



**InDescent**

K. Z. Snow

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## Dedication

For Jan, Greg, Reg, Paul, Johnny, and all the other beautiful boys I've laughed with and loved in Milwaukee, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Green Bay. I miss you.

## Prologue

Sometimes it helped to have a necromancer as a business associate. *Dem bones, dem bones, dem dryyyy bones...*

Smiling, Ivan Kurtz, *magus*, ruminated further as he gazed at the eldritch thing on his black lacquered cocktail table. Nice find, the Prism of Nezirabi. Wonderful big glob of magical whup-ass glass. The sight nearly made him salivate. It had taken four years and a hurtful bundle of money to secure the perfect deliverer of payback, but the wait and expense would soon be worth it.

Is revenge sweet? In this case, the cliché was a gross understatement. In this case, revenge was reclining on a yacht in the Mediterranean, eating the finest chocolate and sipping the finest wine, while the multiple hard dicks you had growing all over your body fucked the tightest pussies and asses in all the universe without the rest of you having to break a sweat. Revenge was food, drink and a chain-chain-chain of effortless, transporting orgasms...at the end of which was your own personalized paradise, infinite and eternal.

Oh yeah. Jackson Spey was gonna get it. But good.

Ivan snickered then gulped some not-so-fine wine. "Wizard." He chuffed in contempt. "Okay, big balls, we'll see how much of a fucking wizard you are."

He pulled his feet off the cocktail table and dropped them to the floor so he could lean forward and study his prize. A vellum-bound book lay beside it, but Ivan hadn't yet perused it. He would do that first thing in the morning, when his mind was fresh. For now he was content simply to savor his victory. There would be plenty of time to figure out how to activate his instrument of vengeance.

The Prism of Nezirabi was a symmetrical chunk of what appeared to be crystal, roughly three feet in circumference, its surface expertly faceted with various geometric forms set one on top of the other. The intersecting circles etched into the crystal's surface all contained relief-carved hexagons, then pentagons, then triangles. The center of each figural mound was set with a small stone, no two of which were alike. Thin lines extending from these stones formed an intricate grid in the crystal's interior. Its core consisted of a silvery black sphere surrounded by tiny metallic flakes that seemed to float around it like stars.

It was impossible to say what, exactly, the lines were. They could have been precisely placed fractures. They could have been hair-thin infusions of some foreign material—simple water, perhaps, or a mixture of organic or inorganic compounds. Legend had it the crystal contained dragon's blood. There were just as likely other legends that claimed it contained fairy dust or the sulfuric vapors of hell.

Conclusion—it didn't matter *what* the damned thing held as long as it worked. And

if it worked, it would soon be holding Jackson Spey.

Ivan took another hefty swallow of the fruit of the vine just as Bothu, the necromancer, glided back into the living room from the bathroom. He folded his long, ashen form into a burgundy leather easy-chair, crossed his legs and splayed his bony fingers over the chair's arms.

"It better do what you claim it can," Ivan murmured, sliding him a glance. He hated looking at the guy. Bothu's complexion reminded him of snow saturated with dog pee and vehicle exhaust. The stringy red hair that seemed coated with shoe polish sure as hell didn't improve his appearance any.

The necromancer's bland expression didn't change. "How well it works obviously depends on the aptitude of the person using it. I got you the Prism, Ivan, and I got you the instruction book. Now it's up to you to figure out how to put them together to play out your scheme."

"Come on, man, tell me where and how you scored it. That must've been some mighty influential crowbait you mumbo-jumboed over." Ivan leaned forward. "Come on. We're partners."

"Partners?" Bothu repeated with a sneer. "This was a *business* transaction. Period. I provided you with a rare and desirable commodity and you compensated me. Where and how I got it don't concern you. So quit asking." He pulled a joint and lighter from the breast pocket of his somewhat malodorous black silk shirt. "And here's a word of advice. You'd better figure out how to keep Spey from finding out what you're up to. Even though *your* recklessness seems to know no bounds, *I* don't need another run-in with that man."

"He won't find out." Ivan poured himself more wine. "I'm keeping this plan securely under wraps."

Bothu barked out a "Ha!" before he lit the joint and took a long, savoring draw. "Just like four years ago," he said, filaments of skunky smoke drifting from his mouth. "You had it all under control, didn't you? You were *so* bloody clever. That's why Spey came at us like the Wrath of God and we were powerless to stop him."

Scowling, Ivan flashed back to the miserable night that had set in motion more suffering than he'd ever known. His resentment mounted along with stubborn, self-righteous determination. "That's exactly why I'm doing this. I owe him one. And he's gonna get it—the most monstrous, hideous, crippling strike he's ever had to endure."

Bothu rolled his eyes and shook his head. "When are you going to learn? You'd be well advised to let a sleeping panther lie." He took a series of shorter, quicker tokes.

That did it. Ivan Kurtz was sick to death of hearing about his rival's preeminence. "Panther, my ass!" he shouted, throwing up his arms. "Spey's a *human being*, for chrissakes!" He shot one forefinger at the necromancer and the other at the Prism. "I'm sitting on one of the most powerful tools in the history of magic, and you're trying to tell me it won't work against some goddamned biker?"

Bothu leaned forward and said in a measured voice, "In case your notoriously piss-poor judgment has been further clouded by amnesia, let me remind you that 'goddamned biker' also happens to be one of the most powerful Adepts on this or any plane. I don't want to cross him. I learned *my* lesson." After a final drag on his dwindling doob, Bothu flipped the roach into his mouth and swallowed it. "Take my advice, Ivan. Be a *true* mage for a change. Use the Prism for a magical mystery tour of your own. But leave

Jackson Spey alone.”

Dramatically, Ivan dropped against the back of the couch and gripped his head. “I can’t believe my ears. After what he did to you, to us—”

“You idiot,” Bothu interjected, “we *asked* for it. Or does your memory fail you on that point, too? It wasn’t as if his attacks were unprovoked. You went after him. You let envy and thwarted lust supersede your judgment, and I was foolish enough to let vainglory supersede mine.”

Ivan fell to brooding. “Water under the bridge,” he muttered. “That prick still needs to be taken down. His fall is long overdue.” He sat forward and rested his arms on his thighs. Immediately his gaze was drawn to the Prism. “You know what a high-minded bastard Spey is, how he prides himself on his focus and clarity, his drive and discipline.” The Prism, Ivan fancied, was eavesdropping on his sarcastic characterization. “Such purity of intent. Such high regard for the highest principles of High Magic.”

“Don’t forget his intelligence,” Bothu said. “The man is no slouch in the smarts department, either. And it’s *all* those attributes that made him as powerful as he is. I was ignorant of those facts five years ago.” With a dour, thin-lipped smile, he pulled out another joint and lit it. “But the wizard didn’t hesitate to educate me.”

Ivan barely heard the necromancer. He was still lost in his own bitter thoughts. “I know Jackson Spey once had an Achilles heel. I believe he still does. Once I confirm the existence of it, I’ll know *how* to take him down.” He lifted a fist and brought it down beside the Prism. “*In there.*” The thought of his rival’s impending journey—or, rather, precipitous descent—made him smile. “Spey’s weakness will make him wallow in the muck, over and over again, until it either drives him mad or wipes out all vestiges of that precious purity of intent.”

“What Achilles heel?” Bothu asked, narrowing his eyes.

Kurtz took a leisurely swallow of wine. “Same one he’s had since his pre-Merlin days, when he was still playing Easy Rider. He managed to overcome that weakness for a while, but I’m willing to bet he never fully rid himself of it. So I’m going to put him to the test.” He drank again and smacked his lips. “And I have just the right tester.”

“What are you babbling about?”

Feeling gleefully cunning, Ivan shifted his eyes in Bothu’s direction. “One little word. One little three-letter word that’s been the downfall of many a powerful man.”

## Chapter One

Jackson Spey had just emerged from the shower, a good day's work behind him and a relaxing evening of reading ahead of him, when his apartment buzzer made its dying-fly sound. He didn't have a proper doorbell. He sure as hell didn't have a doorman. He had a basement flat accessible to pretty much anybody, although the door itself did have three locks. He often neglected to use them. Tonight, only the chain was secured. Not that anything in his domicile would be of much interest to thieves.

His mind was still on a particularly complicated project he'd been puzzling through at his woodshop. A very wealthy couple would be paying him a very handsome sum to design and build a quirky combination of stairways and bookshelves for their library. Although he was an accomplished furniture builder, he still saw every project as a unique challenge. And he loved challenges.

The buzzer sounded again. For the hundredth time, Jackson considered getting an updated living space with more amenities. He could certainly well afford it, but he just didn't desire it. Material things unrelated either to his vocation or avocation meant little to him—except, of course, his bike. Stuff was only stuff, meaningless and ephemeral.

Tying the short velour robe more snugly around his body, Jackson sauntered through the living room toward the door. A thin spear of hope shot through him, prompting a drizzle of adrenaline. He tried to ignore this Pavlovian reaction. It seemed adolescent, silly. Besides, the person he wanted most to see would have called first.

The door didn't have a peephole and didn't need one. Jackson wasn't worried about attackers. The neighborhood might be a bit on the seedy side, but he didn't feel particularly threatened. People pretty much minded their own business. Too much, actually. Besides, any ordinary attacker wouldn't fare too well against him.

He pulled the door open against its chain. He left the chain in place, figuring the person on the other side was probably looking for somebody else in the neighborhood and would be gone within seconds. If the visitor was an acquaintance, he or she would have called out his name.

A woman's face appeared in the narrow space. "Excuse me. Are you Jackson Spey?"

He saw made-up eyes, smelled perfume. The cloud of scent almost made his own eyes water. "Yes."

"The magician?"

Jackson wasn't fond of that word. The fact that this stranger used it immediately put him on guard. Most serious practitioners of High Magic resented its modern connotations. Crowley, bless his rotten heart, had thrown a terminal *k* onto *magic* to distinguish the occult art from stage illusion and visual trickery.

So he didn't answer the woman's question. "Who are you?" he asked instead, leery of her motives.

"My name is Christy. Christy Kemmer. Can I talk to you?"

"Is this going to take a while?"

"It might."

Jackson believed in civility. As long as a person didn't get obnoxious, he was willing to give that person a chance. He undid the chain and fully opened the door. "All right.

Come on in.” He stepped aside to let her enter.

The woman’s gaze did a quick slide down his body and up again as she stepped past him. Strolling off to the right, toward the living area, she made a casual loop in front of the bookshelves and desk, peering quite rudely at Jackson’s possessions. He frowned as he regarded her back. She wore an ankle-length leather coat and spike-heeled boots. Her hair, obviously permed and dyed, lay wetly on her back like a squiggly bunch of Chinese noodles drenched in some bicolor sauce. The sound of chinkling jewelry drifted from both wrists.

“Uh...have a seat,” Jackson said, lifting his jeans and polo shirt from the back of his recliner. He tossed the clothing on the sprawl of books that took up half his sofa then sat on the one uncluttered cushion. “So...” He turned up his hands, releasing obvious questions. *Who the hell are you? What do you want?*

Concluding her nosy scan of his living space, Christy sashayed over to the recliner. Settling in, she opened her coat and crossed her legs. She didn’t seem to be wearing much. Long, glittery fingernails curled over the edges of the chair arms. The nails, decorated with tiny decals, looked fake. Maybe she was on her way to a club.

“I’m the High Priestess of Artemis-on-the-Crescent,” Christy announced. She lifted her over-plucked eyebrows. “Have you heard of us?”

Jackson thought a minute. The name sounded vaguely familiar. “Is that the all-female coven?”

“Yeah. We’re old-school.” Christy smiled.

Spey got the distinct impression she was trying to look alluring. Yet, despite the boot-sheathed calves and shimmering lipstick and electric blue eye shadow, he found her distinctly unattractive. *Hillbilly chic*, he thought, wishing she’d get to the point and leave him alone. He would’ve bet anything she had some gaudy tramp-stamp—a dragon, maybe—riding her ass. Women who were full of themselves and tried too assiduously to be temptresses really put him off.

“Okay, so you’re a witch,” he said. “That still doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“Once in a while,” Christy went on, “we need a male participant to represent the Great Horned One, the god of the hunt.” She leaned forward, laying her forearms together and clasping her hands on her thighs. The movement not only pressed her breasts together but gave Jackson a clear view of her artificially enhanced cleavage. Again, she smiled. “That’s where you come in.”

He sat back and folded his hands. “Um...listen, Christy, I don’t know where or how you heard about me—”

“Ohhh...just through various connections,” she purred.

“Yeah, well, I’m a pretty low-profile guy, and I don’t generally lend myself out to covens I’m unfamiliar with.” Jackson forced a laugh. “Hell, I don’t lend myself out to covens at all. I’m a solo act.”

“That’s not what *I* heard.” Smirking, the High Priestess remained in her folded-over position.

“Okay, there *is* one coven I’m associated with. But only one. It’s like I have an exclusive contract with them.”

“Covens don’t operate under contracts, Mr. Spey. You know that.” Putting both feet on the floor, Christy slid forward in the recliner. “We really need you. We need your power. We need your...sensuality. It’s for a good cause.”

Jackson held her painted gaze. "Sounds like you're talking about sex magic." *Where did she get that stuff about sensuality?*

Christy wiggled a bit in the chair. "Yeah, I am."

"For what purpose?"

"We'd like to use an upcoming esbat for a Passion Celebration. You know, to kind of juice up our love lives. So we need to bring in a man to serve as a temporary High Priest or magister." Christy winked. "You know it would be hard to do this kind of rite without one."

Jackson was getting more uncomfortable. "But why me?"

"Because you're familiar with witchcraft *and* magic. When we cast this Circle, we want it to erupt with power—the right kind of power." Christy's gaze again tripped along his body. "And you sure look like the man to bring it on."

Jackson rested an elbow on the sofa arm and ran a thumb and forefinger over his mustache. Of course he was quite familiar with sex magic. He'd performed such rituals many times. Their purpose was to promote potency and fertility, to generate or enhance romance or physical attraction. But he'd always chosen his own priestess, if he used one at all, and devised his own rituals. Glancing up at Christy Kemmer, he realized how much he *didn't* want to do such a thing with her. And she definitely seemed to implying that's how it would go.

"With all due respect," he said, lifting his head, "I play by my own rules. Abiding by other people's constraints only weakens my work."

This seemed to throw off the High Priestess. A crease appeared between her brows. She must have thought herself and her proposition irresistible. She rose from the recliner and slipped off her coat, letting it fall to the chair. The faux-leather skirt she wore barely covered her ass. Stepping over to the sofa, she managed to squeeze her behind next to Jackson. Reflexively, he drew back by a couple of inches. Christy didn't seem to notice.

"Well, we might be able to work something out," she said, angling her body toward him and smiling. "We're flexible."

Before Jackson could respond, her hand slipped beneath his robe and curled around his cock.

He jerked backward. "Hey!" he cried out, half in shock and half in warning. "What are you—?"

With remarkable agility, Christy climbed onto Jackson's lap and faced him. Her boots bracketed his bare legs. The fingers of her free hand flattened against his lips.

"*Shh*. Just relax and enjoy." Her long fingernails raked through his mustache from upper lip to jaw line then skimmed over his short beard. "I didn't realize how freaking *hot* you were. And you have really spellbinding eyes." She dipped toward his ear. "Why don't you think of this as an interview with me?" she said in a growly whisper. "Just tell mama what you want. I'll do anything for you...now *and* during the ceremony. I'll suck you dry. I'll let you fuck me in the ass. If you like kink, I'm a dominatrix, too." She punctuated her promises by darting her tongue into his ear.

Stunned, Jackson felt his cock swell within her grasp. There was no controlling it. Her fingers moved slowly and firmly up and down the length of his shaft. Occasionally, her nails circled and squeezed the ripening head.

"You'd better tell me what you want," she said more harshly, "before I decide *for* you." Her hips had begun to shift back and forth on his thighs.



Jackson realized she wore no pantyhose, no panties, not even a thong. And she was preparing to mount him. He had no desire to hold her or kiss her or nuzzle those studiously elevated breasts, obviously slathered with suffocating perfume. He had no condoms handy and sure as hell didn't want to thrust his flesh into this STD bait bucket without one. What he should have done was throw her out of his apartment.

But his cock dictated otherwise. It dictated he needed a release. He'd obviously needed one for a while, or he wouldn't have responded so quickly to the brazen caresses of a stranger he didn't even find attractive. Now, rigid, he was past the point of no return.

And he was thinking of his Significant Lover, whom he hadn't seen in two months—how much he missed that sumptuous mouth, those adroit ministrations.

"All right, suck me," he said in a coarsened voice, suddenly wanting it. "Kneel on the floor and suck me."

Christy obliged. Sliding to the rug, she positioned herself between his spread legs. "Shit, you're really hung," she breathed. "Long *and* thick. Damn."

Her wonderment made his cock stiffen further. It stood up like a pole now, the head plump and taut, the engorged veins straining against their sheath of fine skin. Women—and men too, for that matter—had always been impressed by his anatomy. Jackson vaguely wondered why their effusions never failed to arouse him.

Still gripping his rod, Christy slipped the head into her mouth. Her lips pulled at its soft rim. Her tongue laved and circled it. As her right hand continued to stroke him, her left burrowed beneath his balls and seemed to test their weight.

She began doing what he'd commanded. She began sucking.

Jackson closed his eyes and gave himself over to the persuasive, wet tugging. He loved how the feeling snaked up into the rest of his body, urging every nerve and muscle and blood vessel toward orgasm. He relished the growing fullness in his loins. Years of discipline had made him able to hold out longer than most men, and hold out he did. Christy didn't take in much of him—a couple of inches, maybe—but it was enough. The pulling at his cock head, the pumping of his hard shaft, the diddling of his full balls all blended to intensify his arousal.

Recollections of other encounters surfaced in Jackson's mind and made his excitement flare. Good head and wild fucks, supernatural or otherwise, most especially the recent ones with...

Jackson couldn't bear up any longer. With a barbaric growl, he shoved his cock toward Christy's throat and let the cum jet out of him in spasm after delectable spasm, the forceful contractions liquefying his limbs, his torso, until his entire frame seemed to be funneling through his rod and puddling on the back of Christy Kemmer's tongue.

Eyes still closed, Jackson wilted into the sofa cushions. His groin continued to pulse and tingle. He heard Christy's knees crack faintly as she got up. He heard her rustling around the recliner then heard a few delicate spitting sounds. Jackson smiled. It appeared "mama" didn't swallow.

"You're so freakin' big you almost choked me," she chided.

"Sorry, but you asked for it." Jackson lazily opened his eyes. He hadn't been able to watch her. The images in his mind had been far more compelling.

Christy had donned her coat once more and resumed her seat in the recliner. "Yeah, well, with a monster hard-on like that, you gotta be more careful. It's a matter of consideration."

Jackson closed his robe and sat up. Debating with himself whether or not to say what he wanted to say, he quickly opted for frankness. "Listen, lady, I didn't invite you here. I sure as shit didn't seduce you. You're the one who pulled the tool from the belt and started using it."

She looked pouty. "But still—"

"But still, nothing. If I wasn't considerate, it's probably because I don't know you from Martha fucking Washington. You come here uninvited and want to give me head, fine. I doubt there's a man alive who would refuse such an offer." Jackson had to pause briefly to think about this. "Well, maybe Rush Limbaugh." He tied the belt on his robe, making it clear the candy store was closed. "So, given the circumstances, you couldn't really expect me to get all courtly with you."

"You could've just fucked me, y'know," Christy said petulantly. "I was right there on your lap."

*God, what planet did she come from?* "No, I couldn't have 'just fucked' you. I don't just fuck just anybody who just appears at my door." Jackson was rapidly losing patience.

"Whatever," Christy said dismissively. "But what about that favor I asked? Will you do it?"

"If I do, it will be on my terms." Jackson rose from the couch. "I'll get back to you."

Christy looked confused at first. "Oh. Okay."

She fished around in her large, multicolored handbag and pulled out a business card. Her contact information was printed in some mock-medieval typeface on a sparkly silver stock. *Christy Kemmer* it read; beneath that, *Lady Alessandra*, which was obviously her witch name. *Readings and Spell Castings* was printed at the bottom between her home phone number and cell phone number. Jackson wondered if she had a separate business card for her dominatrix gig. He guessed she did...and a web site, too.

"Call me anytime," she said in a throaty voice, lapsing once more into her seductive mode. "I'd love to strip you naked and bind you up and punish you."

Jackson chuckled quietly and shook his head. "I guess you haven't figured this out yet, but I don't do submission."

"Well maybe we can—"

He didn't want to hear it. "Come on, I think it's time you left." Walking to the door, Jackson rested his hand on the knob. "I have things to do." *Like figure out how to make myself more inconspicuous.*

\* \* \* \*

"How'd it go?" The mage peered at his accomplice.

Christy sashayed into Ivan's apartment and tossed her purse on a chair. She peeled off her coat and tossed it on top of the purse. "He's thinking about it." She dropped onto the sofa and crossed her legs, bobbing the upper one. "He'll get back to me."

"How soon?"

"I don't know."

Ivan joined her. "So, what are your impressions?"

She gave him a questioning look. "Of Jackson Spey?"

Ivan rolled his head back. "No, of Hoover Dam. Of course Jackson Spey! Jesus..." Suspiciously, he eyed her short-skirted hips. "Are you wearing any underwear?"

Christy uncrossed her legs and spread them.

“Oh for the fuck’s sake,” Ivan said in disgust. He lumbered up from the couch, hurried over to his linen closet and grabbed a towel. Returning, he thrust the towel at his guest. “Here, sit on this. That’s expensive leather under your ass. Your pussy’s probably leaking all over it.” He waited, standing, as the bimbo positioned the towel. “That gooey shit is great for what it’s meant to do, but it isn’t meant to be smeared on fine furniture.”

She gave him a heavy-lidded, almost dismissive glance. “You’re a cocksucker, Ivan.”

“Sometimes.”

“I thought you liked my honey,” Christy said, hitching up her eyebrows.

“Not *there*.” Ivan sat beside her once more. “Seems Wonder Boy really turned you on.”

“Half and half.”

“What do you mean?”

“He half turned me on and half pissed me off.” Christy looked over her shoulder toward the kitchen. “Got anything to drink?”

“In a minute. First tell me what happened.”

Christy sighed. “Well...I get there, and he answers the door in his bathrobe ‘cause he just got out of the shower, I guess, so he doesn’t give me a big welcome or anything—”

“Cut to the chase,” Ivan said, exasperated. “What did you think of him? How did he respond to you? Does it look like he’ll take the bait?”

Christy pursed her lips. Maybe she was thinking. It was hard to tell. “I gotta admit he is one gorgeous dude. Like *steamy* gorgeous. And those spooky eyes...” With a slight shiver she looked at Ivan. “Know what I mean?”

“No. I think he’s overrated,” Ivan muttered.

“You gotta be kidding!” Christy expelled a single incredulous laugh. “I *so* wanted to get my hands on that bod. And grab his hair. But that wasn’t the best.” She assumed a mysterious look, taunting Ivan.

He played along, although she certainly didn’t catch his drollery. “Gee, now what could ‘the best’ possibly be?” He tapped his lips. “Hm, let’s see. Could Mr. Spey be particularly well endowed?”

Another confused, slightly irked look. “I have no idea how much money he has.” Christy scratched at her head. “Not much,” she murmured, “considering where and how he lives.”

Doubling over, Ivan blurted out laughter. “Sorry,” he sputtered. “I should’ve known better.” Christy didn’t catch the drollery in that, either. “My next guess would’ve been that he’s hung like a horse.”

*That* she understood. “I wouldn’t say like a horse, but he does have a very impressive package. *Very* impressive. Nice looking, too.”

“Yeah, I suppose any big dick would look good to you.”

“You’re a big dick, and you don’t look good to me,” Christy snapped.

Ivan rounded his eyes. Coming from her, the rejoinder was as startling as an epiphany. She wasn’t known for her witticisms. “Nice one,” he said. “So I assume he wanted you to unwrap the package and play with the toy.”

Christy crossed her arms. Her leg began bobbing again. “I wouldn’t exactly say he wanted me to. I kind of went after it myself.”

“Oh shit, Christy!” Ivan threw up his arms. “The point of you going over there was

to test his vulnerability, see if he'd start coming on to you."

"I don't think that woulda happened," she mumbled. "He didn't seem real pleased to have unexpected company. Dude isn't very sociable."

"Still," Ivan said, "you ruined the whole setup by making a fast grab for the jewels!"

Christy got defensive. "Still, he didn't exactly fight me off. That must prove *something*."

Ivan grasped his head, wishing he knew some smart women. "Yeah, it proves that handling a man's meat makes it hard, and once it's hard he needs to get off, and to get off he'll stick it into anything soft that's available. A jar of mayonnaise, for chrissakes. A role of bubble wrap. A bedroom slipper. But that doesn't prove his judgment is constantly overwhelmed by his sexual appetite! I'm looking for signs of a particular *weakness* here, one that leads to a lack of discrimination."

Dramatically, Christy sighed. "I didn't want to wait. Okay? I wanted to *do* him." She skewered Ivan with a glare. "Hey, what do you expect when you send me to see some drop-dead hot man who answers the door in his short little half-open bathrobe? Huh? You expect me to whip out a deck of cards and play gin rummy with him? I don't think so. I got wet as soon as I laid eyes on the guy. So, yeah, I reached for his steak. Couldn't help myself. It was right there. And once it stood up, which it did pretty damned quick, I really, *really* wanted to do him. Only he didn't want to fuck, he wanted a beej. So I gave him a beej. And he nearly choked me and then shot like *buckets* of baby gravy in my mouth. Then he told me to leave." Riled now, Christy poked a finger at her chest. "And what did *I* get out of it?" Nearly throwing herself against the couch's backrest, she indignantly crossed her arms again. "Nothin'. Except disrespect."

*And I got slimed furniture.* Ivan propped an elbow on the couch arm and dropped his forehead to his hand. He mentally re-ran Christy's account of her meeting with Spey. Okay, so she'd been the aggressor. That shouldn't have surprised him. It was part of Christy's shtick. But...but...

Ivan jerked his head up. "But Spey didn't push you away and say, 'What the hell are you doing? Now get out before I throw you out.' He didn't resist."

Still stewing, Christy swiveled her head in his direction. "Huh?"

"As soon as you grabbed the Gila monster. He didn't shove you away and pitch you out the door. He let you keep messing with him."

"I *told* you, he didn't exactly fight me off. He got real hard real fast then let me take care of him."

Ivan could finally smile. Maybe this *was* the confirmation he was looking for. Now that he thought about it, Spey's behavior ran contrary to everything he claimed to stand for. Where was all that spiritual refinement that gave him so much willpower? Where were his standards, his scruples? Hell, he let some slutty stranger breeze into his inner sanctum and wrap her lips around his dick. Just...like...*that*.

Gleefully, Ivan rubbed his hands together. "Wowie zowie. Maybe we *do* have us a game. Did you toss out the 'Passion Celebration' lure?"

"Yes. I said what I was s'posed to." Obviously sick of waiting for her host to deliver a drink, Christy pushed herself up from the couch and headed for the kitchen.

Still seated, Ivan turned in her direction. "Did it seem to pique his interest?"

Ice cubes clunked into a glass. "It didn't seem to do nothin'."

Ivan considered this. Spey's lack of reaction didn't necessarily mean anything. He

always played it close to the vest. “What about the ladies in the coven? Are you getting *their* appetites whetted for this event?”

He had handpicked those witches—all were under forty and single—because he usually served as their high priest. It made for a nice little harem, although a few of the women weren’t as uninhibited as he would have liked. Still, most would be enthusiastic participants in a Passion Celebration.

Christy strolled back into the living room carrying a glass of orange liquid. A screwdriver, probably. How appropriate. She resumed her seat without bothering to rearrange the towel and took a long sip of her drink. “Most of the girls are pretty excited about it,” she said. “I told them a very sexy magician would be joining us.”

“But nothing else, right?”

“No. That was it. A very sexy sorcerer.” Christy frowned and tapped her lips. “Maybe it *was* magician.” She shrugged. “Can’t remember which word I used. Anyway, I didn’t give a name, description, place of residence, nothing.”

“And you haven’t breathed a word about my involvement? Discretion is of paramount importance, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. They think this was all my idea. Spey does, too.” Christy giggled and shook her head. “If I’d ever seen that man before today, it *would’ve* been my idea.” She glanced at Ivan. “Now it’s just a matter of getting him there.”

“Indeed.”

It wasn’t crucial that Spey show up. The wizard could possibly be consigned to the Prism regardless. But it sure would help if he took a shine to one of the coveners. Or to the whole horny flock of them, for that matter. Maybe he’d get hooked on this orgiastic setup. Then Ivan could use one witch or all of them to reel Spey in. Sure wouldn’t hurt, either, to bring Spey’s sexual hunger to the fore and fuel it to the point of uncontrollable combustion. Concupiscence could lead him down some dark paths.

Well, maybe. Ivan wasn’t entirely sure what the Prism was all about, but he did know there was some fuckola jamola associated with that meticulously carved crystal. Some Adepts had come out crazy. Some hadn’t come out at all.

Ivan smiled. Such delicious debasement. Or such a desirable disappearance. In either case, after his descent into the Prism of Nezirabi, Jackson Spey would never be the same.

## Chapter Two

“Hello, dearheart. What’s going on?” A very tall, voluptuous, and impeccably dressed woman picked her way around the furniture and machinery and sawdust piles in Jackson’s woodshop. He looked up from his drafting table and smiled.

Angelina Funmaker had been his best female friend and confidante for years. He’d called her first thing this morning, before he’d left for work. Nearly every time Jackson saw her—and they saw each other often—he still marveled a bit over her transformation. When they’d first met, she was a shy, awkward, poverty-stricken Caribbean islander who was neither male nor female. Or was both. She’d been born a hermaphrodite, an intersexual person. Viewed as a freak, this now regal creature had grown up withdrawn, underfed and undereducated, and sexually abused. It had broken Jackson’s heart. So he’d brought her back to the States and helped put her life on the right track.

“I’m just admiring you,” he said reflectively.

She gave him a modest smile. “After all this time?”

“I’ll never stop admiring you.”

Angelina blushed. Even though her creamy brown skin bore light makeup, Jackson had come to recognize her signs of emotion. “We both know there wouldn’t be much to admire,” she murmured, “if you hadn’t—”

“Don’t even bring it up.” He held out his arms. “Thanks for stopping by.”

She stepped toward him and leaned over to accept his embrace. They kissed each other on the cheek.

“You’re welcome. But I told you it wouldn’t be a problem. I’m on my way to Chicago. Swing off the freeway, swing back onto the freeway. No big deal.”

“Photo shoot?” Jackson asked.

“Mm-hm.”

“You’ll be out of my league pretty soon. All that high fashion and designer cosmetics crap, all those snooty fast-laners you’re constantly hobnobbing with.” He was teasing her, of course. Like Henry Higgins, Jackson was extremely proud of his protégé’s success.

Angelina tossed her head back and laughed. “You’re in a league of your own, Jackson. And you know I’ll still be devoted to you even if I get my own spread in a dozen magazines.” She curtsied. “So tell me, what is it you require of me?”

Nearly from the time they’d met, Jackson knew his friend had keen psychic abilities and even keener intelligence. Angelina occasionally served as his assistant when he worked in his Magic Circle. In addition, she could sometimes “see” people who were miles away. She could “read” people through objects associated with them or by tapping into their thoughts.

Jackson pulled Christy Kemmer’s business card from his shirt pocket. “I need you to hold this and tell me what impressions you get.”

Angelina took the card, face down. “I haven’t done psychometry in a while, you know. But I’ll give it a try.” She pressed the card between her palms. After a moment, she grimaced slightly. “Definitely female. Overdone...self-absorbed...likes attention.” Angelina smiled. “Not terribly bright. Still, she has some connection to occult pursuits.

It's one she doesn't really deserve."

"Why?" Jackson asked, idly stroking his beard.

Angelina's brow furrowed as she rotated her palms over the card. "Because she's so shallow. I get a sense of someone with no moral core to speak of, no spiritual depth. Or much dimension at all, really. She's a poser. I get a feeling of promiscuity, too."

"The schmoozy floozy. Queen of the Skanks. Is that what you're saying?"

Laughing, Angelina pulled the card from between her hands. "More or less." She became more pensive. Her gaze, tintured with concern, turned to Jackson's face. "Did she put the make on you?"

He chuckled and nodded.

"You didn't cave in, did you?"

"Well, no. Not really."

Angelina regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Which means?"

She was very protective of him. Jackson reached out and reassuringly rubbed her arm. "I'd rather not get into it. But believe me, I don't find her in the least bit appealing. My impressions were the same as yours."

"Good. Don't trust her."

"Hm. Pretty much *my* conclusion." Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, here's the scoop. This 'Lady Alessandra' is allegedly the High Priestess of some all-female coven. I believe I've heard of it. They want me to work with them for one night. Now, do you think the whole group is questionable or just this individual?"

Angelina held the card between her ring finger and thumb and tapped its edge with one perfectly manicured nail. Staring at it, she said, "Hard to say. This object is saturated with the essence of a very self-involved woman, so it's not surprising I can't read anybody else through it."

Jackson took the card from her and slipped it back into his pocket. "But if Christy is their priestess, the coveners are bound to be led by her."

"To some degree, yes."

"Shit." Jackson scratched his forehead. Why was this Passion Celebration so strongly tugging at him? Usually, if he felt hinky about someone, he would simply steer clear of that person and all of his or her associates.

"Well," Angelina said, "do you think you're going to go through with it?"

Jackson took a deep breath and expelled it. "If I do, I'm going to have to be brutally frank with Lady Alessandra and tell her to keep her hands off me."

Angelina arched her eyebrows. "Is this going to be an esbat with sex magic?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Heedless of its scrim of dust, Angelina folded herself into the padded office chair tucked beside the drafting table. Her elegant form contrasted starkly with the puckered silver duct tape Jackson had slapped over rips in the green vinyl. In some places, the tape's rolled-up edges exposed the underlying gray adhesive. But he didn't bother cautioning Angelina. She likely wouldn't care.

"Please don't take offense," she said gently, "but I hope you don't do this, *if* you do it, for the wrong reasons."

Jackson shrugged. "And those are...?" He already didn't like where her intro was headed.

"You've admitted there's somebody you're seeing occasionally, somebody who's

already in a relationship.”

His gaze flickered over to her. “I didn’t have much choice but to admit it.”

“And I didn’t have much choice but to pick up on it. You know how it is between us.”

“Soulmates without the ‘mate’ part.”

She gave him an understanding smile.

“So what exactly are you getting at?” Jackson asked, flexing and extending his interlinked fingers. The subject was unsettling.

“It’s difficult having a part-time lover who has a fulltime other. I know. I’ve been there. It can be heart-wrenching. You’re in the same situation now. You can’t be with the person you really want to be with. Worse yet, you know that person has somebody else to fill the void when you’re not around. And you don’t have—”

“A void filler of my own?” Jackson’s clipped laugh was a tad too acerbic.

A furrow formed in Angelina’s smooth brow, precisely between those caring eyes.

“That’s right.”

Jackson looked down.

The chair inched forward with a creaking snickety-snick as Angelina coaxed it closer to his stool. “I can also tell this somebody means a great deal to you, more than you’re willing to acknowledge.”

“Angie, I really don’t—”

She clamped her hands over his knees, startling him into silence. “So maybe you’re feeling shortchanged. Or undervalued. Maybe you want for yourself what *that* person has—some in-between action to tide you over. Maybe you’re even desperate to find a ‘significant other’ so you don’t have to deal with the frustration of this arrangement.”

Pausing, Angelina sighed. She briefly dropped her forehead to the back of one hand, which still rested on Jackson knee, then lifted her head after several seconds. “Those are some of the wrong reasons for doing the esbat gig. And here’s another. Maybe you need to prove to yourself that you’re desirable, because you’ve just turned forty and you’re not getting the attention you want and need from your lover.”

The truth in her theories stung Jackson into crankiness. “And maybe I just like practicing magic, especially when it helps people. Or maybe I just need to get laid. Maybe both in combination give me a big, fat rush, and *that’s* why Christy’s offer appeals to me.”

Silent, Angelina nodded. Jackson could tell she still clung to her maybes. He, however, only wanted to cast them aside.

“Please, don’t do anything rash,” she said, turning her imploring eyes up to his face. “And stop trying to ignore whatever it is you’re feeling.”

\* \* \* \*

It was definitely one of those stop-for-a-drink-after-work days.

Jackson didn’t do it often. Maybe two or three times a month. He’d pull up to a neighborhood tavern—some modest little hole in the wall that usually bore the name of its owner, like Bud’s Bar or Pete’s Place—and have a shot of Jack Daniels followed by a couple of beers. Sometimes he’d get caught up in conversation with one or more of the regulars. People, he’d found, would talk about most anything.

He wasn’t a wizard in these places. He was just another working stiff, a journeyman



carpenter and furniture builder. Occasionally someone would ask for his business card. Truth be told, though, most of the patrons couldn't afford custom work...which was precisely why Jackson was drawn to them. He'd grown up amid such people and, before the accident that changed his life at twenty-six, was such a person himself. Even now—despite his comfortable income, despite his mastery of High Magic—a blue collar seemed to ring his soul.

Today he stopped at the Lobo Lounge, a joint he'd never been to before. As soon as he walked in, he realized it had the kind of half-assed pretension to classiness that put it a small step above a tavern. Décor consisted of padded red booths, amber swag-lamp lighting, barstools with backrests. It had mirrored tiles, threaded with gold veins, on the wall above the backbar. Smiling to himself, Jackson took a seat and leaned on the padded armrest.

Only two other customers were there. On the far left, closest to the front window, a man in a suit and tie read a newspaper. Just to the right of the bar's center, a woman rifled through a briefcase that rested on the stool beside hers. Jackson, sitting between the two patrons, ordered his first drink.

Almost immediately he was aware of the woman's scrutiny. He refrained from looking at her. This was not the time to invite attention. Jackson wanted to relax and think. Unbothered.

"Excuse me."

*Fuck.* It was the woman. Hoping he looked only marginally attentive, Jackson turned his head in her direction.

"Aren't you the same guy who was getting on that vintage chopper in front of Bud's last fall?"

*Huh?* "Uh...maybe." The question threw him. Usually it was men who asked about his Harley. Usually he encountered such interest only when he had the bike with him. But he didn't ride it today. The spring air was too chilly, the streets too sloppy.

"I'm almost sure it was you," the woman said. "Your face is very distinctive."

For the first time, Jackson really looked at her. Maybe it was her interest in his bike that caught his attention. Maybe it was her politely neutral tone. In any case, he rather liked what he saw.

She was entirely average—on the surface, anyway—and a far cry from overtly sexy or glamorous. The clothing she wore was neatly casual and unrevealing. Her blond hair was carelessly clipped up, and her dark brown eyes regarded him over a pair of glasses that rested midway down her nose. It wasn't a perky little minx nose, either. It had some ethnic character. The woman didn't seem all that much younger than he.

"You have a good memory," he said, aware of more expression creeping into his face and voice.

What was it about her face that intrigued him? Maybe the demure smile, not in the least bit flirty. Maybe those perfect, unpainted lips. Maybe those large eyes, warm and guileless and alert. She actually looked a wee bit like a younger version of his mother.

They talked about motorcycles for a while. The conversation ultimately led Jackson to mention his accident.

"How long ago did it happen?" the woman asked.

"Almost fifteen years."

"Was it bad?"

“Yeah, it was bad.” Jackson tossed his second shot. “I died...for a while.”

“It must have changed your life.”

He laughed once, through his nose. “You can’t begin to imagine.”

There was a noticeable stretch of silence before any response came. “Still, you started riding again.”

“Not for a long time.” Jackson felt fidgety. He hadn’t anticipated a trip down memory lane. Moreover, he needed the mental space to ponder Christy Kemmer’s proposal.

“I’m Mikaela, by the way.” The woman leaned across the two stools that separated them, her hand extended. “If that sounds too formal, you can call me Miki.”

Jackson leaned to his right and clasped it. “I’m...Jack,” he said, inspired by his favorite liquor.

Regardless of how inadvertently she’d done it, Mikaela had trespassed on the private property of his past. Jackson’s first instinct was to seal himself against further invasion. He didn’t want to divulge too much. He never wanted to. According to his way of thinking, he’d already opened a gate he should’ve kept locked.

Alcohol—the bane of his guarded existence.

“Would you like to move to a booth?” Mikaela asked.

Jackson hesitated. He hadn’t intended this stop to be a long one. But Mikaela didn’t seem to harbor any ulterior motives. She hadn’t asked if he had a girlfriend. Her gaze hadn’t slid surreptitiously to his left hand to check for a wedding ring. She probably just wanted to socialize. After all, that’s what bars were for.

“All right. But I do have to leave soon.” Jackson ordered a beer as he rose from his stool.

Smirking, Mikaela gathered up her things and took a few steps toward him. “Don’t worry,” she said in a lowered voice. “This isn’t a come-on. Booths are just more comfortable and conducive to conversation.” She headed toward one. “Besides,” she tossed over her shoulder, “I hate those mirrors behind the bar.”

Blood rose in Jackson’s face as he followed her. Was his skittishness that obvious? “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“It’s all right if you *did* mean to imply. Too many people do their mate-shopping in drinking establishments. I just don’t happen to be one of them.” Looking up at him, Mikaela slid onto the booth’s tufted seat. Her mouth wore a hint of a taunting smile. “I’ll even help you figure out what to say next. Why don’t you start by telling me what you do? For a living, I mean.”

Jackson sat across from her. “Carpentry. And, uh, thanks for letting me off the hook.” His smile was self-conscious.

“You’re welcome. And to reassure you further, I never mastered the art of seduction. Don’t want to bother, quite frankly.”

More intrigued by the moment, Jackson didn’t know what to make of her. That seduction statement mystified him. Had he inadvertently offended her? Whatever the case, it seemed more prudent to change the subject. He didn’t want to get embroiled in some prickly discussion about her psychic quirks. That would be way, way too personal to suit his current mood.

“So why do you hate the mirrors?” As soon as Jackson asked the question, he realized he just *had* stepped into psychic-quirks territory. It just didn’t seem quite as

treacherous as Seduction Land.

After taking off her glasses and tucking them into her briefcase, Mikaela folded her arms on the table's glossy red top. "For one thing, I don't like looking at myself."

"Why's that? *I* sure don't mind looking at you." Jackson wondered vaguely if he just said that to be nice or if he was beginning to flirt.

The statement was enough to draw a faint blush from Mikaela. Uncharacteristically, she broke eye contact. "There's just something weird about ogling oneself for no particular reason. Doing it habitually suggests egotism."

Jackson toasted her with his beer bottle and took a drink. "Can't argue *that* point."

