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Lions' Pride

DUALS AND DONOVANS:
THE DIFFERENT

TERESA NOELLE ROBERTS

To save the one they love, they're going in with spells blazing...

Duals and Donovan: The Different, Book 1

Elissa Donovan is a real green witch—when she and her lion-shapeshifter husband have sex, the blazing heat is recycled to warm their house. Now her beloved Jude has been kidnapped by a shadowy government agency, and the last place she can turn for help is her high-powered family, who considers her magic mediocre.

When Rafe Benedict gets Elissa's call for muscle to back up her magic, he risks his law enforcement career to answer. He's spent a lifetime hiding his Dual ability, but something about Elissa and Jude's magic awakens the cougar within him.

Tempting, bronzed Rafe is the perfect fuse for Elissa's sex-fueled magic. Danger lies in breaking her vows; joining with anyone other than her true mate could not only send her marriage up in flames, it could burn out her powers in a last, all-or-nothing explosion. But Jude is worth the risk. And for Rafe, potential heartbreak is nothing next to the chance to help the two people he's coming to love.

First, though, Rafe needs a crash course in Cougar...

Warning: This title contains evil fae, guys with guns, shadowy government conspiracies, a snarky ghost, and smoking-hot, three-way sex.

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Lions' Pride

Teresa Noelle Roberts

Dedication

For Jeff, my favorite Leo. You are my heart, hearth and home, now and always.

Chapter One

The lion padded through the wet, slush-covered nighttime streets. Geneva, New York was all but silent at four AM. The chill late-winter air clouded his hot breath, and he skirted dirty remnants of snow. More wet snow spat from the gray sky, but he smelled the coming spring—mud and the thawing lake and far-off manure, too faint for a human to smell.

Something else was out there, too, something in the air he couldn't name, but which made his blood thrum with anticipation. It sent surges of energy through his great golden body, made him hunger for the hunt, for the thrill of fresh game. For other things as well, although those he always hungered for: the green, fresh scent of his mate, the heat of her skin, the passion of their bodies intertwined.

It made him want things he couldn't name, and the frustration of not knowing what he craved made him want to roar.

So he did, letting loose with a noise that shattered the quiet darkness.

A light went on in a neighboring house, but the lion was already slinking into the shadows.

He caught the musty smell of old dog and heard its wheezing breath before he turned the corner. Normally he avoided dogs. They barked, and humans tended to look out the window to see what was going on.

But tonight he hungered. He had eaten, and eaten well, and the part of him that was wild and thus sensible realized it was stupid to kill and eat when you were already full. Besides, dogs had a musty, processed-food flavor.

But blood and meat and the satisfaction of the kill would quench his restlessness.

He turned the corner, sprang.

The dog died, but not before it yelped in terror.

In one of the nearby houses, a light came on. The lion, muzzle buried in his prey, ignored it as he tore into still-hot flesh, gulped the salt-and-copper blood.

He couldn't ignore the scream so easily, the woman's scream that cut through the darkness and the satisfaction of a fresh kill.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He'd been seen.

The lion melted away into the darkness and bolted for home.

Elissa Donovan paced the dim predawn kitchen, clutching a cup of herbal tisane that wasn't soothing her and vaguely wondering if she was wearing a track in the black and white vinyl flooring.

How could she have not sensed Jude slipping out of bed? At this time of year, she needed to be alert where he was concerned. The shifting seasons called to his lionside. With the equinox just a few days away, he was restless, tense, prone to let the animal make decisions the more human part of him—the part duals like Jude called the wordside—ought to make.

Of course, she thought, stretching a body still sated from lovemaking, having the lionside on the ascendant had its advantages. Jude was always passionate, but when the lion was bleeding over into his wordy form, he was deliciously more so.

If he hadn't made love to her so thoroughly, though, she wouldn't have been so sound asleep. She'd have known he needed to roam. Sometimes, when Jude's lion was too strong, he couldn't trust himself to drive. He'd get distracted by sounds and smells beyond the range of human senses to focus on the road. But he could have woken her. She'd have driven him.

Instead he was Powers-knew-where, getting into Powers-knew-what kind of trouble. Damn the man—she swore he got a kick out of teasing the Agency. It would have been easy enough in this largely rural area to find an isolated house, but no...he'd insisted on buying in town. For her, he'd said. Witches need contact with nature, but also with other humans, and since he wasn't exactly human, she needed to be in a town.

It was all true, but then he'd go put himself at risk like this, then wonder why she couldn't sleep unless she took valerian or he fucked her into limp exhaustion.

Six more months, she told herself. That was all it would take to finish the immigration paperwork. With its cold climate and a Different population that leaned more toward shamans and healers, Canada actively sought green witches who were good at coaxing plants to grow in cold climates—her great strength, and a known specialty of the Donovan line. Back the Donovan name with a Cornell graduate degree in plant genetics and they could apply for the Canadian equivalent of a green card through official channels.

And unofficially, Canada, with its wide-open spaces, large Native population who'd always lived side by side with their Different neighbors and an attitude of polite tolerance, had an open-door policy for otherwise law-abiding American duals who didn't want to take Drozz, suppress their natural abilities and “fit into human society” under Agency policing.

Six more months, give or take a little, until her project at the Ag Station was done.

If she left before then, someone at the Agency might wonder if she was running from something rather than simply accepting a position at, say, the University of Calgary.

Once, she'd regretted not being one of the stronger Donovan witches. Now she was glad. The Agency, the otherwise-nameless government branch that kept tabs on witches and other magically gifted humans as well as the nonhuman Differents, noticed if you could shift weather patterns, like her father, or

cure diseases that conventional medicine couldn't touch, like her mother, or talk to murder victims to solve crimes, like her aunt Bathsheba. But she was off their radar. The Department of Agriculture's magical-research division had seen her name on a few grant applications, but that was it. Green magic was useful, but innocuous, and her only other strong talent wasn't something the Agency worried about.

Red magic.

Sex magic. Fertility magic. Potentially powerful, but at the same time unpredictable, with a tendency to get out of control and become explosive, embarrassing, or both. Best used in the privacy of one's own home, to raise energy for purely domestic matters and to connect with the Powers.

Hence the doctorate. That and her green magic made her useful to normies, even if her own family thought of her as a beloved disappointment.

No one looked at one-trick ponies except when they were doing that one trick. And if no one looked too hard at Dr. Elissa Donovan, good scientist and so-so witch, they might not notice Jude. Or at least not notice he wasn't human.

She sat abruptly on the hard kitchen chair, buried her head in her hands, dizzied—not for the first time—by what a government supposedly by the people, for the people, was doing to its own citizens. Including denying the basic rights of citizenship to many of them on the basis of species.

Head in her hands, she almost didn't hear the door open.

Paranoia propelled her to her feet. She knew who it had to be, knew the odds of someone else getting through both physical and metaphysical locks were slim. Anyway, now he was inside the safety of the wards, she could feel him, warm and brown and gold, clearer to her spirit even than to her eyes.

She turned because she wanted to see him.

He stood in the doorway, strange and glorious, wet snow haloed in his hair, half golden fur, half bare brown skin, in transition between one half of his dual nature and the other.

Desire flared and sparked between them in the seconds as he became, in appearance, fully human, cocoa-skinned and green-eyed and delicious and naked as the day he was born.

Her Jude. Her love. Her lion.

The furry *idiot*.

"Where in the name of the Powers have you been? Couldn't you wake me up so I could drive you someplace safe? But no, you had to sneak out and make me imagine the worst. That you'd run away for some bizarre reason that only makes sense to a lion, that the Agency had broken into the house and spirited you away, even crazier things. What were you thinking?"

"Spring fever, I guess. Something in the air is ruffling my fur, even when I'm wordside-out." He rocked back and forth restlessly, raised his head as if sniffing the air. He was naked and gorgeous, all sleek muscles and height. His cock, tempting in its promise, called to her.

She wanted to beat him over the head with something because he was a complete and utter idiot, an adrenaline junkie who chose not to control his lionside. No one would have cared if he'd gone for a late-night walk looking like a human. He'd just be a guy walking off insomnia. But no, he had to stalk around looking like a freaking predator of the veldt, which was just a bit conspicuous in the Finger Lakes, and put himself at risk.

She opened her mouth to tell him so and got as far as, "You *asshole*. Do I have to lock you up so the Agency doesn't?"

He raised one elegant brown hand. "Yell later. I deserve it, but we've got more important things to worry about right now. Elissa, someone saw me."

"How could you? Do you think you're fifteen and playing games with the normies?" Fury and fear swirled together. Something red swelled inside her. Magic surged and attempted to break free. She tasted it in the back of her throat, raspy, burning hot and bitter. The undertone of green herbs and earth marked it as her own, but it felt stronger than what she could normally tap.

Out of instinct, out of need, she tried to hold it, shape it. Use it to defend her home and her husband.

Hearth, home, heart...

She felt rather than saw the power shift color from angry red to green. The iron-filings taste receded.

No use. Tapping that power never worked. It shouldn't surprise her. She was what normies called, simplistically, a white witch, one who called on and shaped the world's positive energies: love, lust, green springtime growth, even the passing back of life into the soil in the fullness of time, for that, too, was part of the life cycle. A *Donovan* witch, one of the strictest and narrowest traditions of so-called white witchcraft. And a weak Donovan at that.

For someone with different training, it was possible to transmute fear and anger into something useful and positive. But not for most Donovans. Especially not Donovans who really needed the power boost.

It teased her with its fierce strength. But it remained maddeningly out of reach.

"High Lord and Lady, what were you doing? No, let me guess. Hunting, right?"

He nodded, looking as close to sheepish as it was possible for him to look. The humility lasted for all of three seconds before he countered, "At least I wasn't trying to bring another lioness into the pride. Then you really would kill me." He had the temerity to wiggle his eyebrows and grin at his own poor attempt at a joke.

She fought the urge to throw something—such as a fireball—at him. "Can you be serious for a few minutes? Probably not, but try. Unauthorized flirting pisses me off, which is bad. But eating the neighbors' pets means you're a psycho or an Undrozged dual, and either one'll get you locked and medicated and that's way, way worse. Is that so hard to remember?"

"Sometimes it is. Elissa...I'm sorry. I was so restless. I needed to prowl and the lion got demanding."

Elissa studied her husband. Now that she wasn't blinded by emotion, she recognized the meat-sated look in his wide green eyes. A few drops of blood flecked where his muzzle would have been while he was lionside. The shift had cleaned up most of the mess from the hunt, but not all of it.

Idiot.

The untappable protopower flared red again, then fell.

Her anger at Jude subsided, too, replaced by anxiety and love and grudging compassion. If she were forced to hide her magic day in and day out for fear of arrest and forcible "medical treatment" for something that wasn't a medical problem, she'd get stupid with frustration sometimes, too.

Jude pounded his fist on the counter. "We've got to get ready in case someone called the cops. I tried to avoid snow patches, but it's muddy out there. I left tracks. You're the smart one. Think of something to tell them."

Tracks? She cursed under her breath, then changed the curse to a prayer. Most Donovans had some weather-working talent—but not her, not even enough to shift the erratic local weather one way or the other, which should be about as easy as making it rain in Oregon.

She'd never been able to do that, either, much to the amusement of her siblings and cousins. A five-year-old could make it rain in Oregon; not Elissa.

But sometimes you get lucky.

"We may be all right," she said. "Listen."

They held their breaths.

As freezing rain began to fall, wiping out Jude's tracks, diluting Jude's scent, she finally took the two seemingly vast steps across the kitchen and wrapped her errant, stupid, immature—and beloved—husband in her arms. "Come back to bed, darling," she said. "It's late. Besides, if someone tracks you here, we'll look less suspicious if they have to wake us up."

"Makes sense." He pulled her a little closer. "Besides, curling up with you is always good."

But when she smelled the wild musk and predatory power that clung to him, desire bloomed inside her, gold and green positive energy that fueled her powers.

The silver cord of energy between Elissa and Jude, an etheric echo of their commitment, throbbed and thrummed. As the magic flared, she writhed against him, feeling how hard he'd become, a hardness that sought to enter and merge with the springtime flood surging between her legs.

"Powers," Jude breathed into her hair. "How do you always do this to me? Your magic's stroking my skin."

"Come to bed," she repeated, one hand on his bare chest.

"No," he begged, "here?"

She thought of their bedroom, the fireplace that was the house's actual hearth, the anchor for her magic, the skylight on which the saving rain drummed, the altar by the bed where the plants that supported

the indoor wards and protections—the dwarf Alberta spruce from Yule, forced spring bulbs, potted herbs, a passion fruit vine—grew and gathered power. Conventional teaching said they should make love there, in the magical center of her hearth and home, to collect and contain the energy.

But the kitchen was, in many ways, the heart of any home. So her grandmother Josie had taught, smiling slyly at the Donovan in-laws who called her a kitchen witch, and not always behind her back. Elissa had taken advantage of the bedroom fireplace to set up her hearth and center of her power, but she'd made the kitchen a secondary hearth. It would work.

It would make Jude happy.

And the “pardon-me-you-caught-us-in-the-middle-of-fucking” thing would, if necessary, be a good way to deflect a cop's questions. Naked, sex-flushed people had a tendency to stop conversation.

“If there's trouble coming,” she said, “we need to reinforce the wards.”

He smiled at that. One of the few advantages of needing red magic to augment her limited power was that tasks like bolstering the house's defenses could be a lot of fun for both of them.

“Hearth, home, heart,” she invoked, calling upon the three sources basic to indoor magic, and by extension to the Lord and Lady who governed all life.

The power latent in the kitchen rose, bathing the room in soft light that had nothing to do with the light fixture overhead.

Elissa shuddered as Jude drew off her bathrobe—then shivered less pleasurably at the chill. Jude didn't feel cold the way a human would. His basal body temperature, even wordside, was feline-high, several degrees above the human norm. Elissa wasn't so lucky, and at five feet tall and just over a hundred pounds, she didn't have much insulation.

But she did have magic, magic surging through her as Jude's hot hands ran over her skin. A small gesture and the smallest of spells—one of Grandma Josie's, not a traditional one—and she shut out the March chill and damp while letting them still hear the sound of the rain.

“I felt that,” Jude teased.

“Yeah, but I'm warm enough now.”

He smiled, his teeth white against his dark complexion.

She gazed into his green eyes, opening the link between them wider. The silver cord throbbed and her blood pulsed along with it. Her nipples hardened and her sex swelled. She could feel his desire surge as well, feel the blood pulsing in his cock almost as clearly as she saw it swell and grow, eager to enter her.

They pressed together again. Jude's skin felt like heated suede, hot and soft and buttery against her mound and her sensitive nipples. She tasted blood as they kissed, coppery and rank, and for an instant, it cooled her. Then a tendril of Jude strayed into her mind, a tendril of his lionside that yearned to share the hunt with her. He knew he couldn't—not only was she human, but she'd been raised vegetarian, according to Donovan tradition, and still rarely ate meat—but he begged her to try to understand.

She tasted the blood then through his animalside, the sensual pleasure of raw, fresh meat, and while she still didn't enjoy it, she accepted it and moved on.

Kissing him again, she tasted only Jude, warm and spicy and feline.

He slipped one leg between hers as they kissed and she ground against it, feeding her growing arousal. One of his hands cupped her breast—a full breast for someone her size, but small enough to fit easily in his big hand, small enough he could easily cup it and roll the nipple between thumb and forefinger, sending darts of fire through her.

The other hand dragged against her ass, letting her feel his nails, letting her feel a hint of claws. In full lion form, he could tear her in half. There was some small, dark part of her that liked knowing he could, reveled in his contained power—knowing he had it and knowing he wouldn't use it against her. Some small, dark part of him knew and loved that dark part of her and could sometimes, as now, come out and tease it and play with it, catlike.

Fire followed behind his nails, met up with the fire from her nipples and caused a conflagration in her pussy.

How could something be on fire when it was as wet as she was? Her slickness spread, marking his thigh. Her body screamed to come, and with just a few well-timed grinds, she could do it.

She didn't.

Instead, she contained her rising arousal and let the warm scarlet power build. The slight distraction was enough to keep her on the edge of coming, but not tumbling over.

Jude must have sensed her holding back. He nipped at her neck, worked his way up to her ear and nipped at the lobe, then whispered, his hot breath a caress, "More?"

"Yes. Please, yes." The energy surged inside her at his throaty voice, at the nips that let her feel teeth now slightly sharper than the human norm. He slid both arms under her ass, lifting her so she could wrap her legs around his waist, and carried her to the kitchen table.

To her witch-sense, the table—on which she'd prepared meals for the two of them, potted plants, prepared herbs for spells and made love several times—faintly glowed. When he set her down the wood tingled against her skin, sending a pleasurable jolt through her sex and traveling up her spine. Part of it blossomed out the crown of her head, sending its energy out to join with the wardings around the house.

Part of it hit her straight in the pelvis, making her vulva fuller and more sensitive, opening her womb, even teasing at her ass.

"Lord and Lady," she groaned, both an exclamation and a prayer, and spread her legs.

"I honor your body as I honor the Goddess, the female principle in all life," Jude said and sank to his knees. He might not have grown up practicing red magic, but they worshipped a similar pantheon, although Jude's also included the androgynous Trickster. Between that upbringing and his natural inclination to

“honor the female”, or at least have hot, sweaty, mutually pleasurable sex with the woman he loved at every opportunity, he’d had no trouble learning to support Elissa’s magic.

Which, at the moment, was to drive her absolutely wild with desire, but not let her come until she gave the go-ahead.

“You smell like life.” Jude rumbled against her thigh as if he were lionside as he kissed his way to his goal. He pressed his face between her legs and began to lick.

Surges of pleasure washed over her. She curled her fingers in Jude’s thick dreads, enjoyed the heat and the colors dancing under her skin. No release for her, not yet, but the erotic energy flooded her system like a drug, giving color to sensation and flavor to colors and textures. Jude’s skin was chocolate, his hair saffron for some reason.

Power. Energy. Magic. Enough now to encompass not just the house itself, but the land surrounding it. All during the long Central New York winter, she’d been able to do only minimal reinforcement on the protections around the yard, but now, between the erotic power they’d unleashed and the approaching vernal equinox, the green power starting to wake within the earth itself, she could do much more.

She tapped the daffodils and crocuses starting to push up like little green phalluses through the melting snow. Tapped the sap running in the big maple in the backyard.

She sent those energies surging to meet the quiet energies of the wards.

Hearth. Home. Heart. Let all that is mine be encompassed, enclosed, under your protection. Safe.

Everything was connected. Her. Jude. The trees and the bulbs and the muddy, half-frozen ground. Everything.

“Now!” she said. Jude thrust two fingers inside her and cupped her G-spot in the way that always drove her over the edge. She roared with the force of the orgasm that tore through her body, and through her spirit, to power and strengthen the wards.

To bring what was hers into their protections and keep it safe.

A thunk audible only to her witch-senses, a sound like a door shutting to form a barrier between home and the world, told her it had worked.

“Now it’s playtime,” she mock-growled, tightening her grip on Jude’s hair.

And he obliged.

Chapter Two

Officer Raphael Benedict huddled in the backyard of the green and white two-story house, trying to figure out what he was going to do next. In the freezing rain, any tracks of the purported large cat washed away and scents were dissipated to the point where even if he'd had tracking dogs, they couldn't have told a cat from a canary. And of course he didn't have the K-9 unit at his disposal because Dispatch had been ninety percent sure it was all a mistake, an ordinary coyote or fisher cat, or even a larger, more vicious dog. Despite what the hysterical caller had claimed, everyone at the station was sure it wasn't an actual lion.

They were right.

It wasn't a lion. The dog had been killed by a careless dual. He'd known it as soon as he'd set foot in the alley where it died. There was no way to prove it, but he knew.

Despite what they'd told him as a teenager, when he'd chosen life in the human world over his cougar-dual heritage, like called to like.

The suppressive drug that kept him in human form and made it possible to do the job he loved was supposed to make him just like a human for both good and ill, giving him human self-control, consistently humanlike thought patterns—and also duller human senses.

But Drozz was imperfect. He couldn't change forms, but his senses of smell and hearing were unusually keen, allowing him to notice subtle clues humans missed. Sometimes, like tonight, he could pick up...something. Maybe he'd be able to define that something if he'd been raised among duals—probably they had a name for it among themselves—but he was human-raised and just called it “weird shit”. He didn't know why the Drozz didn't block that better. Maybe it was something so uniquely dual that human scientists couldn't isolate it to block it.

The “weird shit” had led him here. Tonight, around the kill site, he sensed a restless, warm, golden energy he was able to follow in the right direction until, near this house, he came upon a single faint, distorted track in a patch of melting snow.

Normally he'd worry about how he'd explain the leap of logic in his report. Not many people in the department knew he was a dual, and no one knew Drozz didn't always work like the Agency said it did, so he was used to fudging things that were clear to his senses, but not to most humans.

Not this time, though.

No, this time he'd be fudging the whole damn report, because he'd arrived at this seemingly normal house just in time to see someone ghost in the back door through the freezing rain, someone or something neither animal nor human, but moving between the two.

His temper flared. He'd been dreading something like tonight since the new laws had gone into effect eighteen months ago, but he hadn't known what he'd do when he finally came up against a dual who hadn't done anything majorly wrong.

He'd be damned if he turned in a report that sent someone to jail or worse just for not being human. That wasn't the way he'd been raised, or the reason he'd become a cop. He was supposed to protect people from criminals—not help drag an innocent guy away from his home and family for no apparent reason.

Okay, so the guy had killed a dog. He could see where humans found that disturbing. Hell, he found it pretty disturbing, thanks to being raised by humans, and he supposed being carnivorous was his inner nature as much as it was the lion-guy's.

It was just nature in action, though. To an unmedicated carnivore-type dual, Fluffy and Fido looked like snack food. Really delicious, bad-for-you snack food, the kind you knew you shouldn't eat, but once in a while couldn't resist.

Used to be you'd just get slapped on the wrist—fines, community service, maybe a short treatment with Drozz so you'd be better able to spot when your inner animal was prompting you to do something that was a bad idea in the human world. Now it was a long, mandatory term in a rehabilitation center—and confinement was pure torture for a dual, even if you were medicated—confiscation of property, psychiatric monitoring, mandatory Drozz and mind-numbing, libido-killing, potentially liver-destroying Parvan for life.

Rafe had chosen his path. Chosen, when his dual side manifested out of the blue, late and seemingly uncontrollable and definitely interfering with his plans to follow in his adoptive dad's footsteps as a cop, to get on Drozz and fit into mainstream society.

Forcing someone to do it was a whole different story.

He could just walk away. Go back to the station, report he hadn't found anything except a frantic, half-asleep woman who'd just seen her dog killed by a coyote and the remains of said poor mutt. They'd believe him.

They'd want to believe him. A lot of cops were turning a blind eye to things they'd once have pursued. The current administration wasn't fond of anyone who wasn't human, and new laws meant any nonhuman, not just a dual, who had even a minor brush with the law was in serious shit.

But he found he couldn't just walk away. He had to do something.

This guy was careless, and he was going to get caught. He needed to be warned that humans were on to him. Even though they'd chosen different paths, this guy and Rafe were cousins of sorts.

That was one reason.

The other was that the walls of this seemingly ordinary house thrummed and throbbed, and if he could feel it through the Drozz, there was something weird afoot beyond a dual who'd had a hankering for an ill-advised midnight snack. Not necessarily something bad—in fact it felt warm and fuzzy and positive—but definitely something strange. To the best of his imperfect knowledge, duals didn't have any abilities that would make a house seem that...alive. At least nothing they'd ever talked about in the “Dealing with the Nonhuman Population” class at the Academy.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but a cougar was one big, tough, hard-to-kill cat, and this sort-of cougar wanted to indulge his curiosity.

Rafe squatted on his haunches between an overgrown yew bush and the garage to observe. To try to figure out why the house twitched and vibrated like it did. To wait for the right time to approach the house and offer his warning.

The cold didn't bother him—never did, even with the Drozz keeping his body temperature closer to human norm—but wet was far from his favorite sensation, and the icy rain dripping down his neck and into his navy police anorak was not making his night. Or morning. Or whatever the hell you called this hour poised between dark and dawn, between winter and spring...

Between him and his nice, comfortable bed.

The eaves of the garage channeled the drip right into his collar. He was tempted to move. But from here he had the best view of the back door and the kitchen it opened into.

Not that he could see much. Dim figures, shadows seen through the cheerful sunflower—patterned curtains: the dual—a lion or some other big cat, bigger than a cougar—and a much smaller person who might be a teenager or a petite woman. Hard to tell, since he wasn't sure how big his dual quarry was in human form. He'd been a big, black-maned lion, from what poor, shaken Mrs. Andersen had to say, but that proved nothing.

He waited. Not for all that long, he supposed, but in the cold and damp, it felt like forever.

He wanted coffee. And a sandwich, or a sweet roll. Anything.

Hell, he wanted a cigarette right about now, and he hadn't smoked since high school.

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that unDrozzed duals could be damn useful in police work if they were just a little more stable, a little more willing to play by human rules than most of them were. Plenty of criminals had parahuman abilities—why shouldn't the cops? If he were a functional dual, he might know what was going on in that house, maybe see or smell something that would help him make sense of it, instead of having a vague and not terribly useful feeling of friendly strangeness.

He wanted to have cougar-keen senses, cougar-quick reflexes—but without the cost.

If he were everything his genes would allow him to be, he wouldn't be a cop.

Rafe prodded mentally at the house, not that he expected to detect anything new. That would take magic, and magic was a human gift, although a rare enough one that human magic users were ranked

among the Different. Still, he always had the feeling that when faced with the “weird shit” he *should* be able to make sense of it if he could figure out the right way to look at it.

As he probed, something burst out of the house. Not an actual something, but a wave of energy, a wave of sensation.

Or maybe it didn't burst out of the house. Maybe he burst *into* the house, because suddenly he was warm and dry and safe in a way he rarely remembered feeling, even though icy water still dripped on his head and his leg muscles were sore from the long crouch.

But he—his consciousness, at least—was inside. Inside the house.

Inside the inhabitants of the house.

Holy shit.

Chapter Three

Some small part of Rafe's brain pointed out he should be terrified. But he was too busy being confused for the fear to sink in. He was literally seeing and feeling things through another's perception. Maybe several people's, because the images that flooded him were scattered.

Scattered and startlingly erotic and bombarding him all at once.

A chocolate-skinned, dreadlocked man, tall and solid yet lithe, kneeling between the open thighs of a tiny redheaded woman who perched on the kitchen table, his dark hands resting on her pale thighs, his face pressed into the joining of her thighs, tasting her, pleasuring her.

The woman's hands—small, freckled, short nails glazed a deep wine color—clenching and unclenching in the man's dreads. The clean, oceanic taste of her on the man's tongue, the way it went straight to his cock, making it heavier, harder, more insistent. The waves of her pleasure rippling out from where the man licked and suckled.

The woman's triangular, fey face flushing red with ecstasy, spreading down her neck and chest.

Rafe saw from a bewildering variety of perspectives: a camera view, outside looking in at the action—the man's, the woman's, what would have been a fly's on the ceiling. He experienced tantalizing flashes of her orgasm, the man's smug delight in making her scream, their love and lust for each other.

Before long, his cock was straining against the fly of his polyester uniform pants.

The woman slipped off the table into the man's waiting arms. The man was tall, broad, dwarfing her. Hell, he'd dwarf Rafe, who was pretty average-sized for a human, if on the small side for a dual—five foot ten and leanly muscled.

He felt the woman's hand wrapping around the man's cock, felt its heft and weight as if he were touching himself.

No, Rafe admitted, not touching himself. Definitely touching another man, stroking and caressing another man's hard cock. An uncut one, which made it different enough from his own to let him know this wasn't just a fantasy. If he'd been fantasizing, he wouldn't have thought to make Anonymous Fantasy Guy #23 uncircumcised.

Shocking, searing desire exploded through him as that unasked-for, unexpected secondhand experience opened a Pandora's box of memories and fantasies. A cock in his mouth. His cock in someone else's ass. Yearning and frustration and fulfillment and rejection as could only be experienced by a young

man, barely more than a boy, in love or what passed for it at that age, with another boy. It had been so long since he'd been with a man that he'd almost convinced himself his bisexuality had been a phase.

Those suspicions went right out the window. He'd just gotten fussier once he got past his horny I'll-do-anyone college days, and a small town like Geneva hadn't had much to offer that side of his personality.

Until this guy.

The couple in the kitchen had shifted positions, the woman leaning over the table, thrusting out her small but adorably rounded ass, looking over her shoulder in clear invitation.

Rafe could see through her eyes as well as the man's. He got a good look at the man's face for the first time, broad-featured and handsome, with light green eyes that stood out against his dark skin.

He kept making his gaze go back to the face so he didn't stare too much at the great cock with its broad, plum-like head.

Or at the woman's pussy, open and pulsing and wet.

He wanted to taste them both, really taste them, not the tantalizing hints this bizarre vicarious experience gave him.

He could *feel* both cock and pussy, though, feel them as they joined, feel both the man's pleasure at being inside her tight, gripping walls and the woman's at being filled. Could feel her rippling, both from the inside and around a cock that wasn't his own. Both sensations ripped through him, set his cock on fire, made him want to scream with the need to come.

Despite being outside looking in the window, a back-alley Peeping Tom in uniform, Rafe tried to touch himself, or, failing that, to break away and give them privacy, which he belatedly realized he ought to do.

He couldn't do either.

Couldn't free his mind. Literally couldn't move. Even though he could feel all kinds of wonderfully erotic things, his body and his consciousness were separated.

All he could do was enjoy the wild ride.

He experienced them both building toward orgasm as if he was the one doing the fucking. He touched her soft skin with hands bigger than his own and harder, with the calluses of manual labor and long, elegant fingers. He felt his dick buried deep inside that sweet, rippling sex. Felt himself penetrated.

Even though he couldn't touch himself or even say where his self was in this bizarre sexual vortex he'd slipped into, Rafe exploded. The orgasm started somewhere deep inside, tore out of his cock in a surge of pleasure that was almost pain. He felt himself opening behind its waves, as if his skin and bones rolled back and his heart flew out of his chest and soared toward the redhead and her leonine lover.

He closed his eyes, lost in ecstasy, but that didn't stop him from seeing.

The man's face contorted. Rafe felt the other man's hot seed shooting the way he'd felt his own, giving Rafe a second orgasm, dry but just as powerful as the first, that kept his heart floating like a balloon.

A balloon with two strings attached to the man and the woman. If he squinted, he saw those coppery strings as clearly as any of the other crazy visions.

He'd think he was having a flashback, but he wasn't even a big drinker, let alone into serious make-you-see-impossible-stuff drugs.

Green and gold energy radiated from the woman as she shook and mewled with the waves of her orgasm.

That was why the house had seemed to pulse. Duh. A witch lived there and for some reason he could feel the protections she'd put on the house.

Protections she was now reinforcing.

The bright energy wrapped the house, forming a barrier. It pushed hard at him. It was a happy, shiny feeling—she must be a good witch, if even her dismissal felt kind-hearted—but it definitely wanted him to leave.

Rafe didn't like being ordered around, especially not by something that, strictly speaking, he shouldn't be able to see. Still muddled by orgasm, acting purely on instinct, his conscious mind shoved back.

The energy twined around him, sniffed at him like a curious animal. He felt rather than heard the words: *Home. Hearth. Heart.*

Or possibly he smelled them, sharp green herbs and animal musk, with a hint of something warm and delicious. Venison stew and fresh-baked bread, and everywhere the smell of sex, the man's juices and the woman's calling forth his own, a clean, hot, furry (furry?) smell that didn't smell like him, but definitely was him. His senses were so confounded he couldn't say what was real, what was imaginary.

It *all* had to be imaginary. Only reasonable explanation. He couldn't see magic any more than the next ordinary human could, so he had to be seeing things. Maybe he'd picked up that nasty flu that was going around and was running a fever, imagining craziness as he sat in the rain getting sicker.

Or, God help him, maybe he was becoming resistant to Drozz after all these years. Unusual, but it happened sometimes. The long-suppressed dual senses ran amok for a while before you passed out from shock and overstimulation and had to be hauled off under careful, and usually armed, supervision.

Stick with the fever option, he told himself, mentally trying to brush off the energy tendrils.

Instead, there was a dizzying, sickening rush, a sensation of being sucked through time and space the way soda is sucked through a straw. It left him feeling sorry for soda. His body seemed to break down and reform. Bile filled his mouth and he barely kept from vomiting.

A woman screamed.

Chapter Four

A solid punch hit him in the jaw around the same time a jolt of something that had to be magic glanced off his shoulder. If he hadn't rocked back from the punch, the magic would have hit him square in the chest, with the possibility of real damage. As it was, it just seared, stung like hell.

Ruined a perfectly good jacket, for that matter.

White magic was fueled by sex and growth and happy, fuzzy things, but when it was used for defense, it could hurt you. Supposedly it couldn't kill you, except by freak accident, but it could definitely put you in a world of pain.

He fumbled for his gun and came away empty-handed.

"Don't bother," the woman said. Her voice was deeper and richer than he would have guessed, and not as angry as she probably had a right to be, considering he'd invaded her kitchen at a moment most women would prefer to keep private. "Unauthorized weapons don't pass the wards. It'll be lying in the yard."

"Why are you talking to him, Elissa?" the big man demanded. To Rafe's ears, the voice burred and roared. Rafe could imagine it purring, too, but not right now.

The dual pushed between Rafe and the woman.

Good. The big guy could probably beat the crap out of him, even if he didn't bother to go lionside, but at least he could fight back against that. The woman, on the other hand, pulsed with magical energies. Against magic, he was screwed unless he wanted to hurt her, and he didn't.

He took a swift punch to the ribs, somehow managed, still breathing shallowly, to duck under a side kick aimed for his head. Great. Wasn't it enough the guy could turn into a lion without him being a fucking black belt, too?

Rafe shook his head, hoping to shake off the effects not only of the punch, but of the weird-ass journey, the whole weird-ass evening.

No such simple luck.

Instead, a secret door opened in his brain, as if one minute he stared at a blank featureless wall, the next minute at a treasure trove he'd never known existed.

You're a predator. You know what to do. Go for the center of mass to take him down, then go for the throat. From a crouch, he sprang forward, his muscles remembering things his conscious mind had never known.

He crashed into the dual, who staggered back and hit the floor hard with Rafe on top of him. Rafe went for the throat, but instead of grabbing or punching, he instinctively slashed with his fingers, which ached to sprout claws trapped by Drozz. The big guy laughed, grabbed Rafe's flailing hands, then got his feet under him and bucked up to throw Rafe off.

Rafe twined his legs around the other guy's, trying to dredge up high school wrestling, since the crazy instincts that guided him seemed to think he was a big cat, not, for all practical purposes, a human. The other man twisted. Rafe twisted with him and found himself riding the other man's hips.

Rafe became acutely aware the man under him was naked and handsome and well-hung and smelled of sex and snow and feline.

They might be engaged in an all-out effort to hurt each other, but their dicks either didn't know this or didn't care. Despite his recent orgasm, Rafe was getting hard again, blood rushing to his cock, and damned if the dual wasn't swelling against him.

Maybe if he just kissed the guy, he could take advantage of the resulting confusion, in one sense of the word or another.

Either it would work—though whether more like a porn film or a slapstick comedy he couldn't say—or it would give the guy one more reason to beat the crap out of him.

Just as he was thinking that, he was flipped over, the strong, solid body pressing into him, controlling him utterly.

Pinned. Trapped.

The smell of man and woman and animal—pure sex and pure adrenaline—filled his nostrils. Unable to resist its lure, he took a deep breath.

A heady, fiery mix of desire and danger surged through him and he was electrified by the image of being bent over the table, fucked hard like the woman was earlier, while she watched, or helped...

Or maybe doing the same to the guy.

His body thought either sounded like a great idea.

When they were done, they could take turns making the pretty redhead scream.

The other man took advantage of his brief distraction to get his hands around Rafe's throat.

"Stop!" the woman commanded, and it was a command, because the air shimmered around her and grew thick, and suddenly Rafe couldn't move. Luckily, the other guy couldn't either.

The woman stepped forward.

My God, she was beautiful. Almost miniature, but lovely, everything in perfect proportion. Her eyes were light honey brown, her fair skin dusted with adorable freckles, her red hair a curly cloud, her nipples pale rose and perky...

And she might be about to rip out his lungs, Rafe reminded himself hastily.

Instead, she placed one hand over his heart as he lay on the floor. He braced for the unknown-but-probably-bad.

Something shot through him. It didn't hurt. It probed, rather like the twining energy earlier, but more intelligent and purposeful. Uncomfortable, yet almost friendly, like a nosy but well-intentioned neighbor.

Finally, it exited where it had entered. It had been a matter of seconds, but it felt more like hours, leaving his nerves raw and his brain flayed.

"Well?" The big man twitched, clearly waiting for the go-ahead to smack Rafe into next week.

Not that Rafe blamed him. If some stranger materialized in his house while he was enjoying post-coital bliss with a beautiful redhead, Rafe would have gone postal on him.

"Jude," the woman said—no, once again commanded—"let him up."

The man called Jude obeyed with a sigh. Rafe rolled away and clambered to his feet with a muttered "thank you" the woman either didn't hear or chose to ignore.

"What the hell is going on?" Rafe and the other man asked almost simultaneously. Under other circumstances, it might have been funny.

"I don't understand," the woman said slowly, her voice confused, incredulous, "but he belongs here. At least my magic thinks he does."

Chapter Five

“What are you talking about, Elissa? I’ve never seen this guy before—and he’s a cop.” Jude spoke on a roar—not a human shout, but something deep and throaty that seemed to emanate from his lionside.

Rafe wanted to put his hands over his ears. Even more than that, he wanted to bolt out the back door, but frankly he didn’t dare. He wasn’t convinced what he’d find outside the door would be the same muddy, snow-splattered backyard he’d left behind. It might look similar, but it might not be on the same planet, for all he knew. Even if it was the same Geneva backyard that ought to be there, he’d never see it the same way again.

A niggling voice in his hindbrain suggested maybe the world had always been a stranger place than he’d thought, but the Drozz and his own determination to maintain the illusion of humanity had kept him from seeing it.

He crushed the voice down. He’d worry about the larger implications when he wasn’t trapped in a kitchen with two naked strangers, one very large and righteously furious and able to turn himself into a lion and the other presenting an unknown level of magical threat.

With that in mind, he raised his hands appeasingly. He just hoped they’d believe he was pretty close to harmless at the moment. “I have no idea,” he said earnestly, “how I got inside your house. I was *approaching* the house”—this didn’t seem like the time to get into the fact he’d been staking it out—“and suddenly things got strange. I saw things I shouldn’t have been able to see. Felt things, too. And then, alakazam, I’m in your kitchen. This kind of thing happen around here a lot?” he added, faking desperate bravado.

“No.” Elissa sounded as confused as he was. Damn.

“Then how did it happen?”

He didn’t want to meet either of their eyes while he was still hot and half-hard. Too damn embarrassing. He wasn’t a voyeur at heart. Sure, he liked porn as well as the next guy, but those people knew they were on display. Elissa and Jude didn’t. It felt creepy, even though it was some kind of magical glitch and not him deliberately peeking in their window like someone he’d have to collar on a vice charge.

Yet in some strange way, he felt connected to them both. Intimately connected. Looking away was painful, as if he’d just had abso-fucking-lutely incredible sex, the kind where you feel like you’ve seen into your partner’s heart, then got into a stupid argument with her. Him. Them. Whatever.

Painful or not, he made himself stare at the floor.

"The wards and protections," the woman Elissa said, "are keyed to heart, to family—to me and you," she clarified, looking at Jude. "Only our family should be able to get in and out without my explicit permission or yours. But they think he belongs here, that he's part of the family. So much so that when he got caught in the magic and had to be pushed out or pulled in, they pulled him in."

"Your wards are fucked up," Jude said firmly. "We're the family, Elissa. Me and you. I don't know who this clown is, but he doesn't belong here."

"I'm Raphael—Rafe—Benedict. Geneva PD, obviously. And I'm sorry about the confusion." Rafe put on his best good-cop-dealing-with-distraught-public voice, smiled at the pretty Elissa, since it was clear he'd get nowhere with Jude. Not that he could blame the man. Perfectly natural to get cranky when someone pops into your house through a locked door and has no rational explanation, or even an irrational one, for how he got there. "With all due respect, I'd have to agree with the gentleman. I've never seen you people before now, I'm pretty sure I'm not related to either of you, and this makes no sense."

"And what," she said, sounding amazingly haughty for someone who was stark naked, "do *either* of you yahoos know about magic anyway? Just because you both happen to be furry part-time..."

Her voice trailed off.

Jude's nostrils flared as he sniffed the air. Rafe backed toward the door, not caring anymore if the outside world wasn't exactly the one he left as long as it was someplace he could find his gun, just in case things went even more weirdly south than they already had.

Jude was on him before he could get his uncooperative hand around the doorknob. He took a defensive stance, prepared to fight back or better yet to kick him in the jimmy and bolt, then realized with a sinking feeling he couldn't. He literally couldn't move against Jude. Too bad the same didn't apply to Jude, he thought, and braced for pain.

Jude didn't attack. Instead he sniffed delicately, wuffling like a great, curious cat at Rafe's skin and hair.

Rafe closed his eyes. This was too intimate, too invasive.

Too arousing.

He smelled Jude's hot breath as the other man sniffed his face. Elissa's juices and something way too much like fresh meat scented it. It should have disgusted him. Instead it stirred him, the blood as much as the female juices. He kept his eyes resolutely closed, suddenly grateful that he couldn't move, that he couldn't give in to the strong temptation to draw Jude into a devour-or-be-devoured kiss.

Jude pulled back, leaving him aching.

"Drozz," Jude growled. "Dual, Drozzed and a goddamn cop. Agency whore."

"An Agency whore who's risking his badge to warn you to be more careful, asshole. There are laws on the books we all know are stupid, but please don't go around begging us to enforce them. That'll be bad

for everyone. You, your wife, other duals, the cops, the normies who'll just have another reason to think duals are bad and scary and out of control..."

"Duals? Not *us*? Interesting." It was Elissa who noted that.

"He's an Agency whore. No more a dual than the damn president. He takes Drozz voluntarily." He made it sound like giving cyanide lollipops to toddlers.

Rafe didn't need to defend himself to these strangers, didn't need to explain his choices.

But he'd been in their heads, shared their pleasure. He felt connected to both of them, far more than made sense.

Trying hard to meet Elissa's rich honey eyes and not stare at her body, he told the story as simply as he could. "I was adopted. I'm sure they did the usual DNA tests before I was put up for adoption, but the lab work must have been screwed up. I didn't ping as Different. Boy, were my parents surprised when they came home one night my senior year of high school and found a cougar where their son was supposed to be."

Jude ventured a smile. He had a nice smile. Probably he was a great guy when he wasn't trying to kick your accidentally home-invading ass. "Bet they wished you'd just thrown a beer bash instead. I remember the mess I made the first time I changed, and my parents expected it and had been hiding all the breakable stuff for a while."

Rafe shrugged, trying not to dwell on the memory of the shock and fear in his parents' eyes. They'd gotten past it in the end. "I was a late bloomer. I've heard most dual kids meet their animalside around puberty. I was eighteen. I'd already been accepted into a criminal-justice program. All I'd ever wanted to be was a cop."

Elissa nodded as if to say it made sense. He glanced at Jude, saw his face, too, was a bit softer. "Damn it, I'd been human my entire life. I just wanted to stay that way. Still do, usually, although I can't help wondering who I'd be if I'd been raised by duals. But I'm not going to put someone else in a position to be Parvaned into an early grave unless they're doing something that's endangering others. Really endangering, not just being dumb. So please be careful. I don't want to be the one who has to haul you in—or the one who ends up having to spring you."

Whoa, where had *that* come from?

The truly weird thing was that he meant it.

He'd shaken his head regretfully in the past when a dual "went bad" and got sent into an Agency rehabilitation center, because he knew the rehab centers never rehabilitated anyone, just broke them into a drugged docility that made humans feel safer. But he'd never felt the urge to intervene.

For Jude, he would.

Never mind the guy had made a concerted effort to take him out. Maybe it was for Elissa, with her honey eyes and her attitude. Or because despite everything he swore he could still feel those strings connecting his heart to this crazy couple.

“So, I...” If he was going to get embarrassed, shouldn’t he have done so a long time ago? “I should be going. Let you guys...get dressed and get on with your day. Night. Whatever.”

Elissa put a small hand on his arm. Even through the heavy coat, her touch burned him. “Yes, go now. But you must come back, and soon.” Her eyes were intense, her diction formal. Rafe recognized it as a geas, a spell of obligation. He’d been drilled in how to recognize them at the academy. He bristled for a second, trying instinctively to resist.

His body took this moment to remind him, rather insistently, it would be a reason to see her again, and Jude. Presumably with clothes on, which was a pity, but an excuse nevertheless.

“Elissa!”

She turned her gaze to Jude. “There is a mystery here, Jude, one we cannot ignore. Rafe means us well. I can sense that much of him, and you should be able to smell that much of him, even through the Drozz. But the wards recognize him. We need to learn why, or my heart tells me all of us may be in danger.”

Her voice didn’t sound normal at all. Rafe shivered, realized the geas was being woven tighter around him. Jude shook his mane of dreadlocks, said, “You heard the lady. Get out of our house. You’ll know when she’s ready to have you back,” and made a shooing gesture that seemed curiously good-humored under the circumstances.

Rafe could move again. He managed, somehow, not to scramble for the door and bolt. Instead, he walked with studied nonchalance into freezing rain and a small-town dawn that seemed all the more ordinary in contrast with the cozy kitchen that was the scariest and strangest place he’d ever been.

Chapter Six

For an irrational moment after Rafe Benedict left, Jude wanted to lash out at his wife. How could Elissa's magic make a mistake like that? Sure, the cop seemed like an okay guy. He smelled honest, even with the undertone of wrongness from the Drozz that made him seem almost human. Jude even understood how, if you'd always thought you were human, you might want to keep the comfortable illusion instead of the unfamiliar and socially unacceptable truth.

But "okay guy" shouldn't have pulled Rafe in. Otherwise, the sweet older couple next door should have been popped out of their beds and into the kitchen. Even "charming and easy-on—the-eyes guy" shouldn't have done it. Not unless...

"Elissa," he finally asked, because it was the only explanation he could think of, "were you fantasizing about that guy?"

She snorted. "I should get mad at that, but it's so silly it's not worth the effort. I'm a witch. We were doing red magic. I have enough discipline not to risk a backlash because the magic didn't know where *heart* was. Even if I'd ever seen the guy in my life to fantasize about him, which I hadn't."

"Of course. Of course. I had to ask, though. I still don't understand..."

"Magic? It takes a while. I don't understand it fully, and I grew up with it."

"I was thinking more *human brains*. How can humans think about anything else, let alone anyone else, during sex? I know you can, that it's normal, even. It's just so damn bizarre."

"I'm surprised so few witches have figured out that duals make the perfect partners for red magic, even if you're not much on conversation in bed. That focus is something else. It's fun, too." She managed a smile, and it diffused a lot of his remaining anger.

Finally, Jude said, "I respect that he came to warn me. He didn't need to do that. It would be safer for him if he didn't. Even if you choose Drozz, they're always waiting to see if you screw up, and that's got to count as a major screw-up."

"You're intrigued by him, aren't you?" It sounded like a non-sequitur, but Jude knew it was more like Elissa reading his mind, his body language, what he *wasn't* saying, far too well for his comfort.

He considered trying to lie, just to see if he could, then decided he'd given her enough good reasons to be mad at him lately. Throwing a pointless lie on top of them was living dangerously, and the dog-snack had been more than enough living dangerously for this month. An angry witch wasn't comfortable to live

with. The static in the air made his fur stand on end, which tickled the internal organs when he was lionside-in, even though the fur wasn't actually *there* in the usual sense.

"Yes," he said slowly, trying to think just how to answer so he was telling the truth but not the parts of the truth he wasn't ready to bring up. "There's something compelling about him. Unusual. Not normal human or normal dual, and it wasn't just the Drozz. I felt like I should trust him, even though it made no sense. It didn't make the situation any easier."

"No, it didn't." She laughed, one of those laughs that seemed to start deep in her body and end somewhere around his cock. "The whole bronzed Native American god thing he had going on didn't exactly help, either, from my perspective."

He raised his eyebrows. Normies were a mixed bunch, some monogamous by nature, others anything but. Witches, though, were like duals with a wolfside—one partner until death, as if it were bred in the bone. Elissa's movie collection proved a witch liked a good ogle of their preferred sex as much as the next person, but they never, ever touched.

And he knew, just from the tone of those few words, she'd gotten the impulse to touch.

He didn't want to know any fantasies Elissa harbored about the black-haired, dark-eyed, copper-skinned cop who'd popped into their kitchen. Knowing his own fantasies right now was disturbing him enough.

The shocks of sheer lust grappling with Rafe evoked still echoed through his body.

There'd been a brief moment of kill or be killed. But as soon as they'd touched, it got mixed up with another type of conquest. If Elissa hadn't intervened, the fight might have ended in one of them trying to rip out the other's throat—but he thought it more likely he'd have ended up ripping off the guy's wet uniform and shoving some of the soggy cloth into his mouth to muffle the screams as Jude drove himself into the cop's ass.

It would have looked like rape, but it wouldn't have been—any more than it would have been if the cop had won and had done the same to him—right in front of Elissa, and as far as Jude's aching cock was concerned, that would have just added to the fun.

What in the name of the Powers was going on? He wasn't bi. If he was, he'd certainly have figured it out before age thirty. He'd been on the receiving end of masculine attention before, from good-looking guys who had the bonus of not being Drozzed-out cops, and he'd never been anything more than flattered.

He supposed he should focus on said Drozzed-out cop confusing Elissa's magic so much he got sucked right through the wards, or on the way he'd let his lionside out in front of humans, endangering both himself and Elissa.

And he would—once his cock stopped its running commentary on how good Rafe's sensual mouth would feel wrapped around his shaft...

“Why,” Elissa asked, although it really seemed to be addressed to herself rather than to him, “would it have been easier to have a *homely* total stranger materialize in the kitchen while we were naked? It doesn’t make sense.”

“It does to me.”

“I’m glad you understand it. I don’t. Bad enough he got inside my magic. I don’t like that he’s gotten under my skin as well.”

Neither do I, Jude thought, meaning that in both possible interpretations.

But instead of saying anything, he wrapped Elissa in his arms and pulled her close, drinking in her familiar, comforting smell, reveling in her petite, curvy female body and her silky red hair, the sheer rightness of her and him together.

He bent his head, pressing his lips to hers, and his distracted cock remembered where home was.

She gasped and clung to him, stretching on tiptoe so she could rub herself against his burgeoning erection. She was slick, hot, swollen, still wet from their earlier sex and if some of the need, the moisture, was from naughty thoughts about the cop, well, Jude could hardly complain. He wasn’t about to quantify how many inches of his erection might have been from fantasies about hot man-sex.

They didn’t bother getting to the bedroom or even the table. Within seconds, he’d lowered her to the floor, barely taking the time to arrange her robe under her for some protection against the chill, and skewered her on his cock. No further preliminaries, but from the way she cried out, the way her sex started gripping him like a silk vise, she didn’t need them any more than he did.

As soon as he entered her, her wet heat, the fierce animal smell of her desire, wiped his mind clean of anything but her and what she was doing to him. Both his sides, wordy and animal, united to take her, claim her, bring them together into a simple world of sensation where everything made joyous sense. Red fire and heat and joy and a body and soul merging.

Sex was always like this for a dual, a loss of words, of worries and concerns, a way to bring the sides together into perfect union. Always like that, but more so with Elissa than with any other lover—although, inside her, he could barely remember any other lovers, barely remember anything existed beyond the union of their bodies and spirits.

This time, though, some vestige of consciousness, some clinging to purpose remained, as it did when they worked red magic.

But this was a different purpose from Elissa’s magic. This was older, more primitive, coming from his lionside.

Reclaiming his mate.

Reclaiming himself.

And as all thought annihilated itself in the rush of orgasm, the lion roared, secure of victory.

Chapter Seven

“Is everything all right, Elissa?”

Elissa dropped the pencil she’d been absently chewing and barely suppressed the urge to jump at the unexpected intrusion into not only her lab, but her thoughts. “Just fine, Anthony. Why?”

“You were late this morning. That’s not like you. That and I’ve been standing at the door for about fifteen minutes now trying to get your attention.”

