



UTOPIA X:
SEEKING SOMETHING WICKED

K. Z. Snow

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Prologue

Keryss spat out pieces of her former mate as she flew over the vast Interzone outside of Villius. Reacting to the brassy gleam of the spring sun, she narrowed her eyes. The gray and green crowns of trees unrolled beneath her, their thickness broken by the occasional settlements and lone huts that sat in cluttered clearings. The ground and the trees showed little evidence of higher life-form activity, and what Keryss did see was of no interest to her.

Damn them, she thought, her vague curse intended for every creature that could be interfering with her search. Otherbeings living in the Interzone might be developing a sense of her. It was entirely possible. Adaptations geared toward survival were the whole point of evolution. Once aware of her approach, the OBs could be alerting their human neighbors. It was one explanation for the deserted landscape. Another was that those bleeding hearts in Regenerie, the next metroplex to the southeast, had been taking in refugees by the truckload.

With every passing kilometer, Keryss felt more disgruntled. It could be days before the bounty hunters of Villius hauled in an acceptable generator, and weeks before they brought her one who would make an exciting mate as well. Her need wasn't pressing -- not yet, anyway -- but she wanted to avoid the dangers inherent in delay. Prompt action, Keryss had always felt, strengthened her control; procrastination only eroded it. If all else failed, she and her minions would have to start venturing into other Interzones to do their stalking. The prospect didn't please her.

The first signs of the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie shimmered in the hazy distance. Keryss would soon have to turn back toward the northwest and the Iron Metroplex of Villius, her home. The Powers who controlled Regenerie were a clever lot. They, too, might have developed a means of detecting the approach of threatening forces. They might even have managed to surround their urban oasis with a protective shield.

Before the geometric details of factories and wind turbines on the outskirts of Regenerie rose like cameos against the flat blue sky, Keryss executed a smooth U-turn. She made sure to avoid the broad strip of highway that led from Regenerie to Villius. Although commerce between the two centers was minimal, there was no point in risking detection. Especially after that attack on Regenerie's hydro-electric dam. The UMoR Powers had certainly deduced by now that her operatives were behind the sabotage.

Gliding over a different strip of Interzone, Keryss indulged in fantasies as she studied the land beneath her. She reveled in the thought of taking over Regenerie, of having its considerable resources, which included thousands of lovely human and nonhuman males, at her disposal. Regenerie's ruling Powers, known as the Triumvirate, were all men in their prime. And all hybrids.

Keryss had never seen them. Their identities were a well-guarded secret. However, a Villius intelligence agent claimed the Triumvirate had recently added a young and fetching human male to their circle. Yes indeed, assuming control of the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie would be gratifying in countless ways.

Then there was the vampire Ridley, the one who'd managed to slip out of her grasp. She'd become so excited upon meeting him one crisp evening last fall that she'd given

him a rather serious burn. Immediately, he'd shot off into the sky, as irretrievable as a blazing rocket. She hadn't come upon him since. Small wonder. The Interzone areas were sprawling and often thickly wooded expanses of land. Because Ridley was out and about only at night, the difficulty of spotting him was further compounded by darkness.

Keryss still salivated when she thought of Ridley. How she would love to find him again! Perhaps, later, she'd do another flyover. Thanks to her last generator, darkness no longer impeded her vision.

Jerking, Keryss coughed. Something had started tickling her throat. She reached to the back of her tongue, plucked out a fragment of fingernail, and flicked it into the air. Almost wistfully, she watched its uncertain descent, air currents buffeting the sliver as if it were a chip of bird's egg and pulling it out of sight before it reached the ground.

The last of Lobran. Keryss remembered how much she'd enjoyed him. Elvish men and vampires made the best mates, at least in terms of sexual vigor. Once consumed, they imparted a variety of useful powers.

But a hybrid -- part angel, part demon, part human. What wondrous traits could she absorb from a hybrid? Just speculating about it excited her.

As Keryss neared Villius, she decided her bodyguard would most certainly have to fuck her as soon as she was in her quarters. Lobran was gone now, his successor hadn't yet arrived, and she was damned aroused.

Chapter One

The six demons and four angels who composed much of Tole's ancestry seemed to be losing ground to the human part of his nature. At least for the time being. Chin resting in hand, he let his attention continually wander from the holographic landscape he'd been studying. His vacant gaze moved from one part of his humble residence to another, from one housemate to another.

Zee, with his usual serene focus, slid lines of figures around his computer's air screen as he calculated the cost of a jogging and cycling track that would circle the metroplex just inside its Production Area. An attractive, mellow man, Zee was, with his even temperament and dedication to duty. That buff body only added to his appeal, as did the dark red hair, its thick waves swept back from his face, and those guileless brown eyes, and the demure smile that revealed a charming pair of dimples. It was impossible to harbor any resentment toward Zee. Most of the time.

Win, lounging on the couch, composed a letter to Regenerie's business leaders to solicit donations for a museum of cultural history. Ah, insouciant, irreverent Win, whose humor concealed a deep vein of compassion. Most creatures, human and non, rarely saw these traits. What they invariably saw and couldn't get past was his stunning, sensuous beauty. It was all too easy to resent Win. Some of the time.

The only nonhybrid in the house was thoroughly human Pablo, who worked on his itinerary for the upcoming week. Discreet, tactful, and smart, in spite of his relative youth, he

was the other men's primary contact with the outside world.

He was also Win's lover. Pablo half reclined against Win, his cropped black hair a stark contrast to Win's smooth, pink-blushed skin. Even as they concentrated on their tasks, they kept touching each other -- idle, fond caresses that had become second nature to them.

Tole lifted one side of his mouth into a wry smile. Here sat the lordly Powers, the great Triumvirate of the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie. Here also sat three horny, profane, often quarrelsome, sometimes shortsighted hybrids who'd hired a male prostitute to take on a slew of significant duties. How could anybody ignore the irony?

Somehow, though, they'd managed to do a commendable job of developing and overseeing the metroplex while keeping their identities a secret. To most of Regenerie, they were the quirky Coven of Three, just a garden-variety group of Alterationists who lived in an Undercity hovel and practiced magic.

Zee rose from the desk and stretched. "Anybody getting hungry?"

"Yeah," said Win, "as long Tole isn't cooking and I don't have to."

Pablo chuckled in response. Their relationship had brought about a revitalizing transformation in both of them. So of course, it indirectly benefited the Triumvirate as well as the entire metroplex.

Nevertheless, that relationship had also upset Tole's equilibrium. He thought his envious yearning would diminish over time, but it had only settled in deeper and gotten worse. There were periods, like this afternoon, when he felt inexplicably distracted or restless, depressed or peevish. Sometimes he sought solitude despite a hollow feeling of loneliness. He had a none-too-placid nature to begin with, but

the arrival of Pablo Creed and his subsequent grand passion with Win had really jugged Tole's temperament out of its precarious alignment.

Sighing, he turned off the real-time hologram. Just before its figures faded, he thought he glimpsed a silver streak shooting over the trees. Tole briefly lifted his eyebrows and pulled down his mouth. He'd never seen an Otherbeing quite like that. Maybe it was just a trick of light.

Zee paused at the dining table on his way to the kitchen and put a hand on Tole's shoulder. "Any luck capturing images of Villius?"

"No. We're still being blocked. The stratocam works really well, but as soon as I enter the coordinates for Villius, I get empty air."

"We might have to have another session with the Celestine," said Zee. "Seems we haven't been asking it the right questions."

Win looked over the back of the couch toward the dining area. "Would Pablo need to be involved in the session?"

"He's our fucking Touch," Tole snapped. "What do *you* think? Part of Pablo's job is to spark us, all of us, not just *your* pretty ass."

Win kept his cool, but it was obvious he'd lose it if Tole poked him too hard. "I think he's already served that purpose well enough," Win said. "In fact, I think we might be able to dispense with the whole carnal-energy aspect of our Orb work."

"You mean, even eliminate contact with each other?" Zee was taken aback by the suggestion.

Tole didn't find Zee's reaction surprising. They had to tap into some rather elusive supernatural currents when they worked with the Celestine Orb, and sexual excitement both

sped up and enhanced this process. Their workroom was like a sophisticated version of a covenstead. It was where the trio found inspiration, spiritual guidance, and answers to confounding questions. It was even where, if a situation warranted, they could engineer minor miracles. Sex had always been an integral part of their rituals.

“Win?” Zee took a step toward the couch. “Is that what you mean?”

“Of course that’s what he means,” Tole said. “Like we couldn’t see *this* coming.” He pushed up from the table and pointed at Win. “Listen, we’re fully aware, and I mean *fully*, that you and Pablo are lovers. But that was your choice. It doesn’t change the fact he has a job to do. And it doesn’t change our mode of generating power.”

Win rose from the couch and faced Tole. “I’m afraid it does.”

“Don’t you dare presume to trash procedure just because it suits you, you selfish prick. We go into the workroom; Pablo goes into the workroom with us. We circle the Orb; Pablo circles the Orb with us. We physically stimulate one another --”

“It’s time to put an end to it!” Win’s cheeks glowed with risen heat. The rich blue of his irises had become the harsh blue of devouring flames. His ancestor Sitri, a Great Prince of Hell, had been roused from dormancy.

Pablo, still seated, said to Win, “Let it go. We don’t need another round of Demon Wars.”

That wouldn’t happen, though. Tole knew just how far Win and Zee could be pushed. They knew the same about him. As much as the men could infuriate one another, they never let their anger spiral out of control and into physical violence. That would be catastrophic.

Whenever Tole felt out of sorts, like today, provoking one or the other of his comrades became a perverse game to him. It helped him vent.

"I think," Zee said, "the logical and respectful thing to do would be to ask Pablo how *he* feels."

"Don't bother," Pablo said from the couch.

Win bent over him. Tole couldn't see or hear what was going on between them.

This clash was totally predictable, of course. Love seemed to have its own inevitabilities. From the moment Win and Pablo laid eyes on each other, it was only a matter of time before possessiveness kicked in. The lovers wanted to monopolize each other.

Pablo got up and addressed the conveners. "I said months ago I didn't want to get involved in any more of your skirmishes. Now, you decide what you need me to do and I'll do it. Just make sure you're all on the same page." Carrying his notebook, he walked to the front door. Win, oddly enough, didn't follow him.

"Pablo," Zee called out.

Their employee paused at the door and turned.

"Please tell us, honestly, how you feel about your Touch role. That's all I ask. Regardless of what you say, your position here is secure. You'll still serve as our liaison."

Lowering his head for a moment, Pablo seemed to ponder his answer. "Zee, I appreciate your consideration. But I don't understand the workings of the Celestine well enough --"

"What you *do* understand," Tole broke in, "is that you're in love with Win and you'd prefer to direct all your 'touch' at him and get all your 'touch' from him. So just fucking say so."

Pablo's gaze remained calm and steady. "I don't need to.

You've already said it for me." He opened the door. "Let me know what you all decide. I've got work to do." He left the house, obviously to go to his quarters in the adjacent building.

Zee simply threw up his hands in frustration and headed for the kitchen.

Win rolled back his head and groaned. "Jesus, Tole, don't you ever get sick of having to apologize to people for being an asshole?"

"I don't apologize often enough to get sick of it."

They exchanged defiant stares for several more seconds. Then, little by little, their expressions succumbed to grudging smiles.

Laughing through his nose, Win shook his head. "Even though I know what you're about, man, you still make me crazy. Can't you at least *try* to appreciate what Pablo and I feel for each other?"

Tole didn't bother asking for an explanation of what he was "about"; he didn't want to hear it. That left him no choice but to respond to Win's request. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the edge of the table. "You can't expect us to appreciate your feelings if your feelings undermine our work. You know that."

Drawing his lower lip between his teeth, Win looked away. Reluctantly, he nodded. "Yeah, I know. I guess what I should've suggested was just *trying* to do Orb work without the sex. One session. If it flops, we could try you and Zee pairing up and Pablo and me pairing up. I just... I'm getting uncomfortable with those free-for-alls." Win's imploring eyes were back to their natural color, which was very easy to fall into. "I hope you can understand."

Tole blew out a sigh. Win was sugar for the sight under any circumstances, but his beauty always seemed more

breathhtaking the deeper his feelings ran. Now, his heartfelt sincerity, reflected in his face, tugged at Tole. It was obvious Win was torn between his sense of duty and a deep-seated desire to keep his and Pablo's intimacy inviolate.

"So you really do love him?" Tole asked.

Win's expression changed still more. By subtle degrees, a softening went through his features. "It fills me," he said. His voice was distant and dreamy and laced with wonderment. "Every time I see him, it fills me again. And even more than the last time."

It. The love.

Tole nodded. It wasn't a nod of comprehension -- he didn't have a clue what love felt like -- but he simply had nothing to say. He cleared his throat. "Is it ever hurtful for you?"

"Only when I'm not with him."

Tole swallowed past an unfamiliar knot in his throat. It was shocking and unpleasant, and he had to make it go away before it got worse. "So, uh...do you plan on having his babies?"

After a couple of seconds of befuddled silence, Win snorted laughter. "Fuck you, Tole."

"I wish somebody would."

"Hey, are we having dinner together or not?" Zee called from the kitchen.

"You go ahead," Tole said. "I'm leaving for a while."

He strode through the living room, giving Win's arm a conciliatory squeeze as he walked past him, and went down the hallway to his bedroom. The Triumvirate shared the same house. Pablo often worked and usually dined with them, and he and Win always slept together in the suite next door. Tole knew everybody's evening would be more relaxing if he

wasn't around.

Sick of his own inner turmoil, he needed to get away. He thought he would jump out of his skin if he didn't.

Once in his bedroom, he grabbed an antique silver flask full of bourbon from a closet shelf and donned a long wool cape. The flask fit perfectly in an interior pocket. He looked around his room, trying to think of anything else he might want to bring along, but he was too impatient to give the matter much thought. He just wanted to be gone.

Unnoticed, for Zee and Win were in the kitchen, he strode out of the house and onto the narrow street. The sunlamps had just begun to dim, easing their way toward a simulation of dusk. Everything about this familiar environment made Tole realize all the more just how much he needed to be outdoors, alone.

The Undercity could be oppressive. Although every effort had been made to provide amenities, create homey "neighborhoods," and bring the outside in, nothing could change the fact this was an underground world fashioned within an ancient subway system. Or that the creatures dwelling here were different from the ordinary citizens who populated the hospitable, progressive city above.

As Tole was pondering which route to take to the Interzone, a male voice called out his name. He turned toward the sound.

A young man waved at him. "What've you been up to, aside from keeping yourself scarce?"

"Hi, Skeep."

The kid -- at least, Tole thought of him as a kid -- was a kind of sorcerer's apprentice to an older Alterationist named Hal. They lived together at 93 Guardian. Maybe twenty years old and thoroughly human, Skeep was a likable fellow who hovered on the brink of being interesting. A tattooed fore- and

middle finger, spread apart, framed the outer corner of each eye. They were large eyes, too, sea foam green and full of youthful sparkle. Some UC residents thought Skeep was a troublemaker. Tole just saw him as mischievous, a creature of impulse. He was probably both.

“Hang on a minute, Tee.” Skeep lifted his arms over his head and fiddled with the house’s door light.

Curiosity piqued, Tole ambled down the narrow street. This week, Skeep’s long hair was burgundy, as neatly ribbed as wide-wale corduroy and tied back in a tail. Charms dangled from the binding. Shirtless, he let his loose pants hang precariously on his hip bones. The smooth skin of his loins seemed to encourage them to slip farther.

Tole had an unsettling sense of walking toward something he should’ve been walking away from. Still, a frisson of excitement crept through his nerves.

Skeep had a pert, pinchable butt, and he damned well knew it. A dimple rode above each cheek. Tole fancied those cute depressions were watching him, flirting with him. The crazy image probably wasn’t far from the truth.

Tall as he was, Tole could easily have managed whatever task Skeep had undertaken. But why help? The view was too enjoyable. A half smile cutting into his cheek, Tole was sorely tempted to expedite the downward journey of Skeep’s cotton pants -- the only help he was willing to give.

“You need a belt,” he said, stopping behind the kid.

Skeep tossed a grin over his shoulder. “Are you staring at my ass again?”

“Only because you want me to, puppy boy.” The guy was a perfect little tease.

“I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do, Tee-bone.”

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't call me that."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't call me puppy boy." Skeep turned. Only a thin slice of air separated him from Tole. "Do you have a bone for me, Tee?"

Tole's cock stirred. "You're such a slut."

Skeep gave him a low-lidded, seductive look. "How many times do I have to offer before you accept?"

Tole glanced at the green door. "Where's Hal?"

"In the OC. With a client."

No. Bad idea. This is Skeep, for chrissake. "How many times have you offered so far?"

Skeep pretended to count on his fingers. "Twenty-seven, including tonight."

"That's the magic number," Tole said. "Get inside." To hell with misguided, delicate sensibilities. He wanted a piece.

Hal's place was just as cluttered as number 86, but Tole barely noticed. Within the glow of countless candles, his focus remained firmly on the slender form of Hal's apprentice. The kid drifted to an end table, yanked open a drawer, and withdrew two things.

"Shed some rags, Tee." Skeep held lube and condoms. With his free hand, he idly stroked his still-hidden dick, its lengthening shadow as much a lure as that dimpled slope of butt. "I want at least to see your treasure before you bury it."

Tole stripped off all his clothes except his shirt and threw them on the nearest chair. Skeep's stroking motion transfixed him. It picked up speed when Tole's stiff cock sprang into view, tall and ready.

"Even nicer than I imagined," Skeep murmured. He stepped up to Tole and, panting quietly, repeatedly pushed his covered hard-on against Tole's naked one.

“Lean over the back of the couch.” Tole’s voice sounded as clotted as his balls felt. He grabbed the necessities out of Skeep’s hand before the kid followed his order. As Skeep was about to drop his pants, Tole snapped, “Don’t. I want to do that.” *God knows I’ve fantasized about it enough.*

He knelt behind Skeep and curled trembling fingers over the slightly bony curvature of his hips. How fragile that narrow pelvis felt, as if one good squeeze could collapse it. Tole fit his thumbs into the matching dimples and massaged the silken skin.

“So fucking pretty,” he said from low in his throat.

His fingers and mouth worked in concert to slide the pants lower until they puddled on the floor. That tender ass he’d been admiring for over a year was now bare...and all his.

Tole’s fingers rubbed, dug in, clutched the tough satin. He kissed it, dragged his lips and tongue over it. Slipping his thumbs inside the tight fissure, he glided them along the inner walls, pausing to circle the puckered hole. It twitched delicately against his touch.

“Fuck me. Soon,” Skeep said, the words garbled.

He’d started pumping his cock again, in earnest, his cheeks tensing enticingly with each stroke. Tole bit one. A cry caught in Skeep’s throat. Tole swiped his tongue over the spot, then delivered a sharp slap, loosening Skeep’s cry.

No time for leisurely play. Tole wanted in. Impatiently, he rolled on a sheath, lubed his fingers, and did a few minutes’ worth of probing. That lovely ass was so round, so exquisite, his appreciation rapidly careened toward greed.

Standing, he gripped Skeep’s hips with one hand and guided his stiff dick with the other. His whole groin ached, inside and out. As his cockhead slipped between those perfect mounds, even before it entered Skeep’s body, a gush

of pleasure sent Tole's eyes into an upward roll.

Sweating from restraint and peaking arousal, he pushed in. Skeep whimpered and pushed back. Immediately, Tole wanted to come. Ants seemed to race beneath the skin of his thighs.

So he fucked that snug heat, finesse be damned, and kept fucking in rapid jerks until his cock began the deep pulsing that eased his deep need.

It was a shoddy facsimile of coupling -- Tole hadn't paid any more attention to Skeep than Skeep had paid to him -- but it lightened his burden nonetheless. Once the last peal of pleasure vibrated through his belly and limbs, he wanted to leave.

Pulling out, Tole removed the condom. Skeep took it from him and tossed it into a wastebasket.

"Sorry that was so abrupt," Tole said, gathering up his clothes. He realized he had no idea if his partner had climaxed.

"You don't know what abrupt is." Skeep hiked up his pants and securely tied the drawstring. He looked and sounded cheerful. "With most guys, it's enter, drop freight, exit. You twiggled me good, Tee. I think I shot on the couch." He reached for its back and felt around. "Yup. I'll have to clean it up before the old man comes home."

"I've got to run, anyway." Tole cupped the kid's shoulder. "Thanks, Skeep. I obviously needed that."

He had a feeling he needed considerably more. His satisfaction, superficial at best, had already waned. The pretty ass of a pretty boy just wasn't enough.

Chapter Two

Tole didn't have to wait on the platform of Guardian Station for a train to arrive. He was glad. As much as he liked the various practitioners of magic who lived here, he simply didn't feel sociable enough to engage in small talk. Especially now.

There were three ways for Tole to get out of the metroplex and into the surrounding countryside. Four ways, actually, but forcing conversion to one of his demonic or angelic forms would be an enormous breach of conduct with very nasty consequences. So he had to make do in his human form.

He could ride the train to the Hellven Station recreational area. Although it, too, was subterranean, it had a number of concealed passages used by construction, delivery, and maintenance workers. Any of these could get him to the outskirts of the Overcity. Or he could ride the train to one of the stops that led up to the Overcity -- the usual course taken by the general public -- then ride the elevated rail to the edge of the metroplex.

But Tole wasn't merely a member of the Coven of Three. He was one of the Powers, and they didn't have to move about the way other Regenerie residents moved about. He could take the Tube, a secret and particularly efficient mode of transportation only the Triumvirate knew about and only the Triumvirate could use.

The Tube was buried in the bowels of Guardian Station. Rather than head for the station's platform, Tole walked to the rear of his residence. Darkness thickened behind the rows of

small houses, clotting within a maze of ducts, pipes, catwalks, and humming machinery.

The Tube was just that -- a wide, vertical cylinder from which other cylinders curved and branched out, starting at a height of roughly three meters from the ground. It had no visible entrance. All Tole or Win or Zee had to do was flatten one hand on the outer surface and a portion of the Tube's wall slid open.

As soon as Tole stepped inside, control panels glowed to life. They banded the cylinder's inner walls. Tole felt a mild stab of guilt as he studied the panels. He and his comrades had agreed only to use the Tube in emergency situations. But how often did he follow rules?

When Tole determined which electronic button would direct him where he wanted to go, he pressed it.

Traveling the Tube was one of the strangest sensations Tole had ever experienced, second only to shifting shape. Invariably, his body felt like an elongated piece of chewing gum vibrating in a strong wind. It was impossible to judge how much time elapsed. It was impossible to think, period. But quickly, very quickly, he was standing upright again, in a confined black space.

Reaching out, Tole touched the nearest wall. A rectangle of dull light appeared, fresh air washed over him, and he saw...trees. In fact, the structure he stepped out of was a tree. Sort of.

He'd been liberated. He was in the northwest Interzone.

Taking a deep breath, Tole patted the side of his cape. Yup, the flask was still there and still intact. As daylight continued to wane, he ambled through the woods, looking for any small clearing in which he could safely build a fire.

As soon as he found one, he set his flask of bourbon on the ground, took off his cape, and went around gathering

kindling and larger pieces of fallen wood. Carefully heaping the twigs and branches into a wickery tent, he stood back and smiled. Damned if building a campfire -- or bonfire or any kind of fire, for that matter -- didn't saturate him with satisfaction. Oh, that demonic DNA.

Holding one hand over the pile of wood, he snapped his fingers, chuckling as the structure ignited.

"That is really hokey. Pissing on it would've been more original."

Tole spun around so fast, he nearly fell into his beloved fire. A tall, dapper man stood behind him. Not as tall as he -- Tole was nearly six feet five -- but not that much shorter, either. He peered at the face. "Ridley?"

The man looked bewildered. "Tole?"

"Ridley." Tole released his tension on a long exhalation. "Can't you sons of bitches ever announce your arrival?"

The vampire smiled. "That would be rather counterproductive, wouldn't you agree?"

"Just don't try to bite me. I'm not in the mood."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Unless you offered yourself."

"Seems you won't be dreaming of it, then." Tole bent over and grabbed his flask off the ground. "Haven't seen you around for a while. Did you leave the area?"

Ridley shoved his hands into his coat pockets. "I spent almost four months in Trieste, dealing with an estate settlement. I got back three weeks ago."

Tole's gaze slid down Ridley's trim body and back to his face. "I didn't recognize you at first. You've changed."

Different was an understatement. The vamp's previously long, pitch-black hair had been cut and styled into soft layers. A small hank of it threatened to drop over his forehead. Uprturned commas of clipped hair grazed the tops of his ears.

He wore a dark all-weather coat, beneath that, a businessman's shirt in some pale color and dress pants with razor-edge creases. The shirt was open at the collar. His face was clean-shaven, and he smelled wonderful -- like cedar, with an underlying note of a more exotic scent.

Tole caught a glimpse of a chain around his neck from which a small, inscribed disc dangled. It looked like an amulet, crafted from white gold or platinum. Then Tole remembered that's indeed what it was. Ridley had suffered a nasty burn last fall while hooking up with some strange woman here in the Interzone. Win had designed the charm, and another Alterationist, skilled in the construction of magical jewelry, had made it.

Although it was strictly for protection and not for ornamentation, the silvery necklace perfectly complemented the dark fan of chest hair in which it nestled. The hair wasn't thick, just noticeable enough to create a masculine signature.

Truth was, Ridley looked damned good all around. A bit like a junior executive, maybe, but a sexy one. He'd always been a striking creature. Now, he was striking in a different way.

"If you'd been around as long as I have," Ridley said, "you'd get sick of seeing yourself too. I need to change once in a while just to be able to keep living with me."

"Actually, I think you look great."

Ridley's eyes glimmered. They were nearly as dark as his hair. The lids, perennially lowered like stuck awnings, hung just at the tops of his irises, giving him a drowsy look even when his gaze shone like obsidian.

"Thank you," he said. "And ditto."

Tole wasn't used to compliments. "You're not schmoozing me to get a drink, are you?"

“Only if it’s from that flask you’re holding. What’s in it?”

“Bourbon.”

Unscrewing the cap, Tole indulged in a long swallow that set a flash fire inside his body. He offered the flask to his uninvited companion, who took it and tilted it to his lips. The sight transfixed Tole. He saw no fangs in Ridley’s mouth. He only saw a handsome man’s lips closing over the opening of a bottle.

The sight kindled a restless warmth that slithered through his lower abdomen.