"And mirrors in public places seem to bring out the stealth in people. Rather than approach and talk to one another, they fall back on sneaking sly glances."

Jackson couldn't help but smile. "So you believe in the straightforward approach." "Usually."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Not all the time?"

"Of course not all the time. *Some* filtering is necessary. For various reasons."

Looking a tad edgy, Mikaela finished her drink. "Do you build houses?" she asked without transition.

A musing smile still on his face, Jackson studied her a few beats longer. "Used to. Now I build what goes in and around houses. What do *you* do?"

"Teach composition at Lennard."

Although Mikaela's gaze was direct once more, Jackson got the distinct impression she had reined in her spontaneity. She was almost certainly doing some "filtering" while they spoke.

Taking a long swallow of beer, he decided this woman was quite appealing, in an understated and unconventional way. And she was definitely bright.

"Lennard—isn't that the community college?" Jackson motioned to the bartender to bring him another drink.

Mikaela nodded. She adjusted the clip in her hair. A few strands came loose and fell against the back of her neck and along one cheek. Ignoring them, she sipped at her drink. Jackson considered reaching across the bar and tucking the fallen hank behind her ear. He'd done that sort of thing before, when he was in grab-ass mode. Today he balked.

Downing more beer, he hazily wondered what the hell was coming over him. Why had he even thought about touching the woman's hair? Must be the alcohol, seeping into his brain cells and fueling his libido. That *must* be it. The feeling was a familiar one. He'd pissed away a good portion of his youth in this state or worse, feeling hormonally nudged toward some hook-up he'd either regret or forget the next day.

Then again, it could be that Angelina had perfectly pegged the nature of his needs. He didn't want to dwell on that likelihood.

Mikaela's face gradually took on a puzzled expression as she once again studied him. "You know," she said, "there's something different about you."

His eyes focused on her. *Different from the ordinary bar-fly?* he almost asked. But he did have some sense left. "Oh? Like...good different or bad different?"

Mikaela seemed to consider this. "Mysterious," she concluded.

Jackson realized he was indeed drinking too much too fast. His mind felt encased in a ball of fuzz. Worse yet...

Worse yet, a woman he found appealing had just pronounced him "mysterious." Shit.

He didn't need to start losing his inhibitions with *that* word hanging in the air.

"I'm not trying to be," he said, hoping he looked and sounded ingenuous. Unfortunately, it didn't come easily. Not that he was lying—Jackson truly never made any effort to be mysterious—but he just didn't convey innocence very well. He was too experienced.

Mikaela quite intently regarded him now, her chin resting in her hand. "No, I don't think you're trying." She shook her head and shrugged. "Maybe it's...some aftereffect of that accident you had. Maybe it changed you in ways you're not aware of."

"Believe me, I'm *well* aware of *all* the ways," Jackson said. He put the beer bottle to his lips, tilted it steeply, and poured the rest of its contents down his throat.

"Would you care to elaborate?"

He set the empty bottle on the table. "No."

"Too complicated? Too personal?"

"Too mysterious," Jackson said, seized by the imp of the perverse. His gaze flipped up to her. "You're right. I *am* different. Let's leave it at that." *Too close. She's getting too close... And I'm wanting to get close, but in a different way. And I'll just be using her.* He began sliding out of the booth. "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

Mikaela's hand locked around his wrist. "Jack..."

He was afraid to look at her but ended up doing so anyway. Damn, those large, inquisitive eyes wouldn't let go of him.

She licked her lips. "Before you leave I'd like to ask you something. It may sound strange. It may be none of my business."

Woozy, Jackson stared down at her. "Maybe you shouldn't ask it, then."

Immediately after he said that, he wanted to slap himself. Now he felt like an asshole. The more he took in that face, the more he wanted to ask Mikaela if he could walk her home...but not exactly like a schoolboy. The impulse rattled him. Something was happening he didn't want to happen—or wanted to happen but didn't believe in and couldn't follow through with for very long. Which was *why* he'd begun acting like an asshole.

Conceding to her request, he sighed. "Go ahead. What is it?"

Mikaela's gaze roamed indecisively over his features. Slowly, she released his arm. "Never mind," she whispered.

Jackson couldn't seem to stop staring at her. He felt buzzed. He felt mesmerized. Foggily, he reminded himself that being buzzed could *seem* like being mesmerized. Like most people, his defenses slipped when he was drinking, leaving him with a sense of vulnerability. He had to get out of there.

Only with effort did he finally muster some volition. "Nice meeting you," he said. "See ya 'round."

"That's entirely possible," Mikaela answered quietly.

\* \* \* \*

"Okay, I'll do it."

Jackson's hand felt damp as he gripped the wireless phone. He sat at his dining table and stared vacantly at the papers spread out there. Angelina's words kept echoing in his mind. A bit guiltily, he glanced at the photos sitting on his bookshelves.

He'd decided to participate in the Passion Celebration of the coven called Artemis-

on-the-Crescent. He'd decided to surrender to the lure. Sex magic always provided him with a good outlet. And an impersonal one. Although the coupling could be explosive, it was temporary and largely symbolic—something he could walk away from without feeling burdened.

"Guess I don't have to ask who this is," the answering voice drawled.

Christy seemed to be gloating. She must have figured she'd triumphed. Jackson didn't care. He was doing this for himself and the coveners, not for her. So it didn't much matter what she thought.

"The next full moon is in eleven days," he said, "so I know when the esbat is taking place. Now I need to know where and at what time. Then I want some reassurances."

Christy gave him an address on the west side. The coven's meeting place, she told him, was in an addition to the main house. It was easy enough to spot because it had a black door flanked by two lights. She gave him a time—ten to midnight. She told him to dress "scantily" and not bother with any ritual paraphernalia. The coven had all that covered.

"Now what kind of reassurance do you want?" she asked.

"Let's start with birth control."

"We're all on it. And disease free, too. We take that stuff real serious. How about you?"

"I'm not on birth control," Jackson said. Her tone made him feel puckish.

But Christy didn't seem to have a well developed sense of humor. "Come on," she said impatiently, "you know what I mean."

"I always use condoms, but I still get checked twice a year. So, yeah, I take 'that stuff' seriously, too. I'm clean."

"That's good to know."

"It's always good to know. But I'm telling you right now I'll only have intercourse with one woman. The more unfocused and random the sex, the more diluted the ritual intention becomes. Having a free-for-all fuckfest would render the whole ceremony pointless and ineffective."

"Oh really." The second word sounded like *rully*.

*She needs to move to California*, Jackson thought. "Yes really."

"Or is the problem that you don't recycle fast enough? I know you're not nineteen, Mr. Spey."

Thanks to rigorous training and certain magical formulae, Jackson could "recycle" just fine—at least in terms of erection and ejaculation. His sperm count certainly dwindled from one release to the next. But that, thus far, was a good thing and therefore a condition he'd never bothered trying to correct.

He decided to let Christy believe what she chose. "I've told you my ground rules," he said. "Either accept them or don't. I'm not going to piss away my time arguing with you."

"Okay, fine. We'll do it your way." She paused. "But we'll do it our way, too."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Don't worry. It won't violate any of your precious principles."

"Then just for good measure," Jackson said, ignoring her sarcasm, "I need to see your Book of Shadows."

"That won't do you any good."

“Why?”

“Because this ceremony isn’t *in* my Book. Not yet, anyway. I’m still working it out. Besides, I’d like some of it to be personal and spontaneous, not a step-by-step thing.”

“Hasn’t it occurred to you,” Jackson said irritably, “that I need to be clued in about how this is going to come down?” He still treated any occult rite, no matter what its focus, with solemn respect. He sure as shit didn’t get where he was by having a cavalier attitude.

“Okay, here’s all you have to do,” Christy said. “When you get up to the door of the covenstead, knock twice, pause, then knock twice again. I’ll let you in. The members will already be there.”

“Will the Circle already have been cast and cleansed?”

“Yeah, yeah, all the preliminaries will be over and done with. You just come in and follow my lead. After some introductory stuff, I’ll take you to a pair of posts. I’ll put a hood on your head and shackle your wrists and ankles and put a chain around your waist—”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Jackson broke in. “I told you I don’t do that shit.”

“Relax, dude!” An impatient sigh came through the phone. “It’s mostly symbolic. You won’t be there for long. And you won’t be humiliated or anything.”

*Don’t trust her.*

“Okay, now it’s your turn to listen.” Jackson hoped he sounded authoritative enough to get Christy’s attention. “Here’s what *you* have to do. Whenever you see me raise my hand, palm out, you remain still and let me take over. I’m not just going to be at your beck and call while you improvise your way through this thing.”

“For your information,” Christy said with childish hauteur, “I won’t be improvising.” Her tone altered, became more oily and insinuating. “Except when it comes naturally. What’s wrong with *that*? I’ve heard about your approach to magic. It isn’t out of a textbook. You’re no slave to tradition either.”

Jackson couldn’t argue that point. “True. But at least I know what I’m doing.”

Christy snickered. “So do I, sweetcheeks. So do I.”

Even after he got off the phone, Jackson didn’t feel reassured.

Man, this was going to be some wild ride...

### Chapter Three

Even the trees seemed agitated. Their branches swayed, rustling and clattering, as Jackson parked at the end of a line of vehicles on a horseshoe-shaped driveway. Shadows shifted in a phantom ballet on the asphalt. He got out of his car, glanced around the property, and looked up at the sky. Gray-streaked clouds scudded across the face of the moon like soiled and tattered pennants. Between them, an almost liquid neon light glazed the landscape.

He turned and regarded the residence. The addition Christy had told him about was on the left, its front door indeed marked by two lanterns. Their yellow glow seemed garish compared with the subtler spread of moonlight. Jackson vaguely wondered if Christy owned or rented this elongated ranch-style house or lived there gratis, thanks to someone's beneficence. She was definitely sugar-baby material.

The lot was only an acre or so and didn't seem quite to belong either to city or suburbs. In fact the whole loose neighborhood was like that—a case of urban sprawl encroaching on woods and fields without any methodical development. As a result, Christy's place had a certain measure of privacy.

Jackson decided he didn't like it. The low, sleek building reminded him of a modern funeral home, and its semicircular drive and neat shrubbery only strengthened that impression. A sudden recollection of Bothu, the odious necromancer, made him like it even less.

Folding himself back into the car, he sat on the outer edge of the driver's seat and slipped off his shoes, socks, jeans, briefs and t-shirt. Without bothering to fold the clothing, Jackson set it in a heap on the passenger seat. He paused for a moment to enjoy his nakedness.

A breeze snaked between his legs and caressed his genitals. Jackson smiled. Being naked always felt good to him. It made him feel not only liberated but in command, like some elemental masculine force. As he reached for a small bag on the floor, he knew he was already becoming sexually charged.

He pulled a green linen cloth from the bag. Standing, he loosely secured the cloth around his hips then once more reached into the bag. This time he lifted out a small bottle. It contained his *oleum magicale*, specially prepared for this particular rite. Opening the bottle, he coated the fingertips of both hands in blended clove and pine oils and began anointing himself.

Base of throat to pubis. Inner thighs. Buttocks. Even the ends of his hair. Tongues of electrical current seemed to lap at his skin, following the slick, pungent paths. A current of air simultaneously curled around his body. Jackson sighed and closed his eyes. Lifting his face to the full moon, he raised his arms to shoulder height and turned up his palms. He knew, without having to look, that gauzy green, phosphorescent orbs now rested in both hands. Again he smiled.

Tonight could very well empower him.

Even further.

Wearing only his loin cloth, Jackson walked to the illuminated door. The night's strong breezes hadn't touched his hair, which was tied by a single gold cord. This didn't

surprise him. It wasn't for the wind to loosen and play with his hair, which normally fell to the tops of his shoulder blades. That would happen during the culmination of this rite. Only the "frenzy" could reduce him to a wholly natural state, free of restraint.

A particle of doubt skipped through his mind. It had been a while since he'd been involved in any rite that had a sexual culmination. The last one was well before...

*Fuck it. Don't think, just do it.* He knocked on the door in the manner Christy had instructed.

She opened it wearing a thin white robe. The low neckline, which barely concealed her breasts, was embroidered with a chain of pagan symbols and mythological creatures. Just as she'd done when she'd come to Jackson's apartment, she unabashedly ogled him.

They stood in a small foyer or antechamber. Coats, jackets and sweaters hung from pegs attached to the two longer walls.

"Jesus, you look inviting," Christy murmured. "I could take you right here."

"No, you couldn't." The refutation was offhanded. Preoccupied, Jackson inhaled the aroma he detected in the air and mentally unwound its intertwined threads. Frankincense. Sandalwood. Saffron. Musk.

*Good. All appropriate.*

"Oh? Why's that?" Christy's tone carried mild umbrage with a hint of challenge.

Impassively, Jackson looked at her. "Because nobody can 'take' me unless I'm willing to be taken."

"In a little while, you won't have much choice."

"Never underestimate my choices." Jackson's gaze went to the inner door, which he was tempted to open. He realized how much he disliked following the lead of this woman. Still, out of deference to the coven and its work, he waited.

Christy made a quiet scoffing sound and moved past him to the door. As she reached for the latch, her left hand skimmed across his chest.

It was too big a breach of conduct. His hand shot up and locked around her wrist. "Don't...touch me." His voice was low and tight. "No more liberties, Lady Alessandra."

Apparently stymied by his sternness, she opened the door without protest. A tramp stamp was indeed visible above her ass, but its precise form was mercifully indistinct.

Jackson immediately noticed moving patches of white on the left or west side of the room he'd entered. White hoods. Large white hoods that covered the heads and concealed the faces of eleven naked women, standing along an arc. He realized they must be just inside the perimeter of the Circle. Forcing his gaze away from them, he surveyed the covenstead.

It was a large room whose pale walls Christy had covered with lurid prints. All had fantastical subjects—heavy on witches, of course. A door in the far wall must have led to the rear section of the addition. A couple of loveseats sat against the other two walls. Elaborate candle stands, their red glass inserts all shimmering with soft light, stood at regular intervals around the room. A properly equipped altar, roughly waist high, faced north in the center of the space.

More or less normal stuff, except for—

"The god has joined us to join *with* us," Christy announced, standing beside him. "When I summon and welcome him into our Circle, it will be complete." She strode imperiously to the altar and began lighting the white, gold and green candles arrayed across the middle of it from left to right.



Normal stuff except for the two pair of wood posts set off to the east and west sides of the altar—sturdy posts from which hardware hung—and the lavish bed positioned at the north end of the room.

Christy turned to Jackson and held out her hand. Thus officially invited into the Circle, he entered it and knelt before the High Priestess. Holding her black-handled athame before her face, she touched the flat of the blade to her forehead, then brought it down and touched Jackson on each shoulder and the top of his head.

“Priest for this esbat and god forever, now celebrate with us and be our lover.” Lady Alessandra motioned for the mangod to stand. “Reveal your name.”

Jackson never intended to use his regular witch-name. He was only on loan here, so to speak, and wanted to keep this an isolated experience, divorced from the rest of his life. “Abelard,” he pronounced.

Lady Alessandra leaned forward and kissed him once on each cheek. When she stepped back, she undid whatever fastener had kept her robe closed and let it slip to her feet. “The other half completes the whole. As above, so below.” Completely nude now, she turned to the altar, lifted a silver bell that sat in the lower right quadrant, and rang it twice.

Lifting her ash wand, which lay farther to the left, she approached the line of skylad witches. Their heads were still downturned. As the High Priestess went down the row and touched each woman’s shrouded head, she recited a verse.

“Lover and lover meant to be  
The life that ever informs the sea  
And earth and air and fire. Strong,  
The bond here made we say belongs  
To all. We claim the passion  
Equally, with no short ration.”

Returning to the altar, Lady Alessandra rang the bell three times and turned to face her coveners. She raised her arms high. “Blesséd be.”

Jackson knew Christy hadn’t written this consecration. He just *knew* that. She either had a researcher at her disposal who’d ferreted the verse out of an old grimoire, or a ghostwriter who’d composed it *based* on something from an old grimoire. And it was likely one of Lady Alessandra’s own coveners who’d made this anonymous contribution to the Priestess’s cachet.

She’d done enough to turn him off. More than ever, he was determined to find a more worthy partner.

Before Lady Alessandra could proceed, Jackson motioned with his hand for her to be still and stay where she was. Since he’d already told her he might do this, she resisted only briefly before relenting.

He began his own perambulation down the row of waiting witches, hoping the sight of them amid the drifting incense and wavering candlelight would soon have an aphrodisiac effect on him. “Speak your name,” he said, “when I stand in front of you.” After each one did so, he kissed her on both breasts—an action the women clearly hadn’t anticipated yet clearly found exciting—then murmured an incantation in Latin that meant, “Only the goddess can return my kisses to me. Only the goddess can claim more from me.”

This guarantee out of the way, Jackson languidly crossed the Circle to the eastern

pair of posts and stood between them. Lady Alessandra looked perturbed. He understood why—he hadn't kissed *her* breasts—but didn't much care. As she came toward him, about to reach for one of the five iron restraints bolted to the pine-trunk pillars, they rose of their own accord and fastened themselves around the mangod's body. Two pair of manacles snapped around his wrists and ankles. A length of heavy chain that hung from one post looped around his waist like a serpent and attached its free end to the other post.

Smiling to himself, Jackson faintly heard the Priestess's stifled yip of shock. Blinking rapidly, she took a few steps to one side and lifted a green hood from a milliner's form that sat on the floor. Jackson lowered his head. Tentatively, Lady Alessandra placed the hood on him, shrouding his face the way each covener's was shrouded.

He saw her bare feet move toward the altar, where she proclaimed in a shaky voice, "The handmaids' duty is to prepare the god for the arrival of the goddess. But only she shall have him. The union of god and goddess shall begin with a kiss only she can claim." The bell rang once, a fey sound that itself seemed to carry enchantment. "Come forward."

Jackson closed his eyes and exhaled, submitting to his captivity. Of course he could undo the iron bindings and free himself whenever he chose. But he didn't want to. He felt energized rather than weakened. Standing even straighter, he inflated his chest and flexed his muscles against the restraints, enjoying the cold heft of the chain that wound just above his hips. This was almost, he thought, like accepting the bite of the vampire—a stirringly sensual experience. And the sensuality was intensified by the power he now had over his captors. Seemingly helpless and fully displayed, his body would entice these women the way it had once enticed a blood drinker.

He definitely was not Christy's slave. Despite the chains and manacles, *he* was the one in control tonight. He was the master.

No surrender made willingly, even eagerly, was really a surrender at all.

Since Christy could hardly be trusted, Jackson sent out his sight to keep track of what was happening in the room. Sending out the senses, a sophisticated projection technique he'd perfected some years ago, allowed him to be cognizant of an environment, even become active in that environment, without moving his physical body. He could see, hear, touch, smell, and taste; he could present himself in whatever form he imagined; he could even move objects. The technique was complicated and, therefore, psychically and physically draining. It couldn't be employed for an extended period of time. An hour or so was about all Jackson could manage, but he'd discovered he could do impressive things if he was energized enough and forcefully directed his power.

So, although his eyes were closed and his head downturned, he sent out his sight to watch the coveners. It was fairly easy, although he couldn't focus on all of them at once.

The witches, heads still lowered, began singing as they walked farther into the Circle. Many snuck glances at the near-naked man tethered almost spread-eagle to the eastern pair of posts. Forming a queue, they took turns reaching into a bowl on the altar that contained a pear, an avocado, a carrot, dill, endive and ginseng root, all sprinkled with sesame and caraway seeds. A cattail lay across the top.

Each woman took a bite from the pear. Each then stood at the eastern perimeter of the Circle, facing the "mangod". He felt their anticipation. They'd all probably heard about him. Furthermore, he knew his power had been pulsing through the room from the moment he'd entered it.

He wondered vaguely if any of the witches recognized the name he'd chosen. It wasn't some predictable name culled from Arthurian legend or Greco-Roman mythology. The twelfth-century story of Héloïse and Abelard was real, infused with both extreme indulgence and extreme denial of passion.

From beneath his hood, Jackson watched as the first witch, Cyrene, approached him. Cyrene attempted to raise his head and remove his hood. These efforts to steal a kiss were supposed to be symbolic. The witches would only *pretend* to try and *pretend* to fail. When they were through, the High Priestess would of course waltz right up to her High Priest and take him with ease. Then the "handmaids" would begin "preparing" him.

But it wasn't happening that way. The mangod had locked himself into utter stasis. His body didn't move by so much as an inch. Leda, after taking her turn, whispered that the hood felt glued to his head and shoulders. It couldn't be moved, truly couldn't be budged. Hyacinth even tried ducking beneath the draping cloth and approaching the mangod's face from below, but it was as if, she told her sisters, she'd hit an invisible barrier. She even claimed there *was* no face beneath the cowl—only an eerie pocket of darkness.

One of the others muttered, "He must be practicing some kind of impromptu sorcery."

Lady Alessandra had begun to look bewildered and anxious. It was understandable. She likely hadn't had much experience, if any, with genuine magic. And she certainly wasn't used to esbat and sabbat meetings being wrenched from her control.

Her consternation amused Jackson. He fought down an urge to laugh. None of this was in the script—a fact that clearly disturbed the Priestess.

It disturbed her so much she departed from the course the rite was supposed to take. Even though three witches had not yet approached him, Lady Alessandra stepped in front of them, seething with impatience. She angrily muttered something and grabbed Jackson's hood with both hands.

As if it were part of a bronze sculpture, it didn't move. He'd made sure of that.

Quaking, the flustered High Priestess slid her hands down the mounds of his chest and over the plane of his abdomen. Jackson was unaffected by her touch. Viciously, she yanked the chain around his waist. Still, no movement.

"What's going on?" Hyacinth whispered.

Nobody answered. Obviously, nobody knew.

Margot touched Lady Alessandra's arm. "Is he even warm?"

The High Priestess irritably motioned for the witch to leave her alone. She slipped her fingers beneath the top of Jackson's loincloth. Her hands, moving in opposite directions, glided around his midsection. Suddenly, she gripped the upper edge of the cloth and tried ripping it off his hips.

The fabric didn't stir.

Now fierce in her determination, the thwarted High Priestess thrust her hand under the loincloth, apparently trying to reach for Jackson's crotch. Almost immediately, she pulled her hand back and let out an exasperated growl.

"There's something in the way," she grated.

Leda stepped forward. "You mean—"

"I mean, *there's something in the fucking way!*" Alessandra's faux-Egyptian eyes had taken on a manic look.

Jackson pursed in a smile.

"The same thing happened to me," Hyacinth whispered, "when I tried getting beneath his hood." She looked at the other witches. "There's like a force field around him or something."

"But not around *all* of him," the High Priestess said, sounding both imperious and cunning. She stood straighter and swept an arm in the mangod's direction. "Handmaids, prepare him."

Uncertainly, the witches glanced at each other. They must have felt hesitant about approaching Abelard. He clearly had powers that were alien to them.

Then one of them stepped forward. Jackson couldn't tell which one it was, for her hood still hung low over her face. She tentatively ran a hand along his arm from shoulder to wrist, as if relishing the sweep of his muscles, the feel of his hair-embellished skin. He felt a rise of warmth as his body responded to the touch. Stepping closer, the woman slowly slid her hand over the top of his hand, her slender fingers slipping between his longer, thicker ones.

She must be the one. Jackson was nearly certain he would couple with *this* witch. He'd earlier ensured that only the most appropriate partner would be able to move him. His fingers flexed slightly. The woman kissed the back of his hand, letting her lips linger on his skin.

Emboldened by their sister's success, the other witches came forward. Jackson sensed their appetite. They'd allowed themselves to begin craving him, to give in to their desire for him. The rite called for it, after all.

The witch who'd enlivened him stepped back. Maybe she wanted to watch her sisters prepare him. Maybe watching turned her on. It turned *him* on to think about her arousal.

Twenty eager hands slid covetously over Jackson's body. The hood and loincloth remained securely in place, though, because only his Chosen One would be able to remove them. Fingernails insistently dug into his ass cheeks as one woman after another gripped his hips and ground her own hips against his crotch. Red lips crushed against and sucked at his pectoral muscles, his nipples. Wet tongues licked his skin. Heavy breasts, peaked with excitement, rubbed against his chest and back. The women writhed and moaned, clutching at him, feverishly kissing and biting his flesh.

Jackson's cock, still covered, rose. Little by little the loincloth began to tent out. His chest heaved as his breath came out in coarse gusts from beneath the hood. Suddenly there was so much focused hunger in the room, it seemed infectious.

The woman who'd been hanging back, the one whose touch had first moved him, suddenly came forward. Jackson hoped that she found restraint impossible. It had certainly gotten more difficult for *him*. All that crazed fondling had done what it was supposed to do. He was going to have to fuck somebody soon.

Lurching toward him, the woman reached for the hood that still shadowed his face. Her fingers sank into the heavy green velvet. Jackson stopped breathing for a moment, waiting for confirmation of his assumption.

The hood fell away like melting ice cream.

Slowly, he lifted his head and stared directly into her eyes.

"Hello, Jack," she whispered. "Although it's really Jackson, isn't it?"

His brows dipped. "Mikaela?"

She shook her head. "Hester."

He was stupefied. Had she known all along he was here? “Aren’t you going to claim your kiss?” he asked in a muted voice, wondering if this odd coincidence was really a coincidence.

The thought unsettled him. His arousal came perilously close to waning.

With one hand scrabbling at his damp skin—shoulders, back, chest—and the other grasping his hair, Mikaela urged his head downward. Jackson acquiesced. He had to; he’d set certain standards for a partner, and she’d met them.

Mikaela quivered as she caressed him. A small sigh issued from her mouth...and then his lips melded with hers. Jackson’s excitement mounted again as she mewled beneath his kiss.

He funneled his attention into the contact and let himself anticipate release. He certainly needed it. No matter what bizarre confluence of circumstances had brought him and Mikaela together again, Jackson decided to take advantage of the situation. He owed it to the coven and he wanted it for himself. At least he found Mikaela attractive. At least he wouldn’t have to force intimacy.

With a metallic rattling and series of thuds, Jackson’s restraints fell away. He’d willed them to, since he couldn’t count on the resentful Lady Alessandra to remove them. He also made Mikaela’s robe drop to the floor. Immediately, he began caressing her face and hair, fondling her breasts and ass. It felt good, pressing his neglected body against another body. Jackson cast off all reservations and compunctions and let his rigid cock poke at his partner’s belly.

“You’re trembling,” he whispered against Mikaela’s ear. “Are you nearly ready?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “No.”

“No?”

“I don’t want you to stop kissing me, touching me. I like it very much. It happens to me so rarely, I want it to last.”

The confession made Jackson smile. He found it sweetly disingenuous. “I hadn’t intended to stop. I’ve only begun.”

As he continued to hold her, he made them rise off the floor. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said, lifting Mikaela’s legs and folding them around his hips. “Just trust me.” Again, he kissed her.

Together they floated like a pair of clouds over the coveners’ heads. Jackson realized he was grandstanding, but he genuinely enjoyed levitation. It wasn’t like floating in the Dead Sea. There was no sensation of any tangible element beneath one’s body. And it wasn’t like weightlessness in a gravity-thin environment. He was able to control the process well enough so there was no haphazard bobbing about.

“I do trust you,” Mikaela said. “And you must come to trust *me*.”

Jackson heard the shrill notes of Lady Alessandra’s voice, protesting this unexpected turn of events. “I’m supposed to be with him! The High Priestess should be doing the coupling!”

“Ignore her,” Jackson murmured to Mikaela as they drifted down and came to rest on the bed. He straddled her supine body.

“I find it very easy to ignore her,” Mikaela answered. “When I need to.” Gazing up at him, she writhed lazily within the brackets of his legs.

Jackson smiled into her eyes. She was trying to seduce him, even though he didn’t need to be seduced. His own hunger, long unsatisfied, was seduction enough. He felt his

expression change as it took on a lascivious edge. His chest heaved more distinctly.

Mikaela's gaze moved there. She stared at the trident tattoo that angled down his left pectoral between shoulder and nipple. It had begun to fluoresce, which it often did during sex magic. She studied it curiously but with no sign of shock—a reaction, or lack thereof, Jackson found strange. Just like her lack of alarm when he'd lifted them into the air. But he couldn't let himself dwell on these anomalies. He couldn't be distracted.

Grasping his erection, he guided the head downward. Mikaela opened her mouth and curled out her tongue, shameless in her desire. Jackson paused as a memory stabbed at him.

Suddenly, none of this seemed right. The whole scenario was beginning to feel like an ill-fitting suit. He lifted his cock away from her mouth. When she reached for it, he said, "No, not yet."

Again Mikaela twisted beneath Jackson, staring greedily at the erect cock he was withholding from her. But she said nothing. She didn't flatter or implore or upbraid him. Still, he could read her frustration in her movements. Her hands scrabbled along the tense muscles of his thighs, which were so hard no impression could be made by her fingers. So she scored his skin with her nails. Jackson winced. Driven on, she grasped his thighs more tightly, scratched them more wildly.

He had to do something before she ripped him to shreds. And before he made himself look like an inexperienced, bumbling nerd. Damn it, what was with him? He'd lost all momentum, all the natural velocity he normally built up during sex.

Concentrating, which he shouldn't have had to do, Jackson guided his cock to one of Mikaela's breasts. The plump head skated over then jabbed into the outer swell of flesh. Mikaela pushed and rubbed herself against it. Her fingers speared the dark tangle of his pubic hair as her thumbs curled beneath his shaft and massaged its underlying tough cylinder. His hips jerked slightly. Parrying her stimulation, he circled her nipples with his cockhead—first one, then the other. Reflexively, Mikaela arched her back.

When Jackson stopped, she quickly curled forward. Palming his tight, dense balls, she slid her forefinger behind them to his perineum. He groaned as his cock twitched...but groaned as much from discomfort as arousal. Apparently goaded by this reaction, Mikaela moved her finger toward the swell of his ass and slipped it between his cheeks. With one fingertip, she lightly rimmed his opening.

"Don't," he gasped.

"You dislike that?"

Jackson didn't know how to respond. "Just...let me pleasure you."

He hadn't anticipated all this exploration, how it would make him feel. He hadn't anticipated the images it would stir. However naively, he'd expected only to play with a woman and then couple with her for the sake of the ritual. From the moment he'd agreed to appear at this esbat, that's all he'd expected and all he'd wanted. Just to get the job done, quickly and efficiently.

Mustering his determination, he began flicking and jabbing Mikaela's nipples with his cockhead. He tried not to jab it into her mouth. He was tempted to, but the mere thought of being publicly fellated filled him with aversion.

He soon realized that hands other than Mikaela's were caressing his balls and ass. A saliva-slicked finger ran firmly along the length of his cock. Someone nipped at his neck.

Before Jackson realized what was happening, his body was wrenched to one side. It

was enough to break whatever faltering stride he'd managed to achieve. Christy, standing near his right shoulder, had grabbed him and now tried to kiss him.

"Get away from me," he grated.

The other women, all naked now, either sat on the edge of the bed or knelt on the floor beside it. Some held dildos. Others pleased themselves with their fingers. One even crouched behind Jackson, her arms curled around his torso, hands running provocatively from his chest to his groin and back again.

Jackson, lost to his bewildering unease, hadn't realized until now that all the members of the coven had been participating in their foreplay. Even his outburst wasn't enough to make them pause. They kept feeling up themselves and each other and the couple on the bed, reveling in the joys of the flesh.

"No kissing," Jackson said to the group. "And no penetration." He thought he'd seen one of them holding a butt plug.

Impatiently, Mikaela reached for him. He lowered himself on top of her.

"No kissing?" she whispered, her hands lost in his spill of hair. The cord had fallen away.

"With one obvious exception," he answered, reminding himself of her special status.

Mikaela didn't simply return his kiss. She began sucking at him, as if he could feed her. But Jackson wasn't in it. He just wasn't in it. He was somewhere else, and he knew damned well where that was.

"Fuck me," she said, breathless and limp.

Jackson stared down at her. "I don't need to be told."

He felt beneath the mattress, where Christy had assured him she kept a stash of condoms. Sure enough, there was a whole line of packets there. He slipped one out, opened it, and rolled an absurdly ribbed, black sheath over his hard-on.

Mikaela lifted her legs, bending and spreading them, inviting him.

Smiling, he tried to counteract some of his previous brusqueness. "How gracious of you," he whispered.

To achieve some semblance of passion, Jackson summoned more concentration as he entered her. It was humiliating, having to try so hard to be involved. He used to wallow in this kind of pleasure. He used to delight in prolonging it by being erotically creative. A female partner's satisfaction had always been part and parcel of his own satisfaction, and women used to compliment him on his finesse.

Now, his body simply wanted to be free of its agonizing, ambiguous tension.

Mikaela arched her back to receive him. Her hips wriggled beneath his weight as she sought just the right positions for stimulation. She dug her fingers into the meager flesh of Jackson's pelvis and held him in place as she moved. He felt her vaginal muscles hugging his rod.

Jackson couldn't remain completely still. Like a piston, his cock needed to move. He rocked against and within her, trying to secure his own release.

"How I love the human body at times like this," she breathed against his throat.

Jackson finally felt of the first quivering clutch of climax. "*Crede quo habis, et habis*," he cried out, hoarsely, as his body stiffened and bowed, as the feverish plunge of his cock dwindled to a series of short, arrhythmic jerks. *Finally, finally*, he thought with each exhalation, relief weakening his limbs. *Finally*...as the thrumming pleasure rolled through him and gradually subsided.

Not the greatest orgasm he'd ever had, but it was better than none. At least he'd been able to come.

Trying not to seem hurried, Jackson pulled out and slid off Mikaela's body. "That should do it," he said, realizing too late how workmanlike he sounded. But, what the hell, he *was* only here to do a job.

Carefully, he peeled off the laden condom and placed it on the floor. Whatever thoughts he'd previously entertained about seeing more of Mikaela, maybe developing a relationship with her, rapidly faded. He hadn't exactly been at his best this evening. Moreover, too many aspects of this encounter troubled him.

"I hope my tattoo didn't burn you," he said.

Mikaela tilted onto her side and touched it. "No. It just felt very warm."

"I'm glad. It can do strange things—glow, pulsate, rise a little, even bleed."

"Is it the Trident of Paracelsus?" Mikaela asked.

"Uh, yeah. As a matter of fact, it is. I'm surprised you recognized the symbol."

"I've studied many things," Mikaela said. "That Latin phrase you uttered—"

"Believe that you have it, and you have it'."

"Yes. I recognized that, too. But why did you speak it?"

"Since this is a Passion Celebration, and we were essentially practicing sex magic, that was a way of sharing the ritual intention with everybody in the room."

Unexpected, added weight lightly jounced the mattress. Mikaela shifted her eyes in its direction. Jackson turned his head.

"I won't take any more of this disrespectful bullshit." A petulant Christy, still naked, sat beside Jackson, her breasts jutting out over his body. "Now it's my turn. Hell, it should've been my turn at the get-go. But if you're a fucking sorcerer, which you sure as shit seem to be, you should be able to re-harden your dick in no time."

Jackson sat up and glowered at her. "One, I'm not a sorcerer. Two, my erections are none of your business. And three,"—he rose from the bed, snatched the condom off the floor, and stepped over to where his loincloth lay—"you don't get a turn. I'm finished here."

That did it. He'd had enough of this. He touched his fingers to his lips then raised his hand toward Mikaela. "Thank you for your generosity," he said to her.

"My pleasure. Take care of yourself."

After securing the cloth around his midsection, Jackson walked to the front door.

"Hey," Christy shouted after him, "you can't leave! We have to conclude the esbat!"

Jackson turned to face her and the other women in the room. "I said I'm finished here. The ritual was successful. You can conclude the esbat without me." He dipped into a small bow. "Blesséd be."

And with that, he strode eagerly into the arms of the moon-drenched night.

\* \* \* \*

"You hurled the chalice at the fucking door?" Ivan asked in disbelief.

He'd gotten there after Spey's departure, so he'd missed all the action.

Christy, still naked, sat across from him. They were both ensconced at the small bar in the lounge area behind the covenstead. Smudged makeup deepened the High Priestess's ferocious scowl. "I pitched it at Spey," she said. "The door just happened to get in the way."



“You know,” Ivan said, “you really need to cultivate more—”

Christy’s glass hit the bar with a thud. “Fuck you. I don’t need a lecture. I got dissed tonight. Your wizard pal is a piss-poor excuse for a high priest.”

Ivan didn’t entirely believe that, much as he hated to admit it, but he *was* mystified by Spey’s behavior. Not the flouting-of-tradition part, since the bastard had a longstanding reputation for being a maverick, but the choice-of-partner part. Why would he pick a mouse like Mikaela?

As Ivan pondered this, the plainest of the witches emerged from the bathroom, where she’d obviously gone to get dressed.

“Ah, *there’s* the little lady with the hexy hoohah.” Ivan raised his drink, toasting Mikaela. She was okay-looking, but considering how much hotter and spunkier most of the others were, Ivan still couldn’t fathom Spey’s rationale.

Sneering, Christy turned on the barstool to face her. “So, *Hester*, I suppose you’re one satisfied puppy, since you ended up with the big bone.”

“I do believe the ritual was effective,” Mikaela said impassively.

“Fuck the fucking ritual!” Christy cried, spinning toward the comfort of her drink.

Reaching across the bar, Ivan patted her hand but kept his eyes trained on the lesser witch. “You sure fooled me, Hester Priss. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

Christy made a derisive sound.

“I never tried to fool anyone,” Miki said, “you included, Ivan. I didn’t ask to be chosen tonight.”

Kurtz continued to smirk. “But it seems you acceded quite willingly—nay, even eagerly—to the guest magister’s choice of partner.” He gulped more scotch.

“I think even you would accede to *that* man’s demands.” The words just wafted out of Mikaela’s mouth.

Glass still at his lips, Ivan froze, staring at her over the rim. Then he lowered the glass and snickered. Even to him it sounded forced, self-conscious. Mikaela quite boldly studied his face.

Damn, she was strange. Kind of gave Ivan the willies, actually. Miki was fairly new to the coven. Just showed up at Christy’s door one day, saying she’d like to join. Since a woman named Bridget had recently bailed out, Ivan came right over, checked out the wannabe, and gave his approval. There was no reason not to. She was young enough, had a decent body, was familiar with the Craft, and had no objection to sex within a coven. Good enough.

But she’d never seemed quite...normal.

The door opened and other women entered the room. As each one greeted the High Priest, he regarded each with a lecherous leer. Yeah, the rest were nice pieces. Easy pieces, too. Some dressed out in the open. Others took turns using the bathroom.

“Surely you know him,” Mikaela said to Ivan.

“Huh?” He wrenched his gaze away from the eddy of nubile females.

“The man who stood in for you tonight,” Miki said. “Lady Alessandra may have picked him, but you must be familiar with him.”

“I, uh, only know about...” He leaned toward Christy. “What name did he use?”

She flapped a hand as she drained her glass. “I dunno. Fuckin’ Applebaum or some fuckin’ thing.”

Grimacing, Kurtz dipped closer to her face and murmured, “Why don’t you get your

ass dressed? Your goddamned tit is sitting in a puddle of orange juice.”

“Why don’t you get me another drink,” Christy shot back, shoving her empty glass at him, “and let *me* worry about my tit?”

“He gave his witch name as Abelard,” one of the coveners supplied, glancing at Mikaela.

Kurtz rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Applebaum,” he muttered as he fixed Lady Alessandra another screwdriver. “Anyway, I only know about him through the grapevine. So, were you impressed?”

Christy suddenly broke in and addressed the women in the room. “All of you, just go home if you’re not gonna help clean up. And if you *are* gonna clean up, go do it. Now.”

Exchanging raised-eyebrow glances, they all gathered their things and padded out of the lounge.

“Well?” Ivan said to Mikaela, turning up his hands. “*Were* you impressed?”

“Yes,” she said without elaboration, and then abruptly wheeled out of the lounge.

Staring at the space she’d just vacated, Ivan pulled down his mouth. “Hm.”

He’d have to give this unexpected turn some thought. Spey had showed up tonight. That was a good sign. He’d allowed himself to be pawed, he’d been turned on by it, and then he’d gotten down and dirty. Those, too, were good signs. But his choice of Mikaela...

Ivan wondered if he should and how he could use the unassuming mouse to get Spey into the Prism.

## Chapter Four

“Hi. I’m sorry to intrude, but I need to talk to you. About a couple of things. If you’re wondering how I got your address, I found it in Christy’s handbag last night while I was in the bathroom.”

Jackson was taken aback. There she stood, the Mikaela he’d first met, her honey-colored hair defying its plastic clip, her chocolaty eyes watching him both expectantly and a bit defiantly. It was as if she anticipated being turned away but was determined not to let that happen.

“Found it because you asked for it,” he said, trying to mask his discomfiture, “or found it through stealth?”

Mikaela showed no sign of shame. “The latter.”

Jackson voiced a surprise that was half feigned and half genuine. “No kidding. If that’s the same bag *I* saw, it really took some guts to rifle through it. I’m amazed your hand came out intact.”

Images of their coupling flashed through his mind. Immediately, his cock began to stir. It was as if it—not he, *it*—needed to make up for the extended period of inaction. Too bad the feeling was matched by an anxious squirming in his stomach.

“The experience *was* kind grisly,” Mikaela said with an uncertain smile. “But in any case, I do need to talk to you.”

“If it’s a matter of need, I can hardly turn you away.” Jackson opened the door farther and casually gestured toward the flat’s interior. “Please, come in. I apologize for the mess.”

Glancing at him, Mikaela stepped inside and quite boldly looked around. The fact that he’d admitted her must have restored some of her natural bravado. “I like it,” she pronounced, facing him again. “It reflects you. I’m glad you’re not anal compulsive.”

At the sound of those words, another image fluttered through Jackson’s mind—an image more compelling on more levels than his recent activity at the esbat. “Not usually, no,” he said.

As he’d done when Christy Kemmer came calling, he strolled over to the couch and sat in one corner, his right elbow on the armrest, one leg jacked up on the opposite knee. Motioning to his left, he invited Mikaela to sit beside him. His gaze, which had a will of its own, inched down her body. Damn, it had felt good to fuck her. To fuck *somebody*. Maybe if he got laid more often—

“Jackson?”

Pulled from his reverie, he jerked his head in her direction. “Hm? I’m sorry. I was drifting.”

Mikaela watched him with a musing smile. “You probably haven’t been called Jack since you were a boy.”

She was obviously referring to the transparent pseudonym he’d used at the bar. Blushing, he picked at a thread on the hem of his jeans. “I think the last time was in junior high, by some classmates. My father always called me Jackie. My mother always called me Jackson. Other relatives adopted one or the other.” Feeling a bit penitent, and probably looking that way too, he glanced up at her. “I’m sorry for not coming clean at

the Lobo. I hope you understand.”

Mikaela nodded. “I believe I do. You’re a very private individual.”

