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EXPLORING
SAVAGE PLACES

KZ Snow

**UTOPIA X:
EXPLORING SAVAGE
PLACES**

K. Z. Snow

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Utopia X: Exploring Savage Places

K. Z. Snow

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
870 Market St, Suite 1201
San Francisco CA 94102-2907
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-959-1
Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Venessa Giunta
Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Part One

The Sand Castle and the Shark

Chapter One

"I remember waiting in the dark and wishing I could see the stars, but the city's lights had washed them from the sky. It was June, a sultry evening. The air felt like molten velvet against my skin.

"I sat near the line of rocks called Boar Knuckles with a lantern at my side. There was a winking speck of light above me, and then another, much lower. Fireflies would be my stars.

"He made me wait. Wanted me to think it through, I guess, and have a chance to bolt if I changed my mind. But that wouldn't happen. I had no thoughts at all. The night had entranced me, and I was numbly content.

"Invisible creatures moved near the ground. Their rustling and pattering never got too close, though, as if I'd cast a perimeter. Maybe the creatures sensed what I was. Or maybe they sensed his approach.

"I didn't. He was silent, undetectable. All I heard was my name. At first it seemed the wind had spoken it through the oak leaves. Then he separated himself from the darkness. My heart did a little jump when he stepped forward.

"I said hello as I glanced up at him, hoping I sounded relaxed. He looked like an underworld prince who'd just risen from a hidden passage between tangles of thick roots. His hair was long then, and black as it is now, black as tar. Faint moonlight smudged a gleam here and there on his hair and on his features.

"I'd seen him a dozen times, of course. Probably more. But tonight he struck me as magisterial and mysterious, with an edgy sensuality I hadn't consciously noticed before.

"'You're sure you want this?' he asked.

"I got to my feet. 'Yes,' I said, wanting it even more as I stared at him.

“‘Then get undressed,’ he said. ‘And decide where you’d like me to enter you.’

“I took off my clothes and asked if there was a spot he preferred. His eyes moved downward, over my body, and he smiled without showing his teeth. Maybe he didn’t want to frighten me. We were too far into it now. I’d invited his attention, so I was at his mercy.

“‘I only have a preference when I’m particularly drawn to someone,’ he said. ‘Otherwise, the wrist or inner elbow will do.’

“God, his voice was so low. It seemed to crawl over my skin and lick it into gooseflesh. His gaze was both dark and bright and never left my face. He didn’t say how much or how little he was drawn to me.

“I felt my cock start to swell.

“‘I’d drink from your lips if I could,’ he said, ‘but that would hurt you. Maim you, too, I suspect.’ He paused, as if he were thinking over the possibilities. ‘I wish I had a needle with me. Some of us, you know, can pierce with a fingernail. It’s much less...invasive.’

“It was getting difficult for him to speak. Or, rather, to enunciate clearly. I found that unsettling. After all, I was used to him being so suave and articulate, so casually droll.

“He lurched toward me without another word. I glimpsed the moon over his shoulder as his fingers speared into my hair. His hands felt so strong, I knew he could crush my skull if he wanted to. I heard him draw in a breath, caught an odd whiff of cinnamon, felt my head tilt...

“And then came the burn, deep and searing, as if a brand had torn through my neck into my chest. The hot iron seemed to melt and charge through my bloodstream, through my nerves and muscles and bones. It happened so quickly...

“I can’t remember much else, except the explosion of arousal following that plunge of blue heat. My whole body was gripped and tugged by it, I swear—navel, kneecaps, the skin between my toes. Every cubic centimeter, right down to my organs. I have no idea how or if I moved, what sounds I made.

“By the time he withdrew, my cock was rigid as a fire hose under pressure. But nothing jetted out. My balls were aching knots.

“I felt a little crazed. I thought I’d lose my mind completely if I didn’t find relief.

“‘You have to take care of me,’ I said, and he assured me he would, that the fun was far from over. That’s when *he* got undressed—”

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Tole said, snapping off Win’s narrative like a twig.

The sound of Tole’s voice jolted Zee. It broke the spell Win had cast. He glanced at Tole, who sat forward in the recliner, his head lowered and forearms on his thighs. He probably hadn’t moved since Win had begun speaking. It was hard to judge what he was thinking and feeling, but Zee could sense a roiling mass of reactions beneath his immobility.

Pablo was, as usual, on the couch with Win. "I was starting to get turned on," he murmured, sounding disappointed. The heel of his hand made a subtle, telling push at his crotch.

"Tough shit," said Tole. He got up from the recliner. "Let Scheherazade turn you on in private."

Win looked up at him. "For chrissake, Tole, you're the one who wanted to hear about it!"

"I just wanted to know what the bite was like. I didn't ask for a blow-by-blow of the aftermath."

"The 'aftermath' is part of the experience, bud. I'm sorry, but if you're going to be romantically involved with a vampire, you'd better get used to this shit."

"Fuck you, Win." Tole strode to the dining area. "Come on," he said to the other three men. "We have work to do. The campfire storytelling hour is over."

"And nary a marshmallow to soften the impact of the tale," Win said with a grin.

Zee sighed. Why the hell did those two have to keep poking at one another? "Win," he said, "just shut up." He, too, rose from the chair where he'd been seated and ambled to the dining table.

He felt bad for Tole. Ridley, the vampire in Win's narrative, was now Tole's lover—the most significant lover he'd ever had. Although Ridley and Win had only spent one night together and their brief liaison was long past, that one night had apparently been a scorcher. It couldn't have made Tole feel good to hear about it...especially since *he* had never experienced his lover's erotic bite.

Once the four men were assembled around the dining table, which served as their conference room, Tole rapped on the tabletop with his knuckles. "The meeting of the Triumvirate of the Utopian Metroplex of Regenerie shall now come to order."

A pretty grandiose opening, Zee thought, for such an unlikely trio of urban leaders. They weren't really a quartet; Pablo didn't count. As important as his position had become, he wasn't one of the Powers.

Win, sitting across from Tole, extended an arm toward him. He touched Tole's still-fisted hand. "Hey, I'm sorry. I know how you feel about Ridley."

Tole snatched his hand away. "You don't know *shit* about how I feel. Just drop it."

For a change, Win remained silent. Zee was glad. Not only did they have metroplex business to attend to, he had personal issues of his own to deal with. "Let's start with Xanandru," he said, before his mind had a chance to wander.

Pablo lifted a forefinger. "Wait. Clear this up for me. I thought that metroplex was called Xandrinu."

"Not anymore." Tole reached for his laptop, which sat at the end of the table, and pulled it toward him.

"Haven't you come across it in the database?" Win asked Pablo, gently, of course. He never got angry with Pablo. The two of them were madly in love.

"No," Pablo said. "I haven't had occasion to look up Xanwhatever. It's halfway across the continent, and Regenerie doesn't have much diplomatic or commercial interaction with it."

"We have *some* interaction, but it's minimal." Tole, who'd activated his computer, touched its screen. He spoke without looking away from it. "The name change came about after Pacemia and Lorenzo, two of the original three Powers, got married and relinquished their positions. Only Andrew was left. So he sort of renamed the metroplex after himself. Now it's *Xanandru*."

"Sounds pretty egotistical," Pablo said.

"You don't know the half of it," Win told him. "From what we've heard, the guy's a real piece of work."

"And the metroplex is now a 'pleasureplex,'" Zee added.

Tole snorted. He continued to study his computer screen. "I'm surprised he didn't start calling himself Kubla Khan. 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree.'"

"Where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man..." Pablo shot Tole a self-conscious smile.

Tole, surprisingly enough, smiled back. "Pablo Xavier Creed, poet laureate of Regenerie."

"The lines are from a poem by Coleridge," Pablo told Win, who looked baffled. "Late eighteenth century. He was probably strung out when he wrote it."

"Not as strung out as Andrew, I'll bet," said Win. "We got a few reports from Pacemia and Lorenzo before they left."

"And we've read the impressions of other Powers who've had contact with Andrew," Zee reminded Win. "I just wish we had some firsthand knowledge of him."

Tole shocked them all by saying, "I have a little, but it's virtually meaningless. In relation to the subject at hand, anyway."

Win's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"Really," said Tole. "I knew him briefly when he was still planning to attend Omnitech. Brilliant guy but quirky as hell...and *very* self-centered. I had my first, uh...homoerotic experience with Andrew."

"He introduced you to the glories of cock?" Win asked, slipping a suggestive glance at Pablo. Although they'd been together for months, they still flirted shamelessly.

Smirking, Tole looked up from his computer screen. "Indeed he did. And for that particular loss of virginity I shall always be grateful to him."

"You never told us any of that," Zee said, wondering if this connection would benefit them. He doubted it; there were too many risks.

Tole shrugged. "Why should I have? Andrew and I were teenagers, he had a crush on me, I took advantage of it. We fumbled around—or rather *I* fumbled around,

because he already seemed to have some experience—and that was that. Our acquaintance was sporadic and superficial and didn't last more than a few months." Dropping the subject, which he obviously viewed as irrelevant, Tole turned back to his computer. "Here, I've got the reports up. Birth name, Andrew Franklin Galwick; EB name, Belius. Endowed and empowered with leadership...et cetera."

Zee reached for the other three computers. After sliding Win's and Pablo's toward them, he opened his own. All four men were silent as they read.

Most of the information they had on the Pleasureplex of Xanandru wasn't particularly alarming. Adult entertainment had long been its primary industry. People and Otherbeings traveled there from all over the continent to have fun sinning. Even the small manufacturing sector of Xanandru's economy centered on sensual delights. Regenerie imported nearly all its sex toys, bondage paraphernalia, and VR porn from Xanandru, in addition to various lubricants and stimulants.

X-land, as it was commonly called, was one unabashedly profane metroplex. Its goods and services put smiles on many faces—human and nonhuman. But it was the rumors of far shadier activities that had made the Triumvirate of Regenerie consider a trade embargo.

"This is some disturbing stuff," Win said, his gaze still following the text on the screen. "Sex slaves, including minors. Blood sport. All involving EBs, OBs, and humans." He turned up his eyes, which, at that moment, looked especially large and were an especially lustrous peacock blue.

Zee felt an upsurge of envy. It was difficult for him and Tole not to feel diminished by Win's beauty, at least occasionally. "These claims need to be investigated," he said. "The reports we have are unverified. We can't slap a trade embargo on a metroplex unless and until we're sure they deserve it. Regenerie's stature in the intermetro community would seriously dwindle if we went off half-cocked."

"You're right," Tole said, looking up. "So how do we investigate? Use the Celestine? Appoint a team to travel to X-land? Try to get in touch with Pacemia and Lorenzo?"

"Let's sleep on it," Win said. He yawned, underscoring his suggestion. "We've spent the whole week on that infrastructure tour. My ass is dragging." He gave Zee a questioning look. "Aren't you going to Villius tomorrow to check on Mirandi?"

Zee's stomach fluttered at the mention of it. "Yeah. I guess I should turn in, too. I'll be getting an early start."

"So let's pick this up tomorrow evening," Win slapped down the lid of his computer.

"I, uh...I might not be here," said Tole.

Wearing a half smile, Win dropped his chin to his hand. He huffed a laugh through his nose and shook his head.

Tole made a point of not looking at him.

Zee's mind was elsewhere.

"How about this," Win said. "We'll make tomorrow a free day. Get back to business after all of us are fucked out."

"Like *that's* ever going to happen," Pablo muttered.

Chapter Two

Mirandi, the reinstated High Lady of Villius, stood at a third-floor window of her sparkling white and blue villa and surveyed her dirty domain. Sunset pinkened the air as slabs of shadow blackened buildings and pavement. The Iron Metroplex was, at dusk, a pastel powder puff, shabby and soiled.

"It's going to take a lot of work," she said, dolefully shaking her head.

The High Lady's suite needed work, too. Empty as an eggshell, its only features thus far were a massive white mantel and an even more massive white bed overhung with a puffy, diaphanous canopy in shades of pink and orange. Soon, the High Lady claimed, her private quarters would be "erupting with plants and art and color."

Zee stood behind Mirandi, his arms around her waist. "You've already made good progress." His voice was muffled as he skimmed his face through her onyx hair, over to her rose-quartz ear, down to her ivory neck. Stone and bone—not very flattering comparisons from a woman's perspective. But Zee forgave himself. He was a pragmatic man, not a poet like Pablo.

As if in apology, he left a trail of light kisses as his mouth moved over the fair landscape he didn't know how to describe.

As if rejecting his apology, Mirandi tilted her head away from him. It seemed more like an evasion than an invitation. Lately, Zee got the impression she was dodging his advances. He lifted his face. Far be it for a gentleman to impose.

"This residence alone," he said, "is a big improvement over that ugly tower. I'm glad you had it razed." Unlinking his arms, he put his hands on her shoulders, waiting to see how their time alone together would play out. He felt uneasy.

"I wouldn't have been able to stand living in the Tower," Mirandi said. "It was a symbol of Keryss's villainy. Too many horrid things went on in there."

Now oblivious to Zee, she neither moved away nor covered one of his hands with her own. Rolling onto the balls of her feet, she craned forward to look at something, or someone, in the courtyard below. Zee glimpsed one corner of her mouth lift into a smile. He took his hands off her shoulders. He had his answer. Mirandi resettled onto her soles.

"Did you know," she said in a distracted way, "people are starting to call this building the Sand Castle? I think it's charming. Maybe we'll reshape the public's perception of Villius around that image." Her head swiveled to the left as she surveyed what little was visible of the cityscape. "The air purifiers do a wonderful job of clearing out the dust from the mines. Getting the whole system installed and running is our top priority. Then we'll put people to work cleaning the streets, the buildings..." Her voice faded.

We. Our. Zee couldn't help but notice the words. He couldn't help but connect them to Mirandi's private smile as she gazed into the courtyard. The plural pronouns and wistful expressions and, probably, her growing indifference to him were all related to Sebastian, the male hybrid who'd been assigned to Villius as coleader. The High Lady now had a Noble Man. Together, they were the new Powers of the Iron Metroplex.

Zee had seen him outside earlier, striding around the partially completed Sand Castle grounds, talking with contractors and workers, even carrying building supplies. Young and rugged, Sebastian had been here for five of the last fourteen weeks—the length of time Zee and Mirandi had been seeing each other—and his presence had increasingly monopolized her attention.

Zee considered sliding his hands up and around Mirandi's rib cage and cupping her breasts, fingering her nipples. How perverse, he thought vaguely, that the less interested she seemed in having sex with him, the more he wanted it. That realization alone quashed his urge. She'd either step out of his grasp or, if she did relent, would do so with that tawny-skinned buck in mind. Zee knew one or the other was inevitable.

He also knew something else was inevitable.

"Are you hoping he'll become your official consort?" Zee asked, his hands hanging, useless as rashers of bacon, at his sides.

"Hm?" Mirandi turned to face him. "What was that?"

"Sebastian."

"What about him?"

Stepping around her, Zee looked out the window. Sebastian was still down there. Maybe he'd intentionally positioned himself where he knew he could be ogled from the suite above.

His shoulders were broad and tanned, his hair a short rug of soft blond curls. Sun-bleached fluff, spangled with perspiration, glimmered above the neckline of his body-hugging shirt. Apollo, the sun god. Brawny, bronzed, and bewitching. Even Zee had to admit he was a looker.

He breathed out a terse laugh. Holy hell, how could he not have seen this coming? "What's his A-D-H ratio?" he asked, studying his rival with more clinical detachment.

No, not his rival. The victor. Zee realized he'd just conceded defeat. He'd only been able to see Mirandi once or twice a week since they'd met. She was essentially living in hiding then, in the Northwest Interzone. When she returned to Villius, which she'd done quite hastily after her cousin's disappearance, her and Zee's relationship never had a chance of evolving into a full-blown romance. She'd been far too busy and preoccupied, and Zee had his own metroplex to run.

Then Sebastian showed up.

Mirandi studiously refrained from turning again and approaching the window. "He's cherubim and human, mostly, but there's also fallen angel in his background." She smiled at these thoughts, although which part delighted her, Zee had no idea. Then she added, "What's most striking is that he's...quintessentially male."

Zee frowned. "What does *that* mean? I'm sure he's ambisexual like the rest of us."

"Of course. He just happens to be especially...you know...masterful."

He just happens to know how to flex and swagger, Zee silently amended. Masterful. The guy was no older than Pablo, who was twenty-five. He might've even been younger. Masterful came with age and experience, not posturing and wishful thinking. Still, the cherubim lineage was impressive. No denying that. And fallens were, in many ways, more interesting than demons.

"So," he asked, "did the two of you start fucking as soon as he got to Villius?" He didn't feel like pussyfooting around the issue. It was obvious his affair with Mirandi was fizzling toward extinction. Besides, Mirandi herself was plainspoken, so his bluntness shouldn't shock her.

An infinitesimal lift of the eyebrows was her only reaction. "No," she said, cool and distant as a polar breeze. "It was two days later." She'd never bothered mentioning to Lover Number One that she'd taken on a Lover Number Two.

Zee nodded. In retrospect, he could pick out the signs. Not that it mattered. They'd never agreed to exclusivity.

"Why don't you just introduce yourself to him?" Mirandi said. Zee had casually exposed her duplicity, and she sounded irked. "He's seen you enough from a distance. I know he's curious about you."

Tentatively, she touched Zee's arm. He wondered if she even remembered how his arms felt around her. His build, too, was admirable. Not that long ago, Mirandi had been impressed enough by his body to look forward to seeing him.

"Maybe," she went on, her tone more insinuating, "we could all...get cozy together."

She'd like that, no doubt. Two muscular men pleasuring her. Zee could hardly blame Mirandi for entertaining the idea. She had a robust appetite. Truth be told, he wouldn't mind enjoying a piece of Golden Boy. But —

"You know I can't get too close to Sebastian. Hybrids immediately recognize other hybrids." Zee wandered over to the bed, sat down, pulled a short red piece of seduction off the footboard. Looking at it, feeling it, smelling it made his horniness resurface. Despite the growing itch he couldn't scratch, he kept holding the filmy fabric. "Sebastian already knows which metroplex I'm from. He knows I've spent a lot of time with you. He'd probably put two and two together pretty quickly."

"Who cares?" Mirandi snapped. She pulled the garment out of Zee's hand and threw it onto the bed. "I recognized the three of you, and it ended up being for the best. So *tell* him you're one of the Powers of Regenerie. Let him meet Tole and Win, too, for that matter."

"You know I can't do that."

"Why? When is the great Triumvirate of the glorious Utopian Metroplex going to shed its cloak of secrecy and crawl out of its Undercity hovel? When is it going to enter the political light?"

"Never," Zee said quietly. This new, self-indulgent side of her was starting to vex him. "We like our humble lives. But there's something more important than our own preferences. Regenerie is the envy of every metroplex on this continent. Your own cousin wanted to take it over. And the biggest step in any invasion of any state is dispatching its leaders. Win, Tole, and I could be snuffed in a heartbeat if our true identities were known. Pablo could be in danger, too, and he's not even one of us."

Mirandi flopped down beside him. "Keryss wanted Regenerie because she was a sick woman with twisted needs. She was the exception among hybrids, not the rule."

Zee looked her straight in the eye. "How can you be sure?" He thought fleetingly of Andrew, the vain creature who ran that den of iniquity far to the southwest.

It wasn't easy for Zee to steel himself against Mirandi's persuasions. The still-dangling lure of a ménage with Sebastian, the too-close heap of silky lingerie, the simple nearness of the woman made him want to give in and say to hell with it. But he had responsibilities. Huge ones.

Since Mirandi had no rejoinder, Zee went on, trying to talk some sense into her. "It isn't just power-hungry hybrids we have to be wary of. Sometimes we wonder if we can trust Regenerie's human population. Vips in particular can get damned uppity. If they found the right organizer and pooled their resources, they could easily stage a coup."

He'd apparently been wasting his breath. Mirandi seemed exasperated. She lifted her hands from her lap and dropped them with a thump. "Oh for God's sake, Zee, you make it sound like there are assassins and conquerors around every corner."

"Could be," he said. "So, in answer to your original question, I'm not going to reveal myself to your new stud just for the sake of a sexual thrill." *Or for the sake of hanging on to you.*

Pursing her lips, Mirandi looked down and tapped her fingertips together. She angled a glance at Zee. "He's not a bad lay, you know."

"I need a lot better than 'not bad' before I'll let my guard down to that extent." *Or before I play second fiddle.*

Zee hated himself for being too delicate to voice these thoughts. It wasn't that he'd been born immune to frustration or resentment or rancor. Primarily a human being, he could experience a host of strong feelings, but his angelic genes always pulled him back from the brink of expressing them. In addition, he'd conditioned himself over the years to be the selfless aide and even-tempered mediator. Somebody had to assume that role within the Triumvirate. Win and Tole, God bless them, weren't always models of cool-headed thinking.

Mirandi, who'd lapsed into quiet thought, had apparently arrived at a conclusion. "I get the feeling you won't be around much anymore."

It was an accurate call, as far as it went, and it nipped at Zee's heart. He'd embraced high hopes for this relationship. "I can't risk being around," he said. "You know I can't avoid Sebastian indefinitely." There was more to it than that, of course, but Zee didn't want her ascribing his absence to a case of bruised ego. That seemed petty, even juvenile, and he did have *some* pride. "If you still need help straightening things out in Villius, we have plenty of Pros we can send over as consultants."

"Okay," Mirandi said, nodding to her lap. "Okay, have it your way."

Zee hazarded a glance at her. She met it. "You won't miss me," he added. A final test.

Letting out a mighty sigh, Mirandi lowered her bright blue eyes. "Sorry for saying so, but you're probably right." Her hand stole over to his thigh and gave it a sisterly rub. "You're a good man, Zee. Maybe *too* good. Quite frankly, you're starting to bore me."

Before her words died in the air, a feeling stitched through Mirandi's features, puckering them slightly. Concern, maybe, or regret. Not because she might have wounded Zee—and she had; he couldn't deny it—but because she might have angered him—and she'd done that, too. The genes he'd inherited from Eligos, a Grand Duke of Hell, crackled at the slur. *Boring? I'll show you boring, you ungrateful bitch.*

He said nothing, though, and came nowhere near shifting. Demonic metamorphosis was more difficult for Zee than it was for Tole or Win. The same angelic heritage that kept him muzzled also kept him from flying into rabid rages. At the moment, hurt further smothered his ire.

Resigned, he rose stoically from the bed.

Mirandi followed. She ran a hand up and down Zee's left arm and gave him a rueful, conciliatory smile. Yes, she was worried. Worried her brash and brutal frankness might have pissed him off and skunked her relations with Regenerie. Struggling to reinvent Villius, she could hardly afford to alienate so powerful an ally.

"I certainly hope Sebastian is more of a diplomat than you are," Zee said.

Looking amused, Mirandi either didn't catch his caustic undertone or didn't want to. She was already counting on Zee's good nature to let her off the hook. "We'll just

have to wait and see," she said, "but I'm sure he'll do fine. He's blessed with natural charisma."

Zee couldn't have cared less. He didn't pursue the subject because he refused to prolong their pointless conversation. Being alone with Mirandi under these circumstances was a unique kind of torture. He felt used and foolish, like a gullible adolescent, and wanted to be gone.

Mirandi touched his face. "Thanks for all your support, by the way. I really do appreciate it. I know you invested a lot of time and effort in getting me reestablished here." She kissed him on the cheek.

Unbelievable.

What about those fevered words, whispered at the height of passion? What about the multiple orgasms you had...as you fantasized about Mr. Charisma licking my cum off your breasts and fucking you in his inimitable, masterly way?

Zee was angry, all right, but there wasn't a thing he could do about it and still save face. Even his thoughts were bogged down in stupidity. God. He didn't dare open his mouth with those kinds of phrases ricocheting through his mind.

Moving stiffly to the windows, he looked out one last time. Before he left he needed to determine Sebastian's whereabouts so they wouldn't run into each other. Shirtless now, Mirandi's not-so-new lover was still in the courtyard, pointing at the unfinished portion of the building. Sweat glazed his torso. Suddenly, Zee wanted nothing more than to fuck his ass raw, just out of spite.

Before he could censor himself, he spoke. "Did you ever care about me? I mean, apart from my role as service provider."

He'd almost said, my *dual* role as service provider, which would've carried a satisfyingly snide implication. "Service provider," indeed. How many consultants doubled as studs? Although he wasn't facing Mirandi, Zee could envision her expression as she puzzled over his question—both its tone and its content—and just how much Zee's expectations clashed with reality.

Her answer took a while in coming. "Of course I care about you. You're a very dear man." Diluted as a pauper's tea, it was hardly worth waiting for.

"I do need to get back to Regenerie," Zee said. "I need to get back to work."

The truth of that finally, fully hit him. He'd been shirking his own duties as a leader of a major metropolplex to play white knight and suitor. That meant Tole and Win had been shouldering more than their share of the load. They'd been tolerant of Zee's infatuation, but that infatuation had whittled the Triumvirate down to a pair of overstressed supernaturals.

Turning and heading for the door, Zee passed Mirandi without a glance. "Good luck," he tossed over his shoulder, starching the phrase.

Deaf to whatever she said in response, he walked out of the Sand Castle for good. He knew his erstwhile mistress wouldn't be alone for long. That pussy sure as hell wasn't slicking for him.

Chapter Three

Every evening precisely at sunset, Ridley woke abruptly. And hunger was the bedfellow with whom he awoke.

His cock was restless—more so than a desire for blood would normally make it. Immediately, he knew why. Familiar scents swaddled his bed, alluring odors that didn't belong to his house but had become an integral part of his life.

Naked, he rose silently and drifted over to the antique fainting couch angled into a corner of his spacious bedroom. He didn't bother turning on a light; he didn't need light. What Ridley had expected to see was there. An irrepressible, affectionate smile sickled into his cheeks.

Tole dozed on the couch, his long, strong body casually arrayed on the tufted velvet. One leg was stretched out; the other, slightly bent. Both arms lay along his sides, fingers loosely curled. His head was turned to one side and had lowered a bit. Blue-streaked golden hair cascaded in shallow ripples over the side of his face. He wore the loose cotton pants that Coms favored in warm weather, although he was far from common, and a thin shirt in the same shade of watery yellow. The shirt was open. His smooth, divided chest rose and fell evenly, peacefully.

Beneath the pants, Ridley saw a faint shadow of the white boxer briefs, thin and snug, that drove him wild when they got wet—a reaction he'd discovered quite by accident when he'd pulled Tole into the shower one night. He couldn't resist *that* lure. The mental image alone poured fire through his veins.

A garbled snore disrupted the rhythm of Tole's breathing. Ridley's smile widened.

He dropped to a squat, tempted to nuzzle or at least palm his lover's supple cock, or kiss his slightly parted lips, or gently swipe the veil of hair away from his face. But Ridley didn't want to wake Tole. Not yet. He rose and hastened to the bathroom so he could shower and shave and clean his teeth.

No fangs to polish, thank God. They only appeared when Ridley was on the verge of feeding. And he wouldn't be feeding from Tole.

The implications of that fact trembled beneath the surface of their relationship—the only shark in its warm, azure waters. Too bad it was so big.

It saddened him a little that Tole hadn't slipped into his bed, although his lover's reticence was understandable. Ridley knew his skin cooled as he slept. He knew even the most skillful, enthusiastic blowjob wouldn't rouse him. It must be unnerving, or at least discouraging, for a lusty mortal to lie down with a vampire. So why bother?

Bathed and shaved clean, his skin humid and fragrant, Ridley opened the door of the master bath and found himself nose to nose with his lover. Almost. Tole was a tall, rangy bastard.

Arms raised and grasping the door frame, legs crossed, he smiled at Ridley. He'd taken off his shirt but not his pants. "Got time to fuck me?"

Ridley grinned. "If you're nice."

"How nice do I have to be?"

They leaned into a kiss, deep and soft, welcoming each other. Their kissing repertoire had become nicely varied over the three and a half months they'd been seeing each other. It meant they never knew quite what to expect when their lips met. Sometimes, tender languor. Sometimes, wet frenzy. The unpredictability made for an excitement that was always fresh, always as compelling as the first time.

Now, as their tongues connected, their mouths became more eager. Tole pulled Ridley's body closer, his hands stroking and clutching, sliding down back muscles, digging into ass muscles, urging a crush. Ridley inhaled the dusky tang of arousal sweat. He licked it from Tole's neck as their hips pushed together.

"I need to be with you," Tole murmured, his breath hot and tight. "Zee went off to meet his chippy. Win and Pablo are snuggled up together like a pair of puppies. And I...realized how much I wanted to see you." His large hands stirred through Ridley's damp, carefully combed hair. "Shit, you feel good, smell good."

Ridley's stiff cock, unrestricted by clothing, poked at Tole's straining shaft. "Lose the pants," he grated. "You know what to do afterward." He ran his fingers over Tole's moist lips, the surrounding stubble bristly sharp against his skin. With his free hand and the rest of his body, he tried to turn Tole around and force him into the bathroom.

Tole kissed Ridley's fingers as he resisted the maneuver. Without heeding the order to strip, he lowered himself to his knees. His erect cock thrust against the two flimsy layers of fabric like a steel bar hidden beneath lemon meringue.

Now it was Ridley who grasped the door frame, bracing himself as Tole's broad mouth compressed around his solid dick and drew it in. Tole gripped the base with one hand and bobbled Ridley's balls with the other, tickling them toward a tight ache.

This isn't good, Ridley thought foggily, hissing in a sharp breath. He couldn't keep his pelvis from rocking toward the suction, could barely keep his knees locked. Arousal

ran like a live wire through his blood. His cock would soon be throbbing like an overworked heart.

"Stop," he exhaled, pulling back.

Tole lifted his alfalfa honey eyes. For a moment, Ridley was struck again by the contrast between them and the rich umber of his brows and down-sweeping lashes. This man wasn't merely a man—Ridley was sure of it—but Tole had never divulged his true nature, and Ridley hadn't asked.

"You ready to take care of me?" Tole asked on a coarse shred of breath. "Have I been nice enough?"

He almost looked pretty just then—hypnotically pretty and sinister, like an exotic snake.

"Get yourself wet," Ridley said, knowing he should stop himself but unable to. "Then I'll decide what to do with you."

"I had a feeling you'd say that."

Ridley stepped aside. With a taunting half smile, Tole sidled past him into the bathroom, making sure to brush his hips against Ridley's hard-on. He loved engaging in this kind of torment. They both did.

After walking to the nightstand, Ridley whipped open the drawer and grabbed their favorite lube. He set it on a waist-high cabinet built into one corner of the room and covered in a Stim-u-pad. The nubby material was made of dense, durable memory foam fashioned from plant fibers. With the flick of a switch, the nubs began to move in a massaging motion and, occasionally, to emit a mild, stimulating charge. A shallow trench, molded diagonally into the foam, perfectly cradled a hard cock, and it rhythmically gripped and relaxed when the pad was activated.

Ridley turned to face the bathroom. Anticipation drove his breathing as he heard the patter of water in the shower stall. He couldn't take his eyes off the doorway.

This isn't good, reason repeated. Distress began to undulate beneath his desire. As much as he loved being with Tole, he was anxious about this unexpected appearance. They always had sex *after* Ridley satisfied his blood lust. Their dates began one to three hours after sunset. Tonight, though, Ridley hadn't yet had a chance to take the edge off his hunger. Sharp and insistent, it was still there, slicing into his marrow, honed by his passion for Tole.

He couldn't take his lover's blood, no matter how much his need screamed for it. Once he started, there'd be no turning back. And Tole would be doomed.

Wet from the shoulders down, Tole sashayed out of the bathroom. His tight underwear was sopping. The ghost of his cock, long and pink and rigid, angled up from his crotch, pressing against the soaked fabric, making it cling. The sight was so goddamned hot, so very fine, it made Ridley light-headed.

Meeting Ridley's transfixed gaze, Tole ran a slow hand down the length of the buried treasure. Fitting its thick base in the crook of his thumb, he drew his hand back

up to the head and lightly fingered it. In the same agonizingly slow motion, he pulled his cock away from his body, its shape straining into hard relief against the wet cloth. He relaxed his hold, paused, then pulled again.

Ridley couldn't stand it.

Darting forward, he clutched the sides of Tole's face and crushed his parted lips against Tole's mouth. It opened immediately. Their tongues wrestled, further moistening their lips. Ridley sawed his stiff cock against the damp ridge in Tole's underwear as they groaned down each other's throat.

"You make me crazy," Ridley said hoarsely. "I don't know *what* to do to you." His left hand slid over Tole's chest while the other clutched the taut slope of his back. "I want to do everything." His right hand slid down to Tole's ass and gripped its tough curvature, forcing their hips into grinding contact.

"Whatever it is," Tole said against Ridley's mouth, "do it fast."

Ridley dropped to a squat and fitted his hands to the backs of Tole's legs. He mouthed the length of Tole's rod and delivered a quick bite to the head when he was through. Tole pushed against him, wanting more.

Ridley stood up. "Go to the corner."

Tole didn't need further instructions. When they weren't making love on the bed or in the shower or on the downstairs sofa, they were using the pad.

Before Tole leaned over the cabinet, Ridley reached around Tole's hips and grabbed his wetly sheathed hard-on. He had to feel it one more time, to imagine how it turned Tole on to feel it. As he squeezed, excited by its solid resistance, Tole uttered, "No. I'll come."

Ridley slipped a hand beneath the waistband of the boxer briefs. Holding Tole's cock against his abdomen, he worked the underwear down. Once the briefs had cleared Tole's ass, Ridley pulled them to the floor, and Tole kicked them aside.

The pad hummed to life when Ridley turned it on. Its little mounds rose and rotated and sank, and rose again. Tole leaned over at a ninety-degree angle, forming his body to the cabinet—his chest flattened against the top, his hips tight against the face. Ridley quickly lubed his own eager cock. It further tensed beneath his hand, forcing out a bead of precum.

Tole's rib cage expanded and contracted as he squirmed against the pad, its nodules and sparklets teasing his nipples. Ridley swirled his oiled thumbs along the seam of Tole's ass, easing the cheeks apart, closing in on the tender rim and then carefully massaging it.

"Good?" he asked.

Tole's butt did a dainty hula around Ridley thumbs. "Too good."

Ridley inched his fore- and middle fingers into the tight burrow. He slid his dick between Tole's thighs and over the narrow track that led from his ass to his balls. Finding that luscious, pierced sac, his cockhead poked at its dense freight.

"Better?"

Tole was panting. "Fuck me, Rid."

It was time to go home.

Ridley eased backward and grabbed his own waiting cock, the head plump and sleek as a ripe plum. He guided it through the shutter of muscle, stirred it in a small circle, withdrew it, and inserted it again. Penetrated deeper. Pumped gently. Then, at a creeping pace, pulled back. Tole quivered and made a startled sound of pleasure, a sound that made him seem more acquiescent than he normally was. His butt muscles shivered through erratic contractions, inviting further invasion.

Every movement and sound that came from Tole's body lured Ridley. The tightness, especially, beckoned. Ridley drove harder into the heat, his hips beginning their domineering thrust. He knew exactly how to find Tole's joy spot, the thin patch of wall over that touchy gland. His cock forged up to it and stroked...

Until he felt a jarring, telltale pang in his gums, a knotty nest of needles revolving around the roots of his eyeteeth. Reflexively, Ridley's upper lip rose. Ruthless need scraped through him just as the points of fangs tickled the lining of his lower lip. He fought the urge to fold himself over Tole, to mold the front of his body to the back of Tole's body and sink his teeth into a smooth, strong, lightly freckled shoulder. The impulse both terrified and excited him.

A bad, bad combination.

Ridley knew he had to conclude this delectable fuck. Grasping Tole's hips, he poled his cock into that sweet, firm ass until an orgasm tore through him, ripping away the blood lust and temporarily flinging it aside. He whimpered and shuddered, his crotch thumping against Tole's cheeks, the cum jetting out of him until his muscles felt limp and his balls felt utterly depleted. Tole must have fit his dick into the Stim-u-pad's trough, because he bucked against the cabinet as Ridley trembled toward his own finish line.

Their weak moans stuttered through the house's stillness.

Ridley fondly drew a hand down Tole's back as he stood up. It sickened him that their coupling, acutely thrilling at first, had veered in so ominous a direction.

"Hold me," he said as Tole straightened. Ridley barely recognized his own voice. How ironic, he thought, that he should feel uncertain and vulnerable. It was Tole who was vulnerable, not he.

Face drawn in concern, Tole immediately turned and took Ridley in his arms, sweat misting his lithe body and mingling with the last faint traces of water. "Is something wrong?" He kissed Ridley's temple.

"No. No, I just needed you to hold me. Wanted it." That much wasn't a lie. Grateful his canine teeth had receded, Ridley kissed Tole's neck, felt the throb of his pulse. Both were dangerously tempting. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave. I need to —"

"Feed," Tole said tonelessly. His arms fell from Ridley's back.

"Yes. Believe me, I can't put it off any longer." Ridley all but hobbled to his closet and dresser and randomly pulled out articles of clothing.

Tole donned his pants and shirt. "Where will you be going? The Northwest Interzone?" More flatness. Strong feeling seemed to drain and stiffen him, as if he had to mummify himself to deal with it.

"No," Ridley said, the layered pain of hunger and restraint constricting his voice. Although the Interzone was safe now, with that monster Keryss out of the way, it was too far for him to travel in his present condition.

"So you'll go to a donor in the Overcity."

Distractedly, Ridley nodded. He grabbed a comb off his nightstand and ran it through his hair. His hand quaked.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Tole's self-containment had started to crack. Looking troubled, he walked up to Ridley and ran both hands over his upper arms. "Hey, I'm not used to seeing you like this. You don't seem too steady." He cupped Ridley's damp face. "Rid?"

Ridley tried to smile. The last thing he wanted right now was to add worry to Tole's hurt. "I'll be all right. And no, you can't come with me. You'd get upset." The whole business upset him enough without him having to witness it.

Tole crossed his arms over his chest. Glancing down, he rolled in his lips. Ridley's vampiric needs tore him up, although he was too proud to admit it.