Oops. It had probably been longer than fifteen minutes. Dr. Hage was shy, especially with the magic-users on the staff. She suspected it was because he had just enough magical potential to be aware of the energies around him, and it gave him the jitters some people got when a thunderstorm was brewing.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to be rude. I was just lost in thought.” He didn’t need to know what she’d been lost in thought about, although she got the feeling her colleague would find the idea of being sandwiched between two extremely handsome guys just as sexy as she did. Especially if one of them was Jude. The couple of times he’d met Jude, Anthony hadn’t been able to stop staring.

It was cute, especially since Jude was utterly oblivious.

But distracting as fantasies about Jude and the yummy Rafe were—and never mind that she’d never do such a thing, the fantasy was enough to make her nipples ache and cause a flood in her panties—it wasn’t enough to displace her worries.

Instead of working on her cold-hardy figs, she’d spent much of the morning racking her brain and making use of the facility’s extensive library to figure out why her wards had confused a stranger for part of the family.

She’d come up empty-handed.

The only similar cases she’d found involved an intruder with dark or neutral magic strong enough to confuse weak positive magics. But Rafe was a dual. Duals couldn’t work human-style magic. Even if he were some kind of oddball case, he was on Drozz, which suppressed any kind of Different abilities.

“Elissa?”

This time she did jump, because Anthony had somehow not just entered her lab without her noticing, but was standing over her shoulder. Fortunately, the file she had open on her computer was related to the figs and not to her earlier delvings. Anthony, tall and lanky, could probably read over her shoulder while she was standing, let alone sitting. “Ladybugs,” she sighed. “You have any ideas about the ladybugs?”

“Hell, no,” he admitted. “Ladybugs don’t eat plants. Period, end of sentence. It must have been the longevity spells.” He picked up her pencil and rolled it between his long fingers. She wondered if he’d be happier if he could knit constantly like her aunt Roslyn instead of playing with pencils or picking at his nails.

“It might have been the earlier genetic engineering, which would make it *your* department. Not your fault, I know—before your time—but more your area than mine.”

“Or the work Patel and his crew in Illinois did on the ladybugs in the first place.” Hage shook his head. “I wouldn’t know where to start on that, other than by calling in Patel.”

“How about a time machine so we could convince them it was a bad idea? Tinkering with plants is delicate enough. Changing animals that can get out and breed with the wild population is just crazy. Sure, enhance them, but don’t make it hereditary. You can’t blame us witches for that. Our powers don’t work that way.”

“I wish ours didn’t.”

“So, what’s up?” Maybe he’d finally relaxed enough to pop in to say hi to a colleague, but chances were he had a reason that had slipped his mind. Anthony did that a lot. Brilliant in the lab, but an utter, though sweet, space muffin outside it.

“I...forget,” he admitted. “It was something about the disease-resistance spells for one of the local vineyards, but I can’t think what.” His face flamed.

From someone else, the awkwardness would come off as a crush. But a red magician got good at reading other people’s sexual signals, and Anthony’s were directed at his own gender.

No, apparently Anthony was embarrassed to the point of agony by his own absentmindedness.

“Oh, right,” she said, casting a minor soothing charm to calm Anthony’s nerves. “It’s getting to be that time of year again. Bit early, though. Usually we don’t do the first round of protective spells until the vines are starting to leaf. It must have been Weimer. They’re going for organic certification this year and they’re really anxious. How did the call get to you, anyway?”

He shrugged. “No clue, but that temp receptionist isn’t exactly a genius. Should I refer them to you, then?”

“Hector and Laura do most of the vineyard work, but Laura’s in Ithaca today—spider mites infesting a greenhouse—and Hector’s home with a sick kid. I can call Weimer, though.” No point in upsetting one of the most successful wineries in the Finger Lakes.

“Thanks.” Anthony headed out, leaving her wondering why he hadn’t just forwarded the message in the first place.

Hage clutched the pencil he’d purloined from Elissa Donovan and hurried down the hall, his heart racing. She was so damn careful, washing her dishes immediately after eating, keeping her hair pinned up

and confined so he couldn't get a single red lock. The traces of saliva clinging to the pencil might be his only chance to give the Agency eyes into her home.

He did his best to shake off the queasy feeling that gave him. It was his job, his duty. The fact he liked and respected Elissa didn't matter. He had a job to do, a responsibility to his government and his country.

If Jude Duclos turned out to be human after all, or even an ordinary, garden-variety dual with his animalside under control and none of the specific genetic markers the Agency wanted, none of this would matter and Elissa would be no wiser.

And if he wasn't...well, it would suck.

But one of the Agency's tame seers had seen that Elissa Donovan's partner was a rogue dual, potentially dangerous enough that the Agency would normally target him for destruction. The seer had also seen, however, that he was one of the exceptionally rare duals with a latent gift for magic. The Agency had ways to make such duals useful to society.

Anthony had to believe that. Otherwise, what he was doing was betraying a friend, and that was unthinkable.

He made himself shut out the memory of Jude's thoroughly human, thoroughly charming smile and the way Elissa's face lit up when she talked about him.

Instead, he focused on the news transmitted from a source in the Geneva police department. Jude had apparently snapped last night, killing a domestic animal while in lion form. Unfortunately, they hadn't gotten anything they could use to set up a trace spell. The dead dog's owner had refused to turn the body over to the police, and the reports from the police were so nebulous as to make Anthony doubt their accuracy. They were forced to resort to whatever slim hope this pencil provided.

He had to believe the news was accurate. Uncontrolled, Jude might be a public menace. A friendly and distressingly handsome public menace, but that made him all the more dangerous, because humans would *want* to like and trust him. Like Elissa did.

Like Anthony did himself, God help him.

In the right hands, though, Jude, or at least his genes, could serve his country in ways most duals couldn't understand. They were loyal only to their families, their prides or packs. They were hardwired that way, which probably helped them survive, outnumbered as they were by humans, but they just couldn't see the bigger picture.

The bigger picture was that China, Japan and Korea had dragons and kirin in their governments, beings older than this country and wiser and more powerful than most Americans of any species could imagine. This country was desperately seeking a means to balance that—but it wanted the Differents on the government's terms, not as free agents.

Which, unfortunately, was where Anthony Hage came in, with his genetics skills and his tiny magical ability that amounted to a natural cloaking, a “don’t look at me” aura that made him the perfect Agency mole.

He hadn’t wanted to do it, but he was the first Hage male in five generations not to serve his country in the armed forces. He wasn’t suited to it and wouldn’t have been allowed to do it if he’d wanted to, due to stupid laws about gay people in the military. But when the Agency approached him, he’d seen it as his chance to serve.

A choice he’d regretted once he’d learned more about the project, and which he regretted even more now that he was forced to do something that might hurt a colleague and friend.

What would happen to Jude, he preferred not to think about. Agent Shaw assured him the test subjects survived—he understood an implied “most of them, anyway”—but he suspected it wasn’t in the same condition they started. More useful, but less free.

He ducked back into his own office, locked the door, reinforced the minor spells of deflection resident in what looked like a harmless PDA and set to work to find out if Elissa’s pencil would give him the key he needed to get into her home—and Jude’s.

Elissa hung up the phone, shaking her head.

No one from Weimer Vineyards had called. In fact, they wouldn’t be using the Ag Station’s magical services this year at all. They’d hired their own witch, a grape specialist from Germany. Made perfect sense. In this agricultural area, the green witches, both the station’s and freelancers, were spread thin, and vinifera grapes needed a lot of attention in a climate where it was often too cold, too hot or too wet for their liking.

The call must have been another grape grower and Anthony, as if to fulfill the absentminded professor stereotype, had just gone along with her assumption. If he’d just forwarded her the voice mail like a normal person...

Oh well, back to cold-hardy figs.

She looked for her pencil. Like many witches, she didn’t quite trust technology and always took paper notes along with her computerized ones.

Where had the blasted thing gotten to? Powers, she’d let Anthony wander off with it. Guess they both counted as absent-minded professors today.

Then again, with all she had on her mind, who could blame her? If the dumbest thing she did today was lose a pencil, she’d be doing well.

Chapter Eight

Rafe couldn't sleep, couldn't even lie still in bed. Although the thermostat declared it to be a pleasant sixty-five inside and fortyish outside, the night felt hot and humid and strange. Haunted, he'd have said, if there were ghosts in his house. But he knew there weren't.

The dead had no business bothering the living, and ever since he was little, he'd been creeped out by the idea that they sometimes did. He wasn't sure he'd even sense a ghost through Drozz, but that made the idea of one hanging around him even creepier. Hence, he'd bought a brand-new house—and still had a medium check it out, just to make sure no one lingered, remembering a home that stood there a century ago.

No, whatever was haunting him tonight wasn't ghosts. Not unless you counted ghosts of dead possibilities.

Jude Duclos led a life that could have been Rafe's. It wasn't an easy life, not in the current political climate—not that a cop's life was exactly a bed of fucking roses—but it was a life rich in ways he could scarcely imagine. A life lived to the fullest, with all sensation heightened. A life full of magic and possibility. A life not confined to one form or one way of perceiving the world.

Not to mention a life with a hot, sexy little witch who clearly adored him. Jude was one lucky bastard.

Rafe couldn't begin to imagine what sex must be like for a dual. Even in the weird echo he'd been blessed or cursed to share, it had seemed extra intense. Which made sense. He'd experienced the full impact of his dual nature only for a few days, just as long as it had taken his parents to get him to a doctor who'd prescribe Drozz. He'd been too terrified of losing control again to enjoy simple pleasures, like a good steak or the fresh smell of the neighbor's garden after rain, let alone sex. He hadn't even dared to get himself off, never mind that at eighteen Mr. Happy kept rearing his head, blithely indifferent that Rafe's world had been turned inside out, his future jeopardized. He'd gotten through those days only by rigid self-control and deep breathing exercises and being too damn scared to let go.

Until now, the only times the regrets even came close to being serious were times when a dual's heightened senses would be useful for his work.

But now...now he felt a ghost of the person he might have become looking over his shoulder. If he'd taken a different route—a Different route, a route which accepted that, human family or not, he was not truly human—he might have been like Jude. Powerful. At ease in his own skin. An impressive blend of what was best in animal and human nature.

And he wouldn't be who he was now, he reminded himself. Wouldn't be a cop, and a damn good one. Wouldn't be an uncle to his niece and nephew, because his sister, also adopted, was human and had never quite gotten over the shock and embarrassment of coming home from a friend's house and discovering her big brother had turned into a "big, stinky wild animal", as she put it. He would probably have some kind of offbeat, under-the-table job, which might not be bad, but wouldn't be the career he truly wanted.

Chances were he wouldn't have Elissa or someone like her, either. It wasn't some kind of cosmic trade-off: give up your social standing, your career potential and some of your civil rights and get a hot, red-haired witch in exchange.

But maybe if Rafe was one thing or the other, fully human or really dual, he'd have someone to share his life with. Women with any sense seemed to figure out he was hiding something, so while they enjoyed his company short-term, they didn't hang around.

Maybe he'd have had more luck sticking to men. When you're both thinking with your dicks, you're willing to overlook a lot of lies by omission, and maybe forgive them when you confess you'd glossed over the truth. God knew he'd done so often enough when the guy was hot, hung and worth taking a few risks for.

He hadn't met anyone who fit that description for a long time. Now that he wasn't the walking cauldron of hormones going somewhere to find trouble that he'd been in college, it took a really special guy to get his attention.

A guy like Jude.

Jude with his green eyes, cocoa skin and body that belonged on the big screen—and a cock that looked like it shouldn't fit into Elissa's tiny body, but did, and apparently just right.

If being haunted by regrets wasn't bad enough, Rafe was haunted by sex he could never have.

He couldn't have either of them. A lionside dual might not be monogamous—lions weren't—but a witch certainly would be. So would a man married to a witch, who wanted to keep his favorite body parts functioning. Rumor had it witches could do anti-fertility and anti-sex magic just as easily as the other kind, at least if the person on the receiving end of the spell had done something scummy enough that disarming his dick could pass as defense of self and others. Rumor might not be true, but it would take a brave man to test it. Brave and, oh, stupid.

Given the dog-eating incident, he had good evidence Jude could be brave and stupid, but doing that would take a special kind of stupid, profound enough to risk what, to Rafe's outsider's eyes, looked like honest-to-God once-in-a-lifetime love.

Not to mention incredible sex.

Almost without thought, Rafe's hand strayed under the covers and found his dick.

Already hot and hard, it started to strain and buck as soon as he touched it.

With a groan, he clasped his hand around it, began to stroke up and down, circling the shaft, caressing the swollen, sensitive head.

Fragmented images poured into his head: Jude's cock swelling against him as they wrestled. Elissa, her fair skin flushed, her head thrown back in the abandon of orgasm as Jude licked her. The two of them fucking against the table, her tiny, pale body overwhelmed by Jude's big, dark one, but giving back as good as it got.

Jude's cock in Rafe's mouth, hot and salty, too big for him to handle well, but he didn't care. Elissa sucking him as he sucked her husband, as her husband licked her, a circle of pleasure. Elissa's tight pussy engulfing his cock—or was it Jude's ass he was pounding into?

Did it matter? Not really. It was all fantasy, and all *good* fantasy.

Rafe's world shrank to his dick and the lush, erotic images in his head. Jude. Elissa.

Fucking each other, but not in the kitchen, not as he'd seen them. No, in a big, old-fashioned spool bed topped with a handmade quilt, in a plant-filled room. Elissa was on top, Jude's big hands cupped her breasts, and her back arched like a bow. She was coming hard, squeezing and pulsating around Jude. Rafe wanted to be there so badly, licking at the place where their bodies joined, pushing them both...

...over the edge, just as he went.

He called a name as he fell, but he didn't know which one, or cared.

Only after he came—only after he was lying in the darkness panting and grinning and wondering if it was normal for the room to be spinning and tilting—did he remember he hadn't taken his evening dose of Drozz.

Or the morning dose, either.

It was downstairs on the kitchen counter. All he had to do was get out of bed and get it.

In a minute. He'd get it in a minute. Right now, the bed had turned to Velcro and was holding him in place.

It was cold out there, and there were wolves.

Lions, at least. But he liked the lions. They were sexy.

Rafe slept.

Elissa cried out as she peaked. Her internal muscles milked Jude, and his face contorted with need, but he wasn't letting himself come yet. Wasn't letting her stop, either. He slid one hand down her body, added his fingers' skilled caress to the pressure on her clit. She threw her head back in ecstasy and opened her eyes.

She should have seen their reflection in the skylight, or, if the dim candlelight in the room permitted, whatever stars shone through the nearly perpetual early spring cloud cover.

Instead, she saw Raphael Benedict sprawled in bed, his face twisted with what she thought at first was pain.

She realized, with a combination of embarrassment and glee, it wasn't pain.

He shouted his pleasure, and she heard it as clearly as the little squelching noises she made moving over Jude, and Jude's sudden roar.

Better than she heard herself as she called Jude's name—at least she hoped it was Jude's—and lost herself to stars.

Whatever Anthony had hoped to see through the spying spell—which, though he'd never admit it to Agent Shaw, was Jude watching TV or playing World of Warcraft or otherwise being incredibly, boringly human—Jude and Elissa making love wasn't it.

So much for a dull evening of spying on his colleague and her husband from the comfort of his own home. Dull would have been a lot easier to handle.

Jude's body was as amazing as Anthony imagined, and Anthony could practically smell the pheromones rolling off him through the magical link. Jude was so intent on his own pleasure and his partner's that a herd of elephants could have stomped into the bedroom and he probably wouldn't have noticed. Pure sex.

More surprisingly, he couldn't stop staring at the play of light and shadow on Elissa's skin, at the way her breasts moved and her stomach rippled as she came. He'd known she was pretty, in the abstract way flowers and kittens and sunsets were pretty, but seeing her like this was different. She was Jude's perfect foil. Anthony might be gay, but seeing people that turned on, even during het sex, was hot. Especially when one of the partners was a witch. Thanks to the spying spell, he could watch her aura flare red and gold, which called to his own meager magic, reminded him how it felt when he'd really connected sexually to someone and his aura had done the happy dance.

Definitely a good view.

But not a useful view. Anthony couldn't look away, but nothing going on would be of interest to the Agency, except to their prurient sides, supposing they still had anything that normal. The higher-ups in the Agency were classic Men in Black, anonymous and detached.

He supposed you developed that kind of detachment after years of doing a dangerous and thankless job. He didn't plan to be with the Agency long enough or get deeply involved enough to develop that creepy detachment. He was already a shy geek. He didn't need to completely forget other people existed.

Just do this assigned job, get the information they needed on Jude Duclos and get out. Get out while he still could, before he got so ensnared in government secrets he could never be the ordinary plant geneticist he wanted to be.

He shut down the link, considered taking a few minutes to relieve the frustrated need his spying had aroused.

No. He wouldn't. Spying on them was a necessary evil. Getting off on what he'd seen during that necessary evil, though, seemed tacky.

With a frustrated groan, he pulled himself to his feet. If he wasn't going to give in to the promptings of his cock and lose the shaky moral high ground he clung to, he needed to do *something*. Cold showers never worked—just left him more eager than ever to find a warm body to curl up with or at least pretend he'd found one.

It was way too late to go to the gym, but the night was pleasant enough for March in Geneva. A run would clear his head, subdue his hormones, maybe wear him out enough that he could sleep. It wouldn't do anything to relieve his sense of shame and guilt, but he was learning to live with that.

It occurred to him to wonder if his father, who'd been a Navy SEAL, ever felt guilty for things he'd done in the name of duty. Not that he'd ever ask. His father would mutter something about damn liberals and what had he done to deserve a fag intellectual for a son.

If he was thinking about his father, regretting the breach between them, it was definitely time for a run.

Chapter Nine

Jude came down from the speechless high of sex. The tendrils of his being separated from Elissa and he became himself again rather than the wondrously joined being, the he-and-she, of moments before.

As the power of rational thought switched back on, so did a realization—an image—that had been lost in the nonverbal bliss of a dual with his mate.

He bolted upright, punched the wall with a hand halfway between a fist and a paw. He didn't even try to pull back his strength. The plaster cracked under the blow—it was good, old-fashioned horsehair plaster, not flimsy plasterboard—and he smiled ferally.

The lion roared inside him. His form wavered and his vision shifted to a lion's, keener in the dim light than his wordy eyes, but with the colors muted. The room filled with bright, poignant smells.

Still in humanoid form, but with the lion taking over his brain, Jude grimaced, tasting the air with a flehmen as a cat would. He didn't have Jacobson's organs in this body to allow him to smell through his mouth, but they waited beneath the surface in case the wordside needed a touch of the lion, an extra sensory edge.

Like he did now.

Someone was coming between the lion and his lioness, his mate.

Rafe Benedict.

He'd felt the other man there, and now, his nose and his flehmen working in concert, he caught a trace of Rafe's baffling, intriguing scent of fur and pine and Drozz and naked lust. But...not really. More an echo of a smell, frustratingly out of reach.

"Jude, get a grip." Elissa reached out to touch him, but pulled back at the last second.

"I'm trying to."

The lion didn't want to keep control. The lion wanted to leap on the errant mate, make her submit and bare her throat. There would be cuffing and clawing and biting and drawing of blood, the lion eagerly prompted him, then there'd be more sex, this time lionside where everything was always much simpler and clearer, black and white and shades of red.

If he'd fallen for a dual woman—any dual woman, not necessarily a lion—that would be where a fight would lead. It was the natural course of things between two duals. He couldn't say how often, growing up, he'd heard roaring from the not-quite-soundproofed basement, and snarling, then other, more

intimate noises. His parents would emerge later, scratched up or worse, but with their arms around each other and grinning from ear to ear in a way that made his younger self say, "You guys are gross!"

But Elissa wasn't a dual. She couldn't match him blow for blow, didn't have a thick coat to cushion against careless claws and teeth. She was small even for a human, far too petite to play with his animal. Lionside, he could kill her by accident, during sex as easily as during a fight.

She certainly couldn't handle sex with his lion form. Lions had barbs on their penises, and to handle that a girl needed to walk on the cat side herself, with a body wired to be stimulated by those barbs instead of injured.

He had to maintain control at all costs. The cracked plaster and sure-to-be-sore knuckles were a small price if it would keep Elissa safe from him.

"Jude, what in the name of the Powers is wrong? I can feel the lion stirring around under your skin, and usually after sex he's relaxed and purring."

"You...were fantasizing about *him*," he said, slowly and softly in a deliberate attempt not to roar, even though speaking the words made his fears real. "About Raphael Benedict."

The full, formal name gave him a measure of distance. Rafe was a name you could cry out to the dark, a name for a gorgeous hunk he could all too easily imagine Elissa fucking. Hell, he could imagine fucking Rafe himself.

Raphael Benedict was safely remote, a stranger with an old-fashioned, sort of goofy name, like a hero from a historical romance.

Although maybe that wasn't such a good image. Elissa loved those books, and some of them were damn sexy.

"No. It's not like that." Elissa shook her head, the fall of her red curls obscuring her face. With a hand that wanted to be a fiercely clawed, tawny paw, he brushed the hair away so he could look into her eyes.

He sniffed at her, letting her scent wash through his nose and mouth to fill his body with her warmth. No lies there, but a simple no wasn't the whole truth either. She smelled frightened, but not, he thought, of him.

She should have been scared of him right now. Instead, what he sensed toward him was annoyance and confusion. What a wonderful woman—even if she was a wonderful woman who owed him an explanation.

"Why did I feel someone else here if you didn't invite him in? I mean, a passing thought is one thing. I know you humans can't always help it."

"I'm not sure what's going on here, but trust me, you had all my attention." She play-roared, more like a squeaky toy than a lion. "And since when were you the jealous one? That's usually my job."

"I believe you. But I felt him, Elissa. I smelled him. I still do."

Elissa glanced toward the skylight then away so quickly an ordinary man might not have noticed. He did, though, and followed her gaze.

Nothing. Nothing now, anyway. And frankly, he couldn't picture Rafe Benedict climbing onto their steeply peaked roof to peer in the skylight.

Eyes meeting his unwaveringly, she said, "I wasn't thinking about him, not while we were making love. But I felt him, too, and saw him."

"Looking in?" Cougars could climb, and even in wordy form they were unusually sure on their feet. Not like lions, who sacrificed a certain amount of lithe grace in exchange for strength.

"No. A vision, a hallucination, a projection...something. He wasn't actually here. Safe, home in his own bed, I think."

She flushed as she said it. Jude guessed what she must have seen and couldn't decide whether to be disappointed or relieved he hadn't seen it himself.

The parts of him that did the better thinking were relieved.

His cock, on the other hand, offered its own opinion: anything that involved Rafe Benedict naked and horny had something to recommend it, even if it involved him astrally projecting his naked, horny self into places he had no right to be.

"I hadn't been thinking of him, I swear. Not then. And even if I had been, that wouldn't explain it. I know you don't understand the whole fantasizing-during-sex thing, but we humans do it sometimes—and the entire cast of *300* has never popped into the bedroom. Not even in some weird ethereal form."

Jude didn't feel like laughing, but she was so clearly trying to diffuse the situation he forced himself to chuckle, more at his own behavior than her words. He'd been grasping at straws...and maybe, just maybe, accusing Elissa of something he could just as well accuse himself of.

Elissa touched his arm, apparently sensing he was calmer. "Maybe you're on to something. It's a matter of figuring out the details. Rafe's been on my mind on and off all day. I've been trying to figure out what went wrong with the wards, why he was drawn here. Maybe by thinking about him so much, I've fed the link, whatever it is."

"In that case, we've both been feeding it. You think I haven't been worrying all day, wondering if he's going to pop in again, or if someone else will? So if that's what's doing it...it still doesn't explain how he got in here last night."

She shrugged. "Maybe it was just a fluke."

A fluke. Some kind of cosmic freak accident, unlikely to repeat itself.

The lion was still restless, but that notion soothed it. A traveler, a male without a pride of his own, had passed through his territory without meaning to. Just ruffled fur in the long run. The lion cared only about the threat to his pride of two, and the immediate fear his mate was losing interest in him had been appeased.

The wordside, though, was far from calmed, understanding how complex the situation was and how few clues they had. Even if Rafe Benedict meant them no harm, he'd breached their defenses. If he had, what else might?

"Sorry about the plaster," Jude said, trying to make it an apology for his fears and accusations at the same time.

"Hazard of loving a dual." She'd taken it as he'd meant it.

"I talked to my dad today," he added, knowing it sounded completely out of the blue but that she'd keep up. "I asked if we had any cougars in the family tree. We don't, not that he knows."

"I don't think we do, either." Elissa grinned weakly. "Never mind that duals and witches can't have kids, can you imagine how miserable a cougar would be with my family?"

"All sixty million of them harping on about the ancestors and tradition? And not a steak in sight? The poor cougar would lose all his fur from stress. I'm sure they'd cure the mange..."

"But they'd make him feel inadequate for getting it." This time, Elissa managed a real smile. "I love you." She snuggled against him and his world felt more right. "Besides, you're warm."

"Your hands are like ice, woman. Put them between my thighs."

For a few pleasant minutes, they cuddled without talking, and Jude thought she might have drifted off to sleep. Then she stirred and said, "Maybe I should call home. My mom might have some ideas about the wards, although there's no way she'll be able to resist saying 'I told you so' a million times and trying to get us to go to Oregon." She sighed. "If only I could talk to Grandma Josie. She was the expert on things that shouldn't have worked but did. And she liked you."

Jude thought he was used to the level of weirdness life with a witch sometimes reached, but that comment threw him. "Uh, I thought she died like fifteen years ago."

"Aunt Bathsheba's a keeper of memory," she said, as if that explained everything—and maybe to her, it did. "Maybe Aunt Bath could ask the ancestral ghosts about the problem with the wards. We've got a few centuries of Donovan experience floating around the estate. One of them might have ideas."

"Of course," he said gently. "I don't think I want to understand, but do what you need to do." He kissed her forehead, grateful to feel her small, silken body against his, grateful to have her in his life.

His lion purred, a huge rumble that shook his wordy body. As far as the lion was concerned everything was fine again. The distracting solitary male was gone, and Elissa, as a female should be, was on the hunt—in this case, the hunt for answers—with him following along to protect her if she should need it. The fact that the hunting party might include dead relatives didn't bother the lion. Once the lionside had accepted a mate who didn't have an inner lioness, he figured any of her other vagaries followed from that.

The wordside Jude knew it wasn't that simple. Something was wrong in their world, and whether Rafe Benedict deliberately triggered it or was caught up in the weirdness with them, he was involved. Involved and somehow tied into his own deep, erotic connection with Elissa.

Right now he'd let the lion overrule the wordy side. There was little he could do to block the intruder who had already found a way in. That was more Elissa's line. What he could do was protect his home and his woman in a more physical sense: comforting, guarding her with his body as she guarded him with her magic. He would not fail in that.

His tail flicked.

Elissa opened her eyes and giggled. "That tickles! What are you..."

She pulled away from Jude, her amber eyes wide and alarmed. "Jude...why do you have a tail?"

Chapter Ten

“Tail? What tail?” He tried to make a joke out of it, although it was no joking matter. The lion brain asserted itself a lot, but he’d never let the lion body out of his control around Elissa. When the lionside came out around her, it was always deliberate.

Not like now—a tail and, dammit, a tawny coating of fur obscuring his dark skin.

Could be worse. Could be claws. But it was definitely *not* a habit he could afford.

With an effort of will, he separated lionside and wordside, pushed the lion deep down and told it to sleep. There was a brief snarl of protest. He promised a long run over the weekend, a chance to hunt.

He felt the tail and fur pull themselves inside, not retracting the way his claws did in lion form, almost rolling up like a window shade. Although it didn’t hurt, it felt strange. Whatever his outer form, even a half-cocked one like a human with a lion’s tail and fur, seemed the natural one, and the moment of transformation—unless he was so distracted he missed it altogether—jarred him briefly.

“Better?” he asked, trying to pretend he wasn’t concerned. “I must be more tired than I’d realized.” He faked a yawn.

“I know, I know. Big cats sleep eighteen hours a day and you have to get by with eight or ten. Spare me the sob story.” She smiled and cuddled up to him again, but he sensed her disturbance.

She should be disturbed. This was wrong. He was losing control. First the dog, now this.

He couldn’t blame Rafe for the dog incident, though. Or could he? He remembered a smell he couldn’t name, a sense of some great and exciting, possibly dangerous, change ahead.

Within a couple of hours, Rafe was inside their wards.

“I’ll never be able to sleep now,” he said. “I’m going for a run—in human form, I promise.”

Before Elissa could protest, he was out of bed, pulling on sweatpants. “Don’t worry,” he said, knowing she would anyway. “I won’t be gone long.”

Anthony Hage was on his second lap of the park that fronted Seneca Lake when his cell phone rang.

That ringtone.

He cursed, considered ignoring it. It was after midnight. Agent Shaw had no reason to think he was even awake, let alone up and out.

Then again, did he have any illusion Agent Shaw wasn’t keeping tabs on his every move? He’d never figured out if Shaw was one of the more-or-less normy Agency employees, some stone-killer ex-Special

Forces type, or one of the terrifying characters most people called sorcerers and he, to play it safe, called sir or ma'am. In either case, he'd have his means. The Agency boasted some tech so advanced and stealthy it might as well be magic.

Reluctantly, he stopped running through a grove of naked willow trees near the icy lake. In summer, it was a pleasant park, a nice spot for a picnic or a game of Frisbee. Now, it was desolate, menacing. Or maybe the thought of talking to Shaw made everything spooky. "Hage here," he answered.

"Jude Duclos is heading toward you, alone and on foot, coming in from Canal Street. Detain him long enough for our agents to get there."

Anthony knew better than to ask how Shaw knew where he was. He certainly knew better than to argue.

He argued anyway. "I've seen nothing. No evidence."

"We witnessed an uncontrolled shift," Shaw said. "I guess you missed it, but I can understand if you had to break the link. That was pretty hot stuff." This was more conversation than he normally got from Shaw, and Shaw's voice sounded gruffly approving, with a little manly teasing that from some other middle-aged straight guy would have been humorous. "You did well for someone at your level by setting up the link. Now contain him for us and we'll take care of the rest."

Anthony's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

Agent Shaw, the creepiest thing he'd ever seen that didn't have more than eight legs and live under a rotting log, had watched Jude and Elissa making love. The idea made him queasy.

But not nearly as queasy as realizing that, for a second, he'd thrilled at the hint of approval in Shaw's voice.

"Is this necessary? Is he that dangerous?"

There was the slightest hint of a sigh. "Would we be going through all this if he weren't?"

Anthony literally bit his tongue to keep from saying something regrettable, such as, "Maybe." He couldn't bring himself to say the expected, "No, sir."

Shaw picked up on the hesitation. "You have your orders, Hage. Carry them out."

He didn't need to tack on "or else". He hung up abruptly and the silence said it for him. So much for the fatherly tone. Not so much different than his own father, then—he could be pleasant as long as you did exactly what he wanted, without question.

In the silence, Anthony realized he was just as screwed as Jude Duclos, just as trapped by the Agency. But in his case, he'd gotten himself into the mess.

He could go through with this and live with the consequences and hope the Agency's purpose was worth Jude Duclos's future and his own self-respect, or he could try to warn Jude and hope they both lived to tell the tale.

He chuckled bitterly. For once, he might have a problem his father could relate to, but there wasn't time to ask for advice. Jude would be here any second.

"Aren't you Elissa's husband?" The vaguely familiar voice came out of the dark from a trail leading through a grove of willows. Jude jumped and cursed under his breath.

Humans shouldn't be able to sneak up on him, not if he was paying attention. This Rafe Benedict business was distracting him dangerously.

He stopped, jogging in place to keep his muscles warm, and glanced toward the source of the voice. A man stepped forward: boyish-looking but no boy, a bit pasty and slim to the point it was hard to say whether wiry or skinny described him better. He was dressed in sweats, too, obviously out running himself.

It took Jude a few seconds to put the affable, deceptively young face into context. "Dr. Hage?"

"Anthony, please. We insomniac joggers have to stick together. Glad I'm not the only one."

"Hell, no. Usually I stick to my own neighborhood, but tonight the lake was calling to me." The park was far from wilderness, but at night, he could pretend there was nothing but him, the trees, the lake and the wind.

"Yeah." Anthony jogged over to him. "Mind company?"

Actually he did, but it wouldn't hurt to be polite to one of Elissa's co-workers, and besides, while the guy looked to be in decent shape, the night he couldn't outlast a lab rat when it came to athletics would be the night they threw dirt on him.

Anthony was blessedly quiet, not trying to make conversation as they ran. From his ragged breathing that may have been because the pace was a little fast for him to spare the wind. It was barely a good jog for Jude, but he figured he'd give Anthony a fighting chance to keep up. He'd let the human pick the trail, too, the flatter one along the lake front.

Anthony had just said, "We should head back," when they came out of nowhere, like ninja or ghosts, five big guys with guns, surrounding them. Jude's brain wasn't up to registering what kind of guns other than *too fucking big*.

They had to be Agency. "Run!" he hissed.

"Too late." Hage's voice was almost inaudible. Even before he said it, Jude realized there was no place for the other man to go except into the lake.

He shoved Hage back and prepared to stand guard.

The air smelled of sulfur and ice.

One of the ridiculously well-armed men was a sorcerer.

Chapter Eleven

Fuck.

Talk about overkill. Unlike witches or other nature-magic types, sorcerers could wield lethal force without corrupting or diminishing their power. It wasn't legal, but the Agency policed that kind of thing—and no one policed those particular policemen.

The lion roared inside him.

He wanted to shift. Lionside, he had a chance, even against Agency professionals. Even against a sorcerer who also had a big gun.

But if he defended himself while in lion form, the best he could hope for was Parvan and life in prison. And that was only if Anthony Hage would speak in his defense, say Jude had been protecting him, an innocent bystander. He didn't know Hage well enough to trust the guy would go out on a limb for him.

He forced the lion down. "I don't know what you think I've done, but your business is with me, not him," he said. No use pretending. A simple blood test would prove he was a dual. "Let this guy go. He's human. Not of interest to you."

Someone laughed. Once again Jude smelled sulfur.

Hage choked back a noise that might have been a sob. You couldn't blame the poor bastard. The guy was a botanist, about the most harmless thing on the planet, for Powers' sake—and his late-night jog had turned into something that belonged in Hitler's Germany.

"Hands up," one of the Agency thugs barked.

For less than a second, he thought about resisting. Getting shot by those fucking personal cannons they carried had to be quicker and less messy than whatever was likely to happen next.

Dr. Hage clutched his ankle. In a small voice that was calmer than Jude would have expected, he whispered, "Cooperate with them. For Elissa. Don't let them kill you."

Elissa.

Shouldn't have taken a human to remind him Elissa came first.

He raised his hands slowly. "I'll cooperate," he said. "Just tell me what you want."

"That's easy. You." An older man answered. His military carriage and still powerful body—not to mention the air of barely contained violence—suggested a background in Special Forces. As soon as he spoke, Jude tasted sulfur and knew he was the sorcerer.

"What are you charging me with?"

“Nothing, Mr. Duclos. Consider it being drafted.”

Then he fired his weird-looking weapon.

Prompted by instinct and civilization alike, Jude threw himself on top of Hage, shielding the scientist as best he could. Something whizzed over his head as he dropped, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

But these guys were good. Too good. The second and third shots hit. It didn't hurt as much as it should have, but the world instantly went blurry and askew.

The goons closed in, dragged him off Hage.

Shaw stated, “Serving your country is risky, Dr. Hage.”

Dr. Hage said something quiet and defiant, something Jude's addled brain couldn't pick up—something that turned into a scream.

The scream filled Jude's ears until they began to bleed. The dark, blurry night became an acid-hued nightmare, then abruptly went silent and black.

Chapter Twelve

Four AM and he still wasn't home.

Jude liked a good, long run. But four hours was getting ridiculous.

No. Not ridiculous. Fucking terrifying. And it was the second time in two nights he'd vanished on her. If her husband was all right, she'd kill him.

Their marriage had made them one life shared between two bodies, metaphysically speaking, and were he to die, she'd feel the death as if half her soul had been stripped away. He was still alive, she was sure—but it didn't follow that he was all right.

She stretched out her senses, trying to feel him. The wards contained her senses almost as much as they shut out intruders—it kept her heightened sixth and seventh senses from being overwhelmed by too much input—but she could push beyond their confines.

A silver cord connected them, a silver cord braided of their shared lives, their vow to be together now and forever, this life and the next. She looked inward and examined it using her seventh sense.

It felt funny—strong as ever, but kinked and tarnished.

Shit, he was hurt.

She sent her psychic senses in for a closer look. Tarnished, yes, but not badly. His physical injuries probably weren't serious, but things were not right with her husband.

There was something else peculiar about the cord: a strand of copper twisted awkwardly around it. A metaphysical bug?

She poked around some more. Yes, there was something here, some alien doorway into her soul and, by extension, into Jude's.

Copper?

She thought of Rafe's copper skin.

But duals weren't gifted with magic. Even if, by some genetic anomaly, Rafe had magical talents, he was on Drozz, which should suppress anything of that nature.

If a person on Drozz could do magic, though—either because it wasn't quite suppressing a strong innate ability or because they had some damn Agency technomagical device that allowed them to get around the Drozz—it might look like this awkward, tangled mess.

Agency whore, Jude had called him. Rafe had denied it, and she'd believed him.

But she'd been wrong before in her life, and now her man was in trouble.

Mentally, she grabbed the copper strand and gave it a good tug. It was woven in fast.

Fine, then. Copper was a great conductor—even symbolic copper. Especially symbolic copper, if magic was what you were talking about conducting. Time to call in the geas.

“Damn you, Rafe Benedict. If you’re responsible for what has happened to Jude, suffer. Bleed inside for what you’ve done to my husband, and do not sleep until you have made restitution. If you’re not, get your policeman ass over here and help me find him.”

She sent a charge through the copper, a shock that would do Rafe no lasting damage—she had no proof of his guilt, just a strong suspicion—but would blast him with her intent, leave him wracked with guilt and driven to confess if he was responsible or drive him to help her if he wasn’t.

Then she began the laborious process of tracing out the silver cable, trying to find her husband. Trying to find a clue.

She couldn’t follow it out of the house. The wards locked her in, blocking her view. Had she reinforced them too much after Rafe’s seemingly accidental intrusion? Or was this some new attack?

She cast her attention to the wards themselves, looking for anything that seemed odd.

She missed it the first time around, but on the second pass she spotted an anomaly.

It was tiny, nothing she would have ever noticed if she wasn’t seeking out wrongness. It looked almost like it belonged there, almost like it was her work. On the surface, it looked green and healthy even to her seventh sense.

But when she magically probed it, it flared a sickly fuchsia—a color that didn’t exist in nature, even in tropical fish. A stab of pain speared her brain, fast but jarring, an ice-cream headache raised to the power of ten. Some signal flowed through that headache and out into the cosmos: the magical equivalent of a spy-cam, only better than a spy-cam, because it was sending information out, but also keeping information from her.

She didn’t know how he did it, but Rafe must have planted it. Maybe his jiggering with their defenses had been what let him get sucked in the other night. It would explain why the wards thought he belonged there; he’d already tampered with them to admit him.

“Agency whore!” He couldn’t hear her exclamation, but she’d make sure he felt it. She reached her power outward. *“Suffer. And when you’re done suffering, repent and try to fix the wrongs you’ve done to Jude, to me, to others.”*

This time, the jolt she sent through the little spy-node wasn’t gentle. Rafe, or whoever he was working for, might end up in the emergency room with a blinding migraine, a racing heart and a curious compulsion to stop working for the Agency.

Although frankly she didn’t have high hopes for that. Anyone who managed to screw so subtly with her wards probably had defenses strong enough to block her.

Scarlet bubbled up around her, that angry power she couldn't harness. If she could use it, she might be strong enough to break through. Strong enough to get answers. Strong enough to get justice. Or vengeance, if, Powers forbid, it was too late for justice.

Desperate, she stretched, tapped the red, roiling force of her rage.

Something reached for her, filled her with heat.

For a few seconds, fire seemed ready to explode from her fingertips, flare into the offending magical trace and burn back to its source, searing him.

Her hands caught fire.

Flames seared her flesh, first blistering, then blackening. The air filled with the smell of charred meat. For a few seconds, she wondered that it didn't hurt. Then her brain, numb with shock, caught up and the pain walloped her, not just in her burning hands, but all over. She couldn't get the air to scream.

For a second, all she could do was stare in horror.

Breaking through her paralysis, she beat them against her thighs to crush out the flames. Still they burned. She thrust them under cold water, although it wasn't easy trying to turn on a faucet with her hands on fire. Still they burned. Bones poked through the charcoal that used to be her hands

Think. Think.

The fire had struck so shockingly fast she was locked in witch-sight, seeing magical energies more clearly than physical objects. It took all her will, but she forced herself to look with her physical sight only.

Her hands were pink and whole, but even knowing they weren't there in any ordinary sense, she felt the flames. It didn't make the agony any less real.

She swayed, willed herself not to faint. It might stop the magic if she did—or it might let it roar over her until she incinerated from inside.

Think. Think. Ground out the power...

She tried to shut down the angry magic. The surging power sucked her in, trapped her, wouldn't let her shake free.

The back door burst open as if it had been kicked.

She wheeled around. If it was the Agency, she'd use this power somehow before it killed her.

Rafe Benedict, Agency whore, loomed in the doorway.

With failing strength, she tried to direct the flames. She could barely raise her hands. Shock. Definitely deep shock. Soon she'd pass out.

If burning alive wasn't bad enough, that would leave her at Rafe's mercy. Must deal with him while she could.

She staggered two steps before her knees buckled.

Rafe was there before she could hit the floor, moving with a dual's animal speed to catch her and ease her down. As he touched her, Elissa rallied one last time, tried to thrust the invisible fire into him.

"Shit, that hurts!" He flinched, but kept cradling her. Then he seemed to see her face. "Elissa, are you okay?"

"Jude..." She wanted to make it an accusation, but it came out more like a whimper.

"It'll be okay. Don't worry. I'm here, and whatever's going on, we'll take care of it together." He pulled her closer into a protective embrace.

As they did, the burning stopped. Her hands still throbbed with heat, but not painfully. Strong energy gathered there, wanting to accomplish her bidding, and it had the force to destroy obstacles.

She knew how to direct it now. Not at Rafe—he'd come to help her, so he was not her target—but at whatever or whoever had infiltrated their house. She didn't even need to move her hands, just her mind. A stream of red righteous anger poured forth into that magical spy-cam.

Something fizzled with a stink of burning circuits and sulfur, cinnabar and ice.

The power released and grounded, and she collapsed against Rafe, sobbing in delayed panic, in fear for Jude, in sheer confusion.

"How did you...Why did you..." She couldn't get the question out through her tears, but he understood.

"You called me," he said simply. "You'd said I'd need to come back and you'd let me know when it was time. I woke up hearing you call me. You sounded frightened and angry—and like you needed my help. I came. You called and I came."

It had worked. He was innocent—or at least not involved in Jude's disappearance—and he'd come in obedience to the geas she'd placed on him earlier and her summons tonight.

Came pretty quickly, too. He was half-dressed, shirtless on this chilly night, as if he'd grabbed a pair of jeans off the floor and a jacket off a hook and bolted.

She pressed against his bare chest, feeling the cat-warm heat of his skin against her cheek, hearing his heartbeat, wearing nothing more than one of Jude's T-shirts thrown on over her nakedness.

It shouldn't matter.

He was a beautiful man, sure. Under other circumstances she'd have enjoyed the view of his broad, bronze chest, smooth and hairless and sculpted, the lines of his thighs and ass in a pair of jeans that fit a lot more interestingly than his uniform pants the other night. She was in love, but that didn't mean she was blind.

But Jude was in trouble. Rafe was here to help, and he offered comfort she desperately needed. The warmth spreading through her body, filling her belly, weighting her pelvis with need...that was inappropriate. A physical reaction, unthinking and instinctive and made stronger by the danger she'd faced, that was all.

She stiffened in his arms. He smelled of cedar and sage, with an elusive hint of the clean cat scent that made her want to nibble on Jude's hair and ears. She wondered how Rafe would taste.

She made herself pull away, but Rafe's grip tightened.

She set her mouth into a grim line, put her hands on his chest to push away, whether she wanted to or not.

Froze.

It felt like the first time she touched Jude—the heat, the erotic rush, the sixth and seventh senses screaming *yes, yes*, the drawing in of green and gold and red power from the place where her skin met his.

Sheer want and magic, dancing together.

It wasn't right. It couldn't be.

Donovan teaching was clear: you might meet many sexy, attractive people in your life, and before you met your one true partner there was no reason not to have fun with them. But there was only one who was right for you, who would be your heart and your home, who would help your magic reach its fullest potential, and you'd know it by the dance of want and power when you touched each other.

One person, not two.

Yet she danced for Rafe as she had for Jude. And she hardly knew the man.

"Do you feel that?" Rafe's whisper was awestruck, almost frightened. "Where you're touching me, I'm waking up. Like you're siphoning off the Drozz and bringing me back to life. Something's dancing inside me, Elissa, and you're doing it."

Dancing? Without magic, he shouldn't feel the dancing.

"Impossible," she said, although her palms were heated and tingling as though she was working magic on him. As though she was negating the drug.

That was all she said, because he kissed her.

Her mind screamed that this was the wrong man, that the right man was out there in danger and she was kissing someone else, someone she wasn't even sure she could trust.

Her body didn't care.

His lips caressed hers gently until her mouth opened against her conscious will. Then he groaned into her and pulled her closer and began to ravage her as if she were prey for his long-neglected cougarside.

Her nipples sprang to sensitive, aching life, pressing against the fabric of Jude's shirt. Her sex slicked. Her other senses picked up a nimbus of energy surrounding them, green and gold and red and bronze and green again, but a grayed, subdued green, sage and cedar and pine like Rafe's smell. Her hips rolled, attempting to rub her sex against Rafe.

The flames roared to life in her palms, but this time they didn't burn her. They were waiting until she needed them, safe and contained.

She wanted...needed...

Chapter Thirteen

She scrambled to her feet, crossing her arms in front of her defensively as if that would fool Rafe into not seeing her puffy nipples through the thin yellow fabric.

Elissa couldn't stop looking at him. Rafe was shirtless and gorgeous, his lips red and moist. And while her brain firmly said no, every cell of her body screamed to kiss him again and take things from there.

"Jude's out there, hurt. I think the Agency has him," she said, forcing her voice to flatness. "We need to get him back."

"I think I felt that, but I was dreaming. I thought it was a nightmare." He took a deep breath that seemed to center him, but his eyes were still wide and dark with desire. "Do you have wireless access?"

She noticed for the first time the incongruous presence of a laptop case on the kitchen floor. Rafe had come over without a shirt, but with his laptop. "Powers, you're a worse gaming junkie than Jude!" she joked, because joking balmed the pain. "Seriously, yes. Set up wherever you're comfortable."

"This place clean? No way an Agent could see in?"

"Not any more, I hope." Briefly, she told him about the spy-cam.

"You sure it's gone? It sounded like you blasted it to kingdom come, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

She probed, then nodded. "It's gone. But I still can't trace Jude. I can feel he's out there somewhere. The cord between us is intact. I just can't see where it's going."

A solemn nod. "If you were the Agency, wouldn't you have everything warded to the nth degree? Mostly they fuck with duals these days, but any kind of suspicious Different activity is their department. That includes blood magic and other seriously nasty shit. You'd want super shields to seal it out—or in, if something went wrong."

"Got a better idea?"

"Why do you think I asked about the computer? Their magical security is great. Non-magical...well, everyone has a weakness." Within minutes, Rafe was set up at the kitchen table and logging in to what looked like a website for a dairy cooperative in Cortland County.

"What the..."

"You think you could just go to theagency.us.gov or something?" He smiled, a feral grin that looked like Jude's when he was doing something to raise the middle finger at the normies.

“I thought you didn’t work for the Agency.”

“I don’t. But I’m pretty sure the chief of police does. When some random hacker put a key logger on the chief’s machine, Jeannie in IT did a little reverse engineering before she took it off. Then she let me know. Jeannie’s girlfriend’s a coyote—a real nice girl, but you know coyotes are always just staying on this side of trouble on a good day—and Jeannie figured it pays to know the enemy. So she and I have been keeping an eye on what the chief’s been up to.”

“How did Jeannie know you were a dual? I don’t get the feeling you talk about it.”

“She’s IT. No secret is safe from her.”

While he talked, Rafe entered a series of passwords that increased in length and complexity. Finally the graphics on the screen spun, and when it resolved again the site didn’t look anything like a dairy cooperative. “Of course,” he said, “it took a while because I had to get in through the work network, using a back door I made sure stayed open on my personal machine. Wouldn’t want them to trace it back to you.”

She nodded, pretending she had some idea what he was talking about. She knew how to use the programs she needed for work, and how to do a basic Internet search, but these were deeper mysteries, as baffling to her as magic was to most humans.

“Bingo!”

She looked over to see Rafe’s expression change from elation to dismay. “No, not bingo. I’m in...but there’s nothing here to help us.” He moved over, let her see. “Look—it’s a log of operations in this area, like a police log, only weirder. There’s nothing about Jude on it, not even if you read between the lines.”

She read the brief, enigmatic descriptions of arrests and had to agree. “But that’s good, right? That means whatever happened, the Agency doesn’t have him. Maybe he headed out into the country, shifted and lost track of time. He’s done that before, just not for so long. Or he fell or got bumped by a car when he was running.”

Rafe shook his head. “Maybe. Maybe he hasn’t been booked yet. It takes a while to process paperwork, even for normal cops. I’m not sure the Agency has to do paperwork, except for their own convenience. Or maybe whatever’s going on is so secret they’re not even reporting it to themselves.”

“But why? It’s just Jude. He’s an ordinary guy. Is this about him eating that damn dog?” The hot power built again, and she forced herself to let go of the anger. “You said you were going to gloss it over.”

“I did. No reports filed, nothing. But who knows what the spy-cam might have seen.”

A lot. An awful lot.

“I thought it was you, at first,” she admitted. “Spying.”

“It wasn’t. Couldn’t do magic to save my life, even without Drozz. Oh, shit.” He buried his face in his hands for a second, then looked up, his expression annoyed but determined.

“What?”

"I missed my last two doses of Drozz. I'm about due for the morning dose and it's at home. I guess I'll have to..." Then his pupils widened, turning his eyes entirely black, and he grinned. No, he snarled. He showed his teeth, but it wasn't a human smile. "The hell with that!"

"What?"

"I'm tired of playing their game. I've done it all my life. Been a good boy, followed their rules, pretended to be human. But I'm not human. Ever since the other night, I haven't been able to forget that. Jude and you...you've changed me."

Fear and lack of sleep, she figured, must be catching up with her, because Rafe was talking in code.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We're getting Jude back. I'm not sure how yet, but we will. And when we do, when we go up against the Agency, I'm going in as who I am. A dual, not a human."

Chapter Fourteen

Where had that come from? He was a cougarside dual, sure, but that didn't mean he knew how to *be* one.

"What the hell am I thinking?" He stood and started pacing, hoping the movement would jar him into thinking clearly. "Going up against the Agency with only two people is a sure way to die."

"Got a better idea? An army for rent, maybe?"

He thought about Jude, about his blunt words that had rearranged his head. No, he didn't have a better idea—he hoped like hell they could come up with one—but if necessary, he'd try the crazy, suicidal one. "And while we're at it, what's up with my brain lately? You don't forget Drozz after ten years. It's like forgetting to breathe."

He didn't expect an answer, but he got one—just not one he liked. "Something's leading you, I think, but I don't know what or why." Elissa reached out like she wanted to touch him, then drew back.

Rafe shook his head and sighed. "Great." What was that supposed to mean for someone who wasn't sure he believed in fate or a higher power?

It was all Elissa's fault somehow. Elissa's and Jude's. He didn't believe in love at first sight anymore than he believed in fate, but whatever was going on here, with the colors and the sense of power and healing, it was more than just his hormones reacting to the presence of a sexy woman. Or a hot man, for that matter. Too quick to be love, but it was something major.

God, this family was going to be the death of him—although he might die with a big, idiotic grin on his face and his hand in his pants. Or in a fiery ball of magic and gunfire at the Agency's hands, but he'd rather not think about that.

Rafe's cock, still half-hard from the earlier kisses, began to throb and ache. Elissa was so close, so very soft and tempting, smelling of sex with Jude and new arousal.

She'd been sweet in his arms when he kissed her, moving against him like she was in heat. He imagined she'd also felt something more than simple desire, something akin to the sense of completion he'd felt as their lips met. He'd never felt incomplete before, but he felt more whole with her—no, with them—than he ever had. If only he could reach out, caress her until her juices bubbled and boiled like lava, then bury his aching cock deep in her sex...

