

A man's back and shoulder are shown, with his skin covered in a realistic, glowing orange and yellow flame pattern. The flames appear to be rising from the bottom and spreading across his back and arms. The man's head is partially visible on the right side, showing a beard and mustache. The background is black.

# Hell Cop 2

ASTRID AMARA  
NICOLE KIMBERLING  
GINN HALE

Loose Id

# HELL COP 2

**Astrid Amara,  
Nicole Kimberling, and Ginn Hale**

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# **TRUST ME**

**Astrid Amara**

## Chapter One

"Ten eighteen! Backup needed at the TG Paper Mill, Fifty-eighth and Riverhead. Please respond!" the radio blared.

Officer Brian Day of the Parmas City Police Department Metropolitan Demonic Unit barely had time to clip his seat belt in before his partner, Field Training Officer Teresa Krane, stomped her foot down on the gas, pulled the hand brake, and spun the patrol car around. She deftly avoided two parked vehicles and a fourteen-foot-tall, delicately haired street-cleaning spider.

A year ago, fresh off the conjure-free commune where he'd grown up, Brian would have been amazed by the sight of the massive demon. But since becoming a police officer, he barely noticed things like giant spiders.

Unless they were doing something illegal, that is.

Krane responded to the radio request while Brian switched on the lights and siren, still excited even after a year in the police force. Driving fast in a police car was a perk of the job. While he tired of the endless paperwork and found routine calls to pick up drunk and disorderly sorcerers annoying, this—a high-speed race through the gritty urban core of Parmas City—*this* reminded him why he became a hell cop.

The sweaty summer streets south of the river were quiet at this hour of the evening. Most humans sought respite from the heavy heat by staying indoors, near fans and air conditioning. But those demonic species accustomed to the grueling humidity of the city ventured out. Krane wrinkled her nose against the stench of the polluted river and slammed shut the intake vents on the dashboard. They passed the burned frame of a minivan outside a cluster of graffiti-strewn apartment towers. A group of large yellow-horn demons gave their car the finger as they drove past. He would have laughed it off, except the radio crackled to life again.

"It's a whole fuckin' nest of surgers... Day, get over here!" The radio went dead.

Brian's stomach clenched. There was only one task he was ever called to by name.

Krane glanced at Brian briefly before turning her attention back to the road. "Sorry."

Brian stared out at the dark expanse of the city, illuminated in brilliant flashes of red and blue. He didn't say anything. He knew he shouldn't be disappointed. This happened all the time. But Krane was more empathetic than the others, and she picked up on his unspoken thoughts.

"It'll be quick," she said.

"Yeah."

"It's an honor, really. I never get personally called to anything."

"Yeah." Brian swallowed.

They raced through the empty intersections of streets surrounding the industrial south end of the city. Circles of light from the tall street lamps flickered as broad palm leaves waved in the sultry sea breeze. Up ahead Brian saw the collection of brick towers and exhaust pipes of the recently closed TG Paper Mill, the shattered window panes and half-demolished outbuildings making the neighborhood appear as though it had been recently shelled.

Krane steered the car through the open gates of the mill. The tires kicked up gravel as she halted next to two other patrol cars. Red and blue lights illuminated the vacant parking lot, demolition equipment, and surrounding buildings. Multicolored wires dangled from the exposed floors like streamers, and cheap plywood office furniture still remained within the half-torn rooms. The car lights strobed the shuttered entrance of the cylindrical brick structure like it was the entrance to some underground nightclub.

Brian grabbed his armored vest from behind the seat and pulled it over his head. Before he fully emerged from the car someone grabbed his arm, directing him to a front line constructed of the angled police cars. It was Detective Argent from the Demonic Unit.

"He's here!" Argent called, ushering Brian onward.

Brian glanced to the front of the motor barricade. Six officers were already on the scene, their shock-volt pistols charged. Brian's weapon remained holstered at his belt as he walked past. Brian leaned closer to Argent, keeping his voice low.

"Who's inside?"

"A sorcerer by the name of Arun Volpe," Argent told him. "He's got at least ten surgeons in there. My guess? He was after one and accidentally conjured a whole hive. He's wanted for toxin trafficking. We can get him once you clear the path."

Brian stepped from behind the cars and toward the remains of the mill. His heart thumped loudly. He hated this.

But he could feel it already, the sucking pull of anger into him, and rage, raw and unbridled, rushing through his muscles with a need to tear and destroy. Though he

understood intellectually that this desire for violence was only the magic that he siphoned from the demons, he still felt sick with himself as his arms began to tremble with the desire to shred flesh and bone.

But being an osmotic sorcerer was what made him valuable to this organization. Without this power he was nothing better than a rookie traffic cop.

Unconscious of his movements, Brian stepped toward the cylindrical brick building, forward, faster, and then he broke into a run, nearly ripping the metal fire door off its hinges as he threw himself inside the building.

There were over a dozen of them—a hive of surgeons loomed over Brian, their bodies thin and strong, with strips of muscle like the torso of a snake. Beady eyes blinked at him from atop stalks as thick as mariner's ropes, swiveling to take in their prey.

Brian's stomach roiled with their sick fury. White steam rose from his exposed skin.

With dramatic speed characteristic of its species, one of the demons lunged at him, its spastic tendrils clenched to crush his neck. Brian snapped his hand into the air, matching the speed of the surger, and gripped the tendril.

The flesh-on-flesh contact intensified his power as the wild violence of their demonic bloodlust rushed into him.

His other hand clutched the bottom of the tendril and ripped the muscle apart. Hot blood slicked his hands and soaked through his uniform, and his skin immediately began to itch in reaction to the toxins in the demon's blood.

He lost himself in the violence. His hands shattered teeth and split sinew. As the beasts mobbed him, he growled in rage and threw himself forward, harnessing their erratic speed into himself, stripping their flesh from their bodies in heavy chunks.

Razor-sharp claws punctured through the muscle of Brian's calf and he nearly toppled. Instead he gripped hold of the neck of a falling surger and drew the essence of its life into himself, instantly healing his wounds with demonic heat. The claw jerked from his flesh, repulsed. He kicked out and crushed his black boot into the eye stalk of the surger who'd injured him. He ground his heel down and separated the beast's eye from its head. Brian used his sleeve to wipe the blood from his face.

In the corner, a man sat, watching with his mouth agape, fingers trembling against the butt of a machine gun.

Brian sucked in the man's sorcerous power and shivered from the icy aftertaste. As another surger gripped Brian in his claws and lifted him into the air, Brian used his osmotic connection to summon the sorcerer's words to his own use, and he spat them out. The surger exploded into ash.

Brian fell, landing hard on his wrist. Bright pain shocked through him. He flailed outward with his unbroken hand and felt along disembodied demon parts, seeking a still-living demon.



He felt a weak sensation of life, in the corner, and he crawled toward it. The surger gave one last screech, and its talon sank into Brian's arm. The pain was terrible, but instantly it disappeared. Brian sucked in the demon's energy, pushing his wrist bone aright.

Something whizzed past his ear, and he swiveled to see the sorcerer shoot his gun as he took advantage of Brian's massacre to flee the building.

And then he heard the electric sizzle of a shock-volt pistol and knew he was no longer alone. The rest of the officers entered, fully armed and armored. They circled the sorcerer, visors down. Someone locked red spell-restraining cuffs onto the sorcerer's forearms, and someone else threw a collapsible spell-net over his writhing body.

Brian stood shakily, his entire body covered head to toe in blood, some of it his, most of it belonging to the demons who lay in pieces around him.

"God..." Detective Argent shook his head at the carnage. "What a mess."

Brian leaned his hands on his thighs, catching his breath. His skin itched painfully from the surger wounds, but he didn't have any enemies alive to steal energy from to heal himself. He'd learned from experience that most of his fellow officers were more than happy for him to barge into the fray and kill for them, but they found his unique ability to take their own powers disturbing. Someone even complained once to Captain Pollar about it – anonymously, of course.

"How you holding up?" Krane patted his back.

Brian gave her a thumbs-up, still too winded to speak.

"I demanded the right to bring the perp in ourselves." She smirked. "You deserve the credit, doing their dirty work."

Brian nodded. "You get to do the paperwork, then." His voice shook from exertion and adrenaline.

"Deal." She went over to supervise loading the sorcerer into their patrol car.

As Brian left the mill, the other officers patted his back, congratulated him, and smiled. And despite himself, he smiled back. He liked the praise. It was just too bad that he only got it when he committed epic violence.

Krane grimaced as Brian sat down in the passenger seat of their car. "You're going to stain the vinyl," she said. "Again."

"I can take the uniform off and sit naked, if you prefer." Brian wagged his eyebrows at her. "I've been told it's a very pretty sight."

Krane's laughter lightened her typically severe expression; it seemed to bring out the dust of freckles across her nose. She tucked errant tendrils of blonde hair behind her ears and then snapped on her seat belt. "Want to go out for a drink after work?" She pulled the car out of the gravel lot and back onto the dimly lit road. "I'm hooking up with Rake and Parish at the Sue Me later."

"I can't. I'm going to the gym with Jay as soon as I'm off."

Krane shook her head. "You've been living with the guy for half a year now. Aren't you sick of him yet?"

Brian laughed. "Nope. And I like going to the gym—not that it's helping me bulk out much."

"You don't need bulk. You've got crazy power." Krane merged into the heavier traffic along Sunset. "I don't even know why you bother with the gym."

"I go because I like watching Jay flex his muscles." Brian grinned. He didn't mention to Krane that Jay was actually a terrible show-off.

She laughed. "He is *built*."

"Yeah." Behind him, Brian heard the sorcerer mumble and turned to watch him through the bulletproof plastic window. Volpe's expression was sour, his face pinched with anger. But he had the delicate pale skin tone and soft facial features of half the powerful hotblood sorcerers in town, making him look somewhat angelic despite his wrath. His lips moved, but Krane had turned the intercom off, preferring not to have to listen to the string of inevitable threats and curses that all hotbloods seemed to master at birth.

Brian felt it then, a pulsing sensation coming from the sorcerer as he combined words in his head. It wouldn't work; the restraint cuffs would cut off his power, but Brian pounded the plastic barrier between them anyway. He punched his finger down on the intercom button.

"Knock it off!" he barked at the sorcerer.

Arun Volpe's lip curled as he spat out another obscenity.

Brian turned back to watch the road. His ass stuck to the car seat with dried blood, and his fingers now itched uncontrollably with the sting of surger blood.

He looked to Krane. He wondered if she'd let him take just a little of her energy to heal himself. Everyone in the Metro Demonic Unit had suffered the unbearable itch of surger blood at one point or another, so she would understand the level of pain he was enduring.

But Krane hated it when he took her energy. Besides, she was driving, and if she got woozy or weak she could crash the car and get hurt. So he focused on the traffic instead of the irritation across his skin.

At Enyalios Station, Brian helped the sorcerer out of the car and led him through the back entrance.

The booking room was packed. Summer months seemed to attract the worst kind of petty criminal in Parmas City, and the room seethed with prostitutes, drug dealers, carjackers, thieves, illegal demons, impersonators, and amorphous gas clouds from the Cold Hells whose inability to communicate was becoming a plague in Parmas. They still didn't understand they were not allowed to come and go at will.

Brian and Krane muscled a path through the crowd. The restless detainees surged closer. An unusually large gorvan demon backed up and knocked Brian into the wall,

and before he could stop it, the lights in the room flickered and Brian sucked in static. He breathed out and gripped Volpe's arm tighter, marching on, ignoring the gorvan and the heady tingle of the electrical grid.

As he walked down the hall, the other officers and department staff ogled his filthy state. Bartleby, the demon translator who worked for the police department, glared at him as though *he* were the suspect, not Volpe, and Officer Bridget Carmichael looked like she would throw up. Even Captain Pollar, Brian's boss, frowned at Brian's appearance.

After Volpe's processing, Brian quickly showered and changed into a fresh uniform. He was dead beat and in a lot of pain. Washing off the surger blood helped, but the toxins had already seeped through his skin, and the itch worsened by the minute.

He needed to find his lover, Jay, who always allowed him to take energy to heal himself. It wouldn't require much—just a pinch of Jay's excessive sorcerous power—and Brian could stop itching all over.

But Jay wasn't in the station, so Brian turned toward the medical office as an alternative.

Officer Krane blocked his path. She cocked her head, studying Brian's expression, then tossed him a file. "You do it."

Brian glanced at the file in his hands, and then back at his partner. "What?"

Krane nodded to the interview room at Brian's back. "Question Volpe."

Brian's eyes widened. "Really?"

She smiled. "You've been begging for a chance to prove yourself for months now. You've seen me do it. It's time you start investigating your own cases. Just go slow and don't let anything he says get to you."

Brian couldn't help the goofy grin that spread across his face. Krane just gave him the chance he had spent months fighting for.

Brian dreamed of making full detective in the Demonic Unit. He wanted to become Jay's partner at work as well as in bed. But his attempts to move up the ranks beyond that of a first-class patrol officer were thwarted by those outranking him, who preferred relegating him to demon clean-up duty.

If he could prove that he had the skills needed to conduct a suspect questioning professionally and effectively, he stood a chance of finally getting a promotion.

So he forgot about getting medical care, ignored the burning itch of the surger irritants, and tightened his grasp on the folder.

"I'll be very thorough," Brian said sincerely.

Krane barked a short laugh. "Just don't let him get to you. Volpe's got a record, and it looks like he enjoys fucking with cops."

Brian nodded. He turned and followed Krane into the interview room.

The sorcerer was seated at a green plastic chair behind the only table in the narrow room. The blue walls were meant to be soothing, but it didn't seem to work on Volpe, who glared at Brian and Krane with clear disdain.

"I want my goddamn lawyer," Volpe said. It was the first time Brian had clearly heard the sorcerer's voice. It was smooth and hypnotic, despite the anger in his tone.

"Yours is on the way." Brian sat down across from him. Volpe flexed his hands in the restraint cuffs and pulled at the ankle cuffs that locked him to the chair, but otherwise did not move or say a thing.

Krane leaned against the wall behind Brian, crossing her arms. She yawned, but Brian had been her partner for several months now and knew she was alert under her guise of boredom.

Brian thumbed through Volpe's file, reading quickly but acting like he was dawdling, a trick he had seen other officers pull a hundred times.

"You still stink," Volpe commented, nodding to Brian's wet hair.

"Mm. Messy business, all those surgeons." Brian lowered the file. He glanced at Volpe calmly, despite the quick, excited beat of his heart. "So why did you summon them?"

"I didn't. It was a mistake." Volpe suddenly winced.

Brian shook his head. "It really won't help you to try and conjure anything. You can't get past those cuffs."

Volpe stared back but said nothing.

Brian absent-mindedly scratched at the backs of his hands. "So what *were* you trying to do?"

"Nothing illegal. I attempted to send a message to the ancestors of my mother's servant." At Brian's frown, Volpe rolled his eyes. "She's a Tafarian tooth-hound. She can't communicate through portals; she has no voice. I told her I'd pass on her regards. I meant to only open a small communication portal."

Brian realized he would scratch all the skin off his hand if he didn't stop, so he pulled his hands apart. "Why did you need the machine gun?"

"I always travel armed. I have a permit for it."

"Why didn't you open the portal at home?" Brian shuffled through the paperwork. "It says here you have a basic yellow permit for communication portals within your residence."

"I needed privacy. The tooth-hound wanted the message to be secret."

"So you drove all the way to an abandoned paper mill on the opposite end of town from your house, sat in the dark with your machine gun, to speak with the ancestors of your family dog? That was the plan?"

"Mistakes happen all the time." Volpe grinned coldly. "I'm not the first sorcerer to screw up."

"So you didn't intend to open the communication portal at the exact location of an existing physical transfer portal?"

Volpe paused. "Like I said, a mistake," he said softly. "I didn't know the mill had an abandoned resource portal."

"Uh-huh." Brian scowled. "Pure, incredible luck. You just sat right beside it. And opened it."

"Hey, fuck-head, I didn't research the history of the building first! I just wanted a quiet place. You can't arrest me for that."

"I can charge you with trespassing."

Volpe laughed. "Trespassing? That's what I am here for?" He shook his head. "I need my lawyer. This is bullshit."

"And with endangering the public by bringing uncontrollable demons into the city."

"Who in their right mind would purposefully summon one? They're uncontrollable."

"Good question," Brian said. "That's why I'm asking."

"How many times do I have to say it? It was a mistake! You can't bust me for that."

"You also opened fire on a police officer."

Volpe looked unfazed. "I was trying to help you kill them."

Brian flushed. Well, that, clearly, was a lie. The man had wanted to blow him away, and now he claimed to have helped him?

Brian frowned at the file. *Now what?* He hadn't realized how hard it was to re-angle questions for better responses.

He glanced over to Krane, but she ignored him, her expression firmly neutral, eyes fixed on Volpe as if he could break his chains and leap for her throat at any moment.

"Look," Brian said, "the judge will be more lenient if you tell the truth now. We'll eventually find it, and if everything you've said here is a lie, I can guarantee you a longer sentence. The sooner you start telling the truth, the sooner we can both get out of here." Brian looked down and realized he had been itching his hands again. Blood welled up from the scratches. God, he needed Jay's energy. The burning was driving him insane.

"I'll make bail tonight," Volpe said.

Brian shook his head. "You shot at an officer. The judge will deny you bail."

"I don't get denied bail. Do you know who my father is?"

"Who cares?" Brian spat, annoyed.

"A little sensitive, are we?" Volpe narrowed his eyes at Brian's badge. "Officer Day. That's right, I heard about you. You're the Sair Pharmaceuticals brat, aren't you? Maybe I'll see your old man in prison." His eyes glinted.

Brian's skin felt like it was on fire. He wanted to punch the smug expression off Volpe's face.

The light bulb dangling above the desk squeaked, and Brian looked up at the fixture. The bulb tilted slightly toward him.

"Day," Krane cautioned quietly.

Volpe noticed as well. He shook his head. "You've got a real problem with aggression, Day." He spoke directly to Krane. "I saw this maniac in action. He's unstable, you know."

Rage flushed through Brian.

"You'll answer the officer's questions," Krane told Volpe.

Volpe shook his head. "I don't have to say shit."

"If you help us out now, it will speed the process," Brian continued, trying to control his mounting frustration. It wouldn't be so bad if his skin wasn't burning with the need to scratch. He felt dangerously like ripping into his own flesh. If he drew enough power from the electrical grid, he could do it, too, which scared him enough to make him clench his hands around the file folder.

"You've been arrested before on suspicion of harvesting surger blood for itch bombs," he said.

"Yeah, and none of the charges stuck." Volpe kept his eye on the light fixture. It leaned toward Brian sharply now and was making a buzzing sound. Brian could feel static charging through him.

"Who do you sell the blood to?" Brian asked.

"Fuck you." Volpe flexed against the spell cuffs. "I'm not going to talk to some menial patrol officer, not without a lawyer present."

Brian heard the door open behind him, and turned to see Officer Carmichael poke her head in and speak softly with Krane. Krane gave Brian a reassuring nod and then stepped from the room.

For a moment, panic filled Brian. He knew he was failing this interview. Detective Argent had been looking for this suspect on prior unregistered demon summonings, but Brian didn't know how to ask his questions in a way that would get Volpe to answer them. He wasn't sure what Argent needed.

"When did you arrive at the mill?" Brian asked, hoping some details might reveal a flaw in Volpe's arguments. He scratched angrily at his arms.

Volpe leaned over the table. "Why don't you fetch that pretty bitch that was in here to chat with me instead? I'm more conversational toward a nice pair of tits, especially compared to a rookie faggot like you."

Rage burst through Brian. The power surged in the room.

Volpe's eyes glinted. "Must have hit close to home with that one." Volpe tilted his head. "You suck cock, Day? You beg the *real* men here to give it to you nice and hard?"

"Shut up," Brian growled. The lights dimmed and then brightened instantly, and Brian felt electricity surge through him. He heard Krane open the door behind him.

"Listen," Volpe said, "pull up your tights and run and fetch me a real officer, not some limp wrist who fucks his way to the top."

Brian's itching suddenly eased. He didn't even realize how. But relief coursed over his skin and he leaned back and closed his eyes, sucking in the comfort.

Then he became aware of the fact that that Volpe had finally shut up.

Brian opened his eyes and saw Volpe frozen stiff in the chair, eyes wide and deathly white.

"Day! Stop touching him!" Krane ran to Volpe's side. Her breath hitched when she realized Brian wasn't touching Volpe. She reached for Brian's shoulder.

Brian literally trembled with electricity, and he'd shock her if she touched him. He pressed his palms against the metal table to expel the charge, and an arc of current sparked from his hand and shot the table sideways.

He tried to break the suction from Volpe, but it was too good, his body needed it too much. He was vaguely aware of Krane grabbing him, yanking him backward, dragging him from the room. Brian turned off the torrential flow of energy from Volpe, but then he found another source, the sensation of healing heat and life pumping into him from Krane's hand, so pleasurable against his burning skin...

Krane swung her fist back and punched him in the face.

Brian stumbled back, stunned.

"What the hell!" He rubbed his jaw. He glared at her, but then saw how frightened she was. They were both in the hallway outside the interview room, and she was pale, clenching her fist in her hand.

Others arrived quickly, rushing at the sound of Krane's alarm. Captain Pollar appeared, and Carmichael dashed into the interview room and immediately yelled for a medic.

Brian glanced inside. Volpe lay slumped unconscious on the table, drained white.

Captain Pollar glowered at Brian, arms crossed over his chest. "Five minutes. My office." He stormed off.

Brian slid down the wall and crouched, rubbing his jaw. "You didn't have to punch me," he said quietly to Krane.

"You weren't listening to me!" She gritted her teeth. "I didn't know you could do that. Steal people's energy without touching them."

"Neither did I," Brian said. He pushed himself back up the wall to a standing position. "You have a nasty left hook."

Krane didn't answer him. She started down the hall.

Brian trailed after her. "So how badly did I screw up?" he asked.

"Pretty fuckin' badly." Krane glanced back at him. She looked furious. Brian shut his mouth tightly against the joke he was going to make. He walked beside her, rubbing his jaw and thinking. If he could etiolate energy from people without touching them, that meant his osmotic powers were growing. And while this excited him, thinking of what he would be able to do, it also worried him, because it would fuel Jay's ongoing argument for Brian to see a specialist about his strengthening powers. Jay worried that the day would come when Brian would go too far and take more than he intended.

Brian hoped today was not that day.

"Is Volpe okay?" Brian asked Krane. She stalked the hallway beside him, still steaming in anger.

"Teresa?"

"I don't know," she snapped.

"Are you in trouble for letting me question him?"

She didn't answer, and he felt sick. "Are *you* okay?"

"No!" She shoved him against the wall. "You had no right to do that!"

Brian blinked. "Do what?"

"You have to ask me! It *kills* me, you know!"

Brian swallowed. He had been so focused on stopping the drain from Volpe he hadn't even thought about what he was doing to her...

"I'm sorry. Teresa? You know I didn't mean to. Honestly!"

Krane angrily flicked wild strands of hair out of her eyes. "Yeah? Well, just watch it, okay? I don't care what you do to other people, but it really pisses me off when you do your little sucking thing without permission."

"It won't happen again."

"That's what you said last time," she snapped.

"Day!"

Brian flinched as Pollar bellowed his name.

"Get in here!"

Despite their argument, Krane gave him a brief, tight-lipped smile.

Brian quickly entered Captain Pollar's office.

Captain Pollar looked weary on the best of days, despite the fact that his skin had a youthful luster and physically he appeared almost boyish.

But the stress of running the severely understaffed and overworked Demonic Unit had affected his eyes, making him glower in contrast to his cherublike, rosy cheeks. His thick blond hair stood straight up on his head from chronically running his fingers through it in moments of stress. As soon as Brian shut the door, Pollar wheeled on him, his expression tight.

"One more incident of brutality like that, and I'm pulling you off the force."



Brian gaped at the captain for several seconds before he found his voice.

"*Brutality?*" He flushed.

"You were way out of line! You nearly killed a suspect!"

Brian continued to gape, sick to his stomach.

"Did you hear me?" Pollar yelled.

"But —"

"This isn't the first time!" Pollar barked. "You nearly ripped apart the very girl we were trying to rescue at the docks last month. Did you forget that?"

"No one told me who we were there for!" Brian countered. "The other cops shoved me onto the boat and told me to clear a path! I didn't know —"

"You have to control yourself and learn some restraint."

"Restraint!" Brian's voice shook. "For months I've begged you to give me less violent jobs, to treat me as an officer with the capacity for reason. All you've ever done is throw me on the front line and use me as a fucking weapon! And now you're pissed because I'm too *brutal*?"

"There's a difference between defending your fellow police officers in a raid and interrogating a suspect, especially a sorcerer as connected as Volpe!" Pollar yelled.

The electricity surged in the room. Pollar narrowed his eyes.

Brian had to calm down. He took deep breaths, but his throat felt tight with the betrayal.

"You've always encouraged me to use my power," Brian hissed. "And now you want me to calm down?"

Pollar pinched his eyes. "Look. You're a good kid, Day. And you've got amazing talent. We've never seen anything like you." He shook his head. "But the second you stop being an asset and start becoming a liability we're going to get into trouble."

Pollar sighed loudly. He walked around his desk and sat down. "Volpe is a hotblood from a connected family. You harm him, we get sued. There's enough press right now about corruption in the police department; we don't need you killing suspects to add to the image of us as butchers. So hell yes, I am asking you to calm down. You want to rip apart demons? Fine. But leave Parmas citizens alone."

Brian stood there, too angry to speak. Pollar was his boss. Brian couldn't say the words that burned his tongue.

Pollar looked up from his desk. "You're not to have anything to do with Volpe again," he said. "Go home and calm down, for God's sake. And if I ever see you pull any stunt like that again, you're suspended."

Brian's anger throbbed inside him. He turned to leave before it got the better of him.

"I'm teaching you control, Brian," Pollar said behind him.

Brian turned and faced the captain.

“No. You are teaching me how to be a hypocrite.” He walked away before he heard Pollar’s response.

## Chapter Two

Detective Jay Yervant stood outside the back entrance of Enyalios Station, smoking a cigarette.

He had to hurry. Brian would be out any minute, and Brian heartily discouraged Jay's nasty habit. But it had been a bitch of a long day, and Jay needed something to distract him until Brian finally got off duty.

Jay's case was not going well.

He was investigating what the media had nicknamed the "changeling babies," at least a dozen infants adopted by unsuspecting families from an unscrupulous agency that had used a glamour spell over demon infants to make them appear human. Normal as babies, the children developed into their full-sized, massive, scaly, demonic selves when the glamour wore off around age two. Without the calming influence of their natural parents, the children were uncontrollable, and often brutal restraining techniques were required to manage them after their change. There was nothing worse than being sent out to shock-volt someone's furious, confused toddler.

It was a big case, involving a national adoption agency, a dozen grief-stricken new parents, and a slew of demon-rights advocates who were horrified that demons were being robbed of their infants and the law did nothing about it. But ever since Jay lost his partner a year ago in an attack, he had been working alone. It was too much for one man to follow up on, and every day he felt clues slipping from his grasp, the trail growing colder.

The back door opened, and Jay pinched his cigarette, ready to toss it. But it was only Bridget Carmichael. She smirked at Jay, knowing Brian disapproved of his smoking.

A moment later the doors opened again, this time for Bartleby and another demon. Bartleby's thin black body was sleek and muscular. Unlike many demons who

worked for humans, Bartleby didn't bother with clothing. His nudity never seemed to be an issue for him, and after a while, it wasn't for any of the cops who had worked with him for so many years.

Bartleby nodded to Jay as well and clicked something in his native language to the other demon beside him. They both laughed. Jay straightened, feeling self-conscious.

"Hey."

Jay quickly dropped his cigarette at Brian's voice. He crushed it under his boot. He turned and had to do a double take as soon as he saw the uniform in Brian's arms, soiled nearly black.

Jay looked him over. "How much of that blood is yours?"

"Just a little." Brian gave him a tired smile.

Jay knew one of his eyebrows raised, but he didn't say anything. He'd let Brian tell him about it if he wanted to.

But it was clear something was wrong. Brian's skin looked irritated, his hands were badly scratched. And the expression on Brian's face was angrier than he'd seen in a long time.

Jay pulled off the thin glove on his right hand and gently reached out to grab Brian's wrist. Brian knew what he offered. Jay expected to feel that odd sleepy draining sensation of Brian taking his energy to heal himself. Instead Brian jerked his hand back as if burned.

"Don't!" Brian looked angry.

Jay dropped his hand. "Sorry."

Brian closed his eyes. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Jay's shoulder. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bark." He lifted his head and gave Jay a weak smile that wasn't fooling anyone. "I'm fine, really."

"You look beat," Jay said. He pulled his glove back on. "You sure you want to go to the gym?"

Brian nodded. "I've got some aggression to work out."

Jay wanted to say the amount of gore on his uniform suggested that Brian had already worked out a lot of aggression, but he kept his mouth shut and started walking.

Ten blocks separated the station and Pearl's Gym, but Jay liked the walk after work, and it was a good way to stretch his muscles before his workout.

Despite the late hour, the air lay heavy against him, like a warm washcloth draped across his face. Jay always burned hot, so on scorching days he struggled to keep himself hydrated. A low blue flame rolled off his exposed skin, and steam rose from his head as his sweat evaporated from his burning body.

"Catch any bad guys?" Jay asked.

Brian laughed. It was one of their inside jokes, a reference to Brian's dismay at how much police work involved filing reports.

Brian didn't answer the question, but he did gently tap Jay on the arm. "I got a call from Leon this morning."

"Oh?" Leon and Brian had an odd but amusing friendship. "What did he want?"

"He wanted suggestions on where to take his girlfriend out to dinner. He said he wanted something nicer than fast food, a classy place."

"Wait. We're talking about Leon here? Leon, your-old-landlord-Leon?"

Brian grinned. "He said, 'somewhere a guy could spend maybe four dollars a person.'"

Jay laughed. "Classy."

"For Leon? Yeah. Remember, I once asked him what his perfect weekend would be, and he said 'I don't know... I always wanted to go to a buffet.'"

"I think buffets are a vision of endless bounty to him." Jay shook his head. "I'm more amazed that he has a girlfriend."

"Me too." Brian laughed. "He didn't believe me once when I told him that women have eggs. He thought I was mixing up demons with humans again. I had to explain all about ovaries. And then I thought to myself, what the hell am I doing? I'm a gay man raised in a religious commune. Why am I explaining this shit to anyone, let alone a forty-year-old guy I hardly know? Insane."

Jay laughed again, feeling the tension of his day slip away. It was always this easy, with Brian.

Brian launched into a lively discussion about some debate he'd had with his partner over the inter-department basketball tournament, and Jay listened, walking casually, enjoying the warm air and Brian's excited voice. After a while Jay realized Brian was a little too animated. He seemed bursting with energy. If Jay had seen such behavior in other people, he might suspect drug use. But with Brian, it usually meant he had absorbed power from a passing sorcerer, or an unsuspecting demon, or, lately, a light post.

Something bothered Brian, he could tell. There was a nervous quality to his voice as he discussed his day. But Jay didn't ask about it. He didn't want to pry. After all, he himself was often grateful for Brian's discretion. There had been many nights Jay had come home in a crappy mood, but Brian never forced confessions out of him or made him relive it. The two of them would find comfort either in light conversation and a little television, or more frequently, some rigorous fucking that would leave Jay so sated and happy that he couldn't even remember what he had been pissed about in the first place.

Yeah, Brian had done wonders for his mood swings, but he doubted he could say the same for Brian. When they had met, Brian had been one of the most optimistic, cheerful, and innocent people he had ever spent time with.

But a year as a police officer seemed to have taken its toll on Brian's formerly bubbly personality, and Jay wasn't sure he liked the change.

At the gym Jay pulled on his workout gear and immediately headed to the weights. The club was always sparsely populated, one of the perks of the high membership price, but at the late hour the place was nearly dead.

Brian began his workout on the treadmill, setting a fast tempo for his run, his dark blue eyes staring forward blankly. He ran his hand through his short black hair, and it stuck upward, wet with sweat. Jay smiled to himself. He always thought Brian looked incredible, but he especially liked it when Brian's appearance grew disheveled like this.

Jay lost himself in the pleasurable exhaustion of his routine, his worries about Brian and the missing pieces of his investigation drifting temporarily from his mind.

When Brian was done with his run, he moved closer to Jay, giving a quick smile before sitting down at one of the nearby stationary bikes.

Jay added a hundred pounds to the bench press and lay back on the leather bench. Just as he did, he caught sight of the short blond hair and sharp blue eyes of Paul Krochalis, one of the other members of the gym.

Jay immediately sat up. He tensed as Paul walked past Brian. And Paul proved his reaction right; while passing Brian, Paul mouthed the word "cocksucker" before going to his own stationary bike.

Brian's face went blank of expression, but Jay felt his own heat pull from his body, toward Brian. The lights in the gym flickered. Jay watched him carefully.

Brian closed his eyes and slowly blew air out between his clenched teeth. He looked down at the floor as he continued to pedal his bike.

Jay glared across the room at Paul. He knew him, vaguely. He was a relative, some cousin thrice removed. That didn't mean Jay liked him in the least. The guy was a prick, and ever since Jay bought Brian a membership at the club for his birthday, Paul seemed to have a thing for Brian, in the worst way.

Paul accused Brian of not wiping down the equipment. He blamed Brian for leaving his towel out. And even though Brian never said anything to Jay about it, Jay knew Paul whispered taunts to Brian when their paths crossed.

Paul looked back at them both with a smirk before moving on to the Stairmaster.

"Bry, check this out," Jay said. He reached up and did a quick succession of pull-ups with one hand, while lifting a one-hundred-pound dumbbell in his other.

Brian laughed. "Show-off." He shook his head.

"Want to see how many I can do?" Jay asked.

"Sure. I bet you quit at fifteen." Brian grinned as he pedaled his bike.

Jay loved a challenge. His arms started shaking at ten, but he pushed through the burn. He focused some of the sorcerous heat that coursed over his body into his muscles, providing extra support, and he managed to finish twenty reps before dropping to the ground in a heap.

Brian laughed again. He looked so damn cute when he did that. Jay moved to Brian's side, still panting.

But his success as a distraction was fleeting. As Brian glanced at Paul once more, his expression hardened.

"You want me to beat him up for you?" Jay whispered.

"No." Brian didn't even laugh like he would normally have. He kept racing, his legs pedaling faster, and he wiped sweat from his forehead. "I just... How many times are people going to insult me today? Seriously?"

"He's just jealous," Jay said, trying for levity. "He can't stand that the only cock you suck is mine."

Brian whipped his towel at Jay. "Asshole." But he smiled, which lightened his expression once more.

Jay watched Brian finish his workout, unable to tear his eyes off the man's body. His pale skin and blue eyes seemed all the brighter against his short black hair. Brian had the long, straight nose of all the sorcerers of the Sair family, but his sensual lips and high cheekbones were clearly from his mother's side.

Unlike Jay, all bulk and muscle, Brian was thin and agile. He could lift a good hundred eighty pounds, but his body remained tight and sleek. He was as close to artwork as Jay had ever seen in a body.

When Brian finished his ride, he stood very close to Jay. Brian glanced at him, and Jay smiled back. And despite the fact that Paul Krochalis watched them disapprovingly, Brian reached out and rested his hand on Jay's neck. A simple touch, but Jay's entire body stretched toward it.

Because of Jay's own genetic makeup, he was too hot to ever touch other living beings. His flesh burned on contact. Until he met Brian, he had spent his entire adult life wearing gloves and keeping his distance, memories of scalding his mother and charring the arms of childhood friends scarring his ability to share physical space with others.

But Brian had changed all that. Brian's osmotic powers absorbed Jay's heat rather than burned from it. Jay could finally have the physical contact he had craved his entire life.

Even now, a year into their relationship, he still reveled in Brian's touch. All day long he thought about it.

And here it was, the soothing weight of Brian's hand, a simple caress that meant everything to Jay.

Jay easily forgot the problems that nagged their relationship when Brian touched him. With someone as beautiful as Brian, it was easy to push problems off for another day.

So Jay ignored the glares of Paul, the exhaustion in his body, and the fruitlessness of his work day, and let himself be lost in the simple pleasure of just the two of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had cooled slightly since they entered Pearl's Gym, and a refreshing breeze from the beach rushed over Jay and Brian as they walked home. Flashing neon street lights illuminated their path. Jay set a leisurely pace, enjoying the wind too much to rush the walk.

"I hate that guy," Brian said. He fiddled with the strap on his gym bag.

"Who? Paul?" Jay shrugged. "He's just an asshole. The world's full of them."

"I ran away from the commune to get away from pricks like that," Brian said. "I don't like finding them here."

Jay put his arm around Brian's shoulder. "I'll talk to the club manager. We'll file a complaint."

"That seems silly," Brian said.

"Well, it's more legal than beating the guy up."

Brian shook his head. "Doesn't it get to you? You seem so immune to shit like that."

"I'm not immune." Jay watched a group of drunk men swerve in and out of the roadway. "I'm just more practiced at controlling my feelings."

"Did you deal with a lot of bigotry growing up?" Brian asked.

Jay shrugged. "The usual. It's not like I was openly out in high school or anything. My family flipped out at first when I told them, and I lost a few friends. The hardest was dealing with assholes at work."

"Really?" Brian cocked his head. "It seems to me like everyone's pretty tolerant."

"In the Demonic Unit, yeah, they're too desperate for sorcerers to be picky. But get out of the department and there are a lot of opinionated pricks."

"Sounds as bad as after Charter Hill."

"Charter Hill?" Jay brushed his gloved hand through Brian's hair.

"There was a group of guys I used to hang out with back on the commune. One guy, Mark, was from my farm, and two other guys were from another conjure-free community about fifteen miles from ours. Anyway, we used to all go to this barn on Charter Hill, and...well, you know."

Jay smirked. "Experiment?"

Brian laughed. "Something like that. Fun stuff. Anyway, one of our pastors got ahold of Mark and made him confess to fucking around with the boys up at the barn. It was devastating. The way everyone treated him afterward... And I was pissed too, because since he referred to Charter Hill by name I couldn't go there to meet the other guys anymore.

"Luckily, he never mentioned me personally, but it was too close for comfort. And when I saw the way the rest of the community treated Mark after that, it was easy to justify leaving for Parmas."

"What happened to him?" Jay asked.



Brian shrugged. "Who knows? He's probably a pastor himself by now. They were all hypocrites anyway."

Brian's tension suggested something more lay under this story, or at least Brian's mood, but Jay didn't ask.

They climbed the stairs to Jay's penthouse condo, and Jay immediately cranked the air conditioning, but it was still too hot for comfort. Jay stripped off his shirt.

"I'll go pick up dinner," Brian said, staying only long enough to drop off his gym bag.

Jay caught his arm. "We can order delivery." The sight of Brian's body flexing on the bike had given Jay a hard-on that still half-heartedly lingered in his pants.

Brian smiled. "I know you can survive on burgers and hoagies alone, but I need something with vegetables once in a while."

Jay grimaced.

"Don't worry," Brian said, "I'll make sure your vegetarian dish comes with bacon."

"My hero." Jay kissed him. The sensation of soft lips and rough stubble only encouraged Jay's enthusiastic dick, and he pulled Brian closer.

He could feel Brian's erection against his leg, but then Brian stepped back, wiping his mouth with a grin.

"You are such a distraction."

"So are you," Jay said, rubbing his gloved finger over his lips, taking in the sight of Brian standing there with noticeably tenting sweats.

Flame spread across Jay's bare chest and down his arms, growing in intensity the more excited he got.

But Brian stepped back, shaking his head. "Food first. Fuck later."

"Fine." Jay plopped onto the couch. "I'll be here, waiting."

Brian waved and then headed back out.

While he was gone, Jay lay back on the couch, inevitably thinking again about the oddness of his current case. The motive was, in itself, clear. Desperate Parmas City couples, infertile and dreaming of a newborn of their own, were willing to pay great fortunes for the chance to adopt a healthy infant. It only took a little genetic cocktail and a dash of sorcery to transform the demon babies into temporary human infants.

But as he investigated the case, Jay trudged through endless legal histories of demonic custody rights and the rights of infants. It still wasn't clear to him if the Ertashi demons were willingly giving up their children for the scam or if they too were victims of the One Family adoption agency. It was a quagmire of legal interpretation, and he really needed to find an expert to help him sort out the mess.

He started looking up adoption law attorneys on his computer, but then Brian returned, hands full of paper bags smelling suspiciously healthy, and Jay happily

abandoned his research for the rest of the night. He popped in a DVD of a TV series he and Brian were addicted to, helped Brian sort the food into bowls, and sat on the couch in front of the television.

As Brian ate, Jay noticed a new, shiny scar on Brian's wrist, and what looked to be a puncture mark on his right arm. This daily collection of new scars worried Jay sick, but he didn't say anything. He trusted Brian to know what he was doing and not take crazy risks. Besides, in reality, there wasn't anyone Jay should have worried less for. Brian was practically indestructible. His osmotic powers made him the match of every beast or sorcerer he met. And his ability to channel and use energy to heal himself made him practically indestructible.

Which is what concerned Jay, because he knew Brian took chances he shouldn't with his life because of this power. The growing collection of scars bore testament to that.

Jay ate his dinner quietly, one eye on the television, the other on Brian, who still seemed to be brimming with an anxious energy, but not yet willing to say anything.

If Jay had been a different man, he would have just asked Brian about it. He would have expressed his concern. But Jay was bad about communicating his feelings. It was a trait he had learned from his father. Jay didn't know how to have a heart-to-heart with anyone.

And he had never cared about anyone enough to want to try. But Brian was different. And so, as Brian ate his salad and stared at the television, Jay wanted to comfort him.

Instead, he just did the dishes while Brian sprawled on the couch.

As Jay finished up in the kitchen, he felt his own heat pull away from him. It was a weird sensation, like being gently lured closer. He peered around the corner to see Brian sitting on the couch, glaring at the television, on fire.

Brian's body absorbed Jay's flames. It was a trait Jay used to find endearing. But now it just scared him. Brian didn't even need to touch him anymore to do that.

"Bry."

Brian stared blankly at the television. Jay noticed a commercial played for the church that founded the commune Brian had grown up on.

Jay walked over and shook his shoulder. "*Brian.*"

Brian looked up then, blinking. "What?"

"You're absorbing my heat."

Brian's eyebrows came together as if confused, and then he shook his head. "Sorry." He leaned back against the couch. "I'm just tired."

Jay blinked. Most sorcerers he knew grew less powerful when exhausted. Brian just seemed to lose control and suck in more.

"What is wrong with you tonight?" Jay asked.

"Nothing."

"Bullshit." Jay sat beside Brian. He crossed his arms and lay back against the armrest, stretching out. He rested his feet against Brian's thighs, and watched Brian's legs absorb Jay's fire with the contact. "What happened?"

"I don't want a fight right now."

"You won't get one. Just tell me what's going on."

Brian's expression faltered, and he looked nervous. "You're going to be pissed."

Jay clenched his jaw. "Only if you don't tell me."

Brian stared at him. "I interrogated a suspect today. A sorcerer. Arun Volpe."

Jay raised an eyebrow. It must have been Brian's partner's idea. "You don't have training for that."

"You're right. I've learned my lesson," Brian said bitterly, and Jay sat up.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I got carried away. He...he called me some names. I didn't think."

"You hit him?" Jay asked.

"No! I didn't touch him." Brian sat up as well. He ran his hand through his hair. "But I was itching. I started... I took his energy."

Jay scowled. "So you touched him."

"No. I did it without touching."

Jay closed his eyes. He knew Brian was getting more powerful, but he really didn't like the idea that Brian could etiolate others without physical contact.

"Pollar threatened to suspend me if I do it again," Brian said.

"Why would he do that?"

Brian looked at the floor. Then he made eye contact. "I got carried away. I guess I almost killed him."

Jay stared at him in silence for a moment.

"You guess? Brian, what are you saying? You almost *killed* a suspect?"

"Well, what does anyone expect?" Brian jumped to his feet and threw his arms in the air. He started pacing the room. "This is what they want me to do, isn't it?"

"Damn it, this is serious!" Jay stood, running his hand through his hair. He felt his fire spread over his torso. "You shouldn't be trying to do things that are beyond you at this point. Just wait and you'll eventually —"

"What? Get to kill a hundred demons at once? Two hundred? I can't wait."

"Don't be stupid! You can do more, of course you can, but you have to learn how to walk before you can run."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Jay swallowed. "You know what I think. We've talked about this before. I think you need to see someone."

Brian stared at him and then immediately turned away. "No. I'm not some junkie sorcerer who's out of control."

"You are going to seriously hurt someone, if not yourself, if you don't get a handle on your power."

"See, I knew you were going to react like this! That's why I didn't say anything."

Jay breathed deeply, trying to control his fire, but it burst across his arms and head regardless. It didn't make much of a case for his argument about control. "Advancing takes time, for anyone, and with your powers growing so out of control you need to —"

"Do you know what I did today, Jay? Do you?" Brian faced him again. "I killed fifteen demons. Fifteen lives. I murdered them with my bare hands."

Jay clenched his jaw. "You had a reason to do that."

"My armor is spattered with blood every single day. No one else goes through the amount of uniforms I do —"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! You aren't the only one who has a bad day at work!"

"I joined the police force to do good! And I —"

"Discovered that sometimes you do terrible things?" Jay snapped. "Have to deal with evil people and evil demons? See things you wish you didn't see? Welcome to the fucking Demonic Unit, Bry. Grow up."

"No! Don't dismiss me like that! I *hate* it when you do that!" Brian pushed Jay against the wall. "All I'm asking for is respect for my own abilities! But all people see is the osmotic in me!"

"I wonder why," Jay said, staring at the light fixtures as the power flickered, as Brian's body burned brighter and hotter than it ever did on Jay.

The flames nearly obscured Brian's furious expression. "I didn't mean to lose control!"

Jay took a deep breath. "I know, but you aren't ready to do interrogations yet, that's all I'm saying."

"Krane does them. You have no problem with her doing them."

"She's not as unstable as you are."

Brian's eyes grew wide, and then rage contorted his expression. "Fuck you!" He turned away.

"Hey!" Jay grabbed his arm and swung him back around to face him. "Listen to me! You got a problem. You have to deal with it! It isn't your fault. You just need to practice —"

"Like you?" Brian snapped. "So I can be as good at controlling my power as you?"

Jay stilled. Fire raged over him.

Brian breathed heavily, staring at Jay. "I *have* it under control. People just need to let me try things, and I will learn to get better at it."

"What if Krane hadn't been there this afternoon?"

"She was."

"And if she wasn't? If you went too far?"

"But I didn't go too far!" Brian's face flushed with anger.

Jay leaned back against the wall. He shook his head. "Bry, you scare people. They don't get osmotics. And when you do shit they've never seen before, they freak."

"What about you?" Brian asked suddenly. His eyes looked glassy. "Do I freak you out too?"

"Of course not," Jay snapped.

Brian's mouth crushed against Jay's. Jay tried to say something else, but Brian thrust his tongue between Jay's lips, forcing his mouth open.

Jay pushed Brian away from him, but Brian just took his strength and slammed him back against the wall.

Jay's cock stirred in his pants. They had done this too many times in fun for it not to trigger a physical reaction now.

But Jay still tore his mouth free and panted. "Stop! You've got to —"

Brian kissed him again, and Jay groaned. He could taste blood where Brian's teeth accidentally cut against his lips. Their kiss became a feral, angry thing, and Jay gave in to it. He gripped Brian's sinewy arms and turned him around, pushing him against the wall instead. He thrust his groin into Brian's, and Brian moaned into his mouth, his body beginning to shiver.

Jay gripped him by the shirt and dragged him along the wall, toward their bedroom. As Brian's hands skimmed over Jay's lower back, Jay realized this was a bad idea.

This wasn't make-up sex.

This was a continuation of their argument.

And the last time they did this, Brian had lost control of his powers and burned him. A handprint scar was seared into Jay's flesh, just above his right hip. Jay's own heat had turned against him, amplified by Brian's abilities and let loose.

Brian had apologized for a month afterwards.

And yet here they were again, literally playing with fire. Jay's skin broke out in a sweat as he pinned Brian against the wall, pushing his erection against Brian's belly. He reached around and gripped Brian's tight ass, kneading it through the thin fabric of Brian's sweats with near desperation. Brian moaned as they kissed, a low-pitched keen that grew longer as they pulsed their groins together.

Brian shoved Jay backwards, and Jay stumbled, nearly falling.

Jay glared. "What the hell!"

Brian pushed him again, sending him falling back against the bed. Brian's eyes were wild, dilated with his arousal. Before Jay could react, Brian was between his legs, unfastening Jay's trousers, tearing them off his legs. His movements were frenzied,

almost panicked. Jay kicked his pants off the rest of the way, and watched Brian's gaze snap with almost predatory focus to the heavy bob of Jay's hard, ready cock.

Brian leaned down and kissed him again. Jay felt consumed by his lover, overwhelmed. His body's flames were yellow, but as they spread down his arms and across Brian's bare back they turned nearly white with heat. He could feel how hot Brian's skin was even now.

Brian scooted down, biting and kissing his way across Jay's chest, and Jay lay back, stunned, as Brian reached his cock. Brian licked up one side of the thick shaft and then the other, and then pulled the head deep inside his mouth, milking the crown with his throat muscles.

Jay knew he whimpered; he ran his bare fingers through Brian's hair and gripped him closer, unable to stop himself, the feeling so good.

But then it stopped, and Jay looked down in disappointment.

"Fuck me," Brian said hoarsely. He reached to their bedside table and tossed the tube of lube to Jay. He got on all fours and pushed his ass back, leaning his head on his arms, breathing so heavily his entire thin body shook with each inhalation. Between his legs, his cock hung low and long, its tip leaking, cum glistening from it in large droplets, and his balls were nearly red, hanging so low they almost looked stretched.

Jay rested a hand on Brian's smooth ass cheek, and the heat he felt from his burning skin gave him pause.

"You're really hot," he said, his voice gravelly. "Are you sure —"

"Jay, please just shut the hell up and fuck me. Hard as you can."

Jay grabbed Brian's hips, yanking him closer. Brian's ass was narrow and tight, but as he spread open Brian's cheeks he saw Brian's hole still wide and open from that morning. He loved the look of Brian's asshole after he had been fucked hard. He loved this, the smell and sight of Brian, backside thrust toward him in invitation.

Jay squeezed lube into his palm and greased up his hard cock. The feeling was amazing; he needed it so badly his cock ached. As he worked lube onto himself, he leaned forward and licked Brian's balls, dragging his tongue upwards. Brian writhed, as if not being penetrated physically pained him.

"You are so sexy like this," Jay whispered, his voice hoarse with need.

"Don't talk. Fuck me," Brian whispered back. He reached behind and fingered his own pulsing hole. "Fuck me."

Jay pushed Brian's hand out of the way and directed his thick cock into Brian. The head slipped in slowly, then popped past the muscle, and he pressed in, filling Brian's ass, the cocooning heat engulfing him in pleasure. He pushed until he felt his balls rub against Brian's.

Brian whimpered, pushing back further to impale himself on Jay's burning cock. Flames spread between them, an inferno of heat.

The velvety slick pressure around Jay's dick was too fantastic to ignore. Pleasure vibrated through him, and he began to thrust, changing their angle slightly so that he could brush Brian's prostate with each stroke. Brian went rigid and then rubbery, his entire body trembling beneath him, a wild, ravenous creature, wanton and pale, covered in Jay's own flames. He looked over his shoulder, eyes dilated and almost blurry with arousal.

"Harder," he gasped.

Jay gripped Brian's hips and pushed in deeper.

"Oh *fuck*, you feel good," Jay whispered.

"You too." Brian braced himself on one hand and reached between his legs, cupping their balls together. Jay thought he'd nearly explode.

Brian's body was so hot. Too hot. He was white with flame. As Jay pounded faster into Brian's hole, he could feel Brian's temperature increasing, reflecting back Jay's own heated skin and doubling it.

"Don't burn me!" Jay cautioned him.

"I won't," Brian promised, arching against Jay's thrusts. Jay ploughed into him, coming with a cry. His pleasure spurted from him, and he closed his eyes, letting his release fill Brian's ass.

Brian's sweat steamed in the fire. Jay reached around and gripped Brian's prick, pumping it in rhythm with his thrusts. With only a few strokes Brian cried out his climax.

The light bulbs burst in the room. Jay looked up at the exploding glass just as arcs of electricity shot into Brian.

Jay felt like someone had smashed a sledgehammer into his chest, and he was blown backward, slamming into the bedroom wall. He slid down and convulsed on the floor as waves of current rushed through his body.

When it passed, Jay lay there, afraid of moving, his arms and chest tingling and numb. Spots flashed over his eyes, and his ears rang.

A second later Brian's face appeared, hovering over him with huge eyes. He was completely pale. "Jay! Jay!" He looked horrified. "God! Speak to me. Are you okay?" Brian's hands cradled Jay's face. He stroked Jay's rough cheeks. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Jay swallowed and blinked his eyes to clear the flashes. His arms still trembled.

Tears threatened to spill from Brian's eyes. "I'm calling an ambulance. Please hold on!"

"Don't." Jay's voice sounded rough. He reached out and grabbed Brian's wrist. "I'll be okay."

Brian sat beside him, cross-legged, hair hanging over his face. "I'm so sorry."

Jay stretched carefully, testing his muscles. He looked down at his softening cock and shook his head. Well, that was one hell of a climax, to be sure.

Brian stared at him, lip trembling.

"I'm okay," Jay said.

Brian threw his arms around Jay, and the two hugged for a moment. Brian's entire body shook.

Jay wanted to comfort him. But his chest ached from the shock, and he went cold with the realization that a current that strong might have stopped his heart. He could have just died.

"This is really fucked up, Bry," Jay said.

Brian's face was buried against Jay's neck. When he looked up his eyes were wet with tears. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You need help," Jay told him softly. "And if you won't let me help you, we're not going to make it."



## Chapter Three

The sound of knocking woke Jay a few hours later.

He groggily rolled out of bed. The clock told him it was six in the morning, too early for any of his family members to pay a visit and too late for a social call. He stumbled to the front door, wincing at the residual soreness in his muscles from his near electrocution.

Only when he got to the door did Jay realize he was stark naked. He walked back to the bathroom and wrapped a towel around his waist, and ran a hand through his hair. The knock at his door returned, more insistent.

He opened the door, and recognized Loris and Shahan, two officers from homicide. Both looked grim.

"What's going on?" Jay asked, his voice still rough with sleep.

"Sorry, detective," Loris said. "We gotta bring Day in for questioning."

Jay stared at them for a moment, trying to make sense of what they'd just said.

He gave up. "Say that again?"

