

Late Shift



Hannah Beckham

Changeling Press

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Trinity Staten works as a file clerk by day and a hunter by night. Her parents were slayers, and until they died when she was sixteen, they'd raised Trini to do the same. Her unique ability to shift skin color like a chameleon is an invaluable tool in the fight against the monsters. Since a one-night stand went bad, Trinity's been unable to control her natural camouflage.

Merlin Davitch, super-hot genius and Trinity's best friend, is trying to discover why her body is changing. Merl is the only family Trinity has left, but if she can't stop going into heat every time he's near, she's afraid she'll lose him too.

On top of that, suddenly the demons are knocking on her door. The hunter is becoming the hunted.

She seeks help from an unlikely ally, Newton Price, a telepath who works for the demons. He is buff and beautiful, with scars of his own, but he won't stay out of her head, literally.

If she doesn't get her shifting ability, her raging hormones, and her life under control, she's going to become demon bait. As the mystery unravels, Trinity tries to hold on to her sanity and her men, and she discovers more about her origins than she ever wanted to know.

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“According to my friend Merlin Davitch, Ph.D., Darwinians speculate (due to fossil evidence) that the history of human evolution includes eighteen distinct hominid groups. What they don’t know, and can’t know, is that other biped species evolved as well. Some more human looking than others, and they are everywhere. Some stay hidden, some coexist, while some hunt us down like prey animals for food and sport.

“The ones that see us as prey, those are the ones you better start worrying about unless you want to see humans go the way of the dinosaur. I’m talking total extinction, people. Maybe not now, or even in the near future, but eventually, if you don’t get them, they will certainly get you.”

-- Trinity Staten, monster slayer and all around kick-ass chick.

Chapter One

Two months earlier...

His mouth tasted of smoke, not cigarette smoke, though that would have been okay, but it was more woodsy, natural and earthy, reminiscent of burned hickory. Trinity had been desperate -- desperate enough to pick up the hottest guy who looked her way at the bar. She needed to be touched, to feel like a normal woman, satisfying normal needs. And she could not have picked a better specimen. He'd been bold, brunette, and beautifully buff. He knew all the right things to say, and in bed, he seemed to know all the right moves.

When she'd asked his name at the bar, he'd said, "Who do you want me to be?"

"Merl," she'd answered.

He'd smiled with pleasure and nodded. It was then and there she'd decided to take him to the local motel. Home was out of the question.

The man's tongue swiped across her lips. "I want to turn the lights on."

"No," she whispered. "Don't."

"But you're so beautiful. It's a shame to waste you in the dark."

Trinity grabbed his rigid cock and gave it a stroke. "We seem to be doing just fine."

"Yes, we do," he agreed.

Trini breathed in his scent, the aroma arousing her even more. "God, you smell good. What are you wearing?"

"It's all natural, darling."

"Good genes."

"You have no idea." He nuzzled her breasts, his hot breath causing goose bumps to rise on her skin. "More talk or more action?"

Trinity grabbed his head, pushing the hotty down her abdomen. "More action. Definitely."

He didn't need more urging. His lips latched onto her clit, sucking and licking the taut nub until it felt like she would explode.

She hummed. "Shit, yeah. God, that feels so good." Trinity rocked her hips to meet his mouth as his tongue slipped inside her sex, going impossibly deep. Moaning, Trinity grabbed his ears, drawing him tighter to her swollen pussy.

He lifted his head, drawing himself up the length of her body. "Tell me you want me to fuck you."

"Fuck me," she panted.

"How bad do you want it?"

She wanted him to shut the hell up and get to getting. All the talk was nearly ruining the illusion for her. Reaching down, Trinity took matters into her own hands. Literally. She guided his thick cock into her primed pussy. She reached between them, her hand moving over the ridge of his length as his shaft slid back and forth between her fingers. He began to thrust in earnest as tension in her body tightened like an over-tuned guitar, strings ready to pop.

"Merl," she murmured, sweat-soaked, the man's engorged cock stroking the sweet spot inside her pussy.

Release came quickly, as Trini screamed out her orgasm, but her fantasy quickly broke. Pain seared her shoulder as teeth sunk into her flesh.

"Son of a bitch!" Reflexively, she bashed his face with her forearm, scrambled to the side of the bed and flipped on the light switch. "You bit me! You really fucking bit me. And damned hard, I might add."

The man stumbled back. "What the fuck?"

"That's what I'm saying." She turned to examine her shoulder and realized why her newly acquired lover was suddenly frightened. Her skin had shifted to pale blue with what appeared to be quilted stitches. The exact color and pattern of the motel bedspread. Trini's mouth formed a small "o."

“Uh, it’s not what you think.” Before she could even try to explain more, he ran from the room, not even bothering to get dressed first.

“Well, crap. That went well. Not.” Wired with adrenaline, Trini walked to the mirror behind the standard motel desk. Her skin shifted to fit her surroundings -- the floor, the walls, even the television stand. As her heartbeat slowed, her skin turned back to flesh tones and freckles, her hair changed back to auburn, and the bite mark flared an angry red around the broken skin where his teeth had penetrated.

“Asshole bit me, and he thinks I’m a freak?”

After washing the wound with soap and water, she dressed it with a clean washcloth from the bathroom. Mostly to keep blood off her favorite blouse. She was half tempted to track the man down and kick his ass, but other than thirty dollars in small bills and some loose pocket change she’d found in the front of his jeans, there was nothing in his clothes to tell her who he really was.

Stuffing the money in her pocket, she sniffed. “No harm, no foul.” Besides, it wasn’t like she had been in any real danger over a love bite.

Amazing how wrong one person could be.

Chapter Two

Present day...

"Here, Trini," the sergeant said, handing her a stack of manila file folders.

"Thanks, Pete." He lingered a moment and she could tell he wanted to say more. She suspected he had a crush on her -- always fidgeting when Trini was around. Quickly, she closed the door between them.

For one thing, she didn't date guys from work, and for another, she didn't date -- period. Or socialize much, for that matter. That's why she had taken the file clerk job in the first place. So she wouldn't have to work closely with other people. Lately, her body's camouflage mechanism had been faulty, and she found it harder and harder to control. It made isolation a brilliant solution.

Sitting alone in the darkened room full of tall metal cabinets, Trini flipped through the files. There had been three violent deaths in the last week, one domestic, one during a B and E, and the last had been a result of a bar fight -- nothing out of the ordinary.

In other words, no demons.

She hated demons. Who were, in fact, not demons of the mythological Heaven and Hell sense of demons, but more like biped creatures upon whom the mythology had probably been based.

A lot of them could pass for human. And they were everywhere. They could be your goddamn neighbors, the grocery store clerk, even the fucking slime bag you met in a bar for a one-night stand. Most of the monsters weren't worth the effort or energy to track, but the ones who came after humans, well, Trini'd made it her mission to take them out. Her chameleon-like abilities made it possible to get the upper hand on the baddies. Her father had called it a gift -- fate intervening and evening the odds against

the abnormalities. Trinity thought it was more like a curse -- fate's way of fucking her out of a normal life.

Trini, feeling bitter, threw the files on the cabinet and brushed her fingers through her thick red hair. She'd accidentally on purpose slept with such a slime bag about two months prior, and since then she'd been completely out of whack. She was having what her friend Merl called "behavioral issues." Even if the behaviors were beyond her control.

Reluctantly, she picked the files up, put them in their proper places, and clocked out. Trini had an appointment to get her head shrunk. Merl had set it up, and she was desperate enough to take him up on the offer, but it was an appointment she wasn't looking forward to.

* * *

Merlin Davitch, Ph.D., put his isolation-gown-covered elbows on the counter in his small lab. He'd designed the clean room soon after he had moved in to the very large apartment he shared with Trinity Staten. Clean meaning that the room was set up for sterile work. The floor was ESD vinyl, and the walls and ceilings were made of thermoplastic sheeting. The air flow and air conditioner were filtered, and thanks to a privately funded grant, he had most of the equipment he needed for his study: a gel electrophoresis chamber, DNA analyzer, a freezer that dropped to -80 degrees, several computers, and many more "bells and whistles," as Trini called them.

He smiled at the thought of her, then frowned. She had changed recently, and not in her normal way. Merl had been drawn to her more and more. There were moments when he had to fight the overwhelming urge to bend her over the nearest piece of furniture and take her right then and there.

The recent changes in her blood work and the chemical makeup of her perspiration since she'd been bitten by her one-night stand had him very concerned that the pull he felt was less about "lack of self-control" on his part and more about Trini and what Merl suspected was an "adopting of behavior" from the guy who'd tried to take a chunk from her.

Not that Trinity wasn't beautiful. She was, exquisite even. But Merl had watched Trini grow up into the woman she was today, and she'd left quite a few men in her wake, flitting from one guy to the next. He loved her too much to be left in the destructive wake of Trini's love life.

But lately, with the overwhelming, driving-him-to-distraction attraction he felt toward Trini, Merl was certain there had to be a scientific explanation. After all, he was a rational human being. And rational humans could control their animal instincts. Right?

* * *

The shrink's small office smelled musky, but not unpleasant. It was like a mix of orange spice and dust. Trini stared at the small man in the brown suit and bow tie who sat across from her, looking down at his pad and paper, scribbling little notes in the margin. His hair was short and his forehead stretched to the top of his dome. She pondered whether his hair had retreated to the back of his head or whether it had just migrated to his eyebrows. They were bold and bushy.

He wore spectacles, the old-fashioned kind, hiding bulging eyes, and Trini couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever heard of Lasik. Nah, the doctor probably liked the effect of the round spectacles -- made him feel more competent somehow. Or maybe he was very competent and didn't care what anybody thought.

Psychiatrists and psychologists were a real bone of contention for Trini, who had her own motives for not trusting the profession. The only reason she was giving Dr. Myron Gray a try was because her best friend, Merl, said he worked wonders with behavior problems. And she definitely had behavior problems.

He still hadn't stopped writing in his little yellow notepad. Trini was beginning to think he was solving world hunger or curing cancer, because she'd only been in his office for five minutes and surely that wasn't enough time to write a book. She clenched and rubbed her hands together, trying to avoid putting her fingers in her mouth. She'd already shredded most of her nails to the nub, and didn't want to suffer the humiliation of having the doctor read some deep psychosis in a nail-biting habit.

Suddenly, he stopped. "Let me see if I understand what you think the problem is. You have problems maintaining yourself in stressful conditions. Is that it?"

"Exactly!" Her hand-wringing worsened as she fought the urge to nibble. "I can't take it, Doctor. One minute I'm green, the next blue, brown, silver, purple, then I'm back to my old self again. It drives me nuts!" She hadn't meant it to come out quite that way. It sounded crazy, even to her own ears.

"Green, then blue. Interesting." He jotted on the pad.

"I'm talking metaphorically of course." Damn it, her right index finger cuticle had found its way between her teeth.

"Metaphorically. Interesting." More jotting commenced.

"I mean I don't really turn blue or green, or any other color for that matter. I'm just... well, you know."

"Yes, interesting."

Trini was beginning to think that all that scribbling was going to lead to her being locked up in the looney-bin. She couldn't go through that again. After her parents had died, she'd been locked up for four years, until she was twenty, and Merl, eighteen and barely out of college, came to her rescue. Trini wouldn't allow that to happen a second time.

She stood up. "You know, Doctor. I don't think this is going to work out. I'm going to be fine." Slowly, she worked her way over to her coat and purse. "I mean, of course I'm going to be fine."

She tried a casual lazy smile, just to let him know she really was all right, but Trini wasn't sure if she knew exactly how to pull off casual lazy. She hoped it didn't look maniacal. "Just fine." Her scarf went on first, then the coat. "I don't *really* need therapy. I don't know *what* I was thinking! I must be crazy."

This was going bad in a someone-just-planted-dynamite-at-the-top-of-the-Alps-and-an-avalanche-is-coming-to-demolish-a-tiny-Swiss-town way. Talk about a *little-ole-lady who was going kersplat*.