Jackson raised his left hand and let it fall to his thigh, hoping his semi-erection wasn’t visible. “So,” he asked abruptly, “what do you need to talk to me about?”

“There’s something very strange going on.” Mikaela looked directly into his eyes, hesitated a moment, then spoke. “How much do you know about Artemis-on-the-Crescent? Like how it got started and by whom?”

*Odd question.* Jackson had in fact given the subject no thought whatsoever, especially now that his business with them was concluded. He shrugged. “I assume it was Christy’s brainchild.”

Mikaela made a scoffing sound. “Hardly. To have a brainchild, one first needs a brain. I’m not even sure she’s qualified to be a high priestess.”

Her comment made Jackson grin. So they felt the same way about Lady Alessandra. “A pretender, huh?”

“You could say that. Although ‘pet’ would be a better word.”

“I don’t understand.”

Mikaela angled toward him. “Jackson, are you familiar with a man named Ivan Kurtz?”

Hearing that detested name was like having one icicle spike up his spine and another pierce his solar plexus. Jackson froze—except for his cock, which started to soften. Of all the questions Mikaela could have asked, that one was right near the top of his “didn’t want to hear it” list. The other would’ve been, “Would you please ball Christy to placate her?”

Trying not to betray his shock, he merely said, “Yes. Why?”

“The coven was *his* brainchild. Like the other one he started, the Coven of the Golden Star. Except ours is...I don’t know...more like his playpen. I won’t go near him, but Christy and some of the others—”

“I get the picture. A playpen full of dolls.” It figured. No wonder the members were all women who hadn’t yet reached middle age. Jackson let out a hefty sigh.

The revelation sickened him, especially after last night’s esbat. *Now* what the hell was Kurtz up to? The memory of his ruthlessness some years earlier was still fresh in Jackson’s mind. Driven by vitriolic envy and resentment, the self-styled mage had provoked a confrontation with the wizard. And the mage had lost. His accomplice, Bothu the necromancer, had gotten off much easier, but he’d still ended up with a sac-shriveling scare.

Jackson had cast numerous afflictions upon Ivan Kurtz. He subsequently heard that Ivan rebounded—a recovery Jackson himself had facilitated, although no one knew this. Recovery wouldn’t have been possible *without* his aid. Despite his initial fury over the mage’s plotting, Jackson had begun to feel guilt-ridden over his enemy’s suffering. So, little by little, he’d reversed the afflictions.

Now he wondered if his sympathy had been misguided.

“What does this have to do with your being here?” he asked Mikaela, trying to erase his frown of concern.

Now the frown appeared on *her* face. “Well, after the esbat last night, Ivan stopped in. He and Christy had some private little confab in the back room, the lounge area. I only heard snatches. It was obvious she was angry with me. She thought I’d usurped her place

during the ritual.”

Jackson snorted and shook his head. “That woman doesn’t even belong in a coven.”

“Why *did* you single me out?” Mikaela asked.

He told her the truth. “I didn’t. I just demanded an appropriate partner. And you were it.” He reached over and touched her leg. “Excuse me. You were *she*.”

“I wasn’t offended,” Mikaela murmured. “Anyway, your name came up. Well, not while I was around. I happened to overhear Ivan and Christy talking about you.”

Jackson’s earlier chill began to resurface. “In what context?”

“I’m not entirely sure. It seems Ivan wanted to know how things went—which was strange enough, considering it was late and he lives on the other side of town.”

“You’re saying he could’ve just called.”

“Yes, although even *that* would’ve been odd. It was only an esbat, after all, not a major sabbat.”

Spey nodded. This wasn’t sounding good, not good at all. Some mischief was afoot.

“Mikaela, who dreamt up that Passion Celebration? And who wanted to get me involved?”

She shrugged. “Christy, I assume.”

Hand to chin, Jackson turned his eyes away from her. He considered this possibility.

“No,” he finally whispered, shaking his head. “No. That would be way too much of a coincidence.”

“I also heard a few references to a prism,” Mikaela said, “some sort of prism Ivan has. He seemed excited about it.”

Staring at her, Spey felt his heart skip. This reaction bewildered him. *A prism. So what?* A lot of occultists had crystals they thought were special in some way. And Ivan did tend to brag a lot about his magical paraphernalia.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt to find out more. “Did he describe it or identify it in any way?”

“He called it by a name,” Mikaela said immediately, as if she’d been waiting to divulge this. “I heard something that sounded like...Robbie or Ronnie, but more exotic.”

“Robbie,” Jackson repeated in a mechanical voice. He felt as if he’d gone into suspended animation. *No. It can’t be. Uh-uh. Not that debauched asshole.* But he had to ask, just to make sure. He needed to dismiss the possibility and ease his mind. “It couldn’t be Nezirabi, the Prism of Nezirabi...could it?”

“Yes, that’s it!” Mikaela said brightly, far too brightly for such a grim revelation.

“You’ve heard of it?”

“You bet.” Spey’s voice was barely audible, his mind barely functioning. “So you’re saying Ivan Kurtz somehow got his hands on Nezirabi’s Prism?” He simply couldn’t absorb this.

“That’s the impression I got.”

“And there’s no chance you misunderstood the word?”

“No. I recognized it as soon as you spoke it. I even heard Ivan say, ‘I can’t believe the motherfucking thing is actually in my possession.’ And he said it gleefully.”

“That can’t be possible.” Spey fell against the back of the couch and dropped his arms over his head. He pondered aloud, mumbling possible explanations. “Could be he’s the victim of a con. Or he got his hands on some other crystal and mistakenly identified it as the Prism.”

Whatever the case, there was still something fishy going on. It was obvious.

“Jackson...”

“Hm?” He wrenched himself away from his thoughts and looked at Mikaela.

“That prism seems to have corralled your attention.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. What *is* your and Ivan’s relationship?”

“We have no relationship. We loathe each other. He thinks I’m a grandstander, which I’m actually not, and I think he’s... Well, it doesn’t matter what I think. But my assessment is accurate.” Spey slid his hands over his face and rubbed it. “Fuck,” he muttered before letting them fall, one to the couch arm, one to the cushion. It sent up a diaphanous cloud of fine dust. “I’m sorry, Mikaela, but I’d rather not dredge up the whole slimy issue. And it’s best if you know nothing about it.”

She didn’t argue, just vacantly studied her lap. When she looked up, her gaze strayed to the bookshelves. “Who’re in the photographs?”

Jackson glanced at them. A softening went through him. “People I care about. You know. Friends, family.”

“But there’s one you care about more than the others.”

Breath going shallow, Jackson forced himself not to look at that one. He kept watching Mikaela. “What makes you say that?”

She shrugged. “Just a hunch.” Finally looking away from photos, she scanned Jackson’s body quite brazenly. “I very much enjoyed how last night went. Did you?”

“Yes, if you mean the part that involved us.” Jackson tried not to let his face betray his growing bafflement. By slight degrees, this meeting kept getting weirder—just as last night had.

Feeling restive, Jackson got up and stood in front of his guest. Strange how he felt simultaneously drawn to Mikaela and wary of her. The mixed reaction was disconcerting. Strange, too, how she evinced both an interest in him and a clinical detachment.

Her open scrutiny continued. Jackson couldn’t help but be excited by it.

“Is your cock getting hard?” she asked.

The question alone made it harden. “Uh, yeah, now that you mention it.”

“I can tell.”

Which meant, she’d been ogling his crotch. Which in turn meant, Jackson got even more excited.

“How does it feel?” she asked.

“Like I need to pull my zipper down and free it.”

The strangeness of their exchange registered in a portion of Jackson’s mind, the small, bright corner his libido hadn’t yet overshadowed. Such personal, lewdly suggestive questions...yet spoken in such a detached tone. But the realization made no difference in his body’s response. The blatantly sexual attention he’d gotten over the past couple of weeks had kept his pump primed. All he could think about was letting go.

Maybe it was a good thing he *didn’t* get out more.

Mikaela leaned forward. She undid the button on Jackson’s waistband. First pressing her mouth against the swell of his shaft, she then lifted the zipper’s tab with her tongue, grasped it between her teeth, slowly pulled it down. The curving bulge of his cock pushed through the V-shaped opening in his jeans. More blood flowed into it. Jackson knew he could come with very little coaxing.

“How does it feel now?” Mikaela turned her eyes up to his face.

“Better. Worse.” Angelina’s warning whispered to him from that bright mental corner. He had no desire to pay attention.

Mikaela tensed her tongue until it peaked and dragged the tip along the cloth-sheathed arch of his cock. It stiffened, began to straighten. When Jackson reached down to pull his still-growing erection out of his boxer briefs, Mikaela nudged his hand away.

“Tell me what it’s like,” she said and then murmured, as if to herself, “I want to remember.”

Jackson ignored the peculiar addendum. He just wanted more action. “A growing, clawing thickness and tension. Like some living thing is attached to my body. Twisting inside of it. Twisting outside of it. Heavy and demanding and clamoring for contact with something. Something, anything that will calm it.”

That was it, the source of his lack of willpower. Need. A need implanted by somebody else, somebody far away, who wasn’t around to satisfy it.

At that moment, his phone began to trill. Jackson ignored it at first. He wanted to concentrate on Mikaela’s actions. She’d begun sliding the elastic of his briefs ever so slowly over the taut head of his cock, darting her tongue at it, lightly tracing its rim with her fingernails. Still, the phone’s summons kept distracting him. When the answering machine clicked on, the caller disconnected.

Immediately, Jackson felt his compass start to turn south. Mikaela didn’t need to be told her persuasions would now be ineffective.

“Seems your concentration has been broken,” she said, rising from the couch. She didn’t sound disappointed or frustrated or resentful. She didn’t sound as if she had any attitude whatsoever about this unfortunate development.

“Fraid so.” As Jackson put himself back together, Mikaela moved away from him. He grabbed her wrist. “Please, leave me your address and phone number.” He still wasn’t sure he’d like to see her again. His attempt to hook up smacked of desperation.

*Don’t do anything rash.*

“All right.” Mikaela went straight to his desk, found the message pad, and wrote on it. “Shall I just leave it here?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Yeah, that way it won’t get lost.”

Jackson approached her and lightly flattened his hand on the small of her back.

“Your hand is hot,” she said in that same affectless voice.

Withdrawing it, Jackson briskly rubbed his palms together. “That ain’t all that’s hot.”

“Well, isn’t this where you say, ‘I’ll be in touch’?”

“I’m not sure *what* to say.”

With uncanny accuracy, Mikaela turned and put a hand on Jackson’s shirt-covered chest, right over the tattoo of the Trident, and gave it a rub. “I have to leave.”

Jackson touched his chest. The Trident had delicately pulsed and flared when she’d put her hand on it.

What was going on?

“Just wait here a minute while I go to the bathroom. Okay? Then I’ll walk you to the door.”

Trying not to jump to any conclusions, Jackson strode down the hallway to relieve himself. It helped get his cock to relax. But not his nerves. Mikaela was...different somehow. Now that he thought about it, she’d been on the eccentric side since he first met her. But the fey nature of her temperament seemed more exaggerated yesterday, and

still more so today. It wasn't a big, screaming change but noticeable enough to make him uneasy.

When he returned to the living room, he didn't see Mikaela where he'd left her. In fact, he didn't see her anywhere in the apartment. She didn't respond when he called out her name.

Three even knocks sounded at the front door. Scowling, Jackson went to it and opened it. The sight that greeted him made him step back. His scowl immediately broke. Surprise, delight and confusion overcame him.

"Adin!" He couldn't believe it. "Hey, did you happen to see—"

Without a word, his friend stepped inside, grasped Jackson's head...and kissed him. It was a shocking, hard slam of a kiss. The floor seemed to tilt like the deck of a ship. Mind spinning, Jackson felt the man's lips flatten against his. It all happened within seconds.

Something was very wrong here.

Jackson shoved the other body away from his own. "You're not Adin," he whispered. Disturbed by the realization, he felt a headache throbbing to cruel life in his forehead.

His statement was met by a cryptic smile.

The phone again trilled at his back. Jolted by the sound, he reflexively whirled around. *Fuck it*, he thought as he was about to make a dash for the handset.

When he turned back to the door, the impostor was gone.

Stunned and panting, Jackson bolted outside and looked around. Nobody there. No vehicles, either, except the usual ones.

Jackson forked his hands into his hair and stared blankly at the walkway. What had he gotten himself into? *Cool it*, he told himself. Okay, recent events were rapidly yawning from puzzling into mind-boggling—he'd faced similar situations before—but everything had an explanation.

He ambled back into his flat, closing and locking the door. The phone sat silently on the kitchen counter, as if waiting for him. He lifted it but didn't bother hitting star-sixty-nine to see who'd called. It was more important at the moment to make another connection. Afterward, he had to get to the shop.

Tapping the speed-dial number he used most often, he dropped into one of the chairs at the dining table. Thank God there was a quick pickup.

"Hi," he said. "It's me." A succinct but adequate greeting.

"Jackson, I've been trying to call. Did you just get in?"

His eyes closed as he sank into the voice. His headache began to recede. "Kind of. Why didn't you leave a message?"

"I hate leaving messages when I don't know who's going to be there to hear them."

Drawing thumb and forefinger over his eyes, Jackson breathed out a chuckle and wagged his head. "Jesus, Adin, it's not like you'd have to leave a phone-sex message." And then another thought, disturbing in a different way—*Just the sound of your voice is like phone sex*. "You didn't happen to call from your car, did you? You're not in town?"

"No, I'm at home. Why?"

"I thought I saw you." Jackson's gaze drifted to those heart-melting photos on the bookshelves. He suddenly felt lonely. It was an unwelcome feeling, one he sometimes had to battle, and he hated it. He particularly hated that the feeling was provoked by this



friend who was more than a friend, this lover he couldn't see often enough, and this discomfort that assailed him whether he was with or apart from the one person whose company he constantly craved.

Angelina had been right. Of course. She knew him too well *not* to be right. He'd been searching for a substitute.

Suddenly, life seemed to be bombarding him with curve balls he could neither bat away nor catch.

Faint noises came through the handset, indications of a person doing ordinary things. *So close and yet so far away.*

"Jackson, I don't like the way you sound."

"I'm okay. There's just some peculiar stuff going on."

"There's always peculiar stuff going on around you."

Jackson could see the other man smiling. The image prompted him to smile. "Yeah, but I understand that stuff. I can control it." Rising from the table, he drifted through the living room.

"So I take it you can't control whatever is going on now?"

"I don't know yet. I don't even know exactly what's happening."

Trying to avoid looking at the photographs—he didn't need more heartstring tugging—Jackson stopped at his bank of bookshelves. He touched a rare and splendid illumination of the Sefirotic Tree, its frame wedged between copies of the *Zohar* and the *Book of Yetzirah*. After tracing its elaborate design, his fingers skimmed across the spines of other books. There was so much to know, and even more that couldn't be known...

He regarded two more mystical illustrations, these from Khunrath. One depicted his cave of wisdom; the other, his Hermetic fortress. Jackson's brows drew together as he studied them. The second in particular seemed to draw him in.

Adin's voice broke his reverie. "So tell me about it."

After a glance at the photos, which was inevitable, Jackson stepped away from the bookshelves and sat at his desk. His gaze alit on the message pad, where Mikaela's address and two phone numbers were written in a hand that seemed both fanciful and aggressive, ethereal and earthy. Feeling a ripple of apprehension, he touched the paper.

"It's too complicated to get into. Especially over the phone."

Jackson never begged. But now he was seized by an impulse to say, I miss you so fucking much it's making me stupid. I need to see you. I know it'll make me a different kind of stupid, but Jesus, please—

"You're not curious about why I've been trying to get in touch with you?" Adin asked.

"Just to catch up, I assume." Jackson's heartbeat accelerated. It suddenly pissed him off royally that some creature had dared impersonate the man to whom he spoke.

"Not this time," Adin said. "I wanted to let you know Celia's going to the U. P. because her mother's in the hospital and she needs to look after her dad. And to remind you I haven't come for a visit since your birthday in March. So, are your hands too full for a houseguest?"

Under the circumstances, wanting him here seemed inexcusably selfish. Jackson knew some process he didn't yet understand had been set in motion. Ivan, the coven, Mikaela. Nezirabi's Prism. Still, his yearning for Adin's presence seemed to stretch over the hundreds of miles that separated them and clutch at the man's shirtfront. He sure as

hell didn't need to be reminded that he hadn't seen his lover-of-choice since March.

"Not if you're the houseguest," Jackson said. "How soon can you be here?"

"Hold on a minute."

*Gladly.* Jackson heard him talking to Celia, his live-in girlfriend. She knew about the two of them, knew they'd been friends for over a decade and had only recently acknowledged that their feelings for each other went beyond the limits of platonic. To this day, Jackson found it ironic that Celia's understanding and acceptance had come so much more easily than his own. This new phase of his relationship with Adin was still, as much as Jackson hated to admit it, like a dirty little secret. But he couldn't either deny or give up the unadulterated joy it brought him.

He closed his eyes. There, in the blackness behind his lids, he saw Adin framed in a moment from last November, kneeling on his haunches before the couch, his back hunched and hands spooned on his lap. Jackson saw those bewitching blue eyes trained on his face, felt his own gaze lower under the sheer force of their beauty. Coward that he was, he'd stared at the glass of Jack Daniels he cradled, seeking refuge in its safe, neutral amber. Then he'd heard Adin's placid voice form one sentence quite distinctly. No haste, no self-conscious slurring of the words.

*I love you.*

To this day, Jackson had not been able to say it back. Or even let himself share the feeling. It was hard enough accepting their physical attraction. Of course he cared about Adin. Yeah, he'd finally allowed himself to revel in the sex. But he'd never been romantically in love with anybody, much less his best male friend. And he sure as shit didn't relish the idea.

Adin's voice returned to the phone. "How about day after tomorrow? I could be there by late afternoon, early evening. I know it's a weekday, but I can keep myself busy while you're at the shop."

Jackson's gaze locked on the notepad. His ballooning guilt couldn't be ignored. "Listen, maybe this isn't such a good idea. I told you things are unsettled around here, and until I can figure out—"

"Don't you get it?" Adin broke in. "That's all the more reason I want to be there. Just change the bedding. I don't know whom you've been fucking lately."

Jackson smiled, even though he was thinking, *Even I may not want to know whom I've been fucking lately. Or what I've been fucking.* "Leave it up to you," he said, "to know when to use 'whom'."

Adin chuckled. "The objective case doesn't get enough respect."

"Neither does frankness," Jackson murmured. He took a small, shaky step toward correcting that. "I miss you. A lot." It was an understatement. He'd been missing Adin far more than he'd let himself realize.

The pause at the other end was noticeable; the voice that followed it, rich with feeling. "Now I wouldn't stay away even if an asteroid with your name on it were hurtling toward earth."

"That just might be the case, buddy."

## Chapter Five

Incunabulum or not, the *Book of Paths* was perilously close to being pitched across Ivan Kurtz's living room. "Fucking gibberish," he muttered, leafing back and forth through the slender volume. Going through it first thing in the morning did nothing to enhance his comprehension. Even a fresh mind couldn't process *this* crap.

It was a cobbled-together mess of at least five different languages, interrupted all over the place by arcane symbols. The hand-drawn illustrations did nothing, as far as Ivan was concerned, to illuminate the patchwork of text. He understood *some* words and phrases. Temporal Gate, Spatial Gate, Astral Gate. The Darkening Cold Tunnel. Here and there were names of archangels and demons, references to natural materials and stars and the four ancient elements. A term kept recurring, *Shebra'felim*, which seemed to be attached to some significant being. Beyond that, Ivan had no clue what it meant.

Wiping his damp expanse of forehead, he realized he had three options. First, he could tote this puzzle to the university and ask for some scholarly help in understanding it. Almost immediately, he scratched that possibility. Those academics would get in such a lather over the book, they'd want to keep it in protective custody for Christ-knew-how-long and pass it around from one specialist to another. Nope, that wouldn't do. Second, he could try to persuade Bothu to perform his necromantic gig and get answers from the stiff who'd led him to the Prism. That might work. Third, he could dispense with all inquiries and simply devise his own spell for casting Spey into Nezirabi's world. The *Book of Paths* called it the *Omnimodus Speculum* or *Vas Universitas*—whatever those damned Latin phrases were. In his frustration, Ivan was no longer sure.

He put the book back on the table beside the crystal sculpture. It seemed to taunt him with its gleaming stillness, its facets and filaments, its spangled central orb. Trying to think out a resolution, he lit a cigarette. Then he huffed out a chuckle.

Of all the people Ivan knew, only his intended victim might be able to comprehend that damned guidebook. Oh, the irony.

\* \* \* \*

Rising early, Jackson drove to his woodshop and put in a few hours of work. It was enough to add the finishing touches to a hope chest and make some progress on that bookcase-with-stairs project, which was nearly completed. He felt too preoccupied to put in a whole day. Dropping into a gliding rocker that was also ready to go, he wondered how to proceed with his life outside of work.

Thus far, only one thing was obvious. He couldn't let himself get distracted by Adin's presence. Well, not *too*. Mikaela's revelation—in fact, her very appearance in his life—required his attention. Especially since that appearance coincided with Ivan's acquisition of the Prism.

*The Prism of Nezirabi. Jesus, how could an inept pig like Ivan Kurtz...* He closed his eyes and shook his head. It was too incredible. There *must* be some mistake.

The Prism was one of the most legendary and powerful *objets magiques* Jackson had ever learned about. Its precise age and origin were shrouded in mystery. From what he'd

been able to gather, its physical form was that of a multifaceted crystal. Each facet led to some kind of passageway. More important, though, the Prism was like an intricate map of multidimensional intersections.

Some mages, *true* mages, had asserted the specific layout of the map was determined by the person who possessed the Prism, or entered it, and so changed from owner to owner or from explorer to explorer. Other sources claimed it didn't matter, that the Prism's "layout" was absolute and immutable. Over the centuries, untold monks and scholars had translated *The Book of Paths*, which always accompanied the object.

Jackson had also heard this vehicle could be put to more nefarious uses. But he didn't know what those uses were or even if this claim was true.

"Shit," he whispered, dropping his hands between his thighs. He had to find out more.

If Kurtz did indeed have the Prism in his possession, it wasn't necessarily a cause for alarm. Maybe the wanna-be mage wanted to tumble down a rabbit hole into his own private Wonderland. That would be fine and dandy. The jackass could use some enlightenment. On the other hand, if he screwed up his activation of the Prism, he might get an ugly scare. He could benefit from that, too. Anything that humbled Ivan Kurtz was a *good* thing.

But those rumors of the crystal's dark potential were a definite cause for concern. It was just too much of a stretch to imagine Kurtz wanting to better himself in any admirable way. A hell of a stretch.

Besides, Mikaela's quirky behavior and the faux-Adin who'd appeared at the door made it clear that shit was already flying off the fan blades.

Time was of the essence. Any research that could yield conclusive results might take weeks, even months. Literature on the Prism of Nezrabi was scarce, and most, if not all of it, was likely tucked away in the inaccessible archives of foreign libraries.

Expelling a sigh of resignation and slapping his thighs, Jackson knew what he had to do.

\* \* \* \*

The last and only other time he'd visited Ivan Kurtz, Jackson had not done so in his body. He'd simply reclined on his own bed and sent out his senses in what was, for the most part, an exercise in bilocation. He'd performed a more modest version of the same feat at the esbat. Few Adepts ever mastered this rare type of projection, and it had clearly rattled Ivan.

Despite the distance between their residences, Spey could see, smell and hear everything in Ivan's overdone living-space. He could speak to Ivan, "touch" him, and cause things to move about. Although he was at first invisible to Kurtz—which *really* threw the mage for a loop, because he couldn't identify his astral intruder—Jackson discovered he could in fact materialize his projected self, in whatever form he chose, if provoked enough. It wasn't surprising. The act of sending out the senses was powered by emotion-driven determination. The stronger the emotion, the more vivid and effectual the projection.

This time, however, sending out the senses wasn't an option. Jackson had no real fix on what Ivan was up to, if anything, and no degree of certainty that it involved *him*. That meant he had neither enough just cause nor emotional fuel to carry out this unique act. If

he wanted to confront Kurtz, he'd have to proceed the way any ordinary mortal would—by schlepping over to the asshole's apartment. So, driving through the thin veil of an early-afternoon, spring drizzle, he headed down city streets to the freeway, then up the freeway to another tangle of streets as he made his way from the humble south side to the chichi east side.

The closer Jackson got to Kurtz's place, the more his memories sharpened. The more his memories sharpened, the more he withered in revulsion at the thought of setting foot inside. Even in astral form, he could barely stand being in Ivan's abode—an ugly jumble of heavy, dark furniture and pretentious paraphernalia and smells that could have emanated from a Middle Eastern brothel.

Then again, there was a good chance Ivan wouldn't let him through the door.

Jackson cursed as he approached the twelve-story building near the lakefront. Parking was a total cluster-fuck in this area. He felt fortunate to find a single space on the street, two blocks away. Walking briskly through the cool mist that still fell from the sky, he concentrated on the core of power within him, readying it. He visualized it as a dense, scintillating egg of white-gold light, the "shell" of which could be cracked at will. Once cracked, he could mold and direct the outpouring of energy as he chose. By the time he was on the elevator, ascending toward the eighth floor, his body felt like a drum being played from the inside.

Of course, Kurtz wasn't expecting him. Giving the mage any forewarning of his arrival would've been self-defeating. Ivan would either have fled the premises or laid some kind of magical trap.

Feeling amazingly light, Jackson strode like a denim-and-leather-sheathed phantom down the carpeted corridor to Ivan's apartment. He paused before the door and slowly filled his lungs with air from the diaphragm up. The action both calmed and stoked him. He felt no anxiety, only a need to be cautious. And alert.

Jackson rang the bell rather than knocked. A knock on a door could be as distinctive as a voice or signature. He stepped far enough to one side of the peephole so only his shoulder, at most, would be visible. For a moment, no sound came from within—no conversation, no strains of music or televised yammering. But Ivan *was* home. Jackson could sense the mage's presence as soon as he approached the door. He could smell the intertwined threads of cigarette smoke and incense.

Then he felt the vibrations of heavy footsteps, heard Kurtz grumble, "What the hell?" He knew the mage was peering through the peephole as he barked, "Who's there?"

Jackson stepped in front of it.

"Holy Jesus," he heard Kurtz mutter in shock.

Within seconds, Jackson felt a push to his chest that made him sway backward. Irrked, he said through the door, "Hold your salvos, Ivan. I just want to talk to you."

"Get the fuck out of here, Spey. I mean it."

Jackson felt another, stronger push. Rebounding from it, he lurched forward and slammed his flattened hands against the door, making sure his eyes were visible through the viewing port. "I said, cut the defensive shit. You're starting to piss me off ...and I don't think you want to do that."

A shrill *ow* sounded from the other side of the door. Spey smiled.

"What did you do to me, goddammit?" Kurtz cried.

"Just sent a little something through your peephole to make a point. And don't try to

counter it, or I'll make the point even stronger."

"Why are you here? Why are you attacking me?"

Sighing, Spey dropped his head between his upraised arms. He let his hands slide off the door. "I *told* you, I'm here to talk. If you just play nice and let me in—"

"How did you get into this building?"

Spey chuckled silently and shook his head. Kurtz couldn't be *that* stupid. He certainly knew the wizard could gain access to any building anywhere.

Then, turning an ear to the door, Jackson listened more intently. His brow dipped in concentration. Indeed Kurtz couldn't be that stupid. He only asked the question to buy himself some time. He'd apparently hustled his ass away from the door and toward the apartment's interior, where Jackson could hear him moving about. Maybe he'd left something on the stove.

Or maybe he had something incriminating to stash away.

"Ivan? Don't tax my patience."

A flurry of soft footsteps, and the mage was again at the door. "Uh, just...gimme a minute, Spey. Okay? I'm not ready for company. And then, if I have your word that you're not here to do any harm, I'll let you in. All right?"

Frowning at the door, Jackson let his distrust build. *That prick is trying to hide something. Or concoct something.* "I give you my word," he said, "but you know it's only valid as long as you don't pull any shit."

"Okay," Kurtz said. "Okay, I'll be right back."

Jackson did a half-turn, leaned against the doorframe, and closed his eyes. He wished Angelina were with him. She could instantaneously read people, tap into their mental and emotional substrata. Although Jackson was a gifted Adept, his own talents were largely the result of training and discipline. He had but a small measure of natural psychic ability, although he could clumsily muster some when need be. Unfortunately, it was too hit-and-miss to be reliable.

The door glided open without warning, giving the reluctant visitor a mild start. He turned and stepped forward...and, for the first time in years, found himself face to face with the person he most despised.

Flushed and slack-jawed, Ivan Kurtz gaped at him. Jackson could feel the man's unsettling combination of fear, hostility, and awe spill over him like a polluted waterfall. The sexual desire wasn't as strong an element as it once had been—maybe the mage's ordeal had diluted his lust—but it, too, was still part of the mix. Jackson forced down a small wave of nausea. He couldn't let himself be weakened by the noxious effect Kurtz had on him.

"Well, well," Ivan said, his tone at once tensely snide and breezy, "to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Towering over him, Jackson stared impassively down into Kurtz's skittish eyes. He said nothing. Verbal sparring wasn't on his agenda.

"Hm. Guess you're tired of standing in the hallway, huh?" Ivan moved out of the way. "So come in."

He wore some mock-Oriental dressing gown of black silk. His initials were lavishly embroidered on the upper left side—roughly the same area where Jackson's body bore a far more significant symbol than a personal monogram. After stepping past his host, Jackson politely waited for an invitation to take a seat.

Ivan trundled to his massive leather couch and dropped onto it. He ran both hands over his thin horseshoe of hair and exhaled, inflating his cheeks. Jackson still hadn't moved.

Kurtz slanted his gaze in Spey's direction. "Sit down, for Christ's sake. You disturbed me because you wanted to talk. So talk. I have better things to do than let you stand in my living room and stare at me with those weirdass eyes of yours."

"Sorry," Jackson said, seating himself on the edge of a burgundy leather chair, "but they're the only eyes I have." He rested his forearms on his thighs and loosely interlinked his fingers.

Kurtz kept regarding him with almost palpable wariness. His face fell into a sneer. "And *I'm* sorry you can't gloat over what you're seeing." He held out his stubby arms. "I obviously managed to undo the damage you inflicted."

"What's done is done," Jackson said quietly. "I'm not here to rehash the past."

Kurtz reached for the pack of Turkish cigarettes that lay on his black-lacquered cocktail table. "Well, you still haven't told me why you *are* here. And make it snappy, why don't you?" He lit the cigarette, languidly inhaled and exhaled. "I have things to do."

"On a Tuesday? Bullshit." Jackson eased against the back of the recliner, his legs parting into a wide V. Ivan's gaze immediately dropped to his crotch. Jackson immediately crossed his legs. "Unless you have a date with Christy."

The color drained from Kurtz's face. His hand, on its way to the cocktail table, froze in midair. The length of ash he was about to flick from his cigarette dropped onto the table's glossy surface, looking as it lay there like an old, graying cat turd on a strip of tar.

"Who?" Ivan asked, his voice as flaccid as his dick likely was.

"Christy," Jackson repeated more distinctly. "Kemmer. Also known as Lady Alessandra, the most worthy High Priestess of the Coven of Artemis-on-the-Crescent." He leaned forward once more. "Why did you have her lure me into that esbat celebration, Ivan?"

The mage spasmodically shook his head in denial. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I didn't have her do a damned thing."

"But you founded the coven, didn't you? You're the usual High Priest."

"Yeah. So?" Kurtz quickly checked his watch. "That doesn't mean she can't act autonomously. I sure as shit didn't know she sought you out." Lamely, he chuckled. "Every freakin' female around here who's involved in the occult thinks you're...thinks you're hotter than a freakin' gamma-ray burst."

Jackson studied him through narrowed eyes. Was it possible Christy *did* act alone, and Ivan only caught wind of it later? The mage's curiosity would be understandable, given his history with the wizard, and it could easily explain why he showed up at the covenstead last night.

Now that Jackson thought about it, Mikaela hadn't really said anything this morning that proved Ivan's complicity beyond a shadow of a doubt. Christy could merely have boasted about "bagging" Jackson once he'd agreed to participate in the Passion Celebration. And such a revelation would surely have piqued Ivan's interest.

Dropping his face to his hands, Jackson wondered how to proceed. He didn't want to jump to any erroneous conclusions; his sense of fairness was too strong. And he sure as hell didn't want to say anything that would implicate Mikaela, despite the fact he felt unsettled about her, too. Given Kurtz's appetite for vengeance, that would put her at risk.

Therefore, he couldn't ask about Nezirabi's Prism.

Spey raised his head. "I've told you before not to underestimate me. Now I'm telling you again. Make damned fucking sure nobody you're associated with comes near me. Make *damned* fucking sure." He knew his eye color was changing, knew a brilliant gold was spiking through the irises. It certainly drove his message home.

The widening of Kurtz's eyes confirmed this. He lifted his hands, palms out, as if warding off the wizard's glare. "Listen, man, *I'm telling you*...it's that crazy bitch you ended up boning that you have to worry about. The one who calls herself Hester. I mean, yeah, Christy's a sleaze—believe me, I know that—but she couldn't find her way out of a closet that had a five-foot-tall exit sign. Hester, though...I shit you not, Spey, she's way smarter, but there's something not right there. Nobody knows a damned thing about that woman. All the other coveners shy away from her, and she keeps her distance from them." Sagely, Kurtz nodded. "That's the person who's up to something. I haven't figured out her game yet, but I will."

These warnings, which Ivan had issued so fervidly, sent a shiver through Spey's gut...and he hated himself for it. Why should he give any credence to anything the scumbucket said? This whole strange, sordid episode must be making him paranoid.

Still, he felt stymied. If he defended Mikaela, it would arouse Ivan's suspicion. If he took the mage's claims seriously, it would be tantamount to betraying her. But did she deserve his altruistic silence?

Jackson decided to steer completely away from the subject. "As far as I'm concerned, Hester has no role in this. No covener does...except Christy, since she's the one who chose me. Stick to the facts."

Flustered, the mage threw up his hands and rocked forward. "I just *gave* you the goddamned facts! Christy must've heard about you and been intrigued by what she heard. But she's dumber than dirt, and the esbat is over and done with, so where's the harm?" He dropped against the back of the couch and ran a hand from his perspiring forehead over his bald scalp. "Jesus, Spey, get over it already."

"I'll get over it," Jackson said evenly, "when I'm sure neither you nor anybody allied with you is bumping up against my life." He rose from the chair. "Don't fuck with me, Ivan. *Don't*." He walked to the door, turned, again drilled Kurtz with his gaze. "Just for future reference, since you're apparently too blinded by egotism to have figured this out, there was only one person in the world capable of easing your afflictions. And that person won't be nearly as charitable in the future." Spey opened the door. "You'd be well advised to think about that."

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Kurtz stared as the tall man in faded jeans and black leather jacket wheeled out the door. *Handsome bastard hasn't changed a bit*, he thought, unable to keep his eyes off those long, taut legs, that small, tightly rounded ass, that thick and glossy cascade of hair. His mind further tormented his body by dredging up an image of Spey in a blood-red ceremonial robe, his then-longer hair buffeted by a supernatural whirlwind. That was how he'd looked when Ivan had last seen him.

*Handsome, diabolical prick.* The mage's dick pulsed in affirmation.

He wished he'd gotten to the covenstead earlier yesterday evening and been able to see the wizard naked and rutting, all those witches' greedy hands running over his body, his cock hard as a length of rebar. Christy said it was big. Jesus damn. Just the thought of



it jack-hammering into a mouth, a pussy, an ass...

Ivan's hand fell to his crotch. Shit, he wanted to get off as he held that picture in his mind. Jackson Spey sexed up, demanding and unstoppable; muscles tense and flexing occasionally; skin glazed with sweat; nipples like garnet beads; balls full and aching for release.

The cell phone shrilled the first several bars of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Cursing, Ivan leaned over his growing woody and snatched the phone off the cocktail table. He idly fondled his sore nuts with his free hand.

"What?" he barked.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Christy. The High Priestess of Bad Timing. Ivan rolled his eyes. *No, not really. I was just indulging in a big ol' juicy fantasy and about to choke the lizard.* "I was just about to call you," he said instead.

"Oh yeah? Why?"

"Because your favorite wizard just paid me a visit, that's why."

"Who?"

Ivan let out a sigh of exasperation. "How fuckin' many wizards do you know, Christy? And of the one wizard you *do* know, who's your favorite?"

"Oh. Oh, you mean Jackson Spey was there?"

"Duh."

"Well...why?" Her tone became snotty. "Did he want Miki's address or phone number or something?"

"Let it go," Ivan said irritably. He grabbed another cigarette. "You're absolutely sure you never said a word to Spey about my connection to Artemis-on-the-Crescent?"

"Positive. My mind was, uh...on other things when I went to see him."

Ivan's dick twitched at the mention of those other things. But his need to get off was rapidly dwindling. "And you didn't let anything slip when you talked to him on the phone or at the esbat?"

"Nope, your name never came up. Hell, Ivan, you *told* me not to mention you!"

"Yeah, like you always follow instructions so well."

"Bite me."

"Not today. So, do you think one of the other women might've said something?"

"Why would they? Shit, they were too busy groping him." A loud respiration came through the phone. "Listen, Ivan, what's the big hairy deal? He could've found out from anybody. It's not like you keep yourself under a rock. Spey probably knows about you and the Golden Star. So why's it so odd that he'd know about your connection to Artemis?"

Ivan scratched his head. She did have a point. But... "But Jackson Spey does keep *himself* under a rock. He couldn't care less what goes on in the occult community. And let me tell you something else. If he'd known previous to the esbat that I was involved with this coven, he would never have agreed to participate. Guaranteed. That means he found out about me between last night and this afternoon. And that brings us right back to where we started."

"Miki," Christy pronounced. Clearly eager to slam the woman who'd stolen her thunder last night, she didn't have to be prompted on how to fill in *that* blank.

"Yeah, Miki." Ivan considered the possibility. She could easily be the one

responsible for letting the cat out of the bag. It wouldn't be in the least bit surprising if Spey's partner in sex magic had become smitten with him. "Maybe they exchanged phone numbers or something," Ivan thought aloud. "Maybe they even spent the night together."

"Wouldn't surprise me. That's why I wanted to see you."

This time Ivan managed to make it to the ashtray with his cigarette. It helped that his dick was now the size of a mushroom cap. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Christy said, all snippy again, "since I'm the High Priestess, I can say who comes in and who goes out. Right?"

"Well...to a point." Ivan certainly wasn't willing to cede control to an idiot, but he wasn't averse to massaging Christy's self-image if it served his purposes. "So what are you getting at?"

"I decided last night, before I went to bed, that I'm gonna kick her to the curb. She way overstepped her bounds at the esbat."

"Don't do that. Not yet. I might be able to use her."

"She overstepped!" Christy repeated more stridently, as if Ivan hadn't understood.

"Chill your ass out," he said, irked by her petulance. "You can always give her the boot after I get done what I need to get done."

"Good luck," Christy said snidely. "Because guess what? When I tried calling both her numbers this afternoon, I got these 'not in service' messages."

Halfway off the couch because he wanted to get a drink, Ivan sank back onto the cushion. "Really? No shit?"

"No shit. I even tried both numbers at different times, just to make sure I got them right. Nothing."

It didn't seem all that strange to Ivan. A lot of people didn't keep up with their bills. But this *was* an unanticipated wrinkle. He'd been considering using Miki as bait, if need be. A wriggly little mouse of temptation that might allow him to reel Spey in.

"Goddamn," he muttered. "Well, I guess all we can do is let it go for now. And by the way, you'd better not get it into *your* head to pursue His Hotness. We all gotta stay away from him. I seriously mean that." His mind began to wander to the Prism, which he'd hurriedly carried into his bedroom and covered with a pile of dirty clothes when Spey showed up. There were too many potholes developing in this road. He had to activate his plan soon. And the sooner the better.

"What's *with* you and Spey, anyway?" Christy asked. "Why all the conniving and cover-ups and secrets and crap?"

"I have an old score to settle, that's what. And once it's done, it's done."

Christy startled him by snickering. "You think so? That dude is wicked powerful, Ivan. Freaked *me* out...and I prob'ly only saw the tip of the iceberg."

The statement gave Kurtz a little quiver of anxiety. He flashed onto the afflictions Spey had beset him with—what a nightmare that had been!—then recalled the wizard's parting words. Almost immediately, he dismissed them. Spey couldn't have been responsible for his deliverance. It made no sense. Why would any self-respecting Adept smite his enemy with one hand then turn around and raise him up with the other?

Of course the prick had been bullshitting him, and it made Ivan hate the wizard all the more.

"Yeah, well," he said to Christy, "there's stuff out there even *more* powerful than his

wicked ass. And I got me some of it.”

## Chapter Six

As he again tapped Mikaela's phone numbers into his cell, Jackson wondered if his usually accurate memory had been derailed. It was possible. After all, Ivan Kurtz and the Prism of Nezirabi, not to mention Adin Swift, had pretty much monopolized his attention since her visit.

That wasn't it. He had a clear mental image of those numbers on the notepad. But he couldn't get through.

After leaving Ivan's apartment, he'd intended to call her from his car, find out where she lived, and stop by for a chat. He didn't know her work hours, but it was worth a try. Some pointed, rigorous questioning was in order.

Right now, Jackson didn't know what to make of his conversation with Kurtz. Was the mage truly innocent of any behind-the-scenes plotting? Was it Christy alone who'd decided to ferret him out? And what exactly had Ivan said last night about this prism he now owned?

More to the point—although Jackson hated to admit it—he needed to determine if Mikaela had some hidden agenda of her own or was working as Kurtz's agent. He didn't think so, but it wouldn't hurt to do some digging. Jackson had often found out the hard way that a powerful man could never be too careful. And a wizard was, by most people's standards, a very powerful man indeed.

Frowning at his phone, Jackson tossed it onto the seat beside him. An electronic voice had again given him that 'not in service' message. He wondered what to do next. Mikaela hadn't written her address on the notepad, but Jackson did know where she worked.

The day's early cloud-cover had begun to shred and dissipate. Sunlight, filmy at first, began to stream over the city. Damp pavement quickly dried. Once back on the South Side, Jackson exited the freeway and headed for Lennard Community College. He always felt most comfortable in this part of town. The patchwork of old duplexes and modest storefronts seemed to wrap around him like a favorite, threadbare blanket.

An accident had stalled traffic on Becher Street. Not much Jackson could do but wait. Rolling down his window to admit some breeze, he vacantly glanced around. The air smelled of spring growth and exhaust fumes and, more faintly, fried food. On his left lay Kosciuszko Park, its verdant stretches of lawn interrupted by public amenities—swimming pool, tennis courts. Between and beyond these, the mature trees gradually thickened, the grass beneath them smeared with charcoal shadows. Jackson smiled. He loved the county parks as much as he loved the Lake Michigan shoreline. His wistful gaze cut between stout, ribbed trunks as he peered deeper into the oasis.

