radiated from him in uncontrollable waves. The nurse stepped back.

"Can I see him?" Jay asked. He closed his eyes and concentrated on a calming meditative mantra to bring down the roiling heat.

"I'm afraid not." The nurse frowned. "We have him sealed off in the burn ward in case of infection."

Jay opened his eyes, and heat burst forth once more. There was no way he could control his temperature when he was this upset.

"Thank you," Jay said between gritted teeth. He turned to leave. He wouldn't wait for Bridget to find him with his gloves. All this standing around was pointless. Anything was better than waiting for the man who had been his partner for four years, and one of his closest friends, to die.

Jay carefully made his way toward the hospital entrance. He passed by the man who had touched him earlier. He looked like a male model, young and flush with life, blue eyes

sparkling, dark black hair perfectly coifed despite the general worn state of his clothing. He was too dazzling to be in such a somber place. He flitted about the room talking to the bereaved.

At the doorway, Jay looked back again, and the man made eye contact. Jay felt a pleasant stirring in his groin. The guy was fucking gorgeous.

But what was weirder was that the man had touched him. Not on the shoulder or on clothing. He touched Jay's hand. And he hadn't burned.

His eye fell on the clipboard in the man's hand. Maybe there was a reason to talk to him after all.

"Is that a list of the parents' names? Mind if I have a look?" Jay asked.

The man presented him the clipboard, and Jay scanned the list of names.

"Is this everyone?" Jay asked.

"There's one girl whose name we don't know yet," the man said. "Her parents haven't made it in yet to identify the body."

Jay reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. "Here's my number. Give me a call when you find out the dead girl's name."

The man touched Jay's bare hand again as he reached for the card. Jay jerked his hand away. But the guy just smiled at him, pocketing the card, his skin fine, no burns, no damage.

Jay had never seen anything like it in all his years.

But he had also never seen a pack of demons slaughter a dozen children before, and so that took precedence. Whatever the guy's story was, that would have to wait. For now he had to hunt down a rogue sorcerer.

* * * * *

Jay drove across town to the small, cordoned-off building that once was the home of the day care. The sturdy brick exterior of the facility remained fully intact, although the

windows and roof were blown out. Inside, blackened reminders of habitation stood like shadows in the growing darkness. The charcoal silhouette of a chair. The sooty outline of a shoe rack. The dull heaviness of melted metal.

Jay spotted two officers crouched together in one corner of the room, their heavy blue armor marking them as fellow members of the Parmas City Police Department Metropolitan Demonic Unit, more colloquially known as “hell cops.” Their heads were close as they spoke in whispers.

Jay clambered through the wreckage of play toys, kids’ tables, and burned clothing. He nodded at the two officers.

Officer Bridget Carmichael smiled at him guiltily. “You probably wanted these an hour ago, huh?” She unlatched her armor and reached inside her uniform pocket, pulling out Jay’s thin black neoprene gloves.

He smirked. “Right on time as usual, Carmichael.” He slipped them over his hands, feeling instantly relieved.

“Sorry, boss, but Moran said this couldn’t wait.” She knelt again. “How’s Marick?”

Jay swallowed. “Alive, for now.”

Detective Ben Moran knelt beside Carmichael and pointed to a spot in front of him, in the air. It was getting dark, and Jay was tired, but he squinted and concentrated. The air twisted and warped, and pinkish colors spun in the fading light. It was like seeing a floating, filmy bubble in the shape of a door.

Jay frowned. “Why are there portal remnants here?”

Moran shrugged. “It’s odd, I’ll give you that. Nearest registered portal is three blocks west.”

Jay reached out to touch the filmy air. A dank, oily sensation crept through him. He felt sick and filthy. He grimaced.

Moran nodded. “I felt it too. Weird, huh?”

Jay had come across only a few illegal portals in his years as a police officer, and none of them had felt so tainted. Illegal portals were hard to hide, time-consuming to construct, and required massive energy. There was no way that someone could have built one here without the day care staff knowing about it. That meant it either had to be an inside job or else it was something new entirely. The greasy, wet-burned-skin feeling made Jay think it was probably the latter.

“Did you run the spectrum on it?” Jay asked.

Moran nodded. “Guess who.”

Jay narrowed his eyes. “Sair family?”

“Again.” Moran handed him the litmus strip. Jay looked at the stripes of watery color. Sair family DNA always left a yellowish trace behind on its conjury. And while this narrowed the list of suspects, there were thousands of Sairs in Parmas alone.

Bridget shook her head. “Fuck. I suppose you want me on the database, then?” she asked.

Jay frowned at the litmus strip. “Not yet. There are too many of them to just start looking through the phone book. We need to narrow the search.”

“Well, that I might be able to help you with,” Moran said. He handed Jay a plastic baggie. Inside was a small lock of hair.

“From one of the kids?” Jay asked.

Moran nodded. “But it wasn’t taken during the attack. This lock came over with the demons. It was in the red-belly’s claw.” He pointed to the charred remains of the claw that was being carefully bagged by the crime scene unit.

Jay clenched his jaw. He had burned that red-belly’s arm off himself. He held up the lock of hair, squinting. “So our perp summons the demons, gives them a DNA sample for them to sniff out, and embeds in them a desire to kill the match.”

"In the Sair family alone, there are two dozen sorcerers powerful enough to summon demons," Moran said dourly.

"Yeah, but how many of them can construct an illegal portal?" Jay added.

Bridget stared at a charred pair of shoes. "But why kill all the children?" she asked. "Why not imbue the demons with the simple murder of that one child?"

"He's probably hoping to cover his tracks and distract us from the real target," Jay told her. "Without this hair, we wouldn't know who the target was."

Bridget spat. "Those heartless, hotblood shitheads!" Then she blanched and looked wide-eyed at Jay. "I don't mean you, of course, boss!"

Jay raised an eyebrow at her. Then he turned to Moran. "Do we have an identification on the hair lock?"

"My computer's feeling sick, so he's a little slow today." Moran tapped gently at his laptop. Jay could feel waves of heat emanating from the machine, and heard something sigh inside.

"My brother enchants electronics," Jay told Moran. "He could probably take a look at it."

Moran shrugged. "He's been sick before. He'll get over it -- just gets sluggish. Here you go." Moran held out the laptop for Jay. The link showed a page from the Gene Registry, a baby photo of a girl named Sarla Lai. Under the fields for her parents, her mother, Ava Lai, was listed. Her father's space was left blank.

"She wasn't at the hospital today," Jay told them.

"Who, the girl? She's dead," Moran said.

"No. Her mother. I don't recognize the name from the waiting room log." Jay handed Moran back his computer and stretched. The wound at his neck itched furiously. "Find me Ava Lai's address. I'll pay her a visit."

"Right now?" Bridget scowled. "Boss, you need to rest."

“I’m fine.”

“You look like a surger cut the shit out of you,” she said.

“Which is funny, because that’s exactly what happened.”

Moran patted Jay on the shoulder brusquely. Jay flinched. “I’ll have it for you tomorrow.”

Jay hated waiting. But there was really no reason to hurry and be sloppy. The sorcerer had already killed the girl.

Jay hoped Ava Lai could tell him why her child would be the focus of such aggression. Jay swore to himself it had nothing to do with vengeance. He knew injuries were part of the job. But the image of Marick, deboned in front of him, was a painfully vivid reason why he wasn’t going to rest until he found the sorcerer responsible.

Chapter Three

Bridget e-mailed Ava Lai's address the next morning, along with her cell phone number.

When Jay arranged a meeting with her on the phone, she sounded terrible, voice thick with tears, and for a flicker of a second, Jay felt relief. He wasn't the one who would have to break it to her that her daughter was dead.

Ava Lai's breath hitched frequently, and she sniffled, but there was an undercurrent of rage in her tone that told Jay a great deal.

"Meet me this evening," Ava told him. "I can't talk now. I'm at work." She choked on tears.

"Miss Lai, the more information you give me now, the sooner I can follow up on what you tell me."

"It's that hotblood shitface, Razi." She sniffled. "That son of a bitch --"

"Razi?" Jay prompted.

"Razi Sair." Ava's voice was tight with anger. "You know that bastard wouldn't give me a dime in child support. Can you believe it? He's the son of the wealthiest man in the world, and he won't give me \$500 a month for his own daughter? What a piece of shit!"

Jay's entire body buzzed with excitement. This wasn't the first time Razi Sair's name had been linked with illegal sorcery.

"Did he threaten you?" Jay asked.

"The moment I told him I was pregnant." Ava's voice shook angrily. "I had to hide for the last two years. I wasn't going to ever contact that bastard again. But then when Sarla got sick, and the doc said she needed surgery..." Ava's voice faded, and Jay could hear her softly weeping on the other end.

"What did --"

"Just meet me tonight," Ava said, her voice rushed. "I'll tell you everything." Ava hung up the phone.

The fact that he would be going alone, without Marick, hit Jay hard.

He had a couple of hours before his meeting with Ava Lai, so he decided to stop by the hospital.

As Jay dressed, he wasted a good minute looking for his favorite pair of gloves before he remembered that he had lost them in yesterday's fight. He always went into combat with his armor off, hands bared. Demons burned as easily as humans. But when the day care caught ablaze, his gloves were left inside.

He hated the thin neoprene spares he kept, but they were better than walking around without his hands covered. Even though he only burned flesh, he had accidentally hurt too many people to comfortably go out without his gloves on. Jay's particular form of conjuring power often felt more like a handicap than a blessing. He supposed it was inevitable; a hundred years of inbreeding amongst the ten most powerful conjuring families of Parmas would inevitably lead to someone like him -- a man with so much energy coursing through him that it could no longer be contained.

Jay locked his door behind him and walked down the stairs of his building. He owned the entire top floor of an older brick warehouse that had recently been gentrified for the new

urban metrosexual. The second floor was a law firm, and the first was a gay bookstore. When he looked at the soot-stained brick walls of the neighboring buildings, the flashing neon, the mismatched congregation of rusting pipes, exposed drainage, and unintended weeds, Jay found the sight almost jarringly beautiful.

Jay walked briskly through his neighborhood. It was safe, if a little seedy, and a far cry from the neighborhood Jay had grown up in on the north side that sprawled along the palm-strewn beaches inhabited by the upper crust.

Most of the Yervant family could be found there. A street was named after them. The Yervant mansions were one of the tourist attractions on sightseeing maps for out-of-towners looking for the names of the great families, the ones who built their spell-powered cars and provided their life-enhancing pharmaceuticals and gave them psychic communication with their pets. Without the rich and famous on Yervant Street, where would the tourist industry be?

Not on Jeravani Street, ten blocks from the hospital and the last stop on the C line. Jeravani looked like a shithole, and sometimes even Jay's sensibilities rebelled against living there.

But Jeravani made up for its dilapidated presentation with other advantages. Gay bars lined the street for three solid blocks. The steak sandwiches at Rusher's Deli were the best, bar none.

And Jay fit in with an anonymous lack of presence that suited him just fine. He got enough attention being a hell cop everywhere else. Here, Jay could be himself, not just another hotblood set to inherit the family fortune.

Jay nodded to familiar faces as he walked down Jeravani Street. He exchanged greetings with a bouncer he knew and waved to the owner of a new bar across the street. While Jay's explosive energy made it harmful for him to ever touch another human being, he still found comfort here, among men with his own tastes. His eye briefly caught that of a man he had

met a few weeks prior. They had spent a relatively pleasant evening watching each other masturbate and now smiled at each other as they passed.

And while the temptation was oftentimes painful -- beautiful men walking by, reacting to him as strongly as he reacted to them, and yet untouchable -- it was still better than hiding alone in his old condo on the north side, pretending to be someone he wasn't.

At the hospital, Marick was still unconscious but showed improvement.

Jay stood outside the ICU window, looking at the landscape of bandages and bruises that was his partner. It would be a long time, if ever, before Marick returned to active duty. But the doctor informed Jay that Marick would survive and recover from his injuries. It was more than Jay had hoped, and so as he stared at his partner's bruised face, he felt a sense of relief.

When Marick's wife arrived, Jay beat a departure. He liked Marian, but Jay didn't want to have to explain what had happened during the attack. Again, he felt that flicker of fear, being the bearer of bad news. It was better to leave before the questions came.

As Jay left the ICU, he saw the slim figure of the man who had touched his bare skin the day before. He was leaving the hospital, backpack slung over his shoulder. Instinctively, Jay rushed after him.

The guy was young, in his early twenties. His thick black hair was styled carefully, but his clothes were worn and clearly used. There was an interesting hesitation in his step as he looked across the street at a yellow-skinned, ram-horned taxi driver. He glanced quickly away.

The neighborhood west of the hospital bordered on dangerous. Jay trailed the man from the hospital at a safe distance, wondering what the hell he was doing. He was in the middle of an investigation, and rather than work, he was following some guy home because he had touched him. Being a thirty-year-old virgin was turning him into a pervert.

The man turned down a shuttered and graffiti-strewn street and plunged deeper into the neighborhood. Now he was in the company of addicts and prostitutes.

At one point, this had been a quaint working community with family homes. Now each dilapidated residence slumped under the weight of years of neglect. Large, untended shrubs bulged out over the sidewalks. Broken cars sat like massive lawn ornaments in the middle of grassless yards.

The man stopped at a corner house with a wooden porch that slanted with rotted beams. Gang signs were written in black paint across the front. He turned the key and hastily stepped inside.

Jay trailed the man up the walkway, then found himself hesitating. He'd followed him all this way. It would be foolish to leave now. He would just ask the guy why he could touch Jay's skin. It was something novel and Jay wanted to learn more about it, that was all. It had nothing to do with the tightness of the man's ass or the mixture of masculinity and beauty in his face.

Jay heard a van screech to a halt behind him. He immediately ducked into the porch shadows, hidden by an overgrown oleander bush. This was ridiculous. Not only was he stalking the damn guy, he was hiding in the bushes.

A cheery whistle filled the air as a large blonde woman with breasts that were nearly popping out of her skintight tank top skipped up the porch steps. Jay looked at her, taken aback by the brazen half-nudity of her delivery costume. The tight spandex bike shorts barely covered her ass.

"Delivery!" she chirped, chewing her gum. She popped a bubble.

Jay leaned out from the shadows for a better look. The delivery boxes in her hands had no labels. And her skin had no pores.

Jay shook his head. Even living in this shithole, the man somehow had enough money to hire a succubus?

The demon knocked again, her perfect smile plastered on her face. “Delivery for Brian Day,” she said in a sultry voice.

The man opened the door. “I’m Brian Day.” He frowned. “But I didn’t order anything.”

The demon took in a deep whiff of air. And then she suddenly shifted, growing in size, skin darkening, growing hair. The thighs within her tight bike shorts widened and bulked out, growing meaty and hard. The demon metamorphosed into a large, brawny man.

The man, Brian Day, gaped at the demon. His face flushed. Jay raised an eyebrow. It seemed he wasn’t the only queer on the block.

The air smelled sickeningly sweet as the succubus released pheromones as part of its illusion.

Jay sank farther into the shadow. The demon finished changing and was now a strapping deliveryman with a roguish grin and two days’ worth of stubble. His tank top fit tight across well-developed abs. The smell of hot, greasy pizza and charbroiled beef wafted from the steaming boxes.

Brian stared openly. “Uh...I didn’t...order...”

“Paid for by an admirer,” the demon said cheerfully. He pushed himself through Brian’s door and shut it behind them.

Jay should leave.

He really should.

This was obviously just a role-playing prostitute. He had no business interfering.

Instead, he moved closer to the filmy window, to watch as the succubus offered his wares, food and otherwise. Jay felt like a filthy deviant. That didn’t stop the tingles of desire that shot through him, the excitement of stolen glances.

“You hungry?” the succubus asked. He held the boxes of food aloft and stepped closer, until he was standing only inches from Brian.

Brian's face flushed bright red. "Yeah." His glance wavered between the succubus's face and the pizza box.

"I got sausage mushroom pizza," the demon said. "Or chicken wings? You want chicken wings?" He held up the other box. "I also got a steak sandwich."

Brian looked hungrily at the boxes. While his nostrils flared at the smells, the succubus placed the boxes on the floor and took off his shirt. His smile didn't waver -- it stayed creepily perfect. Jay had seen far better impersonations of humanity from other demons. This guy was a rube.

Brian glanced at the succubus's face, and his lips parted. His eyes dilated with arousal, and he stepped closer.

Jay could smell the demon's pheromones even from outside the house. His dick hardened, and he saw Brian was also flushed with arousal. He moved even closer, captive to the sight and scent.

Brian hesitated, hands balled into fists at his sides. And then the demon leaned forward and kissed him.

Jay stood still, entranced, watching as Brian returned the succubus's kiss with pulsing hunger.

Jay, who had never himself kissed anyone, felt a surge of aching jealousy. It looked so damned good. The demon's tongue plunged into Brian's mouth, and Brian's body trembled.

The demon tore at Brian's clothes as they kissed. Within seconds Brian stood there in the middle of his living room naked.

The succubus blocked Jay's view of Brian's cock. But he could see the flush of desire across the rest of Brian's body. Unlike Jay's own body, hard and covered in hair, strong and scarred, Brian's body was perfect. Slim, flawless, pale. Brian's voice trembled as the demon kissed his way down Brian's chest, laving each nipple before sinking to his knees. The succubus looked up and smiled.

“Can I suck your cock, Brian?” the succubus asked.

Brian’s eyes stared down at him, pupils wide, hands shaking. “Yeah.”

Jay smirked. Like the answer would ever be no.

The demon smiled up at Brian and then placed his large palms on Brian’s buttocks, pulling his groin forward. Jay strained to see better. He watched the succubus pull Brian’s long, lean shaft deep into his mouth. Brian threw his head back, eyes clenched shut, and moaned.

Jay watched in silence. The succubus was good at his job. He pulled back completely and then slammed his head forward, sucking in all of Brian’s cock, burrowing his nose into Brian’s dark pubic hair. And then he pulled back and repeated the movement. One of his hands reached behind Brian. Jay couldn’t see exactly what he was doing, but suddenly Brian arched forward into the succubus’s mouth, crying out. Jay thought he could see the succubus pumping his finger into Brian’s ass. With his other hand, the demon fondled and cupped Brian’s balls.

Jay’s breathing was rapid, gasping. This was so sick -- and so good. This was better than porn. He could smell the pheromones, his own desire. The demon frigged Brian’s ass and sucked his cock with an inhumanly rapid rhythm now; Brian stunned between alternating thrusts of tongue and finger, clearly in heaven.

The demon’s figure shimmered. A large, spiny, blue tail slowly grew out of the base of his spine, and it whipped in the air like an eel. It coiled, ready to strike. Its entire length was studded with blades. Jay had seen those razor sharp snakes of muscle cut a man in half before he could blink.

Jay’s arousal died. He ripped his gloves off and kicked in the shabby door.

“Freeze!” he bellowed. He unholstered and charged his shock-volt pistol.

The demon spun, teeth growing, fangs pushing through his mouth. Its eyes split into red slits, and it screeched. Its skin rippled as it lunged.

The demon's tail whipped toward Jay with lightning speed, cracking the air. Jay snapped out his arm and grabbed the tail with his bare hand. The demon screamed as his skin burned, charred flesh and hair stinking the air. Jay jerked the demon down onto the ground.

It kept growing, scales bursting over its illusory human skin, tail twitching desperately in Jay's iron grasp.

"Metro Demonic Unit!" Jay shouted. He wasn't about to show his credentials. The demon thrashed as it burned. "You are under arrest!"

The demon tried to kick Jay's feet from under him. Jay stepped hard on the demon's stomach and kicked it. "Who summoned you?" he hissed. He aimed his pistol at the demon's head.

The demon continued to screech. Jay's fingers burned through flesh, and he could feel the raw bones of the demon's tail. The demon whipped it loose and coiled it close to its body. Jay slammed his free hand into the demon's stomach, and the flesh instantly burned.

"Who summoned you?" Jay shouted.

The demon hissed at Brian, who stood naked and stunned.

Jay put the barrel of his pistol against the demon's forehead, but before he could fire, a burst of yellow light blinded him. The succubus vanished in an instant. The smell of singed flesh mingled sickly with the salty, earthy perfume of sex pheromones and sausage pizza.

Jay lowered his pistol, breathing heavily. Then he gave the man a blinding smile.

"Hi."

Chapter Four

“What...” Brian shook his head to clear it. “What was that?”

“A succubus.” The cop holstered his pistol carefully and then stepped outside. He bent down and retrieved a pair of black gloves that he pulled on. He glanced at Brian. “Are you hurt?”

Brian shook his head again. He wasn’t hurt, but he felt sluggish and drugged, his mind hazy, a soft, alluring sexual cloud permeating him, leaving him flustered with unspent arousal.

“Where did it go?” Brian asked.

“I don’t know,” Jay said. “It used an illegal portal to escape.”

Belatedly, Brian realized he was still naked. He looked around for his trousers.

“Here.” The cop handed him his pants. For a moment, the cop’s glance dropped to Brian’s crotch. He quickly looked away.

“Thank you.” Brian watched the man’s face flush. A ghostly aura of flames suddenly burst across the cop’s arms and head, and he appeared wreathed in fire.

Brian felt heated, but not from the flames. The succubus had stirred something in him, wanton and powerful, and he felt almost choked with sexual need.

The cop was handsome, brown hair and soft brown eyes. Brian recognized him from the hospital the day before. If his face hadn't given him away, then Brian certainly would have remembered the halo of fire surrounding his body.

Brian reached out brazenly and touched the cop's chest.

The cop immediately jerked away from Brian's hand. "Back off!"

"Sorry." Brian quickly pulled on his pants, embarrassment making his face even redder. "I'm sorry...so, you're a police officer?"

The officer flashed Brian his badge. "Detective Jay Yervant, Parmas Police Department, Metro Demonic Unit."

"My name is Brian Day." Dressed, he didn't feel any less aroused. His trousers constricted his erection painfully. He suddenly tilted his head. "There's a demonic unit with the police?"

Jay raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you know?"

"I'm not from around here." Brian had to breathe deeply to control his urges. He could smell sex in the air, his sex, and something muskier, coming from the cop. He looked to Jay's trousers and saw a bulge, and the sight inspired him enough to reach forward once more. "Detective Yervant --"

"Don't touch me!" Jay stepped back. Frustration and fear flashed across his face.

"I'm just..." Brian swallowed. He felt drunk on the need to touch, be touched. "I feel..."

"It's the succubus," Jay explained. "His chemistry released pheromones into the air. You'll probably feel the effects for a few hours."

"And you?" The pheromones, or whatever it was, were making Brian far more direct than he usually was. "Is it affecting you too, or...or is it me?"

Jay turned away without answering. He glared at the spot where the demon had vanished, as if blaming the air. He reached out a hand and touched the space in front of him. Then he shuddered.

Jay then crouched beside one of the food boxes. He lifted the lid with a gloved hand, but there was nothing inside.

“But I smelled pizza!” Brian cried, disbelieving. He reached down and opened the other two boxes, which were also empty.

“The succubus is a creature that can change its appearance to meet a person’s desires. It feeds off hungers, giving you the sensation that you are experiencing what you want.” Jay reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic container. Despite the gloves, he dexterously withdrew a small, thin piece of paper. He glanced up to Brian and smirked. “You must have been hungry, and he sensed that.” He pressed the strip of paper on the delivery box. The strip immediately began to change colors.

“Do you have any idea who would have summoned the demon?” Jay asked.

Brian shook his head. “No idea. I didn’t even know succubuses existed.”

“Succubi.”

“What?”

“Plural form.” Jay looked back down at his paper.

“Oh.” Brian felt embarrassed again. Now that his heart wasn’t racing from flirtation and assault, he was beginning to realize what a fool he must appear in front of this hardened officer. “Look, Detective Yervant --”

“You can call me Jay.” Jay stood and offered Brian his hand.

“I thought I couldn’t touch you.”

“These gloves are insulated.”

“Oh.” Brian shook his hand warily. He felt extremely foolish. He should know all this. Probably everyone in Parmas knew better than to touch flaming men.

Jay grabbed the paper from the box, and frowned. "Damn."

"What is that?" Brian asked.

"A litmus test. It can trace genetic stains from demonic presences and help determine who made this portal." He shook his head. "Unfortunately, this one is untraceable."

"Does that happen often?"

"No." Jay glared at the paper.

"Are all...succubi...so deadly?"

Jay stared at him, and Brian had the distinct feeling, once again, that he'd asked a stupid question. "You really aren't from around here, are you?"

Brian flushed. "I grew up on a conjure-free commune."

Jay's eyebrows lifted. "Really?"

Brian shrugged. "I didn't know there were such things as portals to demon worlds a month ago."

"Well, succubi are common. Most are vetted before they're allowed to take up residence here," Jay explained. "They work in the pleasure industries as prostitutes."

"Oh." The word sent blood rushing south through Brian's body once more.

Jay frowned. "Is there a conflict between your commune and any sorcerer or conjuring agency?"

"I don't know. Even if there is, I wouldn't be part of it. I ran away. They don't know I'm here."

"You ran away? Why?"

"I...I didn't fit in." Brian flushed again.

Jay hesitated for a moment, staring at Brian oddly. "Look, Brian, someone went through the trouble of finding you, summoning a demon, instilling in him a drive, finding

your address, and constructing an untraceable portal. They broke the law and performed some tricky sorcery. Someone wants you dead. Why?"

Brian's sexual haze was giving way to fear. "I don't know. Honestly! I've never had an enemy in my life. Okay, that's not entirely true. I once tricked this guy named Joe out of forty-five dollars back on the commune, and he got mad at me afterward for it. Oh, and then, once I stole the keys to Margaret's four-wheeler, and she --"

"Quiet," Jay snapped suddenly. He tilted his head, closing his eyes as if listening to something distant. When his eyes opened, they were bright and mirthless.

"Do you have any pet demons?" he asked.

"No."

"Spell technology? A camera, computer, or phone made by Dashner, or Tarvo, or Yervant industries?"

"Nothing. I don't own anything enchanted," Brian said.

Jay closed his eyes again. When they snapped open, his nostrils flared.

Suddenly he ripped off his gloves and reached out to touch the wall. He ran his bare hands along the wall slowly, as if reveling in feeling the fineness of water-damaged wallpaper.

He moved his hand over an air bubble and instantly the wall steamed and charred.

Jay growled. He punched his fist through the wall and yanked out a small creature, no bigger than his hand. It had no face but was clearly alive -- an assortment of hairlike tentacles whirled furiously around its dull gray exoskeleton. Jay gripped it in his fist, and the creature immediately caught fire. Jay tossed it to the floor and stamped it out gently with his shoe.

"Pick him up for me," Jay commanded as he pulled on his gloves again.

Brian worried the creature would be hot. But when he picked up the demon, it was cool in his hands. Half of its tendrils were burned and curled at the edges.

Jay took the creature from him.

"It's a spy." He shook it, and a little squeak came out. "Probably a zenazar. They're so small, most nets can't catch them." Jay held the creature up to his eye and smirked.

"Guess what? You're coming back to the station with me."

"What is going on?" Brian couldn't control his anxiety anymore. "You tell me that someone is trying to kill me, and now someone is spying on me? Why? I haven't done anything!"

Jay frowned. "That's what I hope we can get from this guy." He shook the little demon for emphasis.

"I've only been here a month," Brian started. He stared at the stained carpet and had an idea. "You know, the last tenant of this apartment was arrested before I arrived. Maybe the demons are after him?"

Jay frowned, but said nothing.

"Why are you here anyway?" Brian suddenly asked.

The cop's frown deepened. "I...was in the neighborhood." He shook his head. "Just keep your door bolted and don't let anyone you don't know inside until I find out who attacked you. Is that clear?"

Brian nodded.

"Do you still have my card?" Jay asked.

Brian shook his head. "No, but I put your number into my cell phone." He grinned at the cop and then felt very foolish, like it was some terrible pickup.

Jay was looking at him oddly, as if he were a menu with small font. "Well, call me if you have any problems."

"All right. Thank you." Brian showed him to the broken door. "Oh, and Detective...?"

"Yeah?" Jay turned and faced him.

Brian flushed. "I'm sorry I came on to you like that. I'm not...I'm normally not like this."

Jay smiled at him. He looked suddenly very sweet. "It's all right. Just the pheromones."

"Just the pheromones," Brian repeated, although the way Jay stared at him now was stirring his cock again.

Jay hesitated at the door. He appeared as though he wanted to ask Brian something. But then he shook his head and walked away.

Brian watched him go and then shut the door quickly. He looked at the hole in his wall. And the empty boxes. Man, could he use a slice of pizza now. Sadly, all he had was a can of beans in the cupboard, and he didn't get paid for another day.

He originally had planned on going to sleep. He had pulled an all-nighter at the hospital, finally finding use as an errand boy for the slammed hospital staff, and his mind was worn with work and the exhausting atmosphere of grief.

But now his body was charged, and his mind raced. The idea that someone wanted to kill him was as ridiculous as it was terrifying. He knew the pastors on the commune would be furious at him for leaving the fold, and he suspected that his mother and stepfather would feel angry and betrayed at his desertion. But he truly doubted any of them would want him dead. And he was certain they would never use a demon to conduct such ugly business.

Sorcery, after all, was the reason most of the folks joined the commune in the first place. They believed that the curses of the modern world were the fault of the powerful conjuring families of the capitol and that they had opened the gates to Hell and poisoned God's world.

When Brian once asked his mother why she joined, he assumed it was because she, too, felt the religious calling of the congregation, or hated the big city and its corruptive influences.

Instead, she simply said, "A man," and left it there.

Brian knew little else about what compelled his mother to abandon her family in the city and plant roots in the small community. He had always assumed the *man* reference meant she fell in love with his stepfather and that was that. But now he suspected it might have had more to do with a man here. It might have even been a reference to his real father.

The thought propelled Brian out of his fear-induced stupor. He took a quick shower, finished the job that the succubus had started, and then changed into clean clothes. He packed his research into his backpack and headed out once more, ignoring the stares and taunts of the passersby, walking the five blocks to the nearest subway station.

He had only been in the city a month, but he knew this route well already. He muscled for space in the crowded afternoon train, getting off and transferring near the zoo, and then taking the A line north toward the capitol buildings. He was virtually propelled out at his station by the press of bodies. He took the escalator up to the street level, still delighting in the joy of the moving staircase. No one around him seemed to realize how fun this was, sliding slowly upward toward a pinprick of light, the smell of exhaust from above combining with the stale subway air below, the sticky grip of the handrail, the silence of so many strangers quietly ascending to the surface of the world.

On the street, Brian confidently turned left, his bearings accurate despite the fact that the afternoon sun and all sense of direction were obscured by the sharp rise of surrounding skyscrapers.

Brian smiled as he walked. He loved the strange mix of faces and races and people around him. He loved that a green faun scuttled past him, mumbling, "Sorry, sir and madam! Sorry, sir and madam!" as he carried a box in his small hands. Everything about Parmas was exciting and raw and frantic. He gazed in the museum shop as he walked past. A beautiful book on Parmas architecture was on display, and Brian was nearly tempted to step inside and inquire as to the cost. Then his stomach growled, helping him strategize his finances accordingly.

The Gene Registry was quieter than the other times Brian had been there. Each visit had presented him with more clues, but no definitive answers as to the identity of his father.

Truthfully, he had little to go on. He knew his father lived in the city and was from a powerful family. He knew his mother hated him. But her angry requests for him to stop asking questions had only fueled his curiosity.

The woman at the reference desk smiled as she recognized Brian. She had helped him on his previous visits. They had run a spectral analysis of his DNA, and she had informed Brian that he was a member of the Sair family.

"You're lucky," she had informed him. "You're from one of the old sorcerous families. You know...Yervant, Dashner, Sair. I'm sure you've heard the names. Those people have serious bank. You might just inherit something."

This concerned him more than excited him, however, as he worried that those he contacted would assume he was only after money.

Brian had written almost a hundred letters to Sairs within Parmas, asking if they knew his mother and if he could meet with them. But he had not heard a thing since, and so today he hoped he could get work addresses or more details on which he could personally follow up.

The reference librarian and he researched together for an hour, and Brian jotted down the addresses of major Sair companies, including Sair Pharmaceuticals, the Sair biofield generation plant, and the Sair Bakery, where most of the city's signature bread was produced, fluffy and enchantingly soft.

Armed with his list of locations, Brian felt accomplished. He had almost forgotten the arousal and crushing fear of being hit on and nearly murdered. It seemed funny now, like exactly the sort of thing that should happen to him in the big city. It was what all those pastors had warned him about as a boy.

"You'll be sodomized by a demon!" one of the old pastors loved to lecture.

Damn, if he hadn't been almost right.

But instead of souring Brian's infatuation with city life, it made him more excited to be here. Parmas was everything it was made out to be. Dangerous, exciting, sexual.

And even though he felt like a country rube, someday, he swore, he was going to fit right in.

Chapter Five

Ava Lai's apartment was on the south side of Parmas, near the commercial docks. The complex was large and shabby, but in front of her door, Ava had potted geraniums and a cheerful kitty doormat. A bright plastic WELCOME! was spelled out on the door.

And the door was ajar.

Jay stared at it for a moment. "Shit." He rapped on the door and it opened. "Miss Lai? It's Detective Yervant from the Demonic Unit." He rested his hand on his pistol. "Miss Lai?"

No one answered. There were lights on inside. He hesitated, wondering if he had enough justification to enter without a warrant.

Then he felt it again -- that slick, nauseating sensation of cold, rotten skin and filthy water. The sensation was identical to the one at the day care and in Brian Day's apartment. Jay slammed open the door, walking through the narrow hallway with his pistol charged and aimed in front of him.

He followed the sickening sensation to the bedroom. A woman hung from the ceiling rafters by a noose. She didn't move despite the breeze from the open window. Her neck was purple. She was clearly dead.

“Shit,” Jay said again. He walked around the small apartment checking closets and hidden spaces until he was sure he was alone. Then he holstered his pistol and called for backup.

As the police made their way, he walked around the body to see the woman’s face. It was Ava Lai, her face recognizable from her gene registry photo even through the bloated contusions of a hanging. Below her, on the bed, was a simple handwritten suicide note:

“I miss Sarla. I’ve gone to be with her.”

Jay stared at the note. Nothing was right about this.

Especially not the filmy portal near her dressing table.

Jay stared at it, forcing himself nearer as his body shuddered in repulsion. What the hell *was* this? He had seen more illegal portals this week than he had previously in ten years on the force. He withdrew a litmus strip and held it against the filmy residue of the doorway, but, as expected, it came back blank.

He stared once more at the hanged woman. An autopsy would confirm whether she truly died by hanging, but the portal residue suggested an external influence.

There was a connection between her death and Sarla’s. But what did it have to do with Brian’s apartment? The same, creepy sensation slithered down Jay’s spine at that unidentifiable portal.

Unable to determine anything else from the residue, Jay examined the rest of Ava’s room.

Photos of Ava, Sarla, and their friends were tucked around the dressing table mirror with an attention to geometry. Ava looked happy. Sarla looked darling. And nothing about them seemed enchanted.

Beside the small television he found a stack of files. There were more photos in here, some dog-eared, some stained, and a large stack with various men. He must have stumbled upon the ex-boyfriend file. There was a series with a stout, balding fellow; another half a

dozen with a beanpole of a man skiing; and then a stack of pictures with a man's face blurred beyond recognition by some kind of anonymity spell.

Sirens broke through the silent evening, and Jay reassembled the file. The crime scene folks would want everything back the way he found it.

The police burst into the apartment like a cyclone. Sergeant MacIan from homicide showed up moments later with his partner, George Finn, a man who was never on good terms with Jay. They glanced at each other with obvious disdain.

"Sorry to hear about Marick," MacIan said, shaking Jay's hand. "He was a good cop."

"He's not dead yet," Jay said dryly. "He'll be back."

MacIan gave Jay a sympathetic look. His partner glared at Jay.

"What does this have to do with demons?" Finn asked. "You're out of your jurisdiction."

Jay raised an eyebrow at MacIan, who seemed embarrassed by his associate. MacIan and Jay had worked together in the past, and while they weren't friends, they respected each other.

"This woman's child was murdered yesterday by a pack of demons," Jay told Finn. "And we had arranged to meet and discuss the case. It looks like someone got to her first."

"That's not your call," Finn glared.

"You got a problem?" Jay asked.

Finn crossed his arms. "Yeah. I don't like hotbloods pretending to be working class. I don't like hell cops barging in on the business of real cops. And, on top of it all, I don't like fags."

Jay gripped him by the front of his shirt and shoved Finn against the wall. Finn went instantly pale, and his fear thrilled Jay.

"Well, don't you worry," Jay whispered in his ear. "Fags don't like you, either."

“Knock it off!” MacIan yanked Finn toward him. “Damn it, can’t you keep calm for a fucking minute?” MacIan gave Jay a pained look. “Sorry, Yervant.”

Jay nodded to him. “I’ll see you.”

“Say hi to Marick from me,” MacIan shouted over his shoulder.

Jay made his way toward the front door, breathing deeply and repeating his calming mantra to bring down his heat. As he walked through the kitchen, he had to slide past the coroner and an officer, and a moment of panic welled in him at the closeness.

As he made his way back to Enyalios Station, Jay managed to calm himself. Cops like Finn used to rile him daily. Over the years the situation had improved, but Jay couldn’t tell if this was because he got better at controlling his rage at the ostracism or because the other officers had grown to respect Jay too much to push him out.

By the time Jay walked into Enyalios Station, his flames were down to a slow, gentle burn.

Even at eight o’clock the station was far from quiet. If anything, the later the hour, the livelier it seemed to get. Jay threaded his way through the crowd of those awaiting arrest or paying bail and made for the second floor, where the demonic unit shared office space with domestic crimes.

He passed Lieutenant Sam Dashner on the stairs and looked immediately to the door. He had just managed to control his anger, he didn’t need it flaring up again. Dashner was a cop like Finn, who rankled Jay, once calling him a “genetic throwback” and questioning whether it was even safe to have Jay around civilians. The fact that this was the asshole who got promoted before Jay and other more experienced cops always fueled the fire of Jay’s rage.

It was because of men like Dashner that Jay rarely spent any time at the station itself. He preferred working the streets. He left the tedious and daunting paperwork to Marick, who felt some perverse joy in filling out forms. Jay suddenly realized he was going to have to

do his own paperwork during Marick's recovery, and the thought immediately soured his mood.

Jay made his way to Captain Pollar's office, but was intercepted by Bridget Carmichael, the demonic unit administrator, who held a paper bag with something in it that appeared to be squirming.

"I have to release your zenazar," she told Jay. "Sorry. We can't find reason to hold him."

"What!" Jay stared at her in shock. "The little prick was hiding in someone's wall. He has to be spying!"

Bridget shrugged. "Well, we can't force him to talk without reasonable cause, and he's not volunteering any information of his own."

"Since when do we care about reasonable cause when it comes to demons?" Jay snapped.

Bridget sighed. It was a growing issue within the department, the treatment and rights of the demons within the city. They all worked with demons that were reliable, hardworking, and fearless. But Jay's interactions always took him to the darker sides of demonic alliances. He didn't like the idea of giving them too many rights.

"Can I just have a few minutes alone with him?" Jay asked, holding his hand out for the bag.

Bridget smirked. "You know the answer to that." She made toward the door.

"Wait," Jay said, but she didn't hear him. Cursing under his breath, he reached out and touched her shoulder. He had his gloves on, and so she simply turned and smiled.

No disaster. Breathe deeply.

"Let me just look at him. You can stand here and watch in case I commit adnihilocide."

Bridget warily handed him the paper bag.

Jay looked at the steel-colored, tentacle-strewn fellow inside.

“Do we know if he understands English?”

Bridget nodded. “Battleby the translator said he could.”

“Look at me,” Jay told the demon. The tentacles shot upward, the only sign of being heard. Jay glared one eye into the bag. “If you do anything to hurt that kid, I’m going to personally visit your godforsaken hellhole and kill every single last one of you motherfuckers, do you understand me?”

The tentacles waved frantically in circles.

“I’m glad we had this little talk.” Jay rolled up the top of the paper bag and shoved it back into Bridget’s hands, feeling only enormously foolish. He’d just threatened with annihilation an urchin in a paper bag.

“Yervant!”

Jay turned to see Captain Pollar waving him into his office.

Jay went to him. He didn’t have a chance to sit down before Pollar pointed his finger at him.

“Focus.”

Jay frowned. “Excuse me?”

“What’s with this zenazar business? You need to concentrate on the day care massacre.”

“I am.” Jay cracked his neck. “But a guy got in trouble on my way home, and I promised I’d look into it for him. I found that demon spying in his wall.”

Pollar sighed and sat down. He looked tired. His skin had an unnaturally pinkish hue that suggested he was taking high doses of Parafect, Sair Pharmaceutical’s number one-selling life enhancer.

“A peeping tom,” Pollar said. Jay felt the blood freeze in his veins, horrified that his voyeuristic afternoon was seen by someone. And then he realized the captain was talking about the zenazar.

Pollar shook his head. "Forget about the zenazar for a moment and tell me where you are with the massacre."

Jay filled him in on Ava's suspicious suicide. "I want to have a chat with Razi Sair," Jay told him.

"We don't have any evidence directly linking him," Pollar said. "Unless he comes out and admits something, it won't work."

"I just want a few details on his relationship with Ava," Jay urged. "She accused him in our conversation, and she has pictures of him in her apartment."

Pollar raised an eyebrow. "Pictures? Really?"

"Well, pictures of someone wearing an anonymity spell."

Pollar shook his head. "That, by definition, could be anyone."

"Ava doesn't seem like the kind of lady who hung out with a lot of sorcerers," Jay said. "And it's all I have to go on right now."

Pollar sighed. "The second a cop shows up at Sair Pharmaceuticals, he'll be escorted off the premises by a legal force the size of a football team. Unless we have direct evidence and a charge, it will do you no good."

"Sometimes I can get information while I'm getting no information," Jay reminded him.

Pollar shrugged. "You want to waste your time? Go ahead." He pointed his finger at Jay again. "Bring someone with you. I'll assign a temporary partner until we come up with someone permanent."

Jay felt a full-bodied rejection of the idea. "No. I can do this myself."

Pollar stared at him.

"I don't want another partner. I don't *need* another partner. Marick is going to recover."

“In what, a year?” Pollar’s tone softened. “I’m sorry, Jay. You and Marick were a good team. But you need someone working with you on this case.”

“Not to get myself escorted off Sair property, I don’t.” Jay smirked. “Look, I’m just going to talk to some businessman. Besides, who do you have to spare anyway?” Jay knew the department was strapped for staff resources, human and otherwise. They didn’t have someone to partner with Jay even if Jay wanted it.

A muscle in Pollar’s jaw twitched, which made Jay smile. The captain’s twitches only came when he was going to agree to something he didn’t like.

“Fine. But keep me posted. And don’t do anything rash. I don’t need to lose two of you in one week.”

“I’ll be careful.”

* * * * *

Sair Pharmaceuticals owned a massive facility in the industrial west corridor of the city. The laboratory and main office took up five square blocks and rose like a black obelisk on the horizon, towering over the factories and smaller industrial parks around it.

Bridget had made Jay an appointment for eight the following morning, but Jay showed up early, hoping to fluster Razi Sair and also to grant Jay a chance to take in the atmosphere of Sair’s world.

Jay was glad that he would be interviewing Razi. Most of Parmas had a very healthy fear and deep respect for Razi and his father, Bergen Sair, for they owned half the city, and their products saved countless lives. Interactions with the upper crust left many of Jay’s coworkers flustered. They were used to working with angry demons that grunted or spoke in strange, single-syllabic languages and whose drives were easy to determine.

Razi, like so many of the hotbloods, was aloof, mysterious, and calculating. His motives were never easy to read, and he had prestige and money to protect him.

However, none of this mattered a damn to Jay, who grew up in the same country clubs as Razi. He had even met Razi before, at charity events and at the annual boat races. Jay couldn't read him either, but he, at least, was not intimidated by his financial credentials.

At seven-thirty in the morning, the factory was already in full swing, and the offices lit up the obelisk like an LED display. Smartly dressed, black-skinned Thenmen demons escorted Jay to the top floor of the tower. He waited in a plush, cream-colored lounge while Razi was informed of his arrival.

When he was shown into Razi's office, Jay realized even half an hour early was too late for a man like Razi. He sat behind his desk, flanked by a team of silk-suited men with very severe expressions. Lawyers, no doubt.

"Detective Yervant," Razi said, rising from his chair to shake Jay's hand. "Please have a seat and tell me what this is about."

Jay studied the man. Razi was attractive in a yachting lifestyle sort of way. His even tan complimented his large blue eyes, and his black hair was short, neat, and only slightly peppered with gray. He wore an expensive dark blue suit and silk tie, and had a gold watch on his wrist that Jay knew cost more than his annual salary on the force.