She grabbed her purse and put a hand on the doorknob. "I didn't mean that. I'm not crazy really, just a little..."

He was looking at her hands.

Good God! They'd turned bright green. She knew she shouldn't have worn the neon green coat, but it was her favorite -- all fluffy and fuzzy. Quickly, Trini shoved her hands that now looked like matching mittens into her pockets.

Dr. Gray didn't appear ruffled in any way. He just calmly put down his pad and paper and said, "Sit down, Trinity. I think I can help you."

Dead stop. Something in Trini's brain clicked and her voice went two octaves higher. "You can?"

"Yes. Changing colors, though not a voluntary behavior, is still behavior. Once we get down to the root cause, or the why, then it's just a matter of training your body to an alternative behavior."

"So, you don't think I'm crazy?"

"No, Trinity." He smiled and it was a wonderful smile with shiny little white teeth. "I don't think you're crazy."

What a beautiful little man... "Call me Trini." She took off her coat. "Everyone calls me Trini."

Two hours of therapy later, she walked into her apartment. "Hey, Merl! I'm home!" Trini's voice echoed off the back walls of the loft she shared with her roommate, Merlin Davitch. She loved the way it sounded.

"Hey Merl! merl, merl. Echo! echo, echo." She felt really good, better than she had in a long time. Dr. Gray had actually given her some hope.

"Trini! Quit being such a nerd," Merl yelled from his office in the back.

Throwing her scarf on the floor, she snorted, "You're one to talk."

"And pick up your scarf, you slob!"

"Don't you start with me!" She swore he had ESP, or OCD, or PMS. No wait, the last one was her. Well, one of those initial thingies.

Merl had a double doctorate in chemical and molecular biology with an emphasis in molecular genetics -- in other words, he was a freaking genius. For the last two years, his main experiments had all centered on Trini. But the last two months he'd really pumped up the volume on his workload. Trini could barely go out into public anymore, since any heightened emotion triggered her skin to shift.

Most of the time she felt like a lab rat, a poke here, a prod there, skin samples, blood samples, and hair samples. She'd grown up with Merl in a small town down south. He was younger by two years, but more intelligent by a millennium. He was the one and only person on earth she trusted completely. It's why she'd agreed to let him be Dr. Frankenstein to her monster. Now that she could no longer control her handicap, Merl's research had become a necessity. He had been offered a lot of great jobs after he got his doctorate, but he decided to take a teaching job at the local university so he could focus on research -- in other words, her. And she'd never been so grateful.

Feeling frisky and oddly carefree, she headed back to his office. "So what's new, Einstein?"

His back was to her while he hovered over his laptop pecking in numbers at a mile a minute. "That's *Mister* Einstein to you."

His dark brown hair was mussed and a bit greasy. He'd been holed up the entire weekend at his desk. She didn't think he'd even slept much more than a few catnaps. He swiveled his tall and naturally wiry body around in his chair.

Merl wore his favorite flannel pajama pants and a holey brown T-shirt that said "98% Chimp" with a picture of a double helix.

Trini smiled. "You're a mess, Merl."

"This is the latest in geek-chic, baby." He grinned. The dark bluish-black circles under his green eyes made him look much older than his sweet young twenty-eight. "How was Dr. Gray?"

She sat down in a ratty old recliner. The blue flowery fabric felt like burlap, but Merl insisted that he couldn't live without it. "It went great. The doc is awesome. Thanks for recommending him."

"No problem." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I told you that you'd like him."

"Yeah, he didn't even freak out when my hands turned fluffy green."

Merl chuckled. "I told you before, you should wear clothing that's more neutral, closer to skin tones."

Even looking tattered, Merl could raise a shiver of lust in Trini. She loved him, but she wasn't in love with him, she told herself. He was more like a brother.

Yeah, a brother I'd like to fuck. She shook the thought from her head. Merl seemed almost asexual. If he dated, he was discreet. She deflected her thoughts. "Hey! I love that coat."

"Don't get your skivvies in a twist. I'm just saying."

"Yeah, yeah. What did you tell him about me anyways? I was expecting to have to run out the door, figuring he was gonna call 911 on me, but he was just really cool about the whole deal."

"I didn't tell him anything." He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. "I told you he specialized in all sorts of... unique... behavior."

"It's okay, you can say weird. I know I'm weird."

"It's not that, Trini." He scratched his head. "Now don't get excited."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Gray is half Dagar."

"What?" Trini's skin started shifting into blue with ugly yellow flowers. "You sent me to a demon?" She silently cursed, wishing that whoever or whatever had given her the gift to fight the demons would have given her some kind of way to recognize them instantly. It just wasn't that easy. The ones who could pass for regular people, well, they looked like regular people.

Merl slid back in his chair. "Only half *other*. His father was human."

"Oh, like that makes it all better."

"Just listen." He stood and walked to Trini, placing an arm around her shoulders. "That's how I knew he could help you out. He had some stuff to overcome in

his life as well. I think that's why he became a behavioral psychologist. He's a really good guy, and a great teacher. I've sat in on a few of his classes."

If Trinity had a pet peeve about Merl, it was his defense of the *others*, as he called them. She supposed it was the scientist in him wanting to understand the impossible. Trini had to admit; he'd developed some great contacts over the past decade. She'd even developed an informant-type relationship with a few, so she had to admit some of them were tolerable.

Taking a deep breath, Trini counted back from ten. The yellow flowers were all but gone, and the blue was fading. Dr. Gray had been really kind, but sheesh. She'd been raised to hunt and slay the monsters, and now she was supposed to let one head-shrink her?

She patted her side where she kept a knife strapped under her left arm. Easier to hide when she went on a job. The strap was made from a durable clear plastic. Merl had rigged it for her, so that when she shifted, the strap would be hidden, and the knife could be covered with her arm. It could get uncomfortable, but it was better than not being armed at all.

"I'll give him a chance. But if he even looks at me funny, I'm taking his head off and cutting his heart out for good measure."

"Agreed." Merl grinned. "I'd better call him and give him a warning."

Mortified, she felt her skin shift to the color of the nearby mahogany wood paneling. "Don't you dare say anything!"

"I'm just teasing, Trini. Mellow out before you completely disappear."

They both laughed. Merl hugged her good and long. She felt his cock stiffen slightly beneath the loose flannel and wished his was more than just a physical reaction to being brushed against. She often wondered if her attraction to Merl was more about his pure acceptance of her flaws than any real chemistry between them. His hand trailed her back and her knees weakened as her pussy went slick at his friendly touch.

Trini sighed and placed her forehead against his chest. "You smell, Merl. Get thee to the tub." She pushed him away and swatted his butt as he walked past her. "And get some clean clothes before those pants are walking themselves."

"Nag, nag, nag," he said on his way to the bathroom.

Trini would have smiled, if she could've mustered one. It really sucked lusting after Merl. It wasn't fair to him or her.

"I need to get laid," she mumbled. "Really bad." Trini snorted. "Yeah, because the last time it worked out sooo well. Not."

The shower went on, and Trini heard Merl humming "Eye of the Tiger" when the front doorbell rang. She looked through the peek hole. A man with his head tilted down, wearing a brown hat, brown shirt, and brown shorts stood in the hallway.

"Merl. You expecting a package?" Trini yelled.

The shower turned off and Merl came tumbling out of the bathroom, hair dripping, with a purple towel barely wrapped around his hips.

"What?" he asked, shaking the water from his ears with a finger.

"There's a delivery guy out here. You expecting something?"

He ran to the door, nearly losing his only cover, and already out of breath. "Jesus, Trini. Why can't you just answer the door like a normal person?"

"Wait!" She didn't like opening the door to a potential threat, human or not human. Experience had taught her to never open the door to someone she didn't know. Granted, she wasn't a child anymore, but years of conditioning made stranger-danger very real in her world.

Merl shook his head and opened the door. The deliveryman dropped his package to the ground and turned his eyes up to Merl. They were beady and piggish, like the snout on his face. His lower tusks protruded over his upper lip.

"Scrofa demon!" Trini yelled, shoving Merl out of its way. She kicked out the demon's left knee and it squealed with rage.

Merl yelped, his hands flying up to cup his ears.

It wasn't the first time she'd come up against a Scrofa. One had surfaced a few years back and demolished a dry cleaner's, killing the owner and his wife. Very messy business. The Scrofa were strong, bullish and relentless, and their squeals could shatter a man's eardrum. Fear for Merl coursed through Trini. Adrenaline flooded her system. She landed a straight fist to the demon's throat.

In a berserk rage, it lowered its head and charged at her. She stepped sideways, enough for it to miss her face, but the demon's thick skull rammed against Trini's shoulder and its tusks tore into her flesh.

"Trini!" Merl shouted. His towel dropped to the floor, his fear for her overtaking any modesty he might have felt.

Trinity's heart skipped a beat.

The Scrofa demon used her hesitation to get the upper hand. It threw Trinity against the wall, her back slamming hard into the drywall, leaving a torso-sized dent. Quickly, she recovered, and took a defensive posture.

Fighting the demon would have been a lot easier if a) she'd been naked -- much easier to hide and get a jump on the beast because of her changing skin, b) if Merl hadn't been naked -- naked Merl was a distraction, and c) Merl wasn't in the room at all.

"Run!" Trini screamed. She needed him out of there and safe. Merl might be a whiz with DNA, but a fighter he wasn't.

Of course, Merl didn't listen.

Stupid head.

Instead, he grabbed a lamp from the nearest end table and clocked the Scrofa in the head. All it did was piss the demon off. Its beady pig eyes turned daggers toward Merl. Its arm lashed out in a flash of unnatural quickness, striking Merl directly in the chest.

Rage and excitement built like an ugly malignant tumor inside her, quickly and dangerously. "Uh-uh." Trini shook her head as Merl staggered back, his head whamming against a support column.

It was one thing to come at her. She was used to it. A lifetime of fighting rogue demons will do that to a girl, but it had hurt Merl, and Trini was going to make it pay.

The Scrofa snarled in Trini's direction.

"You really don't want to mess with me, pig."

The demon reared back, then charged at Trini. She sidestepped the enraged monster, then swung her leg around in a sweeping kick, using his own momentum to drive him into the floor. He landed with an oofing squeal.

Trini didn't miss a beat. She'd learned a long time ago that she who hesitates dies. She smashed the heel of her foot against the back of the demon's head, then proceeded to kick the shit out of it until Merl finally pulled her away.

"Trini. It's over. It's over. He's dead."

Chapter Three

The staggering rush of the kill coursed through Trinity, and it brought out a baser need. Sex. Which was strange, because kicking demon ass had never aroused her before. She stared at Merl, every naked delicious inch of him, fighting the unnerving impulse to throw him down and lick his whole body.

Through gritted teeth, she asked him, "Are you okay?"

He wasn't looking at her. He was staring at the Scrofa. Gray brain matter decorated the floor around the demon's head. Tough thing to accomplish with two-inch thick skull bones, but Trini had had the right motivation.

"I'm feeling a little sick, because, wow, that's gross. But yeah, I'll live." He gestured to the unmoving figure. He diverted his gaze to Trini and his eyes softened. "Holy... You're beautiful, Trini. You're positively glowing."

"I..." She couldn't think. It was like all her hormones had kicked up about fifty notches with the adrenaline from the fight. Quickly closing the distance, Trini kissed Merl hard on the mouth.

After a momentary stillness, he responded, his lips and tongue moving with hers. His body melded to the shape of her own, his hard cock pressing against her abdomen. As the kiss became more aggressive, Merl stopped and pushed her slightly away from him. "Trini."

Shame crashed the party. "I'm sorry. Oh, man. Merl. I didn't mean to..."

He placed a finger over her lips, and then replaced it briefly with his lips. He gestured to the carcass on the floor. "Not in front of the dead demon."