A structure he'd never noticed before stood in a small clearing far back from the street. Forehead creasing, Jackson squinted at it. The structure looked like a hut on stilts, a rustic, raised cabin surrounded by a weathered fence. At irregular intervals, its pickets were topped by large, white finials.

It obviously wasn't a hunter's deer stand. It obviously wasn't a ranger station. Could be something for kids to play in, but it didn't seem to be part of a playground.

A vehicle horn blatted behind him, making him jerk to attention. Traffic had begun

to crawl forward. Impulsively, Jackson flipped on his left directional. He had to circle nearly the whole damned plat before he found a place to pull over, and even then he wasn't sure of whatever curbside parking restrictions might pertain. He decided he didn't care about being ticketed. The park's public lot was too far from the structure he'd spotted.

Without bothering to lock his car, he jogged toward the small clearing he'd seen in one of the wooded areas. Soon he spied the hut up ahead. Or thought he did. Whatever sight now greeted him was less distinct and detailed than it had looked from the street. It wavered like a mirage in the patchy shade.

Jackson felt disoriented. He seemed to be approaching a hologram. Silently reciting a protective incantation, he cautiously circled the insubstantial scene. Nobody else was around. Nobody he could grab and ask, *Do you see that?*

"What the hell?" he whispered, tempted to reach out for, or into, the ghostly diorama. Then he thought better of it. Not wise to touch something unless and until you knew what it was.

Little by little, he thought he did know. It was a fairy tale come to life. Maybe more like an acted-out fairy tale viewed through a camera obscura. The finials on the pickets were human skulls, their eye sockets emitting a ghastly green glow. The shutters on the hut's windows were human bones. Most astonishing of all, the stilts were actually a pair of yellow chicken legs, perhaps twelve feet high, which seemed to grow from the very floor of the cabin. As Jackson stared at them, the toes twitched on the grass.

"Baba Yaga," he murmured in wonderment.

The character was a staple of Slavic folklore, Russian in particular. A hideous, ill-tempered and deceitful hag, she reputedly cooked children in an oversized oven and then ate them, her iron teeth crunching ravenously through flesh and bone. Unlike other witches, Baba Yaga—or Jaga in Polish, which was more appropriate here—rode through the sky in a mortar bowl. She used its pestle like an oar, to ply the air and steer her flight. In her other hand, she clutched a straw broom that swept away her tracks.

This *must* be a hologram, part of some experimental, alternative-art display. Jackson's gaze again swept over the scene. Even a filmy ribbon of smoke wound from the crooked chimney on the hut's roof.

"Are you cooking your next meal, Baba Yaga?" Jackson asked with a smile.

His smile quickly fell. An answering murmur seemed to drift from the hut. The whole structure shifted as its supporting legs subtly flexed and relaxed. Driven by curiosity, Jackson slowly swept a hand toward one of the fence's skulls. His fingers didn't glide through the vision, as he'd fully expected them to. They disappeared *into* it.

Eyes widening, he pulled back his hand. The chicken legs began to bend, lowering the hut. Only the witch, when she recited a certain verse, could cause that to happen.

Jackson took a few steps backward as images of Baba Yaga floated up from his well of childhood memories. He suddenly lost all desire to explore this mystery. Turning, he began briskly walking back to the street. A finger of smoke, acridly putrid, tickled his nose. The smell spurred him into a trot. At his back he heard a series of dry creaks and rattles. Then a hoarse, brittle voice sounded faintly in the distance, as if calling out. Bounding across two lanes of traffic, Jackson finally slid into his car and slammed the door. He gaped at the deceptively still greenspace.

Nothing more appeared.

"I'll be fucked," he gasped, trying to collect his thoughts enough to head in the right direction. He still had to get to Lennard.

Jackson thought of something he'd said earlier to Adin, that the peculiar things suddenly happening around him could be neither explained nor controlled. What was worse, they kept multiplying.

If, over the next twenty-four hours, he didn't hear or read some news report about a little hut on chicken's legs appearing in Kosciuszko Park, Jackson would know he had much more crap to figure out than he'd previously thought. And the whole baffling list seemed somehow to originate with Ivan Kurtz and the Prism of Nezirabi.

Perhaps Ivan was trying to use his new toy to drive Jackson crazy.

Ahead lay the single-story sprawl of Lennard. Jackson turned right, into the parking lot. Finding the main entrance and front office was remarkably easy. The place wasn't much bigger than a good-sized high school.

Inside, it looked and smelled like one, too. The pebbled-beige, industrial-grade linoleum shone bravely despite its scuffs. Floor wax faintly scented the air. The smell of paper was slightly stronger. Boot soles and heels thwacking beneath him, Jackson went straight to the most prominent feature of the central hallway—a long counter topped by a wall-to-wall window. The hive behind it was populated by desks and desktop computers, file cabinets, and mostly female workers. Within seconds, an older woman toddled toward him. Her ID badge read ESTELLE.

"May I help you?"

"I'm looking for one of your instructors," he said in a pleasantly business-like tone.

Estelle eyed him suspiciously. It suddenly occurred to Jackson how much he had going against him in this effort. First, he probably looked like an outlaw to this matronly lady. Second, there'd been way too many stories on the news about twisted stalkers and disgruntled exes cornering women at their places of employment. Third, he didn't even know Mikaela's last name.

"Are you a student here?" Estelle asked.

"Uh...no." Jackson rested his forearms on the counter and briefly lowered his head. He wondered if he should make up some story but decided to take the straightforward approach. It's what he almost always did. "The truth is, I met her recently, in a...social situation, and I'd like to see her again. But all I know about her is her first name and where she works."

"Which is here?"

"So she said." Was that the beginning of a smile he saw on the clerk's powdered face? Maybe she was a romantic at heart. Maybe she found him good looking and was a tart at heart.

"What's her name?" Estelle asked.

"Mikaela. Or Miki. That's all I know. Oh, and she teaches composition."

"What kind of composition?"

Jackson frowned. "How many kinds are there?"

Estelle, bless her, cut to the most likely choice. "You probably mean English comp."

"Yeah, that's what I assumed. I never thought to ask for clarification."

His use of a multisyllabic word seemed further to garner Estelle's trust. "We don't have any English instructors with that name. In fact, we don't have *any* instructors with that name."

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive. Wouldn’t have been here for twenty-six years if I didn’t have a good memory. We have two instructors who teach English composition. A man named Conrad and a woman named Jean.” Finally, Estelle did allow herself to smile. “I doubt Jean is your type.” She didn’t elaborate.

“Can you think of *any* female instructors with blonde hair and brown eyes, about five-foot-four?”

“None who’s single and teaches any kind of composition and is named Mikaela or Miki. Sorry.”

Puffing an exhalation, Jackson straightened. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Looks like you got hoodwinked. Maybe you need to pick your ‘social situations’ more carefully.”

“I think you’re telling me not to meet women in bars,” Jackson said with a smirk.

“Taverns in this city aren’t what they used to be.” Estelle sounded regretful. “Better luck next time.”

Giving her a rueful smile, Jackson had little choice but to leave.

On his way home, he made a point of again driving past Kosciuszko Park. This time he cruised down all four streets that bordered it. The nearly square plat was probably thirty acres, give or take. On Lincoln Avenue near Tenth Street, a life-size statue of Thaddeus Kosciuszko, hero on horseback, punctured the air with his upraised sword. Jackson saluted the general. And almost rear-ended the SUV ahead of him.

The Polish luminary was not alone on his noble steed. A naked young woman with fair, flowing hair, and a bow and arrow resting on her lap, sat nestled against the general’s crotch. Only, she had no substance; she was translucent. As soon as Jackson glimpsed her, the woman’s form elongated into a hazy tendril that shot off into the crown of a nearby tree.

Jackson had walked through or driven past this park a score of times, at least. It was soothingly ordinary. He’d never before seen what he’d seen today. Yet, no other passing vehicles swerved or screeched to a halt; no clusters of neighborhood residents stood gawking at fanciful figures that appeared and disappeared within the pastoral confines of their local retreat. For some reason, he seemed to be the only one witnessing these apparitions.

And Mikaela, his unexpected one-time lover, had appeared and disappeared as mysteriously as the phantoms of Kosciuszko Park. And Ivan Kurtz was again behaving like a weasel with a plan.

None of it boded well.

When he got back to his flat, the first thing Jackson did was pour himself a stiff drink. He glanced at the two most arresting photos on the bookshelves, and his groin immediately tingled at the thought of seeing Adin tomorrow. The gorgeous son of a bitch always made him feel like a mass of sentient jelly.

“You have eyelashes like a woman, Swift,” he murmured, toasting the pictures. “But you sure as hell fuck like a man.”

Snatching up his cordless phone, Jackson went over to his desk and pushed aside its drift of papers until he found his address book. He ambled into the bedroom and flopped on the bed. The whiskey he’d just dumped down his throat had kindled a small fire in his belly that quickly wrapped his brain in dozy warmth. God bless Jack Daniels.

At least he'd come up with some notion of how to proceed. It might not pan out, but it was worth a try. He began flipping through the address book he held above his face. The phone rested on his stomach. It suddenly trilled, giving him a mild start.

Angelina. She was about to leave the Grand Avenue Mall, she said, and was just waiting for rush-hour traffic to die down. Jackson heard the fragmented, atonal hum of busyness in the background, including thready strains of music, then the white-noise splashing of a fountain. Angelina must have parked herself on a bench.

"I saw the strangest thing last night," she said breathlessly. "I was going to call and tell you about it when I got home, but it's just been eating at me. Are you sitting down?"

"Better than that. I'm lying down." Jackson absently rubbed his forehead. What she'd said wasn't something he wanted to hear.

"I was at Baer's house last night, on the lakefront—"

"Wait. Is that the geeky, smart guy or the handsome, rich guy or the politician?"

"The second," Angelina said, "although I think they're all attractive. Anyway, we were just sitting there beneath the full moon, holding hands and talking, and I started wondering how that esbat celebration of yours was going. Then, and I'm dead serious about this, someone or something rose from the water. At first I thought it was just a wisp of fog."

"But it wasn't." This was beginning to sound all too familiar.

"No, it wasn't. It was a girl. Or young woman. She just floated over to the gazebo and circled around it. I guess I must've gasped, because Baer asked me what was wrong. I just said I thought there was something out there. And there *was*...only he didn't see it." Angelina took a breath. The mundane chorus of sounds continued around her. "Jackson, I swear, she had deathly white skin, as if she'd been spun from the moonlight. Her eyes had no pupils; they were just these pale, glowing orbs. Her hair looked green. And wet, sopping wet, plastered against her back."

Sitting up, Jackson leaned against the wall. "So what did she do? Anything?"

"She was staring at Baer," Angelina said, ever more agitated, "like she was eyeing him up. There was the most malevolent expression on her face. I could've sworn I heard her muttering something, *to him*, but I didn't understand what she was saying."

"Didn't understand because her voice was too quiet," Jackson asked, "or because she spoke a foreign language?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe both. So I thought as forcefully as possible, *Get away from us*. Her face took on this sad, defeated look, and she just sort of wafted up into a willow tree. At least I think so. I thought I heard her singing. Good God. I was trying so hard to act normal, because Baer obviously hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary."

"And that was it?" Jackson realized he still had his boots on. *Crude*. Applying toe to heel, he forced each one off.

"Not yet," Angelina said. "After a couple of minutes, this thing floated onto the dock. She sat there, singing softly and combing her hair. That's what the movement looked like. After maybe another five minutes or so, she slipped off the dock and back into the lake like a dead fish."

Jackson waited for the story to continue, but it had obviously reached its conclusion. At least he wasn't the only person who'd been seeing things. "Fraid I can't offer any insights," he said. "Why don't you call me back once you get home? I've got some stuff to tell you, too, but right now I need to make a call."



“Okay, sure. Damn, Jackson, I know I’ve seen worse when I’ve been around you, but that was just so...unexpected and eerie. I get goosebumps just thinking about going near the lakefront after dark.”

“Then you might want to stay away from the county parks, too.”

Before he had a chance to explain, the signal started breaking up. No matter. She’d be calling back later.

Jackson stared at the phone still cupped in his hand. He wondered if Kosciuszko Park, or any natural space within the city, would indeed be more supernaturally active at night. Curiosity made him consider driving to a park and hanging out after sunset, but the exercise seemed rather pointless. What would he do if his suspicions were confirmed? Nothing. Unless and until he could figure out what was going on, he had no foundation for any action.

Well, it wasn’t his responsibility anyway. Who’d made him the Guardian Angel of Milwaukee? So let a host of storybook witches and ethereal exhibitionists haunt the city. As long as they only appeared to a select few people, for whatever reason, they weren’t doing any harm.

Of course, he couldn’t *entirely* ignore the situation. Not with everything else that had been happening.

That in mind, he got off the bed and parted two slats of the blinds at his bedroom window. It was on the side of the building, facing yet another duplex across a cracked walkway flanked by strips of mashed grass. Because he lived in a basement or “Polish” flat, the window was only about a foot above ground level. Jackson didn’t know what he expected to see.

Outside, the light was waning.

He still had a phone call to make.

Letting the slats fall back into place and drawing the curtains that covered the blinds, Jackson went back to his bed. He’d no sooner reached it than a stealthy rustle sounded just outside the window. Cocking his head and stilling his breathing, he listened. Yes, there was a faint, brushing noise coming from the panes of glass. It could just be a piece of trash that had been drawn into the weak wind-tunnel between the buildings. Plastic shopping bags and bits of paper occasionally got hung up on his window frames.

The explanation didn’t satisfy him.

Scowling, Jackson again rose and went to the window. He tilted an ear toward the curtains. The rustling became more tentative, then abruptly stopped. Yanking aside one panel and simultaneously pulling up the blinds, Jackson yelped, “*Fuck!*” and stumbled backward.

The creature staring back at him flashed a grin and darted out of sight down the walk.

It hadn’t even been as high as the top edge of the window, that hair-covered, gnomish thing with stumpy horns and tail. What was even more terrifying, it bore a fleeting resemblance to Jackson himself when it smiled.

“What the *shit?*” he gasped, hand to head, as he faltered back to the bed.

After all the beings he’d summoned and banished, all the demons he’d confronted, all the elementals that had harried him, he should have taken these materializations in stride. That’s what he told himself. But he’d anticipated those other things. He’d been prepared for them and knew how to handle them. Today, though, he was being blindsided

at every turn.

“Ivan,” he whispered, falling back on an earlier theory. Kurtz must somehow be using the Prism to send out these visions. If Jackson could determine that with certainty, he could start countering the attacks.

Hands still trembling slightly, he again found the phone number he’d earlier been intending to reach.

“Sophia?” he asked when he heard the answering female voice.

“Yes.” She paused. “Jackson? Jackson Spey?”

“Yeah, how did you know?” He heard a man’s voice in the background. Had to be Harrison Brock, esquire. Jackson smiled.

“The hair on my arms all stood up at once,” Sophie said. “How are you?”

“Good. How about yourself?”

“Pregnant.” The word issued from her like a sunbeam.

“No kidding? Wow, that’s great. You and Sonny must be thrilled. Hey, put the punk on the phone.”

Sophie did so. “Can’t have her now, Spey,” Sonny said with a smile in his voice.

“Brock, you son of a bitch, you have viable sperm!”

“Fuck you, Jackson.”

“You too. With congratulations.”

“Thanks, man. I might even marry this lady. If you show up at the wedding, just keep your eyes one color and your hands to yourself.”

“On my honor.”

“Got a girlfriend yet?”

“Not anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sonny said with real sympathy. Tough guy though he was, he’d always been a sentimentalist. And a genuinely decent man.

“Don’t be,” Jackson said. He thought of Adin. In this context of girlfriends and romance, babies and impending weddings and domestic bliss, the thought made him distinctly uncomfortable.

Sophie came back on the line. “So, what can I do for you? Need a consultation?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Sophie Alanca, soon to be Sophie Brock, was one of the most gifted psychic mediums Jackson had ever encountered. He’d helped her out of a very threatening, even dire situation within the past couple of years. In the process, he’d also played a role in cementing her and Sonny’s relationship.

More than anything else, it was situations like theirs that made being an Adept worthwhile.

“I’ll do anything and everything I can to be of service,” Sophie said, her sincerity matching Sonny’s.

At the risk of being pushy, Jackson told her, “The sooner the better.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Could be. I don’t know yet. That’s why I need you and Esme.” Esme, a very wise old soul, was Sophie’s spirit guide. “Can you fit me in tomorrow?”

“I’ll make a point of it,” Sophie said. “If you’re thinking of bringing Angelina, please do so. I’d love to see her again.”

Jackson chuckled. “You read my mind.”

\* \* \* \*

Ivan knew he was snug in his bed—a suitably mammoth bed awash in black satin sheets and comforters. Still, he grumbled in his half-sleep. Then he floated out of his dark apartment.

*Ah, astral projection. Heh-heh. Spey isn't the only one...*

Night was deepening in Milwaukee County. Woods and waterways, fields and flowerbeds quivered to life in the silver-blue spill of moonlight. But what exactly caused the quivering?

Ivan struggled to stretch his eyelids. He couldn't see clearly enough to discern the shapes that skated over rivers and slunk through vegetation, but he was aware of them. He knew most people were not.

*That's because I know magic,* he thought with a smile. His superiority pleased him.

He also knew all this hidden life would become more apparent as it became more active and abundant. And it surely would. That particular realization was more alarming than gratifying, although he couldn't determine why.

Moonlight stippled the low waves on Lake Michigan, which wasn't far from his residence. Ivan was suddenly bobbing above the inland sea. He didn't like being there. It made him intensely uneasy. The lake was troubled. Bubbles churned from a portion of its surface, a patch of water darker than the highest reaches of midnight sky.

Soon, a *bagiennik* shot from that patch and over the streetlights and into the high building that housed Ivan's apartment. And Ivan was there, too, reclining once more in the enveloping darkness of his room.

Wearing a curious look, the *bagiennik* hovered over his bed. Two viscous strings oozed from two nostrils in the middle of its forehead. Thick droplets fell on Ivan's skin, burning it like the hot tips of recently blown-out matches.

He flinched. And flinched again. "Leave me alone, Spey," he mumbled. "Leave me alone."

Why, he wondered foggily, did he say that? And what the hell was a *bagiennik*?

Whatever manner of nightmare creature it was, the ugly fuck didn't seem to understand him. And Ivan couldn't seem to move out of its way.

## Chapter Seven

Another early start, even earlier than yesterday's. Jackson dragged himself out of the sack at five a.m. First order of business was to suck down two cups of coffee. Once he was primed by caffeine, he changed the bedding, picked up dirty clothes, cleaned the bathroom, scrubbed the kitchen sink, and wiped down the countertops. He'd vacuumed within the past week. That was good enough. And fuck the rest of the mess. It had become part of the décor.

After breakfasting at George Webb's and putting in another four hours at the shop, he came home, shaved, showered, and donned clean clothing. Angelina arrived before his hair was even dry. It made sense she come to his place. For her, it was on the way to Sophie's house. They could drive there together.

Last night on the phone, they'd filled each other in on recent developments. Angelina, too, suspected Ivan Kurtz was at the bottom of it all, since Ivan hated them both.

"Looks like you've been run ragged already," she said, "and the day's barely begun."

Jackson dragged a brush through his hair. "Yeah, well, I had a lot to do. And I've gotta get back here by four."

"Why?"

After tossing his brush on the coffee table, Jackson reconsidered. Leaving it there would be tacky. He picked it up to carry it back to his dresser. Angelina's question still hung in the air.

"Do you have an appointment," she asked, "or a date?"

He didn't want to look at her. She'd see his self-consciousness. "Neither. I have company coming."

"For dinner? Or for the evening?"

"Neither. Out-of-town company." Jackson scanned his living space for other stuff he should, for the sake of good taste, put away. He picked a stray hair off the coffee table and returned his brush to the bedroom dresser. The hair got lost *en route*.

"Who is it?" Angelina asked when he came back.

Now he noticed the dust. Not just on the coffee table but on every surface. It wasn't thick, but it did allow for trails.

*Jesus, let it go already!*

"Uh...Adin Swift," he murmured, grabbing his jacket off the back of a dining chair and slipping it on.

Angelina watched him. "Oh. That's nice. I'm glad the two of you have been seeing more of each other. You're so much alike."

Jackson glanced at her, just to read her expression. Angelina didn't know—not officially, anyway—just *why* Adin and he had been seeing more of each other. But he had a feeling she suspected.

He pulled his hair out from under his collar and grabbed his car keys.

Angelina stepped forward. "I'll drive," she said. "You seem a little distracted."

\*

It was a happy reunion between three people who truly liked, trusted and respected

one another. Sonny wasn't there—he was at the university, which disappointed Jackson a bit because Harrison Brock was a good shit—but Sophie was as lovely and warm as ever. The extra pounds resulting from her pregnancy were quite flattering.

The room behind curtained French doors, where Sophie conducted her readings, was essentially the same. As clean and unpretentious as the rest of the house, it looked more like a rather old-fashioned personal library than a spiritualist's séance den. Its feel perfectly reflected Sophie. The furthest thing from a grandstanding charlatan, this former nun was a modest straight-shooter intent on helping others through her gift.

First Jackson and then Angelina told her of their recent experiences. Jackson's, of course, came bundled with hefty concerns. Sophie listened attentively, one hand curled over the small dome of her belly. She had no weird sightings to report. This might have been because she and Sonny lived in a rural area in a different county, south of the city. But why that should matter, none of them knew.

"So there's nobody in particular you need to contact?" she asked. "You're just looking for answers?"

"That's about it," Jackson said. "I have no idea where to start. I guess that's where Esme comes in."

Thoughtfully, Sophie nodded. "I know she'll do everything in her power to help. She has tremendous regard for you. Angelina, haven't you picked up on anything? You're normally a very sensitive receiver."

"Nothing's come to me. I was able to psychically 'eavesdrop' on Ivan Kurtz on one occasion. I'm not sure what makes the circumstances so different now, but they obviously are different."

"Well," Sophie said on a sigh, "I'll give it a go."

They were sitting at a round oak pedestal table, an antique. Sophie had already drawn the room's curtains. She didn't do it for atmosphere, she explained, but to enhance her concentration. The one burning candle was symbolic of enlightenment. It also helped draw Esme, Sophie's spirit guide, who was fond of a fire's warmth and glow and reverential of its importance in pagan rituals.

Sophie slid a piece of paper and a pen with purple ink toward Jackson. "That enemy you spoke of," she said, "print his name in block letters on this paper. When we get started, I'll hold the paper under one hand. You and Angelina must visualize him. The more detail, the better. Think about what he looks and smells like, the sound of his voice, how he moves and acts, where he lives. The sharper the images, the easier it will be for me to access him."

"Why purple ink?" Jackson asked, carefully writing Ivan's name.

Sophie smiled. "Because I like purple."

"You're such a girl." He slid the paper over to her.

Carefully, Sophie flattened her palm over the sheet. She reached for Jackson's hand. Angelina curled her fingers over Sophie's wrist. Once they were all connected, the medium closed her eyes. The room seemed bloated with silence. In the center of the table, the candle's small flame looked as frozen and remote as a comet's tail. Sophie's hand flexed delicately over the paper bearing Ivan's name. She took a breath. Words began to stream from her mouth.

"Mr. Kurtz has concocted a scheme. It's fueled by a desire for vengeance. He feels he's been wronged by Jackson Spey. I get the impression he invited whatever fate befell

him. He knows this but doesn't want to admit it. He's been aided by someone named Bothu." Pausing, Sophie winced. Her eyes remained closed. "When we went to Fog Cliff Cemetery to root out the source of *my* problem, Angelina detected this man's recent presence in James Newman's mausoleum."

"Yes, I did," Angelina whispered.

Sophie's wince crept toward a grimace. "Bothu is a necromancer, yes?"

"A soiled one."

Sophie nodded. "Nevertheless, he wants nothing to do with an attack against the wizard. He merely profited from a transaction with Mr. Kurtz, who holds the grudge." She lapsed into receptive stillness. Jackson felt her squeeze his hand. "Do you mind if I say something that might embarrass you?"

"Not much embarrasses me." Still, he braced himself.

"Mr. Kurtz believes you can be sexually enticed into some...place or situation that will ultimately destroy you as an Adept. So he's been testing you and baiting you."

More silence. Jackson all but stopped breathing.

"There's an object involved. It's...like a trap he's trying to lure you into. I see him staring at it, pondering it. He doesn't really understand this thing but he knows it's powerful. It looks like...like a small iceberg. It's some kind of...crystal."

"Is there a name for this thing?" Jackson asked quietly.

After a few seconds, Sophie nodded. "Many names. It's had many names. The current owner calls it"—she paused, as if concentrating—"the Prism of Nezrabi."

Jackson's head fell forward as he softly, tensely exhaled. Okay, now *that* question had been answered.

"But Mr. Kurtz is misreading you," Sophie went on. Her fingers moved within Jackson's hand. She was tapping into him. He could almost feel her gently probing his psyche. "There's something about your...your interior landscape that he's not aware of."

Jackson snorted. "I'd say he's not aware of ninety-nine-plus percent of my 'interior landscape'."

Sophie didn't seem to hear him. "He doesn't know you're committed to someone. He doesn't realize how thoroughly someone has captivated you. Physically, emotionally, intellectually."

Jackson could feel his eyes haphazardly shifting like loose ball bearings. "Wait, that's not really—"

"I'm sorry it's so difficult a situation," Sophie murmured.

From the corner of his eye, Jackson noticed Angelina's fixed attention. Her brows had lifted. She was studying his reactions.

"Esme wishes to come forward and speak through me," Sophie announced, unintentionally letting him off the hook. "She's pleased you're here."

"And I'm, uh...pleased and honored by *her* presence," Jackson said. Sophie's observations had jolted him as much as her revelations.

Either the medium or her spirit guide smiled at this. Or at something. "She deeply values your regard." Sophie was quiet for a moment, obviously listening. "Mr. Kurtz is unaware of why the Prism is *really* in his possession. He doesn't know that he and Bothu are merely facilitators."

Jackson felt his forehead dip. "And what exactly have they been facilitating?"

"Deliverance of the Prism. However unwittingly, they've gotten it where it's

supposed to be.”

*In Ivan Kurtz’s tasteless apartment?* “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Bothu is a morally begrimed necromancer who seeks out the most spiritually tainted decedents. So it was logical for him to find James Newman’s tomb.”

“That’s where he actually discovered the Prism?” Jackson broke in. He and Angelina exchanged shocked glances. They were quite familiar with the site and the man or, rather, the man’s history. Sophie was as well.

“The object was interred with Newman’s body,” Esme affirmed through Sophie.

“The necromancer knew that Ivan Kurtz has been craving the perfect form of retribution. So it was logical that Bothu sold him the Prism. You are Kurtz’s greatest enemy, at least in *his* mind. So it’s logical that he wants to use the Prism against you.”

“Are you saying the trail ends at my doorstep?”

“Yes.”

“And what am *I* to do with the Prism?”

“Enter it.”

Jackson rocked backward in his chair and almost toppled over. He pitched forward.

“What? You mean *willingly*?”

“More or less.”

That was the last thing he wanted to hear. “But...*why*?”

“You won’t understand the answer until you understand the nature of the object. Do you?”

“I, uh...somewhat.” The statement was both reluctant and uncertain.

Jackson knew times and places could intersect. Dimensions could intersect. Such concepts were fundamental to the principles of High Magic. He knew there were worlds very much like the earth but with different histories, different creatures, different physical laws. And there were worlds very *unlike* the earth. He knew that what was mundane in one world could be magical in another, and vice versa.

He’d heard the Prism had some significant tie to these realities.

“Your assumptions are largely correct,” Esme said through Sophie. “What you know as the Prism of Nezirabi is both a schematic and miniature of the Cosmic Warren. Most important—and you must absorb this fact—the Prism ensures that various worlds and planes do not bleed through their boundaries and into one another. A major hemorrhage would undermine Universal Law and result in unspeakable chaos.”

“I can only imagine,” Jackson said, barely aware he spoke.

“Perhaps you can. Over the eons, some seepage *has* taken place. There’s occasional evidence of it. The appearance of things and creatures not indigenous to this planet.”

Angelina broke her silence. “You mean, like UFO sightings?”

“Yes, but much more than that. People and places disappearing in the blink of an eye. The past impinging on the present, the dead on the living. Demons possessing humans. However, nothing on a wide scale. Nothing too terribly disruptive. These incidents are allowed to occur because they stretch the human mind.”

Jackson understood *that* part, but... “I still don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“A boundary has been seriously compromised,” Esme said then apparently addressed Angelina as well as him. “You’ve both lately seen strange creatures, have you not?”

Hyperalert now, Angelina leaned forward. “Yes. What are they? Where are they from? And why can’t everybody see them?”

“Only the most psychically developed or naturally sensitive humans can perceive them. At least for now. They are the beings who populate Slavic legend. Polish and Russian, Serbian and Croatian, Czech and Slovakian. They were drawn to your city because of its ethnic heritage.”

“Wait, wait,” Jackson said, nearly breaking his contact with Sophie and Angelina. “How can they exist at all? Anywhere?”

“Because they were conceived.” The terse explanation was matter-of-fact. “They were imagined and willed into being. Untold numbers of people believed in them. Strong belief imparts life. Theirs may not be the kind of existence you’re familiar with, but they exist nonetheless, usually in their own place.”

“How did they...get out of that place?” Angelina asked. She looked even more befuddled than Jackson felt.

“As I said before, some essential barrier has been broken.”

“But how,” Jackson asked, “if the Prism keeps those boundaries intact?”

“A previous owner of the Prism, some dabbler in the occult arts who was either inept or bent on some maleficent purpose, is likely responsible.”

Jackson’s mind wrapped around this revelation. The fact that Bothu found the Prism in James Newman’s mausoleum was a huge and very telling clue concerning the identity of this previous owner. But before Jackson could toss his theory on the table, Esme again spoke.

“Who was responsible matters not. The point is moot. Damage has been done. Now someone must repair the breach. It could grow larger.”

Jackson gaped at Sophie then threw up his hands. He didn’t stop himself this time.

“No. Nonononono. I’m just a wizard, for Christ’s sake.”

“Not just.”

“Okay. I’m a wizard who values his sanity, thank you very much.”

Sophie’s hand sought out his and again grasped it, reestablishing their circle. “Others before you have been called upon to perform the same task.”

“Yeah,” Jackson said on a tight laugh. “And I’ve heard what happened to some of them.”

“But not all. Some succeeded where others failed. Some emerged from the Prism unharmed and considerably more powerful, while others went mad. Some merely vanished.”

“Am I supposed to be encouraged by those odds?”

“If you have faith in your inner strength, you should be.”

Jackson didn’t know what to say. Dumbfounded, he looked at Angelina. She lifted her shoulders and shook her head.

Judging by Sophie’s demeanor, Esme was patiently awaiting his next question. “Am I to do this alone?” he asked.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. The choice is yours, even if you’re not aware of it. By the way,” Esme added, “your adversary, Ivan Kurtz, is not in control of this situation.”

“Should I be encouraged by *that*?”

“I cannot judge.”

“Well, I choose not to do it at all,” Jackson said as firmly as possible. “Whoever has engineered this can find some chump with more ambition than common sense. I don’t have a superhero complex.”



Unmoved by his protests, Esme had an instant rejoinder. “But you are an exceptional being,” she said through Sophie, “with exceptional potential. For that potential to be realized as fully as possible, you cannot turn away from battles that need to be fought or souls who need to be taught—including, and most especially, your own.”

The concluding phrase was an unexpected and jarring wrinkle. Angelina seemed surprised by it, too. Her eyes moved abruptly from Sophie to him.

“What do you mean?” he whispered, and then swallowed, trying to lubricate his suddenly-dry throat. “What does the Prism have to do with *me*, aside from that crack I’m supposed to repair?” The implication alarmed him, although he wasn’t sure why.

“This not simply a mission for the common good,” Esme said. “It’s to be a personal quest, as well.”

“A quest for what?” Jackson cried. “I know what I’m about. I don’t feel any need to go on some freakin’ journey of self-discovery!” He fell back in the chair and coughed out a laugh. “Been there.”

Nothing he said seemed to matter. Esme kept doling out information as if she were reading from a script. “You, Jackson Spey, are not entirely in control of the situation, either. The Shebra’felim has found you. Despite your resistance, you will go. *When* you go is up to you.”

“The Sheb—?”

Before Jackson could pursue this new topic, Sophie jerked a bit. Her eyes abruptly opened. “Whoa. I’m sorry. The baby just kicked.”

“I guess that *would* be a trance breaker,” Angelina murmured.

“I’m sorry,” Sophie repeated with a smile. Withdrawing her hands, she laid them over her belly. “I hope the session helped you, though. At least somewhat.”

Jackson blinked, trying to focus on her. Esme must have retreated. He wanted to convey his appreciation, but his whole being seemed wired with apprehension from the inside out. “Uh, yeah, it cleared up some things,” he finally forced out. “Didn’t exactly put me in a happy place, but I’ll have to deal with that.”

“You can,” Sophie said. She looked at him so sweetly, with such empathy and encouragement, Jackson wanted to believe her. Turning her attention for a moment from her restless baby, she put a hand over his, which still lay motionless on the table. “Please excuse me for speaking out.”

Attentively, Jackson lifted his eyebrows. All he could think was, *Oh, shit. Now what?*

He didn’t invite her to explain, but she went on nonetheless. “I’m sorry the feelings that *should* make you happy instead trouble you.”

He was too preoccupied to grasp what she meant. “What feelings?”

“The attachment to another person that causes you such distress.”

*Fuck.* He didn’t need that subject raised again, especially on the heels of all the other unsettling stuff. “What makes me uncomfortable is you poking around in my mind.” Jackson got up. “No offense, Sophia, but I think we should stop now.”

She too rose, as did Angelina. “I think it’s wonderful you’ve found a soulmate, Jackson. Don’t fight it.”

“You’re misreading me. It might not happen often, but I’m sure it does happen.”

Sophie smiled a little too smugly.

*Damn all psychics.*

\*

Once they were back in the car, Angelina asked Jackson what he made of Esme's revelations. He told her the truth. At the moment, he was utterly confounded by the whole business. His only recourse was to gird himself, to the best of his ability, for a seemingly inevitable descent into the Prism. Every other aspect of the situation was just a big-ass tangle of nerve-racking uncertainties. The only bright spot was Ivan the Facilitator's powerlessness.

They discussed it a bit more, but since everything they said was mere conjecture, they soon abandoned the subject. Angelina kept shooting sidelong looks at Jackson as she drove. He wondered what she might be working up to. He didn't have to wonder too long.

Avoiding Angelina's gaze did nothing to deter her. "I need to ask you something," she finally said, as gently as if the words were breakable. "And I hope you realize I'm not trying to pry. I just care."

Heart pattering for a different reason, Jackson slid her a wary glance.

"Haven't we always told each other pretty much everything?"

"Yeah," he said. It was an easy admission. "And?"

"I think you've been keeping something a secret. Something important that doesn't *need* to be a secret."

"Isn't that for me to decide?" Jackson said to the window.

Angelina refused to be suckered into any polemics. She skirted his question and, however daintily, cut to the issue's core. "This special person in your life, is it Adin? Is he the one Sophie was referring to?"

This probing was inevitable, really, but that didn't blunt the impact of the first jab. Jackson stared more fiercely out the passenger window. He could've sworn his face was boiling and quivering like a plum pudding.

Realizing this reaction alone was incriminating, he snapped his head in Angelina's direction. "How the hell am I supposed to know? You think psychics get it right all the time? Maybe I just had some stray thought in my mind about Adin Swift because he'll be here today, and that's what Sophie picked up on."

Angelina sighed. Unfortunately, it wasn't a sound of concession. "Damn it, Jackson, I can't help sensing your friendship with him has changed. And when Sophie said—"

Blood pounded through his face. "We get each other off!" he barked. "Okay? You satisfied now? There was an attraction there and we gave in to it and now we're fuck-buddies. That's obviously what Sophie picked up on." Breathing heavily, he pushed a hank of hair from his cheek. "So I'm a bona fide bisexual...as if *that's* some kind of stunner."

"Well, yes and no."

Running out of steam, Jackson tossed her a sullen glare.

"You're lovers," Angelina said.

His body twisted in exasperation. "Isn't that what I told you five seconds ago?"

"Not really."

"Jesus Christ, Angelina, whatever. Just don't make it something it isn't." God-shitting-damn, he *hated* equivocating.

"You've both been carrying matching torches for quite a while, haven't you?" It was more a statement of belief than a question.

Jackson slumped in the seat, clapped his hands over his face, let his hands drop.  
“Don’t get melodramatic. ‘Torches’.”  
“Matching desire, then.”  
“That’s pretty self-evident, considering I just referred to us as fuck-buddies.”  
“Does Celia know?”  
“Yes. She knows everything.”  
“But she still wants him.”  
“Yes, she still wants him.” Before he could censor himself, Jackson muttered, “He’s a damned desirable man.”  
Obviously drawing more conclusions, Angelina was quiet. When she finally spoke again, it was only to say, “Now I understand why you’re fighting it.” She didn’t have to say what “it” was.  
Jackson knew only too well.

## Chapter Eight

Another mind-bender had slipped through the split seam between worlds. When Jackson got home, he found a piece of brown paper on the floor just inside his front door. But he couldn't read it. The note was scrawled in charcoal, in a foreign language. It wasn't the Cyrillic alphabet, so it couldn't have been Russian or Serbian. Judging by the arrangement of consonants and accent marks, it was probably Polish.

Jackson tried to get his mind off his visitor's impending arrival by looking into Slavic myths and legends on the Internet. It was apparently a *domowoj* he'd seen outside his window, a kind of domestic mascot. Each household was supposed to have its own. They were helpful little guardians, for the most part, unless the master or mistress of the house let the domicile degenerate into a filthy mess. The creatures weren't fond of profanity, either. Jackson doubted he'd be cleaning up his flat any more than he'd be cleaning up his language, so he anticipated more *domowoj* activity.

The bow-carrying lady sitting on Kosciuszko's lap seemed to have been a *wi?a*, a beautiful warrior-nymph with quite an array of powers. They dwelled in clouds or in wooded areas. The creature Angelina had seen was considerably more alarming. A *rusalka* was akin to the evil undead—a tortured soul with a bad attitude and worse intentions.

These tales, along with the possibilities they conjured, fully engaged Jackson. Much more than he realized. Sitting in front of his computer, his mind swaddled in silence and fanciful, frightening images, he hadn't kept track of the time. When the apartment's buzzer punctured the stillness, the sound nearly launched him out of his chair.

He strode across the room, finger-combing his hair and shaking it away from his face. But there was never any adequate preparation for the person who stood on the other side of the door. Jackson had to make a concentrated effort to ease rather than swing it open.

The first sight of Adin, following months of separation, always made Jackson feel as if the floor had fallen away from his feet. And there the man stood, smiling, his clipped curls tousled by the wind, his oceanic eyes glimmering softly beneath those luxuriant, dark lashes. A roseate, almost maiden-like blush adorned his high cheekbones. He was breathtaking.

He was also the stumbling block Jackson had encountered during the esbat, even though Adin had been nowhere near the covenstead. There was no denying it. Adin Swift had stood between Abelard and Hester—in fact, between Jackson and *any* potential partner—as surely as he now stood in the doorway.

"Didn't you bring your stuff?" Jackson asked, feeling a small drizzle of anxiety when he saw that Adin wasn't carrying anything.

"Yeah, I brought my stuff." He stepped over the threshold.

Their gripping embrace came quickly, fiercely. Had their bodies been more tightly melded, they both would have lost their balance. Jackson closed his eyes as he pressed the side of his head against his lover's, as he nuzzled his face against the man's hair, ear, neck. Adin's scent was transporting. It was his scent and his alone, enhanced by fresh spring air and a trace of some Crabtree and Evelyn soap. Sandalwood, with vetiver.

Jackson inhaled deeply, grabbing up handfuls of him. His fingers fisted in Adin's silky clean hair and bunched up the shirt on his back.

"Goddamn, it's so good to see you," Adin murmured against his throat. His soft, humid lips flexed against it; his tongue stole out and lightly glazed the whisker stubble. "It's always so good to see you. The best good there is."

Jackson couldn't find words. His mind had hazed. At the moment, he wanted one thing more desperately than he'd ever wanted anything. Clutching the sides of Adin's face, he turned it up and crushed his lips against that luscious, nerve-searing mouth. Nobody, male or female, could kiss like Adin Swift. He made it a sport, art and science all at once. The man was built for kissing.

Their breath strained. Their tongues intertwined. Their moist lips repeatedly flexed and glided, relishing the rightness of the contact.

Hot, molten steel seemed to surge into Jackson's cock. The ridge of Adin's erection slid against his, driving him mad. "Jesus, I want you," he gasped, astonished by the intensity of his hunger. It made him reel. His whole body throbbed with need, and it was a need nobody else could satisfy.

Without fully breaking their kiss, Adin pushed him toward the couch. The backs of Jackson's knees bumped and then buckled against the armrest. He tumbled backward onto the cushions. His quaking hands instinctively went to the front of his jeans and fumbled with the button and zipper. Anticipating this moment, he hadn't worn underwear.

Muscles tensing, blood torrential in his veins, Jackson pulled his hard-on from the open V. Freeing it was almost painful. His cock had crowded all the extra space out of his jeans. Stiff as it could get, it immediately sprang upright. His whole groin felt packed to bursting.

Adin had shoved his own pants down his legs. As soon as Jackson glimpsed his lover's rigid cream-and-rose cock, his own started to leak. A crystalline pearl stood poised at its tip.

Half kneeling on the couch and half squatting on the floor, Adin dove between Jackson's parted, upraised thighs, his mouth sucking and plucking at the dense balls, one deft finger massaging the sensitive track that led to the opening of Jackson's ass.

He could've gone farther. He could've done any blessed thing he wanted to. Jackson was always helpless beneath Adin's lips and hands, beneath Adin's body. Always. It was a forfeit of control he'd never minded in the least.

Jackson's cock jumped and pulsed. He gripped it. "Hurry," he whispered. "I'm ready to shoot." All that free-floating horniness that kept stirring tempests in his blood—all of it had been waiting to condense around this moment.

Adin slid his mouth over the length of Jackson's erection. Its swollen head glided toward Adin's open throat. Jackson hissed in a breath. It came out on a long, vocalized sigh of pleasure. Buried in the moist heat of that suctioning cavern, those plush lips tightened around it, his dick didn't have a chance of staying hard.