The men surrounding Razi stared at Jay coldly. Razi looked Jay over with a calculating grin. Jay wasn't sure if he was staring at Jay's own expensive, charcoal silk suit or the flames that he knew burst from him like a torch. Jay always made an impression with the sorcerers; it was one thing he could thank his burning for.

"I'd prefer to speak with you alone," Jay ventured.

Razi motioned toward his men. "These are my legal advisors. As my lawyers they have every right to be present in the room during any questioning."

"I simply want to ask you about your relationship with a woman named Ava Lai."

"Is this part of an investigation?" one of the men to Razi's right asked.

Jay raised an eyebrow. "Yes."

“Is my client being detained for any reason?”

“No. I am following up on background information for Miss Lai.”

The man who spoke leaned over and whispered in Razi’s ear. Razi’s expression did not change.

“My client will not speak unless he is required to do so,” one of the lawyers stated.

“How well did you know Ava Lai?” Jay asked, keeping eye contact with Razi.

“You don’t have to answer that,” one of the other lawyers said.

“Do you know that she was murdered last night?” Jay asked.

Razi’s expression did not change. Neither did the lawyers’. “You don’t have to answer that,” was repeated.

Jay swallowed his anger. He was about to leave, but then he felt it -- a dank hotness, like disease or foul breath. The sensation made Jay feel as though he were plummeting. Jay scanned the room. “Have you been in contact with Miss Lai over the last month?” he asked, quickly looking around.

“He does not have to answer any of your questions unless charges are brought forth or Mr. Sair is subpoenaed,” the third lawyer stated.

Jay breathed in slowly. He could smell the hot air of demonic devices present -- the computer on his desk, the security system in the wall. He could hear the small foreign chirpings of microscopic demons inside Razi’s desk, where he must have had translation equipment and some form of voice recorder. Jay could feel the waves of heat coming from Razi’s phone.

But this was a stronger, more powerful sensation. It was coming from Razi himself. Jay narrowed his eyes. He casually stretched his hands forward and felt his fingers almost drawn to the necklace around Razi’s neck. He wore some great source of power there. It felt hot and rank.

“Where were you last night between six and eight p.m.?” Jay asked.

“I think this interview is at an end.” Razi stood and offered his hand once more. “Thank you for your time, Detective.”

Jay stepped forward and shook Razi’s hand. Even through the neoprene gloves he could feel the odd power emanating from around Razi’s neck, from his medallion. It wasn’t just enchanted. It was something darker, older.

Jay left the office. Surprise. He’d gotten nothing from Razi at all. Captain Pollar had been right. But at the same time, Jay knew there was a connection. He just had to make the link.

* * * * *

When Jay stopped by the hospital, he was pleased to see that Marick was finally conscious.

Jay sat beside him and listened as Marick explained in detail all of the surgeries he was scheduled to have over the next few months to repair his damaged internal organs.

“And get this, Jay,” Marick said with a tired smile. “They’re going to take part of my ass and graft it on my face.”

Jay laughed, horrified and yet absolutely relieved that Marick’s undefeatable sense of humor had survived the assault.

“Well, I always did call you a buttface.”

“I guess I’m going to be a candidate for testing one of those new eyes your dad is making too,” Marick said.

“Really?” Jay didn’t like the idea of experimenting with prototypes on his friends. “You sure you want to do that?”

Marick gave a little shrug, the best he could, bound as he was. “Marian thinks it would be sexy if I had an eye patch. But I’d like to have depth perception. And those new eyes can download all sorts of information and give me demonic readings.”

“Yeah, and they also have pieces of Laprozome for lenses,” Jay warned him. “I don’t like the idea of permanently installing parts of their predatory little minds inside you. You’re fucked up enough as it is.”

Marick chuckled, and then he grimaced. “God, don’t make me laugh. It hurts like a motherfucker.”

“Sorry.”

Marick grinned. “Laprozome, huh? Does that mean I get two dicks like they have?”

“Nope. Just their endless need to procreate.” Jay smiled. “Oh, and their 10/10 infrared-enhanced vision.”

“Sign me up.”

“Okay.”

“How’s the case going?”

Jay filled him in on his investigation. When he told him about his morning appointment with Razi Sair, Marick’s expression darkened.

“If it’s him, it’s going to be hard to arrest him,” Marick said weakly.

“I’m not afraid of Razi Sair’s legal army. Murder is still murder, no matter how rich you are.”

Marick frowned. “Let’s say it is Razi. Why? What does he have to fear from a four-year-old girl? Even if it is his daughter. What is it about her or what her mother knows that could be enough of a threat as to call down such a noticeable force?”

Jay shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“We know it isn’t power,” Marick said. “His father, Bergen, has all the influence they need. And it can’t be money either. What’s his old man -- seventy? Seventy-five? So when Bergen dies, Razi will be rich.”

“Maybe it has something to do with that medallion,” Jay suggested. “It was giving off huge power, Marick, the kind that I rarely see, the kind inside a portal and...well, me.”

Marick closed his eyes. He was growing paler the longer the conversation continued, and Jay realized he was being selfish. He loved bouncing ideas between them on an investigation. But Marick was far too ill to be thinking this hard over something that was Jay’s responsibility.

“You need to sleep,” Jay said.

Marick licked his parched lips. “You need to talk to Bergen.”

“What?” Jay frowned.

Marick opened his eyes. “You need to find out more about Razi, but not from him. Talk to his old man.”

“If Razi has three lawyers, then Bergen’s going to have ten.”

“Can’t you use your family connections to meet with him privately? Your dad and he probably golf together every week.”

Jay stared at his hands but said nothing.

“Jay, sometimes using your family’s name can be a good thing. You shouldn’t be so ashamed of them.”

“I’m not ashamed,” Jay said quickly. “It has nothing to do with shame.”

Marick’s unbandaged eye narrowed. “What is it then?”

Jay shrugged. “I don’t fit in.”

“Because you’re gay?”

“Because I’m a genetic throwback who’s constantly on fire.” Jay tried to smile but ended up just clenching his teeth. “I’m not a lot of use to them, am I?”

Marick looked at Jay oddly.

Jay swallowed. His throat felt thick and blocked. “For God’s sake, Marick, I couldn’t even give you CPR when you needed it. And I nearly killed you trying to get you out of there.”

“You saved me,” Marick said emphatically. He reached out and touched Jay’s gloved hand. Jay flinched and pulled his hand back. “Jay, give yourself a break. You got me out of there. You fought eight full-size murdering demons on your own. Some of those kids are going to live, and that’s all you, man. You did that. So stop beating yourself up.”

Jay shook his head. “I’m damned sorry about your shoulder.”

Marick snorted. “Forget about it. My shoulder is the least of my worries. I have half a lung, half a stomach, and am missing an eye. Do you think I care if I have a scar on my arm?”

“I burned through your tendons. I could feel them burning in my hands.”

Marick was silent for a long moment. And then he lifted his good arm and weakly punched Jay in the chest.

Jay lifted his head from his hands and stared at him, surprised.

“Do you know what I want more than anything?” Marick said at last.

Jay swallowed. “What?”

“I really want you to relax.” Marick smiled. “You know what you need, my friend?”

Jay shook his head.

“You need to get laid.”

Chapter Six

Brian visited half a dozen Mr. Sairs, and not one of them confessed to being his dad.

They all shared some similar facial features -- a long, thin nose, dark hair, smooth skin. Some were corpulent. Some were thin. Old, young, all these men, these powerful barons of Parmas City, they all looked at Brian with varying degrees of indifference, sympathy, or hostility, but none of them claimed to know his mother, and none of them embraced him as his long lost son.

Despite the depressing results of his search, at least Brian became better acquainted with the city itself. Most of the Sairs lived on the north end, but they worked everywhere, and only two of them were kind enough to respond by inviting him home. For the most part, he showed up in law offices, medical labs, in sales departments, nervously clutching the photo of his mother and him as a child, mentally prepared for the worst.

He now knew the complex subway system almost by heart.

And he had experienced some interesting moments. One of the men, Marty Sair, a developer whose office overlooked the beachfront promenade, wasn't his father but still took Brian out on his sixty-five-foot schooner for a joyride. Brian had never been on the water before, and the feeling of the breeze through his hair, standing on the bow as the boat

plunged through the rough ocean waters, made him exhilarated unlike anything else he had ever experienced.

Apparently, those completely unrelated to him were more interested in bonding than his own flesh and blood was.

Brian finally decided to visit the grand facilities of Sair Pharmaceuticals. He signed up for one of the tours of the facility, hoping to catch some glimpse of the people behind the great company.

Brian took the subway and then a city bus out to the industrial park. Sair Pharmaceuticals looked like God had hurled a massive spear onto Earth -- a spike of corporate office space, black and domineering over the landscape. The factory consisted of half a dozen flat-roofed, massive rectangles with important-looking gold coded numbers along each door.

The tour was boring; Brian really didn't have any interest in medicine or the advances of adnihilo grafts or hybrids. He trotted along with six other tourists, four of whom were one family from abroad, and two reporters, and was given demonstrations of the miraculous wonders of the Sair Pharmaceutical line of products.

Brian craned his neck every time they passed by offices, hoping to glimpse someone in charge, one of the famous Sairs themselves. On a restroom break, the tour group stopped in a long corridor lined with family photos, and Brian avidly peered into each face, hoping something would trigger, some characteristic or look would clue him into a lost relative.

Nothing.

Not even a family resemblance, other than that persistent long nose and black hair.

By the time the tour was finally over, Brian's spirits sank. This was ridiculous. And pointless. If he sent out those letters and no one responded, maybe it was because no one wanted to? Who would care if they had some hick of a son just in from the boondocks,

knowledgeable on the ten ways a man can sin, but who couldn't tell a zenazar from a Paarkuuri sandstrider? He was not worth finding.

Brian, generally an optimist, felt uncomfortable with these self-deprecating thoughts. They didn't suit his personality well. He was distracted by them, and as he walked out of the facility, he had a vague impression of doom and danger that made him realize he had to snap out of it.

The rest of the tourists all had their own vehicles. Brian trudged the half mile to the nearest bus stop, cutting through a vacant side street lined with impersonal, unmarked warehouses and stunted, thirsty palmettos. There was no one around.

Brian's sense of apprehension grew. And then he heard a low roar from behind him.

A demon stood behind him, growling. He looked like a black bear with scales instead of fur, large with massive claws. He grimaced a smile, and blood bubbled from between his monstrous teeth and oozed out of his mouth.

Not good.

The demon ran toward him.

So much for his sense of impending doom being an internal personal conflict. Brian bolted for the main boulevard. There was nowhere to cut in, all the warehouses lined the sides of the road like a canyon of corrugated steel. He could feel the demon behind him, heat radiating from him, as he easily caught up.

The bear roared and windows in a nearby warehouse shattered. Brian covered his ears. The massive creature struck out and knocked Brian down with his paw. The pavement came up suddenly. Brian lay there, stunned, and the beast's claws gouged into his chest and dragged him closer, Brian's back scraping the pavement. Pain made everything bright, everything slow and agonizingly clear.

Brian's heart beat frantically in his rib cage. The beast lifted Brian's leg toward its mouth.

Brian forced thought into his panic-ridden mind. *I do not want to be eaten. Period.*

Brian felt boneless, without strength. A claw ripped through his left arm, and Brian grabbed it feebly with his right. As soon as he did, his body pulsed. The blood pounded rhythmically in his veins, and he could feel himself getting full, a sated heaviness overwhelming him. Strength surged into his arms, pulsing through his body. He kicked in rage, and with such force that the demon's jaw shattered, and the beast dropped Brian, howling in shock. Brian kicked again and felt his foot shatter through the massive beast's leg as if it were balsa wood. The bear crumpled to the ground beside Brian.

Brian's head pounded in agonizing pain, and blood ran into his right eye. But he had no time to think or to defend himself. He had to act. With the last of his strength he rolled over and slammed his fist into the demon's nose. With a sick crunch, Brian felt his fist pass through bone and flesh. He pulled out his hand and slimy, hot innards oozed between his fingers. He gasped and collapsed back against the ground, breathing heavily.

Brian was now so tired he couldn't be bothered to get up, to do anything but sleep. The hulking carcass of the demon lay motionless beside him, and while he was repulsed and wanted to get away, moving hurt unbearably.

Brian slowly turned his head and saw the pavement was stained bright red. He lifted his hand and felt hot blood gushing from his scalp.

He tried sitting up, but his head throbbed with agonizing pain, and everything turned black. He was going to pass out any minute. He could feel the blood drain from him in alarming quantities. He fumbled for the phone in his pocket. It had hardly been used. He only got it to receive return calls in response to his letters. Now he covered its screen with bloody fingerprints.

He pressed autodial and then lay back on the cement. He didn't even know which number he dialed. Just someone.

Then he remembered he'd only ever put one number into the phone. Detective Jay Yervant.

Well, at least this time he wasn't naked.

Chapter Seven

It took Jay fifteen minutes to locate Brian Day. The industrial park wound in endless dead ends, and the only information he had was from the cell phone tracker, placing him somewhere in the vicinity.

At last he spotted him, a body sprawled in the empty parking lot in front of a beige box warehouse. He jumped out of his Jeep and dashed to Brian to kneel in the gravel beside him. A dead Radnaro lay beside Brian, face pulverized, oozing black blood.

“Hey!” Jay shook Brian gently. “Brian! Can you hear me?”

Brian’s head was covered in blood. He had long rents torn through his T-shirt. His skin was deathly pale.

“Brian?” Jay said again. He pressed his fingers to his neck and felt a pulse, low but steady.

Brian’s eyes snapped open, looking terrified. He let out a strangled cry and then gripped Jay’s wrist, hand groping for bare skin between the cuff of Jay’s shirt and his glove.

Jay tried to pull back, but Brian gripped him hard. A sensation of numbness coursed through Jay. He tried to break free, but Brian held him tightly, not letting go. Jay watched Brian breathe, watched the wound seal shut on his head. The blood stopped oozing. The

gashes visible through the claw marks in Brian's shirt faded and then disappeared entirely. Brian's gaze never left Jay's face.

Finally Brian gasped and sat up, releasing his hold on Jay's arm. Jay sat back, rubbing his wrist, stunned.

Brian gently prodded the neatly sealed wound on his head. "Ouch."

Jay didn't know what to say. He had seen sorcerers heal, concentrating their power into the bodies of others to ease away small wounds. But Jay could not do that. People burned from his heat. And this had nothing to do with him. Brian had taken something from him.

"You okay?" Jay stuttered, still too shocked to think clearly.

"I've got a headache," Brian said. He smiled at Jay. "Hey! It's you!"

"Yeah."

"How did you know I was in trouble?"

Jay frowned. "You called me."

"Did I?" Brian touched his head. "I don't remember that."

"Well, you did," Jay said, alarmed by his amnesia. "Do you think you can stand?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Brian carefully folded shut his phone and slipped it into his pocket. "I'm sorry to bother you. I guess I didn't have anyone else to call."

Jay studied his guileless expression. Was he unaware of what he'd just done? Osmotic sorcerers were extremely rare -- almost as rare as ones like Jay himself, who expelled nothing but energy. Osmotics could transform energy, take it, and modify it to their needs. The fact that Brian had taken Jay's raging power and cured himself was clear evidence that he was osmotic. But how could he not know?

Brian had said he'd grown up on a conjure-free commune. Maybe he honestly hadn't known what he was doing when he touched Jay.

Jay shook his head. "Damn." He rubbed at his wrist again, reliving the feeling of having touched flesh after so long. "You shouldn't just grab me like that. I could have hurt you."

Brian cocked his head. "Why? Because you're on fire all the time?"

"You can see that?"

Brian nodded. "It's not so bad now. But when I first saw you at the hospital...it was like you were standing in the middle of a bonfire."

Jay frowned. "What did you say your last name was?"

Brian looked suddenly defensive. "Day. Why?"

"Not everyone can see that. It's usually a genetic trait."

"Adam Day is my stepfather," Brian clarified. "I'm trying to find my real father. The gene registry told me his last name is probably Sair."

"Sair? Your father is a Sair?"

Brian shrugged.

"Well, that would explain it." Jay stood and then offered Brian his hand. Brian took it and stood up, wavering slightly.

"My head is killing me." He shook it as if that would clear it.

"I'll take you home." Jay made a quick call to dispatch and then cleared off all of his junk from the passenger seat. "Sorry about the mess."

"This doesn't look like a cop car," Brian commented as he slid onto the passenger seat.

"It's my private car. I'm off duty right now," Jay said. He backed the Jeep up and turned onto the vacant street. "Tell me what happened."

As Brian described his attack, Jay's anger grew. Whoever wanted Brian dead was cocky. Sending a Radnaro soul-eater after Brian in the middle of the day showed this sorcerer had no fear of being caught. It insulted Jay.

Brian talked during the entire drive. After recounting his story he went into his search for his father. He then talked about his favorite parts of Parmas, this meal he once had at a street vendor's stand, his favorite buildings. Jay listened, growing more amused as the stories wandered. Man, this guy could talk.

"...And so then I found this staircase that led down to an underground bar. I just went in. It was crazy. There were all these people with lasers, and they all looked completely wacked. One of them offered me some weird demon drug that smelled like old feta. Their eyes were glazed over, and they were dancing to this fast-paced music. It was the craziest scene I've ever stumbled into."

"Mm." Jay turned down Fifteenth and stopped at the light.

"...So I talked to this guy who says he has a little wire he hooks up to his dog's head and his own, and he can actually see images from the dog's brain. And I asked him if his dog thought anything interesting. He told me the dog visualized chickens. Nothing but chickens."

Jay laughed. He turned onto Sunset.

"...When I got back from the bar my bag had been ransacked. I was so pissed at myself for leaving it unattended, but I didn't know that, even in small places, people will rob you. So imagine my surprise when I saw all my CDs were still there. They had obviously rifled through them. And I suddenly felt depressed. Because it meant that my CDs are so bad, even criminals don't want them."

The guy was funny, Jay had to admit. He pulled in front of Brian's dilapidated house and left the engine idling.

"...It reminded me of the time this woman back on the commune went around collecting donations for a charity in town. I offered her a bag of my clothing, and she went through it and rejected everything. She said, 'Yeah, these kids are poor, but...come on.' I was

shocked at the time. I learned later that it's no longer acceptable to be under the age of fifty and own a sweater vest."

Jay laughed. "I think I own a sweater vest somewhere."

"I bet yours isn't brown with a yellow zigzag across the front like a heart monitor."

Brian finally seemed to realize they had arrived at his house. "I can't shut up, can I? Sorry. Must have been the attack. Left me all flustered." Brian opened the passenger door but then hesitated. He turned back, his pale skin flushing noticeably, the color spreading down his neck.

"Do you...uh...do you want to come in for a drink or something?"

Jay swallowed.

"Shit!" Brian said. "I just realized I'm pretty much out of everything. Well, I have water. And milk. I could give you a glass of milk. Or I could go to the store and buy some beer. It wouldn't take that long. We could go and pick up some beer and bring it back. My television doesn't work, but I can act out the entire first season of *Sorcerer's Tales* by heart. I used to watch them on the pastor's television when he was doing missionary work. I can play all parts except for the talking crow, and --"

"Brian. Take a breath."

Brian shut up. He looked at his feet pointedly.

Jay snorted. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Yeah."

"I..." Jay stared at Brian's front door. "Did you leave your door ajar when you left this morning?"

Brian quickly glanced up. "No." The color drained from his face. "The door doesn't lock since...well, since you kicked it in. But it does shut at least."

Jay scowled. "Stay here." He turned off the engine and stepped from the Jeep. He withdrew his shock-volt pistol and approached the porch. He nudged the door fully open.

A full search of Brian's place revealed nothing. Whoever had been inside had left. Jay called Brian inside, and Brian confirmed that nothing was missing.

"They still don't want my CDs," Brian said, trying to make light of the situation.

Jay frowned. "They don't want your belongings, Brian. They want you."

"But why?" Brian shook his head.

Jay considered erecting a spell barrier around the house. It would prevent anyone, sorcerers or demons, from being able to conjure any sort of magical force while in the building.

But then Jay looked to Brian. Somehow he had survived two demon attacks on his own, with no training. If he really was osmotic, then any barrier Jay erected would cripple Brian's powers as much as the demons'.

"Do you have somewhere else you can stay for the time being?" Jay asked.

Brian shook his head. "I don't know anyone in town. Your number is the only one in my phone." He looked embarrassed by this fact and set about tidying up his belongings, not looking at Jay.

"Could you stay at a hotel for a few days while I look into this?"

"I can't really afford that," Brian admitted.

Jay considered placing Brian in protective custody. But it would involve hours of paperwork, and he didn't feel up to it, especially on his day off. Nor did he particularly like the idea of handing Brian off to some other officer.

Jay rubbed his eyes. He was going to regret this, he knew it, but he couldn't just leave him alone, not after two clear attacks on his life.

"Pack up a bag, and come with me. You can stay at my place until we figure out who's after you."

Brian's expression lightened. "Really?" he said, and then he shook his head. "No, that's too much. I can't ask you to do that."

“It’s just to crash at, that’s all. Nothing more.”

“Right. Okay. Thank you.” Brian rushed around, stuffing clothes and random papers he’d strewn about the place into his bag.

Jay’s phone rang as he waited. He almost ignored the call; it was from his uncle Oliver, and even though he liked his uncle and found the guy’s eccentric lifestyle amusing, he didn’t know if he could bear a long diatribe on the benefits of jet-setting the world at the very moment.

Still, familial duty made him answer.

“Hey, Blaze,” Oliver said cheerily. “Am I catching you at a bad moment?”

“Well, actually, I --”

“Just found out my secretary forgot to send you the invite for tonight’s party. She’s a bitch. I’m firing her.”

“She probably realized it wasn’t worth the cost of postage anymore,” Jay remarked. He lowered his voice and stepped out onto Brian’s porch for some privacy. “What’s the excuse for a party this time?”

Oliver laughed. “So cynical, kiddo. Just like your old man. It’s a charity event, to aid the children of venom addicts.”

“You’re hosting a charity event? For venom addicts?” Jay asked incredulously. Jay’s uncle himself had spent many a night in the throes of the powerful drug. And he was anything but charitable in real life.

Oliver snorted. “Ironical, huh? So should I have her send it to your house or the station? It’s at seven thirty.”

Jay was about to tell him not to bother, but then he remembered his conversation with Marick.

“Is Bergen Sair going to be there?”

“What? Bergen? Yeah, sure, he shows up to everything with an open bar. Guy drinks like a fish. He’ll be there.”

“Fine.” Jay knew he was going to regret this. “Send it to my house.”

There was a long pause. “Are you serious? You’re actually coming?”

“You invited me,” Jay said.

“Yeah, but you never accept.”

“You want me to blow it off?”

“No! Not at all. *Love* to have you, kiddo. Just shocked that’s all. Your mom’s going to flip to see you.”

“See you then,” Jay said, preparing to hang up.

“Oh, wait. Blaze?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a charity event. Dress the part.” Oliver hung up the phone.

Jay suddenly wondered if he’d ever picked up his tuxedo from the cleaners.

“I’m ready!” Brian said, grinning enthusiastically and burdened with two bursting backpacks, one over each shoulder.

Jay sighed.

He was going to regret everything today, it seemed.

* * * * *

On the way home, Jay spoke with Bridget on the phone, asking her to check the records of the DNA shunts in the portals near Brian’s attack. She called back a few minutes later, confirming that the Sair Pharmaceuticals laboratory portal had pulled through a soul-eater that afternoon. She also checked the company records and saw they had a blue card, permission to summon only nonlethal demons through the company portal. That violation alone would be enough to bust someone.

But Jay didn't want to bust just anyone. An arrest now would lead to some underling in the company hierarchy taking the fall for a superior. He needed more information.

"I also checked on Brian Day's entry in the gene registry," Bridget told Jay. Jay held the phone tightly to his ear, steering the Jeep through the midday traffic with one hand, which seemed to make Brian nervous. Brian's eyes were wide as he watched the road.

"What did you find?" Jay asked.

"Someone accessed Brian's DNA registry four times this morning, all after he first went through the pharmaceutical security scan. As soon as he checked into the tour this morning, someone ran a background on him."

"Good work, Carmichael." He swerved quickly to avoid a group of men carrying surfboards. He smirked as Brian blatantly checked them out as they crossed.

"I'll see you." Jay closed his phone and steered his Jeep down the alley, pulling into his parking space.

As they made their way around the corner to the entrance of Jay's building, Brian stared in a daze. He looked like a child who had just seen Santa Claus. His eyes widened at the bar across the street, the shop that sold sex toys, the covers on display in the bookstore.

"I can't believe it," he said, hushed, following Jay dutifully.

Jay unlocked the staircase door and held it open for Brian. "I take it you haven't made it to Jeravani Street yet."

"No. How amazing! Is everyone..." Brian lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Is everyone here...you know?"

Jay blinked. "Gay?"

Brian nodded.

"No. Lou's family over at Rusher's Deli has owned the place for three generations, long before this area became Boystown."

Jay made his way up the flight of stairs and opened his door.

Brian gaped as he looked around Jay's expansive studio. Jay did a quick peripheral check to make sure there wasn't any porn or weapons lying around and then got Brian a towel.

"The bathroom's over there," he said. "You can take a shower."

Brian frowned down at the bloodstains on his shirt. "Thank you." He dropped his bags in the corner and walked into the bathroom. Jay saw him openly admire the framed photography on the bathroom wall, and then he slowly shut the bathroom door.

While Brian showered, Jay found his tux and cuff links and laid them out on the bed. He swore as he searched through his closet looking for his dress shoes.

Brian emerged soon after, looking wet and clean. He had changed into a white T-shirt and a tight pair of black jeans. His feet were bare. Jay noticed his toes were long and slender. He glanced upward, to the slight bulge in his trousers, his slim chest, his clear, slightly flushed skin, damp black hair. A thin line above his right eye was the only sign of his altercation that afternoon.

Brian smiled shyly.

"The guest bedroom is over here," Jay said, showing Brian to his room. "Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. Make yourself at home. Just don't mess with my computer or my desk."

"Sure. Thank you again." Brian reached out and touched Jay's sleeve. "I really appreciate everything you're doing for me."

Jay had to force himself not to pull away. "It's my job."

"Not this." Brian waved his hand around the room. "Not helping me out this much." Brian seemed to notice the dress shoes in Jay's hand. "Going somewhere?"

"I have to go to a function tonight," Jay told him. "But you can stay here or go out. I'll give you a key. You'll like Jeravani Street. Just stay away from the leather bar three blocks down."

“Why? They won’t like me?”

Jay snorted. “I think they’ll like you a bit too much. Just stick to the places around here, if you’re looking for a good time.”

“I don’t think I need to go out for that,” Brian said brazenly. He squeezed Jay’s arm.

Jay looked at Brian and shook his head. How could he be blushing like that and looking so embarrassed, and be so forward at the same time?

Jay snorted. “Damn, you can’t blame the pheromones this time.”

Brian laughed. “No. But I have to say, after living on the commune, where I had to constantly hide my nature, it’s rewarding to just come out and say what I want.”

“Oh?” Jay swallowed. He could feel his groin stirring. “And what is it that you want?”

Brian stared at him hard. “I want...I want you to fuck me.”

“Can’t do that, sorry.” Not that Jay wasn’t sorely tempted. He let out a shaky breath through his nose.

“Because you aren’t interested, or...?”

“Oh, I *am* interested.” Jay ran his finger over his bottom lip, taking in Brian’s lean muscles, his collarbones, the slight bulge of his crotch.

Brian leaned in to kiss Jay, but Jay immediately pulled back in horror. “No.” He shook his head. “No kissing. Don’t touch my skin.”

“I’ve touched your skin before. I’m fine.”

“Just for a few seconds. I don’t know what could happen if it was longer. I could really hurt you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m not up to testing it. Not tonight.”

“But...”

“Brian, look, I just...” Jay ran a hand through his hair. “I’m scared I’ll...” Jay suddenly realized he was just plain *scared*.

Brian stepped back, smiling slowly. “Okay, Jay.”

Jay’s heart was still racing from the near kiss. He looked at Brian’s perfect, unblemished face, the smoothness of his skin. He imagined it charred. He shook his head to clear the image from his mind.

Brian tentatively placed his slender hand on Jay’s chest. He held his palm there, on his shirt. He stood stock-still. It was strangely soothing, this motionless, simple touch.

Brian cleared his throat. “Can I touch you on your clothing?”

“Yeah.” Jay unbuttoned his dress shirt so only his white T-shirt was between them. Brian replaced his hand. Even through the cotton, Jay could feel him, feel his palm, the touch firm but gentle.

Brian slowly slid his hand to the right. He rubbed his fingers over Jay’s nipple, which hardened under the contact.

Jay let out a shaky breath.

Brian lifted his left hand and placed it on Jay’s other nipple. He slowly circled his fingers over them, and Jay closed his eyes. He never imagined his nipples were so sensitive. He felt as though small bolts of electricity shot from his chest straight down to his groin.

Brian’s palms slid downward, his fingers gliding over Jay’s abdomen. His breathing deepened. Jay stood there, watching Brian’s hands, imagining the heat of his skin, the feel of him. His fingers reached Jay’s belt and slipped behind the fabric.

Jay instinctively jerked back, and Brian withdrew his hands immediately.

“Sorry!” he said.

“It’s okay,” Jay said roughly. Brian immediately brought his hands back, slowly dragging them down Jay’s jeans, tracing him as if searching for concealed weapons. Jay stood

there, legs slightly apart, trying to control his breathing. His cock pressed hard against his jeans and was beginning to hurt.

Brian slid his hands up along Jay's inner thighs. Even through the thickness of his jeans, Jay could feel each finger, moving separately, mapping the contours of his skin.

Brian's left hand slid around Jay's thigh and settled softly against Jay's ass. Brian's right hand pressed against Jay's groin. Brian squeezed gently, and Jay let out a moan.

Brian smiled. "You've got a big dick."

"Yeah?" Jay's voice sounded hoarse. "You've got a dirty mouth."

Brian laughed. He pressed the heel of his palm along Jay's shaft, stroking up and down. Jay wanted to reciprocate. He slid his gloved hands down Brian's back, squeezing Brian's ass through his tight jeans.

Brian pressed harder, and Jay kneaded Brian's buttocks in return. It felt so good, the pliant flesh under his skin, he could almost imagine its texture, the heat of him, the smell.

"Pull your dick out for me," Jay whispered. "I want to see you touch yourself."

Brian fumbled with his left hand to unbutton his jeans. Jay helped him, yanking them down. Brian's cock jutted out immediately, leaking profusely, long and rock hard, the skin soft and pink. Jay groaned again. He could smell Brian's semen, smell Brian's crotch. It drove Jay crazy, and he pushed himself into Brian's hand, rubbing himself desperately.

Brian took long, quick strokes of his dick with his left hand, in rhythm with the strokes along Jay's cock. Jay drew him closer, gloved hands pulling Brian's bare ass cheeks apart, spreading him open, wishing he could touch him inside. And then the feeling grew unbearable, overwhelming. Jay squeezed Brian's ass as he came, shuddering as he pulsed into his trousers, head thrown back, eyes clenched shut. He heard Brian whisper some archaic obscenity, and Jay opened his eyes just in time to see Brian shoot onto his hand and belly. Jay watched avidly, loving the sight of a man's release, the utter abandonment of self to pleasure, the accomplishment bursting from him in satisfying arcs.

They both stood there, gasping for breath, no longer touching.

Brian's cheeks were bright red.

Jay shook his head. "Damn, Brian." He took a deep breath. "*Damn*. That was hot."

Brian looked very pleased with himself. "And no skin," he added.

Jay fixed on Brian's soft, red lips. He reached out with his gloved hand and ran a finger along them.

"You're the best looking guy I've ever done that with," Jay confessed, breathless.

Brian leaned in to Jay's hand, eyes closed, lips parting slightly.

For a moment, Jay was struck with compelling, opposite needs. He wanted to do that again, immediately. He wanted to flop on his bed and sleep for a year. But the sight of his tuxedo jacket, draped across the back of his couch, reminded him of what he really needed to do more than anything.

With a last sigh, Jay pulled his hand from Brian's face and scooped up his fallen dress shoes.

Chapter Eight

Oliver Yervant's house was a massive, blue-tiled modern structure right on the ocean, its two-story curved windows overlooking the crashing waves. Multitiered balconies cascaded down to the boathouse and cabana on the beach.

Jay showed up late. His mind was elsewhere, still reliving Brian's touches. He had never gone so far with anyone in his life, and the memory ran over and over in his mind, a delicious stuttering, that left him aroused and happy, even as he pulled his Jeep up to the front of his uncle's house. The parking attendants frowned at the make of his car. Indoors, the sound of a full brass band filled the cavernous ballroom with salsa music. Hundreds of women in silks and chiffon and sequins were bedecked with diamonds and obligatory long-stemmed glasses of wine. Men blended together as a sea of black-and-white clad bodies, laughing uproariously, yelling over each other for dominance, fisting wine or cocktails or crystal glasses of whiskey.

Too many people, Jay thought. He tensed and shouldered his way through the crowd toward the bar. Two bartenders in white tuxedos served drinks to a group of men clustered along the bar.

One of the men swung his arm up, carrying a drink in each hand, holding them aloft. His hand brushed past Jay's face, and Jay violently jerked out of his way, causing the man to spill his drink.

"Sorry!" he apologized to Jay, as if it was his fault.

"Whiskey sour," Jay demanded of the bartender. As soon as he grabbed his drink, he downed half of it. Then he made his way out of the crowd.

"Blaze!"

Jay turned around and smiled at his uncle.

"You made it," Oliver said. He motioned to a man beside him. "Rob, this is my nephew, Jay. Rob owns the Marcazo car dealership out on Sunset."

"Nice to meet you," Rob said, offering his hand.

Jay gave it a quick shake.

"There you are, my love!"

Jay's mother stepped through the crowd effortlessly as the guests parted in her wake. She looked stunning in a cream-colored sequined gown that hugged her slim body tightly. Her hair was in a loose bun dripping with gemstones.

Jay and his mother exchanged air kisses.

"When Oliver said you were coming, I couldn't believe it! Your father said you were probably drunk when you agreed."

Jay snorted. "Not yet."

"You're staying for the auction, right?" Oliver asked. "There's a motorcycle you'd love."

Jay's mother scowled. "Oh no, absolutely not. He takes enough risks as it is. I don't want him riding around on a death trap too."

Oliver continued, undaunted. "It's got a thousand and seventy-eight cc engine that puts out a hundred and ninety-eight horsepower. It has this amazing titanium racing exhaust system that --"

"Oliver, stop it. Jay isn't bidding on any motorcycles. It makes me nervous enough that he drives around in that old Jeep."

"*Mother.*" Jay closed his eyes. How old was he going to have to be before his family stopped embarrassing him?

His mother looked at him innocently. "What? I offered you my SUV when I bought the new one, but you refused."

"Is Dave here?" Jay asked.

"Dave and Christopher. And Yolanda." His mother lowered her voice. "I do wish you would talk to your brother about her. The woman is an absolute nightmare."

Jay raised an eyebrow. "Mom, I don't think Dave is going to take my advice on women."

"Well, he should. You always had such nice girlfriends in high school."

"Yeah, because I wasn't actually interested in them. They were a front."

His mother pursed her lips. "That may well be. But you had good taste. God knows what Dave was thinking, marrying her."

Soon Jay's father, his two brothers, and his sister-in-law converged on him. They were followed by Yolanda's relatives, and his brother's best friend, Jay's old college roommate, the neighbor, and his father's business partner -- the list grew. The pleasantries were endless, and Jay endured them all. At least no one in his family ever touched him. He exchanged the required niceties, made wisecracks about his uncle that left them all laughing, and returned to the bar for fortifying whiskey sours. All the while, he scanned the crowd for Bergen Sair, hoping to corner him.

As it happened, his father saved him the trouble. He called out to Bergen and waved him over.

“Bergen, you remember my youngest son, don’t you? Jay?”

Bergen offered his hand. Jay shook it quickly with his gloved hand.

Jay listened as his father recounted a fishing weekend on Bergen’s yacht. The two men laughed and filled Jay in on all the details. When Bergen finished his drink, Jay offered to get him another. He returned, and the man looked to the glass gratefully. Jay’s father had already wandered off.

“Thank you, Jay,” Bergen said, taking a deep drink. “That bartender makes the best shocker cocktail in Parmas.”

Jay nodded. “So tell me about your family, Bergen.” He followed Bergen to a set of chairs at a vacant table. “You have a son, right?”

“Razi.” Bergen nodded.

“You must be very proud of him,” Jay commented. “He’s number two at Sair Pharmaceuticals, isn’t he?”

Bergen gave Jay an odd look. “Proud? No. I love the boy, but let’s face it, he got all of his personality from his mother, none from me.”

Jay remembered that Bergen had divorced his wife several years ago.

Bergen shook his head. “I envy men like your father. His boys are great assets to him. Dave and Christopher are going to make Yervant Industries synonymous with innovation.”

Jay pushed aside the insult of being left out and pressed on. “You don’t feel that way about Razi?”

“My son is a conceited, heartless brat, and I often wonder if he even has a soul.” Bergen seemed surprised by his own words, and chuckled as if lightening his harsh remarks. He sipped at his drink.

“He is also committing terrible crimes,” Jay remarked.

Bergen's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"An unauthorized demon came through the Sair Pharmaceutical portal this afternoon. It almost murdered a man and could cost your company hefty fines, if not a complete revocation of your portal permission status."

Bergen glared at Jay hostilely. "What the hell are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I'm Jay, Louis Yervant's youngest son. And I'm also a detective in the Metropolitan Demonic Unit." Jay smiled coldly.

Bergen gave a nervous chuckle. "I had no idea that Louis had a cop for a son."

"He doesn't talk about me much, does he?"

Bergen swallowed. "Surely a small breach of our permit rights isn't enough to shut us down?"

Jay raised his eyebrows. "Technically, yes. But perhaps one incident could be ignored, considering that the very functioning of your entire enterprise relies on those portal permits."

Bergen nodded. "Oh, yes! Yes, it does! Those portals are critical for us to be able to manufacture the medicines we do! Think of all the lives that would be lost if our status was revoked."

Jay watched him coolly. Bergen began to sweat.

Jay studied his glass. "I would feel better about the breach if I didn't know someone whose own father describes him as a heartless and soulless brat was at the helm of the operation."

"I wouldn't worry about that." Bergen downed the rest of his drink.

"No?"

"Razi doesn't run the company, and he never will," Bergen said.

Jay's skin prickled in excitement. "Is that so?"

Bergen nodded. "There is no way I would allow all that I have worked for over the last fifty years to go to someone who can't appreciate the value of what we've accomplished. I am disinheriting Razi as soon as I can locate his son."

Jay's eyes widened. "Your grandson? I didn't know you had one."

Bergen looked wistful. "Yes. The boy's mother took him away when he was born, but I'm in the process of finding him now."

"A son? Not a daughter? Are you sure about that?"

Bergen looked puzzled. "Of course! Razi has no daughter."

Jay had a sinking feeling.

"This grandson of yours," he pressed. "Do you know his name? Where he lives?"

Bergen looked at him suspiciously again. "What for?"

"Perhaps I can help you locate him. I am a police officer, after all. We find missing persons all the time."

"I doubt you would have any luck where four separate private investigators have failed," Bergen said.

"Have you opened a formal inquiry?"

"No. I don't need Razi nosing into my business. I don't think he'd appreciate the effort in any case." Bergen sighed. "The boy must be twenty-one by now. But he and his mother seem to have disappeared off the face of the planet." He shook his head.

"Thank you for your time, Bergen." Jay had to get back to Brian. He had to get back there *now*. "It was a pleasure meeting you. My father speaks of you often."

Bergen still looked preoccupied, but he offered Jay a polite smile. "Yes, well, your father also...yes. Nice meeting you."

Jay told himself to grow up, not care about the parting comment, and just leave. As he made his way to the door, however, he was accosted once more by his mother.

She didn't touch him. She hadn't touched him since Jay was twelve. But she reached out and squeezed her hand toward him, a gesture that Jay had grown to love.

"Leaving so soon?" she asked.

Jay nodded. "I have to check on someone."

"But you just arrived, and --"

"A man's life is in danger. I have to help him."

His mother stared at him, hard. Then she shook her head. "Where did you come from, Jay? I never knew we could ever produce someone so sweet."

"*Mother.*" Jay smiled. "Gotta go."

"Take care," she said. And as Jay left, she shouted, "And for God's sake, sell that Jeep!"

Chapter Nine

Jay's house smelled like toasted cinnamon.

"Hello?" Jay pulled off his necktie as he walked into his loft. The smell wafted in from the kitchen where a pie cooled on the counter. Jay's dishes had all been cleaned. Apparently Brian hadn't sampled the wonders of Jeravani Street after all.

"Brian?" Jay wandered through the living room and down the hall to the guest room. Brian's door was ajar, and he was sound asleep, face down on the bed, legs sprawled on top of the sheets. Jay admired him for a moment and then went back into the kitchen for a beer.

Jay cracked his beer and then plopped onto his couch. He turned on the television but kept the volume low so as not to wake Brian. He didn't want to have to tell him what he was beginning to fear.

Your dad? The one you've been searching for? Yeah, he's a child-murdering, soulless bastard whose own father has disowned him.

Not a conversation he was looking forward to.

The images on the television flickered, the voices low enough to be nothing more than a muted mumble. Every once in a while, the small half-demonic device on top of Jay's television would wake up, open its little pink mouth, and blow out, emitting whatever

fragrance or odor was signaled to it from the television program. Few of the smells were as enticing as the pie in the other room.

Jay wondered if Brian would mind if he had a slice.

As Jay drank and watched television, his mind wandered. He was nearly certain that Razi was the man he was looking for. But he still had no direct evidence linking him to foul play -- neither against the day care nor Brian -- but Jay did not believe in chance, and the fact that everything seemed to point back to the man was too great a coincidence to be ignored.

He could establish motive and a Sair trace at the day care. He could link the attack of the soul-eater back to the pharmaceutical company. But he still had no link to the succubus. How did Razi create that portal?

"Hey."

Jay turned. Brian stood there, looking sleepy, hair mussed, smiling shyly.

Jay smiled back. "You've been busy."

Brian shrugged. "I like cooking, and the gas at my house is turned off. It's nice to do something familiar."

Jay scooted over, and Brian sat next to him on the couch. They watched a silly game show for a while. A commercial for a fast-food chain wafted the smell of bacon cheeseburgers over them. Brian's stomach growled.

"You hungry?" Jay asked.

Brian stared suspiciously at the pink-mouthed creature crouching on top of the television. "A little. I ate your leftover chicken, but I guess it wasn't enough."

"You want to go out and get something to eat?"

"Isn't it too late?"

"Not here." Jay pulled his open tie completely off his neck. "Hold on. Let me change, and I'll take you to the best deli in Parmas."

Brian was quiet and sleepy, but as soon as they hit the pavement, the sounds and sights seemed to wake him up. He began to ramble again, asking Jay questions, pointing at displays, marveling at the sights around them. They walked down the main boulevard. The night was full of men, some drunk, some quietly walking home, many in pairs. Jay and Brian passed by the new bar, and Brian glanced inside, his face flushing.

“You want to go inside?” Jay asked.

Brian’s blush spread. “No, I think a sandwich sounds better at the moment.”

Jay laughed. He forced himself to reach out with his gloved hand and gently steer Brian toward the deli. Once the inevitable panic of touching someone else passed, it was a reassuring feeling, proprietary and companionable.

Even at midnight, the line at Rusher’s stretched through the small deli. As they waited their turn, Jay asked Brian about growing up on the commune.

“So no magic at all, huh? Not even enchanted communication lines?”

Brian shook his head. “There is only one sort of magic at the commune -- some form of barrier around the entire compound that blocks anything to do with sorcery. Even if someone brought something spell-powered into the commune, it wouldn’t function.”

Jay nodded. “We use spell barriers in the police force to restrain demons or sorcerers.” It would also explain why the locating spells of Bergen’s private eyes never found Brian. “Do you miss it?”

“No. I never really fit in. I always had a sense that I was an outsider. That’s why I love being here. Everyone is different, and so it’s easier to blend in. Besides, this is where my father is. I just have to find him.”

Jay hesitated. “Why do you want to find your father so badly?”

Brian shrugged. “Because he’s part of my history. Because my mother doesn’t want me to. Mostly because I like answers, and as I grew up, I had none. Over the years I pieced

together that Adam Day wasn't my real dad, and that my mother had left her original lover and joined the commune."