It would help you find Jude, he distinctly heard in his head—a deep, rumbling voice. Was the voice part of being a dual that he didn't know about? Some kind of weird instinctual prompting?

Yes, that weird inner voice said, or maybe the right word was snarled.

No, his common sense told him. This—like the aura of colors he saw around Elissa, like the inexplicable connection to both Elissa and Jude—was all part of Drozz withdrawal, or of starting to experience his dual senses for the first time in ten years. Things were bound to be bizarre for a while.

His dick made its opinion known: nothing helped what ailed a man, be it drug withdrawal or a plain old-fashioned attack of the crazies, like a warm, willing female body.

His dick might have a point.

He took a step forward, brain bewildered, but body eager.

"I'm sorry about what happened earlier," Elissa said quietly. She hugged herself. It hid her breasts a little, but hiked up her big T-shirt to expose the curve of her ass. He tried not to be obvious about checking it out. "I don't know... I've never... Listen, I'm a witch and we're monogamous. I needed a warm body to cling to for a few minutes, and things got out of hand. It can't happen again. Ever." She bowed her head, half covering her face in a fall of red hair.

Rafe looked away. She'd opened a door to someplace beautiful with that kiss then she'd slammed it in his face. But what had he expected? The fact she'd kissed him at all proved how desperately scared she must be.

How much she trusts you, that weird inner voice suggested.

He nodded absently. "I understand. I'm sorry, too." More than he could ever say.

Because he had no idea who else he'd ask, he threw out something that to Elissa must sound like the non-sequitur to end all non-sequiturs. "Does Jude's lion talk to him when he's in human form?"

Elissa gaped for only a second before she caught up with his runaway train of thought. "The lionside communicates with the human side—Jude calls it the wordside—but it's not exactly in words. He says something pops into his brain, and it makes sense to him, but when he tries to explain it to me, it's alien. You and your animalside are the same being, but the animal perceives things..."

"Differently?"

"Yeah. And it makes sense to Jude, but not always to me." Her eyes narrowed. "Your cougar's trying to tell you something, isn't it?"

Rafe nodded. "It thinks it knows how to locate Jude, maybe even rescue him. But you're not going to like it."

He told her.

He was absolutely right. She didn't like it, not one bit.

Chapter Fifteen

Elissa felt her face going first red, then white, then red again. Her body burned with indignation—and with more arousal than she wanted to admit—as Rafe explained what he thought his cougar was suggesting. His posture—dark eyes lowered, his body half turned away from her as if making it easier for her to repudiate him—suggested shame. But his cock filled the crotch of his jeans proudly, and the angled view showed off the bulge, as well as his flat stomach and the sweet shape of his ass.

In the pale, watery dawn filtering through the kitchen curtains, Rafe's coppery skin offered the only warmth. He should have been wearing a feather headdress and war paint in some old painting romanticizing noble savages instead of standing in her kitchen wearing nothing but a pair of faded Levis.

She didn't want to stare at him, didn't want to appreciate his masculine beauty. Wanted to maintain righteous indignation. But with Rafe in front of her, it was hard to think clearly.

Images rushed through her head. Recaps of their kiss and the shameless way she'd responded, her magic as well as her body reacting to his touch as passionately as to Jude's. The vision of Rafe stroking himself, the way his strong-featured, handsome face contorted with pleasure so fierce it was almost pain. Rafe lying over her, his thick cock filling her almost as perfectly as Jude's, while Jude, in turn, drove into his ass. Rafe's cock in her mouth while Jude fucked her. Rafe leaning against her knee, quietly and companionably, as she stroked his tawny cougar coat. Jude, too heavy to lean on her comfortably, sprawled on a rug within easy reach, his throbbing lion purr filling the house.

Rafe's sage and gold aura woven into the house's defenses.

A child snuggled in Jude's arms, a baby with Rafe's coloring and the green and red aura of a Donovan witch.

Elissa's breath caught in her throat.

On fire. She burned for the second time this terrible night. Only where the first had been pure pain, this was sweet heat, and more frightening for that.

"How dare you," she blustered, the only reaction she could think of that didn't betray her confusion, her lust, her self-induced madness that told her maybe she should listen to him. "Trying to take advantage of Jude's danger... I told you. I'm a witch. We don't do things like that."

"I know. I told you you wouldn't like it. It doesn't feel moral to me, either. I have a rule about not playing with married people. But it feels right." He put his hand on his chest, over his heart—a gesture she'd seen Jude make when trying to explain some lion prompting that sounded completely fucked-up

when put into human terms. It meant *Cross my heart, I mean what I'm saying. I don't quite get it either, but I mean it.* "There's some kind of power between us when we touch, and my cougar swears if we make love, we can use that power to rescue Jude."

Hearing it a second time didn't make it any easier.

A witch raised strictly in the Donovan tradition shouldn't consider such a suggestion. Red magic could destabilize hearth, home and heart if used injudiciously, so the Donovan tradition developed layer upon layer of rules about its use that boiled down to one thing: anything other than monogamy was too risky.

But Elissa wasn't just a Donovan.

She was Josie Clemens the wild witch's granddaughter as well. Grandma Josie taught her—when the rest of the family wasn't paying attention—there was more to magic than the ways laid out in the Donovan grimoires.

What would Grandma Josie do?

Not simply jump into bed with this guy. But Grandma wouldn't dismiss the evidence of her seven senses and Rafe's cougar, either. She'd find another way.

"If you're serious about trying to help Jude," she finally said, "I have an idea. It may not be what you want to hear—" Powers, it wasn't what certain insistent, if not very smart, parts of her wanted her to say—"but it might work. Without compromising my marriage."

"I'm all for win-win situations. Tell me more." Rafe cocked his head to one side, classic "cat studying something interesting" pose. She thought he was trying to diffuse the conversation by being cute, but he wasn't built to do cute and the way he studied her was far too intense. More like a cat stalking prey, only with an edge that went straight to her cunt.

Just keep talking. She'd use these feelings later, and meanwhile she'd do her best to ignore them.

"Almost all Donovans are red witches—that is, we do sex magic—to some degree and we need to learn to channel our powers when we're pretty young. Only you've heard how insular witch families are, right?"

Rafe nodded. "They talked about it a little at the Academy, and I saw that PBS documentary, even though it was probably crap."

"It's all true. Most of it, anyway, except the part where we're a cabal secretly running the government. There sure as Powers wouldn't be an Agency if we were. The point is we live in extended families—I'm considered a freak because I got a full-time job away from the family compound—and that makes learning red magic tricky because everyone around is related to you. And of course some people are gay, but for certain spells you need both male and female principles involved. You see the problem?"

He nodded and leaned forward. His gaze was still intense, but the heat was banked, his eyes serious in a way that told her he was striving to understand, not just pretending to listen.

“So we’ve developed basic exercises where people can raise power together without touching. It’s not as powerful as partnered sex, but it works. And if the only tool we have is a hammer, we’d better use the damn hammer, even if we need a crowbar.”

“Or a nuke.” He tried to smile. It didn’t quite come off, but she appreciated the effort. “I’ve got the magical abilities of a cardboard box, but I’ll do what I can.”

“I’ll do the actual magic. Your part is to get yourself really turned on, but not come until I say it’s okay. Can you handle it?”

He said, “Oh, yeah!” but flushed ruddy as he did. The aroused embarrassment, echoing her own, made her want to hug him.

Elissa fought the urge for a heartbeat, then gave in to it. She did her best to make it a friendly hug, not a lover’s embrace, but as soon as they were skin to skin, her magic flared, her nipples ached and she canted her pelvis forward to press against his thigh, her sex desperate for contact.

Okay, bad idea. She pulled back to an exaggerated buddy-hug, A-frame position, putting some distance between their bodies. “Thank you,” she whispered. He ruffled her hair, and even that awkward, brotherly gesture made her stifle a groan of pleasure.

“No problem.” He sounded edgy himself and looked both aggrieved and relieved when she stepped away.

Elissa wasn’t ready to let Rafe into the bedroom she shared with Jude. Instead, she opted for the kitchen, a hearth in its own right and the only room where she felt there might be some resonance for Rafe, since it was where he’d first been pulled into their home and their life.

She set up kitchen chairs facing each other on opposite ends of the room, not a long distance, but long enough that if either of them had a regrettable impulse, they’d have to walk a few steps and maybe have time to come to their senses.

“Take off your clothes,” she said, wishing her voice sounded less small and squeaky, “and sit down.”

She was still in Jude’s T-shirt. At least it made it easy to undress. Anything more complicated, she suspected, would have defeated her trembling hands.

In what was either seconds or centuries, they were naked and seated, facing each other.

Elissa didn’t want to meet Rafe’s eyes, but looking at any other part of him was worse. She opted for the moment to stare at a stain on the floor roughly halfway between them, where Jude had spilled his morning au jus and didn’t wipe it up.

She felt an instinctive pang of annoyance at his sloppiness. Sometimes her husband seemed to lack thumbs—or be all thumbs—in his wordy form, and he was terrible about cleaning up after himself. Hells, the lion would have licked it up, if only to not waste the tasty beef juice...

Then she cringed.

If they couldn’t rescue Jude, would that damn stain turn into a memorial?

Focus on the spell. If they couldn't find out where he was, they couldn't save him.

Fighting roiling stomach brought on by a wicked cross between anxiety and arousal, Elissa forced herself to look at Rafe. He sat Victorian proper on the edge of his chair, his spine straight, his legs together, and he was chewing on his lower lip. His full, kissable lower lip. The tense posture only accented the lines of his muscles. He was Greek-statue perfect, except most Greek statues didn't have hard-ons. More sleekly built than her husband, he was strong and toned, with abs she'd love to nibble her way down until she reached...

Focus on the ritual. "I honor your body as I honor the God," she said, "the male principle in all life."

He replied as she'd instructed him. "And I honor your body as I honor the Goddess, the female principle."

He sounded hesitant. Natural enough. Magic was unfamiliar, and so, probably, were the words. Normy pagans were a minority.

But when he finished speaking, he licked his lips. She didn't think it was nerves, not with the heat of lust in his dark gaze and the rise in his cock. His posture relaxed as he slid into a more comfortable position. She'd done the same thing, she realized, and the awful tension in her muscles had eased a bit now that they'd gotten started.

Never taking their eyes off each other, they began to stroke themselves.

Elissa's pussy was drenched, her clit so swollen she jumped as soon as she touched it, had to back off so she didn't build too fast to a climax. The point was to build desire, and with it, energy.

But it wasn't going to be easy. Powers, no.

This had never seemed so erotic with her cousins.

Almost all the cousins were handsome guys—not surprisingly, most red witches were attractive—but they were still her cousins, guys she'd known since they were all snotty-nosed brats running up and down a rocky Oregon beach. You tried to focus on the power, not the partner.

This time, Elissa was definitely focusing on the partner.

Rafe's body was more compact than Jude's, more on the same scale she was, at least compared to Jude's six foot five. A cougar tattooed just above his heart twitched as his hand moved up and down the length of his shaft.

His very thick and nicely shaped shaft that she could all too easily imagine wrapping her lips around, or sliding into her wet sex.

She ached to cup her hand over his, to feel his silken heat, to learn how he liked to pleasure himself.

Focus. Focus on the power forming around him.

Not on the intent way he studied her fingers circling her clit.

Not on his hungry smile when she let out an involuntary gasp of need. Certainly not on the bead of pre-come on the head of his cock. She shouldn't be able to see it that clearly from across the room, but to her witch-sight it glowed like a luminescent pearl.

She wanted to lick it off, wanted to take his whole cock deep into her throat—and then inside her pussy. She couldn't. Couldn't do it, shouldn't even think it.

Focus on the power rising, that red, throbbing energy.

Shameless in the face of the magic—or maybe in the face of Rafe, but she didn't want to consider that—she spread her legs wider and penetrated herself. She was wet enough that she slid two fingers in without any resistance.

Lord and Lady, that felt too damn good.

How could she be so turned on when Jude was missing, endangered?

She was a red witch. Sexuality was a pleasure, but it was also a tool. So was her arousal. So was *Rafe*, at the moment.

A tool. A means to an end.

That was all this could be—all Rafe could be for her.

She saw the rising power with her witch-sight. It vibrated through her whole body, spiraling from both of them to form a cone of red and green and gold.

"Think about Jude," she said, her voice ragged. "I know you don't really know him, but there's a connection. So think about him. And I'm going to try to ride the line of our marriage and reach him."

Rafe nodded, but his abs were quivering, his eyes screwed shut. "Don't come," Elissa warned. "Hold it—ride the arousal."

He gritted his teeth so hard her own jaw ached in sympathy. She knew how to stimulate herself enough to raise the power yet not come and dissipate it before it peaked, but she remembered how difficult it could be for someone new to sex magic.

Through the waves of lust and energy overwhelming her senses, some wicked part of her brain insisted on observing that Rafe obviously knew how to hold off his orgasm. A man who could do that would be a lot of fun.

Damn her brain. She so didn't need to think about that.

Jude. Think about Jude. Find the silver cord and follow it to him.

She pushed, felt an almost audible click of connection.

"Now," she cried, wondering if she could be heard over the roaring of her blood and the growling of a big cat who wasn't Jude.

Her orgasm propelled her, and Rafe's added force to the magic.

Like the bottom section of a rocket, Rafe was supposed to drop away as soon as she got going.

Instead, he tagged along.

She heard Rafe's voice in her head, as distinctly as she'd ever heard Jude's. More distinctly, because he wasn't trying for silentspeech, just using whatever parts of the brain allowed silentspeech to project his words. *"Sorry. Did I confuse the magic by...uh, kind of thinking lustful thoughts about your husband?"*

Somewhere, Grandma Josie was laughing her ancestral ass off. Probably while sharing an astral beer with Brendan Donovan, who was famous or infamous for working out most of the male/male red magic in the Donovan grimoires.

As if the situation wasn't crazy enough, Rafe was bi and attracted to both of them.

Under more normal circumstances, Elissa would have found that tidbit both amusing and arousing. Getting herself off while fantasizing about a three-way with Jude and another hot guy that included the guys getting it on could raise enough power to heat the house through next winter.

But this wasn't anything resembling normal circumstances, and it was likely to do weird things to this spell. She hoped, as they zipped together through time and space to Jude, they were useful weird things.

Something wasn't right beyond all the obvious things that weren't right.

The closer they got to Jude—time and space weren't exactly relevant in etheric terms, but *closer* described it as well as anything—the more the link became smeared with something noxious and sticky.

Not just the link. It coated Jude, too, tainting him.

He'd been poisoned.

No, more complicated than that. His body was...changing? The links between lion and wordy were breaking down and trying to reform, causing incredible pain in the process. *"Stay back,"* she warned Rafe, and tried to slip into Jude's consciousness. She hit a wall of something stinking and painful and just plain wrong. Sorcerous magic?

While her spirit recoiled, her mind analyzed.

There was dark sorcery involved, but something seemed familiar as well.

DNA tampering, both magical and scientific, on a vast scale. It was too complex for her to detangle on the fly, but it was serious, potentially spirit-affecting.

So far his spirit was untouched—for once, she blessed Jude's stubbornness—but insidious magic and equally insidious science ate away at his inner strength. It wasn't designed to kill him, although something this strong and major might. It was trying to possess him. Left unchecked, it would eventually succeed.

No fucking way. He's mine. She didn't have a lionside, but she roared anyway, lashed out against the danger with claws she didn't possess.

For the first time, she regretted not marking Jude, not insisting he take the Donovan name as people marrying into the family usually did. It wasn't just paperwork. It was a ritual that recognized and marked the spouse as a Donovan on a soul-deep level other users of magic would recognize. The legal name change was merely an outward symbol.

The family elders had been concerned it might cause more problems than it could solve. Spirit-affecting magic worked differently on duals than it did on humans, and sometimes the results could be catastrophic. She and Jude opted not to take the chance.

But even the Agency didn't screw with Donovans as a rule. The clan was too politically and magically powerful.

Donovans kept what was theirs.

Well, dammit, so would she.

They'd chosen to fuck with the wrong guy's DNA.

DNA magic was one small area where Elissa excelled. Given how her powers operated and the stress on magical ethics in the Donovan teachings, she was also good at reversing problems that could arise when conducting delicate experiments.

Okay, she worked with plants. The principles remained the same.

It would be easier if she could get to his body. A lot of her magic worked better hands-on. But if she couldn't go to him, she'd get him to her. At least in spirit.

She began to call.

Chapter Sixteen

The inside of Jude's mouth tasted of rotten meat and blood. His head throbbed so much he didn't dare to open his eyes, let alone move. Every muscle in his body ached, including the ones that controlled his ears and tail—and since he wasn't in lion form, that was bad.

What the hell had happened?

Maybe he'd been hit by a car while running.

He could almost convince himself he remembered it. Certainly something had hit him. He remembered a bright light, fear, a shock of pain. He must be in a hospital. So why was he still in agony?

Perhaps that fake ID that said he was human wasn't such a great idea. Most of the time it made life easier, but if the hospital had no reason to assume he was a dual, they'd give him human doses of medication, which his faster metabolism would burn through in no time.

Time to see if he could find a sympathetic nurse. There should be a call button somewhere. Eyes still closed, he groped—and found nothing. No call button, no metal rail to keep a battered, unconscious, drugged patient from rolling out of bed. And this bed was oddly narrow, more like a cot.

He opened one eye tentatively. It throbbed, not like the eye was injured, but like he had the worst hangover ever experienced by man or dual, times about six.

Thank the Powers the light was dim. Otherwise he'd be tempted to claw his eyes out because it would hurt less.

That was his first thought. The second was *Oh, shit*.

This was no hospital room.

This was a cell. A cell that boasted a cot with a reasonably decent mattress and a clean, pseudo-piney disinfectant smell, so he hadn't noticed it at first. But definitely a cell.

It all poured back into his brain. The weird feeling that Rafe Benedict was in their bedroom, arguing with Elissa, starting to shift without meaning to. The run, meeting up with Dr. Hage.

Getting caught by the Agency. Big men with bigger guns and a smell of sulfur and sorcery.

Getting shot.

Magic. Pain. Someone screaming—probably him.

He forced himself to open both eyes. Damn, the light hurt. But after a few seconds, it no longer felt like someone was sticking ice picks into his eyeballs.

Was this what being shot felt like?

He was naked. His clothes were nowhere to be seen, and there was no place they could be hidden in the cell. It was about six by eight and spartan, furnished with the cot, a toilet and a simple, sturdy chair and table he was willing to bet were fastened to the floor. The ceiling was high, the light fixture recessed behind a metal grate so he couldn't get to the bulb and use it as a weapon. The only window was in the steel door, and it was tiny and barred—not that he could have fit more than his forearm through it anyway. There was a small, sealed opening in the bottom of the door, just about the size to push a plate and cup through. No natural light at all.

He thought, although he couldn't have explained why, he might be underground. Maybe it was the profound silence that made the dim light seem weighty, made him feel like he'd been buried alive.

The lion prompted he'd been out for hours, but he had no way of verifying that. He thought he'd be hungry if the pain and dizziness weren't turning his stomach.

The only good thing was that the place was scrupulously clean. But under the sharp, almost-pine scent of disinfectant, he smelled wolf and despair. You could wash the bedding, scrub the walls and floor, but the air in such a closed space held odors humans couldn't perceive.

Misery. Sickness. Underneath it, strength unconquered.

And death.

Some wolfside dual had willed himself—no, herself, he determined—to die in this tiny room.

An option a dual could always fall back on. The animalside had such a hatred of being caged that a dual could will himself to die in captivity.

But it wasn't an option Jude would consider, not unless all hope was lost, and it wasn't yet. He had a pride to worry about, a pride of two.

With a moment's queasy concentration, he felt the holy Powers, a distant, soft warmth. The Powers weren't kind and gentle in the way human pagans sometimes imagined the gods. They were forces of nature, their ways beyond mortal comprehension, sometimes arbitrary and strange and seemingly cruel. But they were always present for a dual in a way they weren't for most humans, who had to take their deities on faith. The sure, reassuring knowledge that the Powers watched over the world and that there was life after death was part of what made duals what they were.

Part of why humans feared them, too, more than likely.

Humans thought they were arrogant, as if they thought they were God's gift to the world. But that wasn't it at all. It was more they knew for a fact the world was the gods' gift to them.

Lord of the Hunt, Lady of the Wild, Trickster whose children we are, be kind to this cousin, he prayed. She's already been welcomed back to the universe. If it suits your plans, let her next life be a long and pleasant one, because she got a raw deal on her last turn of the wheel.

He didn't get an answer. He didn't expect one. The Powers did what they would. But he knew he had been heard, that it was known someone in the mortal realm mourned this death and honored the unknown wolf's courage and spirit.

That was all the answer he needed, and it gave him courage to fight for his freedom as she had had courage to die for hers.

First, though, he had to stand. That might be easier said than done.

He rolled over onto his side, every muscle in his body protesting.

No one area felt injured, although some spots were more tender than others. Nothing he could see was bandaged.

But he remembered shots.

He gathered his strength. Rolled again, pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

Again, he couldn't feel an obvious gunshot wound. Plenty of pain, but it was diffused, all over. Naked as he was, a bullet wound would be hard to hide.

Some kind of tranq gun? Made sense. He'd never been unlucky enough to test the theory, but it made sense anything strong enough to knock out a dual was strong enough to leave you feeling awful.

Feeling awful or not, though, he had stuff to do—like getting the hell out of there. And his wordy body wasn't the best body for the job.

Jude concentrated, called upon the lion, imagined the flow of sinew and muscle and fur over bone, the strength and power, the fangs and claws of his wilder self.

He smelled everything more strongly, and the dim light in the room became brighter, the edges of things sharper. A roar tried to surface, choked back because, in his human state, he couldn't roar properly, even when his body prompted it.

He felt the first shudders of the change.

Without warning, a sharp, terrible pain pierced him, as if someone drove a sword into his skull.

At least kill that would you quickly. This agony went on and on.

His muscles locked. He fell to his side, arched backward so he contorted crazily, his head pushing toward heels that drummed on the pallet. He bit his tongue and the inside of his cheek, tasted blood. He forced his bloodied mouth open and tried to scream, but his lungs couldn't force out the air.

This was death.

No, some flash of painful insight told him, this was a drug, something worse than Drozz or Parvan, something designed to separate his sides so harshly he'd break down completely, though for what purpose he couldn't yet imagine.

But the lion was still in there, aiding his wordside, even if he couldn't get his body to change. He was whole, though damaged. He could fight this.

Stubbornly, he reached again for the lion.

As the pain flared worse than before, he clung to that thought. He would beat this...

If the convulsions didn't rupture something vital first. Going down fighting was a sort of victory, but not as satisfactory as the image that pushed past the agony filling his brain: lion claws tearing out Agency throats.

He couldn't speak, could barely think past the pain. But he managed to engrave one sentence on his brain: *I will eat your hearts if that's what it takes to get back to Elissa.*

His vision went first red then dark. Moisture ran down his cheeks. He couldn't tell if it was tears of pain or blood.

Trying to scream, trying to roar, unable to do either, Jude plummeted into blackness.

Chapter Seventeen

Jude snapped awake on a mountainside. Stunted evergreens and granite boulders and the high, clear call of unfamiliar birds, hawks circling overhead. He knew he knew where he was, that it was home, but it was nowhere he recognized from waking life. Not the second-growth forests of the Finger Lakes, where he'd spent most of his life, not the damp green of coastal Oregon, where Elissa's family lived. Not the game-rich veldt he dreamed sometimes in lion terms, wordless and rich in smell and sound, or the place with green mist and silver standing stones he'd arrived at once after a particularly intense session of sex magic with Elissa. He dreamed, but he was conscious he dreamed, and in the way of dreams, it made sense he knew something and didn't know it at the same time.

He was lionside and the lion was happy in the cool, game-scented forest, among the tall trees. He took a deep breath. Rabbits and coyote, but not nearby, and deer and maybe pine marten. His wordy side, who was dreaming this dream no matter what form he wore, wondered how he knew how a pine marten smelled when he'd never been near one.

A rabbit bounded past and he chased it half-heartedly. Fast little bugger. He didn't expect to catch it, but felt he should try on principal.

The air carried new scents to him.

No, not new. Familiar and beloved. Warm female musk and basil and pears and something that was purely her. Purely Elissa.

He ran toward her at top lion speed.

He came over a rise. Sun glinted off the coppery waves of her hair. He tried to approach her at a dignified stalk, but ended up bounding like a gangly half-grown cub, all energy and oversized paws.

Elissa sat in the shade of a tree larger than any in the area. A gigantic redwood, he realized, an Oregon tree. She'd brought a bit of her own dreamworld with her. She wore the long white and green robe she sometimes used for the most serious workings of non-sexual magic, workings that were more ritual than spell, and she looked like some ancient priestess.

Waving, she rose, and he ran toward her, shifting as he ran so he was a naked, eager man, ready for her embrace. Sharp stones and twigs cut his human feet, a detail he wouldn't have expected in a dream, but he didn't slow down.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close. How tiny she was, yet how strong. It struck a blow to Jude's heart every time he held her after even a brief separation, and this separation, with the threat that

it might not end in this lifetime, seemed longer than it had been. She seemed too solid to be a dream, but he was willing to accept the notion of a hallucination, to accept that whatever drug he'd been hit with was messing with his mind considerably. If it gave him escape, however illusory, from his prison and brought him Elissa in a passable facsimile of the flesh, maybe the drug wasn't all bad.

Her body melded to his, hot and pliant. Her arms twined around him and her hips canted forward, making sure his cock felt the heat between her legs. She raised her face, stretched, kissed him as if he was water and she was stricken with drought.

Her lips tasted of green and cinnamon, of life itself burgeoning, and his cock swelled in response. But there was an undertaste, one hauntingly familiar but not right.

Pine and forest smells, like the air around them, amber and male feline musk. For all it didn't belong around his woman, let alone on his woman's lips, it went straight to his cock and balls, adding to his desire. He ached sweetly for things he hadn't known, had barely dared to imagine.

A hand gripped his shoulder, large and heated and firm. Not a threat, but a gift, he sensed. The scent of sage, already on the wind, already on Elissa, grew stronger.

Reluctantly, he turned from Elissa.

Into Rafe's waiting arms.

Rafe stood, fully human, naked as Jude himself. He was shorter than Jude, but strong, muscled. Perfect copper abs tapered to narrow hips and a cock Jude felt hard against him, but didn't dare to look at.

Instead, he met the other man's eyes and saw the cougar, tawny and alert and curious, in the same spot where the human-seeming Rafe stood. The lion responded as he would to a beautiful lioness, or to the lioness the lion perceived Elissa to be despite her human body.

All kinds of questions rambled through his head, too many to ask.

"We've found you," Elissa said. She pressed against him, her arms around his waist, her breasts soft against his back. "We're going to get you out, my heart. No matter what."

"Elissa..." He tried to turn, to look into her eyes, to tell her not to risk herself. That he'd be fine—even though he had no idea how he would be, poisoned and imprisoned and in the kind of pain that would eventually break his mind.

Rafe had left his hand resting on Jude's shoulder as if it was the most natural thing on earth. He placed the other over Elissa's on Jude's hip, so his fingertips brushed Jude's skin, the sensitive low belly, perilously near Jude's swollen dick.

His cock felt huge, treelike. On fire with need. Wrong, yet so right. Elissa's cunt was its natural home, but he felt an equal pull toward Rafe's lush mouth and firm, elegant ass.

The air throbbed with the smell of herbs and pears and pine and fur, of male and female musk. Jude closed his eyes, trying to shut out some of the stimuli, but this was a dream and the sight of Rafe, of Elissa, of the two of them touching him and each other, burned through his eyelids.

"Rafe, what are you doing in my dream?" Jude finally stammered. He'd meant it to sound accusing, but it came out plaintive and eager, as if he'd been yearning for Rafe to be there for so long he'd given up hope.

"This," Rafe said, and reached up to kiss him.

To the extent he'd thought about it, Jude imagined a man's lips to be harder than a woman's, but it wasn't true, at least not in the dream. Rafe's heated skin had a hint of rough stubble, but his lips were living silk and moved over Jude's with skill and delicacy.

Rafe tasted of pine and maple syrup and honey. And curiously, of Elissa—not her flesh, but her spirit. That homey comfort let Jude's beleaguered senses take charge, let his brain stop trying to figure out the whys and accept that it felt right to kiss this man, to feel a hard male body against his own.

A body where he could feel the cougar stirring under the skin, calling to his lion.

Ordinary big cats, *Felis whatever*, the kind without wordy sides, weren't queer as far as he knew.

Duals weren't that simple. Their sexuality was as complex and convoluted as any human's, further complicated by a cat's rich response to smells, touch and other sensations human language, based on human sensory experiences, couldn't readily describe.

His lion wanted Rafe as much as the wordside did. Never mind that Rafe was a cougar; he smelled close enough to right.

Jude growled.

He grabbed a handful of Rafe's ass, just as succulent and perfect as it looked, and hung on for dear life as he rode the kiss.

His hips pressed forward so his dick met Rafe's, the hard lengths passing over each other, teasing and tantalizing.

Someone let loose a throaty, "Oh, gods. Can't believe...how beautiful..."

He thought it must be him. It sounded like what he was thinking.

But it was Elissa, staring wide-eyed, one hand on each man's arm, her nipples ready to tear through her robe.

"My heart," he said, and since it was a dream, she could hear it, although his tongue danced with Rafe's.

"My heart, my home," she echoed. "Always. No matter what. Take what is offered and let it feed my magic. You know how."

He felt his skin lift off. Felt his heart swell and expand, surrounding both Elissa and Rafe.

He slid a hand down to stroke Rafe's cock. Like touching himself and yet not. He was acutely aware of the similarities and differences between their bodies. Acutely aware of Rafe's weight and thickness. A slightly shorter cock than his, but thicker, cut as his was not so it felt pleasantly alien. It was swollen and proud and a deep purple at the crown.

With his other hand, he reached, found his wife, who'd shrugged off her robe so she, too, was naked. He slipped his fingers between her legs, parted her drenched curls to caress her hard little clit.

Rafe's hand closed around him. Surer than Jude's touch on the other man's cock, Rafe stroked and caressed. The perfect pressure, the way he'd touch himself—harder than Elissa normally would unless he urged her to be rough. It felt as though Rafe were drawing liquid silk over him, but that was his own fluids, pre-come leaking in his eagerness.

Pressure built inside him, and not just in his dick.

The air smelled different, not only of sex, but of flowers, and when he forced himself to look he saw the world around them was in springlike bloom. The tree had transformed into an enormous lilac, filling the air with its heady fragrance.

Quickly, he raised his hand to his mouth, licked it to moisten it, tasting Rafe as he did, then went back to stroking that delicious length.

Dancing on the fingers of his other hand, Elissa mewed. Her juices drenched him, flowing down his hand, flowing to the dry earth, he swore, and making it blossoming.

"Fuck me," she breathed, and both men turned to her.

She shook her head, beckoned to Jude.

Jude lay on his back with Elissa straddling him, her slick, tight folds engulfing his aching cock.

Rafe hung back, his eyes sad, his erection blazing.

This was a dream. You could do what you wanted in dreams—and Jude knew what he wanted. "Let me suck you," he said. "I've never...but I know what I like."

Rafe's grin would have been reward enough, especially when paired with Elissa contracting around him like a silk vise.

Rafe knelt beside Jude's head. He clasped his hand around the base of Rafe's cock, took a deep breath, ran his tongue over the slick, swollen head.

Not bad.

Damn good, in fact.

He wanted more.

Elissa moved over him, riding his cock for all she was worth, the liquid sounds of his penis moving inside her an added stimulus.

Another man's cock filled his mouth for the first time ever.

He'd never known he'd wanted this until he met Rafe—had figured it wasn't his thing.

But it was. Oh, it was. He simply hadn't had the right offer before.

Slick with his saliva, his hand stroked more easily now, moving up and down the shaft. He bobbed his head to take in more of Rafe, and he was sweet and salty and rich like one of those soft French cheeses

Elissa loved. He suddenly understood she liked them because they tasted like a man's sex when he was ready to explode in her mouth.

He'd probably appreciate it more the next time she bought some, he thought, and chuckled. The chuckling must have done something good, because Rafe made a strangled but happy noise that went straight to his own dick, made his hips buck, pushed him deeper into his beautiful wife.

The air smelled like rain and forest, like spring, like sex. He opened his eyes to see Rafe almost too close, a copper and red blur. Elissa moved gracefully yet wildly, her breasts bobbing, her hips rolling, a green and silver nimbus around her pale body. His own skin glowed gold.

He closed his eyes and saw the colored auras weaving together.

Elissa cried out, clamped around him, her body bucking.

He drove the nails of his free hand into his palm to distract himself, to hold off at this amazing plateau a few minutes longer.

"I'm gonna..." Rafe groaned, trying to pull away.

"No, you don't," Jude said around the other man's cock. "Want to taste you." The words should have been unrecognizable—he could barely understand them and he knew what he'd tried to say—but Rafe got it.

Remembering something Elissa had done for him, he reached around, cupped Rafe's tight balls, ran his fingernails over the spot where balls and anus blurred together.

Rafe exploded.

It almost choked him, and the salty, musky flavor would take some getting used to, but Jude didn't care. That surge of the other man's pleasure carried him away.

The fire started somewhere around his heart, where the cord that bound him to Elissa started. It ran through his belly, burning with sweet intensity, shot through his groin and into his cock and out again, a fountain of red-hot pleasure.

He saw the universe open. Saw the regal, remote figures of the Lady and the Lord and the fractured, androgynous, species-blurred face of the Trickster with its lopsided grin and its tears. Felt Trickster's tears as rain began to fall.

Heard Elissa's voice, as if at a great distance, saying, "We did it. Rafe, we did it! His aura's almost right again!"

He tried to hang on to Elissa and Rafe, but he was falling, falling. Not a dangerous plummet, more a feather-light float toward his destination. They weren't coming with him, though, and that made it bad.

He woke still in his cell, but in a body that no longer hurt.

A lion's body. His own.

Chapter Eighteen

The kitchen solidified around them, clean and sharply focused and smelling like home: lavender and fur, safety and comfort, Elissa and Jude.

Only Jude wasn't in it and Rafe was, naked, delicious and entirely out of place. Those two things made a mockery of that sense of safety. The serene light of early morning, rose-tinged and cold, underscored how wrong everything was.

How could so much have happened in just a few hours? It was barely late enough to call in sick to work.

Not that it was worth the effort. Odds were she wouldn't be going back to the Ag Station. One way or the other.

Everything was changed utterly, changed to wrongness. Life would never be normal again.

Elissa, shaking all over, fought off the urge to vomit, to fall to her knees and from there to hit the floor in a little ball of panic and misery. Instead, she stood and began to pace. It didn't do much to center her, but it kept her from curling up and wailing.

Rafe stood and touched her arm when she approached him. The contact and the magic that flared almost painfully fractured her scant focus. She jumped away. "Sorry," Rafe said.

"No problem. In a little while, I'll probably need a hug. But you're too distracting when I'm trying to think."

A Donovan witch stayed focused, kept her mind on solutions, not problems. She wouldn't succumb to panic.

On the other hand, a Clemens witch, a crunchy-granola hedge-and-kitchen witch, as the Donovans called Grandma Josie when she wasn't listening, might panic when the situation called for it. But then she'd find some way to use the strong emotions, the love and the need and the fear, to fix the situation.

That, Elissa might be able to pull off. She hoped so, because she sure as hell couldn't say she wasn't panicking.

She kept experiencing Jude's pain, smelling the death in that cell before they'd pulled him to the Otherworld, the dark magic working its way through him. Even though her physical body hadn't been there, the evil clung to her. Death itself wasn't evil—it was merely the natural end of life—but what was going on in that place was.

They'd saved him, for now, but she could almost taste Jude's death.

"What they'd done was almost too strong. We did it, but it was close. If we'd gotten there much later, we'd have lost him."

Dark eyes wide and solemn, Rafe nodded. "What was that stuff? He'd been shot up with something that makes Drozz look like homegrown pot. I don't know about medicine, but I could smell the wrongness. Which doesn't make sense because I wasn't there, not with anything I could smell with. Right?" He sounded like he was trying to not think too much about the utter weirdness.

Elissa froze. "I'm surprised you picked up on that." More like amazed—without magic of his own, he shouldn't have scented anything more specific than sickly sweat—but his odd abilities were a lesser concern. "They're trying to force some kind of change in his genes with a combination of science and magic. Like we do with plants where I work, only what we accomplish over several generations, gently, they're trying to do instantly. It shouldn't work...but it is, to some extent. Not like they want it to, I think, but enough to be dangerous. Maybe even fatal."

"It's okay." Rafe sprang to his feet, his muscles twitching like a cat's poised to pounce. "We'll get him out, if we have to blow up the compound. If we have to start a goddamn war. Maybe it's about time."

"This from the guy who would barely admit he was a dual a few nights ago?" She tried to smile, thinking the effort might give her the positive outlook she'd need to work any further magic. "What's gotten into you?"

"Maybe it's you and Jude. Maybe I'm finally awake and realizing how bad things have gotten. I don't want a war. But if that's what it takes to stop this..."

She put one finger to his lips. "No war. I'm a Donovan, remember? We do this with as little violence as possible—no matter what I may be *tempted* to do. Because right now I'm so angry and so scared I wish I could use sorcerer's magic and fry those bastards until there was nothing left of them but little heaps of ash. And then I'd kick the ash heaps. That's why we don't start with violence. I'm not sure I could stop."

Rafe put his arms around her. He felt so close to right, to being where she belonged. Despite different wild undertones to his scent, he felt feline and manly all at once, like Jude. He made her magic dance.

He felt like someone she could cry on, and that was the worst thing she could do.

She pushed herself away, resolutely ignoring the way his shoulders sagged at the rejection—not to mention the way her spirit did.

She started pacing again as she thought. Rafe fell in next to her. Despite his longer legs, their strides synched up easily. Great, they could wear perfectly matched ruts in the floor. Despite the grave situation, she almost giggled at the image. It took three silent laps of the kitchen before her thoughts gelled enough to share.

"We've got to pinpoint where that compound is and find a way in. Once we're inside, I think we can smuggle him out. Donovans are pretty good at concealment magics and illusions, although I haven't had a lot of practice myself." It hadn't been one of her better areas, but to admit it would be to admit how weak a

witch she was—and the last thing Rafe needed to hear was that she might not be strong enough to do the job.

Rafe picked up an apple from the table when he passed it, tossing it from hand to hand as he walked. She suspected it was because he wanted to take her hand but wasn't sure it was a good idea—suspected it because that was why her arms were crossed over her chest. “Getting out is the easy part—just pretend you belong there and bamboozle 'em with bullshit. If you can create illusions, better yet. But getting in... Even if you're the world expert on illusion magic, that's going to be difficult unless we have someone on the inside.” He didn't actually say *damn near impossible*, but she could hear it in his voice. “They're going to have crazy security at a place like that. Nothing alive could just sneak in there.”

“Nothing alive...” Elissa's arms prickled with gooseflesh as she tried to fight the logical implications of that idea.

She couldn't. Much as she wanted to pretend the idea forming was stupid and doomed to failure, it might work. Fighting to keep the fear from her voice, she said as casually as she could, “How about a ghost?”

Rafe's face took on a nasty greenish tint. “Ghost?” It came out almost as a squeak. Under other circumstances she'd have found it funny, but she felt like squeaking herself.

“Ghost.”

“You mean...like summon a ghost and get it to let us in?”

“Something like that. There was death in that cell. At least one other dual died there, and I don't think he or she has fully passed over. I should be able to summon the spirit and get him or her to help us.”

Should be being the operative words, but she wasn't about to tell the obviously nervous Rafe that. It had been well over a decade since she'd tapped into her legacy as a keeper of memory, and the last time had been close to disastrous.

“You can do that?” Rafe backed a few steps away, then stopped, staring wide-eyed.

Most people were a little scared of ghosts even if they couldn't hurt you. Rafe seemed almost phobic.

Which meant she couldn't let it slip that only pride and necessity kept her from panicking at the idea of dealing with ghosts again.

She'd been fifteen, she told herself firmly, fifteen and messing with magic too advanced for a girl that age. Now she'd be messing with magic she was rusty at—not to mention magic that just plain terrified her. Hardly the best idea. But unless she or Rafe could come up with some way to waltz into a secure government facility, she had no choice.

“Would your family help us? It seems a lot less iffy than playing with ghosts.”

Elissa laughed because it was better than crying. “That's what you call irony. I'm part of one of the strongest witch clans in America and that's exactly why I *can't* ask them for help. They'd be here in a heartbeat—we take care of our own, even the furry freaks who married in. But our magic draws on the

earth, and if we're using it for violence, even violence in a good cause, it gets ugly. The last time Donovans got into a serious magical war, it was back in Ireland. You've heard of the potato famine?"

His eyebrows went up and scrunched together when he realized she wasn't joking. "Ouch."

"Yeah, ouch. And at least we try to fix what we broke. The Agency..."

"Would blow more up more shit for cover and blame terrorists or duals or terrorist duals. The ghosts sound better and better." He shuddered theatrically, obviously making fun of his fear. "Okay, they still sound bad, but better than a potential smoking crater where Geneva used to be."

"Yeah," she said, only it came out as a yawn. "We need to get some rest. We'll be useless without it. The couch is pretty comfy—I'll grab you some blankets."

Rafe ventured a smile. "I'm not going to be able to sleep." As if she would—but she might at least be able to get some peace if she and Rafe were on different floors.

"I doubt I will, either, but I need to meditate. Between summoning ghosts and reversing a weird DNA alternation, I have a lot of complicated magic to do. Exhaustion won't help." All true, and more polite than saying flat out that she had to get away from him before she either jumped out of her skin or jumped him.

"You do what you need to do, Elissa. Point me at your coffeepot and I'll start attacking things from my angle, see if I can crack any codes to get us in. No offense, but I'm not sure about this ghost thing."

Neither was she. It had been more than ten years, but the memory of long-ago ghostly howls and shrieks almost drowned out the awful, tortured sounds Jude had made while trying to regain control in the lab. The ghosts' icy, clammy touch stroked her skin even now.

"If all else fails," Rafe said, "I'll make breakfast."

"I can't imagine eating."

"Magic takes a lot of energy. Even I know that. You'll need to eat." He put one hand on her arm. An almost brotherly gesture, but heat shot through her at his touch.

"Thanks," she said weakly and fled the kitchen.

Chapter Nineteen

Jude passed from the warm, safe Otherworld and the company of his beloved mate and someone who, for whatever reason, smelled like home, to being alone in an Agency cell, in lion form.

He felt safer in that form, but he had to make sure his body, and his shifting abilities, were his own again.

He took a deep breath and willed himself into his wordy body. It worked, without the racking pain he remembered.

Thank the Powers for that.

He instantly regretted the shift, though. In lion form he'd felt tired but basically healthy. In this body he felt like he'd been hit by a truck.

No, worse than a truck. Trucks weren't *trying* to hurt you.

Jude's body ached in places he didn't know it was possible to hurt. His face. His scalp. His fingers and toes. Basically everywhere, including a few places that didn't have nerve endings, like his dreadlocks. His left shoulder throbbed dully, as if he'd torn something, and he was so tender where the tranq darts—or whatever they'd been—had hit him that he figured there must be a spectacular bruise.

Still, he felt better than he had before. More whole, more like himself.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes. He was alone.

The cell was blurry.

Shit and double shit. Blindness meant death, his lionside insisted.

He blinked several times. It helped with the blurriness, but his eyes ached and burned and the dim light made him cringe.

If he thought about it harder than his throbbing head liked, though, forced himself to move the aching muscles of his face enough to squint, he could see more or less normally, thank the Powers.

Not that there was a damn thing worth looking at.

No, the sights he could see when he closed his eyes were far superior—Elissa naked under him, her breasts and throat flushed a mottled rose with her pleasure, her face transfigured by ecstasy. Hell, Elissa sitting across from him at breakfast, hair frizzy, bathrobe pulled tight around her as if it would keep morning at bay, clutching the coffee that was her last hope of AM salvation.

But he made himself focus on the ugliness, so he could find a way out of it.

There was no way in hell he'd let those Agency bastards beat him. Oh, they were cocky, sure of their power, sure of their ultimate victory, especially the older guy, the sorcerer. In most cases they were right. You didn't often hear of people getting away from the Agency. But Jude had Elissa, and with Elissa on his side, there was no one who could tame this lion.

Including who or whatever was on the other side of the door right now.

Jude rolled off the cot and to his feet. The room spun and a surge of pain and nausea almost flooded him. He couldn't find strength to shift again—must be the drugs, since shifting usually felt exhilarating, not draining—but by the time the door opened, he was solid on his feet, ready to pounce on the invader and do whatever he could. He surged forward, gathering what strength he could find within himself, in nature, in the thought of Elissa.

He crashed into an invisible wall of ice.

With his balance already shaky, he fell, hitting the cold cement floor as if he'd fallen from a much greater height.

He looked up, and through eyes that were blurry and dim again saw the hard old man, the sorcerer who looked like a retired but still dangerous Special Forces officer.

Great. He'd tried to punch out someone who could eviscerate him with a flick of his hand.

The sorcerer raised his hand, said one word Jude couldn't decipher.

Ice filled his veins, freezing him in place. He couldn't breathe properly, couldn't think, could only fight the magic and fail and try not to let the fear show in his eyes. The terror of feeling his blood congeal and his flesh crystallize was worse than the pain, and it was excruciating enough to make everything he'd already experienced in this place pale. The only good thing was that he literally couldn't move, so he couldn't beg for mercy.

"Hello, Mr. Duclos. Please forgive the binding, but you haven't proven yourself trustworthy." The sorcerer gave him a narrow-lipped smile.

If the sorcerer were a sick bastard enjoying Jude's suffering, that would make sense in a Psychos-R-Us way, but the smile belonged on a businessman satisfied he was doing a good job. Not even a businessman who loved his job; one who was bored, but pleased he was going to close the deal.

He *was* a sick bastard, all right, but not the kind they made slasher movies about.

He was the kind who had been made into a weapon and couldn't find his way back again. The kind the government hired because it would be a waste to kill him after investing in the expensive training to make him the monster he was.

The scariest sick bastard: the kind for whom it was all in a day's work. Duty. Some people would even think he was a hero.

"I am Agent Shaw. You, when you are allowed to speak again, will address me as Agent Shaw or sir, and not by any of the epithets that will occur to you at various points in your training. And you will be

trained, Mr. Duclos. Your government needs what you can become. You're a big predator, and as such you don't fit into the human world. But you will help protect it once I'm done with you. Unfortunately, your training will be somewhat less pleasant than my own military experience, and I assure you Special Forces training is enjoyable only when you're boasting later about what you endured. We start now."

Jude tried to spit, felt ice crystals in his throat.

This had to be an illusion. Otherwise he'd be a corpsesicle.

If it was an illusion, he could fight it. That didn't take magic, just stubbornness—and everyone always said he had plenty of that.

Jude called on memories of basking in front of the flickering fireplace; the drowsy warmth of his lion in the morning sun; the heat of Elissa's body against his while they made love on a summer night.

Better. He was still cold, but the sense of being trapped in a glacier receded enough that he could shiver. Through chattering teeth, he said, "Choke on a hairball and die, you Nazi wannabe."

His heart froze to a lump of crystalline meat in his chest.

Not a metaphor. Death.

Jude's heart stopped. His spirit tried to leap from his dying body. The pain stopped abruptly, and he glimpsed the Otherworld, the Powers and his ancestors welcoming him to his next home. He wasn't ready to go, but it didn't look so bad. At least he couldn't hurt anymore.

The silver cord leaped and pulsed, sending warm, pleasurable sensation jarring through his spirit and through a body that should by rights be done with all feeling. From a great distance, he heard his wife scream his name and push breath and life at him.

He slammed back into ice and pain. As he tumbled back to life, he realized Elissa hadn't called him back. If she'd done it, it wouldn't hurt nearly so much.

He opened his eyes—he could again—saw Agent Shaw through a nimbus of colors that should be visible only to infrared sensors. Or maybe infrablue sensors, because they were sharp and cold and so far past violet they didn't make sense. Shaw completed what looked like a ritual gesture.

He gave another of those businesslike smiles. "Not so fast. That would be too easy an out for you. You are a fighter. I know you. You're like me at heart."

"Evil *and* pompous? Don't think so." Jude's voice came out a weak croak. Probably stupid, but being killed outright might be preferable to being tortured like this. Except he wouldn't see Elissa again in this life, and that was enough reason to hold on.

Shaw shook his head. For a fleeting instant, Jude thought he saw something in the lifeless gray eyes, something like a memory of what compassion felt like when Shaw still let himself have feelings.

Shaw pointed his forefinger and sent another jolt of icy agony through Jude's body. "Don't try to goad me into killing you. It won't work. It will only cause you more pain. I have no compunction about hurting you. I don't enjoy it, but it's part of my job and I pride myself on doing my job well."

"Fuck you."

"You may yet. I haven't decided. More likely I would fuck you, but forcing you to take a more active role might be...useful." Shaw's voice had no desire in it, just implacable will.

Jude, struggling against pain and fear, had an unbidden memory of the dream about Rafe, Rafe's elegant body with the feline obvious even inside the human form, Rafe's caress, Rafe's cock in his mouth.

What had been delicious now seemed nauseating in the face of Shaw's threat.

Stubbornly, perversely, Jude held the memory, stroked it, made it more vivid.

He didn't know if he'd ever see Rafe again, or, if he did, if he'd react to him the way he had in that dream. But Trickster's turds, Shaw wasn't going to mess up a perfectly good erotic dream on top of everything else.

Shaw took a few steps, crouched next to Jude, put one hand on Jude's bare chest, right over his heart. The hand felt hot against Jude's freezing skin, but it was the deceptive heat of ice. The smell of rot—moral rot decaying an aging but otherwise-healthy body—was overwhelming, even to Jude's wordside. Far away, the lion retched. But at Shaw's touch, the pain and cold that gripped him let go—it snaked back inside the sorcerer, to lurk until it was needed again—and warmth returned to his body as if Shaw's magic had never tried to freeze him solid.

"Please be aware that like hurting you, using you sexually would be serving my country. Nothing personal. Your psychological profile suggests you're unlikely to bargain with your body, but if you're tempted to try, know it would have unfortunate results."

As if he'd willingly get within five hundred feet of the guy without a sniper rifle, let alone willingly fuck him. "Anything you take from me will be taken by force," Jude found the strength to say. "And what you take, you can't keep. You may kill me, but you won't break me."

"Oh, we will break you." Cold confidence filled the sorcerer's voice. Another blast of pain racked Jude, not as bad as others, but bad enough to remind him he was fundamentally helpless, at Shaw's mercy.

"You will live," Jude heard above the pain. "You will learn. You will suffer. You will hate and fear and want to die and then you will want others to die because it will siphon off some of your pain." The sorcerer's voice was cold and dark and strangely layered, as if more than one person spoke through his mouth. It was silkily, sickly seductive, and Jude fell into it as if he plunged from a stunning height into oily black water. He drowned in the words. They filled his ears, his nostrils, his lungs.

It was a spell. A spell to affect his will.

Recognizing that, Jude could shake it off a little. Elissa had taught him a few things every young witch learned in case she ran afoul of someone using mind-altering magic. He couldn't do them as well as a witch could, but Elissa said the lion, not easily moved by words—and the fact he was, as she put it, a stubborn, perverse bastard who never wanted to do what he was told anyway—would help him in a pinch.

Trickster's tits and testicles, she'd better be right.

Focus on Elissa. Focus on the cement floor. Focus on soothing the lion, pacing angrily, unable to understand why he couldn't eat this dangerous but conveniently distracted human. Focus on anything but the words.

"You will despise me and yourself and everything else, and your anger and self-loathing and pain will become your whole world, until they are as beautiful to you as the daylight or the face of your woman. You will become your anger and you will kill without compunction." Shaw's words echoed the cadence of a human religious ritual, like the chanting Elissa's family had done when they were married, like the call-and-response parts of the Mass, which he'd attended with human friends as a kid. Seductive, persuasive, beautiful. But no gods showed themselves, just bleak, oily power.

His lion wanted to leap on the sorcerer now, but Jude held still, pretended he was drowning in language. He thought sorcerers might be vulnerable while casting these complex spells, especially when the power built to a head. Thanks to Elissa he knew enough about magic to be pretty sure Shaw was reaching that point.

"In the end, you will be my creature, my killer, my creation and tool, and whether I tell you to suck my cock or kill the president or skin your mate alive, your answer will be..."

"No!" Jude roared and flung himself at Shaw, knocking him backward with Jude on top of him. "And no is all you'll get from me except a big 'fuck you'."