“You seem different too,” Ridley said. “Must be the hair.”

“All I did was let it grow out.” Self-consciously, Tole pulled his hair back. It was just past shoulder-length now, with waves he’d never noticed when it was short.

Ridley continued eyeing it. “Very nice. Much more touchable. Before, you looked like a mad cactus. Are you going to keep the blue streaks in?”

“I don’t have much choice,” Tole said, “unless I dye the whole mess. The colors are natural.” Deep gold with blue highlights. Shit. Sometimes, when Tole caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he felt like a school mascot.

“Natural,” Ridley repeated. His gaze sharpened into scrutiny. “What *are* the three of you, anyway? As soon as I tasted Win’s blood, I could tell he wasn’t a mere human. And now you, with your unnaturally natural blue hair.”

The question made Tole’s heart jump to his throat. “I’m really not at liberty to discuss that.” The answer would have to do.

Tole lowered himself to the ground, where he sat with forearms resting on his upraised knees. He stared into the fire. If he kept his wits about him, he could make it burn, slowly and evenly, all night.

Ridley hadn't moved. At least, Tole didn't think he had. One could never tell with vampires. They were stealthy buggers, as swift and silent as an airborne contagion. Unsettled, Tole glanced over his shoulder.

Ridley was still there. He, too, gazed into the flames. "The wood isn't dwindling."

"If you're going to hang around," Tole said, "at least sit down. I'm not crazy about having an Otherbeing hovering at my back."

Ridley hesitated, then sank to the ground and stretched his legs out in front of him. He crossed his ankles and pulled his coat around his lap.

Tole slid him a glance. He really was a suave bastard, darkly alluring. Very smart too. His sense of humor, on the acerbic side, was similar to Tole's.

The firelight looked good on his face.

Taking a quiet breath, Tole shifted his eyes forward. "I suppose you're wondering what Win is up to." It was a logical assumption. They'd once had a tryst. By Win's account, it had been intensely erotic.

"Actually," Ridley said, "I'm wondering what *you're* up to. What are you doing out here? Did the ventilation system break down at Guardian Station or what?"

"I just needed to get away for a bit, be outside, enjoy the peace and quiet. And no, the others won't be joining me."

Picking up a thin branch, Ridley snapped it and tossed each half into the flames. He seemed irked. "What makes you think I'm waiting with bated breath for Win to show up?"

The answer required no thought. "Because you want him."

"Everybody wants him. He's by far the best-looking piece of manhood in Regenerie, but that doesn't mean I'm in love

with the guy.”

“Lucky for you,” Tole said. “Otherwise, your heart would be broken.”

Ridley snorted. “I suppose he’s involved in some dalliance with your coven’s boy toy.”

“Pablo’s not a boy and he’s nobody’s toy. And Win is definitely *not* involved in a dalliance.”

“Ah. I should’ve known. So he’s already moved past it, huh?”

“That he has,” Tole said. “He’s moved on to commitment. There won’t be any more dalliances for Win while Pablo’s around.”

Mouth open in stupefaction, Ridley swiveled his head to stare at Tole. “You are *shitting* me.”

“Nope. Win has fallen in love.”

As Ridley stared, his expression began to change. Curiosity supplanted the bald shock. “Does it bother you? Is that one of the reasons you’re out here?”

“I don’t know.”

Tole truly didn’t. He didn’t understand love and didn’t understand his reaction to Win and Pablo. He understood physical attraction well enough, because he’d frequently experienced gnawing lust. Like this evening. He understood caring about the residents of Regenerie, for they were in his charge. But romantic love was something Tole had only a vague, secondhand knowledge of. Win had been mired in the same ignorance before Pablo came along.

It did stir Tole to see Win and Pablo kiss. Hell, to catch a glimpse of any physical contact between them. Aside from the fact they were both insanely desirable men, it was the way they touched that made Tole feel squirmy. Restrained passion and unrestrained affection virtually charged the air

around them.

"It's like," he said, finishing his thoughts aloud, "they've created their own atmosphere."

"I know what you mean," murmured Ridley. "I'm not exactly a stranger to love."

The answer surprised Tole. He looked at the vampire, who now traced arabesque shapes in the dirt with a twig. Ridley seemed reflective.

"I feel like an idiot, talking about this shit," Tole said.

Ridley's mouth crept into a rueful half smile. "So join the club. Feeling like an idiot -- worse yet, acting like one -- is part of being human. Even we so-called immortals haven't found a way to exorcise *that* tenacious demon."

When he realized he was starting to enjoy the vampire's company, Tole quickly swallowed more bourbon. It smoldered in his belly and addled his brain. The night was too still. Ridley's presence seemed to fill the passive darkness and own it.

Concentrating on the fire, Tole made it crackle and send up a spray of sparks. They drifted through the air like flaking stars and soon winked out.

"I wish I had some marshmallows," he said, mostly to himself.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Just don't put an arm around my shoulders and start singing."

"I like roasted marshmallows." Tole looked at the other man, who did seem, now, like just another man. "Do you ever eat regular food?"

"Yes, a few times a week. And I enjoy it. My breed

requires more than blood for sustenance.”

“Well, isn’t there something you really like but don’t get to have very often?”

The color seemed to deepen in Ridley’s cheeks. “Lentil soup.”

Tole had no idea why this confession should embarrass him. “See? Now I’m not making fun of *you*, am I?”

“Not yet.”

“So why can’t you have lentil soup as much as you want to?”

No answer came for several seconds. Then, “It gives me gas.”

Tole snickered. His titters escalated into full-bodied laughter. Infected by it, Ridley leaned back on his arms and chortled into the sky. Tole, hooting, clutched his midsection and dropped onto his side. Damp dirt pressed against the side of his face. It felt good.

He felt good. Tole realized he hadn’t felt this good in longer than he could remember.

“On that humiliating note...” Ridley stood, agile as a dancer, without the faintest creak from a single joint. “I suppose I should try to accomplish what I came out here to do.”

Tole sat up and wiped the moist soil from his cheeks. Immediately, his mirth gave way to regret. “Good luck,” he said without looking at the vampire. “And thanks for the laugh.”

Ridley responded with a final, low chuckle. It sounded like he was adjusting his coat. “It was nice seeing you, Tole. I mean that.”

As Ridley made his casual farewell, he lightly touched Tole’s hair, his fingers slipping along and through the strands.

Tole closed his eyes against a rise of gooseflesh that began on his scalp and moved down his body. He didn't want to surrender to the impulse that seized him, but surrender he did. His hand lifted to the back of his head and closed over Ridley's fingers. The vampire slid his hand forward, delicately caressing Tole's ear and temple, the hard ridge of his eyebrow and soft convexity of his eye.

"You're very warm," Ridley murmured. "I like your heat. And your latent strength."

Without lifting his hand, the vampire sank to his knees behind Tole. Now both cool hands moved like the very breath of the moon over Tole's face, deft fingertips gliding across his cheekbones and down the narrow promontory of his nose. When Ridley's fingers reached Tole's lips, they lingered there, making tiny swirls against the sensitive flesh.

A deep shiver wound through Tole's body. His shallow breathing sent veils of vapor into the cooling air.

He'd never been touched like that, ever, by anybody. It made him feel both less and more than what he was -- less a demon, less an angel, and much more a man. His cock thickened, its increasing length more noticeable as it rose and butted against the loose fabric of his pants, its heft a maddening weight at his crotch.

"It isn't always about the blood," Ridley said against Tole's nape. His voice had dropped to an irresistible purr. "Sometimes, it's about the closeness. You can't imagine how much I revel in closeness. It's a rare commodity for creatures like me. And a precious one."

His hands made a fondling journey down Tole's chest, the sides of his thumbs pushing firmly against the tense nipples. The bold advance further ignited Tole. Gasping, he silently cursed himself for his weakness. A freakin' vampire. Ridley could be setting him up for a greedy, gory feed.

Still, Tole wanted him. He craved this enchanting creature. It was Ridley's last statement, he realized, that made the man's touch so potently compelling. But trust did not come easily to Tole.

He made a paltry attempt to move out of Ridley grasp. "Don't work me," he said. "Don't use me."

Ridley paused. "I'm not trying to. I thought this was what you wanted. I thought you wanted it as much as I did. When you grabbed my hand --"

"I don't know what I want." Tole blindly reached for the flask of bourbon, as if it could save him. He didn't take a drink, though, because he realized if he did, his defenses would melt away even more. Aching with need, he half wished Ridley would vanish and half wished he'd feel the searing plunge of fangs through his skin.

Neither happened. Instead, Ridley's hand unerringly found Tole's erect cock and made a brief, featherlight pass along its length. "You're as hard as I am." The soft words were accompanied by an even softer brush of lips against Tole's neck. A fine grit of whiskers made for a pleasurable contrast in textures.

The observation, as full of longing as it was lecherous, made Tole realize Ridley had never intended to take him, either by force *or* through manipulation. It also made him want to crush that hand against his swollen cock and push into it, until neither of them could stand another moment's restraint.

"I have to go," Ridley said tightly. "If I don't, I'm afraid I'll lose what little control I have left. You excite me, Tole. You've always excited me. Believe it or not, I just want --"

A wild shriek, more terrifying than the wail of a banshee, suddenly sheared the wilderness silence. Before Tole knew what was happening, an arm snapped around his waist like a steel band, and his body whizzed through the air faster than a

slingshot rock.

Within seconds, his head still spinning from the speed, Tole felt his feet and then his ass connect with solid ground.

“What the fuck?” he exhaled. As he shoved the hair back from his face, he realized one hand still gripped the flask of bourbon. His shirt was open and hanging off his shoulders. His pants were around his hip bones. His cape lay in a heap beside him. “What the *fuck?*”

Ridley calmly stood over him. “That was not a happy sound we heard out there. Something wicked our way came.”

The sound. Yes, Tole remembered it. A lunatic screech. It almost seemed *that’s* what sent him sailing through the air.

He knew Ridley was right. Something had been ready to descend on them. Tole could tell from the restless shimmying he felt throughout his body, from bones to blood vessels, organs to orifices. His nonhuman genes caused this autonomic response. Good thing he hadn’t shifted in front of Ridley. It wasn’t fun trying to explain how a man could suddenly sprout wings, not to mention a host of other strange features.

Good thing -- in this case, anyway -- his dominant human traits had impeded the functioning of his supernatural radar.

Tole took even breaths, trying to freshen his mind and steady his stomach.

“Sorry for the abrupt takeoff,” Ridley said, “but I had to get us out of there.” His gaze swept over Tole’s near-naked torso. “Damn, you look inviting.”

“I’m glad I cut a pleasing figure. Keep it in mind when I throw up in my lap.”

Ridley grinned. “Try to aim away from your dick.”

Tole gave him a disbelieving squint. The man had one hell of a libido.

“Just kidding,” Ridley said. “I know sexual indifference when I see it.”

Grabbing his cape, Tole got up. “What do you expect? That was a total, death-defying buzzkill, Ridley. Shit almighty.”

Finally, Tole had gathered his senses enough to look around. They were still outdoors, but they were within the limits of Regenerie at the edge of a residential neighborhood. The metroplex hospital, a sprawl of pink buildings on grassy green knolls, was not more than a few kilometers away.

“At least we’re safe,” Ridley said.

“But from what?” Tole began straightening his clothing, although he was tempted not to. The vampire’s steamy gaze was a persuasive argument for showing off some skin. He slipped on his cape.

“I’m not sure.” Ridley’s eyes moved from Tole to the lit windows of the hospital, then back to Tole. “I just know that sound sometimes precedes an attack or a grab.”

“In the Interzone, you mean.”

Ridley nodded. He looked concerned. “So go back to Guardian Station. Don’t even consider spending a night alone in the northwest Interzone. Ever.”

Tole had almost headed for the southwest Interzone, an area of rolling hills he found very appealing, but strong storms had been predicted for the area. “So where are *you* going? Aren’t you staying at Sang?” Sang Station in the Undercity had been set up specifically to accommodate vampires.

Ridley glided a hand down the side of Tole’s face. It was an unexpected and oddly tender gesture, devoid of any hint of aggression -- like all his touches had been this evening. “You forget,” he said, “I haven’t fed yet.”

Before Tole could ask if Ridley was trying to make him feel guilty, the enticing creature of the night disappeared into

his element.

Tole stared after him. There was nothing to see. Again, the vampire moved like lightning. Tole vaguely wished he could watch Ridley walk away, just put one foot in front of the other and recede into the distance. As he recalled, the man had a straight-backed, fluid stride that underscored his casual elegance. He also had a great-looking ass.

“What’s next?” Tole whispered.

He realized that for the first time in a long time, he felt genuinely desired. And the desire was mutual.

Chapter Three

The bell beside the front door didn't just ring; it clanged maniacally enough to drive Tole out of his bedroom before he could get dressed. Zee, too, jogged out of his room as he wrestled on his bathrobe. All Tole had managed to grab was the first piece of fabric his hand touched, which he hurriedly tried to secure around his waist.

Numerals indicating the time glowed from each wall. It was 2:56.

Few creatures came to 86 Guardian Station this late, and none rang the doorbell so ferociously. Mind still muzzy from sleep, Tole wondered for a moment if fire was sweeping through the Undercity. No, that couldn't be it. Too many safeguards, including a massive and sensitive fire-suppression system, had been built in.

"Shit...Win," he whispered, remembering the third member of the Triumvirate was sleeping nextdoor with Pablo. If some crisis was at hand, Win would have to be here too.

Doubling back to the end of the hallway, where the nearest Call button was located, he pushed it to alert Win. Simultaneously, he heard Zee exclaim, "Ridley!"

"Sorry to disturb all of you," said a familiar, mellow voice, "but there's a good reason for it."

What? Adrenaline shot through Tole's belly. He got to the living room just as Win stumbled into the house through the back door. Situated at the rear of the kitchen, it led directly to Pablo's suite.

Sure enough, Ridley Barron, vampire, stood just inside

the front door with his hands in his coat pockets. Zee, bathrobe largely open, faced him. Tole, farther back in the living room, strove to wrap the arms of a shirt around his waist, for that's what he'd grabbed in the darkness of his room. Win, who'd come in as far as the dining area, was buck naked.

Ridley's gaze moved from man to another. His brows hitched up. "Well," he said, "it looks like a vampire *can* die and go to heaven."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Win asked irritably. He pulled a chair away from the dining table and stood behind it.

A smirk angled into Ridley's cheek. "You needn't hide the jewels, Win. I've already seen them."

"You've done more than see them," Win muttered.

"I know. I've actually tried them on." Ridley's mouth moved into a quick, taunting smile. "But enough reminiscing." He turned his attention from his former lover to the other two men. "Hello, Tole," he said quietly. Unremarkable as the greeting was, it dripped with insinuation.

Tole gave him a self-conscious nod and fumbled with the shirt at his waist.

"Setting a fashion trend, are you?" Ridley asked, staring at the shirt.

Droll fucker, Tole thought, still trying to cover his incipient hard-on. Damn, he was horny. "Can we cut to the chase?" As soon as the question left his mouth, he could have slapped himself. It wasn't meant to be a double entendre. He sidled over to the couch, just a short distance to his right, and carefully sat down.

"Where's Pablo?" Zee asked Win. "Still asleep?"

"Yeah. No point in waking him unless it's necessary. And it sure as shit doesn't seem to be necessary." Win was

displeased. An old, one-time lover had wrenched him from the arms of his new, full-time love.

The snide observation didn't faze Ridley. "Believe it or not, I didn't come all the way over here just to ogle some candy. The three of you better decide where to put your swinging dicks, because I have something to show you." He looked from the coffee table, which was closest, to the more distant dining table. "Where do you want me to set it? Here or over there?"

"I'm not moving," said Win.

"Shit," Tole whispered, dropping his head back. Now he'd have to get up and walk. The shirt wasn't wide enough to cover both his cock and his ass.

Glancing at him, Ridley pursed his lips to hold in a grin. He solved Tole's dilemma by walking into the dining area and sitting across from Win. Zee followed and sank into the chair next to Ridley's. Tole reluctantly rose from the couch and strode across the open space to sit beside Win. He could feel Ridley's heated gaze scouring his body as he walked, and even after he took a seat at the table. Adjusting the shirt to cover his lap, Tole fancifully imagined his chest hair scorching as Ridley looked at him. His balls seemed to be resting on sun-warmed asphalt.

Ridley reached into one of his coat pockets and slid something onto the table. "It appears a Morlock," he said, "is feeding on the Eloi."

The strange references tripped a switch of recognition in Tole's mind. Win and Zee frowned in bewilderment, but Tole immediately thought of the old books sprawled around the house -- on several sets of shelves, on the occasional tables in the living room, even in the bathroom. Ridley was referring to characters in one of those volumes. Tole thought it might be *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, a very old work of fiction.

Ridley lifted his hand. Beneath it laid a very pale scrap of something shaped like an isosceles triangle. A small gold nugget gleamed from the top peak. "Your coven seems to have access to the Powers," he said. "Maybe you ought to clue them in about this."

Reaching for it, Tole slid the object toward him and Win. He grimaced. "It's a freakin' ear. Or the top of one. And it's obviously elvish. Male, I'd say." He looked at the other men.

Zee reached for the part and studied it. "That's what it is, all right."

"What the hell?" Win said. "Where did you find that?"

"In the Interzone." Ridley gave Tole a quick, meaningful glance. "The northwest Interzone. Tonight."

Tole rubbed the lower half of his face, its growth of stubble sanding his hand. He thought of that horrific shriek. He thought of Ridley's warning...and then another book title, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. "You don't suppose this is the work of a spinner," he said to his comrades. "Do you?" It was an ugly thought.

"Let's hope not," Zee said.

"Why a spinner?" Win asked. He nodded toward the ear. "This individual could've been attacked by a shifter and ripped apart. Or attacked by a natural predator, an animal."

"Look closely at the ornament," Tole said, easing the pathetic peak back to their side of the table.

Win curled forward and studied it. Zee, too, peered in its direction.

A fine silk thread, like a section of spiderweb, was wound around and trapped beneath the gold earring. The thread was only visible when light caught it. "Could be a piece of the elf's hair," Win suggested.

"It isn't." Tole spoke with authority. Eight or nine years ago, he'd had an elvish lover. "They have fine hair, but not *that* fine. And on light elves, it's pale gold, not translucent."

"Good point," said Zee, "although one with disturbing implications."

Ridley sat back and linked his hands over his stomach. Looking troubled, he remained silent. His eyes moved from one man to another as they hashed out possibilities.

Tole felt a surge of concern for the vampire. Maybe it was because Ridley stubbornly refused to stop venturing into the Interzone to feed. He did seem quite capable of taking care himself, though. No creature that had such keen senses and moved so swiftly could ever possibly be trapped. And he did have that amulet.

The vampire's gaze met and fused with Tole's for a moment. It was unreadable. Then Ridley looked away.

His eyelids were, as usual, at half-staff, their straight brows and lashes as black as the edge of a crow's wing. But he didn't look quite the same as he did before. The rosy swatches on his cheeks hadn't been there earlier, and the shadow of whisker stubble had been much fainter.

"Damn," Zee said, surfacing from his thoughts. "This is something we never anticipated."

This is something I never anticipated, thought Tole, stealing another glance at Ridley. He felt a connection with this man, this proud pariah. The feeling wasn't a welcome one, but it was undeniable.

"We still don't know that a spinner is responsible." Elbow on table, Win yawned expansively and scratched at his scalp. "I mean, hell, no other evidence has ever turned up."

Again, Tole was irked by how gorgeous the man was, even with his hair disheveled and his complexion blotchy from

sleep. He didn't know what prompted his little twist of resentment until he realized Ridley, too, was watching Win.

Tole knew he should be well used to his comrade's effect on people. Sometimes, though, he got tired of living in Win's shadow. Perturbed and dismayed by his own pettiness, he redirected his attention. There was a far more important matter at hand than Win's damned allure.

"Lack of evidence doesn't mean shit," Tole said in answer to Win's comment. "From what I know, spinners don't leave much behind. And what *is* left would likely be eaten by some animal or just rot away in the underbrush. If Ridley hadn't found this ear, the elf's disappearance would've been attributed to something else, something more mundane."

"It *could* be the work of vigilantes -- vicious ones," Zee said. "And that strand could simply be spider silk, not spinner silk." He got up from the table. "Any of you want something to drink?" The glance he shot Ridley wasn't exactly a nervous one, but it was obvious Zee wanted to avoid any misinterpretation. "I mean, you know, coffee or tea or wine or something."

Ridley chuckled. "No, thank you. I've already had my refreshment for the night."

"Ice water, please," Tole said. He tried to detect a trace of blood on Ridley's lips but saw nothing.

Who fed him?

Did they fuck?

Why does it matter?

Zee interrupted Tole's thoughts by asking if he wanted a twist of lemon. When Zee delivered the glass of cold, tangy water, Tole took a long drink, followed by another. More awake now, he wanted to indulge in a full-body stretch -- just lean against the chair's back, extend his legs, arch his spine,

and clasp his hands behind his head. Considering he was naked and a guest sat at the table, doing such a thing would've been gauche. He didn't want Ridley to think he was making a point of showing off his body. So, instead, he rolled his shoulders.

Even that move caught Ridley's attention. His gaze shifted to Tole and lingered. Tole felt his nipples tighten as his cock did its own little stretch. *Why don't you just crawl under the table, he wanted to tell the vampire, and suck me off? Let's get it over with so I can relax.*

The thought excited him far more than it should have.

Ridley broke the current. "Just for possible future reference," he said to no one in particular, "tell me what you know about spinners."

Zee settled back into his chair. "They're mutant Otherbeings. But mutants of what particular race or species, we don't know. Legend has it that when the Darkening struck, the ancestors of spinners either refused or were unable to find temporary refuge."

Ridley pressed for clarification. "So what are you saying? That being exposed to the effects of the Darkening somehow altered these beings? On a genetic level?"

"That's the gist of it." Zee hesitated. When he again spoke, his voice was more tentative. "It's kind of similar to, you know, how a vamp or were attack can affect a human."

Ridley, who'd been thoughtfully running his fingers over his chin and upper lip, suddenly dropped his hand to the table. "Not all of us 'attack,'" he said curtly.

Win breathed a laugh. "You should've anticipated *that* blast of righteous indignation," he said to Zee.

Zee apologized to Ridley. "I was just trying to draw an analogy. I didn't mean to imply you're all the same."

“Sorry if I’m a bit touchy on that score. You’d be, too, if you were the victim of a stereotype.”

“Like everybody assuming you’re evil incarnate because you have demon blood,” Tole said without thinking. As soon as he felt his comrades’ disapproving stares, he added, “For example.”

He was almost certain Ridley had picked up on his slip and the moment of frosty censure that followed it. The vampire was very astute. Assuming a casual air, Tole sat back and took a drink of water. Nobody was supposed to know that he, Win, and Zee were hybrids. Revelation of their true natures would be the first step toward blowing their cover.

“So, continue,” Ridley said to Zee. “What form did the mutation take?”

Zee cleared his throat. “Well, these creatures allegedly lost whatever supernatural or, at least, superhuman powers they’d been endowed with. In the course of generations, their progeny were instilled with a relentless compulsion to reacquire those powers. Or *any* powers.”

“I think I’m starting to get the picture,” Ridley said with obvious distaste.

“It isn’t a very pretty one,” Tole added. The more detailed this discussion got, the more it unnerved him. He kept glancing at the ear fragment, so proudly impaled with that gold nugget. Damn, he hoped there was some other explanation for this savagery.

“Spinners absorb occult knowledge and supernatural ability from their victims,” Zee explained. “The knowledge is permanent, or may be, but the power is usually temporary. It might last a day or a month or several years. That’s why spinners have to keep ‘renewing.’ So if one were to consume a faery, for example, and it gave the spinner the ability to become invisible, he or she would eventually lose that ability

--”

“And have to find another faery to feast on,” Ridley concluded.

“Correct. But spinners don’t always ensnare prey for the sole purpose of consumption. When they find creatures they fancy, they’ll keep those creatures around for a while as playmates. I’m guessing that’s what happened to the owner of the ear.”

“What makes you think so?” Ridley asked.

Tole answered this time. “Elvish men are quite fetching. As stunning as Win but in a different, more ethereal way. And they can make damned pleasing lovers.”

“You seem to be speaking from experience,” Ridley said with a hint of a smirk. His gaze again held Tole’s.

“I am.” Tole knew he was playing with the vampire, teasing him, but Ridley sure as hell didn’t seem to mind.

Looking a shade more flushed, Ridley raised and lowered his eyebrows. “What else could a spinner have gained from this elf?” Shrugging, he glanced at the other men. “Sorry, I don’t know much about elves. They don’t mix with vampires. Most creatures don’t, for that matter.”

Ridley made the statement without a trace of self-pity. It was a fact of his existence. Still, Tole felt a wave of empathy for him as an earlier confession echoed in his mind. “*You can’t imagine how much I revel in closeness.*”

Troubled by his reaction, Tole looked away from the vampire. He grabbed the moisture-slick glass of water and took another drink.

“We can only guess what spinners get from their victims,” Zee said, “but absorbing an elf would likely provide physical strength and endurance, heightened sensory perception, and maybe even some immunity to aging.”

Frowning, Ridley drummed his fingers on the table. "How do spinners operate? I mean, what's the whole process, from...you know...Point A to --"

"Point Eat?" Win supplied with an impish smile.

Ridley flipped him an irritated glance. "I don't find this subject very joke-worthy. I'm sure the victims didn't, either."

"Sorry," Win said. "Now if you'll all excuse me, I have to relieve myself."

The need to answer nature's call apparently overshadowed Win's self-consciousness about his nudity. He got up from the table and walked from the dining area through the living room and down the hallway. This time, Ridley seemed to make a point of *not* watching him -- a deviation from the norm, and one Tole found quite interesting.

"Now that the resident wag has left the room," Ridley said, "can we proceed?" He seemed grateful for Win's departure.

"Well, none of us has ever witnessed an actual capture," Zee said. "In fact, I don't think anyone has...and lived to tell about it."

"What about the rest of the process?"

"Same thing," Zee said. "Certain inferences can be made, just based on the term *spinner*, but that's about all. I don't mean to suggest these creatures are like monstrous, sapient spiders or anything, but they do seem to use strong filaments in some capacity."

"Strong but very fine," Tole added, "like the one on that ear."