Curling forward, he grasped the back of Adin's head as his hips jerked toward his lover's face. Adin's sucking was firm and urgent. Later, once they'd snuffed this initial fireball of pent-up lust, their lovemaking would be more languorous. But not now.

The sight and feel of that expertly sensual mouth working him stripped away the last shred of Jackson's control. He fell back again as a ferocious, marrow-deep orgasm ripped

from his groin through his limbs. His cock throbbed out cum. For a few ecstatic moments, Jackson was paralyzed by a pleasure so intense he would gladly have endured an eternity of it. Muscles quivering, he exhaled in short, choppy breaths. The cum kept spurting down Adin's throat; Adin coaxed out more and still more, swallowing it along with his own groans.

Only when Jackson's reservoir had been pumped dry did Adin clamber onto the couch cushions. "Shit," he whispered, likely because he couldn't get to Jackson's mouth in time. Stroking hard, he jammed the sleek, plump acorn of his glans at the base of Jackson's still-thickened cock. Cream soon coated the froth of pubic hair. Panting, Jackson curled forward and smiled. It looked like a wet duvet spread out to dry over charred shrubbery, some folds drooping between the branches.

"You're so goddamned selfless," he said.

Still catching his breath, Adin managed a weak grin. He petted Jackson's cock then gave it a gentle squeeze. "Hardly. I wanted to feel that monster in my mouth again."

"And your mouth is where that monster loves to be. Besides your ass, that is. And everywhere else on you."

Adin stood and hiked up his jeans. Jackson kept lying on his back, drinking in the sight of him. He couldn't seem to stop smiling. He felt like a lunatic.

"I'll get a towel," Adin said.

Jackson's gaze followed his retreating form, its smooth flow from narrow waist to lean legs interrupted by the sweetest swell of ass Jackson had ever seen on anyone.

He was hooked, all right. He was hooked but good. It hadn't seemed even remotely possible until he met Adin Swift that such a thing could ever happen to him. The desire part, maybe, but not the hooked part. Even after Adin entered his life—in fact, for the next ten, repression-burdened years—Jackson tried to palm off his attraction as aesthetic appreciation combined with the cozy warmth of friendship. But then came that incident a year ago, and then a charged encounter at Adin's birthday party...and, finally, Adin's unannounced visit last November.

He was the one who took the initiative. He was the one who steadfastly refused to accept Jackson's resistance and ultimately broke it down. It was an emotionally and sexually explosive weekend, one that left Jackson both delirious and depressed, and more than a little confused.

His "internal landscape," as Sophie had put it, leveled out in subsequent months, but this relationship remained the most turbulent aspect of his existence. He still hadn't fully come to terms with it.

Adin returned carrying a damp washcloth. Angling his arms behind him, Jackson boosted himself up on his elbows. His jeans were still crumpled up below his ass. He let Adin pat off the rapidly drying semen, almost sorry to see it wiped from his body. Adin leaned over and tenderly kissed his drooping cock, then slid forward and more fervidly kissed his lips. Again, Jackson grasped the back of his head, relishing the feel of his hair, the feel of his mouth.

Adin eased back, reluctantly, it seemed, as his fingers trailed down Jackson's face. Jackson lifted his hips and slid his jeans back into place. Adin grabbed his hand as it reached for the zipper. "Leave it halfway down," he said in a husky voice. "I like seeing you walk around with your pants undone." His hands slid beneath Jackson's t-shirt and ran over his tightened abdomen to his chest. Greedy fingers slithered over his pectoral

muscles; thumbs nudged his nipples. "I wish we'd had time to break out the clamps. It drives me crazy, seeing them on you."

"It drives me crazy feeling them on me. When you're around." Jackson knew he could get hard again very soon, very easily. Adin's and his attraction was packed with such ardor it seemed to verge on insanity.

"We have to get more toys," Adin said, still fondling him. "Your body just makes me want to *do* things to it."

Jackson was already starting to get itchy under the skin. Shit, the man ignited him. "Sometimes I think you're a closet Dom, Adin."

"Sometimes I think so, too." He doubled over and alternately licked and kissed Jackson's abs. "We should research some playthings while I'm here. Get online, visit some shops."

Jackson boosted himself to a sit. "Research. That reminds me."

As Adin reluctantly backed off of him, Jackson got up and went to the dining table. "If you want a drink," he called over his shoulder, "help yourself. My days of being a formal host are over." Picking up the brown paper with its indecipherable message, he went back to the couch.

"I'll get something in a bit," Adin said. "I'm just enjoying my afterglow." He did look relaxed.

"Can't be much of an afterglow considering you jerked yourself off." Jackson sat beside him.

"Jerking off while I'm doing you is a whole lot different from jerking off when I'm alone."

Jackson handed him the paper. "What do you make of this?"

Adin took it and studied the message. He was a translator, proficient to one degree or another in something like twenty modern languages. He'd even studied ancient ones. After a couple of minutes he turned the paper over, turned it back again, and looked up. "Fascinating. Where did you get this?"

"I found it on the floor when I got home today. I'll get to the story behind that a little later. So?"

"It's Polish," Adin declared. "From a kind of fairy tale, as I recall."

"Well, what does it say?"

"*Ko?ciej* covets life. Thus, hides his soul in a needle, the needle in an egg, the egg in a duck, the duck in a hare, the hare in a chest of iron, which he has buried under a green oak tree on Buyan Island, afloat in the sea. Hold the egg to bind the magic of *Ko?ciej*." Adin looked up. "I'm pretty sure there's more to the legend, but it's not written here."

Jackson didn't know whether or not it was important for him to know the rest. At the moment, it was imperative he fill Adin in.

"If you'd like some refreshment," he said, "now's the time to get it. 'Cause I'm about to give you an earful of some mighty weird shit."

Three hours, six drinks, and countless questions, answers, and speculations later, they'd covered everything Jackson had experienced and learned since Christy's appearance at his door. Adin got a little hung up on the Passion Celebration and Mikaela; Jackson again had to remind him that *he* was the one with the fulltime girlfriend. Jealousy wasn't a big issue between them, but a breath of it did blow by now and then.

Inevitable, Jackson supposed. They were male. And they were pretty tight. Some territorial instinct usually sprang from the flow of testosterone. So they had an unspoken agreement that neither of them would ever get intimate with other men. The homoerotic part of their sexuality was reserved for each other. At least so far. As much as he hated to admit it, Jackson hoped that would never change.

Adin Swift loved him. Truly, madly, deeply. This friend-turned-lover who was nine-some years his junior genuinely fucking loved him. And genuinely loved fucking him. Every time Jackson was reminded of those facts, he felt at once warm and chilled, secure and threatened. The whole situation just plain messed with him. Sometimes in a good way. Sometimes not.

Adin seemed carefully to ponder everything Jackson told him. “What’s hanging me up is this Mikaela person’s involvement,” he finally said. “She appears, you fuck her senseless,”—at this point, Adin shot Jackson a look that matched his peppery tone—“she reappears to rat out Ivan and maybe get more dick, she disappears, then somebody who resembles me shows up at your door and kisses you. And now you can’t find a trace of her.”

Still on the couch, which is where they’d had their talk, Jackson clasped his hands behind his head, straightened his legs, and indulged in a full-body stretch. “That’s it in a nutshell. And I have *no* idea who or what assumed your form or for what reason.”

“How did you know it really wasn’t me?”

Jackson lazily dropped a hand to Adin’s shoulder and fondled his hair. “Don’t you think I know by now exactly how you feel and smell and taste, how you kiss?” His cock perked up at the reminder.

Adin smiled. “I’m glad you weren’t duped.”

Jackson gave the tendons of Adin’s neck a brief, affectionate squeeze. “Impossible.” Sighing, he sat forward. “And now all these goblins and furies are popping up around the city, and I’m the goddamned trainer who’s supposed to herd them back into their cage and fix the broken latch. Or something.” Esme’s personal-quest statement flashed through his mind and immediately sent a quiver through his diaphragm. Reaching for the tumbler on the coffee table, he downed the last of his watery whiskey. “Fuck, I don’t know.”

“So you have no idea when or how this is going to come down?”

“Not yet.” An inner conflict again began to harass Jackson, the same one he’d experienced while talking to Adin on the phone. He had to put selfishness aside and address the issue. He sure as hell didn’t want to, but his conscience wouldn’t allow him to remain silent. “You know,” he said somberly, turning on the couch to face his guest, “I don’t want you getting caught up in this. You need to leave as soon as—”

“Stop right there,” Adin said. He, too, swiveled on the cushion. “I’m sticking around. And don’t try to talk me out of it. Hell, I’ll go into the damned Prism with you.”

Glaring at Adin, Jackson pitched forward and grabbed his shoulders. “Don’t you even *think* about doing that.” His fingers speared his own chest. “This is *my* task. I’m the Adept.” He raised a quaking forefinger to Adin’s face. “You put yourself in danger, Swift, I swear...”

Adin calmly raised his own hand and lowered Jackson’s. “Inside or out, I’m not going to run away. That’s all there is to it. If I can’t get into the Prism with you, then I’ll sleep with the damned thing, carry it around with me, send positive vibes into it,



whatever. But I intend to see this through with you.”

Growling in frustration, Jackson rolled his head back. “*Why?* Your involvement would be pointless. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know if it qualifies as something ‘wrong’, but I love you. And when you love someone, you weather his storms. That’s just what you do.”

A tight knot formed in Jackson’s throat. Adin’s fingers were still curled over his hand. That choked-up feeling further infuriated him.

Jackson pulled his hand away—hard, so he got the message across. “Then don’t love me,” he whispered hoarsely, and got up from the couch.

Walking aimlessly around the living area, he didn’t know where to direct his anger. There was only one person responsible for this mess, and that was the asshole who’d created the Prism’s big bad breach. Only he didn’t know who that person was. And even if he did, it wouldn’t matter.

Standing at the dining table, Jackson spun like a magnet to face Adin. He couldn’t help it. When that man was around, Jackson couldn’t *not* look at him. He seemed to fear that if he turned his back for too long, Adin would vanish from his life.

But his lover was still there, calmly watching him.

“You know,” Adin said, “for such a smart man, you can be awfully damned ignorant.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Love can’t be willed away.”

“How do you know until you’ve tried?”

“I just know. Love has to be eroded.”

“You mean, like a rock?”

Adin looked irritated. “Don’t minimize the issue by quoting lyrics.”

Flustered, Jackson threw up his hand, dropped it to his hip. “It’s a fucking simile, Adin. It’s not my fault Bob Seger turned it into a song title!”

Adin’s jaw shifted forward. It was an unconscious movement, one that often happened when he was about to concede a point, grudgingly. “Okay then. Yeah, it’s like a rock. A big, hard one.”

Spontaneously, Jackson grinned.

“*As in Gibraltar.*” Despite his raised voice, Adin was clearly trying to hold in a smile. He finally exhaled a laugh and shook his head. “How did we get back to *that*?”

“We’re men. We’re pigs.” Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. “Everything in life comes back to the big, hard one. Even sentiment.” *And I’m proving it right now*, he thought, watching Adin’s gaze fall below his waist.

“I don’t know why, but I suddenly want to grab your dick.”

The grin expanded. “See what I mean?”

But Jackson could tell that his levity would only go so far. Adin’s smile had already begun to shrink. He got up and walked toward the dining area. Jackson half expected his lover’s hand to slide over his crotch, but it didn’t happen. He merely took a seat.

“That’s not all we’re about, though.” Adin crossed his arms on the cluttered table. When he turned up those lustrous eyes, Jackson wanted to drop to his knees at Adin’s feet. But those lustrous eyes soon turned down to the tabletop. He spoke again.

“You know, I lived a certain way for a long time. It was a superficial existence. So many people moved in and out of my life, they became like molecules of air. I took them

all for granted. Even my occasional companions were more like conveniences than true friends or lovers.”

Very quietly, Jackson pulled out a chair. Adin had been murmuring his words, reflectively, as if he were in a Confessional.

“Then you came along,” he continued, still without lifting his gaze. “Then Celia. And suddenly, I started having feelings I hadn’t had since I was married to Margery...all those cold, cold years ago.” Finally, without a hint of shame, he looked straight into Jackson’s face. “So am I rejoicing in what I feel for you? The physical desire? The love? Yes, I am. It’s like taking a hot bath after being stranded in some Arctic wilderness. So just accept it and leave me be.”

Jackson swallowed, hard. It was fully a minute before he could speak, and even then his voice was none too steady. “You can’t imagine how much I hate this situation.” He realized he’d never before wished he weren’t an Adept.

“And *you* can’t imagine how much I hate it that you don’t have more faith in me.”

The comment stung. Jackson wasn’t sure how to counter it. “This isn’t a matter of having faith in you.”

“No? You think I can’t handle myself. You think I can’t be of any help to you.”

“That’s not what—”

“Just shut up and listen for a change,” Adin said impatiently. “Fuckin’ hard guy.” He rose and stalked to the coffee table. “Okay, here are some more bulletins. Number one, you know damned well I’m familiar with quite a few languages, ancient to modern.” He picked up the *Ko?ciej* paper and waved it at Jackson. “Knowledge like that comes in handy, wouldn’t you agree? Number two, I probably know more about that Prism than you do, just based on the breadth of my experience. I’m sure I can remember something about it if I try. Number three, within this same time-frame you’ve been talking about, things have been happening to me, too.”

Stunned, Jackson gaped at him. “What things?”

For the first time since their conversation began, Adin faltered. “After I talked to you on the phone, and especially when I got into the city, I, uh...I started feeling...a kind of stirring of old...” He rubbed his forehead. “Damn, I don’t know how to put this. I shouldn’t have brought it up until I was sure. Maybe I was just overexcited by the prospect of seeing you.”

An urgent rattling and squealing sounded outside one of the windows behind the dining table. Jackson whirled around and bolted up just as Adin jogged toward the door.

“Don’t go outside!” Jackson shouted.

He circled the table, reached for the window blinds, and yanked them up. The familiar, hairy creature didn’t startle Jackson—not too badly, anyway—but his heart still knocked at that sight of it. At least the first time it appeared, the thing has been quiet.

Adin came over to the window. Forehead rumped, his gaze shot from Jackson to the panes to Jackson again. “What’s out there?”

“Don’t you see it? Can’t you hear it?” Jackson couldn’t remember the thing’s name and wouldn’t know how to pronounce it if he did remember. “It’s some kind of household watcher.”

The creature’s agitation increased. It jumped up and down, gibbering like a monkey as it gawked at Adin.

“I can hear something,” Adin said, “faintly. But I can’t see anything.”

What must have been the thing's hand, or paw, made a horizontal slide beneath its head. Then it blew out of view, as if a strong wind had caught it.

A single breath emptied Jackson's lungs; his shoulders sagged. "I am getting *so* sick of this shit." He glanced at Adin, who was peering out the window. "What did you hear?"

"Some words." Adin looked over his shoulder. "What did you see?"

"I told you about it earlier. It's like a dwarfish thing with a matted gray pelt and little horns and a tail." Wearily, Jackson pulled out the nearest chair and sank into it. "This time, though, it was really riled up. And it made some kind of sawing motion at its neck. Maybe it was a form of sign language." He rubbed his face, forehead to chin. "Damned if I know what *that* means any more than what it was shrieking about."

Adin sat at the end of the table, diagonally from Jackson. "I suspect it wants you to cut off my head."

Jackson's hand fell with a thump. "Say what?"

"Based on what I heard," Adin said, "it's a logical assumption."

"So what did you hear?"

"The one word that jumped out at me was *strzyga*."

"Oh, well, that explains it," Jackson said dryly. "Thanks for cluing me in."

Adin got up, lowered the blinds, and resumed his seat. "It means 'vampire'."

## Chapter Nine

As soon as their naked bodies fused on the bed, not even a distressed *domowoj* could prevent the responsive flow of sweat and blood that marked Jackson's passion for Adin. Their legs intertwined; their cocks met and began to rise. Already-heated kisses became more feverish.

Slowly, meticulously, Jackson caressed the man he faced. He loved the feel of Adin, his flawless skin so buttery smooth over those long, hard muscles, those muscles layered so gracefully over his bones. He loved that sensuous cushion of a mouth, at once gentle and aggressive and never immobile when it touched his flesh. Adin's lips, he thought, were more nimbly expressive than the fingers of a pianist.

The fondling continued. Adin slid down. Spread fingers massaging Jackson's back, he sucked firmly as well as lightly at Jackson's chest. He caught one tense nipple between his teeth and tugged at it; just as a luscious burn began to set in, a sensation that sent iron to Jackson's cock, Adin gently kissed and licked the rosy bud. Then the tip of his tongue rearranged the fine, dark plume of hair that radiated from sternum to pectorals.

Submerged in Adin's touch, it was a delicious kind of drowning Jackson felt. His lover's hands and mouth continued to assert their mastery over him without exerting any force. Instead, with astonishing tenderness and skill, Adin claimed his body. Nerves seemed to cluster and vibrate wherever Adin touched him, however Adin touched him. Muscles went slack. Adin Swift was the only person to whom he had ever surrendered himself so fully.

There were so many things Jackson almost said, declarations that ran through his mind but were never voiced. Instead, loosely grasping Adin's head, Jackson kissed his full, fragrant hair, over and over, down to the scalp. He damned himself for a coward...and kissed Adin again.

"Fuck me like you did the first time," Adin said breathlessly, pulling up again to face Jackson. Another kiss, fast and fervid. "Remember how you did it? How you strained to control yourself?"

"I don't remember *how* I did it," Jackson said, summoning enough breath to speak, "just *that* I did. And the urgency...the need."

He reached for the fresh bottle of lube as Adin flipped from his left to his right side. Jackson was glad. He wanted to hold him, to maintain as much contact as possible.

Curling an arm over Adin's side, Jackson pressed the man's back to the front of his body. He kissed and nibbled the smooth precipice of Adin's shoulder and the plain of bone beneath it. Both felt like sleek, water-polished rocks that had absorbed heat from the midday sun. Jackson's hands glided lower. He let himself enjoy the texture and contour of Adin's ass, at once tough and yielding, and the buried ridge of his pelvis.

Their first time... It would be difficult to reconstruct that coupling without the same prevailing circumstances.

Adin had indeed been a vampire. He'd been one for over six centuries. He was one when they met and he was one when Jackson first had sex with him, a year ago.

An outlaw wizard and a charming immortal, both living essentially solitary lives well outside the mainstream, each doing what he felt driven to do: practice magic; drink blood.

They were drawn to each other by needs they imperfectly understood at the time. But understanding wasn't necessary to strengthen their bond.

The last person Adin had truly loved was his first and only and very young wife, struck down by the Black Plague as it slunk through London in the winter of 1348. Jackson had never known romantic love.

After wiping lubricant over his fingers and his cock, he began massaging his lover's firm cheeks with both.

Like so many vampires, Adin had been a mixed breed. Unlike so many, his dominant breed was quite respectful of mortals. He never "took" a person unless his intimate attention was invited. Ultimately, Jackson not only invited it, he insisted on it.

For years previous to that moment, he'd heard that a vampire feed could be a transcendent experience. At once savage and mystical and intensely erotic, it was reputedly like the biggest buzz from the most bliss-inducing drug imaginable. It was also supposed to heighten an Adept's powers.

Jackson was intrigued by these claims. Still, it took him over a decade to offer his blood. Even his friendship with Adin didn't dispel his inherent distrust of vampires. Aware of this, Adin never raised much less pressed the issue of a feed. But it was inevitable, Jackson realized later, that this particular vampire would have him. It was inevitable, because Jackson wanted to be taken by him.

"I remember the piercing, though," he murmured against Adin's skin. Even now, the thought of it aroused him. His swollen cock seemed to move with a will of its own against his lover's ass.

Adin never had fangs. He never had to deliver a brutal bite to draw blood. Instead, the nail of his little finger grew and sharpened enough to become, in the blink of an eye, a needle that slid into human flesh with all the speed and efficiency of a laser. That was yet another characteristic of his dominant breed. And the act didn't result in vampirism.

He'd pierced Jackson's neck and drunk from it. He'd pierced Jackson's chest and drunk from it.

Now, Jackson's hand roamed over Adin's chest as he began his own invasion. His mouth sucked and lapped at Adin's flesh the way Adin had then sucked and lapped at his. Images hazed by time became more vivid. His balls felt dense and tender. His straining cock sought the snug cleft that was, now, a threshold.

The blood offering, exquisitely thrilling, had surpassed all claims. Maybe that was a result of the men's existing attraction. Whatever the cause, Jackson's dick ended up feeling like a ponderosa pine with hot resin creeping beneath its too-tight bark. Adin was similarly affected. Masturbation brought no relief. It seemed they, donor and recipient, could only find relief through each other.

So Jackson fucked his friend.

Without trying, he was doing it now the same way he'd done it then. A fraction of an inch at a time, he sank his straining erection into Adin's welcoming body, tender tissue easing into a muscle-banded glove. He fought the urge to thrust like an animal. As much as his body willed him to, he resisted the impulse. Not only did he want to be considerate of his partner, he wanted to prolong his own euphoria.

Adin pushed against him without being demanding. In concert, they rocked in opposite directions that led to the same place. A current branched through Jackson's torso and into his legs and arms. Finally, deep delicious spasms forced the outpouring that led

to his favorite kind of fatigue. Adin, too, jerked, his hips tapping against Jackson's crotch. He must have stroked himself to climax. Soon, he seemed to wilt beneath Jackson's arm.

"Share it with me," Jackson murmured against the damp curls at Adin's nape.

Adin rolled over and touched wet fingers to Jackson's lips. Closing his eyes, Jackson licked them clean of his lover's essence. He scrambled lower on the mattress, drew Adin's softening shaft into his mouth, and took what residue he could from there. Even sated, he wished he could suck Adin hard again and bring him to climax. He loved the feel of that sweet, sweet cock swelling between his tongue and palate. He loved the savory, mild bitterness of the man's cum.

Jackson wondered if the two of them would ever get their fill of each other, if these carnally indulgent weekends were a novelty that would some day wear off. He couldn't begin to guess. It was still too new, too deeply thrilling and satisfying. On countless levels.

Falling onto his back, Adin seemed to stare at the dim halo of light on the ceiling. They always kept on the nightstand lamp on when they had sex; they liked looking at each other. Jackson remained on his side, idly caressing his lover, studying him. He never tired of these simple joys.

"There's something I didn't tell you before," Adin said without looking at him. "It's about the Prism. I didn't want to alarm you."

Jackson tensed. His roaming hand stilled. "Then tell me now. Being alarmed is preferable to being uninformed."

"You'll need to know as much as you can about that thing, and the reason you're in it, before you give in to this. From what I know, that hunk of glass is nothing to toy with."

Jackson lifted his eyebrows. So, yet another report full of foreboding. "You'd better not stop there, my man."

Sighing heavily, Adin turned to look at him. "I'm sure you're aware that some occultists would've given their nuts to get hold of it. What you might *not* be aware of is that other occultists would've given their nuts to steer clear of it. Remember that sixteenth-century mage I told you about?"

"Yeah, the one who liked being fed on by a vampire. By you, in particular." Jackson allowed himself a reflective half-smile. *Just as I did*. "What about him?"

"He had an acquaintance," Adin said, "an alchemist in Budapest who was somehow lured into the Prism. And he apparently faced some terrifying stuff."

With the side of his hand, Jackson swiped away the sweat that had beaded on his upper lip within his mustache. "Is there any way of warding off this...imprisonment?"

"I don't know," Adin said. "Psychic self-defense is *your* area of expertise."

"So, what happened to the alchemist?"

"When he finally was released or found his way out or whatever the hell happened, he manifested as a paranoid schizophrenic. At least that's what I've since deduced. Ended up killing himself. According to the mage, that was a common result of entry into the Prism."

"It shattered a person's mind."

"Yup. If there was even a person left. I guess some who've gone in have never come out."

Feeling the first gnarled grip of a headache, Jackson rubbed the tendons of his neck. Adin's account only verified what other few things he'd heard. "How much credence do you give this story?"

"Pretty much," Adin answered. "The mage wasn't prone to hysteria or exaggeration. At least, not beyond the norms of his time. But the change in his friend rattled him. That much was obvious. Then he got a letter from the alchemist along with his journals, a couple months after the man committed suicide. He found whatever was in those papers very distressing."

"Did you ever get a chance to read any of it?"

"A little, but it sounded like psychotic babble. Something about an elephant being in the belly of an ant and a flea being in both, and something about a hall of mirrors on the way to hell. I'm not sure. My focus at the time was on other things."

*Like finding your next blood donor.* "I suppose it was," Jackson murmured. Adin's vague reference reminded him of an earlier snippet of conversation. "Are you going to tell me what you were getting at earlier, what it is that's been happening to you?"

It was a while before Adin spoke. "The dreams I was having last fall—the images and urges in the dreams—are starting to plague me while I'm awake."

Jackson's pulse became more distinct. "Images and urges from your past, you mean?"

"You know that's what I mean."

"So...maybe these are just more sensory memories. Maybe they're similar to what an amputee feels—phantom sensations in a limb that's no longer there. I mean, hell, you were a vampire for an awfully long time."

Adin, who still hadn't looked at him, sighed. "That's what I've been telling myself."

Jackson tried to puzzle through this. Despite the extent of his experience with the paranormal, he knew precious little about paranormal earthbound creatures. He'd never wanted to interact with them. Not, that is, until Adin came along. Vampires were a particularly confounding and unpredictable race. There were numerous breeds and crossbreeds, all with different sets of characteristics.

Adin had undergone a reversion to mortality a year ago, very shortly after he'd fed from Jackson. If a member of his breed, his dominant breed, murdered another of its kind, reversion was the result. It was an extremely rare occurrence. Knowing full well what would happen to him, Adin nevertheless stalked and killed the vampire who'd brutally murdered his parents in 1349. He'd been living happily ever since. Or so it seemed.

The thought wasn't exactly comforting, but Jackson wondered if everything else that was going on—Bothu's discovery of the "damaged" Prism, the appearance of creatures from another plane, his own involvement in the whole mess—had some bearing on the reemergence of Adin's old self.

"You're thinking it, too, aren't you?" Adin said. "That whatever is oozing out of Nezirabi's little world is somehow...reawakening what I used to be."

Jackson's hand stilled on his body. Within seconds, he removed it. "I wish you hadn't said that."

Rolling his head on the pillow, Adin finally faced him. "If that *is* the case, it isn't your fault, you know."

"The fuck it isn't." Jackson sat up. Elbows on raised knees, he shoved his hands into

his hair. “*I’m* the designated repairman. And you’re too damned close to me.”

Adin scooted higher on his pillows. “That isn’t going to change. So just forgo the guilt trip, would you?” He grabbed the bottle of lube off the sheets and angrily tossed it back into the nightstand drawer. “I’m nearly certain I can’t just lapse back into full-blown vampirism. The transformation is a process, a very *physical* process.”

“You’re ‘nearly’ certain,” Jackson echoed with no little sarcasm.

Adin gave him a resentful glare. Jackson had trouble meeting it. He hated seeing that look on this particular man. Lips compressed, eyes narrowed, his face took on an almost fearsome beauty. *Tiger, tiger, burning bright...*

“Do you *want* me to leave?” Adin said, his voice low and tight. “Is that what you’ve been getting at? Do you have it in your mind now that I’m going to ‘turn’?”

Looking at him was necessary. Jackson realized he had to do it to determine the nature of his own motives. Within seconds, he knew.

“No,” he said quietly. “I just care about you. You have a good life now. I don’t want to put you at risk, in any way.”

Adin hiked himself up and crouched beside Jackson. Those words had instantly melted his defensiveness. For all kinds of reasons, they regularly needed to reassure one another. Vulnerability seemed an unavoidable part of their relationship. Jackson was still trying to accept the fact that neither the vulnerability nor the reassurances were signs of weakness—not any more than most aspects of human nature were.

“The reason I have a good life is mostly because of you,” Adin said. “I couldn’t have tracked and killed Birkett without your help. And our time together has become—” His mouth jumped into a self-conscious smile before he pivoted away and settled back onto his side of the bed. “Well, I think you know what it’s become.”

*An essential part of both our lives.* True, but still discomfiting.

Jackson briefly rubbed Adin’s thigh. “All right, let’s see what tomorrow brings.”

“Now that’s the spirit. When we get up, should we shower first or breakfast first?”

“Shower,” Jackson said without hesitation “I like feeling your skin when it’s wet. And your mouth.” Impulsively, he dove beneath the covers and drew Adin’s cock between his lips. “And this, especially.”

“Especially when it’s big and hard.”

“Like a rock,” Jackson mumbled.

\* \* \* \*

While Adin stayed at the flat to work—all he needed was his computer—Jackson went to his woodshop. He made some business calls. Then, with the help of ragtag group of local movers, he delivered and installed the bookshelves he’d crafted for the well-to-do Hendrickses. The mister wasn’t home. The missus, thrilled, couldn’t stop gushing about her new furnishings. She also wouldn’t stop flirting with the furnishings’ builder. The more she made her attraction known, the more Jackson wanted to be gone.

It wasn’t just her not-so-veiled propositions that made him restless. On the way there, he’d seen more phantasms darting over city streets, lolling in gardens and shrubbery, peering out from the crowns of trees. They made him think of the Prism, which was now never far from his mind. Apprehension accompanied the thoughts. And apprehension, like the pull Adin exerted on him, was not a feeling he was used to.

Jackson realized his ceremonial-magic room was nearby. He felt a need to go there.



The room took up three-quarters of a suburban couple's basement. It also served as their covenstead. Jackson had met them about five or six years earlier, when the house was still under construction. Through some adroit persuasion, he'd convinced them to allow the construction of this special space. He'd done much of the work on it himself.

Pity he rarely used the space anymore. As his power grew, the precise rituals of High Magic conducted in a specially appointed room became more irrelevant to his effectiveness as an Adept. But he did have a special fondness for the place, and it still proved useful in many ways.

So he drove there. The basement had its own entrance, and he had his own key. Lyle and Lola Peck, the home's owners, would be at work. Even if they weren't, they knew better than to bother him.

Today he would gird himself against whatever awaited him in Nezirabi's Prism. Considering Adin was determined to stay with him, he would also throw some protection his lover's way. He had to.

Dewdrop Drive was blanketed by the peculiar lifelessness that seemed to mark so many suburban streets on weekdays. Kids were in school. Parents were in offices. No mythical creatures floated around these bland lanes and cul-de-sacs. The suburbs didn't have the history or ethnic character of the city.

Jackson parked on the Pecks' perfectly paved driveway. Neighboring driveways were empty of vehicles. The gentle spill of May sunlight glistened off manicured lawns. Birdsong occasionally broke the silence. The air was untainted by any odors save that of moist green grass.

Walking to the blue side-door that led to the basement, Jackson unlocked it and stepped onto the landing, pausing there just long enough to turn on a rheostat. Soft light blossomed in the subterranean room. It seemed to be welcoming him. At that moment, he realized Beltane was fast approaching. The Coven of Middle Skye, which he'd been instrumental in founding, would certainly expect his participation in the sabbat.

The name suddenly struck him—*Middle Skye*. Those beings that were infiltrating the city seemed to hail from such a place. Not of the earth, not of the heavens.

Jackson descended.

Gaze fixed, eyes unblinking, he stood stock-still in a corner of his special room and stared at the circle he'd defined with handcrafted strips of silver. It was his other, and otherworldly, work space. Pearlescent waves had already begun to ripple through the air, radiating out from the circle's center and breaking their concentric flow only to surround the stone altar. The waves didn't engulf him—he was, in a sense, their master—but the power they contained seemed to strain toward him. He felt his hair lightly being stirred, felt an ongoing tingle of energy sparking across his pores and burrowing into his solar plexus.

The wizard had returned to his temple.

Soon, an intricate hum began to fill the room. It was the *musica universalis* joining the *musica humana* of his own mind and body. "Music of the spheres" didn't adequately describe the sound, which was not normally audible. But the phrase would do. He'd once heard an orchestral or choral passage similar to it in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Although the replication was rough, it had nevertheless caught his attention.

He took off his boots then stripped away his clothing and draped it over a chair against one of the walls. His body, more sensitive by the second to the room's crackling

atmosphere, seemed to become part of that atmosphere. Fastidious preparation was no longer necessary for his work. Over the years, as he became more masterful, traditional formulas and accessories became more of a hindrance than a help. Knowledge, mental discipline and will were now his only essentials.

Still, rites could be comforting enhancements of his strength. He stepped inside the circle. Now it had to be closed. Precautions were always wise. Going to his altar, the wizard withdrew only two things—a silver strip that fit into the circle's empty arc, and a joss stick of sandalwood incense. He'd decided to do a modified Rose Cross rite. Pentagram rituals, considerably more potent, invited too much astral attention and interference. He had enough of that already and didn't need more entities muddying his focus and dissipating his energy.

He slipped the missing piece into place to complete the circle then passed his hand over it. Starting and ending at this point, a rushing stream of silver light shot through the boundary. The wizard stepped to the center of his private world. He touched the tip of his forefinger to the incense stick; flaring, it began to burn.

With the smoldering tip of the joss stick, the wizard inscribed a cross in the air before him. He then drew a ring around the intersection of its lines. Pointing the stick at the center of both cross and ring, he spoke four syllables. The humming around him immediately ceased. The figure he'd drawn now pulsed with a golden glow.

If he were performing this rite the traditional way, the wizard would have repeated his incense inscription at specific points within the Magic Circle. But he rarely followed tradition anymore. Instead, he touched the burning joss stick to his breastbone then traced the lines of the trident inked into his chest. The smoldering tip didn't burn his skin. He held his arms out to the side, mimicking the horizontal plane of the cross, and pronounced four more syllables.

The joss stick vanished. The scintillating cross merged with his body. He visualized Adin Swift standing behind him, mirroring his position, their bodies pressed together. Closing his eyes and tilting back his head, the wizard exhaled. He was ridding himself of weakness. The weakness of doubt, of fear, of poor judgment and foolish willfulness. He inhaled, drawing in strength and wisdom. Gradually, Adin's body slipped into his body. The power of the Rose Cross shimmered through them, trickling into cells and psyches.

It was then he heard the voice, although no sound entered his ears. And when he responded to it, no sound left his mouth.

"Do not fear the Prism. Respect it. Learn within the labyrinth. When, at your passing, you become a Master, you will be well prepared."

The silent voice seemed vaguely familiar. But Jackson was more struck by the content than the tone of the statement.

"What do you mean? That I *am* to become a Master?"

"Yes. That status was secured in this very place. You not only constructed a room and a coven, you reconstructed yourself and others for the greater good of all. Your achievements were significant, and they were rewarded."

"I don't remember being so rewarded."

"You were not meant to remember. And you will forget once again. It must be that way. The human ego can be an insidious force. To function at your fullest potential, you cannot be aware of your elevated status. Beware vainglory, human. Carnality is but a harmless, burbling infant compared with the bellowing monster called pride. That is

something you *must* remember, a truth you must carry with you when you make your descent.”

The light flowing through the wizard seemed to stab at the core of his being. “Why must *I* be the one to enter the Prism?”

“Because a Master cannot rest easy, can *never* rest easy. His or her work is never finished. There are always souls to be taught and battles to be fought. And, in the process, suffering will always counterweigh joy, for it is this balance that makes you part and parcel of all of creation. Your soul and your battles will always be part of this process. No matter how spiritually refined, a Master must be bound to the dross of the cosmos and not just its glory, and can never stop gaining insight.”

It could be Esme who’d been speaking to him. The voice had echoed her words. But he didn’t think it was she. His wondering fell away as his mind retreated into blankness.

The wizard could feel the light within him begin to fade. His work here was over. Adin’s image, too, was no longer needed and so was relinquished. The wizard sank to his knees and sat back on his haunches.

Hands crossed over his chest, he lowered his head. It was a silent gesture of gratitude. Naked and humble before the forces that both served and controlled him, the wizard became Jackson Spey again. His empty mind refilled. But only one thought filled it.

He was eager to get home. He missed Adin.

## Chapter Ten

“Watching the world go by?” As Jackson sauntered toward the house, he tossed his keys in the air, executed a nifty, overhand catch, and theatrically swung his arm behind his back. *Show-off*, he thought, chiding himself. *Why don’t you just launch into a tumbling routine?* He was acutely aware of his houseguest’s smiling eyes.

“Did you see anything unusual while you were out and about?” Adin, who’d apparently found a couple of lawn chairs in the garage, sat placidly, ankle resting on knee, just outside the front door. He reached out and gave Jackson’s fingers a quick, affectionate squeeze.

“Yep, I did.” Jackson self-consciously returned the pressure and took a seat in the empty chair.

He wanted to lean over and give Adin a long, slippery kiss. Just hold the man’s head and plant one and let their lips and tongues slide around. Since the house wasn’t far from the sidewalk, he refrained. The impulse continued to needle him, even though they’d had sex that morning. Why couldn’t he seem to get enough?

“Well,” Adin said, “I’ve been *hearing* unusual things.”

Before he could explain, a metallic clangor came from inside the flat. It sounded like a chef was throwing a tantrum in the kitchen. A distressed voice let out a mournful, blood-curdling moan. As Jackson bolted up from the lawn chair, Adin grabbed his wrist.

“Don’t bother,” he said. “Nothing’s being trashed. Your *domowoj* isn’t real pleased by my presence, that’s all. So he’s banging the cookware.”

“I don’t give a shit *what* his problem is. I just want him to leave us the hell alone.”

A new crash echoed inside the apartment.

“I don’t think he’s happy with my language, either,” Jackson said. “They’re sanctimonious little pricks.”

This time, something thudded against the door.

Adin kept hold of Jackson’s wrist. “It wouldn’t be a good idea to banish your *domowoj*. He belongs here. He’s only doing his job.”

Indecision made Jackson pause for a moment. He wasn’t sure he could communicate with the creature; he didn’t know its native language. He *was* sure Adin couldn’t do the communicating; the well-meaning pest obviously feared and despised vampires—even former vampires.

Slipping out of Adin’s grasp, he turned to the door. “I’ll try something else, then.”

Entering the cool, dim flat, Jackson immediately spotted his domestic guardian diving beneath the stove. He didn’t bother wondering how the thing fit under there. It just slipped out of sight. Walking to the range, he gripped the top edge of each side.

In Latin he said, “This is my home. You are welcome here. My guest is also welcome here. You and I have nothing to fear from him. Therefore, you must dwell here peaceably, in silence. Leave me and my guest be.”

The *domowoj* must have understood him. Perhaps because Latin was the universal language of magic, perhaps because this guardian could understand any language in which the homeowner spoke. The stove shuddered beneath Jackson’s hands. A disgruntled mumbling came from behind it.

Jackson sent tendrils of white light from his fingertips. The light spread over and seeped beneath the stove like irradiated frosting. The light soaked into the stove. When no trace of it remained, the *domowoj* was still.

"Thank you," Jackson murmured. "Now stay that way."

He turned to the fridge and grabbed a beer, then rejoined Adin outside.

"Got it under control?" Adin asked, twisting around to look up at him.

"I think so."

Continuing to stand, Jackson let himself enjoy the view. He loved looking at Adin from different angles. It was like rotating a well-cut gemstone to admire its facets. Some things, and people, just seemed to redefine the concept of perfection. If only the man were dumber than a stump...

"Are you going back in or staying out?" Adin asked.

Taking a deep breath, Jackson surveyed the street. Spring had come to the city. He sat down. "It *is* nice to be outside." He looked at his companion. "I suppose you miss your woodland chalet."

Adin's eyes took in the other side of street. "Not particularly. I like it here. I've always liked the older parts of cities, no matter how shabby they are."

Jackson followed the line of his gaze. Shabby indeed. Each scrubby yard was the same size of small. The rows of old duplexes, graying in the sun, made him think of plain, poor girls lined up at a Sunday picnic. They weren't expecting anything. It was obvious the rich and pretty would never approach them. So they simply stood, stoic and somehow noble in their resignation, knowing their patience would be rewarded by nothing more than the ordinary passing of days and seasons, sometimes cruel but rarely kind.

For the most part, Jackson loved his humble neighborhood. What pained him most were the rise in crime over the past two decades and the decline of resident owners, although their numbers were very gradually beginning to increase. The area used to be filled to brimming with immigrant families—poor, often large, usually Catholic. It was still full of immigrant families—poor, sometimes large, usually Catholic. The only difference was their place of origin. The old guard had Polish roots; the new, Mexican.

With the change came increased isolation. Households were now islands. And with the change came different sights, sounds, smells. Words were still yelled in anger or enthusiasm but were formed from different phonemes. Graffiti pirouetted down alleys. Gunshots occasionally punched through the night. But, for all the alteration in its details, this was still a neighborhood.

"A man strolled by earlier," Adin said, "singing a Spanish ballad. It was really lovely. I guess I smiled at him. He smiled back."

"I know who you mean. Don't know his name, but I see him a few times a week. The street becomes a moonlit beach when he goes by."

Adin nodded. He seemed reflective.

The balladeer was young and goodlooking, as Jackson recalled. He briefly wondered if Adin might have been flirting. As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he wanted to slap himself for his pettiness. This streak of jealousy embarrassed and disturbed him.

"What happened to your tenants, by the way?" Adin asked.

"They moved out a month ago."

"I thought it seemed quiet upstairs. Are you trying to rent the unit again?"

“I will eventually, I suppose. There’s too much else is going on right now, though.”

Just as a blot of gray cloud interrupted the spill of sunshine, an imposing figure appeared at the end of the block, drifting down the middle of the street. He was unconventionally handsome and very tall. Jackson didn’t make much of it at first. People often moved about in the roadway when traffic was sparse.

The man paused and lifted his arms high over his head. Long fingers speared the air like the panels of an ivory fan. An appliance delivery truck approached from behind.

Leaning forward in his chair, Jackson stared. Without braking or honking, the truck hit the man and sent him into a high, oddly graceful somersault. Jackson sprang to his feet but didn’t move. The figure moved higher and higher into the limpid sky until he disappeared into the solitary cloud. The cloud abruptly dissipated, shredding into tatters of vapor.

“What’s wrong?” Adin asked.

The man who apparently wasn’t a man tumbled back to earth, just as gracefully, somewhere beyond Jackson’s line of vision.

It didn’t end there. The blade of one baffling reality kept slicing into the body of another.

Three girls came down the sidewalk. The one in the middle was crying and quaking and pouring out words in a high, thin voice. Her friends alternately comforted her and made light of her agitation. Or seemed to. They all spoke rapidly, and Jackson’s understanding of Spanish was minimal. He knew only the traditional languages of magic—Latin, which he used most often; some Hebrew and a smattering of Arabic, German, Italian, French.

A tug at his waistband made him jerk and pivot.

“Relax, it’s only me,” Adin said. “Why don’t you sit down? That girl is freaked enough without having some stranger gawking at her.”

“What’s she saying?” Still glancing at the group, Jackson lowered himself into the chair.

“I thought you knew Spanish,” Adin said, looking at him.