Shaw was a massive man, almost as tall as Jude and solidly built. The guy must be over sixty, but he was still physically powerful. Jude was younger, more agile, probably stronger. He lacked the intense military training Shaw had gone through, but he was a black belt. If he'd been himself, he was pretty sure he could have kicked Shaw's ass in a hand-to-hand fight...well, at least had a chance, especially with Shaw drained from casting.

Having been dead, however briefly, does slow a guy down.

Jude connected when he hit or kicked, but he didn't have much force behind it. A couple of times he got an "oof" out of Shaw, but that was it. The only good news was that Shaw looked shaky, even though he managed to throw Jude aside and scramble to his feet. He hit hard enough to make Jude see stars, but considering he was already one giant ache, that didn't take much.

Finally Jude saw his chance. A good kick to the balls knocked the wind out of anyone, even a sorcerer.

Unless he'd been Special Forces, in which case he grunted and tried to break your jaw before he let himself curl up in a self-protective ball.

He was easier to tackle then, but hitting the floor with him jarred every already-sore muscle and joint in Jude's battered body.

For a second the two men lay panting on the cold floor, almost companionable in their exhaustion.

Shaw tried the freezing trick again. It worked for about ten seconds, then Jude was on him again, shakier than ever, but madder than ever as well.

Finally, after ineffectually rolling around banging each other's heads into the floor, Jude ended up on top, kneeling on the older man's forearms, using his weight to pin him while choking the life out of him. Shaw's face darkened, his eyes bulged. His body struggled, but he was tiring, unable to throw Jude off.

Or maybe Shaw wasn't really trying, because he still looked triumphant, although he must realize he was one good squeeze or twist away from dying.

It came to Jude like a message from the lion, although it was in human words: This was part of the Agency's game. Otherwise, someone, probably several someones, would be in here, guns blazing, to rescue Shaw from the crazy lion-man, because the Agency was way too high-tech not to have surveillance cameras in the cell.

You will become your anger and you will kill without compunction.

It was already starting.

There was no fucking way Jude would let it.

Jude kept his weight on Shaw, but released the older man's throat. "I get it," he said. "You don't give a shit if you die or not, because you break me either way and you're so crazy it's worth dying for. If I kill you, I prove you've half succeeded in turning me into a killing machine and the others will work on me that much harder. And if I don't kill you, I'm weak in my own eyes, which might make me easier to break. But you know what? I can live with that better than with killing you and handing them my soul."

"Far too smart for an animal," Agent Shaw croaked and passed out.

At which point the door opened again and four agents with tranq guns poured in. Clearly they'd been waiting for this moment.

"Guess I was right," Jude said to Shaw's unconscious form and raised his hands in the classic "don't-shoot-me" pose.

They shot anyway.

The last thing he saw was a skinny, fragile-looking woman in a lab coat—nothing like Elissa, who was petite but muscled and fit. He thought he remembered her from feverish bits of the night before. A doctor? She rushed to Agent Shaw's side, but as she reached for him, Jude could see her hands shook as if she reached for a venomous serpent.

He wanted to reassure her somehow, because for all she was the enemy, he felt she wasn't much better off than he was.

Two of the agents dragged him back to his cot. He snarled, but couldn't resist. His muscles wouldn't cooperate. The convulsions started, and the pain and the sense he was being ripped apart to see if they could make something new from the scraps.

Not this shit again. He couldn't fight it and, weakened as he was, might not survive trying. Elissa and Rafe had pulled his bacon from the fire last time, but he couldn't rely on it happening another time. Magic was chancy, especially long-distance magic.

With his last scrap of strength, Jude willed himself to pass out.

Chapter Twenty

Elissa tumbled through stars, completely untethered. Something had snapped her connection to Jude and to the earth. Falling didn't seem too bad in comparison.

Landing was going to be a bitch, but in the meantime, the stars, blurring with her speed, were cold glory and in the vacuum of space she felt safe.

Detached and alone and so very cold, but safe. That was all she could hope for, without Jude: to be alone and cold, but safe.

Then something grabbed her. Anchored her. Shook her roughly.

Hands gripped her shoulders. A voice she should recognize but didn't blasted away the stars and ordered her to wake up.

She squirmed, tried to escape the intruding, unwelcome presence. Waking would mean reality, and reality meant pain and loss.

"Wake up!" This time she could identify the voice and the hands as male.

She was half in space, half somewhere else, aware now she wasn't actually moving. Aware her heart was beating, her lungs faithfully collecting air, although the last thing she remembered before she fell was Jude's heart stopping.

Jude was dead.

And someone was annoying the hell out of her by forcing her to live while he was gone.

If she got rid of the intrusion, she could go back to that cold, starry place and maybe catch up with her husband.

She opened her eyes and summoned her energy. A big guy leaned over her, not as big as Jude, but too solid to push away easily. Her brains weren't working well enough to recognize him even though his face seemed vaguely familiar.

Using what magic she could muster without confronting the emptiness where her link to Jude should be, she shoved.

The big guy flew across the room and landed against the coffee table with a startled grunt. He sat up, rubbing his shoulder, and said, "What the hell was that for?"

As he did, she realized two things.

The man was Rafe Benedict and she should have recognized him because she had a tentative new copper cord linking her spirit to his.

And the silver cord connecting her to Jude still pulsed, weakly and erratically, but leading somewhere in this world, not the Otherworld.

Jude was alive.

She sprang to her feet.

That was the intention, anyway. She was trapped in blankets and her legs were shaky. Rather than springing, she struggled until she oozed off the sofa, blankets and all.

She clutched the blankets around her. The room was warm, warmer than it usually was, but she couldn't stop shivering.

"Jude...still alive..." Her voice seemed to come from someplace far away, someplace cold and studded with stars. Her teeth chattered. "But we've got to..."

She sat again, abruptly. Her head swam with stars and images of Jude being tormented by a stern, military-looking older man using magic and plain, old-fashioned pain.

With remarkable grace for someone who'd been knocked ass over teakettle, Rafe reached her side. "Easy there. Take it slow." He sat next to her and drew her close. "You were in shock. Still are, a little. You collapsed at the foot of the stairs, and you were freezing. Talk to me, but don't try to move yet."

His skin burned her through the layers of blankets. She didn't think it was only because she was cold.

His eyes were cat's eyes, with slitted pupils and no whites. Not Jude's lion eyes, but something close.

Her mind snapped back into focus.

"Might want to take those jeans off..." she said weakly, "or they're going to be uncomfortable in a few minutes."

"Sweetheart, I told you to take it slow!" Rafe grinned in keeping with the desperate attempt at silliness. His teeth were pointed, a carnivore's fangs. His voice dropped, became throatier, not like a man talking dirty in the dark, but the way a big cat might sound if it acquired human speech. "I appreciate the compliment, but this isn't the time."

"No, it's not. You're going to go cougarside any second now. Get your pants off before you're tangled up in them, and get off my couch before you rip it."

Or rip her, but she decided not to say that. Making him nervous could be bad.

"What..." He either saw something in her face or realized something strange was going on with his body, but in any case he rocketed to the center of the room. "You're awfully calm about this," he said with another overly toothy grin. "Doesn't having a cougar in the living room faze you?"

She shrugged, although the movement was probably lost under blankets. "For me, a big cat in the house is normal."

He tried to answer—to make a smartass remark, she suspected. He opened his mouth, but the sound that came out wasn't anything human. His catlike eyes went wide and wild and astonished. He fumbled at his zipper with hands that were sprouting tawny fur.

He didn't get them off before they ripped.

She turned her head away. There was something intensely private about the moment a dual embraced his animal. She and Rafe had found themselves sharing—maybe oversharing—a lot during the last terrifying hours, but watching him bring himself to orgasm felt less invasive than watching his first shift.

When she looked back, a cougar paced in circles around her living room rug, his tail twitching nervously. She hadn't realized how big cougars were. He was leaner and more lightly built than Jude was as a lion, but long. He took up a lot of the living room.

Even after years with Jude, she couldn't read feline expressions the way another dual could, but at a guess, this cougar looked confused.

Fortunately, life with a dual meant she didn't have anything fragile at tail level, because Rafe as a cougar had as much tail action going as an over-excited lab puppy, with a lot more tail involved.

Unfortunately, a twitching tail on a feline meant something very different than it did on a dog.

"Hold onto yourself," she said, quietly so as not to startle the cougar.

She trusted wordside Rafe not to harm her. He was a cop, a good cop, the kind who took protection of the innocent seriously enough to go outside the letter of the law if he needed to in order to do what was right.

Cougarside Rafe, on the other hand, was a mass of instincts he didn't know how to control. Probably an alarmed mass of instincts, and anyone who'd ever spent time with house cats, let alone big, wild felines, knew nervous cats could be dangerous.

Jude should be here. Jude could reach him with silentspeech, would know how to guide him safely through the bombardment of his feline senses and the new sensations of his feline body.

But Jude wasn't here. Jude was alive, and that was a miracle because she swore she'd felt him die, but he was still in terrible danger.

He was still in such danger because she and Rafe hadn't managed to spring him yet.

She had to face facts. Even if she could summon a ghost to help them, the only way she could gather enough power to rescue her husband was through partnered sex magic. Every time they'd been able to contact, let alone aid Jude, she and Rafe had been touching, or interacting sexually even if they weren't actually touching, and when they stopped, the contact broke off.

She watched the cougar pace.

To save her husband, she'd have to risk her marriage and her heritage.

That was, as soon as two hundred or so pounds of cat figured out how to turn itself back to a man.

Chapter Twenty-one

Meanwhile, she had a ghost to call and a decade of fear to overcome. And Rafe needed some alone time to figure out his new form. It wouldn't do either of them—or more importantly, Jude—any good for her to sit there shouting, “Don't sharpen your claws on the carpet!” If the carpets couldn't take it, they didn't belong in her house anyway. The bedroom was the safest place for her to work; the protections were strongest there.

Moving away from Rafe, even cougar-Rafe, made everything cold and scary again, but they'd be better off with a bit of distance between them, even if it was just one floor.

Elissa flopped on the unmade bed, which still smelled of Jude so much it brought tears to her eyes.

No good. She moved to the floor, sitting cross-legged in front of the altar.

She could still smell him.

She bit her lip and forced back the tears. No time for that, or for curling up in a ball and trying to escape the problem, because there was no escaping it, no one else who could handle it, at least not without smoking-crater potential.

She had exactly one ally—who, from the sound of it, was practicing his hunting skills on her sofa.

Like it or not, she'd need a ghost on their side.

Deep breath. Ghosts couldn't actually hurt you. Even normies who shrieked in pleasurable terror at horror movies knew that.

Elissa grounded and centered. Tried to center, anyway. Her first attempt left her feeling off balance.

Jude wasn't there.

Panic tightened her throat. Was he...

No, the silver cord still bound them together, and the cord pulsed with his heartbeat. Alive, but far away and heavily warded, as if they'd put extra protections around him after his brush with death. To let him recover or to block outside aid—block her, basically? She had no way of knowing.

Or maybe she was far away. Everything she'd been taught claimed the things she'd already done with Rafe, let alone the sex magic she figured they had to try, should damage both her power and her bond with Jude.

So far, though, the magic seemed to work. The hearth glowed with a warm golden light to her witch-sight, although the fire had long since burned out, and she'd been able to light the altar candles without striking a match.

The bond with Jude would do no good if the Agency killed him or warped him beyond recognition.

Never mind what her family claimed. Sometimes the end did justify the means. If she spent the rest of her life alone and magically inert, but knew Jude was alive, the sacrifice would be worth it.

She tried to center again, reached inside for that point of stillness and safety.

Still off-kilter. Jude wasn't where he belonged, and Rafe was where he didn't belong. She might have to center the way a single person would, cutting off the smaller connections and reaching inward.

She visualized putting clamps on the pulsing cords, temporarily cutting off her links to Jude and Rafe.

The imaginary clamps popped off.

She couldn't figure out how to cut off her link with either man. It would make this balancing and centering business far trickier, yet she found it comforting. They were with her.

If she couldn't shut down the links, she had to make them more even.

Without taking anything away from Jude, she visualized the cord connecting her to Rafe as beefier. She used her mind to shift the cord so it flowed from the right side of her body, directly opposite Jude's, which came from her heart.

No. That might provide visual balance, but not magical balance.

She had feelings for Rafe. They weren't as strong or as deeply rooted as what she felt for Jude, but she couldn't afford to ignore them. She'd been drawn to him, and not just with erotic fascination, since he'd been pulled into their kitchen and their world. He'd risked his career for them almost immediately, and now he risked far more.

If it didn't go against everything she'd been taught, she'd say she was falling in love with him, without falling the least bit out of love with Jude.

She moved the copper cord again, visualizing it emanating from her heart, close to Jude's.

As if it had a mind of its own, it moved even closer and twined itself around Jude.

What the hell? That shouldn't have happened. The link shouldn't have that much of a mind of its own. Maybe a link with another magic-user, but duals weren't magic-users.

Then again, Rafe seemed to be a pretty unusual dual.

Tentatively, she tried to center again with the cords in their new configuration.

Stable as the pyramids.

Now was not the time to question how that worked, curious as she was. Now was the time to power up and...Lord and Lady help her...talk to the dead.

She reached deep into the earth. The uppermost inch or so was mud, cold, but rich with the promise of spring. Below that lay ice crystals. She cursed the necessity that forced her to work unfamiliar magics before the spring equinox. If the Agency had waited another week, she'd be a lot stronger.

If they knew who she was, they'd planned things this way.

But even with winter still gripping the land, enough life-force lingered for her to work with. The soil here liked her, and it was thawing from its long winter's icy slumber. Roots of trees and perennial plants ran deep, and they liked her. The soil cradled seeds, and sleepy as they were, they liked her. Inside the warmth of the house, her potted plants thrived, and they didn't just like her, they loved her to the extent plants could love because she was their goddess, the bringer of light and heat and water. All were willing to loan her a bit of their green energy.

The room glowed green, faint and pale at first, then the vibrant chartreuses and emeralds of new spring growth.

From there she went deep in her own body, drew on the energy of her womb, her sexual energies. Shaken as she was, it wasn't easy to find the place where the serpent energy of sex and sensuality lived. Images of Jude in her arms, his body drenched with the sweat of passion, his cock hard and ready, mutated all too quickly to the awful moment when she thought he was dead. Stray thoughts of Rafe's hand stroking himself, his eyes penetrating her as surely as a cock ever had, did the same, spiraling to the end of all things: Jude broken, Jude dead.

Finally, in desperation, Elissa rummaged in the toy drawer of the bedside table and pulled out her favorite vibrator.

She looked at it dubiously. Donovans considered it bad form to call upon sex toys for magical use. A strong witch, they claimed, was in tune enough with the life-force and in control enough of her own body to turn on sexual energy through concentration alone.

Whoever had set that tidy dictum down in the Donovan grimoire—back in the day when sex toys were made of bone or ivory—had obviously never tried to raise red power in a life-or-death emergency.

She touched the vibrator to her clit.

Her mind fought its familiar persuasions at first, but the vibrations eventually became too strong to resist. Moisture flooded her as tendrils of energy spiraled inside her womb, then issued out to add their red glow to the room. Her pussy clenched.

Biting her lip to keep from coming, Elissa turned off the toy. She needed just enough sexual energy to give her summoning a little more oomph.

And to heighten her own protections.

Through all the preparation, she had deliberately let herself forget what she was trying to do. Otherwise she might have been too anxious to set up the preliminaries properly. Rushing and jangled nerves had both played their part, she knew, of what had gone wrong so many years ago.

She wouldn't take that risk now. Then she had been a lonely teenager so desperate to talk to her grandmother that she hadn't considered other spirits might answer her call. Those hadn't even been seriously unfriendly—they were relatives, after all—just annoyed at being pestered and trying to teach her a lesson in using her powers respectfully.

Now, she had to take every precaution. She was stepping into unfamiliar territory this time, territory she couldn't see and the ghosts could. Chances were good the ghost she summoned would be angry and quite possibly insane.

She reinforced the protections on the house and on herself one last time, visualized the etheric path to the Agency compound, following Jude and closing in on the stench of fear and despair.

In a place such as that, there must be ghosts.

With luck she'd find one willing to help.

It surprised her how quickly she made the journey—a whoosh that reminded her of the pneumatic tubes at the bank drive-in, and she was there.

Wherever “there” was.

Chapter Twenty-two

Elissa could see only the dimmest blurs of light and shade, faint, blobby outlines with a nimbus of energy around them. But she could sense things she probably couldn't have were she there physically.

Earth overhead, concrete and metal. Crushing weight. Crying, damaged earth contaminated by toxins. The place was buried and bombproof, and could withstand just about any force.

Despite all that, something felt familiar. It wasn't too far away, under exactly the same weather Geneva was experiencing. Once, this poisoned soil had been the same rocky but fertile clay as her own yard.

Damn, it had to be the old Seneca army depot.

They'd decommissioned the base more than ten years ago. The soldiers were gone, the missiles once stored there moved elsewhere, and the parts of the land not too contaminated by leaked toxic chemicals were gradually being converted to civilian use.

Or at least that was what the army claimed. But it would be easy enough to say that then let some other branch of the government quietly continue to use some of the facilities under the guise of a private company. What the hell else would you do with acres of underground nuclear missile storage other than use it for some other shady "national security" purpose?

At least it would be easy to get there. Getting in was another question, but she and Rafe wouldn't need to drive to Arizona or something crazy like that.

Elissa walked—floated, rather—down the corridor, trying to get her bearings. More people worked here than she'd expected, although the moving blobs of energy looked more like ghosts to her right now. Many were normies, their auras day-at-the-office neutral, some with the dark orange overlay of working too hard. A few looked red—an angry, muddied shade of red, not the clear, healthy red of sexual passion—or dull charcoal with resigned despair.

When she saw one from a distance that flared with the telltale screaming magenta of sorcery—streaked with a muddy black that meant *bad to the bone*—she squeezed herself as close to the wall as she could and backed up. Surely there'd be an open door somewhere she could slip through, a corridor she could turn down.

A sorcerer wouldn't necessarily sense her etheric form unless he was looking for magical anomalies. But he might, if he was good enough. And that strange brown-striped blob with him—that looked like a

beast witch, though tainted, and a witch might sense some disturbance, something/someone who shouldn't be there. This wasn't like riding her link to Jude. She was, for magical purposes, really there.

They wouldn't put out a welcome mat and make her pancakes.

The sorcerer-blob and the witch-blob were still heading for her. They seemed to be talking. At least she figured that was the low hum she heard from their direction, but about what? They were faceless to her. For all she knew, they might be arguing about how to contain this disembodied intruder. All she could do was keep backing away, hoping for a hidey-hole.

In theory, her defensive spells might work in this form, but she'd never tried.

Why hadn't someone *made* her try?

Right. That would be because a witch with any sense would avoid any situation where she'd need to cast while etheric, especially a weak witch like her.

She needed a side corridor, a broom closet, anything.

What she found was a stairwell, and she found it the hard way, by falling backward. Not that she could get hurt in her current form, but it was just as startling as an in-body slip would be.

The blobs walked past the opening, oblivious to her presence.

She went through the motions of breathing a sigh of relief. Strictly speaking there was no breath involved, but it was still like taking a deep breath: you got a good whiff of whatever smells were in the area. Only what she smelled was terror, pain, despair and dark magic. And death, recent death.

It throbbed up from the bottom of the stairs.

The side of Elissa that was on a mission pointed out if she smelled despair and death, that would be a good place to find ghosts.

Her more sensible and cowardly side pointed out it would be a great idea to keep far away from whatever was down there.

Thinking of Jude kept her moving.

If she'd had her body with her, Elissa would have been shaking and queasy. As it was, she glided slowly down the stairs, pausing every few seconds to look and listen with etheric senses that weren't exactly seeing and hearing.

She detected magic that didn't read like sorcery or anything else she could recognize. Whatever it was, though, it smelled/felt evil and just plain wrong, as if it violated not merely ethics, but reason.

She smelled death and horror.

Was she too late?

She forced herself to stretch, to seek the silver cord, the etheric path to Jude.

Yes. It was faint, but present, somewhere behind the door at the bottom of the stairs.

Behind a locked steel door, with a keypad to punch in a security code she didn't have—and couldn't punch in if she did—and worse yet, about fifteen layers of interwoven wards and deflections and

protections designed to keep out unauthorized magic. It was amazing her probe could get past it, a testimony to her bond with Jude. There was no way she could get farther.

Elissa sank down in despair, letting herself lose form.

Footsteps clumped on the stairs.

She made herself even more diffuse, hoping to avoid detection. Powers, that felt weird.

One look at the person-blob coming down the stairs convinced her she didn't need to worry about being spotted. He—she assumed he, since it was a large blob with a surly, aggressive air that suggested too much testosterone and too few legitimate outlets for it—possessed an aura slightly to the right of textbook normy. This guy didn't simply lack magical ability, he'd come up with a mundane explanation for magic happening right under his nose. His brain couldn't cope with it.

Which must make him useful for certain thankless tasks in a place like this. He'd be nearly immune to mind-altering spells—and wouldn't perceive ghosts at all.

Elissa collected herself, literally, and slipped over behind the man-blob. When he opened the door, she followed him.

And immediately regretted it.

Chapter Twenty-three

This area crawled with ghosts.

The Oregon estate had a dead population almost as high as the living one. After all, the whole extended family was always welcome, including dead relatives. Like her living relatives, some had been more loveable and friendly than others, but they'd all meant well. Donovans, at least in recent centuries, tended to live to a ripe old age and die peacefully, surrounded by their loved ones, which made for calm ghosts. Being around the family spirits was unsettling at times, but not bad.

This was bad.

Bad enough Elissa almost forgot why she was there, almost forgot she needed a ghost. All she could think about was getting away from the bombardment of dead people's feelings, dead people's memories, dead people's pain. It made her woozy, and she was pretty sure back in Geneva her heart was racing at triple speed from adrenaline.

At first they were a swirling mass. She couldn't distinguish one from another. Didn't want to. Her instincts screamed to go back through the door, back to the other side where spells and cold iron kept the worst of it at bay.

But she couldn't.

One of these ghosts might be willing to help Jude.

The first spirit she brushed was wolflike. It howled weakly, as if it been dead a long time and howling a long time and was fading. Not crossing over to whatever version of the afterlife it yearned to reach, just fading into one of those fuzzy ghosts that had no personality, no form, no gender, no self, just a series of habits dimly recalled from life. Elissa tried to find a wordside to speak to, but the spirit seemed completely lupine, its humanoid aspect forgotten or simply too broken and afraid to come out.

Elissa tasted dust and dry bones. Her heart cracked at the weight of the ghost's misery. Tears welled in her faraway eyes.

"Go home," Elissa soothed, and did her best attempt to silentspeak images: a bright doorway, a sunny clearing in a mountain forest, friends and family waiting, healing and peace.

Did the ghost cross over or simply flee? Elissa couldn't be sure, but it was gone and she thought the air where it had been smelled of green.

She probed again. Another ghost, this one stronger, more focused, more individualized.

And evil. This one wasn't a dual, at least not any sort of dual she recognized. It wasn't anything she could identify offhand, and she thanked the Powers for that because she had a feeling too much information about this thing might make her head explode.

"Tasty." She heard a vile slurping sound. *"Come here, little witch-girl. I'm hungry and your soul's sparkly."*

A void opened, a black hole that would suck her inside.

They'd killed this...whatever it was...but it wasn't a ghost. Ghosts might retain any malice and menace they had in life, but not their powers. This creature had its powers.

It didn't have a body at the moment, but there were beings for which that was just a temporary inconvenience, demons and unseelie fae and things of that ilk.

That very powerful, very bad ilk.

Trickster's twisted testicles, she thought, pelting down the corridor as fast as her etheric body could move, the creature's laughter mocking her. Figured when the Agency killed something that actually needed killing, it didn't work right.

She looked back, actually turning her head out of habit although she could just as easily have moved her focus, trying to determine if the thing was following. Distracted, she ran smack into another ghost.

They bounced off each other like oppositely charged magnets.

This one didn't feel evil, but it was a mass of rage. She could make out an outline of the spirit's chosen form. Yup, definitely a dual. Without the confines of a body, the spirit partook of both wordside and animal—wolf, Elissa thought, although it was hard to tell an insubstantial glowing wolf from an insubstantial glowing coyote—in one constantly shifting form.

"Please," she addressed the ghost. It came out as a sound she and the ghost could hear, but most people couldn't. *"I need your help. My husband's in here..."*

"No one helped me. Where were you when I was taken from my pups?" Definitely female, definitely wolf and definitely, righteously angry.

"I would have if..."

The ghost shifted form, and Elissa was silenced by a barrage of images, each one more ghastly than the next.

The dead dual had been tortured like Jude.

She'd been raped, in both her forms.

Anything that smelled human stank of the enemy to her, including Elissa's disembodied but human spirit.

The magic didn't help, either. A sorcerer—probably the one she'd spotted earlier, since powerful sorcerers were fairly rare—had been involved.

"I'm not a sorcerer. I'm a green witch." Oversimplification, but people thought of green witches as harmless and in her case they were mostly right.

A blob of ectoplasm hit her in the face, even though her face wasn't anywhere near the ghost and she'd never thought ghosts could spit anyway. *"Fuck you and your moral superiority. Who do you think figured out all their mutation magic? It was green witches and beast witches."*

Shitshitshit. She choked down guilty nausea. She'd been trying to not think about that, trying to blame sorcerers, scientists, the nebulous government "them", anyone but her kind. But of course rogue green witches might be involved. She already knew there was at least one beast witch.

"I'm sorry," Elissa thought, trying to fight off wave after wave of guilt. Had any of her family been involved? It went against everything the Donovan tradition stood for.

"Funny how morality can fail when someone makes you the right offer. Or they have someone you love over a barrel."

Elissa nodded. There had been rogues before, Donovans who couldn't pass up the potent lure of worldly wealth or shiny new magic. And Donovans and other witches were just as blackmailable as anyone else—maybe more so, given how family-oriented witches were.

Though it was probably fucking sorcerers who came up with the idea in the first place. Certain elements of the way sorcery worked made it easier for sorcerers to slip into morally dubious territory, and from there into downright wrong. It was a much bigger slide for someone who practiced nature magic, witch or shamanic magic of any sort.

"If my people were involved, that makes it even more important I end this thing. Will you help me?"

The ghost seemed to falter. She flickered, as if she almost fled then stayed. A few words passed through Elissa's mind, disjointed and emotional.

The barrage of images started again.

She'd had pups...children... Two had been safe at school when she was taken, but her baby had literally been torn from her arms. She didn't know if they were safe, if they were even alive. Elissa got the sense of a husband as well, but it was the children who concerned her most.

Tears poured down Elissa's face, so hard she was going to lose focus, lose the thread of the spell, have to start the whole process again from home. *"I don't know. I'll try to find out..."*

"If I help you? Well, fuck that, witch! I don't want to make bargains. I want answers." The ghost shoved and, spirit to spirit, it worked. Elissa let out an oof of breath and went flying.

"They're fine, I think," a different ghost voice said. *"Your kids and husband got away because you put up such a good fight it distracted the agents. We think they made it to Canada, because they were just...gone. Shaw was spitting mad. He wanted to poke at those kids because they were cross-breeds. Me, I drank a bottle of champagne when I heard they were off the radar."*

The first ghost gave a sob of relief. *"They're okay? Hank got them out?"*

“Yup.”

“When he bolted...I hoped he was going for the kids, but I was afraid he’d just run. He’s a fox. They’re lovers, not fighters. They’re really safe? No one’s going to drag my babies in here? I can move on?”

For less than a heartbeat, Elissa had the selfish impulse to keep this strong, angry ghost and see if she could help. But she couldn’t keep her here at the site of her suffering. *“Yes. Go and be at peace. If I get through this, I’ll find your family for you and give them your love.”* She didn’t know how she’d do it, but she meant it.

No one had told Elissa that the keeper of memory who guided someone over could see the door to the Otherworld open. She’d never gotten that far in her training, and besides, the ghosts on the Oregon estate moved on of their own accord when they were ready.

Elissa saw the door. It was more like a wrought-iron gate—or maybe a great stone portal or the heavy wooden front door to an ordinary late-Victorian two-story house like the one she shared with Jude. Whatever it was, it glowed with a clear silvery white light that made her yearn to head toward it.

A burst of energy that wavered in shape between a wolf and a woman started walking toward the door.

The door opened, letting in light and a smell of pine, and the energy form changed firmly to wolf and ran, a little joyful scamper in its stride.

“You changed me, Patti,” the other ghost called out. *“You made me think about what was going on here. You were the only one who managed to put up a fight until the big guy they’ve got now.”*

The ghost kept running until it disappeared through the bright gateway that folded around it, but Elissa scarcely paid attention. *“Jude?”* Elissa said. *“You know Jude? Where is he?”*

“He’s right down the...” The second ghost stopped, obviously thought for a few seconds. *“Oh, shit. I’m dead.”*

Chapter Twenty-four

Elissa braced herself for hysterics. Given her long history of avoiding ghosts, she'd never had to break it to someone they were dead, but Aunt Bath had a few less than pretty stories about ghosts who refused to believe the truth.

The ghost made a little "sheesh" sound. *"They took me out faster than I expected. So I'm a ghost now? And that was the portal to the afterlife or something? Who knew?"* The ghost sounded calm about being dead, but incredulous and not altogether pleased with the whole afterlife thing. *"You a ghost, too?"*

"No. I'm a witch who can talk to ghosts and spirit-travel."

Elissa hadn't been able to see this ghost before, merely hear her, but now she could see a dim outline of someone even smaller than she was. Either the ghost was barely holding on or she'd been tiny in life. The outline shrugged. *"You know, I never believed in ghosts. Magic makes sense. It has a DNA marker and an evolutionary function. Duals and manitou and fae and dragons—they're just other species. More interesting than squirrels, but no more otherworldly. But ghosts are oogie-boogie stuff. And now I am one..."* The ghost laughed, a snorting chuckle that reminded Elissa of Anthony Hage—classic geeky-genius behavior.

Suddenly some of the things the ghost had said made sense in a new way.

She'd worked here. Not a dual or some other innocent Different killed by the Agency, but one of their people, probably one of the creepy scientists who'd tortured Jude, who'd met with an accident.

Elissa must have been thinking too loudly because the ghost came back with, *"Accident? They killed me because I didn't want to play their ugly game anymore and I knew too much for them to let me quit. What they're doing to the last guy they brought in was the last straw. Are you here for him—the big lion, Mr. Duclos? If you're going to spring him, I want to help."*

How much could she trust this woman, who'd been one of *them* not too long ago?

Elissa wasn't trying to communicate the thought, but apparently it got across. The ghost put a tiny ectoplasmic hand where Elissa's forearm would be were she there in body. She could feel how cold it was, not death-cold, but as if the woman had always had cold hands in life and still thought of her hands as icy. *"I won't lie to you. I'm not sure I could lie to you if I wanted to. I was always a lousy liar anyway, more likely to blurt out the truth at just the wrong time... Completely transparent, and now I really am. Anyway, I've done some bad things,"* the ghost said. *"And a lot more stupid ones. I got recruited for the Agency when I was right out of med school, and all I could see at first was how exciting the research was, this*

fusion of magic and science no one else was doing. At that point, it was all in a lab, all theoretical, and they told me it was for the good of the country. I believed them. Then I got promoted into hell and I was too scared to do anything. Now it's time to atone. Or maybe it's payback time, because getting your ass fried by black magic is not a pretty way to die."

Elissa wasn't sure how to react. So much information...

"Sorry. Always talked too much when I didn't talk too little, and either way I was likely to confuse the hell out of the person I was talking to." The ghost sounded remarkably good-humored for someone who'd recently been murdered by her own government. *"Oh, I'm Maggie Krantz. And now I should shut up and let you tell me how to help you piss in the Agency's swimming pool."*

Elissa laughed. She realized something very important. She was laughing with a ghost. She'd sent a righteously angry ghost who'd started out wanting nothing to do with her to the Otherside.

Sure, she'd had help. If Maggie hadn't been able to tell the other ghost that her children were safe, it would have been a lot harder. But while reliving Patti's traumatic memories with her had been awful, she hadn't broken down. She'd never want to share anything like that again, thank you very much—but she hadn't been thrown back into her body or allowed the ghost so far into her consciousness that she went a little crazy, as she had as a teenager.

If she was ever able to tell Auntie Bath, she'd be so proud.

"Here's what I need," she said to Maggie, feeling more confident than she had in a long time. *"First, take me to Jude."*

Chapter Twenty-five

He was in a secured hospital cell, but she and Maggie could waltz past the dim humanoid blobs that were the armed guards.

The problem wasn't the ordinary humans.

The problem was the angry purple glow around the door. Some kind of sorcerous warding or warning system that, even out of body, Elissa couldn't approach.

"Don't worry," Maggie said. "I have an angle. Can you slip inside me so we're sort of stacked? The wards are keyed to certain people and I doubt they've had a chance to take me out. I can't have been dead more than an hour."

"That couldn't possibly..." She paused, thought about Grandma Josie and about some of the crazy things she'd done that shouldn't have worked, but had. *"What the hell, let's try."*

Maggie hadn't figured out how to expand or diminish her form yet, so Elissa had to compress herself to fit inside the ghost-shell of the tiny scientist.

Moving awkwardly as a unit, they stepped forward—and passed through the ward with no more than a tickle.

Elissa broke free and ran to Jude.

Jude was so deeply unconscious she couldn't even enter his dreams. She could see him more clearly than she could see other dim shapes of the physical realm. She could even see the silver cord connecting them and, to her surprise, a fragile-looking copper one extending outward toward Rafe. She could touch him as she'd been able to touch little else in this bizarre preview of post-body existence. But she couldn't feel his mind at all, other than the dim reassurance he was still in there.

"He's drugged out of his mind," Maggie explained. "First with the mutagens, then with an antidote to slow those down because they were killing him, then a bunch of tranqs and painkillers after what Shaw did to him—and I don't know what the hell that was, other than damn near fatal. I tried to quit after that. You see where that got me."

Elissa choked on bile.

Jude, in his wordside form, was naked under a blanket, hooked up to various monitors. Most she couldn't see except as vague outlines, but a couple glowed with magic. One, Maggie told her, was to monitor if he was about to shift forms—and would, at the observer's discretion, administer a jolt of pain if he tried. He looked battered, his complexion grayish, his beautiful body somehow diminished.

Yet something about his expression suggested his last thought before passing out had been something along the lines of, “Gotcha, you bastard!”

Elissa ran a finger along the edge of his mouth, tracing the half-smile. She couldn’t feel the velvet warmth of his skin with the same intensity she normally could, but she knew his body so well the sensation registered. He didn’t stir, but with all the drugs floating around in his system, that wasn’t a surprise.

She trailed her hand down, slipped it under the blanket to rest on his bare chest.

“Can’t believe he’s smiling,” she said to Maggie. *“Must be the drugs.”*

“I think it’s just him,” Maggie said. *“Grinning that he’s still alive and managed to piss off Shaw. He’s tough, your husband. He almost killed Shaw. Could have. But he didn’t.”*

“Who’s Shaw? You’ve mentioned him before.”

Maggie’s disembodied voice went flat and cold. *“Bastard in charge of this operation. Sorcerer. Ex-Special Forces. Completely bug-fuck crazy, but the kind of crazy the higher-ups like. I think he’d have been just as happy if Jude did kill him because that would have meant Shaw’d won. He wants them to be killers. The taste of human blood sets the changes somehow—the magic’s way beyond anything I can understand—so it’s better if they kill in animal form, but at that point Shaw just wanted to break him and making him kill would have. Shaw’s the one who killed me.”*

The voice stayed just as cold and hard, but Elissa saw a gleam of energy where a tear might fall if a ghost could cry.

She thought about hugging the other woman. Maggie had already proved they could touch. She got as far as reaching out her arms, but Maggie shook her head. *“Not much of a hugger. Much more of a do-something-about-the-problem girl, and since I can’t do much about the being-dead problem, we’ll work on the kicking-Shaw’s-butt problem.”* She paused. *“Bet he’d like it, though.”* She gestured at Jude, a trail of silvery light following her movement to clarify who she meant and what he might like.

Elissa looked around instinctively at the security guards, the observer. They were looking straight at her...well, at Jude...but they wouldn’t see anything they didn’t expect.

The good news was she didn’t have to peel the covers back to lie down next to Jude. She didn’t even take up much room on the narrow bed, just sort of melded to him. The even better news was she could feel his heat and hard muscle. He shifted as if snuggling into her, although by rights he shouldn’t know she was there.

She could sense how the mixture of mutagen and antidote and tranquilizer confused his system. She smelled wrongness, more strongly than she could have from her body. And she could hardly sense the lion, although usually, even when he was wordy and intending to stay that way, the lion would sniff and greet her. Now all she could sense of the lion was a spaced-out snarl. Jude still smelled like warm fur, but like a cat that’d been at the vet, his natural, healthy scent was masked by medicine and sickness.

Still, touching/sensing/smelling him was exactly what she needed to steel her courage to go on. Maybe exactly what he needed, too; at least she thought his color looked better.

She snuggled closer, flung one quasi-leg over him.

Something else felt better, too. Her leg might not be visible to the humans guarding the room, but if they were paying attention, the tent Jude made in the sheets would be.

Maggie's face glowed a little. The ghost was blushing.

For some reason, that—that bit of normality amid the horror—made Elissa break down.

The last thing she expected was for the woman who'd declined a hug to put a supportive transparent hand on her shoulder. *"Let it out. This sucks and you need a good cry. Get it out of your system now, because we have work to do."*

Whether it was the sympathy or the acknowledgement of how little time she had to let herself get hysterical, Elissa pulled herself together again. She kissed Jude on the forehead, then on the lips, stood and said, *"Let's go. We need to figure out how I can get into this place again with my body with me."*

"I think I can help with that. With luck, I can even help you do it so you don't wind up like me."

Maggie admitted that when she was alive she'd been a flaming coward. Dead, though, she had nothing to lose.

No one had taken the lab key card from her desk or the files from her computer. No rush to do that. After all, she was dead and ghosts could interact with the physical world in only the most limited way without a medium or a keeper of memory to help.

This was cause for much excitement until it turned out Elissa couldn't really assist. With her help, Maggie could use her touchpad mouse and press keys on her computer keyboard, but when she got too close to the computer it went crazy. When the monitor turned itself off and on to flash alternating pink-and-green plaid and a picture of two chubby gray tabby cats, Elissa pounded her hand against the desk. It passed smoothly into the surface.

She sighed in exhausted frustration, wishing she could sit properly or better yet lie down, even on the cold and not too clean-looking tile floor. Being out of body like this was wearying, and she was already tired.

She was wearing herself out further for nothing.

Elissa wasn't powerful enough to allow Maggie to open a door or do any of the things Elissa had hoped a ghost would do for them. Maggie's form had become more solid as they'd spoken, but she'd still be invisible to someone who wasn't attuned to ghosts. A living person might feel her touch, but it was as insubstantial as a cold blast of wind.

Just what Elissa deserved, she supposed, for backing away from being a keeper of memory. She was too rusty and there was too much about ghosts she'd never learned.

"It's no use," Elissa sighed. "There's nothing we can do to hack into the system here. I can't even get the damn keys."

Maggie laughed a loud, braying guffaw—Elissa knew no one else could hear, but she still looked around nervously. *"Not like this. But I've been thinking. It would be better if you had IDs, but if you've got a good memory, I can give you passwords and door codes out the wazoo. Network passwords, too. If you work fast, you might be able to download my files as evidence."*

"How?"

"Honey, you've got your very own socially dysfunctional genius on your side. I can remember just about anything, as long as it's not where I parked my car. Extra points if I wasn't supposed to know it in the first place and only found out because I'm a nosy little fuck."

As Elissa tried desperately to remember them as she would a spell, Maggie rattled off not just her own door access codes and network passwords, but those of six other mid-level Agency employees.

"I can't get you into the labs; those need door cards, and for the inner labs you need retinal scans. Unless you want to take my eyeballs. I sure don't need them anymore. I don't think they've dumped my body yet. It's supposed to snow tonight and that'll make the accident more convincing." She sounded altogether too calm about it.

Elissa tried to picture herself scooping out the dead woman's eyes and shuddered. Too close to necromancy for her taste, even with the former owner's permission.

"No. Just...no. We'll figure something out or we won't. Once we've got your files, we can cause the Agency plenty of problems. The most important thing is getting Jude out safely."

Maggie nodded, a barely perceptible movement of her ectoplasm. *"I'll get you into the lab. I seem to fry computers pretty well now. I bet I can blow up some of the security cameras, too, so I'll run interference. Who knows? By then I might figure out how to open a door."*

That was all Elissa needed.

Once they could get into the cells, they'd have Jude.

And once they had Jude, the ass-kicking could commence.

She smiled dreamily, although if someone had asked her, she couldn't have said if the dreaminess was from thinking about her husband kicking Agency ass or falling asleep back in her body.

Probably the latter. Time to go before something bad happened because she was too tired to keep the spell going. She had what she'd come for...and the sooner she jotted down those passwords the better.

"Gotta go. I'm losing the connection," she said to Maggie.

She zinged back to her body in the least graceful way possible. Coming out of etheric travel wasn't supposed to feel like falling off a cliff, dammit.

She sat up and blinked at how late it was. She and the ghost must have been together a long time, longer than was probably smart even if she'd been better rested and more experienced at that trick.

Time to write those passwords down before she forgot. She attempted to stand.

Instead, she made a classic cat-with-hairball noise as her body showed its resentment of everything she'd put it through. She crawled drunkenly forward a few feet and ended up vomiting on the floor next to the Alberta spruce, having just enough strength and self-control to miss the magically charged plant.

Calling up the focus-at-any-odds ability she'd learned—though she'd rarely had to use—over years of magical training, Elissa repeated the passwords over and over to herself as she heaved out her guts. After a while, nothing came up, but she couldn't control the gagging, the trembling, the feeling she needed to purge herself of everything, including her internal organs.

Finally, the storm of illness passed. No sound came from downstairs the whole time. Either she'd yakked quietly or Rafe, in one form or the other, had fallen asleep. Either way she was relieved he hadn't bounded up to find out what was wrong.

Some things you don't want to share with anyone, especially not a new friend. Especially not when he's in cougar form and might sniff at the vomit.

Still shaking, the taste of bile bitter in her mouth, she crawled to the bedside table, pulled herself up using the bed clothes and found a pencil and an old takeout menu. Using her last bit of strength, Elissa wrote down the hard-won security codes and network passwords, hoping as she did that she still had enough functional brain cells to get them right.

She tried to make herself move after that. Go downstairs, find Rafe and discover if he'd learned to shift back yet—always a useful skill—and take those next vital steps. The ones she didn't want to think about.

Instead, she flopped onto the bed. Just for a minute, she told herself, but even as she told herself, she knew it was a wasted effort. The bedding snuggled her. Jude's pillow grabbed hold of her like a hug.

The room blurred. For an instant Elissa thought it was some weird magical side effect, then realized it was, in fact, a very straightforward magical side effect: exhaustion. Her body refused to do anything more until she allowed it some rest.

Her last vaguely coherent waking thought was of Jude.

Once she slipped into unconsciousness, she was with him and nothing else mattered.

Chapter Twenty-six

By the fifth change-cycle, Rafe could confidently shift from human (wordside, he reminded himself, not human) to cougar in a controlled fashion. Cougar to wordy was trickier. Being a cougar overwhelmed him, in a good but confusing way.

All the smells. All the colors slightly different from human perception. Moving so differently. Having a tail. He loved his tail, but he kept smacking into things with it.

Once he turned cougar, he half-forgot why he'd want to go back to being bipedal and furless. The cougar thought the human body was silly. In human—no, dammit, wordside—form, the word he'd use was limited, but the cougar expressed its opinion with an image of a human male trying to lick his balls and instead throwing out his back.

Yeah, cats were definitely more flexible. Rafe bet the claws would be useful once he figured them out better. Assuming they got through their current mess, he'd have to buy a new sofa for Elissa. And pay to get the floor refinished where he'd scratched it. At least he'd made it to the bathtub when he couldn't figure out how to switch back and he'd needed to pee. Housecat accidents were stinky enough; a quart of cougar piss was not what a carpet needed.

How much time had passed while he was trying to figure out his new body?

He glanced around until he saw a clock. Ten AM?

Where was Elissa? She'd been upstairs for three hours. How long did it take to contact a ghost, anyway?

What if the ghost hurt her?

Ghosts couldn't actually harm you, that was what everyone always said—but "everyone" was wrong about a lot of things. Like it took weeks if not months for Drozz to clear your body. Like the Agency, although it sometimes made mistakes, meant well.

Like you couldn't fall in love at first sight—especially not with two people.

Heart thumping in his chest, cougar struggling to get out and defend/attack/do something that involved pouncing and clawing and rending, Rafe raced up the stairs.

If a ghost had followed her back, he'd punch its ectoplasmic nose. Then he'd shift and tear it to little transparent shreds, which should at least slow it down.

Which room? All the doors were closed. He looked down the long hallway with its worn, fur-covered Oriental runner and couldn't tell.

"Elissa?"

No answer.

The cougar negotiated with the wordside.

He ended up in wordy form, with cougar senses and claws at the ready, prepared to shift fully to one side or the other in an instant. How come no one had ever told him duals could do this? It would be so useful as a cop. Maybe they didn't want to think about useful duals.

With a cougar's stealthy grace, he stalked down the hall, listened and sniffed at each door. The first smelled empty, unused—a guest room, probably. The second smelled of soap and cleaning products and a little bit of Elissa—the bathroom.

The third smelled green and musky and he heard soft breathing. No sounds of distress. Might be good, might be terribly bad.

The door could be pushed open, obviously for the ease of Jude's lion form. Rafe eased it open a crack and peered in. He couldn't see Elissa.

He pounced.

Clear red and green light like Christmas surrounded him, drew him in. It wasn't as weird as being sucked into the kitchen—no traveling through walls or anything this time, thank God—but one second he was jumping into the room and the next, he was on the king-size bed.

Under the covers and next to Elissa.

Lucky he'd gotten good at retracting his claws. Quickly as he could, he shifted back to his more familiar form.

Moving quietly so as not to wake her if she was simply napping, he lifted the covers and checked her out.

No blood or bruising or other signs of injury. Breathing normally. Pale even by her standard, which meant about the color of newsprint before the ink hit it, and with deep circles under her eyes. She stirred, and her closed eyes twitched as if she pursued an image in a dream. She seemed unharmed, but she didn't seem to want to wake up, either.

She must be exhausted. He'd let her sleep a while longer. A nap would do her good. He'd try waking her in half an hour. If he couldn't, then he'd panic.

Meanwhile, he couldn't imagine any place more wonderful—or more dangerous—to be than naked next to Elissa, guarding her as she slept, although guarding her from what he couldn't say.

Maybe himself.

Elissa rolled over in her sleep, snuggled up, laid her head on his chest.

Rafe held his breath. The idea of sex with her drove him crazy, but this was worse. This tenderness, this trust—it wasn't meant for him. Deeply asleep enough to not realize who was there, she was seeking warmth.

Seeking Jude.

He had to keep perspective. Had to keep in mind he was here because she'd put some kind of magical compulsion on him and because they needed to work together to bring her husband home, not because he belonged here.

But damn, he felt like he belonged, so close to Elissa their auras blended—and when had he started being aware of stuff like auras anyway?—both of them enveloped in Jude's scent.

No harm in enjoying the comforting fantasy. Was there?

He snuggled closer, drank in Elissa's warm smell of herbs and female juiciness.

He got a mental image of a cougar trying to slip into a lion pride and being driven bloodily off. But was it the cougar or his human experiences talking to him?

And why did he feel more at home here, more connected to Elissa and Jude, whom he hardly knew, than he'd felt at any point in his attempt to live a human life?

Comfortable as he felt, comfortable as the bed and Elissa's warm presence were, Rafe couldn't sleep. But although he was hungry and thirsty and badly in need of coffee and a shower, he couldn't bring himself to leave Elissa. His senses—both feline and ones he still thought of as human—prickled. His body tensed, but not in a fearful way. More like the nervous anticipation he felt when he was after a dangerous suspect. You needed to watch your partner's back at such times, and Elissa was his partner in this.

And not in anything else, buddy. Remember that.

Even if hormones and human—or whatever the hell he should call it—nature conspired make him forgot.

Elissa woke around noon.

One second she was scarily lost to the waking world. The next she was awake, alert and asking him, not angrily, but with objective curiosity, how he'd gotten into her circle.

So those crazy colors were a magic circle, as he'd suspected. He'd never been able to see one before, although in his work he'd literally run into a couple. From Elissa's reaction, this one should have been the same. It shouldn't have let him in without her doing something, let alone dragged him inside and tossed him onto the bed.

"Bizarre," she said. Then she blinked and went on to tell him about the Seneca army base and security passwords and a plan so crazy it just might work.

"So what are we waiting for?" Rafe said. His prickling nerves told him it was time to go, go, go.

"Food, for one," she said firmly. "You promised me breakfast, and it's past lunchtime. I want to get going as much as...more than...you do, but if I don't eat I'll put myself at risk by doing magic. Only first, put these on." She plucked a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt from a basket of clean laundry and threw them at him.

Rafe scrambled eggs, made coffee and cooked bacon for himself. As they ate, they reviewed what passed for a plan.

“So it’s basically waltz in using stolen passcodes, grab Jude, kick some sorcerer’s ass and leave?”

“The passcodes aren’t exactly stolen. Maggie gave them to me. And I’d love it if you can make specific suggestions because this kind of thing isn’t exactly in a green witch’s job description.”

“Or a cop’s. But criminals get away with a lot through sheer ballsiness and either pretending they’re not doing anything unusual or doing something so bizarre no one knows how to react. We’ve got both angles covered here.” He sounded amused, but not mocking. “So, question for you: how do you kick sorcerous ass?”

“Realistically, it’s best to grab Jude and leave without attracting the sorcerer’s attention, if we can.” She clenched her hands while she said it, imagining them around Shaw’s throat, but there were better ways. “That’s one thing I need you for. Maggie gave me network passwords, too. She has files that could probably take care of the whole operation if we got them to the press, but I’m lousy with computers.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned Maggie. Who’s she?”

Elissa tried to keep her voice steady. “My ghost. A scientist they murdered because she knew too much. She wants to make sure what they’re doing gets exposed. How do you think I got all those security codes?”

Rafe set down his fork. “I was trying not to think about it, I guess.” He stared at her. His eyes had too much white to them.

Then they had no white at all, just the gold of a cougar.

“Whoa. Did you know you’re starting to shift?” She put her hand over his, a gentle reminder of, for want of a more accurate word, humanity.

His hand under hers remained human, but his eyes flickered back and forth several times before they settled back to the familiar brown. “Sorry about that. I...I don’t like ghosts.”

“I gathered.” She squeezed his fingers, thinking she should move. She didn’t. “But Maggie’s the key to us getting in there, not to mention exposing the project. She’s funny, too, in her non-corporeal way. I like her.”

“Ever since I was small, I’ve always been sure I was surrounded by ghosts. It was worse on Drozz because a room could be full of ghosts and I’d never sense them.” He looked away then back, sporting an obviously forced smile. “I must sound like a nutcase. Yeah, sure, ghosts are watching me.” He waved his hand by his head in the universal “cuckoo” gesture.

Elissa could have dismissed his fear, but she didn’t. Instead, she twirled the coffee in her cup as she thought the matter through. She’d had a reason for her fear of ghosts—who was to say he didn’t? “Maybe you do have a personal ghost or two,” she finally said. “You were adopted, and it’s pretty unusual for a

dual mother to turn her baby over to humans voluntarily. Maybe your parents died, but they checked in from time to time to make sure you were all right.”

She wasn’t sure what to expect once she said that. Denial. Anger. More fear.

Instead, what she saw in Rafe’s expression was a profound relief. “So I’m not nuts? Someone really has been watching me all these years?”

“I think so. And your birth parents, I’d guess, loved you very much.”

He smiled wearily, but this time honestly. “I know a lot of adopted kids worry about that, but I never did. Mom and Dad were Mom and Dad, even when I realized I wasn’t human. I just hope they can accept I’ve decided to become who I really am.” Rafe’s expression was bittersweet. “Especially once I make headlines for going rogue. Speaking of which, isn’t about time to start that?”

She’d put it off long enough. Eating, strategizing, talking about Rafe’s personal ghosts—all had been necessary, but at the same time, they’d been putting off the inevitable.

The inevitable moment where, to save her husband, Elissa Donovan became an adulteress.