Loris rubbed his hand over his bald head. "A suspect, Arun Volpe, was found dead in his cell, and Day was the last person signed in to see him near the time of death. Pollar wants to speak to him."

"Are you joking me?" Jay barked. "Brian's been with me the whole night!"

"We just need to discuss his alibi. You know the drill," Loris said. "Volpe's been etiolated. His organs are white and shriveled up, and everyone knows only Day can do that. Plus half the station saw him nearly kill the bastard."

"'Only Day can do that'? Are you fucking nuts?"

"What's going on?"

Brian shuffled into the room, rubbing his eyes. He had on a loose pair of sweatpants, hanging low on his hips. His hair spiked up on his head.

At the sight of the officers, Brian immediately straightened.

Loris nodded to Brian. "Captain Pollar asked me to bring you in to ask a few questions."

Brian looked to Jay.

"Volpe's dead," Jay told him.

Brian immediately went pale.

Loris adjusted his heavy belt and looked apologetically to Jay. "We don't have a choice, Yervant. It's just a few questions."

"It's all right," Brian said. "Let me put some clothes on." Brian left the bedroom door slightly ajar as he changed.

Jay opened the front door for the officers. They stood in his living room, looking as nervous as Jay was angry. Loris kept adjusting his belt. His gut was beginning to expand over the top of it, probably making his uniform uncomfortable. In comparison, Shahan stood stock still, thin as a rail, watching the bedroom door warily.

"He's a fucking cop, he's not going to bolt," Jay snapped.

"I know," Officer Shahan said. He purposefully looked away from the bedroom.

Brian re-appeared a moment later, wearing a blue T-shirt and khaki shorts. He was still pale.

Loris stepped forward. "Sorry, Day, we gotta take your badge and pistol."

"Really?" Brian handed them his shock-volt pistol from the table beside the front door, but seemed to hesitate with the badge in his pocket.

"Just pending investigation," Shahan clarified.

"Am I suspended?" Brian asked shakily.

"Only until this is sorted out," Shahan said.

Jay could tell Brian was terrified.

"Bry. Look at me," Jay ordered.

Brian looked at him, eyes wide.

"You have nothing to hide."

"I didn't do it," Brian said. He looked pleadingly to Jay. "I didn't kill him!"

"I know; you weren't even in the building."

Brian flinched and then said, "I did go back to the station last night. But only to check on Volpe."

Jay felt the flames on his skin flare. "When?"

"I stopped at the station on my way to pick up dinner. I wanted to make sure he was okay and apologize for losing control. I may have been the last person signed in to see him, but he was alive when I left him."

Jay wished the shock in his arm didn't burn so brightly as a reminder.

The more upset Jay got, the more his body covered in fire. Brian's body caught ablaze as well.

Shahan, who was not a sorcerer and unable to see the flames, obviously began to feel them. He jerked back from Brian and stared in surprise.

"Cool down, Brian," Jay urged.

"You fucking cool down!" Brian had tears in his eyes. "Why is this happening?"

Jay stepped closer. "I don't know. But I'm going to figure it out, okay?"

"You believe me, right?" Brian pleaded. "You believe I didn't do it?"

Jay didn't mean to hesitate.

He was trying to think of something comforting to say. But Brian's eyes instantly dulled. He looked defeated. He turned to go.

Jay pulled him closer by his collar and kissed him. Loris and Shahan looked away, a grimace on Loris's face, but Jay didn't care. He kissed Brian hard, hoping to say with his kiss what he failed to express in words.

Brian gripped his arm. "Trust me!"

And then Loris and Shahan took him away.

## Chapter Four

Despite the early hour, a mob already gathered outside Enyalios Police Station, protest signs waving over the crowd of angry faces.

Brian followed Loris and Shahan through the front. He wondered absentmindedly what had angered the crowd this time. And then he saw poster-sized pictures of Arun Volpe wavering in the air, and he felt like throwing up.

"Fascist murderers!" the crowd shouted as they walked past. Their wrath was directed more toward Loris and Shahan, in uniform, but Brian nevertheless shrank away from the crowd, feeling its ire.

The mob chanted Volpe's name and swore vengeance against police brutality. The media had already arrived, and a cameraman appeared in Brian's path, flashbulb blinding as he walked past.

"How many osmotics are employed by the Demonic Unit?" a reporter asked. Brian wondered how the nature of Volpe's death had leaked to the press so quickly. He realized they had to have an informant on the inside.

The crowd's hatred startled Brian. He knew there truly was police brutality in Parmas, and corruption scandals regularly rocked public opinion of the agency. But Brian never imagined himself being personally involved in anything so filthy. He kept his distance from the cops known to be on the take, and his association with Jay scared off anyone else looking to recruit rookies more amenable to racketeering.

The thought of himself being lumped in with the racist and crooked cops formed a twisted knot in his stomach.

As they walked up the front steps someone leaned forward and spat in Brian's face.

He jerked back in surprise.

"Come on!" Shahan urged, pulling Brian into the building and slamming the front door behind them.

"Goddamn it!" Shahan cursed, shaking his head.

Brian followed after them, nauseated. All that anger directed toward *him*.

Loris and Shahan didn't stop at the second floor, where the Demonic Unit was based. Instead they led Brian upstairs to homicide.

Brian spent little time on the third floor. For a moment, he allowed himself to forget the nature of his visit. The resources they had were double what was allotted to the hell cops. He liked their break room, and their copier clearly functioned better than the one downstairs. But then he remembered this wasn't a tour.

Officers coming off the night shift nodded and smiled at him as if nothing was wrong. Word clearly hadn't yet spread that he was a suspect. And when it did, Brian wasn't sure how the other officers would behave. Would they defend him as one of their own? Would they rail against him for tarnishing the name of the department? Would they show leniency or be swift in their actions to exhibit nonpreferential behavior?

Loris led Brian into a well-lit interview room. The chairs were more comfortable, but the hard aluminum table in the middle of the room was the same one they had downstairs in his department.

"Have a seat," Loris said. "Commissioner Hatch will be here in a moment. You want a coffee or anything?"

"Coffee, please." Brian's voice sounded weak with nerves. "With milk."

"Okay. I'll be right back." Loris gave him a smile, then left Brian alone in the room.

Brian rested his palms on the aluminum table, trying to keep calm. Even the mention of Commissioner Hatch's name set his heart racing. Hatch was in charge of Internal Affairs, a branch of the police force with which Brian had hoped never to become intimate.

A minute later Loris returned with a mug of coffee, pale with cream, and a piece of paper. He pulled a pencil out of his pocket and laid it on the table.

"Hatch asked to have you fill out this form while you wait. He'll be here soon. This will help speed things up."

"Sure," Brian said. He took a sip of the coffee and then turned to the form, grateful to have something to do with his hands.

But then he realized that answering the questions on the paper could be a bad idea. One thing he had learned from arresting hundreds of suspects was that they should never say anything before representation arrived. Brian needed a lawyer before he admitted to anything.

But he was too scared of looking guilty to ask for one, so he filled out the form anyway, a gnawing sensation in his gut warning him even as he did so. But he wanted to assist them in any way he could.

The form asked for descriptions of his movements over the last three days. Brian filled in as many details as he remembered, although he was vague about Monday, and he nearly blushed as he thought about Sunday, when he and Jay had spent the entire day screwing. It started with a morning shower and then moved to Jay sucking him off in the kitchen as Brian prepared breakfast, and then into the living room, where Brian returned the favor. They then took a completely sleepless nap together and then ended up back in the shower for more.

Brian smiled at the memory. But then he remembered last night, and his smile quickly faded.

Guilt wrenched his insides. That was the second time he had hurt his lover in a moment of passion, and it was inexcusable. Jay was the one person in the world Brian wanted to protect, and he had burnt him and now nearly electrocuted him.

They had fought about his powers before. For the first time, Brian was beginning to think Jay was right. Maybe he did need help. He had to learn how to stop absorbing so much all the time, especially unconsciously, before it ended up killing Jay.

But even now he could feel it, like he was a drain, sucking in so many sensations. He felt the thrum of energy in the wires, the power of translation filled him from Bartleby in the translations department downstairs, and worse, he felt aggressive brute strength pulling into him from down in the holding pens, where the bestial demons pended sentencing.

Brian clamped his eyes shut and tried to force all of it out of him, away from his body.

He heard the door to the questioning room open and Captain Pollar stepped inside. He wore the same suit as the day before and looked like he had pulled an all-nighter. His hair stood on end and bags were under his eyes.

In comparison, Commissioner Hatch appeared fresh and alert, his dark brown eyes sparkling, dark hair slicked back stylishly, his moustache trim and his suit perfectly crisp. Brian had only met him once, but knew the man's reputation well.

There wasn't a cop in Parmas who wasn't on edge around him.

Hatch and Pollar both sat down across from Brian but didn't say a word. Two other plainclothes officers, also from Internal Affairs, entered the room and stood against the wall. One of them shut the door.

Brian took in the four officers and realized that this wasn't just about Volpe. There wouldn't be four of them for one dead suspect. This was something bigger.

"Hello, Brian." Hatch smiled and reached for Brian's form. He flipped the paper around and read it with great interest.

"Captain," Brian began. "I didn't—"

Pollar held out his hand and scowled at him. Brian immediately shut up.

Hatch took his time reading Brian's responses to the questionnaire, and then straightened, eyeing Brian kindly.

"Did one of the officers who brought you in explain why you're here?" Hatch asked.

Brian nodded. "They told me Volpe is dead."

"Not just dead. Etiolated. The autopsy concluded an hour ago. Meeker down in the morgue said all of Volpe's organs were white and shriveled. No sign of a fight. Someone sucked the life right out of him."

Brian swallowed.

"An osmotic," Hatch added.

"We don't know that," Pollar interrupted. "Another sorcerer could have powers similar to Day's. And there are talismans and other magical devices that can produce the same effect. Just because Brian is the only one we know doesn't mean he is the only one who *can*."

Brian looked from captain to commissioner, wondering what was going on. Was this good cop-bad cop? Shouldn't he be able to recognize good cop-bad cop since he was himself an okay cop?

Hatch nodded. "True. You may not be the only one who can do it, Brian, but you are the last one to see him alive, according to the sign-in sheet."

"I visited him around ten o'clock last night," Brian admitted. "I was nearby, at the Ginger House, picking up dinner, and I wanted to make sure Volpe was all right."

Hatch raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Brian turned to Pollar, but Pollar didn't say anything.

"I...I hurt Volpe during questioning yesterday," Brian admitted. "He was fine afterward, but I felt bad about it, and so I came back to make sure he was feeling better. He called me about a dozen names and told me to fuck off. I left. I didn't even enter the cell."

"But hypothetically, you wouldn't have to enter the cell to kill him," Hatch said. "The video footage of your interview with Volpe yesterday showed you etioliating Volpe without physical contact. And the camera in Volpe's cell later showed him go shock white and still, just as he had done with you, and then slide unconscious to the floor."

"It wasn't me!" Brian cried. He felt his body pulse with destructive energy from the demons downstairs, and he breathed deeply. "I wouldn't have any reason to murder Volpe. I got in enough trouble with him as it is; why would I?"

"Maybe it wasn't intentional," Hatch said. "But we all know you have a problem controlling yourself. It's not your fault; it's inherent with osmotics, is it not? Maybe Volpe simply called you one too many names, and you reacted. I don't think you would

*intentionally* harm anyone, Brian. But maybe an accident? In a fit of rage?" Hatch smiled kindly.

But Brian did not feel kindness from him. He felt a trap. He shook his head. "No. I didn't do it." He scowled. "You have footage, right? Is there anything else suspicious about the death?"

"No one was there," Hatch said again.

"Well, neither was I," Brian said.

"The timing of your signed-in visit, the story you report on this form, and the time recorded on the video of Volpe's death all correspond," Hatch said.

"I would have noticed if he was dead!" Brian said, voice rising. "I would have sent up an alarm!"

"Okay," Hatch said, holding his hands out. "This isn't personal. Unfortunately this tragedy has a big name attached to it. Volpe's family is well-connected, and they have already alerted the media and civil rights groups, demanding a thorough investigation into the circumstances of Arun's death."

Brian kept his hands clasped, worried that the commissioner would see him shaking and interpret it as guilt. Hell, he *felt* guilty, even though he hadn't done what they claimed he did.

"How's your coffee? Need a refill?" Hatch asked suddenly.

Brian shook his head.

"Okay then." Hatch crossed his legs and leaned back. "Then let's talk about Paul Krochalis."

Brian blinked at the Commissioner. The change of topic surprised him, and he didn't recognize the name out of context.

"Excuse me?"

"Paul Krochalis. I believe you know him?"

Brian's eyebrows came together. "The... You mean the guy who works out at Pearl's Gym?"

Hatch nodded.

Brian felt bewildered and a little panicked. The electrical grid pulsed above him, and his body yearned toward it hungrily.

"I heard you had a fight yesterday," Hatch finally said. He looked down at the form. "And it says on your form that you were at the gym last night."

"Yes." Brian swallowed. "I went to the gym with Detective Yervant. While there Paul Krochalis spoke to me."

"Paul Krochalis was found dead outside of Pearl's Gym a few hours ago," Commissioner Hatch said.

Brian felt the blood drain from his face. "He's dead? How?"



"His corpse was burned badly, but the autopsy shows he too was etiolated, all his organs drained of color."

Brian covered his face with his hands.

"Now would be a good time to tell us everything," Hatch said. He leaned forward. "I understand from the staff at the gym that he's bothered you for months now. I would completely understand if tempers got out of hand, and —"

"I did not kill him. Not Krochalis, not Volpe!" Brian shook his head. "And how would I have burned him? Were there accelerants on his body?"

"I've heard you can burn things," Hatch said.

"Only if Yervant is around," Pollar corrected. "Day takes Yervant's heat, he doesn't make it himself."

"And Yervant was around," Hatch replied.

Pollar stiffened immediately. "You aren't suggesting that one of my best detectives is involved in this?"

"No! Not at all. I'm just saying Brian could have taken the heat from Detective Yervant or the boiler room which was right next to the back entrance where the body was found. He can clearly steal power from anything. The ability is there."

"Maybe I have the ability," Brian snapped, "but I am sorry you have so little faith in my conscience to think I have the drive. I'm a police officer. I swore to protect the law, Commissioner, and I have not broken it, not even in a fit of rage."

Unbidden, the image of Jay being shocked across the room came into Brian's mind, and he clenched his eyes shut. What these men accused him of wasn't nearly the stretch he imagined it being.

Hatch reached into his briefcase and pulled out a thin file. From this he withdrew a photograph. He turned it to face Brian.

Brian felt sick. The corpse clearly was Paul Krochalis; his hair and face survived the fire. Agony warped Paul's expression, his eyes frozen open in death. He had clearly been conscious for his horrible end.

The rest of his body was black, burned beyond recognition. A charred trail of soot and ash led from the body toward the back door of the gym. Either he was so hot as he ran out that he melted the pavement, or intense fire was pulled into him from the building.

The picture was taken at night, but under the harsh glare of the crime scene lanterns Brian could make out a glossy smear beside Krochalis's head. It looked like yellow jelly. Brian pointed to it.

"What is that?"

Pollar leaned closer. "Secretions. The lab ran a test on it. Something from a bargebison." He pointed to the crusted landscape of Krochalis's chest. "See this ragged edge here? Someone sliced him open before he died."

"So he was cut open, and then etiolated, and then burned?" Brian shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense."

"I don't think he was cut open," Hatch commented. "It looks to me like he was ripped apart by the sorcery."

"And you are an expert on sorcerous magic now?" Brian snapped. His teeth ached. He wanted to bite something, badly. Obviously some sort of biter lurked in the downstairs holding pens.

"Watch it, Day," Pollar growled, although Brian noticed the corner of Pollar's mouth curl slightly. Brian had the impression that Pollar was not a fan of the commissioner either.

Hatch tapped the photograph. "Is there anything you can tell us about last night, when you met Paul? Anything at all? *Someone* murdered him, and you were in the vicinity. Perhaps you saw something suspicious?"

Brian thought over every memory, every detail of the night before. He remembered Paul whispering "cocksucker" as he walked past. He remembered the furious glare Paul had given him and Jay when they kissed. He knew Paul himself had sorcerous blood in him—as soon as Jay's cool blue flame ignited in excitement, Paul seemed to flinch back, which meant he could see it.

But he had been too upset about his conflict with Captain Pollar to be thinking about anything else at the gym, and so Brian shook his head and confessed he'd seen nothing of use.

"I wish I had something for you, but I don't," he admitted.

Hatch sighed. "We'll keep looking. But in the meantime, I need you to stick around Parmas for the next few weeks."

"Am I your only suspect in both cases?" Brian asked.

Hatch and Pollar exchanged a glance. Then Hatch nodded. "You're the only one who can do it, and you were there. The simplest explanation is usually the right one, I'm afraid."

"Surely some other demon or sorcerer in this damn city can do it too," Brian countered.

"But we haven't found one yet," Hatch said.

Brian stared at him, wanting to explode in anger. He could feel it pooling into him from downstairs, and his hands began to shake with the need to punch and rip and destroy.

And then the door to the questioning room burst open and in marched three men in matching dark silk suits. They were followed by a short, elderly man, who glared at the cops with clear disdain. It was Bergen Sair, Brian's grandfather.

Brian nearly choked in his relief.

"This interview," Bergen Sair said, "is officially at an end."

## Chapter Five

Bergen ordered a mimosa.

Brian declined the offer of alcohol, not only because it was eight in the morning, but because he was panic-stricken enough as it was. He didn't need to be drunk on top of it.

"Those sons of bitches!"

It was all his grandfather had said over the last half hour, and Brian had to agree with him. The questioning had been frightening, and worse, by the time Jay had alerted Bergen and the old man's lawyers secured his release, Brian was on the brink of losing control.

"Those sons of sons of bitches!" Bergen spat again, taking a healthy swig of his drink and picking at his pancake breakfast.

They sat in a private room at one of the classier restaurants near the station. It was under the pretense of getting Brian some breakfast, but Brian suspected the offer was more an opportunity to get his grandfather started on his daily buzz.

"It's okay, Bergen," Brian said, offering him a smile. He still didn't call Bergen grandfather, despite Bergen's watery-eyed request. Brian just hadn't known him long enough to do so. And while their relationship was friendly and Brian truly liked the old man, he still had a hard time fitting in with Bergen's world of wealthy corporate sorcery.

It didn't help that Brian's father, and Bergen's only son, Razi Sair, had tried to kill Brian when they first met.

But both Brian and his grandfather tried their best to put Razi behind them. Brian was Bergen's heir now, and his closest relative in the city, and so for Bergen's sake, Brian tried to reassure him that he was fine.

"It's standard procedure in cases like this," Brian told Bergen. "It looks bad for me, but there has to be enough evidence to prove I didn't do it. Besides, I have Jay's alibi. I doubt I was gone long enough to pick up dinner and kill two men."

"Don't underestimate their desire for a clean-cut case." That was one of the three suited lawyers sitting with them. They were muscular and nearly identical and wore shades as though they were undercover. Brian had the urge to laugh when they sat down at the exact same time and ordered the same power breakfast of a smoothie and toast, but then he remembered his fate was now in the hands of these men. Bergen had the best lawyers in all of Parmas City. It was obvious why Jay had called his grandfather instead of just helping Brian secure legal counsel on his own.

"Osmotics have been erroneously blamed for many things in the history of Parmas City criminal law," said the lawyer on the right. "It's easy to pin crimes on osmotics because no one fully understands the limitations on their power."

Brian used his fork to take apart his scrambled eggs, separating the yellowed mass into tiny pebble-sized pieces.

"We're not going to let that happen to you," Bergen said firmly, pointing his spoon at Brian for emphasis. "Don't talk to anyone else about this until your legal team gets up to speed. Don't go back to the station, and for God's sake, don't do anything even remotely looking like a loss of control, and you should be fine."

"It's not my nature to sit back and wait," Brian told his grandfather. He shook his head. "I wish I knew more about the circumstances of Krochalis's death. Or Volpe's. Something to help me make sense of all of this."

"Johnson was able to pick up a few facts on his way to the station," Bergen said. He bit into his sausage and nodded to the lawyer in the middle, who wore the same dark suit as the others but had a uniquely muted olive-colored tie. When he spoke, the muscles in his face barely moved.

"Krochalis worked for Yervant Industries, in their research and development department," Johnson said, his voice flat and emotionless.

Brian's eyes widened. "He worked for Jay's dad?"

Bergen nodded. "Krochalis's mother is Rina Yervant, the second daughter of Louis's cousin."

Brian didn't bother trying to follow Bergen. Hotblood families of Parmas City could rattle off a hundred twice-removed and thrice-separated family connections easily, like the great web of connections uniting the sorcerous upper class was just a puzzle to memorize. Indeed, Brian had seen the genealogy map used as a drinking game at more than one Sair party.

"Is the connection to Yervant Industries important?" Brian asked. He took a bite of his eggs. It tasted like wet cardboard. He knew this was a nice restaurant, which meant the problem was him — he completely lost his appetite when he was stressed.

"Perhaps," Johnson said tonelessly. "Yervant Industries works with all sorts of sorcerers and demons. Someone else may have osmotic powers. We'll look into others at YI who may have a grudge against him."

"Judging by the way he treated me, he probably had a lot of enemies." Brian chewed in silence for a moment, and then tilted his head. "Did you get a chance to look at the photographs?"

"No," the lawyer on the left said. "We won't see any evidence unless you are formally charged."

When the lawyer spoke, his lips barely moved. Brian realized they had to be succubae. Their movements were too inhuman.

"Why?" Johnson asked.

"There were some weird secretions beside the dead body," Brian said. "Yellow and goopy, like honey. The labs reported it came from a bargebison."

"Bargebison discharge?" Johnson asked. He cut at his toast with aggressive precision.

"I guess," Brian said. "I don't even know what a bargebison is."

"Those massive animals, out by the freeway," said the one on the right.

Brian shrugged.

All three lawyers turned their heads in unison toward Bergen, who laughed. "Brian's not from Parmas."

Bergen took another bite of his breakfast sausage. "The bargebison are famous. They're enormous megafauna, refugees from a destroyed world. They are endangered, only three remain in all of existence. Each one is about five stories high, and each takes up a city block."

Brian raised his eyebrows. "So how did one end up behind Pearl's Gym?"

Bergen shrugged. "I thought they usually kept them tethered in the industrial park. I suppose one could have broken loose and wandered through the city, but you'd think the media would report something like that."

"Is the discharge their blood?"

"They produce a sweet resin that covers their skin; it's a protectant against the air," said Johnson.

"How do you know that?" one of the other lawyers asked.

"Report on the bargebison. Second grade. A-minus."

"Are they vicious?" Brian asked.

"I don't think so," Bergen said. "But we'll look into it."

"Assuming the police don't block any efforts we take to look into the matter ourselves," Johnson replied.

"Sons of bitches!" Bergen cried. He drained his drink and waved the empty glass in the air toward the waitress. "No matter how much we pay in taxes, we get nothing but stupid, dickhead cops who have no respect for sorcerers!"

Brian couldn't let that comment go. "You do realize that all hell cops *are* sorcerers, right? They have to be."

"They're traitors," Bergen growled. "Even Lou Yervant thinks his son is a traitor, turning away from a family business that he should be proud of, and instead, making a living as a gun-wielding fascist."

The comment knifed through Brian. He knew Bergen didn't particularly like Jay, despite the fact that Jay's dad was a good friend of Bergen's.

But what hurt Brian was the idea of Jay's own father betraying him with such a comment. Everyone betrayed Jay. His own family called him a traitor, his friends had left him for his orientation, and now even Brian had betrayed him, hurting him physically.

"A spa." Bergen's random comment snapped Brian back to the present threat. "That's what you need. Just for a little while. You sit back, unwind, enjoy your suspension as time off. Let these guys do their job. They'll stay busy collecting enough proof that you didn't do it. If the cops really try to pin this on you, their case won't even make it into court."

Brian gave him a weak smile. "Thanks, but I just don't think a spa is my style."

"How about a resort, then? The Brayjer Islands are beautiful this time of year —"

"I can't," Brian said. "Internal Affairs told me not to leave the city."

Bergen scowled.

"Besides," Brian continued. "Even if I could leave, I wouldn't want to. I need to clear my name, and leaving would tarnish it. I didn't kill those people, and I'm not going to run like someone with something to hide."

Bergen shook his head but did not argue the point further. The rest of the meal Bergen spoke in low, confident tones to his lawyers, who nodded in unison but showed no facial expressions. Brian ran through his adnihilio identification exercises that he'd learned back in police academy, trying to narrow down their species, but his memory drew a blank.

After the meal, Bergen gave Brian a ride home, his sleek, powerful black sports car at odds with the older vehicles cruising down Jeravani Street. The sun was hot and low that morning, and waves of heat shimmered off the pavement and parked cars.

Despite his clear disapproval of Jay, Bergen seemed completely unfazed by the outlandish style of Boystown. He pulled the shimmering sports car in front of the gay bookstore that Jay and Brian lived above, and didn't even blink at the massive poster of two nude males kissing in the bookstore window.

And that, more than anything, made Brian turn and smile sincerely at his grandfather.

"I can't thank you enough," he said, feeling genuinely touched by Bergen's concern. It was nice having someone believe in him, and someone with the power to see that Brian's side of the story would be heard. "It means a lot to me," he added.

Bergen seemed taken aback by the sincerity in Brian's tone, and looked moved to tears. But then his expression hardened. "Don't you worry, son. We're going to get you out of this. I don't care what it takes. I'm not letting you go to jail."

There was an awkward silence, as Brian immediately thought of his father, and no doubt Bergen did the same. Brian leaned over and gave Bergen a brief hug. "Stay in touch."

"I'll call you tonight," Bergen promised. "As soon as I find out what the triplets discover."

"Triplets!" Brian's eyes widened. "You mean...those guys are just regular, human lawyers?"

"Of course! What did you think?"

"I thought..." Brian gave a little laugh. "I thought they were demons."

"Oh, come on," Bergen replied. "There are some jobs that even demons won't sink to."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jay wasn't home.

Brian tried Jay's mobile phone, but the call went straight to voice mail.

So Brian took a shower and tried to wash off the tension of the morning. He cleaned up the apartment and made lunch, putting extra effort into it despite the fact he had no appetite. He knew he was coming up with strategies to apologize to Jay for his accident the night before.

As he puttered about the house, Brian's mind raged. There was a connection between the two murders, in that both men had been etiolated. But there didn't seem to be an apparent connection between the two individuals. What did Volpe have in common with Krochalis?

It seemed obvious someone was setting Brian up to take the fall. But why? Was another osmotic hoping to push the blame on him? Was someone seeking revenge against Brian, a family member of someone he'd arrested, or a criminal he had sent to jail? There were a lot of possibilities, but without any evidence, or the ability to look for evidence, Brian felt stuck.

And still Jay didn't call.

Hours passed. Brian left several messages. It wasn't unusual—sometimes Jay forgot to turn on his phone or he left it somewhere. But the timing, the day after Brian had hurt him and then been brought in on suspicion of murder, seemed too ominous to ignore.

What if Jay left him?

The idea came and went in Brian's mind. He couldn't accept it. Jay knew him too well to believe he could murder two men and hide it. Brian couldn't even keep Jay's birthday present a secret, and that had been for all of two days. And Jay had to know that he would be the first person Brian would turn to if he ever did lose control.

*Of course, he hadn't voluntarily told him last night.*

Brian clenched his jaw and shook his head.

No. He had to believe that Jay trusted him and would come back. It was silly to get worried otherwise.

Besides, it was Jay's condo.

So Brian switched on the TV and hoped to distance himself from his mounting anxieties. The first face he saw was that of Jay's father, Louis Yervant, on a commercial advertising YI's newest product, the Parlancer, a universal translation device that was small enough to fit in a pocket and provided simultaneous translations from any human or demonic language that utilized vocal chords or rhythms.

Brian took in the confident expression of Jay's father, and saw in one shot Jay's two brothers, Dave and Christopher, smiling as they presented themselves as a cohesive family that believed in the healing powers of innovation.

Brian had met them all, and found their cheerful television personalities deceiving. They all shared Jay's rugged, handsome appearance and his sarcastic sense of humor. But, unlike his lover, the Yervant family in real life was aloof and unapproachable.

Brian remembered his grandfather's comment about Lou Yervant calling Jay a traitor for joining the police force, and anger built inside him. Luckily the commercial ended and the news began, so he was relieved from having to change the channel.

The first image on the screen, however, was that of Arun Volpe. Brian wished he had changed the channel.

"Arun Volpe, son of Congressman Richard Volpe and the well-known proprietor of the Mages Casino, died this morning while in Parmas City police custody.

"Patrol Officer Brian Day, a member of the Metropolitan Demonic Unit, has been suspended following Volpe's death, and an investigation is under way as to whether police brutality led to the death of the congressman's son."

The picture flashed to the protestors outside Enyalios Station. Their numbers had swelled since the early hours, and hundreds of people chanted Volpe's name and cried out for Brian's arrest.

"Officer Day, shown here in footage collected last spring, has been reprimanded in the past for use of excessive force."

Brian watched in horror as grainy footage from a demonic prostitution raid showed him beating two fauns and a Fentari snake with his fists. Of course, the footage



did not show the four hostages that were screaming for help in the corner of the room. The video image zoomed in on Brian's face, spattered with the blood of his victims.

The TV popped and suddenly turned off, along with all the lights. Brian realized that he had been sucking in energy, large amounts of it, getting angrier and angrier as he watched the newscast.

He tried to block it but once the stream was open it gushed forth, the energy of the entire grid filling him, and then he felt heat, massive heat, pouring into him from the staircase.

Jay was back.

But it was too late. He had absorbed too much, too fast, and in his desperation to dump it, he smashed his fists into the couch.

Jay walked into the room, just as Brian set the couch on fire.

## Chapter Six

Jay bee-lined for the closet and pulled out the fire extinguisher.

Brian pulled massive amounts of water from the sink, trying to yank it toward the burning room. But all this did was shatter the water pipes in the kitchen and cause the sink to explode, gushing water over Jay's expensive cherrywood floors.

Jay got the fire out with the extinguisher, and then ran down the stairs to turn off the water main.

By the time he returned, the living room stank of wet wool and potent, foamy chemicals. The couch was blackened. The air was thick with smoke.

And nearly two inches of standing water covered his kitchen floor, along with the broken porcelain of his shattered sink.

Jay stood staring at his ruined house, running his gloved hand through his hair, looking very upset.

"We need to talk," Jay said.

Brian nodded. His throat was parched dry. He walked across the room and shut the front door. He noticed that Jay kept his distance.

"I called you a few times. You didn't answer," Brian said.

Jay looked away from the blackened light bulbs in the room's light fixture, and stared at Brian.

"I've been at the station, looking into Volpe's death," Jay said.

"They put you on the case?" Brian asked, surprised.

"No. I'm not to touch it under threat of suspension." Jay swallowed, still looking at the damage around them. "But that didn't stop me from asking a few questions. I found out Volpe's death was reported by Bartleby, who was downstairs talking to one of the demons in a nearby holding pen. Bartleby says he didn't see anyone else in the

building. But he also has poor eyesight like a lot of his species, so we can't exclude the possibility that someone else was there."

Brian nodded, still shocked by his own explosive outburst to say anything.

"While I was down there I also found out that the evidence room has been pilfered again, and this time it's ours."

"Ours?" Brian asked.

"The Demonic Unit," Jay said. "Someone wasn't looking for drugs or guns for once. Someone was looking for something enchanted. I asked Elliot in operations to check the inventory against the recorded seizures we have listed."

"Smart," Brian said. "But whoever got into the evidence locker would have to have access."

"They could be invisible," Jay suggested. "Or it could be an inside job. The evidence locker combo is the same for all departments. There are at least fifty people at the station who know how to get in."

Brian nodded.

"And there's one other thing," Jay added. "I'm late because I stopped to talk with a handwriting expert I worked with on a case a few years ago. I had her look at your signature on the sign-in sheet. She thinks it's a forgery."

Brian closed his eyes. "No, it's mine. I admitted it. I signed in to see Volpe last night, right before I picked up our dinner."

"Did you sign your name twice?" Jay asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Brian's eyes snapped open. "No. No, I didn't."

Jay looked tired. "There are two signatures on the sheet. I checked it. And the second one looked odd to me, which is why I visited the expert. I'll keep looking into it."

Brian's chest felt heavy. He realized that Jay looked beat and tired because he had spent his entire day off running around trying to prove Brian's innocence.

"You believe me, then?" he asked. "You believe I didn't do it?" His voice sounded strange in his own ears.

Jay scowled. "Of course I believe you."

It felt as though someone inflated a balloon in Brian's heart, so full of emotion he was at that moment. He approached Jay slowly. Jay's flames were low now, a soft blue, and Brian concentrated on not attracting them to himself. He was going to show Jay control. He was going to give for once, and not take.

Brian reached down and carefully stripped the gloves off Jay's hands. Jay watched him warily. Brian guided Jay's hands to his ass, and Jay squeezed, almost as if it was involuntary.

Brian kissed him. He focused on keeping it soft and slow, a lazy kiss, and he ignored the sudden burst of heat and red flame across Jay's skin as he became aroused.

They kissed like that for a long time, teeth clicking, mouths molding to one another. Jay's face was rough with stubble, and Brian licked the edge of Jay's lips, so red and soft compared to the roughness of his chin, the smoothness of his neck.

Brian ran his hands through Jay's thick brown hair. It always looked wild, but today especially it seemed untamable, windblown, and Brian combed it back with his fingers, trailing them to Jay's face, along his thin nose and rosy cheeks. Jay opened his eyes and stared back hungrily. His brown eyes were so light they appeared almost golden.

Brian ran his hands down Jay's chest, and then he crouched, kneeling before Jay and eyeing the impressive bulge in Jay's pants. He could see a dark spot where Jay's pre-cum already stained through underwear and the thick fabric of his jeans. Jay grumbled in anticipation, his hands reaching out to run his fingers through Brian's hair.

Brian glanced upward and saw Jay staring down at him, eyes dilated, fire bursting from his head like a blazing halo.

"I'm so sorry about your apartment," Brian whispered. "And about hurting you yesterday. I want to make it up to you."

Jay smiled at him.

Brian smiled back and then reached up to unfasten Jay's trousers.

Even before he got to the last button, Jay's cock sprang free, poking through the hole in Jay's underwear. Jay released his hold in Brian's hair just long enough to untangle his heavy cock and push his trousers and underwear down.

Brian knelt, taking in the beautiful sight. Jay's cock looked impossibly huge at this angle, kneeling before it on the floor, its tip red and soft, leaking clear fluid, with thick veins contouring the smooth shaft, leading down into a bed of brown curls. Jay's balls hung loose, one slightly lower than the other, and Brian reached out to stroke the tender backside of the sac as he licked up Jay's shaft.

Brian felt heat pour into him from Jay. He forcefully pushed it away from him, determined to take nothing, if only for ten minutes. He covered Jay's cock with saliva and then reached the head, swiping his tongue in circles over the velvety tip and dipping into the slit to lick up the clear fluid creaming the top.

He opened his mouth only slightly, pushing the crown of Jay's cock through his lips with resistance, making his mouth a tight hole, something to shove into. Jay groaned, curling his fingers in Brian's hair, and his groin tilted forward as he pushed his dick deeper inside Brian's mouth.

Brian's lips widened to accommodate Jay's cock, which wasn't extremely long but was very thick, and Brian had to concentrate in order to breathe past the massive rod stuffed in his mouth. The corners of his lips stretched as he swallowed more of it, and the slide of wet, hard flesh against his tongue was incredible. His own dick hardened and pressed against his waistband almost painfully.

When Brian reached the base of Jay's dick and pubic hairs tickled his nose, he slowly withdrew, fondling Jay's balls as he pulled away. He repeated the gesture, taking his time to fill himself up, to swallow all of him in.

As the tempo increased, Jay's fire burned hotter and brighter, and flames occasionally leaped from his skin onto Brian's. Brian forced it off his body, trying to stay cool and pleasure Jay at the same time, fighting his own mounting arousal.

Jay's legs began to tremble and the fingers in Brian's hair tightened. He then let go and cradled Brian's face instead, one hand on each cheek, urging Brian's face up and down upon his dick.

Brian reached around and pressed his palms against Jay's ass. Jay gave a throaty growl and then came, each pulse coating Brian's mouth with salty liquid. Brian stilled, letting Jay fill him up, swallowing repeatedly.

He gave Jay's cock one last lick and then sat back on his heels, staring up.

Jay looked down at him with wet eyes.

"Bry..." Jay choked. He knelt as well, pulling him in for a deep kiss. Jay reached out and gently squeezed Brian's hard cock through his trousers, but Brian just held Jay's hand instead.

"No. No taking, not today."

Jay rested his arm on Brian's shoulder and leaned his forehead against Brian's. "It isn't taking when I offer it. I want to blow you. I love it."

"I know," Brian said, smiling. "But just for once, I want to be giving you something without getting anything in return."

Jay kissed his temple.

Brian leaned into the contact. "Besides, nothing like being accused of the murder of two men to really kill your focus."

Jay froze.

"Two men?" he croaked.

Brian swallowed. "Shit. You didn't hear at the station?"

"Hear what?" Jay straightened, pulling his arm from Brian's shoulder.

Brian sat back. "Paul Krochalis, from the gym. He's dead too. Died during or shortly after the time we were there."

Jay pulled up his trousers and buckled his pants. "Tell me what happened." All arousal was gone in his expression. He was back to being a policeman, and Brian couldn't help but sigh at the quick change.

They couldn't sit on the couch, and the kitchen was sopping wet. So they sat on the floor, by the door, and Brian recounted his morning at the police station, his interview with Pollar and Commissioner Hatch, and Sair's rescue.

As he spoke, Jay grew more agitated, and the flames across his body turned light and hot, reaching out like tendrils from his body. Brian finally gave up on stopping

absorbing them. He watched Jay's flame spread down his arms, felt the residual heat, soothing and cocooning, and knew he would just have to let it happen. He couldn't help it when Jay was this upset.

Jay began pacing the room.

"Did you find out anything more about Krochalis? What he has to do with Volpe?"

"No. Nothing. They aren't going to share evidence with me, Jay. I'm their suspect!"

Jay ran his hands through his hair. "Are you sure you didn't...you didn't touch Paul, did you? Or say anything to him while I wasn't looking?"

"No, I didn't!" Brian glared. "I thought you trusted me."

"I do," Jay said. "But—"

"You witnessed all my interactions with him. He called me a cocksucker, he hissed as I walked by, and I ignored him. That was it."

Brian shook his head. He stared at the warping floor in the kitchen, trying to control his anger. "Even if I wanted him dead, I wouldn't have burned him like that. And what about that bargebison discharge? What the hell was a giant building-sized animal doing outside Pearl's Gym?"

Brian felt bursting with energy, and suddenly wanted to tackle the issue, right then and there. They could walk over to Pearl's Gym, ignore the crime scene tape, and see if there was anything the other detectives missed.

Brian didn't hear Jay's pacing behind him, and turned to see Jay white-faced, eyes wide, looking shocked.

Brian felt it then—huge energy. Flames and life. Pouring into him.

Jay fell to the floor.

"Shit. Shit!" Brian cried. He swallowed and closed his eyes and forced himself to break the connection.

But it was so strong between them, built up over too much time. He had been taking energy from Jay for months. Now that his mind had learned how to do it subconsciously, it seemed impossible to curb.

"Jay!" Brian cried, rushing to him.

Jay clenched his fists and then blew out, exploding his fire like a bomb from his body, shooting Brian backward.

Brian slammed against the wall, but even then he was sucking in all that heat and power, feeling alive and burning and on fire.

"Stop it!" Jay gasped, moving toward the door. "For fuck's sake!" He clutched at his throat.

"I'm sorry!" Brian cried. Brian still pulled Jay's life into him, like warmth and love and power, all in one, and it was so hard to break the connection. It took all of his strength, and when he finally severed the link, he collapsed to his knees.

His body burned with the excess energy. He had to expel it, get rid of all he'd taken in. He stomped on the floor and pushed Jay's heat and power out, into the floorboards. The wood caught ablaze.

"No!" Jay choked. "There are people in the building!"

The entire room burst into flame.

Brian fumbled for the fire extinguisher.

The noise of the extinguisher was deafening. By the time he got the fire out, he breathed heavily with adrenaline and fear. He stared at the damage he had just done.

Silence filled the room.

Jay was bone white. His own fire was extinguished as well. Brian had taken everything Jay had. He stared up at Brian in silence, breathing heavily.

"I can't stop it," Brian whispered.

Jay looked stricken. He slowly got to his feet. He grabbed his shock-volt pistol, wallet, and keys from the table by the front door, and then turned to Brian.

"I'm going."

Sheer panic filled Brian, and he rushed to Jay's side. "What! Where?"

Jay took a very deliberate step back. "I can't talk to you when you're like this. You're killing me."

"You're leaving me?" Brian cried. With horror, he realized that, since he was the only man Jay could touch, he never thought he would be dumped.

Brian blinked quickly, horrified to feel tears. "You're breaking up with me?"

"No! I'm just..." Jay ran a hand through his hair. He looked harrowed. His brown eyes appeared almost black against his bone-white skin. "I'm sleeping somewhere else tonight. We both need to cool it."

"You were right." Brian rushed the words out, he sounded breathless. "Please...you were right! I'll get help. I swear."

Jay stared at him in silence for a moment, and then nodded.

"Good-bye." He walked out.

Brian stood there, too stunned to do anything more. He fell to his knees and just let himself burn, waves of it consuming him, and didn't move again until every spare ounce of energy had left him.

## Chapter Seven

Jay sheltered his coffee protectively as he pushed his way past the throngs of yelling citizens toward the front entrance of Enyalios Station.

He had been tired, but the sound of hundreds calling for Brian's arrest had the effect of a shot of adrenaline. The chief of police was on the steps before the crowd, urging calm from behind a podium.

Jay slunk through the edges of the crowd and pushed his way into the building. Once inside he glanced down and was relieved to see his coffee had survived.

He needed it. Badly.

He was exhausted, having spent most of the night awake. He rarely slept in hotels anyway; his anger and concern over Brian made sleep impossible.

And he had his own case to worry about, beyond anything he could do to help Brian extricate himself from this mess.

Jay made his way to the second floor, thinking that if Brian were any other man, Jay would have left him. He wouldn't have stayed with someone actually violent. Jay had spent too many years as a policeman watching domestic abuse unfold in households around Parmas. He had been too disgusted by the scars left on people who were "loved entirely" by their abusers. He knew what domestic violence looked like.

Jay sat down at his desk and rested his head in his hands for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

Brian had burned him. He had shocked him electrically. He had set fire to Jay's house and nearly drained Jay of everything he had.

Yes. This was a dangerous love affair.

But it wasn't abuse. He couldn't go that far. Brian hated what he was doing to Jay. He honestly didn't mean it.



Which meant Brian's problem more resembled addiction than abuse. It was something spiraling out of his control.

Besides, Jay sympathized with Brian better than anyone. Because of Jay's own huge power, Jay *only* hurt other people he touched. How many people had he himself unintentionally burned? Jay thought back on his former partner, the sensation of melting his hand through Marick's shoulder. He remembered the time he had yanked his brother Chris's leg in an argument, and Jay's hand had seared through to the bone. He had hurt so many people, and there was no way he could ever apologize enough to express the guilt he bore for their injuries.

It wasn't any different for Brian, whose own abilities segregated him from others. Worse, Brian didn't even know the limits of his abilities.

Perhaps that was all they needed—some answers to what Brian was capable of and an idea of how to limit that capacity.

"Hey, boss." Officer Bridget Carmichael smiled at Jay as she walked past. She looked at his face again, frowned, and then turned back, sitting on the edge of Jay's desk. "You okay?"

"Great."

She nodded. "Don't worry. Brian will be cleared. Last month when Argent brought in that run-over puppy, Brian burst into tears. We all know he isn't capable of murder."

Jay sipped his coffee. "I don't suppose any of my report requests from the demonic legal affairs groups came in, did they?"

If Bridget found his change of topic odd she didn't say so. "We got one. A list of cases involving demon custody rights. I'll bring it over."

"Thanks." Jay switched on his computer. He could feel the eyes of the station officers and staff looking at him, could sense their whispers. He kept his expression blank and focused on his screen.

Bridget came back, dropping off a printout.

Jay started scanning the list, but noticed that Bridget remained by his side. He glanced up at her. "What?"

Bridget grinned. "Guess what my parents just bought me?"

"A better outlook on life?"

Bridget slapped his shoulder.

"No, idiot," she said. "A Parlancer!"

Jay looked at her blankly.

"You know? The thing your dad invented?" She whipped out the small device from her pocket. It was sleek and shiny, a brushed metal, flat, egg-shaped device with no discernable buttons or speakers.

"My brother made that, actually," Jay said.

"Really?"

"Well, I'm just guessing. Looks like his design." Jay reached out for it and turned the small machine over. It looked so small and fragile in his large, burning hands. He was always stunned by the beauty of his family's creations, even though his appreciation was tainted by the recognition that he could never be part of it. He handed it back to her. "Definitely Christopher's. See that filigree pattern around the edge? It hides the speakers. He's always doing shit like that for pure aesthetics."

Bridget clasped the device in her hands gingerly. Jay knew they were expensive, but couldn't fathom why she treasured it as if it were a jewel. He studied her overly excited expression and tried to figure out the connection. "Oh, wait. You're dating that exchange student, aren't you?"

Bridget's eyes sparkled as she nodded. "It's amazing! We can talk together now, fluently. It's changed everything! We can have conversations longer than 'How is your breakfast?' 'It is very tasty, thank you!'"

"Good for you."

"I think it's so cool that I know a member of the family who made this possible. Can you pass a message to your brother and father for me?"

"Sure."

Bridget gave a little squeal and then ran off.

Jay rubbed his jaw. He'd left his razor behind at home and hadn't shaved that morning. He knew he looked pretty rough.

He wondered if he could just claim to lose the note. The last time he'd seen his brothers and parents had been somewhat disastrous. Their relationship was cordial but distant. However, Jay might have tipped the balance by taking Brian over to meet them last month.

Brian had been bubbly and polite, charming to them all. But Jay's father and brothers had barely spoken to him that evening. Granted, they were busy inventing their new multi-million dollar device, and spent most of the dinner hunched over design schematics. But the way they interacted with Jay and Brian still seemed strained. Only Jay's mother gushed about Brian afterward, and promised to stop by the condo and exchange recipes with Brian.

The thought made Jay frown.

What the hell was he going to do about Brian?

"Here," Bridget said, handing Jay a typed letter. He glanced at it. It went on about how the Yervant family had given her back her love life. Jay nearly blushed reading it, thinking of Christopher's response.

"I'll pass it on."

"Thank you!"

Jay turned back to his screen.

"Oh, and boss?" she added. "Stay away from Pollar. He's in a pissier mood."

Once alone, Jay scanned the document Bridget gave him. It was a list of lawyers who represented demon custody rights cases, and the nature of each case.

Jay was shocked by the number of them. They involved kidnappings and abandonment cases; there were asylum requests and naturalization trials, and near the end of the list, four Ertashi plaintiffs complaining that their children had been kidnapped by unknown sorcerers, and they had never seen them again.

So the parents of the demon children were not collaborators; they were victims.

Jay found a listing for a legal team representing a group of human parents who had adopted human infants and later discovered their babies were demonic offspring. They sought restitution from both the adoption agency and full custody of their children, who had been taken away by Parmas child welfare services after growing scales and becoming violent.

Jay made a few phone calls and spoke with the lead of the legal team representing the parents. He got the name of a physician, Dr. Philip Tarvo, who specialized in categorizing demonic and sorcerous powers, and who would be able to testify regarding the children's unnatural abilities. Sure enough, the parents had all adopted the children as infants from One Family Ltd., the same agency that the other dozen parents Jay was working with had used. Dr. Tarvo's sworn affidavit could give him the final piece of evidence he needed to bring One Family down.

He stuffed the list into his file, but as he did so, a name caught his eye. There were thousands of Yervants in Parmas City, so it wasn't surprising to see the name. But the listing was for YI, Yervant Industries, the company his great-grandfather had started and that his father currently ran.

Jay read the listing. Apparently his own family had been involved in a legal case regarding the custody of several abandoned demonic offspring. The case concluded last month, with YI winning its custody claim. He would have to ask his father about that later.

Jay needed to meet with the physician specializing in demonic abilities, and then, depending on whether he was able to secure an affidavit, he'd call the judge and get his warrant for One Family.

But as he sat there, his mind kept going back to Brian.

It wouldn't hurt to do just a *little* looking into the circumstances of Paul Krochalis's death, while he was at it.

Jay called down for a copy of Krochalis's and Volpe's autopsy reports.

Instead of getting the reports, he got his boss instead.

Captain Pollar, arms crossed, stared down at Jay with bleary eyes. Just seeing him made Jay feel all the more exhausted.

"No."

It was all Pollar said, but they both knew what he was talking about.

"I'm not going whole-hog on anything, Captain. I just —"

"No. Stick to your own case. Stay out of Day's. We can't have suspicion fall on any of us." Pollar sighed. "The changeling babies. How is it going?"

"I have another witness claiming against One Family, and a physician who will testify to their genetic makeup. I might be able to bring One Family in tonight."

"Do you know who is responsible?"

"It's a small agency, a married couple and their staff of three. I figured I'd book them all and see what shakes out in the interrogations."

Pollar nodded. "Okay. But stay away from Brian's case." He hesitated for a moment longer and then left.

Jay stared at his desk. He finished his coffee and wrote down the address of the physician he needed to meet.

Ben Moran, another detective in the Metro Demonic Unit and Jay's friend, dropped two folders on Jay's desk as he walked by. Jay looked at the titles — *Arun Volpe* and *Paul Krochalis* — and then looked back at Moran.

Moran sat back down at his own desk without making eye contact.

Jay smirked.

He flipped through the files quickly, knowing he was busted if he was caught with either file. He quickly jotted down notes from the case.

When he got to the autopsy report for Krochalis, however, he had to stop and look back at Volpe's.

Whoever the murderer was had removed several organs from Krochalis before etiolating the man to death. He was dead before he was ever burned.

Jay checked the report on Volpe, but the murderer had not done the same.

Krochalis was found missing most of his large intestine, his kidney, liver, a lung, and his testicles.

What the hell?

It was further proof that Brian hadn't killed the man in an unpremeditated fit of rage. But who would remove the organs before killing a man? And why etiolate the rest of them if he planned on setting Krochalis on fire? Was Krochalis's death related to the illegal organ trade?

As he closed the file, Jay saw the lab report on the bargebison discharge found near the body. He knew that no bargebison were loose in the city in the last month. They walked through the city only for special events, usually parades, and they required designated routes to clear their massive bodies.

Jay looked up bargebison discharge on the computer network, but most of the reports were written in Darsh. Jay printed a few out and stacked them to take down to the translator. Then he packed the files back up in the order he'd received them, and as he walked by Detective Moran's desk, he dropped them off.

"Thanks," Jay whispered.

Moran nodded.

Downstairs, Jay asked for Bartleby, but was informed he was gone for the afternoon.

"He's got some trial," said Seamonster, the other translator in the department.

Seamonster's actual name was something extended and unpronounceable by humans, which led to his Parmas City name becoming a reflection of his unusual, aquatic appearance. Despite the impressive double row of teeth and gelatinous exoskeleton, he was a nice enough guy.

"A trial?" Jay asked. "He's testifying?"

"No, he's in it. Something to do with his kids."

Jay frowned. He had to watch it—he had a tendency to see connections where none existed. He was a strong believer in synchronicity, but the coincidence was too much to ignore.

"You know what it's about?" Jay asked.

"Only that he's been in some court case for months now. The whole Darsh hive he's in is nearly broke after paying lawyers' fees. And he's in a shitty mood," Seamonster added.

"Well, he can join the club."

"Do you want me to translate it?" Seamonster offered.

Jay handed the reports over, but Seamonster just shook his head. "They're in Darsh, so you should have Bartleby do it, since it's his native language. Easy translation job for him. Although all of them are, since he can intuitively determine the meaning behind words."

"I'll wait, then. Thanks." Jay noticed the door to the evidence room was open and excused himself.

Around the corner he found Elliot, on his hands and knees, pointing at boxes with a pen and counting under his breath. In one hand he held another box.

"How's it going?" Jay asked.

Elliot started and dropped the box he held. It shattered and white powder went up in dust. A powerful sulfuric smell filled the room and caused Jay to lurch toward the wall, nearly passing out. A giddy euphoria rushed through him.

He shot out his arm and grabbed Elliot's shoulder with his gloved hand, yanking him out of the way as the sulfuric cloud exploded into shards of needle-thin glass and a little translucent, naked devil giggled and ran out of the room.

"Shit!" Elliot gasped.

Jay gripped the door frame, steadying himself until the euphoria passed.

Elliot coughed and waved his hands to disperse the air. "That was stupid of me. I didn't know we had a pocket devil in here!"

"Sorry I scared you," Jay said. He shook his head to clear it. "Any luck finding what was stolen?"

"Yeah, so far, we're missing a set of teeth and a bottle of wine."

"What was a bottle of wine doing in the evidence room?"

"It was laced with venom," Elliot said.

"And the teeth?"

"It was like a bitebox," Elliot explained. "They were jaws from some unidentified demon, and even separated from the body they could still snap shut. They were kept in a glass case. That's all I know from the description on the slip. Oh, and now we're apparently missing an unactivated pocket devil."

Jay smirked. "I'll get someone to round him up."

"I don't even know why people still think those guys are funny."

"Blame the fraternities."

Elliot wiped his brow and smiled sweetly. "I'll keep looking."

"Thanks."

Jay made his way to the exit, stopping long enough to flag down a Demonic Unit patrol officer and warn him that a devil now pranced unauthorized through the police station.

Outside, it was a scorcher of a day.

As he made his way to the parking lot, his phone rang. It was his mother. He answered but then couldn't get another word in, she spoke so frantically. As he listened with growing sickness, he ran to his car.

He wouldn't be going to see the physician after all.

He had to go to the hospital.

Someone had etiolated his brother Christopher.

## Chapter Eight

"Over here, Blaze."

Jay turned at the sound of his oldest brother's voice. He spotted Dave at the end of the hospital hallway and rushed toward him. The two of them didn't touch. None of Jay's family touched him. But Dave nodded, his eyes rimmed red.

"Is he alive?" Jay asked.

Dave nodded again. "Barely. The housekeeper found him in time. He's inside." Dave opened the door beside him, and Jay quietly stepped into the room.

Parmas City Hospital was always crowded, and yet somehow Jay's family had secured a private room for his brother. In the back of Jay's mind, he remembered his own stay at the hospital a year prior. His family hadn't done the same for him.

He pushed the selfish thought aside and stepped closer to the bed.