He was restless. The longer this discussion went on, the more Tole wanted one of two things -- either for Ridley to leave, or for the two of them to get cozy. Being virtually naked while sitting across the table from him was stressful enough.

But being subjected to the vampire's weighty glances and suggestive smiles turned stress into torment.

Win returned wearing a pair of sweatpants. "Here," he said, tossing Tole a robe. "This should keep you from feeling like a flasher."

"Thanks." Tole felt heat steal into his cheeks. He caught the bundle, let it fall open, and awkwardly slipped his arms into the sleeves. Hiking the collar up around his shoulders, he twisted in the chair to get the rest of the garment in place.

"Not that you've ever been shy about exposing yourself," Win added.

Tole glared at him. "Why don't you go back to bed before Pablo comes looking for you?"

"You know, that's not a bad idea. Ridley might take a shine to him. And we all know how seductive vampires can be." Win glanced from Tole to Ridley back to Tole. "Right?"

Zee raised his hands to put an end to the exchange. "Don't start. I mean it."

Chuckling softly, Ridley lowered his eyes and shook his head. "I might as well leave, since there isn't much more you can tell me. I'm feeling pretty exhausted, anyway. It's been a long night." He got up from the table and nodded toward the elf ear. "Are you going to make sure the Powers get to see that, or don't you think it's worth bothering about?"

"Don't worry, they'll get to see it," Win said. Eager to join his sleeping lover, he'd already moved toward the back door, where he paused before making his exit. "To be on the safe side, Ridley, just stay the hell out of the Interzone until this shit is cleared up."

"I second that advice," Zee said. Rising from the table, he shook hands with the vampire, who also stood. "Good night, and thanks for the alert. We'll keep you updated."

"I'd appreciate it," Ridley answered.

"I'll see him out," Tole said to the others. Zee made nothing of this -- he simply headed for his room -- but Win smirked as he turned and left the house.

Chapter Four

"I can let myself out. You don't have to escort me. I won't be creeping around like Nosferatu after everyone's gone to bed." With a weary smile, Ridley faced his last remaining host. He gave Tole a light pat on the upper arm and walked toward the front door.

Just as the vampire's hand closed on the latch, Tole called out, "Wait."

Loping through the living room, he reached past their visitor, opened the door, let Ridley step outside, then followed him onto the sidewalk. As soon as he closed the door at his back, Tole faced the vampire. He wouldn't allow himself to think. Flattening his hands against Ridley's chest, he slammed Ridley against the house's wall.

And kissed him heatedly. Frenzied with desire, Tole entertained no cautionary thoughts and felt no shame.

Ridley neither resisted nor capitulated. He met Tole's kiss with equal fervor. Harsh breath sanding the air, each man gripped the back of the other's head. Their open mouths crushed against lips and cheeks, hard jaws and soft throats. Ridley's flesh was as cool as fresh water. Even his tongue, moving with skill and determination around Tole's, was deliciously cool.

"I want you, just as a man," Ridley said into Tole's hair. His rigid cock butted Tole's for emphasis. His hips made slow rotations as he ground his crotch against the other man's crotch.

"Guess we're not known for our subtlety, are we?" Tole's

voice was graveled with lust. His fingers splayed over Ridley's high cheekbones, holding his head in place. He spoke against the vampire's wicked, wicked mouth. "You know, we might almost be right for each other."

"Don't you know 'almost' is never good enough?" The tip of Ridley's tongue, at once tough and silky, moved with bold deliberation over Tole's parted lips.

They kissed again, with no attempt at finesse. Tole wanted to *feel* Ridley. He didn't know what being right for each other meant to him, beyond this intoxicating connection of willing body with willing body, and at the moment it didn't matter.

"You can't have my blood," Tole said against Ridley's mouth.

"I don't want your blood. I want your cum." Ridley's hands repeatedly glided over Tole's hair, fondling it. "Let me suck it out of you until I draw the very breath from your lungs along with it."

Tole's cock throbbed and grew. He was about to say, *We can't do it here, not here*, but he scrabbled to undo the sash of his robe before speech was even an option. Ridley spun Tole around so their positions were reversed. He sank to his knees with the same fluid grace that marked all his movements. Swiping open Tole's robe, he made that pole of flesh disappear into his mouth with startling ease and efficiency.

Tole gasped. The sudden further swelling of his cock made his body stutter toward climax. He forced himself away from the edge; it was too soon to stop enjoying this piece of heaven. Ridley took long, deep draws, his hand and mouth moving in tandem and moving insistently. Curled against and hugging the shaft's underside, his tongue flexed and relaxed with the same rhythm.

Just as Tole's balls seemed to reach critical mass,

Ridley's ministrations slackened. He was reading Tole's body the way a blind man, in the old days, fingered the raised patterns of Braille. The modulation in his touch from aggressive to airy brought a fresh stab of excitement. A sensation at once dense and sharp made Tole's cock leak, but the urge to come had ebbed.

With a sly crawl, the vampire's fingers moved over Tole's tight sac. Ridley uttered a soft exclamation of delight when his fingertips tripped over the small titanium hoops that ran through the skin of Tole's scrotum.

"Hafada piercings," he murmured, briefly glancing up. "What a nice surprise."

Dizzied with arousal, Tole closed his eyes and spread his legs farther apart. Ridley lifted Tole's hard-on toward his belly and eased between his thighs. The vampire's tongue moved with nimble delicacy over and around the hoops, playing them, while his lips plucked at the surrounding skin. He braced and lightly massaged Tole's nuts with thumb and little finger as his three middle fingers slid farther back and caressed the narrow track to Tole's ass. Then, with careful force, he pulled each ball into his mouth and savored it like a juice-filled fruit.

A supple tongue and lips like satin, fingers dancing with balletic grace. Every move Ridley made was deft and confident and bespoke untold years of experience. There was nothing clumsy or tentative about his approach.

The adroit stimulation went beyond both pleasure and pain into a realm Tole had only heard about. He nearly sealed his airway trying to stifle the sounds that knotted in his throat. Badly needing release, he grabbed his straining shaft. Ridley pushed his hand away and again drew Tole's cock into his mouth. This time, he did it with a vengeance. One mean, prolonged suck was all it took.

Tole thrust into the vampire's open throat as cum

pounded out of him and blessed relief rolled through him. Nothing could feel as good as this delayed orgasm felt -- not the gooey, charred sweetness of melted marshmallows on his tongue, not the press of Win's sumptuous lips against his mouth, not a firm ass beneath his hands or mud between his toes or the sound of an angelic choir against his eardrums. Spread-eagled against the building, Tole felt its rough siding dig into his back through the cloth of the bathrobe. Even that aroused him. His clawing hands popped off one of the shingles.

Spent, finally, he wilted to his knees as soon as Ridley released his softening dick. Ridley knelt before him. It was impossible to tell who kissed whom just then. Their faces simply came together as if they had to. The kiss was leisurely, sensual. Even the slight, bitter tang of his own cum in Ridley's mouth seemed sweet to Tole. But maybe it was this easy closeness that was the true delight.

"Don't you need to get off?" Tole asked, keeping his voice low. Thumb and fingers bracketing Ridley's mouth, Tole kissed him again. He'd missed feeling the press of another's lips against his.

No one was up and about at this hour. Even if somebody did happen to walk by, that person would afford the men privacy. The residents of Guardian Station, not easily shocked or offended, were extremely tolerant. Still, it was a matter of common courtesy to be quiet. People were sleeping.

"I'm all right," Ridley said, but didn't explain.

He sat beside Tole, so close beside him that their shoulders touched, and ran a hand along Tole's leg inside the parted robe. Tole followed the caress with something like wonder. He didn't want this night's intimacy to end.

"What were you before you turned?" Tole asked. "I'd swear you were a professional whore."

“Hardly,” Ridley said on a laugh. “I was a seminarian.”

The word didn’t quite register at first. When it did, Tole’s eyebrows lifted. “You were going to become a *priest*?”

“I wasn’t quite sure. Probably not, though. I was more a student of theology and comparative religion. Went into divinity school after I got a couple of degrees that didn’t mean much to me.”

“Are you sure you’re a vampire?”

Ridley laughed softly. “Quite. Why do you doubt it?”

Tole shook his head in disbelief at the question. But it quickly occurred to him that becoming a vampire wasn’t always a matter of choice. He didn’t want to probe too deeply into the matter. This was private territory, and Tole knew he hadn’t yet earned the privilege of exploring it. Chances were he’d never earn that privilege.

He steered away from the subject of Ridley’s past. “For one thing, I haven’t seen or felt a hint of fangs.”

“My piercing teeth only grow when I’m about to feed. Otherwise, they’re ordinary teeth.”

“Canines?”

“Yes. Some breeds use their incisors. Some even use fingernails.”

Tole was aware there were different vampire breeds. He’d just never found out which one Ridley was. “And you only feed when somebody invites you to?”

“*Expressly* invites me to. I can’t just assume somebody is willing.” Ridley stretched out his legs, which were previously drawn up to his chest. Tole could barely see him in the darkened street. The sunlamps hadn’t yet begun to paint the air with light.

In the dim distance, a train approached the Guardian

Station platform, stopped, and shot forward. The floor vibrated slightly. Tole felt it in his balls, still sensitive from Ridley's ministrations.

He fidgeted. "Do you have sex when you feed?" It nagged at him that the vampire didn't need to get off. Tole had to dispel the primal masculine fear that Ridley hadn't been excited by him.

"Sometimes. Not always. It depends on how horny I am." It was an offhanded answer, as far as it went. Then Ridley added, "Tonight I *did* have sex. Being with you earlier really got me primed."

Tole didn't know whether to feel flattered or cheated. He didn't know why he even cared what Ridley had done tonight, or with whom he'd done it.

"I'm afraid I wasn't very considerate of that host," Ridley confessed. "She wanted some dick, so I gave her some dick. But that's *all* I did. Lock, load, shoot. I really needed the release."

"She," Tole repeated, feeling strangely relieved.

"Mm-hm. One of my regulars. There are two professional donors I sometimes go to in the Overcity and five people in the Interzone who've issued me standing invitations."

"Can't quibble with convenience," Tole said, prompting Ridley to chuckle. "Do you think that woman will retract her invitation now?"

"I wouldn't blame her if she did. Damn, I feel bad about that. I mean, it's not like we're lovers or anything, but I usually make an effort to please my hosts. I figure they're doing me a huge favor and deserve *some* satisfaction in return."

"Why did you go back to the Interzone?" Tole asked, his concern resurfacing. "After what we heard out there, wouldn't it have been wiser to find someone in the Overcity?"

“Well, yeah.” It was a grudging admission. Ridley continued his slow stroking of Tole’s thigh. “But Regenerie’s professional donors taste stale to me. Even the ones I like. Maybe it’s a psychological thing. And I’m put off by the fact other vamps use them.” He glanced at Tole, his smile sheepish and somehow endearing. “Maybe I need to feel special.”

“Don’t we all,” Tole said. “So, um, in spite of having access to these...regulars, you still fed from Win. And had sex with him afterward.” The encounter had taken place a while ago, well before Pablo entered the picture, but this once-insignificant incident suddenly loomed large in Tole’s mind.

Ridley faced him, as if trying to read his expression. “Yes, I did. I fed from Win because he wanted me to. He got aroused, I got aroused, we played with each other, and then he begged me to fuck him. He can be damned irresistible when he’s naked and worked up.”

“He can be damned irresistible when he’s fully dressed and sound asleep.”

The two men smiled in shared understanding. Some truths just couldn’t be denied.

“Do you envy him?” Ridley asked.

“Yes and no.” Tole was determined to be honest. Ridley, after all, had been forthright, so he deserved as much in return. “I don’t envy all the unwanted attention he gets. Just being out and about can be a bitch for him, whether it’s in the Overcity or the Undercity. He didn’t ask to look the way he looks.”

“So, where does the envy come in?”

This was the hard part. Tole tried to choose his words carefully. “It used to get under my skin that Win always had his

choice of sex partners. Now, I guess, it gets under my skin that he has Pablo.” The glance he gave Ridley was tintured with embarrassment. “I mean, it’s what he has with Pablo that I envy.”

Looking down, Ridley nodded.

They both fell silent for a moment. Tole realized his hand was now on Ridley’s thigh. He didn’t remember having put it there.

“May I see you again?” Ridley asked.

“Yes.” Tole was surprised by the abruptness of his answer.

Ridley’s eyes shone faintly in the gloom. “I think it would be nice to do something, you know, normal. Maybe have dinner together.”

“I’d like that.”

Ridley changed position, preparing to get up. “Well, I have to get back to Sang. I really need some sleep.”

Tole grasped his wrist. “Just promise me one thing, okay?”

“What is it?”

He sounded so serious, Tole almost started laughing. “Don’t order lentil soup.”

Ridley smiled beneath his reddening cheeks.

Rising together, they shared a prolonged embrace. The only thing that kept their bodies from sealing perfectly was their laughter.

Chapter Five

Tole could detect the glow from the C-Orb down the length of his body. It was a light that could be felt as much as seen, at least by the three hybrid beings who formed the Triumvirate. He parted the long, saffron-colored robe he wore so a strip of bare skin, neck to ankles, would be exposed. The glow seemed to curl over his cock like a loose fist of sultry air. Lovely sensation -- not like the grasp of an eager lover's hand, more like the comforting touch of a nurse's. But not really. There was no substance behind the touch, just blanketing warmth and gentle pressure.

He knew Zee and Win felt the light in other ways. Each of the men carried an angelic-demonic-human mix or A-D-H ratio that was unique. Pablo, fully human, didn't "feel" the light at all.

The ten-foot sphere of impeccably polished celestite hung in the exact center of the dark room, held in place by nothing material. Semitranslucent, its surface vitreous, it was multihued blue. Deep and intricate veining of ghostly white bled into ghostly gray. The crystalline sphere only *seemed* inert. That would soon change.

"The last time we consulted the Celestine about problems in the northwest Interzone," Zee said, "it did indicate a connection to Villius. But our focus was too diffuse. We had plenty of energy going, thanks to Pablo's participation, but that's the same reason we neglected to ask more specific questions and concentrate on drawing forth more specific answers and solutions."

Tole remembered the session. It was Pablo's first one with the Orb. He was the group's new Touch, there to spark

the Triumvirate's waning interactive energy -- sexual energy, in particular. His influence certainly worked in that regard. But there were strong psycho-emotional elements at play that day, elements that had to do with Pablo's and Win's growing attraction. All the men's attention had been distracted by the drama.

"Why don't you be solely responsible for the intention?" Win suggested.

Tole thought it was a good idea. Zee usually had the clearest mind. Tole's temperament sometimes interfered with his concentration. Win's passion for Pablo certainly hazed *his* thoughts.

"All right," said Zee. "The three of you can simply funnel energy. But let's decide what exactly the intention should be." He glanced at Win and Pablo. "And how we're going to deal with the sex play."

"We have to determine if a spinner is prowling the Interzone," Tole said immediately. He had Ridley in mind. He'd had Ridley in mind a lot since yesterday evening. "And where its base of operation is. And how Regenerie's marshals can storm that place."

"And *how* they're supposed to storm it," Win added.

Thoughtfully, Zee nodded. He was silent for some moments, likely working out how best to present these issues. To evoke the most detailed responses, his focus would have to be sharp, his attitude resolute.

Pablo finally spoke up. He wasn't normally shy about voicing his opinions -- in fact, was getting more self-assured by the day -- but he'd always felt cowed by the mystical Celestine and the coven's casual intimacy with it. So he always deferred to the other men's judgment and simply did as he was told. By his own admission, Pablo didn't understand this aspect of their work.

“When it comes to the sex,” he said, “why don’t we just do what comes naturally, what feels right? It makes sense to me. A lot more sense than forced interaction.”

Watching Pablo, Tole was struck by how grounded in reason he was. Perfect damned solution, right there. Why hadn’t the wise Triumvirate thought of it? Yesterday, Tole realized, he would have launched into a full-blown rant over this suggestion. Now, for some reason, it seemed eminently logical.

For some reason. Yeah. And that reason’s name was Ridley. Suddenly, he had no craving for a piece of the Win-and-Pablo action.

The other three men looked warily at Tole, certainly expecting him to blow. He merely nodded. “I agree. The strongest, purest energy is generated by natural attraction.”

Win gave him a sly smile. “Gee, I wonder how you came to *that* realization over the past twenty-four hours.”

Tole stared straight ahead at the Orb. “Rationality doesn’t always elude me, you know. I feel more settled today.”

Win erupted into laughter. “I’ll bet you do.”

“Well,” said Zee with a smile, “since we all concur, let’s get started.”

The men, each clad in a robe that matched his eye color, took their usual compass-point positions around the Orb. Tole stationed himself at the south; Pablo, at the north; Win, at the west; Zee, at the east. They began moving counterclockwise in measured steps.

This circular path was so familiar to Tole, he could tread it with his head lowered and eyes closed. He didn’t have to worry about matching the other men’s pace. His footfalls were perfectly synchronized with theirs.

The Coven of Three was an apt name for the Triumvirate,

not just a meaningless cover for their true identities and function. They were indeed a closely bonded group of magical practitioners. Together, they'd worked with the Orb so often that they moved around it like precisely programmed satellites.

Left palm turned up to the Celestine, Tole emptied his mind. He chanted the "Paregoria" along with Win and Zee. Win flippantly referred to it as the Regenerie Fight Song. It was part of the formula that activated the Orb and ultimately helped improve the quality of life in the metroplex. The chant was in a language so ancient and arcane that the coveners weren't even familiar with it. They simply knew how to make the sounds, which were more hypnotic than the plainsong of the early Catholic Church.

As he strode and sang, Tole let his essence flow into the Orb and the Orb's essence flow into him. The other men did the same, although Pablo couldn't participate in the chant, since he wasn't an Exceptional Being and one of the Powers. Nevertheless, a complex circuitry was established.

The Celestine sometimes showed them images and sometimes slipped information directly into their minds. It was through the latter means that Tole learned how to devise "Prick Watch" lamps, which allowed the Triumvirate to keep an eye on troublemakers throughout Regenerie. It was also how Win got inspiration for the artistic mobiles that both decorated and protected the Undercity, and how Zee was able to design the stratocam.

The implantation method never ceased to amaze Tole. Sudden, sure knowledge sprouting up in one's mind, knowledge previously elusive, always inspired awe. He imagined it was like a deaf person waking one morning to hearing. Of course, the coven's requests couldn't be selfishly capricious. They had to have something to do with public welfare or the improvement of Regenerie. Tole couldn't, for

example, ask for a new and exciting fuck-buddy every day of the year...as much as he might like to.

As the men continued their humble march, hands extended to the Celestine, it silently began to turn. Tole could feel its movement in his solar plexus and behind his eyes. He was part of it now. The esoteric circuitry began to hum, its celestial tone replacing the deep-throated strains of the Paregoria. The Orb spun faster...and faster still.

Then the world fell away.

Weightless, buoyed in the black void that surrounded the Orb, Tole felt no need to find Win or Pablo or even Zee. He went back to last night's encounters with Ridley. His own long fingers curled around his cock and began tugging. It was a desultory movement. He wanted to take his time and wallow in his recollections, still vivid enough to be arousing.

Recollections... Ridley's cool fingertips, steady as an acrobat on a balance beam, tracing his features. Broad hands sliding over the muscles of his chest and abdomen, over the beads of his nipples. Soft lips flexing against his neck. Suggestive, murmured words...

Tole felt the first surges of blood into his cock, the hot swelling of tissues and vessels, the tautening of skin. He stroked more firmly, making the skin slip over his cockhead, enjoying the feel of himself hardening within his own heated grasp. Fingering the plump head, he caressed the gentle slopes that led from its crown, traced the narrow fissure, lightly pinched the top, and then squeezed the resilient brim. Moving his hand down again, he coaxed the shaft into thickening further.

Silk sheathing wood.

A shimmering tingle began to radiate through his groin. Muscles, tightening, seemed to squirm over his bones. Second by tense second, his skin grew warmer, damper.

Win and Pablo drifted by, legs wrapped around each other, hands scrabbling at hair and shoulders and chests. They kissed, wildly then tenderly, over and over again. The lovers' narrow hips continually nudged stiff cock against stiff cock in another kind of kiss.

An electric slither of excitement went through Tole's limbs. He smiled weakly and continued stroking.

He pretended his own rigid flesh was being suctioned into the humid well of Ridley's mouth and throat. Or being driven into the snug channel of his ass. Tole's breath got shallow and choppy. Pumping now, he let his free hand find his tightening balls. Mere fingertips couldn't do what Ridley's tongue and lips did to those rings, but Tole had a good imagination.

Just as his arousal climbed toward its crest, Zee drifted by. "Come on me," he whispered, working his own cock as he butted a nipple against the moist tip of Tole's dick.

Zee had a gorgeous, smooth chest, its tough muscles broad and well defined. Tole began half sliding, half jabbing his cock against Zee's hard pecs. Suddenly, he couldn't resist the desire to see his cum dripping over one of those perfect mounds. Stroking harder, breathing harder, he aimed for a nipple.

Grinding out a growl, he jerked into release, orgasm throbbing with his heartbeat along each nerve. Cum spurted onto Zee's chest and dribbled lazily over and around that rosy pebble.

The grand Celestine began silently to fracture itself and break into floating, shifting segments.

Zee turned to face it. He closed his eyes and spread his arms. Aside from the pumped muscles that attested to his concentration, he remained still.

The Orb began to release images, hazy but distinguishable. First a metroplex, a dreary one. Villius, city of sand and ash and iron. A mining town. The overview swirled in on itself like a whirlpool. Up came a tower.

Tole had seen it once or twice before, but only from a distance. Regenerie used to engage in some minimal trade with Villius, but after the dam sabotage about five or six months ago, all trade had ceased. There had never been formal, much less friendly, relations between the two metroplexes.

The tower was a peculiar, almost bony structure, its body made from an ash-and-sand aggregate called V-crete, its facade framed on all sides by jagged lengths of cast iron, like black rickrack, and decorated with rococo wrought-iron flourishes. It reminded Tole of a twisted, charred bramble bush on which nothing would ever grow.

This was allegedly the residence of the ruling Powers of Villius, a woman named Keryss and her cousin, Mirandi. From what the Triumvirate understood, a male was part of this picture too, but his name and precise role were unknown.

Perplexed but not surprised by the images, Tole wondered what the Celestine would next reveal. He glanced around at his comrades. Win and Pablo stared fixedly at the Orb. What they all saw next *did* jolt them.

It was Keryss, without a doubt. Her look was unmistakable. She wasn't "closeted" the way Regenerie's Powers were. Although she and the Triumvirate had never met formally, the men had gotten reports and seen pictures of her.

Amazonian in height -- and, reputedly, in temperament -- she was a willowy figure with a waterfall of platinum hair and eyes of nearly the same color. A magisterial woman, to say the least, and more handsome than beautiful, with a distinctly

unconventional magnetism.

She approached a large, round bed. A huge bed, in fact, frothing with rust-colored pillows and comforters. It sat on an iron base. A beautiful man with pale hair and pale skin and petal pink lips reclined on the bed, arms over his head. Keryss shed her thin gown and approached him. As she exposed her high breasts with their very taut nipples, the man rolled onto his side, propped his head in his hand, and smiled.

“Holy fucking shit,” Tole whispered.

A gold nugget gleamed from the man’s peaked ear.

He was an elf.

Chapter Six

"I saw her yesterday," Tole said when they were all back in the house. Hand to forehead, he paced around the dining table, partway into the living room, and back to the dining area, where he gripped the top of a chair. "When I was doing that Interzone scan, I saw a flash of silver shoot over the trees. I thought it might've been an OB with a human shape, but it went by too fast for me to be sure."

Zee drank something in the kitchen. Watching Tole, Win stood with his hands on his hips. Pablo pulled out a chair and sat down.

"You mean you caught Keryss on the stratocam, flying over the Interzone?" Win asked.

"I'm pretty sure I did, yes." Tole slapped the chair back. "Fuck." Brow furrowed, he again looked at Win. "Could she have been the one who burned Ridley last fall?"

Win took a seat beside Pablo. "Man, I don't know. I think Ridley would've said something if his wannabe donor looked like Keryss. Wouldn't you remark on it? I mean, come on, how many women have that stature and that coloration?"

"She could've absorbed some shifting ability from a recent victim," Zee said, joining them. He pointed in the general direction of their workroom, where the Orb was located. It was in the adjacent building, in front of Pablo's suite. "All I know is, my focus was spot-on during that session. The Celestine showed us what I asked it to show us. Keryss is the spinner."

"So the vigilantes of Villius aren't really vigilantes," Pablo

said. "They're hunting parties."

The other three men stared at him as realization dawned.

"You're probably right," said Tole. "Chances are she put a bounty on Otherbeings. Not because the residents of Villius fear them, but because..."

Win moved his jaw in a chomping motion.

"Still," Zee said, "it appears she does some stalking on her own."

"The thrill of the hunt," Pablo murmured. "Or the prowl." His rich green eyes turned from one covener to the next. "She can't get into Regenerie, can she? Either the Overcity or the Undercity?"

"No." Win shook his head and put a hand over Pablo's. "We're extremely well guarded. Magically and electronically. If she'd been able to get in, she would've done so by now."

"I wonder if she offed her cousin." Sunk in thought, Tole began to ramble again, arms crossed over his chest. "Mirandi hasn't appeared in any of our reports in a long time. Hell, I don't think we even have a picture of her."

"From what I remember having heard," Zee said, "she always took a backseat to Keryss. Liked keeping a low profile." He shrugged. "Maybe she got married and moved to another metroplex. Or overseas."

Tole stopped at his Prick Watch lamp and vacantly stared at it. "Goddamn it, how are we supposed to stop her?" He faced the other men. "How can anybody even *get* to her? Villius has defenses too, and if Keryss is constantly absorbing supernatural powers..."

Zee answered, but hesitantly. "Well, the Orb put something in my mind. At least I think it was the Orb. I'll have to double-check. But sending out marshals isn't the solution."

"You just do your double-checking," Tole said. "I have

some other business to take care of.”

He had to see Ridley. He wanted to ask the vampire about that mysterious woman he'd encountered last fall. More important, he had to implore Ridley not to venture into the Interzone. If the fucker didn't solemnly swear to keep his bloodsucking butt in Regenerie, Tole could at least sneak a Tratch onto his body.

He'd never know it was there. Tracking patches were small, transparent rectangles that rapidly dissolved into a person's pores and hair follicles. Once lodged within the subcutaneous layer, their nearly molecule-sized transmission chips would send out a continuous, receivable signal.