The shame was replaced with relief, then joy. Bolting the apartment door, she stripped off her clothes on the way to the bedroom. As soon as they were through the door, Merl slammed it shut behind them.

He shoved Trinity against the wall, pressing his bare chest to her naked flesh. He cupped her breasts as his mouth went to her lips, her neck, kissing and licking over her skin.

This was an aggressive Merl, an almost feral Merl, and Trinity was totally digging whatever mojo had jumped into his skin and turned him into a sexual animal.

"Your shoulder," he said, tracing the one-inch wound. There was hardly any blood, as usual.

"It's fine. Don't stop."

Merl nodded, pulling her toward the bed. She took the opportunity to take in his body -- hard wiry muscles in his chest, which was devoid of hair except for a pleasure trail leading to the short curly brown patch framing his erect cock.

Trinity licked her lips, eager to taste him, to have his rigid length in her mouth. Before he could take them down onto the bed, she moved in front of him, and sat on the edge. "Not yet," she said, her face in line with his groin. "I want to suck you."

Placing her hands on the outside of his thighs, she tugged Merl toward her and twirled her tongue over the tip of his erection. Every caress of her mouth brought a new noise from Merl's throat, some whimpering, some primal, but each one charging Trinity's lust. Sucking and licking, she admired the firm, smooth shaft which slipped like silk between her lips.

Trinity cupped the loose sacs of Merl's testicles, drawing him deeper into her mouth, rolling her tongue across the distended veins, swallowing hard when the bulbous head hit the back of her throat.

Merl trembled. "I'm not going to last if you keep that up." He stepped away from Trinity, effectively removing his cock from her grasp. "I want this to last."

Trinity's body tightened as Merl dropped to the floor between her legs, kissing up her thighs. Tenderly he parted her folds with his lips, stroking his tongue first into her canal, then, unhurried, dragging it up to her clit. He sucked in the engorged nub, teasing the pulsating core with licks and flicks. Her hips raised against his face. The feel

of his lips on her pussy drove Trinity to the brink of orgasm, but she held on. Like Merl, she wanted this experience to last.

Grabbing his hair, she yanked his head up. "Get up here. I want you fucking in me now."

Merl took his time, kissing the crease of her thigh, then below her belly button, moving the length of her body, until his mouth found her breasts. He gave each one careful and individual attention.

Trinity's eyes widened as heat poured through her. "Goddamn, Merl. You're really good at this."

He smirked. "You think I'm a nun?"

Well, no. Yes. Maybe. She didn't want to even think about where he learned his tricks. The idea of him with someone else brought an ugly side out of Trinity that she didn't like. "'Nuff talking."

His fingers slid into her pussy, and all was forgiven as he expertly thumbed her clit. Oh yes, Merlin was a wizard, and he was doing some fantastic magic on Trinity's body.

A familiar tingle, along with pressure, mounted in her groin. She was going to come, and she wanted him in her when she did. "Up, up," she urged, yanking his hair to emphasize her demand.

Merl's mouth crushed her own as he slid his cock inside her in one smooth stroke. The breath whooshed from her body as he buried himself deep into her swollen, slick sex.

"Oh, damn. Harder. Faster," she begged.

Those few words were all the encouragement he needed. Merl leaned back, pushing her thighs up, and began thrusting in earnest. Trinity arched to take the long length of his thick cock deep inside her. She raked her nails down his back until they rested on his ass. Digging in, she urged him on.

Unexpectedly, the mind-blowing orgasm hit her like an out-of-control freight train with her tied to the track. Her upper body bowed at the jolting pleasure vibrating

from her pussy to the rest of her body. She cried out in one long blissful moan. Her climax triggered Merl's. His head flew back as he drove his cock deep. A roar of final ecstasy poured from his mouth.

He collapsed on top of her.

Trinity fought to stave off crying for joy. She'd never climaxed this hard or deep, and it triggered something inside, reaching down into the dusty recesses of her soul. She wanted to rage against all the wasted years -- the wasted time.

Merl wrapped his long arms around her waist and pulled her tight. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she told him. "You?"

"Yeah." He didn't sound convinced. She didn't ask why. Instead, Trinity waited until she could hear his soft snoring. Then and only then did she close her eyes.

When Trini woke up an hour later, Merl lay curled on his side, still naked and a little flushed from sex. He was staring at her. She could tell he'd been over-thinking again. Running scenario after scenario in his mind, weighing the pros and cons, like he often did.

"How does your shoulder feel?"

Trinity looked down and saw a clean bandage over the area where the Scrofa's tusk had punctured her skin.

"I cleaned it and dressed it while you slept. You were out of it."

"Thanks." She smiled, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"This was probably a mistake," he said.

Shoe dropped.

The words devastated Trinity. Something beautiful had happened between them, beautiful and powerful, and Merl thought it was a mistake? "You're probably right."

Merl thinned his mouth in a fine line. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

Again, total stupid head. "Absolutely."

"I don't want this to change what we are and who we are to each other. You know?"

Trinity sighed heavily. Of course he didn't want anything to change. She was work for him. Mixing work with pleasure could really throw off the research. Make it impure somehow. She knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Merl, sweet Merl." She patted his face. "We have to get rid of the body."

She didn't want to think about Merl rationalizing away one of the best experiences of her life. Not to mention the sex was great as well. Better to focus on a task she could actually do something about.

Like the dead pig in the living room. It didn't make sense to Trinity. She went after the monsters. They didn't come after her. And they'd never showed up at her home before. That was new. And they'd involved Merl, although, the way he was acting now, maybe she should have let the demon have his skinny ass.

By the time Trini dumped the body in a nearby storm drain in the alley, Merl was sitting on the couch, still in nothing but a towel. He was fidgeting with the box the Scrofa had dropped. The package was about the size of a carton of cigarettes.

"You shouldn't be playing with that. What if it has some nefarious purpose?"

"Big word. Nice. I see you've been reading your dictionary again." He looked at her then back to the box. "This, my dear, dear Trinity, is samples from a friend of mine, a marine biologist. Which means the real delivery guy is probably toast somewhere."

"What kind of samples?" Trini didn't want to think about the poor schmuck who, in doing his job, was probably now in the belly of the demon she'd just dumped.

"Well..." He opened the package and pulled out a case. It contained a variety of microscope slides. "These have various chromatophores from different fish and amphibians."

He pulled out a stack of the slides. "For example, there are melanophores, erythrophores, xanthophores, leucophores and iridiophores. Each one causes particular animals to change colors to camouflage themselves against predators. I wanted to compare them with the pigment properties in your skin cells and see what they have in common and what they don't. I've even got a few plant samples of chloroplasts. Very cool stuff."

"You think I might have these chromato-watchits in my skin?"

"Couldn't hurt to have a look." He was barely paying attention to her now, his complete focus on this new project that had arrived à la Scrofa.

"Well, I'd love to stay and play." She smiled at the thought of a repeat performance in the bedroom. Like that was going to happen. *Concentrate on the job.* "But I think I'd better go out and ask around." Trini wanted answers and she wanted them yesterday.

His expression betrayed disappointment. "You don't want to look at the slides?"

She laughed. "I'll leave the science to the scientist. Besides, once you start, you won't notice whether I'm here or not." Trini suppressed a sigh. It would have been funny, if it wasn't entirely too true.

"Don't be like that." His robe slipped open, exposing his pale perfect skin over tight muscle. "Here." Merl handed her a piece of paper with some writing on it.

"Newton Price?"

"Yeah, I called a guy who knows a guy. He says if you need the inside scoop on the demon underground, that's the dude you want."

"Who was the guy?"

Merl had the good sense to blush. "Just a guy."

"I don't want to know, do I?"

"Probably not." He turned his attention back to the slides like they were bags of heroin and he needed a fix.

"Fine. I'll check him out. You make sure you get your ass dressed in *clean* pajamas and get at least forty winks."

He gave her a crooked smile, bringing an instant heat between her thighs.

If he kept it up, she was going to forget what she was doing, forget they were *just friends*. "I'm serious. You look flat worn out."

"I've got a mom, you know."

"Yeah, but not one who lives with you. So get to bed, Mr. Einstein, and I'll tell you all about my escapades when you've had a couple hours of sleep."

"Oh, Mother, you never let me play outside with the other kids."

"Sarcasm, I don't need." And mother to Merl, she didn't want to be. "Go to bed."

Impulsively, and despite their prior conversation, Trinity leaned down and kissed him, long and lingering.

Merl blew out a slow breath. "Mom never kissed me like that."

Trini threw a sofa pillow at Merl. "I'm outtie."

After Trini had left, Merl relaxed into the couch with a sigh. He'd probably just screwed up the best thing in his life. He couldn't stand to lose her, but damn if being with her hadn't been worth it. Trini was worth it. Although, he was afraid she'd never forgive him. Not for the sex, but because of the slide sample he'd taken from the Scrofa's blood. If Merl was right, Trinity wasn't going to like the result.

His back still tingled on his left shoulder, like a dermatological histamine reaction. Maybe he'd rubbed up against something while they were having sex, but he'd never had an allergic reaction to anything in the loft before. Putting down the slides, he headed to the bathroom to check it out.

Chapter Four

Trinity had called Newton Price, and he'd agreed to meet with her at his house in the Green Hills sub-division. She'd asked around with her own contacts beforehand, and they all agreed -- Price was supposedly the foremost expert in demon crap. She wondered if he would live up to his hype.

She knocked at the front door of his blue split-level ranch with white trim and pictured the perfect family with two-point-five kids, a wife in a blousy apron and a husband who wore Dockers around the house.

The door is unlocked. Come in, a deep clear voice said in her head. Trini nearly peed her pants and fell off the porch. And Merl accused her of not being able to answer the door like a normal person! She'd been told that Price was a telepath and clairvoyant, but hearing and experiencing it were two different things -- very unsettling.

He wasn't in the living room. "Mr. Price?"

"I'm in the kitchen," he answered, this time out loud.

She could smell garlic, rosemary, and just a touch of basil wafting down the hallway. He stood in the kitchen wearing a pair of fitted jeans that hugged a really cute butt and a black T-shirt that looked like it had been painted on his muscular back. He looked tasty, for lack of a better word -- not what she'd been expecting. She really thought he'd look like a gnome. "What are you fixing?"

He turned around and was wearing a half-apron that said "Kiss the Chef."

"Dinner." He smiled. It made his amber eyes sparkle with light, and everything went squishy inside her. "You hungry?"

The question itself made Trini's stomach growl. Not very lady-like. *Bad belly*, she silently scolded. He was still smiling and Trini heard his laughter in her head. She pointed to her temple. "You stay out of here."

"Food will be ready in a moment, Trinity." He gestured for her to sit at the table.

People rarely called her Trinity. She sort of liked the way it sounded when Price said it, unforced and natural. "I guess I could eat."

He set a pretty table with pasta, antipasto, marinara sauce, and garlic bread. He also had fixed some asparagus, which she didn't eat. Ever. It was bad enough that her skin turned funny colors, she didn't need her pee to do the same thing.

"No meatballs?"

"I'm a vegetarian." He took off the apron and joined Trini at the table.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course you are." Great, he was one of those tree hugger types.

"Even a tree needs a hug sometimes."

She gave him her hardest, most ferocious scowl. "I understand that you can peek in my head anytime you want, but I'd appreciate if you'd stay the hell out."

"Funny, I could have sworn you were human."

The statement was so casual, it took Trini a second to realize what he'd said. "I am human!"

He raised a well-groomed eyebrow. "Half?"

"Fat chance. Why would you even say such a thing?"

"Well, for one thing, your hands, your face, and your hair have all but disappeared. I know a few other species that can camouflage themselves like that. Of course, they aren't nearly as attractive as you are."

As it was Trini didn't know whether to run away mortified or be flattered. The first thing she did was shut her gaping mouth, then close her eyes, and start the breathing exercise that Dr. Gray had taught her during their session.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset." *More breathing, Trini, deeper, deeper, now exhale.* "I'm fine, really." She'd been saying that so much lately, she was beginning to not believe it.