His mother was there, sitting beside the bed, and his father as well, looming over Christopher in a stylish cream-colored suit, looking like a massive guardian angel. Jay's father was a stout man, muscular and rough looking, with a wiry gray beard and a thick head of gray hair that stood wildly upward just like Jay's. His expression was drawn as he stared down at his middle son.

"Hello, darling," Jay's mother whispered, squeezing her hand out toward Jay. He returned the gesture and stood next to Christopher's bed.

Christopher had no visible physical injuries, but his skin was deathly pale, his lips almost bluish, and when he opened his eyes, even his irises seemed drained of color, an odd bluish-white. But he was able to look at Jay and give him a weak smile.

"Oh good," Christopher said hoarsely. "The cops are here."

Jay smiled. He pulled up a rolling stool and sat next to Christopher. More than anything he wanted to reach out and touch him, assure himself that Chris was fine. But a lifetime avoiding physical contact made such a simple gesture difficult, even when

wearing his gloves. The only person Jay ever felt truly comfortable touching was Brian, because he was the only person he couldn't hurt.

Physically, anyway.

"How are you feeling?" Jay asked.

Christopher gave a small shrug. "Tired, mostly. Completely bone weary."

"The doctor wanted to give him some medicine to help him sleep, but he refuses everything," Jay's mother complained. "Tell him he's being stupid, darling. Tell him to take the medicine. He won't listen to any of us."

Jay raised his eyebrow at his brother. Christopher shook his head. "I already feel drugged enough. Everything is sluggish. Narcotics will just knock me out worse."

Jay nodded. "I get it."

His mother rolled her eyes at him.

"Did you get a glimpse of who did this to you?" Jay asked.

Christopher shook his head. Jay noticed even his brown hair now seemed several shades lighter than the rest of the family's. "No. I didn't see it coming. I was in my pool before sunrise. I went for a swim, and when I got out someone pushed me from behind and smashed my head against the tile. Something bit the back of my neck and I suddenly felt completely weak, like someone was inside me, pulling my energy out."

"Was it a demon or a human being?"

"I didn't see."

"Did you feel anything strange? Claws or scales? Or smell anything?"

Christopher closed his eyes and licked his parched lips. "Smelled like honey."

Jay's mother reached out and brushed the hair back from Christopher's forehead.

"Did he say anything to you?" Jay asked. "Or make any other noises we could use to identify him with?"

Christopher's eyes opened again. He looked right at Jay. "He called me by name. My whole name. Christopher Henry Yervant."

The room grew silent. It wasn't like everyone in the world knew Christopher's middle name. Jay looked up at his father, who wouldn't make eye contact. He was busy glaring at Christopher, looking almost pissed.

But Jay knew his father well. He knew that menacing look of anger was his form of compassion. He loved Dave and Christopher fiercely, and would do anything to protect them.

The door behind Jay opened, and he turned to see Dave re-enter the room, followed by his very pregnant wife, Yolanda. She rushed to Christopher's side as well and immediately started crying.

The rest of Jay's family pulled closer together, all of them touching one another to comfort each other. Jay's dad rested one arm on Dave's shoulder, and with the other, he



stroked Jay's mom's back. Dave rubbed Yolanda's shoulders and whispered to her that Christopher would be okay. And Jay's mother held Christopher's hand.

And there was Jay, all by himself, as usual.

"I'll look into it," Jay said roughly, standing up. "You sure you felt something bite you?"

Christopher nodded. "Yeah. But it wasn't like an animal, more like a shot, if you know what I mean."

Jay didn't know, but he also realized little details like that could make a case, so he jotted it down in his notebook.

"All right. I'll go look around the YI complex today," Jay said.

His father nodded. "I called the chief of police as soon as I heard. He swore he'd do everything in his power to find out what happened."

"Good." Jay nodded. "I won't be able to get involved if it wasn't a demon or sorcerer, but since you were nearly etiolated, I think it's a good bet someone with magical abilities was involved. Meanwhile, you should make sure to increase security at your house." Jay turned to Dave. "You too. I know you don't have security now. Get it. If you need a recommendation, I can call a few guys. They're ex-cops and tough in a fight."

"Thanks," Dave said, smiling at him.

"What about you?" his mother asked. She looked worriedly at Jay. "Are you going to be more careful as well? This could be an attack on our family!"

"I'll be fine," Jay said. He held out his hands and let power surge through his core, bursting from his palms for emphasis.

"Will Brian be okay?" his mother asked.

Jay swallowed. He didn't want to think about their fight last night, or what Brian was doing right now. He was probably either flagellating himself or burning something down.

"Nothing can hurt him," Jay said.

"I doubt that," his mother said, but she smiled kindly. "Tell him I said hello."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jay had to rush to make his appointment with Dr. Tarvo. He hadn't bothered to get a department vehicle in his dash to the hospital, so now he navigated the afternoon traffic in his Jeep, unable to use lights or sirens, and wishing he was doing anything other than this interview.

There was too much of a commonality between Christopher's assault, Krochalis, and Volpe to miss.

Etiolation was a misunderstood skill, something that many of the sorcerers could do a version of, but rarely in any great strength. Any sorcerer who channeled heat from

their body into another for healing purposes basically performed the reverse form of etiolation, *giving* their sorcerous power.

But to be able to *take* energy from another and use it was a rare talent. Rare enough that only Brian was known to have it. There were no other documented osmotics in the city, and few historically recorded. So to have three etiolation cases in as many days seemed highly suspicious indeed.

And all of the cases personally touched either Brian or Jay. Was this an attack against them?

Jay finally turned east off of Trade Street and headed toward the central business district, hoping there was a parking garage near Tarvo's practice. The sun was at its zenith and humidity covered the city like a shroud. Jay's open Jeep blew hot air into his face, and not for the first time, he wished he had sold it long ago and gotten a car with air conditioning.

He wound through the central district's one-way streets and managed to find a garage with valet parking at the base of one of the biggest scrapers, the Parmas Stock Center. He looked rough around the edges as it was, in slacks and a loose short-sleeved shirt, no tie. He ran his hand over his face again, wishing he had taken the time to shave before the interview. His two-day beard wasn't going to make much of an impression.

Then again, the doctor was from the hotblood Tarvo family, which meant he would probably be distracted enough by Jay's unusual aura of flames to not notice Jay's disheveled appearance.

Tarvo's practice was on the eighteenth floor, a series of rooms with a sweeping view of the ocean on one side, the cityscape on the other.

Dr. Tarvo was a small man with a tiny face and an almost non-existent chin. He made up for this with a massive head of thick black hair that burst from his scalp like a lion's mane. Jay almost smiled, thinking how worried he had been about his own appearance.

The doctor sat behind a massive glass table with nothing on it, in front of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the beach. Even Tarvo's chair was made of transparent plastic. His office looked like a tower of glass.

Dr. Tarvo confirmed that he had identified the families' children as being Ertashi embryos and not human.

"It's a very clever business," Dr. Tarvo commented, shaking his massive production of a hairdo. "The Ertashi do not develop physical traits until three years of age, and so for the first few years, they grow and act according to the genetic pattern they were injected with. But as soon as the dominant genes kick in, they only have one goal—to eat."

"Will you testify to this in court?" Jay asked.

Dr. Tarvo nodded. "Of course. Those poor families! I had to tell them that their beloved children were illusions, nothing more. Terrible business."

"And can you testify that One Family was the agency responsible for delivering the babies to these families?"

"It's all in the records, but I will swear to tell what I know."

"Thank you," Jay said. He stood. Dr. Tarvo reached his hand over the glass table, and Jay quickly shook it with his gloved hand. He turned to leave, but then remembered the physician's field of expertise.

"What do you know about osmotics?" Jay asked suddenly.

"Not much," the doctor said. "They all die too young to really develop much of a history we can study."

Jay felt his heart stop. "What did you say?"

Tarvo shrugged. "Their power grows exponentially. Over time they can't switch it off, and they just take everything in, all at once. They burn themselves out in an instant. Not a bad way to go, of course, but —"

"How old?" Jay demanded.

Tarvo looked into Jay's expression. He stood. "You know someone?"

"How old do they live?"

Tarvo swallowed. "I don't know. Like I said, no complete study has been done on osmotic powers. But no record I have shows anyone living past their midtwenties. They just...they short themselves out."

Jay felt like someone had punched him.

"But it isn't hopeless," Tarvo said quickly. "We have therapy and drugs now which could prolong the life of an osmotic well beyond that of those used during the riots and the sorcery wars. We understand more about biology now." Dr. Tarvo's eyes glinted. "Maybe we can develop a testing program. Some way to preserve this osmotic's life, in exchange for a record of his abilities?"

"He's not a fucking lab rat," Jay growled. "Thank you for the information."

## Chapter Nine

It was interesting, how the flashing neon lights of Jeravani Street could look so cheerful and comforting in one mood, and appear garish and obscene in another.

As Brian wandered the busy street outside Jay's condo, he suddenly found the environment cheap and unattractive. Triple X signs blared red and white. Men ogled his ass as he walked by, and he passed couples kissing under the awnings of nightclubs or jerking each other off in alleyways. Raffish artwork advertised discos where tasteless music pulsed.

But as ugly as the world around him was, he couldn't just go back to the condo.

Home was a dreary place without Jay. Brian had spent the day with repair men, getting Jay's floor replaced and a new couch delivered. It had cost him nearly his entire savings, but money didn't matter. The scars of their argument were too painful a reminder to stare at any longer.

There was no call from Bergen's lawyers, and no call from Jay. Brian had given up on the idea of acting cool and not calling first many hours ago, and had left Jay no fewer than five separate messages, each one increasingly remorseful. He received no answer, which meant either that Jay was extremely busy or did not want to talk to Brian.

And Brian had to come to terms with the fact that he might have just messed up one too many times and lost the person he loved more than anyone.

Brian kicked at an empty beer can as he walked the street. A massively built biker propositioned him, but Brian shoved his hands into his pockets, lowered his gaze to the pavement, and trudged onward, wanting no one else to look at him or think of him.

Yes. Yes. Fine. He had a problem. A big one. He'd admit it. He'd do something about it. He had told Jay as much. The first thing he would do tomorrow would be to look into sorcery training therapy, and see what options he had. It was scary, how he hadn't been able to stop pulling Jay into him.

It was scarier how wonderful it had felt.

He thought back on the night before, but felt as befuddled as he had during Volpe's interrogation. It was so subconscious now, this draining of things around him. The only sensation he detected was a subtle elation, a positivity, and it depressed him to think of giving up that beautiful high of a feeling.

But then he remembered the way Jay looked, clutching his throat and begging him to stop, and Brian's wish for a good high sobered substantially.

This was all his fault. And just because the idea of therapy or of some doctor experimenting on him frightened him didn't mean he wouldn't risk it all for the chance to save his relationship with Jay.

So why wasn't Jay calling him back?

Brian immediately answered his own question. Brian had almost killed him. Jay had every right to walk.

The thought brought tears to Brian's eyes. He didn't think regret could fill his gut any fuller, but it did, stretching and sinking inside of him like a dead parasite, heavy with remorse.

The funny thing was, he always imagined if they broke up, it would be him leaving Jay. Jay wasn't an easy guy to live with. He was taciturn and rarely spoke his emotions. He was a workaholic who loved his job to the point of obsession. He didn't know how to open up to people.

And Brian was his only chance at a normal relationship, a normal life. Brian knew that, and as unhealthy as the thought was, it gave him confidence.

But now Brian realized how foolish it had been to assume that his ability to touch Jay with impunity would grant him immunity against any of his own faults.

These thoughts churned inside of him. His stomach rumbled but the idea of eating seemed sour and unappealing.

He trudged toward home, dreading the silence and the empty time. It would have been bad enough if this fight had happened earlier. Now, with him suspended, his career on the line, he didn't even have his work to look forward to. And worse, his freedom was threatened.

For the first time, he allowed himself to consider what would happen if no other osmotic was found. What if he was convicted for the murders of Volpe and Krochalis? What if he ended up in prison?

Brian shuddered.

"Hey, man, do you have a cigarette?"

Brian looked up from the pavement and saw a young man leaning against the wall outside the bar across from Jay's condo. The man was very attractive, young with long blond hair and hazel eyes. He smiled at Brian.

Brian shrugged. "Sorry, I don't smoke."

The man's smile faded. "Wait. I know you. I've seen your face."

Brian walked away.

"Hey! You're that cop that beat that guy to death, aren't you?"

Brian kept walking. He heard footsteps behind him but didn't turn.

Someone grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

"Hey, asshole, I'm talking to you!"

The blond stood with two others, tall Thenmen demons with severe expressions on their coal black faces.

"He's the killer cop!" the blond stated, pointing at Brian.

The Thenmen started toward him.

Brian's hackles raised. His body swelled with energy. The power from the electrical wires above flooded him; he felt the engines burning in the cars that passed and the brute strength of the dog on a leash and the force of the pneumatic jackhammer in the street construction equipment nearby, all at once; it all filled him, and he nearly glowed with the power of it all. His hands shook.

He could kill all of them. Right now. Rip their throats and smash those sneering mouths clear off their faces.

Something in Brian's expression must have scared the blond man. He backed up, as did his demon companions.

Brian trembled. He had all that power inside of him, all that he stole. It had to go somewhere. What was he supposed to do now? How the hell was he going to get rid of it? It couldn't stay inside him forever.

He lunged toward them, wanting to kill.

The man cried out in fear.

Brian choked and then forced himself downward. He smashed his hands into the pavement. The asphalt split, and the sidewalk undulated like a shock wave rippling down the road as if an earthquake wracked the city.

Shouts of surprise echoed down the street, and in the distance, a hydrant exploded, shooting water into the sky.

"Sorry," Brian whispered to the terrified man and the Thenmen. Without looking back, Brian ran to the condo and bolted up the stairs.

## Chapter Ten

Uneasy for a number of reasons, Jay decided to grab something to eat in a familiar setting, somewhere safe and comforting. Shelly's Diner was nearby and the accustomed smells and tastes brought Jay some relief, although as he ate he realized no external sense of safety could sink through the dread in his bones. Dark disquietude filled him, something he couldn't think of, not directly, because it was too frightening to consider. So he thought around the edges of it.

Brian needed help. Fast. This wasn't about him being undisciplined anymore. This was about him being sick. He would die if he didn't get a handle on his osmotic abilities.

Unlike Brian, who always lost his appetite when nervous, Jay ordered another hot dog and consumed it quickly, hoping the mere act of eating would distract the rumble of anxiety inside of him. It didn't work.

Jay cleared his table and then stepped outside and had a cigarette. It was still early, only just turned four, and so the lunch crowd had departed but the dinner crowd had yet to arrive. No one occupied the outdoor seating area. The few patrons were inside, sheltering from the humidity.

Jay only managed to take two drags of his cigarette before he heard a familiar voice beside him.

"Smoking makes your kisses taste terrible."

Jay turned. Brian stood there, hands in pockets.

Jay resisted the instant urge to hug Brian to him. Just looking at him now made Jay's insides churn. How could something so beautiful, so good and powerful have no future? How could this be it?

Jay crushed out his cigarette and exhaled. "I was just thinking about you."

Brian smiled shyly. "Yeah? Me too. I got hungry. And I thought about having a salad. And then I thought how horribly you've probably been eating over the last twenty-four hours. And I thought you'd be here, having a hot dog. And suddenly I wanted one too."

Jay smiled.

Brian smiled back, and then ran his hand through his hair. "Are you done eating?"

"Yeah. But I'll sit with you while you finish yours."

Brian ordered and they made their way to an outdoor table. Jay turned the chair around and sat on it backwards. He didn't realize he'd done it until Brian commented on it.

"A habit I used to have when I was nervous," Jay admitted. He laughed. "My mother used to hate it when I did this. She always thought I'd fall and crack my lip."

"Why are you nervous now?" Brian asked. He looked down at his plate. "Do you think I'm going to hurt you?"

Jay took a deep breath. "If you do, I know it isn't intentional." He swallowed. There was so much he wanted to say. But he just didn't know how to put such sentiments into words without sounding like a complete fool.

The words just wouldn't come out.

"I fixed the kitchen," Brian said after he had swallowed a bite of his hot dog. "And I got a new couch. I hope you like it. It's the same color as the old one, but leather."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. I burned the last one."

An uncomfortable silence fell. Jay wanted to ask him about his day, what else he had been doing, but he didn't want to pretend like everything was fine between them either. He still hadn't decided what to do about their relationship.

"Look," he started, just as Brian said, "Jay."

They both paused.

"I called someone," Brian said. "An hour ago, when I got home. She's a therapist who specializes in sorcery."

Jay swallowed. "That's good, Bry."

"It turns out no one really has a field of expertise with osmotics, but since she spends most of her time teaching sorcerers how to concentrate on their powers, she thinks she can train me to concentrate away from them."

Jay nodded. His throat felt tight. Should he tell Brian about Dr. Tarvo's prediction? That even with therapy, Brian was looking at a death sentence?

Brian's eyes were wet. "My number one goal will be never to take anything from you again. I swear to you. I will never hurt you again." He looked desperate.

Jay stared down at his gloved hands.

Brian sniffed. "How's your case going?"



"I got distracted," Jay said. "My brother's in the hospital."

Brian's head shot up. "What? Who? Christopher or Dave?"

"Chris," Jay said. He leaned closer. "Someone etiolated him."

Brian froze. Then his eyes grew wide. "God. They *are* targeting us, aren't they?"

Jay shrugged. "I don't know. But Chris said something bit him."

"Bit him like a mosquito, or like teeth?"

"Teeth." Jay's brain suddenly clicked. "Like the teeth that were taken out of the evidence room, maybe?"

Brian stared back, and then nodded, a smile beginning to form. "Do we know anything about the teeth in the evidence room?"

"Just that they were able to clamp shut," Jay said.

"Okay." Brian leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. "So we have someone who is etiolating people and purposefully arranging the victims to make the blame fall on me."

"It has to be someone from the inside," Jay added. "Someone who saw or heard about your ill-fated interrogation of Volpe. And someone who has access to the sign-in sheet and the evidence room."

"But why would another cop want to sully the reputation of the department like this?" Brian asked. "You saw the media, didn't you? People are calling for complete dismantling of the Demonic Unit."

"It could be an officer from another department," Jay suggested. "Someone who doesn't like us."

Brian looked as if he would challenge the premise, but then he just sighed. "How's Christopher?" he asked after a moment.

"He'll be okay. White as a ghost, but I, for one, know a person can survive etiolation if they have enough heat inside of them."

Brian blanched at the reference, and Jay quickly changed the focus. "Christopher is a strong sorcerer. He can fight back to health."

"Will he be at the hospital for long?"

"He'll be released shortly to recuperate at home."

"Do you think he's under threat of another assault?"

Jay had been wondering the same thing all afternoon. "I don't know. I still don't see what ties all the victims together, other than their connection to us. Besides, Krochalis's organs were removed. What does that have to do with anything? Were they planning to do the same thing to my brother and were stopped in time, or was that something special just for Krochalis? We're missing a critical clue here."

"Well, I can't do much without Pollar getting on my ass about it, but I'm going to see what I can find out on my own," Brian said. "I'm visiting a specialist to find out more about the bargebison discharge, see what he can tell me."

Jay narrowed his eyes. "You be careful."

"Of course," Brian said, too flippantly.

"I'm serious. Not only is there a murderer out there who has the same powers you do, but he has a mission to make you take the blame. Don't go anywhere alone. Keep an alibi active at all times. Report your location to Pollar if you have to."

Jay noticed Brian had barely touched his hot dog. He reached over and took a bite himself.

"You can have it," Brian said. "I have no appetite."

"I can tell. You look skinnier."

Brian smiled. "It's been twenty-four hours since I last saw you. I doubt I look that much worse."

"I keep very close tabs on your appearance," Jay told him.

Brian laughed. "How reassuring."

"All part of the perks of dating a detective."

Brian squeezed Jay's hand. "Are you coming home tonight?" He lowered his gaze. "I really am sorry. I hope you forgive me."

Jay's stomach clenched. He wanted to say yes. He really wanted to go home.

But until Brian actually sought treatment, and didn't just talk about it, Jay would have to make a stand. This wasn't just a matter of principle. This was a matter of his life.

So Jay slowly pulled his hand from Brian's. "Not tonight."

Brian's expression froze.

"You still need help, Bry. I know you are sorry. But until you do something about it, the problem remains."

"Where are you going to sleep?" Brian asked roughly. His voice was thick. He wouldn't make eye contact.

Jay shrugged. "I don't know. A hotel or something. But not right away. I still have to swing by Yervant Industries. I promised my parents I'd check out the premises and make sure it looked safe."

Brian nodded, but still didn't make eye contact.

Jay's heart felt heavy. He wanted to pull him closer and apologize and forgive him. He wanted to kiss Brian and feel that frenzied passion in his arms. He wanted to do everything except what he knew in his heart was right, which was to leave Brian until he got help.

Jay stood up. "I'll see you soon."

Brian nodded.

But he didn't say good-bye.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jay's mind barely focused on the traffic as he turned into the industrial park and drove parallel to the raised highway. At YI headquarters, he took the parking spot marked for his brother Christopher, and ignored the angry look from one of the employees who scowled at his weather-beaten Jeep.

Jay spotted two gray uniformed security guards at the front gates, and another set working the building entrance.

One of the company directors, an enthusiastic woman, gave Jay a tour of the facilities. She seemed thrilled to meet Jay, who was apparently the source of much gossip and intense mystery around the office, being known only as Louis Yervant's blazing, homosexual cop of a son. The director frequently grabbed Jay's arm as she led him around, and he forced himself not to flinch with each contact.

As they toured the facility, she assured Jay that no one would be able to enter past security. Indeed, the building resembled a sleek and stylish prison. Metal-reinforced windows and spell-enchanted locking systems separated sections of the building and made movement between the different departments fragmented. Exits to the outside were closely monitored with cameras, security guards, and more enchantments. They needed the security. Company secrets were valuable, and YI competed fiercely with other sorcery-based technology corporations. The more Jay examined the building, the more assured he felt that his family would be safe, at least while at work. Spells floated through the air and danced along the walls, triggering alerts to the security system should anyone not cleared enter the facility. It made sense that whoever attacked his brother did so in the relatively open environment of Christopher's hillside mansion.

As Jay was leaving, he saw the brick outbuilding of Yervant R&D, and recalled that Paul Krochalis had worked there before his death.

And he had been etiolated.

Going on a hunch, but not much more, Jay excused himself from his enthusiastic tour guide and made his way across the well-manicured lawn alone. A flock of flamingos stood in the spiky grass next to a man-made pool, complete with koi and water lotus. Jay dashed past the spray of an automatic sprinkler system and showed his badge to the uniformed security guards stationed outside the R&D facility entrance.

Inside, Jay noted additional security spells, all focused around a cluster of labs, offices, and a bunch of scientific equipment he did not understand at all. A well-marked room was painted bright yellow and encased in steel, marking the Yervant Industries portal to other demon realms. Out of habit, Jay gave it a quick glance to make sure all the emergency traps were in place and then moved on.

He saw human employees, a faun, cabrasha delivery goats, a morax, and other low-level, trusted demons; nothing seemed suspicious in the least.

"Excuse me," Jay said, stopping a young man carrying a tray of coffees into one of the labs. "Can you tell me what Paul Krochalis was working on before he died?"

"Well, he'd just finished developing the Parlancer," the man said, looking nervously between the badge clipped at Jay's belt, Jay's massive forearms, and his

shock-volt pistol. "And he had begun work on another linguistic device, something more advanced for execs, like an earpiece."

"Thank you." Jay slipped under the police tape blocking Krochalis's office and stepped inside.

There was a smell here. Honey. It hit Jay immediately and sent a tingle up his spine. There was a connection with his brother.

But what?

He did a quick perfunctory search of the room. It wasn't his case, so he disturbed nothing. Spools of spell wire and paper diagrams littered the top of Krochalis's work space, and lining one wall were jars containing various specimens floating in a clear viscous fluid.

Jay took a closer look. They appeared to be tiny organs.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Finished with his examination of the room, he left the building and walked the periphery. The sound of the freeway roared overhead. He didn't like the fact that the back end of the building, facing the paved expanses of the industrial park, had no surveillance camera in place.

Around the side of the building was a garden, clearly tended by a service. Colorful clumps of flowers and green foliage dispersed like islands in a sea of beauty bark. However, beside the building a trench was dug, rich dark soil mounded on one side of the pit. Jay looked down into the trench. It was a few feet deep, but he couldn't see anything inside.

Suddenly someone fell from the sky and nearly knocked him over.

Jay swiveled and gripped the shirt of his assailant, pushing the man against the brick wall.

"Freeze!" he growled.

The man's hands shot up over his head.

"I'm freezing! I'm freezing!"

Jay looked at the man and the camera in his hands. He recognized his handsome face, and that gorgeous, curly blond hair.

Jay let go and snorted. "James Sparks. Great. What are you doing, trying to kill me?"

James's eyes widened with recognition. "Yervant!" He grinned. "Can I put my hands down?"

"Sure." Jay stepped back as James brushed dirt off his shirt. James was Detective Ben Moran's lover, and now Jay recalled Moran mentioning James worked freelance for one of the big papers in the city. Jay shook his head. "I hope you aren't doing a piece on Krochalis."

"Krochalis? Who's he?" James checked the lens of his camera, and then let it hang from his neck. "No, I'm working on something else. This security sucks, by the way. I scaled the wall and took several pictures from the roof, all while the guards made bets on the flamingos."

"Bets?"

"It's mating season," James said with a smile. He nodded to the trench. "I mostly came here to snap this."

Jay frowned at the trench. "Why?"

"I'm working on a story about the Parlancer. YI says they harvested demon parts to synthesize the technology, but refused to specify which ones, claiming the info was proprietary."

"So? A lot of companies do that."

"Yeah, but a lot of companies aren't involved in demon custody cases at the same time." James reached into the back pocket of his tight jeans. Jay took a moment to admire James's finely sculpted ass before shaking his head. Moran would be furious if he knew.

"Look." James thrust the wad of paper into Jay's hands. "One of the YI gardeners found larvae buried here, right in front of R&D." James nodded to the trench. "After running some tests, YI decided to keep them, realizing they could use their parts for their Parlancer."

Jay looked over the documentation. There were pictures of black larvae, a good foot and a half long, ribbed, slimy, and covered in goopy yellow residue.

"Yervant Industries claimed custody over the larvae since they were buried on their property and abandoned. But I did a little research and found out this species *has* to be buried in nitrogen-rich soil. It's part of their life cycle. I guess their parents sued YI for the rights to their children back but were refused."

"I saw a record of Yervant Industries involved in a custody case," Jay commented. "So this is it? They were sued for some grub found in the dirt behind the building?"

James shrugged. "Whatever they were, they became the Parlancer."

"Are you sure?" Jay looked over the documents again. Another picture showed several tiny purple organs and captioning described them as translation glands.

Jay grabbed the phone from his pocket and held out the picture. "I'm taking this for a minute, okay?"

James frowned. "Hey, it's my story..."

"I don't want your story," Jay snapped. "I'm trying to save someone's life!"

"Oh yes. Whatever hell cops do is so much more important than reporters." James crossed his arms and glared at the screwing flamingos.

Jay shook his head, not wanting to know what *that* was all about. He used the camera on his phone to take a picture of the larvae. He was going to send it to Pollar,

but then realized he'd be busted when the captain found out he was still investigating Brian's case.

So instead he sent it to Brian, with the message "Larvae buried at YI R&D being used in new YI translator. Connection?" and hit send.

It wasn't really an apology.

It wasn't even an argument.

But he hoped Brian would be able to ask around where Jay could not.

"I need those back," James said.

"Of course," Jay said. He handed the papers over. "Although you should probably –"

An explosion of pain shocked through Jay's back and he instantly fell to his knees. Nausea welled through him. He struggled to find his balance and turned back in time to see a cloaked figure shoot a bolt of white light from a shock-volt pistol into James's neck. The force threw James to the side, and he tumbled headfirst into the ditch.

Jay's muscles spasmed in agony. Heat and flame coursed over him. Where the fuck was security?

He ignored the throbbing pain coursing through his body, and ripping off his gloves, Jay charged the shrouded shape. Its body was lanky and black, thin, all muscle, almost no bones. Jay tackled it and gripped the demon's neck. It made a clicking noise as it writhed, and its skin burned under Jay's hand.

Jay recognized the clicking sounds. The demon was Darsh.

Something sharp bit into Jay's neck from behind. Jay turned to see another shrouded Darsh withdrawing its hand. It held a set of teeth.

Jay recognized the effects immediately. He was being etiolated. His power ebbed, his flames extinguished themselves. He struggled to hold the Darsh beneath him but the other easily yanked Jay's heavy body off the small frame.

With the last of his strength, Jay unholstered his own shock-volt and fired at the demon holding the teeth. The Darsh collapsed to the ground.

Jay crawled toward James's unconscious body. Jay's energy poured out of him, making it hard to even draw a full breath. He reached for James's leg and tried to pull him from the ditch, but he was out of strength, as weak as a child.

"Help!" Jay gasped, hoping to alert security staff on the other side of the building, but it seemed like the air for breath drew away from him.

And then the burned demon raised its shock-volt. White hot light burst from the barrel of the shock-volt and struck Jay in the chest. Pain shattered Jay's senses, more than he could contain. He shuddered and fell back, senseless, into the ditch.

## Chapter Eleven

The text message from Jay was strange, but the accompanying snapshot was stranger. It looked like a glistening black maggot. Brian didn't know what it meant, or what it had to do with his impending conviction for murder, but he would worry about that as soon as he found his way out of a sprawling basement in the bowels of Parmas City University.

Brian was already fifteen minutes late for his appointment with Dr. Michael Gold, a demonologist at the university. Brian had met the man once before on a case, when the professor was suspected of murder. He seemed like a nice guy, the kind of guy who wouldn't necessarily tell anyone if Brian asked questions. So, he had given Gold's office a call and arranged a meeting.

But after discovering the university had two separate fountains and getting turned around navigating the union building, he found himself trapped in some strange, turquoise-colored fireproof basement filled with the sounds of a freshmen drum circle.

He finally located the exit, and across the manicured courtyard loomed a pale yellow brick structure that was the anthropology department. Inside, long, winding hallways were populated by students in flip-flops. Brian was glad he wasn't wearing his uniform. He would have stuck out as blatantly as a streaker.

He knocked anxiously and then entered Gold's long, thin office. The space was cramped with books and bones and other artifacts, and the desk was covered in papers. Gold stood as Brian entered and smiled.

Brian smiled back. "Hello, Dr. Gold."

"Call me Michael." Michael shook Brian's hand.

As soon as they touched, Brian saw images from Michael's mind and heard his thoughts. Brian saw himself, through the demonologist's eyes, and he looked drawn. Michael was annoyed that Brian was late. He thought Brian had pretty eyes. He

wondered how Brian was adjusting to police culture. He questioned whether Brian had experienced a significant values shift or if he simply attempted to wholly indigenize himself.

The thoughts bombarded Brian, made him freeze in shock. He had never absorbed a telepath's abilities before, and it startled him, the depth of information and the speed of it, all the power of another's mind coursing into his own.

And he didn't even know what indigenize meant.

Michael appeared equally stunned and immediately dropped Brian's hand.

"Sorry," Brian said.

Michael blinked, still looking startled. Then he shook his head. "Argent told me you were osmotic, but I seem to have forgotten."

Brian coughed nervously. "May I sit?"

Michael stared at him for another moment. He was attractive, bronzed skin and blond hair, with startling blue eyes that had no irises, evidence of his half-Paarkuri parentage. Along with the telepathy, of course.

"Sure. Please sit down." Michael sat down himself. "So you're here on official business, then?"

"Not official. I just wanted to ask you a few questions about the bargebison, for my own knowledge," Brian said.

"Sure. What about them?"

"Well, anything. I'm starting from scratch. Are they aggressive? Is there a possibility they could murder someone?"

Michael stared at him a moment longer, and then burst out laughing. "The bargebison? *Murder* someone? They're like building-sized cows. The only way they'd kill someone is by stepping on them, and even then, I'm pretty sure the person would deserve it. They move slower than sloths."

"Oh." Brian frowned. "So they don't eat people?"

"No, they're herbivores." Michael's eyebrows came together. "Are you telling me that you were the only child in all of Parmas City who didn't do a science fair project on the bargebison in second grade? We all did. I even got a tour inside of one."

That image was not pleasant, and Brian grimaced. "I grew up on a conjure-free commune, outside of the city. So no, I really don't know anything about them. I haven't even seen them."

"Well, you'll recognize them when you do," Michael promised. "They look like many large land-dwelling mammals, except they're about sixty-five thousand cubic yards in size. Their skin is similar to an elephant's, rough and porous, and it produces a sweet discharge that the bargebison use to keep themselves protected from the sun's UV rays."

"This discharge," Brian asked, scooting forward in his chair. "Could it be created by some other being? Or taken by someone?"



Michael shrugged. "Well, the Darsh eat it, so they probably take it with them whenever they leave the bison. But that's just a guess. I'm more a student of demonic culture than biology. Although with the bargebison, there's definitely a bio-cultural factor between them and their symbionts."

Brian frowned. "I'm not following you."

"The Darsh have a symbiotic relationship with the bargebison. The bison have these large skin flaps at their chest, which lead into a cavernous bone off their sternum. It's like a rabbit warren in there, with lots of spongy cavities and walls of cartilage. Bargebison skin is luminescent, so the whole chamber glows. The Darsh species live inside the bargebison. They eat their sweet secretions, and in exchange, they care for the bargebison and protect it from predators. Or at least they used to before their home world was destroyed, and the three remaining bargebison and their Darsh colonies moved here as political refugees."

"So the Darsh live inside the other demons." Brian cocked his head. "What do the Darsh look like?"

"It depends on how old they are. They have a complex life cycle." Michael stood and searched his bookshelf, eventually choosing a volume titled *Common Demons of Parmas City*. He leafed through it briefly. "Here we go. The female Darsh lay eggs inside the bargebison, but the male Darsh are responsible for the young ones' care. As soon as the larvae hatch from the eggs they are carried outside and buried in nitrogen-rich soil for up to one year to finish their gestation. Darsh males tend their young during this stage, coating their leathery skin in bargebison secretions to feed them as they grow. When they finish growing, the larvae crawl out and cocoon themselves on the skin of the bargebison and emerge as Darsh babies, who are once again taken up by their father and mother and raised inside the hive."

"Once the young are grown, they too help feed and support the bargebison. Most Darsh work administrative jobs throughout the city."

Michael turned the book to face Brian, pointing to a series of pictures.

"Here's an adult Darsh," he said, his dark finger aiming at the image of a thin, muscular humanoid with large, white oblong eyes and a small, suctionlike mouth. "And here is one in its larval stage."

Brian looked at the picture, and his stomach sank.

"God."

He quickly pulled out his phone and opened the text message Jay had sent him. He showed Michael the picture. "Is this a larva?"

Michael squinted. "The picture quality is poor, but it appears to be a Darsh in larval form. Why? Where did you get it?"

Brian's brain made connections so fast his heart began to speed up. "They were buried in the back of Yervant Industries. They were used in the new Parlancer translation devices."

Michael stared at Brian, and then grimaced. "Are you serious? Even in larval form, they're sentient! Darsh are very intelligent. We have three on staff here at the university!" Michael grabbed his phone. "I have to call the linguistics department. It could be one of their young."

Brian felt sick. "We have one at the police station. Bartleby. He does translations..."

Brian suddenly felt like puking. He grabbed his mobile off the table. Michael was already on his own phone, intent on contacting his Darsh coworkers. Once outside, Brian broke into a run. He knew who'd killed Volpe and Krochalis. He just hoped he could get to Jay at Yervant R&D in time.

## Chapter Twelve

A painful, fiery burn radiated up Jay's spine. A sickly sweet smell filled his nostrils, and he swallowed against the nausea that rushed through him. He slowly opened his eyes.

And was at a complete loss as to where he was.

He was strapped down on an angled medical table, for one thing. He flexed and pulled at the metal straps binding his wrists to his sides, the metal cuff around his neck, the cuffs around each ankle. He was naked.

And he was in a room unlike anything he had ever seen.

It was boiling hot, and intensely humid, to the point that breathing was difficult in such thick, sickeningly sweet air. The floor pulsed up and down slowly and rhythmically, as if it were breathing. It was pinkish and blotched purple, and shimmered and flashed with dancing specks of lights. The flesh-colored floor stretched upward, defining the walls, the ceiling. There were no hard angles, everything curved. A white bonelike wall was to his right, and small white bones protruded from the wall like knobs. A red, ribbed tunnel gaped in the corner of the room, leading into blackness.

It looked like he was in an intestine.

The thought made Jay laugh. He started laughing and couldn't stop, drunk on the pain in his head and the nauseatingly sweet smell around him. The oddest part of the room was this metal table he was strapped to, so artificial compared to the organic nature of everything else. The room expanded and contracted. A deep rumble seemed to come from the floor. If he listened closely, he could hear the clacking chirps of someone else on the other side of the bone wall.

The Darsh.

"Are you awake?"

Jay tensed at the familiar voice. Bartleby, the translator for the Demonic Unit, a demon he had known for over seven years, emerged from behind Jay's chair.

It was good Jay could recognize his voice, because it was impossible to identify Bartleby by sight, given the full-body insulated suit he wore. The puffy silver costume covered Bartleby's thin black body. Silver gloves protected Bartleby's delicate hands, in which he clenched the shock-volt pistol he had used on Jay at R&D. Bartleby's face was obscured behind a glass helmet, but Jay thought he could make out the Darsh's circle-shaped, suctionlike mouth. It looked puckered, the Darsh form of smiling.

"I worried I had taken too much from you with the teeth, and I had killed you," Bartleby said. He nodded to the steel table beside Jay.

Jay saw a pair of teeth sitting there, fangs tainted with blood. So something else could etiolate people. And it had been hiding in the evidence room all that time.

But Jay was presently more concerned by the assortment of surgical tools beside the teeth on the table.

"What do you want, Bartleby?" Jay asked, his voice hoarse. His throat was completely parched. It was very hot in the chamber, and the draining of his energy seemed to have left him dehydrated.

"You, of course," Bartleby said. He disappeared from behind the bone wall and came back, carrying a bright lamp. It looked like something to illuminate a movie set. A power cord stretched along the breathing floor and around the corner. As soon as Bartleby switched on the lamp, Jay shut his eyes, blinded by the bright light's glare. A nearby generator hummed.

"What did you do to James?" Jay asked, squinting. Bartleby continued to adjust the lamp, unfazed by the painful brightness.

"Who?" Bartleby asked.

"The kid you shot at R&D."

"Oh, I left him there. I don't want him. I'm only interested in Yervants."

"Why?"

"Have you ever met my wife, Detective?" Bartleby suddenly asked. He stopped fiddling with the lamp and disappeared down the black hole. Jay heard clicking. While Bartleby was gone Jay pushed his energy into the cuffs at his hands, cracking them. He reached up and gripped the cuff at his neck and did the same, channeling his intense heat to melt the metal.

Bartleby returned with another Darsh, also garbed in shiny fire-retardant insulation. As soon as Bartleby saw what Jay had done, his mouth pinched in rage. He pulled the shock-volt pistol from his pocket and fired.

Electricity coursed through Jay's chest, and he bit his lip as he convulsed in pain. His body thrashed against the metal restraints. He heard Bartleby charging the weapon again. Jay summoned the last of his strength to create a force field around himself of fire and heat, protecting his naked body. He managed to expel Bartleby and his wife,

shooting them across the room with the power of his flames. The entire chamber groaned and shifted slightly. But then they were back, and he was too weak to continue defending himself. They had etiolated too much of his energy, and when Bartleby slammed the butt of the weapon against Jay's cheek, pain exploded through his skull and he nearly passed out.

"You are a very bad boy," Bartleby scolded. He wrenched Jay's hands upward and behind him, nearly pulling his arms from their sockets. Jay cried out. Around his wrists behind the table, Jay felt the heavy weight of spell-restraint cuffs close. His arms were extended at an excruciating angle over his head, his wrists locked behind him. With the spell restraints on he couldn't break the metal cuffs that still strapped down his waist and legs.

Jay breathed heavily, trying to find a point of consciousness beyond the pain. His arms screamed at him, his face throbbed, and his entire body burned from the electric shock. He slowly turned his head. The two Darsh stood beside him, Bartleby slightly taller than the other.

"Anna, I want you to meet Detective Jay Yervant," Bartleby said. He nodded to Jay. "Detective, this is my wife Anna. For a long time she has wanted to meet the family of the man who murdered our children. I'm glad to finally present her the opportunity."

"What are you talking about?" Jay said weakly. He flexed against the spell restraint cuffs. His body began a slow burn again, weak blue flame, but with the spell restraint cuffs on he couldn't channel that energy away from him, could only harness it inside. He struggled with the painful angle, rubbing his wrists upward until he felt an edge to the backside of the table. If he could slam his hand against that edge hard enough, he could dislocate his thumb and perhaps squeeze one hand out of the cuffs. One hand was all he needed to harness his power and break the rest of the restraints.

"Don't pretend like you don't know." Bartleby left his wife's side and disappeared behind the bone wall once more, returning with a video camera mounted on a tripod. "But then again, I don't suppose you thought of them as children, did you? It was easier to chop them into pieces if they were nothing more than worms from the ground."

"The larvae," Jay said. "They were your children."

"And they were conscious!" Bartleby shouted. "They had feelings and emotions and little hearts, and your father took pieces of them while they were still alive!"

Jay swallowed. His throat was parched. He tried flexing against the cuffs again, but there was no way he could strong-arm his way out of there without being able to expel his magical powers, not after he'd been hit with two shock-volts and when he was still weak from the etiolation.

"I didn't have anything to do with that, Bartleby," Jay said.

"I know that," Bartleby said. His voice returned to a calm, almost pleasant tone. He spoke with no accent, another benefit of the incredible linguistic powers of the Darsh.

Bartleby fiddled with the video camera, angling it toward Jay. His silent wife stood beside him, until he handed her another power cord, which she dragged around the wall.

"You see, it was your father's company, and your father's doing," Bartleby explained. "And no matter how I begged my case in court, his lawyers were better, and his heart was colder. Despite spending every penny we had, we lost custody of our own children. To your father. And he cut our children into little pieces. Did you know we could hear them scream, even from here?"

Jay watched Bartleby's movements carefully. He thought back and realized he had told only Brian about his trip to Yervant R&D, and Brian was unlikely to report that to Pollar. Jay had to hope James Sparks was all right and that he would report the incident. But even then—who would know where to look for him?

"So I will give your father exactly what I got," Bartleby said. "Just as I gave that bastard Krochalis what he deserved. He's the one who discovered them, you know. He found them in the garden and was the sociopath who first thought of bringing them into the lab and slicing them up out of curiosity."

Bartleby stepped away from the camera and stood before Jay. In this position, with Jay strapped and angled as he was, Bartleby towered over the hell cop. He glared down from his glass helmet.

"I didn't just want to etiolate you and leave your death to frame your lover. I wanted your torment to be special. Like what I did to Krochalis. And like what I'm going to do to your brothers Dave and Christopher. I'll frame those on Brian too. He'll never see the outside of a prison cell, and I figure, being osmotic, Brian will have to be kept in restraint spell cuffs twenty-four hours a day, won't they?"

"Arun Volpe," Jay said, hoping to buy time as he rubbed his wrist against the frame of the table. "He didn't have anything to do with Yervant Industries."

"No." Bartleby checked the straps around Jay's waist and legs, and then stepped back. "He was just to frame Officer Day for Krochalis's murder. And this one."

At the thought of Brian, the pain within Jay flared brighter. He had brought Brian to tears the last time they had spoken. And now, in all likelihood, he was going to die before he had a chance to apologize.

Bartleby adjusted the angle of the mounted video camera one last time, then turned it on. A small red light blinked above the lens.

"Say hello to your father, Jay," Bartleby said. He waved at the camera. "I thought we'd record today's activities for his enjoyment, so he can watch and understand what it feels like, to know exactly how your child died, alone, and in pain."

"You don't have to do this." Jay wanted to be strong in front of the camera, so that his dad could see how brave he was. But, in his fear, his body was an inferno, and his words came out shaky.

Bartleby drew closer. He picked up the scalpel from the table. His wife stepped beside him, watching avidly.

"It won't matter," Jay whispered. "He's not going to care what you do to me."

He said it as a last hope. He didn't mean it, but as he spoke the words in his heart he knew the truth of them.

"It will make me feel better," Bartleby said. He shoved the scalpel into Jay's navel and ripped it upwards to Jay's breastbone.

Jay screamed.

"Yes," Bartleby said. "I feel better already."

## Chapter Thirteen

After seven tries Brian gave up trying to call Jay. By that time he'd reached Yervant Industries anyway.

He bolted from the taxi and ran to the front door, although the facility was clearly closed for the night. He informed the security guard on duty that he was a police officer looking for Jay.

"He must have left hours ago," the man said, frowning.

"Where's R&D?" Brian asked.

The man pointed to a brick outbuilding. "It's over there, but —"

Brian waved his thanks and dashed toward the building.

"Hey!" he heard the guard call after him. "The building is closed!"

Brian pushed his way through a flock of flamingos and quickly ran to the door, but found it locked. He circled the building and then froze, spotting a trench dug behind the building and the feet of a body sticking out of it.

His heart stopped. *No.*

He darted forward and stumbled to his knees beside the body. And then frowned.

It wasn't Jay.

It took a moment for him to place the face. It was James Sparks, a journalist and the boyfriend of Detective Ben Moran. Brian felt for a pulse. James was alive, but his breathing was irregular and his head darkened with clotted blood.

"Hey!" The security guard caught up to him, breathing heavily. At the sight of James the guard's eyes widened. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah," Brian snapped. "What the fuck! You call yourself a security guard, and there's a man dying fifty feet away from you?" Brian fumbled for his cell phone and called emergency.



The guard paled as he stared at James's bloody head. "This is Hank's territory, see, and Hank's home with sick kids, so I—"

Brian held out his hand to silence the guard as he spoke rapidly with emergency services. He then called Captain Pollar and told him everything, starting with his visit to Michael Gold and ending at Yervant Industries. As he spoke he circled the building once more, looking for any additional clues to Jay's location.

Brian knew that Jay had been here. He had sent that picture from the trench. And, clearly, something had happened. So where was he now?

Pollar sounded too worried about Jay to chastise Brian for breaking suspension. "Do you have any idea where Bartleby would have taken him?" Pollar asked.

Brian's foot squelched in the soil, and he looked down to see he had stepped in a slick puddle of yellow honeylike residue. He grimaced.

And then, with sudden understanding, he realized exactly where Jay was.

"God," Brian shouted into the phone, breaking into a run. "Captain, he's inside the bargebison!"

## Chapter Fourteen

By the time Jay finally managed to break his own hand, it was too late.

A detached, reasoning part of his mind knew that he had only minutes left given the amount of blood he had lost. But these thoughts fluttered and disappeared, his coherence a fleeting thing, chased away between bursts of such agony he could no longer think or breathe beyond the pain.

When coherence returned, briefly, he forced his broken hand through the spell restraint shackles and managed to channel enough of his power into the other band to break free of the spell cuffs entirely.

Instantly Jay's fire coursed out of him, uncontrolled and uncontrollable.

The room shifted and tilted as the beast he was trapped inside suffered from his burns. Jay couldn't help it. Flames gushed from his body, pouring over the bison's flesh and the equipment, the room roiling with flame.

Bartleby and his wife stood safely in their flame-retardant uniforms, silent witnesses to his agony.

Jay managed to melt the shackles strapping him to the table, but he collapsed in a heap as soon as he was free. His hands groped at his guts, spilling from him in bright, colorful loops. His voice was gone, frozen in his agony.

Jay had never wanted to die before, but he did now, the pain something so sharp and endless there could be no other way out of the torment but death. Bartleby stood over him laughing as Jay writhed on the floor, trying to crawl toward the black tunnel, a trail of blood behind him.

Jay was dead. He knew it. No one survived this butchery. But he needed to get Bartleby closer to him and hope that he could summon the last of his strength to take the bastard out. He had to channel his energy and combust, killing Bartleby along with himself.

He tried to say something, to beckon Bartleby closer, but no words emerged.

"Going somewhere?" Bartleby chided, hands red, almost pretty, with Jay's blood. Blood burst from Jay's mouth as he tried to respond.

Bartleby gripped Jay's shoulder and turned him over. The pain blinded Jay, his muscles locked and frozen. He lay there like an overturned turtle, limbs twitching and unable to escape.

Jay tried to close his eyes, to better focus his energy, but even his eyes were locked open in shock. So, he just lay there, using the last of his strength to burn himself to ash.

There was a shriek in the distance. The sound of an explosion. The luminescence on the bison's flesh flickered and dimmed.

Jay drew his fire inward, into himself.

But it pulled away from him. Through the tunnel and out the room. It left him in great gulps, flowing toward someone else.

*Brian.*

Jay looked down at his ruined body. *Oh God, Bry is going to see this. And in his rage, he'll kill us all.*

## Chapter Fifteen

The flesh was soft under Brian's boots.

Hot, animal body scents filled his nostrils, nearly gagging him, but he pushed himself forward. Captain Pollar and backup were on the way. But there was no way Brian was going to follow protocol and politely wait outside the bison—not once he'd seen the massive beasts and witnessed the writhing torment of the one in the middle.

It was then that Brian felt Jay, felt his heat, spewing like a volcano of power, and Brian didn't stop to think of proper procedure, or search warrants, or when backup would arrive. He scrambled up the soft flesh, grimacing as his hands slipped on the honeylike discharge.

In the tunnel he was immediately surrounded by the dark, thin, muscular bodies of the Darsh. They demanded to know his purpose.

"I'm a police officer," Brian told them. Along with Jay's heat, huge strength filled him from the bargebison, as well as the sounds of other words, their meaning. He harnessed the Darsh linguistic abilities and spoke to them in their own tongue, begging them to flee. They had kidnapped a police officer, and he would retrieve him whether they liked it or not.

Instead of fleeing the Darsh surged closer, round mouths gaping, white eyes narrowing in anger. They formed a wall to block his path.

The Darsh clicked at each other and rushed him en masse. Brian stretched out his hands. Jay's heat rushed into him, overwhelming. Hotter than normal, it burned Brian, and he immediately expelled it, pushing it out into a ball of flames, setting the Darsh on fire and burning the delicate skin walls.

The bison roared and Brian slid, slipping against the flesh beneath his feet to collide with the smooth, sticky wall. He focused on the feeling of Jay's desperate heat, following the pull like a beacon.

More Darsh attacked him, from every side, and he kept himself on fire. But his movements were extremely slow. The power of the bargebison made everything feel sluggish.

The innards of the beast were a maze of pink flesh and dull white pockmarked bone that created hundreds of small chambers. Blinking luminescence dotted the surface of the skin but the lights flickered and brightened as the animal suffered from Brian's burning body. As he slowly trudged through each chamber he shouted at the Darsh, begging them to leave or suffer the consequences.

He passed through a ribbed tunnel into a chamber that was on fire. The bison tossed madly now, the ground beneath Brian trembling and shuddering. As he stood at the entrance he sucked all of the heat of the room into himself. The rush left him giddy, almost sick. He let it tremble within him, holding it back. It felt as though he would burn to ash with the power of it.

Two Darsh in insulated suits turned to watch the room's flames sucked into Brian's body.

They stared at him. Brian stared back.

He pushed his hands out and expelled all that heat at once, blowing them backward.

The flames charred the flesh on the floor. The bargebison howled and shuddered.

Brian rushed the closer Darsh, but his steps were almost in slow motion. However, Brian was comparatively heavy, and when he rammed into the Darsh he pushed the demon down into the fleshy floor with ease.

Brian ripped off the demon's protective helmet. He didn't recognize the face.

Someone hit him from behind. He barely felt it, hopped up as he was on the bargebison's sheer strength. He turned around and smashed his fist into the other Darsh's face, splintering apart its helmet.

It was Bartleby.

Brian stomped on the knee of the demon on the floor, disabling it, and then reached out and gripped Bartleby by the throat.

He could smash Bartleby into pulp. He could crush him and his accomplice.

Instead, Brian pulled the bison's strength downward, into his feet, and out, acting as a conduit rather than a terminus. He threw Bartleby down upon the soft floor and wrestled his arms behind him. He sat upon him and pinned his arms with one hand, the strength of the bison giving him what he needed to restrain the flailing, furious demon. With his other hand, Brian worked off the belt around his waist and tied Bartleby's hands together, looping the belt through one of the pocked holes in the bone wall. He left the other Darsh moaning on the floor, crippled and holding its knee in agony. Brian stood and searched for Jay.

At first Brian didn't recognize him. The blood was too bright, Jay's skin too shocking white.

And then with horror, Brian realized he was too late. Jay was dead.

His stomach was flayed open, groin to breastbone. Exposed intestine spilled from him, and a look of such agony was frozen on his face that Brian choked in disgust.

He felt a tug of Jay's heat, away from him. Only then did he realize Jay was still alive, even cut up as he was, and he was trying to draw his own energy back.

Brian dropped to his knees beside Jay's white face. Jay's eyes were frozen wide in shock, his mouth open.

There was so much blood.

Jay looked right through Brian, as if his eyes couldn't focus.

"No!" Brian growled. He clamped his hand around Jay's neck. Jay made a croaking sound. His stare searched the ceiling.

"You can't leave me!" Brian whispered. He punched his left hand through the soft flesh of the bison.

A great howl echoed through the chamber, the sound of a primal scream, and then Brian became overwhelmed with energy.

It coursed into him from the bison, waves so strong his body shuddered. He gritted his teeth, and then with all of his concentration, shot the power out of his hand and into Jay.

Jay convulsed. His hands flailed weakly, scratching against the skin of the bison. He writhed as his body glowed. Brian looked down, watching Jay's body pull itself together, the skin closing, his destroyed insides trying to right themselves.

Brian lost his sight. Everything was bright and hot. And then he realized he couldn't see because he was crying. He ignored his own tears and channeled all that hot energy from the beast into Jay.

He felt light-headed, but continued. Then he felt sick, like something pulled at his chest, prying with burning fingers.

"Bry... stop..."

Brian blinked. Jay looked at him, pleading. "Stop..." he whispered.

Brian yanked his fist out of the bison's body and the entire room suddenly tilted. Jay and Brian both slid to the right as the bargebison finally fell. They slipped along the floor, and Brian threw himself forward to brace Jay's impact with the wall. He broke Jay's landing and wrapped his body around his injured lover.

"Breathe," Jay whispered.

Only then, Brian realized that he was himself about to pass out. He had given everything to Jay, had nearly etiolated himself. He took a deep breath, and sense came back to him, the overwhelming metallic odor of Jay's blood, the sickly sweet stench of the beast's cavity, the rank odor of sickness and death.