“Not at that speed.”

The girls hurried past Jackson’s building. The two who had their wits about them gave the men surreptitious glances. One was accompanied by a shy smile. Several steps farther on, the other composed girl peered over her shoulder. Murmured words were exchanged.

Adin looked at Jackson and smiled. “They think we’re hot.”

“Get out. They’re too young to think we’re hot.” The girls were probably in their early teens.

“No city kid over ten is young these days,” Adin pointed out. “Maybe you need to watch more TV.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that. Now what’s with the one in the middle? Why’s she so upset?”

Adin lifted a bottle of beer from the ground beside his lawn chair. Leinenkugel’s Honey Weiss. As he tipped it to his lips and drank, Jackson wished he were the bottle’s mouth. He and Adin hadn’t even kissed since he got back.

Adin wiped his upper lip with his lower, another unintentionally tantalizing move. “She claims she saw a skeleton climbing up a flagpole. I think it was outside their school.

One of the others told her the Day of the Dead was over. The second said maybe it was a guy named Trevor.” Adin grinned. “Poor kid is probably a pale, skinny geek.”

“That stressed-out girl must have some psychic ability,” Jackson said. “I feel sorry for her.” He combed his memory, trying to recall if he’d read about a skeletal creature in Slavic mythology. Or a tall man who could control the weather.

“I believe,” Adin said, “*Ko?ciej* can appear as a skeleton.”

“Who?”

“The creature mentioned in that note you got.” Adin took another drink. “What did you just see?”

Staring at the ground in front of him, Jackson mutely shook his head. Supernatural activity was ramping up in the city. He swigged some of his beer, which he’d all but forgotten about. “It doesn’t matter,” he murmured. “Just more of the same.”

Adin regarded him. “You’re starting to seem bothered by it.”

“I am.”

Finally, Jackson was genuinely worried. The beings slipping through that interstitial gap were becoming more manifest, as if they were drawing power from this world. At the moment their presence was like a poltergeist invasion: few humans could see them; a few more could hear them and perhaps detect other evidence of their mischief. Soon, though, they could very well start messing with people in nasty physical and psychological ways. Some of the damage could be irreversible.

“I just wonder,” he said, more or less to himself, “how long it’s going to be before Baba Yaga actually does snatch a child.”

Adin extended the fingers of his right hand. “I wonder how long it will be before I thirst for blood again.”

A chill snaked through Jackson’s body. He glanced at his companion.

There was no doubt about it. Adin’s fingernails had ominously lengthened.

\* \* \* \*

Fog Cliff Cemetery, Ivan thought, was even creepier than the portraits of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky painted on Roland Dancy’s scrotum. And they were pretty damned creepy—especially when Rollie squeezed the top of his sac and made those faces pop in all their chicken-skinned, wire-haired glory.

The sun would soon be setting. Already, shadows cast by lines of gravestones had begun to stretch out on the grass like reclining ghosts. It didn’t help the atmosphere any to have Bothu loping along at his side like some oily mortician. It didn’t help, either, that Bothu carried an old, black doctor’s satchel, and whatever was stashed within kept making its presence known through muffled thumps and knocks.

Shielding his eyes with one hand, Ivan glanced up the narrow asphalt drive. There, toward the north, loomed the jagged rock formation that apparently gave the cemetery its name. No fog swaddled the cliff today, but thickening shade and almost palpable stillness provided more than enough atmosphere. The dead place was dead-quiet. Aside from whatever wildlife populated the surrounding woods, no other living creatures were around. This was a rural boneyard, and “visiting hours” appeared to be over.

“Where’s the grave?” Ivan asked, winded. The drive went uphill.

They’d parked their vehicles in a neighboring yard, which Bothu had assured him was safe. Maybe the property was abandoned. Maybe Bothu knew the owners. Ivan

hadn't bothered to inquire.

"We're not going to a grave," the necromancer said.

"Then how the hell—?"

"It's a mausoleum, and it's behind the cliff."

Ivan stopped. He put up his hands. "Whoa, hold on there, bucko. You're not shutting *me* up in some suffocating, vermin-infested—"

Bothu, too, paused. His dark gaze landed on Ivan like a wasting disease. "Then go home and figure things out on your own. I'm not the one who needs to be here, Ivan. I'm not the one intent on luring Jackson Spey into the Prism."

"Yeah, but you're the one who *likes* being here." Ivan tried to give him a playful swat on the arm, but he couldn't bring himself to make contact with the ghoulish figure. His hand fell limply to his side. "Wouldn't you rather do this on your own? Kind of like, you know...masturbating."

Bothu's narrow eyes narrowed further. "Actually, I *would* prefer being alone. But to achieve the results you're after, you have to be present." He nodded toward Ivan's neck. "While I'm thinking of it, you need to ditch the jewelry."

"What jewelry?" Ivan touched the spot Bothu seemed to be looking at. "You mean my amulets and talismans?"

"You'll have to take them off and leave them outside the mansion."

"The *mansion*?" Ivan bugged his eyes in disbelief. Then, resigned, he sighed. He'd given up trying to understand this goof a long time ago. "Listen, I wear these pieces for a reason. Let me explain it in simple terms. The talismans attract the shit I want. The amulets repel the shit I don't want. Considering where we are"—dramatically, he waved his arms to indicate the setting—"I'd say a little protection is warranted."

"And I'd say, get rid of them." Bothu resumed walking. "Things will be a lot uglier for you if you keep them on."

"Why?"

"Never mind."

"Well that's just fucking great," Ivan muttered.

Trudging on, they soon circled the western side of the cliff. Behind it, nearly butting up against the rock's northern face, was a gnomish stone structure patterned with lichens and engulfed in shade. The mausoleum looked like a rotten tooth. Ivan shivered as his gut clenched.

"How are we supposed to get in?" he whispered, hoping they couldn't. He eyed the sturdy double doors deeply recessed beneath a Gothic arch. They appeared to be bronze, and decorated all over with demons writhing and cavorting within a cage of thorny branches. Flanking this dreary portal, gargoyles glowered from atop a pair of Corinthian columns.

It was hardly an inviting entrance. A plaque set beneath the roof's low gable identified the lord of the mansion—one James Newman, who drew his last breath in 1928.

Much to Ivan's surprise, Bothu simply walked up to one door and pulled it open. The hinges didn't even squeal in complaint. *Stiff-lover must keep them lubricated*, Ivan thought. A puff of stale air wafted past his face.

With extreme reluctance, he pulled off his assortment of charms and laid them on a patch of ground rather than the cracked concrete apron that led to the doors. Getting them



dirty, he figured, was far better than letting them come into any contact with Newman's charnel house. Riding a sweaty wave of anxiety, he followed Bothu inside.

The grim, dim space smelled both dank and musty. An open crypt sat in the center, its lid so severely askew it seemed an inch from crashing to the flagstone floor. A hard chill dug into Ivan's bones. He lingered near the door.

"I'd say it's twilight. Wouldn't you?" Bothu murmured, glancing at his companion.

"Sure." Ivan didn't give a fuck. He just wanted to get this ordeal over with.

"Come here."

Ivan cast a longing look at the door, still ajar. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you idiot. I didn't bring you with me because I enjoy your company."

Ivan took a few tentative steps forward. The necromancer reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a key. A hex key. Leaning over the vault, he apparently fit the key into a lock—the lock that secured the lid of the casket nested within. A sharp click made Ivan flinch.

At that very moment, the mausoleum's door swung shut. Ivan jumped and let out a yelp. The space was instantly packed with woolly blackness.

Now, he did hear a creak. Bothu must be lifting the casket's lid. Ivan remained frozen in place, aware of the damp cold from the flagstones leeching through the soles of his shoes. He tried mentally cobbling together some protective incantation, but his mind seemed to have shut down. He heard Bothu rummaging through the satchel.

"Come," Bothu said, his voice dusky, "greet your benefactor."

Mewling, Ivan faltered forward in shuffling baby-steps. A match flared then touched the wick of a thick candle. It smelled, jarringly, like Christmas, but with a bitter note. Another burst of small flame, and the cloying scent of jasmine crept into the air. Ivan still hadn't peered into the relative gloom of the crypt. He watched Bothu remove other things from his black bag—a knife, a glittering chunk of stone, a vial of murky liquid—and array them along the wide edge of the vault.

Holding the candle above what lay within, the necromancer paused as his gaze angled downward. Fondly, he smiled.

Ivan thought he might faint.

As Bothu lowered the candle toward Newman's remains, he simultaneously curled an arm around Ivan's rib cage and drew him forward. Candlelight wavered up from the rectangular gulf.

"Isn't he lovely?" Bothu said. "He was nearly one of the Incorruptibles until fairly recently."

Sheer morbid curiosity made Ivan rise up on the balls of his feet and sneak a glance at the inside of the casket. He wished he hadn't. Closing his eyes, he swayed backward and swallowed hard.

Newman should have been pure skeleton by now. But he wasn't. On his hands, neck and head, skin like poorly tanned leather peeled away from teeth and bone. Scalp and hair, gradually disconnecting from his skull, rested like a clump of thatch on a soiled, rotting pillow. His dark clothing was nothing more than dusty scraps. As sunken and shriveled as they were, his eyes appeared to be open.

Even worse, something protruded from his chest. It looked like a partially corroded blade. *What the fuck?* Ivan kept thinking. *What the fuck?* Had Newman been a vampire? Ivan tried to calm himself. Maybe not a vampire. Bothu brought a knife with him this

time, too, and vampires didn't need to be killed twice. Besides, Newman looked deader than dead already. So maybe it was just part of the ritual. But why had the damned blade been stuck in the corpse's *heart*?

In slow motion, Bothu lifted the vial of liquid.

"Wh-what's in there?" Ivan whispered, because asking questions helped deflect his attention from every other grisly detail of this situation. Not to mention his billowing panic. He didn't think he could hold out much longer.

"Milk. Honey." Bothu pulled out the cork stopper. "Blood." Reaching down, he caressed the lipless mouth and drizzled his concoction inside it.

On the verge of retching, Ivan turned away.

"Come, sweet Azrael," Bothu crooned, "and speak through your servant James. Tell me how the man named Jackson Spey can be brought into the powerful crystal once hidden and protected here."

A soft rustling made Ivan hazard a glance at the necromancer. He'd reached inside the casket again. Very gently, he lifted something. One of Newman's hands. He cradled it.

*Azrael, Azrael...* Ivan tried to recall the entity identified by that name. Was it demonic? Bothu's blandishments went on. Ivan knew they were for his sake. It was the only thing that kept him from bolting. *Azrael...*

Shit. That was the Angel of Death.

A dry rattle came from the casket. Words formed. "C-call. Call him. Open the door."

"Thank you," Bothu breathed out. His tone was rapturous.

Suddenly, Ivan *couldn't* breathe. He frantically stumbled away from the crypt, trying to distance himself from the eerie exchange. His shoulder connected with a slimy wall. Half-expecting Newman to rise, he scrabbled toward the doors, their outlines barely visible in candle's feeble glow.

"We will stay here 'til the next twilight," Bothu said—to whom, Ivan didn't know or care. "Still as the dead yet receptive as the living, we will stay."

*The fuck we will.* Ivan's quaking hand found a thick metal ring.

"Call. Then...open the door."

*Damned straight.* Ivan grabbed the ring and pulled. Nothing happened. Panic began to overtake him. *It opens out, not in!* Grateful he hadn't totally succumbed to hysteria, he threw his considerable weight against the barrier. The bronze plane resisted for a couple of seconds before it swung open.

Ivan pitched himself into the evening, rolled once, and scrambled onto his hands and knees. Without a single glance at the mausoleum, and with greater speed and agility than he'd possessed since childhood, he scurried toward the blessedly mundane haven of his SUV. Amulets and talismans be damned.

## Chapter Eleven

Something was wrong. Jackson knew it as soon as he opened his eyes. He'd always been able to awaken quickly. Now, hyperalert, he sat up and reached toward the other side of the bed.

Adin was gone.

Not sure why it alarmed him, Jackson listened for a moment. Silence filled the flat. No sounds in the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room. Sliding his legs off the bed, he grabbed his jeans from the floor and slipped them on.

"Shit," he whispered. Flipping on the light, Jackson sprinted around the apartment to rustle up a shirt, socks, shoes. "*Shit*," he said more emphatically, his sense of urgency growing.

Adin's laptop was still on the dining table, so he obviously wasn't heading home. In fact, he'd talked to Celia, his girlfriend, just a few hours earlier and told her he'd be staying a while. Maybe he couldn't sleep and was sitting outside.

He wasn't. At first Jackson didn't know which way to go when he stepped out the door. He didn't even know what time it was. He looked left and right but couldn't see Adin's familiar form anywhere on the spottily lit sidewalks. Other people were out, though. A slow-moving, low-slung car boomed down the street. Two men and a woman sat on a stoop kitty-corner from Jackson's building, music playing at their backs. Farther away, Jackson heard a shout, a fountain of laughter.

He steepled his fingers and lowered his forehead to their tips. Closing his eyes, he blocked out all sensory distractions. He not only visualized Adin, he summoned a detailed sense of the man. Then his arms lowered of their own accord. Automatically, his body turned. He faced the dark, narrow walkway between his building and the one next-door. Adin must have gone down the walkway and headed for the alley.

"Don't," Jackson whispered, falling into a jog. He felt tugged along. "Please don't."

He veered left into the alley. When he got to the end of the block, he followed the next alley. Something wispy and insubstantial grazed the side of his face. Almost immediately, a cat yowled. Jackson didn't stop. He didn't care what was flitting about the city tonight. He had to find Adin.

There was a bar on the corner of the second block. His legs braked. Breathing heavily, more from anxiety than exertion, he walked forward and peered into the gloom. There was a Dumpster behind the bar, several paces from its rear exit. Above it, a caged, yellow bulb cast a weak and jaundiced light. It illuminated little more than the scratches, dents and graffiti on the metal door and a scattering of trash on the ground.

Standing still, Jackson listened. Unmistakable sounds came from the slot of darkness between the Dumpster and the building's brick wall. Sporadic, moist sounds. Stifled moans.

He stepped closer. Half in and half out of the pool of sick light, Jackson stopped. His breathing was spasmodic now, chest hitching as he drew in sour air and expelled it. Two figures were pressed together in the narrow space. Two men.

One cracked word came out of his throat. "Adin."

The sounds faltered, stilled. Jackson's legs unsteadily carried him forward, but only

by a few feet. He felt ill.

His lover, shirt open, drifted out of the shadowed hiding-place. The other person dashed off in the opposite direction, footfalls slapping on pavement and gradually receding. Adin's face crumpled in abject despair.

"Why?" Jackson whispered.

Like injured wings, Adin's arms lifted slightly then fell to his sides. "Because I had to."

"Was it the singer?"

Adin hesitated. "Yes."

"Did you feed?"

Adin shook his head. "No. I was...readying him."

Jackson's stomach lurched. His mind and body felt numb. He turned and blindly began walking toward his building. With every mechanical step, he thought his legs would buckle and drop him to the ground.

Within seconds, Adin was beside him, then in front of him. He gripped Jackson's upper arms so hard, each finger dug a distinct pit.

"Stop," Adin said. His eyes looked different. The blue had darkened nearly to black. There seemed to be glimmering rings around the irises.

Jackson tried pushing him aside.

Adin wouldn't move. He gave Jackson a shake. "*Stop!*"

It was painful to look at him. Jackson's heart hurt, it hurt so bad he wanted to double over. "You were...you were 'readying' him." He knew too well what that meant. The deep kissing, the fondling. He was familiar with the arousal that preceded and accompanied a vampire feed.

"I didn't kiss him," Adin whispered. "I couldn't. I swear to you."

"But you let him kiss *you*. You let him touch you."

Adin didn't confirm or deny it. He didn't need to. He stared fiercely into Jackson's eyes. "I love you. Goddammit, I love you so much it's like a force pushing at my skin from the inside out."

Jackson felt his face twist. "You have a strange way of showing it," he said bitterly. He wrenched free of Adin's grasp and resumed walking, strengthened by his pain.

He tried not to think. He didn't bother looking back. Yet he knew Adin was behind him. When he got to his flat, he simply went inside and stood helplessly for a moment, not even capable of deciding which direction to move in—go to bed, get a drink, or head for the toilet and puke his guts out.

Softly, Adin entered the apartment. Jackson heard the door close. He hadn't even had enough presence of mind to shut it after he'd come in. Off to his left, he saw Adin walk to the couch and sink onto it.

Jackson moved in the opposite direction, to the kitchen. He poured himself a neat shot of Daniels and tossed it back as he stood over the sink. He still didn't know what to do with himself. He couldn't stay in the damned kitchen all night.

Ambling toward the dining area, he sat at the table and dropped his head to his hands. His mussed hair was damp where it met his forehead and temples. He'd been sweating.

"When I woke up," Adin said in a monotone, "it was just there."

Jackson didn't lift his head. Instead, he closed his eyes. *It*. The hunger.

"I knew right away," Adin went on. "My body felt sandblasted."

Finally, heavily, Jackson looked up. "Why didn't you turn to me?"

"Because of your reaction earlier. You used to be able to accept me this way. Now you can't."

"Everything's changed since then," Jackson murmured. They weren't lovers before. How Adin satisfied his bloodlust was his own concern. "I haven't so much as *thought* of touching another man since we—"

"I know." Adin's forearms were on his knees, his head hanging. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "You can't imagine what this is like for me. It's as if I woke up into a nightmare."

Jackson's heart still ached, but now it had begun to ache for Adin, too. He looked beaten and dazed. He clearly had no control over what was happening to him.

"Would you have fucked that man when it was over?" Jackson asked. The words alone were like pottery shards in his throat. He knew Adin had to have sex with his host after he fed. The need was hardwired into him. Or had been.

His head moved slightly, back and forth. "No. I couldn't have."

"Something would have happened, though. I know how it is for you."

Adin looked up. "Why are you doing this? What do you want me to say? That he would've sucked me off? Yeah, okay, that's probably what would've happened. In fact, he wanted to do it right from the start."

The admission triggered an eruption that likely was inevitable. Jackson pushed away from the table so forcefully, two chairs toppled over. Blind with a grief he didn't understand yet thoroughly despised, he stumbled down the hall to the bedroom.

"Jackson!"

Before he could get to the bed, Adin was reaching for him. He turned into Adin's arms without thinking. The hug was crushing. Jackson squeezed his eyes shut. But he couldn't let go. He couldn't let go of his thoughts or his feelings or his lover's tormented body.

Adin petted his hair. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. Please."

Their lips met. The kiss was hot, savage.

"Do you still need to feed?" Jackson asked hoarsely.

"Yes. You're the only one I really want."

"You mean, my blood."

"No, *you*. All of you."

The open-mouthed kiss went on as they tumbled onto the mattress and tore off their clothing. They sat facing each other, legs bent around hips. Adin's eyes were an opaque indigo. Bright rings rimmed his irises. The rings glowed red.

*In what distant deeps or skies burnt the fire of thine eyes?* Jackson was transfixed. He couldn't have quelled his arousal if he'd doused himself with ice water. No matter how dreadful this development or how odious he found his own vulnerability, he couldn't resist this man. Could never resist him.

Adin caressed his face. "This might hurt," he said. "I think...I think I'm a cruder version of what I used to be. I don't know why."

He lifted his hand and studied it. Before, it was the nail of his little finger that grew. And it became, like a glass splinter, the perfect instrument for sliding rapidly through flesh and muscle and into blood vessel walls. Now, it was the nail of his forefinger that

had altered most obviously. It looked razor-sharp, but it was more a fine blade than a needle.

“Do it,” Jackson whispered.

The nail hissed across the right side of his chest. Jackson winced as a cry knotted in his throat. The incision was indeed cruder than the neat punctures Adin used to make. It felt like a fiery chasm. Still, acute excitement welled with the blood. It shot from the cut through Jackson’s nervous system. A gleaming crimson thread crept down the rise of chest muscle. When it reached his nipple, the bud tautened. Jackson’s breath caught. Just anticipating the press of Adin’s mouth made him dizzy with desire.

Adin made a sound of brutish lust and triumph as he lowered his head. His tongue flattened against the blood-streaked nipple and pulled firmly upward in a languid lick. The feeling was piercingly exquisite. Shuddering, Jackson gripped Adin’s hair. Plush lips closed over the gash.

Heat. Such intense heat. A shattered mosaic in Gauguin colors, coursing through his body. He was dimly aware of his head falling backward, his mouth falling open. The pulling at his chest created its own current, a purely aphrodisiac current that blazed into his lower abdomen and lodged, dense and throbbing, in his groin. His cock felt packed with steel; his skull, with looping velvet ribbon.

Uncontrollably, his hips began an ejaculatory buck. But he didn’t come. He couldn’t, until Adin was finished drinking. Still, those brilliant shards of heat bloomed like orgasmic flowers within the marrow of his bones. No feeling in the world could compare to this. None.

His body felt weightless, its definition blurred. Like the first time he offered himself, he’d become a drifting mass of sensation.

The suctioning at his chest began to slow, became weaker. As Adin finished his feed, the cut started to throb. Its pulsations matched the throbbing in Jackson’s genitals. He needed release. The sounds that came from his throat carried the agony of his cresting arousal. His balls felt like fists.

Adin lifted his head and sighed deeply. His lips looked slightly swollen and obscenely sensuous. Jackson’s cock began to drip. Instinctively, the two of them slid into a sixty-nine position. It was awkward, not good for either passionate or careful lovemaking, but they were well beyond making love.

Each man fiercely gripped the other’s turgid cock. Their sucking was more desperate than Adin’s careful draw of blood, but finesse didn’t matter now. They both craved relief.

After only a few deep pulls by that deft mouth, Jackson exploded into climax. His cum seemed to spew like a geyser. Adin, too, came quickly and hard. An image of that buff young man sucking Adin off flashed through Jackson’s mind, as painful as a blast of bright light. A roar of rage nearly tore from his chest; he stifled it into a groan. Tears rose in his eyes. He swallowed them away.

Rolling onto his back, Jackson threw an arm over his face. The euphoria he’d experienced was gone. Whatever was left in its wake was soul-draining.

“I don’t want this for us,” he murmured, his voice still thick with emotion.

His relationship with Adin was fulfilling enough without the bloodletting. And Jackson couldn’t bear the thought of his lover finding pleasure through anyone but himself and Celia. It didn’t matter that pleasure was part of any routine feed, if such an activity could ever be called routine. The necessity of sex for Adin as a vampire didn’t

blunt the bruising impact of the act.

Adin sat on the edge of the bed, his back to Jackson. "I don't want it either," he said. "I want us back the way we were." He turned enough to run a hand down Jackson's thigh. "I don't want to lose you. I couldn't stand losing you."

Again, Jackson's eyes stung. He was sick of feeling so damned fragile. "I don't want us to lose each other."

It was time.

\* \* \* \*

## **On the Threshold Shebra'feline**

No beings save the Creators and the Shebra'feline can venture through the Microcosm without aid. Therefore, I was sent.

"In native" means, for a Felim, adopting the form of a species indigenous to whatever plane, planet or place the Felim must temporarily inhabit. On earth, that species is almost always Homo sapiens. Slipping on a human body naturally entails an alteration in the Felim's mode of perception.

I at first found the human mode, with its complex interplay of five physical senses as well as complex anatomical structures, cumbersome and confusing. The human body and its senses can invite both extreme discomfort and extreme pleasure. It took many instances of being in-native for me to become accustomed to this dichotomy and to learn which situations would prove least assaultive and most enjoyable.

Smell proved a difficult sense to accommodate, and I was often tempted to block it. This would not have been wise. Every mode of perception is a pathway to insight, and it is imperative each Felim acquire a full understanding of its wards.

Sight, however...what a delight! I've yet to tire of gazing upon things and people. I still enjoy riding shapes with my eyes, exploring textures, wallowing in colors. Earth's environment is abundantly intricate and does not allow for visual boredom. I am always looking, looking...

The construction of humans intrigued me from the start, certainly because my wards have always been human and, as a result, I've often had to adopt their form. Although the distinctions between ugliness and attractiveness, deformity and normalcy have never concerned me, I eventually came to recognize those distinctions. This did not begin to happen until I had been in-native a number of times. Now, I am occasionally struck by a particular creature's appearance.

Such happened when I first saw my ward, Jackson Spey, and again when I saw the photographs of Adin Swift tucked among Spey's books. I found them both quite arresting.

As a human female, I had not only become familiar with Spey, I had liked him a great deal and for a number of reasons. That was not necessarily a negative development. In fact, a sense of protectiveness toward one of its wards enhances any Felim's performance. Without such a sense, a Felim might not go beyond the basic requirements of its position. And that could quickly place a ward in danger.

Swift, I am yet in the process of discovering. From the moment I saw his photographic likeness, I admired the pure, still beauty of his face, as cool as a mask. It

was subtle in expression yet rich in detail. Later, as I hovered in Spey's home, my presence undetectable to any human, I began to admire those lush details.

Although Swift's emotions run deep, he rarely displays them in a dramatic fashion. Only the most turbulent feelings—rage, gnawing frustration, grief—noticeably disrupt the perfect pattern of his features. Spey, on the other hand, believes he is composed, but he gives more away more of himself than he realizes.

I, like all of my kind, am not prone to the impulses and emotions that drive so many living creatures, regardless of realm. We Felime are systemically devoid of any instincts save the ones that allow us to carry out our duties. But assumption of an animate, physical form invariably comes with surprises. Preferences, affinities, and aversions develop. Urges clamor for attention. Pleasure and pain, satiety and deprivation are felt, sometimes keenly. Such assaults are fleeting, but they take place nonetheless.

So, yes, I had fallen prey to certain human weaknesses. In the process, though, I had learned a great deal about my soon-to-be ward and his associates. This knowledge would be of help both in drawing him into the Prism and serving him once he was contained.

And he *would* be contained. It was inevitable.



## Chapter Twelve

Ivan nearly fell on his ass when he stepped into the living room. Bad enough he'd felt someone or something in the shower with him and thought he'd glimpsed a translucent shape wavering within the spray. Now this surprise.

"Jesus, how did you get in here?"

His heart continued to jig as he tied the bathrobe more securely over his belly. He swiped his hands over the sides of his head. Rivulets of water still trickled from his fringe of hair, making him even more jumpy when they wormed down his neck.

Mikaela stood beside the cocktail table, the fingers of one hand splayed just above the Prism. She looked like she either was about to grab it or was trying to levitate it.

"Hey, don't touch that!" Ivan barked, lurching forward.

Wearing the barest hint of a smile, Mikaela took three measured steps backward. She still stood between the sofa and the cocktail table, which was too close for Ivan's comfort.

Darting wary glances at her, he looked for the tea towel he used to cover the crystal. It was on the floor. Bending over with a grunt, making sure to keep his rear end turned away from the unexpected visitor, he snatched up the towel.

"How the hell did you get in here?" he repeated, draping the linen cloth over the Prism.

"You should keep it covered with silk," Mikaela said. Her voice was just as drifty as the look on her face.

It occurred to Ivan that she'd snapped. Miki had always struck him as a half-bubble off plumb. He did a quick, surreptitious scan of her hands and clothing to look for any sign of a weapon, but there was none.

Her face looked a little fuzzy. After a hard, squeezing blink, Ivan refocused on her. "I always keep my door locked," he said, still trying to get an answer.

More questions rapidly piled up in his mind behind the unsolved mystery of Miki's entry. Where had she been? Why couldn't Christy get in touch with her? How did the Prism get uncovered, and what was with that comment about the silk cloth?

Just as Ivan was about to start grilling Mikaela, his cell phone sent out its robotic version of Bach. He nervously looked around for it.

Kitchen counter.

Ivan scurried toward the kitchen, grateful only a partial wall separated it from the living room. He sure as shit didn't want to take his eyes off Mikaela for more than a few seconds. Just as he reached for the phone, it fell silent.

Cursing, he trundled back toward the couch. This time he *did* lose his balance to shock. "Who...who the fuck are *you*?" he forced out, his voice pared to a thin squeal.

The young woman who sat in his leather recliner was quite pretty—more of a looker than Mikaela—and nicely put together. Sylph-like, Ivan thought, except for that noticeable rack. He wouldn't have minded her presence in the least...if he had some goddamned clue who she was.

"I'm Celia," she said. "I live with Adin."

Gaping at her, Ivan curled one hand over his forehead. With the other, he groped for

the couch to steady himself. "And who the sweet shit is Adin?" He managed to drop to a sit after maneuvering around the couch's broad arm.

The woman smiled. "Ask Jackson."

Ivan's heartbeat faltered. "Spey?" he whispered.

"Yes. Tell him I'm looking for Adin."

"Excuse me, but I...don't stay in touch with Mr. Spey." Ivan's forehead was so crimped from bewilderment it had begun to ache. "Uh, where's Mikaela?"

"She's around," the woman said.

"Where? Around where?"

"Here."

Ivan's gaze jerked over the visible portions of his apartment. No Miki. Either she'd slingshot herself into the bathroom or she'd left. Squinting, he studied the front door. It looked securely locked.

When his eyes shifted back toward the recliner, he almost slapped himself to see if he was really awake.

The blonde sylph was gone. In her place sat the statuesque, mulatto form of Angelina Funmaker.

Ivan extended an arm, palm out. Shaking his head, he breathlessly uttered a diced-up laugh. "Okay, Spey, what the fuck are you up to now?"

"Jackson isn't here," said Angelina. She not only looked like a ship's figurehead, she had all the affect of one.

Ivan lifted the forefinger of his outstretched hand and moved it back and forth. "No. No-no-no. Don't tell me he's not behind this. I know my place doesn't have some goddamned cat door I've never noticed. And if it did, women sure as hell wouldn't be lined up outside, waiting to crawl through." Ivan looked frantically around his living space. "Spey?" he shouted.

"He isn't here," Angelina repeated. Her figure partially dissolved, then morphed into the Celia woman, then faded again and morphed into Miki. "Jackson doesn't know what's going on here. He's at home."

"Get out," Ivan whispered, eyes wide. He tried to come up with some Latin banishment phrase, but his mind was like a log jam.

Fumbling up from the couch, he went over to his chrome and smoked-glass desk and grabbed the address book that lay in one corner. It would take too long to dick with his computer. Hands trembling, he flipped to Spey's number and pulled the land-line telephone toward him.

Ivan damned well knew magic when he saw it. And he knew Spey could perform sophisticated projections, altering his astral self as he chose. No other Adept Ivan knew of could do such things. No other Adept Ivan knew was a wizard.

The figure in the recliner had settled into Mikaela's form. And there it remained, still as a stone.

From the cocktail table, Nezirabi's Prism sent needles of colored light into the room. It seemed to pulse with each ejected beam.

The thing was uncovered again. But no one had gone near it.

\* \* \* \*

Jackson held the phone away from his ear right after he answered it. Someone was

hollering at him. Peering at the nightstand clock—it glowed 1:58—he was about to disconnect when he recognized the voice.

“I’ve had it with you, Spey! I don’t know what your goddamned game is *this* time—”

“Calm down, Ivan.” Jackson tried to keep his voice lowered. He glanced at Adin, who slept soundly beside him. Feeling a spring of mixed emotion, he let his hand lightly graze the mussed curls of Adin’s hair. They gleamed like threads of satin in the moonlight.

As Ivan ranted on, Jackson slipped out of bed and cat-pawed into the kitchen. He poured a glass of cold water. After a few long swallows, he asked irritably, “Now what are you yammering about?”

“You know goddamned well, Spey.”

“No. I don’t.” Jackson sat at the dining table. “It’s two a.m., Ivan. Some people *do* go to bed before bars close, you know.” He ran a thumb and forefinger over his eyes and yawned. Sonofabitch must be drunk.

“Listen, asshole,” Ivan said, “I know damned well this has *something* to do with you. Your name came up. And there’s nobody else of my acquaintance who’s familiar with all three of these females.”

“What three—”

“Hey, *hey*,” Ivan shouted away from the mouthpiece, as if he were trying to get somebody’s attention.

Jackson scowled. What the hell was going on?

“Mikaela,” Ivan said distractedly. “And that friend of yours, Angelina.” A clatter came through the line, as if Ivan had carelessly dropped the handset. He seemed to be moving around, muttering.

Jackson’s frown deepened. He was fully awake now, his attention tensely focused.

Abruptly, Ivan returned. “And who the fuck are Adin and Celia?”

Jackson stopped breathing. “What?” The question was more an expulsion of air than of sound. His arm fell with a thud to the table top.

“Some cute blonde chick appeared—you’ll notice I didn’t say ‘was here’—and said she was looking for somebody named Adin and you knew this Adin.”

Jackson threw the phone aside as he bolted up from the chair and shoved himself away from the table. Jogging toward the hallway, he stopped short when Adin emerged from the bedroom.

Adin grabbed his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“I have to leave.” Briefly touching his lover’s flushed cheek, Jackson pushed past him and headed for the bathroom.

“And go where?”

After peeing and gargling and dragging a brush through his hair, Jackson whirled toward the bedroom and started dressing.

Following him, Adin too began slipping into his clothing. “Where are you going?” he repeated more emphatically.

Jackson’s mind spun. He didn’t want to get Adin involved in this but couldn’t leave him alone, either—not with his vampiric appetite resurfacing. And that mention of Celia... It wouldn’t be right to keep him in the dark, either literally or figuratively.

“Something’s happening at Ivan Kurtz’s apartment.”

After the briefest pause, Adin said, “I’m coming with you. And don’t try to give me any shit about it.”

Jackson didn’t.

Suddenly, the Prism of Nezirabi had become terrifyingly real.

\* \* \* \*

“Why are you here? To fuck with me even more?” Kurtz shouted through the door. “You better put an end to this bullshit. Now go away.”

“Let me in, Ivan.”

Adin stepped beside Jackson and pounded on the door. “Celia? Celia, are you in there?”

Jackson grabbed his arm and forced it down. “Be quiet. You’re going to wake up everybody on this floor.”

“I don’t care,” Adin said. He had a manic look in his eyes, which were bleary and bloodshot and hardly looked like Adin’s eyes at all. Ashen hollows lay beneath them. His skin shone with sweat.

Despite his growing concern about Adin’s condition, Jackson knew he had to be firm. “You’d *better* care. I need to find out what’s going on, and I won’t be able to do that if we get thrown out of here. And to answer your question—no, Celia isn’t in there. Now get a grip.”

Jackson realized his authoritative bluster was acid-etched with resentment and anxiety and a host of other feelings he needed to get rid of. It ate at him that Adin’s primary focus was suddenly on Celia. It ate at him with long, sharp teeth that this concern came on the heels of Adin’s pursuit of another man. But it wasn’t the time for petty jealousies. Jackson knew he, too, needed to get a grip.

“Ivan,” he said, “you’re the one who called me. You jerked the chain that brought me here. So open...the fucking...*door*.”

Within seconds, Kurtz did just that. No resistance, no threats, no imperatives laced with profanity. He just quietly opened the door.

Hand still on doorknob, Ivan stood there, pale and wide-eyed. “That’s what Newman said. Oh Jesus, that’s what Newman said. ‘Call him. Open the door’.”

Pushing past Kurtz, Jackson’s gaze swept over the living room, darted to the kitchen. Nobody else was around. His eyes slowly moved to the left, back toward the cocktail table. A sizable object sat there, covered with a towel.

*Newman...*

Jackson spun to face Ivan. “Did you mean *James* Newman?”

Head jerking, Ivan breathed out, “Yeah.” He seemed on the verge of looking at something else but caught himself. Instead he glanced at Adin, who stood silently against the door. “You must be Adin. Does your girlfriend know you’re cheating on her with a dick?”

With no forethought whatsoever, Jackson grabbed the front of Ivan’s robe and gave him a shove that sent him tumbling onto his couch.

Kurtz’s demented snickering continued. “What happened, Spey? Did you run out of women good enough for you? But he *is* prettier than—”

Jackson fell on him. He repeatedly yanked Ivan forward and slammed him against the cushions, punctuating each exertion with a bitch slap.

“Don’t you *ever* presume *anything* about me, you *clueless* son of a *bitch*.”

As Kurtz squealed and whimpered and protectively draped his arms over his bald head, Jackson felt a pair of hands on his own shoulders.

“Stop. Save your strength. He isn’t worth it. He’s just trying to provoke you.” Adin’s voice was mild and instantly soothing. Whatever wire had been running through him had obviously slackened. He sounded tired.

Breathing heavily, Jackson gave Kurtz one last, lackadaisical jerk then stood up straight. He wanted to turn and hold Adin. That’s all he wanted to do. Hang on to Adin and wish them back into his bed and wish everything else away. Instead, he swept the hair from his face. Closing his eyes, he mustered composure. And resolve. Adin’s hands slid from his shoulders.

Jackson walked around to the other side of the cocktail table and dropped to his haunches. Adin followed and stood over him. They both stared at the covered form on the table. A multicolored glow pulsed like a heartbeat beneath the cloth.

“That must be it,” Adin said quietly.

“That’s it.”

“Now what do we do?”

Tentatively, Jackson reached for the cloth. His hand stopped in midair. He withdrew it. “I don’t know.”

“That’s why *I’m* here.”

She came out of the kitchen. Just drifted out of its darkness like a wraith emerging from a cave. Ivan, curled up on the couch, made a puling sound.

Jackson wasn’t particularly surprised. He had no reaction except to look up, speak Mikaela’s name, and then glance over his shoulder at Adin.

“Hello, Adin,” she said. She neither walked over to him nor extended her hand.

Although Mikaela had given his name the Hebrew pronunciation, a fact as shocking as her immediate recognition of him, Adin continued to watch her without the slightest sign of emotion. He merely inclined his head in acknowledgment. Jackson, his mind scrambling for answers, rose from the floor and stood beside Adin.

“A united front,” Mikaela said. “Good.” She leaned over the back of the couch and touched Ivan’s shoulder. “You’re not needed anymore. You may retire.”

As if he were in a trance, Kurtz mechanically got off the couch and disappeared into his bedroom.

Mikaela stepped over to the cocktail table and stood opposite the two remaining men.

“You’re not human,” Adin said, his gaze fixed on her face.

“I am now,” she replied. “And whenever else I need to be.”

“You mean,” Adin said, “you’re whatever you need to be whenever you need to be it.”

“That’s accurate enough.”

With a jolt, Jackson realized the truth of this. Adin’s vampiric senses, which were kicking in again, had picked up on her nature.

So maybe she, or rather “it,” was the real Keeper of Nezirabi’s Prism. It didn’t matter, though. Not in terms of Jackson’s reaction. He’d begun to simmer. Few things infuriated him more than being played. He was already on edge, what with all the other shit that had been swirling around him, and now to find out some dispassionate puppet-master had

been pulling his strings, making him dance around at the Lobo Lounge and that ridiculous esbat meeting and in his own home...

"I don't know what the hell you are," he told the Mikaela creature, "but I will not be manipulated and made a fool of. You and your Prism can go to hell." His voice was low, like the deep-throated growl of a cat. He turned to Adin. "I'm leaving. I wash my hands of this."

Adin's fingers closed on his sleeve. "You can't, Jackson. And I can't."

There was grim resignation in that statement, and it immediately smothered Jackson's outrage. But the indignation remained. Scowling, he fired a contemptuous look at the still figure that continued to watch them.

"All that deceit. All that humiliation. Why did you do it?" He knew he didn't have to elaborate.

"Your pride is blinding you," the thing said blandly. "I needed to keep track of you as well as learn about you. Mr. Kurtz was the connection."

Jackson remembered Esme saying the same thing, but that that wasn't sufficient to explain all the personal invasions. "I had to fuck you so you could 'learn about' me?"

"I learned a lot that way," Adin muttered.

"Everything that happened was tied together," said Mikaela, "and all for a reason." Her gaze lowered to the Prism. "This is that reason."

"You assumed Adin's form at my flat," Jackson said. It was, in his mind, the ultimate violation.

Her expressionless eyes shifted in his direction. "Yes."

"But why? Why *that*?"

"To determine the degree of attachment, and how or if it would impact your mission. I've needed to get as good a sense of you as possible. You must believe this."

Sighing, Jackson rubbed his face. He needed to understand. To get past his anger and resentment and do what had to be done, he first had to feel all these machinations were justified.

"So...you have some connection to the Prism." *Your mission...* Heart pounding, Jackson glanced down at the still-covered form on the table. Its rhythmic pulsations were stronger on the side that faced him. He was sure of it.

"I served as one link between you and this microcosm," Mikaela said. "My position in the chain allowed me to assess all the players involved, especially you, the Mender. Now that you're on the threshold, my function changes. I shall serve as your guide."

Mikaela's form began rapidly to dissolve, each detail of its substance hazing and fading until that form became little more than a smudge on the air. Before it vanished entirely, it began to adopt another shape, a different set of details.

Where the female figure had been, a man now stood—a very striking man with curling black hair and clear gray eyes and, from what Jackson could tell, an impressive physique. He was dressed casually, maybe in imitation of the two human men.

"It might be best if you simply called me M," the creature said. "I am not who or what you believed me to be. You must let go of the Mikaela illusion now. It has served its purpose."

"But...why did you adopt *this* form?" Jackson asked. Understanding wasn't coming easily.

"First, because you no longer trust the female persona. Second, because you seem to

favor comely men.”

The observation, made so casually, rekindled Jackson’s ire. Regardless of what this entity was, it had no right to be presumptuous. Or insensitive. Jackson glanced at Adin. M’s statement had obviously penetrated his fugue. He looked stung by it, by the implication that Jackson routinely hounded after “comely” men.

Jackson glowered at the being who watched him with such icy impassivity. “The man standing beside me,” he said in a measured voice, “is the only man I favor, ‘comely’ or not. You’d be well advised not to make ignorant assumptions...about *either* of us.”

Although he’d muted his outrage, it wasn’t lost on M. “Very well. My only intention was to put you more at ease.”

“If you had any regard for my goddamned comfort, Adin and I wouldn’t be here!”

“Yes,” M said, “you would. Now, tell me what you’d like me to change into.”

“I don’t give a damn if you change into a jellyfish!” Jackson shouted. “What the fuck *are* you?”

He covered his face for a moment, realizing his mounting tension was self-defeating. Then he felt Adin’s hand flatten against his back. Gentle as the contact was, it calmed and strengthened him. He looked at his lover, trying further to gird himself through Adin’s presence.

“I am the Shebra’felim that has been assigned to you,” M said.

Adin’s eyes immediately narrowed when he heard the word, as if it were familiar to him. Jackson was about to ask if he knew what it meant when Adin’s eyelids fluttered. He swayed and made a low, hurting sound.

Concern clutched at Jackson. Adin was maintaining, but he looked increasingly frail. Sweat had begun to bead on his upper lip. The texture and color of his skin resembled tissue paper. Delicate tremors shimmied through his body. He either needed to feed, or the reassertion of vampiric traits was wreaking havoc with his entire constitution.