Feeling muzzy-headed, Ridley sat on the bed. "It's hard for you."

Tole didn't look at him. "I knew from the start it wouldn't be easy."

"Shit, Tole, I'm sorry. But I can't change it." Ridley wanted to say more, tried to come up with the right words and arrange them into the right message, but he couldn't think clearly.

Tole nodded. He said nothing further about how he felt. Hesitantly, he raised his eyes. "Why won't you drink from me? Why won't you take me the way you took Win?"

Perilously close to an invitation, it wasn't a wise thing for him to say. "It isn't the same for us as it was for me and Win."

"Why?"

So that one meaningless encounter continued to rankle him. "Because we're lovers. I want you and need you, all the time. If I fed from you once, I'd start craving it. *You'd* start craving it. And then, well, I think you know what would happen."

Tole looked appalled. He'd obviously thought about the bite, but not the change brought on by numerous bites delivered daily. His face blanched. "I can't be that way, the way *you* are. My work..."

"I know. Don't worry. I'd never let it happen." With effort, Ridley got up from the bed and went to the door. He desperately wanted to touch Tole, was afraid to touch him. "I have to go. I *have* to." Frigid sweat had begun to slick his pulse points. In less than an hour, his stomach would begin to cramp, then his limbs.

Tole hurried over to him. "Come on," he said, flipping off the light and laying a hand on Ridley's back. "I don't want you to get sick because of me."

A simple declaration full of meaning. Ridley knew it would haunt him as he faced one of the hardest decisions of his long life.

Chapter Four

Pheromones drifted on the sluggish August breeze winding through Oasis Park. It was Zee's first stop when he returned to Regenerie from Villius. In the summertime there were four Giver Posts in the sprawling greenspace, and the professional prostitutes or Prossies of the Park, as residents called them, offered many routes to sexual satisfaction.

Zee wanted to take one of those routes. He didn't want to go to the humble Undercity residence he shared with Win and Tole. He wanted to prowl the humid, glittering Overcity for a whore. A male whore, like Pablo used to be. He wanted to feel some muscle and fuck some ass and not have to worry about precisely placing flagstones on a courtship path. No flattering phrases, no dumbass deference, no excruciating attempts at romantic or sexual finesse. He needed a raw, cathartic session of come-and-go.

He strode down the groomed and dimly lit walkways, trying to remember where Adam was usually stationed. Adam was a gay giver with chaotically chopped, multicolored hair and a riot of tattoos and a butt like fine sculpture—pronounced, symmetrical hemispheres, smooth as alabaster. No scent of a woman on this illustrated man. He was limber, too, a trait that packed all kinds of possibilities into his trim, young frame.

The waterfall at Songbird Ridge—*that* was his post. The whores stationed there called it Sugarbush Ridge. Zee struck off to the left, past Winter Patch, where summer-weary residents could escape oppressive heat and humidity. Zee would normally have enjoyed detouring through those five pine-studded acres, where light snow sporadically floated through the mentholated air. He liked sliding across the frozen pond.

Not tonight, though. Tonight Zee wanted the heat and humidity. He wanted to sweat against a hard body.

He wasn't worried about being seen. Only a handful of people in the Overcity would recognize him as one of the Powers, but they wouldn't be trolling Oasis Park for whores. Most of Zee's acquaintances knew him as an unremarkable Alterationist, a member of the humble Coven of Three. It was a ruse that served the Triumvirate well. Win, Tole, and Zee, camouflaged by Regenerie's misfits, lived in the Undercity as a trio of common magicians.

In the distance, the waterfall whispered into a purling brook. Zee walked faster when he heard it. Real insects shared the air with glowing, holographic butterflies. Within dark copses, diaphanous petals fell from nonexistent blossoms. Gold spangles drifted around benches.

Technological magic at every turn.

The sound of tumbling water grew louder. He was almost there.

The path ended at a broad greensward that mirrored the one on the other side of the stream. Two givers lazed on the far bank. There were usually five men at this post. Zee looked to his right, toward the silvery spill of water over rocks, subtly lit from below and behind.

One of the prostitutes got up, waded into the brook, and waved to Zee.

"Where's Adam?" Zee called, afraid his favorite giver might be with a client.

Just as the wader pointed toward the waterfall, Adam emerged from its curtain like a colorful sprite.

"Hey, Zee-man," he said brightly, sloshing toward the grassy bank and clambering up its rise. "Long time no see."

Adam was naked, and Zee wanted him bad.

Running a wet hand down the side of Zee's face, Adam skimmed Zee's lips with his thumb. His other hand rose and fondled Zee's chest through his shirt, taking time to dampen the areas over his nipples.

Zee shivered beneath his touch. It was the only encouragement Adam needed. His head lowered, and he circled each nipple with his lips while pulling it between his teeth. Zee tried to mute his quavering moan. The keenness of his response embarrassed him. Tiny lasers spiked through his groin as his cock pulsed into thickness.

"Jesus, I *love* that chest." Adam smiled. He wasn't attractive – was rather homely, in fact – but he knew exactly how to work his clients – a natural skill guaranteed to keep them coming back for more.

"Where's your log-in?" Zee asked on a thread of breath.

"Right over here, sweetness."

Adam pivoted and took a few cunningly slow steps, showing off his cute ass. He bent at the waist, a hint of sac visible at the apex of his thighs, and reached for a small heap of clothing on the ground. As he straightened, he fished his recordkeeping computer out of a small shoulder bag and tabbed his employee card into a slot. Only then did he turn and hand the computer to Zee, who'd already pulled out his UMoR ID

card. A packet containing a prelubed condom was pressed between Adam's fingers and the wallet-sized computer.

"Eager, are you?" Adam set his clothing on a nearby rock. "Getting a little blue below the waist?"

"I want to be on you," Zee said, his voice thick. He put the computer on top of Adam's things.

"I know you do, magic-man with the nice titties." Adam began stroking his own dick, which was already semierect. "I can always tell—"

A dark figure blew up to them and spun Adam around. "Come with me," said a gruff baritone voice. Then, "I'm sorry, Zee."

"Ridley?" Zee peered through the darkness. What the hell? Wasn't he with Tole tonight?

"Come with *us*," Adam said over his shoulder as the vampire pulled him toward a pocket of shadow.

Zee had forgotten the giver was a donor, too. He not only serviced men who wanted men, he serviced vampires who wanted men.

Adam obviously wanted to "double dip," as givers said. It meant taking on two or more clients simultaneously. That could result in a hefty payout, particularly if one client was a vampire. Givers got a lot more money when they also served as donors.

By the time Zee reached the two men, Ridley was lying on his back in the tall grass. "Hurry," he told Adam, his voice reduced to a throttled growl. He sounded desperate.

Adam finished unbuttoning Ridley's shirt. He pulled it open, baring the vampire's chest. Other than that, Ridley was fully dressed. Adam no sooner stretched out on top of him than Ridley snatched the donor's arm and angled it over his face. Zee watched, transfixed, as a pair of sharp fangs drove into the tender skin of Adam's inner elbow.

Trembling with excitement, Zee opened his pants and shoved them past his straining dick. The condom packet was still clamped between his fingers, where he'd slipped it just moments ago. Pulling it free, he ripped it open.

Adam lifted his head, as if he were about to howl in pain, but he kept the sound locked in his throat. It soon shredded into ecstatic whimpers. He writhed against Ridley's body, his arm weeping blood into the vampire's mouth, his butt cheeks clenching as he thrust and ground his hips against Ridley's crotch.

Zee couldn't stand it. The sights and sounds were arousing enough, but the thought of that hot friction, bone-rigid cock against bone-rigid cock, made him shove his pants to his ankles. Clumsily, he extracted the slick condom and rolled it down the length of his shaft. He lowered himself over Adam, bracing his weight on hands and knees.

His divining rod found what he needed it to find.

Limbs shivering, he sank into Adam's body with a gusty release of breath. The giver, obviously feeling the penetration, made a fluty sound of surprise and pleasure. He began rocking between the cock beneath him and the cock inside him. Zee tried to take his time—creeping in and pulling out, finding and delivering pleasure through that entrance ring of muscle—but there were too many stimuli to allow for control.

Adam kept pushing against Ridley's crotch, his cheeks repeatedly flexing, his deeper muscles spasmodically tightening around Zee's dense erection. Giving up, Zee rode him. Rode that enticing ass and pumped away.

Occasionally, the earth seemed to send up a tremor through the man-strata of tense muscles and damp flesh and charging blood. But it was only Ridley, bucking against the insistent crush of Adam's hard-on. Just as Zee skidded toward the brink, he leaned forward and stretched his fingers toward the vampire's mouth. Anticipation of what he would feel made adrenaline surge through his body. Slipping his fingers beneath the crook of Adam's elbow, he touched the soft band of Ridley's lower lip, snug against Adam's skin. As soon as his fingertips grazed the sticky warmth that painted it, he came.

The release was strong and startling. Its pounding force dropped Zee onto Adam's back, electric waves rolling out from his groin and shimmying through his limbs. His cock kept pulsing, filling the condom's well. The collecting cum felt warm and gelatinous around its tender head.

Adam just kept moaning and writhing, rubbing his chest against Ridley's chest, his hands clutching blindly at whatever part of Ridley's anatomy he could touch. Intently, Ridley kept drinking.

Lifting himself off Adam's back, Zee felt nearly insensate. His ears rang. He peeled away the laden condom and pulled up his pants. As the tinnitus faded, he heard the other men's muted grunts and gravelly respiration.

He felt a pang of compassion for Tole. What a bitch, he thought, knowing your partner engaged in this sort of activity every night and there wasn't a blessed thing you or he could do about it. It was far worse than having a lover call you boring. A blade in the heart, not a kick in the nuts, and a rusty blade at that.

Zee walked quietly to the rock where he'd laid Adam's service computer and logged himself out. Looking around for a condom depository, he found one discreetly tucked between two hydrangea bushes at the base of the ridge.

Zee could've left then—he'd fulfilled his obligation to Adam—but he didn't want to leave. A voyeuristic impulse, or maybe loyalty to Tole, made him linger near vampire and donor. Apparently finished, they were sitting up now. Zee sank cross-legged to the dewy grass, but the two men didn't seem to notice him.

"I'm sorry for the roughness," Ridley said. He spoke in a murmur, his voice like faraway thunder. "Do you have a Heal-aid with you?"

"Yeah," said Adam. "All donors carry packs of 'em."

"Be sure to put it on."

"I will, in a little bit." Adam leaned to one side and studied Ridley's waistline. "Shit, man, I'm sorry. I got sploo all over the front of your pants. I just didn't have a chance to —"

"I know. It isn't your fault."

"I've never seen you so hungry, Rid. You were fucking *starving*."

"Sometimes, other things take precedence over feeding."

"That's dangerous, putting it off like that."

"It was worth it," said Ridley. He rose to his feet, buttoned and tucked in his shirt. "Come on, let's make sure you get paid. Can you walk okay? Are you woozy?"

Getting up, the donor wobbled a bit. Ridley steadied him. "I think you drank more than usual," Adam said, "but not *too* much more."

"You're right."

As the men stepped past Zee, whom they hadn't yet acknowledged, Ridley asked, "Care to stop for a drink somewhere?"

"Who, me?" Adam said.

"No, not you. Zee."

"Where *is* Zee?"

"Lurking in the grass," Ridley said. "You nearly tripped over him."

Zee arose. "I'm not lurking, just catching my breath."

Ridley abruptly pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed at his lips. Self-consciously, Zee thought. He pulled something else from his pants pocket and handed it to Adam. His UMoR ID card, most likely. "Do what you have to do," he said. "I need to take care of something else."

After shooting a glance at Zee, Ridley walked to the brook. Crouching beside it, he cupped water onto his face. The handkerchief came out again. He patted his mouth, wiped the front of his pants, and then pulled out a comb. Standing, he straightened and smoothed his shirt, fixed his hair, brushed off his clothing. He had considerably shorter hair now, attractively styled. The layered waves flattered his gaunt, handsome face.

Zee hadn't moved. He suddenly understood why Tole was so drawn to this man. It wasn't just that he was tall and impeccably groomed, or that his body tapered so beautifully from broad shoulders to narrow waist and hips. Ridley had class. As much as Zee admired him at that moment, standing there in the hazy pastel glow of landscape lights, he also resented what Ridley's lifestyle was doing to Tole. Zee's comrades in the Triumvirate were like brothers to him.

Yes, he'd go out for that drink. He wasn't entirely sure what he'd say, but he knew he had to say something. And maybe ask more.

Chapter Five

"Want to go to Paniche's?" Ridley asked. "It isn't far, and they have sidewalk seating."

"Good drinks, too," Zee said. "I've been there a few times."

They walked on in silence for several minutes. Ridley, head downturned, shoved his hands in his pockets. He didn't look at Zee until they were about to exit the park.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he said. "Please don't tell Tole."

"I hadn't planned to. But it's no secret what you do every night, Ridley."

"He just doesn't need to hear about it."

"I agree."

They headed for Paniche's, a bistro three blocks from the southeast corner of the park, as the thickness of summer lapped against them through the Overcity's glow. Regenerie had a desultory air. People strolled, engaged in quiet conversations, down clean sidewalks; vehicles streamed silently down clean streets; the airail whooshed overhead. Lines of trees cast shifting shadows on flower boxes erupting with fragrance and color. Muted strains of music occasionally drifted from buildings checkered with light.

Ridley liked it here, had always liked it here. He felt fortunate he hadn't had to petition for residency, as people who weren't born in Regenerie had to do. The Utopian Metroplex prided itself on being a haven for Otherbeings, who were scorned or barely tolerated in most other urban centers. Regenerie had fashioned an entire Undercity to accommodate them, vampires included.

The Powers of this metroplex had their act together.

"I was surprised to see you with Adam," Ridley said. They approached the scattering of small wrought iron tables outside Paniche's and seated themselves. "I didn't think your coven had to resort to givers for sex."

"We don't, usually." Zee studied the menu pad sunk into the tabletop. "Well, Win's *never* had to. He's always had his pick of partners. Now he has Pablo. But I've visited givers once in a while." He keyed in his drink order and looked up. "So has Tole."

The little addendum made Ridley's stomach flutter. He turned his eyes to the menu on his side of the table. Slipping a hand to his lap, he tugged as subtly as possible at the crotch of his pants. The delayed feed combined with Adam's relentless squirming had made him shoot in his underwear. It hadn't been much of a load or much of an orgasm, but enough to make for discomfort. Everything down there felt stuck to everything else.

Zee watched him a little too incisively. "Have you seen Tole yet? I was under the impression you two had something planned for this evening."

"He came over earlier." Ridley selected a drink. "But I had to leave to take care of...you know."

"And while you took care of it, did you...?" Zee paused, apparently stymied in his search for a euphemism.

Ridley supplied one. "Mess myself? Yes." Rising a few centimeters off the chair, he twisted his hips and repositioned his butt. "Oh for Christ's sake, Zee, don't look at me like that. It's not like I'm incontinent."

"But you got off."

Ridley felt a rise of heat in his face. "Shit happens."

"Forgive me for prying, but I don't get it."

A young waiter appeared beside them like a sparkling, hip phantom and swept their drinks onto the table. "You opted to charge?" he asked, glancing at the order tracker clipped to the side of his tray.

"Yes," Zee said, and Ridley nodded.

"My name is Jake." The waiter flashed them an engaging smile. "Enjoy your visit."

"Thank you." Zee turned his attention back to Ridley as soon as their server glided away. "Do you always respond that way to a feed?"

"Not always. Not often, in fact." Ridley didn't think his companion was trying to needle him—Zee wasn't that kind of man; was always courteous and considerate—but it was obvious his curiosity, if that's what it was, had some connection to Tole.

"Now I don't get it even more," Zee said. He sipped peach-colored liquid from a tall, frosted glass. "I doubt you're attracted to Adam. There wasn't any foreplay. You weren't even undressed."

"Aren't *you* observant," Ridley drawled.

"I couldn't help but notice."

"Of course you couldn't, since you were surfing both of us." Ridley didn't intend his tone to be sardonic, but it came out that way.

"Sorry I imposed," Zee said with uncharacteristic archness. "I'd already logged in when you yanked Adam away. So what pushed you over? Was it the taste of his blood?"

"Yeah, okay, we'll go with that." Ridley saw two female vamps, Siobhan and Maria, who didn't live in Regenerie but often stayed in the Undercity. He lifted a hand in greeting as they walked by. The women liked him. Most vamps liked him. Too bad he'd never bonded with one. It would've made his life a whole lot easier.

But hearts didn't come with bridles and reins.

"So...what made it such a turn-on?" Zee asked.

"Hm?"

"Adam's blood. What did it taste like?"

Ridley's forehead dipped. Then he realized Zee was serious. "Radishes," he said.

The answer left Zee dumbstruck for a moment. "You're joking."

"Of course I'm joking. What an asinine question." Ridley shook his head. "Jesus, Zee. I'm drinking the blood of a naked young man with a crackable boner who's squirming against my package...and you're wondering why I lost it."

"I've never been a vampire, Ridley."

"Obviously. But you sure as hell must know how a stiff cock can stir your hormones. Why else would you have been hooking up with a male giver?"

Zee's flexing fingers made parallel tracks on his glass. He took a long swallow of his drink. "I see your point."

Ridley smirked. "Really."

Blushing, Zee keyed in another order.

"So what exactly drove *you* to Oasis?" Ridley asked. "I thought you had a girlfriend."

"Not anymore." Zee took another long swallow.

"What happened?"

"I relieved her of the burden of my company. My *boring* company."

That was a shock. Ridley lifted his brows. "What do you mean, 'boring'?" Zee was a smart, kind, good-looking man with a stunning physique. Sweet face, too, modestly adorned by a sparse cascade of freckles down either side of his nose. Ridley didn't find many things adorable, but those freckles were fucking adorable. Zee also had the cutest smile—radiant, dimpled—Ridley had ever seen on a man. "What does she want? An angel? A god?"

"Both." Zee pulled his fresh drink out of Jake's hand before the glass had a chance to hit the table. In one smooth motion, the server grabbed the empty and twirled away.

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Ridley said.

"Don't be. It's probably for the best."

"I still feel bad for you. You're a great guy."

Closing his eyes, Zee swayed backward in his chair. "Oh, shit, not you too."

"What did I say? That was a compliment, not an insult."

Zee looked chastened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be ungracious."

Ridley smiled. Now *that* was typical of him.

"I just get so damned sick of being the decorous do-gooder," Zee went on, "the model of reason and restraint and responsibility."

"Hell of an onus," Ridley murmured.

"I'm starting to bore *myself*."

"That's even worse."

Zee ranted on. "It seems I always have all the answers, except the ones I need for *me*. You know, sometimes I want to chuck it all and become feckless and self-serving for a while. Just live low. Sink into whatever feel-good muck I stumble upon and let myself wallow in it and say to hell with everything and everybody else."

"So do it," Ridley said.

Narrowing his eyes, Zee studied Ridley. Or maybe studied his answer. "I just may try."

Ridley appreciated how Zee felt. He'd gotten plenty sick of himself over the years. That was one of the many reasons Tole meant so much to him. Every time Tole looked at him, touched him, Ridley felt re-created—a fresh, new man for whom each day brought the promise of fresh, new joy.

Ridley also knew reinvention of oneself came with a price. The cost had to be weighed against the result, and he didn't think Zee would ultimately want to pay the price of becoming some profligate debauchee. But Zee would have to find that out for himself.

"At the risk of pissing you off even further, oh good and wise counselor," Ridley said, "I should tell you why I asked you here." He finished his drink and ordered another. At first, alcohol clashed bitterly with the blood residue on his tongue. Soon, though, the alcohol prevailed, cutting through any trace of coppery sweetness and rinsing it away. Vodka and tonic with a twist of lime was, for him, the best cleanser.

"I suspect," Zee said, "it has to do with Tole."

"Correct." This wasn't going to be easy, but Ridley had a decision to make.

Jake appeared with a full glass, disappeared with the empty one.

Ridley leaned on the table, arms encircling his mouthwash. "Am I bad for him, Zee? You and Win probably know Tole better than anybody else does." Just voicing this concern tightened Ridley's throat.

What was it Noah, the vampire who'd changed him, had said? *Be brave, my man. It will only hurt for a little while.*

Zee pondered his drink, as if he could turn it into an oracle if he concentrated enough. Only, he didn't answer Ridley's question. He asked one of his own. "Do you love him?"

The unexpected query clutched Ridley's stomach like a big, cold fist. "Yes," he said. He'd never admitted it, even to himself.

"Have you told him?"

"No."

"Why?" Zee's gaze had become disconcertingly direct.

"He's never made any declaration, so I haven't, either. We just don't...talk about stuff like that."

"Maybe you should."

Ridley rubbed a hand over his face. "I don't want to complicate things any further. If one of us decides to walk away from this..."

Zee frowned. "What do you mean, walk away from it?"

"I mean, I can't stand —" Ridley clammed up. His voice had seemed to blare down the streets. Tensely, his eyes shifted around the seating area, but nobody appeared to be eavesdropping. He leaned across the table and cut his volume to a near-whisper. "I can't stand hurting Tole. And I know I'm hurting him. I think it would've eaten him alive to see Adam on me like some...some damned incubus. I'm screwing up his life, too. These late-night dates of ours — the poor man must be sleep-deprived as all hell."

Zee raked his teeth over one side of his lower lip. "Tole doesn't need much sleep. But it *would* help if your time together weren't so restricted."

"I'm well aware of that, and I've been trying to do something about it." Ridley put up a silencing hand. "Don't ask what. I can't say more, because it's too early to know if this is going to work. And it might not matter, anyway."

Zee hung his head and sighed. "I hate this situation. For both of you."

"Please," Ridley said, "tell me what your impressions are. Win's too. I need more to go on than my own desire to hang on to Tole. I haven't been this close to anybody since I changed. I certainly haven't been in love. But I'm in deep now, and I don't want *him* to be. Not if it makes his life hell."

"He's already in deep. Tole never discusses his feelings, but we can read him." A troubled scowl creased Zee's forehead. He lifted and lowered his glass, lightly tapping it on the table, as he thought. "Win's and my opinions don't matter. But I will tell you this. If you bail out, Tole is going to assume you're doing it because he doesn't meet your needs. And believe me" — Zee's tone withered into wryness — "rejecting someone because of his inadequacies is *not* the way to ease his pain."

"But Tole isn't 'inadequate.' I sure as shit wouldn't be rejecting him. I'd be trying to —"

"Save him?" Zee shook his head. "He isn't going to see it that way. And if he did, he'd be offended by your condescension."

"Fuck. *Fuck*." Ridley dropped his head to his hands.

The whole rotten dilemma made him heartsick. Scared him, too. For nearly three months he'd tossed it around in his mind, self-interest warring with altruism until they'd kicked up such a dust cloud of confusion, Ridley didn't know *what* was for the best.

He raised his face to look at Zee. "Swear to me you won't mention this conversation to him."

Zee hesitated. "All right. But what are you going to do?"

And here was where the scary part came in. Ridley had tiptoed up to the option before but had always recoiled from it. Announcing a decision, any decision, would be like committing to it.

The world seemed to be crumbling beneath him, and he felt powerless to stop the fragmentation.

"Leave Regenerie, I guess. At least for a while. I've done it before, so Tole won't have reason to think I'm ditching him. Maybe we'll both come to some realizations." The next possibility nearly stuck in Ridley's throat. "Maybe if I'm gone, he'll find somebody who can truly make him happy."

More than anything, Ridley wanted to be that one. But he couldn't change what he was or what he needed. He couldn't change what Tole needed.

He couldn't make a lover happy while he tore that lover apart.

Chapter Six

As soon as he entered his house, Ridley felt desolate. He sat on the sofa and gulped air. Tole wasn't there, waiting for him. Tole hadn't called and left a message. Tole seemed...gone.

So maybe the tables had turned while Ridley was out. Maybe, while he sated his hunger and let a whore bring him to climax, the man he loved had resolved his months-long dilemma. When Tole walked out of this house a few hours ago, he could've been walking out for good.

A surge of panic made Ridley snatch his phone off the end table. Just as abruptly, rage supplanted his fear. He grabbed an old paperweight and pitched it against the door, although he was really pitching it at a dozen different targets he could neither see nor reach.

Hunching forward, he made a strangled sound.

He'd held himself together while he talked with Zee. He'd numbed himself while he made his way back to the Undercity. Now, alone, he felt like he was coming apart at every meticulous seam.

* * * * *

As soon as he entered the red-shingled house at 86 Guardian Station, Zee sensed a hiccup within the Triumvirate's well-oiled machinery. He didn't see anybody, and the place was dead silent. Win and Pablo were probably in Pablo's suite in the adjacent building. It had pretty much become their love nest. But Tole wasn't around, either. At this time of the night, he'd usually be with Ridley or stretched out on the couch, reading. And he wasn't with Ridley.

The absence of any member of the Triumvirate was easy for any other member to sense. The three hybrids were indeed, as Win had once said, like a collection of cells in a

single organism. Zee sank into the recliner and lowered his head to his hands, thumbs pressed against cheekbones, fingertips making an arc across his forehead. He closed his eyes, deeply inhaled, slowly exhaled. A swift contraction of his solar plexus seemed to discharge insight. Revelation always came that way, breaking at the center of the body and rising to the mind, like a bubble buoyed from the depths of a lake to its surface.

A trilling phone startled Zee out of his inward focus. Blinking, he bolted up from the chair and followed the sound. It was coming from Tole's room. Zee jogged down the hallway and smacked open the door. Lights synchronized with sound flickered in the darkness. Zee snatched the phone off Tole's nightstand.

"Yes?"

Pause. "Who is this?"

"I'm...one of the Coven of Three, Guardian Station."

"Zee? Is Tole there?"

He finally bounced out of his fugue. "Ridley."

"Yeah. Is he there?"

"No. No, he isn't."

"Do you know where I can find him?" The voice carried a controlled anxiety, a hint of urgency.

Slumping, Zee dropped to the bed and pinched his fingers across his eyes. "He's in the Interzone. At the line of rocks called —"

"Boar Knuckles," Ridley said. He sounded sad. "Thanks."

"Are you going to tell him...?"

"I don't know. I just need to be with him."

* * * * *

Tole was lying on his side, naked, his body loosely curled around a small fire. In the distance, a whip-poor-will called, as if heralding Ridley's silent approach. Two pinecones dropped into the wavering flames and cackled as they were consumed. Sparks shot up, showered down. Tole didn't move, didn't even blink.

Still in shadow, Ridley stripped off his clothing. He continued to watch Tole, letting his gaze caress the sweeping, light-licked lines of his lover's reclining body, the thick droop of his cock. Although Tole stared into the fire, his gaze was distant.

It was easy to circle around behind him without being noticed. Ridley floated toward the fire. He eased himself to the ground behind Tole and draped an arm over his midsection.

Tole flinched slightly then relaxed. Each of them recognized the smell and feel of each other.

"Hey" — Ridley kissed his nape — "no marshmallows tonight?"

"No. I came straight here from your house." Tole turned his head to glance over his shoulder. "How did you find out where I was?"

"I called your place. Zee told me."

"Oh. That makes sense."

All Ridley wanted to do was touch him. Maybe memorize him. He pulled back his hand and molded it to the round knoll of his lover's shoulder, palm and fingers swirling over the taut skin. His hand began a downward glide to Tole's rib cage, its shallow corrugations like a neatly furrowed field. He stroked back up again, carefully, and back down to the hard, hidden promontory of pelvic bone before caressing the smooth flank below it.

Tole hummed in satisfaction. "Nice style."

"Glad you like it. You inspire that style, you know."

"I'll bet you say that to all the gangly girls."

Ridley kissed the top knob of his spine. "You're not gangly."

"The fuck."

"You're...regal. Like the masthead of a ship."

Tole snorted. He intercepted Ridley's hand as it crawled over his side toward his chest, lifted it, pressed it to his lips in a firm, lingering kiss. Ridley gently fingered Tole's hair with his right hand. It was like floss, fine and silky.

"You're warm." Tole snuggled his butt against Ridley's crotch.

"Mm-hm." Ridley was grateful he'd had the foresight to wash up before leaving his house. He never met Tole with the taint of another person's touch on his body. It would've been an act of disrespect, like peddling used goods to royalty.

"Enjoy your dinner?" Tole asked.

"Not particularly. It was adequate." Ridley nestled his half-swollen cock into the smooth crevice of Tole's butt, nuzzled his face against a sloping muscle of Tole's back.

"No gourmet meal tonight, huh?"

"Not tonight. In fact, not in a long, long while. I do what I have to do to get by."

They lay peacefully in the deep-night silence, the air balmy enough to make nudity a unique pleasure, to make their melded, still bodies an even greater pleasure.

"I love it when you hold me," Tole murmured.

A trapdoor slammed in Ridley's throat. Briefly, he squeezed his eyes shut. His released breath rebounded from Tole's skin. It was a moment before he could speak.

"What made you come here?" he asked.

"You were busy, and I like the outdoors. Most sub dwellers do." Tole lazily scooped a small branch from the ground and flipped it into the fire.

"No, I mean why this particular spot?"

"I think you know." Tole's voice, tighter now, vibrated through his chest cavity into Ridley's face and hand.

"So, Win told you about our meeting."

"I asked him to. Even though I've always known about it, I never heard the details. Then I came here after I left your place, because I wanted to try imagining what it was like." His chest rose and fell as he sighed. "I couldn't."

"It disgusted you that much?"

Tole's head moved beneath Ridley's hand. "No, that's not why. It bothered me to think about how..."

He didn't have to finish the sentence. Ridley knew what he meant. "Roll over. I want to face you."

Tole did so, fallen leaves and pine needles flaking from his body. Ridley boosted himself and brushed off the remaining scraps. Their cocks kissed and thickened. Tole ran three fingers over Ridley's lips, his dark amber eyes tracking the movement. He eased the lower lip down and grazed its lining. Ridley's nerves clustered and quivered at the spot. Closing the dark space between them, Tole replaced his fingertips with his mouth.

It was a leisurely, sensual kiss. Their softened lips pushed together and relaxed, over and over, breaking only long enough to glide over cheeks and jaws and throats. Stubble rasped against stubble...and they kissed again, pressing harder, mouths opening to allow the invasion of tongues.

Ridley didn't want to stop. He loved this kind of slow exploration and engagement. It deluged his senses. As he and Tole exchanged coarsened breaths, their hands reached for each other's cock.

They stroked slowly at first, slipping fine skin over tender heads, until the skin became tight over dense cores. Their lips trembled together but didn't seal, leaving their sandy breath a passageway. Pumping harder, they stiffened against each other, misted skin sporadically connecting. Ridley felt a keen spangle in his groin as Tole groaned against his mouth. The embers flared, and he shuddered into deep climax, jerking within Tole's grasp as Tole thrust and came. They spilled on each other's hands and speckled the fine hair on each other's belly.

"Synchronicity," Ridley murmured. "Gotta love it." He freed Tole's spent cock, lifted his hand to his mouth, and carefully licked the cream.

Smiling, Tole kissed Ridley's hand as Ridley cleaned it. Then he lifted his own to his mouth. They looked into each other's eyes, messaging their reasons for this ritual. Not that it was necessary; they already knew the reasons.

Ridley summoned his resolve. He had to talk to Tole before it got much later. Between now and dawn, he had things to do.

"I, um...didn't get a chance to tell you earlier, but I'll be leaving Regenerie for a while."

Tole's brow furrowed. "Business?"

"Yeah. Remember that estate I had to settle in Trieste a while back? Well, there's some property involved. It might take me a while to get it squared away."

Tole merely nodded. He didn't ask how long a while. He didn't ask for any details. It was so like him to staunchly refrain from firing out questions. Ridley half hoped Tole would grill him, force him to blurt out, *You're my only business. I'm leaving to give you a chance to break free of me...but, damn it, I don't want to go. I want you to talk me out of it, beg me to stay.*

He knew that wasn't going to happen. The lie would have to stand. Ridley would have to fall into his dismal escape.

"Will you be at Guardian tomorrow evening?" he asked, hoping Tole couldn't detect the unsteadiness in his voice. He petted Tole's hair back from his face. Kept petting it.

"Yeah. The four of us have to... Well, we're working with the Powers on a couple of important projects. Today was a free day, but tomorrow we'll be back at it."

"I'll give you a call," Ridley said with a forced smile. Reluctantly he rose, swiping the earth's debris off his body. "I have to be in bed soon. Don't let your fire go out."

Glassy-eyed, Tole stared into the flames. "No. I won't let the fire go out. Not until I have to." He glanced up at Ridley and quickly looked down again.

Ridley's breath shoaled as he read the subtext of that simple reply.

He didn't want this man to give up on him. Not really. Love drizzled through him again, and he was tempted to change his mind about leaving. But he couldn't. Tole deserved more of a chance at happiness than he was getting.

Ridley stepped to the tree branch where his clothes were draped. He tried to keep his mind blank, tried to ignore the hollowness he felt. Once he was dressed, he turned to face the small campfire.

He doubted Tole could see him, but he said quietly, "I love you."

Tole raised his head from his hand. "What? Did you say something?"

"Talk to you tomorrow."

Acclimating himself to vampirism was no longer the hardest thing Ridley had ever done. Walking away from the passion of his life now held that dubious distinction.

* * * * *

Before he sat down and thought about where, exactly, he would go, Ridley went to the computer niche between his living room and kitchen and brought up his e-mail. What little he got usually had to do with his finances, although notes sometimes appeared from acquaintances. He wanted to wrap up as much business as possible before he left.

The third message from the top made him pause and frown. He didn't recognize the address. Touching the screen, he brought up the text.

"It was a miracle of rare device, A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!"

I am still here, waiting. All is emptiness without you. I need your nearness. Share the miracle with me.

Ridley stared at the screen, his breath suspended. From the base of his skull to the small of his back, his skin prickled. He immediately knew who'd sent the unsigned message. And it certainly wasn't Tole.

Chapter Seven

"Tole get his ass back yet?" Win swerved around the corner and into the hallway, nearly running into Zee. They grabbed each other's upper arms to prevent a head-on.

"*Shh*. He's sleeping." Zee glanced over his shoulder at the door to Tole's room. He wondered what had happened last night, whether Ridley had gone out to find him, what Ridley had said.

Win glanced at the time, glowing from the hallway's wall. It was almost noon. "Pablo and I came over at about five thirty this morning, and I could tell he wasn't in the house. I figured he was with Ridley."

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'? Where else would he have been?"

Zee steered Win toward the living room. "He was in the Interzone. You didn't know that?"

"No. Why would —"

Scowling, Zee shushed him more emphatically.

Win sat on the couch and hiked an ankle to his knee. Finally, he spoke in a lowered voice. "Pablo and I were in his suite last night, playing Koozle." He smiled. "And just generally...playing."

"Where *is* Pablo?"

"Overcity. He had a meeting with Tidal Energy Development at nine thirty. So why the hell was Tole in the Interzone?"

Tole shuffled into the living room, loose pants hanging low on his slender hips. "Because I wanted to be." Yawning, he ran his fingers through his tousled, pale blue-and-gold hair then curled his hands over his waist and arched into a backward stretch.

A dainty crack came from his lower spine. Apparently satisfied with this result, he crossed his arms over his chest.

Win looked puzzled. "I thought you went to see —"

Cutting him off, Tole addressed Zee. "How'd things go in Villius yesterday?"

Win kept studying Tole, his lower lids contracted, narrowing his eyes.

"Things *didn't* go," Zee said. "You want some tea?"

"Sounds good. Thank you." Tole turned back toward the hall and headed, probably, for the bathroom.

Win extended a hand in his direction. "What's up with him?" He looked at Zee. "What's up with *you*, for that matter?"

"Nothing," Zee said.

He crossed from living area to dining area, passing the faux fireplace, weaving between cluttered tables and overstuffed chairs and the compressed exercise machine that could be expanded with a few deft touches. As he stepped up to the beverage dispenser on the kitchen's counter, he felt Win behind him, his friend's unanswered questions pressing against his back.

Zee turned with a cup of tea in one hand — liberally soured with lemon, the way Tole liked it — and a glass of vegetable juice for himself. Again he nearly collided with Win.

"Why are you hovering?" he asked irritably.

"And why are you pampering Tole?"

"Getting a person a cup of tea doesn't constitute pampering. Now if you don't mind, get out my way."

Tole returned from the bathroom just as Zee set their beverages on the table. Win took a seat and grabbed his computer. He lifted his eyes to Tole. "You need a shave and a shower, man."

"I need a lot more than that."

The front door swung open. "Did you start without me?" Pablo, flushed from the summer's heat, still managed to look breezy.

Win craned his neck and smiled. "I'd never start without you."

"Christ," said Tole under his breath. He flipped open the lid of his computer. "Okay, Xanandru. What are we going to do about it?"

Pablo took a seat at the table.

"I'll go there," Zee said. He'd been tossing it over in his mind since yesterday, before he left the Sand Castle, and the final decision came while he talked with Ridley at Paniche's. The prospect was starting to excite him.

"You?" Win said incredulously.

"Yes, me. Tole can't go, for obvious reasons. If Andrew were somehow to pick up on his presence in X-land, we'd be screwed. Pablo's booked up with meetings at the

Commerce and Trade Commission. You and Tole are still working on the new wage and salary guidelines, and Tole's planning on visiting Ground Zero and the Great Event Museum."

"I haven't decided yet," Tole said.

"Well, in any case," said Zee, "I'm the most expendable right now. I'll go to Xanandru and nose around."

"But you can't go alone!" Win protested.

"Why?"

"It isn't *safe*, Zee. That place is a haven for human predators. And you're too —"

Zee slapped a hand on the table. "Stop right there. I'm sick to death of being told how fucking naive and trusting I am. It's like one step above mental midget."

Win's gaze slanted to the side and met Tole's. Pablo stared at Zee. The eyebrows of all three sought refuge in their hairlines.

"And you," Zee said, thrusting a finger at Tole, "you're the worst offender of all."

Tole pointed at his own chest.

"Yeah, you. You've called me a 'sanctimonious shit' more than once."

"I don't think that was me."