"Bar..." Jay could barely speak. He looked at Brian with glassy eyes. He was still so pale.

"He's restrained, but alive," Brian assured Jay, reaching out to clasp his hand. "I didn't kill him. I placed him under arrest. He's tied to the bison's...whatever that thing is protruding from the wall."

Jay offered him a ghastly, bloody smile. "Proud."

Terrible organic odors filled the chamber as the bison moaned in pain. Screams echoed and Brian heard the Darsh clicking as they ran about, trying to save themselves.

"Just hang on," Brian told Jay. "Help is coming."

## Epilogue

### *Four Months Later*

Jay had to make a second run to the kitchen of Sarafina's for more liquor, thanks to Bergen Sair.

He'd forgotten how much Brian's grandfather could drink, especially at a party, and had underestimated the booze when arranging Brian's rooftop promotion party at the swanky restaurant.

Party attendance seemed to grow exponentially every time Jay left the roof and returned. He was certain they were breaking fire codes now. A dozen additional Sairs were on the restaurant's already crowded rooftop, laughing and drinking and ravishing the appetizer table as if it were the last chance they'd have to eat for weeks.

And Brian was in the center of it all, grinning happily.

That morning he had been promoted to sergeant, and he wore the new stripes on his armored uniform proudly. Jay had smiled to himself as he had watched Brian carefully iron his uniform that morning. He couldn't remember the last time Brian had looked so genuinely thrilled by life, and it relieved Jay to see such joy after so many months of difficulty—physical therapy for Jay, and suppressive sorcery therapy for Brian.

Sergeant Teresa Krane upended the champagne ice bucket over Brian's head, and he shouted out, laughing and trying to pelt her with olives.

Jay leaned against the door frame of the overhang, holding his side, catching his breath from the climb up the stairs and eyeing the burgeoning crowd. Although Bergen's relatives made up the bulk of attendees raucously rallying around Brian, there were a handful of fellow police officers, their neighbor across the street, and Brian's old



landlord Leon, who looked extremely uncomfortable on a deck full of hotbloods and cops.

James Sparks and Ben Moran came late, but brought a six-pack of a noxious-looking homebrew that made Brian jump out of his seat and hug James in his excitement. Apparently James and Brian had discovered a shared loved of some horrendous alcohol made out in the countryside by commune farmers, something that reminded Brian of home.

As Jay leaned against the wall, Moran came up to him, carrying two of the suspicious beers. He didn't smile. But he nodded his head briefly.

"How are you?" he asked, and Jay knew Moran meant more than just the general greeting.

"Back to work next week," Jay said. Instinctively he gripped his side.

Moran nodded again. "Good. Because I'm tired of working double shifts."

Jay smiled. Moran handed him a beer. Jay sniffed at the opening.

"This beverage isn't made by preparing mash under a mound of cow manure, is it?"

Moran shrugged. "Hell if I know. Tastes like shit. But it grows on you."

Jay gave it a tentative swig. He politely nodded. "Thanks." He would dump the rest of it when Moran and James weren't looking.

"The lawsuit against the department's being dropped," Moran commented. It took Jay a moment to recall which lawsuit, since he was entangled in so many—the trial against Bartleby, the suit from the Volpe family, and this one—the animal rights activists who were suing the Demonic Unit for cruelty to the bargebison. "I guess since the beast is going to live, the judge threw out the case and called its scarring collateral damage."

"Well, that's one weight off Pollar's shoulder," Jay commented. Moran snorted, but then wandered off as James beckoned him over to the ledge of the balcony.

Jay was left to chat politely with Brian's endless streams of relatives. He finally moved from his post at the wall when he saw Brian's grandfather Bergen stumble drunkenly and nearly flip over the ledge of the rooftop.

"You okay?" Jay asked, helping the old man stand. He picked up Bergen's glass, which miraculously hadn't broken. The residual tug and burst of pain from moving his waist was so faint now that Jay hardly noticed it.

"I'm fine." Bergen shook his head and chuckled. "This place makes its drinks stronger than I'm used to!"

Jay smirked at that. He walked over to the bar and returned with another, handing it to Bergen, knowing he'd want it. "You got a driver outside, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry about me." Bergen sat on the ledge and took a sip. A goofy smile lit his face, and for a moment, his resemblance to Brian was clear.

"Look at that kid. He's such a clown!" He nodded toward Brian, eyes shining, clearly proud.

Jay smiled as well, but then his heart felt heavy as it always did when he thought about a future with Brian.

"He doesn't have long to live, you know." Jay looked over to Brian, feeling choked up. "I spoke with a doctor about it. Osmotics die young."

"That's bullshit," Bergen said, snorting into his drink. "My father was osmotic and lived to be fifty-six years old, and while that won't break any longevity records, he managed to have a damn good life while he was at it."

"Really? How did he control it?"

"He wasn't an idiot, that's how." Bergen grinned at his grandson. "And neither is Brian. It takes effort, but he'll pull it together. Soon having a lid on his abilities will be as second nature as taking the lid off."

A sense of something giving way, a great pain easing, washed over Jay. He almost felt like shouting in his relief. This was the first time he'd heard of something positive relating to osmotics, and the comment made him nearly jump up and embrace Brian in his pleasure.

Instead, he just clinked his beer bottle against Bergen's glass. "To Brian's long life," he said, choked up.

Bergen cocked his head, staring at Jay intensely. Then he grinned and clinked his glass back. "To Brian. And to you, Yervant. I think I had you pegged wrong at the start."

"I did imprison your son," Jay pointed out. "I don't blame you."

"You're a good kid." Bergen nodded. He looked about to say something else, but he suddenly shouted out a blurry greeting and teetered over to the entrance where four more Sairs entered, hands in the air in celebration, all hugging Bergen and rushing Brian with more praise. Brian had quite a family.

Jay had invited his own family, but none of them showed. He wasn't surprised, but it still hurt, and he was mad at himself for feeling the insult after all these years. The last time he saw his father and brothers was at Bartleby's trial, and his father had behaved oddly, wouldn't even look Jay in the eye.

So Jay was shocked when he rounded the corner to make sure the restaurant staff was restocking the bar and he nearly ran into his mother.

"Darling!" she cried, smiling widely. Jay's stomach clenched in relief and embarrassment as she gripped his shoulders and air-kissed him.

"We brought a gift for Brian. Where should we put it?" she asked, wagging a set of keys in the air.

Jay groaned. "Oh God. Please tell me you didn't buy him a car."

His mother frowned. "Maybe. Maybe it's an old car. One no one needs."

"He doesn't even have a license, Mom."

"I thought you said you would teach him how to drive."

"We've been a little busy," Jay said sarcastically, but his mother flinched.

"I know, darling. I'm sorry." She blinked and then smiled at someone behind Jay. He turned to see his dad. Jay nodded at him.

His father cocked his head slightly, and Jay followed him to the edge of the rooftop. A waist-high brick wall separated Jay from a five-story fall into the chaotic streets of the Theatre District.

Jay's father didn't say anything; he just leaned over the wall and stared out. Jay mimicked him. The wind on top of the restaurant invigorated him, keeping the sun's heat at bay.

Jay's father glanced around them and then reached into his pocket, pulling out two cigarettes. Jay smirked and took one. It was the only secret the two of them shared from their mother and from Jay's other brothers. Jay's father cupped the tip of the cigarette and blew, lighting it with his own internal heat. Jay did the same and resumed leaning over the balcony.

"The trial is almost over," his father said casually.

"I read that," Jay said. "Bartleby's getting life."

"And we're getting reprimanded. Congressman Volpe's changing the demonic child custody laws so we can't ever sue for custody again."

"That's good," Jay said, and watched his father for reaction. Regardless of Bartleby's actions, Jay knew that what Yervant Industries had done was wrong. And after resolving his One Family adoption case, Jay wanted to see the laws changed so nothing like it could ever happen again.

The two of them looked over the city skyline in companionable silence for several minutes.

"They made me watch it, you know." Jay's father said finally. He smoked and looked over the buildings. "Last week, at the trial."

"Watch what?" Jay asked.

"That video. What Bartleby did to you."

Jay glanced to his father. His voice sounded strange, almost pinched. Jay had never heard him sound like that.

"It was the worst thing I've ever had to see. To see you hurting like that..." His father swallowed repeatedly, but he wouldn't make eye contact.

The silence grew. Jay felt sick. "It's okay, Dad."

"No, it's not."

"I'm fine now."

"You said something. On the video." His father turned and looked at Jay. "You said I wouldn't care what happened to you." He let out a shaky breath. "You were wrong."

Jay blinked.

His father inhaled and held his breath a long time before letting the smoke out. "You are my son, and I love you as much as I love your brothers. You've always been independent, Jay. I never treated you the same because... because you *aren't* the same. You are different. That doesn't mean I love you any less."

Jay had to look away because he worried he was about to tear up, and he would never forgive himself for such a sappy display of emotion.

He father coughed and threw his butt over the railing. "Anyway. Just...I'm bad at talking about this shit. You know me. But I thought you should know."

"Thank you." Jay looked at his boots. They needed to be polished.

His dad punched Jay on the shoulder. "When are we going to have your lieutenant's promotion party?"

"I gotta give Bry a chance to catch up to me." Jay grinned.

His father nodded. "Well...you know, if you ever want out of this work, we'd make a place for you at YI."

"I wouldn't know what to do," Jay admitted.

"We could always use someone with your brains and your sorcerous talent. We'd find a way to work around your handicap." He looked at Jay, eyes a little unstable. "It wouldn't matter what it cost. I'd be proud to have you there."

Jay swallowed. "Thanks, Dad. But I like being a detective."

"Even after this?"

Jay hesitated.

He didn't tell his father the truth, that the prospect of returning to work next week terrified him.

But Jay had to come to terms with the fact that he wasn't going to get over this one quickly. It was one thing to be shot at or bitten in a fight. But being purposefully tortured was something new for him, something especially awful, and while he liked to pretend it was no different from any of the other wounds he had sustained in his years as a police officer, Jay knew something had changed in him.

Maybe it was the resignation he had felt. He had never tried to kill himself before. And having done so made him lose a piece of who he was.

So whether or not his father knew this unspoken thought, his offer was well-timed but ultimately unnecessary.

"I will always be a cop, Dad. It's in my blood now, after all these years, as much as the sorcery."

"Well, if you ever change your mind, you know you are welcome."

"I do now." Jay smiled. He suddenly wished he could hug his father. If Brian was beside him, absorbing Jay's heat, he could, but he couldn't ask that of Brian right now. Brian was celebrating.

Besides, Brian had worked very hard this month on not taking any power from anyone. Asking him to do so would be unfair.

So Jay settled for nodding to his father just once, short and clear, an acknowledgement of all he felt that he couldn't say in words and couldn't show in touch. And it seemed after a lifetime of caring for a child who was too hot to ever hold, Jay's father understood the meaning of the gesture and smiled back in return.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, you."

As they walked home after the party, Jay reached out and clasped Brian's arm, drawing him in for a quick kiss.

Brian blushed as he always did whenever they kissed in public, but then a smile burst across his face and lit his eyes.

"What's that for?" he asked.

Jay shrugged. They walked beside each other on the crowded street, their shoulders brushing companionably.

Brian smiled to himself. He was drunk from the party, his skin flushed with alcohol, and the new uniform that he had taken such pride in that morning was wrinkled and stained with champagne, wine, and the remainders of the appetizer table that got upturned on him at some point in the festivities.

Jay remembered his father, and then tried again. "Bry." He stopped. He looked at Brian.

Brian looked back expectantly. "Yes?"

"I love you."

Brian's eyes widened.

"Just thought you should know." Jay coughed. God, he hated talking out loud about this. He thought of his father and drummed up his courage. "The worst moment, when Bartleby cut me up, was the thought of never seeing you again and knowing that when we last spoke, it was in anger."

"That's all in the past," Brian interrupted, but Jay held out his hand.

"Wait. Let me finish..." He sighed. "I suck at this."

"Go on," Brian said, grinning now. "You're doing a great job."

Jay smirked. "Yeah, right."

"You were saying? Something about love?"

Jay laughed. "Yeah. Maybe we should just leave it there for now. Something about love. And never wanting to walk out on you pissed again. Because life's too short, and what we do is too dangerous. Any day one of us could be gone, and so I want you to know...every morning you leave...that you are everything. To me."

Jay stood there awkwardly. What was one supposed to do with one's hands when admitting something as hideously personal as that? Was it wrong to have them stuffed in his pockets? Should he be —

Brian kissed him. It was fast and discreet, but there was a soft swipe of Brian's tongue over Jay's bottom lip as he withdrew, just enough to push a little heat through Jay's body.

"I know you love me," Brian said quietly. His eyes shone. "I know you didn't want to leave me angry. And I am very grateful you told me."

"Well." Jay cleared his throat. "That's settled, then." They started walking again.

Jay saw a low-hanging branch on one of the sidewalk trees. "Check this out." He jogged to the branch and then jumped, doing a pull up with one arm. He could feel a sting and pull from his stomach, and couldn't even think of doing more than one at the moment. But nothing was too sharp or too painful. He dropped down onto his feet beside Brian, who just shook his head and laughed at him.

"You're such a show-off," he chided.

Jay smiled back.

"Check this out," Brian said. He darted forward and stood next to a spider cleaner. The massive vibrating mouth of the beast licked the street.

"Nothing's happening," Jay said.

Brian smiled. "Exactly."

~ \* ~

## **Astrid Amara**

Astrid Amara lives in Bellingham, Washington, with one man, two dogs, and countless mice. She served in the U.S. Peace Corps and works as a civil servant paid by your tax dollars. When she isn't working or writing, she is either riding horses or sleeping.

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# **DARK WATERS**

**Nicole Kimberling**



## Chapter One

The township of Iron Springs wasn't much more than a freeway exit, a gas station, and the End of the Line Café, a tiny diner sitting opposite the bus stop, whose lollipop sign marked the terminus of Parmas City Municipal Transit's F Line. Michael negotiated his big, unwieldy vehicle from the ramp onto the two-lane highway, hoping that his elderly rock-star father's estimation of the roadworthiness of his old tour bus was close to accurate. The brakes certainly felt spongy, and turning the steering wheel required nearly all of Michael's demonic strength. But he'd needed to borrow a crappy old bus for his research trip and the Devil Dogs' Amphibious Hell Machine had been available.

Besides, he didn't have much farther to go.

The entrance to Iron Springs Mobile Estates was marked by two signs. The first was a white wooden sign that had once been quaint, but since been heavily defaced. At one point it had read: IT'S A GREAT DAY AT IRON SPRINGS MOBILE ESTATES! WELCOME! Now the peeling red and white paint could barely be seen behind the graffiti and tags. A vicious-looking shark had been spray-painted across the bottom half of the sign over the word "Welcome." A leering, horned face had been painted over the top of the sign.

The second, smaller sign read: FOR SALE BY OWNER.

"It's a fixer-upper, but I think we can make it a go of it." Argent had to speak up to be heard above the epileptic growl of the Hell Machine's engine. He swiveled his red leather bucket seat around to face Michael. "If we can clear out the resident gangs — the Sharks and the Devils, apparently — we can make this trailer park into our own little slice of single-wide paradise. I'll sell my boat to raise the down payment on the property. What do you think?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "As if you'd ever sell *Euphemie*. Besides, I think the one with horns is a faun, not a devil," Michael said. "The student who invited me here belongs to the faun community."

"The Sharks versus the Fauns?" Argent chuckled. "I know who I'm betting on."

Argent ran his hands over the red leather armrests of his chair. A smug, satisfied smile lit his face as he once again glanced around the interior of the bus, taking in the flame-colored deep shag carpeting, the faux-wood paneling, and extensive ceiling mural depicting ninety-nine naked, flying, bat-winged devil women having sex with a giant purple octopus. The waterbed, complete with octopus-shaped headboard. The wet bar.

"I still can't believe I'm really in the Hell Machine," he said, grinning. Michael couldn't help but smile in return. When Argent smiled like this it was easy to look deep into that slab of sorcerous muscle and see the little boy Argent must have been before he grew up and became a hell cop. He'd seen a photograph once of Argent, aged nine, arms sticking out of an oversized Devil Dogs T-shirt like skinny black inner tubes, red plastic sunglasses covering his pretty hazel eyes. He was smiling in that exact same way now.

Michael guessed that if he were to lay a hand on Argent now and use his telepathy to read Argent's thoughts, he too, would experience the thrill of being a young boy who loved a noisy and flamboyant band.

Or, more likely, he would see their immediate surroundings and feel a bland sort of contentedness that Michael had deemed the telepathic equivalent of elevator music.

Argent's training as an undercover officer made him unreadable to Michael. Sometimes Michael found Argent's impenetrability new and exciting. That edge that uncertainty and fear lent definitely enhanced his sexual excitement. But most other times, he just found Argent nerve-wrackingly opaque. He tried to console himself with the knowledge that (except for a handful of fellow telepaths) all other people in the world relied on things like conversation and visual cues to glean the emotional state of their partner. He told himself not to be such wimp about it. But deep down he wished that Argent would simply let him in and let him feel what he felt without having to always use words.

Feeling suddenly melancholy, Michael turned down the drive to Iron Springs Motor Estates.

Yellow sunlight filtered through the cypress trees thickly hung with pale green moss. Still water reflected the light on either side of the gravel road, which, though currently dry, clearly got routinely covered over with water. Deep, cracked ruts and powdery dust eroded his confidence in the roadway.

Through the trees he could glimpse patches of corrugated siding in colors like lavender, powder blue, and pink. Someone had strung a line of festive, rainbow-colored pennants between the trees.

Argent leaned forward, squinting.

"Are those the trailers?"

"Looks like it."

"I think the Hell Machine might be too high class for this community."

"Yeah, it's only made up of fifty-eight percent outer-body rust."

"At least it's not made of plastic sheeting." Argent jerked his thumb toward a structure that had been assembled mainly from tarps and discarded shower curtains. Three figures lounged half in half out of the water in front of the structure. Their porpoiselike skin gleamed green-gray. Flat, lidless eyes watched as they drove by.

"Baramans," Michael commented. "Vaughn said there was a big pod of them living out here."

"Illegals?" Argent asked.

"Refugees, I think," Michael said. He felt a twinge of annoyance at Argent for having immediately thought of the legal status of every demon he ever met, but he let it go. "There's the manager's office ahead."

The manager's office occupied one end of a low, concrete building situated on the main berm. The other end of the structure was apparently a laundry room, or at least that's what the sign said. Standing against the cinderblock wall between these two doors were three battered vending machines. The soda machine, particularly, seemed to have seen better days. Several small but deep dents marred the machine's surface at about the level of Michael's knee. He wondered if they'd been stamped there by the hooves of angry fauns trying to retrieve their lost change.

Inside, the office was air-conditioned, but by a machine whose filter had not been changed in a very long time and hence lent the room a smell reminiscent of the inside of an old refrigerator. There was a desk, a television, and a woman named Bert. Bert had short, curly hair that had been recently dyed brown, but not recently enough. She wore a short-sleeved polyester pantsuit and orthopedic lace-ups. Her eyes were watery and brown.

When Michael explained that he'd like to rent a space for a couple of weeks, Bert immediately rebuffed him.

"We don't do short-term leases," she said. "No offense. I'm sure you're a perfectly honorable man, but short-term leases bring in all sorts of transient riff-raff."

"But I'm not a transient. I live in Parmas City. I'm a professor at Parmas City University, and I've been invited here by one of your tenants, Vaughn Songbird."

"Little Vaughn invited you?" Bert perked up at this.

"Yes, he said that I could stay here to document the faun Half Moon Ceremony. He's going to be honored."

"Document it how?" Bert seemed still skeptical, but interested. Michael smiled.

"I'll be taking notes and audio recordings of the ceremony. If the faun elders allow it, I'll take some pictures, but that's contingent on their approval, of course. I wouldn't want to be disrespectful," he said.

"And what about you?" Bert turned her attention to Argent, who had stood silent through this entire interaction.

"He brought me along to wash his laundry." Argent jerked his thumb at Michael. "It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it."

Bert's face stilled, and for a moment, while she processed this new information, Michael thought Argent had made a fatal misstep. In previous situations where people had become offended by their relationship, Michael could never be sure if they objected because he plainly had demonic blood or because of the more banal but still actual prejudice against same-sex lovers.

Not that it had to be one or the other, really.

Bert's long, blank stare ended. She blinked, apparently having come to a decision.

"I suppose I can make an exception, seeing as you're a college professor. I'll meet you down at space fourteen. It's four spaces down from the laundry room. Right next to me." Bert smiled and Michael shook her hand. When he got back in, Argent sat in the driver's seat, again grinning like a little kid.

"Do you want to drive, baby?"

"Only if you're tired." Argent tried to give a noncommittal shrug but was clearly too excited to give even one polite refusal.

"I could let you," Michael said, "but you'll have to let me drive later tonight." He ran a hand down Argent's back. A light touch but definitely a touch descending downward. Argent looked genuinely surprised, then genuinely interested.

"You got a deal."

Michael handed him the keys. "Just don't wreck it. My dad would kill me."

"I would never hurt the Hell Machine." Argent smoothed his hand along the faux-leather dashboard. Argent motored the vehicle slowly down into the shallow canal that had once been the mobile park's main drive. He ignited the outboard and the Hell Machine chugged toward space fourteen. Alongside them, old trailers stood on stilts or floated on pontoons. Squadrons of blue and black dragonflies patrolled the water's surface, snapping up mosquitoes. Structures that had once served as patios now functioned as docks. Three kids, two human and one faun, raced past them in swan-shaped paddleboats, hooting and shooting each other with squirt guns. The backs of the paddleboats read: PROPERTY OF PARMAS CITY RIVER PARK.

Michael glanced sidelong at Argent, who met his gaze with a smirk.

"Come on, Michael. I'm not going to arrest a bunch of kids."

"I never know what you're going to do." Michael's response came out poutier than he had intended and he winced.

"Besides, robbery isn't my division," Argent said. "Not unless they used an illegal spell to do it, but looking at the back of those boats I'd say they were liberated with an average set of bolt cutters."

"So that's how it is? If it's not your department you're not interested."

"Right now, yeah. That's how it is. Especially when I'm on vacation." Argent shifted gears, preparing to maneuver the boat into space fourteen. "You're really nervous about having me here with you, aren't you?"

"I've never brought a lover with me on a trip before," Michael said. "I'm having performance anxiety."

"I don't think so. I think you're worried that your reputation as a cool professor who sponsors the Demonic Peace and Justice Society is going to be tainted when they all find out you're dating a cop."

Michael studied Argent's face. Impenetrable, as always. But he was right on the money. Just who was supposed to be the psychic in this relationship? Caught out, he could do nothing but come clean.

"There are certain aspects of police culture that seem deeply fascist on the surface level," he commented.

"It's true. But then, there are certain aspects of college culture that seem deeply fruity" —Argent turned and flashed him an annoyingly pleasant smile before finishing — "on the surface level."

Argent apparently thought now was the time for engagement in this battle. But Michael thought it prudent to wait at least until the second day of their trip to get into a fight. He elected to yield.

"Too true," he said. He felt the Hell Machine bumping gently against the patio and stood, holding on to the bucket seat to steady himself. "I'll go moor the bus."

Argent nodded, seeming to think better of the argument as well.

Bert arrived in her tiny aluminum motorboat just as Michael finished tying off the bus. She and Argent hooked up the power and water and then stood puzzling over how to hook up the sewer connection. Bert said she had an adapter over at her place and huffed and puffed her way up the embankment, pausing only briefly to nudge a sunning turtle back into the water.

Alone, Michael found himself keeping his distance from Argent, busying himself with rechecking his knots, worried that any conversation they had now might go wrong. When he looked up again, Argent stood, arms crossed, mirrored sunglasses reflecting the water. He surveyed the flooded mobile home park with the standard, affable expression that he wore when he was interrogating a suspect.

Michael knew this for a fact, having been officially questioned by Argent once before during the murder investigation of his cousin, Cassidy. In the confines of a tiny, white room Michael had found Argent's expression quite friendly. Comforting even. After sleeping with Argent for a year, he recognized this same pleasant smile as merely a part of Argent's uniform, as much as his badge or his gun. The smile didn't reflect Argent's internal sense of calm. If anything, that bland smile indicated a state of high alert. Following Argent's gaze toward the water, Michael could see why.

The murky, rust-colored waters near the front of the Hell Machine rippled. Then the top of a smooth gray head broke the surface of the water. Another followed and

then a third. Baraman demons. Sometimes referred to as mermaids, other times, swamp devils.

"Good evening," Argent said.

"Is Bert here?" One creature – Michael couldn't tell if it was male or female, but it seemed to be the leader – spoke.

"She went next door," Michael said. "I'm Michael Gold. I'm a professor of demon studies at Parmas City University and this is Dion Argent. We were invited here to study the equinox ritual."

"The fauns invited you?"

"One of my students –" Michael got no further, since the Baramans instantly vanished into the rust-colored water.

"Looks like some tension exists between the Baramans and the fauns."

"I guess the sign out front did give us some indication of that," Michael said dryly.

Bert returned with the adapter, and she and Argent set themselves to the task of providing the Hell Machine with a flushing toilet. Michael sat down on the patio, close by, jotting down his first notes about Iron Springs Mobile Estates.

*The residents seem to have adapted to damage done by successive hurricanes by raising their houses above the water's high-tide level. A rough estimate of the population seems to be a third human with demons making up the rest of the population. Fauns and Baramans make up the majority of these.*

"Some folks came by to speak with you while you were next door." Argent's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Was it the mermaids?" she asked. Argent nodded. Bert continued, "They are not happy at all about that equinox celebration the fauns are planning, but what am I supposed to do? The fauns have the right to celebrate their religion just like the rest of us, and if it gets too noisy I'll call the cops on them just like I would anybody else. Not that I generally favor calling the cops, mind you, especially not the hell cops. You know that's who they'd send, even if it's just a bunch of drunken goat-legged midgets, they'd have those big boys come storming in and busting up the whole place and leave me to pay for the damage."

"Nobody wants that." Argent's amicable smile became even more fixed. The turtle that Bert had sent into the water before began slowly crawling back up the embankment.

"Do you know why exactly the Baramans are against the equinox celebration?" Michael decided that fully entering the conversation was better than simply lurking and eavesdropping. The turtle made it up to the road and started snapping its beak at low-flying butterflies.

"They say that the fauns are uneducated barbarians and their religious practices are offensive." Bert waved her hand as though this was an invalid argument she'd heard a hundred times before. "And the fauns say the Baramans are a bunch of hippie

freeloaders who got here without papers and mooch off the welfare system. Some sets of people just don't respect each other no matter how long they live next to each other."

"I think an argument could be made that they might fight because they live next to each other," Michael offered airily. "Certain ideologies are just naturally opposed to each other."

"I suppose. But to me, even a perverted religion like theirs qualifies as something that happens behind closed doors, and so it's none of my business." Bert glanced at them above her sunglasses. "I'm sure you two boys can appreciate that."

"We sure can, ma'am," Argent said. He worked the pipe wrench one last time, then handed it back to Bert. "Thank you for all your help, ma'am."

Bert took her tool and left, again pausing to shove the turtle back into the water with the toe of her rubber boot.

"What do you suppose she's got against that turtle?" Michael asked.

"Maybe it didn't keep its perverted personal habits enough on the down low," Argent remarked, mouth twisted into a cynical, but genuine smirk. "That or she thinks it's an undercover hell cop waiting to bust the place up and cost her money."

Michael's previous reticence slid away. All he wanted to do now was cheer Argent up.

"You know what I think we should do?"

"Retreat into our protective shells and slide into the stagnant water of the canal?" Argent asked.

"I think we should make sure our shower works."

"Shower? But it's only noon," Argent protested.

"The judgmental speech about being nonjudgmental made me feel dirty."

\* \* \* \* \*

The shower spray hit Michael directly between the shoulder blades, and Argent was so wide that part of him was always sticking outside the plastic shower stall no matter which direction he turned. But the lukewarm water felt good in the muggy heat.

And besides, Michael just liked to see Argent naked. And if to have that pleasure he had to smash himself into a stall so small that it had been described as an upright coffin, he would do so. His chest scraped against Argent's, and his nipples tightened to dark bronze pebbles.

He settled his arms on Argent's shoulders. He stood a couple of inches taller so that in these close situations he always found himself nuzzling Argent's short, soft hair.

"You hair smells like piña colada," he murmured.

"It's Moran's Tropical Fantasy Two-in-One shampoo and body wash." Argent nipped the side of his throat, and Michael responded by arching against him, pressing his rapidly hardening penis against Argent's heavily ridged abdominal muscles.

"You're showering at Moran's place these days?" Michael asked.

"He's always lugging these gallon jugs of it into the station locker room. Some old lady he used to work for forces it on him every time they meet."

"You expect me to believe a weak story like that? I think you and he have something going on." His tone stayed sultry and teasing. Not even a whisper of jealousy moved through him, as it was impossible to imagine Argent and his fellow detective engaging in any sort of sex. Neither would be capable of making the first move. They'd both just stand there stonewalling each other until one got bored and wandered away.

The mental picture made him laugh and this in turn made Argent chuckle. From Argent's mind he caught an image of big, mean Moran leaning close to him and whispering, "You gonna eat the rest of that sandwich?"

On the rare occasions that he did receive an image from Argent, they were usually like this. Weird and hilarious.

Argent ran his hands down Michael's sides, still laughing softly.

"Yeah, baby, me and Moran have something going on. He just needs to suck my dick from time to time, and I humor him because he's so sensitive. But it means nothing to me."

Argent's mouth found his and Michael indulged in a long, slow kiss. More images slipped past Argent's psychic defenses, images of where Argent wanted to be touched. He complied, dropping his fingers to the head of Argent's cock, working the delicate foreskin, looking into his eyes, smiling.

"You really are a beautiful man," Argent said.

"You too," Michael said, then, "I'm sorry for baiting you earlier. I'm just nervous about this project."

"If you really want to apologize I can think of a few ways."

Argent tried to get his arms around Michael and ended up pushing the showerhead askew. Water sprayed out onto the tiny bathroom floor, making Michael laugh again before Argent righted it.

"This space is just too tiny to fuck properly," Argent said. "Come on."

They didn't bother with towels, just stumbled down the narrow hall to the waterbed. Michael flopped down on his stomach, feeling the full-wave mattress sloshing under his weight. He glanced back over his shoulder to wink at Argent, then caught his breath at the sight of him. Water evaporated off his naked skin in thin wisps of steam. He looked...supernatural, which Michael supposed he was.

Argent liked to pretend he wasn't a hotblood, hiding everything about his sorcerous blood in his daily life, but sometimes, like now, he slipped. Argent's body covered his, knee already placed between Michael's legs, nudging them apart.

"I thought you were going to let me drive," Michael said in mock protest.



"But I've almost got my key in the ignition." Argent kissed the back of his neck. Michael arched up to him, and the waterbed sloshed absurdly beneath him. Then Argent drew back, rolled onto the bed beside him, settling on his stomach. "But I suppose you're right. A deal's a deal. Take it away, baby."

For a moment, Michael did not know what to do.

Well, he knew what to do, had even done it before, but he didn't know how to approach this particular mountain of steaming—literally steaming—muscle.

What he didn't want to do was jump on Argent and stick it in like a horny thirteen-year-old who'd just been greenlighted for the first time.

Not even if that was exactly how he felt.

So he took it slow, treating Argent as though he were some kind of ancient, otherworldly temple to be thoroughly explored. And he did feel a sense of awe and wonder at Argent's responses, most especially his sly, backward glances.

Argent didn't open to him easily, but Michael hadn't expected him to: the man still treated even his most banal thoughts and opinions as though they had been classified by the Parmas City Police Department. But once he did allow Michael slowly, incrementally to enter the hot depths of his body, Argent seemed to relax.

He still kept his thoughts masked, but Michael was used to that strange distance now. He watched Argent's face, listened to his voice urging him to go deeper.

Michael felt the barrier that obscured Argent's thoughts waver as Argent's response increased, and for a moment, he thought he felt the other man's core before ecstasy blinded him to everything but his own exquisite climax.

## Chapter Two

The sound of early afternoon thunder woke him. Argent's arm lay heavily across his chest. A hard thud on the Hell Machine's roof brought Argent into tense wakefulness.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

"A branch falling on the roof?" Michael suggested.

"You don't think it was him?" Argent pointed up at the bus's small tinted window. Through the rain sheeting on the window, Michael saw the upside-down, leering face of a faun.

"That's the student who invited me." Michael waved sheepishly while Argent simply glowered. The faun seemed to assess the situation and gave them both an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Michael stood, wobbling slightly on the waterbed, and slid the window open.

"Hi, Vaughn," he said, as casual as he could be, as if his students caught him in naked, post-coital embraces every day of the week. "I was just about to phone you."

"Wouldn't have mattered if you did," Vaughn said. "I dropped my phone in the water a couple of days ago. Doesn't work. This is a sweet bus."

"It is. Why are you on the roof of it?"

"Me and my buddies like to jump our bikes from roof to roof. It's great practice for the races." Vaughn's bright, slanted eyes seemed to register Argent for the first time. He grinned and said, "Hi, how are you doing? I'm Vaughn."

"Dion Argent. Did you say that you were in the races?"

"I just got my license today. I don't have it with me, though. I'm worried I'm going to drop it in the water." Three more thuds landed on the roof. "I guess my friends finally caught up. I gotta go."

"What about the Half Moon Ceremony?"

"What about it?"

"When is it?" Michael sat down, pulling the thin coverlet over his groin. He wasn't shy, but unless they were engaging in some steam bath-based ritual, being naked in front of a student always felt awkward to him.

"The day after tomorrow. We've got plenty of time to talk about it."

"Why don't you come by around noon tomorrow, and we'll talk about our strategy?" Michael heard his own voice shift into that professional tone he used at the university.

"Great!" Vaughn started to move, but Michael called him back.

"And Vaughn?"

"Yeah?"

"Quit denting my roof."

"Okay, I'll stay off your roof, old man!" And he was away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Noon found the three of them sitting on the dock that also served as a porch, drinking sweet tea. Beside Argent, Vaughn looked tiny, but not frail. He had his legs stretched out in front of him, his delicate hooves propped up on a crate.

"I'm really excited about the Parmas City Open," he was saying. "I've looked at the times for the qualifying heats, and I can beat them easily."

"Is this your first time racing in the Open?" Argent asked. Leaning back in his lawn chair, Argent looked the picture of an indolent man, which almost certainly meant that he was on a state of high alert.

"Yeah, I've done other races before, but nothing as big as the Open. It's a burly course, especially for an urban race. There's a section that goes through the university that goes down these three flights of shallow stairs. I don't know how the guys on road bikes are going to make it through that section of the course." Vaughn batted at a dragonfly that had landed on his leg, shooing the insect away.

"Vaughn was given a ticket for practicing by campus police last week," Michael informed Argent, who nodded.

"That was bullshit! There were at least twelve guys practicing that section of the course, but that rent-a-cop zeroed right in on me," Vaughn said. "It's because I'm little. People think they can take me. Big surprise."

"So you think I should put my money on you?" Argent asked.

"Come again?" Vaughn's puzzlement made his pointy face seem childish.

"I mean I've got a couple of bucks to stake, and it sounds like I should put them on you." Argent sucked down the last of his tea and rattled the ice in the empty cup at

Michael by way of asking for a refill. Michael ignored him. "So what are they? Ten to one? Twenty to one?"

"Oh, gambling!" Vaughn appeared to be genuinely surprised at this thought. Sometimes he seemed so worldly, then other times his naïveté showed. It was one of the reasons that he'd warmed to his difficult and mostly failing student. "I don't think people gamble on the Open."

"People gamble on everything," Argent pronounced. "I could make a call and ask to bet that your grandma makes fried chicken for dinner tonight, and some bookie somewhere would be willing to lay odds for me."

"My grandma mostly fries eels," Vaughn said. "And sometimes she cooks those big snakes that like to sun up on the berm. She's a deadeye with a knife. She can cut the head of a snake from ten feet away."

"I'll keep that in mind," Argent said. "Is she a good cook?"

"She's pretty good. She's been on some painkillers recently that make her a little loopy, but most of the time she's great," Vaughn said.

"Michael's a terrible cook," Argent stage whispered, a hint of that put-on effeminacy creeping into his voice and demeanor. "I don't know what he'd do if he didn't have me to take care of him."

Michael couldn't decide whether to be insulted by Argent's slur against his culinary skills or fascinated by the process he was currently witnessing. Argent appeared to be developing a persona right before his eyes, and that persona, it seemed, was a big-muscle queen.

Somehow Michael had imagined that Argent's undercover personas were as cool as or cooler than his natural personality. Not so.

That glimpse he'd had into Argent's mind the day before had showed a man supremely in control. Even now, Michael felt touched that Argent had allowed him both into his body and his mind, though honestly, he thought that Argent allowing him into his thoughts had been accidental. His chest ached whenever he remembered it in a way that he'd never quite felt before.

He was in love with Argent.

There, he'd admitted it, at least to himself. Even now, watching Argent wield his fake persona against the guileless Vaughn, Michael only felt amazed by him, instead of what he should rightfully be feeling: suspicion about what cop mischief Argent might be planning.

What the hell had happened?

Had Argent placed a spell on his ass that caused whosoever should lie with him to fall in love forever and ever?

Michael slurped the rest of his tea out of his plastic tumbler. The canals of Iron Springs Mobile Estates were quiet, since most of the kids were away at school. Unlike the previous afternoon, the water was calm. Reptiles sunned themselves on most

available dry surfaces. Shocking red flamingos waded at the edges of the water, siphoning up shrimps with their curved beaks. Michael supposed that the high iron content in the water affected the color of their plumage. He spied a couple of Baramans stripping a pernicious vine from the side of a mangrove.

"Do you think many of the Baramans are going to come to the Half Moon Ceremony?" he asked Vaughn. The faun snorted with laughter, stomping his hooves on the crate as if Michael had just told a side-splitter. Three lizards who had been sunning at the edge of the porch startled into the water.

"I take it that means no?" Argent inquired languidly.

"That means no fucking way would any of those deadbeats show up. First of all, there's a bonfire, which they're scared of, and second of all, they would have to be nuts to cross the line like that."

"Cross the line?" Michael asked. "You don't mean that there's an actual line do you?"

"Well, it's not written on anything but see those flags going between the trees?" Vaughn pointed toward the series of rainbow pennants that Michael had found so festive the previous day. "Beyond that line is faun territory."

"So that means we're in Baraman territory now?"

"No, Baraman territory is to the south, more toward the swamp. Everything within a hundred yards of the laundry room is neutral territory."

"Did Bert negotiate the truce after a couple of run-ins with the cops?" Argent asked.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Lucky guess," Argent said, shrugging. "So the Baramans give you fauns trouble?"

"In every way they can." Vaughn rolled his eyes dramatically. "They're determined to make sure there's not a single dry patch left to set hoof on. See those guys over there? If they left that vine there, then eventually enough leaves and sticks and shit might catch there that we could walk but what do they do? Dismantle everything. They want this place for themselves and those ugly-ass, vicious fish they raise. You should watch out for them. Look at this scar I got." Vaughn held up his left leg to show them a jagged pink scar nestled among the hair. "I was almost fucking crippled."

Michael leaned close to see. "Is that from a barracuda?"

Vaughn shook his head. "We call them creepers. They're like mudskippers, only like a yard long and half of that is teeth. I think the Baramans brought them here from their fucked-up home world."

Michael nodded, making mental notes. He wished he'd been recording Vaughn and vowed to have his voice recorder on him at all times for the next week.

The recorder had been a gift from Argent—the latest in nondemonic body-part-derived technology. It used micro cassettes, and had been developed in some reactionary compound that eschewed all magic and thought that extra-planar citizens should be deported. Michael hadn't been crazy about supporting them financially, but he traded that conceit for the comfortable certainty that his pocket recorder hadn't been made from anybody's baby.

Conscientious consumption bred strange bedfellows.

Observing Vaughn's battle scar, Argent remarked, "Seems like a spear gun might have been a good thing to bring along. Just in case I run into the neighbor's pets."

"Or something like that." Vaughn grinned wickedly then leaned in close, whispering, "My granny packs a dot-two."

Without wanting to, Michael looked to Argent. The .2-amp shock-volt pistol was only issued to police and military. How Vaughn's granny got hold of one was anyone's guess. And Argent certainly couldn't have been pleased to hear about the existence of yet one more unlicensed shock-volt in the world.

"Seems dicey to use something like that around so much water," Argent observed. "But then I'm a little bit of a nervous nelly when it comes to those kinds of things."

"But it makes fishing so easy. Pull the trigger once and blam! All the eels you can eat float up to the surface."

Argent chuckled. "I think I'll stick with the traditional method."

"Do you seriously do that?" Michael asked.

"Sometimes," Vaughn said. "If we've got a lot of company to feed."

Michael looked at the murky water. "How do you know there aren't any Baramans swimming by when you do that?"

"Do I care?" Vaughn asked, then seeing his bravado had fallen on an apparently unsympathetic audience, he backpedalled. "They just wouldn't be there. They stay away from our place. I don't really have anything against them. I just don't like them. I guess it's not very 'Peace and Justice Society' of me to admit it, but they're all just so pretentious. But I would never deliberately hurt any of them."

Michael nodded, unsure if he believed Vaughn. In the isolated and highly controlled environment of the university, it was easier for different sorts of demons to put aside their differences. Here in Iron Springs the stakes were higher and group-affiliation plainly more important. That's what he told himself anyway, to soothe his disappointment at Vaughn's lack of sympathy for the Baramans.

Michael wondered if there was any way that he could interview any of the Baraman residents. Being associated with Vaughn didn't lend him any credibility at all. Perhaps he could have Bert set it up? He made a mental note to visit her the next day.

## Chapter Three

The next morning was muggier than it had been the day before. Thick humid air pressed in around him, leaving Michael anticipating relief that the standard afternoon thunderstorm would bring. Both he and Argent had woken early, eaten a quiet breakfast before each settled into his own morning routine. Michael jotted down notes and thumbed through his reference materials, looking for citations. Argent worked out, then meditated, as he did every morning.

Or at least he appeared to meditate. Maybe he was just taking a nap while sitting up. Michael couldn't really tell what went on behind those closed lids, but thought it must have to do with sorcery since occasionally Argent's fingers would twitch and blue sparks would crackle between them.

After a time, Argent opened his eyes, stretched, and announced he was going out for a paddle. He had his camera slung over his shoulder.

"Do you need some help getting the kayak out?" Michael asked.

Argent shook his head. "I'll be fine." He leaned down and kissed Michael on the cheek. "See you later."

Michael watched him go with a mixture of pride and suspicion. Why the camera?

If he'd inquired about needing to bring surveillance equipment with him to go on a paddle, Michael was sure that Argent would have told him that he wanted to take pictures of the local birds. Doubtless, Argent would even return with snapshots of herons or eagles or close-up shots of carnivorous pitcher plants. And Michael would wonder whether or not Argent had gone investigating Vaughn's granny behind his back.

That was the problem with dating a secretive and curious individual: trusting him not to snoop. Or maybe it was accepting that he would?

He tried to do more research, but found his thoughts turning time and again to his lover.

On his notepad he wrote, "Long Term Relationship: Viability Of." Then he scratched it out and snapped closed his notebook.

If he was going to just spend his research time sitting around wondering whether or not Argent and he could make it in the long haul, he might as well pack it in and go interview Bert.

He only got as far as his deck, however, because sitting coiled in the middle of his steps was a red, orange, and blue-striped snake—according to his pocket guide to reptiles, the most venomous creature in the mangrove. Trying to shoo it away with a broom only angered it, provoking it to hiss and open its white-lined mouth threateningly. Across the canal, three Baramans—he thought they were the same three who had spoken to them before—just watched.

Michael gave up and phoned Bert about the snake. She said she'd be right over and seconds later he heard her screen door slam.

Bert arrived and shooed the snake off the patio with one flip-flop clad foot. The snake went away into the water hissing angrily, which made Michael feel a fool.

"I guess I could have done that myself," he said.

"No, you're from the city after all. You're not used to the wildlife." She cast a baleful eye at the leviathan-like constrictors sunning on the berm. "I wasn't used to it either. Then the hurricane came and I had to get myself used to all kinds of things."

"Was that when the fauns moved in?"

"No, that's when the water covered everything up and didn't go away. All my flowerbeds got washed away, and the few that are left are going a teaspoon at a time." Sadness crossed Bert's face, then fled. "That's when I hit upon the idea of advertising for tenants who liked the water. I figured I would get a few houseboats, but instead all these Baramans answered the ad. Those empty spaces were rented in half a day, and I was back in business."

"About the Baramans, do you think it would be possible to set up an interview with one? I'd really like to get their perspective on life here into my paper."

"Paper?" Bert blinked. "You write for a paper?"

"No, it's an academic paper. I have to publish a certain number of papers in order to keep my job at the college, so I've come to look at every vacation as an opportunity to gather research information."

"I can see how you might if your livelihood depended on it." For a moment she seemed lost in a reverie; then, as if remembering herself, she abruptly changed the subject. "It's nice what you're doing for Vaughn. He's had so much trouble."

"How do you mean?"

"He's an orphan, you know. Lives with his grandmother in space fifty-three, and she's pretty much unable to care for herself now, let alone him."



"Why is that?"

"Senility. Can't let her out of the house by herself or she goes wandering off into the swamp. She won't even be able to go to the big Half Moon hootenanny, even though he's going to be honored there."

"So Vaughn takes care of his grandmother most of the time?"

"Well, I often look in on her while he's at school during the day. See that she gets fed and stays indoors" — Bert leaned close to him — "and I keep her off the hooch."

"Hooch?"

Bert nodded sagely. "Those fauns like to dance and they like to drink, and if they're too old to do one, they'll like as not overindulge in the other. It's sad, but that's life, I guess."

Michael nodded. He knew all about parental figures who drank too much. His father was a former rock star, after all. His sympathy for Vaughn deepened as he pondered how difficult it would have been to live life with an irresponsible parent, but without the money to make life easier. And did Vaughn even know about the "hooch?" He said she was on painkillers. Michael wondered if Vaughn had been lying to him or just to himself. Of course it didn't have to be one or the other.

Michael excused himself from the conversation and spent the afternoon thunderstorm reading (and avoiding wondering if Argent had been struck by lightning), then rode his bike into town to buy some groceries at the store across from the bus stop, the only shop in the township of Iron Springs. He returned with his cargo of dubious canned goods just in time to see Argent paddling his kayak up the canal toward the Hell Machine. He dragged the boat out of the water and came over to snoop through the bags of groceries.

"So let's see what I've got to work with." He perused the inside of the bag. "Looks like deviled ham sandwiches tonight. With chips and beer. And candy."

"There's nothing fresh at that little store but the live bait," Michael said. "I think if you want to eat fish, you're going to have to catch it yourself."

"I may just do that." Argent set about making sandwiches, spreading tinned ham on soft hot dog buns. He had that pleasant look on his face that now aroused in Michael deep suspicion.

"Did you enjoy your paddle?"

Argent nodded. "I saw a couple of those creepers Vaughn was talking about. I'm pretty sure I could get them to roll over for one of these sandwiches. Saw lots of birds too."

"And?"

"And what?"

"My experience of you tells me that you went to perform some sort of recreational investigation. That is, if it's possible to investigate while paddling a kayak."

"I assure you that it is." Argent opened up the bag of chips and placed a portion on each of their plates along with a sandwich and a little pile of candy. He had the habit of making up plates from his college days when he worked at his older sister's restaurant. At first Michael had found it strange and controlling, thinking that Argent was trying to put him on a diet for some reason. Now he knew that making pretty food constituted Argent's one and only form of creative expression.

"Why aren't you telling me what you found out?" Michael asked.

"Because I don't want you to be angry with me." Argent set the plates down on the table.

"I won't." Even as he spoke, Michael knew this was probably not true. If Argent thought he'd be mad, he would almost certainly be mad.

"Okay, I managed to strike up a conversation with a couple of the Baramans living over at the end the canal."

"How'd you manage that?"

Argent shrugged. "Asking for directions. Oldest trick in the book. Anyway, this individual expressed some curiosity about you, and I explained what you and I were doing here—they're hermaphrodites, by the way. I found that out while trying to talk to them. They know very few human words, but hermaphrodite is one of them."

"Good to know," Michael said. He wondered when Argent would get to the part that would make him mad.

"And after we talked for a while about places to see nesting storks, this Baraman person suddenly and with great urgency started telling me that I shouldn't be associating with the fauns and that it was dangerous to go out of neutral territory."

"So we're supposed to stick within a hundred yards of the laundry room?" Michael pondered his stack of chips. "Did it say what would happen to us if we didn't?"

Argent shook his head. "The storm was starting by that point, and I had to take the kayak up on a dry patch. Once the shower stopped, I paddled around the area the fauns are setting up for the big event and had a look around."

Yes, that made Michael a little mad. Couldn't Argent just experience another culture without monitoring it? Policing it?

Aloud he said, "And?"

"First, they have a truly astounding quantity of a variety of controlled substances which"—Argent held up a hand to keep Michael from interrupting him—"which I'm sure they have a religious ceremony license to possess. But I have some questions about how they're setting the whole place up. I think they're going to cast a spell."

"I think that's fairly common in these rituals," Michael commented. His initial anger over Argent's sniffing around dissipated with this intriguing new knowledge. "Usually it's just a protection spell. Blessings, that sort of thing."

"It doesn't seem like a blessing to me. It has a familiar pattern that I can't put my finger on. I wish I had my computer." Argent slowly tapped his fingers on the table.

"Do you want to phone the station and describe it to someone and have them look it up?" Michael asked sourly.

"No, they'd be down here right away looking for a permit for the drugs...er, sacred herbs." Argent smiled. "I promised I wouldn't disturb your research subjects."

"Thank you."

"But I would like to pick your brain a little," Argent said.

Michael almost dropped his chip. Argent had never ever asked him for any sort of information about demons. And in a way, Michael had been glad. After the recent debacle with the Darsh and the bargebison, he'd been happy to be left out of investigations.

"What would you like to know?"

"I just have a few questions." Argent pulled a small, spiral-bound red notebook from his pocket. Michael could see he'd sketched the basic layout of the area where the bonfire would occur. He could see Argent's neat print, but not read it. He wondered if Argent had written in code. That would be like him. "Where are the fauns from originally?"

"Elysia, of course," Michael said. "Natural portals to Elysia exist in the continental islands. Most emigrated from there or were brought here as slaves by sorcerers before the revolution."

"Along with the centaurs and harpies and the like." Argent nodded. "What about the Baraman? Are they ugly naiads?"

"No, they're from one of the watery hells. I can't remember which one. Maybe Pelagia. All I know about them is that they're one of the most underdocumented demonic populations living in Parmas. Being amphibious makes it hard for them to access certain city services, like the Department of Licensing, for example. I should remember to bring them up at the next meeting of the Peace and Justice Society. We could do a nice community service outreach here, I think. Helping them get Parmas City IDs."

"Not if Vaughn was in charge of it," Argent commented dryly.

"Obviously I'd get someone else to lead that project," Michael said. "Maybe your department could send somebody down to recruit here as well. The hell cops could use a little diversity in the crew."

"Funny man." Argent cleared away their plates, which, since they were made of paper, consisted of crumpling them up and shoving them into the trashcan. "So you would imagine that coming from Elysia, this ceremony would be set up in an Elysian fashion, correct?"

"I suppose."

"That would mean some sort of burnt offering and an oracle. And yet they seem to be arranging a classic pentagram-powered invocation spell. Why?"

"Somewhere in the last couple hundred years one of them got really into Druids?" Michael suggested, shrugging. "It's not impossible. Druids are very into trees. Fauns like trees. And just because they're physically fauns doesn't mean they all follow the old-time religion. Or it could be a combination of the bacchanal and some sort of Druidic ceremony. We won't know until we get there."

"The pentagram is inverted," Argent clarified. "Classically used to siphon power off some extra-planar demonic force."

"And so?"

"And so what are they siphoning all that force for?"

"First, you don't really know if the pentagram is inverted or not because you don't know how the ceremony is oriented. Second, what do you imagine they're doing out here?"

"I don't know," Argent admitted. "But it feels wrong."

"Well, personally I favor evidence over intuition."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" Argent smiled.

"You were the one who brought up your feelings," Michael said. "All I'm saying is that you might be slightly prejudiced against people setting up magical ceremonies since the only ones you ever get called to are the criminal enterprises."

Argent drew in a deep breath and let it go. "Okay, I'll grant you that."

"Really?" Michael had been prepared for a fight and was surprised by Argent's sudden capitulation.

"There is an inescapable logic to what you say," Argent cracked another beer. "Maybe I just don't know how to stop working."

"Well, you could always spend tomorrow trying to catch us something nicer for dinner."

"But how will I be distracted tonight?" Argent ran his thumb along Michael's lower lip. The touch set his mouth tingling.

"I can't imagine."

"How about this?"

The words appeared in his Michael's mind, soundlessly accompanied by an image of himself on his hands and knees, Argent's hands around his hips, pushing himself inside.

Michael's eyes widened, not just at the explicit image of himself, but that Argent spoke to him telepathically.

"I had no idea you could do that," he said.

"I have many hidden skills."

Argent's hand slid along Michael's flank, and reflexively, Michael leaned in close for the kiss. As his tongue slid along Argent's, more images appeared in his mind. Argent seemed to be rifling through a catalogue of his own memories of favorite positions in which to have Michael. There he lay, on his back on his own bed, tawny against the white sheets, and then came another mental snapshot of his own naked body leaning across the counter of *Euphemie's* tiny galley. One similarity unified all of Argent's pornographic thoughts: a focus on Michael's ass.

"I thought I was driving this trip," Michael said.

"For the whole trip?" Argent broke the kiss to speak, apparently tired of showing off his psychic powers—or maybe simply too aroused to effectively use them now, as evidenced by the stiff cock pressed against Michael's thigh.

"I guess I can hand over the keys for a while." Michael started to lift Argent's shirt, then glanced outside the window and saw three kids sitting on the neighbor's roof, eating popsicles, watching them. He patted Argent's on the shoulder. "Let's take this to the back of the bus."

"Don't you like the peanut gallery?" Argent waved at them. One peeping kid had the audacity to wave back. The other two pretended that they hadn't been looking in the first place.

Michael simply walked toward the round bed, shedding clothes as he went, which was as much encouragement as Argent needed to follow. He stopped at the side of the bed, turning back.

"Have you decided how you want to see me today yet?"

"I think today I want to look at your big blue eyes." Argent freed himself from his last sock and pushed Michael onto his back, then lowered himself between Michael's spread legs.

To Michael's surprise, Argent didn't seem interested in any sort of penetration. He seemed to want to press as much of his body against Michael's as he possibly could at one time. And this skin to skin contact led Michael directly into Argent's mind, to those familiar images of pelagic blue.