"You know, your father might turn out to be someone you don't like. There might be a good reason your mother left him."

"Maybe," Brian said. "I'm not expecting him to be a saint. I know my mother was afraid of him. Something about him terrified her. It could be his sorcery. But who knows? The least I can do is find out for myself. Face my fears, or at least her fears, you know?"

They reached the counter. Brian ordered a cheese steak with everything on it. Jay had already eaten at the party, so he just got a side of chili fries. They sat at a small booth and ate together, watching the variety of Jeravani Street parade past the window. Brian provided a running commentary on the clothing styles.

"Now why do you think a guy would purposely wear pants that tight?" Brian mused.

Jay snorted. "Why do you think? You can see the outline of his balls from here." He scooped up some chili with a fry.

Brian laughed. "Doesn't leave much up to the imagination."

"What about this guy?" Jay pointed at another bystander with his fry. The man was wearing fishnet stockings and a tight black skirt.

Brian's eyes widened. "Confusing, for one thing. Is he a transvestite?"

Jay shrugged. "Maybe."

"I like guys that dress like guys," Brian stated. He raised an eyebrow. "I like the way you dress."

"Thanks."

"I like you, actually." Brian flushed again. "A lot."

"You hardly know me," Jay said, but he felt himself soften at the words.

Brian rested his chin on his hand, staring at Jay with half-lidded eyes. "I can tell quite a lot about you. For example, you care about your partner, the one in the hospital."

"True."

"You like mechanical artwork. You have pictures of engines and gears, and some interesting sculptures all over your place."

Jay nodded.

"You seem pretty private," Brian commented. "But then again, you also invited a complete stranger home when he was in trouble. That says a lot about you."

"Yeah, like I'm a dupe." Jay laughed, but then realized the comment sounded insulting. He coughed. "No offense."

"None taken." Brian smiled. He narrowed his eyes again. "You are pretty isolated."

Jay held out his gloved hands. "For a good reason."

"That's not the only reason." Brian cut his sandwich up with a knife and fork, eating it in polite bites. "I think that's an excuse."

"Pure speculation. Don't get ahead of yourself," Jay said.

Brian seemed unfazed by Jay's reprimand. "I'm just telling you what I see. I think you use that as a justification for keeping yourself solitary. You flinch every time someone touches you. That's not normal."

"Look here," Jay said, suddenly tired of himself as the topic of conversation. "When I was born my mother was shocked every time she picked me up. By the age of five, she couldn't hold me for longer than a few seconds before her hands began to burn. When I was twelve, a kid grabbed my arm, and my skin charred his palms within seconds. When you maim everyone around you, you learn to keep your distance." Jay realized he was pointing his fork at Brian and dropped it. "It's the right thing to do."

Brian watched him, his expression unreadable.

Jay munched the rest of his fries in silence. He didn't like the idea of anyone psychoanalyzing him. There was always the possibility that they'd be right.

Brian looked out the window and scoffed. "Look at that guy. Is that honestly how people dress around here?"

Jay followed his glance to a man clothed in nothing but a tight pair of spandex briefs. A dozen gold medallions hung around his chest. He also wore a massive felt fedora and long earrings.

Jay smirked. "That's just a costume, a way to get noticed."

Brian nodded. "Those medallions are hilarious. Reminds me of my father. My real father, I mean."

"I thought you didn't know who he was," Jay said.

"I don't. But once my mother mentioned that he lured her in with romantic tricks. He had some sort of big gold medallion that he'd pull fanciful creatures from. She thought it was just dramatic courtship. And I thought, at the time, she was speaking in metaphor. But now I think he used magic to lure her, and then she decided that magic wasn't all it was made out to be and left him."

Jay froze. "Medallion? He had a medallion, like those necklaces that guy was wearing?"

Brian nodded. "Some sort of family heirloom."

"And this necklace would pull creatures into the world from thin air?"

"I never saw it myself. But the way my mother described it, all of her wonder and her horror about the man seemed to come from this thing he carried around his neck." Brian wiped his mouth on a napkin. "You're right, you know. This *is* the best sandwich I've ever tasted."

Jay immediately fumbled in his pocket for his cell phone. "I'll be right back." He wandered clear of Brian, out onto the bustling street. The club across the road blared fast-

paced techno music. He quickly called Judge Aren's number. The judge was not happy to be awoken at such an hour, but Jay still managed to convince her to give him a warrant.

By the time Jay returned, Brian had polished off his plate and the rest of Jay's fries. For such a skinny guy, he could sure eat.

"Come on, let's go home," Jay said.

"Trouble?" Brian asked, nodding to the phone.

Jay hesitated. He loathed being the bearer of bad news. Besides, it was just a hunch. And there was always the possibility that Brian would run out and either confront or warn his long lost father.

"Nah," Jay said finally, forcing himself once more to touch Brian's shoulder. Maybe Brian was right; maybe Jay *did* have too much of an issue trusting people.

Back in his loft, Brian was looking at Jay again, in a hungry sort of fashion that made Jay's heart lurch a bit and panic rush through his veins. Brian didn't ask for anything outright. But he walked purposefully into the guest bedroom and sat down on the bed, staring at Jay as if he were telepathically telling him something extremely important.

Jay's dick seemed to have a pretty good idea what Brian was saying and responded forthwith. Brian ran a hand through his thick black hair and looked up at him shyly.

"You tired?" Brian asked.

Jay smirked. He sat beside Brian on the bed, far enough not to touch, but close enough to show he wasn't about to ignore the fact that such a good-looking guy was sleeping in his house.

"Can I try something?" Brian asked quietly, holding his hands out like he was trying to tame a wild animal.

Brian's wariness made Jay feel self-conscious. "What?"

"Don't move." Brian reached out his bare hand. As he pushed his fingers closer to Jay's cheek, Jay pulled his head back, avoiding him.

Brian's fingers touched Jay's cheek briefly. And then he pulled back. He turned his palm over and showed Jay his skin. He grinned. "See?"

Jay stared down at Brian's finger. No blisters. No burn. Even though his eyes told him the truth, he still had trouble believing it.

Brian gripped Jay by the hair and tilted his head up. Jay tried to pull back, but then Brian kissed him, his lips soft against Jay's, the roughness of his cheeks, the touch of flesh, the delirious sensation of human contact overwhelming Jay.

Jay jerked back forcefully. The feeling was so intense. He'd never been kissed before; it was almost too much.

"I'm fine." Brian's eyes were bright, the only change to him the deep red flush to his lips. "I'm fine."

Jay pulled Brian to him, kissing him with desperation. He had only imagined this, and he had it so wrong in his mind. Kissing was so much more, so deeply satisfying, hot and wet, the taste of Brian consuming him, the need to push into his pliant flesh, to reach Brian's core. Brian cupped the back of Jay's neck, holding him close, tongue swiping over Jay's lips and then plunging inside. The two of them kissed until they were both breathless, panting, their mouths touching as they both inhaled deeply.

Jay ripped his gloves off and ran his bare hands through Brian's hair, almost frantically. He watched as flame spread from his arms onto Brian's head, and for a moment he froze, terrified.

But Brian smiled back and pressed his head against Jay's neck. He was just absorbing Jay's energy, not burning from it. Jay gripped him harder, the sensation of skin on skin, the sheer heat of Brian's body, the smell and texture, smooth, then hairy; it overwhelmed him. Brian's mouth captured his, and Jay let go of all his fears, giving into the need.

"I can't believe this." Jay ran his hands over Brian's cheekbones, down his neck, along his torso. And then he laughed; the simplest sensation was everything. It was more than he had imagined. It was perfect.

Brian pulled off his T-shirt and lay back on the bed. Jay touched him, exploring every muscle. He leaned down and licked at Brian's nipples, and as they tightened into small nubs under his tongue, he smiled, wondering that his touch, *his* touch, could cause such a physical reaction in another body.

Jay quickly undressed. His erection was huge, leaking onto his abdomen with what Jay considered excess. Brian looked up with wet lips, mouth parted slightly in expectation.

Jay lay down beside Brian, who quickly removed his own trousers and underpants. Brian pulled their bodies together, and Jay moaned aloud. His cock juttet against Brian's, and the sensation overpowered him. He worried he would come from just this small contact.

Brian ran his hands along Jay's chest. Jay's body arched upward for more. Human touch was so warm, soft, and firm at the same time, and Brian's abilities to pull out the greatest pleasure from each stroke caused Jay to pump his hips into Brian, uncontrollably thrusting, his cock rubbing against Brian's soft ball sac.

Brian kissed him again. Jay's mind blanked of everything but sheer sensation. He felt his orgasm building, coiling within him, ready to explode. Each stroke brought him closer.

Brian slipped down Jay's body, following fingertips with his lips and tongue, and Jay shivered. Brian's tongue reached out and licked fluid from the tip of Jay's cock. Jay exploded upward, his orgasm powerful, shaking through him.

Jay leaned back and panted. His body still tingled in aftershocks of pleasure, his chest rising and falling. "I suspect that's supposed to last longer." He grinned. "Sorry."

Brian laughed. "Don't worry." He licked his lips and then tilted his head, grinning down at Jay. "You taste different. Hot. Almost spicy."

"Really?"

“Try it.” Brian kissed him, pressing his tongue into Jay’s mouth.

“Now taste mine.” Brian straddled Jay’s chest and gently urged Jay’s mouth open with his fingers. He slipped his cock between Jay’s lips before Jay could react. And then he *could* taste it, the salty drippings of precum, coating the tip of Brian’s prick.

“Is this okay?” Brian asked hoarsely. It was a stupid question; he was doing it already, his hips rocking slowly as he pressed his shaft between Jay’s lips. Jay nodded, and opened his mouth wider, urging more inside by gripping the base of Brian’s cock in his fist and pumping toward the back of his throat.

It felt like velvet over wood. He shifted position so that Brian’s cock filled his mouth, almost gagging him, but even that was intoxicating, the sensation of choking on a man’s cock, so full of human flesh he would smother in it.

Jay watched, mesmerized, as his own hand and mouth brought Brian to climax. Brian leaned back, bracing his hands on Jay’s thighs, and let out a shuddering sigh as he came down Jay’s throat.

Jay swallowed, and as Brian withdrew his cock, Jay ran his finger along the tip, staring at the semen on his fingers. He watched, waiting for it to turn to gas, catch fire, explode into flames. Nothing happened. He touched his own mouth -- lips swollen from kisses, wet with Brian’s salty release -- and closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

“How? How is this possible?” Jay shook his head.

Brian kissed him, and suddenly Jay didn’t care. It didn’t matter why Brian was the only one who could touch him. What mattered was that he *could*.

Chapter Ten

At first Jay couldn't remember where he was. The lighting in the room was all wrong, the sun coming in from the east, the walls a muted green, the sheets stiff and confining as they tangled around his naked legs.

Then he realized he was sleeping in his own guest room. He was surprised he lost consciousness at all. For most of the night, sleep had seemed impossible. He was too enamored with the odd and satisfying feeling of having hot limbs tangled amongst his own. Every time he had tried to drift off, he would revel in the fact that he could smell Brian, feel him, and he'd open his eyes and watch Brian's deep slumber. Jay stroked Brian all night. His black hair felt strange between Jay's fingers. The stickiness where their bodies made contact was novel and pleasing.

Jay sat up, wiping a hand over his face. Brian wasn't in bed. He stretched and then got up to look for him. Brian wasn't in the loft, and one of his backpacks was gone.

Then Jay saw the note, written in very tidy script and placed prominently on Jay's coffee table.

Got a call from a man named Razi Sair who says he wants to meet at his company warehouse. He thinks he's my father! Exciting stuff... I'll be back later this afternoon.

Cold fear shot down Jay's spine. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Jay dressed quickly, keeping his phone on autodial, hoping to get through to Brian's cell phone. Brian wasn't picking up.

As Jay drove, he called Captain Pollar and asked for backup. He also told him about the warrant on Razi Sair to check for illegal portals on his person.

"On his person?" Pollar snapped. "What the hell do you mean?"

"I think Sair has a portable portal -- something ancient and powerful, created with old sorcery. It's how he's been bringing in summoned demons to perform his dirty deeds all over the city."

"How sure are you on this?" Pollar asked cautiously.

"Pretty damn sure. Judge Aren gave me a warrant last night."

"Be careful," Pollar said. "I'll send backup. Don't do anything stupid."

The Sair warehouse was not with the main facility, but a few miles south in an industrial park. A large gravel parking lot stretched in front of the building's metal siding. Palm trees rustled from the constant flow of freeway traffic.

One shiny, new, spell-powered sports car was parked next to the office. But that wasn't what captured Jay's attention. A demonic scream split the air. Jay bolted around the corner, ripping off his gloves and charging his shock-volt pistol.

Three massive, bloody, rhino-like carcasses lay motionless on the ground. Two more of the red, scaled Paarkuuri sandstriders charged Brian as he stood, arms outstretched, in the middle of the parking lot. It looked as though Brian beckoned them closer.

"Brian, get down!" Jay fired at the nearest sandstrider. Electric yellow volts lashed out of his weapon and tore into the demon. It roared and collapsed, its body smoking.

Brian turned as Jay sprinted toward him.

But the second demon moved faster than Jay. It drove its large central horn straight into Brian's gut. Brian let out a strangled cry.

Pure rage filled Jay. He threw himself onto the demon. The scales bit into Jay's palms and arms. The strider's skin burst into flames, but it continued to gouge Brian in the gut. Jay kicked at the beast as he clung to it, the stench of burning flesh and hot blood filling his nostrils.

Brian gripped the horn in both hands and tore himself free. Jay burned into the demon, counting the seconds before his shock-volt pistol recharged.

And then Brian seemed to shimmer. Heat radiated off him. Brian slammed his fist into the creature's head. Jay watched in shock as Brian's hand punched through bone and flesh like butter. Brian pulled his fist back, wrenching off the demon's jaw.

The demon collapsed, its skin smoking, blood everywhere. Jay slid off him and breathed deeply. His heart beat frantically. He looked over at Brian. Blood covered him from head to toe. His eyes were wide and startled. Jay yanked Brian toward him by his shirt. "You okay?"

Brian nodded numbly. He opened his palm and let the beast's neck bone drop from his hand.

Jay shook his head. "Fuck." In the distance he heard sirens approaching.

Brian swayed on his feet and pressed his hand against the wound at his stomach. Blood poured through his fingers.

Panic flooded Jay at the sight of so much blood. The wound looked fatal. Brian was deathly pale. Jay gripped Brian tighter, afraid he would fall. And then he remembered the last demon attack Brian had survived.

"Touch me," Jay said roughly. He gently placed Brian's hand onto Jay's neck. Numbness throbbed through Jay instantly, draining his energy. He felt as though his soul pumped out of

him, surging toward Brian in thirsty gulps. Flames danced up Brian's arms. Brian stared at Jay, eyes wide with shock, breathing hard. He hunched over.

"It's too much," Brian gasped. He tried to pull away.

"I can take it," Jay said, clasping his hand over Brian's to maintain the contact.

Weakness coursed through Jay. Brian's breathing slowed, and he relaxed. Jay couldn't tell if the smell of blood lessened or if his own senses were fading. Energy drained from Jay in waves, pulsing into Brian, leaving Jay faint. His legs trembled, and the sensation of being pulled into Brian grew even stronger. As his consciousness ebbed, Jay realized it *was* too much, he was going to die if Brian took one more ounce of his energy, but there was something almost peaceful about joining Brian so completely. As Jay's flames died, he closed his eyes and gave in to the sensation.

Brian forcefully pushed Jay away.

Jay stumbled and nearly dropped to the ground.

"Jay! Are you all right?" Brian asked anxiously.

Jay blinked. He felt dazed, like he'd been sleepwalking. He rested his hands on his knees and took deep breaths. Consciousness returned to him slowly.

"I'm okay," Jay said. He felt winded. "Just need to rest for a second."

"You're completely pale." Brian tenderly touched Jay's bare shoulder. Jay almost pulled back, but Brian took nothing from him now, and so Jay leaned into his hand instead, grateful for the contact.

"How are you?" Jay asked breathlessly.

Brian lifted up his ripped shirt. He mopped at the blood to reveal a fresh new scar, sealed and pink.

Jay shook his head. "Damn, you are good in a fight." He looked at the bloody remains of the five massive demons and shook his head. "You pulverized five of them by yourself."

Brian shrugged self-consciously. "I didn't mean to."

“You did good. Sandstriders are a nasty business. Stupid, but relentless.”

“When I touch them, I get all this strength and rage,” Brian said. He still looked a little shell-shocked. “I’m normally not so aggressive.”

Jay smiled, cupping the back of Brian’s neck. “I think aggression is justified when five monsters are trying to kill you.”

A gunshot rang out, and the gravel in front of Jay sprayed upward. Jay instinctively ducked. He yanked Brian down behind the bulk of one of the dead striders just as another bullet whizzed past his ear. His pulse beat frantically in his throat.

“Freeze!” he shouted. Jay peered over the top of the strider’s carcass. “Parmas police! Put down your weapon!”

“You put down yours!” Razi Sair emerged from the warehouse, gun raised, his face contorted in an angry grin. He looked at the sprawling mess of demons and shook his head.

“Who the hell is that?” Brian hissed.

“Your father,” Jay growled.

Chapter Eleven

Brian raised his head above the carcass of the demon to finally see his father.

“If you want to get something done, you have to do it yourself,” Razi Sair said, walking toward them, gun leveled at Brian.

Brian stared in disbelief. This was the man he was looking for? This murdering psychopath was his *father*? Incredulity battled outrage in his mind. He couldn’t believe his own flesh and blood would incite demons to kill Brian before he had even met him.

For a moment, sympathy swelled in him for his mother. No wonder she had fled to the remotest village she could find to get away from this man. Hurt raged through Brian’s breast.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Brian asked softly.

“Because Dad likes you better.” Razi fired the gun directly at Brian.

Brian didn’t think. He reached out his hand to catch it. *How absurd*, he thought, but then he could feel it, the bullet’s kinetic energy, pulsing toward him in waves, he could sense it like time slowing, and as his hands clenched around the hot metal, speed and explosive force flowed like hot oil through his joints.

Razi and Jay both stared at Brian in shock.

Brian dropped the bullet.

“Un-fucking-believable,” Razi said, more angered than amazed. “You’re even better at that than Granddad was.” With a smirk he turned and shot Jay instead.

The sound bolted through Brian’s consciousness. He wasn’t fast enough to get in the way. Jay hit the ground hard, a low grunt punched out of him,

“No!” Brian screamed, lunging toward him. Jay writhed and moaned. Brian felt absolute fear, unlike any he had ever experienced. He was going to lose Jay, and it was all his fault.

Razi shot another bullet, and Brian snarled, reaching upward once more to harness its energy. He was going to kill Razi. He burst forth with incredible speed. Power surged inside him. He slammed Razi to the ground, smashing the back of Razi’s head into the gravel.

“Don’t kill him!” Brian heard Jay gasp weakly.

Sirens sounded in the distance, coming closer. Razi tried to push up, but Brian slammed him down once more, hand around his neck, restraining him. The energy from the bullet was waning, but there was something darker coming into him from Razi himself, a slick, cold sensation like sinking in black water.

“You got him?” Jay’s voice was weak.

Relief coursed through Brian. At least Jay was still well enough to speak.

“Yeah,” Brian said. He forced Razi flat on the ground, imagining that power restraining him, freezing him. Razi stopped squirming.

Jay unclasped a strange pair of cuffs from his belt, and Brian scooted off Razi long enough for Jay to attach the cuffs to Razi’s hands, behind his back. As Jay’s fingers brushed Razi’s wrists, Razi’s skin smoked, and Razi groaned. The smell of burning skin made Brian nearly puke.

“You can move now,” Jay said breathlessly. “They’re restraining spell cuffs. He’s not going anywhere.” He rolled onto his back and looked up at the sky.

Brian looked at the man, face down on the ground. He saw something shimmer around his neck, and Brian tentatively reached forward and pulled out the medallion.

It felt heavy and slimy despite being nothing but gold. Dark sensations crept through Brian's mind, and he could see them -- other worlds, other demons, hot and unforgiving, howling in rage, banging at the door. Brian dropped the medallion and wiped his hands instinctively on his trousers, as if washing away the contamination.

Anger filled him. Since he could remember, Brian had hoped to one day meet his real father. And now here he was, looking at Brian with eyes glinting in murderous intent. Brian's father was a monster.

Brian had little time to mull over the idea, however, because police cars roared into the parking lot, spewing gravel as they skidded to a halt. And then he was surrounded, a dozen hell cops with silvery guns pointed at him, and Brian raised his hands over his head in submission.

"Yervant's down!" he heard someone cry.

Brian looked over to Jay. He was lying in a pool of his own blood. Guilt knifed through Brian. This was all his fault. Who fell for the same trap twice? And now Jay was going to die because of him.

As medics loaded Jay into an ambulance, Brian was restrained. He begged to go with Jay. Only after giving his statement did one of the other hell cops, a detective named Argent, give him a ride to the hospital.

The cop eyed Brian out of the corner of his eye as he drove.

"Did you punch your fist through those sandstriders?" the man asked gruffly.

"Yeah. That was me."

The cop whistled. "Impressive. You been practicing long?"

"No." Brian shook his head. "I didn't even know I could do that until an hour ago."

Detective Argent smiled. "Ever think of joining the police force?"

Brian didn't answer. He was still too shocked by everything to engage in conversation.

He remained silent for the rest of the drive. At the hospital, he ran into the emergency ward, feeling a sense of déjà vu. Last time he was on the other side of the counter, watching another cop wheeled in. But now the cop was Jay, and he was the man running after.

Brian followed after Jay's gurney until they pushed it through the doors, and he was politely, but firmly, restricted from entering.

He stared at the doors.

Brian sat, covered in blood, miserable and waiting in the same plastic chair he'd first seen Jay hunched on. A nurse brought him coffee. He watched the second hand of the clock ticking slowly forward.

"Excuse me."

Brian turned, choking back his tears. An older gentleman in a finely tailored silk suit stared at him. His hair was graying, his expression tight, but now Brian had seen enough of them to recognize a fellow Sair by the long nose alone.

"Yeah," Brian said.

"Are you Brian Day?" the man asked.

Brian swallowed back his swelling emotions. "Who are you?"

The man offered his hand. "My name is Bergen Sair."

Brian tensed. He recognized the name. He did not shake the man's hand back. "You're Razi Sair's father?"

"Yes." Bergen seemed nervous.

"Your son was just taken away by the cops," Brian said, not bothering to hide the antagonism in his voice. "He shot my friend and tried to kill me."

Bergen looked haunted. “Yes, I know.” He seemed weak, and exposed all of a sudden, despite the obvious efforts in his appearance to seem invulnerable. “Look, I just want to talk to you in private for a moment.”

“I think I’ve had enough private moments with Sair family members for the day,” Brian snapped.

“But this is important.” Bergen moved closer. Brian’s hands formed fists at his side. “You see, I’ve been looking for you. Everywhere. For years. I’m your grandfather.”

“Great. Are you going to try and kill me too?”

“Not at all.” Bergen smiled nervously. “I wanted to get to know you.”

Brian crushed the initial surge of excitement he felt. These people were not normal. They were insane.

“I think your son has cured me of wanting to know any family members better.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Bergen said. He swallowed. “Honestly, I never wanted you to come to harm.” His mouth twitched. “Although, given the mess at the warehouse I just saw, it looks like you can handle yourself pretty well on your own.”

Brian said nothing. He just stared back, wondering where this was leading.

“You know my own father had the same skill as you,” Bergen said. He sat beside Brian awkwardly, frowning at the small plastic chair. “He could absorb and transform energy, which is a highly prized skill, I might add. Very rare, very useful. You could do wonders for us at the corporation.”

Brian breathed deeply to calm his pounding heart.

Bergen gave him a tiny smile. “Come on. Let’s go have a drink and talk it over.”

“I can’t leave,” Brian told him. “Not until I make sure Jay is safe.”

“Jay Yervant?” Bergen stared. “Is he the police officer who Razi shot?”

“Yes.”

"I'm sure he's in good hands."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Bergen's eyes narrowed. "Why does he matter to you?"

Brian steeled his nerves. "Because...because he's my lover."

Bergen sighed. "I'm sorry for what's happened." He looked away. "I am friends with his father, you know. I truly hope he recovers."

Brian stared in disbelief. He just told a family member that he was gay. And Bergen took it in stride. A bit of warmth toward the old man crept into Brian's heart.

A group of people suddenly burst out of Jay's operating room, one of them running down the hall gripping his hands.

Brian rushed toward them. "What's going on?"

One of the nurses shook his head as he yanked off his surgical gloves. "We can't keep operating. He's too hot. We can't get near him."

"Give me a surgical mask, then," Brian demanded.

"Absolutely not," the nurse said firmly. "He's burning everyone who touches him."

"I can help," Brian insisted.

Bergen stepped forward. He put his hand on Brian's shoulder and then turned to the nurse. "My grandson is osmotic."

Brian didn't know what the term meant, but the nurse obviously did. His eyebrows raised, and then he motioned back into the operating room.

"All right, then, follow me. I hope you have a strong stomach."

Chapter Twelve

Something was tugging at Jay's belly.

He considered opening his eyes, but the mechanics of it seemed difficult. He felt the sensation of pressure, his skin being pulled. Something sharp but distant was happening to him.

He tried opening his eyes again. Light blazed painfully, and he squinted. He felt numb. Something pushed into his belly.

With great concentration, Jay opened his eyes fully and then slowly turned his head to the left. He saw men and women in surgical attire. One of them looked toward his face, and then everyone's eyes widened.

"He's awake."

"Just breathe deeply, Mr. Yervant," Jay heard someone else say. He glanced down and saw his belly splayed open, sets of hands inside of him. Panic welled up in him. *Oh God*, he was being operated on. He couldn't feel pain, but he knew.

He tried to cry out, but only a low moan emerged.

"Just stay calm, Mr. Yervant," someone said.

"Look at me, Jay."

Jay turned toward the familiar voice. Brian stood there, also gowned, his hands pressed tightly against Jay's neck and shoulder. His skin was flushed bright red, and flames burst around him in a fiery inferno.

Jay tried to ask what was going on. And then darkness consumed him.

* * * * *

The next time Jay was conscious, his entire body felt cocooned in numbness. He tried to lift his hand and could barely wiggle his fingers.

"Your doctor can't wait for you to be released."

Jay slowly turned his head. Brian sat beside Jay's bed, grinning widely.

"Oh?" Jay croaked.

"You scared the crap out of him when you woke up in surgery. That and almost setting fire to the nurses has you blackballed from this hospital."

Jay grunted in response. He glanced up at the white ceiling.

"Did I hurt anyone?"

"No, everyone's fine. And so are you. They'll let you out of here in a few days."

"Why were you there?" Jay was finding it easier to speak.

"I absorbed your energy so they could operate." Brian reached out and ran his hand along Jay's stubbled jaw. The feeling was so amazing, Jay closed his eyes and sank back into the sheets.

"I'll have to hire you on as my personal assistant in case I ever need surgery again," Jay said. Talking was exhausting, and his eyes felt too heavy to reopen.

Brian laughed. He was still touching Jay.

"Feels good," Jay mumbled. He tried to think of something more to say. *Thanks for saving my life? Too bad about your shitty dad? Sorry for not being able to protect you from him?*

Instead, the numbness of his body seemed to seep upward, and he was lost in a heavy unconsciousness once more.

* * * * *

The second time he woke up, his head was clearer, and now there was a definite sensation of pain in his stomach. He looked to his left and saw the IV stand. The needle in his arm burned bright red. They had the tubes feeding it wrapped in some sort of insulation.

“Did you know you snore?”

Jay turned and saw he had been moved to another room -- Marick’s room.

Marick grinned at him.

Jay dropped his head back onto his pillow and gave a short laugh. “How pitiful are we? Both in the hospital at the same time.”

“I got chewed by half a dozen demons. What’s your excuse?”

“Saving the world, one sandstrider at a time.”

Marick looked better. He wasn’t as pale, and he had more movement in his face. His body was still bandaged, but he was smiling and seemed in higher spirits.

“I had a nice chat with Brian, by the way,” Marick said casually. He settled himself back in bed. Jay looked up at the ceiling, closing his eyes.

“Oh?” he said finally.

“Nice guy. A little young, don’t you think?”

“He’s twenty-one.”

“He doesn’t know how to drive a car.”

Jay was going to snap something back, but he didn’t have it in him. He was still too amazed by Brian’s very existence to mock it.

“He can touch me,” Jay said finally. “He doesn’t burn.”

“Really?”

“I can fuck him if I want to,” Jay added.

“Ugh.” Marick never had a problem with Jay’s sexual orientation, but he also never wanted details. So Jay was surprised when Marick asked, “Do you want to?”

“Oh yeah. As soon as I get out of here. First thing on my list.”

Marick chuckled. “From what I hear, you have to testify at Razi’s trial first. The D.A. is speeding up the process. They’re worried he’ll use his influence to get to a jury otherwise.”

“Okay,” Jay said, yawning. “Right after that, then.”

They both lay there in companionable silence for a while, only the constant, low beeping of Marick’s heart monitor disturbing the peace.

“Brian said that Bergen Sair is giving him everything,” Marick said finally. “Sair Pharmaceuticals. The whole fucking fortune.”

“So?” Jay didn’t bother opening his eyes.

“It’s interesting, that’s all. Your new lover is going to be the richest man in the country. He’s going to run the most powerful corporation and be smack dab in the middle of all those hotbloods.”

“Yeah.” Jay tried not to think about it. But he knew, underneath, that being around such power and luxury did change a person. He knew it was part of who Jay himself was, regardless of what street he lived on or what he chose to do in his spare time. No matter how far away Jay tried to get from his roots, or how much denial he wallowed in, he would always be a hotblood sorcerer, a child of the elite.

But like so much else, Brian would be Jay’s exact opposite. He would be choosing the life of the elite, although raised on a farm in the middle of nowhere. So Jay hoped that, like himself, there would be a core to Brian’s personality that would not change completely, even if he did become the richest man in Parmas.

The bigger issue would be, what would they have in common? Jay had no interest in social parties or yachting excursions. He found racehorses dull and could sit through a total of half an hour of discussion about stock options before wanting to slink off and cry tears of boredom.

If Brian took to the lifestyle, it would be over for them. That much was certain. And yet Jay wanted him to have it, have it all. Brian had wanted family, and now he was going to get it -- the biggest family possible, complete with their own private fleet of airplanes. Brian deserved something spectacular after growing up in such a stifled and unforgiving community.

But Brian was more than just a guy who Jay was considering a romantic relationship with. Brian was the *only* guy Jay could have a physical relationship with. That put a lot of pressure on him and on Brian.

Jay sighed. It wasn't going to do him any good sitting around thinking about how much it was going to hurt if this thing with Brian went south. He had to at least give it a chance to go north. And, recalling the feel of Brian's hand against his jaw, Jay realized it would be worth the horrible pain of potential future separation just to have one more chance at it, one more night where he could lay entangled in somebody else's arms and feel, for one moment, normal.

Chapter Thirteen

Despite the fact that Jay was a miserable patient, and the hospital staff clearly despised him, they still didn't release him for another week.

Brian was busy. He had work to do, which was conveniently at the same hospital, and so he could stop in and see Jay regularly. He met with Bergen Sair several times and was introduced to the rest of the massive Sair family. He borrowed \$100 from his new grandfather and got his front door lock repaired.

And he made some inquiries at the Parmas Police Department. He didn't share the results of his efforts with Jay, because he wanted Jay to heal, not worry, and he suspected that Jay would be less than pleased with some of Brian's decisions about his future.

When Jay was finally given the go-ahead by his doctor, he said a fond farewell to his former partner and hospital roommate and then waited for Brian's shift at the hospital to end. They took a taxi back to Jeravani Street together, and Jay invited Brian up for a drink. Brian took a beer but didn't drink much of it, too distracted by the memory of the last time he'd been there with Jay. He wondered if he could get Jay naked again. Or was it still too soon after surgery?

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Jay asked. He looked tired, but there was a glint in his eye, a way he looked over Brian’s body that gave Brian hope for a reprise of their former night together.

“I’m wondering whether I should kiss you,” Brian replied. “Or if I should wait for you to kiss me.”

“You don’t mess around, do you?” Jay said, setting aside his own hardly touched beer.

“I’ve been waiting for days.”

Jay smiled. “I won’t make you wait any longer, then.” Jay kissed him. Jay tasted like toothpaste and something else, something uniquely Jay, spicy and male, and as Jay cradled Brian’s neck and pulled him in for a deeper kiss, Brian wrapped his arms around Jay’s waist.

Sorcerous flames burst from Jay’s skin. Brian could feel the heat pass onto him, watched his own hands flicker with fire. Jay’s body was hot, but it was more comforting than painful, more like grasping a hot water bottle. Brian’s fingers played along Jay’s belt, and he could sense greater heat there, emanating from Jay’s crotch in waves.

Jay walked forward as Brian walked backward, breaking their kiss only to remove Brian’s clothes. Once inside Jay’s bedroom, Jay himself undressed, although Brian caught the hitch in his movements as Jay reached upward to pull off his shirt.

“Are you sure you feel well enough?” Brian asked.

Jay smirked. “Even if I don’t, I’m not waiting.”

“I’ll be careful,” Brian told him.

Jay gently pushed him back onto the bed.

Jay lay down alongside him, and Brian rolled over, cautious not to put any weight against the bandage hiding the staples in Jay’s stomach. Brian kissed Jay’s burning flesh, rubbing his body along the rough hairs and sinewy muscles of Jay’s toned body. Jay’s suits hid his sculpted abdomen and well-defined arms, but here, Brian marveled at his perfection, his musky, muscular body, shivering under Brian’s touch. Brian’s cock rubbed against Jay’s,

and the feeling of warm, stiff flesh burned through Brian's senses, filled him with the need to be full of him, consumed and swallowed by Jay's cocooning heat.

Brian cupped Jay's balls in his hand and squeezed gently, and they rubbed against each other, the friction stimulating every nerve, sweat slicking their movements. Jay kneaded Brian's hair and moaned. Flames burst over Jay's skin in a torrent of heat.

Brian had to try twice to pull away from Jay, Jay's grip was so tight, holding him against his body. Brian quickly fumbled in his discarded trousers, finding the packet of lubricant he had stowed.

Brian ripped open the packet and squeezed the gel into his palm. He grasped Jay's stiff cock and worked the lubricant over it. Jay watched with eyes slanted with arousal, his breathing labored.

Brian reached behind himself to lubricate his own ass. It must have been then that Jay grasped what Brian was offering, because Jay suddenly groaned and writhed on the bed, a look of raw hunger consuming his expression.

The anticipation of Jay's entry, and the feeling of his own fingers inside of himself, made Brian's cock ache with need. Brian stroked it a few times and then carefully straddled Jay, holding his weight on his hands as he aligned himself with Jay's cock.

"Are you sure?" Jay's voice was rough and broken, and he stared up at Brian through eyes wild with arousal. Jay's wet cock rubbed against Brian's ass. Brian reached behind himself and guided him, slowly lowering himself, his hole pulsing open and closed in anticipation.

Brian slowly sank down onto Jay's cock. Brian's body spasmed against the sensation, it was so shocking and pleasurable.

"You're too tight," Jay said breathlessly. "I'm going to hurt you."

"I'm fine," Brian urged, clenching down onto Jay's solid heat. "Is your stomach okay?"

Jay groaned. Fire roiled down his arms. The air shimmered around them. Jay thrust upward. His hands trembled as they tightly gripped Brian's hips, holding him down as he pressed upward, impaling Brian.

Brian had fucked before -- a lot -- but it was still a shock. Regardless of how well prepared he was, how ready for the heavy fullness of another man, he always sucked in his breath, wondering at the strain and joy of the invasion.

Jay must have heard Brian's intake of breath or felt Brian's muscles resist, for he instantly froze. "Are you okay?" he whispered, panicked.

"Fine," Brian said. He slowly rose off Jay's cock and then lowered himself again, and he closed his eyes, loving the friction, desperate for that aching fullness, tinged with the mere suggestion of pain. Brian felt his skin stretch and make room, hugging Jay's flesh tightly, accommodating his wide cock.

Brian rocked against Jay. Jay pushed himself in deeper, as if he couldn't help it. Brian picked up a rhythm, riding Jay, feeling him fill his insides. He shifted his weight to his left hand and took his own cock in hand.

Jay watched, desperate and hungry. Brian cried out and pushed back, feeling his consciousness dissolve, all thoughts and worries and perceptions fade, until there was only this delirious sensation, staggering in its ability to reduce him to nothing but sheer pleasure.

Jay groaned and then froze. Brian felt the hot slick sensation of Jay's cum fill his ass. With a few additional strokes, his own orgasm blossomed and exploded through him, spurting onto Jay's chest and stomach, just missing the bandages.

Brian straddled Jay for a moment longer, breathing heavily. And then slowly he lifted off Jay and lay down beside him on the bed, pulling the sheets over both of them.

Jay closed his eyes, a small smile on his lips. "Oh, *fuck*, that was good."

"You like that?" Brian asked, grinning. It was a thrill to be Jay's first, to know he was capable of disarming Jay with such joy.

“That is the best feeling I’ve ever felt in my entire life,” Jay said with a sigh. Very slowly and carefully, he rolled over and kissed Brian’s temple.

“How’s your stomach?” Brian asked. He reached down and gently traced the bandage.

“Sore.” Jay stretched. “But I should be back to work next week.”

“And my dad’s trial.”

Jay opened his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Brian shrugged. “He may genetically be my father, but he’s really no more than a stranger. If I’ve learned anything from this whole experience, it’s that being someone’s blood relative doesn’t guarantee that you’ll get along with that person.”

Jay snorted. “That’s true.”

They lay in companionable silence. Brian thought Jay had fallen asleep. But then he felt him shift, his warm hand running down Brian’s back.

“Brian?”

Brian ran his hand through Jay’s hair. “Yeah?”

“Are you going to take Bergen’s job offer?”

“No. I applied for the police academy.”

Jay’s eyebrows came together sharply. “What? Why?”

Brian shrugged. “It was easy for me to fight off those demons. I could help people, like you do.”

“It’s dangerous. And rarely rewarding. It’s a lot of dull work, with mean people and angry demons. And the pay is shit.”

Brian laughed. “Well, someday pay isn’t going to matter to me. I’m still Bergen’s heir, whether I take his job offer or not.”

“Being an exec would be a lot more comfortable.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to do at a drug company,” Brian said. “We only received a high school education on the commune. It didn’t cover the chemistry of life-enhancing drugs made from demon spit.”

“You could learn all that,” Jay said. “Bergen would send you to whatever college you wanted.”

“I want to go to the police academy,” Brian said. “I can do something that almost nobody else can. I want to do something important and that I understand. And who knows? Maybe some day I can even be your partner.”

Jay stared at him a moment longer and then kissed him. When he pulled back, his eyes glinted, and he smiled. “Yeah, well, I’m hard on my partners, you know.”

“Somehow I think I’ll manage to take it,” Brian replied.

“I’m sure you will.” Jay wrapped his arms around Brian and then closed his eyes.

~ * ~

Astrid Amara

Astrid Amara lives in Bellingham, Washington, with one man, two dogs, and countless mice. She served in the U.S. Peace Corps and works as a civil servant paid by your tax dollars. When she isn't working or writing, she is either riding horses or sleeping.

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* * * * *

RED SANDS

Nicole Kimberling

Chapter One

Michael Gold adjusted his pack. It was hot as hell, which wasn't surprising; that's what the weather was always like in the Lesser Red Dune Purgatory. In moments, a portal would appear on this location that would take him back to his day job at Parmas City University.

A fierce, hot wind blasted across the dunes, swirling the fine red sand around his weathered hiking boots. The wind was far too hot for full-blooded humans to endure; his half-demon physiology nearly failed the test. But not quite. The sky glowed pale yellow. Behind him stood the chief judge of the Paarkuur sand caravan, a tall, thin female with bronze reptilian skin and pointed ears. She held a garland of small green and orange fruits, the traditional parting gift of his mother's people. She, like Michael, waited for the portal to ignite. After six months of traveling with the caravan, eating centipede and the strange, spongelike garland fruits, Michael was going back home.

Reflexively he patted his left breast pocket. Feeling the hard rectangle of his notebook, he relaxed a little. Everything he needed to write his paper was there. All the interviews he'd done, all the laws he'd recorded. He thought he might give it a jazzy title like, "Head on a Pike: Decapitation (Fatal and Otherwise) as Punishment in Matriarchal Magical Law Among the Sand Caravans of Paarkuur."

He smelled tenure. And a book deal.

And maybe, just maybe, the chance to appear on a late-night talk show. Visions of fame and glory filled his head. He started to wonder what tie he would wear.

The portal ignited. A glowing disc of silver light spread out in front of him. The fine blond hairs on Michael's arms stood on end. He turned and thanked the judge, his late mother's cousin. She solemnly hung the garland around his neck.

"Go with the fire winds," she intoned in her strange, melodic language.

"And you be well," Michael replied. His accent was perfect.

For a moment, the judge's expression twisted into a snarl, and then she pressed a sugared centipede into his palm and turned away. A pang of sorrow moved through Michael's chest as he watched her mount the red back of her rhinolike sandstrider. She headed back to join the rest of the caravan, which was already moving on toward the line of the horizon. He always hated to say good-bye, but the pull of wanderlust was stronger than his attachment to any particular person or place.

At times like this, he didn't know if he wandered because he was lonely or if he was lonely because he wandered. He supposed it didn't matter. He ended up lonely all the same. This was only him intellectualizing his emotions in order to distance himself from his own feelings.

Or that's how his ex had diagnosed it, and he had been in the psych department, So he would know.

Because of his height, Michael had to duck to enter the portal correctly. An electric shock zipped through his left bicep as the portal identified his DNA via an electronic shunt. Then he felt himself moving, but not in any specific direction. Smooth sailing so far. Within the next few seconds he should be stepping out into a dull brick arrival room at Hilliard Portal Company's downtown headquarters. After that, he would take the C line to his apartment near the university, and assuming the alchemy grad student to whom he'd sublet

the place hadn't turned everything to lead, he'd be asleep on his own couch before the evening news was done.

Then abruptly the portal went black, and Michael felt himself drifting. Adrenaline pumped through his muscles. The portal had failed, leaving him in the black between worlds, helpless. He took a deep breath. Most portal disturbances lasted less than a minute, he told himself. All he had to do was stay still until the power was restored. He calmly began to count the seconds.

One one thousand.

Two one thousand.

Something or someone slammed into his body. His bag flew off his shoulder, and he felt the contents spilling out onto his feet, but heard no sound. He felt cloth, then something heavy and wet.

Demonic power surged up inside him, and Michael pushed it back down. The portal would react, no matter how small his endowment of demonic magic might be. He could end up anywhere.

The rushing feeling started again. And with it came the silver suffusion of light. Seconds later, the light dissolved into the white cinderblock walls of Hilliard's Portal, Inc. The two technicians who were running the portal gaped at him. Michael looked down, hoping that his things had made the journey with him.

Then it was his turn to recoil in horror.

At his feet lay a corpse. The man's body had a round red burn in the center of his forehead, like a wound from a shock-volt pistol. Blood streaked the man's face. Laying atop the man's chest, among Michael's dirty button-up shirts and frayed boxer briefs, was Michael's own shock-volt.

His heart raced, blood pounding in his ears. What must the technicians be thinking now? Michael looked back up at them, smiling and raising his hands in what he hoped they would perceive as a harmless gesture of supplication.

“Hi there, guys!” Michael said. “You wouldn’t believe what just happened.”

One of the technicians, a short, bald man whom Michael remembered from his departure trip, almost started toward him, but was pulled back by his taller partner.

“Don’t approach the demon!” The technician slammed his hand down on a button and a red curtain of containment spells sprang up between them. Restraining spells seeped into Michael’s skin, numbing him like a shot of novocaine.

A woman’s voice penetrated the thick atmosphere.

“Traveler, there is no need for alarm. Please do not try to move as this will cause the spells to constrict. The Parmas Metropolitan Demonic Unit is on the way. Please excuse the inconvenience.” As the women went on to repeat this same message in three common demonic languages, Michael lost the ability to move or even blink.

The technicians fled the room. Through the wide portal-station windows, he could see them in the hallway outside, dead-bolting and demon-sealing the door behind them. A red light in the hall ignited and whirled while sirens like fire engines alerted the entire building that Michael and his dead companion had arrived. A crowd of gawkers gathered outside, pointing at him and the dead body.

He wanted to kick it away, but was held fast, feeling its sickening weight against his leg. He felt no heat and wondered how long the man had been dead. And how had he gotten into the portal in the first place?