"Then who was it? The little man hiding in your mouth? The invisible ventriloquist sitting beneath your ass?"

Zee noticed Pablo trying to suck in a smile. It was enough to make him the next target. "What's *your* problem?"

Pablo put up his hands. "Sorry. I just can't believe you used 'fucking' as an adverb, that's all."

"You better fucking believe it."

Zee felt a twinge of guilt over being so testy — and using profanity, which he rarely did — but he tried to keep up his head of steam. He was tired of being at the mercy of his angelic genes. They had indeed turned him into the resident Sanctimonious Shit.

Assuming an air of authority, he sat up straighter. "Okay, listen. All of you. We can't slap a trade embargo on a metroplex unless and until we're sure they deserve it. Secondhand reports aren't reliable, especially when it comes to this kind of stuff. One man's human rights abuses could be another man's pleasure. Since we trust each other's judgment, one of us has to go check things out. Or at least get more detailed information. I'm the logical choice."

"That doesn't mean you have to go alone," Win reiterated.

"Don't you get it? *I want* to go alone!" Zee lowered and leveled his voice. He was getting strident. "I'm not traveling with a damned entourage. The only way to get an inside view of that place is to be an inconspicuous loner."

"Just another anonymous perv, huh?" Tole said with a smirk.

"Something like that. Anyway, I can blend into a crowd a whole lot better than either of *you*. Boring prick that I am."

Now Win's eyebrows dipped. "What the hell is going on with you, Zee?" His expression changed as he apparently considered the possibilities. "Didn't you get to see Mirandi yesterday?"

"Yes, I did. So what's your point?"

"I'm not sure. Why don't *you* tell me?"

Zee was initially tempted to rant at Win, whose implication seemed to be that a man's moods hinged on whether or not he got laid. But a lecture would've been pointless. Sighing, he decided to come clean. They'd all figure it out sooner or later.

"Sebastian," Zee said.

The name met with more exchanged glances.

Win scratched at his forehead. "You mean, the same Sebastian who's —"

"Banging Mirandi. Yes, that one."

Tole looked down and tapped on the tabletop. Win's mouth puckered, holding in a smile. Pablo coughed.

"Ahh." Tole seemed uncertain how to proceed. It wasn't like him to be delicate. "Well, we weren't aware of how close they'd become." A bit sheepishly, he met Zee's gaze. "You know, that situation does have possibilities."

"No, it doesn't," said Zee.

"The man is, uh...really built. Pretty, too."

Silently, Zee simmered. He didn't need to be reminded. Of course Win and Tole knew about Sebastian's assignment to Villius. The Powers of the Iron Metroplex didn't conceal their identities the way the Powers of the Utopian Metroplex did. They had no need to.

Pablo pattered with his computer. "I don't think I've ever seen him." He was apparently pulling up Sebastian's file.

"Put him on the table," Tole said.

Pablo sounded an appreciative *hm* when he saw the image. He transferred it into 3-D, extracted the likeness, and directed it to the middle of the dining table.

Win's eyebrows lifted as Sebastian's image rotated in all its buff, blond glory. "So Seb stole your gal, huh?" Thoughtfully, he nodded. "Yep, that situation definitely has possibilities. I don't imagine you risked introducing yourself."

"Of course I didn't. He's only seen me from a distance."

"You think there's a chance Mirandi will tell him who you are?"

"No. She might be loose, but she isn't loose-lipped." Embarrassed by his resentment, not to mention his hypocrisy, Zee felt a flaring blush. He downed the rest of his juice.

As the other men continued to ogle the image, Zee made a scoffing sound and shook his head. His scorn had no clear target. Maybe it was his comrades—and, by extension, Mirandi—for their superficiality. Maybe it was Sebastian, who could very well be unworthy of all this admiration. Maybe it was himself.

In any case, he felt restive, eager to enter an environment that might free some of the bad boy in him and make him feel less like the nice guy who always came in last. Having Adam beneath him, writhing and exsanguinating, had done little to quell Zee's unsettled spirit.

"I need to work out for a while and then do more research," he said, sliding back from the table. "You two can hash out how I should proceed with this. Because I *am* going." Standing, Zee considered travel arrangements. "Pablo, please get me a reservation on a commercial helio. Tomorrow afternoon, if possible. Just don't make it a direct flight. Take me to Venturus, maybe, and then get me on a bullet from there to Xanandru."

"Zee," said Win, "you really should reconsider."

"No."

"Then stay here and talk with us."

"Later. Right now—" *Right now I need to sweat out the dull, the bland, the meek and mild and polite. I need to feel like a man instead of Thimien, the Angelic Dickless Wonder.* "Right now I just need some exercise."

Zee was halfway to the living room when Tole called out his name. He kept going.

Chapter Eight

In the privacy of his room, Zee did curls and push-ups and sit-ups until his muscles felt pan-fried. He showered for the second time that day, grabbed something to eat, then returned to his room and began prepping for his trip. Once he'd packed, he printed out a map and went over more documents.

Xanandru was a wealthy metroplex, always solidly in the black and close to Regenerie in terms of annual revenue. Regenerie's primary products were energy and health care. Research and development in both areas was constant and cutting-edge. X-land, true to its Pleasureplex moniker, offered every manner of carnal indulgence.

Establishments—most of which offered alcohol, drugs, and gambling in addition to specialty sex-sports—were defined by their focus. Hemale, shemale, female, cross or transsexual, hardlove, vamp, TVR or tactile virtual reality, fet or fetish in boundless variety, machine or robotic sex, and more. Strange as some of these offerings were, they theoretically involved consenting adults, or catered to the desires of adults, and thus fell within the bounds of acceptability. There were also voms or vomitories and pharmies or drug dens—again, unpleasant or even revolting places to most people, but not in violation of creature rights.

Far more troubling were the reports of darker goings-on, to which X-land's law enforcement reputedly turned a blind eye. These were the things Zee would need to look into. Regenerie could do nothing to alter the face of Xanandru, since each metroplex was a sovereign political entity, but a multimetroplex trade embargo would prove mightily persuasive in getting X-land at least to *wash* its face. More extreme measures were also possible, but they were a last resort.

Zee would have to take plenty of money, dress inconspicuously, and summon his acting skills. Snooping around shouldn't be a problem if he asked the right questions of the right people. All hybrids loved a challenge.

* * * * *

When he awoke *this* evening, Ridley didn't feel the familiar rush that normally came when his eyes greeted the darkness. He felt torpid, and the night's embrace had a hint of foreboding.

Still, he went where need led him—to a donor. Tonight, he happened to find a pair of donors—right in Sang Station, the Undercity neighborhood where vampires lived, occasionally stayed, or just came to socialize. Humans from other UC neighborhoods often hung out in Sang. They not only considered it trendy, they sometimes encouraged vampiric attention. Ridley had little difficulty finding a willing hetero couple. Afterward, he let them take care of each other and immediately went home, which was only a couple of streets away.

Questions, doubts, regret all filled his mind like flocking blackbirds. They didn't only have to do with Tole. Last night's strange e-mail threatened to shoot Ridley's travel plans to hell. Curiosity gnawed at him. If nothing else, he wanted to know what had prompted the unexpected contact. It didn't feel right. In fact, it felt very wrong.

Up until the moment he'd read that startling message, he'd considered going to the Visionary Metroplex of Specula and then move on from there. Ridley didn't like Specula. Hated it, in fact. It was an eerie, colorless place, a quiet hive of universities and research laboratories. But he had a compelling reason to overcome his aversion.

A vampirologist in Specula had developed a drug that could possibly make nocturnal vampires tolerant of daylight. It wouldn't make them *entirely* diurnal—they'd still be more vigorous at night and couldn't spend hours on end in strong sunlight—but at least they'd be able to function around the clock. About six weeks into his relationship with Tole, Ridley had made a three-day trip to the Visionary Metroplex and volunteered to take the drug. Tole wasn't aware of the experiment.

Since then, every night in the last hour before dawn, Ridley took a little yellow pill. So far it had slightly weakened his night vision and made his skin less sensitive. Both were anticipated side effects.

The only way to determine if the drug was achieving its intended result, though, was for Ridley to be subjected to simulated sunlight. That wasn't possible in Regenerie. Although the Undercity was flooded with simulated sunlight from dawn to dusk, because it made life bearable for most sub dwellers, its intensity was impossible for Ridley to gauge. His tolerance had to be tested under strictly controlled laboratory conditions. And before that happened, his biological clock had to be reengineered via the drug. It wouldn't hurt to check in with Dr. Kushner ahead of schedule and get a better grasp of his progress.

Ridley had started taking the drug because of Tole. He felt he had to do *something*. Now, he was afraid it wouldn't be enough. But he'd begun the regimen, so he might as well follow through.

After suffering the cool sterility of Specula, Ridley had intended to go someplace that was the opposite of barebones. The High Metroplex of Lux was known for its jewelry, designer clothing, custom furnishings, and cultural richness. A visit to Lux was always a delight. Ridley figured he'd treat himself to a shopping spree and museum visits, fine dining and shows.

But now...

He stopped before he ascended the stairs to his house's second story and brought up the e-mail that could trash his itinerary. Scowling and shaking his head in bewilderment, he read through it twice. Why, after nine years and a less than amicable split, would an old lover be begging for his company? The enigma darkened the more he thought about it.

After washing up, Ridley went to his bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Like all his decor, it was antique—a masterpiece of springs and stuffing and hand-carved cherry on which he and Tole had spent many satisfying hours. They didn't just make love on the bed; they talked and laughed, read to each other and played chess. No matter what they did, their touches were fond and frequent.

Turning on a bedside lamp, although he didn't need to, Ridley stared at the phone. His heart chugged audibly; his stomach churned silently. Sang Station seemed too quiet. Ridley suddenly realized it was *always* quiet. Even on Darkside Lane, Sang's social hub, residents and guests weren't inclined to rowdiness.

He could've used some noise right now, some distraction from his thoughts, some inducement to venture beyond Regenerie's silent Undercity and civilized Overcity and into a place where he could lose himself for a while. Only he was no longer sure *where* he wanted to lose himself. Or how.

He didn't want to make that call to Tole, but he made it. He felt even more burdened by guilt in light of the unexpected e-mail message.

The phone rang for a while before Tole picked up.

"Hi. Are you busy?" Ridley absently rubbed his belly. His stomach felt like shit, wormy with anxiety.

"Not too." Tole's voice was deep, unintentionally seductive. "You still going on your trip?"

"Yeah. I'll be leaving right after I get up tomorrow evening."

There was a bloated pause, heavy and unpleasant.

"I'm going to miss you," Ridley confessed. Saying more would've been counterproductive. "You've become..." Now he was truly at a loss. He didn't want this to sound like the rueful farewell speech it was.

"Your other half?" Tole said with the faintest stain of sarcasm.

Or maybe there was no sarcasm. Ridley winced. Damn, Tole could be impenetrable. He'd started out that way in their relationship—defensively wry and

insouciant, a bit distant. His carapace, Ridley had discovered, protected a vulnerable underbelly. Little by little he'd exposed himself. Now he was shielded again.

"Yes," Ridley said quietly, "in a way." He tried to inject some levity. "Although it isn't too flattering, being the other half of a vampire. Whatever *that* is. Hope you're not offended."

"No, not at all." A brief lapse into tenderness.

"Shit, Tole, I don't know what I'm saying. I just hate leaving, that's all."

"Do you?"

Ridley frowned. "Of course I do." He got the impression Tole wasn't buying this hasty-departure-due-to-unfinished-business crap. "Why don't you believe me?"

Another pause. "Maybe a vampire doesn't need or want another half. Maybe it's a burden. Maybe it's like having an angel clinging to his back."

Ridley was stymied.

"Maybe you don't realize it yet. Or you're just beginning to."

Maybe he's right. Oddly enough, the possibility irked Ridley. "You know, sweetheart, a vampire is more of a burden to an ordinary man than an ordinary man is to a vampire. So maybe *you're* the one who's—"

Tole didn't let him finish. "Jesus, Ridley, don't call me 'sweetheart.'" He pulled in a deep breath and expelled it. "Do what you've got to do."

"I *will* miss y—"

"Enjoy your trip."

"Tole—"

He'd hung up.

* * * * *

The ringing phone had broken Zee's concentration. He lifted his head and listened, heard the low rumble of Tole's voice in the adjoining room.

Zee felt a stitch of compassion. Trying not to be distracted by it, he gathered his concentration. Within moments, it was broken again. He heard a muffled commotion in Tole's room. Son of a bitch had a much wilder mix of angelic and demonic genes than he or Win. If Tole was upset, anything could be going on in there.

Leaving the orderly, stark confines of his own private space, Zee approached Tole's eclectic mass of junk. A knock on the closed door drew no invitation to enter. Zee eased it open anyway. The widening fan of hallway light fell over a tall form sitting on the air bed. Tole immediately said, "On," and the lamp on his nightstand shed a nimbus of light. He snatched up a palmer, touched its screen, and began to read. Or pretended to. Zee sat beside him.

"I don't recall asking you in," Tole said to the screen.

"It sounded like...you'd punched the wall. More than once."

Tole didn't look up. "Oh? Maybe I dropped something."

Knowing he wouldn't get more of an answer than that, Zee tilted toward the palmer. "What are you reading?"

"'A Brief, Unofficial History of the Great Event,'" Tole recited. He tacked on an acerbic footnote. "In preparation for my exciting vacation."

"You know all about the Darkening." Zee reached for the compact computer. "You don't need to refresh your memory."

Tole swept his hand out of Zee's reach. "Here's a bit about the museum: 'The large caldera,'" he read, "'now known as Memory Lake, spreads like a natural reflecting pool at the foot of the Great Event Memorial, designed by famed architect Harold Gemmish.'"

"Tole—"

"Didn't Gemmish do a shitload of buildings in Lux?" Without waiting for an answer, which he certainly didn't care about, Tole scrolled back and read another section. "'The destruction wrought by the supervolcano did not end with its eruption, which was far worse than anyone had anticipated. Not only were death and destruction left in its immediate wake, but for decades afterward, the world was further ravaged by famine, disease, and outbreaks of violence that ranged from urban guerrilla fighting to tribal warfare to terrorist attacks. The less devastated regions preyed on the more devastated, and then, drunk with power, all but destroyed each other.'"

Tole stopped reading and stared at some point between a throw rug patterned with chess pieces and a shelving unit heaped with old print books. The rest of the story wasn't on his handheld computer; it wasn't for public consumption. What he recited next, which he did mechanically, he pulled from his memory. It was part of a confidential cache of knowledge to which only hybrids were privy. They'd all learned about the Grand Design shortly after they'd learned of their special status.

"As remaining humans, driven by common interests, banded together, the Ulti intervened. Homo sapiens could no longer be entrusted with the planet's, or each other's, safekeeping. Youthful hybrids, heretofore unrecognized as Exceptional Beings, were touched by the Ulti and called upon to serve their fellow man. Thus, as new city-states began to rise, the EBs were sent to lead them—from chaos to order and from savagery to civilization. Once in power, the EBs were allowed their way, trusted to govern as they saw fit."

Finally, Tole glanced at Zee. He wasn't exactly sneering, but he seemed to want to. "Do you think of yourself as an Exceptional Being? Or Win?" He tossed the palmer aside. "Or me?"

"The more I learn about the Powers of different metroplexes," Zee confessed, thinking of Villius and Xanandru, "the less exceptional I think hybrids are. Maybe the Ulti should've sent *pure* angels to run things."

This drew a wan smile from Tole. "Instead of mutts." He hunched forward, arms resting on thighs. "Exceptional Beings, my ass. We're freaks. We're a jumble of raw materials nobody could figure out how to put together properly."

Zee matched Tole's smile and then gave his bony knee an affectionate shake. "The three of us can be proud. We've done a good job with Regenerie."

Tole stared at his empty hands. "But not always with our own lives."

"We're still young. Our experiences are far from over. There isn't much change that happens overnight."

"Isn't there?" Tole nudged the little computer, now resting between them. "Maybe *you* should read up on the Darkening again."

"We're not talking about the Darkening," Zee said gently. "We're talking about something else. And it's a lot more personal."

Tole didn't deny this. Usually, when anybody got too close to one of his well-guarded secret truths, he'd start snapping. His silence didn't bode well. It meant he was hurting.

Zee didn't know what to do when Tole was hurting any more than Win would've known what to do. Leave him alone, probably, and rely on his natural resilience to bring him around. But this could be a lot more serious than any of them realized. Hybrids didn't have an easy time falling in love, and for a demon-heavy hybrid like Tole, it must be like a screw twirled into the brain.

Stretching out on the rectangular cushion of air, Tole linked his hands over his forehead and stared at the ceiling. "I think," he said, "having a personal life is highly overrated."

Zee couldn't argue. His own excursion into that territory hadn't exactly proved fruitful. Of the three of them, only Win had thus far found his heart's desire...and even for him, understanding and acceptance of what he felt hadn't come easily.

"Well," Zee said, slapping his thighs and rising from the bed, "at least we have no shortage of sexual outlets." He couldn't come up with anything better than that. His own disappointment was still too fresh.

As he walked to the door, he heard Tole murmur, "I just wish that would suffice. Like it used to."

Part II

The Sunless Sea

Chapter Nine

Xandrinu, now Xanandru, was even wilder and glitzier than Ridley remembered. The lights were almost blinding; the noise level, near deafening. Beneath its dome, or cluster of domes, nature had been deconstructed. There was no staid march of hours here but only a riotous, perpetual noon.

A shallow river dotted with tour boats bisected the metroplex. Semicircular streets lined with close-packed buildings fanned out on either side, buildings that flashed, blinked, glimmered, and sometimes even moved to get visitors' attention. Ridley stopped in front of one place whose exterior seemed to undulate. It made him dizzy. As he proceeded down the street called Hedonist Alley, he passed a two-story "orgy house" that intermittently rose up and settled down, and another, taller building that kept shifting its appearance. None of Xanandru's structures was over five stories. The air taxi, continuously dodging and weaving overhead, needed room to fly.

The overriding cacophony quickly became more than Ridley could bear. Clashing music and the abrasive voices of hawkers poured out of doors and windows. Some establishments even broadcast what were supposed to be alluring sounds—laughter, heavy breathing, stuttering moans, cries of pain. Ridley found them ludicrous and annoying, like bad porn.

Too much. Within an hour of entering the metroplex, he stopped at a street vendor's cart and bought sunglasses and noise blockers. The latter, which slipped smoothly into his auditory canals, were surprisingly comfortable.

Moving still farther from the central river, he made his way toward Blood Alley, the unoriginally-named street where hotels and clubs catered specifically to vampires and "vampies," the humans who were enamored of creatures of the night. Ridley had never understood the fixation, although he had ample reason to appreciate it. Most vampires were eager donors. He wouldn't have to search for sustenance in Xanandru.

Both the blare and glare were considerably lower on Blood Alley. The street had overarching noise walls, like enormous black clamshells, sprouting from behind its various establishments and effectively shielding it from the general metropex madness. It was also sunk in never-ending, false twilight.

Ridley pulled the mufflers from his ears and the sunglasses from his face and tried to get his bearings. There was a small, quiet hotel, the Carfax, in which he'd stayed nine years ago. The owners made every effort to provide a peaceful haven for their guests. Each room had a sturdy door fitted with a sturdy lock, curtains no light could penetrate, a clean, state-of-the-art bathroom, and a luxurious bed. The Carfax also stocked outveined blood, which came chilled in bottles like champagne. Ridley couldn't stand the stuff. Cold blood made him nauseated, and if it sat out long enough to come up to room temperature, it began to degenerate or even coagulate. He'd only resort to it in an emergency, when nausea was preferable to far graver illness or death.

A woman passed Ridley from behind as he stood on the sidewalk, her hand trailing suggestively down his arm as she walked by. Smiling, she turned to face him. A vampie, no doubt. She didn't have the natural pallor of a vampire, and her clothing and makeup suggested she wanted to draw attention to herself.

"Need help finding something?" she cooed, looking up at him from beneath painted and lengthened lashes.

Her curly, ginger-colored hair made Ridley think of Zee, which in turn made him think of Tole. He'd been trying not to think of Tole. The slightest reminder of Tole weakened his resolve.

"No, thank you," he said. "I've been here before." He didn't want the woman to know where he'd be staying. She'd likely show up at his hotel room door.

"How about a host? Need a host?"

"No, I'm set."

She feigned a pout. "You won't be set indefinitely."

"True." Ridley peered over her shoulder, trying to see the telltale crest that was centered over the Carfax's small portico.

The woman's pout reversed itself, became an engaging smile. "I *really* love the way you look. You're like a panther, dark and sleek."

"Thank you," Ridley said distractedly. He thought he spied the Carfax maybe three-quarters of a block ahead on the curving street.

"Sooooo..." The woman put a hand to his chest. Her fingers tripped down the buttons of his lavender shirt. "Want to keep me in mind for your next sip?"

Ridley tried to smile. "Sorry, but I rather like men." Actually, a woman would do—fresh blood was fresh blood, after all—but he didn't want to deal with the sexual aftermath.

That statement of preference was all it took. The woman whirled away, heels clicking sharply on the sidewalk. When she turned into a club a few doors down, Ridley made a beeline for the Carfax.

Once he was settled into his cream and tea-green room, the questions that had plagued him since he read the strange e-mail message began to nettle him again. Did he really want to pass beneath the dark archway that read A SAVAGE PLACE, the archway that led to a steep, cobbled path carved into the earth beneath Xanandru? He vividly remembered that chasm, its rocky walls bathed in the silvery blue of false moonlight. The tame metroplex river plunged into this crevasse, following a carefully engineered channel that made the waters turbulent yet kept them from overrunning the narrow roadway.

As Ridley relaxed on the body-fitting chaise longue in his room, enjoying a glass of passable merlot, he recalled glimpsing the eerie fountain that gushed up from the gorge. The fountain's topmost plumes were visible from most points in the metroplex. His skin seemed to shrink as he thought about venturing that way again—down into the artfully carved ice caverns that were never cold.

"Shit," he whispered, wishing he'd stuck to his original plan and instead gone to Specula and Lux.

Damn his years in academia. Damn his inquiring mind.

He knew he wouldn't have trouble passing through the well-guarded archway. His name and face alone would probably make a retinal scan unnecessary. But...

Did he really want to see Andrew again? Did he really want to find out how much more crazed that demented fucker had become?

* * * * *

Zee had stopped at three tourist-information kiosks in the manic metroplex of Xanandru before he realized how hard it would be getting useful information from nearly robotic civic employees. He'd been too circumspect in his inquiries, and they didn't seem to grasp what he was after.

He also realized he was forestalling the inevitable. The best guides to X-land's underworld would likely be regular visitors to the pleasureplex. Finding the *right* regular visitor—namely, someone whose tastes ran to the abusively perverse—meant Zee would have to start patronizing establishments he found none too savory. Then he'd have to trust his instincts to lead him to a scumbather.

It wouldn't be easy. Zee's own experiences in Regenerie, which included visits to the submarine penal colony, had taught him that scumbathers often couldn't be distinguished from schoolteachers. Hell, sometimes the two were one and the same. Pablo had even had a couple of ugly brushes with a sadist who was one of Regenerie's Vips.

Chuckling his sense of propriety into the gutter, Zee decided to try a more brazen approach. He walked up to another manned kiosk. There was one on every other street, in addition to the automated stations, and each glittery, hexagonal, ruby red hut was topped by a sign that asked, WHAT'S YOUR PLEASURE? The question, nonmaterial and unattached to the structure beneath it, repeatedly glowed into brightness and faded, pulsing like a lonely orgasm in the climate-controlled and carefully filtered air.

Zee picked a shirtless male kiosk worker. A length of silvery chain fell from the leather collar he wore, snaking between perfect, hairless pecs. The name tag that dangled from the end of the chain read *Kyle*.

This tourist guide, like the others, immediately snapped into greeting mode. "Welcome to Xanandru, sir. What's your pleasure?" His smile, like his attire, was intentionally tantalizing.

"Men," Zee said. "Young men. Younger than myself. I want to be able to play with them, do things to them." He couldn't bring himself to be more explicit and say *the younger, the better*. The words that had already left his mouth prompted him to blush.

"You don't look that old yourself," Kyle said, eyeing him. "How young do you mean?"

Zee couldn't say it, just couldn't brand himself a pedophile. The thought alone disgusted him. Profoundly embarrassed by this charade, he almost turned away. "Just...young and firm," he managed to answer.

Unfazed, Kyle continued to fish for specifics. "What kinds of things do you want to do?"

Zee blinked. He felt like a sin-prone clergyman. "I want...I like...you know, the usual things." *Idiot. What the hell are 'the usual things'?* He'd had no idea how difficult it would be for him to play this role.

"Bondage?" Kyle asked. "Domination?"

"Yeah. Like...slavery."

"Blood?"

Frowning, Zee moved his head forward. "I beg your pardon?"

"Do you want to see blood, draw blood?"

Zee swallowed, shrugged. "Maybe. And...resistance."

The guide's eyebrows drew together. "Do you mean nonconsensual acts?"

Heat flared in Zee's cheeks. He had to press on, had to. Physical abuse and forcible rape, including gang rape, had turned up in the reports. If he could find evidence of any of these... "I, uh, I just want to find males who are young and, uh...helpless."

"The Pleasureplex of Xanandru does not encourage or condone nonconsensual acts or assault of minors," Kyle said stiffly. And likely by rote. It was impossible to tell if he knew more or not. Despite how scantily clad these information givers were, they either didn't know about the city's filthier attractions or were intent on playing ignorant.

Probably the former, Zee concluded. This Kyle guy, who looked to be in his late teens or early twenties, was simply reciting what he'd been instructed to say when a tourist seemed too interested in the dark side of gratification.

"Did you buy an X-land Tour Palmer when you got here?" Kyle asked. "I can transfer the appropriate Pleasure Nooks' names and locations to it."

Zee saw other kiosk employees connecting palmers to what must have been a central computer, then transferring data. "No," he said, "I neglected to."

"You should get one." Kyle turned to one of his coworkers. "Rick, we got any palmers left for sale?"

"I think Lula sold the last one about ten minutes ago," Rick answered.

As Zee looked around the crowded sidewalk, he saw a woman slowly weaving through the throng with a flat-panel device held out in front of her. "What's she doing?" he asked Kyle, who was reaching beneath the kiosk's interior counter.

"Who?"

"That woman who seems to be looking for something."

Kyle raised his head. Squinting, he followed the line of Zee's gaze. "Oh, she's a scanner. That's an A-reader she's holding. It's supposed to read people's auras."

"For what reason?"

Kyle rested his hand on the counter, a gate-folded paper held between thumb and forefinger. "I'm not sure. Someone told me scanners are looking for people with criminal tendencies. Someone else said they're just measuring excitement levels."

At this point, Rick spoke over his shoulder. "I don't think those are A-readers at all. I think they're weapon detectors."

"I wouldn't know," Kyle said. "My own job keeps me busy enough."

Part of his job was handing Zee a brochure printed on thin, resilient, grass-based paper. At least *that* was to X-land's credit. Chemical free, the paper and ink rapidly broke down and served as organic fertilizer.

Resuming his professional air, Kyle smiled. "You should find those establishments to your liking, sir."

After a final, uneasy glance at the scanner woman, Zee took the flyer and perused it. The places listed therein had names like By My Hand, Cuff and Dagger, The Wailing Ward, and Boys in Black.

"Don't confuse Cuff and Dagger with Cuff and Collar," Kyle said, pointing to those entries. "The first has hardlove, red. The second only has hardlove, blue. You can tell what each Nook offers by the dot or dots beside the name. There's a color code in the front of the brochure."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Zee slipped the flyer into his jeans pocket, wondering how he'd strike up conversations with other patrons of these establishments. He suspected they weren't exactly the sociable type, and they'd be resentful of anyone who seemed too inquisitive.

Just as he turned away, Kyle resecured his attention. "Oh, sir, you should also cruise Blood Alley. You might get off on watching a vamp-feed, especially with the right partner. A lot of visitors with your tastes go there."

The suggestion only depressed Zee. He thought of Tole, then of Ridley with Win and Ridley with Adam. But maybe he should follow Kyle's advice. He might run into some tourists on Blood Alley who found violence and gore appealing...and could direct him to X-land's unpublicized Pleasure Nooks.

Chapter Ten

There was enough night left for Ridley to descend into Andrew's cavernous ice palace, pay his regards, and get back to his room at the Carfax. Although he could very well be invited to spend the next day sleeping in the caves, he didn't relish the idea. Andrew had never had any qualms about curling up with Ridley as he slept. Or playing with him, for that matter.

The prospect held no appeal. Ridley was already wary of his old lover's motives. More important, he was too emotionally bound to Tole. Engaging in sex during or after a feed was one thing, and often unavoidable. But sinking into vampiric oblivion near a man who might fondle, fuck, or suck him *was* avoidable. Putting himself in that position would be the same as encouraging Andrew's attention, and Ridley knew he'd feel soiled with guilt if he did so.

He approached one of the two man-made green hills that flanked the Savage Place gate. A guard was stationed in each. Signs warned tourists not to approach the gate itself; if they did, a mild shock arrowed up through their feet. Persistence was met with greater force. Only the walkways leading to the guard stations were safe to tread.

"I'm here to see Andrew," Ridley told a burly man clad in a white and gold uniform. "By invitation."

The man's expression remained impassive. "Speak your name into the flower that emerges from the hillside to your left."

Ridley looked in that direction. A ring of purple petals, edged in gold, pushed up from the emerald grass. Stepping up to it, Ridley spoke his name into the rich yellow stigma at the flower's center. Before the bloom retreated, before he even had a chance to face the guard once more, he heard, "Proceed."

Simultaneously, the elaborate wrought iron gates slid into the hills, the cobblestone path yawned open, and a four-person carriage rose up from the ground. As

comfortable as it looked, Ridley didn't want to ride in it. He hated descending into the gorge, which soon became a dark burrow as it sank into the earth. Perhaps twenty meters in, the river that ran through the city above veered away from the path and into one of the surrounding natural caves. Its distant, gurgling murmur made the tunnel seem haunted.

Indulging his flair for the dramatic, Andrew had refused to light the way to his inner sanctum. It made the descent more mysterious, he said. But Ridley knew his primary motive had to do with his need for control. The dense, underground blackness not only disoriented visitors, it made them feel helpless. The sougling of the invisible river put them on edge. By the time they reached the ice caves, Andrew's guests felt appropriately cowed.

Bypassing the carriage, which would only prolong this unpleasant trip, Ridley rose off the ground and shot toward the caves. He concentrated on his destination and tried to ignore the feeling that he was being swallowed, a scrap of food shooting down a sinuous throat. He'd felt this way in the past—when he *was* little more than a piece of meat, making the same journey to satisfy Andrew's insatiable hunger.

Just before the path reached its terminus, it became a narrow bridge that arched over a subterranean pool nearly large enough to be a lake. The stream, emerging at this point from its hidden detour, spilled into the pool. Hidden blue and purple lights varnished the water's surface with a patchy, shifting glow.

Not far from the end of the bridge stood a pair of stout, impenetrable steel doors, veneered to match the surrounding rock. They slid open when the visitor carriage stopped before them. Ridley knew that motion detectors combined with a trigger mechanism on the path opened the doors. Slowing, he floated down to dim, parallel lines of light on the ground and stood on top of them. The camouflaged doors parted, and he stepped into a glistening white antechamber.

The rocky walls of the tunnel didn't extend into this space. Ridley now stood on the threshold of Andrew's lair. He was surrounded by ice.

* * * * *

"That one," said Zee, pointing at a beautifully muscled man. He couldn't see the guy's face—the four submissives or lowers who were lined up for selection all wore black hoods—but faces didn't matter at By My Hand. Only bodies, and willingness, mattered.

A creeping sensation along his shoulders, which seemed to originate at the base of his skull, alerted Zee to the presence of other hybrids. That didn't surprise him. A majority of EBs lived as ordinary people, and all had powerful sex drives.

"Private or public?" asked the manager. A pearl dangled from his left nipple, the jewel stark as an iridescent teardrop against his dark brown skin.

Zee found it mesmerizing. And hotter than hell. Self-consciously clearing his throat, he asked, "Could you explain? This is my first time here."

"Would you like your own room for this session," the manager said a bit condescendingly, "or do you prefer the open dungeon?"

Zee would normally have preferred privacy—he was a novice at this—but he could hardly hobnob with other Doms if he was secluded. "Public," he said.

The manager entered his customer's preference into the computer at his fingertips. Probably entered the sub's name, too. "Choose your gear," he said without looking up. The lobby's walls and display cases were loaded with all manner of hardlove playthings. A message strip crawled just beneath the juncture of walls and ceiling, informing customers that all "gear" was run through a sanitizer after use.

Zee was hardly reassured. He didn't have a clue what he was doing, sanitized gear or not.

"I'd rather let my lower choose," he said. "Until we're comfortable with each other."

Looking up, the manager nodded at the young man Zee had picked. He rose from the chair where he'd taken a seat and perused the establishment's offerings. Zee couldn't help but ogle him. He knew nothing about the guy except that he was Pablo's height, a shade over six feet, and twenty-three years old. He had a physique that could make even a het man swoon.

The sub wore a G-string and a vest, black and skintight, that covered only the center of his chest and back. His pecs were exposed. His ass was exposed. Nearly every part of his body was exposed, except his cock and balls, sternum and spinal column. And, of course, his head. His nipples were tight, rosy peaks, begging for attention.

Zee's cock began to swell against the removable codpiece of his chaps, the only unusual article of clothing he owned. He'd gotten them as a gift six years earlier and worn them but a few times. Silver spirals studded with onyx polyhedron beads wound around his biceps.

Glancing at him, the sub chose a paddle, riding crop, and small, handled wheel with sharp points around its rim.

The manager made note. Zee felt a more insistent squirming in his groin. Remaining silent, the sub, eyes lowered, handed his Dom the toys he'd chosen. Zee led their way into the public dungeon.

Two other pairs and one trio of men were using the space, which had a variety of fixtures and equipment. Acutely aware he was a pretender, Zee forced himself not to stare. The sounds coming from the men made it difficult to keep his attention trained on his own business.

A low beam covered in midnight blue velvet ran parallel to one wall, metal cuffs and dull spikes affixed to it at varying intervals.

"What's that?" Zee asked. No one was tethered to the beam, so it seemed a good place to station himself and his plaything.

"That's called the altar rail."

The answer didn't come from Zee's sub. Another man sauntered over to them. Paunchy and graying, he wore a red mask and a red tunic that showed legs furred with white hair. "Nice piece you picked," he said, lifting a silver dagger to indicate Zee's sub. "Maybe I'll have a go at him when you're through. See if he can take some stronger stuff. If he's willing, of course." His hazel eyes lowered to the toys Zee held. They didn't seem to meet with his approval. Too tame, probably, for a Dom who liked wielding knives.

Zee seized on the opportunity. "I just wish he were...a little younger."

The man's thin lips did a one-sided curl. "You like fingerlings, huh? Yeah, they can be sweet, but they don't have that kind of musculature. I like seeing muscles twitch, you know?"

Zee didn't know, at least not in *this* context. "You familiar with any clubs that offer...more tender pieces?" The question sounded both vile and moronic. Zee glanced at his lower, but the man's eyes remained downcast.

The talker sidled up to him. "You're not gonna find the freshest fish through any Tour Palmer, I guarantee you that. You new to X-land?"

"Yeah, it's my first time here."

"That's why you don't know nothin'. You need a sponsor to get into the shadows."

"The shadows?"

"The basements and back rooms where the really hard shit comes down. Once a sponsor gets you in for a trial run, you might get your own key. Be prepared to pay for it, though."

"Money's not an issue," Zee said. "Can I find out about other places once I get into the first? I have associates with a variety of tastes."

"Extreme?"

"A few of them. And they'll pay whatever they have to."

Thinking, the man tapped the flat of his dagger on his palm. "Okay, listen. I'm a trusted client at Twenty-three. These establishments don't have names, just numbers. Before one of us leaves, I'll give you a card. That'll be your referral. How you handle yourself after that is your problem. But once you have a key to any Nook in the shadows, you can get all the information you want about other Nooks. The shadows have their own pipeline."

"Thank you," said Zee. "I really appreciate it. Can I repay you somehow?"

This drew another unpleasant smile from the graying man. "I'd love to have you under me someday. Think you're willing to give that a try? You strike me as a switcher."

Zee tried to look and sound willing. Suggestively, he touched the man's weapon. "Sounds exciting. Sure, I'm game." He didn't know what the hell a "switcher" was and didn't care, since he didn't mean a word of what he said.

The man nudged Zee's left nipple with the dagger's point and then trundled away.

"Shit," Zee whispered. "In your dreams, asshole."

A muted cough that sounded like a laugh came from beneath his sub's hood.

Just before the graying man departed, Zee realized he wasn't capable of venturing into the shadows of X-land. He couldn't change what he was. Witnessing brutality and pretending to be excited by it—or, at the very least, blasé about it—required a psychic armor he simply didn't possess.

Had he the power to stop or prevent such acts, he would've done whatever was necessary. But he had no power here. In Xanandru, the EB Thimien was "just another anonymous perv." And he was at the mercy of X-land's law enforcement and justice systems.

He looked at his chosen sub. Silently and patiently, the young man waited to do his bidding.

Chapter Eleven

Ridley stared at the far wall of the antechamber. It, too, had hazy, blue-gray blots within its lividity, giving depth to the frosty white expanse. But there was a door within that sheet. He could feel Andrew standing behind it, waiting for him.

Skin pinching into gooseflesh, Ridley took five measured steps toward the wall. The moment he stopped, the ice sheet parted with a soft hiss.

"Ridley..." The sound was more a long exhalation than a word.

He wasn't aware of stepping through the doorway, wasn't aware of the room beyond. His vision was filled by Andrew, who lurched forward like a phantom from the flickering light at his back, eyes at once dead and hungry.

Swiftly, his fingers spanned Ridley's jaw, his face came forward, and he delivered a crushing kiss. It felt dry, papery, nothing like his earlier kisses. Even his tongue felt dehydrated.