"It was my mistake. And look, your color is returning to normal. You know, I can usually tell why someone has come to see me, but your thoughts have been very

distracted since you got here. Why don't we get down to business? It may help you to relax."

"Good idea." Trini was really glad he hadn't made any comments about her "cute butt, nice back" thoughts from earlier. He smiled again. *Dammit, Trini, focus!*

Newton Price sat down to his own plate and twirled his pasta between his fork and a large spoon. "So, Ms. Staten. What can I do for you?"

Like he didn't already know. "Well, Mr. Price." Trini could be as formal as he was. "Can you tell me why a Scrofa demon would risk exposing itself by coming to a well-populated apartment complex to attack a *human*?" She thought about the demon's blood and brains on her carpet.

Price winced. "I'm not sure." He pushed his plate forward. "I've lost my appetite."

"I thought you were an expert."

"I'm an expert in languages, Ms. Staten. I can fluently speak 5874 of the 6900 known human languages, and sixty-seven other hominid languages."

"Only sixty-seven?" Trini tried not to look impressed.

"Yes. And of the sixty-seven hominoid groups I've encountered, the ones who can't pass for human tend to stay away from public places."

"So, clueless, huh?"

"No, there are a couple of possibilities..."

The wheels were working in his head, spinning round, running scenario after scenario. And while Trini wasn't psychic like Newton Price, she could tell he was holding back -- not telling her everything. Of course, she wasn't telling him everything either. Like that fact that she came from a long line of hunters, and this was the first time she'd been the hunttee.

Newton raised an eyebrow.

"Shit."

"It's all right. I was wondering which category you would fall in."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I get two kinds of clients, Ms. Staten."

"And the two types would be?"

"Rich or desperate."

Trini didn't like the implication. Cute ass or no cute ass, Newton Price was way out of line. "I think that's my cue to leave. This has obviously been a colossal waste of my time... and yours."

Price grinned, the tiny lines around his eyes crinkling, making him more attractive, if possible. "Maybe. Then again, maybe not. I know someone who might be able to help."

"Someone or something?"

"Just because they're not human doesn't make them monsters, Trini." His amber eyes reflected sadness and past pain. "I've seen monsters. Real monsters. And most of the others -- the people you call demons -- I've met don't fall into that category."

Involuntarily, Trini placed her hand on his cheek. "I'm sorry." Not for thinking the demons were monsters, but for reminding him of a past she could tell he wanted to forget.

Price dipped his head, and his lips brushed against hers. Trini felt a sizzle all the way to her toes. His mouth was warm and giving as he moved forward, the tip of his tongue gliding across just the edge of her lower lip.

Trini closed her eyes and moaned as her body reacted to his systematically -- breasts tightening, nipples growing hard, and her pussy slick with heat. The heady scent of rosewood filled her with a sense of calmness and well-being.

Safe. Happy. Horny.

His large hand slipped from her shoulder, down her arm, then dropping to her waist. Gentle and unhurried, he slid his fingers under her shirt, until his thumb brushed against her breast.

Trinity fumbled with his belt, unhooked the button on his jeans, then slid her hand down over his cock.

Newton moaned. His hand reached between her legs, rubbing the seam of her jeans against her clit. A breathtaking jolt of passion ripped through Trini as she fought to keep her knees from buckling. Everything about Newton's touch felt right, familiar, necessary. Her body wouldn't wait for the clothes to come off. Instead, she shoved Newton to the floor and straddled him.

She rubbed her jeans-clad pussy over his groin, grinding out her pleasure.

Newton slid his arms around her, deepening his kiss, taking in every inch of her mouth with his tongue. He flipped her onto her back, thrusting between her legs, fucking her in earnest, even without penetration.

A low groan started in Trini's chest and came out of her mouth as a wail when a powerful orgasm shattered inside her bucking body. *Mine*, a voice cried in her head.

"Yes," she said, panting through the waves of ecstasy.

Newton roared as his own orgasm took him, his chest and abdomen jerking forward, shuddering above her. He collapsed beside her on the hardwood floor.

She rolled toward him. This stranger who she'd just dry-humped on the ground. This stranger who made her feel so calm and at peace.

Price was staring at her with the same wonder and awe.

His voice was soft and low when he pulled her close. "Your hair and face have all but blended in with my house, Trinity. It's amazing. But your eyes, they are still a lovely shade of violet. Beautiful."

"Why did you kiss me?"

"I've never met anyone like you."

Trinity tensed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're just, you know, different."

Great. Merl had rejected her after their encounter, and now she finds out that Price thought of her as a novelty. Like the pretzel girl or the bearded lady in a carnival sideshow. She pushed her way out of his arms. "Sixty-seven demon languages and you've never met any freaks? I doubt that."

"I don't think you're a freak."

"Yeah, right. And monsters are people too."

"Some of them," he agreed. "But that's not what I mean. You're special."

Trinity flushed, her index fingernail instantly going between her teeth. "That's me. Special all over."

"I'd like to find out." The corner of his mouth tugged into a crooked grin.

Trini snorted.

"Look, your normal color is returning."

She gazed at her hands. They were shifting back to sun-kissed and freckled. "None of this messes with your head?" She shook her own. "Guess it wouldn't, since you seem to like hanging out with disreputable characters."

"Is that how you see yourself?"

Trini shrugged. "I've got a shrink." She felt relaxed with Newton, too calm. And now that her brain wasn't sex addled, she didn't like it. Not one little bit.

Newton reached for Trinity. She shrugged away from his touch.

"Don't." She got up and moved to the front window, putting space between them.

Newton stepped toward her. "It's okay." Suddenly, his facial expression and body language changed to alert, defensive. "Move away from the window," he shouted.

Glass shattered around Trini as she lunged sideways to avoid the body flying past her into the house. "What the fuck!"

"It's a Polandrial," Newton said, crouching, his legs a little more than shoulders' width apart. "Watch his spikes. They're deadly poisonous."

Trini took up a similar stance. She'd never seen this kind of demon before. His skin was mottled gray with quills poking out of his face and neck. The beast ignored Newton, focusing his cold eyes on Trinity. The quills lifted, jutting outward like a porcupine in attack mode.

"Holy shit." She let out a long breath. Head blows were out of the question. "Do you have a gun?"

"No. I don't like guns."

"Brilliant," Trini muttered. Newton Price wasn't only a card-carrying, tree-hugging, tofu-loving telepath, he was a goddamn pacifist.

A spike shot out of the hissing demon's neck. Trini barely ducked in time for it to miss her head and bury itself into the wall. She yanked her knife from the sheath under her arm and held it out toward Spike.

Newton jumped forward into a tuck and roll, came up near the monster's position, and kicked the back of the attacker's knee.

The demon dropped down. Trinity seized the opportunity by throwing the knife end on end at the demon's head.

It ducked. Lightning quick. The knife buried itself in the wall behind it.

"Fuck'n A." She ran across the living room to the hallway as spikes from the Polandrial marked her trail. "Does this thing ever run out of ammo?" she yelled as she ducked into the guest bathroom. Partly because she wanted to know, and partly because she wanted to know if Newton was all right.

"I have no idea," he shouted back, his voice coming from farther away than the living room.

"Not comforting." But she was pleased he wasn't sitting out there with the bad guy all by himself. "How do we kill it?"

"It can hear you," came an inhuman voice.

She felt her eyes widen. "Son of a bitch." Trini scanned the small bathroom for anything she could use as a weapon. There wasn't much. A pump dispenser of soap, a hand towel on a ring, and a large mirror. No medicine cabinet, but there was a plastic shower curtain on a rod.

The rod. It would have to do. She yanked the curtain down, rod and all. It fell apart when it hit the tiled floor. "Excellent," she whispered, picking one pole up in each hand.

"Come out, come out, girl. Wherever you are."

Great, it wanted to play hide and seek.

She heard its heavy footsteps coming down the hallway. Trini looked in the mirror; her skin had changed to match the small surroundings. She needed to strip to nothing and fast. Setting the poles on the sink, she yanked her shirt and bra off as she kicked off her pants and underwear.

The creature's heavy breathing grew closer with every step. Trinity crouched just inside the doorjamb, and waited. Her only hope was the element of surprise.

The Polandrial charged in, spraying spikes in all directions. Luckily, they hit above her head.

"Where are you?" the demon snarled.

When it turned its back, Trini grabbed the plastic curtain from the floor and threw it over the demon's head. It thrashed at the plastic, but before it could knock it off, she tackled him into the tub. She dropped an elbow down hard on its shoulder, making the demon cry out in pain.

Good. If she could hurt it, she could kill it. An overwhelming urge to kill it coursed through her. She literally saw red. Screaming out a battle cry, she went into a berserk rage, wildly punching, kneeing, kicking out, making as much physical contact as she could with the monster. She didn't just want it dead, she wanted it to suffer as much damage as possible. Trini couldn't think; it was like her brain shut off and only the animal part of her existed. She was being fueled by pure adrenaline and instinct.

Unfortunately, the Polandrial had managed to remove the curtain from his head and she felt three darts pierce her forearm. The effect was staggering. A sheer burning pain moved away from where the quills had hit her, traveling up her arm like all her veins were fuses and someone had lit the match.

The demon threw her off him, Trini's body hitting the vanity doors with her back as she rolled on the hard tile floor. Even though she'd been hit in the right arm, her left started aching as the pain reached her chest. Her heart.

A guttural laugh cut through the fog building in her mind. "The prize is mine," he declared, leaping from the tub.

Trinity braced herself for death. So when the demon's decapitated head went rolling past her body and out the door, she couldn't have been more surprised.

Newton stood over her, looking magnificently warrior-ish with a bloody sword in hand. He shook his head. "I'm not a pacifist."

"Good... to... know," Trini managed, right before darkness swallowed her whole.

* * *

Newton stayed calm. Years of military training and life as a mercenary had taught him to keep a clear head in battle situations, and this had been a battle. Trinity's heart was still beating, but he didn't know how. Polandrial poison was highly toxic and death usually occurred in minutes. He'd plucked the spikes from her arm to stop the pump of venom into her system before he'd carried her to the bedroom.

She was already naked, much to his chagrin, because he really liked seeing her naked, but not in these circumstances. Her marred flesh proved she'd been at war herself. She had a red bite mark scar on one shoulder, a freshly bandaged wound on the other, and several old scars littered her torso and legs.

For someone so young, Trinity had lived the life of a battle-weary warrior. Or maybe, because she was still young, she hadn't been weary at all. Still finding a thrill in every fight. Newt remembered the feeling, but not fondly. He had scars of his own, not all of them physical, and some of them refused to heal.

Trinity's temperature was rising fast. He placed his hand on her stomach. Her skin felt hot and dry, like someone having heat stroke. Her breasts were only inches away, and he fought to keep his hands from wandering in their direction. He didn't understand the magnetic attraction he felt toward the woman who'd only entered his life less than an hour before.

Not touching her, not having her, it was nearly painful. He hadn't felt that way for anyone, not even his wife. Which only compounded his guilt about wanting to feel up a dying woman. While he resisted the caress, he leaned over and pressed her lips gently with his own. They were warm with fever.

He stroked her hair. Focusing his telepathy on her thoughts, he tried to get into her head to see if she was aware of her situation.

All he got was images of a house on fire, a young Trinity running from room to room, until she saw her parents lying on the floor of a study, flames licking up around them. She was screaming as she tried to get to them, but the ceiling collapsed down on top of them, and the fire blew through the doorway she entered, pushing her out into the hall. Her jeans caught fire and she beat frantically at the flames. Grief and anger and fear roiled within the distraught young girl.

He remembered the shriveled burn scar on her leg, and knew Trinity was reliving a horrific memory from her past.