“How do you feel?” Jackson asked quietly, trying to minimize the stress in his voice.

“Like shit.” Adin’s mouth barely moved.

“Do you need—?”

“I don’t know what I need. This is something like the Fever but...different.”

The Fever. An affliction generated by hunger, it was a vampire’s worst fear, aside from whatever agents could kill him. Adin had told Jackson about it years ago. If the Fever went unchecked, it could lead to a dangerous and debilitating dementia and, finally, death. Blood was the only cure.

Forgetting about M and the Prism and Ivan Kurtz, Jackson held his lover. One hand firmly braced Adin’s back; the other cradled his head. Jackson half expected to feel the fiery slash of a fingernail, even the plunge of sharp teeth...but neither came. Adin didn’t even return his embrace. Heavily, his head merely lowered to the slope between Jackson’s neck and shoulder, damp hair grazing Jackson’s face. His pallid cheek was cool and clammy.

Pressing his lips to Adin’s temple, Jackson silently conjured a strong wave of healing energy and sent it into his lover’s body. The effort seemed to work. Adin’s respiration deepened and slowed. Warmth percolated through his skin.

“Thank you,” he murmured. Lifting his head, he lightly kissed Jackson on the mouth.

Jackson smiled. “Your lips are warm again. I’m glad.” Even now, caught up in some mind-bending mission he didn’t fully understand and couldn’t fully accept, Adin’s kiss

still touched off a small cyclone of lust in his belly. Damn, he was a freakin' mess.

"I don't think it's going to last, though," Adin said.

Jackson's face fell.

Desperation bit into him. It was far more torturous than any vampire attack. Perhaps for the first time, he realized how horribly out of control the situation had gotten; worse, how much beyond *his* control. Adin's suffering tore at him. His own helplessness galled him.

The figure now calling itself M at least provided Jackson with a target for his outrage. Muscles tight as bow strings, he was about to lift the Prism and hurl it at the creature. What the hell. Things couldn't get much worse. Maybe shattering the crystal was something that should've been done eons ago.

Only, it wasn't going to happen that way.

He should've known.

Brilliant blades of colored light seemed to cleave each molecule of air in the room. The multifaceted Prism no longer hunkered and thrummed beneath Ivan Kurtz's tea towel. It had revealed itself.

Blinded for a moment, Jackson turned his head away from the table, his face nearly hidden in Adin's hair. The crystal's aggressive flashing quickly subsided to a sly, beckoning glimmer.

"Go ahead, look at it," Adin whispered. "You have to."

Jackson knew he was right. His eyes faltered toward the table. For the first time in his life, he beheld the legendary Prism of Nezirabi.

It held him spellbound. The object's intricate artistry was depthless, and as alluring as it was terrifying. Kurtz's gauche apartment seemed to recede, fading into its own dark walls. Only Adin's presence and M's voice kept Jackson grounded in the world he knew.

"Should Mr. Swift accompany you," M said, "his health will immediately improve. That place is not the same as this. Different conditions prevail."

The assertion was enough to tear Jackson's gaze away from the crystal. He needed to gauge Adin's reaction.

"I told you from the start I intended to go with you," Adin said.

M smiled. Jackson had no idea why. After one more uncertain glance at his lover, he asked, "How do I...go about entering it?"

"Entering is quite easy for those who've been invited," M said offhandedly. "You need only touch one of its highest facets. Choose one to which you feel drawn. Since you're expected, a door will open and admit you."

"What about me?" Adin asked.

"Mr. Spey may bring whomever he chooses," M said. "I, of course, *must* accompany him. Now, I suggest we not tarry any longer. Certain situations require attention."

Hesitantly, Jackson reached for the Prism, paused, and again pulled back his hand. He knew damned well he was stalling. He also knew he either had to walk away from this thing, once and for all, or just go in. Waffling indefinitely, looking for reasons to delay his entry, wasn't an option.

"Shouldn't I at least go over the *Book of Paths* first?" he asked M.

"The Book is an admirable attempt at occult scholarship, but it has little practical application. You don't need to peruse it. Now please stop procrastinating. Choose a facet and touch your finger to it."



Jackson felt Adin's hand rest on the top slope of his ass. Aside from being casually intimate, the contact carried no message. Adin wasn't trying to spur him on or hold him back, wasn't seeking or imparting reassurance. The gesture was just another unconscious demonstration of...

*His love.*

Jackson glanced over his shoulder. Adin's small lift of the eyebrows seemed to ask, Well, what are you waiting for?

After flicking a glance at M, Jackson extended an arm and forefinger and touched the facet to which his finger seemed drawn.

## Chapter Thirteen

They seemed to be in a bubble. Its walls shimmered with iridescence, like a tracery of moving frost. Trying to peer through the crawling, rainbow-colored lines, Jackson glimpsed indistinct hints of what lay beyond them. The interior of the bubble was suffused with a whiteness so pure it was disorienting. Jackson saw no floor beneath their feet, yet they obviously stood on something. Two cloudy gray indentations puckered the bleached atmosphere like faded stains. Although perfectly breathable, the air had no odor whatsoever.

“Sit,” M said, pointing at the concave blots.

Jackson turned...or thought he did. Maybe the whole environment turned while the people within it remained still. He couldn’t tell; he had no reference point. The engulfing albescence bothered his eyes, making them jittery. He felt a flood of relief to see Adin standing beside him.

“Strangest lobby *I’ve* ever seen,” Adin muttered. He looked and sounded like his old self.

It was the only thing that made Jackson glad to be in this hollow cotton-ball. “You mean,” he said to M, “we’re just supposed to sink into those smudges?”

“They’ll support your weight,” M assured him.

Even their voices sounded odd—flat as rolled tin, with no resonance.

He and Adin settled into the shallow gray wells.

M stood before them. “To battle what others fear, Spey-Taliesin, you must first face and overcome what *you* fear.”

Hearing his adopted magical name was a shock to Jackson. No living creature knew that name. He had to remind himself the Shebra’felim was a being unlike any he’d ever encountered.

“And what might that be?” Jackson asked.

“Only you can answer your question.”

It made sense, of course, but Jackson had no clear notion of what he feared. He had a dim notion, but he preferred it stayed that way.

“Whether you speak this confession aloud or to yourself,” M said, “do not equivocate. The baggage you carry with you on this journey cannot contain lies. Even lies of omission.”

Jackson stared at the faux man. “What if...what if I’m not aware of my worst fears?”

“I realize this is a possibility. The human mind is never fully open to itself. It has many dark corners and sealed chambers. However, I will detect what you fail to detect. What’s most important is the sincerity of your attempt.”

These conditions made Jackson simmer. How the hell much was expected of him? And why? “But if I’m only here to close some damned gap—”

“That’s *not* the only reason you’re here.”

Open-mouthed, he met the statement with a deep dip of his brows. He was on the verge of saying, “I don’t understand,” but that would’ve been disingenuous. Esme had already explained the other reason, but Jackson had shoved it aside.

“You’ve simply chosen not to take the explanation to heart,” M said, reading him.

“That’s because here, in the Prism, you’re far less in control than in your familiar world. And you know it. Therefore, you keep searching for reasons to minimize the extent of this mission.”

“I just don’t think it’s fair, that’s all.” Jackson nearly winced at the statement. It made him sound petulant.

“You know that spiritual advancement requires ongoing effort,” M said, chiding him. “Achieving unflinching self-awareness is part and parcel of that effort.” Only now did M move. He brought his hands forward and clasped them. “Close your eyes. Plunge into yourself. I know you’re capable of intensive searching.”

Plunge Jackson could, but not into the mysteries of his own heart. Striking into other realms was far less daunting. Even mining a vein of demons didn’t make him quail like this exercise.

M had begun to frown. He was obviously getting impatient. “Shatter the walls and shed your armor, Jackson.”

Adin gripped his hand. “I have faith in you.”

He knew that. It, too, made him uneasy. After giving Adin a quick glance and uncertain smile, Jackson lowered his eyelids.

\* \* \* \*

Seven of the ten Black Saints sat on abused, third-hand furniture, drinking Pabst and Old Style out of cans and whiskey out of bottles. Jersey, Swill, Brushy, Toot, Sticky, Hemp, and Supe. Pud, not present, was relaxing in the county motel at taxpayers’ expense. Doca was in the back room, meting out one-eighth of Cutter’s punishment for fucking Jersey’s old lady. Behind the small, nondescript building on Water Street, the dark river rolled and reeked.

In one corner a greasy fan, furred with dust, oscillated spasmodically. Someone hawked and spat. The gob hit the inner wall of a sand-filled coffee can, its intended target, with a muted splat.

Jackson glanced up from the piece of pine he’d been whittling. He was sunk up to his pelvic bones in a chair with shot-to-hell springs, his right ankle resting on his left knee while his elbows rested on the chair’s threadbare arms. At least his leathers protected him from the scratch of its tightly looped nylon upholstery. A few feet away, Brushy drew on a joint. Its glowing cherry was, for a moment, the brightest light in the room.

*Stop! Alert! Danger!*

Brushy got up to pass the doob. Jackson didn’t move from his comfortable slump. He transferred the pocket knife to his left hand and lazily extended his right arm.

“What’re you working on now, Supe? A fork for gnomes?” Brushy cackled.

Jackson sucked in and held the skunky smoke. He wasn’t crazy about his nickname, but he’d had it for three or four years now. Protesting would’ve been pointless. Shit, it was a club. Everybody got hung with dumbass nicknames.

They’d started out calling him JC because of his first and middle names, which he’d told them were Jackson and Carl. But his middle name was actually Charlemagne. JC soon morphed into Superstar, which in turn was shortened to Supe. Moreover, Jackson performed well in fights, so the men found the name especially appropriate in a mock-reverential sort of way.

“A whistle,” he croaked, trying to squeeze his voice through the trapdoor in his

throat that kept the THC contained in his lungs.

“Don’t look like a fuckin’ whistle,” Brushy informed him. “Looks like a fish spear.”

*A trident*, Jackson thought, silently correcting him.

“Why the crazy-ass shape?”

Jackson released the smoke with his answer. “Why not?” Weed exhaust plumed into the stuffy room and added to the existing layer that hung above the men’s heads. All hail the communal buzz.

Why the whistle was turning out that way was a mystery to Jackson. The shape had simply begun to form beneath his hands. He thought it might even make for a wicked tattoo. To this day, he didn’t have a single tat—practically a cardinal sin for a biker.

Doca sashayed out of the backroom, zipping his fly. “He ain’t bad. I think he’s done it before.” He adjusted his chaps and grabbed a pack of Marlboro reds from an empty beer case turned on end. “Your turn, Supe. But I s’pose you got laid before you came here.”

“Nope.” Jackson pushed up from the chair’s baby-shit-green embrace. “Not since this morning.”

Sticky held up a hand as he grinned and uttered, “Heh.”

Jackson slapped it.

“Who was she?” asked Hemp.

“I don’t know. Somebody I met at the R and R last night.”

“Good?”

“Good enough.” Jackson paused for a drink. “I had to kick her out, though, so I could get to work.”

Jackson made a damned nice living at his uncle’s cabinet shop, where he’d started serving as an unofficial apprentice when he was old enough to wield tools and operate machinery. Now he shared the workspace as an independent subcontractor, specializing in the fussier, high-end products Ambrose didn’t want to dick with. Actually, it was the clientele he didn’t want to dick with. But Jackson didn’t mind. He’d even bedded a few of those upscale housewives. Laurel, in particular, had proved the right kind of woman to please. She was a lawyer.

Jackson opened the door to the backroom, chips of cracked paint snowing onto his knuckles. The door had to be shoved to overcome the resistance of its rusty hinges.

Seeing Cutter made him pause as he pushed the door closed behind him.

Facing away from the entry, Cutter knelt on his haunches, handcuffed to two obsolete radiators that sat on either side of him. A mass of tangled mahogany curls ornamented his bare back down to the base of his shoulder blades. Why he’d been stripped to the waist and why his jeans were down to his crack, Jackson had no idea; he’d gotten there late.

The view—probably not intended to be sexy, but sexy nonetheless—immediately touched off an unsettling sensation in Jackson’s lower abdomen. His reaction startled him, although it wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. Cutter was twenty-three and had a nice body. Spring-loaded muscles, taut and solid. Wasn’t bad looking, either, although his temperament left a lot to be desired. He was a cocky shit. Jackson had never before seen him thus displayed. A t-shirt with cut-off sleeves had always been his most extreme state of undress.

Jackson sauntered forward and stood in front of him.

Cutter turned up his large brown eyes. “Why am I here, Supe?”

“You know why.”

“But you’re *always* fucking somebody else’s old lady. What the hell did I do that was so different?”

Jackson dropped to a squat, the better to face him. “What you did, cowboy, was fuck Moira in the ass while she was passed out, and you did it without Jersey’s permission. You know how he is.” Jersey was also the club’s president. Cutter didn’t need to be reminded of that.

“But he’s the one who *showed* me her ass while she was passed out! I figured—”

“You figured wrong, my man.” Jackson rose. The whole situation made him uncomfortable.

Cutter’s face twisted. “How do *you* get away with so much crap? Jesus, you split up Hemp and Anna. Pud even broke Pauline’s jaw because of you, and now he’s sitting—”

“Shut up.” Jackson didn’t appreciate being reminded. At twenty-five, he already felt too old for this shit. “You’re supposed to suck me off, not recite a list of my conquests.”

Jackson eyed Cutter’s smooth chest. There was nary a hair in sight. He had a carefully executed if garish tat right over his sternum—some goat-headed demon, its horns spreading out over a well defined pair of pecs. A rivulet of sweat trickled down the goat’s leering face. Higher up Cutter’s torso, the puckered, pale thread of a scar ran at an angle just below one shoulder.

Balance began deserting Jackson. The effects of weed and whiskey, he told himself. The explanation didn’t quite stick. Maybe something else had upset his equilibrium. Maybe a desire to run his hands over that chest and feel the nubs of those nipples had given him a tilt. Curbing the urge, he looked for something to sit on, saw a folding chair off to his right, and went to get it. He felt Cutter’s gaze on him.

“Supe, I got a confession to make.”

Jackson stationed the chair in front of the prisoner. “Save it. I’m not a priest.” After taking off his jacket, he sat, forearms on parted thighs, in front of Cutter’s damp face. He hoped his loosely linked hands and the room’s dimness concealed his crotch, for his cock had become restless.

Cutter rotated his wrists within the cuffs. His muscles delicately flexed. The chains rattled, making Jackson think of Marley’s ghost. “You gonna take it out?”

“Take what out?”

“Your dick. I gotta tell ya, man”—Cutter laughed tightly—“yours is the only one I actually kind of...looked forward to.”

Jackson gaped at him. “Are you kidding me?”

“No, I ain’t.” Cutter’s eyes shone like round and gleaming pools within the rough terrain of his face. He had acne scars, other scars. More scars than a guy his age should carry. They lent his once-cute face a roguish maturity he certainly didn’t deserve. He also had lips more full than thin. When he licked them, they glistened faintly.

Jackson’s cock nudged its tight casing of denim. An urge to press the heel of one hand against his incipient hard-on made him shift in the chair. Its metal frame creaked.

As if that were a cue, Cutter inched forward. The chains to which his wrist restraints were attached gave him some room to move. “Take my hands out of the cuffs, man. I want to grab you while I do you. I want to pump it while I suck it.”

Jackson flopped against the chair back. “Oh, come on. I can’t believe I’m hearing

this.” His little soldier, however, could believe it.

“Hey, whose old lady gives the best head? Toot’s, right? Shelley does it best. Didn’t Toot let you have her on your birthday?”

“Yeah, all day. She’s good. So what are you getting at?” Jackson hadn’t had a superior blowjob in a while. At the moment, he was all too aware of it.

“I’m better,” Cutter declared. “I shit you not, Supe, I’m *way* better. I been wanting to do you for three years. You’re hung, man. Makes my mouth water.” Again, his tongue came out and skated over his lips.

“Oh, Christ,” Jackson groaned. Curling forward, he dropped his forehead to his hand and scratched at it. “Why are you talking like that? I know you’re not queer.”

“I just think you got a great cock. Nothing wrong with that. I wanna feel it. I wanna taste it. Just once. That don’t make me a closet fag.” Cutter seemed to smile, or try to.

Jackson’s fingertips pressed, cool and dry, against his forehead. “Fuck.” Doca’s assessment echoed in his mind. *He ain’t bad. I think he’s done it before.*

Against his better judgment, Jackson got up, walked around the shackled man, and pulled a key ring off a nail in the wall. As he leaned over to unlock the cuffs, he heard Cutter’s coarse breathing abrade the air beside his face. The words *pump* and *suck*, *feel* and *taste* seemed to ride each exhalation. Jackson was well on his way to a boner, and he wanted a strong hand to throttle it and firm, succulent lips to slide up and down its length.

*Makes my mouth water...*

A broad bolt of pain made his stomach curl in on itself. Another cracked into the ledge of his cheek. Stunned, Jackson crumpled.

“I think *you’re* the closet fag, Superstar. Fucking hotshot ho-dog chump.”

Rolling up his eyes, all Jackson could see through his lashes was a tense-muscle predator within star-studded darkness. He knew he had to fight off both. Teetering, he suppressed his pain and summoned his fury, something he’d done often enough before, and cannon-balled into the predator’s midsection.

The impact emptied Cutter’s lungs with a cough of surprise as much as expelled air. Jackson fell on top of him and held him down. He knew the punk had a glass jaw. Clamping a hand around Cutter’s neck, Jackson snarled, “Fuck you, asshole,” and delivered a swift, jabbing punch to the weak spot. The blow immediately put Cutter out. As soon as he went slack, Jackson got to his feet and kicked Cutter in the nuts. Not hard enough to bring him around, just hard enough to give him something to think about when he revived.

Jackson leaned over, hands braced on knees. “Think you can turn on me, motherfucker? Huh? You’re not good enough to suck my dick, you ignorant pants-pisser.”

With no forewarning, his stomach clenched. An upsurge of vomit scalded his throat. He let it splash onto Cutter’s chest. Drawing back one booted foot, he kicked the inert body again. He didn’t know where, and where didn’t matter. Because in this ugly room with its bug-spotted, low-watt bulb and its shabby, cast-off furniture and its dank odor of new sweat and old piss and urban river, a man he’d considered a comrade had rubbed his nose in multiple piles of his own shit.

Jackson didn’t need it. Those poorly buried memories, like a corpse whose fingers poke out of a shallow grave, were reminders enough. Of broken bones and broken hearts, broken promises and broken friendships. All that ego-and hormone-driven destruction.

And now, on top of it all, a humiliating revelation of secret desires, used against him.

Reaching down, he grabbed Cutter's ankles, dragged him back to the radiators, and resecured the handcuffs. The volume of music, laughter, and profanity-laced drunktalk ramped up in the adjacent room. Two women shrieked in laughter. They must have just arrived. The clinking roll of an empty bottle stopped at the backroom's door. Jackson stared at its form, a hollow ghost in a slice of jaundiced light.

He couldn't bring himself to go in there. He decided to exit through the backdoor, descend the concrete steps to the narrow walkway along the river, ascend to street level at the next building, and then head for the lot where his bike was parked.

He lifted his jacket off the back of the chair. It felt slick and heavy. Humidity greased the leather. Heat coaxed out the smell of the animal from which the hide had been peeled. Jackson didn't want to put it on, but he slipped into it out of habit and necessity.

Feeling a little weak but considerably more sober, he slipped out the building's rear door. The dark river, licking along its channel, had a sinister, opaque sheen. Occasional wafers of light floated and fragmented on its surface. Somewhere in the near distance, the water made lewd lapping sounds, soft and sly. Jackson imagined a wet tongue slithering up from the depths, wrapping around his ankle, and pulling him under.

Despite the night's sticky warmth, he shivered inside his jacket. The river gave him the terrors. He knew he'd freak out if he fell into it, like Pip in *Moby-Dick* after he'd tumbled into the ocean.

Still, Jackson continued to stride along the narrow strip, boot heels clacking on the pavement. Cutter's words kept up their relentless taunt in his mind. Jackson wondered if he was tempting fate, maybe asking for some penance or punishment for every ugly thing he'd ever done or wanted to do. But no monstrous hand swept him into the sluggish water. No liquid tongue twined around his leg.

After finally mounting another stairway to get back to safer ground, he paused to get his bearings. The parking lot and his bike were still a couple of blocks away. Traffic droned steadily down the street but few pedestrians were on the sidewalks. Not many people walked around the city at night, unless some event like Summerfest was taking place. Then they moved in herds. There was safety in numbers.

Jackson didn't like herds. Packs were more his style. Maybe, after tonight, he'd find the solitary life preferable to both.

Very faintly, he heard a male voice calling his name as he turned into the parking lot. One of the guys must have come here looking for him. Yeah, there was definitely a tallish figure standing beside his Roadster, which looked like a jewel in the sodium arc light that spilled over it.

"Jackson. Over here."

He frowned. No member of the Black Saints would be calling him Jackson. He wondered who the dude was. Footsteps slowing, he warily approached the man. His hand instinctively went to the knife sheath on his belt.

Jackson had never seen the guy before. He was maybe six-one, trim and toned and extremely goodlooking. A pretty-boy.

"Jackson," he said gently, "can you see me?"

"Of course I can see you. But who the fuck *are* you?"

The man kept peering in his direction, as if a fog bank lay between them and he was

struggling to see through it.

Everything changed then. The city began crumbling, each building and lamppost and stretch of pavement turning into flaking bone. Chalky fragments powdered the air like scurf. People and traffic froze and faded. Dimming lights bled into the white cloud.

The musty smell of mold overwhelmed the odors of hot asphalt and humid brick, AC and vehicle exhaust. Even Lake Michigan's weedy, fishy tang was lost to the scent of decay.

"My bike," Jackson whispered...and felt a cold clutch of fear, as if his beloved Roadie had become a more threatening force than the smear of black river.

"Jackson, come on. Hold out your hand."

The disintegrating city dissolved into a confused mist.



## Chapter Fourteen

Jackson was breathing through his nostrils, hard, like a horse, when a strong pair of arms came around him. Dropping his cheek to Adin's shoulder, he mashed his face against his lover's neck. Every other exhalation carried a feeble sound, like a whimper. Fisting his hands against Adin's back, he felt the soothing passes of a caring hand over his hair.

"You're sweating like crazy," Adin whispered, resting his head against Jackson's. "Wherever you were, was it difficult for you?"

"Yeah. Just like the first time." It was an incident he'd pushed far back in his mind and smeared with memory-goo to obscure the details. Jackson knew there were plenty more where that one came from. Shit almighty.

The pulse in Adin's neck was strong and regular. Jackson wanted to kiss it, but Cutter's words scuttled between his mouth and Adin's skin like a foul-smelling crab.

He lifted his head. They were once again in that albino bubble with the crawling lines on its skin. "Where were you the whole time?" he asked Adin.

"There was no 'whole time'. We were here and all of a sudden you weren't here and then I was standing over a motorcycle."

"My Roadie."

"Your what?" Adin's lovely eyes stilled. They'd been scanning Jackson's face, probably searching for signs of psychological trauma, emotional distress. Only three other people had ever looked at him that way—his parents and Angelina.

"My old bike. The Harley Roadster."

Concern scudded through Adin's face. "The one you crashed."

"Yeah. But I didn't go through the crash again. That wasn't what I revisited."

Jackson knew why. The accident had no fearsome associations. It had happened too quickly, and the resulting head injuries had left him with no recollection of it whatsoever. More important, though, the wipe-out was an auspicious turning point in his life.

"Correct," said M, standing beside them.

"I don't know where he-she-it was, either," Adin told Jackson, "so don't bother asking."

"I will take you further down the same corridor," M said.

"You haven't 'taken' me anywhere," Jackson pointed out. "I took myself."

M met this assertion with a sardonic lift of one eyebrow. "Beware your egotistical presumptions, Taliesin. Were I to abandon you, you would wander into hideous territories for which you are wholly unprepared. Do not doubt it."

Jackson stared at the creature.

Adin gave him a nudge. "You might consider apologizing."

"Forgive me," Jackson said to M.

"You don't require my forgiveness. Only my guidance."

"Then I graciously accept it." *Maybe.*

\* \* \* \*

He grinned as soon as he saw her standing there, beads dangling from her blonde ponytail, brown eyes unadorned save for the snowflakes that clung to her lashes.

“Ma, why do you always come to the backdoor?” he asked, feigning disapproval. Jackson could only pretend to disapprove; he knew he couldn’t change her and didn’t really want to.

“Because I like entering a house through its kitchen.” She stepped up to him, firmly cradled his face, and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Got coffee on? I’m freezing.”

“Always.” He went to the counter to pour some for both of them.

Sighing, she pulled off her coat and sat at the table. Setting the points of her elbows on the bare wood surface, she pushed windblown strands of hair away from her face and then took off her glasses. They’d started fogging as soon as she’d stepped from the wintry air into the bungalow’s warmth. Irritably, she grabbed a napkin and swabbed the lenses.

Jackson smiled as he watched her. His mother hated bothering with the mundane activities most people took for granted. But she had boundless patience when it came to doing stuff she loved.

Like making time for her only child.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as he slid two mugs onto the table. Her attention was so sharply honed, Jackson could almost feel it drilling into his pores.

“Really great. Like I’ve been reborn.” He *had* been reborn. It was obvious to him well before he left the hospital. It became more obvious as he battled through therapy.

“Are you still laying off the Daniels and the drugs?”

“Completely. Not like I was heavily into drugs anyway.” Jackson had actually stopped taking his prescription meds, too, although he wouldn’t tell his mother. She’d start lecturing him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” she asked at the tail end of a swallow.

“Like you’re expecting my goddamned nose to fall off.”

Normally she’d smile at such an answer. Now, she grew more serious. Even curled a hand over his. “I need to know,” she said with deliberation, gazing straight into his eyes, “that you’re perfectly fine.”

“I’m perfectly fine,” he said, matching her tone.

Although they’d always shared a profound attachment, theirs was a quiet bond—undemanding, ineloquent, demonstrated not through dramatic displays but through playfulness and thoughtful conversation. Annie was an intellectual woman. Oddly enough, though, it was his dad who’d wanted Jackson to go to college. Jackson’s refusal had led to the gravest horn-locking father and son had ever engaged in.

Finally, Annie released his gaze. “Well, you do *look* good.” She seemed tense. As if buying time, she glanced around the kitchen. “I love this house. I’m glad you and your buddies haven’t trashed it. Your father and I used to talk about getting a place in Bay View. I’ve always loved Craftsman-style bungalows.” Her mind drifted off with her voice.

Jackson had started renting the place when he was only eighteen and determined to give his parents the privacy they deserved. He’d gotten it through a client whose mother, the previous owner, had passed away. Lucky for him that his work and maybe some natural charm had impressed the woman. She’d probably credited him with a maturity and stability he didn’t actually have.

But he did keep the place maintained. And he unfailingly paid his rent on time.

As he sipped coffee, Jackson glanced at his mother. Annie was still thinking about Charlie, the passion of her life. He knew because he'd seen that look on her face before.

Odd couple, Ann Marie and Charles Spey. She, an artsy-fartsy beatnik type who made jewelry and wrote poetry and played jazz piano. He, a blue-collar stiff who could operate the biggest cranes on earth with all the aptitude and confidence of Einstein working an equation. Charlie had been a biker, too. Jackson might have learned his woodworking skills from his Uncle Ambrose, but it was his father who'd taught him the hard, intricate beauty of motorcycles. By the time Jackson was sixteen, he could take one apart and put it together blindfolded.

He had a sudden, cutting memory of riding with his father through the Kettle Moraine on a blazing autumn day. And at that very moment of wrenching remembrance, his mother started to cry.

"What's wrong?" Alarmed, Jackson stared at her.

She never cried hard—not in front of people, anyway—just got a little misty now and then. But Jackson could remember the sobs that came from her bedroom for nights on end after her husband died. Jackson, twenty-two at the time and wrestling with his own grief, had stayed with her for three weeks solid after Charlie's death.

Mother and son, so pathetically strong for each other. Pathetically strong and numb and determined to keep functioning. Like zombies.

"I miss him so much," she whispered, hiccupping between the fourth and fifth words.

"So do I." It was the first time either one of them had admitted it.

Her watery eyes shifted to his face. "You never let yourself feel it. I know you didn't. It was there, chewing at the edges of your heart, but you never let it overwhelm you and pound you into the dirt like hurricane surf."

Jackson didn't know what to say. He couldn't interpret her mood. Was she angry with him, sorry for him? He couldn't tell.

"I've set a shitty example for you," she said, dolefully wagging her head. "Your father would cry over movies. Remember? And I would smile indulgently and you would poke fun at him and neither one of us"—her breath snagged—"neither one of us could see or appreciate the vast soul behind those tears."

Pulling off her glasses, she pressed her hands to her eyes. Jackson was dumbfounded. He had no idea what prompted this outburst. He waited until his mother looked at him again. When she did, she was more composed.

"I have to leave," she announced.

His bewilderment deepened. "You just got here."

"That's not what I mean. I need to"—she waved a hand—"get away. *Go* away."

"Where? For how long?" Hell, she was in her mid-forties. So maybe she wanted to go on a fuck-luck cruise.

She shook her head. "I don't know, honey." One answer, apparently, for both questions. And a shocking one. Tenderly, she placed a cool hand on the side of his face. "Jackson, when was the last time I told you I loved you? I mean, other than when you were in the hospital."

He shrugged. In fact, he couldn't even remember her saying it then. Knowing his mother, she probably did it when he was sunk in that bleak coma and couldn't hear her. "Ma, it doesn't matter. I know you love me."

"Yes it *does* matter," she said angrily. "See? This is what I mean. We make too damned many assumptions, you and I. We take too much for granted. Do you realize how romantic your father was? How expressive he was? That man was passion personified. In everything he did."

It was the truth. *Apathetic* and *indifferent* weren't part of his dad's emotional vocabulary. Charlie adored his wife unrestrainedly, in thought, word, and deed. And he threw himself into life.

"I need to escape my own self-containment." Annie let her hand fall from Jackson's face. "Your accident made me realize that. Now that you're well again..."

Jackson had a glimmer of understanding. With it came a niggling panic. He didn't want her to go, but he couldn't tell her that. If he told her, she'd stay.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"No, of course not. I want you to do whatever feels right for you."

How could he not sanction her decision? He'd already embarked on his own quirky journey, a study of occult philosophies and magical practices, so he could hardly fault his mother for striking out in a new direction.

"We haven't talked about your love life lately," she said with a wan smile. "Any promising prospects?"

Jackson pulled down his mouth and shook his head. "Nah. I'm not even looking."

"You're still getting laid, though, I'll bet."

His blush was instantaneous. "Jesus, don't talk like that," he muttered. Even after all these years, he wasn't used to it. His mother could go from erudite to earthy in no time flat. It still embarrassed him to know she'd seen his dick, even though the most recent viewing was a good twenty years ago.

"Why shouldn't I ask you?" Her smile increased. "Come on. You're a vital young man and even more gorgeous than your father. You wouldn't believe how many women I had to plow through to get to him. Even a few men." Lightly, she chuckled. "I'm surprised his equipment still operated by the time *my* turn came around. No pun intended."

Groaning, Jackson dropped his forehead to his hand. She'd been forthright, so he had to be forthright. Much to his chagrin. "Yeah, okay, once in a while."

Exactly three times since he'd gotten out of the hospital. More and more, he'd been shying away from that scene. Between his work and his studies, Jackson didn't have a lot of time on his hands or much opportunity to meet people his age. He'd been keeping to himself, trying to cultivate some spiritual refinement. All that indulgence of his various appetites now felt like sewage clinging to every part of his being. He desperately wanted to shuck it all off.

"Good," Annie said. "That's a step in the right direction. But what you need most is many steps beyond casual sex." She ran her fingertips over Jackson's hand. "Every day from now on, even after I stop breathing, I'll be wishing you success and happiness. And love. Above all else, love. You're already twenty-six, and you've never experienced it."

Jackson's throat felt tight. He couldn't look at her. "When are you leaving?"

"In a couple of days. A truck from Saint Vincent de Paul is coming by to pick up most of my stuff. I'm only taking what I can fit in the car. Things of value to me and things I might need." She gave his hand a little shake. "If you want something, just let me know by tomorrow."

Jackson nodded. Fuck, why did he feel she was deserting him? He was a big boy, and healthy again. He'd been independent, maybe *too* independent, for the last eight years. Still, her abrupt departure was an unpleasant jolt, nearly as much a kick in the gut as his father's untimely death.

"Please take care of yourself," he said.

"I will." She got up. Jackson didn't. Couldn't. Her arms came around his shoulders from behind, and she hugged him tightly. "I love you more than life," she whispered against his ear. "Just as I loved your father. My brilliant and beautiful son." Her lips touched his temple.

After slipping on her coat, she was gone.

Jackson stared, unblinking, at nothing.

His stomach hurt like hell.

\*

Curling his arms around his midsection, he tilted forward. The table's surface didn't connect with his forehead.

"You weren't as blasé about it as you came to think."

"Leave me alone." Jackson didn't have to open his eyes and look up to know who spoke. The transition from past to present was more abrupt than the last time...but, strangely, less jarring.

"You wouldn't fare well if I did," said M.

Jackson remained doubled over, grappling with the realization of his own pointless, aching resentment and even more pointless cowardice. He could have said and done so much more that day. He could have done so much more *since* that day. He and Annie could have discussed her decision at greater length. She would've postponed her departure—or maybe not left at all, or made her absence temporary rather than permanent—had he been more forthcoming. Shit, at the very least he could've made some attempt to find her in the past fourteen years.

*I need to escape my own self-containment.* Had she been challenging him to do the same thing?

He looked up. Where was Adin?

M interrupted his thoughts. "You're a proud man, Jackson Spey. Sometimes, however, pride makes you a quitter. Or brings you close to being one."

"Shut up!"

*Where's Adin?*

\* \* \* \*

He couldn't sleep. Even that shared pitcher of rum and whatever-the-fuck hadn't helped. Raising his head from the pillows, he pushed aside the mosquito netting that surrounded his too-soft bed. He had an exciting research trip lined up for tomorrow. The more obscure Caribbean islands, like this one, were treasure troves of magic and mysticism...if one knew where to go and had the *cojones* to go there. And he had 'em. He just needed a good night's sleep to keep his mind nimble.

Shambling to the patio doors of his room, he slid them open and stepped outside. There was so little and yet so much in which to bathe his senses here. Moonlight spangling the dark sea. The susurrations of low waves breaking on the beach. The caress of a steady tropical breeze against his skin and through his hair. And that rich, varied

palette of scents.

He saw a figure approach the water's edge. A nude man, his stride marked by supple grace, his hair snagging flecks of moonglow. Jackson was transfixed by the smooth, subtle muscularity of his ass. He'd never really looked at a man's ass before. In fact, he'd probably made every effort *not* to look. Now, though, he stared at the pale and perfect symmetry.

He felt lightheaded.

The man was Adin Swift, his educated drinking buddy, the guy who claimed to be a vampire and, from all indications, was. They always met at dusk or later. Although Adin was a diurnal breed, or so he said, strong sunlight could make him very ill. Or so he said.

Without thinking about it, Jackson walked the short distance to the sea. He'd grabbed a towel but hadn't bothered getting dressed. Adin continued to stand on the beach, still as a sand castle.

Jackson stopped beside him. "Going in?" he asked quietly.

"*I thought* I heard someone coming." Adin turned to him and smiled. The breeze ruffled his hair.

Hard to believe a vampire could look like Eros himself.

Ill at ease, Jackson dropped his towel and waded into the water. He had to. His cock had begun to thicken, an unexpected and profoundly embarrassing development. Flustered by his wayward hormones, he leapt up, arched, and dove. The gritty bottom scraped along his chest and the top of his partial erection. When he surfaced, Adin was only a few feet away.

They slid headlong into the sea like a pair of dolphins and began to swim, sinewy arms stroking side by side.

The swim became a race. Adin shot forward like a bullet. Jackson paused, treading water. Son of a bitch *was* a vampire. No mortal creature could move at warp speed. His form wasn't even visible. Jackson could only see his fast-streaming wake and the curling fans of water his body displaced.

Jackson did a U-turn beneath the surface and headed back toward shore. In a heartbeat, Adin was beside him again. They kept pace with one another until, shoaling, they stumbled to their feet. Laughing between breaths, shaking and slicking the hair off their faces, they clapped each other on the shoulder.

The touch was a tad too lingering to be casual, although neither acknowledged it in any way. There was no follow-through. But at that moment, Jackson knew he wanted this man. And he knew he'd felt a spring of desire as soon as he'd laid eyes on Adin four days ago. Vampire or not.

"Well," Adin said, barely winded, "how macho was *that*?"

"I don't know. I never gave a whole lot of thought to the standards for machismo. Good thing, too, or I'd feel like a pussy. You took off like a fucking whaleboat on a Nantucket sleigh ride."

"A whaleboat on a what?" Adin asked.

They sloshed toward the beach.

"In the nineteenth century, when the crew of a whaleboat—you know, the small dinghy-type boats carried on a whaling ship—"

"Yes, I've seen them," Adin said. "I've been through New England."

He obviously meant he'd seen them docked. Jackson lifted his eyebrows. It wasn't

easy getting used to the breadth of this man's experience. "After a whale was harpooned," he continued, "it often pulled the boat at breakneck speed through the ocean."

"Ah, I see. I never had occasion to hear that phrase."

Adin's full lips glistened with moisture. His sensuousness was almost obscene; his beauty, nearly divine. Jackson, shaken by his hyperbolic thoughts, wondered if he was tripping on some island herb a local had slipped into his food or drink just for kicks.

Speculating about the source of his reaction didn't diminish it. He felt a craving, acute and undeniable, and it stunned him. Had Adin said, "God, you turn me on," Jackson would have pulled the man's wet body against his and savored the clench before sliding down the taut length of him—sliding slowly, his hands and chest never breaking contact, until he reached the dense curvature of that cock. He wanted to draw it into his mouth and reinforce it with iron.

Goddamn.

When they'd walked beyond the surf line, they simply stood there, taking in the balmy night. Adin dipped forward with a dancer's fluidity and grabbed his towel off the sand. Jackson turned to face the water so only mermaids and sprites could see his sprouting wood.

A towel hit his back. "This one must be yours," Adin said.

Jackson glanced over his shoulder. "Thanks." He fumbled to secure it around his waist.

"Don't be ashamed if you're getting a boner," Adin said with surprising nonchalance. "Americans are so screwed up about sex that nudity to them is tantamount to being fondled during an orgy."

Cheeks blazing, Jackson turned. Adin watched him with a half-smile. His gaze was maddeningly perceptive.

"Not to worry," Adin murmured. "It doesn't mean you're gay."

Jackson cleared his throat. "I already knew that."

"You do have a nice set, though...if you'll excuse my saying so." Adin vigorously buffed his drenched curls. "I've had more partners than I can count, male *and* female, so I'm something of an expert." Lowering the towel, he slid Jackson a smirk. "Don't bother thanking me. It was just a statement of fact."

That was the end of it. No touches, no propositions, not even a timid gaze, pregnant with longing. They shuffled toward the hotel. Jackson's craving began to dissipate. The sharp claws that had dug into the soft center of him began to retract. He was glad. Since he and Adin lived only ninety miles apart, they could very well be seeing more of each other after they got back home.

It would be all right, Jackson assured himself. He'd have plenty to keep him occupied once he was back in his familiar groove. So would Adin.

More than anything else, Adin Swift was a great conversationalist. And they genuinely liked each other, had similar interests and temperaments. Hell, they'd already started the half-annoying, half-gratifying practice of finishing each other's sentences. All those things were the makings of a solid friendship.

It would be all right. There'd be no more athletic skinny-dipping on sultry nights.

"I'd invite you in for a drink," Adin said, "but I have some work to get done. I work best at night."

“And I sleep best at night,” Jackson replied, “so it’s okay.”

Adin smiled. “Dream deeper.”

Jackson felt his forehead crease.

“It’s something my mother used to tell me.” Adin’s smile became rueful. “When I could still dream, that is.”

\* \* \* \*

Darkness drained from the blue-black night. That beautiful face was the first thing to emerge from the paling atmosphere. Jackson loved looking at it.

They sat facing one another, knees touching knees. Jackson took Adin’s hands in both of his. “Are you finally able to dream deeper?”

Adin nodded. He wore the same smile. “That’s what made me come to see you last November and ‘out’ myself.”

The memory of that weekend would forever be vivid in Jackson’s mind. He’d never stuff it into an abandoned well. “I think dreaming deeper is what I’m doing now. I think that’s what this whole weird trip is about. Maybe those mythological creatures *don’t* exist. Maybe—”

“Oh, they exist,” M said, stepping between the two men and forcing them apart. “And you must indeed contain them, Jackson. It’s just necessary for you to make some stops along the way.”

M turned his gaze on Adin. It wasn’t just a look, it was brazen ogling. And Jackson was none too happy about it.



## Chapter Fifteen

As I looked at Swift, both studying him and pleasing my eyes, I could sense Spey's mounting tension. His cousins in the animal kingdom were similarly covetous of their mates. Swift, however, bore my scrutiny with his usual water-smooth grace.

It wasn't necessary that I study Spey. I'd had ample opportunity to do so, at very close range. But as things progressed, I knew that I must devote some attention to his mate.

"Why are you staring at Adin?" Spey finally asked me.

I detected suspicion and disapproval in his tone. "His physical beauty is remarkable," I said, "now that his vigor has been restored. He was even quite lovely when he was ill."

I didn't want to influence Spey by stating the rest of my reason—that I suspected he and Swift were inextricably bound, and I could hardly guide the Mender without comprehending the nature of this attachment. As recalcitrant as Spey was, though, I knew I might indeed end up having to explain this.

Swift was unmoved by my comment. He'd likely been admired by thousands of people over the course of his long life. Spey, however, was not so unaffected.

His eyes turned up in their sockets and he shook his head. When he spoke, he addressed his mate. "Don't you ever get sick of being told how fucking pretty you are?"

"The word is usually 'beautiful'," said Swift. "And it seems to bother you a whole lot more than it bothers me."

Spey's mouth tightened. He looked at me. The man had a most expressive face. "Just don't get any ideas."

"Ideas of what nature?" I asked, since the warning—it sounded like a warning—confounded me.

Swift looked down and smiled.

My gaze fixed on his eyelids. They were so delicate, their pale gray background embroidered with fine, faint blue veins. The lashes that adorned them seemed out of place. They were too dark and lush, like heavy fringe on the edges of threadbare, faded awnings. I thought his lashes looked exactly right, though, fanning over the crests of his cheekbones, like of clusters of black silk thread on pink satin.

"I remember how you were as Mikaela," Jackson said, the statement acrid with implication.