She took a deep breath. “There’s something we need to do first.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

“I couldn’t even kiss you before and now you want to have sex?” Rafe’s cock leapt, ready to play, but his brain wasn’t entirely with the program. Not that he didn’t want what she offered—God help him, he wanted it so much he hurt—but a man liked to think he was more to his partner than a self-propelled vibrator.

“Please. It’s the only way I can raise the power we’ll need. What we tried before helped, but to get into the base—and more to the point, get out again—I need a lot more.” She wasn’t meeting his eyes. How the hell was he supposed to have sex with a woman who wouldn’t look at him, and who sounded desperate, but not for him?

But how the hell could he say no? She *was* desperate. And he wanted Jude safe too, and if they could expose the Agency’s latest scheme, all the better.

She looked so miserable, her arms crossed over her chest, her shoulders hunched, her eyes studying her empty plate as if it might hold a better answer. Her cheeks blazed.

Even miserable she was beautiful, her red hair wild, the flush accenting her cheekbones. The way she sat concealed her curves, but they were burned into Rafe’s brain, into his skin from the times he’d held her. Her magic teased his senses as much as her beauty did. He still didn’t understand how he could feel her magic, but it pulsed under his skin, a shadow presence like the fur he wasn’t wearing.

Rafe stood, circled the table and put his arms around her from behind. If she pulled away, he told himself, he’d say no and they’d find another way, although he had no clue what.

Instead, she leaned her head back against his belly and said, “Thanks. You feel good.”

“I try.”

“No, you feel really good and that’s part of what makes this so hard.” She shifted in the chair so she could look up at him. Rafe hadn’t thought her face could go any redder, but it did. “I like you, Rafe. As in if I weren’t married—I’d ask you out like you. It’s not just finding you attractive, although, yeah, I do. I’m really comfortable with you, considering how little we know each other. That’s the only reason the red magic has a prayer of working—that and your cougar said it would—but it’s hard to separate...”

“What you need from what you just want? Yeah. I understand. Way too well. I want to help you. But I also want you, period—I don’t think that’s a shocker—and I feel like an asshole. What if my cougar has no clue what he’s talking about and just wants to get into your pants?”

"I don't know how your cougar knows so much about red magic, but my instincts agree with him. Besides, everything's been so crazy I haven't even had a chance to put on pants. That isn't even funny ..."

She started laughing, but it was hysterical laughter that might end in tears. A cop heard laughter like that sometimes, usually when something so nasty was going down that someone's brain decided the proper response was to shut off.

He pulled her close, let her bury her face against his chest. When the tears came, he stroked her hair and let her cry herself out.

She composed herself faster than he expected, pulling away and drying her eyes on a napkin. "Well, let's do this."

"One last time: are you sure you want to?"

"Yes," she said. She drew herself up straighter, squared her shoulders resolutely. "And no. For all sorts of reasons. But the only part of the no that has anything to do with you is that I don't want to hurt you."

"Funny, that's what's running through my head. But we've got to get Jude out of there, and this part will be a lot more fun than the part where people shoot at us."

Elissa stood, stretched. "Before we begin the magic, there's one thing I want to do. Just for you and me." She kissed him, sweet and deep, and Rafe knew he was doomed.

If he lived through this craziness, he was going to be obsessed with this woman for a long, long time—maybe forever.

If she'd trusted her own powers more, she'd have taken Rafe to the spare bedroom, where she didn't feel Jude in every atom. Sure, she and Jude had made love in there a few times—they had in every room of the house—but it was basically a neutral space, unweighted by memory. Uncharged.

Which was why it wouldn't work. Her power centered on the bedroom. The kitchen was the only place close to its equal, the only other room where her powers were supplemented by the magic of heart, hearth and home. The kitchen was less comfortable for sex, though, and with the level of mental discomfort they'd be facing, physical comfort seemed especially important.

She changed the sheets before they got started. She told Rafe it was part of the ritual, but she lied.

It was something she needed to do so she could perform the ritual.

Soft flannel sheets fresh from the linen closet smelled of laundry detergent and lavender, not of Jude. Not of her and Jude together. Not of memories. She tossed the pillows and duvet into the corner—same problem.

The room itself smelled of him, or maybe smelled wasn't the right word. He'd left something of himself here, and she'd never been more aware of it than she was now. She couldn't avoid all the echoes. She'd have to use them to her advantage, then, to remind her why she was in another man's arms.

In the enclosure of the protective circle, she reached out along the silver cord, followed that road to Jude.

Pain. Pain and resistance, anger and determination. Jude's fierceness and strength and the overwhelming power of his love for her fought back against evil magic and physical torture and the drug that was trying to alter him.

For all Jude's strength, for all his pride, for all his great heart and his love, he was barely holding his own.

She'd wanted to beg his forgiveness in advance for what she was about to do.

She couldn't. The last thing he needed was doubt. He needed her strength, needed to know she was there for him in every possible way—including ways he probably wouldn't understand.

Instead, opening the link as wide as she could, she sent him her love, her belief, what strength she could spare. "*We're coming for you,*" she told him. "*We'll be there in a few hours tops.*"

A tiny surge of hope zinged back from him, but no other response. He was far gone, lost in pain, verging on despair.

Just before she was about to break off to conserve her powers, something came through the wall of pain surrounding him. It seemed like a message from the lion: no words, no coherent images, just love and faith and still more love.

Jude trusted she'd get him out of this.

That meant she had to.

By any means necessary.

She broke off the contact, deliberately shielded Jude out as best she could. She wasn't sure what pain and the mutagenic drugs might do to his linking abilities, and she didn't want him to pick up just enough of what was going on to leap to conclusions that would make him lose hope. Conclusions that were accurate in the broad facts, but weren't the truth.

At least she told herself they weren't the truth. Red magic wasn't the same as ordinary sex, and she was driven by necessity, to save Jude's life and possibly others.

Right?

Right...

She centered herself, trying to banish such negative thoughts before she called Rafe into the circle.

The circle already acknowledged him without her doing a damn thing; otherwise she wouldn't have woken up with him next to her. But she wanted to do this formally, appropriately, as generations of Donovans had laid down.

Maybe that would mitigate the fact she was going to gather power through red magic with someone other than the partner of her heart.

It wouldn't help her feel less guilty.

Once Rafe was inside the circle, she reinforced and altered it, turning it into a solid dome that would reflect power back at her a hundredfold so she could bask in it, collect it for later use.

She called Rafe to her.

Her heart raced, and not with desire. Bare and dark and beautiful, more graceful than ever now that he and his cougar were becoming friends, Rafe naked should have provoked lust in any vaguely heterosexual female. He'd provoked her lust, damn him, since they'd met, and it had been more than obvious she'd had the same effect on him.

But now Elissa fought panic-stricken nausea, and her sex was Sahara dry. His cock, which stood tall and proud at the most inappropriate times, shriveled against him, trying to retreat somewhere safe.

Just nerves, she told herself. Sex with a new person was always tense—even if you weren't committing sort-of adultery so you could take on the Agency armed with magic that wasn't supposed to work offensively, a cougar still figuring out how to work his claws and a ghostly geek.

She had to trust that if they said the right words, did the right things, their bodies and hearts would follow.

With a deep, shuddering breath, she pictured Jude's love surrounding her like a shield, pictured green energy and earth energy surging through her. She was safe. She was stronger than she knew—she'd dealt just fine with the ghosts, after all. She could do this.

Centered again, Elissa stepped forward so she could touch Rafe. "I honor your body as I honor the Lord," she said, her voice shaking, "the male principle in all life."

His skin goose bumped as she touched him, but not because he was cold. His skin was fire, hot and living, dangerous and seductive. His breath sucked in with a gasping, desperate note. She didn't touch any obvious erogenous zones, stroking his arms and shoulders and upper chest, but not his nipples. This was a warm-up, a way to make themselves comfortable touching each other in this ritual space.

Power already pulsed between them.

Crazy. Being with Rafe was like being with another witch, as if he had red magic of his own deliberately working with hers, instead of boosting her magic with pure, raw sexuality.

"I honor your body as I honor the Lady, the female principle in all life."

Rafe's hands touched hers then slid down her arms. Crackling power followed.

When he, less patient than she, caressed her nipples for the first time, power surged like an erotic electrical storm, filling the air around them, throbbing to the dome above them and to her suddenly drenched sex.

What was going on? This was as strong as when she worked with Jude, though different, and she didn't like it. This instant response, witch to witch, even though Rafe wasn't one—if she felt that with anyone, shouldn't it be with Jude?

The power flickered and fizzled.

"Don't doubt," Rafe said. How did he know when he couldn't feel the power himself?

She looked into his wide, awed eyes and realized he did feel the power. He was something different, a dual but not what she'd come to think of as a dual.

A dual whose aura pulsed blue and metallic gold with newly awakened psychic power, and green and copper with his own not-quite-witchlike magic, a rich, nature-rooted force that all but roared with its eagerness to come out and play.

"Who are you?" she breathed. "*What* are you?"

"I don't know. What you're making me, I think. What you and Jude need me to be." His voice was faraway, puzzled, but powerful, as if someone or something was speaking through him. He seemed ancient, some nature spirit or a face of Trickster or the Lord himself.

Then he kissed her and he was Rafe again, but that puzzling witch-powered Rafe with a cougar poised under his skin. "God," he whispered when they paused for air, "you are so beautiful. Is it wrong that I want you so much?"

"No," she said. "You are..." She couldn't find the right words, so she shook her head until the curls bounced, then put a finger to his lips. "Try not to talk. Focus on the energy."

He nodded.

Goddess forgive her, she wanted him, not just for the magic, but because he smelled like sex and looked like a bronze god and she needed him inside her.

How they made it to the bed would forever be a mystery.

Slowly, ritualistically, they explored every inch of each other's skin except the genitals, kissing and licking and nipping.

Even Rafe's armpits and the slightly sweaty crack of his ass tasted good. Her nipples swelled, and her pussy swam in rich juices. She ached for this man she hadn't even known existed until a few days ago.

It wasn't just her body aching. That she'd understand. That was nature in action, and nature didn't have ethics or morals or even common sense—it just wanted its creatures to fuck and make more creatures. The tenderness was unexpected. Much as she wanted to convince herself her response was purely red magic greedy for richer fuel, playing upon her emotions to make her sexual responses stronger, she knew it was more complex and dangerous.

She couldn't afford to consider all the ramifications now. Saving Jude had to be the priority, and if she pondered the irony she had to cheat on Jude to save him—and enjoy it, because red magic only worked if you were having fun, and the more marriage-endangering fun she had, the more power she'd have to subdue her husband's enemies—it would screw up the magic as well as her head.

Pondering anything too deep wasn't going to happen for much longer anyway, not when she took Rafe's cock into her mouth. Small as she was, she didn't think to try for a sixty-nine—it never worked with Jude. But Rafe urged her around with his hands and a fervent "please", curved himself so she could reach.

He closed the heat of his mouth, that feline-dual heat familiar but different because it was his, over her aching clit.

Powers, the man knew how to use his tongue! Soft and fierce in turns, licking and suckling at her, making noises like a child shamelessly enjoying something delicious.

All the while his cock filled her mouth and his velvety balls filled her hands and his musky smell filled her senses.

It wasn't the easiest or most graceful position. To take Rafe deep in her throat, Elissa ended up squirming away from his mouth so all she could get was the tip of his tongue flicking at her rather desperately. When Rafe's tongue brought her dangerously close to orgasm, she'd lose track of what she was doing and let his cock slip away from her.

Not the worst thing for sex magic, though, these frustrating moments.

When they were coordinated, when his mouth and hers worked in sync, it was too much. That silken tongue on her clit, that velvet and iron cock in her mouth was too damn tempting.

She couldn't let herself yield completely to the pleasure, had to store the power...and if she hadn't been trying to give at least as good as she got, her body might have turned traitor on her and decided to just enjoy. As it was, she had to fight for self-control every second.

Waves of clear red pulsed, filling her, filling the room. His distinct copper and sage green and gold and her own spring green and silver mingled with the red. The power was peaking.

"Now," she mumbled around a mouthful of cock.

Luckily, he understood.

He rolled onto his back and grinned like a smug idiot—or a very happy cat—as she straddled his hips.

No need for protection, because there was nothing to protect against. Duals were immune to the diseases that made human sex such a latex-laden affair, and the ones they were prone to didn't transfer to humans.

And the two species weren't cross-fertile, a source of regret for Elissa and Jude, but a relief in this case.

The first touch of Rafe's cock brushing her pussy lips shocked her. So hot. So needed.

She took his cock in her hand, rubbed him against her clit until she was half-crazed with lust, seeing red even with her eyes closed, so close to orgasm she had to bite her lip to hold back. Hovering above him, she opened her eyes. Rafe's hands clenched the sheets. His muscles stood out in relief, a sculpture of a man poised at the brink of ecstasy. She had to squint with her witch-sight to see him through the waves of magical energy surrounding them.

Were all duals naturals at being red magic partners or was Elissa just incredibly lucky?

Pain shot through her, real pain as if something was trying to reach in through her belly and tear out her heart.

Maybe she shouldn't think about luck right now. Maybe she shouldn't think at all.

She rose, positioned Rafe's cock at her opening.

Breathed "Jude," and envisioned him, safe and well and far from the Agency.

Took Rafe inside her.

It hurt, and not because he was so large. Oh, he wasn't a small guy, and she liked that. But that first entrance felt so sweet and yet so wrong.

The Powers had cleverly designed cocks and pussies to fit together for maximum fun. It wasn't supposed to feel this good, though, not when she wasn't with Jude. Wasn't that the creed she'd learned, that the right one was always far superior to all other lovers?

Tears welled up, and she blinked them away.

She eased herself down, feeling Rafe stretch and fill her as if he belonged there.

Rafe raised his hips, meeting her halfway, not driving hard, but pushing into her as delicately as she'd been easing him in. It was a tease, a torment, a miracle. Magic crackled around them, and it took all her self-control to concentrate on that power, concentrate on building it and not grab his hands and put them on her breasts or on her hips so he could control her movements. Not start galloping. Not ride him to the finish.

When he was fully inside her, he pressed against the entrance of her womb. She felt full, yet still hungry.

She wanted to move. Wanted him to move with her, to push his hips up and take control, to flip her over and nail her to the bed.

Just a primal need, nothing more than an itch to be scratched. Not even a sexual itch, exactly, although that was part of it. More the need to make the pain and fear go away. He could do it, she could tell, could take a woman to a place where, briefly, she wouldn't care about her troubles anymore.

But her troubles were the reason she was with him.

She pushed the thoughts aside, let her mind go blank, pulsed her inner muscles to squeeze down on Rafe's cock, then release it.

She shuddered with pleasure and the need to do more—to touch herself, to touch him, to let him touch her, to really move—or to run away from this room and from him and from her own traitor body that was enjoying necessity far too much.

Instead, she contracted and released, again and again.

For as long as she could stand it, she knelt over Rafe's body, his cock buried to the hilt inside her, the contractions of her sex around it and the racing of their hearts their only movement.

She kept her gaze on the far wall and tried to forget who she was with.

The sound of tearing fabric startled her into looking down.

Rafe's face was contorted, his body glazed with sweat and taut as a bowstring. Caught up in his right hand, the bottom sheet was torn. "Please," he mouthed, his voice inaudible, but his meaning absolutely clear.

Then he repeated it, "Please." He wasn't whispering. The crackling power had gotten loud enough she could barely hear over the static.

"Yes," she said, then, "Yes" again, and moved, rising and falling on his cock, a sweet impalement.

A second later, his strong hands gripped her hips, not forcing her, but guiding her, and he rose to meet her.

She couldn't see properly. She didn't know if that was the nimbus of energy surrounding them or the tears misting her eyes.

Her orgasm was close, too close. She slowed her movements, but Rafe, caught in the moment, didn't slow his and, oh, Powers, it was too much, with his hands on her hips and his cock deep inside and her clit grinding against him.

"Jude. Jude. This is for Jude."

She hadn't intended to speak out loud, had meant it as a private focus of intent, but Rafe heard.

"Yes," he said, "for Jude." She remembered the men kissing in the Otherworld, and the cock that was fucking her now in Jude's mouth. Maybe this wasn't so inappropriate after all, but some new kind of magic...

"Jude, Rafe...Jude!"

Elissa shattered, and Rafe roared wordlessly and joined her.

The room rainbowed with colored light, clear red and shades of green and silver and gold and the pink of love, the light's source the place where their bodies joined.

Exerting her will, Elissa gathered some of the power to herself and sent the rest winging toward Jude, to protect him and bolster his defenses.

She sobbed, tears pouring down her face and splashing onto her breasts. When Rafe pulled her down and kissed her, she realized he was crying too—not quiet, manly misty eyes, but as messily as she was.

In comparison to what they'd just shared, the kiss felt almost chaste, tender. But his cock was lodged inside her and her sex still twitched, and it took all her willpower to neither start fucking him again, see if she could pull out another orgasm—this one just for her—nor curl up on his comforting chest and doze.

She forced herself to pull away from him and stand. Now, while the power was strong and fresh and coursing through her body, it was time to do more magical work.

For what they were about to attempt, they'd need all the help they could get.

Chapter Twenty-eight

She leaned over, kissed Rafe once more.

Somehow, she managed to keep it as chastely tender as his had been. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

“My pleasure.” He sounded smug. He deserved to be, she supposed. Magic aside—and she couldn’t leave magic aside, not when the power they’d raised together zinged around the room and made the hair on the back of her neck stand like a brush with lightning—that had been some incredible sex.

“When you’re up for it, could you pack up some food—anything that won’t need cooking and will travel well? And anything else we might need for a long road trip without much money. I have an emergency bag in the car with bedding and clothes and some food, but it’s packed for two, not three. Then start doing your computer magic.” she The power spoke through her so she issued orders more than made suggestions. “The rest I need to do alone. Or at least it might work better if you’re not distracting me.”

She’d meant to throw him a bone, pay him a teasing compliment as she dismissed him, but as she said it, she realized it was true. If he stayed there, warm and well fucked and gorgeous in her bed, it would distract her, in all sorts of ways, including guilt and doubts she couldn’t afford to feel.

“Your wish is my command.” Rafe smiled wistfully and got up. “Usually I’m more of a cuddler, though. Not so much into the fuck and run.”

That was really not what she’d needed to hear. Or maybe it was, because Jude was a cuddler, too, and the image of her, Jude and Rafe all snuggled together in one big comfortable pile might be what the magic needed. She didn’t know why her magic wanted them together, but she’d work with it.

Rafe padded naked out of the room. She made a mental note to grab more of Jude’s clothes for him. He was bound to destroy a few sets while shifting.

Once again, she called upon the green powers of the earth, upon the rich, slumbering valleys and rocky hills around her.

The power, a sleeping giant, twitched hard enough that she wondered if it registered as a minor earthquake to normies. From root and seed, tree and shrub, unfurling bulb and dormant bud, the approaching spring and the napping winter land gave what it could.

Elissa also called upon air, fire and water. Growing up near the wild Pacific and living for several years in proximity to the two biggest Finger Lakes, she had some affinity for water. The waters of Seneca Lake graciously added their power. The lake never really slept, not even when its surface iced over. Over three hundred feet deep, its heart remained cold year-round, but never froze completely. The lake was

mother and death here, creating a microclimate that allowed vineyards to thrive in a climate normally too cold for them, but bringing lake-effect storms almost as violent as those on the Great Lakes. Cool, moist power flocked to her, and it was benevolent and menacing, healing and killing, not as fierce as what she'd be able to draw near the ocean, but strong enough.

What she didn't expect was the other power of the lake.

The lake held some of its dead. The deep, frigid waters were haunted by those whose unclaimed bodies left them attached to the place where they drowned. She caught a whiff of death, but no decay, and she tried not to scream as the dead surrounded her, latched onto her aura. They would follow, she knew instinctively, wherever she chose to lead them, would surround and menace anyone she pointed out.

It wasn't a power she'd ever wanted, but if it could help Jude, help bring down the evil, she'd embrace it. Then she would send the lake dead to their rest, because no one deserved to be trapped in a forty-degree limbo forever.

A breeze in the well-insulated room reassured her—air was with her, too, though no stronger than usual. Fire answered her call more readily than she expected. It danced in the hearth for her willingly enough, but she'd never felt any real affinity toward it. Today, though, the warmth zinged to her, added itself to her pool of power as if she was a true fire witch.

Her palms itched and tingled remembering yesterday's flames, both the pain and the feeling of power just out of reach. Could she learn to control fire? Who knew what had come to her through Grandma Josie's wild genes?

Elissa felt taller, heavier, altogether more massive. The power she took in made her feel like she was expanding, growing redwood-tall with roots like an oak.

She had to remind herself it was illusion, that she couldn't go stomp on Agents like a mutant out of a bad movie. Pity. "The Attack of the Fifty-Foot Witch" would be useful against their enemies.

When she turned at the sound of Rafe approaching and saw his expression, she wondered for a second if she'd actually grown. Unfortunately, she still had to look up at him a little. But awe filled his eyes as he mouthed, "You're glowing. A lot."

Her body might not be any bigger, but her aura felt like Godzilla. Wouldn't work for stomping Tokyo, or rather the army base, but it must mean she'd sucked up plenty of power.

She opted not to ponder what it meant that Rafe could see her aura. Jude could smell hers, after a fashion, but seeing auras was a witch/shaman thing, not something even the most keen-sensed dual should be able to do. Certainly not one who had just stopped taking Drozz and was still getting used to his new senses.

"I'm ready," she said. Her voice vibrated in the charged room like a Tibetan singing bowl. "We need to go as soon as I've grabbed some things." She opened the closet, grabbed a duffel, started flinging warm clothes into it haphazardly.

"I've gotten in, logged on using one of Maggie's passwords and downloaded her files onto my laptop. Now all I need to do is copy them onto a flash drive or six for security."

"Take it with us. Work while we drive," she said, astonished by the authority in her tone. "We need to move. I can't hold this much longer."

They took her hybrid Highlander, but Rafe went to his truck and grabbed a handgun and a lock box out of his glove box before they left. Part of her brain noted that she didn't object. Guns scared her the same way magic scared normies and for much the same reason: she didn't know much about them, and while she knew they didn't go off and shoot people all on their own, some primitive part of her believed they might. However, she was so far from a normal frame of mind she registered the gun as just one more tool they could use to get to Jude.

She wasn't sure how she managed to drive with her focus three-quarters in another world, her witch-sight highlighting the auras of living things and the energy stored in non-living ones rather than their physical shape and size. But Rafe needed to deal with the computer. With the amount of power she stored, she'd zap the thing if she touched it.

It helped that once they got out of Geneva proper, there wasn't much traffic.

A late-season storm was building, one system sweeping down out of Canada, another coming northwest from the coast, and they'd hit with a roar in the Finger Lakes and points north later that day. Already snow spat from a sullen, leaden sky and the wind had a dangerous edge.

A sane person would have concluded this wasn't the best time to be out at all.

Elissa, so stuffed with magic that she wasn't exactly sane, thought, *More power*. Storm energy wasn't something she usually tried to draw on—too violent and unpredictable—but violent and unpredictable sounded good at this point.

About five miles outside Geneva, a state trooper appeared out of nowhere, sirens screaming.

She set her will and the spirits and earth powers upon him. Nothing bad, she specified, nothing that would harm him—but she didn't have time for this shit now.

When she looked back, the statie had pulled over, gray steam pouring from under his hood.

He most likely couldn't see that some of the steam wore the faces of drowned men and water spirits.

They reached the old army base without further incident. But where, exactly, was the compound?

She pulled over, got out of the car, walked around to Rafe's side—each step sucked more energy from the ground beneath her feet—and opened his door. "Drive," she said, not even bothering to couch it as a request. The magic was too thick now. It wanted to get out. It wanted to *lash* out. But first it needed its target, and she wasn't safe or sane until it found it.

"But I..."

"Drive." She got in, leaving little choice for him but to scramble into the driver's seat.

She opened her senses, not the five shared with every other human, but the two that only witches and their ilk possessed.

All the natural energies of the place rose in clear relief: forest and field, ghost and living being, animal, mineral and plant. She sought the blank spot among these energies, the void that marked an area that had been shielded all too well.

She found it.

Wordlessly she pointed, and Rafe drove.

When they ran out of road, he stopped, but she pointed again and, with a shrug and a quiet, “It’s your suspension,” he drove off the asphalt and into the woods.

It was bumpy, but not as bumpy as it should have been. A track ran through the woods, not a road, not even a logging trail, but an area about a car-width wide that was reasonably smooth and free of obstructions.

She wasn’t surprised when they came to a parking lot that shouldn’t be there.

The tiny concrete building didn’t seem big enough to be what they were seeking. “It looks more like a storage shed,” Rafe said. “Are you sure?”

“It’s only the stairwell. Everything’s below ground.” She wasn’t sure how she knew.

She stepped from the car and nearly collapsed.

A blast radius of malice emanated from the little building.

It almost covered up the older stench of destruction. That hadn’t been deliberate evil, merely carelessness as the army damaged farmlands it had appropriated during the emergency days of World War II and never returned. Now they were repairing the damage, but toxins had seeped deep into the soil and the earth beneath her feet throbbed with pain, its vegetation weakened and diminished.

She couldn’t normally sense such things without looking, but her magical senses were so sharp right now it hit her like one of the nuclear missiles that used to be stored here.

Inspired, she called again on the powers of the land and of green and growing things, this time specifying they would be striking against allies of those who had polluted the land. If the army was involved in the Agency’s project to develop some kind of mutant dual super-killer, the country was in trouble. If it wasn’t, the country was in worse trouble, because what else would a government agency do with a bunch of souped-up magical assassins? Stage a coup? She shuddered at the thought.

The power of the earth rose and filled her. It was dark and angry power that tasted like oil and revenge. Green mixed with it, but it was thorned green, not the friendly power she knew, but something sharper and fiercer, something that could tear flesh, something that grew as fast as kudzu and would be glad to grow in someone’s path—or around their neck.

Demons and devas, that felt good.

The snow fell faster now. Elissa opened to that as well, swelled with its fierce, impersonal violence.

She heard, or felt, something telling her, "*Call upon the white deer and they will help you.*"

Huh? She wasn't a beast witch, and she didn't know of anything magical about the deer other than their unusual coloring. Descended from a few white deer—not albinos, just light-colored—that had been fenced in when the army base was built, they'd grown to a large, ghost-pale herd that looked like they should be spirit creatures. As far as she knew, though, they were ordinary white-tailed deer in every way except their coloring.

Which made them beautiful, but, as far as she was concerned, useless.

Still, when working magic, it paid to listen to one's instincts.

She stretched forth her hands. How the heck did you call upon deer, anyway? "Deer, white deer, I call upon you for aid," she said, trying to imbue the words with power.

She burst into nervous giggles instead. Although she throbbed with magic she could barely contain, the words came out as ordinary words, and silly ones at that.

"Let me try," Rafe insisted. Rather than say it was impossible—who knew, with that crazy witchlike aura of his?—she nodded and he stepped forward, stretched his hands out as she had done and closed his eyes.

What he did she had no idea, but she could feel the energy of the land shift. His aura flared gold and copper.

Everything, including the wind, went silent, or maybe it seemed that way because Elissa was holding her breath, holding precisely still, to see what Rafe might do.

The moment passed. The wind picked up again, its edge harsher for the brief calm. A crow cawed somewhere. Elissa let out her breath with a rusty sigh.

Rafe chuckled soundlessly. "Well, that was stupid. Don't know what I thought I..."

He pointed, his mouth hanging open and an expression mingling awe and terror on his face.

Camouflaged by the snow, white deer surrounded the parking lot.

"You did it!" Elissa clasped his arm, feeling a jolt of power. "How did you do it?"

"I just...talked to them. Like calling for prey, only I told them I wasn't hunting them, that we were the good guys and we needed..." His voice trailed off.

She shrugged. "Hey, it worked."

"I have no fucking idea what I did, Elissa. I'm not a witch. I can't command animals. I don't even know how to be a dual. I'm making that up as I go along. How did I know how to call prey?"

His voice was tight, almost angry, and Elissa decided this wasn't the time to convince him that, for a non-witch, he was showing every sign of being witchlike, or shamanesque, or something else with an affinity for nature magic.

"What do I do now?" he whispered fiercely.

Like she knew? "Uh, thank them. Tell them to watch and wait."

It was a good idea to thank beings who answered your call for help, even before they helped you, but she had no idea what she meant by *watch and wait*. It seemed to click with Rafe, though. “Cover,” he said. “Distraction. Harming the white deer will piss off the neighbors—they’re the local good-luck charm. And if the neighbors get up in arms, that’ll get the attention of the crunchy types in Ithaca. The last thing the Agency wants is a bunch of suspicious Cornell professors looking at this place, so they’ll have to be careful with the deer.”

He closed his eyes again. The copper aura spiked. Elissa smelled pine and heat sharp against the snow.

It passed and Rafe was normal again. “Well,” he said, “what are we waiting for?”

Elissa took a moment to cast the simplest of illusion spells on them, one where, at a casual glance, they’d look like someone who belonged there, but whom the onlooker knew only vaguely. It wouldn’t hold up to close scrutiny, but the idea was to avoid close scrutiny by being part of the scenery.

Her hands shaking, Elissa punched in the first door code. The system hesitated and she stopped breathing. Had she remembered it correctly?

After a seemingly interminable wait that was really no more than a few seconds, it blinked green and emitted a satisfying click.

As she opened the door, Rafe pushed past her.

His hand went to his gun, concealed under his jacket.

Men. *Cops*. Didn’t he realize they had to be inconspicuous?

She shook her head and made an averting gesture with her hands. Luckily, he seemed to understand and hid the gun.

She still let him go first. It would be easy to argue—but stupid. He had a hell of a lot more experience in potentially violent situations than she did. She worked in an agricultural research lab, for gods’ sake! She was not the stuff secret rescue missions were made of.

The partner more suitable for staging rescue missions was the one who needed rescue.

Once inside, they came to a small bank of three elevators. A security camera pointed down into the little lobby, but all its up-and-running lights were off. “Looks like Maggie did her job,” Elissa whispered, pointing to the dead camera. She felt better immediately.

But Rafe took one look at the elevators and his confident posture sagged.

Elissa almost asked him what was wrong then realized she already knew because Jude had the same problem. Like most duals, Rafe suffered from claustrophobia.

Elissa took his hand in what she hoped was a comforting gesture.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Elevator. Hell, of course there was an elevator.

Drozz had been good for a few things. Everyone knew duals hated small, confined spaces, but he'd never realized how much he did until he faced an elevator without the drug to humanize his reactions. He'd spent a lifetime taking the stairs when he could, but he'd been able to use elevators when he had to. Right now, though, the damn things looked as scary as whatever they'd be facing once they actually got inside the compound.

"Must be stairs somewhere... What if there's a fire or something?" He wheeled around, hoping he didn't look as stupidly frantic as he felt.

If there was a staircase, it was well hidden, and they didn't have time to search for it.

His shoulders sagged. No way out of it that he could see. He had to get into an elevator and go God only knew how many stories down below the surface of the earth, where he'd probably have to deal with ghosts and assorted other weird and dangerous shit bullets probably wouldn't affect.

What was he doing, anyway, letting himself be dragged into someone else's war? Letting himself be used like some cross between a weapon and a sex toy?

Elissa squeezed his hand. "You can do this. You're a good cop, and good cops do what they need to do. Thank you for being brave for me."

What was a little phobia, compared to what she'd already risked to save Jude?

Nothing.

And if she'd used him, she'd been clear and honest about it and he'd gone into it with eyes wide open.

Hell, he'd volunteered to be used.

The elevator door pinged open.

Reverie cut, he braced for action—but the damn little box was empty.

He forced himself to get in the elevator briskly, before his unease turned into a fucking full-fledged panic attack. "What floor?" he asked, inordinately proud it came out calm instead of shaky.

The descent to level nine took longer than Rafe would have thought possible—nerve-wrackingly long, a length that made him all too aware of the weight of earth over them. He noted that Elissa dropped his hand and moved to the far side of the elevator so she didn't crowd him.

"Thank you," he mouthed. The human part of him wanted to cuddle close to her for comfort, but he was afraid the nervous cougar might do something stupid if he tried.

They descended in silence. Rafe didn't know about Elissa, but he couldn't think of anything worth saying. Everything that popped into his mind seemed too trivial, too foolish, too mundane.

Or too fucking major.

This was so not the time to say, "I love you." Especially if you were sure the woman in question didn't want to hear it and you weren't sure what you meant by it, although you knew you meant *something* huge, and working through that could take hours, or possibly years, that you didn't have.

"You have a gorgeous ass" wouldn't go over well either—although Elissa kicking him in the nads might relieve some tension.

"Do you still call it the ninth floor when it's nine levels down?" he finally asked, unable to stand the silence. How could the elevator take so damn long? "Shouldn't it be negative ninth or something?"

Elissa's smile was weak as late-winter sun. "Or the ninth circle, like of hell. Dante's *Inferno*," she added—he must have been staring blankly. "Don't they teach you anything in cop school?"

"Plenty. Not a lot of literature, though. Surprised you get it in witch school."

"We're expected to get a thorough classical education as well as the magical one. Donovan kids don't play much." She might have sighed, but her expression was so grim it was hard to tell. "Besides, it's required at Cornell."

Rafe raised one eyebrow. "I thought..."

He was about to say something to the effect of, "I thought witch kids didn't go that far from home," but the elevator doors opened at last, and he realized the ninth circle of hell analogy was accurate.

Oh, it wasn't the humans, although the people bustling in the corridor were kind of spooky even if you didn't know what was going on here below the ground. No one made eye contact with them, but Elissa had told him to expect that. As long as they did nothing remarkable, the illusion spell made eyes slide right over them. No one made eye contact with each other, though. No small talk. Certainly no smiles.

But that wasn't the creepy part.

It was the smell. The noises that weren't quite noises. The...well, he couldn't describe it precisely in human words.

It tasted the way it would when you put the pistol into your mouth: cold metal and gun oil and fear and impending death and a despair so deep you were ready to splat your brain to make it stop.

Then there were the whispers just out of range, a constant, annoying—no, make that alarming—buzz he knew contained words even his keen hearing couldn't make out.

One glance at Elissa's pale, tight face told him she could hear them, too, probably better than he could.

Which meant the voices were ghosts or some weird-ass magical defense.

Fucking wonderful.

Evil surrounded them. It prickled on his skin, made the cougar's fur stand on end inside him and confirmed what the cop already knew: things were going to get very ugly very soon.

Without thought, he reached for Elissa, not sure whether it was to comfort her or seek comfort himself.

His hand closed around her fingers and, for less than a second, things seemed better in Rafe's world.

She jerked away and said too loudly, "Excuse me!" as if they'd bumped into each other. Her eyes went wide, stricken. Something barely visible wavered and shimmered in the air around them.

He figured it out too late. Even in normal corporate America, employees holding hands would draw attention. Here, where co-workers barely met each other's eyes, it was downright freakish.

With one innocent touch, he'd managed to crack the illusion.

A big, uniformed man wheeled around, pointed at them and shouted, "You! Where are your ID badges?"

The few other people in the hall turned and stared. No, glared. If it had been a movie, they'd be brandishing pitchforks.

Elissa opened her mouth, apparently with a plausible lame excuse. Rafe smiled, said, "Oops!" and raised his hands appeasingly. "It's right in here," he said, hoping he sounded convincing because if he didn't they were in big, big trouble, and reached for his coat pocket as if to find the errant badge.

His gun. Had to get to...

The security guy did exactly what Rafe would do if a suspicious character reached into his pocket. He yelled, "Freeze," and tried to draw.

The man's hand never made it to the gun. Out of the corner of his eye, Rafe saw Elissa do...something.

The corridor turned into one of those dreams where you're frozen while something horrible is about to happen. In this case, though, the bad guy was frozen.

Elissa grabbed his hand. "Hurry, this won't hold 'em long!"

Tugging at his hand, she ran.

But not, as all common sense suggested, back toward the elevator and out to safety.

Down the corridor, past the frozen bad guys, deeper into the compound.

"Shouldn't we..."

"No way."

"But..."

"No fucking way."

He read their doom in those three simple words.

His parents would never know how he died. Maybe just as well. They'd never understand.

He wasn't sure he did either, how Elissa and Jude had gotten such a hold on him in such a short time. The sex magic he'd stumbled into that first night, maybe?

All he understood was that he couldn't abandon her now. So he followed blindly, running like the devil was after them—which was way too close to the truth—and hoped she had a workable Plan B. His Plan B—his Plan A, for that matter—involved a lot of shooting, but he had a bad feeling they'd be outgunned, and a worse feeling guns might not affect everything in this special little outpost of hell.

They pelted around a corner and almost crashed into a heavy steel door. Elissa looked around frantically then punched in another security code.

Something beeped. Lights flashed red on the panel.

Elissa cursed and tried again.

The sound of heavy boots running echoed down the corridor behind them.

This time, the door clanged open. They ran through.

"They're coming." Rafe stated the obvious. "What now?"

Elissa touched the door. A look of intense concentration darkened her face. Her eyes glazed over. Something popped and sparked, and Rafe smelled ozone.

She smiled distantly. "That ought to hold them for a while. Let's go."

"What the hell?"

"Storm energy, I think. It's not an electrical storm, but I managed to tweak it." Elissa blinked. "I'm not sure how. Sometimes you work the magic. Sometimes the magic works you. And sometimes stuff happens that you can't possibly anticipate. Step away from me, Rafe."

Something in her voice demanded his obedience, and he gave it.

Seconds later, it was all he could do to not run down the hall without her, into the unknown, as the area by the door filled with misty spirits and a damp, nasty smell like the rot at the bottom of the lake.

It wasn't enough that this place had its own ghosts. She'd brought her own.

Chapter Thirty

Elissa, shaking, released the first batch of lake-drowned spirits that clung to her. “*Make yourselves visible,*” she urged. “*And terrifying.*”

Hollow eyes, water-logged faces. Water dripping onto the tile floor from no apparent source. And screaming, panicked cries for help, splashing, the helpless flailing of someone going down for the last time.

She wasn’t sure if an ordinary person could hear them in the same way she could, but they’d register on the subconscious, make people want to be anywhere but there.

It was already working on Rafe, who demanded, “Let’s find Jude. Now.”

She nodded tightly. The ghosts were harmless, but the screaming was pitched in the key of get-the-hell-out-of-here and freaked her as much as it would anyone else.

“This way.”

Now she had to lead based on what she’d seen out of body and in visions, lead someone much better suited to being in the lead now, to rescue the one she’d secretly figured would be her furry knight in shining armor in case *she* ever needed rescuing.

But she wasn’t going to let any of that, or even simple fear, stop her. She led, and did what she had to do.

She froze an alarmed lab tech and an oblivious janitor. Listened to the screams of humans mingling with the screams of the ghosts and sent a silent command to the ghosts to ramp up their efforts. Realized not all the humans were put off by the ghosts. Some still followed.

She prepared the freezing spell again, trying as she did to think of alternatives that might hold their enemies off longer. She had plenty of power—but what was the best way to use it?

Rafe jerked his head down the corridor. “Someone’s coming from that way.”

Great. Now they were boxed in.

Worse, the new enemies were between her and Jude.

Some primitive part of her dating back to ancient Ireland, before magic had been codified and Donovan ancestors no doubt did whatever they needed to do in times of war, howled with glee at the prospect of battle.

“Now that’s just unacceptable,” she said and drew up. “You’re not stopping us now.”

“What are you...” Rafe started to ask. Then he changed whatever dumb question he was about to ask to, “How can I help?”

“Touch me,” she said. “Put one hand on my shoulder or something. But be prepared to shoot if you have to. Or shift. Or one then the other. But don’t shoot to kill.”

He shook his head. “I’m a police officer. I don’t want to kill anyone, but if it looks like it’s us or them, I’m not screwing around. I’m shooting to kill. That’s how I was trained.”

“Guess it’s on me to do as much damage control as I can. They’re coming. Get ready.”

Her palms were hot, throbbing. She could barely hear over the crackle and roar of magic. Green, thorny magic. Fire magic. Storm magic and water magic, unsatisfied by the small taste of action. So many flavors of power, all striving to escape.

Her blood roared.

Jude. Jude was down that corridor. Imprisoned, endangered, enslaved.

Through the mist of power that skewed her vision, two sets of big, thuggish agents appeared as if they’d been teleported.

The tingling in Elissa’s palms changed to burning. She wrestled the pain, wrestled for control. She tugged on the silver and copper cords then Jude was with her, groggy, but in her head and soul, supporting her and Rafe.

The fire turned out instead of in and the first two armed thugs fell, screaming.

Magical flames surrounded them. They wouldn’t burn, but they might go into shock, pass out from pain. Certainly they’d stop worrying about anything but putting out the fire.

In what she thought of as the normal world, someone would have stopped to help them. This wasn’t the normal world. Everyone else kept coming.

Fire pressed against her skin, eager to burst out.

Two more blasts trapped small groups of enemies. A few others took a look at them and ran, clearly deciding they’d rather take their chances with their bosses than with the crazy intruders.

One guy had been isolated from the groups, though, and he trained a gun on her.

Rafe shot him, a deafening explosion in the small space.

Elissa, open to spirits, felt the man die. He had only a second to register pain and fear and he was gone, winging his way toward the Otherworld as if he was glad to be out of there.

“I had to,” Rafe mouthed—or maybe he said it out loud, but her ears were ringing too much to hear.

She nodded. Later, once Jude was safe, she’d take the time to get sick. This death that she hadn’t instigated wouldn’t affect her powers unless she let it, and she couldn’t let it. If she faltered, she and Rafe and Jude would die.

She said a swift, silent prayer for the dead man’s soul. Then she refocused and asked herself what else Grandma Josie might do in this pass, how she might hold off these lunatics and keep Rafe’s more lethal skills as a last resort.

It came to her in a flash.

She called upon the green magic. Called upon it as she never had before. Called upon the side of green magic with thorns and phytotoxins.

Called forth a spell dimly remembered from an ancient grimoire, something so weird her instructors hadn't been sure it would work. If it could, though, this was the time, with power thrumming through her veins, more power than she'd ever drawn, and their need desperate and Jude so close and yet so far.

Grandma Josie always said belief in the magic and the self was nine-tenths of the spell, far more important than following some ancient ritual correctly. It worked for Grandma Josie. Elissa could only hope it would work for her.

Whispering half-remembered Gaelic and making up the rest in English as she went along, she conjured fast-growing vines with fierce thorns.

Green magic couldn't create something from nothing, but it could, in need, translate something from one form to another.

This compound was surrounded by woods and fields—by plants.

It should work. It had to work.

At first, nothing happened, but she held the power and kept encouraging it to work. *Confidence was nine-tenths of the spell.* She'd never bought that—but lives had never depended on her magic before.

Something burst through the floor, growing at absurd speed.

The vine was lush and tropical-looking, with thick, leathery green leaves and red flowers and frighteningly long thorns. It wasn't anything that should grow in this cold climate, and it grew like nothing that existed in the mortal world. A sweet, cloying fragrance filled the corridor as the vine twined around the thunderstruck guards, holding them fast.

"Go!" She shoved Rafe in the right direction, sending him past the bound guards.

It wouldn't hold them forever, anymore than the freezing spell had. Sooner or later they'd get smart and send down a sorcerer or another witch, and then they'd be screwed. Rafe might be able to shoot them, but even that would help for only so long...

The leaves of the vines drooped as if from a long drought. The one binding the nearest guard loosened its grip, allowing him to work one arm free. He struggled to reach his gun, which the vine had knocked from his hand. Sooner or later he'd get it.

Shit.

Was it because she'd messed up the spell in the first place or because her confidence had flagged? Better to believe the latter, because that she could do something about.

Not even bothering with what she remembered of the original spell, she sent another wave of power into the vines, putting all the bravado she could muster into it. Obviously she did know what she was doing, more than she realized—at least until she'd doubted. "Thanks, Grandma Josie," she prayed under her breath. Without Grandma Josie's unconventional training, she'd have been screwed.

She bolted in the same direction she'd sent Rafe.

Toward Jude.

She passed Rafe within a second or two—he'd clearly been waiting for her—and kept moving. She didn't dare look back, but no one followed as she led Rafe down the corridor she knew led to the lab. Alarms went off everywhere.

They reached the lab just as a slight, young Asian man, unarmed, lab-coated and vulnerable-looking, was closing a secondary steel door.

She bound him with greenery while Rafe held his gun on him. "I don't want to hurt anyone," she said. "Although my armed friend here may have other ideas. I've come for my husband."

Elissa had been told that menacing wasn't exactly her most convincing look, but it must work better when she had a nimbus of fire and thorns and a rock-solid man with a gun backing her up. The lab guy nodded mutely.

"You're going to help me, aren't you? Not call for help?"

He nodded again. "I don't even know who to call, lady. It's my first day here. The what-to-do-in-an-emergency briefing was supposed to happen later."

Inspiration struck her. "Are you a medical researcher? Got promoted really unexpectedly?"

"They called me at unfuck o'clock this morning, told me I was working here now instead of Buffa... How did you know?"

"They murdered the woman you're replacing."

The guy turned greenish beige and his almond eyes got even wider. "You're lying," he said, but his tone said otherwise, said he knew damn well there was something fishy about the sudden need for him to be there.

She reached into the ether, called a name.

This time when Maggie manifested, she looked pretty solid for a ghost. She'd been cute, in a geeky, couldn't-bother-with-fashion way.

Rafe blinked, his gun pointing at something he couldn't have shot anyway.

"Friend," Elissa breathed. Rafe lowered the gun, but his posture was more feline and feral.

"So you're my replacement," the ghost said. Her voice was just above a whisper, but it was enough for the young man to hear. He turned even greener. "It stinks that they finally hired someone attractive around here after they killed me, but maybe you and I can go on a ghost date sometime. They'll probably murder you sooner or later. Talk about your sucky management policies. Of course, if you're helpful for this nice lady and her friend, they might help you get away."

"I'll help," he said. "Just make it look like I'm a hostage or something...in case your plan doesn't work. No offense."

Smart man, this—she peered at his name badge—Ken Hamaguchi. Then again, the Agency recruited smart people. Not necessarily sane ones, but smart ones.

“None taken. Now get us into the damn lab and to my husband.”

She dropped the vines, but Rafe kept on the young man’s heels, his gun drawn.

Ken didn’t need to ask who her husband was. He led them to a small, heavily secured room that looked like a hospital room crossed with a prison cell, and stepped back as he opened the door as if he expected Jude to shift, pounce and devour him. Elissa half expected it too. When he didn’t move as they entered the room, she feared he was drugged or comatose.

Elissa tried to hold back her emotions, tried to act like a fierce, angry witch capable of doing something far more deadly than tying someone up with vines. But when she saw Jude stir, she smiled and meant it for what seemed like the first time in years. She ran across the little room to her husband.

He breathed shallowly. His naked body was a mass of bruises, but his eyes opened and he sat up with almost his usual lazy grace. “About time you got here, beautiful.”

Then she was in his arms, kissing him over and over again.

She couldn’t let the world shrink to the two of them, though, not the way her body wanted to. No time for that.

She could feel the wrongness in him. He was chilled, human temperature or less, and his breath tasted of chemicals. He looked like he’d been run over by not just one bus, but a whole city fleet. But his heart beat strong and steady, and his green eyes were clear. The rest was fixable.

His cock got harder by the second, doing its best to distract them both from more urgent if less interesting matters.

Rafe cleared his throat, but it came out more like a growl.

“Rafe, there’s something different about you.” Jude’s smile brightened and he slipped from the cot, crossing unsteadily to him and looking him up and down. “You don’t smell like Drozz anymore. Good choice.” He clapped Rafe on the back.

“I shifted today. Taking all my self-control not to do it now, but I can’t shoot with paws and I haven’t figured out my built-in weapons yet.”

He embraced Jude. It lasted a few beats longer than Elissa would have expected, even given the emotions of the moment.

Jude pulled back, his cock still half-hard. “Hope you make a better-looking cat than you do a wordy,” he teased.

With one hand on Jude and the other on Rafe, Elissa felt more right, more balanced than she had since Jude had disappeared. The power inside her crackled again as it recharged. She could have stood there forever drinking in the pleasure of being with her man again, drinking in the redoubled power, the pure, exciting surge of red magic.

But it was time to make a break for freedom.

Damn, she knew she'd forgotten something. Not that they could have fought their way in burdened with a suitcase.

"You got clothes?" she asked her husband.

"Shit, I must look worse than I thought if you have a problem with me being naked." He grinned and, despite the gravity of the situation, Elissa couldn't help grinning back. Still cocky despite everything—and despite everything, he looked gorgeous. She gazed up and down his naked body, showing her appreciation, battered though he was.

He picked up on it, because he grinned even wider. "My clothes were gone when I woke up. They were probably wrecked anyway."

Jude didn't have a shred of personal modesty, but it was too cold to run around naked, even with a dual's warm-running metabolism. Not to mention a little conspicuous, as if a six foot six dreadlocked black man wasn't conspicuous enough in this largely white rural area.

She laughed because it was more productive than crying and said, "In that case, can you shift?"

"Sure," he said, at the same time ghost-Maggie said, "Maybe. He been drugged again, Hamaguchi?"

The kid—he looked like a teenager, although he must have been old enough to be out of med school—shook his head. His eyes were wide with terror. "I was coming in to give him a dose."

"Good, then. He can do it." The ghost nodded briskly, although it was hard to see under the migraine-level florescent lights. "It'll hurt like a bitch, though. Just warning you."

Briefly, Elissa considered stripping Ken and giving his clothes to Jude instead of letting Jude shift. She resisted the urge only because it was impractical. Ken was small and wiry. His clothes would fit her better than they would Jude.

Before she could consider that, Jude roared and began to change.

Not the way he usually did, though. Normally, the change looked not only completely natural, but fun.

This was slower and more awkward, as if his body fought normal behavior—as painful to watch as if he struggled to breathe. Parts changed randomly, changed back. A tail sprouted where it shouldn't, then reabsorbed. Whiskers grew on his human face. His legs went lion abruptly while the rest remained human, throwing him off balance.

Ken tried to make it to the sink in the corner of the room. The stench of vomit filled the air.

Only a feeling that she had to endure this if Jude had to kept Elissa from turning away. Her stomach roiled at the sight, but she made herself watch.

After the initial roar, neither human nor leonine but something awful in between, he was silent, and that, too, was abnormal. Jude would joke and banter as long as he had words then make noises in lion form like a huge version of a housecat chirruping and mewing at his human.

He was silent, she realized, so he wouldn't scream.

Someone—no, make that several someones—pounded at the door. Even though he was barfing, Ken twitched as if he wanted to let them in.

As if he were being compelled to let them in.

Rafe moved between Ken and the door.

Ken was fighting off the dry heaves, but he crawled toward the door, even though he'd have to go through a wall of Rafe to get there.

Compelled. Definitely compelled.

Someone new had turned up on the other side of the door, and he or she—it might be the sorcerer, Shaw—smacked of bad juju from here. His magic tugged at Elissa, trying to force her. It didn't have much chance against her defenses—witch defenses could almost always lock out sorcerous mind control, especially if you had some warning. That she could feel him at all, though, meant he was scary powerful. If he got through the warded door, his offensive magic would be deadly.

She was willing to bet he had a door code, but was using magic for the intimidation factor in classic sorcerer style.

Ken fought to his feet.

With one casual blow, Rafe knocked him down and trained the gun on him again. "Don't push me," he growled. "I don't want to shoot you, kid, but to protect them, I will."

A dark stain flooded the fly of Ken's pants and he began to cry. He still tried to get to the door.

Elissa muttered the necessary words and froze the researcher. The poor guy looked relieved as paralysis gripped him.

With a great roar, Jude went lionside.

Yet not quite right, somehow. He was sleek and tawny with a full black mane, like always, but his aura looked bruised—she'd never seen the lion with anything but a clear, healthy aura—and madness gleamed in his feline eyes. A feral yet unhealthy look, the look of a man-eater. The lion form seemed bigger, but oddly proportioned and wobbly.

Maggie the ghost said in her head before she could ask: *"So that's what a lion would look like coming off a three-day tequila binge. It's the drugs. It's not permanent—at least in theory. We don't know yet. No one's ever survived as much as he's had."*

He needed healing, needed her energy.

The green magic inside her surged. A scent of mint almost masked the stench of vomit.

She reached out her hands. The lion poised to spring, then froze as if trying to recognize her.

In the frozen silence, the lock whirled.

She pulled most of her energy from Jude and into reinforcing the shell of protection around the three of them. She sent a bit at Ken Hamaguchi, too, but there was only so much she could do for him, with no connection to work with. The defenses clicked into place, a satisfyingly solid sound.

Just in time, because several things happened at once, none of them good.