There was still some daylight left. If Tole hurried, he could even affix the Tratch to Ridley while the vampire slept.

He went to his bedroom, where he conjured the wall safe into visibility. “I need to organize this mess,” he muttered to himself as he poked around inside. He'd been neglectful. There was too much crap in the safe that was outdated, and other crap that should've been secreted therein but wasn't. He really had to pull his head out of his ass.

Grabbing a Tratch out of a protective canister, he kept it in its sleeve as he scanned its encoded information into a small computerized receiver. Then he slipped the encased Tratch into another, stiffer sleeve and shoved it into his pants pocket.

He made a beeline for the front door.

“Care to tell us where you're going?” Zee called out.

“No.” Tole walked outside.

He paused indecisively for a moment, considering which mode of transportation to use. Sang Station wasn't all that far from Guardian. Only Mythmir and Hellven lay between them. The train could get him there in time. Besides, the Tube was

too powerful for so short a jaunt.

He jogged to the platform, to which he gained access by simply touching the machines and structures that ensured other creatures had to pay their way. A middle-aged Alterationist couple, Bern and Pye, waited for the next train. Both carried sizable baskets.

“Tole!” Pye extended an arm toward him.

He stepped into her embrace and returned it. Smiling, Bern came up and shook his hand.

“How are you boys?” Pye asked. “We haven’t seen much of you lately.”

“We do see Pablo several times a week,” Bern amended, “when he’s on some mission. I hear he’s working out splendidly.”

“He is,” Tole said. “He’s very capable. Nice guy too.” It was all true. Although Tole had mercilessly needed Pablo at first, he’d soon come to appreciate their new employee. Win was lucky to have won him over. “The rest of us are fine. Busy as usual.”

Tole shoved a hand in his pocket and gingerly felt for the Tratch. Still there. *Where’s the damned train?* Waiting always made him antsy.

“So where are you headed?” Bern asked.

“I need to visit someone at Sang.”

“Business or pleasure?” Pye asked with a wink.

Tole felt warmth suffuse his cheeks. He wondered if these people had seen him and Ridley getting it on last night. “Business, actually. One of the part-time residents could be facing a threat.”

Bern’s expression turned somber. “Funny you should say that. We’re on our way to Mythmir to deliver protective items. And some nicer things too, just to cheer up the guests.

There's been a small influx of refugees from the northwest Interzone."

"*What?*" Tole cried. "Why weren't we informed?"

"Because you were all in the workroom when Jav stopped by to tell you, right after we caught wind of it. Hours went by before word even reached Guardian." Pye gave Tole a wan smile of resignation. "You know how those creatures like keeping to themselves. Anyway, I'm sure you've gotten calls and e-mails by now."

The train's headlight, rapidly expanding, finally punched through the darkness of the tunnel.

"Do you prefer to ride alone?" Bern asked.

"Yes, actually," Tole said. "Thanks for being so considerate." He gave a light clap to Bern's shoulder and boarded an empty car.

Shit, Tole thought. Refugees. The word echoed ominously in his mind. Forest paranormals generally didn't like hanging out in Regenerie's Undercity, as hospitable as it was, and would only come here if they felt in danger.

Keryss or her bounty hunters must really be on a rampage. Then again, this could just be a false alarm.

Tole was about to call Win and Zee when he realized he'd neglected to put on either his ear or wrist phone. He rarely used them because he rarely ventured out long or far enough to need a phone. When he did leave 86 Guardian Station for any length of time, it was usually to find some solitude, in which case a phone would have proved a nuisance.

Well, Zee and Win could deal with the news and sort things out. There wasn't much anybody could do right now, anyway, except maybe question the recent arrivals. Their reasons for fleeing the Interzone might provide some

insights.

As the train slowed into Mythmir Station, Tole peered at the platform. It was nearly impossible to see past the gates into the living-area entrance. This station's setup wasn't like Guardian's. In fact, no two Undercity neighborhoods were alike.

Guardian Station had five distinct streets with five separate entrances. Set well back from the train platform, they were arranged in a rayed or semicircular pattern. Mythmir, on the other hand, was more like a man-made replication of the Interzone, with fields and gardens, caves and tree stumps, and small, rustic cottages widely spaced along a brook. There were even subterranean dwellings built into this already-subterranean neighborhood, just to accommodate creatures that normally lived belowground.

Yes, there did seem to be a bit more activity around Mythmir, but not enough to be alarmed about. Tole saw Bern and Pye get off the train two cars ahead of his and move toward the station gates. Good people, were Bern and Pye -- a devoted couple, well schooled in witchcraft. They were assets to Guardian Station.

The train shot forward. Next stop was Hellven, the Undercity's recreation area. After that came Sang.

Chapter Seven

Tole looked impatiently out the window as the train eased into Sang Station. The platform looked deserted. Night hadn't yet fallen.

Setting up accommodations for vampires had been a daunting challenge. Because they were people, after all, they had a wide variety of tastes, lifestyles, and backgrounds. Their heterogeneity was compounded by the dozens of different breeds that existed. Immortality and a need for blood did not mean all vampires were alike.

As a result, Sang had distinct subneighborhoods, even though it wasn't a particularly large station. Its busiest area was Darkside Lane, which had become a trendy place for UC residents to hang out. This was Sang's main street and social hub, offering bistros and brothels and public baths, clubs, and cafés.

Behind Darkside stretched Quarter Meadow, a rather creepy, outdoorsy field crosshatched with shallow trenches. Some were fluffy with grass and some were hard with packed dirt. All were for vamps who preferred minimal confinement as they slept.

Two streets on the left of Darkside, Gibbous Lane and Full Moon Lane, were more like broad corridors. Each was lined with simple niches or long, narrow rooms. Within them were caskets and coffins, state-of-the-art slumber pods and simple beds. Two other streets, on the opposite side of the station's center, had normal houses ranging from modest to mansionlike. These were New Lane and Crescent Lane.

Tole had no idea where to look for Ridley. He was more

than just an occasional visitor to Sang, so he likely had more than just a sleeping niche. The man had to put his clothes and grooming aids *somewhere*.

Nobody was on the platform. Nobody was loitering around the entrances to the streets. Heading down Darkside Lane, Tole walked into the first business establishment he came upon, an adequately lit coffeehouse. A couple of employees worked behind the counter, preparing the place for the evening's trade. One customer sat at a small table reading an e-book. Tole approached her.

"Excuse me."

The young woman, her hair a slick helmet of rich red crenellations, looked up. Her kohl-lined bottom lids puckered up to her irises. "Don't you live at Guardian?"

"Yes, I do. I'm looking for --"

"Aren't you in that really sizzly all-male coven? The Coven of..." She repeatedly snapped her fingers.

Tole never understood why people did that when a memory eluded them. Was it supposed to stimulate recollection? Fill the silence?

"Three," he said, just to put an end to that infernal sound and spare the girl some calluses. "I don't know about 'sizzly.'"

"But you *are*," she insisted, visually assessing him. "Especially the one with --"

"The azure eyes," Tole said with no little sarcasm.

"Yes!"

"Win." *Naturally.*

"Oh gawd," breathed the young woman.

Fuckin' Aethiel. "He has a boyfriend."

The woman gave him a dismayed stare. "Damn. Wouldn't you know it?"

“I would.”

Tole glanced at the wall clock. It had a dimensional, neon red face in which black circles drifted from background to foreground and then burst into black tears. He could barely read the fucking thing. From what he could gather, sunset was imminent.

“Are you a vamp?” he asked curiously.

The woman got dodgy. “Well, not exactly.”

Being not exactly a vampire was like being not exactly pregnant. Tole didn’t bother pointing that out, because the woman was...well...*young*. Late teens, he guessed.

“I just like coming to Sang,” she said. “It’s a lot neekier than most places in the OC.”

“Do you happen to know Ridley Barron?”

“I don’t *know* him, but I know who he is.”

“Do you know where he stays?”

“Umm...” She tapped a perfectly serrated fingernail against red lips outlined in black. “He has his own place, I think. On Crescent Lane, I think. Oh!” The girl’s eyes suddenly widened and shifted past Tole’s head.

Immediately, a pair of hands closed over his shoulders. “Looking for me?” a low voice said against his ear. It had an arch tone.

The skin all over Tole’s body prickled. Awkwardly, he turned.

Ridley smiled into his eyes. “Hi.” His hands fell away. “I was going to call you about getting together later.”

“Sounds good,” Tole said, trying to gather his wits. Some had obviously plummeted to his stomach, agitating it. Some had obviously gathered around his lungs, constricting them.

Ridley’s face was even more arresting in the light. His

slight pallor didn't diminish the force of his masculinity. All that dark hair and stubble shadow, the creases around his eyes and mouth, those cleanly molded lips with their hint of severity.

His breath smelled faintly of cinnamon. Tole liked cinnamon.

Shit.

"But right now," Tole said, "I have to talk to you."

They said good-bye to the seeker of "neekiness" and walked out of the café. Ridley made for the train platform. The shirt he wore tonight was some kind of knit, tighter and clingier than the tailored, button-down number he had on yesterday. It emphasized the contours of his chest. His coat was longer, and it swayed around his legs in a very flattering way.

"What is it?" Ridley asked.

"Describe that woman who burned you last fall."

"I can't," Ridley said. "I didn't get a good look at her. As soon as she grabbed my wrist, I bolted. I could tell it was a woman, though, because of her hand. Why do you want to know?"

"Please," Tole said, snatching at his arm to stop him, "don't go into the Interzone tonight. Or anytime in the near future. Please."

Ridley's brow contracted. "You came to Sang just to ask me that?"

"Yes. You have to stay away from there. Believe me."

Tole couldn't tell him more. He'd be violating an unspoken oath of secrecy. The Triumvirate's business was confidential. Any important information they came upon, any projects they were working on, anything they knew or talked about or did that had a bearing on their position vis-à-vis the metroplex, could not be shared with anybody unless they all

agreed to it. And even if Tole weren't honor- or duty-bound to keep his trap shut, it would be unforgivably reckless of him to start yammering about spinners in a public place, to a man he didn't know nearly well enough.

"Care to elaborate?" Ridley asked.

"I can't."

The vampire's gaze probed him. "This seems to mean a lot to you."

"It does."

Lowering his head, Ridley laughed softly. "Wow."

"Wow what?" Tole didn't understand the reaction.

"Somebody actually cares what happens to me."

Tole neither confirmed nor denied this. He didn't want to give it too much thought, except for another dismayed, *Shit*.

"You saw last night how I can handle myself. And I have this." Ridley pulled the amulet out of his shirt.

Tole stared at the pendant as he reached into his pocket. "And I have this." He held up the Tratch, clasping it between his fore and middle fingers. "If you won't listen to me, then at least wear it." Tole realized he wouldn't have either the time or the privacy to remove the thing from its two sleeves and surreptitiously paste it onto Ridley's body. Hell, the only parts of him that were exposed were his face and neck and hands. And people were milling all over the platform now.

"What is it?" the vampire asked, eyeing the packet.

"A tracking patch."

Ridley coughed out a laugh. A scoffing, incredulous laugh. "You must be joking."

"I wish I were."

"Do you realize what an unconscionable violation of privacy --"

“Ridley, please, just humor me.”

“No. It’s out of the question. Those damned things actually seep into a person’s *skin*.”

Tole slid the Tratch back into his pocket. “All right, then. But you can’t fault me for trying.”

After studying Tole’s face a few beats longer, Ridley lifted a hand and cupped Tole’s neck. His dark eyes were far more expressive than they seemed at first glance. “You can’t imagine,” he said quietly, “how much it means to me that you came here.” His thumb brushed across Tole’s lips.

Tole’s throat felt blocked. He swallowed hard. He had no idea what was happening to him. Where, he wondered, was all that demonic jadedness when he needed it?

“So, are we on for later?” Ridley asked, finally lowering his hand.

Tole mustered a smile. “We’re on. Mind if I ride the train with you? I’m heading back to Guardian.”

“Not at all.” Ridley’s voice had gone molten.

Once they were seated in a car together, they exchanged phone numbers and talked. Ridley’s hand again rested casually on Tole’s thigh. It crept to the soft roll of his cock and languidly stroked it. The roll soon became a ridge.

“You have to stop that,” Tole said tightly. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Consider it an appetizer.”

Ridley grinned as the train neared Hellven Station, his immediate destination. Unless he was meeting a donor there, he was obviously going to make his way outdoors through one of the station’s several points of egress. They were all artfully concealed, but a vampire’s acute sense of smell could lead his way to the fresh night air.

Before he rose from the seat, Ridley put a hand behind Tole's head. "I look forward to seeing you later. I'll call, so keep some kind of phone nearby. It should be around nine."

Nodding, Tole also angled an arm over the back of the seat. He cupped Ridley's neck and gently massaged it. Without a word, they leaned into a spontaneous kiss.

Keeping the kiss from getting too heated was difficult. Their humid, flexing lips and lancing tongues became more demanding by the second. Forcing himself to withdraw, Tole exhaled a few coarse breaths against Ridley's mouth. Impulsively, they came together and kissed one last time.

"I do want you," Tole whispered, unable to stop himself from saying it. He was unable to stop *any* of what was happening to him.

"I know." Ridley's final smile, demure and fleeting, was barely noticeable. But it was eloquent. "And the feeling is mutual. If we *were* to start seeing each other regularly --" He paused, his eyes searching Tole's.

"What?"

With a shake of the head, Ridley said, "Never mind. I shouldn't make promises I might not be able to keep."

At that instant, Tole knew Ridley felt something for him, some fragile hatchling of emotion that might not survive long enough to mature but had definitely come into the world. Tole also knew something else -- Ridley wasn't alone in harboring those feelings.

"Wait for my call." After a quick kiss of farewell, the vampire got up and made his way to the doors as the train pulled into Hellven.

Although Tole felt guilty as any traitor for what he'd just done, he meekly congratulated himself. The Triumvirate knew full well that sometimes, people had to be saved from

themselves.

That's why the Tratch dissolved into Ridley Barron's neck as he disappeared into the pastoral expanse of Hellven Station.

Chapter Eight

“What’s the big rush? You going somewhere again?”

As Tole blew into the house, he didn’t bother glancing in Win’s direction. He didn’t even know if Zee and Pablo were around, and he didn’t care. He dashed down the hallway to his bedroom. Win followed. Tole slammed the door in his face.

“Tole?”

“Leave me alone. I’m busy.”

Tole again ventured into his junk box of a wall safe and pulled out the Tratch receiver. He brought up the code attached to Ridley’s patch and hit Track. A map came up, complete with coordinates in the margins and a white dot that indicated the receiver’s position relative to the transmitter’s position, which showed as a glowing green bar.

Son of a bitch was heading toward the northwest Interzone. But Ridley seemed to be taking his time, not traveling at sonic speed. Maybe he was walking or floating or had rented a vehicle. Vampires had a whole shitload of transportation options.

Still studying the receiver, Tole flung open the bedroom door and nearly ran into Win, whose azure eyes looked down at Tole’s hand.

A line appeared between his brows. “Are you tracking somebody?”

“No, I’m shopping for Christmas presents.” Tole snapped a glance at Win and pushed past him.

“Who are you tracking?”

“Ridley. I warned him to stay out of the Interzone, but he

wouldn't listen. So I patted him."

"What is it with you and Ridley all of a sudden?" Win asked, grabbing Tole's arm. "Last night --"

Tole yanked his arm away and fiddled with the receiver, which had just flashed an error message.

"Don't tell me you're infatuated with him."

"I hadn't planned on telling you anything." Tole got the map to reappear. Ridley still hadn't moved beyond the metroplex limits.

"Then what --"

"I'm just trying to save his ass." Tole took another two steps on his way to the front door when the receiver glitched out again. Damn, they really had to upgrade their equipment. Some of it just wasn't reliable in the subterranean confines of the Undercity.

"Let it go," Win said. "There are other things we need to do. Ridley can take care of himself."

"Maybe."

"I realize he has a certain mystique --"

"Oh *do* you now?" Tole asked, his look underscoring his tart tone.

Win rolled up his eyes. "Jesus, don't tell me you're jealous too."

"You know, Win, you're doing a lot of prying for somebody who doesn't want to be told anything." Tole tapped some keypads, still trying to correct the malfunction.

Win pressed on. "Hey, listen to me. Go ahead and get your chubby on with him as often as you want. But shit, Tole, don't get all soft in the head. You can't get attached to a vampire!"

Whipping into a half turn, Tole poked at Win's chest.

“Don’t foist that attachment crap on me,” he snarled, “just because *you’ve* become Lance fucking Romance.”

Tole felt a stirring beneath his skin that didn’t bode well. His eyes narrowed. His muscles twisted and twitched. However inadvertently, Win had provoked him.

Initially, it was always difficult to determine which demonic characteristics were about to surface from his muddy pool of genes. Would they be the ones inherited from Belphegor, Asmodai, Sabnock, Lix Tetrax, Furcas, or Xaphan?

The first was a good bet. It was late April, the month in which Belphegor was most active.

Win firmly gripped Tole’s wrist. “Back off, Maligar,” he said, lips barely moving. His limbs quivered with restraint.

The front door opened. Tole didn’t bother looking in its direction. He was too focused on suppressing his updraft of anger to pay much attention to anything else. But Win’s gaze immediately shifted to the door. His reactive rage receded, softening his features.

Tole wasn’t as easily placated. “Keep this in mind, Aethiel,” he said in a strained voice. “Don’t presume to tell me what I feel and whether or not I should feel it, before I even know what’s going on with me. And keep your sentimental bullshit to yourself.”

Pablo sauntered into the living room, his cased notebook dangling from one hand. He looked at the men, checked his watch, and muttered, “Must be time for the next round.” He detoured to the kitchen.

Win obviously knew when one of Tole’s six bad boys was about to manifest. That fact and the sight of Pablo made him ease off. “Please,” he said more cajolingly, “don’t take this thing with Ridley too far.”

“I said, mind your own fucking business, Aethiel!”

“There is no ‘my’ business or ‘your’ business. There’s only *our* business, which happens to be all of Regenerie’s.”

It was true, but Win’s advice still annoyed Tole. He knew he had to simmer down. Closing his eyes, he silently recited an incantation meant to keep a tight leash on his demonic traits. It was an appeal to his angelic ancestors, who were, when push came to shove, the ones in control.

*Respected Dominions, cherished Thrones,
Pour milk and honey over my black stones.
Let not heat break them
Or stillness forsake them
So they may lie cold within my bones.*

Restoration of his human self -- and, with it, self-control -- came almost instantly. Opening his eyes, Tole took a deep breath. Win guardedly watched him. He knew what was going on. All hybrids had to fight this battle once in a while. Tole just had to fight it more often than Win and Zee. He’d inherited more pugnacity from more rambunctious shit-stirrers than the other two men combined.

“Okay, let’s think of it this way,” Tole said. “I’m trying to save a creature we consider our friend. And he happens to be a member of an endangered species. All right? Can you accept that?”

Win blinked at him. “Vampires aren’t an endangered species.”

“But good friends are. And great lays are even scarcer.” Tole strode toward the door. Win had no comeback.

Tole had to take the Tube again. There was no getting around it. Ridley had a big lead on him. So he traveled first to the outskirts of Regenerie, near the area where the tracker had last pinpointed Ridley’s presence. Once outdoors, the device worked perfectly.

Tole watched the blinking speck of green light that indicated the vampire's progress. It was doubtful he'd rented a vehicle, for he was moving through the woods not far from the highway. His pace was still more leisurely than hurried, but not slow or halting enough to indicate he was walking.

Ridley was likely floating. Floating between the trees as easily as a dandelion seed. Tole smiled as imagined that black coat, which was probably open, fluttering around the vampire's tall form like a square-rigged sail on a pirate ship.

Within fifteen minutes or so, Ridley would reach the crossroads locals called Pitchfork Bind. Regenerie's small number of necromancers often went to the crossroads to do their conjuring. A Tube entrance was very near this spot, so Tole decided to go there next.

He began to wonder what exactly he hoped to accomplish by stalking the vampire. Maybe some perverse self-interest was behind this mission rather than his avowed desire to protect and defend. Maybe he wanted to see who Ridley's hosts were, or spy on him as he drank blood and got off afterward, or even forestall one of those feeds by offering himself to the vampire's bite.

Maybe he was just being a freaking voyeur or possessive lover and didn't want to admit it to himself.

Reentering the Tube -- at this location it was tucked within one of the stout, reinforced concrete supports of an overpass -- Tole felt a shiver of anxiety down his spine. Then again, it could have been a shiver of excitement. He wasn't sure. But one thing was certain -- he felt compelled to keep following Ridley.

The marvelous Tube shot him into the Interzone. Tole exited, this time, from a boulder nestled against a limestone outcropping tufted with shrubby growth. Moonlight sluiced between the swaying trees. He immediately checked the

tracker again. Ridley was indeed coming toward the crossroads, moving steadily on the other side of the two-lane highway.

Then he veered off to his right, heading farther away from the road.

“Damn,” Tole whispered.

He tried simultaneously to watch the receiver screen and pick his way through the thick undergrowth that lay between him and the highway. Branches caught at his hair and clothing. As he tried to push them out of his way, thorns delivered fiery scratches to his wrist. A pair of eyes, low to the ground, beamed in his direction for a second before disappearing. Something rustled swiftly through the brush.

Southeast of the crossroads, Tole finally came upon the strip of pavement. He paused to orient himself. There was a faery ring in this area, and it was wise to avoid such things. Over the years, there’d been anecdotal reports of people and other creatures either disappearing or going mad after they’d wandered into these mysterious spaces. The reports hadn’t been verified, but where there’s smoke...

Then Tole remembered the ring was northeast of the crossroads. He and Ridley would be safe. They were moving away from it.

Ridley’s progress had slowed. Tole hurried in the vampire’s direction. The terrain on this side of the highway was much easier to negotiate. No tangle of gnarled branches here, just saplings and rocks scattered across an uneven field. It was still too early in the season for grasses and wildflowers to be waist-tall.

The moon rose higher. Lividity painted the landscape.

Another patch of woods loomed ahead, rough and irregular against the sky. The receiver suggested Ridley was either in the middle of it or perhaps in a clearing on the other

side. Numerous cottages and settlements littered the Interzone. Many were set back from the highway, tucked beyond the drone of rushing traffic and the reach of prying eyes.

Tole neared the woods-line just as Ridley stopped moving. The glowing green bar on the receiver froze in place. Trying to discern some kind of path through the trees, Tole peered ahead and then tentatively walked along the edge of the field.

“Tole? What are you doing here?”

His heart nearly sprang from his mouth. Feet swishing softly through the grass, Ridley approached him.

What made him realize he was being followed?

Tole voiced his question. Or part of it. “Ridley, how did you know --”

The vampire stopped in front of Tole, moonlight flattering his features. “You’re bleeding somewhere,” he said, keeping his voice low. “You must be. I can smell it.”

“Thorns.” Tole lifted his strafed arm as proof.

Reaching for it, Ridley gently curled his fingers around the back. Tole’s breath locked. He felt that familiar drizzle of apprehension bonded with anticipation. Drawing Tole’s arm forward, Ridley’s experienced tongue crept out and made several languid, sensual licks along the thin red tracks.

A deep hum of satisfaction drifted from the vampire’s throat. “You taste a bit like Win, but richer, stronger.”

Tole’s cock immediately stirred in response. He closed his eyes and quaked, releasing his breath in spasms. The vampire’s bold move had keenly excited him.

The effect seemed to please Ridley. “What are you doing out here?” he repeated. “You know it isn’t safe for you.”

“It isn’t safe for you, either.” Tole grabbed one of the

open sides of Ridley's coat. "Come back to the UC with me. If you need to feed --"

He didn't have a chance to make his reckless, desire-driven offer.

Chapter Nine

She seemed to swoop from the very belly of the night, as if it had forcefully disgorged her -- a slash of pale flesh and bright silver. This time, no manic shriek heralded her arrival. She must have learned her lesson.

Just as Tole felt the brush of Ridley's hand, a whirlwind of dust and plant matter flung Tole aside. Keryss, focused on Ridley, didn't even seem aware of his presence. He heard a long, harsh exhalation, like a hiss: "*Ridleeeey...*"

Coughing, eyes tearing against the grit, Tole briefly regained his balance before stumbling and falling to his knees. He tried to pick Ridley's form out of the clouded darkness. What he saw was beyond his ken.

Keryss stood no more than a few meters away from the vampire, her arms fully extended in his direction. Filaments shot from her fingertips and wound continuously around his shoulders, waist, legs. Ridley, who must've been on the verge of speeding away, writhed within his bindings, and with such cyclonic fury Tole could barely make out the details of his body.

The struggle intensified. Tole could no longer discern human figures. Instead, he saw a blurred double helix bend and twist in the air like a speared eel. Its intertwined strands elongated, stretching toward the sky. Black, white, and scarlet along one length, peach and platinum along the other, both making flowing streaks against the impassive backdrop of night. Inhuman sounds echoed across the field -- nerve-pinching growls and squeals, the likes of which Tole had never before heard.

Ridley couldn't seem to free himself.

The terrifying realization dug into Tole. Pressure ballooned against the inside of his skin. Nerves blazed and muscles knotted. The pain became excruciating. Tole thought his flesh would crack and fragment like flawed brick. But nothing further happened.

He wouldn't shift, *couldn't* shift. Whatever demonic traits his fear and outrage had activated were being stifled. Tole knew he himself was responsible. The verse he'd recited just a short time earlier had summoned angels to keep his demons in check. Their influence would be operative for twenty-four hours, and he had no idea how to banish it.

"Goddamn," he tried bellowing, but the words were strangled by unabated pain.

The combatants began drifting down to solid ground, their shapes gradually reforming. Ridley was shockingly limp. Tough silk trailed from the spinner's fingertips, connecting her to her prey. Some threads were still spooled around Ridley's midsection. He'd managed to snap the rest. Broken strands fell loosely from his arms and legs, undulating gracefully whenever the merest whisper of a breeze caught them.

Again, rage exploded within Tole. Again, pain racked his body, pummeling him from the inside out. He tried uttering Ridley's name but could only expel a labored breath.

Keryss, naked and Olympian and half veiled by her own hair, lifted the vampire as if he were a child and held him against her breasts. They were full and firm, the nipples excited into high relief.