He recognized that he was, again, distancing himself from his emotions, but he felt this was good since his primary emotion seemed to be fear, verging on panic.

The crowd at the window parted. And then he saw them -- six cops walking two abreast, towering over all but the demonic employees at Hilliard’s.

Military-trained sorcerers in full riot gear with shock-volt machine guns and no sense of humor. Hell cops. They spread out in an arc in front of him, shock-volts trained on him. Visors down. He could see his own frightened face reflected in the curving surfaces.

A plainclothes officer followed soon after. Like all hell cops, he was tall and built like a tank. He had skin the color of strong coffee and a bull-like neck that seemed barely contained by the neat white collar of his dress shirt. A tan sport coat rested over his left arm, and he carried a tranq bitebox in his hand. Michael wanted to tell him that there was no need for tranquilizers -- that he would come peacefully. He exerted his telepathy, focusing out past the boundaries of the spell cage that held him.

The spell cage contracted around him, crushing even the air from his lungs.

"Please don't attempt to use any magic, Mr. Gold," the plainclothes cop said. He moved so that Michael could make eye contact. The cop's irises were hazel, and he had thick, curling lashes. He held up a badge where Michael could see it.

"I'm Detective Argent. We'd like to ask you a few questions about your trip, so we're taking you down to the station."

Michael reflexively tried again to exert his telepathy and this time lost the ability to swallow.

"Mr. Gold, I need you to stop using magic for your own safety. The spell cage is automatic and can kill you. Just relax and let us get you out of it."

Yeah, right, you'll get me out. More like knock me out...

For a moment, the cop almost seemed to hear his thoughts. He smiled slightly and said, "This might sting."

He pressed the bitebox against Michael's neck, and he felt two fangs stab into his flesh. Paralyzing demon venom pumped into him. Probably from a cabrasha demon, though he couldn't be sure. He should remember to ask one of the adnihilotoxicologists about bitebox venom later.

The cage of spells vanished, and Michael fell forward onto Argent's round shoulder, his face against the freshly laundered shirt. Argent's arms closed around him, holding Michael up with no apparent effort.

Michael's fixed stare fell on the tiny sailboats decorating Argent's blue tie. They seemed to bob on a silken sea. For a moment, Michael thought it might be an enchanted tie. Then he realized he was just passing out.

Chapter Two

The Enyalios Station holding cells were really just a series of cages in a damp and cavernous basement. Animals and sentients were all together with the more humanoid demons, crammed together in one chain link cage. Not the place to be a sissy half-breed, still groggy from being biteboxed, and according to the drunken centaur sitting next to him, “as pretty as a palomino.”

All Michael’s research had shown that among demons, only losers came to this plane of their own accord, and his cage mates seemed to verify that hypothesis. An angry towering devil with ram’s horns and cloven hooves bellowed about how he’d been framed. A trio of pallid and smelly undead slumped together in the corner by the toilet, whispering.

The other cages held demons that could more accurately be described as monsters: extra-planar megafauna summoned into this world to be used as beasts of burden or for blood sports. A shivering, canoe-sized reptile that looked like a snake with legs cowered back from the fluorescent light bulb. A giant spider carrying a passel of cantaloupe-sized spiderlings on her back intermittently spat viscous black liquid at the patrolling guard.

Michael had always been worried that if he got arrested he'd somehow run into his deadbeat, weed-hound father in jail. Now that he had been he realized that it would never happen. They'd never put Michael in with the fully human population.

Michael's lawyer had yet to arrive, but when the guard came around he agreed to a preliminary interview anyway, just to get out of the prison's holding cell. The guard escorted him to a bland blue interrogation room that smelled like fresh paint. Michael wondered grimly what sort of mess had been made in this room that required a paint-over. There was only one window, a tall, skinny slit in the door filled with safety glass that had silver wire embedded in it. He shuffled, in his handcuff and leg-iron ensemble, to a green molded-plastic chair. Detective Argent entered the room and sat opposite him, holding a sheaf of papers. He introduced himself, handed Michael a tiny paper cup containing two sips of lukewarm, coffee-scented water.

He had the short regulation haircut that all hell cops seemed to have. His biceps bulged beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his white cotton shirt. But despite his intimidating musculature, Officer Argent conveyed an easygoing charm. He smiled at Michael, and Michael felt a strange sense of déjà vu, but he thought maybe it was because of the bite-box venom.

"No sailboats today," Michael observed.

"Excuse me?"

"Your tie." Michael pointed to Argent's chest. "Power red today. I must have been out for the whole night. What time is it?"

"Just past eight in the morning. How are you feeling?"

"Like I need a shower."

"We'll see about that after your lawyer gets here." Argent smiled politely. A second plainclothes cop came in and introduced himself as Lt. Sam Dashner. He was a thin, sweaty man who smiled at Michael like a psychopath might smile at his prey. When Dashner took

up a position leaning against the wall to Michael's right, Michael instinctively moved closer to Argent.

"So it says here that you work as an adjunct professor at Parmas City University?" Argent asked.

"That's right."

"You're an adnihilopologist?"

"Yes, I study demon societies."

"And you were in the portal returning from a research trip?" Argent scanned the papers in front of him.

"Yes, I'd been traveling with the Paarkuuri."

Argent put down his papers. "What about them were you studying?"

"I was researching the sociological effects of a peculiar form of punishment the Paarkuuri employ. They're a nomadic tribe, and they can't afford to really jail people, so for lesser offenses, like venom trafficking, they cut off the offender's head and hang it in a cage for a couple of days."

Dashner emitted a short, jittery laugh. "Execution is a lesser sentence?"

"Oh, the Paarkuuri don't die from decapitation," Michael belatedly added. Not everyone was as familiar with Paarkuuri physiology as he was. "The Paarkuuri can survive headless for up to a week, so long as the wound is kept clean and bandaged. They're highly regenerative."

Argent seemed to make a note in Michael's file, then continued, "Wasn't your mother a Paarkuuri demon?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure I'd be as resilient as my full-blooded cousins. I did get my finger chopped off in a car door once when I was little, and the doctor sewed it back on, but any human can do that." Michael shrugged. "I guess I'm not too enthusiastic about experimenting with dismemberment."

"No, I can see why you wouldn't be," Argent said. "Your notebook contained several references to venom trafficking. Were you studying that particularly?"

"Not at first, but it's become so endemic among the Paarkuuri now that I wound up knowing a lot about the trade." Michael shifted nervously. He didn't like the direction of this conversation. Still leaning against the wall, Dashner tapped his fingers relentlessly against his own leg.

Argent seemed to sense Michael's discomfort and followed his glance to Dashner's bouncing hand. He frowned slightly.

"Why don't you tell me about what happened when you stepped inside the portal?" Argent asked.

Michael took a deep breath. He explained again about the power failure, the darkness, the body ramming into him. He'd explained it at least seven times to different officers. He knew what they were up to. The Paarkuuri took the same sort of interrogation tactic. One after another after another asking the same questions, trying to wear him down, find a hole in his story.

Argent listened, smiling pleasantly, sipping his coffee.

"And you have no idea who the dead man inside the portal with you was?" he asked.

"I've never seen him before," Michael said.

"You're sure?" Officer Argent asked. He made a note on one of the pieces of paper.

"Positive." Michael thought they might be getting somewhere. He felt good about the interview. Calm. Like Argent was understanding him and on his side.

"Well, I think you might not be telling the whole truth," Dashner said.

"What?" Michael had to force himself to stay seated, enraged by Dashner's smug accusation. "This is unbelievable!"

"The deceased man's name was Cassidy Stockton," Argent said. "Does that name ring a bell?"

"My cousin Cassidy?" he asked.

"Your cousin." Argent nodded. "So when did you last see him alive?"

"I don't know... I think it was at Grandma's funeral. Cassidy and I weren't close." A hollow sense of disbelief filled Michael, and without thinking about it, he fabricated a long string of denials. How could that be true? Cassidy couldn't have been murdered. He was too normal. Too boring.

"How long ago was that?" Argent's soothing voice penetrated Michael's racing thoughts.

"Six months ago," Michael said.

"So you weren't aware that he was recently employed by Hilliard Portal Company?"

"Like I said, we weren't close." A pang of regret now. Too late to change that.

"Why was that?" Dashner pounced when Michael faltered.

"We just didn't like each other very much." As soon as the words were out of Michael's mouth he wished he could take them back. He looked to Argent for support and received an understanding nod. Michael continued, trying to sound completely casual. "Our fathers didn't get along."

"Why not?"

"Uncle Hugo -- that's Cassidy's father -- was an engineer. He didn't understand my dad's job." Michael sighed. Now that he was an adult, he didn't understand his dad's so-called job either.

Again Argent perused the file in front of him.

"It says here that your father is a musician."

"That's right," Michael said. "He was in the Devil Dogs when I was young."

Argent nodded. "Their single 'Hellfire' was the first song I ever bought."

“That’s great. I’m sure he’d be happy to hear that.” Michael produced this standard response at least once a month, when people discovered who his father was. Or rather had been. He was certainly a has-been now, floating around in a cloud of weed paid for with the trickle of royalties he still received from his one-hit band and giving Michael semi-annual phone calls where he either expressed his remorse for being on tour the entire time Michael was young or asked to borrow money. Michael imagined that there was a message from his dad waiting for him at his apartment now.

He scratched his wrist around the handcuff and wondered how much longer they would keep him here.

“Do you know when my lawyer is supposed to arrive?” he asked.

“What makes you think that creatures like you have the right to an attorney?” Dashner’s lip curled up into a smirk. “I think we should send you back to where you came from.”

“I am a native of Parmas City.” Michael kept his voice low and calm, though rage ignited and burned inside him. “I am not a *creature*.”

Even Argent seemed shocked by Dashner’s comment.

“Mr. Gold is represented by Selma Zalana, Lieutenant. I think she was just clearing security when I came in.” Detective Argent flashed his professional smile again, and Michael’s nascent feeling of attraction increased. Again came that wave of familiarity he’d felt before, like he and Argent were friends who happened to run into each other in a police station interview room. Very faintly, Michael wondered if the level of well-being he felt was the result of some sort of suspect pacification spell.

Dashner’s smirk turned angry, and for a moment Michael thought he would physically attack Argent, then he seemed to get himself under control.

“I’ll just go have a word with this lawyer of yours.” Dashner stalked out of the room, leaving Michael shaken.

“I’m sorry about that, the lieutenant’s been edgy lately,” Argent commented. “More coffee?”

Michael accepted, and Argent got him another tiny paper cup with half a swallow of coffee in it. As their hands touched, Michael got a flash of a scene picked out of Argent’s mind: White sand beach at sunset. Michael standing alone. Tawny skin and short gold hair. Whiteless blue eyes matching the calm and shallow water of the cove. He’d been wearing jeans too tight for his age and too warm for the weather, and a light white pullover. No shoes. No jewelry.

When Michael saw other people’s memories, he saw images the way they did. Argent had looked at him like a cop trying to assess his story.

In Argent’s memory, Michael had held a piña colada garnished with an architectural masterpiece of tropical fruit wedges. Michael remembered that garnish from the cabana party at the Whitecrescent Hotel. He’d gotten lonely, drunk too much, and blown a brawny stranger under the cover of a smoke tree near the hotel’s private boat launch. And that stranger, Michael now realized, had been Argent.

Embarrassment knifed through him, and he pulled his hand away. He felt himself shriveling up inside, praying that his lawyer would arrive before he had to meet Argent’s eyes again. But the silence became too long, and Michael was forced to say, “We’ve met before, haven’t we? The Whitecrescent Hotel last summer?”

Argent nodded and said, “I was beginning to think you didn’t remember me.”

“I’ve had a very stressful day.” Michael was relieved to see Argent smile at him in a relaxed and genuine fashion. In truth, he wouldn’t have been able to connect that beautiful sculpture of a man in yellow swim trunks with the sunset reflecting off his mirror shades to this man sitting before him in a red power tie. But picking images from people’s heads was the pittance of a demonic inheritance he’d received from his mother. That and the pointy ears.

“How dare you question my client outside of my presence?” The sound of his lawyer’s voice penetrated the interview room door, announcing her presence even before Michael could see her. Selma always arrived at any place in three stages. First came her voice, followed by a cloud of sweet perfume, and finally her short, round person appeared, propped up, as usual, on very high heels. Her teased hair added a couple more inches to her height but Michael could still look her straight in the eye while sitting down. Only when he saw Selma and he allowed relief to sweep through him did Michael understand how frightened he was to be here. Someone had murdered Cassidy and was trying to pin it on Michael.

“I have an order for my client’s release.” Selma slapped the paper down on the small table in front of Argent. Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, “Hello, Michael. How were the Paarkuuri?”

“Fierce and bronze.” Michael gave her a crooked smile.

Argent regarded the paper with what appeared to be deep amusement. Michael again felt a sudden surge of warmth toward him, which was weird and wrong and could only be the result of a spell.

Argent nodded at the papers Selma gave him. “Everything seems to be in order.”

“What is that?” Michael asked Selma.

“It’s the ballistics report. Your shock-volt hadn’t been used in a long time. Full of red dust from the dunes of Paarkuur. In fact” -- Selma shot him an annoyed glance -- “the thing was so full of grit that it wouldn’t even deploy for them. You might want to see about maintaining your weapons a little better in the future.”

“You know, I find that the demons I travel with get nervous if I sit around cleaning my shock-volt all the time,” Michael replied. He turned his attention to Argent and held up his handcuffs. “Does that mean you’ll take these off me now? Am I free to go?”

“For the time being.” Argent brought his fingers to his mouth and drew a sign in the air. Michael’s manacles and leg irons popped open and fell, clanging to the floor. He resisted

the urge to kick them violently away. Selma didn't. She shoved them distastefully aside with her pointy-toed shoe. Argent stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the fresh white wall. "We'd like to request that Mr. Gold doesn't go on any extra-planar research trips until we've sorted this thing out."

"Noted," Selma replied crisply. "Good day, Detective Argent."

"And you have a nice day too, Miss Zalana," he said. Michael turned to leave, but Argent continued. "Mr. Gold, here's my card. If anything else comes back to you, feel free to get in touch. My private number is listed last. Call me anytime."

Chapter Three

Once they'd collected Michael's personal effects and were safely in Selma's aging Aurora sedan, she wasted no time in berating him for talking to Argent without her.

"I can't believe that you ignored the only instruction I've ever given you about getting arrested!" She fumed. "They have you in the frame. Don't you understand what that means?"

"That they want to take my picture?" Michael put on his dumbest look.

"Only for a mug shot." Selma's exasperation began to abate. "Give me that card Argent gave you. I want to see if it's clean."

He handed it over. "How do you mean?"

"No surveillance spells. No ocular demon attached."

"To a business card?"

"You have no idea how tricky hell cops are." Selma opened her briefcase and removed her official attorney's seal, a heavy gold thing that looked a little like a bowling trophy that had been fitted with an electronic screen. She placed this on Argent's card. "If there's a law enforcement spell, it has to reveal itself to counsel. I've got to say, as scary as this is, I'm pretty excited. This case is big."

Since they'd been undergraduates together, Selma had spoken about making a name for herself. Mentioning it now was a reflex, if a somewhat insensitive one.

"Glad my false arrest can assist your career. I don't think it's going to do wonders for mine." Michael couldn't keep the sourness out of his voice.

"I'm sorry. I mean --"

"I understand. It's a big deal to defend a half-demon." Michael squinted ahead. A small knot of photographers gathered on the sidewalk outside the authorized jail parking. No doubt some minor celebrity had been arrested and would have to face the media gauntlet. He wondered who it was.

"It's not just your unique ethnicity. News that a portal has been tampered with is causing a huge sensation in the media." Selma put the car into gear and pulled out across the sidewalk. Reporters immediately thronged the Aurora, pressing themselves against the windows, shouting out requests for a statement. Michael recoiled into the car's bucket seat, realizing with horror that the minor celebrity was him.

Selma slowly but deliberately plowed through them and then drove to her tiny, orderly office. Selma's skinny boy-secretary, Ralphie, ordered takeout for them while she filled Michael in on his case. He was still a suspect, yes, but they couldn't hold him without a charge, and now that his shock-volt had been ruled out as the murder weapon, they had no evidence. She was looking into whether or not he could be fired from his teaching position if formal charges were laid.

"Did you really not recognize your own cousin?" Selma squeezed more hot sauce onto her chicken wrap.

"I'm telling you, we never spent that much time together," Michael said. "And it's hard to recognize dead people -- they look different. I suppose I should go see my uncle to give him my condolences, but I'm exhausted."

"After we finish, I'll drive you home. Take a nap and a shower, then call him. Ralphie and I have all the information we need now. I don't think they can make a case against you with what they have now, but if they find anything else... There's nothing else to find, is there?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"I just have to ask. I don't know everything about your life, you know? Maybe you and your cousin were getting it on in secret. Everything always comes out in these investigations, and I just want to know where I may have to do damage control."

Michael thought of telling her how he'd got it on with Argent, but something -- he thought it might be called embarrassment -- kept his confession inside.

It only took twenty minutes to get to Michael's apartment building, a pink stucco quadruplex one block from the university. Michael's two-bedroom apartment took up half the second floor and had a small balcony from which he could see a sliver of ocean on high air-quality days.

More reporters waited on the sidewalk outside, but Selma had prepared for this eventuality. She waved a no-contact order, and the spell sprang up, leaving fiery letters hanging in the air, warning all nonresidents to keep fifty feet from the dwelling. She walked him to the stairs.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come up?" Selma asked.

"I'll be okay," he said. "I just need to get some rest."

He hugged her, then mounted the concrete stairs to his front door. As he turned the key he felt, possibly for the first time, that he was glad to be home. The feeling lasted just until his door swung fully open to reveal his living room. Chairs overturned. Drawers and shelves emptied onto the floor. He stepped inside, almost trying to convince himself that the kid he'd sublet the place to had just thrown a big party. But no party left a mess this big. And besides, there were no beer bottles.

Numbly, Michael scanned the disaster. There were huge rents on the side of his brown leather sofa. His wood and bone inlaid coffee table slumped in the center, cracked in half. He picked his way through the heaps of violently unshelved books to his office. Same story. There were his tax records, spread out on the carpet along with his paperclips, staples, and small collection of shells from the shores of the Azure Hell Inland Sea, now trodden to fragments on the wool carpet.

As he knelt to gather up the pieces, the numb surrounding Michael broke. Stifled rage burst up into his chest. He threw the shell fragments back down on the carpet. Why the fuck was this happening to him? He stalked through each room in his house, just to make sure the place had been completely ransacked. Everything from his medicine cabinet to his freezer had been emptied into one carpet of filth. A pile of slick yellow feces stood in the center of his kitchen table. Even the concrete balcony had not been spared. Spent ash and charcoal from his tiny barbecue lay strewn across the concrete.

Reporters snapped his picture as he tried to right his deck chair.

He flipped them off and then realized that antagonizing the press was the last thing he should be doing. Selma had already gone. By following the cord from the wall, Michael found his phone and answering machine. He called Argent's private number.

* * * * *

Argent arrived driving an unmarked car. He wore loose khaki pants, a yellow pullover windbreaker, and polarized, wraparound sunglasses. His shoes had rubber soles and were unique enough to be made for a specific sport, though Michael couldn't identify which one from the design. He brought another equally muscular man whom he introduced as his partner, Detective Ben Moran.

Moran had dark hair and tan skin and wore a leather biker jacket, jeans, and boots. His eyes were like chips of flint. Michael guessed he fell into the bad cop category.

Argent pushed his sunglasses up on his head and gave the apartment a cursory inspection, stopping to gaze with particular interest at the pile of shit on his table.

“Snuffler?” Moran asked, stepping up beside Argent.

“Definitely a snuffler,” Argent agreed. Since neither of them elaborated, Michael was forced to ask.

“A snuffler’s a kind of bloodhound demon. It looks like a cross between a raccoon and an ugly leather handbag,” Argent said. “Obviously somebody thinks you’ve got something they want.”

“What?” Michael opened up his refrigerator again and found one unopened can of soda in the back. He wiped off the can with his shirt, then cracked it open.

“Why don’t you tell us, Mr. Gold?” Moran crossed his arms and regarded Michael with narrow, suspicious eyes.

Definitely a bad cop.

Moran continued, “This dung heap is only a couple of hours old, so whatever the snuffler was looking for, it was most likely something you were bringing back from...”

“Paarkuur.” Argent supplied the name. “What exactly did you bring back? A souvenir, maybe?”

“Or maybe some venom,” Moran suggested. “I’ve heard some nice venom comes out of Paarkuur.”

Michael straightened and found, happily, that he stood eye to eye with Moran.

“I do not smuggle or even take drugs,” he said. “And even if I had tried, you guys have already seen, felt, and photographed everything I brought back. Did anything look suspicious to you?”

“If we had found anything that even smelled funny, you’d still be in the hole making friends with Mr. Drinky the Centaur.” Moran smirked.

Argent stepped between them. Moran backed off immediately.

“This whole scene is going to require investigation, so I think it would be best if we moved you to a hotel, Mr. Gold,” he said. “We have an arrangement with the Whitecrescent. Do you want to get a few things?”

“I have everything I need in my pack,” Michael said. “As long as the Whitecrescent has laundry service I’ll be all right. I’d like to listen to my messages before I go, though. The machine’s in my office.”

“I want to have a look at the balcony,” Moran said. “I’ll call forensics while I’m out there.”

Argent nodded, and Moran crunched through the debris toward Michael’s sliding glass door.

Argent trailed Michael into his office, pausing to lean against the doorframe while Michael found an unmarked piece of paper and a pen in case there was something important to write down. He did these things automatically, taking comfort in the pragmatic blandness of the actions. His shaking hands stilled.

“You don’t have a cell phone?” Argent asked.

“I do, but it’s pointless to carry it to any of the purgatories since there’s never any reception.” Michael found a functioning pen and addressed his machine. He had thirty-seven messages. He smiled at Argent. “This could take a while. Some of these are from my father, and he likes to ramble.”

Argent shrugged. “I’ve got all the time you need.”

The messages contained the usual assortment of hang-ups, solicitations, and late-night drunken dials that it usually did. Nothing new there, though Argent did raise an eyebrow at a particularly lascivious booty call Michael received from his psych department ex.

Then the messages from his father began, first apologizing for missing Michael’s grandmother’s funeral, then later drunkenly recriminating Michael for giving him the cold shoulder about it. Then, later, a call apologizing for the first call. Typical paternal cycle.

"I knew you were on a research trip." His father's voice floated up from the speaker. "I just forgot about it the other day. I know you must be pretty broken up about Grandma. I miss her too, but we've got to go on." Pause for a long drag on a cigarette. "Which is why I was wondering if you happen to have a copy of her will. I know you won't want to have to deal with a lot of paperwork when you get back, so I thought I could get some of that done for you. I wasn't the best son to her or father to you, but at least I can take care of that for both of you."

Michael heard a scratching noise and found Argent writing something down in a black notebook. He stopped the recording.

"You can't seriously believe my father has anything to do with any of this," Michael asked, aghast.

"Whoever came through here was looking for something, and they wanted it badly enough to summon a snuffler. Was your father in any financial trouble?"

"His whole life is one long financial disaster." Michael wanted to find a way to touch Argent, to find out what he might really be thinking. He stood just out of reach, probably on purpose.

"Was your cousin Cassidy named in your grandmother's will?" From his tone, Michael would have thought Argent was asking if he preferred soup or salad.

"I think so. But my dad wouldn't kill Cassidy for the money. It wouldn't go to him anyway. It would go to me."

"Maybe he thought that you'd share it with him."

"No." Michael shook his head. "He's just not capable of any of this." Michael gestured around at his shattered apartment. "And how would he summon a demon?"

"We already know that he can summon demons," Argent pointed out.

"No, we don't!"

Argent regarded him with a pitying expression.

“The details of your own birth are printed on the liner notes of his platinum-selling album. I think it’s fair to say that we do, in fact, know that he can and will illegally summon a demon for his own use.” Argent’s voice dropped to a soft, compassionate tone that Michael decided came directly from Argent’s professional repertoire. He obviously used this voice to tell people their husbands were having affairs or that their children were venom junkies. And the voice worked. Doubt worked its way into Michael’s mind.

The story of Michael’s birth had been printed at least a million times. It told how his father and the rest of the band had summoned a lust demon and how she’d chosen his father as the object of her affection. The story said she’d ridden him until he was barely alive and then vanished, only to reappear the next morning carrying the bundle of joy that was himself. Listening to the story, Michael always felt himself filling with detachment, which was the last thing he wanted to do. Argent seemed to like him, and he’d liked Argent from the first moment he’d seen him on the beach. Michael forced himself to stay engaged, though doing so pained him.

“That story’s all wrong,” Michael said. “My mother wasn’t a lust demon. There’s no such thing. The summoning spell contained an aphrodisiac curse.”

“I figured as much,” Argent said. “But that just means we can add sexual assault to the list of crimes your father is known to have committed.”

“He didn’t put the nympho spell on her intentionally. He was just a dumb kid following the crowd.” He knew he shouldn’t make excuses for his father, that he was done with all that, yet he still found himself saying, “No matter how negligent the old man has been, he couldn’t have killed Cassidy. He doesn’t have enough brains or physical coordination to rig a portal. His balance is shot.”

“I’ll take that into consideration.” Argent made another mark in his book.

The last message from his father was very agitated. He spoke quickly, shouting over the noise of a bar. He told Michael he'd found a way to make some money and get straight all at once. He said, "You're going to be proud of me, Mikey! You'll see!"

After that Cassidy's voice floated up from his machine, and a chill seemed to move through the room.

"Michael? Are you there? Are you on some damn trip? Michael, I need to talk to you about something, pick up the phone." Then, after a long silence, "Please, Michael, please be home."

Michael looked up to Argent, who regarded him with sad, sympathetic eyes. Michael thought he must have looked terrible.

Last came an anguished message from his uncle, saying he didn't believe what they were saying about him and Cassidy, and asking him to call. Michael finished jotting down the digits and started, automatically, to hit the delete button.

"I'd appreciate it if you left those messages intact," Argent said.

"Oh, okay." Of course. They were evidence against his old man. Sick with guilt, Michael hefted his pack.

Moran returned from the balcony with the old news that it was just as fucked up as the rest of the place.

"I found some claw marks in the stucco behind that big palmetto by the balcony. I'm pretty sure the snuffler climbed up the wall and came in and out through the open bathroom window." Moran spoke to Argent, who nodded. "I'm also thinking that those reporters have been down there waiting for Mr. Gold since his arrest hit the news last night. Maybe one of them heard or saw something."

"You want me to talk to them?" Argent asked, as though this was the way they usually divided their duties. Moran shook his head.

"I think I might know one of them," he said and headed downstairs.

Michael couldn't think how knowing Moran would make anyone want to talk to him, but didn't say so.

"Are you ready to go, Mr. Gold?" Argent asked.

Michael pulled himself together, chin held high, and said, "Lead on."

Chapter Four

The Whitecrescent Hotel occupied a quarter mile of beachfront property at what used to be the northern edge of Parmas. In the fifty years since the hotel had been built, the city had grown up around it in an architecturally lackluster rash of square, flat-roofed buildings. The smooth blue and white hotel facade stood out: a relic of Parmas's bygone heyday. The hotel had been designed by the famous modernist architect, Talu, before the Commons Revolution when this section of Parmas had been a winter playground for the old sorcerous families.

Michael had only come to the famous Whitecrescent cabana parties -- never inside.

"Nice hotel," he remarked. "Good to know our tax dollars are being spent economically."

"We've got a deal with them from way back before the Commons Revolution," Argent said. "This place is cheaper for us than some off-ramp Motel Hell."

Michael followed Argent into the lapis lazuli-tiled lobby, feeling grubby and underdressed. And also decidedly inhuman.

Sleek blue leather armchairs sat next to chrome and glass coffee tables laden with financial newspapers and luxury yachting magazines.

Glancing down at the muscular curve of Argent's ass, Michael recalled that, yes, the Whitecrescent did have a boat launch.

"I've got your room, sir! 777."

Turning, Michael saw a uniformed cop coming toward him. He was young, and the blue armored vest looked slightly awkward on him. He held his helmet in one hand and a couple of hotel keys in the other. He had pale skin and dark hair and approached Argent with the open enthusiasm of a first-week freshman.

"Thanks." Argent took the key from him. "Mr. Gold, this is Officer Day. He'll be in the room next to yours."

They shook hands and then took the old-fashioned elevator up to the top floor. Argent chatted with Day about the Metro Demonic Unit's annual poker tournament, which Day seemed to think Argent would win.

"He's got a great game face," Day told Michael. "You never know what he's thinking."

"I think Mr. Gold might find a way to beat me," Argent said. The elevator lurched to a stop, and Argent opened the cage door.

"Oh yeah, I read that in your file." Day turned to Michael and tapped the side of his own head with a gloved hand. "You've got telepathy, right?"

"Only with direct skin-to-skin contact," Michael said. "So unless I'm sitting on Argent's lap during the game, his poker title is safe from me."

Argent and Day exchanged a brief, smug look. God, did Day know about him and Argent? Probably. Embarrassment crept through him, making him blush.

Argent opened the door to 777. Michael started to go in, but Day stopped him. Argent went in ahead of them.

"He's checking to make sure it's all clear," Day assured him. Argent returned a minute later.

"I opened up the balcony door to get some air inside." He gave Day a nod of dismissal.

"I'll be in the next room," Day told Michael. "There's a connecting door if you need me."

From inside the room, Michael smelled fresh sea air and moved toward it. The room wasn't large, but it was beautiful. The walls, furnishings, carpet, and even the abstract painting above the massive bed were all shades of white, cream or bone. Pale curtains billowed out in front of the sliding glass door that led to a small balcony edged with a wrought iron railing, whose balusters were decorated with modernist palm trees.

Blue Whitecrescent Hotel umbrellas dotted the beach below. A few people swam, all of them tourists, since locals typically found the water too cold in the springtime.

He dropped his backpack next to the bed and noted, with embarrassment, the ring of red dust that fell from his pack onto the white carpet.

"I think I need to wash up," he said.

"Just let me take a look in there first." Argent stepped inside, then came the sound of a running tap. Argent poked his head back out, beckoning him forward. The flirtation in his eye was unmistakable. "Come on in, the water's fine."

A deep twitch of excitement passed through Michael's exhausted body. He felt pretty sure that what Argent seemed to be suggesting went directly against both police procedure and his own common sense. Not that that made him want it less.

The bathroom was spacious and, like the rest of the room, white. The oblong, sunken tub was carved from a single, sparkling piece of white marble. It dominated the room. A small white marble bench sat alongside the tub, next to a chrome rack stocked with towels as big as bed sheets and two fluffy white bathrobes. There was also a shower stall enclosed by panes of frosted glass. The WC was hidden away behind a sliding door alongside a spacious, mirrored vanity.

"I started the bath," Argent said.

"You could wash a whole sandstrider in that thing." Michael started unbuttoning his shirt, then looked to Argent, who flashed him a quick smile.

"I'll be right outside if you need me." Argent started for the door.

A sudden feeling of vulnerability moved through Michael, and he heard himself saying, "I don't mind if you stay with me. Just to be on the safe side."

"Then I'll be right here." Argent stopped just inside the room, leaning casually against the doorframe. He took off his windbreaker to reveal a red and white polo shirt that was slightly too small in the sleeves. But then, Michael supposed everything was too small in the sleeves for Argent.

His expression gave nothing away. He was calm, friendly and professional, even while staring down at a naked half-demon. Although Michael normally tended toward self-consciousness, he didn't feel so with Argent. Whether this was the result of previous familiarity or fatigue he could not be certain. Let Argent have a gander at all of him. He couldn't care about that now. He just wanted to feel safe.

He slipped down into the steaming tub reclining against a smooth marble seat. His muscles relaxed, but the knot of worry remained in his gut.

"I'm sorry to have pulled you away from...whatever you were doing."

"Just some maintenance on the boat."

Ah, Michael thought, *boat shoes*. That also explained the windbreaker, and probably, the tie.

"What kind?"

"*Euphemie's* a forty-foot ketch," Argent said. "I live aboard."

"Euphemie?"

"I named her after my mom." Argent gave him a grin. "I'm a shameless momma's boy."

"I'm more of a grandma's boy myself," Michael murmured. "Do you really think my father had anything to do with the snuffler?"

"I can't rule it out," Argent replied.

"But it just doesn't make sense. It's not his way."

"Okay then." Argent sat down on the bench next to the tub and leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Why don't you tell me what you think happened to you?"

"Obviously I've been framed because of who I am," Michael said. "Whoever killed Cassidy picked me because I'm an easy target, being half-demon."

"But who knows that about you?"

"Apart from everyone who bought my father's album?" Sarcasm edged Michael's voice.

"Point taken, but what I mean is, who would know you were related to the victim? He had a different last name, and you two weren't regularly seen together. It follows that the perpetrator would have had to be close enough to the victim to know who his cousins were, and that usually means that the perpetrator is a member of the family, I'm sorry to say."

"So you still think I did it?" Michael asked.

"I don't think so, no."

"Why not? Apparently you think I've got a motive." Michael found a tiny complimentary bottle of shampoo and lathered his hair.

"Yes, your grandmother's inheritance, but we also know you are most likely not the killer because the victim had been dead for almost twenty-four hours before he was put into the portal with you." Argent's eyes roamed over his body openly. "Plus your shock-volt hadn't deployed."

"So who did it?" Michael smoothed lather over his neck and chest.

"I'm not sure yet. Can you think of anyone else who would benefit from your cousin's death? Anyone with a grudge?"

"How should I know? As far as I knew, Cassidy was doing a good job following in his father's footsteps. He got an engineering degree and became a clueless and judgmental nerd. At grandma's funeral all he talked about were optimizing spells for sorcerous

semiconductors.” Michael drew himself up to the edge of the tub. “Why not talk to his wife? Maybe she did it.”

“Summer Beaty? She, like you, is a person of interest,” Argent said.

“Person of interest,” Michael repeated the words, knowing that they were a standard phrase, yet wanting to believe that Argent meant more by them. Carefully, he reached out and pressed his fingertips against Argent’s calf.

Images quickly flashed from Argent’s mind into Michael’s. He glimpsed himself, naked, but not as he was now -- naked on the white bed, stretched out, Argent’s hands closing around Michael’s hips, pulling him up, pushing his thick shaft into Michael’s tight ass. Blood drained into Michael’s own groin as the image sharpened from a vague notion to an explicit desire, almost like Argent was pushing the images toward him, one after another. He lay on the bed again, face up, legs apart. He stood bent over the marble vanity. He saw himself through Argent’s eyes, kneeling on a white sandy beach sucking hard on Argent’s cock.

The last image, a recollection rather than imagination, came stronger than the others. Argent apparently had a photographic memory, and he’d kept his eyes open the whole time.

Michael watched his own lips tighten and slide down Argent’s shaft. He experienced the feeling as Argent had: the dark, luscious heat of Michael’s mouth, the shock of Michael’s responsiveness. He felt Argent’s helpless reflexive thrust when Michael took him into his throat and also the restraint Argent forced on himself when Michael flinched in response. He felt Argent’s muscles trembling as Michael finished him off with his hand, face pressed against Michael’s stomach, tawny skin against black. Tight pleasure built and built until he finally shot his load, long strands of semen falling to the damp sand where Michael knelt.

The last image in Argent’s memory was Michael’s face, eyes turned up toward him, mouth swollen and about to speak, then falling silent when Argent’s friends had called him back to their volleyball game.

Then the contact was broken.

Argent pulled his leg away. Michael was glad that the tub hid his now erect penis. Michael splashed water on his face, mainly to hide his own embarrassment. When he'd touched Argent, he'd expected to find mild interest, not visions of himself in hard core.

Argent leaned down and said, "While you're still a suspect, Mr. Gold, I'll have to ask you to refrain from physical contact. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure." Michael nodded. "I just wanted to know if you secretly thought I did it. It's a natural desire, to want to know if someone believes you're a murderer."

"What conclusion did you come to?"

"I couldn't tell." Michael couldn't make himself face Argent. "You were thinking of something else. How can you be talking about murder while thinking about nothing but hardcore sex?"

Argent grinned.

"Let's just call it my own form of multitasking."

* * * * *

Argent left shortly after Michael finished his bath, giving Michael's care over to Officer Day. The boy was pleasant enough. Michael sent his clothes down to the laundry and took a nap that lasted into the late afternoon. He ordered sandwiches from room service, and after that, he and Day watched some television -- *Top Magician*, *Last Sorceress Standing*, *Rehab with the Stars* -- before stumbling across a news report where they were showing his own picture, taken from an elderly copy of the university newspaper.

"Michael Gold, a rare human hybrid, was released from police custody today. Mr. Gold is the son of legendary rock star Axe Motorblast Gold. His father could not be reached for comment. Public safety groups continue to press the Parmas city council to shut down operations at Hilliard Portal Company pending a full investigation of Cassidy Beaty's death. City spokesperson Alise Magnuson issued a statement saying that shutting down Hilliard's

would cause unnecessary financial hardship for the many Parmas families who rely on Hilliard's for their income. Hillard Portal Company expressed sympathy for Beaty's widow, but beyond that declined to comment on the event. Cassidy Beaty was twenty-nine years old."

The last photograph flashed across the television screen showed Cassidy and his wife, Summer, smiling, standing on the deck of a yacht. Cassidy wore a tuxedo and had his hair slicked back, while Summer stood by his side in a beaded white wedding dress. Michael remembered it from their wedding reception five years ago.

He should phone Summer now with his condolences. And his Uncle Hugo, too. Somehow mumbling his sympathies down the phone seemed cowardly to him, too much like something his own father would do. He should go in person. Grandma would have told him just that.

And after that he needed to find his father. Alone.

He glanced across at Day, who appeared to be thrilled by a text message he'd just received.

"Good news?" Michael asked.

"My boyfriend's coming back into town tonight," Day said, not raising his eyes from his phone. "Two days early. He's getting takeout."

From the way Day said it, Michael would have thought takeout was a rare and precious commodity brought, at great risk, from the Icy White Purgatory of Lurg. Day was very young, Michael supposed.

"Have you two been together long?" Michael asked.

"Six and a half months."

"So you're mainly still just having a lot of sex?" Michael teased and was rewarded with a bright red flush.

“Not just that,” Day protested. “We also...eat things together...pizza mostly. Want to see a picture of him?”

Day showed him a picture of a severe, frowning guy in a black T-shirt standing in front of a smoking grill, holding a pair of tongs as though they were a weapon. His arms, like Argent’s, bulged out from under tight sleeves. Strangely, he wore gloves.

“Jay’s a detective with the PMDU,” Day said. “Just before I snapped this he was smiling, but he doesn’t like having his picture taken.” Day’s expression landed someplace between fond vexation and a mild pout.

“It sounds like you like him a lot.”

“I do.”

“You’re off duty soon, aren’t you?” Michael asked him.

“Not until the next shift arrives in an hour,” Day replied.

“I wouldn’t mind if you left,” Michael said. “Unless I’m required to have a police escort.”

“No, you’re not being held.” Day finally met his eyes.

“I think I was still in shock when I came here. I hadn’t gotten much sleep,” Michael assured Day. In truth he’d just felt safe with and wanted Argent. But Argent had left him with this rookie while he went to go prove Michael’s father was guilty of filius-fratricide. No reason to stay here and wait for that to happen. Besides, Michael had showered, slept, and shaved. He felt capable again. “I’ll be all right on my own for the last hour.”

Temptation flickered across Day’s fresh young face.

“I am technically on my sixth hour of overtime now,” Day commented. “I didn’t mind because Jay was out of town, but...”

“He’s getting takeout,” Michael finished. “That must mean he doesn’t want to spend too much time on dinner.”

“Yeah.” Day flushed again. “He probably doesn’t.”

Chapter Five

By the time Michael made it to Cassidy's place, the full heat of the afternoon had settled over the city, and Michael finally stopped feeling chilly. Cassidy had lived in a dull suburb full of curving roads and dead ends that Michael had never attempted to navigate. He was happy to let the taxi driver figure it out. He considered asking the driver to wait, but realized that a waiting taxi didn't convey the supportive image one should cultivate when visiting a recent widow.

Cassidy's front door had been recently painted bright red in perfect contrast to the house's beige and cream exterior. Decorative black shutters flanked the windows. Michael could imagine Summer picking the whole color scheme out of some house and garden magazine and then executing it perfectly by herself one weekend. The lawn was cut short and perfectly even, as if measured with a caliper.

Summer took her time answering the door. When she did, cool, dry air thick with lemon-scented furniture polish leaked out around her. She looked the same as she always did, hair coifed and sprayed, baby blue sweater set keeping off the arctic chill of the air conditioning. Even her makeup was applied as usual, just more thickly. She stepped aside to

allow him in, but didn't move from the foyer. She closed the front door tightly and then addressed him.

"I don't know why you've come. I hate you, Michael Gold. I only let you in to tell you that. Now get out." Summer Beaty opened the door again. Michael refused to go.

"I didn't do it!" he said. "Please believe me!"

"Do it? Kill Cassidy, you mean?" Her voice had a slight quaver when she spoke her dead husband's name. "I don't think you killed him, all right? So you can go."

"Summer, please let me talk to you." Though Michael hadn't known what reaction to expect from Summer when he arrived, he somehow hadn't expected this much hostility. She'd always been so bland whenever they'd previously met. He could see he'd mistaken her reserve for lack of fire. She didn't lack fire now.

"You didn't give a damn about Cassidy when he was alive, and now you're just coming around to try and convince me that your father didn't do it. Well, fuck you, Michael."

"I'm sorry --"

"No! You don't get to say you're sorry! All his life Cassidy just tried to impress you and get your attention, and you just treated him like he was some annoying little kid. He looked up to you. He thought of you as a brother!"

"I didn't know," Michael said.

"Maybe if you hadn't been so selfish you would have noticed him trying to communicate with you. He spent his grandmother's whole funeral just trying to get your attention. All you did was talk to your fag-hag lawyer friend and pretend you were the only sad person on Earth."

Michael's anger sparked.

"I was a little upset at Grandma's funeral," he said.

"You're always a little upset, you self-absorbed prick!" Summer was screaming now. "I think it's my turn to get upset today! Get out of my house!"

"Cassidy left me a message. I want to know what he was trying to tell me." Michael wished he hadn't sent the cab away so soon. "I know you hate me, and just for the record, I don't like you very much either, but that doesn't mean I don't care who killed my cousin."

"Your father killed him. I told the police that already. Cassidy went to find your father to see if he had any way of contacting you when you were away in the purgatories. He said that you'd once mentioned that Uncle Axe hung around the Sixth Street strip, and he was going there. He never came back." Summer's left hand hung limply over the doorknob. No wedding band, Michael noted. She hadn't wasted any time getting the ring off, regardless of her recriminations.

Maybe she did have something to hide after all. Was she even alone in the house now, or did she have a new man hiding up in the guest room?

The living room behind her was a perfection of taupe upholstery and silk plants. Michael had never been inside, though Cassidy had invited him a number of times. Regret welled up for the missed opportunity.

Deep down, he knew what Summer told him was right. He'd ignored and ditched Cassidy all their lives. He'd always thought it wouldn't matter, that they didn't like each other, when the fact was that it was he who avoided his cousin. And for no real reason except that Cassidy bored him.

"I'm sorry I said I didn't like you," Michael said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Summer managed a tight-lipped, "Thank you."

"And you have no idea what he wanted to talk to me about?" Michael pushed a little further, since she seemed to have worn herself out.

"No, I really don't," Summer said. "He was worried about getting fired, but not getting killed."

"Why was he worried about that?"

"He didn't get along with his new boss very well." Tension played across her face again.

“Wasn’t his boss Uncle Hugo?” Michael asked.

“No, Hugo’s boss, Jeremy Hilliard.”

Inside the house a phone began to ring, a muted, double beep that matched the decor.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to get that,” Summer said. She motioned for him to leave. This time Michael complied. He was halfway down the sidewalk when the door opened, and Summer called him back. She held the phone handset out to him and said, “It’s for you.”

Michael raised the handset to his ear, and before he’d even said *hello*, Argent started to speak.

“It wasn’t very nice of you to slip out on the rookie like that.”

“He said I wasn’t being held.”

“I’m on my way to get you,” Argent said.

The line went dead. Michael didn’t bother to ask how Argent knew where he was. He returned Summer’s handset to her and went to the curb to wait. Argent rolled up a few minutes later in the same unmarked police car. Michael got in without being told. He felt low. Unworthy.

“You really are quite a handful, Mr. Gold,” Argent said.

“Please stop calling me that. My name is Michael.” Frustration and guilt ground him down. “I would think since I already sucked your cock, we’d be on a first-name basis, at least.”