Chapter Thirty-one

The door banged open.

The room flashed sickly fuchsia and filled with the smell of thunderstorms in a swamp—ozone and decay. A spell bounced against the defenses. It hurt as if someone was sticking rusty pins into every square inch of her skin. It only hurt for a second, though. Harder to tell with the guys, but she thought they were okay, too. Thank the gods for good protective spells, because she had a feeling it should have hurt a lot more, for a lot longer.

Gunfire rang out, deafening. She wasn't sure if all four of the armed agents fired, but somehow, no one was hit.

Rafe shot back and one of them fell, clutching a shattered knee.

Why hadn't the Agency guys been able to do the same? Defensive magic made it harder for mundane weapons to target them, but not impossible. The shooting went as wild as if they were B-movie villains, which seemed unlikely since the Agency recruited a lot of ex-military personnel.

Maybe they were disoriented by the purple spell. Sorcerous spells, especially the unsavory kind, often worked on the "get them all and let the gods sort them out" principle.

Jude jumped right over Elissa's head. He'd never been able to do that before. What the hell? He plowed one agent over with his momentum, leaped on the old man...

Who grinned as he went down under the lion's angry mass.

Grinned?

No matter how powerful a sorcerer you were, no matter how confident you were in your abilities, you didn't grin with close to six hundred pounds of angry lion getting ready to bite into your skull.

"Don't!" Maggie cried, her voice barely audible. "It's what Shaw wants. One taste of human blood and you'll cement the changes."

Shit.

Jude didn't react. He probably couldn't hear her and certainly couldn't understand her. With him furious and drugged, human words would be tricky to understand, especially if he couldn't see their source.

But Elissa heard and reacted.

She called upon the energy she held in reserve to freeze Jude and sicced thorny vines on anything that wasn't her family.

The spells worked on the goons. They looked much better, she thought, in plant bondage.

Not so much on Shaw. The vines crept toward him, but slipped off as if he were coated with oil—or as if they didn't want to stay in contact with him.

While Elissa was working her spell, Rafe changed with startling speed, faster than even an experienced dual could usually manage. He threw his weight against the stunned Jude. As a cougar, he was much smaller than the lion, but surprise and Jude's own shakiness allowed him to throw the larger cat off balance. Jude staggered away, and Rafe landed on top of the sorcerer.

"Another one?" the sorcerer asked. His voice was deep and silken and would have been beautiful except for the overly calm, so-sane-it-was-crazy tone. "And this one is unique. Probably the one my seer meant in the first place. What do you do, witch, collect them?"

"Everyone needs a hobby. At least mine's not torture."

Rafe bit into the sorcerer's shoulder. It was clumsy—he obviously didn't know how best to use the cougar body—but it must have hurt like seven flavors of hell.

The sorcerer didn't seem to mind it nearly as much as he should have.

Rafe tried to claw and tear out his throat, but with a casual gesture Shaw knocked the cougar aside. Rafe twisted in mid-air but didn't manage a full rotation. Landing on his back, he skidded across the slick floor to wind up at Elissa's feet, blinking dazedly.

Maggie had been right: the sorcerer must have wanted Jude to harm him, because otherwise he'd have tossed him away.

Elissa smelled rather than saw a spell swirling around him. Tasted rather than saw that it was dark and cold and deadly, tinged with the abyss. Something worse than death.

"Shaw always was a crazy bastard in his own controlled way," Maggie remarked.

The ghost flowed toward the sorcerer as something materialized in the room.

The thing Elissa had encountered before, the thing that wanted to eat souls.

Only this time she could see it, shadowy and dark, with an emaciated body, a swollen belly, a huge mouth. And wings.

"Shit," Maggie said. *"That thing. A sluagh, someone called it. We destroyed its body, but that didn't kill it. Shaw's made it his bitch. Or maybe the other way around."*

A disembodied sluagh? The spirit of a very powerful, very dangerous soul-eating unseelie fae?

Great.

What the hell did you do with the ghost of something that had never been technically alive in this realm of existence—except be very afraid of it? And how the hell had Shaw gotten control of it?

"Maggie, no!" she screamed, but the ghost had interposed herself between the demon-thing and Ken.

"Come and get me," the ghost taunted, her voice audible, though faint and crackling like a distant radio station. "I've seen you without your skin on. Neener-neener." She sounded disarmingly like she was taunting a schoolyard bully.

The sluagh flared with purple black light and swooped toward the ghost.

The ghost soared up. It followed.

Everyone froze, even the two felines and the sorcerer, watching the deadly game.

"Time to go," the ghost urged, once again loud enough that even the agency guys jumped.

Rafe nudged Jude, pushing him toward the door.

Elissa remained rooted in place.

Shaw would be weakened now, distracted by the effort of commanding a soul-eating fae that, on its own turf, was a thousand times more powerful than Shaw could ever hope to be. And he *was* commanding it, because it wasn't getting near his men or him. If there was ever a time to run...

But what about Maggie? If she sent Maggie on to the Otherworld now...

Maggie seemed to hear her thoughts.

"I didn't expect an afterlife. If I don't get one, no big deal. Let me do my thing and you do yours."

Elissa drew on an imperfect memory of an ancient grimoire she never thought she'd need in a last-ditch to drive the sluagh back to its own reality, or at least disorient it.

It didn't work. The spell sizzled and popped in the air, which might have been funny under less deadly circumstances.

One spell freed Ken Hamaguchi. "Get us the hell out of here!" she screamed. It wasn't until she saw how he scrambled to obey that she realized she'd put a touch of geas into her dealings with him.

Bleeding badly, pale, in obvious pain, the sorcerer still managed to laugh. "How do you choose? How do you choose who lives and who is forever lost?"

"Easy."

That was a blatant lie, but she couldn't cross Maggie over against Maggie's will, or cheapen her willing sacrifice by risking the living. "Go!" She made shooing motions at Jude and Rafe, but their obstinate posture made it clear they weren't leaving until she did.

Fine, then. With one desperate prayer for Maggie, that an atheist whose soul got devoured by a sluagh could still find her way to the Otherworld, she ran.

Correction: they ran. Two big cats, one witch, one shaking young researcher.

They were partway down the hall, heading toward the emergency exit Maggie had mapped out earlier, when spellfire struck at them.

Shaw and the sluagh had caught up.

The protective bubble held around Elissa, Jude and Rafe.

But Ken fell.

The sluagh approached him, waiting to suck his soul when he was dying and unable to fight back.

Elissa held her ground.

Raised her hands.

Thought holiness. Thought cleansing. Thought desperate need.

And blasted with fire. Real fire, not the non-burning, etheric fire she'd used before, but the real deadly deal. Somehow, she'd become a human flamethrower.

In the oldest grimoires, they called it Brigid's Blessing, this battle fire, but warned against using it except in the greatest of urgency because it was so hard to control. She hadn't known she remembered the spell, let alone had the power to cast it.

Hell, she wasn't sure she even *had* cast it. She'd thought of it, needed it, and the flames manifested. Flames with women's faces.

Brigid's Blessing, the fire of the Lady under one of her ancient Irish names.

Both demon and human fell back, unable to cross through the holy flame.

But when she reached Ken Hamaguchi, he was gone.

She could feel his spirit, though, and it was battered, but bright enough, and it seemed to know where it was going. "I'm sorry," she said, tears falling. "I'm sorry." The dead man didn't notice. He slipped through a set of sliding rice-paper doors that appeared near the ceiling and into the arms of an old couple who must have been his grandparents.

She sent another blast of fire toward the sorcerer. This time she didn't think cleansing. She thought hurting.

Then they ran like hell. She prayed as she ran, for her own soul as much as those of Maggie and Hamaguchi, but even though Elissa set a few more things on fire and the guys bared their fangs at terrified staff members, she didn't think their escape had much to do with their own efforts.

She could hear screaming behind them. Shaw must have lost control of the sluagh.

The only good news was that it was still stuck inside the building's wards. With any luck it might devour Shaw's black soul, get indigestion and die for real.

They sprinted back to where they'd come from. She pounded frantically on the elevator call button, wondering how she was going to herd a couple of hunt-crazed duals into the hated elevator.

And quickly realized they had a worse problem than that. The call button didn't light up. Someone had shut down the elevators.

They were trapped.

If they were lucky, something human would get to them before the sluagh did.

Chapter Thirty-two

The air next to Jude shimmered, coalescing into some other damn enemy.

“Shit,” Elissa said, preparing to blast whatever it was, even though she was tired. So tired. The weight of all the power she had expended was dragging her down, and every cell in her body screamed with fatigue.

But she wasn’t going to stop now.

“*This way,*” the shimmering said in Maggie’s gruff mental voice. “*Touch where I touch.*”

The sparkling figure, now human-shaped although faint and transparent, touched a spot on the wall that looked very much like the rest of it.

Gingerly, Elissa put her hand on top of...Maggie’s? Was it really Maggie’s? It was certainly cold enough to be Maggie’s hand.

A panel slid open, revealing narrow stairs lit by the dimmest of emergency lights.

They piled in. Another switch, this more obvious, shut the door behind them. She tried to zap it with a burst of magical energy.

It fizzled.

Power still zinged and zoomed inside her, but at the moment, Elissa couldn’t muster the focus to use it properly.

She raised her hands and closed her eyes, preparing to try again.

Everything swayed. Or maybe she swayed and imagined the room moved with her.

With a bump of his proud, maned head, Jude nudged her aside. Then he raised one paw and tore the lock mechanism off the wall.

He wouldn’t have been able to do that before.

She tried not think about it too much, just prayed it worked for both sides of the door.

They climbed, following the dim glow that, by some miracle, was Maggie. “*How did you...*” Elissa panted as they climbed. They hadn’t even gone a full flight yet and she was already winded. Eight and a half more to go.

Damn, she needed to work out more.

With luck, she’d live long enough to worry about that.

Jude was panting and limping, but at least he had an excuse. Rafe, on the other hand, bounced up the stairs, his tail high and twitchy with pleasure. Well, they called cougars *mountain* lions for a reason...

Maggie, of course, didn't have to worry about running out of breath. *"Kill me once, shame on you. Kill me twice, shame on me. I reminded the sluagh I knew what its insides looked like and it decided my soul might taste gamy."* Elissa sensed rather than saw a fierce, feral grin.

They reached the top of the stairs, wheezing. Elissa frantically punched in the door code Maggie rattled off to her and sent the two cats tumbling out into the snow.

She turned to the ghost. *"Maggie, thank you. Thank you so much. We couldn't have done it without you."* She paused, tried to focus on the shimmering outline that had become an unexpected ally and unlikely friend. "I can open the door for you now—to the Otherworld."

Maggie's outline lit up as if she were smiling. *"No worries. I've seen the door. I can find it when I'm ready. But meanwhile I'm going to have some fun annoying these bastards. Riccardi in the drug lab never followed back-up protocols, and he actually enjoyed the drug tests that killed the subjects. So I'm going to go fry me some valuable data and see how he explains why he never backed up."* The cloud of Maggie giggled manically and was gone.

Even with the fighting, even with that kid dying, Jude knew it was too easy, though nothing seemed easy with every nerve in his body on fire and his lion form feeling like he was wearing a badly fitted costume.

Just the fact he could come up with an analogy in lion form was wrong. That was a wordy thought.

Just as much as the hatred that soured the pleasure of running free with his pride was a wordy emotion. The lion could get vicious, but it couldn't be bothered to hate. Hate was too long-term, too...human. Duals could hate with the best of them wordside, but in animal form, it subsided to a need to keep away from what you hated. Destroy it if you had to, to protect the pride, but better to just avoid it. Life was short, and the world was too big and marvelous to waste time and energy on bad things.

But the lion hated Shaw, as much as the wordy did. He tasted the hate, bitter and rotten at the same time, on his tongue, savored it like he'd yearned to taste Shaw's blood.

He hated everything connected with the Agency.

Worse, he thought he might hate the cougar bounding up the stairs ahead of him. The cougar smelled of his mate. As if he'd fucked Elissa.

Only Jude couldn't hate him, because while the wordy side could get mixed up about all kinds of dumb things, the lion couldn't hate his own mate.

The cougar didn't just smelled of his mate, he smelled like he *was* his mate. Like family. Like family and sex and comfort and sex and home and safety and yeah, like sex.

It didn't make sense, but maybe it would make more sense in wordy form. That side was better for thinking.

Focus now on getting out, and on the sweet, sweet smell of Elissa.

On killing anything that stood between him and freedom.

And on not going crazy in this damn narrow, dim staircase that went on forever and ever. Confining him. Channeling him, forcing him...

He snarled then roared, a noise that echoed painfully in the enclosed space.

He hated the staircase. Was starting to hate Elissa for driving him into it.

"Easy there."

It wasn't silentspeech, but not words in his head like he picked up from Elissa, either. More like a dual kid learning to control silentspeech, but stuck in wordy ways of thinking.

He felt a touch in his mind. Someone stroking his fur, soothing him. The cougar. Rafe.

The touch felt like cool water on a hot day, like sun on his fur.

Like Elissa, only not.

Like love.

"Hold it together. Not much longer."

He hated...hated...

He didn't.

Shaw, sure, he hated, but for the moment he'd settle for getting far, far away. He hated the idea of the Agency, hated what they were doing, but probably half the people who worked here didn't know what was really going on.

But he didn't hate Rafe, and certainly not Elissa.

He stopped long enough to take a deep breath. The air was stale, but it carried the scents of Elissa and Rafe.

Then he kept climbing. It was still too easy—the hunters should be pursuing, but he couldn't hear anything, couldn't smell anything—but the Agency wasn't going to get him *that* way. Not by fucking with his head.

They finally burst out the door and into a white, cold, swirling world.

Bare trees and the smell of weather and underneath, the smell of deer.

"Venison. I'm starving."

Rafe-cougar did that soothing thing again. *"Food soon. The deer are helping us."*

Jude didn't even try to make sense of it, just bounded along, following Elissa although his overstretched nerves longed to outpace her and just gogogogo into the forest where there was game and he'd be...

Safe?

What was safe anyway?

They burst into a clearing. It took his brain a while to register *car* because it was seeing two things at once: Elissa's Highlander and a cluster of low-growing bushes of red-branched dogwood where a number of white deer, almost hidden against the snow, were browsing.

They stopped in their tracks, first Elissa, then Rafe, then finally and reluctantly Jude. Any second now, the deer would smell big predator and bolt. Then he'd give chase.

The heat of pursuit, and the hot taste of blood and fresh meat...

He twitched with longing.

"Behave."

Rafe or Elissa? Hard to tell whose thought that was, but someone had picked up on how much he wanted venison, now please, or maybe ten minutes ago.

Rafe made a little noise that didn't sound very feline, as if he was trying to speak with a body unsuited for it.

The deer perked up their great ears and sauntered off. Didn't run, didn't bolt, just calmly headed out.

Right over the footprints left by one woman, one cougar and one oversized lion.

For once in his life, Jude felt totally frustrated by the lion form. Too many complicated questions burned his brain, and he couldn't begin to ask them in silentspeech.

No time for that anyway.

They pelted to the car, jumped in, Rafe changing almost in mid-step with a fluid grace that rivaled a dancer's. Naked, he got into the driver's seat. A near tussle there—Elissa glared at him, trying to shove him aside with her tiny body, then gave up and got into the passenger side of her own car.

Jude tried to change, but the memory of pain froze him.

"No time," Rafe said in his head, an awkward mixture of human words and images. *"Keep moving. Change later."*

He scrambled into the back, claws tearing at the already battered upholstery and Rafe—wordy again, naked and unaccountably gorgeous—slammed the door closed because Jude couldn't.

They took off in a whirl of snow, between trees, down an almost invisible road. White deer darted everywhere, almost invisible themselves in the snow, watching their progress, stepping between them and the dark, unmarked SUVs that appeared out of nowhere.

Jude clung to the seat and prayed and tried to remember what his wordside form felt like. He could remember only the pain of transition.

A small hand reached around the seat and touched him. Her touch filled him with green, healthy, positive energy, Elissa energy, but tinged with the power of the storm around them, the heat and ambiguous power of fire, the power of sex and love and home-hearth-heart, as she called it.

His jangling nerves calmed. Nausea eased that he hadn't even recognized.

He changed, and it hurt like hell, but not as much as before. Changed on a roar that rattled the car and turned into a scream as his vocal chords shifted to ones adapted for speech.

Different colors, diminished smells and no fur.

And hands that could touch his woman and a voice that could speak to her.

And no fur, dammit. It was cold.

"Clothes are in a bag on the floor," Elissa said. He realized his teeth were chattering, although he could usually handle cold better than this. He rummaged in the bag and threw on sweats and a sweatshirt and searched for socks while Rafe used his cop skills for crazy defensive driving that belong in an action movie.

Rafe was still naked, and this was no time for him to stop weaving through trees to put on clothes.

Parts of Jude weren't at all happy about Rafe's nakedness, up there in the front seat with Elissa. He wasn't sure whether he was being possessive or merely envious of Elissa's better view. Little of both, maybe.

He shrugged. Silly to worry about it either way. They were driving off-road through a blizzard with a government agency on their asses. If there was any time he shouldn't be thinking about sex, this was it.

But Powers help him, he was thinking about it, craving it—wanting sex with both of his rescuers, at once, right now, thank you.

Somewhere, not so distant he could convince himself it was a hallucination, Trickster was laughing.

Chapter Thirty-three

Elissa glanced over her shoulder. “The deer must be doing a good job. Or you are. We’ve lost them.”

“Or they’re all waiting for us at the gate,” Rafe said, keeping his attention on finding a path between the trees.

“That’s cheerful.”

“That’s what I’d do. A lot easier than trying to trail us through the woods. How much do you like this car?”

“Huh?”

“There’s a break in the fence along a back road. I’m not sure it’s big enough to get through without damage, but...”

Elissa looked back again. “Do it.”

She didn’t ask how he knew about the break in the fence, and thank goodness for that. “The deer told me” might sound whacked even to a witch. It did to him.

At this point, he’d take what he could get for help.

They bounced and jounced through the woods in silence, except for the occasional groan from Elissa as the car ran down a sapling or bounced on a rock.

The gap in the fence was smaller than the car. Shit. He knew how to do this, in theory, but it had been a few years since he took that class.

“Hang on, folks. Ride’s going to get rocky.”

Jude croaked from the back seat, “Like it’s been so smooth?”

Figured—the first words out of Jude and they were teasing. “I’ll show you a smooth ride,” Rafe shot back. “Later.”

“Enough with the innuendo,” Elissa said. “Shut up and drive.”

He gunned the Highlander, picking up as much speed as he could in the tight quarters, and crashed through the fence.

If the deer had mentioned the ditch on the other side of the fence, it would have been a little less dramatic. But at least there were no black SUVs waiting for them.

Rafe had time to shout, “Holy shit!” and register they were airborne before they landed hard on the road, eliciting a moan from Jude.

“Everyone okay?” Not waiting for their yeses, Rafe drove.

After that, they were silent until Rafe turned off that side road for another heading east, and then another, this one narrow and windy and heading north with Cayuga Lake several hundred feet below on one side. It would have been fun to drive in decent weather, but was borderline terrifying in white-out conditions.

Even so, Jude kept turning his head, sure he heard a fleet of SUVs in pursuit. He didn't see anything, but he wasn't convinced they weren't out there, invisible.

Finally, he said, "Thank you."

It was all he could trust himself to say. Too much emotion, too much fear still resonated.

Elissa turned and looked at him, her eyes misted, full of love. She reached out, squeezed his shoulder.

He tried to hide the wince, but failed.

"Your shoulder's hurt?"

"Not hurt-hurt. No more than anything else is. But everything's pretty much damaged."

"Everything?" Rafe said. "Elissa's gonna be disappointed."

"I'd smack you," Jude said, "but I don't have the energy." Then he laughed, not sure where that reserve of strength came from. "And no, not quite everything. The important parts are okay."

"Good," Elissa and Rafe said simultaneously.

Rafe added, the grin apparent in his voice, "Hey, speaking of those bits, I can't feel mine. I've got to pull over and dress."

Jude was surprisingly disappointed the only reasonable way for Rafe to perform the reverse striptease was ensconced in the front seat, mostly hidden from his view.

Rafe becoming un-naked was almost as sexy a thought as Rafe naked.

That was plain weird.

Maybe it was the drugs. He swore he remembered Rafe kissing him, Rafe's cock in his mouth, but he knew that hadn't happened. At least not in what, despite Elissa's influence, he couldn't help thinking of as the real world.

He didn't dare ask, any more than he dared ask about smelling Elissa's familiar musk on Rafe. Or why Elissa's magic had been doing things he didn't think it could do.

Too much magic, on top of drugs and torture, was fucking with his brain. Focus on survival now.

Plenty of time to figure out those answers later...once they'd made sure there'd be a later.

The side road ran out at Route 5. They looked for Agency SUVs, police, anything—but all they saw was snow and a few other cars. Rafe shrugged and took the highway to a secondary road heading north and east.

Once Jude's keen hearing thought it picked up the whir of a helicopter overhead, but they couldn't see anything through the snow and had to trust the pilot couldn't see anything either and was just trying to get the hell back to base and out of the storm.

Jude figured they were getting lucky due to the weather—until, many miles from Seneca Lake, they passed a police car directing cars off a closed section of highway.

It ignored them.

"You're hiding us," he said to Elissa. "You've been hiding us."

"They've been chasing an illusion." Her voice was small, pinched, and he realized she'd been talking very little since they got off the base. That would make sense if she was keeping up an illusion—for several hours, after performing a kind of pyrotechnic, fire-and-explosions magic he hadn't thought she could do. Hell, she was lucky she was still conscious.

"Where are you getting that kind of power from?" He caught the accusing tone in his voice.

Trickster's tits, that wasn't right. It made sense for him to be worried, sure—he knew enough about magic to know pushing herself like this was risky—but accusing and paranoid? That wasn't like him.

He trusted Elissa with his life, his soul, everything.

It was the drugs, he told himself. If they'd been trying to make him violent, they'd probably used something that fucked with his perceptions, making him twitchy and trigger-happy.

Now that he'd reasoned it out, he could will his way through it.

He hoped so, anyway.

"Long story. Long, really weird story." She turned to him. Her face, always pale, was the yellow of old paper, her eyes startlingly large, as if she were shrinking to skin and bones. "I'll tell you..." She paused as if talking was too exhausting, then went on, "when we get somewhere safe."

He *had* smelled her on Rafe. That must be what she meant, that in desperation—at least he hoped it was desperation—she'd fucked Rafe to give her magic extra umph.

How had the sex magic worked with someone else? It wasn't supposed to except with her one true love. Jealous rage flared, a hot, queasy feeling as if he was about to vomit burning gasoline.

Whoa. He wasn't quite right in the head at the moment. That meant he had to take his time, think things through, be extra reasonable.

He couldn't be sure what Elissa meant. If he was right...well, sure he'd be jealous, maybe even a little pissed but how upset could a guy be that his wife would do just about anything to save his life? Sex magic was one of her big power sources. A witch had to do what a witch had to do under desperate circumstances.

When you looked at it logically, it wasn't so bad. Powers knew, if some freaky black-ops crew had kidnapped her, he'd do things that were illegal, immoral or insane to get her back. It wasn't as if she'd sacrificed babies—and under the circumstances, if someone could have convinced him it would help, those imaginary babies would have been history and he'd worry about the consequences later.

But he wished she could have used a vibrator instead of Rafe.

He yawned hard enough to learn his jaw was also on the long list of areas that hurt. Maybe a nap would help. Apparently being doped into unconsciousness wasn't the same as sleeping. Who knew?

He may have slipped from half-asleep to snoring by the time Rafe jarred him awake with an exclaimed, "Shit!"

Jude sat up so fast his stiff muscles protested. Claws emerged from five-fingered hands. His still-invisible tail twitched as he got ready to attack. "What?"

"Elissa fainted."

"Pull over!"

Rafe snorted. "Where?"

"Anywhere!" He gestured at the white world around him. "Not like you're going to hit anything."

"The last thing we need is to get stuck here. I can't tell where the road stops and the field starts."

Rafe had a point. They were on a side road somewhere in the blurry backwoods region where New York, Vermont and Canada bordered, and it was getting dark. If the road wasn't closed, it was only because the state police figured no one would be crazy enough to drive in this weather. Not a place to be trapped.

Jude leaned forward. Elissa slumped forward in her seat, so pale and drawn it seemed the magic had sucked the life right out of her. "Hey." He touched her face gently.

No sign she knew he was there.

She felt feverish, but without the hectic flush of fever coloring her cheeks.

"*Come back, come back. I love you and you're scaring me.*" He tried to reach her the way she'd reached him in his darkest moments, but he wasn't nearly as good at it as she was, and she seemed so far away.

He slipped onto the floor of the passenger seat, knelt awkwardly between the seats and leaned forward, moving carefully because he didn't want to distract Rafe. Their situation was nine hundred miles away from good, but it would get worse if they ended upside down in a ditch. He reached Elissa's lips, not enough for a real kiss, but enough to brush against her. Enough to confirm the soft flow of breath. He could see her chest rising and falling, but he needed to feel it. Pouring too much of your own energy into magic could be deadly. Only he had no idea how much constituted "too much".

She sighed, but her eyes didn't open.

"We have to find a motel or something."

"I think we'd better go for 'or something'. I've already heard about us on the radio. Apparently we killed Maggie and some guy named Hage, and I'm sure our pictures are all over TV."

"Hage? *Anthony* Hage?"

"Something like that. I'm sure they killed him themselves, whoever he was."

Jude cursed as an image coalesced from some of the nightmare fragments floating around in his head: Hage screaming that night.

If he'd thought about it, which he hadn't because he'd been too busy fighting and then trying to survive, he'd have figured Hage had screamed from delayed panic.

Apparently not, poor bastard.

Just one more thing Shaw would need to pay for. Elissa had liked the guy.

About five miles up the road, Rafe turned the car abruptly. Jude, lost in studying Elissa's pale face for any sign of recovery, slammed sideways, landing almost in Rafe's lap.

Heat flared where they touched, even through layers of clothing. Jude's heart raced in the fight-or-flight reaction of a male faced with another male who threatened his pride.

Anger and alarm gripped his belly, but it blossomed warmly downward, making his cock twitch with need.

Drugs. Must be the drugs. One reaction or the other he could fathom, but the combination?

"Sorry," Jude muttered, pulling away.

"S'okay." Rafe sounded as rattled as Jude felt.

They plowed down a narrow, snow-covered side road. Through the storm, he could barely make out a multi-winged red farmhouse, once fine, but now vaguely cock-eyed. The front section was burned out, but the other wings looked mostly intact.

"Not luxury," Rafe said, shutting off the engine, "but shelter."

"How did you know this was here?"

"Saw it from the main road. Or maybe sensed it." Rafe shrugged. "I can't say if I actually saw anything. I just knew to head down this road. Cop instinct, I guess." Not particularly convincing, especially through the snow, but the lion, a good judge of character, prompted that Rafe was telling the truth as far as he understood it. "It's not great, but it's safer than a motel. I wish we could bring Elissa someplace warm, but it's too risky." His voice lowered, almost broke. "I'll get the door open," he added. "You get your wife."

In Jude's arms, she seemed a wisp of burned paper that would dissolve in the wind. But as he picked her up, she snuggled against him and murmured his name, and he smelled herbs and saw green and red behind his eyes.

He'd made it to the door as the next wave of the storm's fury hit with a howl of wind and a wall of whiteness.

Chapter Thirty-four

Once they got inside—the door looked like it had been forced open by firefighters—the house seemed less derelict. Jude’s best guess was the inhabitants had moved out after a recent fire and hadn’t had the heart to finish clearing it. The smell of smoke still clung to the air. Most of the furniture was gone and what was left had clearly been damaged by smoke or water or was just too junky to bother with.

It was cold. Gusts of wind cut through rattly antique windows and poorly insulated walls, but Powers be praised, there was a woodstove and some wood in a box next to it. It would be taking a risk, both of detection and of causing another fire, but would be worth the risk to get some warmth for Elissa.

Wordlessly they divided tasks. Rafe fetched a Coleman lantern from their emergency kit and a few other necessities from the car, then started the stove, which filled the room with smoke, but finally caught. Jude tended Elissa, swaddling her in blankets then lying down beside her, sharing the blankets to give her his heat.

Without even opening her eyes, she cuddled close, seeking his warmth. Jude slipped his arm under her, pulled her closer yet.

Finally, she blinked and focused on his face. “We did it?” she asked, her voice thin and exhausted. “We got you out?”

Panic rose in Jude’s throat. “You don’t remember?”

The tiniest shake of her head, barely visible in the dim light of the lantern. “What I remember seems...like I saw a movie. I remember riding in the car, and some crazy driving, but it’s all blurry. I was so busy shielding us and creating an illusion.”

“Save your energy. You’re...”

“Drained,” she filled in. “Beyond drained. Used all the power I’d collected and then some. And I’m freezing.”

Jude laid a finger across her lips. Usually he loved the contrast between his dark skin and her fairness—together they made a yin-and-yang symbol. But now it underscored how physically fragile she was, and how, for all his strength and size, he couldn’t keep her safe.

He couldn’t even keep himself safe. She’d rescued him. The one he’d sworn to protect with his life had rescued him. She and Rafe, a man they hardly knew.

“Rafe’s getting a fire going, but it’s pretty cold in here,” he said.

Another small shake of her head. “Cold inside. Shocky.”

“Fuck. How can I help?”

She almost managed to smile. “Gets better...in a few days.”

Right. If they had a few days, preferably in a comfortable, warm place with decent food and nothing to worry about. He kept his mouth shut. No need to point out how screwed they were.

“Just need rest. Chocolate’s good, too. Some in the duffel.”

Rafe heard and was rummaging through the duffel almost before the words left her lips, crowing in triumph when he found the candy bars she’d stashed in the emergency kit. “Hershey’s or the fancy stuff?”

“Hershey’s,” Jude said. “More sugar. It’ll work faster.”

“Save the fancy stuff...for when...I can taste it.”

“You keep her warm,” Rafe said. “I’ll feed her.”

Jude sat up and raised her so she could lean on him to eat. Rafe arranged the blankets again around both of them, fussing until they were wrapped just right. He broke off a small chunk of chocolate and held it to Elissa’s lips. She opened her mouth, ate it mechanically, dutifully took another as Rafe held it out.

Elissa whimpered a happy, almost-sexual mmm-mmm. “So good,” she whispered. She cocked her head, opened her mouth like a baby bird, closed her eyes blissfully.

When Rafe brought the chocolate near her lips, her tongue darted out, licking at his fingers. Rafe smiled and Jude told himself Elissa’s reaction was merely hunger. She really, really needed that sugar rush.

With the next bite, though, she took his fingertips into her mouth. Not obscene or anything, but definitely flirty.

Rafe’s face ruddied, but he looked smug, too.

The hell with that!

Sex magic Jude understood, accepted, even. Yeah, if things ever calmed down, they’d need a big discussion to clear the air. He probably wouldn’t be alive to be jealous if she hadn’t done the red magic, but he still felt it, and he was sure she felt weird and awkward, too. Rafe, too, most likely. But flirting like that added insult to injury.

The best defense was a good offense. He’d just have to flirt better.

“My turn,” he said, and grabbed the candy bar out of Rafe’s hand.

He was rewarded by Elissa’s lips hot around his finger, sucking way more than was necessary to capture any stray chocolate. Her tongue teased and licked, sending mini-shockwaves through Jude’s tired body.

Where the hell was she finding the energy? She’d been ninety percent comatose...

“More, please.” Elissa did the baby-bird thing again.

Only with her eyes closed, her head thrown back, her lips parted and succulent, she didn’t look like a baby bird. That was her blowjob face, the one she’d show just before she wrapped her lips around his cock and began to suck and lick, torment and tease and ultimately please.

Oh, gods. This was not the time to be having that thought, not when, flirty mood or not, she was weak as a half-drowned kitten. Not when Rafe was watching them both, obviously fascinated by Elissa's expression and by Jude's reaction to her.

Rafe's full, juicy lips were parted, too, his eyes half-lidded. Some kind of subconscious echo. It was pure porn, but classy porn. As if he, too, was waiting to suck Jude's cock.

That image on top of everything else was just too much.

Lust surged through Jude as he rocked his hips against Elissa's ass. Exhausted as he was, his body urged him to do more. He sent his cock a stern, "Down boy!" It would be too awkward with Rafe there and besides, Elissa couldn't possibly be up for playing in her current state.

"Oh, yeah," Elissa breathed. "More of that...and more chocolate."

He froze for a millisecond. Rafe took advantage of his hesitation to grab the chocolate bar from his unresisting hand.

And to kiss his unresisting lips.

He was too surprised to fight back—not that he wanted to. So surprised that his mouth opened in shock.

Rafe's mouth worked against his, and Rafe's tongue just barely brushed the inside of his lips. It was gentle yet possessive and made him even harder, made him grind more against Elissa. He remembered the dream/hallucination/adventure-in-alternate-reality from the facility—the softness of Rafe's mouth, the suede-wrapped steel of Rafe's cock, Elissa's wet tightness clamped around his dick.

He groaned into Rafe's mouth as the other man pulled away, wearing a grin Jude could only describe as smug or maybe sublime. One thing about being married to a red witch was you learned that sublime and even holy turned up in the sexiest and oddest places. Good Trickster lesson, really.

"Powers," Jude breathed.

"Something like that. You felt it, too?"

Jude desperately wanted to make a wise-ass remark, or to reach out and "feel it" in payback for the kiss or, if he was honest with himself, follow up on all the kiss promised.

But the room pulsed around them, and he knew enough to realize it wasn't just lust making his heart race.

Red magic rose between the three of them. He'd lived with Elissa long enough to recognize it dancing across his skin and charging the air.

"H...how?" he stammered, hoping he could get an answer before his brain turned off completely.

Elissa, sandwiched between two male bodies, writhed, pushing back against Jude, grinding forward against Rafe. "I'm not sure. But it's feeding me." Her voice sounded stronger, breathy rather than breathless. "Like the chocolate, only better." She ran one hand down Rafe's chest, and even though he was wearing one of Jude's thermal shirts, he shuddered as if she caressed his naked skin. "More chocolate?"

Rafe put a piece of the chocolate between his lips in blatant invitation.

She eagerly responded.

Jude thought he probably should be furious, or at least annoyed. But color rose in Elissa's pale cheeks. He swore he could feel heat and strength flowing back into her exhausted body.

She was his life, his heart, and she'd gone so far into the magic for him that she'd drained herself dangerously.

Later he'd worry about the ramifications of this weird magical ménage. Right now, if an extra body in the mix helped her fill that empty well, that was more important than his male ego.

And no matter how strange and awkward it got afterward, his insistent body pointed out a threesome would be fun.

Which didn't mean he wasn't going to stake his claim in no uncertain terms.

He snatched himself a piece of chocolate, put it between his lips, tapped Elissa on the shoulder. She took the hint. More than took it.

Chocolate didn't suit Jude's mostly carnivore tastes, but tasting from Elissa's mouth was something else altogether. Sweet and smooth and very sexy, flavored with her breath. Elissa swallowed the chocolate somewhere along the line, but they didn't stop kissing to get more.

Rafe's arms wrapped around them both. One hand traveled up and down Jude's back, leaving a trail of tingling sensation.

Elissa broke off the kiss and ducked to one side, practically forcing the two men on each other.

Okay, no force was needed.

This should feel stranger than it did...but then again, why? Getting hung up on definitions was so human. Trickster got to be both sexes; why shouldn't Trickster's children enjoy both sexes?

They ended up lip to lip, body to body, and oh, Trickster's boobs and balls, hard-on to hard-on. Without his brain being particularly involved, Jude reached for the drawstring on his sweatpants.

Elissa beat him there.

Her other hand was on Rafe's fly. Maybe that should have bothered him, but with Elissa touching him, sending even wilder sensations through his dick, he couldn't be bothered, even by her doing the same thing to Rafe. Rafe seemed to enjoy her touch as much as he did, and he found that curiously hot.

"Please," Elissa said, her voice small, but stronger than it had been. "Help me out here. I can't coordinate."

Both men nodded. Jude untied his drawstring and let Elissa wiggle his sweats down.

Rafe unzipped.

Good God, he'd had that in his mouth? It looked exactly how he remembered it from the dream/vision/whatever, but it seemed more intimidating in the physical world. Gave him new respect for women.

Trickster love the Lady and the Lord, this was going to be strange.
Fun, but strange.

Chapter Thirty-five

Elissa wrapped a hand around each cock. The men's energy surged up her arms and into her body, or maybe her spirit—wherever the hollow was where her magic should be. Arousal pulsed hot between her legs, flaring when she felt the familiar heaviness of Jude's cock in one hand, Rafe's slightly shorter but thicker one in the other, and imagined all the other places they might end up, in her or in each other. Sweet power fed into her from Jude's and Rafe's desire, filling the void, recharging her physical and magical energy.

All her training screamed there was a huge ethical problem with involving Rafe now the emergency had passed. But, sandwiched between the two of them, she felt like a starving woman in the best bakery in the world, ready to run amok and not inclined to worry about nutrition or calories. Jude's energy was powerful, delicious, familiar, but her drained body and spirit couldn't—or wouldn't—turn away Rafe's, either.

And Jude and Rafe kissing... Gods, she felt so much power there, so much male energy combining as they tormented each other so deliciously. Despite their encounter in the Otherworld, she'd figured nothing would happen in the physical realm. Rafe was unabashedly bi, but she'd expected Jude to maintain his straight-guy distance on the theory that what happened in the Otherworld stayed in the Otherworld.

She was wrong. Lucky her. Lucky all of them.

She worked her hands up and down and around both cocks until Rafe made gorgeous, strangled noises in the back of his throat and Jude's cock rewarded her with a pearly drop of pre-come.

She shifted, bent over, took Jude into her mouth, pushing back the foreskin with her lips to reach the sensitive head and taste that pre-come.

God in the oak, it seemed like forever. She couldn't say now how long he'd been gone. The magic and her fear of losing him had distorted time so badly that the bald truth of a calendar would never seem right. It had been a day and eternity, but he was back where he belonged, with her.

Hands caressed her hair. Jude still held onto her legs as if she'd saved him from drowning.

"Beautiful," Rafe breathed, stepping back. Maybe it was to give her room to work or to better enjoy the view, but she felt the chill as his energy pulled away and she wanted to yank him back into contact.

"Keep...touching her..." Jude said through clenched teeth. "She needs us both."

Warmth again, warmth and energy then gentle hands sliding under her sweater to caress her breasts.

Energy of a different kind—the kind that came from a man who wasn't merely turned on, but turning her on.

All the while, Jude's cock was in her mouth. He was sweaty and tasted odd from the drugs, but to Elissa, he was delicious and filling.

Energy buzzed through her.

The two men radiated heat, and not just from simple body contact. Heat and power, red magic and desire and love, all rose together.

"Too many clothes," she said as best she could around a mouthful of cock.

It came out like mush, but Jude said, "Couldn't agree more," and let her ease away.

If she'd known a spell that made clothes disappear, it couldn't have worked any more efficiently.

Naked, she shivered—the room was still icy despite the wood stove's best efforts. The guys pulled her into the nest of blankets, one on either side of her, warming her until the shivers stopped.

They looked at each other over her. "What now?" Rafe asked, his voice husky.

"Whatever the lady wants." Jude smiled and ran his hand down her body to find its home between her thighs.

Focused on the men, on refilling her well of energy, she'd known she was turned on—how could she not be?—but hadn't realized how drenched she was until Jude started stroking her clit.

"Too much," she gasped, fighting the urge to explode into stars. She craved an orgasm from Jude. But she needed to build up more energy before she could dissipate any that way. Her parched spirit was refreshed, but not healed—and when this beautiful interlude was over, she'd need to be strong again, be the witch who'd helped get Jude away from the Agency.

It was possible only luck and a freak snowstorm had kept the Agency away this long.

Something closed off inside her, trying to conserve energy for the battle to come. Trying to detach, so it would hurt a little less if something went wrong.

If she lost Jude. If she lost Rafe.

But at the same time, a barrier collapsed.

Life was dangerous and might be short. Live while you can.

She fumbled, found Jude's cock again. "I want you in me."

"Rafe should pull up a chair and make popcorn. Or something." A world of sexual possibilities opened in those few words, in the light in Jude's eyes and the rough warmth of his voice. A world of possibilities, and she wanted them all.

It wasn't like they could go anywhere with a blizzard howling outside.

With a thought and a gesture, she sealed their corner of the room in a magical bubble, somewhat shielded from possible Agency scrying spells and, just as importantly, from cold and wind.

Just a thought and a gesture, but she was shaky by the time she finished, and she couldn't hide it from Jude.

"You need more, don't you, love? Tell us how to help you."

She took a deep breath. In her wildest fantasies, she'd never choreographed a threesome. When she'd dared to imagine one, it had been vague images, imagined sensory overload—not details and logistics.

"Fuck me, Jude," she begged. "And Rafe..." She hesitated, not knowing how to ask for what she craved.

"When I needed healing," Jude said, "you two made me the center of attention. Do you need that, Elissa? Do you need me in your pussy and Rafe in your mouth?"

Goddess, she was lucky in her man.

Make that in her men. Rafe felt like he belonged. The magic thought so. Even Jude was acting like he did.

Relieved of the need to speak her forbidden fantasies, she nodded.

"Get on top of me," Jude urged, rolling onto his back, kicking aside the blankets.

She straddled him, teased them both by stroking the swollen head of his cock against her slick, sensitive labia then rubbing him against her clit.

Rafe, who knelt beside them, cupped her breast with one hand, teasing the stiff nipple until the fire shooting from there met the fire rising from her groin.

With his other...oh, gods, he wouldn't...

He did. He put his hand over hers to hold Jude's cock, and to move Jude's cock against her.

Jude arched, sputtered. He fumbled blindly and found Rafe's hard dick.

Rafe worked Jude against her cunt, his big, dark hand moving Jude's foreskin back and forth along his shaft. The visual as much as the sensation flooded her, made her arch and gasp and try to fill herself with that delicious, familiar, beloved hardness. At the same time, Jude stroked Rafe's cock, a bit awkwardly, but with a blissful smile.

The room shifted to red. The earth pulsed, or maybe it was the sound of her own heart. "Now," she begged.

Rafe helped guide Jude's cock into her.

She'd meant to take it slowly, to push their arousal even further, but it felt too damn good. She sank down on him, reveling as his thick length opened her.

She wasn't quite sure how it would work with Rafe, but he moved so he knelt next to Jude's head, and she understood.

She leaned forward, stretching over the length of Jude's body, and kissed her husband for all she was worth.

It was fire and green growing things and a purring cat and the best foreplay ever.

"I love you, Jude," she said when she came up for air. "Always and forever."

"And I love you. I also know you nearly killed yourself getting me out. Let Rafe help you, too."

Jude's eyes were unfocused with lust, but she looked into them and saw the truth in what he was saying. He might be confused, even scared—just like she was—but he also understood.

She pushed back against Jude's cock, then rocked forward and wrapped her mouth around Rafe, who obligingly pushed his hips forward to meet her.

Jude's arms supported her so she had a hand free to circle Rafe's girth. He tasted herbal and musky and smoky, and a few salty, excited drops graced her tongue almost immediately. At the same time, Jude rolled his hips, pushing deeper into her.

Liquid fire filled her veins. The room heated a few degrees.

She felt stronger already. Stronger and hotter.

Their bodies moved together, copper and brown and ivory entwined.

She wanted to say how beautiful they looked together, but that would mean taking her mouth off Rafe's dick and she didn't want to.

Any more than she wanted to lose her husband's cock in her pussy, filling her so sweetly, moving inside her, drawing a flood of juices from her body. She trembled, on the verge of an orgasm she held off only by a great effort of will. The raw sexual energy was medicine and coffee and chocolate and wine all at once, reviving and intoxicating her. She wanted more, although she couldn't say if that was magical instinct or pure hedonistic greed.

Rafe's hips started to move in rhythm with her mouth.

The room buzzed with energy, or maybe it purred.

She drew in as much of it as she could, until she was swollen with power.

Her orgasm rose again, almost too hard and fast to resist, but Rafe beat her to it, filling her mouth with his hot come.

To her astonishment, Jude drew her down into a kiss before she finished swallowing, tasting the last dregs of Rafe on her tongue. "Don't be greedy, my heart," he said. The sweetness in his voice, the love for her and the acceptance of Rafe and all that had transpired, undid her.

Her pussy clamped down on Jude. She cried out into Jude's mouth. Rafe embraced them both, kissing her on the spine as she and Jude came together.

The room purred and pulsed, and when it stopped, Elissa felt almost healthy again.

Rafe had rolled onto his side, but she still sprawled on Jude. She opened her eyes and studied his face for a long time before she kissed him back to alertness.

"Feeling better?"

"Like I could take on an army if I had to, but let's hope we don't need to test that theory. And there's something you should know."

His face darkened as if he feared some terrible confession. She sat up quickly, put her hand over his heart and repeated part of their wedding vows: “You are my heart, my hearth, my home, my love and my husband, now and always. Do you understand, Jude?”

He nodded and repeated the gesture, putting his hand over her left breast—apparently unable to resist the temptation to caress her nipple in passing. “And I’m yours. No matter what. Throughout this life and beyond death. You understand that?”

“Yes.” Her eyes misted. “You and me. That’s non-negotiable.”

“The rest is just details.” He waved in Rafe’s general direction, caught himself and laughed uneasily. “Not that you’re just a detail. You’re...”

“I don’t know who or what I am at this point.” He stretched on the blanket as he spoke, making his muscles ripple entrancingly. “Can’t expect you guys to. But I hope you’ll let me stick around long enough to figure it out. And not just because it’s going to take all of us working together to make it to Canada.”

She looked at Jude. Guilt stabbed her, because she wanted to say yes. Donovan teachings be damned—the heart was more complicated than that, and whatever she felt for Rafe, it wasn’t in itself wrong. Not if her magic acknowledged it.

It was wrong only if it came between her and Jude. She couldn’t risk that.

She froze, unable to speak. She wanted Rafe with them—in every sense of *with them*—but she had to leave that decision up to Jude, who had the most at risk.

Jude answered for them both. “If it’s all right with Elissa, I’d like that,” he said, touching Rafe’s hand. “I...I’m straight, or thought I was. And possessive as hell, or thought I was. So this is fucked up. But it feels damn good. After a couple of near-death experiences I’m inclined to grab anything that feels good, ride it into the sunset and ask questions later.”

Rafe smiled lewdly. “I’m impressed. After all you’ve been through, I’d think you’d need more recovery time. Anyway, we missed sunset. Would sunrise do?”

Jude looked like he was about to come back with something equally suggestive.

Elissa spoiled the moment of sexy male bonding by bursting into tears.

Chapter Thirty-six

"I'm all right," she managed to say through her tears. "I'm just so relieved I didn't ruin everything. It would have been worth anything to save you, but I didn't want...and I never imagined..."

Jude rolled over, taking her with him, so both men could wrap around her.

"Of course you didn't," Jude said, as if he'd actually understood her incoherent attempt to apologize and explain. Maybe he did. He knew her awfully well. "Now go to sleep, my heart. Rafe and I will take turns keeping watch."

He yawned broadly on the last few words. "Dibs on the first watch," Rafe said, adding quickly, "I know protecting her is your job, but you deserve a few hours curled up with your wife."

To Elissa's amazement, Jude didn't argue, just pulled her closer. It had to be a measure of how bone-deep his exhaustion was, because Jude could and usually did dispute anything, no matter how sensible.

Cats, she thought, snuggling against Jude's broad chest. Can't talk sense to them, but can't live without them.

Rafe smiled, kissed them each on the top of the head—then stood back and changed.

Damn, he was one long cat. It hadn't struck her at first because the cougar was lighter and more sleekly built than Jude's stocky lion, but Rafe in cougar form stretched most of the way across the small room. From nose to tail tip, he had to be close to eight feet long.

"Quick learner," Jude muttered. "I'd hate him, but he's too damn nice. And hot, too."

"I'm a little biased toward the other form, if you're going to talk hotness. But he makes a good-looking cougar if you like that sort of thing, which I guess you might." Why didn't it feel weirder to be talking with her husband about how hot some guy was—some guy who'd just made love to them both?

Because this is meant to be, a small, but confident inner voice told her. *You and Jude are right, but you and Jude and Rafe are just a little more right. You're not the first people to fall in love with more than one person, you know. What's rarer is being brave enough to make it work.*

The voice sounded a lot like her Grandma Josie.

More likely, though, it was an inner voice, the part of Elissa that was more Clemens than Donovan, that had gone to Cornell and spent time outside the closed world of the traditionalist witch and learned that normies and other Differents managed their relationships in all kinds of ways.

Even witches who weren't from the big European clans had other ways of doing things, not that Donovans admitted it. The al-Arabi family patriarch was married to four witches and, considering the five of them were largely responsible for averting World War Three, it wasn't weakening their magic.

Her Donovan side was terrified.

Her Clemens side thought it all made sense. Magically and emotionally, two people who loved each other were greater than the sum of their parts. If three people could love—if this was the beginning of love and not some pleasant anomaly born out of joy at escaping death—why wouldn't they be stronger yet?

She lay in the dark, listening to Jude breathe, listening to Rafe's quiet pawfalls and smelling the warm scent of cat, feeling curiously secure despite the danger that surrounded them. She fell asleep to the sound of purring.

They must have switched off their guard duty at several times during the night, but she never woke. Sun streaming through the dirty windows finally roused her to a white world, and she found herself curled in Jude's arms again. He snored softly. Like a sleeping cat, he seemed bonelessly relaxed, yet his muscles twitched under his skin and she knew he'd spring awake at the slightest threatening sound. His color was off, but he looked far better than he had yesterday. The drugs may have messed with some of his abilities, but not with a dual's innate fast healing.

The fast healing, Elissa always thought, was proof of Trickster's very special kind of love for duals. They needed to rebound quickly from injuries because they seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time getting hurt, as often as not because the wordy and animal halves each believed the other was in charge of doing the thinking at any given moment. This struck her as a design flaw.

But that was the only design flaw she could think of in Jude.

She sang a silent, silly chorus of *Jude, Jude, Jude* in her head, celebrating that he was safe with her again.

Okay, hiding in an abandoned house and trying to figure out how to get over the Canadian border when the border patrol was probably waiting to arrest them wasn't safe, but it was as close as they were likely to get for a while.

She snuggled closer, breathing in his scent. It was still off, with a sweet, sickly undertone, but much better than yesterday. He shared his warmth with her, but her other side was cold.

Rafe was up. He was wordside again, naked and doing something by the wood stove. From her nest of blankets, Elissa had a great view of his firm ass and the muscled lines of his back. He was even considerately angled to show off the yummy man-dimple at the side of his hip. In a warmer room, she would have happily lain by one gorgeous man and watched the other, but after a few minutes, the lure of the wood stove proved stronger. Clutching her blanket, Elissa eased away from her husband and headed over to the stove.

Blessed heat! She got as close as she dared. Rafe wrapped his arms around her. She wasn't sure it was all right—there'd been no time to talk, no time to figure out boundaries when there wasn't some kind of magical emergency going on—but with the blanket between them, she could pretend he wasn't naked and enjoy his body heat.

She saw what he'd been fussing with: a small, chipped red enamel pan full of slightly chunky water. Maybe they really had fucked her brains out last night, because she had to stare at it for a few seconds before it made sense to her.

"You're melting snow?" Once she said it, it was perfectly clear. The getaway bag lived in the car, but over the winter they hadn't been able to keep jugs of water there and they hadn't taken the time to grab any.

He nodded. "Thought you might want tea. Or I could make nasty cowboy coffee, grounds and all. Otherwise breakfast's whatever you have in that bag. I didn't look much past the caffeine."

Despite the situation, Elissa smiled. Duals had strange eating habits in their wordside form—unsurprisingly, they loved meat, but they also developed cravings for the most unlikely forms of human junk food, and they loved their caffeine.

"We could probably hit a drive-through safely enough. It's all teenagers at fast-food places, and they don't notice much."

"We're not going anywhere for a while."

Rafe gestured toward the window next to the door she vaguely remembered stumbling through the night before.

A bit of the Highlander's green roof stuck up above a snow drift.

Damn late-season blizzards were always the worst.

"Or," she said, starting to rummage in the getaway bag, "we could see what else is in here. I can't even remember."

An odd assortment, as it turned out. Vienna sausages, which fell under the category of unlikely human food that duals—or specifically, Jude—craved. Instant oatmeal. Lots of dried fruit and a couple of apples. Large bags of homemade jerky, beef and venison alike, that Elissa and Jude had been making ever since it became apparent having to flee out the back door and into the night wasn't just a paranoid fantasy. Chocolate. A summer sausage. Crackers and a can of spray cheese.