"Ridley," she crooned, petting his hair and running her fingers over his face, draping his lolling head with her treacherous threads. "You need sustenance, don't you, dearest?" Tenderly, she guided his face into the crook of her neck. "Drink. Drink long and deeply, my love."

The words instantly revitalized the vampire. Abruptly, his head jerked up and his lips pulled back. Fangs glistened in the moonlight. And his head dived down, driving the fangs home.

Keryss arched her neck in blissful oblivion. The sounds she now made were the antithesis of what Tole had heard before. Her whimpers of ecstasy nearly spiraled into wails. Both transfixed and aroused by the sight, Tole felt his pain begin to ebb. He'd been on the verge of offering himself to Ridley before this hell-spawned creature arrived and literally snatched the vampire out of his reach.

All of nature seemed to stand in abeyance as the feed took place. Not the slightest sound came from grass or underbrush or woods. Only the stars continued to wheel overhead, shifting silently and imperceptibly within the powdery arms of galaxies.

When Ridley had drunk his fill, he groggily lifted his head. Keryss kissed his smeared lips. One arm reached below his waist, undid his trousers, and eased them down past his hips. What Tole saw next provoked a more bewildering mix of reactions than he'd experienced all evening.

Keryss lowered Ridley to the ground. He reclined there, his cock exposed and semi-erect. This was the first time Tole had seen it. He'd anticipated seeing it under different circumstances. Even from a distance, the sight was tantalizing.

No matter. Not now. Tole's desire couldn't surface through the scum of dread and outrage that blanketed all other feelings. The only urge he had was to aid Ridley, to rush over and fling Keryss aside.

Only the attempt would've been reckless and futile. Keryss was in control now. The twine that still tethered Ridley to her hands was soon matched by other threads. Eyes

widening in disbelief, Tole watched as Keryss positioned herself over Ridley's hips, feet bracketing his pelvis. Her own hips rocked above him. In eerie slow motion, wetly glistening strings began to stretch from the spinner's cunt toward Ridley's cock. Greedily, they wound around it, tightening and tugging.

Ridley's cock rose and stiffened. Groaning, he clutched at the grass and thrust his hips into the air. Soon, his hard-on was cocooned in a gleaming macramé case, seemingly knotted together from the spinner's own lubricant tempered with more tensile material. The sheath pulsed rhythmically, coaxing blood flow, making Ridley's cock ever harder and taller and thicker. As fascinated as he was repelled, Tole could see its growth from where he sat.

The next step was predictable. Keryss lowered herself onto Ridley's near-vertical rod. He groaned again, bending his head back and panting into the cool air, as she moved up and down on his groin. Doubling over, she swiped a taut nipple over his blood-daubed lips. They quickly opened and began to suck.

The two melded figures bucked against each other. Tole felt a nauseating wave of mingled horror, jealousy, and lust. Once more an impulse to intervene seized him, an urge to throw Keryss back into the maw of night and shake Ridley and yell, *What's wrong with you? Stop surrendering, damn it! You're making it too easy for her!* But Tole knew there was no throwing Keryss aside. If anything, she'd simply trap him too. Or kill him on the spot.

They came, finally, this tragic couple. Ridley actually roared as he climaxed. Keryss expelled a long sigh of satiety. But the sound bespoke more than physical fulfillment. The spinner had triumphed. She'd finally captured the man she'd tried claiming last fall.

Gripped by a sickening chill, Tole went cold all over. He squeezed his eyes shut against a rise of anguish. Being utterly helpless was new and intolerable to him.

Keryss stretched her hands, palms up, to her captive lover. "Now join me. We'll do this again, over and over. On a downy bed in a moon-glazed tower. Or on earth and on water, in fire and in air. You'll never know hunger again, my darling."

This angel of death was actually courting him!

Just as Ridley reached for her hands, Tole bolted forward. "No!" he shouted. "No, Ridley!" And then, with pathetic absurdity, "Come home with me..."

It was too late. It was too late the moment Keryss had sent her first merciless tendril around the vampire's body. Ridley, dazed but on his feet now, glanced at Tole from within the cruel circle of the spinner's arms. His brow furrowed. His lips formed Tole's name.

Then she carried him off. Within seconds, Keryss and her catch were no longer silhouetted against the deepening ink of the sky.

"Guide me," Tole whispered, running faster than he'd ever run in his life.

As he sprinted back toward the boulder, his feet skipping lightly over rocks and roots and tussocks without a single faltering step, he realized his ancestral angels had helped him more than he'd asked them to. Keryss had never noticed him. Even when he'd raced right up to Ridley, yelling his head off, she hadn't known he was there.

* * * * *

Tole banged into Pablo's suite and marched straight into the bedroom, where Win and Pablo lay entwined and sound asleep. He pushed up and down on the mattress, jouncing them awake. "Get your well-fucked ass out of bed, Aethiel;

we're going to Villius."

Bounding into the main house, Tole did the same thing to Zee, who slept alone. "Get up, Thimien, we're going to Villius."

Breathing heavily, Tole strode to the dining area, pulled the Tratch receiver from his pocket, and tossed it on the table. He flattened his hands on either side of the device and stared at it.

Same shit. The transmission signal had died. The green glow that had previously been his only link to Ridley was no longer there. As if both transmitter and receiver were stymied by whatever force cloaked the Iron Metroplex, they'd simply given up.

"Fuck!" Tole went to the refrigerator to grab an energy drink. He downed half the bottle in one swallow.

He heard the quiet *whoosh* of the toilet. Zee appeared shortly thereafter. The other two men, bleary-eyed and swaddled in bathrobes, ambled into the house through the backdoor.

Tole didn't wait for any of their what-the-hell-is-going-on grumbling. "Keryss snatched him," Tole announced, making a point of glaring at Win. "She snatched Ridley. I saw the whole thing."

"Oh no," Win said, exhaling the words. He took a seat. Propping an elbow on the table, he shoved a hand into his hair.

Pablo, still unused to forays into the supernatural, glanced uncertainly at the other men.

Zee tried to get something on the receiver. He got nothing. After going to the kitchen and pouring a glass of milk, he also settled into a chair. "This is bad," he murmured.

"No fucking shit it's bad." Tole paced for a minute before

he sat down.

"What exactly did you see?" Win asked, lifting his head.

Tole gave them a blow-by-blow account, except for the sordid details of the rape. At least talking about the abduction provided some diversion from his roiling thoughts and feelings. Never before had he hurt like this for someone else -- not on such a personal level, anyway. He kept seeing Ridley's final glance, tintured with despair; kept seeing Ridley's lips move to form the single syllable of his name.

Tole's story left the men momentarily dumbfounded.

"What did you mean about going to Villius?" Pablo asked.

The men again paid attention.

"I know what he means," Zee murmured. "It's what the Orb told me." He looked at Tole, awaiting confirmation.

"There's no one else we can send there," Tole explained. "We're the Powers of Regenerie, in every sense of the word. This creature has to be confronted and neutralized. Ridley has to be saved. We're the only beings in the metroplex capable of even attempting those things."

"That's it," Zee said. "That was the message the Celestine implanted. And that I should wait to tell you until the time was right."

When Tole saw the concerned look Win gave Pablo, he added gently, "Don't worry, Pablo can stay here and tend to business. That's all he has to do and all he *should* do. He's not like us. Besides, we need to leave someone in charge."

"How long do you suppose Ridley has?" Zee asked.

Tole's stomach clenched. He knew what Zee meant: How long before Keryss consumes her new plaything? "Judging by what I saw," Tole said, "she, uh...she really gets off on him. It might take --" Throat suddenly closing, he couldn't go

on.

“A while,” Win said quietly. “He might have some time, then.”

“But how much?” Tole asked, trying not to sound frantic. “A couple of days? A couple of weeks?”

“Maybe a couple of months,” Win said. “Or more. As long as she keeps finding other creatures to renew her powers.”

Eyes downturned, Tole nodded. Ifs and maybes brought him little solace.

“But that largely depends on the kind of power she’s after,” Win added, “and how soon she wants it.”

A dismal thought. Ridley had a great deal to offer the spinner -- incredible speed and strength, acute night vision, a sense of smell that exceeded a wolf’s. Maybe shifting ability. Maybe even immortality, or at least temporary invulnerability.

“Does Ridley have alternate forms?” Tole asked Win. If he did, one of them might be the key to his escape.

“I don’t know,” Win said. “I never asked and he never talked about it. Some vamp breeds do and some don’t.”

“How do we go about this?” Zee asked, as if wondering aloud. “I mean, getting to Villius and finding Ridley. Keryss can’t know we’re coming. She’d lay traps. The Celestine revealed to us months ago that she’d love to take control of Regenerie.”

“Too bad the Orb only told us how to protect the metroplex,” Win said wryly, “not how to protect ourselves when we venture beyond it.”

Win’s mere mention of that fact made Pablo’s face blanch. Of course he knew they could be killed; Win had explained the nature of hybrids to him months ago.

Tole felt bad for him. Savvy as he was, Pablo was still a

twenty-five-year-old who believed he'd found the love of his life. He certainly hadn't matured enough to deal with its sudden and brutal loss. Maybe no pure human ever did.

The rest of them weren't that much older than Pablo, but they were different. Very different.

Tole was about to suggest using the Tube to get to the outskirts of Villius when Pablo said, "If Ridley's safe for the time being, maybe you should take a day or two to travel through the Interzone. That would allow you to stop once in a while and ask questions. I found out when I visited that little settlement called Burnside that the creatures and people who live in the NWI know a lot of stuff we *don't* know." He looked around the table. "You might get information that could help you."

Win flashed his lover an admiring smile. "I knew we hired you for reason. Aside from keeping me satisfied, that is."

"Pablo's right," Zee said, becoming more animated. "He went to Mythmir earlier this evening to talk to those new refugees."

"They're light elves, by the way," Pablo added. "From the Erqueqir community. All they said was that they didn't feel safe 'in the Mother's arms' because 'a scourge is upon the land.'"

"Nothing else?" Tole asked.

"Nothing important. They're grateful for the haven, but it was obvious they aren't real thrilled about being here."

Tole nodded. The "Mother" they'd alluded to was, of course, nature. It clearly couldn't protect them from Keryss and her hunting parties, just as Ridley wouldn't have been safe no matter how tightly Tole might have held him.

Zee continued. "OBs can be guarded and evasive and even a little truculent when they're here, out of their natural

environment. Any metroplex is unpleasant to them. But in their own homes, they're much more forthcoming."

Tole lifted his arms, indicating the men should rise from their chairs. "Come on then. Let's get going."

Win turned up his eyes, still heavy-lidded and dozy. "I appreciate your sense of urgency, but the three of us do need some sleep before we embark on this trek. We need any advantage we can get."

"I can make arrangements while you guys rest," Pablo said. "Secure some transportation, gather up the things you need to take along."

Letting out a hefty sigh, Tole knew he couldn't argue this point. The Triumvirate did need to be strong and alert. "Okay. Let's figure out what Pablo has to take care of and then hit the sack. We'll get an early start."

Chapter Ten

Just before dawn, Tole followed Win and Zee into the Tube behind 86 Guardian Station. They went directly to an obscure portion of the Production Area where three solar-powered hovercraft awaited them. The vehicles seemed the best mode of transportation through the Interzone. They were fast enough to minimize travel time, small and maneuverable enough to dodge between trees, and clean and quiet enough not to disturb either the land or its peace-loving residents.

Each craft was outfitted with a communication device, a Satnav or satellite navigation system, and a small storage locker. The men brought only essentials -- a universal translator, more Tratches along with the receiver, eye shields, sonic cleansers for body and teeth, Freshlite for cleaning their clothing, thirst-quenching tabs, and some highly compressed foodstuffs formulated for mental clarity and physical energy. In addition, each man wore a wrist phone. Ear rings would have been more convenient, but the small communication buttons, affixed between base of skull and earlobe, might too easily become detached and get lost.

Like Win and Zee, Tole set his Satnav for the elfin community of Erqueqir in the hilly western reaches of the Interzone. The men had brought along fresh butter and one of Win's fanciful mobiles to offer the creatures. Elves were generally civil if treated with respect, but they were also proud and somewhat aloof. Gifts could help make them more cooperative.

The men had also brought the ear portion Ridley had

found. Seeing the remnant would likely bring the elves closure rather than grief. Both stoical and long-lived, they didn't fear death.

The higher the sun rose, the more powerfully the hovercraft ran. Tole gladly concentrated on maneuvering his vehicle through the woods and over rises. He couldn't let his thoughts stray to Ridley. He couldn't let himself speculate about where and how the vampire was being kept by Keryss and what she might be doing to him. Fretting could warp his imagination into conjuring dreadful images. And such images, Tole knew, could send him slamming into a tree or hillside.

The landscape, too, proved a welcome distraction. With spring came emerging wildflowers and burgeoning, lime green foliage. Rich scents stirred by creeping roots and burrowing critters rose from the softened earth. Sunlight unexpectedly blazed and faded, and each shift from brightness to shade brought out a different facet of the land's beauty.

The northwest Interzone had not been marred by invasive technologies. A multimetroplex treaty, nearly a century old, had effectively kept out loggers, mining companies, corporate farms, and real estate developers -- not difficult, since most metroplexes had achieved zero population growth. There were only two other highways in addition to the one that ran between Regenerie and Villius.

Yes, Tole was grateful. The ride helped center him. In two hours, give or take, the Triumvirate of the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie was again the Coven of Three -- a ragtag trio of magicians in search of a missing friend.

Parking their vehicles about half a kilometer from Erqueqir, the men walked the rest of the way to the settlement. They wanted to create as little disturbance as possible. Otherbeings placed a high premium on privacy and

on whatever routines informed their daily lives. They weren't fond of disruptive intrusions.

"Remember," Tole said, primarily to Zee, "there's a good possibility undines will be around now that spring is here. Keep your guard up. Don't let yourself be charmed." Zee did have a weakness for the ladies -- much more so than he or Win -- and water sprites were lovely creatures that could be quite irresistible. Male elves liked cavorting with undines.

"I don't believe they can absorb souls from hybrids the way they can from strictly human men," Zee said. "In any case, I'm not that gullible."

He'd taken umbrage at the warning. Tole caught the snippiness in his voice. "Just a reminder. Nothing personal, my man."

Zee set his mouth in a line. Tole and Win exchanged amused glances. It was a good bet Zee had also been affected by Win's affair with Pablo. After all, he was the one who'd voiced the belief that all three of them needed to connect "on a personal level" with individuals outside their insular group. Angel-heavy though he was, Zee *had* seemed a little squirmy lately.

Win tilted past him to address Tole. "Your former lover was a dark elf, wasn't he?"

"Yes. From Bildezir in the north."

"Do you ever miss him?"

"No."

Ormegen. Tole had only started thinking about him since the ear turned up. It was through Ormegen that Tole had acquired his knowledge of elves, both light and dark. An incredible lover, that elf, but not one to inspire trust.

He'd known immediately the ear had not come from Ormegen. His former lover was black as tar and would've

worn a silver ear stud. Besides, trapping a dark elf could prove a tricky business for Keryss, no matter what powers she had at her disposal.

Zee suddenly stopped and extended his arms out to both sides, halting his companions' progress. Rather than speak to them, since elves had keen hearing, he signed.

Can you hear the splashing?

Tole and Win nodded. A spring-fed pond circled by forest lay close to the caves in which the light elves dwelled. If they were enjoying a frolic in the water, undines were likely with them.

The men cat-pawed another few meters forward. Despite the lightness of their steps, the sloshing sounds abruptly ceased. Only birdsong punctuated the stillness.

Moving light flared with blinding brilliance between the trees. Squeezing his eyes shut, Tole averted his face.

"You can look now," a mild voice said. "I've muted."

Blinking and stretching his lids, Tole hesitantly glanced toward the speaker, a male with large, luminous eyes of indeterminate color, or too many colors to identify, and long, pale gold hair. His peaked ears seemed an extension of his high cheekbones. Beneath a gauzy tunic of sea foam green, his slender body was almost sylphlike. The elf was so angelically beautiful he made Win look like an alcoholic Villius miner.

He must have held some high station in the community, for he had three gold nuggets in each ear.

"Who are you," the elf asked, "and what do you wish of us?" His tone didn't change. It had no defensive or challenging edge, just the merest trace of curiosity.

"Please accept our humble gifts," Tole said. He swept one hand toward Zee, who pulled the crock of butter from his

pack, and one hand toward Win, who carefully lifted the elaborate mobile. "We are Alterationists from the Undercity of Regenerie, and we only seek information. A dear friend of ours was taken last night by the same creature who did this."

While the elf's startling eyes remained trained on him, Tole reached into his jacket pocket and lifted out a small gold box embossed with flowers, vines, and butterflies. He held it out and lifted its lid. Within, nestled in a cloud of white silk, laid the ear tip.

The elf's gaze immediately fell to the sorry relic. His only reaction was a soft gasp. Stepping forward, he took the box from Tole's hand, stared into it a moment longer, then slowly closed the lid.

"I am Avran," he said. "Please come with me."

After introducing themselves, the men followed him. Whatever swimmers were in the limpid pond had either fled or ducked beneath the water. Not a single elf or undine was visible anywhere.

Avran led them up a flight of steps expertly carved into the hillside and flanked by rows of wildflowers. The dwelling they soon entered wasn't so much a cave as a meticulously crafted chamber. Elaborate pictures, more high art than petroglyphs, adorned the walls, colors flooding each incised line. An equally fine, woven covering stretched across the floor. Torches flickered from artisan-quality sconces.

The hill was honeycombed with chambers -- above, around, and behind this one -- but peering into them or even inquiring about them would have been very bad form indeed.

Avran gracefully extended a hand toward the scattered, cushioned chairs carved from stone and wood. "You may sit if you'd like."

As he placed the gold chest on a wall shelf, the men took their seats. They waited until their host spoke. Avran glided

closer and stood before them.

“I accept your gifts,” he said, “and I thank you on behalf of this community.”

His eyes lit up further, if that was possible, as he lifted the mobile from Win’s hand. For the first time, he smiled. Elves adored beautiful things that were well made, and Tole had to admit Win’s mobiles were works of art. After hanging the piece in a corner of the chamber, Avran returned to take the crock of butter. Lifting the crock’s lid, he lightly swiped one long finger over the yellow mass. He tasted it and again smiled, then spirited the crock to an interior room.

Tole knew Win and Zee were as relieved as he was. Although elves were more predictable than some other creatures, a favorable reception was never guaranteed.

Avran returned and resumed his earlier position, his arms folded and tucked within opposite sleeves of his robe. “Although Regenerie is a city of men, it has been very respectful of beings who are not men. We’re grateful. Now, what information do you seek?”

“When did your friend disappear?” Tole asked.

“Over a fortnight ago. His name was Lobran.”

“Did you see him taken?”

“No. None of us did. He’d ventured beyond Erqueqir to gather plants for our pigments and never returned.”

“What did you suppose had happened to him?” Win asked.

Avran’s gaze flowed over Win’s face the same way it had flowed over his mobile. “Forgive me,” he said, “that I find the creator as lovely as his creation. I can’t help but admire the way you look.”

A sound of self-consciousness came from Win’s throat. Tole saw his eyelashes flutter as he looked down, then

quickly looked up again. He certainly didn't want to seem rude by refusing to meet their host's gaze.

"Humans are generally rather coarse-looking creatures," Avran continued. "I suspect you find praise difficult to accept. Being a jewel among stones can be an onus. It invites too much attention, much of it unwanted."

Tole was tempted to say, *The stones thank you for not embarrassing them the way you embarrassed the jewel.* But wisely, he kept quiet.

Zee came to Win's rescue and restated his original question. "Did you have any theories about what happened to Lobran?"

"We suspected his disappearance was related to the cries we've heard, sometimes in the day and sometimes in the night. Those cries did not bode well. We know a stain upon the land when we see it. Or hear it."

"Have you lost any other members of your community?" Tole asked.

"No. We are more prepared now when we venture beyond the magical bounds of Erqueqir. However, as you surely know, some of our older members have chosen to seek temporary refuge in Regenerie. We recognize it as a place of generosity and good will."

"We do try our utmost to make all guests feel welcome and help them be comfortable," Zee assured him.

"Pardon me for asking," Win said quietly, "but did Lobran have a mate?"

"He had a wife," Avran said without a speck of emotion.

"Is she still hoping he'll return?"

"No. After three days and three nights, she knew he was dead. We all knew."

Win's brow contracted. "Please convey our deepest sympathies."

"That's very kind of you," Avran said, "but she needs neither sympathy nor consolation."

"But she must have mourned." The pathos in Win's voice was noticeable.

Tole and Zee gave him cautionary looks. Win had not only made an assumption, he'd done it a bit stridently. Elves didn't react to death the way other creatures did, and certainly not the way humans did. Win knew this. But he'd always been an empathetic man and had become even more so since meeting Pablo.

"We won't keep you any longer," Zee said to Avran, thereby putting a merciful end to the awkward moment. "Thank you for answering our questions."

Avran inclined his head in acknowledgment. "You're welcome to visit Erqueqir at any time."

The three men rose and moved to the chamber's doorway.

Avran stayed Tole with a gentle touch to the arm. "Did *you* put the sky in your hair, or did the Mother?" The elf seemed tempted to touch the blue strands. His pale fingers reached for them but, at the last moment, withdrew.

"The Mother," Tole answered without thinking.

Slowly, Avran smiled. His eyes danced with light. He knows, Tole thought. My dumb ass. I've just given us away.

"Bring your face close to mine," Avran whispered.

Tole, by far the taller, lowered his head. He didn't know what to expect but felt no trepidation.

Avran kissed him on each cheek. "Go to the woman who dwells five wood-spans from Mare's Crossing. Three oaks

stand sentry over her cottage. She's been looking forward to meeting you." Bowing at the waist, Avran backed away. "May blessings lead and follow you, Triad. Now be on your way."

Chapter Eleven

"What the hell?" Win murmured once they'd reached their vehicles.

"Is Mare's Crossing on our Satnavs?" Tole asked, fiddling with the one on his hovercraft.

They'd tried to program in every landmark in the NWI and every name by which that feature was known -- Pitchfork Bind, the Howling Well, various mounts and cairns and faery rings, dells and glades and groves, caves and tunnels. These in addition to the scores of settlements, waterways, and other sites Interzone residents deemed noteworthy. Complicating matters further, different communities had different names for the same places. It had been a colossal research effort.

"I've got it," Zee said, just as Tole and then Win got it too. "We should be able to get there in under a half hour."

"But why are we going there?" Win asked.

"Because," Tole said, getting situated in his hovercraft, "Avran told us to. And he knows who we are."

Win stared at him for moment and then muttered, "I was afraid of that. You and your damned blue hair."

"My damned blue hair may have just given us a chance to save Ridley's damned white ass."

"Come to think of it," Win said, "his ass isn't exactly sun-kissed." He, too, got into his craft. "It's a really nice one, though."

They headed back toward the east.

* * * * *

Oblivious, Ridley slept in his web. Keryss stood beside it and let her eyes feast on him. She'd undressed him, of course. Floss clung best to bare skin.

The Tower had two web rooms -- one secreted near her suite on the uppermost level, and this one, sunk below the earth. Keryss wasn't terribly fond of the cellar room, but it was necessary for keeping nocturnal vampires and creatures that preferred subterranean housing.

Leaning over her newest guest, whose web was canted at a comfortable angle between ceiling and floor, Keryss forked her fingers through his sweep of jet hair. Thicker and more stylish than Lobran's, its texture struck a delectable balance between coarse and satiny. She bent forward and nuzzled her face in it, scooping handfuls around her cheeks. Where she really wanted to feel it was between her thighs.

Taking advantage of the fact that nothing could rouse a vampire from his fathomless sleep, Keryss trailed her fingers over Ridley's aristocratic features. He was, she guessed, in his early to midthirties when he turned. There was maturity and a touch of haughtiness in his face. Before kissing his broad, symmetrical mouth, she traced the cleanly delineated bow of his upper lip, then the smooth curvature of the lower, which never had a pouty look. It could have if he'd let it, but Ridley wasn't the type of man suited to that kind of look. She fit the tip of her forefinger to the shallow cleft in his chin. A dark, sandy shadow framed his mouth and crept along his strong jawline.

Fingers spread, Keryss ran her hands over his broad shoulders and the low, twin foothills of his chest. Black hair adorned it too, but modestly so, as if Ridley had opted for a tastefully understated emblem of his masculinity.

Keryss kissed and licked each nipple. Still, Ridley didn't stir. Her hands crawled down his hard abdomen. There were

ripples beneath the cool skin, but they weren't pronounced. She tongued the shallow pit of his navel and then let her mouth follow an arrow of black hair from there to his groin.

He had a wide pubic delta. Darkly lush and springy, it was lightly scented with the musk that had been strangely lacking in Lobran. In fact, the elf's groin had been nearly bare.

Pulling back, Keryss fondly bobbed Ridley's genitals. His balls were low and heavy. His cock wasn't enormous, but it was lovely -- a nice hand-length of pure pleasure. Even now, drooping along the gully between hip and thigh, it was enticingly thick, and smooth as quicksilver. Keryss had never before seen such silky skin on a cock. The feel of it made her bend over once more and rub the side of her face along its rouged length. When it was hard, it must be like marble.

"Later, my love," she whispered, delivering a sweeping caress to the vampire's lean, muscle-strapped legs.

When he awoke, she would take him to her private suite and let him feed. Then they would wrestle through a wild fuck. Afterward, she would pet him. Perhaps she would watch Herndon suck him to another climax. She would bathe him, then, and massage his long body.

Oh, there were so many possibilities for enjoyment of this creature! Keryss knew she must make the most of what little time they had together. It was unfortunate she desperately needed the powers he possessed. The cocooning process would have to begin soon. Ridley was a large man. It would take a while to break him down.

Keryss sighed. So unfortunate.

* * * * *

The small rubble-stone cottage tucked amid three large oaks was surrounded by a weathered picket fence. Its gate was latched. That seemed more a symbol of the owner's preference for privacy than a security measure. A strong wind

could easily have blown the whole fence down.

"We can't just barge through it," Zee said, giving the gate a tentative rattle. "Whoever lives here doesn't know us, and she sure isn't expecting us."

"That's not what Avran said." Tole cupped his hands around his mouth. He didn't feel like messing with protocol. "Hello!"

No response.

"Maybe we should --"

Impatient, Tole cut off whatever suggestion Win was about to make. He called out more loudly, "Anybody here?"