Ridley's stomach clenched. He was about to disengage himself, regardless of Andrew's reaction, when a sharp burn sliced through his lower lip. Wincing, he did pull back. The fingertip he put to his mouth came away wearing a tiny cap of blood.

Andrew had cut open his lip.

"What the hell," Ridley whispered, again touching his mouth. He still couldn't bring himself to look Andrew square in the face.

"Did that hurt?" Andrew asked laconically.

"Enough to catch my attention." Ridley pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the cut. His blood, he noticed vaguely, looked different—not as dark, more like a mortal's. Maybe it was those pills. "You might consider trimming your nails."

Andrew lifted his hands and rotated his wrists. His nails were noticeably longer. The peaked ovals were snowy white; the crescents at their bases, black.

"I think not," he said in that same drowsy voice, studying them.

Before Ridley knew what was happening, Andrew's slender fingers splayed across his chest. Smiling, he curled them forward and slowly pulled them down. Sucking in a breath, Ridley jerked backward. His cock pulsed, wanting more. But *he* didn't want more. He grabbed Andrew's wrists and pulled Andrew's arms away from his body.

"Stop it. This is too much, too soon. I just got here."

Andrew's heavy-lidded gaze remained fixed on Ridley's shirtfront. "Still favor Givergny shirts, eh? You always did have the most impeccable taste, my dapper vampire. Did you choose the color just to please me?"

His thoughts in turmoil, Ridley glanced down at the shirt. He couldn't remember what color it was. Lavender. *That's right, he likes purple.*

"No," he said. "No, I just...grabbed it from my closet and put it on."

"Hm. I suspect the color choice was subconscious, then."

Bending at the waist as if he were bowing, Andrew extended his arms and backed away. He wore a purple cape with gold and white brocade around the edges. As he held it out, Ridley caught a glimpse of gold loincloth beneath it. There was nothing else to see but pale skin and a strange pattern of inkwork across his chest. Even his nipples were colored.

Andrew's dreamy voice floated toward Ridley. "Please, come in. I promise to behave with the utmost gallantry. The last thing I wish to do is alienate the affections of my once and future lover." He dipped lower, nearly touching his head to the floor.

Confused and uneasy, Ridley walked farther into the familiar, strange room. Stalactites and stalagmites adorned the vaulted ceiling and smooth floor. Many were imbued with soft light. Ridley had once asked if the structures were real or cleverly fabricated, like the cavern's icy walls, but Andrew had been typically evasive in answering the question. The room's furnishings—a haphazard arrangement of chairs, chaises, divans, and various-sized tables—seemed carved out of ice. But they, like the walls, weren't cold to the touch, and their severity was softened by fat, oversized pillows and plush coverlets. Real flames danced within a large, arched fireplace.

Ridley sat in a chair before the unmelting ice hearth and finally, fully looked at Andrew, who sank to the floor in front of him like a favorite pet.

"You've changed," Ridley said.

Andrew's lashes lowered, feathering his stark cheekbones. "You, of course, haven't."

Ridley continued to regard his old lover with an unsettling combination of curiosity, concern, and revulsion. Andrew's hair, coppery nine years ago, had faded to dull fawn and now bore two swatches as white as spun glass. It hung to his waist like the veil of a ghostly nun. He was thinner, too, but his muscles still had some definition.

Ridley thought of a willow branch covered in hoarfrost. "Look at me," he said quietly.

Andrew lifted his gaze. His eyes used to be breathtaking, the color of fresh orchids. Today they looked clouded, more hazy than dewy. The garish makeup—black liner on both lids, glittery gold shadow with dots of white—only enhanced the dullness of his irises.

Nine years earlier he'd been a handsome, magnetic young man. A bit flamboyant, but interesting and energetic and incredibly smart. He was also sexually supercharged. Over the course of mere months, however, Andrew began to seem more bizarre than beguiling. His drug use rose, his sex drive fell, and his taste in entertainment took some ugly turns. Everything and everybody in his world began to pivot on his eccentric ego.

This turn took the edge off Ridley's fascination. He left and never came back. Until now.

"Why did you want me here?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No."

Creeping forward, Andrew slid his hands up Ridley's thighs, halting his advance just short of Ridley's crotch. "Nothing touches me anymore. Nothing excites me the way you used to excite me."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I'm not the one who can—"

Andrew suddenly rose to his knees. "You," he said fiercely, "...are the only thing...I truly want." His hard nails darted forward and sank into the soft roll of Ridley's cock.

Again Ridley flinched, his hips jerking backward in the chair. Andrew persisted. His fingers and thumbs began a firm, rhythmic caress of Ridley's groin—pubic bone, thickening shaft, the tender juncture of thighs and pelvis.

"Andrew, stop it," Ridley said breathlessly.

He didn't stop. His fingers found the compressed bulge of Ridley's balls and deftly swirled over it. They slithered beneath Ridley's ass and traced its division, back and forth, through the cloth of his pants.

"Remember, darling, how I used to make love to you here?" Andrew murmured. "Just lick and stroke and probe until you were ready to jump out of your skin? Do you remember how it felt?"

"Shit." Ridley closed his eyes as his breathing accelerated. Yeah, he remembered. Son of a bitch rimmed exquisitely. And he was a marathoner.

Ridley's hips crept forward now, reflexively pushing against rather than pulling away from Andrew's ministrations. He wanted to resist, intended to resist, but he hadn't gotten off in...how long? He couldn't remember. Right now it felt like weeks.

Then, abruptly, Andrew did stop. He stood and pulled the loincloth away from his narrow hips.

Ridley slid a surreptitious glance down Andrew's body, and his brows rose. He tried not to stare at whatever patterned the man's groin. As colorful and meticulous as fine mosaic work, the design covered his shaved pubis, the length of his cock, and his upper thighs.

Fondly, Andrew flattened a hand against his own crotch. "It also extends farther back."

"What?" Ridley's gaze jumped back to his face.

Andrew wore a small, taunting smile. "The dragon you're admiring. You can't see all of it from the front. The best part, certainly" —he grasped his cock between two fingers and lifted it—"but not all."

Regardless of Andrew's assumptions, Ridley hadn't been admiring either the art or the body it adorned. He was too thunderstruck. "That can't be a tattoo."

"It can be. And it is."

"So it's permanent?" Ridley asked in disbelief. As sophisticated as body-art technology had become, there were some parts of the anatomy it was wise, for health reasons, to leave untouched.

"Yes, it's permanent." Andrew chuckled. "Don't look so horrified, darling. I'm quite satisfied with the level of craftsmanship."

"But the *pain* —"

"I felt no pain."

Andrew made the assertion with smug pride but didn't explain. Ridley figured he was doped up on something at the time. Even nine years ago, new drugs were constantly turning up in X-land, their development or importation probably encouraged by Andrew himself. In fact, he used to brag about his "private stock" the way wine connoisseurs bragged about the rare vintages in their cellars.

Andrew took a step closer, obviously intent on seducing Ridley—one way or another.

At that moment a clamor of voices and footsteps came from an adjacent room. One of several arched doors burst open, and five people—three men and two women—spilled into the parlor.

Eyes narrowing, Andrew gave them a murderous glance. He let his loincloth fall back into place but seemed far more infuriated than embarrassed. In fact, he didn't seem embarrassed at all.

Grateful for the interruption, Ridley felt his cock shrink. Now he had a reason to turn away from Andrew and his dragon. The newcomers pulled up short, their faces falling, when they noticed Andrew's displeasure.

"Oh, sorry," said one of the women. Her gaze briefly skittered in Ridley's direction then returned to Andrew. "We, uh...we've been looking all over for you."

"It's the middle of the night," Andrew said with menacing flatness. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"We were," said one of the men. "But a call came in from—" He, too, shot a nervous glance at Ridley.

"Please excuse me," Andrew said to his guest. "I'd expected privacy, but it seems some matter relating to the metroplex has cropped up. These people are Bertram, Tweet, Kalto, Midi, and Peyton. My aides. Well, four are my aides. Tweet is more like...a messenger and mascot."

Ridley smiled cordially and nodded in acknowledgment. Each of Andrew's "aides" either lifted a hand in greeting or nodded back. Ridley had no desire to introduce himself. He planned on leaving. Very soon.

"When Lorenzo and Pacemia ran off to set up housekeeping together," Andrew explained, "I took on some extra help." He strode over to the group.

Ridley tried not to seem nosy, but he couldn't help sliding an occasional glance at Xanandru's upper echelon.

Of course, he was used to Andrew having a retinue. The members of it were invariably as young and outrageous as he. This group was no exception. They either had wild hair or no hair. Most of their faces bore smudged makeup as well as piercings and tattoos. Both women and two of the men had beautiful bodies. The exception, likely the guy called Tweet, was unusually short and scrawny. And very odd-looking.

Ridley had a flashing recollection of uninhibited orgies, of offered blood flowing so freely down his throat that he became drunk on it. There were different people then—different, but essentially the same.

The memories sickened him.

He missed Tole.

Andrew's aides spoke in hushed, earnest voices. Ridley would normally have been able to hear them clearly, but Andrew was a hybrid with certain superhuman abilities. He was likely muting or "shielding" the discussion. Ridley could only catch isolated words and phrases.

All hybrids, Andrew once told him, were born with an affinity for magic, an innate capacity to perform supernatural acts. Each hybrid's type and degree of paranormal power depended on a number of complex factors. Like the unique genetic legacy known as his A-D-H or angel-demon-human ratio, and how well he trained and honed his natural abilities. Degree of intelligence was important too.

Although Andrew had never divulged his A-D-H ratio to Ridley, it was clear he'd once been a force to be reckoned with. Visionary and creative, he was largely responsible for Xanandru's rise to super-metroplex status. Now Ridley wondered if he might someday be responsible for its fall.

Growing more restive, he wanted to flee back to his hotel room, take his pill, and fall into a dead sleep on those crisp, clean sheets. Although he'd been trying assiduously *not* to think of Tole, he now welcomed such thoughts.

Just as he was about to rise from the ice chair, Ridley heard more muffled words drift from the clutch of people at the other side of the room. He picked up “self-righteous assholes” and “troublemakers,” then something about a “presidio.” There also seemed to be talk of Xanandru’s tourist industry.

Ridley wasn’t interested. He got up.

Andrew’s gaze immediately shot in his direction. “Ridley, where are you going?” He loped over to his guest.

“I have to get back to my hotel.”

Looking distressed, Andrew stroked both sides of Ridley’s face. “Stay with me. You know you’ll be safe here. You know I’ll take care of you.”

Ridley suppressed a shudder as those long, white and black nails repeatedly skated down his cheeks. “There are things in my room I need.” He gently grasped Andrew’s wrists. “Really, Andrew, I do have to leave.”

His host looked torn. “You’ll return tomorrow evening, won’t you? You’ll feed from me and spend the night with me?” Uncertainly, he smiled. “You know what a marvelous time we used to have together. You remember that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Ridley whispered, “I remember.”

Sadness engulfed him like a sudden, dank fog. The vibrant young man he’d once known, the confident leader of a major metroplex, was now a pathetic caricature of a libertine. And he was groveling for an ex-lover’s attention.

“Say you’ll come back,” Andrew implored.

Ridley’s mouth twitched, trying to smile. “All right. I’ll come back.”

He had no intention of coming back. Now that he knew what Andrew had become and why Andrew wanted him there, Ridley couldn’t stand the thought of spending another minute with him.

The way he saw it, that lie was his only route to freedom. He quailed at the thought of how far Andrew might carry his desperate obsession. Ridley had been the target of obsession before. His memories of Keryss, the former High Lady of Villius, were still frighteningly fresh.

Chapter Twelve

Zee turned back to his sub, who keenly excited him. What the hell? he thought. He'd paid enough to be here, so he might as well enjoy it.

"Do you, uh...like this spot?" he asked, and immediately realized it was a gaffe — Uppers called the shots, not lowers. But now that he'd made a significant breakthrough thanks to the graying man, he could afford to be considerate. Domination didn't come naturally to him. Because of their natures, most hybrids preferred a give-and-take approach to sex.

"It's fine," said the young man. "Shall I kneel in front and lean over it?"

"Go ahead." The prospect plumped Zee's cock, which had lost some of its girth during that conversation with the knife lover.

The sub obligingly knelt in front of the rail, extended his arms, and slipped his wrists into the nearest cuffs. Apparently touch-activated, they snapped shut, leaving him pinioned. He leaned forward, offering his round, bare ass to Zee's whims.

Zee's respiration picked up speed. He might be a reluctant Dom, but he knew a gorgeous butt when he saw one. And this one was as smooth and perfectly molded as the rest of the man's body.

Lifting the riding crop, he traced the tight fissure between those creamy cheeks then lightly rimmed and probed the barely visible hole. The touch elicited a small squirm, a few dainty contractions. He poked and stroked more firmly, but only at the tender perimeter. A low fluttering sound came from the sub's throat.

Emboldened, Zee put down the crop and lifted the paddle. He slapped one cheek and then the other.

"Harder," the sub murmured. "Make it real."

Zee's cock swelled, pushing against the codpiece. He spanked the twin mounds more aggressively, the smacking noise exciting him as much as the red flush that soon

tinctured the satiny skin. The sub flinched and responded with a guttural cry at each stroke. Zee's excitement spiraled. He wanted to paddle the man's whole body.

Dropping his instrument, Zee hastily unsnapped the manacles. "Turn around."

The sub did so and sat on his haunches. His cock had formed a thick arch within the G-string's pouch.

Zee pressed the paddle against the arch and felt its resistance. The sub squirmed. Zee pressed again, harder, and rubbed. Then he tapped the bundle. A throttled sound came from deep in the sub's throat.

"Free it," Zee said breathlessly, "then resecure your wrists."

The sub did as he was told. As soon as his cock sprang, fully erect, from its enclosure, Zee ripped off his codpiece. His own prick was hard and stood nearly straight out from his hips. Hearing the raspy breaths that came from beneath the sub's hood made his balls tighten and sting.

Once the young man was bound again, his chest thrust forward, Zee began to tease his nipples with the tip of the riding crop. They were even more prominent now, delectably taut and high. The man twisted his upper body and moaned.

"Do you like that?" Zee asked, his voice thick with lust.

"Yes. I like...everything about you...sir."

Dropping to his knees, Zee grabbed the punisher wheel. He ran it in shrinking circles over those hard, hilly chest muscles until the wheel's points traced the perimeter of each areola.

"More," the man exhaled. "Rougher."

Zee rolled the wheel over each nipple—up and down, back and forth. He guided it down the man's torso and ran it over his cock. As soon as he heard the sub's response—a whimpering, wavering cry—he pulled open the black vest and shoved it down the sub's shoulders.

His mouth replaced the wheel, lips sealing against the young man's damp chest, teeth closing on one erect nipple and pulling. He tongued the nub as he bit it. The sub's cries drove him crazy with arousal. Easing the pressure of his bite, he gently sucked and laved.

"Will you punish me if I come, sir?" the sub asked in a halting voice.

Zee raised his head. It felt ready to topple from his shoulders. "I doubt it." His cock twitched into a little tantrum, clamoring for its own relief.

"May I come while you fuck me?"

This game was wearing thin. Zee wanted to feel that fine body crushed against his. He wanted to kiss his onetime lover, feel *his* touch.

Freeing the man's wrists, he said, "Take off the hood."

The sub hesitated. "Forgive me, sir, but I don't think—"

"Don't you like to kiss?" Zee asked impatiently.

"Yes, I love it. I'd love to kiss *you*. But —"

"Then do it! Jesus..." Zee's cock had started to leak. He got to his feet. To hell with all this impersonal manipulation.

Standing too, the sub worked the hood off his head. "I'm sorry, Zee."

Just as the shock of hearing his name hit Zee, a new stunner overwhelmed it. He recognized the face beneath the mask.

"I've wanted you for weeks," Sebastian murmured. His hands closed around Zee's face.

He had clear green eyes.

Their mouths came together with a wanton eruption of appetite. Another feeling instantly supplanted Zee's astonishment—the desire that had been growing alongside his petulant resentment. As Sebastian's soft lips pressed heatedly against his, their tongues thrusting and tangling, Zee knew this was what he'd wanted all along.

Zee's jealousy had been provoked by Mirandi having this gorgeous man, not by *him* captivating *her*. And he'd been vexed because he felt honor-bound not to pursue his attraction.

The men's hands began a desperate exploration of each other's body—smooth face to rolling shoulders, muscle-banded back to rocky biceps. They caressed each other's chest. How, Zee wondered, could he not have recognized that spring of lemony hair? Even misted with sweat, it was soft as down. He rubbed his cheek against it, plucked at it with his lips.

Gliding his hands over Sebastian's back and ass, which he touched tenderly, Zee sank to a squat and kissed Sebastian's whipcord abdomen, his froth of red-gold pubic hair, his tall cock.

Sebastian's fingers curled over Zee's head. "Let me suck you. I've dreamt about it."

Zee immediately got up and sat on the rail, legs spread. He didn't give a damn how many other men were in the room or what they were doing. His cock jutted from the open crotch of his chaps, waiting.

Sebastian knelt before him. Zee panted, anticipation dizzying him, as the golden boy's head dipped forward. His hand closed around the base of Zee's rod, and his mouth slid down to meet his hand.

Zee tensed and quivered. His breath seemed to snag on his ribs as he drew it in, held it, and let it out in clipped puffs. Lightly, he touched Sebastian's blond curls. Then he gripped them.

The young man's mouth was moist and warm, its suction firm and irresistible. Sebastian's tongue pulled along the shaft's underside, following its thick cylinder. His sweet lips closed around the head. He alternately sucked and nibbled as his hand began a cajoling pump.

Zee thought he'd fall off his perch. He leaned over and buried his face in Sebastian's sweat-dampened hair. It smelled of chamomile.

"Oh, baby," he breathed out. He feathered kisses against the silk.

Sebastian was making love to him, tugging at the center of him. Nobody had worked his cock this way in longer than he could remember. At the moment, it was the only thing in his life that mattered.

The coil within him sprang open. Its rhythmic vibrations sent an avalanche of pleasure throughout his body and shot cum down Sebastian's open throat. He continued to suck and swallow in time to Zee's release.

Zee felt as much as heard the grunt Sebastian made as he stiffened. Cream began to plume out of his own rigid cock. Amazing, Zee thought with a languid smile, how strongly a twenty-three-year-old could ejaculate. A few small dollops hit Zee's inner thigh and dribbled sluggishly down the synthetic leather.

Shyly, Sebastian smiled up at him.

Zee touched the side of his face. "I think we need to talk."

"You're right."

* * * * *

They left By My Hand together after turning in their toys and changing into their street clothes. Although Zee had been too preoccupied to notice, the graying man had dropped a card—that magic ticket to the shadows—on top of the paddle Zee had used so enthusiastically.

"Care to spend the rest of the night in my room?" Sebastian asked as they wended their way through X-land's crowds.

He was, Zee quickly discovered, modest and soft-spoken and thoroughly, guilelessly charming. The opposite of what Zee, in his dour frustration, had imagined him to be.

"I'll bet my room's nicer," Zee said. "Actually, it's a suite. I decided to travel in style." Truth was, he suspected the new coleader of Villius didn't have plentiful funds at his disposal. At least, not the funds a coleader of Regenerie had.

"Lead the way," Sebastian said with another disarming smile.

The guy was adorable. Together, they headed for the Hotel Bacchus. Zee didn't expect to get much sleep.

He didn't give a crap how selfish he was being.

* * * * *

"All she told me was your name and that you were an Alterationist from Regenerie," Sebastian said. He filled two champagne flutes and handed one to Zee, who

sat beside him on a plush, dusty rose loveseat. "I didn't even know you were an EB until you came into By My Hand." He touched his glass to Zee's. "I'm so glad you did."

Zee was glad, too. They'd just showered together, and Zee had been on the receiving end of one royal fuck. He contentedly sipped his drink. "I'm not a Dom, you know."

"No offense, but that's pretty obvious. I was trying to encourage you to be more aggressive so you wouldn't seem out of place."

"You *wanted* me to be more aggressive?"

Sebastian shrugged. "I could've handled it, even though I'm not a traditional sub. I just like some mild kink now and then."

"And I'm sure as hell not a pedophile," Zee hastened to add. He had to get that straight. "I was only pretending to be one. I'm here to do some research for —"

"The Powers of Regenerie." Sebastian took a drink. "Yeah. Mirandi said your coven worked with them. She mentioned the Triumvirate was investigating Xanandru and might take some action. That's what gave *us* the idea to do it. We're intent on proving that Villius has standards now."

Zee nodded. "Good. You'll have to work hard to undo the old, negative impressions."

Sebastian had said nothing about a trade embargo, so Zee didn't broach the subject. He didn't know just how much Mirandi had told her coleader, but it seemed she hadn't given away Zee's biggest secret. Sebastian still didn't know Zee was one of the Powers of Regenerie.

"What have you found out?" Zee asked. "Anything?"

"A little, but I've only been here a couple of days." Sebastian set his glass on the table in front of the loveseat. "There's supposedly a wooded area called the Maze where people are hunted. Either naked or nearly so. Some guy approached me in a bar and asked if I was the 'sporting type.' I played along and said I was. That's when he told me about this place and offered to get me in."

The revelation was troubling. "As a hunter," Zee asked, "or as prey?"

"I don't know. He did say nobody was ever killed or badly hurt."

"Did you believe him?"

"Not entirely." Sebastian idly stroked Zee's arm then let his hand come to rest on Zee's thigh.

Zee covered his hand, his fingers slipping between Sebastian's. "So what's this sport's payoff?"

"If the hunter manages to trap or disable the prey, he can do whatever he wants to that person. If the prey manages to escape, he or she gets a gullion *and* the option of punishing the hunter."

Zee shook his head. He didn't buy it. "I doubt that's exactly how it goes. If these 'prey' aren't killed, I'll wager their minds are altered somehow so they can't recall what happened."

"Could be." Sebastian lifted his glass and took another drink. For such a solidly built man, his movements were surprisingly graceful. "Otherwise, what's to prevent them from talking about it? Xanandru tries hard to keep a lot of activities under wraps. I've noticed *that* much."

"Exactly."

Without looking at each other, they lapsed into thought while their interlinked fingers continued a slow dance.

"You know," Sebastian said, "I asked Mirandi about you, but she never offered to introduce us. I didn't press the issue because I didn't want to risk irritating her." This time, his smile conveyed resignation. "It's hard enough running a metroplex when the Powers *do* get along."

"I imagine," Zee murmured. "But why do you think she would've been irritated?"

Sebastian blushed—an appropriate cherubim blush, pastel pink, symmetrical, and perfectly centered on his cheekbones. The room's dim lighting shimmered in his hair. Zee was enchanted.

"Well," Sebastian said, "I knew she liked me, and our sexual chemistry was pretty decent." Briefly, his color deepened. "You may not know this, but that sort of thing is important to the Powers of a metroplex."

"So I've heard," Zee said.

That seemed to ease Sebastian's mind. "Anyway, I could tell she was attracted to me, and I didn't want her thinking I was more interested in you than in her"—he slid Zee a demure glance—"which I was. And am." He looked into his dwindling champagne, leaned forward, and poured more. "A ménage wouldn't have been the answer, either, because I would've probably ignored her."

The comment prompted Zee to laugh. He would've likely given Mirandi short shrift, too, with Sebastian there. If only she knew!

Looking just a tiny bit irked, Sebastian watched him. "I don't think you would've found that so funny once you had to work with her again."

"I'm sorry," Zee said, his laughter diminishing. "But I *won't* have to work with her again. From now on, Regenerie's Pros will act as consultants. My coven has too much else to do."

"So you won't be in Villius anymore?"

"Not much."

Sebastian looked disappointed. Crooking one leg onto the loveseat, he fully faced Zee. "I'd like to see more of you. Would that be all right? Can we work something out?"

Zee moved in for a kiss. "Hell yes, we can. Oh you bet, baby. I'm not letting you get away."

Sebastian beamed. Zee would've turned to mush if he hadn't already.

Chapter Thirteen

Sebastian left the Bacchus by midmorning to stop at his own hotel and then do more nosing around Xanandru. Zee was preparing to strike out and pursue a different course. Since they could cover more ground independently than together, they'd decided to go their own ways during the day and meet in the evening. Still, they were acting in concert. They had the same goal. Both now wore audio-video flats—Zee's, disguised as part of the pattern on his headband; Sebastian's, disguised as a tattoo at the base of his throat. They'd agreed to share whatever information they came up with.

Zee had resigned himself to visiting legitimate clubs and striking up conversations with employees and patrons. He hoped, this way, to get more information about the shadows without having actually to enter the shadows.

Sitting at the two-person table in his suite, still glowing from a round of urgent wake-up sex followed by a hearty breakfast, Zee felt energized. Running into Sebastian had been a felicitous turn in more ways than one. The man wasn't only attractive, wasn't only an eager and tireless lover, he had the keen instincts and streak of fearlessness that made him an invaluable asset in this investigation. More important, Zee trusted him. Sebastian was a balanced hybrid and profoundly decent.

Just as Zee finished sending Win a detailed report of last night's happenings— withholding, for the time being, any mention of his new acquaintance—his cell phone twittered. The call came from 86 Guardian Station.

"Win?"

"Yeah."

"Are you on your computer?"

"No. Listen, Zee—"

"I just sent you some preliminary findings."

"Okay, great. Um...we might have a problem here."

Win broke away to speak with somebody nearby. It sounded like Pablo. Frowning, Zee waited. He didn't need to hear about any problems in Regenerie. Not when he was this far away, with his hands full of a delicious new lover as well as a smarmy metropolplex.

"Zee, something's going on with Tole."

"What do you mean? Isn't he leaving to go to that Great Event memorial thing?"

"I don't think he's going anywhere. He's in bed. He's lying in bed, Zee, wrapped in a pair of fucking *wings*."

Zee's frown deepened. "He shifted?"

"Only partially. It must've happened overnight. We didn't see it, so we have no idea what prompted it."

"Well...did he go on any kind of rampage?"

"No. Nothing's out of place. He's just...lying there on his side, looking like a goddamn furred sail."

Ever more baffled, Zee rubbed his forehead. "Is he all right?"

"I ran the Medet over him," Win said. "He seems healthy enough. Metabolism has slowed, but everything's strong and steady. No broken bones, either."

Win's news kept getting stranger and stranger. Most hybrids shifted at one time or another – it was a consequence of having a potent supernatural ancestry – but when the stimulus was gone, the hybrid quickly lapsed back into human form.

"So he's sleeping?" Zee asked, trying to comprehend this development.

"We can't tell. His eyes are open, but he's not responding to anything." Win paused. "I even grabbed his crotch."

Zee dropped his head to his hand. "Jesus, Win, he could've mashed you to a pulp! So which one is it?"

"Which one what?"

"Demon, of course."

"None."

"But you said –"

"They're *angel* wings, Zee. Full-length angel wings, wrapped around him like a chrysalis."

Zee's mouth fell open. The revelation left him dumbstruck. Tole's six ancestral demons cropped up with some regularity, but no Throne or Dominion had ever manifested.

"You still there?" Win asked.

"Yeah. I'm just...flabbergasted."

"So am I. He's *never* gone angelic before. Never. That's why I'm so concerned. What the hell could've caused...?"

"Ridley," Zee said. That was the only explanation.

"Barron?"

"How many Ridleys do we know, Win?" Zee related the conversation he'd had with the vampire at Paniche's, how Ridley was determined to leave Regenerie for Tole's sake. He described how Tole had behaved after getting the evening phone call that was likely from his departing lover.

"Oh, shit," Win groaned. "He never said a word about any of it."

"Of course not. You know how he is." Zee's ebullience had drained away. Win and Tole—and now Pablo, too—were his family. "My guess is, he assumed Ridley was dumping him. I was afraid of that."

"So you're saying he's...what? In mourning or something?" Win was clearly struggling with disbelief.

"I can't come up with any other explanation," Zee said.

"Tole, heartbroken." Win uttered a single, incredulous laugh. "It doesn't seem possible."

"It didn't seem possible with you, either," Zee reminded him, "until you met Pablo."

Win was silent for a thoughtful moment. "Point conceded. But I still don't know what to do."

Zee didn't know, either. He considered trying to contact Ridley or asking Win to do it, but that wouldn't solve the fundamental problem. It might even make things worse. Besides, Ridley didn't know Tole was a hybrid, so explaining his current state wouldn't be easy.

Sighing, Zee said, "Just keep an eye on him. He'll change back soon enough. None of us can stay in an alternate form indefinitely. Maybe this is what his psyche needs to pull itself together."

"Catatonia?" Win asked dubiously.

"Whatever it is. Like I said, just let him lie there and heal."

* * * * *

Blood Alley didn't disturb Zee as much as it might have a week ago. After witnessing up close, *too* up close, Ridley sucking the life out of Adam's arm, a vampire's mouth closed discreetly over a human's throat or wrist wasn't unduly distressing.

He sat at a corner table in a place called the Bistriz, a cocktail lounge lit by handsome iron torchiers worked to resemble trees entwined with ivy. Their glass globes looked like harvest moons. No bat kitsch in here, no garish or grisly icons of vampirism. There were some capes displayed on fancifully posed mannequins—handsome capes, actually, that evinced fine craftsmanship—but they were the Bistriz's only nod to the nature of its clientele.

Zee had earlier wandered into Scarlet's, a club where gelagram blobs crawled over the walls like phosphorescent blood clots, shadowy figures playing out scenes within. Later, Zee and Sebastian *would* be venturing into more raucous or sinister clubs, where they would have the best chance of uncovering the darker side of blood lust.

Just as Zee started thinking about Tole and slipping into a funk, Sebastian breezed into the lounge like a ray of pure sunshine. Zee immediately grinned and got butterflies in his stomach. This man had the most amazing effect on him. He rose from the chair to greet his new lover.

Sebastian strode through the lounge as if he owned the place. His nipples were tantalizing peaks beneath his tight, blue-green T-shirt—tiny bergs within a broad, turquoise sea. Heads turned. Zee felt proud. And aroused.

Matching Zee's smile, Sebastian walked right up to him. "Hey," he said, his gaze whispering over Zee's face. "I missed you."

They fell into an easy embrace and then kissed, warmly. There was more than a hint of passion in the contact, and it made Zee weak in the knees. He wanted to keep going.

Drawing back, Sebastian slid a hand down the side of Zee's face and took a seat. "Those dimples of yours," he said, "just melt me."

"Good." Zee couldn't stop smiling. Mirandi had never affected him this way. Nobody had.

Sebastian, resting his forearms on the glossy black tabletop, leaned toward his companion. "I think I got some great leads and insights today. I stopped at the hotel to dictate everything into my computer while it was still fresh in my mind. Oh, and I left my A-V flat there. Sorry."

Zee touched the silken eddies of hair on Sebastian's right forearm. "Don't feel bad. I did the same thing. We'll just keep our eyes and ears open." He couldn't take his eyes off Sebastian's face.

A new customer solved that problem for him.

"Well, well. People do turn up in the strangest places."

Zee glanced up only because Sebastian did. What he saw gave him a start. "Wow. Hello! What are *you* doing here?"

"In case you've forgotten, I'm a vampire." Ridley stood beside their table, looking roguish as hell despite, or maybe because of, the pearl gray flannel trousers and pin-striped shirt he wore. "So, Mr. Zee, what brings you to X-land? Business or"—his intensely dark eyes briefly shifted to Sebastian, and a faint smile touched his lips—"pleasure?"

"Both," Zee said. He addressed his lover. "Sebastian, this is Ridley Barron, one of our coven's acquaintances from Regenerie. Ridley, this is —"

"The pleasure half." Smiling genially, Ridley extended a hand.

Sebastian gripped it firmly but did nothing coy, like flexing his fingers or prolonging the contact. Another man might have. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Barron."

"Likewise," Ridley said, inclining his head. "Please, call me Ridley. You know, you look rather like a profane angel."

"I am," Sebastian answered, prompting Ridley's brows to rise. "Why don't you have a seat?"

Face flaming, Zee cleared his throat as Ridley pulled out a chair.

"So you're really a vampire?" Sebastian asked.

"Yes. A second cousin to profane angels."

"I didn't know you were headed to Xanandru," Zee said.

"I didn't either." Ridley placed a drink order. He sat back from the table, as if showing he didn't intend to intrude. "I had a last-minute change of plan. It's a little complicated." His expression sobered, and his tone became tender. "How's Tole? Have you talked to him?"

The look on his face and sound of his voice tugged at Zee's heart. He wasn't sure how to answer. "I talked to Win this morning. Tole's fine. Physically, anyway."

Ridley lowered his eyes. His long hands ran absently along the fine fabric of his trousers. Zee got the feeling he either wanted to inquire further or was sorry he'd asked the question in the first place.

Sebastian watched, silent but attentive. His eyebrows had drawn together slightly, as if he sensed Ridley's pain.

"How long do you plan on being here?" Zee asked.

"I'll probably leave tomorrow evening, get back to my original travel plan." When Ridley's drink came, he downed half of it in one swallow. "So, how did the two of you come to meet?"

A neatly dressed man and woman abruptly walked toward the corner table. Both held the devices Zee had seen yesterday while he'd stood at the kiosk trying to finagle information.

"Pardon me," the woman said, her manner as unctuous as a salesman's. "My name is Cathryn. This is my associate, Geoffrey. We're pleasureplex employees."

"Civil servants, huh," Ridley said, eyeing them.

Trying to be subtle, the woman lifted her arm by a few degrees. The device she held crept toward Zee, then Sebastian. Zee drew back from it and glared at her. Cathryn lowered her arm.

"This won't hurt you," she assured him. "It's only an A-reader."

"It looks an Identifier," Sebastian said. There was a subtle challenge in the observation, but his mild voice made it impossible for the woman to take umbrage.

She seemed to realize this. "They're similar," she said curtly. "You're both EBs, aren't you?"

A vertical furrow appeared between Ridley's dark eyebrows. His gaze swung between Zee and Sebastian. "What are EBs?"

The woman laid a placating hand on his shoulder. "This doesn't concern you, sir. You're a vampire."

Squinting, Ridley turned his head and looked up at her. Even Zee could tell she'd said *you're a vampire* the way an insensitive person might speak to someone with a disability.

The woman bolstered this impression by ignoring Ridley. "Our leader, Andrew, would like to meet all EBs who visit the pleasureplex. I should think you'd be honored—wouldn't you?—to have a private audience with him. Geoffrey and I will personally escort you to his residence. He treats his guests with the utmost hospitality." Her smile became insinuating. "You'll very much enjoy your visit."

Sebastian leaned toward Zee. "I don't know what this is about," he said quietly, "but it's an opportunity we might want to take advantage of."

"I agree."

"So, do you want to go?"

"You bet I want to go," Zee said.

By the time their brief exchange was over, Ridley was nearly flying out of the lounge's double doors.

Zee figured he was in a snit because Cathryn had insulted him. He was a proud bastard...even if he was a vampire.

Chapter Fourteen

Ridley charged into Andrew's parlor as soon as the doors slid open. He wasn't tentative this evening. One of the women and one of the men who'd barged in last night were on a couch with Andrew, and both seemed to be pleasuring him. Or trying to. He was bleary-eyed, nearly oblivious of their attention.

"Leave us alone," he said to them, lazily waving an arm.

The two ministrants immediately got off the couch and disappeared into another part of the cave complex.

As Ridley approached him, Andrew rose. His smile was lopsided but lecherous. "I need you to feed from me, my exquisite drinker. Your bite always brought the most incomparable bliss." He pulled aside the collar of his blousy white shirt, exposing the beam of his collarbone.

Ridley eyed the smooth depression between clavicle and neck. That was where Andrew liked it. One of the more intimate points of insertion, it was also where Ridley had bitten Win.

It wasn't *the* most intimate point. Ridley had often fantasized about where and how he'd enter Tole—the high inside of his thigh. Ridley would nuzzle his face in that musk-scented trench and slowly press his lips against the delicate, taut skin. He'd feel the throb of blood and heat...

It drove him to distraction, and often to masturbation, just imagining the feed—the soft abrasion of pubic hair against his cheek while he drank, ever so carefully; his lover's balls contracting and cock heavily expanding along the sensitized skin of his face. Even now, in Andrew's icy den, the image slithered from Ridley's mind to his groin.

He redirected his thoughts. The last thing he needed while he was with Andrew was a boner.

"Do it," Andrew whispered, staring into Ridley's eyes.

"I'm afraid I'm not hungry. You know I have to feed right after I wake up. I found a host in Blood Alley, near my hotel."

Andrew's eyes narrowed. "Did you fuck him?"

"Her," Ridley corrected. "No. A het vamp was happy to handle that part for me."

Slyly, Andrew smiled. Ridley could see where this was going. Before it got there, he spoke up. "I need to know something. What's an EB?"

The question, which clearly had nothing to do with Andrew's current train of thought, threw him off for a moment. "You're looking at an EB, darling."

"What does it *mean*, Andrew?" Shit, if this guy was an EB, it could mean Effete Bisexual for all Ridley knew. Or Erratic Bozo. Or Eager Binger. Ridley had never heard the phrase before.

"It means," Andrew said haughtily, "Exceptional Being. The term distinguishes us from Otherbeings." He swiveled like an unbalanced top and looked for something on or near the couch. Grabbing up a goblet, he drank from it then set it back down and turned to his guest.

His hands slid covetously up Ridley's arms to his face. Holding it, he murmured, "Now partake of my exceptional blood. I don't care if you drink it from my cock." His face dived forward, and his mouth dragged along Ridley's throat, kissing and nibbling. "In fact," he said against Ridley's skin, "I wish you would."

"That isn't going to happen," Ridley said firmly. He knew he sounded callous, perhaps *was* being callous, but this mentally mangled poseur needed to learn how to take no for an answer. "If I drink too much or too often, I'll get sick."

"Not by drinking from me." Andrew's mouth moved toward Ridley's. "No, no, no. Not from the khan."

"Oh, cut the shit, Andrew!" Ridley was in no mood to dance with delusion tonight. Once again, he had to grasp Andrew's wrists and force his greedy hands away.