He'd surely noticed me staring at his mate's eyes. Discretion was not my strong suit. I'd never worked at mastering it.

"I suspect you do remember," I told him, "since I existed in that form not long ago. Please explain what bearing that has on the ideas I'm not to entertain."

A sound came from Swift's throat, as if he were scraping his voice free. He still smiled. "I believe Jackson doesn't want you to touch me."

Spey's face tightened and reddened.

"Is that true?" I asked him, not understanding why such should be the case. "You allowed me to touch *you*, almost everywhere on your—"

"That's enough," he said, cutting off the flow of my words.

"Enough what? Tell me why I could touch you but I'm not allowed to touch Mr.

Swift. I would like to know the reason.”

“Dare you to get your nuts out of *that* vice,” Adin murmured, shifting his eyes in Jackson’s direction.

Something about our exchange amused him. Or so it seemed. I didn’t quite grasp the nature of humor or amusement. They were odd characteristics, present in some species but not in others, and comprehension of them often eluded me.

Now my gaze was drawn to Swift’s irises. They did suit his eyelashes. They were deep blue faceted with countless tesserae that bore the smallest flecks of silver. Spey, on the other hand, had a wizard’s eyes. Their color was linked to his mental and emotional states and, therefore, was unsettled. Now, green crawled up from a field of dark gray, like moss suddenly sprouting from rock.

“I’ve noticed you like kissing Mr. Swift,” I said. “The act seems to move you in many different ways and signify more than a mating instinct. If I could feel him the way *you’ve* felt him, I would better understand—”

“You don’t need to understand!” Spey barked. Gold flashed through the green like small bolts of lightning.

Instinctively, I pulled my head back. I’d never developed much tolerance for abrasive noises. “Yes,” I said quietly, “I do need to understand.” The truth was, I needed to gauge his and Swift’s reactions to the contact. My understanding would be furthered by that, not by the contact itself.

Jackson ran a hand over his mouth then tossed his hand into the air. “Fuck it. I’m sick of arguing. Do what you want. You’re directing this show.”

“Are you experiencing jealousy?” I asked curiously, almost certain he was. It was one of the human equivalents of the territorial imperative. I’d witnessed jealousy before. It was important I knew for certain what Spey was feeling.

“Aren’t you going to answer?” Adin asked him.

“No.” He folded his arms over his chest and refused to look at either of us.

Everything Spey did, every look on his face and change in his voice and alteration in his behavior, was a revelation. I absorbed and processed each bit of this input.

Adin stood serenely, perhaps waiting to see how I would proceed. I approached him. He didn’t back away but didn’t step toward me, either. A hint of that smile remained on his face.

I touched my lips to his mouth. It was a pleasing sensation that could easily, under the right circumstances, lead to keen excitement. I knew, because I’d felt such excitement before. I’d felt it most recently with Spey. Being in human form made me vulnerable in many ways. Vulnerability, in my case, led to receptivity. Receptivity led to understanding.

Adin’s lips were very soft and very warm. They barely moved as I put my mouth against them, and they didn’t open. The man was simply letting me kiss him. He wasn’t engaged in the act.

His behavior, too, was revealing. Pleased that I’d learned more, I withdrew.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

I strongly suspected Jackson had snuck a glance at us while we kissed—or, rather, while I tried to kiss his mate—but his eyes were turned firmly to his feet when I pulled away from Swift.

"You can stop seething now," Adin said. His smile had modulated from amused to tender. "*Bacio di bocca spesso cuor non tocca.*"

"Bravo," I whispered. Swift had just told his mate that the kiss hadn't touched his heart.

I doubted either of them heard my soft word of approbation. They were too preoccupied with each other.

"Damn it," Spey said softly, "why do you have to look the way you look?"

There was no anger in the question. Fondness tinged by frustration, perhaps, but no real resentment.

"Because I can't shift anymore," Swift answered. Then he laughed. "What a stupendously lame question."

"It was rhetorical," Jackson said. "Now quit ridiculing me. You know how sensitive I am."

Swift laughed harder as Spey, blushing again, grinned.

I very much liked the two of them. I liked them *together*. How peculiar and regrettable, I thought, that Jackson couldn't fully accept and express what he felt for the other man. It was but one of the things, and likely the most important, the Prism would help him change.

Something else would *not* change. It was a fact of the Prism that any Felim's attitude toward its ward, whether favorable or unfavorable, would not determine the outcome of a journey. How I felt about these men ultimately mattered not.

I circled Jackson's upper arm with my fingers. "Our interlude is over. I've learned from it. Now we must proceed."

\* \* \* \*

Jackson felt a ripple of anxiety as both his companions froze...and then melted away like snowmen under a desert sun. The glaring whiteness simply obliterated them. That wasn't what made him uneasy. It was M's sudden interest in Adin that troubled him, and he began to doubt the wisdom of allowing Adin to accompany him.

He wasn't given the opportunity to worry. Abruptly, he was no longer in the bubble.

Whether or not M was with him, he couldn't tell. Where Adin was, he didn't know. Jackson was floating down a hazy, duct-like corridor in which geometric forms, both common and eccentric, slid around him. Some were black and depthless, like the entrances to mines or burrows. In others, moving, shadowy shapes and scenes appeared. They varied in degree of clarity and detail, but neither they nor he paused long enough to allow for scrutiny. He just kept going, surrounded by wafting black holes and clouded windows.

Blinding colors began to appear around some of the forms' edges. Jackson tried closing his eyes but couldn't. He tried raising his arms to shield his eyes but couldn't.

"Let me move!" he grated, but his voice seemed to slam against the very air in front of his face and immediately rebound into his own ears.

Nobody was around to hear or heed him.

Then he glimpsed Adin. Once, twice. More. Adin wasn't alongside him, though. Adin was in the windows. The scenery in each was different. Old cities, rustic villages. Dim streets and lanes. Rooms, large and small, steeped in darkness that was pocked by candlelight or gaslight or electric light...but never bright light. There was only one

constant from diorama to diorama—Adin’s lips were always spotted with blood.

“That’s all over.” Jackson shook his head, denying the images’ relevance. “That’s done with. It has to be.”

Then he was motionless, staring at an alley. He’d apparently been suctioned against one of those dreadful windows. It was the same dreary, trash-littered alley he’d been in last night, where he’d been shunted from frigid fear to soul-numbing agony.

Two male figures moaned and pawed each other behind a grimy Dumpster. Adin’s head lolled.

“Not again. Not that,” Jackson’s said in a brittle whisper. He couldn’t stand seeing what his lover had been, how he’d lived. Letting men and women use his body as a playground, a thrill ride, a premium high. He using their bodies in return.

The scene was a sadistic taunt. His own mind was turning on him. His own fucking mind!

Or was M doing this to him?

What he was witnessing soon overwhelmed any other thought.

“Adin!” Jackson shouted, trying to reach out to him. A barrier stood in his way, some dense, ectoplasmic substance that was crystal clear yet seemed to swallow his arms without allowing them passage. Startled, Jackson pulled them free. “Adin!” he shouted again. “Come to me, goddammit!”

His voice, too, was absorbed, melting into a burble before it could penetrate the invisible, gelatinous wall.

Adin lifted his head. His drooping lids rose. For a fleeting moment, his eyes focused; he no longer looked like a junkie nodding out. He stared straight at Jackson. His hand moved an inch or two from the other man’s head, and his fingers straightened.

“Take me instead,” Jackson implored. He hated the sound of his voice, the soggy, last-resort misery in it. He could feel the sound reflected in his face.

The scene shrank to a pinpoint and disappeared.

Now Jackson was taking Adin from behind, trying his damndest to go slowly but only partially succeeding. Small dabs of pain pulsed in his neck and chest—the punctures left by Adin’s feed—and they fueled an excitement already made white hot by the movement of Adin’s body beneath his own.

The feeling was incomparable. As incomparable as the man he’d secretly wanted for ten ball-busting years. His appetite had grown so voracious, Jackson thought he would split Adin in two if he freed the full force of his long-suppressed passion. He could still feel Adin’s cushiony lips, warm and moist, as they pressed against his body, as they took a wholly unnecessary detour and plucked at his nipples. He could still feel their stiff cocks sliding against one another.

Yet, even as the sharpest arousal Jackson had ever known was beating him senseless, he tried to deny its source. It was the feed that had turned his dick from pliant flesh to stone. Having one’s skin’s pierced and blood drawn by a vampire was the most erotic experience in the world. All Jackson needed was to get off; it didn’t matter with whom. He was fucking Adin only because Adin had offered himself.

“God, you’re hard. So beautiful and so hard.” It was a woman’s voice that had spoken, low and ardent.

Adin bucked more forcefully beneath Jackson’s hips and hands. The sultry dance of lips against skin sounded in the unlit room, drifting from somewhere beneath Jackson’s

angled body. He thrust deeper, his dense and aching cock gripped by muscular heat. The exquisite snugness and the gorgeous ass he held made him quiver. Fireworks showered from his abdomen to his thighs.

"I love you," the woman whispered.

It was Celia.

"I love you, too," Adin murmured. He was fucking her. He was fucking her while Jackson fucked him.

"I want to make you happy. My perfect man."

"You *are* making me happy."

Spinning and tumbling through the tunnel again, Jackson's body seemed to shrink and stretch. Sights and sounds, no longer trapped in the well of his subconscious, hammered at his brain. His own soiled lusts and unsatisfied hungers. Adin's vampiric need. A love shared...but not with him. A love into which he kept intruding but from which he would forever be excluded.

His feelings of guilt, and impotence in the face of that guilt. His longing, and impotence in the face of that longing. His cowardice. His hubris.

*A slippery slope*, he kept thinking. *Don't want to be on it. Enough is enough.*

"Do not deviate from the path," M's voice cautioned.

"Go to hell."

Jackson valued his sanity more than this goddamned nightmare-in-crystal, this precious Prism that held nothing for him but torment. His mind couldn't take many more of these cruel assaults.

"But you invited them," M reminded him. "And you did it because you had to."

"*Fuck* you! Leave me alone!"

Through sheer force of will, he careened off onto another pathway, a tubular slice of light filled with an eerie, churning hash of sounds.

Faintly, M's voice echoed behind him. "Not that way, Jackson. You don't want to go that way."

It was already too late. The light began to wane as the sounds increased. It got colder, ever colder, until it was frigidly cold. Soon Jackson was submerged in total darkness, bobbing through a buzzing void marbled with keening wails and gurgling groans. And slurping.

The sound reminded him of the river, lapping at its concrete banks. Only this one was worse, heavier, like waves moving through the thickest oil.

His feet slid out from beneath him, although he couldn't recall walking on a solid surface. *The river's finally got me*, he thought, shivering violently. *At least Adin's safe.* Then he let his mind shut down. A smell more nauseating than the tanneries' putrid miasma gripped his bowels.

A lasso tightened around his neck. Ahead, dull phosphorescence showed slabs undulating on a vast, tarry sea. Was he being reeled into it?

"Oh Jesus," Jackson exhaled. He couldn't give up. As his numbing hands scrabbled at his throat, trying to keep his trachea from snapping, his legs pumped like pistons, trying to drive him up and away from the infernal cesspool.

Just as he began to gain some distance, inch by torturous inch, he saw the slabs were faces, flattened and deformed into lumpy pads. Whatever sluggish slime kept them afloat slopped into their gaping mouths. The eyes were no more than filmy disks, wide with

anguish.

Gradually, the horrific swamp receded. Jackson realized there was no lasso garroting him. It was his own collar that ringed his neck. Someone had grabbed his shirt and was tugging at him. As the level of light and warmth increased, he gained enough purchase to stand. But he couldn't stay upright. His legs felt rubbery. Sinking to his knees, he sagged forward and gasped for breath.

"Damn, you're heavy." Adin dropped down beside him and rubbed his back.

Jackson turned to him. He clutched the front of Adin's shirt and buried his face in it. A desire to laugh and cry, simultaneously, made his body convulse with the effort to quell both impulses. After a moment, he hesitantly looked up. His face felt wet, but he didn't know from what. He didn't want Adin to see him if he'd been crying.

"You were pulling me?" Jackson asked, incredulous.

"As far as I know, we're the only two people stuck in this funhouse."

"Where were you?"

"It was like the last time," Adin said, wiping the moisture from Jackson's face, smoothing back his hair. "We were sitting in that bottle of air-milk and then you were gone and then I was standing in a kind of sickly green glow with this fetid smell pressing in on me. And there you were, on your ass, like a really awkward kid going down a slide he didn't want to go down. So I grabbed for you."

With wonderment, Jackson trailed his fingers over the side of Adin's face, both appreciating him and testing him for substance. He leaned forward and kissed his lover. It was an expressive kiss, driven by feelings Jackson still didn't know how to verbalize.

"You have no idea how much I appreciate it," he said humbly.

"I'd never let you go." Adin's smile radiated what he felt. "Unless you wanted me to, that is."

Jackson continued to gaze at him. Whatever this man had been before mortality again overtook him, he was the greatest gift, the greatest blessing Jackson had ever known. And perhaps that fact lay at the bottom of his greatest fear—that the gift wasn't fully and freely his; that he could lose it at any time. To the vampirism that hadn't irrevocably been laid to rest. Or to Celia. Or maybe even to this crystalline hell.

Jackson suspected he was responsible for whether or not the gift would remain in his hands. He had yet to fully confront *that* realization. It was still wending its way up from the catacombs of his mind.

"It appears," M said, seeming to materialize out of Adin's back, "Mr. Swift rescued you from a nasty sojourn in the Shadowlands."

Jackson shot a horrified look at his guide. "That was—?"

M nodded. "What you saw was only the threshold, so to speak. It gets considerably worse the further one goes...although the Shadowlands can't be measured in terms of distance."

Jackson looked back the way he'd come. At least, he thought he did. There was nothing to see. Direction didn't exist in this place. No backward or forward, up or down. There were certainly no landmarks or signposts. He wondered how he'd even gotten to that dreadful portal.

"You got there because you needed to be taught a lesson," M said. "A couple of lessons, actually. Now come with me. It's time to repair the breach. If you reject my guidance one more time, you *will* be lost...and I will not come find you."

\*

They spun along what appeared to be more passages. Jackson didn't bother trying to discern what was around him. His senses already felt battered. Moreover, intuition told him he didn't have to be mindful of the doorways that shot past him, appearing and disappearing. They were cutting to the chase now. No more detours.

This time, Jackson and Adin held one another in a loose embrace. Neither M nor any other unseen force separated them. Whatever their destination might be, the approach was pleasant.

The destination proved more disorienting than the white space. When, instantaneously, the three travelers stopped, they were standing in the middle of a jumbled geography that wavered like a mirage. Rugged mountains rose from forests that sprang up at the edges of broad plains. The visible bodies of water ranged from streams to rivers to expansive seas.

That was Jackson's impression, anyway. The landscape was too much like a hallucination to be comprehensible.

"This looks like an earth environment," Adin said. He shielded his eyes as he peered around. "Only...compressed somehow. Damn, I wish all that shimmering would stop."

Jackson felt the same way. It bothered his eyes. He and Adin stood with their arms around each other's waist, squinting uncomfortably at the ghostly expanse.

M spoke behind them. "This realm encompasses a variety of features and terrains, because it's home to folklore creatures from a large portion of central and eastern Europe. They've arranged it to suit themselves. It's indistinct to you because you're not part of it."

There *were* creatures darting and scurrying about, from what Jackson could tell, but they, too, lacked solidity. Every form, every color kept up a relentless shimmy.

Only one feature of their surroundings was sharply defined—a bright platinum line at the horizon.

Jackson's heart jiggled as he focused on it.

"I could've sworn I just saw Baba Yaga fly overhead," Adin said. He pronounced the second word *yee-gar*, emphasizing the second syllable.

It was enough to lever Jackson's gaze away from the distant slash. He looked up. There was indeed a hunched crone in some kind of bowl, flying amid a small phalanx of horsemen in red, white, and black.

"I thought she'd slipped out already."

"There are probably ten variations of Baba Yaga," Adin said, "give or take. Different ethnic groups at different times in history put their own spins on the same legends." He glanced at Jackson. "Hence the many ways vampires are portrayed."

Jackson's stomach fluttered at the mention of them. Adin continued to watch him. The most Jackson could do was give him an uneasy glance, an abbreviated nod.

"Do you want to talk about what you discovered in here?" Adin asked.

*My greatest fears.* The liquid, beating wings in Jackson's stomach suddenly intertwined and congealed into a knot. "No," he said quietly. "Not yet. It's too soon."

M appeared and stood beside the two human men. "I believe you've already noticed the split."

"Yes," Jackson answered.

"Where is it?" Adin asked.

Jackson jerked his thumb toward the section of horizon where the gleaming line stretched.

"Before we proceed," M said to Jackson, "I must ask you something. When you're released, should you *be* released, where would you like to go?"

The condition tacked on to the question sent a chilly current through Jackson's body. On this occasion, control was of paramount importance. He'd be useless if he became paralyzed with dread. The enormity of the consequences was too much to contemplate.

"Home," he said as calmly as possible. "I just want to go home. With Adin."

"Do you have any objection?" M asked the other man.

"No, of course not. I want to be where Jackson is. I have to see this through with him."

Still looking at M, Jackson lifted his shoulders and turned up his hands. "So now what? Am I supposed to improvise some kind of magic to stitch up the tear?" He slid his hands into his jeans pockets.

"No," said M. "It's much easier than that. And much more difficult." On that ambiguous note, M carried the three of them closer to the split, floating them through the surreal landscape.



## Chapter Sixteen

We were poised on a hilltop. The crack in the Prism gleamed in the distance. It was, no doubt, a menacing gleam in the eyes of my companions, but I simply saw it as a destination.

I addressed the Mender. "This will be the ultimate test of your mettle, Jackson Charlemagne Spey. And a test of other qualities, as well."

*So, I thought, it is coming to an end now. Its own unique end, inevitable and irreversible.*

I had no notion of what that end would be. The Shebra'feline were not privy to such knowledge, lest they try to influence a mission's outcome. And it was very likely we *would* try, if we carried our instinct for protectiveness too far. I had already fallen prey to such weakness and would be sorely tempted to aid Spey if he showed any sign of foundering.

For a fleeting moment, I allowed myself the pleasure of gazing upon both men. They were so intelligent and yet full of feeling; so complex in their interaction—as every force in the universe was, down to subatomic particles. And they continued to delight my senses.

Spey had begun to look a bit truculent. He fidgeted, probably eager to have done with the mysteries of the Prism. "I think you need to clue me in more than that," he said. "I've resigned myself to tackling this job, but if my magical abilities won't come into play, I'm at a loss."

I understood his confusion. No Mender knew what repairing a breach entailed, and explaining that process was yet another of a Felim's duties. "You, the Mender, must choose the cement that seals the split," I explained. "But your choice is limited. The bonding element must be, can only be, whatever is most important to you, the one thing you consider so essential to your life that's it is irreplaceable."

Spey's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "From any time in my life?"

"No," I said, anticipating this pitiable sliver of hope. "It cannot be something from your past. It must be something you *currently* value above all else. Your faith, your intellect, your manhood; a particular talent; one of your senses; your social network; a parent or spouse or child. Whatever is of paramount importance is what you must relinquish and apply to the break. Other Menders, those who never returned, chose to offer their very lives rather than sacrifice that which gave their lives meaning."

On the verge of hyperventilating, Spey blinked in rapid succession. I could read these signs, for I'd read them in others. They became evident when a Mender realized what he or she was being told to give up...and then tried desperately to determine an adequate substitute for it.

"You cannot," I said, "offer your soul. Humans have an imperfect understanding, at best, of what the soul is. Therefore, the repair would be flawed. The significance of what you offer must be definably clear and very real to you. It cannot be vague and it cannot be of theoretical importance."

Now, Spey began to perspire. Beads of moisture appeared in his facial hair.

"And you cannot lie," I cautioned him. "The seal will not be effective if you

equivocate, and both you and your world will suffer for it.”

“Don’t give up your magical abilities,” Swift said to him quite ardently. “You’ve worked so hard, so long—”

Spey’s head snapped in his direction. “It isn’t the fucking magic! I mastered it once; I can master it again. It isn’t irreplaceable. And even if it were, it isn’t what’s most important to me.”

The secret he’d been trying to keep, even from himself, was fully revealed to him now. The Prism’s inflexible laws had smashed the locks and flung open the door. Still, Spey would not reveal it to anyone else, and certainly not here. I saw the stubborn defiance twist through his features like broken glass.

“Jackson?” Swift said. “Look at me.” He’d glimpsed the secret, too, or thought he had. He wanted confirmation.

Spey shook his head. “No. Let me think.”

“Look at me!” Swift grasped his face and forced his head to turn.

And now, another surge of feeling as their eyes met. Agony wound through Jackson’s defiance—agony prompted by the bleak realization that he cherished his lover beyond measure...and above all else.

Hands quaking, Spey cradled the other man’s face and stared into it, as if it were rarer than the very Prism that held them.

“I’d give anything to hear you say it,” Swift murmured.

Spey could not conceal the truth from him. I could almost see it pass from Jackson’s eyes to Adin’s as they gazed at one another.

Frantically, Spey shook his head. His hands lowered, and he seemed tempted the shake Adin by the shoulders. “Are you crazy? Don’t say you’d give anything. *Don’t.*”

“Then consider it unsaid. Just tell me what you’re thinking. I want to hear it. I *need* to hear it.”

I cocked my head. How very peculiar, I thought, that a man would risk his life for a string of words. Quite obviously, my understanding of humans remained imperfect.

“You already know,” Spey said, straining to refuse his lover’s fondest wish.

“Do I?” Adin touched Spey’s mouth with three fingers, grazing his mustache, his small beard. “I’ve lived for over six hundred years, Jackson, and haven’t done much to benefit anybody, except eliminate Birkett.” His implication was clear. Looking only a bit saddened, he absorbed Spey’s pain. “What matters most to *me* is—”

Spey’s refusal began as a strangled whisper. “No.” Repeated, it grew in intensity until the word became more than sound waves, became as solid and forceful as the blows of a mallet. “No, no, no, *no!* I will *not* sacrifice you!”

Swift’s expression changed. One word was all it took to trigger recognition. I sensed this immediately. Swift’s gaze inched away from Spey and toward me, his guide.

I couldn’t help but smile. *A mind at work. Marvelous mechanism, that. Impossible not to admire.* These fascinating men were exceeding my opinion of them.

“Jackson, I remember what it means,” Adin whispered, then looked back at his mate. When he spoke again, his voice was steady, confident. “*Shebra’felim*. It means ‘sacrificial lamb’.”

Spey’s feverish gaze swept over Adin’s face as he tried to gauge the depth of Adin’s certainty. And the depth of his own trust in it. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Completely. Remember that grand elder I told you about? Rugh?”

“Yeah, the one who was at your party last October. You were...companions for a while. A long time ago. But what does—?”

“He knew how much I loved studying and learning languages,” Swift said more hurriedly. “So he used to filch ancient tablets and papyri for me. We’d go over them together, and then he’d return them. He tutored me for decades. That’s how I came upon the phrase.”

I waited patiently for the full dawning of comprehension. Spey’s gaze, too, moved over my form...but in disbelief. His incredulity began to dissolve as he sprinkled it with logic. An answer rose up.

My smile, and my admiration, were still in place. *A truly marvelous mechanism.*

“You, M,” Jackson said. He cleared his throat, for a residue of emotion still clotted his voice. “Your guidance. That’s what’s been most important to me recently. That’s what’s most important to me now. If it weren’t for you, Adin and I would’ve been lost in this structure and subjected to things that would’ve torn us away from each other and ripped our minds to shreds. Even if I *had* stumbled upon the breach, I wouldn’t have known how to repair it. And I wouldn’t have known how to get us out of here.”

“The sacrificial lamb is the shepherd that leads itself and Menders to the broken altar.” I glanced at the horizon. “So state your intention, Mr. Spey. How do you choose to close this rent in the fabric?”

He hesitated, but only briefly. “With you. I choose to use my invaluable Shebra’felim guide to seal it.”

“Very good. But first, I must call back those who’ve escaped.” I faced the portion of horizon that bore testimony to inept or malicious magic, and sent out a message.

Soon, the creatures that belonged to this plane began returning to this plane. Like other Shebra’felime, I had no power to command them or destroy them, only to communicate with them. So once the creatures knew they must return now or never return, they rushed back. Like a beacon, I guided them.

They had their proper place and instinctively knew it. Most had likely wandered beyond their world without intending to do so. Confused and angry, they would be eager to return.

“Do you see that?” Spey said to Swift.

“Yes. They look like scraps of chiffon shooting through a mail slot.”

Both men’s voices conveyed their awe. I didn’t share it. A Shebra’felim was no more awed by events within the Prism than a human was by the mundane activities that took place within his own home.

When all the vagrant creatures had been recalled, I turned to my companions. “It’s time.”

Spey’s face showed a faint reflection of his previous distress. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I asked. “For determining the best way to do what needs to be done?”

“But what you’re about to do—”

“What I’m about to do, dear man, is fulfill the ultimate purpose of my existence. How regrettable so few humans perceive what that purpose is. I commend both of you.” I then turned to Adin. “You need no longer fear the resurgence of your former nature. The influence of the creatures that slipped into your world, or the force of the beliefs that created them—”

“Was like the moon tugging at the tides,” Adin said. “Yes, I understand that now.”

I nodded. "That is indeed what stimulated your reversion."

Spey grasped my arm. "Tell me, did you enjoy any of what you were called upon to do?"

I briefly pondered this. "When I was in your world, I enjoyed your company. I believe my reaction could be described that way. I would no doubt have enjoyed Mr. Swift's company, as well. But Ivan Kurtz and his silly coven made me tire quickly of being in-native." I paused, interpreting the subtle signs of the men's amusement. They understood my aversion to Ivan Kurtz. "Here, I simply do what my role dictates I do, in whatever form I must do it. I *am* pleased, though, by the outcome of this particular journey. Make good use of what you've learned, Jackson."

"I'll certainly try." He dropped his gaze to the ground under his feet. To his human eyes, it must have appeared as a ragged blur of brown and gray spiked with green and dotted with white, yellow, blue—ethereal, not solid. He gave a desultory kick, but his foot didn't disturb the pebble-strewn grass and wildflowers any more than it would stir a beam of light. Clearing his throat, he looked back at me. "What's going to become of the Prism? The physical structure, I mean."

"It will remain with its owner until passed on to a new owner. How the transference takes place doesn't matter. The Prism always ends up where it's meant to be. Beyond that, I know nothing of the conditions that govern its placement."

Reaching out, I put a hand on each man's arm, reveling in the feel of them. But they looked weary, so weary. Indulging in this pleasant contact was an act of selfishness. Reluctantly, I withdrew my hands. Selfishness was unacceptable in a Felim.

"Thank you for everything," Spey whispered.

I smiled. "You're welcome." It was, for even a temporary human being, the proper thing to say.

## Chapter Seventeen

Jackson walked through the front door of his home, the same ordinary door he'd rushed through to get to Ivan Kurtz's apartment. It was just there, and he and Adin were moving through it.

The flat was dark and still. Jackson flipped on a floor lamp. Nothing scrabbled at the window panes or dove beneath the stove.

"How long do you suppose we were in the Prism?" Adin asked. He stood just behind Jackson's right shoulder.

"I don't know. It feels like months." Jackson glanced at the wall clock set between the dining area's two windows.

He and Adin spoke with muted voices but, Jackson knew, didn't need to. No creatures, seen or unseen, were eavesdropping on their exchange. They were alone. And out of harm's way.

No time had elapsed at all.

Without a word, Adin moved farther into the flat, giving his lover's hand a small lift and light squeeze as he did so. His fingers, loosening, glided over Jackson's as he walked toward the hallway.

Jackson's hand fell back to his side. "Adin..."

Languidly, he turned. He didn't seem reluctant, just tired. His expression was as alert as he could make it, his curved eyebrows slightly elevated. Jackson was struck yet again by his uncorrupted beauty. The sight left him speechless for a moment. Then he found his voice.

"I love you." He didn't charge forward and sweep Adin into his arms. He didn't move at all.

He simply waited for Adin to absorb this declaration and feel the weight of its sincerity. Nothing he'd ever said to anybody had meant so much to him, had carried such stark, consequential truth. "I love you passionately, devotedly. I love you more than I can say, really."

Adin met the words with a smile at once tender and radiant. Its warmth filled the air between them.

"And it hurts like hell," Jackson added, because that was part of the truth, too.

The smile melted away. "Why?" Adin asked. "Tell me why." Without moving his gaze from Jackson's face, he went to the dining table and sat down.

"I love you so much it's *too* much. Sometimes I want to cut it out of myself." Jackson finally overcame his inertia. He moved to the table and sat directly across from Adin.

It was time to stop mucking around in delusion and denial. His experiences in the Prism had made that conclusion unavoidable.

"Why do you want to be rid of it?" Adin asked. "Just let us be in love. Is that so hard?"

The question's naiveté was both endearing and exasperating. It was also understandable. Adin had put a lot on the line to bring them together. If he hadn't had the balls to come clean with Celia and drive down here last November, they'd both still be

playing Let's Pretend. Of course he wanted to bask in his triumph, enjoy the fruits of his risk.

Jackson felt stymied for a moment. He decided honesty had to prevail.

Hunched over the table, he wanted nothing more than to lower his head to his forearms and fall asleep. Instead, he forced himself to look at Adin. His eyelids felt like lead weights.

"Yes," he said, his voice subdued, "it's hard."

Adin compressed his lips and pressed his thumb and fingers against his eyes. He knew. Maybe he'd been trying to assuage his own guilt by ignoring the fucked-up circumstances of their relationship, but he knew.

Jackson took a breath and audibly expelled it. "It's the missing you I can't stand. A three-day weekend every couple of months amounts to eighteen days out of—"

"I know," Adin mumbled. "I've done the math." He let his hand fall to the table. There were puffy crescents beneath his eyes.

"It isn't easy for me to admit this."

Adin nodded. He slid an arm across the table.

Jackson did the same until their hands connected, fingers lacing, unlacing, stroking. They both stared at the idle interplay.

Maybe, Jackson thought, he should put the brakes on his confession. He was swerving too close to ultimatum territory, although it wasn't his intention to do so. He didn't want Adin to feel pressured. Never, ever would he presume to make demands he had no right to make.

Then again, maybe he did have a right but feared the consequences of exercising it.

"I've needed to hear this," Adin said. "I didn't realize..."

"Well, now you do. I'm sick of barely being able to function because all I can think about is your next visit, your next kiss. All that damned yearning. It's like having an open wound. And I can't do anything to heal it."

The fine skin around Adin's eyes contracted.

"I thought I could handle this arrangement," Jackson told him. "I truly thought I could. But—"

"When you're in love, it just isn't enough."

"No, it isn't enough. And then knowing when we're not together, you're with—" Jackson did put the brakes on then. If he brought up Adin's relationship with Celia, he *would* be perilously close to ultimatum territory.

There was a slight flinch at the crests of Adin's cheeks. "I know I don't have a right to say this, but I don't want you turning to somebody else."

"I don't want that, either."

If he did, Jackson knew, his choice would be a man. Adin probably knew it, too. There was a reason he'd never had a serious romance with a woman or even an affair that lasted beyond two months. There was a reason for the superficial and ephemeral nature of all those hook-ups and his long period of near-celibacy.

There was, in short, a qualitative difference between his attraction to women and his attraction to men, and this impossible love cemented that difference. Bisexuality had merely been a comfortable mask before last year, before Adin ripped it off...maybe for good.

"Tell me," Adin said, his voice unsteady, "about those fears you had to face."

Jackson's gaze became more vacant as he watched Adin's fingers skim over his, dropping secret, seductive messages into his pores. "There's only one. It's an amalgam of all my fears. Or it's emblematic of them all." *My own dark river.*

"What is it?" Adin whispered.

With effort, Jackson looked into those lovely, searching eyes. "You."

Adin wasn't shocked or hurt or indignant. He didn't draw back and gasp. He didn't ask *Me? Why?* Immediately, he understood.

Pulling his hand back, Jackson dropped his face to it. Adin Swift embodied every reality and possibility that made his soul cringe. Having his control stripped away; with it, his better judgment. The vulnerability that comes with intimacy and, especially, with love. The haunting threat of loss, of loneliness. The nature of his sexuality and its merciless assault on his self-image. Ever-growing, harping hungers that couldn't fully and always be sated.

All distilled into one relationship, all contained in one man. Finally, Jackson looked at him. He had no idea what his own face conveyed.

Adin likely hadn't stopped watching him. He seemed troubled. Then, softly, he spoke. "Don't let me go."

A defining moment made up of four monosyllabic words. After thirty odd years of self-containment, Jackson lost it.

His response took him by surprise, almost frightening him. A deep, lurching sob rose from the pit of his belly. And then another. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable, they came sluggishly at first, rumbling up on shuddering breaths. Soon they picked up speed, piling one on top of the other. The sounds were alien to Jackson, hitching in and grinding out the way they did, and so harsh they made his throat hurt. Dropping his head to his hands, he felt his shoulders rise and fall, his stomach begin to cramp, his face get slick. He couldn't stop any of it.

Then Adin was holding him, or trying to. Jackson slid, limp and wretched, off the chair and onto the floor. Hunkered on his knees and curled over, he gulped air as the thunder began to subside. Droplets rained to his thighs, darkening the denim. Within moments he had nothing left to pull out of himself. Like a stage magician who slides scarves out of his fist, one tied to another in a long, garish chain, he released every shred of feeling until he was empty.

As his father would've said, he'd cried his heart out.

Adin showered Jackson with desperate encouragements. "I love you. We can fix this. I know we can. I love you so much."

Without realizing it, Jackson had leaned into him. It must have felt natural, the right thing to do to find the right place to be.

"Just stay there," Adin said, kissing Jackson on the head as he gently disengaged himself and rose. "I'll be right back."

Still drooping forward, Jackson had only enough strength to sniffle hard. Weakly, he tried wiping away the wetness, but that proved an exercise in futility. His face was drenched.

Adin knelt beside him once more with a roll of paper towel. He tore off a sheet. "I've never seen you like this. I didn't even think you were capable of it. Here, lift your head." When Jackson didn't, Adin ducked down to look at him. "Jesus, you're a mess. Tears, snot, drool..." He raised the towel just as another drop of fluid extended the Rorschach

blot on Jackson's jeans.

Irritation masking his affection, Jackson snatched the rectangle out of Adin's hand. "Don't dab at me like a grandmother. I'm not a two-year-old." His throat had taken a beating, leaving his voice thick and hoarse.

Adin sat back on his haunches. Jackson straightened and began swabbing his face, clearing his nose. His eyes felt like sandy, overripe fruit ready to burst.

"Damn it, Swift," he croaked in the middle of a good blow, "what are we doing to ourselves?"

"Trying to make the most of what we've got." Although Adin's smile didn't touch the whole length of his mouth, it managed to be forlorn and hopeful all at once.

Surrendering, Jackson shook his head. He knew there'd be no letting go. A person shouldn't reject a blessing...and couldn't reject a curse.

"Celia wants to talk to you, by the way."

Jackson abruptly turned his swollen eyes to Adin's face. "When?" *What the fuck* was more the question he had in mind. He stretched his lids and blinked against the burn.

"Soon, I guess. She mentioned it to me before I came here."

"Why didn't you bring it up before now?"

"You had too much else on your mind. I was trying to be considerate."

Jackson coughed out a laugh. Reaching up, he let his fingertips wander over Adin's features—adoring them, marveling at them. *Well, ma, I've finally found it. Your son might love a man, but he's sure as shit in love.* Reluctantly, he lowered his arm.

"I can stay for a while, you know," Adin said. He sounded a bit sheepish, as if Jackson might think he was being thrown some mollifying crumbs. "Another week. Maybe longer."

Jackson didn't feel patronized. He couldn't feel anything through the love that kept bubbling up, warm as the waters of a spa. So maybe this was worth the regular, dull ache of solitude and the predictability of his hand delivering needed relief. Maybe it was worth a lot more than that.

"Okay," he said, grateful for the time they did have together. "Why, uh ... why does Celia want to talk to me?" *And why does it make me feel I've been called to the principal's office?*

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. She said it was between you and her and not to worry about it."

"Well." Jackson sighed. "I suppose it was inevitable."

"Just don't jump to any conclusions, okay? And be candid with her. She isn't going to castrate you."

"I wouldn't blame her if she wanted to."

They kept sitting on the floor, hip against hip, exchanging heat, not looking at each other.

"Say it again," Adin murmured.

His head was turned down but his eyes were turned up, an irresistible persuasion. Their color in this half-light was beguiling, a can't-refuse cobalt blue. Jackson had seen it before. He didn't want ever to stop seeing it.

He was about to repeat his declaration when something else came out of his mouth. "If I could ask you to marry me, I would." And fuck him if he didn't mean it.

Smiling, Adin slid the edge of his hand between the low mound of Jackson's genitals



and the curvature of his thigh. "Why can't you? No one's going to stop you from asking. There's no law against that."

He dipped down and kissed the mound, his lips molding to it nearly as well as they molded to Jackson's mouth.

Conniving little bugger.

Then Jackson thought of Celia. Then he pushed the thought aside, because Adin was an adult and he wasn't legally bound to Celia. Then he realized how nutty it was to have popped off with that statement in the first place, since he'd never had the slightest desire to be married to any-damned-body, much less another man. And then his beleaguered mind came full circle...and he once again knew he'd meant it.

"Will you marry me, Adin Swift?"

"First I want a ring," Adin said, a clear ploy to divert attention from the pools in *his* eyes.

Jackson lifted Adin's left hand and stuck the third finger in his mouth, tightening his lips around its base. "There. There's your ring. It's the best I can do at the moment, since I don't wear jewelry or smoke cigars."

"A spit circle?"

"Hey, it's a spit circle straight from my heart. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," Adin said almost demurely.

Jackson held out his left hand. "My turn."

Adin slipped the appropriate finger into his mouth. Jackson stared at the soft cincture of his lips, felt the moist leaf-curl of his tongue. In a few seconds Adin gagged and pulled away. "Your finger's too long."

"My dick's a lot longer."

"That's different."

"I hope so. I wouldn't feel like the stud that I am if I had a wiener with knuckles. Well, brass ones, maybe."

Adin began snickering. "Or a penis growing out of your hand."

"That wouldn't be so bad. At least I could blow myself whenever I wanted to."

Adin snorted. His snickering increased.

Jackson joined in. "All right, let's get back on track here. Do you want to pledge your troth? Not that I know what the hell a troth is."

Laughter fading, Adin looked at his finger. He bent it forward and touched the base with his thumb. "An oath," he said quietly. "To be faithful, primarily."

Jackson grabbed his hand before they had a chance to explore *that* path. "Come on, let's go to bed."

Before they could get up, Adin cupped the back of Jackson's head and urged his face forward.

The kiss was extraordinary. Their lips whispered together in introduction, then sealed perfectly, with exquisite slowness. Their tongues stole out and touched, then twined. It was passion meted out in small degrees. Firmness relaxing into softness tensing into firmness again. A feathery brush and demanding crush; a moist withdrawal and reentry. Never the same, always new.

Adin tasted faintly of wintergreen, so tonight his lips were like buttery soft mints melting against and behind Jackson's lips. Then a familiar, bristly scratch of stubble brought Jackson back to the man again...beautiful, but not perfect.

They were both discovering and coming home to each other. Nothing Jackson ever conjured could compare with this transcendent magic.

Nothing could compare with Adin.

Rising, finally, they walked with arms around waists to the bedroom. The linens didn't require much rearranging. Jackson and Adin paused before they undressed to kiss again, this time with hands in hair and mouths gliding over faces and throats. Maybe they sensed there would be no tangle tonight. They were wrung out, and their morning shower would come soon enough. But Jackson knew there was a better reason than that, and if he knew, Adin surely did, too. They simply preferred the more profound and tender intimacy of kissing, a quiet joy.

Slipping beneath the sheets, they automatically assumed their non-lovemaking position—one body spooned against the other. Tonight, Adin was behind Jackson. There was no light to turn off.

Jackson didn't feel drained; he felt full, and serene. He'd emerged from the Prism of Nezrabi unscathed, his multifaceted mission accomplished. He now had time to spend with the man he loved ... for a blessed while. It was spring, and greening lawns would give the neighborhood's urchin houses cheerful skirts to wear. He had many reasons to be thankful.

One overrode all the rest. *It might look like we won't live happily ever after, but maybe we will.* He'd always believed in trying to beat the odds.

Adin slid an arm over Jackson's ribcage, draped a leg over Jackson's legs. Closing his hand over Adin's fingers, Jackson curled them against his chest. He felt the solid, sloping heat of his lover's body, molded against the length of his own, the sultry breeze of his exhalations, the tickly froth of his pubic hair and occasional twitch of his drowsy cock.

"Are we married now?" Adin said to the darkness. He put a final kiss on the top of Jackson's back.

The darkness answered, "Yes."

## **Epilogue**

Kipling got it wrong. The sun didn't come up like thunder; it came up like a spike in the fucking eye. Cursing, Ivan trundled to the heavy drapes on his lake-facing balcony doors and yanked them shut. Hands on hips, he wondered if he should try hitting the sack again or just brew up some espresso. He decided to decide later.

Going to the couch, he flopped onto it with a grunt and stretched out, arm over forehead. He'd have to come up with some rite to keep weird dreams from disrupting his slumber. Hell of a night it had been. And not the only one, either. He tried to remember those half-sleep terrors but couldn't call up any clear images. The only thing he was fairly sure of was Jackson Spey being part of them.

Rolling his head to the right, he squinted at the spiny puffer fish on his cocktail table. That's how he saw the Prism of Nezirabi today—a curiosity that took up too much room and gathered dust. Fat lot of good it was doing him. He didn't know how to activate it and couldn't risk concocting his own abracadabra. The damned thing had a reputation, after all.

It could put him in a world of hurt. Not only through some magical misstep on his part, but because Spey was tripping out on him again. And if Spey tripped out enough, Ivan knew the quality of his life could take a rapid nosedive into Lake Doodoocaca.

Fucking wizard. So let him become deranged on his own time. Ivan had more succulent fish to fry than a spiny puffer.

These soothing thoughts helped him relax. Life wasn't bad, not bad at all. He'd get a good chunk of change by selling the Prism, could wash his hands of that ghoul Bothu, find a juicy tidbit to replace icky Miki in the coven, and maybe get his dick stretched by Christy tonight.

Ivan's eyelids began to drift closed as he ruminated.

Oh yeah. Fortune would descend on him. But good.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

K. Z. Snow is a multi-published author who describes herself as “grossly overeducated and grossly underskilled.” Although K. Z. has written in a number of genres, her real love is m/m fiction. She lives an unremarkable life in rural Wisconsin, where she cooks as little as possible, reads and writes as much as possible, and enjoys spending time with her unremarkable friends and unremarkable dogs.

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