A petite woman with dark, carelessly pinned-up hair strode with obvious vexation from the rear of the cottage. "For God's sake," she said, "at least give me a chance to pull my hands out of the dirt and wipe them off."

And wipe them off she did, on her worn jeans and soiled sweatshirt. She stopped at the gate -- one hand on the stile, one on her hip -- and looked up at them. The men stepped back, away from the gate. Expectantly, the woman's eyebrows lifted.

Tole thought she was rather pretty. Not a knockout, but her shrewd, ice blue eyes were an arresting contrast to that lopsided pile of hair. Although she was small, she wasn't boyish. Ample and obviously unfettered breasts made her look shapely and rather succulent.

"Well," she said, "you summoned me away from dozens of pea, lettuce, spinach, beet, and carrot seeds, *and* a flat of onions, so tell me what you want and make it quick." The woman didn't seem aloof, just assertive.

Tole took a step forward. "We were told at Erqueqir that you might be able to help us. A friend of ours was abducted last night from the Interzone. We're determined to find him."

The nature of the woman's gaze changed. She studied her visitors, one by one, as her arched brows drew together. "Is your friend an Otherbeing?" she asked more quietly.

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"A vampire."

"But *you're* not vampires," the woman said.

"Some breeds are diurnal," Tole pointed out.

"I'm well aware of that. But you're not vampires of *any* breed."

Now Win came forward. "Who are you?" he asked suspiciously.

Tole, too, had begun to get a niggling sense of something familiar about the woman. She didn't present as an Otherbeing, but she didn't feel entirely human either.

"Let me remind you that you're standing at my gate," she said in answer to Win's question. "Etiquette dictates you introduce yourselves first."

Zee, who'd been regarding her with obvious pleasure, spoke up. "I'm Zee. That's Tole and that's Win. We're Alterationists from the Undercity of Regenerie."

Slowly, the woman shook her head. Her smile bore a hint of smugness. "Thimien, Maligar, and Aethiel. You're all hybrids. And you're the Triumvirate of Regenerie." She unlatched the gate. Stepping backward, she swung it open. "It's about time you went after Keryss. I've been wondering why you've been dragging your feet."

Chapter Twelve

The men stared at her. Realization likely hit Win and Zee as soon as it hit Tole. She was a hybrid too. More human than the three of them, her angelic and demonic ancestries were but a sprinkle in her DNA, and a sprinkle quite diluted by time. But she was a hybrid nonetheless.

"You're Mirandi," Zee whispered in awe.

She answered with a single nod. "I assure you, gentlemen, your secret is safe with me. Interzone residents know the value of discretion. And I'm not exactly fond of my cousin."

Tole was the first to step through the gate. "Let's get one thing straight. We haven't been dragging our feet. We just discovered there was a spinner in the NWI and that it was Keryss. We couldn't have acted more quickly."

Mirandi, unruffled, gazed into his eyes as he loomed over her. A remnant of her former smile was still in place. "A little testy, are we? You must be Maligar." She lightly placed three fingers on his arm. "Yes, you're Maligar."

"And you're damned right I'm testy. If it weren't for the man Keryss just captured, we *still* wouldn't know about any spinner activity. So we at least owe him a rescue."

"I understand," Mirandi said more solemnly. "I didn't intend to demean your effort. It's more than admirable. But I hope you do something about Keryss in addition to saving your friend."

As Zee walked into the yard, he laid a hand on the small of her back. "We're going to try."

Mirandi smiled at him. It was a tentative smile, but it was clearly a connective one.

They all proceeded down a crooked flagstone path toward the cottage. Tole noticed that Zee looked a bit flushed. He'd undone the top three buttons of his shirt.

Something was going on with him. His smiles were frequent and engaging. His voice was coddling. Was he simply hoping to charm some information out of their hostess, or did he actually fancy her?

Zee didn't flash those dimples for just anybody.

Mirandi opened the heavy plank door of her home and allowed the men to enter. She slapped whatever dirt she could from her clothing, then took off her work boots and set them just outside the threshold.

"Why are you living out here, anyway?" Win asked. "Why aren't you in Villius?"

"That," Mirandi said, following the men inside, "is a truly stupid question." Closing the door, she walked past a fieldstone fireplace to sit in an overstuffed, gaily patterned love seat angled toward the hearth. "The operative word is *living*. I'm alone, but at least I'm alive."

"What happened to the third hybrid we've heard about, the male?"

"There is no third hybrid. Keryss and I were the Powers of Villius. Or the 'Ladies.'"

"But our reports --"

"Herndon, the only full-time male resident of the Tower, is a golem." Mirandi unclipped her hair, shook and fluffed it, then piled it up again and reclipped it. "I don't know how Keryss acquired him. Maybe she constructed and animated him herself. If she did, I have no idea where she got the knowledge. But Herndon is her bodyguard. And sometimes

her stud.”

“A golem,” Win repeated. “A big old hunk of moving mud stronger than an elephant.”

“But considerably dumber,” Mirandi said with a disparaging smirk. “I wouldn’t worry about Herndon if I were you. He’ll do Keryss’s bidding, but he can’t do much on his own. Except go berserk on Saturdays if he isn’t allowed to rest. Now please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Tole couldn’t help smiling as he looked around the cottage. A chair just as fat and colorful as the love seat also faced the fireplace, a footstool before it and a small end table beside it. Houseplants freighted two larger oak tables in front of two windows. A simple maple desk and chair sat in one corner of the room, a coatrack in another, near the front door. Pressed-flower pictures hung from the walls, but there was no television screen. Mirandi obviously didn’t rely solely on the fireplace for heat. Tole had seen an outdoor shed; judging by the telltale ductwork, it housed a heat stove.

Win immediately claimed the chair before the fireplace. Tole grabbed the one in front of the desk and placed it next to Win’s. Zee had no choice but to sit beside their hostess. Not that he minded, certainly, but he probably wouldn’t have taken the spot on his own. Zee was a gentleman, no matter how much his hormones harried him.

“You believe your cousin would’ve done you in?” Win asked.

“I know she would have. Keryss has been dying to absorb a hybrid since her spinner traits became evident. She also saw me as being in her way. I fled just in time.”

“Great, she’s salivating for a hybrid,” Win said wryly. “Do you think she’ll recognize us the way you did?”

“Hard to predict,” Mirandi said. “She can’t sense other hybrids the way we can; she’s lost that ability. That’s why she

hasn't found me. Short of seeing me face-to-face, she and her bounty hunters wouldn't know who I am. And all she knows about the Powers of Regenerie is that they're all males. She doesn't know what they look like." Mirandi tucked her legs beneath her bottom. "You've shielded yourselves very well."

"Apparently not," Win said, "since you pegged us right away."

That trace of smugness returned with Mirandi's smile. "This is the Interzone, gentlemen. We have our own grapevine. OBs who've returned from your Undercity have speculated about the Coven of Three." Her gaze moved from one to the other. "A trio of handsome men, dwelling together, who have frequent contact with the Powers and perform magic. Then, voilà, three handsome male hybrids from Regenerie show up at my gate. Since I still have connections at the Academy, I've heard a few things about Maligar, Aethiel, and Thimien." Mirandi swiped her hair back with both hands. "It wasn't hard to put the pieces together."

The revelation wasn't exactly comforting, but they couldn't dwell on it. "How the hell did a spinner manage to be chosen for a Powers position, anyway?" Tole asked...before she had a chance to point out his blue hair.

"Simple," Mirandi said. "When we were being groomed for our positions, nobody had any idea what Keryss really was. I don't think even *she* knew. And she was normal enough when we took up residence in Villius. A bit on the cold-blooded and arrogant side, but I figured that was because of her A-D-H ratio."

"It's possible the spinner mutation doesn't begin to show itself until a creature attains a certain age," Zee said. "That's how it is with a lot of inherited conditions." He spoke directly to Mirandi, not his traveling companions.

Shifting onto her left hip, she draped an arm over the

back of the love seat and faced him. "I suspect you're right." There was a brief but telling break in the conversation as the two of them indulged in a bit of visual appreciation. Mirandi was the first to remember there were other people in the room. When she spoke again, she made an attempt to address Tole and Win as well. "In any case, there's no cure. Once a spinner, always a spinner."

"Well, at least you've given us a *couple* of reasons to be encouraged," Win said.

Tole's mind was in overdrive. He scrambled to assess all the information they'd gotten. In spite of Avran's reassuring words about the length of his comrade's captivity, Tole felt edgy.

"Don't feel *too* confident," Mirandi cautioned Win. "First of all, Keryss isn't easy to get to. Second, she does have a weakness for attractive men. That could work to your advantage in gaining access to her, but it could also work to your detriment. She might just decide to keep one or two or all three of you around for a while." Her expression modulated, taking on a shrewd, slightly taunting look. "Unless you're what she calls 'gilded stallions.'"

The men exchanged glances. Win voiced a confused "umm," then shook his head and shrugged.

"Good-looking men who are primarily or exclusively drawn to other men," Mirandi explained.

Win sputtered into laughter. "Really? I like that. I'm going to get a shirt with GS emblazoned on the front. Maybe over a rearing gold horse throwing a rod."

"You flatter yourself," Tole muttered.

"We're polyamorous," Zee said abruptly, "like all supers."

Naturally, Mirandi was familiar with the sexuality of supernaturals. "But with distinct preferences, correct? I know /

have a preference.” She didn’t state what it was. She didn’t really have to, since her preference was pretty self-evident.

“Zee’s the most flexible,” Tole said, trying to maximize his friend’s chances with her. “I’m somewhat flexible.”

“That’s why your guilt is blinding me,” Win said.

Tole ignored him. “Win is --”

“Win’s taken,” Win piped in, “thank you. And by someone who’s very much a man, I might add.”

Mirandi and Zee again caught each other’s eye. Both smiled self-consciously and found their own laps worth studying.

“I’ll be damned if I know how sexual preference is going to spare us,” Tole said. “I’ve seen how Keryss ‘readies’ men. She pretty much raped Ridley.”

“What are you talking about?” Win asked.

Tole was reluctant to get into detail. He hadn’t described that part of the capture to them. It still bothered him.

“He’s being delicate,” Mirandi told Win. Now she made a point of *not* looking at Zee. “He’s just recoiling from a disgusting act.”

“That can’t be it,” Win said. “Tole’s never delicate.”

Mirandi chuckled. “I can’t say I blame him. What’s he’s alluding to is very bizarre. Terrifying, too, for men. You see, Keryss can eject floss from her vagina and wrap it around a penis. That’s how she manipulates some victims into erection.”

Win’s eyes rounded. “Whoa,” he breathed.

“It isn’t like some silky cock ring, either,” Tole said. “Believe me.” Just the thought made him shudder.

“It’s more like a snug, undulating sleeve,” Mirandi added.

“And we’re not supposed to like that?” Zee asked with a

nervous smile.

The suggestive comment was uncharacteristic of him. Yep, Tole thought, he's getting flirtatious. Must have a hankering for soft breasts and slick pussy. No other reason for him to be displaying his tail feathers.

"Oh, come on," Win groaned. "You want your toad choked by some...elastic succubus slime?"

"I was being facetious," Zee murmured. His earlier comment, and Win's reference to his "toad," seemed to embarrass him.

Mirandi was able to suppress her smile but not her blush. "Keryss can only eject floss when she's around her prey. Remember, she's genetically wired to be a hunter of Otherbeings. Humans don't have that effect on her. Since she won't be able to detect you're hybrids, she'll just *assume* you're human."

"So if we make it clear we're 'gilded stallions,' she won't mess with us?" Tole asked.

"Well, she might try testing the waters, particularly with Win --"

Tole snorted a laugh.

"But she won't be persistent," Mirandi went on. "Keryss likes to feel desired. Beyond making her feel that way, you have nothing more to offer her than this jute rug." She tapped a foot, indicating the floor covering that spread nearly from wall to wall. "Then again, it might work to your advantage *not* to behave like gilded stallions. How you present yourselves depends on the plan you devise."

Tole didn't want to ask the question that was uppermost in his mind, but it had to be asked. "Where can we expect to find our friend? And what...what condition will he be in?"

The other men looked down. Mirandi rubbed her

forehead. She clearly didn't relish the idea of providing *that* information. "In the Tower," she said, her voice more subdued. "Keryss has web rooms. That's where she keeps her victims when she's not, you know, having them service her. The ones she finds appealing, that is."

"Damn," Win whispered. He gave Zee a disgruntled look. "And you said spinners aren't like sapient spiders."

"I meant in shape," Zee said, sounding chastened.

A pall had settled over the sunny room. Everybody was somber now.

"Is your friend attractive?" Mirandi asked.

Although the other men's eyes turned to him, Tole couldn't bring himself to answer.

"Yes," Win said quietly. "He's very attractive."

"Then she'll be tempted to keep him around for a while." Mirandi sighed. "Okay...if he's a nocturnal vampire, he'll be in the cellar room during daylight hours and in or somewhere near her private quarters at night. They're at the top of the Tower. Level LQ."

"What hap --" Tole's voice cracked. He cleared his throat and started over. "What happens when she's had her fill of him?"

"I think you know what happens," Mirandi said almost inaudibly.

"No, I want details." Tole felt his face harden, matching the sternness in his voice. He could no longer quail from the ugly realities of this atrocity. Suddenly, he knew nothing would steel his determination more than the brutal truth.

"She spins a cocoon around the victim," Mirandi said tonelessly, "in preparation for consumption. Some chemical process takes place inside, sort of like...accelerated decomposition." Her face compressed. She pinched the

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animal skin draped over one arm.

“Now you have a special gift,” she said, carefully laying the pelt on Zee’s lap.

Chapter Thirteen

Befuddled, Tole and Win stared as Zee carefully stroked the close-cropped pelage. It was dark and sleek and sent up a faint odor Tole couldn't identify.

"Seal," Zee pronounced, looking up at them. He seemed more baffled than before.

"Correction," Mirandi said. "A selkie skin. Or in my case, an insurance policy."

Simultaneously, Tole and Win got up to study it. "A *genuine* selkie skin?" Win asked.

"Yes." Mirandi looked quite pleased with herself.

"But we're nowhere near the sea."

"Believe me, it's real. And don't bother asking how I got it, because that's none of your business."

"Yes, ma'am." Win went back to his chair.

Tole continued to stand over her. "And this will guarantee us access to Keryss?"

"You bet it will. Aside from conquering Regenerie or maybe capturing a hybrid, a selkie skin is the one thing in the world she wants more than anything else. Wearing it, you know, will give her power over men. Without ejecting floss."

"Have *you* worn it?" Zee asked, nearly making Tole laugh. "Not that you need to," he hastened to add.

Now Tole had to feign a cough to disguise the single laugh that did erupt.

Win, sucking in his cheeks, linked his hands and stared down at them.

"Of course I haven't worn it," Mirandi said indignantly. "I don't want power over men. I just want --" She abruptly clammed up.

"What?" Zee asked quietly.

Go for it, Tole thought, sending his friend silent encouragement.

"I want a man to come to me of his own accord," Mirandi said, "not because I've enchanted him into some kind of mindless subservience." Both sides of her face were so ruddy, Tole was surprised she had enough blood in her vessels to feed the rest of her body.

"Is there something we can give you or do for you in return?" he asked.

"Just save your friend and put Keryss out of commission."

Win kept eyeing the selkie skin. "What did you mean by that thing being your 'insurance policy'?"

"I figured if Keryss ever caught up with me, the skin would be my bargaining chip. Just take time to consider how best to use it."

"What if she just flies at us and grabs it out of our hands?" Win asked.

Mirandi shook her head. "Can't be done, and I'm sure Keryss knows it. She could only gain possession of the skin if you freely offered it to her or if you put it down and then became distracted or fell asleep. So hang on to the damned thing. And don't hesitate to resort to deception or subterfuge. *She* sure as hell wouldn't."

Win rose from his chair. "Would you, uh...would you happen to have something for us to eat? Tole and I realized how hungry we were as we left Erqueqir."

Tole gave him a puzzled frown.

Zee said, "But we have --"

"Well, you know," said Win, chuckling and patting his belly, "those little briquettes we brought along hardly constitute a satisfying meal."

"But they --"

"Just aren't very tasty," Win said, since Zee was probably going to point out that the "briquettes" were formulated to satisfy hunger. That was Tole's first thought too.

"Yeah, I have plenty of food," Mirandi said. "I'd be more than happy to share it with you."

She began to rise, but Win motioned for her to stay seated.

"We can help ourselves." He walked over to Tole, firmly placed a hand beneath his upper arm, and urged his friend to get up. Tole cast him an irritated glance. Win tugged at him with subtle force. "I don't want you waiting on us. Just stay put. Tell Zee anything else you think we need to know."

Finally capitulating, Tole got out of the chair. Win followed him into the kitchen. "We'll be in the backyard if you need us," he called over his shoulder and then spoke over Tole's. "Jesus, you're dense," he muttered before heading for the refrigerator.

Tole came up to Win as he swung open the door. "Then why don't you take me to clue school," he said snidely, "so I know what the hell is going on?"

Pear in hand, Win closed the fridge. "I just thought we should give Zee some time alone with Mirandi. He's been growing a horn for that woman since he saw her. Actually, I think she'd appreciate some action herself. That's one lady who knows her mind."

"Yeah, I could see that," Tole said, scowling at him. "But I

can't believe you're playing matchmaker while Ridley is languishing in some w --"

Win shoved the pear in Tole's mouth, which did shut him up. "And that reaction is the other reason I'm doing this. You need to calm down, man. If you start getting all squirrely and damned near shifting every ten minutes, you're going to fuck everything up. So just let yourself relax for a little while and think about how happy this is making Zee. And Mirandi, who's done us a huge favor."

Holding the pear, Tole bit down and slowly chewed. As much as he hated to admit it, Win was right. On all points. A half hour's diversion wouldn't make any difference in Ridley's fate, but Tole losing control could make *all* the difference.

He gave in. "Okay," he said, then shook the pear in Win's face. "But Zee better empty his reservoir in record time. We can't spend the whole day waiting while he pulls out all his best moves."

"Aw, just think of him in there," Win said in a sappy voice, "making Mr. Happy happy." He touched Tole's arm and made cow eyes at him.

Grudgingly, Tole smiled. "It *is* kind of sweet, actually. Zee deserves --"

"Wait, wait, wait." Win dropped the cutesy bullshit. "Did you just say you think something is 'sweet'?"

Tole lowered the pear from his mouth. "Don't fuck with me, Win."

"Damned if Zee wasn't right. "

"Zee is always right. So what else is new?"

Win shook his head. "I swear you're changing."

"And I swear you're full of shit... 'changing.' Changing how?"

"Let's just say there could be more than one Lance

Romance among us.”

Tole narrowed his eyes. “Are you *trying* to piss me off?”

“No. And the funny thing is, you aren’t pissed off. I’d know it if you were.” Reaching past Tole, Win opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bag of cheese curds. He popped a few into his mouth and replaced the bag.

Tole took another bite of the pear and let the issue go. Squabbling would only divide the three of them, and they needed to act in concert. Or so he told himself.

Moving quietly to the arched doorway that led to the living room, he sneaked a glance toward the love seat. His chewing slowed as a grin spread across his face. He motioned Win over, then put a finger to his own lips.

Although the back of the love seat concealed the bodies of the couple sitting there, it was obvious from the positions and movements of their heads that something was going on. Tole put his hands on Win’s shoulders and steered him through a mudroom to the back door. He made a point of closing the door firmly, so Zee and Mirandi would know they were alone. Finishing the pear, he chucked its core toward a row of lilac bushes.

There was a welcoming little flagstone patio out back, set with twig furniture and lorded over by the burr oak that stood at the rear of the cottage. Farther back in the spacious yard, a rose-breasted grosbeak pecked around in one of three bird feeders stationed near a birdbath. Wind chimes tinkled from one of the eaves. Mirandi’s garden sprawled, neatly furrowed for seeds and mounded for potatoes and melons, off to the left. A side of the stove shed was visible to the right. Perhaps a half-acre distant, a stand of tapped sugar maples dripped precious sap into buckets.

“Where are you going?” Win asked as Tole crept around a corner of the cottage.

“To do some window peeping.”

“Oh for chrissake, you’re acting like a frat boy. Just sit down, enjoy the surroundings, and let Zee launch his tadpoles in private.”

Tole disregarded the order. He was getting into this now. Maybe he needed the diversion more than he realized. Maybe there was more to it than that.

Stopping at the window closest to the love seat, he hoped the small jungle of houseplants on the table would effectively conceal his face. Squatting just before he reached the window frame, he shuffled sideways and boosted himself up until his nose was level with the sill.

Zee’s shirt was fully open and pushed off his shoulders. Mirandi, half on his lap, kept her hands busy in his hair, on his chest and abdomen, in his unzipped pants. Zee’s hands weren’t idle either. One moved inside Mirandi’s sweatshirt while the other half braced and half fondled her back. They were kissing like possessed teenagers. Zee said something, but the sound was muffled by the thick, well-insulated walls. Grasping his hand, Mirandi rose from the couch. Tole caught a glimpse of those plump breasts and pert nipples just before her sweatshirt fell back into place.

Jeans barely held up by his ass, Zee rose and followed her. Mirandi led him to a door on the opposite side of the room, just to the right of her desk.

M’lady’s boudoir, Tole thought with a grin.

He scurried around the rear of the cottage to get to the other side. Win snatched at his shirt. “Hey, busybody.”

Tole tried to disengage Win’s hand, but it held firm.

“Are they getting it on?” Win asked.

“They’re getting it *off*,” Tole said with glee. Win released him, and he was once again was on his way.

The location of the bedroom was easily enough deduced. Tole did the same sneak-and-peek he'd done at the other window, only this time drawn curtains rather than plants were in the way. Visibility was limited to a narrow gap. But from what Tole could tell, Mirandi was treating herself to one enthusiastic pony ride.

For some reason, he wanted to jump up and cheer.

Instead, smiling wistfully, he slid down the bumpy wall of the cottage and sat with his arms resting on his knees.

Without prelude, images of Ridley rippled through his mind. Longing clutched at his heart. Caught off guard by this confounding reaction, Tole held his fisted hands together and pressed them to his forehead. "Oh Jesus," he exhaled. He felt as if he'd been flung into a ball of emotional barbed wire, and it held his thoughts and feelings as cruelly as the real thing could snag a body.

Yes, he was changing, and he felt helpless in the grip of this unfamiliar shift. It was far more unsettling than fleeting metamorphosis into some ancestral form. That, he was used to. This, he was not.

Lifting himself off the damp ground, Tole shambled back to the patio. "Win, I have a favor to ask of you. It's going to sound strange."

"Why am I not surprised?" Win's expression gradually sobered as he gazed up into Tole's face.

Tole grabbed one of the twig chairs and sat facing him. "Will you kiss me?"

Win blinked. "Kiss you...where?"

Sighing in exasperation, Tole rolled up his eyes. "Don't worry, I'm not using *kiss* as a euphemism for *rim*. I mean above the waist, Win. Like where my mouth is. You wouldn't be betraying Pablo. I just need --"

What *did* he need? Tole felt like a total nitwit making the request. It sounded silly. Worse yet, it was humiliating. But it had nothing to do with burning desire, much less heartsick love, and everything to do with a substitute for that closeness Ridley so reveled in. Hell, maybe it had everything to do with Ridley himself.

"Some touch?" Win suggested with an understanding smile.

Tole nodded. "Yeah."

Win was probably the best kisser in the universe. His lips were like two plush, heated satin comforters you wanted to dive between on cold winter nights. Except that they moved. Damn, how skillfully they moved. The resultant feeling surpassed the effects of ElySORIA, Regenerie's legal feel-good drug. Kissing Win was sometimes soothing, sometimes revitalizing, sometimes unbearably exciting. It was whatever the "kissee" needed or wanted at the time.

Tole had once talked to Zee about it. They'd decided this was some unique power imparted by Aethiel's particular ancestry.

The men slid their chairs closer together and leaned forward. Tole's eyes drifted closed.

And he felt it -- the sensuously sweet, soft pressure that temporarily blotted everything else from his mind and made him feel close to someone. The kiss wasn't impassioned. Tole flexed his lips against the flexions of Win's, but shyly. The sensation thrilled him, no doubt about that, but the unique satisfaction that came from it wasn't about sexual stimulation.

Their respiration did accelerate a bit -- they were both vigorous men who delighted in their sensuality -- but they didn't let it get out of control. Their tongues only touched fleetingly, demurely.

Easing back in his chair, Tole breathed a long sigh. Win slicked his hair back and left his hands resting on his head for a moment. The men kept looking at each other.

"That was starting to get to me," Win said. The confession seemed to embarrass him. "You've never kissed me like that before."

"Like how?"

"Tenderly. With longing."

Tole gave him a wan smile. "Yeah, I know. I'm usually a beast."

"And a hungry one," Win said, returning Tole's smile. "Now, maybe you're hungry in a different way."

Tole realized how damned sick he was of yearning for something he didn't understand. He looked at the loamy garden, waiting for sealed seeds and spindly roots, waiting to generate vibrant life. "I've tried to imagine how you kiss Pablo." It was another embarrassing admission.

"I wouldn't know," Win said, "since I'm not on the receiving end."

"You must kiss him with feeling, though. Not just appetite."

"I hadn't given it any thought, but...yes, I suppose I do. With a lot of feeling. Because kissing him means something to me. To *us*."

"Bloody hell," Tole whispered. It was too much to contemplate. He wondered vaguely why this bonding business came so late to hybrids -- if it came at all -- and why, when it did appear on the doorstep, it seemed too alien to deserve a welcome.

They sat silently on the patio for perhaps another twenty minutes, listening to the birds chitter, the chimes *ping* sporadically like sleet against icicles. When Zee finally

ambled out the back door, they didn't notice him at first.

"We, uh...we had a nice talk," he announced with starchy neutrality.

Tole and Win cranked their heads around to look up at Zee. He was combing his hair. A portion of his shirt still hung over the waistband of his jeans.

The two temporarily celibate men broke into frat-boy titters.

Chapter Fourteen

The Triumvirate decided to get as close to Villius as they could without crossing its outermost bounds. Any breach by a trio of vehicles would likely alert the Villius Security Force and invite inspection. Travelers on foot had a better chance of entering the metroplex with a minimum of scrutiny.

As afternoon faded into evening, they guided their hovercraft into one of the uninhabited caves that pocked Wind Shorn Hill, a sullen-looking rise covered by a mass of skeletal trees and stunted undergrowth. Two tornadoes had spun across this swath of land in recent years, leaving behind a jumble of ravaged vegetation.