Face tightening, Andrew took a step backward and gave him a wounded look that could easily turn vicious. "Just why the hell are you here, Mr. Barron? To play the coquette and tease me? Does it make you feel more powerful than I, exercising this magic you have over me, making me ache from wanting you?"

Ridley wilted, tiring of these confrontations. "No. I have no magic, and I don't want power over anybody." He didn't want to be there, either, but felt he had to. Why had Zee, a stranger to Andrew, been invited to meet the leader of X-land? What constituted an Exceptional Being?

"Then why the goddamned hell are you here?" Andrew shrilled, lifting and shaking his fists.

"Because you sent me that mystifying e-mail," Ridley said calmly, "and I needed to get away."

"Why did you need to get away? I thought *nobody* needed to get away from" — Andrew steepled his fingers — "perfect Regenerie, the lily-white Utopian Metroplex." He spoke the last string of words with sneering, melodramatic reverence. "Admit it, darling, your life is humdrum without me. Did you realize how insufferably bored you were in Regenerie when you read my message?"

Ridley sighed. It was time for frankness. "No. I needed to get away because I'm in love. And I can't sleep with the man I love. I can't be faithful to the man I love. I can't bring myself to entertain the possibility that the man I love loves *me*. There are too many can'ts. And he's the one who has to suffer for it, and I can't bear his suffering."

Andrew's lip curled. "In love. And with a mortal human, eh? Some weak milksop who'll never be capable of sharing an exquisite ecstasy with you."

"Don't fucking pass judgment," Ridley snarled, tempted to grab the arrogant prick and throw him across the room. "Don't. You're in no position to. Just because some quirk of fate made you a hybrid and gave you a metroplex to lord over doesn't mean —"

Ridley's admonition came to a halt. His lips remained parted. His forehead pulled into a deep, skin-creasing frown. "Is an Exceptional Being the same thing as a hybrid?"

"What fucking *difference* does it make?" Andrew shouted in frustration. He spun around and flung himself onto the couch, a pitiable, petulant sheik who wielded less power than he thought. His hair spilled over the fat, colorful pillows like a broad scar.

"Just tell me," Ridley said evenly. He could barely breathe.

"Yes, they're the same. Sometimes we're called 'supers,' too. So what?"

Ridley took shallow breaths. His gaze fell away from Andrew as his thoughts gathered around the revelation, exploring its implications.

Zee had been identified as an EB. So had the man he was with. Therefore, they were both hybrids.

Ridley's mind skittered along another branch. The rich tapestry of Andrew's blood, that hybrid blood — Ridley had tasted it elsewhere. He'd tasted it when he'd fed from Win. And then, and then...last April, when he'd licked those shallow scratches on Tole's wrist.

"Jesus," he whispered, trying to make sure his sensory memory wasn't tricking him, trying to challenge his recollections, test them for accuracy.

There'd been other hints of Tole's true nature — the natural blue streaks in his hair; a couple of strange incidents, which Ridley had ascribed to Tole's mastery of magic. He was, after all, an Alterationist. Like Win and Zee.

Ridley's imagination went a step further. He thought of all that work the Coven of Three did "for the Powers," the projects on which they worked "with the Powers." Why was a group of common Alterationists so heavily and continually involved in the government of Regenerie?

Unless there weren't merely Alterationists.

Holy fucking damn. Could Tole actually be...?

Ridley shot a look at Andrew. "How many times have I fed from you? How many times in a row?"

Andrew seemed to find the question encouraging. He sat up, his expression no longer belligerent. "Countless, darling. Don't you remember? You marveled at how quickly I healed, how well I 'bore up,' as you put it. And the excitement—you were amazed by its intensity. You even had to drink less, much less, and went from feeding seven times a week down to three, because my blood —"

"Yes." *Oh dear God.* "And you never once felt ill or dazed or weak, like you were anemic, like you were languishing?"

"No. Not in the least, not for a single second. You know that. I never so much as felt faint." Slipping back into hopeful-seducer behavior, Andrew leaned forward. "See what I mean, darling? No mere human can give you what *I* can give you. No human has blood like blended nectar and ambrosia. No human has my stamina, my passion, my —"

"Save it."

Andrew jerked backward, as if Ridley had poked him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," Ridley said distractedly. His mind continued racing along, a high-speed robot plucking pieces off an assembly line and fitting them together.

Andrew had come nowhere *near* lapsing into the weeks-long coma that preceded transformation. And Win, come to think of it, had healed awfully fast following the bite. His puncture wounds had begun to close while he and Ridley had sex immediately after the feed.

The jittery little guy named Tweet skipped into the room...just as the most brilliant sunrise Ridley had ever seen began to blaze in his mind.

"You mighten wanna go to the northwest entrance, sir. C and G's on their way with a couply EBs." His nasal voice, which bore the peculiar accent and cadence of the far north sector, became oily with insinuation. "They's s'posed to be prime, sir. Prime cuts." He winked.

The announcement had a revitalizing effect on Andrew. He immediately got up and strode over to Tweet. "Better than most?" he asked with keen interest.

"Faraway better," said Tweet.

"I should go greet them, then." Andrew's smile, at that moment, did not inspire trust.

"Wanten me to stay with Corpie?" Tweet nodded in Ridley's direction as he posed the odd question.

Andrew's response came with astonishing ferocity. Face twisting, he backhanded the much smaller man. The blow's force knocked Tweet's head to one side and sent him tumbling to the floor.

Andrew loomed over him. "Don't you *ever* refer to my guest that way! His name is Mr. Barron!"

He seemed on the verge of doing more damage to that slight frame. Just as he drew a foot back, preparing to deliver a kick, Ridley bolted up from his chair. "Andrew, no!"

Wild-eyed, Andrew snapped his head in Ridley's direction.

"Don't," Ridley said in a placatory voice. "He's so much smaller than you. And I didn't take offense, because I have no idea what he was talking about."

"He referred to you as 'Corpse.'" Reaching down, Andrew grabbed Tweet by the shoulders of his shirt and roughly set him back on his feet. A blot of inflammation marked Tweet's left cheek. Aside from that, he didn't look any worse for the wear. Maybe he was used to being swatted around.

The possibility intensified Ridley's distaste for Andrew's world. "I don't know what that word —"

"In his lexicon," Andrew said with disdain, "it means corpse. He calls all vampires corpies." Apparently for good measure, he gave Tweet a final shove. "But he sure as hell won't get away with calling *you* that."

Tweet's arms hung straight at his sides once he'd regained his balance. He wore a wide cuff on each wrist, both covered with small, depressed discs. Staring at the floor, he looked properly penitent. "I give you my very most sorry," he mumbled. He quickly raised his eyes, as if making sure Ridley knew the apology was directed at him.

"Accepted," Ridley said.

Straightening his clothing and composing himself, Andrew moved toward one of the room's rear doors. "I have to welcome my new guests," he told Ridley. "Don't take any nonsense from this creature. I'll be back shortly."

Ridley saw it as an opportunity to get more information about Andrew's desire to meet EBs. It certainly wasn't a matter of Andrew feeling a bond with his own kind. There had to be some ulterior motive.

"Tweet, why don't you sit down, make yourself comfortable? I'm very sorry Andrew treated you that way. It was uncalled for."

"Sir Andrew do what Sir Andrew need do," Tweet mumbled. "No fault."

Hesitantly, the unlikely helper moved to a chair. Ridley regarded him, wondering if Tweet was even human. Although he appeared to be an adult, he couldn't have been much over four feet tall. His hair, more chartreuse than yellow, was parted down the middle. Each side swept up and away from his head like a wing. His small features were all clustered in the center of his face, as if huddling together to escape the exotic bird of prey that seemed perched right above them.

Ridley tapped and pressed together the thumbs of his interlinked hands, wondering how to open the conversation. He didn't want to arouse Tweet's suspicion, but he had a bad feeling about Zee and Sebastian being brought to the ice caves. For the moment, he had to push thoughts of Tole aside.

He decided to take a roundabout approach. "Tweet, my man, let me clear something up for you. There are different breeds of vampires. Different *kinds* of vampires. I didn't have to die to be reborn. Approach the brink of death, yes, but not pass over. So, you see, I was never a corpse. Many vampires weren't. We're not all alike."

Tweet blinked at him, gave a jerky nod.

Ridley moved into his segue. "Like hybrids aren't all alike."

"Ehya, that is for true." Tweet wriggled in the chair, as if sitting too long made him antsy, or being under the scrutiny of a stranger made him uneasy. "You mighten think all brids are leaders of plexes. Like Sir Andrew. Only they ain't always. Some brids can't rise to it. But they still's got that swaggertude. Y'know? They got the Big Me 'tween those hidden wings."

Tweet was losing him, but Ridley tried to extract what sense he could from this mini-exposé and press on. "So, does Sir Andrew often have EBs as guests? Even the ones he doesn't know? Even the ones who aren't metroplex Powers?"

"He has a like for 'em," Tweet said, loosening up, "as they's smart an' strong an' please the eyes. So they make a fine show."

"You mean down here, in the Savage Place?" Ridley began to think Andrew might want them as sex partners.

"Oh, Sir Andrew may keepen 'em for a time, but 'tis the other savage places they oft get sent to. Where the tours can watch an' wager an' have *their* fun." Tweet suddenly became animated. "How thrilling, to cheer the Col fights!" Just as abruptly, his flash of brightness faded. "If all can walk out. If Gronitch dunna put 'em down."

Tweet's dialect and disjointed delivery were starting to give Ridley a headache. He repositioned himself in the chair and cracked his knuckles. Every time Tweet answered a question, five more sprang up on its heels. "What other savage places do you mean? And who's Gronitch?"

"The Col, the Maze. Those places. Where the best big contests be. Gronitch be only at the Col."

"Contests?" Ridley had never heard of the Col or the Maze. Of course, he used to visit X-land only to see Andrew. He'd have to pursue the Gronitch reference after he cleared up the first bit of babble.

"Ehya," Tweet said, "the tours do love their savage. Near as much as Sir Andrew. But 'tis the tours that matters. Their coin. Their gladness. 'Tis the gladness that brings 'em back an' brings the coin back."

Ridley tried to erase his frown of confusion. "The tourists," he said, making sure he'd interpreted Tweet's lingo correctly.

"Ehya."

"They pay a lot of money to watch savage contests that involve hybrids."

"Ehya. And oft be in."

"Be *in* the contests."

Tweet nodded.

"And what do the winners get?"

A smile that displayed unusually small teeth, like kernels of young corn, appeared in the middle of Tweet's compressed face. "They win at the Col, they gets a sweetfree Everpass to X-land. Any place, any serv, any hour. An' a gullion. An' their name graven in stone and writ in air, fire, and water. *That's* what they gets. Rewards an' honor."

"What about at the Maze?"

Tweet's smile instantly flatlined. He hung his head. "I canna say, Mr. Barron. I canna say."

"And who or what is Gronitch?"

"Fearsome," Tweet whispered.

Chapter Fifteen

Ridley's desire to call Tole was like a spreading rash he couldn't scratch. His phone would certainly work down here—Andrew had installed an advanced communication system in the ice caves—but he'd have no privacy. He didn't even trust the bathrooms to be free of surveillance.

Fidgeting, he waited for Andrew to return with his new guests. Ridley hoped Zee and Sebastian wouldn't let on that they recognized him. Instinct told him they all had to be on their guard, and that meant the less Andrew knew, the better.

Tweet continued to sit in the same chair, swinging his legs and humming to himself and occasionally casting "Corpie" a timid glance. Ridley considered resuming their conversation, but the strain of communicating with Tweet was more than he could bear at the moment. His own thoughts required his attention.

Just as he got up to stretch his legs, voices drifted from the recesses of the cave complex.

"I urge you to consider this opportunity," Andrew was saying. "You both look eminently capable."

He entered the parlor, one arm over Zee's shoulder and the other over Sebastian's. As soon as Zee spotted Ridley, his eyes widened. Sebastian reacted in the opposite way, his forehead crimping into a frown. Ridley compressed his mouth and narrowed his eyes and gave a quick, slight shake of the head. It was a warning. *Don't look surprised*, he was trying to tell them. *You don't know me*.

Zee glanced at Sebastian. Both seemed to have gotten the message. Their expressions slipped into neutral.

"Well," Andrew said, his mood expansive, "there's my other visitor." Full of smiling conviviality, he looked from one guest to another. "I doubt I've ever been in the company of a more pleasing group of men. And like-minded men, at that."

"Like-minded in what way?" Ridley asked in a sardonic drawl...although he knew Andrew's meaning.

Andrew's smile took on a lewd cast. "Adventurers, all," he purred. "Ridley, these attractive men are EBs—hybrid interzone residents, to be exact—who've broken away from their humble lives to visit Xanandru for the first time. Simon and Brant, this is Ridley, a very dear friend of mine."

Ridley mentally applauded Zee, now Simon, and Sebastian, now Brant, for not coughing up their real names. "Old friend," he said, trying to imply "former."

"Indeed," said Andrew. "And we're in the process of rekindling that old, close friendship."

Instead of matching Andrew's smile, Ridley wore a somber expression and looked down. His eyebrows lifted, fell. Somehow, he had to convey the message that Andrew made far more of their relationship than he did. Should Zee talk to his associates anytime soon, Ridley didn't want him passing along damaging misinformation. *Hey, Tole, guess what? Your boyfriend's been feeding you buckets of bullshit. He's tight with the creep who runs X-land, and he's shackled up with that creep right now.* Jesus. He had no idea how he'd talk his way out of that one.

"Andrew sent an e-mail that quite shocked me," Ridley said as insurance. "We hadn't seen each other in nine years. Needless to say, it piqued my curiosity."

"Ah," said Zee as Sebastian nodded.

Andrew clapped his hands together, startling the other three men. "Tweet, go fetch a party cart. The white one." He beamed at the small gathering. "I feel...festive. Please, gentlemen, have a seat."

Tweet, whose gaze had been flickering attentively between host and guests, dashed out of the room.

Ridley gestured in his direction. "What species is Tweet, anyway?"

"Erblinger gnomish and human," Andrew said, his eyes brighter than Ridley had yet seen them. "Queer little thing, isn't he? Boundlessly energetic and eager to serve, but his sensitivity makes him prone to mood swings."

Once Zee and Sebastian sat down together on a loveseat, Andrew flipped his long hair from back to front and settled into a chair that gave him the best view of all three of his guests. Languidly crossing his legs and bending his elbows over the chair arms, he looked precisely like the supercilious Emperor of Ennui he often was.

"So, dear Simon and Brant," he said to his newest arrivals, "while the night is still young, I *would* like to know if you find my offer appealing."

"I do find it intriguing," Zee answered. "I haven't had a good challenge in a while."

"I feel the same," said Sebastian.

They both appeared comfortable and self-confident. Still, Ridley could tell Zee's radar was up. The other man, several years younger than Zee, gave the same

impression. They weren't acting like starry-eyed, gullible sycophants, eager to please the prince of the pleasureplex. Ridley even wondered if they shared some secret agenda.

Tweet reentered the parlor, weaving between the luminous stalactites and stalagmites with a cabinet that looked like a mammoth, rectangular ice cube. He wasn't pushing the cabinet; he guided it via the wide bracelet he wore on his right wrist. Parking this portable butler where it wouldn't interfere with conversation, Tweet pushed a button near one corner. The upper half of the top unfolded, smoothly lifting up and back until it was parallel with the floor and made an adequate bar. One of its sides slid open, and the interior immediately lit up. Ridley watched with an air of indifference. Andrew was a perceptive bastard when he had his wits about him, and he seemed sharply alert right now. Too much interest in anything would make him wary.

Tweet faded into a dim corner of the room.

"What's your pleasure, gentlemen?" Still smiling like the most gracious of hosts, Andrew rose with remarkable grace and glided over to the serving unit. He swept an arm toward its interior, in which bottles, glasses, and small ornate chests were arrayed in multiple tiers. Spears of light glanced off crystal facets and twinkled on embossed silver lids. Multicolored liquids shimmered.

"What's in the boxes?" Sebastian asked.

Ridley knew. He'd seen them, or similar ones, before. His gaze shifted toward Andrew.

Their host turned his violet eyes on Sebastian, where they lingered before he spoke. Ridley wondered if the blond young man, corded with muscle and pretty as a cherub, felt like the centerpiece of a succulent hors d'oeuvre tray. He was certainly being ogled like one.

"What I have in those chests," Andrew said, "is a delightful variety of safe pharmaceuticals for every need and every whim. Psychotropics, aphrodisiacs, stimulants, relaxants, dreamspinners, moodglazers, synhancers. Elysoria isn't our only recreational drug. That's like having only one kind of sex toy available. We try to accommodate every taste." He bent toward the party cart's offerings and plucked out a small blue flask. A short, narrow tube angled up from its top. "This, for example, is an epidermal neurostimulator we playfully call Gnizz. Were you to spray this..." — Andrew touched the end of the tube — "on, let's say, a sensitive part of your body, you'd experience the most acute excitement of libido you've ever felt."

Ridley, who'd never heard of the stuff, lifted his eyebrows and glanced at Zee and Sebastian. The claim had definitely caught their interest. The younger man repositioned his butt on the loveseat with an enticing little twist of the hips. Zee seemed torn between studiously ignoring the movement and staring at his boyfriend's crotch.

Shrewdly, Andrew watched them. "Would you like to sample it?" he asked in a molten voice.

Now Zee fidgeted too. "It, uh...doesn't sound like the kind of thing you'd want to try in front of strangers."

Andrew tossed the canister in the men's direction. Sebastian snatched it out of the air with one hand and began studying the label.

"Consider it a gift," Andrew said, "to use when and how you see fit. Now, what refreshments would you like?"

"I'd like some chilled tonic water with lemon," Ridley said, "if it isn't too tame for your party cart." He didn't need the vodka. He wanted to stay alert.

"I have some right here, darling."

The term of endearment made Ridley cringe. Zee, who likely picked up on it but displayed no visible reaction, asked for a glass of red wine. Sebastian requested Freesian cream. Andrew plucked two black amethyst goblets and a chimney glass from the cart and went about pouring drinks.

Ridley grew increasingly restless. Shit, he wanted to call Tole. He'd have to leave to do so, but he didn't want Andrew getting huffy. Given the circumstances, he needed to cultivate Andrew's trust. Zee and his boyfriend were being manipulated. Andrew likely wanted them to participate in some dangerous games, and his stubborn determination to hook them would only become more entrenched as the night wore on.

Ridley couldn't abandon these unsuspecting men – Zee in particular. He'd have to come back and do what he could to help them. Worse yet, he might just have to compromise his own standards and get cozy with Andrew. It seemed like the only way to see this mess through from the inside.

Andrew settled back into his chair after distributing the drinks. He flipped open the lid of a dainty enameled box, shaped and decorated like a lily. A translucent ribbon of vapor snaked into the air from a cluster of pink crystals. Andrew held the box to his nose. Closing his eyes, he inhaled.

Ridley gave Zee a solemn look. He wanted to make it clear he neither enjoyed being here nor had anything to hide. Before he looked away, he noticed Tweet watching him. He'd forgotten about Tweet, who must've been adept at making himself inconspicuous when he needed to be. No bouncing or humming now.

Tweet's attention was almost as discomfiting as Andrew's. Ridley felt a shiver in his gut.

Following his indulgence in whatever brainfuck he'd taken up his nose, Andrew again focused on his new guests. "I think you, Simon, would do particularly well in the Maze. You seem quick and agile and shrewd. You're not excessively tall. And, since you live in an interzone, you're familiar with woodlands and wouldn't be frightened or distracted by animals and other...wild things. In fact, you could use your familiarity to your advantage."

Zee nodded, as if considering these points.

"And you, Brant," Andrew said, "are the model of a young gladiator. I believe you'd shine in the Coliseum. I believe victory would be yours for the taking." He gave them both an ingratiating smile. "My assistants and I will of course give you a detailed overview of each venue and see to it you're thoroughly prepared. We could run the competitions tomorrow evening. There'll be great rewards and an enormous party for you afterward." Andrew took another whiff of his magic vapors. "You'll be regaled with food and drink. And the most incomparable attentions of the most incomparable males you've ever seen in your lives. You do favor men, don't you?"

"Yes," Sebastian said quietly. His thumb rubbed the Gnizz canister. Zee didn't answer. He looked down and rolled the wine goblet between his hands.

"There *is* something you must agree to, however." Keeping his gaze trained on his guests, Andrew tapped a long fingernail on the lily box. "You must swear on your ancestors not to recite your personal prayers. And you must take this oath before me and each other."

Zee and Sebastian exchanged glances.

The strange demand honed Ridley's attention. The more he heard about EBs, the more mysterious they seemed, like members of a secret society. And in a way, that's what they were. Ridley was intrigued...and even began to feel a little intimidated. Getting to know Tole could be like untying the Gordian knot. Or, maybe, opening Pandora's box.

"I assume," Andrew said, "I needn't explain the rationale behind this requirement."

Zee didn't give the matter much thought before he answered, "It's fairly self-evident."

Frowning, Sebastian didn't seem to think so. He looked from Andrew to Zee back to Andrew. "I'm not really sure what you mean."

Zee grabbed Sebastian's wrist and leaned toward him. "I'll explain it when —"

Snickering interrupted Zee's assurance. It came from Andrew, and his amusement only deepened Ridley's confusion.

"Apparently your young friend has yet to experience the other benefits of the recitation." Andrew laconically crossed his legs and bobbed the one that was uppermost. "Many EBs never do. But you, Simon, seem to realize what I'm referring to."

The prospective contestants looked uncomfortable, but for different reasons. Zee seemed troubled by Andrew's demand. And bothered, too, by Ridley's presence. Sebastian was probably discomfited by his own ignorance. The only person in the room who appeared to be at ease was Andrew, the one in control, the one who understood everything.

The string-pulling puppeteer addressed his toys. "Then again, if you each feel you're not man enough to compete without supernatural aid" — assuming an air of indifference, Andrew picked at his fingernails — "we'll just call it off."

Now it was Zee who snickered. The sound carried a hint of contempt. "I don't think I've ever been manipulated with such lack of subtlety."

Andrew looked up, eyes wide and guileless. "I'm simply being forthright. If you can't accept the terms of the competition, then don't compete."

Zee raised his head. His gaze went straight to Andrew's face. "What's in this for you?"

Lips parted, Andrew blinked stupidly at him. Ridley took a drink but kept his ears trained on his host. Tweet, still sitting hunched in a corner with his head downturned, rolled up his eyes and watched from beneath the ridge of his brow. The look gave Ridley a mild start. Tweet's attention was surreptitious but focused...and full of canny intelligence.

Andrew recovered, maybe due in part to his pink crystals' exhalations. "Gratification, of course. The kind that comes from seeing fellow hybrids prove we are indeed Exceptional Beings. The kind that comes from knowing visitors to my city have been given a good show and will want to return for more. The kind that comes from their admission fees fattening the coffers of the pleasureplex." He set the enameled box on the floor beside his chair. "It would be disingenuous of me, gentlemen, to claim I don't care about the financial well-being of Xanandru."

He pronounced the name, Ridley suddenly noticed, with the emphasis on the second syllable, so it almost sounded like St. Andrew.

Zee said, "I see. That all makes sense, of course."

Sebastian, wearing a crooked, drowsy smile, took another drink and dropped his head to the cushioned back of the loveseat. The hand he ran along Zee's thigh drew a similar smile from Zee, who moved closer to him. Their behavior was changing, but Ridley hadn't seen Andrew lace anybody's drink with silly spice. He himself felt no different, so it couldn't have been that every bottle on the cart was tainted with some drug.

In any case, it was time to do more than merely observe. Ridley stood, walked to the party cart, and set down his glass. "Andrew, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"Of course." Andrew got up. "Excuse us, please," he said to Zee and Sebastian, who barely acknowledged him.

He led Ridley through one of the room's four doors into a hallway with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. It, too, triggered memories, although Ridley knew Andrew's private chambers lay in a different direction. As soon as they were alone, Andrew nuzzled Ridley's neck and caressed his chest.

"What is it?" he murmured, his breath hot against Ridley's throat.

Ridley forced himself to cup the back of Andrew's head. How fine his hair felt, like a collection of spiderwebs whispering against Ridley's palm. Andrew eased his hips forward, seeking Ridley's crotch. There wasn't much to feel; Andrew didn't move him.

"May I sleep here?" Ridley asked.

Lifting his head, Andrew looked overjoyed. "Of course, darling. You know you can. Your old room has already been prepared for you."

"Good," Ridley said, trying to sound pleased. "Thank you. I'll just need to pick up some things from my hotel."

"Would you like me to send someone to fetch them?"

Ridley stroked Andrew's head as if he were idly petting a cat. "No. They're my things. I'll do it. I should make it back before dawn with time to spare."

"Yes," Andrew said, "you should."

"Do you think your guests will be spending the night?"

Andrew smiled. "I'm certain of it."

Chapter Sixteen

Andrew had Tweet show Ridley to one of the concealed staff entrances to the ice caves, not as far below street level and less dramatic than the public entrance. It also put Ridley closer by several blocks to his hotel.

After jogging down a nondescript street lined with administration buildings, Ridley had to pause to get his bearings. He'd never come this way before. The din and glitter of X-land didn't fully penetrate this bland government sector, and he couldn't overcome his disorientation.

"Shit." Ridley looked for somebody who could give him directions, but the street was deserted. It was well past business hours.

Not far behind him, somebody spoke his name.

Startled, he wheeled around with vampiric speed. That somebody wasn't visible.

"Who's there?"

Tweet stepped out of a doorway.

Sagging, Ridley let out a breath. "Oh, it's you." He figured Andrew had sent the demi-gnome to follow him, maybe to see what he was really up to, maybe to ensure his return. But it wasn't Tweet's voice he'd heard. Ridley was sure of that. "Tweet, did you just hear somebody call to me?"

"Of course I did."

Slowly, Ridley frowned. Tweet didn't sound right.

The little man walked forward with measured steps. "My name is Ulric, by the way. We need to talk, you and I. May I suggest that bench?" He motioned toward one of the many that stood before the office buildings. "We'll be assured of privacy here." He smiled. "Civil servants are the same everywhere...and as difficult to find after dark as nocturnal vampires are during the day."

Too dumbfounded to ask questions, Ridley followed him to the bench. It looked like granite but was obviously made of recycled materials. The unexpected feel of it further rocked his equilibrium.

Tweet sat beside him, keeping a respectful but not unfriendly distance. "I believe I've seen you in Specula, coming out of the PS building."

"PS?" Ridley echoed. He was so stunned, Tweet's statement had barely registered.

"Peregrinus Sapiens. Have you been visiting Dr. Kushner?"

"Yes." Wits gathering, Ridley gaped at his companion. "Who *are* you?"

Tweet, or Ulric, was thoroughly composed. "I can't tell you that. Not in detail, anyway. Let's just say I'm a researcher, too, but of a different nature."

"Meaning..."

"I have the Pleasureplex of Xanandru under my microscope."

Ridley took a stab at his implication. "You're a spy? Some kind of secret agent?"

Ulric inclined his head.

"For Specula?"

"Yes."

"But why here?" Sending a spy to X-land, Ridley thought, made as much sense as sending a spy to a carnival.

Crossing his legs, Ulric linked his hands around the uppermost knee. "Andrew Franklin Galwick—aka the Exceptional Being, Belius—is quite the engineering genius. He's personally designed or overseen the development of some extraordinary technologies. Xanandru is a wealthy enough metroplex to make his visions a reality. But Andrew doesn't like to share. The scientists of Specula believe it's imperative that such advances *are* shared, for the betterment and not simply the entertainment of all."

I'll be damned. Ridley had no choice but to overcome his disbelief. The little man, undeniably articulate, made too much sense. "How long have you been playing this humiliating 'Tweet' role?"

"Three years," said Ulric. "I don't find it humiliating, however. I consider it an honor to serve my fellow creatures."

"Are you gnomish and human?"

Ulric nodded. "Indeed I am. I wouldn't have been able to lie about my lineage. Andrew's clever little Identifiers would have immediately found me out. He himself is too self-absorbed to care much about Otherbeings." Ulric's smile was gently teasing without being scornful. "Except vampires, of course."

Ridley stretched out his legs and briefly linked his hands over his forehead. This abrupt shift in perception was hard to process. Dropping his hands to his lap, he faced Ulric. "Why are you entrusting me with confidential information?"

"I don't have much choice. A lot is at stake." Ulric smiled wanly. "Maybe I want to make up for all the other times I *couldn't* do anything. Besides, I detect the goodness in

you and Simon and Brant. And I know you're not Andrew's lover. Someone else has been monopolizing your thoughts. In fact, I was surprised you came back this evening...until your two hybrid friends arrived. Then I understood."

Another surprise. Ridley began to feel wary. "What makes you call them my friends?"

"Well, one of them seems to be your friend." Ulric shrugged. "I'm not sure about the other. I haven't fully cultivated my reading skills. People-reading, that is. Andrew has a way of monopolizing the attention of everyone around him."

After staring for a few more beats, Ridley nodded. "That he does."

"Don't worry," Ulric said, his gaze direct. "I know nothing about your relationship to these men beyond sensing a connection. So I feel you need to know what's going on."

Apprehension layered Ridley's curiosity. "And what's that?"

Ulric turned toward him. "*That* is why we need to talk. They're both in peril."

"Okay," Ridley said. "Lay it out. I've already guessed something's wrong, but I need specifics."

Ulric sighed. Maybe even looked a little ashamed, as if he felt partially responsible for this alleged threat. "The goblets from which they've been drinking," he said, "are coated with a euphoria-producing relaxant. It will make them sedated and tractable enough for Andrew to keep them in the caves. And make them amenable to his offer. I tried hinting at the danger when you and I spoke earlier, but I wasn't yet sure how well you knew the men. Besides, the caves' surveillance system forced me to maintain the Tweet persona."

"So Andrew's definitely going to shove them into these competitions."

"Yes. If they're not too resistant. And he'll do everything in his power to make sure they're not."

Hanging his head for a moment, Ridley blew out a sigh. "Now tell me what those contests are *really* about, starting with that Gronitch reference you made."

"It's a fixture at the Coliseum that Andrew devised," Ulric explained. "He dubbed it the Groan Witch. I have a feeling he'll pit Brant against it rather than against another hybrid."

"Well, what the hell is it?"

"A fantastical, endotronic parasapient, multiprogrammable, with limited reasoning ability and a squamous, partially mutable exoskeleton."

Tilt, blinked Ridley's mind. He stared at Ulric. "Oh. Okay. Let's try this again. What is the Groan Witch?"

Ulric gave him a half smile. "An ugly, man-made phantasm that's virtually indestructible. Its exterior is covered with scalelike plates, and it has some shifting capacity."

"An android?"

"No. It doesn't mimic the human form closely enough, and it's more than robotic."

"A cyborg?"

"No, it isn't really a melding of flesh and machinery. Mind and machinery, to a point."

With a prickle of apprehension, Ridley absorbed the implications. "Jesus."

"Almost," said Ulric, "but far less kind."

* * * * *

The enormous guest bed had a dizzying array of controls. Zee tried discerning their purpose. Music, fragrance, temperature, movement, and even "partners" — whatever that meant. He soon gave up studying the panel. His eyes and mind refused to stay focused. A comfortable bed and Sebastian's presence were good enough. The large fireplace made good even better.

Peeling off his clothing and letting it fall to the floor, Zee sat on the edge of the bed and watched Sebastian peel off *his* clothing. Damned pleasing sight, those revealed contours. The finest piece of statuary couldn't compare. Sebastian's body had been molded to perfection.

Watching Zee watch him, Sebastian took his time getting undressed — a delectable tease. "So tell me about that other benefit of the incantation. All they told us in the Academy is that it prevents demonic shift. You'd think Andrew would *want* us to prevent that."

"Maybe, but he doesn't want us to become invisible and inaudible to our opponents." Zee had trouble concentrating on what he was saying. He didn't feel like talking. "The prayers can do that, too — make our presence undetectable to hostile forces."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding." Zee stared at Sebastian's bare chest and wondered vaguely if he was drooling. The thought was silly — he had enough sense left to realize that much — but he still touched his mouth to check. "That benefit could be hit-and-miss, though. Maybe that's why...that's why we're not told about it."

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" Sebastian asked.

Zee's cock thickened. He smiled, but the expression felt lopsided. His mouth seemed as heavy as his eyelids. "The best thing possible," he answered, his words running into each other.

Wearing nothing but a seductive smile, Sebastian stepped up to Zee and stopped a breath away from his face. "That's not what I meant." His fingers wove through Zee's hair.

"Maybe," Zee said, "if you got dressed again, I'd listen more carefully."

It was impossible not to touch this creature, to make sure he was substantial and not an illusion. Zee's hands traced the lean lines of Sebastian's hips, fingers pressing into the pronounced curvature of his ass. Yes, *very* substantial. Muscle, muscle everywhere. He swayed forward and nuzzled the golden froth of pubic hair, his nose setting up a rasping sound, his mouth opening to a puff of soft crinkles. The aroma substituted one kind of fogginess for another. He slipped into a haze of lust.

"We'll have to talk in the morning," Sebastian murmured. "I can't think straight." Gently, he pressed Zee's head against his crotch and fondled Zee's hair. "Hey, let's try that stuff Andrew gave us."

Stepping back and away, Sebastian went...somewhere. Zee couldn't seem to follow his lover's movements. Limbs leaden, he crawled toward the padded headboard and lay down, a billow of pillows around his head and shoulders.

The fire in the hearth flickered and crackled beyond the foot of the bed. Winking stars studded the indigo ceiling, a small arc of nighttime sky swallowed by the earth. Zee stretched his eyelids then pulled them into a squint. A blue light, slightly larger than the white ones, glowed steadily from Orion's belt. He made a smudgy mental note of it.

Sebastian's weight returned to the bed. Kneeling between Zee's splayed legs, he lifted a canister and asked, "Where do you want it? *Do* you want it?"

"I want *you*," Zee said, smiling languidly. With the fire at his back, Sebastian's form was a tantalizing inverted triangle, its outline wavy with muscle.

"You'll get me soon enough," a low voice said.

"Then go ahead, give me a shot." Zee doubted he'd feel much of anything, except a break in his comfortable lethargy.

A cold, effervescing mist hit each of Zee's nipples. He cried out weakly. Microscopic diamonds seemed to dance into his skin and skitter down the center of his trunk. Glimmering, they melted. The warm bloat of arousal filled his groin.

"Wha—"

The sensation returned. Zee's back arched to it. He whimpered, helpless as a kitten, as his cock filled and stiffened.

Sebastian's broad hands glided over Zee's chest. The touch shimmied through Zee's cock and solidified in his balls.

Sebastian said something. His indistinct voice seemed to come from the ceiling. Zee couldn't tear his attention from the excitement spitting fire through his body, chest to crotch and crotch to limbs.

"Fuck me, San," he managed to exhale.

Those fizzy blasts were a stimulant, all right. Zee's sexual hunger flared. He needed hard cock to fill him. He needed its deceptive satin glide to batter down that thin door between tension and release.

Sebastian lifted Zee's legs and draped them over the broad, humped silhouette of his shoulders. "I'll take care of you, angel man." The cool snout of the Gnizz can touched the tender rim of Zee's hole. "You want some here?"

"Just...just a little."

More tiny chips drove in, icy hot, making the band of muscle reflexively pucker. The feeling blew through whatever channels lay behind Zee's cock and balls and lodged, glimmering wickedly, deep in his belly. Zee clutched at the sheets.

"I'm here for you," Sebastian said.

His cockhead, fat and sleek, eased in and withdrew. Two, three, four times. Zee squirmed around the invader. His rigid dick responded with nods of approval. His balls, less generous, withdrew.

"All the way," Zee grated...and without delay, a pillar filled him.

Grabbing Zee's cock, Sebastian rocked into him. Stroke matched stroke as hand pulled shaft and head nudged gland. The dual massage sent excitement corkscrewing through Zee's center. The bloat expanded, its edges shimmering.

Sebastian lapsed into his quavering, pre-come hum. The sound always tipped Zee into climax. He forced his eyes open to look at all that bundled muscle straining against him, at that need-racked face. He could only see a laboring shadow.

A startled grunt erupted from his throat as orgasm gripped him. His head drove back into the pillows. Pleasure strung his body tight, its powerful vibrations coursing through each branch of every nerve. Cum spurted from his cock and probably ran down Sebastian's fisted hand.

"That's it," Sebastian whispered. And he came too, head rolling back and iron rod making irregular jabs at Zee's core.

Breathless exclamations came out in counterpoint. Finally, their energy began to wane. Sebastian didn't pull out until the last, faint throb of his cock was a pleasant bit of history. After snapping off the condom Zee didn't know was there, Sebastian tossed it aside and fell onto the mattress beside his lover.

"Incredible." The word came out slurred. Sebastian's hand flattened on Zee's abdomen, limp fingers resting on the trail of hair. "I put a little bit on my dick. Thought my nuts would crack open and empty. Damn, that's some wicked powerful stuff."

Zee couldn't keep his eyes open. "Especially when you're with someone who's already got you primed." Ripples of pleasure continued to radiate from his hips. He felt heavy with contentment.

"Especially," Sebastian said. His fingers stilled.

Zee drifted off with a smile.

Chapter Seventeen

The conversation with Ulric, however revealing, didn't quell Ridley's impatience. He still had to get to his hotel, call Tole, gather up at least some of his belongings, and then get his ass back to the ice caves before dawn. He would literally have to fly. But he couldn't part ways with Ulric. Not just yet.

He'd found out the Maze was essentially an outdoor hunting preserve where high-paying clients got to stalk and shoot at handpicked prey. He'd found out that nouveau-gladiatorial contests took place in the Coliseum, usually between or among hybrids. Often, though, some fabricated monstrosity called the Groan Witch was brought into the fray.

Ridley felt confident he could do something about getting Zee out of the Maze, the location of which Ulric had pinpointed for him. But since the Coliseum was an indoor venue, and both Andrew and his mechanical miscreant would be there, his hands seemed tied where Sebastian was concerned.

"Tell me more about that thing in the Coliseum," he said to his informant. "It concerns me."