Argent glanced sideways and said, “Is there any place you’d like me to take you, Michael?”

“Sixth Street,” Michael said. “I need a cheap drink.”

* * * * *

Michael gave directions to the Sudz-n-Spin, a combination bar and coin laundry at the top of the Sixth Street strip.

Argent bought him one shot and then another. Not shots with fancy names either, just whiskey. Michael pounded both, shuddering after the second. It tasted like dryer-sheet-scented poison. Behind them, the six washing machines stood idle. Only one old woman in pajamas sat facing the sole spinning dryer.

“Interesting choice of venue,” Argent remarked.

“My father does his laundry here.” Michael flagged down the bartender, ordered a Bloody Mary and inquired about his father.

“Yeah, the rock star.” She smiled. She looked fifty but was probably older. Her orange lipstick matched her dyed hair. “You must be his son, the professor.”

“How’d you guess?” Michael smirked mirthlessly.

“You’ve got that same pointy nose,” she replied. She shook a menthol cigarette out of a pack and lit it. “I haven’t seen your dad in a couple of weeks. He’s usually here on Tuesday nights. He likes to watch the news at six o’clock.” She turned to Argent. “Can I get you something else, honey?”

“Just a refill on the coffee,” Argent said. “So it sounds like Mr. Gold Sr. had a pretty set routine?”

“Oh yes, a lot of them are like that.” The bartender poured Argent more coffee.

“Who do you mean?” Argent popped the top off two creamers and poured them into the thick brew. Michael noted that Argent took special care to stack them neatly together.

“Well, them that like to drink as a lifestyle.” The bartender smiled kindly. She eyed Argent, seeming to understand immediately that he was a policeman. “Is Axe in trouble?”

“He’s vanished,” Michael answered before Argent could say anything. “I was hoping somebody might have seen him.”

“You might try down the way at Strykker’s. There’s a Devil Dogs tribute band that plays on Monday nights. I know Axe used to sit in with them sometimes. He invited me to go once, but that music is just too loud for me.”

* * * * *

Strykker's was too loud for Michael as well. Even though the sun had yet to set, metal blasted out of the big open windows. Inside was cavernous and mainly empty so early on a weekday. On stage, three skinny kids tortured electric guitars for the benefit of six or seven bored patrons.

The bouncer knew Axe, sure, but hadn't seen him, not for a while. He asked if Michael was Axe's son and directed them down the strip to Polly's, a narrow, dark watering hole frequented mainly by employees from other area bars.

They served him another shot on the house, since he was Axe's son, and sent him farther on down the strip.

The sun was starting to set, and Sixth Street grew more populated. Dance music throbbed through the open doors of clubs with names like *The Alchemist* and *666 Sixth*. Uniformed cops stood in pairs on the street corners monitoring the crowd. One of them tipped his hat to Argent as they passed by.

"Friend of yours?"

"I worked with him before," Argent said. "Your father sure is proud of you, isn't he?"

"I guess so," Michael leaned against the brick wall, still warm from the sun. "You still think he killed Cassidy?"

"I don't have any evidence either way," Argent replied. "I now know he went missing some time before the murder, though. And I don't think we're going to find him here or any place else on the strip," Argent said. "It's time to take you back to the hotel." Argent gently took hold of his arm. At the touch, Michael saw himself, looking miserable and slightly drunk. Michael shook him off.

"I don't want to go back to some swank hotel so you can dump me on some other rookie. I'll stay out, thanks. I want to be around people."

“These people?” Argent indicated a heavily mascara-ed young man hunched over and vomiting on the sidewalk a few feet away.

“At least I might get lucky.” Michael started down the street, weaving through clots of partiers toward lower Sixth where the strip intersected with Jeravani Street and the crowd turned from college to queer. Argent caught up to him.

“What if I stay the night with you?”

“While I’m still a suspect?” Michael raised an eyebrow.

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” Argent said.

“I’d say we don’t have to go all the way back uptown for that. Come on.”

Michael led him three blocks farther down to where the gay clubs transitioned into sex shops and peep shows. He stopped in front of the Herbal Relaxation House, a bathhouse owned by one of his high school friends, another hybrid like himself. Unlike Michael, she hadn’t been educated into a semblance of respectability.

She gave him a key and a handful of small packets of lube. He led Argent up the narrow stairs and into a private room. Neon flashed outside the window.

Argent came up behind him, hands on Michael’s shoulders, making no skin-to-skin contact, which thrilled and frightened him at once. His hands trailed down Michael’s sides, across his stomach, to his groin, feeling him through the thin material of his pants.

He grabbed Argent’s hand. Images flashed into his mind, of his own body, his own need, and he could feel the desperate hunger in Argent’s touch. Michael pulled off his shirt and shorts and climbed onto the bed, eager to grant Argent’s wish. But when he rolled over Argent was still dressed. Buyer’s remorse? He wouldn’t have been the first to get all the way to the bedroom then chicken out at the real prospect of demon sex.

“Come on, the bed’s not as bad as it looks,” Michael said. “You can lie on top of me.”

Argent regarded him silently, then pulled off his shirt, dropped his pants on the floor.

Outside of his clothes, Argent was a formidable man. Big muscles. Big scars. His clothes, Michael realized, were a disguise, creating the illusion that he was just a harmless neighborhood flatfoot. But that wasn't true at all. He was a hell cop, after all. He fought demons and rogue sorcerers. Somebody had to have apprehended that giant spider in the prison cell. Maybe it had been Argent.

The bed dipped as Argent climbed on, covering Michael, but not quite resting his full weight on him.

Michael opened his lips to Argent, welcoming the other man's mouth, tasting and teasing. Argent deepened into a slow, slippery kiss that left Michael hard and aching. Argent thought of the perfect present. When he kissed Michael, he thought of kissing Michael, nothing else and no one else.

From Argent's mind, Michael sensed a question and answered.

"There's a coin-op machine in the bathroom."

Argent's muscles tensed, and he stopped moving.

"You've got to be kidding," he finally said.

"I'm not, but there's some in my jacket pocket as well, compliments of my friend."

Argent moved off him. Michael rolled onto his stomach and looked over his shoulder to watch Argent. He removed two foil packages and tore one open with his teeth. He rolled the condom down his hard shaft. He glanced at Michael and held up the second packet, which contained a small tube decorated with an augmented pentagram.

"Infused with thirteen arcane, sexual-activation herbs," he said, flipping the tube over. "And cherry flavored apparently." He grinned.

"Grade A," Michael said.

Argent slowly worked the gel into Michael, his touch gentle yet insistent, meeting little resistance. Michael groaned, his muscle twitching around Argent's fingers. Michael saw himself through Argent's eyes, bucking back against Argent's hand.

“Why is it that whenever I see inside your head you’re just thinking about me?” Michael asked.

“Shouldn’t I be thinking of you?” Argent’s tone was playful, but there was a roughness to his voice now.

“Not as much as you are and not as consistently. Are you blocking me somehow?”

“Something like that,” Argent said. “I got a lot of experience dealing with telepaths and mind readers when I was undercover.”

“So there’s no way to really know what you’re thinking.” Michael shuddered as Argent’s fingers moved across his gland.

“You could always ask me.” Argent said.

“But then you could lie.”

“So could you. I guess that makes us even.”

Argent withdrew his fingers. Michael spread his legs and arched back, almost begging. He thrust his ass backward to rub against Argent’s hot thighs, trying to increase the contact, as though it would amplify his power. It didn’t. The only information about Argent’s true mental state came from his tense muscles, from the gentle way he kissed the back of Michael’s neck and laced the fingers of their right hands together.

His cock pressed against Michael’s ass. Michael arched back against it.

“Tell me your first name,” Michael said.

“Dion. My name is Dion Marius Argent.”

Michael felt Argent align his cock and push into him, slowly and, at first, painfully. For each push forward, Argent waited until Michael assented with a word or a shuddering arch. Then he penetrated Michael an inch farther, and another, as patient as he was with his clothes on, but with muscles tensed to thrust.

When he finally started pumping, Michael moaned like an animal as his climax built. Argent’s hand gripped his cock. They found a steady rhythm, the sensation of swelling, being

consumed overwhelming Michael. Sweat ran between their bodies. Michael came first, collapsing, twitching, and tingling while Argent continued to pump into him. He felt Argent's release like an echo of his own, and Michael could see Argent's own thoughts, a blurry display of color and affection, and for a flicker of a moment, Michael felt Argent's release, as intense and powerful as his own.

Argent slumped off onto the ugly bedspread, breathing hard.

"You are amazing," he said, the tenderness he felt for Michael plain to see, even without telepathy.

Michael laid his head on Argent's outstretched arm, and they slept.

* * * * *

The strip had quieted by the time Michael woke up. Only a few distant shouts drifted in through the open window. He was cold, and Argent was gone. But a crack of light leaking out from under the ill-fitting bathroom door assured him that Argent hadn't left the building. He came out a minute later and crawled between the sheets, curling up against Michael's back, running his fingers absently down the line of fine hair going from Michael's navel to his groin.

"I wondered where you were," Michael said.

"Just checking out the facilities. There really is a coin-op machine in there," Argent said. "Fairly good selection of flavored lube. Bubble-gum, even. If I were a sixteen-year-old girl I'd love it."

Michael chuckled, twining his fingers with Argent's.

"So tell me, Mr. Undercover Cop, were you the one who brought in the giant spider I saw in the holding cells at the station?"

Argent laughed. Michael felt his body shake.

“No, zookeeper work like that usually goes to the rookies. Day was involved in that, though. He was catching the babies with a big net.” Argent gave Michael a squeeze. “They didn’t need a detective to find her or figure out what she was doing. She ended up with a trespassing charge and an order to vacate this plane. And for the record, I don’t do undercover work anymore.”

“So what kind of cases do you usually work?”

“Apart from tricky homicides?”

“Apart from those.”

“Demon and human trafficking that involves tricky homicides,” Argent said. “We tend to specialize in the department. There are only so many spells one man can learn.”

“I wrote a paper on Parmas City police culture for the very first anthropology class I ever took,” Michael said. “It wasn’t very good. My thesis was that police culture existed, which wasn’t really news to anybody. I got a C minus.”

“It’s like my first sorcery trial. I got nervous and screwed up the first spell and then just went to Hell. Literally.”

A sensation of smoke and choking heat burst through Michael’s thoughts, then just as quickly, vanished. Suppressed.

“How did you survive?”

“Turns out that although I’m bad at taking tests, I am very good in an actual life-threatening situation. I think I said every spell I knew to keep myself alive in all that heat.” Argent chuckled again.

All that heat...

“How do you think the killer got Cassidy’s body into the portal with me?” Michael asked. “He or she would have had to be in Paarkuur, right? And most humans wouldn’t be able to tolerate the temperature there.”

“Interesting choice of pillow talk, but all right,” Argent said. “I doubt the victim was killed on Paarkuur, since he was shock-volted and not burnt. But he wouldn’t have needed to be on Paarkuur to be inside your portal. When I ditched you with the rookie, I went to go look at the schematic for the portal. Travel through the portals is restricted to authorized passengers via DNA identification. That means that, theoretically, even if another person or entity were to step into the portal with you, then he she or it would not have been transported back to Hilliard’s with you.”

“But Cassidy was dead and within the cargo radius.”

“No, he entered your portal midway, not as cargo. It got me wondering how much of a match Cassidy was for your DNA, so I checked. He’s a much better match than I would have suspected. He appears to share at least one parent with you.”

“But that’s impossible. He isn’t demonic at all.”

“Then it would have to be the other parent.” Argent resettled the pillow under his neck before wrapping an arm around Michael. “I think that your Uncle Hugo’s problem with your father might have been more than disdain for his career.”

Michael stared at the ceiling, flabbergasted.

“Summer told me that Cassidy idolized me. Oh, God, this is fucked up.” Guilt came at him again, and Michael pushed it back. Even if Cassidy had been his brother, the only thing he could do for him now was to find his killer. He realized that up till this moment, he wasn’t really trying to solve Cassidy’s murder, just provide his father with an alibi. But what if, in the end, he found that his father didn’t have one? Would he keep trying to prove his innocence, or would he honor Cassidy by at least honestly looking for his murderer, regardless of who that was? Argent pulled him a little closer, and Michael collapsed against his body, as if he could hide from this new knowledge behind the mass of muscle.

But it wasn’t in Michael’s nature to succumb to emotion, so he pulled himself together, breathing deeply, focusing on the question at hand.

“What if Cassidy wasn’t placed into my portal on purpose?” Michael asked. “What if someone put his body in a portal to dispose of it, and because his DNA was so close to mine, he accidentally got pulled onto my course and ended up with me? Summer told me that he was having trouble at work. He was worried about getting fired. She said that’s why he tried to call me.”

Argent scowled. “See, this is an excellent example of how people withhold information when they know you’re a cop. Did she mention any names to you?”

“Jeremy Hilliard,” Michael said.

“Son of the owner. Runs the maintenance and repair section.” Argent nodded. “He could have had easy access to any portal.”

“Summer also told me that Cassidy had gone out looking for my father the night he was killed.” He tried to make his voice sound casual, but it came out sounding like an admission of guilt. “Do you think it’s also possible that my father created a portal to Paarkuur, which we know he knows how to do, and put Cassidy’s body in it?”

“Maybe.” Argent’s tone remained neutral.

“And it is also possible that the portal containing Cassidy’s body might have crossed my returning path, and he might have been pulled in that way?”

Argent squeezed his shoulder, saying nothing for a couple of seconds before uttering a brief, “Yes.”

“You’ve already thought of that, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have,” Argent said.

They lay there for a while, silently. Michael tried to see into Argent’s mind again, but saw nothing but the bow of a sailboat plowing through miles and miles of blue ocean. Dolphins jumped and spun, riding the breaking wave. No hint of a murder investigation in that image. If he didn’t know Argent’s capabilities, he would have thought the other man

simple. Michael tried to lose himself inside it; to find shelter from his own ugly, guilty thoughts.

"I've never been sailing," he murmured.

"Never?"

"I've been on boats, mostly motorboats when I was a little kid, but never anything with actual sails." Michael rubbed his hand across Argent's chest. "Is that where you got these muscles? Being a sailor?"

Argent chuckled quietly. "I got these at the gym. Where'd you get yours?"

"From my mother, I think." Michael smiled. "All the Paarkuuri have abs like mine or better. There are little kids walking around with six packs. It's humbling, really."

"It must be fascinating to go to other planets," Argent said. "Travel anywhere you like in the known universe."

"Yeah, it's been quite an experience. But...sometimes I get tired of going places where nobody knows me, seeing strangers everywhere, knowing I'm not going to be there long enough to really know anybody," Michael said. "Back when I was a kid, everybody knew me, like today when we went to all the bars. I got tired of that too, and then I ended up going too far the other direction."

"It's like sailing solo," Argent said. "It's just you and the boat and the sea, and for a while that's great. But then it gets to be time for dinner, and you want some conversation that isn't one-sided."

"I'm thinking this conversation might be getting a little one-sided," Michael murmured. "You know everything about me, and I know hardly anything about you. Except that you're gorgeous."

"What's there to know?"

"You tell me, Mr. Detective," Michael said. "Sum yourself up."

“Born in Parmas City. Attended public schools until accepted into the Police Academy’s Special Officer’s Training Program. Unmarried. Gay. Now a detective working in Parmas Metropolitan Demonic Unit. Class One-licensed sorcerer. Shock-volt permit with permission to use deadly force. Father was a police officer in the regular force, killed on duty when the subject was fifteen. Mother survives, eighty-three, retired stage magician and practicing witch living at Mystic Crone Rest Home. One older sister, Serefina Argent Croix.”

“Not the owner of Serefina’s?” Michael’s head popped up.

“That’s her,” he said, smiling. “I used my half of our trust fund to buy a boat. She used hers to build the restaurant.”

“I bet you get a table anytime you want, even right up at the stage.” Michael tried not to let his jealousy show. The floorshow was supposed to be breathtaking and the dinner one for the scrapbook.

“Only if there aren’t any other VIPs. My badge doesn’t carry much weight with her,” Argent said. “I think that’s about all.”

“You forgot to mention the subject’s dazzling smile,” Michael said.

“Right. Eyewitnesses report that subject has a dazzling smile,” Argent said. “And a fantastic oral technique.”

“All hearsay. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask for some evidence of that,” Michael said.

“Let me demonstrate.”

* * * * *

He stood beside Argent at the bow of the boat. Naked. Argent was naked as well. Sea spray glistened on his skin.

Michael dove off the boat into the warm waters. Dolphins surrounded him, squeaking, their strange faces and fixed smiles comforting.

Dreaming... We are dreaming together...

Then Michael felt a jerking motion and darkness. Beside him, he felt Argent's muscles tense. Argent sat up abruptly, flinging the ugly coverlet aside.

"What's wrong?" Michael sat up, too, dazed. Realizing he'd been asleep.

"Moran's coming up the stairs," Argent said.

"How did he find us?" Michael's voice sounded petulant, even to himself.

"Homing spell," Argent answered. "I have one on him too."

By the time Michael heard the knock, Argent had his pants on. Detective Moran took one look at the room and at Michael, and said, "Never knew you went for such classy digs, Argent."

"It was geographically convenient." Argent pulled his shirt over his shoulders.

"If Lt. Dashner finds out about this, he'll bust you right down to police officer one. You'll be on zookeeping duty with Day," Moran remarked.

"I guess I shouldn't tell him about it, then." Argent sat on the edge of the bed and reapplied his bunched, discarded socks. "What's up?"

"There's a John Doe who needs identifying, and I think Mr. Gold might know who he is."

Chapter Six

The leather jacket was one of a kind. First, it was old, black, and so well worn it would have fit its owner like a second skin. It had spikes on the shoulders, three of them bent or broken. The front zip was broken as well, making it impossible to close.

“Can you turn it around?” Michael asked. He already knew what the back looked like, but he asked anyway, just in case, somehow, he was wrong. Moran complied. On the back, silver studs spelled out the name: *Axe*.

“I have to sit down.” Michael groped around for a chair and allowed Argent to guide him to one. While this was exactly how he imagined he’d learn of his father’s death, he hadn’t anticipated how it would make him feel. Like all the air had gone out of the room and all the strength had been taken out of his muscles.

Moran folded the jacket back into a cardboard box and nodded at the short, tidy coroner’s office woman standing nearby.

“Can I get you a glass of water?” Argent asked.

Michael shook his head. “Can I see his body?”

The woman nodded. “Right through here.”

Michael followed her into a cold room that smelled of antiseptic and air conditioning. Argent kept close behind him, but didn't touch him. Although he'd seemed fine with Moran knowing about their--well, it couldn't be called a relationship; more like "sexual relations" -- he'd grown very formal and businesslike when they entered the morgue.

One body lay on a gurney, covered by a sheet. Michael still felt lightheaded, and wondered if he was going to pass out.

The coroner lifted the sheet away to reveal a bald man with a wrinkled, unshaven face. Blond stubble lined his jaw. His earlobes, which had until recently contained half-inch ear-piercing plugs, drooped down limply against his neck.

From the jaw down he was tattooed. Snake scales on his throat turned into flames on his shoulders, which morphed into skulls on each of his biceps. One forearm said *Mom*. The other said *Mikey*.

Michael's breath caught in his throat.

"This isn't him," Michael said.

Argent and Moran glanced at each other, then at the coroner, who said, "Are you sure? Sometimes people don't seem the same to us when they've passed away."

"Except for the one that said *Mikey*, my father's tattoos were fake. Paint-on. These are real." Michael started to smile. "That was his jacket, but this isn't him."

"So you're saying that this man has exactly your father's jacket and replicas of your father's fake tattoos, but isn't your father?" Moran asked. "Why would anyone but your father get a Mikey tattoo?"

"The tribute band," Michael said, looking to Argent. "There's a Devil Dogs tribute band. I think this guy is the singer for it."

"So maybe the jacket doesn't belong to your father either," Argent said.

"I'm pretty sure the jacket is real, but how this man got it, I don't know. That jacket meant a lot to my dad." Michael looked down at the man on the table, who, now that he was a stranger, seemed much less frightening. The coroner pulled the sheet back over his face.

"What did he die of?" Michael asked.

"Since you're not related, I can't say." The coroner glanced at the clock and yawned. "And, since it's past three, I think you'd do best to go home."

Home was still out of the question, being in complete shambles, but Michael let Argent drive him back to the Whitecrescent Hotel.

They rode in near silence, Michael exhausted from the ordeal at the morgue and unable to keep his end of the conversation moving. Argent seemed to respect that and kept his comments minimal.

While stopped at a red light not far from the hotel, Michael found himself investigating Argent's profile. He wondered whether Argent actually liked him, or would see him again after this case was over.

He supposed it didn't matter.

It wasn't like they were true lovers -- just ships passing in the night.

He thought that being a sailor, the figure of speech might please Argent, and almost said it aloud before realizing how sappy and ridiculous he was being.

They pulled into the hotel's circular driveway. Though Michael expected Argent to simply drop him off and go, Argent handed the valet his keys.

"I said I'd stay the night," he said in answer to Michael's quizzical stare.

"Sure," Michael said. "I just didn't think you meant it."

"You need to get some sleep, Michael." Argent laid a hand on the small of Michael's back, a proprietary hand, and guided him through the blue lobby toward the elevator.

"Mr. Gold!" A young man's voice burst across the silence of the lobby, startling the night clerk and making the doorman-cum-security guard suddenly stand alert.

Ralphie loped toward him, his long cranelike legs sheathed in a wrinkled linen business suit, his tie loose around his neck. He held an express mail envelope the size of a paperback book in his long hand.

From deep within the shadowed recesses of a blue leather armchair, a rumpled little lump of teal fabric started to stir, then to stand, then to glare at him.

“Michael?” Selma pushed her hair back from her face. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Sixth Street,” Michael said.

Selma gave him a narrow, irritated look, then spoke to Argent.

“I’d like to have a word with my client alone,” Selma said.

“Whatever it is, Argent should hear it.” Michael pointed to the package in Ralphie’s hand. “Is that from Cassidy?”

Ralphie’s eyes shot to Selma, who nodded her permission.

“It arrived about a month ago. I’d forgotten about it until we pulled your file to look over your university contract,” Ralphie said.

“What is it?” Michael asked.

“I don’t know, I didn’t open it,” he said. “I didn’t mean to withhold evidence.”

Argent raised a hand to silence Ralphie.

“Much as I appreciate your trust, Michael, I think we should continue this conversation upstairs.”

* * * * *

When Michael upended the green and white express mail envelope onto the white bedspread, only one thing fell out: a gray plastic flash drive.

Standing beside him, Argent pulled a ballpoint pen out of his pocket and poked the flash drive, flipping it over. No label. He nudged the flash drive back inside the envelope.

“We’ll need to dust this for fingerprints,” he said.

“But shouldn’t we find out what’s on it first?” Michael asked. “What if it’s personal?”

“I have my laptop with me,” Ralphie volunteered.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want the police here,” Selma commented. She cracked the tiny seal on a bottle of bourbon from the minibar and poured it into one of the two glasses provided. “Why do you even bother to retain me when you don’t follow any of my advice?”

“I do follow your advice.” Michael accepted the glass of bourbon from Selma. “Mostly.”

“You did the right thing,” Argent said. “I’m going to take this down to the station, and we’ll see what’s on it. There’s an officer stationed right next door in case you need anything.”

“Do you think this is what whoever ransacked my house was looking for?” Michael asked Argent.

“Possibly. I’ll call when I know more.”

“I don’t have my cell phone,” Michael said.

“Don’t worry, I can find you.” Argent squeezed his shoulder, and Michael smiled back, wondering how he found that statement reassuring rather than sinister.

As soon as Michael heard the elevator doors closing, Selma pounced.

“What in the world was that all about? Did you fuck that cop?”

“Ms. Zalana!” Ralphie hunched as though her words actually hurt him. The pale skin between his freckles reddened.

“Maybe.” Michael engaged his bourbon.

Selma cocked her head thoughtfully. “You know, that could actually help your case. If you’re charged and you go to trial, we’ll be able to ask for a mistrial. Good strategy.”

“It wasn’t a strategy, it just happened. We’d met before,” Michael said.

“Met?”

“Had sex,” Michael amended, glancing sidelong at Ralphie, who had found a reason to root through his slim attaché case.

"Then I can't believe Detective Argent would be so careless as to actually have sex with you again," Selma said. "Maybe you've got some incubus in you after all."

"Or maybe he just thinks I didn't do it," Michael said.

"In my experience the police would rather make an arrest than rigorously examine a person's innocence," Selma said. "Especially in a high-profile crime like this. The public is not reacting well to the idea that portals aren't completely secure."

"Did anyone ever think they were?"

"Well, apart from the few million citizens who would rather feel safe than question security procedures, no one." Selma opened up the minibar again and plucked a bottle of gin from the selection of wee libations in the door. For Ralphie, she chose a canned strawberry daiquiri.

"Why do you think they're going to fingerprint the flash drive?" Ralphie asked, cracking open the top of his cocktail.

"To make sure it's from Cassidy, probably," Selma addressed her comment to the minuscule bottle of gin she held.

"I wish we'd gotten a chance to look at what was on it before he took it away," Michael said.

Ralphie cleared his throat.

"Well, actually I took the precaution of casting a reveal spell on Mr. Gold's package before I brought it here, so maybe we can get a little look at it after all."

"You tampered with Cassidy's package?" Michael said.

"Not technically, in the eyes of the law," Ralphie assured him.

"I wanted to make sure there wasn't a bomb inside." Ralphie pulled a flash drive out of his pocket. "I copied the contents onto this. We'll see if it worked."

"I didn't know legal secretaries knew spells like that," Michael said.

Selma chuckled. “Oh, Mikey, how little you know of being an attorney. Looking inside the contents of envelopes is one of the first things they teach us at law school. There are some packages that you just don’t want to open.”

“Because they’ll explode?”

“Because they contain summonses. Now, Ralphie, your laptop, please.” Selma plugged the drive into Ralphie’s laptop. Michael leaned over her shoulder. The first few files opened just fine to reveal several spreadsheets and Hilliard’s portal maintenance log. A couple of business letters, one to Bonnie Prince Circus Inc., asking if they were satisfied with their experience at Hilliard’s. Also one file contained his cousin’s résumé.

“This looks like a backup of his work computer.” Selma scrolled the cursor over a series of files that appeared only as red, swirling icons. “The question is, what are these?”

“I don’t know if you should click on them,” Ralphie cautioned.

“We won’t know till we try, right?” Selma said.

“It could destroy the computer.” Ralphie’s protest was weak, and he edged away from the screen. Michael followed his example.

“If it torches it, I’ll get you a new one.” Selma clicked. The red icon burst into digital flames that crawled across the screen in a matter of seconds, devouring the desktop image. Sinister laughter floated out of the computer’s tinny speakers. In the end all that was left was an icon of a tiny tombstone that read RIP.

Selma closed the machine and handed it back to Ralphie, whose expression hung someplace between vindication and a sulk. It seemed Ralphie was not going to say *I told you so* so much as project a sullen feeling of *I told you so*.

Selma sighed and knocked back her gin.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Ralphie, don’t pout,” she said.

“Yes, Ms. Zalana.”

"You can go home now," she said. "And I don't need to see you until after lunch. Take the morning to find yourself a new computer. You can bring me the bill."

Ralphie nodded to her and after collecting his broken machine, departed.

"Do you want me to help pay for that?" Michael asked reflexively, hoping like hell that she didn't.

Selma waved the offer away.

"Occupational hazard. I'll be able to write it off. Anyway, since I'm here..." She reached into her satchel and removed a normal file folder with his name on it. She pulled out his university contract and showed him a page.

"I don't speak legalese," he commented, not bothering to try and read it.

"It's a clause in your university contract that says you can be dismissed from the university if formal charges are laid against you. When I called your department they mentioned that they'd be interested in seeing you in the office, if you're not in jail."

"I'll go in tomorrow." Michael was ashamed to admit he hadn't even thought of going in to work. The events of the previous two days made the importance of it fade.

"It would help your case with them if you did. I don't think anyone there seriously expects you to work, but you should appear. However, I don't think we need to worry about formal charges. Not since you've been intimate with the primary investigating officer."

"You're not suggesting that I blackmail Argent?" Michael asked.

"Not blackmail as such," Selma said. "I don't think I would need to even mention it. He knows he shouldn't have laid his hands on you."

"Maybe I laid my hands on him?"

"And break the well-established pattern that is your sex life? I doubt it. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear all about it." Selma put the contract away and went back to

inventory the minibar. “Looks like we’ve got whiskey, cognac, vodka, and tequila left. What will you have?”

“You should probably just grab them all,” Michael said. “I’ll go get some ice.”

Chapter Seven

When Argent returned to the hotel at ten the next morning, Michael was still asleep on the bed next to Selma -- both fully clothed.

Selma sat on the edge of the hotel bed, gulping orange juice and straightening her twisted skirt before she addressed Argent.

"Did you find anything on the thumb drive?" she asked.

"Not yet," Argent replied. "There are sorcerous encryptions on most of the files so it will take a while for the cyberteam to unravel the defenses around them. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"That's good to hear." Selma collected her briefcase and left. Michael told Argent he had to make an appearance at his office. Argent offered to drive him to the university.

As soon as he walked in the door, Karen, the anthropology department secretary, ambushed him.

"I'm so glad to see you're all right!" She went in for a hug, and Michael allowed it, mainly for appearances. He'd never really gotten along with Karen. She'd been with the university for thirty-odd years, and though he could see she'd once been attractive, three decades of toiling in the anthropology department's basement office had turned her into a

mole maiden. Thin, pale, and owl-eyed, she exuded an air of sympathy that Michael knew from experience was just a front for gossip-mining. Today was no different. She looked Argent up and down with a kind of nosy glee.

"This is Detective Argent," Michael supplied. "He's investigating my cousin's death."

"We're so grateful that you're helping Michael out of this mess." Karen pushed her long, straw-colored hair aside with a manner that conveyed her automatic attraction to any man in uniform, even if his uniform was a sport jacket and tie decorated with little dolphins. Argent seemed to take it in stride.

"It's all part of the service, ma'am. Do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions?" He flashed a smile. The effect on Karen was instant. She nearly swooned.

"Anything." She moved just slightly closer to Argent. A spark of jealousy ignited inside Michael, and he resisted the urge to put himself between them.

"I should take a look at my office," he said.

"Wait a minute." Argent laid a hand on his arm, stopping him with the lightest of touches. "I'd like to go in with you, if you don't mind."

"Sure." The word came out with more tenderness than he'd intended. Karen, damn her, missed none of it. He could see her filing the interaction away in the vault of information that she'd be whispering down the phone to the other secretaries the second they were gone.

Argent asked if anyone had been around inquiring about Mr. Gold.

"Only the usual suspects." Karen grinned like no one had ever made this joke before. Argent nodded and gave her a detached smile. "Mr. Gold senior and Dr. Allory from the psychology department."

"Dr. Allory?" Argent prompted.

"I had a message from him on my phone, remember?" Michael clarified.

"Ah, yes," Argent jotted down a couple of words in his notebook. "That Dr. Allory."

"You don't think Dr. Allory had anything to do with it, do you?" Karen tried to project concern, but Michael could see her excitement bubbling up from within.

"What did Dr. Allory want to see Mr. Gold about?" Argent inquired mildly.

"Well, I imagine he was just...well..." Karen turned to Michael. "I guess that's more your business than mine."

"It's all right," Michael assured her. He was doing his level best to keep a straight face through this ordeal. He didn't think that Argent was going to love him forever, but it was always awkward to have one lover asking about another. "Dr. Allory and I used to see each other."

"Not anymore?" Argent's smile went from professionally pleasant to what Michael would describe as mischievous. He hoped Karen hadn't caught the transition, but had the terrible feeling that she probably had.

"Not anymore." Michael didn't have to forcibly insert the note of finality into his voice. The phone rang, and Karen stepped away to answer. The person on the other end was clearly a student, as Karen became instantly pompous and obstructionist. She began a well-rehearsed speech about how all the grades had been finalized. Michael knew it would be a short phone call.

"Had you and Dr. Allory been together long?" Argent asked quietly.

"Is this really part of the investigation?" Michael countered.

"It's of interest to me," Argent said.

Michael didn't know what to make of that, but was saved the effort of answering by Karen's return.

"I'm sorry about that. These students! They think if they cry loud enough they can get away with murder." Karen shook her head, then seemed to realize what she'd said and began to backpedal. "Not actual murder, I mean. Oh Lord, I'm just so shaken up by this whole thing. I don't know what I'm saying."

“It’s normal for people to feel flustered during an investigation,” Argent said. “So what did Dr. Allory come to see Mr. Gold about?”

“He just wanted to know when Michael would be back, that’s all,” she said. “Nora, that’s the secretary over in the psych department? She has this theory that Dr. Allory is obsessed with Michael, being half-demon and all.”

“Really?” Michael asked, shocked.

Karen shrugged. “Sorry, Michael, but it’s true. He once gave Nora some notes to type up that he’d written about you. He’s doing a paper for the *Journal of Demonic Psychology*, about how your psychology is completely affected by your half-demon bloodline.”

“Are you kidding? No, don’t even answer that.” Michael cut her off. His humiliation was now complete.

“I think that’s about all I need to know. Thank you, Karen.” Argent finished writing and closed his notebook. He gestured toward Michael’s office. “Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Gold.”

* * * * *

To Michael’s relief, he found his office exactly as he had left it. Six months dustier, but otherwise untouched.

Argent closed the door behind them to ward off Karen’s prying eyes.

“That’s just one of the reasons we don’t normally allow people to accompany us on our enquiries,” Argent said softly.

“It’s okay,” Michael said. “I’d rather know what people are talking about behind my back than not. The college is like its own little world. Everyone knows everyone’s business.”

“I know you might not want to talk about it, but I have to ask. Did you break up with Dr. Allory, or was it the other way around?”

"I broke it off with him," Michael said. "And not because he was studying me. I didn't know he was doing that, though I wouldn't put it past him."

"Why, then?"

"Because I got the very specific feeling that he was more interested in my body than my mind," Michael said. "As soon as he started calling me his *demon lover* I broke up with him. He fetishized my body. I didn't like it."

"I have a little experience with that myself, being a cop." Argent sat on the edge of Michael's desk.

"I guess you would." Michael felt a little better. "I suppose there are plenty of people who have cop fantasies. Being a hell cop would take that to the nth degree."

"I've disappointed a few men with my lack of interest in handcuff play," Argent admitted. "But this Dr. Allory, is he the vindictive type?"

"He hasn't ever threatened me, if that's what you mean," Michael said. "He's left his share of pathetic messages, but that's all. What are you thinking? That he killed Cassidy and set me up just to get me back for dumping him?"

"Some people do have extreme reactions to a relationship coming to an end. And if what you say is true, he didn't think of you as a man so much as a demon," Argent said.

"Are you going to question him?"

"Not right now," Argent said.

"What are you going to do right now?"

"I'm going back down to Sixth Street to try and identify the John Doe who was wearing your father's jacket," Argent said.

"Can I come with you?" Michael asked. "I know it's probably against procedure or something, but he's my father and I want to know what's happened to him."

"Don't you need to do some work?" Argent asked.

“It’ll take me twenty minutes to check my messages and put a new auto-response on my e-mail.” Michael heard the note of desperation in his voice. “Please. I need to help.”

Argent sighed heavily.

“I really shouldn’t take you,” he said.

“If you don’t take me, I’ll just go anyway. At least if you take me with you, you’ll know where I am,” Michael said.

“You really are quite difficult, Michael.”

“You said that before,” Michael smiled his most winning smile. He put his hand on Argent’s thigh, feeling the muscles flex under his hand when they touched. “So can I tag along?”

“You can come along. But if I tell you to go, you have to go, understood?”

“Understood.”

* * * * *

At ten a.m., Sixth Street loomed wide, long, and almost empty. A few beer delivery trucks idled along the curb. Heat haze hung in the humid air. Custodians hosed evidence of the previous night’s revelry into the gutter. Michael sidestepped both the spray and flying chunks, sticking close to Argent. He’d never been down the strip this early, and the shuttered bars made him feel awkward, like he’d come visiting after the porch light was out, and everyone had gone to bed.

Argent, on the other hand, seemed cheerful. He was a morning person, apparently.

Dominic, the big, bald bouncer from the night before, wielded a yellow garden hose in front of Strykker’s. He knew the dead man’s name from the description Argent gave. “Monty Manly,” he said. “He idolized Axe.”

Dominic eyed Michael. “Still haven’t found your dad yet, huh?”

"Not yet," Michael said. He stuck his hands into the deep pockets of his cargo shorts. "But I'm still hoping he'll turn up someplace."

"Do you have Monty's address or phone number?" Argent asked.

"The boss must have it in her office someplace, but she won't be in till four or so. Monty's band had a standing gig here." Dominic shook his head. "Is he in trouble?"

"I'm afraid he's dead," Argent said.

"Dead?" Dominic screwed down the nozzle to stop the flow and let the hose drop to the steaming concrete. "Of what?"

"He was struck by a vehicle in the twelve-hundred block of Sixth Street." Argent pointed up ahead a couple of blocks. "At about one a.m. Didn't you hear the ambulances?"

"No, sir, I was at home. I just turned fifty-one last week. One o'clock is way past my bedtime."

"So you wouldn't have seen Mr. Manly last night?"

"No, sir." Dominic shook his head. "People get knocked down on this street all the time, though, and it always seems to be the sober ones. What a shame." Dominic bent to retrieve his hose.

"The sober ones?" Argent asked.

Dominic nodded. "Monty didn't drink or take drugs at all. He always said music was his natural high. Corny, I know, but it was true. He was always trying to get Axe to quit drinking, offering to help him find a place to get sober. Not in a pushy way, really, just...concerned, I suppose. He always worried Axe would fall under a car, drunk. Just goes to show you, huh?"

"What else do you know about the jacket?" Argent asked.

"Nothing," Dominic said. "Dave over at the Donut Hole mentioned it a couple of weeks ago. Dave's the bassist for Monty's band. He's always talking about how he goes straight from

gigs to make donuts. He's probably just finishing up work right now. You might catch him there if you're quick."

* * * * *

The sign on the outside of The Donut Hole said it was open 24 FUCKING HOURS A DAY, with the word *fucking* scratched in pencil. It squatted between two cheap motels, one of the few stand-alone buildings on the block. The smell of chlorine from the hotel pool mingled with the smell of sugar, grease, and car exhaust. Parmas City in one whiff.

A pair of pale, puffy-looking girls in what Michael could only describe as hooker clothes leaned against the front of the building, smoking cigarettes, and eating donuts. Their eyes dropped to the concrete, and they hunched a little close together as Argent walked by. They reminded Michael of the undead with whom he'd shared that fine prison cell experience, but these girls were all human.

The interior walls of The Donut Hole were painted glossy black. Or at least they had been half a decade ago. Now a thin coat of flour grayed them down to a dull greenish color, like a faded tattoo. Patrons crammed together at the six booths and crowded the wide glass counter. Michael caught sight of a young faun in a corner booth. Maybe eighteen or nineteen. The demon kept his goatlike legs mostly hidden beneath the table, but his angular face and pointed ears revealed his demonic nature. Their eyes met, and there came that moment of recognition that always happened when he met other demons in Parmas. He watched the faun try and fail to identify what sort of demon he was, then give him a brief smile of camaraderie before he went back to working the crossword puzzle with a fat boy in aviators.

A sign hung on a silver chain floated above the bar, extolling patrons to BEWARE BAD JUJU, the process of which mainly involved leaving a good tip.

Two stylish young girls worked the bar, pouring coffee and bagging donuts with flavors as diverse as "maple bacon with green onion" and as common as "rainbow sprinkle."

Argent ordered two coffees and a dozen donut holes and then, flashing his badge, asked if he could speak to Dave.

The girl glanced at Argent's badge, then rolled her eyes as though Argent's existence inconvenienced her. She told Argent that Dave was out back, taking out the garbage.

Like Dominic the bouncer, Dave was big, but donuts and age had taken their toll. He had chubby, dimpled fingers. His chest sagged over his gut, which sagged over his belt, which seemed just barely capable of holding his pants up.

Dave confirmed Dominic's story.

"That's Monty, all right. He looks dead," Dave remarked. A stumpy brown cigarette hung off his lip and bobbed as he spoke.

"The man in this picture is, in fact, dead," Argent said. Dave paled, and the cigarette fell off his lip. Argent stepped forward to crush it out and continued, "You wouldn't happen to know his address?"

"He lives out in the suburbs with his wife. I've got the number." Dave fished around in his pocket for his phone. Flour billowed from his pants with each movement he made.

"He was wearing a very distinct jacket belonging to Axe Motorblast Gold," Argent said. "Do you know where he got it?"

"Yeah," Dave pulled a clump of papers out of his pocket, and a kitchen timer on a string. He kept digging. "Axe sold it to him."

"He wouldn't have done that," Michael cut in. "He loved that jacket."

Dave stopped digging long enough to take a good look at Michael before saying, "You must be his kid, right? Mikey?"

"Michael," Michael said.

"Michael, right," Dave said. "Axe said he needed some money to get a bus up to Oceanside. He said it was really important. He hit us all up for cash, but we don't give him

cash no more. Then he offered to sell the coat to Monty. They went off and talked for a minute, and Monty came back with the coat. Axe was gone.”

“Did Axe mention why he needed to go to Oceanside?” Argent asked.

Dave shook his head.

“It must have been important, though. I couldn’t believe he sold his jacket. Monty paid a hundred bucks.” Dave found his phone, pressed a couple of buttons, then showed Argent Monty’s home number. As Argent dutifully copied it down, Michael simmered.

“The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame once offered my dad a million bucks for that coat,” Michael said. “He turned them down.”

“Maybe he just wanted it to go to somebody who loved it as much as he did,” Dave offered. “Axe is sentimental that way.”

“Maybe he was just desperate,” Michael said.

“Do you think that Monty’s plan was to sell the jacket?” Argent asked.

Dave shook his head. “No way. Monty worshipped the Devil Dogs. That night he told me he wanted to be buried in that jacket,” Dave said. “I guess now he gets his wish.”

Chapter Eight

Just as he and Argent had polished off the donut holes, Moran's voice came on the radio. He wanted Argent to get his ass back to Enyalios Station pronto. They'd cracked the spell code on the flash drive.

Michael took a cab to his Uncle Hugo's house to give his condolences. He approached the house warily, belatedly realizing he had come empty-handed to a house in mourning. Wasn't he supposed to bring a casserole? His grandmother had always insisted on carting casseroles over to the many widows she knew. His father had always arrived with a case of beer, which he would be uncharacteristically reluctant to drink. Michael rang the bell, and his Uncle Hugo answered the door.

Now that Michael thought of it, Uncle Hugo didn't look anything like Cassidy at all. Hugo had brown hair, thinning at the top, and flat, thick eyebrows that looked like they'd been drawn on with preschool crayon. His brows were punctuated by long gray hairs that curled up toward his forehead.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry about what's happened," Michael said.

"I know." Hugo moved aside and motioned him inside. "It's just been terrible, especially for your Aunt Jean."

Michael followed Hugo through the foyer, his hiking boots squeaking against the floor. The new floor. He recalled Hugo talking about getting new floors throughout the whole house at his grandmother's funeral.

He supposed Cassidy would have a funeral. And a will.

The thought of it stopped him cold. Could Cassidy have had a will? He would have named his wife, surely. And then his wife would inherit Cassidy's money, wouldn't she?

Hugo turned back to him.

"I've been spending the last few days in my woodshop. I was helping Cassidy with some molding work. I know it's pointless to finish it now, but I can't seem to stop myself doing it. Want to see it?" As Hugo spoke his hand trembled slightly.

"I'm sure there's some point," Michael said.

"No, Summer's going to sell the house, and the new owners would most likely just pull it all out," his uncle said. "Can I get you some lemonade?"

"I'd love some."

His Aunt Jean and Uncle Hugo's house was remarkably similar to Summer and Cassidy's. Beige. Silk plants. Summer herself, sitting at the dining room table holding his Aunt Jean's hand, glaring at him. Jean failed to raise her eyes from the bouquet of gladiola that sat in the center of the table.

"Why do people send flowers when a person dies?" she wondered aloud. "It's not like anyone who's truly mourning can appreciate how beautiful they are."

Hugo pressed his mouth closed so hard that his lips seemed to disappear.

"Michael's come to visit," he said.

"Michael who?" Jean finally glanced up, and the hatred on her face was plain. She stood up, shaking with anguished rage. "You are not welcome here."

"Please, Aunt Jean, I didn't do it," Michael pleaded.

"I don't want him in here!" Aunt Jean said to her husband. Summer sat very still, as if trying to make herself invisible.