No Otherbeings dwelled in these caves. None wanted to live this close to the Iron Metroplex.

The men had stopped just inside the entrance. They decided to have some dinner, then scope out the space and venture in deeper as night fell. They'd have to sleep in their vehicles. The cave floor was cold, uneven, and a bit slimy.

"I'm starting to feel grungy." Getting off his craft, Win scratched vigorously at his scalp with both hands, further mussing his curls.

"You're starting to *look* grungy," Tole said.

"Yeah, well, you and Zee aren't exactly shiny bright, either."

"We can make ourselves pretty again in a little while," replied Tole. "Right now, though, we have more important matters to tend to."

After they had a modest meal, Win called Pablo. All was

well in Regenerie. There were, of course, the usual little wrinkles that popped up on a daily basis, but the Triumvirate's support network could easily smooth them out.

The men debated whether to hike into Villius that night or wait until morning. Tole wanted to go in tonight. He was outvoted by Win and Zee. Again, it was a decision that made sense once he'd given it some thought.

Venturing farther into the pocket of darkness, they didn't start a fire despite the cave's chilly dampness. Ventilation was an issue, but so was attention-drawing smoke. Their magical abilities wouldn't serve the hybrids here -- not in *any* respect. The farther they ventured from Regenerie, the more their powers diminished. None of them knew if this applied to their shifting capabilities. Unpredictable to begin with, they had never been put to the test beyond the limits of the Utopian Metroplex.

Trying to keep his restlessness contained, Tole initiated a discussion about strategy. The selkie skin had given the trio an incalculable advantage, but they needed to determine how best to use it. They had to free Ridley *and* get rid of Keryss. And then there was the matter of the golem. Win, Tole, and Zee were strong, but not strong enough, without supernatural enhancement, to overcome a moving mountain of muscle and mayhem. They'd have to pull off some damned clever improvisation.

"So, are we agreed on this?" Tole asked once they'd worked out a plan.

Zee looked troubled. "I just don't feel good about the role you've assigned yourself."

Tole reassuringly grasped his forearm. "Hey, don't worry so much. You and Win do what you have to do and I'll do what I have to do."

"Some risks are just worth taking," Win added. "Belief is

everything.”

Tole glanced at him, knowing Win spoke from experience. Opportunity, determination, and faith were the forces that had brought him and Pablo together.

“When we’re finished with this,” Zee said, “we’ll have to let Mirandi know how things went. She deserves to be reinstated as the leader of Villius.”

Tole smiled. In the dim light provided by a water lamp, he thought he glimpsed the same reaction on Win’s face. Zee definitely had an itch he needed to scratch.

“Absolutely,” Win said. “Maybe you could pay her a visit soon. I guess you know I’ll be eager to spend some time with Pablo.”

“And maybe,” Tole added, “you could help arrange for her return and find out how we can be of assistance.”

Zee bit at his lower lip. “What if we can’t get Keryss out of the way? Or what if Mirandi doesn’t want to go back?”

“We’ll cross those bridges when we come to them,” Tole said. “If Mirandi doesn’t want to return to Villius, it’s out of our hands. Other hybrids will be sent to take over. In the meantime, the bureaucrats will keep things running. We just have to ensure we can’t be connected to whatever ends up happening.”

“Imagine trying to get our asses out of *that* sling,” Win muttered. “What a cluster-fuck.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tole said. “Only two people know what we’re up to -- well, three, if you include Avran. None of them is going to blab. That’s a guarantee.”

“You forgot someone,” Zee said gently.

Tole looked at the dim smudge of his face. “Who?”

“Ridley.”

Tole's heart thumped against his breastbone. "I haven't forgotten Ridley."

He just didn't want to make any assumptions.

* * * * *

As Keryss watched the naked man in the web, his muscles began to shift. Abruptly, his eyes opened. She all but held her breath as Ridley's dark gaze shot in her direction.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"Keryss. Your new donor. And your new lover. Are you hungry, my darling?"

He tried to raise his head and pull his limbs away from the adhesive strands, but they held fast. Ridley wasn't a stupid man. Keryss both sensed his intelligence and read it in his face. The slight narrowing of his eyes indicated he was thinking. Thinking efficiently and cunningly. Terror did not distort his features.

"You don't fear me?" Ridley asked.

Keryss laughed. "Why on earth would I fear you? I'm quite capable of controlling any situation that arises."

"Good," he said, surprising her. "Then I assume you'll start treating me like a man and not a fly. Really, Keryss, that's not the way to ingratiate yourself with a lover...or stoke his lust. When I have a mistress, I expect to be able to sleep in her bed."

The comment stung her. She'd thought only of the benefits of her safeguards and not their drawbacks. "But I don't yet know if I can trust you."

Ridley smiled. "Shouldn't you find out?" His deep voice and broad mouth were both quite bewitching. The thick, parabolic arch of his cock had even greater allure.

Keryss lifted her arms and pulled Ridley off his sticky

hammock. Silk trailed from her fingertips to his wrists, ankles, and waist. She'd made sure to bind him before he awoke, so she could safely lead him to her suite at the top of the Tower. He didn't writhe against the restraints as he'd done when she'd captured him. It was a pleasant surprise. Keryss hadn't expected this creature to be as tractable as the elf, who'd become quite smitten with her.

"See?" Ridley said as his feet slid to the floor. He raised his arms and glanced at the flowing threads. "This is what I mean. I've gone from a fly to a marionette. That's no better." Clucking, he shook his head disapprovingly. "It's like depriving a man of his manhood. And I should think that's the last thing you'd want to do to a lover."

"But I --" Keryss didn't get a chance to voice her rationalization.

Ridley's expression became severe. Unblinking, he stared directly into her eyes. The look was so forceful it made Keryss sway a bit. She'd forgotten about the hypnotic quality of a vampire's gaze.

"Now feed me, bitch. If you start treating me right, I'll bring you more pleasure than you can bear."

Keryss could hardly protest. Moisture had already begun to slick the soft and swollen division between her thighs.

* * * * *

Villius was ugly. There were no two ways about it. Little effort had been made to keep improving the metroplex. From what Tole had read about history, Villius resembled some of the cities that stood before the Darkening -- smoggy, noisy, trash-littered heaps of inharmonious architecture. The whole place had an air of dissonance.

The men had spent most of the day hiking to and through the metroplex, beneath sunshine that filtered weakly through a blanket of clouds. Shortly after their arrival, street lamps

struggled to send an equally thin light through their grimy globes.

The mines and quarries that ringed Villius had left their mark on it. Fine dust clung to every surface. Residents may have been so used to the coating that they didn't notice it, but any visitor from the Interzone or a cleaner metroplex couldn't help but feel swallowed by all the dreary discoloration.

Tole, Win, and Zee paused on a cracked sidewalk to gaze at the Tower. It loomed like a controlling sorcerer in the exact center of the city. Win carried the selkie skin in a backpack.

It had been two nights and two days since Keryss had kidnapped Ridley from the Interzone clearing. Thinking about the flight of time did Tole no good, so he concentrated instead on honing his ire and his resolve. Both had indeed begun feeling like sharp blades he kept sheathed and concealed somewhere deep in his cells. He had no inclination to talk about anything. Now that the rescuers had formulated a plan, only action would satisfy him.

"Let's go," Zee said. "Straight to the front gate."

"So I'm the one who'll stand directly in front of the camera?" Win asked. He, too, seemed armored with composure.

"Yes," Zee answered, "you're the designated figurehead. Since Keryss has a fondness for good-looking men, we'll give the guards an eyeful of good-looking man."

"I'm glad I cleaned myself up," Win said.

The layout of Villius centered on the Tower, as if it were a rock dropped into a pond. Streets radiated out from the structure in concentric circles. Wider avenues, spaced at regular intervals, cut through the circles.

Keeping pace with other pedestrians, so their

movements would seem neither anxiously hurried nor too deliberate and calculating, the Triumvirate strolled up a boulevard and then followed the arc of Granite Ring Drive, the street closest to the Tower grounds. Nobody paid them much mind. Tole's height was something of a standout but not extraordinary enough to draw serious attention, and the blue in his hair wasn't worth a second look. Probably half the population colored or otherwise altered their hair.

The main gates were easy enough to spot. Flanked by stout, V-crete pillars meant to mirror the Tower itself, their ironwork was an ingenious pattern made up of the letters *I*, *M*, and *V*. They were roughly four meters high, the tops a jagged mass of iron spikes that stuck out at crazy angles.

The men positioned themselves before one of the pillars. It was in each of these, they guessed, that cameras would be placed for viewing visitors.

A glowing red disc appeared, as if exuded by the stone, and a voice spoke one word. "Purpose?"

"We seek work and habitation in Villius," Win announced, "so we've brought a special gift for the Lady."

"Wait at the gates for the security guards."

The glow faded. Win, Tole, and Zee walked several steps to their left to stand in front of the ironwork. Soon, a gap appeared and widened in the Tower wall. Two sections of it had obviously been fashioned into a bifurcated door. The halves slid in opposite directions, creating an entrance.

A uniformed man and woman appeared and approached the gates down a granite walkway that was inset with more iron letters. He was dark and burly; she, fair and slim. Both wore stern expressions. When they stopped, each one's gaze rolled shamelessly over the visitors. The woman walked back to the Tower entrance and spoke into a band that circled her wrist.

“What is it you have?” the man asked. His name, engraved into an iron badge, was Broderick.

Win pulled the pack off his back and opened it. He carefully eased out a section of the selkie skin.

Broderick eyed it with indifference. His cursory examination concluded, he said, “Thank you, but the Lady has no need of furs. You can petition for residency and employment at the --”

“It isn’t just any animal pelt,” Zee broke in. “Since we seek a private audience with the Lady, we’ve brought a very *special* skin, one that has unique properties.”

The guard’s forehead scrunched. “And it is...what?”

“Far too rare and precious to turn over to an underling,” Tole said. “Or even to discuss with an underling. We must give this directly to the Lady. And we must have our privacy when we do so. I’m sure she would prefer it that way.”

Perplexed, Broderick looked over his shoulder at the female guard and then shambled to where she stood. They had a brief tête-à-tête, the woman again spoke into her wristband, and Broderick returned to the visitors. He shone a narrow beam at his side of the wrought-iron barrier. Soundlessly, the gates moved to the left and right, sliding into and through the pillars that supported them.

Lights had begun to appear in the Tower’s windows, but no spotlights illuminated the structure. Keryss, Tole thought, certainly had reason to embrace the darkness.

“Come with me,” Broderick said. “And keep in mind you’re being watched at all times. The Lady’s personal guard will escort you from the entrance hall to a reception area.”

Tole, Win, and Zee trooped behind the inspector to the front entrance.

So, the Triumvirate of the Utopian Metroplex of

Regenerie was about to meet the High Lady of Villius, a secret spinner. The men couldn't kill her. Hybrids weren't allowed to kill. But it was April 30, May Eve. If all went according to plan, Keryss would be dispatched while their hands remained unsullied.

If, that is, they could get past the damned golem.

Chapter Fifteen

The Tower's three-story entrance hall, obviously meant to be grand, was spiritually oppressive. A gargantuan, wrought-iron chandelier freighted with pendulous crystals hung in the exact center of the space. Directly below, as if it were a target for the chandelier's sharp, terminal prism, a large IMoV seal was inset into the gleaming black granite floor. Each footstep sent up an echo.

Since they hadn't been invited to sit down, the three visitors remained standing. Tole didn't find the furniture particularly appealing, anyway. Formal chairs and settees upholstered in carnelian velvet hunkered like guards against the walls. Directly opposite the front door, real flames wavered in a large fireplace, its stone mantel carved with intricate human figures. A low table sat before the fireplace, with a sofa and four more chairs arranged in a symmetrical cluster around it.

The place was still as a tomb.

Tole fancied that, beneath the smoky aroma of burning wood, he could detect the cloying odor of rotting flesh. He had to keep his imagination in check. Enough real challenges loomed without having to battle phantoms created by his mind.

A figure emerged from one of four side doors, and the hall's atmosphere careened from stultifying to threatening.

It was the golem.

"I am Herndon," he announced in a basso voice. Aside from a barely detectable gurgle, the sound had no inflection.

The golem wasn't inordinately tall, but his look was enough to curdle anyone's blood. Tole had never before seen such a being. He knew Win and Zee hadn't either.

From neck to ankles, Herndon was solid as a boulder. His unnatural musculature didn't concern Tole as much as other details of his anatomy. The creature's skin had an unmistakably gray cast. His lashless, browless eyes, the color of weathered bone, were devoid of luster. Most curious of all, his forehead was inscribed with three symbols, darker than the field of false flesh that surrounded them.

"You're to come with me," Herndon pronounced. He enunciated the words mechanically, as if language were still new to him.

Darting glances at one another, the trio followed him to the door through which he'd emerged. Win shifted the backpack. Zee squared his shoulders. Tole simply followed the golem. He felt nothing.

Until he saw *her* again.

As soon as they entered the reception room, Keryss filled Tole's vision. The thing that had captured, raped, and stolen his lover, the new and unexpected delight of his life, greeted her visitors with a toothy, ingratiating smile. Tole simmered. Biliary forces welling from his genes bubbled against his skin. Both sides of his head throbbed. Pain punched between his shoulder blades and at the base of his spine. A burning ache filled his fingertips, nose, and ears.

Definitely Belphegor. Tole had suspected it would be Belphegor, the demonic ancestor who seduced people with promises of riches, the one who was most active in April. Some characteristics of the other five were likely surfacing too. But Tole had to keep all his supernatural traits suppressed, at least temporarily. It required an exercise of will that strained his physical and mental constitutions.

Reciting his angelic invocation wasn't an option. Not on this occasion.

"Well, what a pleasant surprise," Keryss cooed. Her chilly gaze snaked down each man's body, over each man's face. As she ogled Win, her lids lowered and her smile became more suggestive.

Tole glanced at Herndon, just to keep a bead on him. The golem stood motionless behind his mistress -- close enough to move forward and protect her, far enough away not to seem intrusive. She must have trained him well.

Keryss clasped her hands behind her back, thrusting her breasts forward. "And who might you three be?"

"I'm Will," said Win.

"Simon," said Zee.

Tole stared into the Lady's eyes. There was the briefest falter in her brazen gaze, the slightest pucker in her smooth, imperious attitude. He could tell she sensed something out of the ordinary about him but couldn't put her finger on the strangeness.

"Tom," he said, hoping his eye color was more caramel in this light. Keryss must not be able to infer their true natures.

"So you're here in search of residency and employment, is that it? And you'd like my aid in securing both?"

Tole stepped forward. "No. We're here in search of Ridley Barron."

Keryss's face fell. The pupils of her eyes narrowed to vertical slits. Her scrutiny of the men became acidic with suspicion...and defiance. "I don't know whom or what you're talking about." No longer like warm oil, the Lady's voice was as steely as her eyes.

"Yes, you do know," Tole countered.

Her face hardened further. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ridley's friend and occasional donor. And occasional lover. Two nights ago I was to meet him in the Interzone. I live near the crossroads known as Pitchfork Bind. As I approached our usual rendezvous spot, I saw you carry him into the air and speed toward Villius. These men" -- Tole indicated Win and Zee -- "are my neighbors. They live just northeast of the Bind. I went to them, hoping they could help me find and free Ridley."

Keryss was unruffled. Her piercing gaze slid from one man to the next, assessing them. "Oh, you mean the vampire. He came with me willingly. We also meet in the Interzone. He feeds from me too. That night I brought him back here, at his request, so we could fuck in comfort until dawn." Her smile returned, but it was far less pleasant. Tole sensed she was trying to belittle him. "I have a most luxurious boudoir. The bed is large and opulent and sturdy, perfect for vigorous lovemaking." Her alabaster hands came forward. Casually clasping them, she let them rest against the draping folds of her silky taupe tunic. "He left before dawn yesterday. I have no idea where he is. So" -- she nodded toward Win's pack -- "what is it you brought me?"

"That's moot, isn't it?" Zee said. "We thought, in case you were holding Ridley against his will, we could offer you something in return for his freedom. Now there's no point in producing what we brought. There's no point in our being here, for that matter."

Keryss's fingers curled and straightened. "You're very attractive men. There *could* be a point in your being here, if you're open to it. I may not have your friend, but I have many other things to offer you."

Tole knew she wouldn't give up Ridley. Even if she hadn't already begun the cocooning process, she was intent on

absorbing his powers sooner or later. And in the meantime, she was intent on enjoying him.

“Depending on what you have,” Keryss said, “I might be willing to make you all very happy. Euphoric, actually.”

Win paused, feeding her anticipation. He finally swung the pack off his back. Slowly opening it, he withdrew a portion of the pelt.

Her eyes widened and gleamed as she drew in a sharp breath. “Is it --”

“A selkie skin,” Win said. “We thought it might appeal to you.”

Keryss didn’t attempt to reach for it. As Mirandi had said, she obviously knew of the restrictions governing transference of ownership. Craning her neck in its direction, she closed her eyes and inhaled. Excitement serrated her breath as she let it out.

“I assume you’re aware of its rarity,” Zee said. “Taking that into consideration, what do propose giving us in trade?”

“Unimagined wealth,” Keryss said in a thin, rushed voice. “Unparalleled sexual ecstasy. Pampered lives, free of toil and deprivation and worry.”

The men made a point of looking at each other, as if they found her proposal worth pondering.

“Is there somewhere we can go,” Win said, “to discuss this in private for a moment?”

Keryss spun to her right and lifted an arm, fingers pointing behind her. “Behind that partition. You can step back there and talk if you’d like. Herndon and I will sit at the opposite end of the room.”

Tole knew damned well it didn’t matter where in the room she sat. The sensory acuity she’d absorbed from her elvish victim, Lobran, made it possible for her to hear them no

matter how quietly they spoke.

They'd counted on that.

The men stepped behind the partition. The wall it concealed had a cylindrical projection that rose up through the ceiling. Tole suspected it was a vacuum lift and there were others like it at different points in the Tower. This must be how employees, or at least Keryss and her bodyguard, traveled from floor to floor. The partition hid its entrance from visitors.

"We need more time to think about this," Win said, keeping his voice down. They had to maintain the ruse. They supposedly believed they were having a confidential confab, and they had to behave accordingly.

"I say, give it a chance," Tole replied. "She's made us one sweet offer."

"Maybe, but I agree with Will," Zee said. "We should just blow out of here with the skin and give the matter more thought. The woman *seems* sincere, but we just don't know her well enough to be sure. We can always come back."

Win embellished the departure drama. "Okay, let's return to the Interzone. I'd like to attend tonight's event." He sniggered lasciviously. "Lying naked in the grass, being played with before I drift off into dreamland."

Tole kept up a whispered string of persuasions. His seeming advocacy would lead Keryss to believe he was a simple-minded human, ignorant enough to be on her side, ignorant enough to be innocuous. His babble also allowed Win and Zee enough time to mentally recite their angelic incantations.

The risks piled up with each passing second. If this tack didn't work -- if Aethiel and Thimien didn't become invisible and inaudible to Keryss the way Maligar had been two nights ago -- they'd have to move on to Plan C. And that wouldn't be

pretty.

Zee gave one nod. Win did the same. They were as ready as they would ever be.

“No...don’t!” Tole wailed. “Will, Simon, you can’t just dump me here! Come back!”

Win and Zee stood against the wall as Tole kept hollering protests and Keryss wheeled around the edge of the partition. Tole pushed past her into the room. She followed at his heels.

“What happened?” she cried, clawing at his arm.

Win and Zee scuttled from behind the screen and jogged across the reception room. Neither Keryss nor her golem saw them. Tole silently thanked their angelic protectors.

“They want more time to consider your offer,” Tole said bitterly. “Worse yet, they deserted me.”

“Well, where are they? Where did they go?” Frantic and wild-eyed, Keryss spun around the room. She pulled open the door and scanned the central hall. Turning back to Tole, she shrieked, “*How did they get away?*”

“They’re OBs,” Tole said. “I should never have relied on them.”

“OBs? That’s not possible! What race of OBs?”

Tole dropped his head to his hands. “Hybrids, I guess. With a touch of faery.”

“Hybrids?” Keryss breathed, gaping at him.

Dolefully, Tole nodded.

“That makes them EBs, not OBs, you fool. *Exceptional Beings*. And what are *you?*”

“I told you, I’m their neighbor. An ordinary human. A desperate mortal who’s too damned trusting.”

“And a man-lover at that,” Keryss said. “You’re no fucking

good to me.” She all but spat out the words. In a blind frenzy, she turned her attention to Herndon. “Broderick will escort this man out of here. You must guard...my treasure. Go!”

Herndon disappeared behind the partition. Tole heard the hissing glide of a hidden door. His assumption must have been correct -- a vacuum lift was concealed within that bulge in the wall.

Keryss pushed a jewel on her cuff bracelet, probably a button to summon Broderick, then fired a warning at Tole. “Leave the Tower. If I need to get in touch with you again, I’ll find you.” She dashed out the door, most certainly prepared to take flight into the night. After all, how could she possibly resist two hybrids, a nude “Will,” *and* a selkie skin?

They’d goaded her, all right. They’d goaded her but good.

Broderick came into the room, boot heels clacking smartly on the stone floor. “I’ll have to insist --”

“I’m sorry,” Tole said, striding up to him, “but you’re in my way.”

He firmly curled an arm around the unsuspecting guard’s throat and forcefully flexed his muscles. The guy was beefy. It was necessary for Tole to use his opposite hand to pull his arm tighter around the thick neck. But he knew he got the placement of his biceps right. It was a good, solid yoke. He just had to sustain it.

Broderick clawed at Tole’s arms, a natural response, but Tole held firm. No amount of struggling would undermine his determination. For a couple of endless minutes, they teetered through an erratic, desperate dance. The guard, certainly unused to being attacked, had forgotten about whatever weapon or weapons he may have been carrying. As he remembered, he slid one hand to his waist.

He remembered too late. With the flow of blood cut off

from his brain, Broderick finally sagged. Tole let him fall, unconscious, to the floor.

He nearly flew behind the partition, thinking of how Win and Zee were nearly flying toward the Tube entrance just at the edge of Villius; how they must be bounding, swift and sure-footed, the way he himself had done two nights ago as he fled the Interzone to tell them about the spinner.

And her “treasure.”

Tole carefully patted the curved surface of the wall until an opening appeared. He stumbled inside, recalling Mirandi’s words. She’d said a vampire captive would be in or near Keryss’s bedchamber at night. Blinking against blurred vision, Tole studied the array of buttons on one wall of the lift. He ignored G through 5 and pushed the one at the top of the row, LQ.

The turbulence in his body intensified.

Clutching his midsection, Tole doubled over. His neck arched and his shoulders bowed back. Grunting, he fell to his knees. An inferno blazed within and burst through his skull, his shoulder blades. Muscles expanded and clenched.

Tole felt his face contort as new features molded themselves. He had no idea what form he was assuming. Six demonic templates had been buried deep within his chromosomes, and they could easily overlap.

Trying to contain a bellow of pain and triumph, Maligar loosed his ancestors just as the lift reached Level LQ.

Chapter Sixteen

Before Maligar could get his bearings, or even get used to his new patchwork of a body, the lumbering golem bore down on him. Herndon was in attack mode, eyes blazing with white heat, mouth set in a vicious snarl. Pitching forward, he lifted his massive arms and descended on Maligar.

Like a rock slide, the golem could have mangled and crushed any normal creature. Maligar merely thrust him aside with a shock wave of energy. The animate hulk, arms churning in circles, teetered and stumbled backward. His thudding footfalls reverberated through the floor.

Without the golem blocking his line of vision, Maligar realized he was in a foyer. A pocket door was partially open in the opposite wall, several meters from the lift. Beyond it laid a spacious antechamber.

Maligar swept toward the opening. Just as he reached it, a monstrous tug at his back pulled him up short and sent pain knifing across the span of his shoulders and into his trunk. Hollow bones snapped like straws. His skin seemed to be rupturing. Roaring, he swiveled his head to the side. Herndon's hands had a vise grip on the wings that had sprouted on either side of his spine.

As Maligar writhed to free himself, the golem's mass shifted forward and sent them both crashing to the floor. This time, Maligar could not blast the creature away. He knew instinctively that as long as Herndon held fast to him, the golem would tear away part of his body.

"Your Lady calls," Maligar said. The guttural rumble of his voice, an alien sound, startled him at first. "Can you not hear

her?”

The ploy proved effective, if only for a moment. But a moment was all Maligar needed. As soon as the small crack in Herndon’s concentration caused him to relax his grip, Maligar thrust the golem off his back. Moving like the light and heat cast by a fire, he leaped to his feet and grabbed Herndon by the upper arms. The leaded glass windows of the antechamber beckoned him. He lifted the golem over his head.

“Abomination,” he pronounced like a thundering torrent, “be gone!”

With an outpouring of fury mightier than any flex of muscle, he heaved the filthy creature through the nearest bank of windows. The shattered glass shot into the night like a splintered rainbow and fell to the courtyard below.

As soon as Herndon’s body flew from Maligar’s hands, his strength began to wane. He wobbled backward and hit a wall. His neck felt shorn of bone, plucked clean of tendons. Slumping, he took labored breaths and waited.

The transformation that had taken place just minutes before reversed itself. Morphing back to human form was always a faster and less wrenching process, like water seeking its own level rather than being forced to run contrary to nature. Within seconds, Tole lifted and shook his drooping head. He stood, stretched his limbs, and approached the gap in the antechamber’s far wall. Herndon, in his agitation over the intruder, had opened and charged through both sliding doors without closing them behind him. Tole was glad. The oversight would spare him the trouble of finding the doors’ trigger mechanisms, thus saving him precious time.

The innermost room was obviously part of Keryss’s suite. Tole saw the same round, oversize bed the Celestine had revealed. Its abundant pillows and covers were in disarray.

Faint light fanned above evenly spaced wall sconces. A broad mirror in a fancy, dark frame -- wrought iron, most likely -- stood along one arc of the mattress and served as its headboard.

"Tole."

Heart jumping at the soft utterance of his name, Tole peered into the dimness surrounding the bed. "Ridley?" It was impossible to make out any distinct shape in the tangled heap of bedding.

"Here, on the floor. To your left."

Ridley's voice sounded a bit weak, but, bless him, he was still alive. Flooded with relief, Tole took three steps forward and dropped to his knees. "Are you all right?"