"As it should," Ulric said gravely. "The Groan Witch is a very sophisticated apparatus. It can be controlled in three basic ways: from a predetermined program, or extemporaneously from an intelligent creature, or extemporaneously from a group of intelligent creatures. If the last is the case, the enpar can 'prioritize' the various inputs and choose to accept whichever it determines to be most appropriate...for lack of a simpler explanation. Please don't be offended; I'm not trying to be condescending."

Ridley smiled. "Be as simplistic as you can manage, Ulric. I'm familiar with religions and languages, not advanced technology."

"Anyway, the enpar's behavior can be strictly limited or nearly limitless."

"Does Andrew usually determine the input?" Ridley asked.

"Often, but not always. Sometimes he doesn't feel up to it. Sometimes he gets a kick out of letting the crowd handle input to the Witch."

It didn't sound like Andrew to forfeit control, and Ridley said so.

"True," answered Ulric, "but in this case, it doesn't really matter who's in control. The results are still the same."

"How *can* they be?"

The answer seemed to make Ulric uncomfortable. "Well, you see, Andrew has so abused his body over the years that it's difficult for him to find stimulation through conventional physical channels. Like a kiss, for example. A kiss sparks neurons; the signal then travels to the cortex of the brain and on to the limbic system, which both contains and is interlinked with brain structures that register pleasure. But Andrew's neurological connections have significantly deteriorated. Even scent, which normally goes *straight* to the limbic system, isn't for him the powerful, instantaneous stimulant it should be."

The conclusion was as unpleasant as it was unavoidable. "So he needs increasingly stronger stimulation."

"I'm afraid so," said Ulric. "To this end, he's worked out a way of transmitting to himself a contestant's responses to the Groan Witch. If the enpar delivers pain or pleasure in a certain way – and it has many ways of delivering both – Andrew will feel that pain or pleasure. He'll also experience rushes of adrenaline and share emotional responses. Of course, he can regulate the 'dosage' to his sensorium. The contestant cannot."

Frustrated, Ridley twisted on the bench. "Goddamn. Why hasn't anybody altered or destroyed this Groan Witch thing?"

"It's Andrew who needs fixing, Mr. Barron, not the enpar. Although my colleagues in Specula and I *have* devised –" Ulric suddenly clammed up.

"Devised what?"

"I'm sorry. Disregard that. I shouldn't be speaking of a 'solution' that hasn't yet been put to the test. It is true, though, that Andrew is the source of the problem."

There was no denying that fact, and it left Ridley feeling flustered. "Well, why doesn't he just...have a live-in Dom or sub or something?"

"You don't understand. It wouldn't be the same. The crowd's excitement is part of the stimulation. And the spectacle brings a good deal of money into the metroplex."

Ridley dropped his head back and closed his eyes. He considered for a moment just divorcing himself from the whole nasty mess, and then roundly upbraided himself for his selfishness. Taking a deep breath, he asked, "So what does the Maze do for Andrew?"

Ulric's gaze was compassionate, as if he felt Ridley's burden. "He likes watching the 3-D recordings of the hunts. And watching what the hunter does to his prey once the hunter wears that person down. It provides Andrew with a vicarious thrill. An EB

cannot kill, you see, or even injure without just cause. It's strictly forbidden. There'd be dreadful consequences for a hybrid who engaged in brutality for any reason other than defense."

"So humans and OBs *have* been killed in the Maze?"

"It's happened. However unintentional and infrequent the fatalities, some have occurred. But injuries are commonplace. So is post-hunt rape and even torture."

Propping elbows on knees, Ridley dropped his head to his hands. The whole situation became more wretched the more he thought about it. Maybe Zee and his boyfriend would simply refuse to cooperate. Perfect solution. Too bad it didn't seem likely. Those two did have "swaggertude."

"Ulric," Ridley said, "I need some ideas."

Hopping off the bench, Ulric patted him on the shoulder. "Never fear, my good man. 'Idea' is my middle name. I am, after all, a resident of the Visionary Metroplex of Specula."

"I'm glad you're so confident," Ridley said dismally.

Ulric grinned—an unattractive but comforting response. "You just use whatever of this information you can. It *will* help, by the way, that you're staying at the ice caves. Andrew will trust you more. That gives you an invaluable advantage."

Straightening, Ridley offered his hand. "Thank you for your help."

"My pleasure." After shaking Ridley's hand with both of his, Ulric trundled away. Abruptly, he stopped and turned. "Oh, dear me, I almost forgot. The dragon." He laid a finger over his lips then shook the finger at Ridley. "At the Coliseum, where you'll surely be invited as Andrew's guest, you could help the contestant by keeping Andrew's dragon...distracted. The design is full of receptors. If they're covered or otherwise occupied—and I think you know what I mean—he'll be far less likely to bother with the Groan Witch."

Ridley rose from the bench, prepared to ask for clarification. The only dragon he knew of was the one flying across Andrew's hips from back to front, smack over his genitals. Was Ulric suggesting what he seemed to be suggesting?

"Ulric, wait. Do you mean...?"

The little man was already hurrying away. "I'm sorry, Ridley, but I do have to return to the caves now. Andrew will get suspicious if I'm absent longer than he thinks I should be."

Ridley stared after him. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

* * * * *

Bustling around his hotel room, Ridley wished he had a phone button to stick behind his ear. Ear-rings came in handy at times like this. The cell phone he held impeded his gathering and packing. Well, he figured, that was the price he had to pay

for being so blasé about advances in technology. Vampires had gotten by for millennia without zippy devices to enhance the quality of their lives.

"Pick up," he whispered impatiently, trying to stuff things he might need into his smallest piece of luggage. Dr. Kushner's pills went into a sealable side pocket.

"Eighty-six Guardian Station," a man mumbled.

"Pablo, put Tole on."

"This is Win, not Pablo. Ridley?"

"Yeah. I need to talk to Tole. Right now."

"Rid, he's, uh...not really available right now."

Ridley sat on the bed and double-checked his bag. "Is he there?"

"Yeah, he's here; he's just...indisposed."

"Stop being so fucking cryptic and put him on the phone, Win! I don't care if he's in dreamland or fuckland or I-like-my-hand land. Hold the damned thing to his ear if you have to."

Win sighed. Ridley didn't wait for a go-ahead; he just started talking. "Tole. Hey, you there? Let go of your dick and talk to me, man."

No response. All Ridley heard was Win's voice, muffled and distant.

He persisted. "Tole, I need you. Talk to me."

An odd assortment of noises drifted through the phone—thumping, groaning, rustling; Win in the background saying, "Finally. Shit. You okay?" And then a deeper voice, Tole's voice, saying, "Yeah. Now leave me alone and close the door when you do."

Ridley smiled. *That's my boy*. He wondered vaguely what was going on, but it was far down on his list of immediate concerns.

"Hello, Ridley."

The greeting pulled him up short. That was Tole's voice, all right, but its tone and inflection were off. The sound was too...gentle, mellifluous. It hadn't been that way when he'd snapped at Win.

"Why are you talking so funny?"

Tole cleared his throat. "I'm not talking funny. Why are you calling?"

There. That was closer to normal, although the normal seemed a bit forced. "Because I need you to come to me. Will you? I can't get back to Regenerie just yet, but—"

"Where are you?"

"Xanandru. Don't ask me to explain right now. I'll explain when I see you. I ran into Zee, by the way. And his lover."

"Mirandi?"

"No, not if you mean a woman. He's here with a man. Brant." Ridley grimaced and put a hand to his forehead. "Oh shit, no, it isn't Brant. I can't remember his name at the moment. Anyway, Andrew's persuaded them both to participate in some bizarre spectator sports. Andrew is the guy who runs—"

"I know who he is. You mean the leader of the metroplex, right?"

"Yes, that Andrew. This could get ugly, Tole."

"Wait, wait, wait. Back up. How did you end up with Zee in X-land? How did *he* end up with a male lover? How did all of you run into Andrew? What kind of spectator sports?"

Ridley had known he'd be bombarded with questions, but he couldn't dawdle. The conversation would spin off onto countless tangents if he tried to answer everything to Tole's satisfaction. "I told you, it would take too long to explain. Please, just trust me. Can you get away? As soon as possible?"

There was a brief but noticeable pause. "For your sake or for Zee's?"

"Both." *Be honest.* "Mine, mostly. Tole, I really need to see you. Please don't give me any shit about it."

"Should Win come too?"

"No. Just you."

Just you. That's what it was all about, really. Listening to Tole's voice made Ridley yearn to be with him. He felt all quivery inside. After three and a half months, the man still affected him like he did their first week together.

"I'm on my way," Tole said quietly. A hint of that honeyed quality had returned.

Ridley was about to disconnect when he remembered something critical. "Tole, hold on a minute! I'm not sure where I'll be when you get here."

"That doesn't matter. I'll find you." More of a hint now, the melodious warmth was back in his voice.

"But...how?"

"The same way Win found Pablo."

Ridley didn't have a chance to ask what that meant.

* * * * *

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming back," Andrew said, gliding into his parlor. He'd obviously been in another part of the cave complex.

"I told you I was." Ridley tried not to look or sound as preoccupied as he felt. He'd been wishing Andrew had gone to bed. Still, he had to act glad to see his host. It was time to pour on some schmooze. "Where were you?"

"In the computer center."

"Are those two EBs spending the night here?"

"Yes indeed. They're in one of the guest rooms now, happily fucked out and sound asleep." Andrew strolled up to Ridley. "Do you have any idea how damned fine you look?"

Ridley chuckled, trying to make light of the compliment. "I don't feel that way. I never do by the time daylight approaches."

Sliding his fingers into Ridley's hair, Andrew urged Ridley's head forward and gave him a deep, sensual kiss. His mouth wasn't dry this time. It was moist and sweet.

The advance confounded Ridley. He didn't want to accept it but couldn't safely spurn it. Moreover, his body responded although his mind resisted. It had been days and days since Ridley had found full-blown sexual fulfillment—the last time with Tole didn't count, because of the overriding tension—and he was obviously ready for some.

He found himself returning Andrew's kiss. However imperfectly, it dovetailed with his need. And his desire for Tole.

The sound of his own excited breath punching through the air, the feel of his lips flexing against another man's, the little spasms that teased his cock all filled him with shame. This isn't what I want. Not from him, not from Andrew, Ridley kept reminding himself, until he forced apart the messy splice his mind had made between a man he despised and a man he adored. Easing back, he broke the kiss.

"You were thawing so nicely." Andrew put on a pout. "Don't stop now."

"It isn't a good idea," Ridley said, "for me to get worked up just before I retire. It wreaks havoc with my constitution. I thought you'd realized that a long time ago."

Andrew regarded him, maybe trying to remember if this was the case. Actually, it was three-quarters bullshit to one-quarter truth. A spirited roll in the sack did nothing whatsoever to Ridley's constitution, except send him to sleep with a smile on his face, but sexual stimulation without satisfaction did cause him to wake with a snarly attitude that made him too brutal when he fed.

He just didn't want to be sated by Andrew, which would've been a shabby and guilt-tainted excuse for waking up mellow.

"I think I should go to my room," Ridley said, hoisting his overnight bag.

"Without your supper, like a bad boy?"

"Something like that." Ridley touched Andrew's chin. Feigning affection for him wasn't easy. "I need time to bring myself down, not get more wound up."

"So sorry." The implication of arousal clearly pleased Andrew. "Sleep well, darling. And sleep naked. I'll be there when you open your eyes."

Ridley smiled and turned away. He wasn't looking forward to his next awakening. But at least he *could* look forward to Tole's arrival.

Chapter Eighteen

Unfiltered sunlight, hot as a fired-up kiln, blazed over the wooded area just beyond Xanandru's interconnected domes. Andrew looked bleached and delicate in the brightness, a scrap of tissue that could incinerate at any moment and waft away in ashes. Bertram and Kalto, the aides who flanked him and apparently doubled as his bodyguards, were quite the opposite. Their ruddy vigor emphasized the leader's fragility.

"It doesn't look like a maze," Zee said, peering into the patchwork of light and shadow. Not a single rivulet of breeze stirred a single leaf.

"Ah, but it is." Andrew stepped beside him and pointed. "Look more closely. You'll see a distinct path. Farther in, it branches off and keeps branching off. The trees, you'll notice, aren't terribly tall. There's a reason for that...and it's to your advantage to discern that reason."

Zee didn't press for details. Andrew had implied it was up to the hunted man to figure out the riddle of the trees. "How is one to follow these paths in the dark?"

"At night, they're subtly lit at ground level. And you'll get to study a schematic before you enter."

"How large is the entire thing?" Sebastian asked. He stood on the other side of Zee, arms crossed over his chest. His expression today was more focused and somber than Zee had yet seen it.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that." Repositioning his large, opaque sunglasses, Andrew faced Zee with a smile. "But it's manageable—well under twenty acres." He gave Zee's shoulder a lighthearted squeeze. "You won't be wandering for days."

"A few more things," Zee said. He was already second-guessing his decision to go through with this—Sebastian had made it clear *he* disapproved—but the firsthand

experience would be invaluable. "Describe the hunter's weaponry and my defense against it."

Sebastian ambled toward the woods line. Kalto bounded forward and stood in front of him. "Sorry, you can't go in there," the aide said. He didn't sound intimidating, but he looked it. Zee couldn't see Sebastian's face. His lover muttered something and didn't move. He was a plucky bugger, quietly obstinate. Young, mum, and full of cum, thought Zee, indulging in a private smile. But dumb he wasn't.

"The hunter," Andrew said, "can use a binder, a stub-dart gun, or a beamer. The first simply ejects filaments. If one catches you around the neck or ankle, it will bring you down...unless you act quickly to free yourself. The stub-dart gun is self-explanatory; it shoots very short darts, easily removed. The last is a modified directed-energy weapon."

"Laser?" Zee asked.

"Laser or particle beam. The modifications ensure minimum injury—a shallow burn or flesh wound at the most. No shot can be directed at the head, by the way. Only the trunk and limbs."

"Wait a minute!" Sebastian called, marching back over to Zee and Andrew. "He'll be naked!"

"We provide genital protection," Andrew said calmly. His lips, the color of faded cherry blossoms, spread into an unpleasant smile. "After all, it would be counterproductive to allow injury to that area."

"What other protection do I get?" Zee asked, hardly reassured.

"Your skin will be covered with an analgesic and antiseptic oil. Beyond that, your body and wits will be your only allies." Andrew's smile shrank. He tapped a finger to his mouth, as if considering something. "You do need to know one more thing. Should you shift, your opponent's target restrictions will no longer pertain. He'll be able to aim wherever he chooses—and that includes both face and groin. Shifting is only permitted in the Coliseum, and only when a hybrid faces another hybrid or an Otherbeing." The weasel smile returned. "It would hardly be fair to expect a mere human to track an angel or demon...unless, of course, the human were given some leeway."

It was an unexpected wrinkle Zee didn't need. Although he wasn't as prone to shifting as other EBs, feeling threatened *might* cause his ancestral demon to manifest. He'd have to guard against it—and that meant siphoning necessary attention from the task at hand.

"This little contest is starting to seem loaded in favor of the hunter," he said, looking directly into Andrew's eyes.

The wry observation was Zee's first hint of balking, and it clearly made Andrew nervous. He put a hand on Zee's shoulder and gave the upper trap muscle an encouraging squeeze. "No, Simon, not really. You're an *Exceptional Being*, dear man. That alone is an incalculable advantage. You have a sharper mind and faster reactions than any human. You have a very well-tended body, too. Oh...and you'll get a ten-

minute start on the hunter.” He leaned closer. “Besides, you know you love to test yourself.”

The pep talk didn’t assuage Zee’s doubts, but he couldn’t deny wanting to rise to this challenge. “How will I know when I’m in the clear?”

The question visibly relaxed Andrew. “You’ll know as soon as you step through the exit portal. It’s unmistakable. And it is, after all, the only way out.”

“I’d like to talk with Simon in private,” Sebastian said. “Just for a few minutes.”

Andrew, apparently confident of Zee’s commitment, swept an arm to the side. “Be my guest.”

Zee and Sebastian walked several meters away. Turning his back to Andrew, Sebastian clasped his hands behind his back and lowered his head. “I don’t like it,” he said in a muted murmur. His eyes slanted toward Zee. “Do you trust him? I don’t. I’m worried. Especially after what I’ve already heard about this ‘sport.’”

Zee remembered. He wasn’t sold on the setup, either, and had a niggling suspicion Andrew wasn’t being entirely forthright. But the Maze had become his personal proving ground. If his spirited young lover had the balls to do battle in the Coliseum, Zee could at least pit himself against some gun-toting cretin. Hell, he was only five years older than Sebastian. And he was sick to death of feeling like an androgynous, mild-mannered twonk.

“I don’t like what you’ll be doing, either,” Zee told Sebastian. “But you’re still going through with it.”

Sebastian’s green eyes, crystalline in the sunlight, were made all the lovelier by his concern. “It just doesn’t seem as dangerous. I can hold my own against any creature Andrew throws at me, as long as I can face my opponent. But you’ll be out here in the dark...”

“You need to stop worrying about me and start thinking of yourself.” When Sebastian opened his mouth to speak, Zee placed a finger over his lips and then kissed him. “With you to come back to, I’ll make every effort to take care of myself. Believe me.”

The assurance wasn’t an empty one. Zee knew he didn’t love Sebastian—it was far too soon for attraction to evolve into romance—but he was more entranced than he’d ever been by anybody. The sex alone was enough reason to keep his body in good working order. He wasn’t about to let carelessness deprive him of *that* euphoria, no matter how temporary it might turn out to be.

Besides, Sebastian truly cared about him. And there was nothing like caring to improve one’s performance. At anything.

Sebastian tried to smile. “Guess I’ll just have to have faith in you.”

“Thank you,” said Zee.

This time, Sebastian took the initiative. He kept the kiss short but it was hardly tepid. Zee closed his eyes so he could drop into the feeling. Damn, that young man had

a delicious mouth. His lips weren't as plush as Win's or as nimble and commanding as Tole's, but they were very expressive.

"Later," Zee said against those lips as the kiss ended.

"Later."

Without bothering to be discreet, Andrew watched, inscrutable.

* * * * *

The indoor Coliseum was larger than its seating capacity indicated but smaller than most public arenas. "Because," Andrew explained, "we wanted to keep the spectators close to the action. That's what they're paying for." The spectators were also, it appeared, paying for luxury. The Coliseum was outfitted with spacious, theater-style chairs and regularly-placed refreshment stands. What further cut down on audience space was a long, circular draw-curtain. Stationed directly opposite a line of private boxes, it took up probably a tenth of the seating area.

Hands on hips, Andrew surveyed this portion of his domain like a puffed-up Roman emperor. "Xanandru put a great deal of money into the Col," he said, "but it's already paid for itself many times over."

"What exactly do audiences get for their money?" Sebastian asked.

Indulgently, Andrew smiled at him. "You needn't be circumspect with your questions. I'll explain the nature of your challenge." He turned back to the hemispheric space, which was strangely free of echo.

Zee wished he could pay closer attention to the building itself. In this smaller dome, the details of Xanandru's overriding architecture were more apparent. He glimpsed louvered solar panels on the faces of the dome's self-bracing triangles, an elaborate network of gussets that probably allowed for acoustic control. There were other additions, as well, and all seemed to be meticulously engineered and constructed.

Impressive, but this wasn't the time to scrutinize such things.

"We like to offer our audiences variety," Andrew said. "So we sometimes have human combatants and other times, hybrids. They have their choice of weapons, which range from traditional gladiatorial to more advanced electronic pieces—excluding, of course, primitive firearms. If a man opts to use the old-style weapons, he isn't allowed to use them with deadly force."

Zee didn't like the basics of this competition any more than Sebastian liked the concept of the Maze. "What's behind the curtain?" he asked, hoping it was something innocuous, like a sound system or sophisticated hologram projector.

"I was getting to that." Andrew fondly gazed at the hanging folds. They were close to five meters long and had a gold metallic shimmer. He directed his answer to Sebastian, on whose shoulder he laid an avuncular hand. "That, my dear man, will be your opponent. We currently have no hybrid to pit against you, and pairing you with a human would hardly constitute a fair fight. When such is the case, we activate our

enpar. In fact, we activate it in the course of many competitions.” He smiled. “It provides added excitement.”

The unexpected revelation ratcheted up Zee’s anxiety. Any metroplex leader worth his salt kept up with developments in artificial intelligence and robotics. He’d heard of enpars. It was hard to tell if Sebastian was familiar with them or not. As usual, his face reflected nothing more than intense concentration.

“How am I supposed to engage this thing?” he asked.

Andrew continued to stare at the curtain, as if he could see through it. He looked like a proud parent. “Oh, there are chinks in its armor, so to speak. One of my assistants will show you the ‘weapon’ you’ll get to use. There are also features of the playing field that will work to your advantage...if you can lure the Witch far enough into the ring. You can’t see these features but they *are* there, at your disposal. The Col has been very cleverly designed.”

“When do I get to see the enpar?” Sebastian asked Andrew.

“You’ll have some time prior to the start of the competition to study it.”

“How much time?”

“However much I think you need. Now, I have other stops to make.” Andrew motioned to Bertram and Kalto, who immediately stepped forward. “My assistants will take over from here. They’ll fit you with all necessary clothing and equipment and answer any other questions you might have. You’ll both get an excellent meal, formulated to boost your energy and endurance.” He stepped toward the nearest exit, then turned. “Bon appétit, gentlemen. You’ll need every ounce of strength you can muster.”

* * * * *

He isn’t here.

It was the first thought that sprang into Ridley’s mind as he awoke and bolted to a sit on his large bed. Andrew wasn’t lying beside him. Andrew wasn’t fondling him or sucking his dick. Andrew’s cock wasn’t tucked between Ridley’s butt cheeks.

When Ridley spoke the word *time*, a chronobar tilted up from the top of his nightstand. He stared at the numerals.

“That can’t be right,” he whispered.

If it was—and nothing was ever broken in Andrew’s world, except Andrew himself—Ridley had awakened more than an hour before sunset.

Heart pattering, he scrambled from the bed and stood indecisively in the middle of the dark room. Had Kushner told him this might happen, that the pills would start disrupting his normal sleep cycle? Ridley thought so, but he wasn’t sure. He’d lately been too focused on that exposure-to-sunlight test. He’d been too focused on other things, as well.

Still standing there, he tried to determine his hunger level. It wasn't yet strong. So maybe his appetite would always be determined by sunset even if his activity level wasn't – something else to ask Dr. Kushner.

Ridley decided to use his reprieve from Andrew's attention to shower and shave in absolute privacy. Well, maybe not absolute – given Andrew's paranoia and his penchant for voyeurism, there were probably bugs in every room – but at least he could clean up in peace, without being groped.

He wondered where Tole was, where Zee and his friend were. He wondered and kept wondering how he could help the two foolish hybrids who were intent on meeting Andrew's challenges.

The first stirrings of hunger came just as Ridley finished his toilette. If Andrew didn't show up at all, he'd either have to find a willing donor in the caves or, God forbid, try to get out of this subterranean fortress and hustle back to Blood Alley. Neither prospect pleased him.

The light from the hallway blinded Ridley for a moment when he opened his bedroom door. Reflexively, he turned back toward the soothing darkness of the room. Maybe he shouldn't leave. If Andrew came looking for him –

"I'll be your donor, Mr. Barron," a male voice said at his back.

It was a voice Ridley knew well.

Chapter Nineteen

He spun like the needle on a compass, and his direction was true. There stood Tole, watching him. Ridley's breath caught. Tole was ass-hitting-ground stunning. Beneath a long, black, sleeveless duster, the kind that either fluttered or billowed behind him when he walked, Tole wore close-fitting black pants and a blue muscle shirt that matched the streaks in his hair. His arms were sleekly cabled and slightly tanned. A gold cuff hugged his left wrist.

He looked like a diabolical apparition. And an irresistible one.

Their gazes locked. Simultaneously, their mouths crept into smiles. Ridley strode up to his lover and stood toe-to-toe with him. "What the hell are you doing here?" he whispered, wanting a whole lot more than conversation.

"The answer to that should be obvious." Tole's voice was nearly inaudible.

"No, I mean...how did you...?"

"Don't worry, I didn't sneak in. I was invited in."

Ridley tried solving this mystery, but his two spiraling appetites were making coherent thought difficult. Yeah, okay, he was fairly certain Tole was a hybrid, and Andrew liked inviting EBs to the caves, and...

His mind shut down. He craved a kiss. And more.

Tole continued speaking, but only in a mumble. He, too, must have suspected surveillance. "Peyton, the woman who met me after I was admitted, said Andrew was otherwise engaged. But Andrew was concerned about a certain vampire guest needing to feed. Peyton didn't seem too keen on volunteering, so I offered to take her place." Tole slipped off his duster and slung it over his shoulder, then flattened a hand on Ridley's chest and gave him a gentle push. "I suggest we go back to the bedroom and take care of business."

Ridley thought of the savagery inherent in a feed, or what most creatures perceived as savagery, and worried it might terrify or alienate Tole. "Aren't you afraid?" he asked. It was imperative that Tole thoroughly consider what was about to happen.

Tole's reply was immediate and firm. "No." He gave Ridley another, more assertive shove. "Peyton had to get her boss's approval. Andrew assured her I had nothing to fear. And Andrew seems to know whereof he speaks."

The last sentence was wry—Tole must have deduced Ridley and Andrew had been fuck-buddies—but that didn't stop the growth of Ridley's fangs. Grabbing Tole's wrist, he nearly flung his lover into the bedroom. He began peeling off his clothes as soon as the door was closed.

The hundred things he wanted to say couldn't be said, and he had to convey to Tole this need for silence. "Just don't talk," he said in a rush. "Not a word. I hate it when my donors chatter."

The sound of Tole's excited breathing, the smell of his hair and skin, the sight of his body being bared made the room haze with red. Ridley could barely restrain himself. Growls of hunger balled in his throat as he tried to suppress them. His canine teeth were long and sharp; his cock, tall and hard. The pain of keen, double-edged desire sliced through his body.

"Lie down," he said, barely able to articulate the simple syllables.

Tole lay supine on the bed, one bent leg raised. "How much are you drawn to me?"

The strange question glanced off Ridley's brain. Single-minded now, he dived between Tole's legs, spreading them farther apart. His mouth unerringly found the spot he'd only visited, in passing, during sex—the satiny flesh of the inner thigh, just where it joined with the pelvis, just where the fragrant carpet of strawberry-blond hair thinned to a soft sprinkling. A familiar musk saturated Ridley's olfactory sense. Richly delectable, it made his head spin.

Cheek nuzzled against Tole's balls, hand gripping Tole's thickened cock, the vampire at last sank his teeth into the host of his fondest fantasies. Sustenance welled slowly from the font he created. As soon as it touched his tongue, Ridley had an extraordinary feeling of the blood absorbing him rather than his body absorbing the blood. His being seemed to stream into the cosmos, a scarlet runnel of elemental life.

Back arching, Tole let out a long string of quavering whimpers. His cock throbbed in Ridley's hand as his body began a bone-deep quivering. Ridley stroked Tole's hard-on as he drank, relishing its dense rigidity, feeling the pulse within its engorged veins. A thin segment of something hard grazed his cheek—a titanium scrotal ring. Ridley was tempted to flick it with his tongue, but he couldn't drag his lips away from that exquisite trickle of blood.

Tole didn't come. He wouldn't be able to until the feed was over. But his hips had begun a subtle gyration, pushing his groin against Ridley's face, deepening the intimate

connection. His weak cries became coarse exhalations, and his balls felt like a rough, solid heat against Ridley's cheek.

The ecstasy of the feed was, for both of them, warping into a torment of intense arousal. Ridley knew the signs well. He had to stop taking blood and start delivering relief.

More than sated, he felt his teeth withdraw and blunt. Euphoria wound around him, flooded through him. But he, too, needed release. A maddening pleasure-pain had lodged in his balls and made his dick feel like a tight, twitching muscle.

He began laving Tole, his tongue painting broad and narrow swatches and swirls, moving languidly from inner thighs to the narrow gullies between legs and pelvis, moving from there to the pubic mound. The tip of his tongue twirled through Tole's hair and danced around the base of his cock. Tole hummed—half muted laughter, half excited moan.

Sliding forward, Ridley let his hard cock graze Tole's. The heads touched, soft brim bumping over soft brim, up and down.

"Shit," Tole breathed, his hips thrusting, encouraging more contact. "Keep going."

Ridley's cock made a few more vertical glides against Tole's before he resumed licking—over the rippled plain of his lover's abdomen, up along the fine trail of hair that led to Tole's rib cage. Along the way, Ridley let his hard-on plow against Tole's skin. When he reached Tole's chest, the tip of his tongue circled the bead of each nipple. Flattening, his tongue pressed and scoured each. As his lips closed around the right one, Tole's fingers fisted in his hair.

"I don't want you to stop...but I can't stand it."

The sound of Tole's voice, strained and pathetic, heightened Ridley's excitement. He quickly sucked and plucked at the nipple still corralled by his lips.

Tole squirmed and groaned. "I mean it. If I don't get off soon—"

"I know." Ridley reached up and touched his face. "I know. I'll make it better."

Scuttling to the left over Tole's body and a jumble of covers, Ridley pulled open the nightstand drawer. Its neatly organized contents were heavy on sex aids. He pulled out a tube of lubricant, crawled backward, and settled between Tole's long legs. Squirting some of the friction-warmed lube onto his palm, he began slicking his lover's unhappy cock. A drop of precum pearled at its tip.

Tole curled forward, although he likely couldn't see anything. "What are you doing?"

"Giving you a pedicure." Ridley squeezed the rod, making Tole thrust into his grip. "What is this, an episode of Smart Men Who Ask Stupid Questions?"

"Cut the sarcasm. Just help me out."

"I'm about to. How do you want to fuck me?"

Tole abruptly sat up, obviously eager to get on his knees. "With your ass in the air."

Ridley cleared Tole's right leg and bowed to the headboard.

Tole was behind him in a heartbeat. Borrowing some lube from his cock, his thumbs shakily prepared Ridley's entrance as his splayed fingers enjoyed the contours of Ridley's cheeks. Maybe, Ridley thought, Tole didn't love him, but Tole sure loved his ass. For now, that was good enough.

"I'm sorry," Tole rasped. "I won't be able to take my time."

Hands digging into Ridley's ass, his swollen cockhead breached the opening to Ridley's body, rotated, eased back, sank in again. Ridley's stomach fluttered. Tole's weight came forward until the full length of his shaft was buried. Ridley's legs immediately felt brittle.

Tole curled an arm around Ridley's hips and found jutting wood. The pumping of his hand was firm; the pumping of his cock, as careful as he could make it. Stroked inside and out, Ridley was now at Tole's mercy. Preorgasmic tension filled his abdomen. Spangles seemed to flake from its edges and shower through his thighs. He made the same strangled sounds Tole was making.

"Playtime is over," Tole said in a guttural voice.

He rammed twice, swiping hard against Ridley's prostate, and his cock began to convulse inside Ridley's body. His hand locked tighter around Ridley's dick and spasmodically jerked back toward Ridley's scrotum. Ridley grabbed the upper half of his shaft.

The tension in his loins abruptly shattered. A pleasure more acute than any he'd ever felt surged and tumbled through his body, forcing his eyes into an upward roll and his breath into suspension. Tole, jerking and wilting behind him, kept breathing out some weak exclamation, but Ridley was too dazed by his own climax to hear it clearly.

Gradually freed from the rigor of orgasm, Tole began to collapse on top of Ridley as Ridley listed and dropped onto his side. An impulse to declare his devotion seized him, but the impulse had to be quashed. He and Tole were supposed to be strangers, thrown together out of unromantic necessity. Strangers didn't kiss and cuddle, swaddled in the magic of their love. A camera would pick up any inappropriate words or behavior.

Driving this point home, a dispassionate, disembodied voice cut through the bunting of darkness. "As soon as you're finished, gentlemen, please join me in the parlor. I've yet to meet my newest visitor, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for his selfless act. I hope he'll join us at the Coliseum for tonight's entertainment."

Tole immediately got off the bed and extended a hand to help Ridley up. "I wish I could see you," he said quietly.

Ridley swallowed. Under the circumstances, neutrality didn't come easily. "Thank you for your generosity." Impulsively, he hugged Tole. The embrace was brief, but it sent a wave of feeling through Ridley. "How's your leg?"

"Fine. It just burns a little."

Ridley wished he could examine the punctures. If they'd already started to heal, he'd know for certain Tole was a hybrid. "We should clean up before meeting Andrew," he said. "Why don't you get dressed while I use the bathroom?"

Tole nodded. "Okay."

"I'll be out in a minute. Want me to bring a comb?"

"Please."

As Ridley stepped away, he nearly grabbed Tole's fingers. But that cool voice, still echoing in Ridley's mind, made him keep his hands to himself.

* * * * *

Andrew, pacing around the parlor, froze as soon as Ridley stepped into the room. His color was high. He seemed unsettled. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you," he said, walking up to Ridley and laying a hand on his cheek. His violet gaze skittered anxiously over Ridley's face. "Truly I am. You don't know how it pains me to have let you down. Can you forgive me?"

Ridley gently took hold of Andrew's hand and lowered it. "There's nothing to forgive. You're the leader of a metroplex, Andrew. You were busy; I'm sure it couldn't be helped."

"So you understand?"

Ridley smiled, although Andrew's overreaction made him uneasy. "Of course. Besides, you were considerate enough to send someone else. I appreciate that."

"Where is he?" Andrew asked, peering over Ridley's shoulder. "I haven't met him yet. Peyton contacted me while I was out and said a visiting EB wished to meet me. I told her to admit the man, so long as he was cleared by the Identifier."

"And he was?" Ridley asked on a tight thread of breath.

"Yes. But I still don't know who he is."

"He, uh...he should be out shortly," Ridley said. "He's using the bathroom."

So Tole *was* a hybrid. It was official now. And that feed had been incomparable. Ridley wanted to whoop in triumphant glee.

Andrew's gaze still bore a hint of concern. "Was he adequate?"

Ridley twitched out a few nods. "He was adequate."

Just as he began to sense Tole's presence at his back, Ridley was distracted by an abrupt change in Andrew's demeanor. The leader's mouth fell open. As he gaped, the skin around his eyes gathered.

"My God," he breathed. "Tom? Tom LeCanteur?"

Andrew loped forward just as Ridley turned.

Tole gave Andrew a modest smile. "Hello, Andy. It's been a while."

Andy? Ridley's eyes felt like satellite dishes. His stare flew between one man and the other. *Tom?*

Andrew grasped Tole by the upper arms as his gaze scoured Tole's face. "I don't believe it. I haven't heard a word about you in over ten years."

"Closer to fifteen, I imagine." Tole let himself be scrutinized. He didn't look entirely comfortable, but he didn't look uncomfortable, either. He seemed resigned to being tolerant.

"Maturity suits you, Tom. You look better than I remember." Andrew's admiration was not only obvious, it bordered on awe. "Your hair is beautiful." He let one hand fall away from Tole but raised the other to lightly stroke a blue strand. "I remember when you shaved it all off, because you said it made you look like an accident of nature. Wasn't that just before you left for the Academy?"

Tole nodded. "Yeah, I think so. I'm obviously not as self-conscious anymore."

"Well...what brings you to Xanandru?"

"Vacation," said Tole. "I've always been curious about what you've done with this metroplex."

"Didn't you get an assignment?" Andrew asked.

Ridley didn't know precisely what the question meant, but he had a hunch. He listened and watched more carefully.

Tole's cheeks colored. He pulled down his mouth and shrugged and suddenly seemed dodgy. "Well, you know me. I never really fit that mold."

Andrew's eyes glowed. "Don't be embarrassed. You're a maverick. I'd always thought so." Finally, he dropped his other hand and contented himself with looking. "But you must be doing *something* important. You're far too capable to be some interzone hermit or drifter."

"I became an Alterationist," Tole said. "It seemed like the logical course."

"And where are you an Alter?"

Ridley held his breath. *For God's sake, don't tell him.*

"Here, there, everywhere," Tole said. "I don't like staying in one place too long. Restless spirit, I guess."

Relieved, Ridley expelled the breath. He should've known Tole was too smart to say anything revealing.

"Demon spirit, I'd say." Wistfully, Andrew smiled.

Ridley cleared his throat. He'd become invisible during this mystifying exchange, and he damned well wanted some answers.

Andrew finally snapped out of his fugue. "Forgive me," he said both to Ridley and Tole. "I didn't mean to be impolite. I know you've been introduced to each other, in a manner of speaking, but you haven't been properly introduced. Ridley, this is a long-

lost friend from my long-lost youth, Tom LeCanteur. Tom, this is Ridley Barron, another old friend."

Ridley took a few steps toward Tole and extended his hand. "Tom," he said, trying to hold in a smile, "pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine, Ridley."

Their eyes, glimmering with private knowledge, met and held while the handshake turned into hand-holding.

Ridley withdrew his fingers from Tole's grasp. "Well, it appears I'm firmly in the minority here. Andrew's currently entertaining two other hybrids, as well."

"Only until tomorrow," Andrew hastened to add. "They're from one of the interzones. Each will be competing at one of our elite venues tonight."

"Am I invited?" Tole asked.

"To the one I'll be attending, yes, of course," Andrew said with enthusiasm. "I'd be honored to have you on one side of me and Ridley on the other." He looked back and forth between them. "After all, I share such pleasant histories with both of you."

Ridley suspected Tole was wondering the same thing he was: what exactly was the nature of that history, and what made it oh so pleasant?

Chapter Twenty

It was shrewd of Tole to ask about wagering. Of course he'd have to scrutinize the men in the contests before deciding whether or not to bet on them. Andrew, thrilled to be reunited with two former "friends," was amenable to just about any suggestion either of them made.

Andrew and his entourage, which now included Tole and Ridley, made its way to yet another of the ice caves' private entrances. This one was a well-lit, utilitarian tunnel that accommodated a colorful tram. Moving walkways and ordinary sidewalks flanked the track. On the vaulted ceiling, glowing rainbows were spaced three or four meters apart, and each lightband was visually anchored at both ends by a wisteria vine. Pendulous white flowers arched over the tunnel's interior and scented its air. Between the plantings, ever-shifting photographs of Xanandru and its satisfied visitors were splashed across the flat-white walls.