He'd grown used to—even comfortable with—Argent's ability to block his telepathic powers with calming sea images. He'd had visions of the ocean so often when Argent was fucking him that sometimes the sight of rolling breakers, even when pictured on such items as postcards and real estate billboards, was enough to give him a hard-on.

And today was no different. The waves blocked out the cheap faux-wood paneling, the ridiculous round bed, the ninety-nine naked chicks on the ceiling. In this tiny room, in a dismal backwater, when Argent's naked skin pressed next to him, he was transported to a beautiful beach by a beautiful ocean by the force of Argent's imagination and by his strong and steady thrusting.

Sometimes, at the moment of orgasm he would see through Argent's eyes and see himself looking back. At first he didn't like this: didn't like having to see his own

inhuman eyes, the feature that gave him away. But Argent loved them, and Michael had grown to not mind so much the way he looked after being able to see himself this way.

Today, Argent kept his eyes closed, and his face nuzzled against Michael's neck as the climax built between them. The images of the ocean became broken, strange, the scent of the sea mixed with the smell and taste of their sweat. Michael ground against him, urging Argent faster with whispers. It seemed they couldn't get close enough to each other or hold each other tight enough. Then Michael felt his climax building like a wave. A groan escaped his lips, and he felt a resonance from within Argent. His frantic intensity fed Argent's, building and rolling like a massive wave until they found the crashing release of orgasm, dissipating their desperate movements like water dispersed on the sand.

Argent lay over him for a minute, breath coming hard, his expression unguarded and curiously focused. Then again came Argent's silent words.

*"God, you're beautiful."*

Michael smiled up at him and said, "Only to you."

Argent rolled off to the side and pulled Michael against his side.

*"Does anybody else matter?"*

Michael laid his head on Argent's shoulder and whispered, "Not right now."

## Chapter Four

*"Wake up, the sheriff's outside."*

Michael's eyes popped open. Argent leaned over him, one hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him awake. Cool, early morning light shone in through the high window. It looked like it was just barely past sunrise.

"Sheriff?" Michael sat up and ran his hand through his hair. Argent seemed unusually agitated. Alarm prickled at Michael's skin.

*"Are you awake?"* Argent's voice sounded in his head even though his lips hadn't moved.

*"Yes."* Michael forced his thoughts to form an answer. He hadn't spoken telepathically for a long time—not since he'd last visited his mother's home world of Paarkur.

*"There are deputies going door- to-door asking questions. Pretend I'm not here."* Argent let go of him and pulled closed the curtains on the small window.

Outside Michael could hear heavy footsteps and low voices. The patio creaked.

*"What? Why?"*

*"I have to identify myself to another officer if I'm questioned."* Argent kept his voice at a whisper.

*"Why would you be questioned?"* Michael was wide awake now. *"What is this about? What happened?"*

*"One of the Baramans has turned up dead."* Argent peered around the confined space, opening up the tiny closet, frowning, and closing it again. *"There's really no place except the toilet I can hide in here is there?"*

*"I don't think so, no."*

"Then the toilet it is. Listen, go outside to talk to them. Don't let them in. They don't have a warrant."

A loud, commanding knock sounded at the front. Michael jumped nearly out of his skin.

"Why in the world would I let them search the Hell Machine? Who knows what could be stashed in this vehicle?"

Argent shrugged. "Sometimes you're that kind of cooperative fellow."

"Not when they wake me up at the crack of fucking dawn," Michael whispered. Outside he could hear Bert's voice rising and falling with a tone of aggravated protestation, but he couldn't hear her individual words.

The knuckles of authority applied themselves once more across Hell Machine's fiberglass door. Michael took a deep breath and whipped the door open.

"Quiet down!" he hissed, then, feigning surprise at the appearance of sheriff's uniforms, he straightened up and whispered an apology. Before they could ask him anything else he stepped out of the Hell Machine and closed the door firmly behind him. "What can I do for you?"

"Good morning. I'm Deputy Sanders and this is Deputy LeFevre. How are you this morning?" Sanders typified the barrel-chested, sunburned, and hairy-armed law enforcer frequently seen in the county. Next to Sanders, LeFevre looked like a leathery beanpole. Michael wondered if his first name might be Dwayne, as in "Dwayne the bathtub, I'm dwoining!"

Both Sanders and LeFevre gave Michael the up and down. LeFevre made a note on his pad. Michael imagined it said something like "demon of unknown descent." Michael decided to put on his best professorial tone.

"To be honest, officers, I'm a little confused. What is it that you want?" Michael swept his eyes across the mobile estate. Three sheriff's department boats were moored in the canal. Two more cruisers were parked on the berm, lights flashing. There was also an ambulance. At least one other set of officers wearing sheriff's department beige canvassed the trailers on the other side.

Sanders turned back to him, smiling. "One of the residents was found in the canal this morning, and as you can see, we're just making a few inquiries about the incident."

They asked for his name, occupation, and discovering that he was not a full-time resident, his home address.

As he answered, he kept an occasional eye on the other set of deputies. When they knocked on the door of the blue trailer across the street, the back door opened and three people, humans, dove into the water and started swimming away.

Sanders and LeFevre noted this as well. Sanders spoke into the radio attached to his shoulder, and a boat Michael hadn't seen moved in after them.

Returning his attention to Michael, Sanders politely asked where he had been the previous evening and whether he had seen or heard anything suspicious.



Michael kept his responses for the most part accurate. When it came time for them to go inside the Hell Machine and look around, Michael demurred.

For the first time LeFevre spoke. "Is there some reason you don't want us looking around inside?"

"Yes, you don't have a warrant and therefore I needn't allow it. You know what they say about civil rights: if you don't use them, they have a tendency to go away." Michael leaned against the Hell Machine and stuck his hands in the pocket of his robe.

"So your objection is purely philosophical?" LeFevre said.

"Yes, that's right." Michael gave them the same flat, pleasant smile that he gave to students who argued with him about their grades. He hoped to whatever deity might see fit to protect him that the deputies would simply go away and not send for a team of hell cops to further their inquiries, as it would be impossible to hide Argent's presence from them.

"I'm not a college professor so I don't really understand how a person would obstruct a murder investigation for an abstract reason like that. You can see how that would be confusing to a person like me," LeFevre said.

LeFevre was definitely no dummy. Michael kept his smile relaxed in a friendly sort of resistance. He said, "No, not really. What do you find confusing about it?"

"I'm wondering why, if you've got nothing to hide, you don't prove it to us by letting us take a look around your vehicle. You realize that if we come back here with a warrant and find something inside you'll be arrested, right?" LeFevre's expression was one of earnest concern for Michael's well-being.

"I don't know what you expect to find inside, but feel free to go get that warrant, if you think it's necessary," Michael said. Sweat prickled beneath his shirt. Antagonizing the county authorities did not feel good to him. It felt like the road to getting himself pulled over for speeding every time he ventured beyond the Parmas City limits. But Argent wanted him to and maybe, if they didn't actually break up because of their time here in Iron Springs, he'd be a good cop boyfriend who could smooth it all out for him later.

LeFevre gave Michael a faint smile that said he'd be watching for Michael at every crossroads.

"That's all we need then, Mr. Gold." Sanders smoothly closed his notebook and offered Michael his business card. "Be sure to let us know if you remember anything else about last night."

"I will, thank you." Michael slid the card into his pocket, wondering if it was laden with spells as Argent's cards were. Probably not.

The deputies departed, and Michael went back inside.

As relief at deflecting the police swept through him, it occurred to Michael that he didn't know why Argent was evading the other cops in the first place. Or how Argent knew about the dead Baraman.

There was no way he'd actually killed the demon in some sort of unforeseen altercation, was there? No, that was absolutely foolish. If Argent had killed anybody he'd have called his hell-cop buddies immediately, though Michael couldn't honestly say whether his friends would report him or just cover it up.

But he didn't want to think about that. He couldn't think about that and still want to date a cop of any sort.

He carefully opened the bathroom door.

Argent leaned against the tiny hand-washing basin, arms crossed, mouth set in a thoughtful scowl.

An actual scowl. That was new.

"They've gone on," Michael said. "But they're still out there. I think you might have to stay in here a while."

"Lucky for me there's a lot to read." Argent indicated the room's one ancient music industry magazine with a jerk of his chin. The cover featured his father, Axe Motorblast Gold (age twenty-four) holding naked baby Michael aloft. "You were a cute baby."

Michael almost took the bait. Almost.

"How did you know about the dead Baraman?"

"I'm the one who called it in," Argent said. "I woke up about two hours ago. There was some kind of...disturbance."

"Like an argument?"

"No, a magical disturbance—I'm fairly sure it was a spelltrap being triggered. I went outside to figure out what happened and saw the Baraman. It was on Bert's doorstep. Fried. So I reported it from the payphone by the laundry room and came back inside."

"Why didn't you go talk to the deputies? Why all this subterfuge?" Michael found himself whispering. The deputies still lurked outside the Hell Machine's thin walls.

"Knowing that I'm a cop would destroy your credibility as an unbiased observer. You said it yourself," Argent said.

"While I'm flattered, I can't believe that you would withhold information in a murder investigation just to save my reputation with the fauns."

Argent grinned at him. "Nothing gets by you, does it?"

"Plenty of things, just not when they've got to do with you."

"Okay, before the deputies arrived I observed a young female faun, who I have not yet identified, proceed to douse the Baraman's already charred body with lighter fluid, light it briefly then douse it with water before fleeing on hoof toward the faun section of the trailer park."

"Mobile estate," Michael corrected. "So you're saying she set an already burnt corpse on fire?"

Argent nodded. "Why might one perform such an apparently redundant action?"

Michael did not know, but clearly Argent did, so he guessed. "The Baraman was still alive somehow?"

"No, if the Baraman had been alive I would have offered medical assistance."

"That's true, you would have." Michael thought for a moment; then the answer dawned on him so suddenly he wondered if he'd received it telepathically. "They needed to make it seem like the body had been burned with an accelerant when it was burned by sorcery."

"Because..."

"...they don't want the hell cops called in."

"Exactly." Argent resettled himself against the basin, looking absurdly wide in the narrow room.

"And that means...?"

"That they don't want to get caught for unlicensed sorcery?" Michael guessed.

"It means that they're not as worried about committing a murder as they are about being discovered for performing acts of unlicensed sorcery. And that means that the acts of sorcery that they're performing probably carry a higher sentence than murder."

"What acts of sorcery carry a higher sentence than murder?" Not being a sorcerer, Michael hadn't particularly thought about which magical crimes might be considered more heinous in the eyes of the law than others.

"Sorcerous slavery, genocide, and treason all carry the death penalty as well as certain types of invocations such as invocations that summon destroyer gods or ravening demons or sorcerous swarms or plagues. Some forms of necromancy are considered capital crimes, but I doubt that's what's going on," Argent said.

It chilled Michael to realize suddenly that if there was a law against summoning a sorcerous swarm, it had probably actually occurred at some point. Finally he said, "'What do you think they're doing?'"

Argent shrugged. "All I know is that they don't want the hell cops called in. What the perpetrator or perpetrators of this crime don't realize is that there is already a hell cop here."

"Unofficially," Michael said. "And off duty."

Argent merely snorted at this. "Baby, I can arrest anyone anytime anywhere in the greater Parmas City Metropolitan area of which this entire county is a part."

"Then why not go find the faun and arrest her right now?"

"Because I have a very strong suspicion that the death of the Baraman is not an isolated incident, and I think having the uniforms come barging in here, shock-volts blazing, would be counterproductive to uncovering what, if any, larger purpose this sorcery might have."

"You think it's directly related to the Half Moon Ceremony," Michael stated.

Argent shrugging. "I'd rather get a little more information before I start making decisions. Plus, if I can hold off arresting anybody until your research is done, I will. I don't want to undermine your credibility with these people if it's not necessary."

"Is this why you got promoted?"

"Absolutely," Argent said. "The only thing the chief asked me before he raised my rank was, 'Detective Argent, would you ever make your boyfriend wish he'd left you at home?' and I said, 'No, sir, I would not,' and then he shook my hand and made me a lieutenant."

Michael laughed. "I meant, did you get promoted because you were extremely sneaky?"

"Indirectly," Argent replied. A little of the playfulness seemed to go out of his tone. "I should tell you, though, if I think another life is in imminent danger, I won't hesitate to call reinforcements, academic study or no academic study."

"I wouldn't expect anything else from you."

## Chapter Five

After the sheriff's department moved down the road, Argent took the kayak back out to do some more investigation, and Michael went to find space fifty-three.

Deep in faun territory the flooded thoroughfares of Iron Springs Mobile Estates took on a decidedly foreign look. Elaborate walkways made of graying planks and rope stretched between the trailers and crisscrossed the canals. Small rowboats and skiffs crowded the mud embankments. Tiny, goat-legged children in school uniforms clip-clopped along the walkways on their way to the bus stop. Some of the children gave him sidelong looks, but most seemed to ignore him. As long as he wasn't a Baraman, he was apparently of no consequence to them. Middle-aged faun women in housecoats stood on the bridges and walkways talking about the sheriff's department while their teenage sons and daughters postured on the berm below, boasting about various ways they'd kill the next cop they saw.

They saved their most savage (and unrealistic) scenarios for the hell cops. Michael almost laughed as one faun girl described how she would seduce one of them into lowering his defenses, then "cut off his dick with a butcher knife."

She really didn't know much about the elite force. As far as Michael could tell most had strong feelings of attraction only toward their fellow *homo sapiens*. Some even went so far as to be outright racists. And at least half of them seemed to be gay.

Which did nothing to make them more palatable to most segments of the population.

*Poor teenage faun seductress. She has no chance.*

Though he knew Argent to be a class-one sorcerer and generally competent individual, he could not help but feel frightened for his own personal cop, knowing hormone-filled teenagers like these lurked around every corner. Not just here. Everywhere. All the time.

That was the kind of thought that could make a man crazy – the kind of thought that made a man wonder why he'd given his heart to a guy who could be killed in a storm of shock-volts on any given day.

There was nothing to do but put it from his mind and focus on the task at hand: interviewing Vaughn's senile and possibly alcoholic grandma.

The trailer occupying space fifty-three was mint green and raised up on stilts to be about two feet above the general water level.

Michael knocked and Vaughn answered the door, flushed and talking angrily down the phone. His fingers twisted violently in the spiraling phone cord.

"I'm telling you, the cops weren't letting anyone leave until they finished questioning everyone. I didn't mean to miss the practice run." Vaughn registered who he was, then gestured for him to come inside. Michael followed Vaughn into a small living room with worn russet carpet. There was a small sofa and a coffee table along one wall, and a television turned up loud sat against the other. Sets of shelves hung on every wall. Most seemed to display either photographs or trophies.

The only other piece of furniture in the small room was a recliner chair that held a tiny, graying faun. She didn't look at Michael as he came in, seeming to be in some sort of chemically-induced haze.

"Okay, man, I'm sorry. I will be there as soon as I can." Vaughn snapped his phone shut without saying good-bye. Then threw the thing against the wall. The small projectile bounced off a framed photograph and fell on the sofa. As far as Michael could tell it had remained intact, but maybe Vaughn had purchased that particular model of phone on purpose. The wall showed scuffmarks that indicated this wasn't the first time the phone had suffered a hurling.

"Is this a bad time?" Michael asked.

"I can't talk right now, I'm sorry. I was supposed to go ride the practice course for the Open this morning. Now my coach wants me to come into town to go on the second run, and Bert's supposed to be here, but she's not answering her phone and grandma's really out of it, and there's no way I'll be able to come close to winning if I can't even ride the course..." Vaughn trailed off into impotent, enraged silence, then went to the kitchen and began to violently assault the lower cabinet with his small but deadly hoof.

Vaughn's grandmother's eyes slid slightly sideways. Her mouth moved, trying to speak. Her hand raised in a feeble wave that did not penetrate the aura of Vaughn's anger.

"Hey now." Michael went to the kitchen. He didn't try to touch Vaughn, but he did get close. "If the problem is you need someone to stay with your grandma, I can do that."

"You can?"

"Sure," Michael said. "I was coming by to interview her about the ceremony anyway. I'll just stay here until Bert comes."

"Would you really do that?" Vaughn stopped mid-kick.

"Sure. Can you tell me anything else about the Half Moon Ceremony?"

"Oh, yeah." Vaughn immediately launched himself into a different mission, finding his helmet, knee and elbow pads, and hoof clips. "It's just a big party where I drink a cup full of gnarly drugs and then do a dance with the priestesses of the moon goddess. It'll really be a party."

"Moon goddess? Do you mean Artemis Olympus?" As far as Michael knew she lived in a high-rise condo with a rotating cast of athletic, nubile women. He'd interviewed her once for a paper he'd written on demons who lived in Parmas on refugee visas who were also trying to get full citizenship.

"Not that moon goddess." Vaughn adjusted the chinstrap of his helmet. "Fauns stopped being dedicated to those rich Elysian posers generations ago."

"Which moon goddess is it, then?"

"I don't know. I'm not really that religious. You should ask Bert. She knows more about it than I do." Vaughn hefted his bike and opened the trailer's screen door with one well-placed kick. "It shouldn't be too long. Bert's really reliable. Probably the cops just aren't letting her go yet."

"But—" Michael didn't get a chance to finish his sentence. Vaughn was already away, tearing down the berm like a dirty little comet racing across a muddy sky.

Michael turned back to Vaughn's grandma.

Against the huge recliner, she looked tiny, shriveled almost. The hair on her legs had gone silvery white. Her hooves were cracked and gnarled. A TV tray sat right next to the recliner. It contained a tray with several pill bottles, a box of tissues, and a bottle of what looked like cough syrup.

"Hello, my name is Michael Gold. I'm a friend of your grandson. I'm just going to ask a few questions about the ceremony." Michael scanned the cluttered shelves for any indication of her name and finally came across a plaque dedicated to Libby Songbird, rewarding her for thirty-five years of dedicated service to the post office. "Is that okay, Libby?"

Her eyes raised up nearly high enough to meet his, before falling back down to the television. Michael took this as an affirmative and had a seat. He turned on his recorder and set it down on the table between them. Libby rolled an eye toward it.

"It's just a voice recorder so I get all the details right," Michael assured her. "So, are you pretty proud of Vaughn for being picked for this ceremony?"

Libby shook her head. "...not a faun ceremony."

"I was wondering about that," Michael said. "What kind of ceremony is it?"

"Made up," Libby mumbled. It seemed difficult for her to convince her tongue to form words.

"So it's a new religion?"

"No!" Libby shook her head again in a violent, jerking motion. One hoof banged sloppily into the footrest of the recliner chair. Michael guessed anger-kicking ran in their family. "Old fake religion."

The photographs on the shelves showed the progression of the life of Vaughn Songbird from birth to present. Mostly riding bicycles. Mostly shirtless.

Michael wondered how a woman who appeared to be completely incapacitated by narcotics could have raised a person like Vaughn. Closer inspection of the trophies on the shelves revealed that they did not all belong to his student. Libby's name appeared as often as Vaughn's. Here a tennis trophy, there a gold medal in the hundred-meter dash.

He supposed it was only him bringing too much of his own biography to the subject of drug addiction. It was as easy for an athlete to become an addict as it was for a musician, he supposed.

An inarticulate cry brought Michael's attention back to Vaughn's grandmother.

"Is there something you need?" he asked.

Libby's intermittent gesticulations became more emphatic, and she seemed to be moving toward her medication.

"Do you want one of these?" Michael's hand hovered over a bottle of pills. Why hadn't he even asked Vaughn what was wrong with his grandma before he left? He moved his hand from medication to medication. Her urgency grew into jerking motions and grunts, but Michael could not discern which one she wanted. She began to mumble and Michael leaned close.

"Ambulance..." she whispered.

Michael was on the phone in less than a second.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took fifteen minutes to arrive and the flashing lights and sirens had attracted a whole other crowd of fauns.

The commotion also finally attracted Bert, who disapproved.

"I don't know why you had to call the paramedics," Bert said. "Little Vaughn can't pay for that. His grandma's just drunk. You don't need an ambulance ride for that."

Michael shrugged as he watched the paramedics work over Vaughn's grandma, moving her onto a white-sheeted gurney that dwarfed her tiny body, taking her vitals. They didn't think she was just drunk, or if they did they didn't say.

Michael was not sorry. The paramedics asked him what was wrong with her, and he'd had to admit that he did not know. He moved away from Bert, eavesdropping while they tried to deduce her condition from the pill bottles, which consisted of an arthritis medication and a proton pump. Nothing that should have put her in the



condition it had, they said. One of the EMT's gathered her medications, in case they should mean anything to the doctors at the hospital. She hesitated over the cough syrup bottle, then opened it and sniffed it, and that sent her into a sneezing fit.

She said, "I don't know what this is, but we should probably take it with us. It smells like it could induce a stupor."

The other EMT said, "Throw it in the bag. Maybe one of the witchdoctors will be able to identify it."

As he watched Libby Songbird's gurney being wheeled through a crowd of gawking fauns and then lifted into the clean interior of the ambulance, Michael couldn't help but notice the fauns slowly turning their mutual gaze onto him. A few whispers made it through the crowd. Accusations. What had he been doing in there with the old lady alone anyway?

A rock sailed by his head, banging against the side of the trailer.

"Who threw that?" Bert demanded. "Come on now, I won't hold it against you as long as you come clean."

"He did something to Grandma Libby," a faun with a childish voice but a middle-aged haircut called from the thick of the crowd.

"You and I both know Grandma Libby didn't need anybody to do anything to her to be drunk," Bert's voice carried and bounced between the trailers. "Now don't you all have a party to get ready for? Little Vaughn is going to be back before you know it, and he's going to be anxious to start."

The ambulance began to pull slowly away, honking to clear a path out of the mobile estate. Bert turned to him.

"I should probably get back to the office. Would you like to walk me back?"

"Of course."

He walked alongside her, still rattled from his experience.

"You're still coming to the hootenanny tonight, aren't you?"

"Do you really think it's a good idea to go ahead with it?"

"There's nothing to be done about it. Tonight's the Half Moon and that's when it's got to be done." Bert paused to shimmy down the embankment to assault her enemy the turtle once more. She started to slide, and Michael caught her elbow to steady her. "Or so they tell me. I'll be there. They made a little place in the ceremony for me."

"That's nice of them."

"If there's nothing else that can be said about them, fauns are loyal. And they know how to show their gratitude."

"They certainly do." Michael saw her to her trailer and returned to the Hell Machine, puzzled and uneasy.

In the instant that he'd touched Bert, he'd caught a glimpse of that bottle on Libby Songbird's TV tray. Had she been the one to procure... whatever it was for the old woman? There had been no feeling of guilt, just anxiety.

He went back to the Hell Machine to prepare for the night. These sorts of ceremonies usually involved toasting, dancing, and as Argent had pointed out, and Vaughn had confirmed, vast quantities of controlled substances.

He hoped he didn't have to get too high. Deciphering his notes the next day would be a nightmare.

## Chapter Six

"The more I see of it, the more I don't like the sound or the look of this *ceremony*."

"Then don't attend." Michael pulled on his waders. "In order to complete my research, I need to go."

"There has been one murder, and an old woman related to the subject of the ceremony has been taken to the hospital," Argent said. "It's suspicious."

"Did you find out Grandma Libby's condition?"

"I called Day, but he wasn't able to squeeze much information out of the hospital staff."

"Did he use a car battery during his interrogation or did he just punch them really hard?" Michael's voice sounded acid-edged, even to himself.

Argent didn't take the bait. His voice remained even. "He used his power of sweet-talk. Day used to work at the hospital and still has friends there. All they said was that she was in stable condition but seems to be going through some kind of withdrawal."

"Bert said I shouldn't have called an ambulance for a drunk," Michael said. "But even if that's her only problem, it can't hurt to dry out in a hospital for a couple of days. Especially not at her age."

"I agree."

"Good."

"That doesn't change my opinion about whether or not you should go to the 'old fake religion' ceremony tonight. To me the situation doesn't seem safe." Argent's tone had settled into loose geniality. It told Michael that Argent had stopped considering the validity of his argument and had slipped into a kind of intractable friendly opposition.

The first couple of times he'd lost an argument to Argent in this way, Michael had been bewildered and infuriated. Now he knew better. He didn't try to persuade Argent that he was wrong, which was pointless. He only reminded Argent what constituted his business, which didn't include anything having to do with Michael's job.

"When you agreed to come with me, you said that you wouldn't interfere with research."

"And I don't plan to." Argent stretched his legs out in front of him as if his increasingly relaxed posture could lull Michael into acquiescence.

"Even if the ceremony is fake, that doesn't mean it's illegal," Michael pointed out.

"Maybe not, but I'd feel better about you going if you had some kind of backup," Argent said. "Maybe I could make a call before we go, just in case."

"Yes, absolutely. In fact, let's make a party of it. You call your buddies, and they can storm in without a warrant and kill a couple dozen bystanders," Michael countered. "Hey, if we're really lucky we can find a highly endangered animal to severely injure in the process."

Argent ceased his offensive relaxation. For a split-second, Michael felt like he'd landed too low a blow. But then his righteous indignation returned.

"That has nothing to do with this conversation."

"I think it does. The Demonic Unit wasn't even given a slap on the wrist for its part in the death of dozens of innocent Darsh bystanders. I consulted on that case. I was the one who identified the Darsh and told Day where to go to find them. So many innocent people were hurt in that raid, I can't even think about it without feeling sick."

"It's not your fault. It's your civic duty to comply with our investigations," Argent said.

"Maybe so, but it might be my ethical duty to refuse in the future."

"Do you really disrespect the police that much?"

"You mean the police who just this morning implied I should be arrested for exercising my rights as a citizen of Parmas? Do I disrespect them?"

"That was the sheriff's department," Argent corrected automatically.

"From the outside, all these uniforms start to look the same, so I guess the answer is yes." As soon as the words came out of Michael's mouth he knew he shouldn't have said them, but to leave them unvoiced would have been futile. It would have had to come out sooner or later. He was having an increasingly difficult time reconciling being the staff sponsor of the Demonic Students Peace and Justice Society with his relationship with Argent.

"That's good to know, I suppose," Argent finally said. "What about me? Do you disrespect me?"

"No, of course not. You didn't hurt that poor animal," Michael said.

"Not that particular animal, but I've killed plenty of demons in my time." Argent's voice was more serious than he'd ever heard. "In our line of work these things just happen."

"Yes, they do." Michael felt suddenly tired. "And I guess that's why I don't want you to come with me. I'd prefer it if nothing else just happened because of me."

"Suit yourself." Argent turned and walked toward the back of the bus. He stood, staring up at the mural for a few moments. Michael stared at his back, wanting to go to him and apologize and ask him to come. He felt his resolve weakening.

Then came Vaughn, banging on the door, calling out his name.

Argent glanced back over his shoulder and said, "Well, your date's here; you better get going. You don't want to be late to the bacchanal."

Michael grabbed his satchel and headed for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside, he found Vaughn surrounded by a gaggle of female fauns. None of them wore shirts. The girls' breasts bobbed as they shifted from hoof to hoof. Vaughn couldn't keep his eyes off them or the smile off his face.

Michael's hopes for substantive conversation died.

He made a mental note to include the disdain fauns had for upper body clothing when he wrote his paper.

The girls carried flashlights and wore straps of jingle bells around their slim ankles. Glitter paint abounded.

They made their way in an informal procession through the mobile estate, gathering followers as they went. When they hit the faun section the little hoofed demons swarmed out of trailers.

They paraded deep into the woods, following a winding path punctuated with rickety bridges, some of which consisted of nothing more than a plank stretched between two muddy hillocks.

The sound of jingle bells and revelry filled the still twilit mangroves. To Michael it seemed that much of the ground was newly exposed, since it was still muddy and squirming with life.

The procession reached a clearing, a tiny island surrounded by the dense and flooded trees. As soon as Vaughn arrived, he was ushered forward to light the bonfire.

Bert sidled up beside Michael. She wore black galoshes and what looked like a red and black choir robe. Her helmet of hair stood stiffly up like a corona. She said, "Glad to see you could make it. Looks like the party's getting started."

"It sure does."

Bert offered him a beer, gesturing to a line of nine kegs that sat on the edge of the clearing next to a small stage where a band was setting up. Michael declined the offer of

liquor, claiming academic necessity of sobriety. The excuse would have made many of his fellow professors laugh, but he knew Bert wouldn't argue.

"So where's your friend Dion?" Bert asked.

"He decided he didn't want to come," Michael said. "He doesn't like getting his feet wet."

"Nobody's going to get their feet wet," Bert pronounced. "It's neap tide. The water's the lowest it will be all year."

"Really?" Now that was a strange coincidence. He looked around, trying to find evidence of any of the sorcerous wrongdoing that Argent suspected, but apart from a lot of underage drinking, nothing sinister appeared to be occurring. Maybe they'd been wrong about the whole thing. Maybe it was the Baramans who had the big sorcerous plans.

Apart from Bert the only other human was a middle-aged man in a tracksuit. He sat in a lawn chair near a line of kegs. The chair put him at the exact right height to eyeball the faun breasts bouncing by.

"Is that your husband?" Michael asked.

"Heavens no, that's Vaughn's coach. His name's Murphy, I think. Vaughn wanted him to be here." Bert raised the plastic cup to her lips. Behind her some fauns started a conga line.

Michael watched as Vaughn lifted the chalice high and started to pour it into his mouth. The liquid inside shone a strange silver-blue, like stray shafts of moonlight. Where it fell on his chest, it glowed.

After he emptied it, he swayed slightly, and three girls led him to an altar made of wooden shipping pallets stacked on inner tubes. It floated in knee-deep water. To Michael's surprise, they began to tie Vaughn's hands and feet to eyebolts that had been screwed into the plywood. One of the girls leaned down, whispering into Vaughn's ear. He listened very intently, then let out a howl of laughter.

"Those bonds are an interesting feature," Michael remarked.

"Oh, they're just for show," Bert replied.

"So the bonds are ritualistic?"

"I like to think of them as practical. We don't want him to fall off that platform and drown. There was a lot of wine in that cup."

Wine? Is that what they were calling the glowing noxious substances these days? And why was Bert wearing that weird robe? Not that he wanted her to join the fauns in their near-nudity.

"So this little part in the ritual that you mentioned before? What is it?"

"Oh, the girls wanted me to read a prayer." Bert glanced away, distracted by something beyond the line of trees.

"Are you looking for the Baraman?" he asked.

"Baraman? My, no. They wouldn't be anywhere near here. There's too much exposed ground right now." Bert continued to scan the line of trees, though, restlessly. "They go out to sea during the neap tide. That's the only time my land is almost dry."

Bert's expression changed from restless to strangely happy. And that alarmed Michael more than the bonds, the creepy robe, the poorly defined ceremony.

What he needed to do, he realized, was touch her so that he could see inside her mind. But in laying hands on a middle-aged woman in public he risked, at the very least, being assaulted by her enraged faun tenants.

But he needed to know. He laid a hand on the exposed flesh of her arm and saw a great mass of writhing tentacles, like a ball of snakes rising from a pool of blood. Bert glanced sharply down and Michael made a brushing motion.

"Mosquito," he explained.

"Darn it, and I just about soaked myself in insect repellant too." Bert peered at her skin, looking for a red mark, then went back to scanning the trees. "Isn't that your friend?"

"Where?"

There walking along the plank came Argent, unmistakably huge when flanked by tiny fauns.

He caught sight of Michael and immediately closed the distance between them.

"We weren't expecting you." Bert absently scratched her arm where the fake mosquito had been. "Mr. Gold said you weren't coming."

"We just had a little cat fight. You know how fickle we boys can be." Argent lapsed into an exaggerated, almost effeminate tone that made Michael nearly choke. He looked straight at Michael and said, "Are we good, honeybun?"

*Honeybun?* What the hell was he playing at?

"Sure... Dion."

Argent looped an arm around Michael's shoulders. "Am I too late to join the fun?" Argent waggled the six-pack dangling in his hands. "I brought an offering."

Bert's eyes narrowed just slightly, then she broke into a big toothy smile.

"The more the merrier," she said. "Listen, I've got to go read that prayer now, but I'll catch up with you later."

Michael glanced sideways at Argent and was about to ask him what he was doing there, when Argent laid a finger across his lips. "It's okay, Michael, you don't have to say you're sorry."

Where Argent's finger pressed against his lips, his skin felt hot enough to scorch. And he sensed the barrier inside Argent's thoughts fold away to reveal his psychic landscape. Images of dark, roiling waters churned by unseen leviathans curled through Michael's consciousness. Overhead the stars studded the dark skies like diamonds, and clouds colored in swathes of purple and indigo moved like smoke curling in the wind. Argent, or the image of him, sat cross-legged on the water's surface, statuesque and

unmoving. His hands glowed blue as if with bioluminescence. Blue writing swirled across his body like tattoos. Michael wondered if these were the spells that kept his thoughts silent.

Argent looked up at Michael and spoke: *"If you've figured out that your student's in danger by now, put your hand on my hip."*

Michael did so.

Argent kept eye contact, moving his hand to stroke Michael's jaw, looking to all outside observers as though he were myopically, even stupidly, in love.

*"We need to try and get him off that altar. I have my shock-volt, but I don't think a firefight would be a good idea, especially not knee-deep in a swamp."*

Michael leaned forward and tasted Argent's lips gingerly, sensing the underlying emotions there as he did. Wariness. Resignation. And toward him an aching and confusing love.

*"I did a little checking after you were gone. Vaughn's coach took out an accident insurance policy on the kid when he signed up for the Parmas Open. If Vaughn gets hurt badly enough that he can't race, the coach gets half a million. Since the kid has no chance of winning the Open, killing him in a bacchanal probably looks like easy money."*

Michael leaned close, kissed Argent's cheek, and whispered, "I think you're wrong. I think they're going to do a spell."

*"It doesn't have to be one or the other. Either way, we've got to get the kid off that altar,"* Argent's voice said. *"If you agree, kiss me again."*

Michael pressed his lips against Argent's soft mouth, and he slid his hand down Argent's muscular stomach.

*"I'm all for making this convincing, but if you keep doing that I'm not going to be able to walk, let alone think. We've still got to get out of this fucking swamp."*

Michael drew his hands away.

*"You need to position yourself beside the altar. When I shoot out the pontoons on this side at least a few of those priestesses should take a dive. That's when you'll have your chance to cut the ropes."* He felt Argent's hands on his ass, but in addition to the feeling of Argent's fingers kneading him in a gratuitous and out-of-character public display of affection, he felt something cold, hard, and slim slide into his pants pocket. *"That's a shock-volt cartridge. It'll discharge into whatever you slam it against. You've only got one shock, though, so make it matter. Once you get Vaughn free, head for the Hell Machine. I'll catch up with you there."*

*"But what about you?"*

*"It'll be easier to work if I know you're gone."*

*"But—"*

*"I can use lethal force if you're not here."* Argent raised his hand to caress Michael's cheek. Aloud he said, "I love you, baby."



Shocked, and wondering if Argent was merely playing his undercover role, Michael answered, "I love you too."

The faun conga line snaked around them. One short old lady yelled out, "Get a room!"

"Or maybe just get me a drink." Argent turned him around and gave him a little shove toward the bar, which lay in the same general direction as the altar. As Michael started to walk away, he felt Argent slap his ass.

That better have been for the sake of his undercover character. He shot Argent a dirty look that he hoped conveyed his feelings. Argent merely winked at him.

## Chapter Seven

Michael wove through the revelers, ducking through the winding, dancing lines of fauns. Toward the altar the heat from the fire intensified and the heady smoke permeated the air. Whatever those bundles of herbs were, they sure packed a punch. Michael could feel himself growing slightly languorous. The color of the night sky suddenly seemed very rich and deep, almost like the inside of Argent's mind.

No wonder Argent hadn't wanted to get too close to the fire. If the smoke affected Michael this strongly, it probably could have devastated a human's sobriety.

Michael stepped off the dry land and waded into the water surrounding the pontoon altar. Six female fauns attended Vaughn, feeding him grapes and miniature weenies covered in glistening aspic. Their bare breasts swung as they moved and danced and giggled and poured wine down his throat.

Though plainly roped to an altar, and in a very dangerous and vulnerable position, Vaughn appeared to be having the time of his life. His leering grin reminded Michael of a statue he might find in the orgy room of some old hotblood palace. His shorts tented obviously.

As Michael approached, two of the attendant girls fixed their eyes on him, and their smiles faded to suspicion. Following their gaze to him, Vaughn let out a whoop by way of greeting.

"Hi, Vaughn!" Michael allowed his words to slur a little, and the attendants seemed to relax. One of them leaned over and laid her fine, mango-sized breasts on Vaughn's face.

Plainly, the girls did not want Vaughn talking to him. If he'd really been studying their ritual, this would have been a clear sign for him to fade back into the crowd and observe, and for a moment instinct almost made him do just that. But he wasn't acting

as a benevolent college professor right now trying to gather information for some paper. He was trying to save Vaughn's life – social sensitivity be damned.

He waded closer, the slimy fronds of underwater plants wrapping around his ankles as he went. He rested his knee on the top of the pallet beside Vaughn's head. He tried not to think of how many poisonous snakes he might be disturbing right now.

"How you doing?" He grinned stupidly at Vaughn, who mugged back at him. Michael held out his recorder as if he was a television reporter asking for a comment. He had to stay here long enough for Argent to make his move.

"I'm great!" Vaughn's speech was badly slurred. "These priestesses are fucking hot!"

"Not really my thing, but I'll take your word for it," Michael said. "What's happening right now?"

"We're preparing him to be offered as a consort to our goddess," one of the attendants answered.

"So this is what they mean by guest of honor?"

"Yeah! I'm going to be given to the moon goddess, where I'll live in a palace on the moon and we'll have parties like this every night." Vaughn apparently couldn't stop smiling. "It's going to be great."

"Live in the moon palace? What about the race?"

"I'm sure she'll let me have a bike. I can build one out of...moon dust or something." Vaughn's head lolled back as he accepted another grape. "I'll build ramps out of ice and starlight, and I'll get sick air off them. It's going to be tits!"

Behind him the music and chanting grew louder and louder. He chanced a glance back and saw Argent smiling and bobbing his head in time with the music as he casually moved into a better position.

"How do you get to the moon palace?" Michael asked. "Is it through a portal?"

If a portal opened up right here, he and Vaughn might be sucked into it before they could move away.

The attendants – no, *priestesses* – laughed again, giving each other knowing glances.

"He doesn't take his physical body to the Moon Palace," one of them said.

"No, get this, professor. They're going to fucking eat me! Isn't that hard core?"

Michael's chest went cold, and he felt the smile slip from his face, "They're going to *what*?"

"They're going to eat me raw," Vaughn laid back and gazed up at the sky. "That's the way to go out, professor. Eaten raw by hot naked chicks... I'm going to build a ramp out of a comet's tail..."

"Vaughn, that's crazy! There is no moon palace of Elysia. That plane was destroyed decades ago during the war."

"That's just what the man wants us to believe. I'm going to get there and ask the goddess for help. We've got to get the Baramans out of our trailer park forever. There has to be a blood sacrifice. To work the spell."

"But a trailer park is not worth dying for!" Michael abandoned all pretense of being the nonintervening observer now. "There are other places to live."

"This place was ours first!" One of the priestesses made a grab for Michael's recorder, and Michael whipped it away from her. Her expression had turned from mildly ecstatic to feral. She snapped her teeth at him.

"It's not worth it!" Michael insisted. "Please, Vaughn."

"It's not just for us, it's for Bert too," Vaughn mumbled. "She's got the in with the moon goddess. In exchange for me, the goddess will reward her by drawing back the waters. They've got it all worked out."

"For Bert?"

It all came together. Watching the value of her property deteriorate and her tenants fight each other all day and night, she'd hatched a plan to incite the fauns to eliminate the Baramans. And somehow she'd found a spell to summon a goddess to help her do it.

On the shore he could see Bert reading from a book. On the platform around Vaughn strange symbols began to glow.

The music crescendoed and a new rhythm started. The priestess who'd snapped at Michael turned away and, along with the other priestesses, dove onto Vaughn, sinking her teeth into his shoulder. Blood welled up, spilling onto the symbols, igniting them to greater brightness. Vaughn laughed.

*What the fuck had been in that cup?*

Then three loud cracks of gunfire and the altar lurched sideways, sending three priestesses splashing down into the water. Michael leapt up immediately onto the tilting platform, grabbing the edge of the altar to keep from sliding off.

Vaughn laughed and hooted while Michael flipped out his knife and cut through the ropes that held Vaughn's ankles. A weight like a sack of flour slammed into back. One of the priestesses clawed at him, sinking her teeth into his neck, pounding her hooves into his kidneys.

Michael spun and shook her off, sending her flying into the water. The blood seeping from Vaughn's shoulder flowed unnaturally around him into the shape of an inverted pentagram.

He had to get Vaughn out fast, before the portal opened. He dove down to sever the two remaining ropes, but another priestess was on him. He slammed his fist into the side of her face, driving her down to the planks before he cut through Vaughn's remaining bonds. But as he stooped to scoop his student over his shoulder, the priestesses and other fauns crowded the edge of the altar.

Michael slammed the shock-volt cartridge into one faun and hurled it into the water. The end of the volt crackled over the water, stunning everything that moved. Fauns fell. Fish and eels rose to the surface. Another second and the light faded as the shock-volt died.

Michael hauled Vaughn into his arms and leapt from the altar into the sludgy water. He struggled through the mud, racing for the trees.

A thunderous crack split the air and light seared up from the altar. The priestess who lay there screamed as her body was ripped in two.

From a rent in the fabric of space emerged two mammoth tentacles, the ones he'd seen in Bert's mind, dry and writhing like snakes.

He could not see Argent, but saw a flash of blue fire. A chaos of fauns spilled out in all directions as the goddess rose higher and higher into the night sky, her torso held aloft by two huge serpentine limbs, swaying above the treetops. As Michael watched, a crackle of blue flame suddenly writhed around the goddess's torso, and she released a deafening scream.

Again he searched for Argent in the crowd and saw him send a ball of blue flame hurtling at the goddess. It hit her in the belly, and she rocked sideways. Argent sprinted for the walkway, back to the Mobile Estate. Fauns lit out after him immediately, and Michael saw flashes of spellfire as Argent fought them. The smelled of burning hair filled the humid air.

Michael turned and slogged through the muddy darkness, able to outstrip at least the fauns, though not moving fast. The Mobile Estate was only a couple hundred yards away, but mud and roots tripped him up in the dark, and he plowed into the ground more than once.

At least he wasn't being pursued.

Argent had seen to that.

He reached the Hell Machine and threw Vaughn into the passenger seat. He unmoored it, and when he went to pull the electric and water lines loose, he found they were already disconnected.

Argent obviously thought they would need to get away fast and had seen to it before he'd joined Michael for the ceremony.

Outside, the Mobile Estate was eerily silent, as though all the residents were hiding. Maybe they were. Michael crept back inside the Hell Machine and watched through the window for Argent. Seconds passed like hours as he waited and watched, heart in his throat.

When he saw the dark form running toward him, Michael felt tears of relief stinging the back of his eyes. Argent turned back to send a volley of fire behind him.

He caught Michael's eye and roared out, "Let's go!"

## Chapter Eight

Michael fired up the Hell Machine. He forced himself to calm, his hands to stop shaking as he carefully moved the machine forward into the canal.

All along the berm he could see Vaughn's faun friends riding their bikes, silhouetted by the moonlight, whooping.

From his place in the passenger seat, Vaughn returned a long howl. Argent leaned forward and gently jammed a sock into his mouth, but not fast enough that the other fauns didn't hear. The whole pack of them shadowed the Hell Machine as it chugged forward toward the ramp. Once on the road they'd be able to outstrip the riders.

The Hell Machine nudged the edge of the ramp, and Michael started the wheels. He felt a surge of hope as the wheels gained traction, then with a lurch the ramp collapsed, leaving the front half of the Hell Machine jammed into the muddy embankment. Michael reversed the outboard, but the machine wouldn't budge.

"Shit!" He looked to Argent. He stood near the door, loading shock-volt cartridges into his pistol, which he wordlessly handed to Michael.

"But what are you—" Michael began. Argent cut him off with one raised hand. Faint blue light flickered in his palm, the same color of light that he'd seen in Argent's mind. He placed his hands together and drew it out into a thread.

Three loud thuds sounded on the roof as the riders landed. One immediately skidded off. Michael heard him crash into the water, but the other two stomped and pounded on the roof with their hooves, screaming their lungs out. A tire iron slammed into the windshield, but didn't break through.

A hint of surprise showed in Argent's incrementally raised eyebrow.

The crowbar came down again, and then another joined it, slamming into the glass over and over again. Still it did not break. The fauns' faces appeared upside down at the top, sneering in anger.

"This machine was built to withstand mobs of crazy fans, bitches!" Michael gave the fauns the finger. He raised the shock-volt pistol.

Argent's hand stopped him from firing.

"That really will break the glass," he said. "Is this machine honestly that tough?"

"Its design is based on a military vehicle."

"Too bad it doesn't have a caterpillar track or we'd be out of here." Argent ran his hand along the Hell Machine's faux-wood paneling. "Do you happen to know what protection spells are on this thing?"

"No, but Dad said the owner's manual was in the glove compartment. That probably covers it."

The ground rumbled and the earth heaved upward, throwing Argent forward into the dash. The fauns on the roof went sailing off. The semiconscious Vaughn became dislodged from his chair and slithered to the floor.

He gazed up at Michael with glazed eyes. He said, "Why did you let me take so many drugs, professor?"

"You took them yourself," Michael said. "Now your friends are trying to kill you."

"They're not trying to kill him anymore." Argent thumbed quickly through the driver's manual. "Now they're trying to kill us."

The ground heaved again.

In the distance, Michael thought he could see more flashlight beams cutting through the darkness. He found his cell phone and flipped it open.

"Man, I've really got the spins." Vaughn moaned, staring upward. "Sweet! There are little naked chicks on the ceiling!"

"What are you doing?"

"Calling the police," Michael said.

"They're already on their way." Argent pulled the dashboard of the Hell Machine open, exposing the mechanisms beneath. Woven throughout the wires, gears, and small motors were spell filaments.

"Here, hold this for me." Argent handed him a small flashlight.

"What's your plan?" Michael tried to keep the light shining where Argent was working. The ground continued to roil and rumble beneath them.

"I'm hotwiring this thing's magical security system." Argent pulled out a thick clot of wires. "All we need to do is get that big lady inside and we can trap her in here."

"How are we going to do that?"

"If I turn on a flame she'll come to me." Argent grinned back over his shoulder. "Demon goddesses like that can never resist a big flame."

"What the hell do you mean?"

Argent finished twisting a couple of wires together, and the wiring of the Hell Machine lit with an eerie glow. Michael could see it blazing all through the sides of the bus like webbing. Argent said, "Stand away from me."

Michael did as he was told. Argent took a deep breath and hot blue flame rolled out over his skin like a gas broiler igniting.

This is what hotbloods could do that other sorcerers could not, what Argent's coworker Jay Yervant could not stop doing.

The rumbling grew louder; then something huge grabbed the Hell Machine and shook it, rattling them around in the bus like they were mice in a tin can. One of the tentacles slithered in through the side window and yanked a hunk out of the side of the bus. Michael could see the flames wicking off Argent into the spell filaments that fed into the bus's security system. The goddess dipped down so that her body stood in front of the windshield. Her huge reptilian eye-slits narrowed as she caught sight of Argent, mesmerized as a cat staring at a young and clumsy bird.

Argent didn't look back at Michael as he spoke. "Grab the kid and get out the front door."

"I don't want to leave you." Michael's voice shook.

"I know what I'm doing," Argent started to retreat to the back of the tour bus. "Go. Now!"

Michael launched himself out of the door just as the goddess crashed through the windshield of the Hell Machine, scrambling after his lover like a hungry predator.

"Argent!" He didn't even realize he'd screamed until he felt it in his throat. The Hell Machine rocked sideways, and he saw Argent jump from the small window in the back. He held his hand up and the blue light from the bus's security system flashed into view again.

With a word and a twist of his wrist, Argent collapsed the spell and the Hell Machine crushed in around the goddess, encapsulating her in metal and fiberglass. The blue flames around Argent died away, and he heaved himself to his feet and came to Michael, who hefted Vaughn's body higher on his shoulder.

The goddess might be contained, but more fauns arrived by the second.

Were they really going to have to try and run for it?

He didn't think he could outrun a faun on dry land.

Angry fauns crowded the dry ground and the muddy canals. One even held a pitchfork as if he was an extra from an old revolutionary film.

Bert walked forward, still draped in her red and black choir robe. Her normally helmet-worthy hair lay plastered against her face.

She said, "You boys sure do cause a lot of trouble."

"I'm afraid I can't help it, ma'am. I'm Lieutenant Dion Argent of the Parmas City Police, Demonic Unit. You are under arrest for unlawful invocation of a demonic presence, attempted murder, inciting a sorcerous blood cult to cannibalism, and a wide



variety of felony building code violations that I've chronicled over the past week." Argent held up his badge. A flashlight beam glinted off the small shield.

Bert regarded him for a long moment, then turned back to her mob.

"Kill that flatfoot."

Fauns surged forward around her, their hooves sounding like thunder on the berm. Argent lifted his hands, pale steam rising up from his body like smoke. Then came a gust of wind from above. Searchlights cut the darkness, and the sound of helicopter blades drowned out the rushing fauns, who stopped, recoiling from the sudden aerial intrusion.

A voice on a loudspeaker said, "This is the Parmas City Demonic Police. Put your weapons down."

Michael turned and saw three regular police cruisers racing down the road, lights flashing, sirens audible now that the fauns had stopped their stampede.

Bert looked up at the sky, then at the cruisers – then put her hands into the air.

Argent walked forward and handcuffed her.

## Chapter Nine

The very same ambulance that arrived for Vaughn's grandmother took Michael's inebriated student to the Parmas City Hospital, just to be sure he would not suddenly collapse into a drug-induced coma. As the gurney was being lifted into the back of the ambulance Vaughn made him promise to come to the race on Saturday. Michael gave his word.

Although most of the fauns were easily rounded up into the mobile processing vehicle that Argent called the Party Paddywagon, it took three hours for the police to locate a crane big enough to haul the Hell Machine and its sodden but still-living demoness prisoner up out of the canal.

Michael sat on the berm, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, watching the vehicle that had once been his father's pride and joy winched from the swamp. The crane operator set it down on a police flatbed. It didn't resemble a tour bus as much as it looked like a crumpled red and black cigar. The sun had just begun to gray the eastern sky.

"Would you like some coffee?" Michael looked up to find not Argent, but Brian Day offering him a paper cup. Michael took it. "Thank you."

"No problem. Just let me know if you need anything else." Day started to go, apparently aware of the coolness Michael felt toward him since the Darsh affair. He could feel Day's osmotic powers tugging at him like a faint current in the water and noted that Brian stepped farther away as though he perceived Michael's discomfort.

Michael took a sip of the acrid coffee. "Where will they take her?"

"The demoness will be transported to a special holding facility that caters to larger extra-planar travelers. She'll be debriefed and will likely be deported in the next twenty-four hours." Day smiled an extra-winning smile. "There's a special liaison who deals with demons who experience invocation. She won't be harmed. You probably

already know most demons who get invoked in what you would call satanic ceremonies are actually acting against their own free will."

"I don't mean the demon," Michael said. "I mean the Hell Machine. Where are they taking my dad's bus?"

"Oh... It's going to be impounded as evidence." Day gazed at the ruined machine, which jumped and vibrated like a cocoon on the truck bed until four guys began to secure it with large and probably magical white straps. "Did your dad have insurance?"

"Knowing him? Probably not."

"Bummer." Day looked at his shoes.

Seeing the kid standing there trying so hard to reassure him and be his friend, Michael softened. Would it hurt so much to try and make an effort to reconnect? Though he still wasn't 100 percent behind the hell cops' tactics, and had serious problems with their "shock-volt first, ask questions later" policy, he had to admit that sometimes situations could get...ethically ambiguous.

"Congratulations on your promotion," Michael offered.

Day blushed. "Thank you."

"Do you outrank Detective Yervant now?"

"Not yet, but give me a couple of years—he'll be taking orders from me."

Somehow Michael thought Yervant might already, to some extent, take orders from Day. The kid certainly was a firecracker.

"Do you think you could pull some of your new rank to find out where Argent went?"

"No need. He's right over there." Brian pointed to a thick crowd of uniformed and plainclothes cops. Argent was smiling as he spoke with Michael's old friend Deputy LeFevre. "I think he's trying to convince that sheriff's department guy to give you two a ride home before rush hour hits."

Argent's lips moved, and the taciturn LeFevre broke out in a huge smile.

Michael guessed he'd be in the back seat of that car in less than ten minutes.

As it turned out, it was less than five.

## Epilogue

Michael's father forgave him for wrecking the Amphibious Hell Machine, but not until he agreed to bring Argent by for dinner. Michael stalled for several weeks, claiming to be too busy, but eventually was unable to put the old man off any longer. Now, driving toward the marina to pick Argent up, nervousness fluttered through his stomach. He'd never brought a man home for dinner with his father before. Argent and his father had met before on numerous occasions. Argent, being the big fan boy that he was, routinely attended Axe's acoustic gigs, but somehow dinner seemed formal and official. Why did every interaction with his parental figure leave him feeling like a ten-year-old?

He put the top down on his convertible and took the coastal highway, telling himself that he was avoiding the city traffic, but really just taking the scenic route. On one side of the road, sparkling blue water and white sand beaches beckoned. On the other side, billboards made him feel self-conscious about the whiteness of his teeth. Then on a passing billboard he saw the familiar face of a certain overnight bike racing and trick riding sensation grinning like he was about to be eaten alive by naked priestesses. He was advertising sports drinks.

In spite of Michael's intervention, Vaughn the faun dropped out of college after all. After winning the Parmas City Open, he'd gotten sponsorship from Starshooters Energy Drinks and appeared prominently in their television commercials doing elaborate bike tricks on ramps that did, in fact, look something like a comet's tail. He also appeared in a series of public service announcements that attempted to raise awareness about the dangers of becoming embroiled with death-obsessed demonic splinter cults. One such ad showed him standing sandwiched at navel-height between two bikini-clad models saying, "Remember kids, friends don't let friends eat other friends in a cannibalistic ritual. Be smart. Staying alive is fun."

Michael would have laughed at that if it hadn't been so true.

Libby Songbird, Vaughn's indomitable grandmother, had recovered her senses and her ability to speak quite quickly once out of Bert's care. She said that Bert and she had been good friends until Bert had confided her plan to summon a demon who could raise the land enough to get Iron Springs Mobile Estates on dry land again. When Libby declined to help, Bert deliberately dosed her, keeping her in a state of incapacitation so that she wouldn't interfere. For revenge, Bert had decided to sacrifice Libby's own pride and joy, Vaughn.