"I'd be a lot better if I could get away from here."

"*Goddamn*, what has she done to you?" Tole studied the man who lay flat on his back, looking for signs of injury. He saw none, but that didn't necessarily mean Ridley was hale and healthy.

A pale grid of threads covered Ridley's naked body, turning his flesh into a monochromatic mosaic. The threads also secured him to the floor. Gingerly, Tole touched the vampire's forehead. His fingertips nearly adhered to the webbing. A few sticky, viscous strings pulled away as he withdrew his hand. Within a second or two, they broke free of his skin and snapped back into place.

"It isn't all that taut," Ridley said. "Look." He pulled up his arms and legs, shoving them against the covering. "I just can't seem to break the filaments, though. They're elastic, but they're tough. And they sting a little."

"I'll break them," Tole said. "I'll free you. Try to relax. Keryss isn't around."

"Where is she?"

"In the Interzone, I think. Looking for Win and Zee."

"But why --"

"I'll explain later. If the silk burns, don't move against it. Just be still."

Whether the net was an impromptu binding, meant to keep Ridley immobile while Keryss met with her visitors, or the beginnings of a death-dealing cocoon, it inflamed Tole. Heat again rose within him. More aches blossomed beneath his skin. Just the sight of his once and perhaps future lover, trapped and helpless, had summoned his outrage. Another full-blown manifestation might not be possible, but fierce anger and determination were enough to draw out at least a portion of his otherworldly power.

His eyes watered. The skin of his hands prickled. *Something* was changing.

Tole scraped his fingertips between Ridley's supine body and the web's anchor points. His nails, now long and thick and sharp, glowed a dull orange-red. Shriveling, the silk melted beneath his touch.

This was, he knew, no ordinary heat. It was a supernatural flare-up meant to work against his adversaries. His nails would not harm Ridley. Comfortable in this certainty, Tole pulled his fingers over the vampire's body.

"Thank God," Ridley whispered. "I don't know what the hell you three are, but thank God for it." Released, Ridley fumbled to his feet and began brushing away the seared remnants of the net.

Tole helped at first, but skimming his hands over Ridley's nude body wasn't advisable. A different kind of heat, entirely human, was rapidly displacing the supernatural surge. He stopped, crossed his arms over his chest, and contented himself with watching. His forehead dipped as his gaze lit on

Ridley's chest.

Tole didn't see the platinum pendant that usually adorned the fine plumes of black hair. "What happened to your amulet?"

"I'm not sure." Ridley shook his hands to the side, trying to dislodge any remaining flecks of fiber. "I think it was ripped off during that struggle two nights ago."

"Well, you seem vigorous," Tole said.

"That's because I've been well fed." Ridley swiped his hands over his hair. "She's kept me strong so I could service her. But she's not the one I want to service." Grabbing Tole's face, Ridley gave him a fervid kiss.

The sudden contact was startling and acutely arousing. Already primed by the sight of Ridley's nude body, Tole's cock instantly responded. But this wasn't the time for indulgence. "We have to go," he said against Ridley's mouth. They continued to feather kisses against each other's lips. "We have to get out of the Tower. Fast."

The vampire withdrew. "What did you do to Herndon? I heard a lot of commotion in the antechamber."

"I flung him out the fucking window."

Ridley lifted an eyebrow. "Impressive. I won't bother asking how you managed that. Too bad it wasn't enough to kill him."

Tole frowned. "How do you know?" That was one hell of a heave he'd given Herndon, and between the shattered glass and the multistory fall...

"Listen to me," Ridley said. "There's only one way to do in a golem. You might've stunned or damaged him, but he'll be ba --"

As if his words were a portent, the floor shook beneath their feet. Tole's gaze swung to the doorway just as

Herndon's dark bulk blocked the incoming light. One of his arms looked askew; his head was cocked at an odd angle; his hips and legs, jarred out of alignment, gave him a new and awkward center of gravity. Still, none of these alterations seemed seriously to impede his movement. Propelled by murderous intent, he barreled forward like a cannonball.

"Keep him occupied," Ridley murmured. "I'll put him down."

Although the danger they were in wired every fiber in Tole's body, there wasn't enough time for a complete shift. He dashed around the room like a madman, hoping to keep Herndon disoriented enough to buy Ridley and him some time.

But time for what? And where was Ridley?

Just as the golem gained enough momentum and focus to zero in on Tole, a shadow streaked past the upper portion of the golem's face. He staggered. The shooting ribbon made another pass across Herndon's forehead. Reeling almost gracefully, he dropped to the floor. Just fell like an insensate glob of clay collapsing beneath the hands of an inept potter.

Ridley, who seemed to materialize out of the air, stood over him. After staring at the golem for a moment, he said, "That was a bit tricky, but I guess I got the right letter."

Dumbfounded, Tole walked from the other side of the bed. "You did what?"

Ridley squatted beside the golem and peered more closely at the creature's face. He briefly flipped up a hand, forefinger pointed, as he glanced at Tole. "*A/ef*, the first of the three Hebrew letters inscribed on his forehead. Reading from right to left, of course, the original word was 'truth' or 'God's truth' -- *emet*. Rubbing out the first letter results in *met* or 'death.' That, my friend, is how one deactivates a golem."

Tole continued to gape at the lifeless figure, which had already begun to crumble. Clay drying to dust. He looked at Ridley. Nothing fragile looking about *him*. Not anymore. His balls and cock hung, lusciously full, between his trim, splayed legs. It was impossible not to be tantalized by the sight.

Slapping his thighs, Ridley straightened. "Told you I was in divinity school," he said with a smile. "As soon as I saw this thing, I was hoping I could put my Judaic studies to good use."

"I'll be fucked," Tole whispered.

Humility with a touch of fondness crept through Ridley's expression. He cupped Tole's forearm and slowly slid his hand down its length. "I couldn't have done it without your help. We can talk later about how you found me. Right now, I just want to thank you. And tell you how much I admire you."

The statement was another first. It seemed every other thing Ridley said or did jolted Tole. "Well, I couldn't sit back and do nothing." Trying to take the personal element out of this mission, he quickly added, "Win and Zee felt the same way."

Ridley walked to an ornately carved wardrobe and pulled out some clothing. His own, apparently. "They felt *exactly* the same way?"

Tole's flush deepened. He doubted the feeling had a supernatural origin. "This isn't the time or place to analyze motives. We have to leave."

He tried not to watch Ridley dress, but his wayward gaze kept sliding up and to the left, in the vampire's direction. Bastard really did have a tantalizing body -- firm and long-limbed, with a nice swell of lily white, beautifully defined ass.

"Where are we going?" Ridley asked, fully facing Tole

now.

“To the northeast of Pitchfork Bind.”

“Why there?”

“Because an extraordinary event should be taking place,
and we have tickets to ringside seats.”

Chapter Seventeen

The parted drapes of thick rust-and-black brocade didn't draw Tole's attention, but the balcony behind them did. He balked at making use of it, even though he knew that course was unavoidable.

Ridley knew it too. "I'm going to have to take us there," he said. "Descending the Tower down to street level would be stupid. We'd certainly be intercepted."

Tole thought of the broken glass in the courtyard. It was bound to alert some Tower functionary that all was not right on Level LQ. In fact, he wondered how the deformed golem had gotten back up here without being noticed.

"Do you feel up to it?" he asked Ridley.

"I'm fine, now that I don't have that toxic silk clinging to skin and I'm not draining all my energy either fighting or fucking that woman. I tried to be domineering with her. Believe it or not, I think it spared me some abuse." Using both hands, Ridley flung the curtains aside. After opening the triple-glazed doors, likely impenetrable by any projectile, he glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "You're stalling, aren't you."

Tole took a deep, fortifying breath and came forward. After all that had happened and what could *still* happen, his qualms about taking off with Ridley were pretty damned ridiculous. "Just don't loosen your hold on me."

"Never." Ridley securely folded his arms around Tole's waist, pressing their bodies together. "You didn't let go of me, so I won't let go of you."

* * * * *

Tole wasn't as discomposd by the high-speed flight -- or relocation, as vampires often called it -- as he'd been the first time. Maybe he was more prepared. Or maybe his joy over finding Ridley alive eclipsed all other feelings and sensations. Whatever the case, it soon ceased to matter. By the time they got where they needed to be, there was already activity in the distance. Delicate strains of music and light, tinkling laughter drifted through the darkness.

Since Ridley hadn't known precisely where they were going, he'd landed in the center of the Pitchfork Bind crossroads. "What's happening over there?" he asked softly, peering toward the northeast. "I can see a glow through the trees, near the ground."

Tole couldn't see it, but he didn't have a vampire's vision. "That's our destination. Come on. We just have to make sure we're not seen or heard."

"Shit," Ridley whispered. "Isn't that where --"

"Yes. The faeries are dancing. It's May Eve."

"Why do we need to be here?"

"We don't," Tole said, "aside from keeping an eye on Win and Zee. But I think we're going to enjoy this show."

Ridley lifted his brows. "I have no idea what you're talking about, but I do trust you." He circled an arm around Tole's waist. "If we have to be inconspicuous, our approach better be stealthy."

With that, the vampire rose off the ground, carrying Tole as if he were nothing more than a handkerchief in a coat pocket. They floated silently toward the faery ring.

* * * * *

What an enchantingly lovely sight -- a flurry of luminescent, winged creatures, prettier by far than any human, flitting about like multicolored sparks. Rarely were they still.

They joined hands and skipped in small circles. They broke into pairs and flew into exuberant renditions of the quadrille or gavotte, weaving between stalks of grape hyacinth. Some pranced around on tiny white horses, sporting pennants made from blades of grass. Others clambered playfully over a toad, as if it were a rock, and slid through its ridges and warts on wildflower petals. The music, too, was bewitching -- a sweet porridge of flutes and finger cymbals and daintily plucked strings.

When a breeze soughed through the clearing, many of the revelers paused and raised their arms to it, as if they could catch this breath, or shook their heads so the current could stream through their hair. Some females occasionally lifted their gossamer gowns, perhaps trying to gather moonlight.

Mesmerized, Keryss watched. She didn't know what she wanted more -- to join the creatures or to eat them.

She dropped to the ground from the linden tree in which she'd been perched and crept closer. It was then she saw Will and Simon, the alleged hybrids who had a touch of fae in their blood. No wonder they were so eager to be gone from her Tower. They had a family reunion to attend.

Excitement scudded over Keryss's nerves, making them vibrate like the lute strings being plied below by some tiny hand.

The men had both stripped off their clothing. Simon, the well-muscled one with the carmine hair, was stretched out on his side, head propped on his upraised hand. He smiled as he watched the wee people cavort, but he made no move to interrupt their celebration.

Keryss very much liked his dreamy, dimpled smile...and liked his body even more. The scintillating gleam surrounding the faeries caressed Simon's contours, highlighting them,

licking them smooth. His plump cock drooped most enticingly over his right thigh. Occasionally, one of the fae swooped over to it and slid down its length, as if it were a banister, or tiptoed along the rim of the head. Each tease elicited a soft chortle from Simon.

But Will, ineffably beautiful Will -- reclining on his back, one leg drawn up and arms casually crossed beneath his head -- got most of the attention. Faeries scampered across his chest and down his belly, tumbled through the dark froth above his cock. They continually lifted strands of gleaming, curling hair from his head, likely relishing the feel of it, and lightly bounced off his sumptuous, smiling lips.

By all that was sacred and profane, how Keryss *craved* these delectable men. The prospect of capturing them, and the knowledge she had already secured a luscious vampire, were all that kept her from scooping up the winged tidbits and turning them into a banquet.

Then she remembered the selkie skin. Where was it? Had Will or Simon taken it home and locked it up?

As Keryss peered at the men, she noticed they weren't lying on the grass. Something was beneath their bodies. She lifted herself up and drifted closer to the gathering. At the same moment she identified the blanket on which they reclined, Simon sat up and craned his neck to look past the frolicking faeries.

"What a nice surprise! Hello, Keryss. Care to join us?"

Will folded to a sitting position. Upon seeing her, he smiled. "Sorry we had to leave so abruptly, but you can see why. Our cousins asked us to attend their celebration."

The faeries immediately disappeared. They were still around, Keryss suspected, but had made themselves invisible. They often did that when confronted by outsiders. She wasn't one of them and hadn't been invited to the party.

Except...now she *had* been invited. The men wanted her. Those gorgeous and power-packed hybrids, lazing about on the selkie skin, had asked her to come to them. In her most delirious dreams, Keryss could not have devised such a scene. It was beyond perfect.

"Don't fly over here," Will said in a creamy voice. "Walk." He cupped his handsome cock, thumb languidly stroking the tip. "I like the way your breasts move beneath your dress."

Donning her most fetching smile, Keryss put one foot in front of the other and paced through the dewy grass.

Her progress was abruptly halted. Something, or many things, yanked at her hair and clothing and fingers. Her balance became tenuous. She began moving in a circle, faster and faster, against her will, then twirling like a top set on an invisible track, a slick groove from which her feet could not escape. Vertigo overtook her. She felt as if her body were disintegrating, her mind dissolving. Earth and moon pulled at her as fae energy spun her around and around. She wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere. She wasn't...

Creeping out of the small copse in which they'd secreted themselves, Tole and Ridley exchanged tentative glances.

"They lured her into the faery ring," Ridley whispered. His astonishment gave way to jubilation as a grin ruffled his cheeks. "They lured her into the goddamned faery ring!"

Tole nodded. "It isn't a good place to be on May Eve." His spirit ballooned at the accomplishment and leaped when he felt Ridley's pure happiness.

"Is she really gone?" Ridley asked. "Will she stay gone?"

"Well, if she does emerge, which isn't likely considering how the fae feel about her, she won't be in possession of her faculties."

"You're incredible." Shaking his head, Ridley skimmed a

hand over Tole's cheek.

"I didn't do it alone."

Ridley's gaze continued to caress Tole's face. "You're incredible," he repeated more emphatically.

They hurried forward to join Win and Zee, making sure to skirt the faery ring, which was marked by a circle of toadstools. The fungi had become dully phosphorescent. Tole figured either the fae were making its boundaries obvious to their human visitors, or the ring's absorption of Keryss had caused the green glow.

Watching them approach, Win and Zee grinned like lunatics.

"Shit, I have to get dressed," Win said, hugging himself. He did look like he was covered in chicken skin. "I couldn't get a stiffy out here if my life depended on it."

"You don't have to worry about getting a stiffy until you get home," Tole said. He wasn't only thinking of Pablo, he was thinking of Win's proximity to Ridley. "Nice final bit of bait, though, showing her what you've got."

Win patted his crotch after he closed his fly. "Well, you know, anything for the cause."

"Bullshit," Tole said. He launched a good-natured gibe. "You just like touching it."

"It's nice to see both of you." Zee smiled as he slipped into his jeans. "We hated leaving you behind." He turned his sparkling brown eyes on Ridley. "You're looking fit, Mr. Barron. Thank God Keryss hadn't gotten around to...you know."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't have looked so good by morning." Ridley picked two shirts off the ground and held them out to the half-naked men. Each took one. "I think she was fixing to swaddle me at sunrise."

Tole's eyes widened. "You didn't tell me that."

"We had our hands full dealing with the net and then the golem."

"Fascinating. I can't wait to hear the whole story," Win said. He bounced up from a partially buried rock, where he'd been sitting to put on his socks and boots. "But we can do a complete debriefing tomorrow. Right now I just want to get home. So let's go to the" -- he abruptly cut himself off -- "let's find our transportation and head back to Regenerie. Sorry, Rid, but you're on your own now."

Win was obviously referring to the Tube, which was how they were getting back to Regenerie, but mentioning it in front of Ridley would have piqued his curiosity and led to unwelcome questions. The vampire still didn't know that Tole, Win, and Zee were the Triumvirate.

Tole slid him a surreptitious glance, wondering if he should ask to fly back in the vampire's arms. That not only seemed presumptuous, though, it would also invite more of Win's grilling about the nature of his and Ridley's relationship.

Tole didn't *know* the nature of his and Ridley's relationship. He didn't even know if they'd continue to see each other. Vampires were generally capricious and self-centered creatures whose allegiances never ran very deep.

"Did Pablo arrange to have the hovercraft picked up?" Tole asked Win, primarily to redirect his chaotic thoughts.

"Yeah, first thing in the morning." Win lifted the selkie skin from the ground, brushed it off, and carefully folded it. "Oh, by the way," he said to Ridley, "the fae found your amulet. We let them keep it in return for their cooperation. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'm hoping I won't need it anymore." Ridley

rocked back on his heels. "So..." Hands in pockets, he pulled both halves of his coat out to the sides, then let them fall back into place. "We'll meet tomorrow evening, then? At Guardian?"

"Yeah, come by after you feed," Zee said. "We'll be there."

Win shrugged on his jacket and grabbed the backpack with its precious cargo. "Don't make it *too* late. Okay?"

Pulling his lips between his teeth, Ridley nodded. He slid a glance at Tole, then looked at the ground. "I don't know how to tell you what I'm feeling," he said. "I can't seem to come up with the right words."

The statement caused a spike in Tole's attention, and his pulse rate, until he realized Ridley wasn't speaking to him alone.

The vampire looked at all three of them. "I guess thanks will have to suffice for now. My gratitude is inexpressible. And boundless."

Smiling, Zee clapped Ridley on the shoulder and shook his hand. Win briefly gripped his other shoulder. Tole did nothing.

"Our pleasure," Win said. "Glad you're all right, man."

Win and Zee began making their way to the Tube entrance, the darkness gradually swallowing their retreating forms. Tole balked for a moment, feeling stymied and self-conscious. He wanted to say something but didn't know what to say.

The rescue attempt had seemed so noble, Tole had gotten caught up in the selfless, abstract chivalry of it. He didn't have to face his feelings when he took on the challenge and its attendant risks. He never had to face any feelings when he felt driven to do the right thing. In this case, a man

had to be saved from a dire situation. A life was at stake. Action had to be taken.

No thought required.

Until now.

Ridley wasn't a stranger Tole could pat on the back and wish well. He couldn't just walk away, proud of his feat and comfortable in his emotional neutrality, and never look back. He and this man shared a bit of history that had promised to expand as time went on.

But expand into what? Tole wondered. How far did he want to take this thing? How far *could* he take it, given his demonic volatility, and how far could Ridley take it, given his vampiric drives?

"Just don't loosen your hold on me."

"Never. You didn't let go of me, so I won't let go of you."

Unable to justify his dawdling, Tole finally murmured, "See you tomorrow," and turned in the direction Win and Zee had taken.

Ridley caught him by the arm.

Hyperalert, Tole stared at him. *You can't become attached to a freakin' vampire.*

"Are you tired?" Ridley asked.

"Actually, I'm more wired than tired," Tole said on a nervous laugh.

"Would you mind meeting me at Hellven? I have something for you. I have to stop at Sang first, but I'll be there shortly. If you'll be there."

You can't...

"Why Hellven?" Tole asked.

"You'll know when you get there. If you don't want to show up, I'll understand. I suspect it's been a hectic couple of days

for you.”

Tole was intrigued, but he found no clues to Ridley’s motives in his expression. Awaiting an answer, the vampire simply watched him. He certainly looked no worse for whatever wear he’d sustained at Keryss’s hands.

Count to five, then say what you’re most inclined to say. It was the best way to overcome indecision.

“All right. I’ll meet you at Hellven.”

Chapter Eighteen

Reproductions of antique street lamps pooled their soft light on Hellven's paved paths. Small spotlights, set lower, illuminated the park's scattering of ponds and waterfalls. A sophisticated version of the old camera obscura caused a real-time image of the moon to hang in the dome of the false sky, surrounded by a peppering of stars. Like the machinery of any expert illusion, the system of reflectors that pulled the cosmos underground was well concealed. Even the air smelled and tasted right -- a dash of earthiness, a piquant sprinkling of pine, a pinch of narcissus. All around, frogs chirruped and insects darted. Just as persistently as they would in the wild.

The Triumvirate was unabashedly proud of Hellven Station. It gave Undercity residents a chance to escape to the great outdoors without having to venture into the Interzones.

A bat swooped over Tole's head. He smiled, thinking of Ridley, although the vampire would likely take offense at the connection. The man despised stereotypes.

Tole, who'd taken his time getting there, didn't know exactly where they were to meet. Hellven was sizable, with many natural features, and most of the area was sunk in shadow. But a vampire had no problem sniffing out a presence. In recent days, Ridley had gotten a good noseful of him. The thought drew another smile as Tole meandered, waiting for a greeting.

He'd already called Win and Zee to tell them he still had "things to do" before returning to Guardian Station. Both were on their way to bed. Win was surely eager for a

welcome-home session with Pablo, and Zee planned on venturing out at daybreak to see Mirandi.

Life for all of them was good. For the time being.

“Hi. You made it.”

Tole looked up to his left. Graceful as a gazelle, Ridley jumped from a large rock where he'd been perched and landed silently in front of Tole.

Whether fueled by hunger or gladness, by the intimacy of this meeting or the romantic setting, Tole's desire for him immediately swelled. They stepped into each other's arms as easily as Win and Pablo must have embraced when Win got home. Ridley felt cool -- he almost always felt cool -- but his body was firm and his arms, strong and sure. His hair tangled with Tole's as their cheeks came together. Their hands explored the landscape of each other's back.

Cupping Tole's ass, Ridley nudged his lover's crotch into contact with the plank of his lower abdomen. Tole's hardening cock pushed against it.

“Damn, you arouse quickly,” Ridley murmured, excitement tightening around the amusement in his voice.

“That's no news flash, Ridley.” Tole began kissing his face. He needed to put his mouth on someone. His tongue traced the whorls of Ridley's ear. His teeth caught the lobe. His lips dragged across the whisker-rough slope of Ridley's jaw and then, without lifting, moved up to his mouth.

They spoke between the urgent crushes of their lips and thrusts of their tongues. Here, Ridley was warm. Warm and so soft, but with the subtle strength that infused all his movements.

“We have to...save this,” Ridley said, kissing around the words. “I mean it.”

“If you...wanted to save it...you shouldn't have” -- Tole

lowered himself by an inch or two and ground his cock against the dense roll in Ridley's trousers --"awakened the gilded stallion."

Tole intensified the kiss, both his arms folding over Ridley's head and holding it in place. He didn't want to release Ridley's mouth. The more his lips pressed and slid against it and opened to it, the more ferocious Ridley's passion became. The vampire's hand came up and gripped Tole's jaw, fingers mining the bone. He caught Tole's tongue between his teeth before giving it a firm suck. Panting, he pulled back.

"Later," he whispered.

The slight tremor of restraint in Ridley's fingers transferred to Tole's body, stringing tight his muscles and nerves. The command excited him as much as their contact had. He liked rising to a challenge, meeting force of will with force of will.

Later. Oh yeah. Let the tension build...and then erupt.

But there was likely more to it than that.

Ridley's grip relaxed by small degrees. "I want you so much I could throw you to the ground. But I don't simply crave you, Tole, and for me that means first things first."

Tole's stomach fluttered. He understood. The instant comprehension was both exhilarating and terrifying. They'd started to care for each other, and with caring came a shift in priorities. And *that* was the "more."

Ridley's hands glided down Tole's arms. "Impetuosity can open doors. What lies behind those doors might or might not be worth exploring. Usually it isn't."

"But when it is?" Tole asked, feeling breathless.

Ridley smiled. "That's when it's time to master the art of crescendo."

"I hope I have the patience."

"I do too." Ridley grew more serious as he studied Tole's face. "I want you. I don't want just to use you. Maybe we'll be able to ease out of the shallow end of the pool."

"Maybe," Tole said. Then the cynic in him spoke up, or the coward. For all he knew, they were twins. "Or maybe not."

The picture of stoicism, Ridley cocked his head. "Or maybe not. It doesn't hurt to find out, does it?"

Tole broke their eye contact. "I wouldn't know." What had Win said? That it hurt "*only when I'm not with him.*" And Pablo wasn't even a vampire.

Yeah, it was going to hurt. Often.

Ridley took his hand. It felt peculiar to Tole, having another man's fingers laced affectionately through his. But he didn't resist. He had no desire to.

"Over here," Ridley said more brightly. "I told you I had something for you."

They circled the high rock on which Ridley had kept his vigil. Another path, more dimly lit and lined with shrubbery, led into a deeper recess of the park. Ahead and off to the left, wavering light tore a hole in the darkness.

A fire.

Although small, it snapped merrily within a shallow pit of dirt and gravel. There were several such pits at Hellven. All smoke the fire released would be drawn directly into a specialized portion of the ventilation system.

"Have a seat." Ridley gestured toward a couple of stout tree stumps that had smooth backrests carved into them.

A short log lay outside the campfire pit. Two long sticks rested at either end of it.

Tole's face broke into a grin so wide, it made his cheeks

ache. He blinked as his eyes filled. This time, there was no staunching the rise.

A bag of marshmallows hunkered between the sticks.

"I resisted the idea at first," Ridley said, his smile nearly matching Tole's. "Until I realized it had potential."

Tole coughed out a strangled laugh. Tears clotted his throat. He swallowed them away, afraid if they leaked from his eyes they'd be black. Fuck, he didn't know. He'd never wept before. Not since he was a youngster, anyway.

"That's...so sweet," he tried saying. The syllables were but a cracked shell of a sound.

"Selfish, actually. When I was in Keryss's Tower, the thought of this was the only thing that brought me some joy." Ridley squeezed Tole's thigh, then twisted to the right and hoisted a bottle into the air.

"Bourbon?" Tole asked, squinting at it.

"What other drink goes with roasted marshmallows?"

"Lemonade."

"Oops, sorry. Next time I'll get it right."

Tole reached for the bag, soft as a goose-down pillow. He wanted to bury his face in it and let loose his tears, black or not. But what was the point of crying when one didn't know the reason for it?

"Go ahead," Ridley said, "dive into them. Show me how a connoisseur does it. This is my inauguration, you know."

Tole pulled open the bag. Trapped air escaped with a faint *poof*. Mine too, he thought...then stopped thinking about it.

He lifted a stick for Ridley and impaled two marshmallows, dead center, with its tip.

THE END

K. Z. Snow

K. Z. Snow is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a gleaming troll of a Wurlitzer jukebox ("good night, Irene"). Nine years of higher education, resulting in 2-1/2 English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

K. Z. has been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, a Girl Scout, a junker, a fag hag, a gardener, an editor, a saxophone/bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. The Dells, where her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.