The tram stopped before entering the Coliseum dome. Two other tunnels branched off in opposite directions. Andrew would ride into the Col's basement and from there take a vacuum lift to his private, secure box, set well apart from the other audience seating. Three assistants-slash-bodyguards would remain with him. Tole and Ridley, accompanied by the tireless Tweet, were getting off the tram at this point, so Tole could supposedly study tonight's gladiator before placing his bet. "Simon" might or might not be in the bull pen, as Andrew called it, because the Maze hunt began earlier than the Coliseum battle.

"Come now, sirs," said Tweet, bouncing up from his tram seat. "You havna much long to viz the brids. They's got obligates."

"When they're finished here," Andrew called out to him, "show them where and how to wager and then bring them to my box."

Tweet bowed. Looking utterly baffled by the gnome and his patter, Tole rose from his seat and followed Tweet and Ridley off the tram. It glided forward as Tweet gave it a cheery wave.

Ridley blew out a loud, relieved sigh. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he turned to Tole, who still looked discombobulated. Ridley's face rumped into a broad smile. He couldn't help it.

Tweet, now Ulric again, gazed up at both men. "Well," he said, "it's a tall, tall world."

Tole's gaze shifted warily between Ulric and Ridley. "Are you Erblinger gnomish?" he asked Ulric.

The little man's face immediately brightened. "Yes! With some human sprinkled in. How astute of you, Tom."

At the mention of his other name, Tole shot a defensive glance at Ridley. He was certainly anticipating some flak about it. "I've had a lot of contact with Otherbeings," he said to the demi-gnome.

"I'm not surprised, if you're an itinerant Alterationist," Ulric said. "Well, gentlemen, I'll be in the second room on the right. I suspect the two of you would like a modicum of privacy...for a change. This area is bug-free. You'll be safe."

Tole's forehead dipped as he watched Ulric step onto one of the moving sidewalks. Of course he knew nothing about the reason for the gnome's dual identity, so his confusion was understandable. Giving his head a little shake, he looked back at Ridley, who continued to beam at him.

"What are you grinning at?"

"You...Tom."

Tole compressed his lips. "I suppose I'll never hear the end of this."

"Is that really your name?"

"It's the one my parents gave me. Does that make it real enough?"

His affection welling, Ridley couldn't stop looking at Tole. "What's Zee's name?"

"Daniel Simon Zorin-O'Malley. Win's is Jesse William Winfield. So you summoned me here to find out our birth names?"

"No." Ridley stepped up to Tole and grabbed his shoulders. "You're an Exceptional Being, you damned marshmallow-roasting, bourbon-drinking, fire-starting, golem-tossing, blue-haired devil. You're a fucking *hybrid*."

Tole blinked at him. Other than that, his expression didn't change. "I had to travel across half a continent to be told something I already know?"

"Why not, you son of a bitch? *I* had to travel across half a continent to realize how much you mean to me."

Tole's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "And how much is that?"

"I'm asking the questions. Why the hell didn't you tell me about yourself?"

"What difference would it have made?"

Ridley shook Tole's shoulders. "Are you shitting me? *All* the difference, man!"

"How?"

"We'll get into that later."

"I *couldn't* tell you."

"Why?"

Tole's cheeks reddened. Ridley could see he was at a loss for an explanation. He really did have a hard time lying.

Ridley lowered his voice to a near-whisper. "Because you're one of the Powers of Regenerie? Is that it? Because the wonky Coven of Three is actually the great Triumvirate?"

Tole stared at his shoes and said nothing.

"Never mind. It's none of my business. And it doesn't matter. That part doesn't matter at all." Ridley had waited long enough and couldn't wait any longer. As soon as his hands cradled Tole's face, those honey-colored eyes rose to meet his. Everything he needed to know about this confounding relationship was written there.

"Are we expecting too much of ourselves?" Tole asked quietly.

"Probably. But isn't that better than expecting too little?"

Their kiss came as carefully as well-chosen words. A gentle joining, and all the more passionate because of its deliberation. Ridley felt the soft, perfect melding of his lips with Tole's the way he'd never felt any touch. It was a benediction, bursting with hope.

"I love you," Ridley said against Tole's yielding mouth. "Damn me, but I love you, right down to your warring chromosomes. And we're going to make this work."

Tole pressed the side of his face against Ridley's as his arms pulled Ridley closer, one hand cupping his head, the other molding to his back. Without thinking about it, Ridley mimicked the embrace. Tole didn't speak. But he was saying more, and more eloquently, than Andrew with all his genius could ever dream up.

"We should go," Ridley said.

Tole turned his head. His lips found Ridley's ear and flexed against it. Still silent, he withdrew. "Yes, we should." Smiling shyly, he turned away.

They walked to the room where Ulric had gone.

Muted voices came from within. Two men, unfamiliar to Ridley, were obviously readying Brant for battle. One applied oil to his nearly nude body in long, double-handed strokes. The other, standing behind him, was affixing something around his waist.

Tole pulled up short as soon as he entered the room and gaped at the gladiator. He raised a hand, finger pointed, as his mouth began forming a word. The word never made it out. His hand lowered.

Ridley didn't understand the reaction, but it was clear Tole needed some backup. "This is Brant," he said. "He's the one you'll be seeing in the Coliseum tonight."

"Brant," Tole repeated flatly.

The young man's face was creased with concentration. A fleeting glance was the only acknowledgment he gave the visitors. Ulric, back in the guise of Tweet, was securing boots around the gladiator's calves.

"Where's Simon?" Ridley asked.

"He's gone already," Brant murmured, and seemed none too pleased about it.

"He a-been took to the Maze," Ulric said in his Tweet voice.

Ridley heard Tole pronounce "fuck" beneath his breath.

"Tweet," Ridley said, "we'll be waiting for you outside. Okay?"

"I get."

Tole spun out of the room, his duster whirling around his legs. Once at a safe distance, he stopped near the meeting of the tunnel's branches and craned his neck toward Ridley. "Zee's with fucking *Sebastian*!" Although he held his voice down, the shock came through like a tire spinning across gravel.

"Actually, Tom," replied Ridley, "I think he's fucking Sebastian."

Tole scowled at him. "Quit calling me that."

"Why? I like it. It's masculine but modest. Gives you an everyman quality."

"Ridley..."

"Yes, Tom?"

Tole sighed. "You know, if I didn't love you so much, I'd punch you."

He'd never spoken that dreaded word until now. Naturally, he had to tuck it into a throwaway line. Ridley's heart hopped.

"Come again?" he asked.

Tole either didn't hear or pretended not to hear him. "Sebastian. Holy shit."

Lost cause, trying to get him to repeat it. "What's the big deal? Who is he?"

"One of the Powers of Villius," Tole said, scratching his furrowed forehead. "God damn. We knew Zee saw him there, while Zee was carrying on with Mirandi, but we had no idea they'd hooked up. Incredible."

"Well, you can get all the dirt once I help Zee out of that labyrinth."

Ulric trundled out of the preparation room, hopped on the people mover, and hopped off beside the two men. "Ready?" he said, looking up at them. They were both taller than average; the angle of his neck looked achingly unnatural.

Ridley dropped to a squat and put his hands on the gnome's shoulders. "Ulric, I have to get to the Maze. Please be kind enough to explain the Gronitch to Tom. Tell Andrew I needed to make some business calls and I'll be joining him as soon as possible. If I'm gone too long, I'll cover my own ass."

"Will do," said Ulric.

As he stood up, Ridley remembered something else. "Shit, I need to retrieve my luggage from the caves." At least he'd had the foresight to grab his phone and that invaluable packet of pills. There wasn't much else in the bag of any importance. Leaving it behind wouldn't be a great loss, but Ridley recoiled at the thought of even one of his possessions remaining in Andrew's hands.

"Why don't you both meet me back here once the Col event is over," said Ulric. "I'm not sure where your friends will be, but I would like to see the two of you."

"What about Andrew?" Ridley asked.

"I suspect he'll be occupied with other matters. And depending on how things go, I can always snatch your things from the guest room and have them sent to you. Sang Station, is it?"

Tole, who'd been absorbing the conversation, stepped forward. "How do you know about Regenerie's Undercity?"

"How do *you*?" Ulric asked with an arch smile.

"I'm sure he'll explain everything." Ridley gave Tole's arm an encouraging squeeze. "I have to fly, honey."

"Don't call me that." Tole's objection was far less strenuous than the last time. It seemed to be his halfhearted last stand against romantic softness. "I want to come with you."

"You can't. Andrew would know something was up. Besides, if the Coliseum action kicks off before I get back, you might have to step up to the plate."

"They won't be playing fuckin' baseball, Rid. What does...?"

Ridley flattened a hand on the side of Tole's face and kissed him. "Tom, honey, just listen to Ulric."

As Ridley took off at a run, Tole called out, "Be careful, sweetcheeks!"

Chapter Twenty-one

The moderate height of the trees was supposed to help a hunted man find his way out of the Maze. Or so Andrew had implied. Zee considered this as he charged down the first dimly lit path, trying to keep the Maze's schematic in mind.

He'd only been allowed thirty seconds to peruse the elaborate, computer-generated likeness, which hardly gave him time to study it, and the exit hadn't been marked. All he could remember was a rectangular plat, situated on the diagonal from southwest to northeast. Numerous pathways led to its boundaries. Zee thought he'd seen one that was open-ended, which certainly indicated the way out, but he had only a vague idea of how to get to that point. The Maze was a spaghetti bowl of trails.

The trees... As Andrew had pointed out, they weren't that tall. Zee could see swatches of sky overhead, but the bright proximity of Xanandru's domes made starlight faint and sparse. He'd glimpsed the moon on his way to the Maze but couldn't see it now. If he were an astronomer, familiar with the look of the night sky from every point on earth on every day of the year, and familiar with the wheeling of heavenly bodies over that point, he might be able to deduce the location of the exit. But he wasn't an astronomer.

Then again, maybe Andrew had been suggesting the trees could easily be climbed. With a crow's nest view of the Maze, Zee might be able to spot the exit. If, that is, the exit were lit up like one of Xanandru's Pleasure Nooks. There'd be no other way to see it in the dark distance.

After dodging off to the right, branches scraping his shin and upper arm, Zee paused for a moment to listen. Human footfalls should be easy to discern, since there probably weren't many critters on these acres. Andrew had been bullshitting about the presence of "wild things" — aside from the hunter himself, that is.

The reason Zee knew he'd been bullshitting is that the Maze was its own ecosystem. And it was a small one, at that. Its earthen floor and vegetation weren't

native to the area. The Pleasureplex of Xanandru was built upon rubble-strewn volcanic ash thickly layered over a sandy desert. The Maze, however, was more like a mix of temperate and subtropical new-growth forest – an artifice, not a product of nature.

Hearing nothing, Zee moved forward. The thin, soft boots he wore made virtually no sound on the hard-packed path. He felt confident enough to start jogging. Within seconds, a sharp crack came from beneath his sole. He mouthed *shit* and, crouching, swerved toward the woods line.

Cover wasn't easy to find in the Maze. It was thickly planted, the areas of growth packed with crisscrossed saplings and sticky, braided vines, hanging moss and thorn-laden branches. Keeping low to the ground helped somewhat, but scattered rocks jutted from the earth like carnivore teeth.

Zee began to realize how much sadistic relish had gone into planning this trap. Even the trails, he suspected, were only groomed in short stretches. Just as hunter or hunted thought he could tread in silence, his complacency would be shattered by a mat of twigs or gravel.

Hunkered in the underbrush, Zee cocked an ear. Behind and off to the left, possibly on a different pathway, he thought he heard a few muffled clunks. The noises could only be coming from the hunter. Feeling safe for the time being, Zee crept back onto the trail and kept moving ahead and to the right – what he hoped was northeast, where he thought the exit might be. If he kept to the very edge of the path, his progress might go undetected. The small minefields of debris seemed to be scattered down the center.

Instinct told Zee to take another right after he'd gone straight ahead for a few minutes. He hadn't advanced more than six paces when he saw a gray rectangle in the near distance, its plane unbroken by the daunting silhouettes of leaves and branches. Maybe his memory and sense of direction were better than he'd thought.

He dashed forward, eager to pass through the exit, heedless of the noise he made. Freedom and easy victory were at hand. All he could think of now was getting to the Coliseum, being there for Sebastian...

Realization registered a tick too late. With stunning force, Zee bounced off a trampoline-like surface. Arms churning through the air, he staggered backward, his legs faltering like damaged pistons. A knot of brambles caught his teetering body as a luridly colored troll face, glowing into three dimensions from that resilient surface, leered at him. Hysterical laughter pealed from the open mouth. The eyes repeatedly bugged and withdrew.

Zee's shocked yelps of pain mingled with the troll's hooting. It sounded derisive...and was probably meant to be. From shoulders to calves, Zee felt like a pincushion. Worse, he felt like an idiot.

Extricating himself was easier than he'd anticipated – all he had to do was carefully bring himself forward, mindful of his center of gravity – but restoration of

balance proved small consolation. Distant footfalls gradually grew louder. The hunter could easily home in on him using that clownish troll as a beacon.

Zee knew he had little time to decide what to do. If he stayed on this short arm of a path, he'd be trapped...unless he found an adequate hiding place. But looking for one meant risking further injury and more irrepressible cries of pain. Trying to conceal himself could doom him as much as standing out in the open.

Light-footed as he could be, Zee sprinted back the way he'd come. As soon as he turned the corner, he crept inside the woods line, dropped down, and began an agonizing crawl forward. Rocks scraped over his chest and abdomen and jabbed at his covered crotch. Not pleasant, but he soon realized he was lucky to be prone. The path began to undulate. Some buried mechanism must be causing the movement. Had Zee been on his feet, he would've been thrown down. And the hunter was now close enough to hear the resulting thump.

Zee heard him jogging, pausing, muttering, then advancing once more. The man's heavy breathing, not too far away but at least not on Zee's heels, was a chilling sound, as ominous as the panting of any stalker. Each exhalation carried a threat.

An enormous red tongue slithered through the shrubby jungle on Zee's left. It was but another masterful illusion. The tongue licked through rather than over Zee and provoked no reaction from him except an upsurge of impatience. He didn't want to bother with this nonsense, couldn't afford to have his attention distracted by technological trickery. But, he realized, that was the point—to rattle him, trip him up.

It was time to rise and let his legs hurry him along. Zee got up, made a left turn and then a right and another right.

Without warning, a bolt of pain tore through his arm. He kept going. Another drove like a rivet into his hip, making him falter.

The hunter had twice found his mark.

Zee knew he wouldn't stop there.

* * * * *

Undetectable by the human and hybrid males slinking along below him, Ridley shot over the Maze. Even the recorders Ulric had mentioned wouldn't be able to pick up his presence. He was confident of that.

Ridley hadn't seen any sign of an exit portal, which led him to believe there wasn't one—at least for this particular hunt. Maybe the usual one was closed off. Maybe, if a client paid well enough or Andrew's current mood was perverse enough, prey was trapped in the Maze until that prey could be tracked down.

It was entirely possible. In Xanandru, money bought all manner of entertainment, no matter how twisted.

Ridley had little trouble keeping track of the hunter. Sweating profusely, the man sent his excited reek above the treetops. He was none too quiet, either, and remained clearly visible as he alternately crept and trotted along.

Zee was harder to follow. He sporadically ducked for cover and kept turning onto different paths. It seemed whenever Ridley looked away from him, he was gone.

Then Ridley smelled his blood.

Faint at first, the scent suddenly strengthened. It blazed up Ridley's nostrils like molten copper laced with sea salt and caramelized sugar. Briefly, all his senses reeled. Zee was a hybrid, all right—that odor was unmistakable—and he was hurt.

Rechecking the hunter's location, Ridley peered more closely at the camo-clad figure. Furious indignation displaced his concern for Zee. The guy wasn't only freighted with weapons—at least three, judging by their shapes and positions on his body—he was also outfitted with night-vision goggles and a thermal-imaging camera. Zee, practically naked, had nothing.

Hardly a level playing field.

Ridley swooped down and snatched the camera out of the hunter's hand. The look on the man's face would've made Ridley laugh if he hadn't been so outraged. He tossed the camera into the woods and considered making off with more of the asshole's gear, since a vampire could move too swiftly to be seen by human eyes, but the other stuff wasn't as easy to get at. Besides, being mysteriously stripped of his weapons would arouse the hunter's suspicion and provoke his ire. Zee, a convenient scapegoat, could suffer for it.

At the moment, Zee seemed to have disappeared. Ridley circled over the Maze, looking for him. He'd circle as long as he had to.

Tole, Win, and Zee had rescued Ridley from a dire situation within the past year. It was time he returned the favor.

* * * * *

The tree had been a bitch to climb. Not only was its bark scaly, Zee's back burned from bramble pricks, his upper hip throbbed sickeningly from a stub-dart puncture, and his left biceps had been scored by the thin, searing beam of a laser. Hot sweat leaked from his pores, its salt torching his scattered wounds.

Pausing, the hunter uttered a curse. Zee tried to breathe silently, through his mouth, and remain still as a lichen in the crook of that branch. But he wasn't high enough in the tree to feel safe. The hunter's footsteps receded as he seemed to double back. Zee took the opportunity to climb higher.

A shock splintered through his body. The damned treetops were electrified. Losing his hold, he slipped and then tumbled from his perch as he heard the hunter exclaim, "You fucker!"

Before the man came after him, before he even felt his battered body connect with the unyielding ground, Zee was scooped up like a child. Vertigo overcame him; he felt as if his head were separating from his neck. Within seconds he *was* on the ground – but sitting solidly on his butt, not sprawled on the machine-packed soil of a man-made forest. Someone other than an armed assailant faced him.

Slumping forward, Zee caught his breath. The darkness was only a bit less dense. He couldn't make out details of the figure that knelt before him. "Who are you? Where am I and how did I get here? What am I supposed to do now?"

"You'd make a great journalist," a low voice answered. "All you left out was the 'why.'"

Zee patted the earth, looked up at the sky. He was on grass. No ugly mass of flora pressed in on him.

He squinted at his unexpected companion. "Ridley?"

"You can call me 'my hero' if you'd like."

Elbows on thighs, Zee dropped his face to his hands. He felt relieved yet strangely disappointed. "I'm out?"

"You're out."

"Thank you. But I really would have liked to –"

"It wasn't possible," said Ridley, certainly anticipating Zee's protest. "From what I could tell, the Maze has no exit. Not tonight. The only way out was the way you came in. You were trapped like a rat."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be after circling the perimeter several times."

"Incredible." Zee shook his head in disbelief. He silently chided himself for not having foreseen the extent of Andrew's dishonesty and cruelty.

"Good thing you *are* out." Ridley gently touched Zee's face, examined his arm, regarded his chest and abdomen. "You're really banged up. Nothing critical, but I'm sure that bloodthirsty prick would've kept taking potshots at you. I hate to think what he would've done once he'd taken you down."

Zee nodded. "That's what the Maze is all about. The hunter's satisfaction." He could pick out dim hints of Ridley's features now, and Ridley looked as well as sounded solicitous. "I just didn't realize the odds would be so stacked against me."

"They were more stacked than you know."

"You'll have to tell me about it later. Right now I need to get to the Coliseum. God knows what Sebastian is going to be up against."

Zee rose. Without adrenaline to keep his body humming along, aches began to surface. He felt bruised and stiff. Patches of his skin felt like smoldering ash.

"You don't seem to be healing as quickly as an EB should." Smiling wanly, Ridley also stood. "Pardon my presumption, but I have some experience with hybrids, you know."

He was right about the healing. Something was impeding the process. "The only reason I can come up with," Zee said, "is that oil they smeared all over me. It might be antibiotic, but it could also contain an agent that counteracts renewal."

"Yeah, there's an ugly logic behind that." Ridley shucked off his light jacket. "Here, wear this. You look like a lumberjack moonlighting as a stripper."

Wincing, Zee slipped it on. "Let's go."

"There's something else you should know," Ridley said, grabbing his forearm, "just so you're not so surprised you give us all away."

"Make it quick, Ridley." Zee took off the jacket and handed it back. "Thanks for the offer, but I can't wear this. It chafes too much."

Ridley hung the coat over his arm. "Tole's here."

Zee froze, staring at him. "In Xanandru? Why?"

"I called and asked him to come."

"Is he...normal?"

The question seemed to puzzle Ridley. "Of course not. That's one of the reasons I love him."

Chapter Twenty-two

"Where were you?" Andrew's unnaturally bright eyes seemed to bore through Ridley when he entered the royal box at the Coliseum.

"Didn't Tweet tell you?" Affecting a cavalier calm, Ridley folded himself into a large upholstered chair to the right of Andrew's even larger, plusher chair. He adjusted his shirt cuffs, crossed his legs, brushed a few specks of dirt off his trousers.

Andrew kept watching him. "Tweet said something about phone calls, business calls."

"Well, there you have it." Smiling, Ridley put a hand on Andrew's thigh. He took advantage of the gesture to tilt past Andrew and acknowledge the man on his left. "Hello, Tom."

Tole, ankle propped on knee, leaned forward and casually saluted him. Their gazes met for a second, pointedly, and Tole settled back. Ridley had felt his lover's honed attention as soon as he'd stepped into the box. He still felt it, wrapped around him like a coil of stimulant, insinuating its way beneath his skin.

"I wonder how the other contestant is doing," Tole said in a monotone.

It was another opportunity to glance at him. His face was impassive, although he was certainly concerned about Zee. This time, Ridley found it hard to look away. The feed had considerably deepened their bond, which had been anything but shallow to begin with.

"I'm sure I'll be hearing something soon," Andrew answered. He didn't look at either of his guests but stared ahead into the empty arena...or at the still-shrouded figure situated directly across the arena from Andrew's dais.

Tole's question prompted Ridley to wonder where "Simon" was. Ridley had transported him to the Coliseum grounds, in the way only a vampire can do, but Zee

had been adamant about being left alone once he was there. Ridley had no idea what his plans were but hoped they didn't include something rash.

Andrew's slender fingers with their duotone nails skated over the armrests of his chair, as if he were absently petting two reclining cats. Each wide arm was dotted with sunken, multicolored keys. It was the keypads he was stroking, restlessly, perhaps recalling their pattern. Three gilded projections rose from the ends of both arms like thick antennae. Controllers, Ridley realized, noticing the rotator cups into which they were set.

The Col was already abuzz with anticipation, its tiers of seats filled.

"How much longer must we wait?" Ridley asked.

"Not too," said Andrew. "Brant was being...difficult. He didn't want to begin until he knew his friend was out of the Maze."

"And how exactly did you resolve the problem?" Ridley tried to sound casually curious. He immediately sensed a sharpening of Tole's attention.

Andrew slid a glance at Ridley but didn't face him. "Through reason, darling. This crowd can't wait all night for the competition to begin."

Beneath lifted eyebrows, Tole dramatically mouthed the word *darling*. Ridley pursed in a smile.

Andrew fidgeted. His legs fell to either side, reminding Ridley what lay beneath the knee-length skirt he wore. It was black-and-purple plaid. Strips of some material in the same two colors covered his torso, stretching from a choker to a belt. Between the loosely aligned bands, Ridley got his second glimpse of that chest tattoo, or whatever it was. The design did seem similar to the dragon covering his groin. Another network of receptors, probably.

Touching a spot behind his ear, Andrew muttered, "Five three six." Then, "Let's get on with it."

* * * * *

There was no obvious way to get into the Coliseum without either buying a ticket or being invited by Andrew. Since Zee hadn't bothered tucking any coins into the crotch protector he wore, he somehow had to let Andrew know he was out of the Maze. It wasn't the ideal situation—he'd hoped to be able to sneak in and find Sebastian, or at least lurk near the Groan Witch and try to disable it—but prowling around to find a hidden entry point would take too much time.

Even after he'd decided to find Andrew, Zee didn't know how to proceed. Ticket purchasing and admission into the seating area were automated. There seemed to be no employees around. But there must be guards. People who acted up or tried to enter without paying had to be nabbed by *someone*.

Zee had but one choice. He must draw attention to himself, which shouldn't be too difficult. Dirty, battered, nearly naked men weren't the norm on Xanandru's streets – only behind the doors of its Pleasure Nooks.

* * * * *

A robust voice boomed from the sound system. "Ladies and gentlemen; Exceptional Beings, human beings, and Otherbeings; connoisseurs of carnal delights and seekers of stimulating thrills – the Pleasureplex of Xanandru welcomes you to the venue that redefines" – the voice broke into a brief, lewd snicker – "brawn *and* balls, the Col-i-se-um!"

After the crowd thundered a greeting in return, the announcer continued. "Tonight's combatant is the handsomest hunk of hybrid ever to tread the arena floor." His voice got greasy with innuendo. "Veteran Collies, I hope you brought your toys. First-time Collies, your hand, or someone else's, will have to do."

Ridley sneaked a glance at Tole. His face was screwed into an expression Ridley had never seen on it before. Like he couldn't believe what he was hearing, didn't want to believe what he was hearing, and yet found what he was hearing both humorous and disgusting.

Pulling in a smile, Ridley again turned his eyes forward.

He'd missed the announcer's latest bit of bombast, which apparently had centered on introducing the Groan Witch.

The shimmering veil that hung from a large horizontal ring began to part, its folds compressing as they drew back along opposite arcs. Cheers and whistles erupted from the crowd like a burst of mass hysteria. Ridley glanced at his companions. Andrew wore a small, fixed smile. Tole leaned forward and stared, forehead furrowed.

Tweet's description had done little to prepare Ridley for his first sight of the Groan Witch. Only a bit shorter than the curtain that had concealed it, the enpar looked like the misbegotten spawn of a fairy-tale hag and armored space knight, with some deep-sea ugly-fish thrown in.

Andrew slid his left hand forward on the arm of his chair and subtly manipulated two of the protruding levers. The fingers of his right danced over keypads. With a squeal of metal scale on metal scale, the Witch lifted its arms and turned its face to the Col's ceiling. Its jutting jaw creaked open, showing jagged rows of teeth sharper than a vampire's fangs. Wagging its head from side to side, it let loose a manic shriek.

The crowd responded in kind.

Andrew's smile broadened.

From somewhere behind the Witch's platform, a chariot drawn by robotic horses appeared. And there stood Sebastian, all gleaming muscle and defiant scowl, wearing little more than a miniscule skirt of chain mail around his hips. Actual links of chain, attached to a neck-hugging collar, hung down the center of his chest and back.

Ridley found the outfit both appalling, since it offered little protection, and titillating. Sebastian had a damned impressive physique, its contours emphasized by the sheen of oil covering his body and those heavy links snaking between his lats and pecs. Of course, half the point of the competition was to show off his body. This was the Pleasureplex of Xanandru, after all.

Apparently responding to the keys Andrew pressed on the chair arms, the Witch lumbered from its platform right after Sebastian jumped off the chariot. His right hand gripped a sword, or something resembling a sword. Machine loomed over man. The crowd shouted support for one combatant or the other.

"What's Brant holding?" Ridley asked, tilting toward the transfixed Andrew. Tole looked their way.

"An electronic disabler. If he can thrust it into the appropriate slots in the Witch's exo, he'll impair some of her functions."

Enpar and hybrid circled each other. The Witch was three times Sebastian's height but not nearly as nimble as he. Footsteps thudding on the hard-packed dirt floor, the enpar did an awkward but intimidating dance, its feet rising and falling, the entwined tendons of its arms grinding through unnatural flexions. Sebastian kept a wary eye on his opponent. Lunging forward, he jammed his disabler into the thing's lower leg.

An unearthly screech cut through the air, nearly drowning out the shouts of the crowd. Sebastian hustled to extract his weapon and move out of the way, but the disabler had sunk in deep. He pulled harder and got it free. The effort made him lose his balance and stumble backward. Like a bird of prey, the Witch's gnarled hand swept down. A talonlike fingernail hooked into one of the links of Sebastian's anterior chain. He gave a strangled cry as the enpar flung him aside, gouging his chest in the process. When Sebastian skidded across the floor, his hip skirt flipping up to expose nicely rounded buttocks, the crowd roared in approval.

Ridley tensed. His eyes shifted between Andrew and the arena action. Simultaneously, three disturbing movements caught his attention—Andrew's hips shifted as his dragon began to rear its head; the Groan Witch again bore down on Sebastian; Tole's hand slipped between Andrew's legs.

Andrew looked nearly as thunderstruck as Ridley felt. It was a moment before he got over his shock and remembered Tweet's circumspect advice.

You could help the contestant by keeping Andrew's dragon...distracted.

Ridley's gaze, and hand, met Tole's. You take the high road and I'll take the low road, he thought, his fingers burrowing toward Andrew's balls while Tole worked the dragon's neck. The light flush Ridley felt in his cheeks, the self-conscious smile that touched his lips were mirrored on Tole's face.

As Andrew's eyelids closed, his mouth opened. His hands stilled on the chair arms. The Groan Witch froze in midstoop. A yellowy liquid it was about to eject from its fingertips merely dribbled to the ground and made an irregular dark puddle. As insurance, Ridley reached for Andrew's nearest hand and began sucking his fingers.

Sebastian hurried to get up and again face his opponent. Blood from the gash trickled in fine rivulets down his chest and rib cage. The Witch remained paralyzed. Quickly growing restive, the crowd booed.

The invisible announcer said, "We will take a brief intermission to dress our combatant's wounds. The competition will resume shortly."

Lights dimmed as their colors changed to simulate an approaching storm. Billowy, dark clouds hung beneath the domed ceiling and sent out flashes of lightning. Martial music thundered from the sound system.

Amid these distractions, some behind-the-scenes technician got the Groan Witch to straighten. The grinding squeal of its mechanical parts wasn't entirely drowned out by either the music or the rumbles of false thunder, and as soon as the thing moved, the crowd responded with whistles and applause. It made for good entertainment to have the enpar resemble a hideous, insanely vicious crone. It made for bad entertainment to have the enpar resemble a crippled, mindless crone.

A small figure appeared behind the enpar. Frowning, Ridley peered at it. Ulric? Yes, it had to be the gnome, fiddling with the backs of the Witch's legs. He couldn't have been visible to the other people in the arena, as short and swaddled in darkness as he was, and that was probably the point of sending him out there. Let the least noticeable technician make the hands-on repairs; don't destroy the illusion of the Witch's invincibility.

Knees bending, the Witch hunched forward and lifted its arms above its shoulders. Whoever was at the controls made the enpar's hands curl into talons and its toothy jaw jut forward. A growl rumbled from its mouth.

Poised for attack.

Ridley had a feeling Sebastian would be in for even harsher treatment when he returned to the ring. And it didn't matter whether Andrew or the bloodthirsty crowd was at the controls.

"Don't stop," Andrew said tightly.

Ridley realized he'd been so fascinated by the Groan Witch, he'd let Andrew's fingertips fall from his lips. His and Tole's hands had stilled on Andrew's crotch. He sure as hell didn't want to keep going, and he sure as hell hoped Tole felt the same, but things could get even more unpleasant if they didn't finish what they'd started. Andrew's cock was semierect, and he certainly wouldn't want those fondling hands to abandon him now.

Trying to placate the Prince of Perversion, Ridley again started fingering Andrew's balls. Tole's hand moved on Andrew's cock. Their play was lazy and careless now, because they had to save the vigorous stuff for Sebastian's reappearance.

Andrew shifted restlessly. "Harder," he whispered. He sounded annoyed. His slender hips squirmed, demanding more contact.

Suddenly, two or three sets of footsteps shuffled behind the three men in the box's front-row seats. Ridley let go of Andrew's hand and, along with Tole, quickly withdrew

his hand from Andrew's crotch. The leader, who still hadn't climaxed, seemed lust-shocked and breathless. And that meant the night was far from over.

"Excuse me, sir," said a male voice.

Ridley heard the sounds of a minor scuffle at his back. He turned just before Andrew did, as Andrew's bodyguards began to get up. A nearly nude man wrenched free of their grasping hands and bulldozed forward.

Chapter Twenty-three

Tole began to rise from his seat. "Holy shit..."

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," Zee said. "Please, stay where you are." He raised a cautioning hand, hoping Tole got the message. Good thing Ridley had told him about his comrade showing up. Considering how overwrought he felt right now, he probably would've blown their cover if he hadn't been warned.

Startled, Tole fell back into his chair. He continued to gawk at Zee's soiled, nicked body.

Stunned, Andrew, too, kept staring at the escapee. "How...when did you get out of the Maze? I received no notification."

"I shifted and took to the air. Hardly a risk, since your happy hunter wasn't near me at the time." Zee held out his arms and gave Andrew a sour smile. "It was getting annoying, sustaining injuries that wouldn't heal."

"So you took the coward's way out." Andrew tried to launch the comment on a sneer, but it wasn't convincing.

He seemed tensely aware of Ridley's and Tole's presence. Judging by his expression, he couldn't settle comfortably into any one reaction. Outrage shivered beneath his features—escaping the Maze through flight certainly wasn't condoned, since it cheated the customer out of a long, savage hunt—but embarrassment undermined his anger. Andrew knew damned well he hadn't warned Zee about the ointment...and a host of other disadvantages.

"I'm a coward?" Zee stared directly at his accuser, who had difficulty meeting his gaze. "Because I refuse to participate in a 'sport' that guarantees suffering, or worse? Because I was deceived about the true nature of that competition and so had every right to remove myself from it?" Of course, he didn't mention Ridley's intervention.

"Well..." Still seated, Andrew cleared his throat and fidgeted. "We'll discuss those things later. My assistants will take you to the bull pen. They'll clean you up and tend to your scrapes. You can rejoin us once you've freshened up and gotten dressed."

"Where's Brant?" Zee looked around the arena. He couldn't figure out what was going on. The weird thunderstorm effects made it hard to see anything clearly, although he could pick out a tall, irregular shape across the ring. "Has it started yet?"

"Intermission," Ridley said. He was perfectly cool and collected, his legs crossed and hands linked in his lap.

Zee figured Sebastian must be all right. So far.

"You really must leave, Simon." Andrew glanced over his shoulder at the men aligned behind him. They still stood, tensely alert and ready to spring.

"I'm not leaving while my friend is in that arena."

"You can't stay here," Andrew said in a measured voice. It had an edge of menace. "You're too volatile right now. And there's nothing you can do for Brant, anyway."

The lights came up, the music faded, and the crowd signaled its pleasure with a round of foot-stomping and cheering. Zee turned toward the arena. Sebastian reappeared, escorted by a bare-breasted woman and burly man, each wearing nothing more than sandals and miniscule gold skirts. A chain had been wrapped around Sebastian's torso, and each of his "slave masters" held one end of it.

Zee gripped the top of the box's low wall and leaned forward. There appeared to be a cut on Sebastian's chest. He'd also been rubbed with oil—an even-toned gleam shimmered softly on his body—and it was likely the same substance Zee had been coated with. No wonder his injury still looked fresh.

Sebastian's escorts unwound the chain from his body. With a prolonged, chilling creak, the Witch's head swiveled to face him. As the enpar lumbered forward, looking like a storybook monster with its ferocious glower and raised claws, Sebastian moved from one side to the other, trying to keep his opponent off balance.

Zee swung around to face Andrew. "Put me down there with him, goddamn it! He can't take on that thing alone!"

The three men stationed behind Andrew's throne fixed cold gazes on Zee. He wondered vaguely how they were armed, for they certainly carried weapons of some sort. Bodyguards always did.

"He *can* take on the enpar alone," Andrew said. "And he will. Your defiance has only validated my reason for wanting you gone."

At Zee's back, the audience sent up another clamor. Tole and Ridley shifted forward in their seats. They looked alarmed, although they were trying to underplay it.

Not good. Something had happened to Sebastian.

Zee was about to check out the reason for Tole's and Ridley's disturbing reactions when he felt a cabling of his muscles, neck to feet. A hard ache surfaced beneath his face

and between his shoulders. Limbs going rigid, he gritted his teeth. His thoughts fragmented.

Andrew narrowed his eyes. "You shift, my friend, and you're dead. I'm already displeased by your flight from the Maze. The hunter will be allowed to punish you for circumventing the rules."

Off to the side, Zee saw movement. Tole hunched over in his chair then arched backward, rolling his shoulders. A grimace contorted his features.

Ridley whispered, "What the—" and bolted up from his seat.

The burst of activity was enough to wrest Andrew's attention from Zee. Firing a glance at Ridley and then at Tole, his eyes widened. "Sit down!" he barked, jerking his head in Ridley's direction. "Stay out of his way!" Andrew leaned over and grasped Tole's shoulders. "Tom, relax. Don't give in to it. The situation's under control. Recite your incantation."

Heavily, Tole's chest rose and fell. Concern for him halted the advance of Zee's own demon—or rather, the demonic traits he'd inherited from Eligos. His body shuddered as it gave up the transformation.

Zee went to Tole and leaned over him. "Really, everything has settled down now. The process stopped. I'm fine. There won't be a confrontation."

"Why should he give a shit about *you*?" Andrew snapped, glaring at Zee.

"I don't know." Satisfied Tole was getting back to normal—the relaxation of his facial muscles was evidence enough—Zee straightened. "Every hybrid is different. You're certainly aware of that."

"What was happening to him?" Ridley asked, casting frantic glances at Tole. Sitting on the edge of his seat, he looked beside himself. His knuckles blanched as he gripped the chair arms. "Is he all right?"

Now Ridley became the focus of Andrew's resentment and suspicion. "What the *fuck* does it matter to you? Just because you drank from—"

Another piercing metallic shriek came from the floor of the arena, immediately snagging Andrew's attention.

The Groan Witch seemed to be convulsing. Its head repeatedly jerked backward. Legs bending and straightening, it occasionally flung out a foot, kicking the air, or fell into a clumsy, loose-hipped jig. Arms shuddered through nonsensical stretches and twists.

Then it stopped in midspasm. Just pulled up short, buggy, red-veined eyes rolling in their sockets and limbs seizing up. Zee looked from the Witch to Sebastian, who'd gone nowhere near the enpar. But he *had* suffered another injury—he clutched one of his shoulders with his opposite hand. That must've been what had earlier caught Tole's and Ridley's attention.