Michael published an account of his experience at Iron Springs Mobile Estates in *The Journal of Urban Demonic Research* and was immediately invited to speak at a right-wing anti-immigration conference. He declined.

The sign for the marina loomed large from the roadside. Freshly painted and free of graffiti, it was the antithesis of the sad and now immolated Iron Springs sign. In the weeks since the Iron Springs incident, as Argent had become fond of calling it, they hadn't spoken much about their relationship. He knew that he loved Argent and that Argent loved him. Whether they could make a life together remained to be seen, but neither of them seemed to want to stop trying yet.

One day at a time seemed to be their mantra.

Michael parked his car in the windy parking lot and stared out at the sparkling blue waters, so different from the muddy, rust-colored sludge of Iron Springs. A whole world away.

He was greeted by the sight of Argent sitting on the pier watching as the *Euphemie* pulled out of her berth. A red-haired woman Michael had never seen before stood at the helm. Argent waved at her. He wore slacks and a polo shirt. A large duffel bag sat at his feet.

A thrill of alarm prickled across Michael's skin, and he quickened his pace across the boards.

"Who's driving your boat?"

"New owner," Argent replied.

"You sold *Euphemie*?"

"I wanted to trade the boat for something smaller—more of a weekend vessel," Argent said. "Besides, I needed to come up with a fair amount of quick cash."

"What for?"

"To purchase a little item I've had my eye on for a couple of months." Argent's smile widened into a grin. Michael rolled his eyes. Argent had lapsed into cageyness again. But then, when didn't he?

"Where are you going to live?" Michael now suspected the bag at Argent's feet held such items as his work clothes, electric razor, and spare socks.

"I was hoping I could stay at your place." Argent hefted the bag, stuck his hands into his pockets, and started to walk toward the parking lot without giving his former home a single backward look. "My only other option is Moran's couch, but I'd rather not. He's on the rocks with James and in a subpar mood because of it."

"What about your Mom's place?" Michael couldn't resist needling him a little. It helped him recover from the shock of Argent's sudden move towards commitment in their relationship. Living together...

Previously Argent couldn't even be convinced to live on land, let alone be pinned down to another man's street address.

"The Mystic Crone Rest Home? It's women-only, and I look very unconvincing in old-lady drag." Argent tossed his bag into the backseat of Michael's car and settled himself into the passenger seat.

Michael sat gingerly on the hot leather seat. "I guess there really is no other option besides coming home with me, then."

Michael started up the car and pulled onto the coast highway. North, toward his father's beach house. Wind whipped through his hair. Gulls soared over the beaches, eyeing the roiling edge of the surf for tasty morsels. He was glad he'd put the top down on his car.

"So I have an important question to ask your father."

"Does it involve borrowing his car? Because I don't think that's ever going to happen again after you totaled the Hell Machine."

"No, it doesn't have anything to do with cars."

"Are you going to ask him for permission to date me?" Michael teased, pulling out his words into a parochial drawl.

Argent smiled a tight, smug smile that told Michael that he'd guessed very close to the truth. "Why would I need permission to date you? I'm already doing that. No, I've got a different question in mind."

"You're going to finally ask Axe to marry you so you can listen to him play guitar all day long instead of just every Tuesday night?"

"Something like that," Argent replied. "I would like to embark upon a more...familial relationship with him."

*Familial? What the...?* Understanding suddenly overcame Michael, and he was filled with a sudden giddiness. Argent couldn't be serious? He couldn't be that traditional...could he?

"You're not seriously going to ask him for permission to —"

Argent raised a silencing finger, then leaned back in the passenger seat, mirror shades turned contentedly toward the sun. "You'll just have to wait and see for yourself."

Michael turned his attention back to the cracked and winding asphalt, heart thudding in his chest and said, "I suppose I will."

~ \* ~

## **Nicole Kimberling**

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# **SUCH HEIGHTS**

**Ginn Hale**

## Chapter One

Clouds rolled and curled beneath James Sparks's feet as he sprinted across the transparent expanses of the Storm Palace skywalks. His stomach lurched slightly at the sight of Parmas City lying miles below him. The sprawling freeway and towering skyscrapers flashed like spilled glitter in the early morning light. He could just make out the green patches of Marine Park and the tiny glinting gold spark that was the massive Hilliard's Portal Complex. If he looked closer, he might have picked out the bright blue roof of the Enyalios police station. Doubtless, Detective Ben Moran was already at work there, towering over some hapless suspect with a glare that conveyed utter contempt for his vocation, sense of self-preservation, and taste in curry. Or maybe that was just something special Moran saved for James.

James knew he shouldn't still be brooding about Moran. Now wasn't the time or place to worry about it.

Instead, he chased the flight of thirty large, brilliant birds as they swooped through the clouds directly below him. Their long wings glinted like molten gold as they caught the sun and then reflected pearl white when they skimmed beneath the pale supports of the skywalk.

James glimpsed his own lanky figure glinting in the mirror-like plumes of one of the birds. His shaggy blonde bangs covered the worst of his fading bruises, but the last three sleepless nights still showed in his dark brown eyes.

It was almost as if his body had forgotten how to relax without Moran beside him. Memories of Moran's tall, muscular body, his thick black hair, and clear blue eyes taunted James in the emptiness of his bed. And when James did at last fall asleep, Moran's strong hands and crooked smile haunted his dreams. Every night, James woke suddenly to find himself alone and filled with a frustrated longing for the heat and weight of Moran's hard, tanned body.

At least today, his sleeplessness had ensured that he was awake well before sunrise and able to capture these dazzling moments of the phoenixes' dawn flights.

With a single beat of its six-foot wingspan, the bird in front of James effortlessly swept higher into the wisps of cirrus clouds. James snapped photos as quickly as he could while running up and down the skywalks to keep pace with the playful swoops and dives of this rare flock.

Of the hundred thousand phoenixes that were said to have once filled the skies during the rule of the sorcerers, these thirty were thought to be the last remaining. Vast numbers had been slaughtered during the Commons Revolution—some for food, but many simply because of their likenesses graced so many sorcerers' crests. Their numbers dwindled further in the following years as the floating palaces where they bred fell from favor and disappeared from the skies.

Now only the pearl white Storm Palace remained, suspended on trade winds like some huge, surreal seashell. To James it seemed both a shelter and showcase for the last lingering remains of a fallen age.

Most people of James's generation had never even glimpsed a phoenix flying overhead, much less run with a flock soaring only a few feet away. James bounded up a staircase and focused his camera on a pair of the majestic birds as they broke through the ice vapor of a cloud.

They were astounding. Their sleek, heron-like bodies blazed gold in the morning sun, making them shine as if they really were creatures born from flames. They banked and glided directly past James. He clicked off a quick series of pictures, catching the fine details of their seamless beaks, large orange eyes, and luminous pinion feathers. One of the birds rolled, and James grinned as he captured a perfect shot of delicate clawless feet, tucked in tight against a downy silver breast.

Normally he wouldn't have considered accepting a job like this one. Documenting just how extravagantly the descendants of overthrown sorcerers and sycophants could still afford to live struck him as both tedious and pandering, but Lanna had asked him personally. In addition, it had been the only job offer that wasn't likely to add to Moran's poor opinion of his common sense, which had almost made James pass it up just to spite the arrogant bastard.

But at this moment, he felt no regrets. The view was inspiring and the luxurious environment had been easy on his beaten body. Moran hadn't been entirely wrong; it felt good to cover a story that didn't involve brutal criminals who routinely murdered journalists.

The temptation to simply call Moran—to tell him that he'd passed on the Maldvar Islands offer—fluttered through James's thoughts. But the last thing he wanted was to just roll over and concede. Moran could damn well wait. If he couldn't trust James to take care of himself for one week, then it was probably already over between them anyway.

The thought pained James deeply, far more deeply than the lingering aches and bruises that marked his body. He swore at himself for once again letting his concentration slip. He was here to get away from Moran and to get a job done.

The phoenixes were moving now, with a unity and purpose that James hadn't witnessed before. He thought he could even hear some kind of a call penetrate through the thick hy-glass that enclosed the walkways.

The cry sounded alarmed and oddly human. A familiar shudder slithered down James's spine.

He sprinted after the birds, tracking their flight as they dived from the skywalks near the top of the spiraling Storm Palace, down to the blue tinted floors of the arboretum. The airy archways and gilded staircases seemed deserted. Most of the residents of the Storm Palace rose late in the day and entertained themselves late into the night. Still, James would have expected to see a security officer or janitors as he raced past fern-lined reflecting pools and skidded to a halt atop one of the huge viewing ports in the floor.

All thirty phoenixes circled some shadowy mass, as it plummeted down through the clouds. James focused his camera and zoomed in. Was it a bird of some kind? It seemed too large. The edge of the shadow fluttered like silk. A weather balloon? The phoenixes seemed frantic, grasping at the dark shape with their tiny feet and beating their wings as if they could lift it. What the hell was it?

James clicked picture after picture, cursing the rolling clouds and early morning mists. Then suddenly a break opened between the clouds and the phoenixes' reflective wings, and James looked into a young man's face. He saw wide-eyed terror and dark blue silk pajamas. He snapped a picture without even thinking. The man plummeted out of his sight and the phoenixes dived after.

James bolted to the gilded fire alarm, ripped off the casing, and punched the red button. The siren wailed, echoing through the empty halls of exotic palm trees and potted orchids. Sprinklers suddenly hissed into life, dousing James and the surrounding plants with water. James's heart raced as he tried to think of what else he should do. How could he stop the man from falling?

He sprinted down three stories, taking the spiraling stairs in leaps and slipping across marble floors as he raced through of the community promenade in his sopping sneakers. Stained glass skylights illuminated a large, blue pool as well as the surrounding wrought-iron tables and benches. Beautifully inlaid doors stood at perfect intervals along the far wall.

Thankfully, the doors to the travel portal center were not locked. James crashed through them and raced to the young woman standing at the mahogany dispatch desk.

"There's a man falling from the palace!" James shouted at her. "Is there any way you can catch him? Can you use a portal to transport him back up? Anything?"

The young woman stared at James, one hand frozen in the midst of adjusting her ornate pink coif. She looked little older than twenty.

"He's going to die." James panted. His lungs burned and his right knee ached. He didn't think he'd run so hard since the night Tony had been murdered.

"I could—" The young woman reached for a series of tiny gold switches on her desk and then looked helplessly back at James. "I need his ID code to lock in on him. Do you know who he is?"

"No." James felt suddenly sick and cold. How long did it take for a body to hit ground from ten miles up? Two minutes with a parachute—they'd been told that the first day they'd arrived on the Storm Palace. But without a parachute? A young man just falling to earth...a minute, maybe?

It had probably taken James that long just to get down the stairs.

He was already dead, James realized. All James had been able to do was watch. Just like the night Tony had been murdered. Still, James wasn't ready to give up.

"I have his picture." James flipped his camera up showing the young woman the digital screen displaying the image. "Do you recognize him?"

"I...I don't know... I can't really tell..." The young woman bit her lip. "What should I do?" She asked, and she sounded like she might cry.

James just shook his head.

Suddenly he was aware that the distant wail of the fire alarm had stopped. The doors behind him swung open and the woman at the desk caught her breath. James looked back to see a big blond man in a wet black security uniform glaring at him. The red insignia on his shoulder marked him as a captain, and like most of the Storm Palace staff, he didn't look entirely human. His jaw seemed too broad, his skin a little too golden, and his fists looked huge. Whether the man's appearance resulted from inbreeding on the small island of the Storm Palace or from a wild fling outside the norms of species, James couldn't say. And he wasn't going to ask, certainly not after taking in the captain's angry expression and the hooked fighting rings he wore on his left hand.

"Sir, you activated the fire alarm." The mix of polite wording and condescending undertone with which the security captain addressed James would have done Moran credit.

"Yes, that was me," James replied. "I saw someone falling from the palace, and it was the only thing I could think of to do." It sounded so stupid now. How could an alarm possibly have helped the man?

"He has to have hit the ground by now," James said softly. The young woman at the portal desk sat back down with an uncertain, disturbed expression.

The security captain eyed James with that same hard professional gaze that had become so familiar to James after a just few arguments with Moran. He returned the man's assessing stare with his own cool gaze. He wasn't making this up just to get away with setting off an alarm. The security captain gave him a nod.

"I think you ought to come with me, sir." As the security captain stepped closer. James caught a whiff of the man and thought that either he was using turpentine for cologne or he was part morax demon. Either way, James followed him.

The bulky captain escorted James into a glass elevator that rose leisurely from the center of the promenade up past the public spaces of the arboretum and walkways to the private suites where the residents made their homes.

Five stories up, the captain flipped the brass lever that halted the elevator's upward drift. He typed a number into an archaic brass keypad and the elevator's translucent doors opened like the petals of a lotus blossom. The captain led James through a stately corridor, past portraits of disapproving sorcerers into a spacious circular office filled with ancient brass fixtures, leather-bound tomes, and costly furniture.

Gregory Rupen, the slim, silver-haired owner of the Storm Palace sat in a leather armchair behind a massive oak desk. He wasn't alone.

Lanna Yervant—the lovely young socialite who'd landed James this job—lounged on a divan in a flower-print dress that perfectly accentuated both her auburn hair and stunning figure. In a window seat across from Lanna, a mousy film intern named Suzy fought with the battery of a film camera. Golden light poured in from six big bay windows, and a gray parrot in a large bamboo cage eyed James forlornly.

"Captain Kippling." Gregory Rupen gave the security captain a bright smile. "You absolutely read Ms. Yervant's mind. She was just wondering where her photographer was."

"Is there a reason you're both soaked to the bone?" Lanna inquired. She had known James long enough now to suspect trouble, although her coy smile implied something far more flirtatious than the uncomfortable silence that existed between the captain and himself.

"Mr. Sparks set off the fire alarm in the arboretum." Captain Kippling didn't spare Lanna a glance but looked only to Gregory Rupen. "He claims to have witnessed someone fall from the Storm Palace."

"What?" Lanna was on her feet. "Oh my god! Who?"

"I don't know," James began.

"No, my dears. No, no. That's not possible," Rupen soothed. He shook his head and offered James a kind, knowing smile. For a man in his late sixties he was quite handsome—though good looks seemed to run in sorcerous families, along with shocking wealth and high body temperatures. James wondered if it was a sign of the man's advanced age that his fingers felt so cold against James's shoulder as he led James to a chair.

"The Storm Palace is sealed with dozens of security spells," Rupen went on, though now his attention shifted to Lana and a slight flush colored his cheeks. "No one could get outside to fall without Captain Kippling knowing. And I take it that you didn't receive any alarms, Captain?"

"Just the fire alarm in the arboretum, my lord." Captain Kippling gave James a disapproving glance.

"I saw him," James stated firmly. "And I got a picture of him."

He held out his camera. Everyone but Suzy took a turn at looking at the small, digital screen. The film intern stood quietly recording the entire exchange.

"Ah, I see your confusion, young man." Rupen smiled into the dark lens of Suzy's camera having barely glanced at the image James had captured. "The phoenixes and the hy-glass of the walkways can be very reflective, you see. Doubtless James saw his own reflection or that of another man in the arboretum, and with the distortion of the morning mist, it looked as if someone was outside the Storm Palace."

"There wasn't anyone else in the arboretum," James replied. "And that face is nothing like mine." James looked to Lanna. She scowled at the camera.

"It's hard to say..." Lanna replied. She handed James his camera back with an apologetic shrug. "There are so many phoenixes in the picture, it's difficult to make out what's really there and what's a reflection."

"Exactly." Rupen's firm tone belied his benevolent smile. "It's terribly difficult to tell the difference, especially very early in the morning or at dusk. The light and shadows play tricks. Isn't that so, Captain?"

Captain Kippling gave a sharp nod.

Rupen turned his elegant smile and soothing voice back to James. "This sort of confusion is common for people when they first arrive. Even those of us who have lived here all our lives get startled by this sort of thing from time to time."

James knew he hadn't witnessed a mere trick of light plummeting through the clouds. Reflections didn't scream. But two years working undercover for Moran had taught James a little caution. Rupen and his security captain clearly did not want this looked into. Whether that was because they had played some part in it or they just wanted to protect the reputation of the Storm Palace, James couldn't know. But right now they had the power to remove him from the premises, possibly in the same fashion as the man James had watched fall to his death.

*Keep cool, Sparky.* James could almost hear Moran's deep voice whispering in his ear. Annoying as that was, the thought of Moran calmed him, reminded him that he'd been through worse situations than this.

James turned his camera over in his hands, feeling the hum and heat of its sleek black body. He clicked it off.

"It looked like a man..." James said carefully as if he really was rethinking the entire thing. "But I guess..." He frowned out at the wisps of clouds rolling past the big windows. "I suppose it could have been a reflection. I only saw it for a second... I guess I shouldn't have pulled that fire alarm."

"That's of no concern." Rupen offered James a sympathetic smile as he went to one of his cabinets and poured out a shot of some liquor. "You must have been very

startled. Honestly, it was pretty quick thinking and the best of intentions. I can't fault you for either. Here." He handed James the delicate shot glass. "For your nerves."

A familiar revulsion snaked through James as he took the crystal shot glass and drank the searing liquor. The tang of a demon's blood tainted the woody flavor of the alcohol.

"Three-hundred-year-old whiskey, from the Third Purgatory." Rupen held the bottle up into the light, but James's gaze was drawn to the flash of Rupen's ruby-encrusted signet ring. It looked as if it were burning with an inner fire.

"This whiskey was a tribute made to my great-great-grandfather by the White Queen of the morax demons," Rupen stated proudly.

"Heady," James commented.

"Nothing else like it in this world." Rupen smiled.

James could have argued with the older man. There were still plenty of drugs made from the bodies of demons, and plenty of dealers and junkies willing to commit murder to keep it that way. But the last thing James wanted to bring up was Tony's murder, Lanna's addiction, or his own work as a police informant.

Fortunately, Rupen took no note of James's pause. He tossed a quick smile into Suzy's camera lens and then turned his attention back to Lanna. He poured her a shot and helped himself to one as well.

"Things have changed since the glory days of our ancestors," Rupen told Lanna. "But not all the wonders of the past are gone or forgotten. This whiskey, for example was created from holy flowers and demon blood and distilled through a thousand diamonds. It was a tribute to commemorate a great battle..."

James looked as attentive as he could while Rupen once again recounted the details of how his ancestors ravaged and pillaged a demon realm and returned with their inhuman slaves as well as many of the treasures that now graced the Storm Palace. Over the last three days James had heard enough of Rupen's tales to know that this one would probably include the rape of some lithesome demoness or the repression of a slave revolt, and close with a florid description of the mass sacrifice of some now extinct animal.

Lanna kept a pretty smile plastered to her face in a way that made James think that these kinds of uncomfortable stories were common among her sorcerous relations. Suzy hid her horrified scowl behind her camera as she zoomed in on Rupen's handsome, jolly expressions.

James felt almost certain that Rupen had no idea of what the National Conservation Foundation was, much less what information the organization would want included in the documentary that they were funding. He simply delighted in expounding upon the history of his floating kingdom to a woman as attractive and well-connected as Lanna Yervant.

In fact Lanna was the reason he'd agreed to allow a photographer and small film crew onto the exclusive Storm Palace. For decades, Rupen had refused the National



Conservation Foundation any access, but an afternoon with Lanna had convinced him to relent. Clearly, as far as Rupen was concerned, the entire documentary was about wooing Lanna.

Whoever ended up editing all this footage was going to be in for a hell of a job. If the project even got that far. Murder had a way of shutting productions down.

While Rupen spoke, James tried to work out how best to proceed. He could try to contact the Parmas police, but he knew that the Storm Palace was not technically in their jurisdiction. It was a migratory vessel, registered to a tiny island nation owned by Rupen. The police weren't going to touch it unless they had some very solid evidence. They'd definitely need more than a confusing photo. At the very least he needed to know who the man he'd seen falling through the clouds was.

Definitely not a reflection and certainly not an errant skydiver dressed in pajamas. The woman at the portal center hadn't recognized him, which made James think that the man must not have used the portals recently or regularly, which meant he was probably a permanent resident. That narrowed the possibilities somewhat.

As Rupen recounted his ancestor's sexual conquest of the morax queen and the resulting brood of demonic soldiers, James couldn't stop himself from glancing to Captain Kippling. The captain returned his gaze with a look of cold suspicion, and James realized that the captain had been watching him the entire time. Watching him and inspecting the razor edges of the fighting rings that adorned his left hand. James wasn't sure but it almost looked like dried blood stained the edges of the rings.

The parrot behind James let out a jarring avian shriek and James bolted out of his seat. His heart hammered in his chest and Captain Kippling gave him a hard smile.

So much for the relaxing week James had been planning.

## Chapter Two

The body came in at five fifteen a.m., just as Moran dropped his head onto the mountain of paperwork on his desk and tried to remember what it had felt like to be a patrol officer and work a simple eight-hour shift.

He was tired, and not just from wrestling a gang of angry Paarkuri demons into holding cells or from breaking the maze of cryptomystic curses that protected a venom dealer's bank records. He was tired in a way that sleep couldn't ease—not that he'd slept much since James had stormed off three days ago. Anxiety gnawed at his rest and woke him in the dead of night with confused memories of holding James's savaged corpse in his arms.

He'd driven past James's apartment twice, but found no one home. When he called, a prerecorded message informed him crisply that James was away on assignment. That information offered Moran absolutely no reassurance.

James's previous investigation had landed him in hospital for two days and left James sporting several ugly bruises. The one before that had required James to hang by a rotting fishing line inside a filthy water vent, while armed smugglers prowled the docks. And only the year before, while working for Moran, James had charged into a demon pit like he thought he was the hero of some action film. He'd saved Moran's life, but it had nearly cost James his right leg.

The sight of the red scar running along James's knee still riveted Moran with conflicting feelings of pride in James's courage and fear for the fragility of his life.

Moran knew James wasn't too arrogant or too inexperienced to accept that he could die. James had seen death firsthand and been hurt badly enough to feel his own mortality. And yet he still took such risks; he saw trouble and went for it, instead of turning tail. He scared the shit out of Moran.

Three days ago Moran hadn't been able to keep quiet any longer, not when he saw the research pictures on James's desk. Moran refused to just let James run off to his death without saying a word.

In hindsight maybe he'd said a few too many words. They both had, but they'd needed saying.

And after everything—after Moran had flatly told him that it would be over between them if James went—it seemed that James had still flown to the Maldvar Islands to cover the Demonic Slave Revolt. People and demons alike were dying in droves over there, and now Moran could hardly close his eyes without picturing James among the dead.

So, he didn't close his eyes. He'd agreed to work a double shift. He'd filled out reports, helped the understaffed night shift process criminals, and covered a few hours of guard duty down in the holding cells. In the quiet hours, he'd done paperwork and tinkered with the microcircuits of his temperamental computer.

Then a call came in from the morgue and he trudged down to the subbasement, where a bloody, battered corpse dressed in dark blue silk pajamas lay with a huge silver bird spread atop it. The man was clearly dead, the back of his skull, hips and spine crushed to a wet pulp that seeped out in a puddle across the steel autopsy table. But the bird's chest rose and fell in slow breaths. As Moran stepped closer it raised its head and slashed at him with a blade-like beak.

"Careful! It has got a temper." Meeker, the medical examiner who routinely worked the night shift, hunched against the far wall and scowled at the bird. His carrot orange hair looked as though it had been styled with a weed whacker, and he held an ice pack to the side of his head.

"Where are Pat and Kris?" Moran glanced farther back past the autopsy stations to the steel wall of refrigerated body cabinets, but didn't see either of the medical assistants.

"Budget cuts," Meeker responded bitterly.

Moran nodded. They were all hurting with the new budget. Despite complaints about the Demonic Unit's chronic shortage of personnel, the city budget still didn't allot enough funding to compete with the wages that a skilled sorcerer could earn at any other job.

"So they're assigning you birds to help with the autopsies now?" Moran asked.

"Don't give them any ideas." Meeker looked nearly as gray as the stainless steel all around him. "The beast came in with the body. The sedation charm the patrol officer tossed on it isn't holding. I'm really hoping a detective can whip up something better."

"Like a shock-volt pistol?" Moran offered.

"That would be one way to deal with it." Meeker actually brightened at the prospect. "You brought yours?"

Moran didn't bother to answer. He studied the bird, wondering what kind of animal just shook off security-level sedation spells. For that matter, what kind of bird perched over a dead man's body, driving off all comers? Moran wasn't exactly an avian expert, but he felt certain that he would have remembered big, metallic silver birds with three-foot long wings and saber-like beaks if they had been at all common to the area. And yet something about the creature was familiar.

"Where'd we pick the pair up?" Moran asked.

"A night watchman at the university saw them drop straight down from the sky into the ball field. The bird almost put his eye out when he tried to get close. So he left it for us to handle." Meeker lifted the ice pack from his head and Moran glimpsed a red swelling, but it wasn't bleeding.

"Guess we better handle it, then," Moran replied.

He focused on the intense heat that smoldered in his chest. When he'd been twelve years old and his power had first manifested, a fire had ignited in him and blazed through him as if it were burning him hollow. He'd thought he would die of the pain. But in the decades since then he'd learned to contain and control the searing force churning within him. Now, he felt the driving heat roll over him only when he needed to draw it out into a spell.

He carefully released a little of that raw fire down through his arms to his hands. The faintest of lights glowed from the tips of his fingers, and he calmly traced a circle in the air in front of the bird, pushing all of his own exhaustion into the luminous line as he drew it.

The circle hovered like a delicate smoke ring and Moran blew it across the bird. The light glowed and flickered as it settled across silvery plumes. The bird shook its head, resisting for several seconds. Clearly it had been enchanted before and had built up a tolerance to spells. Maybe it belonged to a sorcerer. A moment later, its long neck swayed, and it laid its head down on the autopsy table and slept.

"Is it out?" Meeker gave the bird a suspicious glare. "Last time it woke up the minute I came close. You pick it up, will you?"

Moran sighed. Since when had animal control become his job? On the other hand, nothing but paperwork awaited him upstairs at his desk, and he was curious about the bird and the body it guarded.

Moran went to the table quietly and lifted the silver bird's limp body off the corpse. The long wings drooped, reflecting Moran's black jacket as well as the bloody body on the table. The feathers were as bright as polished steel, but they felt soft and delicate in Moran's arms. The heat of the strangely light body reminded Moran of the warmth he often felt radiating off magical talismans and his own demonically enhanced computer.

"Wow, you really did put it out." Meeker gave the limp bird a scowl. "I was sure the bitch was going to gouge your eyes out."

"Not yet, but the day is young," Moran replied. "Any idea what type of bird it is?"

"Big, territorial, and mean. If we're really lucky, it's edible." Meeker stepped past Moran and frowned down at the body on his table. "Birds aren't really my area of expertise. I'm much more interested in the humanities, as it were."

Moran nodded, then stood back and watched while Meeker delved into his area of expertise.

The dead man's silk pajamas were very exclusive, if the blood-soaked tag was to be believed. What remained of the back of his skull sported short, dark brown hair and a surprising expanse of his face remained intact.

He had obviously died upon impact with the ground. Every major bone in his body seemed broken and most of his organs had ruptured. Yet one injury—a clean, circular incision in his belly—was the work of a very sharp blade, not blunt force.

Moran cradled the unconscious bird while Meeker inspected and made a cast of its beak. But even before the alginate cast set, Meeker shook his head.

"The incision on that body was made by a knife. I'd bet a scalpel. As much as I'd like this bird to be our culprit, it's not the right kind of wound. Too shallow and too narrow." Meeker scowled. "And on top of that, there isn't a trace of blood on the damn beak. It's all over the beast's ridiculous little feet and its belly but not a drop on the beak."

"So much for the easy answer," Moran replied.

A few minutes later, one of the uniformed officers arrived with a holding cage and Moran handed the bird over to him. He left Meeker to weigh, measure, and record the remains of the dead body.

Upstairs, the morning shift of patrol officers was rolling in and the smell of fresh coffee permeated the air. Moran dropped into his chair and stared past the neat stack of case files to the heap of papers displaying wanted criminals, alerts, and interdepartmental notices.

His eyes slid over a grainy copy of a surveillance camera photo that had just been dropped off by Homicide. The hair was longer, the clothes cleaner, and the skull far more intact, but Moran still recognized the man's face. He picked up the notice and read it quickly.

The dead man on Meeker's table was a murder suspect: real name unknown, but for the last nine years he'd been posing as Marcus Saro, heir to the Saro fortune. According to the printout on Moran's desk, the decade-old remains of the real Marcus Saro had been discovered five days ago by mountain climbers. Saro's impersonator had been living literally above the law and in fine style on the famous Storm Palace.

And that explained the bird and how such an utterly foreign creature could be weirdly familiar to Moran. It was a phoenix, a highly endangered creature native only to the Storm Palace. Disparate information and memories collided into a string of realizations.

Before their blow out, James had mentioned something about the birds to Moran. And Moran remembered that he'd also seen an old photo of a flock of phoenixes among

James's research books. At the time, Moran's anger at seeing bloody images of gaping machete wounds and piled corpses from the Maldvar revolution had superseded all other thoughts.

But now Moran remembered that there had been several badly aged postcards depicting the Storm Palace in the heyday of sorcerers. Dozens of smaller, blurred photos of wings and beaks had been stacked along with yellowed articles and piles of notes. The sheer number of images, articles, maps, and anatomical drawings far outweighed the three pictures from the Maldvar Islands.

James had been researching phoenixes. And they lived in only one place. The same place the bird and the body had come from.

Moran made a call to the woman in charge of evidence and another down to Meeker in the morgue, then he whispered a few charming words to his moody computer and dug into the gleaming, electric web of information surrounding the Storm Palace, the Saro estate, and a nature documentary that the National Conservation Foundation was funding. He found James's name right away.

An hour later, he had Meeker's full report, as well as the unconscious, caged phoenix; several pages of spell residue analyses; and a hissing, leather-bound volume of ancient minutiae concerning floating palaces. He'd also flipped on the air-conditioning to a frigid low and commandeered two fans and block of ice from the morgue to keep the phoenix from overheating. The birds normally lived at temperatures near freezing; a seventy-degree room had to feel like an oven for the animal.

"Morning," Lieutenant Dion Argent sauntered in with an easy smile on his face, though seeing the tableau that Moran's desk had become, he raised his dark brows.

"It's been a very long night." Moran's voice felt rough in his throat. Argent's lustrous dark skin and crisp sports jacket only made Moran more aware of just how rumpled and tired he felt.

"Anything I can do?" Argent offered.

Moran shook his head.

They were all carrying heavy caseloads, and since his promotion, Argent had been supervising dozens of investigations. For the most part he made it look easy, but Moran knew him well enough to recognize the forced edge in his dashing smile. He'd just gotten married, and the last thing Moran wanted was to burden Argent with more work to keep him from his new home and husband.

"I'm good," Moran assured him.

"All right, then. Keep on keeping on, my man." Argent shook his head at the tub of ice and the sleeping bird as he walked past Moran on his way to his own desk.

As other detectives arrived, comments varied but most were brief, and Moran didn't bother with detailed explanations. Hunting the archives largely occupied what shreds of energy he retained.

"Saving an endangered species. What the hell are *you* doing?" Moran grumbled when a young patrol officer stood gaping at him for several minutes. The officer flushed and then bolted to Captain Pollar's office to deliver a report.

Moran jotted down a few more notes concerning national airspace and extradition.

Then he turned back to Meeker's report just to be sure he hadn't missed anything. But it was all very straightforward. The wound in the dead man's belly had been the second incision made in him. The first left a clean, thin scar that might have gone utterly unnoticed if it hadn't seared brilliant violet in response to curse residue analysis. Moran himself had verified the spectrum reading. It had been left by some kind of parasitic blood-curse, something very old and definitely forbidden. Moran couldn't know exactly what the curse had done, but the cuts and scars indicated that it had been implanted in the man and allowed to remain for years before it was cut out and his bleeding body fell to earth.

"Moran, please tell me you're not responsible for that stench." Detective Jay Yervant looked tired but well-dressed, the halo of pale flames shimmering over his body only hinting at the raw power he commanded. Moran couldn't help but covet the steaming hot coffee in the other man's gloved hand.

"It's the bird," Moran responded. "According to records, phoenixes produce a musk that allows them to track each other across miles of sky and through some really shitty weather conditions." Moran glanced to the bird. He hadn't found her scent all that off-putting, though he guessed that having a corpse for comparison had probably influenced his judgment. The smell reminded Moran of the way his old retriever used to smell when it got wet. He knew for a fact that the creature couldn't possibly smell as bad as a particularly rank pair of James's cross-country shoes. Or those filthy socks he'd find lying around...

For such a pretty boy, James could be a real slob.

Moran shrugged as Jay frowned at the phoenix.

"Miss Stinky-Feathers here is apparently a rare and valuable creature," Moran informed his fellow detective. "And there's no way she smells as bad as that hooker, Cookies, who I hauled in last week."

Jay made a grim, pained face at the memory. Jay was kind of effete for a bad-ass hell cop, but Moran found his upper-class sensitivity amusing, even a little charming at times.

"A centaur like Cookies just has a lot of hard to soap places," Moran added. Jay gave a short laugh and then strolled to his own desk.

Fifteen minutes later, Moran stepped into Captain Pollar's office with a file bulging with records and evidence reports. He laid everything out while the pink-cheeked captain listened with a slowly growing expression of pinched pain. Halfway through, Pollar got up and locked the door to his office. Then he dropped back into his chair like a miserable sack of baby skin and polyester.

"You're sure about this?" Pollar asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Moran replied flatly. Pollar gazed down at the pages Moran had presented.

"We have enough to get a warrant," Moran assured him. "But I think that Rupen will pull out of our airspace the second he realizes we're investigating his private floating island—"

"Wait!" Pollar held his hands up and shook his head. "Just wait a minute, all right?"

Moran frowned at the captain but remained silent. He knew Pollar was under a lot of strain, trying to hold their understaffed department together while also fending off attacks from both civilians, who perceived them as currying favor with other sorcerers, and from their fellow police officers, who often saw them as a bunch of magic faggots. A high-profile case like this one was probably the last thing Pollar wanted to have to deal with.

Even attempting to investigate an old-school hotblood sanctuary like the Storm Palace could easily turn into a public relations nightmare or end up mired in court while armies of lawyers picked at every loophole and precedent they could unearth. Gregory Rupen was very well-connected, as were the other permanent residents of the Storm Palace. And on top of that, the Storm Palace was well on its way to being legally declared an environmental sanctuary. If the Demonic Unit screwed up on this, then the hell cops really might be disbanded.

"There's a body in the morgue that's crawling with the residue of a parasitic blood-curse, and we have evidence that ties it straight back to the Storm Palace. Something sick is going on up there, and this might be the only chance we'll get to stop it," Moran said firmly. When Pollar gave no response, he added, "It's up to you, sir. If you don't think we can handle it, I'll hand it over to Homicide."

"Damn it, Moran! It's not even eight a.m. and you bring this to me." Pollar dug a bottle of aspirin out of his desk drawer, popped a fistful, and washed them down with a swig of some green health drink. He slumped back in his battered chair, the swivel plate squealing beneath him like a crushed mouse. "If we're taking these people on, we have to be very careful. Men like Rupen have to be handled...delicately."

"Yeah, he's hand-wash only. I get that," Moran replied. "That's why I checked on the repairs he's commissioned for the Storm Palace. I've lined up two possible positions for infiltration."

"This isn't even an official case yet! Don't you think you're getting a little ahead of the game here?" Pollar glared at Moran.

"I just checked a few work rosters," Moran lied. They both knew why he'd gone so far—to ensure that Pollar couldn't scrub the investigation on the grounds that they just couldn't get anyone on board the Storm Palace.

Moran stepped a little closer. He was a tall man with a hard, solid build, and he wasn't above looming over anyone if it meant getting the right thing done. "I didn't



think we had a lot of time on this, sir. The Storm Palace could be out of our jurisdiction in less than a week."

Pollar dropped his gaze.

"We've got to be very careful," Pollar said again. "And I don't want a single word leaked to the press."

"Not a problem." Moran had known James for years and had been dating him for just over a year; in all that time he hadn't once leaked a story, no matter how well James sucked him off or how often he taunted Moran with his lean runner's body and taut, perfect ass. Moran suspected that Pollar knew as much but didn't want to hear it any more than Moran wanted to tell him.

Pollar picked up the file Moran had brought him. He read in silence for several minutes, while Moran waited. At last Pollar closed the file carefully.

"It would look good if the Demonic Unit could be seen returning an endangered species to its habitat. It might remind the public that we're the good guys. I'll have Argent make the public statement and transport the phoenix."

Moran nodded.

Argent photographed well and could maintain a charming smile even when he was shooting a guy point blank in the face. Neither press nor protesters were likely to fluster him.

That still left the big decision. Would they investigate, and if so, who would go in? Moran had already put some serious energy into ensuring the case would be his. Not only did he want to figure out what was going on, but he also knew that James was up there, probably sticking his nose into any trouble he could find.

"You already lined a job up with a repair crew?" Pollar asked.

Moran nodded.

Pollar looked him over quickly. Moran knew he smelled like a wet dog and looked like he'd spent a couple nights under a bridge, but he was already familiar with the case as well as being well trained in the bare-bones mechanical spells that most repair crews used.

"All right," Pollar said firmly. "We don't have much time, so you go straight in. You report to me directly and don't say a word to anyone else. We need to keep this whole thing in the Demonic Unit. I don't want one of those assholes in Homicide screwing it up with some kind of anti-sorcerer crap." Pollar stood and unlocked a painted drawer in one of his antique tea cabinets. He tossed a small receiver to Moran. The thing looked like smooth black stone and buzzed like a cicada in Moran's hand until he ran his thumb over its dull surface and locked it into Pollar's transmission frequency.

"Can you get on one of those work crews and onboard the Storm Palace with the five o'clock portal transfers?" Pollar asked.

Moran had spent two solid hours ensuring that he could do just that. The arcane schematics of the Storm Palace floated, fresh and brilliant, in his mind.

"I've got a spot lined up replacing old voodoo-wiring with synthetic spell-fiber and repairing boilers. Same work I did as a kid," Moran told him, and Pollar nodded as if he'd expected as much.

"I'll get you cleared with the DA and Judge Claris. She'll be open to anything that clears up what happened to the Saro kid... Yeah, the DA will like that angle as well." Pollar nodded slowly to himself, then glanced up at Moran. "You just get your ass up on the Storm Palace while it's still at an altitude that's in our airspace and figure out who the fuck is cutting forbidden curses into people."

"Will do." Moran gave an offhand salute, which made Pollar smile wryly.

He left Pollar's office contemplating which weapons he could most easily slip past the Storm Palace security force and just what he'd do with James once he found him.

## Chapter Three

Steam rolled up and the strong scent of coffee beans and frothing milk washed over James. Grinders roared like savage lawnmowers, and the barista gave James a cool, appraising look.

James had no idea how all baristas – whether they were the hip college girls at his local coffee house, or this goat-horned, red-skinned demon leaning against a giant, hissing wall of brass gears and pressure gauges – mastered that expression of world-weary ennui, but it did seem universal.

“You like it hard, soft, or sweet?” The barista spoke with a strong accent.

“What?”

“Your drink.” She blinked at him with a tired expression that told him that he was a yokel who knew nothing of caffeine acquisition or consumption.

“Uhm, I take mine black,” James provided.

“Hard,” the barista translated. She flipped two brass gears, and as steam gushed from a series of valves, dark, greenish black fluid filled the white porcelain cup in her hands.

She passed the hot drink to James and tilted her head slightly as he took a tentative sip of the harsh, bitter fluid. Definitely not the coffee he was used to. Still, James managed to swallow.

It burned down his throat like hot sauce. Moran would love the stuff; he’d probably pour it over his breakfast cereal. James felt his face going red. He tried to concentrate on the cheerful, classical music drifting through the decorative arrangements of potted trees and flowers, pretending that the pervasive sound of chipper harpsichords was bringing tears to his eyes.

“You’re new, hmm?” the barista commented.

"I'm here with the documentary crew. I'm a photojournalist," James responded in a rasp. He tried another sip of the strong drink. It tasted like it could strip the enamel off his teeth in seven seconds, but there was some kind of buzz already building in the pit of his belly. "Have you been here long?"

"Forever. Fifth generation, bound by blood." She held up a hand and traced the ridged white scar that circled her scarlet wrist. James had no idea what the gesture meant, but this barista wasn't the only servant on the Storm Palace who sported one of those scars. All of the demons seemed to be marked with them. Even Captain Kippling carried a white ring of scar tissue just below his Adam's apple.

Thinking of the captain, James resisted the urge to search the ornately dressed clusters of residents who milled through specialty shops and flirted beneath miniature forests of potted trees. It would probably only be a matter of time before the captain caught up with him. Earlier, Kippling had demanded that James hand the memory card from his camera over to be analyzed. Maybe if this had been the first time James had ever witnessed a murder, he would have trustingly obeyed. But he knew from personal experience that men in authority were just as susceptible to corruption as anyone else.

He'd slipped Kippling a memory card full of botanical pictures and pocketed the card containing the dead man's image to copy it to his hard drive. It had only taken the captain a few minutes to notice the deception, but by then James had dodged into a back passage that led to a huge, bustling kitchen. Amid the medieval-looking kettles, smoky fires, and crowds of servile demons, he'd managed to slip away.

Then he'd slunk down to the public levels and spent the rest of the day attempting to find out just whom he'd seen fall to his death this morning.

The half-breed demons staffing the tea shops, bookstores, and bars that James visited hadn't admitted to recognizing the man's picture, though several had obviously lied to him. As James held the image up to this barista, he saw immediate recognition flash in her orange eyes.

"Do you know him?" James asked.

"Marcus Saro. A double, sweet and soft." The barista took in the image: phoenix wings, clouds, and the man's terrified expression. A hint of concern seemed to infiltrate her professional indifference, though with a demon it was hard to really know. "Did something happen to him?"

"I don't know," James responded. "I'm hoping I can find out. Did you know him well?"

"Everyone knows Marcus," she replied. "He's Rupen's heir. His adopted son."

That was certainly news to James.

"Did he have any enemies?" James asked and the Barista looked disturbed.

"Why do you keep saying, *did* he? Like he's gone or —" She went quiet suddenly.

"I just need to know if anyone had a grudge against him. Maybe owed him money or..."

"No." The barista cut him off. "No one would cross Marcus Saro. Like I said, he's the next Rupen—" The barista suddenly winced. She scowled at James. "I have a lot of work to do so..." She rubbed a thumb against her scarred wrist and then turned back to her machine.

"Look, I'd really appreciate it if you could tell me a little more about him." James stuffed a few bills into her tip jar but only received a glare.

"What I can tell you is that you should mind your own business. Make your stupid film and get out of here," the barista hissed, and James thought he saw the scar on her wrist flex as if something alive were wriggling beneath her skin.

"Are you all right?" James asked.

"I don't have anything to say to you." The barista's complexion had gone a pale pink. "So, just fuck off already, or I'll call security."

James left his drink and backed off to the shadows of an enclosure of potted dove trees and jasmine. Red butterflies flitted around him. He watched from a distance, and after a moment the barista seemed to recover her color, though she still favored her wrist as she prepared drinks for her newest customers. When she noticed James watching her she gave him an obscene gesture.

Whatever had happened to her, it didn't bode well for his investigation. But at least he had a name: Marcus Saro. And he knew the young man had been Rupen's heir. Rupen had to have recognized his picture and lied about it.

Out of the corner of his eye James noticed a dark mass moving fast down the wide, spiral staircase. Captain Kipling charged down and two lower-ranking security men followed him. One looked like an orangutan might have been hanging back somewhere in his family tree, while the other sported a truly magnificent rack of red horns.

For an instant James feared that they were searching for him. But they didn't seem to be looking for anyone in the crowds of well-dressed residents. Instead the three of them hurried down another flight of stairs, which led down to the sapphire pool and the portals.

Curiosity and fear warred in James's chest, but curiosity won—as it always did. He gripped his camera and slunk after the security team. Halfway down the spiraling stairs he found a spot that offered him a little cover while allowing him to take in most of the promenade below. The marble floors were bustling, but James still easily located the security team in their black uniforms.

They stood at attention just outside the brass inlaid doors of the portal center. Out of reflex James took a picture. Then he noticed Suzy, bulky film camera in hand, trailing Lanna from the pool. Both women had changed into better clothes, though Lanna's formfitting silk dress and flower-studded tresses made Suzy's matching socks and sweater combination look more frumpy than fashionable.

Above them, a glass elevator wafted down like a flower drifting on a lazy stream. Petal-like doors opened to reveal Gregory Rupen and Dr. Shahe, his ghostly pale stick figure of a personal physician.

Crowds parted before Rupen and his physician. They met Lanna only a few feet from where Captain Kippling stood like a statue. A hush of expectation fell over the crowd. Several people held stylish little cameras ready.

Something big had to be going on, James realized. Someone important was coming up through the portals.

The shining doors opened, and three dumpy men carrying gray toolboxes wandered out. Their matching brown overalls read: Fulhouse Plumbing.

James almost laughed. Below him, Lanna did. And though James couldn't quite hear her words over the relentlessly tasteful music that lilted from the sound system, he could see that she was teasing Rupen. The old man flushed but smiled in a charming manner. Lanna patted his hand reassuringly.

James scowled. He did not like the old man getting so close to Lanna. She'd already been through hell with Tony, and his murder seemed to have broken something in her, so that now she sought out the most repellant of characters with amazing accuracy. The three lovers she'd taken in the year since Tony's death had all been handsome train wrecks of egotism, infidelity, and poor impulse control.

The very fact that Lanna seemed attracted to Rupen almost assured James that the man harbored a deep indecency.

On the floor below, the plumbers were escorted away by a half-demon in a white service uniform, though one kept gawking back over his shoulder at Lanna; she was something of a celebrity in Parmas.

The second time the doors to the portal center opened, a very different kind of man strode out. James recognized the detective's black skin and charming smile, though it took him a moment to recall the man's name. Moran was always annoyingly tight-lipped with that kind of information. But the man had introduced himself to James once at a party.

Detective Argent—that was it. He carried a large golden cage, with a silver phoenix crouching inside. The bird looked drugged but awake.

James snapped off a quick series of pictures as Argent presented the caged bird to Captain Kippling and then shook hands with Rupen. Lanna slid up next to the detective and proceeded to flatter and question him, while Suzy angled in with her video camera.

Argent's voice carried as he explained that the bird had struck one of the city's communication towers, but had not been injured. The Metropolitan Demonic Unit had captured it and was happy to see it home.

Behind him a stream of men and women in mechanic's coveralls filtered out the portal doors. Some carried toolboxes or thick loops of translucent filament, and a few hauled dollies loaded with arcane machine parts.

James captured their blurred forms in the background of his pictures. Though one figure—a tall man in dark work clothes—caught his attention and held it. His back was to James, displaying the sharp line of his short-cropped black hair as well as sweeping angles of his broad shoulders, tapered waist, and long legs. His height and build seemed familiar, and a glimpse of his scarred right hand made James stare hard. But it was the way he moved—intent driving his powerful strides, his arms loose, hands ready—that shot an electric thrill through James’s belly and groin.

No one else moved quite like Moran. For a moment James just watched him, taking in Moran’s presence as if it were a cool drink and he had been parched for days.

But Moran being here, dressed like an electrician no less, didn’t make sense. He certainly hadn’t come for James. Not after their last fight.

This had to be police business, James realized. They must have found Marcus Saro’s body and traced it back to the Storm Palace.

That was certainly fast.

But then shouldn’t the entire Storm Palace be crawling with police? James glanced at the golden cage in Captain Kippling’s monstrous grip. Something was wrong about all of this.

Detective Argent departed after a final shake of Rupen’s hand. But James wasn’t concerned with them. Instead he crept further down the stairs, following that workman’s broad back and straining to catch even the briefest glimpse of his face. If he wasn’t Moran, James was going to feel like an idiot.

“James, there you are! Come down and take a picture of this. It’s a phoenix!” Lanna waved to him, and James became instantly aware that far too many people looked at him. Rupen and his pale physician both gazed at him with weirdly appraising expressions—as if he was fresh meat pulling into a glory hole. Captain Kippling’s glare radiated irritation, verging on anger.

But it was Moran who surprised James the most, offering him only the briefest glance, almost indifferent and then turning away as if couldn’t care less. In a moment he disappeared down the service stairs along with the other maintenance workers.

\* \* \* \* \*

James handed the memory card over to Captain Kippling, without bothering to apologize for giving him the wrong one in the first place. Both of them knew he’d done it on purpose; that was obvious.

It was also obvious that he and the captain were playing nice for Rupen, Lanna, and Suzy’s camera. James knew why he was smiling and keeping his mouth shut. If he made a fuss then the captain or Rupen could have him removed from the Storm Palace. But he wasn’t sure why Captain Kippling seemed so willing to indulge him.

Could the documentary really be that important? James knew it was expected to boost support for the Storm Palace being recognized as an environmental sanctuary, but it couldn't just be that, could it?

James tried to remember what kind of funding the Storm Palace might receive as a sanctuary, but his mind only seemed willing to focus on the fact that Moran was here. Longing surged through James, and for a moment, it required all of his will not to leap out of his poolside chair and race down the service stairs after Moran. He wanted so badly to feel Moran's body against his own, to touch him and watch that cold indifference melt away...

And then maybe he could shout, *My cop boyfriend is here, working undercover!*

Yeah, chasing after Moran would be an extra special genius move. And Moran would be sure to thank him for it too.

*Come on, Sparky,* James admonished himself. *Stop thinking with your dick for a minute here and get your act together.*

Rupen's heir was dead. So, why had Rupen pretended not to recognize his picture; why had he lied? Because he killed the young man or could he be shielding someone? Protecting the reputation of the Storm Palace itself?

Damn, he wished he could talk this out with Moran. Like old times, when he'd been Moran's informant and Moran hadn't seemed to give a damn how much trouble he got himself into so long as he got useful evidence.

"I brought something for you as well, James." Lanna tossed him a pair of tiny red swim briefs. She'd already changed in the women's locker room, miraculously transforming from elegant socialite into a bikini-clad swimwear model. "Come on, the pool is lovely." Lanna dived into the sapphire blue water. The splash sent a cloud of butterflies swirling up from the recesses of water lily blossoms.

Rupen's eyes followed Lanna's every motion. Then suddenly he glanced to James.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Rupen commented.

James nodded, although Lanna's beauty was the last thing on his mind at the moment.

"Ah, to be young." Rupen gave a wistful sigh as he stared at James. "All of you children are beautiful, really. So much energy and so much life ahead of you."

"Do you have any kids of your own, sir?" James inquired, and he hoped it sounded casual.

"No, no." Rupen shook his head and dropped his gaze down to his tanned, wrinkled hands. "I have—I had an adopted son, but he's...gone now."

"Oh?" James felt his heart beat quicken.

"Marcus Saro," Rupen said the name softly, almost tenderly. "Or at least that's who he claimed to be, but it turns out he was a con man." Rupen looked up into James's face, his expression distraught. "He murdered the real Marcus Saro."



"Pardon?" James couldn't believe what he was hearing. It certainly wasn't what he'd expected, but a revelation nonetheless. This would be the one time Suzy and her camera were off somewhere else: recording Captain Kippling releasing the phoenix back into her flock.

"You aren't just a photographer, Mr. Sparks," Rupen said evenly. "You're an investigative reporter, aren't you?"

"Well," James hedged, knowing it was always worse to be caught in a lie than to tell the truth, but not by much. "I've worked freelance for a number of news agencies..."

"You're too humble, my boy," Rupen objected. "Lanna's told me all about you."

James gave a noncommittal shrug. Lanna knew very little about what James really did—certainly nothing of his involvement with the police, but she'd seen enough the night Tony had been killed to make a few informed guesses.

"She told me that you inherited a fortune but you're so dedicated to justice and the truth that you still insist on investigating criminals." Rupen's tone was almost curious.

"Lanna has a tendency to romanticize these things," James replied.

"Maybe. She certainly is taken with you," Rupen replied, and he sounded a little sad. "But I don't think she was exaggerating when she described you. She made me feel certain that I should be honest with you, because you'll find these things out soon enough anyway."

Rupen accepted a glass of sparkling green liquid from a demonic servant. James took one as well but didn't drink. If this was about to become a murder confession, James needed to record it, somehow. He slid his thumb across his camera's function dial, flicking on the low-grade video option. He had no way to inconspicuously focus the picture, but at least he could hope to record Rupen's words. He felt like an asshole, taking advantage of the old man's trust, but he couldn't stop himself. Moran had trained him too well.

"So, your adopted son wasn't Marcus Saro?" James asked carefully.

"No. His name was Finlay, and he murdered Marcus Saro." For a moment Rupen's proud expression almost crumpled, but he set his jaw and met James's eyes with a firm gaze. "The young man I knew these last nine years was an imposter. He stole Marcus Saro's identity and his money and came here. I suppose it was part of a larger plan to take the Storm Palace, but he really did seem to care about the old place and all our people. He even took to the phoenixes. Used to feed them on the ledges and do drawings of them." Rupen's voice broke and he looked away from James.

His physician drifted nearer. Rupen waved him away with an irritated frown.

"Up this high we sometimes intercept transmissions. A week ago Captain Kippling picked up a police alert. Apparently some hikers near the Dros Commune discovered the body of the real Marcus Saro. I quickly realized that my boy, Finlay, was a wanted man."

Rupen sniffed hard, locking his proud features into a stoic frown.

"I should have turned Finlay over to the police, right then and there," Rupen stated. "But I couldn't. Not my son... I told him I knew what he'd done and I told him that he couldn't stay here any longer. He wasn't my son anymore. I ordered him to pack up... I was going to leave him in Parmas City, but—" Rupen scowled hard, biting down on his trembling lips.

He was silent for several moments and James didn't try to prod him.

"I believe he took his own life instead. He jumped from the phoenix ledges." A tear slipped down the old man's cheek. And then another. James felt sick and sorry, and at a loss for anything to say.

Across the pool, Lanna had stopped swimming and frowned at the two of them.

"He did a terrible thing," Rupen murmured. "But I wouldn't have wanted him to die. I..." Rupen put his hands over his face.

"I'm sorry," James said. "I really am."

Rupen wiped at his eyes, with an almost angry roughness.

"No," Rupen sniffed. "I should be sorry. I behaved very poorly to you this morning. When you showed me that picture... When I saw my son's face..." He just shook his head. "I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it until after you left and Captain Kippling told me that the boy was missing."

"Captain Kippling knew."

"He didn't want there to be a scene in front of the camera," Rupen explained. "He still sees me as his lord and would do anything to protect my dignity. So many of the demons here on the Storm Palace are so dedicated to me, to my family. He was just trying to protect me. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course," James replied. Though he couldn't help but wonder exactly how far the captain would go to protect Rupen's dignity. And what would he perceive as a threat?