Rafe picked up the spray cheese gingerly. "I always wondered about cheese food. What does cheese eat, anyway?"

Jude stirred in his mound of blankets, reached out a hand blindly. "You remembered the cheese food? I love you, sweetie. Gimme."

Rafe pitched it more or less at Jude's head—Jude caught it out of the air without even looking—then snatched a sleeve of crackers from the pile Elissa was making. "Hey, if it's good enough for Jude... Wait a minute, is that *jerky*? Meat in compact, portable form?" Elissa held it overhead teasingly—not like he

couldn't have reached it, but he didn't try too hard. When he did, she jumped, playing keep-away, then tossed it to Jude.

Jude, his mouth full of cheese food and cracker, dove on it.

Rafe grinned and dove on Jude.

Elissa said to no one in particular, "What the hell?" and joined them in the mound of blankets.

At first it was good, clean, giggly fun. The clean part didn't last long.

Long, slow kisses. Hot, melting caresses.

Jude and Rafe each on one of Elissa's nipples, suckling and licking and nipping until she begged for mercy.

She didn't get mercy. She got the two men kissing down her body, one on each side.

They kissed their way down, kissed across her belly.

Then, just as they reached the swell of her mound, they raised their heads and looked at each other.

Elissa's breath caught. She couldn't get used to this, couldn't get used to the idea this was happening between them, that it seemed to be all right, that the two men were as caught up in this erotic mystery as she was.

Like a film clip that should be in slow motion and soft focus, Rafe and Jude stretched so their lips met over her body.

At first it was a gentle brush of mouth on mouth, but only for a second. Then they leaned in, opened their lips, kissed like they were devouring each other with need.

She'd been too foggy-headed to appreciate the view fully yesterday, and the interlude in the Otherworld had faded like an erotic dream that left her wet and aching, but without a clear memory of why.

Now she remembered why.

Elissa had always found two good-looking men kissing hot in a frustrating way. If they were kissing each other, she'd figured all she'd get out of it was a great view. But watching Jude and Rafe kiss so hungrily was different. More beautiful, for one thing, like two nature gods entangled with each other. It wasn't every day you got to see two such gorgeous men in the same place, let alone see them naked and kissing.

What made it even better was they kissed like they were starved for each other, but then turned to her with love and desire for her in their eyes.

Jude's green eyes softened. He blew her a kiss and soundlessly shaped the words "my heart". Then, working together, they nudged her legs farther apart.

Rafe slipped two fingers inside her and Jude began to lick her clit, his tongue almost instantly finding a rhythm that meshed with Rafe's, that meshed with her own.

Pleasure coiled from her pussy and clit, filling her body, filling her heart.

She melted.

It felt amazing to have two men working her over so skillfully with tongue and fingers, but the pleasure went deeper than the physical sensations, great as they were.

Jude and Rafe. These two men. Her husband, whom she thought she'd lost, and the man who'd helped her bring him back.

Her last semi-coherent thought was one of amazement that she fell over the edge so quickly.

She screamed and sobbed. She begged for mercy, but she didn't want it, and that was good because she didn't get it, just got more licking, more fingering, more insanity-inducing orgasms.

With her eyes screwed shut, Jude and Rafe blended together into a glorious whole. She couldn't tell at first whose cock nudged at her pussy lips. Her body didn't much care, but curiosity got the better of her and she opened her eyes.

Rafe.

Jude was poised behind him, the tub of petroleum jelly lip balm from Elissa's purse in one hand and fierce lust in his eyes.

Was he...

Gods, yes. Jude was playing with Rafe's ass. Elissa couldn't see exactly what he was doing, but Rafe looked like he was about to fly into outer space under his own power—and damn, that was a killer-sexy expression, with his eyes glazed and his lips poutily open and his face darkly flushed—while Jude wore an expression of rapt, joyous concentration, like he was doing something fascinating and delicate.

Sticking his fingers into someone's ass, for instance. Opening him, getting him ready for penetration.

From her limited but memorable experience on the receiving end of anal, Elissa had to say it fit the fascinating and delicate bill.

But it couldn't be. Jude would never...

Well, with her, sure he would. Not often—anal sex took her to a dark red place where pleasure and pain blurred, making her magic feel weird and jagged-edged for a day or two afterward—but they'd done it. And she was pretty sure he'd done it with previous lovers.

But they'd been female.

He couldn't be planning to...

He was.

Rafe's face contorted as Jude eased his fingers in. His eyes grew wide, and he sucked in his breath raggedly, a noise that could have been pleasure or pain or some dark and delicious amalgam of both. Elissa realized her own eyes were just as wide, her breathing just as ragged, her pussy and ass pulsing in empathic lust.

For a second, they all froze, Jude waiting for a reaction, Rafe breathing around the new sensation and Elissa staring, unable to look away, her heart racing with shared desire and shared nerves.

Then Rafe let out a surprisingly small whimper of, "More. Please, more. Want your cock."

Jude moved—he must have been inserting another finger, because Rafe grimaced and grinned at the same time. Jude said, “Powers, you’re so tight. Tight and hot and letting me in.”

Rafe growled in response, a noise that couldn’t have come from a human throat. Then he cocked his hips, readying himself for Elissa, angling himself for Jude.

Rafe thrust into her, a hard, delicious push that opened and filled her with one movement, spearing her.

She cried out as sensation surged through her body, as if the penetration released thousands of tiny champagne bubbles into her bloodstream. Pure joy and pure heat.

As Rafe entered her, Jude entered Rafe.

She shouldn’t have been able to feel it, but she swore she did.

The keening cry she heard might have been Rafe, but she was sure it was her last few synapses snapping.

Too tight. Too much.

Too damn good.

Jude and Rafe had talked about it in the night—talked about what Rafe wanted and what Jude finally admitted he wanted, too, reluctantly at first, then with growing excitement.

Rafe had woken him for a shift at guarding the house. In cat form, Rafe had nudged him, the solid, furry head and carnivore breath comforting, familiar. Then Rafe changed, and he’d been naked in the dark with Jude, but what came out of it wasn’t so much a surge of lust as a surge of words. Or rather lust expressed as words and silentspeech, so they wouldn’t wake Elissa by falling on each other like they wanted to.

Jude didn’t understand everything he felt for Rafe, why Rafe brought out desires no other man had. But when Rafe had told him what he’d been dreaming about ever since they’d met, he understood that part.

He understood need. He understood hunger. While he didn’t know what it was like to crave a man inside him as Rafe did, he knew what it was to burn for something you thought you could never have and suddenly realize it was within your grasp.

It had been like that when he’d first met Elissa, when he’d thought a Donovan would never want anything from him and he’d thought he might go mad from desire, and then she’d come to him.

He’d just not realized, until Rafe opened for him, he’d felt that way about Rafe, too. He still didn’t understand why, but the whys didn’t seem to matter.

He understood this gripping heat around his cock, this sense of urgent power and equally urgent need.

Fucking, Jude understood. The lion got it, the wordy got it—there was absolutely no disagreement here. Got the way Rafe pushed back on his cock then pulled away to plunge into Elissa. Got the noises both

the man and the woman made underneath him. Got the heated pleasure rippling through his cock and the thrill of the forbidden, or at least the titillatingly out of the ordinary.

The game itself wasn't entirely new. Elissa liked ass-sex once in a blue moon, and he'd had other lovers who'd enjoyed it, back in his tomcat days.

But it was different with Rafe. Partly because he was a bigger person, so Jude didn't worry so much about hurting him. Partly because Rafe knew what he was doing, knew how he wanted it, felt free to snarl, "Yes, harder," and to move to take in more of him. Probably it was something to do with having a prostate, but Rafe seemed more excited than Elissa or his other lovers had ever been, not just enjoying the I'm-doing-something-naughty head game, but going crazy because he had a cock inside his ass.

Trickster's balls, there was nothing quite like the feeling of a tight, hot asshole contracting around his cock. Not as sweet and wet and rippling as Elissa's pussy, but different and just as delicious.

He was fucking Rafe.

Fucking a man who was fucking his wife, and apparently doing a great job of it. He knew those Elissa-noises, those breathy yelps, those wonderful cries.

He knew what Rafe's cock must be experiencing now, the fierce grip of her inner muscles as she came on him.

He wasn't so sure about what Rafe's butt was experiencing, but Elissa's slender finger felt pretty damn amazing when she slipped it inside him and a dick must be a thousand times more intense.

Lucky Rafe.

Lucky Elissa.

And lucky, lucky, lucky him. Twenty-four hours ago, he wasn't sure he was going to live out the day. Now he was as alive as he could be.

Rafe came before he did, surging into Elissa, crying out so eerily it must have been his cougar vocalizing through the humanoid body. His ass tightened spasmodically on Jude's cock.

Jude bit his lip, trying to hold off long enough to savor an experience he and Rafe might never share again once they left this strange half-world where normal rules didn't apply.

But it felt too damn good.

He growled deep in his throat and came, for the first time ever, inside a man's ass. It felt no more or less head-explodingly good, no more or less blessed, than any other orgasm. But it was with Rafe and that made it unique.

He had just enough presence of mind to roll away before collapsing, which was good. Rafe flopped bonelessly on Elissa, and she didn't need Jude's considerable weight as well. Not that Elissa would mind the weight at the moment, but sooner or later her brain would reactivate and she'd object to being squashed.

Jude stifled a yawn.

Rafe didn't bother trying to.

“You guys!” Elissa teased, her own voice distant and drowsy. “We just woke up!”

“But we didn’t sleep all that much...” Jude said. He pointed to a feeble ray of light that came through the dirty window to dapple their blanket nest. “And there are sunbeams. Cats sleep in sunbeams. All cats, large or small. Right, Rafe?”

“I’m not a cat,” Elissa protested.

“Feline by injection,” Rafe said, rolling so she was sandwiched between them.

She tried to smack him, but was laughing too hard to do more than give a feeble tap.

They didn’t drowse long, but when they woke up, they discovered the tea water had boiled away.

Which gave them an excuse to put on more snow to melt and go back for another round.

Chapter Thirty-seven

By the next afternoon, they were still snowed in, they'd eaten most of their food and they were restless.

Not that the drug of sex was wearing off. It was a damn good drug. The problem was you had to take a break at some point, even if you were a red witch and a couple of athletic duals.

The problem with taking a break was that they'd start *thinking*. Worrying. Wondering if the Agency would catch up with them, and whether they'd be able to defend themselves, and how they'd get into Canada if they even made it that far.

Elissa looked like she was taking it the best of any of them, but Jude figured she was still too exhausted to pace or otherwise show how much she was obsessing.

Jude hid in lion form, sprawled in the feeble sunshine, withdrawn into the stronger body where he felt safer, where he could just *be* for a while.

But even there he didn't feel quite safe. The body didn't feel right. He was bigger than he remembered. Stronger, too, even though it would take about three days of sleep and about two cows' worth of raw meat to feel up to snuff again after all he'd been through.

But bigger and stronger wasn't necessarily good. Not if there was a chance the Agency had tweaked anything else. He could be a time bomb, a danger to Elissa and Rafe.

He couldn't do a damn thing about it except worry and hope he could contain it, whatever *it* might be.

Elissa had tried to see what was still weird and tainted. She'd been able to puzzle out that it was largely magical and thus probably reversible—by someone. Not necessarily by her, though, at least not any time soon. It was sorcerers' magic, different enough that only her knowledge of genetics would allow her to unravel it at all. Examining it had given her a headache bad enough she'd had to sit and meditate.

He wouldn't let her sit next to him, not while he was in this not-quite-right body, so he watched her from across the room. He longed to curl up around her and protect his mate with his feline strength—but who'd protect her from him if someone in the Agency flipped a switch?

Rafe dealt with his tension in more human ways. He cleaned his gun. Counted his ammo. Practiced shifting back and forth. Went out and paced around the house in wordy form, coming back in snow-covered and chilled and grumpy. At least he'd dug the car out in the process and cleared the driveway, using a broken shovel he'd found on the porch and occasionally attacking the snow with his hands.

But they couldn't get anywhere. The main road had been plowed—they could see it in the distance across the glimmering snowfield that used to be a lawn—and the snow was starting to melt, but the road they were actually on was close to impassable.

Jude heard it first and rolled to his feet. He padded to the window, and the others followed.

A plow was clearing their road.

"Freedom!" Rafe crowed, grabbing Elissa's elbow and leading her in a ridiculous jig.

Jude shifted and cut in to dance with both of them.

They could be on the road again. Get farther away from the Agency.

Quickly, they formulated a plan. Elissa would go into the nearest town to pick up a few supplies. With a hat covering her red hair and a mild glamour cast on her—more like a deglamour, Jude joked, since the point was to make her plainer—she'd be inconspicuous. Even without the magics, she'd be the least likely to be recognized by any obsessive CNN watchers in the grocery store, just a tired-looking woman bundled up against the unseasonable weather.

Once she got back, they'd move.

They'd argued to go with her, to keep her safe, but she made a good point. For this, she'd be safer on her own. Glammers could change only so much. They'd still be big guys with dark skin, and that in itself would draw attention in this white-bread area.

That it was completely logical didn't make it easier to handle.

The two men watched out the window as she drove away. Then Rafe went back to alternately fiddling with his gun and pacing. Jude picked a magazine at random from a rack by one of the chairs. It turned out to be a year-old copy of *Good Housekeeping*, but he forced himself to read recipes and parenting advice and articles about people dealing with ordinary problems like bankruptcy and cancer.

The distraction only worked so long.

"How much longer do you think she'll be?" Jude tossed the magazine aside and focused his energy on not wringing his hands or biting his nails or some other unmanly show of the jitters.

And not staring too hard at Rafe.

He did better with the not-wringing-his-hands part than with not staring.

Rafe was pacing, too, and watching him in motion was anything but calming. Too damn easy to imagine the muscles moving under his clothes, too easy to see the cat inside the human-seeming form. Too damn easy to remember pumping into his gorgeous ass.

Or to wonder, as a way of not obsessing about Elissa's absence, how weird and yet hot it would be to let Rafe fuck him.

That was almost as scary in its way as everything else going on, even if it was more the fun, roller-coaster flavor of scary.

Jude repeated the question, phrasing it a little differently. "When do you think she'll be back?" Maybe he'd stop pacing while he talked, and Jude could stop imagining Rafe's body over his.

No such luck. Now he was running his fingers through his hair as he paced, calling attention to its black silk texture. Cop-short though it was, it still managed to look sexily out of control. Just what Jude didn't need.

"She hasn't been gone all that long. She's fine. Relax."

Easy for Rafe to say.

"I know. I'd know if something happened to her, like she does with me." *Like either of us would with you now, like it or not.* "It's just... Dammit, she keeps putting herself on the line for me. For us."

"This time she's just buying food—unless you want to eat worn-out furniture? I don't know about you, but I don't want to risk hunting unless we're really in the boonies." Rafe raised an eyebrow. "I guess we are in the boonies, but I mean farther in the boonies. Or in Canada."

"But it's just that..." He couldn't speak the words. Out loud, they'd sound too corny, too sentimental. *"I hate having her out of our sight."*

It came off better in silentspeech, with all the right overtones of "a pride divided is a pride endangered". And none of what he was afraid might come out if he spoke English, that now their world had shrunk to the three of them versus, basically, everyone. He needed Elissa in ways he'd never imagined. He needed Rafe, too, and when Elissa wasn't around, he needed Rafe too much, wanted to cling and act in ways he dared to do with Elissa, but not with another man.

Silentspeech was safer.

Rafe nodded. "I hear you." He could pick up Jude's silentspeech while in human form, but hadn't yet perfected the knack of answering that way. "I'd rather stay together, even though what she said made sense."

"Maybe she'll get steak," Jude said, trying to distract himself. "I could use some raw meat. Bet you could, too."

Rafe flashed a lecherous grin. "I've got your raw meat right here." Jude couldn't help chuckling, and Rafe said, "Got you to laugh. See, everything will be fine."

Rafe didn't stop pacing, though.

"Then why are you wearing a trail in the floor and twitching like Trickster dropped ants down your pants?"

"Hey, just because I understand doesn't mean I have to like it. She'll be back soon. Hour or less. With that steak you're talking about and, if we're lucky, hot coffee all around. Then we can hit the road."

"Coffee." Jude sighed, but though coffee sounded wonderful, it wasn't really coffee that was making him sigh.

"Soon" couldn't be too soon for Jude.

Every minute apart from Elissa was torture at this point.

And every minute alone with Rafe was torture of a different kind.

As long as Elissa was with them, he could accept the attraction to Rafe. As long as Elissa was in the bed, too, he could touch Rafe and still feel like himself. It wasn't even a question of feeling straight. Dual culture didn't care much about that shit, thinking of it as human silliness that came from not understanding the Powers didn't give a hairball what you did as long as everyone involved had fun. If anything, he felt dumb for not at least giving it a try when he was single and occasionally got hit on by guys.

The sinking realization that it was becoming more than sex, on the other hand, terrified him almost as much as Shaw did.

Tackling the guy and fucking him into next week? That was just good clean dirty fun, with a bonus of turning Elissa on and helping rebuild her magical reserves. Daydreaming about Rafe staying with them, building a new life with them after they got to Canada? Now that was scary shit. He'd never known a lion family with more than one adult male in it, except for the ones that were all guys and that was another ball of wax. Or bottle of lube.

On the other hand, foxes pulled it off all the time. Fox dual women were collectors of fine men and fox guys liked it that way, especially since most of them weren't averse to another fine man, either.

Hells, if it worked for foxes...

Jude hadn't realized how hard and how viscerally he was thinking until Rafe stopped pacing and said, "Does Elissa know you have a thing for fox women?"

Bluff! "I don't, really, but did you know fox girls can keep their ears and tails when they shift to wordside? It's cute as hell."

Rafe grinned. "Sounds sexy to me, like one of those Japanese cartoons. If I'm reborn as a dual, I want to be a Japanese woman. I'm sure it helps you get laid over there, considering the thing they seem to have for chicks with tails."

"You are a bad, bad man."

Rafe stopped pacing, shook his head, ran his fingers through his hair again, but slowly and deliberately, obviously aware he had an audience. "You don't know the half of it yet." He licked his lips.

The world narrowed to Jude and Rafe. Doomed. Jude leaned forward, hoping Rafe would pick up the way his muscles twitched with excitement like a cat getting ready to pounce, and at the same time hoping he wouldn't.

Despite the chill in the house, Rafe refused to wear a coat, just a cream long-sleeved T-shirt that, being Jude's, was too big, but still set off his dark complexion, and black jeans, also a bit too big. Jude had been trying not to remember how the muscles barely concealed by the soft shirt felt under his hands, how the bulge tucked inside those worn jeans felt in his mouth, how it felt to explode inside Rafe's ass. To

wonder if he dared let Rafe try fucking him, even though that might cross a line into unknown territory that looked tempting and treacherous in equal measure.

He'd tried not to think about all that. Now he admitted to himself he was failing.

He bit back the words that wanted to come out. It would be rude, if nothing else, to get something going on while Elissa wasn't there.

"Elissa won't be back for an hour," Rafe said. "You deserve longer than that—but it'll do for a start."

Trickster's furry ass, Rafe was getting as hard to shut out of his head as Elissa was, or he read body language way too well.

"I can't lie to her," he said, knowing Rafe would fill in any degree of non-sequitur.

"No lies." Rafe drew closer, close enough that the heat of his body radiated to Jude's. "Just getting started without her. She'll catch up. Who knows when we'll have a safe place to play again?"

He lifted Jude's shirt, put surprisingly hot hands against his bare skin. Touching, his silentspeech became strong enough Jude could see what he had in mind, what he was craving. It went straight to his cock at the same time it made his stomach flip with anxiety.

Rafe wanted to fuck him. Wanted it badly.

Wanted it enough that the want seeped into Jude, bridging the gap between his curiosity and lust and his fears.

He took a deep breath.

It was just another kind of sex. Edgy, but hot in the way edgy things sometimes were. Either he'd love it or he wouldn't, but didn't he want to get past the fear and find out? He'd known too much real fear lately to let nerves about the unknown get to him.

He trusted Rafe with his life and his wife. Why not his ass?

He'd do it, damn it.

Some of the anxiety turned into nervous excitement. Roller-coaster stuff indeed.

Rafe's cougar growled in Jude's head, but not menacingly. It was apparently the best Rafe, still inexperienced with silentspeech, could do for, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Jude rose. "Maybe we should wait..."

But waiting would mean thinking and worrying. Would mean counting every second until Elissa returned.

That might just drive him insane.

It might have been the need for escape as much as lust that made him draw Rafe into a kiss, but lust took over almost instantly.

Hot sueded-velvet lips. Ferocity he could taste.

When he'd played with Rafe before, they'd toned down their aggressiveness because Elissa was with them and they'd let Elissa take charge. But he'd always been aware he was bigger than Rafe, and on some level he'd imagined that would make him the dominant one if they were alone.

Now Jude felt half-drunk on how strong Rafe really was. More compact than he was, sure, but solid, densely muscled. His equal physically, which was just as hot in its own way as the contrast between his size and Elissa's petiteness.

The kiss turned combative, each one striving for the upper hand in a contest that couldn't have a loser. Locked together, they stumbled toward the nest of blankets where Elissa had concentrated most of her warming spells. Rafe's cock jutted hard against him, and Jude was reminded that while he might be the bigger man overall, it wasn't the case in the personal-equipment department. He was longer, but Rafe was thicker—and thicker, he thought, would make a huge and potentially uncomfortable difference when you were talking about something up your ass.

For a few loud, fast heartbeats, Jude almost balked. Then Rafe whispered, "Don't worry. I'll be gentle."

Jude laughed and said, "Don't you dare!" and tried to tackle him.

It degenerated from there into the kind of wrestling match in which clothing became a casualty, although they both tried not to destroy too much because neither had any clothes to spare. It was all silliness and bluff and guys goofing around. Jude could almost pretend they weren't both naked and hard.

Until he found himself under Rafe, Rafe's hard length rubbing against the crack of his ass, and then he couldn't pretend any more. He let out a feral moan, pushed back against him, tried to open for him.

"Greedy," Rafe whispered in his ear, or maybe it was in his head. "Gotta get you ready for me." He sank his teeth in the muscles of Jude's shoulder.

If someone has asked Jude all of a second earlier, he'd have said he wasn't into pain. But while this might have hurt at another time, it felt good now. Intense. Bone-melting.

While he rode that feeling, the way it radiated from his shoulder to his nipples and down through his belly to his cock, Rafe's hand slipped between their bodies.

Sturdy fingers slick with petroleum jelly teased at Jude's hole, not entering, just stroking.

The cold gel made him gasp, and feeling a finger—a man's finger—in that rarely touched place made him tense up.

But only for a second, because the lion had no such compunctions. The inner lion raised his rear end higher, flicked his tail out of the way and gave in to the sensation. Then again, the lion licked himself there regularly. The lion wasn't big on shame or social taboos. If it felt good, he did it.

Smart cat, he heard/felt, a general feeling of warm—hot, even—approval from Rafe, both wordy and cougar. He should have guessed Rafe would get motivated to finally figure out silentspeech during sex. That way he could snark and tease even when his mouth was busy.

Rafe pushed one finger inside him—slowly and gently, but not too slowly and gently. Hard enough to prove he meant it, and the controlled force, curiously, made Jude relax more than a delicate touch would.

Besides, after the initial shock of “oh my gods, there’s something in my ass”, it felt good.

Really good.

Rafe worked it in and out, reaching spots Elissa, with her smaller fingers, couldn’t.

They were spots that had apparently spent years waiting to be touched. This was beyond good, this was electric and intense, and he swore sparks shot from Rafe’s finger to zap his cock with pleasure. But he needed more. He begged for more.

He got more, first two fingers, then three. He tumbled into someplace dark and hot where there was nothing but him and Rafe. No ramshackle farmhouse, no feeble wood stove, no smell of old smoke and neglect—and no fear for the future. No fear at all, except a slight, pleasurable anticipation about the act to come that sent something bigger than butterflies dancing in his belly. A harrowing of hawks, large and predatory and beautiful. The intrusion hurt a little, but it was good pain, like the one in his shoulder where Rafe still bit him.

But it was time for more. His whole body was on fire, his cock whimpered for release and his anal passage demanded further attention.

“Please.” Jude’s voice came out small and pleading and he didn’t much care for that.

Rafe apparently did, because he chuckled and said, “Beg for it.”

Not happening.

Instead of begging, Jude moved in a way designed to remind Rafe that Jude chose to be where he was and could equally well choose not to be. “Fuck that noise. And fuck my ass. I want your cock, and I don’t want to wait any longer.”

It seemed Rafe liked Jude rough and tough and wanting to be fucked into next week better than Jude small and pleading, because there was a bit more rustling with Vaseline, then Jude was stretched like he’d never been stretched before.

It didn’t exactly hurt, but it burned ominously, as if it would hurt if he gave it a chance. He knew from his experience as the driving end that once Rafe settled inside him, the discomfort would ease into pleasure. “Do it,” he said through clenched teeth. “Just do it.”

“You sure?”

“Gods yes...”

With a flash of pain that, as predicted, faded, Rafe pushed his cock head inside. Jude swore he heard a pop.

Then he just swore, in pleasure and confusion.

So full. So intimate. So amazingly good, especially when Rafe’s hand closed around his cock.

He'd imagined taking it up the ass would make him feel small or submissive or something else uncomfortable. Instead, he felt powerful. Bigger. As if with Rafe inside him, he became Jude-plus-Rafe, a whole stronger than the sum of its parts—like he felt with Elissa, yet different.

Waves of pleasure rolled through him. They weren't just focused on his dick, but maybe more like what a woman felt during sex. His whole body throbbed, inside and out.

The few words he'd been able to muster evaporated and he was lost. Lost in Rafe, lost in feeling, lost in the hinterlands of orgasm. Rafe's body felt different over his, still humanlike but furred, as if Rafe's edges were blurring. One or two brain cells tried to point out this wasn't safe, especially not with Rafe still new to his dual nature.

Jude was blurring, too, not so much his wordside and his lionside as him and the whole damn universe, and his cock was going to explode and he really didn't care what was safe and sane.

Teeth sank into his shoulder again. If it hurt more this time, if it was a real, fanged bite and not a human-style love nip, well, big cats did that and he was a big cat, too.

He cried out as orgasm claimed him. His ass clamped down on Rafe's cock, and Rafe roared, not a human noise, but a mountain lion's, as that pushed him over.

Seconds later, Jude reeled as a fireball brushed him. It mostly missed Rafe, too, but he smelled singed fur.

"What in hell are you doing to my husband?"

Chapter Thirty-eight

Rafe tumbled back into wordy form blindingly fast. Part of Jude wanted to take a few seconds and tell him to never shift that abruptly if he could help it. It must have hurt like a bitch, although maybe getting fireballs flung at him distracted from the pain because he didn't even grimace, just reached for a gun that wasn't there.

The rest of Jude was too busy trying to move from under Rafe and cover him with his own body. Even if Elissa thought Rafe was attacking him or something, she wouldn't hurt *him*.

Jude hoped.

"Easy, my heart," he said, holding up his hands. "Guess we should have waited for you." He was pretty sure that wasn't the problem, or at least not enough of a problem to cause fireball-flinging, but maybe if he said something, anything, she'd start to think instead of react.

It didn't work. "Get out of my way, Jude," Elissa said, her voice hot and tight with rage. "Don't shield him." Drawn up to her full tiny height, quivering with fury, still bundled like the Michelin man, her long hair tucked inside a purple fleece hat topped with a multicolor pom-pom, she appeared more ludicrous than threatening if you didn't know what she was. But an angry witch was a dangerous witch, and he'd never seen her mouth set in such a tight line or her eyes so cold and hard.

"He wasn't hurting me!" Jude stood and stepped forward, planting himself squarely between his two lovers. As he moved, he felt sticky heat where Rafe's teeth had torn him. It didn't hurt—too many endorphins galloped through his system right now, between wild sex and fireballs—but it would. "Okay, he hurt me a little. But it was an accident. Nothing..." He ducked abruptly as a bright streak whizzed over his head. "Nothing to worry about. Right, Rafe?"

He didn't expect Rafe to answer. Every lion bit of him screamed to shift against the threat presented by the crazy witch. Rafe, still not in full control of his cat, would almost certainly be a cougar by now.

Rafe answered, though, the strain of holding himself wordside making his voice tremble. "I'm sorry, Elissa. I thought I could..."

"Thought you could"—another spell zoomed past, this one cold instead of hot—"fuck us both into trusting you"—more fire—"so you could bring the Agency right to us."

Jude stood strong, not even trying to dodge the spells. What she was throwing wasn't lethal. If she hadn't killed anyone at the Agency compound, she wasn't going to start on him or Rafe.

But why was she so damn mad? Her anger stank of pine tar and burning turpentine, and Rafe's pain was cold as iron and bitter as three-day-perked coffee, and between the two of them, Jude could hardly breathe.

Strangling on the cords that bound them together—now that was irony!

Elissa cast another volley of spells, biting down panic. They were coming. Agents were coming. Just miles away now.

One of them was already here. But why wasn't he doing anything but standing there with her husband's blood staining his lips, letting her fling spells at him?

"What are you doing, Elissa?" Jude stepped closer, tried to grab her hands.

She almost weakened. If Jude was being calm and reasonable and trying to talk her down, if he looked so shocked at her behavior, maybe she was mistaken.

No. His brain was sex-fogged and she couldn't trust him to think clearly.

Elissa made a small gesture, a little circle on the air.

He was tossed to the side gently but firmly, like a cub whose mother has had enough of its antics. "Don't stop me, Jude. Help me. He's got a tracking device. And once I dropped my guard and the illusions, they've been able to use it. They'll be here any time. But I've got to get him to tell us how many are coming. Give us an idea of what we're up against."

Rafe spread his arms into a cross, the perfect target. The perfect sacrifice.

She choked on his beauty. How could it still move her when she knew he was setting her husband up for slaughter? He was a murderer who'd killed her friend, and yet...

"I love you both," he said. Something tugged inside her—on her heart, on her womb—as if he was stroking the copper cord she'd seen linking the three of them, trying to prove his feelings.

It only proved Rafe knew more about the metaphysical than he'd pretended. That he'd been lying about everything.

"You know it's true, Elissa. I've been bound to you since your magic sucked me into your kitchen. I don't know what's gotten into you, but I'd never hurt either of you."

She closed her eyes and felt Jude die again.

She tried not to feel, or smell, or remember in any way, Rafe helping her bring him back.

It didn't make sense. None of it made sense.

Especially not the part where she still felt for him.

She tugged on the copper cord, tried to rip it away from her spirit. It felt like tearing out her aorta, and she fought not to crumple from the pain. "Rafe Benedict, what have you done to us?"

"Me? You're the one who's going crazy. If the Agency's coming, why are you wasting your time throwing fireballs at me? Is this because I fucked your husband?"

"Only as a symbol." If he hadn't shifted yet, maybe he wasn't going to right away. Maybe this was all part of his plan, to distract her with reason and the beauty of his body long enough for the Agency to get here.

She drew closer and began to circle him counterclockwise. The most basic of binding magics, but with luck he wouldn't realize it until it was too late. "I wouldn't care that you fucked Jude except it was part of fucking him over. Gaining our trust. Planting tracking devices. Leading the Agency to us. Killing and half-eating my friend Anthony so the Agency could blame Jude."

"The fuck!" Jude found his voice again. He ran to her, tugged on her arm. Charged with sex, even that touch set her magic dancing, but she shook him off. "Elissa, you can't believe that. Shaw killed Anthony. I saw it, I think. I didn't put it together until now because they'd already drugged me, but I remember."

The second circling. "But who ate him? And who else could have betrayed us? They're coming. It's all over the news. They're on their way here, and it's probably too late to run, thanks to the assistance of a 'cooperative insider in the Geneva police department'." She made air quotes, imagining the little brackets binding Rafe in place to strengthen her spell.

One more circle and he would be trapped. She could question him, probe him...

Rafe moved, a blur—but not at her or Jude.

He snatched up his laptop and flung it through the window with a roared "Jeannie!" Antique glass shattered on a surprisingly musical, decorous note. "Damn the bitch!"

Some detached part of Elissa took the time to be impressed at how aerodynamic a laptop could be.

"Your IT buddy? Convenient to blame her. She's not here. Her girlfriend's a dual. Why would she—"

"Think about it. The Agency probably threatened her girlfriend. She always said Marisol pushed her luck."

Elissa lowered her hands. "It's believable," she said. She tasted rotten eggs and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, making it hard to speak.

"More so than me helping get Jude out so they had to capture him again."

"It could be a test. Maybe they wanted to see what he'd do in the field. Then you set him up so you don't just hurt him, he lets you hurt him, to make it easy for them to take him." It didn't make sense, even as she said it.

The sulfur taste dissipated, and it was easier to speak. Something pricked inside her brain, but she couldn't make sense of it through the dark swirls of fury and worry.

Rafe stood naked in front of the open window, a cold breeze ruffling his hair. A bit of flying glass must have caught him, because a thin line of blood marked the cougar tattoo over his heart. "If you believe that, why don't you just kill me? You could. I'd let you, Elissa. If you trust me so little, why don't you just do it?"

Jude spoke for her. “Because trying to kill you would destroy what she is and make her Agency fodder. If Elissa’s right, and I don’t want to believe it, that’s why you’re trying to provoke her. You know you’re caught, and you have to offer them something to keep them from killing you for your fuck-up. A tamed Donovan witch as well as me might keep you safe.”

His voice lowered to a growl. Elissa instinctively drew back, keeping close enough to continue the spell if necessary, but not getting between the lion and his prey.

Jude stepped closer to Rafe, let his claws come out through his human form. Rafe wasn’t a small man, but Jude loomed over him. Elissa held her breath. An enraged Jude could be a lethal weapon. “You know what? Our kind can kill. Doesn’t bother us one bit. We’re fucking predators. You and me both. But a lion’s bigger than a cougar, and I will kill to protect my pride.” He rested the claws of one hand on Rafe’s throat, the other on his chest.

Rafe’s eyes widened and flickered to catlike amber, but he didn’t move.

“What’s it going to be, Rafe? Do you stand with me as my friend and my lover to protect her, or do I kill you where you stand? Because right now, I can go either way.”

There was something alien in Jude’s voice. Something frozen.

Oh, Elissa knew he would kill for her if he had to, but he’d do it with passion, the way he did everything. There was something wrong with his voice, with his body language, with his hulking form, made graceless with over-large, bulging muscles. With the cold, flat gray of his eyes—Agent Shaw’s eyes.

The air smelled of sulfur and ice.

Suddenly her own volatile mood, the bad taste in her mouth, made far too much sense.

Mind control was sorcerers’ magic. Usually they had to be near you to make it work, but Shaw already had a conduit to Jude—and indirectly to her. With the sorcerer working through Jude, her defenses didn’t block the mind control properly.

Shit.

The good news was that now that she recognized it, she could fight it. Strengthening her shields was elementary magic. She’d made what her teachers would call a typical white-witch mistake: worrying so much about everyone else she forgot to protect herself. Someday she might take the time to beat herself up about it. Not now, though.

She envisioned a castle rising around her and Jude, keeping intruders at bay. Immediately she felt better.

Jude was starting to shift, only piecemeal. His mane and muzzle took the place of his human hair and mouth, and half his back sprouted tawny fur. One leg shifted to lion, but not the other. He staggered, started to fall before he changed it back. He wheeled around, raised his hands to Elissa imploringly. His leonine mouth opened, but no sound came out—he could neither roar nor form human words.

No way. No fucking way.

The room roared and tinged red. "No!" She turned toward her husband, raised her hands in a gesture of warding.

Called upon the powers of love and lust, of green things waiting beneath the snow, of all the families that had ever laughed in this old house, and pushed, using the energies she'd called up to defend their castle. "You will not have him!"

There was a half-second where she felt ridiculous, like Gandalf on the bridge shouting, "You shall not pass!" to a demon. That hadn't worked out so well for Gandalf, and she was no fictional mighty wizard.

Then something changed. The drawbridge went up, the gates clanged into place and for good measure archers shot darts of prickly magic after the retreating foe.

Jude half-sat, half-fell with all the grace of a rag doll dropped by a toddler.

But his eyes were the right color again, and she no longer tasted sulfur.

Rafe's form shimmered as he shifted to cougar. Shimmered? Weird, although not weird enough to make it onto the long list of things she had to worry about right now.

He sprang toward the broken window.

Fleeing to the enemy?

As if he knew what Elissa was thinking, he paused and turned his great feline head toward them. To her, his cougar eyes were unreadable. Predator's eyes, but who was the prey?

He sprang through the window, taking out what was left of the glass. "Do something!" Elissa exclaimed, even though she knew she was better equipped for ranged attacks. She raised her hands and started the paralysis spell, hoping to hit him before he got out of its limited range.

Jude clutched her ankle. "I hear him," he said. "You can't lie in silentspeech. He's on our side and he says he can smell the bastards and is going out to meet them. To give us time to run."

He added in a voice that had been left to rust in the rain, "He loves us."

That and Jude's touch got through the dark fog still clouding her brain.

She sank to the floor next to him, curled herself against his broad chest. His arms closed around her. He trembled, the shakiness of illness or extreme fatigue—or magical rebound—but he held her tight and she could feel his great strength underneath it, held in reserve.

Only then did she realize how much she was shaking herself from the spell's toxic residue.

Tears fought to get out, but she wouldn't let them. Crying wouldn't solve anything.

For a few seconds she let herself rest in the illusory shelter of Jude's arms and gave him the illusory shelter of her touch, until they both calmed enough to function.

She forced herself to pull away and stand. "Come on," she said, offering Jude a hand she knew he wouldn't take even if he needed it.

"Are we running or fighting?"

Her instincts told her to run. Drive like mad, stick to minor roads and head north by indirection. Even without her full strength, she was good enough to keep an illusion up for some time. The back roads in this part of the state were winding and convoluted and in some cases imperfectly mapped. There was no way the Agency could have them all under surveillance, even using magic. And northern Vermont had townships that had numbers instead of names. They couldn't be that far from the border.

She didn't have time to raise power properly for a fight. Red magic was her strongest—red and green, but with the land locked in unseasonable snow, she could only call on so much green power. And she couldn't very well stop to have sex while every passing minute put them into more danger.

She imagined voices in the rushed beat of her heart: every member of her family who'd ever pointed out that she was weak for a Donovan, that she took after Grandma Josie as a jack of all magical trades and mistress of none, that "it's a good thing plants like you, dear", a good thing she had a head for skills normies valued and a personality that let her fit into the normy world.

Not good enough for a battle like this. Not without preparation she didn't have time for.

Or spirit for. She ached where she'd tried to rip out the link with Rafe. She was stupid, too, on top of everything else, not to trust her own heart.

The sun reflected brightly off the new snow, but the world turned dark...

Demons and devas, that bastard was trying to do it again. That he got so close when she was prepared and shielded not only proved he was powerful, but that she was...

Distracted and fucking terrified, she told herself firmly, before she started another downward spiral.

A cold wind blew through the broken window. It cut through the crap in her brain, both Shaw's spell-tendrils and her own insecurities, cut straight through to the problem.

Rafe was out there, putting himself between them and the bad guys like the cop he was. Only these bad guys were far beyond the average criminal.

"The idiot left his gun behind," she muttered, snatching it up from the broken table where Rafe had left it, holding it like it might bite her. She handed it to Jude. "You know how to use this thing? Or do we hold onto it until we can give it back to him?"

"Fighting. All right!" He cracked his knuckles. His pecs moved distractingly as he stretched. His eyes gleamed, a lion on the hunt. Her lion. And she'd be the lioness at his side.

"Fighting, then running." She started haphazardly shoving clothes and food into the big backpack, including a dirty pan complete with dried-on dollops of oatmeal. "We can't stop the Agency, just this bunch of them. And we'll need our stuff while we're running. But we can't leave Rafe out there alone."

Jude nodded and got to work.

They were packed in under a minute.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Rafe's tracks led down what had been a secondary driveway but was now just more of the snowfield surrounding the house, distinguishable only by the tall pine trees bordering it, a once-neat hedge that was now an overgrown mess.

The overgrown mess made good cover, though, with snow-laden branches curving down to the ground in some places. Fortunately the air held no human scent other than Elissa's.

Rafe had been bounding, Jude could tell, big, quick leaps through the deep snow.

Almost looked like he'd been having fun despite everything. Which he might have been. Once in cat form, worry and anger and everything else tended to dissipate in favor of the moment.

Lucky bastard. Cougars were built to move through snow. Lions, not so much.

And humans? Forget about it. Call it a slog. Elissa, at least, had it a bit easier than she might have—he was breaking trail for her.

They'd slogged a short distance when Rafe slipped between the trees. Elissa squeaked and jumped, which would have made Jude laugh if he hadn't been startled himself. Damn, a cat that big shouldn't just...materialize the way Rafe just had.

Rafe shifted, seemingly unbothered he was naked and barefoot in the snow. "I've scouted them out. The side road's blocked. There are scouts all around—I took out two. But the main force is at the end of the driveway, getting ready. The cold-eyed bastard's with them. I could feel his cloud of doom and gloom."

Elissa nodded. "He was messing with my mind when I got so crazy before, and if he can do that to a witch, you guys need to be extra careful."

Jude snorted. "You're the one who needs to watch out. As long as we're animalside, I'd think we'd be pretty safe."

"He's got a line into you, Jude." Elissa's voice was tight. "I think I blocked it, but you should still be cautious."

He nodded. "But Rafe should be all right. Shaw's human. He thinks like a human. How's he going to know what scares a cougar or a lion?"

"Being alone." Rafe's voice was softer than usual. "Alone without a mate, without your family... Deserted." He took a deep breath then expelled it in a whoosh, forming a white cloud in the cold air. "That was what I was picking up, what he was trying to make us feel."

Jude shuddered visibly, pulled Elissa close.

“Good thing he doesn’t know much about cougars. We’re comfortable alone.” Rafe’s voice was studiously nonchalant.

Something twinged inside Jude. He wouldn’t blame Rafe for backing away, not after having fireballs flung at him, but Jude wasn’t about to let him. Not unless it was truly his choice. Cougars might be comfortable on their own, but why settle for comfortable when you could be loved and happy?

The lion chimed in with his own images: hunting together, lounging on rocks in the sun, watching clumsy, huge-pawed cubs tumbling over one another.

Silentspeaking those images, although he wasn’t sure how well Rafe would pick them up, Jude reached out his hand to Rafe and Rafe allowed himself to be reeled in. Rafe, naked but still radiating heat, settled against him, snuggling against his side like he’d always belonged there. “Comfortable alone?” Jude said out loud. “You feel pretty comfortable right here.”

“Doesn’t mean we *prefer* being alone, just that we can handle the idea better than some. Doesn’t make the idea of losing your friends any easier.” He buried his face against Jude’s chest, a brief gesture that told Jude just how well he had—or more to the point, hadn’t—handled Shaw’s emotional assault.

Around Jude’s stomach, Rafe reached out to Elissa, who clasped his hand and said, “I’m sorry. I...”

“Blame Shaw until proven otherwise. We already know he’s fucking with us,” Jude cut in.

He couldn’t actually hear the forces massing against them, but the fur hidden inside his wordside form was standing on end. “No time for this. Rafe, you want clothes and your gun?”

Rafe shook his head. “The cougar feels right. But keep the gun handy, Elissa.” She touched it like it might bite. Smiling, he instructed her how to stow it so it would be both safe and easy to reach.

He pulled away from Jude, getting ready to change again.

There might be no time for words, but there was always time for the important things.

Jude pulled him back.

Kissed him, trying to convey trust and apology and forgiveness and all the tangled feelings he hadn’t had a chance to sort out—that he could only pray he still would have a chance to sort out.

Rafe wrapped both arms around him and melted into the kiss.

Lord and Lady love Trickster, the man knew how to kiss. Knew how to fuck, too, but this kiss was really getting under his skin, opening up something inside him. Rafe’s tongue was whisky and velvet, and his lips were shockingly hot—his whole body, for that matter, as if he wasn’t naked in the snow.

Delicious.

Jude’s body sent urgent messages that wanted to override his brain’s insistence they keep this quick. The snowy world brightened, even though dusk was fast approaching, and he could see shades and colors in what had looked all white and brown and gray.

Oh, yeah, time to pull away. This was the kind of stuff that happened when he was with Elissa and her red magic was kicking in—unbelievably good, but not something he had time for.

He let Rafe go, reluctantly—and basically shoved Elissa into Rafe's empty arms.

Elissa sputtered. Froze. Started to say something. Then she pressed herself against Rafe's naked body, on tiptoe in the snow, and kissed him like it was the end of the world.

Jude tried not to think too much about that simile.

She turned to Jude once she let Rafe go. Her eyes were smoked over as she said, "Your turn, my heart."

She felt so small in his arms, but at the same time so strong. She still sported the ridiculous hat, but paradoxically it added to her beauty. Her body quivered, not, he thought, from cold or fear, although either would make sense. Something tugged inside him, as if that silver cord she talked about was swelling, twitching, making it clear they were bound together. "Now and forever," he whispered, his lips against hers.

He heard her in his head. "This life and always, my heart. No matter what."

His cock twitched, and she tilted her pelvis against it.

Fire lit. Colors surged. His senses sharpened so he heard the snow creaking, heard a stream flowing nearby, hidden under ice but moving. Birds twittered. He hadn't noticed birds until now.

Common sense fled, pushed aside by images of taking her now, taking her in the snow, with Rafe there, too, loving them both. He groaned, ground against her, gripping her so hard he half-feared, half-hoped he'd bruise her even through the many layers she wore.

He smelled heat, smelled her herbal smell and under it her arousal. Wet. She was wet, ready for him. Ready for him and Rafe.

And, he realized as she reluctantly pulled away, ready for *them* as well. Power scented the air around her.

"Let's do this," Jude said. "I'd rather choose my ground, but..."

"Something you should know," Rafe said, directing it more to Elissa than to Jude. "There's a graveyard at the edge of the property. It's pretty overgrown—big shrubs and what look like big old-fashioned rose bushes and wild grape vines all tangled in the trees."

Jude held his breath. The plants, human-oriented plants gone wild, some of them with their own defenses she could turn to her need, would be invaluable, but the graveyard... She'd always rejected that side of her power.

"I think," she said, her face set and hard, her eyes narrowed with determination, "we've found our ground. Can you work with it?"

Jude's heart swelled with pride in his brave lioness. He took her hand between his. "I'll stand wherever you need me to, my heart."

Rafe laid one hand over their clasped ones. "Me, too."

For an instant, they were all silent. Jude couldn't read minds, but he knew what he dreaded, and he was willing to bet the thoughts of the others followed a similarly dark path.

Rafe pulled away. "Let's go, then," he said, his voice almost cheerful. He shook himself. He shimmered strangely. A cougar stood where the man had been.

Jude took the seconds of Rafe's transformation to steal another kiss from Elissa before letting his own lionside out.

Two big cats and one human headed for the old graveyard.

Chapter Forty

Weathered headstones poked through the snow at drunken angles. Elissa didn't take the time to look at them closely, and in any case the light was fading. Before she'd fallen into this madness—was it only a few days, give or take a century, since Rafe had been sucked into her kitchen?—Elissa had gleefully noted the lengthening days, counting down to the balance point of the vernal equinox when her power would strengthen with the turn of the season.

Now all she saw was the gathering dusk, and all she felt was the wintry chill in the air.

A warm image entered her mind: three big cats snuggled together, and she was the one in the middle, the female sandwiched between two big males.

She looked from man to man—or rather from lion to cougar—but neither of them displayed the telltale feline-being-nonchalant signs that would help her peg the party responsible. Most likely it was Jude, because it took skill and a close bond to use silentspeech or something akin to it with her human mind. But Rafe was a special case. He didn't have a handle on some ordinary dual abilities, but at the same time he had tricks most of his kind did not.

"I got the point," she said out loud, figuring they'd probably been "chatting" outside her range of perception all along. "We're in this together. We're a team. Think positive thoughts. Think family."

Family.

Where family was, heart was. From heart, Grandma Josie always said, you got hearth and home. It wasn't orthodox Donovan teaching, but Grandma had been an avid traveler and had figured out tricks to keep herself safe on the road.

You couldn't exactly ward the great outdoors, but the graveyard had boundaries delineating it—a fence and even a gate, although it hung by only one rusty hinge.

Elissa pulled on the cords, the silver and the copper, calling upon the power implicit in their connection.

Hearth. Home. Heart. Lord, Lady, let all that is mine be encompassed, enclosed, under your protection. Safe. She added a prayer to Trickster for good measure.

She set bubbles of protection around each of them, bubbles that would move with them as they moved. Imperfect shielding, only marginally useful against bullets, but better than nothing. She charged the fence, turning it into a barrier against ill will.

It wasn't much. It wouldn't slow a powerful magic-user like Shaw, and wouldn't do much to a real fanatic who had no doubt about the mission. But anyone reasonable would be blocked, at least for a little while, forced to stand outside and think of their own family.

Family. This must be a family burial plot. On this isolated farm, what else could it be? There had to be a way it could help her.

She glanced at one of the gravestones. Most of it was hidden under snow, but the bit she could see bore, instead of an angel or a weeping willow or any of the more typical antique-gravestone imagery, a distorted androgynous face, smiling and crying at the same time—Trickster, seeing his/her children home.

It wasn't just any family buried here. It was a dual family.

That might make her work harder. Duals, with their more direct connection to the Powers, didn't linger as ghosts, unless they'd died hard, like Patti had, or left young children behind. But if generations of a dual family had lived and died here on this land, *something* would linger. Call it a collective unconscious. She didn't know if she could tap it, but she could damn well try.

This land, the trees and shrubs and vines, had been nourished by the flesh of duals, perhaps planted and nurtured by duals. There had to be something here she could use.

Elissa closed her eyes, reached deep inside herself, tapped into that seed of hot desire sprouted by kissing Jude and Rafe.

Warmth surged through her, a fluttering of red magic. It needed more force behind it, but it was something.

She tapped into the land, and reached. Reached for the plants, reached for the dead resting in the frozen earth—for their not-quite-human bones, their animal-tinged memories.

The world blurred around her.

Heat rose inside her, but at the same time the cold of the grave circled her. It wasn't menacing, more like pups investigating, sniffing at her and the two felines, but it smelled like old bones and half-frozen soil and ancient rot.

Rafe wailed.

The sound was enough to make her want to fall to her knees and cover her bleeding ears.

She'd heard tales of cougars screaming, how it could be mistaken for a woman being tortured. It didn't sound like a woman, didn't sound like anything human, but it certainly sounded like something being tortured in body and soul.

Half her instincts shrieked to go comfort him. The noise was almost unbearable, the fear he was falling apart worse. But she didn't dare. The magic required all her concentration now. Not to mention that if Rafe lashed out in his panic and anger, acting from instinct like a real cougar, no amount of magic would save her.

Still Rafe screamed, grating her nerves, jarring her concentration, underscoring her own barely calmed fears about dealing with the dead.

To her relief, Jude moved closer to Rafe, his immense black-maned body pressing close to the cougar.

She held her breath for a second. Were they actual big cats, she couldn't imagine contact doing anything other than provoking violence from the enraged cougar.

But Rafe fell silent. His fur still stood on end, his tail still twitched violently, but he seemed visibly calmer.

If she stretched, she could have heard their silentspeech, or at least enough of it to get the gist of how Jude soothed him. But she resisted the urge.

The dead—wolves, she thought—crowded around her and they needed her attention.

Something brushed against her. It wasn't cold anymore, but a breath of faint warmth in the cold air, as if they were starting to remember life, remember they were supposed to be warm. Images half-formed, blurry shapes neither humanoid nor lupine, but wavering between both.

She sensed sullen curiosity, as if the dead duals resented being called forth yet wanted to know why she was here, here with two who were almost but not quite their kind.

They sniffed at her. It was enough to set off waves of near panic. Enough that her heart beat seemingly hard enough to bruise her ribs and her gut wrenched and she wanted to scream like Rafe had. Wanted to run. Wanted at least to send them back to earth and try to find another way.

Snowmobiles roared in the distance. They were closing in. No time to come up with another way. Better do it, then, and figure out how she'd done it later. Always worked for Grandma Josie.

Except for when it didn't. She wasn't going to think about those times now.

She opened her mind, tried to lock wills with the swirling forms. She found nothing coherent to lock on. They were memories and impulses with no real mind or personality remaining.

How the hell did you work with that? Aunt Bath might know, but Aunt Bath was on the other side of the country.

The snowmobiles sounded closer. She couldn't see them, but maybe that was part of their damn technomagic.