A laborious grinding sound filled the arena. Somebody somewhere had managed to reanimate the Witch, but it moved haltingly, as if stricken by arthritis.

"*Shit.*" Andrew's fingers played desperately over the arms of his chair.

After one last, rattling shudder, the Witch fell forward, its head thudding to the ground. Its feet, though, remained firmly planted. Doubled over, it held the inelegant pose.

Sebastian kicked the Groan Witch in the ankle, apparently an act of pure spite. Zee grinned as Ridley chuckled. Tole said, "Ouch. That's it, that's gotta be the death blow."

"Jesus, what's wrong with it?" Staring in befuddlement, Andrew shook his head. Distractedly, he pushed the button behind his ear. "What the fuck is *wrong* with it?" he shouted to whomever had to listen.

"She must like taking it from behind," Tole drawled. "But I don't think the gladiator's sword is long enough."

Ridley spluttered into laughter.

* * * * *

"Guess Ulric called it right." Ridley peered both ways down the tram tunnel. He had no idea from which direction the demi-gnome would appear. The vacuum lift that led to Andrew's Coliseum box was far to his left just at the point where the tram veered off to circle the Col's underbelly.

"I wonder how he could've known," Tole said. "And I wonder what's going on with Zee and Sebastian." He stuffed his hands in his pants pockets and, for no discernible reason, studied the ceiling. "And I wonder why Andrew calls you *darling*." Tole pronounced the word with undisguised mockery.

Ridley, turning down his head and holding in a smile, rocked back on his heels. "He's always called me darling...honey."

Tole shot him a disgusted glance and again looked away. "I've felt like Alice in fucking Wonderland since I got here," he muttered.

"How do you think *I* feel? I didn't know hybrids could shift."

Concern immediately scudded across Tole's features. "Does that bother you?"

"Not particularly. I'm a vampire, remember?"

Tole nodded. "Yeah, that's right. Bats and rats and wolves and all that shit."

"And snakes and hawks and spiders and other animals. It depends on the breed."

Cocking his head, Tole angled his startling eyes at Ridley. "What about you? You've never talked about that part of your life."

Now Ridley got uncomfortable. He still didn't want to talk about it. "I'd rather not do it here," he said.

"I'd rather not, either."

Ridley strolled up to Tole, slipped his arms beneath Tole's arms, and pulled him close. Tole abruptly pulled his hands out of his pockets and returned the hug. His face lowered to the crook of Ridley's shoulder.

"You coming back to Regenerie after this?" Tole asked. Turning his face to the side, he kissed Ridley's neck.

Ridley closed his eyes. "I have to stop in Specula first, maybe for a couple of days. Then I'll be back." He was about to maneuver for a serious kiss, but Tole abruptly lifted his head.

"Specula? Why there?"

Rapid footsteps echoed down the tunnel. Somebody else was on the sidewalk that ran beside the conveyor. The two men pulled apart.

"I do have the most dreadful timing sometimes," said Ulric. He seemed unusually chipper. "Please forgive me."

Tole and Ridley straightened their clothing, although it wasn't disheveled.

"Andrew's still in the enpar control center," Ulric said, "trying to figure out what happened to his creation."

"What *did* happen to it?" Ridley asked.

Ulric clapped his hands together and linked his stubby fingers. He looked so pleased with himself, he was nearly incandescent. "It appears the poor Witch was cursed with an infestation of hostile nanobots, although Andrew doesn't know that yet. So you must keep it to yourselves."

"Ulric, I have no idea what you're talking about," Ridley said, "but I'll do any damned thing you want."

Tole stared at the gnome. "Did you have something to do with it?"

Ulric donned his Tweet persona. "I canna say, Mr. Tom. I canna say."

Chapter Twenty-four

"Think this will work?" Ridley asked.

The tram neared its entrance to the ice caves. Ridley, Tole, and Ulric were the only riders.

"I can't just take off without talking to him," Tole said. "I don't think you can, either."

Ridley hesitated then shook his head. He looked at his intertwined fingers, tensing and relaxing in his lap. He and Tole had at first planned on disappearing, quickly and painlessly, from Andrew's world after grabbing Ridley's things from the ice caves. They looked forward to the peace and privacy of Ridley's hotel room and especially to that sumptuous bed. Tole was also hungry as a bear.

But the shadow of Andrew seemed to hover at their backs, trying to get their attention. They'd both been friends and lovers to him. Although those old, flimsy connections hadn't meant much to Tole and Ridley, they'd apparently meant a great deal to Andrew. Maybe they could convince him to get help.

"He was so bright," Tole murmured, "had so much promise. This is just the most pathetic waste."

"I know." The prospect of hanging around those stultifying caves, of spending still more time with Andrew left Ridley feeling torn and deflated. He wanted to get on with his life and love...yet his conscience dictated that no creature should be classified as irredeemable without being offered a chance to redeem himself.

Ulric, somber now, had been listening quietly to the exchange. "Your intentions are quite admirable, gentlemen, but please don't blame yourselves if your efforts fail. I've heard that Lorenzo and Pacemia, as well as others, have tried straightening Andrew out. Nothing anybody did or said made any difference. He has, you know, a

horrendously monolithic ego. And his mind...well, its reasoning capacity is impaired. A modern case of hubris, I'm afraid."

"I think we're both well aware of that," said Ridley, flipping a glance at Tole.

Tole sighed. "Damn, I need to talk to..." He stopped himself from naming names, but he was obviously thinking of Zee and Win.

"You will, soon enough," Ridley said.

Following Andrew's hasty departure from the viewing box, Zee had gone in search of Sebastian, determined that they both "get the hell out of here." He and Tole hadn't been able to talk openly, because some members of Andrew's cadre continued to mill around, unsure where to go and what to do. After Zee took off, they were summoned to the Col entrance.

The situation in the Coliseum had, by that time, started skidding toward chaos. Realizing they wouldn't get their money's worth, the audience became increasingly restive and belligerent, morphing from crowd to mob. Only an announcement that their admission fees would be refunded seemed to mollify them, but they still felt cheated.

Before the tram entered the cave complex, Ridley turned to Ulric. He'd developed genuine fondness as well as respect for the demi-gnome. "Ulric," he said, "in case we can't speak openly before I leave here, I want you to know how grateful I am for all your insights and advice and help. I truly hope your stay in Xanandru proves fruitful. And I hope you'll be happily resettled in Specula soon."

Humbly, Ulric turned down his eyes. "It's been an honor. Up until now, I've only been doing good in the abstract, without any tangible results. This is the first opportunity I've had to offer direct aid to creatures." Finally, he met Ridley's gaze and glanced at Tole, too. "It's been more fulfilling than I can say. May all four of you realize your fondest dreams."

Rising from his seat, Ridley shook the gnome's small but skilled hand.

Once in the cave complex and off the tram, Ridley, Tole, and Ulric made their way silently to the ice parlor. They were back in surveillance country now. Small talk, under the circumstances, didn't come easily. Ridley suspected Ulric wasn't much in the mood to play Tweet, and he knew Tole always became withdrawn when he was troubled.

They took separate seats while Ulric tended the hearth fire. He offered to get Tole something to eat, but Tole had lost his appetite.

"Do you have any idea, Tweet," asked Ridley, "how long Sir Andrew might take with the Gronitch? I'm afraid I can't wait all night for him."

"He like believe his misters be here, awaiting. 'Twill make him hurry." Hustling out of the room, Ulric returned a minute later with Ridley's overnight bag. After setting it down, he nodded and again disappeared.

Ridley stretched out in the chair, his butt sliding toward the cushion's edge, his straightened legs making a wide V. He was about to link his hands over head when he

caught Tole watching him. Ever so slightly, Tole's mouth tipped toward a one-sided smile. Ridley rested his hands on either side of his crotch. Tole's smile lengthened.

That was all it took to make the wait bearable. Regardless of what happened with Andrew, Ridley thought, he and Tole had each other.

They weren't the perfect couple. But perfection, Ridley told himself, would be dull.

* * * * *

Nobody seemed to give much of a crap about Zee and Sebastian once the Groan Witch took its inexplicable dive and the Coliseum crowd got cranky. Andrew and his underlings had their hands full.

Zee found Sebastian in a kind of locker room tucked beneath the stands near the enpar's platform and control room. The two competitors merely got on one of the moving sidewalks that circumnavigated the Col's sublevel and headed for the bull pen to retrieve their clothing.

"Where should we go from here?" Sebastian asked as they got dressed.

"I think our first order of business is to shower," Zee said. "We have to get this oil off our bodies. I know damned well it's inhibiting the healing process." He and Sebastian winced in counterpoint as they donned their clothing. Sebastian's wounds did seem to have closed a bit. "Then I want to order something to eat, make a phone call, and get out of Xanandru. If I need medical treatment, which isn't too much of an issue, I'd rather get it in Regenerie than here."

"Think we have enough information?" Sebastian lifted his gaze to Zee's face.

The sight of those large, lucid eyes made Zee stop for a moment. He hadn't a speck of carnal impulse since he'd entered the Maze. But now that he and Sebastian were safe...

Pausing, Sebastian frowned. "Is something wrong?"

Zee shook himself out of his daze. "Not anymore," he said with a smile. It probably looked lascivious. He sat down to pull on his socks and shoes.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Oh, sorry. I don't know about you, but I have more than I need to make a recommendation."

Sebastian sat beside him. "I feel the same. So...would you mind having a traveling companion? Maybe you could stop in Villius or I could come to Regenerie. We really should go over—"

Zee shut him up with a kiss. "I hope you were about to say 'each other.'"

Sebastian looked pleased. "You're shameless."

"It's about time."

* * * * *

Low voices drifting from a hallway meant Andrew was back in the caves. The voices fell silent. Seconds later, Andrew appeared in the parlor. His svelte figure didn't even look substantial at first, and his face bore no expression.

Tole and Ridley stood simultaneously, like visiting dignitaries in the presence of a head of state. Andrew didn't act surprised or pleased to see them, didn't even utter a greeting. He simply regarded each of them in turn.

"Would you both like to join me in my suite and finish what you started?"

"That's not why we're here, Andy," Tole said quietly.

Andrew arched one eyebrow. "We. Hm. Sounds suspiciously like a united front." He glanced at Ridley. "But based on what?"

"Concern for you," Ridley answered.

Andrew didn't react. He lapsed into suspended animation. Only his eyes moved, shifting between the men who faced him. Ridley fancied he could hear ticking within that motionless shell.

Without warning, Andrew reanimated. "*What?*" he barked, his eyelids springing open. He looked amused, incredulous. He also looked like he was about to unravel and go spinning down a black hole. "Have you not noticed, dear men, that I am the sole Power of a wealthy metroplex?" Color patterned his high cheekbones.

"Andy, listen to me," Tole said, stepping up to him. "You have no idea how much I used to admire you, even envy you. You had enough energy to fire up a dead star. And your intellect was a thing of wonder to me, so incisive, so inventive. But now —"

Andrew didn't let him finish. "That wasn't my intellect you sucked, Tom," he said. He lifted a hand and threaded his fingers through Tole's hair. "So let's just cut the bullshit and get back to what we *really* like about each other."

Tole could have been at Andrew's funeral, his look of sadness was so profound. "I don't like anything about you right now. Ironically, that's why I'm standing here. I'm not sure what you've been doing to yourself, but you're destroying that extraordinary young man I used to know and turning a vibrant metroplex into a goddamned sewer."

Andrew's face distorted with rising rage. Glaring at Tole, he clenched his fingers within Tole's hair and yanked his head backward. Tole winced, but not in alarm or pain. Rather, with an obvious pang of despair.

Ridley flew up to them and grabbed Andrew by the shoulders. "Stop it!" he shouted, spinning Andrew around and shaking him. "Jesus, look at yourself. Can't you see there's something wrong? You need a new start, Andrew. You're drugged out and bugged out and surrounded by sycophants who don't give a shit about how much you're degrading yourself *or* your metroplex." Ridley pointed at Tole. "That man and I, we've known you for years. We can see how much you've degenerated. We can see how desperately —"

"We, we, we!" Andrew shrilled. He backed away from Ridley and flicked a manic glance at Tole. His eyes became slits. "What's going on? Who sent both of you here?"

"Nobody fucking 'sent' us here," Ridley said wearily. He reached for Andrew's arm.

Andrew lunged toward him, pressed his body against Ridley's, and clamped both hands to the sides of Ridley's face. "Then prove it. Tell me you love me. Swear you love me as much as I love you." His sudden kiss was assaultive, its furor underscored by a dig of fingernails into Ridley's scalp.

"Leave him alone, goddamn it!"

Tole wrenched Andrew away so forcefully, Andrew fell and skidded across the floor while Ridley, thrown off balance, stumbled backward and dropped into a chair. Andrew's eyes looked like smeared daubs of paint as he stared up at Tole.

"Enough is enough," Tole said, looming over him. "You're a danger to yourself and others and this whole damned metropolex, and there's obviously no convincing you of that." Wheeling around, he strode over the chair where Ridley had originally been sitting and snatched up Ridley's bag.

Andrew continued, unblinking, to stare at him. "'And all should cry, Beware, beware!'" he whispered, rising from the floor. "'His flashing eyes, his floating hair!'" Andrew began to turn—slowly at first, then more rapidly, until his hair was indeed floating and his checkered skirt swung out from his slender hips. He dropped his head back. "'Weave a circle round him thrice, and close your eyes with holy dread...'"

He teetered and began to lose his balance. Ridley sat forward. Andrew did a final pirouette and began to crumple.

Bolting up from the chair, Ridley caught him. Andrew's head dropped onto Ridley's shoulder. His body went limp in Ridley's arms.

"'For he on honey-dew hath fed,'" Tole murmured, "'and drunk the milk of Paradise.'"

Only it wasn't honey dew and the milk of paradise that had made Andrew go out like a sputtering candle. It was a complex cocktail, years in the making, of much more insidious forces. And Ridley knew neither he nor Tole could undo the effects.

Chapter Twenty-five

"So we're agreed, then?" Zee glanced around the table at Win, Tole, and Pablo.

They all nodded, although Tole still looked troubled. Sighing, he rubbed his face and briefly rested it in his hands.

"You seem reluctant," Zee said gently.

Tole shook his head and let his hands fall to the table. "It's just...tragic. And Andrew doesn't get it. How the corruption started in him and took him over and then spread like a virus."

Zee felt bad for his friend but couldn't spare any sympathy for Andrew. Tole had been in a low-grade funk since returning from X-land. Actually witnessing the extent of Andrew's deterioration, and hearing Zee's and Sebastian's stories, had been much harder on him than reading allegations and secondhand reports. The fact that Ridley hadn't returned with him to Regenerie further clouded his mood, although they'd at least stayed in touch. If it weren't for Ridley's calls, Tole might be in bed again, swaddled in angel wings.

"The corruption spread because Andrew let it," Win said. "Even encouraged it." He, too, didn't have much compassion for Andrew after hearing Zee's and Tole's accounts of their stay.

"You realize, don't you," Tole said, "that if the trade embargo doesn't persuade him to relinquish power, we'll have to consult the Celestine. And that's going to raise a whole *new* flock of issues for us."

Lifting his eyebrows, Win took a deep breath and blew it out.

"You're *sure* Andrew would resist rehab?" Zee asked Tole.

"He doesn't even realize anything is wrong with him. Believe me, he's pretty much lost it. Ask Ridley." Tole checked the time on the nearest wall. "He should be here soon."

"Ridley's back in Regenerie?" Win asked.

Tole's face took on a delicate blush. Anticipation sang out from that rise of blood. "Yeah, he should be."

Zee smiled. He understood the sweet rush that preceded a lover's appearance. Soon, very soon, he hoped to see Sebastian again.

"All's right in Tole's world," Win mumbled to his keyboard. "No wonder those demons haven't been inclined to come after me."

Tole, of course, turned to him...which Win, of course, had expected him to do. "None of them has ever come after you. If one had, you wouldn't be around. At the very least, you wouldn't be pretty anymore."

Without looking at Tole, Win pulled down the corners of his mouth and waggled his head.

"Can we *please* get back on track?" Zee said impatiently. "Okay, so Pacemia and Lorenzo obviously won't be taking over X-land. They made it clear they wouldn't even consider returning unless Andrew was gone."

"The way he abuses himself," Tole said, "he could be gone fairly soon. And I mean gone from this world. Even a super can't live indefinitely under those conditions."

"Since we have no way of predicting how long he'll be around," Win said, "we'd better just proceed. I say we should take one more step before fashioning the embargo. Let's brief Reynolds and give him a day or two to pull together a team. They could check out that underground network in X-land."

"The shadows," Zee said scornfully. He still had the introduction card he'd gotten from the man with the dagger. "I'm really sorry that Sebastian and I couldn't bring ourselves to —"

"Hey, it's all right," Pablo said. He glanced at the other men. They murmured their assent. "Not many people outside of law enforcement can witness that sort of stuff and keep a cool head. If you'd shifted, God knows what would've happened to you."

Zee nodded, touched by his support. Pablo had suffered at the hands of a scumbather. He understood.

"You could've become one of the victims," Tole said. "Or been imprisoned and interrogated."

"Or killed," Win added. He laid a hand on Zee's arm. "You made the right decision."

"Besides," Tole said, "your experiences at the Maze and the Coliseum are going to figure prominently in our report. So don't apologize. Your balls were plenty big enough." He smiled, and it was as much of a boost as Pablo's empathy. Tole didn't smile for just anybody.

Zee returned it. "Thanks, man." Sighing, he scratched at his forehead as he considered Win's suggestion. "Yeah, I suppose it wouldn't be a bad idea to bring Reynolds into it."

Tole got up. "I'm for it. Send three or four investigators, male and female. Outfit them with A-V patches and let them snoop around for a week. The more concrete evidence we have, the stronger our case." He walked to a table near the fireplace, grabbed up his phone, and checked it for messages.

"When they get back, we'll draw up the document," Zee said, "and send it to Mirandi and Sebastian for their approval or additions. Once we've all reached an accord, the seals go on, the document is sent to Xanandru, and the embargo is instituted. Pablo sets up interfaces with all affected businesses and agencies. Simultaneously, we send our evidence and conclusions, along with an invitation to participate in the action, to other metroplexes."

Win glanced impishly at Zee. "I imagine the document will be 'sent' to Villius on your person."

"I may decide to deliver it, yes." Zee had moved beyond embarrassment about his affair with Sebastian. It could hardly be kept a secret, considering his experiences in Xanandru were inextricably linked to Sebastian. Moreover, there was no reason for secrecy.

The affair did, of course, provide fodder for Win's smart-ass comments, but Zee was becoming adept at ignoring them.

Win got up from the table. "Has Mirandi figured out yet what's going on between you two?"

"Not unless Sebastian's told her. But I doubt that's happened. He realizes our relationship is none of her business."

"Speaking of business," Pablo said, "we also need to alert the shops that import products from Xanandru. Give them a chance to stock up while they look for new suppliers."

"Good point." Affectionately skimming a hand over Pablo's cheek, Win went to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of green tonic.

Zee made a mental note to order more Gnizz. He'd brought six canisters of the stuff back from X-land, but as hot and heavy as things had been going with Sebastian, they could be gone within a few months.

He angled his chair so he could keep talking with the other men. Like all hybrids, they were restless creatures and frequently moved from one spot to another...unless something, or someone, was keeping them occupied.

On his way to the living room, Win stopped beside Tole and tried peering at whatever text Tole was reading. Tole abruptly snapped down the lid of his phone.

"Well," Win said to him, "have you come to terms with it?"

"With what? You sticking your nose in my business?" Tole shoved the phone in his pants pocket. "No."

Win ambled into the living room and settled onto the couch. "I meant, being in love with a vampire. Being *so* in love with a vampire that it makes you sprout big old Dominion wings and lapse into a narcotized state whenever he —"

"Win, when are you going to shut the hell up?" Zee asked.

"The next time Pablo's cock is in his mouth," Tole answered.

"Even that doesn't always do it." Pablo got up, crossed to the living room, and leaned over the back of the couch. "He's mastered the art of talking around erections." He grabbed a fistful of Win's walnut-colored curls, already tousled, and gave his lover's head a playful shake. "Maybe I need a bigger dick."

Win slid a glance over his shoulder. He raised a hand and trailed it down Pablo's arm. "You're perfect the way you are."

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

"It was a Throne," Tole said. Still standing at the table that was midway between living and dining areas, he rested his butt against the edge and crossed his arms and ankles.

Win craned to look at him. "Hm? What?"

"It was a Throne that manifested, not a Dominion."

"How do you know?"

Tole shrugged. "I just do. It felt good, actually. I'm thinking of getting depressed more often."

A jaunty knock came from the other side of the front door. Win rose from the couch to admit the visitor. He paused after he'd swung the door open. "Well, speak of the vampire."

"Hello, Jesse. May I come in?" Without waiting for an invitation, Ridley stepped past the dumbstruck Win. His gaze immediately found Tole, to whom he lifted a hand in greeting.

With a smile that made Ridley's heart skitter to his stomach, Tole returned the gesture.

"Good evening, Pablo." Ridley stepped up to him and shook his hand. Pablo seemed nearly as stupefied as his lover. It was obvious the coveners' birth names weren't common knowledge.

"Ridley," Pablo said, "you're looking good."

"Thank you. I feel great."

"Andrew let the cat out of the bag when he called me Tom," Tole said to Win and Pablo. "For some reason, Rid is getting a huge kick out of our very common names."

"What amazes me," said Ridley, "is how well they suit you. Win *looks* like a Jesse."

Pablo slid his hands to Win's shoulders. "I think so, too."

"Zee is a Danny all over."

"Gee, thanks," Zee said from the dining table. "Does that mean I get to be ten years old for the rest of my life?"

"And Tole is every inch —"

"We've been through this," Tole said, walking toward Ridley. He stopped no more than a hand's length from his face. "Remember?"

There was no embrace, only a taunting stare into each other's eyes. They both liked buildup, the drama of forced restraint and anticipation.

"Hey," Win said to Tole, "you never answered my original question."

Tole gave him a cursory, over-the-shoulder glance. "You can't expect me to keep track of your questions, original or not. There are too fucking many of them."

"About coming to terms with it."

"Oh, that one."

Tole grasped the back of Ridley's head and kissed him, as zealously as if they were alone. Once Ridley got over his initial shock, which only took about two seconds, he succumbed and returned the kiss. No amount of self-consciousness could've prevented it. In under a minute, the junked-up room at 86 Guardian Station ceased to exist.

Ridley's cock sure as hell existed. Rapidly swelling, it pushed against his trousers. He eased off, certain the other men could hear his and Tole's excited breathing through the moist, insistent contact of their lips and tongues.

Ridley thought he heard Tole say, almost inaudibly, "I love you." Maybe he imagined feeling the words in the movements of Tole's mouth against his own. Maybe he only *wanted* to hear them or feel them. It didn't matter. At the moment, he had enough love for both of them.

"Terms," Tole said rather smugly to Win. Pablo now sat beside him, their hands loosely interlocked.

"Fuck the terms," Win replied. "Maybe the two of you should get undressed and do that again. And keep going."

"Now you know how Zee and I feel when you and Pablo go at it." Tole dropped a hand to his crotch and tried as subtly as possible to reposition his cock.

"Need some help?" Ridley murmured against the side of Tole's face.

His skin rumped in response—a sign of a smile. "That would *really* bring out the voyeur in them." Taking a step back, Tole cupped a hand around the back of Ridley's arm. "Mind if I talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

Ridley glanced at the other men. "Is that even possible around here?"

"Just come with me."

Tole led the way to his bedroom, which Ridley had been in only two or three times before, and closed the door once they were both inside. Even though the space resembled a landfill without soil, it was a welcome change from Andrew's ice caves. The room looked like it belonged to Tole, smelled like it belonged to Tole, and so saturated Ridley's senses, he couldn't help but be reminded of his unexpected happiness.

Forehead creased, Tole skimmed a hand down the side of Ridley's face. "You don't look sick. You're not acting sick. And it's after dark."

Ridley grabbed Tole's hand and kissed the palm. "I suppose you're wondering if I've been...taken care of this evening."

"It crossed my mind, yeah."

"I didn't need it," Ridley said with a reassuring smile. "Haven't needed it since you came to me in Xanandru." Still holding Tole's hand, he sat on the covers strewn over that weird, invisible airbed.

Tole sank down beside him. "Really?"

"Really."

"So it's true, then? How having an EB donor affects you?"

"All of it's true. Everything I told you before we left X-land. Everything I told you on the phone. A hybrid's blood keeps me going longer. Maybe it has to do with that A-D-H business." On impulse, Ridley gently forked his fingers through Tole's hair and then cupped the back of Tole's neck. "And a hybrid is immune to any adverse effects." He'd verified that with Dr. Kushner.

"And you learned all this while you were hooked up with Andrew?"

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

"Not particularly." Tole lightly bit his lower lip. "Well, that 'darling' shit..."

Ridley dropped his head back and laughed. "It doesn't mean anything. It never did. You know he's a drama queen."

"So...when do you figure you'll need to drink again?" Tole's look had softened. That pinch of worry was gone.

"By tomorrow evening, probably. I can only judge by how things went with Andrew. Will you be there when I wake up?"

"Yes, if you want me to be."

"I don't want anybody else, honey."

As soon as the last word hit the air, Tole rolled his eyes.

"Why do hate me calling you that?" Ridley asked with a smile. His fingers massaged the tendons of Tole's neck while the silky waves of Tole's hair whispered over the back of his hand.

Nice trade.

"I don't hate it," Tole said grudgingly. "That's the problem. What I hate is liking it."

Ridley grinned. "You're such a fucking hard guy."

"I'm getting there." Tole lifted Ridley's hand and moved it to his crotch.

A rap on the door shattered the moment.

"What?" Tole barked.

"You busy?" Zee asked.

"Oh, for shit's sake," Tole grumbled. "You'd think he'd know the answer." He got up from the bed and flung open the door.

"Sorry for the interruption," Zee said. He peered past Tole's towering frame. "Ridley, would you mind coming out here for a while?"

Sighing, Ridley rose from the bed. He glided a hand over Tole's ass on the way out and followed Zee down the hallway. Tole shuffled behind them, disgruntled enough to mutter a curse.

"We could really benefit from your familiarity with Andrew," Zee said once they were back in the living area. "Your experiences, your impressions. We're putting together a report for —"

"The Powers. Yes, I know." Ridley sauntered over to the dining area. "You four must be indispensable to them. Don't those lazy pricks ever do anything on their own?"

Tole, coming up beside him, looked flushed.

Win snickered.

Chapter Twenty-six

Before he left 86 Guardian Station for the night, Ridley managed to have a few words alone with Zee.

"You and Sebastian staying in touch?" he asked quietly, laying a fraternal hand on Zee's shoulder. Tole had fallen asleep on the couch. Win and Pablo had retired to Pablo's suite next door.

Zee nodded, looking demure. "Mm-hm, we'll be meeting up again. Soon, I hope."

"Please don't take offense," Ridley said, "but do all hybrids get...you know...a little wanky when they're in relationships?"

Zee lowered his head and laughed through his nose. "Romantic relationships? Yeah, they mess with us. We're wired differently – psychologically, emotionally. For the first twenty-five to thirty-five years of our lives, we're either extremely self-involved, like Andrew, or we put community responsibility first. Breaking out of either pattern is never easy." He turned his warm brown eyes up to Ridley's face. "I still haven't done it."

"But what about –"

"Sebastian? I honestly have no idea. It's too new." Zee blushed and uttered a self-conscious chuckle, and Ridley guessed what was coming next. "Right now, I'm pretty much in it for the sex. The body on him..."

Ridley grinned. He'd seen the guy, so he understood. Around a man like that, it was impossible to keep one's baser instincts from kicking in. "Nothing wrong with that, my friend. Maybe, in time, more will come of it."

Zee's blush momentarily deepened as he shrugged. "I don't know. None of us can predict those things."

Again, Ridley was struck by how disarmingly cute he was. Win was beautiful, Tole was striking, Zee was – no denying it – just plain damned cute. There was

something of the fresh-faced, well-behaved prep school boy about him. But obviously, that's not *all* there was.

Within seconds, Zee's dimpled smile shrank. He again grew thoughtful and looked into Ridley's eyes. "Be patient with Tole. What he feels, he feels deeply. You can't begin to imagine."

"Oh, yes," said Ridley. "Yes, I can. Now, I need a favor from you."

"Name it."

"Can you come up with some reason to send Tole to Oasis Park right around sunrise? I'm going to slip out while he's still asleep." Ridley glanced at the couch and felt a twinge of apprehension. "Think you can do that?"

Zee clapped him on the arm. "I'm sure I can. Where in Oasis?"

"The northwest side of Aerie Hill."

"He'll be there," said Zee, "even if I have to lead him on a leash."

* * * * *

Birds let Ridley know when it was about to happen. As soon as their calls floated from the surrounding trees, his heart started to gallop between his sternum and spine. Eyes unblinking, he stared upward, beyond the reach of the city's glow, and all but held his breath as he waited for the first, faint paling of the sky, the alchemy of night becoming day.

It took longer than he thought it would. He even wondered if he was to blame, if his very presence was forestalling the process. A nocturnal vampire shouldn't witness the break of day.

"It's all right," he whispered, but didn't fully believe his own weak assurance.

More voices entered the chorus of birds—chirps and twitters and trills, no two alike—and he realized with a start he could see it happening. For the first time in fifty-two years, Ridley watched darkness drain out of the heavens. Black wool thinned into gray chiffon.

Gradually, natural and man-made details emerged like images in an old, developing photograph. The ghostly backdrop went through countless changes of shade. By imperceptible degrees, it faded...then faded still more. Lights winked out in buildings, and the buildings reformed. Irregular blots resolved into trees. Soon, individual branches and leaves took shape.

Ridley's breath caught. He swiped a hand over each side of his face, not knowing if it was perspiration or tears that had dampened his skin. He was aware of little but the spread of dull illumination through a low overcast. Heavy with a promise of rain, the air smelled like earth.

He'd brought large sunglasses but hadn't put them on. They made an uneven bulge in his breast pocket. Maybe he wouldn't need to wear them. He certainly didn't

want to wear them. Francis Bacon had called daylight "God's first creature." Ridley hadn't been near it in a long time, and its approach was too wondrous to be dimmed.

Fifty-two years of estrangement. For some vampires, it had lasted ten times as long, or longer.

Ridley felt himself being grabbed, shaken. Tearing his gaze from the sky, he refocused.

Tole stood before him, wide eyes gleaming with panic. "Ridley. Oh, Jesus."

A cloth fell over Ridley's head. He snatched at it, trying to pull it away, as Tole snatched at Ridley's shirt and tried to pull *him* away.

"Shit, damn, shit. Hurry!" Tole wrapped an arm around Ridley's waist and draped Ridley's arm over his shoulders. "Here, hang on to me. I can at least get you underground. There's a small cave..."

Frantic, he simultaneously tugged, dragged, and steered Ridley, who finally came to his senses.

"Tole, stop." Ridley yanked the cloth off his head. It was Tole's T-shirt. He almost started laughing. A thin layer of blue cotton was supposed to protect a vampire from the ravages of sunlight? It was too precious. "I'm fine. Really."

"No, you're delirious." Tole's quaking hands slid over Ridley's hair, face, neck. "Fuck, you're too warm. You're sweating."

"Actually, I think I was crying." Ridley grabbed both of Tole's wrists and pressed his hands together. Once his lover was still, or more still than a hummingbird, Ridley kissed him for a few affectionate seconds and slowly withdrew. "Hm. Yeah, delirium is a possibility."

Tole stared at him. "What is going on?"

Slipping a hand into his pants pocket, Ridley pulled out his packet of pills and lifted it between two fingers. "This is why it took me two extra days to get back here, why I had to stop in Specula."

He waited for Tole to put his shirt on and then led him to a nearby bench — still in the shade of Aerie Hill, although it didn't look like Ridley would need shade — and sat Tole down. He explained how he'd gotten into the program for Kushner's wonder drug.

"You're sure it's working?" Tole didn't seem convinced.

A bumblebee lumbered by, buzzing audibly. Smiling, Ridley watched it bob over a spirea bush. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Tole studied him through narrowed eyes. "You're not acting right."

"You'd probably be acting a little strangely too, if you hadn't seen the dawn in decades."

There wasn't much Tole could say to that. His mouth closed. His face relaxed.

"I've never felt better," Ridley said. "Well, maybe I have. Physically, anyway. I'm kind of tired right now. This is a big adjustment."

"How long can you be out here?" Ever vigilant, Tole hadn't moved his gaze from Ridley's face.

"Maybe another hour or so. I think the clouds have bought me some extra time. Once I'm back in the Undercity, I should be good for another few hours. I have to build up my tolerance before I'm fully diurnal."

"Okay, let's get going." Tole got up, still looking uncertain. Then he began to look irked. "You scared the piss out of me. Don't ever do that again."

Suppressing a smile, Ridley stood and faced him. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to surprise you."

"Surprises like that I don't need." Tole's hand briefly bracketed Ridley's jaw. "God damn, Rid." He was already finished being angry. Proving it, he stole a kiss.

"Feel better?" Ridley asked when he pulled back.

"Well, you sure as hell can still kiss. That's a good sign." Tole did a quick, surreptitious penile rearrangement. "I think."

Ridley's desire for him resurfaced. "Let's go back to my place."

They began walking toward the nearest sub entrance. Ridley donned his sunglasses, just as a precaution, then slid a hand into the rear pocket of Tole's jeans, relishing the shifting curve of his ass as he walked. Tole copied the move.

"Those tints look good on you," Tole said.

"Do they?" Ridley adjusted them. "Thank you."

"Have I ever told you how much your sideburns turn me on?"

Giving him a bemused glance, Ridley chuckled. "No. Why would they turn you on?" They were simple tab sideburns that barely extended to the base of each earlobe. Come to think of it, Tole did nuzzle and nibble a lot in that area.

"They just do," Tole said. "They make you look..." He paused.

"How?"

Sighing, Tole didn't answer. He watched his feet move down the path. A jogger passed, breath huffing and soles slapping on the pavement. The metroplex was waking up.

"What made you take this risk?" Tole asked without raising his head.

"You."

Tole's fingers lightly squeezed Ridley's butt cheek.

"I'd really like the EB thing explained to me," Ridley said.

"Andrew never filled you in?"

"Not really. I mean, he told me a little, but I didn't care enough to pursue it."

Tole cocked his head to regard Ridley. "What happened to our original agreement? That we wouldn't ask each other about the more personal aspects of our lives."

"You know what happened."

After a pause, Tole nodded. "Win called it varnish remover."

There was a hitch in Ridley's step as he almost pulled up short. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

Blushing faintly, Tole looked down. "Don't play dumb, Rid."

That's when Ridley understood. Tole had just acknowledged, in his oblique way, that he did indeed know what had made their agreement fall by the wayside. *Win called it varnish remover.*

Love.

A declaration of it changed everything. Love stripped secrets of their justification. It led to a fearsome intimacy that didn't allow for ignorance or illusion.

"I'm sorry," Ridley said quietly. "Guess my brain's a little addled today." He was momentarily distracted by a butterfly, its patterned wings a perfect blend of geometry and artistic whimsy.

"I understand," said Tole. "I haven't been thinking too clearly myself lately. Maybe I've just started seeing the light, too."

Ridley smiled.

They moved from the cooler park to the warmer sidewalks. The sky hung above them like old canvas, lumpy and damp. But it was beautiful to Ridley. Regret seized him when he realized they'd be in the Undercity soon. He'd miss the showers. He'd miss the subsequent first twinkle of sunlight, the overarching prism of a rainbow.

But someday...

Glancing at the surrounding buildings, Ridley entertained the thought of buying a second home in the Overcity, where he and Tole could watch snowflakes and raindrops fall, hear birdsong and thunder as they lay in bed together.

"I have questions, too," Tole said. "I haven't known many vampires. And there are so many different breeds, what I've learned about one doesn't necessarily pertain to another."

"True." It was a grudging admission. Sharing the details of his life with a nonvamp, especially a lover, made Ridley uneasy. He didn't know how Tole would react.

"I get the feeling you're balking," Tole said.

Ridley shrugged. "Well, you know..."

"If it's any consolation, a hybrid's history and lifestyle are hardly ordinary, either."

"No shit." Ridley had certainly gathered *that* much in the past week. "Okay, here are some answers to your questions. Eighty-six, great horned owl, calico cat, and yes, through a variation of van der Waals force." He looked at Tole, who wore a hint of a smile. "Your turn."

"So you *can* climb up and down vertical surfaces." Tole's glance was full of insinuation. "I like the potential in that."

"Guess you know about van der Waals force," Ridley murmured.

"I'm not just a pretty face."

Laughing, Ridley gave Tole's butt a little shove. "Stay on track. Now *you* spill."

"All right. Fair is fair." Tole cleared his throat. "Yes, no, I don't know, maybe."

Pulling his hand out of Tole's pocket, Ridley stopped. "Oh come on. Why not throw in 'sometimes'? At least I gave you actual information."

"Hey, put that back," Tole said, grabbing for Ridley's hand. "I like having it there."

"No. You're cheating."

Tole's eyes glimmered. "I just gave you plenty of information. You've wanted to know if I've ever been in love before. And if I'll be tempted to fuck around while we're together. And if I have an unusually long lifespan. And if I'm one of the Powers of Regenerie. So I told you." Dipping forward, Tole gave Ridley a peck on the lips. "By the way, don't assume the answers are in the same order as the questions."

Shaking his head, Ridley tried not to smile. He also tried pairing the answers to the questions. "Tease," he said.

Tole put his hands on Ridley's hips and urged them closer to his own. "Let's get back to your place, and I'll show you what a tease really is."

Ridley's expression sobered as he studied Tole's face. "Are you happy, Tom?"

Tole met his gaze. "Yes, honey. I'm very happy."

One raindrop fell on Ridley's face. He smiled as another landed in Tole's hair, a rainbow of colors scintillating within.

 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.