"James, seriously, you won't get cooties from swimming with a girl." Lanna waded to the edge of the pool and splashed him. James jerked his camera back from the water.

"Get changed and come swimming with me, or I will keep splashing you until you and your precious camera are soaked." Lanna slapped the water again.

Rupen laughed, looking relieved. "I'd do as she commands, my boy. Go on, enjoy yourself."

James sighed. He knew it was futile to argue with Lanna, and Rupen wasn't likely to tell him anything more at this point. The old man's attention had turned completely back to Lanna.

James felt obscene parading across the marble floor in the tight red swim briefs Lanna had picked out for him. Someone far up on the stairs whistled, and James dived into the warm water.

He came up with a salty taste on his lips. Silky, red sand squished beneath his feet and sulfur yellow fish darted around his legs in bold sweeps. After a few minutes of swimming, he realized how soothing the water felt, especially for his aching right knee.

"You and Gregory looked like you were having a serious heart-to-heart," Lanna commented, and she bobbed in the water beside him.

"Yeah," James agreed. He still wasn't quite sure of what to do with the information or what to think of it being offered so directly.

"Was it about me?" Lanna asked.

"About you?" James frowned. "Why would it be about you?"

"Aside from the fact that a girl likes to think that every conversation between two dashing men is about her," Lanna responded with a teasing smile. "Gregory's sure that you and I would make a perfect couple."

James almost choked on pool water, and Lanna scowled at him.

"James, seriously, aren't you at least curious about how good it could be with a woman?" Lanna leaned close and ran a wet finger over his chest. James had to suppress a shudder. He'd thought Lanna had gotten over this.

"Gregory and I were discussing his heir's death." James stepped back out of Lanna's reach before her hand could slither further down his body. "It turns out I did see someone plummet from the Storm Palace this morning."

Lanna's expression froze for a moment as she processed what he'd said. Then her jaw dropped.

"Oh my god!" Lanna gasped. "What happened?"

"The details aren't exactly clear," James replied. "Rupen says he thought it was suicide."

"Oh, poor Gregory."

James followed Lanna's gaze to where Rupen leaned back in his chair with his physician kneeling at his side. The pale physician administered an injection and Rupen closed his eyes.

"Is he sick?" James asked.

Lanna paused and studied James for a moment as if appraising just how much she should trust his discretion.

"He's dying," Lanna whispered. "He told me yesterday. It's some kind of cellular disorder."

"I remember reading something about osmotic deaths running in the Rupen family," James suggested.

Lanna shook her head.

"Gregory isn't a blood member of the Rupen family. He was adopted by Garen Rupen when he was twenty-seven. He wasn't even from a sorcerous family. He was just the son of some common industrialist. *Nouveau riche*."

James frowned at that.

"So Rupen isn't actually a Rupen?" Odd then that he took such pride in his sorcerous heritage but made no mention of his real family. Maybe there had been a falling out with his biological family. Maybe it had been something to do with him accepting a sorcerer's guardianship...at the age of twenty-seven? James couldn't help but wonder if the term Sugar Daddy might not have been more appropriate than guardian.

"I think that's why Gregory chose to adopt his own heir," Lanna said wistfully.

James nodded. But again he wondered what exactly the relationship between the old man and his young, handsome, and unrelated heir was. Certainly a man as wealthy and attractive as Rupen could have found a wife and fathered children if he'd been the least bit inclined.

This string of wealthy older men adopting handsome, full-grown sons to live with them on their private floating island certainly made more sense if the term *heir* were replaced with *lover*.

Except that James had seen the way Rupen watched Lanna. He obviously wanted her in a way that a man like James never would.

"So Rupen is dying and his heir is dead," James mused. "Any idea who stands to inherit the Storm Palace when Rupen checks out?"

"What a mean thing to ask," Lanna replied. "I'd think you'd spare at least a moment to feel a little compassion for the poor man."

James shrugged. He supposed he'd gotten too used to talking to Moran.

"The Storm Palace would revert to Garen Rupen's closest blood relative," Lanna said at last.

"Any idea who that would be?" James asked.

"I have no idea," Lanna replied, and she gave James an annoyed pout. "You know, I'd expect a gay to be a little more sensitive. But I swear, James, you can be as much of an asshole as a straight guy."

"Maybe you should take your own advice and cultivate an interest in women." James smirked and received a splash of water in his face.

"I don't know why I even bother trying with you." Lanna laughed.

"I don't know either," James replied. "I have it from a very dependable source that I'm an ass and a troublemaker."

"At least you're not boring." Lanna gazed absently at a cluster of tanned men at the edge of the pool. "Of course there's also something to be said for men who appreciate the fact that I don't have a five-o'clock shadow."

James smiled at that, but Lanna's attention had drifted to Rupen. She returned Rupen's wave and then waded out of the water to bask in the older man's charm and tease the young men looking on.

James dived beneath the water and swam out to the deep end of the pool. He knew that Moran was here on the Storm Palace and that he ought to go to him, tell him about Marcus Saro's and Finlay's deaths; at least one was a murder. That was definitely police business. On the other hand, he couldn't just go crashing through the bowels of the Storm Palace shouting Moran's name.

He'd have to wait for an opportunity. So for now James swam, allowing the steady rhythm of exertion to soothe away his anxiety.

It felt good to push himself hard, right up to his limit. Often when he went running, the pain in his right knee would stop him before he could really challenge himself, but then that became a test of its own. The few times he'd kept running through the hurt, his knee had swollen up like a balloon. Moran had always soothed away the pain, gentling his flesh with strong, hot hands while also informing James that he had acted like an idiot and an ass.

Moran wasn't likely to do any of that now...well, maybe tell him he was an idiot.

James dived deep beneath the water and kicked off against a polished marble wall. He turned lap after lap while exotic fish darted and flashed around him and exhaustion slowly overcame restless loneliness.

Overhead the ambient light dimmed, and people drifted away to enjoy the music, drinks, and dancing on the floors above. James vaguely noted that the portal center had closed for the night. Rupen escorted Lanna to his glass elevator. Rupen's physician disappeared soon after them. The darkness of night crept in.

James rolled onto his back and floated. Stars shone through the skylights and reflected in the dark water. The light danced across the distant walls, breaking and rippling with James's motions. Far across the marble promenade, James noticed a dark shadow creeping between the silhouettes of potted trees and climbing vines. The stealthy advance put James suddenly on guard. The guy was taking care to be quiet and keeping to the shadows.

James's heart began to hammer at his ribs. He'd been hunted before, and he recognized those slow careful motions. Then to his far right, James saw a cluster of luna moths startle into silent flight from a bower of potted persimmon trees. A second man lurked there.

James fought against the panic rising in his chest.

*They're obviously taking pains not to startle you, Sparky.* James imagined Moran whispering the words and he grew calmer. *Don't let them know you're on to them and they'll keep their approach slow. That'll give you time to get your ass out of this water.*

James swam slowly into the shallows of the pool, searching the shadows around him while trying to look casual. A third big form prowled down the stairs toward him. A beam of starlight gleamed along the sharp curve of the demon's horn. The demon looked a lot like one of the Storm Palace security officers. All three could have been security for all he knew. Which meant they were probably armed and trained for combat.

No way was James going to try to take all three of them on. He was built for flight not fight, though even running looked tricky right now.

Getting up the stairs was out of the question. The portal center was locked. The changing room, where James had secured his camera and clothes, was a dead end.

That left the maintenance door. And it had to be now because the men were getting closer.

James vaulted out of the water. His wet feet slipped on the marble, but he kept his balance and sprinted for the maintenance door. Behind him he heard a pot crash to the floor as someone lunged through the decorative foliage after him.

"Stop him!" a man hissed.

James felt something whip past his head and crack against the wall ahead of him. They were shooting at him.

Terror surged through him, and his muscles went hot. He hurtled across the promenade, leaping over benches the way he'd cleared hurdles in college.

His hands were slick with sweat as he wrenched the maintenance door open. Bright yellow light flashed over him. Half running, half falling, he took the narrow stairs in a blind rush. Two flights down he heard the door behind him screech open and knew that the men had followed him down.

The first door he reached was marked KITCHENS. James shoved it open loudly but didn't go through; instead he raced down the stairs, praying that the men chasing him heard the door and took the bait assuming he'd gone through it.

As he descended the air turned hot and a smell of machine oil pervaded. The staircase walls and steps felt slick, as if they were sweating. From above again James heard a door. At least one of the security men must have gone into the kitchen. He prayed all three had, but it seemed unlikely.

At last he reached a landing with two huge, iron doors and no more stairs. He took the door on the left, marked QUARTERS, and found himself scurrying through a series of crowded hallways full of people, demons, and cages of nesting chickens.

Hundreds of pipes snaked overhead, and between them drooped thick red wires that appeared to both power dim lanterns and provide lines for drying underwear. A cacophony of languages—demon and human—echoed over the strains of music, engine drones, and laughter. Four half-demon children playing tag bustled past James's legs, and two women dressed in rumpled servant's uniforms shoved him aside as they struggled through the winding corridor with heaping loads of laundry.

As James moved farther into the crowds, he noticed open doors, offering views of small cots, alcohol burners, and the prone, half-naked bodies of sleeping humans and demons alike. The place smelled like old shoes, cooking oil, and hot metal.

James couldn't run in the tight confines, but he didn't dare stay still. Mumbling apologies, he stumbled through the bustling crowds. He dodged a flock of brilliant blue hens as well as the flurry of raggedly dressed children chasing the creatures. All around

him bodies pressed and jostled. At one point he felt a strong hand grab for his arm. He jerked away and plunged ahead faster.

At last he found himself in what appeared to be a public toilet and bath. The floor was nothing but drains and the walls were studded with lime-caked spigots and yellowed hoses.

A tiny woman wearing a dingy gray bathrobe asked him if he'd lost his pants. Her accent sounded familiar but James couldn't quite place it. He shook his head mutely. Two young men laughed at each other under a spurting water spigot, and directly in front of James, a large red demon appeared to be soaping a small camel while a woman collected the animal's droppings in a copper bucket. Beyond the bath stood an open courtyard of what looked like a market of some kind. Cramped stalls displayed bright banners and raucous music poured from barred windows high up in the walls.

James just stared around him in dazed wonder and exhaustion. It was like he'd crashed into a whole other world. Sooty little birds swept past, flying between the tangled pipes running overhead.

James suddenly felt like he needed to sit down.

His rush of adrenaline was fast fading. In its absence he became aware of the grinding pain in his knee and also a strange, dull ache in his shoulder. He reached back and jerked a small red dart free.

He hadn't even notice he'd been hit.

"Well, shit," James slurred. He made three steps clear of the copper bucket full of droppings and then his leg buckled. A strong, hard grip caught him before he hit the floor. James expected to see one of the Storm Palace security men, but instead Ben Moran held him.

He wore dark canvas pants and a heavy work belt. Sweat and machine oil stained his deeply tanned chest and bare arms. He smelled dirty and good at once, James thought deliriously.

"The boy, he lose his pants!" the old woman shouted to Moran.

"Yeah." Moran hefted him up to his feet. "He's lucky he didn't lose a whole lot more." Moran's blue eyes seemed to blaze against the subterranean gloom surrounding them. "You okay, Sparky?"

James wanted to claim that he was fine just for the sake of his pride, but his body betrayed him, buckling forward into Moran's warm arms. The edges of his sight were getting oddly dark, and his head felt like it was packed with wadded cotton.

"They shot me," James admitted. Cradled against Moran's bare chest, he felt Moran's heartbeat jolt.

"Where? James —"

"Just a tranquilizer or something." James clumsily proffered the dart. Moran glared at the red projectile and then snapped the dart away into some plastic case hanging from his work belt.

"I'm okay," James mumbled.

"Oh yeah," Moran replied. "You've never looked better." Then he glanced to the old woman and said something that sounded like gibberish and birdcalls, and she responded in kind. Belatedly, James realized that they were speaking West Islander. James felt the low words rumbling in Moran's deep chest. He closed his eyes. He'd missed the feel of Moran's arms around him so badly. It was stupid and naïve, but he felt calm and safe.

"James," Moran said softly.

James opened his eyes. The old woman had left, as had the couple with the miniature camel. The young men were dressing.

"Earlier, I spotted two men tracking you in the gear hall," Moran spoke softly but very clearly. "Were there any others?" The question floated through the cotton in James's brain for a moment.

"One guy but I think he's in the kitchen." James's voice sounded strange, even to himself, and the lights seemed to have dimmed even further.

"Can you walk at all?" Moran asked.

"Sure." James limbs responded slowly and weakly but he managed to stumble a few steps through the gloom. Happily, the grating pain in his knee had gone numb; unfortunately, that didn't keep his limbs from giving out under him.

Moran braced him and led him ahead into a dim, jostling chaos of crowds and wild noise. Spicy scents rolled over James, as did the odors of caged animals. They wove between stalls burgeoning with caged birds, weird fruits, and vials of strange fluids. Vendors called out sweetly, their voices melding with animal cries and bar music. James thought hazily of childhood stories he'd read of goblin markets. He wished he had his camera and then laughed at the thought of the photos he'd produce, half-blind with hands too numb to move. Even fully cogent he would have been challenged to capture a comprehensible moment in all the color and movement of the demonic crowds and winding corridors. The place smelled like a circus, sounded like a carnival, and twisted like a maze.

"How did you know I was in trouble?" James murmured into Moran's bare shoulder. The heat of his skin never failed to attract James. Which was stupid, because he was pissed at Moran.

"Aren't you always in trouble?" Moran replied. He suddenly drew James back into the shadows of a balcony and eased him down onto a crate. James's muscles felt disturbingly lax. He gazed at his own hands, amazed to see them lying like dead things at the ends of his arms.

"But how did you find me?" James slurred as if he were drunk.

"I was looking for you, and then I realized that I wasn't the only one." Moran scowled at the passing crowd. The multitude of bodies looked like a dim jumble of rolling shadows to James, but something in Moran's expression warned James to be



quiet and remain still. He thought he recognized the scarlet silhouette of a tall demon with large curving horns and another big shadowy figure moved next to him.

They'd tracked him all this way. James's heart gave a sluggish flip in his chest. There was no way on earth he could run now. He could hardly move.

"Are you still with me, Sparky?" Moran gave him a hard, assessing look.

"Where else would I be?" James just managed to flash a crooked smile.

"Funny." Moran's expression was grim and he looked tired. He pushed an unruly clump of James's hair back gently. "All you have to do is stay quiet and wait here. Understand? Don't look for me, don't call for me. Just stay here."

He was leaving? *Now?* Again, James's heart seemed to stumble in his chest like a clumsy drunk.

"They're coming..." James's voice failed him as he tried to tell Moran that the demons hunting him were only a few feet away. Then Moran melted into the shadows of passing bodies. Everyone seemed to be moving too fast, and then James realized he was losing bits of time, lapsing in and out of consciousness.

And suddenly two big demons loomed over him. His eyes skidded and slipped across the alien expanses of the scarlet scales and black spines that covered their bodies. The red one with horns glared at James, while his thorny companion sneered, revealing a mouth full of ivory fishhooks.

"Not so fast now, is he?" the horned demon remarked.

"Not a bit quick," the thorny demon agreed. He dropped his moist palm against James's bare forearm. A rush of panic gave James the energy to knock the demon's hand back.

"Hands off, Mr. Prick!"

Both the demons jumped, clearly not expecting James to still be conscious, much less capable of movement.

"You have no idea who you're fucking with here." James smirked at them, bluffing for every second he could keep them off him.

Where was Moran?

Darkness edged in to James's vision and he fought it, focusing on the horned demon's pale orange eyes. He'd gotten decent at fighting his way up through sedation after having most of his right knee rebuilt in surgeries. But James knew his moment of control couldn't last.

A shadow emerged from behind the demons. A strange luminous smoke floated in the air, coiling and rolling like a cloud; James thought of ghostly vipers. His vision dimmed.

He blinked.

When he opened his eyes he was sprawled back across the crate. A scarlet hand waved over his face and then fell to the side. James rolled his head to see the black thorny demon flopped on the gravel floor like a broken toy. Next to him, Moran

crouched over the horned red demon's prone body with his scarred right hand clamped around its throat. Something twitched beneath Moran's fingers. The horned demon went pale, and a sick gurgle bubbled from its lolling mouth. Moran jerked his hand back and a glistening purple thread ripped from the demon's throat. The thread thrashed like a living thing, and Moran snarled some grating word as he crushed it in his fist.

Steam rose off Moran's hand. The thread burned to white vapor. The demon lay still, though its eyes were open and staring.

"Is he dead?" James wasn't sure what he wanted the answer to be.

"He'll live." Moran straightened. "But they're both going to have a hell of a headache come tomorrow. They won't remember much either. I burned through the binding spells that controlled them."

"Binding spells?"

"Yeah, old-school enslavement. They're everywhere up here. Even in some of the animals." Moran glanced quickly behind him. "We need to get moving, sleeping beauty. You up for another walk?"

"Oh yeah, I'm just lying here like a rag doll to lull my predators into a false sense of security."

Moran laughed dryly, then he hefted James up to his feet, and amazingly, James managed to stay upright. Maybe he was getting better at this. Maybe he could walk.

Another flicker of darkness swallowed him, and when he came to he was flopped over Moran's shoulder, drooling against his hot, strong back.

So much for dying with dignity, he thought, and then darkness closed in again.

## Chapter Four

Moran cradled the antique tranquilizer dart carefully in his palm as he traced a sign of revelation over the copper-red casing. Faint flames licked the metal and dark forms rose like wisps of smoke curling into ornate molecular structures and whispering a name into Moran's ear: somnilium.

Moran scowled. Even a hundred years ago—when the bone-poppies that the sedative was derived from had been common—somnilium had been an expensive and rare drug, one reserved for the benefit and pleasure of the wealthiest sorcerers. Now days, a few rich whack-jobs still collected rusty paraphernalia, but somnilium mostly popped up in trashy gothic novels, not real crime investigations.

In fact Moran only recognized the structure of the tranquilizer because he'd seen it that morning while researching the Storm Palace; low doses of somnilium had been used at one time to sedate wild phoenixes and prepare them for use in arcane spells.

But James wasn't a phoenix and a dart this size wouldn't be packing a low dose. Whoever darted James had meant for him to go down hard. But who took a man out with a drug that cost more per gram than gold? That was like shooting him with diamond bullets. It certainly wasn't the subtlest weapon or the simplest way to kill.

But then, maybe killing hadn't been the point.

Moran lifted his gaze to where James sprawled on his side across the mat that served as Moran's bed. His long, slim body looked golden in the dull lamplight. A sheen of sweat glistened over his exposed skin. His chest rose and fell in a slow sleeping rhythm, but his eyes were open, the pupils dilated to the edges of his dark irises but still obviously unable to make out more than shadows of his surroundings.

"Ben?" James asked softly.

"I'm here." Moran set the dart aside and knelt down beside James. He slowly ran his hand over James's back. Moran couldn't remember James's taut muscles feeling so

lax and cold beneath his hands before. It worried him, but he kept his voice calm and his touch firm.

"Any idea of who had this done to you?" Moran asked quietly. The walls of his cramped dormitory room were little more than papier-mâché and flaking paint.

"An asshole," James suggested in a whisper, and Moran smiled.

"That should narrow the search," Moran replied. He brushed a stray lock of James's hair back from his damp temple. "I'm going to see if I can't burn this shit out of your system, all right?"

James mouthed something, but when no words came out, he simply nodded. Moran didn't waste any more time.

He let a surge of heat rush from his chest to smolder down his hands. He stroked James's smooth skin, sinking his strength into the blood and muscle below his fingers. Cold sweat and a sickening numbness welled up to him. He pressed deeper.

A year ago Moran had cleansed venom from James's bloodstream this way, but that had only been a few oily traces of a simple drug. This somnium coursed thickly through James's veins and it moved with a strange intensity. Moran sensed the glints and whispers of a curse riding like a virus within the drug as it invaded James's body.

Dark violet tendrils—and a wet animal smell—filled Moran's mind. The violet tendrils raced through James's bloodstream, collecting beneath his abdominal muscles and nestling together in a fine weave. Moran had seen a remnant of the same pattern earlier today.

A fucking parasitic curse, Moran realized. Already tendrils tapped into James's gut and wound around muscle fibers. Moran couldn't afford to be gentle.

"I'm sorry, Sparky," Moran whispered.

James murmured, demanding to know what was happening, but Moran didn't have time to explain, and knowing wouldn't make it hurt any less.

Moran clamped his left hand over James's mouth. Then he slammed his scarred right hand down against James's belly, releasing a flood of raw power. White light flashed from Moran's palm like lightning; the force ripped painfully through Moran's muscles. Even sedated, James jerked violently beneath him and howled against Moran's palm.

The nest of violet filaments blazed as Moran seared the half-formed curse invading James's flesh. Still other tendrils twisted and knifed through James like worms evading light. Moran drove the cleansing flame deep. Tears of pain leaked from the corner of James's wide eyes, but he clenched his jaw against any further screams.

"I know it hurts," Moran whispered. "Just hold on."

Moran's own muscles trembled with the exertion of channeling so much heat and power so precisely. His nerves burned, but he kept a tight control on the force surging through him into James. Sweat poured down his chest and back. He tasted smoke in his lungs and felt an electrical fire flaring up behind his eyes.

The somnilium and the violet curses ignited to white flames and then died to darkness.

At last, Moran felt James's heartbeat kicking furiously and his breath come fast. Tension returned to his muscles, and he glared past Moran's restraining hand into his face.

Moran released him and once again locked his power away within his body.

His chest felt like raw meat and his head blazed like it was full of burning bees. He wanted to drop, but there was James in his bed glaring at him. And Moran knew he wasn't going to get any rest anytime soon.

"What the hell was that?" James croaked.

"A flame cleansing." Moran forced himself up to his feet. Tremors vibrated through his right arm, and he shoved his hands into his pockets. "You were hit with more than a sedative. Someone bound a curse into the drug."

"What kind of curse?" James asked.

Moran found the pragmatism of the question almost annoying. James could have died twice over—ending up either gutted by a voracious curse or fried if Moran had lost his concentration. He'd been so damn close to dying, and all he could think was to ask for details. Didn't anything dampen his curiosity for even a minute?

And then Moran took in James's face. His lips were ashen, his pupils still dilated to black holes. He was scared. This was how he dealt with it.

"A parasitic nest," Moran replied. "They feed off a host—which would be you—while rebuilding internal organs and blood vessels to create a suitable environment for an invading body."

"An invading body? Like some kind of body snatcher or something?" James blanched and Moran simply nodded. If he'd found James even an hour later the curse would have been too deep to burn out. Who knew what the hell would have been growing inside him.

"Whatever was supposed to take up residence, it needed the nest to sustain it and protect it from your immune system. With the nest burned, you're out of the woods for now."

Moran poured a shot of bitter tea from his tin teapot into a clay cup. He handed it to James, who scowled at the cup but drank.

Moran watched him, unable to look away from the sleek body and angular face that he knew so well. The thought of someone—something—other than James animating that body horrified him.

And why hit James of all the people on the entire Storm Palace? Moran suspected he knew the answer, and it pissed him off.

"So what kind of shit have you gotten yourself mixed up in here?" Moran leaned against the wall.

"Good to know you're not going to stoop to sweet-talking me for information." James eyed him levelly, ready for a fight even though he was half dead and sprawling on a mat with nothing but a strip of red spandex protecting his bare flesh.

The kid had balls. Moran appreciated that about James, along with a few other things that his near nudity were reminding him of.

Moran couldn't keep his gaze from tracing the line of James's lean legs and tight ass. Slim muscle stretched over the sharp bones, lending a spare grace to the curve of his chest and length of his corded arms. Another man might have thought him too lanky, all angular planes and wild blond hair, but Moran found him beautiful.

It had been only four days since they'd last fucked, and yet Moran's body ached like he'd been waiting months. He forced himself to contemplate the battered mass of wires and circuits that had once been an overhead light. Screwing around right now would only confuse things for them both. He hadn't come here to kiss and make up with James. He was here to do a job.

"Look, James, I just saved your ass at the risk of blowing my cover. The least you could do is come clean with me."

"Oh, I'd forgotten." Sarcasm rang through James's voice. "My career doesn't justify risking my ass but providing information that furthers your career does."

"That is not what I said," Moran growled.

"But it's what you meant, isn't it?" James demanded.

"No, it's not." Moran forced himself to respond evenly. Obviously this wasn't just about tonight. James was still mad about three days ago. Hell, Moran was still mad about that fight, but this was just not the time to have it out. Even knowing that, Moran found himself saying, "The risks you've been taking haven't had shit to do with your career, James. They've been about proving something. I don't know what or why, but I do know reckless stupidity when I see it."

"Bullshit," James responded. "You think this is my problem but it's not! I'm just doing my job, the same job I've done for years. Yeah, I take risks, but I'm not an idiot! I turned the Maldvar Island job down on my own. And I've passed on plenty of other stories that I didn't feel qualified to cover. But I can handle the ones I take. You just can't get it through your head that I'm not some inept kid!"

They were having this same fucking argument again. Moran clenched his teeth against a string of obscenities.

"I don't think you're inept," Moran ground out. "Would I be asking you for information if I thought you were inept?"

James didn't have a response to that; he just gave Moran a wounded glare.

"If you think I can handle myself, then why did you bitch me out earlier?" James asked.

"Because—" Moran had to catch himself from blurting out something savage and angry. He'd already gone that route and it hadn't done either of them any good. If he

was honest, he would admit that what angered him was feeling helpless and afraid in the face of James's mortality. The same feelings fueled his darkest nightmares and arose from memories of burying another young lover and the recollection of cradling a dead body he'd thought was James's, and feeling utterly broken inside.

"I worry about you," Moran forced the words out. "It tears me up to get a call from the hospital and not know if you're going to pull through or not."

James stared at him through the dim gold light, then dropped his gaze down to the clay cup in his hand. He sipped a little more of the tea and made a face. He looked exhausted as he glanced back up at Moran.

"You think I don't worry about the same things, when you go off to work fighting demons and sorcerers?" James asked. "But I know that's just what you do — who you are."

"You shouldn't worry," Moran frowned down at his own scarred hand. "Being a cop, I at least have backup."

"Really?" James gave him an ironic smirk. "Who's your back up here? The little camel?"

Moran felt a slight flush color his face. He wasn't used to being challenged, and of course, James was right. No one had his back.

"All right, you got me." Moran realized he could use this to his advantage. "I'm hanging in the wind here, so I could really use your help."

He sat down on the mat beside James. Up close he could see the shadows of faded bruises beneath James's shaggy gold bangs. Not for the first time, he wished he could have been there to beat the shit out of the man who had assaulted James. As it was, he stroked James's hand, feeling the fine bones and sinewy strength.

"Yeah?" James's dark brown eyes met his gaze with a smoldering intensity that caught Moran's breath in his chest. An electrical thrill rushed over his body, making him suddenly very aware where James's hand rested next to his thigh.

But then James yawned and laid his head on Moran's shoulder. Moran glimpsed the bruised, scabbed welt where the somnolium dart had punched into James's shoulder blade. He'd be lucky if James could stay awake another half hour, much less get an erection. Moran forced himself to stare at the ugly bare wall and think of electrical wiring for a few moments.

"I didn't mean to endanger your cover. I was actually trying to be subtle about it all," James said softly. "Before I got jumped, I was looking for a casual opportunity to find you and talk to you."

"Missed me too much to stay away?" Moran teased.

"Yep, that was it exactly. Three days without you and I was crying myself to sleep." A smile twitched at the corners of James's mouth. "Seriously, what exactly are you investigating here, anyway?"

"If you're asking as a journalist you already know the answer," Moran informed him.

"The ever popular 'no comment.'" James nodded. Then he glanced up at Moran with an appraising look. "But it might have something to do with Marcus Saro?"

Moran guessed he should have expected James to have already figured that much out. Hell, he probably knew a lot more. He had a real knack for ferreting out secrets.

"Yeah, it might have something to do with Marcus Saro," Moran admitted.

"The name Finlay mean anything?" James asked. He yawned again, a big, toothy yawn, just like a kid.

"Should it?" Moran asked.

"That depends," James replied. "Are we going to work together on this or am I just an informant?"

"Are you offering to be my informant again?" Moran responded.

"As I remember, the job paid crap," James said.

"As I recall, you were giving it away for free last time," Moran replied. "Your civic duty or something like that."

"Well, my rent's gone up since then," James responded airily, and Moran smirked at the idea of James having any money problems. He'd inherited a fortune when his friend Tony Allmon died, but typical of James, he didn't consider the money really his. As far as Moran knew, he'd never used any of it.

"Utilities have been skyrocketing," James went on, "And my boyfriend won't let me move in with him."

"Really?" Moran arched a brow at the sudden suggestion. They'd never discussed moving in together, not seriously. "Is it because he knows you're a slob?" Moran asked.

James gave him a sour look.

"No, it's because he's afraid of making a long-term commitment to my ugly couch."

Moran laughed out loud. It *was* a damned ugly piece of furniture. James gave him a dopey, tired smile, seeming both sweet and sad at once.

"What would you suggest I throw in to sweeten the deal?" Moran inquired.

"Before we can move in together?" James sounded hopeful in his confusion, and Moran felt a little like an asshole for not having taken the suggestion seriously at all.

"One project at a time, Sparky," Moran responded. "What do you want in exchange for information about Marcus Saro?"

James scowled.

"I want an exclusive on the story once you've got your killer," James said. "I get to break the story."



"Done," Moran agreed. Pollar might not be thrilled about the deal, but it was better to have James working with them than against the department. And at least this way they'd control when the information came out.

"So, who's Finlay?" Moran asked.

James told him, and then recounted the rest of what he'd learned. Moran found the Rupen family tree of interest as well as the fact that the Storm Palace had been intercepting police transmissions. James stretched out on the mat as he spoke, and Moran pulled a blanket over his bare body. Despite his exhaustion, James was very precise. He had an eye for detail, even when he didn't know what it was that he was describing. He recognized the scar-like marking of binding spells, and he noted the peculiar behavior of the phoenixes despite the fact that he couldn't have seen the wound in Finlay's belly or known what strange traces had perfumed the man's blood.

"All of them were flying around him when he fell?" Moran asked just to be sure. He stroked James's hair almost absently. He hadn't realized what comfort he'd come to take in just feeling those golden, tousled locks against his dark fingers.

"Yeah." James closed his eyes, relaxing beneath Moran's touch. "I got a picture of it. It almost looked like they were trying to catch him...sounds crazy I know...but that's what happened."

Moran considered this, and then reluctantly he stood and lowered the flame of the oil lamp.

"I need to get out to the phoenix ledges," Moran decided.

"If you can carry a tripod and keep your head down, I can get you up there tomorrow," James murmured. "I'm supposed to take more photos...there's going to be a companion book to the film or something..." James's words trailed off.

Moran watched him for several moments, admiring the ease and innocence of his sleep.

At last Moran turned back to his small worktable. Silently, he assembled five silver-magus detonators and laid out slim sticks of C-4, wrapping them in silver foil like chewing gum. With droplets of his own blood and threads of spider silk, he bound the half-decayed and seeping spells that haunted the old wires and churning generators of the Storm Palace, and slowly he turned them to his own purpose.

An hour later, he slipped from the dormitory and crept down into the hot chasm of the engine rooms, blowing sleep spells over bored guards as he passed them. At the heart of the engine room, three lift engines blazed like molten gold towers. A hundred feet above Moran's head, spikes shot out from each of the towers and converged upon a blinding sphere.

Moran squinted against the searing light. Lifting his right hand, he felt the millions of white-hot enchantments whirling around each other in an inferno of power and precision. Perfectly balanced blessings and curses clashed in its core, throwing off plumes of electrons like solar winds.

He'd never encountered a spell-forge like the one that powered the Storm Palace's flight. It was a work of art as much as a masterpiece of technical sorcery. Moran felt a brief wave of regret for the harm he intended to do to something so rare and beautiful. And for an instant he thought of how he was using James again. But he didn't have much of a choice, and it wasn't like James would back off now that he was on a story. Still now that Moran had his information, he knew that he was going to have to get James off the Storm Palace—even if he had to stuff James into a crate and portal him into police custody, he'd do it. Though he doubted that James would forgive him for something like that. He'd probably dump him for some erudite editor who indulged his every self-destructive desire.

Moran hated the thought of that, but not so much as he hated the idea of James dying. And yet for a moment, as he watched the balance of wild beauty and precision within the spell forge above him, he couldn't help but think of how wrong it was to simply overpower James and force his will upon him.

But not everybody could be a good guy, Moran reminded himself. Then he set to work undermining the most beautiful spells he'd ever laid eyes upon.

When Moran at last lay down beside James, he closed his eyes and hoped that somehow he could share the other man's unburdened dreams.

## Chapter Five

James woke on a thin mat in a dim room. His heart raced as a piercing screech rose through the air. For a confused instant he remembered the scream of sirens, and he thought he'd been trapped in a demon pit again. Then the heavy, hot body next to him shifted and mumbled soft obscenities about teakettles. In some distant room someone silenced the kettle. James's heart slowed and he relaxed, rolling his back into closer contact with Moran's chest and hips.

"Are you awake?" James asked softly.

"No." Moran's breath warmed the back of his head. "I just talk a lot in my sleep."

James smiled at the response. His shoulder throbbed and his knee ached slightly, but all things considered, those were minor discomforts. The feeling of Moran's warm body against his own occupied his senses.

Moran's muscular arm draped over James's stomach. Thick chest hair tickled the skin of his back and buttocks as Moran shifted against him and settled. He'd taken the simple pleasure of that contact for granted over the last year, but now it seemed dear.

Memories of the previous night hung in the back of his mind, and he knew that if he took a moment to concentrate on them anxiety and curiosity would propel him up and out to face his present circumstances. But James didn't want to rush into the new day just yet. Leisurely moments just lying beside Moran were too rare and precious to destroy.

"You still asleep too?" Moran asked.

"I'm out like a light," James replied.

"That's a tragedy. I'd feel bad about taking advantage of you while you slept," Moran said. His heavy hand grazed James's hip in a languorous caress.

"You'd feel worse if you didn't, I'll bet." James arched, brushing his ass against Moran's thick erection. "Anyway, I'm a big boy. I should be able to handle it."

Moran gave a soft appreciative sigh and pulled James closer with a flex of his arm.

"You are amazingly resilient, but you aren't invulnerable." Moran sounded thoughtful and distant for a moment. "You take crazy chances sometimes."

"Really? You think I'm in danger of getting humped by a hell cop?"

Moran bowed his head over James's shoulder and James almost expected him to bite. But instead, he kissed the nape of James's neck, rough stubble grazing sensitive skin and sending a shudder of pleasure down James's spine. "You're too damn cocky, you know that?"

James couldn't keep from smirking despite Moran's slightly annoyed tone.

"I'd say you were pretty cocky yourself." He wagged his ass against Moran's blazing hot dick again. Moran's reply caught in his throat, and his hips rocked almost involuntarily against James's body.

"Seriously," Moran's voice was rough and low. "You could be in real trouble here—"

"Damn it, Moran!" James snapped. "Are we going to screw? Or do you just have a hard-on from imagining the long lecture you're going to give me? Because I didn't wake up from the first decent night's sleep I've had in a week to listen to some patronizing bullshit!"

Moran was silent, and James could feel him seething behind him. His hands felt like iron brands where they rested against James's skin.

"Fine," Moran ground out at last. "You want to fuck. We'll fuck."

Moran's hands dug into the muscles of his ass, spreading him to the cold squirt of lubricant without preamble, as if he really was testing just how much James could handle. Light caresses and gentle kisses were forgotten in an intensity of force and drive. Moran fucked him with a silent determination that startled James. And angered him a little.

They'd never been like this before. Their sex was often eager and sometimes too rambunctious for James's bedsprings, but it had never been so cold or impersonal. James was used to catching Moran grinning at him. He was used to laughing, at times almost playing with the hot lengths of Moran's body. He was used to deep kisses and the occasional laughter.

But this felt like they were strangers. Like Moran was only using his body for physical relief and nothing else, like he was just pissing in a public toilet.

Two could play at that game.

James took him like a challenge, bucking into Moran's steady thrusts, setting their pace faster and harder. A breathless West Islander obscenity escaped Moran's lips as he pumped like a machine bent on reducing James to gasping ecstasy. They ground and pounded almost heartlessly, as if they wanted the other to feel it for days to come. Moran groaned and worked James expertly, pumping him to a blind, sweating climax

and then came with a gush of semen and a wounded gasp. He pulled away almost immediately. James lay still, feeling raw and stunned.

"All right, tough guy, enough fun. You want to see this through, then we need to get a move on."

Moran was already on his feet pulling on his pants. He lit one of the lamps and James flinched at the flare of light.

"The toilet is through that door." Moran indicated a narrow panel that James had assumed hid a closet or shoe rack.

"Where are you going?" James asked.

"I need to talk to Auntie Moon, tell her that I'm taking the morning off," Moran said. James had a hazy recollection of a tiny spry woman talking to Moran last night.

"I'll see what I can find for you to wear," Moran added. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

James simply nodded and then Moran was gone.

James found a cold-water tap in the tiny cupboard that housed Moran's toilet and did his best to clean himself up. His hair stuck out in strange directions and the smell of sex hung over him.

James massaged the thick scar tissue of his right knee absently. The thin mat hadn't offered much cushion when they'd been down grinding and scraping. A week ago he and Moran never would have fucked like they just had, not even when Moran was annoyed. Something had certainly changed.

All James could think of was that Moran had handed down that asinine ultimatum. He'd been high-handed but perfectly clear about what would happen if James went to the Maldvar Islands; it would be over between them.

James frowned at the thought.

Of course James hadn't gone—he'd never intended to—but maybe Moran had assumed. And for his part, James had been too angry to tell Moran otherwise. He'd just packed and left for the Storm Palace.

But if Moran had spent the last three days thinking James had gone to Maldvar despite him, then he might have decided that their relationship was over. He would have spent three days cutting James out of his life and heart.

James couldn't imagine letting go of Moran—certainly not in less than a week—but Moran was a proud guy, and he was hard in ways that James couldn't understand. He never talked to or about his biological family, and even his dead lover, Bill, scarcely merited a mention most of the time. Moran was very good at putting things behind him.

James wasn't about to just let Moran forget about him—about them.

Then, despite himself, James snorted as, unbidden, he imagined himself handing Moran a big flowery scrapbook—like the one his mother always dragged out—full of

photos of the two of them together. Or worse yet, making Moran sit through a slideshow with schmaltzy music playing in the background.

There'd be a lot of pictures of the two of them shooting hoops and lounging on the beach at Marine Park. And, yeah, maybe more pictures taken in hospital rooms than James would have wanted. But what was he supposed to do about that?

James glanced at the discarded wad of red spandex that lay beside the sleeping mat. Would that merit the slideshow?

James shook his head. He was probably just tired and sore and blowing things out of proportion because he'd thought he'd made a safe, sane choice in going to the Storm Palace, and still he'd ended up being hunted and shot at.

Moran returned a few minutes later with a pair of black overalls and two bowls of murky orange porridge that James recognized as a traditional West Island breakfast. James dressed and ate the spicy gruel. He watched Moran, but found the man aggravatingly difficult to read. He seemed more interested in some machine parts than saying anything to James.

"So, are we okay?" James asked at last.

"What?" Moran glanced up at him from his tool belt. As far as James could tell he was packing some weird wires and a couple packs of silver-wrapped gum.

"You and me." James felt awkward meeting Moran's clear blue eyes. "Are we okay?"

"Sure." Moran arched a dark brow at James. "Unless you're still feeling that dart from last night?"

That was the last place James wanted to go with the conversation.

"No. I'm fine, especially for...what time is it anyway?" The dim room offered no hint of the hour. It could have been noon or two in the morning. James wondered what odd circadian rhythms had developed among the workers and demons residing in this perpetually sunless catacomb.

Moran glanced to his steel gray wristwatch.

"Four forty-five in the a.m." He grabbed a thick jacket with the words *Magic Moon Electricians* screen printed across the back.

Not even five in the morning. James shoved his feet into the battered work boots Moran had provided. No wonder he felt tired and worn down. He glanced to Moran and noticed the name embroidered over the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Ready to go, Benji?" James asked.

Moran gave him a quick, crooked smile, but it didn't light his gaze.

"Where you lead, I follow."

\* \* \* \* \*

The service elevators shot like bullets through the hidden shafts riddling the Storm Palace. Journeys that would have taken a quarter of an hour in one of the flower-like residential lifts were complete in five minutes. James noted that as they rose higher, Moran took on an odd stance and moved with an unusual care when walking through the gilded, glittering halls.

Once James saw him very deliberately sidestep a certain pattern of tiles, and suddenly wondered if Moran was seeing things—strings of spells or security wards—that were as invisible as infrared light to James. Whatever it was, Moran seemed more on edge and wary.

Despite the early hour, dozens of demonic workgroups were up and hanging dark banners throughout the promenade. Considering how desolate the entire Storm Palace had seemed at this hour a day ago, James found this sudden frenzy of workers odd. But none of the work crews seemed to take any interest in him or Moran.

The two of them collected one of James's cameras from a locker and then stopped in James's room to gather his equipment. James handed Moran his copy of the memory card containing Finlay's last moments of life as well as the card containing Rupen's story about his adopted son. Moran secreted the memory cards into his tool belt. He watched James strip off the overalls and drag on his own jeans and T-shirt, but when James glanced to him, his gaze averted to a heap of test prints that James had developed from an assortment of his photos of the Storm Palace.

"This is Rupen?" Moran held up a picture of the old man. James nodded. It was one of the earliest photos James had taken and at the time he'd found the play of light across Rupen's gaudy signet ring interesting.

Now, knowing that many, if not all, the demons on the Storm Palace were enslaved by binding spells, the rubies glinting in that symbol of ultimate authority struck him as sinister. And yet Rupen's expression was warm and his body looked almost frail, propped between Dr. Shahe and Captain Kippling.

Moran studied the picture intently, even using one of James's photographic loupes to magnify and search it.

"Where was this taken?" Moran asked.

"Rupen's office." James zipped up his hooded jacket and then went to Moran's side to peer at the photograph. "Why?"

"Look at that display case on the bookshelf." Moran handed James the loupe. James quickly zeroed in on the glass display case, surrounded by leather-bound tomes. Red darts glinted inside.

James glanced up at Moran.

"You think Rupen darted me?" James asked. "Why would he? Especially after he went out of his way to tell me all about Finlay being an impersonator?"

Moran's jaw flexed as if fighting against a reply, and he made some quick flicking motion with his hand as if it ached.

"I don't know," Moran said at last. "But look, James, if I asked you to, would you leave the Storm Palace?"

*This again?*

"No one is going to try anything in broad daylight. They were going to too much trouble not to be seen by anyone —" James began.

"That's a no, then," Moran cut him off with an exasperated look.

"Would you leave if I asked you to?" James responded.

"I'm not the one who's been targeted."

"Even if you were," James replied. "You wouldn't just slink off with your tail between your legs."

"If I thought I might die I would," Moran replied. He tossed the picture down onto James's desk. "I don't know where you're getting this idea that I wouldn't."

"Maybe it's because I know you," James replied. Though if he was honest he had no evidence to support his claim. Moran wasn't the kind of man who seemed to feel the need to show off with exploits of courage or stupidity.

"Or maybe it's from watching too many action movies." Moran shook his head. "Honestly, James, I don't have any backup here and I've got a very bad feeling about those darts and you. That wasn't a random assault. The drug loaded into that dart was very rare and expensive, which means someone is going to a lot of trouble to take you down. That doesn't make me think that they're going to give up after one try."

"But there's no reason to target me."

"There's a reason," Moran said firmly. "We just don't know what it is. And we don't know who's behind it, which puts us in a very bad place here. If it is Rupen, then any one of the demons on the Storm Palace could be used to take you out, and I..." Moran didn't go on, but a deep pain flickered through his expression. He glared down at his big hands. "James, I'm not ordering you. I'm not yelling. I'm just asking. Please, don't stay here, where they have easy access to you."

That brought James up short. How dangerous did this have to be for Moran to actually plead with him? For the first time, James felt real uncertainty. It wasn't as if he had sorcery to call upon for protection, or even a gun. A couple of cameras and a flash knife made up his personal armory. Though it had been enough so far.

Well, last night aside.

But it was a repeat of last night that worried Moran. The only reason it didn't terrify James was that he refused to think on it too closely. If he did, then he suspected that he'd be terrified.

If Moran hadn't been there last night, then those demons would have taken him. And right now something else would have been living in his body. A sick feeling moved through James's stomach at that thought. And Moran was right; it could happen again, easily.

Leaving would be a smart move, but it grated against his pride.



He'd be walking out on a job and a story. He'd be admitting that there were things that scared him, that there were situations he couldn't handle. But on the other hand he might be saving his own life and maybe even proving to Moran that he wasn't a reckless kid.

"All right," James said at last. "But I have to give Lanna some kind of explanation, and if you want to get up to the phoenix ledge, you're going to need me as your cover."

Moran glanced up at him and James caught the look of thankful joy in his expression.

Suddenly James knew he was making the right decision. It wasn't easy to give up on a story, but that look made it seem right. He'd put Moran through a lot, he realized now, only thinking of his career—or really, his ego, because he could have been more careful if he hadn't been trying to prove how tough he was—and landing himself in hospital time and time again.

"But our deal still stands," James said firmly. "I get to break this story. And you'd better take great notes or something because you're going to have to be my informant now."

To his surprise Moran pulled him close and kissed him sweetly and deeply, taking his breath away and sending a warm heat flooding his belly.

"It's a deal," Moran whispered softly against his lips. James had to resist the urge to pull Moran to his bed and bask in his aroused approval.

They both still had work to do, and time didn't seem to be on their side.

"Okay, well, let me get you up to the phoenix ledge, and then I'll beat my hasty retreat." James stepped back reluctantly and pointed to the light stands propped up beside the decorative bookcase.

"I need an electrician to rig some kind of transformer for me so that I don't blow out my hot lights. Suzy's already melted one of her lights attempting to plug them straight into the Storm Palace power supply. I brought a couple portable batteries, but they aren't compatible with the lights or the palace outlets." James suddenly glanced back to Moran. "Can you actually do something like that? I mean you've got the outfit, but you're not really an electrician."

"I can manage a transformer," Moran replied with a smile that assured James he could do a lot more. He went to work with the power adaptors that James had brought and found useless. Moran opened plastic casings and spliced wires like it was child's play. For a moment James admired the delicate skill of his strong hands. Then he got to work, packing his bag and gathering the photographic supplies that he needed. He owned a number of tiny spy cameras as well as a couple of cheap, digital surveillance cameras.

It couldn't do any harm to plant a few of them on his way off the Storm Palace. Rupen's office would be a good place to start. If James could just get the cameras planted, he stood a chance of catching a lucky shot, or recording some telling exchange even from a remote location.

It could work. He'd just swing past on his way out, maybe with Lanna and Suzy. No one was likely to make a move on him with Suzy relentlessly rolling film.

Yeah, that would work. He could be recording a live feed before he was even off the Storm Palace.

"You worry me when you get that look on your face." Moran watched him levelly from where he knelt over a portable battery.

"What look?" James couldn't even pretend innocence and Moran scowled at his grin.

"Like a dog that just figured out how to open the refrigerator door."

James laughed at the thought of that, remembering back when he'd been a teenager and Moran—then a rookie cop and his first crush—had amused him with stories of his old retriever's all-day stake out of the refrigerator.

The dog had died just before James had left for college and Moran had never adopted another.

"Don't worry. I plan to share." James held up two of his surveillance cameras. "Interested in live streaming images from Rupen's office?"

"I can't say I'm not, Sparky." Moran nodded and they spent a few minutes working out the most secure frequency to use as well as access codes. James admired the sleek piece of technology Moran had concealed in his tool belt. It looked like nothing more than a small river rock, but as Moran moved his finger over it, faint golden symbols gleamed up from deep below the stone's surface. After a moment Moran picked up the feed from both cameras.

"How did you do that?" James gazed at the small stone.

"Magic." A wry smile curved Moran's lips. "And about sixty K of decoding microprocessors and signal amplifiers. The thing is probably worth more than me as far as the home office is concerned."

"Nah," James replied. "It wouldn't look half as good as you do in a suit."

Once they'd gathered James's supplies and he'd packed a bag, they took the service elevator up to the very height of the Storm Palace. As they rocketed up, James's stomach felt like it had slapped into his colon but he appreciated the speed, if not the sudden shriek of brakes and hammer-fall stop.

Moran hefted James's light stands over his shoulder gingerly as if the steel tripod legs and battered light housings might bruise in his grip. He moved very carefully through the pearly corridors of the upper levels, and again James wondered how much sorcery surrounded them. What kinds of spells did Moran deftly avoid that he walked straight into?

Twice they were stopped by security and James tried to look casual, despite his pounding pulse and tense nerves. But the demonic security men were friendly, having already grown used to James carting his cameras around the Storm Palace. They barely

noted Moran beyond a glimpse at his work pass. Two of the demon's mugged for a photo while Moran charged the portable battery.

Then they escorted James and Moran to the colossal iron doors that opened to the phoenix ledges. Yards and yards of pearl inlay and gold filigree encrusted the arching doors with images of thousands of phoenixes soaring among iridescent clouds.

Generations before, the huge doors had probably been heaved open by enslaved demons. Massive chains still dangled from the crossbars. But today James and Moran simply stepped through a swinging panel secreted in the left door, which would have been used by the servants who once attended the vast aviary.

Still, frigid air enfolded James and a deep animal smell filled his mouth and nostrils.

Inside, the space opened like a strange cathedral, shadows and shafts of light hiding as much as illuminating the walls and high-vaulted ceiling. The bright shafts of morning light shot through countless portals, which studded the walls and ceiling in a series of rings. The portals resembled large circular windows, ringed in bands of golden symbols. But unlike windows, they allowed the phoenixes to pass in and out of the Storm Palace's shelter without disturbing the delicate balance of pressurized air inside.

As James watched, one of the silvery birds swept down and passed through a portal as seamlessly as the light gleaming across its body. The phoenix soared so high above James that it almost looked like an origami crane folded from glittering tinfoil. Then it circled slowly down to settle on one of the thousands of geometrically spaced ledges that scalloped the walls.

Once every one of the thousands of ledges would have gleamed from decades of accumulated enamel-like droppings and displayed a silky white nest.

Now most of the ledges were as pitted and blackened as decaying teeth. Wind-flung seeds had claimed most of the surfaces. Weeds crowned the ledges, weeping strings of lichens hung below, and ivy latticed the pearly walls. Colonies of ghostly blue flowers spread papery petals in the sunlight.

"Damn," Moran whispered softly. He slowly lowered the light stands and portable battery to the floor.

"There's something kind of beautiful about all this gold and pearl sheltering wild flowers and weeds," James commented.

Moran simply nodded, but his attention was clearly focused on the floor.

James glanced down but only saw a spiraling decorative inlay of brass and marble. Moran crouched. Very slowly, he reached out and curled his hand into a shaft of sunlight as if he were catching a cord or rope of some kind.

"Is there something there?" James asked quietly.

Moran didn't move; he only shifted his gaze to meet James's for an instant and then returned his full attention to the spiraling pattern of the floor.

James saw his lips move, but he heard nothing, and then suddenly thousands of incandescent gold symbols lit the air. They swirled and turned like cogs in some vast arcane clockwork, linking each of the gleaming portals to a blazing sphere that floated overhead and blazed like a small sun.

Reflexively, James shot off a quick string of photos, though he doubted that his camera would capture much more than tracers of light against deep blue shadows.

Then Moran murmured a hard, grating word and the entire blazing vision blinked out of sight.

"What was that?" James asked.

"It's a trap," Moran said and then added quickly, "Don't worry, you're perfectly safe. Even with those demonically enhanced cameras of yours, you're not packing enough sorcery to trigger it." Moran clenched his right hand and buried it into his coat pocket as he slowly rose to his feet. His dark skin seemed drained of color, and he stood very still.

"What about you?" James asked.

Moran gave him a wry smile.

"Well, I haven't triggered it yet..."

"What kind of trap is it?" A cold dread coiled through James's guts.

"Defiantly not OSHA-approved," Moran responded as if it were in the least bit funny.

"Seriously, Moran. What's it going to do?" James demanded. Just the fact that Moran didn't want to tell him made him worried.

"Nothing," Moran replied coolly, "because I'm not going to set it off."

"Stop being an asshole and just tell me!" James glared at Moran, and Moran shrugged.

"It'll activate the portals simultaneously and they'll rip me apart," Moran said flatly. "It would be quick, less than a second. And no mess to clean up."

"Fuck! You've got to get out of here—" James's heart jerked in his chest and his pulse raced.

"I'm fine," Moran cut him off with a studied calm. "As long as I keep to the path, it won't even register my presence. I might even be able to make it work for me."

"What path?" James scanned the floor but couldn't guess what constituted a path.

"That's the question of the day." Moran sounded grimly amused.

"Shit, Moran—"

"It's fine, Sparky," Moran said. "I do this kind of thing all the time. It just means I can't skip around turning cartwheels. You'll have to do that for me." Moran gestured carefully to the phoenix ledges. "Can you get a couple of pictures of that wall? And if you can reach them I could use a few of those blue flowers."

"The flowers?" James frowned at the clusters of pale blue blossoms.

"Yeah, grab a couple, will you?"

James nodded and raced to the ledges. Iridescent colors swirled along the walls, making them nearly as lustrous as the inside of an abalone shell or a gasoline spill. Anxiety lent him a shaky, nervous speed as he hauled himself up onto one of the overgrown ledges and then scramble across to another where the flowers bloomed in a cerulean mass. They looked like poppies. James photographed them and then picked a few and tucked them into his jacket pocket before clambering back down to the floor.

When he turned around, Moran was gone, and for a terrible, sick instant he thought Moran had been silently torn away by the portals. Then he noticed a shadow moving through the shafts of sunlight and realized that Moran was prowling carefully along the curving perimeter of the wall.

"What the hell are you doing?" James demanded.

"Messing around with the wiring," Moran replied. "It's a hobby I took up to pass the time while my lover was out pulling crazy stunts."

"You're a laugh a minute, funny boy." James scowled at him. "You're giving me a fucking heart attack! Why can't you just stay still and let me do whatever it is that needs doing?"

Moran paused and glanced to him with one dark brow raised.

"Now, see that's the question I've been asking you for months."

"This is not even remotely the same thing." James's voice actually shook with anger.

Moran had the gall to laugh.

"Come here and help me out." Moran's tone was disarmingly warm and relaxed. James frowned at him and strode to his side.