"There's nothing proven, Jean," Hugo said. "And Michael's our family."

"How can you say that to me?" Jean cried. "How can you insult me like this?"

"I'll go." Michael backed away down the hallway.

"No, wait!" Hugo came after him, puffing and red-faced. "Let's just go around the back of the house. We'll talk in the wood shop."

Hugo got two glasses of lemonade, and Michael followed him down the back stairs. Unlike the front lawn, the back of the property had been xeriscaped with gravel and scrubby bottle palms. The front lawn was clearly for appearance, whereas the back reflected an engineer's natural frugality. Hugo walked to the freestanding garage in the back of the house, Michael trailing behind him.

Inside the garage Michael saw the orderly layout of half a dozen table-size machines. Saw. Router. Drill press. Hand tools hung on the wall grouped by purpose into subsets and then arranged smallest to largest.

Hugo took a pair of coveralls off a hook and stepped into them. The white material was coated with a fine yellow layer of sawdust. He slipped off his shoes and stepped into a pair of old sneakers whose laces were stiff with rust-colored dust. Then he picked up a piece of molding and started clamping it to a table.

"I'm sorry about your aunt," Hugo said. "The last few days have been hard on her. She's not herself. I imagine that's why it took you so long to get here."

"How do you mean?"

"Wondering whether or not you'd be welcome," Hugo said. "That's what I would wonder if I were you."

"But I am, right? In the wood shop, at least?" Michael managed a weak smile.

“Any time you’d like,” his uncle said. “So tell me, what you’ve been doing since you got back?”

“Mainly just trying to clear my name,” Michael said.

“How’s that going?”

“Pretty well.” Michael sat on an upended five-gallon drum he found near the door. “The police know I can’t have done it, and they’re pretty sure Dad’s in the clear now.” This last part was a lie, but Michael couldn’t bring himself to tell Hugo that his father was still the primary suspect.

“Then they don’t have any leads at all.” Hugo shook his head. “You hear about things like this on the news, but you never think it’s going to be your family on television asking for anyone with information to come forward.”

“There might be one lead,” Michael said. “There’s a flash drive that Cassidy sent me in the mail.”

Hugo’s sunken eyes lifted from the bits of wood he’d been fiddling with. “What’s on it?”

“I don’t know, most of it was encrypted, and the other stuff was just maintenance reports from his work.” Michael took a long drink of his lemonade. “Have you got any idea why he sent me that?”

Hugo shrugged. “I suppose you’d have to open up the encrypted files to find out,” he said. “I’m surprised you haven’t done that already.”

“Why is that?”

“You were always such a snoop.” Hugo smiled fondly. “A bad influence on Cassidy.”

“I may be snoopy, but I’m no spell hacker,” Michael said. “That’s what it’s going to take to get into them, I’m afraid.”

“Maybe if I could take a look at it, I could try to guess his password. Have you got it with you?”

"No, I don't," Michael said. "But I think the files might have something to do with Hilliard's. I think Cassidy might have found out something he wasn't supposed to. Summer told me that Cassidy wasn't getting along with his boss. Do you have any idea why?"

"That was just a personality conflict." Hugo waved his hand absently. "Cassidy thought he could improve the power efficiency of the portals and came up with this big plan he wanted to implement. Our department head had the attitude that if it wasn't broke there was no need to fix it, if you know what I mean."

"But why wouldn't he want to improve efficiency?" Michael asked.

"It's not that he was against it, but there are so many regulations about portals that sometimes it's easier to deal with an acceptable level of waste than it is to get a portal re-inspected. It's really a nightmare of paperwork. Cassidy fought with him about it, but his job was never in danger. I talked to him about rocking the boat."

"Talked to Cassidy?"

"Yes, I didn't want him to have to find another job," Hugo said. "He had that big mortgage. Summer's got it now, I suppose."

"She'll survive somehow," Michael said, shrugging. "She's probably got insurance money coming to her."

Hugo shook his head. "Cassidy changed it all. He found out Summer was leaving him. You're his beneficiary now."

"Me?"

"I remember telling him that it didn't make sense for his mother or me to be his beneficiary, since we'd be long gone by the time he died." Uncle Hugo put both his hands on the table and took a deep, steadying breath. "Shows how much anybody knows about what's going to happen."

"Why is Summer here, then?"

“Your Aunt Jean didn’t know they were having trouble. She loves Summer like a daughter, and I think Summer feels the same. Summer’s been a great comfort in the last couple of days. All that crying...it’s getting to me. I don’t mind telling you I’m dreading this afternoon.”

“Why?”

“I got a call from the morgue. The coroner has finished the autopsy. I have to go down and claim the body. I don’t want to see him like that, but I can’t ask your Aunt Jean to do it,” Hugo said.

“See him like what?”

“Dead,” Hugo said. “I’m afraid I’ll go to pieces. Not very manly.”

“I’m sorry,” Michael said. A keen sense of inadequacy surged over him, joining forces with his profound discomfort. He’d never liked it here before Cassidy died. Why was he trying so hard now? Why did he still care about these people who were accidentally his family?

“And I’m still curious about the flash drive.” Hugo picked up a big C-clamp and fitted it onto the piece of molding he was assembling. He picked up another. “Do you think you could bring it here tonight?”

“I --”

The phone in Michael’s pocket vibrated, startling Michael so much that he jumped off the bucket.

“You sure are tense,” Hugo said. The phone continued to vibrate. Michael ignored it. His uncle looked near to tears.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get this whole mess sorted out,” Michael said. “And then I need to find my father.”

At the mention of Axe, Hugo’s expression soured.

"I'm sure he'll turn up someplace. Have you checked the bars?" His uncle seemed to have heard the bitterness in his own voice, because he immediately backpedaled. "I'm sorry, Michael, I didn't mean it like that. I just feel so bad about Cassidy."

On a sympathetic impulse Michael hugged him. An image flashed into his mind of Cassidy, shock-volt hole in his skull, blood smeared across his face. Michael flinched and dropped his plastic tumbler. Lemonade spilled out over the workshop floor, turning the sawdust to mud.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm just, yes, I'm all right. Just low blood sugar." Michael bent to retrieve the tumbler and saw again his uncle's shoelaces covered in rusty dust.

Only it wasn't rust. It was red sand, like the dunes of Paarkuur. He started to ask how they'd gotten that way, then stopped himself.

He had just seen, inside his uncle's mind, an image of Cassidy dead.

But Hugo hadn't been to identify Cassidy's body yet, so how could he have known what Cassidy looked like? Unless he'd seen Cassidy before the body went to the morgue, which would mean that he'd seen Cassidy before his cousin had turned up in the portal -- the portal that had been filled with red sand from the windstorm in Paarkuur.

Michael stepped back from his uncle.

"I think I need to get out of here for a while anyway," Hugo said. "Why don't I go back to your place, and we can take a look at that flash drive together?"

"Tonight's not good for me," Michael said. He backed into the heavy table saw and nearly tripped. Hugo's expression darkened.

"What's gotten into you, Michael?"

"It's nothing, I just don't feel --"

"You just looked in my head, didn't you?" Realization crept into Hugo's expression. "You little bastard."

"I didn't mean to." Michael held up his hands.

Hugo reached beneath the table and pulled out a gleaming shock-volt pistol. A blue aura crackled around the weapon.

"Don't move," he said. "Don't even think of moving. I have a targeting spell on this that can sink a bolt into your brain at fifty paces."

"Please, Uncle Hugo," Michael said. "I won't tell anyone. I'm sure whatever happened, it was an accident."

"Accident?" Hugo smirked. "The only accident was Cassidy's birth. But I did the honorable thing raising him after your father knocked up your Aunt Jean."

"But why kill him?" Michael asked. Then knowledge dawned on him. "There really was something going on with the portals at Hilliard's, wasn't there? What was it? Trafficking? And Cassidy found out?"

"That ungrateful boy repaid my generosity by going to my boss and telling him that I was opening portals illegally to smuggle venom into the city. Where did Cassidy think the down payment I gave him for his house came from? He wasn't much of a realist," Hugo said, sighing in disgust. "It was his mother's influence, making him such a dreamer. Fortunately, my boss had an interest in ignoring Cassidy's blabbering."

"A monetary interest?"

"What do you think?" Hugo asked. He swallowed, disgust plain on his face. "Damn it, Michael. I wish you'd been able to control your snooping. I didn't want to have to do this. You only got involved because of bad luck to be traveling at the same time as Cassidy's body."

"I really won't tell, Uncle Hugo," Michael said.

"No, you won't. Ever."

"Why do you have to kill me? I didn't do anything," Michael pleaded. The phone in his pocket began to vibrate again. It had to be Argent, calling him to warn him about Hugo. If

they'd really managed to open the files, then Argent would be able to figure out that Michael was in danger, wouldn't he? He had to stall as long as he could. "The police know about the flash drive. But I have it hidden, and they don't know where it is. If you promise not to kill me, I'll take you to it. You won't be able to find it without me, not even with a snuffler."

His uncle paused, considering. "All right, Michael," he said slowly. "You're going to drive us to the location, and you're going to give me that flash drive. After that we'll go to Hilliard's, and you can take a one-way trip to Paarkuur. It's either that or death."

"Thank you." Michael pumped gratitude into his voice. "I really appreciate this, Uncle Hugo."

"Turn around and walk toward the front of the house."

Michael slowly turned, hearing his uncle step quickly up behind him, feeling the barrel of the shock-volt at the small of his back. They crunched across the gravel to the front of the house. No one walked along the hot, quiet sidewalk. There was no sign of Argent's car.

Michael heard keys jingling behind him.

"Hold out your hand," Uncle Hugo said.

Michael did as he was told, and the old man put his key ring into Michael's palm.

"It's the big square key. We're heading for my truck just ahead." Hugo nudged him forward.

Then Michael heard the screen door of his uncle's house open.

"Where on Earth do you think you're going?" Jean's voice carried across the lawn. For a second, Michael felt the pressure of the pistol ease, heard his uncle shift. He took his chance and spun around just as Hugo turned toward Jean. Michael grabbed Hugo's wrist with one bronze hand trying to twist the shock-volt pistol out of his grip.

"Let go of me!" Hugo jerked his arm back, pulling free of Michael.

"Michael!" his aunt shrieked. "What are you doing? Get away from him." She screamed for help, her voice echoing off the smooth, plastered facades of the houses around him. Two

houses down a front door opened. A boy peered out. Jean rushed forward, slamming her old, bony fists into Michael's face and neck.

"You don't understand," he tried to explain, but she clawed his cheek, still hysterical. Michael felt the air shiver as the blue aura crackled around him, felt the crushing, burning pain of the shock-volt's power slam like a nail into his thigh.

Michael scrambled away across the lawn, clutching the shock-volt shaft as it burned.

Neighbors emerged from their houses, some standing as spectators, others moving toward him.

"Stop him!" Aunt Jean wailed. "He's trying to kill my husband!"

Three teenage boys rushed toward him, one holding a golf club, another a broken brick.

"It's not true," Michael tried to call, but the pain, the silver, took his breath away.

The rangy, freckled teen raised the club and then stopped, wrapped in a crackling blue light. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Argent, arms raised, pushing out wave after wave of light. Four squad cars filled the street behind him, lights flashing across the staid houses. Two uniformed officers took the club out of the kid's hand. Argent knelt beside Michael.

"You okay?"

Michael tried to force a smile, grimaced instead.

"I feel great," Michael said. "I solved the case."

"Yeah?" Argent reached out and gave his shoulder a light, reassuring squeeze. "So did I."

Epilogue

Euphemie was a beautiful boat, from the teak decking to the brass fixtures below decks. Argent had taken Michael on the tour when he arrived on board, chest puffing with pride as he moved around the deck, pretending to brief Michael on marine safety and taking every opportunity to touch. Michael had been worried about going aboard a boat while he still walked with a cane, but Argent had persuaded him to come. Michael followed him from the forward compartment, with its small but neat galley and dining table, to the office, the head, and the bedroom in back.

Their evening mirrored the tour, starting with a barbecue on deck. Shark steaks, spicy corn and potato boil, beer, and creamy lime pie to finish. Michael was aware of them both controlling their conversation, keeping it light. No talk of murder or of Michael's father.

They talked about the sea, the birds, nearby islands, distant demon realms. After dark when the night breeze got up, they moved down to the galley for scotch. Only then did the conversation turn to Cassidy and to his Uncle Hugo.

"What I want to know," Michael said, "is how you kept finding me."

"A tracking spell, of course. Remote viewing." Argent splashed an inch of liquor into Michael's glass.

"Selma checked me over for spells," Michael said.

"No offense to your lawyer friend, but in my business we do know a fair number of ways to keep track of someone," Argent said.

"So you had me under surveillance the entire time?"

"And aren't you glad I did?"

"Yes, creepy as it is to think about now." Michael sipped his scotch, moving slightly closer to Argent, who wrapped an arm around his shoulders, then obtrusively checked his watch.

"Getting close to your bedtime?" Michael asked, half-annoyed, half-charmed by Argent's overture.

"Just making sure I don't miss my show." Argent, to Michael's annoyance, reached out and jabbed a button on a black remote control. A small television screen came on. Michael cast Argent a sidelong look. Was he really going to watch television at a time like this? Seriously?

A too excited and too clean announcer stood in front of a dull and boxy building.

"And to Dr. Matson's famous clinic now for the most talked about premiere this week: Season Two of *Rehab with the Stars*!"

"God, I hate this show," Michael groaned. "Turn it off."

"I just want to find out who Dr. Matson's secret clients are this time," Argent said.

Michael sat up straight, his evening in ruins. No matter how sexy Argent was, no matter how strong or how brave, he just could not love a man who thought *Rehab with the Stars* constituted entertainment. He wasn't even sure he'd have been able to make it through the opening credits, where that stupid, toothy Dr. Matson swore to help a new set of famous drunks and junkies help themselves, but Argent had him blocked in on the bench seat.

Sullenly he glared at the television and found a thin, grizzled, and completely familiar face staring back at him saying, "I'm gonna make it this time! I'm gonna get sober!" and throwing a rock 'n' roll devil sign at the camera.

"That's Dad!" Michael knocked his glass of scotch right off the table. "He's in Oceanside!"

"So he is." Argent nodded amiably.

"He's okay!" Michael found himself laughing and growing misty at the same time as a tension he had lost awareness of carrying dissolved. "This whole time he's been at that fucking Dr. Matson's place."

"He's more than okay by now. He's ten weeks sober," Argent said.

"When did you find out?"

"I got confirmation this morning. Security at the clinic where they're shooting that show is tighter than at the damn Sorcerer's Council." Argent stood, retrieved Michael's glass, and poured him a replacement scotch, pausing briefly to mop up Michael's spilled drink. "They're shooting the finale now. Your dad should be back in town by next Monday."

Argent rested his hand on Michael's shoulder, fingers stroking the back of his neck.

"Do you want to watch the show?" Argent asked.

Michael shook his head, closed his eyes, moved back against Argent's hand, suddenly more tired and more happy, than he could ever remember being. He said, "I want to go to bed. Will you take me?"

"Any time you like."

Nicole Kimberling

Nicole Kimberling lives in Bellingham, Washington, with her partner, Dawn Kimberling, two bad cats, and approximately 100,000 bees.

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* * * * *

TOUCHING SPARKS

Ginn Hale

Chapter One

Rain battered the black asphalt as cars sped past, spraying plumes up from the flooded gutters. James Sparks swore as a slick red sports car splashed by him, then he sprinted across the street. Rain plastered his shaggy blond hair and soaked through the layers of his hooded sweatshirt and T-shirt. He dashed under a tattered gold awning advertising ginseng baths and rooms for rent by the hour.

Inside the Herbal Relaxation House, James caught a nose full of pungent incense and human sweat. An antique iron clock hung between the dark shelves displaying jars of red fluid and contorted ginseng roots. James checked the time, and his stomach clenched. Nearly an hour late.

Moran would be pissed off.

“Can I help you, sir?” The woman at the check-in desk eyed James for a moment, and then her ivory complexion and fine features began to shift, turning darker and masculine. She had to be some kind of half-breed succubus, James realized, as he watched her image transform to more closely reflect his desires.

“We have several baths open right now.” The woman’s voice dropped to an appealing baritone, which sounded almost as deep as Moran’s voice, but far too sweet.

"I'm meeting a guy, a" -- James still had trouble with this part, even after a year -- "a john. He should have already paid for the room. Three twenty." James flashed the gold room card that Moran had sent him.

"Room 320." The woman gave James a sly smile. "Very big guy."

James could feel a flush heating his cheeks. The woman at the desk grinned and tossed James the room key. James bounded up the worn stairs, raced through the dim hall, and found the room. He knocked.

He'd learned to knock after the first time Moran had slammed him against a wall and jammed the muzzle of a pistol against his head. Now he always knocked.

"Hey, it's James." He opened the door slowly. The room was small, just enough space for the twin bed, floor lamp, and a rickety nightstand displaying Eros-brand condoms. Red and yellow neon flashed through the small window, casting weird shadows over the bare walls.

Detective Ben Moran sat on the bed, looking too long, lean, and clean to belong there. Even dressed casually in jeans, T-shirt, and a weathered motorcycle jacket, he still looked like a cop -- really more like the film version of a cop.

Most of the real detectives James had seen were plain, even a little paunchy. They passed for normal easily and used that to their advantage.

But the officers in the Demonic Unit -- hell cops like Moran -- were different. They took on monsters: demons, rogue sorcerers, and anything malevolent that tore into this world from other ones. The work made them hard, not just physically -- though there was plenty of muscle on Moran's six feet four inch frame -- but psychologically. As sorcerers, they controlled forces James couldn't even imagine holding in his body, and they accepted responsibility not just for the protection of human lives, but also for whole worlds. They weren't people who made mistakes or accepted them easily.

“You’re late, Sparky.” Moran’s voice was hard and precise, his expression so composed that it was impossible to read. Everything about Moran conveyed discipline, from his perfect, short black hair and his sharp, clean-shaven jawline all the way down his hard body to the symmetry of the laces of his polished boots.

“Sorry.” James looked down at his own pale hands just to keep from staring at Moran. “It took me awhile to shake Tony off.”

“You sure you lost him?”

“Yeah. I scraped him off on the C line, but then I had to get back here.”

Moran nodded and stood. One step brought him to James’s side. He leaned against the doorframe. Up close, James could smell the leather of Moran’s jacket and feel the familiar heat of him. Most sorcerers ran hot, the power coursing through their muscles pushing their bodies to the edge of fever. James craned his head back a little to meet Moran’s gaze.

“What do you have for me?” Moran asked.

James handed over the rolls of film. Old-style film, not the digital stuff that security spells wiped clean so easily.

“Mostly it’s the facilities. The gambling parlors and holding pens. Some from the pit fights.” James shuddered and hoped that if Moran noticed he blamed it on James’s wet clothes. “I got shots of the guests like you wanted.”

“Anybody I’m going to know?” Moran pocketed the film canisters.

“Yeah. A lot of rich hotbloods and tabloid types. Phil Sair is a regular, but he’s smart. He never handles his own money, and he always has some girl place his bets, pick up the tickets, and buy his venom.”

“Same girl every time?” Moran asked.

“Different ones, but mostly bleached blondes. Maybe he’s developed some kind of a peroxide fetish.”

Moran gave him a brief smirk, and James grinned back at him.

"Anyone else?" Moran asked. His gaze dropped from James's face to his wet sweatshirt and jeans. He seemed to find them lacking in some way.

"I snapped a lot of Mr. Blurry." James had given the man the nickname six months ago, when every single picture of him displayed a slurred gray mass instead of a face. Moran had guessed that the man had an anonymity spell of some kind.

"I might have gotten him in focus this time." James grinned at Moran's grim expression. "Instead of trying to shoot Mr. Blurry directly, I focused on reflective objects that caught his image. Figured the spell couldn't be on all of them as well."

Moran's dark brows lifted, and his lips curved with the hint of a smile. James's stomach fluttered, and he felt almost sick with himself. All Moran had to do was flash those white teeth, and James's heart raced and any sense of reason or survival that he possessed evaporated into a giddy desire to please.

"Smart, Sparky," Moran said. "I guess they taught you something at that art college, after all."

"Yeah, maybe you should offer ceramics classes to all your snitches."

Moran's smile disappeared. "You're not a snitch, Sparks."

"Police informant. Whatever. I'm getting better at it, you have to admit." James shivered again, but this time it really was because of his dripping hair and clothes. Now that he wasn't running, the cold seemed to sink through to his bones.

"Maybe, but you sure as hell wouldn't be my first choice for this job." Moran frowned at him, and James knew Moran was regretting his decision to work with him. If Moran pulled him out of the operation James didn't know what he would do. He despised the work -- watching the slaughter of terrified creatures while venom-charged men and women shouted and howled around him and then having to pump his fists and scream with the crowd. It made him sick, with humanity and himself. He'd nearly vomited the first time he'd

gone to the fights. And even now, there were weeks when he hardly slept because of the gored bodies and pitiful shrieks that haunted his dreams.

But all that brutality and suffering was what made gathering this evidence so important. There was no way that James could go back to snapping pictures of underwear models in spell-powered sports cars, not after all he'd witnessed. He needed to see this through and know that these crimes had come to an end. He couldn't let Moran think he wasn't up to the work.

"Mr. Blurry is definitely the guy you've been looking for. He's got connections." James pushed on before Moran could say anything more. "I overheard him talking to Mrs. Sunday, telling her which portals would be unattended and when. He also gave her something. It looked like a portal key."

Moran's black pupils flared into his pale blue irises. But nothing else betrayed his excitement.

"Did you see the ID coding on it?" Moran asked.

"I couldn't get close enough to see the numbers, but it looked like a black card." James knew Moran wouldn't like that. A black class portal key meant that it came from a security source, most likely the police force.

Moran gave James a hard look, like he didn't quite believe him.

"How sure are you about that?" Moran asked.

"Not 100 percent, but...pretty sure."

"I need more than pretty sure, Sparky," Moran told him.

"I'll get more." James felt like he might throw up, but he forced a smile. "There's going to be another fight tonight. Mr. Blurry always shows up for the fights. You couldn't maybe raid the place, then, could you?"

"I could, but if Mr. Blurry really is in security, he'll know what's coming." Moran narrowed his gaze as if reassessing James's intellect. "We'd just net a bunch of pissants and

end up putting down the couple dozen demons. A month later they'll have the whole business up and running again. A raid isn't a solution. Prosecution is. For that I need evidence. Solid evidence against the fucker running the show."

James couldn't argue, not when Moran was standing there looking at him so intensely, looking at him like nothing else mattered more. It was pathetic how much Moran's opinion mattered to him.

James nodded, and Moran gave him another of those quick, handsome smiles.

"So," Moran's voice softened. He pushed a lock of James's wet hair back from his face. The heat of his touch lingered even as he stepped back. "How about you get out of these wet clothes, and I'll see if I can't warm you up?"

James's heart hammered in his chest. A surge of blood rushed to his cheeks and groin. He couldn't look at Moran's face.

They had done this before, and James knew that Moran's warm touch and soft words weren't what James wanted them to be. But they were close. Moran would run his hands over him, burning away the venom and other trace drugs and poisons that lingered in James's bloodstream. When James's muscles jerked in response, Moran would massage him, talk to him softly, and make him feel safe and valued.

James pulled off his sweatshirt and the T-shirt underneath easily. He watched as Moran's gaze moved over his bare arms and chest, taking in the peppering of bruises across his shoulders and stomach as well as the scabbed gash across his left forearm.

"I got too close to one of the demons," James explained. He wondered just how bad he looked to Moran.

"What kind?" Moran asked.

"No idea." James shrugged. "It was bright green and kind of cute. Looked a little like a goat with a lot more horns."

“A cabrasha,” Moran said. His eyes flickered over James’s ropey, pale body again, but when James reached to his belt, Moran turned and walked to the window. James dropped to the edge of the bed and worked the knots out of his shoelaces, then peeled off the damp shoes and socks. As he slid out of his clinging, wet jeans, he watched Moran’s back. Red and yellow lights flashed through the window, haloing his broad silhouette like flames.

James glanced down at his own body. Goose bumps prickled his pale skin. Every scratch and bruise stood out starkly, as did the fine blond hair on his arms and legs. He needed to get some sun. Not that he’d ever be as deeply tanned as Moran. Certainly never as muscular.

But his legs weren’t bad. Track throughout high school and college had toned him, prepared him for the serious, desperate running he did now. He’d needed to climb too -- out windows, over fences, between demon cages, even down the side of a gargoyle-laden mansion. It had been hell on his nerves, but his upper body looked good.

He slipped off his briefs and lay on the bed, face down, the way Moran would want him.

* * * * *

Moran took in James’s naked body stretched out against the cheap yellow sheets. He looked peaceful, like he was drifting off to sleep. His head rested on his crossed forearms, face turned away from Moran, damp, blond hair drying into ringlets at the nape of his neck. Moran followed the line of James’s straight spine down from his angular back to the tight muscles of his butt. His long legs parted just enough to tease Moran. Then James crossed his left calf over his right.

Moran caught his ankle and pulled James’s legs back apart. James didn’t resist him, didn’t even lift his head or ask why Moran needed to spread his thighs.

He was so trusting that it almost scared Moran.

Physically James had grown up a lot from the skinny teenager whom Moran could easily remember flipping somersaults on a black trampoline and waving at him from across the fence. But in other ways, James still seemed so young and so full of ideals that he reminded Moran of one of those legendary, golden youths who fought dragons with nothing more than righteousness to protect them.

Even in legends those boys died young.

Moran sat down beside James. The bed creaked with his weight, and James released a slow breath. Moran laid his hands against the small of James's back. His skin felt cool and smooth, with just a hint of heat at the base of his spine. Moran spread his fingers, pushing against the firmness of James's flesh. He felt a shiver pass through James's muscles.

"Relax, Sparky." His voice sounded too rough, even to himself.

Moran concentrated on the searing heat that seemed to always pulse through his chest. He let a little of it free to flow through his arms and pour over James as he massaged his back. For an instant, James tensed, and then slowly, his body relented. Moran pushed the heat deeper into James, feeling silky coolness on his hands and tasting earthy salt on his tongue.

"That's good, Sparky," he whispered. "Just relax and let me in."

"Are you always gonna call me Sparky?" James sounded half asleep.

"You prefer Skinny-Jimmy?" Moran teased.

"No." The languor in James's voice made him sound childishly sullen. Moran smiled and kept working his hands over James, drinking in the pleasure of his slim body and searing away the dark traces of venom that haunted his veins.

Very little of the drug tainted James's flesh, especially considering the places Moran had sent him. Still it was more than Moran wanted to feel. He couldn't suppress his sense of guilt as the oily taste of venom seeped into his memory of James.

When they'd first met, Moran had been a patrol officer, three years out of academy. He'd rented an apartment across from the Sparks family's quaint two-story house, and

occasionally he caught glimpses of James -- bounding, flipping, running, or lying in wait with his black camera in hand. Bill hadn't liked the kid, but then, Bill hadn't liked much, not by then.

Moran had talked to James from time to time, mostly about music and Moran's dog. The kid made him smile, and he appreciated that.

Then James had gone away to college, and Bill had finally done it for real. Deep vertical gashes, cutting down nearly to bone. A week after the funeral, Moran found a small apartment closer to the station and far from his old neighbors and their curious, pitying glances.

He'd kept a couple of the photos James had given him. Now and then he'd noticed James's name on the byline of a photo essay in a magazine, but he hadn't expected to ever see him again.

Certainly he hadn't thought that James would show up on his doorstep one late night looking surprisingly handsome and troubled.

It had been raining that night too.

James's white shirt clung to the lean lines of his chest. His skin looked ghostly pale, and his deep brown eyes seemed almost black in the darkness. Moran had invited him in, found a towel and some dry clothes for him. The bathroom door stood ajar as James stripped and dressed, and Moran watched him with growing arousal. It was too easy to picture that sleek body arching under him. Too easy to imagine the way James would blush as he went down on Moran.

He offered James a beer after he emerged from the bathroom, and briefly Moran thought that James returned his hungry look. But then they started talking, and there was nothing remotely flirtatious about the conversation.

James's roommate, a scrawny blond named Tony Allmon, had found himself a circle of rich, nasty friends and a venom addiction to go along with the bad company. In the wake of

one of Tony's parties, James had discovered that the venom was coming from demons that had been abducted from their home worlds and forced to battle against each other for entertainment. The defeated combatants -- their savaged bodies still pumped with demonic endorphins and adrenaline -- were often half-alive when they were dragged into grinders and processed into very potent venom that would be sold at the next match.

The information didn't surprise Moran, not after eight years on the force. Poor people gambled on fighting dogs in pits, while the moneyed elite -- especially hotbloods of sorcerous ancestry -- preferred more exotic blood sports. But it was still the same thing. People were worse than demons most of the time.

But James had been appalled and furious. Moran had never seen him so angry. His cheeks flushed, and the muscles of his delicate jaw worked like steel cables. Moran sensed the chance of laying James had dropped to zero. He was too righteous and outraged.

It was just as well, Moran told himself. James was just a kid, a beautiful kid, but still a virgin for all Moran knew. And Moran didn't want to be the son of a bitch who screwed him and then broke his heart in the morning.

After Bill, he didn't think he knew how to be anything else.

It was almost a relief when James demanded to know what it would take to stop the summonings and fights. How could a ring of well-connected venom dealers be brought to justice?

Like an idiot, Moran told him, in detail, knowing that the reality of the work would seem overwhelming. The sheer difficulty of producing hard evidence and grooming informants took years. James listened and then thanked Moran. He left without finishing his beer.

Moran had expected James to organize a petition or maybe write an angry editorial to the paper, not to personally go in after evidence. Certainly he hadn't been prepared for James to return -- again in the dead of night -- with pictures, addresses, and names.

Moran knew he should have turned James away then. He should have told him that the police would take it from there. But the information had been too good, and James had been too well placed. Over the course of the past year, James just kept getting better. Now Moran was close to being able to bring down the man at the top. One clear image was all he needed. But he knew he was building the conviction at James's expense.

Moran stroked James's shoulder, felt the tender bruises, and silently cursed himself. He worked his fingers in slow circles, pushing more heat and energy into James. The bruises faded. Moran felt knotted muscles relax under his hands.

James gave a soft, contented sound. He turned his head to look at Moran. A flush already colored his pale cheeks. His lids lowered, and his lips parted as if he were on the verge of sleep.

"That feels so...good," James said softly.

Moran stroked James's back again, letting his fingers linger at the tip of James's tailbone. An intense heat rolled through Moran's crotch. He wanted to tell James that he could make this feel even better, for both of them.

Moran pulled his gaze from James's body and took in their squalid surroundings. The earthy smell of ginseng couldn't mask the stale odor of other people's sex and sweat. A couple of used condoms lay between the nightstand and the wall, drooping over an electrical cord. Outside, on the street, two drunks howled at each other while the rain pounded against the window.

And he still wanted to fuck James, even here in this shit hole.

But James deserved better.

"It's getting late, Sparky." Moran stood and glared out the window at the two men staggering across the street. A low roll of thunder engulfed their argument. The rain was getting worse. He heard the bed creak as James sat up.

"I should get going, I guess."

Moran glanced back to see James pick up his wet underwear and wring the rainwater out of the white cotton. For a moment he looked like a mournful little kid. Moran had to stifle his laugh.

"If it were me, I'd go without."

"Yeah," James agreed. He rang out his socks, pulled them on with a slightly distasteful expression and then dragged his dripping jeans up his legs. By the time he got the fly buttoned and his shirt on, he was shivering. His wet sneakers and sweat jacket obviously did nothing to warm him. But he didn't say anything. He just gave Moran that easy, sweet smile and asked if he'd ever taken one of the ginseng baths.

"Not at this place." Moran followed James down the stairs. He paid for the extra half hour in the room.

He and James stepped out under the awning, and a gust of cutting, cold wind swept over them.

"What a night." James scowled at the deluge of rain as if he were psyching himself up to jump out of a plane.

Moran thought he could hear James's teeth chattering.

"Why don't I get a cab for you?" Moran suggested.

James shook his head.

"The subway station isn't far."

Moran wished he could just take James home with him. Take him home, take him to his bed. God, he felt like a pervert thinking of the things he wanted to do to the kid. Instead, Moran pulled off his own leather jacket and tossed it to James.

"I don't want you getting sick," Moran said. James looked like he was going to argue, but Moran didn't want to hear it. He needed to do something for James, even if it was only offer him a little warmth. Rain pounded the awning like machine-gun fire, and a volley of thunder cracked the sky. Moran turned and walked to his car in fast strides. Inside the cool

leather interior, Moran watched James pull on his jacket and then bolt through the rain and pools of neon light. At last he could no longer discern James's slim form from the gloom.

After that Moran drove toward his apartment, but with a growing dread. Bare walls, a cold shower, and an empty bed awaited him. At one time Moran would have found the clean minimalism of that soothing. He'd been so sick of coming home to a chaos of wrecked furniture, smashed pictures, broken plates, and blood that he'd found solace in isolation. But now the prospect of another night alone in an empty apartment repelled him.

The image of James's naked body flickered through Moran's mind, and the feel of his smooth skin and hard muscles played through Moran's hands. Moran scowled at the red light ahead of him. Then he remembered James gazing at him with that innocent, inviting smile of his. Moran's uneasiness tightened to a hard frustration. He needed to get laid. The signal flashed green, and Moran made a quick turn and headed back toward Jeravani Street.

Bright signs flared through the pelting rain. Moran sped past dance clubs, all-night delis, and gay bars to pull into the dark parking lot behind Dix Lockers. Windowless, squat, and gray, Dix Lockers stood like an oversized cinderblock in the midst of bright strip clubs and the gaudy burlesque theatres. It wasn't anymore interesting on the inside, either. But then no one went to Dix for the ambiance, or conversation, or even prolonged eye contact.

Moran left his gun and badge in his car. Rain soaked his T-shirt to his chest and plastered his short hair as he raced across the parking lot. At the door, he paid his entry fee to one of the three hulking, bearded bouncers and was assured that the pickings were good tonight, despite the weather. The old man who worked registration gave him a familiar nod and handed over the keys to locker room number 93.

The interior of Dix was dark, warm, and humid. The bass line of a relentless dance track pumped from the sound system, throbbing through Moran's body. The smell of bleach, sweat, and semen saturated the air. Dimly lit concrete walls carved a series of narrow halls out of the gloom. Men populated the spaces; some wore bulky jackets and kept their heads

low, their faces hidden in the deep shadows. Other men moved to the music and flexed beneath the scattered lights, displaying nearly naked bodies.

Most men met his gaze as he worked into the tight crowd. His fingers grazed across hot planes of exposed skin. Anonymous hands returned his touch, stroking his chest, caressing his back, and tracing the curve of his ass. Hips and thighs grazed his own. Moran kept eye contact brief and blatantly assessing. He rejected anyone who looked too young, scared, or married. One man caught Moran's attention. He wasn't handsome or all that well built, but his mop of blond hair and long legs sent a twitch up Moran's dick.

The guy's eyes went wide, and he grinned when Moran leaned in close to him.

"Can I suck you?" the skinny blond asked. He ran his hand over Moran's crotch, tracing the length of his dick through the rough denim.

Moran nodded and led him to the locker. There was just enough room for two men to get down on their knees if they needed to, but Moran stayed on his feet. He stripped off his shirt and opened the front of his jeans, allowing the other guy to appreciate the expanse of his defined muscles and his hard cock.

"Fuck," the blond murmured. "That's a lot of meat you're packing, Prince Charming."

Prince Charming? Moran didn't even want to know what this guy was imagining.

Moran didn't want to kiss, and he was glad the guy didn't try. Instead the blond sank to his knees and took Moran's cock hungrily, as if he were starved for it. Hot, wet pleasure enveloped Moran. He curled his hands through the man's hair and thought of James. He imagined James's blushing face as that tongue flicked over the head of his cock and teased his shaft. He pictured James stroking his balls and groaning in pleasure at the taste of him. His dick went deep, skimming through tight lips and pumping into an urgent, hungry mouth. Sweat beaded his chest, and his heart pounded.

Molten pleasure built, and Moran imagined James toying at the tip of his cock and then taking him all the way to the balls. He gripped the soft, golden curls between his fingers and

pushed shivers of hot energy into the body beneath his hands. He felt the response in the ecstatic moans that quivered over his cock. Desperate hands dug into his ass, pulling his dick deeper. Moran's restraint broke; he pumped hard and fast, then came in a powerful gush, with James's name on his lips.

A strange tenderness overcame him then, and he gazed down at the face nestled against his hips. Jarringly unfamiliar features grinned up at him, with none of James's sweetness.

"Damn, you're a hot son of a bitch!" The skinny blond slapped Moran's ass and then rocked back, displaying the white spatter on his own stomach. "I came just blowing you!" Despite the dim light, Moran noticed the deep track marks streaking the blond man's arms.

"Good to know." Moran felt cold and almost sick. He found a towel, dried his flaccid dick, and dressed quickly.

Outside, the downpour of rain seemed welcome, cleansing. As he dropped into the driver's seat of his car he automatically reached for his jacket and then stopped, remembering that he given it to James. Suddenly he realized what an idiot he'd been. The rolls of film were still in his jacket.

Chapter Two

James sprinted from the Trade Street depot to the old warehouse district. The run was only a half mile, and James normally enjoyed the exercise. Tonight's storm should have made it a miserable experience. But, despite the pelting rain and explosions of lightning and thunder, James felt happiness clinging to him like a subtle scent. He bowed his head for just a moment and drew in a deep breath of Moran's jacket, savoring the warmth and smell that still lingered from Moran's body. Then he glanced up self-consciously.

Dim yellow floodlights illuminated concrete loading docks and weathered logos painted across the fronts of old industrial buildings. A few delivery trucks rolled past, but otherwise the neighborhood stood in deserted darkness.

Lightning flashed, and the red brick of the old Sculls Medical Building loomed ahead of James. It rose five stories, festooned with iron balconies and rickety fire escapes.

Crammed beside it, the Allmon warehouse looked sleek, modern, and contrived. Huge windows gaped from curvaceous, art nouveau supports. Chrome plating glinted like glitter in the rain. Tony had spent a good amount of his inheritance rebuilding the old warehouse into his own private playground. He sold art and threw parties in the faux-industrial gallery on

the first floor, used the second level as a painting studio and shared rooms with James on the third floor.

The location kept noise complaints to a minimum and allowed Tony to indulge himself in the belief that he lived outside of society.

James took the cage-like service lift up to the third floor and let himself into the suite of rooms he and Tony shared. Large prints of James's architectural photos alternated with Tony's most recent series of dark, abstract paintings. The new furniture Tony had ordered had just arrived; chairs and tables still wrapped in white drop cloths and tied with black nylon rope filled the living room like strange hostages.

James tried not to seem alarmed when he discovered Tony in his bedroom, digging through his simple wooden dresser.

"I keep the porn under the bed, but you'll probably be disappointed with it," James said, by way of announcing his presence in the room. He leaned against the doorframe.

Tony glanced up and flashed a quick smile. He'd grown too thin and hollow-eyed to still be the pretty boy he'd been in college, but his smile retained its charm. His hair looked more golden this evening. James wasn't sure if it was a dye job or just the warm light pouring in from the living room.

"I'm looking for that shirt you wear all the time," Tony remarked. "The one from the fundraiser."

"Which fundraiser?" James wondered what other drawers Tony had gone through. Had he found anything? What would he have made of the two new spy cameras James had been building or that stupid, sentimental picture of Moran and his dog?

"You know, that race for some cure or something...it's blue." Tony shoved aside several folded shirts.

"My T-shirt from the Heart Foundation marathon?" James asked. "Why do you need it?"

“For the masquerade.” Tony’s expression brightened as he pulled James’s dull blue T-shirt out of the drawer. A huge yellow logo of a heart emblazoned the left breast. “Mrs. Sunday decided to make this tournament more interesting, so we’re all going in costume.” Tony held the T-shirt up to his thin chest.

“You’re going as a marathon runner?” James asked. He noted that his closet door stood ajar. Several pairs of his pants lay crumpled on his bed. He slipped past Tony and sat down at his writing desk. He glanced casually to the drawers; they were still locked. The tiny cameras and the picture of Moran remained safe. James relaxed against his wooden chair.

“I’m going as you,” Tony informed him. “I even picked up a camera at that Sharp Tec shop on the hill, and I got my hair cut and dyed to match yours. Didn’t you notice?”

“Not really, but I can see it now. It looks good. Why not wear the bunny suit you always wear?” James asked.

“Lanna doesn’t like it.” Tony looked annoyed.

James just shrugged. Tony had made many bad choices since his parents’ death had left him both bereaved and rich, but chasing after Lanna Yervant had to be a personal worst. As strung out as a runway model, but not quite as thin, Lanna spent alarming sums of her daddy’s money on venom, day spas, and rehab. She couldn’t be faithful if she tried, and she rarely tried. But Tony adored her. James thought it might have been because Lanna so resembled Tony’s own mother, but he kept that opinion to himself.

“Lanna thinks that grown men in bunny suits are trite.” Tony leaned back against James’s drawers with a morose expression.

“Going as me is better?” James asked.

“Lanna thinks you’re interesting,” Tony told him. “You know, because you’re gay, and she can’t have you.”

“She can’t have a panda either,” James replied. “Maybe you should go as one of those.”

“Actually, for her tenth birthday her father got the National Preserve to name two of their pandas after her,” Tony informed him.

“You’re joking,” James said.

“No.” Tony dropped onto the edge of James’s bed and frowned at the T-shirt in his hands. “She wanted me to ask you something last week, but I kind of...forgot.”

James just waited while Tony pulled off his vicuña wool sweater and wriggled into the faded blue T-shirt. The shoulder seams hung on Tony’s arms, but otherwise the fit wasn’t too bad.

“She wanted to know if you’d ever been in a three-way.” Tony didn’t meet James’s gaze.

“No. And I’m not interested, if that’s what she’s asking,” James replied flatly. It wasn’t the complete truth, but he wasn’t about to tell Tony, and by extension Lanna, about the night he’d drunkenly hooked up with a couple of guys from a rugby team. Anyway, he was pretty certain Lanna wasn’t thinking of three-ways in terms of all-male recreation.

“I thought you’d say that.” Tony looked relieved. He stood up. “So what do you think of the new James Sparks?”

“Cleaner than me most days,” James responded. “You want the press badge I got while I was working at the *Weekly*?”

“That’d be great!”

James dug his keys out of his damp jeans and unlocked one of the desk drawers. He handed the plastic badge to Tony, who pinned it on and grinned.

“What about you? Going as a damp guy?” Tony suddenly asked.

“I didn’t know I was invited,” James replied. Tony looked a little guilty, and all at once, James realized that he’d been hiding Mrs. Sunday’s invitation. He wondered if it had anything to do with Lanna and her interest in a three-way.

“You were invited.” Tony suddenly dashed out into the living room. “You want to wear the bunny suit?”

James frowned at the idea. Not because he cared if it was trite, but because the feet were big and might trip him up if he needed to run. Still, most anything would probably be better than the cold damp things he wore now.

Only he didn’t really want to take off Moran’s jacket.

James listened as Tony rifled through some papers in the living room. White bolts of lightning flashed through James’s window, briefly illuminating the corroded brick and ironwork of the Skulls Medical Building outside. Then darkness closed in, and thunder boomed through the night sky.

“Here,” Tony bounded in with a red card in one hand and a pink bunny suit drooping from the other. He handed James the card. The surface felt like tanned leather and looked like the skin of a scarlet demon James remembered from one of the fighting pits. Below the black text announcing another Midnight Tournament, Tony Allmon’s name stood out starkly.

James frowned, and Tony looked gleeful.

“Hey, I’m you, so I’m taking your invitation.”

“So then, I’m you, and I’m wearing a bunny suit?” James asked.

“Exactly!” Tony tossed him the costume, and James studied it for a moment. It wasn’t a single piece as James had thought, but a combination of booties, pants, and a jacket with ears sewn to the hood, all of which could be snapped together. The dark pink material felt thin like velveteen, and it smelled like cotton candy.

James considered saying *no* to the entire endeavor. He’d send Tony off without him, take a hot shower, then go to bed and jack off with Moran’s jacket over his face.

But Moran would want to know about this tournament, and more than likely Mr. Blurry would be there.

James stripped off his wet clothes while Tony used the mirror on the back of the closet door to study himself and rat his hair into a matted imitation of James's.

"Did you say something about a new camera?" James pulled on a dry pair of jeans.

"Yeah, you want to take a look at it?"

"Of course."

Tony left, and James quickly retrieved his flash knife from the desk and slipped it into his pocket. He pulled the thin pink pants over his jeans. An undershirt protected him from the rough surface of the cheap pink jacket, but did little to warm him. James picked up Moran's jacket and slipped it on over the bunny suit.