As a telepath, Newton's power to read minds traveled in two directions. He could also project his thoughts into other people's heads, and sometimes into their dreams. In a few cases, it was the only way to communicate with some of the species he'd encountered. Reluctantly, he entered Trinity's mind. It was selfish not to at least try and give this woman some peace in her last few moments.

She was out on the lawn, her long red hair pulled back into a ponytail, while tears streamed from her violet eyes as she looked up at the burning house. Trinity looked so young as she hugged her arms around her knees, huddled in despair.

"Why?" she asked when he approached. Then she did a double take, looked at him again, the expression on her face telling him how wrong it felt to have him there.

"I want to help you."

"You can't help me. No one can." Her expression changed again to one of deep thought, and Newton wished he could read the mind of her dream self, but he couldn't penetrate deeper than experiencing the moment as she had.

"I'd like to try."

She scooted back as he approached, weary and on alert. "Who are you?"

Trinity didn't recognize him. Of course she wouldn't, not in her current state. "Newt. Newt Price. And I only want to help."

"Too late, Newt," she whispered. "It's all my fault. If I hadn't snuck out to be with Tyler Rogers, this wouldn't have happened. I could have stopped it."

An oppressive feeling of guilt caused Newton to stumble. Trinity's dying mind had chosen to make her last moments full of the worst memory of her life.

She was holding her leg where her pants had burned. "Can I take a look at that for you?"

"Are you a doctor?"

"No."

"Then no. I'll heal. I always do. I'm a real good healer." Bitterness tinged her words. "I need to get to Merl's. That's the exit strategy. If anything happens, I'm to go to Merl's. Merl can help me. He's smart."

"I'm smart. Maybe I can help," Newton said, trying to keep Trinity in the here and now.

She smirked. "No way are you Merl smart. He is off the scale genius."

Great, Newton thought, his competition in this episode was probably a pimply-faced kid who tutored her in algebra. He closed the distance between them with two long strides. Crouching down next to her, he said in his most calming voice, "Trinity Staten, this isn't real. Not anymore."

"It's all real."

Newton got the distinct feeling she wasn't talking about the nightmare. "What's real, Trinity?"

She looked up at him, her eyes naked and raw with emotion. "Things that go bump in the night, monsters that hide under your bed and in the closet, the boogey-man. The boogey-man is real."

He nodded. "I know."

Trinity blinked. "Newton?"

"Yes."

Anger flittered across her face. "Get. Out. Of. My. Head!"

Newton didn't just leave the nightmare. He was thrown out. Hard enough that his body jerked when he came back to his own awareness.

A moan tore from Trinity's lips, beads of sweat littered her skin, and her eyes slowly opened. "Get Merl," she rasped.

Fantastic, she'd awakened from the dream and was still asking for a ghost from her past.

"Merl was a long time ago. I'm here now."

"No," she responded. "Merlin Davitch. Number's in my billfold."

"Okay." Apparently this Merl character was in the not-so-distant past.

"Okay." Trinity's eyes closed and a soft snore followed.

Newton rubbed his eyes and scratched his itching right shoulder. Her younger self had been right; she was a good healer. Her body was fighting the poison in a way he'd never seen before. He'd call this Merl guy, but he didn't like it. It was looking more and more like Trinity would survive the Polandria's attack, and she wanted Newton to call in the competition to the rescue? His inner caveman wanted to hit her over the head and drag her off to be conquered.

Chapter Five

Trinity came to with a pounding headache. She felt awful. Awfully hung over, that is. She was in her own bed, dressed in a clean white nightgown, and she had panties on, though she didn't check the color. Not important. Somehow, she'd made it home, but couldn't remember how or when she got there.

Funny, she didn't even remember going out for a drink. Or the dozen she must have downed. She tried to sit up, but both her arms ached like they'd been beaten with a hammer.

What the hell had happened? She stiffened as her memories came floating back. First the Scrofa demon, then sex with Merl, then meeting Newton Price, and then dry humping Newton Price, then the Polandrial demon, and finally getting her ever lovin' ass kicked. Two demons and two guys all in the same evening. It had to be a record.

"Shit, I'm a demon magnet and a slut." The Polandrial had spiked her. Newton had said the poison was fatal, but she didn't feel dead. "If this is the afterlife, someone's got a wicked sense of humor."

Merl stepped in through her open door. The afterlife was looking better and better. He was clean-shaven, handsome, and... worried. "Merl."

The lean and lanky yet delicious genius crossed the room quickly, sat on the bed, and threw his arms around her. "Goddamn it, Trinity. You scared the shit out of me."

"I'm here." She patted his back. "No harm, no foul."

His eyes widened in astonishment. "No harm, no foul? You've been out for three days."

"No wonder I feel like hammered shit." She tried to smile, but then she remembered something important. Like *pay the bills* important. "Shit. Shit. Shit. My job!"

If she'd been out for three days, then she'd missed her shift at the police station the day before.

Merl brushed a piece of hair back from Trini's face. "I called in sick for you." He grimaced. "Told them you had a case of avian flu and would be out for a week."

"Damn, Merl. Why didn't you just tell them I had leprosy?"

He had the good sense to blush. "You know I'm a terrible liar. I get all flustered and weird stuff comes out of my mouth. You're just lucky I didn't go with my first impulse and tell them you had typhoid. I've talked about it recently in one of my lectures and it was on my mind."

"Isn't that the bacteria passed through poo?"

Merl bit his lower lip in response.

"Ew." She made a sour face at him. "That's just really yucky." Trinity shook her aching head. "Can I get some water? My mouth is dry."

On cue, Newton walked into the room carrying a glass of ice water. "Someone ask for water?"

Trinity chuckled. It hurt. But she couldn't help it. Newton was here, and it made her almost as happy to see him as it had to see Merl. "What did I tell you?"

"I know," Newton replied. "Stay out of your head."

Merl leaned back, looking none too happy about the familiar banter going on between Trinity and Newton. "I'm going to draw you a bath. The warm soak will do you some good."

Nodding, Trinity let him go. Begging him to stay probably wasn't a good option. Watching Merl leave, as Newton came in, all she could think was that she wanted them both. Why couldn't she have them both? If there was any justice in the world...

Quickly, she glanced at Newton. His expression hadn't changed. Thank God. Maybe he'd finally listened to her and wasn't doing his mind voodoo at the moment. That would be novel.

"What are you doing here?"

"I haven't left since I brought you home." He leaned in conspiratorially. "I don't think your roommate's too thrilled about me sleeping on the couch."

"You shouldn't have stayed." Though she was thrilled he had. "Merl could've taken care of me."

"I know." Newt grimaced. "He was quite fond of telling me so, over and over."

Trini put her hand over her mouth to hide a smile. "Merl can be a little protective. He thinks of me like a big sister." The last sentence had cost her pride a little.

"Yeah, right." Newton shook his head. "Well, one thing you weren't wrong about, he's definitely off the scale genius. Reading his mind is like reading Greek. You know, he actually thinks in numbers most of the time?"

"That doesn't surprise me one bit." She shook her head. "Hey, when did I tell you about Merl?"

"Uh, well..." He hesitated. "When you woke up briefly and told me to call him."

"Oh." All she could remember was demon spikes, pain, then lights out, until she woke up just a little while ago. "Well, he really is very smart."

"Yeah, I got that." Newton reached out and stroked her hair. A rush of excitement twittered through Trini.

"You're disappearing again." He smiled.

"I can't control it anymore. I can't control anything anymore." She fought the tears threatening to well in her eyes. "Maybe I never could."

Newton took off his tight black T-shirt, and holy friggin' smokes his chest looked carved from solid stone, and he wiped her eyes with the edge. Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek. Whatever he was going to say next was cut short by an accusation from Merl.

"You slept with him!"

Merl sauntered over, anger making him look very masculine and very hot. *Not the time or the place, Trini*, she reminded herself. "I didn't."

"Lie," he replied. Merl turned so his left shoulder was to Trinity. "See this?" He pointed to a violet tattoo she'd never seen before. It was a circle with a line through it. The line slashed left to right pointing down toward his mid spine.

"What the hell is that? And when did you get it?"

"I'm not sure but it showed up after we, well, you know. And now I see this." He pointed to the back of Newton's right shoulder. Newton turned with a look of surprise. He hadn't noticed it either, but he had a mirror image of Merl's tattoo only the line swooshed right to left toward his spine. "Hence, the evidence suggests you slept with him too."

"Okay, Grisham. We didn't have actual sex." Newton's mouth pursed sourly. "Not that it's any of your business."

Merl stared at Trinity as if the answer wasn't good enough.

She shrugged, making a distance gesture between her thumb and index finger. "We might have made out just the teeniest-tiniest bit."

"There is nothing teeniest or tiniest about me," Newton countered.

Ignoring his remark, Trinity speculated, "Maybe it's got nothing to do with sex. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with me at all. I don't have any 'not allowed' tattoos on me."

Merl shook his head. "Seriously? Think about it. The only thing this guy and I have in common is you. The correlative data suggest you are the cause."

"Oh sure, blame the sick chick." She put her hand to her forehead. "I don't feel so good." She saw the skeptical look leave Merl's face as her eyes fluttered and then she passed out.

* * *

Merl shook Trini, trying to wake her up while Newton checked her pulse.

"Her heartbeat is rapid and thready."

"Shock?"

"I don't think so. If it was, her legs being raised would have brought her back around," Newt answered. "I think her body is still fighting the poison."

"Her skin is cold, like she's hypothermic. Let's get her to the bath. It's already filled, and it's the quickest way to warm up her core temperature." Merl grabbed Trinity's upper body and gestured to Newton. "Help me get her in there."

Newton picked up her legs and they carried her to the next room. Gently, they placed her in the tub. Merl got in behind her, clothes and all, and held her head up out of the water. There were no scientific explanations for what was going on with Trinity and he was scared for her. Perhaps more frightened than he'd ever been. He looked at Newton, who had sat on the edge of the tub. "I don't understand what's going on."

"That doesn't happen to you a lot, does it?"

"What?"

"Not understanding stuff."

"Oh, more than you'd think."

Sure, Merl was confident where science and theory were concerned. For example, he knew how the heart developed from the embryo stage into full maturity, could even explain how it physically worked down to the cellular level, but in matters *of the heart*, he was virtually clueless. His whole world could be broken down into two parts: Research and Trinity. Which meant half of his world was just barely hanging on, shivering and cold in his arms.

Merl couldn't think like that. He shook the thoughts from his head. "What can we do?"

"I can try what I did at my house, going into her mind, trying to reach her that way, but..."

"But what?"

"She's not going to like it."

"She'll get over it." He gestured for Newton to begin. "Do what you have to do."

Merl watched as Newton closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He slowly let it go, slipping his hands into the water until they made contact with Trini's abdomen. A pang of jealousy swept Merl, and he fought the urge to pull Trini away from the other

man. He didn't have to like whatever relationship had started between Trini and Newton, but he'd be grateful if it fixed her.

"What's she thinking about?" Merl asked after a few moments.

"She's in a basement. It's filled with weapons, floor pads, and several punching bags, along with a wooden fight dummy."

"That's at her parents' house." Merl used to watch her train there in the basement. She'd been magnificent to watch.

"The one that burned down?"

"How did you -- Never mind." Apparently, Trinity had shared a lot with Newton, and that fact twisted Merl's guts in a knot, but there were bigger problems at hand than his jealousy. "What else do you see?"

"Trinity is working out, moving from one area to the next, like a practiced routine."

Before Merl could ask more, Newton shook his head. "I'm going in. I can't share her dream and talk at the same time."

Holding Trini tight with one arm, Merl stroked her forehead and neck with his free hand. Even in the warm bath, she still felt cold, but at least her shivering had stopped. Newton's eyes jerked behind his closed eyelids, as if in REM sleep. The scientist in him couldn't help wonder what kind of data he could gather from an EEG of Newton's brain waves.