Despite the chill in the air, a sheen of perspiration showed on Moran's skin. The scars on his right hand stood out, red and raw, and faint wisps of steam rose from his fingers. Somehow, he seemed at ease—even amused—despite it all.

"Are you actually enjoying this little role reversal?" James demanded.

Moran's smile assured him that he was, but Moran shook his head. "Nah, I was just appreciating the view of your ass while you were climbing."

"And you'd like an encore performance?" James asked.

"Indeed I would, Sparky." Moran pointed about twenty feet up to one of the few ledges not overgrown with vegetation. A huge downy, white nest dominated the outcropping, and from it a phoenix regarded James with dark orange eyes.

"Her name is Miss Stinky-Feathers, and she's known to the police," Moran told him. "She has quite a temper. So keep clear of her beak. I just need a picture of her nest and a reading from this." Moran handed James something that looked like a glass thermometer filled with pale fluids. "Just point it at her nest and hit the button here. You should get a reading in a second or two. If I'm right, it should go dark violet and the residue number will be between two twenty and two fifty."

James frowned at the small device.

"Are you going to tell me what any of that means? What I'm taking a reading of?"

"You're trying to get a match to part of the spell residue that was found on Finlay's body and in the drug you were darted with last night," Moran told him.

For a moment James was taken aback.

"Finlay and I were injected with the same curse?" A shudder snaked down James's spine. "The parasitic nest thing?"

"Yeah, only it had been in Finlay for years before someone cut it out of him and tossed him." Moran's smile dropped as he met James's gaze. "I don't know why, but someone obviously had you lined up to be his replacement."

"But for what?" James shoved the device into his jacket pocket and swung up onto one of the verdant ledges. He scrambled onto a thick patch of grassy sod and yellow dandelions. "What was supposed to use that nest?"

Glancing back he saw the Moran really was watching him intently.

"If I knew I'd tell you," Moran replied. "But I suspect that whatever it was, it required a transference vessel to allow it to be contained and implanted into the nest in Finlay's body or the one in your body." Moran's gaze flickered to the phoenix in the nest.

James tested the strength of several branches of ivy before finding one he could use to brace himself as he clambered up to the next level of ledges. The phoenix tensed and James went still for a moment, averting his gaze from her and doing his best not to scare the bird out of the nest.

He gazed down at Moran.

"So you think this transference vessel had something to do with this phoenix?" James asked. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the bird watching him with its head cocked and its saber-like beak raised.

"I think it's her egg," Moran replied. He made a motion as if brushing aside an insect, but James suspected that Moran was deflecting something sorcerous and unseen.

"You know the legends of phoenixes?" Moran asked.

"Kind of. They arise from their own ashes and live forever or something," James replied. "But that's obviously not true or this place would still be full of them."

"They're not supposed to be immortal. Stories are full of them being shot from the skies, and burning up in flames," Moran replied. "They die, but they're reborn into their own egg at the moment of their demise."

James thought that amounted to the same thing as living forever. The bird still watched him but with a little less agitation. James plucked the yellow head from a dandelion and considered tossing it down at Moran. But with all the invisible spells whirling around them he thought better of it.

"If they are always reborn, why are they on the verge of extinction?" James asked.

"Because they're only reborn if there's an egg for their spirit to transfer into," Moran told him. "If someone destroyed the eggs or killed the hatchling phoenixes before they are mature enough to lay an egg, then when they die they're gone forever." Moran's gaze met James's, and there was something in his expression that seemed both tender and haunted.

"Everything dies," Moran added softly, thoughtfully.

James knew he wasn't thinking of just birds, and he probably wasn't thinking of himself and maybe not even of James. Moran rarely spoke of his dead lover, Bill, and James only remembered the man as a distant shadow in his adolescence.

He'd seemed like ancient history that had nothing to do with himself and Moran. But suddenly James wondered how devastating it must have been to come home to a suicide. How hard it would have been to wait in a hospital only to be told that nothing could be done.

Below him Moran made another brushing motion but went on talking easily. "The phoenixes dying out doesn't mean that the core of their legend isn't true. Rising from fire and ashes might be an exaggeration but there are at least a dozen mentions of phoenix eggs in the oldest Curse Grimoires. They were always used as vessels, usually to hold the soul of a ghost or a demon, until it could be reborn into a new body."

James considered this for a moment as he absently popped the flower from another dandelion. Looking around he could see into at least twenty of the thirty-five nests. In each a single silver egg gleamed. Only Miss Stinky-Feathers presided over an empty nest. The phoenix even poked at the weave of lichen and feathers that made up her nest as if looking for something.

"So someone wants to...what? Grow some demon in my body?"

"That I don't know," Moran admitted. "But I'd rather not find out the hard way."

"Yeah, me either," James admitted.

With a sidelong glance James noted that their conversation seemed to have bored the phoenix. The bird had at last tucked her head beneath a long silver wing. Sunlight played across her reflective body, turning the silver plumes molten gold. James could see how people might think phoenixes were made of fire, seeing the way this one flashed with light.

He crept closer, leaning over the edge of the ledge he stood on and steadying himself against the reedy trunk of a sapling fig. He snapped several photos of the phoenix and her nest, and then he took Moran's reading.

The liquid darkened to a rich purple and digits flickered in the glass, at last flashing two-four-one. Just as Moran had predicted.

"Does she have an egg?" Moran asked.

"Doesn't look like it," James replied.

"I didn't think so."

James climbed down quickly after that and returned the device to Moran. He handed over the slightly crushed remains of the blue poppies he'd picked. Violet pollen peppered his palms. He wiped his hands on his jeans.

"Got all the souvenirs you need?" James asked as Moran packed the poppies away in a zipper lock plastic bag.

"More than." Moran looked pleased despite the obvious strain of being in the midst of a sorcerous trap. "The bone poppies are a definite bonus."

James remembered hearing something about bone poppies before, something about a drug made from them.

"Somnium." James suddenly remembered.

"Good memory." Moran looked impressed.

But the knowledge didn't quite fit for James.

"You're not thinking that we've stumbled into some kind of drug ring?" James asked incredulously.

"Nah," Moran shook his head. "But somnium accelerates spells and curses, and it's relatively easy to distill if you've got a spell forge and bone poppies—" Moran suddenly went quiet, cocking his head back to the doors. James followed his motion in time to see Lanna step into the vast chamber. Her silky sundress looked far too skimpy for the chill of the phoenix ledges. Suzy followed her, lugging a floodlight and camera and dressed for winter.

"James!" Lanna called. She waved and then hugged herself against the cold. "I was looking all over for you last night. Where were you?"

James didn't need to see Moran's warning glance. He had no intention of getting Lanna involved in all of this.

"I decided to check out the lower levels. It's a really interesting place. Have you been there yet, Suzy?"

Suzy glanced up from the eyepiece of her film camera long enough to give him a nod.

"We didn't stay long," Lanna informed him. "It's a rather unsavory setting, and there wasn't much to do but be gawked at by brutes and demons. More your thing than mine."

James supposed she had him there.

"And who's your friend?" Lanna's gaze traced Moran's muscular body with brazen flirtation, but without the least hint of recognition, which relieved and surprised James. Lanna had seen Moran once before—in fact, she'd seen him lying naked and beaten beside Tony Allmon's ruined corpse—but she'd been so strung out on venom that night that James didn't know how much she really remembered. James had tried to forget it himself just for the sake of ever being able to sleep through the night without waking in a cold sweat.



"He's an electrician I met while I was down in the staff quarters," James supplied. Moran nodded casually to Lanna and then bowed his head over a yellow circuit analyzer as if it required all of his attention.

"I got him to fix the adaptors so we could charge up the batteries and power the lights," James went on.

For the first time that James could remember, Suzy actually looked interested in a human being. She lowered her camera and considered Moran. Moran slouched and offered both the women a bland smile, doing his best to appear unremarkable. From James's point of view it didn't seem possible. Moran's body was too imposing and his face too harsh to pass as either benign or bland.

Still, Lanna was accustomed to the company of outstanding men, and as a rule she meted out her attention based on the expense of their watches and shoes. Right now she seemed too cold to even bother with that. Suzy, however, regarded Moran like a retriever eyeing a fire hydrant. Suddenly she hefted up her lighting fixture and strode to Moran's side.

"I need these at full power," Suzy stated without bothering to introduce herself or even greet Moran. James almost laughed at how direct and anti-social the woman was.

"Sure," Moran told her. "Bring me Mr. Sparks's portable battery and I can fix you up."

As Suzy darted to the heavy battery case James shot Moran an annoyed glance. They were supposed to be getting out of here, not lingering in a possible deathtrap.

"We were about to leave," James reminded Moran.

"This'll be quick," Moran replied, and he had the audacity to wink at James. Suzy gave James a cool glower as she dragged the heavy battery across the gleaming floor to Moran's side. Did she really think he was trying to sabotage her by stealing off with an electrician?

"You shouldn't stay on my behalf," Moran added amiably. "Especially since you were thinking of taking the portal back down to Parmas City."

"You're going back to Parmas?" Lanna glanced to James with concern.

"He was going to see his doctor," Moran replied before James could get a word in. "He was really sick last night. He worried the hell out of my auntie when she saw him."

"James! Why didn't you say?" Lanna shivered and then looped her arm around James. "Come on. Neither of us needs to be here. Suzy and that man can manage on their own. I'm taking you straight to the portal center!"

James couldn't offer any argument, though he wanted to flip Moran off.

Instead he hefted his pack and followed Lanna out from the cold, cathedral-like quiet of the phoenix ledges into a balmy hall, newly hung with black silk. Ominous strains of a funereal dirge drifted from the sound system. Ten minutes later they stood in the lower promenade confronted by a set of solidly locked doors.

"Gregory announced Marcus Saro's death late last night. I suppose that's why it's closed." Lanna frowned at the hand-lettered sign on the door of the portal center. "It looks like the whole Storm Palace is in mourning. The portal center's definitely locked up tight."

James frowned at the vast stretches of black silk hanging like immense banners from the ceiling. Silver crests of phoenixes glinted against the darkness. This was what the work crews had been busy doing this morning, draping the entire promenade in black and closing the only means of transport to and from the Storm Palace.

James suddenly wondered how much of a coincidence it was that he'd evaded his attackers last night and now his only means of escape was locked down.

The low drones of a funeral march drifted overhead. James glanced to a group of passing demons with an uneasy apprehension. Moran was not going to like this.

"How sick are you feeling?" Lanna asked.

"Not too bad, really," James assured her.

"You look" – Lanna tilted her head studying James for a moment – "like you're trying not to let me see how bad you feel."

"I'm more tired than anything."

Lanna shook her head.

"I'm sure that if we explain that you're ill to Gregory, he'll have the portal center opened for you," Lanna assured him.

Instinctively James wanted to keep clear of Rupen and his security captain, Kipling, but at the same time he realized that he might as well take advantage of the situation. If he couldn't get off the Storm Palace, then he might as well get into Rupen's office and plant one of his cameras.

"It couldn't hurt to ask," James agreed. Though he had a creeping sensation that it could.

"Oh, and there's something I wanted to show you!" Lanna added with a sudden smile. "You won't believe what I discovered last night."

"What?" James asked.

"The answer to your question about who stands to inherit the Storm Palace now that Saro is dead."

"Really?" James knew he shouldn't sound so surprised, but Lanna wasn't exactly a girl detective.

Lanna just smiled in a satisfied manner.

Ten minutes later as they strolled through the long hallway on their way to Rupen's office, Lanna pointed out the series of portraits on the wall.

"That's Garen Rupen." Lanna indicated a painting of a scowling, gray-haired man. "Remind you of anyone?"

"My third-grade principal?" James offered.

Lanna rolled her eyes and pointed to another, larger painting, which portrayed Garen at his table surrounded by symbols of wealth, prosperity, and power. Exotic fruit and brilliantly plumed game birds spilled from silvery platters. A group of men raised glasses in tribute to him, and James recognized a very young Gregory Rupen among them. Only one woman appeared in the scene. She was obviously a morax demon, depicted standing to Garen's left, holding the golden hand of a young half-demon boy. The child already wore hooked fighting rings and bore that familiar, imposing glower.

James glanced from the golden-skinned boy to Garen Rupen, comparing their features. The resemblance was shocking.

"Kippling?" James asked.

"Captain Kippling," Lanna confirmed. "Interesting, isn't it?"

James nodded. But what did it mean? If Kippling was responsible for Finlay's death, perhaps hoping to claim his rightful inheritance after Gregory Rupen's death, then why drag James into it, with drugged darts and parasitic curses?

"Rupen knows all of this, right?" James asked.

"He's the one who confirmed my suspicion," Lanna nodded. "But he didn't believe that Kippling could be responsible for Saro's death. He's sure it was suicide."

James was certain that it wasn't, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Are those bone poppies in the vases?" James leaned a little closer. The artist had painted the blossoms in with abrupt strokes but James was almost certain he recognized the flowers. And as he looked intently he realized that dozens of the ghostly blossoms filled the shadows surrounding Garen. And the man held a silver egg in one hand.

The hiss of hydraulic brakes warned James that a lift had arrived. He and Lanna both turned back to see a gleaming glass lift settle like a huge lotus flower. Rupen and his physician emerged from the blossom.

Lanna brightened at the sight of the two men. James felt something cold slither through his belly.

"Gregory!" Lanna hurried to the elegant old man's side. "We were looking for you!"

"Were you?" Rupen's gaze flickered to James.

"James isn't feeling good at all," Lanna informed him. "I think he needs to see a doctor, but the portal center is closed."

"Oh my dear," Gregory patted Lanna's arm gently. "You mustn't fret. James certainly doesn't need to leave the Storm Palace to have the attention of the very best physician. Dr. Shahe will take care of him at once."

"Oh Gregory!" Lanna hugged the old man. "Thank you!" Rupen stared past Lanna at James with a fixed smile. Dr. Shahe strode to James's side. His bland, impassive face utterly belied the cold metal gun muzzle he discreetly shoved into James's side. James tensed and froze in place.

"Never fear, Mr. Sparks. I'll have you feeling like a new man in no time," Dr. Shahe said.

James almost called out to Lanna, but he stopped himself. All he was likely to accomplish by involving her at this point was to get her shot.

"Sounds good to me," James replied. Rupen nodded at him with a look of almost fatherly approval, then his attention returned to Lanna.

"Now, my dear." Rupen wrapped his arm around her and gently ushered her to the gleaming lift. "I'll be holding a memorial ceremony for my son on the promenade in an hour, and I was hoping you would attend. It's black dress, of course."

"Of course," Lanna agreed. "I'll change at once. Would it be too rude if I brought Suzy along to record it?"

"Not at all," Rupen assured her. "It does my heart good to see so many young people here on the Storm Palace. I'll meet you both on the promenade in an hour. If he's feeling up to it, I'll bring our dear Mr. Sparks as well."

"James will claim he's fine no matter what. Don't you believe him. If he's sick, make him stay in bed." Lanna stepped into the lift.

"Not to worry, my dear," Rupen said. "Mr. Sparks shan't get the better of me."

Lanna waved to James as the glass door closed. He waved back like an automaton. The lift dropped out of sight, and Dr. Shahe dug the pistol into James's back a little harder.

"No fast moves," the doctor hissed in his ear. James lowered his arm very slowly.

"For such a smart young man," Rupen chided him, "you certainly don't have much of a sense of survival."

## Chapter Six

The halls blazed with luminous symbols. Long golden threads dripped from them like the stinging cells of jellyfish. Moran knelt, pretending to tie his shoe as one of the security spells drifted overhead. A chill slithered down his spine as tendrils brushed over his bowed neck and back.

It was hunting, but Moran wasn't the kind of purebred sorcerer whose power blazed like a morning star. And for once, he was glad not to be so endowed. If he'd been a scorcher like Jay Yervant, he'd already have been enveloped by hundreds of security spells.

As it was he could mask his presence by simply manipulating the Storm Palace's vast web of circuitry and wiring.

Moran brushed the floor with his right hand, finding the tracery of old voodoo-wiring and sending a pulse of power coursing along it. A light on the far wall flared and the security spell drifted toward the sorcerous flare. Other spells followed it, opening a path.

Moran straightened and strode ahead.

A toothy young demon in a black security uniform smiled at him, obviously unaware of the glistening masses of spells and deadly tentacles swirling all around them. Moran smiled back and flashed his work ID like a badge.

"I'm supposed to replace a faulty light in room number five-zero-five. Any idea where it is?" Moran asked.

"Lord Rupen's office?" The demon stood straighter just saying the name. The parasitic binding spell encircling his throat blazed white and pulsed like a leech drawing in a deep gulp of blood. "Take a left and down to the end of the portrait gallery."

Moran thanked the demon and made his way quickly past the security spells to the office. Moran paused in front of the door. He'd seen military security vaults with fewer guardian wards and security spells. Nearly every inch of the door blazed with arcane light. All nine names of death flared and flashed before Moran.

The lock bristled with alarms, assuring Moran that there would be no way to pick it, not in his lifetime. Moran swore under his breath and glared at the door. Then he recalled a trick James had described using when he'd needed to get into a locked library.

Moran glanced to the dull brass hinges. A few wards were anchored across them but nothing Moran hadn't dealt with before. Moran reeled a little spell-filament—a highly conductive spider silk and silver blend—from his tool belt and very carefully spliced and rerouted a few wards. After that he simply removed the hinge pegs and popped the murderous door off its hinges. The interior of the door was well crafted but perfectly harmless wood. He easily pulled the door back into the frame.

And he was in.

Moran supposed that it made sense that James would know just how to get into a dangerous spot. Still, Moran couldn't help but appreciate James's ingenuity; it was easier to acknowledge James's resourcefulness knowing that he'd portaled back to the safety of Parmas City.

Moran turned his attention to the office. Morning light poured in from several windows, illuminating a wall of leather-bound books and a massive desk. Globe maps of various demon realms stood on a display shelf, as did a variety of old brass flight instruments. At the far end of the room, an elderly parrot dozed in its cage. The air smelled like aged leather and musky cologne.

Moran moved carefully through the space, holding his hands out ahead of him as if he were blind. He concentrated intensely, feeling for the slightest shiver of sorcery against the tips of his fingers. There was nothing he could easily see, but some spells were far too subtle to easily spot. Moran made his way to the desk, and there he discovered dozens of dark violet incantations inlaid into the wood grain.

If he hadn't spent years of his career breaking cryptomystic spells, Moran might have just given up right then. But most of these spells were old—made up of codes that had been cracked during the revolution. Only their sheer number lent them a truly intimidating aura.

Moran stretched his fingers out wide and laid his right hand directly down into the center of the incantations as if he had every right to access. Chains of violet spells sprang up around him and the air tasted of acid and smoke as the incantations began to close in on him.

Moran drew up a rush of power from his chest. In the periphery of his concentration he could feel the brilliance and glory of the spell forge that powered the entire Storm Palace, but he ignored the temptation to divert so much power just to dismantle a simple lock. Not only would it set off a whole series of alarms, but Moran

wasn't sure he could channel that much power without frying from the inside out. Definitely a last resort.

Instead he caught the violet incantations between his fingers, feeling individual links in the long chains. Hissing little curses rushed over his scarred flesh, biting at him like fire ants. Moran ignored the discomfort and focused on the words-of-power at the core of the incantations. He dissolved whole chains of incantations simply by burning away the key symbols that bound them to the physical realm. The burn of acid and dark grasp of suffocation became abstract forms floating like smoke in the air before dissipating completely.

Steam rose off his fingers and his chest burned, but he didn't dare slow down. He did by hand what the hundreds of spells etched into the jeweled facets of a sorcerer's signet would have accomplish in an instant, and he knew he couldn't afford to pause. Finally, the last of the incantations collapsed back into the wood grain of the desktop and Moran dug into the drawers.

He was slightly disheartened to first discover Rupen's stash of porn. Glistening women wearing ball gags hung and knelt in a variety of demeaning positions. The next file Moran opened brimmed with copies of angry letters written to demonic rights advocacy organizations. And after that, he leafed through files cataloguing the decades of Rupen's various hobbies: exotic islands, spear fishing, young starlets, and antique guns. None of which helped Moran.

He found the records of Gregory Rupen's excesses and ledgers recording his dwindling income. The man was up to his ass in debt and teetered on bankruptcy.

Moran noted that it was getting lighter outside. He thought he could hear distant voices out in the hall. If he lingered much longer he was going to be caught. But he still hadn't found what he needed.

He riffled through the files in the next set of drawers, and then suddenly he discovered a file marked *J.Sparks*. Inside Moran found James's application for temporary access to the Storm Palace for the purpose of producing a nature documentary. There were several pictures of James, mostly taken from coverage of cross-country races. Moran couldn't help but notice how happy James looked exerting himself with abandon. He reminded Moran of some wild creature set free of a cage.

Beneath the photos lay a medical report. Despite the testament of scrapes, bruises, and scars, James was supremely healthy. Another report gave an even more glowing assessment of James's finances. He was worth a lot of money, more than even Moran had suspected.

A little internal alarm began to hum through Moran.

And then he found the inheritance papers.

Three days ago, Gregory Rupen had designated James Sparks his sole beneficiary and heir. Moran stared at the legal papers for several moments.

Rupen scarcely knew James, and Marcus Saro hadn't even been dead when Rupen had drawn up the papers...or rather Finlay, the con artist impersonating Marcus Saro,

hadn't died yet. The real Marcus Saro—the heir to the Saro family's vast wealth—had been dead for years. Only Rupen hadn't known that until a few days ago, when the police had started hunting for Finlay.

Then out of the blue Rupen decided to rewrite his will in favor of James Sparks, whom he knew nothing about except that he was a very healthy, wealthy young man. And Finlay, who was worth nothing but a long prison term, was mysteriously dissected and chucked out a window.

Rupen was definitely angling for money. But it wasn't as if by designating someone as his heir Rupen could access his heir's wealth.

Unless...

Moran's pulse began to race as an explanation came to him. It was twisted and devious, but it made sense. With his handsome, rich heirs and a parasitic curse, Rupen had found a way to surpass even the phoenixes in surviving his own demise. And he was turning a tidy profit while he was at it.

With this file and the other evidence he'd collected on the Storm Palace, Moran was sure he had enough for an arrest. Not that he was suicidal enough to just walk up to Rupen and try to cuff the bastard, not with an entire city of demons under the thrall of the man's signet ring.

Moran needed to signal Pollar. Time to call in the cavalry.

Moran straightened to his feet, only to discover Captain Kippling glaring at him from the dismantled doorway. The binding spell enclosing the captain's throat flared white.

"You're defiantly not an electrician." Kippling stepped closer, and the astringent smell of his demonic body washed over Moran like mustard gas. The captain was pumped up for a fight.

"You might just be a dead man." Kippling's hand moved for his shock-volt pistol and Moran charged him. Their bodies impacted like colliding train cars; Moran felt Kippling's mass rock through his muscle and bones. They both staggered, but even off balance, Moran made his grab. He gripped the butt of Kippling's pistol and jerked it from its holster. A fist of hooks ripped into Moran's left arm, but Moran kept his hold on the pistol.

"Don't make me shoot—" Moran tried to warn him, but Kippling swung at his head and Moran barely lunged back before the hooked rings tore open his face.

Moran fired one crackling volt into Kippling's chest. The half-demon staggered, but the binding spell around his throat flared. Kippling howled and came for Moran, rage and pain contorting his features. He hammered at Moran, and Moran barely blocked a second blow to his face. Kippling's hooked rings ripped through the collar of Moran's jacket, slashing the side of his neck. Moran swore and slammed the shock-volt pistol into Kippling's head, hard.

Kippling staggered back, and Moran cracked the pistol against his skull again and again. Blood erupted from Kippling's nose and he went down on one knee. Moran



almost pulled the trigger of the shock-volt pistol then; a point blank shot straight into Kippling's head and the captain wouldn't get up again.

But as injured and angry as he was, Moran knew Kippling was a slave.

Moran gripped Kippling's throat with his right hand and dug his fingers into the writhing mass of the binding spell. Kippling nailed him twice—solid blows hammering his gut—before he ripped the binding spell free. Then Kippling fell back to the floor limp as a ragdoll, and Moran burned the vicious, wriggling curse to vapor.

Moran doubled over gasping for air. Blood dribbled down the torn rags of his jacket and shirt. Moran felt the gashes in his stomach and then those across his arm and neck. They hurt like hell but none was too deep to manage.

He glanced to where Captain Kippling lay sprawled and bleeding on Rupen's costly rug. The rest of the security force was going to be on him anytime now. Moran knelt and quickly stripped what he needed from the captain.

Distantly, a few halls away perhaps, he heard alarmed voices and the fast crack of boot heels against marble as security men gathered. Behind Moran, a caged parrot suddenly shrieked; Moran spun on it and almost shot the bird. His pulse pounded and his nerves felt edgy as razors. He silently thanked what luck he'd been born with that he'd already arranged transport to a fall-back position. Though he didn't exactly relish the thought of revisiting the place.

Moran flipped his receiver out and hit the transmission to Pollar. The receiver hummed in his fingers. And then quieted; Pollar had the signal. All that remained for Moran now was to hole himself up.

Then a faint voice cracked and buzzed up from the receiver. Moran traced the transmission and realized with a sick dread that the transmission came from one of James's spy cameras.

"You know, Dr. Shahe, you don't have to dig that gun into my back." James's voice rose through background static. He spoke slowly and clearly, obviously meaning for Moran to record his words. "This would all be a lot easier if you or Mr. Rupen just told me where you wanted me to go. I'm not about to fight when I'm being held at gunpoint, am I?"

The answering gunshot sounded thin and tinny in the receiver. Moran's heart jerked in his chest. The receiver snapped and popped with static. As the quiet stretched on, Moran felt the blood drain from his face and the air go stale in his lungs.

*That couldn't be all there was, a single shot and then nothing. James couldn't be dead.*

Moran clenched the receiver so hard that it bit into his palm. The pain didn't matter; nothing mattered. For the first time since he'd been a boy, Moran's inner barriers crumbled, unleashing a fury of raw sorcerous fire to burn through him. Moran didn't even try to stop it.

And then through the quiet came a garbled murmur and a weak laugh.

"Ah, the medical facility," James's voice sounded strained. "That's handy."

He was still alive, Moran assured himself. Still alive and level-headed enough to tell Moran where he was. Instantly, Moran locked down the wildfire within him. He needed to get to James. Moran slipped the receiver back into his belt and checked the charge left in Kippling's shock-volt pistol.

From the floor, Kippling's radio crackled and sputtered with the voices of the approaching men. Moran could hear them prowling toward the crooked door of Rupen's office. Moran drew in a deep, calming breath. The air stank of blood, gun oil, and sweat.

It was going to get a lot worse fast.

Moran triggered a tiny blasting cap deep in the heart of the Storm Palace. A silent countdown ticked away in the back of Moran mind. Three minutes and then they all went down.

He moved quickly into the shadow of the dismantled door, using its cover to watch the troop of demons in black security uniforms creep up closer, with their shock-volt pistols already drawn. Moran could hear the creak of their boots. They were nearly on him. Moran gripped the door and heaved it into their midst.

Screams tore the silence as searing, murderous spells contacted living bodies. A black smoke billowed, filling the air with the odor of burnt flesh.

## Chapter Seven

Despite the bright sunlight streaming through huge circular windows, James felt cold to the bone. The pale gauzy curtains and white examination table didn't evoke thoughts of enlightenment or care so much as shrouds and dissection. The long array of sharp, cruel, and bizarre medical instruments laid out on steel trays only furthered that impression.

After this, James decided, he never wanted to step foot in another medical facility as long as he lived.

Though, considering the way Dr. Shahe kept jabbing that pistol into his spine, he might not live all that much longer. The gun looked dangerously antique. The good doctor had already made it misfire once when he'd clubbed James in the back with it. Fortunately, the bullet had lodged harmlessly in the marble statue of some sorcerer.

Dr. Shahe shoved James closer to the examination table and James stole a quick glance back at him.

The doctor was sweating and the sheen of perspiration lent his pale smooth skin an almost amphibian quality. His pale gray eyes seemed to tremble in their sockets. His expression seemed a weird mix of paranoia and servitude; something between a grimace and a simper played over his features as Rupen followed them into the room and closed the door.

"This will all be over very quickly, James." Rupen made a little show of locking the door. Then he glanced to the doctor and scowled. "Pull yourself together, Shahe. This is nothing you haven't done before."

Shahe almost flinched, making James think that the full extent of what the doctor had done before didn't make for a reassuring memory or a happy prospect for the immediate future.

James guessed he looked worse than the doctor. His shirt was soaked with cold sweat and his whole body shook with coursing adrenaline. Something warm and wet trickled down his back and he suspected that the dart wound in his shoulder had broken open.

Rupen glanced at his watch and drummed his fingers over the surface of a silver tray. Scalpels and surgical clamps clinked on the tray in rhythm with Rupen's drumming.

"Get on the bed." Dr. Shahe's voice came out in a hoarse whisper. He cleared his throat and glared at James. "Get on and take off your jacket and shirt."

James obeyed, moving very slowly, buying as much time as he possibly could. Earlier, he'd managed to switch on one of the spy cameras tucked in his jacket, but he had no idea if Moran had noticed. With his luck, Moran was still rewiring Suzy's damn floodlights.

The vinyl cover of the exam table smelled of disinfectant. James wondered if this was where Finlay had been opened up, before his long fall. Goosebumps rose across the bare skin of his exposed arms and chest.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me what's going on?" James asked.

"No..." Dr. Shahe's voice cracked. "You don't want to know."

Rupen laughed and took the pistol from Shahe's shaking hand.

"Of course he wants to know. Our James is ever curious." Rupen's eyes moved over James's bare chest with an almost predatory delight. "That's something I will have to remember."

"Why?" James asked just to keep Rupen talking. At the edge of his vision, he glimpsed Dr. Shahe open up a little gold box. Something silver flashed inside it.

"You're the clever investigative reporter, James," Rupen replied. "Haven't you worked it all out yet?"

"I think I've got a good idea," James replied, though he would have said so no matter how lost he was. He needed anything to buy himself a little more time to find a way out of this.

Right now the window was the nearest exit, but the prospect of a ten-mile freefall didn't really seem like much of an escape.

James straightened a little and Rupen brought the pistol up warningly. James froze where he was, but at least the movement had allowed him to see just what it was that Dr. Shahe was doing with the trays of instruments. He carefully sponged red stains from the silver surface of a phoenix egg.

"You were preparing Finlay to be taken over by something else." James made himself speak slowly, calmly.

Rupen nodded.

James didn't think he could reach Rupen before the man could put a bullet in him, but he might be able to take Dr. Shahe. If he could get his hands on a scalpel he might be able to use the doctor as a hostage. If he could just get a little closer...

"You injected Marcus Saro with a curse – a parasitic nest, right?" James asked.

Rupen's expression was nearly admiring.

"Yes, very good. Lanna really wasn't exaggerating about you." Rupen cocked his head thoughtfully. "How did you manage to work all that out?"

"A journalist never reveals his sources," James replied. "You should remember that as well."

Rupen nodded as if taking James's flippancy as genuine advice.

"Anything else you've figured out?" Rupen inquired.

"You used the bone poppies from the phoenix ledges to make somnilium."

"Ah, Dr. Shahe!" Rupen laughed. "James has discovered your beloved little helper."

Dr. Shahe looked almost ashamed. From Rupen's taunting turn of phrase, James couldn't help but wonder if the doctor wasn't using the drug as well as lacing curses with it. That might explain some of Rupen's hold over the physician.

"But I shouldn't have interrupted." Rupen waved his free hand at James. "Do go on."

"Right, you used somnilium to help embed the curse so that it was able to build a nest in Marcus Saro's body. The nest was meant to support a phoenix egg which would serve as a vessel for a disembodied spirit."

"Yes, exactly! I'm honestly impressed," Rupen agreed, and he smiled at James like he was a show dog performing a prize-winning trick. "I thought that I would be most delighted to possess your physical prowess, James, but I have to say that I'm beginning to develop nearly as much enthusiasm for inhabiting that brain of yours."

The implication of Rupen's words sent a chill down James's spine. Rupen was planning on taking possession of his body. It wasn't any demon or ghost but Rupen's own soul that was to be housed by the phoenix's egg.

And remembering the portrait of Garen Rupen, James realized that he wasn't the first man Rupen had made these arrangements for; he wasn't even the second.

"You're Garen Rupen, aren't you?" James asked.

Rupen nodded. "I've learned to answer to other names, of course, and to affect other habits, but yes, I'm Garen...and soon you will be as well."

James felt almost sick at that thought. "But why pick me?" He asked. "You had Finlay."

Rupen's expression went dark.

"Finlay was a lying shit. Literally worthless!"

James nodded. He'd suspected as much. Rupen had wanted the Saro fortune and planned to inherit it, but Finlay had fooled him. That must have been a bitter realization for an old con man like Rupen.

"But then Lanna came along and told me all about you, and suddenly a replacement dropped right into my lap just when I needed it." Rupen made a motion with his hand and instantly Dr. Shahe gripped James's shoulder. His damp, cold hand trembled as he prodded James's bruised shoulder blade.

"The dart went in," Dr Shahe stated. "He's been prepared."

"Ah, to be young again." Rupen beamed at James's bare chest and long legs. Dr. Shahe's hand twitched, like a dying fish.

"I'm going to do everything that you've been too much of a pussy-whipped coward to do with that body of yours, James." Rupen's eyes seemed to gleam with excitement. "First, I'm going to fuck that cock tease, Lanna Yervant, so hard that she won't be able to walk. Then I'm going to nail that bitch behind the camera. Women need a man who knows how to show them their place—"

James couldn't stop his bitter laugh, and Rupen frowned at him.

"Not with this body, you're not," James told him.

A look of panic flashed in Rupen's eyes and then accusation at Dr. Shahe. The doctor instantly shook his head.

"His erectile function is perfect! There's nothing in his records—" Dr. Shahe sounded like he was on the verge of panic.

"I can get it up just fine." James cut off Dr. Shahe's pathetic protest. "But not for a woman. Not even for Lanna." James allowed himself a grin at Rupen's repulsed expression. "You get inside this body and you're not going to be nailing Suzy. You're going to be on your knees sucking Captain Kipling's big dick!"

Rupen's face went white and he looked sick.

"You don't have time to find another body, my lord. We must use the egg before the phoenix does. She will die soon, my lord." Dr. Shahe swallowed hard as Rupen glared at him.

James made his move.

He caught Dr. Shahe's wrist and bounded off the exam table. Dr. Shahe stumbled and James jerked the physician upright, twisting his arm behind his back and holding Shahe between himself and Rupen.

"You think I give a damn about Shahe?" Rupen shouted.

James didn't, but he used the doctor as a shield while he reached out and snatched the phoenix egg. The thing was surprisingly hot and heavy.

"I'll break it—" James flexed his fingers slightly, but the egg was as tough as a stone. "I'll throw it out the window." James pulled Dr. Shahe back with him toward the window.

"You'll try." Rupen held his pistol up, taking aim at James's head.

"Don't!" Shahe shouted. "He's rich and healthy! A perfect vessel for you!"

"I will not be trapped in the body of an abomination!" Rupen snarled. James recognized the fury in Rupen's expression; the man wasn't bluffing. James jerked Dr. Shahe down as Rupen fired.

The bullet tore through Dr. Shahe's shoulder and cracked into the thick hy-glass of the window. Rupen swore and took a step closer to where James crouched with Dr. Shahe bleeding beside him. There was nothing to offer them cover from the next bullet except the exam table.

James could feel his frantic heartbeat pounding through his entire body.

*Get your shit together, Sparky. Find something to stop Rupen from getting a clear shot.*

James looked for something, anything. Then he snatched up one of the trays laden with scalpels and hurled it at Rupen. The old man flinched but wasn't quick enough to dodge. Glittering instruments slashed his cheeks and grazed open a bloody gash in his forehead.

Rupen staggered back, swearing. Another shot rang out and the jar of cotton swabs to James's left shattered.

The old man still had three bullets left.

"You are dead! You fucking faggot!" Rupen wiped furiously at the blood pouring into his eyes from the gash across his brow. James darted to the window, ripped the fire extinguisher from the wall with one hand, and sent it flying at Rupen. Another bullet cracked into the thick hy-glass of the window, just missing James's face. In the same moment the fire extinguisher slammed into Rupen's chest, knocking him back into the wall.

James started for Rupen, but the old man recovered too quickly, bringing his pistol up and glaring at James with ferocious rage. Damn, the old bastard was strong.

"I'm dying. Oh god, I'm dying..." Dr. Shahe whimpered from the tiled floor. Out of the corner of his eye, James caught the scarlet smear of blood spilling from the doctor's shoulder.

"Not to worry, doctor." Rupen's gaze didn't leave James. "At least you won't be alone in death."

Only two bullets left in the pistol, James tried to reassure himself, but he knew it would only take one to kill him and right now Rupen had a clear shot. Still, if he was going to go down, it would be fighting. James gripped the hard mass of the phoenix egg; not much of a weapon but it would have to do.

Suddenly a sound like thunder rocked through walls and the entire Storm Palace lurched. Rupen fell to his knees and James stumbled into the cracked window. Dr. Shahe's prone body slid across the floor, slumping into James's feet.

The door burst open, heavy wood panels splintering and burning. The bloody, battered mass of a hulking man crashed in. The noise of gunfire and shouts poured in

from the hall and the flickering light of orange flames silhouetted the man in the doorway. His blue eyes blazed as he met James's gaze.

*Moran.*

Rupen fired and Moran staggered but caught himself. His gaze didn't leave James. He vaulted over the examination table, leaving a single bloody, charred handprint on the white vinyl. He caught James in a hard embrace and slammed his right hand into the window. The hy-glass shattered and immediately a powerful, howling wind grasped at James's back. Loose papers and cotton balls flew past him, as the pressure imbalance sucked them out into the blue sky.

Over Moran's shoulder, James could see dozens of armed demons in security uniforms charging through the flames in pursuit of Moran.

"Trust me," Moran whispered—and then he pulled James with him out the window.

James's whole body jerked with an animal terror as they plummeted. The frigid wind tore the air from his lungs and above him he could see the gleaming, silver wings of phoenixes. Moran gripped him hard enough to leave bruises, but at the moment that was the last thing James was worried about.

"This had better not be your whole plan, Moran!" James screamed over the howl of the wind. Moran offered James a smile that looked more like a wince. Moran closed his eyes and then spoke a rasping, hard word. A wave of light surged over Moran's body and engulfed James.

Everything blinked out of existence. James saw neither light nor darkness, felt neither heat nor cold. He sensed he was moving, but he couldn't say in what direction—only that it seemed as if he were somehow falling deeper into Moran's embrace. He could smell sweat and blood. His throat choked with the taste of smoke.

An instant later they slammed into a soft mound of green grass. James's senses swam. He drew in a breath of cool air and exhaled, feeling too stunned to know if he was dead or not. There was grass and dirt in his mouth. He could feel sunlight warming his bare back. Had they fallen to the rolling lawn in Marine Park? And survived? It seemed unlikely.

With an immense effort James rolled onto his side. Moran lay beside him on the small expanse of a phoenix ledge. Soot streaked Moran's hair and face and gashed wounds oozed blood into his tattered clothes.

"I rigged one of the portals while you were picking flowers for me..." Moran murmured through cracked lips. "You're safe, now." He gazed into James face for a moment and then his eyes fell closed.

James remembered Rupen's last shot and his heart lurched in his chest. He frantically grasped at Moran's body trying to find the bullet wound. His clothes were spattered with blood and there were at least three bullet holes in the chest of his heavy jacket. The sheen of unshed tears in James's eyes made his vision swim. As James tore open the jacket, Moran cracked his eyes open.



"James, we really can't get it on right now."

"You've been shot." James's throat felt almost too raw to get the words out.

"Oh hell yeah," Moran agreed and his reconciled levity terrified James. He couldn't lose Moran.

James scrubbed the tears from his eyes.

No. He wouldn't lose Moran; he needed to get a grip and stop the bleeding—whatever it took to keep Moran alive.

James peeled back Moran's filthy shirt to expose a thick gray vest. He found the deformed masses of three bullets embedded between the Kevlar weave and metal plates of the vest. Bits of horn and charred wood hung in the vest as well as smoldering wires and steel barbs. But it didn't look like anything had gotten through.

Relief almost brought James to tears.

"I feel like the track after a horse race," Moran murmured. "How about you? How are you holding together?"

"I'm fine." James's voice was rough with emotion. "You saved me."

Moran's ashen lips curled into a wry smile.

"Nah, you were about to beat the crap out of that old man. I think I may have saved him."

James laughed hoarsely, but the thought of Rupen brought the danger of their situation back to him. They were still trapped on the Storm Palace with hundreds of demonic security forces answering to Rupen's commands.

"We need to call the police." James just hoped that they would be safe where they were until the police arrived. He didn't think he could safely lower Moran from the ledge, much less get him across the booby-trapped floor.

"I am the police," Moran teased sleepily.

"More police—"

"Way ahead of you, Sparky." Moran lifted his right hand and pointed upward. Half-formed scabs caked his split knuckles. "Listen. Do you hear that?"

The low whirr of approaching helicopters pulsed through the air. A moment later police sirens wailed and authoritarian voices boomed from bullhorns.

"How did they get here so fast?" James wondered.

"They didn't. We came to them." Moran stretched in the grass and weeds, curling against James's thigh. "I knocked out one of the flight engines, which triggered the other two to descend for emergency disembarking. We're probably in Marine Park by now." Moran closed his eyes. "All we need to do now is keep quiet and wait... Honestly, that's about all I can do at this point anyway."

"Rest, then. I'll keep an eye open for the cops."

Moran mumbled some reply, but exhaustion softened the quip to little more than a rumble and self-satisfied smirk. Then he slept.

James brushed a clump of ash from Moran's temple. For a moment he simply gazed at him. As beaten and filthy as he was at this moment, James couldn't imagine caring for any other man as much as he cared for Moran. And he couldn't think of wanting to protect anyone more. He smiled to himself.

"You've really got no right to lecture anyone about taking risks, Detective Moran."

Shadows fell and fled over James. He looked up to see dozens of huge silver phoenixes sweeping through the shafts of bright light, circling him. Then James noticed the silvery egg glinting between a patch of dandelions and Moran's sprawled leg.

James reached for the egg, but pulled his hand back the instant his fingers brushed its searing hot surface. Beside it the dandelion flowers went from yellow blooms to downy white spheres. Wild grasses ripened from green to gold and spilled glinting seeds into the air.

The egg glowed as if lit by an inner fire. Then, at last, it split, releasing a tiny gleaming chick covered in feathers as brilliant as mercury. It stretched its wings, reflecting sunlight into James's eyes as it flapped. Then, before James could stop it, the tiny bird leaped from the ledge. It tumbled and then caught the air and glided up over the outcroppings of ledges.

James couldn't keep from grinning as he watched the young phoenix fly.

"Reminds me of you, you know," Moran said quietly. James glanced to Moran, but he'd closed his eyes again.

By the time the police reached the phoenix ledges, the young hatchling swooped and banked through the sunlight with the same grace as the rest of her flock.

## Chapter Eight

Moran balanced the groceries and yet another gallon of Tropical Fantasy shampoo in one arm and worked his door open. After the dank, cramped accommodations of the Storm Palace, his own living room seemed vast, airy, and empty.

A simple brown loveseat stood opposite a bamboo shelf that housed Moran's television and stereo. A small collection of books on technical sorcery, mechanics, and cryptography filled most of Moran's single elm bookshelf. The top shelf served as a mantel of a kind, displaying what few sentimental keepsakes Moran allowed himself. Of the four framed photos, James appeared in two. Moran's retriever sat faithfully in the third, and last was a snapshot of Aunty Moon and Auntie Waterfall posing in front of their bathhouse. The two old ladies hardly seemed to have aged over the years. Moran smiled as he took in their linked hands and their sly grins. Forty years together: that was something amazing and they made it seem so simple.

"Just be with him, let him be with you," Auntie Waterfall had told him. Then she'd cocked her delicate head and inquired if he had enough time to look at the boiler again.

Fortunately the repair had been an easy one, just a matter of replacing one of the ancient thermostats. Still it meant that Moran was running late. Though he guessed not as late as James.

Moran absently watched the clock as he put away the groceries and set aside the shampoo to take to the precinct. He couldn't convince Auntie Waterfall to stop supplying him with the stuff any more than he could convince Auntie Moon to let him leave their house without packing him a lunch of spicy ginger soup.

He supposed it was their prerogative to concern themselves; they couldn't help it any more than Moran could help glancing at the clock again and wondering where James was.

Maybe he'd gotten mixed up in something dangerous. Maybe he was scaling the side of a building or focusing his camera in the shadows of some sinister dungeon. Or maybe he'd overslept after a hard run.

It wasn't something Moran could control, and he'd finally come to realize that he wouldn't want to be able to control James even if he could have. Half of what made James the man he was – the man Moran adored – was his willful nature and his natural daring. Without that he wouldn't have been James, but someone else in James's body.

That was last thing Moran wanted now that it had nearly happened.

Moran didn't look at the clock again. He dropped into his loveseat with a ginseng beer and flipped on the television. The last ten minutes of some aged rock star's docudrama flashed the scenes of a tearful father-son reunion. All hugs and forgiveness. Moran snorted at the ridiculously flat script.

And then he heard those familiar footfalls on his steps, coming too fast and too joyfully to be anyone else. Yes, that was James, taking the stairs three at a time, bounding up, and for the very first time, using his very own key to open the door.

"Am I late?" James asked.

A light sheen of sweat glistened over his bare arms and chest. A flimsy pair of blue running shorts clung to his hips. The muscles of his legs bulged from recent, hard exertion, and mud splattered his shins, socks, and running shoes.

"No," Moran informed him. "The Special Report is just starting."

He caught James's hand and pulled him down into the loveseat with him. Oddly, the smells of dirt and sweat seemed deeply appealing on James's skin. Moran kissed his shoulder, tasting the salt of his exertions. James laughed and leaned back to place a quick teasing kiss on Moran's lips.

"You need a bigger couch," James told him.

"A bigger, uglier couch?" Moran teased.

James flushed slightly, as if his gaudy red couch really was in question.

"It's really comfortable, you know." James shifted on Moran's lap, sending an electric hum singing across the nerves of Moran's groin. His jeans began to feel binding.

Then James suddenly bolted off the seat to drop down onto the floor closer to the television. Excitement lit his face.

"Hey, I know that guy!" James pointed at the grainy footage. Thousands of demons filled the rolling lawn of the Marine Park. The camera closed in on one big man as he growled *no comment* at a reporter. Moran scowled at his own image as, caked in blood and streaked with smoke, he stalked from the Storm Palace.

*Did he really look that...mean?*

Then the footage cut to a tidy, plain-looking young woman seated in a bland television studio. Despite everything the makeup and wardrobe people had done to make her look demure, the woman was a bulldog when it came time for her to interview two of Gregory Rupen's lawyers.

When they hemmed and hawed about special circumstances, the newswoman ran footage of the demons and humans who, until two weeks ago, had lived as slaves in the dank bowels of the Storm Palace.

"Are those the special circumstances you mean?" she inquired as the lawyers began to sweat.

"All right, Suzy!" James glanced over his shoulder to Moran. "She's landed a full-time job filming for the McMayle-Sair News Hour."

"They offered you a position too, didn't they?" Moran asked.

James shrugged and Moran smiled at the back of his head, trying to picture all that tousled blond hair plastered down in the style of a news anchor. It wouldn't work. James wasn't the kind to be tied down to an office job or a three-piece suit. He needed his freedom.

And Moran was beginning to suspect that he wanted the same thing for James. After a week of methodical, grim work, Moran found himself mesmerized by James's creativity and pure joy for life. Sometimes just watching James made Moran want to join him. Particularly right now, when he was splayed, nearly naked, with the diffuse afternoon sunlight playing over his sleek body.

Moran tossed the cushions from his seat onto the hardwood floor and flopped down beside James. He shoved a cushion to James.

"Here, sit on something and stop grinding your bones against the hard floor."

"For a minute I thought you were going to let me grind my bones against you," James replied, though he propped himself up on his elbows on the cushion.

"I'm right here, aren't I?" Moran stretched out next to him. James leaned into him and ran his hand over Moran's back.

The light of the television flickered and Suzy announced her next guest.

"Hey, I think you know this guy too," Moran commented.

On the television a tiny version of James strode into the studio, in jeans and a jacket—his blond hair wild despite the ministrations of any number of frustrated hairdressers.

Suzy welcomed him with a handshake and briefest of niceties and then the two of them tore into the meat of the program: the aftermath of the police raid of the Storm Palace. Thousands of demons and humans were suddenly free, but bereft of the most basic resources, such as homes, jobs and even identity papers. The Storm Palace itself had just been designated an environmental sanctuary, but like so many of its residents, its fate was uncertain.

"Legally, Gregory Rupen did leave the Storm Palace to you," Suzy stated. "So, isn't this your responsibility?"

James laughed on the television screen but he hid his face in his hands beside Moran.

"I sound like such a dork." James sighed. "I have to have the stupidest grin in the world."

"Nah," Moran replied. "You look good. Charming. Really."

"You're just saying that," James replied.

"Yeah, but only because you're so charming that I want to get down with you."

James laughed.

Meanwhile on screen he went on to describe the circumstances of his inheritance as well as his decision to turn the Storm Palace over to the rightful heir, Captain Kippling Rupen. When prodded by Suzy, James admitted that he had made several very large monetary donations to the Storm Palace, and then he asked if they could show the number to call in case anyone watching wanted to contribute to either the social outreach for the newly freed slaves or to protect the remaining phoenixes.

The phone numbers filled the screen and James shook his head.

"Lanna has been making arrangements with Captain Kippling for fund-raising in the higher social circles."

"Yeah? Who knew she cared so much about slaves and birds..." Moran's eyes drifted down James's lean bare back to the curve of his ass. His thin running shorts offered just a glimpse of the white skin beyond James's tan line.

"I think it's Captain Kippling that she's taken an interest in," James replied.

"Poor guy."

And Moran was rewarded with another of James's soft laughs.

As the Special Report wrapped up, they curled closer, playfully stroking and caressing each other. Moran teased James about the cowboy boots the wardrobe department had stuck him in.

"You're about as close as I've ever gotten to riding a wild bucking bull." James grinned.

"At least I've never thrown you," Moran responded.

"No, but I've gotten stuck on that big ole horn of yours plenty of times," James drawled as he ran his hand over the crotch of Moran's jeans. A wave of heat surged to Moran's groin, rushing after the sensation of James's fingers. James grinned, seeing Moran's jeans stretch beneath his caress.

"Who knew you were so excited by rodeo metaphors?"

Moran snorted at the idea. "Yeah, it's the allure of chasing clowns into barrels. Who doesn't want to do that?"

James caught at Moran's belt buckle, but Moran had another idea and easily rolled James over. For a few moments they ground and pressed against each other, playing at wrestling.

James laughed and then moaned as Moran tickled his belly and then pulled down his thin shorts and kissed the thrusting head of his dick. Moran enjoyed the salty taste

and deeply masculine scent of James's body. He teased the stiff shaft and dewy head with his tongue. James's whole body responded, tight thrusts playing through his hips as he dug his hands into the fallen cushions.

Moran nuzzled the curls of blond pubic hair and stroked the delicate skin of James's balls. James gave him a throaty, encouraging gasp, and Moran went down on him.

As he sucked and toyed with James's cock, James moaned and murmured. His hands stroked Moran's hair with a quickening desperation.

"You're so..." James gasped. "You're mouth is so hot inside."

"Oh?" Moran asked before returning to James's long, slick cock.

"You're hot as five-alarm chili," James managed to gasp out and Moran laughed and had to draw back for a moment.

"The things you say, Sparky."

"I couldn't help it...it was a good joke." A flush colored James's cheeks. His eyes were dark and excited. "Please don't stop."

"Don't worry, I plan on taking you to fire-curry hot," Moran responded. James's laugh broke as Moran took him again into his mouth.

"God, Moran," James moaned, "this is so awesome. You have to try some of this."

Moran snorted and had to bring his head up to catch his breath.

"What are you trying to do? Choke me?" Moran asked.

"No. I just want to share," James gently nudged Moran's shoulder with his knee and Moran allowed himself to be rolled onto his back. James swung his naked hips over Moran's face while leaning down over Moran's groin. In a moment James had Moran's jeans open and his thick cock in his mouth.

A sweet pleasure flooded Moran's body and he responded in kind to James, kissing, licking, and drawing the straight spear of his cock deep inside him.

James trembled in his grasp, tremors rocking through his taut thighs. He sucked and swallowed Moran with a beautiful, flattering desperation, as if there was nothing he wanted more than this. Moran arched into James.

They rocked and thrust, urging each other further into the joy of their shared pleasure. Every sensation Moran felt began and ended with James: filling his hungry mouth and enveloping his rigid cock. They created a perfect circuit, building a blaze of ecstasy between them.

Electric trills buzzed through Moran's erection. Against his lips he felt James's tense, and then he tasted the rush of climax. At the end of his own cock, James gave a short cry of pleasure and then captured the fountain of Moran's pumping orgasm.

James collapsed to Moran's side, and for a few moments they both lay still, breathing deeply. Then James kissed Moran's spent dick lightly and turned to take his mouth. They kissed, tongues tasting each other and themselves. Then James laid his head on Moran's shoulder.

"I stayed on that thing way longer than eight seconds."

Moran absently stroked James's damp hair.

"Yeah, you're the new bareback riding champion," Moran replied.

James sighed contentedly. "We need to do this more often."

Moran smiled. "What do you think about twenty minutes from now?"

"I like the way you think," James replied, though Moran could already hear sleep creeping into his voice. Moran stroked James's bare shoulder and gazed up at the plain expanse of his ceiling.

A map of the city subway system decorated the ceiling of James's bedroom. Moran had thought it odd at first—as if James spent every night planning escape routes—but lately Moran found himself missing the sight of those circles and loops of intertwined paths. He found himself lying alone in his bed and feeling the absence of everything that was James. Even that snuffling snore that he lapsed into during allergy season.

"I think you're right about me needing a bigger, uglier couch," Moran commented.

James was quiet for a moment, then he looked at Moran, searchingly.

"Are you sure?" James asked. "It can be a real pain sometimes, and it probably clashes with just about everything in your house."

"Yeah," Moran agreed. "But I want it here. I don't care if it's trouble. It's the only thing I can imagine living with. We'll just have to move all of your things in to balance it out."

James's expression lit with joy. He kissed Moran and then whispered, "A couch could fall in love with a guy like you."

That alone, Moran decided, was worth all the heavy lifting that was sure to come.

 THE END 



## **Ginn Hale**

Ginn Hale inhabits a yellow shed in the mossy Pacific Northwest. She writes science fiction and fantasy stories while observing the nearby volcano, which could set a new deadline for all her work.

Visit Ginn on the Web at <http://www.ginnhale.com>.