Between the black jacket and his black sneakers, James thought he looked like he'd just come from an all-rabbit biker convention. James adjusted the ears so that they wouldn't block his vision.

If Moran saw him like this, he'd never live it down. It was bad enough wanting Moran to take him seriously and then being called Sparky, like he was a ten-year-old or a pet.

When Tony returned with the camera, he smiled at James in a way that assured him that he looked ridiculous. Then Tony tossed the camera to James as if it were a toy.

"I don't think the thing even works." Tony turned to inspect himself in the mirror. He ran his fingers over his head. "How do you get your hair to stick out like that?"

"A family curse," James replied, and Tony laughed.

James carefully turned the camera over in his hands. He owned a few Oculus cameras, but none with the kind of enchantments that graced the tiny, living lenses of this NyxOmnius 980. It was small enough to fit in his coat pocket. The memory card was loaded, and the battery showed a full charge.

James flipped the lens from the default night setting and peered at Tony through the viewfinder. As he slowly zoomed in, the image tightened all the way down into Tony's pores. For a venom addict, he had surprisingly good skin.

“How much did you pay for this?” James couldn’t help but ask.

Tony shrugged. “Is it a piece of crap? The guy at the store said it was top of the line, but you know those people will say anything for a commission.”

“He wasn’t lying,” James assured Tony. Then he added, knowing it would make Tony happy, “It’s better than anything I’ve got.”

“Yeah?”

James nodded, and Tony beamed at him.

“Mind if I check out the night vision setting?” James asked.

“Sure, go for it.” Tony cocked his head suddenly, as if listening. Under the staccato of rain James heard the distant clang and growl of the service elevator.

“That’ll be Lanna,” Tony decided. “I gave her a key.”

James didn’t like the idea of Lanna and her pack of associates having access to his room, but he didn’t say anything. Tomorrow he’d rent a locker at the portal station.

“Turn off the lights, will you?” James asked.

“Why?” Tony already had James’s bedroom door open. He gazed out into the living room, anticipating Lanna’s arrival like a kid waiting for an ice cream truck.

“So I can check out the night vision lenses,” James reminded him.

“Oh, right.” Tony slapped the light switch off and the room went dark. James peered through the viewfinder, and as he flipped the lenses the darkness peeled away, revealing a sharp image of Tony standing in the doorway. The light from the living room burned around his silhouette as if he stood on the horizon of a blazing sun.

James flipped back two of the lenses, dimming the exposure of his own room but bringing the living room into focus.

A knock at the door sent Tony scampering to answer it. James followed him with the camera, both amazed and disconcerted by its tracking speed. The lenses seemed to hunt Tony.

James wondered what really resided inside the slim black housing: the stripped down remnants of some predatory demon, or just gold wires and sorcery? The camera felt warm in James's hands.

Tony swung the front door open and scowled at two burly men in brown delivery uniforms. James frowned as well. Who made deliveries at ten at night?

"Mr. James Sparks?" the hulking, bald deliveryman asked Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes and tapped the press badge on his T-shirt. "That's what the badge says."

The deliveryman reached into the inner pocket of his brown jacket and drew out something dark.

An explosive bang resounded through the living room, and blood gushed from Tony's head. He hit the floor like a sack of meat.

James sucked in a shout of horror. His heart pounded in his chest as if it could kick its way out of his rib cage. His muscles turned hot and tremulous, and he thought he might throw up.

But he remained frozen, staring at the blood and soft tissue that spilled from the remains of Tony's head. Silently, he snapped a picture. Then took another of the two men in the doorway. His hands shook so badly that he wasn't sure he'd gotten more than a blur.

The bald deliveryman -- who was obviously not a deliveryman -- shrugged. The dark, bearded man to his left flipped open a phone.

"Got him," the bearded man said into the phone. Then he listened for a moment and looked to the bald man. "He wants us to look around for cameras and film."

"What about James Sparks here?"

The bearded man spoke into his phone again, but his words were lost under a roll of thunder.

“Bring the body back.” The bearded guy snapped his phone shut. “I gotta take a shit. Where do you think the toilet is in this place?”

The bald man shrugged again and stepped over Tony’s corpse. For the first time, James got a clear view of the pistol he carried, black with a red stamp on the side, just like the one Moran carried. Police issue.

The bearded man opened the closet door. His bald companion shook his head.

“Crap in there, and you can wipe your ass with that fur coat.”

James slunk back from the door. He had to get out of here. Now.

He shoved the camera into his coat pocket and crept to the window. Lightning flashed, and James prayed that it hadn’t lit his room well enough for either of the men in the living room to notice him. Thunder rolled, loud, close, and terrifying after the gunshot. James shoved the window open. He heard the men moving in the living room.

James swung out onto the thin ledge of the windowsill. Frigid wind gusted over him, pelting rain against his bare face and hands. Below him the darkness of a sheer drop loomed. His fingers slipped on the wet metal surface of the sill, and for a moment, he teetered before catching himself.

Behind him one of the men kicked his bedroom door wide open and cursed. James’s heart hammered into his throat.

“Where the fuck is the toilet?” The bearded man turned back in the doorway. The bald man made some response that James didn’t catch over the resounding rain.

Any moment now the bearded man would turn and see James crouched in the open window.

A bolt of lightning illuminated the sky, and James jumped. Thunder crashed over the loud clang as James slammed into the iron fire escape of the Sculls building. The impact half

knocked the breath out of him, but he clung desperately to the hard iron rail and pulled himself up onto the narrow landing.

For a moment, he sprawled against the rungs, gasping for breath and shaking. He lay on his back, and rain pounded down on him.

Mr. James Sparks? He could still hear the bald man asking. And then he saw it again: that burst of blood, hair, and brain exploding from Tony's head.

God, Tony. Poor Tony.

James felt dangerously close to tears or throwing up.

The light in his bedroom went on, and James flinched. Through the window, he watched the bald man tear open his dresser, spilling the drawers out onto the floor. Briefly, the bearded man fought with the locked drawers of James's desk, and then he spun it around and kicked out the back. Wood splintered apart.

He couldn't just keep lying here. He had to move, had to get away from here. James pulled himself into a crouch. His first thought was of Moran.

Just the idea of the big hell cop forced James to calm himself. Moran wouldn't have been panicking on a fire escape or running away, and he wasn't likely to respect anyone who did. James realized that he had to pull himself together and think. What would Moran want him to do? Get evidence; get more photos.

James froze at the sound of men tromping through the mud puddles below him. One of them grumbled something, and another man hissed him to silence. Then the beam of a flashlight shot through the rain and struck the bricks a few feet from James's face.

"I swear I heard something," a man growled.

"Over this rain? They got the faggot already."

"There could be more than one guy in a place that big."

James peered through the darkness. But he could only make out shadows and the hard beam of the flashlight. The lenses of the NyxOmnius 980 could have revealed exactly how

many men stood there and how well armed they were, but James didn't dare move, not even to reach for the camera.

Suddenly the light dropped and then swung up, striking the back of James's neck. He fought every instinct in his body not to jerk from the illumination.

"A trash bag and some kid's stuffed bunny stuck up on the fire escape." One of the men below snickered. "Yeah, you gotta watch out for those stuffed animals, Rodney."

James realized that the light had fallen on his hood, illuminating the pink fabric and large satin-lined ears. Between the rain and the shadows of the fire escape, the black of Moran's jacket passed for a garbage bag. But only so long as he didn't move. Air burned in his lungs as he remained perfectly still, not even breathing.

The flashlight's beam swept up the brick wall. A pigeon took flight from its shelter. Again, one of the men below snickered at his companion's nervousness.

The beam dropped, bouncing through the narrow alley between the Sculls building and the Allmon warehouse. Its light lingered on a heap of rusted pipes and then flashed up the glittering side of the Allmon building. Then it flicked off. James listened intently as footsteps receded from the alley and stomped back out onto the street. At last, James released the breath he'd been holding.

Climbing up definitely looked like a better direction than down, James decided.

He took the rungs of the fire escape with silent speed. Momentum carried him over the wet metal and through the pelting rain. His scabbed forearm ached, and a dull pain across his belly assured him that he would soon have black bruises where he'd slammed into the rails of the fire escape.

Still, he moved fast, climbing from the last level of the fire escape onto a rusted pulley support and then hauling himself up onto the flat roof. Rain pooled around his hands and knees as he crawled across the wet slate roof to the front of the Sculls building.

Hunching in the shadows of the old façade, James fished the NyxOmnius 980 out of his pocket and trained it on the street below.

A brown and gold delivery truck juttred out from the curb in front of the Allmon warehouse. Two men sat inside it, both of them dressed in rain-spattered delivery uniforms. James clicked their pictures as well as the plates of the truck.

The little camera warmed his hands. James scanned the block for anything more.

He didn't recognize the sleek silver car across the street. It certainly didn't belong in a warehouse district. He focused in, but the windows offered him nothing but lead gray opacity. James settled for the plates, which told him that it was a registered sorcerer's vehicle and equipped with defensive wards.

The thing probably ran on biodiesel and goats' blood.

The longer James watched it, the more the car seemed to sink back into the surrounding gloom. Soon only the spatter of rain across its surface betrayed its presence at all.

A string of obscenities brought James's attention back to the front of the Allmon warehouse. The bald man appeared, his arms heaped with James's cameras. Behind him the bearded man struggled with what looked like a roll of carpet, except that a limp hand hung out the end of it. James zoomed in, photographing both men while trying desperately not to think of Tony.

The bearded man shifted the carpet over his shoulder, and Tony's entire arm slid out.

"The skinny fucker is falling out," the bearded man complained. One of the men in the delivery truck laughed.

Then suddenly a pair of headlights flashed across the street. The men froze in the light of the high beams. The growl of an engine roared over them. And then Tony's body slid free of the carpet and crumpled onto the sidewalk. His limbs splayed out at awkward angles.

Blood matted the tangles of his blond hair and caked the ruins of his face. Shards of bone jutted from the black chasm where Tony's right eye should have been.

Bile choked James's throat. He pulled back from the tight focus of the NyxOmnius 980 and clenched his eyes closed, fighting his horror.

On the street below, brakes shrieked, and James looked down in time to see a man vault from a dark blue car. Recognition rocked James as he took in a blur of black hair, long body, and muscular speed. Moran.

Before James could even think of what to do, Moran brought the startled bald man down with a cracking blow to his throat. White steam seared up from Moran's hands. The bald man fell to the ground like a rag doll, spilling James's cameras across the mud.

The bearded man dropped the carpet and reached for his gun, but Moran moved with blinding speed, steam rising from his entire body now. He kicked the bearded man's knees out from under him. The man fell, and Moran smashed the heel of his boot into the man's face.

Then Moran stopped dead still, staring at Tony's body. Lightning flashed overhead. James caught a gray blur out of the corner of his eye and realized that someone had gotten out of the silver car; a dark-haired man in a white suit raised a pistol. James screamed a warning to Moran, but thunder drowned out his voice. Then a crackling yellow light smashed into Moran's back, and he dropped to his knees. James couldn't keep himself from starting up to his feet. He swayed at the edge of the Skulls building, helpless and desperate.

Below him Moran struggled back up, but a second bolt knocked him to the ground. He fell across Tony's body and lay still.

"Get them all in the truck. Now!" The man in the white suit slid the pistol back into his shoulder holster.

James sprinted for the fire escape. He didn't know what he was going to do, but that didn't matter. All he could think of was reaching Moran.

He slipped on the rungs, stumbled, caught himself, and kept going. He jumped from the last half story of the fire escape and slammed into the muddy alley. A twinge of pain snaked up his ankle. He ignored it and sprinted to the street just in time to see the red taillights of the delivery truck disappear around a corner. James started after the truck, only to step into the blinding beam of a car's headlights. He spun around and realized that Moran's car idled only a few yards from him. The driver's door hung open.

Chapter Three

For a moment, before he was even fully awake, Moran remembered looking up the length of an old brick building and seeing the outline of a man in a pink bunny suit standing on the roof like some kind of demented superhero.

What the hell had that been?

Then he remembered shock-volts hitting him. He could still feel their burn. He opened his eyes. Dim overhead bulbs seared into his skull. His brain throbbed, and his spine felt like it was on fire. Nausea rose, but Moran knew enough about the side effects of shock-volts to wait it out.

He lay enclosed by the black and yellow bars of a reinforced demon cage, wearing nothing but a pair of big red spell-suppression shackles, which bound his forearms together in front of him.

Lifting his head from the cold concrete floor, Moran took in his surroundings. Vast darkness broken by pools of light and mustard yellow cages stretched back to stone walls. The air smelled of wet cement, sick animals, and blood. Very distantly, Moran thought he heard a pop song playing.

A juvenile gorvan demon, about the size of a hippo but much toothier, howled. A few other demons let out their own cries from farther back along the rows of cages. Then an earsplitting roar rocked through the chamber. Moran's heart kicked into double time. No mistaking that sound: a scylla demon, an old-time, man-eating, fire-breathing dragon. As the echo of the roar died, every other creature in the place went quiet. The pop music played on.

So much for shouting for help, Moran thought. If a scylla demon didn't alarm the locals, nothing would.

He guessed that the nearest neighbors were probably miles away. The grounds of Mrs. Sunday's estate lay twenty miles outside the city and were very private. He was probably in one of the old dungeons, close to the fighting pit. That would explain why the smell of meat and blood just kept coming at him.

Then, out of the corner of his eye he noticed the mass of something gold and blue. He wasn't alone in his cage. Immediately, Moran pushed his aching body upright and turned on the other occupant of the cage.

And it was like someone reached into his chest and just stopped his heart. He could hardly pull in a breath.

James's slim body lay broken and blood-soaked. Tufts of his beautiful gold hair shone through the mass of shattered skull and gore.

He was dead; Moran knew it, and yet he still went to him, knelt beside him, and stroked the cold flesh of his shoulder as if he could offer some comfort to a corpse.

Only he wasn't just a corpse. He was James. He was the boy bounding into the bright blue sky, flipping above a glossy black trampoline, and waving. He was the man stretching naked beneath Moran's hands, smiling up at him with sleepy trust. And now he was...this.

It seemed terrible and almost inevitable. As if he'd always known that caring for James would doom him. Moran closed his eyes. He remembered holding Bill too, but he didn't think it had hurt him as much as this did now.

Moran could feel his throat tightening, his eyes getting wet, and he didn't know that he could stop it. But he had to because he couldn't break down, not here, like this.

A cold, rational part of him knew he needed to go through James's clothes in case there was a pocket knife or a paper clip or anything he could use to get out of here.

The shackles made his hands clumsy, but he managed to turn the front pockets inside out. He found a ball of lint, and a red, folded invitation. James's body felt so small -- almost fragile as Moran shifted him.

Moran felt like a monster jamming his hands into the loose jeans, digging into the back pockets as if he were groping James's ass. The pockets were empty. Moran pulled his hands away, and James's body rolled onto its back. The left arm flopped out, pale and needle-pocked under the bare lights.

Moran stared at the arm, not sure if he should believe what he saw.

People did this, he warned himself. They looked at the dead bodies of their friends and lovers and refused to recognize them. They found ways to make the corpses into other people and the deteriorations of death itself aided them. Dead bodies bloated, contorted, and discolored. Birthmarks and scars seemed different on lifeless skin.

But injuries didn't just go away.

Moran checked the right arm as well, just to be sure. There was no half-healed gash, only a thick history of old and new needle marks, far too many for James's body.

Relief washed through Moran. He gazed at the body again. Blond, thin -- too thin to be James now that he was really looking -- and wearing James's clothes. Tony Allmon, most likely, Moran decided. That wasn't good news, but at least it offered Moran the hope that James was alive. Somewhere.

He prayed it was far from here.

Moran rose to his feet slowly. Twitching pain shot up his spine as he moved. He hadn't even noticed it before; the horror of seeing James dead had superseded all other perception.

Now the tingling tremors assured Moran that his nerves were recovering. The discomfort became an annoyance to work through.

Moran paced the perimeter of his cage, testing the bars and bolts. Demons in the surrounding cages watched him; some like the red anu-hounds stalked his movement while several small, green cabrasha demons cringed. Somewhere in the darkness the scylla demon doubtless watched as well. Even with the spell-suppression shackles fettering every ounce of his power, Moran knew that a scylla demon could still sense his sorcerous blood. Another deafening roar of challenge seemed to confirm Moran's suspicion.

But then he realized that it might not be his presence alone that agitated the scylla.

A man and a woman, both dressed in white, appeared at the far end of the cavernous chamber. Moran thought he saw elevator doors close behind them. The couple strolled between the cages of demons as if walking through a zoo. The woman laughed at the hiss of a medis serpent and clung to her companion. The man drew a shock-volt pistol, and a crackling yellow light arched from the barrel and into the cage. Moran smelled burning meat, and the medis serpent went silent. The man holstered his gun.

As the couple drew closer Moran realized that he knew both people. He hadn't immediately recognized the wealthy young widow, Mrs. Sunday, because her short red hair was hidden under a blonde wig, which appeared to have a plastic halo affixed to it. She also wore a pair of little silver wings, a flowing white dress, and white satin gloves.

Beside her, Police Lieutenant Sam Dashner stood in a white naval uniform, wearing that tight, satisfied smile that Moran had always disliked. At the station it had meant bad news would be forthcoming, and Moran knew this time wasn't any different. The fact that Dashner hadn't bothered to wear an anonymity spell told Moran that the lieutenant didn't expect Moran to live long enough to tell anyone about Dashner's involvement in all of this.

Dashner met Moran's gaze with a sneer. Mrs. Sunday looked his way as well, but her attention moved past Moran to the body in the cage with him. Her pretty face tightened into an expression of disdain.

"You ruined my very favorite photographer, Detective Moran. Just wrecked him." Mrs. Sunday shook her head, and her plastic halo wobbled.

Moran knew it wasn't James lying there, but that didn't mollify his anger. A man had still been murdered, and here she stood, chastising Moran as if her carpet had been soiled.

Moran clenched his jaw and kept quiet.

He was pretty certain that the only reason he was still alive was because these two needed something from him, and if he wanted to keep living he needed to be careful not to give it to them.

"There's no point in pretending like you didn't know him, Moran," Dashner said. "The cells are monitored. We all saw your reunion with James Sparks. Liked him, did you?" Dashner's face radiated smug satisfaction. "He was a queer, you know."

At this, Mrs. Sunday laughed and rolled her eyes.

"Who didn't know that, Sam? He wore a T-shirt with it printed on the front."

Her response seemed to annoy Dashner. He glared at Moran.

"So, when did you and your little fuck buddy last meet?" Dashner demanded.

Moran saw the desperation in Dashner's narrowed eyes, and he suddenly remembered James saying that he had gotten clear shots of the man in charge.

"I noticed him taking photos of me in the mirrors," Dashner snapped. "It took a little while, but I worked out what he was doing, and then I realized that he had to be the snitch who was providing you with all that information." Dashner's gaze drifted to Tony's body but then flicked back to Moran. "Where are the photos?"

Dashner had to know that those rolls of film would nail him. Moran took in a slow breath.

"You want the pictures; I want out of here," Moran told him.

"You're in no position to make demands," Dashner snapped.

"I think I am." Moran forced a hard smile.

"Don't fuck with me! I could kill you right now!"

Moran could smell Dashner's sweat.

"You kill me and those pictures will be in Captain Pollar's hands before you get home." Moran met Dashner's glare and held it. He watched anxiety undermine fury, and Dashner looked away from him and swore.

"Tell me where the pictures are, and I'll let you go," Dashner growled.

"No," Moran said flatly. "You'll release me, and I'll get the pictures to you."

Dashner chewed at his own lip. Moran could see the man's confidence eroding, and he wondered suddenly how Dashner had managed the stress of both venom dealing and all these illegal fights with such shaky nerves.

"Don't be foolish, Sam." Mrs. Sunday sighed and looked at Dashner as if he were an exasperating child. "Detective Moran isn't going to give you those photos."

"He has to!" Dashner shouted.

"No, sweetie, he doesn't." Mrs. Sunday glanced over Moran's naked body and then smiled into his face like they were sharing a joke.

"I'll kill you!" Dashner pulled his shock-volt pistol and aimed it at Moran's face. Moran's guts clenched, but he held his ground.

"Sam!" Mrs. Sunday caught Dashner's hand, her expression disapproving. "Of course we're going to kill him, but not with a pistol that can be traced directly back to you."

Mrs. Sunday drew Dashner's hand down and took the pistol from him as if she were confiscating a sling shot from her errant son.

"If those photos get out --" Dashner began, but Mrs. Sunday silenced him with a brief kiss. Dashner calmed.

"What are we going to do, Ann?" Dashner asked softly. Mrs. Sunday kissed him again, more deeply. Moran watched them, praying they would step closer to him. Even with the shackles, he could get his hands a little ways out between the bars. If he could just reach the pistol in Mrs. Sunday's gloved hand.

"If it comes to trial," Dashner whispered. "I swear I'll tell them that I intimidated you -- that I used your property against your wishes. You won't go to prison --"

"Hush, darling. I know," Mrs. Sunday said softly. "I know."

Moran caught the motion of her hand, but Dashner didn't. An instant later, yellow volts shot into Dashner's chest. He jerked and fell. Mrs. Sunday knelt and fired the shock-volt pistol into Dashner's chest four more times, unloading the weapon's entire charge into him. Sizzling black smoke rose around her. Then she calmly worked the empty pistol into Dashner's dead hand.

Moran remembered that her husband had supposedly committed suicide after his involvement in human blood sports had been discovered.

Mrs. Sunday straightened and looked at Moran.

"Another of my things you've ruined, Detective Moran." She shook her head. "You and those pictures of yours. I really would have liked it if you'd just handed them over and saved poor Sam his suffering."

Moran glared at the woman.

"You think anyone will really believe that Dashner killed himself?" Moran demanded.

"Obviously, I do." She glanced down at Dashner. "He was a proud man. Daring and chivalrous, but quite fragile when it came to public embarrassment. He never could have endured the shame of standing trial for his crimes."

"But you're expecting to get through your own trial a lot better?" Moran asked.

Mrs. Sunday smiled at Moran.

“Why, Detective Moran, I’ll have you know that moments after you are torn apart by a scylla demon, I will be making a desperate call to the police begging them to help me. You heard Sam. He misled me, threatened me. I trusted him because he was in the police force. I thought I was helping him with some kind of investigation. By the time I realized what he was doing on my property, it was too late.” She batted her lashes as if fighting back tears. “That poor Detective Moran and dear James Sparks had already been killed. After that I didn’t care how Sam Dashner threatened me. I called the police. It had to stop!” Conviction rang through Mrs. Sunday’s voice and showed in her expression. Then she grinned at Moran. “Anyway, a short shutdown lets the clientele get desperate. I can double rates for membership when I open back up.”

Moran stared at her for a moment, appalled and amazed by her arrogance and cruelty. Despite both, she was right about the way the police would proceed if she called them. She’d be treated as a victim, a valuable witness.

He and the rest of the investigating detectives had thought she was a minor player, a rich venom addict who’d gotten in over her head with the hardened criminals who had done business with her husband. Obviously, Mrs. Sunday cultivated that appearance as her defense.

Mrs. Sunday reached up and straightened her plastic halo.

“Dressing like an angel is taking it a little far, don’t you think?” Moran asked.

“It’s a costume party.” Mrs. Sunday laughed. “I thought it would be nice to do something special for the big event. It’s not every night that I get to watch a hell cop be eaten alive.” Again her eyes raked over Moran’s naked body appreciatively. “I’m very much looking forward to your performance, detective.”

“You’d get a better show if you took these shackles off me.”

"I'm sure there will be plenty of fun if you keep them on." Mrs. Sunday peeled her glove back from her wrist and studied the small gold watch she wore. "It's time to go and greet the guests." She started to turn but then stopped and glanced again at the dead body in the cage. "When you join James in hell, do give him my love."

With that she stepped over Dashner's burned body and strolled to the elevator. The doors opened, and she was gone.

For a moment Moran let himself think of James. God only knew where he was. Tony's gaping skull offered Moran little reassurance. Moran remembered the invitation he'd pulled out of Tony's pocket. It had been for tonight's tournament, and James's name had been on it. If James came here, Mrs. Sunday would kill him.

Moran slammed his shackles against the bars of his cage. The impact jolted through his arms. He smashed the shackles down again and again. Sparks skipped off the bars and deep welts rose across his forearms where the shackles bit into his flesh.

Moran clenched his teeth against the discomfort. He needed to get the hell out of here and find James. He slammed against the bars again.

The noise agitated the caged demons around him. Their calls rose as he hammered his shackles against the bars. The anu-hounds snarled and paced, their molten red eyes flashing. The gorvan demon howled, displaying teeth like axe blades. Moran swore under his breath and threw his full weight against the cage bars. The shackle on his right arm cut into his flesh. A rivulet of blood trickled down his wrist, but the link of chain between his shackles cracked.

Moran wrenched the link apart. He could move his arms more freely now, but the shackles on his wrists still restrained him from calling on any sorcery.

And then he realized that he wasn't the only one moving more freely. Something in the dungeon had gotten loose. A strange silhouette darted between the cages, prowling through the shadows toward him.

Chapter Four

James trailed the delivery truck through the frenetic city streets out onto the highway lanes. Moran's car smelled like leather and responded with powerful precision. It was clean and cool and a little bigger than James was used to handling. James fumbled for the wipers, hit the blinkers, and then corrected himself quickly. Ahead of him, rain and darkness enfolded the delivery truck, leaving James only the trail of red taillights. He sped closer despite his fear that someone in the truck might notice him. Fortunately, there were dozens of other vehicles, most of them new and expensive, heading in the same direction. They were all going to Mrs. Sunday's estate.

James darted between a Phantom Turbo and a white Zipp, staying as close to the delivery truck as he could. It should have been simple: just follow the delivery truck the same way he had tailed countless friends' cars to parties and galleries. But James's heart pounded like he was sprinting the last yards to a finish line. Beneath his hands, the steering wheel was slick with his sweat.

The truck changed lanes lazily. James peered through the darkness searching for an opening between cars, while trying to keep his eyes on the truck. He veered into the right lane, barely missing a black limo.

He remembered Moran saying that movies always made police work look too easy, and now he really understood what Moran might have meant. Unbidden, the memory of Moran falling across Tony's dead body flashed through James's mind. A sick fear shuddered through his belly. He fought the urge to gun the engine and run the truck down.

If Moran were still alive, then James needed to stay calm and find a way to help him. If he were still alive... It seemed like a big *if*, considering what had happened to Tony.

Stay cool, Sparky. You can do this. Just keep your head together.

He imagined Moran's voice speaking low and calmly -- which was crazy but somehow soothing. And then James laughed a little at the absurdity of this; imagining Moran telling him not to fall apart had to be a sure sign that he was well on his way to disassembling.

Still, it calmed him. For the first time he took in the road ahead, the gray masses of ancient cypresses, and the vast black silhouettes of the Sunday mansion and coliseum. He glanced to the truck in time to see it pull off onto a service road. James almost swerved after it, but then caught himself. He knew where that road led as well as the number of security men that he would encounter at its terminus.

James sped past the service road and turned off onto a long cobblestone drive that led to the entry of the ancient coliseum. Dozens of other cars followed him, and dozens more had arrived before him.

James pulled into line behind a sleek sports car. Out of the corner of his eye, he picked out the taillights of the delivery truck as it swept around to the loading docks behind the coliseum fighting pits.

James dug Tony's invitation out of his jacket pocket at the gated entrance. A security guard wearing the white lily emblem of the Sunday family glanced at the invitation and smirked at Tony's familiar costume. He waved James ahead.

The white stone of the Sunday coliseum gleamed through the darkness and the rain; beside it, the cypresses looked bent and beaten down by years. The immense proportions of

the coliseum's two stories and arching black dome loomed up like a reminder that the ancient past, when sorcerous families reigned with the brutal authority of gods, was neither forgotten nor entirely gone. Once heirs of ruling families had summoned and battled demons here to prove their legitimacy and entertain their peers. Before the Commons Revolution, troublesome peasants had often been executed here, as well.

The sinister stone creatures glaring out from the granite walls of the coliseum and climbing the columns at the entry were no flights of fancy, but clear warnings of what awaited within.

And now Moran was in there somewhere.

James's headlights swept over a stone gargoyle, and its shadow jumped as if it were taking flight. James shuddered at the sight. He hated this place.

He parked in Tony's space and then sprinted up the marble stairs. He wasn't alone. Most of the other guests ran from their cars as well, trying to escape the pouring rain. James rushed inside in a crush of strangers.

The stone entryway opened into a reception area where throngs of guests chatted and laughed at each others' garish costumes, while young women dressed in revealing white uniforms proffered champagne and canapés from silver trays. Music pulsed from the sound system, and expensive perfumes hung through the warm air, nearly masking the distant animal scents that seeped up from the dungeon below the fighting pit.

James searched through the menagerie of guests. Dozens of princesses, fairies, and bikini-clad kittens flirted with men in capes, masks, pirate costumes, and the uniforms of social servants who commanded far too little income to receive one of Mrs. Sunday's invitations. Firemen were popular this year; only one guy dared to wear the blue uniform of a hell cop. Well over a hundred people filled the room. James recognized many of them, but doubted that any knew him well enough to remember his name. Between his blond hair and the bunny suit, James hoped that most people mistook him for Tony.

At the far end of the room stood the wide double doors that led to amphitheater seating surrounding the fighting pit. Two big men in white uniforms stood guard, and James glanced away before either of them could notice his gaze. To the far left were the doors leading to the restrooms as well as the service kitchen. Twice before James had used the kitchen shafts to get down to the demon cages, but far too many people populated the area now for James to pass unnoticed, particularly since he was dressed as a big, pink bunny.

On the right wall, just past a mural of winged serpents and gilded knights, stood the unmarked door that led up to the surveillance rooms on the second floor. The door opened, and Lanna Yervant stepped out. She wore a gown of gold silk leaves, which should have brought out the red tones of her chestnut hair and her salon tan. But now she looked strangely pale, almost sick. She pulled the thin chiffon of her gold wrap closer around her shoulders.

James turned as she looked toward him. He started for the bathrooms, but in a moment Lanna rushed up behind him.

"Tony, we've got to get out of here right now." She gripped the back of his elbow and dropped her voice to a whisper. "They're going to put a human being -- a man -- in the pit with those demons. I can't --"

James turned on her, and Lanna was startled to silence for a moment.

"James?" Lanna asked.

"What man?" James demanded in a hiss.

Lanna glanced nervously to the men standing guard at the doors.

"Where's Tony?" Lanna asked. "Why are you wearing his costume?"

"He lent it to me." For a moment James had to push back the memory of Tony's skull bursting open. "I don't know where he is," James said. He bowed his head closer to Lanna's. "Tell me about this man. Did you see him?"

Lanna looked like she might actually burst into tears and then nodded.

“This guy, Peter, who works up in surveillance, showed me. I guess he thought it would turn me on or something...” Lanna bit her lip. “They’d obviously beaten him unconscious. There was blood all over one of the security men’s hands. What kind of skank would find that arousing? Peter’s one of those fuckers who thinks that an addict can’t have any morals. I slept with him to get a fix once, but that doesn’t mean I’m okay with him and his buddies beating the shit out of some guy down in the demon cages.” Lanna suddenly lifted her hand to her mouth as if she feared that she would be sick. “There was so much blood...”

James could easily imagine how much blood there might be.

“But he was alive?” James asked.

Lanna nodded. She took a slow breath and then went on in a hushed whisper. “But not for long. Peter told me that they’re going to throw him in with a scylla demon, like it’s something to be proud of. God, if you could have seen the man, James. He was handsome and about my age. He was barely standing, but he kept fighting them, jerking and trying to get up. They hit him with a shock-volt gun so many times... You probably don’t believe me, but I swear it’s --”

“I believe you.” James cut her off. He didn’t know that he could stand to hear what else they had done to Moran.

Lanna stared at James for a moment, searching his face for something. James didn’t know what she saw in his expression, but Lanna suddenly looked relieved.

“I know you and Tony are tight, but this place...this whole blood sport thing is fucked up. It’s not worth the venom. It’s not worth Tony’s money, if that’s why you keep coming with him. And I’m over it, you know. I’m sick, and I’m out of here for good. You tell Tony I’m serious this time.”

She started to turn, but James caught her hands.

“What about the man?” James demanded in a whisper. “Where is he now?”

Lanna blinked at James for a moment. Clearly she had expected a different reaction from him.

"He's down in one of the demon cages," Lanna whispered.

"We have to get him out," James told her.

"What?" Lanna's brows shot up. "No! I have to leave."

She tried to pull away, but James held her hands tightly and tugged her up against his chest.

A few of the other guest looked their way, but James just smiled at them and kept his grip on Lanna. Most people were familiar with Lanna and Tony's constant quarrels. Attention slid off them.

"I'm not asking, Lanna," James told her quietly. "You're going to help me get him out."

Lanna glared at James and opened her mouth but then said nothing. A look of realization came over her as she studied James's face.

"You know him," Lanna whispered.

James nodded. Knowing him didn't even begin to cover the full extent of it.

"I need you to get me into that surveillance room where Peter showed you the demon cages," James said.

"They've got guns." Lanna's narrow face went pallid. Her hands felt like ice in his grip. "Let's just call the cops. They'll come and take care of it."

"There's no reception anywhere near this estate. We would have to make the call from a landline in one of the surveillance rooms." James knew his tone was too harsh. He tried to sound more reasonable. "If you don't do anything, you'll be an accessory to murder. Come on, don't let this Peter asshole be right about you. You're a good person, Lanna. Help me save this guy."

In all honesty, James had no idea how right Peter was about Lanna's morality. He hardly knew Lanna beyond the stories Tony had told him. But the fact that she had been so

revolted by the idea of murder gave him hope. It also made him briefly re-think his assumption that Lanna had dragged Tony to these tournaments. Maybe it had gone the other way.

“All right.” Lanna clenched her eyes closed as if it hurt her to agree. “But I’m out of here as soon as we make the call.”

“Just get me in and you can go,” James agreed. Lanna snatched a glass of champagne from a silver tray and drank a little. James watched her, thinking.

“Are you still taking Sedirest to get to sleep?” James asked.

“Yes. So what?” Lanna frowned at him.

“It would be really useful if you had a loaded injection pen on you.”

Lanna’s defensive expression melted into understanding. She fished a short, silver cylinder from her little gold purse and handed it to James. At another gathering the transaction might have drawn attention, but here green vials of venom passed openly from hand to hand, and stylishly personalized injection pens were everywhere in sight. If anything, he and Lanna fit in all the more now.

“How heavy is this Peter guy?” James asked.

“250, 270, but it’s a lot of fat,” Lanna supplied and then took another glass of champagne. She smiled at a man across the room, but didn’t go to him.

James calibrated the dose on the pen and cocked back the spring-loaded needle for a fast injection. Then he carefully tucked the pen into Moran’s jacket pocket.

“Let’s go.”

He followed Lanna through the plain white door and up the concrete stairs. An armed security guard stood at the top of the steps.

“Peter wanted to talk to my friend,” Lanna told the bored-looking guard. James smiled and tried not to seem nervous. His eyes slid to the holstered gun at the man’s belt. He looked quickly away. Lanna just smiled in an inviting manner, and the guard allowed them past.

Peter worked in D-7, one of four small surveillance rooms along a hall on the second floor. He monitored the loading dock and the dungeon, and when requested, fed the images to Mrs. Sunday's office screens. According to Lanna, he was bored and regularly lured pretty young women up to him with offers of cheap venom and exotic views.

At the door, James met Peter. He was heavysset, well into his forties, with a drooping gray mustache and a uniform that didn't hide his beer gut. He wore a gun at his hip but held a bag of potato chips in his hand. As James trailed Lanna into the small room, he scowled.

On the far wall, ten screens flickered different images. Demons paced their cages. One camera showed an empty loading bay. A phone and a handheld video game lay on a table in the corner. Naked cartoon girls writhed on the video game screen.

"Thought you weren't feeling good?" Peter studied Lanna's smiling face and seemed to like what he saw. He tossed the bag of chips to the table.

"A little bubbly cleared my headache right up." Lanna raised her champagne glass and drained it. She set her empty glass down beside the bag of chips.

When Peter glanced to James his expression grew slightly contemptuous. "You're Tony, right? Lanna told me about you."

"Yeah? Nothing too bad, I hope." James scanned the screens for any sign of Moran and thought he caught a glimpse. A long body sprawled in the shadows of a cage. He quickly returned his attention to Peter. They shook hands. Peter's fingers were greasy, and he squeezed James's hand far too hard.

"Well, I'm not really interested in a three-way with another guy. Girls are more my thing." Peter's mustache didn't hide his sneer.

James couldn't help a nervous laugh. What the hell had Lanna told this guy?

"To each his own," James replied as gamely as he could. He needed this bastard out of the way so that he could use that phone, and more importantly, to find Moran.

“Tony has a proposition for you,” Lanna leaned up against Peter. “A different proposition. Isn’t that right, honey?” Lanna gave James a hard, quick glance, but he had no idea what she meant by it.

“Yeah,” James stalled. “But I...You probably aren’t interested...” He pushed his hands into his pockets and gripped the injection pen.

“He wants to watch me blow you.” Lanna pressed her breasts against Peter’s chest, and Peter gazed down the neck of her gown.

“Yeah.” James couldn’t imagine anything he desired to witness less. Except Tony getting shot, or Moran being torn apart by a demon. He’d do anything to keep that from happening.

Lanna ran a finger over Peter’s belt, instantly commanding Peter’s attention as she wriggled down to her knees in front of him. She unbuckled the belt and let it drop to the floor, taking Peter’s holstered gun with it. Peter’s erection jutted out from the front of his green boxers, and Peter dug his fingers into Lanna’s hair. He pulled her face closer to his groin.

Revulsion swept through James.

He lunged forward, catching Peter around the neck, and jerked him back onto the needle of the injection pen. Peter tried to shout, but James gripped his throat tight, choking his cry to a wheezing moan. An instant later, the huge dose of Sedirest brought Peter down in a heap. James jerked a set of handcuffs from Peter’s belt and secured Peter’s wrists behind his back.

He reached for Peter’s keys and gun, then noticed Lanna still kneeling on the floor as if she were in shock.

“Lanna, get the phone. Call the cops!” James hissed, but she didn’t move. Instead she stared up at one of the flickering screens on the wall.

“Tony,” she whispered, her expression shocked. “That’s Tony.” She put her hands over her mouth as tears poured down her cheeks.

James glanced to the screen.

Tony’s body lay in a demon cage, the wreckage of his face clear even on the small screen. Moran was there as well, naked and shackled. Dark blotches from shock-volts mottled his muscular back. As James watched, Moran pushed himself up from the concrete floor and turned to Tony’s body.

Raw sorrow showed in his expression as he went to Tony. He wrapped his big hands around Tony’s thin shoulders and held him. He bowed his head and clenched his eyes shut.

James had only seen Moran look so devastated once before. The day Moran’s aged retriever had died, James had glimpsed Moran in the backyard, kneeling beside the dog, silent and almost broken. He had held the animal and stroked its still body. James had felt ashamed of himself spying on Moran in such a private moment and hurried away.

He felt that way again now, but he kept watching as Moran straightened, his expression turning hard and calm. James felt awed by Moran -- holding himself together even now. At the same time, James was terrified for him. There were so many demons, and Moran was shackled. Then something huge and bristling with scarlet spikes moved across a screen. It eyed the camera and bared its white teeth.

A scylla. James recognized it from exhibits he’d seen in the museum. Smoke curled from the massive creature’s red mouth.

“We’ve got to call the cops,” James went for the phone when Lanna didn’t move. She stared at the screen, at Tony’s body, tears pouring down her face.

James made the call. The moment he mentioned Moran, he was patched to the Demonic Division. He told them everything, trying to answer correctly when they asked how many armed security guards they could expect, as well as the number of entries into the coliseum and demons being held in the dungeon. Silently James tried to calculate how long it

would be before the police could arrive. It had taken him a half hour to drive from the warehouse district. The police station was farther away. When James asked, a young man informed him that they would be there as soon as they could. James thanked him and hung up, hoping no one noticed the call go out. Just as he returned the phone to its rest, Lanna called out, "What's he doing to Tony?"

James glanced to the screen in time to see Moran turning Tony's pockets inside out.

"He's trying to find something to help him escape." James looked at Lanna. "The cops are on their way. You should get out of here."

"What about you?" Lanna asked.

"I'm going down to the cages to help him." James looked to the screen where Moran now stood, testing the bars of his cage. His powerful, naked body strained against the titanium steel.

James thought for a moment, remembering the layout of the coliseum, the elevators and fire escapes that he'd just described to the police. Then he picked up Peter's security key and his silverbolt pistol.

The gun felt wrong in his hands, and not just because he was loath to use it. Something about the weight seemed off. James released the clip only to find it empty. Not loaded with a single bolt.

He tossed it onto the table. He'd probably have gotten himself shot running around with a gun in his hand anyway. Unarmed, at least he could claim that he'd just gotten lost if a security man caught him.

"Do you have to go?" Lanna wiped her face.

"Yeah, I do."

"But they'll see you on the cameras," Lanna protested.

James frowned at the screens and noticed that the one displaying Moran showed a feed light, which most likely meant that the image was being sent to Mrs. Sunday's office.

But none of the others were. James quickly flicked the feed-timers on the other screens, setting them back twenty minutes. That would give him a little time before anyone noticed him down in the dungeon. Lastly James switched on the record button. This way, whatever happened to him or Moran, the police would have a record of it.

James started for the door, but Lanna remained where she was.

“Lanna,” he began, but she shook her head.

“I’ll stay here,” Lanna said. “If I go back down without you, the guard on the stairs will get suspicious. Peter would never have a guy up here alone with him.” She didn’t look at James, but instead stared at Tony’s body on the small screen. “The police will need to talk to someone. I’ll tell them what happened.”

James didn’t have the time to argue with her.

“Lock the door behind me,” James told her. Lanna nodded.

“Be careful, James.”

“Always,” James assured her.

He tried to appear calm as he left the room and strode down the hall toward the small bathroom. A few feet from that stood the locked door to the fire stairs. James used Peter’s security key to disarm the alarm, and then he rushed down the dim stairwell.

A single fluorescent light flickered and hummed high above. He raced down three floors to the dungeon level. As he descended the stale air took on a humid, animal odor, and darkness enclosed him.

James fished the slim NyxOmnius camera out of his jacket. He adjusted the lenses, peeling back the inky blackness, and slipped out into the dungeon.

Long aisles of cages stretched the length of the dungeon. Dim lights, casting more shadows than illumination, hung between them, and up on the walls, tiny black cameras made slow mechanical sweeps.

James moved between the cages warily. Some stood empty, but many more were occupied by demons. Most were fodder for the larger demons -- game for natural hunters that wouldn't eat dead flesh. The green, goatlike cabrasha watched James creep by with wide, fearful eyes. Something that looked like a large yellow cotton ball skittered away from him as he passed. There were so many cages.

James wanted to shout Moran's name, but he knew they weren't alone down here. At the very least, the guards at the loading dock would hear him.

Keep calm and think, Sparky, James chided himself. *Where would they put Moran?*

Peter had said Moran was to be used in the tournament tonight so he ought to be caged in the center of the dungeon, where his entrance into the fighting pit would offer the best view for the spectators. The sacrifice cage, as Mrs. Sunday called it.

James moved quickly, but carefully. Previous excursions down into the dungeon had taught him to be wary of the horns and claws that easily fit between the bars of cages. The footing could prove tricky as well.

Every demon cage rested on a slightly raised platform. When time came for a tournament, hydraulics beneath the platforms drove the cages up to the fighting pit. But even fully recessed, the platforms posed the hazard of tripping James forward into the bars of a cage.

As James slunk forward past two huge snakes sleeping curled around each other, the stench of sulfur rolled over him. It grew stronger as James advanced. Then he recognized the red spines and jagged scales jutting between the bars of the cage ahead of him.

The crouching scylla demon would easily have fit in among the specimens of ancient, predatory dinosaurs in a museum, if it hadn't been so brilliantly festooned with red spines and also so obviously alive. Its haunches were thick and bore sharp spurs. Its forearms seemed delicate in comparison, but the large talons on each of its three fingers looked deadly. It drew in slow, deep breaths as James crept closer to its cage.

Sleeping, James hoped.

One yellow eye in the long serpentine head opened. A black pupil, the size of James's fist, pulsed wide, and the iris glowed as if it were molten.

Scylla demons fed on magic and hunted sorcerers, so it shouldn't have stared so intently at James. There wasn't a spark of sorcery in his family, not even the rumors of ancestors' hotblood affairs or illegitimate births that peppered the family trees of so many hell cops.