Merl was filled with envy and wonder, as he simply held Trini. Newton was seeing a side of Trinity no one else could even imagine. To know what she was thinking, feeling -- an ability worth having for sure. He leaned his head against the cool tiled backsplash, held her tighter, and closed his eyes. Just to rest them. The last three days had really taken it out of him, and it seemed they were far from over.

He'd not only had to contend with a doting suitor, his competition for Trini's affections, but he also had to figure out how to tell her of his current findings. And tell her in a way that she could accept without hating him.

Feeling dizzy, Merl opened his eyes, but when he did, he was no longer in the bathtub. He was standing in Trini's parents' basement. He'd forgotten how incredible she looked kicking and flying -- not literally flying, but her jumps had seemed so high to Merl, he used to worry she'd float away.

Trinity couldn't have been more than fourteen in this dream. Merl would've been twelve then in this version of Trini-verse. She used to sneak him down when her parents weren't around. Young Trinity landed a flying kick to the dummy's upper arm, then followed up with a dropped elbow, twisting around with lightning speed to catch its chest with a hard backhand.

"I think you've killed it," Merl said teasingly, as he had in the past.

Trini stopped, her hard eyes snapping up to take in Merl. She raised her left brow. Then a huge grin spread over her face. "Merl!"

Running toward him, she flung herself at him and tackled him to the ground. She pinned his shoulders with her knees and smiled down at him. "When'd you get here?"

"Uhm, not long ago."

"Egg-head. I figured you to be nose deep in studies." She gave his shoulder a light punch.

Even though Merl could deduce that he was in Trinity's dream because the facts seemed to support that conclusion, what he couldn't rationalize was the twinge of pain he felt when she hit his arm.

"Oh, suck it up, genius. I'm just trying to toughen you up a little. What happened to geek camp? I thought you were stuck there until after summer break?"

Geek camp? Then it dawned on Merl; this was the summer he'd gone off for the special advanced study program he'd gotten into at the university. When the summer had finished, they'd offered Merl a scholarship to study abroad.

He'd turned them down. Twelve years old and he knew what he wanted even then, to be by Trinity's side.

Newton crouched down next to them. "How come she can see you, but apparently not me? I've been trying to get her to talk to me for about five minutes, and I might as well be a ghost."

"I have no idea. You're the expert on this mind stuff."

Trinity frowned, her bow lips turned down in a pout. "What are you talking about, Merl?" She tapped her index finger against his temple. "Did they scramble your brain in one of those think-tank experiments?"

Newton was correct. They were both in Trini's dream, but she could only see Merl. A small smile formed on his lips. He couldn't help it. "Maybe," he told her.

"Don't play into her fantasy. If we want to get her out of here, you have to make her realize that this isn't reality anymore. She needs to wake up."

Merl didn't take his eyes off Trinity's electric violet eyes, but he nodded his acknowledgement. "Trini."

Her head snapped up in sudden alertness. "Shh..."

"What is it?"

"Footsteps on the stairs. Oh man, it's Dad. I'm not supposed to be down here today."

"Where are you supposed to be?"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Up in my bedroom, studying." She made a sour face. Jumping up, she grabbed Merl's hand and hauled him with her. "Over here." She led him to a weapons cabinet on the far wall, opened the door and shoved him in. Coming in behind him, she closed the doors. "If he catches me, I'm gonna have my ass handed to me. Especially if he catches you down here as well."

Her body so close to his, her warm breath falling against his shoulders, Merl remembered why his twelve-year-old self gave up a grand opportunity to study in Germany. God, Trinity had been worth it then. She was worth it now.

He heard voices from outside the cabinet. Two people, both male. He recognized her father's voice. "What does he know?"

"Nothing, so far. His paranoia keeps him searching for the child. He's not satisfied that she's simply vanished. He wants proof of her death," the other man replied.

"And what if he finds her?"

"He won't hesitate, Daniel. He'll kill her quick and without a second thought."

"I won't let that happen. I'll just have to get to him first."

"You killed his wife and the first husband. As second, he's in charge now. It's exactly how he planned. You'll never get near him. Your purpose is greater now, greater than that of a hired killer."

"I will protect the girl with my last breath."

"It may come down to that. You broke the Triune when you helped him murder Marta and Dar." Acrimony laced the second man's words.

"I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. All you cared about was killing the 'demons' as you like to call us. And if you got paid in the process, so much the better."

"They killed my father."

Merl felt Trinity stiffen next to him.

"A small faction killed your father. You can't judge every *other* by the action of one group."

"Don't bet on it. You are all monsters." Daniel's voice with tight with seething anger.

"I don't think you believe that anymore. It doesn't matter. Your penance is to keep Jessie from learning about the girl."

"She's well hidden, gray man. Don't worry."

A sinking feeling grew deep inside Merl as well. This memory of Trinity's was wrong somehow. Even more so, since he hadn't been there the first time. He'd stayed at the university until the summer ended. But even if he had heard the private conversation between Trinity's dad and the unknown man, he would not have understood it then. Not like he understood it now.

After the basement door closed, Trinity cracked the cabinet open and looked around. "They're gone. Whew, that was close. Dad would have had my hide." She turned around and smiled up at Merl. "Hey, you think you can sneak out of your house tonight? There's a wicked band playing up at the Black Bear." She wiggled her eyebrows. "I think I can sneak us in."

"Trini," he said, grasping her by the shoulders. "Wake up."

"What are you talking about?"

"This isn't real. You're dreaming. Wake up."

"Merl, I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Look at me? Do I look like the twelve-year-old boy you remember?"

She frowned, but didn't respond.

"A little help, Price."

Newton, who'd been relegated to the role of observer, walked over to them. He put his hands on Trini's shoulders. Her neck muscles went rigid, but she didn't turn around.

"Trinity," Newton said.

"Merl, why are you acting so strange?" Trini asked.

He placed his hands on her shoulders, overlapping Newton's. "Wake up. Please. I need you to wake up."

She gazed up at him, her eyes swirling with color. "Merl, I..." Placing her hand on Merl's, she grazed Newton's fingers as well. She turned back to look. In an instant, her body transformed, grew taller, older, that of the adult Trinity. "Newton."

"Yes," he whispered in her ear.

"My father..."

Merl shook his head. "Is not coming back now."

Trinity's arms slid around Merl. Newton mimicked her action, embracing both Trinity and Merl.

She looked up between them. "I want to go home."

Merl leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. "Then wake up."

Newton dipped his head and kissed her cheek. "Wake up."

Trinity met Newton's mouth with a fiery kiss, then broke it. Turning up to Merl, she pulled his head down, her lips parting as she kissed him hard. Her tongue darted past his teeth. Merl closed his eyes, savoring her taste as he fed from her lips.

He didn't even feel the sensation of warm water surrounding him, until she broke from his mouth. He opened his eyes. They were no longer in the basement. Now, all three of them were in the tub.

Trinity smiled up at Merl. "I'm awake."

He smiled back. "I'm aware."

She kissed him as the water level began to drop. Newton was getting out of the bath. Trini reached back and grabbed his wrist. "Stay."

Newton looked as confused as Merl felt.

Chapter Six

But neither of them were as confused as Trinity. Once again, she'd slipped into a memory of her past. Waking up in a tub full of hot water and hot men should have put her on guard, but instead, all she felt was need. She needed both Merl and Newton. Her body, mind, and soul craved them both. It was as if she'd lose her sanity if one of them walked away.

"I don't know if I can." Newton shook his head. "I feel so drawn to you, Trinity. It scares me." He stood from the tub. "I can also read your mind, so I know how much you want me." The words held pain. "But you love him. I can't compete with that."

Merl slid out from under her and sat on the edge of the tub. "No worries, Price. If it comes down to Buff and Beautiful versus Bony and Brainy, I know which side wins every time."

Trinity stared at them both as if they'd each grown an extra head. Merl's words hurt her most of all. "I need you. Both of you." She felt desperate. Every fiber of her being cried out to be in their arms. "I don't know why, but I do."

Hot and cold, cold and hot, she felt nothing and everything. "I'm losing my mind."

Her skin had become like the water, translucent and liquid. "I'm losing myself."

Without them, both of them, she would die. It wasn't something she knew in her head, but she definitely felt it in her heart. Trinity was overcome with despondency and despair. Merl was the air she breathed. Newton was nourishment. She couldn't survive without both of them. One might sustain her for a while, but without Merl she would suffocate, without Newton she would starve.

"I'm sorry." She slipped beneath the surface of the water; better to go quickly than have her death drag out for days.

The next thing she knew, Merl and Newton were hauling her onto the bathroom floor.

Merl embraced her, rocking Trini's body. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

Newton stroked her face. "Her mind is so dark. Darker than I've ever encountered. I don't know if it's physical or mental, but she truly believes if she can't have both you and I, then she'll choose death as the alternative."

"Will she die?"

Newton bit his lower lip, his brows narrowed with worry. "Maybe."

"Please," Trinity begged. "Let me go, or don't. But choose. I've chosen already."

She didn't know where the words had come from, or even when she'd made the choice. But it didn't change the fact that she had chosen. It was like some great biological imperative had taken over. Merl was intelligent, but he was more than that, he also had the inner strength to protect Trinity if necessary. Newton was strong, powerful, and his sharp mind and ability would only add to their power base.

"We have two options..." Newton didn't say them aloud, but Merl seemed to get it.

"Option number two is not going to work for me." He caressed Trini's face, and placed his lips on hers.

She tilted her head to meet Merl's mouth full on, feverishly kissing him, her tongue delving to the hot recesses. Trinity moaned as her mind began to clear. She needed more. Blindly she reached out for Newton and pulled him down to them. Parting from Merl's mouth, she turned to Newton. He met her halfway, his sensuous lips working hers as Merl fluttered kisses down her neck, licking and sucking the water from her skin.

"Yes," she breathed into Newton's mouth. "Yes."

A hand -- she wasn't sure whose -- slipped between her thighs, a finger sliding over her swollen clit.

"God, you're so slick and wet," Merl said, his voice two octaves lower than normal.

"Taste me," Trinity said.

He brought his fingers to his lips, his beautiful green eyes drowsy with lust, and licked the glistening fluids from them. "So good," he murmured.

Newton rumbled, and Trinity recognized the raw passion in his eyes. She reached out, fumbling his jeans open.

She grasped Newton's cock and he groaned.

Merl laid her down, pulling her nightgown up as he kissed a trail to her chest. He sucked in one nipple, teasing and twirling. Trinity pushed her hips off the floor, aching for him to go lower.

Newton, leaning over Trinity on all fours, darted his tongue into her mouth as she stroked his rigid length. He cupped her other breast with one hand, and turned his body to meet it. She moaned, pressing her shoulders against the floor as she raised her lower body even higher. When Newton latched onto her other nipple, she cried out her pleasure.

The mouths, Newton's firm, with just a hint of scruff, Merl's soft and determined, moved down her abdomen like a duet melding smoothly, trying to find the right chemistry, and showing so much promise. Trinity needed to bind them to her completely, and she needed them bound to each other, as well.

When their lips found the insides of her thighs, she gasped. The both peered up, their lips stilled at the sharp intake of breath.

"Please don't stop," she begged. "Please. I need. Need... need." Her arousal was choking, and she felt like she would suffocate on it if they didn't bring her to completion.

Newton, on her right, licked first across the folds of her sex, and the shudder the sensation brought collapsed her legs. He crawled between them, lifting her with his shoulders. He worked his tongue in circles around her clit, flicking and sucking. Merl, on her left, sat back on his heels, watching, waiting.

Trinity grabbed Newton's thick black hair and ground her pussy against his face. The stubble of his chin rubbed against sensitive skin, but still it wasn't enough. She couldn't come. Her body wouldn't allow it. Not without Merl.

She turned her gaze to meet his, silently pleading, but he just stared, his eyes slightly aghast. Trinity cringed. She needed Merl and he was disgusted by the naked display.

"Fuck!" she screamed. Her body felt like a balloon, filled until it was so tight, ready to burst, but no one had brought the pin to pop it. Trinity knew that what she wanted from Merl wasn't fair to her best friend, but fairness didn't matter. Not now.