Maybe Aunt Bath could explain by cell phone? If she hadn't left her phone charging on the kitchen table in her hurry to get to Jude, she was desperate enough to try it.

To Elissa's astonishment, Rafe shook himself and stepped into the swirling mass of spirit energy. His fur stood on end, his tail slashed the air, but he forced himself forward until he stood next to her, his flank pressed against her side. The fine, energetic tremble of his big body shook her.

She tasted clean, pine-scented power.

Tasted it and grabbed a tendril of it—it was so healthy and green-smelling she had to be able to use it, even if she had no idea where it came from—and shoved it into the dormant shrubs and vines in the graveyard.

Rafe had always thought ghosts were cold as the grave, but these weren't. Cooler than life, but warmer than air. That was the first surprise.

No, make that the second. The first was that as soon as he yielded to the compulsion to try to communicate with the spirits, blind terror lost its hold on him. He felt yoga-calm, like he was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing and he knew every step of his path, which was damn weird considering he was pulling all this out of his furry ass.

The memory of fear's acrid stench hit his nose under the scents of earth and ancient decay. The spirits were as frightened as he had been. More so, because they were about as dumb as a box of dirt and had no clue how they'd gotten where they were.

He probed, wondering how he knew how to probe. Another one of those things he'd think about later, if he had a chance.

No, they weren't dumb, just incomplete. Bits of spirits, the part that belonged to this world rather than the greater part that moved on to the Otherworld when you died. They knew they'd been summoned for a purpose, but they couldn't communicate with Elissa.

He didn't know what to do, but he made his best guess. These were duals, or bits of duals. Alive, they'd thought in images.

He opened his mind and showed them the Agency.

Showed them black sorcery in government hands.

Showed them Jude tortured, and Patti dying alone to protect her mate and cubs.

Showed them making a difference—and showed Elissa as the one who would let them make a difference.

Targeted rage crackled like ozone in the cool air—the cool green-scented air.

Elissa worked her plant magic. Spring was coming to this patch of earth.

Something weird was happening to him, too. Make that something *else* weird, on top of being able to communicate with ghosts and talk to deer and sometimes find things, like the farmhouse, that he shouldn't have been able to see, and all that other seriously bizarre shit. He heard the green magic whooshing around, prematurely awakening slumbering vegetation. He heard what Elissa whispered to the plants in their own language.

Something in his own spirit answered the call, made him want to throw himself into the magic and help nature arm them. It was even stronger than the call to help the dead had been, and it sang along his synapses. He didn't know what to do with it, but it was seductive.

Seductive, but not for him. This wasn't Rafe Benedict's life. Staking out a cemetery waiting for a showdown with magically enhanced bad guys wasn't all that far from life as a cop. He just had different weapons. Facing the bad guys in the form of a cougar was new and strange, but at least he'd always known the cougar was part of him.

The magic-type stuff, on the other hand, hurt his head. He wanted to block it out. Block out the plant and earth voices, block out the ghosts. More to the point, block out that he'd managed to talk to the ghosts when Elissa, who was *supposed* to be a ghost-whisperer or whatever Donovans called it, couldn't. Block out the way the magic teased him, suggesting he could do it, too, if he only tried.

Duals didn't have humanlike magical abilities. He'd think if some mutant freak dual did develop human-style magics, it would be while he was in wordy form.

Certainly not while he was in cat form, his reasoning and verbal functions diminished, his instincts in the forefront. Everyone knew magic-using genes were linked to certain types of verbal intelligence, even though using them properly also called on intuition, what witches called the sixth sense.

Then again, he shouldn't be thinking this wordily in cougar form.

Enough to make a guy wonder what the fuck was going on.

He wasn't going to have time to ponder that big, big question, though, because the Agency posse barreled through the gate, guns drawn.

For not quite a second, he regretted his choice of form. Regretted he didn't have his weapon. He was—had been—the best shot in the Geneva police department, better than the guy who'd been an army sharpshooter. Even on Drozz, his reflexes and vision had been superior to most humans. With a gun in his hand, he felt safe.

But the Agency had no quarrel with the Rafe Benedict who carried a badge and a gun, because that Rafe was the guy who followed the rules and took his Drozz and turned himself into a good little imitation descendent of monkeys.

The Rafe who had a problem with the Agency had fur, and fangs, and big-ass claws, and jaws that could snap necks.

He gathered himself, gathered his energy. Felt his muscles bunch and twitch.

Said a prayer to God, Goddess and especially Trickster, and felt an answer as he never had in years of going to a human church.

Leapt at the Agency flunky unlucky enough to be in the lead.

He heard screaming before he lashed with his claws.

He lashed anyway.

Jude issued a warning in clear images: *"Play with your prey until it gives up, but don't kill it. It's not good to eat"*—the mental image was eating a toad and getting sick—*"and once it stops moving, it's no fun anyway."*

The prey stopped moving pretty quickly once Rafe pounced on it, although it didn't stop screaming. In any case, it stank of pee and voided bowels, and what feline would put up with that if he had a choice? Sheesh, humans. So messy!

Luckily there was plenty of prey for him to play with.

Some of them had guns, which would have been scary except they didn't always remember how to use them.

When a bullet did hit him, it just stung like a big bee and he ignored it.

He hit the human who shot him a little harder than he'd meant to, and the human fell over, blood gushing from a torn throat. Oops. Accidents happened, and at least the fool human wouldn't be around to shoot his pride-mates.

After that, he lost words.

The rest blurred red, except for the gray of dead wolves flowing past him to surround their attackers and invoke the terror only things long dead can invoke, and the tawny gold of Jude, his brother, his lover, his mate, fighting by his side and the green blur of energies that was Elissa.

Rafe smiled as a cat smiles, showing his fangs, and another enemy began to scream.

All around them, spring was coming—with a vengeance.

Chapter Forty-one

Power welled up from the earth, from the plants Elissa revived and commanded. The snow didn't simply melt from the heat; it sublimated, turning instantly to steam. She directed it into the eyes of their attackers.

More surprisingly, power surged up from inside her, a deep, hot well as if she'd been working passionate red magic. There was no way she should be able to raise that kind of power without sex.

But she was. When she had time, she'd say a prayer of thanks to the Lord and Lady and especially Trickster. But right now, she was busy.

Directing wildly twining grape vines to rip the guns from agents' hands, binding them with grape vines, or with the nastily thorny canes of wild-grown rambling roses. Setting branches in their way. Making sure those who ran away, spooked by the ghosts, would get no peace from the local vegetation. Chasing them on their way with goutts of Brigid's fire.

Only a few shots had been fired, and her plants had made those go wild. The agents who'd been taken out of the fight, either by her magic or by the guys tackling them, seemed to have all the wind knocked out of their sails. Some raised their hands in surrender. They were guarded by roses and ghosts, frozen in place by spells. Others had fled.

It was all too damn easy.

There were a lot of agents—twenty, maybe more—but Shaw had apparently brought along raw recruits. Not one of the men had a trace of magical ability—human-standard auras, all of them. Most looked terrified to start with, easy victims for ghosts and mobile plants and displays of showy but not especially dangerous magic. They weren't even very good shots. Some of them were still doing their best to fight, but even she could tell their best wasn't very competent.

Shaw wasn't with them, even though Rafe had spotted him earlier.

Shaw wasn't that stupid. Crazy, maybe, but not stupid. And yet he'd sent in the black-ops version of the Keystone Kops and wasn't there to back them up.

Which meant he was trying to soften the three of them up, make them use a good chunk of their energy before he even showed his face. Maybe he'd found some new trick, a weapon so powerful he felt his victory was assured.

That was it. He was holding back, waiting for them to weaken then hit them with something they couldn't possibly resist...

Or, she told herself firmly, he was fucking with their minds again, making them sweat from a safe distance. Setting his cloud of doom and gloom on them so they gave up when they had a chance of winning.

Elissa sucked in more energy from the green things around her. It was a loop, a cycle, giving them energy enough to grow, then taking back some of what that growth generated.

One of the roses had started to bloom out of season, out of time, and the sheer surprise of that light clove and silk fragrance at this time of year made it seem even stronger.

The sun was setting.

Her heart leapt inside her and she remembered what day it was: the vernal equinox. The last night of winter was beginning.

“Too bad you won’t live to see spring. Your pet cats I have use for. You, not so much—except to eat your soul.”

She heard the voice in her head, tasted sulfur and blood.

Shaw’s and not Shaw’s.

He was here, or very near. He’d snuck up, somehow. Tendrils of dark magics surrounded them. So far they lapped impotently at the wards, but she couldn’t imagine that would last. Not with Shaw here.

Why couldn’t she see him? There was no such thing as a true spell for invisibility or she’d have used it a lot lately.

She used her witch-sight, stared wildly around. She should be able to detect him if he’d cast a don’t-notice-me type spell.

Nothing except Jude cornering the last few hapless agents.

Rafe drew closer to her, shifted so abruptly it made her head spin. Rafe was naked in the snow again, but it didn’t seem to bother him. His eyes were still cat’s eyes, slitted and focused on something she couldn’t see.

“I smell him,” Rafe said. “Can’t see him, but I can smell him. He stinks. Sulfur and ice and death. And I can hear him moving. I know where he is. Give me my gun.”

Her breath caught. “He’s playing with you. You can’t shoot something you can’t see.”

He flashed fangs in his human smile. “Want to bet?”

Maybe he could shoot something invisible. She was willing to believe his reflexes were that good.

If this wasn’t another elaborate head game on Shaw’s part, designed to make them destroy one another. If Shaw was actually there, if she could *find* him somehow, she might be able to do something that wouldn’t risk, oh, Rafe shooting her or Jude.

She handed Rafe his gun, but said, “Point him out. I want to try something first.”

He pointed.

She focused. Hard, harder than she'd ever focused in her life, bringing her witch-sight and all the power of the equinox and the awakened land to bear.

Saw an outline: Shaw and not Shaw. Shaw with glowing eyes, a gaunt face, the swollen belly of famine and vestigial wings.

She'd vaguely wondered, as they'd fled the compound, how Shaw was going to get the sluagh back under control. Apparently, it had worked the other way around.

Wonderful. Now they were dealing with a sociopathic sorcerer controlled by a dark fae.

That would explain the magically null agents chosen for this mission. With no understanding of magic's darkest possibilities, they might notice their boss was acting more vicious than usual, but literally wouldn't see the changes in him, or would write them off as anger because his big experiment got away.

He was more powerful than ever, thanks to the sluagh.

And the sluagh had a body again, a body that couldn't be contained inside wards.

"Ah, now you understand, little witch. Your soul smells like herbs and rainwater. It's sparkly. I wonder how it will taste. And my companion will break your men and rebuild them, and if they do not survive, I will eat them as well."

The grotesque Shaw-figure licked its lips and took two steps closer.

It flowed in a way a human body shouldn't and an unseelie fae should, in a way both disturbing and beautiful.

An unseelie fae was a being from another world. And this was a time when the door between worlds was open, a time of perfect balance. That might make it stronger—but it made her stronger, as well. The damn thing was trespassing in her world. That had to give her some kind of advantage, if only she could figure out what that advantage was.

Then she noticed the cemetery fence poking out through the snow.

The pointed wrought-iron cemetery fence.

"The gun, Rafe. But wait until I tell you. And tell Jude to be ready to pounce. No biting, no clawing, just pouncing and pushing."

Rafe glanced at her, then in the direction she was staring.

"What are bullets made out of, anyway?" It wasn't something she'd thought about.

"Lead. Sometimes steel-jacketed." Grim understanding crossed his face. "It matters, doesn't it? Shaw's not human."

"Unseelie fae," she mouthed, hoping his police training had covered the fae, who operated according to unpredictably alien rules. The well-intentioned ones, the seelie, were dangerous more or less by accident, because even the laws of physics could get strange around them. Add malice and they could screw you six ways to Sunday. And while they weren't quite immortal, they were damn hard to kill in this world. "Pass it on."

Would the guys understand what she needed them to do?

A vivid image appeared in her mind: a bleeding body on the fence, a satisfied lion and cougar smirking at it.

All her training rebelled at the idea of killing a sentient being. But if there was a human soul left inside Shaw's body—if he hadn't been devoured from the inside, leaving a shell with his memories, entirely controlled by the sluagh—it would be a blessing to free it.

Shaw wouldn't see it that way, but if they couldn't banish the sluagh any other way, there wouldn't be much choice. A sluagh-possessed sorcerer was too dangerous to let live.

She prayed to the Lord and Lady for guidance, prayed to Trickster for good measure.

She could believe Trickster's touch was behind so much of this, behind her and Jude meeting Rafe and falling for him under such crazy circumstances. "Trickster gives a gift with one hand and a slap with a dead haddock with the other," Jude often said, with curious respect in his voice.

They could use a cosmic dead haddock right now. What they had was her and a righteously angry lion.

And a few bewildered ghosts.

And some pissed-off plants.

And a naked cop with a handgun.

It would work, though. Trickster loved stories like this.

Mind you, the cosmic dead haddock might smack them on the backswing, but she'd take that chance if it smacked the bad guys harder.

Chapter Forty-two

Elissa closed her eyes and reached for the silver cord and the copper one, feeling the three-way connection pulsing with nervous energy. She reached for the energy of the earth. Of the setting sun. Of the moment of balance that approached: night and day in perfect union, one season past and the next waiting to be born with the sunrise. Of the moon phase—a perfect half-moon would soon be visible in the rosy silver sky, although the last light still concealed it.

Reached for the plant energy, sending thorns and vines chasing for the Shaw-thing with an audible rush.

The remaining members of the Agency brute squad dove out of the way, some of them shooting at the plants as if that would do any good. The brighter ones tried to shoot at her, but the bullets deflected. It occurred to her to wonder if her own shields were that strong or if the sluagh was saving her for a snack.

Better to believe in the shields.

A blast of eldritch fire hit the thorny rose canes snaking in from the left. They went up in cold purple flame, but in the light of the blast, Shaw became briefly visible.

Rafe took aim.

Jude advanced, snarling, his body low to the ground, his tail twitching.

While their motion distracted Shaw or the sluagh, wild grape vines snaked in from overhead and wrapped around him, binding his arms to his body with lightning speed.

With any luck, that might distract the Shaw part of him from casting immediately. With luck. Fae *were* magic, and didn't need to concentrate to cast a spell anymore than a human needed to concentrate to breathe. She just hoped Shaw wasn't at that point yet.

The vines went up in smoke, but as they did, Shaw became clearly visible.

He raised his hand, pointing at her heart. His lips moved.

Three things happened at once.

Rafe shot, three blasts in quick succession.

As if on a signal from Rafe, Jude leapt as Rafe lowered the gun.

Elissa pushed back and up.

No other spell, no pyrotechnics, no fire or ice—just putting all the force of her will and the power she collected and the energy of the equinox into a child's training spell, an exercise in moving small objects that adults used only when they couldn't reach the remote without waking the toddler or cat in their lap.

But what could pull could also push, especially when helped along by the impact of three bullets and the weight of a lion. Shaw flew backward. But not high enough.

Jude's claws raked at him. When he moved to follow up with a bite, Elissa and Rafe screamed "No!" in one voice.

He listened, an equinox miracle. Even wordy Jude didn't take direction well.

Elissa prayed for forgiveness. She might never be able to cast again after this night—her magic might become too corrupt to use safely—but she was ending this. What could push and pull could also lift. She called on the plants for help. Vines hoisted Shaw as she threw him up—and dropped him hard on the iron fence.

Not hard enough, though. He was caught, injured, but not impaled. Not enough to kill a near-immortal fae.

All her instincts wanted to believe this was enough. She was trained not to shed blood, trained not to kill.

Fortunately, Rafe and Jude weren't witches.

Another shot rang.

Jude's claws caught the squirming body, pushed it down. Rafe tossed his gun aside and shifted to cougar blurringly fast. Two leaps and he added his strength to Jude's.

The thing that had been Shaw screamed horribly, and she screamed with it, stabbed through the gut and the ribcage with iron stakes.

Jude shifted. "Fuck you and the ghoul you rode in on," he said, looking down into the Shaw-thing's eyes. "We end this." He pushed. Pushed hard. At the same time, Rafe's great jaws tore out the sorcerer's throat.

So much blood. So much screaming, abruptly cut off.

They'd killed. All of them together.

"It's okay," a gentle male voice soothed in Elissa's mind. *"In the end, I did it. Sometimes the only way to keep innocents safe is to kill a criminal. I took on that responsibility when I got the badge and I didn't give it up with the badge."*

Exhaustion hit like a sledgehammer, and Elissa sank to her knees in the snow.

Maybe it would be all right.

They'd just killed a Federal agent, or a creature everyone thought was one, which wasn't going to make their lives easier, but maybe it would be all right. They had Maggie's files, evidence of Shaw's crimes—the computer might be in a snowbank, but Rafe had saved the files onto several different flash drives and they hadn't gone flying with the computer.

The body on the fence exploded into a gray, powdery mist.

Inside the cloud, Rafe screamed that terrible panther scream. "Shit, he's hurt," Jude called.

It barely registered. All Elissa could do was kneel in the snow, panting, wondering that the snow around her wasn't covered with blood. The wounds were imaginary, but still throbbed dully, as if she'd slipped into shock.

Rafe cried out again, a weaker and more human cry this time.

"Oh, no you don't, fucker," she said, her voice hoarse. She realized she'd been screaming the whole time Shaw writhed on the fence.

The mist took on a vaguely humanoid form. They'd killed the body holding the sluagh, but not the sluagh itself. Maybe it couldn't be killed in this world. Fine, she'd send it back where it belonged. Somehow. She couldn't stand. Her legs were floppy and weak as seedlings. But it was the equinox, when all was in balance—a perfect time for getting something that didn't belong in this world out of it.

She cast back into her memory for a spell she thought she'd never need, one she remembered only because the rhythm of the Gaelic words had stuck in her mind. As far as she knew, no Donovan had come up against an unseelie fae since the 17th century.

Until now.

"This is not your world," she chanted in Gaelic. "It is ours, heart, hearth and home. We cast you out by cold iron, by the blood I have shed, by my will, by the power of love, which you cannot feel. You are banned from this world for three centuries and three, and when you return again, the children of my blood will ban you again."

The cloud laughed at her.

"No children for you, little witch. One of your men is dying, and the other can't give you babies."

A taunt. That was all it was. Rafe could not be dying.

But why wasn't the spell working?

Duh. It was a Donovan spell. *The blood I have shed* didn't mean the blood of others. It meant her own, given for the good of those she loved. She hadn't bled in their defense. Rafe and Jude had, but she was unscathed.

Maybe the sluagh knew the spell? It might have. Who could say if it had eaten some unfortunate Donovan in a past century?

"1496, in your terms. He was delicious."

It figured she'd end up dealing with an enemy who wasn't just evil, but a wise-ass.

"Jude! Come to me!"

As he bounded the few leaps it took to get to her, she tried to convey what she needed.

She had no weapons, nothing edged to shed her own blood. Jude had spent the past five years learning not to hurt her. He was going to have unlearn it, and fast.

"Trust me," she said, looking the lion in the eyes. "I need you to make me bleed. The magic needs self-sacrifice." She held out her arm.

He shook his head. Then he looked back at Rafe, sprawled in the snow, and nodded.

In lion form he couldn't say "I love you", but she felt him say it, lion-fashion.

He did what he had to do. She winced, but schooled herself not to cry out as his claws raked through her parka and into her flesh.

Breathing shallowly, she shrugged off the ruined parka. Jude had good control. The wounds were just deep enough to let her blood drip onto the snow.

Her voice shaking, but as loud and as strong as she could make it, she repeated the spell.

Nothing happened.

Try a third time. The ancients were big on groupings of three.

This time she swore she heard other voices echoing the words, not quite accurately, but close enough. Swore she felt, through the silver cord and the copper, a lion running a pack of jackals out of his pride's territory and a cougar, wounded but still fierce, taking down a hunter.

The cloud wavered.

Jude's lion-body shuddered and altered itself down to its normal configuration. He roared with pain then stopped and glanced down at his new-old form. His ears flicked as if he approved.

"Go!" Elissa screamed hoarsely. "Go back where you belong!"

With a howl that defined despair, the cloud vanished.

With it all but five of the living agents did as well, and the one who lay dead in the snow. The living five looked wildly from one to the other and ran toward the road, slipping clownishly in the snow.

Exhausted, Elissa didn't even try to stop them.

Illusions. Shaw and the sluagh had them wasting their energy on illusions, mixing in just enough real people to confuse her magic and the guys' noses. That explained so much. The fae, seelie and unseelie, were masters of illusion, good enough to fool even a witch who wasn't busy fighting for her life.

Jude shifted faster than he could usually manage, scooping her into his arms before his mane settled into dreadlocks, before his eyes went fully human. "Your arm..."

"Will heal. It's not bad. Thank you." Her throat felt raw.

She wanted to lean against Jude's chest, to snuggle there forever. He felt right again, the strangeness in his aura smoothed out with Shaw's death, confirming Shaw's sorcery had been the force behind the drug cocktail. Still, Jude was naked in the snow, and he was bothered by that sort of thing, unlike Rafe.

And Rafe... "Rafe's okay, right? That was another lie, right? Another illusion?"

Jude said nothing, but the silence itself was an answer.

She forced herself to look.

Rafe sprawled in the snow. It was impossible to tell if the blood around him was his own or the Shaw-thing's.

"Put me down!" Elissa ordered, but Jude was already running with her in his arms.

Rafe was back in wordy form, his skin green pale. He opened his eyes as they knelt next to him.

"Bullets don't hurt me anymore," he said, somehow producing a weak echo of his roguish grin. "Pretty cool, huh? I got shot, but they bounced. Check this out."

The four bullets he'd pumped into Shaw were strewn on his naked form, with small red dents under them.

"Too bad it's not true for shrapnel." Jude almost managed to sound teasing. Almost.

He couldn't quite pull it off with one of the fence spikes stuck in Rafe's thigh, perilously close to the femoral artery.

Night was falling, and Rafe's blood poured into the snow. He needed a hospital, but there was still an APB out on them, and Elissa's meager healing skills might have been lost or corrupted when she helped kill Shaw.

"You healed me," Jude said as if he read her thoughts or her body language. "You and Rafe. Brought me back from the dead, just about. And we took care of you. We can do this."

"I don't dare to do magic, just first aid. We'll have to chance a hospital."

Hospitals had to report gunshot wounds, but puncture wounds were another story. Hospitals had a tendency to check IDs, though. That would be bad.

As she tried to stanch the flow of blood, Elissa prayed, hoping someone would still accept her prayer. Jude ran to collect her ruined jacket.

"Easy there, love," Jude said, talking to both of them, but holding Rafe down.

She pulled out the spike, trying to pretend he wasn't screaming, then immediately clamped the jacket over the wound and applied pressure. The thick fabric turned red.

Some bleeding was good, right? It would help cleanse the wound.

Was he up on his tetanus shots? Duals might not be prey to all the ills humans were, but, like felines, they could still get tetanus. She hoped she could keep him alive long enough to worry about that.

Rafe insisted he could walk, but in the end, Jude carried him back to the relative shelter of the house.

"Not safe here," Rafe insisted weakly. "They know..."

Then he passed out.

Chapter Forty-three

“Do something!” Jude urged, setting Rafe down on a wobbly plaid sofa with one charred arm.

The temptation to say “duh” was strong, but not helpful. Barking, “I’m exhausted and my healing, which wasn’t too great in the first place, may be kaput,” wasn’t exactly useful either.

When you’re desperate, there’s not much to do except try.

Elissa took a deep breath, closed her eyes, reached for Jude’s hand. “Help me,” she whispered. “I’ll need all the strength I can get.”

She tapped the earth and swore it groaned in exhaustion. The plants she’d called into bud and bloom out of season were fading—she’d been too distracted even to thank them properly—and either she was too weary to call on the power of the land again or the land itself needed a rest after being pushed prematurely through the seasons.

“I can’t...” No. She could. She had to. “I will. Somehow. But Jude, I’m so tired.”

“I believe in you,” he replied. “I believe in us. All of us.”

She concentrated and felt his love flowing into her, bolstering her confidence and her powers.

Flowing into Rafe, offering the wounded man some of his strength.

Love was all she had to offer at this point. Heart, hearth and home and the cords that joined them, because try as she might she couldn’t muster anything stronger than that.

“Silly, what’s stronger than love?”

She swore it was Grandma Josie’s voice.

Dammit, she’d wielded Brigid’s fire. Why was she so powerless now?

What had fueled Brigid’s fire but love and desperation, the same forces she had to work with now?

Brigid was also the goddess of healing in the Celtic pantheon.

“Powers, don’t let Rafe die,” she prayed.

Jude squeezed her hand.

She added to her prayer. *“Please, he’s become my heart, as Jude is my heart.”*

Following a magical intuition she hoped was right, she opened her eyes, looked at Jude, asked point-blank, “Do you want Rafe in our lives?”

Jude did a fine imitation of a gaping fish. Then he swallowed visibly and said in a barely audible voice unlike his ordinary roar, “Yes. I... It’s like when I met you, Elissa. I met Rafe and someone turned on the lights so I can see everything more clearly.”

That told her almost everything, but she pushed him for the words. "Do you love him?"

"Do you?"

She checked the two simple words for accusation or reproach. She found none. "I think I do. It's really soon, but I can see him in our lives forever. But I love you more than ever. Crazy, isn't it?"

Jude wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to his scarcely clothed body. "Thank the Powers! I thought I was losing my mind, because you're my world, but I've fallen for Rafe. Hard. I want to see if we can make this work, all three of us. So yeah, love's a good word for it."

A surge of warm red strength passed from Jude into her. "And we're not letting him die. Keep your hands on me, Jude, and keep thinking about the future. Our future. The three of us, together."

She laid her hands on Rafe's wound, let the heat pass through them into Rafe.

Imagined Brigid's fire, but in a healing form that burned away infection, stopped bleeding, knit tissues. Imagined the force of Jude's feelings and her own tugging on Rafe, pulling him back from the Otherworld.

Rafe let out a long, rattling sigh.

That sounded bad.

To the universal force of death, she said no.

She pulled on reserves she didn't know she had, pulled on Jude through the silver cord and poured any strength she found there through the copper one.

A presence tickled in the back of her brain.

Rafe's watching ghosts, waiting for him so they could all cross over together?

"No, please. I'm not letting him go. We need him. We love him. I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait a while longer for him."

A ghostly hand rested on her head—a small one, she thought, a woman's. Another placed itself on her shoulder, cold but large and strong-feeling.

"It's a day of power," she sensed. *"Perhaps we can help."*

Cool, clean air filled the room as if they were in a remote forest. Magic flowed into her, unfamiliar but friendly. It felt similar to green witchcraft and similar to the little she knew of beast magic, but not exactly like either. Most instinctual, less learned and controlled, alien in some ways, but it found what she was trying to do, fit into the gaps where her skills were weak or her power was drained.

Drums throbbed in the distance.

Shamanic, some small part of her brain reasoned. Shamanic or maybe elemental, an actual force of nature as opposed to magic powered by a force of nature.

As if one of his parents was human—but that wasn't possible, was it? Not unless he was something other than a dual. But in that case, what was he?

Did it matter at the moment? She didn't want to think about anything but Rafe safe, didn't want to do anything except breathe *thank you, thank you, thank you* as Rafe's bleeding slowed and his breathing became regular once more.

Elissa stepped outside herself. She wasn't Elissa Donovan, or Elissa-and-Jude, or even Elissa-and-Jude-and-Rafe, but a channel for unfamiliar forces—forces that wanted Rafe alive. She was pretty damn sure what the reason was, and it was the same as hers and Jude's: love.

The room blurred. Jude's grip on her tightened, but that was all she knew for a while.

When she came back to herself, both men were holding her, one on either side on the awful old sofa. In the dim light of their Coleman lantern, Rafe still looked pale—but when she asked, he showed off a mostly healed wound. “How the hell did you do that?” he asked. “I felt myself slipping away, but now... I mean I'm sore, but okay.”

“I don't think I did it,” she admitted. “Rafe, remember what I said about your parents' ghosts being close to you? Let's just say they love you very much, and they have a few tricks I'd like to learn.”

Very peculiar tricks, too, which raised questions she couldn't answer, but they had more important things to worry about first, such as staying ahead of the Agency.

One thing might be more important yet.

“I'm all right to travel,” Rafe insisted. “Let's hit the road.”

She smiled and said, “First things first. I love you. He loves you. We're not letting you go unless you insist on leaving. Okay?”

Rafe's jaw dropped and his eyes went wide. Then he laughed—not mocking or defensive, but a sound of pure joy. Through the laughter, he asked, “Do I get a choice in this?”

Jude joined in the joyous laughter. “Do you have a problem with what Elissa said?”

“Hell, no. In fact, I'd like to show you both how little I have a problem with it, but I don't have the energy.” He yawned.

“You're both sleeping while I drive,” Jude said.

When Rafe didn't argue and Elissa handed over the car keys quietly, Jude said, “Now that proves it. Sex is great. But letting the lion drive shows love.”

Elissa chuckled. “You don't know how true that is. Perfect love and trust. But only until I've had some sleep.”

They headed north toward Canada and the first day of spring.

Epilogue

They'd left the car behind them somewhere in the nebulous region where Vermont blurred into Canada and had crossed the border on foot. Rafe led the way. He'd never been there before, but something called to him, leading him on. Jude was dubious at first, not keen on being guided by vague premonitions, but Elissa backed him up. "It's his parents," she insisted. "Remember, I met them. They're powerful. Freaky powerful, like witch ghosts who keep a lot of the magic they had in life. I'd buy that they know this part of the world."

If someone had told Rafe he'd someday be guiding his lovers through a wild area of Canada based on information being fed to him by his dead parents, he'd have laughed. The crazy thing was, it seemed to be working.

It wasn't easy going—the days were pleasantly cool, but the nights were frigid and the snow was still deep in places. The men shifted to sleep huddled around Elissa to keep her warm.

They were deep in the woods when an old woman's voice, strong but with the slight quaver of age, called to them. "Oh good, we found you."

It came from nothing they could see.

Rafe jumped out of his skin. They were alone in the snowy world. Trickster's tits!

Cop instincts were more ingrained than dual ones. Faced with an unknown threat, Rafe drew his gun—and realized he had nothing to shoot at.

Elissa's posture went defensive, and he suspected from a slight tingling, a sense that his cougar's fur was ruffled, she was setting up defenses around them.

The tingling came and went fast as a thought, though, and from the look on Elissa's face, things weren't working quite right.

Jude threw off his coat and shifted, the rest of his clothes shredding as he flowed from form to form with a grace that made Rafe ache despite his rising panic. Jude bared his teeth, getting ready to spring as soon as there was something to spring at.

Rafe kept aiming at...nothing. At the direction from which the voice had come. At this point, he figured the gun was nothing more than a security blanket, but maybe it would do some good eventually. If not, he'd try cougar form.

They all froze at the disembodied chuckling coming from the trees around them. It wasn't movie-villain cackling, more like an old lady laughing at children's antics, kindly and indulgent, but ready to scold or spank if things got out of hand.

It chilled Rafe's blood and warmed it at the same time. The disembodiedness was unnerving—a couple of lifetimes in Elissa and Jude's world might be enough to get used to that kind of thing, though he doubted it—but the sound itself was sweet.

It evoked memories that couldn't be his own, memories of a grandmother cuddling his infant self. Not his adoptive mother's mother, who'd died before he was born, or his adoptive dad's mom, who'd come out from Cape Cod to visit a few times a year, driving her sunflower yellow convertible, always smelling like oil paint and ocean, a baseball cap on her cropped iron gray head. This memory involved his baby hand grabbing a long, white braid. This memory smelled of woodsmoke and pine and sage and...something like Elissa, only more so.

Like magic.

Smells and sounds and colors all grew clearer.

Words in a language he didn't understand filled his head, words he knew were names of what he saw around him. White pine. Cedar. Maple. Sky. Snow. Deer. Lovers. Family.

Something shattered inside him, but in a good way. It reminded him of going off Drozz, but with the suppressed senses hitting all at once instead of gradually. A door in his head, previously shut and locked, blew open—a strong gust of wind, clearing out cobwebs and rickety old barriers.

He knew what people meant when they talked about the sixth sense. He'd always had keen intuition, even on Drozz, and it had been stronger since he'd stopped taking it. But when Elissa talked about a seventh sense, about what she called witch-sight, he'd been confused. Her explanations had made it worse.

Now he got it, only he couldn't make his mouth work to say he got it. He wanted to take her hand and let her feel it, but he couldn't move. He wanted to holster his gun, but the signal wasn't transmitting from his brain to his hand.

Everything in the universe was connected. Everything had magical energy. Everything spiraled back to the Powers. If he squinted just right, he could see it all.

Which would probably make his head explode.

Once, he'd had to deal with a kid they'd all thought was tripping on something. Turned out he was a genetic-sport witch in a normy family. One day his witch-sight turned on without warning.

They'd pulled him off the ledge before he'd jumped. Barely. For the first time, Rafe understood the poor bastard.

Rafe focused his new weird sense on the speaker, or rather on the fact he couldn't see her. Someone or something moved among the trees. Rafe couldn't make out the shape, but it was there, in a blurry not-

there way that suggested it would be invisible to anyone else. It felt strong and ancient, yet fresh as a sunny spring day.

"I can't draw power here." Elissa spoke quietly, but her voice cut through the silence. "Something's blocking me. It's not unfriendly, just protective. This land's loved, and it loves back. It doesn't want to give me any power until it's sure I'm not dangerous."

Rafe nodded. He sensed what she was talking about: a cool wall, and behind it, warmth and affection and the power of wilderness.

"Stand down," she said to Rafe. Putting her hand on Jude's back, she repeated her words, stroking the fur as if she hoped the touch would calm the lion-brain even if her words weren't sinking in.

Rafe lowered his gun. Should holster it, he thought, but that was as far as he got. His brain was overwhelmed, all the circuits scrambled.

The figure in the trees stepped forward into sharp focus. Extremely sharp focus, like some kind of movie special effect, and the forest seemed to tilt toward it.

Not it. Her. Standing before them was an old woman dressed in what looked, to Rafe's untutored eyes, to be traditional Native American clothes: a deerskin dress, leggings, white hair in long braids wrapped with leather strips on the end. She was tiny, not just wizened with age, although she was that as well, but an actual little person, a midget.

No, not that either. She might be tall for whatever she was, because she wasn't human. Her features were subtly off, her eyes a solid brown like bark. She was alien, and yet, to Rafe's heart, familiar.

To his new witch-sight, she glowed with power.

"Manitou," Elissa breathed.

Glad she knew.

"Not precisely, but close enough." The implied "for a white human" was strong, but not unkind. "Welcome to Canada, Dr. Donovan, Mr. Duclos. We've been expecting you."

Elissa punched the lion's shoulder until he transformed to his other shape.

The manitou shook her head and exclaimed with the unabashed glee of a woman old enough to be beyond shame, "You *are* a magnificent beast. I envy you, girl. The two-natured ones are awful on clothes, though, aren't they? Here."

She waved a hand idly and Jude was dressed in a male equivalent of her own outfit, deerskin trousers and shirt, soft boots. "I had a lot of practice with that spell, once upon a time," she said, her voice softening.

She turned to Rafe. "And look at you, all grown up and so handsome and strong," she said, her voice quavering like any old woman's in the grip of strong emotion.

Her face turned misty, as if that was her equivalent for unshed tears.

Something clenched inside him then melted.

Once again, memories flooded him, only they couldn't possibly be his. A grandmother. Parents. A home entirely different than the ordinary suburban Syracuse ranch house in which he'd grown up: a rustic log home scented by forests and sage and magic.

And then violence, the copper smell of blood and darkness.

He couldn't possibly remember anything like that. He'd been adopted at six months.

But he did.

The old woman took a few steps toward him. "We've sought you for so long, but there was no way to reach you until your loves helped you find who you are."

Rafe gaped. It almost made sense, but he still couldn't believe it.

She turned back briefly to Jude and Elissa and smiled like a ray of sunlight through mist. "Thank you. You would be sheltered here in any case—my trees like you—but now you will be as family."

Elissa reached out, found Jude's hand. Jude tried to reach for Rafe, but Rafe still couldn't unclench his fingers from his useless gun.

Rain began to fall, but only around them.

Warm rain. The nature-spirit's tears.

His grandmother walked over to Rafe. She didn't leave any footprints, not in the mud, not in the wet snow. She beamed at him.

Rafe thought he knew about love. His adoptive parents and sister loved him enough to accept he wasn't even the same species they were. He loved them back and regretted he couldn't figure out how to let them know all the wild stories about Rafe Benedict, rogue cop, weren't true. He loved Elissa and Jude more than he'd ever known it was possible to love someone, let alone two people.

But he'd never seen love like what he saw in her face.

She smelled like home, even more than Elissa and Jude did.

His grandmother touched his hand and his gun dropped from his nerveless fingers into a puddle. She took his hand between her two smaller ones.

Rafe looked down at their intertwined fingers. Her hand was tiny and wrinkled, but the skin color and even the shape were similar.

Then he looked in her eyes. His brain reeled.

Before he could force the witch-sight shut, he saw a cougar wearing a necklace of shells and bear claws, decidedly a dual in animal form. An achingly young, tiny woman with a cougar's eyes and a not-quite-human face. A handsome man, scarcely more than a boy, with Native American features similar to his own and a glow that reminded him of Elissa's. Saw something that—Elissa would know better than he—might have been the double helix of shared DNA.

He knew what the old woman would say before she did. He still couldn't quite believe it, but he knew.

"Raphael Abooksigun Three-Bloods. Welcome home, grandson."

Three-Bloods.

So many things that hadn't made sense did now. He wasn't dual, or not entirely. He certainly wasn't human, but he had human blood. Witch or shaman blood, he'd guess. He was...whatever his grandmother was. A nature being of some kind.

He was different even by Different standards. But looking into eyes that shifted from bark to spring leaf and glancing over at his lovers—Elissa wept openly and Jude was doing the manly stoic thing but he was close to losing it, too—Rafe knew that was fine.

He folded his grandmother into his arms.

The rain fell harder as they both cried.

But not for long. His grandmother patted him on the back, then pulled away to glance at Elissa and Jude, and then at him. "This is so exciting. As if having you come home at last isn't enough, it's been forever since we've had a three-way wedding."

"We're... Elissa and I are already married, ma'am," Jude said in a painfully polite voice.

"You love my grandson, don't you?"

She looked from one to the other and it was obvious she didn't need their spoken yeses to know the truth. "I already know he loves you both. So you should all be married. Plain as mud. Complicating important things like love is for humans, not people like us."

Rafe nodded slowly and let his newfound grandmother shunt him into his partners' waiting arms. Not that he didn't want to be there, but he'd have been too stunned to object in any case. Whatever his grandmother was, she was a force to be reckoned with.

They took him in, and he could feel their joy, their confusion and most of all the love radiating from them. He saw, for the first time, the cords connecting their spirits, the ones Elissa talked about.

A three-way wedding? In a heartbeat, if they'd have him.

"Let's get you back to the longhouse. We've family for you to meet and a wedding to plan." Grandmother started leading the way, then turned and grinned at them. "And a cradle to build, if I don't miss my guess, though we won't need that for..." She squinted at Elissa's flat belly. "Probably eight months, although it depends on what species the baby is, and even I can't see that yet. Might be something new altogether—you probably have some fae blood with that fiery hair, and who knows what that'll do to the mix."

Three voices spoke as one: "What?"

"It seems pretty simple. You're having a baby, dear."

"How? I'm human and they're duals." Elissa's voice wavered.

Grandmother put a hand on Elissa's head. Short though Elissa was, she had to stretch to do it. "I guess it's complicated after all. Raphael is my grandson and the grandson of a two-natured cougar and the son of

a shaman of the Algonquin nation. He's three-bloods, able to give you children because I'm an earth spirit and we're all about fertility. Now you do want this baby, the three of you, right?"

One by one, they nodded.

Grandmother grinned. "Wonderful! Come along, my dears. Must get you settled. No time to waste!"

About the Author

Teresa Noelle Roberts started writing stories in kindergarten and she hasn't stopped yet. A prolific author of short erotica, she's also a published poet and fantasy writer—but hot paranormals are her favorite.

When she's not writing, Teresa enjoys belly dance, yoga, playing in the ocean, cooking, and growing more vegetables than she and her husband can possibly eat. She shares her home in southern Massachusetts with a handsome Leo who works in law enforcement and three immense housecats. In terms of pounds of meat purchased and volume of fur vacuumed up, it's practically the same as living with a lion.

To learn more about Teresa Noelle Roberts, please visit www.teresanoelleroberts.com.

Giving in to the lure of passion could lead to disaster.

Lycan Tides

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Guardians of the Light, Book 3

Selkie princess Finora is all too familiar with betrayal. Betrayed by her curiosity, which led her from the sea. By her body, which yielded to a handsome human under the full moon. By the human, who hid her skin and took its location with him to his grave. After seven years of searching, she no longer believes in miracles.

Trystan is a werewolf on a mission to find and return dragons to his homeland. He follows a slim lead westward across an unfamiliar sea. Gravely wounded in a pirate attack, his ship foundered in a storm and sinking fast, he comes face to face with the most unexpected rescuers—Finora and her two half-human children.

Selkie and werewolf. Both creatures ruled by the moon. The attraction is instant, mutual, undeniable...and impossible. Trystan is destined to return to the mountains and Finora can't leave the sea. Their only gift to each other is one night of searing passion—which could lead to the greatest betrayal of all...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Lycan Tides:

What had she gotten herself into? Finora crossed her arms to hide her shaking hands and watched Trystan's broad back lead the way into The Mermaid Pub. The tightness in her womb, the wet heat betwixt her thighs, shocked her. The full moon was last night. The burning need should have been over. She wasn't supposed to respond to a male out of time. Of course, four years was a long time to go without. 'Twas the selkie way to indulge that part of their natures. 'Twas the easiest way to trap them, as she'd learned to her sorrow.

Why now? Why *him*?

Her lips still tingled from his kiss. She quivered at the thought of sharing her bed tonight, of limbs entwined and hot skin sliding against hot skin. What was it about Trystan that made him impossible to resist? She should have put her foot down and left him in town to find his own way. Was it because he wasn't human, either, but a fellow creature of the moon?

He *was* safer with her, away from eyes and questions. But was she safer with him? Ioain wasn't the only one at risk for a broken heart. *He's not staying long. He has a mission to complete, then a family and home of his own to get back to. A family of his own...* "I made a promise t' someone back home, a promise t' keep," he'd stated.

"Trystan, wait."

He turned at the doorway, a question in those piercing blue eyes.

Stars, those eyes...

"The someone back home whom you promised. Is it a woman? Are you married?"

"A woman? Aye. But a wife?" He shook his head and smiled. "Nay, lass. Were I bound t' another, I'd no' be stayin' with ye an' the littles. 'Tis no' me way. Me folk back home have but one mate. There's no one awaitin' me return."

One mate per male? In her world the strongest bulls got the most cows. A bull could have many cows in his household, but each cow answered to but one bull. A pang struck her. A course being stuck on land, with Bran gone, she'd had an uncommon spell of freedom. None to answer to, making her own decisions. A small rebellious part of her—the part that had caused her to disregard her sire's warnings so long ago—reveled in that freedom. Even as she yearned for the sea itself, she dreaded going back to the harem, to being just one of many in her sire's household, until he shipped her off to some other bull.

Why her heart flipped at Trystan's unbound status she didn't know. 'Twas of no consequence to her. "You've never taken a wife?"

His eyes twinkled. "I've been asked. But I've ne'er been tempted t' say aye."

Stop talking now. You're making a fool of your— "What? You mean to tell me your *women* do the choosing? And they *ask*?" Finora knew her jaw was surely hanging down around her knees, but she couldn't seem to close her mouth.

"The clans are each ruled by a headwoman. The women govern an' each decides who they wish t' take as a mate an' father their bairns. Doth a mon piss her off enough, a lass is free t' release him an' choose another."

"What do the men do?"

He shrugged. "Whate'er we're good at. We hunt, scout, craft, defend. Those o' us that be guardians, though," a shadow crossed his face, "are sworn t' the clans as a whole. That be above any bond t' one woman. There's no' many women who relish the thought o' a mon that oft disappears for days, weeks or months at a time on clan business, or can be slain in battle."

"Is that what this is?" Finora asked. "This quest of yours? Clan business?"

His eyes sobered. "Nay, lass. 'Twas a promise t' a guardian queen, who wished t' know if she be the last o' her kind."

She sensed a holding back in those words, like there was something he could have added but didn't. One thing was clear to her, however: Trystan was an honorable man, with his own ironclad code of conduct. She could trust him. She moved around him, brushed against his arm as she opened the Mermaid's door and went back inside.

The children sat at the table with Giles and Jan, Niadh and Storm sprawled at their feet. Ealga perched on the back of Braeca's chair. Giles handed Trystan the half-finished whiskey Trystan had set down when he'd stepped outside for their talk. "Would you like something?" Giles asked Finora.

The whiskey was too tempting. She needed a clear head. "Just cider," she replied. Tess unloaded her tray at the next table.

Giles waved Tess over and gave her Finora's request.

Finora sat down in the empty chair betwixt her two children. "Were the scones good?"

Ioain nodded. "Can we bring some home?"

"Please, Mama?" Braeca added, pleading in her big brown eyes.

Finora laughed. "Very well. Enough with those cow eyes, poppet!" When the other woman brought her the cider, she said, "Tess, I think I'll need a dozen of those cranberry scones to take home with us."

"I'll wrap them now," Tess replied.

Trystan held out a hand and Ealga returned to his shoulder. He slouched against the wall, savoring his drink. "They make this back home. Me uncle Cormag's a master. His has a unique nutty flavor an' his barrels're stamped with an acorn."

Finora stared at Trystan, the wild Arcadian mountain man, from his long, grizzled grey hair to his muscled legs. She couldn't help herself. The tattoo down the left side of his face made him look so fierce, but all she could recall was the hot desire in his eyes and the feel of those strong arms around her, holding her close. She wasn't the only one staring at the way his broad shoulders filled out his shirt. Catching herself at it made her frown. Ridiculous to feel possessive over a stranger. She had no claim on him.

"Acorn whiskey's rare," Jan stated. "Hard t' find, an' too rich for the common purse."

"Soon we should be able t' afford it. Cap'n's lookin' for 'nother ship," Giles clarified. "We'll be sailin' 'gain in a few weeks."

Finora's gaze slid to Trystan, who stared at the memorial wall, at all the names of those lost to Cilaniestra. "What is it?"

"'Tis lucky I am t' no' be listed there. Thanks t' him." He saluted Storm with his cup.

"Lighthaven Water Dogs. Mari breeds and trains them," Finora told him. "They've gained a reputation all over Rhattany."

Braeca also stared at the wall. "My da's on that wall."

"Aye, lass." Trystan's face softened. "I'm sorra for yer loss."

Oh, he was dangerous...

"Is your da gone, too?"

"No' t' me knowledge. But I've been gone from home for some months now."

"But ye're *old*!" Braeca indicated his grey hair. "He must be *ancient*."

"Braeca!" Finora's cheeks heated.

Trystan laughed. “Well, I’m no’ as old as all *that*. Simply went grey early. They told me it makes me look wise.” He assumed a solemn expression that made the children giggle.

Finora again sensed a holding back. Trystan shot her a sharp glance but said naught further.

“Time to go home,” Finora said. “I don’t want to be climbing in the dark.” She stood, picked up the wrapped packet of scones and inclined her head to Giles and Jan. “Good night.” The children headed for the door, shadowed by the two canids. Finora followed with Trystan and Ealga bringing up the rear. She tried in vain to ignore his gaze. The back of her neck prickled with awareness.

She stopped at Mari’s. Storm’s dam sprawled against Mari’s makeshift stand but lumbered to her feet at their approach. She looked to be near her time—swollen like a great furry whale. “I need a *kira* of frill and a half of red.” Finora reached down to rub the dog’s ears.

Mari weighed out the two seaweeds. “Pups should be here next week,” she said to the Ioain and Braeca. “You two will have to come see them.”

Ioain stared at his shoes. Finora paid Mari and tucked the wrapped packages under her arm. They continued up the cliffside path. The children sang a counting rhyme Mistress Greta had taught Braeca. Finora and Trystan followed in silence.

“*Finora!*”

Bree’s call stopped her in her tracks. “*What’s wrong?*”

“*Naught’s wrong,*” the mermaid replied. “*We’ve been scavenging the ship and I found something your new friend might wish to see.*”

Trystan placed a hand against her back. “What is it?”

She turned around. “Bree’s found something she wants you to see. We’d best go down to the shore.” She shivered. That luring, elusive shore...

When there's a tiger—and a lion—on your tail, there's no escape...

Theirs to Capture

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Delilah is strong, independent—and a princess on the run. Her father, King of the Falcon kingdom, wants to unite her with Pierce, Prince of the Tiger kingdom, and Jason, Prince of the Lions. Never can she imagine giving herself to one man if there is no love—let alone two! So she flees her home in hopes of avoiding the union.

Delilah may be dead-set against the plan, but Jason and Pierce have no doubts. She is the one they want to complete their triad, to be their mate. She alone has the power to form the bond that will, in turn, join all their kingdoms in peace.

They're prepared to use every means of pleasure to convince her they are all destined to be together. But first they have to catch her...

Warning: This book is hot! Hot! Hot! Threesomes, m/m, and capture fantasies, oh my!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Theirs to Capture:

Her head shook from side to side, the panic in her eyes increasing. "I won't do it. I won't, Pierce."

"Yes, Delilah, you will." He slid his hand up the back of her neck, holding her head still as his mouth descended onto hers.

Her lips remained tightly pressed together, refusing to open to his tongue. With a soft laugh, he nipped lightly at her bottom lip. Her gasp of surprise gave him the opportunity to slip inside the forbidden cavern of her mouth.

Her hands slammed against his chest, attempting to push him away, but they were no more effective than if she had been using her wings. Instead, the touch of her soft hands inflamed him further. His cock throbbed, lengthened and pressed into her belly.

He sought her tongue, teasing it with soft gentle flicks, before curling his own around it and sucking gently. It only took a moment to realize she'd stopped pushing against him, and instead those delicate hands now explored his chest openly.

Lifting his head just a bit, he murmured a throaty, "Yes. Touch me, Delilah." Then he claimed her mouth again.

Her hands moved downward on him. Down his chest, to his abdomen. The breath locked in his chest. *Lower, just a little lower.*

She hesitated only a moment before her fingers slipped those last few inches. His cock twitched against the edge of her hand and when she finally wrapped her fingers around his flesh, he about came in a heartbeat.

Until she squeezed. Tightly.

Pierce froze, his knees locking as pain signals rushed toward his brain.

"Delilah," he choked out. "That's a bit hard."

"So I noticed." She smirked. "I asked you to release me, Pierce. Now back off or I'll break it in half."

"I'm not sure that's possible, little one." But he took a step backward, his only thought for the moment that she needed to release her death grip on his cock.

Her fingers unwrapped from around him and, just as fast, she slammed her palms against his chest, pushing him backward.

Pierce stumbled, trying to regain his footing and reach for her at the same time. She spun, ready to take flight.

Relief poured through him as she was swiftly grabbed by Jason, who'd come up silently behind them.

"Jason!" She retreated, obviously startled, and bumped right back into Pierce.

Pierce drew in a deep breath, grabbing her hips to hold her immobile. He willed himself to control the anger that now burned in his gut. She'd threatened to break his cock in half like it was a damn sausage at a festival.

"This time, Delilah, you've gone too far." Jason shook his head, his eyes suspiciously bloodshot. "I do believe we will have to agree upon some form of punishment to bestow upon you."

Punishment. Pierce slid one hand down to the rounded curve of her ass and squeezed the soft flesh. *Now that sounded like a lovely idea.*

Delilah whimpered, and though he couldn't see her face, he could well envision her wide eyes and the realization that she'd gotten herself in too deep.

Pulling his hand back, he swung it forward again to connect sharply with one round cheek.

"Oh!" Her shrill cry echoed in the woods, sending birds scattering up into the trees.

Delilah arched away from Pierce's hand, but with Jason so close in front of her, the movement forced her body flush against him.

Pierce stepped forward again, so she was sandwiched between both their bodies. Jason closed his hands over Pierce's hips, trapping her between them.

The result was an image so close to what they'd experience once they all joined together. It was so intimate and erotic that it startled him. Heat radiated between their bodies as a sizzling undercurrent heightened all of Pierce's senses.

His gaze locked with Jason's and he saw the same awareness in the other prince's eyes.

"You feel it, little one," Pierce whispered against her ear. "Don't you?"



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