Then James realized that it wasn't him. It was the NyxOmnius he held. All those enchantments housed in one tiny body had to excite the scylla's appetite.

James slowly lowered the camera. Even in the darkness he could see the scylla's blazing eye follow the camera's movements.

Suddenly the scylla jerked forward, slamming into its cage. The bars groaned, and James leapt back, hitting an empty cage. The scylla let out a resounding roar: a sound like colliding freight trains and shattering glass. The sound pounded through James's body. He cupped his hands over his ears, but the sound waves buffeted him like a physical blows. His gut felt liquid, and his heart raced. The scylla's hot breath distorted the air, and the stench of sulfur choked James.

But the infamous flame didn't gush out from the gaping red maw. Instead there was just the stench of sulfur and a long, strained hiss. Then James caught a glimpse of a huge red spell-suppression shackle restraining the scylla's throat.

James remained still and quiet.

The scylla snapped its jaws shut. Its burning gaze dimmed but didn't go dark. James jammed the camera into his pocket and ran.

Through the ringing in his ears James heard a woman's voice. Mrs. Sunday laughed nervously. A man murmured low words to her.

If Mrs. Sunday had been watching Moran, she was probably headed to him now. James followed the voices. He lifted the NyxOmnius from his pocket and focused it far ahead of him.

Between the bars of cages, he caught sight of Mrs. Sunday and the man in the white suit -- the man who had volt-shot Moran in the back. The man held a pistol out at Moran now as well, though this time it was to Moran's face.

"I could kill you!" The desperation in the man's voice echoed through the dungeon. His expression verged on panic.

Moran said nothing, just gazed at the man with a cold disdain that James found utterly alarming. James scurried forward, desperately trying to think of some way to keep Moran from getting himself shot.

"Sam." Mrs. Sunday reached out and pulled the gun away from the man. Sam seemed relieved when she took it from him. He gazed at her as if she were the angel that she dressed as. Then Mrs. Sunday murmured words too softly for James to hear.

James inched a little closer, but he was moving dangerously close to the overhead lights and the direct line of the cameras. He strained to catch the soft exchange that passed between Mrs. Sunday and Sam. Mrs. Sunday's tone sounded calm and reasonable.

James raised his camera, pulled the focus close and snapped several pictures, while watching Mrs. Sunday's lips, form the words, "I know...I know."

Then Mrs. Sunday kissed Sam. As he leaned into her, she suddenly fired a blinding white shock-volt into the man's chest. James felt like he was going to vomit, but his hands were steady as he caught three clear pictures. Sam fell, and Mrs. Sunday continued to fire into his supine body, until black smoke rose from the man's chest cavity.

A tiny red light flashed in the viewfinder, warning James that the memory card was full. Numbly, he released and pocketed the leathery, black card.

The smell of seared meat drifted through the air, and demons all around James sniffed and snorted. A tiny cabrasha near James pissed its cage, but a sleek, canine demon stared at the smoking corpse with hungry intensity.

James crept past the demons, keeping his attention on Mrs. Sunday and Moran. Mrs. Sunday did something with one of Sam's hands, and then she rose and turned on Moran.

She said something. The grunts and snorts of two large demons drowned out most of her words as well as Moran's response, but James heard their tones. Mrs. Sunday sounded amused, almost laughing. Naked and shackled, Moran still spoke as if he were interviewing a suspect, all cold reserve.

Either he had one hell of a game face, or Moran really didn't care if he died right here and now. The thought alarmed James, because it seemed possible.

Moran wasn't the type to slit his wrists and bleed out on the kitchen floor. He was much too restrained for anything so grandiose. But James had sensed the inclination when he'd first gone to Moran's apartment. A self-imposed isolation had permeated the Spartan rooms. Bare walls, empty shelves, single bed. No pets, no lovers, no one to leave behind. He was the kind of man who could kill himself through indifference to his own survival.

He'd thought -- hoped, really -- that Moran had changed over the last year. He'd smiled more and even laughed this year. Not that he was doing either now. But Mrs. Sunday seemed plenty amused. Her sharp laughter echoed through the dungeon, and James scowled at her. She might have been working for someone else, but from what James had seen, she was vicious enough on her own to deserve a couple life sentences.

"When you join James in hell," Mrs. Sunday purred at Moran, "do give him my love." Then she turned and walked away.

A moment later Moran's apparent indifference vanished. Moran hurled himself at his cage, slamming his shackles against the bars so hard that sparks flashed up. He arched back, muscles rippling, and hammered the shackles again. James rushed between the cages,

heartened by the sight of Moran fighting so hard. Moran wrenched the link between the shackles apart.

Then he went still, staring into the gloom, and James realized that Moran had seen him. James fished the flash knife out of his pants pocket and sprinted to Moran's cage. The cameras were doubtless bouncing his image up to Mrs. Sunday's office, but James wasn't going to waste time trying to find a way around them.

"I called --" James didn't get any further before Moran caught hold of his jacket through the cage bars and pulled him against his bare chest.

He kissed James deeply and passionately -- a hot, invading kiss. And for a moment all thought fled James's mind. He held onto Moran and kissed back, feeling electricity shiver through his belly and groin.

Then Moran pushed him gently back.

"Nice outfit, Sparky." Moran eyed the pink satin ears.

"It's a costume party --" James began.

"Yeah, I heard." Moran scowled down at Tony's body and then glared back at James. "You shouldn't be here."

"No shit," James replied. "We both have to get out of this place. Is there any way a flash-knife could cut through these bars?"

Moran shook his head. He looked past James to where Sam's burnt body splayed on the floor.

"Get me that shock-volt pistol," Moran ordered, and James quickly pulled the pistol from the dead man's hands. The smell of roasting meat still rose from the black hole in Sam's chest.

Moran took the pistol and the flash-knife. He scowled at the empty charge of the pistol. Then he looked up at James.

"Thanks. Now go." He turned his attention back to the flash-knife while still addressing James. "Give the film in that coat to Detective Argent or Detective Yervant at the Enyalios Station. Tell them that Sam Dashner was just a pawn. Mrs. Sunday is the one in charge --"

"They're on their way here, already," James broke in. "Can you use the battery from the flash-knife to power the pistol?"

"Sure, if I had a couple days to wait for it to charge up," Moran replied. The muscles of his jaw worked with tightly controlled frustration. He wrenched the dead battery from the shock-volt pistol and then spooled out a mesh of gold wires. Carefully he wrapped the wires around the shackle on his right wrist.

James studied the cage. From witnessing several pit fights he knew that one of the cage walls could be released remotely. But there had to be a physical lock. Somewhere at the top of the cage, he guessed. He caught hold of two bars and started to shimmy his way up the cage.

"What the hell are you doing?" Moran demanded. "Get the fuck out of here!"

"There's a release. You need to --" James began.

"I need to get these shackles off," Moran growled. "And you sure as shit don't want to be here when I do, because a scylla demon is going to come running."

James didn't think he'd ever seen Moran look so angry, not even when he'd been holding a gun to James's head.

Suddenly the hatch above them twisted wide open. Light flared down across Moran's cage. Loud party music and hundreds of human voices poured from the fighting pit above them. Then the platform beneath Moran's cage began to rise.

"James, go!" Moran shouted.

James didn't bother to argue. There was no way he could leave Moran like this. He clung tight to the bars as hydraulic lifts pushed the cage up into the center of the fighting pit. Moran swore and kept working wires from the pistol around his shackles.

Triumphant music blared. Floodlights dazed James as they flashed down the length of the walls encircling the fighting pit. In the stands high above, venom-pumped spectators cheered and screamed. Someone in the audience tossed flowers down. They bounced against the clear hy-glass dome that protected the spectators from the combat below. Red roses splayed on the clear dome, seeming to float over the frieze of knights and demons that decorated the walls. Closer to the floor of the fighting pit, scorch marks and jagged cracks obliterated the heroic images. The air smelled of sweat and meat.

A shudder rocked through the cage as the platform locked into the stone floor of the pit. Little electric shocks shot up the bars of the cage, and James let go and jumped back. A loud crack sounded, and the far wall fell from Moran's cage to clang against the stone floor. Moran bounded out, still gripping the flash-knife. He glared past the cage at James, then turned in a slow circle, taking in their surroundings.

Then twenty feet ahead of James, trapdoors in the floor dropped open, and the shriek of the scylla seared the air. The heavy cage rocked and groaned as the demon slammed its massive body against the bars. Waves of heat distortion rolled out from the scylla's gaping jaws. Its teeth shone like molten steel.

Moran's expression changed, going from angry to gentle, almost scared.

"James, get back here, behind me." Moran spoke in a calm steady tone as if he were coaching a child back from the ledge of a building.

James nodded, backing toward Moran. The wall dropped from the scylla's cage.

Moran jammed the blade of the flash-knife into the clasp of one of his shackles and hit its flare release. Sparks ignited across the wiring, and Moran winced as the wires crackled and burned.

The shackles hadn't even opened, but James saw the scylla's attention snap to Moran. Its eyes went bright. Its jaws gaped, and it stalked forward.

James didn't think. He simply knew that he had to buy Moran time to get those shackles off.

He lifted the NyxOmnius and snapped a picture of the scylla. The demon immediately veered toward James, its eyes focusing on the NyxOmnius in his hands. James snapped two more pictures. The scylla's body tensed to pounce. James sprinted for the far wall.

The scylla pounded after him, closing the distance in a heartbeat. The crowd roared with excitement. Moran shouted something, but all James heard was the crash of the scylla's teeth snapping just behind him. Burning breath scorched his neck.

James hurled the NyxOmnius ahead of him. The scylla slammed him aside and leapt forward to snap the camera up in its massive maw. James crashed into the floor and skidded several feet across the stones. He felt more than saw the scylla slam into the wall; the whole pit shuddered at the impact.

On a surge of pure adrenaline, James scrambled up to his knees, almost got to his feet. Then dizzy confusion flooded him and his right leg folded, tearing pain knifing from his thigh to his knee. He collapsed.

He saw the blood pumping from his right thigh. The bone of his kneecap thrust up from a bloody mass of fabric and skin. Just brushing past him, the scylla's spiny body had sliced through his clothes and gashed open his leg. Blood trickled down the back of his head as well. His skull felt broken.

The scylla had recovered from its own collision. Several of its long spines had cracked against the wall, but it still moved easily. Now it rounded on James.

A thin, whining sound pierced the air, and the scylla's restraining collar dropped from its neck and crashed to the floor like a battered fender.

You are fucked now, Sparky, James told himself.

The scylla's yellow eyes shone as luminous as stained glass. Its jaw dropped wide, but, instead of a red darkness, a sweltering gold light rolled up from its throat.

James hunched down against the floor, wrapping his arms around his head as if that would do him any good.

The flame surged out; the fire roaring more loudly than the surrounding crowd.

And Moran stepped in front of James, white steam rising from his naked body. The scylla's flame slammed into Moran and split apart. It rolled around them, crashing against the far wall, blackening the empty cages. Heat poured over James. Perspiration instantly soaked his body. His lungs went dry, and his eyes watered as he fought to keep them open.

Above him, Moran stood glistening with sweat. He held his right hand high, fingers stretched out to meet the torrent of fire. Amidst the molten white flames, Moran's hand appeared soot black. Fury and intense pain flickered through his expression. In his left hand he gripped James's flash-knife, and a dark blue mist curled around the short blade.

The heat blurred James's vision. He could feel blisters rising on his exposed arms and taste smoke in every breath. He thought he heard a siren somewhere far off.

The heat intensified as the scylla stalked closer, still pouring flames from its mouth. Moran raised the flash knife. Then he sprang forward into the flames of the scylla's gaping mouth and hurled the knife into its glowing throat.

A choked, wet scream escaped the scylla, and then an explosion of fire and smoke threw James back several more feet. His right leg felt like ground meat, his lungs burned. Scorched expanses of his arms and face flared. His right eye felt blistered and too swollen to open.

Above him the wall of flame suddenly turned to rolling clouds of suffocating smoke. Pieces of broken red spines, charred flesh, and burning scales rained down through the reek of blood and sulfur.

Just out of the corner of his left eye he could see the charred, cracked remains of one of Moran's red shackles and a charred mass of scales and meat.

Where was Moran?

James tried to get to his knees. Exposed bone ground against the stone floor and agony wracked James. He lay back shaking with pain. Overhead, weird shadows writhed against the blackened hy-glass dome. Sirens wailed, and the music had stopped. James wondered when that had happened. He dragged in a wheezing breath and coughed violently against the smoke.

Where was Moran?

He thought he glimpsed a familiar silhouette staggering through the smoke. He tried to focus, but his vision wavered and warped.

You can't even see straight, Sparky.

That sounded like the punch line to some gay joke. James would have laughed at himself if he hadn't been so scared.

The dark figure swayed and then went down. James knew it had to be Moran.

James couldn't stand, much less walk. Instead he dragged his body across the rough stone to Moran's side. His lungs and eyes filled with smoke. But he managed to grasp Moran's shoulder and pull him away from the flaming remains of the scylla's ruptured body. Moran didn't respond. The heavy muscle under James's hand felt weirdly lax and cold. James struggled for air.

Then his surroundings grew dark and blurred, as if they were receding. James fought to stay conscious, but his hand slipped from Moran, and he couldn't lift it back up.

Shadows moved over him. Someone laid a hand against his throat; the touch felt like ice, and James flinched from it.

"Argent, Yervant, I've got the Easter bunny down here!" a man called to someone else. Blurs of blue uniforms and police armor moved in and out of his line of vision.

"Help Moran," James gasped, but then he was wracked with coughing. His breath tasted like soot.

"It's all right," a dark-skinned man assured James. "We've got you now."

But it wasn't all right, because the man wasn't going to Moran, and James couldn't understand why. He tried again to speak up but just choked. Frigid air blew from an oxygen mask into his face. Then James felt the sting of a needle in his arm, and a strange coldness pulsed through his bloodstream. Silence and darkness followed in its wake.

Chapter Five

Ornate headstones filled the vast green expanses of the cemetery. The imposing facades of family crypts stood in the distance, surrounded by flowering trees. Just beyond two stone angels rose a gleaming marble memorial stone.

Moran trailed the sporty, blond Sparks family on the walk from the chapel. His crisp, black linen suit smelled of cedar chips after four years of storage. The uncomfortable starched stiffness of the white shirt seemed appropriate to the occasion. Moran had worn these same clothes to every funeral he had attended in his adult life.

He'd worn this suit to bury Bill.

But on this sunny, clear day, that funeral seemed like it had been a long time ago. He couldn't remember if the suit had smelled of cedar or mothballs back then. Or if it had fit just a little more tightly. Even his sorrow felt distant, like history.

Today the suit simply reminded him that this was a somber occasion, and he ought to take pains not to get caught ogling James's ass as he carried the urn containing Tony's ashes up the hill to the Allmon family memorial.

Moran bowed his head slightly, watching James from below his lashes. James looked tired and pale -- not surprising considering he'd only been released from the hospital three

days ago -- and yet such energy underlay his movements and lit up his expressions that he seemed vibrant, despite his somber black attire and the graves surrounding him.

Beside James, Lanna Yervant appeared wan. A black hat and veil hid her chestnut hair. She wept quietly into her kerchief while a white-robed priest spoke in solemn tones of Tony Allmon's passing from this life into another.

James squeezed Lanna's shoulder gently, and she leaned against him. Behind them, James's parents bowed their heads in polite silence, though it seemed clear to Moran that James's mother, Kate, was more concerned about James's right leg than the funeral. Both parents watched James with expressions of tender pride.

Every few moments, one of them glanced to Moran, but said nothing. He wondered if they were thinking about Bill and the night their street had resounded with ambulance sirens. Or that other funeral years ago.

Moran had bumped into them numerous times at the hospital, when he'd been waiting to visit James. They'd been polite, but their manner and expressions had told Moran that they remembered him as something dangerous and that they worried about his association with their son.

Moran pretended not to notice James's father staring at his scarred right hand. No doubt that did little to reassure the parents.

Moran could hardly blame them. All James had gotten from knowing him so far was a severe concussion, knee surgery, and a dead friend. Guilt churned in Moran's belly, but he still couldn't keep away from James. He wanted him.

James's blond hair shone against the bright blue sky. He briefly met Moran's gaze with an honest smile: artless and inviting at once.

Moran felt that smile pierce deep into his body. A hard, physical hunger flickered through him. Moran forced his eyes off James.

He took in the black-clad crowd. A dozen other mourners gathered around them. From what Moran had overheard in the parking lot, he guessed that most of these men and women had known Tony from college or galleries; their faces displayed the calm sadness of acquaintances more than any true sorrow. Curiosity as much as the desire to pay last respects seemed to have brought many of them out today.

They hovered around Lanna, whose testimony had been front-page news throughout Mrs. Sunday's trial. Lanna had already appeared in an antidrug PSA, displaying her delicate, track-marked arms and stating, "Venom is poison." The slogan struck Moran as obvious and stupid, but as the DA had pointed out, Lanna Yervant's pretty body and charming face could sell steak to vegans.

She'd made an affecting witness on the stand.

Though neither her tears nor her repentant confessions would have mattered if it hadn't been for the reams of evidence that James had supplied for the police. The recording of Mrs. Sunday murdering Sam Dashner alone had ensured a conviction of first-degree murder. And charges had mounted as the trial went on.

Moran should have been elated. But all he'd really cared about by then had been James's recovery. He'd spent most of his free time haunting the hospital, annoying doctors, surgeons, and nurses with questions. When he could, he'd sat beside James's bed holding his hand, pushing his power into James's body and strengthening the healing spells woven into stitches and bandages.

He'd been stumbling from exhaustion each time he left the hospital, but it had been worth the effort. It would have been worth even more just to see James as he was now: healthy and flushed with life.

Moran found his eyes slowly roving James's body again, imagining the pleasure of exposing the supple, strong frame beneath those black clothes. He could almost feel the smooth expanse of James's skin as he pictured himself stripping away shirt and slacks.

Then he noticed Mrs. Sparks watching him, following his gaze to her son.

"Dr. Black expects him to be running marathons again in a month or two," Mrs. Sparks whispered to him.

"That's good." Moran forced himself to meet her eyes. They were dark and warm like James's. She was the supportive type of mother that he never dealt with personally or professionally.

"He's very fond of you, you know." Mrs. Sparks creased her brows, studying James as he knelt to place Tony's urn in an alcove in the memorial stone. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You mean a lot to him, detective."

"Well, I..." Moran tried to think of a response that wasn't vastly inappropriate to tell someone's mother. "He's a good kid. A really good kid."

"He'd be heartbroken to hear you say that, Detective Moran," Mrs. Sparks whispered. "He's a grown man. Old enough to risk his life for what he cares about and believes in."

The words, though delivered gently, came like a slap in Moran's face. She was right, of course. James was no child. "I didn't mean --"

"No, of course not." Mrs. Sparks gave him that same laughing smile that looked so handsome on James. "But maybe you should tell him, because he can be a little reckless when he's trying to prove himself to someone."

"James has nothing to prove to me," Moran replied, and he meant it.

Mrs. Sparks simply nodded. Mourners placed flower buds around the base of the memorial stone. Both the Sparks parents added roses. Moran lay a lily beside the blossom James had left. Then as the priest sang a low, sweet chant, a golden light sparked over the memorial stone and each of the flowers opened.

After a final prayer, James led Lanna down to the waiting cars. The rest of the mourners followed. Moran walked behind James's mother and father, gazing past them to where James stood beside Lanna's bright red car.

James patted Lanna's back and then handed her over to a dapper older man whom Moran thought he recognized from the covers of financial magazines.

James waved as they drove away. Then he shoved his hands into his pockets and lifted his face up to catch the sunlight. Absently, he bounced on the heels of his feet. Moran imagined he was aching for motion -- to race across the long green lawn and leap over the headstones like they were hurdles.

"He's so restless just hanging around our house," Mrs. Sparks turned back to Moran. "Someone ought to take him out somewhere."

At this Mr. Sparks, too, turned back. He studied Moran with an expression somewhere between concern and curiosity. Moran met his gaze, and Mr. Sparks smiled just a little.

"I wanted to thank you for saving my son's life." Mr. Spark's voice was strikingly similar to James's quiet tone.

"It was the least I could do," Moran replied. "I probably would have died down there if James hadn't brought me that flash-knife."

Mr. Sparks nodded. No doubt he was already familiar with the story.

"He was worried about your hand," Mr. Sparks went on. "It was badly burned, wasn't it?"

"It was," Moran conceded. "But I heal fast."

"That's useful in your line of work, I'd imagine." Mr. Sparks smiled more broadly. Both parents seemed relieved.

"Sure," Moran agreed. "The health insurance comes in handy as well...no pun intended."

"Handy indeed," Mr. Sparks replied.

Mr. and Mrs. Sparks chuckled as if Moran had said something very clever. Moran noticed James watching them. He briefly met Moran's gaze and offered him a sympathetic

smile. Then he leaned back against his parents' green sedan, apparently resigned to wait for them to be done with Moran.

"James still needs to take it easy with his right leg," Mrs. Sparks informed him, and Moran realized that she'd already decided that he would be taking James out.

"Don't let him tell you otherwise, detective," Mr. Sparks added firmly. "He's already been running once today, and that's all he's allowed."

Moran nodded, utterly at a loss.

These two were so unlike his own disinterested family or Bill's accusatory parents that he didn't know what to say or what to expect. Experience made him cautious.

He'd been like a wrecking ball to Bill's family. Not that Bill hadn't done his share of damage all on his own, but he'd left Moran to face the recrimination and insults in the end. Bill's suicide had made them feel justified in their bigoted belief that no relationship between two men could succeed. Hell, it had made Moran think the same thing for a while.

Since then, numerous one-night stands had eased Moran's body and soothed his isolation, but they certainly hadn't prepared him for family encounters.

Carl and Kate Sparks, on the other hand, seemed utterly unconcerned by James's sexuality. Moran wondered how many boyfriends and lovers they must have met to become so relaxed. Moran stole another glance at James's slim, strong body and handsome expression.

Looking at him, Moran suddenly realized that a man as attractive and outgoing as James would've had more than his share of lovers -- decent and rotten -- since those long ago days when they had been neighbors.

He really wasn't a kid, not at all.

"Be safe, both of you," Mrs. Sparks told Moran.

"Of course," Moran agreed, and then he excused himself. He strode to James, his muscles feeling hot, his pulse pounding fast and deep as if some restraint inside him had at last broken.

Chapter Six

James watched Moran close in on him. Something in the intensity of his stare brought a burning flush to James's cheeks. James glanced down at his watch, just for an excuse to break eye contact. It was stupid how easily Moran affected him, how absurdly aware he was of Moran's mere presence.

He remembered waking in the hospital several times and feeling the sudden absence of Moran's strong, warm hands around his own. He had glimpsed Moran's broad shoulders and dark hair as a nurse quietly scolded Moran from the room. Another evening he'd fought to consciousness, chasing the distant sound of Moran's voice, low and deep. He woke in time to see Moran leaving with two other detectives and a woman who looked like a lawyer.

When Moran had visited in the day, he'd stood behind James's parents, kept quiet, and only briefly met James's gaze. He could have been a cardboard cutout, and yet his presence had altered the whole room. When Moran was near, James noticed the heat of the sunlight pouring through the windows and caught the slight scent of leather in the otherwise sterile air. He felt excited and frustrated because he wanted to be up on his feet. He wanted to close the distance between them in a few quick steps.

But Moran remained distant. He rarely touched James. When he did, it was with hesitation, as if he thought James might break apart in his hands.

James felt like he'd gone from being a gawky kid to a sickly infant in Moran's mind. That idea galled him and drove his recovery and early release from the hospital. He needed Moran to see him standing strong and know that he wasn't too fragile to lay hands on.

Something of that must have gotten through, because now Moran caught his arm in a firm grip, and he drew him to a sleek blue vehicle. James followed, noting the pleasant heat of Moran's fingers soaking in through his jacket.

"Your parents say you're bouncing off the walls at home." Moran's gaze moved over James, hard and appraising and almost hungry. Again James flushed and felt ridiculous for it.

Moran opened the passenger door. James glanced back at his parents. They waved to him. He returned the gesture and got into Moran's car. Moran slid into the driver's seat and slammed his door.

"I agreed to take you off their hands and wear you out," Moran told him.

The turn of phrase irritated James. Especially after weeks in the hospital, with doctors and nurses ordering him around as though he couldn't make a single decision for himself.

Wear him out? Was he supposed to be Moran's dog now? Could he sink any lower in Moran's estimation?

"I'm not a retriever," James snapped. "I can entertain myself."

"Sure you can." Moran sounded amused. He pulled out of the drive. "But I'm offering. So, will you let me?"

Moran's met his gaze with a knowing smile that sent a thrill through James's body and obliterated his annoyance.

What exactly was Moran offering?

And suddenly James was aware of the heat of Moran's body and the earthy smell of his skin. He watched Moran smoothly shift gears as they accelerated.

“Yeah, okay,” James said. “Entertain me.”

Moran passed other drivers and absently flicked on the car radio. A reporter detailed the latest accidents, construction, and traffic jams.

The last time James had been in this car, he’d been at the edge of panic; it had seemed like a monstrous vehicle, almost too much for him to manage. Now the ride felt easy, controlled, and soothing after the funeral. James leaned back into his seat and stretched his legs. His right knee felt tight. He massaged it.

“Does it hurt?” Moran asked.

“Not really.” James watched a white seabird soaring between the colonnades of skyscrapers. He’d strained his knee trying to work out all of his anxiety in his morning run. “I’m not used to it yet, that’s all. What about your hand?”

“Ugly,” Moran grinned as he briefly lifted his right hand from the gearshift. Streaks of shiny red scar tissue stood out from the dark tan of his long fingers. “But it works just fine.”

A tinny recording of Lanna’s voice seeped out from the radio. Another of her anti-venom ads. James frowned, and to his relief, Moran switched the radio off. He was so tired of thinking about Lanna and Tony, and how easily people died.

“You hungry?” Moran asked as they navigated through the heavy afternoon traffic and sped onto the freeway.

“No.” James didn’t think he’d be hungry for a while. Not so soon after burying Tony. “I ate earlier. You?”

Moran just gave a shake of his head. His blue eyes flickered over the merging traffic ahead and then lighted briefly on James.

“You look tired, Sparky,” Moran commented. His expression was gentle, edging on worried. The last thing James wanted to see from him right now.

"You wish! You're not getting out of entertaining me that easily, Detective Moran," James replied. A month ago he wouldn't have talked back to Moran, but since that night in the fighting pit, James had lost some of his timidity.

Moran smiled at the response, then focused back on the road.

Far to the south James caught the dazzling blue of the ocean. White beach curved along the shore like a fingernail. Then they turned north and sped past the iron trestles of the Trade Street Depot. James squinted into the distance, imagining that even from the freeway he caught a flash of silver from the Allmon Warehouse.

"A lawyer contacted me last week. I guess I'm Tony's only beneficiary." James wasn't sure why he brought the subject up, except that he had wanted to talk to someone about it for days now. Somehow he'd never felt comfortable enough with anyone else, but maybe a year of graphically detailing crimes, drug use, and violence had conditioned him to open up to Moran.

"You didn't know?" Moran's dark brows lifted as he stole a quick look at James.

"Tony said something about it way back in college, but I thought he was kidding." James restrained his nervous urge to play with the air conditioning vents. "Right after his family died, he wanted to make a will, and I was...there, I guess."

Moran's blue eyes flickered to him questioningly.

"We weren't lovers or anything like that, not ever," James clarified quickly. "It was just that he could be an asshole sometimes. I was one of the only people who would put up with him."

Moran nodded. "You put up with a lot as far as I can tell."

James shrugged. It had seemed like too much sometimes, but now that Tony was dead, he didn't know if he'd done enough, really.

"They thought he was me when they shot him," James said, and immediately he wished he hadn't.

The image of Tony's head splitting apart came to him. It had been all he could think about right after the lawyer contacted him and again this afternoon as he carried Tony's ashes. Even the ache of his knee had done little to distract him.

But now, with Moran, it didn't seem quite as unbearable. Moran had probably seen worse and yet here he was, sane and strong. And when he looked at James there was no accusation in his face.

"His death wasn't your fault," Moran told him firmly.

"I know." James gazed out the window and watched old, unfamiliar buildings blur past. They swung onto the Greensea exit ramp and circled down into a tightly packed immigrant neighborhood. Tiled roofs and cinnamon trees abounded. Storefronts displayed arcane symbols and were guarded by statues of crouching demons.

"I just wonder if there wasn't more I should have done to help Tony. If I could have found a way to get him off the venom, then he'd probably still be alive."

Moran was silent for a while, and James began to wonder where they were going. He couldn't imagine Moran hunching through the tiny grocery stores or crouching in one of the medicinal lotus pools.

"There's only so much you can do for another person," Moran said at last. He seemed to weigh some other thought and then went on. "For two years, I forced Bill into therapy and kept him on his medication. I'd call him from work every day and check up on him; I kept him alive. But it exhausted me, and he just resented it. He was a grown man, and I was treating him like a child. Finally I stopped. I knew Bill probably wouldn't make the best decisions...but I had to let him control his own life."

James had never heard Moran talk about Bill before. He hadn't meant to bring it up, and he suddenly worried that he'd badly misstepped with this entire conversation.

But Moran's tone was surprisingly collected, his expression relaxed despite the subject. He sighed.

"You can only do so much to protect a man from himself. In the end, either he decides to change or he doesn't. You can't make that choice for him."

"No, I guess not." James had known as much, but hearing Moran say so made him feel better. "I suppose I'm just wishing it could have turned out differently."

"That can't be helped. Everybody has something they wish had turned out differently," Moran replied. "But it reminds me of this island saying my uncle used to always tell me: don't waste your prayers on the past when the future is where you're going."

James nodded and then studied Moran. The more he knew of him, the more he liked him and wanted to be with him.

"So, the future," James said lightly. "I suppose you have yours all worked out already?" It was as close as he could bring himself to ask Moran about the two of them. What were they to each other now that Mrs. Sunday had been convicted?

"I know what I want." Moran spared him a glance and then turned his gaze to the green light ahead of them. "But I don't have it all worked out. Not everything, not yet."

James studied his sharp profile. He looked young when he relaxed. The hint of a boyish smile played on his lips. James remembered the feel of Moran's mouth on his, that hot, deep kiss that had left him breathless and aching. He wondered if Moran thought of it -- if he jacked off remembering their brushing tongues the way James did.

Unable to stop himself, James stole a glance down Moran's broad chest and muscular thighs. He looked good in his black tailored suit, but the sense of mourning and reserve it lent made him seem almost unapproachable. James liked him in jeans better -- and better still out of them. He felt his face flushing as he remembered Moran's naked body.

Arousal twitched through James's groin.

James looked out the window. The streets were becoming narrower and more crowded. The strong smell of charcoal burners and aromatic spices wafted through the air. Star-like

ginseng flowers appeared on signs and painted across the brick walls of the surrounding buildings.

“We’re not too far from the Herbal Relaxation House, are we?” James realized.

Moran nodded. “About six blocks west.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in this section of the city in the day before,” James commented. It was brighter and busier than he would have imagined.

“I grew up ten blocks from here, on River Street.” Moran slowed to allow two kids on bicycles past. “Most summers I worked at this bathhouse, right here.”

To James’s surprise, Moran pulled into a tight parking space and stopped the car. James took in the big red building, with its gaudy gold sign and swooping green roof. Steam clouded the round windows on the first floor and white curtains hid the interiors of the second.

“You were a bath boy?” James asked. The glistening image of Moran in nothing but a towel came unbidden.

“If you’re imagining that I got any action, put it out of your mind. It’s not that kind of a bathhouse.” Moran smirked. “I cleaned the pump room and kept the boilers running.”

Inside, the tiny old woman behind the ornately carved reservation desk recognized Moran. She rushed forward and hugged him. Her accent was thick as she teased him about coming to get his old job back. Twice, she stole quick glances to James, offering him a sly smile, but she said nothing to him.

Earthy perfumes hung in the humid air. Shafts of sunlight shot through the haze of steam, illuminating the red glass tiles on the walls like rubies. Bath attendants in simple green uniforms appeared from between displays of potted tree ferns and hurried through a set of curving doors across the room. James watched wisps of steam curl like mist around the verdant fronds of the plants.

He wished he’d brought his camera.

Moran collected the key to a private room and led James up the highly polished wooden stairs to the second floor. James's right knee ached from the extra strain, but he ignored it.

Diffused light streamed down from skylights, and a sandalwood fan lazily circulated the fragrant air. A sunken pool and wooden massage table dominated the tiled room. Just beyond that stood an intricately carved chest and several shelves displaying fluffy white towels, exotic jars, and potted ginseng plants.

"This is a nice place," James said. After meeting Moran in so many dank rooms, he couldn't help the surprise in his voice.

"It is, so long as you don't sign up for a sulfur purge," Moran replied. "That can be terrifyingly medicinal."

"I've had my fill of terrifying medical treatments already, thanks," James said.

"You and me both," Moran agreed.

"So...a ginseng bath?" James asked. He'd seen Moran naked and caged. He'd nearly died with Moran, and yet he was unaccountably nervous now in this clean, civilized place.

"I thought it would be a good way to get you off your feet and out of your clothes." Moran held his gaze.

James's heart pounded; his throat felt too tight to get words out. He nodded and mutely stared as Moran stripped off his suit jacket and hung it up on a hook on the back of the door. As Moran opened his shirt, exposing tanned muscle and thick black chest hair, James's face flamed, flushing as if he were seventeen again. His dick was already hard, tenting his pants.

James turned away and stared down at the jars and bottles scattered across the table, hoping to gain some kind of composure. Excitement was one thing, but this was ridiculous. Moran was going to think he'd never fucked before in his life.

Despite the distracting assortment of bright labels and jewel-colored jars on the table in front of him, James's eyes went to an inconspicuous little dish holding four Gold Lion brand condoms. Their brassy packaging gleamed like gold.

Moran came to him. He slid his bare arms around James's waist. His big, scarred hands crossed loosely over James's belly, sending flickering thrills down into his groin. Moran pressed his body against James's back.

"It's all right if you don't feel up to this yet," Moran said gently. He leaned close, his words caressing James's neck.

He felt like he'd been waiting all his life for this moment.

"I'm definitely up to it," James whispered. He turned in Moran's arms and met Moran's gaze. Excitement fluttered through his belly.

Moran kissed him gently, his lips just brushing James's mouth. James leaned into Moran. Then Moran kissed him again. This time his mouth took James's with a deep, consuming force. James responded with desperate hunger. He dug his hands into the thick muscle of Moran's ass and pulled Moran's crotch against his own, letting him feel the hard thrust of his erection.

Moran gripped him, invading his mouth and grinding their bodies close. Their belt buckles clattered in metallic friction. The heat of Moran's body pulsed through James's clothes.

Then Moran drew back, catching his breath. His lips were flushed, and his eyes dilated with desire.

"Could you ditch the jacket? I feel like I just picked you up from the prom." The words were joking, but Moran's voice was rough.

James managed a breathless laugh. He tore off his black jacket and hurled it away. As James unbuttoned his shirt, Moran's hands roved his exposed chest. His callused fingers scraped and teased James's tight nipples. The sensation sent electric pleasure skipping across

James's skin. Moran was good at this, good enough to probably get him off in a few minutes, but James wanted it to last. He'd waited too long for this to just let it end in a few casual strokes.

James let his shirt fall to the floor and caught Moran's hands, kissing his fingers and palms. Then he leaned close and kissed Moran's broad, tanned chest. Moran's skin felt feverish and tasted like cedar and salt.

James flicked his tongue over Moran's dark nipples as his fingers followed the pattern of Moran's thick chest hair downward. A low rumble of appreciation escaped Moran when James slid his hands past the deep cleft of Moran's abdomen to the cool metal of Moran's belt buckle. He ran one finger over Moran's zipper, stroking the hard flesh beneath. Even through the linen, it felt burning hot.

"You're a little bit of a tease, aren't you?" Moran asked huskily.

James allowed himself a smile. *Yeah, Sparky has grown up.*

"Don't I always deliver for you, Detective Moran?"

James unzipped Moran's fly and slipped his hand into Moran's pants. Moran's stiff, thick erection thrust into his palm. James stroked the blazing head as beads of precum welled up.

"Do you like this?" James whispered.

A throaty gasp escaped Moran. James quickly unbuttoned the front of Moran's pants and let the heavy belt carry them down to the floor. Moran kicked the crumpled pants aside.

James's heart skipped a little at the sight of Moran's big, dark cock jutting up from the black curls of his pubic hair. It was more than James had imagined, sleek and straight and fiery under James's fingers.

He felt Moran's pulse throb along the stiff shaft, and the rhythm seemed to pass through his own body, making his heart hammer, his taut cock bulge, and his mouth tingle with anticipation.

He glanced up to see the flush coloring Moran's skin and his breath catching with desire. Moran returned James's gaze, his expression enraptured and raw with longing.

James kissed Moran's shoulder and then his chest, slowly working Moran's cock with his hands. He loved the low sounds of pleasure that escaped Moran and the feeling of Moran's fingers stroking the nape of his neck and curling through his hair.

James started to kneel and felt a warning ache flare through his knee. He ignored it. He'd waited years for this, and he didn't care if it hurt him. He wanted Moran desperately.

Then, with a tearing sensation, his knee gave, and he stumbled. Amazingly, Moran caught him before he hit the tiled floor. Pain seared through the tendons of his knee. James sucked in his breath to keep from crying out as Moran helped him limp to the massage table.

Moran studied him, scowling. Nothing sensual lingered in his touch. Instead, he was firm and professional. His arousal seemed utterly forgotten, all chances ruined now. James wanted to howl from both embarrassment and the pain knifing through his knee.

Moran eased him back onto the massage table. James couldn't look him in the eye. Instead he bowed his head and angrily massaged his right knee, which only made it hurt more. He hadn't wept at Tony's funeral, but he thought he just might cry now from the raw frustration of it all.

"James, you should have told me." Moran's tone was soft and terse. "How bad is it?"

"It's fine," James ground out between clenched teeth. "You don't have to hover there trying to mother me, for God's sake. I'm not a child."

Moran gave a humorless, dry laugh.

"If I thought you were a child, I wouldn't be trying to fuck you," Moran replied. James stole a glance up and saw the honesty in Moran's face. "And for the record, I'm not mothering you. I'm trying to get your pants off. So lie back and let me undress you, all right?"

James shook his head, his hair falling across his face.

"Why can't I catch a break with you, Moran?" James hated how miserable his own voice sounded. He cleared his throat. "Every time I try to, I just end up looking like an idiot."

"That's not true." Moran brushed the hair back from James's face. His knee still hurt, but Moran's touch drew his awareness away from the pain.

"I don't know what you think you need to prove to me, but let me tell you what I already know." Moran leaned close. His blue eyes seemed brilliant. "You're beautiful, brave, and strong. You will risk your life for your convictions. You're fast on your feet and smart in a crisis." Moran's fingers stroked the back of James's neck, stealing more of the hurt from his knee. "You came after me when most anyone else would have given me up for dead. You broke into a dungeon armed with nothing but a tiny flash-knife, took on a scylla demon with just a camera, and you saved my life -- all while dressed in a pink satin bunny suit."

Moran kissed him lightly, smiling.

"You amaze me and make me laugh, and there's no one I want more than you. No one."

James stared at Moran, feeling flattered and awkward and, despite his pain, elated by the thought that this wasn't the end for the two of them. He could see that in Moran's face and feel it in his own heart.

"So, now can I get your pants off?" Moran asked.

"All right," James said at last. He slowly stretched back on the massage table, careful not to jar his knee. He opened his own belt, but Moran removed his shoes and socks and then worked his pants and underwear off him.

The scar from his surgery stood out vivid red and glossy against the pale skin and blond hair surrounding it. Moran laid his hands on James's calf and began slowly massaging up from there. James recognized the healing sensation of heat that trailed Moran's touch. He relaxed under Moran's ministrations as he had countless times before, letting Moran ease away his hurt.

"You're so good at this," James said. "I feel like I should be paying you."

Moran gave a soft laugh. "You could buy me dinner."

"Dinner it is," James agreed. He closed his eyes and let Moran work his muscles and tendons. Soon a warm throb replaced the ache of his knee. Trails of pleasant heat rolled up James's leg.

"Better?" Moran asked.

"Much," James replied.

Moran continued massaging up his thigh, and James's cock began to rise to meet his touch. James blushed a little as Moran gazed down at his arching erection.

"Quite the trooper." Moran grinned. He ran his thumb over the head and down the shaft. James bucked into Moran's palm. Moran gripped him and pumped slowly. James's balls ached, and a hot, ready feeling pulsed through his ass. Moran's touch felt wonderful, but James didn't want Moran to coolly play him like a piccolo. He wanted to see lust and passion overpower Moran. He wanted to feel him come and know it was because of him.

He caught Moran's hand as it stroked his dick.

"I'm going to come if you keep going, but I don't want to do it alone. So, can you...can we..." James couldn't bring himself to say the begging words to Moran.

"Can we fuck?" Moran asked, his dark brows rising.

James nodded.

"Your knee --"

"-- will be fine. I'm limber, and we don't need to be on our knees." James easily lifted his legs over his chest, exposing his ass. He felt like a demented circus performer, with Moran standing there, just looking at him. "Please, Moran I need this from you."

Moran studied him a moment longer, his cock growing stiff. Then, agonizingly, Moran stepped away from the massage table. James lowered his legs and looked after him, but Moran simply collected up a couple towels and a jar. He returned a moment later and laid the towels on the corner of the massage table. As he unscrewed the lid of a red jar, James tried not to wonder how many other men had dipped into that jar before this.

“What is it? Pomade?” James asked.

“An ancient Islander secret,” Moran replied. He withdrew a sealed silver packet, emblazoned with the words *Hot Shot Intimacy Glide*.

“Lube for two,” Moran told him. He cocked his head slightly, studying James.

“What?” James asked.

“Nothing,” Moran replied, “I’m just admiring how resilient you are when you’re horny.” Moran kissed him, sweetly. “I like that.”

Moran straightened and tore open the silver pack, squeezing the clear gel into his palm. While it warmed, Moran stroked a slow circle over James’s belly with his left hand. James slid himself closer to the edge of the massage table and spread his legs.

Moran slipped a condom on. Then he eased James’s legs up and kissed from the backs of his thighs down to his balls. The sensation almost distracted James from the slick warmth of Moran’s fingers circling his exposed hole. James relaxed as Moran eased his thick fingers past the tight ring of muscle and pushed into him.

A wave of pleasure enveloped the first twinge of resistance. Moran slowly worked his ass, stroking in at the perfect angle again and again. An incoherent groan of pleasure escaped James as Moran spread him wider and at last pushed the hot head of his cock into James.

He held himself there for a moment, allowing James to adjust to the size of him, and then slowly he began pumping, rocking his thick shaft deeper, sending quivers of ecstasy

through James with each motion. Every inch felt like too much, and yet, somehow, not enough.

James stretched his long legs up and locked his heels over Moran's shoulders. Then he flexed, pulling Moran closer to him, deeper into him. Moran let out a low, desperate moan and began pumping hard. His hands dug into James's hips, jerking him into each thrust, and James moved with him, arching and pulling Moran deeper.

James's balls slapped against Moran's hot body. Sweat beaded his legs and Moran's chest. Moran slid one hand from James's hip and gripped his cock, pumping him with the same fast rhythm that he drove into James's ass.

Heat and pleasure rocked through James. He thrust into Moran's grip and urged Moran on with desperate whimpers. They fucked hard and fast, and when James came, his semen felt molten hot as it splattered his chest. An instant later he felt Moran's climax rock through him.

Moran leaned over him, his body glistening with sweat, his breath still coming fast. He smiled and pushed James's hair back from his face. They kissed, and James wrapped his arms around Moran, holding him close.

"See?" James said. "Who needs knees?"

"You're fucking amazing." Moran laughed and then kissed James again, sweetly and lightly.

"Did I manage to entertain you?" Moran asked after a moment.

"That, and you got me off my feet," James replied. "Anything planned for an encore?"

Moran laughed at that, and James grinned, feeling happy and satisfied and easy with lassitude.

"We should probably take that ginseng bath." Moran eased himself out of James's body. "And I was promised dinner," Moran reminded him.

“Yeah, you were,” James said. “What do you want?”

“Anything,” Moran replied. “As long as it’s with you.”

 THE END 

Ginn Hale

Ginn Hale inhabits a yellow shed in the mossy Pacific Northwest. She writes science fiction and fantasy stories while observing the nearby volcano, which could set a new deadline for all her work.

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