Newton stopped his ministrations.

Shit, worse and worse. She felt a creeping madness building in her mind.

Newton's voice was low and soft when he spoke. "You're wrong, Trinity."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," she murmured. Fear of being swallowed whole, disappearing into nothing, tightened her throat.

"Merl," Newton said. "You have to help her. She's dying. Maybe not her body, but definitely her mind."

Yes, Trinity thought, help me. Without either of them tending her, Trinity's body began to burn and ache. The fire burning her from the inside out.

"I've never seen her skin do that before," Merl said. Worry filled his voice. "It's like millions of blinking lights on a small Christmas tree."

She closed her eyes against his stare. She couldn't be an experiment anymore. She couldn't handle this moment being reduced to an opportunity to collect more data.

"You're wrong," Newton said again.

Trinity didn't care about words or feeling, she only cared that if someone didn't touch her soon, she was going to implode. She grabbed Newton's hair and tugged until his mouth was back on her pussy. She felt a finger sliding inside her, then another, and the pain eased.

She opened her eyes. Newton's hands were on her thighs, which meant... She rolled her head to the left and looked at Merl. "I'm sorry." Emotionally, Trinity wanted

him to want her. Physically, she didn't give a shit what he wanted. She needed him to do what she needed him to do.

"Tell her you want her," Newton said, after his tongue swiped the length of her sex. "She needs to know how you feel."

"I..." He didn't finish, but thank God his fingers kept working in and out of her, sliding and rubbing the sweet spot just inside her channel.

He crawled up next to Trinity, his hand continuing its ministrations. Merl kissed her shoulder, then her neck as she looked away. Shame and fear made her afraid of what she might see in his face. His free hand cupped her chin and he forced her to look at him. "I love you."

"I know," she whispered, and tears she didn't know she'd cried fell down the side of her face. He'd always loved her. She knew that. Merl was family. The only family she had, and she was destroying their bond with her stupid desires. "This isn't fair to you. I'm sorry."

"No, you don't understand." He kissed her mouth gently. "I'm in love with you. I have been for a very long time."

She blinked with disbelief. Time stood still for several seconds as she studied Merl's face. "When? How?"

"It happened the first moment I saw you."

"You were ten years old."

"Yes, and you were twelve, and would never look at me as more than a little kid. I knew then and there that I had to have you in my life, any way you wanted me. Any way you needed me."

"Oh, Merl." She breathed his name like air. The pain running in her veins returned, hard and fast. "God!" she screamed. "It hurts so bad."

"What do you need me to do?"

She grabbed Merl by the back of his head and tugged his face within inches of her own. "Fuck me, goddamn it."

Merl, without hesitation, shimmied out of his wet pajama pants, his erection jutting from his body. Trinity scrambled off of Newton's shoulders and climbed onto Merl's lap. She grasped his cock and guided the length inside her. He was long, and large, and perfect, but even as she stroked her body onto his, she didn't feel relief.

Why couldn't she get relief?

She leaned forward, her mind and body silently shouting, *Newton!*

He heard her call, felt her need, and still, Newton hesitated. Watching her fuck Merl, his own cock threatened to blow at the sight of Trinity's ghostly naked form. So, why did part of him want to run away?

Because she doesn't love you, he thought. That's why.

Sure, he could feel Trinity's desire for him, but it wasn't a fraction of what she felt for Merlin Davitch. If he did this, something inside his head told him it would be forever. He'd been listening to her thoughts all muddled and muddied, like a mental ward on steroids. He knew the costs if he denied her, but could he live with being second best in her heart?

His body said yes, but his heart wasn't so sure. He'd been hurt before. Emotions clouded his judgment, clouded his ability. Could he go through that again? Would it be even worse this time?

Newton! He heard her call again. There was power in it this time, leaving him staggered with a driving lust. Thinking was keeping him from fucking her.

Thinking was overrated.

Pushing his jeans to his thighs, he straddled Merl's legs and leaned over Trinity's back. "I'm here," he whispered. Her skin mimicked the floor and Merl's naked body, but he knew it was all Trinity he felt in his arms.

"In me," she begged. "Fuck me."

Merl stopped his upward thrust into Trinity, intuitively giving her time to adjust as Newton slid his cock into her slickly ready pussy. It was difficult at first, Newton's cock competing with Merl's for room inside Trinity. But she reached between her legs

and stroked their erections at the same time, pressing them together, and managed to squeeze them both in.

All three of them moaned at the same time as Trinity rocked her hips downward and back. She felt so hot and tight around his shaft, and add in Merl's cock sliding up and down his own, Newton didn't think he could last. Not as long as she needed him to.

"Oh, fuck, yes," Trinity mumbled. Newton could feel and hear the pain in her mind ebbing, leaving her body like a tide rolling out to sea.

He matched rhythm with her gentle rocking, thrusting forward when she would rock back.

Merl's cock drawing out, Trinity's pussy sliding down, then her sliding up, as Merl slid in. The sensation was amazing, like nothing he'd ever felt before. The closest his mind could come to grasping the feeling was being stroked, sucked, and fucked all at the same time. His eyes met Merl's through Trinity's chameleon skin, and neither of them looked away.

He could hear Merl's panting growing louder with every thrust, matching Trinity's, matching his own. An astounding sense of love surrounded his entire being, and in that moment, it didn't matter who loved who or how much.

Trinity wept openly, her head flung back against Newton's shoulder, her mouth finding his, frantically kissing him as her body bucked between the two men. All the pain had gone, and she was left one raw nerve of desire. She broke from Newton, and leaned forward to kiss Merl, the shift in position allowing Newton and Merl to go deeper inside her. The sensation of both cocks thrusting simultaneously made her feel completely whole. More so than she'd ever felt. There was no way two men of their size should have felt comfortable inside her at the same time, but it was more than comfortable, it was glorious.

Sweet release took her with such surprise. She threw her head back, roaring her pleasure as her body jerked spasmodically with blinding rapture. Merl shuddered beneath her, gritting his teeth and holding his breath as he came inside her. Newton

was more demonstrative, a loud moan tearing from his lips as he bucked and jerked his hips against her ass.

And in that moment, something *popped* in her brain. Trinity collapsed.

A moment later, she heard Merl. "I think we put her in a coma."

"Don't be stupid," Newton countered. "Her mind is the calmest it's been since I met her. She's not even dreaming."

Trinity felt the velvet softness of her bed caressing her stomach. Newton was on her left, Merl on her right, and both men were talking over her.

"At least all her color has returned." Merl stroked her back. "That's a plus."

Newton tangled his fingers in her hair. "She's awake."

"Can't put one past you, can I?" Trinity grinned. They were both still here, still with her. She'd been half afraid they'd run away from the freak show she believed herself to be.

"You're not a freak show," Newton said.

Trinity gave him a sharp look, but then softened. Could she really blame him for checking in on her thoughts? After all, she'd completely lost it earlier, and she didn't know if or when it would happen again. "I know you can read my mind, Newt. I accept that. But could you be a little more discreet about it? I mean, do you really have to remind me all the time?"

"I suppose not." He chuckled.

Merl's hand stilled on her back. "Trini, we have a problem."

"No shit." Her problems were too many and too complicated to even list.

"Not what I mean." He traced a circle on her lower back, then drew a line toward himself, then another line toward Newton. "I have no idea what this means."

Trinity chewed the inside of her cheek. She had no idea what he was talking about. Merl stood up and took Trinity's left hand. She followed him off the bed. Newton came around and took her other hand. They turned Trinity so that her back was to her dresser mirror, then they both turned to face the opposite wall as well.

"Now look," Merl said, peering over his shoulder.

Trinity craned her neck around. "What the hell does that mean?" There was a violet circle on her lower back, matching both Merl's and Newton's in size. Only instead of one line pointing downward, she had a "V" through hers that pointed outward toward the men.

"I'm not sure," Merl said. "But I think I might know someone who can give us a few answers."

Chapter Seven

A knock sounded at the door. Merl began walking toward it to answer, but Trinity stopped him. "Have you learned nothing?"

"You're so paranoid."

"It's not really paranoid if people are out to get you."

Merl threw his hands in the air. "Fine. You get the door."

"I will." She put her hand on the slide bolt and the knob, and looked through the peek hole. On the other side was a nearly bald head and thick pop bottle glasses looking back. *Dr. Gray?*

Startled, she turned her back to the door as if to hide. Irrationally, she could only think that he was coming to take her away. Merl wanted her institutionalized, just like his parents had.

As if reading her mind, which of course, he couldn't, only Newton could, Merl said, "Let him in, Trini. It's not what you think."

"How do you know what I think?" Rising panic froze her in place. It would be better if he was coming to kill her. That she could deal with.

"I've known you for eighteen years. You don't think I know how your mind works?"

"Why is he here then? You called him, didn't you?"

"Yes. I called him, but I called him for answers. Remember when your father talked to someone he referred to as 'gray man'?"

The memory returned to Trinity. The dream had been a little different from the actual event, Merl hadn't really been there for one thing, but yes, she remembered "gray man."

She nodded, afraid to speak. Afraid of what it might mean if Dr. Gray and gray man were one and the same.

The knock sounded again, only louder. Trinity jumped.

Newton walked over and placed his hand on her shoulder. She could feel a pressing calmness coming from him, easing the tension and anxiety.

"Open the door, Trinity. Or leave it closed. But know that the only person who might be able to tell you what the hell is going on is out in the hallway."

She nodded again, gulping air as she pushed back the slide bolt with her thumb, and turned the knob.

Blinking, she looked down at Dr. Gray, who, when not sitting, only came to her chest in height.

"May I come in?" he asked politely.

Trini shook her head, but moved out of the way to allow him room to enter. She walked numbly to the couch and plopped down on her ass. Merl and Newton, as if drawn, sat on either side of her.

"The right and left," Dr. Gray mused. "Appropriate."

Trini shifted uncomfortably. "You're not going to break out your little yellow notepad are you?"

"No, no." He chuckled. "Not this time." The little man, demon, psychologist, whatever he was, gestured to Merl. "Do you want to start?"

Trini turned to Merl. His eyes widened like a deer caught in the headlights. "Not really." He sighed. "But I suppose I should."

"What are you not telling me?" Trini could take it. She was a tough girl. She'd survived her parents' death in a fire, four years in a mental hospital, and ten years of tracking and killing the monsters when they threatened human life.

What could Merl say that could possibly top all that?

"You're not human."

Okay, that statement pretty much did it. "What the fuck, Merl?"

He scooted a couple of inches away from her. "Calm down, Trinity, before you fade away."

"I am a fucking human being, goddamn it!"

"Well... technically... you're not."

"I knew it," Newton muttered.

"You shut up," Trini snapped.

Newt looked slightly embarrassed. "Sorry. Didn't realize I said that out loud."

"Let's all be calm here," Dr. Gray said all doctorly. Trinity wanted to kick the shit out of him. Hell, she wanted to kick the shit out of all of them.

"Okay, just lay it all out on the table. No holding back. Tell me what the hell you think you know, and no messing around. Just say it."

Merl's face reddened, making the green of his eyes really pop. "I've determined that two months ago you were bitten by a Maenad."

Trinity snorted derisively. "I thought Maenads were only female, and uh, make believe."

Ignoring her sarcasm, Merl continued, "Well, technically, they can be male or female it turns out, and they aren't make believe, but the species is what the mythology is based upon, if that helps."

"Yeah, sure. Helps tons."

"Anyhow, you were bitten."

"We've established that. I even have the scar to prove it."

"Then you began changing. Lack of self-control, yada, yada."

"When are you going to get to the stuff I don't know?"

Dr. Gray cleared his throat. "Trinity, I understand your *wit* is a defense mechanism, brought on by deep-seated abandonment issues that stem from childhood tragedies and self-esteem problems, but you can either let Merlin tell you what he knows, or you can bury your head in the sand."

Well, that last little bit of advice had been unexpected, but Trinity bit her tongue. Perhaps she was acting just a bit like a baby.

She stared at her lap, twiddling her thumbs, which had taken on the appearance of her blue sweatpants. "Fine, whatever. Mouth zipped."

"Anyhow," Merl continued after taking a deep breath. "I checked and rechecked your blood work after the bite occurred, all with the same results. The chemical make-up of your body has been altered. You have an increase in sex pheromones, and an extra chemical I can't identify that seems to have aphrodisiac properties." He paused for a moment. "I put a small sampling of the pheromone on a swab and placed it in a cage with two of my white lab mice." Merl sucked his teeth. "They were all over each other, copulating like bunnies in a matter of seconds."

Merl scratched his head. "Trinity, I don't know if you understand the significance of this discovery. Humans don't have sex pheromones. At least there is little scientific research to prove it exists. Up until I saw your results, I had never seen the quantities that you have in your body in any creature outside of female animals while looking for mates."

"No way." Trinity shook her head, but shut her mouth after a disapproving look from the doctor. It helped that Newton had taken her hand in his and was stroking her fingers.

Newton leaned close. "It gets worse."

Shiii-ite. How much worse could it get? Apparently, she was a bitch in heat.

Merl nodded his agreement. "After that pig thing attacked us, I tested his blood against a new sample from you, and your work up showed that it had altered again."

When Trinity didn't say anything, Merl continued on. "This time I found another chemical that I couldn't identify, but when I isolated the compound and injected it into two of my lab mice, they basically tore each other apart." Merl shuddered. "It was pretty awful, but the only conclusion I can draw is that whatever causes a Scrofa demon to go into a berserker rage, well, it transferred to you when his tusks tore into your chest."

"Hmmm." In heat and out of control. It sort of explained why she had suddenly had the driving need to have sex with not one, but two guys. Then, she'd almost gotten

killed by the Polandrial demon, when she went crazy on his ass in Newton's bathroom. So filled with rage she couldn't think.

"Fuck me..." The Polandrial. "Please tell me I'm not going to grow friggin' poisonous quills out of my face and neck."

Merl pursed his lips tightly. "To tell you the truth, I'm not really certain. When I isolated the new substance I found in your blood after Newton brought you home, well... It instantly killed two more of my lab mice."

"So, basically, the monsters are making me one of them?"

"Not exactly." He scooted even farther away. "In layman's terms, there are four basic components that make up human DNA. Adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine. You are missing adenine from your DNA, and you have an abnormally high amount of crystalline guanine."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Well, for one, it's highly reflective, which could explain why you're able to blend into the surroundings. And..."

"Oh Lord, there's more." Trinity sighed.

"You've heard of stem cells?"

"I haven't been locked in a basement for twenty years, so yeah, I've heard of them."

"Well, every multi-cellular creature has stem cells. They're designed to repair and replace damaged cells and organs in your body. But as an adult, all the stem cells you have are specific to whatever they have been programmed to fix. However, embryonic stem cells have the ability to become something entirely new."

"I'm not one of your students, Merl. Just tell me how this applies to me."

"It's a miracle of science, but all the stem cells in your body are more like embryonic. They have the potential to become more than their basic programming. It's fantastic, really."

"Fantastic. My freak factor has been confirmed." She looked up at Merl, feeling numb from head to toe. "What about my parents? Did they have this same... condition?"

Merl moved up to the arm of the couch. "Well..."

"Merlin Davitch, damn it all to hell, quit moving away from me. Why don't we just assume that I'm not going to go all *American Psycho* on your ass."

"Sorry, Trini. But I know what happened to the mice."

Newton laughed, unable to hold it in. Trinity followed, along with Merl. Soon all three of them were rolling in laughter. Even Dr. Gray cracked a smile.

"Very effective stress relief," he said approvingly.

Merl put his arm around Trinity. "Your parents were not, biologically speaking, your parents."

She looked up at him, all mirth leaving her instantly. "Now would be a good time to back away."

"Now, Trinity," Dr. Gray said. "It is what it is. Nothing Merlin will say or do can change facts or history. You can either accept that what he is saying is real or..."

"I know, I know. Bury my head in the sand."

Dr. Gray shrugged, and adjusted his thick glasses back up his nose. "Exactly."

"So, if I wasn't born to my parents, how did I come to be what I am? Hatched?"

Merl put up his hands. "I'll let Myron explain the rest."

Trinity wasn't sure if she was comfortable with Merl being on a first-name basis with her shrink, but she conceded to herself it was the least of her worries.

Dr. Gray crossed his legs and folded his arms. "Trinity, you're a special woman."

Fantastic. There was that word again. Special. She'd been described as special her whole life, most of the time not in a good way. She was getting pretty damned sick and tired of being so *special*. But she kept her mouth shut. For one thing, not wanting something to be true wasn't the same thing as it being a lie, and for another, the little doctor sort of intimidated her. He had that whole authority mojo thingy going on.

When she didn't say anything, Gray nodded. "Good. Some acceptance. That's a good thing." He pushed his heavy glasses back up his nose again. "Your real parents --"

"Daniel and Lisa Staten *were* my real parents."

"Fine. Conceded. Your biological parents were the Triune of Caledon."

"The what of what? Where the hell is Caledon?" It sounded like a Middle Eastern country.

"The what is Triune, the first family of Caledon. They were the most powerful, traditionally, of all the other species that exist on earth. Their leadership has traditionally helped maintain a balance between humans and others."

"I don't get it."

"The power of the Triune is inherited. Your mother, Marta, inherited the Triune from her father, and she bound two men with it. A first husband, Dar, and a second husband Jessia. They were the leaders in our system of government."

"Like a monarchy?"

"Yes, like that, in that the position is inherited through blood. And Caledon is not a what, but a who. They are high-born creatures filled with true earth magic. They are unlike any other species. Human-looking for the most part, they are what elf and fairy mythology is based on."

Trinity didn't know if she was buying any of this. Her mind told her it was all fabrication and lies. "My parents were Caledon, then? That makes me some kind of leprechaun, huh? So what happened to them?"

"They were killed. Murdered by a team of humans. Hired guns, if you will. They were led by Daniel and Lisa Staten. They were supposed to kill you as well, but Lisa couldn't bring herself to do it." He shrugged. "Instead, she snuck you out of the mayhem of the attack and took you home with her."

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me my parents killed my parents?" She fought the rage building inside her.

"Unfortunately, yes. And now, because of the Maenad you had sex with, the man who hired your parents knows that you're still alive." He smacked his lips disconcertingly. "Very unfortunate."

"And that's why all the attacks? He's been sending demons to kill me?"

"Yes. Demon isn't a very accurate term though. And remember, you are one of us."

"I am not one of you."

"Unimportant. The fact that you've now formed a new Triune makes your situation even more dire."

"I've done what?"

"The essence of a Triune is to make three..." Dr. Gray held up three fingers. "...into one." He folded his middle and ring finger.

"I still see three of us here." Trinity gestured to Newton and Merl.

"Actually," Dr. Gray started, "I suspect there's four of you sitting there."

Newton and Merl looked as confused as she felt. "Is there an invisible elephant in the room?"

"In a sense." Dr. Gray leaned forward, scratching his chin. "You're with child."

"No. No way." Maybe Trinity could buy all the other crap the doc was spinning, but pregnant? No fucking way.

"It's true whether you say so or not. The mark of the Triune proves it. And unfortunately, again, it will make you easy to find. The marks will act as a homing beacon for Jessie."

"Marta's second husband?" Newton asked. He'd been paying attention. Neither of them had said anything about the possibility of her being pregnant though.

"Very good, Mr. Price. Yes, the second husband. Like yourself. And Trinity's second father."

"My what?"

"I'm not anyone's second any thing," Newton said, his discord apparent.

"The power of the Triune lies in the child being created equally by each father," Dr. Gray addressed the two men. "Which means you are both the father of Trinity's unborn child."

Trinity stiffened. "Let's pretend this is all true. What needs to happen next?"

"Jessica fears you will overthrow him for the leadership of the Caledon. He will keep sending people after you until he has killed you, your men, and your child. Do you understand?"

"What if we just tell her people who she is?" Merl asked. He'd put his glasses on and was nervously adjusting the wire frames.

"They won't believe you. Not at first, not until the child is born. Until then, Jessica will do everything in his power to make sure that doesn't happen."

"So, nine months then?"

"Twelve actually. The gestation period for a Caledon is longer than that of a human." Dr. Gray stood to leave. "The way I see it, Trinity, you have three choices. You can run away and hope that Jessica doesn't find you and kill you and your men in the next twelve months; or you can stay and fight off mercenary after mercenary until they kill you all; or you can find Jessica, track him down, and kill that bastard before he has the chance."

Wow, good speech from the doctor, very gloom and doom, Trinity thought. "How come you're not afraid of him? Won't he kill you for telling me all this?"

Dr. Gray shook his head as he walked to the door. He opened it, but turned back briefly. "Marta was my sister. I stopped being afraid of Jessica the day he had her murdered. I don't care what happens to me. Not anymore." He tipped his head. "Oh, and I think you'll find, now that you are Triune, you'll have a better grasp of your abilities. Just practice those exercises I gave you. Goodbye for now, Trinity. I've watched you grow into a woman, and I hope to see you have grandchildren one day, but I suppose that will be up to you."

After Dr. Gray left, Trinity tried to wrap her head around all the information that had been laid at her feet. She still couldn't believe that her shrink who was a demon

was actually her uncle and she was a demon, or other, or whatever you called upright, walking, talking, thinking, feeling non-humans.

Trinity worried more for Merl and Newton than herself. The baby wasn't real, yet. Hell, for all she knew it wasn't real. And if it was, it was all of about a minute old. So, worry for the dividing cells would have to wait. Right now, her first priority was making sure the two guys she cared more about than anything else in the world didn't get dead because of her.

"Merl." She grabbed his hand. "Newt." She took the telepath's hand as well. "I'm going to leave. Tonight. You both shouldn't and won't have to worry about me, about any of this. It's my fight."

Newton kissed her neck. "I can't let you leave. I won't promise that I'll always feel this way, because to tell you the truth, I really don't know how I feel. But I know my own mind, and it's telling me to protect you with everything that I am and ever will be."

Merl tilted her chin up to face him. He kissed her lips, soft and slow. "You know me, Trini. I over-think everything until I can hardly function, but living without you isn't an option. It hasn't been for a very long time. I meant it when I said I love you."

Trini gazed back and forth between the two men. How had she gotten so lucky, and so unlucky, all at the same time? "What do we do now?"

Newton shrugged and then put his arm around her shoulders. "I've never been one to run or sit around waiting to die. I say we take the fight to Jessia. Kill him before he kills us."

Merl sagged down next to Trinity and put his head on her shoulder. She stroked his hair. A heavy sigh fell from his mouth. "My first impulse is to run or wait, but Newton's probably right. We should find the asshole. We'd at least have the element of surprise."

The way Merl and Newton stepped up for Trinity astounded her. She felt loved, protected, and most of all she felt... "Grateful."

"What?" Merl asked.

Standing up, Trinity turned to face both men. She smiled. Finding Jessie could wait one more day. She knelt on the floor between Merl and Newton, undoing the telepath's jeans first, then Merl's. They both relaxed back into the couch cushions. She stroked their cocks, licking one then the other. Tonight, she would show both men just how grateful she was.

Tomorrow, they would go kick some serious demon ass.

Hannah Beckham

Hannah Beckham is ready to be fitted for her own straightjacket and a magical stay in the rubber room. After a stint in the Army, Hannah found writing a great way to escape the insanity that is her life. She likes tough heroines with a sense of humor, and heroes who are hunkishly supernatural and a little damaged. She's always up for email. Readers can write her at hannah@hannahbeckham.com or visit her website at www.hannahbeckham.com.